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## Introduction

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## INTRODUCTION

# Canterbury Tales Project Special Issue: Introduction

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## Introduction

I first learned about the Canterbury Tales Project in December 1998 while I was preparing an essay on the transcription of Middle English manuscripts and found myself puzzled by the graphemic variation among the witnesses of "The Shipman's Tale." I could not fathom then how a fortuitous e-mail exchange with Peter Robinson would so thoroughly change my life. Now, twenty-three years later, I am the project director, second only to Robinson in the length of time I have invested researching the 88 fifteenth-century witnesses of Chaucer's most important work.

During my time as part of the project, I have done everything: transcribed, encoded, collated, corrected, analyzed, edited, and published the *Canterbury Tales*. I thoroughly revised the project's transcription guidelines, made substantial changes to the encoding system using knowledge acquired from working on other medieval and non-medieval texts (Bordalejo 2010; Ward et al. 2016; Darwin 2009), and have achieved a reasonably sound knowledge of the textual relationships, codicology, and bibliography of the textual tradition as well as some of the more subtle philological aspects of Chaucer's work.

From the beginning, it was clear this project could open new avenues of research. The first time Robinson showed it to me, I understood what he had discovered using SplitsTree (Hudson and Bryant 2006), software for the production of unrooted phylogenetic networks: I saw a graph depicting an early split in the textual tradition;

two nodes giving rise to separate textual branches. At the time, Robinson called the second node, the one opening into a distinct textual branch, *alpha*. With further research, we have come to understand that some of the witnesses of the *Tales*, which we call O, represent direct and independent lines of descent from the archetype. In this sense, these witnesses are not a genetic group despite sharing many early readings inherited, independently, from the archetype.

After moving to the UK and joining the project, I became proficient on every tool used and continued the pursuit of improving the ways in which we represent manuscripts and incunables in transcription with a particular interest in what I call places of variation in which the text presents differences (Bordalejo 2013; 2016). Although the development of my understanding of the variant states of the text is entirely due to my work with manuscripts and their corrections, my focus on the unending work of transcription, collation, and analysis is so involved and all-consuming that I never even had the time to consider how the project is perceived by others.

Thomas Farrell is a Middle English scholar I have known for more than twenty years. He has been working, as part of the project, on the edition of *The Tales of the Reeve and the Cook*, (Farrell, Forthcoming) but it was his recently published article, “The Value of the Canterbury Tales Project” (Farrell 2021) that gave me a glimpse of a world I did not even know existed. Farrell wrote that:

Today, the Project’s publications are rarely cited in Chaucer scholarship—less so, for instance, than Manly and Rickert’s 1940 Chicago edition of the *Canterbury Tales*, a scholarly work whose diligence is widely admired but whose deficiencies are well-documented. (Farrell 94)

It is correct to state that the Canterbury Tales Project’s research is infrequently referred to among Chaucerians. Focused as I had been on researching the textual tradition, I never gave much thought to the low impact of the project’s work but rather attributed it to the fact that there are many other approaches to study texts and that literary interpretation, in the light of gender and critical race studies’ productive approaches, has much to contribute to our reading of medieval literature

(the project's current steering committee is leveraging some of the very best scholars doing these approaches with the aim of expanding the interpretive readings of the text). Farrell, however, explains further:

Having several times cited the CTP's conclusions in submitted essays, I have more than once been warned by journal referees that the Project has not found widespread support among Chaucerians. This was not news to me. But no such reader has ever taken the logical next step of detailing why the CTP conclusions are suspect or pointing me toward scholarship that explains the error of its ways. (Farrell 2021, 95)

Perhaps this was not news to Farrell, but it was certainly news to me: anonymous journal referees suggesting the project's work be dismissed on the grounds of our failure to have been widely accepted by a majority of those studying the *Tales*. As seriously as one might take journal adjudicator's opinions, one cannot help but notice that such assertions point beyond new approaches to the study of medieval texts to continued prejudices set on dismissing intricate work without giving it proper consideration. To reach a balanced and correct conclusion about the results of a textual critical study such as the one the Canterbury Tales Project has undertaken requires a commitment in time and effort that few scholars are ready to invest, but it is an effort that academic rigour demands and large-scale projects deserve.

I am ready to accept the project has not been as active as it should have been in putting forward the findings of our research. For this reason, when the occasion arose to submit a series of articles to *Digital Medievalist*, we took this opportunity to present all of our methodologies in one place. Now, anyone can put our methods to the test.

