



THE CHAUCER NEWSLETTER

A Publication of The New Chaucer Society

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Summer, 1981

THIRD CONGRESS SET

The third International Congress of the New Chaucer Society will be held April 15-18, 1982, at the Sir Francis Drake Hotel in San Francisco, California.

According to the Program Chairpersons, Penn Szittyá (Georgetown University) and Donald K. Fry (State University of New York, Stony Brook), the program of events will have three differing presentations. The Annual Chaucer Lecture will be given by Jill Mann (Girton College, Cambridge University), and the Presidential Address will be given by John H. Fisher (University of Tennessee). Each of these addresses will be given on a designated day at a mid-day luncheon. Also on the program will be three plenary sessions, each focusing on a major theme. Chaucer's Audience and Language will be chaired by Paul Strohm (Indiana University); Chaucer and Wycliff will be chaired by David Jeffrey (University of Ottawa); and Chaucer's Manuscripts and Mind will be chaired by Jerome Taylor (University of Wisconsin).

The third part of the program will feature presentation of papers on a variety of topics. The papers will be delivered at the following sessions:

Exegetical Approaches — Chairperson: Joe Wittig (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill)

Chaucer and the Continent — Chairperson: Ann Middleton (University of California, Berkeley)

Visual Chaucer—Chairperson: John Fleming (Princeton University)

The Canterbury Tales—Chairperson: Robert apRoberts (California State University, Northridge)

Troilus and Criseyde—Chairperson: John McCall (University of Cincinnati)

Prose and Shorter Poems — Chairperson: Michael Cherniss (University of Kansas)

Papers on these topics are still being accepted. However, interested contributors must send finished papers to Program Chairperson Donald Fry on or before 15 October 1981. Notification of acceptance will be given by late November.

Arrangements Chairperson Janette Richardson (University of California,

Berkeley) will send reservation cards for the Sir Francis Drake Hotel to all members of the Society in the next issue of the Chaucer Newsletter. Members interested in staying at the hotel should return their reservation cards to the hotel no later than 15 March 1982. Registration fees and room rates will be given in the next issue of the Newsletter.

Contemporary Literary Theory and Chaucer

Judson Boyce Allen

If one wishes, in our own time, to understand medieval lyric, one inevitably must read Paul Zumthor, who would certainly qualify as a person involved in, and representing, contemporary literary theory. When I did so, I found, among many other helpful statements, the following: The *grand chant courtois*, Zumthor says, "est un mode de dire entièrement référé à un *je* qui, tout en fixant le plan et les modalités du discours, n'a d'autre existence pour nous que grammaticale."¹

This statement raised for me an extremely fruitful question. If the "I" of the lyric has no existence except grammatical, then what is the nature of grammatical existence? I went to the medieval grammarians, and in their writings I found that pronouns have "substance without quality." Further, I found that first and second person pronouns — those, of course, normal to lyric — are demonstrative rather than only relative, and so signify something present or as if present. In this discussion there is a strong sense of the metaphysical. Something substantial is at stake. The medieval lyric "I" or lyric ego exists grammatically by being a substance which, as uttered, has a presence inviting qualification — inviting occupation. The medieval love lyric enacts the state of being in love, and so defines that state for any given lover. Modern lovers who play or hear "their song" submit their emotions to a normative definition which we would doubtless call sub-poetic. Medieval aristocratic courtly lovers had both a better love poetry and a

higher respect for the normative. Their respect was, in part, provided for them and grounded for them by their grammar.²

This experience I take as a critical parable for our discussion. I am a person who knows rather more about literary theory contemporary with Chaucer than I do about the literary theory of my own day. But when I do read modern literary theory — the structuralists and the deconstructors, the phenomenologists and the hermeneuticists and the linguists — the array which Professor Bloomfield has defined for us — I very often find myself sent back to the Middle Ages with a new and fruitful question. But when I study the medieval evidence I usually make a discovery about medieval literature which contradicts the modern critic who pointed me toward it. In this case of the *grand chant courtois*, I was stimulated by a remark about textuality to find, in medieval lyric, a mode of utterance which was at once referential and normative.

