

ARTICLE

Chaucerian Theatricality: Then and Now

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ABSTRACT

John Ganim's 1990 book, *Chaucerian Theatricality*, raised important questions about the methods of studying Chaucer's public poetry and, in turn, about the relationships among authorial, narratorial, and critical voices, both in his time and ours. This paper reconsiders Ganim's book in the context of Chaucerian criticism of the 1990s, and it develops the implications of its notion of theatricality to embrace new readings of the *Tales* and new approaches to twenty-first-century debates in Chaucer scholarship. The paper concludes by arguing that the real, current site of Chaucerian theatricality lies in the areas of teaching and research, especially in the recent publication and dissemination of work reassessing the status of Chaucer's raptaur of Cecily of Chaumpaigne.

Published in 1990, John Ganim's *Chaucerian Theatricality* sought to realign the central metaphors of criticism and scholarship surrounding Chaucer's poetry. Moving away from the older paradigms of "roadside drama" or "psychological interiority," Ganim proposed a notion of theatricality as a "governing sense of performance, an interplay among the author's voice, his fictional characters and his immediate audience" (Ganim 1990, 5). At the theoretical heart of Ganim's theatricality was a blend of Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque and a historicist argument for the political theater of the late fourteenth century's Ricardian court. Rather than seeking to offer one-to-one correspondences with, say, the medieval cycle plays (the Miller playing Herod, or the sound of Pilate's voice), *Chaucerian Theatricality* sought a more figurative relationship to traditions of performance, preaching, commerce, and communion. While acknowledging that, "from an empirical point of view, it is Chaucer's early poetry that is most obviously theatrical" (Ganim 1990, 7), Ganim makes the point that theatricality as a governing poetic principle shapes the *Canterbury Tales*. Behind that principle—the very poetics of mature Chaucerian making—were not only the literary models of Boccaccio but the political tensions between court and city, Latin and vernacular, silence and noise. Another way of putting it might be to say that *Chaucerian Theatricality* sought to reconceive the

familiar dualisms of Chaucerian criticism (*senescence/soldan*, *earnest/game*) as matters less of genre or subject matter than as questions of dynamic social interaction.

In these attentions, Ganim anticipated the kind of work to be done later in the 1990s. Steven Justice's *Writing and Rebellion* for example, saw the Rising of 1381 as a kind of vernacular theater. Eamon Duffy's *Stripping of the Altars* argued the first decades of the Reformation played out an authoritarian squelching of a living, popular tradition of religious theater in the Mass and festivals (Duffy 1992). David Wallace's *Chaucerian Polity* understood the poet in historical and personal dialog with Italian city-state despotism and, in turn, the performative qualities of local rule. Many of these, and other works, framed Chaucer looking outwards to the complex dialectic between court and city. These studies, too, participated in a distinctive historicist turn in Chaucer studies, looking for the ways which, in Lee Patterson's terms, Chaucer's subject was always the historical distance of past texts to present readers, the place of his contemporary power-structures in an arc of moralizing historical narrative, and an overarching relationship of subjectivity, subjecthood, and subjection between ruler and ruled or author and reader (Patterson 1991).

Chaucerian Theatricality

JA Banks



Chaucerian Theatricality:

Whispering the Strategies of Language: An Mental Journey through **Chaucerian Theatricality**

In a digitally-driven earth wherever monitors reign great and immediate transmission drowns out the subtleties of language, the profound techniques and psychological subtleties concealed within words usually get unheard. However, located within the pages of **Chaucerian Theatricality** a fascinating literary value pulsing with organic emotions, lies an extraordinary quest waiting to be undertaken. Written by a skilled wordsmith, this marvelous opus attracts readers on an introspective journey, lightly unraveling the veiled truths and profound impact resonating within the very cloth of every word. Within the psychological depths of the touching review, we can embark upon a heartfelt exploration of the book is core styles, dissect their captivating writing design, and succumb to the strong resonance it evokes deep within the recesses of readers hearts.

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