

13 Identity and subjecthood

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Part of the enduring appeal of Chaucer's poetry, especially in the *Canterbury Tales* and *Troilus and Criseyde*, is his apparent ability to create realistic individuals with believable and understandable interior lives. Generations of readers have felt as if they know Chaucer's characters, and Chaucer himself, the way they know their neighbours and acquaintances. Indeed, it is not uncommon for us to observe how modern Chaucer's characters sound, at least when we factor out his antiquated language. Over the past few decades, however, a number of critical approaches have converged to question this time-honoured response to Chaucer. Initially, scholars directed our attention to the conventions of medieval literature and the degree to which they represent abstract types rather than psychologically motivated human beings. Then, cultural theory replaced the commonly held idea of an integrated, autonomous self with the complex idea of a constructed subject. More recently, historically based interpretations of medieval identities have pointed to the ways in which traditional medieval social categories were beginning to unravel, with new formations and associations replacing older allegiances.

All of these new developments have implications for understanding Chaucer's work and characters, as well as for understanding his own representation of himself as an author or narrator. What seems to be a modernizing self-presentation on the part of Chaucer's most fully developed characters turns out to be a deeply enigmatic construction. At the moment in the history of European culture when the very conception of the modern individual seems to be articulating itself, Chaucer can be seen to be demonstrating the degree to which this apparent modernity is implicated in the discourses of the past. This chapter will describe these literary and historical contexts in relation to Chaucer's works.

Individual, self, and subject

Most readers instinctively understand literary characters as if they were real people. We even judge the success of fictional or dramatic works by holding their characters or narrators to the standard of 'real life', even if we demand more consistency from

literature than we do from life itself. In a tradition stretching back many centuries, one of the apparent purposes of literature has been to show us what it means to be fully human, especially in terms of identifying with an autonomous, coherent, individual self. Chaucer's characters, especially some of the pilgrims in the *Canterbury Tales*, such as the Wife of Bath, have a special place in this tradition, appearing to be among the first characters to articulate their needs, desires, lives, and circumstances in a fully developed and unified vision. Seen from this perspective, Chaucer seems to predict what we have traditionally understood as the Renaissance discovery of the individual.

In recent decades, however, this traditional understanding of the self has come under attack. The great nineteenth-century deterministic models of Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx, and Charles Darwin initiated a rethinking of just how unique humans were as individuals by emphasizing how much we are shaped by biological and economic forces, but structuralist and poststructuralist thought has fully pursued the implications of this determinism. Freud's understanding of human consciousness as undergirded by layers beneath our comprehension, for instance, suggests that our awareness of motivations and patterns of thought and behaviour could only be partial at best. Still, Freud was concerned with helping the individual understand, and therefore master, the unconscious history that helped shape them. The postmodern theory of the subject, however, depends on another revolution, that in linguistics, especially the structuralist linguistics of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913), who emphasized the system of language, which authorized individual expression, rather than individual expression itself. Taking the system of language as a model, structuralist and poststructuralist theories have questioned whether an autonomous self can exist in any society. These theories have attempted to replace the terminology of the 'self' with the terminology of the 'subject'. In so doing, we are made to confront the possibility that the coherent, autonomous, fully conscious self is an illusion. As with the notion of the subject in grammar, the subject is acted upon, even constituted, by other discourses. We are not the conscious centres of awareness we think we are, but are sites upon which various forces—psychological, sociological, economic, and political—act and intersect. Like the replicants and cyborgs in recent science fiction, our apparent awareness of ourselves as individuals, even our memories and desires, are invented, constructed, and implanted by forces beyond our control. From this point of view, the Wife of Bath is a creation of the many anti-feminist tracts and discourses that she argues against.

This extremely pessimistic view of the subject has been modified by some poststructuralist theorists to allow a certain modicum of manoeuvring room to the subject. In the psychological theories of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, the subject emerges from infancy with a concept of the self that is basically a fiction. The French poststructuralist philosopher Michel Foucault has argued that the discourses of authority that control behaviour are so various and contradictory that the individual subject can sometimes appropriate and manipulate these discourses. Power can circulate from

system to individual and back again. Feminist theorists, drawing upon Lacan, have pointed to the ways in which identity, especially gender identity, can be 'performed', thereby subverting the binary categories of normal and deviant behaviour. New historicist interpretations of Early Modern (a term borrowed from linguistics and applied to what we used to call the Renaissance) literature and culture have employed some of these concepts to redefine Renaissance individualism as a 'self-fashioning', a fictional, almost literary, making of one's identity in the face of many conflicting social forces. As some of the other chapters in this volume demonstrate, these theories and ideas have important consequences for understanding Chaucer's work and characters, but they also resemble debates that have been carried on about, and within, the Middle Ages.

