

# Choosing poetic fathers : the English problem

Autor(en): **Coopet, Helen**

Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature**

Band (Jahr): **25 (2011)**

PDF erstellt am: **24.09.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-389628>

## **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Inhalten der Zeitschriften. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern.

Die auf der Plattform e-periodica veröffentlichten Dokumente stehen für nicht-kommerzielle Zwecke in Lehre und Forschung sowie für die private Nutzung frei zur Verfügung. Einzelne Dateien oder Ausdrucke aus diesem Angebot können zusammen mit diesen Nutzungsbedingungen und den korrekten Herkunftsbezeichnungen weitergegeben werden.

Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. Die systematische Speicherung von Teilen des elektronischen Angebots auf anderen Servern bedarf ebenfalls des schriftlichen Einverständnisses der Rechteinhaber.

## **Haftungsausschluss**

Alle Angaben erfolgen ohne Gewähr für Vollständigkeit oder Richtigkeit. Es wird keine Haftung übernommen für Schäden durch die Verwendung von Informationen aus diesem Online-Angebot oder durch das Fehlen von Informationen. Dies gilt auch für Inhalte Dritter, die über dieses Angebot zugänglich sind.

# Choosing Poetic Fathers: The English Problem

Helen Cooper

Poetry is self-consciously created within existing traditions; and many poets choose to invoke a specific poetic forebear to create the kind of reader receptivity they want, whether or not the invocation is strictly accurate. In the English tradition, the choice of an authoritative father, whether God or the classical poets, could further find itself at odds with the use of the mother tongue; and the anonymity of much Middle English poetry also at first prevented the establishment of a poetic genealogy. Chaucer passed on to his successors the right to name themselves, and he is also the first poet in English to name his poetic forebears – though the ones he chooses are not his actual sources, but the giants of the Classics. Many later writers down to Dryden were happy to place themselves within this new genealogy that incorporated Chaucer himself, though the dominance of humanist education and the increasing inaccessibility of Chaucer's vernacular rendered such a line of descent increasingly problematic. In the last century, only James Joyce, in *Ulysses*, seems to have carried through the idea of Chaucer's parenthood with conviction, and that is done silently.

The paradox of the title is entirely intentional. Your father is one relationship you cannot choose: having a father is as much a precondition of your existence as your existence is a precondition of your ability to choose. When it comes to poetic fatherhood, however, a poet can indeed choose whom he will nominate as his father, whether or not the descent to which he lays claim is genetically true. Naming a forebear may well be less a matter of strict accuracy than a statement of poetic purpose, of the way a poet wants to present himself and how he wants his readers to understand him.

It has long been recognized that poetry constitutes a tradition which is passed down by a process of learning or imitation or adaptation from model to copy, master to disciple, symbolic father to son. The process of poets actually placing themselves in such a line nonetheless has a rather fitful history, and especially so in English. The earliest surviving poetry invoked, not the shade or influence of an earlier poet, but the gods, or more literal forebears in the shape of one's ancestors or the great heroes of the past: "O Gilgamesh, lord of Kullab, great is thy praise" is the opening of the Mesopotamian *Epic of Gilgamesh*. The Greeks famously associated poetry with divine inspiration, personified as the Muses. A more explicit genealogy of poetics occasionally emerges as poetry becomes a matter of written composition, as Lucretius refers to Epicurus as his father (*De rerum naturae* III.9), but such direct citation remains rare. Cicero's description of Herodotus as the father of history has nothing personal about it (*De legibus* I.5), and Horace, who names a large number of earlier poets, cites almost all of them for their inadequacy as models. Virgil does pay homage to his forebears, but more indirectly. His reference to the *sicelides musae*, Sicilian Muses, in his *Eclogues* (iv.1) is sufficient to recall Theocritus; and in the *Aeneid*, although Homer is never named, the imitation of topics (the opening citations of Troy and the wrath of Juno to match the *Iliad's* wrath of Achilles), along with the invocation of the gods, locates him firmly within the epic tradition. The idea of divine inspiration, that the poet was a mouthpiece for God or the gods to speak through, remained something of a constant for religious poetry in a Christian age as well. Many religious poets looked to the Bible, the Word of God, as the source for their own words; others claimed or prayed for more direct divine inspiration, even when their style and rhetoric has more evident earthly sources. George Herbert may reject "nightingales or spring" in favour of writing directly about his experience of God ("Jordan I" 200), but that amounts to an agenda for himself and his readers rather than a general rejection of any contemporary rhetorical influence, the allusion to love-lyric serving to divert attention from his deeper engagement with the fashion for more "metaphysical" styles of writing. The humility of stance characteristic of much religious poetry when the writer pleads for divine help in writing also rules out any claims about more literal poetic forebears, since those most commonly imply emulation or earthly ambition.

The most famous early English example of God operating as the immediate source of poetry is the story of the cowherd Caedmon recorded in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. Caedmon, famously, was unable to sing, and when the harp came around in the mead-hall he crept out to the cowshed to escape. "In due time he stretched himself out and went to sleep," Bede tells us, "whereupon he

dreamt that someone stood by him, saluted him and called him by name: ‘Caedmon,’ he said, ‘sing me something’” (iv.24). Caedmon insists that he cannot; but his dream visitor – by implication, an angel – insists, and Caedmon responds by singing an account of the Creation paraphrased from the Book of Genesis. After he has woken, he repeats the song to the abbess Hild and the monks of Whitby, and “it seemed clear to all of them that the Lord had granted him heavenly grace.” The story is summed up by Bede in terms of God’s special favour to the poet: “For he did not learn the art of poetry from men nor through a man, but he received the gift of song freely by the grace of God. Hence he could never compose any foolish or trivial poem.” Very clearly, Caedmon does not choose himself a poetic father: the divine father chooses him, and in doing so by implication provides an origin for the whole tradition of Old English Christian poetry. Yet the poem may well not be what it seems. Old English poems on Biblical material that could have guided Caedmon may have pre-existed him, though none survives. It is also possible that the famous Old English version of the hymn, which was first recorded as part of a vernacular translation of the *History* composed some decades later, was derived from Bede’s Latin rather than representing Caedmon’s original. Bede reports the song in Latin prose, with a note about the need to translate sense for sense rather than word for word; in his version, the work thus becomes part of the linguistic tradition of the Church rather than of vernacular poetry. The scholarly importance assigned to it may thus be a retrospective invention of a genealogical root for vernacular religious poetry, not the genuine article (Frantzen 120, 134-59).

