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*Philosophical Chaucer: Love, Sex, and Agency in the
Canterbury Tales , and: Chaucer's Agents: Cause and
Representation in Chaucerian Narrative (review)*

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does not appear enough to say merely that they “are connected,” as Desmond so often does. Similarly a recurrent allusion to the Lacanian and Derridean writings on the “Seminar on the Purloined Letter” animate Desmond’s discourse about letter writing in these texts, but neglects the issues regarding the “itinerary of the signifier” that the purloined letter traces. And indeed it should not. It is unclear that this theoretical debate has any place in this book or could add to its argument. Instead, Desmond deploys the rhetoric of the “letter arriving at its destination” (or not) for stylistic effect.

If this might be seen as theoretical opportunity lost, there is also outright error. The book consistently misuses the term “commodity fetish,” by which it understands an intense interest in luxury items and material goods by one character or text, yet which fails to grasp (or even be aware of) the specific meaning of Marx’s term or, for that matter, Freud’s important understanding of fetishism. While there is no great loss in the misuse, it does reveal an attempt to capitalize on a theoretical sophistication the book does not have. It is unfortunate because the colonialist reading of Ovid and its medieval uses and translation is excellent, and it need not try to borrow capital it cannot repay. Desmond’s strength, and the book’s, is in the rhetorical tradition that emerges from the medieval schoolroom use of Ovid’s *Ars amatoria* and its later vernacular translations. And it is as such a reception history of Ovid that this book is a success and should be read.

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PHILOSOPHICAL CHAUCER: LOVE, SEX, AND AGENCY IN THE CANTERBURY TALES.

By Mark Miller. Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature, 55. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. Pp. x + 289. \$75.

CHAUCER’S AGENTS: CAUSE AND REPRESENTATION IN CHAUCERIAN NARRATIVE. By Carolyn Van Dyke. Madison and Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2005. Pp. 371. \$63.50.

Subjectivity and its companion term agency have been privileged terms in literary criticism since the eighties, coming to the fore in the criticism of medieval literary texts not only through the paradigmatic work of Marshall Leicester, Carolyn Dinshaw, and Lee Patterson, but also in the debate between medievalists and early modernists over the origins of the self-conscious subject set in motion by David Aers’s “A Whisper in the Ear of Early Modernists.” There Aers argues that the early modernist claim that Hamlet is the first “modern” subject, one divided and self-reflexive, is belied by the medieval evidence, beginning most notably with Augustine’s *Confessions*. Despite Aers’s call for a richer understanding of the contours of medieval subjectivity, the term itself, often either linked with or seen as identical with agency, has until recently received little detailed attention. Mark Miller’s *Philosophical Chaucer: Love, Sex, and Agency in the Canterbury Tales* and Carolyn Van Dyke’s *Chaucer’s Agents: Chaucer and Representation in Chaucerian Narrative* make a major contribution, not simply to the study of Chaucer, but to literary criticism more generally by delving deeply into the meanings of the term agency as those concepts are revealed in the writings of Geoffrey Chaucer.

Mark Miller’s elegant meditation on agency focuses on representations of love, sex, and gender in Chaucer’s work, especially in *The Canterbury Tales*, because these three areas crystallize Chaucer’s interest in the nature of agency, autonomy, and practical reason and his commitment to a poetic understanding of the “dialectical structure of thought and desire” (p. 2). Central to Miller’s discussion is