Mentality, affinity, and association

Recent theories of the subject have threatened the traditional humanist conception of the autonomous individual psyche. Interestingly, an earlier debate about the nature of the individual in medieval society had defined the issues surrounding identity and subjecthood in a surprisingly similar manner. On one side of this debate was an attitude towards the Middle Ages that dated back to the Renaissance, and that peaked during the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century. From this point of view, the Middle Ages were indeed the dark ages, controlled by an arrogantly oppressive feudal system that virtually enslaved its populace, and a coercive Church that encouraged superstition and blind obedience. The Renaissance began to overthrow this dark past by emphasizing the centrality of the human individual and by rediscovering the rational philosophy and science of classical Greece and Rome. The classic celebration of the Renaissance individual is a famous book by Jacob Burckhardt (1818–97) called *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*. From this point of view, Chaucer represents a preview of Renaissance individualism, especially in his anticlerical satire and in his presentation of 'rounded' human characters who articulate their psychological states. A more complex and more recent variant on this stark distinction between the medieval and the modern argues for a radical difference between modern and medieval mentalities. Medieval people did not think of themselves as individuals, but rather as part of a group, and defined themselves through the complex network of loyalties developed under feudalism. Where we might think of society in terms of a conflict model, with opposing sides pitted against each other, medieval people thought in terms of an hierarchical model, in which one accepted one's place. Emotions, feelings, and reactions we would consider private and interiorized were for medieval people to be expressed publicly in authorized rituals. A largely oral culture emphasized shared experiences and memories, rather than the private meditation encouraged by silent reading in the later age of print. There may even have been, some psychologists speculate, a shift in the very neurological basis of consciousness itself, from one side of the

brain to the other, so that premodern people literally thought differently. Hence, we may be indulging in an illusion when we attempt to identify emotionally with Chaucer's characters, who represent a very different way of thinking, even about emotions, than we do.¹

The other side of this debate over medieval mentality rejected this picture of the Middle Ages as a stereotype, while at the same time agreeing with a general pattern of the evolution of individual human freedom.² From this less negative view of the individual in medieval society, changes were already occurring in the twelfth century, which had its own renaissance. Indeed, Charles Homer Haskins coined the term in a book called *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century* (1927). The crusades and the opening of trade routes to the East ended the cultural isolation of western Europe. The establishment of early universities helped encourage new ideas and a certain rational scepticism. The rise of cities, especially in Italy and north-western Europe, resulted in nascent conceptions of citizenship and liberty and served as an incubator for an emerging middle class. Certain forms of religious practice, especially mysticism, emphasized individual piety and interiorized spirituality. Literature began concerning itself with inward states, and the new discourses of love in the troubadours and in medieval romance reflected a new interest in the hero as an individual and in private emotions as worthy of cultivation. The apparent emphasis we find on individual character and autobiographical explanation on the part of Chaucer's pilgrims, for instance, is from this point of view not an exception to medieval traditions, but a culmination of several centuries of emerging individualism.

Not surprisingly, recent scholarship on the medieval subject has suggested that neither of these two pictures of the medieval subjectivity, neither an incipient nor evolving modern self nor a consciousness entirely determined by group or institutional identity, is complete in itself. Medieval subjects negotiated a sense of themselves as individuals and also as members of larger defining groups such as the social estates that divided medieval society into aristocracy, peasantry, and clergy, and into higher and lower status within those estates (on this, see Chapter 2). They thought of themselves as members of religious fraternities and of guilds (which could often be similar in composition). But medieval individuals also negotiated their position as subjects, contesting the various overlapping and perhaps conflicting spheres of influence through which they were constituted.³ In this regard, Chaucer's often conflicted characters, lashing out at the very structures which define them, such as the Monk mocking the counter-intuitive rules of monastic orders, or the Wife of Bath railing against a patriarchy that has in fact seeped into every crevice of her consciousness, are typical.

