

## Preface

Sheila Delany retired from Simon Fraser University in 2006, after a distinguished career which greatly enriched medieval studies both here in Canada and abroad. In celebration of her career and in recognition of her many outstanding contributions to the profession, the Canadian Society of Medievalists / Société canadienne des médiévistes takes great pleasure in offering this special issue of its journal *Florilegium* as a tribute to Professor Delany.

Born and raised in New Haven, Connecticut, Sheila Delany completed her BA at Wellesley College (1961) before attending the University of California at Berkeley for her MA (1963), and she then returned east for her PhD in English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University (1967), having studied with Alain Renoir, Charles Muscatine, E. Talbot Donaldson, W. T. H. Jackson, and Dorothy Metlitzki, whom she credits with awakening the medievalist in her. After teaching briefly at Queens College, CUNY, she accepted an appointment at Simon Fraser University in 1970 and made Canada her adopted home.<sup>1</sup> Her scholarship initially focused on Chaucer and Middle English literature but even in its early stages intersected with related fields and disciplines, including philosophy, gender studies, Old French literature, and, later, medieval Jewish studies. Her first two books, both published within the first two years of her new appointment, bear witness to the ease with which Sheila Delany moves from one discipline and one period to another: the anthology *Counter-Tradition: A Reader in the Literature of*

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1 For a detailed biography of Sheila Delany, see Lynn Arner, "Up Against the Great Traditions: The Career of Sheila Delany," *Exemplaria* 19, no. 1 (2007): 1-15.

*Dissent and Alternatives* (1971) includes texts ranging from Thucydides's *Peloponnesian War* to Malcolm X's "The Ballot or the Bullet," and her first monograph, *Chaucer's House of Fame: The Poetics of Skeptical Fideism* (1972), based on her doctoral dissertation, reads Middle English poetry through the lens of philosophy and literary theory. These two books are the first of an impressive string of publications. The scholarly breadth and depth of her research, its intellectual acuity, and its argumentative rigour are remarkable, as is the passionate commitment that leaps from the pages of Professor Delany's work.

Her first two books already partake of the characteristic mode of her later scholarly oeuvre, which is defined by a constant questioning of conventions and received positions, and her sense of academic mission is already manifest. As the titles of many of her books and articles suggest, from the very beginning of her career she has been concerned with "counter-traditions" and with "undoing connections," her own critical position being grounded in Marxist theory and growing out of her practical commitment to political activism through, for example, the Spartacist League and, later, the Canadian-Cuban Friendship Association. In the opening pages of *Counter-Tradition*, Professor Delany re-evaluates not only traditional anthologies which uncritically present to students the values of official culture under the guise of objectivity, but equally those anthologies devoted exclusively to contemporary material selected for its alleged "relevance." As she argues,

Logically extended, the confusion of relevance with up-to-the-minute modernity generates absurd slogans ('Don't trust anyone over thirty') and absurd fables ('the generation gap'). These, carefully nurtured by the establishment media, not only reassure us that our crises are without historical roots; not only divert our attention from their real causes; but cut us off from what help can be found in the revolutionary past.<sup>2</sup>

Over the next four decades, in numerous influential and provocative studies, she has battled to re-establish the connection to this past, showing just how revolutionary it had been and what it could offer today.

Long before it became normal practice, Professor Delany's work was informed by a theoretically grounded consideration of class and gender, as illustrated by her early (and much reprinted) essay "Sexual Economics, Chaucer's Wife of Bath, and *The Book of Margery Kempe*" (1975) and, later, the controversial "'Mothers to Think Back Through': Who Are They? The Ambiguous Example of Christine de Pizan" (1987). Subsequently, issues of proto-colonialism and ethno-religious identity also came to be important areas of concern in her scholarly writing. Her next book in this vein, *The Naked Text: Chaucer's*

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<sup>2</sup> Delany, *Counter-Tradition*, 3.

