



Feminizing Chaucer

JILL MANN

CHAUCER STUDIES XXX

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JILL MANN

D. S. BREWER

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To St Anne's College, Oxford, and Girton College, Cambridge

Preface to the 2002 Edition

Feminizing Chaucer is a revised edition of the volume entitled *Geoffrey Chaucer* in the Harvester-Wheatsheaf Feminist Readings series, published in 1991. Since the nature of the book is no longer defined by the series in which it originally appeared, it has been re-christened with a title that reflects its contents and approach more directly. The new title has – as I suppose is readily apparent – a dual significance. In the first place, it signals that the book interprets Chaucer's work from a feminist standpoint, and in the light of modern feminist writings. Secondly, it aims to show that the ethos that pervades Chaucer's work is a 'feminized' one – that women are central to his imaginative vision and his explorations of ethical and religious problems. The central substance of this book remains unchanged since 1991, but it has been updated by means of additional references, footnotes, and bibliography, and a new Excursus on 'Wife-Swapping in Medieval Literature', which extends the discussion of the *Franklin's Tale*, has been added. In this Preface, I shall try to sketch some of the developments in Chaucerian gender studies over the last ten years, and to re-situate my own study in relation to them.

At the end of the 1980s, feminist criticism seemed rather thin on the ground. True, exploration of gender stereotypes played a significant role in the work of David Aers and Sheila Delany, but both these critics aligned themselves primarily with the tradition of Marxist criticism rather than with feminism *tout court*. Despite a number of pioneering articles by (among others) Mary Carruthers (1979), Louise Fradenburg (1986), Lee Patterson (1983), and Susan Schibanoff (1986, 1988), there was no book-length study of gender in Chaucer. All that changed in a short space of time, with the appearance of Carolyn Dinshaw's *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* (1989), closely followed by Priscilla Martin's *Chaucer's Women* (1990), my own volume in the Feminist Readings series (1991), and Elaine Tuttle Hansen's *Chaucer and the Fiction of Gender* (1992). These volumes appeared so rapidly that in each of them there is barely a mention (if that) of any of the others. These first forays into the territory are also strikingly different in approach and attitude. If Priscilla Martin's book follows a relatively traditional line in focussing primarily on Chaucer's representations of women in various roles (as is indicated by the sub-title of her book, 'Nuns, Wives and Amazons'), Dinshaw's book traces a highly original trajectory, in pursuit of the 'figurative association of literary activities with human bodies' (1989, 4) that is her theme. This trajectory takes her from *Troilus and Criseyde* to the *Legend of Good Women*, and thence to the *Man of Law's Tale*, *Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*, and the *Clerk's Tale*, analyzing Chaucer's poetry 'in terms of its allegorical representation of the text as a

woman read and interpreted by men' (12) – that is, the way in which the slipperiness of discourse, figuratively gendered as feminine, is subjected to attempts by 'distinctly masculine readers, narrators, interpreters, glossators, translators' (155) to limit and fix its meaning in the interests of patriarchal order (51). Dinshaw's concluding chapter, in an even more original move, links the sexual indeterminacy of the Pardoner with the fundamental instability and arbitrariness of language; he represents a 'eunuch hermeneutics' (159), rooted in lack, which undermines the certainties of patriarchal discourse, just as he himself undermines the binary opposition of male and female which constructs the male Same through contrast with the female Other (182).

Dinshaw's view of Chaucer's own relation to patriarchal discourse is, on the face of it, oddly double. In the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale* and in the *Clerk's Tale*, she claims that he speaks for (and as) 'the excluded feminine' (129), albeit through a sense of what patriarchal discourse leaves aside. But this is in contrast to (though in response to) 'his representation of masculine narrators' misogynistic literary acts in *Troilus and Criseyde*, the *Legend of Good Women*, and the *Man of Law's Tale* (ibid.). What might have motivated this change of stance is not made clear, and Dinshaw's habit of using the pilgrim-narrators to occupy the author-position in her analysis leads to an elision of the question (she speaks, for example, of the Man of Law as the 'voice of patriarchy' (103) on the one hand, and of 'the Clerk's identification or sympathy with the female' (154) on the other.¹ Reading these two (in many ways very similar) tales in terms of this supposed difference in their narrators leads Dinshaw to misread a striking instance in the *Man of Law's Tale* where Chaucer could be said to speak for the 'excluded feminine', in the last two lines of the stanza on Constance's 'unhappy plight as a token of exchange between men' (107):

Allas, what wonder is it thogh she wepte,
That shal be sent to strange nacioun
Fro freendes that so tendrely hire kepte,
And to be bounden under subjeccioun
Of oon, she knoweth nat his condicioun?
Housbondes been alle goode, and han ben yore;
That knowen wyves; I dar sey yow na moore. (267–73)