The same thing, of course, happens with Chaucer. I began impressed with Foucault's analysis of Borges' Chinese encyclopedia — that bizarre system for the classification of animals.³ Having read Foucault, I was able to suppose that I might expect a similar "alterity" as the ground of the *Canterbury Tales*. When I looked at medieval classification systems, I found no category corresponding to our modern "literature." But when I gave that up, in considerable surprise, I did find medieval ways of classifying tale collections, and the tales collected in them. By medieval norms Chaucer turns out to be a brilliant normative social theorist.⁴

Contemporary literary theory is, in essence, as Professor Bloomfield has told us, a discussion of language. It is concerned with signs, with the structures

(continued on page 2)

Editors

Daniel J. Ransom,
Indiana State University

J. Lane Goodall,
University of Oklahoma

Lynne H. Levy,
University of Oklahoma

Contemporary Literary Theory (continued from page 1)

which signs generate, with their interpretation, and, I fear, with the solipsism which provides for much of this enterprise both its field of reality and its Archimedean fulcrum point. At one end, this expanse of theory includes the anthropology of Levi-Strauss, which subsumes vast patterns of real human behavior under linguistic metaphors. At the other, the Marxists and the Freudians claim for words a material determinism. But it is all a web of words. Living in this modern web of words forces the medievalist, as he reads the past, to expand his attention. Literature is more than *belles-lettres*—in fact, as I said, in medieval terms it is no longer literature at all. Modern preoccupations with language, and with heuristic metaphors of language, help the medievalist see that medieval poetry is also grounded in a world whose Being is linguistic—verbal. But once the medievalist looks at his subject under this linguistic axiom, he finds texts that refuse deconstruction. He must see, if he is willing to read medieval texts in a medieval way, that even the most nominalist ones preserve a foreclosure with Being. They exist as a desire to find some way of believing in the Being of universals. In preserving this foreclosure with Being, medieval texts utterly contradict Derrida's desire to cauterize out of language all possibility of platonic utterance.

Again, modern Hermeneutik makes us conscious of the power and responsibility of reading, of critical attitude, of—most generally—points of view. This consciousness not only sharpens our attention to Chaucer's ironic narrators and ultimately to the authorial voice which the text generates.⁵ More important, if we are honest, it leads us to the abundant surviving documentation of medieval reading, to which Professor Minnis has called our attention, and which we are only beginning to bring to the attention of modern scholarship.⁶ From this documentation—from medieval commentaries on texts being taken as literary—we can reconstruct the medieval point of view and its way of reading. And then we can know how to read Chaucer's ironic authority in a way not at all like that practiced by modern deconstructors.

Again, modern notions of textuality, which give maximum scope to the critic to read in an infinitely various field, following the infinite codes with which a text is saturated, make us expect multiple and shifting meanings in medieval texts. And the texts respond. Of Chaucer's strategies, Josipovici makes, in these terms, a brilliant modernist reading.⁷ This reading he contrasts with

Dante's more dependable truth. Even in Dante, of course, there are unstable ironies, and images that fail.⁸ But if Dante's words enact provisionally their unstable ironies, or even a nihilism, it is only to make evidence of precisely that fallen condition which the enacting words seek, by expressing, to redeem. Medieval texts are polysemous, but only within structures which permit one to raise problems like those of modern deconstruction safely. Even when medieval texts force these problems on our attention, and they do, it is only to show that they are being raised by words which have the power to solve them.

I must admit that Chaucer had his own problems with what he would have considered an inheritance from Platonism. Like Dante,⁹ who quoted his own *dolce stil nuovo* in his *Commedia* in order to repent of it and transcend it, Chaucer had to recover from idealizing love poetry in order to discover a valid voice. This recovery, as it is documented in the *Book of the Duchess*, Professor Shoaf has analyzed in great and convincing detail.¹⁰ That the problem was persistent, Professor Vance has shown us in his discussion of the *Troilus*.¹¹ Chaucer, in working for this recovery, was not moving into a language which was useful because, in the modern idiom, he could keep it unenclosed. Just the reverse. Chaucer was moving from a language—the language of idealizing love—which was paralyzing precisely because he could not make it vitally referential. He was moving toward that great achievement of the *Canterbury Tales*—exemplarity—that collection of material particulars of human life and action in which and from which universal truths can be conceived. He was trying to move, in short, from the unenclosable to the happily foreclosed. However, though Chaucer's goal is the opposite of the modern one, he does begin, in the *Book of the Duchess*, in the predicament which modern theory has for the first time described with sufficient violence and terror. Our achievement of this description, of course, makes us particularly qualified to profit from what Chaucer did with it.

