AMOROUS BEHAVIOR: SEXISM, SIN, AND THE DONALDSON PERSONA

by Carolynn Van Dyke

One of Carolyn Dinshaw’s achievements in *Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics* was what R. W. Hanning calls in this issue of *The Chaucer Review* a brilliant deconstruction of a “classic . . . binary.”¹ In the book’s first chapter, Dinshaw conjoins what had long been regarded as opposing poles: the approaches of D. W. Robertson, Jr., and E. Talbot Donaldson. She aligns the New Criticism of Donaldson and the Patristic Exegesis of Robertson in a common “patriarchal structure of literary activity.”² Like most of their contemporaries and followers, she argues, Donaldson and Robertson both assume and presume a masculinist standpoint, aiming at “a rigorous control of the dangerous feminine.”³ The two iconic “sons” both “read like men,” to paraphrase the title of her chapter.

Dinshaw does not return to Robertson’s and Donaldson’s views after her first chapter; her identification of the two serves primarily to launch her own readings of many Chaucerian texts. But I wish to return to her revisionist geometry, not only to contest it but to redraw it. I propose to conjoin Dinshaw herself—and at least one other early feminist critic—with Robertson, in a shared misreading of Donaldson and his fellow New Critics.

Robertson and Dinshaw themselves epitomize schools of criticism that differ at least as sharply as Robertson and Donaldson were ever said to do. But patristic and antipatriarchal critics oppose Donaldson in surprisingly similar ways. In brief, both represent the humanistic New Critics as practicing a suspect kind of love, directed ultimately toward the self rather than toward the Other. It is an accusation that I intend partly to concede. Donaldson’s reading (and his editing) does constitute what Dinshaw calls “amorous behavior.”⁴ But I will argue that it arises not from absorption in self, but from a remarkably wide embrace of the subject; and I think that the love affair that he began has been taken up, productively, by generations of readers, including contemporary feminists.

Though notorious, patristic critics’ opposition to the New Criticism was mostly indirect. As far as I can determine, D. W. Robertson, Jr., did not directly refute E. T. Donaldson in print; indeed, he rarely singled
out any scholarly opponents, having established a distinctly impersonal persona. Rather, Robertson rebuked the mass of post-Romantic medievalists for taking too little account of historical circumstances, particularly historical ideologies. But Donaldson unquestionably represented those misguided critics. “We must remember,” Donaldson had written in 1958, “that it was Chaucer’s aim to make the reader suffer vicariously the experience of Troilus.” Medieval authors,” Robertson wrote four years later, “do not usually invite us to share [characters’] experiences.” For Donaldson, the Wife of Bath “still competes with Falstaff for the title of the greatest comic character in English literature”; to Robertson, she, like her namesake in the Miller’s Tale, “is not a ‘character’ in the modern sense at all.” With good reason the English Institute chose Donaldson in 1958 to represent “the opposition” to “patristic exegesis in the criticism of medieval literature.” In responding to that invitation, Donaldson emphasized what may have been his fundamental disagreement with Robertson: Donaldson’s own conviction that a modern critic can understand a medieval poem without “special knowledge.” In a 1969 essay, Robertson in turn reiterated his fundamental position: that readers who presume to understand the past using modern concepts are practicing “concealed self-study” that “only stultifies us within the narrow confines of our own naively envisioned perspectives.”

The disagreement has usually been described in abstract terms, as a clash in approaches to history, but Dinshaw was right to observe in Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics that it rested largely on the fictional bodies of women. Both New and patristic critics devoted particular attention to female characters. Donaldson wrote at least eight essays entirely or mostly about Criseyde, several about the Wife of Bath, and another about “Four Women of Style” (Criseyde, Emily, the Miller’s Allison, and the Prioress). Perhaps more important than the number of his essays on female characters—far more than he wrote about male characters—is their tone. Donaldson may or may not have been “in love with Criseyde,” as Dinshaw claims, but he acknowledged her “devastating” effect on “most masculine readers,” and he seemed to include himself in the “we” seduced by her charms. He did the same with the Prioress, who, “like other attractive women,” he wrote, makes “fools of us male critics.” And the Wife of Bath not only seduces but subverts. Toward the end of her Prologue, Donaldson writes, she “ceases to be an enormously funny parody of a woman invented by woman-haters, ceases even to be a woman fascinating for her intense individuality, ceases in a way to be a woman at all, and becomes instead a high and gallant symbol of a humanity in which weakness and fortitude are inextricably mingled.”
For Robertson, in contrast, female figures epitomize Chaucerian allegory. “Alison of Bath,” he writes, “is . . . an elaborate iconographic figure designed to show the manifold implications of an attitude.” So too Criseyde is a “discrete moral entity” whose extended monologues expound ideas rather than rendering psychological states. We misread Custance and Griselda if we do not recognize them as personified abstractions. To be attracted to these expository icons is to commit not just an aesthetic error, for Robertson, but also a moral lapse: the seduced critic reproduces the fatal concupiscence of Troilus. Such critics are guilty, in short, of “amorous behavior.”