Bede’s account sets up an equivocal relationship between the mother tongue and the male language of authority and learning that recurs frequently over the centuries; and two further features of the story invite discussion. One is that the nature of the inspiration Caedmon receives explicitly excludes secular material, the “foolish or trivial” – *frinoli et superuacui poematis* in Bede’s Latin, *leasunge ne idles leopes*, lies and idle talk, in the Old English translation; secular poetry would have to look elsewhere for its inspiration. Second, Caedmon is first named in the passage by the angel, in effect by God: the Father here, Bede insists, chooses his son. It is, however, one of only two names that we have for Old English poets (the other being Cynewulf), and the rest of the poetic corpus is anonymous.

The concept of the *materna lingua*, the mother tongue,<sup>1</sup> is one that provides an interesting counterbalance to the patrilineal model of poetic fathers, or to Bede's relocation of Caedmon's hymn within the authoritative male language of the Church. English surnames, in common with those of most of Europe, record fatherhood, not motherhood; but the gendered imagery that stresses poetic fatherhood is at odds with the very language in which the poetry is written. The choice of language is the matrix, the womb, for the actual words written by all the poets discussed in this article. For most of them, writing in the mother tongue was the default position rather than an active choice (Chaucer, who may well have grown up bilingual in Anglo-French and English, is the only exception), just as one's mother is a given of one's existence. They may have chosen whom to name as their fathers, but their matrilineal inheritance of language, for all that it rarely invites explicit comment, is what actually constitutes their poetry. Medieval theories of conception commonly represented the mother as providing the matter for the foetus, the father its form: poetic conception followed suit, only with the important proviso that the shaping, the fathering, lay in the power of the poet, the child.

If secular poetry, "foolish or trivial" in Bede's eyes, stems from something other than the divine grace that he insists inspired Caedmon, it has to have other sources. There was no such absolute division between sacred and secular for early heroic poetry. Greek heroes were, technically speaking, men whose exceptionality enabled them to become gods, and who were revered as such; Gilgamesh likewise crosses the boundary between mortal and immortal, though the point of the epic is that he is unique in doing so. Secular poets within the Christian tradition, by contrast, could not easily cite God as their inspiration. They had to locate the sources of their poetry elsewhere, and the famous poets of the past offered a comparable way of lifting their poetry above the commonplace. There are of course likely to have been a host of other reasons too as to why the naming of human poetic forebears should have become a poetic *topos* – the increasing importance of written records, the greater self-consciousness of poets in an age of formal education, and so on; but whatever combination of causes was in play, there

---

<sup>1</sup> The term itself first appears in Latin in the thirteenth century, in English around 1400, to create a clear contrast with the distinctively male-associated *sermo patrius* of Latin (Bonfiglio 63-121; Haugen). Bede's phrase for Caedmon's language is "sua, id est Anglorum, lingua." Thomas Usk, in his *Testament of Love* of 1385, a work long ascribed to Chaucer, uses the phrase "our dames tonge" (Wogan-Browne et al. 30.29; and see Watson *ibid* 331-45, and Butterfield 339-44).

was a change in practice, both with regard to recording the names of the poets themselves, and to their own attitude to naming their forebears.

The two do of course go together: it is impossible to name one's forebears if their names are unknown. Even when most poetry was anonymous, however, it was possible to place one's composition in a poetic genealogy by invoking poetic tradition. "*Hwaet!* we have heard of the glory of the Spear-Danes" is how *Beowulf* opens: a line that makes the poem's ancestry literal, in its insistence that the function of such poetry is to maintain the fame of one's forebears. The line of memory is more important than any individual poetic practitioners; it is not the glory of the poets that concerns the composer of *Beowulf*, but the glory of his subject. In the transmission from hearing of the Spear-Danes to speaking a new song about them, the poet is invoking a poetic tradition just as strongly as did later writers who cited Virgil or Ovid. Even when it was not so directly concerned with ancestral stories, much medieval secular literature – especially narrative fiction, romances – was insistent about placing itself in a tradition authorized by its longevity, in ways that stress a comparable indebtedness of the new poem to those written earlier. Breton lais, which define themselves by their claim of such a relationship, are a well known example. Many romances begin with some variation on the idea that their protagonists were as good as, or better than, a list of other named romance heroes known to the audience. It was sufficiently common for Chaucer to parody it in the later stages of *Sir Thopas*:

Men speken of romances of prys,  
Of Horn child and of Ypotys,  
Of Beves and sir Gy,  
Of sir Lybeux and Pleyndamour –  
But sir Thopas, he bereth the flour  
Of roial chivalry! (*Canterbury Tales* VII.897-902)

This is a process of stories begetting other stories rather than poets begetting other poets. Even as great a poet as the *Gawain*-poet – a pseudonym invented in the modern age to disguise the anonymity that current criticism finds so hard to deal with – makes such a comparable appeal to tradition in his insistence that the tale of Gawain he is about to tell is not original, but was put into poetic form long ago:

I schal telle hit astit, as I in toun herde,  
     With tonge;  
 As hit is stad and stoken  
 In stori stif and stronge,  
 With lel letteres loken,  
 In londe so has been longe. (*Sir Gawain* 31-6)

Such a claim was sufficiently characteristic of medieval poetry for Shakespeare (or his collaborator) to appeal to it in the Prologue to *Pericles*, spoken by John Gower: it is “a song that old was sung,” one that

hath been sung at festivals,  
 On ember-eves and holy-ales,  
 And lords and ladies in their lives  
 Have read it for restoratives.  
 The purchase is to make men glorious,  
*Et bonum quo antiquius eo melius.* (5-10)

“The older, the better”: it is its antiquity that confers value on the story, and the object of retelling it is “to make men glorious,” to preserve the fame of those who lived long before. The Prologue combines two ways of invoking poetic ancestry: through the value ascribed to a venerable story, which, it is correctly suggested here, goes back far beyond any individual named author; and the authority conferred by a famous poetic predecessor. Gower’s version of the story in the *Confessio amantis* was the only one of the pre-Elizabethan retellings to carry an author’s name. For a new author to make his choice of forebear explicit, there had to be a tradition of named poets. The Prologue to *Pericles* identifies a moment when the authority of story makes the transition to the authority of the author.

