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# CONGENIAL SOULS

Reading Chaucer from  
Medieval to Postmodern

STEPHAN T. TRICH



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CONGENIAL SOULS

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# CONGENIAL SOULS

READING CHAUCER FROM  
MEDIÉVAL TO POSTMODERN

STEPHANIE TRIGG



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## ABBREVIATIONS

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BL	British Library
CU	Cambridge University Library
EETS	Early English Text Society
JEGP	<i>Journal of English and Germanic Philology</i>
LRB	<i>London Review of Books</i>
MED	<i>Middle English Dictionary</i>
MLA	Modern Language Association
MLQ	<i>Modern Language Quarterly</i>
MP	<i>Modern Philology</i>
NLI	<i>New Literary History</i>
NM	<i>Neuphilologische Mitteilungen</i>
PLL	<i>Papers in Language and Literature</i>
PMLA	<i>Publications of the Modern Language Association</i>
PQ	<i>Philological Quarterly</i>
RES	<i>Review of English Studies</i>
SAC	<i>Studies in the Age of Chaucer</i>
SAQ	<i>South Atlantic Quarterly</i>
THFS	<i>Times Higher Education Supplement</i>
TLS	<i>Times Literary Supplement</i>

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## INTRODUCTION

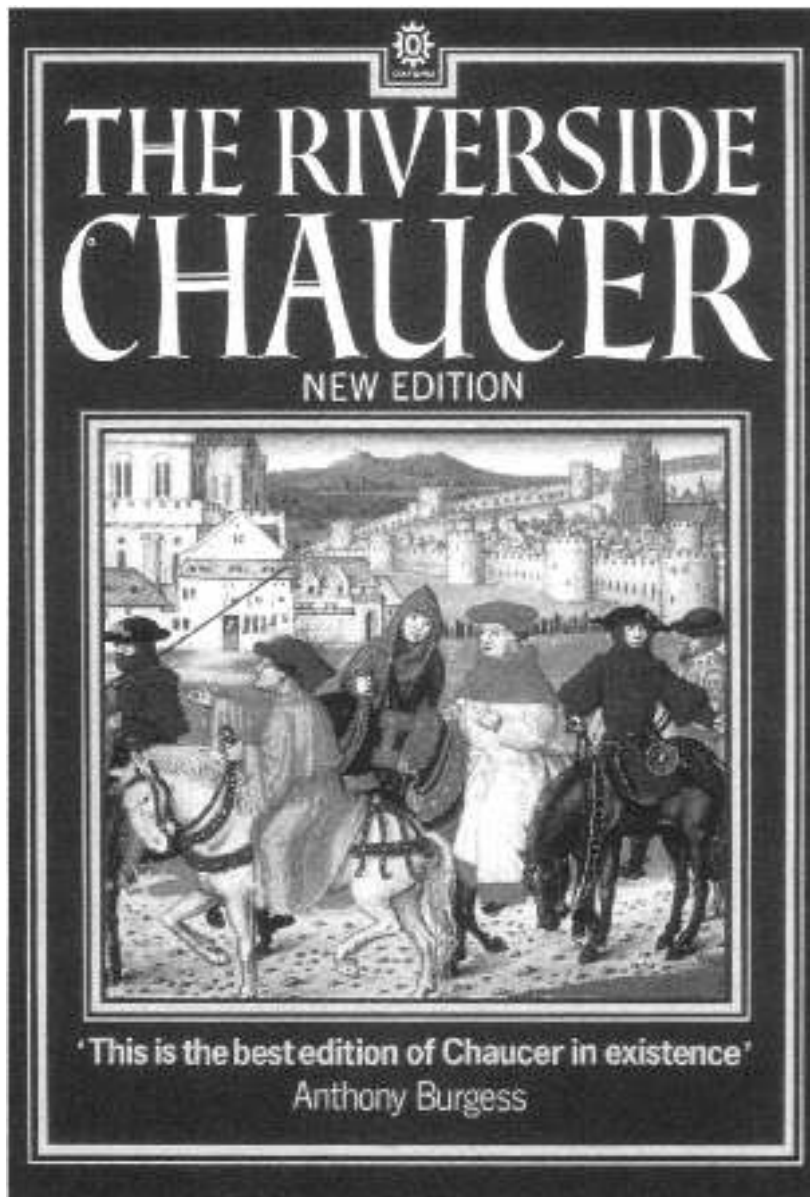


### THE CONGENIAL SOULS OF CHAUCER AND HIS READERS

The cover of the Riverside paperback edition of Chaucer's works features a famous fifteenth-century image of pilgrims on horseback. The group rides out beyond the city walls; the bright reds and blues of their clothes and the elaborate detail of their horses' trappings gleam against the background of soft green grass. The top third of the picture is divided into three receding and overlapping planes: a building in warm ochre, then the walls of the cathedral town in the soft gray of distance, and finally, a range of blue hills and smaller villages against a horizon breaking into dawn. Our eye returns to the pilgrims. We can see four of them completely, and only the torsos of two other men whose horses are barely visible; it is clear that this frame shows us only part of a much longer string of riders. They spread across the page, gesturing at one another in attitudes of public or confidential appeal.

The picture is a perfect choice for the cover of *Chaucer's Works*. It combines the gorgeous detail of the medieval illuminated manuscript with a flattering confirmation of all that is most recognizable and appealing of what we remember about the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer's most famous work. The sober figure in the middle of the painting who seems to be listening attentively to a man of impressive demeanor might well be Chaucer himself.

