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‘And gret wel Chaucer whan ye mete’

Chaucer’s Earliest Readers, Addressees and Audiences

Sebastian Sobecki

Abstract

This article will attempt to take stock of what we know about Chaucer’s earliest audiences, that is, about uses of and references to his work made during his lifetime. Relevant new research on manuscript use and ownership has been included in the case of Thomas Hoccleve and the scrivener Thomas Spencer. In addition to various named addressees of Chaucer’s works – Peter Bukton, Henry Scogan and Philip de la Vache – this brief survey lists contemporary references to Chaucer and his works in the poetry of John Gower, Eustache Deschamps, John Clanvowe and Thomas Usk.

Keywords: audience, Eustache Deschamps, Geoffrey Chaucer, John Clanvowe, John Gower, reception, Thomas Hoccleve, Thomas Usk

Little can be said with any certainty about the earliest reception of Chaucer’s works. We do not really know how his writings were experienced. Were the poems enjoyed in silence by individual readers who may or may not have mouthed the words as they were moving their fingers along each line? Or were his works read aloud to groups of eager listeners, as is suggested by the celebrated frontispiece illumination in the copy of *Troilus and Criseyde* in Cambridge Corpus Christi College, MS 61?¹ Where and when, in which locations and on what occasions, did Chaucer’s readers first experience his poetry? If some of his works were performed, were these readings punctuated by interjections or even topical exchanges? Were his earliest audiences socially diverse?

Often the best answers are afforded by diligent manuscript work, the painstaking combing through often multiple interrelated versions of a text in an attempt to learn more about the process of copying, assembling, correcting and annotating medieval texts. Scribes are

therefore the earliest readers of medieval texts we encounter. A good deal can be gleaned by observing their craft. A scribe may copy the same work on a number of occasions, and his hand can appear in other texts, too. Scribal mistakes, self-corrections and countless other palaeographical practices open up a window into the sophisticated and arcane world of professional copyists. Yet for all their significance, scribes are not readers in a typical sense, of course: they interfere with texts; they interpret and censure, elaborate and forget, interpolate and confuse, update and condense. As valuable a source of textual knowledge as they are, scribes are not necessarily representative of other categories of medieval audiences. Their engagement with a text may be intimate yet ultimately intermediary; they are not recipients but handlers.

As far as we know, no single manuscript containing Chaucer's known works can be dated to his lifetime, although it is not impossible that the Ellesmere *Canterbury Tales*, now San Marino, Huntington Library MS EL 26 C9, might have been started before 1400, the year in which Chaucer probably died. But we *do* know that Chaucer was read during his lifetime. Some of the evidence is circumstantial and some of it has reached us in the form of other poets' use of Chaucer's work before 1400. This article will attempt to take stock of what we know about Chaucer's earliest audiences, that is, about uses of and references to his work made during his lifetime.² Such a fixed chronological boundary is useful in the sense that the consumption of secular literature usually was limited to defined social circles or particular circulation networks. At a time when writers interacted with one another and with their audiences through their writings, the biological availability of a writer represented an opportunity for exchange. Literary conventions were differently configured during a period where writers did not call themselves authors, where willed anonymity was the default condition of texts, where retractions relied for their effect on the intentional fallacy, and where the death of the writer became the birth of the author.

As concerns Chaucer's earliest readers, one of the most exciting finds in recent years was Martha Carlin's discovery that Thomas Spencer, a scrivener from Southwark and member of the London scriveners' company, used 'a certain book called *Troylous*' to repay a debt in 1394.³ In all probability, *Troylous* is Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, not least because Spencer was closely acquainted with John Brynchele, another Southwark resident and later clerk who, according to his will of 1420, was the earliest known owner of a copy of *The Canterbury Tales*.⁴

A second set of readers can be inferred from the probable addressees of some of Chaucer's shorter poems. The envoy to 'Truth', also known as 'Balade de Bon Conseyll', is directed at a certain 'Vache':

Therefore, thou Vache, leve thyn old wrecchednesse;
Unto the world leve now to be thral.
Crye him mercy, that of his hy goodnesse
Made thee of noght, and in especial
Draw unto him, and pray in general
For thee, and eek for other, hevenlich mede;
And trouthe thee shal deliver, it is no drede.⁵

The addressee in question is in all likelihood Sir Philip de la Vache (d. 1408), a courtier and later Garter knight.⁶ The narrator's gentle moralizing even suggests a certain degree of intimacy between the speaker and the persona of the recipient. At any rate, as the poem's dedicatee, de la Vache can be safely counted among Chaucer's earliest audiences.

