Holly A. Crocker. *Chaucer's Visions of Manhood.* The New Middle Ages Series. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. Pp. xiii + 250.
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ALTHOUGH A RELATIVELY slim volume, Holly Crocker's *Chaucer's Visions of Manhood* is a daunting text to review in a little more than a thousand words. It is by no means a light read, but well worth the effort for scholars of gender in the Middle Ages. Packed with invigorating insight into Geoffrey Chaucer's diverse literary representations of masculinity, coupled with a truly admirable range of scholarship that draws on contemporary critics, classical and medieval philosophy, medieval medicine, and medieval conduct treatises, among others, this text questions the motivations underlying gender performances throughout Chaucer's works.

Despite the title's focus on medieval masculinities, Crocker's book offers a wealth of awareness regarding the construction of medieval femininities in relation to their masculine counterparts. Building on Judith Butler's ideas about the performance of gender, Crocker focuses on visibility and invisibility of both genders to show the limitations of binary characterizations when applied to medieval constructions of gender. Arguing that although Chaucer's male and female characters may initially appear to meet these prescriptive gender expectations, Crocker reveals that these characters are simply "passing" in order to align themselves with these binary categories, and to do so often involves (in)visible transgressions against these norms. In short, Crocker dives beneath the surface to explore a hither-to-unseen complex and ever-shifting web of gendered relations.

Crocker foregrounds her study by contextualizing her approach in the broader scheme of literature, showing visibility to be an issue in the classical traditions as well as in modern literature, and does so in a way that helps to clarify her methodology. She next explores the idea of "Chaucer the Man" (an idea to which she returns in her conclusion), focusing on his (in)visibility as a pilgrim and his subsequent empowerment. Although Chaucer the pilgrim might appear passive and thus potentially feminized, he is not so, for the medieval definition of *manhed* includes stereotypically "masculine" traits as well as more feminized traits such as passivity. Thus the boundaries between masculinity and femininity, agency and passivity, become illusory, as the remainder of her study demonstrates.

Crocker's first chapter opens by discussing medieval medical and philosophical theories regarding ocularity, particularly in relation to gender. Drawing on

the works of Augustine, Aristotle, and Albertus Magnus, among others, Crocker traces the theories of extramission and intromission to establish the degrees to which agency and passivity are possessed by the seer and the seen. She then turns to Roger Bacon's work on the bilateralism of sight, specifically its application to gender roles, presenting the idea of the male and female as "complementary rather than competing forces in generation" (25). After a discussion of the cultural history of marriage, Crocker turns to the dialogue between Melibee and Prudence in Chaucer's *Tale of Melibee* to show that successful masculinity depends upon the erasure of the appearance (albeit not the reality) of feminine agency. That is, Prudence displays her agency through her counsel (which focuses on the community's perception of Melibee's reactions to violence done against his property) in such a way that her husband's appearance of controlling masculinity is protected.

In her second chapter, Crocker explores how feminine agency threatens masculinity in Chaucer's *Physician's Tale*. Drawing on late medieval conduct discourse as well as the historical account of the marriage of Elizabeth of Lancaster, Crocker establishes the concern for men to display power over women as part of their gender performance. Although Chaucer shifts the focus from the political to the domestic sphere in his retelling, Crocker points out that men must still show that they control that space. Crocker also explores how women become conduits between men: the struggle between Appius and Virginius stems from each man's attempt to establish himself as superior—either to other men, as in the case of Appius, or to women, as in the case of Virginius. Ultimately, though, Virginius's inability to preserve his daughter's sexual purity leads him to deny Virginia any agency, further undermining his masculinity.

Drawing upon intromissive theories of vision, Crocker returns to the idea of vision and distance in the third chapter, which focuses on *The Book of the Duchess*. Here, she discusses masculinity that must set itself apart from femininity in order to succeed. Drawing on theories of medieval memory, particularly as regards devotional traditions and meditations on the body of Christ, Crocker argues that the nearly invisible narrator helps the Man in Black define the boundaries between his identity and that of White's image. Once separated, the Man in Black can respect her feminine agency while retaining his own.

The fourth chapter focuses on two women who have "equal investments in invisibility" (118): namely, Chaucer's Wife of Bath and the Wife of *The Shipman's Tale*. That is, Crocker focuses on how each wife uses invisibility to establish her agency. In the case of Alison of Bath, it is at the cost of Jankyn's masculinity, for she exposes him as lacking in control over her body as well as

over his own body. On the other hand, because the wife of the *Shipman's Tale* has agency and invests in invisibility, Daun John's attempt to establish superiority over the merchant fails, and the partnership between the merchant and his wife is strengthened as the latter recognizes her influence on public perceptions of his masculinity. By way of conclusion, Crocker turns to Harley 7333, a collection of fifteenth-century works including those by Chaucer, in order to explore how textual studies participate in the construction of Chaucer's "manhood."

Overall, there are many strengths to this study; Crocker displays a firm command of her subject matter, conveying her ideas in lucid prose and frequently contrasting Chaucer's treatments with contemporary analogues to highlight the changes introduced regarding gender. One potential weakness, however, is the demands placed upon the reader; while some of the works under investigation are well-known, others, such as *The Tale of Melibee*, are less so, and therefore more detailed application of her ideas to the primary texts might be provided in order to help ground readers more firmly in her analysis. At the same time, Crocker is careful to reiterate her main claims throughout the text, drawing connections between chapters and to the larger picture. The range of examples and overall organization contributes to the effectiveness of her argument about the performative and reciprocal nature of feminine and masculine interactions. Ultimately, her deconstruction of gender binaries using the theory of vision proves entirely effective and will certainly pave the way for new, equally innovative explorations of medieval gender.

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