

New Casebooks

The background of the cover is a solid yellow color. Overlaid on this are several thick, white, expressive brushstrokes that sweep across the page. These strokes are reminiscent of calligraphic flourishes or perhaps stylized, flowing lines that suggest movement and energy. They are positioned behind the main title, creating a layered effect.

Chaucer

Contemporary Critical Essays
Edited by Valerie Allen and Ares Axiotis

New Casebooks

CHAUCE

EDITED BY VALERIE ALLEN AND ARES AXIOTIS



New Casebooks

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EDITORS' NOTE

In order to include a wide range of essays covering a number of the *Canterbury Tales*, it has been necessary to cut all of the essays, with the sole exception of Sheila Delany's 'Slaying Python'. We are most grateful to the contributors for their cooperation in producing, very often, much shortened versions of their work. In every case, a good deal of the documentation has been eliminated as well as some qualifications to the argument set forward, so that occasionally statements appear more categorical than in the original version. Individual cuts in the text are not marked. Where there have been losses, we hope these are repaired by bringing the essays together in the present volume.

General Editors' Preface

The purpose of this series of New Casebooks is to reveal some of the ways in which contemporary criticism has changed our understanding of commonly studied texts and writers and, indeed, of the nature of criticism itself. Central to the series is a concern with modern critical theory and its effect on current approaches to the study of literature. Each New Casebook editor has been asked to select a sequence of essays which will introduce the reader to the new critical approaches to the text or texts being discussed in the volume and also illuminate the rich interchange between critical theory and critical practice that characterises so much current writing about literature.

In this focus on modern critical thinking and practice New Casebooks aim not only to inform but also to stimulate, with volumes seeking to reflect both the controversy and the excitement of current criticism. Because much of this criticism is difficult and often employs an unfamiliar critical language, editors have been asked to give the reader as much help as they feel is appropriate, but without simplifying the essays or the issues they raise. Again, editors have been asked to supply a list of further reading which will enable readers to follow up issues raised by the essays in the volume.

The project of New Casebooks, then, is to bring together in an illuminating way those critics who best illustrate the ways in which contemporary criticism has established new methods of analysing texts and who have reinvigorated the important debate about how we 'read' literature. The hope is, of course, that New Casebooks will not only open up this debate to a wider audience, but will also encourage students to extend their own ideas, and think afresh about their responses to the texts they are studying.

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University of Wales, Cardiff

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Introduction: Postmodern Chaucer

VALERIE ALLEN and ARES AXIOTIS

TRADITIONAL LITERARY CRITICISM AND THE ENLIGHTENMENT

It is instructive to remember that literary criticism as a formal discipline is much younger than Chaucer's writings, which date from the late fourteenth century. Alexander Pope's *Essay on Criticism*, written in the early eighteenth century, exemplifies the Enlightenment vision of literary criticism as a scholarly specialism. Indeed, Enlightenment culture styled itself as the age of criticism.¹ This tradition of literary criticism has proved deeply problematic both for the Chaucerian text and for what is now popularly called 'critical theory'² because of its insistence on the distinction between the *creative* and the *critical* act. Witness the opening of Pope's poem:

'Tis hard to say, if greater Want of Skill
Appear in *Writing* or in *Judging* ill.³

The distinction between the creative and the critical takes hold with the general separation of the arts and sciences from an all-embracing religious outlook at the end of the seventeenth century. The arts, bereft of the authority of religion, reinvented themselves as *human* sciences whose task it is to investigate and to depict the realm of the 'aesthetic', the concrete human world of immediate, lived experience. The aesthetic is not something one knows conceptually but is apprehended through the senses – which is what

the Greek word *aisthesis* means: sensory perception or feeling. Aesthetic awareness is a view of things from the heart rather than the mind, an embodied knowledge that indissolubly combines cognition, interest, and feeling in judgements of taste. Aesthetics as a discipline thus comes to denote systematic reflection on our 'higher' faculty of pleasure which is responsible for the appreciation of beauty. The rules by which we judge such beauty are the rules of artistic and literary criticism.

