



Chaucer and the Subject of History

Lee Patterson

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Renowned scholar of medieval literature, Lee Patterson, presents a compelling vision of the shape and direction of Geoffrey Chaucer's entire career in *Chaucer and the Subject of History*.

Chaucer's interest in individuality was strikingly modern. At the same time he was profoundly aware of the pressures on individuality exerted by the past and by society—by history. This tension between the subject and history is Patterson's topic. He begins by showing how Chaucer's understanding of history as a subject for poetry—a world to be represented and a cultural force affecting human action—began to take shape in his poems on classical themes, especially in *Troilus and Criseyde*. Patterson's extended analysis of this profound yet deeply conflicted exploration of the relationship between "history" and "the subject" provides the basis for understanding Chaucer's shift to his contemporary world in the *Canterbury Tales*. There, in the shrewdest and most wide-ranging analysis of late medieval society we possess, Chaucer investigated not just the idea of history but the historical world intimately related to his own political and literary career.

Patterson's chapters on individual tales clarify and confirm his provocative arguments. He shows, for example, how the Knight's Tale represents the contemporary crisis of governance in terms of a crisis in chivalric identity itself; how the Miller's Tale reflects the social pressures and rhetoric of peasant movements generally and the Rising of 1381 in particular; and how the tales of the Merchant and Shipman register the paradoxical placement of a bourgeois class lacking class identity. And Patterson's brilliant readings of the Wife of Bath's Tale—"the triumph of the subject"—and the Pardoner's Tale—"the subject of confession"—reveal how Chaucer reworked traditional materials to accomplish stunning innovations that make visible unmistakably social meanings. *Chaucer and the Subject of History* is a landmark book, one that will shape the way that Chaucer is read for years to come.

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