'Antient Chavcer' at New: Reading Early Prints from 1602 to 1897

THE NEW COLLEGE 'CHAUCERS'

In *Editing Chaucer: The Great Tradition*, Paul G. Ruggiers sums up nearly 500 years of Chaucerian printing and editing history in one concise sentence:

> We are inclined, somewhat carelessly, in looking back at the succession of editors of Chaucer, to assume that Caxton's shadow is cast forward, gradually diminishing in density up to the time of Tyrwhitt; then Tyrwhitt shines more brightly than all the other editors until Skeat's great edition; next Skeat holds sway until Robinson's production of 1933.[1]

While Ruggiers rather dismisses this sequence not only as 'careless' but also as smacking of 'gross simplicity', it does happen to align quite serendipitously with the selection of early 'Chaucers' which can be found among the special collections at the library of New College, Oxford. Its mid-15th-century Chaucer MS contains the *b*-text on which Caxton based his first ever print of the *Canterbury Tales*,[2] and the library also holds copies of the second edition of *The workes of our ancient and learned English poet, Geffrey Chaucer* (1602) by Thomas Speght (*d.* 1621),[3] and of the much-maligned *Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* (1721) begun by John Urry (1666–1715) and completed by Timothy Thomas (1694–1751) and others.[4] There is a set of the second, 1798 two-volume edition of the *Canterbury Tales* by Thomas Tyrwhitt (1730–1786),[5] as well as the seventh, supplementary volume of W. W. Skeat's first edition of the *Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* (1894–97).[6] Finally, on the open shelves, we find multiple copies of the most recent third edition of *The Riverside Chaucer* (1988),[7] based on Robinson, which is the prescribed text for any student reading Chaucer at Oxford today.

This rather impressive collection of early Chaucers at New provides a happy opportunity to examine and compare these early editions side-by-side—though far from trying to offer anything like a detailed discussion of the scholarly merits an defects of these editions, or delve too deeply into the intricate details of Chaucerian editing history, I want to take a look at them much more from a (non-academic) reader's (rather than a scholar's, editor's, or literary critic's) point of view, even if (or maybe specifically because) this means viewing them rather more superficially than the scholars, editors and literary critics of previous centuries have done. With the actual books

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[1] Paul G. Ruggiers, 'Introduction', in *Editing Chaucer: The Great Tradition*, ed. Paul G. Ruggiers (Norman, Oklahoma: Pilgrim Books, 1984), pp. 1–11, at pp. 1–2.

[2] New College Library, Oxford, MS 314.

[3] *The vvorkes of our ancient and learned English poet, Geffrey Chaucer, newly printed. To that which was done in the former impression, thus much is now added. 1 In the life of Chaucer many things inserted. 2 The whole worke by old copies reformed. 3 Sentences and prouerbes noted. 4 The signification of the old and obscure words prooued: also caracters shewing from what tongue or dialect they be deriued. 5 The Latine and French, not Englished by Chaucer, translated. 6 The treatise called Iacke Vpland, against friers: and Chaucers A.B.C. called La priere de nostre Dame, at this impression added.*(London: printed by Adam Islip, 1602), New College Library, Oxford, BT1.19.2; ESTC No. S107210.

[4] *The works of Geoffrey Chaucer, compared with the former editions, and many valuable Mss. Out of which, Three Tales are added which were never before Printed; By John Urry, Student of Christ-Church, Oxon. Deceased: March, 17, 1714/9. Together with a Glossary, By a Student of the same College. Jim Thomas. To the Whole is prefixed The Author's Life, newly written, and a Preface, giving an Account of this Edition* (London: Printed for Bernard Lintot, between the Temple Gates, 1721), New College Library, Oxford, NB.92.14; ESTC No. T106027.

[5] *The Canterbury Tales of Chaucer. To which are added an essay on his language and versification, and an introductory discourse: together with notes and a glossary. By the late Thomas Tyrwhitt, Esq. F.R.S.*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (Oxford: at the Clarendon Press, 1798), New College Library, Oxford, NB.96.9 and NB.96.10; ESTC No. T75508.

[6]*Chaucerian and Other Pieces: Being a Supplement to the Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. Walter Skeat (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1897), New College Library, Oxford, EE 14.1 CHA. The remaining volumes are *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. Walter Skeat, 6 vol. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1894–97).

[7] *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson and F. N. Robinson, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988, repr. 2008). Unless otherwise indicated Chaucer's works are quoted according to this edition.

available to handle, put on a table in front of me, and leaf through at my leisure, my interest is in much more easily observable issues than editorial practices and principles: the collection of texts they contain, how these are presented in terms of layout, illustrations, or decoration, and what (if any) accompanying explanatory material helpful to the reader is added to the text. These are issues which actively shape the actual reading experience of Chaucer's text in print, and as such are vocal witnesses to the changes in attitude towards reading (or studying) Chaucer over the centuries.

<div align="center">THE 'WORKS' OF CHAUCER</div>

In *The Myth of Piers Plowman*, Lawrence Warner makes a rather dogmatic statement about the idea of the corpus of any given author's works:

> The establishment of the corpus is the foundation of any author's literary archive, one so important that it is usually taken as a given before the work of scholarship begins. Any challenges to a set corpus . . . usually take place on the borders of scholarly interest.[8]

A look at the early editions of Chaucer, however, does not quite bear out the truth of this statement—far from being relegated to the margins, the discussion of the Chaucerian canon (which then determines what actual contents is presented to the reader as 'Chaucer's Works') takes centre-stage among early printers, later editors, and modern-day critics alike.

Francis W. Bonner describes Chaucer as the writer whose reputation, in all of English literary history, was 'most consistently and significantly affected by works falsely ascribed to him':

> During the centuries following Chaucer's death—especially the sixteenth and seventeenth—pseudo-Chaucerian poetry and prose were so indiscriminately assigned to him that readers of these and later periods were confronted with editions of Chaucer's 'works' containing nearly twice the volume of his authentic writings.[9]

Thomas J. Heffernan dismisses complaints about the lack of a 'stable tradition' for Chaucer by arguing that 'the canons of most medieval authors share this lack of stability'—the idea of the 'fixed canon', he says, would 'impute to a medieval author a standard derived from a print culture'.[10] In Chaucer's case, though, this is an issue clearly already embedded in the manuscript transmission, and carried over to print culture from there.

Chaucer's own lists and hints as to his canonical works are less than helpful here. The 'Retraction' at the end of *Canterbury Tales*—printed by Caxton, but omitted after 1526 and only reinstated with this title by Urry in 1721—mentions, in addition to known works, 'many another book . . . and many a song and many a leccherous lay' (*CT* X 1086); and in *The Legend of Good Women*, Alceste describes the hapless figure of Chaucer-the-narrator as a poet who 'hath maad many a lay and many a thing' (*LGW* F 430). His early editors seem to have taken these statements as license, in order to satisfy their readers' thirst for things Chaucerian, to include in their publications not only a wide range of apocryphal texts, but also works by named authors who were in some way associated with or (near) contemporaries of Chaucer.[11]
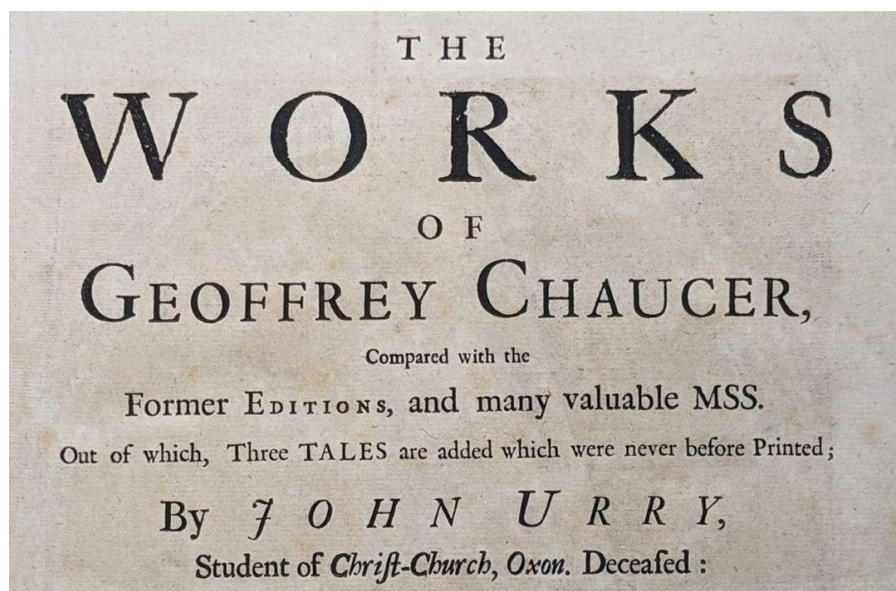
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[8] Lawrence Warner, *The Myth of Piers Plowman: Constructing a Medieval Literary Archive* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 22.

[9] Francis W. Bonner, 'The Genesis of the Chaucer Apocrypha,' *Studies in Philology* 48 (1951), 461–81, at p. 461.

[10] Thomas J. Heffernan, 'Aspects of the Chaucerian Apocrypha: Animadversions on William Thynne's Edition of the *Plowman's Tale*,' in *Chaucer Traditions: Studies in Honour of Derek Brewer*, ed. Ruth Morse and Barry Windeatt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 155–67, at p. 155.

[11] Bonner puts the blame on *LGW*: 'It seems very likely, then, that these lines by Chaucer provided a basis for the addition of a number of spurious poems to the early editions of his works,' p. 463. Alice S. Miskimin, however, blames the 'Retraction': 'It is this open category of other *bookes* and *songs* which offered early scribes and editors the invitation to attribute to Chaucer what seemed likely to have been his': *The Renaissance Chaucer* (New Haven: Yale University

Firmly within this 'tradition of reprint-with-augmentation',[12] Speght's second edition of the *Works* in 1602 advertised 'The treatise called Iacke Vpland, against friers: and Chaucers A.B.C. called La priere de nostre Dame, at this impression added' (Speght, title page), bringing the amount of spurious rather than genuine Chaucerian text up to 60 percent of the entire volume.[13] As late as 1721, over 300 years after the poet's death and nearly two and a half centuries after his works first appeared in print, to the texts in Urry's edition 'Three Tales are added which were never before Printed' (Urry, title page).

