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INTRODUCTION

Placing the Past

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Collections of essays on Chaucer, whether handbooks, introductions, or companions, are numerous. While they vary in terms of what they seek to offer readers, they share some common features: above all, a preoccupation with time. They seek at once to place Chaucer in his own historical moment and, in some sense, to place him in our current moment, or even to use him to frame contemporary social and cultural issues. Chaucer's work is both seen as fundamental to a national, English literary history, and described as universal, almost 'modern' in its attentiveness to human nature, the nuances of social structures, and the interior life of the individual subject.

This history of responses to Chaucer, especially regarding the temporal paradox—where Chaucer is seen as being at once genuinely 'medieval' and strikingly 'modern'—is a useful backdrop to the present volume, which places his works in a significantly different context. We have sought throughout to juxtapose contributions by well-established Middle English scholars with chapters by specialists in other fields—Latin and vernacular literature, philosophy, theology, history of science—in order to produce a view of Chaucer's works that is stereoscopic. We intend to produce a complex view, one that does not so much look from the outside into the works of Chaucer as to inhabit the works of Chaucer looking out. For example, instead of soliciting essays by scholars working in Middle English studies who have an interest in medieval French or Italian literature, we have sought out those who are specialists in Machaut or Boccaccio; or instead of a Chaucerian interested in science or theology, we have sought out specialists in those areas, asking them to give an account of the intellectual history in which Chaucer's writings are embedded. In other cases, we have solicited work from scholars whose work sits clearly at the centre of Chaucer studies. By juxtaposing these perspectives, we are able to compose a handbook that breaks new ground and offers substantial room for growth of the field in fresh directions.

Before turning to an overview of this handbook's contents, it may be useful to offer a brief comparative summary of other introductions, handbooks, and companions to

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Chaucer, focusing on how each positions the work relative to their own moment in time. This review is not exhaustive but selective, with the purpose being to draw out some important—yet implicit—assumptions concerning temporality and Chaucer. It is first worth noting the kinds of titles that accrue to these volumes: handbook; companion; introduction. What kind of reader is called into being by these labels, and what kind of relationship? That is, how is the book positioned relative to the reader? If a 'companion', an implicit affective relationship is posited, where the book serves almost as a mentor—a kind of Virgil to the reader's Dante. If a 'handbook', the reader is being positioned as a kind of technician who seeks to get to work, requiring only an instruction manual and the right 'tools' to take apart and reassemble the text before him. If an 'introduction', a naive or developing reader is assumed, who needs to be led by the hand.

Accordingly, this spectrum of perspectives is evident in the history of publication: among those books that are most clearly directed at the student as opposed to the specialist, we find some that almost serve as a textbook, such as (for example) Gail Ashton's *The Canterbury Tales*.[1] Peter Brown's 2011 *Geoffrey Chaucer* addresses a similar readership, and is noteworthy for the ways in which it emphasizes a connection not only to the medieval past but also to the student-reader's own moment in time.[2] The volume concludes with a section titled 'New Contexts', and its last subheading reads 'Tomorrow'. Harold Bloom's edited collections *Geoffrey Chaucer* and *Geoffrey Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales* (in the eponymous series 'Bloom's Literary Criticism', also explicitly address the novice reader.[3]

Among the volumes addressing more experienced readers, Piero Boitani and Jill Mann's *Cambridge Companion to Chaucer* stands out for its systematic nature.[4] Like Brown's 2011 volume, this one also ends with a future-oriented perspective, with Carolyn Dinshaw's contribution 'New Approaches to Chaucer'. Another fine volume by Brown, *A Companion to Chaucer*, addresses the advanced reader and even problematizes the very undertaking of the volume itself, opening with a self-reflective piece on 'The Idea of a Chaucer Companion'.[5] The alphabetical ordering of the book's twenty-nine chapters is particularly interesting: while not every letter of the alphabet is represented, and some letters have multiple essays, the effect produced is one of comprehensiveness and underlying order. The book literally runs the gamut from A to Z.

