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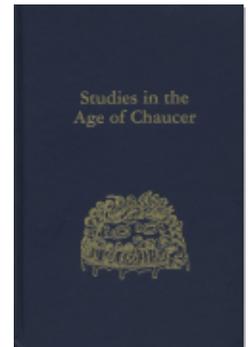
**Dark Chaucer: An Assortment ed. by Myra Seaman,  
Eileen Joy, and Nicola Masciandaro (review)**

Marion Turner

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MYRA SEAMAN, EILEEN JOY, and NICOLA MASCIANDARO, eds. *Dark Chaucer: An Assortment*. Brooklyn, N.Y.: Punctum Books, 2012. Pp. vii, 203. \$15.00.

This book is experimental, staging different ways of responding to Chaucer. While some contributions are mini-versions of fairly traditional scholarly essays, others use rhyme, refrains, and word-association; weave together different stories; or juxtapose Chaucerian texts with modern pornography or with more canonical modern literature. Beginning with a “poetic preface” (by Gary J. Shipley) that describes each essay in a short, poetic paragraph, *Dark Chaucer* is an idiosyncratic series of meditations on moments or scenes in Chaucer that speak to the dark side of life. They are “essays” in the sense of essaying something, trying something out.

The assortment is connected by the theme of darkness. The book aims to move away from comic, playful aspects of Chaucer and from the idea of resolution in Chaucer’s work, and instead focuses on “small black pearls” (Joy and Masciandaro), dark moments in Chaucer’s writings. A theme that recurs over and over again is Chaucer’s interest in the liminal space between life and death: reanimated corpses; bodies that won’t die when they should; sleeping, dream-like, death-like states. Lisa Weston focuses on zombies and *The Prioress’s Tale*; Masciandaro on Cecilia’s three-day half-death in *The Second Nun’s Tale*; Ruth Evans and Myra Seaman on *The Book of the Duchess* and its uncanny bodies. As one might expect in a book about dark Chaucer, gender is also a recurrent theme, as authors explore some of the most disturbing female figures, abused women subjected to violence such as Constance, Virginia, Cecilia, and Dorigen. Several essays circle around art and artifice. Elaine Treharne, for instance, writes about the focus on artifice in *The Physician’s Tale*, connecting this to what she terms Chaucer’s “hagioclasm,” arguing that the tale challenges and breaks the genre of hagiography. Myra Seaman interestingly compares *The Book of the Duchess* to *Sir Orfeo*, analyzing how both texts interrogate the relationship between art and mortality.

The collection is dedicated to Lee Patterson, but the greatest influence on the essays as a whole is Aranye Fradenburg, whose work on psychoanalysis and sacrifice permeates many of the essays. Indeed, the fact that two such different critics both gravitate toward the darkness in Chaucer in various ways indicates the potential within this theme. Many of the essays are interested in psychoanalytical and specifically

Lacanian and post-Freudian approaches, but the theoretical scope is wide. One essay (by Thomas White) focuses on manuscript layout and reading practices; another on the reception of Chaucer by African-American poets at the turn of the twentieth century (Candace Barrington). Several essays engage with ecocriticism and animal theory, and some of the most memorable insights in the collection come from these perspectives: Travis Neel and Andrew Richmond discuss the crow as a crow, rather than as a figure for the court poet; Brantley Bryant discusses the destruction of the grove in *The Knight's Tale* and the horror of the light itself as an example of "dark counter-thinking" (27); J. Allan Mitchell sensitively explores the lithic imagery of *The Franklin's Tale*. Often-neglected texts are brought to the fore in this collection: Leigh Harrison's essay focuses on "The Former Age," and fabliaux are sidelined in favor of the much less discussed tales such as *The Second Nun's Tale*, *The Physician's Tale*, and *The Tale of Sir Thopas*.

The diversity of the essays makes the book an assortment in many ways. While some essays are imbued with scholarship, others analyze texts without showing knowledge of the critical field at all. Others do not aim to be critical essays in this sense, but instead explore themes in creative ways. Lisa Schames's essay begins with an associative prologue inspired by Beckett; Hannah Priest takes us through different versions of the Constance story and of connected stories, focusing on the theme of retelling through cloth and tapestry, as woman and cloth are made blank over and over again. The refrain-based structure of the piece itself mirrors this theme of cycles and returns as it foregrounds questions about control, storytelling, and recurrence. Bryant's essay uses Saturn and Theseus's attitudes to life (in *The Knight's Tale*) as a lens on the current state of the academic profession and the value we place on a certain kind of sociability, exploring the experience of depression through the words of several anonymous academics who have suffered from mental ill health.

