

Subliminal Chaucer

in Shakespeare's History Plays

by Michael Delahoyde

One would think library shelves would be sagging under the weight of all the scholarship concerning Chaucer's influence on Shakespeare: they are the giants of English literature. E. Talbot Donaldson, the grand old master of early English literature, responsible for two of the very few books examining the Chaucer/Shakespeare connection (and my own "academic grandfather," having been my late mentor's mentor), says of Shakespeare, "Until Marlowe and Spenser almost in his own time, there were no poets in English besides Chaucer who had anything to teach him."¹ Yet, the surprisingly few scholars who have examined the connection have generally produced comparative source studies with the obvious cases: Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* with Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* and Chaucer's *The Knight's Tale* in *The Canterbury Tales* with Shakespeare's *The Two Noble Kinsmen*. Shakespeare, however, has made much subtler use of his Chaucer than has been previously detected.

The importance of Chaucer to Shakespeare is difficult to overestimate: "The sheer quantity of the material involved implies that Shakespeare did not merely use Chaucer for a plot or two (as he did some authors) but knew him so well that he recalled his work (often unconsciously, one would imagine) in virtually every play."² Subtle Chaucerian allusions are woven throughout the canon, and, Ovid notwithstanding, Chaucer may be the single most important influence on the "poetry" in Shakespeare's works. Yet despite Chaucer's eventual reputation as the "father of English poetry" (ever since John Dryden declared it) and also the "father of English literature," we should not take for granted that Shakespeare would have known Chaucer's works so well. Samuel Daniel in his *Defence of Rime* (1602) touts English medievals such as the Venerable Bede, Roger Bacon, and Occam, but not poets of the later Middle Ages. And "Of Chaucer's 'ancient' English rhyme, Daniel has nothing to say."³ We should ask how it was possible that Shakespeare became acquainted with Chaucer. As Ann Thompson notes, "vernacular literature was not read at school, and there is no sure way of ascertaining when, how, and in what variety a middle-class schoolboy might have come across English books; for the most part we are thrown back upon the internal evidence of the plays themselves"⁴ – circularly.

The record shows that the Earl of Oxford purchased a copy of Chaucer along with his Plutarch and his Geneva Bible in 1570. But more compelling is the family con-

nection, for it is known that shortly after Chaucer's death the early 15th-century de Veres owned, and it is surmised commissioned, the first most glorious copy of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, the Ellesmere manuscript, celebrated for its marginal illuminations of the pilgrims, including Chaucer himself on a diminutive horse.

Though he somewhat restricts his otherwise admirable explorations to the obvious plot borrowings, we can also agree with Donaldson "that Shakespeare read Chaucer's poetry with understanding and great care, more carefully, perhaps, than some of his [Chaucer's] critics."⁵ In addition to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and *Troilus and Criseyde*, Shakespeare was a careful reader of Chaucer's so-called Minor Poems. For example, Aaron in *Titus Andronicus* claims, "The Emperor's court is like the house of Fame, / A palace full of tongues, of eyes, and ears" (2.1.126-7),⁶ a reference to Chaucer's enigmatic and surreal *House of Fame*.⁷ Though the most obscure of Chaucer's Minor Poems, the incomplete *House of Fame* yields an assortment of details demonstrably echoed in the works of Shakespeare. In Chaucer's poem we read of a white and red garland (135), colors Shakespeare uses repeatedly in *Lucrece* and elsewhere to signify the Tudor rose and Queen Elizabeth. We read of the Greek spy Sinon (152) and of King Priam of Troy slain (159), heated Shakespearean concerns in *Lucrece* and in *Hamlet*. We read of a "tempeste" (209). We read that "Hit is not al gold that glareth" (272), a message Shakespeare will paraphrase and insert in a gold casket in *The Merchant of Venice*. Chaucer writes, "But that is doon, nis not to done" (361), inspiring a phrasal obsession in *Macbeth*: e.g., "What's done cannot be undone" (5.2.68).