One final observation. If there has been any one discovery which characterizes our times, it is, as Josipovici puts it, that the "world is not 'given' but depends on the kind of assumptions we bring to it." (p. xiv) We have made this discovery simultaneously in science, philosophy, and art, and we have been led by this discovery to fundamental alterations of the worlds we once thought so objective and so safe. In art—from painting to sculpture to the novel—we have become anti-representational. We have called into question the validity of the whole realistic tradition, from its

roots in Renaissance mimesis to its apogee in nineteenth-century realistic fiction. Having made this discovery, we have by definition removed from between ourselves and the Middle Ages a definitive barrier—that of the whole mimetic, Cartesian, subject-object, scientific, realistic world. Medieval people had not yet thought of it. We now no longer have to think from within it. We are beginning again to use the heuristic metaphor of language in a way which formally at least resembles the medieval. This is happening even in such barbaric fields as sociology—most eminently in the work of Erving Goffman, whom I should certainly want to add to our array of contemporary literary theorists.¹²

We are, in short, being qualified by contemporary literary theory to begin to ask medieval questions of medieval texts, and to ask those questions as if they were simply our own, directly, without having to break through the barrier of an intervening mimetic world. As we do, we have the great good fortune to be able to expect from Chaucer, and of course from Dante and Langland and Chrétien and Malory and all the rest as well, a medieval answer.

Marquette University

NOTES

This article is a redaction of a position statement given at the Chaucer Society's Second Congress.

1. *Langue, texts, énigme* (Paris, 1975), p. 171.

2. I deal with these matters in detail in "Grammar, Poetic Form, and the Lyric Ego," in *Vernacular Poetics in the Middle Ages*, ed. Lois Ebin, forthcoming.

3. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York, 1973), p. xv.

4. For a full account of this position, see my book, *A Distinction of Stories: The Medieval Unity of Chaucer's Fair Chain of Narratives for Canterbury* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1981), written in collaboration with Theresa Anne Moritz.

5. H. Marshall Leicester, Jr., "The Art of Impersonation: A General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*," *PMLA*, 95 (1980), 213-224. This article had a particular presence because it appeared shortly before the Congress met.

6. I am happy to thank A. J. Minnis for having let me read the manuscript of his book, *Medieval Theory of Authorship: Scholastic Literary Attitudes in the Later Middle Ages*. Its central evidence is drawn from materials in exegesis. I deal with the evidence of literary commentaries in *The Ethical Poetic of the Later Middle Ages: A Decorum of Convenient Distinction*, now forthcoming with the University of Toronto Press.

7. Gabriel Josipovici, *The World and the Book: A Study of Modern Fiction* (Stanford, 1971), pp. 52-99.

8. The magisterial treatment of this aspect of Dante's art is Giuseppe Mazzotta, *Dante, Poet of the Desert: History and Allegory in the Divine Comedy*, (Princeton, 1979).

9. Marguerite Mills Chiarenza's review, "The Singleton Paradiso," *Dante Studies*, 96 (1978), 207-212, rightly points out that the habit of glossing Dante with Aquinas needs to be corrected with awareness also of his platonism.

10. R. A. Shoaf's dissertation, in addition to providing a persuasive explication of the *Book of the Duchess*, is the best full study of Chaucer's theoretical attitude toward poetry. See "Mutatio Amoris: Revision and Penitence in Chaucer's *The Book of the Duchess*," (Cornell University, 1977).

11. Eugene Vance, "Mervelous Signals: Poetics, Sign Theory, and Politics in Chaucer's *Troilus*," *New Literary History*, 10 (Winter, 1979), 293-337.

12. See especially his *Relations in Public: Microstudies of the Public Order* (New York, 1972), and *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Cambridge, Mass., 1974).

NEW SERIES ANNOUNCED

MRTS announces the first three volumes of Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies.

