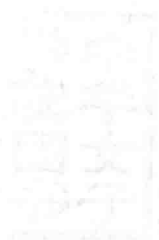


Chaucer Studies XXV

Masculinities in Chaucer

Edited by PETER G. BEIDLER

DEDICATED TO
Derek Brewer, a “gentil” man



List of Contributors

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Acknowledgments

I happened to sit next to Derek Brewer at one of the sessions on Chaucer at the 31st International Congress on Medieval Studies in May, 1996, at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo, Michigan. I had been encircling some of the titles of papers that seemed to reflect an emerging focus on masculinity in the many Chaucer papers that were being read at the four-day conference.

After the first paper in the session I showed some of my encirclings to Derek and whispered, "Why don't you get some of these papers together and do a book on *Masculinities in Chaucer* in the Chaucer Studies series at Boydell and Brewer?" He shook his head, and we both listened to the next paper.

After that paper Derek had weakened slightly and whispered to me, "Would YOU edit it?" I shook my head, and we both listened to the third paper.

By the end of the third paper, I had weakened slightly and asked him whether, if I did edit it, he would submit the paper he was presenting on whether Troilus is "a man or a mouse." He said he might rework the paper for publication, but really I should talk to Richard Barber, of Boydell and Brewer, about the volume. Two nights later Derek and Richard and I had dinner together at the Blue Dolphin, and the upshot of that conversation is in your hand.

I express my gratitude to Derek both in the dedication of the volume and by giving him the last word in the volume. He is the beginning and ending of this work. I thank Richard Barber for agreeing to publish the volume and for helping work toward the many decisions we had to reach. I thank Aaron Ensminger, my research assistant at Lehigh, who did almost all of the computer work connected with the volume by formatting the seventeen disks submitted from all sorts of wordprocessors. I am most grateful to Caroline Palmer and Pru Harrison for their work in the Boydell and Brewer trenches in bringing this book into being. I also, of course, thank the many contributors who so graciously put up with my heavy editorial hand.

P.G.B.

Abbreviations

<i>ChauR</i>	<i>Chaucer Review</i>
<i>ELH</i>	<i>English Literary History</i>
<i>JEGP</i>	<i>Journal of English and Germanic Philology</i>
<i>MÆ</i>	<i>Medium Ævum</i>
<i>MS</i>	<i>Mediaeval Studies</i>
<i>MLN</i>	<i>Modern Language Notes</i>
<i>MLQ</i>	<i>Modern Language Quarterly</i>
<i>MP</i>	<i>Modern Philology</i>
<i>NM</i>	<i>Neuphilologische Mitteilungen</i>
<i>PMLA</i>	<i>Publications of the Modern Language Association</i>
<i>SAC</i>	<i>Studies in the Age of Chaucer</i>
<i>SP</i>	<i>Studies in Philology</i>

Introduction

PETER G. BEIDLER

All seventeen essays in this collection are published here for the first time, though many of them were in some earlier form presented as conference papers. By design they have little in common except that they all have some connection to the shifting and complex notion of "masculinity" and what that term means to readers of Chaucer's works. This volume of essays is in no way designed to be a "masculinist revolt" against feminist readings. Indeed, virtually all of the contributors would agree that feminist readings have so enriched our understanding of Chaucer and medieval culture that the approaches and terminology of feminists must be more widely applied.

Here are some of the questions that these seventeen essays attempt to answer. How does the Host demonstrate bourgeois masculinity? In what sense are Palamon and Arcite homosocial rivals? How do the various erotic triangles work in the *Miller's Tale*? How does the Reeve symbolically rape the Miller? Why is the Wife of Bath sometimes referred to as "masculine"? What kinds of rivalries and attractions inform the relationship of the Summoner and the Friar? Why does January really go blind? How does Dorigen's immobility define her response to her husband's mobility? How does identity politics work in the *Physician's Tale*? Why is the merchant of Saint Denis not so bad a man as his wife says he is? Why did Chaucer "diminish" the sexuality of Sir Thopas? What message does Chaucer speak to the boy-king Richard II in the *Tale of Melibee*? How does the Monk offer a sustained exploration of secular masculinity in his prologue and tale? How does the Nun's Priest send up traditional masculinity in his portrayal of the cock-of-the-walk? Is Troilus effeminate, impotent, or manly?

