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## Review of *Chaucer and the Subject of History*, by Lee Patterson

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CHAUCER AND THE SUBJECT OF HISTORY. By Lee Patterson. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991. Pp. x + 489. \$14.95.

*Chaucer and the Subject of History*, updating Caroline Spurgeon, tells us how to read Chaucer in a modern way. Ms. Spurgeon's half-century-old introduction

to *500 Years of Chaucer Criticism and Allusion* notes that the real Chaucer, the “literary craftsman,” was discovered in the nineteenth century since previous times had seen him only as a moralist and rhetorician. This richer Chaucer was, in her view, made possible by the nineteenth-century growth and development of the individual personality. Now Lee Patterson offers us a twentieth-century Chaucer whose interest in the “constitution of the self” is “quintessential modern” (p. 11). Much of this book contains arguments with which I agree (specifically many of the arguments concerning the *Legend of Good Women*, the *Miller’s* and *Reeve’s* tales, and the commercial locus of the *Shipman’s* and *Merchant’s* tales). I wish to focus here, however, on its conception of Chaucer’s view of history and the “subject” in the Theban-Trojan matter.

Patterson’s reading of the Theban dimension of the *Troilus* makes it represent “Boethian” escapism reflecting Chaucer’s late 1380s incapacity to engage history in a positive way. Chaucer’s personal malaise reappears in the private lives of Troilus and Criseyde and Oedipus. Patterson claims that Chaucer shapes his Troy after Thebes with its endless destruction; Thebes, as the original empire, undercuts the legitimacy of the idea of founding empire and imperial succession. But Thebes is not the founding empire in *The Former Age*, rather the earlier empire of “Nembrot, desyrous / To regne . . . with his towres hye.” And neither Thebes nor Troy is necessarily bound to endlessly destructive cycles. Other empires, not all of them futile in the Chaucerian mythos, emerge from Troy (i.e., some of his versions of Rome and of England). However, for Patterson, a Theban Oedipus and a Trojan Troilus both discover the “ineluctable power” of fate, and an ignorance that destroys each as he tries to deal with the evils of history (p. 136).

Patterson derives Chaucer’s recursive and repetitious vision of history from a “secular medieval historiography” that contrasts with Augustine’s sacred history in the *City of God* with its progressive six ages tuned to the divine salvation plan (pp. 86–90). However, Markus and others have demonstrated that Augustine wrote many kinds of history, many not sacred in Patterson’s sense (consider for example his additions to Optatus’s work on the history of Donatism). Moreover, medieval history-writing served various uses—legitimizing imperialism, propping up dynasties, creating local pride, or claiming Fortune or Providence as the causes of this or that event. To call any medieval historical work wholly sacred or secular is too simple. Chaucer’s histories are not straightforwardly sacred or secular histories with the exception of the *Man of Laws’* and the *Second Nun’s* tales, with which Patterson does not deal.

Yet, Thebes, in the versions of it that Chaucer knew best—those in the *Commedia*, the *Teseida*, and the *Thebiad*—is not a good candidate for straight secular history. Eternity constantly poaches through. Dante makes Statius claim that he was baptized before his Adrastus approached the Theban rivers and, thus, he qualifies as a guide through Eden. The myth of a Christianity underlying the *Thebiad* received reinforcement, as David Anderson has demonstrated in his *Before the Knight’s Tale*, from standard Lactantian glosses, accompanying the *Thebiad*, that identified Statius’s temple to Clemency with the Pauline altar to an unknown God (Acts 17: 22–31). Boccaccio’s *Thebiad* gloss reflects this interpretation. So does his description of Theseus’s pity for the Argive widows before the temple in the *Teseida*. Chaucer’s *Knight’s Tale* builds on Lactantian tradition by emphasizing Theseus’s relation to the Temple of Clemency, his horseback kindness to the widows (a gesture also drawn from

the “redeemed” Trajan in Dante), and his knowledge of divine love in A, 2987–3040.

Given his assumption of a Theban doom governing Troy, Patterson finds that the *Troilus*’ ending “lacks any clear message” (p. 163), that all the poor poet can do, in V, 1863–69, is “offer up a prayer for release” (p. 164). The prayer does not ask for release but for defense from visible and invisible foes (V, 1866). Since Patterson sees Chaucer’s Thebes and Troy as essentially doomed, illegitimate empires, perhaps like 1380s England, he ignores possible Chaucerian implications that human freedom could have been exercised to make their history and tragedy different, a major implication of the earlier Boethian interpretations of the *Troilus* from Howard Armstrong Patch through Chauncey Wood. Speaking of the Boethianism of the *Troilus*, Patterson argues, as he has earlier concerning the *Anelida*, for a *Consolation* that says nothing about action in history but urges an escape from it to “a utopian world in which origin and end are simultaneously possessed—a world . . . from which the embarrassment of history has been entirely banished” (p. 153). This view neglects Boethius’s claim to have defended the Roman Senate, opposed a Nero-like Theodoric, and prevented the tyrannical *coemptio* levied on the Campania. Indeed, the writing of the *Consolation* itself is a political act, a piece of prison protest, and Philosophy never forbids action to Boethius, rather the expectation of visible rewards for it.