*Legend of Good Women* (1994), achieved the same for the *Legend* as her earlier book had done for the *House of Fame*: it returned the *Legend* to the Chaucerian canon and, in the process, released a flood of books and articles by other scholars reconsidering this long-neglected work. More recently, Professor Delany has turned her attention to medieval Jewish studies, producing two edited collections: “*Turn It Again*”: *Jewish Medieval Studies and Literary Theory*, originally published as a special issue of *Exemplaria* (2000) and since republished twice, and *Chaucer and the Jews: Sources, Contexts, Meanings* (2002). These volumes encouraged the rapprochement between medieval Jewish studies and western literary theory and thus are part of the larger trends already seen in her earlier work.<sup>3</sup>

Sheila Delany’s influential scholarship has been recognized in diverse ways. She has been awarded a Killam Research Fellowship as well as major research grants and other stipends by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, and later served in various capacities in the SSHRC adjudication process. She has also been a member of the advisory and editorial boards for *English Studies in Canada* and other journals, including *The Chaucer Review*, *Science and Society*, and *Exemplaria: A Journal of Theory in Medieval and Renaissance Studies*. Her numerous plenary lectures include an address to the newly formed Canadian Society of Medievalists at its inaugural conference in Ottawa in 1993 as well as her memorable remarks on “Hagio, Porn, and Femcrit” at the 1995 meeting of the Association of Canadian College and University Teachers of English (ACCUTE) in Montreal and her lecture on “Confluence and Resistance in an Old Yiddish Romance: Elias Levita’s *Bovo-bukh*” at the inaugural session of the Canadian Society for Jewish Studies, in Winnipeg, 2004. Other invitations have taken her around the globe, for engagements across North America, much of Europe, Israel, South Africa, and Australia. Back in Canada, one of her more recent books, *Impolitic Bodies – Poetry, Saints, and Society in Fifteenth-Century England: The Work of Osborn Bokenham* (1998), won the Canadian Society of Medievalists’ first annual Margaret Wade Labarge Prize for the best book in medieval studies in Canada – one of her many Canadian “firsts.”

While being an extremely productive scholar, Sheila Delany also contributes to the well-being of the profession in other ways. She is committed to nurturing emerging scholars, mentoring graduate students and other junior researchers both at her own

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3 For a more detailed discussion of Sheila Delany’s scholarship, see Suzanne Conklin Akbari’s essay (in this collection) “Making Substantial Connections: A Critical Appreciation of Sheila Delany,” *Florilegium* 23, no. 1 (2006): 1-18.

university and informally elsewhere. In the late 1980s and again more recently, she has been the main organizer of the Vancouver Medieval Symposium, hosting monthly sessions for colleagues and graduate students at the universities and colleges in southern British Columbia to meet, give papers, and forge professional contacts. Indeed, Professor Delany is a forceful example of that allegedly disappearing species, the public intellectual. She takes medieval literature off-campus and speaks to audiences of senior citizens and other community groups; she gives readings of her poetry and short fiction (published as self-contained collections and in Canadian and international literary magazines); and she participates in nationally broadcast radio shows on literary and political topics and writes reviews and commentaries for left-wing publications and others aimed at an educated public, both local and international. But her social engagement does not end there; over the years, she has been involved in cultural institutions outside the university, such as the Peretz Centre for Secular Jewish Culture in Vancouver and the speakers series of the Vancouver Public Library as well as in educational outreach projects including SFU's Headstart programme and the Harlem Tutorial Program, and she supports other projects such as organizing technology aid for Cuba and, on her retirement from Simon Fraser University, donated part of her private library to the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Poland.

Sheila Delany's prominence in medieval studies in Canada and her simultaneous international involvement are reflected in the thirteen articles in this volume, prepared in her honour by friends and colleagues now residing in Canada, the United States, Britain, Poland, Hungary, and Israel, though many of the contributors first met Professor Delany when they were teaching at universities in western Canada. Her interest in Chaucer and Middle English literature, in issues of gender, and in the intersection between medieval, post-colonial, and Jewish studies are all subjects represented in this festschrift. One of Sheila Delany's contributions has been to challenge narrow regional limits, encouraging medievalists to look beyond western and Christian Europe. This festschrift reflects this broader vision.

