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## The Development of Chaucer Criticism

In Chaucer's own age, as references that term him 'translator' suggest, he was viewed as the inheritor of a great tradition as well as the inventor of a new one, and his writing makes clear his desire to follow in the footsteps of the great ancient writers, in particular Ovid and Virgil. It is only with Chaucer and his contemporaries that English becomes a sophisticated literary language, and it is striking that Chaucer consistently places himself in the context of classical writers, referring to them as his authorities even when they are filtered through Continental writers. In subsequent centuries, however, Chaucer came to be seen instead as the great innovator, the 'father of English literature'.

In the period immediately following his death, he was most commonly viewed as a skilled courtly poet: he would be seen as inspiring a line of courtly poets down to Wyatt. It was often his 'eloquence' that was praised, but also his learning. Thomas Hoccleve's lament for Chaucer in his *Regement of Princes* (1412), for example, refers to Chaucer as 'flour of eloquence' but also 'universel fadir in science', renowned for his 'excellent prudence' and 'philosophie' to rival Aristotle: for Hoccleve, Chaucer follows in the footsteps of Virgil. Lydgate, also writing in the early fifteenth century, similarly praises 'excellence / In rethorike and in eloquence' and 'sentence', but refers as well to the variety and humour of Chaucer's writing. A little later, Dunbar admires him as 'rose of rethoris all' (*The Golden Targe*, 1503), and Caxton, who printed the *Canterbury Tales* (Proem, 1484), places him as 'laureate poete' because he has 'by hys labour enbelysshid, ornated and made faire our Englissh'. Gavin Douglas, referring to Chaucer's defence of Dido in his translation of the *Aeneid* (Prologue, 1513), offers a description that critics return to again and again: 'he was evir (God wait) all womanis frend.' These views of Chaucer as great learned poet and 'rhetor', father of English literature, are sustained across the sixteenth century: Sir Brian Tuke, in the preface to William Thynne's

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1532 edition, again refers to Chaucer's 'excellent learning in all kinds of doctrines and sciences' and his 'fruitfulness in words'; Gabriel Harvey praises him for his treatise on the astrolabe (c.1574); George Puttenham places him 'as the most renowned of them all' for his translation, wit and metre in the 'first age' of English writing, which was to be followed by a second 'company of courtly makers', Wyatt and Surrey (*The Art of English Poesy* I, 1589). Spenser's *Faerie Queene* (1596) emulates the 'heroick' language of 'Dan Chaucer, well of English undefyled' (IV, ii), and Francis Beaumont defends him from 'incivility' (1597), praising his art of description and his eloquence.<sup>1</sup>

In the course of the seventeenth century, however, doubts arise regarding Chaucer's status, as his language becomes less familiar and new learning replaces that of the Middle Ages. Edward Phillips, like Beaumont, places Chaucer as, despite his 'uncouth' terms, 'by some few admired for his real worth' (1675); Addison, however, describes him as 'a merry bard,' but one with whom 'age has rusted what the poet writ, / Worn out his language and obscur'd his wit' (1694). Dryden in his *Fables* (1700) translates a collection of the *Canterbury Tales* – avoiding the profane ones. In his preface he particularly admires Chaucer's realism:

He must have been a man of a most wonderful comprehensive nature, because, as it has been truly observed of him, he has taken into the compass of his *Canterbury Tales* the various manners and humours (as we now call them) of the whole English nation, in his age. Not a single character has escaped him. All his pilgrims are severally distinguished from each other; and not only in their inclinations, but in their very physiognomies and persons. . . . there is such a variety of game springing up before me, that I am distracted in my choice, and know not which to follow. 'Tis sufficient to say according to the proverb, that here is God's plenty. We have our forefathers and great-grand-dames all before us, as they were in Chaucer's days; their general characters are still remaining in mankind, and even in England, though they are called by other names than those of Monks, and Friars, and Canons, and Lady Abbesses, and Nuns; for mankind is ever the same, and nothing lost out of Nature, though everything is altered.<sup>2</sup>

Dryden compares him favourably to Ovid, 'Chaucer writ with more simplicity, and followed Nature more closely', and praises too his 'philosophy and philology', his description and translation; he places Chaucer as 'the father of English poetry', but remarks, however, that because of his imperfect metre, 'though he must always be thought a great poet, he is no longer esteemed a good writer.' For Dryden, Chaucer is defensible because he writes 'in the infancy of our poetry', and his work needs to be revived in modern English, in order to be understood – but also to be perfected.

Eighteenth-century views reflect both Dryden's praise and his concerns: Pope (1730) praises Chaucer as 'master of manners and of description' in the art of tale-telling, and also offers a translation; Johnson (*Dictionary*, 1755) criticizes Dryden for excessive praise of 'the illustrious Geoffrey Chaucer', but also those who censure Chaucer excessively for adding 'whole cartloads of foreign words'. Chaucer's realism and ability to inspire emotion, in particular to convey a sense of the pathetic, were singled out by late eighteenth-century writers such as Richard Hurd, Thomas Warton and Joseph Warton.

One of the most memorable Romantic considerations of Chaucer is that of William Blake, who discusses at length the Canterbury pilgrims in the context of his own painting of the subject (*A Descriptive Catalogue*, 1809). Blake explores the significances of the characters, who come to represent 'the eternall Principles that exist in all ages':

The characters of Chaucer's Pilgrims are the characters which compose all ages and nations: as one age falls, another rises, different to mortal sight, but to immortals only the same; for we see the same characters repeated again and again, in animals, vegetables, minerals, and in men; nothing new occurs in identical existence; Accident ever varies, Substance can never suffer change nor decay.

