One of the most familiar, enduring, and amusing clichés in Chaucer reception is the notion of Chaucer’s “rude times.” I chose this topic years ago (or at least this title), not because I thought Chaucer’s reception history was unique, but because I happened to be familiar with the anecdotal details of that history. I drafted the article, dropped it, then lost everything I had imagined or thought during a computer crash years ago, leaving me with that same sense of liberation I experienced in 1971, when everything I owned was incinerated in an apartment fire.

This critical myth serves and has served a number of functions, and this chapter will outline what those functions are. More important, it will reflect on my own understanding of this history, on why this topic appealed to me in the first place, why I did not pursue it almost two decades ago, and why I was blinded then to certain aspects of this project that seem obvious to me now.¹

The phrase has now fallen out of favor: respected medievalists cannot really chide Chaucer, that sophisticated citizen of London, for his rudeness, whether they mean “rude” in a purely metaphorical sense, or hear vestiges of its presumably literal meaning ‘rustic’, ‘uncultivated’ (but there is that metaphor again). We cannot chide the medieval period for being less sophisticated than we are, or than Chaucer himself was. Such authorial rudeness, however defined, is something to be celebrat-

ed, even though those likely most responsible for our notion of an “urbane” Chaucer — that is, Dryden and Kittredge — seemed to apologize for it.

Today, to invoke the contrast rudis/urbanus is to speak in metaphors, and perhaps this was always the case. In contemporary America, the meaning of these metaphors is entirely other than what it was in Dryden’s day or in what seems to us that glorious past of old time America (the days when some of us grew up in mid-century, or perhaps a half or a full century earlier in the heady early days of the Chaucer Society). It is thus extremely difficult to communicate with our predecessors on such topics, and difficult as well for them to communicate with each other. Yet despite this (or perhaps because of it), the power and utility of the myth of rudeness persists.

One of the most full blown and effusive variants is in Thomas Warton’s *History of English Poetry* (1774), a work that generally captures the full flavor of the Chaucerian clichés that enable us to understand Chaucer as well and as badly as we do:²

Chaucer was a man of the world: and from this circumstance we are to account, in great measure, for the many new embellishments which he conferred on our language and our poetry….His travels…induced him to polish the asperity, and enrich the sterility of his native versification with softer cadences, and a more copious and variegated phraseology….At rude periods the modes of original thinking are unknown, and the arts of original composition have not yet been studied.³

I have before hinted, that Chaucer’s obscenity is in great measure to be imputed to his age. We are apt to form roman-

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tic and exaggerated notions about the moral innocence of our ancestors. Ages of ignorance and simplicity are thought to be ages of purity. The direct contrary, I believe, is the case. Rude periods have that grossness of manners which is not less friendly to virtue than luxury itself.⁴

We are surprised to find, in so gross and ignorant an age, such talents for satire and for observation on life; qualities which usually exert themselves at more civilized periods, when the improved state of society, by subtilizing our speculations, and establishing uniform modes of behaviour, disposes mankind to study themselves, and renders deviations of conduct and singularities of character more immediately and necessarily the objects of censure and ridicule.⁵

For Warton and those contemporaries who cared about Chaucer, “rude times” or any of its variants was a catch-all that encapsulated whatever topic literary historians wished to raise in regard to him: vices and virtues, distinctions of the subject from competitors, his relation to his competitors, poetic lineage. Warton’s persuasive and self-assured rhetoric may obscure the illogic behind his particular claims: we think virtue is a function of pure ages, but gross ages produce it to the same degree. In fact, our ancestors were no less pure than we are, although perhaps we believe otherwise.

Warton pretends that we are “surprised” to discover that preceding ages are gross,⁶ and furthermore, that whereas we thought Chaucer’s virtue was a function of the absolutely pure age in which he lived, in fact his unquestioned virtue is to be praised despite the grossness of the age in which he lived. More likely, no serious reader of Chaucer ever formulated such a thought. It’s just that we can be persuaded that we should have thought or actually did think that.

⁴ Ibid., 1:431.
⁵ Ibid., 1:435.
⁶ A favorite phrase of Warton, e.g., 1:367: “We are surprised to find, in a poet of such antiquity, numbers so nervous and flowing…”
Early Variants (Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries)

What passes for the earliest criticism or evaluation of Chaucer is free from apology: Chaucer is simply the subject of praise. We know this because it is recorded in the now classic compendium of early Chaucer reception, Spurgeon’s *Five Hundred Years of Chaucer Criticism and Allusion*. It is now customary to call this a basic source, as if, rightly or wrongly, it were beyond criticism. I will be returning to the nature of this source and the implications of using it in my conclusion. The following are from Spurgeon, 1:10–66.

Gower (1390):

Of Ditees and of Songes glade,
The whiche he for mi sake made,
The lond fulfild is oueral:
Whereof to him in special
Aboue alle othre I am most holde …

Lydgate (1400):

Go gentill quayer, and Recommaunde me
Vnto my maistir with humble affectioun
Beseke hym lowly of mercy and pite
Of thy rude makyng to haue compassioun

Lydgate (1401):

Chaucer is deed that had suche a name
Of fayre makyng that [was] without wene
Fayrest in our tonge , as the Laurer grene.

