

REVIEW ARTICLE

The “Tale of Gamelyn” of the “Canterbury Tales”: An annotated edition. By Nila Vázquez. Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2009. Pp. vi, 466.

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1. Summary

Did Geoffrey Chaucer compose the *Tale of Gamelyn*? The question is inevitable in any discussion of this tale, since the manuscripts of his poem the *Canterbury Tales* provide the only medieval context in which it has survived. Nila Vázquez takes no stand in the volume under review but she does succeed in showing that previous scholarship has failed to supply convincing evidence against the possibility that Chaucer may indeed be the tale’s author. The stated principal aim instead is to furnish the reader with an edition permitting the tale to have an identity separate from the *Canterbury Tales*.

To accomplish this aim, Vázquez offers more than merely the elements typically constituting a synoptic edition. For in addition to such typical elements as a fresh critical text supplemented with apparatus, notes, and indices, and an evaluative review of previous studies, she provides a translation of the tale and full diplomatic transcripts of ten key manuscripts. This hardbound volume, a Santiago de Compostela doctoral thesis in origin, measures 9.2 x 6.3 x 1.3 inches and contains no figures, tables, or illustrations. The text is presented with 1.5 line spacing on matte beige paper with the transcripts set in a smaller font size.

The contents are structured as follows. Teresa Fanego praises the edition’s model properties in a foreword, while a personal narrative serves as Vázquez’s short introduction. The first chapter enumerates the primary source materials available to the editor of the *Tale of Gamelyn*. It gives sigil, shelf-mark, and repository for every manuscript of the *Canterbury Tales*. For those of them containing the tale, it also gives their tale order and textual affiliation as established by John Manly and Edith Rickert (1940), in addition to offering select details about their present condition and production circumstances.

An unusual feature is that the second of the volume's three chapters takes up 425 of its total of 453 numbered pages. The chapter opens with a critical review of previous published editions of the *Tale of Gamelyn*, which all regularise and modernise spelling to target a literary audience and which all are based on British Library, London, MS Harley 7334. The sole exception is the 1997 TEAMS edition. Stephen Knight and Thomas Ohlgren, who were responsible for this edition, were hasty in rejecting both the Corpus and Harley manuscripts as potential base texts in preference to Petworth House, MS 7. These editors' found the readings of the former two manuscripts to be unreliable, as did Manly and Rickert (1940) in their authoritative eight-volume edition of the *Canterbury Tales*. Both manuscripts date earlier than the Petworth manuscript. A reconsideration focussing on certain repeated phrases ultimately leads Vázquez to settle on an edition based on the Corpus manuscript.

Vázquez next identifies an additional nine manuscripts for collation for reasons of their production date and stemmatic position according to Manly and Rickert (1940). There follow, for every manuscript, descriptive remarks on its *mise-en-page*, quiring, and other codicological features as well as, first, a selective profile of its spelling/paleographical features and, second, a full transcript compliant with the transcription principles developed for the purposes of the *Canterbury Tales Project*. Vázquez here pays special attention to mentioning three of the scribes' possibly having worked to dictation, as suggested by Manly and Rickert (1940). The profiles catalogue what letters no longer in use, punctuation marks, abbreviation marks, and flourishes are used by the individual scribe, along with citing some occasional spelling forms. The transcripts help the reader develop a stronger sense of textual variations typically merely summed up in the apparatus to a critical text. In them, mark-up formatted on the model of "[underline]word[/underline]" surround deleted letters, line numbers, textual notes, and other annotations to produce a typographically unconventional presentation.

The discussion now turns to the tale's internal features. Vázquez summarises its plot and reviews its language, metre, rhymes, date of composition, authorship, and literary connections. Specifically, a sketch of the inflectional morphology (of the critical text? of the Corpus manuscript?) of the tale shows its language generally to agree with that of Chaucer and his contemporaries. Examples support the idea of Neil Daniel (1971), whose unpublished 1967 Indiana University doctoral thesis was a critical edition based on the Corpus manuscript, that the lines have an alliterating tetrametre feel to them when read aloud, implying that the poetic quality rises above doggerel. Other examples demonstrate that the rhymes practically all are attested in authentic Chaucerian verse or other learned poetry of the fourteenth century, including the few examples of superficially deficient rhyme such as "tuo": "go". The *Tale of Gamelyn* contains a

mere four words unrecorded in Norman Davis et al, *A Chaucer glossary* (1979), and it is untrue that the tale's frequency of French word tokens is different from what we find in Chaucer, since this frequency is in fact "as high as twelve percent" (p. 287). The morphology, metre, rhymes, and vocabulary of the tale, therefore, do not preclude Chaucerian authorship of it.

