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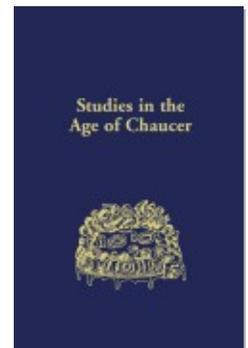
*Chaucer and the Poems of "Ch" in University of
Pennsylvania MS French 15* by James I. Wimsatt (review)

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development of unified approaches—that is the book’s greatest strength. There is no historical Truth, no folkloric Truth, no archaeological Truth, just truth. Schmitt follows his paths wherever they lead him by whatever route.

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JAMES I. WIMSATT, *Chaucer and the Poems of “Ch” in University of Pennsylvania MS French 15*. Chaucer Studies ix. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer; Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1982. Pp. 136. \$47.50.

Chaucer’s early poetry shows so close an acquaintance with French poetry, and his early court milieu so clearly preferred French literature to English, that it seems almost certain that Chaucer tried his hand at lyrics in French before moving into English for such an accomplished early product as *The Book of the Duchess*. “Where are all his earlier poetic exercises that paved the way for that mature product?” asks Rossell Hope Robbins, who concludes that we should “start looking for texts of anonymous French poems of the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries,” if not to discover Chaucer’s own work then at least to get a better idea of what his youthful poetry would have been like (*ChauR* 13 [1978–79]:93). James I. Wimsatt’s book answers this call, by selecting and commenting on a group of works from “by far the most interesting extant anthology of fourteenth century French lyrics” (p. 78).

From this anthology, University of Pennsylvania MS French 15 (Penn), Wimsatt edits twenty-five ballades, chants royaux, and a rondeau, with the purpose of illustrating the kind of French poetry Chaucer might have written, the connections linking him to certain French poets, and those poets’ interrelationships. Wimsatt’s balancing of general information and detail will make this a valuable source for Chaucerians. The list of incipits, verse forms, authors, manuscripts, and editions for all of Penn’s 310 poems is impressive in scope, as is Wimsatt’s knowledge of French verse forms and their

evolution. But most intriguing is the manuscript's notation "Ch" before fifteen of the lyrics, an abbreviation which could plausibly stand for "Chaucer." None of the other poems carries indication of authorship, though Wimsatt identifies 107 by Guillaume de Machaut, 27 by Oton de Granson, several probably by Eustache Deschamps, and a few by other poets who can be connected to Chaucer.

The fifteen "Ch" poems are here edited with facing-page translations. In comparison to Chaucer's English work, the work of "Ch" is formal and not very inventive; the *Roman de la Rose* dominates poetic imagination powerfully in these lyrics. Wimsatt's argument that one of the fifteen lyrics (Ch XI) is not really by "Ch" weakens the possible connection between "Ch" and Chaucer, since this work shares procedure and detail with Chaucer's ballade from *The Legend of Good Women*. In both, anaphoric presentation of models of beauty and goodness ends in praise of the special lady "that al this may disteyne" (cf. "Qui n'a de tout pareille ne seconde," "Who has among all no equal or second" [Ch XI.11]). The two poems share Esther, Helen, Polixena, and Hypsipyle in their lists of surpassed models. Does Wimsatt's desire to exclude Ch XI from the "Ch canon" influence him to omit the ballade from *The Legend of Good Women* from his list of parallels to Chaucer's works (p. 5)?

Wimsatt's translations stay close to the originals, with some helpful adjustments to loose syntax (e.g., "when" for "et," Ch III.3; "whoever" for "qui"/"on," Ch XV.1-2). A more figurative translation for Ch VII would bring out the wealth-and-poverty imagery that develops this ballade's central conceit, that the lover will be able to reach his imprisoned lady only if like Jupiter he can be turned to a shower of gold. Otherwise the lover will languish, "*mendis*/Des drois d'Amours, en angoisseux tourment. / *Mes biens* seront divers gémissement . . ." ("deprived/Of the rights of Love, in anguished torment;/My pleasures will be varied sighs. . ." [Ch VII.25-27]). Here *mendis* could suitably be translated "beggared" or "impoverished" and *biens* given the double meaning "goods" in English that it has in French. This would support the dominant metaphor of love as riches; the desired lady as "la tresbelle *pris*" could similarly become "most beautiful reward" rather than "most beautiful one" (Ch VII.15). No need to reduce the already slight imagery and zest of these lyrics.

How likely is it that “Ch” is really Chaucer? Wimsatt sensibly refuses that argument for the much better one that the fifteen poems “show what Chaucer’s French verse might have been like and well exemplify the whole French lyric mode that prevailed in his time” (p. 8). Probably we do not have Chaucer’s poems here. Penn is not of English provenance, though Wimsatt does show that some of the contents could have been collected in England (pp. 47–68). The manuscript includes an openly anti-English sirvente (no. 15, p. 85), and Jean de le Mote’s reference to Edward III (no. 63, p. 54) has been sabotaged by the copyist’s “Roys serfs Autheus” (serf King Arthur; suggested emendation “Roys [chiers] Autheus”). The case for equating “Ch” with Chaucer would be stronger if another insular poet could be identified in Penn. Something from John Gower or another of Chaucer’s English friends who composed in French would at least demonstrate that the anthologist did know of French poetry by Englishmen.

The importance of this book does not depend on the identity of “Ch,” however. Whether or not we have young Chaucer’s work here, Wimsatt uses the Pennsylvania anthology to present a fine overview and sampling of French court poetry from Chaucer’s time, all directed toward improving Chaucerians’ knowledge of their poet’s milieu. Especially striking is the evidence that poetry writing in this milieu was a social activity, an important kind of interaction for courtiers. Wimsatt’s illustrations of “Ch” reworking ballades from elsewhere in Penn (pp. 44–46) and illustrations of poetic debates that reached across the Channel (pp. 51–57, 75–77) provide a context for Chaucer’s adaptation of Granson’s ballade sequence in *The Complaint of Venus*: Penn offers the best text of Granson’s sequence, which Wimsatt edits with line-by-line references to Chaucer’s *Complaint*. Wimsatt’s selections and the supplementary information he provides give this book great value for Chaucerians, and the manuscript’s tantalizing “Ch” makes it an irresistible choice for edition.

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