

# PMMLA

Volume 100  
Number 5

*Publications of the  
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October 1985

# Princeton University Press

## The Georgic Revolution

*Anthony Low*

Although Virgil was immensely influential on English poetry in the Renaissance and seventeenth century, inspiring dozens of epics and thousands of pastorals, the middle term of the Virgilian *rota*, georgic, has been neglected by those who have examined the literature of the period. In the first book on this important topic, Anthony Low discusses the courtly or aristocratic ideal as the great enemy of the georgic spirit, and shows that georgic powerfully invaded English poetry in the years from 1590 to 1700. During that time a revolution took place with religious, ideological, and technological as well as literary ramifications. Professor Low describes a significant current of social history, as revealed in poetry, and at the same time elucidates that poetry by placing it more precisely in a living context.

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# PMIA

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**Abstract.** Boccaccio's *Genealogia deorum* has endured for reasons quite apart from its usefulness as a reference book. Its genealogies dismember myths as narratives and do little to facilitate reference, but they enact the mingled senses of hope, frustration, and bad faith that characterize early humanist efforts. The extinction of myth both justifies and blocks Boccaccio's quest to restore the genealogy of the old gods in order to revive and legitimize the line of poets. He can safely undertake this quest only if assured of failure. Even then it may not be safe to play Aesculapius to the dismembered *corpus* of ancient myth. Similar paradoxes emerge from analogies with the Bible and its genealogical mode of history. Finally, the *Genealogy's* structure imitates the dilemma of the modern poet who, inheriting no authority for his fictions from great antique originals, must press his claim to legitimacy, make it good, perhaps make it up. (TH)

Dismantling the Canterbury Book. JAMES DEAN . . . . .	746
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**Abstract.** Although several Chaucer scholars have argued for the last four tales of the *Canterbury Tales* as a concluding sequence, it has not been generally recognized that Chaucer ends his book deliberately and skillfully beginning with the Second Nun's Tale. Through the concluding stories Chaucer disengages himself and his audience from the fiction making of the *Tales*, moving toward his own voice in the Retraction, and he introduces themes of transformation in tales concerning the conversion of souls (Second Nun), the transmutation of metals through alchemy (Canon's Yeoman), the metamorphosis of Apollo's crow (Manciple), and the transforming powers of contrition and penitence (Parson, Retraction). The consistency of these closure themes provides evidence for the authority of the Ellesmere manuscript as against the highly regarded and recently published Hengwrt manuscript of the *Tales*, which has a different concluding tale order and which does not contain the Canon's Yeoman's Tale. (JD)

Reading Characters: Self, Society, and Text in <i>Emma</i> . JOSEPH LITVAK . . . . .	763
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**Abstract.** Most criticism of *Emma* echoes Jane Austen's powerful moralism. Even feminist critics who find the novel subversive locate its unsettling force in its celebration of female "authority," a virtue opposed to "literacy" or linguistic playfulness. Austen subverts her own moralism, yet she does so by identifying her heroine, and women in general, with the very figurative language that readers have attempted to discredit or ignore. Wordplay in *Emma* almost always signals a disruptive counterplot. Emma's strategic misreading of Mr. Elton's riddle is an exemplary disruption, in which the distance between self and text collapses. Extending this principle of the rhetorical self to imagine collective existence as an endless process of reading and writing, Austen reveals a greater linguistic and social sophistication than critics have acknowledged. (JL)

Ibsen, Strindberg, and Telegony. MARVIN CARLSON . . . . . 774

**Abstract.** During the nineteenth century the phenomenon of heredity was of great interest to artists as well as biologists, but its actual dynamics remained mysterious to both. Some felt that the inheritance of characteristics was to be explained on physiological grounds, some on psychic, and some on a combination of the two. A writer inclined toward scientific materialism like Zola naturally emphasized the physical interpretation of this phenomenon, but Ibsen and Strindberg found the possibility of heredity through psychic means, called telegony by August Weismann, more useful for their aesthetic concerns. Their plays show many varieties of this phenomenon, using telegony in ways related both to contemporary scientific speculation and to a long literary tradition, in which a key work was Goethe's *Die Wahlverwandtschaften*. (MC)

Debasing Exchange: Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*.  
WAI-CHEE DIMOCK. . . . . 783

**Abstract.** The principle of exchange, a principle that governs all aspects of social relations in *The House of Mirth*, institutes a fiction of parity even as it feeds on and reproduces the fundamental inequality of the transacting parties. Exchange does not mean mutual expenditure; it requires, rather, a paying party, there to meet the obligation, and a receiving party, there to collect the profits. Nonpayment—financial or otherwise—is the secret behind exchange. Lawrence Selden, despite his noble protestations, belongs firmly to the book's privileged, miserly company, for he refuses to part with his asset, his emotional capital. Lily is the only one who consistently pays, although, by the nightmarish logic of exchange, her scrupulous expenditure is precisely what constitutes her crime and justifies her punishment. (WD)

An Onomastic Double Bind: Colette's *Gigi* and the Politics of Naming.  
SUSAN D. COHEN . . . . . 793

**Abstract.** Although Colette did not consider herself a feminist in the activist sense of the term and even mocked feminism as a political movement, her fiction presents the situation of women in ways that stress their specificity and their imposed social inferiority. *Gigi* addresses the problem of naming as a crucial factor in male-female relations and implicitly identifies it as the nodal point of a struggle for discursive, as well as socioeconomic, identity. (SDC)

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