



Historians on Chaucer: The 'General Prologue' to the Canterbury Tales

By Alastair Minnis

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As literary scholars have long insisted, an interdisciplinary approach is vital if modern readers are to make sense of works of medieval literature. In particular, rather than reading the works of medieval authors as addressing us across the centuries about some timeless or ahistorical 'human condition', critics from a wide range of theoretical approaches have in recent years shown how the work of poets such as Chaucer constituted engagements with the power relations and social inequalities of their time. Yet, perhaps surprisingly, medieval historians have played little part in this 'historical turn' in the study of medieval literature. The aim of this volume is to allow historians who are experts in the fields of economic, social, political, religious, and intellectual history the chance to interpret one of the most famous works of Middle English literature, Geoffrey Chaucer's 'General Prologue' to the *Canterbury Tales*, in its contemporary context. Rather than resorting to traditional historical attempts to see Chaucer's descriptions of the Canterbury pilgrims as immediate reflections of historical reality or as portraits of real-life people whom Chaucer knew, the contributors to this volume have sought to show what interpretive frameworks were available to Chaucer in order to make sense of reality and how he adapted his literary and ideological inheritance so as to engage with the controversies and conflicts of his own day. Beginning with a survey of recent debates about the social meaning of Chaucer's work, the volume then discusses each of the Canterbury pilgrims in turn. *Historians on Chaucer* should be of interest to all scholars and students of medieval culture whether they are specialists in literature or history,

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Editorial Review

Review

"The editors and contributors are to be commended for compiling a useful and interesting collection of essays. It will be a valuable resource for scholars and teachers of the Canterbury Tales for many years to come." --Matthew Ciancarlo, *Renaissance Quarterly*

"This collection has the outlines of a quite old-fashioned book, but it addresses perennial questions for readers of Chaucer and uses up-to-date historical research to illuminate the character portraits in the General Prologue...in almost every chapter, readers of Chaucer will learn something new, or be encouraged to rethink the familiar...The book is full of intriguing suggestions and interesting readings...The book offers many useful pieces of information, large and small." --John M. Fyler, *Modern Philology*

About the Author

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Stephen Rigby was educated at Sheffield and London universities. He has published widely on social theory, medieval English social and economic history, Middle English literature, and medieval political theory.

Alastair Minnis is currently the Douglas Tracy Smith Professor of English at Yale University. Formerly he taught at the Queen's University of Belfast, Bristol University, and the University of York. His research methodology brings together reading strategies from literary criticism and the history of ideas, and an interest in medieval philosophy and theology has informed much of his work. He is a Fellow of the English Association and of the Medieval Academy of America.

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