

CHAUCER THE MAKER. By John Speirs. (Faber; 12s. 6d.)

MIDDLE ENGLISH LITERATURE. By George Kane. (Methuen 12s. 6d.)

Mr Speirs has planted new and helpful signposts in the Chaucerian landscape. His book is to be commended, first for the fruitful courses of thought which it sets flowing, and secondly because by applying the fundamental principles of literary criticism to Chaucer's poetry he establishes facts about the Middle Ages which have so far only been believed or found defensible on theological or philosophical theory. 'Chaucer's subject', he concludes, 'is human nature, human nature observed as particular persons in a particular society planted in Nature and in God.' And again, 'The whole-hearted acceptance of the supernatural involves in the medieval mind no rejection of the rôle of the natural body'. For, while he does not believe that Puritanism began with Protestantism (it was present in Gnosticism and Manicheism), he appreciates that it did not dominate the Middle Ages either directly or obliquely as it has dominated since. He shows, too, how the rational and religious mind coincided in the Middle Ages. All this is deduced from poetic texts in the most matter-of-fact way, and must be regarded as an advance in Chaucer criticism. On many points, of course, occasion will be found for discussion and disagreement. Is Chaucer made through the instrument of his irony to seem too agnostic about life? Does Mr Speirs inject a little too much vinegar into Chaucer's satire? we hear very little about how Chaucer spoke of the Parson and some of the other 'good' characters. One would have welcomed also some further discussion of the progress of Chaucer's views on 'courtesy' between Troilus and Criseyde and the Knight's Tale. The emergence of Theseus as the pattern of true 'courtesy' set against the false is not without importance. But many more peccadilloes than this must be forgiven in view of at least two really great things: a spirited and strong defence of a high vernacular culture in medieval England, and an equally sound exposition of the continuity of English from Chaucer to today. Mr Speirs has started something that may well be followed up. Incidentally, he has some shrewd things to say in the earlier pages about the Christian heritage of Shakespeare, a fact sadly ignored by some major critics. There is one startling misprint on page 107: Chaucer even at his bitterest would never have spoken of the Monk's 'bride'.

Mr Kane's book studies a more neglected part of medieval English literature; he applies the 'methods of literary evaluation' to the metrical romances, religious lyrics of the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries, and to *Piers Plowman*. Up to now social historians, theologians and philologists have done most of the work on these texts, and it is right that the critic should follow and work upon their findings, and Mr Kane's work is to be welcomed.

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