The Pynson Chaucer(s) of 1526
Bibliographical Circularity

The Pynson edition (or editions) of Chaucer in 1526 is (are) either a mainstream example of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Chaucer editing, squarely within the tradition of Chaucer folio editions, or an outlier. It (or they) consist(s) of three parts, each with an autonomous signature series (that is, each could be sold as an individual item with quires signed A, B, C…): the Canterbury Tales, Troilus and Creseyde, and the House of Fame with other texts. Each is printed in the same format and in the same type. The colophon for the Canterbury Tales contains the date 1526; the colophons for the other two contain only a reference to the printer. The Short-Title Catalogue (STC) assigns three numbers—5086, 5088, and 5096—although in all extant copies but one, the three items are bound together in some way.¹

The main question I ask here is simply whether descriptive bibliography should consider this one or three items (the bib-

¹ There are three versions of the STC/ESTC: A.W. Pollard and G.R. Redgrave, A Short-Title Catalogue of Books Printed in England, Scotland and Ireland, and of English Books Printed Abroad, 1475–1640 (London: The Bibliographical Society, 1926); a three-volume second edition of the same title revised by W.S. Jackson and F.S. Ferguson (London: The Bibliographical Society, 1976–91). When necessary, these are conventionally distinguished STC1 and STC2, although (without qualification) an “STC number” refers to the one assigned in STC2. The online English Short-Title Catalogue (ESTC) is based on these, but includes books to 1800, http://www.bl.uk/. Early English Books Online (EEBO) contains images of many of these books, as well as bibliographical descriptions (not yet fully incorporating everything in ESTC), http://eebo.chadwick.com/.
liographical version of whether it actually is one or three items). The related questions I brought to this problem seemed rather simple ones to me, and I had hoped I could deal with them without referring to the books themselves or even to images of them. There was no advantage, bibliographical or ethical, to working this way; it was simply an arbitrary choice. But this method proved difficult. The language used to describe copies in standard bibliographies and in library catalogues is equivocal, and even the simplest questions I addressed to competent librarians produced ambiguous results: libraries that were said to hold the books did not; the order of texts implied by the catalogues was incorrect. And despite my familiarity with the ESTC, even the simplest of its conventions often baffled me.

This section will show why these simple questions proved difficult and what obstacles presumably authoritative bibliographical references place in the way.

Early Descriptions

By the time Pollard and Redgrave made the decisions regarding this book, now embodied in their STC of 1926, the most important bibliographical authorities had spoken and their conclusions were various. Ames, *Typographical Antiquities* (1749), noted Pynson’s early edition of *Canterbury Tales* of 1492 (STC 5084), but made no reference to this one. Herbert, in his revision of Ames, had a copy of the 1526 edition, but Dibdin, in his revision, noted that Herbert’s “description, it must be confessed, is not quite so clear and methodical as could be wished.”

The full entry in Dibdin is as follows:

CHAUCER’S WORKS. Imprinted at London in fletestrete, by me Rycharde Pynson, printer vnto the kynges noble grace:

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and fynisshed the yere of our lorde god a. M.CCCCC. and XXVI. the fourth day of Iune.\textsuperscript{3}

“Chaucer’s Works” is Dibdin’s addition, since that inclusive title is not found in the books themselves. Dibdin proceeds, describing the texts in the order they appear in his copy: \textit{Troilus and Criseyде}, \textit{Boke of Fame}, and \textit{Canterbury Tales}. He quotes Herbert’s description:

Chaucer’s \textit{Canterbury Tales}, with the following poems, The boke of Troylus and Cryseyde, the boke of Fame, the assemble of Foules….What other pieces it may contain is uncertain at present, since the copy that the writer of the preface to Urry’s Chaucer had the use of, was imperfect, containing only the pieces above-mentioned; and my own copy more so, having nothing beyond La bele Dame sans mercy; however, I shall describe such as I have, in the order they stand. Of the Canterbury tales I have two copies, but unluckily neither of them have the title leaf, or the prohemye, as mentioned in the preface to Urry’s Chaucer. Indeed that other copy seems to have wanted the title also, as no mention is made whether the said title was general, or only for the Canterbury Tales.\textsuperscript{4}

I assume that by “missing the prohem,” Herbert means missing the first leaf of the \textit{Canterbury Tales}, which contains on its recto a full page with the title, “Here begynneth the boke of Caunterbury tales…” (A1r), on its verso, a Prohem, based loosely on Caxton’s preface to the second edition of \textit{Canterbury Tales}, and a list of tales (A1v). The following page begins The Prologue of the Authour, meaning the General Prologue (A2).