For Hamlet's utterance of the memorable line, "I am but mad north-north-west. When the wind is southerly, I know a hawk from a hand-saw" (2.2.378-9), Shakespeare borrowed from an equally peculiar moment in Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls* where the poem's narrator refers to "Citheria" (embodied in the planet Venus) being "north-north-west" (113, 117).⁸ This has remained a Chaucerian puzzle, since Venus is never seen that far north from the vantage-point of England. Hamlet's enigmatic utterance originated in Chaucer's enigmatic utterance. And this from lesser-known works of Chaucer; we may be assured Shakespeare would have found much more

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of interest in Chaucer's exploration of character, voice, and dramatic narrative in his masterpiece, *The Canterbury Tales*.

In *Henry IV, Part 1*, the Gadshill robbery plotted by Prince Hal, Falstaff, and others aims to waylay "pilgrims going to Canterbury with rich offerings" (1.2.126). Falstaff later calls the Hostess "Dame Partlet the hen" (3.3.52) and editors, evoking sunny bucolic Warwickshire scenes, explain in footnotes that Dame Partlet is a traditional name for a chicken. This is absurd. Farmers "traditionally" don't tend to name their chickens anything more glamorous than "Sunday Afternoon Dinner." "Dame Partlet" is really an inside literary joke and poetic reference to Chauncleer the rooster's wife/sister in *The Nun's Priest's Tale*. In *Henry IV, Part 2*, the "Master Gower" with whom Falstaff spends time cannot be intended to represent John Gower, the other poet besides Chaucer in the Ricardian court. Nevertheless, Falstaff does mention recollections of *the* John a' Gaunt (3.2.324) and is credited with having "break Scoggin's head" (3.2.30), a likely reference to the Scogan to whom Chaucer wrote "Lenvoy de Chaucer a Scogan." In this short poem, Chaucer describes himself, like Falstaff, as being "rounde of shap."

We can sense Shakespeare's identification with the entertainer/philosopher Feste in *Twelfth Night*, so it is intriguing that to visit Malvolio in the darkhouse, Feste takes on the disguise of "Sir Topas" (4.2.1-2), superfluously, since Maria later remarks, "Thou mightst have done this without thy beard and gown, he sees thee not" (4.2.64-65). Just as Chaucer creates his own Canterbury pilgrim persona who in turn brings forth the character Sir Thopas in his aborted tale, so does Shakespeare have his own persona create a Sir Topas character.

Consider also the apothecary scene in *Romeo and Juliet* with its absolutely extraneous character the apothecary (the film *Shakespeare in Love* makes a joke of it), termed a "caitiff wretch," "[w]hose sale is present death" in the form of poison to Romeo and who is called a "beggar" even though he owns a shop in Mantua (5.1.51-56). In Chaucer's *Pardoner's Tale*, a strange wandering figure symbolically points out the way to some young men in search of "Death," a concept they foolishly misunderstand and personify. Chaucer's "cherl" (VI 750), a "resteles kaityf" (VI 728; the noun Shakespeare also uses), sends the youths towards a cache of gold, while Shakespeare's Romeo rails inappropriately, since it is not a theme in the play nor a relevant moral concern: "There is thy gold, worse poison to men's souls, / Doing more murther in this loathsome world, / Than these poor compounds" (5.1.80-2). Later in Chaucer's poem, one of the young men visits "a pothecarie" in the town to purchase "Som poyson" with which to kill his companions (VI 852, 854). Surely Shakespeare was more than subliminally influenced by Chaucer here.

Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, possibly Shakespeare's favorite source, appears on stage as a prop in *Titus Andronicus*, and the other much lesser Ricardian court poet Gower

serves as a chorus in *Pericles*. Why, then, is Chaucer never represented as a character in Shakespeare's works? For nearly all of Chaucer's career, Richard II was king. Richard's uncle, John of Gaunt, was Chaucer's patron, brother-in-law, and friend. Shakespeare represents Gaunt as a noble character in the play, giving him the delivery of "the most stirring paean to England ever written"¹⁰ – those beloved lines ending with "This blessed plot, this earth, this realm this England" (2.1.50). So one would naturally expect at least an oblique mention of the father of English poetry in Shakespeare's *Richard II*. But though the poet Chaucer is never mentioned, Shakespeare infuses *Richard II* with his spirit and with his shadow.

Chaucer's most immortal lines are those that begin *The Canterbury Tales*. If you had a responsible "old-school" secondary-school English teacher, you had to memorize the first eighteen lines of the *General Prologue*.

Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote
 The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,
 And bathed every veyne in swich licour
 Of which vertu engendred is the flour;
 Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth
 Inspired hath in every holt and heeth
 The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne
 Hath in the Ram his half cours yronne,
 And smale foweles maken melodye,
 That slepen al the nyght with open ye
 (So priketh hem nature in hir corages),
 Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages,
 And palmeres for to seken straunge strondes,
 To ferne halwes, kowthe in sondry londes;
 And specially from every shires ende
 Of Engelond to Caunterbury they wende,
 The hooly blisful martir for to seke.
 That hem hath holpen whan that they were seeke.

(I 1-18)

In the second scene of Shakespeare's *Richard II*, John of Gaunt, speaking with his sister-in-law the widowed Duchess of Gloucester, immediately begins:

Alas, the part I had in Glousters blood,
 Doth more solícite me then your exclames,
 To stirre against the Butchers of his life.
 But since correction lyeth in those hands
 Which made the fault that we cannot correct,

Put we our quarrell to the will of heaven,
 Who when they see the houres ripe on earth,
 Will *raigne* hot vengeance on offenders heads.

(1.2.1-8)¹¹

The “rain” of vengeance initiates a pattern of natural horticultural imagery we will hear throughout the play and that will be made literal for us in the scene of the gardeners. The effect of the image here is certainly not that of Chaucer’s “shoures soote” (“sweet showers”; line 1), but then Gaunt’s widowed sister-in-law rails:

Findes brotherhood in thee no sharper spurre?
 Hath love in thy old blood no living fire?
 Edward’s seven sonnes (whereof thy selfe art one)
 Were as seven violles of his Sacred blood,
 Or seven faire branches springing from one *roote*: [“roote”; line 2]
 Some of those seven are *dride* by natures course, [“droughte”; line 2]
 Some of those branches by the destinies cut:
 But Thomas, my dear Lord, my life, my Glouster,
 One Violl full of Edwards Sacred *blood*, [“bathed every vein”; line 3]
 One flourishing branch of his most Royall roote
 Is crack’d, and all the precious *liquor* spilt; [“licour”; line 3]
 Is hackt downe, and his summer leafes all vaded
 By Envies hand, and Murders bloody Axe.
 Ah Gaunt! His blood was thine, that bed, that *wombe*,
 That mettle, that self-mould, that *fashion’d* thee, [“engendred”; line 4]
 Made him a man: and though thou liv’st, and *breath’st*, [“breathe”; line 5]
 Yet art thou slaine in him: thou dost consent
 In some large measure to thy Fathers death,
 In that thou seest thy wretched brother dye, [“the yonge sonne”; line 6]
 Who was the modell of thy Fathers life.

(1.2.9-28)

The word “liquor” is especially unusual and obsolete as Shakespeare uses it; and he opts for an even subtler but not uncommon word-play with Chaucer’s “sonne” (son). Later in Shakespeare’s Act I, we hear reference to “smale foweles” (line 9) when John of Gaunt tries cheering up his son on the occasion of Henry’s banishment: “Suppose the singing birds musicians” (1.3.288). At the same time, Gaunt also offers this piece of very Chaucerian advice: “Teach thy necessity to reason thus: / There is no virtue like necessity” (1.3.277-278), certainly a conscious paraphrase from Chaucer’s *Knight’s Tale*: “Thanne is it wisdom, as it thynketh me, / To maken vertu of necessi-tee” (I 3042). Ultimately, the “hooly blisful martir” (line 17), or at least the “martir,” will be King Richard himself.

Most unambiguously Chaucerian is the idea of “pilgrimages” (line 12). A banished Henry kneels to Richard, saying oddly that “Mowbray and myself are like two men / That vow a long and weary pilgrimage” (1.3.48-9). But how is banishment into exile in any way like a pilgrimage *to* a sacred shrine? Similarly, a philosophical and conciliatory Gaunt and an impatient Henry say goodbye to one another, the latter off on “an enforced pilgrimage” (1.3.264; cf. 1.3.230).

