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## Literary value and the object of Chaucer studies

The poetry that modern editorial practice assigns to Chaucer may be charming, astute, and, simply, beautiful, but the stable Chaucer whose agency determines this achievement – the Chaucer who serves as a canonical center against whom the marginal voices of vernacular culture have been defined – is more the creation of a Shakespearian-focused textual criticism than a historical medieval reality.

– Tim William Machan<sup>1</sup>

Few would deny that Chaucer's work has distinctive value.

– Peggy Knapp<sup>2</sup>

As I mentioned in this book's introduction, the ground and provocation of the book's ruminations on literary value, as well as the leash that aims to keep those ruminations manageable, are specific, practical experiences of the study of literature. For this chapter, the provoking experience is an instance of my own pedagogical bad faith. When I first began teaching the *Canterbury Tales* (and to a significant degree as I still do), on the first day of the course I would inevitably cast the work as a wonderfully complex linked set of short stories, wholly conceived as such in all its details – a much more capacious and generically adventurous version of, say, *Dubliners*. Such a characterisation of the *Tales* is of course problematic for numerous reasons, and on that same first day, I would fully admit this. And yet – in the same way that, although Milton continuously reminds his readers that Satan is, well, Satan, we nonetheless remain fascinated by the character – no matter how much I emphasised the unfinished state of the *Tales*, its manuscript messiness, and the variety of objectionable motives behind its canonisation, somehow the work always ended up a Work (by the

capitalisation of which I mean, here and throughout this chapter, a putatively unified aesthetic object abstracted from any of its material witnesses). My repeated falling into this temptation may have been merely a personal weakness, but I am arrogant enough to believe that it was, at least in part, a symptom of a more significant critical conundrum, one that was particularly visible around the turn of the century when I began teaching the *Tales*. This conundrum is the result of a conflict between what was then an ascendant trend in scholarship on premodern texts and inherited approaches to Chaucer criticism and pedagogy, a conflict that, as I will argue in this chapter, ultimately pivots on the problem of literary value. To be sure, the felt pressure of this conundrum was already beginning to fade by 2008, when I published the article that serves as the basis of this chapter, and by now in most quarters I suspect that it is not much felt at all. But this change is not due to any resolution of the conundrum. Rather, as I will suggest, it attests to the continuing impact of the problem of literary value, which has ensured the conundrum's sweeping under the rug. The story of the momentary palpability of this conundrum, therefore, provides an apt launching point into this book's inquiry into that problem.

The trend in scholarship to which I refer is that which is evident in the Machan quotation above. Extending well beyond Chaucer studies, it consists of a loose amalgamation of late twentieth-century critiques of authorship, authority and canonicity; historicism and the related, if not entirely coincident, emphasis on material culture in interpretive studies; and the self-consciousness about the theory and practice of textual criticism and editing that arose, in Middle English studies, in the wake of the Athlone *Piers Plowman* and from the prompting of textual critics and bibliographers of other periods and traditions, such as Jerome J. McGann, Bernard Cerquiglini and D. F. McKenzie. It overlaps and has a mutually inspiring relationship with the burgeoning field of book history.<sup>3</sup> Although my impression is that over the last two decades this trend has plateaued, it remains a vital force in the study of late medieval literature as well as in the larger field of literary studies, an approach ever more reflective upon its methodological and theoretical distinctiveness, affinities, provocations and evolutions. (Book history, for example, has been positioned as dovetailing with so-called distant reading.)<sup>4</sup> For convenience, I will call this amalgamation manuscript studies,

recognising that this term is used by others both in more specific and more general ways, and that not all scholars who understand themselves to be working under this label would want themselves associated with all (or perhaps any) of the elements of my definition.<sup>5</sup>

The conflict to which I refer is evident in Machan's opposing of the 'beautiful' canonical Chaucer enshrined in the products of 'modern editorial practice' with the Chaucer of 'historical medieval reality'. This conflict, in one sense, was hardly novel. As David Matthews has shown, the beautiful, canonical Chaucer had thrived for centuries (in contrast with the rest of Middle English literature) before colliding with historicism in the form of nineteenth-century philology – a collision that in this instance turned out to be mutually generative, as it inaugurated, under the auspices of the first Chaucer Society, modern Chaucer studies.<sup>6</sup> As Ethan Knapp describes, Chaucer's subsequent eligibility for admission into the university in the late nineteenth century rested on his dual status as a poet 'gifted with visionary insight and universal applicability' (that is, as a prophetic Romantic canonical poet) and as an 'object of analysis for philology and *Textkritik*' (that is, as an object of rigorous, scientific historicism).<sup>7</sup> To an extent complementary, these two apprehensions of Chaucer nevertheless possess antithetical principles, and the tension between them has been felt in various ways throughout the history of Chaucer studies, sometimes in the form of oppositional schools (as in New Criticism versus Exegetics) and sometimes in the work of individual scholars (as in the disjunction between the philological and literary critical work of such Chaucerians as George Lyman Kittredge and John Livingston Lowes).<sup>8</sup>

Knapp goes on to suggest that the critical movements of the last thirty-some years have so shifted the terms of this conflict that we may in some respects have moved beyond it. Yet the ascendancy of manuscript studies at the turn of the century revived it in at least one specific, concrete and crucial way: as Machan's remarks indicate, a manuscript-informed historicist scepticism put into question that which had served as both the longstanding product and object of Chaucer studies, the critical edition. The editorial tradition that marked the first phase of modern Chaucer studies – and which later culminated in the collective effort of *The Riverside Chaucer* – had sought, as Stephanie Trigg puts it, to produce critical editions answerable both to 'generalist' and 'specialist' readers. Trigg

characterises these audiences as those without and within medieval studies, respectively, but the division also aligns with the Romantic/philological split lying at the origin of modern Chaucer studies. According to Trigg, the generalist reader understands Chaucer's text 'to embody timeless values and perspectives of easy relevance to modernity', which corresponds to the Romantic, canonical understanding of Chaucer; in contrast, the specialist reader insists 'on a discontinuous linguistic and historical past, approachable only through specialist training' – traditionally, philological training.<sup>9</sup> Put simply, the *Riverside*, like all the products of this editorial tradition, seeks to answer to this split by being at once an object of artistic excellence and an object of historical authenticity. But by the turn of the century, the notions of authorship and canonicity that underwrite the notion of artistic excellence had been widely subjected to intense scepticism, and, conversely, commitment to some form of historical authenticity, however provisional, had come to predominate interpretive criticism. The fusion of aims represented by the *Riverside* thus began in some quarters to seem instead conceptual *confusion*, if not merely an ill-founded, misleading anachronism.

Derek Pearsall conveyed this critique of the Chaucer edition as early as 1985 (while the *Riverside* was still being compiled) in an essay published in a collection edited by McGann. In his characteristically witty fashion, Pearsall compares the 'the sterile operating theater (or terminal intensive care unit) of the modern critical edition' to listening to 'medieval music played on modern instruments'. Nonetheless, he maintains a commitment to the critical edition as a 'practical necessity for the needs of readers and students'.<sup>10</sup> Conceding the rift between generalist and specialist readers later described by Trigg, he suggests that different objects be constituted for each of these audiences. A little over a decade later, Theresa Tinkle, focusing specifically on the importance of manuscript *mise-en-page*, offered a similar account of the liabilities of the critical edition:

Modern editors adopt a page layout that insists on Chaucer's alienation from medieval annotations and, accordingly, from scholasticism, medieval Catholicism, and Latinity. The page layout pronounces medieval readers and ways of reading at best irrelevant, at worst stodgily wrongheaded. The uncomplicated page also asserts

that the text is immediately accessible, that every reader is sufficient to it. Chaucer's medieval alterity becomes invisible.<sup>11</sup>

Tinkle's comments, with their implication that accessibility to Chaucer's work should give way to his 'medieval alterity', typifies many of the statements on the topic from the time of Pearsall's essay through the turn of the century.<sup>12</sup> As Trigg remarked in 2002, today's 'professional Chaucerians ... seem willing to make it more difficult to read Chaucer',<sup>13</sup> and they were so, as in Tinkle's privileging of 'medieval readers and ways of reading', in the name of historical authenticity unmoored from debunked Romantic notions of authorship and canon.

Tinkle's exceptional study – which, through close examinations of text, gloss and *mise-en-page* across versions of the *Wife of Bath's* Prologue in different manuscripts, limns the different ways that early readers, editors and scribes apprehended the *Wife of Bath* – represents one possible avenue of literary critical response to the deauthorisation of the critical edition.<sup>14</sup> This response requires the decentring of the critical edition in favour of the medieval manuscript, that is, the elevation of the latter to the status of central object of inquiry, not just for those who have been traditionally concerned with manuscripts (e.g., textual critics, palaeographers) but also for many who fill the departmental ranks of medieval literary hermeneuts.<sup>15</sup> In studies such as Tinkle's, investigators put aside that which used to be the *end* of the labour devoted to manuscripts, the critical edition, in favour of the *means* to this end – or, more specifically, in favour of the material conditions of the production and dissemination of late medieval books, the state of those books and their reception and use by various audiences. This is the sort of work (whether or not Tinkle intends the association) that Stephen Nichols affirms in the introduction to the 1990 'New Philology' issue of *Speculum*, a mode of investigation that he describes as an examination of the 'manuscript matrix' rather than merely the texts represented in editions, 'and of both language and manuscript [in interaction] with the social context and networks they inscribe'.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, in an essay published around the same time, John Dagenais writes,

I think the first thing we have to do in order to get at this physical text is to free it from relations of representation, that is, from the idea

that it represents, badly, an originary, authentic text. What I would propose as the first level is a simple shift in the unit we study from 'text' to ... the individual, unique, concrete manuscript codex.<sup>17</sup>

Tinkle's article exemplifies the undoubted perspicacity of this approach to medieval literary scholarship, as do many other, subsequent interpretative engagements with Chaucer's 'manuscript matrix', such as Maidie Hilmo's study of the pilgrim portraits in the Ellesmere manuscript, Arthur Bahr's study of the dynamic constellations of *Canterbury Tales* 'threads' (among other medieval texts he examines) and the contributions to a special issue of *ChR* on 'Medieval English Manuscripts: Form, Aesthetics, and the Literary Text', guest edited by Bahr and Alexandra Gillespie.<sup>18</sup> As Mary Carruthers remarked in her 1998 New Chaucer Society Presidential Lecture, '[M]uch of the most innovative and important work in medieval literary study ... has come from material studies of manuscripts and early books, and the greatly sophisticated theorising of editing procedures that these have enabled.'<sup>19</sup>

Given this demonstrated vitality of manuscript studies – along with its neat confluence of the old and new, the empirical and theoretical, and strands of several different widely adopted critical movements – one might fairly have expected it to produce a comprehensive paradigm shift in Chaucer studies. In particular, one might have predicted that the neglect, in published interpretations of Chaucer's poetry, of its formative critique of the critical edition would render those readings retrograde: conservative, naïve, ahistorical, presentist attempts to cover up the conflicts, fix *variance*, reprivilege the canon and just generally bring back the good old days. Yet, in fact, all through the period of manuscript studies' ascendancy and up to the present, by far the majority of published interpretations of Chaucer – even the avant-garde, such as Aranye Fradenburg's *Sacrifice Your Love*, and even those in Marion Turner's historicist *tour de force* biography of the poet – generally restrict themselves to the *Riverside*.<sup>20</sup> Despite the prominence of some of the work that I have referenced, a manuscript studies approach to Chaucer was then and remains today the exception to the rule. As inclusive as current Chaucer scholarship may be of a variety of intertexts, for the text itself it usually does not look beyond the *Riverside* and, much less frequently, that edition's textual apparatus. Although Fradenburg, for example, certainly seeks to complicate

our reading of Chaucer (as well as our understanding of Chaucer studies), she and most other Chaucer interpreters, then and now, show little interest in locating those complications in the material object of study. Indeed, wondering aloud about this discrepancy back in 2007, the manuscript studies scholar Andrew Taylor issued a call for papers for the 2008 New Chaucer Society conference in which he poses the question of whether 'Middle English manuscript studies and Middle English literary criticism constitute distinct academic cultures'.<sup>21</sup>

Such a distinction between the 'academic cultures' of manuscript studies and literary criticism, insofar as it exists, surely does not derive from mutual ignorance, since studies that call attention to this distinction – such as Trigg's and, more particularly, those of Ralph Hanna cited below – have been widely read in the field. Let us then assume, for the sake of argument, that the critique marshalled by manuscript studies of the aims, methods and ideologies of the Chaucer edition did not languish in obscurity but rather that professional Chaucer interpreters have generally granted its applicability, at least that of the moderate version as voiced by Pearsall. This seems plausible, given that no substantial counterargument to that critique (if not to manuscript studies generally) has to my knowledge been put forward. If this assumption thus holds to any significant degree, then the Chaucer critic's continued use of the edition as the basic material object of study necessarily incurs some amount of bad faith. This situation can lead to awkward moments, not just for the critic but also, as I suggested in this chapter's opening, for the teacher in the undergraduate classroom. As students file in on that first day – students who are unlikely to know much if anything about the late Middle Ages, much less about late medieval literary culture – does one begin by debunking the editions of Chaucer that they have just purchased? In an institutional economy in which study of the Middle Ages has been marginalised and at some institutions (including my prior one) faces the loss of faculty positions, how much ought a teacher emphasise that the *Canterbury Tales*, already in forbidding Middle English, is, as a Work, merely a modern editor's fiction?<sup>22</sup> One obvious solution to this awkwardness, both for teaching and for scholarship, would be the development of textual materials that attest better than does the standard print edition to the historical production, circulation and reception

of Chaucer's writings. A marriage of manuscript studies to Chaucer interpretation and teaching might thereby be made on the basis of a replacement of the print edition as the basic material object of Chaucer studies with this other common object of study. But what ought, then, to constitute the latter?

