

## • INTRODUCTION •



THE THESIS of this book is that gender is crucial to Geoffrey Chaucer's conception of romance in the *Canterbury Tales*. In Chaucer's works, as in those of other poets who engage romance, gender provides a way of reading aspects of the genre beyond courtship alone. Social hierarchies, magic, adventure, and less salient preoccupations of romance are so intimately involved in gender that their operations are unclear in isolation from it. My concern is not with identifying specific sources and analogues for the *Canterbury Tales* nor with encompassing in my discussion every aspect of romance. The many studies that illuminate these issues provide a context for investigating more specifically how Chaucer understood the place and meaning of gender in the history of romance.

Gender and genre have phonic and etymological but also more substantial bonds. Both are systems of distinction that are susceptible to hierarchization; both have an informing relation to specific persons and works. They can be conceived as the inspiring potential that generates intelligible identities and texts; they can also become measures that constrain and evaluate. Gender and genre can make claims to transhistorical permanence, when they ground their claims in nature in the former case and art in the latter, but both categories prove to be subject to negotiation as they are mobilized in particular identities and works. Finally the historicity of both categories must be accepted: both are persistent over time but also reformed and reinterpreted in their every instantiation. For Fredric Jameson this link between recurrence and reinterpretation makes a concept of genre necessary to literary history: "Only the history of the forms themselves can provide an adequate mediation between the perpetual change of social life on the one hand, and the closure of the individual work on the other" ("Magical Narratives," 136). It is equally evident that a concept of gender can clarify the relation between the shifting social functions of gender and particular gestures, literary or

historical, that are meant to distinguish gay from straight or masculine from feminine behavior.

Gender and genre are not simply analogous but intersecting constructions in romance. This is the medieval genre in which courtship, marriage, lineal concerns, primogeniture, and sexual maturation are most fully at issue. In plots that dramatize the establishment of gendered identity, romances raise questions such as: What differentiates men's values and comportment from women's? How rigid is the binary contrasting masculine to feminine? Can same-sex relations persist within heterosexuality? So rich are the implications of gender for romance that my discussion only begins to indicate the questions gender can illuminate in the five *Canterbury Tales* most indebted to the genre, the Knight's, Wife of Bath's, Squire's, and Franklin's tales and the *Tale of Sir Thopas*. I am concerned not to find the edges and subdivisions of romance but instead to discover in Chaucer's tales what aspects of the genre are invoked there and to what effect. The range of Chaucer's reference is wide, encompassing Breton lays, Middle English metrical romances, late medieval composite romances, the *romans antiques*, and more. What focuses his response to these disparate kinds of romance is a concern with how the genre imagines gender. In the *Franklin's Tale*, for example, a narrator drawn in part from romance, the hospitable vavasour, attempts to revise the genre that defines him as a passive domestic figure, an anomaly among men. Canacee's encounter with the falcon in the *Squire's Tale* recalls other women's adventures in both its miniaturized resemblances to chivalric adventure and its suppressed difference from that dominant model. These tales stage the authority and durability of concepts of gender and romance but also the interrogation to which each concept is subject in every new enactment. The brief overview below argues that this tension between ideological consolidation and particular destabilizations generates the historicity of gender and genre.

A first way of conceiving gender is to contrast it to sex. In that contrast, gender is the exterior, social interpretation of sexual practices specific to a particular culture. Sexuality, broadly understood as the generation, expression, and organization of desire, is the ongoing behavior that informs gendered identities. Deriving

gender from sexuality risks referring all gendered traits to physical differences between female and male. Insofar as they are said to be verified by biological sex, the gender distinctions a given culture elaborates may appear more stable and fundamental than other distinctions such as those of estate or national identity. But the permutations of gender over time and place suggest that biological sex does not constitute its unchanging natural foundation. Judith Butler argues against treating sex difference as the verifiable basis for gender, noting that humans experience their bodies through the conceptual processes that have elaborated ideas of gender. "Bodies cannot be said to have a signifiable existence prior to the mark of their gender. . . . There is no recourse to a 'person,' a 'sex,' or a 'sexuality' that escapes the matrix of power and discursive relations that effectively produce and regulate the intelligibility of those concepts for us" (8, 32). Even the most directly physical phenomena such as giving birth or losing virginity immediately partake of cultural formulations that give meaning to physical changes. For humans, as Denise Riley puts it, "in a strong sense the body is a concept, and so is hardly intelligible unless it is read in relation to whatever else supports it and surrounds it" (104; see also Laqueur). Better than conceiving gender to be the complex of meanings assigned to sexuality is conceiving sex to be subsumed within a gender system that makes it available to consciousness.

