

Introduction
Contextualising Contexts of Chaucer

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This is not a collection of essays on Chaucer in the normal sense. Neither is it a ‘Companion’ or ‘Guide’ or ‘Handbook’ to Chaucer. It does not have the primary intention of providing readings of the texts of Chaucer (even though it contains much illuminating treatment of his works). Its key aim is to enhance the independence and critical capacities of modern readers of Chaucer by giving them a rich repertoire of contexts – historical and conceptual information and perspectives – through which to read, interpret and enjoy his works with greater confidence and assurance.

Different chapters set about this intention in different ways. Some offer and elaborate an invaluable conspectus of relevant information that categorises itself pretty self-evidently as ‘history’. The best scholars to do this are, as a rule, ‘real’ historians rather than Chaucer specialists: hence the unusual number of chapters (unusual, that is, for a book contributing to Chaucer Studies) written by historians rather than colleagues in Middle English literature. Our historians write variously about the material and socio-political circumstances of Chaucer’s England (like the economy, the polity, social orders, everyday life, home, marriage, religious life, heresy) or aspects of culture (such as chivalry, heraldry, art, architecture). Sometimes, chapters do not need to contain much in the way of reference to Chaucer to achieve their contextual aim. Often, however, our historians combine their historical expertise with insights and evidence from Chaucer’s works. So often, Geoffrey Chaucer provides a rich and satisfying (and sometimes challenging) context for Geoffrey Chaucer.

A number of chapters shed light on vitally important aspects of the literary culture of Chaucer’s time, be it, for example, the French, Italian, classical or English contexts; form and textual culture (e.g. romance, metre, authority, literary roles, love); distinctive conditions of textual production (London, manuscript culture and the likely books available to Chaucer); or, less tangibly but unignorably, considerations such as holiness, secularity, God, sex and the self – not forgetting, of course, the life of Geoffrey

Chaucer himself. The closing five chapters of the book discuss the reception of Chaucer and his works, from the agenda-driven invention of his status as ‘Father of English Poetry’ in the fifteenth century through to the intellectual problems and opportunities posed by his twenty-first-century digital afterlife.

This book addresses a whole host of questions likely to be in the minds of those studying Chaucer. What was Chaucer like himself? What was heraldry about? What were the pathways of children’s education? How did a medievalised classical tradition impinge on Chaucer? What kind of understanding did someone like Chaucer have of the heavens and cosmology? What was chivalry? How did medieval marriages work – or go wrong? What did the commercial and social life of town and country involve? How did verse scan? What was a normal day in the life of someone of Chaucer’s time like? What were medieval romance and love about? Who and what were heretics/Lollards? And what about Boethius? Answers to questions like this, and the perspectives and food for thought provided across the sweep of essays in this volume, should go some way to help readers to prepare and develop their readings of Chaucer’s works and their critical responses to a whole world of further issues raised (and characteristically exacerbated) by his texts.

Geoffrey Chaucer in Context has not exactly been the most straightforward editorial task. While the coverage is reasonably comprehensive, there are inevitably gaps, which owe themselves to limitations of space, time, configurability and other circumstances. The user of this book would do well to make habitual use of the index and (in the best tradition of medieval *compilatio*) to read across and amongst chapters at will, according to their own needs and interests. Like any compiler, I gratefully acknowledge the authority and the value of the work of the contributors to this volume. I am particularly grateful to Vincent Gillespie, Chris Given-Wilson and Alastair Minnis for their invaluable advice during the process of recruiting contributors. I’d also like to thank colleagues at Cambridge University Press – Anna Bond, Linda Bree and Alison McMenemy, and in particular Emily Hockley, Sarah Lambert, Tim Mason, Carrie Parkinson, Dawn Preston and Robert Whitelock for their support and expertise before and during production.

It is the hope of *Geoffrey Chaucer in Context* that it will assist readers in listening to the voice(s) of Chaucer and in taking on board the complexity and colour of his times with heightened appreciation, but not to do so passively. To contextualise is not passively to accept the past on its own terms, but to put that past – and by extension oneself and the constructedness of

Introduction

3

one's own culture and situation – in a more self-aware, historically contingent, context. No writer was more inventive and tempting than Geoffrey Chaucer in making his readers perform the work of interpreting his own writings and take responsibility for it. The same belief in the independence and answerability of the Chaucerian reader lies at the heart of this book.