

# UP AGAINST THE GREAT TRADITIONS: THE CAREER OF SHEILA DELANY<sup>1</sup>

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As late as 1990, in the Preface to *Medieval Literary Politics: Shapes of Ideology*, Sheila Delany lamented the tenacity of New Criticism in medieval English literary studies. With its ahistoricism, universalizing claims, insistence on a “human condition,” and refusal to acknowledge ideological struggles in literary works, New Criticism has long thwarted investigations of literature’s participation in political struggles, social formations, and historical transformation. Continued investments in New Criticism by large numbers of medieval English literary scholars produce resistance to explicitly politicized analyses, as Sheila explains:

If, as Terry Eagleton argues, the category of “aesthetic” has developed over the last two centuries not simply nor even primarily as discourse about art but rather as discourse about structures of feeling, mediating between the rational and sensual to produce an ideologically laden social practice whose coercive quality is concealed in its appeal to “universals” of taste, manners, feeling and desire [. . .] then to help demystify the aesthetic is a socially useful act. To do so seems especially desirable in the arena of English-speaking medieval studies, a field notoriously resistant to new critical development and one whose father-figures still consider Marxist or gender-conscious work “marginal” or “special-interest pleading.”<sup>2</sup>

Sheila had critiqued the shortcomings of New Criticism twenty years earlier, and, throughout her career, attempted to demystify the aesthetic of universals about which Eagleton writes.<sup>3</sup> Sheila became one of the most important medieval literary scholars of the late twentieth century by helping to negotiate a space for Marxist and gender-conscious investigations in a field that frequently stymied such work. This article pays homage to Sheila and her outstanding career as a medievalist. Following a brief biographical sketch, this piece outlines Sheila’s scholarship, locating her writings within the field of medieval English literary studies and within the larger terrain of English literary studies as a discipline.

## A BIOGRAPHY

Sheila Winnick was born in 1940 in New Haven, Connecticut, to Mina (née Reger) and William Winnick. Mina worked primarily as a homemaker, while William was employed as a musician, insurance agent, and organizer of New Haven's Congress on Racial Equality. As Trotskyists, Sheila's parents laid the foundation for their daughter's Marxism.

Sheila entered Wellesley College in 1957. She first participated in a mass demonstration in Boston, when she joined a counter-protest against Nazis picketing the film *Exodus* (1960), Otto Preminger's adaptation of a novel by Leon Uris about the founding of modern Israel. For Wellesley's student newspaper, Sheila reported on the Cuban revolution and on Fidel Castro's 1959 speech on the Boston Common. During her undergraduate studies, Sheila gravitated towards English literature and published her first short story and first book review, the latter examining *A Mirror for Anglo-Saxons*<sup>4</sup> by Martin Burgess Green, who directed Sheila's honors thesis on J. D. Salinger. Sheila graduated with a BA in English in 1961.

For her master's studies, Sheila selected the University of California at Berkeley, partly because of *Operation Abolition* (1960), a film on the House Un-American Activities Committee hearings in San Francisco, where large student protests disrupted the trials. Joining such an activist student body appealed to Sheila, as did inhabiting the same city as Allen Ginsberg. Sheila began the MA program in English at Berkeley with a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship, completing the degree in 1963, under the tutelage of Dorothée Metlitzki, Alain Renoir, Charles Muscatine, C. A. Patrides, and Thomas B. Flanagan.

Following Berkeley, Sheila entered the PhD program in English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University, accompanying her husband, Paul Delany, to his first teaching post. She held New York State Regents Fellowships for two of her three years at Columbia, where she studied with Visiting Professor E. Talbot Donaldson and wrote a dissertation on Chaucer's *House of Fame*. Sheila thrived in the lively, stimulating environment in and around Columbia that included such colleagues and friends as

Abbie Hoffman, Edward Said, Robert Alter, Kate Millet, Sacvan Bercovitch, and Naomi Weisstein. At Columbia, Sheila became thoroughly politicized. In an informal women's consciousness-raising group, she perused feminist books and pamphlets circulating at the time, and as a member of the New University Conference, a New Left organization modeled after Students for a Democratic Society and composed of graduate students and young faculty members, Sheila helped orchestrate the first women's liberation teach-in at Columbia. Under the guidance of a recruiter for the Progressive Labor Party, Sheila began reading extensively in classical Marxism, particularly the writings of Marx, Engels, and Lenin.

After finishing her PhD in 1967, Sheila began her teaching career at Queens College, CUNY. In 1970, she and her family—including sons Nick and Lev, to whom she had given birth while a PhD student—relocated to Vancouver, for she and her spouse had been hired into tenure-track posts in the English department at Simon Fraser University (SFU). An activist at SFU, Sheila led Marxist reading groups and helped organize demonstrations on issues ranging from problematic funding priorities on campus to international crises such as the 1973 coup in Chile involving the assassination of president Salvador Allende. Sheila earned tenure at SFU, the same year for which she won a Canada Council Fellowship to pursue research.

