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# Review of *Strange Footing: Poetic Form and Dance in the Late Middle Ages*

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Book review of:

# STRANGE FOOTING: POETIC FORM AND DANCE IN THE LATE MIDDLE AGES.

By Seeta Chaganti. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2018. Pp. x + 299. 35 illustrations. $35.

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Seeta Chaganti's dazzlingly experimental *Strange Footing* offers a novel take on understanding lyric form. Whereas previous
formalist approaches have sought to define form as a discernible property or attribute of a given text, Chaganti
defines form not as the culmination of a particular textual process but as itself a textual process that produces a set of
effects on its audience. In this way, Chaganti contributes to the radical reassessments of form recently emerging in Middle
English Studies in works such as Arthur Bahr's *Fragments and Assemblages* (Chicago, 2013), Eleanor Johnson's *Practicing
Literary Theory in the Middle Ages* (Chicago, 2013), and Ingrid Nelson's *Lyric Tactics* (University of Pennsylvania, 2016).
Chaganti organizes her book around two dominant case studies—the *danse macabre* tradition and the Middle
English *carole*—as two traditions that produce an especially disorienting effect on their audiences. These audiences, she
argues, are uniquely attuned to this effect because of their familiarity with dance. Drawing on contemporary dance theory,
Chaganti posits that dance always involves a "virtual supplement" (p. 53) emerging in the kinetic tension between dancers'
bodies, the negative space created by dancing shapes, the sightlines generated between dancers and spectators, and, on

the macro level, in the "vestigial force of the past dance that the present performance evokes" (p. 51). The spectator grows aware of this virtual supplement because the temporo-spatial structure of dance produces an experience, for the viewer, of being led, a process Chaganti terms *ductus*. This *ductus* builds suspension, anticipation, and release into the spectator's experience, thus further dislocating her experience of time and space. Medieval poetry, Chaganti suggests, also manifests a virtual supplement, revealed through *ductus*, so that "… medieval readers experience poetic form as the presence of virtuality, a presence to which dance habituates them" (p. 64).

Chaganti begins with the *danse macabre*, a complex tradition originating with a mural painted in Paris in 1425–26 that contained both text and image. To behold a *danse macabre* mural, Chaganti argues, is to have an embodied experience with a multimedia installation: the viewer follows the horizontal and vertical sightlines of serialized images and words in the same way modern readers read graphic novels, while additionally physically displacing herself within an architectural space in a reification of *ductus*. Arguing that this multisensory viewing is an experience of apprehending virtuality, Chaganti juxtaposes the *danse macabre* with Lucinda Child's *Dance* (1979), in which dancers move against a backdrop of video footage of the dance as originally performed. As the viewer watches current live dancers move in front of past filmed dancers, he observes both a temporal dislocation between the present and past dancers' movements and a spatial dislocation enhanced by the performance's use of mixed media. This kind of temporo-spatial dislocation makes visible dance's virtual supplement; by analyzing Child's *Dance*, therefore, we see how the multimedia quality of the *danse macabre* similarly dislocates its viewer temporospatially. The haunting power of the *danse macabre*, in other words, is produced by its virtual supplement, as made apprehensible to a dance-attuned viewer.

At this point Chaganti turns to John Lydgate's *Dance of Death*, which he translated after seeing the original French *danse macabre* mural in Paris. By meditating in his prologue on the idea of replicating the mural's image within the mind's mirror, Lydgate, Chaganti contends, draws attention to the boundaries of perception between viewer and specular object that are further reified in his text's didactic program. In this way, "Lydgate's imagery acknowledges that the textual encounter occurs in terms of a ductile experience in a multimedia and virtually kinetic setting" (p. 158). Chaganti then turns to what she sees as another literary testament to a *danse macabre* viewer's multimedia experience, a fragmentary version of Lydgate's own *Dance of Death* text in British Library MS Cotton Vespasian A.XXV, which is headed by the rubric, "An history and daunce of death … written in the capell of Wortley in Wortley Hall" (quoted on p. 160). She suggests that its drafty, nonlinear quality and marginal doodles might be a viewer's record of his embodied encounter with a *danse macabre* mural whereby "what begins as a perceptual practice associated with the installation emerges as a shaping force for textual response" (p. 165), an intriguing idea that I would have loved to see expanded to include a larger manuscript set. Chaganti concludes this case study by arguing that her approach resolves a limitation in New Formalist studies that privileges formal rupture over formal regularity as the locus of textual meaning, especially in lyric. By viewing textual meaning as residing instead in the text's virtual supplement and by defining form as the textual elements facilitating its apprehension, Chaganti suggests that a text can be as prosodically regular as Lydgate's *Dance of Death* and still profoundly disorient its reader through other formal means.

