

*Chaucer's Feminine Subjects: Figures of Desire in The Canterbury Tales*, by John A Pitcher. The New Middle Ages. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. Pp. xiv+200. ISBN: 9781403973221.

Pitcher's examination of the feminine subjects in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* focuses on the construction, and deconstruction, of the presentation of women in Chaucer's work. Of particular interest to Pitcher are the elements of modern subjectivity that appear within the tales he has selected. This subjectivity is, in his view, not to be found on the surface of the text but is created by the indeterminacy and tensions within the individual texts that appear at once affirming and contradictory, the *différance* of the symbols Chaucer has provided. Pitcher's text is inherently deconstructionist in its methodology, while firmly grounded in current medieval and feminist scholarship. The strength of this examination is Pitcher's willingness not only to engage with the source texts and the scholarship, but also to explore the tensions between scholarly readings in an effort to decenter current thought on Chaucer's work and to show the reader the ideologies and readings that exist in the gaps and conflicts Chaucer creates through his use of rhetoric and wordplay.

Three of the tales Pitcher examines, those of the Wife of Bath, the Clerk, and the Franklin, are obvious choices for such a reading as they are the core tales of the traditional Marriage Group and, as Pitcher acknowledges, "the tales on which critical debates about women in the Canterbury enterprise turn" (7). The choice of *The Physician's Tale* as a complement to these three tales, rather than *The Merchant's Tale* which would complete the Marriage Group, repositions the readings and allows for a greater degree of latitude in examining the roles of women in *The Canterbury Tales* as a whole.

The first chapter, "Figures of Desire in *The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*," serves both as a practical model for how Pitcher's theoretical paradigms will be applied in the subsequent chapters and to demonstrate the effectiveness of the model in problematizing Chaucer's work. At the heart of Pitcher's dissection of the Wife of Bath and her tale is the image of the indecisive incubus and friar in the *Prologue*. This indecision, and the possibility of equivocity or substitution between the two, mirrors the frequently examined indecisive substitution between Alison and the protagonist in her tale and the ideological substitution of one feminine ideal for another in Pitcher's reading. The use of violence and coercion in the *Prologue* and the tale represents another iteration of this displacement and substitution, as Pitcher amply documents both the scholarly work that has been done on the subject and the rhetorical construction of ambiguity

in what Alison chooses to include and elide in the construction of the tale. Of particular interest, in terms of its feminist discourse, is the emphasis placed on the sexual difference and forms of desire expressed by the characters. The interjections into Alison's prologue by the other pilgrims, Jenkin's violence and misogynistic reading, and the displacement of desire and violence in the tale itself present an environment in which the specifics of desire and, to a point, gender expectations become mobile and highly subjectivized.

"The Rhetoric of Desire in *The Franklin's Tale*" applies these effects in terms of gender politics and the manipulation of love and duty in the confines of the odd triangle formed by Averagus, Dorigen, and Aurelius. The deferment and displacement of love and the obligations it brings, in terms of the characters' expectations and understanding of their positions, both complement the more overt violence of the Wife of Bath and her tale and further illustrate the underlying ambiguity Chaucer presents. While this chapter is in many ways more psychoanalytic than the first, the variations on the central ideas Pitcher advances provide a suitable contrast and balance within the text as a whole. The tensions explored, specifically between the fantasy of courtly love and the realization that honor demands fulfillment of her pledge, place Dorigen in a uniquely subjective light and illustrate the possible vacillations between fulfillment and desire as they are rhetorically expressed not only in this tale but in *The Canterbury Tales* as a whole.

The rhetorical dimensions of these gender struggles are brought more fully to light in the examination of *The Clerk's Tale* and the character of Griselda. Of particular interest in Pitcher's reading is his application of the concept of the open secret and its effect on the psyche of the character. Griselda's acceptance of Walter's abuse and seeming infanticide becomes a case study in gendered expectations and cultural norms pushed to the extreme. Pitcher argues that the extremities of the tale reflect and distill the expectations of the audience and the Clerk himself, creating a specifically biased world view that operates on a more universal scale within the framework of the Canterbury enterprise and reflects the ambiguities that Chaucer may have felt about gendered expectations in writing the text.

A similar rhetorical examination takes center stage in the final chapter, "Chaucer's Wolf: Exemplary Violence in *The Physician's Tale*." The symbol of the wolf in the prologue, which should represent the false and predatory judge of the tale, becomes an ambiguous sign for both the predatory Apius and the consumptive familial violence committed by Virginus. The ambiguity between the threatened loss of Virginia's maidenhead to Apius and the real loss of her

maiden's head to Virginius's sword to preserve her honor serves to underscore the use of violence and gendered power within *The Canterbury Tales* as a whole. When compared to the preceding chapters, this analysis is much briefer but also very concise, a suitable summation of the figures of desire and the ambiguities of gender and social position established by Pitcher's reading of the texts.

While the general approach to the text makes it noteworthy for breathing new life into frequently studied tales, a stylistic concern could be raised in regard to the tonal differences between the introduction and the conclusion. The conclusion better positions the project in terms of its feminist readings of the tales and the interplay between postmodern theory and medieval texts than is hinted at in the introduction. Reading the conclusion first may be beneficial for some, as it would clarify a number of issues raised in the body of the text and make the overall reading much more accessible to less theoretically motivated readers. Pitcher's text does succeed in its general goal, showing the ways in which the presentation of the feminine as a figurative object of discourse and desire is central to the text.

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