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The Injuries of Time: Geoffrey Chaucer, Thomas Speght and Wade’s Boat

The State Library of Victoria holds a wonderful collection of early Chaucer editions: two leaves from William Caxton’s editions of The Canterbury Tales (from 1478 and 1483), and a more substantial group of relatively rare sixteenth- and seventeenth-century editions. Starting with this impressive group, it is possible to use the Melbourne collection to track the major stages in the long history of editing and printing Chaucer, through John Urry’s lavish but inaccurate edition of 1721, the more scholarly text of Thomas Tyrwhitt in five volumes (1775-78), the numerous texts of various works produced by Frederick J. Furnivall for the Chaucer Society in the late nineteenth century, and the beautiful Kelmscott Chaucer of 1896, printed by William Morris and incorporating wood-cuts designed by Edward Burne-Jones, through to the scholarly and student editions of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

These editions often differ considerably from each other. Not only have critical opinions varied substantially over the centuries as to the best manuscripts and the best methods of presenting Chaucer’s work, but the audience and the use anticipated for each edition (for different generations of general readers, scholars or students) also affects the nature of the prefatory material and the commentaries, notes and glossaries that surround the text.

Reading the history of editing Chaucer, then, is far from simply a case of tracing the stages by which we reach our present understanding of what makes an excellent text, though this is a fascinating study in its own right. Editorial histories are often histories of great vicissitudes in fashion and vitriolic disagreement amongst editors. In the case of Chaucer, for example, for many generations after his death in 1400, the best Chaucer text was seen as the most inclusive, and so the early manuscripts and printed texts made a point of collecting anything that seemed even vaguely Chaucerian. This might be a missing link, prologue, or tale that might supplement the incomplete Canterbury Tales; or a poem of unknown authorship that might have been written by Chaucer; or poems by poets such as John Lydgate, whose fifteenth-century Siege of Thebes included a prologue which introduces the tale as the first told on the return journey from Canterbury to London. This poem was regularly bound up in manuscript and early printed editions of Chaucer’s Works, even while it was correctly attributed to Lydgate. The most damning critique of this practice came from Thomas Tyrwhitt in his edition of 1775, who wrote of the ‘heap of rubbish’ added to the Chaucerian corpus in the edition of 1561 by John Stow, better known as the chronicler writer and author of the Survey of London of 1598. A copy of Stow’s Chaucer is also held by the State Library.
Even leaving aside the question of authorship and attribution, these editions can help us deduce a history of reading medieval literature. Again, the case of Chaucer is particularly instructive. As the oldest canonical English poet, Chaucer’s work is marked by a deep familiarity, but an equally important aspect of his popularity is the wonderful strangeness of his language and his world. The history of the ways we ‘explain’ Chaucer to new generations of readers offers an instructive lesson in the surprisingly unstable relationship between the medieval and the modern, or the contemporary. Our knowledge about medieval culture is sometimes mediated in strange ways, across a variety of post-medieval scholarly and popular forms, in fiction, film, and architecture, for example, as well as in our study of medieval literature, art and music. The study of this mediation is another version of ‘medievalism’.

I

My key text in this paper is the 1598 edition of *The Workes of our Antient and Learned English Poet, Goffrey Chaucer, newly Printed*, edited by Thomas Speght and printed in London by Adam Islip in 1598; and reprinted several times over the seventeenth century. The State Library holds three imprints of this text, from 1598, 1602 and a revised version of 1687.

Speght’s edition sits at a turning-point, about a third of the way along the rich lineage of Chaucer commentary and editions. It precedes the modern systematic emphasis on establishing an accurate text from the most reliable manuscripts, but in its form it anticipates much of the scholarly apparatus we associate with modern editions, with their learned prefaces, commentaries, notes and glossaries.