THE

WORKS

OF

GEOFFREY CHAUCER,

Compared with the

Former EDITIONS, and many valuable MSS.

Out of which, Three TALES are added which were never before Printed;

By *JOHN URRY*,

Student of *Chrift-Church, Oxon.* Deceafed:

Urry's 1721 title page

There are a number of 'Chaucerian' texts which are regarded by the early editors as practically obligatory inclusions in the 'Works', and which appear again and again in the various editions: 'The Floure of Courtesye' by John Lydgate (*c.* 1370–1449/50?), the 'Letter to Cupid' by Thomas Hoccleve (1368/69–1426), 'The Testament of Cresseid' by Robert Henryson (*fl.* 1460–1500), and 'The Testament of Love' by Thomas Usk (*c.* 1354–1388). Sometimes these texts are correctly attributed (and advertised): Speght's title page advises that his volume contains Chaucer's works 'With the Siege and Destrvction of the worthie Citie of Thebes, compiled by Iohn Lidgate, Monke of Burie' (Speght, title page); and Urry's table of contents correctly lists 'The Floure of Courtesye, made by John Lidgate' (Urry, *sig.* m4). On other occasions, in their eagerness to label items as Chaucer's and include them in their compilations of his works, the early editors to go to some lengths in order to suppress or ignore clear evidence of non-Chaucerian authorship. For 'The Floure of Courtesye', attribution to Chaucer was always questionable: the text itself clearly states: 'Chaucer is deed, that hadde suche a name'.[14] The apocryphal nature of Hoccleve's 'Letter to Cupid' is similarly evident: the poem is described as having been completed 'The yere of grace joyful and joconde / A thousand and foure hundred and secounde,' two years after Chaucer's death.[15] But both Speght and Urry engage in a clearly intentional deception by omission, misleading the reader (and purchaser) of their books by including for example Hoccleve's poem in their table

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Press, 1975), p. 243. See Bonner, pp. 462–4 for a detailed discussion of Chaucer's other comments about his own works.
[12] Derek Pearsall, '4. Thomas Speght (ca.1455–?)', in Ruggiers, *Editing Chaucer*, pp. 71–92, at p. 71.
[13] Heffernan, 'Chaucerian Apocrypha', p. 161.
[14] Ll. 236–8. Skeat, *Chaucerian and Other Pieces*, p. 273.
[15] Ll. 475–6. Skeat, *Chaucerian and Other Pieces*, p. 232.

of contents without any comment, and only giving the correct authorial attribution in the headnote preceding the text.[16]

Urry's table of contents [detail], listing 'The Floure of Courtesie, made by John Lidgate', but the 'Testament of Cresseid', the 'Testament of Love', and the 'Letter to Cupid' all unattributed (m4).

The case for 'The Testament of Cresseid' is possibly less obvious, even though in it the poet-narrator clearly describes the book he is reading as '[w]rittin be worthy Chaucer glorious'.[17] Speght presents this piece without any comment at all, and thus implicitly as Chaucer's own (Speght, ff. 271v–302r). Urry, however, though with no hint as to its non-Chaucerian origin in his table of contents, comments on the authorship of the piece in prefatory remarks worth quoting in full:

> The author of the Testament of CRESEIDE, which might pass for the sixth Book of this Story, I have been informed by Sir *James Eriskin*, late Earl of *Kelly*, and diverse aged Scholars of the Scottish Nation, was one Mr. *Robert Henderson*, chief Schoolmaster of *Dumferlin*, a little time before *Chaucer* was first printed, and dedicated to King Henry VIII, by Mr. Thynne, which was near the end of his Reign. Mr. Henderson wittily observing that Chaucer in his fifth Book had related the Death of Troilus, but made no mention what became of Creseide; he learnedly takes upon him in a fine Poetical way to express the Punishment and End due to a false unconstant Whore, which commonly terminates in extream Misery. (Urry, p. 333)

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[16]Cf. Speght, f. 310v: 'This letter was made by Thomas Occleue of the office of the priuy Seale, Chaucers scholler . . .' Urry seems less convinced: 'This letter is said to have been made by *Tho. Occleve* of the Office of the Privy Seal, *Chaucer's* Scholar;' but he has to concede that 'the Author telling us at the Conclusion it was made *Anno Dom.* 1402. it can't be Chaucer's, who dy'd *A.D.* 1400.' Urry, p. 534.
[17] Ll. 41–2. Skeat, *Chaucerian and Other Pieces*, p. 328.

Finally, in including among Chaucer's 'Works', and attributing to him, 'The Testament of Love', the early editors have to be held all but blameless. Not only did the true author's identity remain a mystery until the end of the 19th century, but in the first rendition of his *Confessio Amantis* John Gower (*d.* 1408) includes some very misleading verses undoubtedly responsible for the misattribution. Here Venus gives the Lover the following message to her 'owne clerk' Chaucer:

> '. . .For thi now in hise daies olde
> Thou schalt him telle this message,
> That he upon his latere age,
> To sette an ende of alle his werk,
> As he which is myn owne clerk,
> Do make his testament of love,
> As thou hast do thi schrifte above,
> So that mi court it mai recorde.' (*Confessio Amantis*, VIII, ll.*2950–*2957)[18]

From the early 16th century on, Usk's 'Testament' thus features as a firm part of Chaucer's canon, and is only relegated to the status of a mere 'Chaucerian piece' by Skeat in 1897. Earlier that same year Henry Bradley had concluded that pages of the original, lost MS from which the text was first printed must have been displaced, and that in the correct order the acrostic formed by the initial letters in the final sections of the piece spelled the author's name as 'Usk'.[19] Skeat therefore delayed the appearance of his seventh volume that year, and had the second half of the poem cancelled and reprinted in the right order, finally with correct authorial attribution.[20]

Despite high-handedness of the early editors in adding to the Chaucerian canon, and their occasional deliberate disregard of evidence to the contrary for the sake of sales, many of the editorial processed they employed (and criticised in each other) are part of what since at least the 19th century is acknowledged to be editorial best practice: choosing the best authority to print editions from, comparing texts with earlier versions, and collating readings from a variety of sources. These processes (and the disagreements they spark) begin as early as 1483 with Caxton's second printing of the *Canterbury Tales*.

<div align="center">THE 'CORRECTED' CHAUCER—CAXTON 1483</div>

While there are no copies of either of Caxton's two printings of the *Canterbury Tales* held at New College Library, its mid-15th-century Chaucer MS (MS 314, *c.* 1450–1475) is very closely linked to these incunabula: it is one of only three still extant MSS of the *b*-text on which Caxton based his print.[21] Neither of these three MSS seems to be the exact copy from which Caxton worked for his first edition of 1477/1478,[22] but his choice of text was highly influential for decades to come: W. W. Greg stresses that up to 1532 'no print after Caxton's original edition was set up

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[18] Quoted according to John Gower, *Confessio amantis*, ed. Russell A. Peck, 2nd ed. 3 vols. (Kalamazoo, Mich: TEAMS, 2006–).

[19] Henry Bradley, 'The "Testament of Love",' *The Athenaeum* 3615 (6 February 1897): 184. For the verses forming the acrostic see e.g. Speght, ff. 294v–301r.

[20] Water W. Skeat, 'The Testament of Love,' *The Athenaeum* 3616 (13 February 1897), 215; see also Skeat, *Chaucerian and Other Pieces*, p. xx.

[21] The other two being Trinity College, Cambridge, R. 3. 15 and Princeton University Library MS. 100.

[22] Geoffrey Chaucer, *wHan that Apprill with his shouris sote and the droughte of marche hath p[er]cid þe rote . . .* (Westminster: printed by William Caxton, 1477) ISTC No. ic00431000. For images of the copy at Oxford, Merton College MER.111.C.9 see <https://digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/objects/f7c02454-770e-47d1-8737-4a820cb71bed/>. W. W. Greg argues for the Trinity College MS as the copy in 'The Early Printed Editions of the *Canterbury Tales*', *PMLA* 39 (1924), 737–61, but Boyd disagrees: Beverly Boyd, '1. William Caxton (1422?–1491),' in Ruggiers, *Editing Chaucer*, pp. 13–34, at p. 22; see there for a detailed discussion of the issue.

from a manuscript':[23] the later reprints by Caxton himself in 1483,[24] by Wynkyn de Worde (*d.* 1534/5) in 1498 and by Richard Pynson (*c.* 1449–1529/30) in 1490 and 1526 were all based solely on the very first version.

Caxton's choice of a *b*-text MS for the first ever printed Chaucer was not only influential, but also already controversial. As the *Prohemye* to the second edition famously records, one of the earliest purchasers of the first printing took it upon himself to castigate Caxton, explaining that his source was 'incorrecte' and 'abrydgyd', and 'not accordyng in many places vnto the book that Gefferey chaucer had made'—an accusation which Caxton readily acknowledges to be true:

> For I fynde many of the sayd bookes/ whyche wryters haue abrydgyd it and many thynges left out/And in so*m*me place haue sette certayn versys/that he neuer made ne sette in hys booke/of whyche bookes so incorrecte was one brought to me vj yere passyd/whyche I supposed had ben veray true 7 correcte/And accordyng to the same I dyde do enprynte a certayn nombre of them/[25]

Caxton apologises to Chaucer that he 'by ygnouraunce . . . erryd in hurtyng and dyffamyng his book in dyuerce places in settyng in so*m*me thynges that he neuer sayd ne made/and leuyng out many thynges that he made whyche ben requysite to be sette in it,' and assures the reader that for this second edition he borrowed a better MS, 'a book trewe and correcte . . . by whiche I haue corrected my book'.[26] Caxton may thus have only been the printer of the first *Canterbury Tales*, but he was most certainly the editor of the second.