Chaucer and his characters were also heirs to a long tradition of thinking and writing about the self, even when that self was defined by subjection. One of the great classics of spirituality to this day remains St Augustine's *Confessions*. While we may read the *Confessions* as a proto-modern autobiography, it was probably read more in terms of its emphasis on conversion and submission in the Middle Ages; the generic soul was probably a more important marker than the unique Augustine. Later medieval writers

also emphasized their personal relation to spiritual truth, such as Abelard and Hugh of St Victor. After the eleventh and twelfth centuries, poets such as the troubadours wove the details of their supposed personal experiences into a literature of love that has defined the discourse of love to the present day. Dante Alighieri, the author of the *Divine Comedy*, transformed this tradition by linking his spiritual and erotic autobiography, even linking his own life to the shape of creation itself. From the twelfth century on, a newly personalized and internalized piety, loosely defined as mysticism, emphasized a direct experience with an extremely humanized Jesus, one who took an interest in the subject as an individual.⁴ As mysticism developed, it opened a particular window for female spirituality, which often involved erotic experience, sometimes in relation to Jesus himself, becoming a metaphor for spiritual transcendence. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries a widespread and considerable literature of spiritual autobiography is produced by female mystics, and one of the most famous, Julian of Norwich, recorded her *Showings* during and shortly after Chaucer's lifetime. Julian was visited by Margery Kempe, whose life, in *The Book of Margery Kempe*, has become part of the literary canon, and whose extravagant emotional displays and sometimes shocking frankness are often compared to the Wife of Bath by modern readers.

Of course, the lives of the medieval mystics (with perhaps the exception of Margery) were so similar that it is possible that they were producing a life history and a sense of themselves as an individual that was dictated by what had become an always already existing spiritual narrative. A similarly complex relation between an apparently modern self and the procedures of medieval subjection emerges from debates surrounding the impact of the institutionalization of confession. In response to a general sense that the quality of parish clergy had declined, to fears of heresy and heterodox movements, and to an anxiety about the competitive authority and power of the Church in relation to royal and aristocratic courts and to cities and towns newly empowered by economic changes, the Fourth Lateran Council was called by Pope Innocent III in 1215. It mandated a series of reforms, the most far-reaching of which was the requirement of annual aural confession by every Christian to his or her priest. Guides and handbooks were produced which detailed the nature of sin and the appropriate response of both penitent and priest. To an unprecedented degree, the interior life of the individual medieval Christian was now open to examination and definition.⁵

Some modern scholars have suggested that after the resurgence of individualism in the twelfth century, the Church was attempting to dampen what it feared to be secularizing and modernizing tendencies. Others have suggested that, for better or worse, the sense of the medieval subject as an individual emerged at this point, paradoxically in response to the authority and surveillance of the most powerful corporate social institution of the Middle Ages. What is interesting to note for our purposes in understanding how the subject and identity articulate themselves in Chaucer is how often Chaucer's characters define themselves through a sort of confession. The Wife of Bath, the Pardoner, the Merchant, and others detail their everyday lives and their desires and conflicts in ways that suggest an appeal to absolution or forgiveness (even while they

dig themselves deeper in so doing). The 'Parson's Tale', with which the *Canterbury Tales* ends, is actually based on a tract that had its origins as a confessional manual. We would not want to suggest, as did some scholars a century ago, that we can understand the *Canterbury Tales* in terms of the Seven Deadly Sins, but it is interesting to note how Chaucer's characters test the boundaries of acceptable and forbidden behaviours, and articulate their actions and feelings in terms of fixed values and standards that all too frequently fail. Chaucer's great contemporary William Langland, for instance, in his *Piers Plowman*, envisions a scene in which the Seven Deadly Sins themselves, personified as allegorical characters, agree to go to confession, but never quite get there. Chaucer and Langland may seem to be very modern in their questioning of the discourses that define individual behaviour, but that questioning still takes place within a system of medieval practices and patterns of conduct.

Two important books, one largely historicist and the other largely phenomenological in approach, address precisely this negotiation between self and subject in their titles. Lee Patterson's *Chaucer and the Subject of History*⁶ conflates the awareness of being a historical subject on the part of the critic with an argument for the acute self-consciousness of the medieval author and an analysis of the historically conditioned subjectivity of characters such as the Knight, the Pardoner, the Wife, and the Miller. Patterson's Chaucer, as it were, invents the ironic supra-historical artist of humanist interpretation as a response to a specific historical and social position, and this negotiation is enacted in the performances of many of his characters. In *The Disenchanted Self: Representing the Subject in the 'Canterbury Tales'*,⁷ H. Marshall Leicester, Jr., asserts that Chaucer's most fully engaged narrators, the Pardoner, the Wife, and the Knight, are represented both as postmodern subjects, whose effective construction by social and historical conditions is made transparent, and as selves, autonomous consciousnesses who compose themselves in the performance of their own textuality.