In order for that to happen, the names of earlier poets had to be known, and they are only intermittently recorded for Old and Early Middle English literature. There are the two known Old English poets, and a handful of English ones down to the mid-fourteenth century – Orm, La3amon, Thomas of Hales – but few in total, and none of them given to *leasunge ne idles leopes*. Continental poets writing in French or German, by contrast, were much more likely to record their names, or to have them recorded, and the same holds for many Anglo-Norman writers: men such as the Jerseyman Wace, or the Thomas of Britain who wrote the most influential version of the Tristan story, or Hue de Rotelande (Rhuddlan, in the Welsh marches), author of *Ipomedon* and *Prothese-laus*. Furthermore, even when we do have the name of a Middle English poet, we still tend to treat his work as anonymous. We invariably attach the French *Lanval* to the name of Marie de France, but very rarely *Sir*

*Launfal* to Thomas Chester. It is as if Middle English poets before the age of Gower and Chaucer carry so little authority as not to be worth mentioning: a phenomenon indeed confirmed by the lack of contemporary citation. It is the stories, not the authors, that were known.

The new status carried by the named poets of the Ricardian age is evident again in the only other statement of source in the whole Shakespearean corpus, in the Prologue to *The Two Noble Kinsmen*.<sup>2</sup> The play, it declares,

has a noble breeder, and a pure,  
A learned, and a poet never went  
More famous yet twixt Po and silver Trent.  
Chaucer, of all admired, the story gives:  
There constant to eternity it lives. (10-14)

The lines may well be by John Fletcher, co-author of the play, rather than Shakespeare himself; but there is no reason to question that he agreed with the sentiments, and evidently the audience was expected to agree too – this is an advertisement, without any of the traces of apology that colour the Prologue to *Pericles*. The lines make a big claim. The phrasing insists that Chaucer was as great a poet as anyone from Petrarch to the contemporary poets of the English Midlands, including Shakespeare himself; and that claim is very firmly attached to Chaucer's name.

Although Chaucer, Gower and Lydgate became the established triumvirate of great pre-Elizabethan English poets, Chaucer was regularly singled out as the great precursor. Poets of the succeeding generations identified him as the only poetic model that mattered (Watson in Wogan-Browne et al. 345-52). To Thomas Hoccleve, who knew him, he was the father – the first time the word had been used in English for a poetic predecessor, but here carrying the immediacy of the love and respect felt by a literal son:

O maister deere and fadir reuerent  
Mi maister Chaucer flour of eloquence...

Alasse my fadir from the worlde is goo  
My worthi maister Chaucer hym I mene. (Brewer I no. 7)

---

<sup>2</sup> This excludes works named within the plays' plots, such as the mention of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in *Titus Andronicus*.



John Lydgate, who did not have such a personal acquaintance, refers to him repeatedly as “my maister Chaucer,” the man who was the first to “enlumyne” English poetry and who was deserving of the poetic laurel (Brewer I no. 4). John Shirley, who copied a good many of Chaucer’s poems in the mid-fifteenth century, adds an interesting descriptor to his account of Chaucer’s reformation of the language: he was the “laureal and moste famous poete þat euer was to-fore him as in þemvellisshing of oure rude moders englisshe tonge” (Brewer I no. 9b). The mother tongue here is dismissed as “rude,” insufficiently formed, matter awaiting the imposition of form, embellishment, from the father.

By the sixteenth century, that Chaucer was the father of English poetry had become the standard epithet; and that carried with it an insistence that, as with biological fatherhood, later poetry would not have existed, or existed in the form it did, without him as its founding ancestor. Literal paternity makes itself most evidently traceable through the inheritance of a name; and although later poets did not literally adopt the name of a poetic forebear, that that forebear should have a name seems a necessary condition of declaring whose son you are. So although later poets do not inherit Chaucer’s name as such, they do inherit the right to attach their own names to their poetry: to announce themselves as authors within this new English tradition of named poets, and so to use their poetry to memorialize not just the heroes they write about or the gods who inspire them, nor even their poetic models, but themselves.

The eagerness of fifteenth-century poets to claim Chaucer as their father may seem odd in a post-Freudian age. Harold Bloom’s great work on the anxiety of influence famously insisted that the rivalry of son with father carried through to the poetic world, so that anxiety rather than homage becomes the keynote of a poetic genealogy. A.C. Spearing has indeed argued that fifteenth-century poets, for all their praise of Chaucer, display just such an anxiety, though the matter is more complex in practice (92-110). In *The Siege of Thebes*, for instance, Lydgate describes himself as joining the Canterbury pilgrims, but Chaucer is missing from among them; the link with the *Tales* is none the less so firmly spelled out that the absence seems likely to be due not to suppression but to the rhetorical awkwardness of including him. Longfellow’s *Tales of a Wayside Inn* of 1863, which he had provisionally entitled *The Sudbury Tales*, names almost every medieval poetic tradition except the Chaucerian, including the Italian, Norse, and a list of romance heroes from Eglamour to Bevis of Hampton, but it does not need to cite Chaucer to make its parenthood plain. Whatever the motives for naming or not naming him – the substitution of unmistakable family resemblance, rhetorical strategy, Freudian anxiety – poets did not simply accept their place in the English

poetic tradition with any of the inevitability with which they had to accept their literal genetic inheritance. They could, and did, choose whom to invoke as their poetic fathers. They can, so to speak, select their own poetic genes, and they do so, like Hoccleve, out of a sense of conscious pride, both to boost their own standing (however humble the form of words they choose may be) and proclaim it to the world, and also to invite a certain kind of reader reception, a definition of tradition such as had been invoked by naming precursor heroes of romance. The “sons of Ben” may have been to an extent Jonson’s own favourites, but they formed a sibling group primarily because they themselves wanted to be adopted into it.

