

LITERARY VALUE AND SOCIAL IDENTITY  
IN THE *CANTERBURY TALES*

Literary authors, especially those with other occupations, must come to grips with the question of why they should write at all, when the world urges them to devote their time and energy to other pursuits. They must reach, at the very least, a provisional conclusion regarding the relation between the uncertain value of their literary efforts and the more immediate values of their non-authorial social identities. Geoffrey Chaucer, with his several middle-strata identities, grappled with this question in a remarkably searching, complex manner. In this book, Robert J. Meyer-Lee examines the multiform, dynamic meditation on the relation between literary value and social identity that Chaucer stitched into the heart of the *Canterbury Tales*. He traces the unfolding of this meditation through what he shows to be the tightly linked performances of Clerk, Merchant, Franklin, and Squire, offering the first full-scale reading of this sequence.

ROBERT J. MEYER-LEE is Associate Professor of English at Agnes Scott College. He is author of *Poets and Power from Chaucer to Wyatt* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), as well as numerous articles on Chaucer, fifteenth-century poetry, and literary value published in journals such as *Speculum*, *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, *New Literary History*, *The Chaucer Review*, *JEGP*, and *Exemplaria*.

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ROBERT J. MEYER-LEE

*Agnes Scott College*



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*In memory of  
Lee Patterson, 1940–2012  
and  
Robert Lee, 1928–2016*

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## *Abbreviations*

<i>CLR</i>	Crow, Martin M. and Clair C. Olson, eds. <i>Chaucer Life-Records</i> . Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966.
<i>MED</i>	<i>Middle English Dictionary Online</i> . <a href="http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/">http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/</a> .
<i>MR</i>	Manly, John M. and Edith Rickert. <i>The Text of the Canterbury Tales: Studied on the Basis of all Known Manuscripts</i> . 8 vols. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1940.
<i>OED</i>	<i>Oxford English Dictionary Online</i> . <a href="http://www.oed.com/">www.oed.com/</a> .
<i>Variorum GP</i>	Andrew, Malcolm, Charles Moorman, and Daniel J. Ransom, eds. <i>The General Prologue</i> . The Variorum Chaucer. Vol. 2, parts 1A and 1B. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993.

Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations of Chaucer's works are cited by line number in *The Riverside Chaucer*, gen. ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987). For the Hengwrt manuscript, I have relied on *The Hengwrt Chaucer Digital Facsimile*, ed. Estelle Stubbs (Scholarly Digital Editions, 2000); and, for Ellesmere, *The Canterbury Tales: The New Ellesmere Chaucer Monochromatic Facsimile*, ed. Daniel Woodward and Martin Stevens (San Marino: Huntington Library, 1997). All Chaucer manuscripts other than these two are cited by the sigla in *MR*.