

what the conservative South stood for, there was nothing to be alienated from. He was proud to be descended from Confederate veterans, and he was a member in good standing of the Sons of Confederate Veterans, as well as being its Historian-in-Chief. He was also proud to be a Texan and was often seen wearing a Stetson. As a southern bard, Bradford mobilized his considerable talents as a literary scholar and historian to defend the good life as defined in the southern conservative tradition of John Taylor of Caroline, John Randolph of Roanoke, John C. Calhoun, and the Southern Agrarians. It was a conservatism similar to that of Edmund Burke's, which considered the "unbought grace of life" more important than a higher gross national product, valued freedom more highly than security, and defended the prerogatives of Burke's "little platoons" and private property against the ever encroaching leviathan state.

In his essay "Walking the Levee with Mel Bradford," James McClellan notes that when the history of twentieth-century America is written, "M.E. Bradford will be remembered as the plucky schoolmaster who opened the doors to a restoration of the Southern conservative tradition." This tradition involves the defense of "limited constitutional government, local self-government, political and cultural diversity, protection of the rural environment and way of life, encouragement of religion, and promotion of family and community institutions." Thanks to people such as Bradford, the South has remained the most conservative section of the nation, but it is also capable of producing a Bill Clinton and an Al Gore, two manifestations of the canker eating at the heart of the republic. The question is whether the doors opened by Bradford will be used primarily by those entering the mansion of southern conservatism or by those leaving it.

The Spirit of the Fourteenth Century

E. CATHERINE DUNN

Chaucer and the Late Medieval

World, by Lillian M. Bisson, *New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999. x + 294 pp.*

THIS IS THE MOST CHALLENGING book that I have read in the last twenty years, but also the most engaging. It is not a volume of primary research but rather an admirable gathering and organizing of a tremendous collection of secondary materials. It is the product of two institutes sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities, and directed to secondary school teachers. It is based on the premise that Chaucer used his poetry as an attempt to understand and evaluate the confusing world of the late fourteenth century in which he lived. There are many citations of scholars from the so-called New Historicism, but I judge the book as an effort at literary history in the broadest sense of the term. Because the author often traces events of the fourteenth century back to their roots in the earlier Middle Ages, the scope and detail of the study are at times overwhelming. Its topics are as follows: Chaucer's role as poet; religion in the late medieval world; class consciousness and class struggle; love and marriage; and the carnival spirit as the cultural characteristic of the age.

E. CATHERINE DUNN is Professor Emerita in the Department of English at Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., and author of various studies in medieval literature.

Professor Lillian Bisson questions what role Chaucer selected as his own in the writing of his verse: "maker" or poet. She follows the lead of Glending Olson in deciding that Chaucer was a "maker" who matured into a poet. She interprets the role of maker to be that of a courtly entertainer, writing society verse for the pleasure of a wealthy and leisured audience—a role equivalent to dancing master, card player, or choral singing director. As a versifier he was expected to be adept at technical manipulation of prosody, rhyming, and clever repartee.

As Chaucer grew older and more serious, he became a story-teller of great narratives in world literature, from ancient classics like the Trojan war epics and the medieval *corpus* of knightly adventure and romantic love. In this later role he became a poet, a moralist, and a seeker for knowledge about the meaning of human life and its problems in his time. The basic surprise for the modern reader that Bisson offers, however, is the theory of Chaucer's withdrawal in the final years of his compositional artistry from his elevated role into a pose as "Master of the Revels." In the last chapter she explores the carnival spirit that some writers find prevailing in the late Middle Ages of European culture.

The section on religion contains three chapters: the Church in turmoil, the clergy, and popular religion. The first topic is the record of abuses within the Church, especially the alleged conflicts over papal power and the authority of local bishops, culminating in the Great Schism of the late fourteenth century, and the papal residence in Avignon instead of in Rome. Bisson then considers the conflicts between parish clergy and the mendicant religious orders (Franciscan and Dominican), and finally the individual devotional lives of the laity.

