

Making Substantial Connections: A Critical Appreciation of Sheila Delany

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The title of this article plays on the subtitle of an intriguing early essay by Sheila Delany, called “Undoing Substantial Connection: The Late Medieval Attack on Analogical Thought.” In it, Delany advances a broad argument that addresses trends in medieval philosophy, history of science, and political theory as well as fourteenth-century literature. The essay’s breadth and energy is characteristic of Delany’s best work, which has stimulated and provoked lines of investigation by her contemporaries as well as by a subsequent generation of younger scholars. Some of the critical responses to Delany’s work have been contentious; others have served to corroborate the speculations advanced in this seminal article. Consistently, however, they provide evidence of the extraordinary way in which Sheila Delany has worked to shape the field of medieval studies and of the extent to which her thinking has been, so to speak, ahead of the curve.

This essay is not intended as a comprehensive survey of Delany’s work on medieval literature and culture, much less of her work on literature and political thought of other periods and her numerous publications of fiction and poetry. Such a survey can be found in Lynn Arner’s recently edited special issue of *Exemplaria*, which includes Arner’s biography of Delany as well as a comprehensive list of Delany’s publications.¹ Instead, the purpose of this essay is to use three of Delany’s most influential articles to provide insights into how her work has dramatically shifted the direction of critical discourse in emergent subfields of medieval studies. These articles include “Undoing Substantial

1 Arner, “Up Against the Great Traditions” and “Sheila Delany’s Publications.”

Connection: The Late Medieval Attack on Analogical Thought” (1972), mentioned above; “‘Mothers to Think Back Through’: Who Are They? The Ambiguous Example of Christine de Pizan” (1987); and “Geographies of Desire: Orientalism in Chaucer’s *Legend of Good Women*” (1992). Through these articles, each of which has inspired debate and stimulated scholarly research, Delany has demonstrated an uncanny ability to anticipate major trends in the field, and a willingness to make bold — even provocative — statements that shake up established notions about value and meaning in medieval culture.

Delany’s earliest publications, centred in the main on Chaucer and related works, are distinguished by their close reading of the literary text coupled with a strong interest in the intellectual history that lies behind the works of the so-called “father” of English poetry. With “Undoing Substantial Connection,” however, Delany clearly moves onto a new level of discourse, sketching out a big picture of the ways in which science, philosophy, political thought, and literature participated, during the late Middle Ages, in a common shift in modes of thought. The article first appeared in *Mosaic*, a journal of critical theory (published at the University of Manitoba), which was a particularly appropriate venue for a piece of work that would be read avidly not just by scholars of medieval English literature, but by those working on other periods and — most importantly — readers concerned with the effort to theorize precisely how literature might be historicized, and in what terms. Its wide appeal is attested by the reprinting of “Undoing Substantial Connection” in a collection of essays selected from *Mosaic* later in 1972.² Delany begins her essay with a quotation from Marc Bloch, the widely influential *Annales* historian, suggesting that “similarities” in medieval culture can best be explained not in terms of “imitation,” but rather in terms of common causes that lie behind a range of effects.³ Delany uses this observation as the basis for a consideration of “analogical thought” in a host of discourses including literature, science, political theory, and philosophy.

In literature, Delany situates analogical thought firmly in the realm of allegory, which she defines not so much in typological terms (as in Dante’s *Commedia*, following Auerbach) as in terms of personification and similitude. Allegories such as the *Roman de la Rose* and Orwell’s *Animal Farm* speak “to the already convinced,”⁴ constructing a

2 Reprinted as “The Late Medieval Attack on Analogical Thought: Undoing Substantial Connection,” in *Chaos and Form*, edited by Kenneth McRobbie.