In a 2001 article assessing the implications of the *Canterbury Tales* Project – an ongoing, now over three-decade effort, founded by Peter Robinson and currently led by Barbara Bordalejo, to produce digital editions of Chaucer – Charlotte Morse suggested, with only partial enthusiasm, 'Perhaps we will eventually prefer an electronic text for teaching students struggling with Middle English, a text ... whose parts we could reorder at will, whose text we could modify, leaving in or out, for example ... the Man of Law's Endlink.'<sup>23</sup> In the early 1990s, when the rise of manuscript studies coincided with excitement over the then nascent revolution in the electronic accessibility and digital representation of information, similar suggestions appeared with relatively more degrees of enthusiasm. For Murray McGillivray, for example, a hypertext edition could be 'an editorial vehicle that responds to the real nature of medieval textuality by presenting medieval works in their original state, as series of varying manuscript texts'.<sup>24</sup> Yet, despite the subsequent publications of the *Canterbury Tales* Project and widespread use of the Web as a pedagogical resource, the print edition remains today the basic material object of criticism and teaching. As of this writing, the paper pages of the *Riverside* still constitute the standard scholarly object of study, and, from what I have been informally able to gather, most teachers continue to assign one or more of the print options designed for classroom use, if they do not assign the now hard-to-order *Riverside*.<sup>25</sup> One new complete edition of Chaucer's works – the 2019 *Norton Chaucer* – has been published since the *Riverside*, and two others are in preparation.<sup>26</sup> The *Norton*, a student edition, is available as an eBook that comes equipped with a set of digital learning tools that does realise some of the potential imagined in the 1990s for electronic publications. Nonetheless, this eBook – as well as, say, the Harvard online inter-linear translation of the *Tales*, which legions of students now consult as a crib – does not attempt, in the manner that McGillivray and others envisioned, to emulate 'the real nature of medieval textuality'. Nor will, as far as I am aware, the two forthcoming



scholarly editions. In 2006, Ethan Knapp was still hopeful that digital editions may 'bring the diversity of manuscript culture into the classroom as never before'.<sup>27</sup> But by 2013, Bella Millet, reflecting on some of the continuing challenges with digital editions (including those of the *Canterbury Tales* Project), concludes, 'But even if electronic editing is not – from an academic point of view at least – a dead end, the way forward for those who use it is by no means clear.' Of the three kinds of challenges that Millet discusses, the most relevant for present purposes is 'impact' – the challenge of getting people to use such editions, 'even specialists in the field', which challenge, as Thorlac Turville-Petre admits in an essay in the same volume, remains daunting, despite his generally more optimistic view.<sup>28</sup> For now and the foreseeable future, therefore, the 'print' edition remains the field's object of study, no matter what its actual means of access.

This persistence, I argue, does not merely reflect the predictable lag between the promise and practicability of new technology, nor does it only derive from legitimate uncertainty about whether a digital edition truly would respond to the 'real nature of medieval textuality' better than a print edition. Rather, it represents, more profoundly, a *resistance* to an edition of Chaucer anything like that which was envisioned in the 1990s, and especially a resistance to such an edition of the *Canterbury Tales*, one that would announce in its very structure its own impossibility. It represents, that is, a resistance to an edition that would admit, in its material realisation, that there really is no *Canterbury Tales*, conceived of as a Work, but instead only eighty-some manuscripts dressed up to look like one.

This resistance is diffuse and largely unvoiced, discernible mostly through Chaucerians' collective decisions or the lack thereof. If it were to be formally articulated, I suspect that it would not be stubbornly traditionalist but rather speculatively interrogative. It would ask why the 'real nature of medieval textuality' ought necessarily to be the most appropriate object of study. It would wonder if the best material realisation of an object of study is necessarily the one that is, in theory, the most historically authentic. And, relatedly, it would ask on what basis ought we to allocate more scholarly and interpretative attention to some objects of study over others.<sup>29</sup> Manuscript studies shook loose these and other practical, foundational questions from their formerly secure institutional

underpinnings. Chaucer studies silently responded, it seems, with a nod of the head and a shrug. In retrospect, then, it appears that the provocations of manuscript studies represented a sophisticated evolution of the same mixed motivations that lay behind the original concept and institutionalisation of Chaucer studies, in which Chaucer's texts as objects of timeless literary value sat uncomfortably next to his texts as objects of historical inquiry. The foundational questions shaken loose by manuscript studies, that is, represented a momentarily pronounced confrontation with the continuing operation of literary value in the subfield. Literary value has apparently won this confrontation, thereby demonstrating, among other things, that it still possesses determining force on the nature of the subfield's material object of study.

This victory of literary value has a number of important implications of cascading significance, some of which derive from the fact that that confrontation and subsequent victory went, as I have suggested, mostly unacknowledged outside of manuscript studies. While it is quite evident, as I will discuss below, that a more prominent, cognate confrontation with historicism likely provided cover for this one, that confrontation, too, pivots upon literary value in some essential respects. Literary value thus remains central to Chaucer studies in ways that at the very least call for examination. Moreover, if following that scrutiny we wish to embrace this centrality, in however qualified form, that embrace requires some defence, and a defence not merely for this or that instance of Chaucer study but for the institution of Chaucer studies – and more generally for the field of literary studies for which it constitutes a synecdoche. It is the project of this book as a whole to perform this scrutiny and to consider at least some responses to the problem of literary value, which in some cases will resemble provisional defences of it. In the rest of the present chapter, I will argue that literary value's particular claim on the nature of the material realisations of the object of Chaucer study is neither fully avoidable, nor theoretically indefensible nor wholly undesirable.

To make this case, I have much groundwork to lay. It would seem, for example, that I need to provide at least a skeletal formulation for the concept of literary value. But in fact that task will require deferral until the [next chapter](#), following the ground-clearing efforts of the ensuing three sections of this present one.

In the first of these sections, I take a closer look at the collision between manuscript studies and inherited approaches to Chaucer studies in order to identify the basic conflict involved. In that light, the second section establishes a sort of toe hold for the concept of literary value and proceeds to consider the nature and implications of the basic conflict in its terms. The final section puts forward claims about the conflict's consequences, some of which will provide cues for the theorisation of [Chapters 2](#) and [3](#). Before moving on, however, I should make plain that in broaching this topic, I am not in any fashion seeking a return, with some Ghost of Criticism Past, to the days when Great Works could simply be studied and taught as Great Works. Rather, I am claiming that the considerable achievements of manuscript studies over the last several decades have exhumed some ghosts that have not really left us: in particular, the ghosts that had informed some central New Critical presuppositions. I aim not to reanimate those ghosts but rather to scrutinise the implications of the continuing influence of one in particular, the ghost of judgement.

### New Critical revenant

It is no coincidence that the rise of manuscript studies followed shortly upon the heels of the demise of New Criticism as the dominant ideology and set of practices governing literary studies. Although manuscript studies cannot claim credit for this demise, several of its practitioners make plain that the New Critical hegemony was a hostile environment, one premised on an *a priori* hierarchical disjunction between manuscript studies – in its earlier, edition-oriented formation – and literary criticism. As Machan describes it,

Within this interpretative framework [of New Criticism], the labors of textual critics of any historical period could only be pedestrian: they provided the texts necessary for serious and sensitive scholars to do serious and sensitive work. The transcendent verbal icon by nature simply is, and so any inquiries about its origin or development are non-questions; indeed, when the New Critics themselves glanced at textual criticism, the attention they manifested was often in essence indifference or ignorance.<sup>30</sup>

Although Machan offers here, for polemical purposes, something of a caricature of New Criticism, he fairly calls attention to New Criticism's notorious emphasis on the autonomy of the literary object and its consequent deemphasising of that object's historically contingent material origins and realisations. Even when formalists and textual scholars were, so to speak, on the same side (as when they were the same individual, e.g., George Kane and E. T. Donaldson), the assumptions regarding the critical utility of such basic categories as intention made the perspectives of the two roles rather different, and hence registered a division of hierarchy between their labours. As Machan notes, to create the 'medieval verbal icon' out of the surviving manuscript evidence, editors relied on 'the supposition that an author's final intentions and an authoritative text lay in the distant but recoverable textual past'.<sup>31</sup> The edition was thus an edifice constructed out of authorial intention, and yet, when that edition subsequently became an object of critical explication, considerations of intention became categorically suspect, if not simply relegated to the realm of fallacy.

In practice, New Criticism – especially as applied to Chaucer – was rarely so categorical, but it nonetheless did maintain the inherited conception of manuscripts as, to put it figuratively, shadows on a cave wall cast by the light of genius shining on a Work. Only with the loosening of New Criticism's grip on the academy – first by poststructuralism and then by historicism and cultural studies – was it possible to undo this conception. What was subsequently accomplished within some quarters of manuscript studies was, as I have described above, akin to Marx's standing of Hegel on his head: the materiality and multiplicity of manuscript matrices became the real, and the edition became a sort of false consciousness. This demystification was largely salutary, and, again, I have no wish to turn the clock back in this regard. Nonetheless, while the number of Chaucerians wholly comfortable with the identity of New Critic likely dwindled to zero over the course of the last third of the twentieth century, key formalist concepts and practices maintained a core influence on Chaucer criticism. In part, this influence consisted of the continuing, if increasingly obscured, legacy of such powerful critics as Donaldson and Charles Muscatine, whose shaping of Chaucer studies in the second half of the twentieth century, particularly in contestation with D. W. Robertson and the

exegetical school, has been well documented by Lee Patterson.<sup>32</sup> In part, too, this influence is simply that which was carried forward within some versions of late twentieth-century historicism. As Alan Liu and others have argued, the historicist criticism practiced under the label 'cultural poetics', for example, represented not an abandonment of formalism but a projection of it into the space of history and culture.<sup>33</sup>

For certain types of Middle English texts, such as the lyric, the continuing influence of formalism was scarcely even hidden, as Seth Lerer pointed out in 2003 in 'The Endurance of Formalism in Middle English Studies'. In this essay, Lerer expresses dissatisfaction with New Critical readings of Middle English lyrics that then still held currency (and had led to the genre's relative marginalisation, even in respect to the already marginal subfield of Middle English Studies), and he concludes by calling for a renewed attention to form as a locus of historical contingency.<sup>34</sup> With this exhortation Lerer took a position that had affinity with the growing array of approaches, originally developed in respect to the literatures of other periods, that was beginning to be called New Formalism. As in Lerer's essay, many of those who have embraced this sort of approach (whether or not under that label) understand it to be more of a correction or an expansion of historicism than a rejection. They maintain, for example, that inattention to the specific nature of literary forms, deriving from the historicist suspicion of the autonomy of the art object, had actually circumscribed the analytical reach of historicism.<sup>35</sup> Today, this revitalised, more theoretically nimble and ideologically self-aware concern with form has taken up firm residence within Chaucer studies, as evident in, say, the work of Eleanor Johnson and a recent collection of essays entitled *Chaucer and the Subversion of Form*.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, the very ease with which this approach has secured practitioners constitutes another indication that earlier varieties of formalism had not really been wholly eclipsed.

