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Review Essay: Kiser, Lisa J. *Truth and Textuality in Chaucer's Poetry*

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portions of the *Romance of the Rose* and, second, reconstructing the resulting meanings. Beginning with the allusion to Jean's relics-testicles debate in the Pardoner's Tale, Frese comes to the intertextual conclusion that the Pardoner's 'long crystal stones' must be symbolic testicles. This equation then points to two additional intertextually mediated conclusions, namely that the two crystals in Narcissus's fountain in Guillaume's portion of the *Romance of the Rose* must also have symbolized testicles and that Narcissus's fountain contains a 'deeply concealed' (p 33) allegory of masturbation. This rereading then leads back to a genitalized reconstruction of the Pardoner's Tale and, more important, to a reconstruction of Guillaume's, Jean's, and Chaucer's *ars legendi*: a copulative and reproductive intertextuality/literacy as opposed to masturbatory and homosexual isolation/orality.

Frese's insistence on the importance of intertextuality and reconstructive rereading rather than oral performance becomes especially important in the defense of her remarkable proposition that Chaucer did not leave *The Canterbury Tales* in fragmentary and unrevised condition. Indeed, Frese argues that Chaucer, after a workshop disaster by his scribe Adam that resulted in the Hengwrt MS, commissioned the Ellesmere MS as his authorized version, even adding the Canon Yeoman's Tale to suggest, by punning (a Frese standby) on canon, that this manuscript represented the canonical version of his *Canterbury Tales*. Relying throughout on intertextual rereadings and reconstructions both from *The Canterbury Tales* and other Chaucerian and medieval sources, Frese argues that incomplete tales, disconnected fragments, and other signs of incompleteness are deliberate pointers to deeper coherence. Among her conclusions are these: the General Prologue was written last to be read first; the twenty-four partial or completed tales are designed to correspond to the hours in a day; the pilgrims, variously numbered from twenty-eight to thirty-one, are designed to suggest days in the month; the number of lines in the last poetic tale suggests days in a year; the seven pilgrims without tales reflect those persons removed from the 'new literacy' (p 110); the four incomplete tales, one from each of the three estates plus Chaucer the poet, are incomplete by design because each fails to achieve 'intertextually productive fusions' (p 111); three strategically placed astrological allusions indicate tale order; the return journey implied by the Prologue is a poetic indication of the necessity of reconstructive rereading.

Chaucerians of all persuasions can, with perseverance, find useful materials here, but not many will grant more than a few of the fervid and often farfetched reconstructions based on Frese's intertextual rereadings.

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Kiser, Lisa J. *Truth and Textuality in Chaucer's Poetry*. University Press of New England, Hanover, N.H. 1991. 201 pp. \$35.00.

Hill, John M. *Chaucerian Belief: The Poetics of Reverence and Delight*. Yale University Press, New Haven, Conn. 1991. 204 pp. \$27.50.

Kiser and Hill both approach the problem of truth in Chaucer's works in different ways; each, however, asserts that the search for truth is inconclusive.

In *Truth and Textuality in Chaucer's Poetry*, Kiser, covering most of the major works, finds that Chaucer initially adopts a historical reality that authenticates each work. In each case, Chaucer undermines the truth of that reality; he sacrifices truth to suit his poetic needs and those of the audience. *The Book of the Duchess*, for example, eulogizes an actual woman, but real characters like John of Gaunt become fictionalized and thus can be altered to suit the author's purpose. *The House of Fame* and the *Parliament of Fowls* record supposedly true dreams in which the narrators search for the truth about love and lovers. In shaping these dream visions, Chaucer's narrators select material derived from visions of Dante, Scipio, Boccaccio, and Alain de Lille. Chaucer implies that the visions in his sources are as subjectively derived as his own and thus places doubt on the historical or revelatory truth of the sources. The difference between Chaucer and his sources is that Chaucer does not make a claim for truth.

Both the *Legend of Good Women* and *Troilus and Criseyde* claim origins in history. Though *Troilus and Criseyde* professes to be a translation of another work and is supposedly grounded in historical reality, the source is altered to suit the narrator's purposes: some material has been added; other material, deleted. *The Canterbury Tales* describes a fictionalized historical event. Chaucer's narrator attempts to record true events, but these truths are ultimately undermined: 'history is openly sacrificed at the altar of art' (p 127).

