



PROJECT MUSE®

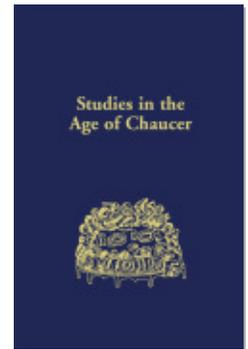
Chaucer's Chain of Love by Paul Beekman Taylor (review)

Richard J. Utz

Studies in the Age of Chaucer, Volume 20, 1998, pp. 334-336 (Review)

Published by The New Chaucer Society

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/sac.1998.0038>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/660881/summary>

PAUL BEEKMAN TAYLOR. *Chaucer's Chain of Love*. Madison and Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996. Pp. 215. \$35.00.

Taylor begins his thorough study by discussing the background of Theseus's famous First Mover speech as Chaucer's "encyclopedic reference book for his poetic enterprise" (p. 19). In that speech, as in its background, the European intellectual tradition of the *catena aurea* from Homer through Dante (admirably surveyed on astonishingly few pages), the cosmos and its triune structure are seen as held in place by the chain of love, the central binding principle in Chaucer's medieval world as well as the central dramatic principle in his textual universe.

After this introductory chapter, the critic's perspective zooms in on the horizontal chain of love, the earthly, linear temporality (connected to God's eternity) of human life described by Theseus as "progressions" and "successions." In this part, which represents the second substantial treatment of literary and extraliterary time in Chaucer's poetry since Paul Strohm's splendid chapter 5 in his *Social Chaucer* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), Taylor (who is unaware of Strohm's study) intends to demonstrate how the storytelling (i.e., art-making) pilgrims, who kill and transcend time on the way to Canterbury, emulate God's own timelessness in that their stories are in time but do not move with it: "Retelling story, like the hag's riddling choice, retrieves the past, so that pilgrimage recollected is grace retrieved, sin and time redeemed" (p. 55). He also makes some suggestive observations about female protagonists' conceptual and male protagonists' perceptual dealings with time, but overlooks how many of the supposedly female perceptions are framed by the male narrator's wishful gaze.

Taylor then investigates *The Legend of Good Women* as a text that exposes the women's (and perhaps the poet's?) vain attempt to link the sight and linguistic signs of love with an insight into and true expression of its deeper form, and reads *Troilus and Criseyde* and *The Knight's Tale*—two plots that repeat the threefold process of amatory possession (visual, verbal, physical) typical of the stories in *LGW*—as texts that reveal how man's *ratio* and words may either direct affections toward unworthy or worthwhile objects, "but do best when they hold him to those activities proper to time and place in his life" (p. 75). Next, the Clerk's Grisilde, unlike the Franklin's impatient Dorigen, is held to exemplify how the womb of a woman mediates God's providence by serving both the measurable process of natural time and the progress of redemptive

time. She is the vehicle through which “an idle life sets itself on a track toward a future good higher on the chain of love” (p. 106). Taylor similarly shows the extension and varying levels of love’s chain by pitching the knight’s serious concern for the glory days of secure monarchical order against the uproarious fourteenth-century disarray in the responses of the Miller, Reeve, and Cook.

Several other tales (e.g., *WBT*, *PardT*) also undergo Taylor’s allegorizing readings as more or less successful quests for physical or spiritual love, a universalizing strategy that sometimes brings the critic dangerously close to forcing his theoretical choice too schematically onto the literary texts and which reminds readers of Robertsonian techniques or other trends that would favor a moral and Christian Chaucer. Thus, the incomplete *Tale of Sir Thopas* is supposed to figure the incompleteness of the pilgrimage and its binding book while the completeness of the *Tale of Melibee* becomes an “emblem of the completeness of God’s design which one is liable to read as confusion” (p. 132). The specter of nominalism, which might well have served as a philosophical correspondence to explain what Taylor terms open-endedness or indeterminacy,¹ is invoked several times (pp. 57, 89, 143, 156) only to disappear into oblivion. However, this is scarcely surprising with a critic who is convinced that the late medieval writer “prefers the Boethian model to various opposing Scholastic and Nominalist speculations” and was “too cautious to take the confident stance of the zealot and proselitizer” (p. 156).

This latter statement may characterize Taylor at least as much as Chaucer, especially when one remembers the study’s puzzling prologue. Perhaps to safeguard against the current antiphilological rhetoric in the academy, he tries too hard to please both sides of the debate. He joins—rather Zeugmatically—the Hirschean idea that “[a] reading of Chaucer suggests its own theory” with the truism that “[t]here are many rooms in the mansion of Chaucerian criticism,” and further claims that he has “no stake in any particular critical stance” because the poet’s texts are “ideologically open-ended” (p. 16). However, the very reasonable methodological (hence theoretical) resolve to read—in the wake of

¹ For such a reading see Hugo Keiper, “‘I wot myself best how y stonde’: Literary Nominalism, Open Textual Form and the Enfranchisement of Individual Perspective in Chaucer’s Dream Visions,” in *Literary Nominalism and the Theory of Rereading Late Medieval Texts: A New Research Paradigm*, ed. Richard J. Utz (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1995), pp. 205–34.

Arthur Lovejoy and Emil Wolff—the *catena aurea* as the dominating dramatic principle in Chaucer's spiritual and textual world on the basis of highly nuanced semantic and solid philological observations, to concentrate on an "exposition of Chaucer's play with ideas" (p. 16) and not on a history of ideas or mentalité, is only weakened by this curiously apologetic *captatio*. Although the volume could have gained through a final round of editorial fine-tuning (see, e.g., the book's back flap, which inverts the content of chapters 5 and 6, and a number of unfortunate typos) as well as through the inclusion of Katherine Tachau's *Vision and Certitude in the Age of Ockham* (Leiden: Brill, 1988) and Linda Holley's *Chaucer's Measuring Eye* (Houston: Rice University Press, 1990) on the topic of "sight," Taylor's investigation, in its learnedness and accuracy, is a welcome contribution to the ideologized realm of Chaucer studies in the nineties. Once one has accepted its basic (moral?) premise, the book's impressive array of detailed philosophic and linguistic analysis and its depth of interpretive insight (esp. on the connectedness or mediation of sight and word, time and narrative form, memory and design) rival Jerome Mandel's recent *Geoffrey Chaucer: Building the Fragments of the Canterbury Tales* (1992), which attracted, not surprisingly, the same publisher.

RICHARD J. UTZ

University of Tübingen / University of Northern Iowa

N. S. THOMPSON. *Chaucer, Boccaccio, and the Debate of Love: A Comparative Study of The Decameron and The Canterbury Tales*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996. Pp. x, 364. \$72.00.

The author of this engaging and learned work insists that he is out to prove only that it takes more than the search for verbal parallels to investigate the possible connections between *The Decameron* and *The Canterbury Tales*. He also acknowledges that the kind of evidence for influence that he explores is not likely to change the minds of those who will admit nothing less than positive evidence in such matters. Yet he is himself convinced that his comparative readings of the two works yield results that show, at least, stronger connections between them than have been hitherto shown, if not conclusive reasons for believing