his explanation of a fundamental antinomy at the heart of agency in which an agent "must embrace her historical imbeddedness in socially sanctioned norms that are necessarily ideological. On the other hand, her very activity of doing so is always inflected by another imperative toward reflective distance" (p. 135). Miller's explication of this contradiction brings into productive conversation theorists interested in the influence of ideology on the formation of the self (Althusser, Foucault et al.) and psychoanalytic critics more concerned with analyzing the psychic structures that determine an individual's particular actions. Miller works within philosophical frameworks in order to elucidate how Chaucer's love poems grapple with issues that are usually associated with psychoanalysis, such as repression, fetishism, narcissism, sadism, and masochism, but that in Chaucer's representations are foundational to a philosophical ethics. Central to the ways in which love, sex, and gender in Chaucer's work reveal aspects of agency are the contradictory impulses of normativity where the individual, on the one hand, resists society's impositions of norms, and on the other, desires to live by norms, such as truth, justice, and morality. Especially useful for a study of the nature of normativity, "erotic energies trouble and cross presumptive borders between the normal and the perverse" (p. 2).

Miller shows Chaucer to be steeped in Aristotelian, Ciceronian, Augustinian, and Boethian traditions in philosophical psychology, but rather than consider those places in Chaucer where he cites or directly engages such philosophical works, Miller focuses instead on places in Chaucer's work where the poet does the "work" of philosophy himself; that is, whereas in his early writing Chaucer depends heavily on his reading of philosophy, especially Boethius, in his later work he comes to use his training in philosophical thought to grapple with philosophical problems directly himself. Considering Chaucer's literature as "a place where the abstract work of philosophical analysis meets flesh and bone," Miller shows Chaucer's interest, less in the "abstract articulation of philosophical problems themselves than he is in the ways persons inhabit them" (p. 4; pp. 30–31). Within the purview of literature rather than philosophy, then, are the "mobilities and opacities of identification, desire and self-understanding which also cannot be fully understood through the analysis of ideological and discursive formations" (p. 18).

In each chapter, Miller demonstrates the philosophical work Chaucer's writing performs at the same time that he himself performs the philosophical work that leads us step by step to the overarching argument about the antinomies of agency he fully articulates in his central chapter on Boethius. Miller surprisingly begins his discussion with *The Miller's Tale*, reversing both Chaucer's poetic order and the usual order critics follow. This discussion lays the groundwork for his analysis of the antinomies inherent to agency by showing the limits of the Miller's nostalgic "appeal to nature as normativity's ground" (p. 31). Miller then turns to *The Knight's Tale* to show analogous contradictions at the heart of the normative longings in Theseus's ill-fated attempts at "reflective endorsability" (p. 100). Theseus's embrace of practical reason depends on a renunciation of passion that fails not only for Palamon and Arcite, but also for all of his subjects including himself. Having demonstrated the dialectical nature of practical reason, Miller turns to a full explication of the contradictions inherent in Boethian accounts of agency that so influence Chaucer. Miller shows how Boethian dialectics illustrates the subject's "simultaneous desires for abject particularity and self-dissolution" (p. 139). Miller then turns to the *Romance of the Rose*, *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale* and *The Clerk's Tale* in order to explore how love and sexuality, and the masochism and sadism that underlie them, crystallize and complicate these contradictory impulses.

In his study of the *Romance of the Rose*, Miller exposes the sadomasochism at the heart of courtly love and thus of hegemonic masculinity. In his consideration of *The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*, he examines the speaker's sadomasochistic attempts to manipulate her commodification while simultaneously envisioning a utopian ideal of intimacy. His analysis of *The Clerk's Tale* is a tour-de-force because it simultaneously acknowledges the power of Griselda's unconditional love for Walter while also accounting for the pathologies within it. Thus the discussion reconciles two camps of criticism—one that praises Griselda as a model of patient suffering and the other that condemns her as complicit in infanticide—by showing us the origins of both these trajectories in a single account of her agency.

