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Robert S. Sturges, *Chaucer's Pardoner and Gender Theory: Bodies of Discourse*. New York: St Martin's Press, 2000. Pp. xxiii + 232.

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By drawing together the various critical accounts of Chaucer's Pardoner and his 'Tale', Robert Sturges' *Chaucer's Pardoner and Gender Theory: Bodies of Discourse* will become essential reading for any Chaucer course and invaluable in any investigation of gender in medieval literature. Accessible and intellectually agile, this book incorporates a plethora of modern theoretical approaches to interrogate the ambiguous and difficult portrayal of Chaucer's Pardoner. The theme of 'discoherence' describes both the vagaries and confusions of the Pardoner's ambiguous gender identity and the post-modern eclecticism of this book.

*Chaucer's Pardoner and Gender Theory* is separated into two discrete parts. The first discusses the 'Contexts' for understanding the figure of the Pardoner. This wide-ranging discussion not only rounds up all the modern critical understandings of the Pardoner's sexuality and gender identity but also investigates medieval medical and moral discourses on sex and gender. This approach succeeds in exposing the limitations of previous univalent readings of Chaucer's tale. The competing modern assessments of the Pardoner's gender identity are grouped to reveal the fragmentary analysis that Chaucer's creation encourages.

This establishes a solid base for the second part of the book, a collection of original and thought-provoking theoretical 'Readings' of the heterogeneous cultural meanings that might have been attached to the idiosyncrasies in the Pardoner's portrayal. Sturges is aware of the dicey nature of some of his associations and this admission forestalls criticism of his more energetic connections (p. xxiii). The Pardoner's veiledness, his caprine vocals and his bodily fragmentation are prised open with the tools of psychoanalytic, structuralist and post-structuralist theories to reveal their semantic implications. Some of these are more successful than others. For example, Sturges' discussion of the Pardoner as a Baudrillardian simulacrum is a particularly rich line of enquiry. The Pardoner, in this reading, is seen to emulate hegemonic phallogocentric orthodoxy where such a thing is, in itself, a wholly constructed entity. This book is pioneering in showing the application of such models in the study of medieval literature.

Although he is concerned with the multivalency of 'bodies of discourse', however, Sturges overlooks the plurality of discourses about the body and often rests on an uncritical reading of the work done by Caroline Walker Bynum on female penitential asceticism:

Has the body itself, sex, as distinct from its cultural meanings or gender, traditionally been assimilated to the feminine or female? If we do agree with Bynum that in the Middle Ages, 'the weight of the

western tradition had long told women that physicality was particularly their problem,' the answer would be 'yes'. (p. 45)

While, as her work shows, the body was often essentialized as feminine, and while the female experience was often described in somatic terms, it does not follow that men were never characterized as bodily in medieval representations.<sup>1</sup> Sturges uses Bynum as a starting point in a discussion of the 1381 rebellion (p. 28). He concludes that the rebels were constructed as bodily and therefore effeminate in conservative chronicle texts. This, he claims, has implications for the unsettling figure of the Pardoner and his mutinous behaviour amongst the pilgrim body:

It should not be too far-fetched, then, to suggest that the Pardoner's insufficient manliness be regarded as another link with the Peasants' revolt: he epitomizes the body out of control, which is to say the sodomitical body or the body feminized, and for that very reason, dangerous. (p. 13)

While the loquacious, inebriated and inordinate body is regularly a female one, is it right to say that there was no medieval paradigm of the rebellious male physique? If dualist debates are always privileged above other alternative, contradictory medieval discourses and traditions of representation, then we risk reconstructing (as opposed to deconstructing) the authoritative phallic central unity which Sturges claims to want to efface. Indeed, the representations of male bodies at the end of the fourteenth century were more 'discoherent' than Sturges' position allows. Rather than being compared to women, on account of the simplistic woman=body / man=spirit binary, disruptive peasant bodies should be contrasted with the ideal of the perfect male working body.<sup>2</sup> Damaging his body whilst ensuring his spiritual health, this figure expresses the physicality of the man who works with his hands. The idle poor in the conservative texts of the second half of the fourteenth century were constructions devised to oppose the fantasy of the dutiful member of the third estate. The representation, constructed in legal and moral productions as well as self-consciously literary texts, of the muscular, gluttonous and leisured working-class man was a response to the newfound agency of a long marginalized masculinity.

The Pardoner's body cannot be described as feminized solely on account of his disruptive tendencies. The discursive construction of male bodies needs to be read in a much more nuanced way. I propose that we adopt the modes of enquiry suggested by Toril Moi in her revival of Simone de Beauvoir's notion of the body as 'situation':

... the body is our perspective on the world, and at the same time that body is engaged in a dialectical interaction with its surroundings, that is to say with all the other situations in which the body is placed. The way

we experience —live—our bodies is shaped by this interaction. The body is a historical sedimentation of our way of living in the world, and of the world's way of living with us.<sup>3</sup>

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1 Kathleen Biddick, 'Gender, Bodies and Borders: Technologies of the Visible', *Speculum* 68 (1993), 389-418 has shown how ethnicity throws Bynum's structural binaries into confusion.

2 See my forthcoming article on the discursive construction of the body of the labouring man which is also a critique of Bynum's thesis. 'Consuming the Body of the Working Man in the Later Middle Ages', in *Gender and Monstrous Appetite in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, eds. E. Herbert McAvoy and T. Walters (Cardiff, 2002).

3 T. Moi, 'What is a Woman? Sex, Gender, and the Body in Feminist Theory', in *What is a Woman? And Other Essays* (Oxford, 1999), p. 68.



