

CHAUCER AND THE MASCULINITY
OF HISTORICISM¹
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Stephen Barney, the Riverside editor of *Troilus and Criseyde*, notes that Chaucer “presents himself in this poem as something of a historiographer, a pedantic scholar,” when he pretends that Lollius is his source.² This pedantic stance of studied and dispassionate knowingness is of course a pose: the dutiful and disciplined translator of a Latin historical source is not one; he is just Chaucer, borrowing and freely adapting mostly from other vernacular poets. Chaucer’s masquerade as a historian raises a number of interpretive issues about the perceived relative value of literature and history, but it also can be shown to inform many of our appraisals of each other as scholars. Our own desire for history—for its seeming superior knowledge, for its authority—drives the way we attempt to define ourselves and our Others in relation to the field.

Chaucer’s historiographer-manqué contrasts sharply with another narrating figure who shares many qualities with the lovesick Troilus: the empathetic, sentimental writer of weeping verses, buffeted by the emotions elicited in him by his material. As Winthrop Weatherbee writes, this other narrator is in a “hapless state,” one in which, “blinded by desire, [. . .] he abandon[s] himself to Tisiphone.”³ Like Troilus himself, this narrator does not master events and forces but rather is in thrall to them.

For most of the poem, Troilus is dramatically abject and feminine: thanks in part to Chaucer’s many borrowings from the *Heroides*, the hero is specifically figured as an abandoned woman.⁴ We never see him fighting; instead we see swooning, deliberating, complaining, longing, letter-writing, singing, playing, waiting, and finally mourning. Chaucer is clearly gendering Troilus’ behavior: when parliament decides to trade Criseyde to the Greeks, Pandarus urges Troilus to “Go ravysse here! / [. . .] Ris up anon, and lat this wepyng be, / And kith thow art a man” (IV 530; 537-538). But this Troilus is no rapist, or kidnapper, or man.⁵

Suddenly, however, at the very end of the poem Troilus becomes a warrior. He experiences what Weatherbee calls an “epic renewal”⁶ when, overcome by “wrath” (V, 1800), he kills thousands of Greeks before Achilles kills him and he ascends to the spheres. Finally rejecting passion, Troilus becomes a man.

The rapid change is absurd, designed to call attention to the exaggerated nature of a number of gendered performances in the poem. As an inside joke to, say, Gower,⁷ pretending that Lollius is the source is funny; the narrator’s posing as a histrionic versemaker is equally so (especially given the self-emasculating notion that he is no lover himself, just a servant of the servants of Love, which would be particularly witty coming on the heels of Chaucer’s legal hassles surrounding Cecily Chaumpaigne’s “kidnapping”).⁸ At the same time, in shifting from a Troilus who sounds like Dido to a Troilus full of muscular wrath, Chaucer exposes just how constructed the notion of proper masculinity is. His “twin heroes” correspond interpretively to his “twin narrators”: as Troilus veers from feminine abjection to masculine wrath, the narrator also shifts from mere translator to, in his own moment of epic renewal, canonical author when he imagines his text joining the literary pantheon of “Virgile, Ovide, Omer, Lucan, and Stace” (V, 1792). Chaucer’s ability to imagine both gendered identity and authorial identity along such a wide spectrum of values suggests that these twin heroes and narrators are the products of playful and self-aware acts of disguise. Chaucer displays a knowingness about the limits of both historical and masculine authority.



Our own critical maneuvers are rarely so self-knowing. Paul Strohm provides an exception when, in the course of noting a recent trend among “literati” to describe themselves as historians, he urges us to “admit that this self-description represents something of an aggrandizement. In fact, let us be really honest and admit that [. . .] we are not really historians at all.”⁹ Strohm’s language suggests that we are pretenders to history, as opposed to “actual practitioners of that specialized and exacting discipline.” Exposing and enacting the desire for history, Strohm continues by arguing that to call

oneself a historian is a way of saying “I care about the past—I desire, or traffic in, knowledge of the past.”¹⁰ The incomplete literary scholar, wanting history, lacking the knowledge that will legitimate him, is of course a gendered subject position. So, too, is the favored identity of many historicists: if we are careful custodians of the past, resistant to its fables and to the seductions of false memory—if we are disciplined, in other words—we are worthy men.

Or we would be, if we were historians. But we historicists have not really mastered the past (never mind that historians haven’t either—the point here is that “mastery” is itself an illusory and objectionable goal). Literary study, especially since having abandoned philology many decades ago, is—some fear—a diminished, lacking thing; it’s just “litcrit.” And our approach to “Theory” has not helped. The work of Derrida and Lacan, for instance, is often effeminized, glossed as purposefully obtuse so as to disguise its nothingness. Interestingly, the arrival of continental deconstruction and psychoanalysis (in the mid- to late-1980s for medievalists) coincides with the first major feminist publications in our field. Appearing on the radar more or less at once were feminism, deconstruction, psychoanalysis, Carolyn Dinshaw (1989), Louise Fradenburg (1991), and Elaine Tuttle Hansen (1992).¹¹

Psychoanalysis, of course, exposes, usually in very embarrassing (and enraging) ways, what it is that we want, what we lack, and what we do as we hopelessly try to fill that need. Thus, as Fradenburg has written, psychoanalysis has “served medieval studies as a whipping boy—or girl—for the convulsion in theories of knowledge that shocked every discipline in the twentieth century.”¹² The phrase “whipping boys and girls,” Fradenburg continues, is ideally suited to medieval studies: we stand, after all, for the discipline in discipline.¹³ Masking a fear of being caught at not knowing, at not mastering, at not being what we claim to be, the rejection of psychoanalysis as illegitimate, feminine, and of course ahistorical, is perfect.

