

I

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The social and literary scene in England

Social structure

Ideas of medieval social organization have much to contribute to the study of Chaucer. Socially and politically inflected topics are manifest within his writings, and socially grounded issues of literary taste and reception are thematically important as well. But, looking beyond particular matters of content, generally held notions about the structure of society also exert a tacit but persistent influence on the structure of his literary works.

Medieval social descriptions are very conscious of degree, and tend to emphasize the relatively small number of people at the top of the social hierarchy. The thirteenth-century legal commentator Bracton is representative when he divides society into those high in the ecclesiastical hierarchy (the pope, archbishops, bishops, and lesser prelates), those high in the civil hierarchy (emperors, kings, dukes, counts, barons, magnates, and knights), and those remaining (a general category of 'freepersons and bondpersons' or *liberi et villani*).¹

Bracton's concentration on prelates and magnates is consistent with formal theory in his day, but we must remember that his category of 'freepersons and bondpersons' comprised an overwhelming majority of the fourteenth-century populace. After the cataclysmic Black Death of 1348–9, the population of England levelled off at about 3,500,000, where it remained for the rest of the century and most of the next.² Among these persons the 150 lords and 2,000 knights and their families upon whom Bracton concentrates would have totalled no more than 8,000–10,000, or considerably less than one-half of one per cent of the whole.³ He is undoubtedly correct in his half-stated assumption that most of the remainder were agricultural workers, with many still bound in some fashion to the land, but other groups are apparent to the modern observer. Taken together, ecclesiastical orders probably included some 50,000 members, or just under two per cent of the whole.⁴ Esquires and other lesser gentry and their families probably comprised about

30,000–40,000 additional persons. Cities were small and city-dwellers were few by standards of today. London and nearby Westminster had a population of some 40,000, and lesser cities (which we might be more inclined to call ‘towns’) such as Bristol, York, Norwich, Gloucester, Leicester, and Hull had populations between 5,000 and 10,000. All told, though, we might suppose that about 100,000–125,000 additional persons were ‘urban’ in some sense of the word.

Latent even within Bracton’s commentary is another way of viewing society which encouraged more recognition of such constituent groups. His division of society into the ecclesiastical hierarchy, the civil hierarchy, and the mass of other persons is based upon the traditional medieval view of the three estates (clerics, knights, and peasants).⁵ Even when treated most hierarchically, the estates of society were also seen as interdependent, with each group contributing in its own way to the good of all. This notion of interdependence issued at times in an alternative view of society, as organic rather than hierarchical. This organic view – often conveyed through extended metaphors of the social estates as members of the body politic – permitted recognition of new classes of persons not clearly accommodated in the more traditional tripartite system. It is to be found less in formal statements than in sermons, statutes, ordinances, and a variety of other irregular and occasional documents.

A sermon delivered in the 1370s by Bishop Thomas Brinton of Rochester supplements the hierarchical view of society with a more organic view of the interdependence of its estates. We are all, he says, the mystical members of a single body, of which the head (or heads) are kings, princes, and prelates; the eyes are judges, wise men, and true counsellors; the ears are clergy; the tongue is good doctors. Then, within the midsection of the body, the right hand is composed of strenuous knights; the left hand is composed of merchants and craftsmen; and the heart is citizens and burgesses. Finally, peasants and workers are the feet which support the whole.⁶ Similar views of society crop up in other occasional and relatively informal papers of the time. A Norwich guild ordinance of the 1380s, for example, takes note in its opening prayer of a ruling stratum composed of the king, dukes, earls, barons, and bachelors; a middle stratum composed of knights, squires, citizens and burgesses, and franklins; and a broader category of tillers and craftsmen.⁷

The middle groupings in Brinton’s sermon and the Norwich prayer embrace persons of different social outlook. The knights – and, in the second half of the fourteenth century, the new class of esquires – enjoyed the same *gentil* status as the great aristocrats, though clearly without enjoying the benefits conferred by the hereditary titles and accompanying revenues of the latter group. Although non-*gentil*, the urban merchants (whose free status

and prosperity entitled them to the titles 'citizen' or 'burgess') often enjoyed wealth considerably greater than that of most knights.⁸ And even these distinctions mask variations. Many knights and esquires of the period held no land at all and had few or no military obligations, but earned their status through civil and administrative tasks which we might consider essentially 'middle class'.⁹ While not *gentil*, citizens and burgesses were eligible to serve their cities and shires as 'knights' in Parliament, and some were knighted for royal or military service.¹⁰ The ultimate standard for inclusion in these middle groupings would seem not to be rank or title, but simply civil importance and responsibility, however defined.

Chaucer's own position

Chaucer himself was a member of this middle social grouping, his place within it secured by various forms of what might be called 'civil service'. He was born in the early 1340s, in a family situation appropriate to a career of royal service.¹¹ His father, John Chaucer, was not only a prosperous London vintner, but had himself served Edward III in such capacities as deputy chief butler (with responsibility for certain customs collections). Chaucer's own career began in 1357 with his appointment to the household of Elizabeth, Countess of Ulster, and her husband Prince Lionel. In the service of the latter he journeyed between France and England (and was captured and ransomed during a 1359–60 military campaign in France), inaugurating a series of journeys which would take him frequently to France, twice to Italy, and elsewhere in the course of his career. Like many in his station, he married rather advantageously, to Philippa de Roet, daughter of a knight of Hainault (who had come to England in the service of the queen) and sister of Katherine Swynford (soon to be mistress and eventual third wife of John of Gaunt). In 1367, soon after his marriage, he is listed as *valettus* to King Edward III, and by 1368 he is listed among *esquiers* of the royal household. While remaining an esquire and never entering the inner circle of chamber-knights, he nevertheless continued in respected service of one sort or another until the end of his life. In 1374, he shifted from the precincts of the household to the post of controller of customs in London, assisted both by preferment from Edward III and by a timely annuity to him and to his wife from John of Gaunt. Posts and assignments continued after the accession of Richard II in 1377. The latter 1380s marked a period of comparative withdrawal from London activity, possibly tactical in nature since it roughly coincided with the years 1386–9 in which Richard II was severely challenged by an aristocratic coalition. Richard reasserted his royal prerogatives in 1389, and Chaucer soon after received his next royal appointment as clerk of the king's

works. He continued in various capacities – though none of greater lustre – through the 1390s. When Henry IV supplanted Richard II in 1399, a year before Chaucer's death, he confirmed Richard's annuities and added a grant of his own.¹²

Even so spare a summary of Chaucer's civil career suggests several interesting perspectives on his life and place in society.