Of Chaucer's characters, as described in his *Canterbury Tales*, some of the names or titles are altered by time, but the characters themselves for ever remain unaltered, and consequently they are the physiognomies or lineaments of universal human life, beyond which Nature never steps. Names alter, things never alter.<sup>3</sup>

For example, the Pardoner, like the Summoner, represents the Devil, who plays a crucial role in the shaping of man's destiny: 'This man is sent in every age for a rod and scourge, and for a blight, for a trial of men, to divide the classes of men; he is in the most holy sanctuary, and he is suffered by Providence for wise ends, and has also his great use, and his grand leading destiny.' Blake places Chaucer as 'the great poetical observer of men, who in every age is born to record and eternize its acts.'

In the nineteenth century, realism and the power to inspire sentiment were seen as Chaucer's great qualities: Crabbe (*Tales*, preface, 1812) writes of Chaucer's 'powerful appeals to the heart and affections'; Hazlitt (*Lectures on the English Poets*, 1818) of the 'severe activity of mind' that leads to Chaucer's reality of sentiment, particularly pathos; Coleridge (1834) of 'How exquisitely tender he is' – and how knowable by contrast to Shakespeare; Leigh Hunt of how his images are 'copied from the life' (1844). Englishness was crucial to understandings of Chaucer: for Ruskin (*Lectures on Art*, 1870), Chaucer's was 'the most perfect type of a true English mind in its best possible temper',

combining beauty, jest and the danger of degenerate humour! Arnold ('The Study of Poetry,' 1880) offered a learned discussion of Chaucer in terms of his French and Italian, and placed him as 'a genuine source of joy and strength, which is flowing still for us and will flow always'; he admired his humanity, his plenty, his 'truth of substance' and especially his fluidity. For Arnold, praise of Chaucer needed to be qualified: 'he lacks the high seriousness of the great classics, and therewith an important part of their virtue', yet 'He has poetic truth of substance, though he has not high poetic seriousness, and corresponding to his truth of substance he has an exquisite virtue of style and manner. With him is born our real poetry.'<sup>4</sup>

By the early twentieth century, then, a collection of critical commonplaces about Chaucer had been established. Notions of Chaucer as rhetorician and learned philosopher had largely been displaced by notions of Chaucer as realist, master of pathos, comic writer. Difficulties of supposed unevenness of language and metre, and bawdiness, were viewed with more and less emphasis as the flaws in Chaucer's writing. What was sustained from his own time and even through the more critical Augustan period, when his metre was deprecated, was the strong sense of Chaucer as father of English poetry. Criticism emphasized his timelessness, his continued appeal, his humanism, his realism – although there was also a new sense that the medieval period had been one of great artistic sophistication and poetic innovation. For W. P. Ker, who wrote a celebrated study of the medieval genres of epic and romance (1896), Chaucer's writing, far from being rooted in a dark Middle Ages, demonstrated many of the qualities later associated with the Renaissance, but retained too an extraordinary immediacy:

The art of Chaucer has nothing to fear by comparison with anything in modern fiction, and, over and above the strength of what one may call its prose imagination, it is also poetry.

Chaucer has come down with both feet on the real world.

What has this to do with the Renaissance?<sup>5</sup>

Alongside the development of Chaucer criticism, a more technical emphasis was maintained in Chaucer studies. Early admiration of Chaucer's writing was accompanied by an antiquarian and scholarly interest in editing and publishing his collected works, culminating in the collected edition of William Thynne (1532), which included various Middle English texts not in fact written by Chaucer. Although this was often reprinted, sometimes with additions, no new edition based on the manuscripts appeared until John Urry's in 1721, which included many 'corrections'; this was followed by the more reliable edition of Thomas Tyrwhitt (1775–8).<sup>6</sup> The obscurity of Chaucer's writing by the Romantic period led to translations of his work by a series of

English writers: Wordsworth, Leigh Hunt and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. A revived interest in the nineteenth century in antiquarianism, philology, the origins of the English language and early English writing, however, inspired great new scholarly projects, in particular the Oxford English Dictionary (first volume, 1884) and the Early English Text Society (1864), responsible for the editing and publication of early works. It was natural that scholars should also turn to the writings of Chaucer, to invest them with a new authority. Work on editing continued, while a number of essential strands of international Chaucer scholarship were established: E. G. Sandras produced a critical study of Chaucer's sources (1859), the American Francis J. Child completed a consideration of Chaucer's language (1862), and the German Bernhard ten Brink published a study of authorship and date in Chaucer's works (1865). Alongside these initiatives, F. J. Furnivall had founded a Chaucer Society 'to do honour to Chaucer and let lovers and students of him see how far the best unprinted manuscripts of his works differ from the printed texts';<sup>7</sup> Furnivall undertook a new, six-text edition of the *Canterbury Tales* (first volume, 1867) and the Society published the Chaucer manuscripts.<sup>8</sup> From this point on, a good deal of attention was devoted to questions of editing and authorship – the establishment of the 'Chaucer canon'. Further manuscript studies led to Walter W. Skeat's six-volume scholarly edition (1894–7), which removed apocryphal texts, and his study *The Chaucer Canon* (1900). J. M. Manly and Edith Rickert published a vast, eight-volume edition of the *Canterbury Tales* (1940), which collated all known manuscripts, around ninety in total; R. K. Root studied the manuscripts of *Troilus and Criseyde* to produce a similarly detailed edition (1914). Such scholarship was the basis for F. N. Robinson's standard edition (1933, revised 1957), and L. D. Benson's revision of this in *The Riverside Chaucer* (1987), the current student edition, which draws on a range of new technical and critical work. Manuscript studies continue, with the gradual publication of a *Variorum Chaucer* (first volume, 1979) and hypertext editions that take advantage of new computer technology.

