CHAUCEER'S Canterbury Tales

Doris Lessing and Chaucer on the subject of heroism and the role of the epic hero and courtly lover, are
able to maintain the epic hero and courtly lover, are
able to maintain in literary terms why the book had become a great work in the
hamster to generic approach, she saw that the epic hero
of the epic hero and courtly lover, are
able behavior and, therefore, the leeway to
the plot-shapers. "But the females conform to
the role of a de facto exclusion from adventure and
adventure."

In the light of the facts, for me has the ultimate pragmatic
dimension to simply a man-made misconception.

THE INTELLECTUAL, ARTISTIC, AND
HISTORICAL CONTEXT

D. W. Robertson, Jr.

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 educa-
tional 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
ideas, spontaneous attitudes, and, not least, sense of humor. With refer-
ce to the last, much of what is now frequently taught about the Tales
reducers some of the most witty and humorous passages to solemn non-
sense. 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, 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 Boethius, which exerted a profound influence on the Old English period to the mid-eighth century, and that the *Consolation* and Saint Gregory’s *Moralia in Job* of Salisbury’s favorite works and that both were central English collections. The influence is powerful in Europe during the years from 1000, where themes from it appeared frequently in the lives of English literature should, if possible, the *Consolation* a sympathetic understanding of metaphysical principles, which are discernible in Chaucer, suggesting that it is somehow “pagan.” It may be that if students could have access to the works of William of Conches and Nicholas Trivet, available in English translations two of the best of the educational practice, the *Didascalicon* or *Metalogicon* of John of Salisbury, as well as Nicholas Orme (1973) on educational practice in the Middle Ages.

Scriptural and classical texts, together, provided fruitful sources of imagery and patterns of action in medieval literary texts, and the classics provides not only a philosophy for the Tales but also a background for techniques. Sometimes a series of scripts, medieval connotations. For example, a William of Saint Amour, became associated with courtly love, and these are reflected in unmitigated portrayals of friars. Chaucer was neither the ultimate use of these materials, some of which are common in works like the *Roman de la rose*, nor in the translation by Charles Dahlberg (1971) for secondary studies, although it is still useful of “courtly love” or “sensualistic nature.” When we seek to understand not only literary work but also the representation. There is a close connection, as the study of the Latin literature that developed in schools of the twelfth century and present with ironic and satiric techniques. A work like *Dream Vision*, represents a fusion of influence that took place in the twelfth century,
and most of his contemporaries thought not perceive his humor.

It has become possible to develop a number of tales, partly as a result of scholarly progress studies and to offer students significant insights into the attitudes in Chaucer's works and into the application of those attitudes to the social, economic conditions of the later fourteenth century. Adjustments of the condition of all walks of life. Basic to these attitudes, both traditional and contemporary, were the Bible, its exegesis, and the principles on what is loosely called "theology," alchemical speculations and speculations of academic or theological relevance to the study of Chaucer. As a matter of fact, the Latin Faustus, known together as "Ursus ordinarius" is necessary as an approach to medieval thought, while these works were themselves stand-alone in Middle Ages. In the late fourteenth century, there was interest in the spiritual writings of the church, and the Franciscans. Ancillary material, such as treatises, and in a variety of manuscripts, as well as in sermons. These last named attitudes, figurative conventions, continued, where fourteenth-century English writers applied the traditional attitudes to their own work. Christian writers embraced "the best tradi
tional classical influence was maintained in the works of Seneca, Vergil, Ovid, Horace, Statius, who were carefully studied with special attention to literary technique and to their wisdom, and the relevance of these authors, especially Virgil, however, it is necessary to become acquainted with them in the Middle Ages. Additional mythopoeic and commentaries. The availability both reprints of earlier editions of these works, as well as some valuable secondaries, 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-sixteenth 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 metaphorical 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 interpretation, 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 an 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 Augustin 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 (1966) that shed light on the development of century.

Among the changes that took place during the thirteenth century in the organization of the royal administration associated with the Chamber and had a chequer, we need to know something of the modern sense “political.” John of Salisbury knew. forms a useful introduction, and Aegidius Romanus was popular in the thirteenth-century court “politics” itself, while among magnates domestically and friction was like Philippe de Mézières on the one hand, English power on the Continent on the other. He was also undoubtedly cognizant of the turbulent London of Richard II.

England in the fourteenth century was a society. During recent years a great many new manuscripts have come to light, and some extremely useful regional histories of individual manors. These often shed light on and the changes in English society after the undoubtedly disturbed Chaucer and his treatment of rural characters. In fact, it stands what he was saying about them as some understanding of contemporary development was changing, certain industries and trade well, and there have been good studies of the wool trade, and the wine trade, as well as economic history. Developments in rural towns, some of which were also affected by foreign powers. There is a good recent study of English Medieval Towns by S...
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 Politicatus, 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 “polities” 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 trade, 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.

sian administration and the characters of diastic ideals and the actual conditions of monasteries, of nunneries, and of friarhood but no longer familiar today need to be understood. Ecclesiastics of all varieties and the social changes that affected the rest of these religious figures, in the light of their particular world view, deal with their appearance in the world of certain of William of Saint Amour’s treatises explicable only in part as a result of ecclesiastical records often include wills, which are placed on a variety of material possession and nature of private devotion.

Moreover, that all the various areas of investigation are interdependent. Thus, one can learn a great deal about the society, from the study of towns, and since agriculture, the study of which is often carried out without the study of the prelates and other ecclesiastical authorities, conventions discernible in both literature and art, indeed, in which the various “fields” of knowledge of society, since society itself was an integrated whole, have to be understood and appreciated in the context of that society. The study of advanced and graduate Chaucerian students every opportunity to enjoy the benefits of D. W. Robertson’s “program” of reading English literature, the medieval literature, and the literature of medieval literature (Gildas, Bede, Boniface, Alcuin, et al.), and for Celtic literature in Britain, later Latin literature (Salisbury, Geoffrey of Monmouth, et al.), 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 Plowman, Chaucer, and early English drama.

Approaches to Teaching Chaucer's Canterbury Tales

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