

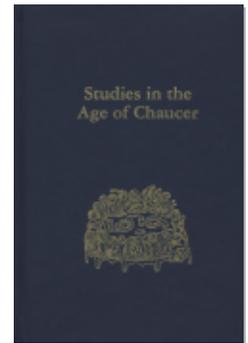


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Representing Righteous Heathens in Late Medieval England
(review)

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“organized, commercial, and even speculative production of manuscripts in England before the arrival of the press.” Downplaying Shirley’s own role in this rise in favor of the Hammond-scribe’s, she then complicates the thesis by noting that even the Hammond-scribe’s work (1460–80) postdates the arrival of print (pp. 48–50). Finally, she argues that just as Lydgate’s *Troy Book* relies on Chaucerian authorship as a springboard for authorial ambition, and Caxton’s in turn on Lydgate, so too do these *auctores* also “close in” upon the ambitions of the younger writers (p. 42). Gillespie never settles for the easy or obvious answers.

Of course, some queries spring to mind. Given that the emphasis on authorship throughout skews Gillespie’s findings in favor of named authors and classical traditions, would there be a way to conceive of the study so as to foreground, say, the 1550 editions of *Piers Plowman* as much as, for instance, the 1532 Chaucer? Would more emphasis on the printing of medieval mystical texts (as pioneered by Goldschmidt) reveal a different kind of sociology of the book (one thinks of Kempe or the *Orchard of Syon*)? Undoubtedly it would. But these subjects, though mentioned, are not Gillespie’s primary concern. Her primary concern—the print tradition of Chaucer and Lydgate especially—is beautifully realized, and a great addition to our history of the book.

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FRANK GRADY. *Representing Righteous Heathens in Late Medieval England*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. Pp. 214. \$65.00.

Representing Righteous Heathens is a sharply focused monograph that, in spite of its concision, covers a great deal of ground. Frank Grady suggests that the trope of the “righteous heathen” must be understood not only as a theological concept but as a literary “topos” (p. 70), and he goes on to explore the various ways that this trope was deployed in the cultural environment of late medieval England. The book is organized into four main chapters, each centered on one facet of the rich literary tradition of depicting righteous heathens in medieval England: “The Trouble with Trajan,” “Mandeville’s ‘Gret Meruaylle,’” “The Middle English Alexander,” and “The Rhetoric of the Righteous Heathen.” A

concluding chapter, “Virtuous Pagans and Virtual Jews,” productively moves the discourse of pagan alterity outside the simplistic framework of “heathen” nature (that is, the mere fact of exclusion from salvation by means of the mediation of the Church), exploring other forms of exclusion from the living body of Christ. Throughout *Representing Righteous Heathens*, Grady’s apt, often witty, turns of phrase are much in evidence; his narration of contemporary analogues to the phenomenon of the righteous heathen, in the introduction (pp. 8–9) and conclusion (pp. 131–32), are well chosen and add to the historical resonance of the book’s theme.

Beyond its fundamental premise, Grady’s argument conveys broader implications concerning the role of temporality and the formal principles of literary allusion: first, he suggests that the attempt to recuperate ancient alterity, enacted in medieval narratives of the righteous heathen, provides a template for interpreting “the modern critical attempt to understand the Middle Ages” (p. 10). Second, concerning the “formal significance” (p. 6) of the trope of the righteous heathen, Grady shows that the device appears at critical narrative junctures in several of the works he surveys: in Chaucer’s *Troilus*, as in the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*, “the virtuous pagan scene” serves as “an aesthetic resource” (p. 113) or, in Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*, “as a formal resource for aesthetic organization” (p. 121). This latter insight is among the most striking features of *Representing Righteous Heathens*: too often, studies of alterity treat poetic depictions in isolation, as though literature had the same evidentiary status as philosophical or theological treatises, encyclopedias, or historical chronicles. This is not to suggest that such sources should be read naively; with regard to historiography, for example, scholars such as Gabrielle Spiegel and Nancy Partner have long since demonstrated conclusively that chronicles must be read both with attention to expectations arising from the genre and with a keen awareness of the text’s moments of resistance. Grady, however, illustrates persuasively the extent to which formal principles specific to literary production dictate the nature of the portrayal of the righteous heathen, as well as determine the particular moments when the trope is demanded by the exigencies of the literary work.

In keeping with its specifically English focus, *Representing Righteous Heathens* is at its best when the literature under scrutiny is situated most explicitly in the local context: this is especially the case in the chapter on Alexander the Great, which includes detailed discussion of the wide

range of Alexander texts current in late medieval English (written not only in Middle English but also in Latin and Anglo-French [pp. 79–80]), with particularly tantalizing notes concerning English ownership of manuscripts of relevant texts. Other chapters, especially that on Mandeville, are noticeably weaker in this respect; *Mandeville's Travels* is read as a specifically English example of the trope of the righteous heathen in spite of the fact that the book was composed in French, most likely on the Continent, and scholars such as M. C. Seymour have argued quite forcefully that the author's claim of English identity is itself merely a literary trope. Grady justifies his inclusion of Mandeville on the rather shaky grounds that "there are more English versions of the *Travels*" than are found in other vernaculars, "though there are more extant manuscripts in those languages" (p. 46). His choice of the Cotton version is similarly peculiar: he chooses it because "it is available in two relatively common critical editions" and "due to its relatively faithful and complete rendering of its French source" (147 n. 7). If fidelity to the source is desirable, it would have been preferable to use Christiane Deluz's excellent edition of the French text; if widespread circulation in medieval England were the most important criterion, it would have been best to use the Defective Version, which is by far most common among English manuscripts. I belabor this point not because the choice of texts is so important in itself, but because it illuminates an aspect of *Representing Righteous Heathens* that is both its greatest strength and its greatest weakness: that is, its limitation to the local context of late medieval England, so superbly defined in relation to the Alexander texts and in the chapter on Trajan (treating both *Piers Plowman* and *St. Erkenwald*), but less well grounded in the chapter on Mandeville.

