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Delicious, Tender Chaucer: Coleridge, Emotion and Affect

Stephanie Trigg

New studies in the history of emotion are transforming, enriching and extending current humanities scholarship. Emotional responses to literary texts have the potential to constitute an important archive for the history of feeling. The literary reception of medieval texts, especially that of Chaucer, has been mined for its potential to track changes in style and taste within textual communities over time. Using William Reddy's concept of the *emotive utterance*, this essay tests a key moment in Chaucer reception: Samuel Taylor Coleridge's discourse about the affective experience of reading Chaucer. Such analysis of the critical archive can help us understand not just the history of Chaucer reception, but also the history of feeling about medieval literature, and the literature of the past.

Studies in the history of feeling, passion and emotion can take many forms. They range from the small-scale analysis of literary or artistic works and the sensibilities they express or evoke through to broader accounts of large-scale and long-range historical change. The networked inter-disciplinary field of the *history of emotions* is similarly varied. It is interested in the history of terminology about passions, feelings, emotions; in emotional restraint and self-governance; and in the continuities and differences in emotional regimes, scripts or practices (the terminology used is very diverse), across the pre-modern, the modern and the post-modern periods (Trigg, "Introduction"). It is a field that shares affinities and methodologies with a number of diverse disciplines: cognitive psy-

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chology, history, philosophy, language, literature, sociology, anthropology, and linguistics. It can also intersect productively with what is often named as the *affective turn* within cognitive, phenomenal, and cultural studies. However, it is probably fair to say that within most institutional settings, the predominant methodological orientation is historiographical. The most often cited theorists and practitioners in the history of emotions – Barbara Rosenwein, Peter and Carol Stearns, William Reddy, Thomas Dixon – are trained as historians, and while they sometimes work with “literary” sources, and are sometimes attentive to rhetorical structures and forms of expression, their own theoretical discussions tend to be directed to other historians: that is, the disciplinary default position of the field is still historical study.

In that context it is sometimes possible to discern a kind of bias against the witness of literary texts to the history of emotions. When considered in general terms, literature, drama, art, and music are all privileged sites for the exploration of emotion. As creative and imaginative forms, they open up spaces in which we may contemplate emotion, feeling, and passion without embarrassment. Indeed, works of music, art, and literature are sometimes used in clinical studies that seek to measure neurological, cognitive, or psychological affect. Yet in spite of their often very precise delineations and descriptions of feelings and passions, literary texts are sometimes sidelined as sources for the history of emotions, regarded as the expressions of specialized or elite communities or individuals, especially when that history reaches back through premodern to medieval times. Alternatively, they are seen as too self-consciously rhetorical or overtly fictional to be either truly representative or faithfully expressive of genuine feeling. It has to be said that the dominant methodologies of literary studies don’t help the case here. Our characteristic love of ambivalence, uncertainty, even undecideability hardly promotes our texts as reliable or unmediated sources in the history of feeling, at least to those looking to track precise semantic changes or accurate definitions of particular emotions.

And if literature is seen as courting too much ambiguity to be a reliable witness to “real” emotions, then the discourses of literary criticism lie even further beyond the pale as potential sources for emotional histories. Even more than literature itself, criticism is heavily mediated by its own conventions, social codes, and decorum as an indirect secondary or theoretical discourse. The practice of literary criticism seems remote from broader patterns of psychic or social change; it is hardly representative of broader communal and social movements, and in its dominant modern form is often more concerned with the exercise of critical

judgment and interpretation, or the shaping forces of social and cultural change than affective or emotional responses to the literary text. This broad pattern is not always even or consistent, however; and it is possible to chart distinct waves of greater and lesser intensity in emotional responses to literature, whether amongst academic, or scholarly, or “general” readers. Through most of the second half of the twentieth century, for example, the dominant critical discourse in the universities cultivated a neutral, impersonal tone that repressed, rather than celebrated, the passions. The renewed interest in a more personal tone in literary criticism in recent years reminds us of the long and uneven history of emotional expression in the critical reception of literary texts, and the different inflections – modulated by class, gender, and other cultural forces – of the reading and writing critical subject.

