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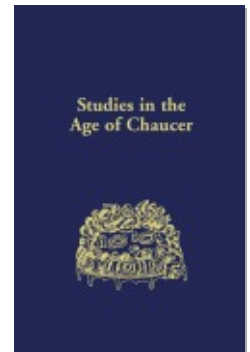
Medieval to Renaissance in English Poetry by A. C. Spearing
(review)

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Pearsall's placement of *CT* in two crucial contexts frequently slighted in introductory courses: problems of form and transmission peculiar to a manuscript culture and the conventions of various medieval narrative genres appropriated and transformed (or subverted) by Chaucer. The latter will have their assumptions about the unity, tone, and dramatic or mimetic effect of *CT*, and about the significance and success of individual tales, tested repeatedly by Pearsall's articulate, opinionated readings.

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A. C. SPEARING. *Medieval to Renaissance in English Poetry*. Cambridge, London, and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985. Pp. vii, 369. \$44.50, £27.50.

This elegant and provocative study seeks to stand on its head the influential view (best known in the formulation of C. S. Lewis) that Chaucer "medievalized" his Renaissance-oriented sources, especially the poetry of Boccaccio and Dante. On the contrary, Spearing argues, Chaucer's imagination was aligned and directed by his experience of Italian culture; it enabled him to gain "a new and more exalted idea of what it was to be a poet, a higher sense of what kind of poetry was possible in a modern European vernacular, a new sense of the past and his own relation to it, and an awareness of the possibility of re-creating in poetic fiction the world of classical paganism" (p. 21). Chaucer's successors, alas, could not comprehend or emulate the "major push towards Renaissance values" (p. 89) which the father of English poetry (and of English literary history) had achieved, and so they "medievalized" his work, taking it down a cul-de-sac from which it had to be rescued several decades later by writers like Dunbar, Skelton, and, of course, Spenser.

This is not to suggest that poetry which was not avant-garde in these "Renaissance" terms should be dismissed; indeed, Spearing has a chapter entitled "Outside the Chaucerian Tradition" which offers interesting criticism on *The Awntyrs off Arthure* and the Wakefield Master. But the main thrust of this book is that Chaucer was an isolated pioneer whose achievement was revered rather than understood until long after his death, by which time his language was too archaic for practicing poets, who had to

strive afresh to bring English poetry into line with international standards of eloquence and excellence: "The work of the literary Renaissance, which Chaucer had begun single-handed, had to be done all over again in the sixteenth century" (p. 120).

This thesis is exhilarating, and Spearing argues it through with all the critical subtlety and stylistic lucidity which we expect of him. Since in a brief review it is impossible to do justice to the excellence of so many of the individual literary analyses, I shall concentrate on what I regard as the book's main limitation, namely, the way in which it views the movement from medieval to Renaissance in terms of an "evolutionary" process in which the fittest emerged, suffered a temporary setback, and then proceeded to flourish and multiply. Species of poetry which did not have history on their side are said to have been "located on dead-ends rather than on what now looks like the highroad" to the Renaissance (p. 121). Surely this is to underestimate the amount of medieval lore and the number of medieval attitudes, conventions (both literary and social) and genres which continued to thrive long into the Renaissance. A glance at Pollard and Redgrave's *Short Title Catalogue of English Books 1475-1640* or Wing's *MLA Short Title Catalogue of English Books 1641-1700* is salutary in this regard, for they make abundantly clear just how many essentially medieval works were being printed and reprinted. But Spearing is acutely aware of the dangers of generalizing about what is essentially medieval and what is essentially Renaissance, about what is "scholastic" and what is "humanistic." He talks of "the increasing depth and subtlety of our understanding" of the period in question "which rightly prevents us from accepting the bold contrast the fourteenth-century Italians themselves drew between their own age and that preceding it. Almost nothing that has been attributed to the Renaissance is entirely new" (p. 20). The problem is how, then, one demonstrates in Chaucer's poetry a credible degree of "newness," this being vital for the very structure of the book, since Spearing will proceed to investigate the "persistent distortion" of Chaucer's advanced outlook and methods in which his semicomprehending successors engaged. My impression is that the proto-Renaissance Chaucer, the figure we are led to expect by the book's title and introduction and indeed by the chapters which follow the one on Chaucer, does not clearly emerge, in the Chaucer chapter itself, from the medieval shadowlands.