When Lee Patterson loudly foreswore Freud in 2001, he confessed to having been seduced when, back in 1985, he “invoked psychoanalytic terms” in a discussion of the Pardoner at Kalamazoo.¹⁴ But like Augustine’s tears for Dido, this critic’s sympathy for psychoanalysis was in error, a case of unregulated

passion, or “insufficient control.” Acknowledging now that the “allure” was false, he looks back on his vanities and rejects them, with particular focus on the work of Dinshaw, Fradenburg, and Hansen. Patterson’s personal “epic renewal” extends self-analysis to a broader call for reform, insisting (symptomatically) that his remarks are not meant as “armed warfare” but are instead indicative of “vigorous diversity” in the field. It is not enough for one man to climb off the couch; instead, all true medievalists should discipline themselves, get off their backs, and get back to the “scholarly thoroughness for which medieval studies has always been justly admired.”¹⁵ I would suggest that when we read such an exhortation we ask ourselves just what type of former critical approach is being praised for its “scholarly thoroughness,” and what and whose approaches are being denigrated for their lack of thoroughness (or just lack?), and just whose admiration we are meant to regain. Patterson’s language constitutes a call to repopulate the field—if not with men, *per se*, then with scholars who resemble in their critical practice what the field looked like before the trauma of 1985. A reformist will not just whip himself, after all; he will discipline the discipline, aggressively guarding its definitions of truth and fraud, self and other.

Patterson’s declaration is, of course, old news at this point, and happily the field has not since banded together around it. The notion that historicism and feminism are somehow at war does not advance thought; it is productive primarily of cliquish subject identities and personal dramas at conferences. It is possible to be a feminist historicist. The archive is not our enemy, and neither is Freud. I would encourage fellow feminists to visit the Public Records Office (and a good place to start might just be that 1380 *raptus* release, which is by no means a settled issue). And let’s be sure to bring our “scholarly thoroughness,” which is to say our Latin and our paleography. But to my fellow historicists I would add, let’s do try to leave our desire for the phallus at home, and stop pretending to a bogus “mastery of history” that is just as harmful to women now as it was in the Middle Ages.

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END NOTES

1. This essay was first read at the New Chaucer Society meeting, July 2006, in New York City.
2. Stephen A. Barney, "Introduction to *Troilus and Criseyde*," *Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986), p. 472, emphasis added. Future quotations from Chaucer's poetry will refer to this edition.
3. Winthrop Weatherbee, "Dante and the Poetics of *Troilus and Criseyde*," *Critical Essays on Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. Thomas C. Stillinger (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1998), pp. 243-266, p. 255.
4. See Suzanne C. Hagedorn, *Abandoned Women: Rewriting the Classics in Dante, Boccaccio, and Chaucer* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2004), esp. pp. 130-58.
5. To "ravish" someone in Middle English could mean to rape or to kidnap; see Christopher Cannon, "*Raptus* in the Chaumpaigne Release and a Newly Discovered Document concerning the Life of Geoffrey Chaucer," *Speculum* 68 (1993): 74-94, for a discussion of the controversies surrounding the legal definition of rape in Chaucer's time.
6. Weatherbee, "Dante and the Poetics of *Troilus and Criseyde*," p. 244.
7. Chaucer's friend and fellow poet John Gower is one of the dedicatees of *Troilus and Criseyde* (see Book V, 1856).
8. See Cannon, "*Raptus*," for a full discussion of the Chaumpaigne case; Sylvia Federico, "The Imaginary Society: Women in 1381," *Journal of British Studies* 40.2 (2001): 159-183, discusses the possibility of rape as a political strategy in the 1380s.
9. Paul Strohm, "Rememorative Reconstruction," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 23 (2001): 3-16, p. 3.
10. Strohm, "Rememorative Reconstruction," p. 3.
11. Carolyn Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1989); Louise O. Fradenburg, *City, Marriage, Tournament: Arts of Rule in Late Medieval Scotland* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1991); Elaine Tuttle Hansen, *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1992).
12. Louise O. Aranye Fradenburg, *Sacrifice Your Love: Psychoanalysis, Historicism, Chaucer* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2002), p. 52.
13. Fradenburg, *Sacrifice Your Love*, pp. 52-53.
14. Lee Patterson, "Chaucer's Pardoner on the Couch: Psyche and Clio in Medieval Literary Studies," *Speculum* 76 (2001): 638-680, p. 657.
15. Patterson, "Chaucer's Pardoner," p. 680.