





The Shaping of
English Poetry

VOLUME II


ESSAYS ON




Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,
Langland and Chaucer



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Preface

I print here the second volume of essays under the title *The Shaping of English Poetry* in accordance with the intention expressed in the Preface to the first volume. All eight essays are on the three golden poets of the Golden Age of English poetry in the second half of the fourteenth century. The first two essays are on the great alliterative poems, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Piers Plowman* and the remaining six essays are on Chaucer, five of them on *The Canterbury Tales*. No one doubts the sustained excellence (and often the sublimity) of these works and it remains a hard task for readers and scholars to measure up to them. I cannot hope, therefore, to convince the readers of this collection of essays at all times to assent to the soundness of critical judgments made in them, and perhaps there will be many who will want to take issue with the approach taken, and especially with the insistence upon the importance of Aristotelian moral philosophy. But I hope that the arguments of these essays are sufficiently well grounded in the texts of the poems, their sources and historical contexts as to persuade not a few that they are worthy of consideration (even if only by way of refutation).

It has been a feature of the scholarship of at least the past two generations that the romance of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* has been elevated not only to the front rank of medieval poems but of English poems at any period.¹ In the process the romance has been subjected to many different kinds of scrutiny and has had to make account of itself to those who associate the Middle Ages not so much with politeness towards women but with virulent forms of anti-feminism. Indeed, no one is more eloquent on the bias of men against women than Chaucer's Wife of Bath in her famous *Prologue*. But whereas the strictures of a St Jerome are hard to defend, it is dismaying to find that the celebrated courtesy of a knight such as Sir Gawain is represented to be, both in the romance itself and elsewhere, is reduced to the level of a rant against women as he takes leave

of his erstwhile host. Such criticism of Sir Gawain accords so well with a commonplace view of the medieval world (one in which the very word *medieval* has become in itself a term of abuse) that we are apt instinctively to sympathise with it and to grant it credence. On the other hand, the moral argument of the poem is systematic and subtle and often baffling to modern points of view that we may hesitate before we rush to judgment. The essay on 'Medieval Misogyny and Gawain's Outburst against Women in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*' is a case for the defence, written in the belief that medieval men (just as modern men) are apt to love women rather than hate them.

In the second essay on Langland's Meed, still loved by critics as much as deplored by them in the guise of Lady Meed, I return to a subject that I have visited more than once in the past. On the evidence of the text of *Piers Plowman* it is the critic rather than the poet who identifies Meed as Lady Meed and I have long pondered why this should be so when the text of the poem itself is not especially ambiguous on this point. Perhaps it is because we live in a money culture (one indeed in which the sovereignty of nations has been subordinated to the stability of banks), whereas our medieval ancestors had a distaste for lending of any kind under the name of usury. Certainly attitudes to money, and especially to conspicuous wealth, are likely to be ambivalent, since few will be willing to embrace the virtue of a life of poverty in earnest. The argument of this essay has been summarised by Michelle M. Sauer in *The Year's Work in English Studies*, 90 (2011), 240, as follows:

Gerald Morgan challenges the idea that Lady Meed is a fallen woman ... Detailed examination of the words Langland chooses to describe Meed indicates a level of respect other scholars have overlooked. Nevertheless, overall she is excessive and false, and cannot be trusted in any way. Lady Holy Church surpasses Meed in every sense of dignity and respect. Thus Morgan concludes that we should leave the poem wanting to suppress all dignity accorded to Meed.

I do not recognise in this summary the argument of the essay and perhaps I have been unclear in my exposition. But the corruption of our judgment by the love of money is as important an issue for Langland as it is for Chaucer in his representation of the Pardoner. The present economic crises in the

various nations of Europe underline the fact that Langland addresses an issue of universal concern in the difficulty of conforming our judgments with truth when confronted with the attractions of wealth and especially its easy availability.

The six essays on Chaucer are dominated in one way or another by the influence of Italian poetry and moral philosophy. These influences have long been recognised, but their depth and weight have not so readily been acknowledged. Only those who have read Chaucer's works with a text of Boccaccio or Dante (and also Petrarch, whose influence it has taken longer to acknowledge)² in front of them will begin to appreciate the extent of Chaucer's learning in relation to these three great Italian masters. How Chaucer acquired his knowledge of Italian, whether from Italian wine merchants in Vintry Ward or Florentine bankers such as the Bardi at court, or by reason of his journeys to Genoa and Florence in 1372–1373 and Milan in 1378, is still to some extent a matter of speculation and dispute.³ But that matters little by comparison with the undoubted fact of its acquisition. Chaucer has followed these Italian masters in close detail, often word for word, but expresses his enthusiasm for them in a way that only a creative genius could do by freely adapting their masterpieces to his own distinct imaginative purposes. There is much scholarly work still to be done on the Italian presence in Chaucer's poetry and undoubtedly it will produce many more valuable insights. But however we may explain this extraordinary aptitude for Italian literature in an English poet, we can hardly deny its transforming effect on Chaucer's poetry. More than this, we have to say that Chaucer is not merely an admirer of these poets (as, let us say, Dante is of Virgil) but their equal. This is not an easy conclusion to reach, but it carries with it profound implications for medieval English scholars. To approach Chaucer without a comparable knowledge of the *tre coroni* of Italian literature is to leave one not merely ill-equipped for the task of interpretation, but unequipped for it.