Alongside the editing of Chaucer, related and influential studies of the dating of his works and the order of the *Canterbury Tales* appeared, as did works on his language and versification.<sup>9</sup> Current criticism often takes for granted aspects such as Chaucer's romance vocabulary, first examined by Joseph Mersand, who gives a highly technical analysis, yet writes memorably of Chaucer's poetry, 'Chaucer was a Merlin of language. In his poetry he has locked up beauties of sound, of sense, and of rhythm which seem incapable of disenchantment at the hands of misguided modernizers and over-zealous text-emenders';<sup>10</sup> his views would be echoed, for instance, by A. E. Housman, who compared Dryden's translation negatively with Chaucer's own language (*The Name and Nature of Poetry*, 1933). Chaucer's stylistics, language structure, usage, versification and prosody remained for some time

central critical issues, as in the work of Ruth Crosby and Dorothy Everett. The biographical trend continued in various directions, perhaps most importantly in Martin Crow and Clair C. Olson's collection of the *Chaucer Life-Records* (1966), and studies of Chaucer's times, such as those of Edith Rickert, Roger Sherman Loomis and Maurice Hussey. Scholars took special account of Chaucer's own learning and medieval learning more generally, and this has been an interest sustained in contemporary cultural studies.<sup>11</sup> Source studies have also played a crucial role in Chaucer criticism, although interest has shifted from attempting to trace the origin of popular stories, for example, by looking at Eastern analogues, to analysing Chaucer's use of more direct sources and analogues: Chaucer critics rely on works such as W. F. Bryan and Germaine Dempster's *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's 'Canterbury Tales'* (1958).

What kind of literary criticism accompanied these ground-breaking historical studies? It was certainly not the case that Chaucer was seen exclusively in historical terms, although criticism often drew on contemporaneous literary and historical archeology. But as well, early criticism relied on and developed the Victorian admiration for Chaucer's realism and humanism. At the end of the nineteenth century Thomas R. Lounsbury's three-volume study (1892) developed the notion of Chaucer as father of English literature and hence as essential to the study of English. For Lounsbury, Chaucer was second only to Shakespeare, and he praised in particular the 'transcendent' quality of his poetry: 'he brought a lightness, a grace, a delicacy of fancy, a refined sportiveness even upon the most unrefined themes'; 'There is no other English author so absolutely free, not merely from effort, but from the remotest suggestion of effort'.<sup>12</sup> Early twentieth-century critics like G. L. Kittredge and his near-contemporary J. M. Manly pursued this notion of a new ease and injection of life in English writing, placing particular emphasis on how Chaucer learned to move away from medieval literary conventions into a new mode of realism. In a famous series of lectures on Chaucer, Kittredge explores in detail the ways such realism is effected, developing the notion of the *Canterbury Tales* as 'roadside drama': 'The Canterbury Pilgrimage is... a Human Comedy, and the Knight and the Miller and the Pardoner and the Wife of Bath and the rest are the *dramatis personae*'.<sup>13</sup> He urges the need to explore the tales in this context:

The story of any pilgrim may be affected or determined, – in its contents, or in the manner of the telling, or in both, – not only by his character in general, but also by the circumstances, by the situation, by his momentary relations to the others in the company, or even by something in a tale that has come before.<sup>14</sup>

Kittredge vividly imagines the pilgrims, their lives and relations, linking them to Chaucer's life and world, and to other literary texts. He is, however, best

known now for his analysis of the 'marriage group' of *Canterbury Tales*, in which he argues that the tales treating marriage function as a dialogue between their narrators. The Wife of Bath's lively defence of female sexuality and power is redressed by the Clerk's sober and doctrinal tale of the patient wife Griselda; the Merchant's mock-romance is an embittered reflection on his own unhappy marriage; and the Franklin's tale is Chaucer's own response, an elegant, sincere depiction of honourable and equal marriage: 'the whole debate has been brought to a satisfactory conclusion, and the Marriage Act of the Human Comedy ends with the conclusion of the Franklin's Tale.'<sup>15</sup> Kittredge's emphasis on realism and dramatic interplay is often now seen as naive and limited, yet his animated discussion retains relevance, for it is informed both by an easy and perceptive familiarity with English literature, and an enduring engagement with Chaucer as a great English writer. As well, the identification of a central thematic pattern in the tales was to inspire and underpin an enormous amount of critical writing on the issues of love, marriage and gender.

Kittredge was by no means alone in his views: Virginia Woolf, in *The Common Reader* (1925), had described Chaucer as 'little given to abstract contemplation'; 'Chaucer fixed his eyes upon the road before him' – though she remarks too his questioning mind, and places his moral perspective as that of the novel rather than poetry. The editor J. M. Manly similarly admired most the realism of the tales, the move away from 'the thin prettiness of the *Book of the Duchess*' to 'methods of composition based upon close observation of life and the exercise of the creative imagination', which he attributed to the stimulating effect of Italian literature (*Chaucer and the Rhetoricians*, 1926). For G. K. Chesterton, Chaucer was a 'great humorist', 'a humorist in the grand style; a humorist whose broad outlook embraced the world as a whole, and saw even great humanity against a background of greater things'.<sup>16</sup> Interestingly, Chesterton emphasizes the large 'design' of Chaucer's writing and the entirety of his cosmos, anticipating a later critical notion of the Gothic design of the *Canterbury Tales*; he applauds, too, Chaucer's irony. John Livingston Lowes's 1932 series of lectures offers a classic, humane study of Chaucer in terms of 'human comedy': Lowes places his writing as 'modern' in its realism – and disagrees with the notion of J. M. Manly (*Some New Light on Chaucer*, 1926) that the Canterbury pilgrims were based on actual people.<sup>17</sup> The debate, now peculiarly dated, points to the new directions in which Chaucer criticism was moving, and the growing recognition of Chaucer as experimental writer. For Lowes, like Kittredge, it is drama that is central to Chaucer's originality: 'The *Canterbury Tales*, even though their plan remains a splendid torso only, are an organic whole, and that whole is essentially dramatic'.<sup>18</sup> The powerful sense of Chaucer as modern, dramatic and vibrantly realistic underlies the amazing success of Coghill's translation of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, which