But, of course, aesthetic taste requires cultivation and discipline. The two activities of writing and judgement depend on each other for their meaning. The writer must be educated to *write* and the reader must be educated to *judge*: both must submit to the laws of beauty as expounded by literary criticism. The term 'criticism' itself with its juridical origins exhibits the regulatory function to be performed on literature. As guardian of the artistic canon, criticism enforces a strict dichotomy between literary and critical writing. We are taught that there is the literary text (the *Canterbury Tales*) and then critical interpretations of its meaning (these anthologised essays). The two are conceptually distinct according to a strict division of labour. The substantive, first-order business of literary creation falls to the author as source of meaning, while the critic as judge occupies a meta- or second-order level, parasitic, as it were, upon the logically prior literary work. In introducing the essays in this collection as distinctively representative of current thought, we seek to show how *both* Chaucer's own medieval writing *and* post-Enlightenment critical theory undermine any systematic creative/critical division which presupposes hard-and-fast distinctions between interpretation and text, meaning and use, and sense and reference.

The manner in which Chaucer's writing cuts across this division made him unpalatable to Enlightenment critics. John Dryden sums up this disparagement of Chaucer in his English translation, published in 1700, of some of Chaucer's works. He saw the translating of Chaucer's language as an *improvement* on the rude English of the fourteenth century: 'Chaucer, I confess, is a rough Diamond, and must be polish'd, e'er he shines. ... Sometimes also ... he runs riot ... and knows not when he has said enough. ... Having observ'd this ... I have not ty'd myself to a Literal Translation; but have often omitted what I judg'd unnecessary, or not of Dignity enough to appear in the Company of better Thoughts.'⁴ As we can see, a latent but insistent contempt for the entire Middle Ages

pervades the discipline of literary criticism as a condition of its very possibility. To Enlightenment thought, the Middle Ages was a pre-critical age, and therefore a pre-literary one also. For the Enlightenment's formal ideal of the rule of reason in culture carries with it a profound horror of culture differently (dis-)ordered according to custom and tradition.

All the essays in the original *Chaucer Casebook* could be described as representing a traditional theory of literature.⁵ And it must be said that the essays here in the *New Casebook* do not ultimately depart from this distinction between primary text (literature) and secondary text (criticism). No matter how exhaustively or convincingly the critics explicate Chaucer's meaning, they always presuppose a logical gap between the text itself and the particular appreciation of the text. To bridge this gap requires an absolute standpoint from which competing readings may be measured against the true meaning of the text. Yet such an Olympian gaze eludes us in principle, inasmuch as the idea of true meaning itself presumes a reading prior to all readings. Even this challenge by critical theory to the nature and status of criticism, however, is still being made from *within* critical writing. It would also be misleading to think that traditional Chaucer criticism stopped somewhere during the 1980s and that everything written since then displays a different kind of postmodern awareness. Traditional research (including essential skills such as palaeography and lexicography) remains intrinsic to Chaucer scholarship. Indeed, the first five essays in this anthology are offered as instances (whether implicit or explicit) of the continuing presence and value of traditional criticism. The issue is thus not a matter of exclusion and banishment of older approaches in favour of a new critical orthodoxy but of inclusion and tolerance of differing, even antagonistic, concepts of criticism *per se*.

POSITIVIST HISTORICISM

After the disparaging attitude of the Enlightenment, Chaucer criticism began to fare better in the nineteenth century when, virtually for the first time in 400 years, serious and systematic attention was paid to his text. A vast amount of invaluable historical data was compiled. Philologists busily traced etymological origins for Chaucer's language. And, as the twentieth century started and

English became established as a university subject, these efforts took on the character of systematic scholarship. Caroline Spurgeon collated every known reference made to the poet.⁶ A Chaucer concordance was published.⁷ Sources of Chaucer's poetry were painstakingly compared line by line.⁸ Historical persons were identified as possible models for various of the Canterbury pilgrims.⁹ Scholars such as J. L. Lowes researched medical treatises on the 'malady' of love;¹⁰ the logic being that once we understand Arcite's or Troilus' languishings as formal stages of a recognisable illness, their otherwise exaggerated behaviour is explained.