As I have already noted, that phrase comes not from Robertson himself but from Carolyn Dinshaw. In critiquing Donaldson’s approach to Chaucer’s women, Dinshaw uses terms surprisingly similar to Robertson’s. She does not accuse anyone of concupiscence or blindness to iconography, of course. But Dinshaw and some other late-twentieth-century readers reject Donaldson’s emotional engagement with Chaucer’s women not just on aesthetic grounds but also in moral terms.

First, these critics use feminist claims in order to accuse Donaldson and his contemporaries of rhetorical and theoretical myopia. That is, they charge that Donaldson established a narrowly subjective perspective: he wrote as if Chaucer’s readers would normally be heterosexual men. Dinshaw detects that perspective in Donaldson’s implication that his masculine reading is “humanistic.” In a study published three years after Dinshaw’s, Elaine Tuttle Hansen elaborates on Donaldson’s “presuppositions about the gender and sexualized response of ‘the’ reader.” Hansen notes, for instance, Donaldson’s statement that “Every sensitive reader will feel that he really knows Criseide—and no sensible reader will ever claim that he really understands her.” “It seems almost too easy,” Hansen continues, “to point out . . . the exclusion of the woman reader from the prominent strain of critical interpretation that such readings represent.”

Second, Dinshaw and Hansen argue that the perspective is not only masculine but patriarchal: Donaldson aims, they argue, to objectify and contain female sexuality. Dinshaw makes that claim by qualifying (even reversing) her demonstration that Donaldson was “in love with Criseyde.” He holds himself aloof from the blind enamorment of Troilus and the narrator, she argues; even his declaration that Criseyde is incomprehensible amounts to a claim that he comprehends her. Dinshaw senses “a desire for order, a desire to control a threateningly uncontrollable libido, in Donaldson’s analysis.” Similarly, Hansen finds in certain comments of Donaldson about the Merchant’s Tale a masculine discomfort—his own as well as the Merchant’s—over signs that real and fictional women have “sexual desire, and hence, by the logic of
masculine dominance and Christian thought, subjectivity that cannot be controlled.26

In some ways, of course, Dinshaw and Hansen reverse the patristic analysis. They might be said to accuse Donaldson of repressing female sexuality—or its fictional representation—whereas D. W. Robertson, Jr., faults him for overvaluing it. But both critiques attribute the error to a fundamental solipsism. For Robertson, humanist critics like Donaldson see women through modern blinders, formed by a sentimentalizing Romantic aesthetic and a sensualist ethic. For Dinshaw and Hansen, the sensualism is distinctly masculine, the sentimentality a form of domination. For both, Donaldson’s readings are spuriously universalized: he mistakes modern views for truth or male perspectives for human ones. That his readings are so affirmative, so well disposed to author and reader alike, would make this solipsism all the more insidious. Dissent would seem to have been co-opted.

I must acknowledge a personal interest in defending Donaldson against such charges, particularly those of other feminist critics. If Donaldson’s criticism is informed by genial sexism or even misogyny, those feminists who have always found his work persuasive must have been seduced away from our own principles. Hansen suggests that the patriarchal standpoint that she traces to Donaldson could be embraced by “a self-consciously female human being in the late twentieth century” only if that female reader had become “thoroughly immasculated.”27

But my motivation in resisting these charges goes beyond personal vindication, on Donaldson’s behalf or my own. Two larger matters are at stake.