attracted more than 2 million listeners when first read in 1946 on the BBC, and played an important role in popularizing Chaucer, though the *Miller's Tale* was considered too shocking to be included in the broadcast reading (Coghill's translation was later used in Martin Starkey's successful 1968 musical of the *Canterbury Tales*).<sup>19</sup> The 1944 Powell and Pressburger film *A Canterbury Tale* alludes to Chaucer's work in order to evoke an enduring notion of Englishness.

While the sense of Chaucer's genial realism and Englishness was sustained, successive generations of critics began to realize the limitations of this perspective, in particular, in considering Chaucer's other writings. A shift in critical opinion was most of all influenced by the work of C. S. Lewis. In Lewis's study *The Allegory of Love* (1936) he turned away from (and indeed rather dismissed) Chaucerian comedy as a distraction from Chaucer's poetic achievements, to focus on the early poems and their use of the French love allegory, *Le Roman de la Rose*. Lewis thus created a new critical perspective on Chaucer as 'poet of courtly love', whose writing employed to new effect the French conventions of 'radical allegory' and revealed the 'delicate threads' of a poetry 'written for a scholastic and aristocratic age'.<sup>20</sup> The French scholar Gaston Paris (1883) had already identified a distinctive attitude to love in medieval literature, which he termed *amour courtois*, and the English critic W. G. Dodd had written on this phenomenon in English writing in *Courtly Love in Chaucer and Gower* (1913). C. S. Lewis took up this notion with special reference to the thirteenth-century treatise of Andreas Capellanus on the art of loving, *De arte amandi*, to argue compellingly that medieval literature depicted 'love of a highly specialized sort, whose characteristics may be enumerated as Humility, Courtesy, Adultery, and the Religion of Love' – though in its ideal form, this love would not be consummated, as Dante's sublime love for the celestial Beatrice.<sup>21</sup> For Lewis, the great medieval examples are Lancelot and Guinevere, Tristan and Isolde, Troilus and Criseyde, but the celebration of such love is always shadowed by a sense of transience and human frailty: it is 'never... more than a temporary truaney. It may be solemn, but its solemnity is only for the moment. It may be touching, but it never forgets that there are sorrows and dangers before which those of love must be ready, when the moment comes, to give way.'<sup>22</sup> Lewis's incomparable prose captures the way such transience is often signalled at the end of medieval works, as in *Troilus and Criseyde*: 'We hear the bell clang; and the children, suddenly hushed and grave, and a little frightened, troop back to their master.'<sup>23</sup>

Lewis's role in illuminating the complexities and delicacies of medieval writing cannot be overestimated. There are, however, difficulties with his theory, in particular his absolute insistence on love as a fixed religion, despite the fact Andreas Capellanus's rules of love were not well known in the



medieval period, and his insistence on adultery, which means that the many depictions of married love in medieval literature must be dismissed as poor shadows of the real thing. Critical debate over 'courtly love' has been extensive. E. Talbot Donaldson writes sceptically: 'courtly love provides so attractive a setting from which to study an age much preoccupied with love that if it had not existed scholars would have found it convenient to construct it – which, as a matter of fact, they have, at least partially, done.'<sup>24</sup> Donaldson emphasizes the idiosyncrasy of Andreas Capellanus and the fact that *amour courtois* was not a current medieval term, and remarks the 'spell' that Lewis's definition has cast on readers, obscuring the truth that 'there is very little adultery' in medieval literature.<sup>25</sup> The term *fin'amors* is now usually preferred, in that it implies a set of courtly conventions without the fixity of Lewis's definition and with the possibility of marriage.<sup>26</sup> It was, however, the power of Lewis's argument, and even more, his vibrant, acutely knowledgeable and imaginative engagement with the thought world of medieval literature, that effected a shift away from the sometimes desiccated historical approach of early scholars to a new recognition of the literary richness and sophistication of medieval writing, to a critical engagement with the interplay of convention and originality, and to the wealth of possibilities offered by the allegorical mode. Lewis's special interest was the rarefied fictional world of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, and he wrote eloquently too on the 'process of *medievalisation*' of a classical text.<sup>27</sup>

The impact of Lewis's work was by no means immediate or absolute: it was not until Charles Muscatine's study, *Chaucer and the French Tradition* (1957), that the ideas presented by Lewis were developed as part of a New Critical approach that emphasized Chaucer's use of two literary modes, the courtly and the realist. Muscatine's book played an essential role in revitalizing traditional source study as cultural contextualization, and also represented the New Criticism advocated by such critics as F. R. Leavis, I. A. Richards and William Empson in its emphasis on the poem as verbal object and hence on analysis of structures such as irony and ambiguity, in particular through close reading of the text. Empson, considering Chaucer's language in *The Structure of Complex Words* (1951), writes of his 'sustained and always double irony'.<sup>28</sup> Critics of the 1950s, such as Kemp Malone, John Speirs and Raymond Preston, tended to reflect these new interests in their focus on Chaucer's language, while W. K. Wimsatt considered the nature of Chaucer's poetry in his study *The Verbal Icon* (1954). These studies emphasize technical aspects of Chaucer's poetry, often in relation to the French and Italian poetry that informed it. Typical of this period in its immensely scholarly attention to language and literary context is J. A. W. Bennett's monumental study of the *Parliament of Fowls* (1957; see p. 96), which reflects too the shift in critical interest to Chaucer's early dream vision poetry. By the later 1950s and 1960s,