THE 'IMPERFECT' CHAUCER—SPEGHT 1602

Well over a century lies between the date of New College Library MS 314 and the earliest printed Chaucer held here, a second edition of Speght's *The workes of our ancient and learned English poet, Geffrey Chaucer* (1602).[27] Still, in jumping over these years the reader may not miss out on much after all: Pearsall dismisses the printed Chaucers of the later 16th century summarily as 'not in any sense 'editions", since they are mere 'bookseller's reprints' of the 1532 *Workes of Geffray Chaucer* by William Thynne (*d.* 1546)[28]—it is only with Speght, whose second edition was produced in collaboration with William Thynne's son Francis Thynne (1545?–1608), that collections of Chaucer's works start to include 'the beginnings of an editorial apparatus'.[29]

As we learn from the 'Preface', this second edition is a product of almost exactly the same process as the one which shaped Caxton's second *Canterbury Tales*: a discerning reader slips into the role of critic, reprimanding the editor for their omission and negligence, and for not doing justice to the author's text; and the editor, acknowledging these accusations as true, revises his work accordingly to produce a new edition.

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[23] Greg, 'Early Printed Editions', 741.

[24] Geoffrey Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales* (Westminster: W. Caxton, 1483), ISTC ic00432000. For images of the copy at Oxford, St John's College A.2.5 and MS 266 see <https://digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/objects/e9ddab12-2110-4aa0-ac87-74d77b55836a/>.

[25] William Caxton, 'Prohemye', in W. J. B. Crotch, *The Prologues and Epilogues of William Caxton* EETS OS 176 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1928), pp. 90–91. Also printed in Greg, 'Early Printed Editions', 738–9.

[26] See Boyd, 'William Caxton', pp. 24–7, for a detailed discussion of the editorial changes made by Caxton to the text of his second *CT*.

[27] Philip Knox, William Poole, and Mark Griffith suggest that 'this was probably in the library not long after publication': 'Reading Chaucer in New College, Oxford, in the 1630s: The Commendatory Verses to Francis Kynaston's "Amorum Troili Et Creseidæ"', *Medium Ævum* 85 (2016), 33–58, at p. 35.

[28] *The workes of Geffray Chaucer newly printed, with dyuers workes whiche were neuer in print before: as in the table more playnly dothe appere. Cum priuilegio* (Lo[n]don: By Thomas Godfray, 1532) (ESTC No. S106664).

[29] Pearsall, 'Thomas Speght', p. 71.

Unlike Caxton's reader-turned-critic, who he says 'cam to me' and so apparently voiced his misgivings in a personal, informal face-to-face conversation, this time the dissatisfied reader Francis Thynne made his objections in detail and in writing. His *Animaduersions uppon the annotacions and corrections of some imperfections of impressiones of Chaucer's works* (1599)[30] are most certainly the source of Pearsall's characterisation of him as 'lack[ing] all sense of the difference between important and trivial matters' and 'the perfect pattern of the pedant'.[31] Thynne compiles a long list of points where Speght erred, criticising him for his decisions on the canon ('. . .yt would be good that Chaucers proper woorkes were distinguyshed from the adulterat and suche as were not his', *Animadversions* 56); for making errors in his account of Chaucer's life; for misquoting Gower's *Confessio Amantis*; for re-titling the poem formerly known as 'Chaucer's Dream' to 'The Book of the Duchess'; and for numerous misinterpretations, wrong etymologies and faulty explanations of Middle English words in the glossary and annotations.

All of this, he takes care to explain, could have easily been avoided if he had been given a chance to collaborate on the edition:

> . . .yf you wolde have vouchesafed my howse, or have thoughte me worthy to have byn acqueynted with these matters, (whiche you might well have donne without anye whatsoeuer dispargement to yourselfe,) you sholde haue understoode before the impression (*Animadversions*, 5)

Francis Thynne is in general a rather harsh critic of extant Chaucer prints. On Caxton he agrees with the anonymous reader on the quality of the text, and does not think much of Caxton's revisions either, 'for I knowe (notwithstandinge his fayre prologe of printing that by a true copye) there be manye imperfections in that Booke' (*Animadversions*, 50). He also agrees with Pearsall on the value (or lack of it) of the Chaucer re-prints that followed his father's, which were made 'by oure carelesse (and for the most *part*e unlerned) printers of Englande' (*Animadversions*, 5–6). The only edition he values, and the treatment of which by Speght is one of his main points of grievance, is his father's:

> you saye 'secondly the texte by written copies corrected' by whiche worde corrected, I maye seme to gather, that you imagine greate imperfectione in my fathers editione (*Animadversions*, 5)

It is Francis Thynne's view that his own work had been disregarded, and that of his father disrespected and even disparaged, which leads to the copious and often quite severe criticism of the *Animadversions*, written in a tone characterised by Pearsall as ranging 'from the patronizing to the irascible'.[32] But the reader of the 1602 second edition is left with the distinct impression that four years later there were no hard feelings whatsoever left on either side. Not only does Speght include a number of the corrections suggested by Thynne in this new edition, but, much more noticeable to a reader not quite as well versed in the minutiae of editing, liberally bestows (reciprocated) flattery in the prefatory matter. Speght's address 'To the Readers' mentions 'M. Francis Thynn' and his intention 'to set out Chaucer with a Coment in our tongue' as 'a Gentleman for that purpose inferior to none' who 'most kindly lent . . . his helpe and direction'.[33] Included

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[30]Printed as Francis Thynne, *Chaucer: Animaduersions uppon the annotacions and corrections of some imperfections of impressiones of Chaucers workes (sett downe before tyme, and nowe) reprinted in the yere of oure lorde 1598*, ed. G. H. Kingsley, EETS OS v. 9 (London: N. Trübner & Co., 1965). The autograph MS this is edited from, dated 20 December 1599, is now Huntingdon Library EL 34 B 11.

[31] Pearsall, 'Thomas Speght', p. 84.

[32] ibid., p. 84.

[33] Speght, *sig.* a1v–a2r. The New College copy is imperfect, missing Speght's preface; the above is quoted according to the copy digitised on *Early English Book Online*: Geoffrey Chaucer, (1602). *The vvorkes of our ancient and learned english*

among the prefatory materials is then later a page with two poems, the first, 'Vpon the picture of Chaucer' signed 'Fran.Thynn.'; the second unsigned but presumably by the same, since it is titled 'Of the Animadversions Upon Chaucer':

> IN reading of the learn'd praise-worthie peine
> The helpefull notes explaining *Chaucers* mind,
> The Abstruse skill, the artificial veine;
> By true Annalogie I rightly find,
> *Speght* is the child of *Chaucers* fruitful breine,
> Vernishing his workes with life and grace,
> Which envious age vvould otherwise deface:
>> Then be he lov'd and thanked for the same,
>> Since in his love he hath reviv'd his name. (Speght, *sig.* b.i)

Having satisfied even his most critical reader, Speght's edition cannot but also please any reader with a less discerning eye. Pearsall characterises the black letter font as 'by now archaic in itself yet seemingly integral to the sixteenth-century view of Chaucer', but concedes that together with the roman font used for the apparatus '[t]he combined effect is not unhandsome'.[34] The apparatus certainly is helpful to the non-specialist reader, particularly the short introductory passages containing the 'arguments' or summaries of texts; the glossary ('The old and obscure words of Chaucer, explaned', Speght *sig.* 4t.1ff); the appendix with translations ('So much of the Latine in Chaucer translated, as is not by himself Englished', Speght *sig.* 4u.1ff); and also the 'Prouerbes and Sentences marked' (and credited to Francis Thynne in the address to the readers, Speght, *sig.* a.2) with countless manicules in the margins.
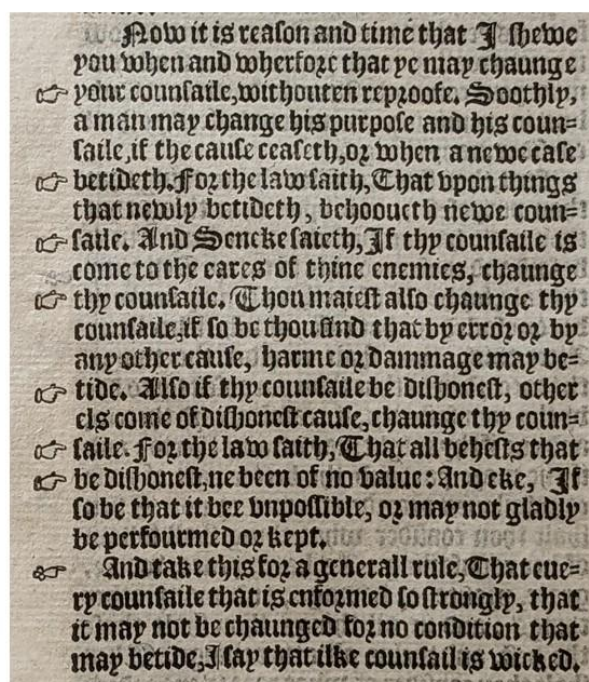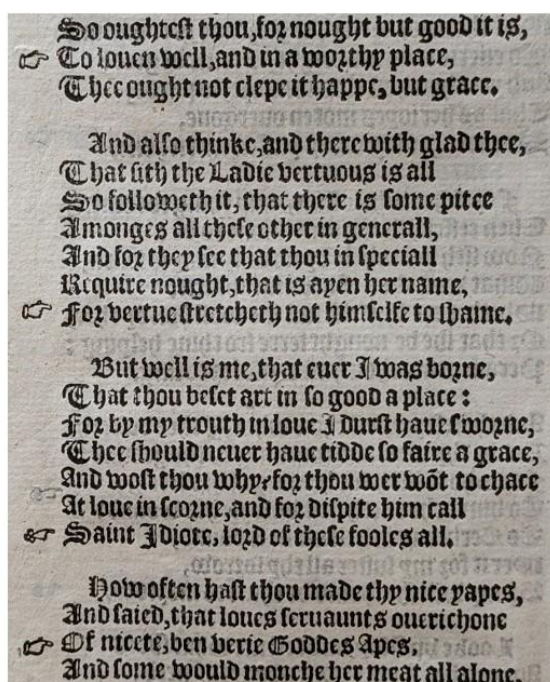
Manicules pointing to proverbial sayings in *Troilus and Criseyde* Book 1 and *Tale of Melibee* (Speght ff. 147v and 70v)

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poet, geffrey chaucer, newly printed (London: 1602). Retrieved from <www.proquest.com/books/vvorkes-our-ancient-learned-english-poet-geffrey/docview/2240881974/se-2>.
[34] Pearsall, 'Thomas Speght', p. 75.