Much later in the play when Richard suffers in prison, Sir Pierce Exton speaks with his servant about something the usurper Henry had said: “Have I no friend will rid me of this living fear?” (5.4.2). Exton interprets this as meaning that he should kill Richard at Pomfret. “There may well be a resonance, too, with Henry II’s famous query about Thomas à Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury, in 1170: ‘Will no man rid me of this meddlesome priest?’”¹²

In the end, Henry will put on the appearance of sorrow, an “absurd hypocrisy that closes the play”¹³: “Lords, I protest my soul is full of woe / That blood should sprinkle me to make me grow” (5.4.45-6). He vows a show of piety:

Come mourn with me for what I do lament,
And put on sullen black incontinent.
I’ll make a voyage to the Holy Land
To wash this blood off from my guilty hand.
(5.6.47-50)

He never will. By the way, now the correct word *is* “pilgrimage,” not “voyage” – but he doesn’t use it. The Chaucerian era is over. Chaucer himself, historically, will soon be dead.

I have intended to show how Shakespeare embedded a pattern of Chaucer allusions in *Richard II*, the very play in which the “father of English poetry” ought to have appeared in some form of tribute, considering how steeped in Chaucer Shakespeare is, but where Chaucer surprisingly receives not even a mention. Chaucer seems to have died very early in the reign of the usurper, Henry IV. As if pleased with the subtlety and effect of embedding Chaucer’s most famous lines subliminally in that play, Shakespeare repeats his technique within the very opening lines of his play *Henry IV, Part 1*, honoring the subtle spirit of Chaucer just when the poet’s world and ethos were rapidly being dismantled by the new regime.¹⁴

The first line of the play reads, “So shaken as we are, so wan with care” (1.1.1). The word “wan” is homophonic for the Middle English “Whan[ne]”: the very first word of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*. “Whan” appears twice more in the first eighteen lines of the *General Prologue*: “whan Zephirus eke” (line 5), and the last phrase, “whan that they were seeke” (line 18). This last “whan” phrase – when they were sick – actually captures the atmosphere of the Shakespearean play’s opening.

So shaken as we are, so wan with care,
 Finde we a time for frighted Peace to pant,
 And breath shortwinded accents of new broils
 To be commenc'd in Stronds a-farre remote.
 No more the thirsty entrance of this Soile,
 Shall daube her lippes with her owne childrens blood:
 No more shall trenching Warre channell her fields,
 Nor bruise her Flowrets with the Armed hooves
 Of hostile paces. Those opposed eyes,
 Which, like the Meteors of a troubled Heaven,
 All of one Nature, of one Substance bred,
 Did lately meete in the intestine shocke,
 And furious cloze of civil Butchery,
 Shall now, in mutuall well-beseeming rankes,
 March all one way, and be no more oppos'd
 Against Acquaintance, Kindred, and Allies.
 The edge of Warre, like an ill-sheathed knife,
 No more shall cut his Master. Therefore Friends,
 As farre as to the Sepulcher of Christ,
 Whose Souldier now under whose blessed Crosse
 We are impressed and ingag'd to fight,
 Forthwith a power of English shall we levie. . . .
(1.1.1-22)¹⁵

In the second and third lines of the play, Chaucer's "Zephirus eek with his swete breeth" (line 5) – the west wind with his sweet breath – appears in the form of "pant" and "breath[e] short-winded." By "swete breeth" Chaucer means "sweet," but Shakespeare puns on Chaucer's "swete" and includes the concept of "sweat" in the frantic panic of the times Henry feels pressured and harassed by.

The fourth line of the play refers to "Stronds" (capitalized in the First Folio), an unusual word for tracts of land and always glossed as "strands" in editions of the play; but Shakespeare is specifically borrowing Chaucer's "straunge strondes" (line 13), and this form of the word is unusual by Shakespeare's time.

The fifth line of the play, referring to both thirst and soil, echoes Chaucer's "droghte," remedied by April's showers having "perced to the roote" (line 2). The sixth line of the play concerning literal "blood" echoes Chaucer's "every veyne" (line 3). The play's eighth line extraneously brings up "Flowrets," an odd import since the primary image is of horses' trampling hooves, but it matches Chaucer's engendered "flour" (line 4).

The ninth line of the play refers to “opposed eyes,” echoing the “open ye” (line 10) of Chaucer’s “smale fowles,” or small birds sleeping restlessly at night in springtime.