In this essay I suggest that the reception history of Geoffrey Chaucer offers a distinctive and symptomatic archive of feeling and thought about the past, as well as about this most intriguing medieval poet. Chaucer’s reception history discloses a range of individual and shared emotions that vary dramatically from the fifteenth through to the twenty-first century, and which allow us to chart a critical and emotional lexicon quite precisely around the more or less stable core of the medieval poet’s work. I say “more or less stable,” because the authorship and ownership of the works we now name as Chaucer’s were not always as sure as they are now; and because the history of editing Chaucer’s works has produced some very different versions of his texts and narratives of his life. We have now become quite accustomed to reading this tradition in ideological terms: scholars of Middle English will think of Carolyn Dinshaw’s reading of the work of E. Talbot Donaldson and D. W. Robertson (*Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics*), for example; or Seth Lerer’s work on the rhetorical construction of the fifteenth-century laureate Chaucer (*Chaucer and His Readers*). I am suggesting that as a kind of supplement to this work, the rich archive of Chaucer criticism (it would be the same for Shakespeare, or Homer, or Virgil, as well as other more recent writers, musicians, or artists) can also help us understand the emotional history of our critical and affective negotiations with the medieval past.

It is not just that Chaucer’s own works vary so widely in tone, genre, and style, nor that the history of changing taste foregrounds different texts and different “Chaucers” in different periods, from comical, romantic, satirical, and tragic, for instance. It is crucial to remember that literary criticism has not always been practiced by the same social groups or according to the same rhetorical conventions across its history. An important part of this story, then, would be the gradual displacement of

personal emotional response in favor of philological and language study as English literature moved into the university sector in the late nineteenth century, at the same time as the universities began to welcome women students. As the practices and social contexts of literary criticism change, so too do the forms and varieties of emotions that are expressed and displayed.

My central example of the way reception studies can meet the study of the history of emotions is a tiny fragment of Chaucerian response from a famous and influential poet-critic, Samuel Taylor Coleridge. In 1835, the year after Coleridge's death, his nephew and son-in-law, Henry Nelson Coleridge, published his *Specimens of the Table Talk of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, a collection of his uncle's conversational discourse on various topics of literature, philosophy, and other matters. Somewhat less formal than his *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge's *Table Talk* is frequently mined for its opinions on various topics that are then lifted out and cited in different contexts. His short discussion of Geoffrey Chaucer is a good example of this tendency; it is discussed far more often in the traditions of Chaucer reception than Coleridge criticism.

The extract in question is dated 15 March 1834:

I take unceasing delight in Chaucer. His manly cheerfulness is especially delicious to me in my old age. How exquisitely tender he is, and yet how perfectly free from the least touch of sickly melancholy or morbid drooping! The sympathy of the poet with the subjects of his poetry is particularly remarkable in Shakespeare and Chaucer; but what the first effects by a strong act of imagination and mental metamorphosis, the last does without any effort, merely by the inborn kindly joyousness of his nature. How well we seem to know Chaucer! How absolutely nothing do we know of Shakespeare! (Coburn 466)

This is not part of a larger discussion of Chaucer or medieval poetry. The "entry" for this date begins here. The paragraph that follows is a discussion of Chaucer's poetics including a few suggestions about how to regularize his meter and modernize his vocabulary, before Coleridge turns to discuss Shakespeare, Beaumont, Fletcher, and Herrick. There is no obvious connection to the "talk" that precedes or follows it on other days, nor any record of Coleridge's interlocutors on this occasion.

The conventions of the "table talk" genre frame these remarks as if they were an accurate record of the poet's thoughts and discourse over dinner or in other company, though they must have been mediated, revised, and polished to some degree by their editor. This discussion of Chaucer is particularly conversational and personal, far more than some

of the more philosophical topics treated in the collection. Already this shows us that literature, or medieval literature, or at least the poetry of Chaucer seems to license a different form of emotional discourse.

The simplest way to read this paragraph is as one side of a casual, though not unconsidered, conversation. The commentary on Coleridge's *Table Talk* often draws attention less flatteringly to the poet's reputation for long conversational monologues, sometimes to the frustration of his hearers and interlocutors. Indeed, Henry Nelson Coleridge goes to some pains in his introduction to defend his uncle from such charges. Nothing is recorded about the immediate context of these remarks about Chaucer. If they were part of a conversation, the voices of any other participants are silenced, and the discussion of Chaucer is absorbed into the continuous stream of Coleridge's opinions, collected and recorded over many years.