Like the rise of manuscript studies that preceded it, this trend in scholarship is, I believe, wholly laudable. The distinct historicity of form, as well as its relation to the historicity of other elements of the text and contexts of a work of literature, is surely worth the renewed attention that it is receiving. Moreover, that New Formalism began to be adopted in Chaucer studies amid the

ascendency of manuscript studies does not attest to any necessarily agonistic relation between the two. To be sure, the rise of New Formalism was, as I have suggested, plainly part of a more general inclination within the field of literary studies to move beyond historicism,<sup>37</sup> and therefore inasmuch as manuscript studies partook of the latter, the return to form also supplied some cover under which the implications of manuscript studies may be evaded. Without actually seeking any engagement with the critique of the Chaucer edition, that is, New Formalism's revisionary response to historicism has helped to bury that critique. Nonetheless, the two approaches are not *prima facie* mutually exclusive and are not infrequently fruitfully complementary – indeed, the latter view is the overall contention of the aforementioned *Chaucer Review* special issue edited by Bahr and Gillespie, and no few Chaucerians have worked both sides of the aisle.<sup>38</sup>

These new kinds of formalist analyses, however, may still put demands on their objects of study – though not as many or as rigidly as did New Criticism – that manuscript studies would resist. Such resistance, for example, was readily in evidence during the Q&A that followed a 2006 New Chaucer Society conference session dedicated to 'The Value of Close Reading: Theory'. Several times, manuscript studies scholars raised questions about, for example, textual variance, and finally the session organiser and chair, Christopher Cannon, understandably moved the conversation on to other topics.<sup>39</sup> As an illustration of exactly where the resistance lies, let us imagine a New Formalist reading of the *Wife of Bath* that closely examines the forms of her speech habits, against the backdrop of records of actual fourteenth-century women's speech, for evidence of her attitudes toward sexuality. As Tinkle's article shows, variation in the wording of the Wife's speeches on this topic between the Ellesmere and Hengwrt manuscripts makes a determination of these attitudes for *the* Wife of Bath (as distinct from either the Ellesmere or Hengwrt Wife) problematic.<sup>40</sup> Without the mooring of a critical edition and its restriction of variation to a carefully circumscribed apparatus, therefore, any instance of formalist analysis, old or new, may potentially transmogrify into either an epiphenomenon of an editorial debate (such as that of the relative authority of Ellesmere and Hengwrt) or, as in Tinkle's study, analysis of something other than the meaning of a literary text (for

example, of that text's reception, rewriting or misunderstanding by a professional reader). And when one extends the scope of formalist analysis beyond lexical detail to structure, the situation may become proportionally more tenuous, especially in regard to the *Canterbury Tales*, with its manuscripts' variation in tale order and links. To be sure, *Tales* manuscripts, especially the earliest ones, share a great deal more than, say, the notoriously variant manuscripts of popular romances, and editors have resolved differences in accidentals and wording, in many cases, with a high degree of likelihood.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, countless formal characteristics, such as Chaucer's use of rime royal for particular tales, are universally attested. Nonetheless, despite the hopes that some may hold for the *Canterbury Tales* Project or, several generations ago, the monumental efforts of J. M. Manly and Edith Rickert to construct a definitive edition from all available witnesses, a single form for the *Tales* will necessarily remain an editorial fiction, and hence the ground of formalist treatments of its text always, to greater and lesser degrees, shaky.<sup>42</sup>

In response to this situation, a manuscript-alert, historically robust formalism might consist of context-saturated studies of the literary forms evident in individual or particular sets of manuscripts – which is in fact more-or-less what Tinkle achieves in her essay, as do some New Formalist studies. But this sort of project takes us back to the position, discussed above, that would make the manuscript, rather than the critical edition, the central object of study. Hence, insofar as this sort of project represents a way forward that reconciles historicism, manuscript studies and emergent formalisms, its shift in the object of study returns us to the basic questions that this chapter seeks to explore, which may now be rephrased as: what rationale remains for *not* giving the manuscript this place of honour? The answer, it appears, is: essentially the same rationale that had been hiding in plain view prior to the twenty-first century renovation of formalism. To see this, we may turn the clock back a few years and revisit a celebrated study published during the apex of the influence of manuscript studies by one of its most prominent practitioners.

In 1996's *Pursuing History*, Ralph Hanna argues that the production of critical editions is still necessary, but only so that the distinct features of individual manuscripts may thereby be cast into

relief. He contends that the notion of a stable, authorial text that transcends any of its manuscript witnesses – a postulate that had undergirded the autonomous New Critical verbal icon, the putative unity of which depended upon lexical and structural constancy – still possesses heuristic power, in that it provides access to precisely those materials that the New Critical verbal icon hid:

History is not to be found initially in ‘the genuinely authorial’ but only through what is ‘inauthentic’, ‘not genuine’. And erroneous readings only reveal themselves to editorial judgment, to a knowledge of how textual transmission occurs within a manuscript culture. Hence, identifying possibly authorial (or at least archetypal, O<sup>1</sup>) readings remains important as allowing a more pervasive historicization, that of medieval literary communities.

The authorial text remains necessary, but primarily for its position within a negative dialectic that yields the ‘more pervasive historicization’ evident in departures from this text. In Tinkle’s study, for example, the critical edition serves as the backdrop for identifying the manuscript variants pertaining to the *Wife of Bath*’s language that constitute the more important object of study. Hanna thus calls for continuation of traditional author-centred editorial activity but only so that we may use the traditional result of this activity – the supposed canonical text – to unearth a more important object, the ‘Middle English literary communities the record of whose existence Chaucerian canonical hegemony had by and large suppressed’.<sup>43</sup>

Like other manuscript studies scholars, then, Hanna calls for a shift in the object of study from edition to manuscript, but he also provides a rationale for retaining the edition, albeit a much diminished one. As undeniably fruitful as this approach has been, however, it also puts rather awkward demands on Middle English scholars, as it calls for considerable energy to be devoted to producing editions in whose critical priority (and even authority) we ought no longer to believe.<sup>44</sup> In effect, Hanna calls for the production of two distinct but interdependent material realisations of objects of study – the critical edition and the collection of ‘erroneous readings’ that carry the history of ‘medieval literary communities’ – and then asks us to put aside the latter for the former. Yet even if the expertise required for such an enterprise abounded, it is not likely to become widely adopted, as the elapsed years between Hanna’s comments



and now appear to attest. And the reason for this is in fact evident in Hanna's own account of the origin and outcome of his career-long pursuit of just this enterprise, which provides us with a sort of parable about the inevitability of literary value.

This account requires some close attention, as, for the purposes of this present chapter, it serves as a paradigm for the persistence of literary value, inherited from supposedly discarded critical practices, even among those scholars who consciously devote their work elsewhere. As Hanna describes, his first exposure to Chaucer occurred when he was twelve years old, when his father, reprimanding him for his use of questionable language, made an off-hand comment about Chaucer's use of such language. In response, Hanna developed what may be described as, for lack of a more sophisticated term, a passion: 'But I'd also discovered a poet apparently salty enough for twelve-year-old tastes (and within a week acquired a used Vintage Chaucer at a Guadalupe Street bookstore) and discovered that "in form of speche is change". I was hooked irrevocably, however I tried to wriggle away'. Hanna's experience resembled, precociously, that of many undergraduates in their first encounter with Chaucer: initially attracted by the poet's salacious reputation, they soon are drawn by other aspects of his writing and, in some cases, become 'hooked irrevocably'. And, like many of those who become so hooked that they pursue postgraduate study, Hanna later experienced a demystification of his former passion. As with his initial encounter, this experience was a precocious one, although in this instance (with its anticanonical sensibility) it was so in respect to the history of Chaucer criticism and in particular the rise of manuscript studies:

I began to realize that what I felt alienated me from Chaucer was, not knowability, but overfamiliarity – not Chaucer's ease, but what modern literary study had made of Chaucer ... the Chaucer we read had come to be conceived of as the ultimate New Critical poetic text ... In this critical context, the notion that Chaucer or his readers had a history and were embroiled in one was largely suppressed. Whatever the effect of such repression upon 'the father', the effect on study of his contemporaries and successors was even more dispiriting. Informatively, the literary canons that privileged Chaucer's *Art* directed attention from these figures as of interest only 'historically' – but then failed to outline what such a history would be.

Hanna discovered that the object of his initial attraction was a New Critical object, and, as he learned about all that New Criticism had ‘largely suppressed’, he began a search for an alternative object. The latter object became the local histories of medieval literary communities, as they have been transmitted by the specificities of individual manuscripts:

I began to wonder whether some aggressive use of the primary evidence for the existence of such [noncanonical] literary figures – the manuscripts themselves – might undo what Chaucer studies had done only too well, return these figures to a historical context and direct research toward a local knowledge that would uncover that context, whatever it was.<sup>45</sup>

No one would dispute that Hanna, in his many publications, has made a remarkable contribution to the ‘local knowledge’ of the production and dissemination of Middle English texts. And yet, the very book in which these passages occur, which states so clearly in these introductory remarks its anticanonical intentions, makes a major contribution to Chaucer studies.<sup>46</sup> Half of its sixteen chapters take some aspect of one or more of Chaucer’s texts as their basic topic, and Chaucer features significantly in several others. Conscious of this potential contradiction, Hanna seeks to explain it as follows:

The center of the volume in the main takes up Chaucerian problems. This block of six essays consists of studies I should have preferred not to have undertaken, deviations from the major areas of my concern. (All, in fact, began as accidents.) However, writing about the text of Chaucer, the poet’s *ipsissima verba*, may be construed as an inevitability: just as Shakespeare’s text has always triggered the most exciting advances in general bibliographic studies, so the canonically central medieval poet demands the attention of anyone involved with Middle English textual dissemination.<sup>47</sup>

As Hanna describes, the return to a canonical author is ‘an inevitability’, indeed, one that supersedes the will of the scholar. In pursuing what he calls the ‘precanonical’ history of medieval literary communities in the evidence provided by manuscripts, Hanna is led repeatedly back to the manuscripts of ‘the canonically central medieval poet’. The reason for this recursion (other than the ‘accidents’ that initiated each study) seems to lie in the fact that

because so much attention has already been bestowed on the study of Chaucer manuscripts, as in the case of the folios and quartos of Shakespeare, they have become the principal vehicles for reflection on the complexities in the relations between surviving documents and the myriad histories to which they attest. Because Chaucer's canonicity has garnered his texts so much scholarly attention, even studies with anticanonical intentions are drawn into the orbit of that canonicity. As a result, *Pursuing History*, however much it seeks to circumvent Chaucer's value, makes Chaucer's texts one of its principal objects, thereby contributing, against its intentions, to Chaucer's prominence within Middle English studies.<sup>48</sup>

This parable thus begins with a boy drawn to a literary work by qualities that seem intrinsic to it (for example, its saltiness). Later as a young man he realises that whatever qualities the work in fact possesses, its character has been constructed for him by an interpretative heritage (New Criticism) that suppresses the real (local histories). He therefore puts aside intrinsic literary value as an object and sets off in pursuit of the real. The parable concludes with the protagonist as an older man discovering that in this very pursuit, he has returned to the scene of the value that he earlier put aside, albeit in a different interpretative fashion. When extrapolated from the career of one particular scholar, Hanna's experience tells the story of the rise of manuscript studies more generally: at both the beginning and on the horizon of this trend (as well as at the beginnings and ends of many of its individual projects) stands literary value, even when practitioners do not consider such value integral and sometimes – as with Hanna in the introduction to *Pursuing History* – when they depict it as hostile. More specifically, the parable tells the story of the uneasy relation between Middle English manuscript studies and Chaucer's *a priori* literary value, the energies of which manuscript studies both draws upon and at times resists.

The New Critical ghost that haunts the Hanna parable, the one that never left Chaucer studies and with which the rise of manuscript studies provoked confrontation, is thus the ghost of judgement, the assessment of the relative value of a literary work. Of course, judgement, as a task of criticism, was hardly invented by New Critics. Going back at least as far as Aristotle and Plato, the critical imperative of evaluation was, as mentioned above, particularly integral to the establishment of modern Chaucer studies in the nineteenth century,

as it was the long history of affirmative judgement of Chaucer's poetry that constituted the enabling companion to 'scientific' philology. Moreover, I do not mean to overemphasise the influence of New Criticism on Chaucer studies. In comparison with, say, the early modern lyric, Chaucer's works (especially the long narratives) were less amenable to the approach, and many scholars, for a variety of reasons (Robertsonianism being one of them), were reluctant to adopt or just outright opposed to it. Insofar as I am addressing the judgement of Chaucer's texts *per se*, then, my topic necessarily has roots in deeper soil than the shifts in critical approaches over the last three-quarters of a century. Nonetheless, those shifts provide a revealing lens and convenient scope, both because the influence of New Criticism on Chaucer studies – albeit not comprehensive – is unquestionable (as, for example, Hanna's and Machan's negative reactions to it attest) and because judgement was, in comparison to other approaches, so central to New Criticism.

