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Chaucer's Influence and Reception

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There was a time, not so long ago, when a topic like "influence and reception" was regarded merely as a minor specialization in the broad field of Chaucer studies. For much of the twentieth century, it seemed more important either to read Chaucer's poetry as the expression of a unique medieval sensibility or to insist on its timeless "relevance" for modernity. Either way, the historical patterns of response to Chaucer's poetry in other centuries, or in other contexts, seemed to be of secondary interest. Similarly, a great deal of philological work was undertaken in this period to purify Chaucer's texts of all scribal traces, in a concerted effort to distinguish the work of the poet from his early copyists, editors, and imitators. As a result, the reception of Chaucer, along with the study of these secondary or derivative texts, was set aside as part of literary history, a discipline that had been displaced from its earlier central position by the growth of interest, over the course of the twentieth century, in the theory and practice of criticism "proper." The past ten or fifteen years, however, we have seen a powerful paradigm shift in the understanding of literary history: in more recent practice, cultural history and the patterns of literary reception have become central to literary studies. There are complex reasons why this shift has taken place, concerned with the ever-changing disciplinary boundaries between literary, historical, and cultural study and, more specifically, with criticism's perpetual capacity to interrogate its own traditions.
This chapter takes for granted that the study of how poets, scholars, and critics have read Chaucer in the past is crucial for our understanding of the scholarly, critical, and cultural forms by which he is mediated for us today. It assumes that we are empowered by a greater and deeper familiarity with those forms. It also assumes that Chaucer's indisputably canonical status is due only in part to the quality of his poetry, also, and more important, it is something we remake anew, albeit in different ways, every time we pick up a volume of Chaucer, no matter what the context. The more we are familiar with those traditions and the origins and histories of our reading practices, the more we can speak with authority of the importance of medieval literature, and the poetry of Chaucer, for the understanding of “English literature,” both as a set of poetic and fictional texts and as a foundational cultural construct. For this, finally, is the contentious burden of this chapter: Chaucer is the originary canonical poet of English literary tradition, and he remains an exemplary figure for the patterns of literary reception and criticism, not just of canonical literature, but of all literature in English.

Poetry and Genealogy:
Chaucer and the Patterns of Literary Influence

English literary studies have traditionally been organized around the figure of the author. Modern critiques of the canon have attempted to shake up these patterns of emphasis on the “great” writers of the past, and the cultural assumptions about masculinity, heterosexuality, whiteness, Englishness, and the aesthetics of writing that sustain them, by drawing our attention to neglected writers from earlier periods (women writers, for example) or the work of different language and cultural groups (the writers of the Caribbean diaspora, perhaps, or of Australian Aboriginal communities). However, it has seemed almost impossible to resist shaping our discussions around the work of individual writers. Most of the institutions of general reading beyond the academy (literary prizes, biographies, writers' festivals) still privilege the individual personality that lies, or seems to lie, behind the books we read, while the traditional defense of literature, that it broadens our experience and hones our sensibilities by putting us in touch with the great minds of the past, still exerts a powerful influence on all readers.

Medieval English literary studies is no exception to these general patterns. For many years, the second half of the fourteenth century was thought of and written about as “the Age of Chaucer.” As its most widely read author, Chaucer seemed not only to encapsulate the most representative qualities of this period but to do so in a way that surpassed all its other writers. A cluster of important assumptions lies behind his continued preeminence: (1) Chaucer was the first poet to render the English language as a respectable medium for court poetry; (2) he progressively broke free first from French then from Italian literary and rhetorical models to perfect a native style of English comic realism; (3) some sense Chaucer also enriched the English language and established the southeastern dialect of Middle English as the origin of modern “standard English”; (4) Chaucer not only conditioned and encapsulated the literary, cultural, social, and political preoccupations of his age but was also able mysteriously to transcend them; and (5) he inaugurated a line of cultural and literary transmission that passed from Chaucer’s to the next great “age,” that of Shakespeare.

Some of these critical assumptions can be sustained by linguistic and literary evidence, but they are probably best seen as driven by ideological and cultural forces that find their origin beyond Chaucer studies and, in particular, by the needs of a national literary history that delights in finding evidence of continuity in literary production over the centuries, suitably punctuated by works of individual genius. In Reform and Cultural Revolution, his revisionary literary history of the period 1330–1547, for the Oxford English Literary History, James Simpson stresses the determining influence of concepts of literary periodization on this construction of genius: “The logic of strict periodization (medieval versus Renaissance) determines the need for an exception to prove the rule. This unnatural exception is invariably Chaucer, who is consistently dragged as a forerunner of the forces of whatever new ideological order takes control of the field of literary studies.”

There have been many attempts to break down these structures. In addition to detailed studies of individual writers like William Langland, John Gower, and the Gawain poet that set out to discuss their works in terms not generated by Chaucer criticism, J. A. Burrow’s Ricardian Poetry (1971) sought to define a rather more generalized view of literary style between 1370 and 1460. “Despite its fertility,” he writes, “the age of Chaucer and Langland has failed to achieve the full status of a literary period.” Before the establishment of a national literary culture, or the self-conscious “movements” that characterize later literary history, the “Ricardian” poet, in Burrow’s formulation, nevertheless shares a number of stylistic and thematic concerns and preoccupations. Burrow’s book encourages us to read Chaucer’s experiments with style and voice as part of a broader fourteenth-century engagement with the vernacular tradition and the attempt to graft a more learned Latin or European style onto that native “stuck.”

More recently, Christopher Cannon’s Making of Chaucer’s English (1998) deconstructs many long-cherished beliefs in Chaucer’s linguistic and literary innovation. Central and representative among these is Ian Robinson’s claim that
“Chaucer made English capable of poetry.” Cannon emphasizes the traditional elements in Chaucer’s language while analyzing why and how the language of his poetry gives the impression of being more innovative than it is and how this impression came to dominate subsequent commentary for so long.

However, these dominant paradigms that attribute broader linguistic or literary developments to single authors and personalities are extremely durable. They persist, for example, in the very influential writings of Harold Bloom, who has mounted the most vehement defense of the tradition Western canon of “genius.” When writing on Chaucer, for example, Bloom seeks to unatangle the mystery of his position between Dante and Shakespeare, working on the assumption that literary history can best be explained as a series of paradigm shifts from one individual writer to the next. For Bloom, Chaucer is the genius of pre-Shakespearean character, although this insight depends on collapsing the familiar distinctions drawn so influentially by T. D. Donaldson:

“We should not separate Chaucer the man, Chaucer the poet, and Chaucer the pilgrim: all combine in one living ironist whose richest legacy is a roster of literary characters second only to Shakespeare’s in the language. In them we can see burgeoning what will become Shakespeare’s most original imaginative power: the representation of change within particular dramatic personalities. . . . Chaucer anticipates by centuries the inwardness we associate with the Renaissance and the Reformation: his men and women begin to develop a self-consciousness that only Shakespeare knew how to quicken into self-overhearing, subsequent startlement and the arousal of the will to change. . . .”

