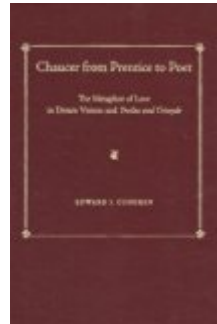


Edward I. Condren. *Chaucer from Prentice to Poet: The Metaphor of Love in Dream Visions and Troilus and Criseyde*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2008. xiv + 239 pp. \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8130-3241-2.

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The Spiritual Chaucer Revisited

Edward I. Condren begins by setting out the main premise of this book. It is that Chaucer has three subjects: human life, eternal love, and the creation of poetry. He sees the first as filling the surface impression that readers get, while the other two only make their presence felt now and again, yet are “loosely connected allusions” to two kinds of creation: one a “universe created over by an intelligent, just, and omnipotent deity”; and the other the creation of poetry (p. 2). As the title *Chaucer from Prentice to Poet* suggests, Condren sees a marked progression in Chaucer’s career: it is from a scarcely conscious practice of poetry to a maturity in which “he knew more about literary creation than we have yet realized” (pp. 2-3). Many will cavil at such an estimation of his early poems and the implication that French models must necessarily produce unoriginal apprentice works, but Condren, I think, means a more profound, spiritual, approach to creativity. A readiness to look above all for a spiritual unity behind Chaucer’s writing has been a characteristic of American Chaucerian criticism for the past hundred years, particularly, of course, during the Robertsonian decades, but Condren brings his own particular insights in an interpretation that conforms broadly to such an approach. He focuses on what he sees as two characteristics of Chaucer’s work: what he calls “self dialogue” and numerology. The book concentrates on his first three dream poems—the *Legend of Good Women* is largely ignored—and a basically Boethian/Christian reading of *Troilus and Criseyde*.

The chapter on the *Book of the Duchess* illustrates how Condren approaches these themes. First, the “self dialogue” in that poem consists of a contrast between the language of the dreamer and that of the Black Knight. Secondly, Condren disputes the usual assumption that the Man in Black in some sense represents John of Gaunt; instead, he and the narrator both represent “the same historical figure, Geoffrey Chaucer” (p. 29). Reinterpreting the puzzling allusion to the knight’s age, he suggests that Chaucer composed an elegy for Queen Philippa, a patroness who encouraged the “prentice” poet, and reworked it for John of Gaunt’s bereavement. This, Condren suggests, could explain several features of the poem, including its use of “fers,” meaning a chess queen, for the dead lady. He further argues that the finished poem divides into sections that recall the Golden Proportion, a sign of divinity and infinity. And that is the real consolation, along with the message about eternity after death, that the poem offers its readers.

Bolder speculations appear later in the book. Chapter 5 suggests that the *House of Fame* is a “fictive account of how Chaucer happened to experience, perhaps on December 10th, the dream now known as *Troilus and Criseyde*” (p. 131). Condren offers this interpretation partly as an explanation of why, compared with the other three dream poems and the *Retraction* to the *Canterbury Tales*, there is no sense of the narrator as signing off his completed work (an argument that is dubious in relation to the *Legend of Good Women*): the *House of Fame*

lacks such a leave-taking (it is unfinished). Condren's view is that it segues into *Troilus and Criseyde*, and thus too its allusion to "Englysshe Gaufride" (*House of Fame* 1470-2) refers to Chaucer himself as the author of *Troilus and Criseyde*. He argues that, in linking the two poems, the *House of Fame's* tale of Dido foreshadows the tragedy of Troilus but with a gender reversal like that between Alcyone and the Man in Black in the *Book of the Duchess*. A further observation, which will probably command greater assent from readers than the hypothesis that the *House of Fame* and *Troilus and Criseyde* are one, is that the *House of Fame*, *Troilus and Criseyde*, and the *Legend of Good Women* all deal with the same issues: the duty of poetry to preserve the past, difficulties in finding truth, and the fidelity or infidelity of women. One might, of course, argue, against Condren's theory about the *House of Fame* as a preface to *Troilus and Criseyde*, that it is precisely Chaucer's tendency to keep returning to certain themes, including the experience of lover's betrayals, but to present them each time with radically new perspectives, that accounts for the recurrence of certain motifs, and that the theme of abandonment extends beyond those two particular poems.

Another example that illustrates his interest in the possibility of spiritual symbolism in mathematical elements in the texts is the reading of "dulcarnoun" in *Troilus and Criseyde* III 931-2. This term refers to either Euclid's 47th proposition (the familiar Pythagorean theorem about the square on the hypotenuse) or his 5th proposition, about isosceles triangles having equal base angles. The latter is the easiest of all theorems without a proof, the so-called *pons asinorum*, providing a dividing line between students who cannot do even simple mathematics and those who might be able to go further. Condren suggests a religious reading: "As with the *Parliament of Fowls*, where mathematics underscores the perfect harmony and coherence of the created universe ... so too in *Troilus and Criseyde* rational and irrational triangles capture well the irreconcilable human circumstances of lives that aim for perception, yet fall short in misguided action" (pp. 144-145). Whether one feels the

allusion can carry this spiritual message will depend in part on larger questions about modes of Chaucer exegesis, but the reading typifies well Condren's readiness to take on difficult allusions often passed over by readers.

Condren focuses on many anomalies, inconsistencies, or unexplained features in Chaucer's writings, and often interrogates explanations by earlier critics, with a courteous implication, one feels, that they have swept awkward details under the carpet in the pursuit of smooth or widely acceptable interpretations. Indeed, though this book's picture of Chaucer's career is animated by a strong conviction of principles of cosmic unity informing it, its critical method involves digging up awkward cruces and questioning received opinions with cheerful disruptiveness. Condren's account of the close of *Troilus and Criseyde* exemplifies his conviction that the import of Chaucer's writing always points toward cosmic harmony. Though many readers and critics find the ending of *Troilus and Criseyde* multiple, provocative, and deeply conflicted, Condren sees all the poem's threads drawing together, all merely human discordances reconciled and silenced, and the poem pointing toward "a permanent heaven" (p. 187).

The general problem with such an approach to critical methodology is that, by passing over the question of *how* Chaucer's writing handles those human experiences and discordances, Condren's assertion of belief in harmony as the poetry's message can come across as involving a leap of faith rather than a critical demonstration, just at the point where, in his argument, human concerns and eternity meet in the writing. Many readers will probably leave this book unconverted to Condren's hypotheses, even despite the fact that strongly religious readings of Chaucer still have a large following in American classrooms. But many, like this reviewer, will nevertheless probably warm to a study that makes the reader think anew, and that probes in such an insistent fashion into many puzzling aspects of Chaucer's texts and demonstrates so fervent a belief in the profundity of Chaucer's dream poems and *Troilus and Criseyde*.

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