

## Cut, Pasted, and Pocketed: J. L. Carr's Chaucer Pocketbook



J. L. Carr's house, 27 Mill Dale Road, Kettering, where he established The Quince Tree Press. His work as an author and publisher is commemorated with a blue plaque.

In the much-quoted foreword to his novel *A Month in the Country* (1980), J. L. Carr writes that 'novel-writing can be a cold-blooded business. One uses whatever happens to be lying around in memory and employs it to suit one's ends'.<sup>1</sup> Here, Carr conceptualises his writing process in terms that render intangible thought distinctly material. His writerly thoughts are 'lying around' in his memory like ephemera that can be rifled through, selected from, and arranged to meet the needs of the author. In this way, Carr figures his writing process as akin to another kind of art: collage. 'Collage' is a difficult mode to define, but is most commonly used to describe the visual art form whereby paper images and/or text are assembled together on a flat surface to create a novel composite whole (its name is taken from the French verb *coller*, meaning to glue or stick, although the term has become more expansive and now includes a range of photographic, architectural, musical, and literary forms).<sup>2</sup> Collage requires the maker to select and extract material by cutting, tearing, or otherwise removing it from its previous setting and positioning it with other materials in a manner that produces a new piece. Images can overlap or underlie one another; their initial action or position can be reconstituted; or they can be fractured in a way that renders them unrecognisable when compared to their previous form. As such, collage possesses a latent engagement with the possibilities of fragmentation and of wholeness. In her exploration of collage across a range of media in the twentieth century, Rona Cran writes that:

Collage is about sticking string and scraps of ephemera to paper. It is also about an intellectual and emotional relationship with a given aesthetic environment [...] Collage is about encounters. It is about bringing ideas into conversation with one another.<sup>3</sup>

J. L. Carr (1912–1994) was an author, artist and publisher who was, I argue, particularly alive to the generative possibilities of placing fragments (both textual and imagistic) together, and to their capacity to form the 'aesthetic environment', to borrow Cran's phrase, that surrounds canonical authors and their work. This is best demonstrated in one of Carr's more peculiar publications, his pocketbook of Geoffrey Chaucer's 'The Reeve's Tale' from the *Canterbury Tales*, in which he employs different kinds of cutting – textual cutting, imagistic cutting, and dimensional cutting – to both reflect the character of the text itself and exhibit his own distinctly collagistic sense of Chaucer and his work.

Carr is best known for his short novel *A Month in the Country* which follows First World War veteran Tom Birkin as he uncovers a medieval wall painting in the church of Oxgodby, a fictional Yorkshire village, in the summer of 1920. The novel had wide appeal; it was nominated for the Booker Prize and won the Guardian Fiction Prize of 1980, and in 1987 was adapted into a film starring Colin Firth and Kenneth Branagh. Carr wrote eight novels in his lifetime (another of his novels, *The Battle of Pollocks Crossing*, was also nominated for the Booker Prize of 1985), but he is less well known for his more unusual publications: the small, illustrated books containing selections of verse and prose by mainly British authors that he termed 'pocketbooks'; his series of dictionaries compiled by himself and others; and his county and country maps of England and Wales. In 1967, Carr took a two-year leave of absence from teaching and devoted his time to The Quince Tree Press, which he had founded three years before and which he ran from his home of 27 Milldale Road, Kettering,



J. L. Carr's map of Berkshire (pre-1974).

Northamptonshire, initially using it to publish the maps that he began drawing when serving in the RAF in North Africa during WWII. Carr's maps are not topographical and neither do they make a claim to geographical reality, but they instead capture a sense of localised identity formed of historical, cultural and physical references. They are comprised of cut-and-pasted images, hand-drawn illustrations, quotations from folk rhymes and literature, recipes, songs, and biographical details of famous figures, each placed together to visually form the country or county's shape. Carr's maps are therefore representational: they crystallise a sense of place through a textual and visual collage, both literally and conceptually.

Similarly, Carr's pocketbooks are not scholarly anthologies of an author's oeuvre, but are short, selective, playful material texts which attempt to capture the character of canonical works of literature and their authors. Byron Rogers, the author of two biographical texts on Carr, writes that the pocketbooks constitute 'maps to Carr's own mind, to his delight in oddities and his tongue-in-cheek prejudices', but they are also creative-critical responses.<sup>4</sup> Carr's pocketbooks represent explorations of the aesthetic environment of an author's work that incorporate the contemporary moment in which the work was produced, its legacy, and Carr's own individualised response to the text. In this way they are similar to zines, the small booklets made by individuals or small groups which display enthusiasm for a discreet subject, although Carr's pocketbooks are more professionalised and less counter-cultural than most zines.<sup>5</sup>

Carr published his first pocketbook containing a selection of the poems of John Clare in 1964 upon the discovery that his milkman was a descendant of Clare and, shrewdly, the

pocketbook was published to coincide with the centenary of the poet's death.<sup>6</sup> Carr's range of pocketbooks expanded within the Quince Tree Press to include the selected works of mostly canonical, deceased British poets who did not, therefore, require royalty payments. Carr's series of pocketbooks are perhaps reflective of a late twentieth-century schoolteacher's sense of the English literary canon. His earliest pocketbooks of the 1960s include the work of Robert Bloomfield, William Blake, Andrew Marvell, Wilfred Owen, Alfred Tennyson, and

1. J. L. Carr, *A Month in the Country* (London: Penguin, 2016), pp. xv–xvi.

2. For a discussion on the difficulties and variations in the definition of collage, see Freya Gowrley, *Fragmentary Forms: A New History of Collage* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2024), pp. 13–16. I am using the term 'mode' in accordance with Gowrley, who compellingly argues that 'collage is neither a medium nor a genre, but a mode; a means of processing the world as it was encountered by individuals across cultures and geographies, who subsequently produced a creative response to that experience' (p. 16).

3. Rona Cran, *Collage in Twentieth-Century Art, Literature, and Culture: Joseph Cornell, William Burroughs, Frank O'Hara, and Bob Dylan* (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 3.

4. Byron Rogers, *The Life & Times of J. L. Carr* (Northamptonshire: Northamptonshire Libraries Information Service, 1996), p. 14.

5. See Stephen Duncombe, *Notes from Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture* (Bloomington, IN: Microcosm Publishing, 2008).

6. This pocketbook preceded the founding of The Quince Tree Press and was distributed to all members of *The Northants Campaigner*, a bi-annual magazine for the Northamptonshire branch of the National Union of Teachers, which Carr edited. It is unclear what the relationship between Carr's milkman and John Clare was. Byron Rogers in *The Last Englishman: The Life of J. L. Carr* (London: Aurum Press, 2003) describes the milkman as Clare's 'great great grandson' (p. 18) but also his 'grandson' (p. 206). Andrew Hall has instead suggested that the milkman was Clare's grandnephew, see <https://www.threaisacollection.org/carr/poetry/clare.html> [accessed 22 August 2025].



Green edition of the Chaucer Pocketbook. Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Reeve's Tale*, s.n. 71 (Kettering: J. L. Carr Publisher, c1970s), pp. 4–5.

Matthew Arnold, although he did include two living poets within his series too.<sup>7</sup> That is not to say, however, that these pocketbooks are staid: like his novels, they are also illustrative of his impish sense of humour. His pocketbook *Dictionary of Extra-Ordinary English Cricketers* (which contained both facts and fabrications) was published in 1977 and sold 10,000 copies, with W. H. Smith ordering 4,000.<sup>8</sup> By 1987 Carr had sold over 500,000 pocketbooks, and they are still being printed and sold today by Bob and Jane Carr, J. L. Carr's son and daughter-in-law.<sup>9</sup>