I quote Bloom at such length in part because he is such an influential critic, writing for a non-specialist audience (a perspective that is always a good corrective to the more narrow assumptions of any academic discipline), and in part because his view of Chaucer so eloquently captures for a contemporary readership what is in fact a relatively conventional view of our poet’s skill: his genius for characterization, his knowing irony, and his uncanny insights into human nature. Bloom goes on, in this passage, to wonder at Chaucer’s anticipation, with Shakespeare, of insights into human nature that Sprague Reed “could do little more than pant over and cry out.”

What is the history of this view of Chaucer as master of character and master of irony?

The word “master” is not used lightly, here. Some of the first responses to Chaucer use such vocabulary very precisely, to show that Chaucer was seen as, indeed, a master of poetic and rhetorical discourse, inspiring a series of followers and imitators. It is important to acknowledge that before the development of the Romantic aesthetic in the eighteenth century, poetic art was firmly grounded in a set of rhetorical skills, as much as it took its first inspiration from nature, from experience, or from the imagination. This is not to suggest that the rhetorical figure of the muse was not important; indeed, it was a familiar mode in which to begin a poem. But a poet’s deployment of that well-rehearsed trope could become a powerful indicator of his originality and inventiveness, from the outset of the work. The invocations to each book of Chaucer’s Troilus and Criseyde experiment with different formal addresses to the Furye, to the Muse of History, to the Chaucer, to the Erinyes, the three Furies, and to the Paracel, the three Fates. Chaucer’s earliest work, the Book of the Duchess, also plays with this convention. Here, the sleepless narrator promises an elaborate featherbed, fitted out with black satin sheets, to Morphus, the god of Sleep, if only he will grant him sleep, only to undercut the dedication with a calculated aside “Yf I wiste where were his cave?” (line 262).

Medical poets drew freely on a range of sources, and Chaucer is an exception: he reworks, translates, imitates, and parodies both his classical models, especially Ovid, and his predecessors in the European vernacular: the authors of Le Roman de la Rose, Guillaume de Machaut and Jean Froissart in French, and Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio in Italian and Latin. As many commentators point out, however, Chaucer is the first writer in English to reveal any kind of anxiety about authorship as a mark of originality. His Troilus and Criseyde is deeply indebted to Giovanni Boccaccio’s Il Filisteo, yet he avoids mentioning the Italian poet’s name, while his own text is deeply concerned both with its relationship with its source and with the question of future posterity. Chaucer’s firm refusal of Petrarch (“He is now dead and nayled in his chest.” 4.249) in the Clerk’s Tale is equally notable.

Like Petrarch, Chaucer is conscious of his fame and refers to himself as a poet whose works are read by others. Some of these moments appeal to the immediate context of recitation or public performance, such as the frequent appeals to the exquisite sentiments of the noble audience of Troilus and Criseyde or to the bourgeois war between men and women in the Clerk’s Eneid after his tale, and various knowing comments about marriage elsewhere in the Cantebury Tales. In a more wryly ironic, the Prologue to the Legend of Good Women is concerned with the reception of Troilus and Criseyde and opens up a debate about the poet’s courtly responsibility to women. Later in Chaucer’s career, he adopts a more mocking, even insouciant attitude to his own posterity, as in the Host’s brutal assault on his telling of the tale of Sir Thopas in the Canterbury Tales—“ Thy dresty ryning is nat worth a rood!” (7930)—or in passages of less emphatic tone and register. In the Introduction to the Man of Law’s Tale, the lawyer lists some of the many tales that Chaucer has
told so badly—"he kan but lewedly / On metres and on rymyng craftily" (2.47–48). Finally, in the Retractions that conclude the Parson's Tale, for all their famous ambiguity, Chaucer shows how it is possible to move from a narratorial voice within a text to an authorial signature beyond it; to develop an authorial identity that can bring together a series of poems as a distinctive body of work, sealed and brought to finite closure by the imminence of death.

This growing sense of what his own poetic signature might guarantee and the implication of an authorial personality beyond the poetry, combined with the sheer rhetorical and cultural authority audible in a poet who was so able to translate classical and European style and content into English verse, made it easy for other poets to see Chaucer as a master and to adopt the vocabulary of homage in their elegiac verse.

The relationship is not straightforward, of course. It is one thing to identify Chaucer's mastery; another thing to emulate it or to adopt a similar rhetorical stance. Seth Lerer argues, indeed, that Chaucer's poetry is preoccupied with authority, in ways that often dramatize the subjection of readers and poetic imitators. "Throughout his major narratives, Chaucer presents a class of readers and writers subjected to the abuse of their audience or subject to the authority of their sources..." Such examples as the Clerk's Obedience to Petrarch and the Host, the Squire's vain attempts to match his father the Knight, and Adam Scriveyn's garbings of the Troilus and Boccace, Chaucer's inheritors found their persons. Lerer reads the poetry of Sir John de Chandos, Thomas Hoccleve, John Lydgate, and others, commentaries by William Caxton and John Shirley, and other fifteenth- and sixteenth-century texts to show how these writers rehearse a readerly and writerly dynamic already anticipated and rehearsed in Chaucer's fictional scenes of reading and writing. They are thus doubly subjected to Chaucer's authority and must invent various more or less successful strategies for accommodating or resisting that subjection.

Whatever the specific relations of power and influence among Chaucer, his predecessors, his contemporaries, and his followers, it remains the case that they are relations structured around individual voices and names. In one sense this seems obvious, but it represents a dramatic contrast to earlier English understandings of poetry. Even the alliterative poets of the fourteenth century, contemporary with Chaucer, never refer to individual makers and poets but place themselves in relation to older anonymous traditions and styles of poetry, either to affirm their inheritance of that tradition or to lament its passing. Under the influence of Italian humanism, mediated through the poets he loved to imitate and outdo, Chaucer learned to make poetry an issue for individual poets and their posterity, and his followers picked up the theme.

