

THE DARK SIDE OF CHAUCER

When a man of reputation dies, news of his death is the topic of the day: How did he die? Where did he die? What were the circumstances? And, if the man is an outstanding author, an arrangement would be made to safeguard his writings, his personal papers. The question would be asked: Who will be responsible for preserving them? If that man, that author, is Geoffrey Chaucer, the answer to all of the above questions is—we don't know.

Consider that he is the first great poet of the English language. That reputation prevailed in his lifetime and continues today. When I attended college, his date of death was presented as a fact to remember, but his manuscripts—or, more accurately, the lack of them—went without comment. Perhaps it was felt that if no definitive statement could be made about them, why mention the topic at all?

Not until sometime later, when I began doing the research for my own books, did it become clear, as well as confusing, that all the “original sources” of Chaucer's works are actually one step removed. They are *not* writings in his own hand; there are none. Nor are they the work of a personal scribe while the poet lived. All we identify today as his works were produced *after* 1400, the year of his death.

This greatest of English writers of his day, though a commoner, had a privileged position. With friends near the crown, he frequently entertained the court with his writings—and his readings. Some of his poetry was “commissioned” by nobility. How could it be that there are no original volumes for posterity, while writings of lesser fourteenth-century authors have been carefully preserved? Medieval manuscripts from his contemporaries (Lydgate, Langland, Gower, and others), produced during their lifetime, have survived. Why is Chaucer's case so exceptional? The unique situation *needs mentioning*; questions need to be asked.

A serious and lengthy quest into all matters surrounding Chaucer's death has recently been published by Terry Jones. Yes, *that* Terry Jones, one of the

comic geniuses of “Monty Python.” His book *Who Murdered Chaucer?* (2003) is a thorough and engaging inquiry that confronts deadly possibilities based on the hostile political climate of the late fourteenth century. Jones, along with his associated experts, has made common knowledge of the mysteries of the poet’s final days. It’s high time.

Have you asked yourself that burning question yet? If all the copies of his writings disappeared, how can Chaucer’s works exist today? The fact that the entirety of the originals have not been found is tantalizing, fascinating. Who took them? Who kept them? What happened to them—*all of them*—after copies were made? Obviously the manuscripts *were* preserved for a time, otherwise we would not have their reproductions. Were they initially concealed by knowing friends? Can we doubt the presence of, shall we say, a friendly conspiracy? Was a master plan formulated during the poet’s final months? Let’s leave questions behind and consider what we know.

We know, for example, that Chaucer’s last residence was on the grounds of Westminster Abbey. A rental agreement in December 1399 attests to this. A few months later, in June of 1400, an entry records Chaucer’s receiving £5 of his annuity. That is the last recorded transaction naming the poet. Then, with no interim disclosures, we are told he died in October 1400. There is no hint about his daily activities or possible visitors, no indication of illness or cause of death, no details of final arrangements. It is as if he and his worldly possessions had simply ceased to exist.

We also know that, prior to his moving to the Abbey, life in England was in a state of royal upheaval. One needed agility to maintain diplomatic footing as Henry IV wrested the throne from Richard II. Several courtiers, who were supporters of Richard II (and friends of Chaucer), were cruelly executed by the infamous “Merciless Parliament.” One’s allegiance could be a matter of life or death. (It has been provokingly speculated that Chaucer’s motive for living on the grounds of Westminster Abbey could have been to gain the protection of sanctuary.)

Besides supporters of Richard II and Henry IV, there was a third faction—

the Church. One's *religious* leanings could be life-threatening as well. If Chaucer had participated in the heretical Lollard movement, current at the time, such participation would have been an additional hazard. Lollards were hostile to the authority of Rome, pleaded for access to Scripture in the vernacular, condemned celibacy, and advocated simple church décor. By 1399, the movement had been both royally and ecclesiastically silenced.

An author also had to consider that the Church already had a history of book burning. Objectionable works were gathered up and the author censured. His creations (and their message), if condemned, would be destroyed. Physical reprisals varied in severity and included death.

The foregoing hardly describes a “Merry Old England” as the setting of Chaucer's creativity. To limit our impression of him as amusing, bawdy, and bright, is only half the picture. Look again. Find the poet more complex, his creative backdrop filled with shadowy figures and dark recesses. That establishes the mood for our poet's words to go out into the world.

Chaucer, no doubt, had confidential knowledge from his travels across the Continent as emissary of the king—a succession of kings. Beyond the external political scene, on which Terry Jones concentrates, I believe evidence of an internal nature is to be found within Chaucer's images and words. His reputation, for instance, some 200 years hence, gives credence to serious *religious* communication. He had something to say about the Church. No, not simply making fun of a monk who would rather hunt than spend time in prayer—not of ordinary fallible individuals, but the poet peered into the heart of his medieval faith.