Chaganti's final two chapters examine the Middle English carole as her second case study. As with the *danse macabre*, she places the carole in conversation with another modern dance performance that, like the carole, privileges dancing in the round: Mark Morris' *L'Allegro, Il Penseroso ed il Moderato* (1988). Like Child's *Dance* and the *danse macabre* murals, this piece is another complex multimedia installation that offers us another example of the virtual supplement. This dance dislocates the viewer's perspective in having dancers gaze outwards while dancing in the round, thus producing "networks of gazing" that "create an experience of virtual circles as forces cast alongside, inside, and outside the main dance" (p. 208). Chaganti goes on to connect the virtual effects produced by dancing in the round in this performance to medieval iconography of dancing in the round, in which dancers also tend to be represented as gazing in a variety of different directions, offering a similar virtual effect which recalls, for her, the significance of circularity for Boethius.

From here, Chaganti looks at the stanzaic structure of two carole texts. The first, "A Child is Boren," is a traditional carole with stanzas and a burden, which is a type of extended refrain proper to the carole. As with Lydgate's *Dance of Death*, Chaganti sees the stanzaic regularity of the lyric as being at odds with its content, in which Christ promises His life to redeem mankind in "an unwieldily crooked dynamic" (p. 246) between humankind's multiplicity and Christ's immortal singularity. This lyric's burden further amplifies the asymmetry otherwise occluded by its stanzaic regularity because the burden changes slightly over the course of the text to introduce what Chaganti identifies as a conditional element. By

introducing conditional change into a regularized formula, the burden "reflects a formal experience dictated by the perception of circles always in the process of producing other circles temporally and spatially beyond them" (p. 248). Her final example, "Maiden in the mor lay," is rubricated "carole" in manuscript despite its lack of a burden and irregular stanzaic structure. Chaganti thus posits that the choice to rubricate a lyric by a form that it does not exhibit suggests a process whereby a reader mentally supplies the missing elements that she perceives to inhere virtually in the work before her. She perceives, in other words, a virtual burden due to structures of anticipation encoded within the work. In this final example, then, the virtual supplement emerges as a kind of Jaussian "horizon of expectations."

Chaganti's richly interdisciplinary argument brings modern dance into play with medieval literary study through a methodology that transforms anachronism into a robust analytic tool evoking Carolyn Dinshaw's recent work. In so doing, Chaganti suggests that those elements that we traditionally ascribe to content, such as the uncanniness of *danse macabre* imagery, are also formal effects which are all the more powerful because they operate upon the audience's own embodied experiences. Yet although she advances her argument as "a theory of poetic form" (p. 64), Chaganti's analysis focuses on just two examples, the *danse macabre* and the carole, genres that require "an audience's sensitivity to danced virtuality" (p. 64). But by the early fifteenth century in particular (the period under investigation in this book), multiple lyric styles on both sides of the Channel underwent a major transition away from their roots in dance towards longer lines, longer stanzas, and the inclusion of envoys. In so doing, they continued to manifest temporo-spatially dislocating effects of the kind considered here. I am thinking, in particular, of someone like Charles d'Orléans and his infamous heart that shifts from meddlesome go-between, to second self, to disposable object, to vast internalized seat of the emotions. Charles's poetry is formally undanceable, and yet his treatment of self vs. heart strikes me as exhibiting features of what Chaganti identifies as the virtual supplement. Similarly, to return to medieval performance, polyphonic music relies on the simultaneous performance of two sung melodies with different texts combined in ways that are often aurally unintelligible but, nevertheless, deeply evocative precisely because the audience is conscious of experiencing two musical phrases at the same time. This mode of apprehension also fits, to my mind, Chaganti's definition of virtuality. These very different examples thus offer rich avenues of further possible inquiry into the relationship of virtual supplement, dance, and poetic form so delicately teased out by Chaganti's work.

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