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The Best-Text/Best-Book of Canterbury: The Dialogic of the Fragments*

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Geoffrey Chaucer's final utterance is so un-Chaucerian in sentiment that several ingenious theories have evolved over the years to account for its textual persistence. The *Retraction* has been read as a real confession by Chaucer the poet in the face of imminent death; as a realistic confession by Chaucer the Pilgrim in response to the Parson's sermon; and as an ironic parody of both confession and retraction in keeping with the Manciple's cynical counsel to silence.

Although these readings are largely incompatible, they do share one important assumption. Each interpretation to some extent accepts unquestioningly that a final sequence of Manciple—Parson—*Retraction* was intended by Chaucer to bring the Canterbury pilgrimage to a definitive and fitting close. But the order of the tales has never been established with any degree of consensus. It is not even agreed that the *Parson's Tale* and the *Retraction* were written late, by Chaucer, and for the *Canterbury Tales*. The vexed question of whether the *Parson's Tale* and *Retraction* silence the Manciple, or whether the Manciple's *caveat* in fact pre-empts and silences *them*, cannot be answered, then, without at least tacit assent to a position that is implicitly editorial.

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Recent studies of the *Canterbury Tales* point to the futility of further debate over Chaucer's final plan. In his comprehensive treatment of the manuscripts, Charles Owen (*Manuscripts*) finds no evidence whatever for any authentic arrangement of the fragments. Jerome Mandel argues as convincingly against any effort to present the *Tales* as a single coherent work (186), and several contributors to the recent volume *Cruz and Controversy* are also protesting against such silent reconstructions of Chaucer's intentions. In support of these positions, I shall argue here that modern editors continue without justification or caution to read order and coherence into Chaucer's supposed closural sequence. I suggest a close scrutiny of such editorial licence, and a re-direction of critical attention to a dialogic—and authentic—principle of order for which sequence is immaterial.

I

Examination of the early editing of Chaucer reveals two fundamentally opposed attitudes to the textual difficulties: there are those who have sought to reproduce a single and therefore most authentic "best text" (Bedier 161) as the closest witness to what Chaucer actually accomplished, and there are those who have sought to produce the most complete and comprehensive "book of the tales of Canterbury" (the rubric which follows the *Retraction*) as a representation of what the poet would have achieved had he lived to supervise the publication of his "book."

Because a lack of explicit connections between fragments left the matter of tale sequence open to conjecture, the early process of revision tended to be additive and reconstructive. By the time John Urry's edition was printed in 1721 the tales had acquired headlinks. By 1775, the fractured nature of *the* text was all but healed: Thomas Tyrwhitt discarded all manuscript rubrics and introduced continuous lineation, so that his five-manuscript collation appeared as a complete and logical sequence of prologue-tale-prologue-tale. A strong objection to such a "made-up" text was finally voiced by Thomas Wright. Wright considered his 1847–1851 edition a truer text, as it was based upon one manuscript only (Harley 7334), and one that he felt was the earliest and therefore best reproduction of the exact language and intention of the poet.¹

Wright's heated attack upon Tyrwhitt can be seen as a prototype for the current "Hengwrtist"² trend in recent Chaucer editing (the crucial difference, of course, is in the modern conviction that Hengwrt, and not Harley 7334, is the more authentic single manuscript), while Tyrwhitt's eclectic

reconstruction from all available manuscripts and editions characterizes the editorial practice of Furnivall, Skeat, Manly-Rickert, and all three versions of F.N. Robinson's most influential 1933 edition. The division is and was not simply a matter of the choice of manuscript(s), however. *All* modern "eclectic" editions are to some degree based upon the "best-text" principle in that they declare either Hengwrt or Ellesmere as their base text (Moorman 100; Fisher 790). The true debate then and today derives from a more fundamental difference in the way each side views an editor's licence in presenting an overall scheme for the *Tales*. Wright was protesting in part against the artificial unity that Tyrwhitt imposed upon a collective "text," The "Hengwrtist" objection is similar: put simply, "Hengwrtists" consider Ellesmere a "book," not a text.