We may assay forto countrefete

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His gay style but it wyl not be; 
The welle is drie …

Lydgate (1405):
I symple shall extoll theyr soueraynte
And my rudenes shall shewee theyr subtylyte …

And eke my master chauceris nowe is graue
The noble rethor Poete of breteine
That worthy was the laurer to haue
Of poetrie

Hoccleve (1412):
Of maister deere, and fadir reverent!
Mi maister Chaucer, flour of eloquence,
Mirour of fructuous entendement
…..
Althogh his lyfe be queynt, the resemblaunce
Of him hath in me so fresh lyflynesse
That, to putte othir men in remembraunce
Of his persone, I haue heere his lyknesse
Do make, to this ende in sothfastnesse,
That thei that haue of him lest thought & mynde,
By this peynture may ageyne him fynde.

Lydgate again (1412–20):
The noble Rethor that alle dide excelle
For in makyng he drank of the well
Vndir pernase that the musis kepe
On whiche hil I myght neuer slepe.

Lydgate (1426):
The noble poete off Breteyne,
My mayster Chaucer, in hys tyme,
Afeter the Frenche he dyde yt ryme
Word by word, as in substaunce,
Ryght as yt ys ymad in Fraunce ….
NOSTER CHAUCERUS

Hawes (1503):
   O, prudent Gower! …
   O, noble Chaucer! …
   O, virtuous Lydgate! …


In my own condensed version of Spurgeon’s selections above, there is nothing in Chaucer that requires apology or even qualification. He is simply a wonderful poet, and we come limpingly after him; we are not historians evaluating Chaucer with disinterest, but rather we ourselves are part of that history. To Lydgate, the only distance between “us” and “Chaucer” is one of quality: Chaucer was a great writer, we are worse. Our distance from Chaucer is not temporal, but literary. He shares the virtues of both the aristocracy (nobility) and clergy.

What appears to us to be the earliest criticism of Chaucer we could label as “modern” incorporates some notion of the historical distance we ourselves necessarily feel when discussing him: Chaucer’s time and culture is in the past and irrecoverable. Caxton’s famous preface to the second edition of the Canterbury Tales portrays a Chaucer whose text has been corrupted, not by his times, but by his scribes. It is interesting that Caxton uses this myth not only to excuse Chaucer, but also to excuse himself. He, Caxton, is not responsible for the corruption of Chaucer’s text; rather, this is to be attributed to the badness (rudeness?) of a manuscript, which, like Chaucer’s own pedigree, can only be corrected by an act of gentrification.

one gentylman camn to me and said that this book was not according in many places vnto the book that Gefferey chau- cer had made….Thenne he sayd he knewe a book whyche hys fader had and moche louyd that was very trewe …
Whereas to fore by ygnouraunce I erryd in hurtyng and
dyffamyng his book in dyuerce places in settyng in somme
thynges that he neuer sayd ne made….\textsuperscript{8}

This sense of historical distance leads in the following centu-
ries to many things: the creation of a biography that is largely
fictional (at least in terms of what late nineteenth-century historiography believes constitutes a fact), monumentalization of
Chaucer, best epitomized by his tomb in Poet’s Corner or the
series of complete editions begun in 1532 (or perhaps 1526), the
ideological reinterpretation and modernization of him as a pro-
to-reformist.\textsuperscript{9} Chaucer is no longer the inspiration for particular
writers (Hoccleve, Lydgate), but rather the origin of a history of
writers.\textsuperscript{10}

The earliest biographies of Chaucer seek to model Chau-
cer after writers in other traditions. Chaucer functions as does
Dante, or Homer, or Alain.\textsuperscript{11} That is, he is an abstract figure in
literary history, not a poet familiar to other poets. His “mean-
ing” has become more important than the words he wrote or the
life he may have lived. And biographical assertions are a product
of this cultural function, not mere records of historical fact.

\textsuperscript{8} The most easily available version is in W.J.B Crotch, \textit{The Prologues and Epi-
For my reservations on the use of this source, see my \textit{Abstractions of Evi-
dence in Manuscripts and Early Printed Books} (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2009),
132–37.

\textsuperscript{9} On these editions, see my \textit{Who Is Buried in Chaucer’s Tomb?}, Johnston,
notion of rudeness, which in earlier writers was simply a rhetorical \textit{sermo humilis} attached to themselves, is historicized, and projected onto the his-
torical context in which Chaucer stands out.

\textsuperscript{10} On this notion of “Father Chaucer,” see Seth Lerer, \textit{Chaucer and his Read-
ers: Imagining the Author in Late Medieval England} (Princeton: Princeton
University Press, 1993).

\textsuperscript{11} The most convenient summary of these early biographies is in Eleanor
Prescott Hammond, \textit{Chaucer: A Bibliographical Manual} (New York: Mac-
millan, 1908).
When John Shirley earlier discussed Chaucer in terms of class, nobility was attributed to his audience. This seems to correspond to what we know (or now know) of his background, all scrupulously recorded in Chaucer Life Records. Shirley in 1456 describes the Canterbury Tales as follows:

First foundid, ymagenid and made bothe for disporte and leornyng of all thoo that beon gentile of birthe or of condicions by the laureal and moste famous poete that euere was to-fore him as in themvelisshing of oure rude moders englishe tonge....