As a graduate student and young faculty member, Sheila battled many obstacles that women and leftists face in academe.<sup>5</sup> However, by the mid-to-late 1980s, she had become a widely published, well-respected scholar. Beginning in 1987, she garnered numerous grants from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, along with the prestigious Killam Senior Research Fellowship. With this help, from 1990 to 2002, Sheila published two scholarly monographs, a volume of fiction, a translation of medieval saints' lives, and two edited collections. Among her many accolades, Sheila's *Impolitic Bodies: Poetry, Saints, and Society in Fifteenth-Century England*, *The Work of Osbern Bokenham* earned the first Margaret Wade Labarge Book Prize awarded by the Canadian Society of Medievalists for the most outstanding book in medieval studies. Sheila has been a

keynote speaker at various conferences in Canada, Australia, South Africa, and the US and has lectured on numerous campuses in Canada, England, Belgium, the Netherlands, South Africa, Israel, Poland, Hungary, and the US. In 2002, Sheila co-organized (with Jacek Fisiak) “Medieval Literature, Languages and Culture: A Symposium in Memory of Professor Margaret Schlauch (1898-1986)” at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznan, Poland.<sup>6</sup>

During her thirty-six years at SFU, Sheila taught a wide array of undergraduate and masters-level medieval courses, including “Chaucerian Dreaming,” “Women in Medieval Literature,” “Medieval Lyric,” “Medieval Women Writers,” “Medieval Marriage: Theory, Practice, Representation,” and “Medieval Jewish Literature.” Noted for her broad range of offerings and innovative course design, she developed such classes as “Marxism and the Arts,” “Literatures of Sexual Politics,” and “Prison Writing” and introduced Jewish studies to SFU’s curriculum.

During this impressive scholarly career, Sheila never abandoned her commitment to social justice. In the Preface to *Medieval Literary Politics*, she contends, “Unlike many left intellectuals, I didn’t believe then, and I don’t now (when I am no longer affiliated with [a political] organization), that intellectuals will change the world through their scholarship. They will change it as everyone else does: through participation in the public life around them.”<sup>7</sup> Sheila has participated in formal projects such as SFU’s Headstart Program and, while on sabbatical, the Harlem Tutorial Program at the International House in Manhattan. She chaired the Program Committee at Vancouver’s Peretz Center for Secular Jewish Culture and has spoken at political meetings on reviving leftism. Recently, she orchestrated drives to collect and ship computers, books, clothes, bicycles, and medical equipment to Cuba and Poland.

Sheila lives in an old, diverse neighborhood in Vancouver. Her eldest son, Nick, lives in Manhattan, while her younger son, Lev, resides in San Francisco, accompanied by Sheila’s new grandson. Sheila officially retired on September 1, 2006, and looks forward to new adventures.

## SCHOLARSHIP<sup>8</sup>

Sheila is best known as a Marxist in a field of literary studies—medieval literature—where, in contrast to early modern English studies, Marxist work is rare. Shortly after completing her PhD, Sheila grappled with the contradictions between being a Marxist and being a professor of English literature. In “Up Against the Great Tradition” (1972), she begins, “If you teach English literature, you may find it more difficult to relate left political convictions to teaching than do your friends in the social sciences, for your job is to disseminate the monuments of a culture many of whose central values you reject.”<sup>9</sup> She argues that “masterpieces” of English and American literature have conventionally supported conservative values, including the sanctity of private property and the inevitability of a class-based society. Literary criticism mystifies experience by disguising class relations as eternal truths, while instructors

have absorbed the myths of bourgeois society and are daily engaged in perpetuating them. To reject those myths—that is, to oppose the real relations of power they represent—necessarily changes your role in the university, your relation to students, and your analysis of literature.<sup>10</sup>

The article concludes with pedagogical strategies for the radical teacher, and several strategies—such as desanctifying literature by exposing it as promoting political values, moving away from form, and acknowledging the impossibility of ideologically neutral positions—are now practiced in many English departments across the US and Canada. However, the approaches Sheila outlined in 1972 opposed several foundational tenets of New Criticism, which still enjoyed hegemony in English studies at the time.

Committed to radical instruction, this young professor published as her first book *Counter-Tradition: A Reader in the Literature of Dissent and Alternatives* (1970), an anthology for undergraduate classrooms. Featuring writings from ancient Greece and Rome through the twentieth century, this collection, Sheila explains, represents currents of oppositional thought that challenged dominant ideologies and constitutes a small sampling of a larger tradition of dissent.<sup>11</sup> This compilation includes selections

by Mary Wollstonecraft, Karl Marx, Frederick Douglass, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Mao Tse-Tung, Marshall McLuhan, Roland Barthes, and Ernesto Ché Guevara, pieces not widely disseminated in American classrooms in the 1960s and 1970s.

