Christopher Cannon. *The Making of Chaucer's English: A Study of Words.* Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature 39. Cambridge (UK): Cambridge University Press, 1998. Pp. xiii, 435.

Christopher Cannon's book, as a *book*, presents an interesting curiosity: a scholarly diptych, with two related, but separate and nearly equal-sized, parts. A detailed monograph on 'The Study of Words' (pp. 9-220) precedes a complete glossary of Chaucer's vocabulary ('The Words Studied,' pp. 223-416). The five chapters in Part One present perceptive analyses of textual and methodological issues in the history of English. Focussing on the expanding lexicon, Part One re-evaluates Chaucer's role in the making of that history. Chaucerians and historians of English will be challenged by Cannon's arguments and conclusions; the glossary in Part Two provides a useful reference. The book's value is, however, lessened by at least one aspect of its structure, and by one of its foundational axioms.

In 'The making of English and the English of Chaucer' (9-47), Cannon seeks to keep 'stable' the 'two linguistic objects' in this first chapter's title, while describing 'the relation between them' (21). He argues in 'Traditional English' (48-90) that 'lexical invention constituted Chaucer's English because lexical invention constituted Middle English literary culture. The traditional was paradoxically new in Chaucer because novelty was precisely the method of Middle English tradition..." (90). This leads him to set out, in 'The development of Chaucer's English' (91-135), his evidence to support the view that a careful study of Chaucer's words reveals 'a vocabulary that, *as* it borrows, is not really growing at all' (109) and that 'Chaucer's simultaneous invention and abandonment of words was generally constitutive of his style' (126). In Chapter 4, 'Invented English' (136-78), he sets out to show that 'Chaucer everywhere presented himself as the poet who could save English from itself,' that he 'presents *his* English as the salvific form that can extract the good from the bad and become the best' (137). This he achieves by 'the alternation of native and borrowed lexis,' an alternation that 'is *itself* the linguistic texture' of his English(176). In 'The myth of origin and the making of Chaucer's English' (179-220), Cannon assesses how the 'lexical evidence ... compiled from the *OED* and *MED*' is marked by a 'bias toward Chaucer ,' and he describes 'the *procedure* by which Chaucer's originality was postpositively constructed by abject praise and empirical scrutiny alike' (183). From this he advances the stimulating conclusion that 'if Chaucer's English is made as much by our attempts to understand it as it was made by the Chaucer who wrote it, then the simple antidote to the myth of origin is some commitment to understanding early Middle English as something more then [*sic*] a tributary to the Chaucerian flood' (219).

Readers of Part One may easily consult, and significantly benefit from, the pertinent references in Part Two; the reverse, unfortunately, is not possible: users of 'The Words Studied' cannot locate easily where the words appear in the earlier discussion. This lack of two-way communication between the parts renders the rich and extensive 'footnoting' in Part One unavailable to the independent user of the glossary. Since neither the Glossary nor the Index offers readers any easy access to discussions of particular words, there is a significant missed opportunity to enhance the book's value as a reference work. The considerable data and illuminating discussions in Part One could have been more widely employed than as support for Cannon's main critiques of previous analyses of Chaucer's English. With better two-way linkage, the book could have served as a longer-lived resource for advanced students of Chaucer. In its present form, 'The Words Studied' has a more limited value as a supplement (with important corrections, granted) to Benson's *Concordance* and to the nearly concluded *Middle English Dictionary*.

The methodological and theoretical issues raised in 'The Study of Words' are important ones. They are effectively argued (often in quite lively prose), but there is some unnecessary repetitiveness in the minutely detailed discussion. The essential theses of these five chapters could have been effectively and fully presented in one or two substantial chapters, and some of the highly detailed tables and analyses of particular usages could as usefully have appeared in less discursive fashion. This criticism should not be taken to cast doubt on the value of the data presented, but rather to suggest that there is some imbalance between detailed evidence and the main arguments of the five chapters.

But there is a more substantive reason to examine the data and conclusions more critically. Cannon's analysis of Chaucer's language and its history rest, it seems to me, on unnecessarily shaky foundations. From the outset, he accords primacy to Fragment A of the Middle English *Romaunt of the Rose*: he presumes its unquestioned status as a genuine part of Chaucer's 'making' and assigns it a prominent place as 'Chaucer's first text,' which makes it available as a 'control' (116). Erecting an elaborate 'history' on such controversial textual 'facts' requires fuller discussion and supporting argument than he anywhere provides. Since such a large number of English words first appear in Fragment A, we are entitled to wonder whether presumptions about authorship and date can be allowed without fuller critical elaboration. Discretion alone requires acknowledgement of the serious questions about these matters; and this might have led to a qualification of some arguments and claims that depend on the 'precedent' (116) of the *Romaunt*. Chaucer's making and Chaucer's English may be more safely assessed on the basis of his genuine (or at least uncontested) words. The considerable prominence given the Middle English *Romaunt* may render Cannon's 'history' less persuasive. It also highlights how much of his book centers on an over-extended critique of Joseph Mersand's *Chaucer's Romance Vocabulary* (1937).

This book is rich in lexicographical particulars and stimulating in its generalizations and reflections on method. Like a fine Dutch still life, it offers meticulous, at times arresting, attention to particular details; by offering a plausible illusion of documentary record it will stimulate further study of the making of Chaucer's English. Chaucerians and historians of the English language will need to consider its data and respond to its critique of their methods and assumptions.

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