Previous scholars have, of course, talked about masculinity. The term itself has been around a long time, but it has been inconsistently applied to Chaucer studies. When my research assistant, Aaron Ensminger, searched for the terms

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“masculine,” “male,” and “man” in the on-line annotated bibliography that Mark Allen puts together for *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, he came up with a strange list of articles and books that told us little of value. There was no consistency in the 40-odd items that turned up and, curiously, almost half involved the Wife of Bath and her tale. “Masculinity” – and related variations on the concept, like “manhood,” “maleness,” and even “malehood” – did not become a serious subject for Chaucerians until the 1990s. In this decade it suddenly became prominent on the programs of most medieval conferences and in the tables of contents of books and journals in medieval studies.

A glance through the footnotes to this volume will help readers who seek to discover more about masculinity as a cultural phenomenon. Three recent books stand out, however, as foundational in the study of masculinity in medieval literature. The first, a collection of essays edited by Clare A. Lees, *Medieval Masculinities*,¹ unfortunately makes no mention of Chaucer. The second, Susan Crane’s *Gender and Romance in Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales*,² takes up only the five romances in the *Canterbury Tales*. The third, Anne Laskaya’s *Chaucer’s Approach to Gender in the Canterbury Tales*,³ is of broader interest to Chaucerians. Laskaya’s book has the triple virtues of being entirely about Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, of discussing more than the romances, and of presenting a single-author consistency of approach and point of view. The present volume shares the second of those virtues with Laskaya’s volume. It goes beyond her book by discussing in some detail the Host and fourteen of the *Canterbury* stories and by presenting three essays on *Troilus and Criseyde*. Our book does not, by its very design, present a single-author consistency of

¹ The full title of Lees’ book is *Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994). Readers should also be aware that an earlier electronic discussion of “Medieval Masculinities: Heroism, Sanctity, and Gender” occurred in 1992 and was published via the World Wide Web in 1993 (Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and the members of Interscripta, *Interscripta* [November–December 1993, revised October 1995], <http://www.georgetown.edu/labyrinth/e-center/interscripta/mm.html>). It was also published as a journal article edited by Jeffrey Cohen, “The Amour of an Alienating Identity,” in *Arthuriana* 6.4 (1994): 1–24. There is some mention of Chaucer, and the discussion involved several of the contributors to the present volume. A fourth book recently appeared that may be of interest to some of our readers: *Becoming Male in the Middle Ages*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Bonnie Wheeler (New York: Garland, 1997). Two of the essays deal with Chaucer, Glenn Burger’s on the *Miller’s Tale* and Robert S. Sturges’s on the Pardonier.

² Susan Crane, *Gender and Romance in Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994). The first chapter is entitled “Masculinity in Romance.” The five romances she discusses are those of the Knight, the Man of Law, the Wife of Bath, the Clerk, and the Franklin.

³ Anne Laskaya, *Chaucer’s Approach to Gender in the Canterbury Tales* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1995). Only six of the tales are discussed in any detail, those of the Knight, the Miller, the Man of Law, the Wife of Bath, the Merchant, and the Second Nun. Laskaya devotes a few pages each to the tales of the Friar, the Summoner, the Clerk, the Franklin, the Physician, the Pardonier, and the Prioress.

approach or point of view, but it has an alternative virtue: the sometimes discordant tones of a variety of voices. The point of this volume is to bring between two covers the views of a number of recent scholars who are all thinking about the notion of masculinity as it is revealed in Chaucer's works.

As editor of these essays, I have encouraged contributors to define masculinity in their own words or to imply through their own approaches what they mean by the masculine. The definitions that we find in these pages emerge in all the richness of diversity that this book was designed to encourage. Indeed, in inviting contributions I have purposefully selected the kinds of scholars who would give the widest possible view of Chaucerian masculinities. The plural form of the term is one this book insists on. Represented in the following pages are both men and women scholars, both straight and gay scholars, and both graduate students still at work on their academic requirements and retired professors. My scheme was to bring together the broadest array of approaches that I could.