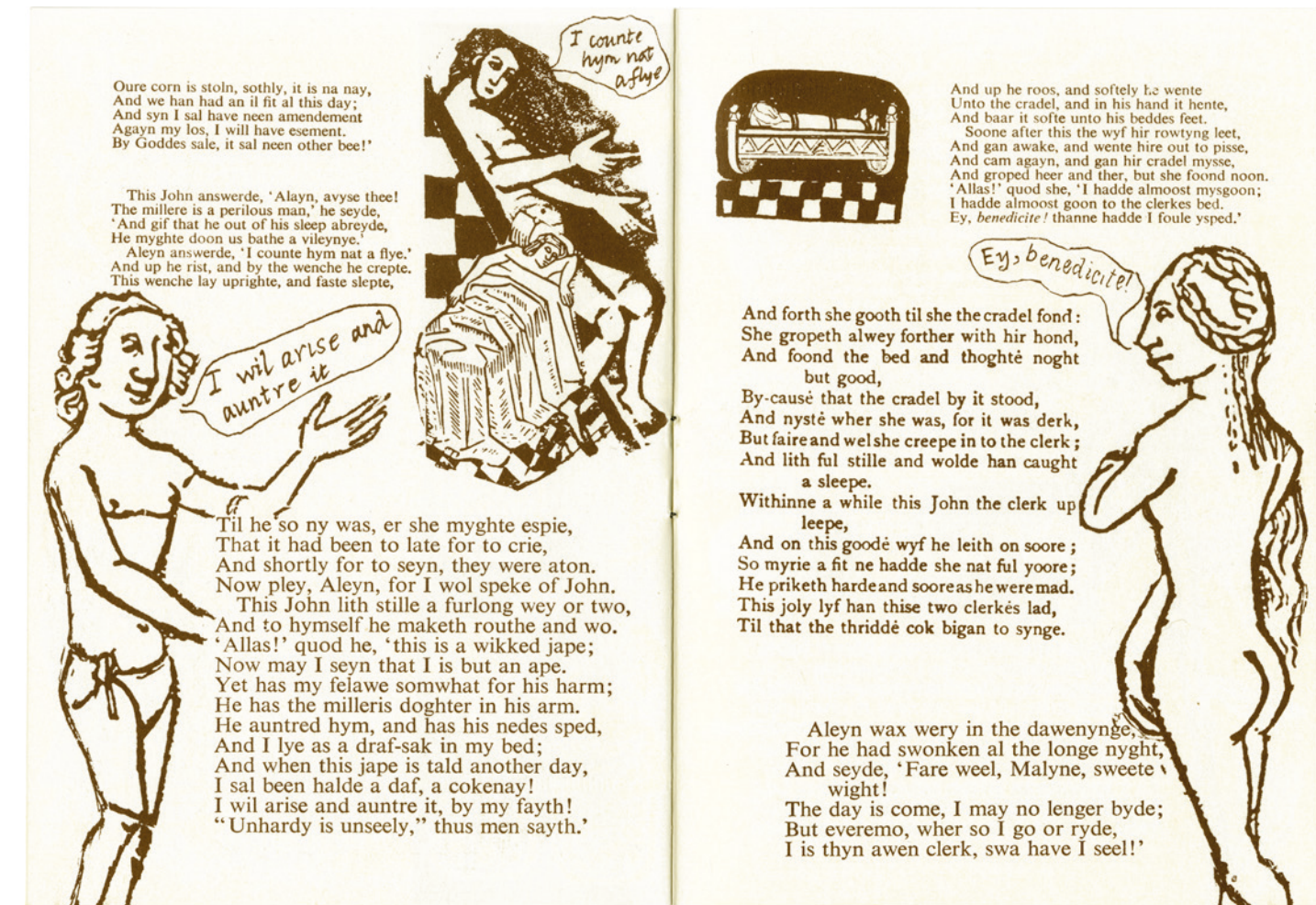
In this article, I will examine Carr's pocketbook of 'The Reeve's Tale' from Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (henceforth referred to as the Chaucer Pocketbook), the only pocketbook of Carr's that features a work of Chaucer. The Chaucer Pocketbook is one of the most densely populated of Carr's pocketbooks, both in terms of text length and of the number of images, and thus represents a particularly rich example to consider. The bibliographical details of the Chaucer Pocketbook are hard to discern; the number of impressions and the dates of their respective publication are uncertain although they number at least four, the earliest of which was likely published in the 1970s.<sup>10</sup> The outer front and back covers feature a collage of images cut from artists reference books and other illustrated texts, as well as his own re-drawings. The inside of the pocketbook features the text of 'The Reeve's Tale' (without its accompanying prologue, although the red impression contains the description of the Reeve from the 'General Prologue'), more collaged illustrations, and hand-written notes from Carr. The images and hand-written textual annotations within the Chaucer Pocketbook vary between editions, as does the placement of the text on each page,

although many of the images are recycled between them.

Carr's preoccupation with the opportunity that fragments create for conceptual conversation and encounter motivate the various kinds of cutting exhibited in the Chaucer Pocketbook. By cutting 'The Reeve's Tale' away from the wider text of the *Canterbury Tales*, Carr responds to some of the latent issues of fragmentation present in the text, but he also uses textual cutting to illustrate Chaucer's literary legacy. In his cutting-and-pasting of images to decorate the covers and illustrate the text of the pocketbook, Carr gestures towards our perception of late medieval English culture, which is itself born of fragments, and the amalgamated references and associations proceeding Chaucer's lifetime which comprise our sense of the author and his literary works. Lastly, Carr figuratively cuts Chaucer 'down to size': he places a work of 'the Father of English literature' in a book small enough to fit in a pocket. Ultimately, Carr creates a material text that, while surely not comprehensively representative of Chaucer, his works, and his wider literary influence, offers a compelling, idiosyncratic response to figuring the fragments that cohere to form a canonical piece of literature and a sense of its author.

#### Cutting 'The Reeve's Tale'

It may be posited that Carr's choice of text for the Chaucer Pocketbook was motivated, in part, by practicality: 'The Reeve's Tale' is one of the shorter texts of the *Canterbury Tales*, but it is by no means the only tale which would have conformed to the requirements of the pocketbook's small dimensions. It could also be argued that Carr selects the text



Green edition of the Chaucer Pocketbook (c. 1970s), pp. 12–13.

because it is one of the few discrete narratives within the *Canterbury Tales* that features a conceivably contemporary English setting, and is thus representative of the cultural moment which Chaucer himself lived in, and perhaps reflective of Carr's own enduring interest in English landscapes and the characters which resided within it.<sup>11</sup> More significantly it is, I argue, a text that satisfied Carr's predilections as a reader, editor, and publisher. 'The Reeve's Tale' is the third tale told in the pilgrim's tale-telling competition, and the story recounts the conflict between the greedy miller Symkyn and two scholars, John and Aleyn, from Soler Hall at the University of Cambridge, who are outraged that the miller has overcharged their college for flour. The two scholars ride to Symkyn's mill and feign an interest in better understanding the miller's process, but the miller is wise to their tricks and unties their horses to allay their escape, regaining the flour that John and Aleyn had hoped to steal. In return, John and Aleyn plot a violent revenge: Aleyn ultimately rapes the miller's daughter, Melayne, whilst John rapes the miller's wife by deception by placing her baby's cradle, which had formerly stood at the foot of the bed she shared with her husband, at the foot of his own. When the miller's wife awakes, she mistakes her husband for one of the students and beats him, and Aleyn and John take advantage of the miller's weakness to beat him further, take their horse back, and steal flour. It is a rich text which raises difficult questions born of the collision of disparity: how should a reader, medieval or modern, respond to its combination of farcical humour and sexual violence? Does 'The Reeve's Tale' conform to either of the qualities, the 'best sentence and moost solaaas [pleasure]' (l. 798), that Harry Bailey, the jovial innkeeper of the Tabard Inn, outlines

as assessment criteria for the tale-telling competition?<sup>12</sup> To what extent does the tale grapple with contemporary anxieties about education, regionalism, and other social divisions in late medieval England? These questions engage with some of the central concepts that weave through Carr's publications: the representation of English national and localised identity, interactions between individuals of different social status and occupation in rural settings, and the uncomfortable tension between humour and tragedy.

7. I am grateful to Andrew Hall's website <<https://www.threesacollection.org/>> [accessed 17 August 2025] which contains a wealth of information about Carr's career and useful information about the pocketbook series in particular. The two living poets included within his series were Robert Bloomfield and Frances W. King.

8. Rogers, *The Life & Times of J. L. Carr*, p. 11.

9. J. L. Carr, *An Inventory and a History of the Quince Tree Press to Mark Its 21st Year and the Sale of Its 500,000th Small Book* (Kettering: The Quince Tree Press, 1987). I would like to thank Bob and Jane Carr for their generous correspondence about Carr's Chaucer Pocketbook and Carr's creative process.