3 Delany, “Undoing,” 31; quoting Bloch, “A Contribution,” 54.

4 Delany, “Undoing,” 35.

parallel fictive narrative that mirrors a narrative based in ‘real’ experience, which is epistemologically prior to the fiction. Thus, Delany argues, “meaning precedes narrative in allegory.”⁵ Assimilating allegory (of this type, at least) to analogical thought in general, Delany goes on to argue that “scholars in fields as varied as physics and cosmology, political theory and logic, began to question received theories based on analogy.”⁶ Texts such as Jean Buridan’s *Questions* on Aristotle’s *Physics* and Nicole Oresme’s commentary on Aristotle’s *De Caelo* are, Delany suggests, manifestations of a similar attack on analogical thought. It might at first seem peculiar to identify Aristotelian science as characteristic of “analogical” modes of thought; after all, the rise of Aristotelianism in medieval science during the thirteenth century served largely to displace earlier neoplatonic forms, where similitude was the very foundation of all intellectual enquiry. Nonetheless, Delany suggests, medieval Aristotelianism retained “some aspects of analogy,” such as “the existence of elemental spheres” surrounding the world and the “principle of like to like,” which explains why stones fall downward and air flies upward.⁷ In addition, according to Delany, Aristotle’s use of the rhetorical trope of analogy was displeasing to medieval commentators; she notes that Buridan explicitly rejected Aristotle’s use of anthropomorphic analogies regarding physical phenomena, such as fatigue and labour, on the basis that these concepts are inappropriate to objects that have no innate capacity for movement. Thus, for Buridan and Oresme, as for other “advanced late-medieval scientists,” analogy was ultimately deceptive as a guide to the nature of the created world, both on the level of an overarching “world-view” and on the rhetorical level.⁸

Delany invokes Mircea Eliade — another figure, like Bloch, profoundly influential at that moment in critical discourse — to move her argument concerning the rejection of analogical thought into the realm of political theory, suggesting that “the analogical world-view” is “a social phenomenon,” and that myth itself is, for primitive societies, a form of political theory.⁹ The “organic analogy” of the “body politic,” first formulated in detail in the twelfth century by John of Salisbury, is one such “especially versatile myth”;¹⁰ another such political analogy concerns the likening of papal and imperial power to the sun and the moon. As early as the late thirteenth century, however, figures such as Jean Quidort began to take note of the “arbitrariness of allegorical exegesis” that

5 Delany, “Undoing,” 35.

6 Delany, “Undoing,” 35.

7 Delany, “Undoing,” 38.

8 Delany, “Undoing,” 39.

9 Delany, “Undoing,” 39.

10 Delany, “Undoing,” 40.

lay behind such political analogies.¹¹ By the fourteenth century, writers ranging from Dante to Marsilius of Padua openly rejected the unbridled use of allegorical exegesis, discounting the powerful myth of the “body politic” on both theoretical and — most strikingly — experiential grounds.¹² William of Ockham is a particularly significant figure in Delany’s argument, for he, like Marsilius, rejects analogical thought in his works on political theory, and exhibits in his logical writings what Delany identifies as a “systematic critique of the general epistemological basis of analogy.”¹³ Ockham’s nominalist stance with regard to the existence of universals is, for Delany, the cornerstone of the late medieval rejection of “analogical thought,” and the flowering of a form of skepticism that, Delany suggests, uprooted the very foundations of medieval Christianity and paved the way for the intellectual and cultural tumult of the Reformation: “If there are no real abstract essences, in what sense can bread and wine be said to ‘be’ the body and blood of Christ? How can Christ be considered both man and god at once?”¹⁴

In the closing pages of her essay, Delany returns to the realm of literature and a closer consideration of allegory in the context of the general decline of analogical thought sketched out in the preceding pages. She suggests that a figure such as Chaucer, while not necessarily cognizant of the political, philosophical, and scientific theories of scholars such as Buridan, Oresme, and Ockham, would certainly have partaken in the general decline in analogical thinking, aided by his own “experience and observation” of historical events such as “the failure of the crusade movement,” the Great Schism and increasing prevalence of religious heterodoxy, and political rebellions such as that of the Jacquerie in France and the Peasants’ Revolt in England.¹⁵ The “unusual complexity” and “ambiguity” of the late fourteenth century, Delany concludes, would have made the genre of allegory untenable, its assumption of an orderly system of correspondences clearly incompatible with a world fraught with contingency. In particular, the rising value placed on the infinitely flexible human will could not be rendered in terms of allegory: “The ambivalence of human will is [Chaucer’s] constant theme.”¹⁶ Chaucer’s *Criseyde*, then, epitomizes the simultaneous failure of the allegorical mode and the rise of a new form of literary realism, one that does justice to the fragmented will of the human individual.¹⁷

