

FOREWORD

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THIS WONDERFUL BOOK brings together writers and teachers inspired by Caroline Bergvall and invites new people, from all over, to the party. *Bringing together* is a key Carolingian trait. In her work peculiar dialects, strange voices, dropped aitches, archaic letter forms, not-from-around-these-parts accents, all rub together to compose the space and sound of a planet. For there is a strong sense of planetarity in Caroline's essays and voicings: a common home, over-worked, over-heated, crossed by desperate people in small boats. But there is also the great joy of encounter, extending across both space (Caroline is much fascinated by migrating birds, and birdsong) and time: each English sentence, for Caroline, as accentuated through her medieval trilogy (*Meddle English*, 2011; *Drift*, 2014; *Alisoun Sings*, 2019), drops anchor a thousand years deep, moored to meanings and etymological tales still drifting through time: *sadde, sad; sely, silly; no thing, nothing; dent-de-lion, dandelion; dayeseye, daisy*.

I first met Caroline in late July 2006 at the New Chaucer Society meeting in New York City.¹ We had commissioned a number of poets to offer us, and a wider NYC public, something, anything, Chaucerian. These included my brilliant Penn colleague Charles Bernstein—with whom, given his mercurial, decalcifying, coinage-prone way with language, I felt, *qua* mother tongue medievalist, strange, *alpha and omega* rapport. Charles gave us Chaucer in Brooklynese (see further below, Chapter 20), discovering, like the bard of Southwark before him, that if “cloisters” appear in a rhyming position, “oysters” must soon be served.² Charles also provided first contact with Caroline. And Caroline, at that NYC meeting, first publicly meddled with Middle English in a creative process that, we hope, is not yet done.³ Bergvall is willing to be *difficult*, when needed, taking arms against a sea of facile language, of officialese, of putting green pabulum. So too Charles Bernstein, in his *Attack of the Difficult Poems* (2011), a book deemed, by Tan Lin, “highly unsuitable (not suitable) for National Poetry Month.”⁴

Two thousand and six, the year of the NCS conference in NYC and of Caroline's first public engagement with Chaucer, was a heady moment. Almost five years on from 9/11,

1 See <http://newchaucersociety.org>, accessed April 24, 2023.

2 Chaucer, “Summoner's Tale,” 134, lines 2099–2100.

3 These texts were published as “Shorter Chaucer Tales,” in Bergvall, *Meddle English*, 21–52.

4 Bernstein, *Attack of the Difficult Poems*, with jacket blurb by Tan Lin.

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and innocent of decline to come in 2007 and fall in 2008, our Chaucerian convo, our biggest conference ever, was reaching heady highs of cultural self-confidence. Back then conventional academic papers constituted the core of the conference, with poets and creatives forming the fringe. This is no longer the case. Premodern literature no longer commands core curricular space. Enrollments are in free-fall, and historical Humanities under assault by bad actor governors, trustees, and corporate managers. Increasingly, teachers and students of literature face the precarities long known to poets and performers. Caroline Bergvall's long-refined, hard-won creative resilience is now thus vitally encouraging. As classroom teachers, we may continue to address difficult topics and difficult scripts while shucking off stiff-jointed academicism. "Big up!" cries Bergvall's Alisoun, her wonderful re-rendering of the Wife of Bath, "Hystoricise!"⁵

Caroline loves company, and so too her Alisoun. Chaucer's Wife of Bath forms part of a network of women who tell tales and share information (Alisoun herself, her "gossib" Alisoun, her niece).⁶ But as Usha Vishnuvajjala points out, relaying Karma Lochrie, it is notable that Chaucer's three female Canterbury tale-tellers never address one another (Chapter 16). Bergvall's *Alisoun Sings* gives us, by contrast, "a sort of fellowship of women." "The Franker Tale (Deus Hic, 2)" from *Meddle English* had earlier called for female solidarity in the face of papal proscriptions: "Kashmiri women! Punjabi women! Women of France! / Women of Britain! Women of Finland! Women of America!"⁷ Such calls from the page are powerfully supplemented, as Georgina Colby notes, by "Bergvall's relational practice" (Chapter 19). Erín Moure ponders further Bergvall's commitment to such non-instrumentalizing relationality:

Following the trilogy, and in consonance with it, she has worked more and more at inviting others into the harbours she has created, not to appropriate the words or thinking or histories of others but to let their differences resonate and compel other orbits, differentiations, differences.