In line with humanist scholarly conventions, Speght’s prefatory materials consistently frame Chaucer as a venerable author from a pseudo-classical past. The edition opens with an elaborate title-page (Fig. 1) with classical figures and epigraphs pairing Chaucer’s *Parlement of Foules* with Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. This is followed by a dedication to Sir Robert Cecil; the editor’s address ‘To the Readers’; a dedicatory letter from Francis Beaumont; a poem ‘The Reader to Goffrey Chaucer’, in which the poet speaks from the grave to commend the labours of the editor; a full-page ‘Progenie’, a full-length portrait of the poet surrounded by his family tree (Fig. 2); a sixteen-page biography; and then the ‘arguments’, or summaries of all the works. These materials are followed by re-prints of materials from William Thynne’s edition of 1532, his Epistle to Henry VIII, a table of contents, and finally, two dedicatory poems: the ‘Eight goodly questions with their answeres’; and Thomas Hoccleve’s poem addressed to Henry V and the Knights of the Order of the Garter, exhorting them to stamp out the Lollard heresy. These thirty-odd pages represent a rich and wonderful accretion of historical moments in the reception of Chaucer.

Throughout these prefatory texts, Speght resurrects a Chaucer who was once virtually lost in the mists of time, but whom he now redeems and presents to a modern audience through his own labours of love. He writes from a classicising impulse, treating Chaucer as the renaissance humanists treated the classical writers. But there is also a difference, in that
Speght and Beaumont both regarded the medieval period with mixed feelings. On the one hand, it produced Chaucer and rated him highly as a poet, guaranteeing a worthy point of origin to English poetic tradition; but on the other hand, it was so long ago, and is marked by such difference from late sixteenth-century culture that many of Chaucer’s words and expressions have fallen into desuetude, needing the rescue of the editorial hand.

In his address to the editor, ‘F.B. to his very loving friend, T.S.‘, Beaumont defends Chaucer from the charge that ‘many of his wordes (as it were with ouerlong lying) are growne too hard and unpleasant‘, and asks:

Now (M. Speght) tell mee, seeing not onely all Greeke and Latine Poets have had their interpretours, and the most of them translated into our tongue, but the French also and Italian, as Guillaume de Saluste seigneur du Bartas, that most divine French poet, Petrarke, and Ariosto, of whom this last instructed by M. Harrington doeth now speake as good English as he did Italian before, and is withall encreased with many good notes, shall onely Chaucer our Poet, no lesse worthy than the best of them amongst all the Poets of the world lie alwaies neglected and neuer be so well understood of his owne countrymen as strangers are?

The implication is clear: Chaucer’s language has become sufficiently unfamiliar to require learned translation. In the poetic dialogue, ‘The Reader to Geffrey Chaucer,’ the poet similarly praises Speght as

The selfe same man who hath no labor spar’d,
To helpe what time and writers had defaced:
And made old words, which were unknown of many,
So plaine, that now they may be known of any.

The consistent impulse in this 1598 edition is one of recovery, of bringing Chaucer into the present, into the light of modernity. Another important theme is Speght’s apparent reluctance to share his private researches with a commercial reading public in the glare of print. He addresses himself to a community of gentlemanly readers who enjoy reading and discussing Chaucer in private; and explains in his address ‘to the Readers‘, how these friends encouraged him to make his research available to the public:

Some few yeres past, I was requested by certaine Gentlemen my neere friends, who loved Chaucer, as he well deserveth; to take a little pains in reviving the memorie of so rare a man, as also in doing some reparations on his works, which they judged to be much decaied by injurie of time, ignorance of writers, and negligence of Printers.

In Speght’s gentlemanly world of private research, the commercial Printers are the ones least able to perform the work of scholarly recuperation, to repair the ‘injurie of time‘. Here is the ‘stigma of print‘ writ large.‘

We may suspect that much of this reluctance has become a conventional expression of modesty. Certainly Speght presents a generous array of scholarly aids to translating and reading Chaucer: a glossary, ‘The old and obscure words of Chaucer, explained‘; translations of the French; an index of Authors cited by Chaucer; and a series of Corrections and Annotations.
As if to emphasise the historical distance between Chaucer and the late sixteenth century, Speght’s edition also uses an intriguing mix of fonts: Roman type for English, italic for Latin and marginal quotations, and black letter for quotations from Chaucer in the introduction and in the text itself (Fig. 3).

