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Since Chaucer's death, a large body of modernized editions of his work has amassed, many of them fragmentary in nature and few complete, yet valuable for what they reveal about the transformations in style and meaning that inevitably occur as a text undergoes translation. Given that many modern readers no longer choose to approach Chaucer in his native tongue, an analysis of these changes is valuable. First, it exposes what is behind the modern reader's resistance to Chaucer's Middle English dialect, which can be easily understood by most readers today after a little exposure. A close study of modernized versions of Chaucer's works will also reveal important characteristics of Chaucer's multifaceted readership, particularly because of the tendency of translators to transform Chaucer after the fashion of the literary period in which they live. Finally, the catalog of translations is an index to the reception that Chaucer's writings have found since his own time, reflecting the taste of the various eras in which translation has been done.

SHADES OF GRAY

PROBLEMS OF MODERNIZATION AND CHAUCER'S *CANTERBURY TALES*

A Thesis

Presented to

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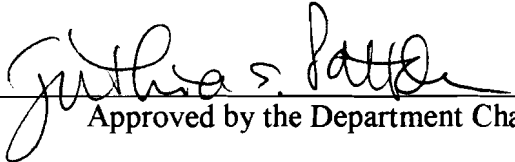Of the Requirements for the Degree

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by

Rebecca B. Miller

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This work is dedicated to my grandfather, B. Woodfin Hinton, (1918-1999), the kindest man I have ever known. He was generous with his praise and admiration for whatever I attempted, especially as I sought to navigate the often-difficult waters of higher education.

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Chapter One

Introduction

On April 5, 1930, *The Saturday Review of Literature* featured an article by Frank Hill in anticipation of his soon-to-be published translation of *The Canterbury Tales*. In this brief essay, intended to be the preface to his translation, which included the General Prologue and four tales as well as the *Book of the Duchess* and six lyrics, Hill sets forth his argument on the value of modernizing Chaucer for a new generation of readers. Hill asserts that, although Geoffrey Chaucer is widely considered to be among the greatest of English poets by scholars and casual readers alike, he is also one of the least known because of the strangeness of his ancient tongue:

> He himself brought his language to literary flower, and though it shaped the character of our later speech and writing, for purposes of literature it may be said to have died with him. In order to possess him, we must learn it almost as though it were a foreign language. And Chaucer's peculiar misfortune (and ours) is that Middle English, while actually so different from Modern English, seems fairly close to it. We assume it can be mastered with a casual amount of study, and though it never is, the illusion of ease persists. ("Unknown" 889)

That he is not the first to play at translating Chaucer's works, Hill readily admits; however, he also tries to give voice to the reasons behind what he perceives as the failure of past translators to capture their audience as Chaucer himself did. He writes, "Such failure has perhaps been partly due to the peculiar difficulties of translating from a

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language paradoxically both close to ours and remote from it" (890). Given that Hill felt Chaucer has suffered from inadequate adaptation, one must only assume that he considered his own addition a worthy contribution to the ever-growing list of modernizations.

Hill's initial essay was soon followed by a favorable review of his translation by the editor of *The Saturday Review*, Henry Seidel Canby, who also acknowledged the stumbling blocks many modern readers find embedded in Middle English: "No author is more studied in graduate schools, upon no other corpus have such profitable structures of research been built, of no writer in English before the Elizabethans do we know so much, and few great poets are more readily accessible in editions of every kind. And yet Chaucer is studied, but little read" (1085). Canby strongly endorsed Hill's own merit as a writer, noting, "He is a poet of taste, erudition, and skill, a skilful versifier in his own right, and if it is necessary to translate Chaucer, his pen was a happy choice. . . . His poem is excellent modern verse, which is more than can be said except for the best translations" (1086). However, he stopped short of suggesting that readers replace Chaucer's text with Hill's version; instead, he suggested that Hill's text would best be used as a tool with which to delve more deeply into the original.

Combined, Hill's essay and Canby's review sparked an engaging and passionate, often amusing, literary debate in the form of letters to the editor of *The Saturday Review*, which played out over the next five months. Donald A. Roberts, of the College of the City of New York, threw out the first and perhaps the most volatile remarks:

> No matter how well done the 'translation' of Chaucer may be, was there
>
> any reason for making it? Whom do the author and his favorable

reviewers expect to read the volume? . . . No person sufficiently interested in literature and life to read Chaucer will think of reading him in any other form than the truly inimitable one in which his works have come down to us. . . . It is my belief that such a book simply panders to the laziness of shallow culture seekers who would like to believe they have read a great and profound poet but who lack the qualities essential to the understanding and appreciation of his work. (1180)

Roberts' condemnation of Hill's proposed text, sight unseen, was swift and unforgiving, even condescending to those outside what he perceived to be the boundaries of the educated community. He quite accurately recognized that "everybody cannot, or, at least, will not, obtain the preparation, and use the intellectual energy necessary to read Chaucer. What is the use then of encouraging their deluded notion that all knowledge is available if one but knocks at the doors of the outliners, the paraphrasers, the translators, and the popularizers?" (1180). Of other letter writers engaged in the debate, some suggested such alternatives as modernized spelling, while others were both skeptical and defensive of the notion of modernization. Hill himself was drawn into the debate and, while he acknowledged the limitations of translation, persisted in his argument that a supplementary modernization is the only means of making Chaucer's work readily accessible to the casual reader ("Response" 26). This debate came full circle as Roberts, his own "criticism" criticized, found himself forced to defend his position on the potential modernization of Chaucer.

Although this debate and the voices behind it pale in comparison to the mountain of Chaucer scholarship, it is representative of the controversy that has surrounded the

modernization and translation of Chaucer's work since his death. Much of the Chaucer

canon is now available to an international audience; in fact, parts of *The Canterbury*

Tales have been published in many languages, at least fifteen by my own cursory count.

However, the repeated attempts by modern English poets and scholars to adapt and

modernize Chaucer's works for their English-speaking audiences are viewed as the most

controversial, even deemed by many as unnecessary. Yet the appeal of Chaucer's works,

particularly his *Canterbury Tales*, continues to fuel the popular practices of imitation and

modification. Theodore Morrison, one of the twentieth-century scholars to try his hand at

modernization, attempted to express the staying power of England's greatest medieval

poet: "Chaucer and his work, however imperfectly understood, at no time passed

unnoticed or unknown, as his work never has in any century since his death" (15).

Morrison attributes the continual return of poets and scholars to Chaucer's works in part

to a general decline of English poetry in later years, and because Chaucer was widely

held as an important literary forerunner, particularly in the art of narrative poetry, his

work was continually revisited and rediscovered.

Many writers imitated Chaucer's style and manner of writing early on; therefore,

it is not surprising to find evidence suggesting that the first modernization of his work

took place in the mid-1600s. A footnote in T. R. Lounsbury's multivolume work, *Studies*

in Chaucer, refers to "bookseller's catalogues [that list] 'a book purporting to have been

published in 1641, which is entitled Canterbury Tales, translated out of Chaucer's Old

English into our usual Language'" (qtd. in Hammond 221). Lounsbury, however, admits

he has never seen this book, and later evidence strongly indicates that it may not be a

direct attempt at translating Chaucer after all. However, a large body of modernized

editions has been amassed, many of them fragmentary in nature and few complete, yet all valuable for what they reveal about the transformations in style and meaning that inevitably occur as a text undergoes translation. Given that many modern readers no longer choose to approach Chaucer in his native tongue, an analysis of these changes is valuable, especially since it may expose what is behind the modern reader's resistance to Chaucer's Middle English dialect, which can be easily understood by most readers today after a little exposure. A close study of modernized versions of Chaucer's works will also reveal important characteristics about Chaucer's multifaceted readership: What types of people concern themselves with reading the modernizations of Chaucer? Perhaps more interesting, who took upon themselves the task of modernizing his work? As Betsy Bowden notes, "Among authors in any language, indeed, only Chaucer has inspired a multitude of later writers to modernize his written work for speakers of the same language in subsequent centuries" (ix). The resulting works can be used to examine the reception that Chaucer's writings have found since his own time, reflecting the taste of the various eras in which translation has been done. Although many serious scholars of Chaucer would like to ignore the large number of modernizations and dismiss them as unnecessary or not worth serious study, their very presence suggests that they may be worth a closer look.

That so many scholars argue against the validity of modernizing Chaucer's works is worth noting, given that Chaucer himself was a translator. As Canby pointed out,

> Like all medievals, and most great writers, Chaucer borrowed freely; as an
>
> apostle of learning and an advance agent of the earliest Renaissance in
>
> England, he was first of all, and always to some extent, a translator and

adaptor. He quarried wherever he found a vein, and trusted to his own

genius to add, expand, or invent, only when spirit or necessity stirred him.

