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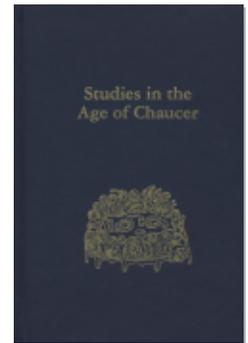
*Who Murdered Chaucer? A Medieval Mystery* by Terry Jones, et al. (review)

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TERRY JONES, ROBERT YEAGER, TERRY DOLAN, ALAN FLETCHER, and JULIETTE DOR. *Who Murdered Chaucer? A Medieval Mystery*. London: Methuen, 2003. Pp. x, 408. \$29.95.

Chaucerians everywhere will welcome a new book by Terry Jones, in this case a book organized by him for publication with unspecified contributions from four fellow conspirators. He is a gleeful renegade, an upsetter of applecarts, who relishes controversy, and is a breath of fresh air, or perhaps a dose of salts, to our discipline. His book on *Chaucer's Knight*, when it came out in 1980, provoked both delight (from students) and irritation (from some established scholars). The former took great pleasure in seeing the sinister secrets of the mercenary Knight exposed; the latter were annoyed by the lack of attention to the normal rules of historical evidence. It was an episode in the history of criticism with a happy ending for Chaucer studies. Serious scholars were obliged to reexamine and restate more thoroughly and carefully the arguments on which their views of the Knight and his *Tale* were based, and, as a result, in some respects there were indeed modifications to established critical opinion.

Terry Jones is a great lover of conspiracy. His books, like his informational programs about the Middle Ages on television, are based on the idea that the academic authorities are in a plot to keep the real facts of history from us. These facts, once revealed, tend always to the discredit of established figures of authority. It is a recipe for readability, and not far from the position taken by many recent Chaucer scholars. The new book follows in this iconoclastic tradition. The argument begins with the mysterious circumstances surrounding Chaucer's death: the lack of contemporary record of the event, the lack of attention to the death of such an important public figure, the omission of any mention of a funeral ceremony, the absence of a will. It develops the idea that Chaucer during his life showed sympathy for Lollardy, as well as being closely identified with Richard II, and, when Thomas Arundel resumed office as archbishop of Canterbury after the deposition, came increasingly under suspicion. He hastened to take up quarters in the Westminster Abbey precinct where he might find sanctuary, his works were suppressed, and in the end he was done away with at Arundel's instigation. The accumulation of evidence, so enthusiastically marshaled by Jones and his cohort, is often wildly compelling.

Yet the argument often employs deductions based on the absence of

kinds of evidence that we are only occasionally and accidentally likely to have. It would be nice to have Chaucer's will, but it is no surprise that it does not survive, and its absence (though Nigel Saul, in conciliatory mood, calls it "a bit puzzling," p. 277) no base on which to build speculation. The lack of report of a funeral, "another odd thing" (p. 305), is actually much less odd than the presence of such a report would be. Chaucer's contemporary reputation is throughout vastly exaggerated—"one of the most prominent members of his society . . . the intellectual superstar of his time" (p. 3), "the literary spokesman of Richard's court" (p. 291). The use of evidence throughout is highly selective: one familiar method is to give the maximum prominence to any piece of evidence that supports or does not actually contradict the argument while ignoring evidence to the contrary. More often, the authors cite the opinions of scholars who have put forward views opposed to those being promulgated, and then, instead of answering them or refuting them or negotiating a position that takes them into account, take no further notice of them at all, but simply leave the opinions lying intact as inert witnesses to a kind of fair-mindedness while the main argument goes blithely forward as if its suppositions had been supported: "this playful allusion—if it is indeed that—demonstrates . . ." (p. 52); "We may not know the precise extent—if any—of Burley's involvement in the revolt of 1381, but one thing seems certain . . ." (p. 74); "Whether or not Chaucer was actually involved in the conspiring [of January 1400] . . ." (p. 159); "Of course, we are not suggesting that the Peasants' Revolt was necessarily instigated by the court party. But . . ." (p. 73); "Of course, it's not necessary to take the remark in the *Legend* as the literal truth, but . . ." (p. 278); "Of course, untimeliness is one of the 'great themes' in eulogies. . . . But . . ." (p.280); "As an isolated passage this could, of course, be passed off as totally conventional, but . . ." (p. 284); "Of course, we should bear in mind that Caxton was Chaucer's publisher . . . but . . ." (p. 285); "Of course, we don't know, and it may be none of these reasons, but . . ." (p. 326). In matters where what is needed is a scrupulous attempt at objectivity in weighing up conflicting and enigmatic evidence on crucial matters, we get instead a predetermined decision to interpret all the evidence in one way.

Yet, hidden away behind the conspiracy-to-murder story, the fantastical exposition of the contents of the lost "Book of the Lion" (confessedly "supposition heaped on supposition", p. 335, as if the admission conferred respect on the suppositions), the wild speculations about a 1402

date of death based on the evidence of MS Add.5141, there is a worthwhile revisitation here of some familiar Chaucerian themes—Richard's role as a literary patron, Chaucer's closeness to him, Chaucer's reformist tendencies and vulnerability to anti-Lollard attack, the question of the Parson's *Tale* and the Retractions. We are reminded of how little we positively *know* about Chaucer's life. On some matters there is fresh and persuasive argument—the closeness of Richard and the young prince Henry, the role of Arundel as arch-persecutor during the reign of Henry IV, the occasion of Scogan's "Moral Envoy" in 1407, the influence of Prince Henry in encouraging the recognition of Chaucer and the circulation of his works. There are the makings here of a good popular survey of English politics and culture during exciting times, unfortunately obscured by the determination to have everything "inextricably bound up with the fate of Geoffrey Chaucer" (p. 128).

It is a broadbrush approach, but not unrespectable. The various authors avail themselves (I presume) of the umbrella provided by Terry Jones to write in a lively and companionably light-fingered way, not too worried about using vernacular asides and popular clichés. Some of the phrasing echoes the kind of comically exaggerated comparative allusion for which Jones is well known on television: "To offer men like Gloucester and Arundel tournaments with blunted weapons instead of real-life *chevauchées* into France was like asking Attila the Hun to settle down to a nice game of draughts and a cup of tea" (p. 15); in Oxford, in 1382, "the knives were out—literally. If they'd had machine guns, they'd have been ready in the violin cases" (p. 79).

The evidential basis for the murder-conspiracy argument is flimsy, and one's view of its likelihood is that it must lie somewhere in the gray area between the wildly implausible and the wholly preposterous. But nevertheless, the book is much to be welcomed. It will give pleasure to all, some extra employment for those scholars who feel obliged to dismantle the edifice of its argument, and may provoke some fresh and useful thinking about subjects that have grown stale. Instead of dismissing it in an ungrateful way as simply all very unlikely, or as a work of historical fiction, or as a new experiment in the use of historical evidence, perhaps we could look upon the book as an attempt at a popular and provocative history of some exciting times.

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