New Criticism's ghost of judgement, however, was in 1996 and remains today easy to ignore for at least two principal reasons. First, it is such an obvious target for both poststructuralist and historicist (and, for that matter, any of the post-New Critical) approaches to literature. Evaluative terms such as 'great', 'better' and 'more valuable' have been justifiably considered cheap ideological Trojan horses, and the most cursory survey of literary history proves characterisations of worth to be among the most evanescent of literary pronouncements. One may thus decisively discredit judgement categorically, without a deeper examination of whether one has in fact thereby evaded it. (By the same token, as I will explore in [Chapter 4](#), one may thus discredit canonicity without actually freeing oneself from it.) Second, New Critics themselves expressed varying degrees of ambivalence towards judgement. Not wishing their method to appear impressionistic like that of so many of their predecessors outside the academy, they typically framed their arguments in terms of explication or understanding, rather than evaluation.<sup>49</sup> The critique of New Criticism marshalled by manuscript studies consequently focused not on judgement but on principles of explication, especially New Criticism's anti-historicism, anti-intentionalism and requirement of a singular, fixed text – that is, all that Machan places together under the label 'transcendent verbal icon'.

Yet, for New Critics, understanding always implied judgement, since explication was a process of disclosing how all the elements of a poem either succeed at contributing to a whole or fail to do so. As W. K. Wimsatt put it, 'our main critical problem is always how to push understanding and value as far as possible in union, or how to make our understanding evaluative'.<sup>50</sup> Indeed, in Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley's famous polemic against the 'intentional fallacy', it is the fundamental category of judgement that makes intention (as well as history) relatively unimportant in critical practice: 'How is he [the critic] to find out what the poet tried to do? If the poet succeeded in doing it, then the poem itself shows what he was trying to do .... Judging a poem is like judging a pudding or a machine. One demands that it work. It is only because an artefact works that we infer the intention of an artificer.'<sup>51</sup> For Wimsatt and Beardsley, and New Criticism generally, the determination of the relative success of a poem – that is, its aesthetic merit – is identical to the process of understanding it. A poem becomes less successful to the extent that appeals to intention or historical context, deemed external, are required for this understanding. Hence, given judgement's foundational role, a critique of New Criticism that does not fully account for literary value leaves itself open to be haunted by what it has supposedly left behind.

In the field of English literary studies generally, and especially in the products of its institutionalisation, the persistent ghost of judgement is not hard to find. In addition to the type of vexing presence evident in Hanna's *Pursuing History*, it makes, pervasively, more straightforward appearances. For example, for all the changes to the *Norton Anthology of English Literature* over the last several editions to bring it in line with changing notions of literary history – the greater variety of texts, the retuned historical introductions to periods, the timelines of texts juxtaposed with contexts, the groups of texts centred around historical and cultural issues such as 'women in power' – the headnotes to authors are so consistently laudatory of aesthetic prowess that most undergraduates must come away with a powerful sense of judgement's role in the discipline. New to the seventh edition (2000), for example, was the offhand value-laden remark, 'Andrew Marvell's finest poems are second to none in this or any other period', and this remark – the opening to Marvell's headnote – has been retained in the most recent (tenth) edition.<sup>52</sup>

Similarly little effort is required to locate offhand remarks of judgement in Middle English criticism. In addition to this chapter's second epigraph, the opening sentence of an article by Peggy Knapp, an example especially resonant with present purposes (although with Langland standing in for Chaucer as the self-evident instance of literary value) appears in Kathryn Kerby-Fulton's response to what she perceives as Hanna's charge, in his negative review of *Iconography and the Professional Reader*, that she and Denise Despres undervalued *Piers Plowman*:

The particular approach under disapproval here is our reception history. Contrary to what Hanna implies, it is an approach, we feel, that pays Langland the profoundest authorial compliment: we *know* he's a great poet, and we do not feel we have to prove that in every sentence we write. (Previous generations did carry this burden, and established his poetic reputation brilliantly.)<sup>53</sup>

For the celebrated manuscript studies scholar Kerby-Fulton, the value of Langland's poem is irrelevant to her project, not because such evaluative terms as 'great poet' are ideologically freighted or mere historical contingencies, but rather because the value has been so well established it need no longer be of concern. Moreover, she positions her and Despres's critical project neither in opposition, nor even as an alternative, to the activity of judgement. Instead, she suggests that manuscript-based reception study, while not directly evaluative, is in its very existence affirmative of the worth of Langland's poem – since, presumably, only a 'great poet' justifies such extensive critical attention to a single manuscript. Inasmuch as *Iconography and the Professional Reader* succeeds, then, it testifies not only to the historical interest in the Douce *Piers Plowman* but also to the continuing value of the Work *Piers Plowman*. As in the parable of Hanna's *Pursuing History*, once again a manuscript-oriented study begins with value (the already established 'poetic reputation' of Langland) and ends with value (the 'profoundest authorial compliment' the study represents).<sup>54</sup>

It perhaps goes without saying that if we may spot the ghost of judgement within manuscript studies out of the corners of our eyes, so to speak, we may expect its regular appearance in more-or-less full view in the more value-friendly approach of New Formalism. As with New Criticism, however, this ghost usually wears a thin

disguise, appearing not as judgement per se but as some sort of aesthetic success brought about through an author's canny deployment of formal devices and, sometimes, reflection on the category of form itself. Quite frequently, the aesthetic success also entails a windfall of some other kind of value (ethical, epistemological, political, etc.), and later in this book I will explore the broader nature and implications of this tendency in literary criticism generally to propagate kinds of value. As just one example for present purposes, I highlight Johnson's contribution to *Chaucer and the Subversion of Form*. In considering how several works of literature, including Chaucer's *House of Fame*, formally enact a 'disavowal of the necessity or even utility of linear causality in human life', Johnson argues that in Chaucer's poem, 'the dreamily rendered antiplot becomes a formal tool for meditating on the unknowables and inscrutables of life'. In this way, the *House of Fame* joins the other works in showing us that 'linear causality has become a distortionary hermeneutic that must be overthrown if the true experience of things – whether those things comprise a quest for good fame, human vulnerability, or political resistance – is to be conveyed'.<sup>55</sup> Not unlike Wimsatt and Beardsley's 'pudding or machine', Johnson plainly tacitly reaffirms Chaucer's literary value by judging the form of the *House of Fame* to be successful, in this instance by its disavowal of linear causality. And she goes further than her New Critical predecessors by understanding this formal success as reaping the reward of some extra-literary value, here 'the true experience of things'. As in New Critical studies, the very inclusion of Chaucer presumes his literary value, which the ensuing analysis goes on to reaffirm, and so literary value stands as both the study's enabling condition and its product.

### The object of value

If the ghost of judgement – whether in the form of Langland, Chaucer or some other signifier of literary excellence – thus continues to haunt late medieval English literary studies, then we must ask what the nature of this ghost is and what the consequences of its haunting are. As I have just recalled, for New Critics, that one piece of language could possess more 'greatness' or aesthetic value than another was the preexisting condition that made literary

criticism, as a definably distinct intellectual activity, both possible and necessary. Without the assumption that texts possessed relative greatness, the task of criticism (conceived of as, most fundamentally, judgement) was meaningless. Hence, the object of study that both justified the discipline and was its product was the *notional object of literary value*. What was held to constitute this value was theorised in different ways by different groups of formalists (and thus tended to distinguish one from another, for example, the New Critics from the Chicago School). Indeed, as I mentioned in this book's introduction, such theorisation, well before and after the age of New Criticism, has constituted a vast collective enterprise. Inasmuch as a definition of *literary value* requires a definition of *literary*, it raises the questions of the nature of the literary per se and whether and how texts may possess relative amounts of it – questions that go as far back as we can trace the history of meditations on something that we now include in the category of literature and that have received an intimidating array of answers. In the [next chapter](#), I formulate a preliminary theory, not of the literary nor even of literary value, but of literary *valuing*, a more modest task that has more likelihood of fitting the box to which it is assigned. For present purposes, I will simply emphasise only that which strikes me as a more-or-less self-evident pragmatic given: the *structural role* that literary value plays in the field of Chaucer studies as a *concept* (hence my label 'notional object'), conceiving of that concept first as a placeholder in an institutionalised system of scholarship and teaching, prior to whatever content this placeholder may contain. In [Chapter 2](#), it will be precisely this emphasis on literary value as a placeholder that becomes the basis of this book's preliminary theory of literary valuing.

Literary value, regardless of the relative persuasiveness of the many and various attempts to define it in a tangible sense, was pragmatically extant for New Critics as a collective surmise. If a group of investigators – under the influence of a long tradition of judgement both within and without the academy – assumes that some texts are somehow better than others, then the selection and elucidation of those texts become justifiable scholarly and pedagogical activities. For New Critics, the structural position held by literary value could thus function institutionally as centripetal mission, the notional centre around which the discipline was organised. For individual



acts of critical practice, literary value could function as both anchor point (what one looks for in a text) and outcome (what one finds or does not find). The notional centre hence enabled the myriad activities of literary studies and was at the same time (that is, dialectically) confirmed and defined by those activities: the presumed existence of this quality necessarily preceded the act of formalist criticism, and the evidence for its presence, or lack thereof, was that act's product.<sup>56</sup>

New Critics acknowledged other relevant and related objects of study but considered them adjuncts to the object of value and named as 'fallacies' those critical practices that unduly sought to elevate one of those lesser objects. For example, for Wimsatt and Beardsley, a poem is unarguably from one perspective an object of intention: 'A poem does not come into existence by accident. The words of a poem ... come out of a head, not out of a hat.' But, as their immediately subsequent assertion makes plain, a critic errs when making this object the focus of investigation: 'Yet to insist on the designing intellect as a *cause* of a poem is not to grant the design or intention as a *standard* by which the critic is to judge the worth of the poet's performance.'<sup>57</sup> The authors' two emphases in this statement mark two different objects of study, and, for Wimsatt and Beardsley, the second object – the object of 'worth' or value – constitutes the logical apriority that, for poetry, would lend any interest at all to the first, the object of intention.

As I have reviewed, such a hierarchy was also, until the rise of manuscript studies, largely assumed among the scholars who concerned themselves with Chaucer's manuscripts and whose primary aim was the production of editions of Works. Although their more immediate object of study was the object of intention – that is, authorial readings – they readily acknowledged the subordination of this object to the one of value. The search for authorial readings among the manuscripts of the *Canterbury Tales*, for example, proceeded on the assumption that the *Tales*, as a singular literary Work in the very process of being constituted by the editor, *a priori* possessed value, which thereby justified the effort. Putatively cordoned off from consideration until the quasi-scientific work of the editor was complete, this *a priori* object of value in fact not only initiated the effort but also, as many have shown (and as most editors would readily admit), was a determining factor in

the minutest editorial decisions, regardless of editorial method – for example, recension, best-text or eclectic.<sup>58</sup> Editors conceived of the completed effort – the edition – as an imperfect reification of the notional object of value, the material substitute upon which critical judgement of value may be exercised, a substitute assumed stable until subsequent editors constituted new, presumably less imperfect reifications.

Given this history, what we have seen to be the persistence of the ghost of judgement subsequent to the rise of manuscript studies – even among those scholars whose work exemplifies that trend – suggests that this New Critical hierarchy of objects has never really been supplanted. But if this is so, it stands in stark contradiction with the many insinuations and no few explicit assertions, sometimes programmatic ones, otherwise. Manuscript studies, as evident in Hanna's emphasis on 'Middle English literary communities', has often (though certainly not always) appeared to subordinate the object of value to, if not wholly replace it with, the object of *cultural significance* (or, less neutrally, the object of ideology). This object, which often goes under the name 'material culture', is also more-or-less the one that historicist approaches have typically sought to put at the centre of inquiry. As Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt described in 2000 (in retrospect, at the beginning of the end of historicism's hegemony), while historicism by no means rejects the object of value, it has – under the influence of cultural anthropologists such as Clifford Geertz – subordinated it to the more general 'cultural text', demoting it to the status of just one historical integer among others. This move 'vastly expands the range of objects available to be read and interpreted' and thus in turn entails, to some degree, an attitude 'skeptical, wary, demystifying, critical, and even adversarial' towards the object of value that no longer holds centre stage.<sup>59</sup> It is the move that David Wallace, in his general preface to the 1999 *Cambridge History of Medieval Literature*, describes as especially well suited to the study of the late medieval literatures produced in Britain, and the one that Charlotte Morse in a 1997 essay understands as (among other things) transforming the largely formalist-inspired notion of 'Ricardian poetry' into the project of 'Ricardian studies'.<sup>60</sup> And, to many of those who remain committed to the central position of literary value – even such manuscript-savvy and historically-informed

critics as Pearsall and John Burrow – it is a move that therefore threatens the discipline by its failure to distinguish works of lesser and ‘greater intrinsic literary significance’ and its tendency to push literature ‘aside in the quest for socio-political significance’.<sup>61</sup>

Moreover, as many readers will have already recognised, this putative subordination of the object of value to the object of cultural significance by manuscript studies and historicism is one that has obtained more purchase in the more general distinction between the disciplines of literary and cultural studies, the latter being famous for having no particular commitment to literature at all and certainly not to canonical literature.<sup>62</sup> And for the study of medieval literature this distinction is further complicated by the already longstanding distinction between literary studies and the multidisciplinary formation of medieval studies. The multi-layered relation between the latter and the sort of cultural studies approaches that emerged in the late twentieth century, however, requires more attention than I can supply here. It will have to suffice to observe that on the one hand, medieval studies traditionally has been very welcoming of the distinctive objects of each of its contributing disciplines, but, on the other hand, under the influence of historicism and cultural studies, its potential as a kind of flagship for medieval cultural studies has garnered some recognition, as, say, the aforementioned essay by Morse suggests. There is hence something of a parallel, albeit a very imperfect one, between the distinction between the objects of literary and cultural studies and the distinction between the objects of Chaucer studies and medieval studies, with manuscript studies (at least that which involves Chaucer) often explicitly aligning itself with the latter even while it maintains a more-or-less subterranean commitment to the former.