however, critical interest had shifted further to the topics of ambiguity and irony central to New Criticism: Muscatine contextualizes his own approach, writing, 'Our own generation has necessarily its peculiar sensibility. To use such terms as "irony", "ambiguity", "tension", and "paradox" in describing Chaucer's poetry is to bring to the subject our typical mid-century feeling for an unresolved dialectic.'<sup>29</sup> Although the difficulty of Chaucer's language made him a less popular subject for writers like Leavis, his evident love of irony, questioning tone and frequently unresolved texts rendered him a promising candidate for medievalists interested in the New Criticism. The widespread and radical shift within English and American critical tradition thus inspired a range of New Critical studies, which emphasized the exposition of poetic complexities – irony, ambiguity, organic unity.

This challenge to the positivist historicist emphasis of earlier critics resulted in a critical backlash, for while Chaucerians such as Muscatine, James I. Wimsatt, who published an influential study of *Chaucer and the French Love Poets* (1968), and Donaldson were deeply scholarly in their approach and most interested in the intertextuality of Chaucer's writing, other critics could seem to remove Chaucer from his historical context into a world governed only by the nuances of language and effects of ambiguity and irony. The New Criticism was thus opposed by the critic D. W. Robertson, Jr, who espoused a 'new historicism' of a specifically exegetical kind; Robertson and his followers offered exceedingly scholarly but exclusively allegorical interpretations in search of a 'medieval aesthetic' centred on the divine.<sup>30</sup> Robertson's approach could not be further from that of Kittredge or his predecessors, with their love of Chaucer's genial realism. For Robertson, 'all medieval literature is, like the Bible, designed to promote Charity (*caritas*) and condemn Cupidity (*cupiditas*)',<sup>31</sup> all medieval works are didactic and allegorical, aiming to expose the 'kernel' of truth, to separate the wheat from the chaff. Robertson employed examples from both classical and medieval literature and iconography to justify his approach, offering a new perspective on medieval aesthetics and the medieval imagination. He argues powerfully for the historical approach: writing of the *Book of the Duchess*, for instance, he states, 'What does Chaucer's poem, then, mean to us? It means nothing at all in so far as "emotional profundity" or "serious thought" are concerned unless we can place ourselves by an act of the historical imagination in Chaucer's audience, allowing ourselves, as best we can, to think as they thought and to feel as they felt.'<sup>32</sup> Yet his approach leads to some awkward and unpersuasive readings: it is difficult, for example, to subscribe to his moral reading of *Troilus and Criseyde* as 'the tragedy of every mortal sinner'. Robertson writes of Troilus, 'His fall is an echo of the fall of Adam. When his senses are moved, he proceeds to indulge in "pleasurable thought," allowing his lower reason to be corrupted as he cooperates with Pandarus in deceits and lies.'<sup>33</sup> Not only does Robertson

portray Troilus as seemingly unaware of his manipulation by Pandarus, but also it is precisely his love for Criseyde that moves him to a sublime state, in which he composes hymns in celebration of divine love – the reverse of corruption. Robertson's disciple Bernard F. Huppé presents a similarly rigid moral reading of the *Canterbury Tales*: 'it is the end "for oure doctrine" toward which all the tales have been moving'. Huppé argues explicitly against the traditional view of Chaucer as genial, humane realist: 'To realize the pilgrims only for their warm humanity is to realize only a fraction of their reality, for they are seen in Chaucer's vision of humanity as human souls on a perilous journey, in which each action and each word have consequences terrifyingly absolute.'<sup>34</sup> This exegetical reading of the *Canterbury Tales* seems as limited as that which it opposes, the tales as 'roadside drama'. The dangers of the Robertsonian mode are memorably captured in E. T. Donaldson's essay, 'Designing a Camel: Or, Generalizing the Middle Ages': 'the image of the Middle Ages now current looks like a camel achieved by a Committee on Medieval Studies trying to design a horse'.<sup>35</sup> Donaldson demonstrates the need for a sophisticated critical engagement that allows for exceptions and originality, so that Chaucer may be seen as questioning and creating rather than simply preaching.

Reactions against the ahistoricism of the New Criticism also produced less radical, more fruitful, approaches, which followed in the footsteps of scholars such as Lewis, Bennett, Muscatine and Wimsatt, but often took a more questioning perspective. In the 1960s the study of Chaucer's poetics was reformulated: Robert Jordan in his influential book *Chaucer and the Shape of Creation* (1967), for example, aimed to contextualize Chaucer as both writing within and responding to the literary and aesthetic assumptions of his time. The 1970s brought a revival of interest in literary and cultural history: Chaucer was once again placed in his own social context, though often in ways radically different from the earlier historical studies of Manly or Lewis. Over the next few decades this 'new historicism' produced a large number of influential works which treated Chaucer's writings in light of other medieval literature and theories of rhetoric and poetics, but also examined related discourses and topics such as natural philosophy (medieval science), astronomy, law, theology and epistemology.<sup>36</sup> Biographical studies were reformed to produce more ideologically engaged contextual studies of Chaucer and his age, such as the various works of Derek Brewer, Donald R. Howard's comprehensive *Chaucer and the Medieval World* (1987) and Derek Pearsall's excellent, questioning *Life of Chaucer* (1992). Traditional source studies were replaced by more wide-ranging works on intertextuality (literary and intellectual), such as those of Robert P. Miller on the *Canterbury Tales* (1977), N. R. Havelly on *Troilus* (1980), and B. A. Windeatt on Chaucer's dream poetry (1982). Miller powerfully argues for the need to see Chaucer, like other

medieval writers, 'as part of a tradition of "authority" reaching back through their immediate literary predecessors to the great "clerks" of classical antiquity, and, indeed, to the six days of Creation'.<sup>37</sup> At the same time, interesting new writing was produced on the relation of literature to music, art and iconography.<sup>38</sup> New scholarship on Chaucer's language also continued to be undertaken.<sup>39</sup>