This description is certainly in error, as Dibdin realized: the general title page was not “missing”; it simply did not exist except in its invocation. And the question of concern here — whether the three sections were intended as one book or three — was not

\textsuperscript{3} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{4} Ibid.
yet formulated.\textsuperscript{5} T. Thomas’s preface to Urry’s edition of 1721, referenced by Dibdin, describes it as Pynson’s “Second Edition” (the first was the edition of 1492 containing only the \textit{Canterbury Tales}). Thomas clearly considered it a single edition; he did not distinguish the three sections, but simply listed the texts without reference to the tripartite structure of the book indicated by the signature series.\textsuperscript{6} Skeat, in his edition of Chaucer, was not much interested in the history of editions as a subject, since his own would supplant all of them. To him, the first “complete works” was Thynne’s 1532 edition (STC 5068), which initiated a series of folio editions to 1687, each re-editing and supplementing those before it. His introductory section, “The Complete Works,” states unequivocally: “the first collected works was that edited by W. Thynne in 1532.”\textsuperscript{7} The first scholar who seemed even to imagine the problem was Eleanor Hammond in her 1908 \textit{Chaucer: A Bibliographical Manual}.\textsuperscript{8} Hammond’s \textit{Manual} described editions under two headings: Complete Works, and Copies of Individual Works. The first item in Hammond’s list of complete works is Pynson, 1526:

The copy in the Grenville Library of the British Museum has as titlepage for the first of the three parts, which are there bound together: Here begynneth the boke of Troylus and Cresseye newly printed by a trewe copy.
Titlepage to the second part:…boke of Fame….
Titlepage to the third part….
Colophon Thus endeth the boke of Caunter | bury tales. / Imprinted at London in flete- | strete / by me Rycharde Pynson | printer vnto the kynges no- | ble grace: and fynis= | hed the

\textsuperscript{5} I assume the two copies referred to by Herbert are the two referenced in Pollard and Redgrave in the 1926 STC: L (a complete copy) and O (containing only the \textit{Canterbury Tales}).
\textsuperscript{6} John Urry, ed., \textit{The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer} (London, 1721), sig. l2r.
yere of our lorde god a M. CCCCC. | and xxvi. the fourth | day of June. ⁹

The most important pronouncement was that of Pollard and Redgrave in the 1926 STC. Pollard and Redgrave assigned three separate STC numbers (apparently following Skeat, rather than Hammond) and these numbers would necessarily be the basis of all bibliographical discussion, if not bibliographical decisions, to follow. ¹⁰ I quote these in full, respecting as well as I can the typographical conventions they use. Note that Pollard and Redgrave place what they consider editions of Troilus among other editions of Troilus and editions of the Canterbury Tales with other editions of that title. Thus even though these three parts generally appear together in individual book-copies, they are separated in STC:

5086 [Anr. ed.] [Here begynneth the boke of Canterbury tales, dilygently corrected and newly printed.] fol. R. Pynson, 1526 (4 jn.) L. O. This with nos. 5088 and 5096 may be called the first edition of Chaucer’s works.

5088 Here begynneth the boke of fame, made by G. Chaucer. With dyuers other of his workes. fol. R. Pynson, [1526?] L

5096 [Anr. ed.] Here begynneth the boke of Troylus and Creseyde. fol. R. Pynson, [1526?] L¹¹

STC 5086 is preceded by the two Caxton editions of Canterbury Tales (CT) and the Pynson edition of 1492. STC 5088 is preceded by the Caxton edition of House of Fame (HF). STC 5096 is then

⁹ Ibid., 114.
¹⁰ The most extensive and detailed base for STC descriptions was George Watson Cole, Check-list or Brief Catalogue of the Library of Henry E. Huntington (English Literature to 1640) (New York, 1919). Unfortunately, this is the one major early Chaucer edition that the Huntington Library does not possess.
¹¹ Pollard and Redgrave, STC 1926. The abbreviations L and O here refer to locations of copies, e.g., London (now British Library) or Oxford.
preceded by editions of *Troilus* by Caxton and De Worde. The entry for 5088 does not read [Anr. ed.]; this might be an error, but I assume it means that Pynson’s supposed edition contains works in addition to the *House of Fame*; earlier editions of *House of Fame* (which immediately precede this) contain only the single text. I think the brackets in 5086 (“[Here begynneth . . . ]”) are a mistake, although there might be a convention justifying them. Only two copies are noted: the British Library copy and the Oxford copy, and from this, we might guess that other British libraries do not have the work, which is not the case.

