

Preface

When the Wife of Bath says, “But yet I praye to al this compaignye / If that I speke after my fantasye, / As taketh not agrief of that I seye” (3.189–90), or when the Merchant describes Januarie’s choosing a wife as a matter of “Heigh fantasye and curious bisynesse” (4.1577), a modern reader, supported by notes and by current usage, will likely assume that the term *fantasye* refers to some sort of daydream or imaginary world. In fact, in both of these cases the term refers to a specific feature of medieval psychology—the belief that through sensory experience in general and sight in particular, each human mind is a unique repository of various experientially generated images—the medieval term is *phantasms*—that it uses to comprehend immediate circumstances and form generalizations, or recalls as memory. In passages like these, when Chaucer or his characters talk of *fantasye* they refer to an important element in a complex late medieval psychology devoted to explaining how people see, imagine, and remember.

This book situates *The Canterbury Tales* within this late medieval context of thinking about the nature and function of the senses in human psychology, especially the chief sense, sight. The sensual basis of knowledge, the role and function of images in worship, the nature and promise of spiritual alchemy, the function of verbal signs to stimulate the individual imagination both in response to an author’s invention and beyond an author’s control—all topical issues in Chaucer’s intellectual milieu—figure prominently in the tales he gathered together in his last, unfinished work.

But while allusion, verbal patterns, and explicit themes in *The Canterbury Tales* build on and grow out of a body of common knowledge familiar to medieval audiences, this system remains largely unknown to modern readers. Ironically our unfamiliarity with this material stems in part from the fact that we retain the words, the *signs*, that once evoked it, but use them to signify modern, not medieval, ideas. Modern English

and Middle English share a basic vocabulary and a basic grammatical structure that makes Chaucer's poetry accessible and seemingly familiar in ways that *Beowulf*, for instance, is not. But in the six hundred years since Chaucer wrote, the ideas that our common vocabulary evokes have changed significantly. A case in point is what has happened to the word *fantasye*. For us it is inevitably colored with Coleridgean, romantic connotations of secondary imagination, or of chimeras, whereas in the late fourteenth century the term referred specifically to mental images derived originally from some kind of sensory experience. Recognizing the play of issues, wit, and ideas in moments of seeing and imagining in the *Canterbury Tales* depends on recovering at least the broad outlines of late medieval thinking about vision and imagination. In semiotic terms, we seek the medieval interpretants and referents of verbal signs that seem deceptively familiar.

The book that follows begins by describing the complex nexus of ideas about human cognition and psychology comprising late medieval theories of how sight, imagination, and *fantasye* function within the individual human mind. It moves on to discuss the role of sight and imagination as they affect action and desire in several fragments of *The Canterbury Tales*. The second chapter, on "The Knight's Tale," identifies a previously unrecognized theme centered in the limits of vision, articulated in different ways but to the same end by the three major male characters as well as by the narrator; this chapter argues that the dark tone of the tale, which most recent criticism has imputed to anxiety about chivalric culture, derives as well from the tale's depiction of the constrained range of imagination and conceptualization each of the main characters exhibits. The third chapter deconstructs the "Marriage Group," breaking it into two pairs of tales that explore the power of will and *fantasye* in destabilizing human relations. In the first pair, "The Wife of Bath's Tale" and "The Clerk's Tale," Chaucer presents stories of uncontrolled male will linked directly to problems in perception. In the second pair, "The Merchant's Tale" and "The Franklin's Tale," he presents parallel cases of male and female obsession derived from mental images that direct action by simultaneously arising from and feeding desire. This third chapter argues that because medieval marriage is constructed as a union of two people into one, strains between partners in a marriage figure strains within individual human psyches. The fourth chapter reads the odd pairing of "The Physician's Tale" and "The Pardoner's Tale" as an inquiry into the dynamic effect of images of the beautiful on human desire, judgment, and greed; it does so by situat-

ing both tales within the general context of a late medieval psychology of vision as well as within a specific element of that context, Lollard anxiety about how the mind responds to images. The fifth chapter of the book reads Fragment VIII, “The Second Nun’s Tale,” and “The Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale,” as a comparison of true alchemy to false alchemy. The action of both tales centers in vision and the preparation of the mind to see through physical to evidence of the metaphysical. The final chapter contextualizes the language of “The Parson’s Tale” by reference to Lollard discourse and to Chaucer’s own patterns of philosophic language; it argues that the tale is Chaucer’s experiment in language and style to achieve what the Parson terms *undirstondynge*, direct, undistorted communication free of the mental images metaphor and *fable* encourage. The Retraction, read within the context of this tale, appears less concerned with repudiation of Chaucer’s art than as one final attempt to call attention to the uncontrollable nature of human imagination, this time in response to literature.

In his last work Chaucer explored the effect and power of mental images on desire, conceptualization, and action. Read against the background of late medieval thinking about sight, Chaucer’s art appears to negotiate a late medieval tension between affirmation of sight as the premier human sense and anxiety about the mental images vision might produce. But whereas the philosophic tradition closely tied to theology situates human psychology within a moral paradigm whose apogee is salvation, Chaucer’s art problematizes the nature of human psychology and, in each fragment or tale where vision and psychology figure prominently, directs attention away from moral judgment and toward representing the complex bases of human relations and the uncertainty of human knowledge.