PROJECT MUSE®

Manuscript Studies, Literary Value, and the Object of Chaucer Studies

Robert J. Meyer-Lee

Studies in the Age of Chaucer, Volume 30, 2008, pp. 1-37 (Article)

Published by The New Chaucer Society

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/sac.0.0009>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/268755>

Manuscript Studies, Literary Value, and the Object of Chaucer Studies

Robert J. Meyer-Lee
Indiana University, South Bend

The poetry that modern editorial practice assigns to Chaucer may be charming, astute, and, simply, beautiful, but the stable Chaucer whose agency determines this achievement—the Chaucer who serves as a canonical center against whom the marginal voices of vernacular culture have been defined—is more the creation of a Shakespearian-focused textual criticism than a historical medieval reality.

—Tim William Machan¹

Few would deny that Chaucer's work has distinctive value.

—Peggy Knapp²

THE ORIGIN OF THIS ESSAY lies in a bad-faith pedagogical practice for which I am perhaps seeking to do some penance. When I teach the *Canterbury Tales*, on the first day of the course, despite attempts to forestall the impulse, I inevitably cast the work as a wonderfully complex linked set of short stories, wholly conceived as such in all its details—a much more capacious and generically adventurous version of, say, *Dubliners*. Of course, such a characterization of the *Tales* is an utter fiction, a fact that, on that same first day, I make no attempt to conceal from the students. And yet—in the same way that, although Milton continuously reminds his readers that Satan is, well, Satan, we nonetheless remain fascinated by the character—no matter how much I empha-

For their helpful feedback on this article, I owe thanks to Matthew Giancarlo, Ashby Kinch, Frank Grady, and the anonymous readers of *SAC*. None should be blamed for its opinions, however.

¹Tim William Machan, "'I endowed thy purposes': Shakespeare, Editing, and Middle English Literature," *Text* 13 (2000): 9–25 (quotation on p. 23).

²Peggy A. Knapp, "Aesthetic Attention and the Chaucerian Text," *ChauR* 39 (2005): 241–58 (quotation on p. 241).

size the unfinished state, manuscript messiness, and variety of objectionable motives behind the canonization of the *Tales*, somehow the work always ends up a Work (by the capitalization of which I mean, here and throughout, a putatively unified aesthetic object abstracted from any of its material witnesses). What sparked this essay is the reflection that my repeated falling into this temptation may not merely be a personal weakness but rather a symptom of a more significant critical conundrum, the result of a conflict between trends in the scholarship on premodern texts and inherited approaches to the criticism and pedagogy of Chaucer's works.

The principal trend in scholarship to which I refer is that which is evident in the Machan quotation above: extending well beyond Chaucer studies, it consists of the now-familiar amalgamation of late twentieth-century critiques of authorship, authority, and canonicity; historicism and the consequent emphasis on material culture in interpretive studies; and the self-consciousness about the theory and practice of textual criticism that has arisen, in Middle English studies, in the wake of the Athlone *Piers Plowman* editions and from the prompting of textual critics of other periods and traditions, such as Jerome J. McGann and Bernard Cerquiglini. For convenience, I will call this amalgamation "manuscript studies," recognizing that not all the scholars working under this label would want themselves associated with all (or perhaps any) of the elements of this definition.³

The conflict to which I refer is evident in Machan's opposing of the "beautiful" canonical Chaucer enshrined in the products of "modern editorial practice" with the Chaucer of "historical medieval reality." This conflict, in one sense, is hardly new. As David Matthews has shown, the beautiful, canonical Chaucer had a centuries-long history (in contrast with the rest of Middle English literature) until colliding with historicism in the form of nineteenth-century philology—in this instance, a productive, mutually beneficial collision, which inaugurated, under the auspices of the first Chaucer Society, modern Chaucer studies.⁴ As Ethan Knapp suggests, in his recent review of Chaucer criticism, Chaucer's

³ Machan, for example—at least in "I endowed"—seeks to disassociate his position from "relativism, post-modernism, and other perceived threats to the integrity of the subject, whether that of the author, the critic, or the society" (25), even though his historicism is plainly the product of the age in which these threats became literary-critical commonplaces.

⁴ See David Matthews, *The Making of Middle English, 1765–1910* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), pp. 162–86.

subsequent eligibility for admission into the university in the late nineteenth century rested on his dual status as a poet “gifted with visionary insight and universal applicability” (that is, as a proleptic Romantic canonical poet) and as an “object of analysis for philology and *Textkritik*” (that is, as an object of rigorous, scientific historicism).⁵ To an extent complementary, these two apprehensions of Chaucer nevertheless possess antithetical principles, and the tension between them has been felt in various ways throughout the history of Chaucer studies, sometimes in the form of oppositional schools (as in New Criticism versus Exegetics), and sometimes in the work of individual scholars (as in the disjunction between the philological and literary critical work of such Chaucerians as George Lyman Kittredge and John Livingston Lowes).⁶

Although, as Knapp suggests, the critical movements of the last thirty-some years have so shifted the terms of this conflict that we may in some respects have moved beyond it, the rise of manuscript studies has revived it powerfully in at least one specific fashion. As Machan’s remarks indicate, a manuscript-informed historicist skepticism has put into question that which has served as both the long-standing product and object of Chaucer studies, the critical edition. The editorial tradition that marked the first phase of modern Chaucer studies—and that persists into the present in the form of *The Riverside Chaucer*—has sought, as Stephanie Trigg puts it, to produce critical editions answerable both to “generalist” and “specialist” readers of Chaucer. Trigg characterizes these audiences as, at present, those without and within medieval studies, respectively, but the division also aligns with the Romantic/philological split lying at the origin of modern Chaucer studies.⁷ In simplistic terms, the *Riverside*, like all the products of this editorial tradition, seeks to answer to this split by being at once an object of artistic excellence and an object of historical authenticity. But as the notions of authorship and canonicity underwriting the former object have given way, and commitment to the latter object has, in various forms, come to dominate interpretive criticism, the fusion of aims represented by the *River-*

⁵ Ethan Knapp, “Chaucer Criticism and Its Legacies,” in *The Yale Companion to Chaucer*, ed. Seth Lerer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), pp. 324–56 (322).

⁶ For these oppositions—in addition to Ethan Knapp, “Chaucer Criticism”—see the influential account of the history of Chaucer studies in Lee Patterson, *Negotiating the Past: The Historical Understanding of Medieval Literature* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), pp. 3–39.

⁷ See Stephanie Trigg, *Congenial Souls: Reading Chaucer from Medieval to Postmodern* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), pp. 10–14.

side has come to be seen in many quarters as an ill-founded, misleading anachronism.

As early as 1985 (while the *Riverside* was still being compiled), in an article published in a collection edited by McGann, Derek Pearsall suggested as much in his characteristically witty fashion, comparing the “the sterile operating theater (or terminal intensive care unit) of the modern critical edition” to listening to “medieval music played on modern instruments.” Nonetheless, he maintained a commitment to the critical edition as a “practical necessity for the needs of readers and students”; conceding the rift between generalist and specialist readers later described by Trigg, he suggested that different objects be constituted for each of these audiences.⁸ More recently, Theresa Tinkle, focusing specifically on the importance of manuscript *mise-en-page*, has offered a similar account of the liabilities of the critical edition: “Modern editors adopt a page layout that insists on Chaucer’s alienation from medieval annotations and, accordingly, from scholasticism, medieval Catholicism, and Latinity. The page layout pronounces medieval readers and ways of reading at best irrelevant, at worst stodgily wrongheaded. The uncomplicated page also asserts that the text is immediately accessible, that every reader is sufficient to it. Chaucer’s medieval alterity becomes invisible.”⁹ Tinkle’s comments, with their implication that accessibility to Chaucer’s work should give way to his “medieval alterity,” typifies many of the statements on the topic from the time of Pearsall’s article to the present.¹⁰ As Trigg remarks, today’s “professional Chaucerians . . . seem

⁸Derek Pearsall, “Editing Medieval Texts: Some Developments and Some Problems,” in *Textual Criticism and Literary Interpretation*, ed. Jerome J. McGann (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), pp. 92–106 (105, 106). This suggestion reflects Pearsall’s well-known, if sometimes inscrutably harmonized, commitments both to artistic excellence and historical authenticity. With his remarkably multifaceted career, Pearsall is perhaps better able than anyone else to negotiate the potential conflicts between these commitments.

⁹Theresa Tinkle, “The Wife of Bath’s Textual/Sexual Lives,” in *The Iconic Page in Manuscript, Print, and Digital Culture*, ed. George Bornstein and Theresa Tinkle (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), pp. 55–88 (74). Tinkle traces this treatment of Chaucer all the way back to William Thynne’s 1532 *Workes of Geffray Chaucer*.

¹⁰For two of many possible examples of such statements, see the pair of consecutive articles, Murray McGillivray, “Towards a Post-Critical Edition: Theory, Hypertext, and the Presentation of Middle English Works,” *Text* 7 (1994): 175–99, and Daniel W. Mosser, “Reading and Editing the *Canterbury Tales*: Past, Present, and Future (?),” *Text* 7 (1994): 201–32. Helen Cooper, “Averting Chaucer’s Prophecies: Miswriting, Mismeasuring, and Misunderstanding,” in *A Guide to Editing Middle English*, ed. Vincent P. McCarren and Douglas Moffat (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), pp. 79–93, offers a similar but more balanced conclusion: “Editions of Chaucer . . . are not

willing to make it more difficult to read Chaucer,"¹¹ and they do so, as in Tinkle's privileging of "medieval readers and ways of reading," in the name of historical authenticity unmoored from debunked Romantic notions of authorship and canon.

Tinkle's exceptional study—which, through close examination of text, gloss, and *mise-en-page* of the versions of the Wife of Bath's Prologue in different manuscripts, limns the different ways that early readers, editors, and scribes apprehended the Wife of Bath—represents one possible avenue for the literary critical response to the de-authorization of the critical edition. This response involves the elevation of the medieval manuscript to the status of central object of inquiry, not just for those who have been traditionally concerned with manuscripts (e.g., textual critics, paleographers) but also for many who fill the departmental ranks of medieval literary hermeneuts.¹² In studies such as Tinkle's, investigators put aside that which used to be the end of the labor devoted to manuscripts, the critical edition, in favor of the means to this end—or, more specifically, the material conditions of the production and dissemination of late medieval books, the state of those books, and their reception and use by various audiences. This is the sort of work (whether or not Tinkle intends the association) that Stephen Nichols affirms in the introduction to the 1990 "New Philology" issue of *Speculum*, a mode of investigation he describes as an examination of the "manuscript matrix" rather than merely the texts represented in editions, "and of both language and manuscript [in interaction] with the social context and networks they inscribe."¹³ Tinkle's article exemplifies

safe as a basis for certain kinds of critical work, and it may be impossible to tell when one crosses the boundary into danger" (86).