Tradition is an important rubric in Sheila's early scholarship. Her earliest medieval scholarship centers primarily on Chaucer, often scrutinizing Chaucerian poetry in relation to traditions and epistemologies in fourteenth-century England. Her first scholarly monograph, *Chaucer's House of Fame: The Poetics of Skeptical Fideism* (1972), explores the critical and skeptical tradition central to the *House of Fame*, a tradition rooted in Chaucer's awareness of coexistent contradictory truths, requiring the suspension of final rational judgment.<sup>12</sup> This book bespeaks Sheila's sustained interest in medieval philosophy. The companion pieces "Undoing Substantial Connection: The Late Medieval Attack on Analogical Thought" (1972) and "Substructure and Superstructure: The Politics of Allegory in the Fourteenth Century" (1974) argue that fourteenth-century scholars "in fields as diverse as physics, cosmology, political theory, and logic" and the laity alike questioned received knowledge based on analogy, in light of emergent understandings of society, humankind, and the universe. It was in this context that Chaucer rejected an analogical mode of thinking and, by extension, allegorical ways of perceiving the world.<sup>13</sup> At the zenith of D. W. Robertson's exegetical method, Sheila condemned the tendency of writers on allegory, including Robertson and C. S. Lewis, to generalize easily about "the allegorical tradition" and about the "universality" of the medieval impulse to allegorize.<sup>14</sup> Sheila also launched a well-deserved critique of Robertson's totalizing view of history:

And D. W. Robertson, attempting to trace what he sees as a nearly monolithic Augustinian tradition of allegorical thought over a thousand years of history, writes of "the medieval world with its quiet hierarchies," "a world without dynamically interacting polarities," which knew nothing of "class struggles, balances of power, or [. . .] conflicts between economic realities and traditional ideals." [. . .] With such a statement, wishful thinking becomes outright fabrication.<sup>15</sup>

This rejection of Robertson's reductive rendition of the past demonstrates a distinctive characteristic of Sheila's scholarship: a recognition of the importance of analyzing literary texts in their historical contexts, an understanding nurtured by her Marxist training. As Georg Lukács observes, with its ability to unveil the constructedness of social relations and institutions, history is an intractable problem for bourgeois thought: bourgeois thought alleviates this difficulty by denying historical processes, by regarding social institutions of the present as products of eternal laws of nature, and by banishing everything meaningful or purposive from accounts of the past.<sup>16</sup> Since one effective strategy to counter New Criticism's endorsements of bourgeois ideologies is to historicize, Sheila, from her earliest publications, frequently produced analyses demonstrating not only that history structures cultural documents, but that such documents intervened, and continue to intervene, in the surrounding political milieu. Sheila's insistence on the importance of history made her scholarship increasingly visible by the late 1980s, once New Historicism in English Renaissance literary studies had helped reshape part of the intellectual terrain of medieval English literary studies and once many medievalists had abandoned the ahistoricism of New Criticism, several philological approaches, and, later, psychoanalysis.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, the intervention of British cultural studies in the discipline of English in the early 1990s led medievalists versed in British cultural studies to Sheila's publications. While her scholarship does not directly engage with that of key figures in British cultural studies—such as Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, and Antonio Gramsci—her oeuvre features a persistent interest in questions important in classical Marxism, questions that British cultural studies, structured by Marxist theory, shared.

However, it is Sheila's analyses of gender that propelled her to the forefront of the field. Her scholarship on gender, especially from the mid-1970s and throughout the 1980s, is particularly concerned with intersections of gender and class, an intersection, unfortunately, rarely examined by medieval English literary scholars. Beginning with "Womanliness in *The Man of Law's Tale*" (1974),<sup>18</sup> Sheila wrote about gender for most of her career, her studies of the

Wife of Bath, Margery of Kempe, and Christine de Pizan being among her most frequently cited and taught articles. In “Sexual Economics, Chaucer’s Wife of Bath, and *The Book of Margery Kempe*” (1975), she considers the divergent approaches to the special oppression of women that Alice of Bath and Margery Kempe adopt in a society under nascent capitalism and argues that, although both women are bourgeois, their sexuality is commodified:

Like the Wife of Bath, Margery is free to own property, run a business, and enter a guild, but she is not free to dispose of her person. Oppressed within her class, she participates in the economic advantages of the class but not in the full range of personal freedom extended to the bourgeois man.<sup>19</sup>

A capitalist ethos structures Kempe’s autobiography, for a heavily mercantilist language is ubiquitous in the text, and although Kempe desires poverty for spiritual reasons, throughout her pilgrimage, she expresses anxiety about losing her money; a cash nexus pervades Kempe’s consciousness, as it pervaded her world and manifested itself as part of every human endeavor and confrontation.<sup>20</sup> One of the central concerns of “Sexual Economics” is the special place of women under capitalism, which, although Sheila does not explicitly draw the connection, was also a key issue for Marxist-feminist theorists in the 1970s and early 1980s.<sup>21</sup>

