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PAUL STROHM

The social and literary scene in England

Social structure

Ideas of medieval social organization have much to contribute to the study of Chaucer. Socially and politically inflected topics are manifest within his writings, and socially grounded issues of literary taste and reception are thematically important as well. But, looking beyond particular matters of content, generally held notions about the structure of society also exert a tacit but persistent influence on the structure of his literary works.

Medieval social descriptions are very conscious of degree, and tend to emphasize the relatively small number of people at the top of the social hierarchy. The thirteenth-century legal commentator Bracton is representative when he divides society into those high in the ecclesiastical hierarchy (the pope, archbishops, bishops, and lesser prelates), those high in the civil hierarchy (emperors, kings, dukes, counts, barons, magnates, and knights), and those remaining (a general category of 'freepersons and bondpersons' or *liberi et villani*).¹

Bracton's concentration on prelates and magnates is consistent with formal theory in his day, but we must remember that his category of 'freepersons and bondpersons' comprised an overwhelming majority of the fourteenth-century populace. After the cataclysmic Black Death of 1348–9, the population of England levelled off at about 3,500,000, where it remained for the rest of the century and most of the next.² Among these persons the 150 lords and 2,000 knights and their families upon whom Bracton concentrates would have totalled no more than 8,000–10,000, or considerably less than one-half of one per cent of the whole.³ He is undoubtedly correct in his half-stated assumption that most of the remainder were agricultural workers, with many still bound in some fashion to the land, but other groups are apparent to the modern observer. Taken together, ecclesiastical orders probably included some 50,000 members, or just under two per cent of the whole.⁴ Esquires and other lesser gentry and their families probably comprised about

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30,000–40,000 additional persons. Cities were small and city-dwellers were few by standards of today. London and nearby Westminster had a population of some 40,000, and lesser cities (which we might be more inclined to call ‘towns’) such as Bristol, York, Norwich, Gloucester, Leicester, and Hull had populations between 5,000 and 10,000. All told, though, we might suppose that about 100,000–125,000 additional persons were ‘urban’ in some sense of the word.

Latent even within Bracton’s commentary is another way of viewing society which encouraged more recognition of such constituent groups. His division of society into the ecclesiastical hierarchy, the civil hierarchy, and the mass of other persons is based upon the traditional medieval view of the three estates (clerics, knights, and peasants).⁵ Even when treated most hierarchically, the estates of society were also seen as interdependent, with each group contributing in its own way to the good of all. This notion of interdependence issued at times in an alternative view of society, as organic rather than hierarchical. This organic view – often conveyed through extended metaphors of the social estates as members of the body politic – permitted recognition of new classes of persons not clearly accommodated in the more traditional tripartite system. It is to be found less in formal statements than in sermons, statutes, ordinances, and a variety of other irregular and occasional documents.

A sermon delivered in the 1370s by Bishop Thomas Brinton of Rochester supplements the hierarchical view of society with a more organic view of the interdependence of its estates. We are all, he says, the mystical members of a single body, of which the head (or heads) are kings, princes, and prelates; the eyes are judges, wise men, and true counsellors; the ears are clergy; the tongue is good doctors. Then, within the midsection of the body, the right hand is composed of strenuous knights; the left hand is composed of merchants and craftsmen; and the heart is citizens and burgesses. Finally, peasants and workers are the feet which support the whole.⁶ Similar views of society crop up in other occasional and relatively informal papers of the time. A Norwich gild ordinance of the 1380s, for example, takes note in its opening prayer of a ruling stratum composed of the king, dukes, earls, barons, and bachelors; a middle stratum composed of knights, squires, citizens and burgesses, and franklins; and a broader category of tillers and craftsmen.⁷

The middle groupings in Brinton’s sermon and the Norwich prayer embrace persons of different social outlook. The knights – and, in the second half of the fourteenth century, the new class of esquires – enjoyed the same *gentil* status as the great aristocrats, though clearly without enjoying the benefits conferred by the hereditary titles and accompanying revenues of the latter group. Although non-*gentil*, the urban merchants (whose free status

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and prosperity entitled them to the titles ‘citizen’ or ‘burgess’) often enjoyed wealth considerably greater than that of most knights.⁸ And even these distinctions mask variations. Many knights and esquires of the period held no land at all and had few or no military obligations, but earned their status through civil and administrative tasks which we might consider essentially ‘middle class’.⁹ While not *gentil*, citizens and burgesses were eligible to serve their cities and shires as ‘knights’ in Parliament, and some were knighted for royal or military service.¹⁰ The ultimate standard for inclusion in these middle groupings would seem not to be rank or title, but simply civil importance and responsibility, however defined.