11 Delany, “Undoing,” 43.

12 Delany, “Undoing,” 44-45.

13 Delany, “Undoing,” 46.

14 Delany, “Undoing,” 48.

15 Delany, “Undoing,” 48-49.

16 Delany, “Undoing,” 50.

17 Delany, “Undoing,” 51.

Admittedly, it is not difficult to point out a number of flaws in Delany's argument, moments when the conflation of related but distinct concepts leads to very specific, localized errors. It is also impossible to deny that the essay tends to rely upon secondary sources for the citation of certain technical passages, especially in then-untranslated Latin philosophical and scientific texts, and that the overview of Platonic and Aristotelian modes of thought is, at best, highly reductive. The brilliance of the argument, however, lies precisely in its breadth, and in the almost intuitive way in which Delany draws together a range of texts, philosophical, scientific, political, and literary, into a coherent 'big picture' of medieval thought. It is impossible to overstate the importance of such work, which stimulates even as it provokes, and enables exciting new questions even more than it provides fully satisfying answers. In this respect, Delany's "Undoing Substantial Connection" can be fruitfully compared with historian of science A. Mark Smith's effort to describe how changes in medieval optical theory are linked to broader epistemological changes, or philosopher Katherine Tachau's detailed study of the relationship of developments in medieval logic to contemporary scientific theory, or Joel Kaye's exploration of Nicole Oresme's concurrent role in cosmology, economics, and political theory.¹⁸ Delany's work differs from theirs, however, both in its extraordinary breadth and ambition and in its dissemination in the remarkably fertile field of literary theory.

The provocative quality already evident in the first of the three Delany articles selected for this brief survey is even more fully manifest in the second. "Mothers to Think Back Through: Who Are They? The Ambiguous Example of Christine de Pizan" first appeared in a collection of essays published in 1987 by Laurie Finke and Martin Schichtman, but it is an essay whose intellectual origins were evident at a much earlier stage in Delany's career. As early as 1974, with her essay on "Womanliness in *The Man of Law's Tale*," Delany had come to be interested in the medieval depiction of women not just in terms of contemporary feminist theory but in terms of the broader social position of women. For Delany, it was increasingly crucial to consider medieval women, both as subjects of history and subjects of literature, as being defined not only in terms of gender but also in terms of class and economic status. In 1983, Delany published several essays related to this theme in *Writing Woman: Women Writers and Women in Literature, Medieval to Modern*. Yet this topic continued to simmer for Delany even as the figure of Christine de Pizan, long neglected in surveys of medieval literature, became the darling

18 Smith, "Getting the Big Picture in Perspectivist Optics"; Tachau, *Vision and Certitude*; Kaye, *Economy and Nature*.

of Women's Studies programmes (and revamped Great Books programmes) everywhere. Delany, who had included a relatively sympathetic overview of Christine in *Writing Woman*, was appalled by the unproblematically celebratory way in which Christine de Pizan had come to be read, making this point both in her 1978 *Signs* review of Enid McLeod's biography of Christine and in the heated exchange of letters that followed the review's publication.

In that exchange, Delany was criticized by Arlyn Diamond for using a tone in her essay inappropriate to a journal that is "a model of feminist scholarship," a tone that "is not what women's studies needs."¹⁹ For Diamond, Delany's review "endorse[s] a model of scholarship which is competitive, individualistic, and hierarchical."²⁰ Diamond's painfully repressive view of what sort of tone is appropriate to women's discourse is partly redeemed by her subsequent insightful observation regarding the actual object of Delany's excoriating review: "A large part of the review's rigor seems to come from a judgment about the subject of the book."²¹ Diamond's suggestion that Christine's extreme social conservatism was due to her own "precarious" economic position, and that she therefore "deserve[s] our sympathy"²² is absurd; however, her identification of what can only be called anger or indignation at the biographical subject in Delany's review of McLeod is right on the mark. Delany herself indirectly acknowledges this in her response to the letters by Diamond and Susan Groag Bell published in *Signs*, stating that "I see the special oppression of women as a product of large historical and economic processes [. . .]. I would be happy to write at more length on why feminism and Marxism are and have historically been counterposed."²³

In "Mothers to Think Back Through," Delany treads some of that ground promised in her *Signs* response. While the intersection of Marxism and feminism is not the central focus of the essay, it is the theoretical framework within which its argument is articulated. Delany refers to Christine as "my test case" in an examination of "the special problems" posed by "the tradition of the writing woman."²⁴ In Delany's analysis, gender alone is not a sufficient matrix within which to understand the position of the woman writer, and the simple fact of her gender does not excuse her from the responsibility to

19 Diamond, "Comment on Sheila Delany's Review of *The Order of the Rose*," 593; see also Bell, "Comment on Sheila Delany's Review of *The Order of the Rose*."