Some of these contributions, then, are not the kind of essays that one usually—or ever—reads in collections about Chaucer; they are very much written in the spirit of Punctum Books' mission statement (<http://punctumbooks.com/about/>): "neo-traditional and non-conventional scholarly work that productively twists and/or ignores academic norms." Punctum aims to be a refuge for "the imp-orphan of your thought and pen"—to encourage creative engagement with the humanities in the broadest sense.

In other ways too, *Dark Chaucer* is an unusual book. It was first imagined by the editors in April 2011 and it was published in 2012. It is currently available free online on the Punctum Books website. Most of us are used to working within a publishing system in which, sometimes, we wait many months for readers' reports, copy-edits, and proofs, and, once the process has finally worked its way through many years, our books are priced at a level that makes them unaffordable for almost anyone except libraries. Punctum offers a challenge to this standard publishing model, just as it also offers an alternative to the kind of work we might do with, for instance, Chaucer. That isn't to say that all publishing needs to go down this route. Most scholarly work needs time to bed down and to be worked through; many essays and books are not ready for publication so soon after their conception. And, at a time when many of us are thinking about open-access papers and journals, there is much to be said for books costing money.

Open access sounds like a bastion of intellectual freedom and knowledge-sharing, something that only an old-school elitist could possibly be against, but that is not necessarily the case. In the UK, the recent, government-supported Finch Report suggested moving the costs of publishing articles from publisher or consumer to published (i.e. author), with the implication that only those articles that a university department decides to fund will get published. This is a serious threat to academic freedom. It would work against the basic principle that work should be published based on merit, not based on where a researcher works or on the stage of his or her career. Issues about open access for edited collections or monographs have not yet been foregrounded, but these are issues with which we will all have to grapple. Of course, impoverished students and independent scholars should have access to knowledge through well-funded libraries and library subscriptions; our books should be cheaper, and the onus is on presses to find ways to do that. But, I don't want them all to be free. Books are the products of many kinds of labor, and we should value that.

This is not a critique of Punctum Books, an innovative, blue-skies concept that is enriching and diversifying the world of book production. Rather, what I want to emphasize is that open access is problematic as a more general aim. Punctum should make older publishers think about how they can work on getting books out faster and more affordably. But text-workers—editors, copy-editors, typesetters, peer-reviewers—are worthy of their hire, even if their labor is not as physically grueling

as it was for Hoccleve or Usk. Making a book is still a collaborative process, and we need all of these different kinds of text-workers if we want to be able to read actual books. It would be nice if government funding or infinite philanthropy could make books available to all, free at the point of use, but since that isn't happening, I think readers and libraries—rather than authors or their patrons—should pay for the production of books. Open access is a crucial and complicated issue: we need to ensure fair access for the institutionally less privileged, as both readers *and* as authors, and we also need to support our colleagues in the publishing industry if we want the book as material object to continue to be part of our scholarly landscape.

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A. C. SPEARING, *Medieval Autographies: The "I" of the Text*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012. Pp. viii, 347. \$32.00 paper.

In this book, A. C. Spearing revisits the central claims made in his *Textual Subjectivity: The Encoding of Subjectivity in Medieval Narratives and Lyrics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). The guiding conviction there and in *Medieval Autographies* is that modern critics of Middle English literature misrepresent the works that they attempt to explicate when they apply the same set of interpretative categories to their texts as those that were developed for the analysis of nineteenth- and twentieth-century novels and poems. In particular, Spearing asserts, unlike the dramatic monologues of Kazuo Ishiguro and Robert Browning, the "I" of a Middle English poem "*may* refer to a fictional individual . . . whose consciousness the writing purports to represent" but "it does not necessarily do so" and "rarely does so in any clear-cut or systematic way" (13, emphasis in original). Closely bound up with this argument is a rejection of the assumption, which Spearing finds commonplace, that a medieval author's purpose "would be to produce a text coherent in perspective and ideology," and that "he or she could normally be expected to be perfectly in control of the text in fulfillment of this aim" (3). Although "discovering planned intricacies of structure