Chaucer’s own position

Chaucer himself was a member of this middle social grouping, his place within it secured by various forms of what might be called ‘civil service’. He was born in the early 1340s, in a family situation appropriate to a career of royal service.¹¹ His father, John Chaucer, was not only a prosperous London vintner, but had himself served Edward III in such capacities as deputy chief butler (with responsibility for certain customs collections). Chaucer’s own career began in 1357 with his appointment to the household of Elizabeth, Countess of Ulster, and her husband Prince Lionel. In the service of the latter he journeyed between France and England (and was captured and ransomed during a 1359–60 military campaign in France), inaugurating a series of journeys which would take him frequently to France, twice to Italy, and elsewhere in the course of his career. Like many in his station, he married rather advantageously, to Philippa de Roet, daughter of a knight of Hainault (who had come to England in the service of the queen) and sister of Katherine Swynford (soon to be mistress and eventual third wife of John of Gaunt). In 1367, soon after his marriage, he is listed as *valettus* to King Edward III, and by 1368 he is listed among *esquiers* of the royal household. While remaining an esquire and never entering the inner circle of chamber-knights, he nevertheless continued in respected service of one sort or another until the end of his life. In 1374, he shifted from the precincts of the household to the post of controller of customs in London, assisted both by preferment from Edward III and by a timely annuity to him and to his wife from John of Gaunt. Posts and assignments continued after the accession of Richard II in 1377. The latter 1380s marked a period of comparative withdrawal from London activity, possibly tactical in nature since it roughly coincided with the years 1386–9 in which Richard II was severely challenged by an aristocratic coalition. Richard reasserted his royal prerogatives in 1389, and Chaucer soon after received his next royal appointment as clerk of the king’s

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works. He continued in various capacities – though none of greater lustre – through the 1390s. When Henry IV supplanted Richard II in 1399, a year before Chaucer's death, he confirmed Richard's annuities and added a grant of his own.¹²

Even so spare a summary of Chaucer's civil career suggests several interesting perspectives on his life and place in society.

(1) Chaucer's position as an esquire of the royal household would have conferred *gentil* status, though he was among the more ambiguously situated members of that somewhat fluid group. Lacking the security from possession of lands and rents enjoyed by the great aristocrats and even by some of his fellow knights and esquires, Chaucer depended for his living upon his career in service. In this sense, the posts and assignments which he held in the course of what Sylvia Thrupp has called his 'versatile' career were not just an expression of his energies or his zest for politics, but were essential to his livelihood and to the maintenance of his station in life.¹³

(2) Chaucer appears to have had a representative career, both as an esquire of the king's immediate household and as a member of the royal party beyond the immediate confines of the court.¹⁴ He would seem to have been rather good at what he did; while not lavishly rewarded, he enjoyed frequent appointments and re-appointments while weathering the extreme and sometimes dangerous factional vicissitudes of his day. His service bridged successfully the careers of three monarchs, and he managed the extremely difficult task of being on good terms both with Richard II and with John of Gaunt and the Lancastrians, even during such points of extreme tension as Richard's clash in 1386–9 with the Appellants, an aristocratic coalition headed by the Duke of Gloucester and including Gaunt's son Henry. In a period of what Thomas Usk called 'confederacie, congregacion, & couyne',¹⁵ Chaucer was necessarily something of a factionalist, allied like Mayor Brembre of London and Chief Justice Tresilian and others with Richard's royal party. Yet – unlike such fellow partisans as Brembre, Tresilian, and Usk, who were beheaded by the Appellants in 1388 – Chaucer seems to have understood the limits of faction, and to have tempered his activity in 1386–8 and possibly in other crucial periods as well.

(3) Patronage based on his literary accomplishments seems not to have been a major factor in Chaucer's civil career. Later we will consider several literary works which may have been written in part to console, compliment, or please his superiors, but most of the facts of his civil career are comprehensible in terms of strictly non-literary talents and exertions. Chaucer's poetry fosters an impression of separation between his public and literary lives, as when the garrulous Eagle in the *House of Fame* chides him for his

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habitual withdrawal from the world of affairs to that of books and private reading:

For when thy labour doon al ys,
And hast mad alle thy rekenynges,
In stede of reste and newe thynges,
Thou goost hom to thy hous anoon,
And, also domb as any stoon,
Thou sittest at another book
Tyl fully daswed ys thy look . . . (652–8)