Volume I is Frank Livingstone Huntley's *Bishop Joseph Hall and Protestant Meditation in Seventeenth-Century England: A Study, with Texts of The Art of Divine Meditation (1606) and Occasional Meditations (1633)*. Huntley provides an account of the distinctly Protestant mode of meditation in England, analyzes five characteristics of meditation, and places Hall in the literary and religious contexts of his time. The texts of *The Art* and *Occasional Meditations* are here edited for the first time in over a century.

Volume II is Brady B. Gilleland's translation of Johannes de Alta Silva's *Dolopathos: or the King and the Seven Wise Men*. This is the first English translation of the twelfth-century Latin *Dolopathos* which is the earliest extant

example of the western branch of *The Seven Sages* cycles. Gilleland provides important contexts for both the story itself and its framework tale of a lustful wife's accusations of attempted rape by her stepson.

Volume III is Albert Rabil, Jr.'s *Laura Cereta, Quattrocento Humanist*. Laura Cereta of Brescia, one of the few fifteenth-century women in letters, was a highly educated Humanist and sharp critic of the antifeminism in her society. The Book consists of three parts 1) an analysis of her life and thought 2) a study of the sources of information about her and 3) a critical edition of eleven unpublished letters and a mock funeral oration in honor of an ass.

Further inquiries about these and forthcoming volumes may be sent to: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, State University of New York, Binghamton, New York, 13901.

Progress Reports EARLY DRAMA, ART, AND MUSIC

A number of projects being prepared for Early Drama, Art, and Music are nearing completion, with publication by Medieval Institute Publications expected during the coming year. Published recently were *Music in the English Mystery Plays* by JoAnna Dutka (University of Toronto), Reference Series 2, and *The Quasi-Dramatic St. John Passions from Scandinavia and Their Medieval Background* by Audrey Ekdahl Davidson (Western Michigan University), Monograph Series 3. The *EDAM Newsletter*, now available in new format, is beginning its fourth year of publication.

Sponsored by The Medieval Institute at Western Michigan University, Early Drama, Art, and Music encourages interdisciplinary studies especially as they touch upon early drama. Special attention is being given to the art of England, with lists from various regions being placed on the computer for analysis. Inquiries should be directed to the Executive Editor, Clifford Davidson, The Medieval Institute, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, MI 49008.

RECORDS OF EARLY ENGLISH DRAMA

The third set of records in the REED series, the records of Coventry edited by R. W. Ingram is now in press. This volume provides the most detail so far of the

production of late medieval civic drama. Many guild records provide information about costumes, stage-effects such as earthquakes and the activities of the "Mother-of-Death" and "three side Marys." Well along in the editorial process are the records of Newcastle edited by J. J. Anderson documenting a Corpus Christi play in which the pageants were apparently carried and a renaissance custom of keeping a civic fool. Also close to completion is the edition of the renaissance records of Norwich edited by David Galloway that combine details of the activities and stipends of the Norwich waits with many references to visiting players. The records of the county of Berkshire that are being worked on

show much folk activity in May-games and Robin Hood plays but practically no interest in music. Conversely, it seems that most of the references collected by John Coldewey to "players" in Nottingham record, in fact, the work of musicians. As research continues old assumptions and generalizations are being called into question. A complex pattern of regional variation, itinerant quasi-professional entertainers and sturdy local custom is emerging. What is abundantly clear is that many forms of what we have tended to label "medieval drama" were still flourishing in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century.

A Calendar of Forthcoming Events 1981:

October 1-3, Southeastern Medieval Association, West Virginia University. Write: Patricia W. Cummins, Department of Foreign Languages, West Virginia University, Morgantown, WV 26506

October 15-16, St. Louis Conference on Manuscript Studies, St. Louis University. Write: Conference Committee, Pius XII Memorial Library, St. Louis University, 3655 W. Pine, St. Louis, MO 63108

October 16-17, Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies: Social Unrest in the Later Middle Ages, State University of New York, Binghamton. Write: Francis X. Newman, Conference Coordinator, State University of New York, Binghamton, NY 13901

November 7, Medieval and Renaissance Studies Pedagogy Conference: Event and Image, Barnard College. Write: Regina Ayre, Department of German, Milbank Hall, Barnard College, New York, NY 10027