In the first piece in this collection, "Making Substantial Connections," Suzanne Akbari discusses two of Delany's most provocative pieces, her 1972 essay "Undoing Substantial Connection: The Late Medieval Attack on Analogical Thought" and her 1987 critique of Christine de Pizan as a "mother to think back through," and then turns to Delany's 1992 article "Geographies of Desire: Orientalism in Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*." Moving boldly across the fields of philosophy, intellectual history, and literature, the first of these pieces argues that the rejection of analogical modes of thought (such as the concept of the body politic) by late medieval philosophers such as William of

Ockham represented a turn towards skepticism that could also be seen in Chaucer's recognition of the ambivalence of the human will. The second piece criticizes Christine de Pizan's social conservatism and takes issue with the naïve celebration of Christine by liberal scholars, calling for a sterner assessment of her political choices. And the third applies Edward Said's model of Orientalism as a form of colonial control to the medieval Crusades. In each case, Akbari notes, Delany brought medieval studies into contact with broader theoretical issues and provoked vigorous debate. In the spirit of this tradition, Akbari does not hesitate to challenge Delany's positions (especially her elision of medieval Orientalism with its later forms), but has only praise for her courage and her determination to "confront the present with the past."

In numerous pieces on Chaucer's *Wife of Bath* and his *Legend of Good Women*, on Margery Kempe, and on Christine de Pizan, Delany has contributed to a more complex understanding of medieval gender issues and the intersection of gender with class and power. It is fitting, then, that the first group of articles in this collection address issues of gender. Glenn Burger draws on Judith Butler's recent discussion of the ways in which gender can be "undone," that is, in which certain prevailing conceptions of gender can be resisted or transformed. Extending this discussion back to the Middle Ages, he turns to the reconfiguration of marriage in western Europe in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, as attention shifted from the broader social group to the two spouses, united in mutual affection, and as marriage was increasingly seen by religious authorities in positive terms, a sacrament, a reflection of Christ's love for humanity, and even a model for a virtuous life. Burger examines the twelfth and thirteenth centuries' new attitudes to marriage as reflected in the *Menagier de Paris* and in the *journées chrétiennes*, conduct books instructing upper middle-class wives to incorporate a quasi-monastic regimen of devotion into their daily lives. Burger finds in these texts possibilities for hybrid identity for both the bourgeoisie reader and her husband, defying efforts to impose certain patterns of gender inequality. Turning to a different set of commercial and socio-economic changes, Brenda Hosington explores the intersection of printing, gender, and translation in her account of the ways in which early English printers capitalized on the *querelle des femmes* through translations of texts which had already proved popular on the Continent and offered guaranteed commercial success. Misogyny sold well, although the medieval anti-feminist tradition began to be supplemented by early humanist texts in defence of women's education. These varying treatments of the *querelle* illustrate the broader sexual politics of English printing during its first half-century. Rhoda Friedrichs assesses the degree of freedom widows had to remarry, noting the various kinds of pressures that were brought to bear on a number of late medieval

royal, aristocratic, or gentry widows by relatives or other interested parties; while being a widow did give a woman some power in a masculine society, this power was heavily curtailed. In the last piece in this section, Liliana Sikorska turns to female piety and *imitatio Christi* in her account of the *Mystical Autobiography* of the seventeenth-century Polish Carmelite nun Anna Maria Marchocka, who drew upon hagiographic models in shaping her confession, which later attained a wider role in strengthening Catholic piety during the Counter-Reformation.

Often the drive to break out from conventional paradigms requires a return to the basic material of medieval studies, the manuscripts. Following Sheila Delany and Ruth Nisse's call to broaden our understanding of English attitudes towards Judaism and to look beyond Chaucer's "Prioress's Tale" and across the Channel, Kathryn Kerby-Fulton turns to one of the most provocative of medieval theologians, the early thirteenth-century Italian exegete Joachim of Fiore, whose works provide a rich set of sources for attitudes to Judaism. Widely regarded as either a prophet or a heretic, Joachim advanced what might be called "pluralist millenarianism," based on a succession of historical periods in which Jews first surpass Gentiles in spiritual understanding during the age of the Father, then are surpassed by them in the age of the Son, and eventually become their equals in the coming age of the Holy Spirit. Kerby-Fulton provides a sketch of English Joachimism and its influence on English attitudes towards prophecy, universal salvation, and the role of the Jews, followed by an extensively annotated list of manuscripts of English provenance containing Joachite texts. In the next paper, "The Authorship of the Poems of Laurence Minot: A Reconsideration," A. S. G. Edwards turns to a series of eleven poems dealing with the military victories of Edward III. These poems have long been attributed to a single author, Laurence Minot, but as Edwards argues, the authorial attribution, like others on which the Middle English canon is based, is far from certain.