This point can be illustrated by reference to three of the qualities which Spearing cites as proof of Chaucer's Renaissance credentials: his belief in the dignity of poetry, his respect for the past, and his doubts about cosmic order. In regard to the first of these, it is very debatable whether Chaucer

found a clear message concerning the dignity of specifically *vernacular* poetry in Italian humanism, given the way in which Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio, all masters of their native tongue, vacillated between affirming the traditional prestige of Latin and championing the cause of poor-but-honest Italian.

Not even that "modern classic" *The Divine Comedy* was immune from sociolinguistic snobbery. Petrarch was worried lest it had put serious subjects into the mouths of "ignorant oafs in taverns and market places" (what, one wonders would he have made of *The Canterbury Tales*?),¹ and in the lectures on the *Comedy* which he delivered at Florence in 1373 (the year in which Chaucer visited the city), Boccaccio sought to defend the vernacular status of the poem by (apparently) making up the story of how Dante, having begun the poem in Latin, realized that this would be lost on contemporary noblemen (who had abandoned liberal and philosophical studies), and so was obliged to compose in accordance with their capacities, which meant writing in the vernacular. Such special pleading could not protect Petrarch against the diatribe of the humanist friend who complained that his lectures had prostituted the Muses by sharing their secrets with the common herd.

One can only speculate about how much that great frequenter of (literary) taverns and sharer of the Muses' secrets Geoffrey Chaucer knew about all this and what he thought about such matters. In *Troilus and Criseyde*, perhaps the most "Italianate" of Chaucer's works and certainly the one in which he makes his largest claim for his own art (5.1786-98), he deliberately obscures his debt to the Italian writings of Boccaccio and Petrarch and gives most of the credit to the infamous Lollius, allegedly a Latin authority. Does this reflect the Italian uncertainties to which we have alluded, or should it be seen as a parallel to the way in which Guido delle Colonne (no humanist he) carefully obscured the fact that his *Historia destructionis Troiae* is largely a Latin translation of the Old French *Roman de Troie* of Benoît de Sainte-Maure? In this instance our litmus test for Renaissance values is inconclusive.

This seems to be the case with Chaucer's respect for the past also, a respect which, as Spearing rightly says, is concomitant with a sense of the universal nature of much human experience: "Guided by his reading of Boccaccio," Chaucer "attempted with remarkable success to re-imagine a

¹ Quoted from *Rerum familiarium libri*, 21.15, by Kenelm Foster, *Petrarch: Poet and Humanist* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1984), p. 29.

classical pagan culture in its own terms—a culture interesting for its difference from his own, and yet imaginable as part of a universal human culture, in which pagan and Christian are at one” (p. 86). First it must be said that a sense of universal human experience is not exclusive to Renaissance ideology. Late-medieval compilers and commentators effected a convergence of pagan and Christian authorities on matters of common interest and importance. They had a belief in universal moral standards, of a science of ethics to which all wise men, whether pagans or Christians, had contributed by their words and deeds, each according to his lights. The notion of good and bad behavior “in general” permeates the *Confessio Amantis* of John Gower (never, to my knowledge, accused of being a humanist). Its organization of exempla from sources both ancient and modern within the Christian framework of the Seven Deadly Sins and its presentation of Genius as a sort of “universal priest” whose expertise and relevance extend far beyond *amoris causa* have their rationale in the conviction that a single code of conduct is appropriate to all mankind. Then again, late-medieval historians like Vincent of Beauvais and Ralph Higden brought together the dicta and deeds of pagans and Christians within the organizing framework of universal history. Such “classicism”—for want of a better label—fostered an awareness of the many correspondences and parallels, as well as the contrasts, which, in the eyes of the medieval beholders, existed between ancient and modern ways of life and value systems. The readers of, say, the *Communiloquium* of John of Wales and the *Speculum historiale* (both known to Chaucer) would have come away with a sense of both the achievements and the limitations of the virtuous heathen, of what should be respected and what should be rejected from alien traditions.

Similar attitudes to pagan antiquity can, of course, be found in the writings of many Italian humanists (Spearing goes a little too far when he implies that they usually and unequivocally saw pagan and Christian cultures *as one*), but there are undeniable differences of tone and texture. Does Chaucer’s depiction of the past, then, evince features distinctive enough to enable us to align him either with the “classicizers” or with the humanists? This is a very debatable point, and it would seem that Spearing thinks so too. Discussing Chaucer’s treatment of pagan philosophizing, he warns us that he is not asserting that the specific source was Petrarch rather than, say, the “classicising friar” Robert Holcot (whom Spearing erroneously refers to as “Thomas Holcot”—confusing him, presumably, with his theological opponent Thomas Bradwardine, a man equally learned in the classics). The intention is rather

to point out that in this area the distinction between “late-medieval” and “Renaissance” can scarcely be made, and that what Chaucer may have derived from Holcot and other late-medieval *moderni* fitted neatly into the historical conception of classical antiquity that he would have gained through his contact with Italy. [P. 46]

One could argue with equal force that what Chaucer made of his contacts with Italy fitted neatly into the historical conception of pagan antiquity which he had elicited from the likes of Holcot, Vincent of Beauvais, and Nicholas Trevet, all essentially “scholastic” writers (to use the term in its broadest sense). Here, to put the situation in the best possible light for Spearing’s thesis, the score would seem to be “nothing either way.” And those who would wish to argue that Chaucer’s respect for the past has, in its characteristic idioms and attitudes and its implicit priorities, more in common with the values of late-medieval classicism than those of early Renaissance humanism, are quite at liberty to do so.

In a final attempt to flush out the proto-Renaissance Chaucer, Spearing attempts to identify “a Renaissance broadness and daring of vision” in the poet, which led him to express, through pagan mouthpieces, his own questions and doubts about the cosmic order:

I see no reason to resist the conclusion that Chaucer—doubtless without wishing to abandon his genuine religious faith—felt a personal need to ask such unanswerable questions. It was not only “benighted pagans” such as Palamon and Arcite for whom certain fundamental aspects of the world provoked irresistible questions yet were beyond understanding; the same was true of Chaucer himself, and he needed to imagine pagan worlds in order to gain the impetus and courage to interrogate his own God. [P. 57]

Spearing has in mind passages such as Troilus’s questioning of a God who fails to further truth and punish vice (*TC* 5.1706–1708) and Dorigen’s protest against those “unreasonable” black rocks which seem rather a “foul confusion / Of werk than any faire creacion / Of swich a parfit wys God and a stable” (*FranT* 868–72), to which he appends lines 218–44 of *The Complaint of Mars*, in which, he claims, “the questioning comes not from a pagan but from the poem’s presumably Christian narrator” (p. 56). That statement is rather surprising given that in *Mars* “the speaker is no longer the poet, but the Roman divinity” (to quote F. N. Robinson),² and Chaucer

² F. N. Robinson, ed., *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 2d ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. 520–21.

is quite brilliant (as any reader of *The Canterbury Tales* knows) at narratorial empathy with views that are appropriate to the dramatic situation in which he has placed a character. Moreover, *Mars* is narrated by a "foul" who sings in his "briddes wise. . . / The sentence of the compleynt" (lines 23–24), a further stage of detachment which hardly reassures one about the theory that Chaucer is conveying his own angst. But let us turn away from this enigmatic poem of torrid, frustrated love, long suspected of being an allegory of some contemporary scandal, to the relatively secure ground of *Troilus* and *The Franklin's Tale*.

At the outset it must be noted that, in the lines cited by Spearing, *Troilus* and *Dorigen* are speaking from the very depths of despair, incomprehension, and isolation. Surely this must direct the way we read them—as coming from the heart rather than from the head. Chaucer, it may be argued, is conveying extremes of emotion which are clearly "placed" as such rather than his own darkest doubts about the divine order. Then there is the fact that Chaucer drew most of the material in question from the *De consolacione philosophiae*: the tortured Boethius persona became the role model for many of his passionate pagans. But the fact that in those cases Chaucer used part of the Boethian pattern of problem and solution can hardly be taken as evidence that he was breaking the mold, rejecting the ideological thrust and consequences of that pattern, which ensure that eventually all doubts will be stilled and all questions answered. Moreover, on occasion Chaucer makes some movement toward completing the pattern, as when, in the *Troilus* epilogue, the ultimate failure of the pagan world is affirmed (5.1849–53), and when the Franklin deplores "swiche illusiouns and swiche meschaunces / As hethen folk useden in thilke dayes" (*FranT* 1292–93). Statements such as these should serve to remind us that the views expressed by Chaucer's pagan characters are not necessarily the poet's own views. In other words, all we have to go on is the traditional pattern, which appears to be firmly in place; we cannot go beyond it to share Chaucer's most personal thoughts on fate, freedom, and the divine will. To prove that Chaucer used his pagan worlds to interrogate his Christian God would require the powers of a clairvoyant rather than those of a critic.