20 Diamond, "Comment," 594.

21 Diamond, "Comment," 594.

22 Diamond, "Comment," 595.

23 Delany, "A Response to Bell and Diamond," 596.

24 Delany, "Mothers," 177.

be sensitive to other social and economic issues of her day. Taking her title from a phrase in Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, Delany confronts head-on the often blind way in which scholars in the field of feminist literature and women's studies have constructed female writers as heroic figures on the basis of the mere fact of their having written, rather than criticizing their work with the same rigour they would apply to a male author. For Delany, the "rehabilitation" of Christine de Pizan as a significant contributor to literary history is desirable not as part of an ongoing commitment to the creation and nurturing of a trans-historical "sisterhood," but rather as a humanistic response to the broader social and economic currents running through pre-modern societies. As Delany notes, citing Charles Fourier, "the condition of women in any society is an index to the advancement and limitations of that society as a whole."²⁵

The reading of Christine de Pizan that follows is undeniably angry and, I think, deliberately provocative. Delany's explicit goal is to produce a critical reading that pushes back against "the large claims that have been made" for Christine,²⁶ such as those found in Earl Jeffrey Richards' translation of *The City of Ladies*, ubiquitous on undergraduate syllabi in courses both on medieval literature and on women writers. Richards has influentially characterized Christine as "profoundly feminist," a "revolutionary" figure whose effort to liberate women is comparable to that of Martin Luther King, Jr., on behalf of African-Americans.²⁷ Delany caustically replies, "if King is your idea of a revolutionary, then the leap to Christine de Pizan is not hard to make."²⁸ For Delany, the simple fact of being female — or African-American — is not enough to make one a "revolutionary." The responsibility to question authority, to resist oppression (by violence, if necessary), is no less applicable to a human being regardless of the accidents of gender or race. The forceful nature of Delany's argument is justified by the prevalence (in the 1980s, at least) of just such a naive reading of Christine de Pizan and by a facile acceptance of the principle of trans-historical "sisterhood" celebrated by Women's Studies as the price to be paid for the recuperation of one more medieval figure within the syllabi of literature survey courses. As Delany puts it, "Mothers to Think Back Through" is an effort to "correct" a pattern of "overestimation" in contemporary readings of Christine,²⁹ to push aggressively against a prevalent, stultifying pattern of misreading.

25 Delany, "Mothers," 179.

26 Delany, "Mothers," 180.

27 Richards, trans., Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, xxviii-xxvix [sic]; Delany, "Mothers," 180.

28 Delany, "Mothers," 197.

29 Delany, "Mothers," 194.

Responses to the undeniably inflammatory nature of Delany's essay were, predictably, severe. Over the last two decades, "Christine Studies" has taken on an increasingly institutional quality, with several webpages devoted to her oeuvre and the secondary literature it has spawned, international Christine de Pizan colloquia held regularly, and the inauguration of a Christine de Pizan Society which meets annually at Kalama-zoo. Concomitantly, the field has engendered a proprietary quality among a number of scholars, some of whom seem to have a great deal invested in a particular 'kind' of Christine de Pizan. This is not the place to rehearse such debates; what is pertinent, however, is the role that Sheila Delany's essay has had within them, acting as a sort of straw man to be criticized as an example of criticism that is simply too provocative. To be fair, Delany herself invites this kind of response, likening Christine to Rosemary Woods on the basis of her blind service of the political hierarchy, and to Phyllis Schaflly on the basis of her invectives against obscenity in the *Roman de la Rose*.³⁰ Recently, the effectiveness of this provocative quality has waned: as those of us who teach Christine de Pizan in undergraduate and graduate courses have observed, the current generation of readers of "Mothers to Think Back Through" are unlikely to recognize the name of the founding mother of the Moral Majority, much less that of Richard Nixon's personal secretary. First-time readers of Delany's essay now tend instead to take her argument at face value, interpreting it within the context of current retrospective views of the evolution of Women's Studies and feminist criticism over the last few decades.

Perhaps the most valuable contribution of "Mothers to Think Back Through," however, is the way it has provoked other scholars working on Christine de Pizan to define more carefully the extent to which, and in what terms, we may think of Christine as a champion of women. In this respect, the work of Christine Reno has been outstanding, characterized by a refusal to echo the tone of simplistic celebration found in the work of other Christine scholars. Borrowing a phrase from Delany for her subtitle, Reno's "Christine de Pizan: 'At Best a Contradictory Figure?'" argues that Christine's opposition to revolution emerges not from an obsequious urge to support the aristocracy, but rather a profound aversion to human suffering and an eagerness to use her writings in the service of an effort to bring about social reconciliation and communal harmony.³¹ Reno is just one among a large number of scholars to respond to the challenge posed by Delany's essay, an essay that provided a bracing corrective to the predominant trend in reading that had, for a time, stifled critical enquiry. The republication of "Mothers to

30 Delany, "Mothers," 187 and 191.

31 Reno, "Christine de Pizan," 181-83.

Think Back Through” in the Norton Critical Edition of Christine’s works in 1997 played a part in ensuring its continued dissemination,³² as has the inclusion of a recent critique by Delany in the same collection that contains Reno’s essay noted above.³³ In sum, Delany’s essay made a significant intervention at a particularly crucial moment in the development of Christine Studies, and continues to play a vital role — if a less inflammatory one — in contemporary criticism.