I want to focus in the remainder of this essay on what is perhaps Speght’s most famous annotation. In The Merchant’s Tale, the old man January has determined to marry a young wife. He declares:

I woll no woman of thirty Winter age
It nis but Beanstraw and great forage
And eke these old widowes (God it wote)
They connen so much craft in Wades bote
So much broken harme whan hem list
That with hem should I neuer liue in rest

fol. 28.1 (text taken from Speght’s edition).1
Speght annotates this passage thus:

28. 1 *They connen so much craft in Wades bote, etc.* Concerning *Wade* and his bote called Guingelot, as also his strange exploits in the same, because the matter is long and fabulous, I passe it ouer. (Fig. 4)

January’s fears have incited a wealth of commentary, though it is nearly all focussed around the mysterious boat of Wade, rather than the enigmatic and suggestive ‘broken harm’. As an allusion to a lost source, the mention of Wade, about whom we know relatively little, has been an irresistible invitation for learned speculation or commentary, even if much of that commentary is evasive or strained. Speght’s comment is the earliest, and establishes the pattern.

What does his refusal to say more about Wade signify? Clearly the dismissal of the story as too ‘long’ is contingent: any story can be condensed, or its source named. That the story might be seen as (too) ‘fabulous’ for the late sixteenth century is a more complex problem. It is possible that Speght wanted to distance himself from the rambling excesses and marvelous tales of medieval romance, though this is the same editor who glosses Chaucer’s allusion to Sir Gawain by describing, on the same page as the *Merchant’s Tale* annotations, the discovery of Gawain’s sepulchre in Wales in 1082: ‘and his body affirmed by many to haue bin of the length of fourteene foot’.

Speght seems fairly comfortable with the idea of the fabulous, then, and so it seems more likely that he was unfamiliar with the details of Wade’s history, which indeed survives in only fragmentary form.

Wade seems to have been the father of Wayland the Smith. (Most of the surviving legends connect him with the sea in some way, while he is also cited, somewhat obscurely, as a model of humility in a thirteenth-century Latin sermon.) In the Middle High German *Kadrunt* he appears as the faithful retainer of Hetel. In this story Wade commands a boat with a hidden compartment concealing armed men who facilitate the abduction of Hilde, his master’s beloved, from under the eyes of her father, King Hagen. It is also possible that Wade’s boat has been conflated with that of his son: Wayland escaped by boat from the dwarfs to whom he had been bound. None of the extant stories or references seems particularly ‘strange’ or ‘fabulous’, however, and none of them names Wade’s boat ‘Guingelot’. Deliberately and self-consciously or not, Speght has added one more piece to the puzzle of the allusion to Wade while telling us he will not tell us anything.

Whether or not Speght knew more or less of Wade than he mentions here, it is apparent that the discursive position of ‘not knowing’ is not really available to him (any more than modern scholars are fond of invoking it). Many commentators have found his note frustrating. In Robinson’s edition he says ‘it has often been called the most exasperating note ever written on Chaucer’.* In his edition of 1775, Thomas Tyrwhitt attributed the omission to a failure of judgement. ‘*Tantamne rem tam negligenter*? Mr. Speght probably did not foresee that posterity would be as much obliged to him for a little of this “fabulous
matter” concerning “Wade and his bote”, as for the gravest of his annotations.” Tyrwhitt does not openly countenance the possibility of Speght’s ignorance, or his cultural forgetting, but indirectly criticises his failure to predict what would be forgotten two hundred years later.

Tyrwhitt thus distances himself from Speght, in what we might call a ‘medievalising’ comment, sending Speght securely back into a prior age, a different temporality, and closer, indeed, to Chaucer, while simultaneously casting doubt on the usefulness of the rest of his commentary and his scholarship. In this way, Tyrwhitt marks out the modernity of his own editorial approach. From the safety of this distance, Tyrwhitt can now profess himself eager on modernity’s behalf for the fabulous, under the neutral sign of medieval scholarship. We have had enough of the ‘grave’; now we can allow the re-entry of the ‘fabulous’.