In the English court of the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, there was also a growing culture of royal patronage, which rewarded individual practitioners, not traditions. Under pressure from that competition, individual poetic careers began to take shape, both in rivalry (think of Chaucer's throwaway allusion to Gower in the Introduction to the Man of Law's Tale) and in companionship (think of Chaucer's appeals to Gower and Ralph Strode at the end of Troilus and Criseyde). Chaucer himself had to learn how to negotiate the vagaries of patronage. His Complaint to His Purse plays most elegantly with the necessity to please, entertain, and flatter while asking for favor, while his Prologue to the Legend of Good Women similarly improves a scene of commission, with Cupid and Alceste giving the orders, and a proleptic scene of presentation to Richard II's Queen Anne. Gower and Hoccleve both learn from Chaucer how to do this: these are skills the Gawain poet, or even Langland, never really needed or troubled to acquire to anywhere near the same degree. We know, too, that Chaucer practiced this discretion in the turbulent factional politics of Richard's court, where his relatively low profile sits somewhat at odds with the growing authority of his narrative and poetic voice in this period.

The poet who responded most fully to the challenges of that narrative voice was John Lydgate, and it is worth pausing over some of the critical problems raised by the inevitable comparisons between the two poets. Lydgate was only one of many Chaucerian imitators in the fifteenth century, but the dynamic of their relationship is instructive for our concern with the patterns and structures of literary reception.

Lydgate wrote far more than Chaucer, and many more manuscripts survive of his work. His name was frequently paired with Chaucer's (and Gower's) in the fifteenth century, and perhaps most remarkably to modern readers, his poems were often included, over his own name, in early "Complete" editions of Chaucer's works in the sixteenth century, as successive editions collected more and more examples of "Chaucerian" poetry. Modern literary study, however, finds room in its canon for only one major medieval figure, and the reception of Lydgate is a far simpler and shorter story than the reception of Chaucer. The volumes of Chaucer's Critical Heritage or Caroline Spurgeon's Five Hundred Years of Chaucer Criticism and Allusion are substantial documents in the development of a readily history of Chaucer, from the praise of his contemporaries and followers, laments for his death, hundreds of imitations, modernizations, and translations, and a considerable body of commentary and elucidation. Lydgate's poetry attracted only a fraction of this attention; although individual works, like the Fall of Princes, remained popular and influential in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Lydgate criticism never generated its own affectionate traditions and patterns, as Chaucer's did.
In fact, Chaucer's star rose as Lydgate's fell. When modern critical comparisons are made, they are usually at Lydgate's expense, too, although the nadir of Lydgate's posterity came in 1802, when Joseph Ritson delivered what must be the most damning account of any poet, assembling "this voluminous, prosaic, and an undignified writer, who disgraces the name and patronage of his master Chaucer."10

In the climate of professional medieval studies in the twentieth century, however, there have been a number of lively discussions about the poetic achievement of John Lydgate, though these discussions are nearly always framed in comparative terms, even in books devoted to Lydgate. Derek Pear- sall finds only weak imitation of Chaucer's skill and verse; A. C. Spearing follows Harold Bloom's identification of an oedipal struggle between succes- sive poets but names Lydgate as the weaker poet, unable to shake the influence of his master and capable only of a weak "misreading" of Chaucer, as his poetic father.11

When Lydgate writes about Chaucer to commend him, he invokes the idea of the laureate poet:

And eke my master Chaucer is ygrave
The noble Rethor, poet of Bryayne
That worthy was the laurer to haue
Of poetry, and the palme atreyne
That made first to, to distille and rayne
The golde dewe droopes of speche and eloquence
Inne our tyme, thurgh his excellence ([Life of Our Lady, lines 1628-14])11

Here, and in other poems, Lydgate praises the illumination Chaucer brought to poetry and to England while also voicing his own anxiety about following him:

To God I pray, for he his soule haue,
After whos help of ned he most crave,
And seke his boke joye is left be-hynde
Som goodly wrothe her-in for to bynde,
To sette amonge pe croked lynys royde
Which I do se; ass, by similane,
Be rube stant, so roul of renoun,
Wth-tune a ryng of espur or laton,
So stant pe making of hym, dougthly,
Amonge oure boke of englishe perlour: (Troy Book, lines 4701-10)11

It can be tempting to read such verses as measures of Lydgate's sense of his own inferiority or belatedness, to use Bloom's terms. Yet such statements are not necessarily our best guide to Lydgate's feelings about Chaucer, either conscious or unconscious, and it is important to distinguish between what we may call the official discourse of Chaucerian poetry from the actual practice of Chaucerian poetry by his followers. One of the central texts here is Lydgate's Siege of Thebes, which is prefaced by a long prologue, in which Lydgate presents himself at Canterbury, twenty years after Chaucer's death, and joins the pilgrims for their return journey to London, riding, himself, in Chaucer's place.

In this prologue, Lydgate seems to attempt to out-Chaucer Chaucer's General Prologue, in the complex syntax of his opening sentence, the length of his astrological conceits and his vernacular poetics. His tale, too, reaches back further in Theban history than Chaucer's Knight's Tale, whose structural position it matches, as the first tale told on the return journey. Both prologue and tale can be read as straightforward homage to Chaucer (though Lydgate avoids men- tion of the poet's name until the very end of his Siege); until, that is, we begin to exercise our own aesthetic judgement on Lydgate's achievement. Derek Pear- sall establishes the dominant tone here for modern critics, writing of Lydgate "ambling in clumsy playfulness after his master,"11 In Pearssall's edition of the Siege, this attitude has become so entrenched and habitual that his editorial commentary becomes quite searching, drawing attention to Lydgate's "often tiresome syntax," and the "distress" caused by Lydgate's frequent use of the headless line. Further, the "desperate editor has to call a halt" and impose a full stop after forty-five lines of Lydgate's opening sentence; and finally, in the most unlikely of these comments, Pearsall suggests that the Host's recommended cure for flatulence (lines 177-18) might reflect Lydgate's concern about his poetry's own long-windedness.14 In spite of various at- tempts (several of them Pearssall's own) to appreciate Lydgate's achievement, he remains an easy target for satire. Reading Lydgate's poetry and his critical reception independently of Chaucer's remains a major challenge for medieval English literary criticism.