Chaucer is a cleric (as he was for earlier writers) and the English language is given the attribute “rude.”

The earliest biographers Bale, Leland, and Pitts literalize or transfer the metaphor of nobility. Chaucer is not a “noble rhetor” (as he was for Lydgate), but a “nobleman” period—a member of the aristocracy. In the introduction to the printed edition of 1532, William Thynne (or Brian Tuke) refers to Chaucer as “that noble & famous clerke Geffray Chaucer,” the use of the word clerk shows that “noble” is still metaphorical. But to Leland in 1545, it was not: “De Gallofrido Chaucero, Equite.” As these editions were reprinted and re-edited, that notion of nobility is established iconographically on the title page of 1561

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12 On Prologue to Knight’s Tale, quoted in Spurgeon, Chaucer Criticism and Allusion, 1:53–54.
13 This preface was one of the few major pieces of Chaucer reception not printed extensively in the two major scholarly works on Chaucer’s reception in the early twentieth century: Hammond’s Manual, and Spurgeon’s Chaucer Criticism and Allusion. It was, according to Spurgeon, readily available in the EETS edition of Francis Thynne, Animadversions Upon the Annotacions and Corrections of some Imperfections of Impressiones of Chaukers Workes (1598), ed. G.H. Kingsley, rev. F.J. Furnivall (London: N. Trübner & Co., 1875).
14 Hammond, Chaucer, 87.
and most emphatically in the engraved author portrait in the 1602 edition showing details of his lineage.\textsuperscript{15}

The notion of “Noble Rhetor” sets up an implied contrast with what came before: if Chaucer is noble, whether literally or figuratively, then others must be churls; if Chaucer’s virtue is that he “embellished” the English language, then by contrast, English prior to Chaucer is unembellished. By the end of the fifteenth century, the main lines of Chaucer reception (or perhaps less grandly, the most common clichés in the reception of Chaucer) are well established. And it is easy (through Spurgeon) to multiply the examples shown above.

The themes of Chaucer’s early reception are broad enough that any seemingly conflicting examples can be incorporated or explained away, and the commonplaces of the “noble” Chaucer and the embellishing of our tongue lead to a number of sometimes contradictory variants. For Robert Copland (1530), the printer saves Chaucer’s language from the damage of time:

\begin{quote}
And where thou become so ordre thy language  
That in excuse thy prynter loke thou haue  
Whiche hathe the kepte from ruynous domage  
In snoweswyte paper, thy mater for to saue  
With thylke same langage that Chaucer to the gaue  
In termes olde\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

More commonly, Chaucer’s language is not simply old (something to be preserved) but distinct from that of his contemporaries. The most tortured variant of this is perhaps in Thynne’s Preface to his 1532 edition:

\begin{quote}
For though it had been in Demosthenes or Homerus tymes  
whan all lernyng and excellency of sciences florisshed amon-
\end{quote}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{15} See also Berthelet’s contemporary edition of Gower’s Confessio Amantis (1532): “The whiche noble warke, and many other of the sayde Chaucers….” (“To the Reder”).
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{16} Lenuoy of R. Coplande boke prynter; in Spurgeon, Chaucer Criticism and Allusion, 1:77.
\end{flushright}
ges the Grekes or in the season that Cicero prince of elo-
quence amonges latynes lyued, yet it had been a thyng right
rare & straunge, and worthy perpetuall laude, that any clerke
by lernyng or wytte coulde than haue framed a tonge, before
so rude and imperfite, to such a swete ornature & composy-
cion, lykely if he had lyued in these dayes, being good letters
so restored and reuyued as they be, if he were nat empeched
by the enuy of such as may tollerate nothyn, whiche to vnder-
sonde their capacite doth nat extende, to haue brought it
vnto a full and fynall perfection.  

Even in Demosthenes’ times, when learning flourished, it would
have been a praiseworthy thing had Chaucer done what he did,
and if he had lived in these times and avoided the envy of detrac-
tors, he might well have brought language to its full perfection.
(But he did not, because he lived in his own times, and therefore
had no chance of perfecting it.) Chaucer is a jewel set in “rude
matter,” just as in later centuries he would be “urbane” among
his rude conmtemporaries. That seems the basis of Thynne’s
equally tortured praise of the King:

And deuisyng with my selfe, who of all other were most
worthy, to whom a thyng so excellent and notable shulde be
dedicate, whiche to my conceite semeth for the admiracion,
noueltie, and strangnesse that it myght be reputed to be of in
the tyme of the authour, in comparison, as a pure and fyne
tryed precious or polyced iewell out of a rude or indigest
masse or mater, none coulde to my thynkyng occurre, that
syns, or in the tyme of Chaucer, was or is suffycient, but onely
your maiestie royall, whiche by discrecyon and iugement, as
moost absolute in wsysedome and all kyndes of doctryne,
coulde, & of his innate clemence and goodnesse wolde, adde, or gyue any authorite hervnto.18

Much of this is simply an acknowledgement of temporal change: that which makes us human rather than what we imagine it is like to be a god. It has to do with the growing unintelligibility of Chaucer’s language and style, an unintelligibility that makes the claims of its virtues unassailable: there was a time when Chaucer seemed not strange at all, when scribes produced manuscripts of his work as if it were the most natural thing in the world. But no more. I read. I listen. I no longer understand what is in front of me. The effort I expend must be matched by the virtues of the text that requires it.

