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## Review of *Social Chaucer*, by Paul Strohm

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COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

SOCIAL CHAUCER. By Paul Strohm. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989.  
236 p.

Paul Strohm's *Social Chaucer* argues that late fourteenth-century England knew two social paradigms, the "hierarchy of high medieval tradition" and a society "horizontally arranged, commercial, secular and based in finite time." Chaucer in the main expressed the latter paradigm. In support of these ideas, Strohm presents the notions that the sacred feudal homage relation was, in Chaucer's time, rapidly being replaced by relationships of contract; that new, less rigid social descriptions going beyond the three-estate one had appeared; and that Chaucer's audience comprised members of the king's affinity who more or less belonged to the new group—"gentle civil servants and litterateurs"—an audience that, moving from the *Book of the Duchess* to the *Canterbury Tales* and late minor poems, is increasingly made up of equals and near equals.

According to Strohm, Chaucer's poetry deals with such audiences' world views, to some extent questioning them. In the *Canterbury pilgrimage*, the traditional characters—Knight, Parson, Plowman—represent the unworkable old classes while the Merchant, Friar, Franklin and many other pilgrimage characters ideate a new world of selfishness, trade-offs, convenient oaths, and flexibility for a fourteenth-century audience caught between an "unworkable feudal ideal and a congeries of eminently workable but manifestly cynical postfeudal arrangements." Chaucer's treatment of time examines the contrast between the new "merchants' time" that looks toward secular efficiency and profit and an old "church time" that gives temporal activity a significance in relation to eternity, e.g., in the differences between the external and temporal emphases in the *Parliament* and *The Knight's Tale/Miller's Tale* complex. Chaucer's partial subscription to the new view also appears in his adoption of the Aristotelian view of social relations as natural—e.g., in the election of Harry Bailly as governor of the pilgrimage. This Aristotelian underpinning in turn leads in the tales

to a stripping of authority from heavenly and earthly hierarchies and the creation of a flexible series of pilgrimage voices, each of which offers a partial truth.

Though Strohm argues for the existence of a horizontally organized and permeable society in the late fourteenth century, segments of Chaucer's society, especially those close to him, were actually less permeable or horizontal than they had been in earlier times. Part of Strohm's evidence for a new society is the decline of sacralized chivalric induction ceremonies, but these were elaborated in the High Middle Ages in connection with crusading wars and were never universal. The crusading Order of the Passion to which many of Chaucer's patrons and friends belonged posited, in its *ordo*, a sacralized and hierarchical chivalric ideal similar to that used by earlier crusaders. Furthermore, medieval contracts were not less "sacred" than oaths of homage; the discarded oaths and oral contracts treated in the *Franklin's Tale* are not comic because they are "finite contracts" (p. 106) to be renegotiated but because, as that "gentle litterateur" Boccaccio suggests, they are promises to do evil in the name of a false "trouthe." Chaucer's ballade, "Truth," makes clear what the basis of trothpledging ought to be.

In England, democratic horizontalism was hardly in vogue in ruling or adjacent circles. Wycliff favored a marked centralization of royal power despite his attacks on extreme papalist doctrines, and "the king's affinity" and Chaucer's circle of friends included a good number of Lollard knights. As Pantin has shown, in the early fourteenth century a high proportion of the bishops were administrators or civil servants, often from rather humble backgrounds. Under Richard most were of aristocratic family (e.g. Chaucer's associate Arundel). Richard's judges, some of them also appearing in the *Chaucer Life-Records*, reinforce an authoritarian posture through much of his reign. Richard's chronicles speak of his sitting high on a throne, lifted up so that anyone catching his eye was obliged to kneel; Henry IV's reign in 1401 installed the system of burning heretics under "De Haeretico Comburendo."

Fourteenth-century civilization did create a new international commercialism that affected England's war effort, wool trade, rural rents, friar penances, trade in papal indulgences, and a variety of other social institutions. Chaucer does not treat the monetarization of social relationships without irony. The poets he admired, the intellectuals in his circle, and his disciples who wrote about these matters—from Dante to Gower to the members of the Order of the Passion to Lydgate—treat these changes as either a mixed blessing or a bane. Chaucer's job as controller of customs did not invite him so much to support the great merchants as to keep a watchful eye on them in behalf of royal taxes, and his role in the wool trade and Italian diplomatic negotiations does not suggest the engaged merchant advocate. If he saw the international pursuit of mercantile or social satisfaction as a complete or even a partial good, he certainly embedded his references to the Epicurean conception of the good in pseudo-myths less persuasively attractive, more qualified, than they might be: the portraits of the Franklin, of January in the garden, and of the Wife of Bath's dance of wit and wisdom.

The Hundred Years War, the "Peasants" Revolt, the London conspiracies of Brembre and Northampton, the *rouitiers*, the bands of marauding rural workers, the wars of chivalric thugs like Bernabo Visconti or Sir John Hawkwood, the 1383 "diarrhea" crusade, the Derby revolt, and the execution of Richard do not suggest a society pleasantly governed by gentle civil servants and litterateurs, and many from Chaucer's "affinity," including Chaucer himself, were involved in the repression of disorder and the undertaking of dangerous diplomatic missions. Curiously, Strohm treats few of these topical or historical references in the *Canterbury Tales*—or in

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other poems—that might have reinforced or countered his thesis.

