How to
Study
Chaucer

Rob Pope

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M
MACMILLAN
EDUCATION

General editors' preface

EVERYBODY who studies literature, either for an examination or simply for pleasure, experiences the same problem: how to understand and respond to the text. As every student of literature knows, it is perfectly possible to read a book over and over again and yet still feel baffled and at a loss as to what to say about it. One answer to this problem, of course, is to accept someone else's view of the text, but how much more rewarding it would be if you could work out your own critical response to any book you choose or are required to study.

The aim of this series is to help you develop your critical skills by offering practical advice about how to read, understand and analyse literature. Each volume provides you with a clear method of study so that you can see how to set about tackling texts on your own. While the authors of each volume approach the problem in a different way, every book in the series attempts to provide you with some broad ideas about the kind of texts you are likely to be studying and some broad ideas about how to think about literature; each volume then shows you how to apply these ideas in a way which should help you construct your own analysis and interpretation. Unlike most critical books, therefore, the books in this series do not simply convey someone else's thinking about a text, but encourage you and show you how to think about a text for yourself.

Each book is written with an awareness that you are likely to be preparing for an examination, and therefore practical advice is given not only on how to understand and analyse literature, but also on how to organise a written response. Our hope is that although these books are intended to serve a practical purpose, they may also enrich your enjoyment of literature by making you a more confident reader, alert to the interest and pleasure to be derived from literary texts.

John Peck
Martin Coyle

Acknowledgements and note on references

All quotations from *The Canterbury Tales* are from the Everyman edition: *Geoffrey Chaucer: Canterbury Tales*, ed. A. C. Cawley (London: Dent, 1976). Line references relate to this edition. For quotations from and references to Chaucer's other works, the edition used is *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F. N. Robinson, 2nd edn (London: Oxford University Press, 1957).

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Getting started

THE aims of this book are simple and practical: to help you
understand Chaucer in the original language, and to help you
form a critical judgement of your own as to what his poetry
is about and how it works. We start together from scratch. I
assume no prior knowledge of Chaucer, his language, the
subjects he wrote about or the society he wrote in. You are
shown how to read a few lines and taken on to the point where
you should be able to build up a critical sense of the meaning
and shape of a whole poem. At the same time you are shown
how to use literary and historical 'background' material so
that it really works as part of a full and informed analysis.

Use this book as a companion to whichever Chaucer text
you are studying. It will not solve every problem of detail,
but it will show you how to solve the most common ones, and
without the mind-sapping necessity of resorting to notes and
a glossary all the time. You can then get on with understanding
and enjoying Chaucer for yourself – but not on your own.

Who (or what) is 'Chaucer'?

If you are just starting a Chaucer text, a quick answer to this
question may help. Otherwise you may see only the details in
front of you and never see the whole picture. In fact 'Chaucer'
is a handy way of referring to a number of rather different
things. It is convenient to distinguish four. First, there is
Chaucer the man who lived and died in late-fourteenth-century
England: the courtier, soldier, diplomat, administrator,
Knight of the Shire and, of course, poet. Secondly, there is
Chaucer the works, the Chaucer we know from the things he
wrote, the texts rather than the man. A third Chaucer is

Chaucer the narrator, the image of himself that Chaucer chose to project in his poetry – a kind of amiable and artful mask 'Chaucer the man' put on when he appeared in his own works. And finally (alas!) there is *Chaucer the exam*. This last Chaucer may well by your main reason for studying him at all. The point is that all these many and varied things go to make up what we mean by 'Chaucer'. We have distinguished four: the man, the works, the narrator and the exam. Each of them has its part to play in arriving at a full understanding of who and what Chaucer is, and we shall pay attention to them all.

We go on to look at the four Chaucers later in this chapter. However, this book is not planned so that you have to read through it all from beginning to end to extract what you need. To begin with, if you are reading Chaucer in the original for the first time, you should work through the next section, 'How to read five lines of Chaucer', before attempting a whole text. Chaucer is one of the most musical and stylistically versatile poets, but his language is not difficult once you have had a little practice. If you rely on someone else's translation the trouble is that you will quite literally not know what you are missing. Next, to obtain some historical bearings, consult the 'Chaucer the man' sub-section. You will then probably find it best to turn straight to the section dealing with your particular text. There you will find a framework and a method relating to your specific needs, as well as some detailed guidance on when and where to draw on further material in the 'Four Chaucers' section. As you will see, this book is basically a guide, and the sections you should read and the order in which you should read them will depend on your own particular needs.