Derek Pearsall's quarrel with "the book" is typical of the "Hengwrtist" stance:

so powerful is the influence of 'the book', so imperative the need for readers for complete, unified and unequivocal texts, the concrete and perceivable realities of the existence of the *Tales* are denied, and any number of myths of unity promoted. ("Editing Medieval Texts" 105)³

A century after Wright, "Hengwrtists" like Pearsall have conducted a second critical housekeeping of such matters as editorial inflation⁴ and subjectivity. As an alternative to the Ellesmere tradition, the "hard Hengwrtist" stance advocates strict adherence to Hengwrt and rejection of all else (including the entire *Canon's Yeoman's Prologue and Tale*) as inauthentic. "Soft Hengwrtism" uses Hengwrt as a guide for all textual readings, but follows Ellesmere's tale order. Both streams are united in privileging Hengwrt's rougher verse and erratic design over the "book-ish" regularity of Ellesmere.

Critical debate over the *Retraction* brings this division between "best-text" and what I will call "best-book" editing into sharp focus: the issue of tale order and linkage inevitably involves questions of textual authority, which in turn devolves upon the question of the "makere" taking leave of the "book" *in propria persona*. How we read these final words and their introductory rubric "heere taketh the makere of this book his leve" is conditioned by our habits of reading and by our notions of what constitutes "the book." Indeed, the rubric itself is possibly the first instance of a subjective "best-book" editorial intrusion, and Hengwrt (our "best-text"), possibly the first attempt at a "best-book." Norman Blake has ventured to reconstruct the task of the Hengwrt compiler. In the introduction to his 1980 edition (6), he states that the compiler attempted to give coherence to Chaucer's

“erratic and muddled” collection of fragments by having Fragments I and X copied first, “as they clearly represented the beginning and end of the poem.” While Blake objects to the unwarranted influence of Ellesmere’s more logical tale-order as “a case of the tale wagging the dog,” he does not note the Hengwrt compiler’s seminal role in this process, which led even so rigorous a “Hengwrtist” as Blake himself to such “book-ish” expressions of unity as “the poem.” This unquestioned placement and acceptance of the final fragment would effectively make a well-wrought frame out of what was admittedly a disordered collection. It is this frame-tale that is wagging the dog.

Once a closing sequence of Parson-*Retraction* is assumed, it is an easy matter to proceed from “the poem” to “the idea” of the *Canterbury Tales*. Pearsall draws our attention to several thematic studies, like Donald Howard’s, that are wholly dependent upon a tale-order artificially set by editors (“Authorial Revision” 41). Thematic connections or incongruencies so discovered are even more problematic when applied to “the ending” of “the poem,” as they inevitably lead to statements being made not only about individual tales, but also about overall design, the existence of which has in this circular manner been first presumed, then proved.

Any such statements are potentially misleading, in that they ignore some very stubborn textual objections that neither Hengwrt nor Ellesmere is able to solve without editorial interference. To begin with, the internal evidence for the commonly accepted sequence Manciple-Parson is problematic (Manly and Rickert I: 270, II: 454; Owen, “Pre-1450 Manuscripts”; Baker 45), and the *Manciple’s Tale* has in some manuscripts been credited to Lydgate. The authenticity of the *Parson’s Tale* has also been questioned, as has its closural function: some critics insist that it is merely an interruption of the fictional tale-telling before the homeward journey (Pratt; Owen, “Alternative Reading”). Some have considered the *Retraction* to be the interpolation of a pious compiler (Lawton) or a repentant Chaucer (Wurtele 337; Dean, “Dismantling,” “Chaucer’s Repentance”). Disappointed readers have laboured to demonstrate an ironic purpose, citing amongst other points the *Retraction’s* conventional convenience as a curtain-call for Chaucer’s works, and its echoes of the Nun’s Priest’s most equivocal “moralite” as evidence of playful rather than earnest “entente” (Hanning, Sayce, Finlayson). Finally, there is no internal evidence that determines absolutely whether the *Retraction* is spoken by Chaucer the Pilgrim, Chaucer the poet, or by the Parson, or whether it refers to the *Parson’s Tale*, or to the *Canterbury Tales*, to the entire canon, or only to itself.⁵

