

FITL Internship Report

Feminine Pity in Chaucerian Poetry

I spent the first three weeks of August on the Mountain assisting Dr. Matthew Irvin with his research for his new book, *The Erotics of Pity in Chaucerian Poetry*. Jordan Sharpe was also helping with this project, and together we handled different parts of the project. Dr. Irvin wanted to explore the differences between the concept of male virtue (*virtu*) and the feminine equivalent, and in particular the way Chaucer treats them in his various works, especially in his *Legend of Good Women*. This book draws heavily on Ovid's *Heroides* and classical sources; Dr. Irvin was particularly interested in the Legend of Dido, so he wanted to examine Vergil's *Aeneid* and compare how the two authors portrayed Dido, which led to an examination of any classical material Chaucer could have read and used in his own writing. He also similarly wanted to look at any medieval materials Chaucer might have read and look at the specifics of key words and how various sources treated the words. In short, we were examining exactly how and why Chaucer used the vocabulary he did in presenting the feminine equivalent of male virtue.

The English word "virtue" comes from the Latin *virtu*, which essentially means "manliness" (from the root *vir* – "man"). Thus, by very definition of the word, it is impossible to attribute real virtue in its strictest sense to women. The classical world treated the word more strictly than does the modern English language, which gives the word a moral quality that can be applied to both men and women. A desirable feminine quality was not manliness or strength but shame, *pudor*. The word itself is interesting because of its various nuances and meanings, ranging from shame to modesty to virginity

to disgrace. *Pudor* is at once very different from *virtu* in that once lost, it cannot be regained. It is also highly attractive to men, as seen in the classical stories such as Dido and Aeneas or Jason and Medea. This creates a difficult situation, because a man wishing to win a woman must overcome the obstacle of her shame and modesty. He cannot simply eradicate it by force, however, because that jeopardizes his own virtue. Here, the importance of eroticized pity comes into play. In order to eliminate honorably the woman's *pudor*, the man must humble himself before the woman. In turn, the woman pities him, creating a relationship in which pity for the man surpasses her desire to preserve *pudor*. In this way, the man is able to eliminate the woman's *pudor* without directly having to take responsibility. The research we did this summer centered on this concept of eroticized pity and Chaucer's use of both the notion itself and the language he uses to describe it.

Given my familiarity with Latin, I concentrated on looking at various classical texts that might have provided the basis for Chaucer's work in order to understand exactly how the ancient authors treated words such as *pudor*. I began by running a very basic search on Perseus (an online database run by Tufts University of the major Latin and Greek texts) for every instance of the word *pudor* in classical antiquity. This provided me with the essential information such as author, work, book, and line number. From this search I was able to compile a list, selecting what I thought might be appropriate authors or texts. Dr. Irvin then reviewed it and told me which authors in particular to look at. I started with Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, locating each instance of the word from my search and examining the exact context in which it was used. I expanded on my initial list, providing the background story and context of the line or passage and

also a loose translation of the Latin. It was a familiar text for me, since I have read the *Metamorphoses* in Latin twice now, and I felt comfortable with Ovid's Latin and sentence structure.

I had planned to continue with Ovid and look at his *Heroides*, which is essentially the Latin equivalent of Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*, but Dr. Irvin wanted me to look at Statius's *Thebaid* next. I have never read anything by Statius and had in fact forgotten about the text, since I generally associate the author with his *Silvae*, which Dr. Irvin told me he would not have read. It is clear that Chaucer had read some of the *Thebaid*, however, since he opens the first story of the *Canterbury Tales* (the Knight's tale) with a quote from the *Thebaid*, and the setting of the Knight's tale overlaps the setting of the *Thebaid*. This text was not included in my initial Perseus search, but I did find a searchable text at the Latin Library website, which had the same effect. When I was doing my work on this text, I noticed certain changes in the way the author used the word *pudor*. Whereas Ovid's use of the word very frequently involved some sexual attribute or context (and when it did not, it usually hinted at certain gender definitions and expectations), Statius sometimes used the word to mean something much closer to the "disgrace" definition of *pudor* rather than the "shame" or "modesty" meaning. It is true that there can be little difference between the two at times, but I did pick up on a shift from sexual to non-sexual.

Next, I read the account of the martyr Perpetua but did not find much that would be useful for the research project. I turned my focus to a later period and read Boccaccio's *De Mulieribus Claris*. I had forgotten that Boccaccio had written pieces in Latin, as he is known primarily for his *Decameron*. Medieval Latin is noticeably

different from Classical Latin, with much simpler sentence structure, so *De Claribus Mulieribus* was at once a challenge in its difference from the language I am used to and at the same time much easier than the epic style of Ovid, for instance. It was considerably more difficult locating every instance of the word *pudor*, however, for two reasons: there was no reliable online or searchable text available on the computer (that I could find), and there were really no times when Boccaccio actually used the word *pudor*. He referenced shame and modesty and virginity endlessly, but used different vocabulary. I located a bilingual edition of the text, which had a more or less accurate English translation facing the Latin, but I worked mainly from the Latin since I needed to examine exactly how Boccaccio chose to describe female shame. My list for this book, in the end, was a bit shorter than the lists for the previous materials, but it was much more varied as I included many different words.

This project was largely self-directed in that I essentially worked on my own for most of the time. During the first few days of the internship, I would work in the mornings and then discuss with Dr. Irvin in the afternoon both what I had accomplished and what I should do next. I would typically show him what I had found so far, he would look over it briefly, and then later when I had finished an author or text I would email him the final report. Twice we all three had dinner at Dr. Irvin's house to discuss the state of the project further. After the initial couple of days, however, Dr. Irvin left the work to us and we would only meet occasionally, and I would email him with any questions that arose. I enjoyed being able to work independently, and Dr. Irvin encouraged us to undertake our own projects as we found topics or texts that especially interested us.

I am incredibly grateful that I had this opportunity this summer. I am applying for Ph.D. programs in Classics this fall, and my work this summer both gave me good experience and convinced me that I love this kind of work and want to continue to do it. Above all, I am glad that I finally studied texts and language this closely; I had never been able to take a real philological approach to a text in my research for other classes, so I was a little apprehensive about the strong philology emphasis in some of the programs I am considering. However, this project has shown me that it is immensely interesting and satisfying, and I look forward to doing similar work in the future. I also hope to be able to use my research from this summer to produce a paper to present at a conference this year – I went to my first conference at the British Studies Symposium at Rhodes last year and would love to attend more of the sort. All in all, this internship was extremely rewarding and enjoyable, and I am certain that it will prove to be very beneficial for my future work and goals.