Rarely is this admitted: no purported literary scholar or dillettante says flat-out that Chaucer writes in a dialect that they no longer understand. Rather the strangeness of his language is paradoxically judged as hyper-modern. As such a hyper-modern author, Chaucer has lapses: his meter is unscannable, his words unintelligible, his spelling unorthodox. These apparent faults should be a product of chronological distance; but they are not. Rather, they are indications of an infectious “rudeness” in history. The chronological distance, which would easily excuse all this or make it hardly worth consideration (of course Chaucer is difficult to understand, because he wrote 200 years earlier), is ignored or rather displaced from Chaucer to his contemporaries. It is not that Chaucer is difficult; rather his “times” are rude. Chaucer, noster Chaucerus — he is like us; he maintains his “urbanity,” which increases as those who can experience it, who can understand or appreciate it, become fewer and fewer in number. What begins as a diachronic view of history is scrapped in favor of a synchronic view (the transhistorical Chaucer, noster Chaucerus); and this Chaucer is then rehabilitated, or the myth of his greatness supported, by a readmission of the diachronicity: times have indeed changed; we have advanced culturally.

18 Chaucer, Works, 1532, sig. A2v–A3r.
In 1700, Dryden offers a more adequate interpretation of this linguistic situation, that is to say, one we consider modern: language simply changes, as we know from our Horace:

If the first end of a writer be to be understood, then as his language grows obsolete, his thoughts must grow obscure:

Multa renascentur quae nunc cecidere; cadentque,
Quae nunc sunt in honore vocabula, si volet usus,
Quem penes arbitrium est et jus et norma loquendi.

When an ancient word for its sound and significancy deserves to be reviv’d, I have that reasonable veneration for antiquity, to restore it. … Words are not like landmarks, so sacred as never to be remov’d; customs are chang’d, and even statutes are silently repeal’d, when the reason ceases for which they were enacted.19

And the way is set for the philological Chaucer of the nineteenth century.

Modern Reception and Modern Chaucer

The history of Our Chaucer is amusing to trace and it is easy to proceed further. In the sixteenth century develops the notion of the reformist Chaucer, whereby Chaucer is first excused for “superstitious beliefs,” then said not to have them. According to John Foxe in 1563, Chaucer wrote deliberately on such a dark allegorical level that the most inquisitory readers of all — the bishops — were completely fooled.20 And this “Chaucer” was soon embodied in editions, with the elimination of the Retractions

and the addition of obviously reformist texts such as the *Plowman’s Tale*.

Yet as Chaucer is rendered familiar (a Protestant like us, with a language that through editions is evolving as we are), he is also growing distant. Kynaston’s translation of 1635 shows that the ability to read Chaucer was not considered unusual among English speakers: readers needed a Latin version, not a modern English one. But within a half century, this seems to have changed.

I soon resolv’d to put their Merits to the Trial by turning some of the *Canterbury Tales* into our Language, as it is now refin’d: For by this Means, both the Poets being set in the same Light, and dress’d in the same English Habit, Story to be compared with Story, a certain Judgment may be made betwixt them, by the Reader, without obtruding my Opinion on him.\(^{21}\)

Bizarrely, the translator disappears; the real Chaucer (like the real Spenser) is the one obscured by his words.

Note however, that the myth of rudeness, having no particular function in the eighteenth century, remains constant, as Dryden: “With Chaucer the Purity of the English Tongue began.”\(^{22}\) What was once a response to the sudden obsolescence of Chaucer combined with ideological catastrophe, is now accepted as a given. Chaucer’s “rude times,” once invented and inserted into the canon of criticism, become inextricable.\(^{23}\)

It would be easy to complete or at least extend this survey: the tradition of English translations, the first so-called modern edition by Tyrwhitt in 1775, complete with a scholarly preface and introduction. The philological work of the Chaucer Society

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\(^{117–26}\); *Who Is Buried in Chaucer’s Tomb?*, 79–86. Foxe’s ingenious defense is of works that Chaucer did not write, e.g., *The Testament of Love.*


\(^{22}\) Dryden, *Fables*, quoted in ibid, 1:273.

\(^{23}\) See also, the typographical variant of “rude letters,” i.e., blackletter: Sian Echard, *Printing the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 21.
in the nineteenth century: Furnivall’s extraordinary claim of an
affinity between himself, Chaucer, and Tennyson, a claim that
seems to be calqued from Dryden.24 The invention of Chauce-
rian irony, which instantly transformed Chaucer into a mod-
ern poet (unlike his contemporaries), and readers of the mid-
twentieth century into his most sensitive readers. But that goes
beyond the principal sources that outline this history.

By Way of Conclusion

This was the kind of article I envisioned writing when I first
ran into the strange 1721 edition of Chaucer by John Urry and
its even stranger and (for Chaucerians) more embarrassing re-
ception. At the time, it was the most disparaged and the least
examined edition of all of them. So incensed were Chauceri-
ans over the failings of this edition, they seemed to be rendered
speechless, and thus had no recourse but to repeat, often word-
for-word, the evaluations and opinions of their predecessors.25

I knew “rudeness” was a key concept in the development of
our notion of Chaucer, and imagined it was one of the things
Urry’s roman type edition may have been trying to expunge
from Chaucer. But that idea did not pan out. The roman type
used to represent Chaucer was a purely economic issue, and not
what Urry had intended.26 In the end, I never analyzed or de-
fined “rudeness” sufficiently. And there were other subjects that
seemed to make my point better: the inscription of the tomb, ty-
pographical changes in Chaucer editions; the inscrutability and
remaking of the past, our projection of our own prejudices back

24 “He comes closer to me than any other poet, except Tennyson”: F.J. Furni-
vall, A Temporary Preface to the Six-text Edition of Chaucer’s Canterbury
26 See the detailed discussion of the publication history in William L. Alder-
son and Arnold C. Henderson, Chaucer and Augustan Scholarship (Berke-
onto Chaucer through such terms as “irony” and even “parody.” The notion “rudeness” at the time just could not work, or rather, I could not make it work.

Obviously, neither Chaucer nor his times were rude in any meaningful way. Chaucerians created that myth; at least they did according to the argument sketched above, or more precisely, my version of the reception of Chaucer suggests that they did. Neither Chaucer’s contemporaries nor the enthusiastic reformers were fools, nor were even the stuffiest of Victorian Chaucerians, and dismissing their claims as wrong would be pointless: “Aint it awful” that preceding Chaucerians were not as wise and sophisticated as we are; “ain’t it awful” that they did not have the literary sensitivity we are blessed with today. Beginning, by contrast, with the seemingly naive assumption that they were right may help us see the function their claim had in Chaucerian history. Maybe Dryden was right: words have life, both Chaucer’s and our own.

Or so I thought.

I return to the question of my sources.

The one source that at the time seemed to treat these critics as if they were right, that is, as legitimate witnesses to “the way Chaucer was,” was Spurgeon’s Five Hundred Years of Chaucer Criticism and Allusion. To use this work as a basis for studying reception never seemed problematic to me, no more problematic than the differences between evidence types (see Introduction above). Everything in Spurgeon’s book was “right,” or at least “factual” in the nineteenth-century sense, and even the opinions registered there are “right,” in the sense that they were intelligible variants or even versions of what we think of Chaucer today. Comments were reprinted, without serious mediation (so it seemed) from other historical sources; Spurgeon herself did not seem to second-guess, critique, or even feign amusement at any of them. No one advanced the claim that Spurgeon falsified history in serious ways, not even those who offered updates of her work or redid her work in more presumably accessi-
ble ways, 27 nor did anyone argue, as far as I know, that those who relied on it as I do and have was simply recycling what Spurgeon thought and imagined in the years before 1925.

Spurgeon’s work was an embodiment of Henry Bradshaw’s dictum to Furnivall: “Arrange your facts rigorously and let them speak . . . .” 28 Bradshaw in this letter may have intended that as a mild admonition: no Chaucerian has falsified Chaucer more than Furnivall did and with greater effect, and no one was in better position to see that than Bradshaw. Yet even though Spurgeon claims that Furnivall’s “spirit still lives in the work,” 29 she is following the presumably more sober Bradshaw, and in so doing, sets a high standard for a particular version of literary historiography: here are facts, arranged chronologically, and as such, they do not speak at all, until the scholar makes them speak with a second iteration.

Yet of course Spurgeon falsifies history in some way, just as I falsify history and her own version of it by discussing her here. Spurgeon selected these passages from an undefined corpus—published or printed comments including the name “Chaucer”(?), passages selected and collected by other Chaucerians(?), many chosen by serendipity(?) — and then edited those down to what she or others thought worthy to publish again in a more coherent collection that supported her view of history or contradicted it in what she thought were important or significant ways. 30 I in turn select from them. I have no idea whether I am distorting her history or confirming it, or perhaps misinterpreting completely what she considered the importance of the passages that eventually found their way into her book.

