

**Janine Rogers, “A Compaignye of Sondry Folk: Mereology, Medieval Poetics and Contemporary Evolutionary Narrative in Richard Dawkins’ *The Ancestor’s Tale*.” *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews* 39.1 (2014): 47-61.**

All too often, for reasons too variegated to debate here, the Humanities and Sciences are considered opposites rather than partners in pedagogy. Whatever C. P. Snow’s intentions, this perceived antagonism was not helped by his famous Two Cultures lecture; but whatever its origins, the dichotomy is false. In “A Compaignye of Sondry Folk” Janine Rogers provides further evidence of the shared inheritance and goals of the Sciences and the Humanities, especially medieval literature. Rogers is able to do this partly through her own expertise and partly through analysis of Richard Dawkins’s *The Ancestor’s Tale* (2004). Dawkins, a controversial figure and former Chair of the Public Understanding of Science at Oxford, channels Darwin and Chaucer to offer a history of evolution-cum-warning against overly rigid anthropocentrism. To illustrate his thesis Dawkins adopts Chaucer’s model of pilgrimage and storytelling to offer a “[b]ackward chronology in search of ancestors,” ultimately to “a single concestor [sic] of all surviving life” (Dawkins 6-7). For her part, Rogers explores why the *Canterbury Tales* might play such a key role in this modern scientific inquiry. The result is a detailed and convincing elucidation of Dawkins’s use of medieval poetics.

Rogers contends that “contemporary science and literature share poetic resonances” (47). For Rogers, Dawkins is concerned equally with ethics as with evolution, and he employs Chaucerian poetics to assist in evading and critiquing the anthropocentric ideology that dominates much modern thinking on evolution. Since for Dawkins all life is inter-related, it is “unethical to imagine one form of life as discrete from and non-continuous with other life forms” (48). This is where Chaucer comes in, since his poetry provides a model (and similar interrogation) of the complex relationships between the parts and the whole. In terms of science and literature, argues Rogers, both Chaucer and Dawkins “are interested in emphasizing common bonds and merged boundaries” (50). Hence, one might add, the generic plurality of the *Canterbury Tales* or Dawkins’s mixture of genes. Rogers then turns to a variety of subsections and subjects, outlining how they are used in each set of tales: frame stories; pilgrimage allegory; and medieval poetics. Rogers insists that frame stories are inherently mereological. As she points out, Dawkins’s backwards pilgrimage through time allows him to introduce many new pilgrims and ancestors *en route*, whereas Chaucer’s pilgrims are almost all present from the outset of his journey. Nevertheless, the literary frame narrative’s “message of unity in diversity presents a structural idea of evolution that unifies all living beings” (52): by medieval thinking pilgrimage is both an “allegory for a human life” and a path to God; in Dawkins’s account pilgrimage becomes a path to the fount of biological or evolutionary origin, our common ur-ancestor or “Concestor 0” (53-4).

Dawkins’s use of *Canterbury Tales* runs deeper than just structure and variety. Just as Chaucer’s pilgrims travel to the shrine and relics of Thomas à Becket, so Dawkins presents “fossils as analogous to relics” and DNA as a “‘renewed relic’” or “re-copied relic”, not unlike a “‘written text’” (54). Rogers compellingly argues that Dawkins sees “reading DNA through evolutionary time [as] akin to textual archiving”, where the body represents and indeed writes “identity, history and community” (55). For Rogers, Dawkins enhances this metaphor through manipulation

of medieval ideas of *compilatio*. Here, even more than in the comparisons with Chaucer, Rogers draws insightful connections between science and literature, for archiving, she argues, is “a form of compilation, and the practice of compilation is at the heart of medieval textual culture,” building new from old but also mirroring the creation of the world in microcosm (55). Books and genes each contain stories within stories and exist as both part and whole; the relation of the part to the whole is as central to the study of DNA as it is to the medieval codex. Dawkins gives a rather rosy comparison of evolution to manuscript production, ignoring scribal contamination, but both he and Chaucer share “an interest in the ethical implications of disrupting established orders,” whether those orders are based on medieval estates theory or modern biological theories of species division (58). In this sense, Rogers reads Dawkins as a humanist as much as a scientist, one who is equally sceptical of “contentious disciplinary divisions of literature and science” as of creationism (58).

Ultimately, for Rogers, Dawkins’s use of Chaucer and medieval poetics alerts us to the possibility – and significance – of redrawing modern disciplinary boundaries. Impressively, Rogers is equally at home explaining medieval poetics or evolutionary history, and the result is a cogent, well written and persuasive study. Rogers begins and ends her conclusion by noting the ways in which Dawkins blurs period boundaries. The same is true of Rogers herself. Although her overall thesis is entirely convincing, her emphasis on the similarities and potential for cooperation between literature and science, especially codicology and scientific classification, is arguably the greatest contribution this article makes to the field.

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