Notice of the Final Oral Examination for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy of

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Department of English

Friday, July 17, 2015
9:00AM
David Turpin Building
Room A144

Supervisory Committee:
Dr. Allan Mitchell, Department of English, University of Victoria (Supervisor)
Dr. Iain Higgins, Department of English, UVic (Member)
Dr. Hélène Cazes, Department of French, UVic (Outside Member)

External Examiner:
Dr. Carolynne Van Dyke, Department of English, Lafayette College

Chair of Oral Examination:
Dr. Donna Jeffery, School of Social Work, UVic

Dr. David Capson, Dean, Faculty of Graduate Studies
Abstract

This dissertation attends to the figurative device of personification, or "prosopopoeia", in the writings of three late-medieval English authors, Geoffrey Chaucer, William Langland, and John Lydgate. Situating my study between three coordinates - the lineage of rhetorical anthropomorphism stretching back to Quintilian, the medieval political context that drew on figurative personification, and recent theoretical work in political ecology and philosophical sociology (actor-network theory) - I argue in the introduction that the redistributions of agency from abstract terms to personified figures performed in "prosopopoeia" entails an intrinsic politicization; the personifications of non-humans deployed by Chaucer, Langland, and Lydgate hinge on and exploit the anthropomorphic qualities of speech and embodiment, which late-medieval theories of political representation see as essential prerequisites for political agency. The affinities between literary and legal-political discourses are even thicker; more sophisticated instances of personification refract in fictive narrative the mereological dynamic between unity and multiplicity that undergirds representative government in its negotiation between delegated sovereignty and deliberative conciliarity, or, put differently, between actors and the networks within which their action becomes intelligibly institutional. "Prosopopoeia" thus emerges in my texts of interest as not only a multifaceted catalyst for democratizing debate about matters of concern to vernacular publics – from female agency to royal reform - but also as a moving target for imaginatively theorizing - and experimenting with the limits of - the ethical imperatives that govern the proper practice of equitable governance: participation, answerability, reconciliation, common profit. In the discursive culture of late-medieval England, literary "prosopopoeia" animates simulations of nonhuman polities for heuristic, humanistic purposes.