(1086)

Most of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* is based on verifiable outside sources rather than

being of his own invention. It is quite clear, however, that he adds something of himself

to every tale he relates. For example, the Middle English text of *The Romaunt of the

Rose*, a translation of the French text that profoundly influenced Chaucer's work as well

as literature of the fourteenth century as a whole, is attributed by many, at least in part, to

Chaucer. Boethius' *Book of the Consolation of Philosophy* also served as an original text

that Chaucer translated for much the same reason that scholars today modernize his own

works, possibly "filling a clearly perceived need, making the work available to his

contemporaries" (Hanna and Lawler 396). Unlike his treatment of his former

translations, Chaucer took a different approach with his five-part narrative, *Troilus and

Criseyde*, based primarily on Giovanni Boccaccio's *Il Filostrato*. Chaucer "freely alters,

augmenting and contracting his sources so much that the [poem is] essentially new"

(Barney 471). Given the parallels between Chaucer's own endeavors as a translator and

the approaches of those who seek to translate his works, it is indeed ironic that so many

scholars view translations of Chaucer with contempt. Yet the difference between

Chaucer the translator and the translators of Chaucer is that he is almost universally

recognized as having improved the original texts from which he worked, whereas the

same is rarely said of his translators.

At this point, a brief discussion of the use of the terms *modernization* and

translation, which I have been using interchangeably despite their having fairly different

meanings, seems necessary, especially since there are many who do not consider the practice of moving from Middle to Modern English to be translation, but rather modernization. To modernize is to give a modern character or appearance to something considered old; when applied to an old text, the word *modernize* specifically refers to the rewriting of that text using modern spelling or language, especially trading obsolete words for their modern equivalents. To translate, on the other hand, is to turn a text from one language into another while retaining its sense. As dissimilar as these two terms are, however, they can both be applied to the methods by which others have introduced their contemporaries to the works of Chaucer. Because Chaucer's English shares many important characteristics with Modern English, any attempt to adapt his work for a later audience or rewrite it in the manner of the literary tastes of a later time can appropriately be referred to as modernization. Yet the increasing difficulty with which modern audiences approach Chaucer's work has prompted some modernizers to dub themselves translators, because Middle English is considered a foreign language by a large segment of today's readers. Therefore, I will continue to use both terms, especially when particular individuals clearly choose one term over the other to describe their methods; however, I will give preference to the term "modernization" in most cases because it seems to encompass both the method and the spirit by which many have altered Chaucer's work.

What follows, then, is an analysis of some of the significant changes that have arisen through the continual revision of Chaucer's Middle English text. The next chapter provides a brief historical overview of modernization from Chaucer's day through the nineteenth century. Chapter three seeks to define the wide variety of approaches to

modernizing Chaucer that have characterized the twentieth century, while chapter four investigates the transformation of a particular tale—in this case, the Miller's Tale—as it is adapted by various individuals. The final chapter explores the implications of modernization as they apply to the future reception of Chaucer among both general and scholarly readers.

Chapter Two

Modernization: A Brief History

After Chaucer's death, poets repeatedly turned to his work for inspiration and instruction in the art of narrative poetry, yet by the mid-sixteenth century, less than two hundred years later, changes in the English language also prompted them to criticize his versification and label his poetry as unsophisticated. Although Thomas Speght, in his second edition of Chaucer's work, published in 1602, argued correctly that Chaucer's lines are consistently scannable by a "skilful reader" (qtd. in Hammond 465), popular opinion until the late 1700s held that the potential beauty of his poetry was marred by lines of unequal length. Therefore, poets both famous and obscure attempted to improve upon their predecessor by modernizing his work, particularly the *Canterbury Tales*. John Dryden was the first major English poet to undertake the daunting task of modernizing Chaucer; he included his versions of the Knight's Tale, the Nun's Priest's Tale, and the Wife of Bath's Tale in his *Fables Ancient and Modern*. In the "Preface" to that volume, Dryden is sharply critical of Chaucer's technique: "The verse of Chaucer is not harmonious to us. . . . [T]hey who lived with him, and some time after him, thought it musical. . . . There is the rude sweetness of a Scotch tune in it, which is natural and pleasing, though not perfect" (292-93). He also attacks Speght's position, calling his argument

> so gross and obvious an error, that common sense . . . must convince the
> reader that equality of numbers in every verse which we call heroic, was
> either not known, or not always practised in Chaucer's age. It were an

easy matter to produce some thousands of his verses, which are lame for

want of half a foot, and sometimes a whole one, and which no

pronunciation can make otherwise. We can only say that he lived in the

infancy of our poetry, and that nothing is brought to perfection at the first.

We must be children before we grow men. (292-93)

It is obvious that Dryden considers himself to be one of those grown men, given that he

felt confident in his ability to improve Chaucer's tales.

As emphatic as is Dryden's criticism of Chaucer, however, so is his praise. It is

clear in that same essay that Dryden respected Chaucer as one of the most important

figures in England's poetic history:

In the first place, as he is the Father of English poetry, so I hold him in the

same degree of veneration as the Grecians held Homer, or the Romans

Virgil. He is a perpetual fountain of good sense; learned in all sciences;

and therefore speaks properly on all subjects. As he knew what to say, so

he knows also when to leave off; a continence which is practised by few

writers, and scarcely by any of the Ancients, excepting Virgil and Horace.

(292)

Likewise, Dryden also praises Chaucer for his ability to create memorable and distinctive

characters. "He must have been a man of a most wonderful comprehensive nature,

because, as it has been truly observed of him, he has taken into the compass of his

Canterbury Tales the various manners and humours (as we now call them) of the whole

English nation in his age" (295). However, Dryden felt that by 1700 Chaucer's Middle

English dialect was already obsolete and interfered greatly with the reader's

understanding and enjoyment. He compares Chaucer to a "rough diamond [that] must first be polished ere he shines" (297); therefore, he set out to transform Chaucer's work into a poetic form more palatable to an audience of his contemporaries:

> I have not tied myself to a literal translation; but have often omitted what I judged unnecessary, or not of dignity enough to appear in the company of better thoughts. I have presumed farther in some places and added somewhat of my own where I thought my author was deficient, and had not given his thoughts their true lustre, for want of words in the beginning of our language. (297-98)

The resulting modernizations, although recognizably based on Chaucer's works, read much more like free imitations than close translations of his tales.

Given the neoclassical propensity for imitating and translating the works of past poets, it is hardly surprising that Dryden should attempt to modernize Chaucer's works. Yet the verse of past English poets, including Chaucer, was thought to be the product of a rude, uncultivated age. Dryden recognized Chaucer's imaginative genius in spite of what he perceived as lack of poetic skill and produced his modernizations by building upon Chaucer's already stable framework. In Dryden's skillful hands, Chaucer's poems become models of neoclassical verse, governed by order, convention, and the strict style of the heroic couplet. However, Chaucer's unique voice is replaced by Dryden's own, and the result is a very different, although still charming, type of poetry. Most notable among the changes in Dryden's modernizations are his additions to and expansions of Chaucer's text. Dryden expands the already lengthy Knight's Tale by almost 200 lines, then "fortifying," as he puts it, the Wife of Bath's Tale with nearly 150 lines. The first

twenty-five lines of Chaucer's Wife of Bath's Tale become, in Dryden's version, forty-five, of which I quote only the first twenty-three:

> In days of old, when Arthur fill'd the throne,
>
> Whose acts and fame to foreign lands were blown:
>
> The king of elfs and little fairy queen
>
> Gamboll'd on heaths, and danc'd on every green:
>
> And where the jolly troop had led the round,
>
> The grass unbidden rose, and mark'd the ground;
>
> Nor darkling did they dance, the silver light
>
> Of Phoebe serv'd to guide their steps aright,
>
> And with their tripping pleas'd, prolong the night.
>
> Her beams they follow'd, where at full she play'd,
>
> Nor longer than she shed her horns they staid,
>
> From thence with airy flight to foreign lands convey'd.
>
> Above the rest our Britain held they dear,
>
> More solemnly they kept their sabbaths here,
>
> And made more spacious rings, and revell'd half the year.
>
>   I speak of ancient times, for now the swain
>
> Returning late may pass the woods in vain,
>
> And never hope to see the nightly train:
>
> In vain the dairy now with mints is dress'd
>
> The dairy maid expects no fairy guest,
>
> To skim the bowls, and after pay the feast.

> She sighs, and shakes her empty shoes in vain,
>
> No silver penny to reward her pain. (1-23)

When compared with the corresponding lines of Chaucer's text, Dryden's method of elaboration becomes abundantly clear:

> In th' olde dayes of the Kyng Arthour,
>
> Of which that Britons speken greet honour,
>
> Al was this land fulfild of fayerye.
>
> The elf-queene, with hir joly compaignye,
>
> Daunced ful ofte in many a grene mede.
>
> This was the olde opinion, as I rede;
>
> I speke of manye hundred yeres ago.
>
> But now kan no man se none elves mo. (857-864)

Dryden greatly "fortifies" Chaucer's brief description of a fairy gathering, adding details that are not mentioned by Chaucer at all, such as elf-kings and fairy rings. A classical allusion to Phoebe, the moon goddess, is evidence of the neoclassical habit of drawing on the ancient classical past. Dryden expands a single word from Chaucer's text, "Dairies" (871), into a five-line anecdote about a milkmaid's foolish dreams of fairies. In each of his modernizations, as in this excerpt, Dryden, for the most part, retains the order of Chaucer's ideas; however, his extensive elaborations undermine the charming simplicity of Chaucer's verse.