That, at least, is how the reader is invited to read *the* illustration, an image that often adorns the covers of books on Chaucer and that comes from a manuscript of John Lydgate's *The Siege of Thebes* (BL, MS Royal 18 DII, f. 148). In his prologue to *The Siege*, Lydgate explains how he chanced to meet up with Chaucer's pilgrims as they lodged at Canterbury, though Chaucer himself is dead and buried. He agrees to accompany them as they return to London, and tells "The Siege of Thebes" as the first tale of the homeward journey, reactivating the narrative contract drawn up by the host in Chaucer's *General Prologue*, whereby each pilgrim will tell two tales on both legs of the journey. In this prologue, Lydgate praises Chaucer's poetic skills but simultaneously inscribes



Cover of the paperback edition of *The Riverside Chaucer*

himself in Chaucer's place. Like Chaucer, he is both observer and participant, another poet-pilgrim. Lydgate pays stylistic homage to Chaucer's work in his own voice, yet his fiction of the return journey underlines and compensates for its narrative deficiencies, its incomplete state. *The Siege of Thebes*, moreover, seems designed generically to complement or rival the *Knight's Tale*, the first of Chaucer's outbound stories, in that it recounts the history of Thebes up to the point where the *Knight's Tale* begins, with Theseus's return to Athens.

Because it illustrates Lydgate's preface, this picture stands as a curious supplement to Chaucer's work, for it depicts a moment that is dependent on but conspicuously absent from *The Canterbury Tales*. Chaucer notoriously shows us his pilgrims approaching, but not arriving at, the end of their pilgrimage. There is no hint, apart from the Host's ambitious plan for the story-telling competition, that he might ever describe the return journey. This picture shows the moment of departure from Canterbury, not London, while its central sober figure, we now realize, signifies not only Chaucer but also Lydgate in his monk's habit, his "cope of blak" (prologue to *The Siege of Thebes*, line 73).

The most seductive aspect of the Riverside cover is its combination of realism and wish-fulfillment. The Royal manuscript satisfies the desire that Chaucer's work and its manuscripts consistently frustrate: the desire to witness the poet in the prime imaginative site of the *Tales* meeting and speaking with his fictional creations. It goes much further than the portraits in the Ellesmere manuscript, for example, in satisfying doubling speculations as to how the pilgrimage and the dynamics of its narrative exchanges might really have worked. Would it have been possible to hear a story told on horseback? This manuscript shows us how. We see the horses in more realistic proportion, too; and the whole scene is far more elaborate and less stylized than the Ellesmere illustrations. And yet it enacts what can be only a fantasy of telling stories from horseback to a company of thirty odd people.

Taken from its context in a single copy of a supplementary poem by Lydgate and used to herald a standard edition of the monumental *Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, the picture's register changes dramatically. As an emblem of the edition it introduces, it promises nothing less than a fulfillment of our unspoken and increasingly unspeakable desire to see and speak with Chaucer, to recapture an elusive, virtually forbidden moment of authorial presence. The figure in red and white is engaged in precisely



that activity, speaking as if in private confidence with the monk-priest, who inclines sympathetically toward him. This speaker may be designed to represent the Host, who, on the eve of the journey, addresses Lydgate in familiar terms and offers to counsel for his health. In any case, it is a private and intimate moment; the man in orange to the left claims the attention of the pilgrims riding ahead, while the man in blue to the right appeals back to those who follow. At the heart of this public, or communal, scene, then, with its glimpses of complex urban and rural societies, we find the possibility of a private moment shared with the author. This more intimate reading generates its own losses, though, as the fantasy of horseback narration collapses: three of the six riders are speaking at once.

Like other early poets, editors, and commentators, Lydgate regarded the *Canterbury Tales* as an open, unfinished text, a text that needs more work. Its generic opposite, the modern edition, makes a virtue of offering textual closure in the form of an authoritative, established text that constrains, even prohibits, any work of reconstruction by the reader. This jewel-like illustration, this pristine medieval artifact, is an attractive emblem of unmediated historical authenticity, the guarantee embodied in the edition (though in fact the image has been increased in size by almost one-third, and its colors deepened and enriched in reproduction). What is this cover but a confident promise of immediate communication with the author, as if this we who are speaking with Chaucer, we who are riding by his side? The image smoothes the path of our approach to the poet, precisely and perversely through its own mediated historicity, its context as a marginal illustration to Lydgate's parasitic text. Chaucer's complex reception history of imitation, commentary, and editorial reconstruction is thus embraced, but transcended.

The Royal manuscript is a more inviting induction to the Chaucerian community than are several other familiar fifteenth-century images of Chaucer. Unlike the famous Corpus Christi frontispiece to *Troilus and Criseyde*, where the richly dressed aristocratic audience is silent and passive, or the tradition of Chaucerian portraiture exemplified by the manuscript portrait in Hoccleve's *Regement of Princes*, where the poet's audience is invisible, the Royal manuscript as cover illustration offers the modern reader a place from which to listen and, most important, from which to "speak" to the author. It's even easier to imagine ourselves here as readers of Chaucer or, indeed, as members of his original audience, since the pilgrims are not distinguished one from another by the tradi-

usual iconography of costume or physiognomy. We may like to think ourselves into some kind of medieval mind-set in order to read Chaucer, but we don't often dress up as the Wife of Bath or the Miller in order to do so. On the contrary, the ideal position for reading Chaucer has often been to become as much like Chaucer as possible. Lydgate is the first to discern this advantage when he puts himself in Chaucer's place on the return journey to London, riding Chaucer's horse—as it were, in order to write his own *Canterbury tale*.

There remains to make one obvious point about this front cover illustration: as an image of an exclusively male company of pilgrims, it implies a male readership. For the Royal illuminator, characterization might be dispensable, but gender is not. It is a measure of Chaucer's reputation as a generalist, as a writer interested in women, if not, indeed, as an androgynous writer, that the absence of women does not stand in the way of this appealing representation of the Chaucerian community and the welcome it seems to extend to the prospective reader or buyer of the book and the academic and cultural capital it signifies.<sup>1</sup>

It would be narcissistic and "presentist" in the extreme to expect the fifteenth-century illuminators to furnish an image or series of images that would reflect Chaucer's readers to themselves in all their changing forms and ideals across the centuries. My interest in this book design stems less from the possibilities of critique than from those of analysis: this image beautifully encapsulates many of the relationships among Chaucerians that are my central concerns. The reverse cover offers a very typical form of invitation to the world of Chaucerian scholarship and criticism, an invitation that is both individualized ("Place yourself in the company of Chaucer") and socialized ("Place yourself in the company of other Chaucerians").

*Congial Souls* tracks the dynamics between the various forms of readership that cluster around Geoffrey Chaucer at different times in his long reception history. It analyzes the discursive patterns in which Chaucerians speak and write of Chaucer, with a special interest in uncovering the way they establish various forms of affiliation and affinity with him, with his work, and with other Chaucerians. This project is both historical in its coverage and political in its concerns, since it will challenge the attractive fiction of the Chaucerian community as an inclusive, unproblematic point of entry to Chaucer studies. Tracing the history of Chaucerian critical discourse and its present manifestations also forces us to

ask questions about the future of Chaucerian studies. How, and how often, will we speak and write of Chaucer in the new millennium?

*Congruent Study* starts from the assumption that Chaucer is an exemplary figure of canonical authorship for English literary tradition and that the historical patterns of his reception and his present study are instructive for both the past and the future of literary studies. From Chaucer's early commentators we learn about the making of English authorship in the humanist tradition and about the early forms of literary studies in English, while his current situation might also prove to be exemplary in another fashion. Chaucer is a prime site on which to consider the critical future of texts and authors who have traditionally formed the core of the canon of English literature, especially in the education sector. In this book I bypass the question of whether Chaucer should be included in any particular syllabus or curriculum: this is not really an issue for students of canonical authors to determine in isolation from specific pedagogical contexts. Instead, I examine the relation between his canonical status and the discursive forms in which his readers and the institutions of criticism have sustained that status, particularly in the face of current critiques. The question of canonicity is not solely concerned with what to teach and read; it is also about how we read and write and, crucially, the subjectivities we invite our students to perform.

One of the most powerful imperatives of traditional literary criticism is the metaphysical fiction of authorial presence, sustained by the possibility of the reader identifying with the author, the better to hear their words directly. Chaucer studies provides the exemplary model for such identifications. Chaucer is exemplary, in the sense that as the first English writer to receive the formative attentions of humanist textual criticism in the sixteenth century, he becomes a model for the making of literary authorship. Chaucer's own works also invite sympathetic readerly identifications, through the attractive narrative voices he constructs for himself. The image of the Canterbury pilgrimage—a group of diverse characters with a common aim—will prove to be one of the most important means of imagining such identifications, both with Chaucer and with other Chaucerians, among his various reading communities.

It is true that in the most recent Chaucer criticism, these patterns of identification play a vastly reduced role, but in the final chapter I will suggest that they persist, not merely as vestigial, often embarrassed, traces of earlier, less self-conscious modes, but indeed, as structural fea-

tures of modern criticism. In that respect, they continue to maintain and reproduce the community of readers that constitutes the audience for all monographs and articles on Chaucer, no matter how transgressive their intent or how trenchant their critiques.

This book makes no claim to exhaust the history of Chaucer's reception as a narrative of changing images or representations of the poet, nor does it attempt to survey the enormous critical variety of Chaucerian interpretation. It takes for granted that canonical authors are reinterpreted and reinvented to suit the tastes and interests of subsequent centuries and the changing demands for different forms of cultural capital. I examine the media of Chaucerian representation: the forms, the genres, and the discursive voices of Chaucer criticism; and the institutions that sustain those discourses. Poetic voice is a privileged topic in Chaucer studies, usually organized around issues of authorial intention and dramatized characterization or, in more recent years, of writerly play and the dispersal of authorial voice into impersonated or dialogic voices. Instead of trying to "hear" Chaucer's voice more accurately, I approach this topic from the opposite angle, studying the various attempts of Chaucer's readers to voice what they see as an appropriate "Chaucerian" tone in criticism and, in so doing, to become model Chaucerians. While at times my analysis will touch on the influence of Chaucer on his poetic followers and moments of popular reception, I am principally concerned with the greater gap his prose critics must bridge between themselves and the medieval poet and with the functions of imitation, dialogue, and conversation in the project of critical commentary.

I take my title from John Dryden and the defense of his "improvements" and "additions" to Chaucer when he translates several tales into his *Fables Ancient and Modern* in 1700: "And to this I was the more embolden'd, because (if I may be permitted to say it of my self) I found I had a Soul congenial to his, and that I had been conversant in the same Studies." Dryden writes Chaucer (translating, adding, improving) on the strength of his exemplary reading. His direct knowledge of Chaucer derives not only from a spiritual capacity (as a poet, he is born into the same race, or family, as Chaucer), but also from an apprenticeship in learning comparable to the medieval poet's. The two poets reflect well on each other, while philology and poetry—scholarship and inspiration—are still at this point perfectly compatible. At the midpoint of Chaucer's six-hundred-year reception history, the preface consolidates a

number of strands in the late medieval and early modern response to Chaucer. It also provides a founding moment for modern criticism. Dryden's combination of historicism (reading Chaucer well by replicating his own studies) with formalism (responding to the long-dead poet with a cur-fortable, and comforting, familiarity) will be crucially establishing for modern criticism, as we will see in chapter 5.

