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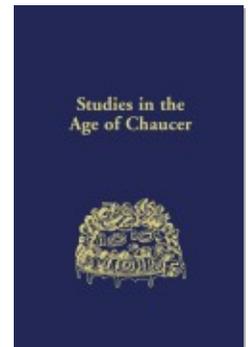
*The Miller's Tale. A Variorum Edition of the Works of  
Geoffrey Chaucer, Vol. 2 . The Canterbury Tales, Part 3 ed.*  
by Thomas W. Ross (review)

Jeremy Griffiths

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general approbation, those of us whose special love is Langland will have access to new insights about the birth process of his life work.

One only wishes that Rigg and Brewer had shunned the temptation of marketing hyperbole and titled it "An Early Draft of *Piers Plowman*." Some of the resistance that their thesis will meet is likely to be based on the perception that, valuable as their discovery may be, they have, in calling it a separate version of the poem, been guilty of claiming too much for it. Many *Piers* scholars, one imagines, after reading Z, are going to see it as an early and rather odd draft of A and will sympathize with Kane's decision to exclude it from his collations of the A MSS. We have always known that, if we wished to narrow our focus sharply enough, more than three versions of *Piers* could be discerned. What else should be expected of a poem being constantly revised over some twenty years? But it merely confuses the issues to label something like Bodley 851 as a different version when its plot is identical to A's and no longer and when the percentage of unique expository material is so modest.

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THOMAS W. ROSS, ed. *The Miller's Tale. A Variorum Edition of the Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, Vol. 2. The Canterbury Tales, Part 3.* Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1983. Pp. xxix, 273. \$39.50.

The General Editors' preface to this edition of the *Miller's Tale* announces that "the complete justification for a variorum edition is the record it presents of the history of scholarship, in short, the commentary" (p. xvi). This programme is carried out by the editor of this volume in the Variorum Edition of the Works of Geoffrey Chaucer through a review of scholarly writings on aspects of the *Miller's Tale*, a "survey of criticism," a discussion in the introduction of certain manuscripts and all the major printed editions and by the provision of a full apparatus to the text he prints, consisting of textual collations and detailed commentary in notes. The considerable effort of research that this represents is at least partly reflected by the large and useful bibliographical index. Undoubtedly this volume,

and the Variorum series as a whole, will be amongst the first points of reference for anyone working on the *Canterbury Tales* in the future.

The introduction to this edition of the *Miller's Tale* is divided into two parts, headed 'Critical' and 'Textual Commentary.' The Critical commentary, as well as reviewing discussion of the sources and analogues of the *Miller's Tale* and critical views of the tale itself, also provides a more general introduction to some topics in Chaucer criticism. It includes, for instance, an extensive review of the development of critical opinion about the *fabliaux* (pp. 7–12) and, with the *Miller's Tale* as its focus, a résumé of critical reaction to the moral propriety of the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole (pp. 12–25). As other volumes of the Variorum Edition are published it will be instructive to see how the critical history of the *Canterbury Tales* appears from the perspective of individual editors. What emerges most clearly in Dr. Ross's survey of views of the *Miller's Tale* is a surprising continuity between the concern of the earliest readers and that of later critics with the morality of the tale. In Dryden's suppression of the tale and in Robertsonian apologetics there are shared critical concerns, if very different critical reactions. It is, perhaps, unsurprising that the broad humour of the *Miller's Tale* should provoke a reaction, but the critical insistence upon this one aspect of the tale is of some interest in the light of the fact that Chaucer, himself, seems to go out of his way to pre-empt this sort of critical approach. In the Prologue to the tale the narrator acknowledges the churlishness of both Miller and Reeve, but pleads the concept of decorum:

... for I moot reherse  
 Hir tales alle, be they bet or werse,  
 Or ellis falsen som of my matere. (lines 3173–3175)

It doesn't really matter if this is or is not a real consideration in choosing to tell these tales; simply by raising the notion of narrative decorum, the Prologue protects the tale from a certain sort of moral inquiry. The narrator and not the narrative is now the target of any possible objection on moral grounds and even the narrator is protected by the double bind of the last line of the Prologue, as a result of which any moral criticism runs the risk of being laughed away:

And eek men shal noght maken ernest of game. (line 3186)

But this ploy to disarm moral criticism of the idiom and subject-matter of the *Miller's Tale* fails entirely, to judge from Dr. Ross's survey of critical

reactions. From the earliest readers onwards, the scurrility of the tale and the countering argument of narrative decorum, by which the Prologue itself seeks to neutralize such moral objections, are the focuses of the critical debate. Even recent critical writings have continued the calculation of morality in their analysis of character portrayal and have sought, especially, some logic of justice in the dénouement of the tale. But here, too, the tale itself pre-empts any expectation of moral judgment; its concluding lines ("Thus swyved was the carpenters wyf. . ." lines 3850 ff.) are formulated as moral lessons but in fact simply describe the preceding events.