It is only recently that James Simpson has attempted a radical rethinking of Lydgate's relation to Chaucer, bypassing the poetics of personality and concentrating on the thematic and structural relationships between the texts of the two poets while also reminding us of the specific social and political con- text in which Lydgate was writing. Simpson suggests that Lydgate often "writes back" to Chaucer, setting Chaucerian narratives in the context of a much longer historical perspective. So, his Troy Book paints Chaucer's Troilus and Cresside "back unto the larger historical canvas from which Chaucer's narrative has been scaled down," just as his Destruction of Thebes (Simpson's preferred title for the Siege) reminds us of the broader context of the events of
the Knight's Tale. Simpson reads Lydgate as foregrounding his own status as "clerical narrator," using that position as "to persuade English knights against imperial mission, and against the dangers of civil war."

Lydgate's politics, however, appeared less dynamic and less urgent to writers of the sixteenth century, no longer content to cluster Lydgate, Chaucer, and Gower together. These three poets had dominated fifteenth-century literary history, but in Simpson's reading, Lydgate falls victim to the tyranny of periodization, becoming representative of the fifteenth century at its most medieval, the dull background against which Chaucer's star shines the more brightly.

This is not to say that the image and representation of Chaucer remained stable or indeed that he was always highly regarded for the same qualities in his poetry. Each age, each writer of a national literary history finds something different in Chaucer to suit the dominant climate and aesthetic sensibility. As I mentioned, the Elizabethan poets loved Chaucer for his Ovidian and courteously love poetry. Edmund Spenser recuperates Chaucer for nostalgic pastoral, figuring him as the "God of shepherds Tityrus," the preeminent poet of unrequited love, in his Shepherdes Calender, while later plundering him for chivalric narrative as he furnishes a conclusion to the Squire's Tale in Book 4 of the Faerie Queene. Here, Spenser rehearses an earlier elegiac mode, allowing him to lament the death of Chaucer, the "well of English voudyfled," while also stepping in to revive his "labours lost."

Other sixteenth-century writers, less concerned to take up Chaucer's poetic mantle, praised other aspects of his classicism and his philosophical learning. In his influential edition of Chaucer's Works in 1598, Thomas Speght included a "letter" from Francis Beaumont, who commends Chaucer's imitations of Homer, Vergil, and Horace, although Beaumont also strikes a new vein in praising Chaucer's imaginative power: "so may Chaucer rightly be called the pith and sinews of Eloquence, and very life itself of all mirth and pleasant writing. Besides, one gift he hath above all others, and that is by excellency of his descriptions to possess his readers with a more forcible imagination of seeing that (as it were) done before their eyes which they read, than any other that ever hath written in any tongue." This is a crucial aspect of Chaucerian reception: his capacity to consolidate classical tradition in English while also producing the effect of what we would now call realism. Taking the lead, perhaps, from Chaucer's own pairing of solas and mutua, critics often praise Chaucer's learning and his realism in this way.

In 1700, introducing his translations from selected classical and medieval authors, his Fables Ancient and Modern, John Dryden picked up this theme, giving influential voice to the idea of Chaucer's naturalism. Dryden's Preface is a powerful document in English literary history, as it formulates a number of assumptions about language, poetry, and criticism that would dominate literary discussions for nearly three hundred years. For Dryden, Chaucer is the "Father of English Poetry," but his language is still marked by imperfection, since "he liv'd in the infancy of our Poetry. . . . We must be Children before we grow Men." The idea of Chaucer as a father figure is not original to Dryden, but he is the first to generalize the idea of literary patriarchy across such a long historical perspective. The narrative of masculine generation is also crucial to Dryden's understanding of literary history and the transmission of genius: "Milton was the Poetical Son of Spencer, and Mr. Waller of Fairfax; for we have our Linen Descents and Clans, as well as other Families; Spencer more than once intimates, that the Soul of Chaucer was transmuted into his Body, and that he was begotten by him Two hundred years after his Decease. Milton has acknowledged to me, that Spencer was his Original." Such inheritances, however, are held in suspension with a different kind of trope: the committal of poets in a kind of transcendent heavenly company. In Chaucer's case, however, as fits such a cheerfully childlike spirit, this company is envisaged in rather more informal terms: "I see . . . all the Pilgrims in the Canterbury Tales, their Humours, their Features, and the very Dress, as distinctly as if I had supped with them at the Tabard in Southwark." This is distinctly reminiscent of Beaumont's praise of Chaucer's realism, while the frequency of appeals to the Canterbury Tales and to the convivial scenes of drinking, storytelling, and community also play an important ideological role in the formation of the Chaucerian community of readers and our capacity to imagine ourselves coming into Chaucer's presence.

It is almost impossible to tell the story of Chaucerian reception without tracking this path from one influential (that is, male) writer to the next, and as these quotations from Dryden reveal, the traditions of earlier commentary and criticism establish their own patterns of influence and genealogy. This is particularly the case for Dryden, who combines the dual function of poet and critic and who exerts such a powerful influence on the development of literary criticism more generally. This is exactly my point, though Chaucer's reception is closely bound up with the development of critical method in English Writing like Dryden needed to develop a set of attitudes and opinions about the origins of poetry in English in order to write both a persuasive national literary history and to coin a workable and fruitful discourse of literary criticism. The specific features that Dryden identifies in Chaucer—the preeminence of the Canterbury Tales, his comic realism, his refinement of the English language, and, above all, his position as an early, and thus imperfect poet—dominated Chaucer studies and the writing of English literary history for nearly 350 years.
As we have seen, Chaucer’s rhetorical skills were deeply admired by his contemporaries and followers, while in the Renaissance it was his preeminence in romantic and courtly poetry that was singled out. A host of poets in the eighteenth century took delight in modernizing, or “civilizing” Chaucer’s pastoral poetry into heroic couplets, with a marked preference for the fabliaux; the tales of the Reeve, Miller, and Shipman dominate Betty Bowden’s collection of such modernizations from the Canterbury Tales. It is from this period that Chaucer’s reputation for comedy and bawdy humor arises, a reputation that persists well into his modern and contemporary reception. Alexander Pope, for example, translated the Merchant’s Tale as January and May while he was still sixteen or seventeen and returned to Chaucer to translate the Wife of Bath’s Prologue several years later, in 1713. Yet he was also drawn to Chaucer’s study of reputation and humor and wrote his Temple of Fame in 1715.

