

Cooper, Helen. 2023. *The Canterbury Tales*. Oxford Guides to Chaucer. 3rd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Pp. xiii + 484. ISBN 978019882142.

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The third edition of Helen Cooper's indispensable guide to *The Canterbury Tales* (1989, 1996) retains the original aim and format, "to give an up-to-date summary of what is known about *The Canterbury Tales*, together with a critical reading of each tale" (1). The format is admirably user-friendly: discussion of the Prologue and then each of the tales is divided under the headings Genre, Sources and Analogues, Structure, Themes, and Style, with brief bibliography for each section. The comments rarely exceed two or three pages, but a great deal of ground is covered. Detailed plot summaries are not given, but a rich sense of the individual character of each tale (and teller) is created, and Chaucer's work is situated in a broader context of classical and medieval writing. The criticism cited is, inevitably, selective. In the twenty-eight years since the second edition a great deal has been written about Chaucer and about each tale, and as Cooper notes, "so much of the more recent criticism on the *Tales* has been of the broader theoretical or political kind that looks beyond the particularity of the tales" (3), to politics, sexuality, identity, ethnicity and racism. These developments are judiciously reflected both in the Introduction and throughout the comments. Including new criticism does not always mean that older work is omitted, however, and indeed some is added. After the discussion of Theology and Christian Doctrine in the Introduction, the two critical works cited are Robertson's *A Preface to Chaucer* (1962) and Murton's *Chaucer's Prayers* (2020), a striking juxtaposition.

The chapter on "The Man of Law's Tale" is a good example of the helpfulness of the format. As a continuous chapter, the shifts between the various approaches and issues might seem confusing, and the amount of material included overwhelming: questions about sources, genre (romance? history? saint's life?), composition process (originally an independent composition?), Introduction (focused on story-telling), proportion of comment to narrative, ethics and piety (sympathy for pagans), the problematic link to the following tale, and thematic links to other tales. But divided into manageable sections, the commentary reads very smoothly. Cooper does not seek to give decisive interpretations; she is frank about the problems raised by "The Man of Law's Tale," and quite robust in her responses. She draws attention to the lack of "any coherent pattern" (152) in the explanations given in the text for Custance's vicissitudes, which are resolved by an unsettling mixture of miracles, destiny and providence. How can this be explained?

It is hard to credit so serious a thinker as Chaucer, however, with believing that the naïve folk piety of the tales, with its miracles provided to order, answered any serious questions . . . One way out of the problem is to ascribe such instabilities to the failings of the Man of Law. Assigning the weakness of a tale to the weakness of the teller is a widespread, and comfortable, critical practice, but raises the awkward question of how many bad tales the complete work can hold . . . (152–53)

Cooper's gentle irony here would surely have appealed to Chaucer, whose pilgrim narrator frequently claims to be unsophisticated and fallible:

It would seem reasonable to give a poet of Chaucer's status the benefit of the doubt as to knowing what he was doing, without having to resort either to naïvety or to a plea of deliberate bad writing for the narrator's sake such as avoids facing the actual issues raised.
(153)

These comments were in the first edition, but in the third Cooper has added considerably to the bibliography for this section, citing the feminist readings of Geraldine Heng and Carolyn Dinshaw, Siobhain Bly Calkin on links to crusade, Elizabeth Robertson on race, class and gender, and warnings from David Lawton and A. C. Spearing about assuming that a tale represents the views of its narrator. All these critical approaches have developed significantly in the last thirty years. The discussion of the tale ends, as in the first edition, with a brief comment on the Epilogue, which is included in many manuscripts but not in Ellesmere and Hengwrt, and does not constitute a satisfactory link to the following tale. Cooper concludes that it might have been written on a separate sheet, with the engaging comment: "Every author will be familiar with the phenomenon of having a good passage lying around, waiting to find a new home" (159). A final paragraph is added here about the mention of Lollardy in this link, the only specific reference in Chaucer's works, and perhaps a reason why the Epilogue does not appear in every manuscript.

The Clerk's Tale of Patient Griselda continues to attract much critical attention. Here Cooper does not change her comments significantly, though she does expand her discussion of The Tale in Context to consider female archetypes in *The Canterbury Tales*, noting that in one Italian manuscript of Petrarch's version Griselda is shown as Justice, with sword and scales. Some additional bibliography is old, such as Anne Middleton's article "The Clerk and his Tale" (1980), and some new, such as Elizabeth Robertson's *Chaucerian Consent: Women, Religion and Subjection in Late Medieval England* (2022). Cooper's discussion of the tale ends with a new paragraph about the language of the Envoy: "The asceticism of the Tale's style is exploded in the Envoy, both in the virtuosity of the verse form—thirty-six lines on only three rhymes, in a form unique in either English or French—and in its density of similes and metaphors" (227). This is typical of the virtuosity of her own discussion, which ranges effortlessly and elegantly across so many aspects of Chaucer's work.

