TEACHING THE BACKGROUNDS

THE INTELLECTUAL, ARTISTIC, AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

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I believe that an advanced or graduate course including Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* should introduce students to a variety of primary materials useful to an understanding of that text, should recommend only such secondary materials as are based firmly on primary research or that help to control the use of primary materials, should place Chaucer's work in a cultural tradition that extends from classical antiquity through the early decades of the eighteenth century, and should lead finally to an appreciation of Chaucer's techniques for making what he had to say vivid, attractive, and meaningful to his own special audience. The tendency to read Chaucer from a "modern" point of view, a point of view, incidentally, that has changed considerably during my lifetime, results in distortions, leads to cultural deprivation which should not be an educational goal, and makes the *Tales* less attractive to students, who can supply this point of view spontaneously and need no instruction in its application. Students, both graduate and undergraduate, do enjoy learning something about a different and now remote culture with its own ideals, spontaneous attitudes, and, not least, sense of humor. With reference to the last, much of what is now frequently taught about the *Tales* reduces some of the most witty and humorous passages to solemn nonsense. Humor results from departures from reason, and unless we have

clear ideas about what Chaucer and most of his contemporaries thought to be true and reasonable, we cannot perceive his humor.

During the last thirty years, it has become possible to develop a number of new approaches to the *Tales*, partly as a result of scholarly progress in other fields. It is now possible to offer students significant insights into the principal intellectual traditions that underlie the attitudes in Chaucer's writings as well as insights into the application of those attitudes to the rapidly changing social and economic conditions of the later fourteenth century—conditions that affected persons in all walks of life. Basic to any reasonable grasp of these attitudes, both traditional and contemporary, is some knowledge of the Bible, its exegesis, and the principles derived from exegetical study in what is loosely called "theology," although the more technical ramifications and speculations of academic theology are probably of small relevance to the study of Chaucer. As a preliminary grounding in these traditions, a knowledge of the Latin Fathers, especially Augustine, whose works found a prominent place in almost all fourteenth-century libraries of any consequence, is essential. A familiarity with standard medieval works like the commentaries of Peter the Lombard on the Psalms and the Pauline Epistles, known together as the *Major glossatura*, and the *Glossa ordinaria* is necessary as an approach to the later exegetical tradition, while these works were themselves standard references throughout the later Middle Ages. In the late fourteenth century there was also a revival of interest in the spiritual writings of the twelfth century, in part stimulated by the Franciscans. Ancillary material is available in letter collections, in treatises, and in a variety of miscellaneous writings on special subjects, as well as in sermons. These last often afford insights into popular attitudes, figurative conventions, conventional thought structures, and, where fourteenth-century English sermons are concerned, into the application of traditional attitudes to contemporary problems.

It has been said that early Christian writers embraced "the best traditions of Classical philosophy." The classical influence was maintained in medieval schools, where Cicero, Seneca, Vergil, Ovid, Horace, Statius, Lucan, and other Latin authors were carefully studied with special attention both to their eloquence or literary technique and to their wisdom, chiefly moral. In considering the relevance of these authors, especially the poets, to the study of Chaucer, however, it is necessary to become familiar with the attitudes developed toward them in the Middle Ages and to study the works of medieval mythographers and commentators. We are now fortunate to have available both reprints of earlier editions of such works and new editions of others, as well as some valuable secondary guides and studies. One work that illustrates vividly the adaptation of

classical thought for Christian purposes is *The Consolation of Philosophy* of Boethius, which exerted a profound influence on English writers from the Old English period to the mid-eighteenth century. It is not strange that the *Consolation* and Saint Gregory's *Moralia* on Job were two of John of Salisbury's favorite works and that both were often found in fourteenth-century English collections. The influence of Boethius was especially powerful in Europe during the years following the Black Death, when themes from it appeared frequently in English wall painting. All serious students of English literature should, if only in a detached way, accord the *Consolation* a sympathetic understanding without quarreling with its metaphysical principles, which are developed for a moral purpose, or suggesting that it is somehow "pagan." It would also be especially helpful if students could have access to the standard medieval commentaries of William of Conches and Nicholas Trivet. Meanwhile, we now have available in English translations two of the most useful guides to medieval educational practice, the *Didascalion* of Hugh of Saint Victor and the *Metalogicon* of John of Salisbury, as well as a good recent book by Nicholas Orme (1973) on educational practice in English schools in the Middle Ages.

