I recently listened to a colleague give a paper on Robert Frost at a departmental colloquium and was astonished at her intimate psychologizing of his intentions. It was a well-done presentation, certainly eloquent and well-reasoned—if one could accept her premises that, unfortunately, remained underexamined and unproblematized throughout her talk. I was amused that I, the lone medievalist among a host of Americanists, had the strongest reaction against the idea of author function and autonomy on display over the cheese and crackers. Like many medievalists traditionally trained but committed to contemporary literary theory, I am perhaps more sensitive, if not actually neurotic, about how theory is or is not deployed by my peers.

The afternoon demonstrated for me once again that all critical theories are equal, but some are more equal than others. First, poststructuralist theories have made it impossible to write about texts without writing about method and the problems of method; second, the recent turn to history (as we like to describe it) has made it impossible to write about texts without taking into consideration the history of criticism itself. Such developments have dictated a short shelf-life for certain kinds of approaches to texts.

These are the thoughts that came to mind as I read *Gender and Language in Chaucer*, for Catherine Cox’s readings of the Chaucerian oeuvre, finely calibrated as they are, represent a strain of poststructuralist French feminism which, while it may no longer require explanation, demands justification. Our current interest in—if not mandate for—historicizing and interrogating modern constructions of the past has had a profound impact on feminist criticism. Perhaps more than any other trend, the historical turn has divided feminism into feminisms.

Thus when Cox makes such statements as: ‘In connection with the metatextual, or self-reflexive, dimension of Chaucer’s work, evocations of gendered textuality may be understood as en/gendered reflexions, that is, as metacritical representations of the gendered process of textual production’ (5), she acknowledges her debt to a certain kind of medievalist-feminist practice represented by R. Howard Bloch’s *Medieval Misogyny*, E. Jane Burn’s *Bodytalk*, and Carolyn Dinshaw’s *Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics*, all of which work out a theory of writing and its figuration by and through the feminine in rich and various ways. In Chapter One, ‘Promiscuous Glossing and Virgin Words,’ Cox argues that the Wife of Bath is a ‘narrative/discursive construction that Chaucer uses to delineate his own discovering of the limits of discourse’ (18). In Chapter Two, ‘The Text of Criseyde,’ Cox reads Criseyde as ‘manifest[ing] literary activities—reading, glossing, writing, translating—and so the narrative that produces her, by extension, yields metatextual, or self-reflexive, commentary on its own manifestation of these and related activities’ (39). *The Legend of Good Women*, The Physician’s Tale, The Second Nun’s Tale, The Clerk’s Tale, and The Man of Law’s Tale are the subject of Chapter Three, ‘‘Wretched Engendryngé’ and (wo)Mankynde,’ in which Cox argues that these texts ‘use sexualized tropes of cruelty and pain
subversively...to challenge narrative decorum even as they overtly assert cultural orthodoxy’ (58).

In Chapter Four, ‘Marks of Womanhood in the Ballades,’ Cox reads Chaucer’s short poems as ‘a critique of conventional gender hermeneutics’ (77). Chapter Five, ‘The Jangler’s “Bourde,”’ focuses on the Manciple’s Tale in order to work out how the complex relationship of tale to teller, mother to son, foregrounds the ‘role of gendered speech in Chaucer’s work’ (98). In Chapter Six, ‘The Summoner’s Subversive Erotics,’ Cox reads the Tale the Summoner tells as ‘complicating gender decorum and foregrounding hermeneutic models’ (132). Throughout, Cox constructs Chaucer as an artist who is not only aware of his own worth and keenly in touch with the zeitgeist, but who is also highly aware of the limits of the discourse(s) in which he chooses to work.

While Cox is somewhat mindful of the problem of method in her introduction, she never really gives us compelling reasons for accepting her arguments beyond an appeal to an idealized sexual/textual hermeneutic. And this is too bad, for Cox is a sensitive, insightful reader, and her explications often lose their impact because they lack historical texture (such as when Cox states that ‘the flexibility in gender identity that constitutes a foundation for current thinking on gender—the recognition that a gender position may be taken up, that is to say, appropriated, by someone of either sex—is...part of Chaucer’s own depictions of gender identity’ [5]). I find myself in the curious position of liking the book, but not quite believing in it.

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