



Devani Singh. *Chaucer's Early Modern Readers: Reception in Print and Manuscript.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. xiv + 272 pp. ISBN 9781009231114. \$110.00 hardback.

Devani Singh's erudite and clearly written study of the reception of Geoffrey Chaucer's medieval manuscripts in the centuries following his death is a welcome addition to scholarship on the complex, overlapping cultures of print and manuscript books that existed in early modern England. *Chaucer's Early Modern Readers* joins other recent studies such as Margaret Connolly's *Sixteenth-Century Readers, Fifteenth-Century Books* (2019), Hannah Ryley's *Re-Using Manuscripts in Late Medieval England* (2022), and Elaine Treharne's *Perceptions of Medieval Manuscripts: The Phenomenal Book* (2021). It has been well established, by these books and others that examine the complex relationship between an emerging print culture and the manuscript culture it would eventually replace, that the early modern period did not reflect a unidirectional move

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away from manuscript and toward print. In the case of Chaucer, one might be tempted to assume that the many print editions following those of William Caxton would render Chaucerian manuscript books increasingly obsolete, except as reference texts for printers. In fact, as Singh shows, print and manuscript influenced each other in sometimes surprising ways. Central to Singh's argument is her meticulously collected evidence that printed books not only served to sustain manuscript culture but that they also enabled an array of manuscript interventions that reflect conventions newly formed in print. Early modern collectors of medieval manuscript books demonstrate a pattern of using printed copies to modify and improve their books. Rather than discarding a manuscript book for a new print version, they would often "renovate" the old book—and do so in ways that reflected emerging early modern ideas about texts and authors. This phenomenon might be illustrated by the manuscript transmission history of John Gower or William Langland or John Lydgate, but Singh chooses to focus on Chaucer because "he presents us with the most successful example of how Middle English texts which circulated widely in manuscript were transmitted to readers in a new medium and age" (41). Moreover, Chaucer's reputation as a figure of literary authority in (and largely created by) the early modern period gave him a level of visibility unlike his medieval peers.

In a lengthy and assiduously researched introduction, Singh positions herself with respect to existing scholarship, approaching Chaucerian reception history less through the stories of editors such as Thomas Speght and more from the perspective of "the readers who engaged with these print authorities and their earlier manuscript counterparts" (5-6). Singh organizes her book around different readerly practices, divided into the following four categories: 1) Glossing, Correcting, and Emending; 2) Repairing and Completing; 3) Supplementing; and 4) Authorizing. All of these practices reflect a dedication to "perfecting" texts in the sense of rendering them complete: a goal for readers of print and manuscript books alike. Singh is most interested in print-to-manuscript interventions that reveal readers using printed texts to improve manuscript versions of Chaucerian texts that they considered deficient in some way. Recognizing this goal of completion or augmentation can help us better understand early modern texts that straddle the worlds of manuscript and print. As Singh writes: "This book attends to some of those manuscripts which book historians might call hybrid, and recasts them in terms of the practice of perfecting. In the process, it suggests that a sharper understanding of

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pre-modern book culture may be gained from reconceiving such volumes not as hybrid oddities but as having been renovated in the spirit of improvement” (38-39).

The first chapter, “Glossing, Correcting, and Emending,” focuses on readerly interventions at the level of words and phrases that were meant to render Chaucer’s Middle English as accurate and intelligible as possible. Singh points out that, by the sixteenth century, Chaucer had become synonymous with outmoded and difficult language, best seen in the campaign by some language purists against “Chaucerisms” and other forms of obscure vocabulary. Against this backdrop, Speght included a Glossary in his 1598 edition of Chaucer’s *Workes*. To illustrate how printed texts influenced manuscript books, Singh turns to a fifteenth-century anthology, “the earliest surviving attempt to collect Chaucer’s works between two covers” (54), acquired by Joseph Holland around 1600. The manuscript, CUL MS Gg.4.27 (abbreviated as Gg), was damaged and incomplete. Holland set out to repair it, using Speght’s print edition not only to fill in gaps, but to supply a glossary for the manuscript book. Like that of Speght, Holland’s glossary is formatted in three columns with an identical rubric: “The old and obscure words of Chaucer, explained.” But this is not a simple case of copying, for Holland’s glossary is only about a third as long as Speght’s and not all of Holland’s 631 entries come from the printed edition. Holland’s glossary is part of a larger plan for “perfecting” the manuscript (58), to which Singh will return in subsequent chapters.