The same has to be said for the influence of Aristotle, not merely on Chaucer's poetry, but on English and European culture as a whole in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Medieval English scholars have been reluctant to face the challenge of Aristotle, but recently a medieval historian, Stephen Rigby, in an important book and article, has shown a way

forward for literary critics who seek to engage with the moral arguments embedded in Chaucer's poetry.⁴ Once again this is not a matter of speculation or of opinion, but established historical fact. Rigby's study of the *De regimine principum* of Giles of Rome (c.1243–1316), composed about 1280 for the future Philip IV of France (1285–1314), establishes beyond doubt the widespread diffusion through this work alone of fundamental Aristotelian ideas. The *De regimine* draws on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, *Politics* (rediscovered c.1260), *Rhetoric* and *De anima* and also on the *Summa theologiae* and commentaries on the *Ethics* and *Politics* of Thomas Aquinas under whom Giles studied in Paris. It survives in some three hundred and fifty manuscripts of Latin and vernacular versions, and sixty of these are of English origin or provenance from the pre-Reformation period. The height of the popularity of the *De regimine* in England is the period from 1380 to 1430. Copies of the Latin treatise were owned by Thomas of Woodstock, Duke of Gloucester, and by his widow, Eleanor de Bohun (d.1399) and also by Sir Simon Burley (d.1388), Richard II's tutor. John Trevisa translated the *De regimine* into Middle English as *The Governance of Kings and Princes* (c.1388–1402) for his patron Thomas IV, Lord Berkeley (1352/3–1417). It survives in one manuscript from the early fifteenth century (1408–c.1417).⁵

How we shall deal with Chaucer's response to Aristotelian moral philosophy is another matter, but engage with it we must. In the process our view of many things will alter dramatically, not least, for example, our view of the Theseus of *The Knight's Tale*, now convincingly interpreted by Rigby as not merely not a tyrant but a model of good lordship. Unsurprisingly in the light of much negative and even hostile criticism of Theseus, Rigby strikes a defensive note: 'It should be stressed that what is at issue is whether or not Chaucer presented Theseus as an ideal ruler, not whether modern critics themselves approve of the duke's actions.'⁶ Not every reader of Chaucer is as open-minded or flexible as a medieval historian. But why should we even expect to approve of the assumptions and value systems of ages remote from our own? And why should we expect great minds of a former age to agree with us? If words that once 'hadden pris, now wonder nyce and straunge/ Us thinketh hem' (*TC*, II.24–25), so too the moral values that they express. We see this in the competing moral values of our own time. We cannot claim any special privileges for our own

systems of thought and the values to which they give rise. Our task as literary critics is not to subject poems and writers to tests of morality (at least not in the first instance, and perhaps not in the second instance). First of all we must try to grasp the meaning of what lies before us, and this is a sufficiently difficult task in all truth. And perhaps also as we survey our present world of cruelty and disappointment we shall be bound to admit that our medieval ancestors 'spedde as wel in love as men now do' (*TC*, II.26).

Generalisations about Aristotelian moral philosophy, therefore, cannot as such hope to persuade, and readers will be rightly suspicious of ideological bias. The test for any lover of poetry and literary scholar (as I claim to be) can only rest in the readings offered of the texts themselves. Have we made sense of these texts or not, and how much do our interpretations have to leave out in the effort to convince? Like Langland's Conscience, all literary critics are open to error, however sound their general principles may be. If any of the essays on Chaucer are persuasive, it is because they have confronted the problems of the text of his poems and not evaded them. For those who are moved rather to disagreement, perhaps there will still be elements of enlightenment. But no interpreter of poems can take away from the reader the final authority for critical judgment.

These essays first appeared in the following journals and I wish to thank their editors and publishers for permission to republish: 'Medieval Misogyny and Gawain's Outburst Against Women in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*', *Modern Language Review*, 97 (2002), 265–78; 'The Dignity of Langland's Meed', *Modern Language Review*, 104 (2009), 623–39; 'Chaucer's Adaptation of Boccaccio's Temple of Venus in *The Parliament of Fowls*', *Review of English Studies*, NS, 56 (2005), 1–36; 'Moral and Social Identity and the Idea of Pilgrimage in the *General Prologue*', *Chaucer Review*, 37 (2003), 285–314; 'Obscenity and Fastidiousness in *The Miller's Tale*', *English Studies*, 91 (2010), 492–518 (www.tandfonline.com); 'Chaucer's Man of Law and the Argument for Providence', *Review of English Studies*, NS, 61 (2010), 1–33; 'The Logic of *The Clerk's Tale*', *Modern Language Review*, 104 (2009), 1–25 and 'Boccaccio's *Filocolo* and the Moral Argument of *The Franklin's Tale*', *Chaucer Review*, 20 (1986), 285–306.

Notes

- 1 As I write an excellent new edition of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* by Paul Battles (Broadview Press: Peterborough, Ontario, 2012) is about to be published.
- 2 On the relationship between Chaucer and Petrarch, see the recent study by William T. Rossiter, *Chaucer and Petrarch*, Chaucer Studies XLI (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2010).
- 3 Rossiter, *Chaucer and Petrarch*, pp. 38–44.
- 4 Stephen H. Rigby, *Wisdom and Chivalry: Chaucer's 'Knight's Tale' and Medieval Political Theory* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2009) and 'Aristotle for Aristocrats and Poets: Giles of Rome's *De Regimine Principum* as Theodicy of Privilege', *ChR*, 46 (2012), 259–313.
- 5 Rigby, *Wisdom and Chivalry*, pp. 13–15 and 17–19.
- 6 Rigby, *Wisdom and Chivalry*, p. 27, n. 1.