¹¹ Trigg, *Congenial Souls*, p. 14.

¹² For a wonderfully personalized account of this shift, among those working on manuscripts, see Derek Pearsall, "The Value/s of Manuscript Study: A Personal Retrospect," *Journal of the Early Book Society* 3 (2000): 167–81.

¹³ Stephen G. Nichols, "Introduction: Philology in a Manuscript Culture," *Speculum* 65 (1990): 1–10 (9). Cf. John Dagenais, "That Bothersome Residue: Toward a Theory of the Physical Text," in *Vox intexta: Orality and Textuality in the Middle Ages*, ed. A. N. Doane and Carol Braun Pasternack (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), pp. 246–59: "What I would propose as the first level is a simple shift in the unit we study from 'text' to . . . the individual, unique, concrete manuscript codex" (252). Although New Philology, as a label, has not achieved widespread currency, and the special issue of *Speculum* represented an observation of an ongoing and diverse shift in scholarship rather than a point of origin, Nichols's articulation of this shift remains influential. See, for example, Siân Echard and Stephen Partridge, "Introduction: Varieties of Editing: History, Theory, and Technology," in *The Book Unbound: Editing and Reading Medieval Manuscripts and Texts*, ed. Siân Echard and Stephen Partridge (Toronto:

its undoubted productivity, as do other recent interpretative engagements with Chaucer's "manuscript matrix," such as Maidie Hilmo's study of the pilgrim portraits in the Ellesmere manuscript.¹⁴

Given the demonstrative productivity of manuscript studies—along with its confluence of the old and the new, the empirical and the theoretical, and strands of several different widely adopted critical movements—one would expect a pronounced influence on Chaucer studies. In particular, one might surmise that the neglect, in published readings of Chaucer's poetry, of its critique of the critical edition would characterize these readings as old-fashioned: conservative, naïve, ahistorical, presentist attempts to cover up the conflicts, fix *variance*, reprivilege the canon, and just generally bring back the good old days. Yet, in fact, by far the majority of readings of Chaucer—even the most avant-garde, such as Aranye Fradenburg's *Sacrifice Your Love*—generally restrict themselves to the *Riverside*.¹⁵ A manuscript studies approach to Chaucer like Tinkle's or Hilmo's remains the exception to the rule and does not appear to be gaining much ground on the much more typical interpretive approach, which, as inclusive as it may be of a variety of intertexts, for

University of Toronto Press, 2004), pp. xi–xxi. Matthews, too, explicitly registers his sympathy with these ideas, although in *The Making of Middle English* he adapts them "in a way that does not privilege manuscript culture over copy technology" (xxi). Most recently, Carol Symes, "Manuscript Matrix, Modern Canon," in *Oxford Twenty-First Century Approaches to Literature: Middle English*, ed. Paul Strohm (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 7–22, in reproaching a Bloomian approach to literary criticism, offers more or less the same argument as Nichols and Dagenais.

¹⁴Maidie Hilmo, "Framing the Canterbury Pilgrims for the Aristocratic Readers of the Ellesmere Manuscript," in *The Medieval Professional Reader at Work: Evidence from Manuscripts of Chaucer, Langland, Kempe, and Gower*, ed. Kathryn Kerby-Fulton and Hilmo (Victoria, B.C.: University of Victoria, 2001), pp. 14–55, which also appears as the final chapter in Maidie Hilmo, *Medieval Images, Icons, and Illustrated English Literary Texts: From Ruthwell Cross to the Ellesmere Chaucer* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 160–99. For other examples (and by no means the only ones) of interpretive work on Chaucer that follows a manuscript studies approach, see the essays collected in *Reading from the Margins: Textual Studies, Chaucer, and Medieval Literature*, ed. Seth Lerer (San Marino, Calif.: Huntington Library Press, 1996); Thomas A. Prendergast and Barbara Kline, eds., *Rewriting Chaucer: Culture, Authority, and the Idea of the Authentic Text, 1400–1602* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1999); and the studies described as such cited below.

¹⁵L. O. Aranye Fradenburg, *Sacrifice Your Love: Psychoanalysis, Historicism, Chaucer* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002). One need only browse through the last several volumes of *SAC* and *The Chaucer Review* to confirm this point. Anecdotally, I can report that, for a project involving the *Merchant's* and *Franklin's Tales*, I asked my two research assistants, whom I assigned to read several decades of criticism on the tales, to keep track of how many studies make use of manuscripts in more than a cursory manner. After six weeks, the count was one.

Chaucer generally does not look beyond the text of a critical edition and, less frequently, that edition's textual apparatus. Although Fradenburg, for example, is certainly more than willing to complicate our reading of Chaucer (as well as of Chaucer studies), she and most other Chaucer interpreters show little interest in locating that complexity in the material object of study. In comparison, outside of Chaucer studies the influence of manuscript studies is stronger. Recent books, such as Katherine Kerby-Fulton and Denise L. Despres's *Iconography and the Professional Reader* and Andrew Taylor's *Textual Situations*, testify to its vitality.¹⁶ Indeed, Taylor, wondering about this apparent discrepancy, especially in comparison with the literary criticism on texts in the romance vernaculars, issued a call for papers for the 2008 New Chaucer Society (NCS) conference in which he posed the question of whether "Middle English manuscript studies and Middle English literary criticism constitute distinct academic cultures."¹⁷ Perhaps manuscript studies has provoked simply the most recent evolution of the mixed motivations behind the foundation of Chaucer studies, in which Chaucer's texts as objects of literary value sit uncomfortably next to his texts as objects of historical inquiry.

The distinction between the "academic cultures" of manuscript studies and literary criticism, insofar as it exists, surely does not derive from mutual ignorance, since studies that call attention to this distinction—such as Trigg's and, more particularly, those of Ralph Hanna cited below—have been widely read in the field. Inasmuch as the literary critic accepts, then, the critique, marshaled by manuscript studies, of the aims, methods, and ideologies of the Chaucer edition, that critic's continued use of such an edition may involve (as I suggested in my opening) a degree of bad faith. This situation can lead to some awkward moments, not just for the critic but also, perhaps more important, for the teacher of Chaucer in the undergraduate classroom. As students file in on that first day—students who are unlikely to know much if anything about the late Middle Ages, much less about late medieval literary culture—does one begin by debunking the (expensive) editions of Chau-

¹⁶ Kathryn Kerby-Fulton and Denise L. Despres, *Iconography and the Professional Reader: The Politics of Book Production in the Douce Piers Plowman* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Andrew Taylor, *Textual Situations: Three Medieval Manuscripts and Their Readers* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002).

¹⁷ Andrew Taylor, "Session 3 (Papers): 'In Praise of the Middle English Variant,'" *The New Chaucer Society Newsletter* 29 (2007): 2.

cer that they have just purchased? In an institutional economy in which study of the Middle Ages has been marginalized and, at some institutions, faces the loss of faculty positions, how much ought a teacher emphasize that the *Canterbury Tales*, already in forbidding Middle English, is, as a Work, merely a modern editor's fiction?¹⁸ If the solution to this awkwardness is the development of better teaching materials (and, in turn, better materials upon which to practice criticism), then the question arises about the constitution of these materials—the question, that is, of what should replace the Chaucer edition as the basic object of teaching and criticism.

In an article assessing the implications of the *Canterbury Tales* Project, Charlotte Morse suggests, with only partial enthusiasm, "Perhaps we will eventually prefer an electronic text for teaching students struggling with Middle English, a text with hypertext glosses and notes, whose parts we could reorder at will, whose text we could modify, leaving in or out, for example . . . the Man of Law's Endlink."¹⁹ In the early 1990s, when the rise of manuscript studies coincided with the excitement over the then-nascent revolution in the electronic accessibility and representation of information, similar suggestions appeared with relatively more degrees of enthusiasm. For Murray McGillivray, for example, a hypertext edition could be "an editorial vehicle that responds to the real nature of medieval textuality by presenting medieval works in their original state, as series of varying manuscript texts."²⁰ Yet, despite the

¹⁸Revealingly, among recent discussions of Chaucer pedagogy, the most common matter of concern is not how best to respect late medieval manuscript culture or the fragmented, uncertain state of the surviving evidence (a topic that typically appears only briefly), but rather whether or not to teach Chaucer in modern English translation. See, for example, the essays collected by Christine Rose for the "Teaching Chaucer in the Nineties" symposium published in *Exemplaria* 8 (1996) and those in Gail Ashton and Louise Sylvester, eds., *Teaching Chaucer* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007). Obviously, if one decides to teach Chaucer in translation, one is unlikely to devote much class time to the manuscript variation hidden by the editions upon which those translations are based.

¹⁹Charlotte C. Morse, "What the *Clerk's Tale* Suggests about Manly and Rickert's Edition—and the *Canterbury Tales* Project," in *Middle English Poetry: Texts and Traditions: Essays in Honour of Derek Pearsall*, ed. A. J. Minnis (Woodbridge: York Medieval Press, 2001), pp. 41–56 (42). Morse sees this idea as a technologically more sophisticated version of the proposal of Derek Pearsall, *The Canterbury Tales* (London: Routledge, 1985), for an edition of the *Tales* packaged as a partially bound book containing "a set of fragments in folders, with the incomplete information as to their nature and placement fully displayed" (23). For an overview of the *Canterbury Tales* Project, see its website, <http://www.canterburytalesproject.org>, and Peter Robinson, "The History, Discoveries, and Aims of the Canterbury Tales Project," *ChauR* 38 (2003): 126–39.