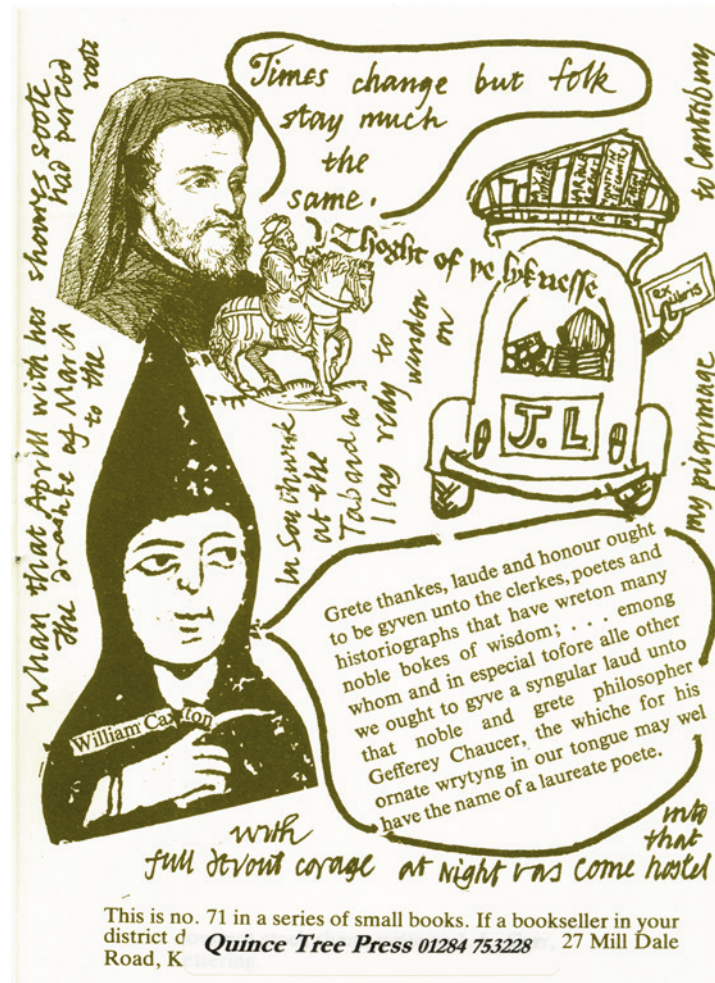
10. The impressions can be told apart by the colour of their covers, which are red, green, and blue, although the exact ordering and dates of their publication is not known. The Chaucer Pocketbook is marked as the seventy-first in the series (although his also gives the pocketbooks of Francis Bacon, Thomas Bewick, John Donne, Hilda Frank, Joan Hassall, Ben Jonson, Christina and Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the bookplates of Brian North Lee the same series number).

11. Scholars have argued that 'The Miller's Tale' and 'The Reeve's Tale' offer a particularly contemporary rendering of late medieval English university culture and of King's Hall, figured as Soler Hall in 'The Reeve's Tale'. See J. A. W. Bennett, *Chaucer at Oxford and Cambridge* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1974), pp. 11, 20; Derek S. Brewer, 'The Reeve's Tale' and The King's Hall, Cambridge', *Chaucer Review*, 5 (1971), 311–17.

12. Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. by Larry D. Benson, 3rd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 36. All subsequent references shall be made to this edition, and line numbers entered parenthetically.



The inside front and back cover of the green edition of the Chaucer Pocketbook (c. 1970s).

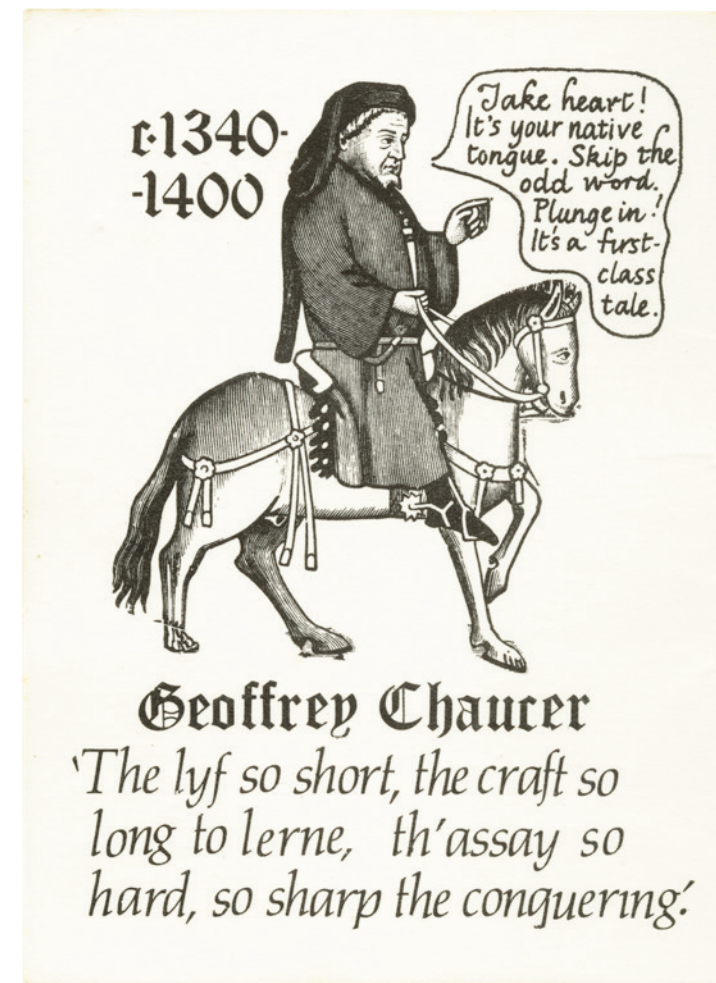


This is no. 71 in a series of small books. If a bookseller in your district d Quince Tree Press 01284 753228 27 Mill Dale Road, K

'The Reeve's Tale' offered in Carr's Chaucer Pocketbook is itself a cutting. The narrative told by the Reeve has been incised away from the wider textual setting of the *Canterbury Tales* and thus divorced from the frame-narrative of the tale-telling competition.<sup>13</sup> But this cutting also responds to the fractured nature of the tale itself. Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* is a text which, in and of itself, can be described as collagistic. Beverly Boyd has described Chaucer's Marian poetry as akin to 'collage' and 'montage' in its layering of various kinds of liturgical text, but his longer work engages with the possibilities of collage in a far broader sense.<sup>14</sup> The *Canterbury Tales* is a composite of narratives told by pilgrims on their way to Canterbury and represents a sprawling exploration of the 'aesthetic environment', to borrow Cran's phrase again, of late medieval England and its literary culture. It is a text which is acutely conscious of the multivalent senses of encounter and conversation that it precipitates. The text is also fragmentary in terms of its wider organisation as Chaucer did not provide, as far as we know, any kind of ordering principle (such as numbering) for his tales himself, and it abounds with incompleteness and absence – the text does not present all the stories in the tale-telling competition that Harry Bailey establishes, and we never hear from some of the characters detailed as part of the pilgrim band.<sup>15</sup> As Derek Pearsall provocatively summarised, 'Chaucer left the work as a partly assembled kit with no directions'.<sup>16</sup> The work survives in ten editorial units referred to as 'fragments' that group various tales together, and scribes, printers, and modern editors have presented the order of these fragments following their own proclivities.<sup>17</sup> It is a text which has always raised – and will continue to raise – questions about cutting, ordering, and wholeness.

Indeed, 'The Reeve's Tale' itself is part of a fragment that is particularly fraught with complement and competition. The tale is part of Fragment I or Group A; it is preceded by the 'General Prologue', 'The Knight's Tale' and 'The Miller's Prologue and Tale', and followed by 'The Cook's Prologue and Tale'. In this collection of tales, the chivalric romance of 'The Knight's Tale' is juxtaposed with the dubiously comic quality of the Miller and Reeve's fabliaux, but there are also threads of commonality, too – plot points, themes, and linguistic echoes are interwoven between them.<sup>18</sup> The relationship between 'The Miller's Tale' and 'The Reeve's Tale' has been afforded especial scholarly focus as they share generic and stylistic qualities, but are ostensibly positioned against one another as the Reeve attempts to 'quite [answer, challenge, retort, or equal]' (l. 3864; l. 3916) the Miller.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, John Hines describes the two tales as a 'diptych', a provocative term that captures the two tales' interconnected but abstruse relationship with one another.<sup>20</sup>

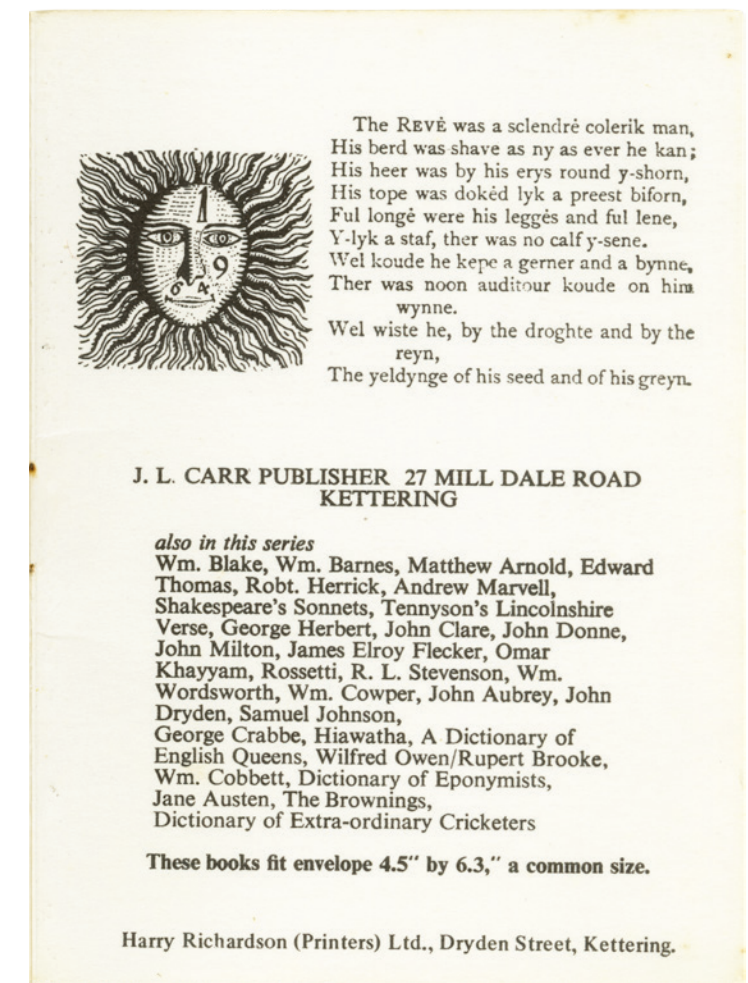
The genre of 'The Reeve's Tale', too, is particularly rich in its engagement with fragmentation. In her history of collage, Freya Gowerly explains how, like the form itself, the history of collage is fraught with juxtaposition and multivalence. It is a mode which has been perceived as both 'high' and 'low' in terms of cultural status; it is associated with the fine artists of Cubism, Dada, and Surrealism (the 'high' art of collage) but also with the work of Victorian women producing scrapbooks and valentine's cards (the 'low' craft of collage).<sup>21</sup> As Yuval Etgar writes, the form itself also allows for examples of 'high culture [to] be placed side by side with low culture' as images of artistic masterpieces can be placed next to mass-produced adverts.<sup>22</sup> While there are, of course, manifold



The inside front and back cover of the red edition of the Chaucer Pocketbook (c. 1970s).

problems with trying to classify artistic forms using the high/low culture binary, it is a useful framework to bring to a text which self-consciously places the antithetical in proximity. Chaucer's 'The Reeve's Tale' is a fabliau, a genre which (like many genres) evades stable definition, but which is generally understood as comic verse that often features provocative content, such as scatological humour and sexual obscenity. In her study of Old French examples, the language in which the genre originates, Holly A. Crocker states that fabliaux 'often collapse many of the classifying questions our critical discourse would impose: are they bourgeois or courtly, misogynist or feminist, realistic or fantastic, conservative or subversive?'.<sup>23</sup> These same questions might be asked of 'The Reeve's Tale', a narrative which can be understood as a light-hearted tale for amusement, a serious moralistic condemnation of the human capacity for vindictiveness and violence, or somewhere between the two. It is a tale which, like a collage, sits at a provocative juncture between states and allows for varied interpretation.<sup>24</sup>

In Carr's Chaucer Pocketbook, the sense of fragmentation latent in the text and its book history is compounded through the placement of other textual cuttings related to the tale or its author on its inside front and back covers. The inside front covers of each of the editions include the famed quotation from Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowles*, 'The lyf so short, the craft so long to lerne, th'assay so hard, so sharp the conquering', presented as prose rather than verse. The inside back-cover of the red and blue editions include a snippet of the description of the Reeve from the 'General Prologue' (ll. 587–96), placed after the text rather than preceding it, and a list of other available pocketbook titles. On the inside back-cover of the



J. L. CARR PUBLISHER 27 MILL DALE ROAD KETTERING

also in this series  
Wm. Blake, Wm. Barnes, Matthew Arnold, Edward Thomas, Robt. Herrick, Andrew Marvell, Shakespeare's Sonnets, Tennyson's Lincolnshire Verse, George Herbert, John Clare, John Donne, John Milton, James Elroy Flecker, Omar Khayyam, Rossetti, R. L. Stevenson, Wm. Wordsworth, Wm. Cowper, John Aubrey, John Dryden, Samuel Johnson, George Crabbe, Hiawatha, A Dictionary of English Queens, Wilfred Owen/Rupert Brooke, Wm. Cobbett, Dictionary of Eponymists, Jane Austen, The Brownings, Dictionary of Extra-ordinary Cricketers

These books fit envelope 4.5" by 6.3," a common size.

Harry Richardson (Printers) Ltd., Dryden Street, Kettering.

green edition of the pocketbook, Carr instead places an excerpt from William Caxton's laudatory prologue to his 1483 second edition of the text in a speech bubble drawn from an illustration, to which Caxton's name has been pasted on. This and the blue edition also feature an illustration of Carr driving off on his own Canterbury pilgrimage in his car (as indicated by

13. Indeed, the text has a history of being excerpted: individual tales or groups of tales have been cut away from the wider text since the fifteenth century. See, for example, Daniel D. Silvia, 'Some Fifteenth-Century Manuscripts of the *Canterbury Tales*', in *Chaucer and Middle English Studies: In Honour of Rossell Hope Robbins*, ed. by Beryl Rowland (London: Routledge, 1974), pp. 153–63.

14. Beverly Boyd, 'Our Lady According to Chaucer: Translation and Collage', *Floreligium*, 9 (1987), 147–54.

15. For a considered analysis of the significance of gaps, absences, and incompleteness in the *Canterbury Tales*, see Elizabeth Scala, 'The Deconstructure of the *Canterbury Tales*', *Journal X*, 4 (2000), 1–20.

16. Derek Pearsall, *The Canterbury Tales* (London: Routledge, 1985), p. 23.

17. Many fingers have been worn on the ordering of the *Canterbury Tales*. Arthur Bahr offers a considered overview of the various critical debates and responses to the problem and opportunity that this represents in *Fragments and Assemblages: Forming Compilations of Medieval London* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), pp. 117–22.

18. For a sustained engagement with this interweaving, see John Hines, *The Fabliau in English* (Harlow: Longman, 1993), pp. 139–47.

19. See 'quiten' (v), sense 3, in the *Middle English Dictionary* <<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/>> [accessed 7 February 2026].

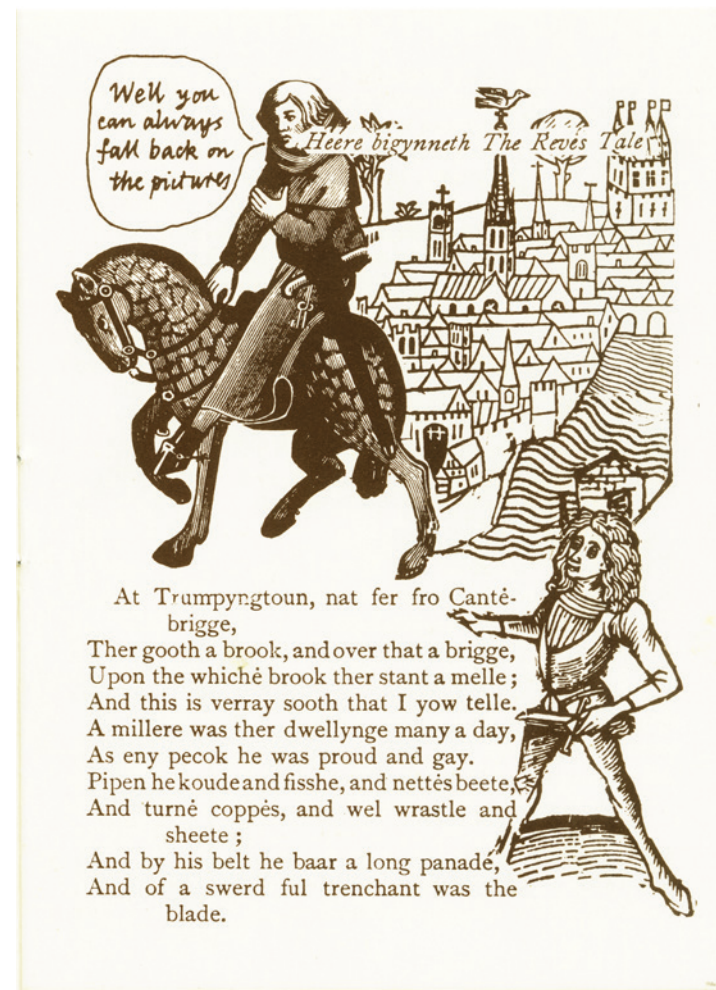
20. Hines, *The Fabliau in English*, p. 107.

