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John M. Hill Chaucer's Neoplatonism: Varieties of Love, Friendship, and Community

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JOHN M. HILL. *Chaucer's Neoplatonism: Varieties of Love, Friendship, and Community*. Lanham-Boulder-New York-London, Lexington Books, 2018. Pp. 201. \$95.00.

It would certainly be difficult to count the number of monographs studying the Boethian nature of Geoffrey Chaucer's poetry. Readers and literary critics from the past centuries have long recognised that connexion and studied how Chaucer went through *The Consolation of Philosophy* for his own understanding of Love's binding principle, or for notions such as providence, fate, and free will.

John M. Hill's detailed analysis in *Chaucer's Neoplatonism: Varieties of Love, Friendship, and Community* follows that critical tradition but accomplishes, however, a rare feat: indeed, for a study underlying the importance of old books in the production of new science, to paraphrase Chaucer, Hill brilliantly manages to absorb past criticism and to offer something new on the subject. He thus documents Chaucer's intellectually exploratory methodology, which comes from his complete immersion in Neoplatonic metaphysics, and questions not only his cognitive approach but also his ethical use of Boethian-inspired Neoplatonism.

To do so, Hill develops in his six Chapters – the first one serves as an introduction – first an overview of how Chaucer balances the question of form and truth in fiction with our willingness, as readers, to suspend doubt and actually believe in the truth of fiction. Chaucer notoriously alludes to different and contrasting versions of a story in several of his poems, and *The House of Fame* obviously comes to mind here. But Hill underlines that Chaucer actually found buried in Boethius the Platonic operation of looking for significant likenesses allowing us to reach the best possible approximation of truth. He then focuses from Chapter 2 to Chapter 6 on what he considers to be Chaucer's main interests, following this thread from his dream visions to *The Canterbury Tales*. He offers remarkable insights into the shifting approximations of friendship, joy and love which we find in *Troilus and Criseyde*, and *The Prologue to the Legend of Good Women*.

Nonetheless, despite the philosophical nature of Hill's analysis, he does not lose himself – and his readers, for that matter – in some sort of categorization of Chaucer's philosophical tendencies. Hill is conscious that even though Chaucer was a remarkable compiler and translator, and a courtly love poet having left his mark in stories of love, friendship, and community, he was far from being a purely English Platonist. Defining Chaucer like that would indeed ignore much of the richness and diversity of his poetics, and greatly reduce the importance of his wit and humour. Chaucer was much more than a philosopher, for if his reading of Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy* and of both Jean de Meun's French

translation and Nicholas Trivet's commentaries certainly gave a new gravitas to his poetry, it did not alter its very essence. Chaucer is a much more complex poet than we might sometimes think. It is accordingly very difficult to systematically predict what he will be saying next, and this monograph gives us an interesting portrait of Chaucer as being loosely meditative: his philosophy does not turn him into a philosophe, just as his poetry can be moral without changing Chaucer into a moralist. And as Hill notes in his study of countervailing joy in his fifth chapter ("Varieties of Joy in *Troilus and Criseyde*"), the valorisation of lesser versions of good seem to trouble the poet himself when "cognitive embrace and contempt of the world come into conflict" (13). In short, Hill's monograph manages to treat Chaucer's rational Neoplatonism without confining the poet to the Platonic sphere. It is the poet's sensitivity to Neoplatonism that awakened his humanism and allowed him to invoke the law of kind and the bond of love, which in their turn gather individuals in "compaignie". It is additionally his Neoplatonic orientation that generates a work such as the *Canterbury Tales*, in which a company of pilgrims exchange different stories and truths.

As I mentioned above, the scholarship on Chaucer's Boethian influences is vast, but Hill covers a lot of ground in this monograph. His own work over the past decade or so has, of course, largely directed the book's orientation since he has long been publishing and lecturing on Chaucer's Neoplatonism – one thinks for example of his contribution to the 2005 special issue of *The Chaucer Review* on Chaucer and Aesthetics, or of his chapter in the wonderful *New Readings of Chaucer's Poetry* (D.S. Brewer, 2003). Yet, despite the importance of similar studies, such as Laurence Eldredge's "Boethian Epistemology and Chaucer's *Troilus*" (*Mediaevalia* 2, 1976: 49-75) and Jeffrey Alan Hirshberg's dissertation (1977) on the Platonic rhetorical tradition informing the "cosyn to the dede" topos, Hill manages to break new ground by pushing further our understanding of Chaucer's appropriation of a Platonic cognitive hierarchy. Indeed both Eldredge and Hirshberg mentioned this Platonic perception but left it undeveloped, or completely overlooked its working implication. *Chaucer's Neoplatonism* also manages to distinguish itself from Mark Miller's *Philosophical Chaucer* (CUP, 2004), which addressed the confusions of doubt and perplexity about one's desires. For Miller, Chaucer's Boethianism was deeply connected to the social or psychological particularities of one's inhabitation of philosophical issues and was accordingly close to notions such as nostalgia. Miller's exploration of Chaucer's philosophical influences focused, in the end, less on Boethius's own Neoplatonism than on his investigation of the problems that animate characters. And it is more precisely on the question of Chaucer's scepticism that Hill and Miller strongly differ. Indeed, according to Miller, Chaucer occupies a sceptical

position that completely precludes Hill's approach to cognitive Neoplatonism: Boethius's dialectical investigation, writes Miller, stops in the articulation of philosophical truth, while Chaucer is more sceptical and keeps his distance. Chaucer, for Hill, is not sceptical but analytical, something that Miller ignored in Book V of *The Consolation of Philosophy*. Nonetheless, both authors share the same position regarding the fact that Chaucer would never lead his audience and readers towards a definitive philosophical truth.

Chaucer's Neoplatonism is a great addition to Chaucerian criticism as a whole, not only because Hill offers a fresh reading of the poet's philosophical plenitude, but also because of the author's methodology. Hill led an authentic investigation – instead of being led by “agency and nostalgia and questions about autonomy” (17) – that provided him with unexpected results: where he thought he would find a Platonizing Chaucer with sceptical tendencies (something that Miller's own study underlined) echoing nominalistic thinking, Hill discovered a poet completely foreign to nominalistic modes of cognition. And it is truly refreshing to read a monograph that invites you to follow its author during his investigation. We should all remember the importance of unexpected results in academia. Hill reminds us time and time again of the importance of old books, and of how truths can be mixed with falsehood, just as the tidings escaping the House of Rumour. These truths are the keepers of our literary, historical, and philosophical memory, and represented for Augustinians and Christian Platonists alike a source of knowledge allowing us to catch a glimpse of divine light. Hill's monograph is new science based on the truth residing in old books, and will most certainly keep on preserving the light of Chaucer's Boethianism for years to come.

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