November 20-21, Medieval Workshop: Medieval Drama to 1550, University of British Columbia. Write: Derek C. Carr, Department of Hispanic and Italian Studies, University of British Columbia, 258-1866 Main Hall, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada V6T 1W5

1982:

February 18-20, The annual meeting of The Medieval Association of the Pacific will be held at the Claremont Colleges, Claremont, California. In addition to the usual variety of papers on medieval topics, a portion of the Claremont program

has been set aside for studies devoted to *Piers the Plowman* or its background. This theme will of course interest many in the field of English, but this early announcement is intended to attract the attention of scholars in other fields, for whom additional lead time is obviously important. Deadline for submission of Claremont proposals will be November 1, 1981. Areas of interest in *Piers the Plowman* or its background solicited for the Claremont meeting are: allegory, Bible, computer, Dante, friars, history, influence (on later tradition), Latin, law, liturgy, meter, monasticism, rhetoric, satire, sources, textual criticism, theology, and Wyclif. A detailed proposal and summary of scholarship appears in the Fall 1980 issue of *Chronica*, and spells out what is meant by these categories in

relation to the text. A copy of this issue of *Chronica* can be obtained by writing to Professor Patrick Gallacher, Department of English, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM 87131. Proposals for the Claremont meeting should be mailed to Professor David C. Fowler, Department of English, University of Washington, Seattle, Washington 98195. On or about January 1, 1982, copies of the Claremont program, together with information about registration for the meeting, can be obtained by writing to Professor Barry Sanders, Department of English, Pitzer College, 1050 North Mills Avenue, Claremont, California 91711.

March 5-6, Third Biennial New College Conference on Medieval-

Renaissance Studies, Sarasota, Florida. *Call for Papers*: All disciplines, all aspects of Europe and the Mediterranean, 1000-1600 A.D. Special themes: urban studies, aristocratic culture and institutions, perceptions and ideals, Mediterranean region. Send one-page abstract to Professor Lee Snyder, Director of Medieval-Renaissance Studies, Division of Social Sciences, New College of USF, 5700 North Tamiami Trail, Sarasota, FL 33580, by December 1, 1981. Also, national undergraduate student paper contest: write for rules.

May 6-9, The Medieval Institute, Western Michigan University will hold the 17th International Congress on Medieval Studies at Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, Michigan.

Jack Arthur Walter Bennett 1911-81

Jack Bennett died suddenly on 29 January, 1981. He had just arrived at the house of some friends in Los Angeles, the first stop on what was to have been a visit to his native New Zealand. To those who had known him in the last few months of his life, the news of his death, though distressing, may not have come altogether as a surprise. Chronic ill-health for much of his life had noticeably weakened him during the previous year or two, particularly since the death, only a year before, of his wife, Gwyneth, to whom he was devoted. Her own protracted illness must have taken its toll of Jack himself.

Jack was one of the foremost medieval scholars of this century. Such works as *The Parlement of Foules* (1957), Chaucer's *Book of Fame* (1965), the splendid blend of history and literary criticism of *Chaucer at Oxford and Cambridge* (1974), the editions of *The Knight's Tale* and of *Piers Plowman*, are remarkable not just because of their massive erudition, but because a deep sense of humanity informs the literary criticism. Significantly, his inaugural lecture at Cambridge, dedicated to his old friend and colleague C. S. Lewis, was entitled *The Humane Medievalist*. And indeed, life and learning were to him as inseparable as they were to Renaissance scholars. Those whose privilege it was to know him will recall his totally unselfish sharing of scholarship, where in most cases Jack gave away far more than could possibly be returned; they will recall his study elbow-deep in notes and scraps of paper where the delving through the strata might yield the discovery of some item long-since lost, though not necessarily the object of the present quest! But in his vast personal library he knew exactly where to find any particular book. Memorable, too, is the splendid white hair, brightness of

eye, the tough, alert intellect which seemed to belie the frailty of the stooped body in the last few years. Not a few will have reason to feel grateful to him for his ready sympathy and wise advice in terms of anxiety.

