



chaucer and the trivium





Chaucer and the Trivium

The Mindsong of the Canterbury Tales

j. stephen russell



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For Mary, Elizabeth, and Catherine





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preface

This book was written primarily for students of Chaucer and Middle English literature. In my experience, many such readers first encounter this powerful writing of long ago and find themselves feeling that they are not completely connecting with the minds of the authors. Of course we cannot connect with these minds: none of us can and none of us ever will, but this inability is not restricted to medieval literature. Thinkers in the Middle Ages and today share the realization that, in fact, we never actually connect with each other at all, that we can never do better than to share words and ideas imperfectly, inexactly.

This does not mean that we needn't *try* to connect. Living in a society is really nothing more than making the effort to connect with those around us, and reading literature is nothing more than trying to connect with those distant from us in time and space. At its heart, this book is an examination of the medieval expression of that truth, that our words try to connect but still remain a *mindsong*, a performance that is both by us and about us.

Thus this is a book written not only for students of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* in particular but also more broadly for people interested in medieval ideas about the mind, language, expression, and identity. It is not particularly written for specialists in the field: it is written, as I said, for *students*, a word that originally meant *workers*. To try to connect with others is work: it is wonderful, human, ennobling work; it is work we never complete.

Any book about the *Canterbury Tales* is, at base, a collaboration, and this is no exception. I am happy to acknowledge my many, many collaborators. All of them are students, workers: some have doctoral degrees and even chairs at universities and colleges, and some sat on chairs in my classes over the years. What you find in these pages that is right or true



is thanks to all of our work together.

Four of my colleagues took time out from their busy schedules to read this book in manuscript and to make sensitive suggestions for improving it: Julian Wasserman of Loyola University in New Orleans, and my Hofstra colleagues Fred Keener, Paula Uruburu, and Laviece Ward. Thanks to each of you: this is a better book for your efforts. Thanks also to two anonymous colleagues who read the manuscript for the University Press of Florida: your attention to detail and empathy with my intentions were a great benefit.

Finally, a word to my wife, Helen: only authors and their spouses know how this is your book as well as mine. Thanks, Helen, for the patience of Griselda, the faith of Custance, and the gentillesse of Emelye.

A note on sources: Abbreviations include *BD*, *CT*, and *HF* (Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*, *Canterbury Tales*, and *Hous of Fame*, respectively), *CHLMP* (*Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy*, edited by Norman Kretzmann, Anthony Kenny, and Jan Pinborg), and *CTMT* (*Cambridge Translations of Medieval Texts*, edited by Norman Kretzmann and Eleanora Stump). Quotations from the works of Chaucer are taken from *The Riverside Chaucer*, edited by Larry Benson, and are cited in text. Quotations from Hebrew and Christian scripture are taken from *Biblia Sacra iuxta Vulgatam Clementinam*, edited by Alberto Colunga and Laurentio Turrado, are cited in text. Translations are mine unless otherwise noted.