The first chapter also examines several other manuscripts, including Cambridge, St. John’s College MS L.I., where we find marginal glosses borrowed from Speght. Singh writes, “The annotations show these readers consulting old and new volumes in parallel,” a technique similar to the process of “collation” that early editors such as Caxton and William Thynne used to establish accurate copies of medieval texts for printing (63). Other manuscripts feature corrections that introduce archaic words taken from later print editions. For example, a line from the opening of the *Canterbury Tales* in Bodl. MS Laud Misc. 739 is emended, following Speght, from “Whan Zepherus wyth hys soote breth” to “Whan Zepherus *eke* wyth hys soote breth” at a time when “eke” was thoroughly outmoded in English. These kinds of changes, taken as a whole, show readers “wrestling Chaucer’s language and text into a form they believed to be more comprehensible, more accurate, or more authentic [...]. The perfecting of manuscripts according to seemingly superior printed texts offered readers a means of marrying the desirable qualities of the

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old books with authoritative readings” (72, 74). At such moments, it is not difficult to see the circularity of the manuscript-print relationship. Medieval manuscripts were considered authorities by Chaucer’s early printers in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries as they sought to establish correct and reliable Chaucerian texts, but then these new manuscript-based print versions themselves became authorities to correct Chaucerian manuscripts considered “imperfect.”

Singh’s second chapter, “Repairing and Completing,” moves from the level of word or line correction to larger-scale readerly interventions, such as “supply pages” for manuscripts with missing leaves or other significant lacunae. Here again, early modern readers turned to print copies to fill in the gaps: “For Chaucer’s works, print culture became not only the mode of their dissemination in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but an unexpected contributor to their restoration and survival in earlier manuscript copies” (92-93). Singh returns to Holland’s Chaucer compilation (Gg), which had been stripped of illustrations and illuminated borders prior to Holland’s acquisition. Serious damage resulted, as these removals took significant portions of the text with them. Some scholars have suggested that the stripping of Gg’s illustrations reflects a desire to preserve the artwork with little care for the remaining, mutilated Chaucerian text that could now be had in “better” printed versions. Singh’s research, however, offers a different perspective: Holland’s extensive restoration of Gg shows that early modern readers could still find great value in a manuscript book despite its damaged state. Rather than discarding what remained in favor of new printed versions of the Chaucerian texts, Holland replaced missing leaves with new manuscript pages meticulously copied from Speght’s print edition. The desired result, it seems, was a book that preserved the antiquity of a medieval manuscript, with its temporal proximity to Chaucer, while benefitting from the textual accuracy and bibliographic apparatus offered by modern print editions.

Again, Holland was not alone. Singh examines several other manuscript books illustrating similar renovation projects that reveal surprising relationships between manuscript and print, such as the example of the addition of a table of contents to Bodl. MS Laud Misc. 600 comparing the order of the Chaucerian tales in the manuscript to that found in Speght. Early modern owners of manuscript books would go to great pains to recreate lost medieval texts, to the point of having modern copyists imitate the fifteenth-

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century secretary hand of medieval scribes. The time and cost required for such work is a testament to the enduring value that early modern readers ascribed to Chaucer in manuscript. A parallel restoration process can also be seen in damaged early modern *print* editions, as in the case of a page of the Canon Yeoman's tale mostly ripped away from a copy of Caxton's *Canterbury Tales* (c. 1493). The damaged page of the printed edition has been patched with a new page featuring the missing text hand copied in an approximation of the style of Caxton's typeface.

The chapter concludes with a fascinating reflection on the discourse of "mutilation" as applied both to books and to bodies. The language of mutilation, incompleteness, and imperfection is consistently moralized, with human bodies perceived as somehow "defective" being marginalized in a manner similar to the ways in which imperfect texts ("unreliable" manuscripts, "bad" quartos, etc.) have been deemed less worthy of serious attention due to persistent scholarly biases. As Singh's study makes clear, "imperfect" manuscripts have their own stories to tell beyond whatever limitations they might have for authorizing Chaucerian texts. Given Singh's focus on the materiality of texts, it feels appropriate to note that Cambridge University Press's hardback of *Chaucer's Early Modern Readers* is an attractive and well-made book, though unfortunately many of the reproduced images of manuscripts are faint and difficult to read. The book's footnotes, index, and bibliographic apparatus are all excellent.

