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The Textual Tradition of the Canterbury Tales by N. F. Blake
(review)

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to be focused on four individual tales. These essays, on *The Miller's Tale*, *The Friar's Tale*, *The Summoner's Tale*, and *The Manciple's Prologue and Tale*, all appeared originally about two decades after the general essays reprinted in the first half. The notion of "structural irony" as developed in each of these essays covers ground that today might be well advertised as a study of "intertextuality" and "narratology." Birney anticipates the arrival of such hard-core new-age professionalism as our terms imply with what he would still see, I think, as appropriately Chaucerian ironic deflation; gently he lampoons a contemporary critic who "recently observed, with somewhat disingenuous gravity, that Chaucer enriched the irony of Absolom's fate by making him the inhibited 'flatulatee' in contrast to Nicholas, the 'natural' man, the 'flatulator'" (p. 79).

From Birney's point of view it must nevertheless appear that the critical voice of the Victorians is distressingly persistent, still as burdened with tomes and terms of post-Romantic German idealism as ever and, with the earnestness of genuine insecurity, still transposing them into the English critical vocabulary. Inescapably, Birney's own literary style — the very accents of his critical prose — ironically echoes the same era. He wants us to know, however, that as a reader of Chaucer's irony he votes with the Elizabethans: "I think that old Elizabethan, Reginald Scott, was accurate when he said Chaucer looked upon men 'and derided their folly in such a manner as the time would suffer him.'" In his next sentence, ever the gentleman, he deftly applies his point: "The trouble with Chaucer study today is that it has fallen into the hands of professors, who are such incorruptible fellows" (p. 10). He means it, of course; and one suspects that his editor and former student does too.

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N. F. BLAKE. *The Textual Tradition of the Canterbury Tales*. London and Baltimore, Md.: Edward Arnold, 1985. Pp. xiii, 222. \$49.50.

The Textual Tradition of the Canterbury Tales draws together the many facets of Norman Blake's research on *The Canterbury Tales*, gives the rationale behind his 1980 edition of the work, and in some respects goes beyond what he has previously published. Blake's position among editors of

The Canterbury Tales is unique. He not only bases his text on the Hengwrt manuscript and uses its ordering of the tales and links but rejects as scribal almost every line of text not in Hengwrt. The only exceptions are those passages where eyeskip by the scribe can be demonstrated. Excluded as a result are the links in the E and F sections except for the Clerk's Envoy and the Host stanza, the five added passages in *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*, the Adam stanza in *The Monk's Tale*, and the whole of the Canon's Yeoman's sequence.

Blake bases his decisions on a set of interlocking arguments derived solely from textual evidence. He rejects any effort to distinguish on grounds of quality lines Chaucer wrote that do not appear in Hengwrt from those added by scribes. In this respect he reflects the recent tendency to question any revision by Chaucer of his work—to attribute to scribes and editors most of the changes hitherto seen as authorial. Even the lively addition to the Knight's interruption of the Monk in *The Nun's Priest's Prologue* falls victim to this rigorous principle. Blake envisages *The Canterbury Tales* as a set of unarranged fragments on which the author was still at work when he died. No circulation of tales or groups of tales took place either before or immediately after Chaucer's death. An editor or a small group worked on what Chaucer had left behind, producing a copy text which became the exemplar for all the early manuscripts. This copy text consisted not of a new manuscript but rather of an arrangement of Chaucer's own materials, some of the groups loosely held together, a few of the tales still without links, all of the major segments subject to rearrangement as familiarity with the materials developed. From a very early stage in this procedure came the Hengwrt manuscript.

Blake takes issue with the usual explanation for the irregularities of Hengwrt as presented most authoritatively in the Doyle-Parkes introduction to the *Variorum Facsimile*. He believes the order to have been settled before hand on the basis of (1) working first with the certainties of beginning and end (A and I, to use the Chaucer Society system, as the one most people know), (2) taking up then the linkless tales but leaving spaces for linking passages to be produced on order by some gifted person associated with the project, and (3) turning finally to the linked tales (C, B¹, H, and D). In the course of the copying, two problems arose. First, someone noticed the mentions of the Wife of Bath in the Clerk's and Merchant's tales and realized that the D fragment with her *Prologue* and *Tale* ought to precede the tales with reference to her. The man in charge inserted this last written section into the only early place in the manuscript with a coincidence of quire and tale ending (i. e., after the A section). He also withheld

The Second Nun's Tale for a time, hoping to have a newly written *Canon's Yeoman's Prologue* and *Tale* to attach to it. Hence the anomalous twenty-second quire with Saint Cecilie apparently inserted to follow *The Franklin's Tale* as it does in most of the manuscripts.

Blake goes on to discuss in great detail all the other early manuscripts of the collected tales, i.e., Corpus 198, Harley 3774, Cambridge Dd.4.24, Ellesmere, Cambridge Gg.4.27, Lansdowne 851, and Petworth. He pays more systematic attention than has any previous scholar to such codicological features as quire makeup and rubrication. He also considers closely any additions to or omissions from the text as presented by Hengwrt. He regards Corpus's rearrangement of the text as based on a new principle of ordination, the use of numbered chapters rather than the sequence of prologue-tale-link or prologue-tale, etc. This new principle led to the incorporation of Gamelyn, the Cook's fragment of a tale being too short to make up a full fourth chapter. The Corpus editor reverted to the other system before the completion of his manuscript, and none of the other editors—though some were influenced by the numbering in Corpus—took up the system of chapters as a basis for arrangement. Blake goes on to discuss the *b* family of manuscripts and to extend his case against any circulation of Canterbury tales during Chaucer's lifetime to cover all his other works as well.

Few scholars will accept Blake's account of how the manuscript tradition of *The Canterbury Tales* evolved. Despite his attempt at rigor in confining himself to textual evidence, he indulges in frequent *ex parte* reasoning. For instance, he rejects the Chaucer Society lettering as a system of reference for the fragments of *The Canterbury Tales* because it does not reflect the order of tales in any manuscript, because it does not readily allow for discussion of alternative arrangements, and because it tends to suggest that a particular arrangement is correct (p. 44). He then goes on to adopt the Arabic-number system of his own edition, based on Hengwrt but omitting the only two links in Hengwrt that he considers spurious. He does this with many disclaimers: "This is not meant to imply that Hg contains the only genuine pieces by Chaucer. . . . The links are therefore excluded without at present implying anything regarding their genuineness or otherwise" (p. 45). As it turns out, the passages not in Hengwrt (referred to by letter and number as in Skeat) are the only ones easily identified by a non-Hengwrt addict. The reference on page 108 to "10:2896," for instance, requires a reader unprovided with Blake's edition to consult a table on pp. xii–xiii and then add 28 lines to 2896. The 10 stands for the fragment that has come to be known as B². The difficulty of Blake's system proves at times too much for its

author, as witness mistakes in section numbering on pages 40, 141 (2), and 155.

Much more serious is the way Blake rejects the pre-1400 circulation of any of *The Canterbury Tales*. He takes the absence of any extant manuscripts from the fourteenth century as decisive for all of Chaucer's works. In support of his position with regard to *The Canterbury Tales* he points out the stability of the constant groups. One would expect these "constant sections to have become muddled and their links to have been lost. If there was an early version of KtT which was published, why does that text not appear in other sections of the poem" (p. 52)? Of course, the early version of *The Knight's Tale* (mentioned in *LGW*) was not a part of *The Canterbury Tales*. The possibility of a tale circulating without its links and at the same time remaining in Chaucer's possession firmly in place in its section does not occur to him. Similarly he dismisses the word "read" in Chaucer's advice to Bukton, attributes Chaucer's reputation as a poet at home and abroad to readings aloud by the poet or professional readers, and ignores the *Retraction* (which even if not by Chaucer must refer to works known to be beyond the poet's control). He also fails to consider the textual evidence for circulation before the tales were gathered into collections.

Here the theory of a single copy text as exemplar for all the early manuscripts comes into question. If the textual tradition of *The Canterbury Tales* has established one thing, it is that Hengwrt did not use the same exemplars as those for Corpus 198 and Harley 7334. No amount of tampering to improve the ordering and to make the work seem more nearly complete will account for the variants that appear in what Blake takes to be the second and third manuscripts to use his posited copy text.

When we come to the two rejected links in Hengwrt, we see the danger of ignoring aesthetic considerations. The linking in Hengwrt of *The Squire's Tale*, *The Merchant's Tale*, and *The Franklin's Tale* was done according to Blake's theory with passages written after Chaucer's death for that specific purpose. When the tales were reordered for Harley 7334 to bring *The Clerk's Tale* and *The Merchant's Tale* into closer association with *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, names in the links were changed to fit the new order, Merchant-Squire-Franklin. To claim, as Blake's theory implicitly does, that F 673-708 were written specifically to introduce *The Merchant's Tale*, with the Merchant praising the Squire and comparing him to his own son, that the change to Franklin involving only the change of the name forced the link into a relationship for which F 1-8 (*The Squire's Prologue*) had been originally composed — this claim violates all likelihood, especially when we consider the lameness in Hengwrt of E 2442 without the mention of love

and of F 699 with the extra word *certeyn* to give the rhyme sound provided by *Frankleyn* in the other version. It is furthermore absurd to ascribe to those interested in making sense of the disconnected fragments Chaucer left behind the quixotic project of composing *The Canon's Yeoman's Headlink, Prologue, and Tale*, connecting them to a saint's legend mentioned in *LGW* as a separate work, and then tying the resulting fragment to a specific place five miles from Canterbury and four and a half miles from the inn where the pilgrims spent the previous night. The omission of *CYPT* by Hengwrt has little in common with the omission of Gamelyn, though Blake tends to associate the two. *CYPT* makes its first appearance fully integrated into the sequence of tales. No grouping of manuscripts omits it. The Tale of Beryn, similarly compared by Blake, belongs to a totally different period of response to Chaucer's masterpiece.

Numerous other objections to parts of Blake's "tradition" could be made. Suffice it to mention his labeling of Ellesmere and Cambridge Gg as *a* manuscripts and his inclusion of Lincoln 110 in the *b* family. Only the ordering associates these manuscripts with *a* and *b*. As he does with his theory of a single copy text, Blake ignores the evidence of textual variants. This evidence confines the *a* family to Cambridge Dd, Egerton 2726, Devonshire, Cardigan, and Manchester English 113; the *b* family, to Helmingham, New College D314, Caxton's first edition, and Trinity College Cambridge R.3.15. As one would expect of so complicated a subject, the book is difficult to read; it is also repetitive. The questions Blake addresses himself to are important. The effort to present a consistent picture of the textual tradition is commendable.

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N. F. BLAKE. *William Caxton: A Bibliographical Guide*. Garland Reference Library of the Humanities, vol. 524. New York and London: Garland, 1985. Pp. x, 227. \$39.00.

One has to applaud the strategic marketing of the Garland Press because they have managed to fulfill a good many needs with this slender not very expensively printed text. As Caxton himself has become as interesting or perhaps more so than the works he printed, scholars have acutely felt the