If sexuality is positioned within gender as a socially negotiated and defined status that does not itself determine gender, then a binary gender division is not the only possibility. A third gender occurs in some cultures; same-sex and mixed sexual orientations proliferate and overlap in others. For reading Chaucer one implication of this sense in which gender is arbitrary should be that the sex of an author is not a completely reliable predictor of a work's perceptions concerning gender. Taking seriously the idea that sex and gender are both constructed and continually renegotiated through an array of social forces entails untying the bond between, in the case of Chaucer, a historical man and masculine discourses. The sex of an author fixes discourse no more securely than sex fixes gender. To be sure, critics have traced conventionally masculine orientations in Chaucer as they have traced conventionally feminine ones in Marie de France (e.g., Huchet, "Nom

de femme"; Freeman). Chaucer's and Marie's more predictable alignments, however, should not obscure for us certain sensibilities that are less obviously consonant with their sex.

Far from being natural, then, the sex-gender system is inherently and intensely ideological. Convictions about gender underlie choices in every social context, from the public and private behavior of a young knight to the ground plan of a nunnery, the law of primogeniture, and the sacrament of marriage. This is the quality of gender that helps to situate romances in their historical moment. Romances place themselves in their time less through the referentiality of their representations than through their participation in forming, playing out, and disputing interrelated beliefs that have meaning for their authors and audiences. The romance genre is a particular vehicle among many for the expression, perpetuation, and critique of gender in the culture as a whole. Considered as social forces, genders and genres partake of ideology in their capacity to constitute social identities through powerful appeals to imagination.<sup>1</sup> Thinking of gender and genre as instances of ideology at its work of establishing and revising consciousness involves the particular instance of "gender in romance" in the culture's wider negotiations.

That gender speaks through conventional discourses such as romance does not displace it from its equally powerful involvement in the gestures of everyday behavior. Written and enacted instances reinforce one another; in Teresa de Lauretis's formulation, "the construction of gender is both the product and the process of its representation" (*Technologies*, 5). Conceiving gender as a representation encompasses texts and gestures in one register of meaning that is subject to historical fluctuations. Gender emerges not as the fixed expression of binary sex difference but as a socially instituted construct that interacts with other constructs of class, faith, and so on—very differently, for instance, in the experience of a provincial countess and a London alderman.<sup>2</sup> Like all

<sup>1</sup> De Lauretis proposes the analogy between gender and ideology (*Technologies*, 6–11). It is probably clear from my discussion that I am not considering ideologies to be false consciousness that makes oppressions bearable but instead to be genuine attempts at the broadly social level to understand and justify the social order from the perspectives of differing interests.

<sup>2</sup> Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, excludes the medieval period from the social

social representations gender has a history, and literature has a prominent role in that history of asserting and modifying what it means to live in gendered identity.

Over all these reconsiderations hovers the inadequacy of the terms *men* and *women*, inaccurately universalizing, indeterminately referring to persons and to ideas of gender, and differently specified even in compatible theories of gender. Meaghan Morris writes that "we seem to be sliding on our signifieds, and the scare quote stalks in to fence off the space of a disaster zone: 'woman,' 'women,' 'Woman' are the warning signs of an increasingly unposable problem, all of a heap, wrong from the start" (24). My deletion of the wary scare quotes is a typographical convenience that does not claim determinate meaning for gender terminology. To attempt to simplify the problem by declaring, for example, that I use "woman" to refer only to the literary idea of woman in one set of texts would be to deny my conviction that there is a constitutive relation between ideas and historical identities. Nor does labeling a behavior "masculine" evade in my view the important complication that masculinity is differently resisted and mobilized in different persons. But I recognize that the place of gender in identity and in social analysis is heavily contested. In terminology as in conceptions, the burgeoning diversities of gender theory challenge each position within it while generously sustaining new possibilities.