If the strength of *Representing Righteous Heathens* lies in its close analysis of the texts and its illumination of the cultural contexts directing particular readings, its weakness lies in the larger framework of the argument, especially the concept of "heathen" nature. The term "heathen" does not occur in the late medieval English texts that Grady studies; instead, it is used rather indiscriminately to render a range of other terms, some of which differ significantly. For example, chapter 4 opens with a quotation from Lord Cobham that refers to the status "of heathen peoples" (p. 101). The original text in the notes shows that the term translated is "ethnicorum" (168 n. 2), sometimes translated "pagan" or "heathen," but a term that refers to ethnic or national origin in addition to religious deviation from the Christian norm. A few lines

later, the term is glossed somewhat differently, as “infidels to the Christian faith” (“infideles . . . ad fidem Christianum” [p. 102]). If a “heathen” is one who is excluded from Christian salvation as mediated by the Church (which seems to be Grady’s working definition), surely it is important to understand the nature of that exclusion. Does it arise from a deliberate disavowal of the Christian faith, as in the case of medieval Muslims or “Saracens”? Or does it arise from ignorance of Christian revelation, as in the case of the hypothetical virtuous pagan living on the banks of the Indus, described in Dante’s *Commedia*? To what extent is ethnic or national difference understood as being coterminous with pagan or “heathen” identity?

These kinds of questions are not taken on directly in *Representing Righteous Heathens*, though they emerge obliquely in the spectrum of “righteous heathens” encountered in the chapter on Mandeville, ranging from the Muslim Sultan of Babylon to the Mongol Great Khan to the virtuous inhabitants of the Isle of Bragman. In the Introduction, Grady defines the problem of the righteous heathen as not singular, but rather made up “of different classes of heathens” (p. 5). A fuller definition of “heathen” nature, grounded in the terminology used to characterize these figures, would have been a useful foundation for the chapters that follow; in addition, it might have been wise to consider explicitly the consequences of choosing Trajan as the paradigmatic case of the virtuous heathen in medieval English literature. A study of the righteous heathen in medieval Italian literature, for example, might instead have focused on the hypothetical virtuous man, unaware of the Incarnation and consequent role of the Church in mediating salvation. While Dante shows up occasionally as a point of comparison in discussions of *Piers Plowman* (p. 17) and *Troilus and Criseyde* (172 n. 10), the reader lacks any sense of the wider framework of the trope of the righteous heathen—especially richly elaborated by Dante, as both Amilcare Iannucci and Marcia Colish have shown. In part, this is a limitation of the deliberately restricted, late medieval English focus of the volume; in part, however, it represents a somewhat undertheorized aspect of the very foundation of the book’s argument.

The extremely flexible definition of “heathen” nature used in *Representing Righteous Heathens* leads occasionally to some blind spots, especially with regard to gender. In the Introduction, Grady notes offhandedly that the righteous heathen is always male (p. 7; cf. 173 n. 19: “the discourse of the virtuous pagan is a masculine one”). It is not clear

why prominent female “local informants,” such as Floripas in the Old French and Middle English *Fierabras* romance or Belacane in Wolfram von Eschenbach’s *Parzival*, are excluded from the category of the righteous heathen, as they seem to provide witness to Christian truth from a pagan perspective no less than, for example, Mandeville’s Sultan of Babylon. (Coincidentally, the romance of *Fierabras* is also related to a small error concerning the contents of an English manuscript said to contain both *Fierabras* and a vernacular romance of Alexander: “Un Volum del Romaunce . . . de Ferebras, de Alisaundre” (p. 78). This is much more likely to be a romance “of Fierabras of Alexandria,” as many of the Old French versions are titled; if both romances were present, the entry would probably have read “de Ferebras e de Alisaundre.”)

Representing Righteous Heathens is a valuable contribution to our understanding of non-Christian alterity as it was viewed in late medieval England, containing particularly fine close readings of *Piers Plowman*, *St. Erkenwald*, and *Alexander and Dindymus*. Grady has done much to illuminate the nature of the vernacular theology concerning salvation and redemption to be found in the diverse poetic production of late medieval England, as well as the nature of its “specifically insular audience” (p. 40). The book will certainly attract a wide readership and serve as a stimulus to further work in this rewarding field of study.

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NOAH D. GUYNN. *Allegory and Sexual Ethics in the High Middle Ages*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. Pp. xii, 218. \$65.00.

With this book, Noah Guynn makes a significant fresh contribution to literary scholarship and to the history of sexuality, deftly intertwining three distinctive balancing acts in interpretation. The first and most prominent is his attention to the contrasting forces at the heart of medieval allegory, the tension between “an overarching, formalized, and essentialist textual design and a more fluid, variable, or protean conception of textual meaning” (p. 3). Guynn provides a clear account of the importance of both tendencies, rather than the first alone, to ideological forces in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Guynn’s conjoined consid-