Introduction

Chaucer and the problem of normativity

This book refines and redirects two views of Chaucer that have dominated the reception of his writing since his lifetime: that he was a philosophical poet and that he was a poet of love.[1] I argue that the *Canterbury Tales* represents an extended meditation on agency, autonomy, and practical reason, and that this philosophical aspect of Chaucer's interests can help us understand what is both sophisticated and disturbing about his explorations of love, sex, and gender.[2] In pursuing this argument about Chaucer, the book opens onto a broader discussion of the long-standing association in the Christian West between problems of autonomy and problems of sexuality, and the premodern intellectual and literary resources for understanding psychological phenomena often associated with psychoanalysis, such as repression, fetishism, narcissism, sadism, and masochism. And in discussing both Chaucer's literary experiments and the philosophical methods and psychological concepts informing them, *Philosophical Chaucer* develops a still broader theoretical argument concerning normativity and its relations to ideology and practical reason. This introduction will sketch the landscape of these arguments to indicate why they belong together in a single book.

The idea of Chaucer as a philosophical love poet has traditionally centered on his career as a courtly writer steeped in the Latin, French, and Italian traditions of psychological and philosophical allegory and erotic lyricism, a career that mostly predates the *Canterbury Tales* and whose crowning achievement was *Troilus and Criseyde*. Such an emphasis brings into relief the moments in Chaucer's poetry when philosophy and erotic life are most obviously conjoined, moments when longing,

abjection, and loss open within the erotic subject an urge to speculation that often takes explicitly philosophical form; it also allows for the drawing of close connections between Chaucer's work and that of many of the writers who meant the most to him, such as Alain de Lille, Guillaume de Lorris, Jean de Meun, Guillaume de Machaut, Dante, and Petrarch. I turn to the *Canterbury Tales*, however, because for all the value of the traditional focus, it encourages a restricted notion of what makes Chaucer's poetry philosophical and of what he finds philosophically provocative in erotic life. I argue that Chaucer's project in the *Tales* is philosophical not only in tales like those of the Knight and the Clerk, where such interests are explicit, but also in ones that have been seen as tangential to any philosophical interest or even as antiphilosophical, like those of the Miller and the Wife of Bath. The picture of Chaucer that emerges in these pages is that of a poet as deeply committed to philosophical thinking – and indeed, as deeply committed to dialectic – as Jean de Meun or Langland or the *Pearl*-poet, but one who became interested in pursuing that commitment independently of dialogue form, or for that matter independently of any explicit representation of philosophical topics or themes. What makes Chaucer's mature poetry philosophical is its engagement with the often repressed dialectical structures imbedded not only in abstract reflection but also in every expressive act, even the most routinized, seemingly unreflective ones. The philosophical richness of the *Canterbury Tales* lies in its way of using forms of literary representation, including narrative, genre, character, and tropological language, to investigate the dialectical structure of thought and desire.

Such imbedded dialectical structures, and the conception of philosophical poetry that attends them, are also central to my account of Chaucer's interest in love. As I have already indicated, for me, as for many recent Chaucerians, thinking of Chaucer as a poet of love means attending to his interests in gender and sexuality. Like some such critics, I will be concerned with what Carolyn Dinshaw has called a "touch of the queer" in Chaucer's representations of erotic life – or, as I would put it, with the ways erotic energies trouble and cross presumptive borders between the normal and the perverse, even as in many ways they depend on the constitution of such borders.[3] This book also shares with psychoanalysis interests in the phantasmatic constitution of desire and its

objects, the intersubjective structuring of desire and will, and the misrecognitions on which attachment and a stable sense of self depend.[4] But if queer theory and psychoanalysis provide two of this book's most proximate others, one of my central projects here will be to understand how Chaucer and his main intellectual interlocutors might have conceptualized an interest in these topics; or, to put it another way, to see how far we can get in an analysis of such topics without invoking a specifically psychoanalytic account of them. Such a project can be helpful both historically and theoretically, by refining our sense of the continuities and differences between ourselves and the past, and by defining more clearly, for both proponents and opponents of psychoanalysis, the point at which a genuinely psychoanalytic account might be taken up.