¹ Dinshaw explains on p. 27 that she treats the pilgrims as having 'psychological dimensions', 'the capacity to make choices' (such as the Man of Law's choice not to talk about incest), and 'a certain interiority'; what is not entirely clear is how Chaucer's choices are related to the fictional choices of his pilgrims. Frequently they are spoken of as if they inhabited the same level of reality (see, for example, p. 158, where she speaks of 'the Clerk and Chaucer' as 'men who put themselves in the woman's place ... see things from the woman's point of view'). Does Chaucer also, then, put himself in the place of the misogynistic male narrator when writing the *Man of Law's Tale*? The habit of treating the pilgrims as quasi-independent authors of the tales they tell is surprisingly common in the other books referred to in this Preface; for just one example, see Laskaya's distinction between the Second Nun and the Man of Law as examples of female/male attitudes to virginity (1995, 168).

Dinshaw claims that the Man of Law is here speaking ‘unironically’ – that is, despite being able ‘to sense that something is wrong in this gender asymmetry ... he has no way to think of it outside of patriarchal categories’ (107). To me, not only is the irony obvious, but also the appeal to ‘what wives know’ is a clear invitation to the reader to take a cynical attitude to the patriarchal view of woman’s ‘subjeccioun’. It is the survival of such an attitude *within* a tale that makes female subjection a serious and powerful image of the human condition (cf. p. 118 below for a similar example in the *Clerk’s Tale*) that constitutes the ‘double perspective’ that Dinshaw sees (as I do) as the mark of Chaucerian irony (154). The complexities of the Chaucerian voice are in my view evident throughout his work, and they make it impossible to identify some narrators as ‘misogynistic’ by virtue of an unquestioned masculine standpoint, and others as sympathetic to the female point of view.

For Elaine Tuttle Hansen, in contrast, it is precisely this complexity of voice that shows that Chaucer *never* speaks for the woman as the ‘excluded feminine’. Dissociating herself from the view that ‘the representation of women in Chaucerian fiction testifies to the poet’s open-mindedness and even intentional subversion of traditional antifeminist positions’ (1992, 11), she proposes that ‘what is spoken in the name of women’ actually voices ‘an urgent problem for the gendered identity of male characters, male narrators, and (?male) readers’ (12). While agreeing that Chaucer’s poetic persona, and many of his male characters are ‘feminized’, she interprets this feminization ‘in terms of the ambivalent, insecure, and inferior position that [the medieval poet] held in the fourteenth-century court’ (37). Poet and woman are both ‘marginalized and subordinated figures’ (37), but this does not mean that the poet has any real sympathy with woman; instead, he displaces his own anxieties on to her, effacing and disguising his own voice ‘in an attempt to remain as free of the constraints of fallen language, as powerfully apolitical, muted, unaccountable, unnamed, and unspoken as possible’ (38). Hansen’s rejection of ‘the attempt to recuperate a feminist Chaucer who does not threaten the humanist Chaucer’ (12) implicitly marks off her project both from my own book (see Introduction, p. 3, below) and from Dinshaw’s (although she refers to neither).

In the period between Hansen’s book and the present, this reluctance to credit Chaucer with a ‘real sympathy’ with women has persisted and intensified. It can be seen, for example, in the essays on Chaucer by Felicity Riddy and Lesley Johnson in the collection edited by Ruth Evans and Lesley Johnson (*Feminist Readings in Middle English Literature*) which appeared in 1994.² Sheila Delany’s book on the *Legend of Good Women* (*The Naked Text*, 1994) argues that his attitude to women is ‘ambivalent’ (240) and ultimately conservative, ‘entirely compatible with the orthodox Augustinian morality that suffuses both *Troilus and Criseyde* before it and the *Canterbury Tales* afterward’ (12). Susan Crane’s

² See, for example, my account of the essay by Felicity Riddy, pp. 152–3 below.