All of these subjects are examined, weighed, and evaluated with admirable efforts at objectivity and fairness. My

judgment, in general, is that these conflicts and their backgrounds in earlier medieval centuries are full of complexities that could not be covered in the seventy pages here given to them, especially since other massive issues like class conflicts and economic struggles are also a part of the overarching survey made in the book.

In the fifth chapter of this section there is an analysis of the pilgrimage metaphor underlying the *Canterbury Tales*. The metaphor is the key to the unity of the poem, but also a way of understanding the popular religious devotion of Chaucer's time. Bisson sees pilgrimage as the laity's substitute in the quest of perfection made by monks and the fraternal orders. Moreover, pilgrimage was closely involved with the cult of the saints, since the shrine of a martyr or other holy person was the usual goal of a pilgrimage journey. The search might be for a miraculous cure or for spiritual healing.

There were abuses connected with pilgrimage journeys. Persons of ill repute, thieves, or mere vacationers were among those who traveled, and church authorities recognized the threats that hangers-on represented. Chaucer's Pardoner is an example: the bearer of fake relics that duped some pious persons eager for a piece of clothing or an object once owned by a saint. Pilgrimages tended to decline on account of these abuses and also because spirituality in the fourteenth century grew toward inner devotion to Christ and the Virgin Mary in place of the external journey to a saint's shrine.

I sense the lack of consideration given here to the role of the great fourteenth-century mystics, who are crowded out of the section on popular religion. For England, Richard Rolle and Juliana of Norwich were comparable in the religious life of the time to Bridget of Sweden and Catherine of Siena on the Continent. There is, moreover, a tradition of devo-

tional prose writings that permeated the literature of the late Middle Ages, some of them anonymous. Walter Hilton's *Scale of Perfection* is an example of this genre. Directed largely to women in convents, who could not read the books of Latin spirituality, they nevertheless reached out to the general populace and leavened their religious life. Anchoritic men and women were sought out by the laity for spiritual advice, and some of them recorded their mystical visions in ways appealing both to the learned and to the unlearned. The present book makes reference to Juliana of Norwich only once, in a passage puzzling in its interpretation.

The three chapters at the center of the book, under the caption of "Class and Commerce," are concerned with the ideals and the reality of aristocratic chivalry, with the peasantry's rebellion, and with the economy of the late medieval world. Although these chapters marshal a large collection of differing views of Chaucer's attitude toward chivalric values and also the role of the peasants' rebellious activity, the upshot of this quest remains doubtful. It is a moot question at the end of the survey whether or not Chaucer was criticizing the aristocratic code of honor—military bravery, fealty to an overlord, and knightly service to widows and orphans.

A number of recent commentators on Chaucer's view of chivalry are cited in this chapter; for example, Lee Patterson's judgment that he portrayed chivalry as a failure in the "Knight's Tale" because it was absorbed in its own logic and could not respond to the social changes of the late medieval world. Again, R.F. Yeager is quoted as seeing Chaucer as a pacifist, one who opposed war and military heroism throughout his work in an implicit way, especially in the "Tale of Sir Thopas" and the "Tale of Melibee." On the other hand, Charles Muscatine had found the "Knight's Tale" a glorification of chivalry

and the noble life, and many other earlier commentators had regarded the Knight as an idealized portrait.

The difficulty of these questions offers an opportunity to reflect on Chaucer's general involvement in social theory and criticism. It seems to me that his adoption of a *persona*, or mask, as an uninformed, shy, and reticent observer, is his way of defeating an attempt to make him out as a social critic. Moreover, the *Canterbury Tales* belongs, in a free and easy way, to the genre of dream vision literature, to which several of the major poems of the Middle Ages are related. These works are quests for knowledge, from Guillaume de Lorris's *Roman de la Rose* to Dante's *Divina Commedia* to William Langland's *Piers Plowman*. The narrator poses as a confused or uninformed *persona* in order to justify the search for values, wisdom, or spiritual guidance. He meets many "teachers" along the way and subtly permits himself to appear as a youth, a sinner, or even a fool. Although the pilgrimage framework takes the place of a dream in the *Canterbury Tales*, the situation is generically the same as that of the vision.

