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The Canterbury Tales by Geoffrey Chaucer (review)

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Burrow is careful to underscore the difficulties implicit in discussing what is preserved in Old English as against the much richer corpus of Middle English texts, but there is so little Old English secular literature extant that to contrast earlier with later attitudes towards age in this case is essentially to contrast religious with secular ideas. If Burrow had adopted a somewhat broader comparative approach and taken into account the incomparably rich portraits of men and women at various ages in the *Íslendinga sögur*, his generalizations about earlier English and Germanic literature would seem to me more securely based. Alternatively, if he had limited himself to Old French and Middle English literature, his argument would have been based on a more coherent corpus of literature, although he would have had to alter and modify the case he makes for change and development.

There are also some omissions and debatable points of detail. In discussing the age of thirty as the age of the general resurrection, Burrow should have given more emphasis to the Biblical texts which underlie this idea (see particularly Numbers 4:3, 23, 30, 35, etc.). On page 114, footnote 59, the citation should include the exact reference to *Erec et Enide* (i.e., a reference to lines 231–33), if Burrow thinks this passage enough of a parallel to cite at all. It is misleading to give only the *PL* references to works such as Augustine's *De civitate Dei* which have appeared in modern editions; *PL* references to Jerome (p. 106, note 37) are particularly confusing since Migne reprinted two different texts of the works of Jerome with different pagination. For a startling claim such as the one that Christ lived through all the ages of man (p. 142), one wishes for references to the primary sources, not just one reference to a secondary source.

In conclusion, however, I wish to emphasize the merits of this book. J. A. Burrow is one of the best living critics of medieval English literature, and this book is a rich and informative literary history of an important topic.

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GEOFFREY CHAUCER. *The Canterbury Tales*. Verse trans. with Intro. and notes by David Wright. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1985. Pp. xxviii, 482. \$24.95, £15.00.

This is a handsomely produced book which has cost its makers a good deal of care. David Wright has translated all the verse of *The Canterbury Tales*

(that is, excluding *The Tale of Melibee* and *The Parson's Tale*) into his own pentameters, using a variety of forms of rhyme, half rhyme, and assonance to create an imitation of the Chaucerian couplet and stanza. The translation is sound and respectable: it goes for the communication of sense rather than the communication of effect, though there are some good moments in the comic tales and some good special effects, like the version of the students' Northern dialect in *The Reeve's Tale* and the imitation of the stanza of *The Tale of Sir Thopas*. The brief introduction gives little offense, though there are odd errors (*The Book of the Duchess* is said to have been composed in 1368, p. xxvi, a year before the Duchess Blanche died), and extreme brevity occasionally produces that familiar "1066 and All That" effect, as in the mention of the battles of Crécy and Poitiers, "in which English bowmen destroyed the chivalry of France, and in so doing helped to end the feudal system" (p. xi). The critical commentary on the *Tales*, in which William Blake figures large, could well have been written a hundred or more years ago; it trots out some familiar half-truths (the Manciple's is one of the "comparatively unsuccessful stories. . . not related to their tellers," p. xx) and ventures a few of its own.

The translation is, as I say, respectable, but there is no good reason for its existence. David Wright argues in his introduction that Chaucer's language is more difficult than it is often made out to be, nuances and idioms having changed, as well as the meanings of words, and he claims that his translation is not in any case a substitute but an "introductory prologue to the real thing" (p. xxi). If this were likely to be true, it might not be so bad, but the fact is that people who read translations of Chaucer very rarely move on to the original. Translation does not act as a transition in the way that Wright suggests, and the better the translation the less likely it is to do so. It is the same reductionist logic, carried to its limit, as with on-the-page glossing: the problems and excitements of engagement with the text are prevented from occurring, and the reader, thinking he has something, has virtually nothing. The case is different with foreign languages: one accepts the losses one incurs in reading a translation of Dostoevski because, for most of us, there is no practical choice. But Chaucer's is not a foreign language. The difficulties of reading should not be minimized (in fact, to be proper, they should be maximized), but a moderate amount of effort and concentration and sensible use of a good glossary reap immediate rewards. Every line read in the original contributes to an advance in understanding; every line read in translation seals off Chaucer and his English more finally.

It is possible to think of cynical reasons for a translation of Chaucer—a cheap paperback crib that helps students who have no interest in the

subject anyway, or that offers, like Coghill, some alternative pleasures. But this book is not cheap, and it offers few alternative pleasures. A sense of dreary futility enfolds the whole proceeding as one reads the opening lines:

When the sweet showers of April have pierced
The drought of March, and pierced it to the root. . . .