Performance and negotiation

Contemporary theories of the subject have suggested that the subject can achieve a modicum of agency through the practice of performance. Somewhat earlier, the sociologist Erving Goffman proposed the idea of 'the presentation of the self in everyday life', noting how we follow dramatic scripts or even scenes in our interactions with others, particularly in social hierarchies or institutional settings.⁸ Everyday life, that is, requires that we assume certain roles. Reacting to conflicting social demands, we, and literary characters, perform many different roles. Feminist theory has questioned the notion of an essential gender identity, noting that the appearance of gender difference is often the result of performing a series of culturally prescribed roles, which can then be parodied or subverted. The critical school called new historicism has described how the apparently heroic individuals of Renaissance drama and historical narrative engage

in a process of 'self-fashioning', negotiating among the various centres of political and institutional authority, such as the rapidly transforming Church and royal state, changing themselves in response to these changes but also achieving some individual power in so doing.⁹ What Chaucer does with the question of what we would call identity or subjecthood is to dramatize or theatricalize its operations, to show the struggle involved for his characters and himself in claiming a personal autonomy distinct from the literary, cultural, or textual contexts in which they are set.

Even if we employ Early Modern concepts, or postmodern concepts, with some caution in interpreting the Chaucerian subject, there is no doubt that performance pervades the *Canterbury Tales*, as well as many of Chaucer's other works. The fiction of the work is that it is a performance, wherein the various pilgrims actually tell their tales. The 'General Prologue' is structured much like one of the many processions and ridings that marked important occasions in late medieval cities. The pilgrims seem to ride out at the end of the 'General Prologue' to the tune of the Miller's bagpipe. This and other incidents locate the work in terms of the highly performative folk culture and marketplace entertainment of the late Middle Ages. The interaction between the various pilgrims forms a sort of sideshow within the work, and an earlier generation of critics took this 'dramatic principle' to be the main event. Some of the characters literally perform as part of their tale-telling, such as in the Prologue to the 'Prioress's Tale', with its prayer to the Virgin, and in the great sermon performance of the 'Pardoner's Prologue'.

Chaucer's descriptions of people pay a great deal of attention to what we would consider external details, including clothing, accessories, and comportment. Medieval rhetoric prescribed a certain procedure for describing people, but Chaucer takes some liberty with the conventions. The 'General Prologue' is a fashion show of sorts, with specific enumeration of clothing materials, jewellery, hairstyles, and the relative success of managing the total package as what we might call a personal style. Sometimes, as in the case of the Knight, with his appropriate disarmament, his rusty mail, and stained tunic, Chaucer seems to imply a certain authenticity. In other cases, such as in the description of the Prioress or the Monk, the loving picture of sartorial splendour, including fabric, texture, and workmanship, is clearly meant to alert us to a disjunction between their religious roles and their love of the things of this world. In the later Middle Ages, and particularly in the court circles Chaucer travelled in, clothing and livery were politically and socially significant, and an indicator of class or family identity. Personal and class appearances were 'branded', and legal redress could be sought for infractions. Chaucer, for instance, testified in the Scrope-Grosvenor trial concerning a dispute involving the right to a coat of arms. Sumptuary laws determined what kind of materials and fabrics could be worn by certain estates. The surplus of luxury goods caused by the population decline after the plague occasioned some anxiety about social inappropriateness, actually about social mobility. By this standard, the Merchant and the Man of Law might be regarded as social climbers, if not perpetrators of misdemeanours. Clothing could, as it can today, also be a personal statement by

virtue of its outrageousness. The Wife of Bath's red outfit, for instance, could be understood symbolically (see Revelation 17: 4), but it could also be read as a call for attention, a lapse of taste for a woman of a certain age, or even as a defiance of taste and propriety.

The 'General Prologue' pays a great deal of attention to the faces as well as the clothing of the pilgrims. Such details have made the pilgrims memorable for many centuries of readers. Medieval tracts on physiognomy suggested that one's character was imprinted and readable on one's face. The coarse face of the Miller, the skin afflictions of the Summoner, the shapes of noses and the cast of eyes, are all detailed by the narrator. Such an emphasis suggests that Chaucer regarded character in terms of stereotypes. Modern readers are likely to think of such stereotyping as a form of prejudice, and to think of, say, nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century forensics that attempted to identify a 'criminal type', and pseudo-scientific theories that accorded relative intelligence to certain skin colours or sought to identify racial identity and characteristics through the shapes of noses. Physiognomy, like astrology, seems to suggest that character was fixed and immutable, determined by forces above and beyond our own ability to define ourselves. But, as with other medieval codes, Chaucer seems as interested in exposing the thought systems behind such assumptions as embracing them. Medieval science, for instance, could also suggest that we begin to resemble physically our behaviour patterns rather than the other way around. Chaucer seems alert to the possibility that we tend to act the way we are treated. A certain measure of defiance in the Pardoner's self-presentation, for instance, seems to derive from a satisfaction in acting the way people expect him to act based on his appearance. The Wife of Bath's personality is related to her birth sign or her physiognomy (especially her gap teeth), but in other areas of her self-presentation, she defies received wisdom, suggesting that she is willing to accept deterministic explanations when it suits her and reject them when it does not. That is, Chaucer seems to juxtapose situational and relative explanations for character on the one hand with deterministic and absolute explanations on the other. Chaucer's explanations, or his characters' explanations for why they are how they are, are often circular in ways that make us aware of how circular are our own assumptions about the relation between inner character and appearance.

