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Travis, Peter W.

Disseminial Chaucer: Rereading the Nun's Priest's Tale.

Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010. Pp. xi, 443. ISBN 978-0-268-04235-6 (paperback) \$40.00

Peter Travis has written a very long book about one of Geoffrey Chaucer's shortest yet most complex tales. The 626 lines of *The Nun's Priest's Tale* (NPT) require us to move beyond mere narrative — a pleasing beast fable — and to confront as well a number of learned discourses, on topics that include the significance of dreams and the nature of textual interpretation. The result is a tale that delights on many levels but also seems intent on instructing. Travis's book demands much of its readers, too, asking us not just to consider our interpretation of this one tale on the Canterbury pilgrimage but also to understand it as providing a key to much larger questions about the reading of *The Canterbury Tales* (CT) and Chaucer's and medieval works more generally.

To do that, Travis leaves no stone unturned, rigorously tracking down every clue that the NPT offers us, examining each of those clues from (I dare say) every conceivable vantage point. Suffice it to say that *Disseminial Chaucer* explores everything — from the intricacies of medieval educational exercises in grammar and rhetoric to the implications of the heliotropic representation of the rooster Chauntecleer, from medieval conceptions of time to the historiographical meaning of Chaucer's equation of the noise of the farmyard chase with that of the mobbing participants in the 1381 Peasants' Revolt, and from the absence of any description of the Nun's Priest in *The General Prologue* to Harry Bailly's interest in the Nun's Priest's virility. Readers familiar both with the NPT and with critical responses to it will not be surprised by the compendiousness of Travis's frames of reference: it is possible to read the tale just for its humorous, apparent unpredictability, but critics have long sought to understand the seeming disconnections in the tale as indicative of a hidden pattern of signification and have thus explored much of this ground before.

What Travis's book does, though, is take such exploration to the next level, seeking a grand unifying theory for the tale's meaning and its purpose within the CT, arguing, painstakingly, that all of the tale's disparate elements must be understood as part of an *ars poetica*, Chaucer's definitive statement of what texts mean and how they come to mean it. Specifically, Travis argues that Chaucer intends us to understand the very act of reading and rereading the tale

as a constant negotiation and renegotiation of its ever-elusive meaning, and that Chaucer understood all reading as similarly dependent on the reader's own intervention in the text.

That argument, which draws on historicist readings and a theoretical insistence on the deconstructive force of semiotics (hence the "disseminal" in the title), seems less radical in précis than it does in its full articulation: unlike previous critics, Travis takes into account and joins together not just individual parts of the tale, its placement in the CT, and the multiple texts to which the tale refers — as do any number of arguments that have based themselves on the concluding confusion about the story's moral — but (seemingly) *every* element of the tale and *every* connection the tale has with other parts of the CT and, indeed, almost the entirety of Chaucer's complete works, not to mention all of the works Chaucer and his contemporaries might have read.

In undertaking such a sweeping argument, Travis has taken on a daunting task, one for which Chaucerians owe him both praise and gratitude. His conclusions about the way Chaucer wants us to read this tale are persuasive and, in many respects, seemingly unassailable, so deep is the learning and so logical are the arguments behind them. This book should form the primary jumping-off point for future studies of the NPT.

Writing such a book would have been enough, but Travis wishes to go one step further, relating his reading of the NPT to the larger and even more complex task of understanding late medieval hermeneutic practices. Again, the performance is bravura even if some of the ground may seem to have been covered previously: Travis is far from the first to see the NPT as a key indicator in understanding how Chaucer and his contemporaries read and interpreted various kinds of text, both sacred and profane. What Travis adds are the texture and details to such arguments.

None of Travis's scholarly work can be faulted. His research is both exhaustive and meticulous, and his writing is precise and occasionally witty. That this is a book to be admired is clear. Its bulk and its intricacies, though, may mean that it is more admired than read. That would be a pity, but it is one that Travis and his editors might have avoided by reconceiving the project, making this one, daunting book into two more approachable books, one focusing on the NPT and the other on the larger questions of Chaucer's hermeneutic demands. The richness that would have been lost, the way this book builds to its argument about the centrality of the NPT for everything we think about Chaucer and

medieval textuality, I believe, would have been repaid by the gain of more and more attentive readers.

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