Steve Ellis's *Chaucer: An Oxford Guide* similarly sets out a comprehensive scope, with relatively short pieces by a large number of contributors producing a kind of mosaic effect.[6] The volume's penultimate section is titled 'Afterlife', followed by a final section dedicated to 'study resources', separated into 'printed resources' and 'electronic resources'. In its effort to include online resources even within the setting of a print volume, Ellis's *Chaucer* looks forward to the central role of web-based resources in Chaucer studies. These include a wide range of formal and informal online fora, as well as *The Open Access Companion to the Canterbury Tales*, produced by an 'Editorial Collective' made up of Candace Barrington, Brantley Bryant, Richard Godden, Daniel Kline, and Myra Seaman.[7] The editors' self-awareness of the temporality of online resources is signalled in the project's landing page, which identifies the author as 'The Editorial Collective of The Open Access Companion to the Canterbury Tales, Summer 2015–September 2017'.

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The specificity of this time frame both reflects the period of the editors' initial work and also signals the ephemeral—or, seen from another perspective, up-to-date—nature of the online 'companion'. This emergence of the Open Access companion signals a new horizon, where ongoing crowd-sourced research and peer review offers new scholarly outlets and different patterns of textual circulation both for academics and lay readers.

This very brief, highly selective, and far from exhaustive overview is relevant to the present work not just in general terms, outlining the kinds of functions that a handbook might be expected to serve, but also in bringing out the assumptions concerning time, space, and order that have underlain these earlier examples of the genre. Just about all of the volumes noted above have a peculiar relationship to time. They tend to open with a section titled something like (for example) 'The Age of Chaucer', or with a series of essays that ground Chaucer in his historical moment; and they tend to conclude not in the present moment of the volume's editor but rather—interestingly—by looking forward into the future.[8] This can be seen, for example, with the closing header 'Tomorrow' in Brown's 2011 volume, the conclusion 'New Approaches' in Boitani and Mann's *Cambridge Companion*, and the forward-looking 'electronic resources' that close Ellis's Oxford guide. It is significant that these closing moves do not consist of an effort to link Chaucer's time with our own time, but rather to link the medieval past with some projected future moment: that is, not the now, but what lies ahead of the now. What is suggested by this move is the notion that Chaucer is relevant not just to our own time, but to some potential future time—or, even, relevant to all times, including a range of moments that both extend back into the past and onward into the future. What's suggested is that the end date, the expiration date of Chaucer's relevance, always lies ahead of where we are.

In some ways, this temporal positioning of Chaucer is similar to what we see in the field of Shakespeare studies, where the work is assumed to have not only an enduring pedagogical value but also a 'universal' human appeal. The field of 'Global Shakespeare' studies, along with its little sibling 'Global Chaucers', builds upon this aspiration to capaciousness and universality, suggesting that the works of a single author can offer a kind of epitome or microcosm of humanity itself. Some formulations of this 'universal' quality are explicitly colonial and normative, projecting outward from an imagined stable cultural centre. Others, however, are explicitly postcolonial and explore how different people and different cultures 'write back' to the imperial centre through their appropriation and adaptation of the canonical work, recreating the work of the 'dead white male' writer so that it emerges as a work of art that is, always and essentially, something different.

Chaucer—again like Shakespeare—plays a peculiar role in the stories we tell ourselves about English literary history. In survey courses, and in departmental hiring patterns, Chaucer is consistently positioned as *the* medieval writer, as Shakespeare is for the Renaissance. This is not the place to go into the long history of how the 'medieval' was invented, and especially the ways in which Chaucer specifically was identified, in Spenser's words, as 'the well of English undefiled'; [9] it is impossible to ignore, however, the extent to which the fantasy of a pure ('undefiled') language serves the ends of an

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emergent sense of national identity, from Spenser's time through the emergence of English as a field of study in the nineteenth century. The national philology underlying this view of Chaucer can also be compared with the role of Dante—and the Florentine vernacular—in the self-fashioning of Italian national identity, especially as it was developed in the nineteenth century. The history of the discipline of English is inseparable from the invention of Chaucer as a figure who can be at once localized to the medieval past and also generalized as a man for all times, whose premodern nature aligns seamlessly with an endlessly renewable 'modern' quality.