Kiser concludes that it is impossible for a poet to claim with any validity that his or her history is unbiased truth: authors of Chaucer's sources, like Dante and Boccaccio and, by extension, most medieval poets, cannot assert poetic truth because, like Chaucer, they must inevitably bend the truth as they bow to their own needs and those of the audience. Kiser's book casts new light on Chaucer's poetry, especially on his sources; however, some readers may find the chapter on *The Canterbury Tales* too brief.

John M. Hill approaches the problem of truth from another angle in *Chaucerian Belief: The Poetic of Reverence and Delight*, asserting that organization in *The Canterbury Tales* revolves around the search for truth. Though many tales touch on the same topics, each pilgrim's perception of truth differs from the next. Hill discusses a number of tales (including all of Fragment 7) in pairs, according to their themes. He discusses love in the paired tales of the Squire and the Franklin, noting that the Squire refuses to speculate on the meaning of love; he does not mention feeling, nor does he question the truth of his tale. The Franklin is more open to feeling; he has a sense of 'utopia'; he reveals a truth about marriage that covers the need to be patient and prudent and to avoid rash promises. Though the Franklin has a more mature outlook on love and marriage than the Squire, he is overly sentimental and unrealistic. Neither tale sorts out truth and falsehood, but both imply that fiction suggests truth.

The Monk's Tale is paired with the Nun's Priest's Tale; both touch on the problem of prudence. The Second Nun's tale of the work of Christian instruction, salvation, and martyrdom can be paired with the Canon's Yeoman's tale of the labors

of alchemy. The secular truths of the Canon's Yeoman's Tale (that alchemy involves materialism and is evil) contrast with the spiritual truths of the Second Nun's Tale.

Hill concludes that fiction does tell truth; some of the truths come from old books, but comedy, common sense, and experience also reveal truth. The truth in fiction, however, is usually mixed with falsehood. The pairing or grouping of tales, which may compete against or even contradict others, is an attempt to arrive at some broader truth, which a single tale cannot provide. Hill's first three introductory chapters provide a useful overview of past criticism. He can be faulted for too much retelling of plots, and some readers will complain that he neglected some pilgrims whose tales invite a discussion of truth — the Wife of Bath, the Pardoner, the Merchant, and the Clerk, for example.

Though the problem of truth, especially the multiplicity of truths, has been discussed by a number of scholars, these two books explore the topic in more comprehensive ways than does earlier criticism; their bibliographies and notes are copious and comprehensive.

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Kugel, James L., ed. *Poetry and Prophecy: The Beginnings of a Literary Tradition*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca, N.Y. 1990. 251 pp. \$13.95.

Poetry and Prophecy: The Beginnings of a Literary Tradition contains papers from a conference 'Poetry and Prophecy' held at Harvard University in 1986. While focusing on individual works or questions within particular fields, contributing scholars were asked to address a set of larger, common questions: 'To what extent were poetry and prophecy felt to be fundamentally similar activities, perhaps even identified with each other? What sorts of similarities were conceived to exist between the two, and how were these explained? How was poetic inspiration viewed in the light of prophecy, and what effect did the existence of prophecy have on the poet's self-presentation?' (p 2). The anthology coming out of this conference is interdisciplinary in perspective with contributions by professors of biblical studies and English, Hebrew, Greek, Latin, and Arabic language and literature. The book is historically focused and chronologically organized, beginning with Old Testament literature and ending with the Renaissance.

The anthology includes three papers specifically on poetry and prophecy in the Middle Ages, namely 'The Meaning of *Mutanabbi*', 'The Poet as Prophet in Medieval Hebrew Literature' and 'The Nature of Prophecy in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Vita Merlini*'. These essays represent the Arabic, Jewish, and Christian traditions respectively. Medieval studies tend to focus on the Christian tradition, and this anthology is commendable for its religious and cultural breadth. Discussion of a medieval Jewish view of prophecy as belonging to the faculty of imagination is also tucked away in an essay ostensibly on Old Testament prophecy — 'Imagining Prophecy'.

The book's subtitle, *The Beginnings of a Literary Tradition*, might lead potential readers to expect essays giving careful analyses of literary texts, and this