book on *Gender and Romance in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales*, which appeared in the same year, is similarly sceptical. Crane provides some illuminating discussions of Chaucer's romances – for example, in her exploitation of Luce Irigaray's concept of mimicry, 'the deliberate acting out of prescribed femininity in an effort to thwart its limitations and reveal its hidden mechanisms' (59). Dinshaw had used this notion to interpret the Wife of Bath's appropriation of antifeminist stereotypes (1989, 115–16); Crane uses it to interpret Dorigen's invention of an 'impossible task' by means of which Aurelius might win her love as an exaggerated replication of the courtly lady's expected response to her would-be lovers. Since a lady's 'no' is conventionally read as 'yes' (see pp. 77–9, 91, 93 below), Dorigen's 'rash promise' reveals that 'her desire to refuse is at odds with courtly discourses that do not admit a language of refusal' (65). Equally insightful are Crane's notions of quoting 'against the grain' as exemplified in the speech of the female falcon in the *Squire's Tale*: Boethius's 'bird-in-the-cage' image and Jean de Meun's use of it are both refashioned so that both the bird and the instability it represents are masculine rather than feminine (66–72). She also makes good use of Joan Rivière's concept of masquerade in relation to the *Wife of Bath's Tale*: the Loathly Lady's switch from ugliness to beauty constitutes both these bodily forms as 'masquerades of womanliness, exaggerated facades reflecting back to the knight his own standards of repulsion and desire' (89). Crane is, however, reluctant to trace these instances back to any serious intention on Chaucer's part. Instead, she emphasizes the 'playful context' (72) in which these examples of mimicry and masquerade occur, a context which in her view leaves 'the masculine perspectives of dominant literary conventions' (73) untroubled – indeed, not only untroubled, but the necessary framework within which 'what is "feminine" about Dorigen, Canacee, and the falcon, works itself out' (ibid.). 'The latent masculine retort seems to be the necessary context for the feminine articulations that oppose it' (ibid.).

Chaucer's attitude to the relationship between 'play' and its relationship to 'sooth' is, however, more complex than Crane's comments imply, as the exchange between the Host and the Cook makes clear (*Cook's Prologue* 4354–60). The whole of the *Canterbury Tales*, including its most apparently 'earnest' elements, comes under the heading of 'play', but it is in such play that new possibilities can be glimpsed and made available for lived experience. It seems apposite here to quote Judith Butler's well-known comments on performativity, in *Bodies That Matter* (1993, 241):

Performativity describes this relation of being implicated in that which one opposes, this turning of power against itself to produce alternative modalities of power, to establish a kind of political contestation that is not a 'pure' opposition, a 'transcendence' of contemporary relations of power, but a difficult labor of forging a future from resources inevitably impure.

What one might claim for Chaucer's complex representations of the feminine is what Butler claims for performativity: 'though *implicated* in the very relations

of power it seeks to rival, [it] is not, as a consequence, reducible to those dominant forms' (ibid.). This is why mimicry might be a fruitful way of reading not only Dorigen's 'playful' promise or the Wife of Bath's comic appropriation of antifeminist discourse for her own ends, but also the willed acceptance of female subjection expressed by Constance and Griselda – an acceptance so complete that it exposes and calls into question the nature of the power (not only masculine but also divine) to which they submit.

In the second half of the 1990s, studies of Chaucer's relation to gender issues have come thick and fast. 1995 saw the publication of Angela Jane Weisl's *Conquering the Reign of Femeny*, which, like Crane's book, focusses on the special relation between romance and the feminine,³ and also of Anne Laskaya's book on *Chaucer's Approach to Gender in the Canterbury Tales*. Two years later there appeared Catherine S. Cox's *Gender and Language in Chaucer*, which extends Dinshaw's claim that 'woman may be understood to represent ... the body of the text' by arguing that she may also be understood to represent 'its figurative capacity to generate and articulate meaning' (12). Florence Percival's book on the *Legend of Good Women* (*Chaucer's Legendary Good Women*, 1998) argued that the work is 'a debate between a presentation of idealized feminine virtue in the Prologue versus a somewhat compromised, certainly more naturalistic, view of women's goodness in the Legends' (327). Meanwhile, the growing sense of the need to problematize masculinity, evident in scholarship from the late 1980s (Laskaya, 1995, 12, n. 34), prompted a collection of essays, edited by Peter Beidler, on *Masculinities in Chaucer* (1998). And finally, Dinshaw's demonstration of the Pardoner's importance for queer theory was confirmed and developed in Robert Sturges's *Chaucer's Pardoner and Gender Theory* (2000), in which Butler's notion of performativity and Rivière's notion of masquerade again prove fruitful (78).⁴

³ The association between romance and woman had already been discussed by Fradenburg (1986).

⁴ However, Sturges rejects Dinshaw's 'concluding vision of the Pardoner's "poetics" as founded in the Incarnate Word or Body of Christ "in whom there is no lack, no division, no separation" [Dinshaw, 1989, 183]' as 'sentimental and over-optimistic' from a medieval perspective (Sturges, 2000, 202, n. 65). One point of possible contact between the present book and Sturges's work is his claim that the Pardoner 'resembles Baudrillard's Disneyland, which "is represented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, whereas all of Los Angeles and the America that surrounds it are no longer real, but belong to the hyperreal order and to the order of simulation"' (2000, 76). That is, he might serve to draw a line between the 'feminized hero' described in my Chapter 5, who is nevertheless unmistakably heterosexual, and the homosexual; cf. Dinshaw's account (1994) of the way that homosexuality is deliberately suggested in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in order to be shown as irrelevant. However, Sturges rejects Laskaya's suggestion that 'the Pardoner, by his very presence, becomes an "Other" Chaucer uses to reaffirm the male pilgrims' masculinity and his own culture's gender definitions' as 'too simple', since the Pardoner troubles masculine authority but nevertheless assumes it (Sturges, 2000, 105, quoting Laskaya, 1995, 192).