How to read five lines of Chaucer

To help you start reading Chaucer's poetry in the original language, here are just five lines of it. They may not be from the text you are studying, but that is not important. The principles are the same whichever bit of his poetry you look at. Read these lines through now, trying to make some general sense of what is going on:

Now have I toold you soothly, in a clause,
Th'estaat, th'array, the nombre, and eek the cause
Why that assembled was this compaignye
In Southwerk at this gentil hostelrye
That highte the Tabard, faste by the Belle.
        (*Canterbury Tales, General Prologue*, ll. 715–19)

Even after just one reading you have probably got the general
idea: this is about some people being assembled somewhere.
You have probably understood that the somewhere is 'in
Southwerk'' and that you are being told all this directly by
the 'I' of the opening words: 'Now have I toold you'. However,
other than that, much of the detail may have escaped you.
What is it about the word order which is initially so confusing?
What – or who – are 'the Tabard' and 'the Belle'? And so on.
You have a fair general impression but are not clear about
the details. In fact, this is about as far as most people get
without resorting to a translation or rooting around in the
glossary. And yet, with just a little more educated guesswork,
they could get much further on their own.

Here are four simple tips on how to turn Chaucer's
English into reasonable Modern English. They will not solve
every problem of detail, but they will solve most.

1   Go for the general sense first.
2   When words look familiar but are oddly spelt, keep the
    consonants, tinker with the vowels and drop the final 'e'.
3   When the word order feels odd, simply invert it and look
    for the subject.
4   Get to know the 'top 100' most commonly misunderstood
    words and phrases used by Chaucer (you will find them
    at the back of this book).

If we now return to our passage you will see how simple these
four tips are to apply. We have already established *the general
sense* (tip 1): some people are assembled somewhere. But who,
when, where? Well, 'compaignye' and 'hostelrye' certainly
look like familiar words but they are oddly spelt, so we should
try tip 2: *keep the consonants, tinker with the vowels and drop the
final 'e'*. That done, it is not difficult to recognise the modern
equivalents of these two words: 'company' and 'hostelry'.
Even if you did not know that 'hostelry' is an old-fashioned

word for 'inn', you could have guessed its meaning from its similarity to the modern words 'hostel' and 'hotel' and the immediate context. So now we know that the passage is about a company assembled at an inn. And to know more about them we simply carry on applying tip 2. From the second line we know we are being told about their 'estaat' and 'nombre'. In context the former obviously has to be something like modern 'estate' or 'status', while 'nombre' – at first so perplexing – just has to be 'number'. Note how constant consonants are, and how changeable the vowels. Likewise, when we drop the final 'e' of 'Belle' we produce a plausible-enough name for an inn, and 'Southwerk' is only a vowel different from the modern 'Southwark', the name of a district of London.

Initial problems with word order can be solved as easily. The first and third lines feel odd till you realise that subject and verb are coming at you back-to-front. All you need to do is to apply tip 3: *invert the word order and look for the subject.* This gives you 'Now I have told you' from Chaucer's 'Now have I toold you', and 'Why this company was assembled' from Chaucer's 'Why that assembled was this compaignye'.

I hope you can see how easy it is to make sense of the text when you know what to look for and go about changing things systematically. In all these cases notice that all we are really doing is fastening on odd-looking but somehow familiar words, tinkering with the spelling and word order, and then seeing if the results fit in with the general sense. As for 'eek' (meaning 'also'), 'soothly' (meaning 'truly') and 'gentil' (which means 'fine' or 'noble' rather than 'gentle'), they all feature in the 'top 100' most commonly misunderstood words (tip 4). These words present no problems if you take the trouble to learn them from the list at the back.

Admittedly, there will be times when you have used all four tips above and are still stuck for a word, but this will not happen often. In fact, in our passage of thirty-nine words there is just one ('highte') that you could not work out by tinkering with it and that is not common enough to make the 'top 100'. In such a case you need to turn to a glossary. There you would find that 'highte' means 'called'; hence 'this gentil hostelrye / That highte the Tabard' means 'this fine inn that was called the Tabard'. However, by the time you had made

'educated guesses' at the other thirty-eight words, even a wild guess would have probably given you that last one!