Moure refers here to a range of events or "facilitations" pursued by Bergvall beyond the bounds of her trilogy, yet still within "medieval" frames of reference, and recorded (vestigially) on her website. Her first "Conference of the Birds" event, in 2018, billed as a "conversation-performance," brought together people of different avocations and orientations: Clyde Ancarno (sociolinguist, interspecies research), Shadi Angelina Bazeghi (Iranian-Danish poet and translator), Adam Chodzko (visual artist), Geoff Sample (ornithologist and environmental sound artist), Cherry Smyth (poet, art writer, and curator), and myself (medievalist, cruise guide).⁸ We met and talked in the morning, then became part of the Whitstable Biennale in the afternoon, joining a good-sized audience in a Sea Scouts' hut. The gathering was modelled on *The Conference of the Birds* (1171 CE) by Persian Sufi poet Farid ud-Din Attar. Conversations between we-people-

⁵ Bergvall, *Alisoun Sings*, 191.

⁶ Chaucer, "Wife of Bath's Prologue," 112, lines 529–37.

⁷ Bergvall, *Meddle English*, 34.

⁸ Bergvall, "Conference."

who-had-just-met were orchestrated, but not dictated, by Caroline, playing a role equivalent to that of the hoopoe in Attar's poem. Human talk was gradually augmented by, perhaps commentatively, chirrups from Geoff Sample's recorded birds. Growing more insistent, birdsong gradually drowned out, covered over, human speech, opening us into a quite different world. Silence followed.

Like a great composer, Caroline creates out of diverse, complex sound-worlds deep and enduring silences, spaces to think in. A year later, at the Dublin International Literature Festival, Caroline assembled another group: Vahni Anthony Capildeo (Trinidadian Scottish poet), Ceara Conway (Irish singer and visual artist), Vera Regan (tracker of bilingual Dublin communities), James L. Smith (geographer of the sea), with Geoff Sample and myself carried over. This time the medieval bird-text of choice was *Buile Shuibhne*, notably Englished or Ulstered by Seamus Heaney as *Sweeney Astray* (1983).⁹ Again, informal morning conversation between strangers was followed by public exchanges in the afternoon, guided by the beautiful modulations of Bergvall's distinctive voice (likened by Áine McMurtry in this volume to *Sprechgesang*, Chapter 11). This time silence was made, issuing suddenly out of all this, right after Ceara Conway rose to her feet singing a searing, keening lament, in Irish. Happily, Caroline is not done with her *Conference of the Birds*: there will be new gatherings in new locales with fresh groups of strangers.

As a classroom teacher translated to such occasions, I felt a bit out of my element: some sort of academic straight-man foil, perhaps, for the true creatives. Ceara Conway did say that she found my presence "reassuring," and sadly I lacked the wit to say, right away, how reassuring I found *her* singing in Irish on a Dublin stage. But there is no doubt that exposure to and involvement in Bergvall's medieval text-and-sound worlds changes the ways you teach, gets you off the podium. You become more inclined to notice who you share space with (who you are teaching), and hence less consternated when these others, in Moure's phrase, "let their differences resonate." Quite recently I lost control of a class on (what else) *The Wife of Bath's Tale*. The knight-rapist reaches the edge of a forest and sees twenty-four maidens "and yet mo" dancing.¹⁰ At which point Joanna, Texas Chicana, adduces *Barbie in the Twelve Dancing Princesses*, a frame of reference, and personal reminiscence, taken up by everyone else in this all-female class (on a female utopic tale) like some feminine hue and cry. The hapless professor, knowing none of these new ground rules, has lost the plot. Later he embarks on a lonely online quest, discovering that *Barbie in the Twelve Dancing Princesses* is a 2006 computer-animated dance film.¹¹ And recalls that in Chaucer, "the edge of a forest" (990) is a liminal site, a place where magic happens.

Sierra Lomuto, in this volume, also finds her teaching touched by the strange alchemy of contact with Bergvall. *Drift* makes her think not just of the fog of a distant Middle Ages, but also of the foggy middle-distance of her childhood home, San Francisco.

⁹ Heaney, *Sweeney Astray*, first published in Ireland in 1983 by the Field Day Theatre Company in Derry. Heaney worked from the parallel text edition *Buile Shuibhne*, ed. O'Keeffe.

¹⁰ Chaucer, "Wife of Bath's Tale," 118, lines 989–92.

¹¹ Richardson, "Barbie."

And of how the lost letter þ, as featured in the last section of *Drift* (and contemplated in *Meddle English*, 7) compels her “to think of ๓ (ng) in the Thai alphabet, a letter from my heritage language that intermittently falls and recovers across my own tongue” (Chapter 12). Contemplation of this letter, and associated sounds, in turn sparks memory of a childhood ascent to the Buddhist temple of Wat Phra That Doi Suthep, in Thailand. Caroline Bergvall’s own cross-cultural and multi-lingual biography, with its combination of Germanic, Romance, and Norse elements, might suggest that she is ideally situated to embody and subvert the premodern histories of the English language. But then Bergvall looks to Middle English not as an assured point of origin, or arrival, but as “a mashup on the rise.”¹² She aims not for some integrative rendition of “English,” but rather for an accounting where all elements, ancient and modern, remain active and valid, *in play*. And this, too, proves encouraging in classrooms, where students, increasingly of dual or complex heritage, have felt obliged to favour one strand of themselves (while others lie, neglected, in the dark). Thus Lomuto is led to recall climbing to a temple, on her father’s shoulders, while the students of her “Adaptation” class consider their own paths.

