



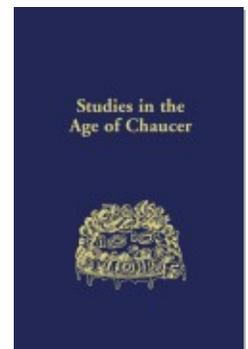
PROJECT MUSE®

*Acts of Interpretation: The Text in Its Contexts,
700–1600: Essays on Medieval and Renaissance Literature in
Honor of E. Talbot Donaldson* ed. by Mary J. Carruthers,
Elizabeth D. Kirk (review)

William F. Pollard

Studies in the Age of Chaucer, Volume 6, 1984, pp. 181-186 (Review)

Published by The New Chaucer Society
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/sac.1984.0012>



➔ *For additional information about this article*
<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/658320/summary>

MARY J. CARRUTHERS and ELIZABETH D. KIRK, eds., *Acts of Interpretation: The Text in Its Contexts, 700–1600: Essays on Medieval and Renaissance Literature in Honor of E. Talbot Donaldson*. Norman, Okla.: Pilgrim Books, 1982. Pp. xi, 385. \$32.95.

To honor a man whose contributions to the field of medieval studies have been as perceptive and judicious as E. Talbot Donaldson's requires caution by the editors of his festschrift. Mary Carruthers and Elizabeth Kirk have assembled twenty-one essays from Donaldson's students and colleagues that celebrate his career with a volume of importance for the specialist and generalist alike. Appropriately, eight of the essays speak of Chaucer, and two are directly concerned with *Piers Plowman*. The other eleven deal with the history of Old English scholarship, *Beowulf*, *Pearl*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Gower, Margery Kempe, *Everyman*, medieval feasts, Thomas More, Edmund Spenser, and the "existential" mysteries in English poetry through Spenser. These essays are organized into nine units preceding a tenth part of the festschrift, a warm verbal portrait complementing the photograph of Donaldson on the frontispiece.

Part one, "The Problem of Interpretation," begins with an important article by Robert Hanning, "Sir Gawain and the Red Herring: The Perils of Interpretation." Hanning's essay concentrates on the text of the green man's entrance and the description of the "penitential" fish at Hautdesert. Hanning sees the Christmas Eve fish as emblematic of all the "red herrings the *Gawain* poet places athwart our trail" (p. 23). I happen to see the Green Knight in apocalyptic terms which do not "solve" the poem, but which (I hope) constitute further evidence of the poet's interest in herring. Negative capability keeps the poet from providing a key to the "lel letteres loken." Marshall Leicester's "Synne Horrible: The Pardoner's Exegesis of His Tale, and Chaucer's" is a subtle and witty investigation of the use and abuse of typology by the Pardoner, by Chaucer, and by the modern critic: "The end of the tale shows that the typological imagination, by taking a God's-eye view, can all too easily deceive itself into playing God" (p. 48).

Part two, "The Transmission of the Text," contains two essays on poetic revision. George Russell's "The Poet as Reviser: The Metamorphosis of the Confession of the Seven Deadly Sins in *Piers Plowman*" discusses the changes in B from A as the movement toward deeper social and political themes, while the changes from B to C are "repair work" — "a reworking which remakes the poem, which creates deliberately something different in kind from its predecessor" (p. 65). Eric Stanley's essay, "Translation from Old English: 'The Garbaging War-Hawk,' or, The Literal Materials from Which the Reader Can Re-create the Poem," is a witty but sobering ramble through the pleasures and dangers of relying upon translation. See, for instance, Stanley's discussion of Samuel Henshall's eighteenth-century "translations" of Caedmon's "Hymn" and "The Battle of Brunanburh."

Part three, "The Textual Plane," contains Judith Anderson's "What Comes After Chaucer's *But*: Adversative Constructions in Spenser." Comparing "buts" in Spenser's Proem to book 6 of *The Faerie Queene* with Chaucer's *General Prologue*, Anderson raises the likelihood of Chaucer's influence on Spenser's use of irony and illogic and opens up possibilities of investigation for renewed research on the literary relationship between Spenser and the "well of English vndefyled." In "The Grain of the Text," Derek Brewer illustrates the problems facing an editor of a text with variant manuscripts. Using *Troilus* as his particular text, Brewer argues for intelligent emendation by a modern editor when it is based on a knowledge of historical philology and an awareness of metrics. A detailed examination of Beowulf's report to Hygelac is the subject of Edward B. Irving's "Beowulf Comes Home: Close Reading in Epic Context." Irving sees Hygelac as a "straight man" against whom we see the glory of Beowulf. This essay is remarkable for its contribution to our ever-increasing awareness of point-counterpoint in the poem's structure.