One indication that gender holds greater social power than genre is the ease with which recent critics have resisted genre's coercive classifying function, so congenial to earlier literary study. Gender is more than a concept and exerts substantial control in the world; genre is a conceptual tool that can be refashioned without significant repercussions for society at large. Currently, then, genre has come to provide a context for reading particular works rather than a standard against which works are measured. So conceived, gen-

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articulation of sexuality, tracing that articulation to the eighteenth century (e.g., 103–5), but much of his argument on sexuality's social function as "an especially dense transfer point for relations of power" (103) fits the late medieval period better than his own characterization of that period as monolithic, without competing discourses on sex, would suggest (e.g., 33).

res do not have a fully constitutive relation to texts; their hold over texts is relatively slight, as is their capacity to explain specific texts. Jameson suggests not only that we distinguish consistently between the facilitation or potential of genre and the concreteness of particular works, but further that generic categories "are ultimately to be understood (or 'estranged') as mere ad hoc, experimental constructs, devised for a specific textual occasion and abandoned like so much scaffolding when the analysis has done its work" (*Political Unconscious*, 145). Adena Rosmarin concurs that for the purposes of critical explanation genre should not be taken as a preexisting category but as an implement for reading. We would then not assume that *Lybeaus Desconus* should instantiate a definition of romance; we would instead read it as if it were a romance, with the aim not of accounting for its deviance from a norm but of discovering its meaning through the aid that a generic perspective can provide. Genre study so conceived resists the taxonomic impulse and imagines genre to be less a pigeonhole than a pigeon—mobile, organic, and subject to time.<sup>3</sup>

The case of medieval romance makes particularly clear how provisional and protean a genre can appear. The breadth of features illustrated in romances Chaucer uses or cites, such as *Guy of Warwick*, the Breton lays, and *Cleomadés*, is compounded by time: Chaucer stands relatively late in the course of romance, when other genres can briefly invoke it as a mode. In these conditions "romance" can refer to a few lines or an entire tale, a familiar resonance or an innovation that departs from and even contradicts the genre's past. Conceived as a historical genre, romance draws together measures of scale, style, structure, and content that inform entire works; conceived as a generic mode, romance is a register or moment that calls features of the historical genre to mind within any number of other genres.

For some scholars the capaciousness of romance makes it "doubtful whether the romance can be indeed regarded as a genre at all," in Pamela Gradon's judgment; "it seems preferable to talk

<sup>3</sup> The image is from Fowler: "Some have concluded that genre theory, being unhelpful in classification, is valueless. But in reality genre is much less of a pigeonhole than a pigeon, and genre theory has a different use altogether, being concerned with communication and interpretation" (37).

of a romance mode" (269–70).<sup>4</sup> Even if lays were excluded from affiliation with romance, which would in my view falsify their place in the genre's history, romance would resist definition according to recurring expectations of form, subject matter, or narrative technique.<sup>5</sup> Yet Chaucer and his contemporaries did attribute generic meaning to the term *romaunce*. In the fourteenth century, the term could designate works written in French and sometimes any written source, or secular works that were not rigorously historical, or a generic category of narrative fictions concerning the deeds of chivalric heroes.<sup>6</sup> The *Book of the Duchess* uses the term in the first or second sense in attributing the story of Ceyx and Alcioun to "a book, / A romaunce" (47–48), probably to recall Chaucer's French sources, Guillaume de Machaut's *Dit de la fonteinne amoureuse* and the *Ovide moralisé*, as well as Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.<sup>7</sup> Paul Clogan argues that "romaunce" has more generic force in *Troilus and Criseyde*, where Criseyde so designates a book whose contents tally with those of the *Roman de Thèbes*, in contrast to the *Thebaid* material that Pandarus then invokes. In *Sir Thopas* "romances that been roiales" and "romances of prys" designate works that Thopas describes as "Of popes and of cardinales, / And eek of love-lykyng" and that the narrator specifies as the stories of Horn, Ypotis, Bevis, Guy, Lybeaus Desconus, and Pleyndamour, all less fine than the tale of Sir Thopas (VII 845–50, 897–902). The popes, cardinals, and holy Ypotis would seem to be comic violations of a generally accepted idea of romance, since the narrator's promise to tell "of bataille and of

<sup>4</sup> Barron, 4, and Jordan concur with Gradon; see also Parker. I will not be concerned with genre as a mode that transcends genre altogether, as in Frye's use of the term to denote "the structural core of all fiction" (15).