It emerges from Dr. Ross's survey of criticism that for all the critical attention that has been paid to the question of the moral propriety of the *Miller's Tale*, the results have been, frankly, disappointing. Other approaches have been more fruitful. In particular, studies of the relationship between the *Miller's Tale* and other tales (those of the Knight and Reeve especially) have provided a series of very precise insights to Chaucer's articulation of the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole, through echoes of structure, theme and language between different tales. The complexities of these relationships offer more interesting opportunities for future critical examination than continued calculations of narrative decorum and moral propriety. Dr. Ross's survey gives an instructive overview of the trends in critical thinking and thought, inevitably, there are some small points of interpretation that one might disagree with, these are not of any great importance to the purposes of the introduction. Some minor irritants might well have been avoided though. For instance, Dr. Ross describes Sir John Harrington, who complained in 1591 of the scurrility of the *Miller's Tale*, as being "famous today for his . . . treatise on the water closet" (p. 14) and only mentions obliquely the rather better known and certainly more important translation of Ariosto. In similar vein, discussing censorship of the tale by manuscript copyists, Dr. Ross talks of "expurgative scribes" (p. 13), and elsewhere he has gone to the dictionary to find "pudibund" (OED, "easily ashamed," "bashful," "modest") to describe the carpenter's young wife Alison (p. 55). In another context this coy humour might be more amusing, but it is surely inappropriate here.

The second part of Dr. Ross's introduction is the "Textual Commentary," in which he discusses and tabulates the textual characteristics of the ten base manuscripts (supplemented by a further two) and the twenty printed editions whose readings appear in the textual apparatus. The General Editors' preface states the broad criteria for the selection of base group manuscripts: "We have wished mainly to provide the collations of

those manuscripts that have attracted commentary" (p. xv). In the descriptions of individual base group manuscripts, Dr. Ross provides more detailed discussions of the textual characteristics and affiliations of these manuscripts and the justification for their inclusion. Some have been chosen to reflect the readings of groups of manuscripts in Manly and Rickert's analysis of textual affiliations, for as the General Editors point out, they "have never intended in any way to reassess the results of Manly and Rickert's labors except at particular points at which correction has become necessary" (p. xv). Other base group manuscripts, such as the Helmingham copy (now Princeton University Library MS P 100), are included to clarify the textual affiliations of the early printed editions. The collations of the base group manuscripts and of the printed editions that accompany Dr. Ross's text are designed to display the evolution of the text and so to provide one constituent of the Variorum's "record . . . of the history of scholarship," from the earliest to the most recent editors. But at several points another, and very different, claim is made for the text of the Variorum Edition, namely that it "may . . . present *The Miller's Tale* as Chaucer wrote it, as nearly as our present knowledge and resources permit" (p. 61 and p. 114). Dr. Ross contrasts this with Manly and Rickert's edition, the purpose of which, he writes, was not "to provide the text as Chaucer wrote it but . . . through collation and recension to establish O<sup>1</sup>, a hypothetical common ancestor for all extant manuscripts" (p. 54).

Dr. Ross argues that Manly and Rickert's edition, whilst perceiving the importance of the readings of the Hengwrt manuscript, was nevertheless influenced by the authority of earlier editions to adopt, in particular, readings of the Ellesmere manuscript in preference to those of Hengwrt (pp. 53–54). Dr. Ross defends the authority of the Hengwrt manuscript, finding it necessary to make only six emendations to its text of the *Miller's Tale* (pp. 55–56); he characterizes Manly and Rickert's edition, influenced, he seems to suggest, by an unjustifiable preference for readings from the Ellesmere manuscript, as "a necessary (indeed indispensable) intermediate step" (p. 61) on the way to his own edition of the tale "as Chaucer wrote it." In fact Dr. Ross has simply pursued what he perceives as the logic of Manly and Rickert's edition, for as he points out, "As M[anly and] R[ickert] and their staff went through the painstaking process of collation and recension, they moved closer to H[en]g[wrt]" (p. 61), though his edition still relies upon Manly and Rickert's analysis of the textual affiliations of the surviving manuscripts.

As it happens the *Miller's Tale* presents some particular difficulties in assessing the relationship between the Ellesmere and Hengwrt manuscripts, in the form of two couplets (lines 3155–3156 and 3721–3722) that appear in Ellesmere but not in Hengwrt. As Dr. Ross recounts, Manly and Rickert seemed to feel that the first couplet may have been added by an editor, but that the second could have been an emendation by Chaucer himself (pp. 54–55). Objecting to the arbitrariness of such editorial decisions, Dr. Ross thinks that “both may be Chaucerian afterthoughts made available to El[l]esmere]” (p. 55), but that the omission of all four lines from the Hengwrt manuscript makes their status uncertain. His edition includes the lines within square brackets. The admirable pragmatism of this solution cannot disguise the arbitrariness of his own decision to follow Hengwrt at all costs. Omissions of this kind are inevitably less significant as indications of the status of the readings of a manuscript than textual agreements or disagreements would be, given the constraints and accidents of manuscript transmission. And since Dr. Ross is anyway of the opinion that these four lines may be authentic, one might prefer to see their omission from Hengwrt and inclusion in Ellesmere as an indication of the complexity of the relationship between these early manuscripts, rather than as a reason to doubt the authenticity of the lines after all. But whatever opinion one might have about the authenticity of these four lines, Dr. Ross's introduction, itself, provides good reason to wonder whether his claim that the Variorum Edition may present the *Miller's Tale* “as Chaucer wrote it,” is not based upon an over-simplification of the manuscript affiliations.

As indicated above, Dr. Ross's edition draws almost exclusively upon the Hengwrt manuscript, developing Manly and Rickert's view of the considerable authority of the readings of that manuscript, based upon their extensive and exhaustive collations of the manuscripts of the *Canterbury Tales*. But Dr. Ross's own re-collation of the text of the *Miller's Tale* in his group of base manuscripts raises at least some questions about the utter reliability of Manly and Rickert's description of the textual affiliations of the manuscripts; as Dr. Ross claims, “their Corpus of Variants is sometimes in error and occasionally inconsistent” (p. 113). Very probably such errors and inconsistencies would have little effect upon the affiliations of manuscripts of the *Canterbury Tales*, but if they are significant enough to be noticed by Dr. Ross in his re-collation of the text of a single tale in a small number of manuscripts, it must at least raise the possibility that Manly and

Rickert's account of textual affiliation might have to be refined. This possibility alone, raised by his own re-collations, might have inclined Dr. Ross to make other claims for his edition than that it presents the *Miller's Tale* "as Chaucer wrote it."

As it is, his edition pursues to a more extreme position the logic of Manly and Rickert's work, whilst his re-collations raise the possibility, at least, that their account of the affiliations of manuscripts might require modification. This is not to criticize the choice of the Hengwrt manuscript as the base text for the edition, but only to reflect unease over the other claims Dr. Ross makes for his text. Only if the massive work of collation of all the manuscripts of the *Canterbury Tales* were undertaken again could one imagine an edition that differed from Manly and Rickert, with a similar claim to authority. The General Editors' preface makes it quite clear that this is not an aim of the Variorum Edition. The choice of the Hengwrt manuscript as base text for the Variorum, and Dr. Ross's own enthusiasm for its readings in this edition of the *Miller's Tale*, reflect the current standing of the text amongst editors and are in themselves an appropriate fulfillment of the Variorum's intention to record a history of scholarship.

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RICHARD ALLEN SHOAF. *Dante, Chaucer, and the Currency of the Word: Money, Images, and Reference in Late Medieval Poetry*. Norman, Okla.: Pilgrim Books, 1983. Pp. xv, 312. \$35.95.

This is an ambitious, difficult, and stimulating failure, to review which properly one would need a full essay. I shall therefore limit myself to a few essential points. Shoaf's book "seeks," in the author's own words, "a late-medieval poetics of reference," thus examining "the faith which assumes that word and thing do—and, moreover, shall—tally" (p. 14). In itself this is an extremely important goal, and at various points Shoaf rises to the occasion, particularly in parts Two and Three, which are devoted to Chaucer's *Troilus* and *The Canterbury Tales*.

However, several objections can be raised. The first is that the accumulation of several strains is difficult to control and produces a certain amount