The Knight's Tale is headed by a rather splendid woodcut of a caparisoned knight armed with a lance before a background of a multi-towered and crenellated castle (f. 1r).[35] Framed to the right and left by two decorative foliate panels it takes up a whole quarter page before the text of the Tale itself starts with a six-line initial 'W' in a wide frame of foliate ornamentation with fleur-de-lys.

Woodcut marking the beginning of The Knight's Tale (Speght, f. 1r).

However, any expectation in the reader of similar ornamentation for the other Tales, or, for that matter, any of the many other works in this volume, are entirely thwarted: this is the only pictorial woodcut in the entire volume, and other than ornamental initials decoration in general is somewhat scant. The empty space at the bottom of the table of contents and at the very end of Chaucer's works, before the *Storie of Thebes* begins on the next folio, are partially filled with the same large, triangular fleuron tailpiece, and three of the larger works (*The Romaunt of the Rose*, f. 109, *The Treatise on the Astrolabe*, f.249, and the *Siege of Thebes*, f.353) have an arabesque headpiece across the entire page. Others, including such lengthy works as *Troilus* or *Boece*, only merit one of single-column width, and the *Romaunt* and the *Siege* are the only texts to begin on a new page.

It seems that the printer responsible for the decorative elements had access to only a few pieces of sets of six- and eight-line initials, the former with both foliate and figural decoration, the latter with a similar style of foliate ornamentation each. The same six-line initial T with its figure of a wild boar amidst oak branches with acorns, and with unmistakeable damage on both the vertical bar of the letter and at the bottom of the frame, is found numerous times throughout the entire volume;[36] and the same six-line figured W and large eight-line floriate I are also repeated again and again.[37]

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[35] Charles Muscatine identifies this as the same cut already used in previous editions in 1551, 1561, and 1598, with this being its last appearance and 'the end of the tradition of simple woodcuts of the pilgrims initiated by Caxton': *The Book of Geoffrey Chaucer: an Account of the Publication of Geoffrey Chaucer's Works from the Fifteenth Century to Modern Times* (San Francisco: Book Club of California, 1963), p. 33.

[36] E.g. on ff. 16r, 43v, 47v, 198v, 321r, etc.

[37] The I is found e.g. on f.47v, f.60v, f.245r, and f.324v; the W is repeated on ff. 213v, 215r, and 216v, but also on f. 2r, 11r, 284v, and 327r, etc.

Six-line figured initial T with boar; six-line figured initial W; eight-line foliate initial I (Speght).

Still, particularly the smaller six-line initials are rather attractive: while some only have floriate decoration (C, B, M, and I), others are figured with quirky animals or even mythological creatures—the boar in the T is joined by a wyvern in the K, a mermaid in the L, a griffin in the E, a mandrake in the V, and human figures in G and W.

Figured initials with humans and mythical creatures (Speght)

In addition, despite the clear restrictions in available choices the printer took great care to provide a pleasing variation in the decorative initials, especially for texts made up of shorter sections which required multiple initials on the same page, such as *Boece* or the *Astrolabe*. Apparently caught short in terms of variants on offer, on several of these pages the printer resorts to simple larger-font letters, often as 'factotums', blocks of ornamental borders with a blank space for the insertion of a plain capital letter. Though condemned by E. Gordon Duff as 'a system which soon succeeded in destroying any beauty or originality which letters had up to this time possessed',[38] in the Speght edition the effect is rather attractive: as with the printed initials, there is evidence that the printer had access to only a limited range of these faktotums, and the same frames are reused and repeated throughout the volume—though never on the same page, and rarely with the same letter in the same frame. Interestingly, the capital letters used for this purpose are all roman type, contrasting with Speght's texts in 'archaic' black letter.

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[38] E. Gordon Duff, 'Chapter 11: England,' in Alfred W. Pollard, *Early Illustrated Books: A History of the Decoration and Illustration of Books in the 15th and 16th Centuries*, 2nd ed. (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., Ltd., 1917), p. 248.
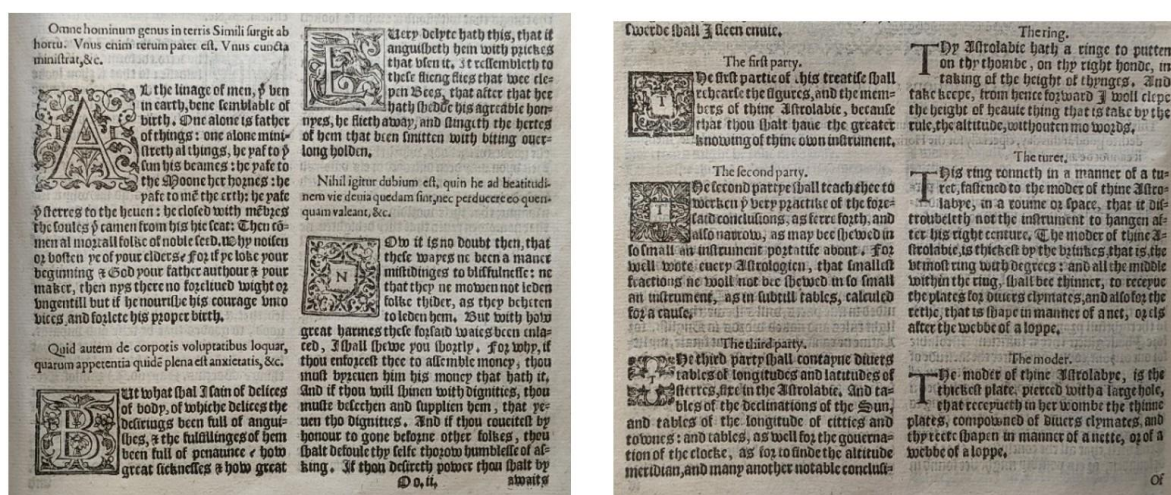
Multiple initials on one page in Chaucer's *Boece* and *Astrolabe* (Speght ff. 210r and 249v)

A rather closer look at the decorative initials, and with an eye to the obvious care and creativity evident in the use of the various initials and faktotums, I think most readers of the Speght's 1602 edition would agree to upgrade judgement of the overall aesthetic effect from Pearsall's grudging 'not unhandsome' to something rather more complimentary.

THE 'POMPOUS' CHAUCER—URRY 1721

Although nearly the same chronological distance lies between them, the world of printing and its customs and aesthetics changed rather faster in the roughly 120 years from Caxton to Speght than from Speght to Urry: Urry's 1721 edition is far less similar to Speght's than Speght's was to Caxton's.

Undoubtedly aware of, and possibly with a thought to the harsh words of Caxton's first critic and Thynne's *Animadversions*, in the only surviving part of his intended address to the reader (reprinted by Thomas in the 'Preface') Urry asks for lenience from his reader, whether interested layperson or experienced editor:

> If thou ever wert an Editor of such Books, thou wilt have some compassion on my failings, being sensible of the toil of such sort of creatures; and if thou art not yet an Editor, I beg truce of thee till thou art one, before thou censurest my Endeavours.

These his pleas, however, fell on deaf ears, and Urry's Chaucer did not receive a very positive reception from either his contemporaries or critics in later centuries.[39] But even if it really is 'rightly considered the worst edition of Chaucer ever published',[40] the 1721 edition it has the distinction of serving the reader (rather than the critic) of Chaucer in two rather important ways.

Firstly, it does away with the by then most certainly archaic black-letter font and becomes the first full edition of Chaucer printed almost entirely in roman type (except, notably, Chaucer's newly re-inserted 'Retraction')—a decision apparently made by its printer and co-owner of the rights, Bernard Lintot (1675–1736), against the express wishes of its editor and others involved in the project.[41]

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[39] For a list of obloquy heaped on Urry's Chaucer over the centuries see William Alderson, '5. John Urry (1666–1715)', in Ruggiers, *Editing Chaucer*, pp. 93–115, at pp. 93–5.

[40] Alice Miskimin, 'The Illustrated Eighteenth-Century Chaucer', *Modern Philology* 77 (1979), 26–55, at p. 28.