Bisson shows very well that Chaucer had a balancing act to perform in the class conflicts of his day. Born into a merchant family—vintners—and not into the aristocracy, he nevertheless gained positions of importance in the royal establishment, under his Lancastrian patron, John of Gaunt. In the Peasants' Rebellion of 1381, Gaunt's residence was attacked by the citizens of London and the peasants; he himself escaped harm only because he was away from home at the time. Bisson indicates that Chaucer could not have been safe, or indifferent to the peasants' cause, and yet his references to the rebellion are few and indirect throughout his poetry.

The chapters concerned with gender, love, and marriage in the Middle Ages have a very modern ring because they

confront the well-known antifeminism of the medieval period. Bisson attempts to avoid the spectrum of hostile views among modern feminine writers on Chaucer. She calls attention to the fact that antifeminism was prevalent long before the medieval age, and that misogyny forms a backdrop for the later developments. Moreover, she finds in Chaucer's great romantic heroines a series of sensitively drawn portraits: Constance, Griselda, Emilye, even Criseyde. One of the finest sections of the present book occurs on pages 204-210, in which Chaucer's heroines emerge as stately and impressive figures, perhaps modelled on women he had known at the English court, like Blanche, Duchess of Lancaster, and John of Gaunt's first wife.

Courtly Love is a shadowy theme in the traditions of the Middle Ages, and a much debated subject in historical study. According to the code in lyric poetry and narrative, woman (usually a married one) was worshipped as a kind of goddess, inspiring the devotion of a lover, who undertook feats of martial bravery as proof of his attachment. While this concept, originating in French poetry and narrative, figures largely in Arthurian romance, Bisson cites D.W. Robertson's view that Courtly Love was simply an elaborate game in the literature of the Middle Ages rather than a social reality (*Preface to Chaucer*, 1962), an option that I myself favor.

The outspoken Wyf of Bath, in her prologue and tale, is all that the antifeminists have said about woman, but she is a caricature needed to balance off the patience of Griselda in the Clerk's tale. She is, in fact, one of the great comic characters of world literature, comparable to Shakespeare's masculine portrait of Falstaff, and she is rightly presented in the present book not as a sardonic example of feminism gone awry, but as a rollicking exaggeration of the

"book of wikked wyves" that her fifth husband, Jankyn, reads to her in self-defense.

The final chapter, "A Zone of Freedom," gives me pause. It is a survey of popular customs and festivals based on folk beliefs and practices many centuries old, traceable to the Saturnalian spirit of ancient Rome. There was a strong tendency in these customs to rebellion, and the overturning of authority and public order.

The spirit of the fourteenth century becomes, in this final chapter of Bisson's, dominantly "carnavalesque," a thrust against traditional authority, religious and secular. This is a view thoroughly in line with "New Historicist" theory, especially as it appears in the works of the Russian critic, Mikhail Bakhtin, which Bisson cites in translation.

When this rebellious texture is found in Chaucer's poetry, a new interpretation of his art emerges. The carnivalesque becomes more than an occasional intrusion into the *Canterbury Tales* through the fabliaux. It becomes the central meaning of the poem, as Alfred David claims; and Chaucer appears as the "Lord of Misrule," taking holiday from his philosophical poise and his status in the royal court of England. I see this interpretation of Chaucer as the negation of his growth from "maker" to "poet." All of this secularization supposedly happens in his masterpiece at the close of his life. I do not agree.

Chaucer and the Late Medieval World is a valuable contribution to a study of the fourteenth century and of Chaucer. The older scholarship had been largely a literary criticism, from G.L. Kittredge to Charles Muscatine. This study is one with a sociological approach—in harmony with the dominant interests of our world in the twenty-first century.