In most of these works, there is little sign of any notion that Chaucer seriously speaks for 'the excluded feminine'. The relentless critiques of Chaucer's representations of gender which have become their dominant theme have certainly produced some challenging readings of his work, but they also tend to flatten out its tonal, emotional, and intellectual complexities by assimilating it to the 'misogynistic literary culture' that it supposedly represents. Anne Laskaya states firmly that 'Chaucer's text is homosocial – written by a man, primarily about men, and primarily for men' (1995, 4); 'with regard to gender issues, the *Canterbury Tales* is best studied as a male-authored text containing representations which tell us much about late medieval constructions of masculinity/masculinities' (13). Although the *Tales* 'can be said to call gender ideals into question' (ibid.) by exposing their implicit tensions and contradictions, nevertheless 'in so far as Chaucer's text situates the issue of obedience and rebellion at the center of its depictions of women, the text can be said to reinscribe the culture's dominant codes of femininity' (141). Similarly, Catherine Cox's comments on Chaucer's ballades represent the approach that underlies her view of his poetry in general:

... we see conventional patriarchal codes at work, but their relentless foregrounding demands scrutiny. Chaucer, then, while no 'feminist' himself, exposes his texts' relationship to the cultural, ideological orthodoxy out of which they arise. His own position seems to resist the extremism of, say, Jerome or Walter Map, but his orthodoxy often operates covertly, leading readers to proclaim him a protofeminist even as he exhibits compliant participation in a misogynistic literary culture. (95–6)

The result of such an approach is that Chaucer's work is treated as a series of case studies in which the operations and inadequacies of the patriarchal codes that they embody are revealed.

What is particularly worrying – and surprising – in a number of these books is the way that they rely on traditional gender stereotyping, and indeed reinscribe this stereotyping within the terms of the critique itself. Thus, already in Elaine Tuttle Hansen, 'feminization' is an entirely negative term; if 'the courtly model of aristocratic behavior feminizes the male lover', it does so by 'rendering him subservient, weakened, infantilized, privatized, and emotional' (1992, 20). Likewise, an entirely traditional view of 'masculine' qualities underlies Cox's complaint that Troilus is 'wholly ineffectual and passive' (47). His actions in Book IV, she asserts, are 'hardly the behavior of a hero' (48), and his (alleged) unwillingness 'to risk himself for the woman he purports to love' (49) sets him in Cox's list of 'the men who fail' Criseyde – Pandarus, her husband (who very thoughtlessly 'dies and leaves her a widow'), and the narrator, who (allegedly) 'betrays Criseyde most of all by naming her as the betrayer' (48). The implicit demand for an active masculinity that will absolve Criseyde from the need to act is left unexamined. The essays on *Troilus and Criseyde* by Stephanie Dietrich and Maud Burnett McInerney in *Masculinities in Chaucer*

(Beidler, 1998) have a similarly conventional view of what constitutes ‘manhood’, claiming that Troilus is ‘unmanned’ by love. ‘Troilus’, says McNerney, ‘regularly behaving like a heroine when he should be playing the hero, remains tragically unaware of the degree to which he is out of step with the world in which he has been placed’ – and that is an Ovidian world ‘in which the role of men ... consists largely of the pursuit of women’ (234). ‘The result is that, again and again, Troilus appears ridiculous when he should appear sympathetic and sensitive’ (ibid.). The dispiriting aspect of such attitudes to Troilus is that they are essentially no different from those that were widely current in the 1960s and 1970s – in other words, the development of feminist criticism and gender studies was unnecessary for their deployment and indeed they are more easily derived from conventional presuppositions. The other side of this coin is Martin Blum’s praise of Alison in the *Miller’s Tale* for her ‘virile womanhood’ (Beidler, 1998, 51). It is instructive to contrast this latter phrase with Chaucer’s careful deletion of Petrarch’s admiring reference to Griselda’s ‘virile’ (‘virilis’) mind; he speaks instead of her ‘rype and sad corage’ (*Clerk’s Tale*, 220).⁵ The substitution suggests not only that he is generally sensitive to the implicit condescension involved in praising women for exhibiting ‘manly’ qualities, but also that he is aware that in a story where masculinity is represented by Walter, it is a positive insult.