[41] Michael Shugrue, 'The "Urry Chaucer" (1721) and the London Uprising of 1384: A Phase in Chaucerian Biography', *JEGP* 65 (1966), 229–237, at p. 234, quotes a letter from the Bodleian librarian Thomas Hearne (*c.* 1678–1735): '[The edition] is printing at Lond., in the white Letter, contrary to Mr. Urry's mind. . . . Mr. Thomas himself is dis pleas'd at
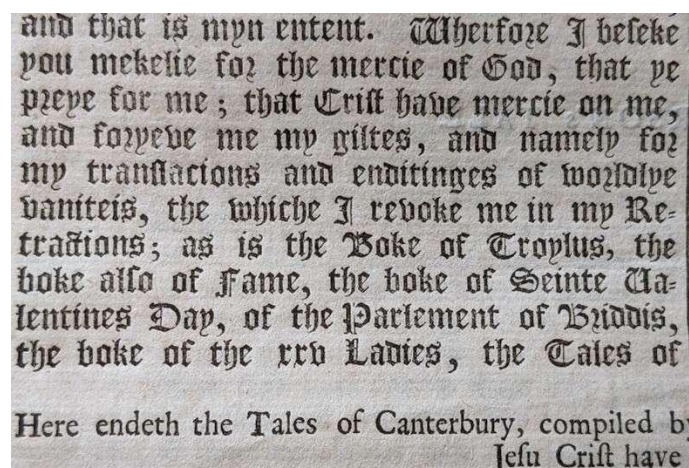
Chaucer's 'Retraction' (Urry, 214)

Alice Miskimin, in her discussion of the illustrations, considers it a matter of aesthetics:

> To contemporaries, the visual archaism of Speght's edition seemed consistent with the archaism of Chaucer's language . . . Urry's partly normalized text looked incongruous in the mixed classical-Gothic setting newly designed for it. [42]

Cuttingly, she adds that '[t]he legibility of the new edition increased the visibility of its flaws':

> the replacement of the silent signal of Black letter revised the reading of Chaucer after 1721, by shifting the sense of verbal archaism visible to the eye from the shapes of the words to their linguistic difficulty alone.[43]

Despite its linguistic flaws, in a second service to the reader, Urry's Chaucer is also, as Ruggiers stresses, the first edition to contain the entire accepted canon of his works.[44] This is of course not to say that it *only* contained the complete canon of Chaucer's works—as with its predecessors, Chaucer's works are presented here 'along with the spurious works that had accrued to previous editions':

> . . .although Chaucer's authorship of a number of items is flatly denied or seriously questioned in the headnotes, the life, the Preface, or other part of the volume's apparatus, the edition, in its gross contents, partakes of the 'miscellany' character of the earlier tradition.[45]

With Urry, Chaucer's works are edited anew for the first time in over a century—Speght was reprinted in 1687, but this is in essence a page-for-page reprint of the 1602 edition with a new title page, possibly put out to retain copyright.[46] Thomas in his Preface to Urry's edition certainly puts it into its place:

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yet White Letter. The Bp. of Rochester, Dr. Atterbury, declared expressly agt the white Letter.' Before Urry only selections had been printed in white letter—Dryden's 1700 *Fables* for example contain The Knight's Tale and The Nun's Periest's Tale in roman type: *Fables ancient and modern; translated into verse, from Homer, Ovid, Boccace, & Chaucer: with original poems* (London: printed for Jacob Tonson, within Gray's Inn Gate next Gray's Inn Lane, 1700).

[42] Miskimin, 'Eighteenth-Century Chaucer', 29.

[43] ibid., 29 and 34.

[44] Ruggiers, 'Introduction', p. 5.

[45] Alderson, 'John Urry', p. 113.

[46] Cf. Pearsall, 'Thomas Speght', p. 91, quoting William L. Alderson and Arnold Clayton Henderson, *Chaucer and Augustan Scholarship* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), p. 48.

The last edition in 1687 scarce deserves a mention here, having all the defects of the former ones, with many additional Errors of it's own. It is furnished with a pompous Title Page only for Sale, pretending that it was compared with the best MSS and that several things were added never before in print. . . (Urry, *sig.* m1)
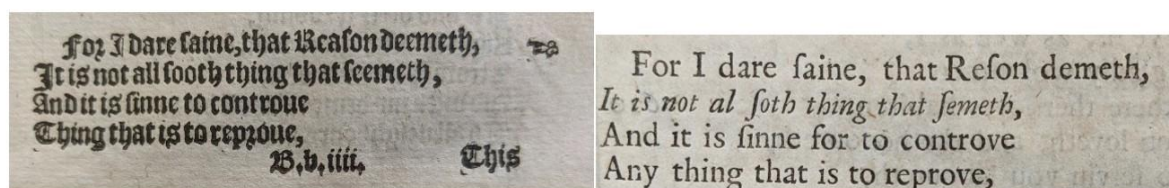
Calling the 1721 *Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* 'Urry's edition' is of course something of a misnomer—it was the collective work of a group of Christ Church people at Oxford, originating as an idea in 1711 with Francis Atterbury (1663–1732), Dean of Christ Church and later bishop of Rochester, who recruited Urry as the main editor, and Thomas Ainsworth (d. 1719), also of Christ Church, as his assistant. The deaths of Urry in 1715 and Ainsworth in 1719 left Timothy Thomas, previously asked to compile the glossary only, in charge of the entire endeavour (cf. 'The Preface', *sig.* i3ff.). While the glossary was completely newly compiled, and a 'Life of Chaucer' added by the antiquary John Dart (d. 1730) after Urry's death,[47] the text itself was apparently ready and even printed before Thomas' involvement, so that editorial decisions including the controversial spelling and metrification can be laid summarily at Urry's door (cf. 'The Preface', *sig.* i3). It was then also clearly Urry's decision to retain much of the additional editorial matter for the reader—Speght's helpful headnotes for the individual works with their summaries and explanatory notes are taken over practically wholesale, with nothing changed apart from the occasional spelling, without any acknowledgement.
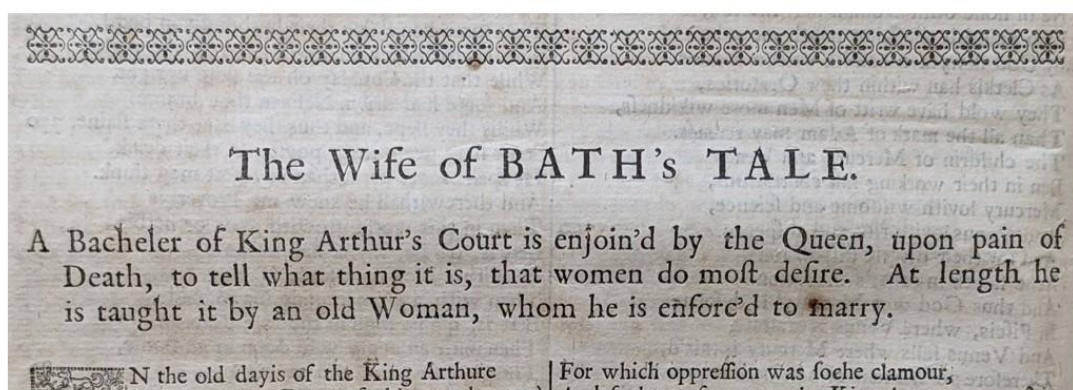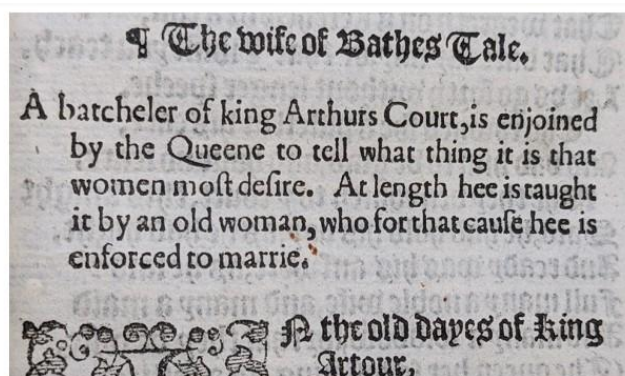
Speght's headnotes for The Wife of Bath's Tale (f. 35r), reprinted by Urry (82).

Urry does indeed seem to have found much in Speght that was worth salvaging. The 'Prouerbes and Sentences' marked in Speght are retained, though the manicules which pointed them out in the 1602 edition are replaced with italics, and Urry neglects to explain the reason for this use of italic font.

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[47] On this see Shugrue, '"Urry Chaucer"', 229: 'The life of Chaucer prefixed to Urry's edition of the works, the first truly significant biography since Speght's, became at once the standard biographical account of the poet and was not supplanted until the more accurate life by Sir Harris Nicolas appeared in 1844'.

For I dare faine, that Reason deemeth,
It is not all footh thing that feemeth,
And it is finne to controue
Thing that is to reproue,
B,b,iiii.   This

For I dare faine, that Refon demeth,
It is not al foth thing that femeth,
And it is finne for to controve
Any thing that is to reprove,

A proverb emphasised with a manicule in Speght (f. 142r) and in italics in Urry (267)

Miskimin characterises the edition as a whole as a 'pompous format and design',[48] and with its large folio size of 40 x 26 cm, 6.5 cm thickness and over 750 pages, it is indeed noticeably larger and more cumbersome than Speght is at 32 x 23 cm—though with 414 numbered and unnumbered folios it is not much thinner. Both editions are set in double columns, though the far lighter roman type and wider margins and the solid thin lines separating the columns in Urry make for a rather lighter picture. The line numbers, added for the first time to a Chaucerian text, also give the volume a rather more scholarly feel, since they are clearly designed to assist serious study rather than leisurely reading for pleasure.
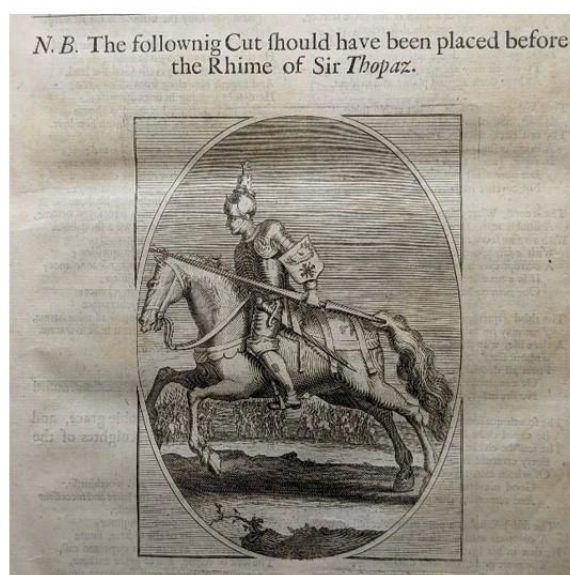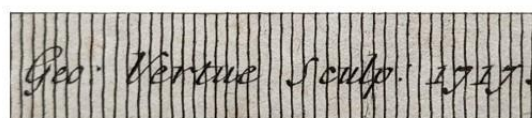
George Vertue's portrait of Chaucer and signature (front flyleaf), and the engraving of Sir Thopas (*sig.* n1)

In Speght the decoration is noticeably heavier in the later part of the book due to the many initials used for the sections in *Boece* or the *Astrolabe* and the shorter poems and ballads included towards the end; in Urry, however, the major decorative elements are centred on the *Canterbury Tales*, sending a clear message to the reader as to which of Chaucer's works deserve the most attention. Nearly every Tale is preceded by one of the altogether 26 equestrian portraits: 24 depicting the pilgrims and tellers of the tales, two showing characters from the tales, namely

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[48] Miskimin, 'Eighteenth-Century Chaucer', 34.