When they appear as part of the long archive of *Chaucer* criticism, on the other hand, Coleridge's remarks are lifted out decisively from the context that celebrates *his* collected works and thoughts, and placed into a different, much longer chronological stream of Chaucerian reception. This is a deep, rich, and varied record of opinions and feelings about Chaucer, from the earliest fifteenth-century attempts to complete and supplement *The Canterbury Tales* and the long history of adaptations and translations of his work; through the interplay of personal, private, and public statements about his poetry; and into the less personal, more formal conventions of modern, academic, and pedagogical discourse. In this context, even though it is so short, Coleridge's paragraph on Chaucer carries a disproportionate amount of symbolic capital: as the words of one poetic master about another; as words of high praise that have the added virtue for Chaucerians of comparing Chaucer quite favorably to Shakespeare; and as words that model a deeply personal affective and emotional response to Chaucer, as someone we feel we can come to know on quite intimate terms (Trigg, *Congenial Souls*). This is already a very influential mode in Chaucer criticism by this period.

The standard way to read extracts cited out of context in this manner is through the history of taste, through changing fashions in medievalism, the readerly construction of different images and representations of Chaucer and his poetry; even different relationships with Chaucer, and ideological assumptions about what literature does, and is for. Such reception studies are nevertheless usually positioned as a kind of secondary adjunct to literary interpretation.

However, these responses to literary texts have the further potential to contribute to the broader history of feeling. The long history of reception of a poet like Chaucer, for example, that ranges from the medieval period through to the present, can be read as an important, focused, historical narrative archive for the history of emotions. It is not just that this archive can help us track changing patterns of affective, emotional response in literary criticism; it can also help us understand the changing rhetorical and expressive language in which literature is read and discussed, and the changing ways readers have responded emotionally to the literature of the past.

The very act of writing literary criticism may thus be analyzed as an indicative component of the social and cultural habitus, in Pierre Bourdieu's sense of that term (52-65). Such readings encourage greater attention to the social context of literary response as well as criticism's structures of feeling. Literary criticism and response may have become the specialist product of the literate classes, but in the case of Chaucer this is still part of a continuous history of feeling about medieval literature and the medieval past, a history that operates according to its own internal logics and patterns of influence.

Reading and studying reception history is usually practiced in a very abstracted way: the most typical form of assembling the Chaucerian archive is to extract descriptions and characterizations of the work or author in question and to anthologize them historically, as in Eleanor Hammond's *Chaucer: A Bibliographical Manual*, Caroline Spurgeon's *Five Hundred Years of Chaucer Criticism and Allusion*, D. S. Brewer's two volumes in the *Critical Heritage* series, or J. A. Burrow's *Geoffrey Chaucer: A Critical Anthology*. Chaucer's reception history is thus constituted as a precisely dated archive. Typically, in such anthologies, extracts from reviews, criticism proper, introductions to translations and commentaries, diaries and other forms are gathered and put into sequence with little regard to their textual or social context. This is the form in which Coleridge's remarks on Chaucer usually appear. While this is itself a distinctive form of critical practice, it is also profitable to slow down and examine these references and allusions to Chaucer in closer detail to analyze their emotional and affective import.

Monique Scheer has recently shown how Bourdieu's understanding of the "habitus" can be used to shape an understanding of emotions as themselves a form of practice. In contrast to studies that insist on the ontological priority of affect, or that try to untangle the competing claims of mind, body, brain, and language, Scheer emphasizes "the mutual embeddedness of minds, bodies, and social relations in order to

historicize the body and its contributions to the learned experience of emotion" (199). She avoids the word "affect," citing Ruth Leys' critique of this concept when it is used to force an artificial division between mind and body.