²⁰McGillivray, "Towards a Post-Critical," 192. See also Mosser, "Reading," and Tim William Machan, "Chaucer's Poetry, Versioning, and Hypertext," *PQ* 73 (1994): 299–

subsequent electronic publications of the *Canterbury Tales* Project and the widespread use of the Web as a pedagogical resource, the printed critical edition remains the basic object of criticism and teaching, a fact that is evident in Ethan Knapp's still-hopeful nod toward the future possibilities of an electronic edition in his 2006 review of Chaucer criticism.²¹ This persistence, I argue, does not merely reflect the predictable lag between the promise and practicability of new technology, nor does it only derive from legitimate uncertainty about whether an electronic edition truly would respond to the "real nature of medieval textuality" better than a printed critical edition. Rather, it represents, more profoundly, a resistance to an edition of Chaucer, and especially of the *Canterbury Tales*, that would announce in its very structure its own impossibility—an edition that admits, in its material realization, that there really is no *Canterbury Tales*, conceived of as a Work, but instead only eighty-some manuscripts dressed up to look like one.

This resistance, in its most reflective form, is not stubbornly traditionalist but speculatively interrogative: it asks why the "real nature of medieval textuality" ought necessarily to be the most appropriate object of study. It wonders if the best material realization of an object of study is necessarily the one that is, in theory, the most historically authentic. And, relatedly, it asks on what basis ought we to allocate more scholarly and interpretative attention to some objects of study over others. Manuscript studies has shaken loose these and other foundational questions from their formerly secure institutional underpinnings. In what follows, while I initiate an exploration of these questions, I devote most attention to the question that they collectively imply: that of the place and function of *literary value* in the field of Chaucer studies. I argue that, inasmuch as a conception of literary value remains integral to scholarly and pedagogical practice, even if it often goes unacknowledged, it continues to possess a claim on the nature of the material realizations of the objects of study and pedagogy. Further, I argue that this claim is neither fully avoidable, nor theoretically indefensible, nor wholly undesirable.

To make this case, I have much to define, especially the term "literary value." But before venturing toward this end, I should make plain that, in broaching this topic, I am not in any fashion seeking a return, with some Ghost of Criticism Past, to the days when Great Works could

316, who, after painting a picture of an ideal hypertext edition of the *Canterbury Tales*, offers a more sober assessment of the potential for one.

²¹Ethan Knapp, "Chaucer Criticism," 355 n. 73.

simply be studied and taught as Great Works. Rather, I am claiming that the considerable achievements of manuscript studies over the last twenty years or so have released some ghosts that have not really left us: in particular, the ghosts that had informed some central New Critical presuppositions. In this essay, I aim not to reanimate these ghosts but rather to confront the implications of the continued influence of one in particular, the ghost of judgment.

New Critical Revenant

It is no coincidence that the rise of manuscript studies coincided with the demise of New Criticism as the dominant ideology and set of practices governing literary studies and pedagogy. Although manuscript studies cannot claim much credit for this demise, several of its practitioners make plain that New Critical hegemony was a hostile environment, one premised on an *a priori* hierarchical disjunction between manuscript studies—in its earlier, edition-oriented formation—and literary criticism. As Machan describes it:

Within this interpretative framework [of New Criticism], the labors of textual critics of any historical period could only be pedestrian: they provided the texts necessary for serious and sensitive scholars to do serious and sensitive work. The transcendent verbal icon by nature simply is, and so any inquiries about its origin or development are non-questions; indeed, when the New Critics themselves glanced at textual criticism, the attention they manifested was often in essence indifference or ignorance.²²

Although Machan offers here, for polemical purposes, something of a caricature of New Criticism, he fairly calls attention to New Criticism's notorious emphasis on the autonomy of the literary object and its consequent de-emphasis of that object's historically contingent material origins. Even when formalists and textual scholars were, so to speak, on the same side (and in this regard names such as George Kane and E. T. Donaldson are inevitable), their assumptions regarding the critical utility of such basic categories as intention made the perspectives of the two roles rather different, and hence registered a division of hierarchy be-

²²Tim William Machan, "Middle English Text Production and Modern Textual Criticism," in *Crux and Controversy in Middle English Textual Criticism*, ed. A. J. Minnis and Charlotte Brewer (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1992), pp. 1–18 (8).

tween their labors. As Machan notes, to create the “medieval verbal icon” out of the surviving manuscript evidence, editors relied on “the supposition that an author’s final intentions and an authoritative text lay in the distant but recoverable textual past.”²³ The edition was thus an edifice constructed out of authorial intention, and yet, when that edition subsequently became an object of critical explication, considerations of intention became categorically suspect, if not simply relegated to the realm of fallacy.

In practice, New Criticism—especially as applied to Chaucer—was rarely so categorical, but it nonetheless did maintain the inherited conception of manuscripts as, to put it figuratively, shadows on a cave wall cast by the light of genius shining on a Work. Only with the loosening of New Criticism’s grip on the academy—first by poststructuralism and then by historicism and cultural studies—has it been possible to undo this conception. At present, what has been accomplished within some quarters of manuscript studies is akin to Marx’s standing of Hegel on his head: the materiality and multiplicity of manuscript matrices have become the real, and the edition a sort of false consciousness. This demystification has been largely salutary, and, again, I have no wish to turn the clock back in this regard. Nonetheless, while few, if any, still claim the identity of New Critic, formalism more generally maintains an influence on Chaucer criticism. In part, this influence consists of the continued, if obscured, legacy of such powerful critics as Donaldson and Charles Muscatine, whose shaping of Chaucer studies, particularly in contestation with D. W. Robertson and the Exegetical school, has been well documented by Lee Patterson.²⁴ In part, too, this influence is simply that which has been carried forward within some versions of historicist criticism; as Alan Liu and others have argued, the historicism practiced under the label “cultural poetics,” for example, represents not so much a correction to formalism as a projection of it into the space of history and culture.²⁵

In addition, formalism retains its dominance in the normative practices of close reading that prevail in the classroom and, as Seth Lerer has pointed out, in the criticism of certain types of Middle English texts,

²³ Machan, “Middle English Text Production,” p. 10.

²⁴ See Patterson, *Negotiating the Past*, pp. 3–39. For a recent assessment of Donaldson’s influence in particular, see *ChauR* 41 (2007), a special issue devoted to his legacy.

²⁵ Alan Liu, “The Power of Formalism: The New Historicism,” *ELH* 56 (1989): 721–71.

such as the lyric. Indeed, Lerer, while expressing dissatisfaction with New Critical readings of Middle English lyrics that still possess currency (and have hence led to the genre's marginalization in the current critical climate), concludes his essay by calling for a renewed attention to form as a locus of historical contingency.²⁶ With this conclusion he takes a position that has to date gathered more momentum among critics of later periods of literature. Many of these critics—sometimes labeled “new formalists”—maintain that inattention to the specific nature of literary forms, deriving from the historicist denial of the autonomous art object, has in fact circumscribed the analytical reach of historicism.²⁷ Several signs suggest that this revitalized concern with form, while very diverse in its emphases, is making significant inroads into Chaucer studies. In addition to the three sessions devoted to close reading at the 2006 NCS conference (New York, July 27–31), one may cite, for example, recent articles by Maura Nolan and Peggy Knapp (the first sentence of which, affirming the ubiquitous certainty of Chaucer's value, follows the quotation from Machan in my epigraph) that reconsider the critical and pedagogical importance of the category of the aesthetic.²⁸

The distinct historicity of form, as well as its relation to the historicity of other elements of the text and contexts of a work of literature, is surely worth the renewed attention that it is receiving. And yet, while formalism and manuscript studies are by no means mutually exclusive, formalist analysis still often tends to put demands on its object of study (though not as many or as rigidly as did New Criticism) that manuscript studies would resist. For example, a formalist reading of the Wife of

²⁶Seth Lerer, “The Endurance of Formalism in Middle English Studies,” *Literature Compass* 1 (2003): 1–15. For an example of how New Critical readings of a (supposed) Middle English lyric can be overturned by manuscript studies, see Siegfried Wenzel, “Poets, Preachers, and the Plight of Literary Critics,” *Speculum* 60 (1985): 343–63.

²⁷See, for example, Ellen Rooney, “Form and Contentment,” *MLQ* 61 (2000): 17–40; and Stephen Cohen, “Between Form and Culture: New Historicism and the Promise of a Historical Formalism,” in *Renaissance Literature and Its Formal Engagements*, ed. Mark David Rasmussen (New York: Palgrave, 2002), pp. 17–41; as well as the other essays collected in these volumes (Rooney's article appears in a special *MLQ* issue devoted to formalism). For an overview of the so-called new formalism as a movement, see Marjorie Levinson, “What Is New Formalism,” *PMLA* 122 (2007): 558–69, the longer version of which Levinson has made available at http://sitemaker.umich.edu/pmla_article/home.

²⁸See Maura Nolan, “Beauty,” in *Oxford Twenty-First Century Approaches*, ed. Strohm, pp. 207–21, and Peggy Knapp, “Aesthetic Attention,” as well as the other articles in the special issue of *ChauR*, devoted to “Chaucer and Aesthetics,” in which the latter appears. The three NCS sessions were “Historicism as Close Reading,” “The Value of Close Reading: Theory,” and “The Value of Close Reading: Practice.”

Bath might closely examine her speech habits for evidence of her attitudes toward sexuality, but, as Tinkle's article shows, variation in the wording of the Wife's speeches on this topic between the Ellesmere and Hengwrt manuscripts makes a determination of these attitudes for *the* Wife of Bath (as distinct from either the Ellesmere or Hengwrt Wife) problematic.²⁹ Without the mooring of a critical edition and its restriction of variation to a carefully circumscribed apparatus, any instance of formalist analysis may potentially transmogrify into either an epiphenomenon of an editorial debate (such as that of the relative authority of Ellesmere and Hengwrt) or, as in Tinkle's study, analysis of something other than the meaning of a literary text (for example, of that text's reception, rewriting, or misunderstanding by a professional reader). And when one extends the scope of formalist analysis beyond lexical detail to structure, the situation becomes proportionally more tenuous, especially in regard to the *Canterbury Tales*, with its manuscripts' radical variation in tale order and links. To be sure, these manuscripts, especially the earliest ones, share a great deal more than, say, the manuscripts of the notoriously variant popular romances, and editors have resolved differences in accidentals and wording, in many cases, with a high degree of certainty.³⁰ Moreover, countless formal characteristics, such as Chaucer's use of rime royal for particular tales, are universally attested. Nonetheless, despite the hopes some may hold for the *Canterbury Tales* Project or, many generations ago, the monumental efforts of J. M. Manly and Edith Rickert to construct a definitive edition from all available witnesses, a single form for the *Tales* will necessarily remain an editorial fiction, and hence the ground of formalist treatments of its text always, to greater and lesser degrees, shaky.³¹

In response to this situation, a manuscript-alert, historically robust formalism might consist of context-saturated studies of the literary

²⁹See Tinkle, "The Wife," p. 64.