Ben Jonson himself had his own idea of who had fathered his poetry; and for all his love for Chaucer (which was both deep and influential), Horace was his primary favoured model. That choice is typical of the problem faced by English poets. Chaucer remained unquestioned as the father of English poetry, the wellhead, the fountain, the spring; but the form of English in which he had written had none of the stability or authority of Latin, and moreover it became steadily less accessible with the passing of time. His use of his mother tongue began to undermine his authority as father. As the dominance of humanist education insisted that the Classics (primarily the Latin classics) were the pinnacle of poetic achievement, anything in English was downgraded to the second-rate *by definition*, and especially so if it predated what was perceived as the great age of humanist enlightenment. Everyone outside Britain, furthermore, knew nothing about literature in English, and cared less; whereas to choose the classical poets as your fathers was to place yourself in a universally recognized tradition.

Chaucer himself had made the same choice. At the end of *Troilus and Criseyde* he placed himself in the line of the classical poets, inviting the work to “Kis the steppes where as thow seest pace / Virgile, Ovide, Omer, Lucan and Stace” (V.1791-2). The line is formulated as homage, but it also serves to locate him in the long genealogy of epic poetry, as he implicitly attaches himself to the line as sixth of six – as Dante had also done when he describes encountering the great pagan poets on the outskirts of Hell. For both Dante and Chaucer, the choice complicated things twice over, as it skips over both their own English or Italian models and their contemporary European models too (though Dante, unlike Chaucer, makes some mention of those later in the *Divina commedia*). He was fully aware of the existence of other poetry in English, and some of its stylistic practices can be traced in his early poetry. It is most on display, however, when he parodies it in *Sir Thopas* – a parody that may or may not be affectionate (critical views differ), but which is certainly devastatingly accurate in a way that shows a deep familiarity with

what is being parodied. His actual forebears, however, the earlier writers on whom he drew most, were overwhelmingly contemporary or near-contemporary French and Italian poets: poets such as Machaut and Froissart and Oton de Graunson, who were read, or, in the case of the latter two, were living, at the English court. They themselves were writing in the tradition of Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, the authors of the *Roman de la Rose* which was a key precursor text for Chaucer too. Later in his life, Boccaccio became his principal source, supplemented by some Petrarch, and with Dante as a major influence on his whole conception of what poetry could do. Not the least interesting thing about that list, however, is that it is a list of names, such as is impossible to give for any English influences on Chaucer.

Those were not the poets, however, that Chaucer chose to name in his poetry. He probably knew the names of all the French and Italian writers he used, and he had a personal acquaintance with some of them; yet he very rarely cites any continental vernacular poets as his sources. The only French poet he so names is Graunson, from whom he borrowed for his *Complaint of Venus*. He tells us he translated the *Romance of the Rose*, Fragment A of the surviving Middle English fragments probably being his, and he cites it by title twice later for rhetorical purposes (*Book of the Duchess* 334, *Tales* IV.2032); but when he actually uses it as a source, for the *Physician's Tale*, he substitutes the *Romance's* citation of its own source, the classical Livy. Italian poets fare equally badly. His one mention of Petrarch, at the start of the *Clerk's Tale*, is to his Latin prose, and he ascribes the sonnet he adapted as Troilus's first song to the invented Lollius (*Troilus* I.393-420). Dante gets several mentions, but most of those focus on Chaucer's doubts about the content of his work: the unorthodox second-guessing of God's judgements, and the fictional insistence on the absolute truth of his next-world journeys (cf. *Legend* 1-9). Chaucer's overt references to the *Divina commedia*, as opposed to his silent borrowings, are therefore distinctly sceptical, as when the devil of the *Friar's Tale* declares that Dante deserves a chair in Hell studies (*Tales* III.1517-20), or when his retelling of the story of Dante's damned traitor Ugolino gives pride of place to the fact that he was a victim of mere rumour (VII.2461). Notoriously, he never names Boccaccio at all, though the *Decameron* was almost certainly the inspiration behind the story-collection of the *Canterbury Tales*, and he was the immediate source for the *Knight's Tale* and *Troilus*. Chaucer seems to have read well beyond the *Filostrato* in preparation for writing *Troilus*, but although he cites the supposed eyewitnesses Dares and Dictys and the fictional Lollius, his more recent vernacular sources all disappear from sight. His choice of the classical poets to name as his forebears at the end of the poem is in

keeping with that;<sup>3</sup> and he was the first English-language poet to make such a claim.

In taking that step, Chaucer set himself up as a poet in that recognized authoritative line of great poetry. For all that it was unprecedented in English, he goes some way to preparing the reader for it. Writing a narrative about Troy declares a potential debt to the Classics, though he, like most of his readers, primarily encountered the story in more accessible medieval rewritings. The great sweep of Latinate syntax in the very first verse of the poem, with the sentence running over five of the seven lines of the rhyme royal stanza and the verb held back until the last of those five, also sounds a note that is unparalleled in earlier English poetry. It is in keeping with that new note that the “auctor” Chaucer names within the body of the poem is the pseudo-classical Lollius. His name is given just twice: once as the source for the song that Troilus sings in total secrecy and which is in any case translated from Petrarch (I.381); the other in a passage of pure invention (V.1653). It is a name that sounds plausible as a classical source, though it could hardly have cut much ice with those of his readers familiar with the surviving corpus of Latin literature. The declaration of the poets Chaucer actually wants to claim as his line of poetic forebears is held back until the end of the work, separated off from any references to sources for the narrative.

