



THE CHAUCER NEWSLETTER

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Chaucer: The Life and Its Work

A generation ago, the cardinal sin in English studies was to use a poet's works as evidence about his life. But Chaucer's works are the prime evidence about his life: were it not for the works, we would not know him except as a name in the Calendar of Patent Rolls or a minor character in Froissart—he would be a less likely subject for a biography than, say, Nicholas Brembre, or Enguerrand de Coucy. I once wrote that no real biography of Chaucer could ever be written. No sooner was this printed that two biographies appeared—John Gardner's and Derek Brewer's—and they seemed as real as any other. I have revised my estimate of what a real biography is, and am writing one myself.

What seems to loom up as the overwhelming problem in writing a biography of Chaucer is the cold fact that we are never going to know the intimate details of Chaucer's life. But Chaucer didn't write literature of an intimate, personal kind—it wouldn't help us much to know such details. About Chaucer, compared with other medieval poets, we have a great deal of information, all readily at hand in *Chaucer Life-Records*, ed. Martin Crow and Claire Olson (1966). That great work of scholarship, to which we can never pay enough honor, came out in the twilight or what you might call the cocktail hour of the New Criticism, and for a decade it stood quietly at the edge of a very noisy crowd talking mostly about irony and ambiguity. But its very existence has helped recently to turn the emphasis in Chaucer studies in the direction of the life and its work. . .

A generation from now we will know more about Chaucer's life because we will have thought and written about it more. We will find more mistakes in what we know, as with the now obsolete date of the death of the Duchess Blanche. Someone, but not I, may even find more documents, not in England, which has been turned upside down, but in places Chaucer went to or passed through, Aquitaine, Flanders, Genoa, Florence, Milan, which have not to anyone's knowledge been searched in any systematic way. Or just to mention one of a dozen possibilities, and this I am pursuing, we may find that women's studies will help us understand something about Chaucer as yet ignored, his unusual interest in and empathy with women, especially victimized women.

No two of us would sit down before the *Life-Records* and write the same biography of Chaucer. But this is so of anyone's biography: no one knows anyone except in part, and most of us but slenderly know ourselves. My biography of Chaucer, as distinct from someone else's, focuses on Chaucer's development as an artist, on his works as they were first conceived and perceived. About this I have a thesis: that the one great central influence on Chaucer was Boccaccio, but that this influence was of the kind Harold Bloom described, a reaction *against* what he imagined Boccaccio was doing.

This is all interpretive, of course, and can't be proved; in this respect it is exactly like literary criticism, in fact *is* criticism. Do I conjecture in the first person the way Derek Brewer does so engagingly in *Chaucer and His World*? Never: I conjecture, but not in the first person.

In any biography conjecture is unavoidable: we have to adopt what seems probable, knowing that the improbable is also probable. According to one document, a safe-conduct, Chaucer went abroad in 1368—it doesn't say where—and returned on such dates that he could have traveled to Italy just after Prince Lionel's wedding in Milan. It seems probable that he went with the huge wedding party, was sent back to England and back again to Italy. He had been in Lionel's service; the wedding was the event of the season; a huge party went of which no list survives. Everything about the wedding and its aftermath is completely improbable—it sounds like a late-night movie—but *it's* all documented and must have happened.

A biography, by the conventions of the genre, is a narrative, a total picture that hangs together and makes sense; a life bumps on from day to day, has no meaning, is at the mercy of chance. We impose form on our own lives with inherited, shared ideas about youth or age, purpose or duty, out of motives of which we are often unconscious. Our remembered lives have form only because memory selects and shapes, as it also forgets and discards; our remembered lives—our unwritten autobiographies—are themselves conjectures.

What do we want in a biography of Chaucer? We want, whether we can have it or not, to see inside his mind, to see his age and his works as he saw them. But to see this, there are certain facts we would like to know and can't. Let me give an example. We would like to know if Chaucer, when he went to Italy,

1984 NCS Congress: Progress Report and Call for Papers

The Program Committee has selected topics and chairpersons for the paper-sessions to be held at the 1984 Congress. Several sessions arrived as complete proposals, including papers and topics, and will require no further submissions—though the chairs may be able to add some discussants. These complete sessions are listed first, and marked with an asterisk (*). The remaining sessions still seek papers and—in most cases— discussants.

