CHAUCER AND HIS ENGLISH CONTEMPORARIES

Also by W. A. Davenport

CHAUCER: COMPLAINT AND NARRATIVE
FIFTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLISH DRAMA
THE ART OF THE *GAWAIN*-POET

Chaucer and His English Contemporaries

Prologue and Tale in *The Canterbury Tales*

W. A. Davenport

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Preface

Long ago I studied Chaucer's *General Prologue* as a set text for the Oxford School Certificate (replaced by the old O levels soon after), and a very odd piece of poetry it seemed to me at the age of fourteen, not much like 'The Pied Piper of Hamelin' or 'The Jackdaw of Rheims', which were the sort of thing I had learnt to expect narrative poetry to be, nor fitting into any other category I knew. I am more familiar with it now and with medieval poetry in general than I was then, but it still seems an odd work to me, partly because I find it difficult not to read it as I first knew it, that is as a self-contained poem, rather than as a preliminary to something else. Is the *General Prologue* actually much like a prologue? What is a prologue anyway?

From such questions this book began and it was natural to move from prologue to tale, the main component of *The Canterbury Tales*, and to realise that tale too was a supposedly obvious literary notion, where Chaucer's use of the form was far from simple. Trying to answer questions about what Chaucer thought a prologue and a tale to be, I turned to contemporary English writing to see if other poets were producing works similar enough to Chaucer's to help explain his versions. And so the book developed into a discussion of *The Canterbury Tales* alongside other narrative works of the fourteenth century, the poems of Gower, Langland and the *Gawain*-Poet, the Middle English romances and alliterative poems. The resulting book is about *The Canterbury Tales* and some of the ways in which reading Chaucer in the company of the other writers of his time, particularly those writing in English, can help one to understand the literary ideas which he was exploring in his great compilation of tales and their prologues.

The reader will find discussion of all twenty-four of the tales somewhere in the book, though in some cases a brief one, but I have not attempted an exposition of each in turn: on the one hand I have thought of them in groups, according to genre, and so have looked at some aspects of Chaucer's didactic narratives and then of his fabliaux in Chapter 3, and at the romances in *The Canterbury Tales* in Chapter 4, with detailed commentary on the two longest stories Chaucer shares with Gower in Chapter 5; in Chapter 6, on the other hand, I have

grouped them according to my judgement of how near to and how far from a conception of normal narrative patterns the various tales are.

In writing this book I have assumed that the reader is, to some degree, used to reading Chaucer and has a general knowledge of his works and other literature of Chaucer's period. Some glosses have been added to the quotations to remind readers of some fourteenth-century usages and to save looking up unusual words and expressions, and the spelling of medieval texts has been slightly modernised, though only to the extent of replacing obsolete letters by their modern equivalents.

A version of parts of Chapter 2 was delivered as a paper to the London Old and Middle English Research Seminar in 1993, and an earlier version of part of Chapter 6 was delivered as a paper to the Graduate Centre for Medieval Studies at the University of Reading in 1991; to the members of both groups I extend my thanks for their helpful comments at the time. Several of my colleagues, academic and administrative, at Royal Holloway, University of London have given help of various kinds and I am grateful to them, particularly to Joyce Bianconi for sorting out my word-processing problems. Hester, my wife, knows how grateful I am for her encouragement, for reading the drafts of each chapter, and for making sure that some of my commas are in the right places, but let me record it here.

Abbreviations

Bennett and Gray <i>MEL</i>	J.A.W. Bennett and D. Gray, <i>Middle English Literature</i> , Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1986
Burrow <i>RP</i>	J.A. Burrow, <i>Ricardian Poetry: Chaucer, Gower, Langland and the Gawain-Poet</i> , Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1971
<i>CA</i>	<i>Confessio Amantis</i> [All quotations are from G.C. Macaulay (ed.), <i>The Works of John Gower: English Works</i> , 2 vols, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1900–01.]
<i>ChauR</i>	<i>Chaucer Review</i>
Cooper <i>OGCT</i>	Helen Cooper, <i>Oxford Guides to Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales</i> , Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1989
Cooper <i>Structure</i>	Helen Cooper, <i>The Structure of The Canterbury Tales</i> , Duckworth, London, 1983
<i>CT</i>	<i>The Canterbury Tales</i>
<i>EC</i>	<i>Essays in Criticism</i>
EETS	Early English Text Society
Fellows <i>et al.</i>	J. Fellows, R. Field, G. Rogers and J. Weiss (eds), <i>Romance Reading on the Book: Essays on Medieval Narrative presented to Maldwyn Mills</i> , University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 1996
Fisher <i>JG</i>	John H. Fisher, <i>John Gower, Moral Philosopher and Friend of Chaucer</i> , Methuen, London, 1965
<i>JEGP</i>	<i>Journal of English and Germanic Philology</i>
Kean	P.M. Kean, <i>Chaucer and the Making of English Poetry</i> , 2 vols, 1972; shortened version, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1982
<i>MAe</i>	<i>Medium Aevum</i>
Meale <i>Readings</i>	Carol M. Meale (ed.), <i>Readings in Medieval English Romance</i> , D. S. Brewer, Cambridge, 1994

<i>MLN</i>	<i>Modern Language Notes</i>
<i>MLQ</i>	<i>Modern Language Quarterly</i>
<i>MLR</i>	<i>Modern Language Review</i>
<i>MS</i>	<i>Mediaeval Studies</i>
<i>NM</i>	<i>Neuphilologische Mitteilungen</i>
Pearsall <i>CT</i>	Derek Pearsall, <i>The Canterbury Tales</i> , Allen & Unwin, London, 1985
Pearsall <i>OE&MEP</i>	Derek Pearsall, <i>Old English and Middle English Poetry</i> , Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1977
<i>PMLA</i>	<i>Publications of the Modern Language Association</i>
<i>PPI</i>	<i>Piers Plowman</i> [All quotations are from the B-Text as in A.V.C. Schmidt (ed.), <i>William Langland, The Vision of Piers Plowman</i> , Dent, London, 1978.]
<i>PQ</i>	<i>Philological Quarterly</i>
<i>Riverside</i>	L.D. Benson et al., <i>The Riverside Chaucer</i> , Oxford University Press, Oxford, 3rd edn, 1988 [All quotations from Chaucer are from this edition.]
<i>SAC</i>	<i>Studies in the Age of Chaucer</i>
<i>T&C</i>	<i>Troilus and Criseyde</i>
<i>YES</i>	<i>Yearbook of English Studies</i>