28 Bradshaw’s “rigorously” is misquoted as “vigorously” in G.W. Prothero, A Memoir of Henry Bradshaw (London: Kegan Paul, 1888), 349, as I have repeatedly noted. Reviewers please take note.
29 Spurgeon, Foreword to Chaucer Criticism and Allusion, 1:vi.
30 She acknowledges her reliance on Hyder Rollins for Troilus, but does not detail, as far as I can see, her methods of collection. See her Foreword, 1:vi, for reference to those who “helped me in sending me references, in searching for references and in copying and collating.”
Spurgeon’s work was a massive extension of a genre that was once part of printed editions, that is, the “Testimonials” assuring potential buyers that the work was worthwhile. In Chaucer, these are found in Speght’s edition of 1598 and again in Urry’s edition of 1721. By the nineteenth century, such commentary is out of favor (or it is repurposed): testimonials are redefined as evidence of some kind, a Bradshavian set of facts; they are not statements about Chaucer (secondary sources), but rather facts of his reception (primary sources). These once testimonials, intended to compare Chaucer to his context (his verse is worthy of purchase) now function to isolate Chaucer from this context. Furthermore, they redefine everyone who writes or wrote about Chaucer as one of us — a modern scholar like us — with the same goals, ideals, and prejudices. Those who wrote these early testimonials were not blurb writers; they were critics, just as we are.31

But what is the alternative to these testimonials or to a compendium such as Spurgeon’s? And how else can we begin to understand Chaucer reception, and thus perhaps Chaucer himself, without conducting a sober assessment of the presumed facts, that is, the language in which conversations about Chaucer are conducted? What better and more efficiently arranged compendium of those facts could there be than Spurgeon? Isn’t this the same theory followed by textual-critical history? We study scribal and printing history in order to undo its pernicious effects, leaving us with the pure, unmediated original; and here, we study reception, in order to rid ourselves of its influence, ignoring, for the moment, that we ourselves are part of the reception we are attempting to undo.

Making the Facts Speak

As schoolchildren, we were repeatedly directed to dictionaries for spelling. These were amusingly referred to in the singular — “the” dictionary — as if they were authoritative without

31 See also my “Scribes as Critics,” in Who Is Buried in Chaucer’s Tomb?, 195–213.
being burdened by the inconvenience of authors. Yet as many of us whined behind the backs of our grammar school teachers (it would never have occurred to us to challenge them face to face), you have to be able to spell the word before you can look it up. So you cannot use a dictionary efficiently for this purpose until you have little need of it (it is somewhat alarming that this same difficulty with spelling reappears as one gets older). You also have to have confidence that a certain entity is in fact a word, as defined by “the” dictionary, before you can analyze or even assimilate its various meanings. How do you know that the definitions you see belong to the word you are trying to look up and not to a near homonym? I circle back to that spelling problem — how do I know the spelling of the word whose meaning I am seeking in “the” or in any dictionary? And all this before the even more vexing issues: the problematic assumption that primary and secondary meanings can be demarcated; that “the best writers,” whoever they are, knew and respected these boundaries; that there is a coherent difference between a literal and a metaphorical use of a word. These assumptions are rational, even though they seem indisputably wrong. They are embedded in the conventions of lexicography, and the use of a dictionary can thus never challenge them.

I return to Spurgeon with these unhelpful thoughts in mind: it is no longer a question of the facts, which I have probably read or skimmed more than once. What concerns me is their arrangement, and the categories Spurgeon believes apply to them.

Vol. 1.ix lists the following sections:

1. An outline of the fluctuations of the literary reputation of Chaucer during the last five hundred years.
2. An examination of the criticisms and allusions themselves, roughly grouped and sorted.
3. The various classes of qualities ascribed to Chaucer.
4. The evolution of Chaucer biography.
5. A note on some Chaucer lovers and workers of whom we get glimpses through the centuries…. 
These first five sections concern what we would consider problems specific to Chaucer. Sections 6 through 9 are concerned with more general issues—for example, “the gradual evolution of new senses in the race” and “the evolution of scholarship.”

Section 1 defines six apparent periods of Chaucer reception, variously named (I summarize these in part by running heads, in part by selecting from her discussion): I: Contemporary praise or “Enthusiastic and reverential praise by his contemporaries and immediate successors (Lydgate and Hoccleve)”; II. The Scottish Chaucerians through early editions, reformers, and those who condemned his “scurrilitie”; III: Elizabethans (1:x: “The critical attitude, which begins toward the end of the sixteenth century with the Elizabethans”); Francis Thynne; IV: The seventeenth century (editions 1602–87);52 V: “Dryden and modernizations”; VI: “Scholarly study and appreciation “revival of genuine appreciation” (Tyrwhitt and the Chaucer Society).53 I think, although I am not certain, these categories can be mapped conveniently onto century divisions: I—fourteenth century; II—fifteenth; III—sixteenth; IV—seventeenth; V—eighteenth; VI—nineteenth. And that, I think, is roughly the organization of my inchoate article sketched above.

Grafted onto this chronological view is a list of “qualities” found in the reception of Chaucer.54 (I do not see how sec. 2 really “analyzes and classifies” references; it seems rather a catchall, discussing “those who note that Chaucer ‘refined’ the language” and the relative popularity of texts.) This presumed uncritical (that is to say, unmediated) and unsystematized list of qualities in sec. 3 is distributed along the axis of chronology: (1) Chaucer is eloquent, ornate, (2) moral, (3) learned, and (4) jovial, facetious, merry. This seems to end with the seventeenth century.

52 This period, 1602–87, is defined as that period in which “the knowledge of his versification entirely disappears” (Spurgeon, Chaucer Criticism and Allusion, 1:x). Cf. my conclusions in Chapter 1 above.

53 There is certainly an article to be written about what “inauthentic” or “disingenuous” appreciation might be, at what period that was possible, and who would best exemplify it.

