CHAUCER'S WOMEN

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Chaucer's Women

Nuns, Wives and Amazons

Priscilla Martin

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*In memory
of two friends who talked and wrote about Chaucer*

*William Frost
and
Paula Neuss*

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List of Abbreviations

Works by Chaucer

AA	<i>Anelida and Arcite</i>
BD	<i>Book of the Duchess</i>
CT	<i>Canterbury Tales</i>
HF	<i>House of Fame</i>
LGW	<i>Legend of Good Women</i>
PF	<i>Parliament of Fowls</i>
RR	<i>Romance of the Rose</i>
TC	<i>Troilus and Criseyde</i>

Periodicals

AnM	<i>Annuaire Mediaevale</i>
CE	<i>College English</i>
ChR	<i>Chaucer Review</i>
EIE	<i>English Institute Essays</i>
ELH	<i>Journal of English Literary History</i>
ES	<i>English Studies</i>
JEGP	<i>Journal of English and Germanic Philology</i>
JMRS	<i>Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies</i>
MA	<i>Medium Aevum</i>
MLN	<i>Modern Language Notes</i>
MLR	<i>Modern Language Review</i>
MP	<i>Modern Philology</i>
MS	<i>Medieval Studies</i>
N&Q	<i>Notes and Queries</i>
NM	<i>Neuphilologische Mitteilungen</i>
PMLA	<i>Publications of the Modern Language Association of America</i>
PQ	<i>Philological Quarterly</i>
RES	<i>Review of English Studies</i>

SAC	<i>Studies in the Age of Chaucer</i>
SP	<i>Studies in Philology</i>
TSE	<i>Tulane Studies in English</i>
TSL	<i>Tennessee Studies in Literature</i>
TSLL	<i>Texas Studies in Literature and Language</i>
UCSLL	<i>University of Colorado Studies in Language and Literature</i>
EETS	<i>Early English Text Society</i>
PL	<i>Patrologia Latina</i>

Preface to the 1996 Reprint

Several ages seem to have passed – in my own life and in Chaucer's — since I began the Introduction by observing that there were no books on the women in his poetry. There are now at least five more on the subject or, rather, in the area, since neither 'Chaucer' nor 'women' remains a very stable category. The area can certainly accomodate them. They are strikingly different from each other. They focus on various aspects of the work, ranging from the formal, such as the implications of genre and its metamorphoses, to the ethical, such as the Christian respect for virtues associated with the 'feminine'. Their findings range from affirmation of Chaucer's sympathy with his female characters and sense of their cultural oppression to scepticism about this possibility or commitment to its impossibility.* As I wrote my own book and read those of others, I became more and more convinced of the centrality of the issues for Chaucer, though I would now focus on the problem of gender rather than the subject of women. Despite our different approaches and conclusions we all concur in seeing gender as a locus of anxiety in Chaucer's work and in seeing the work as about gender. I intended *Chaucer's Women* as a feminist reading. It now looks equally like a general introduction to the major concerns of his poetry.

Priscilla Martin
1996

* Susan Crane, *Gender and Romance in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales* (Princeton, 1994)
Carolyn Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* (Madison and London, 1989)
Margaret Hallissy, *Clean Maids, True Wives, Steadfast Widows: Chaucer's Women and Medieval Codes of Conduct* (Westport, Connecticut, and London, 1993)
Elaine Tuttle Hansen, *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1991)
Jill Mann, *Geoffrey Chaucer* (London and New York, 1991)

Introduction

As I write this Introduction there are no full-length studies available of the women in Chaucer's poetry. There are a number of articles and chapters in recent books and I know of several works in preparation or in the press.¹ Chaucer's women have had to wait for the intense activity in feminist scholarship of the last two decades. Yet as early as 1915 Kittredge suggested that Chaucer's problems and preoccupations were analogous to those of the twentieth century: 'There is scarcely a political or social catchword of the present (even "feminism" . . .) which does not fit the fourteenth century.'² But 'feminism', softened by 'even' and segregated in a parenthesis, looks timidly provocative and in Chaucer studies Kittredge's suggestion was not taken up for about half a century.

It seems strange that such a major subject as Chaucer's representation of women should have been ignored, when so many other aspects of his work have received so much scholarly and critical attention. It makes one wonder if women have been, for all the emphasis on their appearance in medieval and later literature, invisible. Or if the Wife of Bath, despite her tendentious articulacy, is inaudible. Or if she, the lady White, Criseyde, Alceste, the heroines of the Legends, the Prioress and the Second Nun, Emily, Dorigen, constant Constance and patient Griselda and prudent Prudence, the almost indestructible Cecilia, the elastic wives of the fabliaux, all focal points in various discourses, are finally marginal.