The emergence of manuscript studies, as I reviewed above, was related but not reducible to the emergence of historicism and cultural studies – as evident, for example, in the fact that a scholar such as Pearsall was so active in manuscript studies even while taking an adversarial stance toward some historicist approaches. Nonetheless, the apparent subordination of the object of value to the object of cultural significance, which historicism and cultural studies often explicitly trumpeted, provided crucial legitimation for the elevation of the manuscript from means to end. As a key element of the ‘cultural text’, the physical manuscript for Middle

English investigators became the most important of the vastly expanded 'range of objects to be read and interpreted' described by Gallagher and Greenblatt. Dovetailing with initiatives in the theory of textual criticism (in particular, the demotion of the authorial text), this emphasis blurred the distinction between literary critic and manuscript scholar in a way that is so visible in studies such as Tinkle's or, in a somewhat different vein, Lerer's 1993 *Chaucer and His Readers*.<sup>63</sup> Indeed, in his introduction to a 1999 collection of manuscript studies essays, Thomas Prendergast calls attention to this blurring as such, stating that the collection's 'variety of approaches ... encompass the palaeographical concerns of Hanna and Pearsall, the New Historical approach of Lee Patterson, and some of the bibliographical methods of Greetham and McGann'.<sup>64</sup>

In *Chaucer and His Readers*, Lerer constructs from a codicological study of fifteenth-century manuscripts and early printed books an understanding of how, and to what end, the authority of Chaucer was constituted vis-à-vis the particular time, place and constituency of the producers and audiences of those codices. The cultural significance of such artefacts – to a much greater extent than the timeless literary value of Chaucer's Works – appears to serve for Lerer as the *a priori* notional object of study that dialectically both enables the investigation and is that investigation's product. Indeed, from the perspective of this and similar studies – or from a metacritical perspective such as Trigg's – the object of literary value might well seem an ideological screen to be lifted, the false transmutation of historically contingent, material conditions into a historically transcendent virtue, one that blinds us both to history and to the ideological uses to which literature is put. In short, the object of value may seem everything that the many expositors of the conservative ideologies of New Criticism have accused it of being.<sup>65</sup>

This returns us to the critique of the Chaucer edition put forth by Machan and others. If the Chaucer editions produced under traditional editorial paradigms are reifications of the notional object of value, then the subordination of this notional object in literary critical studies would seem to necessitate a corresponding subordination of that object's material reifications to more suitable ones. And, indeed, it is precisely the persistence of the traditional reifications of value that prompts Machan's complaint recorded in this chapter's first epigraph. In the place of these reifications ought

to be, say, reifications of cultural significance (that is, of the complexity of cultural influence and transmission, properly historicised), such as might be achieved by a digital representation of various interlaced manuscript matrices, in which manuscript reproductions are linked rhizomically to each other and hypertextually embedded in myriad informing contexts. For both scholarship and pedagogy, this replacement material realisation of the object of study would correspond to the shift in the central self-justifying task of the field from judgement to, say, something like Hanna's discernment of 'medieval literary communities'.<sup>66</sup>

We have already seen, however, that this shift away from judgement has been far from decisive and, accordingly, that digital editions, at least those designed to convey the complexity of cultural influence and transmission more so than literary value, have not been widely adopted. Further consideration of Hanna's remark about how 'Shakespeare's text has always triggered the most exciting advances in general bibliographic studies' suggests the precise source of this continuing resistance to editions of Chaucer not constructed as objects of value. Hanna's remark reminds us that the presumed value of Shakespeare's Works remains firmly in place despite the considerable attention given to the textual indeterminacy of those Works and their lack of authorial imprimatur. Indeed, as the remark further implies, this very attention has more likely perpetuated this value than diminished it. (In Machan's view, the literary value attributed to Shakespeare's Works has not only determined the entire history of Shakespeare editing but also that of Anglo-American textual criticism generally, so that Chaucer's texts have been edited to accord with the model of value set by the Bard's plays.)<sup>67</sup> Similarly, within the realm of historicist literary criticism, the immense amount of attention given to the culture of early modern England over the last forty years or so has done nothing to displace the centrality of the Bard in either early modern criticism or in British literature curricula. (In this regard, one may observe that many – perhaps most – historicist studies, such as Gallagher and Greenblatt's, do not hesitate to include valorisations of such traditional objects of value as Shakespeare's texts.) Although Chaucer has never possessed literary capital anywhere near the scale of Shakespeare's, his Works nonetheless continue to play an analogous role in the disciplinary economy of Middle English studies.

During the height of historicism's and manuscript studies' influence, as much as, say, the topics of Lollardy, Lancastrian politics and women's literary activities turned critical energies in other, often explicitly noncanonical, directions, Chaucer's Works maintained their prominence in the field. As Nicholas Watson observed, in his response to the 2006 New Chaucer Society conference (and despite what he considered, on the one hand, to be the field's broadening concerns and, on the other, the potential negative consequences of its continued dependence on Chaucer),

It's obvious that, for many here [at the conference], Chaucer remains simply the most interesting and demanding of all the writers in our field to study and to think with; and that even for those of us whose most passionate attachments are elsewhere [as for Watson], Chaucer is still the place where many of our new intellectual perspectives come from or find their ultimate test (the question 'does it work for Chaucer?' can still make or break in this business), as well as being the bedrock of our medieval teaching.<sup>68</sup>

We may fairly wonder from comments such as these whether the proposal to subordinate the object of value to the object of cultural significance is not only highly unlikely practically but also just contradictory in principle, as we may begin suspect that the object of value actually possesses determining influence over the object of cultural significance. For if cultural significance were indeed to be promoted as the principal object of study, then we would expect that, say, the *Middle English Prose Brut*, with its 181 surviving manuscripts – or even the *Prick of Conscience*, with 117 – would be given equal if not more attention than the surviving manuscripts of the *Canterbury Tales*. Surely the numerous manuscripts of the former works were at least as culturally significant and ideologically powerful in late medieval England as were the manuscripts of the *Tales*, and in fact they strike me as very likely to have been more so. To this observation, an obvious rejoinder is that the *Tales*, unlike the *Brut* or the *Prick of Conscience*, has continued to possess cultural significance. But that argument effectively extends the object of cultural significance through the full history of Chaucer reception and thereby dilutes historical specificity from that object, reducing it to the generality that Chaucer has been significant for particular constituencies in particular times and places. And this generality

is simply another way of saying that Chaucer's texts have been regularly construed, by various constituencies for various reasons, as possessing more value than other texts. In effect, the object of cultural significance, at least when posited within the ambit of 'studies in the age of Chaucer', becomes merely a displaced object of value, which, even when obscured, thereby retains its role as the disciplinary centre of gravity. What changes through this displacement, however, is the perception of this object's ownership and the perceived need to assign it stable content. By naming the object cultural significance, we are able to define it as someone else's object of value rather than ours, and we may thereby allow the content of that object to be whatever those others needed or desired it to be in their particular historical moments.

Hence, even when projects do not concern Chaucer directly (or another established object of value, such as *Piers Plowman*) and avoid even such aesthetically neutral evaluative terms like 'significance' in favour of a notional object of historical authenticity, they may still depend on a displaced object of value, at some level of indirection. For example, Hanna has declared that 'the ultimate goal of manuscript studies should be the composition of cultural histories ... At every step, one strives to integrate minutiae toward a holistic analysis which reaches beyond books, indeed literature, to society and history.'<sup>69</sup> In this formulation, 'cultural histories', rather than any special significance within them, is the stated object. Yet, as modern historiography has repeatedly taught us, simply to notice something in the past is already to conceive of its value for, and bearing on, the present.<sup>70</sup> A study of, say, the manuscripts of Wycliffite sermons is also an argument for why those manuscripts matter to us. If that study appears in SAC, then implicitly that argument must be, in part, that those manuscripts convey a significant aspect of the culture that also included Chaucer, and hence they may (among other functions, of course) help explicate Chaucer's texts. And the only reason that Chaucer's texts require such explication is because they have already been conceived as an object of value.

To be sure, I do not mean to imply that the entire field of late medieval English studies revolves around a Chaucerian star. Moreover, as I have mentioned, I realise that the position of the object of value vis-à-vis manuscript studies depends at some level on the

ambiguous relation between Chaucer studies and medieval studies (a relation further blurred by the bridge term, 'studies in the age of Chaucer') – or the relation between the more general (and more contested) formations of literary and cultural studies. Indeed, for the latter's advocates, one of the benefits of the multidisciplinary nature of cultural studies is that it tolerates multiple, competing objects of study (which, of course, is one of its liabilities to its detractors). But the corollary to this point is that inasmuch as Chaucer studies remains part of literary studies (and as long as the term 'literary' remains in any way meaningful), the institutionalisation of Chaucer studies carries with it an inherited commitment to value that we may put at arm's length but which we cannot finally evade.

If we cannot then escape the historically sedimented investments of the institutions in which we first learned about Chaucer, and in which we now teach and produce criticism, one might argue that we should at least seek exactly this arm's length distance – the critical distance that levels of indirection from the object of value may achieve. And, certainly, the substitution of cultural significance, or simply cultural history, for the object of value has served this function in the work of many celebrated Chaucerians. Yet, this critical distance, from another perspective, remains an attempt at evasion. If the object of cultural significance in Chaucer studies ultimately translates into the object of value as perceived by historically distant others, and if this object's cultural significance extends, *mutatis mutandis*, to the present and thus includes us, then we have performed a sort of conceptual sleight of hand. The attribution of the object of value to historically distant others enables our own inherited commitments to that object to remain in some inchoate state – to varying degrees offhand, intuitive, impressionistic and unexamined, if not simply submerged and unacknowledged – even while they continue to structure the field.<sup>71</sup> Moreover, by conceiving of the content of the other's object of value as historically contingent, we exempt ourselves from the responsibility of defining the content of the object of value to which we remain committed – on the argument that to do so would merely reflect our own historical conditioning. Again, as a tactic of critical distance, these evasions have use, but they nonetheless remain evasions, and hence the decisions that we might make on the basis of them bear reexamination.



### Reifying the *Canterbury Tales*

One of these potential decisions returns us to the question of whether the best material realisation of an object of study is necessarily the most historically authentic – by which I mean, at this point, whether a reification of the notional object of historical authenticity is necessarily the most desirable material object upon which to practice criticism and pedagogy. As long as the aim of the various tasks involving manuscripts remained the production of a Work in the form of a print edition, the objects of intention, cultural significance and historical authenticity were subordinate to the object of value and hence not thoroughly distinguished from it. But, as the complaint of Machan's recorded in this chapter's first epigraph indicates, reifications of value, inasmuch as they are historically vitiated, would seem to present a mismatch with the aim of investigating cultural histories. As Machan puts it elsewhere, 'All of the modern editions of Chaucer's complete works contain carefully presented, artistically pleasing poetry, but none of them offer genuine examples of works produced within the discourse of Middle English manuscripts, since the Chaucer they imply can only be a projection of postmedieval thinking.'<sup>72</sup> Yet even if we grant the categories that Machan wields here, we nonetheless remain confronted with the question of whether to choose for critical and pedagogical practice 'modern editions' with their 'artistically pleasing poetry' or something that better reifies 'genuine examples of works produced within the discourse of Middle English manuscripts' – perhaps, again, one of the digital editions first imagined in the 1990s.

Machan published the above comments in 1994, at a time when the historicist hegemony and increasing influence of manuscript studies within Chaucer studies would have made the rejection of 'postmedieval thinking' and the embrace of 'genuine examples of ... the discourse of Middle English manuscripts' appear wholly salutary and perhaps inevitable, once digital technology made this possible. As we know, however, Chaucer studies has silently pushed this option aside (and, not coincidentally, 'postmedieval' has of course been embraced as the title of a journal in the larger field of medieval studies). As it was the notional object of value that in fact remained the field's central structuring force throughout the historicist hegemony and ascendancy of manuscript studies, the necessity

to provide a reification of that notional object as the field's fundamental material object could not, in practice, be weakened. Yet this outcome, as I have said, has not been articulated as a matter of principle but rather was more the result of a kind of business-as-usual moving on.