The implicit claim of universality that is yoked to the study of Chaucer's works is worth reconsidering, whether it be grounded in the apparent social realism of the General Prologue that was a preoccupation of Chaucer scholarship from the nineteenth century through Jill Mann's seminal study of estates satire, or in the multicultural and multilingual engagement and adaptation that is the focus of 'Global Chaucers'. To what extent can this claim to universality stand? What is the ground on which we justify the continued centrality of Chaucer to our discipline? Instead of taking these difficult questions head on, the chapters contained in this handbook address them obliquely, offering a range of perspectives on what we might call the troublesome side of diversity. Confronting the anti-Judaism or antisemitism of the Canterbury Tales, as in Steven Kruger's chapter, or the persistence of Hebrew literature in medieval England, as in Ruth Nisse's contribution, allows us to reflect on what was suppressed or elided in the construction of English literary history on the shoulders of Chaucer. Considering the Arabic sources and analogues of the frame tale tradition, as in Karla Mallette's chapter, allows us to decentre not just English literature but European frame tale models more generally, considering the wider scope of literary dissemination and circulation that lies behind the early modern emergence of national literatures. We expect these interventions to open up new directions in future scholarship. Beyond these, the medical accounts of bodily diversity found in the writings of the fourteenth-century physician Henry Daniel, studied by E. Ruth Harvey, offer new insights into the premodern understandings of racialized identities. Similarly, the conceptions of 'nation' found in the medieval histories of Troy described by Marilynn Desmond and in the Anglo-French chronicle of Nicholas Trevet that is the focus of Suzanne Akbari's chapter, underlie the premodern conceptions of collective identity that emerge in Chaucer's narratives of Thebes and Troy. In other words, this handbook offers a range of perspectives on some of the issues that are now central to the field of Chaucer studies, and to the discipline of English more generally, including national or ethnic identities, religious difference, bodily diversity, and race.

What then, is the role of a Chaucer handbook in the current moment? And what is our temporal attitude toward Chaucer and his work right now? Is this volume simply one more in a long history of volumes—companions, handbooks, introductions, and guides—that seek to situate Chaucer relative to their own historical moment? In other words, is this volume reflective of its historical moment in the same way that they all are? Or is there something distinctive about this historical moment, in terms of how the discipline of English is evolving, and how our own sense of temporality is changing with

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reference to our object of study? It is impossible to deny that the last two decades have brought about a sea change in medieval studies, in part mediated through the fields of queer theory and history of religion, where affective links to the past enable a sort of temporal transgression, whether expressed in terms of a 'queer touch' (in the words of Caroline Dinshaw)[10] or a 'desire for the past' (in the words of Nicholas Watson).[11] The field of Chaucer studies does not remain undisturbed by this affective turn, which is particularly felt in current scholarship that addresses race, gender, and sexuality in the context of the writer's works. To what extent is our willingness to import the past into our own historical moment, or to project ourselves back into that historical past, at work in today's Chaucer studies? And will Chaucer studies—and even, more generally, the discipline of English itself—look the same in the wake of this turning point? If there is a way forward, it lies in the very heterogeneity of what Chaucer's works offer, which is in part based in the unfinished nature of so much of the work—above all, the *Canterbury Tales*—that in turn engenders a profound heterogeneity of readerly response.

It is this heterogeneity that we have sought to provoke in the selection of contributors to the present handbook. We invited those who are not primarily Middle English specialists to write the chapters on other literary traditions, not simply following the conventional summary of Chaucer's so-called 'French period' and 'Italian period' but rather engaging seriously with the wider linguistic context of late fourteenth-century Europe. We invited specialists in philosophy, history of science, and theology to write the chapters on these contexts for Chaucer's works, mindful that their contributions would not be the last word on Chaucer's own philosophical, scientific, and theological commitments: instead, the chapters gathered in our handbook would be the spur for precisely these new areas of development within Chaucer studies. In other words, we were determined to get outside of the Middle English bubble, and particularly to get out of the Chaucer bubble, in order to see what new regions we might begin to map out within this *terra incognita*.

