

## Preamble: what this book is about

These preliminary remarks aim to calibrate potential readers' expectations about a book that possesses the broad title of *The problem of literary value* but nonetheless appears within Manchester University Press's Medieval Literature and Culture Series.

Most fundamentally, this book is about the challenges that literary value presents for the general field of literary studies, and hence I hope that, regardless of their areas of specialisation, readers concerned about these challenges will find the book's various considerations of this topic of interest. Yet, by far most of the specific examples of these challenges that the book examines involve the study of medieval literature and, most often and more narrowly, Chaucer studies. In the course of the book's consideration of the general problem of literary value, therefore, it also supplies an extended reflection on the state of Chaucer studies over the last several decades in respect to some of the issues, ideas and practices that have been prominent within the subfield.

Doubtlessly, my choice to so limit the scope of my examples attenuates in some regards the applicability of the book's most general arguments. But obviously I have proceeded on the assumption that more has been gained than lost. Chaucer studies, in particular, in several ways serves as a perspicacious synecdoche for the general field of literary studies in respect to the problem of literary value. Because Chaucer, on the one hand, has enjoyed long and enduring canonicity in Anglophone literary studies – figured from soon after his death up to the present as the genial progenitor of a patrilineal English literary history – and, on the other hand, possesses a somewhat marginal position in the field as a medieval author for whom

there are historical and linguistic obstacles of access, the problem of literary value has been especially salient in Chaucer studies. Indeed, in recent years, within a changing landscape of Anglophone literary studies that for crucial reasons has sought to become more inclusive, the pressure on Chaucer's paradoxically marginal centrality has become intense. In some quarters, the combination of his standing as a fountainhead of a Eurocentric conception of literary value and the perception of his language and culture as forbiddingly alien to modernity has urgently brought to the fore the question of his value. Accordingly, in very practical ways, as in, say, revising the content of a university's English major curricula, that question has become, in miniature, the question of value for the field as a whole. While literary value is ultimately no more or no less of a problem for Chaucer studies than for literary studies generally, this corner of the field thus provides a ready vehicle for thinking through some of the problem's myriad complexities.

There are, moreover, more practical reasons for the book's restriction of the scope of its examples. This book attempts to treat in individual chapters topics – the critical edition, canonicity, interpretation – that are, obviously, massive in scope, that quickly ramify into all sorts of conceptual difficulties and that possess accordingly vast traditions of commentary. Even if I were able to master those traditions, any sustained engagement with them would quickly overwhelm the relatively modest aims of this book. The pragmatic approach that I describe in this book's introduction hence serves as a kind of throttle on the expansiveness of these topics, as this approach tries to stay close to concrete scholarly and pedagogical practices and does not attempt to account for the full conceptual landscapes in which these reside. This concreteness depends in part on specificity, which the repeated returns to Chaucer studies supply. Relatedly, the blinders imposed by the focus of the book's examples aim for a compensatory perceptual clarity by way of those examples' consistency. By usually limiting itself to a narrow slice of the literary studies pie (to use a different metaphor), the book may explore the intricacies of the problem of literary value as they emerge in diverse endeavours that nonetheless share the same object. In this way the book both keeps in check the generation of ramifications peculiar to different slices of that pie

(say, those that would emerge from a consideration of editions of *Frankenstein*) and provides common points of reference across the endeavours that it considers.

Readers who have been convinced enough by these remarks to keep reading to this point may still be sceptical, however, about the book's decision to centre Chaucer. No matter how germane Chaucer is to the topic, in simply granting the place of honour to such a traditional object of literary value – at a moment in the history of Anglophone literary studies when the field has now for some time striven to unmask and overcome the regressive ideological dimensions of its investments in such objects – has not this book in effect already solved the problem that it sets out to explore, and in a way that ought rightly ensure its early obsolescence? In fact, the very terms of this question involve several of the dimensions of the problem of literary value that this book considers, and thus my best response to it is to encourage such sceptical readers to venture forth into its pages. For example, in [Chapter 4](#), I suggest that the troubles of canonicity – which include, say, the inevitable traffic between literary and political value – have not been overcome through the retirement of traditional canonical texts and authors. Nonetheless, here at the outset, let me be clear that my choice to centre Chaucer is by no means intended as a defence of his continuing canonicity, but rather, as I have indicated, that choice has been prompted by the analytical utility of the currently vexed status of that canonicity. Whether the overall effect of the book tends towards an apologia for the study of Chaucer or actually further erodes that study's presumed value is a question that I ultimately will leave to my readers, although I offer a few brief reflections on the topic in the book's postscript.