Interestingly, even this collection is unlikely to reach many Chaucerians. Other medievalists might be inclined to review our approaches to reinvent them for other textual contexts. The truth, as it was put to me by the president of the New Chaucer Society many years ago, is that "The text of Chaucer" (the name of a proposed session to the NCS conference) was not of interest to the members of the society. This is likely one of the main differences between the New Chaucer Society and its

originator, the Chaucer Society, which was a fundamental channelling force for the work of Skeat and Furnivall in the production of editions of the *Canterbury Tales*. Although the complexity of the textual tradition, the emphasis on material culture, and the falling out of fashion of editorial work might be partly to blame for the lack of substantive impact the CTP has had in the community, one cannot discount the fact that we have not presented the results of our research but rather we have pushed for the publication of editions as we continued the basic tasks required for them. This explains why many of our conclusions have not reached a majority of scholars in easily digestible ways.

Key aspects of our work have changed since I assumed the leadership of the project in 2019. The project has, for the first time in its history, ambitious editorial objectives to present reading and critical texts of the *Tales* based on our understanding and analysis of the textual relationships of its fifteenth-century witnesses. The CTP continues to produce complete transcriptions of all witnesses of the text as first outlined more than twenty-five years ago, but the work is at a point at which editions can be produced with relative confidence.

This collection of articles represents a new era for the project. In 2020, just before the pandemic struck, we released the *CantApp: General Prologue*, an application for mobile devices, the result of almost eight years of planning and development. The app received a substantial amount of publicity, in part due to the fact that Terry Jones, our collaborator and friend, had passed away a few days before its release. He contributed the translated text to the app, but also served as an inspiration for some of our research and contributed a unique perspective to our scholarship. The article, "[Making an Edition in an App](#)," (Bordalejo et al. 2021) recounts part of the story that led to its creation. The app is the first Canterbury Tales Project publication to present a deliberately edited text (I write deliberately edited because even the most faithful transcriptions are just representations of textual objects and, in that sense, they are interpretive and so can be considered edited texts). It is a reader's text designed for people approaching Chaucer for the first time, likely without the help of a teacher. But the app goes well beyond the manuscript, edition, and translation and it includes a reading of the text by Lina Gibbings, a talented actor and scholar, who breathes a

new life into the text of the General Prologue as well as historical notes and glosses by Richard North.

The other four articles focus on the project's more intimate aspects:

Kyle Dase and Nicole Atkings' article, "Pacience is an Heigh Vertu," (Dase and Atkings 2021) describes the management of the project using the Textual Communities platform. Dase and Atkings had an important role in training and supervising students and this article serves to fill a gap in documentation often lacking for large-scale projects. Dase and Atkings present both the most successful aspects of the management system while also highlighting challenging areas. Other large projects might benefit from understanding how the Canterbury Tales Project has used Textual Communities as a management tool as well as a transcription database, and versioning system.

In "A Macron Signifying Nothing: Revisiting The Canterbury Tales Project Transcription Guidelines," Kendall Bitner and Kyle Dase (2021) discuss the evolution of the transcription system and the challenges they faced when working with the fifteenth-century witnesses of Chaucer's text. Their examples serve as illustrations to the puzzling, occasionally frustrating, and generally challenging task of transcription. The maxim "transcribe what you think you see" takes on new meanings when scribal corrections and idiosyncrasies occur relatively frequently. Bitner and Dase are the first researchers who write about using the project's transcription system without having participated in its creation and development. This positionality allows them to present a perspective that focuses on the functionality of the guidelines as a practical tool.

"You Are Collating Just Fine and Other Lies You Have Been Telling Yourself," which Adam Vázquez and I co-authored (Bordalejo and Vázquez, 2021), presents a theory of collation that shows the heavy dependence between the comparison process and scholars' definitions of variation. Only after variation has been defined for a particular project, is it possible to carry out textual comparisons that take into account that specific definition. It follows that the concept of variant arises from the nature of individual projects. For the Canterbury Tales Project, complete transcriptions are fully collated to identify and isolate stemmatically significant variants which, in turn, inform our stemmatological work.

My article, "Well-Behaved Variants Seldom Make the Apparatus: Stemmata and Apparatus in Digital Research," (Bordalejo 2021) details the process by which the project extracts data from Textual Communities in the form of NEXUS files compatible with some bioinformatics software. The article goes into detail in explaining the models of phylogenetic inference the project uses and the reasons behind those choices. This article highlights the many decisions required in order to produce stemmata and emphasizes the continuous use of judgement by those making use of these methods.

The project's editions are released as final products. They might be considered impressive or not, influential or not, accessible or not, but until the opportunity arose to publish in *Digital Medievalist*, we had never made as clear as it is here the enormous amount of detailed decision-making, supervision, or resolve that are required to create these materials. As the Canterbury Tales Project moves into its future, more research results will be made available, but also the theoretical aspects pertaining to our critical editions and the editorial principles underlying them. We have an ambitious publication project for the next fifteen years, so the community will continue to hear about our discoveries. We aim to be as clear as possible, as helpful as possible, as productive as possible. But mostly, we aim to understand the textual tradition of the Canterbury Tales and to share that understanding with others.

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