Scriptural and classical texts, together with their medieval interpretations, provided fruitful sources of imagery, conventional descriptions, and patterns of action in medieval literary texts. Thus, knowledge of the Bible and the classics provides not only a philosophical basis for understanding the *Tales* but also a background for studying Chaucer's literary techniques. Sometimes a series of scriptural passages acquired special medieval connotations. For example, a series of them, first used by William of Saint Amour, became associated with attacks on the fraternal orders, and these are reflected in unmistakable fashion in Chaucer's portrayals of friars. Chaucer was neither the first nor the last poet to make use of these materials, some of which he undoubtedly found in earlier works like the *Roman de la rose*, now available in a good English prose translation by Charles Dahlberg (1971) and well treated in a number of secondary studies, although it is still systematically abused by advocates of "courtly love" or "sensualistic naturalism." It is extremely important to seek to understand not only literary works, like the *Roman*, that Chaucer knew and used extensively but also the literary traditions that such works represent. There is a close connection, for example, between the *Roman* and the Latin literature that developed in the monasteries and cathedral schools of the twelfth century and provided both the *Roman*'s authors with ironic and satiric techniques. Again, the "form" of this poem, the Dream Vision, represents a fusion of classical and Scriptural traditions that took place in the twelfth century, a fusion that gave the poem and

others like it special connotation and helped to assure their widespread appeal. Where medieval commentaries on medieval authors are available, like those on Dante, for example, they should be treated with respect and not dismissed as irrelevant in the light of our own supposedly superior knowledge.

Much the same sort of influences that shaped both the techniques and the general content of literary works is also evident in the visual arts of the Middle Ages. Emile Mâle's great study of religious art in France, the first volume of which has recently appeared in a new translation with supplementary notes (Princeton Univ. Press, 1978), is, in spite of certain limitations, a basic guide to the meaning of medieval religious art. Since Raimond van Marle's *Iconographie de l'art profane au Moyen Age et la Renaissance* (1931–32) other special studies have provided similar analyses of "nonreligious" art that now enable the student of Chaucer often to find significant imagery common to the visual arts and to Chaucer. In addition, changes in style during the course of the Middle Ages, which were sometimes fairly rapid, are more clearly evident visually than they are textually.

Research in the other arts is frequently rewarding, both in the illumination of details in Chaucer's text and in leading to an understanding of his general outlook. Thus, some knowledge of medieval music, both in its basic theory—as illustrated in the treatises of Augustine and Boethius and in a series of subsequent medieval treatises—and in its actual practice, can be very rewarding. The usefulness of a knowledge of medieval astrology, cosmology, medicine, and logic has been amply demonstrated.

Chaucer lived among clerks and administrators familiar with the law. A distinguished legal historian has recently observed that the actual structure of a society, the nexus of commonplace relationships that is frequently taken for granted and not much discussed, is most readily discernible in its laws and their application. Thus, students of *The Canterbury Tales* should find a study of law useful in evaluating the behavior of Chaucer's characters. There are now available good editions of some of the relevant Year Books, an excellent selection by G. O. Sayles of cases from the King's Bench, some fine editions of rolls of the Justices of the Peace, coroners' rolls, borough court records, records of courts with the View of Frankpledge, and manorial court records. The Civil Law has been less thoroughly studied, but there are studies that offer good introductions to the work of the ecclesiastical courts, like R. H. Helmholz, *Marriage Litigation in Medieval England* (1974). Meanwhile, a new edition of the synodal decrees of English bishops is under way. Finally, there is a good study of the laws of war by M. H. Keen. More generally, we now have a good brief history of English law in J. H. Baker, *An*

Introduction to English Legal History (2nd ed., 1979), and some special studies that shed light on the development of law during the fourteenth century.

Among the changes that took place during Chaucer's lifetime were those in the organization of the royal administration. Since Chaucer was closely associated with the Chamber and had frequent dealings with the Exchequer, we need to know something about administrative history to understand his daily concerns. In this connection, it is important that we study the characters of Chaucer's associates, some of whom probably made up the membership of the audience he usually addressed. The recent publication of the works of Sir John Clanvowe is especially welcome. Medieval political theory offers another field of fruitful inquiry although such theory in Chaucer's time represented a Christian modification of the ethical principles of Aristotle's *Politics* and was not in the modern sense "political." John of Salisbury's *Policraticus*, which Chaucer knew, forms a useful introduction, and the *De Regimine Principum* of Aegidius Romanus was popular in the later fourteenth century. Fourteenth-century court "politics" itself, which was partly a matter of rivalries among magnates domestically and friction between followers of reformers like Philippe de Mézières on the one hand and advocates of the recovery of English power on the Continent on the other, surely influenced Chaucer's attitudes. He was also undoubtedly cognizant of events in what has been called "the turbulent London of Richard II."