In spite of the consequent instability inherent in any notion of an integrated closing design, editors of *both* the “best-text” and “best-book” traditions continue to comment without reservation upon the thematic coherence of a final sequence for which neither authenticity nor position is unproblematic. In an influential essay on the order of the tales, Larry Benson effectively dismisses all critical inquiry into the voice, tone, intention, and authenticity of the *Retraction* in his circular assertions that “speculation is not necessary, since we have Chaucer’s own word in the *Retraction* that, unfinished as the *Canterbury Tales* obviously is, he was finished with it” (“Order” 80). This singular position itself becomes the final word on the subject when it is repeated in a major critical edition: the *Riverside* introduction concludes with Benson’s re-assertion that “The *Retraction* leaves us no doubt that unfinished, unpolished, and incomplete as the *Canterbury Tales* may be, Chaucer is finished with it” (22).⁶

Benson’s privileging of Ellesmere has come under severe “Hengwrtist” attack, particularly for the “pernicious effect” of his ascription of both text and tale-order to Chaucer himself (Morse 20; Blake, “Geoffrey Chaucer” 31). A related “Hengwrtist” objection has been voiced by Pearsall against any perceived “sense of ineluctable movement towards some imaginative goal” (“Authorial Revision” 42). But even “Hengwrtists” cannot resist forming a frame for “the poem.” Pearsall himself speaks of “a fixed beginning and end” that is “undisputed” (*Canterbury Tales* 16), and Donald Baker, in his *Variorum* introduction to *The Manciple’s Tale*, carries this kind of closural assumption further in his declarations about Chaucer’s “unfolding plan” and “closing argument”: “The Manciple’s *Prologue and Tale* function within the closing argument of the Canterbury pilgrimage *as a whole* . . . and make clearer Chaucer’s larger intentions for the *Canterbury Tales as a whole* . . . they provide one more insight into the unfolding plan of the work *as a thematic whole*” (3, italics added).

Both recent Chaucer editions, then, introduce their “best-text” with unqualified statements about authorial intentions of order and unity and especially of closure, presumptions that critics have laboured to question for more than fifty years. To insist repeatedly as Benson does that “we have Chaucer’s own words” overrides the highly speculative critical history of those words. Baker’s repeated insistence upon “the whole” is a similarly personal view that is hardly in keeping with the fragmentary state of the text, or with the allegedly “Hengwrtist” bias of the *Variorum* project. It would appear that “Hengwrtists” no less than eclecticists have been distracted by the influence of “the book,” and directed by what Ralph Hanna has called

a “mystified nostalgia” for the recovery of the supposed authentic position of the medieval Ur-audience (“The Problems” 88).

Central to such a recovery is the question of the copy-text in circulation at Chaucer’s death. Manly and Rickert’s crucial notion of multiple exemplars⁷ is supported by Pearsall, who concludes that as “Chaucer left the work as a partly assembled kit with no directions,” the scribes were faced with the task of re-assembling and re-arranging the collection as new material was discovered (*Canterbury Tales* 23). Blake insists rather that the scribe must have received all the material at once in the state of disarray and incompleteness left by the poet, and that all later material must therefore be spurious (“Editorial Assumptions” 388); those of us who must include the *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale* in “such a ramshackle construction” are simply too closed-minded to allow that it could have been written and arranged by an imitator. Our problem, says Blake, “arises simply because we put Chaucer on a pedestal and assume that no one else could write like him” (“Critics, Criticism” 55).

