Gender and Time in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales

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the writers themselves, who create the need for the novel form. Nothing inherent to character or narrative demands the longer forms, only a desire to keep the dream alive as long as possible requires the stories to sustain a pattern of both plot and character that gives the appearance of being complete in a way that the shorter genres are not popularly thought to be. Compact, abrupt, deft, Dixon's fictions demonstrate the effectiveness of the short genres that remain essential, ineluctable and irreducible. Though Dixon's stories are not overtly studies in character formation, they play with character in a way that is clearly postmodern. Which is to say that character, Self and identity are called into question as being primarily linguistic constructions. And the closest the postmodernist can get to "knowing" an Other is through the character-effect of a language used to delineate what one does as well as how one does it, especially when one doesn't know exactly what to do.

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The word "time,"¹ as defined by cultural critic Norbert Elias in his essay on the sociology of knowledge, is a human symbol "for a relation which a group of human beings, who possess the biological capability of memorization and synthesis, establishes among several events, one of which they standardize as the frame of reference or measuring rod for the others" (11–2). Similarly, Aron Gurevic underlines that there are no universal definitions of space and time because “these categories are felt and applied in various ways in different civilizations and societies, on different levels of the same society, and even among individuals” (29). Or, as Hans Willy Hohn explains: “Time is neither an attitude of nature nor does it inform human consciousness a priori. It does not exist as

¹A preliminary version of this essay was read at the meeting of the New Chaucer Society at the Sorbonne, Paris, in the summer of 1998. I would like to express my gratitude to Joerg O. Fichte, Nadia Margolis, Ann Marie Rasmussen, and Bonnie Wheeler for a number of helpful suggestions, and to Ruth McIntosh for her editorial assistance.
such, but as a social concept which is constituted and varied by and together with the forms of labor and interaction" (92). Although I have deliberately selected these definitions from publications in the areas of sociology, anthropological history, communication studies, and aesthetics, they all agree on the constructedness of human time on the one hand, but exclude the category of gender on the other. Recent investigations of time perceptions among diverse social groups in western societies demonstrate that such an exclusion is problematic as there are conspicuous variances in the ways women and men perceive, do, make, and kill time. The sociologist Karin Jurczyk, e.g., has established a time perception for women which is more intensive and contradictory, endless and body-related, while that of men is more linear, goal-oriented, and abstract (180–1). Jurczyk’s results, which coincide with Julia Kristeva’s theses in her 1979 essay, "Le temps des femmes," are based on women’s social shapeshifting between the consciously rationalized space of abstract and linear time which dominate professional work and the competing demands of motherhood, reproduction and/or a family home. For Jurczyk, women are “in between times;” for Kristeva, women are linked to both “cyclical” time (i.e., repetition) and “monumental” time (i.e., eternity).

While I would not want to claim that the results of late twentieth-century sociology or psychoanalytical feminism can be forced, somewhat simplistically, on the situation in Chaucer’s late medieval England, it seems to me that the process which gradually transformed human life and labor into rationalized spheres increasingly governed by abstract, mechanical time and

which separated home and work environments began in the thirteenth century and accelerated toward what the German language tellingly calls the “frühe Neuzeit” (literally: “early new time”), i.e., Early Modernity. I would like to sketch this process of transformation by looking at two extraliterary late medieval constructions of space and time: the Gothic cathedral and the mechanical clock.3

The Gothic cathedral, unlike its Romanesque precursor, not only moves human perception upwards toward eternity but at the same time considerably enlarges the horizontal reaches of space human beings can shape. While it is unquestionably the house of God and intends to celebrate, microcosmically, the glory of God’s creation, it shows unmistakable signs of the process which Hans Blumenberg has aptly described as the “restless taking stock of the world” which can be designated as the motive power of the age of science. The symbolic quality of the cathedral for this “restless taking stock” can be deduced from the building’s significance as an object of civic and economic pride; it becomes visible in the fame of the individual architect and his genial knowledge of statics as well as in the stonemasons’ authorizing signatures on the cathedral’s building blocks, the stones; and it is palpable in those features which display the cathedral’s unmistakable constructedness of the internal and external framing devices, the linear pillars soaring toward the nave’s ribbed vault and the flying buttresses. Along with the gigantic project of the cathedral, medieval society also submits to a new way of organizing labor: Employers demand the norming of sizes; a standardization of all parts becomes