This fascination with historical origins was also demonstrated throughout the new empirical sciences (such as sociology and biology), and nowhere more graphically than in Darwinism. The investigation into the evolution of *homo sapiens* revealed an unquenchable faith in origins as the explanation of essential nature. Such faith in the reliability of empirical data and in their capacity to reveal hidden origins represents a spirit of scientific optimism called positivism. Although the scholarship is modern, the socio-historical concerns of Timothy O'Brien in discussing the history of science in the *Summoner's Tale* and of Peter Goodall in discussing the social history of domestic architecture in the *Miller's Tale* (essays 1 and 2 in this collection) bear witness to the value of a traditional scholarly approach. In both essays we see a forceful consideration of traditional methods and a modern awareness of the material examined. Indeed, just how contemporary the concerns can be in traditional criticism is demonstrated by Monica McAlpine's historio-linguistic research into medieval homosexuality and Chaucer's Pardoner (essay 3), an essay that fuses scholarly discipline with a profound alertness to twentieth-century gender politics.

NEW CRITICISM

The early positivist phase of Chaucer criticism was challenged by that literary movement spearheaded by T. S. Eliot and popularly called 'New Criticism'. New Criticism rejected the historicism which was always trying to explain the text in terms of its context. For what, they asked, was left of literature once the text had been con-textualised away? New Criticism sought to rescue literature from what was seen as the encroachment of history and sociology.

Eliot makes a crucial distinction between the *interpretation* of a work of art and the *criticism* of it. The mere interpreter of the text grubs around for original sources and is similar to an empirical scientist in dealing exclusively with the world of facts. But the *real* critic, true scientist of the beautiful, has a more abstract and taxing role:

Qua work of art, the work of art cannot be interpreted; there is nothing to interpret; we can only criticise it according to standards, in comparison to other works of art; and for 'interpretation' the chief task is the presentation of relevant historical fact which the reader is not assumed to know.¹¹

Asserting the value of intuition and emotion, New Criticism restores authority to individual, aesthetic perception in a world of increasingly barren, objectified fact. From the same essay, here is Eliot's now famous statement on the need in art for an 'objective correlative':

The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlative'; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked. ... The artistic 'inevitability' lies in this complete adequacy of the external to the emotion.¹²

Utterly rooted in the immediacy of individual intuition, New Criticism none the less takes pains to distance itself from self-indulgent, superficial impressionism. That is, it sets out to be a rigorous science of aesthetic taste, and, in so characterising itself, strongly resembles the Enlightenment project of determining the laws of beauty. New Criticism starts from the individual's intuitive reading of a poem and refines it until insight into the true nature of the poem is attained. Text, not context, is all. The emphasis is upon the cultivation of sensibility through the art of 'close reading'. Meaning is thus ultimately founded on the individual's experience of the text. Thrown back on the text, the critic's most vital object of scrutiny is language. The study of how language reveals the inner heart of a poem – the placing of rhymes, the slight nuance of a stress, imagery, tone, etc. – generates for New Criticism an entire vocabulary of quasi-scientific analytic terms for 'anatomising' the

body of the text. The medical metaphor is deliberate. It captures exactly the sense in which New Criticism 'dissects' the body of the text with the finely sharpened scalpel of literary analysis. And 'Casebook', the word chosen for the original series, denotes a quasi-clinical file of reports, specialist studies, and interpretations of the 'data' of Chaucer's poem.

Within Chaucer studies, E. T. Donaldson in his 1970 book, *Speaking of Chaucer*, represents the New Critical point of view. It is motivated by the belief that a poem is answerable to laws of its own genre and that these laws are not relative, in any final sense, to different historical periods. The *Canterbury Tales* should essentially be read as a work of art and not as a socio-historical document. If Chaucer's poetry is great literature then it will speak directly to us across the ages. Thus, on the authority of his close reading of the text, Donaldson advances his theory of Chaucer the pilgrim-narrator as a naïve, bourgeois bumbler, so dazzled by money and status that he prefers scoundrels such as the Friar and Monk to the lowly, but morally superior, Parson and Ploughman.¹³ In this collection, Brooke Bergan's essay on the *Knight's Tale* (essay 4) also ultimately invokes the authority of close reading of the text. Where Donaldson resolves problems of characterisation by reading Chaucer's characters ironically, Bergan shows a more contemporary approach in letting such inconsistencies remain as intrinsic to the texture of the work. None the less, her appeal to metaphor as a poetic universal goes right to the heart of New Criticism's insistence on a sensuous poetic language which transcends historical difference.