Her other piece on the Wife of Bath, “Strategies of Silence in the Wife of Bath’s Recital,” scrutinizes Alice’s question, “Who painted the lion?” Pointing out that the question refers to Marie de France’s “Del leun e del vilein,” the article investigates the multiple ways in which the question signifies—including the often misogynist positions inadvertently mouthed by the Wife of Bath—raising issues surrounding the appropriation and control of the tools of cultural production.<sup>22</sup> The article critiques attempts to read Alice of Bath as a realistic psychological portrait of a woman or of female subjectivity and discusses the problematic nature of the Freudian question posed in *The Wife of Bath’s Tale*: “What do women want?”<sup>23</sup> The piece closes with considerations of the infidelity of Chaucer’s spouse (Philippa Payne de Roet) and of Chaucer’s “raptus” of Cecily Champaigne, offering a more condemnatory reading of the rape charge than most Chaucerians have provided.<sup>24</sup>



Sheila's writings on Christine de Pizan, especially "Mothers to Think Back Through': Who Are They? The Ambiguous Example of Christine de Pizan" (1987), had a significant impact on Christine de Pizan studies.<sup>25</sup> In "Mothers to Think Back Through," Sheila challenged the all-too-common perception that Christine was "revolutionary [. . .] profoundly feminist,' completely dedicated 'to the betterment of women's lives and to the alleviation of their suffering.'"<sup>26</sup> If one locates Christine's politics within their social context, Sheila argues, one will understand that this writer "was not, even by the standards of her own day, a reformer or profeminist; that she is at best a contradictory figure, admirable in some respects, deplorable in others."<sup>27</sup> By contextualizing Christine's poetry within the political debates in France during her adulthood, her conservatism becomes clear: she strongly supported the monarchy, argued against a larger distribution of power, and adamantly opposed peasants' interests. Regarding gender, this aristocrat surveyed the past for impressive women; although early fifteenth-century France contained innumerable strong, intelligent, industrious, and ambitious women, *Le livre de la cité des dames* fails to mention working women of the time (with only one exception), apparently because they occupied ranks beneath this court poet.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, despite her own investments in learned texts, Christine does not advocate for women's education.<sup>29</sup> Without a historically rounded analysis, Sheila contends, the search for "mothers to think back through" becomes a scholarly version of that "sisterhood" which was highly contested intellectually and pragmatically in the women's movement during the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>30</sup>

Sheila had problematized claims to sisterhood much earlier. "Confessions of an Ex-Handkerchief Head; or Why I am Not a Feminist" (1982) critiques feminism for focusing primarily on white, middle-class and/or bourgeois women, overlooking the working classes and women of color. "The history of feminism as an organized tendency over the last century and a quarter," Sheila laments, is "[. . .] a shameful history, full of evasion and betrayal."<sup>31</sup> Sheila explains, paralleling Angela Davis' view, that the American suffrage movement is an example, which despite its early roots in the abolition movement, "soon incorporated the racism

endemic to American middle-class life.”<sup>32</sup> The Canadian suffrage movement, Sheila notes, was equally unsuccessful in attracting working-class women, especially farm women.<sup>33</sup> “Confessions of an Ex-Handkerchief Head” includes a consideration of the relation between gender and class under capitalism. When female employees are paid less than male counterparts and if women are oppressed in the home, whether through violence or by providing years of unpaid domestic labor, Sheila demands, who benefits? Employers as a class glean greater profits through free housework, childbearing, and childrearing.<sup>34</sup> Around the same time, Michèle Barrett was posing similar questions and providing similar answers.<sup>35</sup> In fact, “Confessions of an Ex-Handkerchief Head” raised issues central to Marxist-feminist theory in the late 1970s and early 1980s. By condemning the marginalization of working-class women and women of color (particularly African-Americans), Sheila launched a critique of feminism that did not gain widespread acceptance among feminist scholars until the late 1980s and early 1990s: North American feminism, inside and outside academe, needed to more fully acknowledge both that the histories and subjectivities of women are structured not only by gender but also by race, ethnicity, and class and that the interests of different groups of women often conflict dramatically, premises that became ascendant in Women’s Studies in the US and Canada, through the scholarship of Michele Wallace, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, bell hooks, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, and others.