³⁰For *variance* and the popular romance, see, among other studies, Jennifer Fellows, "Author, Author, Author . . . : An Apology for Parallel Texts," in *A Guide to Editing Middle English*, ed. McCarren and Moffat, pp. 15–24.

³¹For one explanation why the *Tales* cannot be reduced to a single form, see Derek Pearsall, "Authorial Revision in Some Late-Medieval English Texts," in *Crux and Controversy*, ed. Minnis and Brewer, pp. 39–48; for another, see Stephen Knight, "Textual Variants: Textual Variance," *Southern Review* 16 (1983): 44–54, an early, wide-ranging account of the difficulties and history of Chaucer editing that anticipates many of the topics later taken up by others. For Manly and Rickert's project, see John M. Manly and Edith Rickert, *The Text of the Canterbury Tales: Studied on the Basis of all Known Manuscripts*, 8 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1940).

forms evident in individual or particular sets of manuscripts (that is more or less what Tinkle achieves in her article). But this sort of project, in making the manuscript the central object of study, returns us to the basic questions this essay seeks to explore, which may now be rephrased as, what rationale remains for *not* giving the manuscript this place of honor? For Ralph Hanna, one of the most prominent practitioners of manuscript studies (in several of its variations), the production of critical editions is still necessary, but only so that the distinct features of individual manuscripts may thereby be cast into relief. In *Pursuing History*, he argues that the notion of a stable, authorial text that transcends any of its manuscript witnesses—a postulate that had undergirded the autonomous New Critical verbal icon, the putative unity of which depended upon lexical and structural constancy—still possesses heuristic power, in that it provides access to precisely those materials that the New Critical verbal icon hid: “History is not to be found initially in ‘the genuinely authorial’ but only through what is ‘inauthentic,’ ‘not genuine.’ And erroneous readings only reveal themselves to editorial judgment, to a knowledge of how textual transmission occurs within a manuscript culture. Hence, identifying possibly authorial (or at least archetypal, O¹) readings remains important as allowing a more pervasive historicization, that of medieval literary communities.”³² The authorial text—paradoxically, a prerequisite for New Criticism, despite its purporting to care little about authorial intention—remains for Hanna necessary, but primarily for its position within a negative dialectic that yields the “more pervasive historicization” evident in the departures from this text.

Hanna’s argument is a powerful one, but it also exacerbates the awkwardness of the current situation, as it calls for considerable energy to be devoted to producing editions in whose critical priority (and even authority) we ought no longer to believe.³³ Hanna calls for a continua-

³²Ralph Hanna, *Pursuing History: Middle English Manuscripts and Their Texts* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), p. 11. Tinkle’s article provides a good example of how such “erroneous readings” can become fruitful objects of study.

³³I do not mean to imply that Hanna’s views in this regard stand for the consensus of practitioners of manuscript studies or, more narrowly, textual critics. In fact, how much and what kind of a role the project of discerning the authorial text still possesses are matters of some debate—see, for example, the essays collected in McCarren and Moffat, eds., *A Guide to Editing Middle English*, especially those in the first section, “Author, Scribe, and Editor.”

tion of traditional author-centered editorial activity, but only so that we may use the traditional result of this activity—the supposed canonical text—to unearth a more important object, the “Middle English literary communities the record of whose existence Chaucerian canonical hegemony had by and large suppressed.”³⁴ In effect, Hanna calls for the production of two distinct but interdependent material realizations of objects of study—the critical edition and the collection of “erroneous readings” that carry the history of “medieval literary communities”—and then asks us to prioritize the latter over the former. And yet, in his own account of the origin and outcome of his career-long pursuit of just this choice, he offers a sort of parable about literary value that may help explain why this choice, in practice, is so difficult (and perhaps impossible) to carry through fully.

This account requires some close attention, as, for the purposes of this present essay, it serves a paradigm for the persistence of literary value even among those scholars who have most consciously devoted their work elsewhere. As Hanna describes, his first exposure to Chaucer occurred at the age of twelve, when his father, reprimanding him for his use of questionable language, made an offhand comment about Chaucer’s use of such language. In response, Hanna developed what may be described as, for lack of a more sophisticated term, a passion: “But I’d also discovered a poet apparently salty enough for twelve-year-old tastes (and within a week acquired a used Vintage Chaucer at a Guadalupe Street bookstore) and discovered that ‘in form of speche is change.’ I was hooked irrevocably, however I tried to wriggle away.”³⁵ Hanna’s experience is, precociously, that of so many undergraduates in their first encounter with Chaucer: initially attracted by the poet’s salacious reputation, they soon are drawn by other aspects of his writing, and, in some cases, become “hooked irrevocably.” And, like many of those who become so hooked that they pursue postgraduate study, Hanna later experienced a demystification of his former passion. As with his initial encounter, this experience was a precocious one, although in this instance (with its anticanonical sensibility) it was so in respect to the history of Chaucer criticism:

I began to realize that what I felt alienated me from Chaucer was, not knowability, but overfamiliarity—not Chaucer’s ease, but what modern literary study

³⁴ Hanna, *Pursuing History*, p. 7.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

had made of Chaucer . . . the Chaucer we read had come to be conceived of as the ultimate New Critical poetic text. . . . In this critical context, the notion that Chaucer or his readers had a history and were embroiled in one was largely suppressed. Whatever the effect of such repression upon "the father," the effect on study of his contemporaries and successors was even more dispiriting. Informatively, the literary canons that privileged Chaucer's *Art* directed attention from these figures as of interest only "historically"—but then failed to outline what such a history would be.³⁶

Hanna discovered that the object of his initial attraction was a New Critical object, and, as he learned about all that New Criticism had "largely suppressed," he began a search for an alternative object. This object became the local histories of medieval literary communities, as they have been transmitted by the specificities of individual manuscripts: "I began to wonder whether some aggressive use of the primary evidence for the existence of such [noncanonical] literary figures—the manuscripts themselves—might undo what Chaucer studies had done only too well, return these figures to a historical context and direct research toward a local knowledge that would uncover that context, whatever it was."³⁷

No one would dispute that Hanna, in his many publications, has made a remarkable contribution to the "local knowledge" of the "historical context" of the production and dissemination of Middle English literary texts. And yet this very book, which states so clearly in these introductory remarks its anticanonical intentions, makes a major contribution to Chaucer studies:³⁸ half of its sixteen chapters take some aspect of one or more of Chaucer's texts as their basic topic, and Chaucer features significantly in several others. Conscious of this potential contradiction, Hanna seeks to explain it as follows:

The center of the volume in the main takes up Chaucerian problems. This block of six essays consists of studies I should have preferred not to have undertaken, deviations from the major areas of my concern. (All, in fact, began as accidents.) However, writing about the text of Chaucer, the poet's *ipsissima verba*, may be construed as an inevitability: just as Shakespeare's text has always triggered

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 2–3.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 3

³⁸ Or, to be more precise, the book represents the major contribution to Chaucer studies that Hanna, at this juncture in his career, had already made, since only two of the sixteen chapters are entirely new.

the most exciting advances in general bibliographic studies, so the canonically central medieval poet demands the attention of anyone involved with Middle English textual dissemination.³⁹

As Hanna describes, the return to a canonical author is “an inevitability,” indeed, one that supersedes the will of the critic. In pursuing what he calls the “precanonical” history of medieval literary communities in the evidence provided by manuscripts, Hanna is led repeatedly back to the manuscripts of “the canonically central medieval poet.” The reason for this recursion (other than the “accidents” that initiated each study) seems to lie in the fact that, because so much attention has already been bestowed on the study of Chaucer manuscripts, as in the case of the folios and quartos of Shakespeare, they have become the principal vehicles for reflections on the complexities in the relations between surviving documents and the myriad histories to which they attest. Because Chaucer’s canonicity has garnered his texts so much scholarly attention, even studies with noncanonical intentions are drawn into the orbit of that canonicity. As a result, *Pursuing History*, however much it seeks to circumvent Chaucer’s value, makes Chaucer’s texts one of its principal objects, thereby contributing, against its intentions, to Chaucer’s prominence within Middle English studies.⁴⁰

This parable, as I have characterized it, thus tells the story of a boy drawn to a literary work by values that seem intrinsic to it (for example, its saltiness). Later, as a young man, he realizes that, whatever qualities the work in fact possesses, its character has been constructed for him by an interpretative heritage (New Criticism) that suppresses the real (local histories). He therefore puts aside intrinsic literary value as an object and sets off in pursuit of the real. As an older man, however, he discovers that, in this very pursuit, he has returned to the scene of the value that he earlier put aside, albeit in a different interpretative fashion. This parable, when extrapolated from the career of one particular scholar, may well tell the story of the rise of manuscript studies more generally: at both the beginning and on the horizon of this trend (as well as at beginnings and ends of many individual projects) stands literary value,

³⁹ Ibid., pp. 14–15.

⁴⁰ In this light, one might understand Hanna’s most recent book, *London Literature, 1300–1380* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), as a less diverted culmination of his project, in that it steadfastly focuses on “local knowledge” of the literary communities extant in London before Chaucer’s major productions.

even though practitioners do not usually consider such value integral and sometimes—as with Hanna in the introduction to *Pursuing History*—depict it as hostile. More particularly, the parable tells the story of the uneasy relation between Middle English manuscript studies and Chaucer's literary value, in which the former both draws on and resists the energies of the latter.

The New Critical ghost that has not left Chaucer studies—and with which the rise of manuscript studies necessitates confrontation—is then the ghost of judgment, the assessment of the relative value of a literary work.⁴¹ Of course, judgment, as a task of criticism, was hardly invented by New Critics. Going back at least as far as Aristotle and Plato, the critical imperative of evaluation was, as mentioned above, particularly integral to the constitution of modern Chaucer studies in the nineteenth century. It was the long history of affirmative judgment of Chaucer's poetry that formed the somewhat uncomfortable companion to scientific philology in the academic establishment of Chaucer studies. Moreover, I do not mean to overemphasize the influence of New Criticism on Chaucer studies; in comparison with, say, the early modern lyric, Chaucer's works (especially the long narratives) were less amenable to the approach, and many scholars, for a variety of reasons (Robertsonianism being one of them), were unwilling to accept it. Inasmuch as I address the judgment of Chaucer's texts per se, then, my topic necessarily has origins further back than the shifts in critical approaches over the last half century. Nonetheless, these shifts are enormously revealing, both because the influence of New Criticism on Chaucer studies—albeit not comprehensive—is unquestionable (as, for example, Hanna's and Machan's negative reactions to it attest) and because judgment was, in comparison to other approaches, so central to New Criticism.