In response to this “hard Hengwrtist” position, Hanna argues that if the original “*omnium gatherum*” of tales had been available in its entirety from Chaucer’s study, there would have been no reason to produce the first manuscripts in “discontinuous chunks” (“Hengwrt Manuscript” 65–69). To sum up the “best-text”/“best-book” argument for origins: if multiple copy-texts were circulating at Chaucer’s death, then an eclectic “best-book” edition of those texts would be more true to Chaucer; if all copy-text remained in Chaucer’s possession, however, then an edition of the earliest single “best-text” manuscript would be more true to Chaucer. In either case, and regardless of the mechanics and history of its genesis, the *Canterbury Tales qua* poem is still an undirected *omnium gatherum* of discontinuous chunks. After close to six centuries of editorial effort, we are left really to choose between a “partly assembled kit” of papers in circulation, or a “ramshackle construction” of papers *in scrinio*. How do we read the “text” of such a “book”?

Pearsall suggests that ideally the “kit” should be presented as a set of fragments in folders (*Canterbury Tales* 2). According to Hanna, “responsible best-textism” dictates variant editions for the variant versions of Chaucer’s work (“Producing Manuscripts” 128). A more practicable solution is available in a suggestion put forward by A.J. Minnis:

Why not develop an ‘aesthetic of the unfinished’, an approach which would focus directly on the alternative patterns both between and within the groups

of tales, and celebrate these phenomena rather than minimizing or ignoring them? (“Ordering Chaucer” 267)

Such an aesthetic would demystify the perceived impasse between “best-text” and “best-book” editing and make possible a best reading: one which demonstrates an overall design that is *dialogic* rather than univocally whole, and one that is not falsified by a lack of attention to order, especially final order. Indeed, the attention given by editors to the correct positioning of the fragments has distracted scholarship from the more interesting free-play of discourse possible between them.

II

There is consensus at least that the *Canterbury Tales* begins with a concentrated focus upon order and design, and that the ensuing degenerative movement within the first fragment is the result of a deliberate deconstruction by Chaucer of these conventional expectations. The spring opening describes a paradigm of perfect hierarchy: an impulse of progression, in harmonious conjunction with the four elemental sources (“shoures,” “breeth,” “sonne,” “heeth”), evolves through an ascending scale of life on earth (“croppes,” “foweles,” “folk”). The movement of images of the earth (“roote,” “flour,” “croppes”) accompanies this process of fulfillment, while the continuous spatial focussing (“straunge strondes,” “sondry londes,” “Engelond,” “Caunterbury”) parallels the ultimate focus of all of the life images upward toward the “blisful martir”:

The hooly blisful martir for to seke,
That hem hath holpen whan that they were seeke. (1.17–18)

Although the visual and aural assonance of the culminating *rime riche* (“seke”/ “seeke”) reflects a perfect concord between the earthly pilgrims and their spiritual aspirations, this harmony is momentary and illusory. “Real” order is dispelled immediately and repeatedly in the troubled pilgrimage. The Knight inadvertently “quites” the ordered spring opening by introducing the discord notably absent there — human love — and then ceremoniously amplifies it to cosmic proportions. The Miller and the Reeve then contend both to “quite” one another and to demystify the Knight’s courtly vision: the bloodless Emilye pales before the tactile Alisoun; that refreshingly natural view of human lusts is immediately reconsidered and supplanted by the sterile and degraded perspective of the Reeve. After the Knight’s idealized conception of order is replayed in these two very different modes, the

progressively degenerate visions of lust and vengeance in the fabliaux are occasions not only for comparison, but for a perhaps more appreciative review of the Knight's ideal. Each time the Knight makes his presence felt within the fiction of the pilgrimage, his noble ideal of order and justice is recalled and therefore reasserted.