The confidence with which Dryden offered his modernizations of Chaucer's tales is clearly delineated in the "Preface" that accompanies them. He is swift to criticize those who would react to his efforts with dismay, who would say his modernization was

unnecessary. Dryden's argument in support of his methods of modernization is worthy of quoting at length because it anticipates the future justification by others in the continual debate over modernization:

> They suppose there is a certain veneration due to his old language; and that it is little less than profanation and sacrilege to alter it. They are further of opinion, that somewhat of his good sense will suffer in this transfusion, and much of the beauty of his thoughts will infallibly be lost, which appear with more grace in their old habit. . . . If the first end of a writer be to be understood, then as his language grows obsolete, his thoughts must grow obscure. . . . When an ancient word, for its sound and significancy deserves to be revived, I have that reasonable veneration for antiquity, to restore it. All beyond this is superstition. Words are not like landmarks, so sacred as never to be removed. Customs are changed, and even statutes are silently repealed, when the reason ceases for which they were enacted. As for the other part of the argument, that his thoughts will lose of their original beauty by the innovation of words; in the first place, not only their beauty, but their being is lost, where they are no longer understood, which is the present case. I grant, that something must be lost in all transfusion, that is, in all translations; but the sense will remain, which would otherwise be lost, or at least be maimed, when it is scarce intelligible, and that but to a few. How few are there who can read Chaucer, so as to understand him perfectly? And if imperfectly, then with less profit, and no pleasure. . . . I will go farther, and dare to add that what

beauties I lose in some places, I give to others which had them not
originally. . . . Yet I think I have just occasion to complain of them, who
because they understand Chaucer, would deprive the greater part of their
countrymen of the same advantage, and hoard him up, as misers do their
grandam gold, only to look on it themselves, and hinder others for making
use of it. In sum, I seriously protest that no man ever had, or can have a
greater veneration for Chaucer than myself. I have translated some part of
his works, only that I might perpetuate his memory, or at least refresh it,
amongst my countrymen. If I have altered him anywhere for the better, I
must at the same time acknowledge that I could have done nothing without
him. (298-99)

Dryden's motivation, then, is to reintroduce Chaucer to the readers of his time, to remind
them of the excellence and beauty that is hidden by the difficulties of truly understanding
Middle English verse. He is convinced that his practice of adding to and manipulating
Chaucer's text will serve to enhance its strengths and remove the barriers that keep
Chaucer's work confined to an ivory tower accessible by only a select few. Yet, although
Dryden's motives seem pure and noble, his methods of modernization ultimately mask
the uniqueness in style and spirit that belongs to Chaucer alone.

Alexander Pope was the next major literary figure to venture to modernize
Chaucer's work. His rendering of the Merchant's Tale appeared in 1709 and anticipated
his future translation of the Wife of Bath's Tale and his *Temple of Fame*, a revision of the
third book of *The House of Fame* (Hammond 222). Pope's motivation for modernizing
Chaucer's works is somewhat more practical than Dryden's. Whereas Dryden turned to

Chaucer near the end of his life, Pope approached Chaucer in the early stages of his career. After Pope completed his formal schooling around the age of twelve or thirteen, he spent a number of years learning to write by imitating various poetic styles. Because of his poor health and Roman Catholic status, Pope was not eligible for further education; modernizing Chaucer's work, therefore, was part of his training as a writer. Evidence of Pope's attention to Chaucer in his youth survives in the form of his personally annotated copy of Chaucer's works, given to him in 1701 (Mack 105-06). Nor did he put Chaucer aside as he matured as a poet; in 1730, he remarked to Joseph Spence, "I read Chaucer still with as much pleasure as almost any of our poets. He is a master of manners, of description, and the first tale-teller in the true enlivened natural way" (Spence 43). Pope shared Dryden's high esteem for Chaucer, and his modernizations also share many of the same characteristics.

Like Dryden, Pope was also influenced by the neoclassical period in which he wrote. He was a master of style, and his original verse is praised for its remarkable variety and depth in spite of the rigidity of the heroic couplet in which he wrote. Likewise, his modernizations of Chaucer's works should be considered successful when examined in terms of neoclassical verse. Pope's adherence to the strict couplet form of the neoclassicists is even more consistent and stylistically polished than Dryden's. Pope's rhetorical instrument, constrained by its precise parallelism, is quite different from Chaucer's freer narrative couplet, characterized by loose syntax and idiomatic diction. Pope's modernizations also exemplify the neoclassical tendency of giving prominence to type over individual. Consider, for example, Chaucer's first three lines of the Wife of Bath's Prologue:

> Experience, though noon auctoritee
>
> Were in this world, is right ynogh for me
>
> To speke of wo that is in mariage. (1-3)

Right from the start of her prologue, as the Wife of Bath begins her famous autobiographical sketch, Chaucer is careful to ascribe these words to a specific character. Pope's rendering, however, is a little less pointed:

> Behold the woes of matrimonial life,
>
> And hear with rev'rence an experienc'd wife!
>
> To dear-bought wisdom give the credit due,
>
> And think, for once, a woman tells you true. (1-4)

Although it becomes clear as Pope continues that the Wife of Bath is the giver of this advice, he reduces that dynamic character to a type—in this case, "an experienc'd wife" or any married woman. Pope also adheres to the neoclassical tenets of taste and decorum. Although the Wife of Bath's Prologue and the Merchant's Tale are among Chaucer's bawdiest, Pope is careful to exclude offensive material in his modernizations. As a result, he condenses the Wife of Bath's Prologue roughly by half, eliminating most of its bawdy language. He also sanitizes the Merchant's Tale, replacing, for example, the lines in Chaucer's text in which January takes May's virginity (1821-1844) with "What next ensu'd beseems not me to say; / 'Tis sung, he labour'd till the dawning day" (383-84). Although he does not add as much to Chaucer's text as Dryden does, Pope adapts Chaucer's works according to the demands of neoclassical verse, resulting in free imitations instead of faithful renderings.

Most lesser-known modernizers of the eighteenth century, like Pope, followed Dryden's model of free translation. However, unlike Dryden, many of his eighteenth-century successors favored Chaucer's bawdy tales, such as those of the Miller, the Reeve, and the Shipman (Bowden xix-xx). In fact, an anonymous 1791 rendition of the Miller's Tale was accompanied by a preface that successfully argues in support of its sexual content, which can be blamed somewhat on the "rude age" that Chaucer lived in. As this modernizer notes, "[I]t may shock, at first sight; but on consideration, will be found not a whit more injurious to morality than the customary vein of luscious phraseology and description, which abounds among our modern poets" (169). Furthermore, he points out, "I do not think that [this poem's] other beauties should be doomed to oblivion from the bad company they may be found in" (170). The concept of free translation was also understood differently by individual modernizers. For example, an anonymous 1769 modernization of the Nun's Priest's Tale, entitled "The Cock and the Fox: or, Flattery is the Food of Fools," condenses Chaucer's first 517 lines to 68 and eliminates the final scene in which Chaunticleer escapes. On the other end of the spectrum, an anonymous modernization of the Reeve's Tale, first published in 1715, greatly expands Chaucer's work, increasing his 404 lines to 2602. The author does apologize in his preface, "particularly for running away so often from his Master old *Jeffrey*," calling his own version "but the little Rambles of a merry Traveller, jumbled together, sometimes a Trot, sometimes a Gallop" (31). One of the changes involves John and Allen's journey to the mill, which is only nine lines in Chaucer's tale (4013-21). The two students travel for over 500 lines in the modernization and discuss many subjects, among them the warden, the miller, his attractive daughter, and various literary topics, including the pros and cons

of translation. For example, John wonders what the use of "versifying" is, for he is sure that they, students of divinity, will never "pen new Psalms, or preach in Verse" (976, 979), and Allen's reply is reminiscent of Pope's reasoning that it is a valuable educational exercise in creativity:

> Nor scan our Prayers neither; yet
>
> It serves to sharpen up our Wit,
>
> And helps Invention mightily;
>
> So 'tis of use you must agree. (980-83)

Later remarks sound suspiciously like echoes of Dryden's theories as well, such as John's comment that translation need not be a line-by-line rendering of an original text, "For Paraphrase is less offence, / Than stifling up an Author's Sense" (1038-39). John later states,

> But further yet; I'm of the mind
>
> Translators need not be confin'd
>
> To just their Authors Thoughts, but may
>
> When any Hint comes in their way,
>
> Pursue their own new Thoughts, and make
>
> Sir Author stay till they come back. (1067-72)

Dryden would agree, because he believed that Chaucer "wanted the art of fortifying" (291). The two students finally arrive at the conclusion, however, that translation is ultimately little more than imitation.