(1) Chaucer's position as an esquire of the royal household would have conferred *gentil* status, though he was among the more ambiguously situated members of that somewhat fluid group. Lacking the security from possession of lands and rents enjoyed by the great aristocrats and even by some of his fellow knights and esquires, Chaucer depended for his living upon his career in service. In this sense, the posts and assignments which he held in the course of what Sylvia Thrupp has called his 'versatile' career were not just an expression of his energies or his zest for politics, but were essential to his livelihood and to the maintenance of his station in life.¹³

(2) Chaucer appears to have had a representative career, both as an esquire of the king's immediate household and as a member of the royal party beyond the immediate confines of the court.¹⁴ He would seem to have been rather good at what he did; while not lavishly rewarded, he enjoyed frequent appointments and re-appointments while weathering the extreme and sometimes dangerous factional vicissitudes of his day. His service bridged successfully the careers of three monarchs, and he managed the extremely difficult task of being on good terms both with Richard II and with John of Gaunt and the Lancastrians, even during such points of extreme tension as Richard's clash in 1386–9 with the Appellants, an aristocratic coalition headed by the Duke of Gloucester and including Gaunt's son Henry. In a period of what Thomas Usk called 'confederacie, congregacion, & couyne',¹⁵ Chaucer was necessarily something of a factionalist, allied like Mayor Brembre of London and Chief Justice Tresilian and others with Richard's royal party. Yet – unlike such fellow partisans as Brembre, Tresilian, and Usk, who were beheaded by the Appellants in 1388 – Chaucer seems to have understood the limits of faction, and to have tempered his activity in 1386–8 and possibly in other crucial periods as well.

(3) Patronage based on his literary accomplishments seems not to have been a major factor in Chaucer's civil career. Later we will consider several literary works which may have been written in part to console, compliment, or please his superiors, but most of the facts of his civil career are comprehensible in terms of strictly non-literary talents and exertions. Chaucer's poetry fosters an impression of separation between his public and literary lives, as when the garrulous Eagle in the *House of Fame* chides him for his

habitual withdrawal from the world of affairs to that of books and private reading:

For when thy labour doon al ys,
And hast mad alle thy rekenynges,
In stede of reste and newe thynges,
Thou goost hom to thy hous anoon,
And, also domb as any stoon,
Thou sittest at another book
Tyl fully daswed ys thy look . . . (652–8)

The principal communities of readers

Solitary as Chaucer's own habits of reading and writing might have been, his poetry still shows a notable concern with issues of reception: with situations of telling and listening, of writing and reading, of audience reaction. This concern, in turn, encourages us to imagine the circumstances into which Chaucer actually launched his literary works – for whom he wrote them, and in what ways he expected them to be promulgated. Any attempt to answer these questions is, however, complicated by a number of situations peculiar to the society of Chaucer's day, including the coexistence of older 'oral' and newer 'literary' presuppositions; the relative infrequency of literacy in Chaucer's England; and, especially, the fragmentation of the literate populace into small and relatively self-contained communities of readers, based on considerations of language, geography, production and distribution of manuscripts, vocation, and social class.

The task of determining the boundaries of Chaucer's contemporary audience is complicated by the fact that the circumstances of oral narration in Chaucer's day could have permitted people to *hear* his work without having the occasion (or perhaps even the ability) to *read* it.¹⁶ Chaucer himself seems occasionally unsure about whether he is primarily an *oral* or a *written* poet. We might loosely conceive of his earlier vision-poems as composed to be read aloud to an intimate audience and his *Canterbury Tales* as intended to reach a larger audience in manuscript form, with the mid-career *Troilus and Criseyde* as a watershed. Even so broad a formulation is, however, subject to uncertainties. Chaucer's tone of address to his audience is nowhere more intimate among his narrative poems than in *Troilus*, yet this poem concludes with an apostrophe ('Go, litel bok . . .') which certainly anticipates the circulation of his poem to an enlarged audience in manuscript form. The *Canterbury Tales* are laced with different sorts of references to hearing and reading, often within a single passage. Apologizing for his plain speech in

the *Miller's Tale*, Chaucer seems to imagine his audience both as hearers and as readers of a bound manuscript:

. . . whoso list it nat yheere,
Turne over the leef and chese another tale. (I, 3176–7)

We might provisionally imagine Chaucer writing for an immediate, oral audience and an ultimate audience of readers, though we must add this matter of oral/written to the list of uncertainties which urge caution upon us.