3My description condenses the discussion in Martin Burchardt’s *Metamorphosen von Raum und Zeit: Eine Geschichte der Wahrnehmung* (Frankfurt and New York: Campus, 1997), pp. 20–71. I am greatly indebted to the insights of this excellent study.

necessary. The process begins to resemble an enormous kit, a system of thought, a mechanical and specialized grammar of construction. The birthplace of the guilds (which began as religious brotherhoods) is in the builders’ huts surrounding the cathedral. The statutes of the workers’ guilds, based on the Cistercian Codex written by Bernard of Clairvaux for the Knights Templars, champions the principle of effectiveness over that of noble birth and ushers in a new secular work ethic. Thus, the systemic space called “cathedral” embodies the prototype of a compact and perfect ordo and, at the same time, facilitates a new model of society and time.

If the “project cathedral” provides the rationalized space for new social, economic, and artistic paradigms, the parallel advance toward genetic time, represented by the invention of the mechanical clock, accompanies and confirms this experiment and supplies a technical apparatus which will measure and come to stand for the restless secular taking stock of God’s creation. Biological or natural rhythms, time as an elementary analogue of flowing water, running sand, or a burning flame are replaced by a machine, which – after the invention of escapement in connection with wheeled, hour-striking mechanisms – announces the cutting of duration into equally long units, often enough into twelve or twenty-four sections, thus resembling the number of sections of the cathedral’s rose windows.

By the end of the fourteenth century, the mechanical clock, which measured time independent of natural periodicity, became a standard piece of public equipment for any self-respecting city. As Gerhard Dorn-van Rossum has demonstrated, the spreading of mechanical clocks was inextricably linked with urban modernization. They were not exclusively championed by merchants, as Jacques Le Goff has claimed (417–33), but were funded and maintained by monarchs and princes, city governments, church administrators, basically by all those who proceeded more and more according to their own logic of labor, e.g., in the meetings of urban bodies (city councils, courts of law, guilds, and parliaments), at markets (to place limits on competition and protect the interests of townspeople), in schools (to coordinate the study of different subjects in a curriculum), and for sermons (to limit the rhetorical exuberance of preachers and safeguard the participation of audiences) (Dorn van-Rossum, esp. ch. 8). Mechanical clocks also share with the cathedral the external features of rational constructedness. Clockmakers’ sketches as well as manuscript illustrations up to the Renaissance present them as architectural wonders, as open artifices to demonstrate the inner structure and mechanics of the new time they signified. This graphic functionalism corresponded with that of the ribbed vault and the flying buttresses so that the mechanical clocks deserve to be called “cathedrals of time” (Burkhardt, 53). This correspondence also explains why the cathedral became the preferred architectural site for the integration of the clock. As varieties of the anatomy of rationalized space and time, they reached an immediate functional and aesthetic symbiosis.

When one applies the category of gender to the general technological, social, and economic developments symbolized by the cathedral and the mechanical clock, it becomes evident that women participate only marginally in this decisive paradigmatic shift towards exact measuring, toward time as project, linearity, and progression. Perhaps because of their largely biologically determined social role in medieval society, they are only indirectly influenced by the male-dominated mentality toward achieving human progress via the invention of machines, a mentality which Carlo Cipolla sees as responsible for the striking revolutionary
push for technological progress so typical of late medieval Europe (35–6). Both the concept and construction of the Gothic cathedral and the clock exclude women, just like the other areas which will increasingly use the now measurable, systemic time to organize and modernize their work: formal (university) education, administration, and government. Thus, the rift between medieval and early modern concepts of time was accompanied by a gender-related rift, one which we might also expect to inform late medieval literary texts.