54 Sec. 3, in Spurgeon, Chaucer Criticism and Allusion, 1:xciiiff.
The following section is on the development of biography (sec. 4, Spurgeon, 1:ci). These categories and terms bother me: but that is likely because centuries (the basis of the organizational scheme above) are more a part of my thinking than the sometimes quaint literary critical terminology here.

The implication seems to be that serious (or “authentic”? or perhaps “modern”?) scholarship begins at the point where her survey ends: Spurgeon is thus a part of true scholarship and “genuine appreciation” that begins with Tyrwhitt, or perhaps with the magical date of 1800, or perhaps with the creation of the Chaucer Society a half century later; she is not part of a tradition of flawed impressionistic “criticism and allusion” that begins in Chaucer’s own lifetime. The growth and development of Chaucer studies moves toward discovering what he really is. At some point between the late-eighteenth and the mid-nineteenth century, we are in the realm of modern criticism, painstakingly recovering (or attempting to recover) the true Chaucer, in whom earlier readers had little interest. The familiar notion of noster Chaucerus is doubled in the notion of “Our Tyrwhitt,” and from that moment on, we no longer read Chaucer criticism for its quaintness but for its truth (or perhaps more accurately, we ignore quaintness even in its most egregious manifestation, for example, in Furnivall). A scholar as good as Spurgeon, of course, would never put it this way.

I turn to the elaborate and sophisticated index, which according to Spurgeon is the “responsibility of Arundell Esdaile, without whose expert and invaluable help in recent years these volumes would, I fear, still be unfinished.” (There seems to be no reference to Esdaile in the Index itself.) Spurgeon’s sometimes abstruse introduction seems breezy by comparison. For a few pages, everything proceeds in a pedestrian manner, fol-

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36 Spurgeon, Foreword to Chaucer Criticism and Allusion, 1:vi. The Index appears now as the final section of Spurgeon’s volume 3; it is paginated separately.
lowing conventions familiar to anyone who has made an index. Entries are alphabetized, and subheadings are organized not according to the alphabet or level of importance, but rather in the order of the first page reference given under that sub-heading.

But then, we arrive at the problem that every indexer sooner or later must address: the entry naming the main subject of the book, here Chaucer. The entry begins with a synopsis of the ten headings that follow: Biography, Criticism, Modernizations, Imitations, Illustrations, Manuscripts, Bibliography, Works, Chaucer (a character in fiction), Book titles taken from Chaucer. The order of these headings is neither explained nor is it clear (Spurgeon, vol. 3, Index pp. 1, 9–10). I turn to the most important section, sec. 2: Criticism, since that is announced subject of Spurgeon’s entire work. The sub-headings and selected sub-sub-headings are as follows:

II. CRITICISM
   a) evolution
   b) general
   c) language

The entry “language” contains ten sub-subheadings: 1. general; 2. monosyllables; 3. dialects; 4. pronunciation; and 5. “Held obsolete or rude” (including those who excuse while admitting the charge). For this sub-sub-heading, there are more than two columns of citations (Spurgeon, 31: Index, 15–16). This is followed by a brief 6. “Held not obsolete or rude”; 7. “C. praised for refining English”; 8. “C. corrupted English”; 9. “the importation minimised”; and 10. “the importation denied.”

We are back to the first level of sub-heading:
   d) verse.

This has ten sub-sub-headings: 1. thought irregular; 2. thought rhythmical; 3 thought only apparently irregular; 4. final -e discovered; 5. decried; 6. riding rhyme; 7. couplet; 8. stanza; 9. alliteration; and 10. miscellaneous
   e) prose
   f) particular qualities found in C.
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II. Chaucer

(n) Evolution

(o) General

(p) Language

(q) Text

(r) Print

(s) Geography

(t) Quality found in C

(u) Comparisons of C with other writers

(v) Influence of C on other poets

III. Modernization

IV. Interpretation

V. Illustrations

VI. Bibliography

VII. Biography

VIII. Works

(a) Relative popularity of

(b) 1930 edition of

(c) Chaucer's birthday

(d) Corrections

(e) Editions of complete or nearly complete works

(f) Commentary

I. Biography

(a) Evolution

(b) Texts

(c) Dates

II. Life Stories

(a) and chronology

(b) 4, 1916

(c) 4, 1916

(d) a character in stories and drama

E. Books taken from C

F. Figure 2: Spurgeon, Chaucer Criticism and Allusion, 1934, 3: Index, 10–11.
I believe I am still under the heading “Criticism,” but it is very difficult, looking at a single page, to stay oriented in terms of the general outline.

Twenty-two sub-sub-headings follow. I believe these are under the sub-heading (f) “Particular qualities found in C.” itself a sub-heading of II: Criticism.37

1. realism
2. observation of character
3. Humour: ‘wit’
4. indecency: frivolity
5. moral purpose: satire.
6. anticlericalism
7. piety
8. impiety
9. pathos
10. sublimity
11. want of sublimity or of seriousness
12. love of nature
13. happiness
14. learning
15. universality
16. prolixity
17. brevity
18. eloquence
19. facility
20. artificiality
21. heaviness
22. originality.