- *Florence Ridley (UCLA): Chaucerians and Chaucer Contemporaries
- *Piero Boitani (University of Perugia): Chaucer and the Continent
- *A.S.G. Edwards (University of Victoria): Editing Chaucer
- *Lorraine Y. Baird (Youngstown State University): Chaucer and Medicine
- Sheila Delaney (Simon Fraser University): Sex and Gender in and around Chaucer's Work
- C. David Benson (University of Connecticut): *The Canterbury Tales*: Beginnings, Links, Endings
- Robert M. Jordan (University of British Columbia): Rhetoric and Chaucerian Narrative
- Kay Gilliland Stevenson (University of Essex): Manuscript Illustration
- Linda Ehrsam Voigts (University of Missouri-Kansas City): Chaucer and Science

The Program Committee is currently discussing two additional sessions—one to be organized by John McGavin (University of Southampton) and one possibly to be organized by A.C. Spearing (Cambridge University). Details of these sessions will be reported in the next *NCS Newsletter*.

Persons wishing to propose papers for any of these sessions should contact the chairpersons by 15 April 1983.

A special session has been arranged and remains open to participants. Charles Muscatine has agreed to chair a session on "Research in Progress," which will begin with brief reports and conclude with a discussion of current directions in Chaucer scholarship. We anticipate reports on such cooperative projects as the Variorum and the Chaucer Library, and we wish also to include reports on individual projects which promise important contributions to the study and understanding of Chaucer. Persons wishing to offer such reports should contact Paul Strohm (Department of English, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN 47405).

Chaucer Life Continued

met Petrarch and Boccaccio. We would like to know it because in his works we find, strangely, not a single mention of Boccaccio, yet we find that encomium to Petrarch in the Clerk's Prologue.

There are no documents, only probabilities and hunches. To speak first of probabilities: it's most improbable that he met Petrarch. He could have seen him from afar at Prince Lionel's wedding in Milan, but Petrarch was on that occasion too sick to be gladhanding the English squires, and Chaucer was too unimportant at twenty-five to get an introduction to the great man. Five years later when Chaucer went to Florence Petrarch was to inaccessible in war-torn Padua. It's a hundred times more probable that he met Boccaccio. The merchant bankers with whom he had his dealings in Florence were all reading the *Decameron* and all knew and revered Boccaccio, and Boccaccio was nearby at Certaldo.

Why then does Chaucer have the Clerk praise Petrarch but never once mention Boccaccio? Now to speak of hunches: it is, by my hunch, because Petrarch, whom he didn't meet, remained for him a distant figure, the legendary laureate poet. Boccaccio, whom he did meet, was a reality, and not perhaps a very pleasant one: a meeting between them, if we think of it, would almost certainly have been a disaster. They were different in age, temperament, health, nationality; Boccaccio at this time was old, fat, gloomy, sickly, probably quite incommunicable, and would surely have left a young admirer subtly let down if not brutally disillusioned. And who is to say old Boccaccio wouldn't have found young Chaucer overconfident, too Frenchified or courtly, or too ignorant of, among other things, Boccaccio's writings. Chaucer continued to emulate what works he knew or knew about by Boccaccio, because he knew a good thing when he saw it, but he conveniently forgot about the man.

This hunch is a reading—a reading of some circumstances presented by Chaucer's works, but a reading of the circumstances more than of the works. Such circumstances can help explain what a work or a passage was when it began its own life as part of literary tradition—explain its occasion or genesis, and some of its content of feeling. Each of Chaucer's own works has, since it was written, enjoyed a life of its own, of which we are a part, and they are ours now to edit, to interpret, to deconstruct or reconstruct, to discover each time we read them, as they were his then to invent. But they were his first. And as they exist now, each bears his imprint, each "waxeth like the same wight / Which that the word in erthe spak. . ."

One way Chaucer's work bears the imprint of his life has to do with the changing temper of the times. Chaucer had all his education, from the age of fourteen, in the king's household at a time when everything was looking up. It was a golden age of chivalry: the Order of the Garter was founded in the 1340s, Ed-

ward III had a round table built at Windsor, there were glorious tournaments, and great ladies—Queen Philippa, the Countess Elizabeth, the Duchess Blanche; England won all its battles and was ascendant over France, center of chivalry—had even taken the French king prisoner. In the late 1360s, when Chaucer was in his twenties, the wheel turned: the Countess Elizabeth had died in 1363, Prince Lionel died a few months after his wedding in 1368, the queen died the following year. The Black Prince really went down to defeat in his victory at Najera, 1367, for after it England fell into debt and the Black Prince fell mortally ill. And the king fell embarrassingly into dotage with the egregious Alice Perrers. All of Chaucer's works, beginning with *The Book of the Duchess*, were written in the aftermath of this turn for the worse. From this point of view, *The Book of the Duchess* is in some measure about the passing of an older and better order, and *Troilus and Criseyde* is in some measure a backward look at England in its glory, just as the wheel was about to turn. But *The Parliament of Fowls* and perhaps *The House of Fame* are different: they relate more specifically to particular events at court, and lack this larger reference, this nostalgia and this broader sense of history. Larry Benson has recently shown in the most persuasive way that *The Parliament of Fowls* treats plans in early 1380 for the marriage of Richard II to Anne of Bohemia: that was an occasion of hope, momentary and specific, when the court could relax and laugh and look to the future, if only for a time.