Alfred David and Marie Borroff contribute essays to part four, "The Stylistic and Iconographic Context." David's "An ABC to the Style of the Prioress" sees Madame Eglentyne's portrait and the anti-Semitic tale she tells as glosses on each other: "They reveal between them a new and fashionable religiosity that combines gentility with

emotion, decorousness with enthusiasm" (p. 157). Borroff's "*Pearl's* 'Maynful Mone': Crux, Simile, and Structure" is quite simply the most provocative essay on the poem in many years. She sees in the full moon, or "maynful mone," of line 1093 an image from which the major images and themes of *Pearl* radiate and toward which they converge. For Borroff the moon is symbolic of the poem's many round objects whose common purpose is to contrast sublunar or linear time with the endlessness of eternity. The dreamer's salvation from linear time to an awareness of spiritual time is itself illustrated by the circularity of the poem's narrative and structure.

Part five, "Intellectual Context," continues to examine views of salvation and time in Langland and Chaucer. Mary Carruthers's "Time, Apocalypse, and the Plot of *Piers Plowman*" ends with a sentence suggestive of her article's richness: "In the search for Saint Truth which is this poem, plot exactly mirrors the motivation of Christian history, both general and individual, and in its incorporation of the repeating salvational pattern becomes itself one of the signs that point the way to Truth, to be read by those with the ears to hear and the eyes to see" (p. 188). Morton Bloomfield's "*The Franklin's Tale: A Story of Unanswered Questions*" probes Dorigen's questioning of God's purpose and the less-elevated question of the Franklin on human generosity. Bloomfield concludes that "there is charm and gaiety in the tale, but it ill consorts with the unanswerable questions about human destiny it raises" (p. 198).

Dealing with "The Social Context," part six begins by rehabilitating the character of Margery Kempe. Hope Phyllis Weissman's "Margery Kempe in Jerusalem: *Hysterica Compassio* in the Late Middle Ages" places the *Book* within the context of hagiography and the patterning of spiritual biography on the *Meditations on the Life of Christ*. At the end of her essay Weissman examines the encounter between Margery and the circle of scorning Roman wives: "Their scorn expresses the resentment of colluders in the system at another's attempt to escape the bonds with which they have been bound" (p. 216). Constance B. Heatt's contribution to the social context is a discussion of England's culinary independence from France by the thirteenth century. Her "'Ore pure parler del array de une graunt mangereye': The Culture of the 'New Get,' Circa 1285"

is an edition of a portion of the Anglo-Norman *Treatise* of Walter of Bibbesworth and its Middle English translation.

“Courtly Love” is the mutual interest of George Kane and Elizabeth Kirk in part seven. In “Chaucer, Love Poetry, and Romantic Love,” Kane examines *fin amour* in Chaucer’s classical models and in his Continental contemporaries. Kane sees a major theme of Chaucer to be “the capacity of sexual selfishness to injure, to cause unhappiness” (p. 254). He warns the student of “courtly love” that not all questions are necessarily capable of solution, that an artist’s career will not always develop uniformly, that an author will not necessarily conform to the moral code of his day, and that an author’s works do not always represent his own moral position. In “Courtly Love and Chaucer’s Re-Vision of Dante,” Elizabeth Kirk examines the ending of *Troilus* with such care that we are able to perceive the world of Chaucer’s audience gradually replacing the Troy of earlier sections. She defends the narrator from the charge of clumsiness and Troilus and Criseyde from being mere emblems of the foolish and the false. For Kirk, Dante’s *Commedia* reflects the unified world of Saint Thomas, while Chaucer’s *Troilus* is a product of the “dislocated” world of Ockham.