<sup>5</sup> Hernadi responds to this difficulty by proposing that genre can manifest itself in a number of registers, some of which evade measures of form, others of content. He suggests four kinds of similarity that might be described in generic terms: a mental attitude expressed within works, verbal and stylistic similarity, a shared imaginary world or view of the external world, and a shared effect on readers. Accepting multiple registers for romance permits the genre to encompass long works and short ones, a subtle poetic of *conte* and *conjointure* and straightforward storytelling, verse and prose, chivalric exploits or courtship or both.

<sup>6</sup> See Strohm, "Storie, Spelle" and "Origin and Meaning"; Thompson argues that an awareness of romance as a genre can be discerned in the Thornton manuscript.

<sup>7</sup> All quotations from works of Chaucer and from the *Romaunt of the Rose* are taken, unless otherwise noted, from *Riverside Chaucer*.

chivalry, / And of ladyes love-drury" (VII 894–95) resembles medieval and modern accounts of the genre.

Chaucer's references to romance indicate a doubly low status for the genre that helps explain why and how Chaucer took his distance from it.<sup>8</sup> First, that one of its subjects is "ladyes love-drury" oddly but appropriately associates the foundational fictions of heterosexual courtship with one sex only. Romance is a feminine genre according to medieval writers. The scene of reading in *Troilus and Criseyde* sustains this connection. When Pandarus finds Criseyde reading with her women, she explains, "This romaunce is of Thebes that we rede," and describes a sequence of events peculiar to the *Roman de Thèbes*. Pandarus's reply that he knows its "bookes twelve" refers to the Latin *Thebaid* despite Criseyde's designation of the vernacular "romaunce." Clogan notes Pandarus's pedantic display of knowledge; the genre gap dividing Pandarus's allegiance to classical epic from Criseyde's to "romaunce" instantiates a gender gap as well. Adenet le Roi asserts that two ladies have commanded him to write *Cleomadès* (ll. 17–66), and Chrétien de Troyes claims that the matter and the sense of *Le Chevalier de la Charrette* were provided to him by Marie de Champagne (ll. 1–29). Denis Piramus notes that "les lais solent as dames pleire" (lays are pleasing to the ladies) but that they "ne sunt pas del tut verais" (are not at all true) (*Vie Seint Edmund*, ll. 38, 46). The association between untruth and a feminine audience recalls the Nun's Priest's asseveration "This storie is also trewe, I undertake, / As is the book of Launcelot de Lake, / That wommen holde in ful greet reverence" (VII 3211–13). Literary histories have invoked such claims to argue for women's patronage of romance, but they refer more directly to the doubtful validity of the genre, to a hierarchy of genres that matches the relatively low credibility of romance's lies and wonders to feminine identity. Romance has the name of a feminine genre, although its historical audiences were surely mixed.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> It is virtually a critical commonplace that Chaucer eagerly seized on such genres as the fabliau, saint's legend, and dream vision but "felt less easy with the very genre which we regard as most characteristic of his period, the knightly romance" (Burrow, "Canterbury Tales," 109; see chapter 5, "Adventure and the Feminine in the *Knight's Tale*").

<sup>9</sup> On gender and the audiences for romance see R. F. Green, "Women"; Hanning, "Audience"; Krueger; Strohm, *Social Chaucer*, 58–62.

