

Preface

The great Chaucerian scholar of the mid-twentieth century generation, Talbot Donaldson, introduces his own collection of essays, *Speaking of Chaucer*, in characteristically urbane and witty fashion by observing that the author of such a collection 'would be hard put to it to devise a modesty formula capable of concealing his vanity'.¹ I make no attempt to introduce the present collection of essays with a similar Donaldsonian *captatio benevolentiae*, even though it is of the kind that Chaucer and his contemporaries themselves would much have admired. Readers will no doubt readily discern my true motives in gathering together essays written by me twenty and thirty years or even more ago. I certainly welcome the opportunity to bring these essays together in a single volume. But I also wish to say on my own behalf that this collection of essays is conceived not so much as a summary of past endeavours but as the beginning of an attempt to present a sense of the wholeness of a distinctively English literature from *Beowulf* to Spenser.

In the present volume the native alliterative tradition of England is represented by its final flowering in two essays on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (c.1350–60) and three on *Piers Plowman* (A: 1367–70; B: 1377–79; and C: 1385–86). The renewal of English letters in the fourteenth century, inspired by continental models in French and Italian, is represented by four essays on Chaucer (c.1343–1400). The poetic achievement of these three medieval masters remains unmatched until Spenser announces himself in a third great age in the history of English poetry, and this is represented by three essays on the first three books of *The Faerie Queene* (1590). Spenser's indebtedness to Langland and Chaucer and his philosophical conservatism in drawing on the thought of Aristotle and the tradition of medieval commentary surrounding the works of Aristotle ensure that the tradition of English poetry in the Renaissance is securely rooted in its medieval inheritance.

The sequence of essays begins with those on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and this order is designed as a deliberate challenge to the conventional dating of that romance to the end of the fourteenth century and to the consequent focus on the court of Richard II (born 1367; king 1377–99) rather than on that of his illustrious grandfather, Edward III (born 1312; king 1327–77). There is no compelling evidence to place *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in the age of Richard II and scholars and critics seem to have been unduly influenced by the date of the sole extant manuscript (c.1400) and the flowering of Chaucer's poetic career in the 1380s and 1390s. Langland is without doubt an Edwardian poet and Chaucer himself is formed as a poet in the households of Edward III (by 1367 at the latest) and of his sons, Lionel of Antwerp and John of Gaunt (and possibly also of Edward of Woodstock, the Black Prince) in the 1350s and 1360s. A convincing argument, building on the work of earlier scholars, for *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as a Garter poem of the 1350s or 1360s, has recently been made in the book-length study of Francis Ingledew.²

Chaucer's work overlaps with that of these great alliterative poets, his first original poem, *The Book of the Duchess*, celebrating the life of Blanche of Lancaster, daughter of Henry of Grosmont and first wife of John of Gaunt, who died in 1368, being directly contemporaneous with the A Version of *Piers Plowman*. Chaucer refers somewhat dismissively perhaps to alliterative verse in the voice of the Parson, 'a Southren man' (the alliterative tradition persevering longest in the North and West of England) who cannot 'geeste "rum, ram, ruf," by lettre' (I 42–43),³ but uses it (albeit briefly) to classic effect in the tournament of *The Knight's Tale* (A 2601–16). From the metrical point of view Chaucer is a great innovator, introducing into English both rhyme royal (the stanzaic form consisting of seven iambic pentameters rhyming *ababbcc*), for the first time in *The Parliament of Fowls* and subsequently in *Troilus and Criseyde* and the most elevated of *The Canterbury Tales* such as *The Man of Law's Tale* and *The Clerk's Tale*, and also the heroic couplet of iambic pentameters used throughout *The Canterbury Tales* and notably in its famous opening lines (*General Prologue*, 1–2): 'Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote / The droghte of March hath perced to the roote.' The distinctive Spenserian nine-line stanza of eight iambic pentameters and a concluding iambic hexameter

or alexandrine rhyming *ababbcbcc* used throughout the *The Faerie Queene* would seem to be a development of Chaucerian rhyme royal, based upon Italian *ottava rima* as used by Boccaccio and Ariosto, and imparts (like rhyme royal) a distinctively elevated and serious character to Spenser's great epic poem.

Moreover, Chaucer, like Langland and the unknown author of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, writes in the mainstream of Catholic England of the final years of Edward III. Despite attempts to link Chaucer with the writings of Wyclif and with the Lollards there is no convincing reason to do so, and it seems that English critics still have a need to see Chaucer and Langland as precursors of the Protestant reformation. But in his representation of the pilgrimage to Canterbury Chaucer has kept alive an English world that was largely to pass away amidst bloody conflict and sectarian destructiveness in the sixteenth century. Ignorance of medieval Catholic theology explains why so central an element of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as the confession scene remains widely misinterpreted by English critics. There is a desire too to place Spenser at the heart of the Protestant reformation,⁴ even though the greater part of *The Faerie Queene* was written in Kilcolman Castle in North County Cork (a place seldom visited by English scholars) where Spenser lived from 1588 until he was driven out by rebels during the Tyrone rebellion in October 1598. But Spenser is not a Protestant partisan and it would be unwise to interpret his work in the light of *A Vewe of the Present State of Irelande*, a work not published until 1633 and still not securely attributed to him.⁵ Instead he has the broadness of view of his philosophical sources of inspiration, notably Aristotle and the tradition of medieval commentary surrounding the works of Aristotle.