Gamelyn (from 'The Cooke's Tale of Gamelyn' inserted at the end of Fragment I, Urry 38), and Sir Thopas (whose portrait is inserted with an errata note at the end of the Table of Contents, Urry, *sig.* n1).

These smaller copperplate cuts, which in their style go back beyond Caxton to the pilgrim miniatures of manuscripts like the Ellesmere Chaucer,[49] may or may not be the work of George Vertue (1684–1756) whose signed, full-page engraving of Chaucer opens the volume. An innovative frontispiece which depicts the entire group of the pilgrims together on horseback as they are leaving the Tabard in Southwark, has also been credited to him.[50]


Vertue's engraving of the pilgrims leaving the Tabard on the way to Canterbury (Urry, 1)

In addition to the quarter-page copperplate engravings heading each tale, there are further decoration in the form of ornate *bas de page* ornaments or tailpieces at the end of each text. Together with the pilgrim portraits this results in a noticeable top-heaviness in terms of the distribution of decorative elements throughout the volume—of the remaining poems, only the *Romaunt*, *Boece*, and the apocryphal *Court of Love* and *Chaucer's Dream* merit a tailpiece (Urry 268, 403, 571, and 587). There are thus no less than 15 tailpieces of various sizes and in seven different designs to be found on the first 200 pages of the volume; but only four on the remaining 550 pages. The tailpieces are elaborate, detailed and lavish—birds, putti, butterflies and human faces are depicted on and around baskets, urns, pedestals and vignettes surrounded by leaves, flowers, and garlands. Except for the tailpiece with the vignette and portrait of a bearded man, which (intentionally?) only appears once, at the end of *Boece*, they are all repeated at least once throughout the volume.

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[49] Betsy Bowden identifies MS Cambridge Gg.4.27 as the direct source for several of the portraits in Urry: 'Tales Told and Tellers of Tales: Illustrations of the Canterbury Tales in the Course of the Eighteenth Century,' in *Chaucer Illustrated: Five Hundred Years of the Canterbury Tales in Pictures*, ed. William K. Finley and Joseph Rosenblum (New Castle, Del./London: Oak Knoll Press & The British Library, 2003), pp. 121–91, at p. 159. See here, pp. 158–65, for detailed discussions of several of the pilgrim portraits in Urry. On early Chaucer illustrations see also David R. Carlson in the same volume: 'The Woodcut Illustrations in Early Printed Editions of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales', pp. 73–117.

[50] See Miskinim, 'Eighteenth-Century Chaucer', 30–33 and Bowden, p. 159, who disagree on this, and Stephen R. Reimer, 'The Urry Chaucer and George Vertue,' *The Chaucer Review* 41 (2006), 105–109. Miskinim makes the interesting point of a shift in iconographical tradition, from a focus on the tellers of the *Canterbury Tales* as social types in the early part of the century to illustrations of the stories told in the tales and interest in the Chaucerian narrative in the later 18th century. With two characters infiltrating, for the first time, the tradition of pilgrim portraits, the Urry Chaucer may thus reflect the very beginnings of this trend.
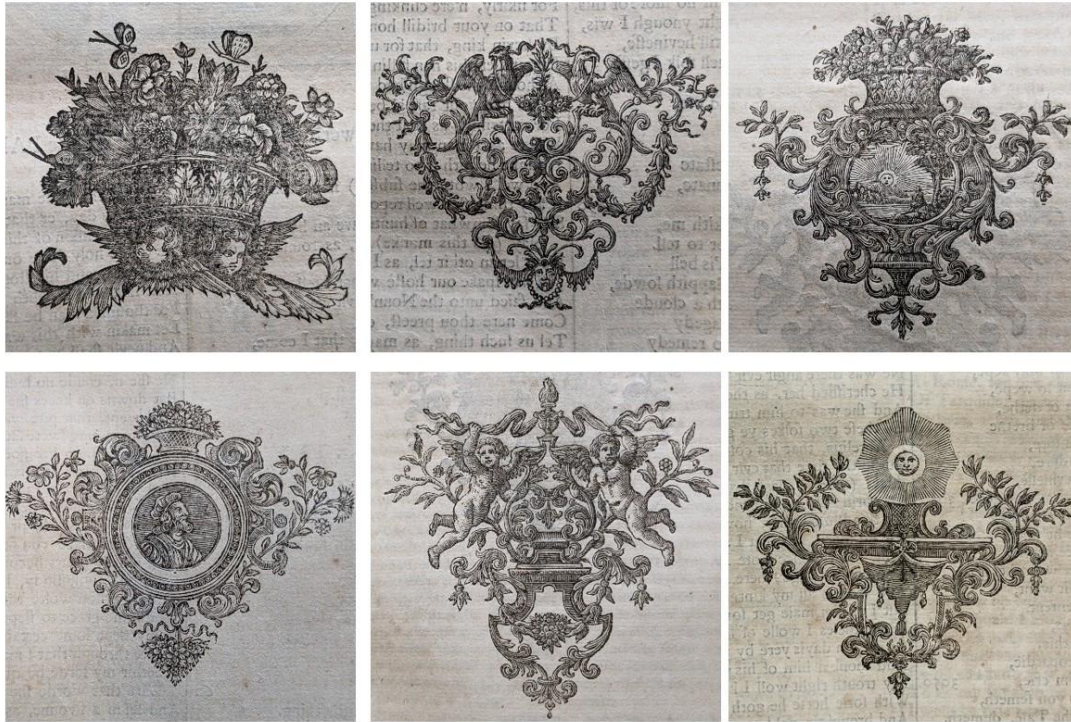
Tailpieces in Urry (131, 89/127/167, 213, 403, 75/95/214, 114).

Throughout, ornamental bands of single or double-column width set off the prologues, tales, books of longer poems and individual shorter poems, serving to separate texts and direct the reader's eye, so that there is no real call for large or elaborate initials. The Urry Chaucer makes do with a small number of five-line figured initials (e.g. T, W, L, S, J), but these are of much lesser quality or intricacy than the tailpieces or even the borders, and are very sparsely used: where initials are wanted, more often than not these are a in the form of a small variety of four-line frames of reasonably intricate design with plain letters, the factotums so condemned by Duff.

Initials and factotums in Urry

Urry's Chaucer feels like it cannot quite make up its mind as to its intended audience. On the one hand, the showy pilgrim portraits and tailpieces, and its much easier readable 'white letter'

type, provide a visual appeal conforming with the aesthetic of the time, and are clearly intended to make perusing this Chaucer a pleasurable experience.

On the other hand, features such as the line numbering and especially the extended preliminary and back matter (the 'Life of Chaucer' having grown from 12 pages in Speght to 21 in Urry; the glossary from 20 to over 80 pages) point towards a development of preparing Chaucer's text for a readership of scholars rather than non-academics, providing a text to study, not to read at leisure.

THE 'GREATEST' CHAUCER—TYRWHITT 1798

The not entirely subtle message contained in the highly unequal distribution of decoration in Urry, indicating that there is a clear candidate for Chaucer's most important and most popular work, is carried over to Tyrwhitt, which is of course an edition of *The Canterbury Tales* only— Tyrwhitt himself is certainly unequivocal in his opinion, and calls them 'the greatest work of Chaucer' (Tyrwhitt, II.252).

Dubbed by Windeatt 'the founder of modern traditions of Chaucer editing',[51] Tyrwhitt's is the edition with which, according to Ruggiers' harsh judgement, 'the making of a Chaucer edition was finally submitted to the workings of a truly learned mind and freed from the taint of dilettantism'.[52] This might be rather too severe considering that Tyrwhitt not only used Speght's edition as the basis of his text (albeit with reference to an additional 24 MSS for different readings, including New College Library, Oxford, MS 314),[53] but also consulted Urry's edition in detail (albeit apparently primarily to add corrections and emendations rather than take anything from it)[54]—in the 'Advertisement' preceding the glossary appended to the 1798 edition, Tyrwhitt famously offers the most damning judgement on Urry's edition ever made, namely that it 'should never be opened by any one for the purpose of reading Chaucer' (Tyrwhitt, II.524).

In Tyrwhitt's view, the only good thing about Urry is not actually Urry's work: Thomas' glossary, which Tyrwhitt draws on heavily for his own, initially published as the fifth volume of the 1775 edition, and appended in 1798 to the end of Volume II:

> It would be injustice to the learned author of the Glossary to Mr. Urry's edition, not to acknowledge that I have built upon his foundation, and often with his materials. (Tyrwhitt, II.521)

Tyrwhitt is, in fact, highly complimentary of Thomas' work: he praises the 'expediency' of citing examples for the use of a word, acknowledges that he has re-used his citations and spared himself 'the trouble of hunting for others', and even apologises for not using any of these references without verification because of the 'numerous and gross errors in the text of that edition to which Mr Thomases Glossary was adapted' (II.521 note and 522).

While the critics praise Tyrwhitt for his editorial principles, laid out in detail in his 'Essay on the Language and Versification of Chaucer' (I.1–66), for the non-academic reader it may be this glossary, 'intended to facilitate the reading of Chaucer, by explaining, in our present language, such of his words and phrases as are now become difficult to be understood' (II.521), which counts as Tyrwhitt's greatest achievement in bringing Chaucer to his audience. A second major

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[51] B. A. Windeatt, '6. Thomas Tyrwhitt, 1730–1786', in *Editing Chaucer*, pp. 117–143, at p. 118.

[52] Ruggiers, 'Introduction', p. 6.