One is the relationship between reader and text. The patristic and feminist critics whom I have cited all link Donaldson’s attitudes toward Chaucer’s women with his stance toward Chaucer’s texts. Robertson accuses the humanists of responding to Criseyde’s or Alison’s attractive feminine surface rather than to the philosophical femininity that it represents28—that is, of reading icons literally. As we know, literalism is also one name for the reading practices that Robertson opposed in general. Proper reading, for him and other exegetical critics, sees beyond Chaucer’s verisimilitude to the “underlying abstractions” that the text manifests.29 The connection is more than a distant analogy: as Dinshaw reminds us, medieval and modern writers represent allegorization explicitly as the unveiling of a female body.30 Confusingly, that body sometimes represents the deceptive carnal surface and sometimes the “naked truth” underlying feminine garments;31 but the wise reader or viewer will always see beneath literal femininity to the “conceptual reality” represented by all allegory and, paradigmatically, by the female personification.32 In the index to Robertson’s Preface to Chaucer, “woman”
is followed immediately by “(fig.)”—a notation that, he implies elsewhere, the humanistic New Critics have overlooked. In Robertson’s reading of medieval texts, apparently, there are no literal women. Dinshaw sees Robertson’s programmatic allegorizations as a “hermeneutic of suspicion,” a drive to establish patriarchal control over texts that she associates with the desire to control women. And she finds a comparable identification of woman and text in Donaldson’s work. But in explicating that link, she echoes Robertson’s own position. Dinshaw notes that in “The Psychology of Editors of Middle English Texts,” Donaldson figures variant readings as potential brides among whom the bachelor-editor hesitates. She infers that Donaldson identifies “the essential indeterminacy of the text” with the indeterminacy of female characters, particularly Criseyde. His response, she concludes, is to posit an omniscient male poet who manipulates and controls both slydyng female and slippery meanings—and to identify himself with that poet. In that way, Dinshaw claims, Donaldson shares Robertson’s drive for masculine mastery. But Dinshaw joins Robertson in faulting the New Critical approach as narrowly subjective—limited not by modernist assumptions, as Robertson would have it, but by masculine ones. She suggests that Donaldson identifies with the poet/editor/bridegroom who presumes, in his masculine superiority, to comprehend even the unknowable. Thus for the feminist Dinshaw, as well as for the patristic Robertson, an unduly personalized view of female characters epitomizes a solipsistic hermeneutics.

Those charges are almost correct; but the “almost” is crucial. That leads to my second reason for attaching importance to the accusations about Donaldson’s sexism or sensualism. Being half-right, they block our understanding of his fundamental contribution to Chaucer studies. The correct half of the attacks is the charge of subjectivity. As I have noted, Donaldson does register emotional reactions to female characters, and he describes his editorial struggles in highly colored heterosexual metaphors. I have also noted that his subjective responses look different (though similarly flawed) to certain exegetical and feminist critics: to the former they indicate a surrender to feminine sensuality; to the latter, a claim to master it. And I acknowledge that Donaldson’s work supplies ample support for both views. There are on the one hand his warm tributes to the feminine: he refers at one point to “that tantalizing self-assurance, momentarily disquieting, ultimately enhancing [Criseyde’s] mystery and charm.” On the other hand, he displays the cool reserve that leads Dinshaw to write sardonically of “the lucid and honest Donaldson.” Thus after tracing Chaucer’s significant silences and ominous hints about Criseyde’s character, he comments, “Caveat spectator—in this case, both Troilus and the romantic reader.”
But that same range of tones points to the “wrong” half of the accusations that I have described. Robertsonian and Dinshavian critiques respond selectively and thus mistakenly to the same phenomenon: the Donaldson persona.