The revised *stc* of 1976 (*stc2*) expands these entries and expands the holdings list. But Pollard and Redgrave’s decisions in the 1926 *stc* (based on two copies) remain the basis of these descriptions:

5086 [Anr. ed.] Here begynneth the boke of Caunterbury tales, dilygently corrected, and newly printed. fol. (R. Pynson, 1526 (4 jn)). L L2. LEEDS.G2.Blackburn Pl. +; HD, TEX (frag.). Y. [1526]

This, 5088, and 5096 may be called the 1st ed. of Chaucer’s Works

5088 [Anr. ed., w. additions.] Here begynneth the boke of fame, made by G. Chaucer; with dyuers other of his workes. fol. (R. Pynson,) [1526?] L(imp.), L2. C2. LEEDS. Blackburn PL.; HD.Y.

Issued w. 5086


Comparing these descriptions with those from the 1926 *stc* raises a few questions. (In the paragraphs below, I distinguish the *stc* of 1926 from the 1975 revision with the abbreviations *stc1* and *stc2*.) Was HF in *stc1* not called “Anr. ed.” because it
contained additions (my thought above)? Or was that simply an error? The “Oxford” copy of CT seems to have disappeared (I believe it is now in Texas). The brackets for “Here begynneth” in STC1’s entry for the CT have disappeared. (What were they supposed to have meant?) Further problems emerge: STC1’s statement “may be called the first edition of Chaucer’s works” is retained in STC2 under 5086. But there is no reference to that in the two other volumes. In STC2, the entry under 5088 contains the additional statement, “Issued w. 5086.” No such statement occurs under 5096.

The information is now contradictory and misleading. First of all, STC2 introduces the ambiguous notion “issue.” To say a book was “issued” with another must mean, if anything, that it was produced at the same time and was intended to be sold with that second book. If such a statement is not qualified (for example, “may have been issued…”), then the conjectured date 1526 should also not be qualified: read [1526] not [1526?]. Furthermore, if 5086 is “issued” with 5096, then 5096 must of course be “issued” with 5086, but there is no note to that effect. That seems obvious, but in catalogues whose conventions are as strict as those in STC2, nothing can be imagined to be obvious.

Let us now look at entries in ESTC as constituted online today (meaning “the last time I checked it”).

Here begynneth the boke of C[a]nterbury tales, dilygently [and] truely corrected, an[d] newly printed [Imprinted at London: In fletestrete, by me Rycharde Pynson, printed vnto the kynges noble grade: and fyuished [sic],

12 See also, STC2 on the 1602 edition: 5076 “Anr. issue, w. gen. tp reset” for one of the copies 1561, whereas 5076.3 is “A variant, w. colophon:…” I don’t understand the difference between “issue” and “variant.” See further STC2 entries 5078, 5079, 5081, and my discussion in Joseph A. Dane, Who is Buried in Chaucer’s Tomb? Studies in the Reception of Chaucer’s Book (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1998), 5–8.

the yere of our lorde god. a. M.CCCC. and xxvi. the fourth day of Iune. [1526]

The cryptic note “Anonymous. By Geoffrey Chaucer.” must be saying that an anonymous prologue precedes the *Canterbury Tales*, but it would be hard to determine that without the book in hand. References include STC (2nd edn.), 5086 and Duff 89. This is Duff’s detailed catalogue of fifteenth-century English books, although I’m not certain of its relevance here.¹⁴ The section “Holdings” (meaning, extant copies) lists 5 British copies, 3 American.

ESTC’s entries for the other sections are as follows. For the *House of Fame*:

Here begynneth the boke of fame, made by Geffray Chaucer, with dyuers other of his workes.

[Imprinted at London: In fletestrete, by Richarde Pynson, printer to the kynges most noble grace, [1526?]]

Place of publication and printer’s name from colophon; publication date conjectured by STC.

Edited by William Caxton. — STC

Issued with STC 5086

5 British holdings; 2 American.

And finally, for *Troilus and Criseyde*:

[Emprynted at London: In Fletestrete by Rycharde Pynson printer vnto the kynges noble grace, [1526?]]

Note: Anonymous. by Geoffrey Chaucer

As in *House of Fame*, there are 5 British copies, and two American copies (these are the same seven copies, of course, although the note does not state that).

From this, without investigating the entries in individual catalogues, I can only conclude that the Oxford copy of the Canterbury Tales noted in STC1 ended up in Texas, and that all other listed copies are copies containing all three works. I don’t understand the use of brackets around publication information that is clearly quoted from the actual books (does this mean, strangely, that that information is not on the title page?). The problem with “issue,” raised in STC1, reappears. And as is often the case, when a statement like this reappears in a later catalogue, it is not simply “repeated”; it is, rather, “confirmed.”

Under modern cataloguing conventions, the three sections must either constitute “one edition” intended to be sold and bound together, or they are “three editions” that could like any other books be bound together by a bookseller or by an owner. If the claim that they were “issued” together is at all meaningful, that likely means they constituted one edition, but it almost certainly means that the publication dates are the same: 1526 indeed needs to be in brackets (as in the ESTC entry for Troilus) that is, it is conjectured, but it does not need to be in brackets with a question mark — what does that mean? that it is “sort of” questioned?

Finally, although it is doubtless churlish to criticize cataloguers for making no more mistakes than I myself will introduce trying to copy their entries, it seems to me that the more scrupulous the conventions, the more problematic the details become. Why, for example, are letters in the title bracketed, but the preposterous turned letter n transcribed as a u followed by “[sic]”? This is pedantry. A turned n is not a u to begin with. It is a mis-set n. Our “Anonymous” reappears. Why are names in bold? (Generally, any change in typeface in these bibliographies represents something of bibliographical concern: but note how the italics used in STC2 to distinguish actual text from paraphrased or conventional text have disappeared.) The bold-face, as far as I can tell, is no more than a highlight; that is, it is bibliographically meaningless.

Putting these together we can come to some tentative conclusions, which have nothing to do with facts or early printing his-
Cacophonies

tory, but only with the history of STC from its origins in 1926 to the present-day on-line ESTC. Pollard and Redgrave made their decisions on the basis of two copies: the British Library copy had all three works bound together; another (the Oxford copy) had only one. Furthermore, because there was no extant general title page, there was, on Skeat’s authority, no complete edition. The 1526 Pynson, like the early Caxton volumes, had failed to represent adequately the ideal form of the “complete edition” which was found in the 1932 Thynne edition and in the folio editions that followed it.

STC2 and ESTC are stuck with the decisions of STC1. They could hardly renumber the books, even though their examination of the many individual copies now recorded almost certainly leads to the opposite conclusion: that the copy O (now Tex) is an outlier (much like pamphlet copies of later Chaucer editions that are found bound singly) and that the three sections (Canterbury Tales, Troilus, and House of Fame) were intended as one book. Again, none of these decisions may be wrong, but this shows how difficult it can be to eradicate errors once introduced into standard bibliographical history.

Order of Sections

All but one of the extant copies contains all three STC items (STC 5086, 5088, and 5096), and no copy exists that binds only two of them together.¹⁵ Does the ordering in the extant book-copies tell us anything about how the printer Pynson conceived these books?

The most important copy bibliographically is the British Library copy, the basis for STC descriptions and also the only copy described in detail in Hammond’s Bibliographical Manu-

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¹⁵ One advantage of the STC’s decisions is that it should enable me to refer to the three “items”/“works”/“parts”/“sections”/“books”/“pamphlets” by STC numbers rather than a word that implies bibliographical status. But as even the introductory sentence above shows, it is almost impossible to do this.
al of 1908. This copy places the *Canterbury Tales* last; the now standard ordering of texts in “complete works” editions places the Tales first, a tradition which begins in 1532 and continues through modern editions. For the Pynson Chaucer, the placement of the *Canterbury Tales* last makes sense, since its colophon is the only one of the three to include a date.

Other copies have different orders for these sections, which I will distinguish as CT (*Canterbury Tales*), HF (*House of Fame* and other texts), and TC (*Troilus and Criseyde*). Harvard has the order CT, HF, TC; the Yale copy also has this order. Leeds has TC, HF, CT. Glasgow has CT, TC, HF. A logical explanation can be given for any of the extant orders: CT is first because it was first in the 1532 edition (the argument could then be made that it was “later” bound to conform to complete-works editions, but another argument could be made that the later order was based on this one). CT is last because it contains a colophon; HF is last because it concludes with “minor works” following the *House of Fame*. But such arguments may be specious: there is no argument that would place HF before TC, as in the Harvard and Yale copies, unless it would also justify HF as the first of three (a placement that does not appear in any copy).