In examining the analytical structure of Chaucer's interests in gender difference, sexual desire, and love, I will locate him in relation to a number of ancient and medieval currents of thought in which, by the late Middle Ages, questions of sexuality and questions of agency and autonomy had come to intersect. Perhaps the most important of these currents is the tradition of Christian thinking about morality and sociality that Peter Brown has so brilliantly traced from Paul to Augustine, a tradition that turned time and again to the conceptual and metaphorical links between problems of sexuality and problems of autonomy.[5] Other such currents include an Augustinian and Boethian tradition of thinking about desire and its frustrations, an Aristotelian tradition in philosophical psychology, and an analysis of utopian intimacy developed in Aristotelian and Ciceronian discourses of friendship, all of which were adapted to erotic contexts by, among others, Jean de Meun. In discussing these traditions my interest will once again be both historical and theoretical. On the one hand, they will help us reconstruct an intellectual idiom important to Chaucer and in key respects different from our own. On the other, pursuing such a reconstruction will lead us to theoretical arguments concerning the ways agency and identity are constituted around incompatible demands of practical reason, and the ways an account of those demands can help us to read intersubjective and intrasubjective dramas of misrecognition. Those theoretical arguments in turn will help us to understand a historical phenomenon of interest throughout this book, namely a crisis of

intelligibility in the emergent paradigm of western sexuality and romantic love which, I will argue, is conditioned by the problematic structure of practical reason. This crisis of intelligibility in sexuality and love cannot fully be understood either through the analysis of the cultural construction of discourses, practices, subjects, and texts which currently dominates historicist modes of inquiry, or through a psychoanalytic paradigm that seeks its causes in Oedipal structures or traumatic narrative. This is not to say that I take my argument to obviate historicist and psychoanalytic accounts. It is just to say that accounts of the historical and psychological causes of such a crisis need supplementing by an account of the structures of practical reason that inform it.

Reading with an ear for the resonances between problems of sexuality and problems of agency will help us see sexuality less as a sphere of desire and behavior that provided Chaucer with the underlying causes of human behavior than as a highly charged and tropologically rich site on which he explored the drive to autonomy and the grief that attends it. This in turn will help us understand Chaucer's moral seriousness as something other than the moralizing it has often been taken to be – indeed as something in many ways disturbing to conventional moral sensibilities rather than confirming of them, and so as something we need not pass by in embarrassment on the way to supposedly more exciting topics.[6] The effort to recover that moral seriousness, the powerful speculative impulse that attended it, and the poetic resources through which Chaucer pursued it, requires rethinking the relationship between philosophy and the rhetorical forms of philosophical dialogue, allegory, and Canterbury narrative; and that rethinking requires a substantive investigation of the philosophical problems engaged by Chaucer and the traditions to which he belonged. In the course of this effort of recovery, sexuality will emerge both as a provocation to speculate on the structure of agency and the drive to autonomy, and as a place where the abstract work of philosophical analysis meets flesh and bone.

EROS AND NORMATIVITY

Of the philosophical and theoretical terms on which my argument will depend, "normativity" is both the most important and, I take it, the most obscure. I think this obscurity is both a result of the current

condition of our intellectual culture and a feature of the concept itself. A good portion of this introduction, and for that matter of this book, will therefore be devoted to giving an account of what normativity is, and why it might be worth fuller critical and theoretical attention. But before turning to an initial unpacking of this term, I want to provide a Chaucerian anchor for what will be some fairly abstract considerations. Let me then point to a scene from the *Knight's Tale* which will receive extended attention in chapter two and which suggests something of the form in which eros and normativity intersect in Chaucer's philosophical-poetic project.

The scene is that of Emily in her garden, performing her springtime maidenly duties under the watchful and desiring eyes of Palamon and Arcite. This scene condenses some key features of a normative picture of gender difference and sexuality which will be of concern throughout this book. In establishing a voyeuristic relationship between desiring men and a desired but utterly oblivious woman, the scene figures the masculine as the site of erotic subjectivity and agency, and the feminine as the site of erotic passivity and objectification, an association that continues throughout the tale as Emily's fate remains entirely hostage to the conflicts among the men whose desires seem to be the only ones that effectively count. While the Knight, here and elsewhere in the tale, adopts a stance of critical distance on what he sees as the pathological desire of the Theban cousins, the portrait of Emily with which he introduces the scene participates in this normative picture and helps to specify its further contours. Emily

> fairer was to sene
> Than is the lylie upon his stalke grene,
> And fressher than the May with floures newe –
> For with the rose colour stroof hir hewe,
> I noot which was the fyner of hem two.
> (I.1035–39)[7]

Through the location of Emily in the garden and the more pointed identification of her attractiveness with that of the floral beauty that surrounds her, the Knight associates the feminine with the natural, the ornamental, and the cultivated. And through the desire this scene kindles in Palamon and Arcite, and even more through his own admiring description, the Knight associates the masculine both with the

subjectivity that appreciates all this beauty and with the agency that cultivates the aesthetic object – that is, the poem – in which, like the garden, or for that matter Emily's lovely body, such beauty is both produced and contained.

