

BOOK REVIEWS

Catherine S. Cox. *Gender and Language in Chaucer*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997. Pp. xi, 196.

This book is an extended meditation, well organized and tightly reasoned, on the power of language to shape and influence Geoffrey Chaucer's storytelling, specifically as regards gender. One might have thought—incorrectly, it turns out—that there would be little left to say about Chaucer and gender after Carolyn Dinshaw's *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* (1989) and Elaine Tuttle Hansen's *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender* (1992), two books Cox frequently cites. Cox owes much to Dinshaw's groundbreaking study of the medieval text as feminine Other, polysemous and unstable in a patriarchal context, and to Dinshaw's important distinction between "reading like a man" and feminist ways of reading. But Cox in her linguistic analysis keeps her focus on what she terms the "epistemological framework" of Chaucer's works and how gendered words both create and subvert meaning. Hers is a more thoroughgoing critique of gendered language in Chaucer than has yet appeared.

Cox's chief audience are Chaucerians and medievalists well acquainted with Chaucer's writings. A secondary audience would be feminist readers of medieval texts interested in how misogynistic linguistic codes operate in the literary works of a major English author often regarded as sympathetic to women. The alleged sympathy, as Cox demonstrates, is more fiction than fact, at least on the linguistic, textual level.

Cox organizes her study as follows. After an introductory chapter detailing the theoretical premises and backgrounds of her study—distinguishing between sex and gender (Sedgwick), relating sexuality to textuality, differentiating her work from *écriture féminine* (Irigaray, for example), invoking Derrida's metaphysics of presence—she analyzes the (Chapter 1), *Troilus and Criseyde* (Chapter 2), the *Legend of Good Women*, the *Physician's Tale*, *Second Nun's*, *Clerk's*, and *Man of Law's* tales (Chapter 3), Chaucer's ballades (Chapter 4), the *Manciple's Tale* (Chapter 5), and the *Summoner's Tale* (Chapter 6). Her method in each chapter is to scrutinize Chaucer's texts for gender codes and afterward to open up the critique to metatextual, self-reflexive analysis to demonstrate that the instability of meaning in the texts supports the unstable, polysemous, open nature of Chaucer's writings generally.

If the goal of much feminist criticism of Chaucer's writings has been, crudely put, either to indict or exonerate the poet from charges of misogyny (or, on a physical level, rape), Cox's readings may be characterized as "against the grain,"

since she is less interested in the possible misogynist medieval poet—an “unlikely possibility,” she says (53)—than in antifeminist texts and cultural codes. This approach usually yields good results, as when she chooses “not to condemn Criseyde” and demonstrates the extent to which she is mediated by men (Troilus, Pandarus, Hector, Diomedes, the narrator); when she argues that women in the *Legend of Good Women* “are gendered and sexualized constructs articulated in masculine terms in relation to masculine decorums” (55); when she observes that Custance of the *Man of Law’s Tale* is “good because she suffers and suffers because she is good; within the generic code of hagiographic praise, goodness is rewarded with pious pain” (74); or when she points out that Phebus’s unnamed wife in the *Manciple’s Tale*, “once dead and therefore no longer a witness to Phebus’s shame . . . is reclaimed by Phebus as his prize property, restored to her former status as his ‘gemme’” (102)—hence more valuable dead than alive, from which Cox formulates a gendered point about speech and the silencing of women in Chaucer’s texts. Cox’s judicious conclusions about Chaucer and his culture should provide a point of departure for future discussions:

Chaucer, then, while no “feminist” himself, exposes his texts’ relationship to the cultural, ideological orthodoxy out of which they arise. His own position seems to resist the extremism of, say, Jerome or Walter Map, but his orthodoxy often operates covertly, leading readers to proclaim him a profeminist even as he exhibits compliant participation in a misogynistic literary culture. (95-96)

On occasion Cox pushes her arguments too far (although in ways that manage to be productive). An example would be her understanding of *fin’amors* in *Troilus and Criseyde* as a textual tradition with “kitschy trappings” that offers a script for conduct that Troilus tries to force on Criseyde: “Troilus . . . may be implicated in manipulative behavior, particularly as he determinedly adheres to the literal text of *fin’amors*, anxiously attempting to shape Criseyde according to a procrustean decorum that excludes the harsh political and social realities of a volatile and violent world” (45). So far, so good. But her dismissal of Troilus’s pain at his discovery of her new love and her characterization of the narrator’s rhetoric as “humorous irony generated by overstatement; the grandiose pretensions to high tragedy seem comical, the melodrama ironic” (47) will strike many Chaucerians as too cynical and trivializing. Of the kiss-off letter that Criseyde writes to Troilus, Cox claims, “Criseyde recognizes the subjectivity of the text, that it is subject to interpretation and that interpretation and intent are frequently divided, beyond the author’s control. In her reiteration of the polysemy of the text, she further underscores the subjectivity of the (feminine) letter: that its surface covers far more than is made apparent and that therefore the codified

and formal articulation of the letter is betrayed by the invisible legions occupying its semantic space" (52). This seems too heavy a burden for the one-stanza letter to sustain. A second example is Cox's characterization of Griselda of the *Clerk's Tale*, who, according to Cox, "willingly accedes [to her husband] to maintain her status as his wife" (69) rather than as a gesture of humility, and her giving up her children "in order that she might retain her own status as wife, a startlingly self-interested strategy depicted as a gesture of valorized submissiveness" (70). These mercenary interpretations of Griselda, while not impossible, have support neither in the text nor in the Griselda tradition.

Cox often plays on words in delightful ways, as when she characterizes the Wife's speech as not "feminine discourse" but "an *écriture d'Alisoun*." Her speech, says Cox, is autoerotic and therefore does not connect with a larger feminine discourse. The pilgrims may enjoy her "play," but their "laughter serves less to corroborate her complaints than to reinforce the autoerotic motivation for her sexual rhetoric" (35). Cox emphasizes how the Wife, who appeals to the pilgrim audience through a "sexualized *captatio benevolentiae*" (23), tries to replace "the hegemonic patriarchal discourse" with "an equally hegemonic feminine one." "Rejecting or usurping the masculine," Cox adds, "does not constitute a feminine even as the Wife's inversion challenges the hegemony of the masculine. Hence the ambivalence of her narrative: her ostensibly profeminist arguments are betrayed by an articulation that supports what it professes to subvert" (37). Cox's formulations about the Wife and her speech are important for amending previous arguments and for getting beyond old controversies.

Despite my few reservations about some of Cox's individual readings, I have profited from reading and studying *Gender and Language in Chaucer*. This book is not the first on its subject, nor will it be the last. But it revises and refines our understanding of Chaucer and his texts within late medieval culture and its gendered institutions.

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