Another important strand of criticism praises Chaucer’s sentiment, piety, and his capacity for pathos, though these qualities are usually also paired with the quality of mirth and humor. Samuel Taylor Coleridge finds the perfect balance of tenderness, sympathy, and masculinity: “I take unceasing delight in Chaucer. His kindly cheerfulness is especially delicious to me in my old age. How exquisitely tender he is, and yet how perfectly free from the least touch of sickly melancholy or morbid drooping!” As John Burrow points out, it is in this period that the tales of the Man of Law, the Clerk, and the Prioress come into the foreground, as tales in which “children or ladies suffer extremities of distress.” Against the context of much Victorian poetry and fiction, however, Chaucer’s poetry seems perhaps less weighty, and it is in this period that Matthew Arnold famously excludes Chaucer from the top rank of English poets (see Knapp’s essay in this Companion). Arnold compares Chaucer favorably to other medieval romance writers and commends him for making an epoch in English poetry and for “the lovely charm of his diction, the lovely charm of his movement.” And yet, “The substance of Chaucer’s poetry, his view of things and his criticism of life, has largeness, freedom, shrewdness, benevolence, but it has not this high seriousness. Homer’s criticism of life has it, Dante’s has it, Shakespeare’s has it. It is this chieftly which gives to our spirits what they can rest upon; and with the increasing demands of our modern age upon poetry, this virtue of giving us what we can rest upon will be more and more highly esteemed.”

Such a comparison of Chaucer with other poets, regardless of the terms of comparison or the critic’s conclusions, now appears as a distinctive marker of criticism written before the development of professional Chaucer studies or outside that specialized discourse. D. S. Brewer closes his volumes of Chaucer’s Critical Heritage at the year 1913, “marking roughly the end of the tradition of the generally cultivated amateur critic and reader, who shared,
usually unconsciously, the general tradition of Neoclassical, Romantic, and Victorian premises about literature, with their social implications. All such dates are necessarily somewhat arbitrary, and as I have suggested, this "tradition" of general commentary on Chaucer does persist in important and influential forms.

It is clear, however, that as English literary studies has become more securely established as an academic and university subject in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, there has been a dramatic shift in the kinds of criticism produced. As "English" becomes more fully instituted as a scholarly discipline, with all the benefits and constraints of such systems, Chaucer criticism and commentary forecloses on its own history, and reconfigures its issues and debates rather more locally, within the confines of a specialist field.  

The Terms of Praise

One of the most tantalizing issues raised by Chaucer's life is the issue of how Chaucer's poetry was received and recognized in his day. The external evidence is slight, and the internal evidence—the witness of the poems—often ambiguous. Certainly there is no surviving evidence beyond the poetry of any formal commission or reward; all the evidence that suggests court context—the Book of the Duchess, the scene with Cupid and Alcestis in the Legend of Good Women, the frontispiece to the Corpus Christi Manuscript of Troilus and Criseyde—are deeply conditioned by fictional and imaginative constructs: the best means of soliciting patronage seem to involve the suggestive rehearsal of such scenes in poetic form, whether those works received material or personal support or not. We need to recall, too, that Chaucer depended on patronage for the maintenance of his salary and allowances as a court official, and much or more than he depended on political or royal favor for the furtherance of his poetic art. It is thus often difficult to untangle the evidence that survives about Chaucer's personal and social connections with the court and to weigh their import for his reputation as a poet against his reputation as a courtier and administrator.

Several of Chaucer's contemporaries, however, did recognize his poetic supremacy in his own lifetime. Fastache Deschamps addressed a French ballade to "Grant translate, noble Geoffroy Chaucier," praising his philosophical and rhetorical skill. And in their narrative fiction, the English poets Thomas Usk and John Gower both give speeches to Love and Venus, respectively, praising Chaucer as a poet of love. Usk's Love praises "the noble philosophical poet in English" for the poem he made of his servant Troilus, while Gower's Venus sends a special greeting to Chaucer, for...
In slagh tre of him, but att this land it smกรณ
But noneeth yt hastow no power
His name sle; his by vertu asterith
Ursley fro thee, which ay us llyly herith
With bookes of his ornat endyng
That is to att this land enlumynge. (lines 1965–74)\(^{13}\)

Consolation for Hoccleve and the nation comes in the forms of the works that will survive the poet’s death, the “bookes of his ornat endyng / That is to att this land enlumynge.” Hoccleve encapsulates much of the early praise of Chaucer, whom he commends here for the sweetness of his rhetoric, his science, his “fructuous entendement” (“fruitful significance”), his philosophy, and for being “the first fyndere [poet] of our faire langauge.” Hoccleve’s affection for Chaucer is also evident in his desire to memorialize him by including a portrait of him in the text.

The paired epilogues to Chaucer and to Death appear again in the anonymous Book of Courtesy from 1477, a book of instruction printed by Caxton:

O fader and founder of ornat eloquence,
That enlumyned hast alle our Beteayne,
To some we lote thy laureate science,
O lusty lyricour of that sullen fontayne!
O cursid Deeth, why hast thou that poet slayne,
I meene fader Chaucer, myser Galfrydew.
Alas the whyle, that ever he from us dyde!

As Thomas Pendergast puts it, “The fifteenth-century poetic heirs of Chaucer seem to foreground the absence of his body in order to lay claim to his poetic mantle,”\(^{14}\) lamenting his death in such full rhetorical flight lays open an absence and fills that space with poetry at the same time. As I suggested earlier, it is a strategy many of these poets learned from Chaucer’s emphatic burial of Petrarch.

This thirst for a personal relationship with the poet seems almost insatiable, even now, though it tends to take shape in the discourses of criticism rather than poetry. Linne Mooney’s recent identification of Adam Pinkhurst as the copyist to whom Chaucer addresses his famous stanza of complaint seems set to generate a range of biographical expressions of desire to have shared this same kind of personal working relationship with Chaucer.\(^{45}\) Now that we have a name, and perhaps a more authoritative ordering of the Tales in the Hengwrt and Ellesmere Manuscripts, it seems even more tempting to imagine a closer personal relationship with the poet, in his own lifetime, rather than simply through his posthumous

Sometimes the loss these elegies appears personal, as in Hoccleve’s case, but as time goes on, the mourning for Chaucer is often generalized through the trope of ubi sunt. The dominant text in this regard is William Dunbar’s (c. 1456–1135) Lament for the Makaris, which groups Chaucer, Gower, and Lydgate briefly in one stanza as all taken by Death, with the echoed refrain, “Timor mortis conturbat me.” Other lists and catalogues organize their poets more critically. John Skelton in 1507, for example, made some careful distinctions. He found the poetry of Gower and Lydgate to be worthy in theme and subject matter, but Gower’s English is “olede, / And of no vse tolde”; and he writes of Lydgate, “It is dylyse to fynde / The sentence of his myse.” In contrast,

