

Leeds Studies in English

New Series XLII

2011

Edited by

Alaric Hall



Editorial assistants
Helen Price and Victoria Cooper

Leeds Studies in English

<www.leeds.ac.uk/lse>

School of English
University of Leeds

2011

Parish Priests, and Chaucer's *Treatise on the Astrolabe*. Yet Mirk's *Instructions* is a standard pastoral manual intended, obviously, for priests (although, admittedly, for ignorant ones), while Chaucer's *Astrolabe* presupposes a reader with the money and time to invest in acquiring and learning to use a complex astronomical instrument. On this showing, the late fourteenth-century 'crisis' Breen attributes to English literature in general really applies only to *Piers Plowman*, and Chapter 5 reveals that it doesn't apply to *Piers Plowman* either.

Breen's book has other problems as well. Her exposition is often jumbled, and thus hard to follow. The appropriateness or relevance of texts she chooses to analyze can be hard to see, and the ground of her commentary and arguments keeps shifting. She never establishes a stable definition of *habitus* (at times, it seems that any move to denounce vice or praise virtue can be labeled 'habituation'), while her model of *habitus*-acquisition is unsatisfactory. Her claims for what primary texts allegedly reveal often exceed anything I can see happening in the sources as quoted. As we have seen, in order to make her argument she sometimes misrepresents primary texts via paraphrase or cherry-picking of examples. There are also important gaps in her coverage: hardly any consideration of the programme of educating the laity in religious observance that followed the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 — surely a major early effort at lay 'habituation' — and no attention paid to England's other vernacular, French, or to the pragmatic realities of manuscript access and reading modes.

In reviewing problematic books, one traditionally looks for and highlights the areas in which useful contributions are being made. In this case, so much of Breen's analysis seems like ventriloquism — the author making the texts say what she wants them to say — that one can never feel confident about her readings. I can only hope that in her future work, the author will combine her considerable abilities with a more rigorous approach to the material.

JOYCE COLEMAN

UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA

Peter Brown, *Authors in Context: Geoffrey Chaucer*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. xvi + 254pp. ISBN 978-0-1928-0429-7. £8.99.

This affordable paperback aims to be both 'compact and comprehensive', to offer 'a wide-ranging account of the medieval society from which works such as *The Canterbury Tales* and *Troilus and Criseyde* sprang'. I opened it hoping to find a book that would be a good starting-point for undergraduates struggling to make sense of Chaucer's world, and was partly satisfied.

There are seven chapters, all of which combine history with literary analysis: 'The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer', 'The Social Body', 'The Literary Scene', 'Society and Politics', 'Intellectual Ideas', 'Science and Technology' and 'New Contexts'. The book's greatest strength is that it provides summaries of relevant contextual information that can be hard to find so helpfully and succinctly presented elsewhere: there are excellent accounts, for example, of the Peasants' Revolt, guilds, named individuals in Chaucer's circle, the four humours, and the Hundred Years' War. The best of these involve a sensitive examination of their relation with Chaucer's poetry. Anyone wanting to know about Chaucer's response to the Black Death or Lollardy should find this book a great place to start. More on religious practice beyond Lollardy would not have gone amiss, but it is hard to criticise omissions from such a short book. Some of the more literary material also reads as fresh and interesting: the analysis of how the Wife of Bath uses social networks and navigates textual culture is invaluable, and the section on 'Personal Identity' under 'Society and Politics' will be a good resource for helping students to think

about the pilgrim portraits in the *General Prologue*, as well as the performance of identity in the *Merchant's Tale*.

However, in general the material on literary cultures and contexts was less well done than the more strictly historical. 'London as a Literary Scene' moves eccentrically from the *Parson's Tale* to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* to *Piers Plowman* — and back again to the *Parson's Tale* — with only a short and incoherent discussion of *Sir Thopas* making a real connection between Chaucer and his native literary inheritance. First we are told that Chaucer mercilessly lampoons popular romance, then that his narrator 'does not properly understand the genre' (p. 99) — claims that, if not mutually exclusive, would at least bear clearer exposition. The section on 'Manuscript Culture', which asserts that a single accurate copy of a literary work was used to produce subsequent copies (p. 90), simplifies things to a degree that seems likely only to generate confusion among those trying to understand what the fragments in the *Canterbury Tales* are, or why some lines appear in some manuscripts but not others. The section on patronage, too, cries out for a clear articulation of what the reason for Chaucer's annuities might have been if they were not given for literary productions.

In fact, that struck me as a recurrent problem with this book. As all teachers know, it can be hard to explain phenomena that you have read about and explained a hundred times without skipping a few crucial points along the way: they are so familiar to you that they seem almost self-evident. But readers using this book as an introduction to Chaucer's world will not find it self-evident, for example, what a 'valettus' is — Chaucer's role when serving Lionel, earl of Ulster — and are unlikely to find the gloss 'yeoman' much help (p. 46). The oblique statement that 'land ownership counts for more than ownership of property and possessions' (p. 30) does not say much to someone who does not already know that knights typically owned more land than merchants. On astrology, while Brown's opening claim that the stars were a description of what would come to pass rather than actually directing events on earth (p. 171) is clear enough, he later asserts that the planets 'directly influenced ... human experience, identity, and behaviour' (p. 173), which left me scratching my head wondering how the author's perspective had changed.

The literary readings also tend to be a little flat, eliding critical controversies rather than exposing areas of ambiguity and disagreement in ways that might stimulate further reading and thought. To give just one example, Brown argues that the *Knight's Tale's* Palamon and Arcite have entirely opposing perceptions of the world, and that Arcite 'sees Emelye as a woman to be won by force and enjoyed physically' (p. 160). This in itself is probably an over-reading, but crucially, Brown makes no reference to the opposing critical view — that Palamon and Arcite are virtually indistinguishable except in terms of their fortunes. The final chapter extends analysis to modern reception of Chaucer in film, on TV and on stage, and comes down rather stuffily against the comic postmodernism of Helgeland's *A Knight's Tale* (2001) and in favour of Chaucer as 'icon of national identity' evoking 'ancient spiritual values' in Powell and Pressburger's 1944 *A Canterbury Tale* (p. 198).

This book will be useful resource for those teaching Chaucer to refresh their memories about historical contexts: it is quick to read and reliable. As an introduction for students, it will work best when there is ample class time to tease out its full implications.

CATHY HUME

NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY