

**Singh, Devani. 2023. *Chaucer's Early Modern Readers: Reception in Print and Manuscript*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Pp. xiv + 272. ISBN 9781009231114.**

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Devani Singh's book examines how Chaucer's works were read, in both manuscript and print, mainly in the period from the late fifteenth to the mid-seventeenth centuries. The avowed aims of her study are to "highlight the early modern afterlives of fifteenth-century volumes . . . [and] to refine our understanding of the multiple points of intersection between manuscript and print in the period" (3). Throughout she is concerned to explore the evidence of different forms of readerly engagement reflected in the activities of antiquaries and printers as they sought to recontextualize Chaucer for contemporary audiences, private and public.

Singh's book has four chapters, preceded by a lengthy "Introduction" (1–43) and followed by a brief "Afterword: Perfecting Medieval Manuscripts" (225–29). Chapter 1, "Closing, Correcting, and Emending" (44–83), is concerned with various forms of engagement with Chaucer's words by early modern readers in the form of lexical, textual and explanatory annotation. The growing inaccessibility of his language over time prompted Thomas Speght to include a glossary of Chaucer in his 1598 edition, the first printed edition to have such an appendage; it was enlarged in his 1602 edition. Singh has valuable observations about the influence of Speght's glossaries and about the efforts of contemporary antiquaries to provide their own glosses, notably the seventeenth-century collector, Joseph Holland, in the large collection of Chaucer and others that is now Cambridge University Library MS Gg. 4. 27, a manuscript to which she returns in later chapters. She also astutely notes the different, radical response to the linguistic challenges of Chaucer, by Francis Kynaston. In 1635 he rendered the first two books of *Troilus and Criseyde* into Latin verse, with the Middle English in parallel, presumably to render this part of the work more accessible to modern readers through a markedly different form of explanatory aid.

Singh points out (64) that William Thynne was the first to use the term *collation* in the modern sense of textual comparison. She examines some of the efforts at such comparison by early readers, sometimes using an early print to correct the manuscript original, as in the extensive corrections in this way to Bodleian MS Laud Misc. 739, a manuscript of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. She suggests that the underlying motive for such forms of reading was to "improve" (77) the received texts. I wonder whether it might not be more accurate to suggest that their primary aim, or at least a parallel one, was less improve than to clarify the text. That is, to extend the lexical attention to Chaucer's language that Singh has noted, through collation and emendation to achieve greater textual accessibility.

Singh's second chapter, "Repairing and Completing" (84–126), addresses the problems of incompleteness that Chaucer's texts raised for early modern readers, what she terms "the inconvenient gaps in the material remains of Chaucer's works" (85). These

prompted various attempts to fill “the unsatisfying, gaps, blanks, erasures and lacunae” in manuscript copies that descended to such readers. Once again, Joseph Holland figures prominently in such processes of physical repair, as does the much less studied figure of John Markham whose efforts form one part of a more elaborate attempt to bring Bodleian Library MS Laud 600 to imagined completeness. She also analyses the more localized post-medieval attempts to fill in lacunae of words, phrases or lines in, for example, Bodleian Library MS Fairfax 16, an important witness for Chaucer’s shorter poems. There is no discussion here of the most problematic of these gaps, the incomplete Cook’s Tale, which in manuscript is sometimes simply suppressed altogether, more often supplemented by the romance *Gamelyn*. Doubtless this is because *Gamelyn* was not printed until Urry’s 1721 edition. But the apparent failure of early modern readers to perceive *Gamelyn* as a problem might have been mentioned.

Conversely, the question of how “to consider books which do not show signs of damage or glaring incompleteness, but which were nonetheless perceived as wanting or inviting expansion” (129) is the focus of chapter 3, “Supplementing” (127–75). Here Singh discusses, inter alia, the early modern tendency to insert new materials, taken from printed books back into post-medieval manuscript anthologies, like the Bannatyne manuscript (Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, MS Adv. 1. 1. 6). She also considers larger compilational questions. These include the appearance of Henryson’s *Testament of Cressid* (the earliest surviving text) in Thynne’s 1532 Chaucer immediately after *Troilus and Criseyde* and before the *Legend of Good Women*, with the clear implication that Thynne perceived it as a genuine work of Chaucer’s. This conjunction, which she argues became recurrent, came to “express a new cultural interest in an imagined textual entity called *Troilus and Criseyde* which accommodates the fate of Criseyde as well as Troilus” (154). She also examines the publication history of the *Plowman’s Tale*, first included in the 1542 edition of Thynne (it has been earlier separately printed). As she shows, the work is an important plank in the creation of a “Wycliffite” Chaucer, linked also to *Piers the Plowman’s Creed* and to *Piers Plowman* itself in the early modern consciousness.