By the same token, the addressees of Chaucer's two 'Lenvoys', to 'Scogan' and 'Bukton' respectively, belong among Chaucer's first readers. The Scogan of the first poem is usually believed to be Henry Scogan (d. 1407), lord of the manor of Haviles from 1391. Scogan was a squire in Richard II's household and later tutor to the future Henry V and his brothers.⁷ A poet himself, Scogan even receives a hypothetical speaking part in the poem:

But wel I wot, thow wolt answer and saye,
'Lo, olde Grisel lyst to ryme and playe!
Nay, Scogan, say not so, for I m'excuse —
God helpe me so! — in no rym, dowteles⁸

With medieval poems frequently invoking allusions to their own performativity, a speaking part is more than a literary trope: Scogan's persona and person are summoned at the same time, making him both a part of the audience and of the poem. The third of Chaucer's lyrics with a named addressee is the 'Lenvoy de Chaucer a Bukton'. The 'My maister Bukton' of the first line of the poem is Sir Peter Bukton (d. 1414), a knight and politician.⁹

It is difficult to assess how many of Chaucer's other dedicatees or addressees can be counted among his earliest readers and listeners. While it is probable that John of Gaunt and his household were familiar with *The Book of the Duchess*, a work likely composed to commemorate the death of John's wife Blanche, it is more difficult to ascertain whether Richard II, the nominal addressee of 'Lak of Stedfastnesse' ever saw the pontificating envoy dedicated to him:

Envoy to King Richard

O prince, desyre to be honourable,
 Cherish thy folk and hate extorcioun.
 Suffre nothing that may be reprevable
 To thyn estat don in thy regioun.
 Shew forth thy swerd of castigacioun,
 Dred God, do law, love trouthe and worthinesse,
 And wed thy folk agein to stedfastnesse.¹⁰

By the same token, the ironic though earnest ‘Complaint of Chaucer to His Purse’, written as a request to the recently crowned Henry IV in the hope that the new monarch would pay Chaucer’s arrears, was probably not meant for its famous dedicatee. Although the poem may have reached neither the king’s eyes nor his ears, it surely ended up in the hands of some royal administrator since the records show that payments to Chaucer later resumed. Other names, such as Chaucer’s surmised son ‘Lyte Lowys’, who appears as the addressee of the poet’s *Treatise on the Astrolabe*, can be added to Chaucer’s earliest audience, though in this case not of poetry but of scientific prose. And if ‘Chaucer’s Wordes unto Adam, His Owne Scriveyn’ was indeed written by Chaucer, then the scribe Adam named here (whether his surname was Pinkhurst or not) is another early, if allegedly careless, reader and copyist.

Chaucer’s contemporary poets certainly belong to the earliest documented audience of his works, and there have been new developments in this field, too. The trilingual poet John Gower (d. 1408), a leading English writer, appears to have had personal dealings with Chaucer in 1378, when he was charged with the power of attorney by Chaucer ahead of a continental voyage.¹¹ While it is not clear whether their relationship was personal or professional at this point in time, by the late 1380s, when Gower composed his best-known English work, the *Confessio Amantis*, he refers to Chaucer by name in the earliest version of the work:

And gret wel Chaucer whan ye mete,
 As mi disciple and mi poete:
 For in the floures of his youthe
 In sondri wise, as he wel couthe,
 Of Ditees and of songes glade,
 The whiche he for mi sake made,
 The lond fulfild is overal:
 Whereof to him in special
 Above alle othre I am most holde.¹²

Chaucer reciprocates this praise, at about the same time, in the penultimate stanza of his *Troilus*, when he extols (or perhaps gently mocks) Gower's virtues:¹³

O moral Gower, this book I directe
To the and to the, philosophical Strode,
To vouchen sauf, ther nede is, to correcte,
Of youre benignites and zeles goode.¹⁴

Gower is of course not the only addressee of this stanza. 'Philosophical Strode', the second name mentioned here, is not a certain identification. It may be Ralph Strode, an Oxford logician and Latin poet.¹⁵ He may also be the same man as the London lawyer who was Common Serjeant of the City of London from 1373 to 1385 and Standing Counsel until his death in 1387.¹⁶ Documentary evidence shows that Chaucer knew the London Strode, and it is likely that both Strodes are one and the same person.¹⁷