In these respects, this scene is of course utterly conventional. The aestheticizing voyeurism of masculine desire here seems flat and clichéd, so familiar in the Middle Ages and today that it is hardly even recognizable. That is why I have begun with it, and I think it is also why Chaucer places it so early in the *Canterbury Tales*. I will be arguing throughout this book that one of Chaucer's most characteristic philosophical and poetic interests lies in the unpacking of cliché, the analysis of attitudes that, because of their familiarity and the way they can pass for somebody's version of plain (if objectionable) common sense, tend to fly beneath our intellectual radar. Such cases are always in Chaucer's poetry more complex than they initially appear; and part of what interests Chaucer in such cases is the way their apparent flatness and easy recognizability function to keep their radical incoherence out of sight, and so to enable their psychic and social functionality. What we really ought to say about such moments, I think, is not that they are flat, but that we are used to thinking flatly about the attitudes to which they give expression, and that these flattening habits of mind are essential to their reproduction and inhabitation. The aestheticizing voyeurism of masculine desire is only possible in the first place because we think we know all too well what we see there.

As I have already indicated, it has been known for some time that at the center of Chaucer's literary inheritance was a rich tradition of French and Italian poetry – a tradition exemplified in the *Roman de la Rose* and the writings of Guillaume de Machaut, Petrarch, and a host of others – which combined a strong interest in erotic desire with an extremely refined formalist and lyrical aesthetic sensibility.[8] This scene belongs squarely in that tradition, and that is part, although only part, of what makes it seem so familiar. But, like that tradition at its best, this scene asks us to think about what is at stake ontologically and ideologically in a voyeuristic eroticism, and more broadly in the gendered production of beauty as an aesthetic and erotic phenomenon. As I will argue in later chapters, one thing crucially at stake is the production of an unstable ideology of gender difference, according to which the

contrast between masculine and feminine gets figured in terms of parallel contrasts between subject and object, activity and passivity, the human and the natural, soul and body, artist and artifact, and so on. This ideology in itself is familiar enough, both in Chaucer and in medieval culture at large. To pick a few examples, some of which will receive extended attention in the present study and others of which are random selections from a nearly limitless archive: think of the central trope for masculine erotic satisfaction in the *Roman de la Rose*, that of plucking the feminine rosebud, or that text's interest in the Ovidian figures of Narcissus and Pygmalion; or Alisoun's animal sexuality in the *Miller's Tale*, or the Wife of Bath grounding her speaking voice in her "joly body"; or the appropriation of Aristotelian theories of generation, in which the male partner contributes the animating principle and the female partner contributes the matter, in medical-philosophical treatises such as the *De Secretis Mulierum* of Pseudo-Albertus Magnus; or the application in late medieval and early modern English civil law of the principle of "coverture" to the traditional conception of the married couple as a single person, such that "the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband."[9] As these examples suggest, the widespread dissemination of this ideology in so many sites of cultural authority – literature, art, theology, preaching, popular religion, confession, law, medicine, and beyond – established an identificatory norm with powerful effects on the ways medieval people came to recognize themselves and each other as men and women.[10] And, as the scene of Emily in her garden and many of the above examples suggest, this gender ideology was closely related to an ideology of sexuality. Forms of gender identification necessarily affect and are affected by the ways people imagine themselves and each other as subjects and objects of desire; and this scene from the *Knight's Tale* captures the outlines of an erotic norm, again quite widespread in the culture and of central interest to the French and Italian traditions of lyrical eroticism, which figures masculine desire as inherently voyeuristic and objectifying, and feminine desire – which Chaucer does not directly represent here, but which he does in a host of other places – as a desire for voyeuristic objectification, a desire for being loved as the kind of aestheticized, passive figure Emily is.

This description of the scene, and of the ideology of gender and sexuality it figures, is necessarily simplified, and I do not intend it as a characterization of medieval representations of gender and sexuality as a whole. Much that is far from marginal in late medieval culture runs directly counter to this picture of gender difference: for instance, the feminization of Christ through an increasing emphasis on both his sufferings and his maternal nurturing, or the identification with the sorrows of the Virgin Mary cultivated in the affective spirituality of both men and women. But, while the above package of contrasts by no means presents a totalized or even internally coherent ideological edifice, we should not underestimate the force of the simplifications it expresses, either in the conceptual habits of medieval culture or in the lives of those for whom these habits had practical consequences. This is something Chaucer means to take the measure of in scenes such as the one above. He does so in part by making such scenes problematize the overly neat conceptual packages they instantiate; in this way, Chaucer explores the quite porous structures of identification and desire that swirl around ideological schematisms of this kind. This is somewhat different from the project of accounting for tendencies in medieval thought that run counter to this ideology; it is more a matter of attending to the inner workings of the ideology itself, of tracking its representational logics to see ways in which they both are driven by and lead to beliefs and desires they cannot accommodate.[11] One way Chaucer typically engages in such an exploration is by representing the paradoxically shifting valuations this ideology assigns to the feminine in order to imagine it as contrasting with a masculinity that stands in for the fully human subject and agent. So in Emily the feminine is at once associated with the natural and with a group of terms we would now take as referring to the cultural – the cultivated, the ornamental, and the aesthetic. This raises problems both for what the feminine is supposed to be and for what the desiring masculine subject is supposed to take as its object, problems which it is a principal task of ideology to try to mask, but which nevertheless must have effects on the identificatory and libidinal investments of ideology's subjects. In chapter four I will argue that Chaucer learned a basic literary and conceptual vocabulary for pursuing such problems from the *Roman de la Rose*. But while I think that the