With the increasing popularity of critical theory in the 1980s, Chaucer studies were opened out still further.<sup>40</sup> Most influential of all were the Marxist and sociological approaches of the 'new historicism' advocated by Stephen Greenblatt. The notion of all social phenomena as historically determined, and hence, as products of the ruling ideologies of any given time, offered a new way of placing Chaucer's writing; this approach also opened up possibilities of revisionist readings for feminist critics.<sup>41</sup> Contemporary Chaucer criticism has also taken account of a range of other branches of critical theory: reception theory, reader response theory, semiotics and linguistic philosophy, deconstruction and psychoanalytic theory, gender theory and speech act theory. The tradition of serious, historically informed scholarship has always been sustained, as, for example, in works such as David Burnley's *The Language of Chaucer* (1983) and J. Kerkhof's *Studies in the Language of Geoffrey Chaucer* (1982). A great deal more has been written on the literary contexts of Chaucer's writing, from classical to medieval.<sup>42</sup> The best of recent Chaucer criticism combines the scholarship of traditional approaches with the questioning self-consciousness of postmodern theory. Recent incisive contextual studies include that of Peter Brown and Andrew Butcher, *The Age of Saturn* (1991), and Lillian M. Bisson's *Chaucer and the Late Medieval World* (1998).<sup>43</sup> Christopher Cannon's *The Making of Chaucer's English* (1998) uses speech act theory to examine the development, originality and reception of Chaucer's language, and challenge the notion that Chaucer created English as a literary language. Perhaps it is not surprising that the writings of Chaucer, himself a literary critic who questions and undercuts his own writings through his self-conscious use of form, genre and text, lend themselves extraordinarily well to the interests of postmodernism even while they remain rich with possibility for the historian.

Yet it should not be forgotten that much postmodern criticism takes for granted and builds upon the work of earlier critics and scholars even while dismissing their approaches as outdated: in their ways, men like C. S. Lewis and G. L. Kittredge are the giants on whose shoulders Chaucer criticism has been raised. For instance, although Lewis's discussion of 'courtly love' is problematic, the recognition of medieval notions of *fin'amors* is essential to any study of romance writing, and it is to Lewis, too, that the influential notion of Criseyde's fear and vulnerability may be traced.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, while Kittredge can often seem patronizing and simplistic in his character study and

humane praise of Chaucer, no study of the *Canterbury Tales* fails to engage in some way with his notion of a 'marriage group' of tales. Even D. W. Robertson's allegorical readings, though frequently constrictive, provide a salutary reminder of medieval scholarship and the religious world in which medieval literature is necessarily grounded. In one way or another, contemporary criticism inevitably rests upon, remakes and responds to that of the great Chaucerians of the early twentieth century.

There is such a plethora of criticism on Chaucer that selection is extremely difficult. The following chapters offer discussion of central aspects of Chaucer's major writings (the dream vision poems, *Troilus and Criseyde* and the *Canterbury Tales*), a summary of critical approaches to each, and discussion of and extracts from a range of critical works. Brief references are given to related reading. The bibliography gives full details of all works cited and some further reading, including useful journal articles, as well as essential reference tools, such as bibliographical guides, journals and websites. Particularly useful are John Leyerle and Anne Quick's *Chaucer: A Bibliographical Introduction* (1986), the *Chaucer Bibliographies* series, and the bibliography contained in yearly issues of *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*. Anne Rooney offers a helpful *Guide Through the Critical Maze* (1989). The *Oxford Guides to Chaucer* series provides invaluable introductions to the *Shorter Poems* (Alistair Minnis, 1995), *Troilus and Criseyde* (Barry Windeatt, 1992) and the *Canterbury Tales* (Helen Cooper, 1989). The *Oxford Companion to Chaucer Studies* (Beryl Rowland, 1979) and the *Cambridge Chaucer Companion* (Piero Boitani and Jill Mann, 1986) offer useful collections of introductory essays on texts and contexts. Christian K. Zacher and Paul E. Szarmach are currently editing a new series, *Basic Readings in Chaucer and his Time*, which combines influential critical essays with some new studies.<sup>45</sup> The anthologies of Burrow, Schoeck and Taylor, cited above, contain helpful collections of earlier criticism, as does that of George Economou (1975); the *Casebook* (J. J. Anderson, 1974) and *New Casebook* series (Valerie Allen and Ares Axiotis, 1997) comprise critical essays on the *Canterbury Tales*.<sup>46</sup> Derek Brewer's *A New Introduction to Chaucer* (1998), discussed below, provides an approachable way into Chaucer.<sup>47</sup>

## Notes

- 1 See also Alice S. Miskimin's study of the reception of Chaucer in this period, *The Renaissance Chaucer* (Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, 1975).
- 2 J. A. Burrow, *Geoffrey Chaucer: A Critical Anthology* (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1969). 66–7.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 77.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 101.