Four Chaucers: the man, the works, the narrator and the exam

(i) *Chaucer the man*

Here we concentrate on the most critically useful aspects of Chaucer's life, and the most relevant features of the historical 'background'. The keynotes of Chaucer's life are its *variety* and comparative *comfort*. Born around 1343 into a well-to-do merchant family with court connections, Geoffrey Chaucer learnt the manners and expectations of upper-class life early on. He was first a page, then a squire, and then (at about twenty-five) one of King Edward III's own personal attendants. During this period Chaucer also learnt the meaning of 'chivalry' first-hand, as a soldier fighting in the Hundred Years War with France. In fact he was captured and finally ransomed, the King himself making a personal contribution to the ransom. Between 1360 and 1381 he was often abroad on diplomatic and trade missions: negotiating peace with France (1360), trade with Italy (1372–3), and the terms of a proposed marriage between King Richard II and the daughter of the French king (1381). From 1374 to 1386 he was Controller of the Custom on wool and later wine in the Port of London – a kind of high-powered tax-collector. And that was followed by a two-year stint as Clerk of the King's Works, with senior responsibility for administering accounts and organising a wide range of craftsmen. These were employed to build and furnish royal palaces and to organise royal tournaments. Chaucer was also appointed Justice of the Peace and Knight of the Shire for Kent (1385–6).

Chaucer thus held a wide range of diplomatic and business posts linking the royal court and the commercial city, and his responsibilities brought him prosperity and security. Around 1366 he married a prominent lady-in-waiting called Philippa Roet. She was the sister of Duke John of Gaunt's third wife, and by the 1380s the joint incomes of Geoffrey and Philippa Chaucer averaged £45,000 a year by 1988 standards

(about £100 then). Certainly, in an economic and social sense, late medieval England was 'merrie' (meaning 'pleasant') for the Chaucers.

You might now ask what all this has got to do with Chaucer's poetry? The answer is: a lot. However, this will not become clear to you until you actually need to link such information with a specific poem. All I shall do at this stage is tease out some inferences and invite you to return this way when you have a better idea what you are looking for. The significance of 'Chaucer the man' can be summarised under four headings.

1   *Chaucer was a man of the world as well as a man of letters.* Chaucer moved freely between the court and the city, between England and the continent, and between business and writing. All this activity brought him into regular contact with a wide range of English, French and Italian diplomats and courtiers like himself, as well as the increasing numbers of merchants, lawyers and administrators who flourished in late-fourteenth-century England. In short, Chaucer moved in a world of teeming life as well as ideas and literature. As usual, 'variety' is the keynote.

2   *Chaucer kept a high personal profile – and a low political one.* This can be readily inferred from the generally stable pattern of Chaucer's fortunes at court. For the ambitious or contentious, life at court was like a roller-coaster: it could suddenly lift you to dizzy heights, or equally suddenly plunge you down into the depths. The heights were being given vast estates and privileges; the depths were imprisonment, exile and beheading. Both these extremes marked the careers of people whom we know were Chaucer's close associates, and yet he himself seems to have kept to the flat and smooth bits of the track. Apart from a brief dip in 1386 (when the Duke of Gloucester took over during the minority of the young King Richard), Chaucer seems to have negotiated the ups and downs of court life quite well. This is particularly remarkable considering the fact that during his lifetime he served under a total of three monarchs, and in unusually trying circumstances. Many of the problems arose because King Edward III (d. 1377) had a lot of sons, and this in turn meant a lot of wrangling over

power. Chaucer, however, seems not to have become too embroiled. He ended his days out of the mainstream of court life but still comfortably supported by it. His final job was the lucrative and largely honorary post of Deputy Forester for the King in Somerset. For the rest, grants and payments continued to flow from Henry IV as they had from Richard II, even though Henry had arranged for Richard to be deposed and murdered a year before! Putting it bluntly, Chaucer 'hedged his bets' and 'kept his nose clean'. It seems that he was liked and trusted at court. That qualification 'at court' is important, for it brings us to a third, usually neglected aspect of Chaucer and his times.