standard scene of an objectifying masculine voyeurism is more mysterious than it is usually taken to be, the issues it raises cannot be fully explored if we restrict our scope to "courtly" lyric eroticism. This is one reason why I have focused on the *Canterbury Tales* and left both *Troilus and Criseyde* and a broader survey of the French and Italian traditions aside: for in the movement out of courtly eroticism in the *Tales,* Chaucer opens the text to scenes of desire and conceptual pressures he otherwise could not have taken into account.

I have focused so far on the aspect of normativity most familiar in the study of gender and sexuality, including studies that focus on the Middle Ages and Chaucer. One thing that sets the present project apart from such work is an argument that we cannot fully understand the function of normative ideologies of gender and sexuality, in Chaucer's work or elsewhere, without attending to normative considerations of quite a different kind than those I discuss above. To return to the scene in question: Palamon and Arcite viewing Emily from their prison has long been understood to have Boethian resonances, and these resonances establish a normative trajectory which problematizes the scene's ideology of gender and sexuality in surprising ways.[12] In Boethian terms, Palamon and Arcite's imprisonment reads not just as an unfortunate political abrogation of their freedom but as a trope for a much deeper loss of autonomy, the kind that occurs when a person becomes incapable of ordering his dispositions into a coherent and functional will, and so suffers compulsion by whatever passions happen to arise in him. More specifically, as I will argue later, the kind of compulsion at issue here is not one in which the person's will is elided or erased, but one in which the person is *invested*, and so something that characterizes his will. That is, it is not the case that Palamon and Arcite cannot order their dispositions because something external to their will intervenes to block them from doing so – a massive brain hemorrhage, say, or as in some theories the degrading influence of desire or the body. Their problem is rather that they are devoted to their compulsion; they suffer from what Augustine calls "the perversion of the will."[13] The psychic and social disintegration so much in evidence in the Thebans' fratricidal conflict is in this respect the sign of their imprisonment in their own perverse wills, their self-imposed exile from any possibility of an authentic identity.

Given the history of Chaucer criticism since the middle of this century, it is far too easy to think that we know what it might mean for Chaucer to be interested in such a condition – far too easy, that is, to think that the only form such an interest could take is that of moralizing Christian diagnosis.[14] The result is that critics without much interest in moralizing diagnosis have had little interest in what was, for Chaucer as well as for Boethius and Augustine, the immense and haunting problem of the human creature's psychic and moral alterity to itself, a problem from which the comforts of moralism offer no refuge. But we should remember that the French and Italian poetry of erotic subjectivity, like Chaucer's, was steeped in Boethian and Augustinian thinking; it did not seem like a yoking together of incommensurable thought worlds to Jean de Meun or Dante or Guillaume de Machaut to inflect an investigation of erotic longing with philosophical arguments, and more importantly, with the forms of philosophical dialectic. We can thus perhaps begin to find the philosophical and moral problem of the will's alterity to itself compelling again if we return it to the erotic location this poetic tradition gives it.

In the scene I have been using as a touchstone, the Boethian valence of Palamon and Arcite's overwhelming desire for Emily has two apparently contradictory functions, each of which deeply problematizes the ideology of gender and sexuality the scene nevertheless serves to instantiate. On the one hand, the Thebans' erotic compulsion represents their perversion, that is, their inability to take command of themselves as men properly should – in quite pointed contrast to Theseus, who does manage a masculine self-command, and who later in the tale announces with pride that he is devoted to Diana rather than to Venus. If this scene figures erotic desire as normatively masculine, then, it also figures such desire as a threat to the very masculinity it defines, a disturbance of the norms by which that masculinity regulates itself. But the identification of eros with perversion is itself problematized by another normative function of Emily's desirability that also tracks a concern with autonomy. For, as I will argue in chapter two, when Palamon and Arcite longingly observe Emily's garden activities from behind the bars of their prison, part of what they see there is a figure of a beautifully stylized freedom, the freedom of a subject and agent perfectly ordered with respect to herself – a figure, that is, for the