In mentioning Donaldson’s persona, I invoke his own work on Chaucer’s persona. His essay on that topic is probably his most remembered; it may also be his most misremembered. It does not propose the neat schema that many later writers remember and challenge—a continuously naive speaker manipulated by a sophisticated but silent author. Instead, Donaldson writes of an author who deploys various attitudes to convey a double or multiple vision:

> One can imagine also the delight of the audience . . . which was aware of the similarities and dissimilarities between Chaucer, the man before them, and Chaucer the pilgrim, both of whom they could see with simultaneous vision. . . . This Chaucer was telling them of another who, lacking some of his chief qualities, nevertheless possessed many of his characteristics, though in a different state of balance. . . . The constant interplay of these two Chaucers must have produced an exquisite and most ingratiating humor—as, to be sure, it still does.41

A similar interplay constitutes Donaldson’s own authorial presence. The distinctive “I” of his essays expresses a wide range of states: disquiet, rudeness, bemused wonder, rueful acknowledgement of his own earlier mistakes, pleasure in pedantry, conspiratorial bias, deep admiration.42 Sometimes his “I” seems disingenuous. Sometimes it echoes the naivety of the Chaucerian persona, just as the latter seems to echo the shallow complacency of many of his fellow pilgrims. The pilgrim “does not feel that, with important people, his own likes and dislikes are material,” but he can “recognise, and deplore, a rascal when he [sees] one”—“provided the rascality [is] situated in a member of the lower classes and provided it [is], in any case, somewhat wider than a barn door.”43 But just as Donaldson insists that the Chaucerian naif is no “mere fiction,”44 his own tonalities are never entirely feigned or insincere. Rather, they enact a dynamic of reaction and reassessment, engagement and distance. Collectively, they model the reader’s experience. They perform the same function that Donaldson attributes to the Chaucerian persona—the role of “the representative of all mankind.”45

Of womankind as well, despite the gendered terminology of 1954. Paradoxically, the masculinity of Donaldson’s persona opens his texts to readers of both sexes and various sexualities. Like Chaucer, Donaldson grounds his persona in particular circumstances. He cites his own
career, past and future: “I look forward myself to a year when the many incidental problems of editing Piers Plowman will, I hope, constantly distract me from the effort of understanding its meaning,” he writes in “Patristic Exegesis in the Criticism of Medieval Literature: The Opposition.” He owns his limitations, writing in the same essay that “Middle English . . . is the only field in which I am competent.”

And, as feminist scholars have noted, he owns his sex and his gender. “I am happy to think,” he writes, “that . . . the Prioress is continuing her journey, . . . probably making a fool of herself, but surely capable, like other attractive women, of making even bigger fools of us male critics.”

That passage concludes his essay “The Masculine Narrator and Four Women of Style,” and it comes from a man of style—that is, a rhetorical man, a persona. In its openness, it avoids the tacit universalizing that Hansen and Dinshaw adduce. Nowhere does Donaldson equate “male critic” with “critic”; I have found no pseudo-universal references to readers or critics in Donaldson’s work. He does employ pseudo-generic male pronouns, as did (probably) all contemporary scholars, but those statements more appropriate for male readers than for female ones are explicitly keyed to male readers.

Gentlemanliness, susceptibility to female charm, restiveness within a hasty textual marriage—these are poses, not unquestioned sinecures.

One might still detect a masculine superego that controls the poses, just as it purports to control slippery texts and female libidos. But any such ghostly über-persona is much less palpable than another kind of meta-agent, the verifiably extant Talbot Donaldson. Donaldson writes that Chaucer’s persona coincides intermittently with Geoffrey Chaucer the poet, “a very personal fact to his own audience.” Donaldson’s self-references complicate his persona in the same way, converging but never coalescing.

That is, Donaldson’s persona establishes an ironic self-consciousness. I define irony as did a former professor: the simultaneous existence of more than one perspective on the same object or event. Here, the “object” in question is in part the self, which becomes more and less specific, more and less obtrusive, more and less gendered, at various points.

My account of Donaldson’s persona may recall a misconception of authorship that some recent scholars have attributed to the New Critics. Among those scholars is Carolyn Dinshaw. Like many later Chaucerians, Dinshaw seems hesitant to label Donaldson’s critical approach, but several times she associates him with “formalism”—a term often used as a synonym for “New Criticism.” She invokes formalism particularly in discussing Donaldson’s representation of authorship, Chaucer’s and his own. Donaldson’s “critical vision,” she writes, “makes him as all-seeing as
the poet himself, and we might suggest that Donaldson identifies most deeply with that omniscient poet whom he formalistically posits as locus of creative power and textual control. Her language may resonate with my reference to a meta-agent or super-persona, self-named as Donaldson or Chaucer. But Donaldson represents neither himself nor Chaucer as an all-seeing controller. Donaldson insists that the poet shares, albeit in different proportions, the faults and virtues of his fictional first-person. More fundamental, in staging themselves, both Donaldson and Chaucer belie the claim to authorial omnipotence. Their playfulness mocks, rather than endorses, readers’ tendency to posit an absolute auctor. Moving between detachment and embodiment, Donaldson’s persona models a way into the text for readers, who are, like him, both gendered roles and personal facts.