By the mid-eighteenth century, the flurry of modernization had reached a high point, prompting George Ogle to publish a modern version of the *Canterbury Tales* in

1741. Although incomplete, the three-volume work, *The Canterbury Tales of Chaucer, Modernis'd by several Hands*, contains one version each of the General Prologue, as well as eleven tales. Included are most of Dryden's and Pope's versions and modernizations by various lesser-knowns; Ogle contributed most of the tales' prologues himself (Hammond 224-25). In 1795, William Lipscomb published *The Canterbury Tales of Chaucer: Completed in a Modern Version*, which contains, with three exceptions, all the tales published by Ogle, in addition to those Ogle omitted. The three tales Lipscomb chose to exclude are the Miller's and the Reeve's tales, which were omitted for their indelicate nature, and the Parson's Tale, which was dismissed because it was "dry and uninteresting" (227). By the time of Lipscomb's modernized edition, however, the longstanding argument that Chaucer's verse was rough and unsophisticated had finally been laid to rest by Thomas Tyrwhitt's edition in Middle English. Volumes one through four appeared in 1775; volume five, which contains one of the first valuable Middle-English glossaries, arrived in 1778 (205-06). In his edition, Tyrwhitt also provided much supplemental information, including "An Essay on the Language and Versification of Chaucer," in which he defended Chaucer as a more astute versifier than previously thought:

> The great number of verses, sounding complete even to our ears, which is to be found in all the least corrected copies of his works, authorizes us to conclude, that he was not ignorant of the laws of metre. Upon this conclusion it is impossible not to ground a strong presumption, that he intended to observe the same laws in the many other verses which seem to us irregular; and if this was really his intention, what reason can be

assigned sufficient to account for his having failed so grossly and

repeatedly, as is generally supposed, in an operation, which every Ballad-

monger in our days, man, woman, or child, is known to perform with the

most unerring exactness, and without any extraordinary fatigue? (qtd. in

Spurgeon 1: 444)

Tyrwhitt was one of the first scholars to argue successfully that the Middle-English

unstressed *e*, in both medial and final positions, was sometimes pronounced when the

poetic meter demanded it.

Tyrwhitt's edition was received with a mixture of censure and praise, and he

failed to profit from its publication because he neglected to copyright his work; however,

he helped turn critical attention back to Chaucer's original text. In the early nineteenth

century, Dryden's methods of modernization drew sharp criticism. In 1817, J. H. Leigh

Hunt argued for different methods of modernization, which called for little more than

changes in spelling (Spurgeon 2: 89 [part 2]). He asserted that past modernizations of

Chaucer's work had done more to hurt than to help Chaucer's public reception: "But

modern versions, strictly so called, of an old poet, tend to divert attention from the

illustrious original, and to foster an additional ignorance of him, in consequence of what

one supposed to be the rudeness of his style, and the obscurities of his language" (qtd. in

Graver 17). Hunt ultimately does concede that modernization is acceptable, as long as

the modernizer is careful, "altering only just as much as is necessary for comfortable

intelligibility, and preserving all the rest, that which appears quaint as well as that which

is more modern,—in short, as much of his author,—his nature,—his own mode of

speaking and describing, as possible" (17). A renewed general interest in Chaucer and a

21

reexamination of how best to modernize his works prepared the way for William Wordsworth's attempts.

William Wordsworth was the third major poet to try his hand at modernizing Chaucer's works prior to the twentieth century. In the early 1800s, Wordsworth modernized the Prioress's Tale as well as sections of Book V of *Troilus and Criseyde*. He also modernized the Manciple's Tale, but did not initially consider his modernization worthy of publication (Hammond 227). Not surprisingly, he did not think too highly of Dryden's or Pope's modernizations, given that he was a Romantic poet reacting to the Age of Reason. In a letter to Walter Scott, in anticipation of Scott's edition of Dryden's works, Wordsworth remarked, "Chaucer, I think, he has entirely spoiled, even wantonly deviating from his great original, and always for the worse" (De Selincourt, *Middle Years* 458c). Furthermore, he wrote, "I have a very high admiration of the talents both of Dryden and Pope, and ultimately, as from all good writers of whatever kind, their Country will be benefited greatly by their labours. But thus far I think their writings have done more harm than good" (458d). His own methods, which differed sharply from those of Dryden or Pope, he made public in 1820. In his book, *The River Duddon, A Series of Sonnets; Vaudracour and Julia: and Other Poems*, Wordsworth included his version of the Prioress's Tale as well as a headnote that explained his practices of modernization. He maintained that his version was faithful to Chaucer's text, in that he permitted "no further deviations from the original than were necessary for the fluent reading, and instant understanding, of the Author" (36). Also, Wordsworth attempted to retain an archaic flavor rather than simply to update Chaucer's language: "The ancient accent has been retained in a few conjunctions, such as also and always, from a conviction that such

sprinklings of antiquity would be admitted, by persons of taste, to have a graceful accordance with the subject" (36). Wordsworth hoped to recapture Chaucer's ancient poetic style and share that experience with his nineteenth-century readers.

Thus, Wordsworth renders the following lines of Chaucer's text with strict faithfulness:

> Among thise children was a wydwes sone,
>
> A litel clergeon, seven yeer of age,
>
> That day by day to scole was his wone,
>
> And eek also, where as he saugh th' ymage
>
> Of Cristes mooder, hadde he in usage,
>
> As hym was taught, to knele adoun and seye
>
> His *Ave Marie*, as he goth by the weye.
>
>
> Thus hath this wydwe hir litel sone ytaught
>
> Our blisful Lady, Cristes mooder deere,
>
> To worshipe ay; and he forgat it naught,
>
> For sely child wol alday soone leere.
>
> But ay, whan I remembre on this mateere,
>
> Seint Nicholas stant evere in my presence,
>
> For he so yong to Crist dide reverence. (502-515)

This passage becomes, in Wordsworth's modernization,

> Among these children was a widow's son,
>
> A little scholar, scarcely seven years old,
>
> Who day by day unto this school hath gone,

And eke, when he the image did behold

Of Jesu's mother, as he had been told,

This child was wont to kneel adown and say

Ave Marie, as he goeth by the way.

This Widow thus her little Son hath taught

Our blissful Lady, Jesu's mother dear,

To worship aye, and he forgat it not,

For simple infant hath a ready ear.

Sweet is the holiness of youth: and hence,

Calling to mind this matter when I may,

Saint Nicholas in my presence standeth aye,

For he so young to Christ did reverence. (50-64)

Wordsworth's more literal attempt at modernization is quite unlike the free adaptations

produced by Dryden and Pope. He sticks to a line-by-line rendering and preserves, for

the most part, Chaucer's rhyme-scheme, often ending with the same rhyme-words. His

addition of line 61 above is the only expansion in his entire poem. His version also

reflects throughout his refusal to modernize Chaucer's diction and idiomatic syntax more

than is absolutely necessary. Wordsworth also strives to maintain an archaic flair by

retaining medieval forms such as "eke," "wont," "adown," and "forgat"; such

constructions appear infrequently in his own poetry (Graver 11). Wordsworth tries

always to remind his readers that they are reading a medieval, and not a modern, poem.

For two more decades, Wordsworth's rendition of the Prioress's Tale was his only

modernization in public circulation, the others seemingly forgotten. In 1839, however,

Thomas Powell invited Wordsworth to contribute to a collection of Chaucer's poems,

modernized by various contemporary writers and scholars. Wordsworth initially offered

Powell all of his as-yet-unpublished modernizations, yet his participation in Powell's

project was characterized by frustration and controversy. Although Powell attempted to

solicit Wordsworth's help in editing some of the other contributions, Wordsworth

repeatedly turned him down. In a letter from early 1940, Wordsworth expressed his

reluctance to become more involved in Powell's project: "My approbation of the

Endeavor to tempt people to read Chaucer by making a part of him intelligible to the

unlettered, and tuneable to the modern ears, will be sufficiently apparent by my own little

contributions to the intended Volume" (De Selincourt, *Later Years* 999). Wordsworth

also was afraid that his name was being exploited by Powell in order to boost sales and

promote his own reputation in literary circles. In October, 1840, Wordsworth wrote to

Powell, obviously displeased:

> Yesterday I received from a Lady from which I transcribe the following.
>
> 'I have read in a Newspaper that you are about to publish Chaucer's Tales
>
> modernized'—and a friend also tells me that he has seen an advertizement
>
> of your Publication in which my name stands first in large letters. Now
>
> dear Sir, you will remember that the condition upon which I placed these
>
> things at your disposal was, that for many reasons I should not be brought
>
> prominently forward in the Matter—but that my communications, given
>
> solely out of regard for you and reverence for Chaucer, should appear as

unostentatiously as possible. I am therefore much concerned for what has
been done, as it cannot be undone. (1045)

Powell protested, and Wordsworth, upon seeing a copy of the newspaper ad, apologized
for his hasty and harsh words; however, several copies of Powell's collection, with
Wordsworth and Hunt listed as joint authors, survive, suggesting that Wordworth's fears
were well founded after all. Wordsworth's final struggle took place closer to home;
Mary, his wife, also suspicious of Powell's motives, strongly opposed Wordsworth's
involvement in the collection and therefore urged him to limit his involvement in the
project. She objected most strongly to the inclusion of Wordsworth's version of the
Manciple's Tale on the grounds that it was not appropriate to a contemporary audience.
Ultimately, because of the concerns of his wife and the advice of trusted friends,
Wordsworth declined to send Powell the tale: "I could not place my version at the
disposal of the Editor, as I deemed the subject somewhat too indelicate for pure taste to
be offered to the world at this time of day" (165).