A governing social group without permeability is a group without access to the competence it needs to govern. This is as true in John of Salisbury's time as in Chaucer's. Gaunt's emphasis on using persons from outside the clerical orders in civil government may have led to slightly more use of a learned chivalric group to serve the court and government in learned roles and less importation of clerics. Of course, urban horizontal relationships in guild structures, religious confraternities, international chivalric orders, friar chapters, and the like go back well before Richard's period though they do expand in the fifteenth century. Finally, J. M. W. Bean's *From Lord to Patron*, published too late for Strohm to use it, dispatches the theory of "bastard feudalism" on which Strohm mounts his argument about social change and shows both the continuities of expectation that united English lord and follower from Beowulf to the Renaissance and the regional and temporal variations in these continuities (e. g. a contract system for obtaining soldiers goes back at least to William the Conqueror).

While the fiction of the *Canterbury Tales* is a fiction of a casually amused tale-telling society governed by a self-appointed Harry Bailly, who stands to reap private profits from the feast he proposes at the end of the tale-tellings, the problems of the "horizontal" sectors do erupt in the fight of the Miller and Reeve, of the Friar and Summoner, of the Manciple with the Cook. The Knight's impatience with the Monk and the Parson's with the Host present problems in the "rulership" of the pilgrimage. Each of these outbursts, when related to the social evils described in the "General Prologue," gives us a "trace" of destructive horizontal conflicts back home. Strohm says "Chaucer has virtually excluded the peasantry" from the *Canterbury Tales* (p. 174). But the manor is present in the Reeve and Miller and serfdom in the Reeve, and both Miller and Reeve—the Miller as representative of the lord and the Reeve as an "elevated" peasant—are represented as mercilessly exploiting the serfs of the estates on which they serve, the Reeve creating fear in his fellow peasants comparable to fear of the plague. If the Miller and Reeve are part of the new, more workable horizontal social order, their actions toward those beneath them are so unjust and inhumane that one wonders whether workability works.

Strohm is to be commended for attending to the generic characteristics of Chaucer's works and using these as indices to their semiology. However, he does not give a complete account. For example, he correctly notes that the *Knight's Tale* is a "storie" (lines. 3110-11; p. 130), that is, in Boccaccio's phrase, an *istoria* or history (which Strohm recognizes as related to the epic). He does not state that the common designations for the epic are the *carmen heroicum*, a metrical designation, or mixed fiction, a story mixing fable and history or that Boccaccio also calls the *Teseida* an *istoria* at the same time as he interprets the actions of Venus and Mars as fables for the stars and their effects on the passions in his *chiose*. Strohm's lack of attention to the fable element in the *Knight's Tale* leads him to a misreading. Since Theseus is included in the chronicles as a historical character, his *Knight's Tale* "story" is a history, but Chaucer also makes clear that "Saturnus the colde" is a planet who has a "cours so wyde . . . to turn" that he controls melancholy and contemplation, melancholy Chaucer has related to mania and fury in lines 1373-76; and Saturn makes a fury destroy Arcita. Pretty clearly, Saturn's daughter Venus and her rival "complexioun" (line. 2475), Mars, are also the planets carrying these names and their unruly complexions. The "Juppiter" of line 2442 is also a planet having physical effects. He is not "the kyng." The notion that the machinery of the gods aside from Jove himself is a fabulous *figura* for physical passions and events is as old as Servius

and embedded in every major medieval commentary on the *Aeneid*, Dante, the *Thebiad* and *Teseida*, including Walsingham's brief remarks on the *Aeneid* in the *Prohemia Poetarum*. Chaucer uses the interpreting habits in which his audience is trained. Yet Strohm treats all of Chaucer's Knight's "gods" not as time-bound passions and planets but as eternal gods controlled by the personification of disorder, Saturn.

Theseus and the Knight only place the "Firste Moevere," or "Juppiter, the kyng," who is clearly not the planet of line 2475, in the Timaeon-Boethian eternity. Theseus ascribes to Jupiter the ultimate ordering of nature's "necessitee," including by implication the necessity of planets and passions, Martian death and Venus's marriage. If Chaucer wished to show "unruly celestials" calling "hierarchy itself into question" (p. 138), he would surely not have placed his unruly celestials mimetically within time and had his tyrant-killing, order-creating Theseus announce at the work's end the superposed order of Jove that makes the partial evil of the work into universal good. Nothing in the poem requires us to believe Theseus wrong (p. 133) or Saturn in ultimate control; no medieval audience would believe a planet controlled the First Mover, and nothing in the tone of Theseus's first speech suggests that he is a fool or a Pangloss. History writing in the fourteenth century proceeded in a variety of modes, for various purposes, and underwriting a variety of assumptions about events, as John Taylor has shown us, but none of these is the historical mode of Strohm's *Knight's Tale*.

Strohm has written a thoroughly readable book. He has worked honestly and long. His work has a thousand worthwhile and accurate insights. However, it is in its central thesis more often an exercise in what Wittgenstein calls "seeing as" than in "seeing." Certainly the responses to Chaucer from his first readers—Deschamps, Usk, Lydgate, Gower, Hoccleve, and the glossators of the early manuscripts—suggest as much.

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