Godwin’s Portrait of Chaucer

Figure 4 comes from William Godwin’s *Life of Chaucer*, 1803. It is one of three engravings in this book. The first, in volume 1, is a familiar portrait of Chaucer, fingering what appears to be an amulet on his chest, actually a pen holder; his right hand is in the form of a “teaching” position. His left hand holds beads. This is a version of the engraving in the 1602 Chaucer — hand position, pen, and rosary beads. A later version of this pose is in the portrait by George Vertue in Urry’s 1721 Chaucer, which places Chaucer in a cameo; the beads are thus outside the frame. The frontispiece to Godwin’s vol. 2 is of John of Gaunt, portrayed not as the Duke, but as “King of Castille and Leon.” This would look fine on a pack of cards. The portrait of Chaucer reproduced here is variously placed in the copies I have seen.

You can imagine a coherent history of illustrations of Chaucer, and all goes well until you come to this.

Godwin provides us no information on how he or his publishers expect us to interpret this. The caption tells us this is “supposed to be a Portrait of Chaucer” from a painting in “in the

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3 In my copy, this is in vol. 2 preceding the Appendix; in a recent sale copy, it serves as a frontispiece, facing the title page of vol. 1, thereby authenticating it (Temple Rare Books, sale ending 20 Aug. 2014). It is omitted in the all copies I have seen of the smaller format, 4-vol. edition of 1804.
House where Cromwell was born,”⁴ but doesn’t tell us who supposes such a thing, or who is supposed to suppose that. Chaucer holds a sheet of paper, folded once. A staff. On his writing desk is a sheet of “paper” (?) with the writing “sas faire, was hs m up hle”? What does this say? Chaucer turns away — riding coat, stockings, birkenstocks.

Seeing this, I am reminded of the multi-layered verbal description of a minstrel in Thomas Percy’s *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765). Percy describes a pageant for Queen Elizabeth put on by the Earl of Leicester in 1575:

One of the personages introduced was that of an ancient Minstrel, whose appearance and dress are so minutely described by a writer there present, and give us so distinct an idea of the character, that I shall quote the passage at large.

…His cap off: his head seemly rounded tonster-wise: fair kembed that with a sponge daintily dipt in a little capon’s greace was finedly smoothed, to make it shine like a mallard’s wing…every ruff stood up like a wafer. A side [i.e., long] gown of Kendale green, after the freshness of the year now, gathered at the neck with a narrow gorget, fastened afore with a white clasp and a keeper close up to the chin;…His gown had side [i.e., long] sleeves down to mid-leg, slit from the shoulder to the hand, and lined with white cotton. His doublet-sleeves of black worsted: upon them a pair of points of tawny chamlet laced along the wrist with blue threaden poinets….⁵

I have quoted perhaps a third of this third-hand description. Note that by “character,” Percy means the fictional character. I think. Percy notes: “The reader will remember that this was not a real minstrel, but only one personating that character: his or-

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nments therefore were only such as outwardly reproduce those of a real Minstrel.”

What does it mean to “outwardly reproduce [the ornaments] of a real Minstrel”? Is this or is this not a description of a minstrel? And is Godwin’s illustration, or is it not, a portrait of Chaucer?

Godwin has been much criticized in Chaucer scholarship, a unanimity of contempt parallel to that heaped on Urry’s 1721 edition of Chaucer. Much of this seems due to Nicholas Harris Nicolas’s biography in the popular Aldine edition of 1866:

In his ardour, Godwin has however both overlooked and mistaken some material circumstances: and his confidence in the fact not only induced him to case unmerited reproaches upon the learned Tyrwhitt for merely presuming to express a doubt on the subject, but to give the reins to his own imagining by describing Chaucer’s motives for seeking the interview [with Petrarch], the interview itself, the feelings of the two Poets, and the very tone and substance of their conversation.

Most of Nicolas’s more strident criticism of Godwin comes early in his Memoir, where readers are more apt to be exposed to it. Nicolas’s opinions were confirmed by Thomas Lounsbury in

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6 Ibid., 1:xx, note.
9 Nicolas, Memoir, The Poetical Works of Geoffrey Chaucer: “If Godwin’s extract from that Letter were a faithful version of the original, his argument would have weight” (11); “It would be profitless to follow Godwin farther through the web he has spun out of his own imagination on this subject, or to cite against himself his own equally baseless vision of Chaucer having first heard of the existence of the Decameron from Petrarch in 1373....” (15–16).
1892, and they are now more or less canonized through Derek Brewer’s Critical Heritage series. Godwin insists he has taken nothing second hand:

Throughout this publication care has been taken to make no reference to any book, which has not been actually consulted, and the reference verified by inspection.

