Stephanie Trigg

*Congenial Souls: Reading Chaucer from Medieval to Postmodern.*


Reviewed by J. Stephen Russell

Published 22.4.2002

*Congenial Souls* is a trenchant and hard-nosed analysis of Chaucer’s reception that traces a compelling story from Chaucer’s earliest readers and admirers to the present and offers a searching critique of our responses to the poet and his works. It is an important and controversial book, sure to provoke debate and raise hackles; even for its errors of energy and enthusiasm, it is a book which should be encountered and carefully meditated on by people who study and teach Chaucer.

The book begins with a spirited prologue that deconstructs the cover of the paperback *Riverside Chaucer*, making the case that the cover picture, a scene from Lydgate’s *Siege of Thebes*, testifies to the invidious contradiction that lies at the heart of Chaucer studies: Chaucerians, Trigg argues, empathize with portly Lydgate riding along with Chaucer’s pilgrims - we long to be part of the jovial company - and yet we celebrate this openness on the cover of that most “closed” of artifacts, the “definitive edition.”

Chapter One, “Speaking for Chaucer,” explores this contradiction through a measured and intermittent discussion of the Envoys to Scogan and Bukton, two late short personal poems. The critical response to these poems, Trigg correctly argues, celebrates them as homosocial, heterosexalist expressions, overheard bachelor party performances whose “appreciation” all but requires that the reader accept enrollment in the boys’ club. In showing this, Trigg can flesh out the contradictory (and, by implication, hypocritical) impulses she sees at the heart of Chaucer studies, a jovial, pluralistic confraternity that co-opts debate by embracing it and subsuming it into the still-tight “clerisy” of medievalists.

In Chapter Two, “Signing Geoffrey Chaucer,” Trigg explores how critics occupy and exploit this simultaneously welcoming and closed tradition. On the one hand, she argues, Chaucer scholars see the text or corpus as complete (or “signed,” bearing the mark of “authority”). At the same time, Trigg argues, critics regularly act as if the text were “open” or unfinished, a book replete with interesting lacunae and inviting “empty” spaces where a Plowman’s Tale (for example) might go. In making this (largely persuasive) case, Trigg works with an interesting progression of “identities” which Chaucer has traversed on his road to us. From “poet” to “writer” to “author,” Chaucer moved from a (putative) lyricist-companion to locus of a book to the progenitor of a tradition. Modern critics’ response to this edifice, Trigg argues, is to “countersign Chaucer,” to enter into the text, finish sentences, complete “defective” lines and (most irritatingly, it would
seem), playfully lapse into a little faux-Middle English themselves to enregister themselves as initiates. For Trigg, these innocent little gestures betray membership in the Chaucer club, even if they protest that men *shuld n at maken ernest of game*, as it were. The chapter closes with a brief consideration of how postmodern concepts of the writer and the text begin to undermine both the presence of the author in the text and the presence of the critic sitting there beside him.

Chapter Three, “Writing Chaucer,” focuses on 15th-century additions to Chaucer’s poems, works that, in effect, “authorize” Chaucer by creating a “Chaucer tradition” through (bad) imitation. Focusing on the *Tale of Beryn* and looking at other early Chaucerian “supplements,” Trigg compellingly shows that imitation produces mutual valorization – adding to Chaucer, continuing the stories or filling in the gaps, both realizes the “ontological alterity” of the “real” Chaucer and simultaneously asserts the imitator’s qualifications as a provider of such additions.

The next chapters (4 through 6) offer a selective history of Chaucer reception from the 16th to the 19th centuries. Time and again, from the Renaissance to Dryden and Virginia Woolf, these discussions reassert the seemingly irresistible tendency to empathize with that shadowy 14th-century Controller of the Wool Custom. Trigg correctly notes the pull of the text’s personality, its ethos, on this diverse group. As the earliest (known and fairly readable) poet in English, there Chaucer stands, ready to allow diverse men diversely to say what they will, and in this old book they found, among other things, the essence of the English personality, the earthiness of good solid English life and folk, the love of the land and its flora, and the accents of everyday life. Above all, these readers found themselves “congenial souls” with Chaucer – the phrase is Dryden’s – incapable and unwilling to maintain a critical distance.

The book’s final chapters are, not surprisingly, its most trenchant, as they deal with the 19th century’s stumbling invention of modern editorial processes and the 20th century’s invention of textual criticism, neither of which, for Trigg, turn out to be inventions at all. Frederick Furnivall, that colorful editorial entrepreneur, gets knocked around a good bit (in the current fashion) as a liberal dilettante whose efforts stand in a weirdly dialectical relationship with more sombre contemporary paleographers. The result, Trigg astutely argues, is the contradictory edifice of modern Chaucer studies, at once clubbish and protective, specialized and communal, liberal and reactionary. At the close of the book, Trigg argues that this initiate-mentality is perpetuated in the proliferation of “introductions” to Chaucer for beginning students, reductive little books that teach the young how to be proper Chaucerians.