Fundamental to this book is the notion that gender is socially constructed, and that literature plays an important part in its construction. In saying ‘socially constructed’ rather than ‘psychologically constructed’, however, I differentiate my own project from the psychoanalytic approach that has provided the framework for much of the current work in gender studies, including writing on Chaucer (e.g., Hansen, Dinshaw, Fradenburg). The patriarchal bias of Freud and Lacan has often been recognized and criticized in these same writings (e.g., Dinshaw, 1989, 15–17, 165–7), although the usual response is to revise the theory so as to accommodate this objection. This enterprise seems both misguided and pointless to one who shares (as I do) the widespread and fundamental scepticism about the validity of Freud’s work (see Webster, 1996, and Patterson, 2001). Robert Sturges has defended the use of psychoanalysis by arguing that ‘even if one does not accept [its] validity ... for the understanding of psychic realities, it has shown itself a valuable tool in analyzing cultural productions such as literature – perhaps because it is derived from cultural productions rather than from life’ (2000, xxii). Sturges’s recognition that not everyone accepts the validity of psychoanalytical theory is welcome; as Patterson says, Freud is generally discredited everywhere except in literary studies. But I remain unconvinced that psychoanalysis can be valid for literature

⁵ See Bryan and Dempster, 1958, 302 (II.8). A few lines later (II.17), Petrarch describes her virtue as being ‘beyond her sex and age’ (‘supra sexum supraque etatem’), whereas Chaucer speaks of ‘hir wommanhede,/ And eek hir vertu, passynge any wight/ Of so yong age’ (239–40), linking her virtue with her gender rather than seeing the two as contradictory.

when it is not valid for life (of which ‘cultural productions’ are certainly part). And the circularity of psychoanalytic criticism is evident in Sturges’ formulation: if psychoanalysis derives its language and modes of thought from literature, it is not surprising that psychoanalytic critics often have very perceptive things to say about literary texts. Freud and Lacan mobilize a powerfully emotive set of metaphors which can serve as an imaginative prism through which to see life. But this metaphorical network does not have sufficient foundation in either scientific or philosophical analysis to merit the name of ‘theory’; it exists at the level of rhetoric. I agree, therefore, with Patterson in preferring a historical approach – by which is meant not a naïve belief in the attempt to adopt a medieval point of view, but rather a dialectal engagement between the medieval text and the modern critic.

As I said in 1991, my belief is that this engagement will reveal that the medieval text is not just the inert object of a modern critique but has valuable things to say to us. This book was originally written out of a conviction that Chaucer criticism had not done full justice to the subtlety and complexity with which gender issues are treated in his work, especially in *Troilus and Criseyde*. I am not so much concerned, that is, to show how Chaucer’s writings are (inevitably) embedded in the literary, cultural, and social matrices of his time, but rather to show that rather than simply reproducing these matrices in their own structures, they refashion them in ways that call to mind Butler’s words about ‘forging a future from resources inevitably impure’. My method is therefore – so far as is possible within the limits originally imposed on the length of this book – comparative. Setting Chaucer’s work within its literary context, comparing and contrasting it with its sources and analogues as well as other medieval literature, makes it possible to identify its significant features and see them as the result of *choice* – not in order to vindicate Chaucer on intentionalist grounds, but in order to capture the full significance of the literary design. So, in the new Excursus on ‘Wife-Swapping’, I read the *Franklin’s Tale* against a wide range of texts which similarly depict a husband who (wittingly or unwittingly) sends his wife to another man, in order to show that Chaucer’s tale certainly *invokes* such stories of homosocial bonding as a context, but differs from them in ways that undermine homosociality. Or again, in Chapter 2, I show how Chaucer invokes the misogynist tradition of the *dissuasio de non ducenda uxore* but gives it a uniquely original twist that directs its laughter against men rather than women.

I also aim to compare Chaucer with *himself* – that is, to work back and forth between texts in such a way as to show how, in an important sense, they may be seen as variations on a theme. For that reason, each of these texts is provisional, representing the imaginative exploration of a particular situation, and representing the question ‘what if ...?’ rather than the declaration ‘this is the way things are/should be’. Chaucer’s tales are (to borrow the anthropologists’ description of myths) ‘good to think with’, rather than mimetic representations of contemporary life. So one can see Chaucer meditating, for example, on betrayal and its roots in the human capacity for change (or rather its incapacity for *non-change*), shifting the gender of the betrayer from male to female and

