

Preface

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This preface introduces the essays in this volume and also gives a brief introduction to the history, aims, and methods of the *Canterbury Tales* Project. This Project has been inspired by two considerations: firstly, the increasing dissatisfaction with the work of Manly and Rickert (1940); secondly, the growing realization that new methods of computer analysis permit fresh approaches to the problems of the *Canterbury Tales* tradition. Both perceptions are crystallized in the comment by the general editors of the *Variorum Chaucer* on Manly and Rickert:

The classification of manuscripts ... central to their entire edition ... was for them and remains to this day, a continuing problem in Chaucer textual criticism ... The extraordinarily complicated system of constant groups still awaits refinement by careful computer program (p. xv, Vol. II, Part III, 1983).

All the essays in this volume touch upon these issues. The essays by Blake, Mosser, and Partridge sketch some of the recognized inadequacies in Manly and Rickert, and outline possible remedies and the effects these remedies might have on our study of the *Canterbury Tales*. The other two essays (Robinson and Solopova; O'Hara and Robinson) discuss the potential and difficulties of some of the computer methods available to this Project.

We stress the word 'Occasional' in the title of this collection. The main work of this Project is not these papers, but the Project itself. The Project aims to make available, in computer-readable form, transcripts, images, collations, and analyses of all eighty-four extant manuscripts and four pre-1500 printed editions of the *Canterbury Tales*. The origins of the Project lie in the experimental transcription of some manuscripts of the Wife of Bath's Prologue during the Computers and Manuscripts Project, based in Oxford University Computing Services between 1989 and 1992. The aim of this transcription was to provide materials for testing the computer collation program *Collate*, then under development by Robinson, and for exploring methods of computer-assisted stemmatic analysis. This work showed up serious deficiencies in the analysis of Manly and Rickert. Collaborative work by Robinson and O'Hara also suggested that computer techniques (outlined in their article in this collection) might permit more exact and comprehensive analysis. More than anything, the success of cladistic analysis was vital in confirming that these new methods might bear fruit, and that this Project was worth pursuing. A workable transcription scheme was devised by Robinson and Solopova, in consultation with many other scholars: this is described in their article. Over the same period, advances in computer handling of images and their distribution in CD-ROM form suggested that images of all the manuscripts might be made available also.

Blake's well-known reservations about the work of Manly and Rickert, and his oft-stated desire to see a firmer foundation for the editing of the text

(see his article in this collection), led to a meeting of the editors in June 1992. At this meeting, the editors determined the broad aims of the Project. Funding was secured from the Universities of Oxford and Sheffield, and from the British Academy, to complete the first phase of the Project, relating to the materials for the Wife of Bath's Prologue. The Project also benefits from its close association with the Computers and Variant Texts Project, which has taken on responsibility for development and maintenance of *Collate* and is funded by the Leverhulme Trust. In June 1993 a contract was signed with Cambridge University Press for publication of the Project's materials in CD-ROM form in a new Cambridge Electronic Editions series. The first part to be published will contain materials for the fifty-nine manuscripts and early printed editions of the Wife of Bath's Prologue. As the Project has progressed, other scholars have expressed interest or offered help. Following the first public presentation of the Project at the Early Book Society conference in Sheffield in July 1993, both Daniel Mosser and Stephen Partridge have agreed informally to co-operate with the Project: hence their articles in this collection. We hope in subsequent volumes to publish the results of Beverly Kennedy's work on the reception of the Wife of Bath's Prologue, work which draws on the materials made available by the Project, and we invite other scholars working in this or analogous areas to speak to us about publication of their research in future *Occasional Papers* volumes.

The Project intends to publish at regular intervals, with some parts being sections of the text in all the witnesses and others transcripts of all the text in a few witnesses. After the Wife of Bath's Prologue we will publish transcripts of all the text in some of the important early manuscripts, with computer images and accompanying matter. We are particularly impressed with the potential of digital photography for the making of computer images direct from the manuscripts themselves. The frontispiece of this volume shows the first page of the Wife of Bath's Prologue on folio 100 recto of Corpus Christi College, Oxford, MS 198 (Cp), from a digital image made by a Kontron ProgRes 3012 camera. Experiments with this and similar cameras suggest that the Project may be able to make available high-resolution full-colour computer records of complete manuscripts. The images in these will be at least as good as those available in printed facsimiles, and promise to be far cheaper with a full manuscript fitting onto a single CD-ROM. The availability of such images may in itself provide new directions for medieval textual scholarship. Mosser's article suggests some of the ways in which these images might enrich a new electronic catalogue of the manuscripts of the *Canterbury Tales*.

Beside computer images of each manuscript page, we will publish transcripts of the complete text in every manuscript. Transcription of handwritten texts for the computer presents its own special problems, and Robinson and Solopova's article explains the Project's solutions to many of these problems. Through these transcripts, each of which may be studied beside the image of the manuscript page itself, every different version of the text surviving from before 1500 may be examined in its own right. These transcripts will supersede those produced by F. J. Furnivall between 1868 and 1908. Furnivall's transcripts are outdated, and Furnivall transcribed only eight of the manuscripts.

After transcription, the next task is collation. For this, the Project uses the computer program *Collate*, specially devised for use with medieval vernacular texts. As the texts are collated, they are also regularized so that 'substantive' variation may be filtered out and then subjected to further analysis. Robinson and O'Hara's article describes the methods of computer-assisted stemmatic analysis which this Project will be using. Through the collations and through these analytic methods we hope to study the evolution of the manuscript tradition in precise detail, thus superseding both the collations and the analyses of Manly and Rickert. The Project will also produce spelling databases, as part of the regularization preceding collation, in which every spelling of every word in the manuscripts and early printed editions will be drawn together. From these, it will be possible to survey the distribution of different spellings across the witnesses, and to analyse the changes in the language over the century of the tradition as they are reflected in the spellings. Among other applications, this information might be invaluable to a manuscript cataloguer, as Mosser explains.

We have described some types of research this Project might foster. We believe that the materials we intend to produce will be useful to many others beside researchers. Scholars citing the *Canterbury Tales* will be able to check, rapidly and easily, just what the manuscript support for any one reading is and—where necessary—qualify their argument accordingly. Students of manuscripts, art history, and medieval culture may use the manuscript images (some of them in colour) for their own work. Teachers may use the material provided in courses on Chaucer in particular, or on the transmission and reception of texts in general.

This *Occasional Papers* volume epitomizes two principles of this Project which we believe to be important if it is to succeed. The first principle is part-publication: if we were to wait until we had finished all the manuscripts, all the transcripts, all the collations, all the analyses, before we published, we would never finish and we would never publish. Rather, we intend to publish what we can, when we can. Naturally, work done early may need to be revised later but the advantages of rapid publication much outweighs this disadvantage (itself minimized by the relative ease of revision afforded by electronic media). The novelty of what we are doing means we must learn as we go, and we wish others to help this learning by their comments on what we do.

The second principle essential to this Project is co-operation. Mastery of the many fields touched on by this Project (palaeography, codicology, evolutionary biology, art history, computing methods, and interface design, etc.) will not be found in any one person, or even in any one small group of people in any one place. The backgrounds of the contributors to this volume, representing North America, England, Russia, and Australia, neatly symbolizes the Project's collaborative scope. Chaucer has become (like the English language) the property of the whole world. In order to reach this world, we have published the first number of what we intend to be a regular series of twice-yearly newsletters. They will supplement the annual *Occasional Papers* volumes. We invite and welcome partners in this enterprise, whether as fellow researchers, contributors to any of our publications, subscribers, or simply casual readers.