Patterson passes over the inverted Boethian language in the mouths of Troilus and Pandarus, Boethian language that in the *Consolation* requires both just action and philosophic detachment from the expectation of fixed historical consequences. Chaucer’s Hector takes a Boethian anticonsequentialist position in the parliamentary discussions over the trading of Criseyde for Antenor, Troy’s betrayer; and Troilus could have done so too. When he rises to the eighth sphere, he recognizes too late that his actions have been committed to rascally “gods,” but he is not there so much a modern “subject” as a paradigm of Venus’s followers’ historical misinterpretations, their projection of desire on historical reality. Troilus cannot be *only* the victim of ignorance or fate, for his final bitter laughter at those who mourn for him implies that he could have chosen otherwise, and his poem at the end kisses the steps of the tragic epics (“Virgile, Ovyde, Omer, Lucan and Stace” [V, 1791]), works that, in medieval criticism, mix history with “fables” of the gods to judge human action by transcendent standards.

Patterson analyzes the Theban matter in the *Knight’s Tale* similarly. For him, history is blind in Chaucer’s Canterbury epic, random in its unequal treatment of an apparently equal Palamon and Arcita. Patterson does not consider any interpretations wherein the work demonstrates that the former as lover and the latter as warrior, lustful man, and angry man, can pray for differing ends and be honored differently in their respective lives and deaths, getting what they ask for in their temple prayers and more. Palamon and Arcita are not subjects reaching toward an identity but rivals cast in the mould of Eteocles and Polynices. As Robert Haller has demonstrated, they misinterpret Theban history at the behest of the Venus and Mars that they allow to govern them respectively. Patterson claims that Arcita’s removal to the cold grave cancels both his triumph in the tournament and his death, but he dies reconciling himself to old enemies, the correct ending in Aries’s studies of medieval dying.

Moreover, if God (i.e., Jupiter) controls the “destinee” and “pureveiaunce” that the Knight sees as constructing the forest scene where Theseus’s arrival is crucial to the poem’s outcome (A, 1663–65; A, 2987–3108; A, 3011), then history is not blind, and Theseus’s First Mover/Jupiter speech is not so foolish, given the terms of the fiction. Patterson, however, dismisses Theseus’s First Mover speech and interprets its Jupiter as if he were some sort of rival planet speciously imported at the end (p. 203). This reading, of course, “subverts” the myth of Theseus’s rationality and civilizing function from the forest scene on. And, as Patterson transforms Theseus into a tin god, he makes the *Tale* destroy the myth of chivalry as a “spectacle of the honour of princes and the virtue of knights” (p. 174). He apparently believes that late fourteenth-century chivalry subscribed to an ideology that tended “to privatize all historical action” (p. 175), that it was completely unaware of its sins, projecting on the unchivalrous all of the excesses of the battlefield. Yet, almost every major chivalric analysis of chivalry created within Chaucer’s culture in the 1390s recognized how far contemporary chivalry departed from virtue, honorable spectacle, and the defense of Christendom.

The Chaucer of Patterson’s *Canterbury Tales* eventually sees that the chaos and cruelty of history can be altered through the discovery of an authentic Lacanian self beyond the reach of institutions. His analyses of the Wife of Bath and Merchant purport to show how such identity is discovered and expressed. His Pardoner by inversion does the same thing. Whereas in Robert P. Miller and his successor exegetical critics (who reflect institutional orthodoxy) the Pardoner’s fiction of youth becomes rebirth, his Old Man becomes spiritual despair, and his oak tree sterility of spirit, in Patterson the Pardoner is a victim of castration (p. 372) and a Judas or a Theban Oedipus who seeks to exchange his “chest” (l. 734) for a “hair clowt.” He desires to return to swaddling infancy, perhaps to his mother’s pubic hair (pp. 411, 418). His alter ego is the old man of the tale who holds the staff that stands for the phallus that he has been deprived of and asks the earth that is his mother to let him in. Thus, he expresses his Oedipal desire both to penetrate the mother and be born whole (pp. 418–19).

To find this meaning in Chaucer, we have to subscribe to another institutional orthodoxy, the modern psychoanalytical orthodoxy that assumes that such meanings are inscribed deep in human nature and never expressed directly until the twentieth century. “Old man” becomes Theban Oedipal man (though Oedipus and Judas are not mentioned in this tale). The Pardoner’s desire to be “suffisant” becomes a corollary of that “endlessly painful sense of lack that characterizes the human condition” and that cuts him off from Christendom (p. 420). Yet the Pardoner, never exiled from institutional Christendom, comes straight from Rome and sells its highest prize. He is not the victim but the potential victimizer of the ordinary people to whom he appeals, especially the wives (C, 910), and he reflects standard Lollard and some orthodox critiques of the pardoning office after 1381, down to his ambiguous sexual character, often used to represent the confusion of temporal and spiritual authority.

In short, in the Theban-Trojan sections of the book, Patterson’s Chaucer’s modernity derives as much from our time’s institutionalized handling of interpretation as from Chaucer’s own and his time’s handling of its language.

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