The principal communities of readers

Solitary as Chaucer's own habits of reading and writing might have been, his poetry still shows a notable concern with issues of reception: with situations of telling and listening, of writing and reading, of audience reaction. This concern, in turn, encourages us to imagine the circumstances into which Chaucer actually launched his literary works – for whom he wrote them, and in what ways he expected them to be promulgated. Any attempt to answer these questions is, however, complicated by a number of situations peculiar to the society of Chaucer's day, including the coexistence of older 'oral' and newer 'literary' presuppositions; the relative infrequency of literacy in Chaucer's England; and, especially, the fragmentation of the literate populace into small and relatively self-contained communities of readers, based on considerations of language, geography, production and distribution of manuscripts, vocation, and social class.

The task of determining the boundaries of Chaucer's contemporary audience is complicated by the fact that the circumstances of oral narration in Chaucer's day could have permitted people to *hear* his work without having the occasion (or perhaps even the ability) to *read* it.¹⁶ Chaucer himself seems occasionally unsure about whether he is primarily an *oral* or a *written* poet. We might loosely conceive of his earlier vision-poems as composed to be read aloud to an intimate audience and his *Canterbury Tales* as intended to reach a larger audience in manuscript form, with the mid-career *Troilus and Criseyde* as a watershed. Even so broad a formulation is, however, subject to uncertainties. Chaucer's tone of address to his audience is nowhere more intimate among his narrative poems than in *Troilus*, yet this poem concludes with an apostrophe ('Go, litel bok . . .') which certainly anticipates the circulation of his poem to an enlarged audience in manuscript form. The *Canterbury Tales* are laced with different sorts of references to hearing and reading, often within a single passage. Apologizing for his plain speech in

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the *Miller's Tale*, Chaucer seems to imagine his audience both as hearers and as readers of a bound manuscript:

. . . whoso list it nat yheere,
Turne over the leef and chese another tale. (I, 3176–7)

We might provisionally imagine Chaucer writing for an immediate, oral audience and an ultimate audience of readers, though we must add this matter of oral/written to the list of uncertainties which urge caution upon us.

If oral rendition enlarged the possible audience of fourteenth-century works, other considerations were decidedly narrowing in their effect. The already small body of literate persons in England (probably no more than five to ten per cent of the population, even including what M. B. Parkes has called exclusively 'pragmatic' or non-literary readers¹⁷) was further segmented by other criteria into a number of separate 'communities of readers'. Several literary languages remained in competition throughout the second half of the fourteenth century. Though English was gradually coming to the fore, the last quarter of the century still saw Latin as the language of ecclesiastical and theological discourse, and French as the language of statecraft and civil record-keeping, as well as a literary language in some circles. Such geographically based considerations as the different dialects of English, local preference for different forms (such as alliterative as opposed to metrical verse), and physical distance were also centrifugal in their effect. Different vocational and social groupings, while anything but rigid at their outer margins, still fostered divergent tastes among such groups as the aristocracy, the gentry, and the urban middle classes. Such segmentation of the literate populace into different communities or reading publics is most dramatically illustrated by the fact that the three greatest writers of English of the later fourteenth century – Chaucer, Langland, and the *Gawain*-poet – may not have known each other's work. (Chaucer perhaps echoes the opening scene of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in his *Squire's Tale*, and his Parson's dismissive allusion to poetic alliteration or 'rum, ram, ruf' may possibly embrace both writers, but neither these nor other suggestions that they knew each other's work are very persuasive.) In order better to understand how such a situation could occur, we might examine the principal literate communities of fourteenth-century England.¹⁸

The upper levels of the *clergy*, and especially those connected with monastic libraries and scriptoria, were naturally literate. As surviving booklists show, their continuing concern throughout the century was with theological and ecclesiastical matter written in Latin – though literature in all three languages is encountered. Some fourteenth-century manuscripts of

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likely ecclesiastical provenance include works in Latin, French, and Middle English, and occasionally both divine and secular works as well; London, BL, MS Harley 2253, for example, not only contains a generous selection of Middle English secular and religious lyrics, but also secular works in French and devotional works in Latin.

