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Book Review of: Eleanor Johnson, Practicing Literary Theory in the Middle Ages: Ethics and the Mixed Form in Chaucer, Gower, Usk, and Hoccleve

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Eleanor Johnson's book demonstrates that "the aesthetic power of literary language—its power to make ideation sensory and hence experiential through form and style—is fundamental to late medieval experimentation with ethically transformative writing" (3–4). As that quotation indicates, Johnson is concerned with the aesthetic in its etymological meaning of sense-perceptible rather than with any notion of beauty, Kantian or otherwise. The "mixed form" of her subtitle is prosimetrum: verse and prose alternating within the same work. Her study's other keyword is protrepsis, "the literary modeling of ethical transformation" within a narrative that aims to effect a comparable transformation in its readers (10). Prosimetrum and protrepsis are most clearly united in Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, which Johnson aptly describes as "a work of literary theory-in-practice" (19) in that it both articulates and performs the proper relation between prose and verse: the former enables rational thought and linear argumentation, whose protreptic effects the latter supports by offering a sensually pleasurable reprieve from logical rigor. Johnson argues that a host of late-medieval vernacular fictions are indebted to Boethius for their explorations of the relation between mixed literary form and the potential for ethical conversion.

After brief considerations of texts by Alain de Lille, Dante, and Machaut, Johnson turns to Chaucer, arguing that his surprising decision to efface the prosimetric texture of the *Consolation* in his *Boece* represents an attempt to develop an "aesthetic prose" that would "be painstakingly faithful to the *Consolation*'s ideation while also making that ideation sense-perceptible" (61). At the meta-level of Chaucer's career as a whole, this artful prose finds its complement in the poetry of the *Troilus*; together the two form "a single, unified stylistic project, in which Chaucer reinvents how Boethius's prosimetric *Consolation* renders meaning aesthetically available" (91). Her analysis of the *Canterbury Tales* considers the Boethian

resonance of the possibility, fundamental to the *Tales* but vigorously disputed by many homiletic writers, that vernacular fiction might offer a valuable way of spending time. Johnson reads various mixed-form dyads within the *Tales* as riffs on Boethian prosimetrum, which, because they present neither the same literary form nor a unified message about the relation between ethical transformation and literary practice, enable readers to reach their own conclusions on the matter. Her final two chapters treat Usk, Gower, and Hoccleve: Usk and Gower use mixed form to advance ethical claims about society, not just individuals, while Hoccleve's *Series* offers an ironic take on both prosimetric form and its supposedly transformative ethical potential.

Johnson is an absolutely brilliant close-reader. She has helped me see new possibilities in some of the texts I love most, and to become interested in others that I might otherwise never have cared about. Moreover, as a fine example of the New Formalism with which she forthrightly identifies (12–15), her book will resonate even beyond the insights of its close readings and the ingenuity of its larger arguments. These arguments depend upon reading many different literary forms as “mixed” that are not literally prosimetric. This strategy is both necessary and appropriate, since Johnson's authors are worth studying precisely because they creatively adapted Boethius instead of slavishly imitating him. It also raises a question crucial not just to this study but to also literary criticism more broadly: to what degree do form and style, distinct though clearly related concepts, actually overlap? Is a work like Usk's *Testament of Love*, which is entirely in prose but features a mixture of plain- and high-spoken styles, therefore also an instance of mixed form? Does the fact that Chaucer's *Troilus* evokes the themes and ethos of Boethius's *Consolation* make his poem, like the work that undoubtedly influenced it, also a mixed-form enterprise? Johnson addresses such questions with subtlety and skill, but the nature of her project is such that her answers cannot be decisive. As a result, she opens up

possibilities rather than imposing a single interpretation of the text at hand. Her readers will be the richer for that kind of critical generosity.

This study will also spur a range of other, quite different scholarly projects. Johnson's interest in the senses, for example, makes me wonder how the sensory particularities of various media and reception practices, such as manuscript layout and construction (so crucial to Machaut, Hoccleve, and others), or oral performance as distinct from silent reading, might be informed by the more purely textual modes of sense-creation that she discusses. Her brief, concluding discussion of criticality (235–36), meanwhile, suggests opportunities for more deconstructively minded critics. Finally, although she understandably eschews any discussion of aesthetics-as-beauty, her close readings in fact both reveal and produce an experience of beauty—which suggests how these two branches of aesthetics might be more fully united in other projects. Provocative and generative, this book will rightly be read, taught, and discussed for years to come.