What it would mean to articulate this outcome as a matter of principle is in a sense the project of this book as a whole. For the specific instance of the problem of literary value under consideration here, the principle involved may be provisionally invoked by the question of what the necessary, justifying logic would be for the choice of a rhizomic, dynamically reconfigurable, variant-comprehensive, hypertext edition of the *Canterbury Tales* over, say, the 1975 Donaldson edition, if (and this 'if' is crucial) the latter represents more effectively the object of value and thus more precisely corresponds to the notional object that remains the centre of the field's actual organisation. Upon reflection, one has little basis on which to claim the former as a more legitimate material literary object than the latter. Both are historical composites produced by multiple agents, in essence collaborative projects involving numerous individuals, most of whom are unknown to one another, pursued over the course of hundreds of years. Both lift material from one, uncertain aesthetic context and place it in another, better known but radically different one. Both may be the objects of rigorous and illuminating interpretative practice, although in both cases the interpreter must take care to respect the multiple intentions and contexts constituting the object.

As is well known, Donaldson produced his edition under the New Critical assumption that complex artistic unity is what makes a literary Work valuable, and he manipulated the surviving material record of the *Tales* to create a Work possessing ample amounts of this quality (most strikingly, perhaps, by having the 'Wif of Bathe' disrupt the Host's plan in the Man of Law's Endlink, revealingly defending this decision by simply remarking, 'this gives coherence to the chosen order').<sup>73</sup> This quality is without question 'postmedieval', but this fact alone does not make his version *a priori* any less legitimate as a material literary object. His version is rather simply one produced over time by diverse agents with different motivations. The same description applies in fact to the very earliest witnesses to the *Tales*, such as the Hengwrt and Ellesmere manuscripts.

Although the temporal distances among the several agents responsible for these manuscripts are obviously much smaller than those of any print edition, those agents plainly still possessed diverse motivations, as, say, Hilmo's and Tinkle's studies amply demonstrate. In Tinkle's apt phrasing, the pages of any manuscript reflect a 'hybrid, cumulative authorship'.<sup>74</sup> Hence, even what is arguably the most historically authentic version of the *Tales*, the Hengwrt, is already a historical composite – as indeed is any material literary object in any era. What necessary reason dictates that a less radically composite work (the Hengwrt) be chosen over one that is more so (the Donaldson edition) if – and again this 'if' is crucial – the latter better represents the object of value?<sup>75</sup>

The proposed digital *Canterbury Tales* would also, obviously, be a historical composite, one even more radical than the Donaldson edition, although, in contrast, it would possess the (equally postmedieval) motivation to represent the 'discourse of Middle English manuscripts' with as much authenticity as possible. If one would choose this version of the *Tales* solely because its constitution possesses this motivation, despite finding more literary value in the Donaldson version, then one self-contradictorily abandons the motivation that actually continues to define the field for a motivation that is, at best, an arm-length displacement of the former. One in effect diminishes the 'greatness' of the *Tales*, even while that very quality (whatever it may consist of) remains the reason why any critical energy is expended upon it, in favour of a less 'pleasing' *Tales* that nonetheless ultimately still depends on an idea of greatness for its *raison d'être*. This potential self-contradiction is, then, the principle at stake in the tacit resistance to and ultimate *de facto* casting aside of the manuscript studies argument about the Chaucer edition. However committed Chaucer scholars may be to the idea of historical authenticity – or indeed to any sort of epistemological or ideological position – they are, as an institution, more committed to the object of literary value because that object remains at that institution's centre and indeed provides the rationale for the very presence within Chaucer studies of those other commitments.

An imagined scenario may make this point plainer. Suppose tomorrow someone unearthed incontrovertible evidence that corroborated the speculation that David Lawton made years ago, that Thomas Hoccleve authored some of the linking passages in

the *Canterbury Tales*.<sup>76</sup> Say (to make the scenario more extreme) this individual discovered a manuscript – in the attic of an obscure descendent of Adam Pinkhurst – that contained *all* the linking passages, as well their most important revisions, and that concluded with an envoy to Pinkhurst in which Hoccleve pseudo-humbly proclaims his inadequacy to complete the work of his recently deceased master; and all this appears in Hoccleve's hand, dated November 1400. Obviously, scholarly understanding of a number of things would change rather dramatically, but how should this discovery affect editions of the *Canterbury Tales*? Should the linking passages be bracketed, supplied but not lineated, relegated to endnotes or just dropped altogether? In my view, the best choice would be to use the new evidence to maximise aesthetic power – to produce an edition with, say, the tales and links more seamlessly and confidently integrated than previously, with no indication of so-called fragments and the tale order fixed without hesitation in the Ellesmere schema.<sup>77</sup> To choose one of the other options would be, as in the Donaldson edition example, to choose self-contradictorily the motivation of historical authenticity over that of value, thereby diminishing the very quality that continues to sustain critical interest in the *Tales*, the interest that was the very reason to produce a putatively more historically authentic edition in the first place. Figuratively speaking, it would be to set out for the best pizza restaurant in town but then settle begrudgingly for an undressed salad, even while longingly looking over at a neighbour's pizza. My argument is that most Chaucerians, no matter how nutritionally informed, rightly still want the pizza that motivated the trip out in the first place.

Clearly, the key conditional assumption in both of these examples is that one version of the *Tales* better reifies the object of value than another (or, for that matter, that one likes pizza better than an undressed salad). In these examples I have assumed a specific content for the object of value, one rather tendentiously calibrated to my opening admission of teaching the *Tales* as a linked set of short stories. This assumption is mostly heuristic, inasmuch as my aim has been to call attention to the persistence of the structuring power of literary value in Chaucer studies rather than to define the nature of that value. Given this structuring power, however, the obvious implication is that as a conscientiously reflexive postmodern literary

critic, one ought to make such assumptions explicit, scrutinise their ideologies, investigate their theoretical bases and – I would add – continue to embrace them to the extent that after this process one still believes in them. I will return to variations of this latter point in the subsequent chapters, since, insofar as this book has any advice to give beyond its reflections on the problem of literary value, this simple point is indeed the essence of that advice. In concluding this opening chapter, I offer the following two related considerations, which in various ways have been hovering throughout and which are precursors to the formulations of the [next chapter](#).

First, literary value in general and that of Chaucer in particular plainly neither originated in, nor is decisively controlled by, the academy. Rather, literary value was one of the enabling conditions of the initial academic institutionalisation of Chaucer studies, and its sustained presence outside the academy is in part what continues to legitimise, shape and perpetuate the subfield. In this regard, Hanna's youthful extracurricular encounter with Chaucer may stand as an illustration of how broadly disseminated and influential extra-institutional literary value may be. Also revealing in this regard is Hanna's comparison of Shakespeare's and Chaucer's roles in their respective bibliographic studies. Clearly, Shakespeare scholarship from the start has been and continues to be pendant on the immense value ascribed outside the academy to the Bard's plays.<sup>78</sup> This consideration suggests that no matter how we within the academy choose to define the content of literary value, we would do well to take into account in some fashion the definitions current outside the academy – a task that, as subsequent chapters will indicate, academics have indeed been pursuing in various ways over the last many years. This consideration also confirms the *de facto* choice of Chaucer studies to stick with editions that are more-or-less reasonable representatives of literary value, since it is as an object of value that anyone outside the academy is likely to pick up an edition in the first place and thereby later become, like Hanna, one of those who sustains the field within the academy. (More typically, of course, one's first exposure to Chaucer will be as a student, that is, as temporary consumer within the academy, for whom the point holds equally if not more so, despite however their professor negotiates Chaucer's value.) If in the future Chaucer studies becomes fully submerged within medieval cultural studies

(or any other larger, differently centred formation), then this concern with value may no longer apply. But I do not foresee this submersion occurring until Chaucer no longer possesses literary value outside the academy, at which point it may well occur by default.

The second consideration is that the specific content of the notional object of value – the presumed qualities that define it – is always multiple and potentially unstable, for individual readers as well as among different readers. Attempts to define this content are, as I have suggested, an essential component of reflexive criticism but are also necessarily partial, in both senses of that term. When, for example, Fradenburg, in the final pages of *Sacrifice Your Love*, critiques both John Guillory's adaptation of Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital and the principles of New Philology as articulated by Stephen Nichols, she does so to promote one content of literary value – 'enjoyment' in the psychoanalytic sense – over others (or, in the case of New Philology, over a different object of study).<sup>79</sup> In this light, the early 2000s agon that occurred within Chaucer studies between psychoanalysis and historicism (an agon that Fradenburg seeks to dispose of as a false dichotomy) may be understood, in my terms, as a debate about the content of literary value. Similarly, the more general conflict between supposedly historically rigorous and supposedly anachronistic theoretical approaches to Chaucer (which is still felt in some quarters, although increasingly less so) dissipates when one understands the latter as performing, however consciously, the necessary definition and critical examination of literary value that justifies the former in the first place. As I will argue in [Chapter 5](#), axiological theorisation, no matter how putatively anachronistic, may function as a mark of literary critical integrity.

If one were to follow these considerations and develop a definition of the notional object of value for the *Canterbury Tales*, ought one then to construct an edition that best corresponds to this definition and proceed to use this edition in one's criticism and teaching? Although this conclusion is practically absurd and conceptually nearly as ridiculous, it is in fact not far from the position taken by eminent textual critic G. Thomas Tanselle many decades ago in his account of an editor's aims and responsibilities – a position that amounts to a more radical version of Pearsall's proposal for different editions for different audiences:

A person of taste and sensitivity, choosing among variant readings on the basis of his own preference and making additional emendations of his own, can be expected to produce a text that is aesthetically satisfying and effective. Whether or not it is what the author wrote is another matter; but editing which does not have as its goal the recovery of the author's words is not necessarily illegitimate – it is creative, rather than scholarly, but not therefore unthinkable ... it is ... obvious that an editor could conceivably produce a version of a work aesthetically superior to the original. In such a case the editor would in effect become a collaborator of the author, in the way that publishers' editors or literary executors sometimes are. So long as one is concerned only with individual aesthetic objects, there can be no objection to the procedure; but if one is interested in the work as part of an author's total career, one must insist on having the words which that author actually wrote.<sup>80</sup>

In effect, Tanselle divides the universe of editions into two – the 'creative' ones that correspond to literary value (in his terms, aesthetic superiority) and the 'scholarly' ones that correspond to historical authenticity (which he equates with 'the recovery of the author's words') – and willingly grants legitimacy to the former.

But, as most editors (including Tanselle) have known all along and as manuscript studies has repeatedly taught us, all existing print editions (not to mention the manuscript witnesses themselves) are to some degree creative. They all are products of one or more individuals of (ideally) 'taste and sensitivity', who have manipulated the evidence according to preconceived notions of aesthetic superiority – precisely because such notions are irrecoverably entangled with those individuals' perceptions of what 'the author's words' might have been. Yet the solution to this situation is not, say, to give up the inevitably value-vitiated activity of editing and, in scholarship and teaching, just to consult facsimiles of one manuscript or another. To do so would be, as I have argued above, a misguided attempt to sever the field from the axiological energies that actually sustain it. Neither, however, is the solution to hold all editions equally worthy objects of study simply because no edition may escape being to some degree 'creative'. Such would be to mistake solipsism for subjectivity. Instead, the solution is to continue to produce value-potent editions that nonetheless recognise in some

fashion, both in themselves and in the criticism that takes them as its objects, the constraints of the latest historical and textual findings – for, as I will argue in subsequent chapters, those constraints are actually themselves ascribers of value that necessarily mediate whatever definition of the object of value we may possess. One of the tasks of Chaucer criticism is not just to make its own and its chosen edition's definitions of the object of value explicit but also to shift the axiological grounds in such a way as to highlight the conversation between the creative and the scholarly that has always defined our work.