Scheer's approach, rejecting the Cartesian opposition between mind and body, seems particularly useful for this study. We may thus work with the highly individualized texts of literary expression and response, but read them in their own broader social contexts: the texts, bodies, objects, and practices of everyday life. Bourdieu's *habitus* does not *constrain* emotion, but provides a framework, an orientation for feeling. For Scheer, "[e]motions can thus be viewed as acts executed by a mindful body, as cultural practices" (205). As she explains:

the habits of the mindful body are executed outside of consciousness and rely on social scripts from historically situated fields. That is to say, a distinction between incorporated society and the parts of the body generating emotion is hard to make. [...] [t]he feeling self executes emotions, and experiences them in varying degrees and proportions, as inside and outside, subjective and objective, depending on the situation. (207)

This method of reading can help us make sense, for example, of the way we read medieval bodily gestures and other emotional practices such as weeping, and the response to them, both in literary fictions themselves, and in the textual, editorial, and critical reception of such moments (Trigg, "Langland's Tears").

In the context of literary criticism, however, practice theory encourages us to think about the social context in which such discourse is practiced. How are the author roles of scribe, editor, copyist, translator, typesetter, printer, publisher, critic, reader, and reviewer differentiated from each other at different times? In what social contexts and with what social expectations and assumptions is Chaucer's work read and discussed? Chaucer's reception history is of particular interest, it must be admitted, if only because the long patterns of his reception help us track changes in the construction of authorship and its reception from the medieval period through to the postmodern.

To sketch out the broad parameters of this reception history we could do worse than quote Stephen Knight, who in 1986 deftly summed up the main trends of critical response to the medieval poet:

Chaucer's near-contemporaries admired the technical dexterity and wide scope of his poetry, because an author was then seen as a socially responsible craftsman ("maker" is the Middle English for poet), but when writers

came to be conceived of as sophisticated renaissance individuals, Chaucer was only seen as a surprisingly learned precursor. Later, among the constrained self-concepts associated with the emergent bourgeois state, readers found an almost noble savagery in Chaucer, ranging in its direction from the vulgarity relished by Dryden and Pope to Coleridge's "manly cheerfulness." Some nineteenth century ideologues heard in him a patriotic voice from "Merry Old England"; a less reductive re-reading linked with the mainline sociocultural tradition of the novel and when Kittredge disseminated the model of Chaucer as a wisely passive observer of humankind, he only brought to a head a dominant attitude of his period. That is still the most widespread reception of the texts, but the special social world of the academy has generated some new and even more conservative versions. The "new criticism" found Chaucer a master poetic ironist, making wit and euphony a sufficient response to the world. An even more potent ivory tower was constructed by the allegorical school, who deployed their quasi-monastic learning to find in the texts consistent reference to sin and salvation. (1)

It would be possible to update this, now, to take account of more recent developments in feminist, Marxist, postmodernist, performativity, reception, and medievalist theory, for example. There are other more detailed summaries of Chaucerian reception, but this gives a good survey that is unusually alert to the social, institutional, and political contexts in which Chaucer criticism is practiced. Knight is less interested in embodied, emotional responses here than charting the ideological history of Chaucer criticism.

A different kind of summary comes from Corinne Saunders, in her more detailed account of nineteenth-century responses to Chaucer:

In the nineteenth century, realism and the power to inspire sentiment were seen as Chaucer's great qualities: Crabbe (*Tales*, preface, 1812) writes of Chaucer's "powerful appeal to the heart and affections"; Hazlitt (*Lectures on the English Poets*, 1818) of the "severe activity of mind" that leads to Chaucer's reality of sentiment, particularly pathos; Coleridge (1834) of "How exquisitely tender he is" – and how knowable by contrast to Shakespeare; Leigh Hunt of how his images are "copied from the life" (1844). Englishness was crucial to understandings of Chaucer: for Ruskin (*Lectures on Art*, 1870), Chaucer's was "the most perfect type of a true English mind in its best possible temper," combining beauty, jest and the danger of degenerate humour! Arnold ("The Study of Poetry," 1880) offered a learned discussion of Chaucer in terms of his French and Italian, and placed him as "a genuine source of joy and strength, which is flowing still for us and will flow always"; he admired his humanity, his plenty, his "truth of substance" and especially his fluidity. For Arnold, praise of Chaucer needed to be qualified:

“he lacks the high seriousness of the great classics, and therewith an important part of their virtue,” yet “He has poetic truth of substance, though he has not high poetic seriousness, and corresponding to his truth of substance he has an exquisite virtue of style and manner. With him is born our real poetry.” (7-8)