Perhaps criticism has not seen Chaucer's women because it has been resistant to the problems they raise. If so, one might draw inferences from this gap about the power-structures of the critical establishment. Or perhaps the subject has seemed practically and theoretically too problematic. To one school of historical criticism it has presented no problem at all. D. W. Robertson influentially argued in the 1960s that medieval literature must be approached on its own terms and that it always teaches its own uniform orthodoxies. Among the 'quiet hierarchies' it assumes is the doctrine that the female is subordinate to the male. On this view a protofeminist Chaucer is unthinkable. To Robertson the Wife of Bath is merely an evil exemplar of 'rampant "femininity" and carnality', the Prioress a negative example of an aberrant nun and Amazons a whole society of 'up-so-down'-ness, 'worthy precursors

of the Wife of Bath ... figures for rampant sensuality or effeminacy'.³ Critics who have not assumed that Chaucer's entire purpose must be to propagate one version of late medieval Christian conservatism as conceived by mid-twentieth-century nostalgia may still despair of his intentions being recoverable. To those who respect and wish to recover authorial intention, Chaucer's ironies, ambiguities and multiple narrators present a hall of distorting mirrors. One could construct a feminist or a sexist Chaucer using essentially the same evidence from his writings. But it is possible – and perhaps vital for our own demystification – to analyse images of women or constructions of masculine identity in literature independently of the author's intentions or opinions. A recently fashionable theory has also maintained that it is no more feasible to recover the author's context than the author, that neither original culture nor original individual exists to convey original meaning. Our interpretation of medieval texts is our interpretation, inevitably produced by our politics and prejudices and the more prejudiced if we deny our own historical circumstances and claim objectivity for our scholarship. The late medieval society that recent historical critics have recovered or constructed turns out to be not quietly hierarchical, uniform and static, but liminal, plural, mobile, divided, internally subverted and its literature, whether willingly or unwillingly, bears witness to its contradictions.

Amid such shifting indeterminacies there are two simple things that one can say with confidence. The first is that women and the relationships between the sexes are Chaucer's favourite subject. In poem after poem he presents women – virgins, wives and mistresses – and men intimate with women in sex, love affairs and marriage, and men and women interacting in the social processes of court and trade, city and country, war and peace, siege and pilgrimage. The second is that he treats their relationships as a problem area. He writes of the suffering caused to both sexes in their involvement with each other, of unrequited love, of unhappy marriages, of power struggles for 'maistrye'. He shows an unwillingness or inability to write of happy weddings. He even (and perhaps something of his 'intention' can be inferred from this) omits descriptions of joyful marriage ceremonies in his sources. When he explores the problems of pain and injustice, he uses women (Constance, Griselda) or men hopelessly in love with the same woman (Palamon and Arcite) as emblems of the suffering of humanity.

The problems generate famous questions: 'What do women want?' 'Who painted the lion?' To these celebrated enquiries I would wish to add the indirect question: 'God knows what she thought.' The first was later to be asked by Freud. The second is often quoted by feminist critics for whom it anticipates their awareness that gender is constructed in male-centred language, that the women in literature have mainly been created by male authors, and that female writers inherit a literary tradition largely transmitted by men. The third indicates female exclusion from oral as well as written discourse. I would find it hard to accept our recognition of these questions as only 'reader-created'. The questions take us straight into the subject of power. The answer to the first is that women desire power; the second identifies a particularly important source of power; the third is prompted by a symptom of powerlessness.

Chaucer lived in a time of growing access to and desire for the various forms of power – linguistic, economic, political and spiritual. The Peasants' Revolt was the most violent and visible example in his lifetime of the clash between those with and those wanting power. Other annexations of power were more stealthily successful. Literacy was growing among the laity; English was replacing French as the language of the upper classes in England; after the population decline caused by the Black Death labourers could command higher wages and enjoy more mobility; the secular and sacramental authority of the clergy was being questioned by theologians; the voice of the Commons was gaining in confidence. We do not know if Chaucer approved of all or any of these developments but he exemplifies some of the changes in English culture. He came from the merchant class and from a highly 'upwardly mobile' family, he was a member of the expanding category of literate laity, and he chose to write in English. His work, like that of many other medieval authors, contains expressions of respect for the ancient and traditional but also conveys a sense of the obsolescence of many values, forms and institutions. He uses traditional literary forms but is innovatory, experimental and frequently revisionary. His most celebrated poem takes the form of an institution that was increasingly under attack, the pilgrimage, which he treats as a kind of mobile obsolescence.⁴ And the pilgrim who argues 'feminist' views explicitly is the Wife of Bath, a fictional character who represents the aspirations of marginal energy, female, bourgeois, newly rich, critical of the prejudices of the clergy

and well aware that their literacy is a resource as powerful as weapons or wealth.⁵