One of the striking features of Delany’s criticism is the way it adroitly situates itself relative to contemporary movements in the field, both responding critically to recent currents of reading, and anticipating, often with great acuity, imminent changes in perspective. This is evident in “Mothers to Think Back Through” in the way in which Delany grounds her enquiry in Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), a book that was at that time a central element in Women’s Studies syllabi and the foundation of almost any piece of writing on women authors, regardless of the period studied. With great perspicacity, Delany returns to the same figures in the last lines of “Mothers to Think Back Through,” thanking Gilbert for her comments on an earlier version of the essay.³⁴ Elsewhere, Delany alludes to Christine’s view of woman as “the angel in the house,”³⁵ a phrase (probably not coincidentally) central to Gilbert and Gubar’s writing on women authors both in *Madwoman* and in subsequent phases of their work. A similar bracketing effect can be seen in the third of Delany’s essays explored here, “Geographies of Desire: Orientalism in Chaucer’s *Legend of Good Women*,” in which the work of Edward Said provides the groundwork for the essay’s theoretical trajectory. “Geographies of Desire” is at once more ambitious and less fully articulated than the two essays previously discussed, but it provides perhaps the most striking example among the three of the extent to which Delany has consistently anticipated broad trends in medieval studies, and the way in which her work has set the terms for further research — sometimes confirmed by that research, sometimes refuted.

Both “Undoing Substantial Connection” and “Mothers to Think Back Through” are free-standing articles, related to but not directly adapted from longer pieces of work by Delany. Though the former article clearly shows its origins in Delany’s early publications on Chaucer, it goes far beyond them in the scope and breadth of the argument it advances. Similarly, the latter article emerges, to some extent, from Delany’s earlier

32 *Selected Writings of Christine de Pizan*, ed. Blumenfeld-Kosinski.

33 Delany, “History, Politics, and Christine Studies,” 193–206.

34 Delany, “Mothers,” 197 n. 29.

35 Delany, “Mothers,” 190.

Writing Woman but ventures far afield from the conclusions of that monograph both with regard to the specific reading of Christine de Pizan and in using her as a “test case” for much more wide-ranging questions regarding how to assess the merits — political, historical, and aesthetic — of literature. Unlike these two articles, “Geographies of Desire: Orientalism in Chaucer’s *Legend of Good Women*” (1992) is to some extent an offshoot of a concurrently written volume titled *The Naked Text: Chaucer’s “Legend of Good Women”* (1994), though the influence of Delany’s work in this area has been mediated primarily through the article, partly because the article appeared in print at an earlier date and partly because it presents Delany’s ambitious argument concerning medieval Orientalism in fuller form. It is useful to take note of the close relationship between “Geographies of Desire” and *The Naked Text*, not because the two works are redundant, but because the monograph’s use of gender as the fundamental vector of alterity serves to skew the article’s argument concerning how geography — the quality of being “Oriental” — functions as a vector of alterity in the *Legend of Good Women*. While Delany proposes to demonstrate that there is “another target than woman for the construction of otherness in the *Legend*,” that is, “the Orient,”³⁶ her analysis in the end reveals much less about how Chaucer conceives of the Orient than how he represents the “barbarian,” one who dwells in “outlying” places.³⁷ For Chaucer, geography most often stages alterity in terms of the centre and the margin, as Delany herself has suggested in her work on the “Man of Law’s Tale”; the “east-west confrontation” is less apparent³⁸ and fits awkwardly with the article’s insightful close readings of passages in the *Legend of Good Women*.