The lines at the end of the *Troilus* are unusually explicit in Chaucer’s poetry in declaring their allegiance, but the idea is much more pervasive. He kept recurring to those classical antecedents throughout his career, though often so obliquely that they are easy to overlook. The practice starts as far back as the *Book of the Duchess*. Within the poem’s dream, the emperor Octavian rides hunting; and for all that John of Gaunt doubles as the bereaved husband, it is Octavian, “this kyng,” who returns at the end to a castle identified by a rebus, a riddle, as Lancaster and Richmond, Gaunt’s own titles (Cooper, “Chaucerian Poetics” 40-46). It can scarcely be accidental that this figure carries the same name as the emperor who patronized Virgil. Chaucer may be dropping a hint to Gaunt about patronage, or perhaps acknowledging patronage received; but he also appears to be making a quiet bid that he might himself take on the role of Virgil. A comparable claim occurs in his later dream poem, the *House of Fame*, which takes the intertwining of historical and literary fame as its subject. Here, the dreamer encounters a series of classical poets arguing with each other; and the sixth of the six poets of Troy to be

---

<sup>3</sup> For a profound study of Chaucer’s relationship with Virgil, Ovid, Statius, Dante and the *Roman de la Rose* in *Troilus*, see Wetherbee (though my argument diverges from his); for the detail and extent of his classical borrowings, see Windeatt 36-50.

cited (1464-72) is named as “English Gaufride” – Gaufride being derived from the Latin form for Geoffrey, Galfridus. The name is usually glossed as referring to Geoffrey of Monmouth, or possibly to Geoffrey of Vinsauf, sometimes named in Latin as “Galfridus anglicus.” There are however two problems with those suggestions. First, is that neither of those Geoffreys wrote about Troy as such; Geoffrey of Monmouth wrote about what happened well after its fall, and although some works of Geoffrey of Vinsauf may well have been lost, there is little evidence to suggest that they included anything on Troy. Second, all of Chaucer’s twenty-four other uses of “English” refer to the language, whereas the other Geoffreys wrote in Latin. The only English Gaufride to have written the story of Troy in English was Chaucer himself, in *Troilus and Criseyde*. Although the *House of Fame* has customarily been taken to have been the earlier poem, there is strong evidence that it might in fact have been written later (Cooper, “Four Last Things”); and this kind of slippery self-reference (the name preceding Gaufride is Lollius) would be in line with the resistance to authority that is the subject of the poem, and to Chaucer’s self-deprecation elsewhere. By contrast, a more orthodox sense of himself as a poet in the classical poetic line such as appears in the *Troilus* is conveyed by the use of a quotation from Statius as an epigraph to the *Knight’s Tale*, which appears at the root of the manuscript tradition and so seems likely to go back to Chaucer himself. Ovid too figured high on Chaucer’s reading list. He based the *Legend of Good Women* on the *Heroides*, and cites him as its source on a number of occasions. His works also reveal a generous debt to the *Metamorphoses*, for its stories rather than the commentary tradition it had accreted, though he may have used a French version alongside or instead of the original Latin. His silence about his more extensive French and Italian models is made all the more marked by such contrasts, and it is what he claimed, rather than what he did, that is at issue. In citing the great classical authors, he was making a poetic declaration, not writing scholarly footnotes; and that declaration is about his choice of forebears – of fathers.

Such a choice of genealogy may seem surprising in Chaucer’s case. He was profoundly sceptical of authority, his own included – or rather, he did not see why any poet’s version of the famous events of the past should be any more reliable than any other’s (*House of Fame* 311-14, 375-82). His most explicit comments on Virgil, the master-poet of the Western tradition, are challenges to his authority. In pointing out in the *House of Fame* that Virgil is making up his account of Dido, that Ovid tells it differently, and that there is no possible authoritative recoverable fact behind them, he turns the *Aeneid* into a key example of an *unreliable*, unauthoritative, poem; and although he starts his Legend of Dido by invoking “glorye and honour” on Virgil’s name, he keeps querying his

version, and ends by recommending Ovid's instead. His scepticism was so overt that Gavin Douglas, translating the *Aeneid* around 1500, felt the need to excuse Chaucer's attitude to Virgil on the grounds that he was too much "womanis frend" (Brewer I no. 20). That refusal to accept the authority of even such writers as Virgil and Dante, coupled with his own famous reluctance to claim authority for himself, may be what made earlier criticism of Chaucer look straight past the higher claims he makes to be writing within the classical tradition. Victorian literalism tended to replace the top civil servant, diplomat and intellectual with his own self-parody as an innocent (Trigg). Yet in his own way, he was making the same choice of poetic fathers as so many humanist and later poets: looking beyond and above the contemporary vernacular poets, in any language, to the Classics. It was those ambitions – achieved ambitions, to produce an English poetry that could stand comparison with the Classics – that enabled him to be so highly regarded by readers in the three hundred years after his death, precisely because they were prepared to accept him as in the line of descent from Ovid and Virgil, or even to serve as a substitute for them. Lydgate explicitly acknowledges his first-hand debt to Chaucer rather than "Virgyle . . . Omer . . . Dares Frygius . . . Ovyde" in the Epilogue to the *Fall of Princes* (Brewer I no. 4g). Caxton commissioned an epitaph for him from the Italian humanist Stephen Surigo, which compares the role played by his *maternis versibus* in reforming the language's uncouthness to Virgil's embellishment of Latin (Brewer I no. 15). The final lines of the epitaph, which were also inscribed round the edge of the tomb erected for him in 1556, insisted that he was the *fama poesis maternae*, the glory of poetry in his mother tongue; but even they memorialize the paradox that they are written in the nobler language of Latin. It had to wait for Dryden, in the Preface to his *Fables* of 1700, for anyone to make a serious argument that Chaucer should be ranked as high or higher than the Classics, as a better poet in many respects than Ovid, and with the *Knight's Tale* being "of the Epique kind, and perhaps not much inferiour to the *Ilias* or the *Aeneis*" (44, 30-3).