This ‘medievalising’ tendency remains attractive, and can be activated from many different perspectives. Commenting on Speght’s ‘nonannotation’ in 1984, Derek Pearsall
invokes a nostalgic envy, in a remark that is eerily reminiscent of Tyrwhitt:
the point is worth making that Speght, for all his earnest attempt to present Chaucer as
an ‘ancient and learned’ poet, is here, as on other occasions, intimate with Chaucer’s
poetry in a way that we, across many more centuries, can never be.8

Just as Tyrwhitt contrasts the ‘grave’ and the ‘fabulous’, so Pearsall, over two hundred
years later, draws an analogous contrast between Speght’s ‘earnest’ work and his careless
‘intimacy’ with Chaucer. For all the clever technologies of modern scholarship, Pearsall
cannot help but lament his difference and his separation from Chaucer.

II

The split between the fabulous and the grave, between play and philology, is also
symptomatic of a powerful structuring force in the relationship between medieval and
medievalism studies. Academic medieval studies often seek to distinguish themselves from
both ‘popular’ or ‘uncritical’ medievalism and sometimes also from the academic study of
such medievalism, but I want to suggest that these distinctions are often founded less on
methodological than ideological distinctions. It is not always fully understood that this
opposition has a very long history, its own network of multiple temporalities that we can see
played out across a number of cultural hierarchies.

For example, the divisions legible in the commentary tradition at this point in
Chaucer’s text are not purely epistemological; they also speak to broader issues of cultural
politics. To disclose these politics, we need to look more carefully at Chaucer’s allusion to
Wade. Given the context of January’s deliberations on marriage, we will not be surprised to
find that these broader issues involve sex and gender.

Underpinning the comments of Speght, Tyrwhitt, and most other commentators is
the assumption not only that Chaucer himself had the full resonances of the allusion at his
fingertips, but that the story would have been equally familiar to all his contemporary
readers. Jumping another two centuries, we find Karl Wentersdorf, commenting in 1965:
‘Although the English Tale of Wade is no longer extant, the story of the great Germanic
champion who overcame a dragon and had many other heroic adventures was well-known
in Chaucer’s day [my italics].’9 Wentersdorf’s ‘many other heroic adventures’ is rather vague
(though his essay does adduce some other evidence about Wade), but the prevailing
assumption here is that there is indeed a ‘lost’ English tale which was perfectly and equally
familiar to Chaucer and his contemporaries. Wentersdorf invokes the easy myth of the
perfect historical alterity of the Middle Ages, in his appeal to a self-knowing fourteenth-
century, in which all members had equal access to the known sum of medieval tradition.

Strengthened by these assumptions, Wentersdorf’s exegesis is equally positivist in its
certainty:
January’s reference to the boat, a symbol of ruthless and successful deception, suggests
the kind of guile with which May will help Damian conceal himself in the forbidden
garden and, after January has seen her in the squire’s arms, the kind of bravado with
which she will successfully defend herself in a seemingly indefensible position. January’s reference to Wade’s boat is thus another example of the Merchant’s twofold irony. May, notwithstanding her youth, will prove as cunning as any old widow in deceiving her husband and then worming her way out of trouble. And even more pertinent to the Merchant’s theme than the nature of the boat (which is what January has in mind, since it symbolizes trickery) is the role played by Wade himself in the story of Hilde. His abduction of the beautiful maiden in Hettel’s behalf was a ravishing; and, like that of Helen, it called for revenge.10

L. Peeters, on the other hand, uses Speght in a somewhat convoluted excursus into etymological explanation and the tradition of double entendre.11 First he suggests Speght probably knew little or nothing of Wade’s story, except the name of the boat, which Peeters derives retrospectively and hypothetically from its function in the Hilde narrative. He expounds the name ‘Guingelot,’ or in its cognate Northern form, ‘Wingelock,’ from the boat’s
quickly removable deck, beneath which the armed men who effected Hilde’s abduction were concealed. He derives the first part of Wingelock from Old Icelandic and Norse vingla, ‘to turn, move, to move to and from, to move up and down, to move backwards and forwards’; and comments, ‘The boat of Wade would be most appropriately named after its construction and its function: the boat with a deck that can be removed. It is possible that the literal meaning is at the base of the later use of the name’. Moreover, the Icelandic vingull ‘horse’s male organ’ is linked to vingla whose meanings ‘lok, chest, vessel, locker in stern of boat,’ are ‘hard to keep apart’ from those of lok ‘enclosure, fold, hole, female pudenda’, analogous to the Wife of Bath’s quoniam.12

All this speculation is pressed into the service of the following timeless piece of ‘neutral’ moralising: ‘The old knight January in the “Merchant’s Tale” certainly will be better off with a young inexperienced girl than with a widow who knows the trade, and is as tricky as the Boat of Wade.’13 More recently, in the same tradition of imaginative etymologising, an essay by Ross Downing comments (in syntax that matches the shakiness of the argument):

Here clearly we see Wade’s boat used as a euphemism for the sexual act, perhaps Speght’s inclusion of the name of this boat; ‘Guingelot’ is related to the Norse ‘Gunga’ the verb ‘to swing or rock’ even through the Anglo-Saxon inheritance this is very possible. Thus the boat itself like a ship rocking on waves is in turn alike to the motion of the sexual act.1

In one sense, this essay is not dissimilar to that of Wintersdorf’s essay, though its source is quite different. I found Downing’s essay in the easy manner of modern scholarship, by googling ‘Wade’. I then tracked back to ‘home’ to find the following description of the website: http://www.ealdiriht.org/wade.html:

Miercinga Rice is a group dedicated to the study, revival, and practice of the pre-Christian religion of the Angles of the kingdom of Mercia (one of the seven kingdoms of the Anglo-Saxon Heptarchy), and Anglo-Saxon Heathenry in general.

The ‘study, revival, and practice ...’: it is a temporal conjunction that transgresses the boundaries of most scholarly practice, and yet it is perfectly naturalised here, as on many other similar sites. For example, in my search for commentaries on Guingelot, I found another great source of information about Guingelot, as I was trying to untangle its seemingly French appearance with what I was learning about the story’s Norse analogues and traditions. But the site, the Annals of Arda, turned out to be dedicated to an encyclopaedic elucidation of J. R. R. Tolkien’s names; in this case, his boat Vingilot.15

According to the strictest conventions of scholarly research, it should still be possible, of course, to keep these things untangled: to separate medieval text from modern
commentary; and to separate scholarly article from e-zine or fan website. But it is not difficult to predict a time when the distinction between Tolkien’s Vingelot and Speght’s version of Wade’s boat will be harder to maintain. Like it or not, this is not just how our students find material; it is also how scholars find it. In this way the multiple temporalities of all our research materials – manuscripts, books, dictionaries, websites – have immense, and growing potential to confound the distinction between the medieval and the medievalist. Of course it is possible to untangle these historical knots and restore linearity to our knowledge, and the paths along which we come to it; but this particular knot is symptomatic of an issue that is currently being played out whenever a fiction writer or film director ‘researches’ the Middle Ages. Speght’s commentary is an important stage in the development of a scholarly discourse that is now being applied to popular medievalist texts as well as medieval ones.

III

The issues, however, are not solely epistemological; and it is worth returning to the text to test the original shape of what we forget and remember.

And eek thise olde wydwas, God it woot,
They konne so muchel craft on Wades boot,
So muchel broken harm, whan that hem lest,
That with hem sholde I never lyve in reste.\textsuperscript{17}

One thing it seems easy to forget is that it is the ‘olde wydwas’ who do, indeed, know more about Wade’s boat; that in the context of the story, the ‘craft’ or knowledge cited here is not presented as the preserve of learned commentators and historians but rather as one of the secrets of women’s knowledge. Alternatively, we might name it as popular culture, and invoke a folk tradition that sits behind the official culture of, say, St Jerome or St Paul’s discourse on marriage. There is another brief reference to Wade in Chaucer: during the party at Pandarups’s house in book III of \textit{Troilus and Criseyde}, the evening’s entertainment is described, ‘He song; she pleye; he tolde tale of Wade.’ It appears here as a trace of medieval popular or court culture.