How men or women 'carry themselves' impresses the narrator of the *Canterbury Tales*, and sometimes impresses other pilgrims. Medieval conduct books went into great detail about table manners, dress, social graces, and other forms of external social behaviour, but Chaucer seems to be especially interested in variances from type and in the nuances of gendered behaviour. Harry Bailly seems particularly sensitive to such matters of bearing and comportment. The Clerk appears to him to be as bashful as a newly-wed bride at a wedding reception: 'Ye ryde as coy and stille as dooth a mayde | Were newe spoused, sittyng at the bord' ('CIP' 2-3). This sense of the relation of comportment to gender is despite the fact that the narrator has earlier praised the Knight for his comportment—'of his port as meeke as is a mayde' ('GP' 69). Elsewhere

Harry notes the masculinity, wasted in his celibate role, of the Nun's Priest ('NPE' 3450–9), just as Chaucer in his role as narrator had praised the manliness of the Monk ('GP' 167, 204–5). Clearly defined gender roles can also fall into the sort of comic role-reversal found in medieval festive misrule, such as the charivari, which featured parodic cross-dressing (for more on such reversals, see Chapter 22).¹⁰ Harry's portrait of his wife as a sort of incipient Lady Macbeth, urging him to beat his servants when they are remiss, is in this comic tradition ('MoP' 1897–1900).

Group identity is clearly important to the portraits of the individuals in the 'General Prologue', but even here that sense of group association is complicated. There is only a hint of emerging forms of national identity, except perhaps for the enthusiasm for the military adventures of the Knight and the Squire, and the concern for maritime policy alluded to in the Merchant's portrait ('GP' 276–7). Elsewhere in the *Canterbury Tales* there are suggestions that identity is associated with opposition to another group, or with belonging to a group that excludes others. For instance, in the 'Prioress's Tale' the Christian members of the town understand themselves by their difference from the ghettoized Jews, but this sense of belonging or not belonging could be ascribed to the simplistic understanding of the Prioress herself. In the 'Man of Law's Tale' some Muslim characters are stereotyped as evil, but others, especially those willing to convert to Christianity, are pictured as potentially good. Even in these cases, otherness, and therefore group identity, is not absolute, but provisional. The catastrophic events of the fourteenth century, including the recurring waves of the plague, the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, and the Dual Papacy, had called into question, at least for a time, traditional schemes of social and political organization. Chaucer is writing in the tradition of estates satire, which contrasted the ideal arrangement of medieval society into the three major groups of clergy, aristocracy, and commoners, against its apparent decline and decay. Chaucer, however, calls into question the validity of that grouping by the relatively small part played by the aristocracy (the Knight and, potentially, the Prioress may belong to the lower aristocracy) and the peasantry (only the Plowman represents what would have been the largest sector of the medieval population), and by populating his pilgrimage with members of society for whom there was no clearly prescribed or ordained estate. The Guildsmen, for instance, represent a new force in late medieval society. Some modern readers might expect them to be represented as a newly energetic and progressive force in the evolution of society towards individual enterprise, but Chaucer's portrait lumps them together anonymously, almost contemptuously, as if they lacked the subjectivity that arises from conflicts between old and new values ('GP' 361–78). In the case of the religious figures, Chaucer consistently emphasizes their private and personal negotiation of their roles as members of religious communities, roles which we might expect to render them less individual. The Monk, for instance, questions whether the rules for monastic behaviour apply to him, at least as paraphrased by the narrator: 'What sholde he studie and make hymselfen wood, | Upon a book in cloystre alwey to poure . . .?' ('GP' 184–5). Obviously, here and elsewhere Chaucer may be pointing to the social shortcomings of his characters by

contrasting the ideal to their actual behaviour, but the result is that what we consider literary character is produced by this conflict, as if subjectivity itself were the result of conflict.