In her comments on the Franklin's Tale, Cooper describes two approaches she finds equally unsympathetic. One (less common now, she admits) is that in the medieval world of strict Christian orthodoxy, the secular values of the Franklin, "Epicurus owene sone," cannot be admired. The other, more recent, "sees a middle-class man trying to assert his membership of the gentry by mouthing empty platitudes about *gentillesse* and honour that his story refuses to support, and that are in any case mere grand words to disguise the collapse of medieval chivalry" (265–56).

She rejects both these attitudes, emphasising here that the Middle Ages "encompassed far more than a single perspective," and criticising "the modern tendency to read everything cynically, or at best ironically: the hermeneutic of suspicion" (266). She also defends aspects of the tale which have drawn negative comments such as Arvaragus' concern for his honour, "a proper one in the chivalric world" (268).

Examples of additions which relate to current social concerns can be found in the chapters on the Physician's and Prioress's tales. In the Physician's tragic tale of Virginia, killed by her own father to save her from rape and sexual slavery, Cooper notes that this is not an honour killing in the modern sense; she compares Virginius' motives with those of Sethe in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. She also notes that Chaucer differs from his sources in having the murder happen at home rather than in court, allowing time for Virginia to give her reluctant consent. The Prioress's Tale deals with another issue which is very live today, anti-Semitism. Cooper's introduction is expanded to include more on Hugh of Lincoln, the boy supposedly murdered by Jews, and the suggestion of a possible link with a visit to Lincoln by Richard II in 1387; she notes that John of Gaunt had interests there, and that Chaucer's wife and her sister Katherine Swynford (who married John of Gaunt) both had links with the cathedral. In light of this, Cooper expands her argument that however disturbing the anti-Semitism of the tale may be to modern readers, it cannot be assumed to be intended as satire of the Prioress: "there is nothing in the tale that is not found widely across medieval (and indeed later) culture" (322). It is a mistake, Cooper argues, to read the tale detached from the Prologue:

If one reads the Tale forwards from the Prologue, as must have been universal in the Middle Ages (the Prologue is present even in all the independent copyings), then it appears rather differently from the view given by the twentieth-century assumption of ecclesiastical or antifeminist satire or the inevitable colourings of the horrors of the Holocaust. (326)

The Prologue is Chaucer's addition, a very powerful and eloquent articulation of devotion to the Virgin.

Cooper stresses in the Introduction that Chaucer has "a clear ethical core," though this may not always accord with modern attitudes. But she also emphasises that he is never "a simple or simplistic writer; indeed he frequently fits with the definition of queer writing as a mode that refuses binaries, among them the heteronormative and the patriarchal" (26). In relation to masculinity, she points out that while homosexuality was condemned in the Middle Ages, male friendship was strongly approved; but "sworn brotherhood" is often treated by Chaucer "with less than total endorsement" (31). Many of the additions to the bibliography are related to gender, though the updating is not always extensive, understandably given the volume of criticism produced in the last thirty years. A balance is retained between the work of twentieth- and twenty-first century scholars. The General Bibliography at the end adds some frequently cited recent work relevant to more than one tale, including Jill Mann, *Feminizing Chaucer* (2002); Alcuin Blamires, *Chaucer, Ethics and Gender* (2006); Alastair Minnis, *Fallible Authors: Chaucer's Pardoner and Wife of Bath* (2007); Robert Meyer-Lee, *Literary Value and Social Identity in the Canterbury Tales* (2019). Robert Correale and Mary Hamel's *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales* (2002, 2005) appears throughout as an invaluable resource.

At many points Cooper adds comments on Chaucer's relationship with and knowledge of his contemporary world, "his powerful sense of historical authenticity" (41). In her introductory comments on the General Prologue, for instance, she notes "the overlap between the professions he selects and those named in the poll tax records for Southwark in 1381"—one of the compilers was the historical Harry Bailly (41). The section on the Franklin is expanded to discuss social ambition and the roles of "men in the middle," such as both the Franklin and Chaucer himself; Cooper notes that while

franklins do not appear often in medieval literature, in *Mum and the Sothsegger* a white-haired franklin is the authority figure in a dream vision. Chaucer is now increasingly seen as a cosmopolitan figure; another addition to the general bibliography is Marion Turner's *Chaucer: A European Life* (2019).

Throughout the Introduction and the opening discussion of *The Canterbury Tales* Cooper emphasises, often even more than in previous editions, the very unusual and often unique aspects of Chaucer's work. She describes him as "exceptional among Middle English writers for his interest in, and alertness to, the differences of literary kinds available to him" (4); his work "exploits a generic and poetic range for the individual tales that is unparalleled in any other collection" (15). To add to the challenge of producing a commentary on *The Canterbury Tales*, "he so rarely writes in a voice that can be identified simply as his own" (1). No single volume could cover every aspect of *The Canterbury Tales* with all the relevant bibliography, and indeed the result would be unreadable. Cooper offers us a splendid galaxy of comments and insights, with a wide range of criticism old and new; the result is very much her own voice, combining experience and authority.

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