Members of the royal family and the fourteenth-century *aristocracy* were drawn to works in chivalry, statecraft, and occasionally theology, particularly in French. In the middle of the century, Henry, Duke of Lancaster, had written a devotional treatise entitled ‘Le Livre de Seyntz Medicines’. In that work, he apologizes for the quality of his native or Anglo-Norman French, on the ground that he is more familiar with English: ‘Si le franceis ne soit pas bon, jeo doie estre excusee, pur seo qu jeo suit engleis et n’ai pas moelt hauntee le franceis.’¹⁹ In style and thrust Henry’s work was somewhat of the older fashion, since the mid-century provided members of the court with ample opportunity to polish their Continental French. A series of lustrous marriages brought Continent-born and -educated wives and their trains to the royal household in the course of the century, including Isabella of France (wife of Edward II and mother of Edward III), Philippa of Hainault (wife of Edward III), and Anne of Bohemia (first wife of Richard II). Additionally, the series of conflicts between England and France known as the Hundred Years War brought the two countries into inevitable association through legations, missions, and – especially – the practice of holding prisoners for ransom (after the battle of Poitiers in 1356, King John of France and a virtual court-in-exile were resident in England throughout most of an eight-year period which lasted until his death in 1364). Extant booklists throughout this period testify to a continuing interest in French literature. At the time of her death, Isabella of France bequeathed to Edward III a number of French books, including a *Brut*, deeds of Arthur, and *Tristan and Isolde*; she owned copies of *Aimeri de Narbonne*, *Percival*, *Gawain*, and other narratives as well.²⁰ Although no bibliophile, Edward III seems to have had some interest in French romance; in one case the Issue Rolls of his reign specify 100 marks ‘for a book of romance . . . for the King’s use, which remains to the chamber of the Lord the King’.²¹ Booklists of Richard II include similar romances (some possibly from his great-grandmother’s bequest), and others including a ‘Romance de la Rose’ and a ‘Romance de Perciual & Gawyn’, as well as a Bible written in French or *lingua gallica*.²² Froissart, presenting a volume of his poems to Richard, comments that he spoke and read French very well (‘moult bien parloit et lisoit le franchois’), and we have no reason to doubt his word.²³ The interest of the aristocracy was not confined to French. The Duke of Gloucester’s library contained both French romances and Latin theology, and Henry IV was a reader of Latin as well.²⁴ Chaucer’s contemporary, John

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Gower, claimed some encouragement from Richard II in undertaking his English *Confessio Amantis*.²⁵ Yet only with evidence of Henry V's preference for literature in his native tongue does English emerge clearly as the preferred literary language of the royal and aristocratic group.²⁶

The situation was different among the lower echelons of the *gentry* – especially among those knights and esquires of the royal household and/or chancery clerks and secretaries and lawyers who comprised what might be considered the ‘civil service’ of the day. There, an emergent public for English literary works provided a receptive milieu for Chaucer and others as well.²⁷ One such writer was Thomas Usk, initially a scrivener or professional scribe who became a political factionalist and convert to the royal party. In the period 1385–7, while in temporary eclipse and awaiting the royal preferment which was to be his undoing, Usk composed a political and spiritual allegory entitled *Testament of Love*, in which he explained his still unusual choice of English as a literary language:

Trewly, the understanding of Englishmen wol not strecche to the pryvy termes in Frenche, what-so-ever we bosten of straunge language. Let than clerkes endyten in Latin, for they have the propertee of science, and the knowinge in that facultee; and let Frenchmen in their Frenche also endyten their queynt termes, for it is kyndely to their mouthes; and let us shewe our fantasies in suche wordes as we lerneden of our dames tonge.²⁸

Usk's probable intention in choosing English was to reach an influential audience of persons who could further his civil and factional activities. Less involved in self-promotion, but no less concerned with finding an appropriate audience for his works, was John Gower – a landed esquire with legal training, and a friend and associate of Chaucer. Gower wrote major works in French, Latin, and finally English – not, as one might suppose, from confusion, but with respect to different generic traditions and to different intended audiences. His motive in composing the *Mirour de l'Omme* in 1376–8 was comparatively devotional and private, and his linguistic choice was appropriately conservative. His *Vox Clamantis*, completed about 1385, was written in the voice of Old Testament prophecy, and the choice of Latin, which John Fisher calls ‘the language of serious political discussion’, suits his intended audience of influential clerics and, ultimately, the court. His *Confessio Amantis* (1385–93) addresses its message of political reconciliation to a still wider audience, and is thus written in English, ‘for Engelondes sake’.²⁹ The deliberateness of Gower's respective choices of Latin, French, and English is underscored by the fact that, even after composing his *Confessio* in English, he returned to Latin for his *Cronica Tripertita*, with its serious political motive of Lancastrian revisionism.

