

Annotated Bibliography: Gift Giving and Commodity Exchange in
Chaucer

Overview:

The goal of this annotated bibliography is to present a selection of secondary sources that examine the roles of gift giving and commodity exchange in the works of Geoffrey Chaucer. As we will see, the majority of the entries will focus on *The Canterbury Tales*. Each entry will contain the bibliographic information of the source followed by a summarization of the source's contents.

1. Carroll, Virginia Schaefer. "Omen and Money in the Miller's Tale and the Reeve's Tale." Medieval Perspectives. 3.1 (1988): 76-88.

While attention on women, marriage, and the effects of women on men can be seen in *The Miller's* and *The Reeve's Tale*. Whereas the Knight uses courtly romance and subtlety, the Franklin and Wife of Bath use "book learning and experience", the Miller and Reeve define women and their influence through blunt stories that focus on rivalry, commerce, and currency. Two threads are interwoven in both tales: the woman's position in family and society, and the commercial outlooks of the tales themselves. Alisoun of *The Miller's Tale* and her interactions with Absolon and Nicholas are expressed in terms of "value". Symkyn's wife in *The Reeve's Tale* is his undoing, and she too is described in terms of economic value as well as social position. Both women retain a certain

amount of passivity; while they free themselves from their men and make their own decisions, they are nonetheless participating actively (and unexpectedly) in commercial exchanges.

2. Hahn, Thomas. "Sexuality, Wordplay, and Context in the Shipman's Tale." Chaucer in the Eighties. Ed. Julian N. Wasserman and Robert J. Blanch. Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1986. 235-49.

The merchant in *The Shipman's Tale* is similar to the Merchant of *The Merchant's Tale* in that both deal in the foreign or merchant exchange. In *The Shipman's Tale*, the merchant was a financial entrepreneur, someone whose income was derived from the new, growing market system of the fourteenth-century. Hahn sees that the interchangeability of money and sexuality is not an image or a theme, but rather a means of characterization wherein the "movement between displacement and identity becomes the shape of the tale itself." Hahn examines Chaucer's sexual and economic wordplay within the tale, and sees that Chaucer was commenting on the changing economic landscape which his reader would themselves be witnesses to. *The Middle English Dictionary* and Dante and Gower are some secondary sources that Hahn uses in examining contemporary issues in medieval literature of economy and exchange.

3. Harrow, Kenneth. "The Money: False Treasure or True Benefice." Interdisciplinary Dimensions of African Literature: Papers Selected from the 8th Annual Meeting of the African Literary Association, Howard University, Washington, D.C. 6-10 April 1982. Ed. Kof Anyidoho, et al. Three Continents. Washington, DC: Three Continents, 1985. 75-87.

Harrow does a comparative analysis of Chaucer's *Pardoner's Tale* with Sembène Ousane's novella *Le Mandat* (*Mandabi* in the film version) to explore the latter's hopes to lead his audience to a greater degree of social consciousness. In both the money order is a false treasure that brings only misery, and both, then, are moral commentaries on greed in society. Harrow does a close reading of the film with minimal secondary sources to support his reading of Ousane and no secondary sources to enhance his reading of the *Pardoner*.

4. Joseph, Gerhard. "Chaucer's Coinage: Foreign Exchange and the Puns of the Shipman's Tale." Chaucer Review. 17.4 (1983): 341-57.

Gerhard, using Derrida's texts *Of Grammatology*, *Writing and Difference*, and "White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy" as a post-structuralist approach to *The Shipman's Tale*, sees the Shipman (and Chaucer himself) as an unwitting metaphysician. The Shipman, Gerhard argues, is a storyteller who narrates a tale in which "the rapid circulation of money and language leads to an intersystemic circulation of both." *The Shipman's Tale*, while not as dark as some fabliaus, such as *The Reeve's Tale* and the *Merchant's Tale* nor as lighthearted as *The Miller's Tale*, nonetheless is a fabliau in which Chaucer is in full command of his rhetoric. In particular, the pun is Chaucer's main rhetorical device in *the Shipman's Tale*, and he uses it to

examine the multiplicity of meaning regarding the language used to convey concepts as monetary exchange, trade, and human economy.

5. Nicholson, Peter. "The Medieval tale of the Lover's Gift Regained." Journal of Folktale Studies. 21 (1980): 200-22.

In using J.W. Spargo's 1930 monograph, *Chaucer's Shipman's Tale: The Lover's Gift Regained* as his main source, Nicholson seeks to determine if this tale is a version of a folktale. To do this, he defines what type of tale it is, and to see how and where a source text may have been orally transmitted. *The Decameron* 8, 1 and 2 and Boccaccio's analogues are examined in relation to Chaucer's in regards to circulation of popular literature. Chaucer's borrowing from Boccaccio is examined, and Nicholson concludes that Chaucer's tale is a highly literary version of a literary variant of a popular oral text.