New Criticism's ghost of judgment, however, has been easy to ignore for at least two principal reasons. First, it is such an obvious target for both poststructuralist and historicist (and, for that matter, any of the post-New Critical) approaches to literature. Evaluative terms such as "great," "better," and "more valuable" have been justifiably considered cheap ideological Trojan horses, and the most cursory survey of literary

⁴¹ Notice of this ghost is also a consequence of the resurgence of interest in form and aesthetics, as Jeff Dolven, "Shakespeare and the New Aestheticism," *Literary Imagination* 5 (2003): 95–109, has suggested in respect to Shakespeare studies. In Chaucer studies, however, the so-called new aestheticism is itself a response to manuscript studies, as well as, more obviously, historicism more generally.

history proves characterizations of worth to be among the most evanescent of literary pronouncements. One may thus decisively discredit judgment categorically, without a deeper examination of whether one has in fact thereby evaded it. Second, New Critics themselves expressed varying degrees of ambivalence toward judgment; not wishing their method to appear impressionistic like that of so many of their predecessors outside the academy, they typically framed their arguments in terms of explication or understanding rather than evaluation.⁴² The critique of New Criticism marshaled by manuscript studies has consequently focused on the former's principles of explication, especially its anti-historicism, anti-intentionalism, and requirement of a singular, fixed text—that is, all that Machan places together under the label “transcendent verbal icon.”

Yet, for New Critics, understanding always implied judgment, since explication was a process of disclosing how all the elements of a poem either succeed at contributing to a whole or fail to do so. As W. K. Wimsatt put it, “Our main critical problem is always how to push understanding and value as far as possible in union, or how to make our understanding evaluative.”⁴³ Indeed, in Wimsatt's and Monroe C. Beardsley's famous polemic against the “intentional fallacy,” it is the fundamental category of judgment that makes intention (as well as history) relatively unimportant in critical practice: “How is he [the critic] to find out what the poet tried to do? If the poet succeeded in doing it, then the poem itself shows what he was trying to do. . . . Judging a poem is like judging a pudding or a machine. One demands that it work. It is only because an artifact works that we infer the intention of an artificer.”⁴⁴ For Wimsatt and Beardsley, and New Criticism generally, the determination of the relative success of a poem—that is, its aesthetic merit—is identical to the process of understanding it. A poem becomes less successful to the extent that appeals to intention or historical context, deemed external, are required for this understanding.

⁴²See Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), esp. pp. 121–61.

⁴³W. K. Wimsatt with Monroe C. Beardsley, *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1954), p. 251. Cf. René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1949): “an essay which appears to be purely exegetical must, by its very existence, offer some minimal judgment of worth. . . . To spend time and attention on a poet or poem is already a judgment of value” (262).

⁴⁴Wimsatt and Beardsley, *The Verbal Icon*, p. 4.

Hence, given judgment's foundational role, a critique of New Criticism that does not fully account for literary value leaves itself open to be haunted by what it has supposedly left behind.

In the field of English literature generally, and especially in the products of its institutionalization, the ghost of judgment is not hard to find. In addition to the type of vexing presence evident in Hanna's *Pursuing History*, it makes, pervasively, more straightforward appearances. For example, for all the changes to the *Norton Anthology* over the last few editions to bring it in line with changing notions of literary history—the greater variety of texts, the retuned historical introductions to periods, the tables of texts juxtaposed with contexts, the groups of texts centered on historical and cultural issues such as “women in power”—the headnotes to authors are so consistently laudatory of aesthetic prowess that most undergraduates must come away with a powerful sense of judgment's role in the discipline. (For just one example, chosen more or less at random, see the headnote to Andrew Marvell, which proclaims that his “finest poems are second to none in this or any other period.”)⁴⁵ Similarly, one also expends little effort in finding offhand remarks of judgment in Middle English criticism. In addition to the opening sentence of Peggy Knapp's article cited in my epigraph, an example especially resonant for my purposes (although with Langland standing in for Chaucer as the self-evident instance of literary value) appears in Kerby-Fulton's response to what she perceives as Hanna's charge, in his negative review of *Iconography and the Professional Reader*, that she and Despres undervalued *Piers Plowman*: “The particular approach under disapproval here is our reception history. Contrary to what Hanna implies, it is an approach, we feel, that pays Langland the profoundest authorial compliment: we *know* he's a great poet, and we do not feel we have to prove that in every sentence we write. (Previous generations did carry this burden, and established his poetic reputation brilliantly.)”⁴⁶ For Kerby-Fulton, the value of Langland's poem is irrelevant to her project, not

⁴⁵ *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 7th ed., ed. M. H. Abrams and Stephen Greenblatt (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000), 1:1684. This quotation is from the opening sentence of the headnote, which, with its unmistakable suggestion of an aesthetic value unbound to a historical moment, first appeared in the edition cited and has been retained in the most recent (eighth) edition.

⁴⁶ Kathryn Kerby-Fulton with Denise Despres, “Fabricating Failure: The Professional Reader as Textual Terrorist,” *YLS* 13 (1999): 193–206 (194), emphasis in the original. Hanna's review directly precedes the response in the same volume—Ralph Hanna, “*Piers Plowman* and the Radically Chic,” *YLS* 13 (1999): 179–92.

because such evaluative terms as “great poet” are ideologically freighted or mere historical contingencies, but rather because this value has been so well established it need no longer be of concern. Moreover, she positions her and Despres’s critical project neither in opposition, nor even as an alternative, to the activity of judgment. Instead, she suggests that manuscript-based reception study, while not directly evaluative, is in its very existence affirmative of the worth of Langland’s poem—since, presumably, only a “great poet” justifies such extensive critical attention to a single manuscript. Inasmuch as *Iconography and the Professional Reader* succeeds, then, it testifies not only to the historical interest in the Douce *Piers Plowman* but also to the continuing value of the Work, *Piers Plowman*. As in the parable of Hanna’s *Pursuing History*, once again a manuscript-oriented study begins with value (the already-established “poetic reputation” of Langland) and ends with value (the “profoundest authorial compliment” the study represents).⁴⁷

The Object of Value

If the ghost of judgment—whether in the form of Langland, Chaucer, or some other signifier of literary excellence—thus continues to haunt late medieval English literary studies, then we must ask what the nature of this ghost is and what the consequences of its haunting are. For New Critics, that one piece of language could possess more “greatness” or aesthetic value than another was the preexisting condition that made literary criticism, as a definably distinct intellectual activity, both possible and necessary. Without the assumption that texts possessed relative greatness, the task of criticism (conceived of as, most fundamentally, judgment) was meaningless; hence, the object of study that both justified the discipline and was its product was the *notional object of literary value*. What was held to constitute this value was theorized in different ways by different groups of formalists (and thus tended to distinguish one from another, for example, the New Critics from the Chicago School). For present purposes, I will put aside such theorization, even though, as I suggest in my conclusion, it remains an essential activity.

⁴⁷ One may also consider in this regard that, while the study of Middle English documents by literary scholars has expanded aggressively into the arena of the nonliterary, the most celebrated work of this sort in recent years—Linne Mooney’s use of documentary records to identify Adam Pinkhurst as the scribe of Hengwrt and Ellesmere—is plainly invested in the value we continue to ascribe to the *Canterbury Tales*: see Linne R. Mooney, “Chaucer’s Scribe,” *Speculum* 81 (2006): 97–138.

Inasmuch as a definition of “literary value” requires a definition of “literary,” it raises the questions of the nature of the literary per se and whether and how texts may possess relative amounts of it—questions that, as is well known, go back as far as the oldest surviving writings about literature, and that have received an intimidating array of answers. At this point, I wish to emphasize only the *structural role* that literary value plays in the field of Chaucer studies as a *concept* (hence my label “notional object”), conceiving of it first as a placeholder in a institutionalized system of scholarship and teaching, prior to whatever content this placeholder may contain.

Literary value, despite some attempts to demonstrate otherwise, was not available to formalist investigators in a tangible sense but was extant, rather, as a collective surmise: if a group of investigators—under the ineluctable influence of a long tradition of judgment both within and without the academy—assumes that some texts are somehow better than others, then the selection, production, and elucidation of these texts become justifiable scholarly and pedagogical activities. For New Critics, the structural position held by literary value could thus function institutionally as centripetal mission, the notional center around which the discipline was organized. And, for individual acts of critical practice, literary value could function as both anchor point (what one looks for in a text) and outcome (what one finds or does not find). The notional center hence enabled the myriad activities of literary studies and was at the same time (that is, dialectically) confirmed and defined by them: the presumed existence of this quality necessarily preceded the act of formalist criticism, and the evidence for its presence, or lack thereof, was that act’s product.⁴⁸

New Critics acknowledged other relevant and related objects of study but considered them adjuncts to the object of value and named as “fallacies” those critical practices that sought to put one of these lesser objects into the central role held by the object of value. For example, for Wimsatt and Beardsley, as is evident in the first axiom that they propose in their essay on the intentional fallacy, a poem is unarguably, from one perspective, an object of intention: “A poem does not come into exis-

⁴⁸That this sort of critical activity thus possessed a marked logical circularity—as its conclusions (“the poem succeeds”) are more or less restatements of its assumptions (“the poem is an object of value”)—has been argued well and often. For a trenchant, early articulation of this point, see Stanley E. Fish, “Interpreting the *Variorum*,” *Critical Inquiry* 2 (1976): 465–85.

tence by accident. The words of a poem . . . come out of a head, not out of a hat." But, as their next assertion makes plain, a critic errs when making this object the focus of investigation: "Yet to insist on the designing intellect as a *cause* of a poem is not to grant the design or intention as a *standard* by which the critic is to judge the worth of the poet's performance."⁴⁹ The authors' two emphases in this statement mark two different objects of study, and, for Wimsatt and Beardsley, the second object—the object of "worth" or value—is the logical *a priori* that, for poetry, would lend any interest at all to the first, the object of intention.