21. Gowrley, *Fragmentary Forms*, pp. 9–21. See also Elliot Patrick, Freya Gowrley and Yuval Etgar, *Cut and Paste: 400 Years of Collage* (Edinburgh: National Galleries of Scotland, 2019), and Dawn Ades, 'Collage: A Brief History' in Peter Blake et. al., *Peter Blake: About Collage* (London: Tate Gallery Publishing Limited, 2000), pp. 37–56.

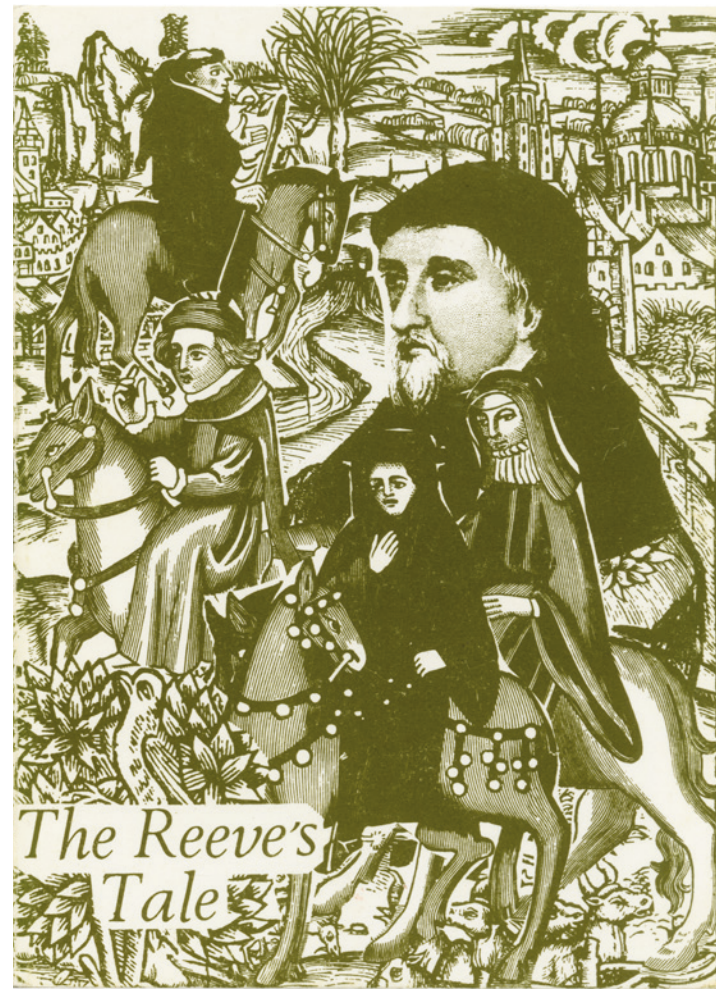
22. Yuval Etgar, 'The Ends of Collage' in *The Ends of Collage*, ed. by Yuval Etgar (New York: Luxembourg & Dayan, 2017), pp. 9–18 (p. 12).

23. Holly A. Crocker, *Comic Provocations: Exposing the Corpus of Old French Fabliaux* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 4.

24. I am not the first person to describe Chaucer's fabliaux as collage-like. Beryl Rowland has also made this claim about Chaucer's use of contemporary localised setting, *effictio*, and irony in the fabliaux of the *Canterbury Tales*, although I disagree with her assessment that earlier French examples are necessarily more simplistic in terms of plot or character. See Beryl Rowland, 'What Chaucer did to the fabliau', *Studia Neophilologica*, 51 (1979), 205–13 (p. 210).



The first page of the green edition of the Chaucer Pocketbook (c. 1970s).



The front cover of the green edition of the Chaucer Pocketbook (c. 1970s).

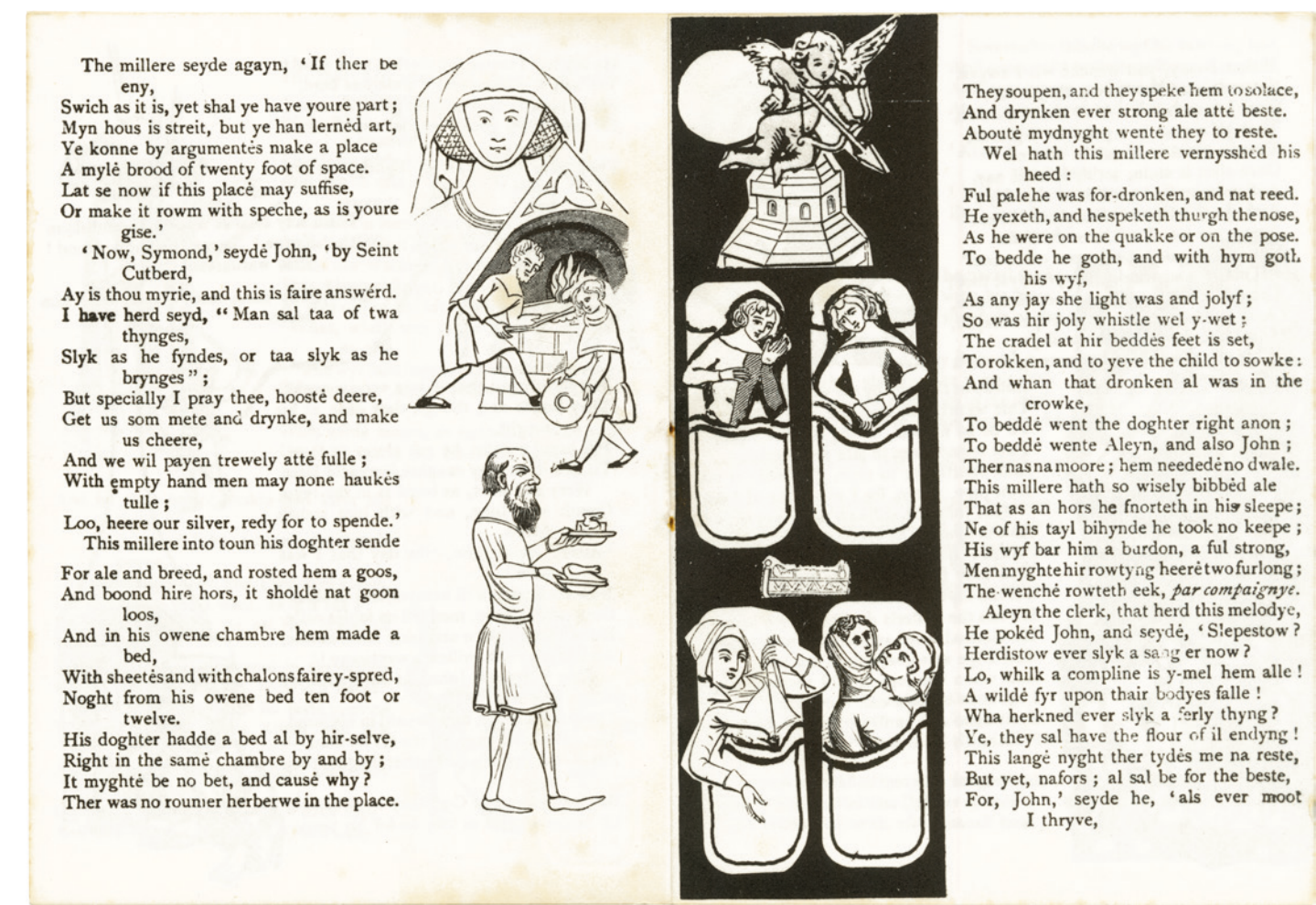
the 'J.L.' of its number plate and drawings of his novels on the roof box), which is spelled out by the annotations that adapt lines from the General Prologue. On the inside front-cover of the green edition of the pocketbook, Carr has also included a quotation from Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queen*, 'Dan Chaucer, well of English undefiled, / On Fame's eternal bedroll worthy to be filed', which partially covers the illustration of Chaucer-as-pilgrim.

The resultant effect is that the text of 'The Reeve's Tale', whilst extracted from the *Canterbury Tales*' frame narrative and web of interconnected narratives, is afforded a different kind of frame narrative: that of Chaucer's wider literary output and subsequent reputation. By being placed in the inside front and back cover, these textual cuttings materially surround 'The Reeve's Tale', but they also conceptually frame it. As Gérard Genette and Marie Maclean have influentially explained, paratexts – like the material which sits on inside covers – act as a transactional space in which the relationship between the text, author, and reader are negotiated.<sup>25</sup> In the case of the Chaucer Pocketbook, Carr has used the textual cuttings to present, with a sense of jumbled immediacy, the reception of Chaucer and his work, and Carr's place within this reception history.