If oral rendition enlarged the possible audience of fourteenth-century works, other considerations were decidedly narrowing in their effect. The already small body of literate persons in England (probably no more than five to ten per cent of the population, even including what M. B. Parkes has called exclusively 'pragmatic' or non-literary readers¹⁷) was further segmented by other criteria into a number of separate 'communities of readers'. Several literary languages remained in competition throughout the second half of the fourteenth century. Though English was gradually coming to the fore, the last quarter of the century still saw Latin as the language of ecclesiastical and theological discourse, and French as the language of statecraft and civil record-keeping, as well as a literary language in some circles. Such geographically based considerations as the different dialects of English, local preference for different forms (such as alliterative as opposed to metrical verse), and physical distance were also centrifugal in their effect. Different vocational and social groupings, while anything but rigid at their outer margins, still fostered divergent tastes among such groups as the aristocracy, the gentry, and the urban middle classes. Such segmentation of the literate populace into different communities or reading publics is most dramatically illustrated by the fact that the three greatest writers of English of the later fourteenth century – Chaucer, Langland, and the *Gawain*-poet – may not have known each other's work. (Chaucer perhaps echoes the opening scene of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in his *Squire's Tale*, and his Parson's dismissive allusion to poetic alliteration or 'rum, ram, ruf' may possibly embrace both writers, but neither these nor other suggestions that they knew each other's work are very persuasive.) In order better to understand how such a situation could occur, we might examine the principal literate communities of fourteenth-century England.¹⁸

The upper levels of the *clergy*, and especially those connected with monastic libraries and scriptoria, were naturally literate. As surviving booklists show, their continuing concern throughout the century was with theological and ecclesiastical matter written in Latin – though literature in all three languages is encountered. Some fourteenth-century manuscripts of

likely ecclesiastical provenance include works in Latin, French, and Middle English, and occasionally both divine and secular works as well; London, BL, MS Harley 2253, for example, not only contains a generous selection of Middle English secular and religious lyrics, but also secular works in French and devotional works in Latin.

Members of the royal family and the fourteenth-century *aristocracy* were drawn to works in chivalry, statecraft, and occasionally theology, particularly in French. In the middle of the century, Henry, Duke of Lancaster, had written a devotional treatise entitled ‘Le Livre de Seyntz Medicines’. In that work, he apologizes for the quality of his native or Anglo-Norman French, on the ground that he is more familiar with English: ‘Si le franceis ne soit pas bon, jeo doie estre excusee, pur seo qu jeo suit engleis et n’ai pas moelt hauntee le franceis.’¹⁹ In style and thrust Henry’s work was somewhat of the older fashion, since the mid-century provided members of the court with ample opportunity to polish their Continental French. A series of lustrous marriages brought Continent-born and -educated wives and their trains to the royal household in the course of the century, including Isabella of France (wife of Edward II and mother of Edward III), Philippa of Hainault (wife of Edward III), and Anne of Bohemia (first wife of Richard II). Additionally, the series of conflicts between England and France known as the Hundred Years War brought the two countries into inevitable association through legations, missions, and – especially – the practice of holding prisoners for ransom (after the battle of Poitiers in 1356, King John of France and a virtual court-in-exile were resident in England throughout most of an eight-year period which lasted until his death in 1364). Extant booklists throughout this period testify to a continuing interest in French literature. At the time of her death, Isabella of France bequeathed to Edward III a number of French books, including a *Brut*, deeds of Arthur, and *Tristan and Isolde*; she owned copies of *Aimeri de Narbonne*, *Percival*, *Gawain*, and other narratives as well.²⁰ Although no bibliophile, Edward III seems to have had some interest in French romance; in one case the Issue Rolls of his reign specify 100 marks ‘for a book of romance . . . for the King’s use, which remains to the chamber of the Lord the King’.²¹ Booklists of Richard II include similar romances (some possibly from his great-grandmother’s bequest), and others including a ‘Romance de la Rose’ and a ‘Romance de Perciual & Gawyn’, as well as a Bible written in French or *lingua gallica*.²² Froissart, presenting a volume of his poems to Richard, comments that he spoke and read French very well (‘moult bien parloit et lisoit le franchois’), and we have no reason to doubt his word.²³ The interest of the aristocracy was not confined to French. The Duke of Gloucester’s library contained both French romances and Latin theology, and Henry IV was a reader of Latin as well.²⁴ Chaucer’s contemporary, John

Gower, claimed some encouragement from Richard II in undertaking his English *Confessio Amantis*.²⁵ Yet only with evidence of Henry V's preference for literature in his native tongue does English emerge clearly as the preferred literary language of the royal and aristocratic group.²⁶

The situation was different among the lower echelons of the *gentry* – especially among those knights and esquires of the royal household and/or chancery clerks and secretaries and lawyers who comprised what might be considered the ‘civil service’ of the day. There, an emergent public for English literary works provided a receptive milieu for Chaucer and others as well.²⁷ One such writer was Thomas Usk, initially a scrivener or professional scribe who became a political factionalist and convert to the royal party. In the period 1385–7, while in temporary eclipse and awaiting the royal preferment which was to be his undoing, Usk composed a political and spiritual allegory entitled *Testament of Love*, in which he explained his still unusual choice of English as a literary language:

Trewly, the understanding of Englishmen wol not strecche to the privy termes in Frenche, what-so-ever we bosten of straunge language. Let than clerkes endyten in Latin, for they have the propertee of science, and the knowinge in that facultee; and let Frenchmen in their Frenche also endyten their queynt termes, for it is kyndely to their mouthes; and let us shewe our fantasies in suche wordes as we lerneden of our dames tonge.²⁸

Usk's probable intention in choosing English was to reach an influential audience of persons who could further his civil and factional activities. Less involved in self-promotion, but no less concerned with finding an appropriate audience for his works, was John Gower – a landed esquire with legal training, and a friend and associate of Chaucer. Gower wrote major works in French, Latin, and finally English – not, as one might suppose, from confusion, but with respect to different generic traditions and to different intended audiences. His motive in composing the *Mirour de l'Omme* in 1376–8 was comparatively devotional and private, and his linguistic choice was appropriately conservative. His *Vox Clamantis*, completed about 1385, was written in the voice of Old Testament prophecy, and the choice of Latin, which John Fisher calls ‘the language of serious political discussion’, suits his intended audience of influential clerics and, ultimately, the court. His *Confessio Amantis* (1385–93) addresses its message of political reconciliation to a still wider audience, and is thus written in English, ‘for Engelandes sake’.²⁹ The deliberateness of Gower's respective choices of Latin, French, and English is underscored by the fact that, even after composing his *Confessio* in English, he returned to Latin for his *Cronica Tripertita*, with its serious political motive of Lancastrian revisionism.