Sheila never self-identified as “feminist” because the term for her, as for many women, is strongly aligned with white, middle-class and bourgeois women. Instead, Sheila dubs her writing “gender-conscious.” Despite this self-representation, medievalists often categorize Sheila’s scholarship as feminist, in part, because of her deployment of several strategies shared with feminist literary scholars. For example, Sheila’s third book, *Writing Woman: Women Writers and Women in Literature, Medieval to Modern* (1983), a compilation of new and previously published essays, enacts two ubiquitous feminist strategies: discussing women writers, including in this case, Margery Kempe, Christine de Pizan, Rosa Luxemburg, Charlotte Gilman, Marge Piercy, and Virginia Woolf;

and examining male-authored, canonical pieces through the lens of gender, in this case, Pope's *Rape of the Lock*, Boris Lavrenev's "The Forty-first," and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. The first chapter of *Writing Woman* (a slightly expanded version of "Confessions of an Ex-Handkerchief Head") demonstrates another practice commonly deployed by feminist academics at the time: interweaving the autobiographical with the conventionally scholarly, to illustrate the adage that the personal is political and to authorize individual experiences as worthy of analysis, a fairly common tactic in Sheila's writings.

In the 1990s, Sheila published five books. One of these, *Medieval Literary Politics*, compiles several of her articles, most previously published, on medieval literature. A second book, *Telling Hours: Journal Stories* (1991), features a collection of her short stories. Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, several of Sheila's short fictional pieces appeared in various venues, such as *Ms. Magazine*, *The Massachusetts Review*, *Fiddlehead*, and *Queen's Quarterly*; and she read her fiction publicly, with "A Minor Operation," for example, airing on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's "Art Beat" in 1987.<sup>36</sup> Sheila's laurels for creative writing include first prize for "Alibis" in the 1993 *Event Creative Non-Fiction Contest*, and runner-up for "Party Girl" in *Stand Magazine's* second international Short Story Competition. Intermittently, Sheila also published poetry, such as the cluster of poems in *Intricate Countries: Women Poets from Earth to Sky* and individual compositions in *Aphra*, *Contemporary Verse 2*, *West Coast Review*, and *Celebrating Women: Prose and Poetry By and About Canadian Women*.<sup>37</sup>

*The Naked Text: Chaucer's Legend of Good Women* (1994) became required reading in graduate Chaucer courses and helped *The Legend of Good Women* become required reading as well. *The Naked Text* offers a thorough and respectful analysis of a poem that, until recently, had been overlooked by most medievalists, frequently considered an embarrassing failure in the otherwise glorious Chaucerian canon. This book discusses not only the Prologues, which had typically attracted the most scholarly attention, but also the tales, often thought to lack Chaucer's

brilliant artistry. Employing formulations by twentieth-century theorists, including Jacques Derrida, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Hélène Cixous, and Michel Foucault, *The Naked Text* focuses on several issues central to 1990s Chaucerian scholarship: language, reading, writing, ideology, and gender. While doing so, the study uncovers in *The Legend of Good Women* similar philosophical concerns that Sheila detected in *The House of Fame* and investigates these concerns in terms of gender.<sup>38</sup> The book discusses literary antecedents of tales in *The Legend of Good Women*, demonstrating another characteristic of Sheila's scholarship: a strong interest in sources and analogues, attesting to an impressive breadth of knowledge of ancient Greco-Roman and medieval European texts. One section of the book offers a witty analysis of the poem's bawdiness, especially double entendres, reflecting Sheila's willingness throughout her oeuvre to grapple with such indelicate topics—when necessary.<sup>39</sup> Another section of *The Naked Text*, "Geographies of Desire: Orientalism in the *Legend*," employs Edward Said's observations to scrutinize Orientalism and gender in the tales in relation to English interactions with Muslims in the late Middle Ages, an analysis which helped usher in one of the most exciting areas in current medieval literary studies—scholarship in dialogue with postcolonial theorists.<sup>40</sup>

Sheila's second major project in the 1990s centered on Osbern Bokenham, an interest that burgeoned from her perusal of *The Legend of Good Women*, for, as she demonstrates, Bokenham's saints' lives were influenced by Chaucer's poem. Since most medievalists were not conversant with Bokenham's legends, the first (extant) all-female hagiography, Sheila published *A Legend of Holy Women: A Translation of Osbern Bokenham's Legends of Holy Women* (1992),<sup>41</sup> a modern English rendition of the Latinated Middle English. This project represented her initial foray into fifteenth-century English literature and into saints' lives. During much of the twentieth century, fifteenth-century England was conventionally denigrated as a cultural wasteland, sandwiched between two centuries that produced glorious poetry. Sheila's translation of Bokenham's legends fifteen years ago signaled the beginnings of a dramatic rise in medievalists' attention to fifteenth-

century English literature, an escalation tied to larger attempts to bridge the gap between the Middle Ages and the “early modern.”