This is exemplified in Carr's use of the quotation 'Thought of þe lyknesse', which is pasted between an image of Chaucer and Carr's automobile drawing in the green edition. The quotation is drawn from *De regimine principum* ('The Regiment of Princes') by Thomas Hoccleve, a poem dedicated to King Henry IV just before his accession to the throne and which offers advice on proper kingly conduct. In London, British Library, Harley MS 4866, a manuscript believed to have been

made shortly after Hoccleve's completion of the 'The Regiment of Princes' in 1411, Hoccleve's lines eulogising Chaucer as his 'worthy maistir Chaucer', sit just below a portrait of Chaucer himself, who points towards the text.<sup>26</sup> In Hoccleve's text, the reader is encouraged not only to pause on the physical likeness between Chaucer and his miniature, but to meditate on Chaucer's legacy. As James H. McGregor explains, this passage 'manifests the legend of Chaucer and inspires its viewer to follow his example'.<sup>27</sup> While Carr's cutting of the quotation leaves the reader without this contextual information, the placement of the cutting between the image of Chaucer and himself encourages the reader to mark the 'lyknesse' between Chaucer and Carr. In the green edition of Chaucer's pocketbook, the inside back-cover not only gestures towards Chaucer's status as an exemplary author, but cheekily draws a parallel between Chaucer and Carr.

Carr's Chaucer Pocketbook also suggests to readers themselves that they might cut words out of the text themselves should it hinder their enjoyment. The engraving of Chaucer-as-pilgrim on the inside front-cover of the pocketbook derives from the Ellesmere Chaucer – the fifteenth-century manuscript containing the *Canterbury Tales* notable for being close in date to Chaucer's own lifespan. The image is not a direct facsimile, and is accompanied by a hand-drawn speech bubble encouraging readers to 'Take heart! It's your native tongue. Skip the odd word. Plunge in! It's a first-class tale'. The red edition supplements this with a further speech bubble drawn from the mouth of an illustration of the Reeve, who offers a brief consolation: 'Well you can always fall back on the pictures'.



Red edition of the Chaucer Pocketbook (c. 1970s), pp. 10–11.

### Cutting Images

Carr evidently possessed a keen interest in the fragmentary survivals of visual culture from medieval England. This is testified not only by his most famous novel's focus on a medieval wall painting, but with the collection of Carr's drawings, paintings, and etchings that form the J.L. Carr Collection held at Northamptonshire Archives & Heritage Service, which abound with partial renderings of medieval churches, architectural details, fonts, wall paintings, tombs, misericords and other medieval objects.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, the majority of medieval visual and textual culture survives as fragments, and scholars have considered how they can usefully engage with these partial, fragmented forms.<sup>29</sup> Carr's use of collaged images, I argue, represents a creative-critical response to both the existence of these fragments, and the fragments of references and associations (from Chaucer's near-contemporary medieval world and beyond) which coagulate to form our sense of the author and his work. It also affords the reader the opportunity to make generative connections between the provocative images that Carr has selected, and to develop a sense of the author themselves.

In his collaged covers and illustrations for the Chaucer Pocketbook, Carr made significant use of the Dover Pictorial Archive Series books, the royalty free artist's source books that contained facsimiles or re-renderings of visual content usually grouped according to a particular subject, period, or theme. He also mined second-hand bookshops for relevant works which were out of copyright and which he could therefore safely relieve of their images. Some of these images Carr cut out and pasted directly into his pre-prepared plain card booklets,

but others he would re-draw himself to avoid copyright infringement or to resize to better fit its setting.<sup>30</sup>

A reader may be forgiven for initially perceiving the collages of the Chaucer Pocketbook as comprised of images drawn from sources contemporary to Chaucer, as each impression of the Chaucer Pocketbook coheres the cover images together by printing them in monochrome red, blue, or green on white. However, the images that Carr selects to illustrate his Chaucer pocketbook are not all originally drawn from

25. Gérard Genette and Marie Maclean, 'Introduction to the Paratext', *New Literary History*, 22 (1991), 261–72 (p. 261). See also Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. by Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

26. Thomas Hoccleve, *Regiment of Princes*, ed. by Charles R. Blyth (Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1999), l. 4983.

27. James H. McGregor, 'The Iconography of Chaucer in Hoccleve's "de Regimine Principum" and in the "Trollus" Frontispiece', *The Chaucer Review*, 11 (1977), 338–50 (p. 344).

28. The J. L. Carr Collection < <https://cdm21066.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/JLC/> > [accessed 25 August 2025].

29. See, for example, Christoph Füeler and William Doba, 'Fragments and Fragmentology', *Fragmentology* 1 (2018), 1–5; Bahr, *Fragments and Assemblages*.

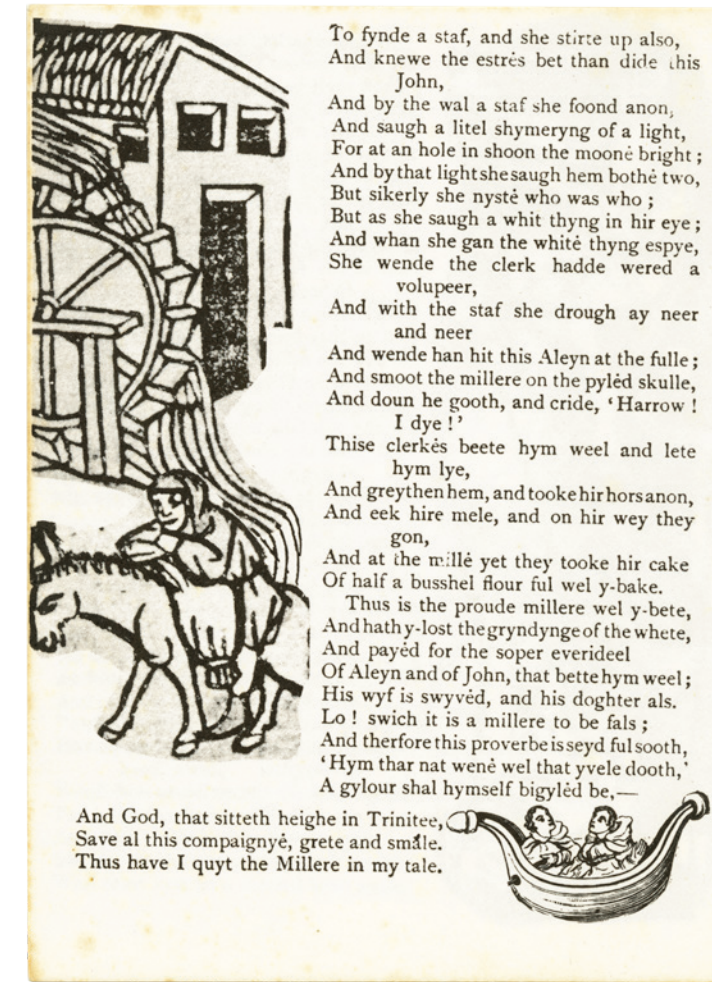
30. Jane and Bob Carr kindly explained J. L. Carr's method for sourcing images in correspondence with me.



The back cover of the red edition of the Chaucer Pocketbook (c. 1970s).

medieval manuscripts and even when they are, they are not all from sources that date to Chaucer's lifetime. For example, the portrait image of Chaucer, which constitutes the largest element of the front cover in each of the editions, is drawn from *Old England's Worthies* by Henry Brougham, The Lord Brougham and Vaux, published in 1847 – a book which gathers together 87 short biographical sketches and steel engravings or woodcut portraits of those men (and two women, Lady Jane Grey and Queen Elizabeth I) deemed embodiments of English culture, and which is heavy with nationalistic sentiment.<sup>31</sup> The images of the *Canterbury Tales* pilgrims which adorn the front and inside front covers are recognisably drawn from the Ellesmere Chaucer. There are yet more images on both the back cover and illustrating the inside text drawn from the Luttrell Psalter (London, British Library, Additional MS 42130). The Luttrell Psalter is famed for its depictions of English rural life and its illustrations are often appropriated as cover or accompanying images in a range of publications concerning late medieval England, but are an 'ideological construction', in the words of Richard K. Emmerson and P. J. P. Goldberg, born of its patron Geoffrey Luttrell's perception of himself and the world around him.<sup>32</sup> To complicate this further, even when the images are drawn from sources contemporary (or near contemporary) to Chaucer, such as those of the Ellesmere Chaucer, they are often re-renderings which recreate images from medieval manuscripts as line drawings or engravings. Consequently, the collages which Carr creates are busy with disjunction in terms of dating, content, style, and medium, and this fracturing is capitulated by the thin outlines of white which clearly show where Carr has cut and pasted his images together.

