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 Sattya (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 Apt (University of California, Northridge)

Troylus 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."

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.

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 hermeneutics 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. 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.

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

Lynn 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 determination. 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. More important, if we are honest, it leads us to the understanding of the 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. From this documentation—from medieval commentaries on texts being taken as literature—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. This reading he contrasts with Dante’s more dependable truth. Even in Dante, of course, there are unstable ironies, and images that fail. 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, 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. That the problem was persistent, Professor Vance has shown us in his discussion of the Troilus. Chaucer, in working for this recovery, was not moving into a language which was useful because, in the modern idiom, he could keep it unforclosed. 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 unforclosed to the happily forclosed. 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.

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 Chaucer 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.


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.


5. H. Marshall McLuhan, Jr., “The Art of Impersonation: A General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales,” PMLA, 95 (1990), 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 Poetics of the Later Middle Ages: A Decorum of Convenent Distinction, now forthcoming with the University of Toronto Press.
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 Passion 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 49009.

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 Mary's." 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 stipes of the Nor- wich 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

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 an-
nouncement 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 1981 meeting are: allegory, Bible, com-
puter, Dante, friars, history, influence
(on later tradition), Latin, law, liturgy, meter, monasticism, rhetoric,
satire, sources, textual criticism, theol-
yogy, 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 Gallagher, Depar-
tment of English, University of New
Mexico, Albuquerque, NM 87131. Prop-
osals 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, to-
gether with information about registra-
tion for the meeting, can be obtained by
writing to Professor Barry Sanders, De-
partment of English, Pitzer College,
1050 North Mills Avenue, Claremont,
California 91711.

March 5-6, Third Biennial New Col-
lege Conference on Medieval-
Renaissance Studies, Sarasota, Florida.
Call for Papers: All disciplines, all as-
pects of Europe and the Mediterranean,
1000-1600 A.D. Special themes: urban
studies, aristocratic culture and institu-
tions, perceptions and ideals, Medi-
eranean 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
33550, by December 1, 1981. Also, na-
tional undergraduate student paper con-
test: write for rules.

May 6-9, The Medieval Institute, West-
ern Michigan University will hold the
17th International Congress on Medi-
eval Studies at Western Michigan Uni-
versity, 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 pro-
tracted 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 Cam-
bridge (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
titled 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 unself-
ish sharing of scholarship, where in most
cases Jack gave away far more than
could possibly be returned; they will re-
call his study elbow-deep in notes and
scraps of paper where the delving
through the strata might yield the dis-
coverv 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 stopped
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 de-
scribed as "a little wooden box of a house
that like its neighbors was adored 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 prig-
glish nor puritanical," there were to him
less acceptable characteristics of the
Brethren—"rapport and religiosity, sev-
erness and amugness"—which make his
own conversion many years later to the
Roman Catholic Church no great sur-
prise. 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 autobiographi-
cal 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 col-
league, C. S. Lewis. In 1964 he followed
Lewis to the Chair of Medieval and Re-
naissance Studies at Cambridge.

Though a shy and sensitive man, Jack
was unafraid to denounce trendiness or
half-baked thought. Perpetrators of the
wider excesses of critical theory might
be the recipients of his rebuke; or the
care 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 says, not aloud but
deep, must stir even a cardinal's con-
sience," and later, ". . . in schools
dogmatics are dropped in favour of Com-
parative Religion and Benedictines ex-
pound 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, "con-
formable to the long tradition of English
liturgical prose."

Few people can have read so widely as
Jack, or have possessed such a reten-
tive 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 hap-
pily 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, Ed-
mund 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 — draw-
ing a picture for an infant grandchild. It
remains for me a tableau of the humane
medievalist.

Colin Wilcockson
Pembroke College, Cambridge.
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 Queen, 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.
Cloth, $18.95

New Perspectives in Chaucer Criticism, edited by Donald M. Rose. Major statements by foremost Chaucerians underscore newly emerging trends in Chaucer scholarship. Topics in this volume range from the study of Chaucer in light of new critical approaches, the examination of Chaucer's relation to the arts of his time, to analyses of the rhetorical strategies employed by the poet.
Cloth, $21.95

Dante and Chaucer, by Howard Schless. An indispensable tool for the study of the influence of Dante upon Chaucer's growth and development as a poet. Howard Schless' monograph presents an extremely judicious and balanced view of the inter-relationships between the two poets. The study falls into two sections, the first of which presents an overview of the question of the degree and kinds of influence Dante has exerted upon Chaucer; the second presents in clear perspectives the loci in which the influence is actually present or is thought to be, with a thorough examination of the scholarship on each point. No book like it exists in the field of Italy's influence upon Chaucer. The book will fill a gap in a field which has waited long for just such a study.
ISBN 0-837664-59-6
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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 (1888), The New Shakspere 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.
Available Spring 1982

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