The printing history of Chaucer's works demonstrates the same conviction that he was England's equivalent to the great Classics. The first printed complete works, of 1532, was famously named just that, *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, on the model of the *Opera* reserved for those; it is not matched until the seventeenth century, and only rarely then. The preface to this edition noted Chaucer's equivalence in English to the most famous classical poets; it also gave the English language high praise for its descent from Greek and Latin, as if to override ideas of a less authoritative mother tongue. It also accorded a care to the production of its text comparable to that given to the Classics, including the

collation of different manuscripts; “collation” in this sense indeed is given its first usage in this editorial sense here (Blodgett 47). The edition was reprinted four times down to 1561; a new edition appeared in 1598 and was further revised just four years later. All appeared in expensive folio format, both the cost and the number of the editions bespeaking a substantial buying public eager to possess the works of Chaucer. In the 1598 and 1602 editions, Chaucer’s part in the begetting of English poetry was given a further boost by the inclusion of a portrait page drawn by the great cartographer of England John Speed. Here, he is turned into something close to being the literal father of the English nation, by the addition of the heading “The Progeny of Geoffrey Chaucer,” and lines of descent down each side of the page showing, on the left, the royal houses of Lancaster and Tudor, and on the right, the dukes of Suffolk. One has to look quite hard to see that it is not in fact Chaucer at the root of both lines, but Payne Roet, his father-in-law and also the father of Katherine Swynford, John of Gaunt’s mistress, third wife and ancestress of the Tudors.

The four-figure number of sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century references and allusions to the whole range of Chaucer’s works, by almost all the major writers of the period and even more minor ones (Spurgeon; Boswell and Holton), demonstrates that people did not just possess copies, but read them too; and they could expect those allusions to be picked up in turn by their own readers. Many of those who commented explicitly on his poetry compared him to the poets who had become established as the named forefathers of the classical tradition, as the English Homer, for Greek, or Ennius, for Latin; but he was also often the English Virgil, not just an ancestor to revere, but a continuing model of what poetry ought to be. The most extensive homage along those lines was that paid to him by Edmund Spenser, who in the *Shepherd’s Calendar* set out to recreate great English poetry that could stand comparison with contemporary European and classical literature. The eclogue is a Virgilian form, and starting one’s poetic career with the form promises an epic to come, as both the commentator E.K. and one of Spenser’s shepherds point out; but it is none the less Chaucer that Spenser invokes as his main predecessor. The way he does so conflates his classical and English poetic forebears, as the Tityrus whom the *Calendar* declares to be its guiding spirit is not Virgil, who chose the name for himself in his own *Eclogues*, but Chaucer (February 91, June 81-8). In the *Faerie Queene* too, for all its Ariostan and Virgilian influences, it is Chaucer whom Spenser picks out by name in order to pay homage (IV.ii.32). He insists, indeed, not just that Chaucer is his forebear, but that his poetic genes, to use a modern analogy, are alive in him:

through infusion sweete  
 Of thine owne spirit, which doth in me suruiue,  
 I follow here the footing of thy feete. (IV.ii.34)

Their relationship was paraphrased by Dryden, who in his Preface to his *Fables* was the first person to see English poets in a genealogical succession rather than just a historical sequence, as that Spenser “was begotten by [Chaucer] Two Hundred years after his Decease” (25). The major studies of Spenser’s classical connections have however never been matched for his Chaucerianism, which has elicited no more than a handful of articles. It is as if criticism could still not quite believe that any early modern poet could be serious in claiming English fatherhood, for all the recognition of the period’s imperative search for native origins. Typical is Richard Helgerson, whose otherwise excellent *Self-Crowned Laureates* starts with Spenser; but although Chaucer was the earliest English poet by far to have been associated with the laurel, an association made repeatedly over the hundred and fifty years before Spenser, Helgerson dismisses him in one sentence as “too remote” to matter (68). To critics of the early modern, perhaps; but not to Spenser, or to the Shakespeare of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *Troilus and Cressida* and *The Two Noble Kinsmen* (Donaldson).

The assumption that one should “of English Poets of our owne Nation, esteeme *Sir Geoffrey Chaucer* the father” (Henry Peacham, *Brewer* I no. 56), and indeed have him on your bookshelf as part of the cultural literacy of a gentleman, was on the wane by the fourth decade of the seventeenth century. Milton, himself widely read in Chaucer, could still assume that an allusion to the *Squire’s Tale* (to “Call up him who left half-told / The story of Cambuskan bold,” *Il Penseroso* 109-10) would be picked up by his readers; and the one proper name he cites in his summary of the English poetic tradition in his Latin *Mansus* is “Tityrus” (line 34), referring, as in Spenser’s usage, to Chaucer. Dryden described Milton as “the poetical Son of Spenser” and says that he had acknowledged as much himself (25), but the late Milton preferred to cite the Classics and the Holy Spirit. After the Restoration, enthusiasm for Chaucer was confined to small groups of admirers, and even poets no longer read him as a matter of course. Dryden records that Philip Sidney, the third earl of Leicester, tried to persuade Cowley to read Chaucer (and no one with any poetic ambitions sixty years before would have dreamed of not reading him), but Cowley remained steadfastly unimpressed: he “had no taste of him,” and “being perhaps shocked with his old style, never examined into the depth of his good sense” (Dryden 32). Dryden himself, by contrast, firmly recognized Chaucer as his father, noting in the Preface to his *Fables* that “as he is the Father of English poetry, so I hold



him in the same degree of veneration as the Grecians held Homer, or the Romans Virgil" (33), as well as believing him to be of comparable poetic brilliance to them, and better than Ovid (30-33). The tribute is carried through from the Preface to the *Fables* to its dedicatory poem to the Duchess of Ormond, which opens with a panegyric to "the Bard who first adorn'd our Native Tongue," the equal of Homer and over whom Virgil can claim only a "doubtful Palm," and especially when it comes to the poetry of love: "He match'd their Beauties, where they most excell; / Of Love sung better, and of Arms as well."

