Introduction

C.W.R.D. Moseley

‘Trouthe thee shall deliver...’

—Truth: Balade de Bon Conseyl

We are living at a time of what seems like unprecedented social, political, moral, epistemological and environmental uncertainty. It seems we are moving into – or are already in – what some historians call a ‘general crisis’. They usually apply that term to the seventeenth century. But however different his view of the world may have been to ours, Chaucer was himself living through just such a period, when ancient certainties and assumptions seemed radically unstable, when society seemed to be sliding into irresolvable war and chaos, and the weather was reliably unreliable. Famine stalked every happy harvest. Dame Fortune seemed to be at her most unpredictable. And ancient voices from that anxious time may have something to tell us in our own.

It is hardly surprising that this unease should be reflected in Chaucer’s work. In Critical Survey 29(3), the first of these two special issues on Chaucer, Helen Cooper’s exploration of a single concept, ‘hap’, and its cognates demonstrated just how deep, and how intellectually and emotionally charged, this issue was for Chaucer all through the career we can know about. Moreover, ‘Fortune’s sharp adversitee’, the topsy-turviness to which things are liable, leads to an extraordinary interest – in Troilus and Criseyde, in ‘The Knight’s Tale’ and others of the Canterbury Tales, the House of Fame, for example – in what can be relied on. To take the line somewhat out of context, can we be sure that ‘Trouthe thee shall deliver, it is no drede’?

That word, and the broadly related concepts it can signify, clearly mattered to Chaucer in his turbulent world. In the Prologue to the Canterbury Tales, ‘The Knight’s Tale’ and Troilus and Criseyde, Chaucer uses ‘Trewe’ forty-six times, and ‘trouthe’ sixty-four. But it has many shades of meaning. As something like ‘integrity’, it is the
key characteristic of Troilus, ‘trewe as stiel’ (V. 831). In that poem, moreover, Chaucer rhymes ‘trouthe’ with ‘routhe’ – ‘compassion’ – no fewer than eighteen times, thus setting up a provocative if understated dialogue between the two concepts. Yet ‘trouthe’ also implies certainty, knowledge, reliability, and it could be argued that the whole of the House of Fame is an essay on how and what we can know, and on how ‘true’ that knowledge can be. The aporia with which that poem closes – well, what could that man of ‘gret auctoritee’ have said, when the poem has subverted all authority and certainty in history, narrative, speech, language? Perhaps the aporia of silence is that to which all our knowledge and cleverness, our poems, ultimately lead.

These are not comfortable ideas. It was not a comfortable age, any more than ours is. We can be quite sure that if we can read Chaucer in this way, his contemporaries and successors could also. (And, after all, we can reach even further back: there is little in modern uncertainties about language, utterance and culture that is not anticipated in, for example, Augustine or Aristotle.) And that worry about authority, knowledge and interpretation, which seems to run like a leitmotif through his work, is also for a long time part of the very long shadow he casts, just as much as is the rhetorical and linguistic dexterity for which his immediate successors praise him. Jacqueline Tasioulas’s exploration of one of the very greatest of late mediaeval poems, Henryson’s Testament of Cresseid, leads us straight into a consideration of how a poet could make room for himself under that complex shadow, indeed profit from it, use it. Henryson’s poem has not a nonce intertextuality, but a serious engagement with how a very great poem can be read, with the counter-story it does not tell but which it implies, and with one of Chaucer’s own great themes, the nature of knowing, authority and ‘truth’. It is to that very issue of the conflicts inherent in any ‘authority’ to which John M. Fyler’s article draws attention: ‘The Merchant’s Tale’, Troilus and Criseyde and The Testament of Cresseid may seem miles apart, but they share the same uneasiness about literary authority, precedent and the possibility of certainty in anything – indeed, in language itself. Is seeing believing? John Fyler’s detailed and thoughtful article shows the attractiveness and exegetical value, too, of a critical approach where we agree to take the fiction at its word, surrender to its illusion and give the narrator an intimate and organic relationship to his or her tale. (Indeed, it could be argued that Chaucer himself began ironically to play with the fruitfulness of this idea, when he took decorum to new and extraordinary heights with ‘The Pardoner’s Prologue and Tale’.)
‘Tewe as stiel...’ Simone Fryer-Bovair’s approach to one of the greatest poems about human love in Western literature explores what exactly Chaucer might have meant by (and, perhaps more interestingly, how he might have valued) what we call ‘romantic’ love, its associated emotions and how they can be depicted; for the depiction hides as much as it reveals. For ‘in forme of speche is change / Withinne a thousand yeer, and wordes tho / That hadden prys, now wonder nyce and straunge / Us thinketh hem; and yet they spake hem so / And spedde as wel in love as men now do’ (Troilus and Criseyde II.22–28). As so often, there is much we cannot know, of course. Barry Windeatt’s ‘Chaucer’s Tears’, which examines the unusually emphasised and detailed emotionalism – even if sometimes with moments of delicate comedy and irony – which Chaucer gives especially to his heroines, raises the question of how the lost translation of Pseudo-Origen’s De Maria Magdalena, which Chaucer claims among his early works (Prologue to Legend of Good Women, F 427–28), might have affected his treatment of weeping. The tears of ‘routhe’ might be more complex than they seem at first.