[53] Cf. Windeatt, 'Thomas Tyrwhitt', p. 123, and Pearsall, 'Thomas Speght', p. 91. The exact copy of Speght used for this, with copious notes and annotations in Tyrwhitt's hand, has been identified as University of Virginia Library, Special Collections PR1850 1602, digitised at https://search.lib.virginia.edu/sources/uva_library/items/u1885154?idx=0&x=0.475&y=0.665&zoom=0.474&page=20, with additional fragments in the British Library (641.m.2); see Atcheson L. Hench, 'Printer's Copy for Tyrwhitt's Chaucer Studies,' *Bibliography* 3 (1950/1951), 265–6.

[54] See Sarah A. Kelen, 'Tyrwhitt's Urry's Chaucer's 'Works': The Tracks of Editorial History,' *The British Library Journal* 25 (1999), 180–87.

contribution in making the text accessible are his 'Introductory Discourse' and 'Notes' on the Tales,[55] 'the first effective modern commentary on Chaucer'.[56] The introductory notes on each separate tale with references to sources and explanatory commentary, for example, go rather beyond Speght's headnotes in terms of enlightening the reader unfamiliar with Chaucer's works.

In terms of ease of reading the actual text, Tyrwhitt moves beyond Urry and his already much more reader-friendly white letter to a large-point type and clean page layout without any decorative elements whatsoever. Speght's 1687 reprint was the first black letter edition entirely devoid of ornamentation; apart from a frontispiece portrait of the editor, Tyrwhitt's is the first white letter edition to follow suit.[57] His second edition, however, takes a step back from reader-friendliness in two important aspects. For one, compared to the (especially in contrast to Urry) modest four octavo volumes of the 1775 first edition, with its two quarto volumes Tyrwhitt's second edition has grown back to being quite 'pompous' again, made even more substantial by their thick paper—Muscatine calls it 'a tribute to his memory' intended to re-establish the editor's (rather than, as might have been assumed, the author's) importance: '[t]hat Tyrwhitt's plain, anonymous, modestly-printed octavo volumes are not a sufficient monument to his achievement was felt at his university after his death'.[58] Tyrwhitt is not the first to print Chaucer's verse in single rather than double columns, but lines that filled the page in the smaller octavo format leave margins of a width reminiscent of Urry on the larger pages of the quartos.
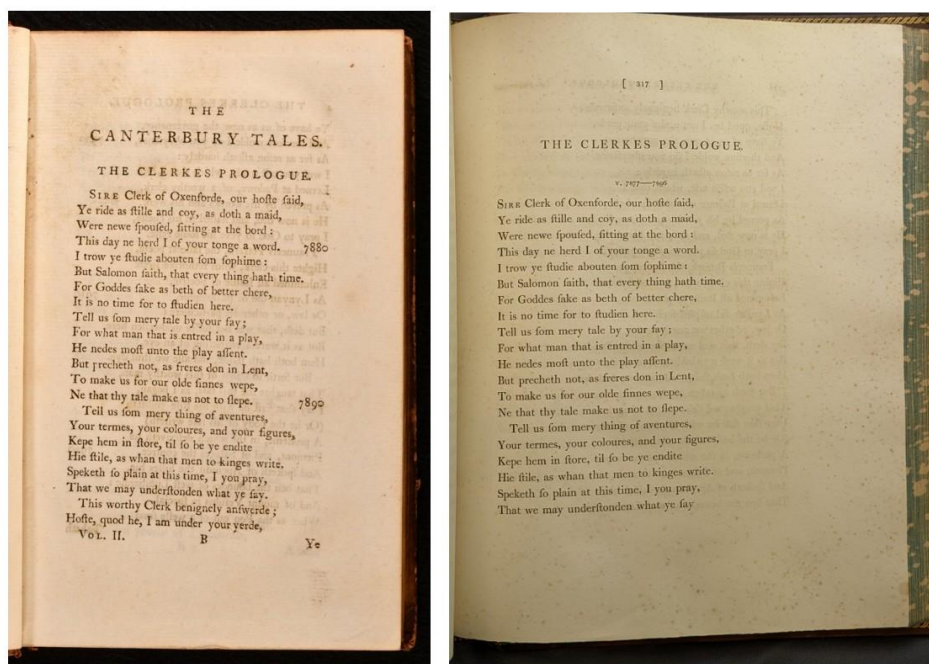
The beginning of The Clerk's Prologue in Tyrwhitt's first and second editions

A second step back in terms of reader-friendliness is taken by Tyrwhitt in his line numbers. The practice of numbering the lines began of course with Urry, who never explains the system followed in numbering the verses of the *Canterbury Tales*, though seems to follow some of the now generally accepted divisions into Fragments: the numbers run continuously through Fragment I from the General Prologue to the end of The Cook's Tale, but begin again with The Cook's Tale of Gamelyn inserted here. The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale have their own line numbers;

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[55] I.67–114 and II. 393–516 respectively.

[56] Windeatt, 'Thomas Tyrwhitt', 134.

[57] Muscatine notes that 'some copies have engraved illustrations' (*Book of Geoffrey Chaucer*, p. 51), but neither the copy at New College nor the copy I consulted at the Bodleian (Weston Library Clar.Press 41 a.22) do.

[58] Muscatine, *Book of Geoffrey Chaucer*, p. 51.

after these, enumeration begins again anew and continues from the Friar's to the Summoner's, Clerk's and Franklin's Tales, then starts again with the Second Nun's Prologue and Tale and so on. Tyrwhitt, in contrast, numbers the verses continuously from the start of the General Prologue all the way through to the end of the Parson's Prologue while omitting any numbering at all for the prose of the Tale of Melibee (II.72–133) and the Parson's Tale (II.281–389), to which Chaucer's Retraction is confusingly appended without a break (II.389–90). Tyrwhitt thus ends up with a count of altogether 17,385 verses at the end of the Parson's Prologue. While both Urry and Tyrwhitt's first edition had line numbers printed alongside the text, this second edition only has the relevant range at the top of each page, so that precise referencing can be tricky especially for the later tales.[59]

<center>THE 'PURGED' CHAUCER—SKEAT 1897</center>

Despite the first edition's reader-friendly format, with its vanished ornamentation and extended explanatory contents, Tyrwhitt still takes another step away from the reader's Chaucer to the critic's Chaucer. This development that finds its pinnacle in Walter Skeat's 'Clarendon Chaucer', praised by Ruggiers as 'the finest edition since Tyrwhitt's edition' a hundred years earlier, and celebrated by A. S. G. Edwards as marking 'the beginning of a new epoch in Chaucer scholarship, signalling the beginning of its Modern Age'.[60]

Skeat himself has almost only good things to say of his immediate predecessor:

> Of Tyrwhitt's text, it is sufficient to remark that it was hardly possible, at that date, for a better text to have been produced . . . it is to be regretted that he based his text upon the faulty black-letter editions . . . On the other hand, his literary notes are full of learning and research . . . His reputation as one of the foremost of our literary critics is thoroughly established, and needs no comment.[61]

In Skeat, Chaucer's text is printed for the first time with a proper textual apparatus, though Edwards bemoans the 'overconfidence and suppression of evidence' in Skeat's emendations, with 'recording of variants devoid of consistency and method':[62]

> Skeat's texts for the Clarendon Chaucer were generally constructed in ways which subsequent scholarship has found unsatisfactory: the erratic presentation of manuscript evidence, arbitrary emendation and excessive interference with the accidentals of his texts. . .make his editing ultimately unsatisfactory, though immeasurably superior in most respect to that which preceded it.[63]

This is surprising in light of Skeat's own complaint about his many predecessors' editorial processes:

> All [readers] who have been accustomed to former (complete) editions have necessarily imbibed hundreds of false impressions. . . Chaucer's text has been manipulated and sophisticated, frequently in most cunning and plausible ways, to a far greater extent that I could have believed to be possible.[64]

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[59] Skeat, *The Complete Works*, IV.xxi–xxii has a table comparing the various ways of numbering of the *Canterbury Tales* in several previous editions. He includes notes on Tyrwhitt's numbering throughout.

[60] Ruggiers, 'Introduction', p. 8, and A. S. G. Edwards, '9. Walter Skeat (1835–1912)', in Ruggiers, *Editing Chaucer*, pp. 171–189, at p. 172.

[61] Skeat, IV.xvi–xvii.

[62] Edwards, 'Walter Skeat', pp. 182 and 183.

[63] ibid., pp. 186–7.

[64] Skeat, IV.xvi.

Skeat ostensibly voices this complaint on behalf of Chaucer's readers; but since he quickly concedes that 'such variations seldom affect the sense' but only 'vitiate the scansion, the grammar, and the etymology in many cases', there is a question as to how much readers (rather than editors, scholars and critics) have really been affected by this, or profited from the corrections introduced in his own text.

According to Edwards, Skeat's 'greatest gifts' as an editor are as 'glosser and annotator of Chaucer's text' and as a 'purger of his canon'.[65] The latter in particular is very obvious: in a clear break with the 'tradition of reprint-with-augmentation'[66] which held sway for nearly three centuries, and in a 'victory of philology over wishful thinking',[67] Skeat eliminates over 10,000 lines' worth of spurious Chaucerian text which had been included in prints of Chaucer's 'Works' since the 16th century. Still, it seems that he could not bring himself to make away with these altogether—what he removed from the canon and excluded from his six-volume edition is then printed (with correct attributions to the various authors) in the supplementary, seventh volume of *Chaucerian and Other Pieces* of which there is a copy at New College Library.