Dryden's enthusiasm for Chaucer, like Spenser's, has received little attention from modern scholars, even though the importance of the Restoration poet's concern with literary lineage and authority has become something of an industry. That lineage, however, is represented as almost entirely classical; and Chaucer, not being classical, has largely disappeared from the account.<sup>4</sup> Dryden did however help to bring him back to wider attention in the decades after the *Fables* appeared. The 1602 edition had been given an exact reprint in 1684, but the first new edition since 1602, by John Urry, appeared in 1721. He was held in high esteem too by Pope (Brewer I no. 67), who was given a copy of the 1598 edition when he was thirteen and seems to have been enthralled by it. He started his poetic career with reworkings of the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* (omitted by Dryden from the *Fables* on grounds of indecency, in favour of her *Tale*), the *Merchant's Tale*, and the *House of Fame*, here upgraded to a temple. Its father Chaucer, however, does not get a mention in its gallery of authors, who are all classical: a suppression paralleling Chaucer's own avoidance of the names of his actual continental models in favour of his elected classical forebears. Pope ended his career too with Chaucer. When he was told, six weeks before his death, that his dog, whom he had consigned to the earl of Orrery for care, had died, he responded with a parody of a couplet from the *Knight's Tale*: "Ah Bounce! ah gentle Beast! why wouldst thou die, / When thou had'st Meat enough, and Orrery?" (Pope 837).<sup>5</sup> That it was Chaucer who came into his mind when he was dying is a measure of both love and respect for him. The Age of Enlightenment's taste for indelicacy gave the *Tales* a popular boost through the appearance of dozens of rewritings of vari-

<sup>4</sup> Of the mentions of Chaucer in an otherwise strong volume on "literary transmission and authority" in Dryden, for instance, only three, totalling 24 lines, actually engage with him, and then only as an element in arguments focused elsewhere (Miner and Brady 32, 79-81, 111).

<sup>5</sup> He misquoted *Tales* I.2835-6 as "Ah Arcite! Gentle Knight! Why would'st thou die, / When thou had'st gold enough, and Emilye?"

ous of them (Bowden), though the corollary, if Samuel Johnson's few and dismissive remarks on him are anything to go by, was a sharp drop in his more highbrow reputation. It took the Romantics to see more in him. To Wordsworth, he was the "great Precursor"; and although the context there (the "Ecclesiastical Sonnet" on Edward VI, indebted to the long ascription of various Lollard works to Chaucer) was as much Protestant as poetic, the Wordsworth household were not above delighting in the *Miller's Tale* as well (Brewer I no. 88). Keats produced a modernized version of the *Flower and the Leaf*, which was still accepted as Chaucer's – as was "La belle dame sans merci," of which he borrowed the title. In 1841, a collection of translations of Chaucer appeared by various authors including Wordsworth, Leigh-Hunt, Elizabeth Barrett (later Browning), and others, with a preface that attacks the ignorance or denigration of the "father of English poetry" resulting from his choice of his mother tongue. "Although he is one of the great poets for all time," the editor, R.H. Horne, complained, "his poems are comparatively unknown to the world... Had Chaucer's poems been written in Greek or Hebrew, they would have been a thousand times better known" (Brewer II no. 2).

Critics who double as creative writers, as Dryden was, have often been the quickest to recognize Chaucer's position as founding father. C.S. Lewis, in a particularly curmudgeonly moment, claimed that "perhaps none of our early poets has so little claim to be called the father of English poetry as the Chaucer of the *Canterbury Tales*" (163), but he none the less suggested that the origin of the lyric voice in English poetry lay in the line "Singest with vois memorial in the shade" (201, quoting *Aeneida* 18). Jorge Luis Borges identified the point of transition from allegory to the novel in "the smylere with the knyf under the cloke" (157, citing *Tales* I.1999). Recent writers who use the formulation *The X's Tale* as a title need never have read any Chaucer; but one of the greatest of the modernists does, I believe, engage with him at a much more profound and extended level, and that is James Joyce. He not only referred to Chaucer as "the father of English literature," as many people did without much thinking about it, but he put that fatherhood into practice: for he was rereading Chaucer between his first attempts at composing what became *Ulysses*, when it was still largely a conventional novel, and the rewriting that turned it into what it is in its final, very different version. In its last redaction, it consists of a series of chapters each written in its own genre, style, register and form, and with its own implied speaker – eighteen in *Ulysses*, against Chaucer's twenty-four. Joyce turned it, in fact, into something that has its only precedent in the *Canterbury Tales*. That too has a highly naturalistic frame such as made earlier generations of critics seek out real dates for the pilgrimage and real-life

models for the pilgrims with the same intensity that Joyce constructed Leopold Bloom's Dublin. Within that frame, both works become a kind of book of books, a summa of everything written (Cooper, "Joyce's Other Father"). Joyce himself owned a copy of the 1915 reprint of Skeat's one-volume edition of Chaucer's *Complete Works*, and when he did not have access to it he borrowed a copy off a friend. As with Shakespeare and Dryden, it is the influence of the Classics, and especially Homer, that has been emphasized in Joyce criticism, and not without reason. The title itself proclaims its genealogy, in the carrying forward of the name from parent work to its offspring; and so do the chapter headings that supply modern critics with their means of navigating around the book, even though, having been used in his draft and in Joyce's own letters, they were removed from the text as printed. To his first readers, however, with nothing but the main title to go on, the further similarities to Homer remained largely invisible, and it took T.S. Eliot to draw attention to them; and once that consciousness was there, the work took an instant large step towards respectability and acceptance. There were not, so far as I know, any early readers who proposed the *Canterbury Tales* as the work's inspiration instead, but the choice would in many ways have been a much more obvious one. Hence Umberto Eco's description of the medievalism of *Ulysses* is also an exact description of the *Tales*, for the way "the 'dramatic' technique eliminates the continuous presence of the author and substitutes for his point of view that of the characters and events themselves" (37-8); and that the whole "operation . . . is performed *in* language, *with* language and *on* language (on things seen through language)" (34). He notes too Joyce's own description of the work as a "summa," "a sort of encyclopaedia" (33). All of those are elements well to the fore in the *Canterbury Tales*.