In line with Chaucer's wish for the *Troilus* to 'go' into the world and be disseminated,¹⁸ there is indeed evidence that this poem, together with his translation of Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, circulated during his lifetime. In addition to the scribe Adam, the scrivener Spencer and the poets Gower and Strode, another writer must have enjoyed access to this work: Thomas Usk, the undersheriff for London who was executed during the purges of the Merciless Parliament in 1388. Usk borrows from Chaucer's *Troilus* in his *Testament of Love*. Usk's prose work anticipates the fifteenth-century praise uttered by Lydgate and other admirers, and at one stage he refers to Chaucer as the 'noble philosophical poete in Englisshe' who has made a 'treatise' of 'Troylus', identified a few lines later as 'the *Boke of Troylus*'.¹⁹

The courtier, poet and follower of John Wyclif, Sir John Clanvowe (d. 1391), also belongs to this group of Chaucer's earliest readers. Clanvowe's *The Book of Cupide*, composed in the late 1380s or early 1390s, harks back to the Knight's Tale and the *Legend of Good Women*.²⁰ There may of course have been other English writers who had read or heard Chaucer's works during his lifetime – John Walton or William Langland are possible candidates – but their knowledge of Chaucer's works before 1400 cannot be ascertained with the same confidence or, at least, high degree of probability as that of the individuals listed above.

Then there is also the influential French poet Eustache Deschamps (1340–1406) from whom Chaucer frequently borrows. Deschamps wrote a ballade dedicated to Chaucer, in which he celebrates the English writer as 'grant translateur, Geffroy Chaucier', largely for the latter's

translation of the *Romance of the Rose*.²¹ The French poet must therefore have seen a copy of Chaucer's translation, though it is doubtful that he would have been able to read it. Chaucer's friend Sir Lewis Clifford (d. 1404) is said by Deschamps to have delivered the French ballade to Chaucer, probably in 1386.²² It is therefore not unlikely that Clifford may have had access to Chaucer's translation of the *Romance*.

A final consideration belongs to the role of Thomas Hoccleve (d. 1426), poet and privy seal clerk. Hoccleve was certainly one of Chaucer's earliest posthumous readers, borrowing frequently from his predecessor and addressing him as 'the firste fyndere of our fair langage' in his longest work, the *Regement of Princes*.²³ Simon Horobin has recently argued that, based on instances of Hoccleve's hand, the production of the Hengwrt and Ellesmere manuscripts of *The Canterbury Tales* was overseen and conducted by Hoccleve himself.²⁴ Horobin suggests that Hoccleve may have acquired Chaucer's papers after his death in 1400,²⁵ but it is not impossible that Hoccleve had access to these materials earlier, during Chaucer's lifetime. After all, there is no evidence that Chaucer was working on *The Canterbury Tales* in the years immediately preceding his death, particularly if he lost interest in the project or if his health did not permit him to continue. Hoccleve, then, may have been not only Chaucer's first editor but also one of Chaucer's last readers during his lifetime.

Sebastian Sobecki is Professor of Medieval English Literature and Culture at Groningen University. His first book, *The Sea and Medieval English Literature* (Brewer), appeared in 2008, and his second monograph, *Unwritten Verities: The Making of England's Vernacular Legal Culture, 1463–1549* (Notre Dame University Press) in 2015. He is working on *The Material Politics of England's Fifteenth-Century Literature* (Oxford University Press) and completing two volumes of a new edition of Hakluyt's *Principal Navigations* (Oxford University Press), as well as co-editing three books: *Medieval English Travel* (Oxford University Press), with Anthony Bale; *A Companion to John Skelton* (Brewer), with John Scattergood; and, with Candace Barrington, *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Law and Literature* (Cambridge University Press). His articles have appeared in *Speculum*, *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, *Renaissance Studies*, *The English Historical Review*, *The Chaucer Review*, *The Library*, *New Medieval Literatures* and *The Review of English Studies*, among others.