Miller's analysis convincingly demonstrates the philosophical spirit that infuses Chaucer's work, and his perspicacious readings take us deep into philosophical waters difficult for those untrained in philosophy to navigate. Should we, however, be navigating only philosophical waters? What has happened to the theological frame that dictates so much of the philosophical enterprise in the Middle Ages? The line between philosophical analysis and theology is of course hard to draw in medieval writing, but a number of thinkers Miller engages, such as Augustine, are first and foremost theologians. How might Miller's account of Chaucer's philosophical investigations shift if given a theological inflection? Would a subject living within a Christian medieval ideology be as concerned with autonomy as s/he might be with free will? From the perspective of the individual, a drive to autonomy and a desire to enact free will might be one and the same thing, but from the perspective of God, they are not, for the enactment of free will is guided by God's will. Since free will is always already contingent upon God's plan, the Christian individual is never fully autonomous but always in relationship. Furthermore, that relationship has implications not only for the subject's identity as an individual or in relationship to another individual (as in a relationship of love or friendship), but also for the formation of community. Miller's philosophical investigation stops short of a consideration of how a relationship to God might complicate the antinomies he elucidates. Furthermore, since the interaction between the individual's desires and the community clearly informs the structure of the *Canterbury Tales*, it seems odd to extract characters from the poem for analysis without considering their place in the Christian community that the poem celebrates.

In that regard, the religious tales might have generated some additional twists and turns to Miller's already intricate arguments—and especially in his discussion of female agency and subjectivity. While his analysis of *The Wife of Bath's Tale* is keenly sensitive to gender inequities, the culture's assumption of female agency's potential may shape Chaucer's representations of women more deeply than Miller acknowledges. Locating contradictory pulls in the Wife's will, Miller brilliantly demonstrates the conflict between the Wife's embrace of herself as the commodity she is understood to be by patriarchy, on the one hand, and her utopian desire for intimacy, on the other. For Augustine, as Miller points out, sexuality is "a privileged ideogram for all that is most irreducible in the human will," but is the will a gender free category and are male and female sexuality the same thing given the fact that Aristotelian medical views so shape the culture's understanding of gendered behavior and desires? (p. 22). In addition, we might locate the Wife's utopian notions of intimacy, what Miller describes as a Ciceronian "desire for relations with an *alter ego* who occupies the deepest sites of one's selfhood," in a Christian understanding, not only of the self or will, but also of marriage (p. 211). Theologians at times described marriage in utopian terms as a union of wills that reflects God's relationship to the soul. In his strictly secular analysis of

the problematics of the wife's utopian desires, Miller can only understand her impulses as motivating a death wish, but a death wish has different implications for a Christian thinker.

Furthermore, the issues he confronts in his analysis of feminine desire in both the *Wife of Bath* and *Griselda* would become more complex were he to consider Chaucer's religious heroines such as Constance or St. Cecilia or even *Griselda* as a religious heroine. Passive endurance of suffering—or masochism, if we use the concept Miller has shown to be so central to the love poems—is actually a form of agency that has quite a different meaning within a Christian rather than a secular frame. Additionally, given the cultural predisposition to associate the feminine with the passive, masochistic agency also has different meanings for female as opposed to male religious figures.

Carolynn Van Dyke's analysis of agency broadens rather than deepens the meanings of the term. Rather than explore the philosophical contours of agency as an individual's desire for and capacities for action, Van Dyke categorizes different forms of agency. She begins by importantly distinguishing between primary and secondary agency—that is, we can act for ourselves or on behalf of others. Rather than uniformly referring to an individual's ability to perform an act of his or her own will, agency, in legal contexts, she reminds us, can mean “to be bound by the will of another” (p. 18). She argues that critical differences that locate Chaucer's commitments variously to “a lifelike character, a doctrine, a fragmented subject, or even an omnipotent author” can be resolved by shifting our attention to “a wider principle of which they are all variations: agency” (p. 16). Skirting close to Miller's argument, she suggests that there may be an “irreducible ambiguity” in agency itself whereby “any agent may appear, and even be, simultaneously autonomous and determined” (p. 20). The variety of Chaucer's views emerge as he reacts to changing concepts of agency in politics, scholastic philosophy, and understandings of authorship. Chaucer provides readers with perspectives both on the misguidedness of characters who attribute events to a single cause and to the possibilities of “the multifariousness of agency—the diffraction, reconfiguration and convergence of causes” (p. 22).