The modernizations of Dryden, Pope, and Wordsworth, as well as those of their
lesser-known colleagues, have received a mixed reception since their publication.
Dryden's methods—and by extension those of Pope—were questioned barely a century
later. In 1818, William Hazlitt, a Wordsworth supporter, noted that Dryden's "alterations
from Chaucer and Boccaccio show a greater knowledge of the taste of his readers and
power of pleasing them, than acquaintance with the genius of his authors" (qtd. in
Spurgeon 2: 105 [part 2]). Yet such twentieth-century critics as Marvin Mudrick, argue
that the spirit and passion the of Augustan Dryden and Pope best reflect Chaucer's
spirited intent:

[T]he Augustans were the last English poets who had a sufficiently large command of technique and decorum, and sufficient trust in the versatility of their idiom, to be capable of turning Chaucer into a contemporary. Modernization—or, in their own term, "imitation"—was for the Augustans, then, not an effort to reproduce Chaucer's values in a language no longer hospitable to these, but an adaptation into another idiom (another medium almost) of different, simpler and more formal, values. With a poet as uniquely sensitive and accepting as Chaucer, as remote from any confining decorum, as secure in his own universally expressive idiom, such a reduction may provide the only way of seeing him out of his own time. (29)

Theodore Morrison disagrees, critical of both Dryden's and Pope's additions and alterations: "They are totally unlike Chaucer except as they take over roughly the substance of what he said or told. Neither has the simplicity of Chaucer's nature or style" (47). However, he is even more harshly critical of Wordsworth's attempt at modernization:

It is superficially more faithful to the original; it does not add, does not alter, does not transform Chaucer into a fashionable poet of a different period. But it is faithful only to Chaucer's content; its effect and tone are even farther from Chaucer than Dryden and Pope are, inasmuch as if falls short of the spiritedness of their versions. (49)

Despite the controversy surrounding the modernizations of these three poets, their

attempts, as well as the various modernizations by relative unknowns, ushered into the

twentieth century the debate over the value of translating Chaucer.

Chapter Three

Translation and the Twentieth Century

The question of whether or not to translate Chaucer has long been a controversial one, prompting many to preface their attempts with a long list of qualifiers in order to justify their work. In fact, most translators find it necessary to apologize for their translations, admitting that, in order for Chaucer to be truly appreciated, he should be read in his original form. According, for example, to J. U. Nicolson,

> It is with much diffidence and after long hesitation that I offer to the
> public this version in modern English of the Tales of Canterbury—not
> indeed that I have felt myself less well equipped than another to perform
> the work, but that it may be called in question whether such a work,
> performed by anyone, is justifiable. For, after all is said, it remains a truth
> that Geoffrey Chaucer did not write in French, or in Latin, or in Gaelic, or
> in any other foreign language; he wrote in English. Why then (it may be
> asked) should his lines need modernizing? (xi)

Therefore, it is quite surprising that there are any modern translations of Chaucer's works at all. However, the eagerness and confidence with which recent modernizers have offered their individual attempts somehow negate their more cautionary comments. Throughout the twentieth century, Modern English versions were published with such frequency that one critic referred derisively to the springing up of a "minor academic industry among Chaucer scholars with a turn for verse" (Mudrick 21). Mudrick further suggests,

It is besides tempting and pertinent enough to observe that recent versions

of Chaucer have all been done by scholars, not poets; and it is certainly

curious that all these scholars whose knowledge enables them to survey

the history of world literature without discovering a single enduring

translation of any poem made by anyone except a poet, should have been

so bold themselves with Chaucer. (24)

Despite this callous and critical view, no doubt shared by many traditional literary

scholars, which points to the futility of adequately rendering Chaucer anew, those who

would play with Chaucer's words persisted. As a result, readers today may now choose

from a large number of new versions; however, what purpose they serve remains to be

seen.

My observations about the nature of translating Chaucer in the twentieth century

are based on the following list, which by no means contains all available twentieth-

century translations. It completely ignores, for example, the large number of translations

aimed primarily at children, the addition of which would more than double its number.

This list is, nevertheless, representative of the wide variety of approaches taken in the

modernization of Chaucer's work for a twentieth-century audience:

Nevill Coghill. *The Canterbury Tales: Translated Into Modern English* (1952).

Rhymed verse.

Kent Hieatt and Constance Hieatt. *Chaucer: Canterbury Tales / Tales of

Canterbury* (1964). A facing-page translation, with Middle English text

on the left page and a line-by-line translation on the right page.

Frank Ernest Hill. *The Canterbury Tales: Translated Into Modern English Verse* (1935). Rhymed verse.

Vincent F. Hopper. *Chaucer's Canterbury Tales (Selected): An Interlinear Translation* (1948). Alternating lines of Middle English and Modern English text.

R. M. Lumiansky. *The Canterbury Tales of Geoffrey Chaucer: A New Modern English Prose Translation* (1948). Prose.

Theodore Morrison. *The Portable Chaucer* (1949). Rhymed verse.

Michael Murphy. *The Canterbury Tales: The General Prologue and Twelve Major Tales in Modern Spelling* (1991). Modernized spelling.

J. U. Nicolson. *Canterbury Tales: Rendered Into Modern English* (1934). Rhymed verse.

John S. P. Tatlock and Percy MacKaye. *The Modern Reader's Chaucer: The Complete Poetical Works of Geoffrey Chaucer Now First Put Into Modern English* (1912). Prose.

David Wright. *The Canterbury Tales: A Prose Version in Modern English* (1965). Prose.

David Wright. *The Canterbury Tales: A Verse Translation* (1985). Rhymed verse.

These eleven translations exemplify nearly every approach thus far taken to the problem of translating.

The most crucial step for any translator is first to define his or her role. According to Hopper,

> The translator is . . . faced with a painful choice. He may strive to obtain a close approximation of the meaning of each individual word by giving what is known as a "literal" translation, and in so doing sacrifice the poet by representing him in wooden and uninspired prose; or he may attempt to recreate the spirit of the original by a "free" translation, the success of which depends on the poetic flair of the translator himself. But however admirable in itself the result of either kind of translation may be, it never speaks with the voice of the original poet. (v-vi)

As should soon become apparent, the number of approaches taken toward solving this problem equals at the very least the number of individual modernizers, because each one is prompted by a variety of motivating factors, often highly personal and subjective. A survey of the modern works listed above, however, reveals some consistencies. First, most twentieth-century scholars have been much more prolific than past modernizers, who, predominantly poets, limited themselves to a handful of tales or segments of Chaucer's works. Past published exceptions include, of course, such compilations as those by Ogle and Lipscomb. More recent renderings of the non-anthology variety, however, are much more complete. Tatlock and MacKaye, Nicolson, and Hill include all of Chaucer's tales, and Coghill, Lumiansky, and Wright (*Prose* and *Verse Translations*) omit only Chaucer's Tale of Melibee and the Parson's Tale, primarily because of their great length. Hopper and the Hieatts, with eight tales each, include the fewest, no doubt because of space constraints imposed by the publishing of a dual-language text. Second, the majority consider Middle English comparable to a "foreign" language, albeit an easier one for native readers of English to decipher than, say, French or Italian. Coghill, for

example, boldly exclaims, "I have treated Chaucer's text as if it were a classic in a foreign tongue, seeking to keep faith with its tone and spirit, rather than to render it word for word" (13). This type of belief naturally leads to questions about the nature of translation in general. Morrison, for instance, argues, "The translation of poetry at full value from one language or dialect is notoriously impossible" (49). Hopper agrees, noting,

> The attempt to translate poetry from one language to another has always been a somewhat futile procedure. Since the art of the poet depends so much on his phrase-making ability, there is no way of transposing exactly the effect of the original to a different language. In no two languages are meanings and associations the same for any but the commonest words; consequently the particular effect of any group of words in one language can never be reproduced. (v)

Finally, all agree that the chief deterrent to reading Chaucer's work in its original form is primarily due to shifts in language and vocabulary; however, all differ widely in their proposed solutions to this dilemma.