Chaucer’s tales told to kill time on the way to Canterbury cathedral are held together by the visible constructedness of an experimental literary space, the frame tale, which allows not only for the inclusion of various genres, social classes, and aesthetic viewpoints, but also for the negotiation of contending extraliterary concepts of time within the intraliterary world of narrative configurations. Linne Mooney, Laurel Braswell, Edgar Laird, and Peter Travis have shown how familiar Chaucer was with the conflicting fourteenth-century methods of time-telling. More importantly, the various pronouncements on and measurements of time in the Canterbury Tales are “predominantly a male activity” (Taylor, 52). Following Julia Kristeva’s and Karin Jurczyk’s postulates and terminologies, one could say that Chaucer and


his male narrators and characters are obsessed with ideas of linear/finite time, progression, arrival, and teleology. They attempt to measure and master time via clocks, chronographiae, patrilinearity, genealogy, tydinges, astrological eleclions, and judgment day. As the narrator of the tales invites us to join him into his framing tale he does infer that his position is limited by “tyme and space” (I, 35). Chaucer’s Knight gives us exact information about the times Palamon, Emelye, and Arcite have chosen for prayer (I, 2209ff.); the Franklin distinguishes between the dies vulgaris and the dies artificialis (V, 1015ff.); the Nun’s Priest refers to the difference between unequal and equal hours when he claims that Chauntecleer is a more accurate time teller than a clock (VII, 2850ff.); nature still announces time in the Nun’s Priest’s (VII, 2853–54), the Reeve’s (I, 4232ff.), and the Miller’s (I, 3653ff.) tales; however, an “abbey horologe” is mentioned in the Nun’s Priest’s Tale (VII, 2853–54); Harry Bailey converts shadow length into artificial time when he concludes it was high time the Man of Law told his tale (II, 1–14); the Prologue to the Man of Law’s and the Parson’s (X, 1ff.) tales give the equivalent clock times for astronomical times; and in the Shipman’s Tale Daun John has put time to economical and sexual use and consults a portable “chilyndre” (VII, 206) to determine that “it is pryme of day.” The Shipman’s, Reeve’s, Merchant’s, Franklin’s and Friar’s tales are examples of narrative economy and undigressiveness; similarly, the Miller, unhampered by the Knight’s feminized courtliness and concern for transcendence, requires his social superior’s story by constructing a literary space in which the linear causality of circumstantial detail and smart male scheming moves the story

5All references to Chaucerian texts are to The Riverside Chaucer, 3rd ed., gen. ed. Larry Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).
progressively toward its climax; the *The Tale of Sir Thopas* is cut short by Harry Bailly because he is a satirical parody of a romance threatens with narrative binarity and it seems probable that the Squire’s potentially monumental and unilinear romance is interrupted by the Franklin for the same reason.

Chaucer’s major female characters and narrators do not share the men’s fascination for clocks or the restless measuring and controlling of time and narrative space. However, Chaucer makes some of them silently subscribe to the male obsession – as in the fully teleological vita of (Saint) Cecily in the “Second Nun’s Tale” which the teller – who refers to her- or himself by the gender-neutral liturgical formula of an “unworthy sone of Eve” (VIII, 62) – pushes forward to its Christian end result “to tellen shortly the conclusioun” (394). With many other female protagonists Chaucer manages to harmonize male typifications with women’s own time perception by linking cyclical/monumental and transcendental time: Custance’s passive but time-resisting self-constancy within a tale which inhabits the undefined border country between romance and saint’s life is confronted with the Man of Law’s obvious haste in finishing his story; Dame Prudence in *The Tale of Melibee* demonstrates the superiority of (otherworldly) patience over vengeance (VII, 1427–545); the Prioress, who sublimates her desire for experiencing the natural rhythms of pregnancy and childbearing through the telling of a salvific miracle of the Virgin, situates her tale outside of specific time and European space and transcends time via the pre-


her mouth, and spurs on her shoes. This image of Temperantia is tautological, as frenum is not only the technical term for the bridle restraint, but also for the “other side” of escapement (German: “Hemmung” = inhibition, hindrance), the technological invention which facilitated the construction of the mechanical clock. The male mastery of the natural flow of speech and the natural cycles of time, both inscribed onto an allegorical woman’s body, are a telling image of the gendered attitudes governing both areas.

If Chaucer’s women and their closest allegorical representation are temperate, measurable and can be framed and restrained by male authorities and the empowering buttresses of their technology, the Wife of Bath alone seems to upset this order of gendered temporality. Alisoun of Bath is constructed as the diametrical opposite of Temperantia. She tries to emulate, perhaps even outdo men: she rides and uses her spurs like a man; she shows herself, in contrast with the strictly undigressive narrated time in the Shipman’s Tale (the tale with a theme originally intended for her but with a time structure – merchant’s restless “flight” of tempus – much better befitting a male narrator!), unbridled by the restraining frenum which keeps women from using the flowers of rhetoric, and she wants to convince her audience with a conspicuously digressive prologue. Unlike Harry Bailey, she does not accept “tyme and space” as limiting forces but as an opportunity to relate her personal experience. Although she certainly has not lost her desire for jouissance and requires the limiting ageism of male narrators and co-travellers by intending to count out even the fifth of her husbands, she may have sacrificed, like Julia Kristeva’s proverbial “homologous woman,” the cyclical experience of pregnancy so as to become “like a man.”