Manuscript evidence also fails to dismiss Chaucer as the possible author of the *Tale of Gamelyn*, or at least his sanctioning of its integration into the *Canterbury Tales*. This conclusion follows from Kathleen Scott's (1995) re-dating of the decorative borders in Huntington Library, MS El.26.C.9 [Ellesmere] to near Chaucer's premature death in 1400. For the re-dating implies that several *Canterbury Tales* manuscripts may date from within the poet's lifetime because "it is generally acknowledged among scholars that Cp [the Corpus manuscript], Ha4 [the Harley manuscript], Hg [Hengwrt] and La [British Library, London, MS Lansdowne 851] preceded El [Ellesmere]" (p. 284). Although the aggregate evidence is inconclusive as to the authorship of the *Tale of Gamelyn*, it should consequently be recognised that Chaucer could have been composing (or reworking if he is not the original author) the tale when the production and revision of the first several manuscripts of the *Canterbury Tales* were already underway. Although the poem is unfinished, the poet may conceivably have commissioned scribal fair copying of it on "feeling his death close" (p. 289). The *Tale of Gamelyn* itself could be a product of the poet's youth in need of revising, or it could have been hurriedly composed toward the end of his life after National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth, MS Peniarth 392 D [Hengwrt] had already been completed (p. 289). Vázquez reports widespread agreement on a composition date in the mid- to late fourteenth century and a provenance somewhere in the Midlands (pp. 283-284). An outline of the tale's literary connection, primarily with the *Robin Hood* cycle, Thomas Lodge's *Rosalynde*, and William Shakespeare's *As you like it*, concludes the review of its internal features.

The *Tale of Gamelyn* thus contextualised, the critical text comes next, still in the volume's second chapter. A guiding idea in editing the text was to refrain from modernising the spelling forms and instead reproduce them from the Corpus manuscript, except for dialectal forms deemed less significant for establishing genetic relationships between exemplars (p. 333). A principle adopted here from unspecified *Canterbury Tales Project* transcription guidelines was to reproduce yogh but convert thorn into "th", although both letters characterise the Corpus scribe's spelling practices.¹

¹ Some seven or eight years ago, the Canterbury Tales Project had a text in which special characters were taken out. This text was exclusively used internally for reference purposes. The letter thorn is represented by the corresponding character in any published transcript.

Another principle was to use the symbol abbreviating the Latin word “quod” for representing the letter sequences “con/com” and “cr(o)” (p. 39; e.g. p. 213: COMPANY in Cambridge University Library, MS Mm.2.5, l. 317; p. 152: CRIED, Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS Hatton Donat. 1, l. 700). The critical text has footnotes explaining the meaning of Middle English words and phrases considered less transparent to the non-specialist, while the critical apparatus is deferred to the subsequent section in the interest of reader-friendliness. The chapter translates the tale into Present-day English with a medieval flavour, before closing with a glossarial index to the critical text. This index has spelling variants of a lexeme grouped together under a single headword, but has grammatically different forms of a lexeme as separate headwords.

The final item is an afterword presented as the third chapter. In it, Vázquez reverts to personal narrative and rehearses her intention for the publication to serve as what may effectively be described as a “Gamelyn compendium”, as a collection of materials suitable as a basis for scholars to draw their own conclusions. An inconsistently formatted bibliography of scholarship until 2004 and an accurate general index constitute the exclusive back matter.

2. Evaluation

Vázquez deserves credit for addressing an up-to-date topic. The manuscript record of the *Canterbury Tales* received little scholarly attention for nearly half a century following the publication of Manly and Rickert’s (1940) edition, which collated all extant manuscripts. These editors held no manuscript to date from within Chaucer’s lifetime and several complete manuscripts, including the earliest ones, individually to be directly or indirectly based on numerous exemplars having once circulated in the London-Westminster area. Renewed interest in the record in the past two decades has, however, seen convergence towards a simpler textual history involving a significantly lower number of exemplars, and also initiation of the production of the first manuscript, possibly manuscripts, under the poet’s own direction.

One current trend is to identify scribes. Scribes were active in several London-Westminster localities outside the Pasternoster Row community of book artisans traced by C. Paul Christianson (1987, 1989a, 1989b, 1990). Particularly noteworthy here is the paleographical work of Linne Mooney and Estelle Stubbs, as this work has revealed the Guildhall to have been a major centre for the copying of late medieval English literature.²

As the copyists of literary works frequently also copied or composed civic

² <http://www.medievalscribes.com/>. See also Mooney – Stubbs (forthc.).

and other records, such documents have permitted their identification. The work has also expanded the list of manuscripts and documents associated with individual scribes, although unanimity has yet to be reached on all attributions (Mooney 2006; cf. Roberts *forthc.*; Horobin – Mooney 2004; cf. Thaisen 2011). These recent developments entail challenges to the relative chronology of the early *Canterbury Tales* manuscripts relied on by Vázquez.