We, who work so hard on the background, lose sight of what a personal breakthrough *The Canterbury Tales* was. My intuition—there isn't time to plead a case—is that this breakthrough came together quite suddenly in Chaucer's mind, having been mulled over for some time at a less than conscious level—came together under circumstances of emotional stress: an upheaval in his job, 1386, an upheaval in the government, moving away from London, about this time losing his wife, and in the following years losing touch with Gower, seeing Strode die and Usk executed. The infighting and factions of the late 1380s must have made him doubt and question all that he had done and believed in. Call it a life-crisis or just hard times, but it gave him a need for an outlet and an escape—and he escaped behind the role of that comic bourgeois that we call Chaucer the Pilgrim. From which distanced vantage point he found a way to make his readers laugh at and think about the very fabric of a society that seemed to be falling in pieces about them. Things changed for the better in a few years, but by then he had made the bold step.

Part of that step was in his style, and here I will be tentative and brief. The language of the royal bureaucracy must have been a particular irritation to Chaucer the maker. Reading the *Life-Records* one can't help being struck by the awesome repetitiousness and mindless formal-

ties of official language—the endless letters patent, enrollments, writs in Latin and French. Obfuscation and delay were its effects, most annoyingly to Chaucer delays of months or years in paying funds it owed to courtiers. It's interesting that in all the *Life-Records* there is only one entry ever thought to be written by Chaucer himself—a memorandum in French appointing Richard Barret deputy controller, 16 May 1378—and it may tell us something that it is unique in being short and to the point, one sentence long. This exasperation with official hot air, which we can safely presuppose in Chaucer himself because we can see it in his work, may emerge first in a very funny passage, the verbosely pompous speech of Juno in *The Book of the Duchess*. It emerges at key points in his works where he commands silence. It may explain why the long-winded bore—the Eagle in *The House of Fame*, January, Chaunticleer, the Monk—is one of his favorite butts; why the glib manipulator of language—Pandarus, the Pardoner—is a discreditable figure; why he, a master of rhetoric, so often ridicules rhetorical flourish. And it may explain how, in reaction, he developed that laconic manner in the General Prologue—that concise, straightforward way of saying no more or less than what he sees and knows, of saying only what he means, which we read as irony.

Donald R. Howard, Stanford University

These are extracts from a talk given at the 1982 MLA meeting in Los Angeles.

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100 Years of Chaucer Study

The Chaucer Section sessions at the MLA Centennial Meeting in New York next December will be devoted to a century of developments in Chaucer studies:

Chair Charles A. Owen, University of Connecticut

Text and manuscript Charles A. Moorman, University of Southern Mississippi

Prosody Alan Gaylord, Dartmouth College

Source studies John Fyler, Tufts University

Critical appreciation Paul Theiner, Syracuse University

Intellectual and social history Anne Middleton, University of California, Berkeley

Criticism and exegesis Lee Patterson, Johns Hopkins University.

DUES PAYMENTS

Volume V of *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* is now in press. It can be sent only to members whose dues for 1983 are in hand. *Verb. sap.*

Index of Middle English Prose

Work began on the Index of Middle English Prose (IMEP) in mid-1978, after several years of preliminary consultations and discussion initiated by Rossell Hope Robbins (who continues to serve the project as Honorary Advisory Editor). Editorial and Advisory Committees were established, and initial assignments were made to a number of scholars. Each scholar is responsible for indexing a particular manuscript collection, according to established procedures. When each has completed work on a collection the results are vetted by the Editorial Committee and will then be published as a separate fascicle or handlist of IMEP by D.S. Brewer, Ltd.

Substantial progress has been made on a number of important collections. The first fascicle, Ralph Hanna's handlist of the Huntington Library collections, is now ready for publication. This will be followed by Linda Voigts' handlist of Harvard manuscripts. Several other collections are in the final stages of preparation. In addition, a number of indexers have already found material for a number of related studies, some of which have already been published. Although it will be many years before IMEP is completed, it is already stimulating new discoveries and further research in Middle English prose.

