

Lynn Arner. *Chaucer, Gower, and the Vernacular Rising: Poetry and the Problem of the Populace after 1381*.

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Repercussions of the Great Rising of 1381 — when craftsmen and others rose up against those deemed to be enemies of the populace, taking their grievances to

the streets of Bury St. Edmunds, London, and elsewhere — were deep and aggravating. Chroniclers of the time, notably Thomas Walsingham, denounced the rebels as monsters, enemies of church and state; and the king and his circle took swift revenge on the dissident leaders. The question is, what were the literary and cultural aftereffects of the rising? Lynn Arner's new book investigates the aftershocks. Arner argues that the writings that we have conventionally regarded as foundational for English literature came at a cost, at least early on: that literature involved social control and audience shaping. Arner sums up in her conclusion: "English literature from its nascence did not offer a democratization of culture but represented a new means of constructing authority and imposing social control as a form of education" (160).

Arner tells a story in her book. After the rising, literate readers became interested in acquiring and consuming the vernacular writings of Chaucer and Gower, who in turn crafted their fictions to define their readers as elite and privileged, able to perceive sophisticated jokes, as opposed to the "grey multitudes." Gower's portrayal of Nebuchadnezzar's statue shows that love visions cannot escape history and that "the *Confessio* buries generations of the downtrodden" (81). The conclusion of *Confessio Amantis* and the *Legend of Good Women* are set in love gardens with educational missions, out of the fray of urban political and gender issues. Both the *Confessio* and the *Legend* contain significant encounters with Cupid, although, as has often been noted, Cupid is not an astute literary interpreter. In the gardens Gower learns that he is too old to love; and Chaucer discovers that some observers regard his translation of the *Romance of the Rose* and his depiction of Criseyde in *Troilus and Criseyde* as constituting slanders against women. Alceste, a figure of wifely fidelity from classical antiquity, comes to his defense, requiring Chaucer to do penance and occasioning the *Legend*. According to Arner, these late fourteenth-century poets and their gardens of avoidance set the terms for the foundations of English literature into the Renaissance and beyond.

One of Arner's most significant topics is her discovery of an emergent upper class as likely consumers of the writings of Gower and Chaucer. She characterizes Chaucer and Gower as "ruling class" writers (22), and she identifies the post-rising readership as not quite ruling class, yet prominent nonetheless. Her somewhat cumbersome but useful phrase for these readers is "upper strata of nonruling urban classes." Arner is thinking of the professional and bureaucratic writers, literate in English and perhaps some Latin, as the mercantile oligarchs, business people both male and female who could own and read books. She differentiates between these nonruling urban elites, addressed in the writings of Gower and Chaucer, and those she calls the "grey multitudes," for whom, Arner argues, such writings were not produced. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu and his notion of cultural capital, Arner argues that the two English writers fostered in their readership an appetite for elite storytelling, drawing on classical writers such as Virgil and Ovid; in other words, they created their audience.

Not quite as successful, in my judgment, is Arner's assertion that Nebuchadnezzar's statue focuses on English history — it looks beyond England and finds divisiveness in history generally. Also unconvincing is her argument that

Chaucer, in the *Legend*, created the conditions for a debate on gender but then reneged on the plan, evading responsibility for gender critiques by portraying Cupid as obtuse and the character Chaucer as throwing responsibility back to the reader. Chaucer may be evading accountability to a certain extent, but he is also engaging with Giovanni Boccaccio's more misogynistic *De mulieribus claris* (*On Famous Women*, 1361–62), a work that contains some of the same legends as Chaucer's *Legend*. As in his "Monk's Tale," from *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer educates his readership about famous men and women from history — a humanist tutorial — seeking details in their biographies that render them memorable.

JAMES M. DEAN
University of Delaware