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The *citizens and burgesses* of London and other urban centres were (in Parkes's phrase) 'pragmatic readers' in the course of their business activities.³⁰ The question is, whether their interests turned when they engaged in more general reading. Throughout most of the fourteenth century, the answer seems to be that they turned toward service books and works of lay devotion in Latin. Study of the wills of London merchants and other gildsmen of the later fourteenth century shows them in possession of numerous service books (missals, breviaries, and graduals), works of pious devotion (psalters and legends of the saints), and occasional legal compilations.³¹ Little wonder that, turning to English in the later fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, this audience sought devotional compendia (such as the *Prick of Conscience* – more popular than the *Canterbury Tales*, if we are to judge from over one hundred extant manuscripts), translations of Bonaventure, and mystical treatises. Segments of this audience seem, as well, to have given encouragement to Chaucer's fervent contemporary, Langland. Langland's ardently reformist poem *Piers Plowman* would seem initially to have envisioned an audience of clerics, including many in minor orders, as suggested by its theological preoccupations and its frequent interjection of scriptural and other Latin quotations. Yet its choice of Middle English embraces a larger possible audience, and most of its Latin quotations are paraphrased for that audience's benefit. The B-version of Langland's poem may even, to his possible consternation, have stimulated rebellious designs among the rebels of 1381.³²

We must remind ourselves that boundaries between communities of readers tended to shift. While probably aimed at civil servants and literate gentry, Gower's *Confessio* was at least partially encouraged by the king; if *Piers Plowman* was first read by clerics, it was soon taken up by literate laypersons. An instance of how very far we are from establishing a 'sociology' of fourteenth-century taste is the case of the *Gawain*-poet, whose audience has been variously located with equal plausibility in baronial courts, among the country gentry, among Cheshire servants of Richard II, and in the monastic houses of the south-west Midlands.³³

Chaucer's audience

Chaucer appears to have found his own community of readers among his fellow gentlepersons and civil servants, though several considerations argue against oversimplification. The embedded or fictionalized audiences within Chaucer's own poetry – such as his created audience of Canterbury pilgrims – are socially mixed, and at times his *gentils* and non-*gentils* engage in what appear to be socially based literary disagreements. We may assume at least a

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modest degree of social mixing within his actual audience, and several of his works do indeed appear to have been directed toward social superiors. The *Book of the Duchess* shows definite signs of intent to console John of Gaunt for the death of Duchess Blanche of Lancaster in 1368, both in the grieving knight's final return to a 'long castel' ['Lancaster'] (1318) and reference to the lost lady as 'White' ['Blanche'] by name (948). The narrator of this poem is himself somewhat more elevated socially than those of Chaucer's later efforts; unable to sleep, he bids a servant bring him a book (47), and riding forth to join a hunt he displays some hauteur in demanding of an attendant, 'Say, felowe, who shal hunte here?' (366). He is nevertheless deferential to the grieving knight, finding him neither curt nor formal and marvelling to find him 'so treftable . . . for al hys bale' (533–5). The relation of the narrator to the grieving knight in fact shares some characteristics of Chaucer's own probable relation to John of Gaunt: familiar in the sense that both are gentlepersons, but yet with a recognition of the rather considerable social gap between one who is simply a gentleperson and one who is at once a gentleperson and an aristocrat second in wealth and power to none in the kingdom.

Only in his short poem 'Lak of Stedfastnesse' does Chaucer appear to address Richard II directly, but Richard and Queen Anne may have been partially responsible for his ambitious but incomplete *Legend of Good Women*, with their relation to Chaucer wryly restated in his portrayal of a God and Queen of Love who set for him a trying (if not impossible) narrative task. This presumption is further fortified by the *Legend's* points of coincidence with Gower's *Confessio Amantis* (each written in English and containing a collection of narratives of love held together by a frame which secularizes a traditional devotional form), raising the possibility that Richard and Anne were sufficiently interested in the course of English letters to give parallel charges to the two poets. If the portrayals of the God of Love and Queen Alceste are indicative, however, then certain attentions from persons in socially authoritative positions were at best to be politely endured. After all, the imperious threats of the God of Love and the inadvertent insults of Alceste ('Hym rekketh noght of what matere he take': F 365) leave Chaucer little choice but to withdraw into the defensive irony which Alfred David has seen as his characteristic strategy for dealing with socially secure members of his audience with 'limited and established literary tastes'.³⁴

Chaucer's impulse to direct works beyond his immediate circle might not have been exhausted with these two efforts. Works such as his translation of Boethius and his *Tale of Melibee* may belong to the general category of 'advice to princes',³⁵ and the peaceable sentiments of Dame Prudence in