Jack was born in 1911 in what he described as "a little wooden box of a house that like its neighbors was adorned by a front-verandah in fretwork, approached by a broad flight of wooden steps." His father had been converted to the Plymouth Brethren, and in that sect Jack was brought up. Though of his father he wrote, "He was neither priggish nor puritanical," there were to him less acceptable characteristics of the Brethren—"rapture and religiosity, severity and smugness"—which make his own conversion many years later to the Roman Catholic Church no great surprise. His freethinking brought him into occasional conflict with the authorities at Auckland University College, where he was an undergraduate contributor to *Open Windows*, a student Christian magazine that was considered rather too liberal. In a notebook of autobiographical jottings made during the past year or two, Jack describes his attitudes in the 'thirties as "vaguely revolutionary" and he goes on to say that his change of role to that of "defender of the status quo" in later life was because of the considerable change in English social attitudes over that period.

After Auckland, Jack went to Oxford, a city which was always to hold a special place in his affections. He studied at Merton College, first as a Commoner, then as a Harmsworth Senior Scholar. In 1938 he was elected to a Junior Research Fellowship at Queen's College, though he was posted to New York with the British Information Services for much of the tenure of that Fellowship. In 1947 he was elected Fellow and Tutor of Magda-

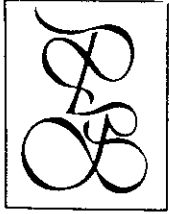
len College, where his reserve ideally complemented his more ebullient colleague, C. S. Lewis. In 1964 he followed Lewis to the Chair of Medieval and Renaissance Studies at Cambridge.

Though a shy and sensitive man, Jack was unafraid to denounce trendiness or half-baked thought. Perpetrators of the wilder excesses of critical theory might be the recipients of his rebuke; or the concern he had for the liturgy might provoke him to the attack. In an article written in 1975, he discussed the virtual displacement of the Tridentine Mass by the new rite. His irony was devastating: "Jacques Maritain's imprecations, not loud but deep, must stir even a cardinal's conscience," and later, ". . . in schools dogmatics are dropped in favour of Comparative Religion and Benedictines expound the virtues of Buddhism." But it was not change that Jack mistrusted, it was shoddiness; he himself made a facing-page translation of the Mass in a style which is, says the preface, "conformable to the long tradition of English liturgical prose."

Few people can have read so widely as Jack, or can have possessed such a retentive memory for what they have read. He was pre-eminently the right man to edit *Medium Aevum* for some twenty-five years. The critical notes in his medieval works often make references, apt and imaginative, to other areas of literature. His last book (the manuscript was happily completed a few weeks before he died) ranges over a millennium — from the Old English *Dream of the Rood* to the *Anathemata* of David Jones.

Jack is survived by his two sons, Edmund and Anselm. My last memory of him, a few days before he died, is his hunting up of an obscure reference while — simultaneously it appeared — drawing a picture for an infant grandchild. It remains for me a tableau of the humane medievalist.

Colin Wilcockson
Pembroke College, Cambridge.



Titles from Pilgrim Books



Laughter in the Courts of Love: Comedy in Allegory, by Frances McNeely Leonard. A refreshing and persuasively argued analysis of the ways in which allegorical structures, symbols, and devices coalesce with the comedic vision in matters of style and technique, articulating a highly complex vision of truth. Leonard's wide range of literary selections, from Chaucer's *House of Fame* to Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, corrects the traditional attitude that comedy and allegory are mutually exclusive, or that when they both appear in a single work, one becomes incidental or subordinate to the other.

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Available: Spring, 1982

Furnivall: Victorian Scholar Adventurer, by William Benzie. Rude, impetuous, tactless, but admired for his prodigious energies, Frederick Furnivall became, in the course of an amazing life, the prime mover of The Oxford English Dictionary, and the founder of The Early English Text Society (1864), The Ballad Society and The Chaucer Society (1868), The New Shakspeare Society (1873), The Browning Society and The Wyclif Society (1881), and The Shelley Society (1886). A fierce fighter for humanitarian causes, feeder of the poor, defender of women's rights, organiser of social events for working class students, and sculler supreme, Furnivall emerges from this rousing study as the scholar whose energy became the dynamo of 19th century English scholarship.

As a worthy successor to Elizabeth Murray's tribute to her grandfather James Murray, who became editor of the OED, *Caught in the Web of Words* (Yale, 1977), Benzie's study offers keen insight into the sometimes bizarre, always fascinating world of Victorian scholarship.

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