Chaucer, that famys clerke,
His termes were not daire,
But pleasant, easy, and playne,
No worde he wrote in rayne. (Phil. Sparrow, lines 860–861)\(^{41}\)

In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Chaucer is praised and emulated on a number of fronts: as love poet, as poetic innovator, as rhetorician, as moral philosopher, as scientist, and as courtier.\(^{42}\) These terms were rehearsed again and again, especially as the invention of print made it easier to reproduce the terms of criticism. Poets may have internalized and repeated the terms of praise used by their predecessors, but they had to adapt them into their own narrative contexts of love or elegy. The context of print, however, encouraged the accumulation of prefatory material, increasingly in prose, that could be duplicated and repeated or collected, out of context. The history of Chaucer’s Works in print is a history of the steady accumulation of Chaucerian texts (by Chaucer and others), and the commentaries, dedications, sonnets, and letters that precede them, especially in the editions that followed that of William Thynne in 1512.\(^{43}\)

Although print culture did not always mark a radical disjunction with manuscript tradition (there was initially little change in the way collections of works were assembled or even in the layout, font, and design of many texts), nevertheless, print was quickly absorbed into and came to represent a more obviously commercial sphere of textual reproduction and circulation. This was not a straightforward transition—print and manuscript competed for cultural supremacy and symbolic capital for several hundred years—but this was a crucial period for the development of Chaucerian critical discourse. Thus, the emerging, if restricted public sphere of print directed Chaucer’s texts and the work of his editors and commentators into a commercial context. This movement is signaled most dramatically in the split that becomes apparent
between the stream of poetry that laments Chaucer’s death while it seeks to fill that void; and the stream of critical prose that commends Chaucer to this new class of readers.

Caxton’s prose Epilogue to Chaucer’s translation of Boethius (c. 1478) and his Prologue to his second edition of the Canterbury Tales (c. 1484), establish the convention of bringing together a critical or scholarly introduction to the work in question, with some discussion of Chaucer’s poetics, some biographical information, and perhaps some discussion of the textual tradition, with a general commendation of the work to the reader. Both texts invite the reader to pray for Chaucer’s soul, but the tone throughout is formal rather than elegiac, and impersonal rather than personal.

Later editions follow this trend, and although it becomes fashionable to express a love for Chaucer that verges on the sentimental, it is a love that is closely aligned to the humanist love for the classical authors, where love is very precisely conditioned and measured by the scholarly labors of historical recovery. In part as a result of his own classicizing, Chaucer was the medieval English author most susceptible to construction as a humanist author, needing linguistic and cultural explication and commentary, and belonging sufficiently to the past to warrant the antiquarian enterprises of recovery and recuperation. So, if Thomas Spedg in 1598 writes of the love for Chaucer he shares with his friends, it is a love that takes the form of the “pains” taken to repair the damage to Chaucer’s texts caused by “injury of time, ignorance of writers, and negligence of Printers.” This discourse of scholarly recuperation is very different from the mourning and sense of loss that characterize the responses of the poets Chaucer left behind. As editors and commentators, Caxton, Thynne, Spedg, and others cultivated a sense of distance between themselves and Chaucer that permits the articulation of a more critical sensibility than was possible when the burden of poetic tradition and inheritance weighed more heavily on the poets who came immediately after him.

This distance has a marked historicizing effect, however, and many of these sixteenth-century editions develop an extensive apparatus of linguistic commentary, glossary, and textual elucidation. Ironically, Chaucer becomes a canonical English poet through the same critical formation that renders his language inaccessible without special expertise and assistance. Chaucer’s linguistic alterity remains a vexed issue throughout his reception history and persists into contemporary debates. Is his language best treated as a minor variant of the “standard” linguistic currency of English poetry, requiring only light editorial treatment, or should it be embraced as distinctively medieval and subject to the rigorous, if somewhat forbidding, discourses of philological study?

The story of Chaucer’s reception, however, is a history of prevailing ideas of “Chaucer,” in the most general sense, as much as it is about the history of his texts. Where “Chaucer” is understood as a historical monument to the complexities of fourteenth-century rhetorical, social, and political life, his works will appear with the full critical and textual apparatus; where he is understood as part of a continuous tradition of English poetry, his work will appear in anthologies and discussions of that tradition with minimal editorial intervention. A similar pattern is legible in the long tradition of supplementing Chaucer’s texts over the course of six hundred years, poets, novelists, and filmmakers revisit Chaucer more and more frequently, though with less and less precision, as his reputation becomes both more secure and more global.

Completions and Supplements

I earlier discussed several Chaucerian texts that play with the possibility of Chaucer recognizing his own authorial signature. This sense of a signature is to be carefully distinguished from a later conception of literary proprietor, or the sense of personal ownership that would become so important to issues of legal copyright. In the late fourteenth century, such issues were barely imaginable. This is not to say, however, that late medieval English writing took place in a free-floating world of textual exchange. Although some aspects of medieval textuality are perfectly anonymous, and although poets did borrow freely from each other, Chaucer’s poetry demonstrates a strong degree of preciseness about the relationship between a poet’s name and his works that would come to dominate literary criticism. Indeed, Chaucer’s various presentations of himself as author and his relationship with the classical past and his medieval contemporaries were influential factors in the development of later critical practice, in the Renaissance and beyond.

The conclusion to the Troilus and Criseyde encapsulates many of these dynamics. Critics have often commented on the way Chaucer attempts to balance a number of competing cultural imperatives in this poem: his narratorial sympathy for Criseyde is established as a personal point of resistance to the narrator he has inherited (but also chosen) of her necessary betrayal and the turning of her story from romance in the first three books, to tragedy in the last two. Similarly, he balances his historical curiosity about the epic world of pagan Troy with his fascination with late medieval domestic and court life, in the sequence of domestic interiors and the long conversations that take place in those settings. One of the great achievements of this poem is to present a flexible narrative perspective while also convincing us that the narrator’s voice is a relatively simple one.
In the final hundred or so lines of the poem, Chaucer moves rapidly in and out between these perspectives, shortening and lengthening his focus in an impressive display of narrative control as he gradually "takes leave" of his story. Troilus has deferred as long as possible the dual realization that Criseyde will not return to Troy and that she has accepted the protection of a new lover, Diomede. Chaucer refers us to Dares' fuller account of his military exploits but reminds us that he has set out to write of Troilus in love. He seeks forgiveness from the women in his audience for writing of Criseyde's infidelity, promising to write more cheerfully about faithful women. He also expresses sympathy for all men and women who are betrayed in love but then moves suddenly into a public exhortation to his "lief bok," to take its place in the classically conceived temple of learning, in the company of Virgil, Ovid, Homer, and others. The perspective contracts once more, though, to a prophetic apology for any mistakes in future copies of his English poem, implying that in register, theme, and style Chaucer's poem belongs with the deathless classics but that its language is mutable and uncertain.