Saunders’ citations focus our attention on the distinctive, descriptive rhetoric used by these commentators, all writing in the same century. Her account is slower and richer than Knight’s, as part of a longer and more leisurely narrative. It offers a more comprehensive window onto the world of “sentiment”: the world constructed by nineteenth-century literary men and their reading of Chaucer, and conditioned by a range of social, cultural, and gendered expectations. What Knight loses in detail, he makes up for in the boldness of his ideological and social analysis, brief and suggestive though it is. My point in comparing these two accounts, which both foreground key phrases from Coleridge’s *Table Talk*, is that the very act of citation inevitably produces a distinctive critical frame that itself is a form of social and cultural practice. There are many different ways of writing the reception history of Chaucer, contingent on scale, and the reader’s interest in ideology, rhetoric, questions of influence, originality, and so forth. Knight and Saunders both focus on the different versions of “Chaucer” that are produced by these critical discourses, not the emotional *relationship* between poet and reader that emerges in more painstaking, detailed readings of critical practice.

Coleridge’s discussion of Chaucer encourages us to explore some of these ideas, and tease out the emotional work performed by his remarks. The first three sentences set the tone, and establish the form of socialized, conversational discourse at work in Coleridge’s discussion of Chaucer; and indeed I will focus just on these three. In the context of the reported speech of the “table talk” genre, we are invited, I think, to hear a warmly personal, even confessional tone in these words:

I take unceasing delight in Chaucer. His manly cheerfulness is especially delicious to me in my old age. How exquisitely tender he is, and yet how perfectly free from the least touch of sickly melancholy or morbid drooping!
(Coburn 466)

Coleridge affirms the perpetual pleasure of “Chaucer,” in a way that helps to construct the twinned ideas of the timeless value and appeal of the canonical author, and the capacity of such an author’s name to stand in for all his works. In the words of Michel Foucault, the author’s name is “the principle of thrift in the proliferation of meaning” (146). Later in

this paragraph, Coleridge compares Chaucer to Shakespeare: in doing so, he lifts both writers out of their own centuries and their own distinctive writerly genres to contrast the apparent intimate familiarity of Chaucer against the apparent mystery of Shakespeare's character. This is personal, comparative author-centric criticism of the kind hardly acceptable in conventions of modern academic pedagogy and professional practice, yet such comparisons are still the bread-and-butter, as it were, of modern "table talk": in book clubs, dinner party conversation, and general conversation about what we like and do not like about certain books and certain authors.

Coleridge's discourse moves back and forth between the discourses of subjective pleasure and emotion ("I take unceasing delight," "delicious to me in my old age"); and descriptive evaluation ("manly cheerfulness," "exquisitely tender," "perfectly free from the least touch of sickly melancholy or morbid drooping!"). He also uses the powerful rhetorical form of the *exclamatio*: "How exquisitely tender he is!"

What kind of language is this? I suggest that these expressions of emotion can be read as a species of "emotional utterance," in the sense that William Reddy uses that term, in *The Navigation of Feeling*.

The startling features of emotional utterances that take the form of first-person, present-tense emotion claims warrant designating such utterances as constituting a form of speech that is neither descriptive nor performative. I propose that we call such utterances "emotives." (104)

Reddy's idea of "emotional utterances" or "emotives" draws attention to the role of language in simultaneously expressing and describing emotions (104-105), and is thus very well suited for literary criticism, though that is not Reddy's concern. For Reddy, emotives are similar to performatives (and differ from constatives) in that emotives do things to the world:

Emotives are translations into words about, into "descriptions" of, the on-going translation tasks that currently occupy attention as well as of the other such tasks that remain in the queue, overflowing its current capacities. Emotives are influenced directly by, and alter, what they "refer" to. Thus, emotives are similar to performatives (and differ from constatives) in that emotives do things to the world. Emotives are themselves instruments for directly changing, building, hiding, intensifying emotions, instruments that may be more or less successful. (105)

Reddy's emphasis on emotives as translations of feeling has widespread application, especially in literary studies and practice theory, far wider than his initial focus on first-person, present-tense expression would seem to suggest. Coleridge's language, in his discussion of Chaucer, serves many comparable rhetorical and social functions. Like Reddy's emotives, it gives further shape to the speaker's own "aggregated self": the subject-in-process who both utters and is shaped by emotive discourse as he responds to the earlier poet; it shapes a community of readers who silently accede to Coleridge's judgments and feelings about Chaucer in the abstracted context of his table talk; and it models a personal, emotional and affective relationship with Chaucer that will be deeply influential in subsequent centuries.

