BOOK REVIEWS


Bullón-Fernández's book is a careful, insightful analysis of the ways Gower uses father-daughter relationships to explore the dynamics of power and authority between king and subject, author and text. She moves beyond previous scholars' recognition that family structure describes political structure by demonstrating that Gower represents the incest prohibition as "a foundational and originary law at the core of patriarchal society" (215). So too, then, is the father's desire for the daughter "at the heart of patriarchal rule" (39). The incest prohibition, and the concomitant transgression and desire it produces, as Bullón-Fernández shows, constructed through discourse and thus of particular interest to a poet. Gower's concern, then, is with the difficulties of marking the limits of paternal/political authority and also the limits of his own textual authority. Just as the parameters of political rule are ambiguous and potentially "incestuous," so too is an author's control of the text always on the verge of rigidity and abuse, on the verge of authorial incest. Rather than resolving this problem, Gower explores and circumvents it by refusing ever to identify himself with one authorial voice, thus making the Confessio Amantis a self-reflexive analysis not only of authority, but also of subjectivity. Bullón-Fernández intervenes in the critical tendency to read the Confessio in light of Gower's earlier Vox Clamantis and Mirour de l'Omme because the former, she argues, does not offer a comparable moralistic reading of contemporary society, but rather, "explores the contradictions behind those institutions and the conflicting power relationships that regulate them" (4).

The introductory chapter, "Fathers and Daughters: Defining Authority," provides the anthropological and psychoanalytic theory on which Bullón-Fernández bases her analysis of the incest prohibition, drawing particular attention to Judith Butler's work on performativity and discourse in the production of the subject. Gower, Bullón-Fernández argues, ultimately represents the individual as discourse constructed through the incest prohibition, a taboo fundamental to subjectivity. Gower's concern is incest's private nature and its rejection of the social contract to exchange women. Because the father, patriarchy's lynchpin, refuses the social exchange of his daughter, he threatens the foundations of patriarchy; the law's representative will not uphold his own law and thus threatens the stability of the social order. As the king embodies the law, the metaphor of incest provides Gower a way of describing Richard II's abuses of authority and his increasingly insular rule.

The second chapter, "Redeeming Daughters: Thaise, Peronelle, and Constance," elaborates this theoretical ground and looks at three daughters who, through language, help forestall paternal desire and participate in their own exchange. Yet even as they do so, they expose the fluid boundaries of paternal authority, in part because their relationships with their fathers, modeled on that between God and Mary, shift subtly between daughter, mother, and wife.
The parameters of paternal governance are thus also in flux. This ambiguity is complicated further in chapter three which describes shifting paternal roles. "Fathers as Husbands, Husbands as Fathers: Supplantation and Exchange in the 'Tale of the False Bachelor' and the 'Tale of Albinus and Rosemund,'" describes the rigidity of chivalric masculinity as it is constructed through the repeated performance of chivalric acts. In these tales, gone are the public and active daughters, replaced by largely passive women whose primary function is to help delimit and define masculinity. Yet these static gender categories produce what Bullón-Fernández describes as the "‘sin’ of the system of exchange’ (39). Because masculinity is the only requirement for authority, male figures may supplant one another; the husband may take the father’s position, which implies the corollary that the father may take the husband’s. Hence Gower identifies yet another difficulty in delimiting the parameters of a father’s authority, and he uses the tales to demonstrate that chivalry’s "self-absorption makes chivalric ideology an inappropriate ethos for the ideal ruler" (40).

Chapter four, "Limiting Authority: Leucothoe, Virginia, and Canace," takes up the issue of private and public space to further consider the extent of the father’s governance and the extent of a daughter’s private space. In all three tales discussed in this chapter, the father kills his daughter, thus taking absolute power over her and raising anxieties about a king’s reach into his subjects’ private space. However, Genius only condemns one of the fathers, Eolus in "The Tale of Canace and Machaire," and Bullón-Fernández argues that such selective condemnation indicates Genius’ own paternal authority as he attempts to govern meaning in his tales according to his own desires, thus becoming the abusive (incestuous) father who wants absolute control over the text’s meaning. This argument leads seamlessly into the final chapter, "Textual Fathers and Textual Daughters," which examines the narrator Genius as father to the daughters in his tales and as father to the tales themselves. From there, Bullón-Fernández moves to an examination of Gower as father to the whole Confessio. These relationships, she argues, share the same structures of authority as between father/king-daughter/subject. This shared dynamic raises the possibility of incest, and Genius’ attempts to exert absolute control over the narratives’ meanings reflects Gower’s own anxiety over his position as father/author. Gower, however, by remaining distanced from Genius and refusing to assert a single authoritative voice in the Confessio avoids simply replicating Genius’ role but rather represents and explores problems of authority.

The theoretical underpinnings of this work are well-established ideas in psychoanalytic feminist theory, and Bullón-Fernández is able to sketch them clearly and fairly quickly. Readers who are skeptical of her theoretical approach may well find themselves yielding as they move into her close and nuanced analyses of the tales which offer readings that are subtle, often surprising, and always convincing. The work’s greatest strength is its graceful incorporation of historical context and theoretical approach, both of which inform, rather than overwhelm, her reading of the Confessio.

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