The various contributors have not read and so do not refer to each other's essays, but it goes without saying that we will not necessarily agree with each other. The range of views – most obviously on the masculinity of Troilus – is so great that no agreement is possible. Nor is it desirable. The purpose of this collection is not to attempt the final word on Chaucerian masculinities, but to stimulate scholarly thinking about them. Our book reflects only the most general theses:

- For Chaucer, masculinity is a continuum that involves heterosexual and homosexual, military and domestic, noble and ignoble, mercantile and agrarian, ecclesiastical and lay, married and unmarried, and both the sexual and nonsexual relations of both men and women.

- Chaucerian masculinity is more a matter of gender than of sex. That is, masculinity has little to do with one's biology but much with one's reaction to and relations with others, one's reaction to and relation with the culture of medieval Europe.

- Although the adjective "patriarchal" is now almost always used to suggest the oppression of women, the patriarchy has through the years also done much damage to men by limiting the roles men can acceptably play in a society that tends rather to essentialize than to individualize, to assume or impose sameness rather than encourage diversity, to encourage action rather than the expression of feeling.

It goes without saying – but let me say it anyhow – that it is not part of our project to "erase" women by spending all these pages on masculinities. We share the concerns of Anne Laskaya when she writes:

Frequently the point of discussing concepts like "masculinity" and

"femininity" seems to be to dismiss or avoid them and to aim for "gender" as a preferable term. Indeed, collapsing sex role differences into one word, "gender," may indicate the discomfort we seem to be experiencing with difference. But any dream of escaping differences or of combining differences into "androgyny," "polysexuality," or "performance" often suggests an erasure of women and can be a way for a patriarchal society to disguise its on-going powerful preference for the masculine.⁴

We also share the concerns of Thelma Fenster, who decries the fact that in the past the "historical discourse," although written largely by men, about men, and for men, too often limited the notion of what men were:

As that reductive narrative obscured the many, flattening diversity and failing to record difference, obliterating *men as men*, it projected the local, the gendered, and the temporally bounded onto a universal, genderless, and atemporal screen, willingly ignoring the power imbalances thus served. In that way women were rendered invisible; but, ironically enough, so were gendered men. The terms *he*, *his*, and *man*, claimed as both grammatically masculine and neuter and allowing of no visible feminine, paradoxically also masked the particularity and materiality of their masculine referents.⁵

We have aimed in this volume to bring into sharper focus the individual particularity and the wondrous variety of Chaucerian men and in doing so to call attention to the gender issues that still affect us all.

If as an editor I have been liberal in encouraging contributors to go in their own directions with the concept of masculinity and to suggest their own definitions of the term, then I have been – as I am sure every one of the contributors will attest – pushingly conservative with matters of form. With a view to the publishing and purchasing costs of long books, I have been particularly outrageous in my insistence that the essays stay within the stipulated length requirements. With a view to a potential readership that we all hope will include undergraduate students as well as professional scholars, I have asked that contributors write in sentences and terms that non-specialist readers can understand, that they place near the start of their essays a preview of the major ideas in their essays, and that they give meaningful section headings to help guide readers through their arguments.

After hearing a tale by the aggressively masculine Miller about John's aging masculinity, Nicholas's randy masculinity, Absolon's questionable masculinity,

⁴ Laskaya, 1.

⁵ From "Preface: Why Men?" in Lees, *Medieval Masculinities*, x.

and the reactions of the sometimes *unladylike* Alison, the various pilgrims enjoy chatting about the tale:

Whan folk hadde laughen at this nyce cas
Of Absolon and hende Nicholas,
Diverse folk diversely they seyde. (I 3855–57)⁶

Like the Canterbury pilgrims, we are a group of diverse individuals who have different personalities, different notions about what makes a man, and different reasons for telling our tales. Like them, we never quite reach our destination, and none of us wins the free supper at the Tabard. But we have had fun on our journey. We hope we have given others some reason to be glad that they listened to what we have had so “diversely” to say to one other, and we encourage them to join us as we continue our journey.