Joyce himself insisted on the need to reject classicism in favour of the greater "emotional fecundity" of the medieval (Power 95). In its relation to both Homer and Chaucer, *Ulysses* embraces both. It brings those two traditions, of the classical and the medieval, back together, as they had been in Chaucer himself, to produce one of the very greatest of modern works in English. It is a work, moreover, in which Stephen, the figure who had represented Joyce in the earlier *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, is looking for a father: a search that in literary terms too Joyce writes into his book. Once again, however, fatherhood as a metaphor for Chaucer's relationship to the work may be compromised, or enriched, by a concomitant sense of the feminine. The work carries Chaucer's literary genes, but his name has been deleted, as a mother's name is deleted. The one place where criticism has been open to the suggestion of Chaucerian influence is where the work ends up, in the great monologue of Molly Bloom: a figure who is generally accepted as

Joyce's counterpart to the Wife of Bath. Both characters share an easy addiction to the mother tongue, and a ready sexuality that seems to promise progeny. For Joyce, at least, it may be that Chaucer as mother takes his place alongside Chaucer as father.

## References

- Bede. *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. Ed. Bertram Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969.
- Blodgett, James E. "William Thynne." *Editing Chaucer: The Great Tradition*. Ed. Paul G. Ruggiers. Norman, Oklahoma: Pilgrim Books, 1984. 35-52.
- Bloom, Harold. *The Anxiety of Influence*. Second edition. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997.
- Bonfiglio, Thomas Paul. *Mother Tongues and Nations: The Invention of the Native Speaker*. Berlin and New York: De Gruyter Mouton, 2010.
- Borges, Jorge Luis. *Other Inquisitions 1937-52*. Trans. Ruth L. Simmons. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964.
- Boswell, Jackson Campbell, and Sylvia Wallace Holton. *Chaucer's Fame in England: STC Chauceriana, 1475-1640*. New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2004.
- Bowden, Betsy, ed. *Eighteenth-Century Modernizations from the Canterbury Tales*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1991.
- Brewer, Derek, ed. *Chaucer: The Critical Heritage*. 2 vols. London, Henley and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978.
- Butterfield, Ardis. *The Familiar Enemy: Chaucer, Language and Nation in the Hundred Years War*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Chaucer, Geoffrey. *The Riverside Chaucer*. General ed. Larry D. Benson. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988.
- Cooper, Helen. "Chaucerian Poetics." *New Readings of Chaucer's Poetry*. Ed. Robert G. Benson and Susan J. Ridyard. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2003. 31-50.
- . "The Four Last Things in Dante and Chaucer: Ugolino in the House of Rumour." *New Medieval Literatures* 3 (1999): 39-66.
- . "Joyce's Other Father: The Case for Chaucer." *Medieval Joyce*. Ed. Lucia Boldrini. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2002. 143-63.
- Donaldson, E. Talbot. *The Swan at the Well: Shakespeare Reading Chaucer*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985.
- Dryden, John. *The Works of John Dryden VII: Poems 1697-1700*. Ed. Vinton A. Dearing. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2000.
- Eco, Umberto. *The Middle Ages of James Joyce: The Aesthetics of Chaosmos*. Trans. Ellen Esrock. London: Hutchinson Radius, 1989.
- Frantzen, Allen J. *Desire for Origins: New Language, Old English, and Teaching the Tradition*. New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 1990.

- Haugen, Einar. "The Mother Tongue." *The Influence of Language on Culture and Thought: Essays in Honor of Joshua A. Fishman's 65th Birthday*. Ed. Robert L. Cooper and Bernard Spolsky. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1991. 75-84.
- Helgerson, Richard. *Self-Crowned Laureates: Spenser, Jonson, Milton and the Literary System*. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1983.
- Herbert, George. *The English Poems of George Herbert*. Ed. Helen Wilcox. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Lewis, C.S. *The Allegory of Love*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936 and reprints.
- Longfellow, Henry Wadsworth. *The Complete Poetical Works of Longfellow*. Ed. Horace E. Scudder. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1893 and reprints.
- Milton, John. *The Complete Shorter Poems*. Ed. John Carey. Second edition. London: Longman, 1996.
- Miner, Earl and Jennifer Brady, eds. *Literary Transmission and Authority: Dryden and other Writers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.
- Pope, Alexander. *The Poems of Alexander Pope*. Ed. John Butt. New Haven and Yale: Yale University Press, 1963.
- Power, Arthur. *Conversations with James Joyce*. Ed. Clive Hart. Dublin: Millington Press, 1974.
- Shakespeare, William. *The Complete Works*. Ed. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986.
- Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Ed. J.R.R. Tolkien and E.V. Gordon. Second edition revised by Norman Davis. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967.
- Spearing, A.C. *Medieval into Renaissance in English Poetry*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.
- Spenser, Edmund. *The Poetical Works of Edmund Spenser*. Ed. J.C. Smith and E. de Selincourt. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1912 and reprints.
- Spurgeon, Caroline F.E. *Five Hundred Years of Chaucer Criticism and Allusion (1357-1900)*. 3 vols. London: Chaucer Society, 1914-25.
- Trigg, Stephanie. *Congenial Souls: Reading Chaucer from Medieval to Postmodern*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2002.
- Wetherbee, Winthrop. *Chaucer and the Poets: An Essay on Troilus and Criseyde*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1984.
- Windeatt, Barry. *The Oxford Guides to Chaucer: Troilus and Criseyde*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992.

Wogan-Browne, Jocelyn, Nicholas Watson, Andrew Taylor and Ruth Evans, eds. *The Idea of the Vernacular: An Anthology of Middle English Literary Theory 1280-1520*. Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1999.