Luke Sunderland's book pursues a double objective: to apprehend Old French narrative cycles through successive studies of four major works (*Guillaume d'Orange,* the *Vulgate Cycle,* the *Prose Lancelot,* and the *Roman de Renart*) and to analyze medieval heroism in the light of ethical questioning. Those two aims do not always intertwine smoothly in Sunderland's development. It sometimes even seems as if the work could have been two separate books: one on cyclicity and the other on freedom and submission in medieval narratives. The four chapters present four quasi-independent studies on the most important cycles in Old French, providing some interesting interpretations based upon each of these texts but not always drawing together all the links that could have shed light on similarities and differences between them.

Starting with the *Cycle de Guillaume d'Orange,* Sunderland suggests approaching it with the Deleuzian concept of "rhizome" since these works' signifying potential sprouts in random directions. Through different heroes (Guillaume, Vivien, Aymeri, and Rainouart) the cycle explores different templates that ultimately serve the same morality. The model of duty developed through tales of sacrifices and fantasies of social integration appears to be an open structure that can provide infinite continuations and prequels.

In the *Vulgate Cycle* heroism is defined rather in relation to an object, the Grail, with the distinct potential to drive the cycle toward closure. Borrowing from Peter Brooks's work on plot (*Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* [Oxford, 1984]), Sunderland sees the *Vulgate Cycle* as an effort to delay the inevitable and radical ending of the Arthurian world once the quest is accomplished. The *Vulgate Cycle* would thus be a work of deferral, more or less convincingly associated with the death drive and fueled by the reader's desire for closure and totalizing signification. In this sense, Lancelot, with his flaws, would be the ideal heroic figure, always generating new discourses, while the too perfect Galahad would become properly unnarratable.

With the will to outdo Lancelot, the *Prose Tristan* attacks the *Vulgate*'s incompleteness but is then taken into a logic of supplementarity where, according to Derrida's definition, the supplement "is added only to replace," in an endless chain of additional interventions, ultimately showing that completeness is impossible. The complex manuscript tradition of the *Prose Tristan* would thus be material evidence of the fragmentation resulting from numerous attempts at an unreachable wholeness. In the *Prose Tristan* Sunderland sees "a world of perverse knights joyously subordinating themselves to the laws and codes of chivalry" (p. 137) in an attempt to duplicate the "Best Knight" that will finally lead to the collapse of their universe.

"Perversity" is used by Sunderland to put together *Guillaume d'Orange,* the *Vulgate Cycle,* and the *Prose Tristan,* which would all be governed by a superstructure (the *geste,* the moral law, or chivalry), opposing them to *Renart,* where desire for a well-ordered world (and plot) is replaced by an infinite quest for *jouissance.* Therefore a manuscript of the gamma family, here essentially C (Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, fr. 1579), would be the perfect example of cyclicity since the end of the book (*La mort Renart* acting as a new beginning) would mark the triumph of circularity over linearity.

If some elements of literary theory are useful to Sunderland's demonstration, such as Deleuze-Guattari's "rhizome" or the Derridian "supplement," other theoretical approaches are not well integrated, notably the Lacanian reading of ethics concerning the heroes' relationships to the "good." Psychoanalytical theory, which can be very enlightening for medieval texts, as has been proven by the works of Henri Rey-Flaud, Charles Méla, and Sa-

rah Kay, here too often looks as though it has just been tacked onto the medieval texts. For the most part, the developments on concepts by Lacan or Žižek are presented almost as didactic digressions, interrupting the demonstration. Furthermore, the link between the reflection on heroism in terms of ethics and the question of cyclic organization is generally very thin.

Otherwise, this book is interesting in its attempt to consider together four of the most important French narratives of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. This ambitious goal gives Sunderland the opportunity to present some useful thoughts on cyclical organization in the Middle Ages. Even though his study would have gained from more attention to the materiality of manuscript tradition and less fascination with Lacanian psychoanalysis, it nonetheless remains a useful contribution to the current scholarship on medieval books and textual transmission.

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Peter W. Travis, *Disseminal Chaucer: Rereading "The Nun's Priest's Tale."* Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010. Paper. Pp. xi, 444; black-and-white figures. $40.

This is an elegantly written meditation on what is arguably Chaucer's most intertextually challenging poem. It is a book in which Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man vie with Geoffrey of Vinsauf and the fourteenth-century logician William of Sherwood as the most frequently cited *auctores*. Obviously the result of many years' teaching and thinking—not just about the Nun's Priest's Tale but about Chaucer and medieval intellectual culture more generally—the book ambitiously marshals the Derridean concept of "dissemination," the semiotic dispersal of a putatively originary meaning that can never be fully recovered, to explain how the tale activates its (presumably male) readers' early education in order to target overactive exegesis. The book's marriage of poststructuralism and Scholasticism will not be to everyone's liking; however, this conjunction does suggest what the two intellectual movements have in common: an awareness of how high the stakes are (and were) in theorizing the process by which language comes to reside among things. Like Chaucer himself, Travis is a witty and entertaining guide through complex (if only occasionally tiresome) material.

The first chapter argues that the Nun's Priest is a version of the familiar medieval figure of Genius, a mediator between nature and sexuality and, ultimately, a figure for the poet himself. This identification—what might be called a *roman (de la rose) à clef*—grounds the chapter's argument about how the feminized rhetorical voice issuing from the hypermasculine body of its teller is Chaucer's attempt to "diagnose and decenter the phallocentric presuppositions of a complex European aesthetic tradition" (p. 44).

The speaking body of the Nun's Priest indexically points toward another quintessentially masculine experience: the tale's bravura rhetorical structure would bring to mind its readers' grammar school education, particularly the progymnasmatic exercises required of schoolboys throughout the medieval period. The second chapter (the longest and, in this reviewer's opinion, also the strongest) argues that the tale's disjunctive succession of set pieces enacts a "Menippean curricular parody" (p. 83) of the disputations, imitations, translations, and memory exercises familiar from grammar school and university culture. In the tale's quasi-alchemical rhetorical transmutations, for example, Vinsauvian apostrophes are transferred from English monarchs to wayward chickens. Similarly, Chauntecleer's well-known aphorism "mulier est hominis confusio," when read through the lens of the logician William of Sherwood on supposition, demonstrates a Scholastic prov-