For the moment, though, "congenial" is my key term, since it embraces the two senses in which readers have traditionally established a relationship with Chaucer.<sup>4</sup> First, in Dryden's primary sense, it invokes a brotherly, even spiritual, companionship in poetry and learning; a relationship between two bookish yet compatible individuals across a substantial historical gap. It's a relationship that takes flattering echoes from the word's roots in the Latin *genius*: "guardian spirit," but also "enjoyment, inclination; talent." But there is no restriction on the number of readers who can claim a congenial soul with a dead author; and the convivial Chaucerian personality eases such identifications. In this second sense, Chaucer is less the solitary bookish figure than the jovial companion on pilgrimage. And while Dryden's invocation of a Chaucerian spirit at this point in his preface is more individual than communal, the congenial society of pilgrims—the most idealized drinking companions in English literature—is not very far away. Writing of Chaucer's naturalism, he comments, "I see . . . all the Pilgrims in the *Canterbury Tales*, their Humours, their Features, and the very Dress, as distinctly as if I had suppt with them at the *Tavern* in *Southwark*" (4.1450–51).

In my title, the idea of Chaucer and his readers as "congenial souls" evokes a number of influential patterns and traditions in Chaucerian reception. Both the key aspects of those patterns—the individualized and the socialized forms of Chaucerian identity—derive from moments in his works and long-established understandings of those passages. From the early dreamer alone with his books to the amorous aspirant who serves love from afar to the quiet observer with his head cast down on the *Canterbury* pilgrimage, Chaucer appears as a solitary figure, a flattering image for readers who encounter his works alone in their own studies or libraries. "The existence of a scholar can be a lonely one; too often he must sit, hermit-like, at his books 'also dumb as any stone.' An irrepressible zest for life and the ability to communicate it are rare qualities," Beryl Rowland's remarks in honor of Roselli Hope

Robbins epitomize this mode, of the scholar who transcends "his" necessary, readerly solitude with an equally "Chaucerian" love of life.<sup>5</sup> But the vision of Chaucer as a congenial member of the Canterbury pilgrimage, laughing with, not at human weakness, is a powerful social complement to this solitary mode: Chaucer's readers over many centuries have taken pleasure in picturing themselves among his companions at the Tabard Inn. In recent years, this is more often than not done ironically, but it is still done and plays an important, if indirect, role in "training" new Chaucerians.

A third, less obvious, but just as powerful, image of communication in Chaucer's writing is found in his addresses to his own friends: Bukton, Scogan, Stoude, and Gower. It is an image supported, though not unequivocally, by other instances of brotherly friendship in his fictions: Pandarus and Troilus, Palamon and Arcite, Alwyn and John. These also assist the male reader wanting to place himself close to Chaucer, wanting to imagine himself as a member of Chaucer's first audience of friends and fellow poets, sharing the poet's sensibilities and frames of reference. That these ideals of solitary reading and spiritual communion, of conviviality and of amity are nearly always exemplified as masculine, or more directly homosocial, is only one difficulty faced by Chaucer's modern readers.<sup>6</sup> We have learned subtle ways, however, to negotiate or transcend the critical heritage we must embrace, in order to find different kinds of affinity with writing that is in many regards un congenial to modernity and postmodernity. These maneuvers are not unique to Chaucer's readers, but their history is more distinctly legible here than in most other traditions of English literary studies. Shakespeare tradition is the most obvious comparison, but Chaucer studies has more in common with many other fields in that Chaucer's texts provide many images of the poet himself at work, reading, talking, and writing, images that are particularly enabling for readers wishing to place themselves in Chaucer's company or in a company of Chaucerians. For example, consider the ease with which Leigh Hunt "reads" *Troilus and Criseyde* as if it were addressed personally to himself. Where the narrator comments, "Thow, redere, maist thyself ful wel devyne" (5.27c), Hunt annotates his copy: "There is something singularly pleasing, flattering, and personally attaching in finding one's self thus personally addressed by such a man as Chaucer, even under an individual designation so generalizing."<sup>7</sup> This uninhibited desire to hear Chaucer directly, while repressed from

modern scholarly decorum, still resonates through much of our work, despite our best professional intentions.