These backward and forward reverberations within the first fragment obtain between the fragments as well. Each new group of tales alters and refocusses in some manner the opening exposition of hierarchic order, diffracting it in the process into inter-related sub-themes of domestic order, dominance, and subjection. Just as the Knight's vision of cosmic justice contends with the Miller's of poetic justice and the Reeve's of vicious revenge, so the Wife of Bath's idea of order in marriage contends with the alternatives of Constance and Griselde and Dorigen, and again with Chauntecleer's and the Manciple's. These alternatives themselves serve as foci for the dissemination of a multiplicity of contradictory perspectives. Moral judgment becomes increasingly complex when, for example, the Wife's worldly imperfection is seen against the tales of other women who, in spite of (or because of) their moral perfection, find themselves in the same unjustly unfulfilled state of subjection. The barnyard provides another ambivalent perspective on order and justice: blind capitulation to worldly vanities brings Chauntecleer to salvation, thanks to the similarly base tendencies in his fellow creature, the fox. This equivocating "moralite," buttressed by no less an authority than St Paul, appears in different guise in the *Manciple's Tale*. Like Chauntecleer, Phebus accommodates the demands of the world to the demands of truth by wilful self-delusion, but here the humour of a long-winded exhortation to brevity is lost to a sneering cynicism.

Encouraged to look for "doctrine" in "all that writen is" by such unlike voices as the *Nun's Priest's Tale* and the *Retraction*, the reader must judge Chaucer's supposedly final utterance from amidst an overload of diverse and conflicting intertextual resonances that magnify and complicate it considerably. Each supplementary viewpoint in the work speaks to precedent as well as subsequent utterances. Each tale limits all the ones told before it, and cautions all the ones that follow, by demanding re-appraisal of assumptions and perspectives. Once the process begins, no single addition can be read or recalled in isolation, as each is partly determined by this self-generating intertextual milieu. "Auctorite" is thus continually blurred and deferred. The Pilgrim Chaucer's own narrative stance as an admiring reporter of face values undermines any semblance of a truly authenticating voice, and each

pilgrim's voice is similarly suspect.⁸ Does it really matter, in this symposium of opinion, at what point each individual speaks its piece?

On the contrary, the multivalent "foyson" of Chaucer's discourse is in fact falsified by an ordered agenda. In spite of the apparent disorder, and the dubiousness of Chaucer's overall "moralite," we need not conclude that Chaucer left behind an introductory promise of pilgrimage that was subsequently forgotten and then tidied up with a lame afterthought. The integrity of the work is found not in the problematic closure of the frame, but in the opening exposition, which is wholly programmatic: the first fragment announces *both* impulses — of unified spiritual quest *and* of worldly fragmentation — at once. This theme of troubled pilgrimage is from the start radically dual, and it is subjected to a series of variations that is compound and indefinite. While those manuscripts which include the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, the *Parson's Tale*, and the *Retraction* might give the theme its fullest expression, the collection of tales is not dependent upon either total inclusion or upon sequence or position for thematic or structural integrity. Each tale defines its perspective — states its position — against that of the opening paradigm, and against each of the other tales in the (changeable) set.

The musical form of "theme with variations," the structure proposed by Helen Cooper for the *Canterbury Tales*, is a close analogue to the dialogic process I have been describing: the work is not incomplete if fewer variations are performed or extant; all that is required for coherence is that the variation treat some aspect of the opening theme. A dialogic principle of inclusion provides that "aesthetic of the unfinished" that Minnis ("Ordering Chaucer") found lacking in Cooper's analysis. This ordering principle can accommodate late-comers and even impostors, welcoming rather than silencing the questions that they raise. From this perspective, the *Retraction* is really only one more tidying that adds its new voice to the multitude. *Somewhere* in the *Canterbury Tales*, *perhaps* penultimately, a cynical voice warns us that repentance can not call back even one word from the profusion of Canterbury tidings: "Thyng that is seyde is seyde, and forth it gooth/ though him repente" (*Manciple's Tale* 355–60). But before we smile with relief at this facile negation of the *Retraction's* efficacy, we should recall that in Chaucer's equivalent and multivalent design, the *Manciple's* is also only another supplantable viewpoint.