There must be a principle of order here, just as there must be in the ten sub-sub-headings under “Verse,” but I look for a direct statement on it in vain. I had thought I understood the sections, even if they are somewhat arbitrary, but the order of these sub-sub-headings is a mystery. These are not arranged by any con-

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37 Spurgeon, Chaucer Criticism and Allusion, 3: Index, 16–17.
vention of indexing that I know: not alphabetically, nor by the number of references, nor by the date or first mention in which any of these things are found or asserted. Yet all of them look familiar; they look familiar because we know what nineteenth-century Chaucerians said, and we know what later scholars said based on what Spurgeon said.

Anyone in the late twentieth- or early twenty-first century who tried to speak intelligently about Chaucer reception without reference to Spurgeon would be grossly deficient as a scholar. Ignoring Spurgeon and the categories used by Esdaile that enable us to use Spurgeon is not an option for responsible, mainstream Chaucerians. And yet, anyone using Spurgeon is bound in some way to Esdaile’s categories and the unsystematic or simply unintelligible way they are defined and deployed. Spurgeon had categories of thought to begin with: she knew what constituted a citation of Chaucer and also had or developed certain themes of reception, which are likely not the ones that would have been chosen at any other point in Chaucerian history. (Early Chaucer editors never had to organize their Testimonials; they simply repeated what was available.) Esdaile then overlaid this with his own detailed but abstruse organizations and Spurgeon must in some way have signed off on this, even though the two systems of organization do not seem to be the same.

I have used Spurgeon (by which now I mean the work in which both Spurgeon’s and Esdaile’s thinking is embodied) in various ways, usually reading from front to back, trying to avoid the restrictions of the categories and the history outlined in the index. I have done the same to the index alone. I have opened the various volumes and read passages at random — the Sortes Spurgeoniana approach to Chaucer reception — thinking or deluding myself that such a method was as good as any other. I would have no idea where in the volumes I was, and when I used the index in this way, I would have no idea how the entry I chose at random was classified. I have more diligently acceded to the apparent views represented in the finished book as it was presented to readers, beginning with a word in the index, trying
to locate its various sub-headings, and following its guidance to the sources.

Yet whatever I do, I am still controlled by the assumptions I am trying to eliminate: Spurgeon’s view of Chaucerian reception and even what literary reception is in the first place, her selection of passages, her editing of the passages she selected, and Esdaile’s re-organization of her work in his index. Spurgeon never articulated the principles by which particular items were chosen and only rarely those for which some were rejected (see footnote 30 above). And neither Spurgeon nor Esdaile defined the conventions used for the extensive index. To determine even the basic principles of selection would require at least giving some attention to questions such as the following: In what way are these selections representative; and what is it they represent? How was the corpus defined? What constitutes an “allusion” to Chaucer? Does it have to involve his name? or a work he actually wrote or was assumed to have written? Is there a difference between “Chaucer” and “the Chaucerian” or is that a function of our conclusions and not involved in our corpus of evidence? If Chaucer’s reputation and his very nature were determined in large part by works he didn’t write, does this mean allusions to those works are part of our histories of reception? And does omitting them recast the history of Chaucerians in our own image? Were passages omitted because they were redundant? or because they did not cohere in any significant way?

I have no way of determining Spurgeon’s thinking on these questions. I can only assume for better or worse that Spurgeon was more or less randomizing these selections more or less in accord with late nineteenth-century scholarship, which is sort of or kind of or to some degree the way we were taught to look at Chaucer in the mid-twentieth century, and that is sort of or perhaps the best I can do when looking at an overall pattern of reception (I cannot, say, confine my thinking to the grammar of a particular sentence in one of the texts that forms this reception). In other words, despite what I do, I seem locked into the (often quaint) assumptions of the nineteenth-century Chaucer Society, in whose series of publications Spurgeon’s work first ap-
peared. But even here, my views on “quaintness” interfere with what I am trying to do.

So I am entitling this chapter “Chaucer’s Rude Times” and going about things the way I always used to, and to some extent still do: I take the most reputable or uncontroversial source, one that has to me proven useful in the past, and begin reading through it, pencil in hand. I check the index to make sure I have not simply read over something obvious. All is circular: variations of a theme, where the theme is so abstract (unlike a musical theme) that the discovery of evidence is merely a projection of the assumptions I formed when I began.

There may be a way around this, by beginning with a word rather than an abstraction: I would simply follow the use of the phrase “rude times” and see where we end. I would simply start with the word “Chaucer” and define that as constituting an “allusion to Chaucer” and exclude all else. But the method that seemed to work so well years ago—looking at the history of a word rather than the history of an idea—fails here. Even the name Chaucer does not work, and the index here diligently distinguishes allusions to the “real” Chaucer (the author?) from those to the “character” Chaucer (in a play?). What, after all, are “rude times”? Real ones? or the naming of them? The words for this idea (was it an idea?) seem so time-bound it is almost impossible to find a use of it after the seventeenth century. Does the concept end? Become concealed under a new, more modern phrase? Or, as Spurgeon seems to suggest, does history end in some Hegelian way once our most immediate ancestors come into view.