⁶ All the quotations in this volume are from the *Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987). Readers should keep in mind that other editions may have slightly different readings, and that virtually all of the punctuation in modern editions is inserted by the editor. We have indicated the fragment, book, and line numbers parenthetically after quotations, though sometimes, when it is obvious what the fragment number is, we have omitted fragment designations after the first few references.

I. *Canterbury Tales*

Mirth and Bourgeois Masculinity in Chaucer's Host

MARK ALLEN

Chaucer's Host is a descendent of Deduit of the *Roman de la Rose*, but unlike his literary antecedent, he is a figure of bourgeois masculinity. Masters of ceremonies and leaders of revels in their respective fictions, Deduit and the Host both provide their constituencies with diversion or "myrthe," the term used in the Middle English *Romaunt of the Rose* to translate the name "Deduit" into Middle English and the word Chaucer uses recurrently to introduce his Host. One an aristocratic garden-owner and the other a middle-class innkeeper, the two characters differ radically in social class and, as I will argue here, this class difference manifests itself in parallel differences in gender or kind of masculinity. My point is not that Chaucer set out to show us how class inflects gender. Instead, I want to explore how the interrelationships between class and gender are initially evident in the transformation from Deduit or Sir Myrthe to Chaucer's Host and how they play out in the Host's roles in the rest of the Canterbury fiction.

Mirth and commerce

In creating his Host, Chaucer converted the upper-class grace and courtesy of Sir Myrthe – note the title in *Romaunt of the Rose* (725, 733–34, etc.) – to a middle-class domineering presence.¹ Both characters are male, of course, but

¹ There is no parallel to the title in the original French, but its use in the Middle English translation – perhaps by Chaucer himself – reflects contemporary awareness of the aristocratic status of the figure. On the possibility that Chaucer himself translated the *Roman* (or

their masculinities are quite different. Much of the difference resulted, no doubt, from transporting the traditional figure of the master of revels from the aristocratic garden to the commercial inn. Sir Myrthe simply does not belong in Southwark at the Tabard. In the *Romaunt*, Myrthe is introduced as "lord of this gardyn" (601), a place of solace (613, 621, 735) for himself and his "folk," a "fair and joly companye / Fulfilled of alle curtesie" (622, 639–40). The garden excludes all those who are sorrowful, and those included are attractive and without worry. Myrthe himself is described by the narrator as an ideal of masculine beauty. He is young and marked with physical attributes less reminiscent of the Host than the Prioress – an apple-round face, red-and-white complexion, "metely mouth and yen greye," fashionable dress, and recurrent use of the intensifier "ful" (eight times in thirty-two lines [817–48]). The highly conventional portrait is static, except that Myrthe dances with Gladnesse, holding her by the finger in a gesture more elegant than intimate. We are told only that "gret love was atwixe hem two" (854) and "bothe were they faire and bright of hewe" (855).

Partners in the dance, Myrthe and Gladnesse are cast as sexually male and female, although they are barely distinct in gender: both fair and beautiful, both gracious and graceful, both taking solace in the pleasures of the garden. They share what can be called feminine qualities and no strong sense of social distinction separates them or the other participants in the dance. The only distinguishing feature of Myrthe is his lordship over the garden, since it was he who had brought to it all the trees "fro the land of Alexandryn" (602) and had them enclosed within the decorated wall.