The *citizens and burgesses* of London and other urban centres were (in Parkes's phrase) 'pragmatic readers' in the course of their business activities.³⁰ The question is, whither their interests turned when they engaged in more general reading. Throughout most of the fourteenth century, the answer seems to be that they turned toward service books and works of lay devotion in Latin. Study of the wills of London merchants and other gildsmen of the later fourteenth century shows them in possession of numerous service books (missals, breviaries, and graduals), works of pious devotion (psalters and legends of the saints), and occasional legal compilations.³¹ Little wonder that, turning to English in the later fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, this audience sought devotional compendia (such as the *Prick of Conscience* – more popular than the *Canterbury Tales*, if we are to judge from over one hundred extant manuscripts), translations of Bonaventure, and mystical treatises. Segments of this audience seem, as well, to have given encouragement to Chaucer's fervent contemporary, Langland. Langland's ardently reformist poem *Piers Plowman* would seem initially to have envisioned an audience of clerics, including many in minor orders, as suggested by its theological preoccupations and its frequent interjection of scriptural and other Latin quotations. Yet its choice of Middle English embraces a larger possible audience, and most of its Latin quotations are paraphrased for that audience's benefit. The B-version of Langland's poem may even, to his possible consternation, have stimulated rebellious designs among the rebels of 1381.³²

We must remind ourselves that boundaries between communities of readers tended to shift. While probably aimed at civil servants and literate gentry, Gower's *Confessio* was at least partially encouraged by the king; if *Piers Plowman* was first read by clerics, it was soon taken up by literate laypersons. An instance of how very far we are from establishing a 'sociology' of fourteenth-century taste is the case of the *Gawain*-poet, whose audience has been variously located with equal plausibility in baronial courts, among the country gentry, among Cheshire servants of Richard II, and in the monastic houses of the south-west Midlands.³³

Chaucer's audience

Chaucer appears to have found his own community of readers among his fellow gentlepersons and civil servants, though several considerations argue against oversimplification. The embedded or fictionalized audiences within Chaucer's own poetry – such as his created audience of Canterbury pilgrims – are socially mixed, and at times his *gentils* and non-*gentils* engage in what appear to be socially based literary disagreements. We may assume at least a

modest degree of social mixing within his actual audience, and several of his works do indeed appear to have been directed toward social superiors. The *Book of the Duchess* shows definite signs of intent to console John of Gaunt for the death of Duchess Blanche of Lancaster in 1368, both in the grieving knight's final return to a 'long castel' ['Lancaster'] (1318) and reference to the lost lady as 'White' ['Blanche'] by name (948). The narrator of this poem is himself somewhat more elevated socially than those of Chaucer's later efforts; unable to sleep, he bids a servant bring him a book (47), and riding forth to join a hunt he displays some hauteur in demanding of an attendant, 'Say, felowe, who shal hunte here?' (366). He is nevertheless deferential to the grieving knight, finding him neither curt nor formal and marvelling to find him 'so treftable . . . for al hys bale' (533-5). The relation of the narrator to the grieving knight in fact shares some characteristics of Chaucer's own probable relation to John of Gaunt: familiar in the sense that both are gentlepersons, but yet with a recognition of the rather considerable social gap between one who is simply a gentleperson and one who is at once a gentleperson and an aristocrat second in wealth and power to none in the kingdom.

Only in his short poem 'Lak of Stedfastnesse' does Chaucer appear to address Richard II directly, but Richard and Queen Anne may have been partially responsible for his ambitious but incomplete *Legend of Good Women*, with their relation to Chaucer wryly restated in his portrayal of a God and Queen of Love who set for him a trying (if not impossible) narrative task. This presumption is further fortified by the *Legend's* points of coincidence with Gower's *Confessio Amantis* (each written in English and containing a collection of narratives of love held together by a frame which secularizes a traditional devotional form), raising the possibility that Richard and Anne were sufficiently interested in the course of English letters to give parallel charges to the two poets. If the portrayals of the God of Love and Queen Alceste are indicative, however, then certain attentions from persons in socially authoritative positions were at best to be politely endured. After all, the imperious threats of the God of Love and the inadvertent insults of Alceste ('Hym rekketh noght of what matere he take': F 365) leave Chaucer little choice but to withdraw into the defensive irony which Alfred David has seen as his characteristic strategy for dealing with socially secure members of his audience with 'limited and established literary tastes'.³⁴

Chaucer's impulse to direct works beyond his immediate circle might not have been exhausted with these two efforts. Works such as his translation of Boethius and his *Tale of Melibee* may belong to the general category of 'advice to princes',³⁵ and the peaceable sentiments of Dame Prudence in

the *Tale of Melibee* may be seen as supportive of King Richard's interest in peace with France.³⁶ Although we have no particular evidence that Chaucer found a bourgeois readership prior to the fifteenth century, this possibility must also be entertained. Chaucer certainly had numerous associations in the London merchant classes, such as his Port of London association with Nicholas Brembre (several times mayor, and chief among the London merchant-oligarchs) or his legal surety for John Hend (prosperous draper, eventual mayor, and also member of the royal party).³⁷ No documents suggest that such men were members of Chaucer's literary audience, but forums and contexts existed in which they might have been. John Gower's biographer has discussed the existence in fourteenth-century England of the French-derived merchant *Pui*, an assembly of prosperous *bourgeoisie* devoted to the cultivation of *ballades* and other *belles-lettres*.³⁸ Many social fraternities and guilds of the later Middle Ages provided a common meeting-place for *gentils* and merchants (for instance, the membership rolls of the Gild of St George at Norwich contain bishops and knights as well as mayors and the generality of merchants and other gildsmen and their wives).³⁹