THE 'PERFECT' CHAUCER?—RIVERSIDE TO OXFORD 1987–2024

Where, then, was left for editors to go after Skeat? At the end of his *Animadversions* against Speght, Francis Thynne explains that he offers his 'conceytes' to Speght 'to the ende Chawcers Woorkes by much conference and many iudgmentes mighte at leng[t]he obteyne their true perfectione and glory' (*Animadversions* 75). When F. N. Robinson's *Complete Works* appeared in 1933, they became 'the most widely accepted edition of Chaucer all over the world within only a few years of its publication':

> Robinson's sections of extended textual and comprehensive explanatory notes were an ideal compromise satisfying the need for scholarly reliability and a more general audience's desire for accessibility. . .[68]

In stressing accessibility for non-academic readers, and bringing back the opportunity to read Chaucer for pleasure rather than study, Robinson's edition reverses the tendency towards preparing Chaucer's text for scholars and critics rather than readers which had increased almost continuously since Caxton (though with exceptions—it is much easier to imagine curling up on the sofa with Tyrwhitt's earlier, octavo edition of the *Canterbury Tales* than with Urry's later, pompous *Works*).[69] With Chaucer's text judged to be 'a non-difficult pleasure for readers with a competence in Modern English',[70] the mere reader rather than student of Chaucer certainly moves back into view for the editors: Robinson addresses 'all readers of Chaucer' as the intended audience of his edition, and in his Preface to the *Riverside Chaucer* Larry D. Benson mentions that a completely new edition was required 'in fairness to both Robinson's memory and to Chaucer's readers'.[71] The reader-friendliness of both editions certainly improved with the 'banning of textual and explanatory notes to the end of the volume' and, in the *Riverside Chaucer*, the page glosses

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[65] Edwards, 'Walter Skeat', p. 187.
[66] Pearsall, 'Thomas Speght', p. 71.
[67] *The Oxford Chaucer*, ed. Christopher Cannon and James Simpson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), p. 15.
[68] Richard Utz, 'The Colony Writes Back: F. N. Robinson's Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer and the Translatio of Chaucer Studies to the United States,' in *Studies in Medievalism: Defining Neomedievalism(s)*, ed. Karl Fugelso (Boydell & Brewer; 2010), pp. 160–203, at p. 172.
[69] On this see Utz.
[70] *The Oxford Chaucer*, p. 19.
[71] *The Poetical Works of Chaucer*, ed. F. N. Robinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), p. vii and *The Riverside Chaucer*, p. v.

which, though they 'provide only brief explanations of words and allusions unfamiliar to modern readers' indeed 'usually suffice for a first reading'.[72]
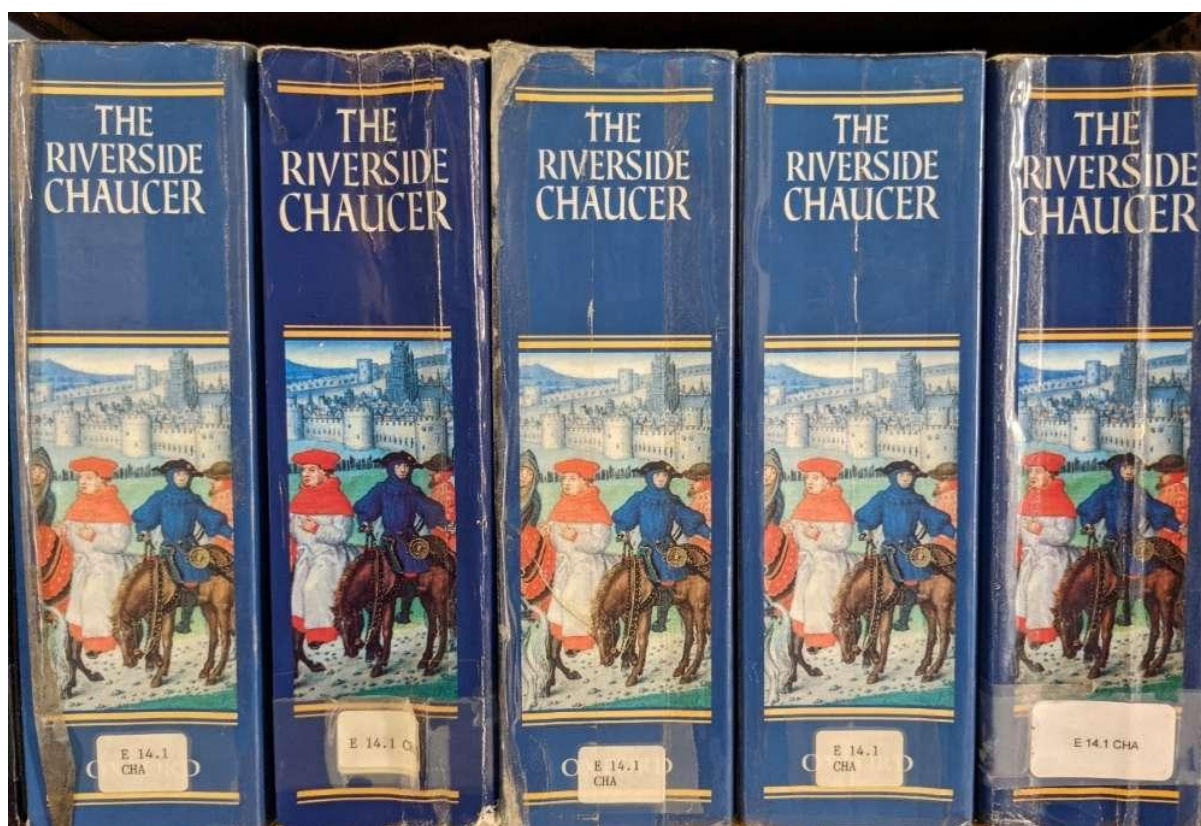
Well-used copies of *The Riverside Chaucer* in New College Library

Its balancing act between scholarliness and readability is undoubtedly the reason why *The Riverside Chaucer* has been the set text and go-to edition for both readers and students of Chaucer (including myself) for decades, but the search for an edition in which Chaucer's works would finally attain their 'true perfectione and glory' continues. In 1963, Muscatine calculated that 'the interval between 1602 and 1687 [i.e. between Speght's second edition and its reprint] was (and has remained) the longest period since Chaucer's death in which no new edition of the *Canterbury Tales* or of the *Works* appeared'.[73] This record still comfortably stands today—only 37 years after the first edition of *The Riverside Chaucer* was published in 1987, *The Oxford Chaucer*, edited by Christopher Cannon and James Simpson, made its appearance in 2024.

Judging from the editors' Introduction, in *The Oxford Chaucer* the return of Chaucer for the reader has come full circle: acknowledging that 'Chaucer's readability depends on his accessibility', they speak of 'permitting readers . . .to judge for themselves', list rhetorical figures to 'aid the reader's understanding', address 'the reader new to Chaucer's writing', assert that 'Chaucer's language is not difficult for any reader with competence in Modern English', and offer 'editorial decision clear enough for a reader to reconstruct its logic'.[74] The editors omit a glossary at the back entirely to avoid 'the reader shuttling back and forth between the text s/he wants to read and a dense list of semantic possibilities' and do away with the letter forms of 'thorn' and 'yogh' because '[t]heir use has very significant disadvantages, and no gain whatsoever, for the general reader'.[75]

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[72] *The Riverside Chaucer*, p. vii.
[73] Muscatine, *Book of Geoffrey Chaucer*, p. 33.
[74] *The Oxford Chaucer*, pp. 36, 2, 28, 24, 20, 32.
[75] ibid., pp. 36 and 37.

Ornamentation, and with it reader guidance, however, has returned to a small degree: in what seems like a nod to the earliest prints of Chaucer's works, four-line black-letter initials are included at the various chapter openings, and paraph marks (¶) signalling narrative units hark back even further to the MSS tradition.[76]

The 'Reader's' Chaucer

The reader's experience of Chaucer in print over the last five and a half centuries has clearly been dramatically shaped and influenced by the decisions made by printers and editors on how to present Chaucer's text: Caxton's use of a *b*-text MS; Speght's 'archaic' black letter and his inclusion of the many apocrypha; Speght's printer's creative use of initial letters; Lintot's insistence on white letter and the editors' choice of folio format; Urry's addition of line numbers and use of illustrations for *The Canterbury Tales* only; Thomas' helpful glossary; Tyrwhitt's reader-friendly octavo format and his colleagues' reversal of reader-friendliness and return to a degree of pomposity in the posthumous second edition; Skeat's purge of the canon and addition of textual apparatus for the serious scholars in an edition swelled to six volumes; Robinson's reduction back to a single volume; Benson's page glosses; and Cannon and Simpson's even more improved accessibility and slight return to the aesthetics of the black-letter editions and MSS tradition with their initial letters and paraph marks.

A reader's overall reading experience is subjective, personal, and idiosyncratic, and shaped by a plethora of factors well beyond the editorial preparation of the text itself. Such factors, in their unique combination, give a completely different feel to reading even the same text: it makes a difference to me whether I read *The Canterbury Tales* in a priceless print by Caxton, in Speght's beautiful 400-year-old black letter, in a still-pricey 20th-century deluxe limited edition from the Folio Society, as an e-book on my Kindle, or in my much-used and well-annotated *Riverside Chaucer* paperback. For the early editions of Chaucer which I had the privilege of reading at New College Library this is may be even truer than for many other texts. Whether to use archaic black or modern white letter font, whether to choose the 'display-at-home' pomposity of a large folio or the 'read-at-home' format of a humble octavo, whether to lavish care on the ornamentation with initials and headpieces to guide and delight the reader's eye or choose to illustrate the 'greatest work' only and neglect the remainder, whether to label texts as Chaucer's or purge the canon, whether to provide reader-friendly page glosses or a textual apparatus of only academic interest: all these are decisions with which the editors exercise their immense power of influencing how Chaucer is perceived by their readers, and thus by society as a whole.

Because of the subjectiveness and idiosyncrasy of each reader's reading experience, however, their influence can only ever go so far: in which (if any) of these many editions (whether from 1483, 1602, 1721, 1789, 1897, 1987, or 2024) Chaucer's works have finally obtained their 'true perfectione and glory' is, in the end, left for every reader to judge for themselves.

Antje G. Frotscher
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[76] *The Oxford Chaucer*, pp. 42, 63, etc. See the Introduction, p. 27, for their note on the paraph marks.