Chaucer recognises the power of discourse and the implications of the traditional restriction of written discourse to a male clerical class. My first chapter deals with questions of role and textuality, male authorship and authority. Chaunticleer embodies in parodic form masculine pretensions to learning; Alison and Jankin confront each other over a book. Chaunticleer voices almost simultaneously the extreme idealisation and vilification of women, superficially opposed but profoundly connected. Alison protests the evil stereotypes and identifies their origins. The next two chapters continue the subject of role. In Chapter 2 I consider two medieval ideals, the Virgin Mary and the courtly lady, as they appear in Chaucer's earliest surviving poems. The Madonna is one of the most pervasive and persuasive images of womanhood in the late Middle Ages but in her impossible perfection and her virgin motherhood might function as a reproach rather than an inspiration to actual women. The courtly lady of medieval poetry has much in common with the images of the Virgin. Chaucer produces a particularly humane and intelligent version in White but she is absent from the poem in her honour: she is dead and she is recalled and reconstructed through the indirections of dream, literary convention and a conversation half-understood. In Chapter 3 I discuss two female pilgrims, the nun and the wife, who exemplify the two major roles available to women and who cannot fulfil these roles 'correctly'. In Chapter 4 I examine two examples of a dominant medieval literary form, the romance. It is a genre which commonly celebrates women as the object of desire without enquiring what they desire. But the question 'God knows what she thought', provoked by May's quietness in the *Merchant's Tale*, determines the structure of other poems by Chaucer: in the *Knight's Tale* the desires of the silent heroine are pointedly and belatedly revealed and the *Wife of Bath's Tale* pivots on the enigma of female desire. The next two chapters examine the relationships between sex and economics. In Chapter 5 I consider the changing valuations of sex and love in the First Fragment in terms of the medieval economic distinction between 'winners' and 'wasters'. Chapter 6 demonstrates the mercantile uses to which, in the absence of any other economic power, women put their sexuality. The wife in the *Shipman's Tale* is happy to sell herself, May in the *Merchant's Tale* sells herself and seeks happiness elsewhere. The Wife of Bath makes capital out of this resource but

her desire for happiness is more complex: the *General Prologue* describes her as a clothmaker as well as defining her as a wife and it is made clear in the story of her five marriages that she needs money of her own. In 'Real Women in Imaginary Gardens' I return to the subject of genre and to a motif found in religious art and courtly poetry: the *hortus conclusus* is an emblem for the Madonna and the earthly paradise a setting for adoration of the courtly heroine. For all its beauty Chaucer is suspicious of the Garden of Love and the passions cultivated in it in lyric and romance: he analyses it critically in the *Parliament of Fowls*; he exposes it as a setting for fabliau intrigue in the *Merchant's Tale* and for fantasy in the *Franklin's*. In the chapter on saintly women I consider Constance, Griselda and Cecilia and the virtues they exemplify. The *Man of Law's Tale* treats the suffering of its heroine as the 'thralldom and penance' both of being a woman and being a Christian. The *Clerk's Tale* makes manifest the corresponding hierarchies of sexual politics as analogues of the class system and marriage as a microcosm of society. The problems of preaching patience and humility to the oppressed do not arise with Cecilia, whose active and celibate virtue is empowered by the marginality of the Church and the liminality of her time. The story of Criseyde demonstrates that women are part of the private life and politically expendable; despite Hector's denial, women are sold and exchanged in the civilised but besieged Troy as much as in barbarous societies. Criseyde, neither a nun nor wife, is initially a heroine without a role; I consider how she becomes the stereotype of treacherous femininity. The last two chapters return to the problems of discourse. 'The Women in the Books' considers written discourse, the construction of women as the subjects of literature and the mediation of authority through patriarchal tradition. The last chapter deals with the power relationships between gender and speech and Chaucer's presentation of sex, discourse and silence.

My method in this study is to work from the particular to the general. Each section of each chapter begins with a specific passage from which I move to larger issues. This means that some poems are considered in more than one chapter. I have found it impossible to contain one character, the Wife of Bath, tidily in one section. She argues her way through several chapters, perhaps taking up a disproportionate amount of space. In this I am following my author.