back again, changing the context from a love-affair to a marriage to an envisaged death, showing it actualized or evaded (and, had he finished the *Squire's Tale*, atoned for), asking if trust and love can survive a bodily betrayal. One can also see him meditating on rape and its connection to gendered power-relations, pondering the nature of the wrong and its sources in masculine assumptions, asking why rape or the threat of it calls forth suicide or sacrificial death, showing it averted by violent struggle (Constance) or submitted to, albeit with horror (Dorigen), asking what would need to happen for it to be eradicated. The extreme nature of the narrative situations through which such questions are sometimes explored should not lead the reader to imagine that they are proposed as everyday norms; it is evidently absurd to suppose, for example, that a wife in Dorigen's situation would have done anything other than protest 'but I didn't mean it'.⁶ The quasi-magical power of the promise is a way of constructing a situation in which actions can be seen as simultaneously willed and not-willed, and the limits of marital trust can be tested. Despite their finely-attuned sensitivity to the way people behave, speak, and feel, most of Chaucer's tales are anything but realistic in terms of their plots and settings; they are permeated by the motifs of fairy-tale, religious miracle, and fabliau farce, and are set for the most part in distant times and distant lands rather than fourteenth-century England.

It is through such extreme motifs – Griselda's promise, Constance's rudderless boat, the Loathly Lady's transformation – that Chaucer explores the problem of power. One of the central claims made by this book is that Chaucer complicates the binary opposition between active and passive, traditionally associated with the male/female binary. I suggested that Chaucer not only questioned the superiority of active masculinity (as is evident, *inter alia*, in the general absence of active male heroes in his work), but that he also questioned the nature of active power itself, distributing agency through a multiplicity of causes which embrace the apparently passive. I suggested that his notion of patience and pity as *active* qualities might 'enrich the range of twentieth-century gender models, limited as it is to shuffling the "active" and "passive" counters back and forth between the male and female ends of the board' (see p. 144 below). Chaucer's 'careful integration of activity and passivity', I claimed, offers the vision of 'a fully human ideal that erases male/female role-divisions' (*ibid.*). These claims were met with sympathy but some scepticism by Susan Crane, who, while welcoming the 'departure from ... critical simplification and consequent impasse' that they offer, nevertheless argued that

'the handling of gender-marked traits in romance suggests ... that the "fully human ideal" is finally masculine. Traits marked feminine can indeed

⁶ It is true that Richard Firth Green (1999, 293) cites a real-life case where a woman brought a legal action against a man who had made her a playful promise of marriage, in the attempt to hold him to it; the point is, however, that the young man himself was not at all disposed to take this playful episode seriously and the court took his side.

be integrated into masculine behavior, but the current does not run in reverse from masculine into feminine identity; and the complications of masculine behavior that femininity figures contribute to enlarging and universalizing rather than feminizing the masculine experience' (1994, 21).

While I can certainly understand this point of view, I do not, at the end of the day, find myself agreeing with it. In the first place, I do not think it is so clear that 'the current does not run in reverse from masculine into feminine identity'. Constance and Griselda, to take the most obvious examples, dominate the narratives in which they appear, reducing the men who are supposed to wield power over them to shadowy puppets. Their 'suffisaunce' involves a stoical courage and self-reliance that could well be said to represent a current running from the (conventionally) masculine to the (conventionally) feminine. It is the *same* Boethian 'suffisaunce' that is an ideal for men, who, however, need to be 'feminized' in order to achieve it, not because they thereby need to achieve a fuller humanity than women, but precisely because of the deficiencies of conventional masculinity. In the second place, since feminism assumes that the source of the problem lies with the masculine (patriarchy), which needs the feminine to function as the Other, it is reasonable to expect (particularly in the work of a male author) that the emphasis should be on the *redefinition* of the masculine, in such a way that the feminine is not constructed as a necessary Other. So, for example, in the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, for example, we do not see the Loathly Lady transformed into a CEO, but into a beautiful and faithful wife, because the point of the story is the transformation of the *knight*, which is the condition and cause of the change in her; female ugliness is the accurate reflection of the deformity of male desires. What the ending shows is that men can have what they want only by renouncing their claim to it.⁷

Less sympathetic than Crane to the notion of an integration of activity and passivity is Anne Laskaya. Though she does not refer to this book in particular, it is worth quoting her on this point in order to clarify and re-articulate my own position.

