THE LANGUAGE OF LITERATURE

General Editor: N. F. Blake

Professor of English Language and Linguistics

University of Sheffield

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THE LANGUAGE OF CHAUCER

DAVID BURNLEY

M
MACMILLAN

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FOR HELEN

Abbreviations

Chaucer

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

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

Gower

CA *Confessio Amantis*

Langland

PP *Piers Plowman*

Other abbreviations

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

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

Preface

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

UNIVERSITY OF SHEFFIELD
AUGUST 1982

JDB

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

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

Map 1: Middle English Dialects