WRITERS IN THEIR TIME
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Writers in their Time

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For Katherine, Rachel and Michael

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Introduction

The aim of this book is to enable the reader with little or no prior knowledge of medieval history to read the works of Chaucer in a historical context. For this reason it frequently summarises important historical movements or events more fully described elsewhere in order to indicate the range of context that readers of Chaucer might wish to take into account.

The first two chapters together provide a general perspective for later chapters. The first outlines Chaucer's life against some of the wider issues and events of the later fourteenth century, while the second describes the conditions of literary production and expectations of the audience in a manuscript culture. There is often no direct link that can be made between the events of recorded history and Chaucer's own life, yet it is important that readers should be aware, as Chaucer must have been, that they took place, so that they may judge for themselves the interactions between text and history. Although the necessity for providing the reader with brief historical information about the fourteenth century has the unfortunate effect of seeming to suggest that history can be neatly packaged and separated from literature, the aim of this book is to do just the opposite: to insist on the inseparability of text and context and on the uncertain boundary between historical and other kinds of writing.

Subsequent chapters select some of the concerns outlined in chapters 1 and 2 and develop them in more detail as contexts for reading Chaucer. There is no attempt at parity between chapters either in the amount of space they devote to historical discussion or in their approach to texts. Clearly some aspects of the fourteenth century need more explanation than others for a modern non-specialist audience; similarly, variation between close analysis of one text and comparison of several offers the reader different methods for evaluating the connections between literature and history. I have consciously adopted different approaches in order to show that history shapes literary texts in a number of ways. Thus, for example, chapter 2 refers only intermittently to Chaucer's work within the wider context of relations between

writers, texts and readers in fourteenth-century manuscript culture; chapter 4 uses source study within one of Chaucer's texts as a means of focusing English internationalism in the fourteenth century; and chapter 7, following a brief summary of Chaucer's reputation, compares a recurrent preoccupation of Chaucer's poetry with its manifestation in one of Shakespeare's plays in order to discuss the question of 'influence' via literary practice.

Notes to secondary sources consciously privilege historical material at the expense of the vast critical literature on Chaucer. To attempt to cover both would be impossible as well as inappropriate for a book of this size: the notes might have been longer than the text. My approach assumes a reader unfamiliar with fourteenth-century history, and the notes to chapters 1 and 2 are particularly full in order to create paths for the reader into the writings of both Chaucer's contemporaries and modern historians. I have also quoted from accessible editions and anthologies of primary sources and from translations of Latin texts wherever they exist, so that the reader may be encouraged to return to these sources where possible.

Middle English spelling is partially modernised throughout in accordance with the conventions usually adopted for Chaucer's text but not normally applied to his contemporaries, in an attempt to minimise the exaggerated distance between Chaucer and much other contemporary writing that such inconsistency in editorial practice produces for the modern reader.