Our cover image seeks to make this shift in perspective visible, showing a familiar geographical region—north-western Europe—from a point of view that may be less familiar: the world map of al-Idrisi (Abu Abdallah Muhammad ibn Muhammad ibn Abdallah ibn Idris, ca. 1100–66). On this map, which is south-oriented (south at the top), England appears as a promontory extending downward from the European continent, although England (and Scotland) are depicted in elaborate detail on a separate page of Idrisi's *Nuzhat al-mushtāq fī ikhtirāq al-āfāq* ('Book of pleasant journeys into faraway lands'). Also called the *Tabula Rogeriana*, or 'Book of Roger', due to the patronage of Roger II, Norman King of Sicily (1095–1154), this series of regional maps organized sequentially by latitude or climate drew both on Islamic mapmaking traditions and those available at the royal court at Palermo. Yet, as Karen Pinto reminds us, we cannot simply take this image as representative of twelfth-century geographical perspectives, since the earliest manuscript witnesses of Idrisi's maps date from the fourteenth century; and we cannot take it as representative of Islamic mapping practices, since Idrisi's work is in many ways separate from the mainstream tradition.[12] Moreover, the intricate detail of Idrisi's climate maps are not reflected in the world map that opens the volume; as Marina

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Tolmacheva notes, this is 'in the classical Islamic cartographic tradition, unrelated to al-Idrisi's own system and not mentioned in the text. There is no direct evidence that al-Idrisi ever drew one complete world map following his own projection and incorporating all the seventy sections.'[13] We can, however, see this world map as representative of the spatial and hermeneutic perspectives that our handbook seeks to provide: defamiliarizing familiar territories; drawing in twelfth-century textual traditions and their mediation through late medieval reception; and providing a Mediterranean perspective on premodern English literary history that seeks to re-centre the field—however provisionally—and to chart out new courses for future research.

The handbook opens with an introductory section 'Biography and Circumstances of Daily Life', exploring the diplomatic, legal, economic, codicological, and rhetorical contexts for Chaucer's life and works. These chapters historicize the writer and his production, understood both as labour and as material codex. We then turn to a pair of complementary groupings: 'Chaucer in the Mediterranean Frame', and 'Chaucer in the European Frame'. Each of these sections situates the Middle English text within the context of other literary traditions: Arabic and Hebrew, French and Italian, as well as Latin. In both sections, we have been guided by our principle of dual perspectives, with contributions by scholars who are specialists in their various fields juxtaposed with contributions by Middle English specialists. Significantly, we have not sought to place Chaucer's writings within the context of 'World Literature' or 'Global Chaucers', instead opting for a networked approach that highlights regions of connectivity, entanglement, and cultural exchange. The next two sections, 'Philosophy and Science in the Universities' and 'Christian Doctrine and Religious Heterodoxy', turn to the context of intellectual history that informs Chaucer's writings. Again, we have juxtaposed work by Middle English specialists with those working in other fields—philosophy, history of science, and theology—in order to maintain a stereoscopic view of the literature. The volume concludes with 'The Chaucerian Afterlife', considering the strands of continuity that emerge in the writings of Gower, Lydgate, Hoccleve, and Henryson. By embedding Chaucer within a series of conceptual contexts, each of which situates this eclectic and capacious figure within a different framework, our handbook breaks fresh ground and offers opportunities for a new generation of investigations in the field.

Notes

1. Gail Ashton, *The Canterbury Tales* (New York: Continuum, 2007).
2. Peter Brown, *Geoffrey Chaucer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011)
3. Harold Bloom, *Geoffrey Chaucer* (New York: Bloom's Literary Criticism, 2007); Harold Bloom, *Geoffrey Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales* (New York: Bloom's Literary Criticism, 2008).
4. Piero Boitani and Jill Mann, *Cambridge Companion to Chaucer*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003)
5. Peter Brown, *A Companion to Chaucer* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000).
6. Steve Ellis, *Chaucer: An Oxford Guide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

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7. Candace Barrington, Brantley Bryant, Richard Godden, Daniel Kline, and Myra Seaman, eds., *The Open Access Companion to the Canterbury Tales*, opencanterburytales.dsl.lsu.edu/
8. Dieter Mehl, 'Introduction: The Age of Chaucer', *English Literature in the Age of Chaucer*, ed. Dieter Mehl (New York: Longman, 2001), 1–8.
9. Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, 4.2.32.
10. Carolyn Dinshaw, 'Chaucer's Queer Touches/A Queer Touches Chaucer', *Exemplaria* 7.1 (1995): 75–92.
11. Nicholas Watson, 'Desire for the Past', *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 21 (1999): 59–97.
12. Karen C. Pinto, *Medieval Islamic Maps: An Exploration* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 24–5.
13. Marina Tolmacheva, 'The Medieval Arabic Geographers and the Beginnings of Modern Orientalism', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 27 (1995): 141–56, quotation from 147.

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