He then returns to Troilus, to give an account of his death, and in four stanzas effects a dramatic reversal of many of the generic expectations established in the poem, especially in the proem to each book. Troilus's spirit ascends to the "holughunsse of the eithe spere" and looks down, laughing, on the earthly vanities that mourn for lost love and the loss of his own life. Chaucer then moves out again, bringing the focus back to his own audience, exhorting them to piety and spiritual peace in the universal terms of medieval Christianity. But still, the authorial voice returns, in the dedication of the book to two friends, "moral Gower" and "philosophical Strode," to open up the possibility of dialogue or "correction" of his work, before the final stanza dedicating the work to Jesus.

Shell-like, this conclusion seems to open and close in waves, as the narrative voice both opens up and closes down the meaning and interpretation of the poem. In contrast to many others of Chaucer's poems, Troilus and Criseyde does bring its narrative fully to an end, but at the same time it raises a series of questions about audience, reception, literary posterity, and the weight of philosophical and literary tradition. In opening those questions so deftly at the end, Chaucer also throws wide open the question of his narrative voice throughout the poem.

His vision of his little book kissing the steps where the classical poets pass up and down has a lovely doubled effect of humility while also placing the poet firmly in that honored company. Dryden was not slow to pick up on this trope of the heavenly company of poets. In some of its earliest origins, the canon of literary works or authors is very clearly, as feminist critics have often pointed out, a club of male friends. Chaucer's open invitation for others to correct his work functions similarly, as a modest, even penitential request for improvement while also drawing attention to the poem's "moral" and "philosophical" content. Whether deliberately and self-consciously or not, this conclusion sets out many of the directions for literary criticism: the relation between the text and its sources, its inherited traditions, its generic affiliations, its audience, and its posterity, all in questions arrayed neatly around the mysterious figure at the heart of the puzzle: the author.

Neither Gower nor Strode took up the invitation to correct Chaucer's text, but others did. Troilus and Criseyde enjoys a substantial afterlife of supplements and modernizations. These can be considered under the dual auspices of Chaucerian reception and of medievalism, as this complex poem is rendered into different forms for different contexts and occasions.

The most dramatic re-visions of the poem must surely be Robert Henryson's Testament of Cresseid. Snuggled into his "tatri" in the northern winter, the narrator of this supplement, written in Chaucer's rhyme royal, summarizes the end of the poem "writin be worthi Chaucer glorius" (line 41). He then enacts a very Chaucerian moment, inventing "ane other quair"

In quhilik I find the fatal destinee
Of sir Cresseid, that endit wretchtlie (lines 62-64)

Chaucer was not the only medieval poet to appeal to an unnamed anonymous book, but his Troilus and Criseyde represents a most sustained elaboration of this trope. Henryson asks, famously, "Quha wait gaf all that Chaucer wait was trewe?" and then glosses this comment and his decision to summarize the matter of this new book:

Not I wait notch gaf this narration
Be authenthe, or trespit of the new
Be sum poet, throw his intention
Maid to report the lamentation
And wull end of this luste Cresseid,
And quhat distres schol thought, and quhat deid. (lines 65-70)

Henryson begins with the traditional medieval dichotomy between a text that might be either "authorised" or "eloged anew," but the terms of discussion rapidly become more complex: Criseyde's lament is "invented" (in the familiar anglicisation of inventio) and "made," but it also "reports" her miserable end. Henryson's text thus rehearse a number of late medieval anxieties about composition, originality, and testimony, in stances borrowed from Chaucer's.

In the content of his poem, too, Henryson seems to adopt a quasi-Chaucerian style of amicable sympathy toward Criseyde: "I will excuse als far furth as I
may” his heroine’s femininity, her wisdom and her beauty, and her innocent fall at the hands of fortune. But this passage comes just one stanza after he has abused her roundly for becoming so “masculat” with her own lust and for going “among the Greekis aire and lace, / Si gigiolikhe takind thy foule plesaunce!” (8:8–85). Henryson goes on to tell a gruesome narrative of how Criseyde is soon abandoned by Diomede. Praying at Venus’ temple, she faints and dreams of how the planetary gods debate her case and the accusations Cupid brings before Saturn. The vengeful god condemns her to suffer leprosy; and so she must leave her father’s house. In a lyrical core, like those that structure Chaucer’s poem, she laments the turns and twists of fortune, but she is eventually integrated into the community of lepers. One day Troilus rides into the camp and is stirred deeply by the faint resemblance between this diseased woman and his “aunkin darly.”

Henryson is not the only writer to find that Chaucer’s sympathy for Criseyde opens up a space for a less equivocal response to his heroine. Wynkyn de Worde, who printed the poem in 1517, adds three more stanzas, also in rhyme royal, depicting Criseyde as, herself, the goddess Fortune.

Of feminine gender the woman most wylkynde
Dyomedhe on here whele she hath set on lyc
The fayrthe of a woman by her now may ye se. 16

De Worde then slips easily into the medieval catalogue of faithless women, just as Gawain does, when the plot to trap him is revealed by the Green Knight.

When Shakespeare re-visits the story in his Troilus and Criseyde he accomplishes something rather more complex with this long classical and medieval tradition. His Criseyde is so different from Chaucer’s — so much more sexualized, and so much more a public figure — that several commentators have denied Shakespeare even read Chaucer’s poem. E. T. Donaldson, however, remarks, “I can think of no literary characters who have been subjected to criticism less cool-headed than Criseyde and Cresida; and when they are treated together they tend to become the two halves of a companion picture, in which the good qualities of the one are exactly balanced by the bad qualities of the other. Criseyde is written up at Cresida’s expense, and Cresida is written down to Criseyde’s advantage.” 17 Donaldson wrote this in 1885, before the full weight of feminist criticism was brought to bear on either Chaucer or Shakespeare. Readers of the present volume are more likely to see the traditional polarization of female qualities and female characters into “good” and “bad,” precisely the same move made by Wynkyn de Worde and the Gawain poet. It is this pattern that lingers in Jonathan Swift’s refusal, in the early 1650s, to modernize any more than the first three books of the poem, since it would involve rehashing “the wanton slips of this deceitful Dame.” 18

This problem — how to tell the story of Criseyde’s failure to keep faith with Troilus while preserving our sympathy for her as long as possible — drives much of the narrative tension in Chaucer’s poem. Those of Chaucer’s readers who feel compelled to pick up this complex narrative in order to rewrite it for their own interests tend to flatten this feature, imposing strong and authoritative voices on the narrative, where Chaucer had proceeded by indirectness and equivocation, and making comparably harsh judgments on Chaucer’s most subtle female character. This reminds us that literary canons are not formed solely through the aesthetic preference for some authors over others. Specific patterns of reading are also involved; and in the case of Troilus and Criseyde, those patterns are determinedly antifeminist.

