

*libera viduitate et potestate mea.*) Wilkinson nonetheless has illuminated many aspects of medieval women's lives that have been obscure or poorly understood.

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DEANNE WILLIAMS, *The French Fetish from Chaucer to Shakespeare*. (Cambridge Studies in Renaissance Literature and Culture, 47.) Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 2004. Pp. xiv, 283; black-and-white frontispiece and 18 black-and-white figures.

This book analyzes how late-medieval and early-modern English writers inventively came to terms with the formidable presence, in their midst, of all things French. A legacy of the Norman Conquest, English preoccupation with French language, literature, and culture in this period, Williams argues, prompted redefinition of the concepts of barbarism and civility that had inflected a putatively rude and inferior England's symbolic and material relationship to its culturally refined conqueror. In this long process of redefinition, English attributes once deemed barbarous were assigned new registers of meaning that resignified England's historic cultural abjection as a new brand of civility founded upon authenticity, pragmatism, masculine authority, and moral critique; at the same time French cultural superiority was reinvented as decadent, excessive, performative, and artificial. This process of redefining dominant cultural categories was fraught with contradiction, however, as England simultaneously invested in and resisted its French connections. Ideas of an English literary culture and an English nation that emerge during this period depend upon this crucial ambivalence, Williams contends, as they at once embrace and disavow examples of French precedence.

The concept of the fetish as outlined by Marx and Freud provides the theoretical framework for Williams's characterization of England's competing desires to emulate and reject French culture. The Marxist fetish gives its possessor "wondrous powers" that Williams associates with the "ineffable prestige" that the French language and French cultural objects conferred upon their medieval and early-modern English adherents. Extrapolating from Freud's idea of the fetish as a "product of castration anxiety," Williams posits that England's French fetish substitutes for a fundamental cultural lack and supplies "imaginative compensation for the emasculating experience of conquest" (p. 14). Williams also turns to postcolonial revisions of fetish theory, invoking Homi Bhabha's account of the fragmented postcolonial subject to gloss the ambivalent, split subjectivities that she identifies as an important aftermath of the Norman Conquest. Overall, the book's argument is well served by its theoretical supports. In appealing to medieval England's colonial experience of domination, this book gestures toward the prehistory of England's own later imperialist adventures, in which Williams finds signs of the very cultural struggles that marked early English encounters with French conquest.

Williams examines the logic of England's French fetish across an impressively wide range of writers and texts. Chapter 1 investigates how Chaucer transformed the French cultural materials in which he was immersed into "an enabling *mythos* of English authorship" (p. 21). In Williams's reading, *The Book of the Duchess* emerges as both a "manifesto for English poetry" (p. 30) and an elegiac reflection on the passing of a French literary status quo, and the Prioress's affected language and manners betray anxious aspirations for social ascendancy that depended upon an inevitably failed performance of cultural signs of Frenchness. Chapter 2 focuses on the Herod figure that medieval English biblical drama consistently encoded as French (contra Williams, not all the biblical cycles are Corpus Christi plays). Duplicitous, decadent, excessively corporeal, this highly theatrical Herod represents a critique of the French-speaking ruling class whose demise is anticipated in Herod's downfall; at the same time the mercantile prosperity and politics that underwrote

the performance of English biblical drama were deeply knowledgeable about and attracted to French language and culture. Chapter 3 tracks William Caxton's radically shifting relationship to French cultural paradigms. Amiably shadowed by the French exemplarity associated with his Burgundian royal patrons, Caxton began his career publishing courtly and chivalric works with a strong romantic flavor; but his later projects redirected his engagement with French materials toward the interests of an international, humanist community. Along the way, Caxton's privileging of courtly discourse's female subjectivities yielded to the authority of a masculine coterie focused on homosocial bonding and the rejection of desire. The conflicted attitudes to things French that Williams locates within Caxton's career also structure the poetic and linguistic allegiances of Stephen Hawes and John Skelton. Juxtaposing Hawes's *Example of Vertu, Pastime of Pleasure*, and *Conforte of Louers* with Skelton's *Bowge of Courte*, *Phyllyp Sparowe*, and *Magnyfycence*, chapter 4 advances an intricate argument about these writers' contrasting constructions of their French fetish: Hawes's unyielding Francophilia finds an implicit response in Skelton's impulse to valorize English writing and reading at a historical moment amenable to the diminution of things French. A chapter devoted to Shakespeare's history plays rounds out Williams's analysis of medieval and early-modern English literature's French fetish. Incorporating analyses of *Richard II*, the two Henriads, *King John*, and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, this tour de force of critical analysis reinforces the coherence of the book's argument and demonstrates the crucial role played by England's French connections in Shakespeare's efforts to define an English national and cultural identity.

This book's compelling account of Anglo-French literary and cultural relationships is informed by learned reference to critical and cultural theory, history, rhetoric, and a wide range of English and French literary texts that are not the major focus of its chapters. But what impresses most is the meticulous detail and originality of its readings of specific texts, rendered throughout in Williams's crisp and witty prose. For example, having established the fetish as the central trope of her analysis, Williams identifies early cognates of the word that resonate with the theoretical terms of her analysis—the repetition of “fetis” in Chaucer's portrait of the Prioress furnishes one of those moments (pp. 32–35); the character Felycle Fetewse (or Happy Fetish) in Skelton's *Bowge of Court* provides another (pp. 132–33). The book is chock full of imaginative insights and creative juxtapositions, many of which emerge almost as asides to the main argument. Among them are Williams's notice of the prominence of the French language in the earliest fragments of medieval English drama, the *Cambridge Prologue* and the *Rickenhall Fragment* (pp. 68–69); her point about the importance of French to the “exploration of authorial identity and class performativity” (p. 44) in fragment 7 of the *Canterbury Tales*; and her use of the Digby play of *Mary Magdalene* to introduce the “English romance with France” (p. 116) that motivated the poetry of Hawes and Skelton.

*The French Fetish* conducts an energetic dialogue with major issues in current medieval and early-modern English literary studies. Arguing implicitly for the need to think across the medieval/Renaissance divide, it also illuminates the emerging conversation on the “French of England” and contributes to an important body of work on medieval and early-modern constructions of English national and cultural identity. The book's effective appeal to postcolonial theory strengthens the case presently being made for the relevance of pre- and early-modern cultural formations to those of much later centuries, even our own. *The French Fetish* provides a valuable, indeed an essential, chronicle of England's long, ambivalent struggle to throw off its Norman yoke.

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