Romance is not only feminine but outmoded in Chaucer's milieu. The pastness that earlier conferred dignity on the genre—the "olde dayes of the Kyng Arthour" (III 857), the "olde gentil Britouns" (V 709), the "Whilom, as olde stories tellen us" (I 859) of so many prologues to romance—becomes a mark of obsolescence in the later fourteenth century. As Chaucer's youthful work indicates, romance writing did not dominate literary production at English and French courts in the later fourteenth century. Lyric poetry, *dits amoureux*, and dream visions were in ascendance, in part for their suitability to occasional commissions and to oral performance during the decades when poetry writing was becoming an important social accomplishment for courtiers. To such poets the metrical romances may well have seemed but "drasty speche" (VII 923) and Arthurian material as remote as in the *Squire's Tale*. There the narrator refers to Gawain and Lancelot as models of behavior respectively "olde" and "deed" (V 95, 287), invoking their excellence but locating it in a past inaccessible even to rhetoric: in both cases the citation of the hero's name marks with hyperbole the absence of an account of courtly behavior. Chaucer's literary experience stretched far beyond the poetry of Machaut and his compatriots, but their influence is great in his milieu and early works. As its authority and source of motifs, their poetry declares its debt to the *Romance of the Rose*, in which Guillaume de Lorris reorients the courtship narratives of romance toward allegory and lyric autobiography. The *Romance of the Rose* made romances in the generic sense unfashionable, yet Guillaume's work is obviously dependent on the genre despite its allegorical mode and dream-vision form. The *dits* of Machaut and Froissart and Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess* perpetuate such features of romance as its dramatization of courtliness and courtship, its melding of lyric and narrative impulses, and its use of allegory to unfold moments of emotional turmoil. The *Squire's Tale* illustrates the contiguity between romance and the more modern *dit* as it moves from narrating the arrival of Cambyskan's adventure-provoking birthday gifts to the falcon's lyric lament based on *Anelida and Arcite*. The generic shift is virtually imperceptible because the narrative component of the falcon's lament and its concern with the vagaries of courtship incorporate it into the generic frame of romance. Here as in the *dits* of the later fourteenth century, conceiving romance to be outmoded seems to

be a strategy for remobilizing it, just as declaring the genre to be feminine licenses its production and reception beyond women's circles alone.

The parallels between gender and genre move in two directions. One line of connections to investigate would be how historical men and women "perform" romance—how their behavior imitates or inspires romance's representation of gender and how they receive, interpret, and circulate particular romance texts.<sup>10</sup> My question in this study is how romances "perform" gender rather than the reverse—how they construe masculinity and femininity, how they work out the paradigm of difference and the challenge of intimacy, and how they relate gender to other expressions of social identity. I seek out the most visible and repeatable ways in which the genre configures gender, with the goal of illuminating both the durability of gender ideology and its mobile instantiation in Chaucer's response to romance. I am not concerned to establish whether Chaucer was familiar with each text to which I refer; it is evident that he knew the genre and that it holds an important place in the *Canterbury Tales*. Rather than attempting to provide a history of romance, I treat resonances between Chaucer's works and others as part of Chaucer's moment, features of his context and his response to the literary history he experiences. My premise is that romance assigns gender a high degree of motivating and explanatory force. Romance implicates the dichotomy between masculine and feminine in a range of other oppositions between authority and submission, familiarity and exoticism, justice and mercy, public and private, with which the gender dichotomy suggestively interacts. The insights drawn from gender theory that are most important to my readings are roughly four: that the conceptual power of difference strongly characterizes romance's depictions of gender; that difference is innately hierarchizing in romance; that the gender hierarchy is related to other systems of

<sup>10</sup> R. F. Green, *Poets and Princepleasers*, and Poirion usefully situate poetry writing in court culture; the theoretical work of Jauss, e.g., *Aesthetic of Reception*, particularly sustains audience-oriented studies. Wimsatt has made many contributions to the study of literary influences in the *dits* of Machaut, Froissart, and others, most recently in *Chaucer and His French Contemporaries*. See also Krueger, Fewster, 104–28.

distinction; and finally that despite the dominance of a hierarchized conception of gender difference, romance also represents gender contrarily as unstable, open to question, and in danger of collapse.

