
Over thirty years ago, Richard Rorty said that ‘we are in for another few hundred years of getting adjusted to the availability of the psychoanalytic vocabulary’ (‘Freud, Morality, and Hermeneutics’ in New Literary History, 12 [1980], p. 177). The appearance of George Edmondson’s The Neighboring Text is surely an eloquent demonstration of just how fast such adjustment is happening and how developed critical uses of this psychoanalytic vocabulary has become. In the same spirit, it is also true to say that this is surely a book ahead of its time. Not for the faint-hearted, it is rigorous, relentless even, in its adherence to and deployment of a Freudian, Lacanian critique and makes few concessions to those yet to be initiated into its specialized vocabulary or indeed those yet to be convinced of the value of such a critique for reading medieval poetry. Even bearing in mind Adorno’s pithy remark in Minima moralia that ‘In psycho-analysis nothing is true except the exaggerations’, it is not always easy to fully share in the readings offered nor to see how one’s own encounters with Chaucer, Boccaccio and Henryson might be inflected by such readings. Not easy, that is, for now.

The book opens with a reconsideration of how texts sit side-by-side, in a horizontal, neighbourly relationship rather than vertical, patrilineal one. This leads to further theoretical remarks on the figure of the neighbour, the Judaeo-Christian injunction to ‘love thy neighbour’, and especially to Freud’s ideas of the Nebenmensch and Fremde. In turning to the figure of the neighbour, the author aims ‘to formulate a mode of literary history responsive to the event of reading: to the encounter with the neighboring text’ (p. 19). Much of the analysis is Lacanian, centring especially on his Séminaire: Livre VII, ‘L’éthique de la psychanalyse’ 1959–1960, first published in 1986, and cited in the (not altogether satisfactory) 1992 translation of Dennis Porter; Žižek too, features prominently.

Three Troy stories form the material of Edmondson’s study: Boccaccio’s Filostrato, dating to ca. 1335–38, Chaucer’s Troilus and Criseyde, dating to the mid-1380s, and Henryson’s Testament of Cresseid, dated to some time before 1492. Chaucer made extensive use of the Filostrato for his Troilus and Criseyde, while Henryson rewrites the story, bringing Troilus back to life and killing off a leprous Criseyde. Thus, broadly speaking, we are in the realms of the ‘anxiety of influence’, but with the emphasis firmly on the anxiety rather than the influence. The argument is elaborated over three chapters. The first is entitled ‘Henryson’s Doubt: Neighbors and Negation in the Testament of Cresseid’; the second, ‘Fremde and Neighbor: On Chaucer’s Encounter with Boccaccio’s Il Filostrato’, and a third, ‘Troilus and Criseyde between Two Deaths’. The latest text, chronologically, is the first discussed. Edmondson reads a line in the poem, where the narrator wonders if all that Chaucer wrote was true—‘Quha wait gif all that Chauceir wrait was trew?’, Testament of Cresseid l. 64—and takes it as an important moment of doubt (the ‘doubt’ of the chapter’s title), interpreted as Freudian resistance, or a form of repression. ‘Whether intentionally or not, the Testament, by insisting on the existence of Troilus in a continuous present, disinters, revives, that which must remain dead and buried so that the English New Troy may go on existing on its canceled ground’ (p. 77). The second chapter is concerned with Chaucer’s encounter with Boccaccio’s Filostrato, and sees there a paradox, one ‘predicated on the assumption that Chaucer’s act of reading Boccaccio’s poem was as mundane as is any act of reading, the outcome of a complex set of everyday, material realities. All the same, it was eventful, a transformative moment in Chaucer’s career as a poet’ (p. 81). C. S. Lewis’s notion of Chaucer subjecting the Filostrato to a process of ‘medievalization’ is taken in new directions: ‘Chaucer’s affirmation of himself as a “medieval” subject, a subject in the middle, poised between past and futures: that is what
constitutes the ethical heart of his experience with Boccaccio’s text’ (p. 85). The third chapter concentrates on Troilus and Criseyde and seeks to place the poem within a context of memorialization and death. Troilus’s death is already written in to his story, as well as Troy’s destruction. Troilus ‘keeps being brought back to life, retroactively, by the workings of what Žižek terms symbolization/historicization—the process, in short, of writing about his tragic death’ (p. 143).

An Epilogue discusses the famous frontispiece to the copy of Troilus and Criseyde in Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 61, with particular attention paid to the fact that the face of Richard II is no longer visible. This is ascribed to defacement, to having been ‘rubbed away by a later hand’, and is interpreted as making visible the ‘stain of aggression, the antagonism, that was already defacing the surface of social relations in England just around the time of the Frontispiece’s original composition’ (p. 206). This interpretation might well be correct or acceptable. I too had long assumed that since his face could no longer been made out, an act of erasure or defacement had taken place. However, a direct examination of the illumination surprised me: Richard’s eyes are still just visible, while his face rests on parchment that has now slightly buckled. I do rather wonder if this explains his face wearing away: use rather than abuse. It is a reminder that reading poetry really is the most difficult thing to do and that all criticism (whatever its aims) must keep its eyes firmly fixed on the page, closely attending to those eyes that still manage to look back at us.


This substantial collection of 25 essays originated in the 2008 conference ‘1408-2008: The Age of Gower,’ a major stock-taking in Gowerian scholarship that brought together established scholars and new voices. The selection of papers here organizes itself around Gower’s trilingual accomplishments. While there are, as one would expect, many essays that deal with Gower’s most famous work, the Middle English Confessio Amantis, there are others that emphasize the French and Latin works, and many of the essays that focus on the Confessio place that text in the multilingual context provided by Gower’s own oeuvre, and by the cultural situation of late medieval England.

Elisabeth Dutton’s Introduction includes a brief biographical sketch of Gower, along with a short account of the linguistic situation in late medieval England. Both gestures serve to invite a non-Gowerian reader into the volume, and the organization of the essays, too, attempts to establish threads of coherence which would appeal to a range of scholars. While it is inevitable that a work by so many hands is more likely to be dipped into than read cover to cover, a reader who does move through the collection from beginning to end should come away convinced that to read any of Gower’s works most profitably, one should read all of them, in all of his languages.

The first essays in the collection emphasize place. Jean-Pascal Pouzet concentrates on Gower’s association with the Augustinian foundation of St Mary Overey. He outlines the library holdings (the essay ends with a useful appendix), and considers the role played by Augustinian networks in the circulation of the Vox Clamantis and Cronica Tripertita. The next two essays offer rather different places: Ethan Knapp deals with Gower’s treatment in the Confessio of Egyptian theology and science, while Carolyn P. Collette assesses Gower’s deployment of Armenia in the poem. Somewhat later in the volume, Nigel Saul’s