Interiority and consciousness

Subjectivity is represented inconsistently across and within Chaucer's works, suggesting that at times subjectivity is specific to genre. The excruciating inner motivations of *Troilus and Criseyde*, for instance, which have reminded readers of the subtle psychology of much later literature, may also be regarded as specific to the genre of romance. Criseyde's awareness of her own plight, and her conversation with herself regarding whether or not she should engage in an affair with Troilus, is often cited as an example of one of the first and fullest expressions of consciousness in literature:

Criseyda gan al his chere asprien,
 And leet it so soft in hire herte synke,
 That to hireself she seyde, 'Who yaf me drynke?'
 For of hire owen thought she wex al reed,
 Remembryng hire right thus, 'Lo, this is he
 Which that myn uncle swerith he moot be deed,
 But I on hym have mercy and pitee.'
 And with that thought, for pure ashamed, she
 Gan in hire hed to pulle, and that as faste,
 Whil he and alle the peple forby paste,
 And gan to caste and rollen up and down
 Withinne hire thought his excellent prowesse,
 And his estat, and also his renown,
 His wit, his shap, and ek his gentilesse;
 But moost hire favour was, for his distresse
 Was al for hire, and thoughte it was a routhe
 To sleen swich oon, if that he mente trouthe. (2. 649–65)

Criseyde has just seen Troilus passing below her fresh from battle, modestly acknowledging the cheers of the crowd. Almost as if Chaucer were alluding to the famous scene in the legend of Tristan and Isolde when the two fall in love by quaffing a love potion, she asks rhetorically whether she has been given a magical drink. She then considers the various external attributes of Troilus, particularly his bearing, and considers whether this reflects the quality of his inner virtue. To do so requires that she reconstruct his image in her memory, and play it back as it were, to mull over the consequences of her decision. Several stanzas follow in which she adds up the pros and cons of an affair with Troilus. She almost convinces us, as she does herself, that 'I am myn owene womman, wel at ese' (2. 750). She deliberates at great length, attempting

to look at the situation from many different angles, to consider her feelings, her precarious social situation, even her own attractiveness. It is one of the most extensive attempts by a male author of the Middle Ages to represent the consciousness of a woman. Certainly it is much beholden to earlier medieval traditions. She parses the grammar of her emotions in a procedure that gestures back to scholasticism, and to the institution of confession that in fact reflects a scholastic precision in its deliberations about what might or might not be a sin, and if so what kind. Her debate with herself is akin to the debates between personifications in love allegories such as the *Romance of the Rose*, which after all were meant to represent the thought processes of men and women in love. Her use of memory and mnemonic techniques is consistent with the importance of memory to the medieval understanding of human psychology.¹¹

Yet by framing these philosophical and religious discourses in terms of the interiority of a female character who makes a claim to be an autonomous being, Chaucer's creation gestures as much forward as backward in terms of the history of consciousness. If she seems to calculate her odds and consider her economic and social status in ways that might strike us as inauthentically analytical, we must remember that the heroines of much later fiction consider themselves in terms of analogous categories. The heroines of Jane Austen and Edith Wharton, and Tolstoy's Anna Karenina and Flaubert's Emma Bovary, are also limited in their choices, and also attempt to convince themselves that their choices are their own, or that, on the other hand, there is no other choice than the one they have already decided on. As soon as we recognize her modernity, however, we find ourselves paradoxically back with the contradictions of subjectivity with which we began. For not only are Emma Bovary, Anna Karenina, and their literary sisters limited by the conventions of their local cultures and the economic dependency of women, they are limited, so to speak, by their own internalized literary genre. They read themselves as if characters in a novel, much as Criseyde reads herself as a heroine of romance. They are, of course, and she is, a figment of the text, but the literary self-reflexiveness of the way in which their and her consciousness is described and represented teaches us the extent to which subjectivity itself is prompted and conditioned by codes, genres, and scripts. The apparent freedom of Criseyde's consciousness at this point (and one would not want to minimize its momentarily liberating elation) must be read in conjunction with her similar thought processes in book 5. There she accepts the fate of her consignment to the Greeks and to Diomedes. That is, Criseyde seems to imagine herself as free to choose that which has already been chosen for her. The very thought processes that allow her to plumb her desires and emotions, to consider her social and political situation, are the very same processes that result in her acceptance of the limits of her freedom. It is only in the momentary and provisional suspension of all that she must consider that she is able to imagine the possibility of agency, however fleetingly.