Forms of agency proliferate in Van Dyke's account as she explores non-human agents (such as animals, pagan Gods, a Christian God) and finally the kinds of agency manifest in authorship itself. In the first three chapters, Van Dyke considers the agency of the nonhuman in ideal allegorical forms, animals, and pagan deities. She discusses “universal agency through allegory” in her analysis of *Fame*, *Nature*, and the God of Love and *Alceste*, showing, for example, how the latter two “magnify and limit” the agency of the narrator/poet (p. 44; p. 63). She shows in her discussion of animal agency how Chaucer blurs the distinction between human and animals, sometimes presenting animals as irreducibly other and sometimes as performing a humanized agency. Her analysis of Chaucer's representations of pagan gods illustrates Chaucer's interest in their “theological ambivalence” (p. 114).

In the next two chapters, Van Dyke turns to Chaucer's human agents and the shifting relationships between autonomy and subordination they exhibit. In her penultimate chapter, Van Dyke addresses the fluid status of an author as agent and considers the varied ways authorial voice manifests agency. Finally, in an analysis of “*The Complaint of Mars*” that crystallizes the argument of the whole by looking at the shifting status of Mars from humanized agent to planet, she concludes the book by suggesting “human freedom arises from our ability to confer freedom on our own agents” (p. 38). Throughout her study, Van Dyke engages a large amount of Chaucer criticism from its beginnings. Profoundly influenced by a

Donaldsonian perspective, she tends to turn to critics in that tradition for support of her arguments. Though generous and capacious, her embrace of the work of others sometimes eclipses her own voice.

Unlike Miller, Van Dyke does at times attend to some of the issues raised both by a Christian concept of free will and by Chaucer's religious heroines. Yet, despite the formidable range of the book, she, like Miller, in the end eschews a consideration of agency within a specifically medieval theological context. She acknowledges new understandings of will promulgated by late medieval philosophy in reaction to scholasticism, and in her chapter on pagan Gods she shows Chaucer's engagements with the Christian God's effects, but chooses not to consider fully the role Christian understandings of free will play in Chaucer's work. Given the thoroughness of her analysis, this eschewal seems surprising; still, Chaucer himself refuses such a direct engagement, so perhaps her multifarious angles on agency give as full a picture of Chaucer's theological understanding of agency as we are meant to get.

The chapter that most productively can be brought into conversation with Miller's analysis is chapter five, Van Dyke's discussion of exemplary agency in Chaucer's religious heroines, the very subject absent in Miller's book. Like Miller, Van Dyke considers the various tensions Chaucer's female characters exhibit as they struggle to reconcile will with norms. Van Dyke stresses, however, that female agents are limited by a cultural predisposition to cast women as secondary agents, "responsive and instrumental rather than originary and controlling" (p. 151). Furthermore, whereas men can interact with a variety of categorical determinants, women are defined by a single category, gender, however much they escape the determinations of that category. To Van Dyke, Chaucer's exemplary women "play out the paradoxes of purely secondary agency" (p. 155). In her consideration of Griselda, Constance, and the Prioress, Van Dyke shows how the characters' seeming identity as secondary agents is belied by their primary agency. St. Cecilia, however, differs in that her secondary agency as an agent of God is enacted from a position of autonomy. Furthermore, her agency is productive, creating other agents (such as Valerian) who eventually form a community of Christian martyrs. In her argument, then, gender has a more profound influence on agency—especially religious agency—than Miller seems to allow.