The Book of the Duchess is a poem that seems reassuringly, delightfully, familiar. We mostly take it to be the earliest big poem of Chaucer’s that we have, and readily assume it to have been written soon after the death of Blanche of Lancaster. But it is salutary from time to time to take our certainties – about chronology, context, audience and so on – out of the cupboard and explore why we think they are certainties. And find they might not be, quite. The MS history can be an invaluable aid here. Simon Meecham-Jones’s article explores intriguing speculations about the connection of Bodleian MS Fairfax 16 (one of the very few early authorities for The Book of the Duchess) with the Stanleys, a family doing very well out of the political troubles of Henry VI’s reign, and (perhaps indirectly) with Alice Chaucer, Countess of Suffolk. If the argument holds, here is an early example of people in a later age adjusting their Chaucers to fit their own agendas, and their preconceptions. In a more brash way, a radical, anticlerical ‘Plowman’s Tale’, originally from around 1400, is included in his edition of 1532 by Thynne,4 which suggests Chaucer, now effectively central in a new, developing, English canon, held impeccable proto-Reformist views. He is too important to be left to the opposition, but the challenges he would have posed to the certainties on either side of the religious divide are simply neutralized.

This may be one example of the dulling effect of canonization. There are others. In the Introduction to Critical Survey 29(3), I tipped my hat,
as was proper, to Dryden’s sensitive respect for Chaucer. But Dryden’s respect was also qualified by a desire to make Chaucer respectable in an age of periwigs and politesse. As he remarked in the Preface to the *Fables* (1700), ‘... I have confined my choice [in the *Fables*] to such tales of Chaucer as savour nothing of immodesty. If I had desired more to please than to instruct, the Reeve, the Miller, the Shipman, the Merchant, the Sumner, and, above all, the wife of Bath, in the prologue to her tale, would have procured me as many friends and readers, as there are beaux and ladies of pleasure in the town. But I will no more offend against good manners’. (This almost anticipates the line Alec Guinness speaks as the old parson in Hamer’s *Kind Hearts and Coronets* (1949) about the stained glass in his church: ‘I always say it has all the exuberance of Chaucer with none of his concomitant crudities’.) For many of Dryden’s contemporaries, indeed, Chaucer’s stock stood high. Sir John Mennes, Samuel Pepys’ superior as Comptroller of the Navy, published imitations of him in *Musarum Deliciae* (1655), and on 4 June 1663 Samuel Pepys and he were talking when ‘Sir J. Mennes brought many fine expressions of Chaucer, which he dotes on mightily, and without doubt is a very fine poet’. Pepys certainly knew at least some poems very well indeed, for on 10 August 1664 he notes the difficulty of reading the tiny figures engraved on his slide rule and echoes closely, and completely naturally, a line from the *aubade* Troilus speaks (*Troilus and Criseyde* III.1461–63). But canonical Chaucer, ‘without doubt ... a very fine poet’, has with the passage of time become less subversive of certainties and more a poet whose manner is to be imitated, and whose *Canterbury Tales* is now centre stage. As a youth, for example, Alexander Pope imitated ‘The Wyf of Bath’s Prologue’ and ‘The Merchant’s Tale’, and attempted ‘Chaucerian’ bawdy; this last does not enhance his reputation.

‘Trouthe is the hiehst thing man may kepe’ (*The Franklin’s Tale*, V (F) 1478–79). However ironically and problematically framed Arveragus’s words to Dorigen may be – ‘But with that word he brast anon to wepe’ – the issues of integrity and compassion, which the lines focus, are faced by every person in every age. One value of reading old poets – yet another great value is simply pleasure, too often forgotten when we are being high-minded and academic – is that they remind us that they too faced these problems, and their news from that other country we call the past may help us to cultivate our own moral and intellectual gardens the better.
C.W.R.D. Moseley teaches in the Faculty of English at the University of Cambridge, and has been Director of Studies in English for several colleges of the university as well as Programme Director of the university’s International Summer Schools in English Literature and Shakespeare.

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