Delany’s critical interest in the literary work central to “Geographies of Desire” first appeared in the form of a paper titled “The Logic of Obscenity in Chaucer’s *Legend of Good Women*,” given at the meeting of the New Chaucer Society in 1984 and published in the pages of this journal. Delany delivered other related papers in 1985 and 1986, but a period of abeyance followed the *Florilegium* article until the presentation of “Geographies of Desire” as a talk in 1991 and its subsequent publication in 1992 as an invited contribution to the inaugural issue of the *Chaucer Yearbook: A Journal of Late Medieval Studies*. Delany cites her forthcoming monograph, *The Naked Text*, in the first note of “Geographies of Desire,” signaling clearly the affiliation of the two pieces of work. However, where *The Naked Text* focuses particularly on the ways in which Chaucer “aims to

36 Delany, “Geographies,” 2.

37 Delany, “Geographies,” 23.

38 Delany, “Geographies,” 5.

deconstruct” the “socio-literary construction of gender,” “Geographies of Desire” turns instead to “another target,” namely, “the foreigner,” a figure rapidly assimilated, in Delany’s argument, to the remote inhabitants of “the Orient”;³⁹ this seemingly innocuous shift produces a subsequent disjunction in the development of the thesis of the article.

Delany explicitly grounds her study of Chaucer’s crucial figure of the “foreigner” in Edward Said’s groundbreaking study of Orientalism. It is impossible to overstate the extent of the influence of Said’s provocative argument: every study of the depiction of the Orient or Islam in western culture published since the appearance of *Orientalism* in 1978 has necessarily positioned itself (either affirmatively or negatively) relative to Said’s work. Delany cites Said’s three fundamental definitions of Orientalism in outlining the contours of her own argument, but departs significantly from the third of these, which Said defines as a means for the West to manage and control the Orient and which he locates in the late eighteenth century with the Napoleonic conquest of Egypt. Delany differs significantly from Said (and Foucault) in claiming that such a discursive formation, grounded in the power structures of modern colonialism, existed long before the eighteenth century. She argues that the western assault on “Palestine — *outramer*, the Holy Land, the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem” in the course of the Crusades was in fact an early manifestation of modern western colonialism.⁴⁰ Delany’s conflation of modern and pre-modern colonialism in the form of the Crusades is based on Joshua Praver’s controversial work, whose thesis has been repeatedly challenged on the basis that the power dynamic separating medieval Crusaders from the local Levantine population was very different from that separating modern western armies from those living in colonized areas. While Praver himself is careful to emphasize the differences separating modern and pre-modern colonialism in the Levant, Delany minimizes them, suggesting that it is doubtful whether “the ontological/epistemological uses of the Orient” fundamental to Said’s initial definition of Orientalism can even “exist without an accompanying [. . .] material basis in colonialism.”⁴¹

Delany soon moves beyond the “generalities” of her opening paragraphs on pre-modern Orientalism and colonialism to a closer examination of what the Orient and the Crusades would have signified to a fourteenth-century “English courtier-civil servant.”⁴² She goes on to frame her discussion in terms of an “east-west dynamic,” suggesting that

39 Delany, “Geographies,” 1-2.

40 Delany, “Geographies,” 3.

41 Delany, “Geographies,” 3.

42 Delany, “Geographies,” 4.

Chaucer's work reflects "an awareness of the east-west confrontation threatening Europe."⁴³ Delany's subsequent insightful close readings of the *Legend of Good Women*, however, reveal less of an awareness of "east-west" issues than a sensitivity on Chaucer's part to the precarious place of the outsider, the person who is removed from the cultural, linguistic, or imperial centre, whether in terms of spatial location or bodily difference. Delany's initial figure of the "foreigner" as the "barbarian"⁴⁴ who inhabits remote, isolated territory (developed more fully later in her reading of the "Legend of Hypsipyle and Medea") proves far more useful in her analysis of the text. In this case, seeing the 'big picture' of medieval Orientalism tends to pull Delany away from her reading of the literary work rather than nourishing it, as is the case in the two seminal articles discussed earlier in this essay.

In spite of this feature (or perhaps because of it), "Geographies of Desire" has had a strong impact on recent efforts to articulate to what extent and in what terms Orientalism can be defined as a pre-modern phenomenon. Its speculative, sometimes facile elision of categories has stimulated a range of fascinating responses — both challenges and affirmations — in the critical literature. The reason why "Geographies of Desire" has so successfully stimulated further research is, paradoxically, the very flaw at the heart of the article's argument. In it, the category of the "Orient," so crucial to the fundamental framework of the argument grounded in the historical circumstances of medieval crusade and colonial conquest, is gradually expanded to encompass an extremely wide range of negative qualities: degenerate sexuality, feminine weakness, dark skin, and so forth. In some ways, such a broad spectrum of Oriental difference would seem perfectly logical, following closely the general features highlighted by Said in his wide-ranging study of the phenomenon of Orientalism. The difficulty is that many of these features are late developments that are not manifested in pre-modern Orientalism.