The distinction between "emotional" and "affective" response is worth pausing over. While I do not think "affects" are always clearly distinguishable from "emotions," I use the adjective "affective" to draw attention to that aspect of Coleridge's language that describes the things that *happen to him* when he reads Chaucer. Coleridge *takes* "unceasing delight" in Chaucer, for example, while "[h]is manly cheerfulness *is especially delicious to me* in my old age." These are things that happen to him when he reads Chaucer at a particular time in his life, when Chaucer appears "tender" in comparison to his own age. Coleridge does not foreground his own somatic response, but his language is nevertheless sensory and embodied as well as emotional, describing the effects of Chaucer's works upon him.

For students of medievalism and Chaucer reception, it is significant that Coleridge does not refer to any particular Chaucer text. If we think about this in practical terms, it is probably not the entirety of Chaucer's works that produces these affects on Coleridge, but either selected works or the generalized properties of Chaucer as "author." When Coleridge appeals to the idea of Chaucer's tenderness, and manly cheerfulness, this composite Chaucer is a mix of his narrative voices as love poet, nature poet and the presiding genial spirit of *The Canterbury Tales*. There is little sense here of Chaucer's medieval author-functions as translator or *compiler*, for example. By the early nineteenth century, "Chaucer" had clearly been absorbed into the modern authorial economy, the owner and origin of all his works, with the potential to be compared with Shakespeare and other writers.

Further clues to the nature of this authorial economy are found in the single exclamation: "How exquisitely tender he is . . . !" As we will see, the language of emotional response is closely linked with the language of somatic, or tactile experience. As in all exclamations, there is a

strong degree of performativity here. In the younger Coleridge's collection, the older "Coleridge" – for we are negotiating two author-functions here – performs for perpetuity a sense of surprise at this perennial capacity of "Chaucer" to impress with his tenderness. Any original context for this conversation, and any original or historical audience are displaced by an inclusive, self-conscious appeal to subsequent readers to agree with Coleridge's assessment. This becomes an enabling and productive practice in modern criticism: the personalized expression of a critical evaluation that is offered to other readers with an implicit invitation to agree.

The association of Chaucer with tenderness may evoke the love-sick, nature-loving narrator of the early dream visions, or the small boy murdered in *The Prioress's Tale*, or female victims of fate and narrative twists such as Criseyde, Griselda, or Emily. But the word itself also repays further examination, as it is often used by Chaucer. "Tender" is borrowed into English from French in the early thirteenth century, and is derived from Latin *tenerem* (the accusative form of *tener*), meaning "soft, delicate, of tender age" (*OED* definition 3). In English it also comes to mean "kind, affectionate, loving" while the meaning "having the delicacy of youth, immature" is attested from the early fourteenth century. Chaucer seems "tender" to Coleridge in the latter's old age. While Coleridge may be echoing Chaucer's own use of the word, the cumulative effect is to suggest Chaucer's own perpetual youthfulness. This idea of the naïve and tender poet is sustained by the commonly perceived childishness or simplicity of the medieval period. The emotional utterance – "how tender he is" – works to establish a temporal and emotional affinity between Chaucer's perpetual and youthful tenderness and Coleridge's old age.

Chaucer uses the word "tender" many times, often in the phrase, "tendre herte" (Burnley 156). It is repeatedly used in *The Merchant's Tale* to describe the young bride, May ("Hir fresshe beautee and hir age tendre," 356; "Whan tendre youthe hath wedded stoupyng age," 494; "He rubbeth hire aboute hir tendre face," 582). Chaucer draws a strong contrast between ageing patriarchal sexual desire and the young virgin's powerlessness.

There is another sense of "tender" that is also relevant to Coleridge's exclamation. The word is already used in the medieval period of food that is soft, juicy, and easily consumed. January's attitude to bridal meat is expressed most tellingly when Chaucer has him debating the virtues of marrying a younger woman. "And bet than old boef is the tendre veel," he tells his friends (176).