As I have suggested, such a hierarchy was also, until the rise of manuscript studies, largely assumed among the scholars who concerned themselves with Chaucer's manuscripts and whose primary aim was the production of editions of Works. Although the more immediate object of study in this field was the object of intention—that is, authorial readings—practitioners readily acknowledged the subordination of this object to the object of value. The search for authorial readings among the manuscripts of the *Canterbury Tales*, for example, proceeded on the assumption that the *Tales*, as a singular literary Work in the very process of being constituted by the editor, *a priori* possessed value, which thereby justified the effort. Putatively cordoned off from consideration until the scientific work of the editor was complete, this *a priori* object of value in fact not only initiated the effort but also, as many have shown (and as most editors would admit), was a determining factor in the minutest editorial decisions, regardless of editorial method—for example, recension, best-text, or eclectic.⁵⁰ Editors conceived of the

⁴⁹ Wimsatt and Beardsley, *The Verbal Icon*, p. 4.

⁵⁰ For Middle English studies, the editor/critics Donaldson and Kane have been especially vocal in their insistence on the role of subjective judgment in all methods of editorial work. For Donaldson's views on this topic, see "The Psychology of Editors of Middle English Texts," in E. Talbot Donaldson, *Speaking of Chaucer* (London: Athlone Press, 1970), pp. 102–18. Among Kane's many statements of his views, see the brief summary (in respect of *Piers Plowman*) in George Kane, "The Text," in *A Companion to "Piers Plowman,"* ed. John A. Alford (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 175–200 (194–98). For a consideration of the affiliations between New Criticism and Kane's and Donaldson's editing practices, see "The Logic of Textual Criticism and the Way of Genius: The Kane-Donaldson *Piers Plowman* in Historical Perspective," in Patterson, *Negotiating the Past*, pp. 77–113. For this view in respect to English literature more generally, see G. Thomas Tanselle, *Textual Criticism and Scholarly Editing* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1990), who argues the point throughout this collection of essays—e.g., "In scholarly editing the role of literary judgment is vital to all decisions—those concerning accidentals as well as those concerning substantives" (329–30).

completed effort—the edition—as an imperfect reification of the notional object of value, the material substitute upon which critical judgment of value may be exercised, a substitute assumed stable until subsequent editors constituted new, presumably less imperfect reifications.

Given this history, the persistence of these considerations of value subsequent to the rise of manuscript studies (even among those scholars whose work exemplifies this trend) raises the question of how much the New Critical hierarchy of objects has changed. Manuscript studies, as evident in Hanna's emphasis on "Middle English literary communities," has in many instances appeared to subordinate the object of value to, if not wholly replace it with, the object of cultural significance (or, less neutrally, the object of ideology). This object, which often goes under the name "material culture," is also more or less the one that interpretive historicism has sought to put at its center of inquiry. As Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt suggest, while historicism has by no means rejected the object of value, it has—under the influence of cultural anthropologists such as Clifford Geertz—subordinated it to the more general "cultural text," demoting it to the status of just one historical integer among others. This move "vastly expands the range of objects available to be read and interpreted" and thus in turn entails, to some degree, an attitude "skeptical, wary, demystifying, critical, and even adversarial" toward the object of value that no longer holds center stage.⁵¹ It is the move that David Wallace, in his general preface to *The Cambridge History of Medieval Literature*, describes as especially well suited to the study of the late medieval literatures produced in Britain (and which that volume of literary history hence seeks to epitomize), and the one that Charlotte Morse understands as (among other things) transforming the largely formalist-inspired notion of "Ricardian poetry" into the project of "Ricardian studies."⁵² And, to many of those who remain committed to the central position of literary value—even such manuscript-savvy and historically informed critics like Pearsall and John Burrow—it is a move that therefore threatens the discipline by its failure to

⁵¹ Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 9.

⁵² David Wallace, ed., *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. xi–xxiii; Charlotte C. Morse, "From 'Ricardian Poetry' to Ricardian Studies," in *Essays on Ricardian Literature: In Honour of J. A. Burrow*, ed. A. J. Minnis, Charlotte C. Morse, and Thorlac Turville-Petre (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp. 316–44.

distinguish works of lesser and “greater intrinsic literary significance” and its tendency to push literature “aside in the quest for socio-political significance.”⁵³

Manuscript studies is, as I have suggested, not reducible to historicism and in many ways arose independently of it—as evident, for example, in the fact that a scholar such as Pearsall can be so active in the former even while taking an adversarial stance toward elements of the latter. Nonetheless, historicism’s apparent shift in the object of study provides crucial legitimation to the elevation of the manuscript from means to end; as a key element of the “cultural text,” the individual manuscript, at least for Middle English investigators, becomes the most important of the vastly expanded “range of objects to be read and interpreted.” Dovetailing with initiatives in the theory of textual criticism (in particular, the demotion of the authorial text), this historicist interest in the individual manuscript creates the common ground between literary critic and manuscript scholar that is so visible in such studies as Tinkle’s or, in a somewhat different vein, Seth Lerer’s *Chaucer and His Readers*.⁵⁴ In the latter, Lerer constructs, from a codicological study of fifteenth-century manuscripts and early printed books, an understanding of how, and to what end, the authority of Chaucer was constituted vis-à-vis the particular time, place, and constituency of the producers and audiences of those documents. The cultural significance of such manuscripts—to a much greater extent than the timeless literary value

⁵³Derek Pearsall, “Medieval Literature and Historical Enquiry,” *MLR* 99 (2004): xxxi–xliv (xl, xxxvii). In the first quotation, Pearsall refers specifically to James Simpson, *The Oxford English Literary History, Vol. 2, 1350–1547: Reform and Cultural Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), and, in the second, to Lee Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991). In this article, Pearsall follows, with some qualifications, the disciplinary diagnosis of J. A. Burrow, “Should We Leave Medieval Literature to the Medievalists?” *ELM* 53 (2003): 278–83, but adduces different causes. As many readers will recognize, in citing the sentiments of these two articles, I broach the hoary theoretical and institutional debate between literary and cultural studies, one recently given new animus with the advent of new formalism. And, in many ways, my argument in this essay rests on the ambiguous position of manuscript studies within this debate, with Chaucer studies standing for literary studies and medieval studies standing for cultural studies. Inasmuch as it is possible, I hope to skirt the margins of this debate rather than plunge into it, as I do not find it fruitful, although my conclusions regarding Chaucer editions necessarily bear on it.

⁵⁴Seth Lerer, *Chaucer and His Readers: Imagining the Author in Late-Medieval England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993). Prendergast formulates this common ground explicitly in his introduction to the manuscript studies anthology *Rewriting Chaucer*. See also the introductory statement of aims in Echard and Partridge, eds., *The Book Unbound*.

of Chaucer's Works—appears to serve as the *a priori* notional object of study that, dialectically, both enables the investigation and is that investigation's product. Indeed, from the perspective of this and similar studies—or from a metacritical perspective such as Trigg's—the object of literary value might well seem an ideological screen to be overcome, the false transmutation of historically contingent, material conditions into a historically transcendent virtue, one that blinds us both to history and to the ideological uses to which literature is put. In short, the object of value may seem everything that the many expositors of the conservative ideologies of New Criticism have accused it of being.⁵⁵

From this perspective, if the Chaucer editions produced under traditional editorial paradigms are reifications of the notional object of value, then the subordination of this object would seem to necessitate a corresponding subordination of its reifications to more suitable ones—and, indeed, it is precisely the persistence of the traditional reifications that prompts the complaint by Machan quoted in my epigraph. In their place should be, say, reifications of cultural significance (that is, of the complexity of cultural influence and transmission, properly historicized), such as might be achieved by a representation of various interlaced manuscript matrices, in which manuscript reproductions are linked rhizomically to each other and hypertextually embedded in myriad informing contexts—perhaps one of the dynamically reconfigurable electronic editions mentioned above. For both scholarship and pedagogy, this replacement material realization of the object of study would correspond to the shift in the central self-justifying task of the field from judgment to, say, something like Hanna's discernment of “medieval literary communities.”

We have already seen, however, that this shift away from judgment has not been decisive, and further consideration of Hanna's remark about how “Shakespeare's text has always triggered the most exciting advances in general bibliographic studies” suggests the source of the resistance to editions of Chaucer not constructed as objects of value. Hanna's remark reminds us that the presumed value of Shakespeare's Works remains firmly in place despite the considerable attention given to the textual indeterminacy of these Works and their lack of authorial imprimatur; indeed, as the remark further implies, this very attention

⁵⁵ See, for example, Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 15–46.

has more likely perpetuated this value than diminished it. (In Machan's view, the literary value attributed to Shakespeare's Works has not only determined the entire history of Shakespeare editing but also that of Anglo-American textual criticism generally, so that Chaucer's texts have been edited to accord with the model of value set by the Bard's plays.)⁵⁶ Similarly, within the realm of interpretive historicism, the immense amount of attention given to the culture of early modern England over the last quarter century or so has done nothing to displace the centrality of the Bard in either early modern criticism or in British literature curricula. (In this regard, one may observe that many—perhaps most—historicist studies, such as Gallagher and Greenblatt's, do not hesitate to include valorizations of such traditional objects of value as Shakespeare's texts, although such valorizations tend to be of the incidental nature discussed above.) Although Chaucer has never possessed literary capital on the scale of Shakespeare, even within the boundaries of Middle English studies, his Works nonetheless continue to play an analogous role in the disciplinary economy. As much as, say, the topics of Lollardy, Lancastrian politics, and women's literary activities have turned critical energies in other, often explicitly noncanonical, directions, Chaucer's Works still retain their prominence in the field (if having received, in recent years, a challenge in this regard from *Piers Plowman*). As Nicholas Watson observes, in his response to the 2006 NCS conference (and despite what he considers, on the one hand, to be the field's broadening concerns and, on the other, the potential negative consequences of its continued dependence on Chaucer),

It's obvious that, for many here [at the conference], Chaucer remains simply the most interesting and demanding of all the writers in our field to study and to think with; and that even for those of us whose most passionate attachments are elsewhere [as in Watson's case], Chaucer is still the place where many of our new intellectual perspectives come from or find their ultimate test (the question "does it work for Chaucer?" can still make or break in this business), as well as being the bedrock of our medieval teaching.⁵⁷

One wonders, from such comments as these, how subordinated the object of value actually is; one begins to suspect that, though ostensibly

⁵⁶This is the argument of Machan, "'I endowed.'"

