
In *Practicing Literary Theory in the Middle Ages* Eleanor Johnson writes a history of prosimetric literature in English from 1380 to 1422. This history begins with a reading of Chaucer’s play with form in *Boece* and ends with a look at Hoccleve’s ironic and revisionist use of *prosimetrum* in the *Series*. These texts make up the outer limit of what Johnson calls a literary-theoretical laboratory, in which late medieval English writers experimented with the relationship between *prosimetrum* and protrepsis (in which narrators undergo ethical change) as a way of theorizing the ethical good of vernacular literature. Here Boethius’ *Consolation of Philosophy* looms large, in that it offered medieval writers a model for achieving ethical transformation through the mixing of verse and prose. By toggling between the affective lyricism of metre and the rational argumentation of prose dialogue, the *Consolation*’s mixed form mechanizes ethical growth in its narrator: first from sorrow to sensible pleasure, and only then from ignorance to mature understanding.

Earlier continental Boethians such as Alain de Lille, Dante Alighieri, and Guillaume de Machaut also took up the mixed form as a vehicle for literary-ethical experimentation. In doing so they contributed new lines to the rhizomatic tradition of protreptic writing that Chaucer, Gower, Usk, and Hoccleve inherited and added to themselves. Crucially, for Johnson, this tradition is fundamentally metapoetic. By twinning protrepsis with *prosimetrum* these writers could thematize ethical change while simultaneously theorizing its formal requirements. This is the ‘practicing’ of Johnson’s title: far from being simple inheritors of Boethian philosophy and form, these writers produced works of literary theory-in-practice that experiment with and ultimately destabilize the notion that the aesthetic experience of reading has a natural relation to ethical learning. As such, Johnson’s argument triangulates form, affect, and ethics as interpenetrating and codependent, showing how Middle English writers leant on style to generate sense-perceptible ethical thinking, in ways that only literature can.

Throughout this book Johnson writes with elegance and, often, with serious verve. Her argument for mixed-form experimentation in the all-prose *Boece* makes for an enlightening second chapter, full of exciting close readings that show Chaucer’s deft command of Latin prose stylistics. Another highlight is her analysis of ‘bisy rhyme’ and ‘verse alchemic’ in Fragment VIII of the *Canterbury Tales*. Here Johnson reads the Second Nun’s stanzaic verse as bounded, linear, and logical, much like prose, while the Canon’s Yeoman’s couplets are non-linear, overflowing, and disorderly, like the time-wasting poetry of ‘Thopas’. In the final section of the *Canterbury* chapter she builds to a reading of the Retractions in which Chaucer intentionally postures a *Consolation*-inspired protreptic transformation, built up through Fragments VIII–X. This is a brilliantly provocative thought-experiment. Never mind that it relies entirely on
the assumption that Chaucer intended Fragments VIII–X and the Retractions to be read as a sequential unified group, and never mind that it levels the Retractions to a topos: just more literary play.

Johnson is most bracing, however, in her work on *Troilus and Criseyde*. Here she argues that Chaucer critiques the Boethian project by alternating emotive lyric with rational dialogue in a way that provokes psychological transformations, the very changes that become tainted by manipulation and ultimately lead to tragedy. Emotions are also key in the analysis that grows out of this, especially the crucial Aristotelian emotions of ‘drede’ and ‘pite’. The argument goes that Chaucer wrote the poem’s narrative/narrator dialectic as a mixed-form protreptic in which the narrator cultivates pity for the main characters and fear for their ultimate end. Chaucer does this, Johnson claims, as a defence of Aristotelian tragedy against Boethius’ understanding of tragedy as being ethically unhealthy. Chaucer may have been exposed to Aristotelianizing commentaries on Boethius, and exposure to these texts might have encouraged him to write *Troilus* as a ‘versified Aristotelian commentary on the ethical utility of tragedy’ (p. 120). Readers will have to decide for themselves what to make of that.

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In *Reading Literature Historically*, Greg Walker both revisits and re-examines territory that he has previously made his own. The title suggests that his new book will align seamlessly with his established practice of reading fifteenth- and sixteenth-century literature ‘in dialogue with historical events and the political cultures of the communities which produced it’. Yet although this approach has previously proved a productive one, Walker here sets himself the task of examining its dangers as well as its benefits. Prefacing the book with a discussion of text as the occasion for ‘conversation’ with and among its readers, he argues that his interest is less in the straightforward idea that a text is a means of delivering a ‘message’, than in the notably more complex possibility that it invites its readers – both historical and contemporary – to engage in interpretative work of their own. To explore this further he presents five case studies, some that build on familiar territory, and others that represent something of a departure from his previous work: the first part of the book contains chapters on *Godly Queen Hester* and Lindsay’s *Satyre of the Thrie Estaitis*, while the second consists of chapters on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the *Plowman’s Tale*, and Chaucer’s *Miller’s Tale*.

Each of these reflects the theme of the book in a slightly different way. The *Godly Queen Hester* and Lindsay chapters are classic Walker: scrupulous and