But this narrative has nothing to do with evidence, however evidence might be characterized—first- or second-hand, internal or external, primary or secondary:

It is likely that Thomas Chaucer stood by, and saw the remains of his father quietly deposited in the grave. It is likely that his funeral was attended by his nephew, Beaufort, bishop of Lincoln, and the brother of the bishop, the Lord Great Chamberlain of England. If these circumstances add nothing to the genuine honours of Chaucer, and if we confess the name of the poet to be greater than all the denominations which monarchs can bestow, yet the most fastidious philosopher may be gratified to see things as they actually were, and to be an attendant in imagination upon the herse of Chaucer.

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10 Thomas Lounsbury, *Studies in Chaucer*, 3 vols. (New York: Harper, 1892), 1:192: "It is perhaps the earliest, though unhappily not the latest or even the largest, illustration of that species of biography in which the lack of information about the man who is its alleged subject is counterbalanced by long disquisitions about anything or everything he shared in or saw, or may have shared in or seen. [These biographies] are not written to be read….Men with good intentions are always expecting to read them, but never find for it just the right time.” See more recently, Richard Osberg, “False Memories: The Dream of Chaucer and Chaucer’s Dream,” *Studies in Medievalism* 19 (2010): 204–25.


13 Ibid., 2:559.
Now that I have finished my introduction, this is a section that should write itself. There is nothing really to “point out” to a reader who has even glanced at the Chaucer portrait, read even a paragraph or two of Godwin. I am wondering as I look at this portrait whether there is anything I really wish to know about it, or wish to formulate about it — what Godwin thought of this, or what he may have felt his readers should think of it, or what they did think of it, what the artist or engraver was thinking or whether they were thinking at all. And whether any of that is going to change what my own readers will think of it.

I could, of course, follow the usual path with this engraving. I could point out the difference between the engraving and the original — that is, how the engraving in the book is a sophistication and simplification of what it portrays. Or how the original is itself a sophistication and simplification of what it pretends to portray. Perhaps there is an irony in the original missed by the engraver, and mass production hides this detail. I could show also that Godwin’s Chaucer (the Chaucer Godwin creates) is perfectly represented by this grotesquely anachronistic portrait.

I could investigate the difference between what is laughably obvious to us, or what we pretend is laughably obvious, and what finally is not. Shakespeare’s anachronisms do not bother us, nor do those of Homer. We view these things through a dual perspective — on the one hand accepting the illusions completely, and on the other hand, perfectly aware of their stupidities, just as Samuel Johnson and Samuel Taylor Coleridge tell us we do. It is not the seamlessness of these illustrations we enjoy, but their failures.

But did that early-nineteenth-century reader, viewing this Tudor mock-up of Chaucer, see the same thing? I keep hearing Furnivall in all this — to us, the epitome of the Victorian scholar, his Chaucer “closer to me than any other poet, except Tennyson.” F.J. Furnivall, A Temporary Preface to the Six-text Edition of Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales, Chaucer Society Publ, ser. 2, pt. 3. (London: N. Trübner & Co., 1868), 3.
and Furnivall. What did those nineteenth-century readers think or see?

I could, more likely, follow through on my suggestion above, and show, as I have done with a number of other Chaucer works, that once a negative evaluation is proposed, there are few who bother to challenge it (see notes 9 and 10 above). By defining something as “outside” a tradition, a community of scholars simplifies that tradition and clarifies what it is; thus, if we are interested in Chaucer’s biography, we need no longer refer to Godwin. Only a crank would seek to bring such works back in: Godwin’s biography is not good, and there is nothing more to say. I could say, by contrast, Godwin’s portrait is as accurate as any other of the time, except more sincere in its obvious anachronisms: it depicts precisely what stands between us and the history we seek.

Thomas Chaucer, reflecting perhaps on the end of things, as his father’s body is lowered into the grave.