The Hengwrt and Ellesmere manuscripts are the two *Canterbury Tales* manuscripts most closely associated with Chaucer. They contain no *Tale of Gamelyn* but both do contain space for the addition of material in the place in the tale order where the tale is regularly found. The tale is, however, present in the Corpus, Harley, and Lansdowne manuscripts, which are of a similar date and location. Today is for these reasons an opportune time for an edition of the *Tale of Gamelyn* and especially for a review such as Vázquez's of the reasons for the tale's customary, almost automatic, exclusion from the Chaucer canon on account of its perceived poor literary quality.

The perfect timing makes two matters a pity. The first is that Vázquez stops short of taking a stand on the authorship question. The other is that she directs so little of her attention to the codicological embedding in the *Canterbury Tales* manuscripts and the interrelationships between the scribes who produced them. The pity is the greater since the mentioning of both the *Tale of Gamelyn* and the *Canterbury Tales* in the title of the volume suggests that their relationship is going to be a main theme. It will be apparent from the above summary that Vázquez may have been ill-advised to aim at effecting a separation. A complete detachment is certainly both unworkable and undesirable.

To elaborate on this point, it would have been particularly useful to have learned details about why the individual manuscript might pre-date Chaucer's death. An argument sensitive also to other evidence could have been developed, as other evidence exists potentially to serve as such justification than a proposed absolute dating of the production of the Ellesmere manuscript's decorative borders. It could, for example, be significant that Scott has offered "c. 1405-10" (1995: 117n. 44), "c. 1407-10" (1996, 2: 87), and "c. 1410" (1996, 2: 141) as the production date for the decorative borders present in the Lansdowne manuscript. This evidence thus includes not only the differences between the early manuscripts in canonical and spurious contents and the ordering of these contents, but also what is known about where, when, and by whom they were produced, as hinted at in what has preceded. Vázquez attributes the textual differences to authorial revision, while at the same time accepting that "all the extant witnesses [to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*] derive from a single ultimate source" (p. 289).

Fuller development of the argument could have enriched the publication in other respects too. It could have clarified the ways in which the *Canterbury Tales* represent "all his [Chaucer's] literary production available" (p. 289), the

text of Christ Church, Oxford, MS 152 is written on “vellum flyleaves” (p. 42), and the Cambridge Mm manuscript is “[c]learly made in a shop” (p. 17). It might also have been helpful to have discussed the *Tale of Gamelyn* as a possible addition or continuation to the *Canterbury Tales*, especially if Chaucer is not the tale’s author. The fifteenth century saw several spurious tales become attached to the unfinished poem; for example, John Lydgate’s works *Churl and Bird* and *Siege of Thebes* follow the copy of the *Canterbury Tales* found in the Christ Church manuscript, while Thomas Hoccleve’s poem *De Beata Virgine* is inserted into this copy and introduced as the *Ploughman’s Tale*.

There are possible alternatives to the selected base text. The discussion exclusively addresses the Corpus, Harley, and Petworth manuscripts, with it being unclear to this reviewer what features dictated the selection between the former two. However, already Manly and Rickert (1940) established that early text is found in two additional manuscripts hosting the *Tale of Gamelyn*, despite both being of comparatively late production date. These are Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, MS 181 in parts and the Christ Church manuscript throughout the canonical tales. The latter is especially interesting because Peter Robinson’s (1997, 2000, 2004a) phylogenetic analyses of textual variations indicate that it is exceptionally close to the Hengwrt and Ellesmere manuscripts. Vázquez’s discussion would therefore have benefited from considering these two manuscripts.

The argument for overall agreement with Chaucer’s language would have been bolstered up with overt reference to other texts from the medieval period or descriptions of late Middle English, just like knowing the frequency of French word tokens in authenticated Chaucerian verse would have enabled the reader to make a direct comparison.

Editorial praxis has seen a move away from the traditional single-text edition in recent years, as the electronic medium has enabled the simultaneous display of readings from multiple manuscripts. A final possible improvement to the publication under review would none the less have been the relegation of the ten manuscript transcripts to an appendix. Other tabular information, such as the list of sigils, shelf-marks, and repositories, might also best have been removed from the running text and placed separately. Arranging the contents in this way would have brought their presentation into compliance with traditional editions and have foregrounded the critical text.

On balance, this synoptic edition addresses a welcome topic of current interest. There exist in Chaucer scholarship, as in other fields, assumptions so long held that they have come to be taken as unassailable facts. One such assumption, the mysogyny of Wytton, the scribe of Cambridge University Library, MS Dd.4.24, was demonstrated by Orietta Da Rold (2007) to rest on hardly any evidential basis. Vázquez’s work bravely challenges another such assumption. It

does so by convincingly showing that the case for non-Chaucerian authorship of the *Tale of Gamelyn* requires stronger evidence. On the other hand, the case for Chaucerian authorship also requires stronger evidence than what Vázquez offers.

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