3   *'Chaucer's England' is not the whole story.* The commonly held view that 'Chaucer's England' is somehow a fair and comprehensive image of late medieval England as a whole is inaccurate. The Peasants' Revolt, for instance, gets just one, disparaging mention in the whole of Chaucer's work. This is so despite the fact that what happened in 1381, when Chaucer was in his late thirties, was the greatest popular upheaval in England before the seventeenth-century revolution. The London Palace of John of Gaunt, one of Chaucer's patrons, was burnt down; Simon Sudbury, the Archbishop of Canterbury and first minister of the King's government, had his head cut off; and King Richard himself was beseiged in the Tower by large numbers of his own people. There is, however, hardly a word about this from Chaucer. In other words (and it is a point which is often overlooked) Chaucer's view of life may have been varied and capacious, but it certainly did not extend to all the 'lower orders' – to the radical preachers, the aggrieved tradesmen and the repressed peasants who made up the rank and file pressing for an end for serfdom. None of these have a voice in 'Chaucer's England'. And that brings us to our final inference on 'Chaucer the man', again obvious and again often overlooked.

4   *Chaucer was a man in 'a man's world'.* Women had little direct power in the public sphere. They had no place in Parliament, as Justices of the Peace or as Knights of the Shire. Their property rights in general (except in the case of widows) were heavily dependent on men. Their opportunities for careers in

law, medicine, education, the Church and business were non-existent or severely limited. So, all in all, it is necessary to underscore the fact that Chaucer was born a man and that this automatically gave him powers and privileges which many women could only dream of. You will see that Chaucer's reaction to this situation in his poetry was both complex and flexible. However, the situation itself, while certainly complex, was all too often harshly inflexible as far as women were concerned.

This sub-section has set out some major terms of reference to help you see Chaucer in the context of his times. The sheer variety of his experience of life, the world of books mingling with the world of affairs, the tactful subservience of the diplomat, the elegant refinement of the courtier, the more straightforward practicality of the businessman, the expectations of a sensitive yet privileged medieval male – all these must figure in any full estimation of who 'Chaucer the man' was. Later sections suggest how to make use of this material when exploring individual texts.

(ii)   *Chaucer the works*

Read this sub-section through if you want an overview of Chaucer's writings as a whole. Otherwise the material is best used in conjunction with later sections, when studying individual works.

As with his life, the keynote of Chaucer's works is their sheer variety. There are racy tales and stately tales, treatises on love and on philosophy, and the settings of these works are as varied as Fairyland, ancient Rome and contemporary fourteenth-century England. Yet, despite such a wealth and range of material, it is still possible to categorise Chaucer's total output according to just *six* story types. (The unfamiliarity of some of their names should not put you off. They made sense in Chaucer's day and, as you will see, can be understood easily enough now.) The six types are: *court romance, fabliau, sermon, holy life, confession* and *moral tract*. Sometimes Chaucer uses one of these in a more or less pure form (*The Prioress's Tale*, for instance, is a straight 'holy life'). But more often he mixes one story type with another and the result is a particu-

larly rich and interesting hybrid. However, whether 'pure' or 'mixed', you will find that one or more of these story types forms the basis of any Chaucer text you are studying.

1   *Court romance.* Court romances are tales which explore refined notions of love and war in a court setting. The plot usually revolves around the competition between two noble men for one noble woman. Court romances are characterised by elaborate, highly idealised forms of courtship (sometimes called 'courtly love') and elaborately ritualistic behaviour in general. This means that, when they are not agonising over whether they should love one another, the lovers are engaged in other upper-class pursuits. For the men that means hunting, feasting, tournaments and war, with the odd distraught love poem thrown in for good measure. For the women it means walking in gardens, reading and visiting one another. You might say, then, that court romances are all about sex and violence, but in a peculiarly sublime form. *The Knight's Tale* is a good example. Two noble cousins fall in love with the same noble woman and finish up fighting a tournament for her. One of them gets her and the other does not. In outline it is as simple as that! Of course the actual treatment is more complicated and problematic, but it helps hugely if you establish the underlining story type and its basic shape from the start.

All the following poems use the court romance as their main base: *The Knight's Tale, The Squire's Tale, Sir Thopas, The Wife of Bath's Tale, The Merchant's Tale, The Franklin's Tale, The Book of the Duchess, Anelida and Arcite, The Parliament of Fowls, Troilus and Criseyde* and *The Prologue to the Legend of Good Women.* Most of Chaucer's shorter poems (such as *To Rosemounde* and *The Complaint of Mars*) are built round notions of refined love too.