The dance of Myrthe sets the scene as the narrator enters the garden of the *Romaunt*, establishing its courtly, aristocratic atmosphere, but disappearing before the narrator is stricken by Love's arrows, the enactment of his passion for the Rose. The dance ends – and the dancers disappear from the fiction – as the various paired lovers go "away / Undir the trees to have her play" (1317–18). Envious of their dalliance, the narrator sets out to inspect the garden where he gazes into the fountain of Narcissus, conceives his love for the Rose, and is pierced by Love's arrows. During his subsequent quest for the Rose, he does not meet Myrthe again, so that Myrthe is perhaps best understood as part of the setting of the poem, a psychomachiac personification who helps to

a portion of it) as the existent *Romaunt of the Rose*, the introductory note to the *Romaunt* in the *Riverside Chaucer* says simply that there is "some doubt," although fragment A, which includes the material on Myrthe, "is Chaucerian in style and language and has been accepted by most scholars as an early work of Chaucer's" (686). For convenience, I cite the Middle English translation throughout this essay, except when it is helpful to recall, following Charles Dahlberg and Barbara Nolan, that "Deduit," and hence "Myrthe," denotes both "having a good time" and "turning away from a course." See Charles Dahlberg, trans., *The Romance of the Rose* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1983), 361, 590n, and Barbara Nolan, "'A poet ther was': Chaucer's Voices in the General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*," *PMLA* 101 (1986): 165.

establish the mental condition of the narrator that leads to his falling in love with the Rose.

The Host, of course, is not a personification, and the atmosphere he establishes for the Canterbury pilgrims is another form of mirth altogether – competitive and commercial rather than courtly or aristocratic. Unlike Sir Myrthe, he appears among a variety of social types and, as the *Canterbury Tales* develops, his continued interaction with the pilgrims effects some depth of characterization.

Unlike the other descriptions in the General Prologue, that of the Host was not apparently constructed from estates satire, but social status and economic gain are recurrent concerns which underlie the description, both functions of class distinction and class competition. Yet the Host is initially reminiscent of Myrthe. He extends his “chiere” to “everichon” (I 747), addressing one and all as “lordynges” (761, 788), and devising a plan (a “myrthe” [767]) that will provide diversion (“myrthe” [766]) alike for all. The reminiscences of Myrthe in the Host’s description and initial speech include four instances of “myrthe,” four of “myrie,” two each of “pley” and “confort,” and one each of “chiere,” “ese,” and “disport” (747–83).² Competing with the mirthful egalitarian surface here, however, is a cross-current that is less merry and distinctly commercial and competitive, antithetical to the rarified social harmony of the dance of Myrthe. The description of the Host is preceded by the narrator’s apology for not setting “folk in hir degree” (744), a comment that focuses the economic and social differences among the preceding sketches, much as the similarities of detail and diction disallow such differences in the descriptions of Myrthe, Gladnesse, and their entourage. We are then told that the Host “served” food and strong drink to all the company alike, and we are given the impression that he somehow simultaneously presides as he proposes his

² No material on innkeepers is included in Jill Mann’s *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), and though Barbara Page asserts a “vast reservoir” of applicable criticism from estates literature, she depends for the most part on a twentieth-century general critique of the bourgeoisie by Felix Colmet Daâge. See Page, “Concerning the Host,” *ChauR* 4 (1970): 10–11. On issues of class and economy in the characterization of the Host, see Patricia J. Eberle, “Commercial Language and Commercial Outlook in the General Prologue,” *ChauR* 18 (1983): 161–74; Walter Scheps, “‘Up roos oure Hoost, and was oure aller cok’: Harry Bailly’s Tale-Telling Competition,” *ChauR* 10 (1975): 128n8; Nolan, 164 (as in note 1 above); and Linda Georgianna, “Love So Dearly Bought: The Terms of Redemption in the *Canterbury Tales*,” *SAC* 12 (1990): 103–05. Peter Brown, *Chaucer at Work: The Making of the Canterbury Tales* (London and New York: Longman, 1994), 44, suggests that Chaucer’s transformation of Myrthe into the Host enabled him both to burlesque the aristocratic pretensions of the *Roman* and to critique his own society. J. V. Cunningham laid the groundwork for comparing Myrthe and the Host when he discussed the “literary form” of the General Prologue as the “dream-vision prologue in the tradition of the *Romance of the Rose*,” in “Literary Form of the Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*,” *MP* 49 (1952): 172–81. Loy D. Martin shows how Chaucer adjusted the dream-vision prologue to the economic realities of his contemporary society, in “History and Form in the General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*,” *ELH* 45 (1978): 1–17.