It is possible to read articles claiming Griselde more powerful than Walter in the *Clerk's Tale* and Custance more powerful than the men residing in the *Man of Law's Tale*. Within an exclusively Christian framework, such arguments can stand, for these women exhibit superhuman, Christ-like obedience and humility in the face of oppression and suffering; however, they only have 'power' in the eyes of readers who fully believe

⁷ On this point I differ from Louise Fradenburg (1986, 54): 'through the transfiguration of the hag, the fantasy is reconstituted: the woman is represented as an other who can live in happy obedience to the same, provided that the same rescues her from fairyland and then worships her as the angel of the house'. This account of the ending of the tale ignores the essential condition of the transformation, which is the Same's surrender of 'maistrye' to the Other – a surrender which remains in place as the condition of the woman's voluntary 'obedience'.

that men should behave likewise and/or who fully believe in a hierarchical Christian afterlife with specific Christ-like prerequisites... Attempts to ascribe 'power' to Chaucer's obedient female characters may well reveal how a modern reader who has spent years of her/his life studying literature would like to find Chaucer, would like to read the text as if it were advocating greater autonomy and power for women. Although such a reading is viable from an idealistically moral and Christian perspective, it runs the risk of praising women for using all their inner strength to achieve silence and a stillness of soul in the face of oppression; in other words, it runs the risk of appearing to endorse women as victims, as though passive-aggressive power were laudable, and as though martyrdom were a powerful and appropriate goal, particularly for women. (1995, 141–2)

Although I have certainly spent long years both studying and teaching Chaucer, I would never dream of reading his work as 'advocating greater autonomy and power for women'; the modern phraseology testifies unmistakably to the anachronism of such an idea. Nor does the phrase 'passive-aggressive power' accurately represent the integration of passivity and activity that I have tried to describe in this book. As for the 'idealistically moral and Christian perspective' which Laskaya assumes must underpin any sympathy for Chaucer's "'ideal" women', I have made clear elsewhere that my own position is that of an unequivocal atheist (Mann, 1995). This does not mean, however, that my response to Chaucer's religious tales is limited to an exercise in social anthropology, the temporary suspension of disbelief. On the contrary, there is a very real point of contact, for the precise reason that what I most admire in Chaucer is his emotional and intellectual commitment to *questioning* the operations of divine power, whether explicitly (as in the constable's 'Boethian question' at *Man of Law's Tale* 813–16) or implicitly (as in the role of Walter in the *Clerk's Tale*). It is in the course of this questioning that Chaucer explores the nature of power, both human and divine, and shows active and passive as different sides of the same coin. As I say in Chapter 4, Chaucer does not so much attempt to redistribute power from active to passive as to *deconstruct* the idea of power, or at least ideas of simple 'possession' of it. His Boethian insistence on the determining role of chance limits human agency to the contingent, and leaves divine agency merely a matter of trust – a trust that can only be understood in terms of the *human* manifestations of love and faith.

It is also important that, if Chaucer's tales lead to the rediscovery of a Christian belief in the power of suffering, this rediscovery comes, not in the familiar forms of asserted doctrine or instructive *exemplum*, but as a surprise and an enigma. I was, I believe, among the first to claim that in Christian terms, Griselda offers a truer image of God than Walter.⁸ Nowadays, this idea is casually mooted as simply one possible way of reading the tale. But the point

⁸ See Mann, 1983a, 180–82, and Mann, 1983b, 43–5. The article by Edward I. Condren (1984) which argues that Walter represents man tempting God was unfortunately unknown

is that this realization should come *as a surprise*, as a result of the experience of reading and allowing oneself to be troubled by the mysterious infinitude of Griselda's suffering love. It is only the experience of being troubled that gives value to the revelation that there is another way of reading the narrative. And the point is that this reading is not simply to be substituted for the alternative reading in which Walter plays the part of God, cruelly and gratuitously killing and torturing his victims. The two readings are inextricably intertwined; somewhat like the celebrated picture of the rabbit and the duck, it is not possible to settle for one or the other, and indeed they seem in some strange way to depend on each other. The tale structures the alternative readings not as objectively contemplated possibilities, but as an emotional experience, and one which takes full account of the suffering and loss involved.

Chaucer's exploration of gender roles, that is, is bound up with his exploration of cosmic power, and his engagement with the questions of chance, destiny, divine justice and human free will that Boethius had laid out so many centuries before. It is this cosmic perspective that I increasingly miss in the most recent studies of gender in Chaucer. One of my regrets about the limitation of length imposed on this book is that it inevitably led to the exclusion of important issues that are inextricably linked with gender in Chaucer's writings. The only one of these issues that has enjoyed much attention is language, which has been explored by Dinshaw and Cox. I have tried to indicate the importance of others (time, change, cosmic order, chance) in the course of my discussion, to indicate the larger network of ideas in which gender plays a part.