Chapter 3, "Supplementing," examines the tendency to add material to Chaucerian manuscripts even when those manuscripts are not obviously damaged or incomplete. In particular, Singh focuses on the pairing of Robert Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid* (often attributed to Chaucer) with *Troilus and Criseyde* in both manuscript and print, which, she argues, shows "literary history in the making" (154). Following the lead of editors such as William Thynne, John Stow, and Thomas Speght, renovators of Chaucerian manuscript books participated in a reshaping of Chaucer's Troy story to focus on Cresseid's suffering rather than Troilus's philosophical epiphany concerning transience. Another contested addition, in both manuscript and print, is the spurious *Plowman's Tale*, first omitted and later included for centuries as one of the *Canterbury Tales* for reasons having at least as much to do with shifting ideas of religious orthodoxy as with questions of Chaucerian authorship. Similar questions of religious content shape the reception history of Chaucer's *Retraction*, which appears in Caxton but then

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disappears from print collections until John Urry's in 1721. Holland added the *Retraction* to his renovated manuscript Gg, but, notably, as Singh observes, revised the text to remove details perceived as especially Catholic, such as references to Mary and "alle the sayntes of heuen" (169).

Many of the additions to Chaucer manuscripts in the early modern period take the form of "authorizing paratexts" (178), features that center Chaucer-as-author. These paratexts are most often drawn from the biographical and bibliographical apparatus introduced by Thomas Speght in his 1598 edition of Chaucer's *Workes*. By providing a biography, genealogy, and portrait of Chaucer, Speght asserts that he has resurrected not only Chaucer's text but the poet himself, and in so doing plays a central role in the early modern period's figuration of Chaucer as the foundational poet of the English literary tradition. This is the subject of Singh's final chapter, "Authorizing." Here, she addresses how paratextual manuscript additions in the form of tables of content or alternate titles for Chaucerian texts that derive from the print editions helped shape an increasingly authoritative Chaucer canon. The annotations analyzed in this chapter thus "witness not only a burgeoning early modern interest in the print-published medieval author, but also demonstrate readers' use of print to situate medieval manuscripts and their texts within a larger, author-centric literary history" (204).

Particularly interesting is Singh's discussion of the influence on manuscripts of the famous engraved genealogical portrait of Chaucer by John Speed, which features prominently in Speght's first edition of Chaucer's *Workes*. Speght insists that the image is a "true portraiture" because Speed modelled his engraving on the Chaucer portrait in Thomas Hoccleve's *Regement of Princes*, an image authorized by a medieval poet who knew Chaucer personally. Singh identifies Speed's portrait as what Volker Remmert has called an "itinerant frontispiece," one which may appear in different places within a book and which can even move out of a book entirely. The fact that many surviving copies of Speght's edition lack the Speed frontispiece suggests that it was removed for other purposes, one of which was to supplement manuscript books of Chaucer. As evidence, Singh returns once again to the manuscript known as Gg, Joseph Holland's "imperfect" Chaucer anthology, which received a copy of Speed's Chaucer portrait when Holland renovated the manuscript around 1600, just a few years after the portrait's initial publication. Singh also examines several additional manuscript examples of the

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reappropriation of Chaucer's portrait, including one—Bodl. MS Top.Gen.c25—that features a hand-drawn portrait of Chaucer apparently modelled on the image found in Speght. As she demonstrates, the transmission of authorizing paratexts from print to manuscript points to an early modern literary culture that placed increasing value on the figure of the author as an organizing principle for books of all kinds.

As her argument draws to its close, Singh reiterates her point that, despite new technology's transformational effects on how texts were created, circulated, and consumed, "print did not have the last word on Chaucer's early modern reception" (223). Singh's study of the "inverted textual transmission from print to manuscript" (204) makes for engaging reading. In a compelling Afterword, Singh brings the readerly instinct to "perfect" texts up to the present by linking her analysis to the emerging field of "fragmentology," or the study of manuscript fragments. Digital technology has enabled the reconstruction of manuscripts in a way never before possible. Scholarly undertakings such as the Fragmentarium project, launched in 2017 to empower "libraries, collectors, researchers and students to publish images of medieval manuscript fragments, allowing them to catalogue, describe, transcribe, assemble and re-use them" (quoted on 229), may avoid the kinds of idiosyncratic manuscript transformations practiced by Chaucer's early modern readers, but, Singh argues, readers who rehabilitate medieval manuscripts both then and now nonetheless share a desire "to extend the lives of medieval volumes by remaking them for their own age" (229). A well written, cogently argued, and thought-provoking book, *Chaucer's Early Modern Readers* will be essential reading for anyone interested in the history of the book, the reception history of Chaucer and of medieval manuscripts more broadly, early English canon formation, questions of periodization, and the intersection between manuscript and print culture in early modern England.

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