The first chapter considers how romance imagines masculine identity. In the paradigm of difference, polarizing male and female traits does not confer equivalent status on masculine and feminine identity. The social position occupied by those gendered male becomes conflated with that of humanity at large, exiling those gendered female to the position of difference, otherness, and objectification.<sup>11</sup> The process is central to romance's depiction of masculine maturation and courtship. Striving suitors establish their identity in meeting and overcoming resistance from the objects of their love. However projected and predetermined by masculine desire that resistance may be, its difference marks it feminine and announces romance's particular engagement with gender. As for the male protagonist, his centrality in romance criticism attests to the self-determination romance plots seem to place in his charge. But Chaucer's use of the genre recognizes that the heroic subject is first of all part of the social unit, and only by its consensus is he distinguishable and self-determining. As masculinity strives for definition in courtship, heterosexuality works to exclude the threat of homoeroticism, which persists in plots that make courtship analogous to and involved in relations among knights.

Intrinsic to masculine identity in romance is the concept of a fundamental difference between self and other. In the dominant paradigm of courtship, women attest to their suitors' deeds and reflect back to them an image of their worth. The resistance women may put up to suitors is compatible with the masculine desire for a complex experience of affective subjectivity. However, certain distortions of the paradigm can speak against it. Chapter 2 treats a feminine mimicry by which women attempt to resist the scripted position of the other. Their mimicry is not

<sup>11</sup> The locus classicus is De Beauvoir; Cixous articulates the more recent corollary that otherness risks or amounts to absence: "The paradox of otherness is that, of course, at no moment in History is it tolerated or possible as such. The other is there only to be reappropriated, recaptured, and destroyed as other. Even the exclusion is not an exclusion" (71).

merely the echo of masculine speech but an ironic repositioning of it that makes its premises available to criticism. Physical distortions extend the effects of verbal mimicry for women by loosening the bond between the feminine and the bodily that contributes to defining gender difference.

The third chapter examines how gender in romance is related to other hierarchical social arrangements. The hierarchical ordering of gender difference is so nearly universal in medieval articulations as to appear natural and unproblematic. From Aristotle a dominant theoretical tradition has conceived the original social differentiation to have been gendered, based in the different capacities and natures of men and women (Allen, Maclean). Modern theorists attribute gender's hierarchies to its subsumption in wider power negotiations. "Feminism is a theory of how the eroticization of dominance and submission creates gender, creates woman and man in the social form in which we know them to exist," writes Catharine MacKinnon, "Gender here is a matter of dominance, not difference" ("Desire and Power," 107-8). In romance, gender difference is implicated in hierarchies of gentility, estate, and degree (roughly, of moral worth, social duty, and achievement). Chaucer particularly exploits the overlap of gender and social hierarchy through the relation of narrators to tales. For example, in a crossgendered comparison of marginal gentility to femininity, the *Franklin's Tale* aligns Dorigen's incapacities with those of the narrating Franklin to express the restrictions of their respective social statuses.

Magic is a familiar generic feature of romance whose workings are closely involved with gender. Chapter 4 argues that in association with masculine characters and concerns, magic expresses desires for achievement and completeness that are denied to masculine identity in romance. The magic of learned clerks promises Aurelius and the children of Cambyuskan expanded capabilities through appropriation and control of the exotic, but their magical machinery finally throws men back on their own resources. In contrast, women's magic involves men in intimacies, expresses the ambiguous pleasure and danger of those intimacies, and tends to have occulted origins.

As the most immediate expression of the unknown in romance, woman instigates and is allied with adventure. Chapter 5 con-

siders how adventure figures and critiques gender constructions. Adventure is first of all a masculine pursuit, a self-risking solitary endeavor. But adventure does not represent escape from the feminine. Diana's uncanny foreknowledge together with Emelye's unexplained resistance in the *Knight's Tale* identify the feminine with the very terrain of adventure. Victories won in combat, land taken by conquest, and marvels appropriated or overcome replay metonymically the lover's ultimate conquest of his lady. At the same time, the adventurer's vulnerable submissiveness to errancy and accident recalls feminine pliancy. Particularly when they are subject to love, men experience a crossgendering that puts them at risk of resembling women. For their part, women have adventures that may involve crossgendering but that more importantly contrast with and reinterpret men's adventures.