Chapter 4, “Authorising” (176–224) “looks to medieval manuscripts which passed through the hands of early modern readers [to reveal] what readers made of the new conventions of presenting Chaucer” (178). Singh stresses the importance of the ways in which print gave Chaucer an identity that he did not have in a manuscript culture. The establishing of this identity made the question of his canon of particular relevance. There is a lengthy analysis of the importance of John Stow (1525–1605), editor and antiquary, and his role in “correctly attributing and titling” works of Chaucer (192) in his annotations of manuscripts, particularly to the large verse collection in Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Fairfax 16. This quest for the authentic was not simply textual. As she shows it modulates at times into Chaucer’s biography. It is Stow who provides the only early statement of the death of Blanche, duchess of Lancaster, wife of John of Gaunt and Chaucer’s future brother-in-law as the occasion of *The Book of the Duchess*. She also discusses another important manuscript collection, Bodleian MS Tanner 346, to which an early owner, Archbishop Sancroft, added various attributions seemingly based on Thynne’s (1532) edition, a process that she argues demonstrates “the authority that readers attached to the paratextual presentation of [Chaucer’s] texts in print” (201). There is also an examination of Chaucer’s portraiture, particularly the influence of John Speed’s engraving of him, first printed in Speght’s (1598) edition and later incorporated

into other editions and back into manuscripts. The image, she suggests, together with others, contributed to the status of Chaucer as author that early print generated.

Overall, this is a valuable book, the product of an alert bibliographical intelligence linked to a keen sense of literary history. Dr. Singh demonstrates a firm grasp of the significance of the material forms and is able to convincingly interpret the evidence that they provide. All who are interested in the early reception of Chaucer will read this book to their profit.

Inevitably, in such a detailed bibliographical study, points are occasionally open to correction or qualification. The *House of Fame* does not appear in Cambridge University Library MS Gg. 4. 27 (93). Nor does *The Tale of Gamelyn* occur in Bodleian Library, MS Ashmole 59 (171). The title, "The Craft of Lovers" is not, I think, added by Stow to Cambridge, Trinity College MS R. 3. 19, fol. 154, though he very probably did add the attribution "Chaucer." The approving endorsement of the view that the poem "Prophecy" (NIMEV 3943) is "the most popular apocryphal work" (137) ascribed to Chaucer may not be borne out by the evidence, if the assertion is based on the number of surviving copies: it appears in nineteen manuscripts and some early printed editions, not all of which credit it to Chaucer. *Gamelyn* is seemingly more popular numerically, with twenty-six manuscripts. The discussion of Oxford, Christ Church 152 of the *Canterbury Tales* (154–56) might have noted that it includes more spurious works than any other manuscript in which Chaucer's work appears: Lydgate's *Churl and Bird* and *Siege of Thebes*, *Gamelyn*, Hoccleve's *Miracle of the Virgin* are all included without attribution and hence all implicitly defined as part of a single canon of Chaucer's writings for the early modern readers who engaged with it.

Some points seem open to doubt. The possibility is raised (187) that Stow took information about Chaucer from Speght's editions rather than providing it on the grounds that "Fairfax came into Stow's possession around 1600." No evidence is presented to support the view that Stow had his hands on the manuscript at this date. And since Speght's acknowledges Stow's assistance in his edition, there seem grounds for a judicious application of Ockham's razor. Dr. Singh suggests that "the *Retraction* seems to be genuine but was probably excised on account of its orthodox piety. This, at least, is the scholarly consensus today" (168). I am not sure that this is "the scholarly consensus." If it is there are grounds for questioning it. The position of the *Retraction* at the very end of the *Canterbury Tales* in manuscript made it particularly vulnerable to accidental loss rather than purposeful removal. Twenty-seven manuscripts out of fifty-five originally complete ones of the *Canterbury Tales*, lack the Parson's Tale in part or whole and the *Retraction*, through physical loss of leaves. Only in one manuscript, Cambridge University Library MS Gg. 4. 27, does the possibility seem to exist of the deliberate omission of the *Retraction*. Such losses in manuscript have an obvious relevance to the later print history. The *Retraction* appears in both of Caxton's editions, (1487) and (1483), and in those by de Worde in 1498 and Pynson in 1526. It does not appear in Pynson's (1492?) edition or in Thynne (1532). Its subsequent absence from the editions of Stow (1561) and Speght (1598, 1602) is of less moment since they seem likely to have been set serially from earlier editions starting with Thynne, so the absence of the *Retraction* in them is less likely to be of ideological significance. Quite a lot seems to depend on identifying the setting copy for Thynne's edition of the *Canterbury Tales*, something that has not yet been established. The omission of the *Retraction* in Thynne could also have been an act of pragmatism on the part of the printer. The Parson's Tale ends halfway down a verso (fol. cxxvi<sup>v</sup>). It may have been the case that the printer did not

feel he could accommodate the *Retraction* into the available remaining text block (the following recto is the title page for *The Romaunt of the Rose*).

Certain aspects of the production of the book are regrettable. The quality of the illustrations varies between poor and illegible. The failure of Dr Singh's publisher in this respect is an obvious impediment to fully grasping the force of her arguments at some points. The trusting reader, viewing the "Contents" (vii), is told that the "Index of Early Printed Books" is on page 256; what appears there is a list of shelf marks not linked to author or title. There is a much longer list of "Early Printed Works" on pages 230–32 that is not noted in the "Contents." There are a few errors in the lengthy list of Secondary Works (233–53), the most serious of which is the failure to identify "Cloud, Random" (236) as a pseudonym used by the distinguished textual scholar Randall McLeod.

(Received 10/11/2023)