Personae and authorial subjecthood

How did Chaucer think of himself? With many later writers, we have reams of letters and interviews and personal accounts. In Chaucer's case, the very extensive documents of his life make virtually no mention of his literary career. The few comments made by his contemporaries are largely formulaic or honorific. Fifteenth-century writers who depended on the image of Chaucer to authorize their own literary careers offer us a very different Chaucer from the one we recognize. In their eyes, he is not only the 'father' of English poetry, but he sometimes assumes a somewhat forbidding patriarchal role as rhetorician and moralist. The Chaucer generations of readers have been more comfortable with is the one portrayed in the dream visions such as the *Book of the Duchess*, the *House of Fame*, and the *Parliament of Fowls*. These dream visions begin with the narrator complaining about his insomnia, and then finding himself in a magical, and usually beautiful, landscape. He then begins a dialogue with an interlocutor who functions as a guide. In the *House of Fame* the guide for part of the way is a giant and somewhat loquacious eagle, who answers the narrator's sometimes obvious questions as they ascend into the sky, while the narrator holds on fearfully. In the *Book of the Duchess* the interlocutor is a man dressed in black. After a long series of questions and answers, the narrator realizes that the interlocutor is a grieving widower, who has been speaking to him indirectly and metaphorically.

The portrait that emerges, as it does from the image of the narrator in the 'General Prologue', is of a somewhat obtuse, inquisitive, and vaguely inappropriate observer of supernatural events and personal crises that he is ill-equipped to understand. Since Chaucer himself, with his diplomatic, bureaucratic, and government experience, is highly unlikely to have been so naive, scholars have looked elsewhere for an explanation of his self-portrayal. Other late medieval poets writing in the tradition of dream visions, such as Chaucer's contemporary Machaut, also portrayed themselves in a less than flattering light, and also dramatized their incompetencies and failures. Chaucer may have fashioned this convention to suit his own situation as a poet and courtier of non-aristocratic origins writing for his social superiors, who may have been both charmed and flattered by an appeal to their greater sophistication. He may also have been distancing himself from potentially controversial content in his work. For instance, in the Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women*, he allows Alceste to characterize him as a fool who did not know what he was doing (G 340–5). That is, in the dream visions Chaucer seems to have been negotiating his identity as an author and his identity as a historical person in the service of the royal court. Chaucer seems outwardly respectful of traditional social distinctions, but his narratives and descriptions often undermine those distinctions, and his own success in life was testament to the new possibility of social mobility leveraged by personal ability and ambition as well as by birth or wealth.

Chaucer presents himself as a character in the *Canterbury Tales*, almost as if he were performing his own identity. His literal performance, at least on one attempt, is not so successful. After he attempts to tell the tale of 'Sir Thopas', he is silenced by Harry Bailly in a particularly insulting way: "'By God," quod he, "for pleyedly, at a word, | Thy drasty rymyng is nat worth a toord! . . .'" ('TST' 929–30). Chaucer here is also assuming a series of poetic identities. By telling the tale of 'Sir Thopas', he is assuming the role of a popular romancer, which is roundly rejected. In telling the serious tale of 'Melibee', he takes on a more august role for a medieval author, that of an adviser and dispenser of wisdom. At the very end of the *Canterbury Tales*, in the 'Retraction', he asks to be remembered for his pious writings, and not for those tales that might lead us into sin.

Who is the 'real' Chaucer? Even Harry Bailly is not sure: 'What man artow?' ('PST' 695). The question conflates modern and medieval conceptions of identity, for it can mean 'Who are you?' in a modern existential sense as well as 'What kind of person are you?' in the medieval sense exemplified by the 'General Prologue' portraits. Chaucer has been lurking, as it were, in the corners of an event he has in fact created. He is in effect making an ironic comment about his own identity as an author, since he is being ordered around by figures of his own devising. Our immediate assumption is to identify Chaucer the author with his self-portrait, here in 'Sir Thopas' a puppet-like figure, perhaps overweight. Near the beginning of the *Legend of Good Women* he describes his pleasure in waking up early to enjoy the morning and the flowers, and in several of the dream visions he describes himself as insomniac, exhausted by his detailed work associated with his positions such as collector of customs during the day.

Medieval poets often employed an image of themselves, like architects and builders who include an image of their own faces in sculptural decorations, as a narrative device, even when the overall meaning of the work is not dependent on their status as an individual. Even so, compared to Dante in the *Divine Comedy* or Langland in *Piers Plowman*, Chaucer is actually rather reticent about his self-presentation in his major works. It is true that he offers the *Legend of Good Women* as penance for seemingly blaming women in his earlier works, but the tales themselves follow with little reference to that autobiographical frame. The narrator of *Troilus and Criseyde* occasionally interrupts the action to apologize for its tragic course, or to appeal to us as readers, but he does not make the action dependent on his perspective. That is, from a modern critical perspective, Chaucer is operating like one of Conrad's narrators, shaping the story with his own sometimes confused misunderstandings. We have had to learn to read his narrative persona as if he were a distinct fictional character, which criticism has come to call 'Chaucer the narrator' or 'Chaucer the pilgrim'. Yet the number of lines that present any of these Chaucers outside of the dream visions is relatively limited. In the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer disappears, like the sort of artist James Joyce celebrated, allowing his creations to interact almost as if they had lives of their own. It is this negative dramatic mode of presentation which so often leads us to forget that the characters exist only as words on a page, and that the Chaucer we feel so comfortable with as a guide is absent much of the time.