Despite such possible diversity, Chaucer's immediate circle was almost certainly composed of persons in social situations close to his own. Its members are to be sought among fellow knights and esquires of the royal household, and civil servants and lawyers of similar station in the London/Westminster area.⁴⁰ We see the outlines of such a circle in the names of those contemporaries familiarly mentioned in Chaucer's poetry: Scogan (Henry Scogan, an esquire, apparent tutor to the sons of Henry IV, and poet in his own right), Bukton (probably Peter Bukton, knight in Richard II's household and later close associate of Henry IV), Vache (Philip de la Vache, Richard's chamber-knight and eventual Knight of the Garter), Gower (lawyer, esquire, and fellow poet), and Strode (Ralph Strode, a London lawyer, who – unless we are dealing with two persons – enjoyed some standing as an Oxford philosopher-theologian earlier in his career). This circle may be filled out by our sense of other *littérateurs* in and about the court: Richard Stury (Ricardian chamber-knight and friend of the French chronicler and poet Froissart), Lewis Clifford (chamber-knight, suspected Lollard, and literary intermediary between Chaucer and the French poet Deschamps), John Clanvowe (chamber-knight, close contemporary, and author of 'The Boke of Cupid', probably the first consciously 'Chaucerian' poem in English), and more. We may also presume the presence in this circle of educated women of similar station. Philippa of Hainault (queen of Edward III) and Anne of Bohemia (queen of Richard II) and other ladies of the court were attended by *damoiseselles*, and – while court records suggest they were fewer in number than

household knights and esquires – a document of 1368 lists six ladies and thirteen *damoiselles* (including Philippa Chaucer) and a document of 1369 lists forty-seven ladies, *damoiselles*, and *souz-damoiselles*.⁴¹

Our sense of this circle is further amplified by the familiar tone in which Chaucer often addresses members of his audience – especially in his earlier poems, and most of all in certain of his verse epistles and other occasional works. One such poem is his *Envoy to Scogan*, in which a portentous opening reference to broken statutes in heaven and a consequent deluge gives way to the jesting explanation that Scogan has upset Venus with his matter-of-factness in love. As Chaucer reminds him, Scogan has in fact gone so far as to give his lady up (instead of serving patiently like the knights of literary convention), simply because she did not respond to his overtures or ‘distresse’:

Hastow not seyð, in blaspheme of the goddis,
Thurgh pride, or thurgh thy grete rekelnesse,
Swich thing as in the lawe of love forbode is,
That, for thy lady sawgh nat thy distresse,
Therfore thou yave hir up at Michelmesse? (15–19)

Associating Scogan’s situation with his own (both are evidently ‘rounde of shap’: 31), Chaucer fears that both will suffer Cupid’s revenge – consisting not of Cupid’s assault, but rather his decision to leave them alone:

He wol nat with his arwes been ywroken
On the, ne me, ne noon of oure figure;
We shul of him have neyther hurt ne cure. (26–8)

Chaucer concludes with reflections on his poetry (he suggests that he has recently been inactive) and friendship (he asks Scogan, kneeling ‘at the stremes hed’ – that is, presumably, the court – to remember him, living dully downstream). Although not quite as wide-ranging, Chaucer’s ‘envoy’ to Bukton is similarly familiar in its jocular warning of ‘the sorwe and wo that is in mariage’ (6). Cited as an ostensible authority on the subject of marriage is one of Chaucer’s own literary creations, here as elsewhere assuming an autonomous existence outside the confines of the *Canterbury Tales*; ‘The Wyf of Bathe I pray yow that ye rede / Of this matere’ (29–30), Chaucer warns the prospective groom.⁴²

These two poems, probable survivors of a much larger body of occasional verse now lost, confirm the existence of an ‘inner circle’ of Chaucer’s audience which was on intimate and confidential terms both with Chaucer’s store of literary devices and with Chaucer the person. Other occasional poems

addressed both to men and to women – along with such moments as his address to ‘every lady bright of hewe’ in *Troilus* v, 1772ff – support and extend our sense of such an audience. Nimble enough to follow Chaucer’s tonal shifts, acquainted enough with his verse to appreciate intertextual reference, easy enough with his company to accept and encourage jests in potentially sensitive areas – it is an audience which, in the words of Bertrand Bronson, ‘must compel our admiration’.⁴³

While confident in his manner of address to his immediate *hearers*, Chaucer seems less certain about the nature of his reception by those unknown persons who will be *readers* of his works in manuscript form. His ambition for such an audience has already been noted, in reference to such passages as his closing address to *Troilus* when he imagines his ‘bok’ entering the larger realm of ‘poesye’. This imagined transition is, however, accompanied by certain anxieties, both about simple matters of transcription and also about more fundamental matters of understanding:

. . . prey I God that non myswrite the,
Ne the mysmetre for defaute of tonge;
And red wherso thow be, or elles songe,
That thow be understonde, God I biseche! (v, 1795–8)

Nice questions of interpretation aside, Chaucer need not have worried about his embrace by an enlarged fifteenth-century readership. A progressive enlargement of his readership is suggested by the evidence of manuscript dissemination: the absence or near-absence of manuscripts from Chaucer’s lifetime suggests that he prepared only a limited number of copies and used them mainly as texts for oral delivery; the first extant copies of *Troilus* and the *Canterbury Tales* are relatively fine productions, evidently intended mainly for nobility in the opening decades of the fifteenth century; by 1430–40, well before Caxton’s first printed edition, the rapid proliferation of less sumptuous manuscripts in paper rather than vellum suggests that his acceptance by a truly national public was complete. All told, *Troilus* exists in sixteen fifteenth-century manuscripts; the *Tales* exist in fifty-five relatively complete manuscripts (and in Caxton’s two printed editions), together with eighteen segments in miscellanies and nine more fragments. Dream visions and shorter poems circulated in numerous collections of the mid-century. Moreover, these manuscripts and fragments are distributed widely, both geographically and socially. *Troilus* exists in a vellum manuscript prepared for Henry V while he was Prince of Wales and also in paper miscellanies; the *Tales* enjoyed a fifteenth-century readership so diverse as to include a future king (Richard, Duke of Gloucester) as well as London goldsmen