For example, Delany rightly discusses the "effeminate" quality of Aeneas in the "Legend of Dido" in the context of the accusations of homosexuality levelled against his character in the twelfth-century *Roman d'Eneas*. Less persuasive, however, is her subsequent comment concerning "the association of Oriental societies with homosexuality."⁴⁵ Although medieval texts refer to sexual deviance in connection with Islam (mainly concerning polygamy, promiscuity, and unorthodox sexual positions), the accusation of homosexuality is extremely rare until the sixteenth century, when references

43 Delany, "Geographies," 5.

44 Delany, "Geographies," 23.

45 Delany, "Geographies," 20.

to homosexuality begin to appear in western texts concerning the Ottoman court. Here, anachronism concerning the distinctions to be made between pre-modern and modern Orientalism dilutes the force of the close reading of the literary work. A similar anachronism appears in the discussion of the “Legend of Cleopatra,” where the queen is described as being “fayr as is the rose in May.” Delany notes that “This last phrase describing a swarthy North African queen must have evoked some little sense of irony in the keenly color-conscious medieval reader.”⁴⁶ This statement is misleading not just because (as Higden notes in his *Polychronicon*), Cleopatra was of the same northern (and therefore white, in terms of medieval climate theory) Macedonian stock as Alexander the Great, but because the trope of the fair, blonde Saracen queen is ubiquitous in medieval *chansons de geste* and romances. Again, the modern paradigm of racial difference distracts the reader from the more subtle insights of the argument, generating needless anachronism.

A further difficulty is generated by the loose application of categorical distinctions with regard to medieval Orientalism. The descriptive term “Oriental,” in Delany’s argument, comes to be an impossibly diverse geographic descriptor, referring only rarely to any location actually situated in the East. Cleopatra of Egypt, Thisbe of Babylon, and Dido of Carthage are all identified as members of a single group: “Oriental women.”⁴⁷ Yet Asia and north Africa were not understood by medieval readers as part of a single category, “the Orient.” As I have argued elsewhere, the tripartite division of the world into the three known continents, as well as the quadripartite division of the world into the four regions of North, South, East, and West fundamental to Orosius’s widely disseminated universal history, were equally powerful geographical frameworks for medieval readers.⁴⁸ The simple “east-west” dichotomy is useful, if limited, in understanding the modern phenomenon of Orientalism; in pre-modern manifestations, it introduces dangerous distortions. For example, in the “Legend of Dido,” the common inability of Aeneas and Dido to take control of their destiny is due to their status as “two Oriental figures.”⁴⁹ In his universal history, however, Orosius takes care to distinguish sharply between imperial Babylon, the seat of eastern power, and Dido’s imperial Carthage, the seat of southern power. And in what sense can Aeneas, refugee from Troy and founder of Rome (for Orosius, the seat of western power), be understood as an “Oriental figure”?

46 Delany, “Geographies,” 13.

47 Delany, “Geographies,” 23.

48 Akbari, “From Due East to True North” and “Alexander in the Orient.”

49 Delany, “Geographies,” 22.

In her final pages, Delany returns to the big picture concerning medieval western views of the Orient, taking note of the energetic intellectual engagement of scholars such as Peter the Venerable with the tenets of Islamic law. Yet this “scholarly approach”⁵⁰ to the Orient lies far afield from the views reflected in Chaucer’s *Legend of Good Women*: as Delany puts it, “This is not, however, the tradition that Chaucer chose to embody in his work.”⁵¹ The fact that, apart from the “Man of Law’s Tale,” medieval views of Islam played little part in Chaucer’s literary production should have thrown up a red flag in Delany’s exposition of “the Oriental theme” in the *Legend of Good Women*. While Islam and the Orient are almost synonymous in Said’s account of modern Orientalism (so fundamental to Delany’s own study), this is emphatically not the case in pre-modern Orientalism, where the religious and geographical discourses of alterity are often complementary, but far from completely overlapping. The tension between the broad outlines of medieval Orientalism and the close engagement with the expression of alterity in the *Legend of Good Women* lingers into the final paragraphs of “Geographies of Desire,” both revealing the article’s genesis as a kind of fraternal twin of Delany’s *The Naked Text*, and setting the stage for her subsequent work on Muslim alterity in “Chaucer’s Prioress, the Jews, and the Muslims” (1999).

