
BOOK REVIEWS

Laura Howes. *Chaucer's Garden and the Language of Convention*.
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Reviving a critical interest in Chaucer's knowledge and use of the garden topoi that climaxed in the early 1970s with the publication of Paul Piehler's *The Visionary Landscape* and Derek Pearsall and Elizabeth Salter's *Landscapes and the Seasons of the Medieval World*, Laura Howes' *Chaucer's Garden and the Language of Convention* reconsiders Chaucer's garden discourse in light of recent studies in the history of medieval gardens as well as theoretical reconfigurations of medieval literary conventions based upon reader response models.

Howes' approach, which strikes a practical balance between historical and theoretical material, draws upon garden historians who argue that far from being exclusively "walled" affairs, medieval pleasure grounds were quite diverse and often rather extensive, ranging from two to over seventy acres in size; thus Howes' work moves beyond conventional considerations of the "walled" gardens in the Knight's and Miller's tales and considers the vast natural setting of the *Franklin's Tale* within the matrix of medieval garden discourse. Anne Hagopian van Buren's research on the Parc de Hesdin as well as John Harvey's archeological examination of medieval agriculture and horticulture provide the empirical evidence for a reconsideration of the domesticated landscape of Chaucer's England, which Howes at once distinguishes from and also shows continuity with previous classical and biblical garden traditions as well as later horticultural practices and literary conventions within the English Renaissance.

The often conflicting framework from which garden topoi evolves provides Chaucer, Howes maintains, with both a literal and linguistic space in which convention and "protest can be voiced" (5). Here Howes' analysis is indebted to Hans Robert Jauss' "horizon of expectations": a set of expectations that the text evokes for the reader and which functions as part of the rules of the "genre game" that may undergo "transformation" by parodying or thwarting convention. Howes argues that "[i]n its capacity to both define and limit, convention thus provides a kind of proving ground for Chaucer's relation to his poetic predecessors and a commentary on social and cultural ideals" (3). For Chaucer, gardens provide just

such a language of convention, which the poet both adheres to and deviates from — gardens become a space where “meanings,” or “conventions,” collide.

In a well annotated and generously illustrated opening chapter, Howes reviews garden conventions, both literary and horticultural, with which Chaucer was familiar. Howes’ broad historical analysis provides a cogent foundation for her claim in the next two chapters that gardens in the dream poems — *The Book of Duchess* and *The Parliament of Fowls* — function as meditations on literary conventions and that gardens in *Troilus and Criseyde* serve as a critique of courtly conventions (84). If Howes’ work thus far seems rather innocuous, her concluding chapter, “Gendered Paradises in the *Canterbury Tales*,” is sure to draw interest, if not protest, from those who approach the book from disparate backgrounds and interests. For those taken by Howes’ deft historical analysis of garden conventions, her discussion of gender may seem rather bold and thus secondary to her enlightened historicism, while for those drawn to her work primarily for its analysis of gendered paradises, the work may seem rather conservative and even appear pedestrian in light of more radical work by gender critics such as Carol Clover, Susan Crane, and Elaine Tuttle Hansen.

Drawing on Bakhtin’s notion of dialogic discourse, Howes claims that gardens within the *Canterbury Tales* “contribute to an examination of the social conventions surrounding marriage, specifically the roles women are called upon to perform as wives and as marriageable daughters” (84). Through a Bakhtinian sleight of hand that privileges dialogic contact between the author and his female characters, Chaucer empowers female voices, Howes argues, within a text that is dominated by misogynistic males and antifeminist values. This process is exemplified in her opening analysis of gardens and “anti-gardens” in *The Wife of Bath’s Tale*, which is most provocative; however, the main body of Howes’ gendered analysis focuses on the gardens in the Knight’s, Franklin’s and Merchant’s tales, stories in which gardens function prominently as *loci* for action involving female characters. Here Howes’ argument is based upon a rather conventional feminist interpretation of the *Tales*, her previous historicism seeming rather distant and sometimes irrelevant to her present analysis. In the *Knight’s Tale*, for example, “Theseus’s garden ... represents the way in which men control, guard, and imprison women for their own purposes; political, personal and narrative” (94). Here Chaucer rather predictably promotes “antimisogynistic values, if not outright feminist ones” (87). For those committed to a “feminist” Chaucer, however, Howes’ reading may be somewhat disappointing when, finally, she seems to argue that the garden space in the *Tales* becomes but “a contested ground” where Chaucer merely dabbles in feminist possibilities rather than committing his stories to female potentialities.

Howes' work exemplifies a high degree of interdisciplinary research and literary interpretation throughout, her initial historical chapter on English medieval gardens is informative and delightful to read; at times, however, the causal relationship between her initial and thorough analysis of the history of medieval gardens and her later gendered interpretation of the *Tales* is not always clear: often they seem to be two separate endeavors yoked together by political rather than historical necessity. ✨