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Chaucer at Oxford and at Cambridge by J. A. W. Bennett

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self-sacrifice. Many a villainy offset the heroics that poets lauded. The “gap between the chivalric ideal . . . and the behavior of the second estate” prompted intellectuals and religious to criticize the military and to condemn war (p. 122). Barnie deals but briefly with the conscientious critics who pointed out the shortcomings of the fighting class — as both Christians and aristocrats — and who prepared a higher and nobler code of chivalry. Henry of Grosmont’s whole life exemplified true chivalry at its best, but by mid-century such piety, prowess, and “ascetic idealism” became old-fashioned (p. 63). However, the Order of the Garter that Edward III created c. 1344 in emulation of Arthur’s Round Table still survives. Even so, the contemporary *Morte Arthure* abhorred “the excesses of the military . . . against innocent civilians,” and it portrayed Arthur ambivalently, “as a great chivalric and national hero as well as a proud and avaricious tyrant” (p. 150).

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J. A. W. BENNETT, *Chaucer at Oxford and at Cambridge*. Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1974. Pp. x, 131; 3 illustrations. \$7.50.

THIS slender volume of four chapters represents the Alexander Lectures which Professor Bennett delivered before the University of Toronto in December, 1970. The informal style of the oral form has been retained. In the published form footnotes, three short appendices, and an index have been added, as well as useful maps and drawings.

Materials for the lectures were taken almost entirely from printed sources, albeit these in large part were compiled by various antiquarian specialists, many of whom had assembled and copied numerous manuscript records and documents. Histories, monographs, reviews, publications of learned societies, articles in journals and *Festschriften* devoted to medieval studies, biographical and institutional registers, reports, surveys, bulletins, catalogues, inventories, handbooks, editions (including transcripts) of rolls, statutes, cartularies, calendars, almanacs, letters, formularies, glossaries, wills, accounts, assizes, and deeds, as well as editions of literary, religious, and scientific works, have all been drawn upon for basic information. Publications of the Oxford Historical Society are cited far more frequently than any other source — over fifty references. Such a heterogeneous mass of learning has been compacted into this small book, giving a composite picture of fourteenth-century life in Oxford and Cambridge, that one feels certain there must have been a vast overflow of information, perhaps to appear, one hopes, in additional studies on the Middle Ages. Throughout his researches Bennett displays a scholar’s joy of the quest, which often led him through cryptic texts in crabbed Latin (no easy reading!) to much homely and domestic detail that otherwise might be overlooked, though Chaucer noted it with a keenly observant eye and made good use of it in his poetry.

The title of the book would lead one to suppose it to be a contribution to the biography of Geoffrey Chaucer. And, although no new G. C. life-records are brought to light, in a sense it is such a contribution, for it reveals the fact, not surprising of course, that Chaucer was thoroughly familiar with the two university towns — their topography, social classes, manners and customs, conflicts between town and gown. We may well believe that Chaucer passed along the road to Oxford and Oseney, as well as to Cambridge and the mill at Trumpington. But Bennett's purpose is only incidentally biographical. He endeavors to show in a linked pair of the *Canterbury Tales*, the fabliaux told by the quarreling Miller and Reeve, which are set in Oxford and Cambridge respectively, how Chaucer's first readers must have responded to these tales, especially to their realistic backgrounds. As the blurb on the dust jacket says, Bennett sets out "to explore the correspondences between the literary cities and their citizens and the historical ones, and to illuminate some of the details of Chaucer's poetry." The poet's first readers must have experienced numerous instances of the pleasure of recognition — of both places and persons, if not individual persons at least true-to-life types. To modern readers there is the pleasure of seeing anew how a literary artist handles realistic detail which he has observed; we get a fresh glimpse of the creative mind at work.