(as exemplified by a bequest from John Brinchele to William Holgrave, citizens and tailors of London).⁴⁴

Chaucer as a social poet

Chaucer's poetry is complexly situated in the social context of his own time. Unlike his contemporaries Gower and Langland, he rarely if ever treats his poetry as a forum for the direct discussion of social issues of his day. The burning subject of peace with France might be addressed by Prudence's wise and pacific counsel in the *Tale of Melibee*, but only in an elliptical and proverbial way. The widespread social upheaval of 1381 known as the Peasants' Revolt – in the course of which peasants and their allies from Kent and elsewhere stormed London, burned John of Gaunt's palace, and killed Archbishop Sudbury – is a subject only for glancing and bemused comment (particularly in the *Nun's Priest's Tale*: 3394–7). Richard's near-deposition by the aristocratic Appellants and the accompanying execution of Brembre, Usk, and other of Chaucer's associates and acquaintances is mentioned not at all. As these illustrations might suggest, Chaucer is not a very topical poet. Neither, for that matter, is he a particularly historical poet, in the sense of committing himself to faithful representation of individuals or assemblies of persons or events which he might actually have seen. While his vivid portrayal of thirty-odd pilgrims has tempted scholars to propose historical identifications, the tendency of current critical theory is to see even those characterizations most apparently drawn from life as derived largely from 'estates satire' and other literary sources.⁴⁵ Yet, granting that Chaucer is neither particularly topical nor particularly historical, in certain respects he is nevertheless profoundly social.

The pilgrims gathered at the Tabard Inn seem intended to represent neither a complete census of fourteenth-century English society nor an enumeration of its most influential ranks: the great majority of the populace who worked the land is represented only by the Ploughman; entirely missing are the great aristocrats who still controlled most of England's land and wealth. Present at least by implication, however, are all three traditional estates of medieval society: the seigneurial (represented by the Knight), the spiritual (represented by the Parson), and the agricultural (represented by the Ploughman) – together with assorted other *gentils* (such as the Prioress and the Monk), and a very full review of the middle strata. While admittedly not very faithful to the numbers or proportions of fourteenth-century society, this modestly varied gathering is nevertheless presented in a way which confirms a vital premise about the relationship between social position and worldly behaviour. Jill Mann points out that the behaviour of the pilgrims on the road

to Canterbury and the kinds and styles of tales they tell suggest 'a society in which work as a social experience conditions personality and the standpoint from which an individual views the world'.⁴⁶

The pilgrimage itself is, after all, a social as well as religious event, with individuals interacting according to their social perspectives as expressed by their class (or rank) and vocation. One notices, for example, that the representatives of those traditional estates whose social responsibilities are prescribed by their place in a hierarchy mainly hold themselves aloof from the badinage of their fellow pilgrims. The Knight confines his interventions to different adjudicatory roles. The Parson chides Harry Bailly for his swearing (II, 1171) and refuses to depart from truthfulness to tell a fable (X, 31). The Ploughman does not speak. Even quasi-*gentils* like the Prioress and the Monk stand on ceremony in the end, as reflected in the Prioress's choice of a miracle for her tale and the Monk's stubborn refusal to 'pleye' (VII, 2806). In the cases of the Knight and Parson, we see evidence of the selflessness which accompanies their acceptance of the responsibilities of their social roles. Even in the case of the more self-absorbed Prioress and Monk, a certain aloof and attenuated sense of *noblesse oblige* still seems to inform their relations with their fellow pilgrims. Such restrained social conduct is at considerable variance with the bonhomie and good fellowship exhibited by their fellows. If the five gildsmen in livery are silent in the tale-telling, theirs is nevertheless the social ethic of the pilgrimage: fraternity, expressed through vital and egalitarian social interchange, is the order of the day. Certainly, quarrels based on vocational difference and other animosities constantly threaten to erupt. But the ideal of the pilgrimage is still one of amity, based on turning 'rancour and disese / T'acord' (IX, 97-8), much in the mode of those gild ordinances which seek to banish 'grucching' and 'rebellious tongues'.⁴⁷ The Merchant, in short, is not the only character attracted to 'chevyssaunce' or good deals (I, 282) – the behaviour of many of the pilgrims shows the emergence of forms of civility well suited to the advancement of transactions in an increasingly mercantile and profit-oriented society.

No less socially based are emergent issues of gender and sexual orientation; issues brought into focus by recent critical and theoretical emphases, but already evident in medieval society as well.⁴⁸ Non-normative figures like the Wife of Bath (with her commando approach to gender relations) and the Pardoner (whose unclassifiable sexuality chimes disturbingly with his religious apostasy) create their own variety of havoc on the pilgrimage, posing a challenge to the status quo.

Finally, social orientations of the pilgrims are reflected in the kinds of tales they tell.⁴⁹ The Knight, the Parson, the Prioress, and the Monk all favour

traditional and edifying genres – as does their apologist, the Clerk, with his unabashed endorsement of social hierarchy. Other pilgrims more clearly identified with the middle strata of society tell tales more racy in content and more situational in ethics, culminating at one extreme in the *Shipman's Tale* with its firm satiric equation of surface civility with the furtherance of 'chaffare' and the profit-motive. To be sure, Chaucer somewhat simplified the actual state of affairs in order to suggest this socially conditioned view. While contemporary evidence *does* suggest a split in literary taste between *gentils* and others in the middle strata, that split was (as suggested earlier in this essay) probably actually grounded more on the inclination of the *gentils* toward both secular and devotional literature versus the inclination of the others toward devotional literature alone, rather than (as Chaucer seems to suggest) a clash between the *gentils'* taste for hagiographical and other elevated genres on the one hand and the taste of the non-*gentils* for fabliaux or other 'ribaude' (VI, 324) on the other.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, Chaucer is faithful to the state of literary affairs in fourteenth-century England when he suggests that literary tastes often diverged, and that social considerations underlay the divergence.