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- 5 'Chaucer and the Renaissance' (1912) in Burrow, *Geoffrey Chaucer*, 111.
- 6 The first editions are by Caxton (1476 and 1482), Wynkyn de Worde, Caxton's assistant (1498), and Pynson (1492 and 1526). Thynne's edition is the basis for those of John Stow (1561) and Thomas Speght (1598, revised 1602 and 1687), who adds a glossary, biography, notes and 'arguments'. Material from these later editions is included in D. S. Brewer's facsimile of Thynne's edition, *Geoffrey Chaucer, The Works, 1532...* (Scolar Press, London, 1969).
- 7 L. D. Benson, 'A Reader's Guide to Writings on Chaucer' in Derek Brewer, ed., *Geoffrey Chaucer* (London, Bell, 1974), 326.
- 8 Further editions had been produced by Thomas Wright and the Percy Society (1847–51).
- 9 For early studies of dating and order, see, for example, the editions of Skeat and Robinson; Skeat, *The Chaucer Canon* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1900); and John S. P. Tatlock, *The Development and Chronology of Chaucer's Works* (Kegan Paul, Trench and Trübner, London, 1907); on language, see, for example, Joseph Mersand, *Chaucer's Romance Vocabulary* (Comet Press, New York, 1937).
- 10 *Ibid.*, 2.
- 11 See, for example, Morton W. Bloomfield, 'Chaucer's Sense of History' (1952) in *Essays and Exploration: Studies in Ideas, Language and Literature* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1970); Walter Clyde Curry, *Chaucer and the Mediaeval Sciences* (Barnes and Noble, New York, 1960 [1926]); A. C. Cawley, ed., *Chaucer's Mind and Art* (Oliver and Boyd, Edinburgh, 1969); Chauncey A. Wood, *Chaucer and the Country of the Stars* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1970); Beryl Rowland, *Blind Beasts: Chaucer's Animal World* (Kent State University Press, Kent, OH, 1971); J. D. North, *Chaucer's Universe*, revd edn (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1988); see also the various essays on medieval learning in Brewer, *Geoffrey Chaucer*, and Beryl Rowland, *Companion to Chaucer Studies* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1979).
- 12 Thomas R. Lounsbury, *Studies in Chaucer: His Life and Writings* (James R. Osgood, McIlvaine, London, 1892 [1891]), III, 444–5.
- 13 George Lyman Kittredge, *Chaucer and His Poetry* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1970 [1915]), 154–5.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 156.
- 15 Kittredge, 'Chaucer's Discussion of Marriage' (1911–12) in Richard J. Schoeck and Jerome Taylor, *Chaucer Criticism*, 2 vols (University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, IN, 1960–1), I, 157.
- 16 G. K. Chesterton, *Chaucer*. 2nd edn (Faber and Faber, London, 1948), 20.
- 17 John Livingston Lowes, *Geoffrey Chaucer and the Development of his Genius* (Houghton Mifflin, Boston; Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1934, 1944), 160, 162.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 164.
- 19 See also Coghill's study, *The Poet Chaucer* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1949).
- 20 C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1936), 161, 174. See also Lewis's study of medieval and Renaissance literature, *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1964).

- 21 Lewis, *The Allegory of Love*, 2.
- 22 Ibid., 42–43.
- 23 Ibid., 43.
- 24 E. Talbot Donaldson, 'The Myth of Courtly Love' (1965) in *Speaking of Chaucer* (Athlone Press, London, 1970), 155.
- 25 Ibid., 155–6.
- 26 For a sensitive treatment of 'the social and emotional dimensions' (p. 1) of medieval marriage, which argues against the predominant association of love with adultery in the literature of the period, see Neil Cartlidge, *Medieval Marriage: Literary Approaches, 1100–1300* (D. S. Brewer, Cambridge, 1997), in particular 1–32.
- 27 C. S. Lewis, 'What Chaucer Really Did to *Il Filostrato*' (1932) in Schoeck and Taylor, *Chaucer Criticism*, II, 17.
- 28 William Empson, *The Structure of Complex Words* (Chatto and Windus, London, 1951): Burrow, *Geoffrey Chaucer*, 160. See also Germaine Dempster's full-length study of *Dramatic Irony in Chaucer* (Humanities Press, New York, 1959).
- 29 Charles Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition: A Study in Style and Meaning* (University of California Press, Berkeley), 9–10; also quoted by Burrow, *Geoffrey Chaucer*, 116.
- 30 See, for example, D. W. Robertson, Jr, *A Preface to Chaucer: Studies in Medieval Perspectives* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1969 [1962]); see also Robertson's historical study, *Chaucer's London* (John Wiley and Sons, New York, 1968).
- 31 L. D. Benson, 'A Reader's Guide to Writings on Chaucer' in Brewer, *Geoffrey Chaucer*, 349.
- 32 D. W. Robertson, Jr, 'The Historical Setting of Chaucer's Book of the Duchess', *Essays in Medieval Culture* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1980), 255–6.
- 33 D. W. Robertson, Jr, 'Chaucerian Tragedy' (1952) in Schoeck and Taylor, *Chaucer Criticism*, II, 118.
- 34 Bernard F. Huppé, *A Reading of the 'Canterbury Tales'* (State University of New York, Albany, 1964), 239, 241.
- 35 E. Talbot Donaldson, 'Designing a Camel: Or, Generalizing the Middle Ages', *Tennessee Studies in Literature* 22 (1977), 1–16: 1.
- 36 Influential works on rhetoric and poetics include Joerg O. Fichte, *Chaucer's 'Art Poetical': A Study in Chaucerian Poetics* (Gunter Narr, Tübingen, 1980); Earle Birney, *Essays on Chaucerian Irony* (University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1985).
- 37 Robert P. Miller, ed., *Chaucer: Sources and Backgrounds* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1977), 3. Studies of the influence of classical writing on Chaucer include John M. Fyler, *Chaucer and Ovid* (Yale University Press, New Haven, CT 1979) and Bernard L. Jefferson, *Chaucer and the 'Consolation of Philosophy' of Boethius* (Gordion Press, New York, 1968 [1917]); studies of the Italian influence include Piero Boitani, *Chaucer and Boccaccio* (Society for the Study of Medieval Languages and Literature, Oxford, 1977).