All of the following use the court-romance type part of the time, as a subordinate but still important aspect of their construction: *The Miller's Tale, Melibee, The Nun's Priest's Tale* and *The House of Fame.*

2   *Fabliau.* The fabliau (plural 'fabliaux') is a kind of story dealing with an extended joke or trick, usually set amongst the lower orders of society. The trick invariably involves

some unlikely but uproarious combinations of raw sex and knockabout violence, and by the end everyone has received a kind of justice. *The Reeve's Tale* is characteristic of the basic shape and concerns of fabliau. In it, two students are cheated of some corn by a miller, so they get their own back by sleeping with the miller's wife and daughter. At the end there is a chaotic and very funny fight in the dark. A similar thing happens in *The Miller's Tale*. There, a carpenter's wife is being wooed secretly by two men, only one of whom she likes. As a joke she gets the unwanted suitor, who is expecting a kiss in the dark, to kiss her backside instead. The wife's lover then tries to repeat the trick, but the rejected lover has meanwhile got a red-hot ploughshare from the blacksmith's. The result, not surprisingly, is a lot of pain and a lot of laughs – and both are increased by the sudden arrival of the carpenter himself, crashing through the ceiling! Such a chaotic and farcical ending is wholly characteristic of the fabliau. In fact you might say that fabliaux are the comic, cartoon equivalents of court romances. Where court romances are sublimely abstract and idealised, fabliaux are grotesquely concrete and physical. The former take place in a never-never world of solemn knights and ladies, while the latter (in line with traditional comedy) draw their figures of fun from amongst tradespeople, minor clerics and the peasantry. The two story types are exaggerated inversions of one another.

All the following use fabliau as their main base: *The Miller's Tale*, *The Reeve's Tale*, *The Cook's Tale* (fragment), *The Friar's Tale*, *The Summoner's Tale*, *The Shipman's Tale* and *The Canon's Yeoman's Tale*. And these others use fabliau elements for a significant part of the time: *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*, *The Merchant's Tale* and *The Nun's Priest's Tale* (an animal fable with much of the knockabout fun and trickery of fabliau).

Apart from court romance and fabliau we have one other large area of Chaucer's output to consider, his *religious* writings. This is not to say that any of Chaucer's work is particularly irreligious or utterly opposed to Christianity. It is just that *The Knight's Tale* and *The Miller's Tale*, for example, are not primarily concerned with Christian instruction or piety, so they are broadly secular in appeal. For the rest, therefore, we can talk about an overtly religious cluster of story types. Chaucer used most of the major forms of religious writing

available at that time, and together they make up the remaining four types: *sermon, holy life, confession* and *moral tract.*

3   *Sermon.* Medieval sermons, like modern ones, were basically exhortations to embrace virtues and shun vices. Essentially oral and often highly rhetorical, they were the main way in which Christian doctrine was communicated. The preacher was for the many people who could not read (more than 95 per cent of the population) the *only* bridge between the Latin of the Vulgate Bible and common English. Sermons, along with songs and stories, were as central to the communication system of medieval society as TV and radio are now.

The medieval preacher, who was usually a man, built his sermon around four types of material:

(i)   *an abstract 'theme'* (such as 'gluttony', 'avarice' or 'charity');

(ii)   *a biblical story or quotation* (perhaps the story of the Good Samaritan, or a text such as 'render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's');

(iii)   *popular stories and proverbs*, or *classical stories and maxims* for a more learned congregation (such moralised stories were called 'exempla');

(iv)   *a contemporary event* (perhaps a recent storm or a bout of plague, or a local riot).

Chaucer steers clear of this last, most ephemeral and potentially most sensitive topic. References to contemporary events are not at all common in his work. However, he freely uses the other three methods of sermon-building – 'theme', biblical material and popular (or classical) exempla – and often, like professional preachers, Chaucer uses all three in the course of a single sermon. In that case, much of the skill is in deciding precisely where and how to move from one strategy to another.

There are three full sermons in *The Canterbury Tales*: *The Pardoner's Prologue and Tale*, *The Nun's Priest's Prologue and Tale* and *The Parson's Tale*. In each case we carry with us a strong image of the preacher as well as the sermon he delivers. We see him both as a human individual and as a divine authority figure. If you study any of these tales you will become aware