### Notes

- 1 Tim William Machan, "‘I Endowed Thy Purposes’: Shakespeare, Editing, and Middle English Literature", *Text*, 13 (2000), 9–25 (23).
- 2 Peggy A. Knapp, 'Aesthetic Attention and the Chaucerian Text', *ChR*, 39:3 (2005), 241–58 (241).
- 3 For the especially textual-critical conscious volume of the Athlone *Piers Plowman*, see William Langland, *Piers Plowman: The B Version*, ed. George Kane and E. Talbot Donaldson (London: Athlone Press, 1975). For key works by McGann, Cerquiglini and McKenzie, see Jerome J. McGann, *A Critique of Modern Textual Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983); Bernard Cerquiglini, *In Praise of the Variant: A Critical History of Philology*, trans. Betsy Wing (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999); and D. F. McKenzie, *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). For a couple of additional representatives of late twentieth-century textual-critical theoretical ruminations, see Philip G. Cohen (ed.), *Devils and Angels: Textual Editing and Literary Theory* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1991); and Joseph Grigely, *Textualterity: Art, Theory, and Textual Criticism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995). For an excellent survey of the field of book history, see Alexandra Gillespie, 'The History of the Book', *New Medieval Literatures*, 9 (2007), 245–77.
- 4 See, e.g., Leah Price, 'From The History of a Book to a "History of the Book"', *Representations*, 108:1 (2009), 120–38, as well as the comments in this regard by the guest editors of this special issue of *Representations*, Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, 'Surface Reading: An Introduction', 1–21. I cite below several instances of



Middle English literary scholarship that take a manuscript studies approach. For three examples of relatively recent collections that exemplify this approach and, to varying degrees, also reflect on it, see Orietta Da Rold and Elaine Treharne (eds), *Textual Cultures: Cultural Texts* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2010); Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, Maidie Hilmo and Linda Olson, *Opening Up Middle English Manuscripts: Literary and Visual Approaches* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012); and Michael Johnston and Michael Van Dussen (eds), *The Medieval Manuscript Book: Cultural Approaches* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

- 5 Machan, for example – at least in ‘Shakespeare, Editing’ – seeks to disassociate his position from ‘relativism, post-modernism, and other perceived threats to the integrity of the subject, whether that of the author, the critic, or the society’ (p. 25), even though his historicism is plainly the product of the age in which those threats became literary critical commonplaces.
- 6 See David Matthews, *The Making of Middle English, 1765–1910* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), pp. 162–86.
- 7 Ethan Knapp, ‘Chaucer Criticism and Its Legacies’, in Seth Lerer (ed.), *The Yale Companion to Chaucer* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), pp. 324–56 (322).
- 8 For these oppositions, see – in addition to Knapp, ‘Chaucer Criticism’ – the influential account of the history of Chaucer studies in Lee Patterson, *Negotiating the Past: The Historical Understanding of Medieval Literature* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), pp. 3–39. For Patterson’s final views on the topic, and for his thoughts on manuscript studies that anticipate some of those that I express here, see Lee Patterson, *Temporal Circumstances: Form and History in the Canterbury Tales* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 1–18, 20–25. For the broader history of the nineteenth-century emergence of literary study under the auspices of philology, see James Turner, *Philology: The Forgotten Origins of the Modern Humanities* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), esp. pp. 254–73. Turner observes that the tension between the antithetical principles involved was not particularly felt until the twentieth century.
- 9 Stephanie Trigg, *Congenial Souls: Reading Chaucer from Medieval to Postmodern* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), p. 11.
- 10 Derek Pearsall, ‘Editing Medieval Texts: Some Developments and Some Problems’, in Jerome J. McGann (ed.), *Textual Criticism and Literary Interpretation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985),

pp. 92–106 (105, 106). Pearsall's suggestion reflects his well-known commitments, if sometimes inscrutably harmonised ones, to the ideas of both artistic excellence and historical authenticity.

- 11 Theresa Tinkle, 'The Wife of Bath's Textual/Sexual Lives', in George Bornstein and Theresa Tinkle (eds), *The Iconic Page in Manuscript, Print, and Digital Culture* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1998), pp. 55–88 (74). Tinkle traces this treatment of Chaucer all the way back to the William Thynne's 1532 *Works*. See also Elizabeth Scala, *Absent Narratives, Manuscript Textuality, and Literary Structure in Late Medieval England* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), especially the introduction (pp. 1–36), which covers in some detail the critique that I am summarising.
- 12 For two of many possible examples, see the pair of consecutive articles published in *Text*, 7 (1994): Murray McGillivray, 'Towards a Post-Critical Edition: Theory, Hypertext, and the Presentation of Middle English Works', 175–99; and Daniel W. Mosser, 'Reading and Editing the *Canterbury Tales*: Past, Present, and Future (?)', 201–32. Helen Cooper, 'Averting Chaucer's Prophecies: Miswriting, Mismetering, and Misunderstanding', in Vincent P. McCarren and Douglas Moffat (eds), *A Guide to Editing Middle English* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), 79–93, offers a similar but more moderate conclusion: 'Editions of Chaucer ... are not safe as a basis for certain kinds of critical work, and it may be impossible to tell when one crosses the boundary into danger' (p. 86).
- 13 Trigg, *Congenial Souls*, p. 14.
- 14 See also Theresa Tinkle, *Gender and Power in Medieval Exegesis* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 101–16, in which Tinkle revisits the manuscripts of the *Wife of Bath's* Prologue, in this case focusing especially on the implications of the glosses.
- 15 For a wonderfully personalised account of this shift in the central object of inquiry, see Derek Pearsall, 'The Value/s of Manuscript Study: A Personal Retrospect', *Journal of the Early Book Society*, 3 (2000), pp. 167–81.
- 16 Stephen G. Nichols, 'Introduction: Philology in a Manuscript Culture', *Speculum* 65:1 (1990), 1–10 (9). Although New Philology, as a label, never achieved widespread currency, and this special issue of *Speculum* represented an observation of an ongoing and diverse shift in scholarship rather than a point of origin, Nichols's articulation of this shift remains influential. See, for example, Siân Echard and Stephen Partridge, 'Introduction: Varieties of Editing: History, Theory, and Technology', in Siân Echard and Stephen Partridge (eds), *The Book Unbound: Editing and Reading Medieval Manuscripts and*

*Texts* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), pp. xi–xxi, which characterises New Philological ideas as a ‘formative influence’ (p. xii) on the anthology’s contributions. Matthews, too, explicitly registers his sympathy with these ideas, although in *The Making of Middle English* he adapts them ‘in a way that does not privilege manuscript culture over copy technology’ (p. xxi). And Carol Symes, ‘Manuscript Matrix, Modern Canon’, in Paul Strohm (ed.), *Middle English* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 7–22, in reproaching a Bloomian approach to literary criticism, offers more-or-less the same argument as Nichols.

- 17 John Dagenais, ‘That Bothersome Residue: Toward a Theory of the Physical Text’, in A. N. Doane and Carol Braun Pasternack (eds), *Vox Intexta: Orality and Textuality in the Middle Ages* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), pp. 246–59 (252).
- 18 Maidie Hilmo, *Medieval Images, Icons, and Illustrated English Literary Texts: From Ruthwell Cross to the Ellesmere Chaucer* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 160–99; Arthur Bahr, *Fragments and Assemblages: Forming Compilations of Medieval London* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013); and Arthur Bahr and Alexandra Gillespie (eds), ‘Medieval English Manuscripts: Form, Aesthetics, and Literary Text’, *ChR*, 47:4 (2013). For other examples (among many) of interpretive work on Chaucer that follow a manuscript studies approach, see the essays collected in Seth Lerer (ed), *Reading from the Margins: Textual Studies, Chaucer, and Medieval Literature* (San Marino: Huntington Library Press, 1996); and Thomas A. Prendergast and Barbara Kline (eds), *Rewriting Chaucer: Culture, Authority, and the Idea of the Authentic Text, 1400–1602* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1999).
- 19 Mary Carruthers, ‘“Micrological Aggregates”: Is the New Chaucer Society Speaking in Tongues?’, *SAC*, 21 (1999), 1–26 (18–19). Carruthers, however, then seeks to steer the efforts of Chaucerians in another (or an additional) direction.
- 20 L. O. Aranye Fradenburg, *Sacrifice Your Love: Psychoanalysis, Historicism, Chaucer* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002); Marion Turner, *Chaucer: A European Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019). One need only browse through the last several volumes of *SAC* and *ChR* to confirm this point.
- 21 Andrew Taylor, ‘Session 3 (Papers): “In Praise of the Middle English Variant”’, *The New Chaucer Society Newsletter*, 29:1 (2007), 2. The call resulted in three separate sessions.
- 22 Erick Kelemen, ‘Critical Editing and Close Reading in the Undergraduate Classroom’, *Pedagogy: Critical Approaches to Teaching Literature*,

*Language, Composition, and Culture*, 12:1 (2012), 121–38, partly in response to the initial published version of this chapter, has described ways in which the problematising of the edition may indeed be pedagogically valuable, and, anecdotally, I am aware that other teachers of Chaucer successfully include some sort of exercise along these lines. I am not so confident, though, that this strategy, however sound pedagogically, serves to broaden, or even sustain, interest in medieval literature. Revealingly, more frequently debated in published discussions of Chaucer pedagogy than how best to respect late medieval manuscript culture is whether or not to discard the Middle English edition in favour of a modern English translation. See, for example, the essays collected by Christine M. Rose for the symposium ‘Teaching Chaucer in the Nineties’, *Exemplaria*, 8:2 (1996); and those in Gail Ashton and Louise Sylvester, *Teaching Chaucer* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

- 23 Charlotte C. Morse, ‘What the Clerk’s Tale Suggests about Manly and Rickert’s Edition – and the *Canterbury Tales* Project’, in A. J. Minnis (ed.), *Middle English Poetry: Texts and Traditions: Essays in Honour of Derek Pearsall* (Woodbridge: York Medieval Press, 2001), pp. 41–56 (42). Morse sees this idea as a technologically more sophisticated version of the proposal of Pearsall, ‘Editing Medieval Texts’, for an edition of the *Tales* packaged as a partially bound book containing ‘a set of fragments in folders, with the incomplete information as to their nature and placement fully displayed’ (p. 23). Timothy Miller has since developed a website that accomplishes digitally something of what Pearsall imagined: Timothy S. Miller, ‘Hyper Chaucer’, [www.thefishinprison.com/hyper-chaucer.html](http://www.thefishinprison.com/hyper-chaucer.html) (accessed 17 October 2021). For an overview of the *Canterbury Tales* Project, see its website, [www.canterburytalesproject.org](http://www.canterburytalesproject.org), and Peter Robinson, ‘The History, Discoveries, and Aims of the *Canterbury Tales* Project’, *ChR*, 38:2 (2003), 126–39.
- 24 McGillivray, ‘Towards a Post-Critical Edition’, p. 192. See also Mosser, ‘Reading and Editing’; and Tim William Machan, ‘Chaucer’s Poetry, Versioning, and Hypertext’, *Philological Quarterly*, 73:3 (1994), 299–316, who, after painting a picture of an ideal hypertext edition of the *Canterbury Tales*, offers a more sober assessment of its potential.
- 25 See Ruth Evans, ‘An Interim Report on the Standard Edition(s) of The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer’, *The Chaucer Blog*, <https://chaucerblog.net/2017/10/an-interim-report-on-the-standard-editions-of-the-works-of-geoffrey-chaucer/> (2017; accessed 9 January 2022).

- 26 *The Norton Chaucer*, ed. David Lawton (New York: W. W. Norton, 2019). The forthcoming omnibus editions are one from Oxford edited by Christopher Cannon and James Simpson, and one from Cambridge edited by a team headed by Julia Boffey and A. S. G. Edwards.
- 27 Knapp, 'Chaucer Criticism', p. 355 n. 73.
- 28 Bella Millett, 'What Happened to Electronic Editing?', in Vincent Gillespie and Anne Hudson (eds), *Probable Truth: Editing Medieval Texts from Britain in the Twenty-First Century* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), pp. 39–54 (54, 36); Thorlac Turville-Petre, 'Editing Electronic Texts', in the same volume, pp. 55–70. For an account of some of the practical problems that have stymied the *Canterbury Tales* Project, see Peter Robinson, 'Response to Roger Bagnall Paper: Integrating Digital Papyrology', in Jerome J. McGann (ed.), *Online Humanities Scholarship: The Shape of Things to Come* (Houston: Rice University Press, 2010), pp. 99–108.
- 29 As these were questions that I did actually voice in 2008, I obviously cannot say that they went entirely unarticulated. But, then and now, the questions represent just my own attempt to capture some of the deeper issues that underlie most Chaucerians' apparent complacency with the print edition.
- 30 Tim William Machan, 'Middle English Text Production and Modern Textual Criticism', in A. J. Minnis and Charlotte Brewer (eds), *Crux and Controversy in Middle English Textual Criticism* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1992), pp. 1–18 (8).
- 31 Machan, 'Middle English Text Production', p. 10.
- 32 For Patterson's study, see note 8 above. For an assessment of Donaldson's influence in particular, see *ChR* 41:3 (2007), a special issue devoted to his legacy.
- 33 Alan Liu, 'The Power of Formalism: The New Historicism', *ELH*, 56:4 (1989), 721–71.
- 34 Seth Lerer, 'The Endurance of Formalism in Middle English Studies', *Literature Compass*, 1 (2003), 1–15.
- 35 Early examples of this sort of work include Ellen Rooney, 'Form and Contentment', *MLQ*, 61:1 (2000), 17–40; and Stephen Cohen, 'Between Form and Culture: New Historicism and the Promise of a Historical Formalism', in Mark David Rasmussen (ed.), *Renaissance Literature and Its Formal Engagements* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), pp. 17–41, as well as the other essays collected in these volumes (Rooney's article appears in a special issue of *MLQ* devoted to formalism). The seminal reflection on New Formalism as an emergent trend is Marjorie Levinson, 'What Is New Formalism', *PMLA*,