The mingling of styles and perspectives in Chaucer's poetry has another, deeper fidelity to his social reality. The opening sections of this essay suggested that social description and social practice in Chaucer's day were moving from the static and the hierarchical to a more fluid and less hierarchical state. The penetration of new groups (such as Chaucer's own class of esquires) into the previously existing hierarchy resulted in conceptions of society as more and more internally diverse. This adjusted view in which society embraces a broadened spectrum of social groups finds a counterpart in the stylistic variety of Chaucer's own poetry – from his earlier vision poems (such as the *Parliament of Fowls*, in which the Garden of Love is divided into the regions of Venus and Nature, with each further subdivided into competing qualities and perspectives) to the *Canterbury Tales* itself (with its receptivity to a maximum variety of styles, genres, and their accompanying pre-suppositions). Again and again, Chaucer's poetry offers us an experience in which a hierarchy is postulated and then penetrated or otherwise qualified – as when the lower fowl of the *Parliament* interrupt the gentle pleas of the tercils with their 'kek's and 'quek's and pragmatic analysis (499) or when the drunken Miller of the *Canterbury Tales* will not abide Harry Bailly's intended order of tellers and introduces his own brand of comic 'harlotrie' (I, 3184). Chaucer's bold juxtaposition of personal and literary styles may take some liberties with the facts of personal behaviour and literary preference in his day. Even so, these stylistic juxtapositions offer an apt analogue

to the complicated, varied, and dynamic social situation in which Chaucer lived and worked.⁵¹

NOTES

1. Bracton, *On the Laws and Customs of England*, eds. and trans. G. E. Woodbine and S. E. Thorne, vol. 2 (Cambridge, Mass., 1968), p. 31.
2. The estimates given in the pioneering study of Josiah Cox Russell, *British Medieval Population* (Albuquerque, N.Mex., 1948), are now generally regarded as too low; see, among others, John Hatcher, *Plague, Population and the English Economy, 1348-1530* (London, 1977).
3. See N. Denholm-Young, *The Country Gentry in the Fourteenth Century* (Oxford, 1969), pp. 1-40.
4. Based on Russell's analysis of the 1377 poll tax, *British Medieval Population*, pp. 133, 146.
5. The rise of the theory of the three estates between the eleventh and the thirteenth centuries in France is described by Georges Duby, *The Three Orders: Feudal Society Imagined*, trans. A. Goldhammer (Chicago/London, 1980).
6. Printed in G. R. Owst, *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England* (Cambridge, 1933), p. 587.
7. *English Gilds*, ed. L. Toulmin Smith, EETS es 40 (London, 1870), p. 23.
8. The relative prosperity of the different estates of the realm is suggested by the different categories of the graduated poll tax of 1379; see *The Anonimale Chronicle*, ed. V. H. Galbraith (Manchester, 1970), pp. 127-9.
9. The 1379 poll tax specifies a category of esquires who do not possess lands, rents, or chattels, but who earn their livelihood *en service* (*Anonimale Chronicle*, p. 127).
10. M. M. Crow points out that only six of the twenty-three shire-knights in Parliament for Kent during the reign of Richard II were dubbed or formally knighted. See *Chaucer Life-Records*, eds. M. M. Crow and C. C. Olson (Oxford, 1966), p. 364.
11. Supporting evidence for this brief summary of Chaucer's career is to be found in *Life-Records*, eds. Crow and Olson.
12. Subsequent examination of the evidence suggests, however, that Henry IV's response to Chaucer's needs might not have been particularly prompt. See Sumner J. Ferris, 'The Date of Chaucer's Final Annuity and of the "Complaint to His Empty Purse"', *Modern Philology*, 65 (1967-8), 45-52.
13. Sylvia Thrupp, *The Merchant Class of Medieval London, 1300-1500* (1948; repr. Ann Arbor, Mich., 1968), p. 282. On the general matter of Chaucer's social position, see Derek Brewer, 'Class Distinctions in Chaucer', *Speculum*, 43 (1968), 290-305, at p. 304.
14. As suggested by James R. Hulbert, *Chaucer's Official Life* (1912; repr. New York, 1970).
15. In 'The Appeal . . .' in *A Book of London English, 1384-1425*, eds. R. W. Chambers and M. Daunt (Oxford, 1931), p. 29.
16. Joyce Coleman, *Public Reading and the Reading Public in Late Medieval England and France* (Cambridge, 1996).