While Van Dyke's argument that St. Cecilia exhibits a less disturbing or ambivalent form of agency than do the other female characters is certainly convincing, it is important to note that such agency was allowed to women in an age of martyrs. Chaucer therefore represents such uncomplicated female agency only when it can be placed firmly in an age gone by. One might account for some of the contradictions in the contemporary Prioress's agency, then, by the fact that by the late fourteenth century women were not allowed to preach. Her very act of speaking, however much it submits to God's authority, is always also an act of resistance to hegemonic norms. Van Dyke offers other productive distinctions, however, showing us, for example, how God acts *on* Constance and the Prioress, but *in* Cecilia and insightfully demonstrating how Cecilia's agency is marked by an enactment of complete submissiveness and full autonomy at the same time. The complex relationship between free will, autonomy, and God's will, as well as the impact such relationships have on community formation and deformation (as in the Prioress's Tale) nonetheless bear further investigation.

Both books, while greatly deepening our understanding of the nature and forms of agency in Chaucer's poetry, at times seem to do so at the expense of a sensitivity to form. Although Miller offers subtle observations on the suitability of allegory for the exploration of the dialectical processes inherent to agency, there is a curi-

ous absence in his discussion of the poetry itself. What difference does it make, for example, that the antinomies at the heart of the Wife's agency are revealed first in a dramatic monologue and secondly in a Breton lai? Perhaps a Breton lai—a fairy tale—affords possibilities for utopian thought outside of patriarchal constraints less available in the dramatic monologue that typically operates in the domain of social discourse. Certainly this Breton lai allows its female characters wider scope as agents, from pronouncing sentences in law courts to setting the terms of marriage. While Van Dyke considers a broader range of forms in her discussion, she nonetheless tends to privilege character over form, and, although her analysis foregrounds different aspects of agency depending on the form she is considering (from beast fable to saint's life), the ways in which these different forms might shape agency itself is never brought to the fore. Perhaps it is unfair to ask for more of two such perspicacious, intelligent, and far-ranging studies. Both authors have shown that far from being over, Chaucer Studies—rumors to the contrary—have only just begun.

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CHAUCER, GEOFFREY. *THE NUN'S PRIEST'S TALE ON CD-ROM*. Edited by Paul Thomas. The Canterbury Tales Project. Birmingham: Scholarly Digital Editions, 2006. \$85 (individual license) or \$230 (institutional license).

This CD-ROM edition of Chaucer's Nun's Priest's Tale is the fourth in a series of single-tale CDs produced by the Canterbury Tales Project, the others being the Wife of Bath's Tale (1996), General Prologue (2000), and Miller's Tale (2004). The project has also produced CD-ROM editions of two important witnesses to the complete *Canterbury Tales*, the Hengwrt Manuscript in the National Library of Wales (2001) and the pair of editions by William Caxton, from copies in the British Library (2003). The series of single-tale editions is an interesting experiment in a computer-based approach to presenting a text of which multiple versions exist. A commonplace of late twentieth-century critiques of traditional editorial practice states that, while a critical edition does represent all witnesses with its lists of variants, nevertheless the editor's choice of a base manuscript governs and mediates the presentation of all the other witnesses, and the eclectic "correction" of the base text with preferred variants from other manuscripts means that the critical edition offers a text that is new and idiosyncratic. In the name of reconstructing the author's "final intentions," a new and non-authorial version of the text is authored by the editor, and, because the other versions are reduced to lists of variants (printed in small type at the bottom of the page or at the back of the book) the user's access to the versions that the editor does not prefer is limited. In many cases, such as when there are a limited number of witnesses to a text, varying only in a limited number of readings, such a critical edition may be adequate; however, in cases of complex textual transmission the inadequacies of this approach multiply exponentially with the increase in divergencies among witnesses to the text. Such is the case, of course, with respect to the *Canterbury Tales*, for which there are some 70 fifteenth-century witnesses to all or parts of the text, with substantial variability.

In cases where witnesses are so divergent that the editor cannot readily reconcile one copy of the text with another, the approach suggested by Tanselle ("The Editorial Problem of Final Authorial Intention," *Studies in Bibliography*, 29 [1976], 192) is to treat such divergent copies of the text as separate "versions" and to edit