- 122:2 (2007), 558–69. See also Verena Theile and Linda Tredennick (eds), *New Formalisms and Literary Theory* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), several contributions to which directly take up the relations among New Formalism, New Historicism and New Criticism. The trend achieved a certain apotheosis in Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).
- 36 Eleanor Johnson, *Practicing Literary Theory in the Middle Ages: Ethics and the Mixed Form in Chaucer, Gower, Usk, and Hoccleve* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013); Thomas A. Prendergast and Jessica Rosenfeld (eds), *Chaucer and the Subversion of Form* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018). See also the volume of essays that I edited with Catherine Sanok: *The Medieval Literary: Beyond Form* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2018).
- 37 For this general inclination within medieval studies, see, e.g., Elizabeth Scala and Sylvia Federico (eds), *The Post-Historical Middle Ages* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).
- 38 As with, for example, Prendergast's role as coeditor for both the 1999 manuscript studies and the 2018 New Formalist collections cited above. See also Helen Marshall and Peter Buchanan, 'New Formalism and the Forms of Middle English Literary Texts', *Literature Compass*, 8:4 (2011), 164–72.
- 39 I confess to being one of those stubbornly raising this question, although I was (and am) as much attracted to formalism as I am to manuscript studies. Another questioner was Wendy Scase.
- 40 See Tinkle, 'Textual/Sexual', p. 64.
- 41 For *variance* and the popular romance, see, *inter alia*, Jennifer Fellows, 'Author, Author, Author ...: An Apology for Parallel Texts', in McCarren and Moffat (eds), *A Guide to Editing Middle English*, pp. 15–24.
- 42 As Peter Robinson avers, 'the notion that we can, in textual situations of any complexity, reconstruct the "original form" of the text, or what Chaucer actually wrote or intended to write, is obviously absurd and always was' ('The History', p. 135). Yet, in the same article, Robinson defines 'the single most important issue in Chaucer textual scholarship' to be the understanding of the nature of Chaucer's 'lost set of originals' (p. 133). Machan, while recognising the potential of the project, accuses it of still possessing 'early modern objectives', by which he means the traditional, author-centric aims of textual criticism ('Shakespeare, Editing', p. 21). For a recent (qualified) affirmation of the *Canterbury Tales* Project, see Thomas J. Farrell, 'The Value of the *Canterbury Tales* Project, and Textual Evidence in the

- Emendation of *Canterbury Tales* III.117', *JEGP*, 120:1 (2021), 93–129. For one explanation for why the *Tales* cannot be reduced to a single form, see Derek Pearsall, 'Authorial Revision in Some Late-Medieval English Texts', in Minnis and Brewer (eds), *Crux and Controversy*, pp. 39–48. For another, see Stephen Knight, 'Textual Variants: Textual Variance', *Southern Review*, 16:1 (1983), 44–54. I address the instability of the structure of the *Canterbury Tales*, or lack thereof, in 'Abandon the Fragments', *SAC*, 35 (2013), 47–83. For Manly and Rickert's project, see John M. Manly and Edith Rickert, *The Text of the Canterbury Tales: Studied on the Basis of All Known Manuscripts*, 8 vols (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1940).
- 43 Ralph Hanna, *Pursuing History: Middle English Manuscripts and Their Texts* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), pp. 11, 7.
- 44 I do not mean to imply that Hanna's views in this regard stand for the consensus of practitioners of manuscript studies or, more narrowly, textual critics. In fact, how much and what kind of a role the project of discerning the authorial text still possesses are matters of some debate. See, for example, the essays collected in McCarren and Moffat (eds), *A Guide to Editing Middle English*, especially those in the first section, 'Author, Scribe, and Editor'.
- 45 Hanna, *Pursuing History*, pp. 1, 2–3, 3.
- 46 Or, to be more precise, the book represents the major contribution to Chaucer studies that Hanna, at this juncture in his career, had already made, since only two of the sixteen chapters are entirely new.
- 47 Hanna, *Pursuing History*, pp. 14–15.
- 48 In this light, one might understand Hanna's follow-up book, *London Literature, 1300–1380* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), as a less diverted culmination of his project, in that it steadfastly focuses on 'local knowledge' of the literary communities extant in London before Chaucer's major productions. Indeed, in the preface to this book, Hanna contrasts his project with those of historicist critics Richard Firth Green and David Wallace, whom he claims ultimately underwrite Chaucer's traditional canonicity.
- 49 See Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), esp. pp. 121–61.
- 50 W. K. Wimsatt with Monroe C. Beardsley, *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1954), p. 251. Cf. René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1949): 'To spend time and attention on a poet or poem is already a judgment of value ... "Understanding poetry" passes readily into "judging poetry", only

judging it in detail and judging it while analyzing, instead of making the judgment a pronouncement in the final paragraph' (p. 262).

- 51 Wimsatt, *Verbal Icon*, p. 4.
- 52 M. H. Abrams and Stephen Greenblatt (eds), *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 7th edn, 2 vols (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000), p. 1:1684. Stephen Greenblatt (ed.), *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 10th edn, 6 vols (New York: W. W. Norton, 2018), p. 2:1339.
- 53 Kathryn Kerby-Fulton with Denise Despres, 'Fabricating Failure: The Professional Reader as Textual Terrorist', *The Yearbook of Langland Studies*, 13 (1999), 193–206 (194), emphasis in original. Hanna's review directly precedes in the same volume: '*Piers Plowman* and the Radically Chic', 179–92.
- 54 One may also consider in this regard that while the study of Middle English documents by literary scholars has expanded aggressively into the arena of the non-literary, perhaps the most celebrated work of this sort over the last couple of decades – Linne Mooney's use of documentary records to identify Adam Pinkhurst as the scribe of Hengwrt and Ellesmere – is plainly invested in the value that we continue to ascribe to the *Canterbury Tales*. See Linne R. Mooney, 'Chaucer's Scribe', *Speculum*, 81:1 (2006), 97–138.
- 55 Eleanor Johnson, 'Against Order: Medieval, Modern, and Contemporary Critiques of Causality', in Prendergast and Rosenfeld (eds), *Chaucer and the Subversion of Form*, pp. 61–82 (79, 80).
- 56 That this sort of critical activity thus possessed a marked logical circularity – as its conclusions ('the poem succeeds') are more or less restatements of its assumptions ('the poem is an object of value') – has been argued well and often. For a trenchant, early articulation of this point, see Stanley Fish, 'Interpreting the Variorum', *Critical Inquiry*, 2:3 (1976), 465–85.
- 57 Wimsatt, *Verbal Icon*, p. 4.
- 58 For Middle English studies, the editors/critics Donaldson and Kane have been especially vocal in their insistence on the role of subjective judgement in all methods of editorial work. For the former's views on this topic, see 'The Psychology of Editors of Middle English Texts' in E. Talbot Donaldson, *Speaking of Chaucer* (London: Athlone Press, 1970), pp. 102–18. For a consideration of the affiliations between New Criticism and Kane's and Donaldson's editing practices, see Patterson, *Negotiating the Past*, pp. 77–113. For this view in respect to English literature more generally, see G. Thomas Tanselle, *Textual Criticism and Scholarly Editing* (Charlottesville: University Press



- of Virginia, 1990), who argues the point throughout this collection of essays – e.g., ‘In scholarly editing the role of literary judgment is vital to all decisions – those concerning accidentals as well as those concerning substantives’ (pp. 329–30).
- 59 Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 9.
- 60 David Wallace (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. xi–xxiii; Charlotte C. Morse, ‘From “Ricardian Poetry” to Ricardian Studies’, in A. J. Minnis, Charlotte C. Morse and Thorlac Turville-Petre (eds), *Essays on Ricardian Literature: In Honour of J. A. Burrow* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp. 316–44.
- 61 Derek Pearsall, ‘Medieval Literature and Historical Enquiry’, *The Modern Language Review*, 99:4 (2004), xxxi–xlii at xl and xxxvii. In the first quotation, Pearsall refers specifically to James Simpson, *Reform and Cultural Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); and, in the second, to Lee Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991). Pearsall follows, with some qualifications, the disciplinary diagnosis of J. A. Burrow, ‘Should We Leave Medieval Literature to the Medievalists?’, *Essays in Criticism*, 53:3 (2003), 278–83, but adduces different causes.
- 62 See, e.g., Easthope, *Literary into Cultural Studies*.
- 63 Seth Lerer, *Chaucer and His Readers: Imagining the Author in Late-Medieval England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).
- 64 Thomas A. Prendergast, ‘Introduction: Writing, Authenticity, and the Fabrication of the Chaucerian Text’, in Prendergast and Kline (eds), *Rewriting Chaucer*, pp. 1–9 (2). Cf. the statement of aims in Siân Echard and Stephen Partridge, ‘Introduction: Varieties of Editing: History, Theory, and Technology’, in Echard and Partridge (eds), *The Book Unbound*, pp. xi–xxi.
- 65 See, for example, Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), pp. 17–53.
- 66 Part of Turville-Petre’s argument for the virtues of the digital edition suggests a rationale along these lines, although I do not think that he would subscribe to this shift in literary study’s self-justifying task; see ‘Editing Electronic Texts’, p. 56.
- 67 This is the basic argument of Machan, ‘Shakespeare, Editing’.
- 68 Nicholas Watson, ‘Response to the New Chaucer Society Conference, New York, July 27–31, 2006’, *The New Chaucer Society Newsletter*, 28:2 (2006), 1–5 (2).
- 69 Ralph Hanna, ‘Analytical Survey 4: Middle English Manuscripts and the Study of Literature’, *New Medieval Literatures*, 4 (2001), 243–64 (255–6).

- 70 This basic historiographical position will serve as one of the points of departure for [Chapter 5](#).
- 71 In this regard, it is to Pearsall's credit that in his defence of Chaucer's literary value in 'Medieval Literature', he offers what one rarely encountered in Chaucer criticism through the period of historicist hegemony: an explicit attempt to define poetic literary value generally and to demonstrate its presence in Chaucer's verse. That this demonstration seems so much like a formalist exercise is striking.
- 72 Tim William Machan, *Textual Criticism and Middle English Texts* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1994), p. 181.
- 73 *Chaucer's Poetry: An Anthology for the Modern Reader*, ed. E. T. Donaldson, 2nd edn (New York: Ronald Press, 1975), p. 1074.
- 74 Tinkle, 'Textual/Sexual', p. 76.
- 75 In raising this question, I echo arguments made to somewhat different ends by Michelle R. Warren, 'Post-Philology', in Patricia Clare Ingham and Michelle R. Warren (eds), *Postcolonial Moves: Medieval Through Modern* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), pp. 19–45.
- 76 See David Lawton, *Chaucer's Narrators* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1985), pp. 127–9. If the more recent contention of Simon Horobin, 'Thomas Hoccleve: Chaucer's First Editor?', *ChR*, 50:3–4 (2015), 228–50, that Hoccleve served as 'editor' of both Hengwrt and Ellesmere is correct, Lawton's speculation is perhaps a little less farfetched.
- 77 Representation of the *Tales* as a collection of fragments is, in any event, not even historically authentic. See my 'Abandon the Fragments'. I offer this whimsical thought exercise of Hoccleve's coauthorship, rather than one of the actual debates about how the *Tales* ought to be represented, to avoid digression into textual controversies. But readers may easily see how the debate about, say, the status of the penitential treatise and so-called *Retractions* that stand at the end of the *Tales* (whether, that is, they belong in the *Tales* at all) depends not just on textual questions but also on the inertia of the literary value attributed to the current configuration of the *Tales* and the likelihood that a new configuration (ending with the *Parson's Prologue*) would possess more. For the argument that the *Parson's Tale* and *Retractions* are a scribal appendage, see Charles A. Owen, 'The Canterbury Tales: Beginnings (3) and Endings (2 + 1)', *Chaucer Yearbook*, 1 (1992), 189–211; and, more extensively, Mícheál F. Vaughan, 'Creating Comfortable Boundaries: Scribes, Editors, and the Invention of the Parson's Tale', in Prendergast and Kline (eds), *Rewriting Chaucer*, pp. 45–90.
- 78 For a general consideration of how literary canonicity is not nearly as much a function of the academy as academics tend to believe, see

E. Dean Kolbas, *Critical Theory and the Literary Canon* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2001).

- 79 Fradenburg, *Sacrifice Your Love*, pp. 243–52. Knight is similarly forthcoming about his (rather different) sense of the literary value of Chaucer's texts when he frankly admits, in respect to his work as an editor, 'when faced by equally possible variants I will print the one which has the maximum possible historical tension, the reading which loads the text most strongly with ideology' ('Textual Variants', p. 49).
- 80 Tanselle, *Textual Criticism*, p. 329.