Any type of translation is difficult at best, but translation of Chaucer is especially so because he wrote in a language that, although close to Modern English, is not quite close enough to be readily comprehensible. Modern readers can not appreciate or understand Chaucer's original text without considerable study. This is not to say that Chaucer's Middle English dialect is so out of reach that it can not be read with ease after spending a short time in directed practice; however, it is more difficult for most readers than many literary scholars recognize. Part of this difficulty can be attributed to the

tendency of many modern readers to reject the literature of the past as outdated in both idea and style, but the main problem with Chaucer is change in language and vocabulary. Chaucer struggled with this same dilemma himself. In *Troilus and Criseyde*, the narrator says,

> Ye knowe ek that in forme of speche is chaunge
>
> Within a thousand yeer, and wordes tho
>
> That hadden pris, now wonder nyce and strange
>
> Us thinketh hem, and yet thei spake hem so. (22-25)

The first language barrier that confronts the modern reader is the large number of obsolete words or phrases that simply no longer exist. Chaucer's vocabulary is filled with words that have long since fallen out of use and have been forgotten, such as "vavasour" (GP 360), the precise meaning of which is uncertain, or the "white pater-noster" (Mil 3485), mysteriously invoked by the Miller. However, a good glossary or a Middle English dictionary can adequately explain, with very few exceptions, even the most unrecognizable words. More problematic in the reading of Chaucer's English are the words that are similar in form to Modern English words.

Language changes since the fourteenth century have resulted in the existence of Modern English words that are similar, if not identical, in sound or spelling, to their Middle English counterparts, but that have subtly shifted in meaning. These words can be dangerous traps for modern readers of Chaucer, especially if those readers assume that similarity in sound or spelling signals similarity in meaning. Consider the following line from the General Prologue that refers to Chaucer's Knight: "He was a verray parfit gentil knight" (72). To the careless reader, this line could easily be interpreted as "He was a

very perfect gentle knight." However, the words "verray" and "gentil" pose hidden difficulties. Although "verray" is similar in sound and spelling to the modern intensifier "very," it actually meant "true" or "genuine" in Chaucer's day. Further complicating matters is the word "gentil," easily confused with the modern "gentle," yet Chaucer's term carries denotations of nobility and aristocracy. In this case, Coghill notes, the "translator, aiming at Chaucerian brevity, can do little more than hope that, by the addition of a hyphen, he may eliminate the feeling that 'gentle' means what it has come to mean, namely soft, tender, sweet-natured, peace-loving, and may impart some feeling that the word is as appropriate to knighthood as it is to manhood in 'gentleman'" (14). Thus, Coghill renders Chaucer's line as "He was a true, a perfect gentle-knight," a fair enough estimation of Chaucer's meaning, though less sophisticated readers might still be led astray. The changes in meaning of these words as well as many others can be easily traced with a little effort. These changes in meaning represent a subtle and discernible shift; they are not the result of an arbitrary leap from one meaning to another. The key to translating Chaucer is to locate the specific meanings of his Middle English words, particularly when he uses a certain word in different contexts, yet this can be an extremely difficult task to accomplish, hence the popularity in some circles of the translated text. In the preface to their translation, the Hieatts remark that "if a student shows a comprehension of Chaucer's meaning, we do not think it makes much difference where he got it" (vi). However, those readers who prefer to approach Chaucer through a translation are probably not ambitious enough to judge whether it is or is not faithful to Chaucer's original.

It is clear that Chaucer's original meaning is altered through translation, often resulting in only superficial faithfulness to his original text. Perhaps the greatest loss, however, is the beautiful rhythm and melody of his Middle English verse. Chaucer is revered for proving that English could be written with elegance and power, yet also with great simplicity in style and manner. As Wright points out, "That intimate conversational undertone remains more or less impossible to translate or counterfeit in modern English" (xx). Sadly, more than one translator readily admits to sacrificing Chaucer's unique poetic flair for the sake of his own translation. Coghill, for example, remarks, "In his own day Chaucer's poetry was fresh and lively, close to the spoken language of the time; and I have therefore tried to make this version close to the spoken language of our time" (13), as if fourteenth-century verse is an accurate indication of what fourteenth-century speech sounds like. Yet Coghill strives at least to preserve Chaucer's metrical forms and rhyme-schemes, whereas Wright, in his verse translation, rejects even that small measure of fidelity:

> I have preferred to sacrifice, for the sake of the immediacy, directness, and
> plain speech that make up the real poetry of the original, any strict
> adherence to Chaucer's rhyme-schemes. . . . The idea has been rather to
> suggest them by such contemporary alternatives as half-rhymes, quarter-
> rhymes, or assonance real or imaginary, and so keep, as nearly as possible,
> to Chaucer's tone. (xx)

Morrison also is concerned with staying true to Chaucer's tone, although he acknowledges that Chaucer's spirit and the light musical effect of the original are in danger of being lost. In Morrison's opinion, the goal of the translator should be "to catch

the notes of gaiety or irony or gravity as they succeed each other in Chaucer's pages"

(50). This is, however, extremely hard to achieve in translation. Morrison avers,

> Here is the problem of style and language; here is the point at which the
>
> translator is bound to lose the game, to ache with private chagrin as he
>
> sees what he has done to his original, how the magic has leaked away,
>
> how the charm has flattened out, how the light-wine sparkle of Chaucer
>
> has been turned into beer if not outright dishwater. (50)

The difference between Chaucer's English and Modern English is sufficiently great that

phrases and lines that were flowing and liquid in the original are likely to appear clumsy

and inept in Modern English. Therefore, the style chosen by the individual translator,

whether it be a prose or verse translation, greatly affects the experience of his or her

readers.

The loss of the beauty and melody of Middle English verse notwithstanding, most

of Chaucer's translators profess their faithfulness to his original. However, the degree of

fidelity to which they hold themselves varies. In the preface to their translation, for

example, Tatlock and MacKaye justify their systematic removal of whole sections of

Chaucer's verse:

> The editors have striven always to paraphrase as little and to be as faithful
>
> to the original as they could, certainly never to misrepresent it. They have
>
> departed from it only to save their version from one or another of four
>
> possible stumbling blocks [including] excessive coarseness. Their rare
>
> omission of words or short passages for the last reason has not been

indicated; in the still fewer cases where a whole episode is incurably gross

or voluptuous . . . its omission is shown by asterisks. (vii)

Any lover of Chaucer's tales will surely be able to guess correctly at more than one

instance of "excessive coarseness;" a quick glance at Tatlock and MacKaye's version of

the Reeve's Tale, for example, reveals that lines 4193-98 and 4214-37 have been simply

lifted off the page without comment. Theodore Morrison is frank about his method of

condensing Chaucer's works. He boasts, "My versions of the Knight's Tale and the

Troilus are about half as long as Chaucer's, and yet I have achieved the reduction by the

outright squeezing down of expression" (52). One can almost imagine Morrison

squeezing the very life out of Chaucer himself. Yet it is a 1905 translation by F. J.

Harvey Darton that takes the most liberties. Darton condenses the Miller's Tale into a

paragraph and the Reeve's Tale into a sentence; in other words, he paraphrases rather

than translates. Most translations are aimed at casual readers, however, in hopes that they

will neither notice nor care greatly about whatever is omitted for the sake of length or

politeness.

Chapter Four

Censored: The Miller's Tale

The Miller's Tale is one of Chaucer's most popular and best-known stories. It is also one of the most controversial because of its blatantly crude sexual references. Told in the tradition of the fabliau, a short, lively verse tale that nearly always involves people caught up in naughty sexual circumstances, Chaucer's tale revolves around John, an old carpenter; Alison, his lovely young wife; and Nicholas, her young lover. A sub-triangle involving Alison, Nicholas, and Absolon, the local parish clerk desperately in love with the carpenter's beautiful wife, further complicates the plot. The fabliau was extremely popular in thirteenth-century France, and Chaucer skillfully revived it for his fourteenth-century English audience. Most fabliaux share common characteristics, including love triangles, ordinary stock characters culled almost always from the lower and middle classes, and simple plots that depend on the gullible victim and the ingenious trickster-hero. In fact, many fabliaux are virtually indistinguishable from one another to any significant degree. By contrast, Chaucer created a quartet of memorable characters and spun a deliciously intricate plot that has proven popular with both readers and modernizers. However, even Chaucer himself realized that some people of his own day, much like many readers since, might well be offended by his undisguised sexual themes. In the prologue to the Miller's Tale, Chaucer the narrator warns his readers of its indelicate nature and reminds them that he is only the voice of someone else:

> And therfore every gentil wight I preye,
>
> For Goddes love, demeth nat that I seye

Of yvel entente, but for I moot reherce

Hir tales all, be they bettre or werse,

Or elles falsen som of my mateere.

And therfore, whoso list it nat yheere,

Turne over the leef and chese another tale;

For he shal fynde ynowe, grete and smale,

Of storial thyng that toucheth gentillesse,

And eek moralitee and hoolynesse.