THE BEGINNINGS OF CRITICAL THEORY

A mark of critical theory is the degree to which it challenges New Criticism's idea of a 'science of intuition'. It had become painfully clear that New Criticism's assertion of the authority of individual experience was fatally prone to relativism. Free of the moorings of objective historical fact, New Critics could pass off the most fanciful caprice by a sleight of the text. Safe from being gainsaid by a dead author, they had become adept ventriloquists of Chaucer. New Criticism foundered on a fundamental paradox: a 'science' of 'intuition' is a contradiction in terms. For the scientific is necessarily universal and the intuitive is necessarily particular. Because every

intuition is historically and linguistically situated, it can never attain the status of universal foundational truth. New Criticism was blind to the possibility of a 'hermeneutic' or 'interpretative' circle from which it is impossible to escape.¹⁴ A hermeneutic circle occurs when an object can only be defined in terms of attributes which themselves already presuppose the definition of that object. So, for example, an understanding of the text as a *whole* depends upon an understanding of the sum of its *parts*, but the understanding of a part itself depends on that of a whole. Because meaning is never externally authenticated, it is always negotiable. What marks the shifting boundaries of a hermeneutic circle in literature is time and language: in the former instance, to talk about the meaning of the *Canterbury Tales* is always to be talking about the *history* of meanings of the *Canterbury Tales*; in the latter instance, any question the reader asks about the *Canterbury Tales* is always answered in terms of the language of the question. Critical theory *includes* the ground it stands on as part of the terrain it is investigating.

MEDIEVAL EXEGETIC CRITICISM

The hermeneutic circle should be distinguished from medieval hermeneutics which was, more specifically, the exposition or 'exegesis' of the sacred text of scripture. For medieval hermeneutics, the human reader is also situated because scripture's divine truth is beyond the vision of man whose eyes are blind through sin. Language and time exist in a corrupted state and medieval hermeneutics seeks to restore their lost innocence and transparency. But, in contrast, the hermeneutic circle sees language and time without origin or end. Within Chaucer studies, the New Criticism was most notably opposed by the Exegetic criticism of D. W. Robertson.¹⁵ While this movement was a theoretically informed rejection of New Criticism's intuitionism, it took the form of a return to a premodern conception of literature. Robertson's fundamental point was that the Enlightenment and the Middle Ages do not share the same concept of literature. For Robertson, medieval art is defined in nature and function by an essential relation to the Christian faith. In place of the Enlightenment literary/critical distinction, Robertson's view proceeds from the distinction between the sacred and profane. Behind everything secular and fallen lies the call of the sacred. The sacred is implicitly or

explicitly present in each and every one of Chaucer's texts. Robertson's criticism is thus 'exegetic' because it expounds the hidden, sacred meaning of Chaucer's text. To the extent, then, that Robertson recognises a rival, premodern conception of literature, he goes some way towards debunking the universality of traditional criticism. But his approach is ultimately retrograde because it holds that medieval literature is definable in terms of an essential nature. Gerald Morgan's essay on the *Franklin's Tale* (essay 5) upholds the values of the Exegetical school in its emphasis on the distinctiveness of the Middle Ages and on the necessity of recuperating an authentically medieval viewpoint. It is, however, his quest to uncover the text's essential meaning which exposes his interest in controlling the text just as criticism controls literature.

FEMINISM AND PSYCHOANALYSIS

As critical theories, feminism and psychoanalysis, each in their own way, challenge the traditional division of labour between literature and criticism. Because of this, they pose great obstacles to comprehension, particularly for those accustomed to conventional ways of reading. The sceptic asks: 'What has feminism or psychoanalysis got to do with Chaucer? What commends these approaches to Chaucer over others?' In so far as we provide reasons internal to feminism or psychoanalysis, that is, a justification expounding and explaining what these positions stand for, the sceptic will not be satisfied. These sorts of reasons give grounds for belief that already presuppose the validity of the critical theory in question. The sceptic demands external reasons justifying the superiority of these critical theories. An external reason justifies by appeal to neutral criteria of validity among competing theories. The problem, though, is that such impartial and universal principles of theory-choice simply do not exist. Substantive theories always generate their own standards of evidence and proof according to which their claims are to be assessed. In effect, the sceptic's question is already loaded in favour of traditional theory by reproducing the literature/criticism distinction in the way that the problem of theory-choice is posed: we are now just being asked to criticise literary theories in the same manner as we do literary texts. Implicit in this is the aestheticisation of theory and truth. To judge properly, we are exhorted to adopt a spectator's point of view, the detached and disinterested, con-