The temper of Spenser's work is strikingly conservative and not at all sectarian. Thus in the 'Legend of Holiness' he refers (seemingly without discomfort) to Catholic doctrines such as the sacrament of penance, the seven corporal works of mercy and the sanctification of the Red Cross knight as the patron saint of England⁶ and draws upon his great English predecessors Chaucer and Langland as well as the Italians Ariosto and Tasso of a later age. Of all our writers, perhaps, Spenser has been most ill-served by preconceptions about his place in the wars of the English in Ireland

and about his attitude towards the barbarities of religious conflict. But it needs to be borne in mind here that the first book of *The Faerie Queene* is a 'Legend of Holiness', that is, a moral and philosophical subject, and not a history of Roman Catholicism or Protestantism (although Spenser can hardly avoid taking up a side in this great struggle). He has the openness of mind of a great philosopher and the breadth of vision of a great poet.

We may say, therefore, that from, say, 700–1600, that is, from the early Middle Ages to the high point of the Renaissance (so-called) in England, we have a continuous tradition of poetry at the highest level (often indeed sublime, like English perpendicular cathedrals). From the twelfth century onwards we may describe it as at once English and Catholic and Aristotelian. If it is to speak to us authentically in its own voice we need to free it from the shackles of the Henrician and Elizabethan revolution. The English Reformation is not to be read into a previous age and ought not to be allowed to extinguish the discordant assumptions and beliefs of its own age that stem from a medieval tradition that remains vibrant and strong.

These essays first appeared in the following journals and I wish to thank their editors and publishers for permission to republish: 'The Significance of the Pentangle Symbolism in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*', *Modern Language Review*, 74 (1979), 769–90; 'The Action of the Hunting and Bedroom Scenes in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*', *Medium Aevum*, 56 (1987), 200–16 (© 1987 Society for the Study of Medieval Languages and Literature); 'The Meaning of Kind Wit, Conscience and Reason in the First Vision of *Piers Plowman*', *Modern Philology*, 84 (1987), 351–58 (© 1987 by the University of Chicago); 'Langland's Conception of Favel, Guile, Liar and False in the First Vision of *Piers Plowman*', *Neophilologus*, 71 (1987), 626–33; 'The Status and Meaning of Meed in the First Vision of *Piers Plowman*', *Neophilologus*, 72 (1988), 449–63 (with kind permission of Springer Science and Business Media); 'The Universality of the Portraits in the *General Prologue* to the *Canterbury Tales*', *English Studies*, 58 (1977), 481–93; 'Rhetorical Perspectives in the *General Prologue* to the *Canterbury Tales*', *English Studies*, 62 (1981), 411–22 (<http://www.informaworld.com>); 'A Defence of Dorigen's Complaint', *Medium Aevum*, 46 (1977), 77–97 (© 1977 Society for the Study of Medieval Languages and Literature); 'The Self-Revealing Tendencies of Chaucer's Pardoner', *Modern Language*

Review, 71 (1976), 241–55; ‘Holiness as the First of Spenser’s Aristotelian Moral Virtues’, *Modern Language Review*, 81 (1986), 817–37, and ‘The Idea of Temperance in the Second Book of *The Faerie Queene*’, *Review of English Studies*, NS, 37 (1986), 11–39. The final essay of this collection, ‘The Meaning of Spenser’s Chastity as the Fairest of Virtues’, first appeared in a collection of essays entitled *Noble and Joyous Histories: English Romances, 1375–1650* (Dublin, 1993), pp. 245–63, edited by my learned colleagues Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin and J.D. Pheifer and published by the Irish Academic Press. I owe them a special debt of gratitude.