Bennett speaks of the traps a critic may fall into when attempting to reconstruct the milieu of fictional narrative and in this connection avows that he is not "a Manly man." However, his methods and purposes in this book are very like those of J. M. Manly in his *Some New Light on Chaucer*, published half a century ago. Both critics are seeking for verisimilitude in parts of the *Canterbury Tales*, whether it be in portraits of persons or of towns, or in identification and description of college halls. Both deliver their findings as lectures, later to be published as books. Both search most diligently for proof of Chaucer's realism in contemporary records and documents. Both speak with certainty of their belief in early readers' immediate recognition of allusions to the contemporary scene and in their "relishing the situations they knew in daily life." Both insert disclaimers: Bennett states that his "surmises are not to be pressed home . . . but taken merely as hints of possibilities" (p. 9); Manly states that his "treatise . . . is merely a collection of suggestions of a more or less speculative character" (p. ix). Yet both authors obviously are convinced, and are generally convincing to their readers, that they present well-documented theses which are essentially factual.

As a study of Chaucer's Oxford and Cambridge Bennett's book may be compared with D. W. Robertson's *Chaucer's London*, a study of much wider scope. Bennett limits his study, for the most part, to what is pertinent to the illumination of the Miller's and the Reeve's tales. But the third chapter, "The Men of Merton," though quite informative, mars somewhat the unity of the work. This chapter deals with Chaucer's learning and points out his familiarity with Mertonians of his day, such influential men as Ralph Strode and Bishop Bradwardine. Many of the literary, rhetorical, philosophical, and

scientific treatises which Chaucer knew and referred to in his writings were to be found in the library of Oxford's Merton College in the fourteenth century, Bennett shows. Yet he states that "we cannot prove that Chaucer ever stepped inside the gates of Merton." This learned chapter, dealing with intellectual history, does not contribute much to our understanding of the realistic backgrounds of the two coarse fabliaux, although in the conclusion reference is made to the widespread distrust that men of the town felt for subtle and cunning clerks (university students). Alas that John the carpenter and even "deynous" Simkin the miller gave so little weight to this distrust that they both fell victims to the schemes of clerks!

When Bennett discusses the close ties of the Miller's and Reeve's tales to the university localities concerned, shows how the two tales are "bound to each other in a tight warp and woof of parallels and contrasts," producing a mirror-like effect, and wonders if they were not meant to be read as a narrative unit, one is reminded of a conjecture Edith Rickert used to relate to her Chaucer seminars, that the two tales were written originally for some kind of student gatherings at the two universities, the Miller's Tale being told by Cambridge students as a take-off on Oxford students and the Reeve's Tale being told by Oxford students in reply. Bennett's discussion lends some support to this attractive conjecture.

Annotation, though not entirely exhaustive nor entirely accurate, reveals the wide-ranging researches upon which the lectures were based. A few errors or oversights, noted in passing, are these: Footnote 2, p. 30, gives volume and page reference to an unidentified work (Publications of the Oxford Historical Society?). In note 3, p. 49, *Last* should read *Lost* in R. M. Wilson's title, *The Lost Literature of Medieval England*. Note 1, p. 94, should read E. P. Kuhl, *PMLA* xxxviii (1923) 123, not E. P. Kuhn, *PMLA* xxxvii (1922) 123. From note 2, p. 110, a casual reader might infer that the editors of *Chaucer Life-Records* (1966) had omitted a Philippa Chaucer record, that for 6 May 1382; this record is printed in *CLR*, p. 91. These few restrictions will dim but little the pleasure which Chaucerians must certainly take in reading this learned, and at the same time very entertaining, study.

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THOMAS H. BESTUL, *Satire and Allegory in "Wynnere and Wastoure."* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1974. Pp. xiv, 121. \$6.50

THOMAS Bestul's short but succinct book on *Wynnere and Wastoure* discusses considerably more than satire and allegory in the poem, as announced in its title. Bestul states that his two goals are to give, first, a general introduction to the poem, and, second, an understanding of the Alliterative Revival. A by-product of the second purpose of the book is an examination of the