CHAPTER 5

THE BEAUTY OF WOMEN

Look not upon a woman’s beauty, and desire not a woman for beauty.

Ecclesiasticus 25:28

to be frank, a beautiful woman, that’s what beauty is!

Plato, Greater Hippias

There Is No Maid

Good, bad, old, young, religious, secular—
Not even a nun, chaste in both body and soul—
Who’ll not delight to hear her beauty praised.

Jean de Meun, Romance of the Rose

Nowhere in medieval thought are the contradictions of aesthetic attitudes more obvious than in dealing with beauty in women. Biblical and classical traditions flow together to create a fund of long-standing common wisdom, both very loud and perfectly schizophrenic. On the one hand, female beauty is always already complicit in the descent of man into sinful lust. The pit into which the man falls to his damnation is opened by the mere sight of a woman’s beauties, whether or not the woman in question is aware of his gaze. In a remarkable application of Exodus 21, the writer to anchoresses concludes that the penalty must be paid by the one who uncovers the pit, not he who falls into it.1 On the other hand, the visually apprehended beauty of the Bride of the Canticles, the Virgin Mary, Beatrice, the Pearl, and many other prominent female presences is a sign of their merit. Medieval romances typically move, as Joan Ferrante says, toward the union of prowess with beauty,2 and this formulation would seem to be corroborated by tales of military contests.
offering the winner the hand of a beautiful princess and by somewhat soberer stories from historical sources. This contour figures the new society as one in which the weak are protected and the strong are civilized by the radiance emanating from the beautiful.

In Prudentius’s *Psychomachia*, both the Virtues and the Vices are personified in female form, but their warfare is waged for the “mansoul,” the male human subject. Saint Jerome avers that any woman who “wishes to serve Christ more than the world...will cease to be a woman, and will be called man.” The generalization that the Middle Ages, like Alanus in Joan Ferrante’s remark, “rejected women morally but accepted them philosophically, as abstractions” seems only a partial truth (although the Bride and the Pearl may be regarded as ideas), but that doesn’t solve the problem of how to read the tangled antifeminism and woman-worship presented in many fictional female figures. Chaucer’s practice, in this as in other matters, plays various complex language games calling on components from both sides of the schism. Attention to the aesthetic effects of this complexity, that is, allowing imagination and understanding to be pleasurefully “quickened” (*CJ*, p. 60), undermines the single-minded project of ideology critique to reduce the *Canterbury Tales* or *Troilus and Criseyde* to concepts about women.

The beauty of women and the study of art—both as inspiration for good and seduction to perdition—are connected across a long history. Beauty here has two quite different senses: women presented as beautiful and women beautifully presented. Aesthetic effects in art are produced by good construction (as Bonaventure and Aquinas argued), not by choosing beautiful objects to depict, and the idea that beautiful images may be troubling rather than decorative is a well-nigh consensus view in contemporary aesthetics as well. In this chapter, however, the concept of “the beauty of women” tends to entwine the two senses, especially in moral terms. For both medieval and contemporary thought, the subject is further complicated by the way debates about the value of feminine beauty are meshed with the feminization of the philosophical domain called aesthetics.

Beauty seems too “good-hearted” (in Elaine Scarry’s term) for the tough-minded positivism of the current human sciences, as I argued earlier. Even in circles that still discuss aesthetic effects, the sublime, especially the transgressive or scandalous, has more cache than life-enhancing beauty, although Kant’s treatise puts them on an equal footing. A neat analogy can be detected between medieval anxiety over women and contemporary critical theory’s anxiety over “the aesthetic” (when it is not sublime): it is sometimes rejected *in toto* because of its nature (like the medieval woman) and sometimes blamed in particular cases for presenting