The essays as they now appear are in substantially the same form as in their original publication, but I have taken the opportunity to introduce some minor corrections and revisions. I have removed some irritating tricks of style, including a general assertiveness of manner (the false confidence of youth) and an inexplicable fondness for the semi-colon. More importantly I have taken account (albeit slightly) of scholarship in the intervening years where it has made an earlier position untenable, particularly in relation to the two fine books on Chaucer’s use of costume in the *General Prologue* by Laura Hodges.⁷ The present generation of medieval scholars has in many respects better texts to work from than were available when I started writing in the 1970s. Langland in particular has benefited from the textual endeavours of several generations of scholars with the appearance of authoritative (if not uncontroversial) editions of *Piers Plowman* by Kane-Donaldson (The B Version in 1975), Russell-Kane (The C Version in 1997), A.V.C. Schmidt (second edition of the B text in 1995, as well as A Parallel-Text edition in 1995) and Derek Pearsall (second edition of the C text in 2008).⁸ As if the textual condition of *Piers Plowman* were not sufficiently complicated we have had to get used to a Z Version since 1983 (A.G. Rigg and Charlotte Brewer).⁹ Chaucer is now to be studied in the third edition of F.N. Robinson’s great edition (*The Riverside Chaucer*) and Spenser in the magisterial editions of A.C. Hamilton (1977 and 2001).¹⁰ The twelve essays are referenced to the editions available at the time of writing but I have attempted to ensure that their arguments are consistent with the discoveries embodied in the new standard editions. Finally we ought not to overlook the completion of the *Middle English Dictionary* in 2001.¹¹ These works are triumphs of textual and philological scholarship and they

will surely be of inestimable value for the present and future generations of literary scholars.

I wish to express my gratitude (as no mere formality) to Andrea Green-grass who compiled the Index and to Kara Dolan who prepared the book for publication. Their exemplary professionalism has made the final stages of this work less burdensome and more pleasurable than they might otherwise have been.

The republishing of these essays gives me finally a welcome opportunity to acknowledge the scholarly debt I owe to Mrs Janet Mathews. In the period of the writing of these essays she was a lecturer in French in Trinity College Dublin (1969–85) and for a time (1978–79) a Fellow of St Hilda's College Oxford. She was the first to read these essays in their original drafts and in each case the first to send me back to my study to think again. I hope she will now consider these essays worthy of her meticulous and exacting scholarship.

Notes

- 1 E. Talbot Donaldson, *Speaking of Chaucer* (London: The Athlone Press, 1970), p. vii.
- 2 Francis Ingledew, 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight' and the Order of the Garter (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006). See my review in *RES*, NS, 57 (2006), 795–96, and see further W.G. Cooke, 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: A Restored Dating', *Medium Aevum*, 58 (1989), 34–48; W.G. Cooke and D'A.J.D. Boulton, 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: A Poem for Henry of Grosmont?', *Medium Aevum*, 68 (1999), 42–54 and Leo Carruthers, 'The Duke of Clarence and the Earls of March: Garter Knights and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight', *Medium Aevum*, 70 (2001), 66–79.
- 3 Reference is to Larry D. Benson and others, *The Riverside Chaucer*, third edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987).
- 4 See Anthea Hume, *Edmund Spenser: Protestant Poet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

- 5 See Jean R. Brink, 'Constructing the *View of the Present State of Ireland*', *Spenser Studies XI: A Renaissance Poetry Annual*, edited by Patrick Cullen and Thomas P. Roche, Jr (New York: AMS Press, Inc., 1994), pp. 203–28.
- 6 See James Schiavoni, 'Predestination and Free Will: The Crux of Canto Ten', *Spenser Studies X: A Renaissance Poetry Annual*, edited by Patrick Cullen and Thomas P. Roche, Jr (New York: AMS Press, Inc., 1992), pp. 175–95.
- 7 Laura F. Hodges, *Chaucer and Costume: The Secular Pilgrims in the General Prologue*, Chaucer Studies XXVI (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2000) and *Chaucer and Clothing: Clerical and Academic Costume in the General Prologue to 'The Canterbury Tales'*, Chaucer Studies XXXIV (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2005).
- 8 George Kane and E. Talbot Donaldson (eds), *Piers Plowman: The B Version* (London: The Athlone Press, 1975); George Russell and George Kane (eds), *Piers Plowman: The C Version* (London: The Athlone Press; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); A.V.C. Schmidt (ed.), *William Langland: The Vision of Piers Plowman*, second edition, Everyman (London: J.M. Dent; Vermont: Charles E. Tuttle, 1995); A.V.C. Schmidt (ed.), *William Langland, Piers Plowman: A Parallel-Text Edition of the A, B, C and Z Versions*, Volume I (London and New York: Longman, 1995), and Derek Pearsall (ed.), *William Langland, Piers Plowman: A New Annotated Edition of the C-text*, Exeter Medieval Texts and Studies (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2008).
- 9 A.G. Rigg and Charlotte Brewer (eds), *William Langland, Piers Plowman: The Z Version*, Studies and Texts 59 (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1983).
- 10 A.C. Hamilton (ed.), *Edmund Spenser: 'The Faerie Queene'* (London and New York: Longman, 1977), and second edition, text edited by Hiroshi Yamashita and Toshiyuki Suzuki (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2001).
- 11 H. Kurath, S.M. Kuhn, R.E. Lewis and others, *Middle English Dictionary*, 13 vols (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1952–2001).