Blameth nat me if that ye chese amys. (3171-3181)

Chaucer reminds his readers that they can always choose another tale, perhaps a moral or

pious one, if this tale does not suit them. Because Chaucer is pretending to be a pilgrim

on his way to Canterbury, and because he has promised to reproduce faithfully one of the

tales told along the way, he deflects the blame onto the Miller, "a cherl" from whom this

type of behavior and speech are to be expected (3182). This only intensifies the tale's

joke, however, since most readers should realize that the Miller, and thus his tale, is of

Chaucer's own invention. Chaucer ends the Miller's Prologue with a cautionary note:

"And eek men shal nat maken ernest of game" (3186). Loosely translated, "Men should

not take seriously that what is meant in fun."

Tatlock and MacKaye, it seems, failed to get Chaucer's joke. In fact, a more apt

title for their translation would be *Chaucer: Censored.* Their version of the Miller's Tale

is censored to the point of prudery and gross inaccuracy; in their attempt to avoid

"excessive coarseness," they have either covered up or omitted virtually all of the tale's

bawdy elements. Consider, for example, Chaucer's spirited scene in which Nicholas first

lays his hands on Alison:

> And prively he caught her by the queynte,
>
> And seyde, "Ywis, but if ich have my wille,
>
> For deerne love of thee, lemman, I spille."
>
> And heelde hire harde by the haunchebones. (3276-79)

Tatlock and MacKaye's version is much less explicit; line 3276 is rendered as "and

suddenly he caught hold of her." Perhaps they hoped to conjure up an image as chaste as

hand-holding. Line 3279 is a little more specific—"And he held her hard about the

waist"—but it still implies no more than a strong embrace, whereas Chaucer's line is

much more sexually explicit. This version also delicately omits one of Absolon's most

important characteristics. Absolon, Chaucer writes, "was somdeel squaymous / Of

fartyng, and of speche daungerous" (3337-38). This is translated as "he was somewhat

dainty, and bashful of his speech." Chaucer includes this delicious bit of detail, of

course, in anticipation of one of the tale's funniest scenes. In Tatlock and MacKaye's

translation, the omission of farting is barely missed, because the subsequent action never

materializes. They entirely omit lines 3716-3759, in which Absolon's kiss is graphically

described, and downplay the crudeness of the farting scene. Chaucer writes,

> This Nicholas was risen for to pisse,
>
> And thought he wolde amenden al the jape;
>
> He sholde kisse his ers er that he scape.
>
> And up the wyndowe dide he hastily,
>
> And out his ers he putteth pryvely

> Over the buttok, to the haunche-bon;
>
> And therwith spak this clerk, this Absolon,
>
> "Spek, sweete byrd, I noot nat where thou art."
>
> This Nicholas anon leet fle a fart
>
> As greet as it had been a thonder-dent,
>
> That with the strook he was almoost yblent;
>
> And he was redy with his iren hoot,
>
> And Nicholas amydde the ers he smoot. (3798-3810)

This becomes, "This Nicholas thought he would amend all the sport; he should kiss him ere he escaped! Back he put the window in haste, and out he put himself. Thereupon spoke this clerk, 'Spek, sweet bird, I wot not where thou art;' and then he was ready with his hot iron and smote Nicholas therewith." What was deleted goes without saying. Finally, Tatlock and MacKaye tamper with the joke's punch-line, the end of the tale. Chaucer nicely wraps up his fabliau by summarizing the tale's action:

> Thus swyved was this carpenteris wyf,
>
> For al his kepyng and his jalousye,
>
> And Absolon hath kist hir nether ye,
>
> And Absolon is scalded in the towte.
>
> This tale is doon, and God save al the route! (3850-54)

Chaucer's rousing finale to a spirited tale well told is transformed into, "Thus the carpenter lost his wife, for all his watching and jealousy; and Nicholas was sore burned. This tale is done, and God save all the company!" By comparison, Tatlock and MacKaye's ending falls flat, a fitting conclusion for a dull tale.

Most other translators barely approach the level of censorship advocated by Tatlock and MacKaye. In fact, most render the Miller's Tale fairly accurately and completely: the plot unfolds along the same lines, the characters are similar to those of Chaucer, and the themes common to his fabliau hold true. However, the scenes that Tatlock and MacKaye censored, as well as many others in the Miller's Tale, test the creativity and the faithfulness of all who try to translate Chaucer. The description of Alison in line 3268 is a good example of the lengths to which some translators go in their efforts to stay true to Chaucer while preserving their individual methods. Chaucer refers to Alison thus: "She was a prymerole, a piggesnye" (3268). Both terms are commonly held to be flower names, although concrete identification has proven difficult. "Prymerole" is usually taken to mean "primrose," "cowslip," or "daisy." Likewise, "piggesnye" is commonly referred to as the "cuckoo-flower," otherwise known as a "swine's eye," a 'sow's eye," and a "trillium." It is also recognized as a low or familiar term of endearment, appropriately applicable to a "wench" like Alison. These fragrant references applied to Alison are also ironic; Beidler suggests that Chaucer's labeling of Alison as a sweet-smelling flower humorously anticipates the nasty-smelling surprise given to Absolon by Nicholas (293). Most translators accurately substitute the names of flowers as suggested above, yet others translate "piggesnye," both literally and archaically, as a "pig's eye." However, many readers today are not likely to recognize that Hill's "sweet pig's eye" or Tatlock and MacKay's "dear little pig's eye" actually refer to flowers. Other translators veer even farther off course. Wright renders the line as "She was a peach, a dolly, and a daisy," while Nicolson and Coghill, in attempts to secure a rhyme, refer to Alison, respectively, as a "tender chicken" and a "lollypop." These

creative renderings of Chaucer's fragrant flowers prompted Beidler to wonder, "A 'piggesnye' by any other name might smell as sweet, but a chicken, a peach, and a lollypop?" (293).

Another example of Chaucer's language that differs from one translation to the next is lines 3337-38: "But sooth to seyn, he was somdeel squaymous / Of fartyng, and of speche daungerous." Most translators courageously and accurately retain Chaucer's crude reference to farting, although both Lumiansky and Hill politely refer to it as "breaking wind." It is the word "daungerous," in fact, that results in the most discrepancies. "Daungerous" has more than one meaning in Middle English. Most of the translators surveyed hold that it means "fastidious" or "hard to please," resulting in such translations as "fastidious," "prim," and "careful." Yet Nicolson reads the word as meaning "haughty" or "aloof"; thus, in his version we learn that that Absolon was "of language haughtyish," a quality that could be applied appropriately to the parish clerk. In line 151 of the Wife of Bath's Tale, however, "daungerous" suggests "niggardly" or "stingy," a connotation Hill echoes when he describes Absolon's speech as "sparing." That definition seems questionable in the context of the Miller's Tale, however, because Absolon is anything but "sparing" when he woos Alison at her window.

Most of the more obvious differences between Chaucer's original text and those of his translators are syntactical in nature, yet there are nuances at issue that can not be simply dismissed as syntax or vocabulary. For example, many translators, in their attempts to make Chaucer more appealing to their contemporaries, consistently avoid ancient tags such as "thee" or "thy," substituting the modern "you" and "your" in their place. While this type of change may seem minor, with no real effect on Chaucer's

intended meaning, it must be pointed out that these words held different connotations and class associations in Middle English usage. Murphy, for one, suggests that there may be some significance in the fact that Absolon addresses Alison with the more respectful plural pronouns "you" and "your," while she addresses him with the common "thee' and "thy," during their initial conversation at her bedroom window (123). Alison, of course, was described earlier in the Miller's Tale as a "wenche" (3254), a young girl from the lower class worthy "For any lord to leggen in his bedde, / Or yet for any good yeman to wedde" (3269-70). In other words, she belongs to a station in society that does not command respect, yet Absolon approaches her respectfully:

> What do ye, hony-comb, sweete Alisoun,
>
> My faire bryd, my sweete cynamome?
>
> Awaketh, lemman myn, and speketh to me!
>
> Wel litel thynken ye upon my wo,
>
> That for youre love I swete ther I go. (3698-3702)

Through his use of "ye' and "youre," Absolon reveals the depth of his courtly love; Alison, however, responds with rejection. She commands him to leave, proclaiming, "I love another—and elles I were to blame— / Wel bet than thee, by Jhesu, Absolon. / Go forth thy wey . . . (3710-12). When Absolon agrees to leave after one kiss, Alison assents, but commands him to kiss her quickly, "Lest that oure neighebores thee espie" (3279). Alison addresses Absolon with the more familiar "thee" and "thou" throughout her conversation with him, thus intensifying, to all but Absolon, the contempt evident in her speech. Chaucer makes a deliberate choice here, one that further deepens the development of his characters, yet most of his translators ignore this subtle discrimination

in grammatical number. Only two translators among those surveyed, Hill and Murphy, retain Chaucer's use of "thee" and "thy." The richness of Middle English words and phrases consistently keeps Chaucer's translators guessing.