A powerful contrast is found in the variety of response to Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales, among the many texts that take up the challenge to complete, retell, modernize, and imitate. The variety of response here is far more extensive, more diverse, and less programmatic. This should not surprise us, for two main reasons. The first is pragmatic: because Chaucer’s poem remained unfinished at his death, its many gaps and incomplete tales and links between tales invited completions rather than the kind of ideological correction we find in the Troilus and Criseyde rewritings. The second reason is more thematic: Chaucer’s collection of tales and characters seemed to capture the imagination as an idea, as an inclusive set of possibilities for narrative. The Tales’ early reception history involves the addition of extra links and stories, woven more or less carefully into Chaucer’s pattern. Later, a “Canterbury Tale” became a generic expression for a bawdy tale, sometimes completely detached from any Chaucerian or medieval context. In the eighteenth century and in recent years, the springtime opening to the General Prologue and the drama of character have both come to prominence, so that the signifiers “Chaucer” or “Canterbury” generate a poetic reuse of that opening (heavily mediated by T. S. Eliot’s The Waste Land) or a collection of stories held together by the idea of travel, the diversity of character, or indeed their medieval setting. 19

As Norman Blake comments, Chaucer’s first copyists and scribes responded quickly and consistently to the idea of the alteration of prologue and tale. Blake insists on the primacy of the Ellesmere Manuscript, suggesting that all the various links, completions, even tales (the Gawain’s Yeoman’s Prologue and Tale, for example) not found in this early manuscript are necessarily spurious. 20 Medieval writers, scribes, and editors were not so concerned with Chaucerian authenticity, of course. What seems to have possessed their imagination was the idea of completing such a rich, promising, and productive compendium of stories; it was a wonderful opportunity to stitch in other tales, and to join, somehow, the communal community of storytellers. Modern Chaucerian critics have often positioned themselves informally as listeners, joining the pil-
Not everyone was so intrigued by the idea of the communal pilgrimage, however, or by all the tales. A number of tales from Chaucer's collection are lifted out of their Canterbury context and appear in other manuscript collections of religious tales. Similarly, parts of Troilus and Criseyde were recopied in different contexts. The imaginative reach of Chaucer's poetry was a uniquely inspiring starting point for many poets in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, but we should acknowledge that many of these supplementary writings, commentaries, and reconceptualizations depend on the relatively porous borders between poem and commentary that characterize the textuality of manuscript production. The "openness" of medieval manuscripts facilitates the rearrangement of text and tale or the addition of supplementary conclusions to Chaucer's works. The advent of print only gradually closed down these possibilities. Chaucer's textual history is stabilized for several centuries, however, in Thomas Sprat's comprehensive edition of Chaucer's Works in 1696, at a time when Tudor poets were beginning to find print an acceptable medium (1598 also saw the publication of Philip Sidney's Works, for example). By the end of the sixteenth century, Chaucer has become firmly entrenched as a venerable father figure and as the founder of a thriving national poetic tradition.

Once Chaucer is securely entrenched at the head of this tradition, response to his poetry takes rather different form. As we have seen, commentaries, translations, and modernizations start to dominate the reception of Chaucer, and his texts now seem finite and closed rather than open and inviting new closure.

Conversely, with the development of a professional, academic discourse of Chaucer studies and the emphasis on Chaucer's poetry as an important part of the secondary school syllabus for much of the twentieth century, Chaucer enjoys a much wider currency in this period. Steve Ellis's Chaucer at Large: The Poet in the Modern Imagination surveys the extensive afterlife of Chaucer's poetry in the twentieth century, in drama, film, puppetry, fiction, poetry, animation, opera, children's literature, and heritage culture more generally. These repurposes of Chaucer range widely in the extent of their familiarity and knowledge of their originals, but most take the form of explorations of the Canterbury Tales, the text that has become synonymous, to all intents and purposes, with "Chaucer." It seems likely that many of these examples derive from a familiarity with Chaucer learned at school or university.

This is a good place to end this discussion, then, as it raises a wonderful paradox for students and teachers of Chaucer. In this chapter I have emphasized the importance of the various institutions that govern and guide our reading, writing, and teaching of Chaucer over the centuries since his death. I
have also tried to suggest that the historical particulars of Chaucer's case make him an exemplary study for the development of the conditions under which the canon of English literature takes shape. So, given the force and persistence of such traditions, is it possible to untangle the structural force of these conventions from any particular qualities in Chaucer's poetry that make him "great"? Or is it Chaucer's poetry that has defined "greatness" for us before we even open his book?

NOTES
2. Burrow, Ricardian Poetry, 1.
5. Bloom, Western Canon, 112.
6. Lecce, Chaucer and His Readers, 1.
7. See in particular Strohm, Social Chaucer.
9. Raiton, Bibliographia Poetica, 87, 88, quoted in Matthews, Making of Middle English, 1765-1910, 43-44.
10. Pearsall, John Lydgate, Spearing, Medieval to Renaissance in English Poetry, 84-118. Of Lydgate's commentary on Oedipus's self-blinding in his Siege of Thebes. Spearing remarks, "it would be difficult to imagine a more inept explanation of one of the most haunting myths of Western man; indeed, Lydgate's only tribute to the power of his apparent determination to defuse it" (86).
13. Pearsall, John Lydgate, 68.
21. This is the central theme of my Congenial Souls.
23. Blake, Descriptive Catalogue.
25. Williams, Canterbury Tales, 9.
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TRIGG, SJ

Title:
Reception: twentieth and twenty-first centuries

Date:
2005

Citation:

Persistent Link:
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File Description:
Reception: twentieth and twenty-first centuries