In the \textit{Merchant’s Tale}, however, the knowledge of Wade is not common ‘in Chaucer’s day’. Whether the usage here refers to a specifically female knack of getting out of marital strife with a false hold or ‘hole’, as many commentators assume, or simply the capacity to tell lots of stories, January feels threatened by a strategic use of women’s knowledge so powerful he should never find peace under its weight.\textsuperscript{18} If this is a cultural memory that has been lost, then, it is women’s cultural memory, and it is so powerful that January can only imagine it as shared by multiple women, in a hysterical vision of being married to collective feminine wisdom. The last line quoted here – ‘with hem sholde I never lyve in reste’ – may imply that marital discord will trouble such a marriage; it may also suggest that the sexual activity may knock him out. It is also has the effect of multiplying wives. It is thus a momentary echo of the

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Wife of Bath’s famous conflation of her first three husbands into the one ventriloquised voice in the long autobiographical Prologue to her Tale. In this case, the old man is threatened by the combined mass of the widows.

Remembering, or cultural memory, in this feminised, orally transmitted form, is fearsome and threatening to the old man who wants to live in peace with a young wife over whom he can exercise cultural and sexual mastery. None of the learned scholars reveals the slightest degree of empathy with the old man’s sexualised dilemma: in this tradition of commentary, modern scholarship has repressed the sexual politics and transformed them into issues of epistemological recovery. The absence of any allusion, in the commentary tradition, to this form of women’s knowledge – or its temporality, if you will – seems to me a clear sign of cultural repression.

For all the richness of the scholarly tradition, we can see that it is marked by its own distinctive concerns: Speght concluded his address ‘To the Readers’:

And so making no doubt of the friendly acceptance of such as have taken pains in writing themselves, and hoping well also of all others, that meane to employ any labour in reading, I commit our Poet to your favourable affection.

Speght’s assumption of a gentlemanly readership with interests similar to his own is a typical, and influential step in the creation of the scholarly conventions which still govern much of our work today.

Chaucer’s text, on the other hand, shows that cultural memory, or popular culture, has the capacity to multiply female identity and subjectivity; and to fracture the old man’s, a problem that is carefully repressed by the predominantly masculine scholarly tradition of Chaucer commentary. Wade’s boat reminds us that medieval culture is not simply either lost or recoverable; it is itself fractured, divided by gender, class, ethnicity, Latinity and other forces, just as the traditions of scholarship are also conditioned by broader cultural movements and conventions. Learning to be attentive to those broader movements through the rich reception history of the Chaucerian text is an important way for modern readers to repair the ‘injuries of time’.

Notes
3 In the 1602 edition, this sentence is revised to read, ‘that many of his words are become (as it were) viewed & hoarie with ouerlong lying’.

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The phrase is from J. W. Saunders, ‘The Stigma of Print: A Note on the Social Bases of Tudor Poetry’, Essays in Criticism 1, 1951, 139-64.


Tyrwhitt, ii.176-77.

Pearsall, p. 83.


Wentersdorf, p. 527.


Peeters, p. 61.

Peeters, p. 61


See my ‘Creating Your Own World: Researching the Middle Ages for Fiction and Film’, forthcoming in Parergon.

Merchant’s Tale, IV. 1421-26, The Riverside Chaucer.

Sumner J. Ferris draws attention to the mention by Justinus, January’s brother, of the Wife of Bath, at lines 1685-8. “Wades Boot”: Canterbury Tales E 1424 and 1684’, American Notes & Queries vol. 9, 1971, pp. 71-2. Ferris suggests: ‘to use Wade’s boat means to extricate oneself from an unpleasant or difficult situation, either literally (in a magic boat) or figuratively (by one’s “wit”), p. 72. But Paul Acker suggests that Chaucer is alluding to the Northern English tradition that Wade is a giant who caused tides and tempests as he strolled through the waters. ‘Wade’s boat’ is thus his own person, so that the expression constitutes ‘a metaphor for the (male) body.’ American Notes & Queries, vol. 21, 1982, p. 2-4, p. 3.