

PIERO BOITANI and ANNA TORTI, eds., *Mediaevalitas: Reading the Middle Ages*. The J.A.W. Bennett Memorial Lectures, Ninth Series, Perugia 1995. Cambridge, Brewer, 1996. Pp. x, 183. ISBN: 0-85991-488-7. \$71.

In recent years the term 'reading' in medieval studies has been redefined and expanded to act as a kind of shorthand for the processes of textual transmission and reception, as well as intertextuality and literary influence. Employing this shorthand, Piero Boitani and Anna Torti present *Mediaevalitas: Reading the Middle Ages*, a collection of papers from the J.A.W. Bennett Memorial Symposium in 1995. In this anthology they broach the rather broad subject of how medieval texts and culture have been 'read' and represented on an international scale, from the Middle Ages to the present. The title, perhaps, is a shade misleading. Although the collection does, as the title suggests, involve material from a variety of literary traditions, the anthology is weighed very heavily towards medieval and modern *English* texts, particularly Chaucer; it is scholars of English who will find the collection most useful.

The first half of the book supplies four interesting readings of Chaucer and his contemporaries. Lisa J. Kiser demonstrates how Chaucer, Alain de Lille and Jean de Meun present three significantly different views of a single medieval trope, Nature as a female figure. Adding another layer of reading, she brings to the discussion the philosophy of ecofeminism and examines its (somewhat dangerous) association with the Dame Nature tradition. In the second discussion of Chaucer as a reader, Robert R. Edwards discusses how Chaucer's hermeneutics respond to Boccaccio and Petrarch in the *Clerk's Tale*. The collection then switches from Chaucer reading to reading Chaucer as Julia Boffey deftly negotiates the tricky business of trying to ascertain his impact on Charles of Orleans, while exploring the issue of influence and intertextuality amongst French and English medieval authors generally. Sheila Delany presents a somewhat more restricted example of reading Chaucer in the Augustinian friar Osbern Bokenham's pious re-appropriation of Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*, his reclamation of the hagiographic genre in his genuine collection of female saints lives, *Legends of Holy Women*, from Chaucer's courtly parody.

The fifth essay in the collection makes the transition from medieval to modern readings of medieval texts. In it, Carol Meale considers how books and texts moved through the life of one woman, Alice Chaucer, and how her reading habits can be interpreted as a part of female participation in medieval literate culture. The latter half of the anthology shifts to the subjects of post-medieval authors and critics reading medieval texts and, more broadly, medievalism in general. Leading this section is Thomas P. Roche's effort to correct what he considers to be critical misreadings of Spenser's allegorical use of the Four Daughters of God to refashion political history in the *Fairie Queene*. Next, Stefania D'Agata D'Ottavi provides a refreshing expansion beyond the literary focus of the anthology in her discussion of Blake's artistic rendering of Chaucer's pilgrims in the image of his own (perhaps regressive) 'scholastic' world view. Angelo Righetti provides a more general discussion of Browning's medievalism, in particular his readings of Dante in *Sordello*. Reading medieval culture is brought into the twentieth century in the last two contributions to *Mediaevalitas*, where

Toshiyuki Takamiya and Joerg O. Fichte examine Japanese and German reworkings of the Arthurian tradition.

Aside from the aforementioned bias towards English literature, Boitani and Torti's collection does an adequate job of fulfilling its mission statement of 'reading the middle ages.' Still, given the broadness of the subject matter, not to mention the vagueness of the title, the book might have benefited from a more detailed introduction, including an elaboration of their understanding of the concept of 'reading' (it contains only a very brief preface). Similarly, some selections in the volume use the term 'reading' simply as a hook for basic textual criticism without considering the concept carefully—although some of this criticism is interesting as such. Only a few contributors (Edwards, Boffey and Meale especially) demonstrate true sensitivity to the way 'reading' as a concept folds in on itself—enveloping the reception, interpretation and representation of texts or ideas. Nevertheless, whether by good fortune or good design, this anthology does a decent job of linking varieties of reading regarding the Middle Ages, however loosely.

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