Review Essay: V. A. Kolve, *Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative: The First Five Canterbury Tales*

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and expanding the Rashdall thesis. To this end he draws upon a wide variety of letters, sermons and treatises by critics of the creeping vocationalism at Paris during the formative years, ca. 1150-1210. The author contends that the nascent University of Paris responded less to the "pragmatic need of scholars to ... secure their interests against an external adversary" than to the preservation of "certain exalted educational principles and values." These principles transcended narrow professional self-interest by aspiring to benefit society generally through the cultivation of educational goals much broader than those encompassed by the "lucrative arts." In a sense the struggle was for the soul of the emerging university, with internal pressures for more specialized and practical programs successfully resisted by advocates of the liberal arts and of teaching excellence.

More particularly, Professor Ferruolo ascribes the crucial role in the victory over excessive specialization to the cumulative impact of a diverse collection of monastic contemplatives, satirists, humanists and moral theologians. These critics the author ranges along a continuum from the "Evangelical Cistercians," like Bernard of Clairvaux, to humanist scholars like John of Salisbury and the canonist-prelates like Stephen of Tournai. Whatever their differences, these critics were at one in their opposition to subordinating the arts in general to any single discipline like logic, law or medicine.

While the author has significantly illuminated the complex intellectual milieu out of which the University of Paris emerged, there is a serious difficulty with the book's thesis. The identification of a decisive influence by the critical opposition on those with the power to make educational decisions is not persuasively sustained. There is no consistent, direct evidence that the verbal assaults of the many critics, mostly outside the university, were effective in reversing or modifying the trend toward more pragmatic and professional studies. The accumulation of testimony, however interesting and valuable in itself, thus remains largely circumstantial, attenuated by the scantiness and ambiguity of the data at crucial points.

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This book studies narrative and pictorial dimensions of medieval iconography and examines Chaucer's use of this tradition in the first five of the Canterbury Tales. The first chapter explores an unrecognized aspect of medieval aesthetic principle and demonstrates (with wide reference to literary and pictorial evidence as well as to faculty psychology) that medieval poets saw
themselves as creating images in the minds of their readers and hearers. Images, Kolve argues, serve as means both of recognizing and of remembering essential truths. Since we no longer respond directly to these images, Kolve’s subsequent chapters seek to train the modern eye and awaken the modern mind to the variety of meanings in selected images and image patterns of the first five Canterbury Tales. For each of the selected images, Kolve offers an illustrated iconographical history. The permanent value of this volume surely lies in these histories and in the nearly two hundred pictures drawn from late medieval manuscripts.

In his chapters on the first five tales of The Canterbury Tales, Kolve identifies (usually two) dominant or controlling narrative images for each tale; images, he claims, that “organize and clarify” its meanings. After surveying traditional possibilities—both symbolic and literal—for these narrative images, Kolve assesses their significance for the specific interpretive problems posed by the tale. With respect to the Knight’s Tale, for example, Kolve argues that Chaucer’s text accepts much of the moral meaning of its narrative images but resists their specifically Christian meanings. Set in ancient Athens, the tale becomes a “noble and dignified” presentation of pagan experience, a sympathetic view of an alternate mode of life “culturally and historically [separated] from knowledge of the true God.” The Miller’s Tale, Kolve argues, excludes both the moral and the Christian meanings of its narrative imagery and so counters the Knight’s Tale with a view of experience “lived outside of morality” and completely uncomplicated by “any sense that life is lived under the aspect of eternity.” The partial experiences of life projected by these two tales and those of the Reeve and the Cook are then countered and completed, according to the author, by the last, The Man of Law’s Tale. This tale, unlike the other four, embraces the full literal, moral, allegorical, and anagogical meanings of its narrative images. Grounded in historical and Christian truth, The Man of Law’s Tale becomes an “authorial self-correction” of the preceding fictions and a commentary on their spiritual ydelnesse. Each tale, thus, presents a different view of human experience, but together, they make up a small whole, complete with preliminary retraccioun.

Kolve’s study of the iconography of narrative thus synthesizes two antithetical approaches to medieval literature. Like those who insist on the full moral and religious significance of Chaucer’s work, he insists that Chaucer’s narratives, finally, deal with the “serious business” of Christian truth. Like those who insist on the centrality of the literal fiction and its truths, he insists on the primacy of the letter, permitting traditional images to carry extraliteral weight only to the extent and in the precise way that the letter of each separate tale itself does. As a result, Kolve presents Chaucer as standing “at a point of momentous change in the history of narrative,” combining the rich iconographical tradition of the past with the “liberating possibilities”—both literary and religious—of the future.
Chaucerians will find much to disagree with in Kolve’s theory, selection, and interpretation of narrative images, as well as his understanding of Chaucer’s position in cultural history. Nevertheless, this study and its marvelous pictures contribute to our understanding of the visual and narrative iconography of the late Middle Ages. All Chaucerians of whatever critical persuasion will recognize the independence, comprehensiveness, and wholeness of this personal, inevitably partitive, but rich assessment of Chaucer’s fiction.

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David C. Fowler, *The Bible in Middle English Literature*, University of Washington Press, 1984. $25.00

This study traces patterns of scriptural influence on the vernacular literature of late medieval England, particularly the fourteenth century. The author proceeds through a close textual analysis of a variety of literary works, culminating in a novel thesis on the meaning of *Piers Plowman*.

In the first two chapters Professor Fowler examines cyclic dramas like the Cornish *Ordinalia* and selected lyric poems that range in inspiration from the creation themes of *Genesis* through the doomsday motifs of the *Book of Revelation*. He finds both forms of religious literature closely linked in their origins with the liturgical cycle of the medieval church. In particular, he sees the wide-ranging cyclical dramas as receiving crucial stimulation from the contemporary vogue of the great illustrated Bibles.

The next chapters focus on poems of Chaucer and the *Pearl* poet. Chaucer’s *Parliament of Fowls*, for example, is construed as a creation poem based on *Genesis I*, as glossed in the hexameral commentaries of St. Ambrose. Fowler here advances a persuasive new theory of the poem’s deeper structure. He then identifies the resonant biblical themes in the various works of the *Pearl* poet, above all in the uses of the *Book of Revelation* in the *Pearl* itself.

But if a serene faith and a calm rationality infuse the works of the *Pearl* poet, *Piers Plowman* clearly mirrors the “agony of its age.” It is precisely the troubled historical context of the poem that Fowler seeks to evoke. He has long argued for at least two distinct authors of the poem’s separate versions. Thus the “A” version, generally regarded as preceding the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381, presents a striking contrast to the “B” and “C” versions composed in the decade or so after the failure of that revolt. For Fowler, the tone, emphasis and style of the “A” version differs so markedly from the others as to convince him of their separate authorship.

He contends that the “A” poem’s praise of the simple faith and spiritual vitality of the English peasant, coupled with fierce attacks on the corruption