Chaucer first suggests the ill success of her homologizing efforts in her prologue which, according to the standards of medieval rhetoric, is a typical example of the very exuberance the frenum should reign in. Then, he makes her tell a tale which – while avoiding and defying linear time and the ageing process in the indefiniteness of Arthurian adventure time – paradoxically ends in awarding to men (specifically: a rapist knight) measurement and mastery over women’s age and body. Small wonder that Rudyard Kipling used the Wife of Bath as his model for the exuberantly talkative, man-shocking, and time-killing “old woman” in Kim (1901), an adventure novel about an adolescent boy’s pilgrimage toward his imperialist, male identity.

In his Social Chaucer, Paul Strohm maintains that Chaucer “asserts a social basis for ideas about time and narrative” and that he intends for “particular ideas of time and narrative [to] rest in the sole possession of particular social groups” (125). Although this is true for the Parliament of Fowls where pairs of birds react according to their respective social standing, the interpersonal concerns inhabiting the frame of the Canterbury Tales complicate such

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9 In fifth-century Greece, dekaëdras (water clocks) were used in order to limit the duration of speeches at public meetings. This technique was taken over by the Roman republic as a “bridle” (according to Tacitus: frenum) to control the length of speeches at court. In the middle ages frenum is applied to describe escapement. Further depictions of Temperantia are the following: Chantilly, Musée Conde, Ms. fr. 491, f²⁴⁰v; Paris, BN Ms. fr. 9186 f³⁰⁴; Oxford Bodl. Lib. Ms. Laud Misc. 570, fⁱ⁶ (c. 1450); London BL Add. MS. 6797, f²⁷⁶v; Rouen, Bibl. mun., Ms. 12, f¹⁷v (1454); Examen de conscience, Rouen (1492), f¹⁹¹v; P. Breughel, Temperantia (copper engraving, 1557); see also two tapestries (from around 1520) in the series “Los Honores,” Segovia, San Ildefonso.

an exclusive explanation. Here, Chaucer also blends in gender-based concepts of time which, according to this preliminary analysis, he typifies to fit his audience’s horizon of expectation and which, consequently, reflect the larger extraliterary rift brought about by the restless late medieval turn toward controlling and technologizing space and time. His *Canterbury Tales* is written in what Peter Schwenger has aptly characterized as “the masculine mode,” a way of writing which genders intraliterary constructions of time in correspondence with extraliterary late medieval male experience.\(^{11}\)

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\(^{11}\)“The Masculine Mode,” in Elaine Showalter, ed., *Speaking of Gender* (New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 102. Cf. also Anne Laskaya, *Chaucer’s Approach to Gender in the “Canterbury Tales”* (Woodbridge, Suffolk; Rochester, NY: Brewer, 1995), p. 196: “Chaucer’s concerns with masculinity and gender are... clearly central to the *Canterbury Tales*. From the opening lines of the General Prologue to the last lines of the retraction, the *Canterbury Tales* establishes its concern with male characters, male subjectivity, masculinity, and male sexuality.”


WŁADYSŁAW WITALISZ

Authority and the Female Voice in Middle English Mystical Writings: Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe

Botte God forside that ye schulde saye or take it so that I am a techere, for me nought so, no, I mente nevere so. For I am a woman: leued, sebille and freyl.

Beer 48

These words of Julian of Norwich reflect the traditional self-deprecatory attitude of many medieval women writers. The feeble and frail woman does not presume to be a teacher and thus conventionally accepts the medieval exclusion of female authority. Auctoritas was, of course, an exclusively male concept in the Middle Ages. God the Creator was definitely interpreted to be male, God assuming human flesh becomes the male Christ. The Virgin Mary, although endowed with divine honours by the mystery of Christ’s birth, is remembered by medieval theology (e.g. in Ancrene Rivete...