6. Rosenthal, Joel T. The Purchase of Paradise: Gift Giving and the Aristocracy, 1307-1485. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972.

In this book-length study of the social and political forces in the Middle Ages from 1307-1485, Rosenthal examines the power of the Crown, and how it was maintained through the manipulation of the various levels of nobility. The author focuses on the "parliamentary nobility", those who were summoned to sessions of the king's parliament means of individual writ. These several hundred people in fact had a large amount of influence and control over the secular and religious realms of England, and these individuals sought to sustain and gain power through the

systematic giving of gifts to particular segments of the populace. Rosenthal examines five specific forms of medieval charity by the nobility: the endowments of prayers when they procured royal licenses to alienate property into mortmain and when they wrote their wills, the building of great chantries to use the services of countless clerics, the building of *de novo* foundations (houses, colleges, universities, and hospitals) to justify their status and style, the bequests left in wills to the ecclesiastical institutions that served as burial houses, and the giving of alms to the poor that had attached to it several stipulations. While Rosenthal does not focus at all with literary representations of the nature of gift giving in the nobility, one sees the moral shortcoming of these individuals. Rosenthal concludes that this need by the parliamentary nobility to give these gifts was merely a way to satisfy their desires of a better life in the next world did little to further secularize society or enhance their power as a social and political group.

7. Schneider, Paul Stephen. "'Tailyngge Ynough': The Function of Money in the Shipman's Tale." The Chaucer Review. 11 (1977): 201-9.

The tone and style of *The Shipman's Tale* centers on the merchant and Chaucer's use of money as a theme. Schneider examines the positive and negative effects of money in the tale, on personal and social relationships (particularly marriage) and that the overall tone of the poem is, as Harry Bailly suggests, jolly, but not as jolly as that of the *Miller's* or *Reeve's* tales. The tale

constantly makes reference to money, particularly in the ideology of courtly love and marriage. Money eventually will corrupt ideal relationships: sexual, marital, friendship, brotherhood, and service. The merchant, by the close of the tale, has learned a lesson regarding monetary expenditure and marital relations.

8. Shoaf, R.A. Dante, Chaucer, and the Currency of the Word: Money, Images, and Reference in Late Medieval Currency. Norman, Oklahoma: Pilgrim, 1983.

In this book-length study, Shoaf sees a profound similarity between Dante and Chaucer. Both are love poets and each sees love as an exchange, and both are fascinated with the nature of economics. Language and money are analogous in *The Divine Comedy*, *Troilus and Criseyde*, and *The Canterbury Tales* (particularly *The Wife of Bath*, *The Merchant*, and *The Pardoner's* tales). Shoaf sees language in the Derridian sense, where it has an innate difference imbedded within each word. Shoaf's close readings of the above texts reveal that the authors and readers alike implicitly and explicitly examine issues of monetary exchange.

9. Shoaf, R. Allen. Chaucer's Body: The Anxiety of Circulation in the "Canterbury Tales." Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2001.

Shoaf takes a post-structuralist and psychoanalytic approach to examining several of the *Canterbury Tales*. Lacan, Freud, and Derrida are the three theorists influence Shoaf's study the most. The tropes, those literary devices of a text employed by the author, are of primary concern. These tropes examine the anxiety

of the physical, social, and political climate of Chaucer's England. Shoaf examines each fragment of *the Canterbury Tales* as a discreet unit, each one relating to a particular area of anxiety in terms of "circulation". In Fragments VII (B²) and II (B¹) the concern is with the circulation of the human body and of its fragmentary condition; in Fragment VI (C) the tales are darker and more despairing versions of their B² member in regards to the sentence given at the narratives' close and its effect on the individual's being (the *Pardoner's* complements the *Monks* and the *Pardoner's the Nun's Priest's*); in Fragments VII (G) and III (D) the narratives unsuccessfully examine the power of etymology and alchemy while conversely realizing that the power of storytelling in revealing those secrets; in Fragments V (F) and I (A) the trope of metonymy is examined as "rhetorical magic" but as readers we often do not see or realize how magically it works; in Fragments IX (H), X (I) and IV (E) the anxiety of influence is apparent in his translations and also in his life as well.

10. Thormann, Janet. "The Circulation of Desire in the 'Shipman's Tale'". Literature and Psychology. 39.3 (1993): 1-16.

The three registers of symbolic law (speech, money, and sexual division) each operate simultaneously and synonymously as metaphors, and each is "a circuit of desire that crosses the others to produce exchange" and each gives structure to "the human subjects of narrative action." Women, in the *Shipman's Tale*, are the metaphor of man's desire. Both desire and women are in a double bound, linked by the deceptive nature of language,

the "valuable" nature of money, and the need for (and the pleasure of) the telling of this story.