The creative journey of his ultimate masterpiece, the *Canterbury Tales*, is studded with gems to be discovered. Many pilgrims, we are told, were thankful for bodily cures attributed to the prayers of St. Thomas à Becket. Though Chaucer would have a different intention, it is most fitting that thoughts of Becket would have inspired the “destination” of his “pilgrimage on paper.” Why? Because his sole aim was not merely to entertain but also to enlighten, to inform, to edify. Who better to supplicate than Becket when in need of courage and

perseverance? I believe Chaucer would have prayed for the courage to inform his readers, to persevere no matter the cost, and to face death (if need be) as St. Thomas had.

Let's join the poet briefly on his pilgrimage to Canterbury. He tells us in the Prologue to the *Tales* that he is alone and ready for his "devout" journey. Then, at the midpoint of the pilgrim trek, Chaucer is asked to tell his tale. He begins with a humorous story of Thopas, a devotee of "pricking." Although students are advised that the word refers to "galloping on a horse," feel free to use an alternate association. Call a prick a prick; see Thopas as being "in the saddle." [An entry in the *Middle English Dictionary* under "priken," that is, "to prick," tells of Jack in "bedde" with a wench. He pricked and pranced while she enjoyed the merriest night ever. Equestrian terms for sexual relations were common long before the Middle Ages.]

When part one of the tale ends, Pilgrim Chaucer asks if his audience wants more of the racy story. If so, he says, "I will *fonde*." *Fonde* is not found in Modern English. In Chaucer's English (see the *MED*) it has several meanings. Notes to aid the student, again, gives the *seventh* definition. The phrase, then, can be read as "I will *strive*." The first definition of *fonde* in the dictionary, however, is a show stopper, a show stopper that's ignored if religious possibilities are disregarded. Subsequent action, nevertheless, bears out the startling revelation—"I will *try the patience of God*." The initial humor of the story takes a turn as the action portrays the end of *patience* toward Thopas' lecherous antics. After just 28 more lines, and *in mid sentence*, the guide of the pilgrims calls a halt. Enough is enough! The filthy story makes his ears ache. A contrite Pilgrim Chaucer makes amends by following with a completely moral offering.

Chaucer closes the collected *Tales* with a prayer at the very end, asking forgiveness for his sins and begging for Christ's mercy and for eternal salvation.

The pricking story takes on a deeply personal aspect when we learn that Chaucer had been accused of rape. Maintaining his good reputation was essential to protect his creations; if he fell into disfavor they could be repudiated and discarded by association. Friends in high places, however, stealthily

intervened to safeguard his good name. Evidence discovered not many years ago by Christopher Cannon confirms “friendly” assistance in minimizing the charge recorded in documents most likely to come into the hands of the king.

The poet's words once elicited serious admiration; they continue to hold a communication not obvious to *everyone*. It is an idea so cleverly concealed that it could be overlooked—and has been. It becomes clear as a reward for those dedicated to pursuing a covert significance. Both intentions are presented; both are to be understood simultaneously, as with “strive” and “try the patience of God.”

The purpose of allegory, such as this, is to hide truth from those without sufficient knowledge, those who do not *work* to gain the hidden reward. The technique serves political and social purposes by the very fact that a reigning authority does not see the underlying interpretation. In the late 1500s, books once again were being scrutinized. Those who “knew” rejoiced when the authorities judged Chaucer's works to be only a diversion.

Why assume a double meaning? First, because multiple levels of a storyline distinguished great works of medieval imagination from the mediocre. No one can deny the greatness of the *Canterbury Tales*. Second, because the poet had thoughts to pass on. How better to hide a serious thought than behind a humorous façade? A conversion from lechery, dramatized by Pilgrim Chaucer, is only one of the messages confided allegorically by the various pilgrim travelers.

Chaucer, seen as a bold spirit, revealed problems by using plain or pleasantly covert words. More than 150 years after his death, readers spoke of him as eloquent, learned, a reformer and teacher of doctrine. One respected writer even said that he knew of persons who, by reading Chaucer, had gained knowledge of true religion. This reputation as a serious religious thinker would not just grow out of thin air. There must have been a long standing (if essentially underground) basis for it. If Chaucer could inspire conversions, isn't it misleading to ignore or deny this capacity? It is not fashionable to talk of religion in criticism/literary analysis, but what are we missing if we do not?

The eighteenth century unwittingly did the poet a disservice when it heaped praise upon his humor and bawdiness. His qualities of nobility, learning, and art became obscured. Serious, somber aspects get little notice. With the stimulating advances in scholarship during the last century, new information has become available. We can hope for the development of a more balanced view of the poet's creativity.

It took genius to avoid suspicion, to escape detection. His courage and keen wit drive me to want to tell his story. It took unknown friends to preserve his works. Will we solve the mystery of Chaucer's disappearing manuscripts? Probably not, but their disappearance is important to acknowledge; it's important to consider what it means. It gives us new knowledge of Chaucer because of *what we don't know*.

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