In 1991, I ended my Preface by stressing the 'dialogue between text and reader', which means that a writer's work is realized in different forms, not only by each century, but almost by each individual reader. It pleases me to think that this is the relation between text and audience that Chaucer represents in the *Canterbury Tales*, where the pilgrims react to each story in terms of their own personal experience and interests (Mann, 1991b) – the Reeve feels personally affronted by a story about a carpenter, the Host wishes his wife was like Griselda or Prudence, the Franklin wishes his son resembled the Squire. The Friar and the Summoner use their stories in the service of mutual aggression, the Pardoner thinks he can use his to make a fast buck. To call Chaucer a 'protofeminist' is pointlessly anachronistic, but his own shrewd observation of the uses to which literary texts are put licenses us to read him with feminist concerns uppermost in our minds. My continued conviction is that to do so is not just an exercise in unpicking masculinist assumptions, but is both a rewarding and enlightening experience.

The aim is not to rescue 'the humanist Chaucer', but to see in what ways his stories might enlarge our perceptions of human life and its possibilities, even though they were written out of and for a very different historical context.

to me when this book was first published. Condren, however, rejects the alternative reading in which Walter occupies the position of God, whereas my point is that the disturbing power of the tale depends on the co-existence of the two.

Sheila Delany puts it well when she says that we should not rewrite the past, but rather use it to rewrite the future (1994, 240).

My thanks are due to Derek Brewer and Richard Barber for offering to publish this revised edition, and to Caroline Palmer for help in the process of its publication. The Excursus on Wife-Swapping first appeared (in slightly different form) in *Viator* (Fall, 2001), and I am grateful to the editor, Blair Sullivan, for permission to reproduce it here.

In 1991 I thanked the Cambridge undergraduates with whom I had discussed Chaucer. In this revised edition, I should like to thank my wonderful students at the University of Notre Dame, both graduate and undergraduate, whose sharp insights and freshness of response have since January 1999 rejuvenated my pleasure in teaching Chaucer. I should also like to thank Maura Nolan and Chris Cannon for reading and commenting on this Preface in draft.

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January 25th, 2002

Preface

Chaucer is a major poet and women are a major subject of his poetry. In consequence, this book has turned out to be much longer than it should have been, and even so the reader will notice some obvious omissions. Among the more important casualties are the Prioress and her tale, St Cecilia, the Wife of Bath's fourth husband, the *Book of The Duchess* and the *Parliament of Fowls*. I can only plead in excuse that it seemed less important to give exactly equal coverage to all things female in Chaucer's work than to develop a coherent argument which would enable the reader to place individual works or passages in relation to a structure of poetic thought and practice.

The restrictions of space have had other consequences: I have had to omit any systematic survey of previous feminist writings on Chaucer, although I have dealt with numerous examples of them at appropriate points of my own discussion. I have also had to renounce any attempt to define the relationship between the fictional world of Chaucer's poetry and the social realities of fourteenth-century England. I hope that in doing so I shall not be thought to believe that when all is well in literature, all is well in life, but I do believe that literature is not only produced but also produces – that it is precisely in its imaginative engagement with the ideologies and myths of contemporary society that it can make a contribution to the formation of new social conditions. To concentrate on the text is therefore not an isolationist exercise, but a recognition that this imaginative engagement is itself a critique of prevailing ideologies and a visionary outline of the future, which must be grasped in its full subtlety if it is to be of any use.

As for the kind of 'feminist reading' that this book represents, I should make it clear that it is not tied to any particular school of feminist criticism, though I have formed many of my arguments in mental dialogue with their imagined representatives. Feminism as a historical movement belongs to the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and it is therefore legitimate to ask of the literary texts of this period how they stand in relation to the issues that were central to this movement (and which these literary texts themselves may well have helped to identify) – sexual freedom, the 'double standard', work, economic independence, domestic responsibility. There is nothing to stop us considering medieval texts in relation to these issues, as part of the constant re-interpretation and re-testing of past literature that brings it into meaningful relation with present-day culture. But adaptation to different historical circumstances will inevitably change them, sometimes out of recognition (the widespread existence of nunneries, for example, altered the pattern of choices for women – but whether towards greater freedom or greater repression is

arguable). And we also have to be prepared for medieval texts themselves to throw up new questions, to point us to unfamiliar issues or unfamiliar areas of importance, if we are not only to avoid distorting the text, but also to see in what ways it can extend our own thinking. I have tried to describe Chaucer's 'feminism' in his own terms rather than ours, not with the narrow historicist aim of keeping him bounded in the past, but rather to avoid bounding him in the orthodoxies of the present. Rather than patronizingly awarding him praise to the extent that he managed to anticipate modern views or demands, I want to allow his text to speak in ways that can tell us something new as well as confirm what we already believe.

I should like to thank the three Harvester Wheatsheaf readers for their careful and appreciative comments, which I have used for last-minute improvements of the text. I should also like to thank Gillian Beer, Piero Boitani, Peter Dronke and Michael Lapidge, who likewise read the work and made helpful suggestions at an earlier stage, and the Cambridge students with whom I have discussed Chaucer and women over the last ten years.

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1991