



PROJECT MUSE®

---

*Geoffrey Chaucer, Second Edition* by Robert O. Payne (review)

R. A. Shoaf

*Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, Volume 9, 1987, pp. 247-249 (Review)

Published by The New Chaucer Society

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/sac.1987.0033>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/658828/summary>

writing; we are also indebted to the University of California Press for giving us a magnificent book-object worthy of their enterprise.

RUPERT T. PICKENS  
University of Kentucky

ROBERT O. PAYNE. *Geoffrey Chaucer, Second Edition*. Twayne's English Authors Series, vol. 1. Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., Twayne Publishers, 1986. Pp. ix, 153. \$14.95.

"The general perspective of the poem [*Troilus and Criseyde*]. . . has sometimes been characterized as 'middle-aged,' the outlook of a somewhat scarred survivor of youth and love who can look back on it with a mature mixture of sympathetic understanding and evaluative objectivity" (p. 83). The same judgment, *mutatis mutandis*, can be applied to the book under review. The general perspective of Payne's book can be characterized as "middle-aged," the outlook of a somewhat scarred survivor of thirty-odd years of Chaucer criticism who can look back on it with a mature mixture of sympathetic understanding and evaluative objectivity.

Those of us who entered the academic profession in the 1960s with an interest in Chaucer quickly learned a handful of prominent names. Among them, though much less flung about as a label or a brand in the "critical wars," was that of Robert O. Payne. There was, as I say, no "Paynesian" to join "Kittredgean," "Donaldsonian," or "Robertsonian," but *The Key of Remembrance: A Study of Chaucer's Poetics* (1963) was still one of the books we knew we had to read and one of the books we were glad we had read. The book evaded scholarly evangelism and tried, seriously and elegantly, to read Chaucer's poems on their own terms. So successful was the effort that whether we agreed or disagreed with the various readings (I remember assenting to about half of them) we always felt we had learned something—had not wasted our time.

Much the same judgment holds true of *Geoffrey Chaucer, Second Edition*. The book is worth reading, although there is a lot to question, a good deal to disagree with. Chief among the items to question is the bibliography. For a book published in 1986, it cites only one study later than 1979 (a book published in 1980); it is difficult, even for someone of Payne's stature,

to justify ignoring the past six years of scholarship and criticism on Chaucer, with (to take just one example) all that they have taught us about the poet's relation to his Italian precursors. To be sure, Payne tries to justify his decision:

There is nearly nothing in this book for which I am not indebted, either directly or indirectly, to the work of other readers of Chaucer over most of the six hundred years since his death. Most of this debt I have not tried to acknowledge, because the audience I anticipate does not want to be buried under a mass of footnotes and book lists. I have also tried to avoid initiating or continuing battles with colleagues and predecessors with whom, although I may have learned much from them, I disagree. [P. v]

But though this is all very urbane, I still find it unacceptable to refuse to engage some of the more crucial questions being debated today about Chaucer's poetry.

In this regard the book is indeed "middle-aged" (now in a pejorative sense), and no one will come away from it, for example, the better able to assess just what Chaucer's relation to Dante or Boccaccio or Petrarch really is. In fact, most readers, I predict, will be very disappointed on this issue. On page 26, for example, Payne claims that Chaucer knew Dante's work "thoroughly"; then, on page 44, he asserts that "Chaucer did little extensive borrowing from Dante, . . . and . . . no one has ever seen much in Chaucer's poetry that could rightly be called Dantean." These statements are at best confusing, at worst irresponsible, and they certainly will not help "beginners in the close and careful study of Chaucer's poetry" (p. ii).

As harsh as this judgment is and as necessary as it is, at the same time it is also necessary to praise the book for its occasional excellent summary statements about Chaucer and his art. To cite just one example here:

. . . Chaucer consistently reflected three dominant concerns, three nuclei of formal and imaginative engagement. His involvements with them overlap, and yet they form a rough chronological sequence. The poetic center of the early years is, formally, the framed dream-vision, thematically dominated by the art of love and the art of poetry. In the middle years it is the long, single narrative, exploring human love through the experience of particular characters. Finally, there is the near-total engagement with the large group of stories, held together and interrelated by a framing outer narrative. [P. 57]

Similar felicitous summaries can be found in all seven of the book's chapters ("Chaucer's Life," "Medieval Theories of Poetry," "The Continental Background: Chaucer's Literary Sources and Influences," "Chaucer's Versification," "Chaucer's Dream Poems," "*Troilus and Criseyde*," and "*Canterbury Tales*"), and they are quite helpful, especially those in the chapters on versification and *The Canterbury Tales*, where Payne is at his best.

But the summaries and the insights they represent remain compromised by various irresponsible statements and decisions which also determine the nature and the contents of the book. We have, as a result, a mixed and flawed product. And if finally we accept this, it is because we know that Robert Payne also knows it is a mixed and flawed product: "What Chantecleer shows us, finally, is that all interpretations are made by interpreters, usually for their own purposes, and usually in some kind of ultimate ignorance" (p. 134). Because we know that Payne would be the first to apply this Chaucerian wisdom, which he articulates so well, to himself, we interpret his interpretations with a "mature mixture of sympathetic understanding and evaluative objectivity."

R. A. SHOAF  
University of Florida

DEREK PEARSALL. *The Canterbury Tales*. Unwin Critical Library. London, Boston, and Sydney: George Allen & Unwin, 1985. Pp. xiv, 380. \$35.00.

It is no accident that the cover of Derek Pearsall's substantial study of *The Canterbury Tales* reproduces a leaf from the Hengwrt (Hg) manuscript. As Hg — better in text, but less coherent in order, than long-favored Ellesmere (El) — has risen in scholarly estimation during the last decade, there has been a corresponding increase in skepticism about El's presentation of *CT* as a unified poem with a carefully articulated framing fiction. Pearsall, sharing that skepticism, locates the main achievement of *CT* in Chaucer's deployment and manipulation of inherited story types in individual tales:

In taking over the different genres of narrative that were traditionally current in the Middle Ages, [Chaucer] is able, through the fiction of the tale-telling, to exploit, challenge, and often defy the expectations that they carry of the relationship