17. M. B. Parkes, 'The Literacy of the Laity' in *The Medieval World*, eds. D. Daiches and A. Thorlby, vol. 2 (London, 1973), pp. 555-78.
18. On 'textual communities' see Brian Stock, *Listening for the Text* (Baltimore, 1990), pp. 16-29.
19. Ed. E. J. Arnould, Anglo-Norman Text Society (Oxford, 1940), p. 239.
20. Edith Rickert, 'King Richard II's Books', *The Library*, 4th ser., 13 (1933), 144-5.
21. *Issues of the Exchequer*, ed. R. Devon (London, 1837), p. 144.
22. Rickert, 'King Richard II's Books', pp. 144-5; *Issues*, ed. Devon, p. 213.
23. *Chroniques*, ed. J. B. M. C. Kervyn de Lettenhove, vol. 15 (Brussels, 1871), p. 167.
24. 'Inventory of the Goods . . . Belonging to Thomas, Duke of Gloucester', *Archaeological Journal*, 54 (1897), 275-308; William Dugdale, *Monasticon Anglicanum*, vol. 1 (London, 1846), p. 41.
25. Gower, *Complete Works*, ed. G. C. Macaulay, vol. 2 (Oxford, 1901), Prol., 48*-52*.
26. Arguments may be made for Henry V and his brothers as readers of Latin, French, and English. Indications of his preference for English include the fact that Edward, second Duke of York, translated Gaston de Foix's *Livre de Chasse* for him during 1399-1413 and that he possessed a copy of Chaucer's *Troilus* during the same period. See *The Master of the Game*, eds. W. A. and F. Baillie-Grohman (London, 1909).
27. See T. F. Tout, 'Literature and Learning in the English Civil Service in the Fourteenth Century', *Speculum*, 4 (1929), 365-89.
28. W. W. Skeat, *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, vol. 7 (Oxford 1897), p. 2.
29. *Complete Works*, ed. Macaulay, Prol., 24. On Gower's career and literary objectives see John H. Fisher, *John Gower: Moral Philosopher and Friend of Chaucer* (New York, 1964). The quotation is on p. 106.
30. Thrupp, *Merchant Class*, p. 161.
31. *Calendar of Wills, Court of Hustings, London*, ed. Reginald R. Sharpe (London, 1889); discussed by Thrupp, *Merchant Class*, pp. 162-3.
32. According to John Burrow, 'We must think . . . of *Piers Plowman* reaching two kinds of audience - the old audience of clerks, and the new one of prosperous, literate laymen'. See 'The Audience of *Piers Plowman*', *Anglia*, 75 (1957), 373-84. On Langland's Latin, see Tim Machan, 'Language Contact in *Piers Plowman*', *Speculum*, 69 (1994), 359-85. Wider dissemination of his poem is discussed by Anne Hudson, '*Piers Plowman* and the Peasants' Revolt', *Yearbook of Langland Studies*, 8 (1994), 85-106.
33. Argued, respectively, by James R. Hulbert, 'A Hypothesis concerning the Alliterative Revival', *Modern Philology*, 28 (1930-1), 405-22; Thorlac Turville-Petre, *The Alliterative Revival* (Cambridge, 1977), pp. 40-7; Michael J. Bennett, 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and the Literary Achievement of the North-West Midlands', *Journal of Medieval History*, 5 (1979), 63-88; Derek Pearsall, 'The Origins of the Alliterative Revival' in *The Alliterative Tradition in the Fourteenth Century*, eds. B. S. Levy and Paul Szarmach (Kent, Ohio, 1981), pp. 1-24.
34. Alfred David, *The Strumpet Muse: Art and Morals in Chaucer's Poetry* (Bloomington, Ind., 1976), p. 122.
35. See Richard F. Green, *Poets and Princepleasers* (Toronto, 1980), p. 166.

36. Gardiner Stillwell, 'The Political Meaning of Chaucer's *Tale of Melibee*', *Speculum*, 19 (1944), 433-44.
37. *Life-Records*, eds. Crow and Olson, pp. 281-4. Additional materials on Brembre, HEND, and other mercantile associates of Chaucer are found in Ruth Bird, *The Turbulent London of Richard II* (London, n.d.).
38. Fisher, *John Gower*, pp. 78-83.
39. *English Gilds*, ed. Toulmin Smith, pp. 443-60.
40. The argument that this group provides Chaucer's principal 'point of attachment' has been made by several writers; the evidence is admirably surveyed by V. J. Scattergood, 'Literary Culture at the Court of Richard II' in *English Court Culture in the Later Middle Ages* (London, 1983), pp. 29-43. Additional information on the persons mentioned in the next paragraph is available in the *Dictionary of National Biography* and in K. B. McFarlane, *Lancastrian Kings and Lollard Knights* (Oxford, 1972).
41. *Life-Records*, eds. Crow and Olson, pp. 94-9. Less persuaded that women represented a substantial portion of Chaucer's audience is Richard F. Green, 'Women in Chaucer's Audience', *Chaucer Review*, 18 (1983), 146-54.
42. More extensive discussion of these poems, in a similar vein, is offered by R. T. Lenaghan, 'Chaucer's *Envoy to Scogan*: The Uses of Literary Conventions', *Chaucer Review*, 10 (1975-6), 46-61, and Paul Strohm, *Social Chaucer* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989), pp. 71-83.
43. Bertrand Bronson, 'Chaucer's Art in Relation to his Audience', *Five Studies in Literature*, University of California Publications in English 8 (Berkeley, Calif., 1940).
44. On manuscripts of the *Canterbury Tales*, see John M. Manly and Edith Rickert, *The Text of the Canterbury Tales*, vol. 1 (Chicago, 1940), esp. pp. 606-20. On manuscripts of *Troilus* see Robert Kilburn Root, *The Book of Troilus and Criseyde* (Princeton, N.J., 1926), pp. liii-lxi.
45. Jill Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire* (Cambridge, 1973), esp. pp. 1-16.
46. *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire*, p. 202.
47. *English Gilds*, ed. Toulmin Smith, p. 97.
48. Carolyn Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* (Madison, Wis., 1989); Elaine Tuttle Hansen, *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender* (Berkeley, Calif., 1992); Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval* (Durham, N.C., 1999).
49. For the intriguing suggestion that Chaucer created pilgrims for his tales, rather than the other way round, see C. David Benson, *Chaucer's Drama of Style* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1986).
50. The argument that courtly audiences enjoyed fabliaux and other narratives in everyday settings has been advanced by Per Nykrog, *Les Fabliaux: étude d'histoire littéraire et de stylistique médiévale* (Copenhagen, 1957) and has been restated in modified form by Jean Rychner, 'Les Fabliaux: genre, styles, publics' in *La Littérature narrative d'imagination* (Paris, 1961), pp. 42-52.
51. On poetic style and civic order see David Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity* (Stanford, Calif., 1997).

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