All students of *Troilus* can be grateful to the editors for their inclusion in part eight of “*Troilus and Criseyde: Poet and Narrator*,” by the late Elizabeth Salter. The essay begins the section “Genre and Convention” and, in its brevity, offers a clear and fresh approach to the problem of the “fallible” narrator at the end of the fifth book. Beneath the simplicity of the following lines lies a wealth of knowledge—about Chaucer, his sources, and his audience: “The commentary in *Troilus and Criseyde* carries the burden of authorial doubt and assurance, thought and afterthought. It records the poet’s busy—and sometimes not entirely happy—engagement with his medieval materials, with his medieval public” (p. 290). Paul Strohm’s “A Note on Gower’s Persona” is also concerned with the intermingling of narrator, poet, and historical person. Reminding us of Donaldson’s comment that Chaucer’s three persons “frequently got together in the same body,” Strohm sees Amans, Gower-the-poet, and Gower-the-man becoming a unity at the end of the *Confessio*. Eleanor Winsor Leach’s discussion of *The Legend*

of *Good Women*, “Morwe of May: A Season of Feminine Ambiguity,” and Carolyn Van Dyke’s “The Intangible and Its Image: Allegorical Discourse and the Cast of *Everyman*” complete part eight. Van Dyke’s reading of *Everyman* rejects studies of the play that view its allegory as wooden. She does what few students of medieval drama think of: she looks at a script and thinks of actors. Leach’s study of May mornings and characters named May leads her to see a complexity in Chaucer’s ambiguity belying the simplicity of the individual legends.

The final set of essays focuses on “The Uses of Literature.” Richard A. Lanham’s “More, Castiglione, and the Humanist Choice of Utopias” is a treatment of “the fundamental contradiction in More’s Utopia and in our humanist admiration of it” (p. 341). This contradiction resides in the meaning or significance for society of concepts like “style,” “need,” and “purpose.” More’s use of aureate Latin seems “to urge upon us a utopia where such devices—like literature itself—could have no place” (p. 331). The final essay of this festschrift summons John C. Pope “to knytte up al this feeste, and make an ende.” I am not suggesting that we mistake a Pope for a parson, but there is good reason to see this final essay of twenty-one as curiously parallel in function to the final tale of the Canterbury group. Pope discusses “The Existential Mysteries as Treated in Certain Passages of Our Older Poets.” He examines the *ubi sunt* theme in Old English poetry and in the *Catholic Homilies* of Aelfric to clarify the end of *Troilus* and Spenser’s “Cantos of Mutabilitie.” He sees both Chaucer and Spenser ending their works with equivocations intended “to present strongly contrary or seriously divergent views of the world, its values, and its mysteries, not so as to cancel out one or the other but so as to suggest a *tertium quid* that holds both in suspension and points to an inexpressible synthesis” (p. 362).

Acts of Interpretation is uniformly useful and frequently illuminating. Several of the essays are significant for their originality, while others make clear or refine the approaches of the past two decades. Often the essays develop from the previous work of Donaldson himself. Indeed, one can almost hear Donaldson as “Hoost” to his own celebration, pleased by both the “ernest” and the “game”

and with little inclination to shout "Namooore of this, for Goddes dignitee!"

WILLIAM F. POLLARD
Maryville College

W. A. DAVENPORT, *Fifteenth-Century English Drama*.
Cambridge: D. S. Brewer; Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1982. Pp. 152. \$37.50.

Despite greatly increased interest in medieval English drama, evident in numerous articles published over the past several years, relatively few studies have addressed themselves to problems of literary criticism. Instead, matters of social and theatrical history have dominated the annual lists of publications in this field. W. A. Davenport seeks to correct this imbalance, not for the whole field of *Fifteenth-Century English Drama*, as his title implies, but rather, as his subtitle indicates, for "The Early Moral Plays and Their Literary Relations." The choice of title is no doubt deliberate. Davenport finds the growing tendency to insist on the generic categories of "mystery cycle" and "morality play" exerting an unfortunate influence on the way we think of the plays of the fifteenth century. For him the use of such classifications forces us "to look at kinds of drama rather than plays, so that individual works tend to be seen as versions of the archetype rather than as achieving effects in their own right" (p. 2). Thus the broad title is part of a general attempt to avoid as much as possible the use of the category "morality play" in the discussion of *The Pride of Life* and the plays of the Macro manuscript that constitute the core of this study.

Before I discuss the study's real strengths, a word is in order on the question of generic distinctions and medieval drama. In the first place, no generic distinction adequately accounts for all the works of literature we seek to place in one pile as opposed to another. One has merely to reflect on the difficulties posed by the traditional categories imposed on Shakespeare's plays to realize how often plays