Consciously or not, Coleridge pairs this association with Chaucer's "delicious" (and "manly") cheerfulness. The language of consumption in literary criticism is not unique to Coleridge. We have become familiar with the imagery of "devouring" literature, for example, or of "savoring" favorite passages. Coleridge's enthusiastic characterization of Chaucer and the fiction or recollection of literary talk over a meal gives particular social form to this intellectual and critical practice, and bespeaks a number of implicit assumptions about the relationship between text and food on the one hand, and reader and consumer on the other. The medieval poet is brought into the present through the act of consuming the tender meat of his poetry. The discursive genre of "table talk" thus offers a doubled, or at least, layered model of the relationship between thinking and feeling. As one in a series of speeches, Coleridge's account of Chaucer appears abstracted from its putative social context of discussion at dinner. It appears disembodied, dehistoricized and neutral, ripe for anthologizing in the context of Chaucer criticism. Yet the comestible language ("delicious," "tender") cannot help but return us to the idea of the body that consumes and tastes food as well as a mind that experiences the emotions of reading poetry. Coleridge's language reminds us how difficult it is to separate emotional from mental processes and social practices. I have written elsewhere about the persistence of the idea of the communal Chaucer, in which the act of criticism is often likened to the idea of talking, eating, and drinking with Chaucer at the Tabard Inn on his way to Canterbury. Even in this one-sided account of Coleridge's "table talk" we can read traces of these strong social associations.

We may also pair Chaucer's use of "tender" with Coleridge's use of the adjective elsewhere. In his *Biographia Literaria Vol. 1*, for example, he describes how a friend introduces him to the sonnets of "Mr Bowles":

It was a double pleasure to me, and still remains a *tender* recollection, that I should have received from a friend so revered the first knowledge of a poet, by whose works, year after year, I was so enthusiastically delighted and inspired. (9, my emphasis)

Here, the word "tender" evokes the memory of reading another poet who, like Chaucer, continues to delight over many years. In the same passage he describes the salutary effects of

the genial influence of a style of poetry, *so tender and yet so manly*, so natural and real, and yet so dignified and harmonious, as the sonnets and other early poems of Mr. Bowles. (10, my emphasis)

These lines are instructive for our present concerns as Coleridge here contrasts the idea of “tenderness” with manliness, as he does in his discussion of Chaucer.

Moreover, when Chaucer is “perfectly free from the least touch of sickly melancholy or morbid drooping” it sounds very similar to Coleridge’s comparison, at this point in the *Biographia*, with his own somewhat morbid speculations about metaphysics, theological controversy, free will, and predestination from which Bowles’ poetry and “an accidental introduction to an amiable family” seem to have saved him. Chaucer’s tenderness is a corrective, in many different ways, to Coleridge’s own tendencies to both ageing and melancholy.

The difficulties of finding the perfect balance of tenderness and manliness is further apparent from a contrasting discussion of Spenser in Coleridge’s *Literary Remains*, Vol.1:

Lastly, the great and prevailing character of Spenser’s mind is fancy under the conditions of the imagination, as an ever present but not always active power. He has an imaginative fancy, but he has not imagination, in kind or degree, as Shakespeare and Milton have; the boldest effort of his powers in this way is the character of Talus. Add to this a *feminine tenderness and almost maidenly purity of feeling*, and above all, a deep moral earnestness which produces a believing sympathy and acquiescence in the reader, and you have a tolerably adequate view of Spenser’s intellectual being. (97, my emphasis)

Coleridge’s association of tenderness with femininity and maidenly purity here is telling, especially as it is firmly contrasted with and corrected by Chaucer’s “manly cheerfulness.”

We could draw out further semantic, historical, and psychological associations of Coleridge’s critical vocabulary, but I hope I have begun to thicken our understanding of the textual and social habitus in which Coleridge’s reading is performed. We can read the rhetoric of criticism as a form of social and emotional practice, by focusing on the associations of vocabulary and critical assumptions and practices on display. Lines that are often quoted in the bloodless context of citation history are performed in their own rich (if putative) social context, and trail their own semantic and critical associations, when they are considered as emotional performances.

The reception history of Chaucer is not just “opinions” about Chaucer, then, but “feelings” about him and his poetry. The same may also be said for Coleridge. Such analysis and such critical archives can help us understand not just the history of Chaucer reception, but also the history of feeling about medieval literature and the literature of the past.

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