None of these desires, or the strategies to fulfill them, is straightforward or unproblematic, and my work in this book is to explore their contradictions. I argue that we need to pay particular attention to the ways in which we currently define ourselves as "Chaucerians" and the ways we invite, or teach, our students to take up that identity, to join that increasingly professionalized community. If the possibility of direct access to the canonical writers of the past looks less and less feasible—and desirable—in a postmodernist academy, can we conceive a form of Chaucer studies independent of these structures of identification and affinity with the author? What if these structures turn out to be a necessary condition for the study of canonical authors from the past?

*Chaucer's Souls* starts by considering Chaucer's status as an exemplary canonical author for English literary tradition, and the more specific formation of Chaucerian "tradition" as a means of bridging the gap between the medieval and the modern, while introducing the ideas of community and Chaucerian identity in greater detail. Chapter 2 considers the question of where the Chaucerian text begins and ends and the nature of the Chaucerian signature: what are we responding to when we read "Chaucer"? I turn in chapter 3 to look at a number of early readings of the Chaucerian text as still open, where reading Chaucer is, literally, to write Chaucer. Chapter 4 considers the reinvention by humanists: textual criticism of Chaucer as an object of both scholarship and affection among restricted communities of readers. Chapter 5 revisits the crucial moment of Dryden's translations and commentary on Chaucer and examines the importance attributed to this text by later Chaucerians, especially the dynamic it establishes between loving and criticizing Chaucer. In chapter 6, I examine the early academic writing about Chaucer in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, focusing less on the familiar work of the early professionals than on some of the more popular "amateur" kinds of writing that have now fallen out of favor. Chapter 7 considers a number of recent attempts to "reform" Chaucer studies and the Chaucerian community and examines their effect on mainstream Chaucer studies, in the present and into the future of Chaucer criticism and medieval studies.

*Chaucer's Souls* traces patterns that I argue are extensive and wide-ranging over the long traditions of Chaucer studies. It plots a selective

rather than an inclusive trajectory and tends to focus on those moments when the tradition turns to analyze its own history, since my primary concern is with the way Chaucerian readers imagine and write about their relationship with each other and with their predecessors. My method is anapologetically historical in its concerns for origins, as I aim to demonstrate the influence of some of the earliest forms of response to Chaucer on later discussions and the importance of Chaucer and Chaucer studies for the history of modern English literary criticism. It's a further project of this book, however, gradually to politicize our current readings of Chaucer – indeed, the reading of Chaucer in general – in relation to the discourses by which we make ourselves Chaucerian(s). The history of Chaucer criticism is still being made, after all.

Since I began work on this project almost ten years ago, there has been a discernible tonal shift in Chaucer criticism, comparable with many other areas of literary studies. The voices of Chaucer studies are in process of undergoing a transformation that responds to the major changes in literary studies, tertiary education, and the traditional distribution of cultural capital in our communities, as well as other factors. I have sought to articulate those changes as they affect Chaucer studies, tracing the history of a tradition through some of its most important transitional moments.

Some of these moments will be familiar; others, less so. For example, American readers may have already experienced an unusual kind of alienation when I began by writing of the paperback edition of the *Riverside Chaucer*. This edition is the standard text for readers in the United Kingdom and many Commonwealth countries, but has never been published in the United States. The Houghton Mifflin Company first published the *Riverside Chaucer* in 1937. In the following year, they licensed Oxford University Press to produce a paperback edition, on condition that it would not be sold in the United States. This agreement revived the spirit of the British Traditional Market Agreement of 1947 (rescinded in 1976), whereby U.K. and U.S. publishers agreed to divide the English-speaking book market into two: the United Kingdom, along with (former) members of the Commonwealth, and the United States, along with its dependencies.<sup>8</sup> Houghton Mifflin reserved the right to publish a paperback version for sale in the United States, but have never exercised that right, while even the Canadian office of Oxford University Press has no right to distribute the paperback title. It's worth noting how the structure



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