How, then, does Spearing's evolutionary view of English poetry work in the subsequent chapters of his book? On occasion one feels that he is having difficulties in carrying it through as the central, informing principle. Robert Henryson, whose *Testament of Cresseid* and *Moral Fables of Aesop* are highly regarded by Spearing, causes him to change tack somewhat: ". . . little is to be gained by attempting to fit every poet considered

into an exclusively 'medieval' or 'Renaissance' category. Robert Henryson is a major poet in whom, as in his age, 'medieval' and 'Renaissance' qualities exist side by side, and at least partially in synthesis" (p. 165). Similarly, John Skelton's interest is stated to be "partly a matter of the conflicting energies embodied in his work, which make it seem to belong at once to the Middle Ages and to the Renaissance" (p. 225), and it is admitted that "this book's perspective is to some extent a misleading one for Wyatt," because it has paid no attention to the short fifteenth-century love lyric (p. 280). Would not this "synthetic" and conciliatory approach have worked on Chaucer as well?

Spearing's detailed criticism of Skelton, however, is most impressive; he brings out superlatively well how "Skelton . . . is the first English poet to appropriate to his own practice the theory of poetic inspiration that was expounded by Boccaccio in his *De genealogia deorum gentilium*" (p. 247). There follows a brilliant section on "Medieval to Renaissance in allegory," wherein deliberate obscurity is identified as a distinguishing feature of Renaissance allegorizing (and something, incidentally, which is alien to Chaucer's "strongly literal and rational temperament"; hence "this aspect of the Italian Renaissance is not reflected in his work" [p. 249]). Regrettably, this is not paralleled by a correspondingly full account of the scholastic literary theory offered by the preface to Henryson's *Moral Fables*, this being a harvest of the ideas found in grammatical textbooks which Henryson, as a grammar master at Dunfermline (as tradition has it), would have known by heart.

Also impressive is Spearing's constant attempt to strike a balance in his criticism, to be responsive to other points of view. Sometimes he brings aspects of the "New New Criticism" to bear on the interpretative problems of medieval texts, and sometimes he considers the influence of late-medieval scholasticism on Middle English literature. Unfortunately, at one point he (tentatively) makes a connection between the "arbitrariness" of some of Henryson's moralizations of Aesop's fables and the "strong emphasis on the arbitrariness" of "divine authority" (p. 194) which several recent writers have taken, rather glibly perhaps, to be a major feature of late-medieval nominalism. In fact, this arbitrariness had for long been a feature of medieval interpretation of poetic fiction. To take but one example, in a standard reading of the fable of Orpheus in the underworld (as offered by William of Conches and updated by Nicholas Trevet), Aristaeus, literally the would-be rapist who pursued Eurydice, is identified as virtue striving to join itself to concupiscence. Henryson himself draws on this interpretation in his *Orpheus and Eurydice*, a poem greatly indebted, as he freely

acknowledges, to Nicholas Trevet, “quhilk in his tyme a noble theolog was” (lines 421–24).

Obviously of the same stuff is Henryson’s treatment of the cock who, acting rationally in accordance with its own needs as a creature, prefers corn to a jewel: in the *moralizatio*, it becomes a figure of the foolish man who rejects the virtue of prudence. The fact that events or characters which, considered literally, are good can, considered allegorically, turn out to be bad is one of the fundamental paradoxes of the medieval allegorical method; there is no need to relate it specifically to nominalism. It may be added that some recent critics have tended to exaggerate the links between the more speculative aspects of scholasticism and Middle English literature. William J. Courtenay’s forthcoming study of fourteenth-century English schoolmen and scholasticism is much needed, not least because it promises a chapter which will take a cool look at the influence (or lack thereof) of the neoteric ideas of the *moderni* on Chaucer and his contemporaries.

These comments suffice, I hope, to make clear just how stimulating the book is; it should provoke discussion for some time to come. If, on occasion, one suspects that the analyses are too sophisticated for the book’s title and the principle it encapsulates, that in itself is an indication of Spearing’s openness as a critic. He may have hitched his critical wagon to an inadequate star, but its cargo will be welcome, especially to those who share his concern about an era which may be witnessing the end of a “great phase of thought” which (so the argument runs) originated in the Renaissance, namely, liberal humanism, with its central concept of “an essential human nature as the source of action and history” (p. 11, quoting Catherine Belsey). At one point Spearing engages in a little speculation about the psychology of two previous critics, C. S. Lewis and D. W. Robertson (p. 21). Let us, then, consider the psychology of Spearing’s scholarship. Comparing Chaucer and Dante, he declares that, for both of them,

the past is analogous to a distant country: its inhabitants follow laws and customs that differ greatly from our own, yet beneath the differences they are men and women like ourselves. The educated reader must learn to overcome historical as much as national provincialism. [P. 32]

We all tend to make our favorite poets in our own image; here Spearing is investing two major medieval authors with something of his own liberal humanism. It is a telling moment, perhaps even a moving one.

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