⁵⁷Nicholas Watson, "Response to the New Chaucer Society Conference, New York, July 27–31, 2006," *The New Chaucer Society Newsletter* 28 (2006): 1–5 (2).

secondary to cultural significance, it still possesses a determining, if subterranean, influence over the latter. For if cultural significance were indeed the determining object, then one would expect, for example, that the *Middle English Prose Brut*, with its 181 surviving manuscripts—or even the *Prick of Conscience*, with 117—would be receiving as much attention as the surviving manuscripts of the *Canterbury Tales*, if not more. Surely these collections of manuscripts were at least as culturally significant and ideologically powerful in late medieval England as the manuscripts of the *Tales*. To this observation, an obvious rejoinder is that the *Tales*, unlike the *Brut* or the *Prick of Conscience*, has *continued* to possess cultural significance. Yet this argument effectively extends the object of cultural significance through the full history of Chaucer reception and thereby dilutes historical specificity from that object, reducing it to the generality that Chaucer has been significant for particular constituencies in particular times and places. And this generality is simply another way of saying that Chaucer's texts have been regularly construed, by various constituencies for various reasons, as possessing more value than other texts. In effect, the object of cultural significance, at least when posited within the ambit of "studies in the age of Chaucer," becomes merely a *displaced object of value*, which, though obscured, thereby retains its role as the disciplinary center of gravity. What changes through this displacement, however, is the perception of this object's ownership and the perceived need to assign it stable content: by naming the object cultural significance, we are able to define it as someone else's object of value rather than ours, and we may thereby allow the content of that object to be whatever these others need or desire it to be at their particular historical moments.

Hence, even when projects do not concern Chaucer directly (or another established object of value, such as *Piers Plowman*) and avoid even such aesthetically neutral evaluative terms as "significance" in favor of a notional object of historical authenticity, they may still depend on a displaced object of value, at some level of indirection. For example, Hanna has declared that "the ultimate goal of manuscript studies should be the composition of cultural histories. . . . At every step, one strives to integrate minutiae toward a holistic analysis which reaches beyond books, indeed literature, to society and history."⁵⁸ In this formu-

⁵⁸Ralph Hanna, "Analytical Survey 4: Middle English Manuscripts and the Study of Literature," *NML* 4 (2001): 243–64 (255–56).

lation, “cultural histories,” rather than any special significance within them, are the stated object. Yet, as much twentieth-century historiography has taught us, simply to notice something in the past is already to conceive of its value for, and bearing on, the present. A study of, say, the manuscripts of Wycliffite sermons, then, is also an argument for why these manuscripts matter to us. If this study appears in *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, then implicitly this argument must be, in part, that these manuscripts convey a significant aspect of the culture that also included Chaucer, and hence they may (among other functions, of course) help explicate Chaucer’s texts. And the only reason that Chaucer’s texts require such explication is because they have already been conceived as an object of value.

To be sure, I do not mean to imply that the entire world of late medieval English studies revolves around a Chaucerian star. Moreover, as I have mentioned, I realize that the position of the object of value vis-à-vis manuscript studies depends at some level on the ambiguous and contested institutional and theoretical distinctions between Chaucer studies and medieval studies (distinctions further blurred by the bridge term, “studies in the age of Chaucer”)—or those between their more general (and more contested) formations as literary and cultural studies. Indeed, for the latter’s advocates, one of the benefits of the interdisciplinary nature of cultural studies is that it tolerates multiple, competing objects of study (which, of course, is one of its liabilities to its detractors). But the corollary to this point is that, inasmuch as Chaucer studies remains part of literary studies (and as long as the term “literary” remains in any way meaningful), the institutionalization of the latter carries with it an inherited commitment to value that we may put at arm’s length but that we cannot finally evade.

Reifying the *Canterbury Tales*

If we cannot then escape the historically sedimented investments of the institutions in which we first learned about Chaucer, and in which we now teach and produce criticism, one might argue that we should at least seek exactly this arm’s length distance—the critical distance that levels of indirection from the object of value may achieve. And, certainly, the substitution of cultural significance, or simply cultural history, for the object of value serves this function in the work of many, if not most, current Chaucerians. Yet this critical distance, from another

perspective, remains an attempt at evasion. If, as I have argued, the object of cultural significance in Chaucer studies ultimately translates into the object of value as perceived by historically distant others, and if this object's cultural significance extends, *mutatis mutandis*, to the present and thus includes us, then we have performed a sort of conceptual sleight of hand. The attribution of the object of value to historically distant others enables our own inherited commitments to that object to remain in some inchoate state—to varying degrees offhand, intuitive, impressionistic, and unexamined, if not simply submerged and unacknowledged—even while they continue to structure the field.⁵⁹ Moreover, by conceiving of the content of the other's object of value as historically contingent, we exempt ourselves from the responsibility of defining the content of the object of value to which we remain committed—on the argument that to do so would merely reflect our own historical conditioning. Again, as a tactic of critical distance, these evasions have use, but they nonetheless remain evasions, and hence the decisions that we might make on the basis of them bear reexamination.

One of these potential decisions returns us to the question of whether the best material realization of an object of study is necessarily the most historically authentic—by which I mean, at this point, whether a reification of the notional object of historical authenticity is necessarily the most desirable material object upon which to practice criticism and pedagogy. This question, as I have indicated, has become newly pertinent because the rise of manuscript studies has, for quite justifiable reasons, begun to drive a wedge between this notional object and the one of value. As long as the aim of the various tasks involving manuscripts remained the production of a Work (in the form of an edition), the objects of intention, cultural significance, and historical authenticity were subordinate to the object of value and hence not thoroughly distinguished from it. But as the quotation from Machan in my epigraph indicates, reifications of value, inasmuch as they are historically vitiated, are now precisely what manuscript studies would subordinate, if not reject altogether. As Machan puts it elsewhere, “All of the modern edi-

⁵⁹In this regard, it is to Pearsall's credit that, in his defense of Chaucer's literary value in “Medieval Literature,” he concludes his essay with what one rarely encounters in current Chaucer criticism: an explicit attempt to define poetic literary value and to demonstrate its presence in Chaucer's verse (but see also the essays pertaining to Chaucer's aesthetics cited above). That this demonstration should seem so much like a formalist exercise is striking.

tions of Chaucer's complete works contain carefully presented, artistically pleasing poetry, but none of them offer genuine examples of works produced within the discourse of Middle English manuscripts, since the Chaucer they imply can only be a projection of postmedieval thinking."⁶⁰ Even if we grant the categories Machan wields here (and I am fully willing to do so), we nonetheless remain confronted with the question of whether to choose for critical and pedagogical practice "modern editions" with their "artistically pleasing poetry" or something that better reifies "genuine examples of works produced within the discourse of Middle English manuscripts"—perhaps, say, the electronic edition described by Morse.

Given the predominance of historicism in Chaucer studies, the choice might seem to fall unhesitatingly to the latter—if not yet to an electronic edition, to some more adequate printed representation. Yet, if the notional object of value remains, as I have argued, the central structuring force in the field, why should not we choose instead the reification that best represents this object? What necessary logic justifies the choice (to consider an extreme dichotomy of options) of an electronic, rhizomic, dynamically reconfigurable, variant-comprehensive, hypertext edition of the *Canterbury Tales* over, say, the Donaldson edition, if (and this "if" is crucial) the latter represents more effectively the object of value and thus more effectively serves the field's actual organization? Upon reflection, one has little basis on which to claim the former as a more legitimate material literary object than the latter. Both are historical composites produced by multiple agents, in essence collaborative projects involving numerous individuals, most unknown to one another, pursued over the course of hundreds of years. Both lift material from one, uncertain aesthetic context and place it in another, better known but radically different one. Both may be the objects of rigorous and illuminating interpretative practice, although in both cases the interpreter must take care to respect the multiple intentions and contexts informing the work.

As is well known, Donaldson produced his edition under the New Critical assumption that complex artistic unity is what makes a literary Work valuable, and he manipulated the surviving material record of the *Tales* to create a Work possessing ample amounts of this quality (most

⁶⁰Tim William Machan, *Textual Criticism and Middle English Texts* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1994), p. 181.

strikingly, perhaps, by having the “Wif of Bathe” disrupt the Host’s plan in the Man of Law’s Endlink, revealingly defending his decision by simply remarking, “this gives coherence to the chosen order”).⁶¹ This quality is, without question, “postmedieval” (to use Machan’s phrasing), but this fact alone does not make his version *a priori* any less legitimate as a material literary object. His version, rather, is simply one produced over time by diverse agents with different motivations. The same description applies in fact to the very earliest witnesses to the *Tales*, such as the Hengwrt and Ellesmere manuscripts (and especially the latter). Although the temporal distances among the several agents responsible for these manuscripts are, obviously, much smaller than those of any printed edition, these agents plainly still possessed diverse motivations, as Haimo’s and Tinkle’s studies amply demonstrate. In Tinkle’s apt phrasing, the pages of any manuscript reflect a “hybrid, cumulative authorship.”⁶² Hence, even what is arguably the most historically authentic version of the *Tales*, the Hengwrt, is already a historical composite—as indeed is any material literary object in any era. What necessary reason dictates that a less radically composite work (the Hengwrt) be chosen over one that is more so (the Donaldson edition) if—and again this “if” is crucial—the latter better represents the object of value?⁶³

The proposed electronic *Canterbury Tales* would also, obviously, be a historical composite, one even more radical than the Donaldson edition, although, in contrast, it possesses the (equally postmedieval) motivation to represent the “discourse of Middle English manuscripts” with as much authenticity as possible. If one chooses this version of the *Tales* solely because its constitution possesses this motivation, despite finding more literary value in the Donaldson version, then, in effect, one self-contradictorily chooses to diminish the “greatness” of the *Tales* even while that very quality (whatever it may consist of) remains the reason

⁶¹ *Chaucer’s Poetry: An Anthology for the Modern Reader*, ed. E. T. Donaldson, 2nd ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 1975), p. 1074.

⁶² Tinkle, “The Wife,” p. 76.

⁶³ One may similarly ask, given that changes in technology throughout the history of literary production and reception have engendered a broad diversity of experiences of what is nominally the same literary object, on what necessary basis do we decide which of these experiences is most worthy of critical attention? In raising such questions—and, more generally, in my willingness to see the printed edition and the manuscript as equally legitimate, if vastly different, material literary objects—I echo arguments made to somewhat different ends by Michelle R. Warren, “Post-Philology,” in *Postcolonial Moves: Medieval Through Modern*, ed. Patricia Clare Ingham and Michelle R. Warren (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), pp. 19–45.

why any critical energy is expended upon it. This potential self-contradiction is the essence of the resistance to manuscript studies. Because Chaucer studies is still organized around the notional object of value, its practitioners will continue to resist changes in the reifications of this object that seem to diminish value, even while those same practitioners are ideologically and practically committed to historical authenticity.