The opening sentence of Chaucer’s *General Prologue* has supplied the key material for Shakespeare’s opening speech by Henry, but absolute alignment between the two passages after the first line comes only, and significantly, with the term “Nature”: in the play’s eleventh line and, I think not coincidentally, in Chaucer’s eleventh line. Chaucer’s *reverdrie* opening is a thorough celebration of the natural order, and what follows in his “great chain of awakenings” is the impulse towards the spiritual: towards a pilgrimage. In Shakespeare’s subliminal use of Chaucer, Henry accidentally, unwittingly, and momentarily aligns with this idea of the healthy and natural; but what follows now in Henry’s scheme is turned militaristic, not into a pilgrimage, but into a crusade. Shakespeare creates a palimpsest effect, overwriting Chaucer and nearly obliterating him. The technique, though, also provides a nearly invisible critique of Henry, who may promise post-war peace but who admits that we are in a period when “Armed hoofes” trample flowerets.

If Oxford knew what modern medievalist Terry Jones has recently asserted about the suppression and attempted elimination of Chaucer,¹⁶ then he understood this in terms of the pattern whereby governments eliminate poets and prophets. For example, Ovid was famously sent into banishment for what he claimed in his poem “*Epistulae ex Ponto*,” was “a poem and a mistake.” Shakespeare knew of Ovid’s punishment under Caesar Augustus. He also would have sensed that Chaucer did not thrive, or perhaps fared much worse, under the new authoritarian regime of Henry IV. With access to antique Tower records, Oxford may have known as much, if not more than modern Chaucerians do about the final disappearance of the man christened the father of English poetry. Shakespeare, naturally identifying with literary artists living in police states (as Tudor England has been designated), and especially identifying with his only significant predecessor in English literature, demonstrates that, unlike the poets, the works of the poet cannot be so easily erased. Shakespeare demonstrates that Chaucer can survive just below the surface of other texts, virtually undetectable by those who are unaware that they have been subliminally influenced by the words of those poets they have tried to marginalize. Chaucer the person, the character, does not appear in Shakespeare’s history plays set in the Ricardian court of Chaucer’s own time. But Chaucer the poet remains, his words having been renewed and newly contextualized by English literature’s new Bard, both poets ultimately insuppressible.

Notes

- 1 E. Talbot Donaldson and Judith J. Kollmann, eds., *Chaucerian Shakespeare: Adaptation and Transformation* (Detroit: Michigan Consortium for Medieval and Early Modern Studies, 1983), 5. The other key works are Donaldson's *The Swan at the Well: Shakespeare Reading Chaucer* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), and Ann Thompson's *Shakespeare's Chaucer: A Study in Literary Origins* (NY: Barnes & Noble Books, 1978).
- 2 Thompson, 59.
- 3 Alice Miskimin, *The Renaissance Chaucer* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), 21.
- 4 Thompson, 2. For a closer look at Oxford's Chaucer-steeped background, see my "Lyric Poetry from Chaucer to Shakespeare" in *Brief Chronicles V* (2014), 69-100; rpt. in *Soul of the Age: Building the Case for Edward de Vere as Shakespeare, Vol. 9*, ed. Paul H. Altrocchi (iUniverse, 2014), 365-402.
- 5 Donaldson, *The Swan*, 4.
- 6 Unless otherwise indicated, all Shakespeare references are to *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997) and given parenthetically in the text.
- 7 The connection is acknowledged by May A. Klipple, *Chaucer in the Sixteenth Century* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1920), 11.
- 8 All Chaucer references are to *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed. by Larry D. Benson (NY: Oxford University Press, 2008) and given parenthetically in the text. Fragment number and line numbers appear for quotations from *The Canterbury Tales*.
- 9 Laila Z. Gross, "The Short Poems," in *The Riverside Chaucer*, 2nd ed. by Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1987), 636; cf. Thomas H. McNeal, "Henry IV, Parts I and II, and Speght's First Edition of *Geffrey Chaucer*," in *The Shakespeare Association Bulletin* 21.2 (April 1946), 91-92.

- 10 Herschel Baker, Introduction, *Richard II*, in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 843.
- 11 Italics are mine; otherwise I have provided here the spelling and typography of the *First Folio*.
- 12 Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare After All* (NY: Pantheon Books, 2004), 268.
- 13 Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (NY: Riverhead Books, 1998), 270.
- 14 Terry Jones, et al. *Who Murdered Chaucer?* (NY: St. Martin's Press, 2004).
- 15 Again, the spelling and typography of the *First Folio*.
- 16 Terry Jones. Yes, the Terry Jones from Monty Python. A legitimate medievalist.