This use of disparate imagistic sources drawn from various periods of literary history mimics twentieth and twenty-first century engagements with Chaucer and his works, which are inextricably informed by the representations and interpretations that have come before them. David Banash astutely comments that collage offers an engagement not only with mass-production, but also with the experience of consuming this material. Banash explains that unlike traditional artists who were intimately engaged with the creation of the constituent materials required to produce their art (by mixing pigments to create paint, for example) 'the collage artist arranges fragments to which they have no holistic relationship through the labor of consumption'.<sup>33</sup> Collages, Banash explains, are 'assembled from the consistency of the commodity and mirrors and reproduces the operations of the consumerist lifeworld'.<sup>34</sup> While Banash is clearly concerned with those collages that cut and paste images from advertisements and other mass media, his understanding of collage as representative of the consumer experience is useful for considering Carr's use of images in the Chaucer Pocketbook, which are themselves drawn from published material. Carr's use of collage is resonant of Chaucer's reputation itself, which is formed of a kaleidoscope of associations, references, reinterpretations and perceptions that have developed over six-hundred years, and which are recapitulated in media concerning medieval literary and visual culture, like academic publications, history books for a general readership, and artists' source books. Like Chaucer's texts, the images which Carr uses are reiterations which have been copied, edited, re-rendered, cut, and pasted in reproductions. Carr's use of disparate sources and the



The inside front cover of the red edition of the Chaucer Pocketbook (c. 1970s).

evident remnants of his collaging process visually represents the jumbled and reworked 'aesthetic environment' which has coalesced around Chaucer and his literary output.

Beyond this, Carr's employment of collage allows the reader to generate their own connections between images, and between text and image. A collage does not necessarily gesture towards the causal connections between the fragments it employs but instead, as Judith Seligson adroitly puts it, 'leaves a space for the viewer to do that creative work'.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, this motivation can be felt in the images which Carr employs in his Chaucer Pocketbook. Ashby Kinch, in his careful investigation into why texts concerning Chaucer are so often illustrated by images from the Luttrell Psalter, finds that both Chaucer's texts and the varied manuscript illustrations are perceived as cultural artifacts which require the reader to generate their own imaginative connections. As Kinch writes, both Chaucer's texts and the Luttrell illustrations are:

part of the visual-verbal dreamspace in which a reader is expected to expend energy [...] an open invitation to follow the dizzying turns of interpretation that precede and follow.<sup>36</sup>

The collages that Carr uses to decorate the Chaucer Pocketbook consequently have two effects. They work to visually represent, with alacrity, the miscellany of sources relating to Chaucer and his works that have accrued over time, and also encourage the reader to critically engage with the connections, contrasts, and complications that this collage represents. Carr's use of collage is both an effective means of providing the reader with visual support in their

navigation of Middle English, but also in discreetly eliciting the reader's interpretive energy to appreciate the fragments which together cohere to form our understanding of text, author, and literary-historical moment.

31. Henry Brougham et al., *Old England's Worthies: a gallery of portraits from authentic copies, of the most eminent statesmen, lawyers, warriors, men of letters and science, and artists of our country. Accompanied by full and original biographies, with illustrative woodcuts and twelve splendid illuminated engravings* (London: Charles Cox, 1847).

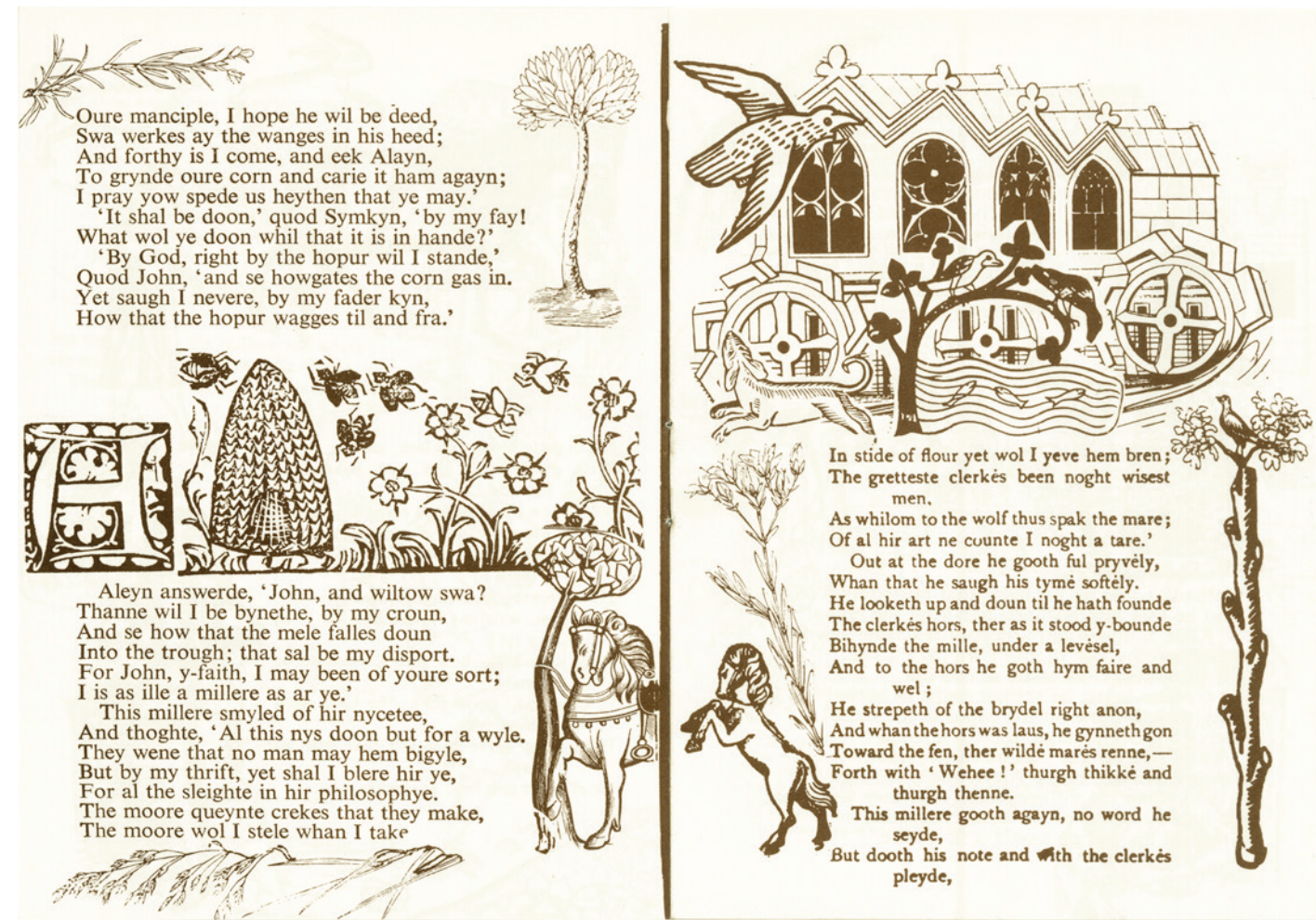
32. Richard K. Emmerson and P. J. P. Goldberg, "'The Lord Geoffrey had me made': Lordship and Labour in the Luttrell Psalter", in *The Problem of Labour in Fourteenth-Century England*, ed. by James Bothwell, P. J. P. Goldberg, and W. Mark Ormrod (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2000), pp. 43–64.

33. David Banash, *Collage Culture: Readymades, Meaning, and the Age of Consumption* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013), p. 16.

34. Ibid., pp. 16–17.

35. Judith Seligson, *Gaps and the Creation of Ideas: An Artist's Book* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2021), p. 414.

36. Ashby Kinch, 'Intervisual Texts, Intertextual Images: Chaucer and the Luttrell Psalter', in *Chaucer: Visual Approaches*, ed. by Susanna Fein and David Raybin (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2016), pp. 3–22 (pp. 12–13).



Green edition of the Chaucer Pocketbook (c. 1970s), pp. 6–7.

### Cutting Chaucer ‘Down To Size’

This article has so far considered two types of cutting present in the Chaucer Pocketbook: various kinds of textual cutting, and Carr’s use of imagistic collage. Carr undertakes a further kind of cutting, although one more figurative, in placing Chaucer’s text within a sixteen-page book small enough to fit in a pocket. Carr’s pocketbooks are, as their name suggests, pocket-sized – most measure 13 × 9.5 cm (5 × 3.5 in.) – and form a booklet of sixteen pages with a card cover. They are therefore significantly smaller than a common paperback. The pocketbook containing works by Algernon Swinburne contains a hand-written exhortation on its size, and states that the pocketbook is:

Well suited for castaways and those trapped in cold bedrooms [only one hand need suffer exposure]. They can be palmed from the cuff during tedious speeches, repetitive sermons and anecdotal conversational monologue. By and large, perusal and reflection upon the contents will do no harm and we have had letters certifying spiritual and intellectual benefit. They fit a common envelope and go for minimum postage.<sup>37</sup>

This jocular reflection draws attention to how the material form of the pocketbook impacts the kind of readerly engagement it expects to excite: it is a book to be read when the reader is at leisure or brought along for moments of clandestine recreation. It is worth pausing on how the material form of the Chaucer Pocketbook elicits a different kind of readerly engagement with Chaucer’s texts than that of other sizes and kinds of material text.