England in the fourteenth century was still basically an agrarian society. During recent years a great many manorial documents, in addition to the court rolls mentioned above, have become available, and there are some extremely useful regional histories, histories of estates, and studies of individual manors. These often shed a great deal of light on the significant changes in English society after the Black Death, some of which undoubtedly disturbed Chaucer and his associates and influenced his treatment of rural characters. In fact, it is probably impossible to understand what he was saying about them and why he was saying it without some understanding of contemporary developments. While rural society was changing, certain industries and trades were undergoing changes as well, and there have been good specialized studies of the cloth industry, the wool tradé, and the wine trade, as well as general studies in social and economic history. Developments in rural society and in trade and industry affected towns, some of which were also deeply affected by relations with foreign powers. There is a good recent general *Introduction to the History of English Medieval Towns* by Susan Reynolds (1977), and there have been useful studies of individual towns.

In view of the presence of ecclesiastics in the *Tales*, students also need

to know something about diocesan administration and the characters of English bishops. Further, the basic ideals and the actual conditions of cathedrals, regular and secular, of monasteries, of nunneries, and of friaries familiar to Chaucer's audience but no longer familiar today need further study on the part of Chaucerians. Ecclesiastics of all varieties were deeply affected by the same social changes that affected the rest of society, and Chaucer's attitude toward these religious figures, in the light of traditional ideals, has a great deal to do with their appearance in the *Tales*. For example, the persistence of certain of William of Saint Amour's accusations against the friars is explicable only in part as a result of literary tradition. Finally, ecclesiastical records often include wills, which afford excellent clues to the value placed on a variety of material possessions as well as indications of the nature of private devotion.

It should be emphasized, I think, that all the various areas of investigation suggested above are interdependent. Thus, one can learn a great deal about friars and monks, for example, from the study of towns, and since some towns had close connections with agricultural activity, the study of one sector of society can hardly be carried out without the study of the other. Similarly, statements by bishops and other ecclesiastical authorities sometimes reflect the figurative conventions discernible in both literature and the visual arts. There is a sense, indeed, in which the various "fields" of modern research may be misleading since society itself was an integrated whole.

In the above remarks, I may have omitted certain "fields," but I have sought to show that Chaucerians still have a great deal to learn and that those wishing to deepen their understanding and appreciation for Chaucer's writings still have a great deal to do. There is plenty of room left for hard work, for the excitement of discovery, and for the satisfactions of real accomplishment. Teachers of advanced and graduate Chaucer courses should, I think, offer their students every opportunity to enjoy the possibilities that lie before them.

Editor's Note: For another view of D. W. Robertson's "program" of reading in the Middle Ages, see his anthology, *The Literature of Medieval England* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970). Its introduction discusses medieval life and ideals, medieval astronomy and astrology, the medieval Bible, the character of medieval literature, and the literature of medieval England. Its twelve chapters are devoted to early Celtic literature in Britain, early Anglo-Latin literature (Gildas, Bede, Boniface, Alcuin, et al.), Old English literature, later Celtic literature in Britain, later Latin literature in Britain (John of Salisbury, Geoffrey of Monmouth, et al.), medieval literary theory (John of Salisbury, Dante, Boccaccio, Richard de

Bury, Bernard Silvestris, Nicholas Trivet, William of Conches, et al.), French literature in England (Marie de France, Jean Froissart, et al.), songs and short poems in Middle English, the English medieval romance (*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*), *Piers the Ploughman*, Chaucer, and early English drama.

Hugh of St. Victor's *Didascalion* appeared in an English translation by Jerome Taylor (New York: Columbia Univ. Press) in 1961. John of Salisbury's *Metalogicon* is available in a translation by Daniel M. McGarry (1955; rpt. Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1962). *The Statesman's Book* (trans. John Dickinson, New York: Knopf, 1927) includes Books 4, 5, and 6 and selections from Books 7 and 8 of John of Salisbury's *Policraticus*; the volume entitled *Frivolities of Courtiers and Footprints of Philosophers* (trans. Joseph B. Pike, Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1938) also offers selections from Books 7 and 8 as well as the first three books of the *Policraticus*. For translations of other works mentioned in the essay, see the appropriate bibliographical listings for, among others, Vergil, Ovid, Boethius, Augustine, Dante, Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, and Emile Mâle.

Approaches to Teaching Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*

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The Modern Language Association of America
New York · 1980