In mistaking Donaldson’s staging of authorial personae for a naive theory of authorial agency, Dinshaw represents many of her contemporaries, who have oversimplified New Critical conceptions of authorship in the same way. I suspect that very few New Critics allege an all-powerful choreographer behind the dance of textual coherence. But incomplete readings of Donaldson’s work on the persona also predate Dinshaw’s generation. Earlier I argued that patristic and early feminist critics converge in attacking Donaldson’s engagement with female characters. I now return briefly to the patristic critics to suggest that their misreading of the Donaldson persona complements Dinshaw’s. If Dinshaw and Hansen unduly privilege the detached and masterly Donaldson, the Robertsonians seem to isolate an intuitive, sentimental voice, that of the “aesthetician” as opposed to the “allegorist.” For patristic critics, Chaucer’s irony is hierarchical, and humanists like Donaldson see only the bottom.

In fact, Donaldson often makes moral and doctrinal judgments. While one face of his persona responds to the Prioress’s charm, another terms her an object of satire. The stern Donaldson calls Criseyde in Book V a “sorry little woman” whose letter to Troilus displays “exquisitely selfish cruelty,” judgments as harsh as Robertson’s. He writes that the “moralitee of Troilus and Criseide . . . is simply this: that human love, and by a sorry corollary everything human, is unstable and illusory.” And Donaldson acknowledges allegorical meanings: Criseyde, he writes, double-exposes with Fortune. But he knows that in allegory abstractions do not annul their particular representations but combine with them to yield “an ultimate meaning that is an inextricable union of both.” So too a poem’s “ultimate meaning” is not its moralitee but a “complex qualification,” and Criseyde’s selfish act defines her no more fully than does the love of the various personae who read her.
Like his author, Donaldson does not merely articulate those disparate perspectives; his ironic self-consciousness performs them. At the end of his great essay on *Troilus and Criseyde*, we gaze from a great height on what we still inhabit, the “little spot of earth that with the sea embracéd is, as in Book Three Criseide was embraced by Troilus.” That is, led by Donaldson’s “amorous behavior,” we experience at once *eros* and *caritas*.

Stephanie Trigg has observed that the “formal autobiographical voice is rarely invoked by Chaucer scholars.” She may be right, but a different kind of subjectivity has become increasingly common in the wake of Donaldson’s ironic self-consciousness. This kind of autobiographical voice is not formal but performative. It acknowledges its particular authorship but never takes its authority for granted. Thus it invites the performances of other readers’ selves, with their own kinds of amorous behavior.

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1. R. W. Hanning, “No [One] Way to Treat a Text: Donaldson and the Criticism of Engagement,” 261–70 in this issue, at 266. I see Hanning’s “criticism of engagement” as congruent with what I will term subjective or “amorous” reading, but Hanning complements my feminist and metacritical approach with an astute and historically grounded rhetorical analysis.
9. Robertson, *Preface*, 330; see also 249.
31. See, for example, Dinshaw, *Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics*, 21, 38.
34. Dinshaw, *Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics*, 35.
44. Donaldson, “Chaucer the Pilgrim,” 11.
48. This is not to say that his readings always encompass what I regard as a female reader’s viewpoint. I do not agree that female auditors of *Troilus* would have discerned the “anti-feminist moral” against which the narrator defends himself (“Ending,” 94), and I think Donaldson seriously underestimates the physical dangers facing Criseyde when he assumes that the narrator pities her isolation in the Greek camp only for sentimental reasons (“Criseide,” 76). But these partial readings by no means indicate an elision of masculine readings with human ones, for they proceed from an advisedly partial persona.
attitude, see particularly 86 and 101. Here as elsewhere, Robertson does not name Donaldson; I take his references to New Critics to include Donaldson.


57. Stephanie Trigg, Congenial Souls: Reading Chaucer from Medieval to Postmodern (Minneapolis, 2002), 236.