A Guide to Chaucer's Language

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FOR HELEN

Abbreviations

Chaucer

CT	*The Canterbury Tales*
BD	*The Book of the Duchess*
HF	*The House of Fame*
AA	*Anelida and Arcite*
PF	*The Parliament of Fowls*
Bo	*Boece*
TC	*Troilus and Criseyde*
LGW	*The Legend of Good Women*
ABC	*An ABC*
Pity	*The Complaint unto Pity*
Lady	*A Complaint to his Lady*
Mars	*The Complaint of Mars*
Stedfastnesse	*Lak of Stedfastnesse*
W. Unc.	*Against Women Unconstant*
Complaint	*A Balade of Complaint*
RR	*The Romaunt of the Rose*

See the Preface for the significance of line references and the editions used.

Gower

CA	*Confessio Amantis*

Langland

PP	*Piers Plowman*

Other abbreviations

ANTS	The Anglo-Norman Text Society
Arch. Ling.	*Archivum Linguisticum*
ASE	*Anglo-Saxon England*
Chau. R.	*Chaucer Review*
CN	*Chaucer Newsletter*
EGS	*English and Germanic Studies*
EETS	The Early English Text Society
ES	*English Studies*
JEGP	*Journal of English and Germanic Philology*
JEL	*Journal of English Linguistics*
LSE	*Leeds Studies in English*
MLA	Modern Language Association
MED	*Middle English Dictionary*
MLQ	*Modern Language Quarterly*
MLR	*Modern Language Review*
MS	*Mediaeval Studies*
NED	*New English Dictionary*
NM	*Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*
NQ	*Notes and Queries*
OED	*Oxford English Dictionary*

PBA	*Proceedings of the British Academy*
Phil. Prag.	*Philologia Pragensia*
PLL	*Papers on Language and Literature*
PMLA	*Publications of the Modern Language Association*
RES	*Review of English Studies*
SATF	Société des Anciens Textes Français
SP	*Studies in Philology*
SN	*Studia Neophilologica*
TPS	*Transactions of the Philological Society*
TRHS	*Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*
UTQ	*University of Toronto Quarterly*
YES	*Yearbook of English Studies*

Preface

This is a book addressed rather to the reader of Chaucer than to the student of language; but its ideal audience would be that reader who would seek to make no distinction between the two activities, recognising the fact that the beginning of literary wisdom is in the knowledge of language. For such a reader, the word 'language' need not imply an excess of formal description, a complex of paradigms, or a conglomeration of statistics. Language for him is the bearer of meaning, and he hopes through its study to gain a fuller understanding of his text. This is by no means a simple matter because the text cannot be deciphered by the use of a grammar and a glossary as though it were a code. Just as the fossil leaf once flourished in a prehistoric forest, so the words preserved in a text are the immobilised testimony to a vital language system which has now disappeared. The text drew its original meaning from the place which its language held in this system, and the language system itself was significant by its use and history in the culture to which it belonged. Chaucer's language is, above all, a variety of Middle English of a kind used in London in the late fourteenth century, and this historical context is essential to its meaning.

The reference to language variety is one which recurs throughout this book, not only because variation is an essential descriptive quality of Chaucer's language, but also because that variation has important repercussions on the interpretation of his meaning. The possibility of choosing one linguistic form in preference to another in any given circumstance implies a potential for fine distinctions in stylistic nuance. To what extent could this potential be exploited? Just what are the distinctions implied by any such choice? Even

near-contemporaries like Usk and Caxton could be unsure of the answers to these questions, so that modern attempts at answering them must often remain speculative. What is important is that the reader should recognise the dangers of over-confidence at the same time as the need to ask such questions. By asking them, some satisfactory answers will be found, and our understanding of Chaucer's poetry will be enriched. This book, therefore, is intended to be the kind of guide which encourages its reader to ask the right questions.

The book is divided into two parts: the first, concentrating upon the text, deals with problems of interpretation which are likely to be encountered in grammar and syntax. It also discusses the principles of text coherence. The second part deals with Chaucer's language and vocabulary in its broader contemporary context, discussing language use, style, and variety. Except where it would prejudice discussion, modern punctuation has been supplied to aid understanding of passages from Chaucer. Non-Chaucerian passages have been translated or glossed as necessary, but I have assumed that the less-experienced reader will be well enough served by his text or by the *Chaucer Glossary* (see Sources and Further Reading) not to need glosses of Chaucer quotations.

Indexes of words and of lines quoted are provided in order to facilitate the use of the book as a study aid. For convenience, line references relate to *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, edited by F. N. Robinson, except that in references to the *Canterbury Tales* the lineation of Skeat's edition has been used, since this can readily be used both with Robinson's edition and with N. F. Blake's recent edition from the Hengwrt manuscript.

Although the book may be used for reference purposes, and indeed its two parts may be consulted individually, if read consecutively its chapters adumbrate a coherent conception of Chaucer's language as a variety of Middle English. This is an aspect of the book which may be expected to interest the more specialist reader, for whom extensive notes are given.