Notes

1. On the frontispiece, see Joyce Coleman, 'Where Chaucer Got His Pulpit: Audience and Intervisuality in the *Troilus and Criseyde* Frontispiece', *Studies in the Age of Chaucer: The Yearbook of the New Chaucer Society* 32 (2010): 103–128.
2. For further reading on Chaucer's early audiences, see Richard Firth Green, 'Women in Chaucer's Audience', *The Chaucer Review* 18 (1983): 146–154; Dieter Mehl, 'The Audience of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*', in *The Audience of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde**, ed. Beryl Rowland (London: Allen and Unwin 1974), 173–189; A.S.G. Edwards, 'The Early Reception of Chaucer and Langland', *Florilegium* 15 (1998): 1–22; Julia Boffey and A.S.G. Edwards, 'Manuscripts and Audience', in *A Concise Companion to Chaucer*, ed. Corinne Saunders (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 34–50; Paul Strohm, *The Poet's Tale: Chaucer and the Year That Made The Canterbury Tales* (London: Profile, 2015); Paul Strohm, *Social Chaucer* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).
3. Martha Carlin, 'Thomas Spencer, Southwark Scrivener (d. 1428): Owner of a Copy of Chaucer's *Troilus* in 1394?', *The Chaucer Review* 49, no. 4 (2015): 387.
4. *Ibid.*, 393–394.
5. Ll. 21–28. All quotations from Chaucer's works are taken from Larry D. Benson, *The Riverside Chaucer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).
6. On this poem and its probable dedicatee, see Craig E. Bertolet, 'Chaucer's Envoys and the Poet-Diplomat', *The Chaucer Review* 33, no. 1 (1998): 75ff; V.J. Scattergood, 'Chaucer's Curial Satire: The "Balade de Bon Conseyl"', *Hermathena*, no. 133 (1982): 29–45.
7. John Scattergood, 'Old Age, Love and Friendship in Chaucer's Envoy to Scogan', *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 35 (1991): 92; Douglas Gray, 'Scogan, Henry (c.1361–1407)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004), <http://www.oxforddnb.com.proxy-ub.rug.nl/view/article/24847> (accessed 13 October 2016).
8. Ll. 34–37. On 'Lenvoy de Chaucer a Scogan', see Alfred David, 'Chaucer's Good Counsel to Scogan', *The Chaucer Review* 3, no. 4 (1969): 265–274; Scattergood, 'Old Age, Love and Friendship'; Robert Epstein, 'Chaucer's Scogan and Scogan's Chaucer', *Studies in Philology* 96, no. 1 (1999): 1–21; and Richard P. Horvath, 'Chaucer's Epistolary Poetic: The Envoys to Bukton and Scogan', *The Chaucer Review* 37, no. 2 (20 December 2002): 173–189.
9. On this poem, see John Scattergood, '"Chaucer a Bukton" and Proverbs', *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 31 (1987): 98; Lawrence Besserman, 'Chaucer's Envoy to Bukton and "Truth" in Biblical Interpretation: Some Medieval and Modern Contexts', *New Literary History* 22, no. 1 (1991): 177–197; Horvath, 'Chaucer's Epistolary Poetic'.
10. Ll. 22–28.
11. Martin M. Crow and Clair C. Olson, *Chaucer Life-Records* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), 54.
12. Book VIII, ll. 2941–2949, quoted from John Gower, *The English Works of John Gower II*, ed. George Campbell Macaulay, vol. 2, repr. 1969, EETS E.S. (London: Oxford University Press, 1901), 466.
13. In addition, some readers have argued that the Man of Law in *The Canterbury Tales* is modelled on Gower (the critical discussion is summarized in Benson, *The Riverside Chaucer*, 854).
14. Book V, ll. 1856–1859.
15. Benson, *The Riverside Chaucer*, 1058, note to ll. 1856–1859.
16. *Ibid.*
17. On this identification, see Rodney Delasanta, 'Chaucer and Strode', *The Chaucer Review* 26, no. 2 (1991): 205–218.
18. Book V, l. 1786.

19. Thomas Usk, *The Testament of Love*, ed. R. Allen Shoaf (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications 1998), Book 3, chapter 4, 266–267. On Usk's use of Chaucer, see also Benson, *The Riverside Chaucer*, 1020; and Marion Turner, "'Certaynly His Noble Sayenges Can I Not Amende": Thomas Usk and *Troilus and Criseyde*', *The Chaucer Review* 37, no. 1 (2002): 26–39; Edwards, 'The Early Reception of Chaucer and Langland', 3.
20. On Clanvowe, see Lee Patterson, 'Court Politics and the Invention of Literature: The Case of Sir John Clanvowe', in *Culture and History, 1350–1600: Essays on English Communities, Identities, and Writing*, ed. David Aers (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1992), 7–41; Andrew Cole, *Literature and Heresy in the Age of Chaucer* (Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Sir John Clanvowe, *The Works of Sir John Clanvowe*, ed. John Scattergood (Cambridge: Brewer, 1975).
21. Elizaveta Strakhov, 'Tending to One's Garden: Deschamps's "Ballade to Chaucer" Reconsidered', *Medium Aevum* 85, no. 2 (2016): 236–258.
22. Benson, *The Riverside Chaucer*, 1060.
23. Thomas Hoccleve, *The Regiment of Princes*, ed. Charles Ramsay Blyth (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications 1999), l. 4978.
24. Simon Horobin, 'Thomas Hoccleve: Chaucer's First Editor?', *The Chaucer Review* 50, no. 3 (2015): 228–250.
25. *Ibid.*, 24.