I leave for last the first half of Chapter Seven, the cleverly titled “Reforming the Chaucer Community.” The punning title refers – if I read it correctly – to both an apparent but actually unreal “reformation” of Chaucer studies in the 1980s and to another hoped-for “real” reformation still to come. The high water mark of the “apparent” reformation was the publication (in 1981) of *New Perspectives in Chaucer Criticism* (Norman, OK: Pilgrim Books), edited by Donald Rose, a book whose title, Trigg can archly declare from http://www.as.uni-hd.de/prolepsis/02_01_rus.html
twenty years’ distance, was “auspicious” (p. 201). With some justice, Trigg sees the book as ultimately conservative despite its liberating title: analyzing the language of Rose’s introduction, Trigg writes,

Concerned about “a perceptible erosion of the more traditional approaches to scholarly appraisal of Chaucer,” the writers of these essays “demonstrate a renewed commitment to a kind of discourse about Chaucer which is learned and serious and which makes this collection an important examination of major trends in Chaucer scholarship... (202) [the emphasis is Trigg’s]

She calls this, uncharitably in my view, “a kind of discursive subterfuge” (202), the attempt (by Rose and Co.) to be seen to embrace new critical modalities while in fact co-opting them into a traditional, stiflingly pluralistic framework. Brighter lights in this abortive “reformation” seem to be principally feminist and Marxist critics, but even these, Trigg argues, risk being teased away from the wrecking ball and into the cathedral.

The second, hoped-for revolution, Trigg proposes, seems principally to be a new forthrightness, self-consciousness, and honesty in Chaucer studies, a true openness and independence that can keep its distance from heterosexalist and still homosocial constraints: postcolonial, feminist, and postmodern critics hold the hope of freeing our response to Chaucer from the tunnel vision of “congenial souls.”

The nature of Trigg’s argument makes evaluation or criticism a tricky business. Liking the book risks, it seems to me, the charge that the response is just one more friendly, pluralistic gesture from Chaucer, Incorporated, arms open wide to embrace and smother all comers. Disliking the book appears to be even worse, for doing so would be to reject an incisive, defiant voice that tells Chaucerians that they – we – are a closed, hypocritical club.

That said, this is a compelling and important book with a challenging argument, technically correct even when it is trivial and unworthy. Deconstructing the cover of the Riverside Chaucer is a virtuoso performance, and tweaking writers for a little Middle English jouissance is guilty fun, but these moves seem to me too ready to assign culpability, to blame the establishment for its venial sins. What Trigg never seems to notice is that her book is a profoundly historical essay that looks at fallible and time bound individuals but fails to see the profound external forces that shaped Chaucer’s reception. In fact, Geoffrey Chaucer was a genuine innovator who, by accident, became one of the first English writers to become “authorized” in the new print culture of the 15th century. For later centuries, he remained, by this accident, there at the top left of the library shelf, the earliest English writer that people could read without special training but one whose language was quaint enough to evoke a pleasing alterity – Yoda in Star Wars speaks Middle English. In the 19th-century dialectic of egalitarian versus elitist models of education, Chaucer naturally emerged – again, almost unavoidably – as the affable patriarch of an already patriarchal enterprise. Revealing this history, as Trigg has done in this book, is immensely rewarding and potentially liberating, but tweaking her time bound predecessors is unworthy and short-sighted.

http://www.as.uni-hd.de/prolepsis/02_01_rus.html
This is so because, in the end, all criticism, all writing, is by definition positivist, the attempt to put to paper “what in myn hed ymarkyd is,” and a critic like Trigg, even if it pains her to recognize it, is the latest in the real communal struggle to connect and to understand. The struggle is good and real and human, and all the more so when it is sharpened by the recognition that our response to a past artist is shaped by forces we have not recognized or admitted.

At the end of the House of Fame, the intrepid Geoffrey, having escaped from the Palace of Fame, finds himself watching a crowd encircle a “man of great authority” in, of all places, the House of Rumour. Chaucer wisely puts aside his great poem at this precise point, leaving it to us to decide if this latest authority is any more worthy of the name. In the end, Trigg’s book does the same, revealing the unlikely and rickety architecture of the House of (Chaucer’s) Fame and leading us out to the House of Noise to find, one hopes, our liberated way.

**KEYWORDS:** Chaucer, reception, critical theory, history of criticism, medievalism

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**Originally published in** *Prolepsis: The Tübingen Review of English Studies*