



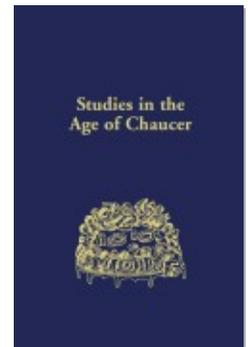
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The Wisdom of Poetry: Essays in Early English Literature in Honor of Morton W. Bloomfield ed. by Larry D. Benson, Siegfried Wenzel (review)

Donald K. Fry

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is no one source for the *Tale* but that it depends on “an amalgam of the Phoebus stories with which Chaucer was familiar” (p. 9) and that both the *Prologue* and *Tale* date from the period of *The Canterbury Tales* and that the two form an entity. The survey of criticism skilfully charts the fortunes of the *Tale*. Two things emerge very clearly: the tenacity of Manly’s disparaging view of it (evidently still held by John H. Fisher, S. S. Hussey, and Stephen Knight) and the current majority attitude which sees it, in Nevill Coghill’s words, as a “little masterpiece.” It is probably true that modern critics have displayed an increasing awareness of the linguistic and moral subtleties of the Manciple’s performance, but, lest anyone should become complacent, Baker reminds the reader of just how perceptive Wordsworth, in a letter of 1840, was on the moral workings of the *Tale* (pp. 19–20).

This is a very useful book in that it sifts a lot of material and assembles it cogently and critically so as to define the state of the subject. I noticed very few mistakes. In the note to line 205, “Whiting” is mistaken for “Whit-tock,” and in the note to line 183 the reference to my article in *Notes and Queries* (215[1970]) is misplaced: it should be cited in relation to lines 175–82 since it concerns cats, not she-wolves.

JOHN SCATTERGOOD
Trinity College, Dublin

LARRY D. BENSON and SIEGFRIED WENZEL, eds. *The Wisdom of Poetry: Essays in Early English Literature in Honor of Morton W. Bloomfield*. Kalamazoo, Mich.: Medieval Institute Publications, 1982. Pp. 314. \$22.95.

No *festschrift* could capture the range, subtlety, intelligence, wit, and wisdom of Morton Bloomfield. His bibliography in this tribute volume lists 203 publications from 1939 to 1981 in the following fields: Old and Middle English literature, theology, Canadian and American English, contemporary poetry, Chaucer, nineteenth-century novels, drama, Italian literature, linguistics, pedagogical values—and here I give up on this list before it takes up the whole review even though I only got to item 23. The editors wisely did not attempt to solicit essays to applaud all this intellec-

tual richness; rather, they confined themselves to English medieval literature and have given us fourteen fine pieces. My review emphasizes the Chaucerian essays.

Opening the Old English section Fred Robinson tries to decide whether *Maxims II*, 10a, *sod bid swicolost*, means what it says, "truth is most tricky," or needs emendation to *switolost* or *swutolost*, meaning "truth is most evident," a real Bloomfieldian paradox; commendably he opts for the manuscript reading. Robert Kaske applies his favorite formula, *Sapientia et Fortitudio*, to *Judith* and William Alfred reads *The Wanderer* in terms of a dramatic internal struggle toward understanding. Stanley Greenfield interprets the coast guard's famous proverbial response to Beowulf to mean "the sharp shield-warrior must learn to tell the difference between 'empty' words and words which have the resolution and capability of deeds behind them." Roberta Frank adds to the current debate on the dating of *Beowulf* by proposing that the poet's sense of history fits best in the later period, when one could "believe that pagan Germanic legend had intellectual value and interest for Christians."

A second group mostly deals with *Piers Plowman*. Talbot Donaldson analyzes five passages in which Langland consciously distorts Scripture, using "syntactical choplogic to exploit the potentialities of language in order to give the text an added or somewhat different meaning." George Kane portrays Langland as caught in the crisis of fourteenth-century eschatology and trying to invent new thinking tools to deal with it. Anne Middleton suggests looking at *Piers* in terms of its episodes as "a unit of narrative form rather than a unit of statement or meaning," giving us a better tool for understanding the poetry as "subjective testimony."

Larry Benson leads off the Chaucer section, explaining *The Parliament of Fowls* as an occasional poem "written in 1380 on the occasion of the beginning of the negotiations that ultimately led to the marriage of Richard and Anne." He sees the dream of Scipio as political instruction for the young king, specifically about royal marriages as steadiers of the state. He reads the three eagles in terms of Anne's three suitors (Richard, Charles of France, and Friedrich of Meissen) and explains the delayed choice historically, negotiations still in progress. He calls on an astronomer friend to show that lines 113–119, which seem to put Venus in the "north-north-west," do not rule out a date of May, 1380. Bloomfieldian wisdom draws on all other forms of wisdom.

Donald Howard treats us to one of his excursions into introspection, with the usual results, a daring jab at our certainties. He analyzes the

personal philosophies of the main characters in *Troilus* as artistically consistent and creatively imagined. He sees Pandarus as a temporalist, skeptic, pragmatist, and humanist, all at once; Chaucer “created unawares and by coincidence a very modern man.” Howard sees Chaucer not as the rising star of the Renaissance but as an artist trying to make attractive internal sense of characters’ thoughts. That sense led to “the impulse which we call classicism.”

Continuing the trend of this volume to grapple with hard issues, Robert Frank tries to explain the apparent anti-Semitism of *The Prioress’s Tale* in terms of genre. Historically, he discusses the increasing anti-Semitism as the Middle Ages moved along. In terms of legend, he proposes that “the age perceived a very specific antagonism between the Jews and the Virgin.” And doctrinally, he points to the notion of Jews as heretics. He analyzes a number of Virgin miracle stories to show the stage-villain Jew in conflict with Mary and her followers. Frank rejects as naïve the common interpretation of Chaucer condemning the Prioress by having her tell a savage anti-Semitic tale. He sees her as telling a tale of pathos about the Virgin, perfectly in character, leading inevitably to what we now regard as an unfortunate plot and ethnic insult.

Stephen Barney closes the Chaucer section with a brilliant piece on Chaucer as cataloguer. He proposes that “medieval poets generally, and Chaucer especially, were list-makers,” and awards our poet the epithet “Pinkagraghphos.” This whole essay is one long list—of definitions, sources, and effects; of outrageous word rows; of rhetorical terms and play; of epigrams (“a metaphor as a disappointed list”); of catalogues seen as out of control or deliberately comic or both at once; of Chaucer’s thought and distrust of thought; of oral characteristics and memorial devices; of mockeries, especially of jargons; of the amazing conclusion that lists speed up action rather than retarding it, etc. Barney shows us that “to list is to attempt to comprehend, and Chaucer revels in and distrusts lists.”

Finally, Siegfried Wenzel discusses the motif of the court fool who converts his master by demonstrating a moral lesson, a fitting close to a collection of wise and witty essays by some of our wisest and wittiest scholars in honor of one of our field’s wisest wits.

DONALD K. FRY
State University of New York, Stony Brook