An imagined scenario may make my point plainer. Suppose tomorrow someone unearthed incontrovertible evidence that corroborated the speculation David Lawton made years ago, that Thomas Hoccleve authored some of the linking passages in the *Canterbury Tales*.⁶⁴ Say (to make the scenario more extreme) this individual discovered a manuscript—in the attic of an obscure descendant of Adam Pinkhurst—that contained *all* the linking passages, as well their most important revisions, and that concluded with an envoy to Pinkhurst in which Hoccleve pseudo-humbly proclaims his inadequacy to complete the work of his recently deceased master; and all this appears in Hoccleve's holograph, dated November 1400. Obviously, scholarly understanding of a number of things would change rather dramatically, but how should this discovery affect the manner in which editions of the *Canterbury Tales* appear? Should the linking passages be bracketed, supplied but not lineated, relegated to endnotes, or just dropped altogether? In my view, editors should use the new evidence to maximize aesthetic power—to produce, say, an edition with the tales and links more seamlessly and confidently integrated than previously, despite the fact that this edition would correspond to no actual manuscript. To choose one of the other options would be, as in the example of the Donaldson edition, to choose the object of historical authenticity over that of value, thereby diminishing the very quality that continues to sustain critical interest in the *Tales*. Figuratively speaking, it would be to settle begrudgingly for the undressed salad, even while one longingly looks over at a neighbor's pizza—and my argument is that most Chaucerians, no matter how nutritionally informed, still want the pizza.⁶⁵

⁶⁴See David Lawton, *Chaucer's Narrators* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1985), pp. 127–29.

⁶⁵I offer this far-fetched example of Hoccleve's co-authorship, rather than one of the many actual debates about how the *Tales* ought to be represented, to avoid digression into textual controversies. But readers may easily see how the debate about, say, the status of the penitential treatise and so-called *Retractions* that stand at the end of the *Tales* (whether, that is, they belong in the *Tales* at all) depends not just on textual questions but also on both the inertia of the literary value attributed to the current constitution of the *Tales* and the likelihood that a new constitution (ending with the Parson's Prologue) would possess more. For the argument that the *Parson's Tale* and

Clearly, the key conditional assumption in both of these examples is that one version of the *Tales* better reifies the object of value than another (or, for that matter, that one likes pizza better than an undressed salad). In these examples I have assumed a specific content for the object of value, one rather tendentiously calibrated to my opening admission of teaching the *Tales* as a linked set of short stories. This assumption is mostly heuristic, inasmuch as my aim has been to call attention to the persistence of the structuring power of literary value in Chaucer studies rather than to define the nature of this value. Given this structuring power, however, the obvious implication is that, as a conscientiously reflexive postmodern literary critic, one ought to make such assumptions explicit, interrogate their ideologies, investigate their theoretical bases, and, I would add, continue to embrace them to the extent that, after this process, one still believes in them.

Although I cannot pursue this task here, I offer, by way of conclusion, two considerations (which in various ways have hovered over this essay throughout) to take into account in its undertaking. First, literary value in general and that of Chaucer in particular neither originated in, nor is decisively controlled by, the academy. Rather, literary value was one of the enabling conditions of the initial academic institutionalization of Chaucer studies, and its sustained presence outside the academy is, in part, what continues to legitimize, shape, and perpetuate the field. In this regard, Hanna's youthful extracurricular encounter with Chaucer may stand as a representative illustration of how broadly disseminated and influential extra-institutional literary value continues to be. Also revealing in this regard is Hanna's comparison of Shakespeare's and Chaucer's roles in their respective bibliographic studies. Shakespeare scholarship has been from the start, and continues to be, pendant on the immense value perceived, outside the academy, to reside in the Bard's plays. Hence institutions such as Indiana University may choose, as Patrick Brantlinger has described, to suspend Shakespeare requirements not so much as an attempt to shift the object of study from value to culture (as Brantlinger himself might wish) but simply because

Retractions are a scribal appendage, see Charles A. Owen Jr., "The *Canterbury Tales*: Beginnings (3) and Endings (2 + 1)," *Chaucer Yearbook* 1 (1992): 189–211, and, more extensively, Míceál F. Vaughan, "Creating Comfortable Boundaries: Scribes, Editors, and the Invention of the *Parson's Tale*," in *Rewriting Chaucer*, ed. Prendergast and Kline, pp. 45–90.

students will take Shakespeare regardless of requirements.⁶⁶ This consideration suggests that, no matter how we within the academy choose to define the content of literary value, we would do well to take into account, in some fashion, the definitions current outside the academy. It also confirms the suspicion that, if literary value not only organizes the field of Chaucer studies from within but also sustains it from without, then, even while manuscript studies continues to reap its impressive scholarly harvest, we will be best served if we retain a material object of study that, at the very least, does not obscure this value. If, in the future, Chaucer studies becomes fully submerged within medieval cultural studies, then this concern with value may no longer apply. But I do not foresee this submersion occurring until Chaucer no longer possesses literary value outside the academy, at which point it will occur by default.

The second consideration is that the specific content of the object of value is always multiple and unstable, for individual readers as well as among different readers. Attempts to define this content are, as I have suggested, an essential component of reflexive criticism but are also thus necessarily partial, in both senses of that term. When, therefore, Fradenburg, in the final pages of *Sacrifice Your Love*, critiques both John Guillory's adaptation of Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital and the principles of New Philology as articulated by Stephen Nichols, she does so to promote one content of literary value—"enjoyment" in the psychoanalytic sense—over others (or, in the case of New Philology, over a different object of study).⁶⁷ The supposed agon between psychoanalysis and historicism (which Fradenburg seeks to dispose of as a false dichotomy) may thus be understood as a debate about the content of literary value and how much any individual ascription of content should determine our critical practice. Similarly, the conflict still perceived in some quarters between historically rigorous and supposedly anachronistic the-

⁶⁶See Patrick Brantlinger, *Who Killed Shakespeare? What's Happened to English since the Radical Sixties* (New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 13–30. For a general consideration of how literary canonicity is not nearly as much a function of the academy as academics tend to believe, see E. Dean Kolbas, *Critical Theory and the Literary Canon* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2001).

⁶⁷Fradenburg, *Sacrifice Your Love*, pp. 243–52. Knight is similarly forthcoming about his rather different sense of the literary value of Chaucer's texts when he frankly admits, in his work as editor, "when faced by equally possible variants I will print the one which has the maximum possible historical tension, the reading which loads the text most strongly with ideology" ("Textual Variants," p. 49).

oretical approaches to Chaucer dissipates when one understands the latter as performing a necessary definition and interrogation of literary value. Hence, whether one theorizes the content of the object of value as *jouissance*, cultural capital, commodity fetish, resistance, alterity, hybridity, misprision, defamiliarization, aesthetic unity, the sublime, beauty, truth, or *sentence* fused with *solas* (to name just a few of the many possibilities), axiological theorization, no matter how putatively anachronistic, is a mark of literary critical integrity.

Having developed and defended an axiology of the *Canterbury Tales*, does one then construct an edition of the *Tales* that best corresponds to one's personal axiology and use this version in one's criticism and teaching? Although this conclusion is ridiculous (equivalent, analogously, to mistaking license for liberty, as Milton defined the terms), it is not in fact far from the position taken by eminent textual critic G. Thomas Tanselle many decades ago in his account of the editor's aims and responsibilities—a position that amounts to a more radical version of Pearsall's proposal for different editions for different audiences:

A person of taste and sensitivity, choosing among variant readings on the basis of his own preference and making additional emendations of his own, can be expected to produce a text that is aesthetically satisfying and effective. Whether or not it is what the author wrote is another matter; but editing which does not have as its goal the recovery of the author's words is not necessarily illegitimate—it is creative, rather than scholarly, but not therefore unthinkable. . . . [I]t is . . . obvious that an editor could conceivably produce a version of a work aesthetically superior to the original. In such a case the editor would in effect become a collaborator of the author, in the way that publishers' editors or literary executors sometimes are. So long as one is concerned only with individual aesthetic objects, there can be no objection to the procedure; but if one is interested in the work as part of an author's total career, one must insist on having the words which that author actually wrote.⁶⁸

In effect, Tanselle divides the universe of editions into two—the “creative” ones that correspond to literary value (in his terms, aesthetic superiority) and the “scholarly” ones that correspond to historical authenticity (which he equates with “the recovery of the author's words”)—and willingly grants legitimacy to the former. But, as Chaucer editors have known all along and as manuscript studies has repeat-

⁶⁸Tanselle, *Textual Criticism*, p. 329.

edly taught us, all existing print editions (not to mention the manuscript witnesses themselves) are to some degree creative. They all are the product of one or more individuals of (ideally) “taste and sensitivity,” who have manipulated the evidence according to preconceived notions of aesthetic superiority—precisely because such notions are irrecoverably entangled with those individuals’ perceptions of what “the author’s words” might have been. But the solution to this situation is not, therefore, wholly to abandon creative or value-based editions. To do so would be to sever the field from the axiological energies that in fact sustain it. Neither, however, is the solution to hold all creative editions equally worthy objects of study simply because no edition may escape being to some degree creative. Such would be to mistake solipsism for subjectivity. Instead, the solution is to continue to create and use value-potent editions that nonetheless recognize, in some fashion, both in themselves and in the criticism that uses them, the constraints of the latest historical and textual findings. One of the tasks of Chaucer criticism is not just to make its own and its chosen edition’s axiology explicit but also to shift the axiological grounds in such a way as to keep the creative and the scholarly in conversation.

Perhaps, as Chaucer studies continues to evolve, these grounds may shift enough to make the question of what best reifies the object of study once again moot (or, alternatively, Chaucer studies, as such, will vanish as the energies that supply it dissipate). In the meantime, Chaucer critics may view the options already extant or proposed—options varying from a New Critical collection of lightly annotated short stories, to a critical edition presenting a text and variants, to a hypertext representation of manuscript matrix and cultural nexus—as vehicles for articulating their axiologies. And I may well continue to teach the *Tales* as I do currently, at times pretending a critical edition is a collection of short stories and, at other times, encouraging discussion of how both that literary idea and the edition itself are critical fictions. But I will do so with considerably less guilt.