Beginning with her translation of Osbern Bokenham's late Middle English *Legend of Holy Women* (1992) and her subsequent study of Bokenham in *Impolitic Bodies – Poetry, Saints, and Society in Fifteenth-Century England* (1998), Delany's work has increasingly focused on medieval religious practice and on medieval Jewish studies, the subject of a special issue of *Exemplaria* which she edited in 2000 and of her collection *Chaucer and the Jews: Sources, Contexts, Meanings* (2002). While Kathryn Kerby-Fulton's paper on Joachite works touches on this field, two other contributions fall squarely in this area. Tova Rosen provides the first complete translation of Ben El'azar's thirteenth-century Hebrew romance *The Story of Maskil and Peninah*, a work which combines rhymed prose and poetry in the Arabic tradition. While this love story is usually regarded as an allegory of the triumph of Platonic Reason, Beauty, and Love over Folly, Ugliness,

and Violence, in her critical commentary Rosen explores the cultural conflicts operating in the romance, suggesting that it might ultimately be read as an expression of “the longing of exiled Arabicized Andalusian Jews for their cultural past.” In the next contribution, Robert Daum analyses the concept of “verbal wronging” in Rabbinic commentary on the Mishnah, the first major redaction of Jewish oral tradition, in the socio-economic context of Roman Palestine. The Mishnah recognizes the force of language, which can wound, misrepresent, and threaten the identity and status of its object, but it also recognizes that the true intent of the speaker is not accessible to merely human judgement.

In keeping with Sheila Delany’s interest in contemporary culture and her defence of “the much maligned fifteenth century” in *Impolitic Bodies*, the contributions in the final section reach beyond the traditional temporal boundaries of the western Middle Ages. In “Robin Hood and the Crusades,” Stephen Knight returns to surely the most famous English figure of popular resistance and asks how this renowned archer came to be a mounted gentleman in post-medieval productions from the fifteenth to the late twentieth century, riding in a landscape whose vague location reflects the political travails of the time. In his contribution, Lawrence Besserman likewise draws contemporary connections — between three forms of late medieval *imitatio Christi* and three American films whose concentration on the graphic depiction of Christ’s physical mutilation, on the recognition of Christ’s sexuality, and on Christ’s teaching, respectively, parallels works of late medieval affective piety, notably the *Meditationes vitae Christi* by Johannes de Caulibus (often called Pseudo-Bonaventure), who urges his reader to imagine herself witnessing the brutality of the Passion and to see Christ’s nakedness, and the works of the mystic Walter Hilton, who asks his reader to focus on (an unbloodied and asexual) Christ’s virtues of humility and charity; Besserman finds the same paradigms in late medieval visual art. David Gay returns to Delany’s concept of counter-tradition, “not that which opposes tradition [but] the tradition which opposes,” and applies it to Milton’s *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes*, both of which show heroes confronting authority and drawing on an earlier textual tradition to do so, that of the Hebrew Psalms. Gay notes that Milton’s Jesus resembles religious dissenters such as the utopian “Digger” Gerard Winstanley (one of the writers whom Delany includes in *Counter-Tradition*). Samson provides Gay with the second example of a dissenting figure who draws upon the Psalms for strength, echoing their language of prayer and finding in them a way of connecting the individual experience of exile and deliverance to that of a collective tradition. As Gay notes, the “Psalms complement prophecy in their unique affirmation of the human voice.” In the final piece, János Bak offers a sketch of the politically charged

deployment in Hungary of medieval and later myths of national origin which trace the Magyars back to Scythia or to the Huns or draw parallels between Hungary and the Israelites. Bak concludes by turning to the debates among twentieth-century historians concerning the effects of the recent use of such myths for political propaganda.

On behalf of the Canadian Society of Medievalists / Société canadienne des médiévistes and on behalf of the contributors, we offer this volume in the hope that these essays in their rich variety reflect the interests of Sheila Delany and are a fitting tribute to a respected colleague and a generous friend.

***A. E. Christa Canitz and Andrew Taylor***