After the translation, Sheila published *Impolitic Bodies: Poetry, Saints, and Society in Fifteenth-Century England, The Work of Osbern Bokenham* (1998), an analysis of Bokenham’s saints’ lives. Like *The Naked Text*, the breadth of this study attracted a wide spectrum of medievalists. After considering the life and writings of Bokenham, his historical context, and the commissioning and circulation of his legends, *Impolitic Bodies* provides nuanced discussions of the participation of Bokenham, Bokenham’s Clare Priory, and Bokenham’s legends in Yorkist-Lancastrian struggles. Because Clare Priory was the oldest Augustinian establishment in England, the book offers a lengthy examination of the connections between the tales and some doctrines of Augustine of Hippo, a figure in whom Sheila demonstrated a sustained interest throughout her career.<sup>42</sup> Much of the book investigates the gender politics of the legends, considering, for example, the semiotics of sundry body parts, the violence against female bodies, and ways in which Bokenham altered problematic formulations of femininity in earlier renditions of these lives.

Most of Sheila’s latest efforts have cultivated medieval Jewish studies. In “Chaucer’s Prioress, the Jews, and the Muslims” (1999), Sheila ponders the significance of Chaucer’s decision to set *The Prioress’ Tale* in Asia, a location at odds with the thirty-three extant versions of the story, all of which locate the tale in various European cities.<sup>43</sup> Sheila discusses the westward expansion of the Ottoman Empire in the mid-fourteenth century and Chaucer’s inevitable knowledge (as a courtier, diplomat, customs official, and member of Parliament) of Islamic-Christian affairs in Europe and Asia. Moreover, a well-traveled English diplomat, Chaucer would know that Jews were treated reasonably well in the predominantly Muslim societies of which Asia was composed, where Jews possessed more rights than in Christian areas.<sup>44</sup> Therefore, Sheila continues, the terms of the scenario the Prioress narrates—the ghettoization of Jews, punishment without trial, persecution of many Jews rather than the actual culprit—reflect conditions probable only in Christian territories. Furthermore, the choice of Asia betrays a common conflation of Jews with Muslims in late medieval English minds.<sup>45</sup>

To foster the study of Jewish history and culture from the Middle Ages, Sheila edited a special issue of *Exemplaria*, “‘Turn it again’: Jewish Medieval Studies and Literary Theory” (2000), noting, “Most medievalists, I found, have virtually no idea of Jewish culture in their chosen period, despite its often intimate relation to the literature, art, philosophy or history they study.”<sup>46</sup> Explaining that the special issue represents her desire to “de-ghettoize Jewish studies, to attempt a mainstreaming or normalization of the field,” Sheila encourages readers to teach courses in medieval Jewish literature and to integrate Jewish material into syllabi, as female authors have been incorporated.<sup>47</sup> Following the *Exemplaria* volume, Sheila edited a second anthology in medieval Jewish studies: *Chaucer and the Jews: Sources, Contexts, Meanings* (2002).<sup>48</sup> She also wrote an article on the Old Yiddish romance *Bovo-bukh* by Elias Levita and is completing work on Chaucer and the Paris Jews of 1394.<sup>49</sup> For the past fifteen years, her interest in Jewish intellectualism and history has expanded well beyond the Middle Ages: she has consistently contributed to *Outlook: Canada’s Progressive Jewish Magazine*, editing a special cluster on Black-Jewish relations (1998)<sup>50</sup> and reviewing sundry books, from an edition of a Jewish Renaissance play, to an autobiography of Joe Slovo, to a study of crises on Israeli kibbutzim.<sup>51</sup>

Sheila has several ideas for future projects. In the meantime, to celebrate Sheila’s official retirement and her outstanding body of scholarship to date, several of her colleagues in the US, Canada, and around the world have written essays in her honor. One collection of these essays, which debuted in May 2006 in *Exemplaria*’s web preprint format, is *Exemplaria: A Journal of Theory in Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 19.1 (2007), a special issue I edited. A second collection, scheduled to appear later this year, is *Florilegium* (the journal of the Canadian Society of Medievalists) 23.1 (2006), a special issue co-edited by A. E. Christa Canitz and Andrew Taylor. Collectively, all of us applaud Sheila’s impressive *oeuvre* of scholarship and wish her the best in her retirement.