The article’s final lines anticipate (perhaps unconsciously) this future direction in her scholarship, as Delany reflects on the fundamental distinction between the two vectors of alterity that are the focus of this article. She concludes that “Chaucer was able to deconstruct gender difference,” but was not able to similarly deconstruct “an alien ideology embodied in Orientals [. . .]. Woman isn’t *eternally* other; the infidel is.”⁵² In this pithy formulation, gender appears as a category which is entered into at birth, not chosen freely, and which can (in the fullness of time, at the Resurrection) be perfected. Oriental difference, by contrast, is the result of a willful choice, made by those who “though exposed to Christian truth, rejected it.”⁵³ Such a volitional defect cannot be remedied; paradoxically, however, like sex difference, Oriental difference is “embodied,” inscribed in the flesh.⁵⁴ Such complicated imbrication of categories of race, gender, and religious diversity in the figure of woman, on the one hand, and “the Oriental,” on the other, could not be fully resolved through the argument articulated in “Geographies of Desire”

50 Delany, “Geographies,” 27.

51 Delany, “Geographies,” 27.

52 Delany, “Geographies,” 28.

53 Delany, “Geographies,” 28.

54 Delany, “Geographies,” 28.

and would have to await fuller treatment in Delany's 2002 edited volume on *Chaucer and the Jews*. This moment illustrates particularly well the way in which Delany's work both offers fertile insights to be pursued (or refuted) by other scholars and sows the seeds for upcoming developments in her own research trajectory.

That trajectory would include a renewed focus on collaborative work, in the form of two influential edited collections: *Chaucer and the Jews*, published in 2002, and "*Turn It Again*": *Jewish Medieval Studies and Literary Theory*, published as a special issue of *Exemplaria* in 2000 and revised and reissued in book form in 2004. The two volumes are complementary, with *Chaucer and the Jews* focusing particularly on western European perceptions of Jews and the rise of anti-Semitism, and "*Turn It Again*" illustrating the wide range of research possibilities open to the student of medieval Hebrew literature and Jewish history. While *Chaucer and the Jews* bears the stamp of Delany's own theoretical approach to medieval anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism, apparent both in her own republished article (originally printed in *Medieval Encounters*) on "Chaucer's Prioress, the Jews, and the Muslims" and in her critical introduction, it also amply demonstrates the heterogeneity of contemporary approaches to the place of Jews and Judaism in medieval European thought. The collection includes particularly fine historiographic essays by Anthony Bale and Mary Dove and stimulating literary studies by Denise Despres and Elisa Narin van Court, as well as two intriguing essays on teaching medieval anti-Semitic texts by Judith Neaman and Gillian Steinberg. A similarly capacious editorial sensibility informs "*Turn It Again*," in which Delany assembles scholars in a range of fields, from theology and critical theory (such as Daniel Boyarin and Chanita Goodblatt) to anthropology and literary history (Elliot Wolfson and Susan Einbinder), producing a rich intellectual feast that stimulates the reader to desire to learn more about medieval Jewish studies. Delany's profound influence on the development of Jewish studies as a crucial element within medieval studies is apparent not only in the reception of her two edited volumes described briefly here, but in some of the essays collected in this present issue of *Florilegium* as well.

In thinking back over the three key articles surveyed in this essay, perhaps the most inspiring quality of Sheila Delany's work is its fearlessness. That quality expresses itself not only in Delany's willingness to make bold, deliberately provocative arguments in order to shake up commonly accepted scholarly views — particularly evident in her article on Christine de Pizan — but also in her consistent willingness to go beyond a good but narrow reading based on a close analysis of the text in order to provide a fuller view of the culture that produced the literary work. The sometimes inflammatory quality of Delany's language serves the pragmatic purpose of stimulating the reader to rethink entrenched

ideas, often fruitfully. In addition, however, the raw passion that flares up in her writing testifies to the real importance of the work of the scholar, the responsibility we all have to do justice to the past both by representing it as fairly as we can and by making clear the ways in which that past relates to (and departs from) our present moment.

Delany's willingness to confront the present with the past, and to explore their relationship in political as well as literary terms, is evident not just in her written work but in her record of teaching as well, which includes courses on Marxism and the Arts as well as on primarily medieval topics. Her fearlessness of mind appears, too, in her syllabus for a course on the genre of Prison Writing, which includes not only Boethius and Oscar Wilde but also Hitler and Mumia Abu-Jamal. Never afraid to provoke, always willing to offer a bold (if speculative) argument, Sheila Delany has been a powerful voice in medieval studies over the past few decades. For me, as for a number of those in my own generation, she has truly been — to borrow a phrase from her own article — a mother to think back through.

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