Charles Owen objects that the inclusion of the *Retraction* in the *Canterbury Tales* gives us a conventionally religious, unoriginal Chaucer ("Alternative Reading" 237). On the contrary, it is a measure of Chaucer's genius that the *Retraction*, which in isolation is perfectly straightforward, can elicit

suspicions of irony and ambivalence in every line simply by virtue of its placement in the company of the likes of the Manciple and the Nun's Priest. The placement might indeed have been the editorial decision of a scribal imitator. But the dialogic of the "book" from which it speaks — however fragmentary or seamless its representation — is a most original achievement of a poet who must remain fixed on his pedestal. Unfortunately, modern editors actually serve the poet poorly by allowing their personal presumptions to limit the potential for dialogic readings. Although a critical edition purports to present the full range of critical opinion, the editor's introduction can effectively preclude such critical debate if this prime space is used as a forum for interpretative comments that are not identified as such. "Best-text," "best-book," variant, or computerized versions of Chaucer are equally susceptible to subjective prefatory comment. The poet would be better served by editors who do not attempt like the Manciple to pre-empt all the tidings that follow their own.

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NOTES

¹ In his "Anecdota Literaria" (1844), Wright wrote: "Tyrwhitt fell into the error of attempting to make up the text of an author, when he was totally ignorant of the grammatical construction of his language, and equally incompetent to appreciate the comparative value of the manuscripts" (qtd. in Lounsbury 315–16). For more detailed discussion of textual and editorial history, see Blake, *Textual Tradition* 1–9; Pearsall, *Canterbury Tales* 1–23; Manly and Rickert, Vol. II; and Ruggiers.

² The terms "Hengwrtist," and "hard" and "soft" "Hengwrtism" are Ralph Hanna's (*Problems* 87–95). Recent editions based on Hengwrt are Blake's (*Canterbury Tales*) and the *Variorum* (ed. Ruggiers and Baker), now in progress.

³ Pearsall reiterates his position in his 1992 article in *Cruz and Controversy*: "The *Canterbury Tales* became a Book, in the most portentous medieval sense of the word" (41).

⁴ Recent criticism points especially to Robinson's (and by implication, Benson's) reliance upon earlier editions. Because Robinson's text has been the basis from which modern scholars have learned, taught, and cited Chaucer's poem, many have been led to defer to it as canonical. Joseph Dane argues that Benson's *Riverside* edition, rather than superseding the authority of Robinson's earlier edition, transformed the earlier edition into an authoritative text (177). See also Ramsay, "F.N. Robinson's Editing" 150.

⁵ In the type-a manuscripts, all but one (which breaks off in the middle of the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*) leave out the phrase "of this book" from the introductory rubric "here taketh the makere the leve of this book." This perhaps is evidence that the scribes of these manuscripts did not consider the *Retraction* an end to the *Canterbury Tales per se*, but to the canon, in which case its placement at the end of the *Tales* would be entirely editorial.

⁶ In his review of the *Riverside* edition, Blake notes another instance of Benson's lack of objectivity, in this case on the matter of manuscript choice (257–61).

⁷ Manly and Rickert maintained that the variations between manuscripts derived from individual lines of textual transmission which represented various stages of composition and revision (I: 150, 268; II: 36–41, 477–49). Supporting arguments are given by Doyle and Parkes, xix–xlix, and Ramsay (“The Hengwrt”).

⁸ Thus the same thematic intertextual dialogue that Jerome Mandel describes *within* each fragment obtains in all possible combinations *between* fragments and between tales. For a fuller discussion of Chaucer's multiple voicing, especially for the voices of the Manciple and the *Retraction*, see my article in *Chaucer Review*.

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