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## END NOTES

1. This article is a modified version of "Up Against the Great Traditions: The Career of Sheila Delany," *Exemplaria* 19.1 (2007): 1-15; also available at <www.maney.co.uk>. I am grateful to *Exemplaria* and Maney Publishing for permission to reprint a version of the article here.
2. Sheila Delany, *Medieval Literary Politics: Shapes of Ideology* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1990), p. xii.
3. Sheila Delany, "Introduction," in *Counter-Tradition: A Reader in the Literature of Dissent and Alternatives*, ed. Sheila Delany (New York: Basic, 1970), pp. 2-6; and "Up Against the Great Tradition," in *The Politics of Literature: Dissenting Essays on the Teaching of English*, ed. Louis Kampf and Paul Lauter (New York: Vintage, 1972), pp. 308-31.
4. Martin Burgess Green, *A Mirror for Anglo-Saxons: A Discovery of America, A Rediscovery of England* (London: Harper, 1960).
5. See Sheila Delany, "Confessions of an Ex-Handkerchief Head; or Why I am Not a Feminist," *Queen's Quarterly* 89.4 (1982): 816-28; and "Medieval Marxists: A Tradition," *Science and Society* 68.2 (2004): 206-15.
6. Sheila's conference presentations have included such titles as "Sex and Revolution: Avram Room's *Bed and Sofa* (1926)," "What Has Medieval Studies to Offer the New South Africa?," "Afterlife of a Medieval Genre: Maréchal's 'Revolutionary' Legendary," and "Run Silent, Run Deep: Heresy and Alchemy as Alternatives to Utopian Discourse in the Middle Ages."
7. Delany, *Medieval Literary Politics*, p. xi.
8. For a complete list of works by Sheila Delany, see Lynn Arner, "Sheila Delany's Publications, 1960-2006," *Exemplaria* 19.1 (2007): 206-16.
9. Delany, "Up Against the Great Tradition," p. 308.
10. Delany, "Up Against the Great Tradition," p. 315.
11. Delany, *Counter-Tradition*, p. 6.
12. Sheila Delany, "Chaucer's *House of Fame*: The Poetics of Skeptical Fideism" (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1972), p. 1.
13. Sheila Delany, "Undoing Substantial Connection: The Late Medieval Attack on Analogical Thought," *Mosaic* 5.4 (1972): 31-52; and "Substructure and Superstructure: The Politics of Allegory in the Fourteenth Century," *Science and Society* 38 (1974): 257-80.
14. Delany, "Substructure," p. 258; see also Delany, "Undoing," esp. p. 32, n. 2.
15. Delany, "Substructure," p. 259, n. 3, citing D. W. Robertson, *A Preface to Chaucer* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1962), p. 51.
16. Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971), p. 48.
17. Significantly, in "Strategies of Silence in the Wife of Bath's Recital," in *Medieval Literary Politics*, pp. 112-29, pp. 119-20, Sheila criticizes New Historicists for looking too intently at specific immediate or local facts and for paying insufficient attention to long-term, large-scale factors of social stability

- and change (such as the nature of early capitalism) and to the relation between “substructure and superstructure.” (Sheila never employs Louis Althusser’s terminology “base” and “superstructure” from “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses [Notes towards an Investigation],” in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster [New York: Monthly Review P, 1971], pp. 127-86.)
18. Sheila Delany, “Womanliness in the *Man of Law’s Tale*,” *Chaucer Review* 9.1 (1974): 63-72.
  19. Sheila Delany, “Sexual Economics, Chaucer’s Wife of Bath, and *The Book of Margery Kempe*,” *Minnesota Review* n.s. 5 (1975): 104-15; p. 112.
  20. Delany, “Sexual Economics,” pp. 110-11.
  21. See for example, Michèle Barrett, *Women’s Oppression Today: The Marxist/Feminist Encounter* (London: Verso, 1980); and Angela Y. Davis, in “The Approaching Obsolescence of Housework: A Working-Class Perspective,” *Women, Race, and Class* (New York: Random House, 1981), pp. 222-44.
  22. Delany, “Strategies of Silence,” pp. 113-19. This essay was also published in *Exemplaria* 2.1 (1990): 49-69, while an earlier version appeared as “Notes on Experience, Authority and Desire in the Wife of Bath’s Recital,” *Hebrew University Studies in Literature and the Arts* 15 (1988 for 1987): 27-35.
  23. Delany, “Strategies of Silence,” pp. 119-28.
  24. “In Strategies of Silence,” Delany explains that Chaucer’s escape from serious legal consequences may have resulted from Cecily Chaumpaigne’s subsequent pregnancy, for “According to medieval medicine, pregnancy followed from orgasm (‘female semination’) which in turn implied a consenting will and therefore obviated rape” p. 128. Derek Pearsall, *The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer: A Critical Biography* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), pp. 137-38, conjectures that Cecily, possibly a spurned lover, threatened Chaucer with a rape charge to force him into some compensatory settlement. Larry D. Benson, *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), p. xxi, insists that the record is clear: Cecily Chaumpaigne cleared Chaucer of all responsibility. Christopher Cannon, “Chaucer and Rape: Uncertainty’s Certainties,” in *Representing Rape in Medieval and Early Modern Literature*, ed. Elizabeth Robertson and Christine M. Rose (New York: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 255-79, p. 266, argues that the blurred boundaries in late fourteenth-century law between rape and abduction mean that modern rubrics will never distinguish the precise meaning of the “raptus” with which Chaucer was charged.
  25. Sheila Delany, “‘Mothers to Think Back Through’: Who are They? The Ambiguous Example of Christine de Pizan,” in *Medieval Texts and Contemporary Readers*, ed. Laurie A. Finke and Martin B. Shichtman (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1987), pp. 177-97; rpt. in *The Selected Writings of Christine de Pizan*, ed. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski (New York: Norton, 1997), pp. 312-28. See also “History, Politics, and Christine Studies: A Polemical Reply,” in *Politics, Gender, and Genre: The Political Thought of Christine de Pizan*, ed. Margaret Brabant (Boulder: Westview, 1992), pp. 193-206; and “A City, a Room: the Scene of Writing in Christine de Pisan and Virginia Woolf,” in *Writing Woman: Women*



*Writers and Women in Literature, Medieval to Modern* (New York: Schocken, 1983), pp. 181-97.