Chapter Five

Conclusion

In the introduction to his modernized-spelling edition of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, Michael Murphy only half-humorously reflects on his colleagues' aversion to the modernization of Chaucer:

> There is an old joke among scholars about librarians, which holds that librarians exist to guard the books and manuscripts in their libraries from scholars who want to read them—except for special friends. But the same can be said about scholars, especially some Chaucerians, who act as if the works of the poet should be carefully kept away from the general reader and general student, and reserved for those who are willing to master the real difficulties of Middle English grammar and spelling, and the speculative subtleties of Middle English pronunciation. (xiv)

The fact that so many works of literature are studied and enjoyed largely in translation does seem to mock the seriousness with which many Chaucer scholars demand that arriving at his work through an original Middle English text is the only valuable route, especially given the large number of modernizations now available. In fact, toward the end of the 1930 debate in the *Saturday Review of Literature*, Harold S. Davis bemusedly questioned the motivation behind his own strong aversion to translating Chaucer:

> It is not, surely, a criminal offense to translate Homer, Dante, or Goethe, imperfect as the results must inevitably be. It is a misfortune not to have such a command of Greek, Italian, and German as to render the mediation

of a translator needless. Nevertheless, I have never heard it suggested that the attempt to translate these authors was therefore to be condemned. . . . Exactly what is it, therefore, which puts Chaucer in a class by himself, so that it is high treason to try to make him accessible to those who have not been able to make a serious study of Middle English—a class which includes not only the uneducated, but practically all the educated as well, except for a small group of specialists? (256)

In his attempt to inject a little levity into the discussion, Davis nevertheless poses a question worth pondering: Why is it so difficult to welcome the growing number of translations, to let the individual reader choose the path he or she takes in order to experience the delightful humor of Chaucer's tales?

Perhaps the answer lies in discovering just who is reading Chaucer in translation. It is impossible to summarize Chaucer's target audience neatly and succinctly. Both in the original Middle English text and in translation, his work has consistently appealed to a diverse readership. Betsy Bowden, in her attempt to describe an eighteenth-century audience, noted that the modernizers of that century

share only the broad characteristics of race and gender. Among these white males are noblemen and paupers, though, British and Irish and part-time Americans, hack writers and renowned scholars, clergymen in rural villages and shopkeepers in the heart of London, confirmed bachelors and fathers of enormous families, men active well into their eighties and men who died young of alcoholism, suicide, natural causes. Some wrote for money, some for pleasure, some for fame, some perhaps in self-

effacement. . . . [E]ach modernizer took on Chaucer for his own reasons,

stemming from his own experiences and expectations. (x-xi)

The difficulty of categorizing this diverse group becomes even more so after an

examination of the results of their labors. For example, an anonymous 1791

modernization of the Miller's Tale, attached to a preface justifying its sexual content, was

published just as William Lipscomb was completing his 1795 composite edition of *The

Canterbury Tales*, which contained a preface justifying the exclusion of such bawdy tales

as the Miller's and the Reeve's. Bowden cautions, "Such contrasting attitudes toward

Chaucer's bawdy, published four years apart, illustrate the rationale against here making

any broad statement about the usual reception or interpretation of Chaucer during this or

any other sociohistoric period" (x). The rise of a more literate reading public and the

increased availability of both Middle English and modern texts have given Chaucer an

even more diverse readership during recent years than he enjoyed earlier. Yet even

today, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* continues to appeal to an audience increasingly

separated from him by the passage of time and the change of language.

While it may be difficult to describe Chaucer's target audience, it is much easier

to pinpoint that of his translators, who unapologetically and boldly aim their efforts at a

modern audience, the casual readers who will probably never attempt to read Chaucer's

original text, if indeed they even realize that they are, in fact, reading a translation. Both

Nicolson and Wright declare in their introductions that they are simply offering to the

public their versions in the hope that it will prompt their readers to seek out the richness

in Chaucer's Middle English text. However, the tone adopted by many modernizers,

including Lumiansky and Coghill, indicates that they feel their versions are substitutes

adequate for those readers who will never aspire to a serious study of Chaucer's text.

Perhaps they are right; maybe more serious scholars should be grateful that these

modernized versions exist. After all, these modernizations have opened the door to a

broader audience, making Chaucer's work easily accessible for readers who might not

read his work at all. Does it really matter that the average adult reader of English, a

policeman, perhaps, or a housewife, reads and enjoys Chaucer's tales in his or her own

vernacular? These modernizations have also helped to preserve Chaucer's literary

renown among non-scholarly readers.

One of the more serious problems resulting from the large number of Chaucer

translations available is the temptation they offer to students. Peter G. Beidler sums up

the attitude many students, even serious ones, adopt when confronted by Chaucer's

Middle English text:

> Oh, they bring their Baugh or their Donaldson or their Fisher or their
>
> Robinson or their Cawley to class, but we know that back in their rooms
>
> many of them are really reading their assignments in a dog-eared Coghill
>
> or Lumiansky, or in one of many other modern verse or prose
>
> translations. . . . They will readily enough admit that the "poetry part of
>
> Chaucer is different in a translation, by which they mean that the lines
>
> sound different in modern English, without the final –e's and the Great
>
> Vowel Shift and all. But there comes a time, they say, when they have to
>
> read for meaning. Their trusty Coghill or Lumiansky gets the meaning to
>
> them more quickly and accurately than if they tried to guess at all those
>
> unfamiliar words and phrases themselves. After all, Coghill and

Lumiansky are Chaucer scholars, and surely they can render truer

meanings than students can render for themselves. (290)

These students naively place their trust in the modernizations of mere men who, although

they strive to adhere to a general faithfulness regarding Chaucer's text, quite frequently,

and sometimes knowingly, offer a mistranslation. Inevitably, basing opinion or

performing literary analysis on their translated texts will almost always generate different

results than will a consultation of Chaucer's original. Continued modernization of

Chaucer's work will probably not improve his standing among casual readers; however,

it will provide his students with an increasing number of crutches on which to depend.

By and large, modernizations of Chaucer's works have attracted scant attention

from medieval scholars, whose attitudes toward such modernizations, when they notice

them at all, have consistently been critical or negative. Likewise, scholars specializing in

the study of such authors as Dryden and Pope, for example, have largely ignored their

exercises in Chaucerian modernization. As Bowden points out,

Until recently academic custom has assigned validity to study of

Chaucer's contemporaries and near-contemporaries, and assigned perhaps

too much validity to the products of our own century's unexamined

prejudices and preconceptions including the evolutionary premiss [sic]

itself, according to which each critic's most recent interpretation must be

proven the best of all possible interpretations. Therefore, Chaucerians

have implied, Pope's and Dryden's responses are not fascinating but

merely wrong. Specialists in Pope and Dryden, and those in other

reworkers of Chaucer such as John Gay and William Wordsworth,

apparently concur. (xi)

The failure among specialists of different literary periods to cooperate seems somewhat surprising, especially because such study could simultaneously reveal important details about products and attitudes from very different literary traditions: that of Chaucer and that of such modernizers as Dryden, Pope, and others. Similarly, such a study could also be instructive with regard to twentieth-century predilections and tastes where both popular and scholarly literature is concerned. Sometimes a translator may reveal as much about himself in his work as about the author he translates. Scholars, however, have shown little interest in such endeavors, thus relegating the large number of Chaucer modernizations to obscurity.

The existence of these translations is often seen as an example of a cyclical nature of literature, in which later writers learn by imitating and translating their predecessors. In the introduction to his own modernization, Morrison notes, "[E]very age must translate the great writers of the past all over again, for it must, by a law of taste and sensibility, re-create them in its own image. What it sees is never the original writer as he was in his own time or under some absolute eternal view, but its own lineaments reflected back from the original" (49-50). This argument suggests that translation of past works, including Chaucer's, should be viewed as a necessary and worthwhile act. However, it may be Morrison's argument in favor of translating Chaucer can ultimately be seen as more of an act of self-justification than a true statement of artistic responsibility. If this is true, Morrison is not alone in his attempts to argue for the credibility of yet another translation. Lumiansky, for one, begins the introduction to his modernization by saying,

"A new translation of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* needs some explanation" (xiii), as if the act of modernizing Chaucer's work were suspect. The fact remains, however, that six centuries ago, Chaucer succeeded in committing words to parchment that no one since has managed to reduce to one set meaning.

The aim of this study is not to identify the best or worst translations of Chaucer's work. There can never be a perfect translation; no matter how good it might be, no translation can convey Chaucer's exact meaning, at least not for many lines at a stretch. In translation, much is inevitably altered, misrepresented, added, and subtracted, not only in style, but, often enough, even in content. Ezra Pound once remarked, "Anyone who is too lazy to master the comparatively small glossary necessary to understand Chaucer deserves to be shut off from the reading of good books forever" (qtd. in Beidler 297). Perhaps that is too harsh a judgement. I, for one, will be satisfied if those readers who choose a translation over the original at least admit that it is not Chaucer's work that they are reading, but the work of someone else. Chaucer's name and reputation have endured for six hundred years and will continue to garner respect; I doubt that those of his translators will fare as well.

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