

Chaucer: A European Life. Marion Turner.

Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019. xx + 600 pp. \$39.95.

Occasionally a scholarly work appears that both synthesizes the best of previous scholarship and also brings a truly new perspective to its subject. Marion Turner's *Chaucer: A European Life* is such a book, and is a must read for scholars of Chaucer, humanism, and late medieval culture. While biography by its nature follows the chronology of the subject's life, Turner has taken the innovative approach of focusing on space, not time, as the governing principle of her book. Through impressive analysis of primary sources she re-creates both the physical and imagined spaces that Chaucer inhabited over the course of his lifetime, and uses these spaces as lenses through which to understand better Chaucer's literary works: "I am interested in how Chaucer's habits of mind, conditioned by the world in which he lived, are expressed in his writing" (366). Part 1 ("Becoming") explores "Vintry Ward, London," the "Great Household" of Elizabeth de Burgh, "Reims and Calais," "Hainault and Navarre," "Lancaster," and "Genoa and Florence," chronicling the space-time of young Geoffrey Chaucer. In part 2 ("Being") the focus is more frequently on imagined spaces, as mature Chaucer spends his years in the "Counting House," while imagining the "Cage," the "Milky Way," the "Tower," "Troy," "Parliament," "Empire," and the "Garden." Part 3, "Approaching Canterbury," on the last few years of Chaucer's life, takes the reader to "South of the Thames," the "Inn," "Peripheries," "What Lies Beneath," "Threshold," "Westminster Abbey," and Chaucer's "Tomb."

Turner's focus on Chaucerian spaces allows her to give an almost encyclopedic account of Chaucer's complete corpus, addressing the most common topics of literary studies (her chapters stand strongly on their own, and could profitably be assigned in a university course). It is always tempting to read one's own values into the works of a beloved author, to make Chaucer an egalitarian humanist, a defender of women's dignity, a "protodemocratic" writer (405), and Turner argues that Chaucer's poetry displays all of these stances. Significantly, however, she supports her reading of Chaucer's literary imagination through magisterial contextual analysis and philological acumen. Her painstaking attention to documentary evidence solidifies the claim, for example, that Chaucer's most constant loyalty throughout his life was to John of Gaunt specifically and the house of Lancaster generally, a position that did not, however, impede his various court employments under Richard II (in contrast to Strohm's reading, which she puts in productive dialogue with hers). Throughout, Turner is quite careful about the degree of certainty with which she can predicate statements about Chaucer's life and thought, only occasionally speaking with a bit too much certainty. Statements like "he must have felt unmoored" (485) are rare outliers in this precise biography.

Turning from the *sentence* of the book to its *solaas* (cf. *The Canterbury Tales*, 1 [A] 798), Turner's prose is simply a joy to read: she blends immense erudition and careful logic with beautiful turns of phrase. While focused on Chaucer throughout, she is not above a proud aside about her own home county (Northumberland) or making what I am convinced is a Monty Python reference on page 417. Her writing reminds me

of that of Helen Cooper, one of the foremost Chaucerian scholars of our age, whose laudatory blurb graces the back cover.

Written and published in the midst of a resurgence of nationalism across the globe, of which Brexit is a single example, *Chaucer: A European Life* is an utterly timely book. Much of Chaucer's reception history was national in nature, figuring Chaucer as a proto-Protestant court poet who was the father of English literature. Turner's work serves as a corrective to this history: "In death, Chaucer came to represent Englishness, patriarchy, authority. . . . In life, Chaucer did not represent the canon; he certainly wasn't a figure of Englishness; nor was he monumental or grandiose" (508). Turner recovers the human and humane Geoffrey Chaucer, a man whose identity was fundamentally international and European. Turner's groundbreaking work has done justice to Chaucer, and her accomplishment should solidify her place within the Chaucerian house of fame.

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Chaucer's Prayers: Writing Christian and Pagan Devotion. Megan E. Murton. Chaucer Studies 47. Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 2020. viii + 170 pp. \$99.

Megan E. Murton's book takes a reader-response approach to the study of Chaucer's major works. This critical approach has often proved to be a productive one in Chaucer scholarship, and such is often the case in *Chaucer's Prayers*. Murton argues, in fact, that her method is not just useful to understanding Chaucer's use of prayer throughout his poetry, but essential to his aim with that poetry to create a participatory space for his readers that "can be both devotional and literary: at once a stance before a deity and a stance in relation to a poem" (3). Emphasizing the poetry's "participatory, performative qualities," Chaucer creates "public interiorities for readers to inhabit" (9, 57).

In her first chapter Murton reads Chaucer in the Marian prayers in the "ABC" and the Prioress's "Prologue" as a sincere writer of "devotional" poetry: "the 'ABC' scripts a devotional performance that aims to provide not comfort, as in the source [Deguileville], but transformation" (30). Indeed, she constitutes Chaucer's responding reader as "both a penitent and a reader" accustomed to the performances of liturgical practice and primed, in turn, to perform the poet's "prayer scripts" (10, 24). In her second chapter, however, she examines how in "The Knight's Tale," "The Franklin's Tale," and "The Man of Law's Tale," "Chaucer invites [those same] readers to engage with the unfamiliar religious worlds of these tales not by evaluating truth-claims but by participating in devotional practice" (60). Murton hears Chaucer in these tales challenging the way that philosophy constitutes "innocent suffering . . . as a problem to solve," as something that needs to be "reconciled with the fact of divine providence" (68). Custance, of course, occupies a Christian perspective so that her prayers provide "an