26. Delany, "Mothers," p. 180, is quoting from Earl Jeffrey Richards' "Forward" to his translation of Christine de Pizan's *The Book of the City of Ladies* (New York: Persea, 1982); and Delany notes similar remarks by others (pp. 180-1, n. 5).

27. Delany, "Mothers," p. 181.

28. Delany, "Mothers," p. 189.

29. Delany, "Mothers," p. 190.

30. Delany, "Mothers," p. 179.

31. Delany, "Confessions," p. 821.

32. Delany, "Confessions," p. 821. See Davis, "Woman Suffrage at the Turn of the Century: The Rising Influence of Racism" and "Working Women, Black Women and the History of the Suffrage Movement," in *Women, Race and Class*, pp. 110-26 and pp. 137-48, respectively.

33. Delany, "Confessions," p. 822.

34. Delany, "Confessions," pp. 824-5.

35. Barrett, *Women's Oppression Today*, especially "Gender and the Division of Labour," pp. 152-86.

36. Sheila Delany, "My Mother's Feet," *Ms. Magazine* (May 1983): 98-102; "Tree Day," *The Massachusetts Review* 26 (1985): 146-52; "The Unveiling" and "The Arch-Criminal," *Fiddlehead* 140 (1984): 27-40; and "King of the Block," *Queen's Quarterly* 92.2 (1984): 274-81.

37. Sheila Delany, "Commedia," *Aphra* 1.4 (1970): 32; "Exhibit," *Contemporary Verse* 2 14.2 (1991): 25-26; "Pasture," *West Coast Review* 7 (1973): 11; and "Anniversaries," in *Celebrating Canadian Women: Prose and Poetry By and About Canadian Women*, ed. Greta Hofmann Nemiroff (Markham, Ont.: Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 1989), p. 224.

38. Sheila Delany, *The Naked Text: Chaucer's Legend of Good Women* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1994), pp. 1-2.

39. See, for example, Sheila Delany's saucy "Beginning," in *Telling Hours: Journal Stories* (Vancouver: New Star, 1991), pp. 9-25.

40. Delany, *The Naked Text*, pp. 164-86. This essay first appeared as "Geographies of Desire: Orientalism in Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*," *Chaucer Yearbook* 1 (1992): 1-32.

41. Sheila Delany, *A Legend of Holy Women: A Translation of Osbern Bokenham's Legends of Holy Women* (Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P, 1992).

42. Sheila Delany, *Impolitic Bodies: Poetry, Saints, and Society in Fifteenth-Century England, The Work of Osbern Bokenham* (New York: Oxford UP, 1998), p. 13.

43. Sheila Delany, "Chaucer's Prioress, the Jews, and the Muslims," *Medieval Encounters* 5.2 (1999): 198-213, p. 199.

44. Delany, "Chaucer's Prioress," pp. 202-3.

45. Delany, "Chaucer's Prioress," pp. 205-12.

46. Sheila Delany, "Introduction," "'Turn it again': Jewish Medieval Studies and Literary Theory," ed. Sheila Delany, *Exemplaria* 12.1 (2000): 1-5; pp. 1-2.

47. Delany, "Introduction," in "Turn it again," pp. 2-3.
48. Sheila Delany, ed., *Chaucer and the Jews: Sources, Contexts, Meanings* (New York: Routledge, 2002).
49. Sheila Delany, "Bovo Then and Now: An Old Yiddish Romance in its Time and Ours," in *Medieval Cultural Studies: A Volume of Essays to Celebrate the Work of Stephen Knight*, ed. Ruth Evans, Helen Fulton, and David Matthews (Cardiff: U of Wales P, 2006), pp. 181-97.
50. "Special Issue on Black-Jewish Relations," ed. Sheila Delany, *Outlook: Canada's Progressive Jewish Magazine* 36.1 (1998): 10-23.
51. Sheila Delany, review of "A Comedy of Betrothal," by Leone dé Sommi, Ebreo, trans. Alfred S. Golding, *Outlook* 29.9 (1991): 26; review of *Slovo: The Unfinished Autobiography*, by Joe Slovo and *Every Secret Thing: My Family, My Country*, by Gillian Slovo, *Outlook* 36.1 (1998): 18-19; and review of *Crisis in the Israeli Kibbutz: Meeting the Challenge of Changing Times*, ed. Uriel Levitan, Hugh Oliver, and Jack Quarter, *Outlook* 37.6 (1999): 22.