Conclusion

The notion of personal identity, subjecthood, and the idea of the self in Chaucer are illuminated by consideration of modern and postmodern theories of subjectivity. Yet a number of unique late medieval discourses and systems of signification, including the practice of confession, the tension between private and public forms of worship, the importance of estates and social classes in defining identity, and the elaborate deployment of visible signs of individuality such as sartorial array and physiognomy, remind us of the irreducible historicity of Chaucer's subjects. At the same time, he projects the subjectivity of his characters largely as a conflict between modernity and tradition, in such a way as to suggest that this conflict is part of the human condition rather than as a specifically late medieval quandary. As with his own understanding of language change in *Troilus and Criseyde*, where he demonstrates a deep understanding of how language can become obscure ('in forme of speche is chaunge', 2. 22) and a concomitant understanding of how social and aesthetic values can change with time and culture, Chaucer purposely conflates cultural alterity and apparent translatability in his arrangement of the signs and languages of subjecthood. In so doing, he appeals to our desire to reach out to and comprehend what seem to be complete and complex beings such as we imagine ourselves to be, at the same time that he demonstrates the difficulties and contradictions of that desire.

FURTHER READING

- Cohen, Jeffrey, *Medieval Identity Machines* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003). How awareness of ethnicity, race, gender, and class intersect in medieval literature.
- Crane, Susan, *The Performance of Self: Ritual, Clothing and Identity during the Hundred Years War, The Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002). A study of how English and French medieval culture marked identity during the age of Chaucer.
- Greenblatt, Stephen, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980). A new historicist reading of how the Early Modern self shapes itself.
- Hanning, Robert W., *The Individual in Twelfth-Century Romance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977). Classic study linking twelfth-century intellectual innovations with the rise of romance.
- Kay, Sarah, *Subjectivity in Troubadour Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). How subjectivity in troubadour poetry is repeatedly negotiated anew.
- Leicester, H. Marshall, Jr., *The Disenchanted Self: Representing the Subject in the 'Canterbury Tales'* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990). Emphasizes the radical textuality of Chaucer's literary characters.
- Patterson, Lee, *Chaucer and the Subject of History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991). How the strategic pose of the Chaucerian narrator as above and beyond the historical is transformed into the humanist conception of Chaucer as a poet for all times and places, disguising the radical historicity of both poet and his characters.

- Root, Jerry, *Space to Speke: The Confessional Subject in Medieval Literature* (New York: Peter Lang, 1997). Argues for a relation between confessional reform and a specifically late medieval conception of subjectivity in literature.
- Spence, Sarah, *Texts and the Self in the Twelfth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). Shows how transitions from Latin to vernacular languages and from visual to verbal signs impact the development of the high medieval subject.
- Zink, Michel, *The Invention of Literary Subjectivity*, trans. David Sices (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999). On subjectivity and interiority in French medieval literature.

NOTES

1. A widely discussed interpretation of Chaucer's work from this point of view was D. W. Robertson, Jr., *A Preface to Chaucer: A Study in Medieval Perspectives* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962).
2. On the idea that the twelfth century developed a proto-modern notion of individuality, see Colin Morris, *The Discovery of the Individual, 1050–1200* (London: SPCK, 1972) and the classic study by Robert Hanning, *The Individual in Twelfth-Century Romance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977).
3. For a wide-ranging discussion of how state formation and other forms of coercion shaped individual and group identities, and how individuals and groups resisted such coercion, see Peter Haidu, *The Subject Medieval/Modern: Text and Governance in the Middle Ages* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2004).
4. On the relation of new forms of spiritual practice in the twelfth century to the idea of selfhood, especially in connection with women, see Linda Georgianna, *The Solitary Self: Individuality in the 'Ancrene Wisse'* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981).
5. One of the most influential studies of the role of confession is Thomas N. Tentler, *Sin and Confession on the Eve of the Reformation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977).
6. (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1991).
7. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).
8. Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959).
9. For a critique of new historicism's dismissal of medieval subjectivity, see David Aers, 'A Whisper in the Ear of Early Modernists; or, Reflections on Literary Critics Writing the "History of the Subject"', in Aers (ed.), *Culture and History, 1350–1600: Essays on English Communities, Identities and Writing* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1992), 177–203.
10. On the uses of charivari, see Natalie Zemon Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France: Eight Essays* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1975).
11. The most influential recent discussion of the role of memory in medieval literature is Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).