Carr’s pocketbooks are too big to be true miniature books, which are generally considered to be books smaller than three inches, but their relatively diminutive size means that they engage with some of the same conceptual possibilities and problems as miniature books, albeit with some key differences.<sup>38</sup> In her study of eighteenth-century miniature books, Abigail Williams writes that the small book ‘makes the ordinary extraordinary’ – it asks the reader to pay attention to the material qualities of the book that have become defamiliarized through their miniaturisation.<sup>39</sup> The Chaucer Pocketbook is not as remarkable as true miniature books in terms of book-crafting skill; it is a curious material text, but it is not so minute as to excite wonder in response to its size. What is more remarkable is its attempt to concentrate a work of Chaucer, a writer sometimes described as the ‘Father of English literature’, into a small book of sixteen pages.<sup>40</sup> The effect is to assert both literary canonicity, and material mobility.

The conception of Chaucer as the ‘Father of English poetry’, was expressed by John Dryden in his *Preface to the Fables, Ancient and Modern* (1700), but Chaucer himself wrote in a culture in which literary authority and identity was already articulated through metaphors of paternity.<sup>41</sup> Although scholarship within the academy from the 1970s onwards began to unpick and challenge the moniker, this perception of Chaucer was still potent beyond its walls.<sup>42</sup> By rendering the work of Chaucer in miniature, Carr afforded the reader a different means through which to engage with his literary output: his work is no longer lodged within the intimidating bindings of scholarly editions or the tattered covers of classroom textbooks of the 1970s, both of which

likely stressed Chaucer’s monumental literary importance with dogmatic zeal, and neither is it adapted as if for a child readership (although it does not necessarily exclude a young reader, either). Instead, the Chaucer Pocketbook invites readers to engage with ‘The Reeve’s Tale’ with a readerly attitude of curiosity, humour, and relaxedness, while also tacitly endorsing Chaucer’s literary status through its inclusion within a pocketbook series almost exclusively concerned with canonical authors. As previously discussed, the reader is encouraged to skip words, enjoy the illustrations and their helpful plot-indicative speech bubbles – in short, to engage with the text in a manner that suits their inclination and ability best. While the miniature book makes the ordinary extraordinary, the pocketbook helps make the extraordinary accessible, and reframes the reading of Chaucer as a means of entertainment as well as edification.

The combination of the Chaucer Pocketbook’s size and its playful engagement with Chaucer’s text render it similar, although not identical, to zines. Carr’s Chaucer Pocketbook does not try to emulate the standards of traditional publishing which attempts to remove evidence of human fallibility and evidence of individual response in the production process. Instead, the pocketbook’s charm lies in the traces of hand-crafting that are evident in the final product: the changes in font size, the images that are sometimes snipped too close or left with a wide margin of white, and the hand-written notes or scrappy illustrations. While Carr’s Quince Tree Press was a commercial endeavour, it was run from his home address and relied on his personal and intimate involvement for each of its publications. It cannot be claimed that Carr’s was representative of ‘the variegated voices of a subterranean world staking out its identity through the cracks of capitalism and in the shadows of the mass media’, as Stephen Duncombe describes zine makers.<sup>43</sup> His Chaucer Pocketbook does, however, represent a distinctly alternative means of engaging with a canonical author’s work, and one which could be described as unorthodox, if not radical.

The small size of the Chaucer Pocketbook also makes it eminently portable. As Felicity Brown notes in her discussion of miniature works of Shakespeare, the storage of small books often resulted in a prioritisation of ‘display, rather than portability’, and rendered the latent transportability of the miniature book static.<sup>44</sup> Pocketbooks, while difficult to characterise in terms of their textual features, retain this portability as a central aspect of their materiality. Many readers will be familiar with the pocket guide: the compact volume designed to be carried around by, for example, a budding forager who wishes to determine the toxicity of a fungus, or a tourist looking for local points of interest in a new city. Other pocketbooks are written for professionals and work as dictionaries or redacted encyclopaedias and yet more contain excerpts of writings by famous authors or orators for consultation pertaining to work or play. What unites them all is that they are designed to be *vade mecum* (literally, ‘go with me’). The Chaucer Pocketbook is not designed for consultation in the same way as some of these examples, but it is certainly designed for portability. Like its more encyclopaedic text-types, Carr’s Chaucer Pocketbook lends itself to being consulted by the reader in situ, perhaps when greeted with examples of the English countryside that reflect the tale’s setting of ‘Trumpyngtoun, nat fer fro Cantebrigge’ (l. 3921) with its accompanying ‘brook’, ‘brigge’ and ‘melle’ (l. 3922), or encounters with members of the public that mirror the belligerent miller Symkyn or the conniving

students Aleyn and John. Furthermore, Carr was evidently alive to the pocketbook’s suitability as a gift, or a book that could easily be shared with other readers. The convenient size of the pocketbook is emphasised by the inside-back cover of the red edition of the Chaucer Pocketbook, which notes that ‘these books fit envelope [sic.] 4.5” by 6.3”, a common size’. The pocketbook’s ease of portability meant that it could be circulated via post, and in doing so, it became an eminently social material text. As much as the textual and imagistic collage used by Carr brings ideas about the ‘The Reeve’s Tale’ and Chaucer into conversation with one another, its size also meant that it could bring readers themselves into dialogue. In *A Month in the Country*, Tom Birkin is struck by the sense of artist’s presence he experiences when looking at the dramatic fourteenth-century wall painting of the Judgement he has uncovered:

Here I was, face to face with a nameless painter reaching from the dark to show me what he could do, saying to me as clear as any words, ‘If any part of me survives from time’s corruption, let it be this.’<sup>45</sup>

Carr’s use of cutting, I argue, enables the reader to experience a similar sense of immediacy in relation to ‘The Reeve’s Tale’, but it is a different kind of encounter from that experienced by his character Birkin. Instead of encountering only one ‘part’ that ‘survives from time’s corruption’, Carr offers a collage of different fragments accrued from Chaucer’s contemporary or near-contemporary culture and those succeeding it. Carr’s Chaucer Pocketbook does not offer a comprehensive representation of Chaucer’s life and works – indeed, no edition of his works ever could. Instead, Carr offers an intelligent and creative response to the fragmentary nature of ‘The Reeve’s Tale’, Chaucer, and late medieval English culture, and draws attention to its kaleidoscopic range of visual and textual references which together form our modern sense of ‘The Reeve’s Tale’.

37. Swinburne, s.n. 73 (Kettering: J. L. Carr Publisher, c. 1984), inside rear cover.

38. See Laura Forsberg, ‘Multum in Parvo: The Nineteenth-Century Miniature Book’, *Papers of the Bibliographic Society of America*, 110 (2016), 403–32 (p. 407).

39. Abigail Williams, ‘“The Sum of All in All”: The Miniature Book and the Nature of Legibility’, in *Small Things in the Eighteenth Century: The Political and Personal Value of the Miniature*, ed. by Chloe Wigston Smith and Beth Fowkes Tobin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), pp. 15–30 (p. 19).

40. Indeed, Chaucer’s texts do not appear to have been a popular choice for miniature books in any period of literary history. There are no instances of any of Chaucer’s texts in Doris Varner Welsh, *A Bibliography of Miniature Books (1470–1965)* (Cobleskill, N.Y.: Kathryn I. Rickard, 1989). A miniature *Canterbury Tales* in three volumes was published as part of the Spanish publisher Del Prado’s ‘The Miniature Classics Library’ series, see Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, 3 vols. (Madrid: Del Prado, 2003).

41. John Dryden, *Fables Ancient and Modern Translated into Verse from Homer, Ovid, Boccaccio & Chaucer: With Original Poems* (London: Printed for Jacob Tonson within Gray’s Inn Gate next Gray’s Inn Lane, 1700), sig. B2r. See Helen Cooper, ‘Choosing Poetic Fathers: The English Problem’, in *Medieval and Early Modern Authorship*, ed. Guillemette Bolens and Lukas Erne (Tübingen: Narr, 2011), pp. 29–50.

42. See Stephanie Trigg, *Congenial Souls: Reading Chaucer from Medieval to Postmodern* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), pp. 195–238.

43. Duncombe, *Notes from the Underground*, p. 2.

44. Felicity Brown, ‘The Bard Bounded: Containing Miniature Shakespearean Books’, *Inscription: The Journal of Material Text – Theory, Practice, History*, 5 (2025), 13–23 (p.17).

45. Carr, *A Month in the Country*, p. 25.