It seems to me I could reasonably conclude one of two things: (1) that the order of these texts “makes sense” to any binder, even though the orders are different, and (2) that the order of the texts is completely random and the only reason for certain orders not appearing is that too few copies exist. The fact that either of these arguments can be made tells me that we are back at square one: there is nothing to be concluded at all.

Descriptive bibliographers might well feel they do not have the luxury to carry on such discursive discussions: ideal copy description should, if possible or feasible, reflect the printer’s intentions (at least, that was how Fredson Bowers conceived it)\(^\text{17}\);

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16 Blackburn PL and Lambeth Palace, despite what ESTC says, claim not to have copies. I cannot confirm whether ESTC’s assertions or the librarians’ denials are true.

yet since printers may have been as wishy-washy or vague as the rest of us, there will be some situations where conventional bibliographical distinctions, meant to be clear and decisive, cannot possibly reflect the historical facts that are the subject of a catalogue. There is no bibliographical room for a situation where neither printer nor distributor had any opinion or preference on section order, or perhaps, even whether the books should be bound together in the first place.18

Alexandra Gillespie, who has studied and thought about the 1526 Pynson edition(s) as much as anyone, started at a different place in Chaucer history, beginning with the notion of a complete-works edition, and working not forward but backward. Not only is Pynson’s edition a complete works, but precedent for both this edition and Thynne’s 1532 edition can be found in Caxton and De Worde’s early quarto editions of individual works. The individual items now found bound separately in almost all copies (for example, de Worde’s 1498 Canterbury Tales, stc 5085, and his Troilus, stc 5095) were once intended to be bound together, at least potentially. Customers who imagined a “complete works” in the early sixteenth century would have one available to them at a bookseller, by combining any of the quartos of Caxton or De Worde that happened to be available. But even Gillespie’s thoughts on this matter run afoul of Hammond’s note: “No collection, even partial, of the Minor Poems was brought together until the ed. by Pynson in 1526. In subsequent prints of the Works or Poems the minor poems are included.”19

In other words, Pynson is the only printer to produce any “collection” of Chaucer works (in this case, the “minor poem”) in an edition with a single signature series (stc 5088). His 1526 edition is thus more easily seen as a precedent for the edition series

18 Precedents for this situation are not uncommon. The pamphlets printed by Ulrich Zell (the first printer from Cologne) in the 1460s were clearly meant to be bound together (or foreseen that way), but not in any particular order or number. Zell’s own notes exist in a presentation copy, whose order and selection occurs in no other extant copy. See my What Is a Book?, 175–76.
19 Hammond, Chaucer, 350.
of 1532–1687 than as an endpoint in Chaucer editions by Caxton and De Worde.

Conclusion

In their book *The Ants*, Bert Hölldobler and E.O. Wilson describe a rather terrifying predator of a particular species of ant. This predator gains access to the ant colony easily, even though to us, it seems not to resemble these victims at all. Hölldobler and Wilson then imagine an unsettling scenario to explain how this is possible:

> When the crickets [who prey on ant eggs] are newly introduced into an ant nest,… they are usually treated in a hostile manner by the worker ants. They are then able to escape death only through swift and nimble running. But the ant aggression usually subsides as soon as the crickets adjust their locomotory pattern to the movement patterns of the undisturbed host ants….Although the cricket does not look like an ant overall, portions of its body resemble parts of the ants’ bodies. Hölldobler [in a 1947 study] elaborated his tactile mimicry concept with a metaphor. Suppose, he said, that we live in a completely dark room and orient primarily by means of the tactile sense in our hands. Among hundreds of us dwells one creature that is very differently constructed but has appendages resembling human hands, and it also manages to mimic our body movements and to touch us with a humanoid caress. This creature is perceived by us as a fellow human being until some crucial behavioral mistake unmask it as an alien.²⁰

This entomological variant of Plato’s cave has kept me up at night, imagining shaking hands in a dark room with an alien

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predator or food source, while mistaking it for a possible sexual partner. I can extend this metaphor again, with the alien STC-creature extending its apparently book-like hands into the closed and protective field of book-copies and their histories. As long as the appendages are properly constructed, and the caresses appropriate, all seems fine. And this is the world in which scholars and bibliographers are more or less content to live. But the world perceived may well be far different—what appears to be the “fit” of bibliography to the objects of the bibliographers’ study is simply the ant-like appendages, mimicking the books. We can only hope they will be fellow-ants (the subject of Holldobler’s metaphor) rather than predatory invaders, who of course would use precisely the same technique.