My thanks are due to my colleagues in Sheffield: in particular to Brian Donaghey for helpful discussion, and to John Johansen and Norman Blake for reading the typescript and making valuable suggestions for improvement. They are in no sense responsible for any errors which may have

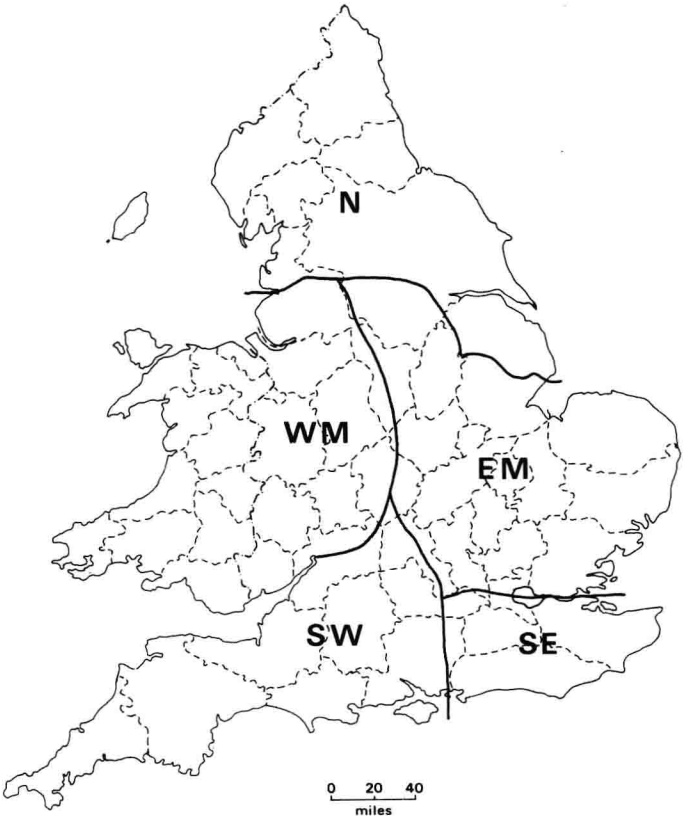
persisted. I am grateful too to Sandra Burton for finding time amid her other duties to produce the final typescript so efficiently. Not least, I should like to record my appreciation of the patience and understanding of my wife and children.

UNIVERSITY OF SHEFFIELD JDB
AUGUST 1982

I should like to thank the authorities of the National Library of Wales both for supplying and for permission to reproduce photographs of part of Peniarth MS 392 ('the Hengwrt MS').

I am indebted to Dr G. H. V. Bunt for suggesting certain corrections incorporated in this (1985) reprint.

Map 1: Middle English Dialects



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PART ONE
The Language of the Text

Preliminary Note

Chaucer died in October 1400 and within the next twenty years his works became widely read. Among these readers was one Thomas Hoccleve, a minor poet who claimed him as 'maister deere and fadir reverent', and who tried to preserve his memory by having Chaucer's portrait included in the manuscript of one of his own poems. However, it is not Hoccleve's devotion to Chaucer which concerns us here, but the job by which he earned his daily bread, and which he describes so poignantly in his *Regement of Princes*. He was in fact a scribe, a clerk in the Privy Seal office for nearly twenty-four years; one of an army of London scribes who, in the days before printing, spent their working lives laboriously copying documents by hand. People, he tells us, think it an easy job, but in fact it is exhausting and exacting:

A writer mot thre thynges to hym knytte, *combine*
And in tho may be no disseuerance;
Mynde, ee, and hand, non may fro othir flitte, *eye, separate*
But in hem mot be ioynt continuance. *must be joint*
The mynde al hoole with-outen variance *entirely*
On þe ee and hand awayte moot alway, *must be in attendance*
And þei two eek on hym; it is no nay.

Who so schal wryte, may nat holde a tale *gossip*
With hym and hym, ne synge this ne that;
But al his wittes hoole, grete and smale,
Ther must appere, and halden hem ther-at; *be present*
And syn he speke may ne synge nat,
But bothe two he nedes moot forbere
His labour to hym is þe alengere. *more tiresome*
(995–1008)

Stooping over his copy damages the scribe's back and upsets his stomach, but most of all his eyes suffer. Nevertheless, Hoccleve occupied his leisure hours not only by writing his own poetry but by copying that of others in order to eke out a meagre salary. He was not alone in this, and indeed some scribes seem to have become specialists in copying the newly-fashionable English verse of Chaucer, Gower, and Langland: such copying was the only method of widely publishing a poet's work before the invention of printing.

Publication by scribal copying differs from that by the printing press in that, instead of the uniformity of the print-run, each scribal copy will reflect the skills or vagaries of its individual writer; and not all scribes maintained the perfect co-ordination of hand, mind, and eye recommended by Hoccleve. Their attention might wander, and they would omit, repeat, or re-phrase the words of the original. Sometimes – more consciously – they might feel that a text required explanation, so they would add it in the margin, from where it later became incorporated into the work. Because the language still consisted of a continuum of dialects without any universally-accepted standard, they felt free to alter the dialect-forms of the original poem, perhaps destroying stylistic effects intended by the author as they did so.

For their part, medieval authors were well aware of the destruction wrought by the process of copying, but there was little they could do about it. Just before Chaucer's birth, Robert Manning of Bourne in Lincolnshire tells of his experience of the highly-esteemed romance, *Sir Tristrem*, which he ascribes to Thomas of Erceldoun. The poem, he says, has been ruined in transmission, so that it is no longer possible to judge its merit:

> I see in song, in sedgeyng tale
> Of Erceldoun and of Kendale,
> Non þam says as þai þam wroght,
> and in þer sayng it semes noght;
> þat may þou here in Sir Tristrem;
> ouer gestes it has þe steem,
> Ouer alle that is or was,
> if men it sayd as made Thomas;