In addition to her trilogy, Bergvall further engages with medieval texts via *Via*, part of a greater exercise, according to Jacob Edmond in this volume, in “iterative poetics” (Chapter 3).¹³ As Edmond explains, Bergvall here arranges the British Library’s 47 available Englishings of the first tercet of Dante’s *Inferno* in alphabetical order, according to the translation’s first word; she then recites the sequence in deadpan monotone. *What, one wonders, new hell is this?*¹⁴ Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), in his 1965 *The System of Dante’s Hell*, opens with a declarative challenge: “But Dante’s hell is heaven.”¹⁵ Which is to say, and as Baraka’s text will prove, that the historical experience of Dante, compared to that of a black man in America, is a walk in the park. Baraka publishes in 1965, the seven hundredth anniversary of Dante’s birth, and Bergvall in 2000, the seven hundredth anniversary of Dante’s journeying. Her hell is one of perpetual ending, without progression. That is, the first line of each translated tercet rhymes with the third line, and then the poem stops. Dante’s first line rhymes with his third, and so stopping at line three feels like being sealed in by the lid of a tomb. Dante’s line 2 rhymes with lines 4 and 6, 5 with 7 and 9, 8 with 10 and 12 ... and so we pick up the rhythmic movement *through* the poem which suggests and sustains that of Dante and Virgil through Hell. But in Bergvall’s *Via*, this “via” (a word from the *Inferno*’s third line) really is “smarrita” (“lost,” also from *Inferno* 1.3). “Via” in Italian can mean, usually means, “pathway,” but it can also mean, imperatively, “go, away with you”: the Italian for *Gone with the Wind* is *Via col Vento*. And so each Englished tercet remains as a world unto itself, ordered by alphabet, with readers sealed in like Farinata and Cavalcante after Judgment Day (*Inferno* 10). The effect of *hearing* Bergvall intone this sequence, especially if you don’t know that it *will* end at

¹² Bergvall, *Meddle English*, 13.

¹³ See further, for a fine account, Southerden, “Voice Astray.”

¹⁴ Remarkably, Mary Jo Bang was, she tells us, inspired to translate the entire *Inferno* by her first reading and hearing of *Via*. See Dante, *Inferno*, 12.

¹⁵ Baraka, *System of Dante’s Hell*, 13.

47, compares perhaps to first experiencing Samuel Beckett's *Not I* (1973)—where all is darkness, excepting the lips and teeth of Billie Whitelaw.¹⁶ This too memorably creates the panicked sensation of *no way out*: the first theatre performances of *Not I* saw audiences desperately scramble for the exits, only to find that Exit signs had been masked over. All is darkness; will this never end? Alisoun, Chaucer's Wife of Bath, is a creature of light, but her voice too can panic listeners—mostly, men. Alisoun begins speaking unbidden in Fragment III of Chaucer's *Tales* (in Ellesmere MS order), and her stream of speaking withstands three interrupters (all men) until she is done. *Alisoun Sings* is a text of bravura uninterruptedness, the greatest such performance in all the long Wifely history chronicled by Marion Turner (Chapter 18 below).

Hellacious experience to which Bergvall's *oeuvre* speaks especially poignantly at present is that of the “small boats,” and the prospects of those debouching onto English *terra firma* (if they get that far). Bergvall has already contributed to *Refugee Tales*, an annual walk-and-tale-telling event that, originally modelled on the Canterbury trek of Chaucer's pilgrims, shares stories of those held in immigration detention.¹⁷ *Drift* interweaves Norse lyrics and the Old English *Seafarer* with memories of the “Left-to-Die” boat which left Tripoli in 2011, headed for Lampedusa.¹⁸ “Small boats” now shifts the saga of English political news-making from wide expanses of the Mediterranean to “home waters,” a space of two connected seas previously mapped by Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale*. In Chaucer the dazed and desperate immigrant protagonist washes up from Syria;¹⁹ in the excellent BBC version of this tale from 2003, as played by Nigerian British actress Nikki Amuka-Bird, she is from Nigeria.²⁰ Chaucer and *The Seafarer* are timely, renewed by Bergvall's new Englishings, and by all these splendid essays, reviews, and creative meditations that follow in her train.

16 See Powell, “Wake for Sam,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M4LDwfKxr-M>.

17 Bergvall, “Voluntary Returner's Tale.”

18 See further and more broadly Solterer and Joos, eds., *Migrants Shaping Europe*.

19 Chaucer, “Man of Law's Tale,” 94, lines 526–27.

20 Jarrold, *Man of Law's Tale*.

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