What conceivable purpose, one might ask, is served by the repetition of *pierced*? Why is that word, of all of them, picked out for special emphasis? As always, the answer lies in the exigencies of meter, where the padding that becomes necessary in a modern verse translation of a still-inflected language sometimes produces effects of utter banality:

What is this world? What does man ask to have?
Now with his love, now in the chilling grave,
Alone, and with no kind of company!

(cf. *KnT* 2777–79). The unavailability of *withouten* in the last line forces this ludicrous subterfuge of *no kind of*, as if various kinds of company had been in prospect, but none found. So too that terrifying line in the Temple of Mars, describing the wolf (*KnT* 2048):

With eyen rede, and of a man he eet;

becomes

Eyes glowering, about to eat a man.

One almost imagines the wolf tucking his napkin under his chin. Another memorable line in *The Clerk's Tale* (line 510),

No lengthe of tyme or deeth may this deface,

becomes

Which neither time nor death is to erase.

The form *is to* cannot be used as padding; it has a meaning in English, and one which is quite inappropriate here: Griselda's expression of voluntary, willed submission becomes a statement of abstract fact, as if she were reading a notice.

Subtleties of this kind are constantly lost, not because the translation is incompetent but because they are inevitably lost in translation. And the subtleties are not “extras” to the meaning, touches of finesse that can be missed without too much loss: they are intrinsic to the meaning — they *are* the meaning. A momentous line in *The Franklin's Tale* has Dorigen declare her fidelity (line 986):

I wol been his to whom that I am knyht.

Not much could go wrong with such a line, one might have thought, but it comes out, presumably because *whom that* is thought to be archaic and unintelligible, as

I shall be his to whom I have been knit.

The losses incurred in *have been*, implying some other agency than Dorigen's choice, and implying too some act perfected in the past of which the present is a mere consequence, rather than the everlasting present of Dorigen's vow of constancy, are disastrous.

There are easier targets, too, for the reader of Chaucer, examples of grandeur (*KnT* 1984):

Was long and streit, and gastly for to see

reduced to rubble:

Exiguous, long, and dismal to look at;

or of moments of high emotion (*FranT* 1485):

Ne make no contenance of hevynesse

reduced to triteness:

I shall not go about with a long face.

Further, the general effect created by Wright's technique of using half rhyme and assonance is one of bewilderment, for it is neither one thing nor the other. The occasions when he does use full rhyme make one long for more of this Coghill-like kind of snappiness:

I only wish to God that it were night,
 That night would last for ever and a day,
 And all these people here had gone away.

(cf. *MerT* 1762–64). Most often it is hard to see the point of the technique:

A hard-up widow, getting on in age,
 Once on a time lived in a small cottage.

(cf. *NPT* 2821–22). It does not seem possible that one is intended to draw out the second syllable of *cottage* here to bring out the rhyme; but if not, what is achieved by eye rhyme on an unstressed syllable?

I do not want to denigrate this translation, or its author. What has been done has been done conscientiously and worthily: the translations are careful and maintain a high level of accuracy, and there are times, especially in the comic tales, when one can take genuine pleasure in the translator's skill. My argument is simply that translation of Chaucer is not only unnecessary but undesirable, since it does, in the end, a disservice to Chaucer's poetry.

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JOHN SMARTT COLEY, trans. *Le Roman de Thèbes (The Story of Thebes)*. Garland Library of Medieval Literature, vol. 44, Series B. New York and London: Garland, 1986. Pp. xlv, 240. \$40.00.

Along with the *Roman de Troie* and the *Roman d'Enéas*, the twelfth-century French verse narrative known as the *Roman de Thèbes* helped to convey the legends of classical antiquity to the later Middle Ages. *Thèbes* begins with a brief retelling of the story of Oedipus and then focuses upon the dispute between the fated king's sons, Eteocles and Polyneices, who become embattled over the question of which of them should rule Thebes. As one would expect, the poem reflects not only the ancient theme of a feud between brothers, but also various medieval preoccupations, including the nature of feudal loyalty and the conduct of love affairs. Chaucer may well have used *Thèbes* (see, e.g., *Troilus and Criseyde*, II.100) and the poem is important in its own right. Until the book under consideration here, no