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- 38 See, for example, on music, John Stevens, *Music and Poetry in the Early Tudor Court* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1979) and Nigel Wilkins, *Music in the Age of Chaucer* (D. S. Brewer, Cambridge 1995); on art and iconography, V. A. Kolve, 'Chaucer and the Visual Arts' in Brewer, *Geoffrey Chaucer and Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative: The First Five Canterbury Tales* (Edward Arnold, London, 1984).
- 39 See, for example, Paul F. Baum, *Chaucer's Verse* (Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 1961), Ian Robinson, *Chaucer's Prosody: A Study of the Middle English Verse Tradition* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1971), Ralph W. V. Elliott, *Chaucer's English* (André Deutsch, London, 1974), Helge Kökeritz, *A Guide to Chaucer's Pronunciation* (University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1978 [1961]), Norman Davis, *A Chaucer Glossary* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1979), G. H. Roscow, *Syntax and Style in Chaucer's Poetry* (Rowman and Littlefield, Totowa, NJ, 1981), and Stephen Knight's study of language and meaning, *Rymymg Craftily: Meaning in Chaucer's Poetry* (Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1973).
- 40 See Donald M. Rose's early collection of essays addressing the possibilities raised for Chaucer scholars by new theoretical strategies, *New Perspectives in Chaucer Criticism* (Pilgrim Books, Norman, OK, 1981).
- 41 Different approaches will be discussed at more length in subsequent sections. New historical approaches include: David Aers, *Chaucer* (Harvester, Brighton, 1986) and *Community, Gender and Individual Identity* (Routledge, London, 1988), Paul Strohm, *Social Chaucer* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1989), Lee C. Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History* (Routledge, London, 1991); studies of rhetoric and poetics: Rita Copeland, *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics and Translation in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991) and Leonard Michael Koff, *Chaucer and the Art of Storytelling* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1988); feminist approaches: Carolyn Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* (University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 1989), Priscilla Martin, *Chaucer's Women: Nuns, Wives and Amazons* (University of Iowa Press, Iowa City, 1990), Jill Mann, *Geoffrey Chaucer* (Harvester Wheatsheaf, New York, 1991), Elaine Tuttle Hansen, *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1992); psychoanalytical and deconstructionist studies: Judith Ferster, *Chaucer on Interpretation* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1985), H. Marshall Leicester, Jr, *The Disenchanted Self: Representing the Subject in the Canterbury Tales* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1990); and the various recent articles of Louise Fradenburg and R. A. Shoaf.
- 42 On classical influences, see A. J. Minnis, *Chaucer's 'Boece' and the Medieval Tradition of Boethius* (D. S. Brewer, Cambridge, 1993) and Michael A. Calabrese, *Chaucer's Ovidian Arts of Love* (University Press of Florida, Gainesville, 1994); on Italian influences, Howard H. Schless, *Chaucer and Dante* (Pilgrim Books, Norman, OK, 1984), David Wallace, *Chaucer and the Early Writings of Boccaccio* (D. S. Brewer, Woodbridge, 1985), Carla Taylor, *Chaucer Reads the 'Divine Comedy'* (Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA, 1989), Piero Boitani, *The European Tragedy of Troilus* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1989), Michael G. Hanly, *Boccaccio, Beauvau, Chaucer: 'Troilus and Criseyde'* (Pilgrim Books, Norman, OK, 1990) and



- Richard Neuse, *Chaucer's Dante* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1991); on French influences, Barbara Nolan, *Chaucer and the Tradition of the Roman Antique* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992); on the Bible, David Lyle Jeffrey, *Chaucer and Scriptural Tradition* (University of Ottawa Press, Ottawa, 1984); on clerical tradition, Ann Astell, *Chaucer and the Universe of Learning* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 1996); on theology and natural philosophy, Norm Klassen, *Chaucer on Love, Knowledge and Sight* (D. S. Brewer, Cambridge, 1995); and on medieval reception, Seth Lerer, *Chaucer and His Readers* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1993).
- 43 See also Brown's *Chaucer at Work: The Making of the Canterbury Tales* (Longman, London, 1994) and S. H. Rigby, *Chaucer in Context: Society, Allegory and Gender* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1996).
- 44 See Lewis's discussion, *The Allegory of Love*, 182–90.
- 45 Two volumes in this series have been published: Daniel J. Pinti, ed., *Writing After Chaucer: Essential Readings in Chaucer and the Fifteenth Century* (Garland, New York, 1998), and William A. Quinn, ed., *Chaucer's Dream Visions and Shorter Poems* (Garland, New York, 1999); see also Thomas Hahn, ed., *Chaucer's Readership in the Twentieth Century* (Garland, New York, 2000) and G. A. Rudd, ed., *A Complete Critical Guide to Chaucer* (Garland, New York, 2001).
- 46 For discussion of the numerous other introductory works and anthologies of criticism on the *Canterbury Tales*, see chapter 8, p. 193.
- 47 See also Brewer's useful collection of essays, *Tradition and Innovation in Chaucer* (Macmillan, London, 1982).