If any scholars require information about Middle English prose manuscripts, I will be happy to attempt to answer their questions and/or circulate information to my colleagues. It may also be worth noting that we hope to publish in the foreseeable future a full bibliography of all published Middle English prose and its manuscript sources. In addition, a collaborative critical guide to major authors and genres of Middle English prose, of which I am General Editor, will be published in late 1983 by Rutgers University Press. This includes full primary and secondary bibliographies.

I include below a list of assigned collections with the names of those indexing them.

A.S.G. Edwards, University of Victoria

British Library Additional (V. Adams, R. Allen, P. Brown, J. Cowan, E. Higgs, W. Marx, M. Wakelin); Harley (R. Dahood, C. Morse); Royal (T. Hahn); Cotton (B. Donaghey); Egerton (A.G.R. Petti).

Bodleian Laud & Digby (P. Horner); Douce (L. Braswell); Rawlinson (C. von Nolcken); Bodley (C. Revard); Eng. & Lat. theol (R. Hanna); Ashmole (L. Eldredge).

Cambridge University Library (R. Dwyer, T. Heffernan, D. Thomson); Trinity (J. Reakes); Corpus (D. Lawton); St. John's (R. Beadle); Magdalene (R. Black); Other Colleges (M. Andrew).

Other British Libraries London Libraries (S. Horrall); Durham (A.I. Doyle); Lambeth Palace and Brotherton (O. Pickering); Rylands and Chetham (G. Lester); Lincoln Cathedral

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Chair, 1984 Program Committee Paul Strohm

Trustees' Meeting

The NCS Trustees will meet in Knoxville 27-29 May. Their agenda includes the following:

Approval of the program for the 1984 congress

Choice of site for 1986 congress

Revision of the constitution

Approval of financial report and budget

Approval of administrative procedures

Appointment of nominating and other committees

Consideration of editorial procedures for *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, *Annual Chaucer Bibliography*, *Chaucer Newsletter*

Consideration of the sponsorship of special projects

Consideration of the roles of the International Secretaries

Comments on these agenda items or additional matters to be brought before the Trustees should be in the hands of the Executive Director by 15 April, in time to be forwarded to the Trustees in advance of their meeting.

and Holkham Hall (J.J. Griffiths); Aberdeen (H. Hargreaves); Cathedral Libraries (S. Powell); Duke of Buccleuch and Alnwick Castle (Kathleen Scott); Irish Libraries (T.P. Dolan); National Library of Wales (W. Marx).

American Libraries Huntington (R. Hanna); Harvard (L.E. Voigts); Boston Public (D. Kunin and G. Berlin); Library of Congress (J. Hirsh); Yale (S. Gallick); Columbia (P. Acker); Various New York, Ohio, and Pennsylvania Collections (L. Smedick); University of Pennsylvania and Philadelphia Free Libraries (J. Krochalis).

Europe and Elsewhere Italy (C.T. Berkhout); Brussels (Kathleen Scott); Germany (R. Neuhäuser); Japan (T. Takamiya); Australia (D. Lawton).

The Endowment Fund

The preliminary responses to the appeal for endowment support has been gratifying. In the first month \$315 have been contributed by fourteen members. We plan to keep NCS dues as low as possible but, alas, costs of printing, postage, and administration continue to rise. Were it not for the substantial support first from the University of Oklahoma and presently from the University of Tennessee, dues would have to be considerably higher. In the future, income from invested funds could help to slow the rise in dues. The "firste stok":

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Humanities Seminar at Oxford

The University of Oklahoma announces a humanities seminar in art and literature to be offered at Oxford University May 20-June 17, 1983. The seminar, entitled "Than Longen Folk to Goon on Pilgrimages—Literature and Art of Medieval Pilgrimages" will be led by Douglas Gray, J.R.R. Tolkien Professor of English Language and Literature, Oxford University, and Susan Caldwell, Professor of Art, University of Oklahoma.

Spiritual and secular aspects of medieval pilgrimage will be explored primarily through examining literature, art, and architecture. The seminar is open to college students and interested adults. Questions about this seminar may be directed to: Oxford Seminars, 1700 Asp Avenue, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK 73037, (405) 325-1061.

1984 Reservations

One hundred and seventeen people have so far indicated that they plan to attend the 1984 congress. We would like to have as accurate a count as possible. If you have not done so, please—particularly those on the program—fill out the pre-registration form and send it to us.

PRELIMINARY REGISTRATION FOR THE NCS CONGRESS, YORK, 6-11 AUGUST 1984

I plan to attend the 1984 New Chaucer Society Congress.

Name _____

Mailing Address _____

I will be accompanied by _____ (number) dependents.

I (We) would plan to join the Thursday excursion to the Yorkshire abbeys. Yes _____ No _____

I (We) plan to travel to York by public transportation _____ by car _____.

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