

CHAUCER: AN INTRODUCTION by S. S. Hussey
University Paperbacks, London, Methuen, 1971, 244pp.

The great strength of Dr Hussey's book is that it takes its title seriously. The publishers assure us that it is 'a gracefully written book, which introduces sixth formers and undergraduates to the most readable of Medieval English poets.' Having decided on his audience, Dr Hussey unfailingly directs his material towards it. The book is designed as an introduction which will be useful, and many of its features derive from this consideration. It is written in a comfortable style which is easily approachable. There are foot-glosses which translate the more difficult Middle English words, and the extensive notes are unobtrusively tucked away, after the American fashion, at the back of the text. The author is not above offering a summary of the action of the Roman de la Rose, or of the narrative framework of the Confessio Amantis, where these might prove illuminating, for, as he points out, a knowledge of this poetry is simply not available to his readers.

The first chapter of the book sets out details of Chaucer's life, writings, and the age in which he wrote. It also considers several matters designed to set the reader thinking about the nature of medieval poetry at the very outset, such as what it meant to be 'literate' in the Middle Ages, and what a poet could expect from a listening audience. Particular attention is given to the portrait of Chaucer which emerges from his poetry. Dr Hussey regards the naive, inexperienced, and easily impressible persona Chaucer presents as a combination of the rhetorical convention of affected modesty and the desire of a court poet to please an audience of superiors. He feels that attempts to explain the differences between the Chaucer represented in public records and the persona encountered in Chaucer's poetry loom too large in modern critical discussion. It is claimed (perhaps too severely) that 'what began as autobiographical dichotomy has ended in critical schizophrenia'.

The characteristic organization of the book becomes apparent in the second chapter. As it is entitled 'Dreams and their Dreamers' one would expect the author to launch immediately into a consideration of Chaucer's early poetry. Instead, the chapter moves leisurely through a discussion of the Roman de la Rose, the conventions of fine amour, and the question of unity in Medieval English literature. Any introduction to Chaucer must consider such matters as these. Dr Hussey's pleasing innovation is to consider such topics as they are suggested by the individual poems he discusses. The matters I have mentioned are not at all arbitrary, but provide a frame work for the discussion of the Book of the Duchess, which follows them.

The technique of first considering general problems, and then the specific works from which they arise is a surprisingly successful one, and it is retained throughout the book. Chapter Three, for example, discusses the use of source study, medieval techniques of characterization, Boethius' influence on Chaucer and Chaucerian tragedy as a preface to Dr Hussey's interpretation of Troilus and Criseyde.

It is in reading Dr Hussey's interpretation of the ending of Troilus and Criseyde that the full value of the Notes becomes apparent. Frank, evaluative comment is made on each of the more important readings of the ending of Troilus. Professor E.T. Donaldson's famous study (recently reprinted in his Speaking of Chaucer) 'somewhat overstresses the intractability of the material', while Mrs Gordon's argument in The Double Sorrow of Troilus 'finds too much deliberate ambiguity'. What the Notes offer, in fact, is a fully annotated bibliography of modern Chaucerian studies. It will be found one of the most useful features of the book.

Much of the book is taken up with a consideration of the Canterbury Tales, which is certainly appropriate, as most of the readers of Dr Hussey's introduction will be coming to Chaucer via the Canterbury road. Chapter IV, which is the first of the two chapters on the Tales, begins plainly enough with a consideration of the Scheme of the Tales, an account of what was left 'un-revised' at Chaucer's death, and a discussion of the possible ordering of the fragments. Dr Hussey then goes on to give an extremely readable account of Chaucer's pilgrims in a delightful blend of critical insight and historical explanation, which is no less lucid from being derived (in good medieval manner) from the standard authorities. Some of the general points Dr Hussey makes are worth noting. He reiterates that the group of Pilgrims is not a complete cross-section of Fourteenth-century society (old myths die hard), but points out that pilgrims connected with the church occupy about half the length of the Prologue, although there are twice as many secular characters. This, he claims, is certainly representative of the power of the church in the Fourteenth-century, which, as well as having unique spiritual authority had also a powerful, central organization.

An introduction to Chaucer can be embarrassed by the abundance of 'God's plenty' in the Canterbury Tales. It is difficult to discuss each tale in less space than is taken by P.G. Ruggiers in The Art of the Canterbury Tales, which makes a valiant attempt to be inclusive. Dr Hussey proposes an elaborate scheme whereby he will divide the tales into four genres, 'and concentrate on one or two tales in each class, invoking the others only occasionally as corroborative evidence'. This, like the scheme Harry Bailey originally devised for the Canterbury tale-tellers, soon breaks down, and we are left with a pleasant, though arbitrary discussion of most of the major tales.

The final chapter offers some of the best things in the book. It is an attempt to fill out the picture of late Medieval English literature, to look at Chaucer in relation to his contemporary poets, and to prevent the idea that Chaucer had any particular monopoly on certain themes and concerns.

First of all, he discusses the role of the dreamer in Ricardian poetry (to use John Burrow's useful term for the work of Chaucer, Langland, Gower, and Gawain poet). Dr Hussey argues that, at the simplest level, the function of these dreamers is to ask questions of a kind the dullest member of the audience would raise. He also points out the extreme literal-mindedness of the dreamer in Pearl and Piers Plowman, and argues that, as the fallible guide of these poems grows in understanding, the poems grow with him.

There is an extremely fine account of the range of attitudes to love in Chaucer. "Troilus and Criseyde pursue the evanescent and fragile pleasure of a fine amour which is finally seen to be ... an estat in which there is litel hertes reste. In the Book of the Duchess, it can be a proper feature of leisured, aristocratic society, or in the Parliament of Foules, a formal, arid, and potentially dangerous pastime." In contrast, Sir Gawain uses fine amour as a way of talking himself out of a delicate situation, and Gower, according to Dr Hussey, offers a most sensitive treatment of fine amour which proves that it is a young man's game.

This final chapter will, I am sure, be the one to which readers will return most often after they have finished this excellent introduction to Chaucer.

J.A. GRAY

AUTUMN FUNERAL

He receives condolences like dead butterflies
while a married daughter hovers nearby.
We each step forward in turn,
self-conscious tokens of past years
who stumble and are afraid of words:
stubbled men in faded blue suits;
a girl in wilted pastels sobbing;
grey businessmen who've brought
further deficits with them;
a group of chattering women,
black, black, crows already.
We offer our inadequacy,
our own meagre hoardings depleted,
and winter ahead.

GRAEME CURTIS.

LAST BUT ONE

The day she died
Like a man-to-be
He folded his paper
Piece by piece
Forsook his chair
And cried.
Habit placed aside
War, murder, rape
Fell off the page
Into the fire
Of a nail here
A kiss there

ROBERT C. BOYCE