

Ruth Evans
Saint Louis University
revans19@slu.edu

MLA January 2015 Session 333: Rethinking the Place of the Author

“What is a Chaucer?”

What we are here to debate today is the consequences of the Modern Language Association of America’s recent (2013-4) root-and-branch appraisal of its subject-divisions, and in particular the retention of a Division (now properly, as the new terminology goes, a Forum) with a single author title, namely “Chaucer,” a distinction shared by only one other author and Division, namely “Shakespeare.” Given that the MLA last reviewed and reorganized its divisions in 1974 (MLA itself was founded in 1883), such a reappraisal was unquestionably timely, if not long overdue. As a result of that internal review, the MLA proposed that the three existing medieval English language and literature divisions be consolidated into one single Medieval English Division in order to make room for new forums that better represented the field of language and literature as a whole in the twenty-first century, and that also anticipated its future directions. The proposal to cut a number of existing divisions – not only, it must be said, medieval divisions – and to rename some existing ones was, to say the least, controversial.

To create a single Medieval English Division would have had the effect of reducing our number of guaranteed Congress sessions from six to two, as well as dramatically reducing the visibility and importance of the field of medieval English language and literature. This decision was not necessarily motivated by a desire to get rid of medieval literature (one stated reason for the changes was “to eliminate redundancies in group designations”), but it showed enormous insensitivity to our discipline and a lack of awareness of the number of North American teachers

who not only regularly teach in these areas but also interview candidates for jobs in them at the MLA, and who continue to need representation at the annual MLA Congresses.

The MLA invited members to weigh in on [the proposed changes](#): 1 February 2014 was the deadline for comments. As a result of fierce lobbying that included letters from Larry Scanlon and David Wallace, the New Chaucer Society, and the chairs of all three medieval English Divisions, the MLA agreed to retain our 3 divisions (forums), now renamed Old English, Middle English, and Chaucer. However, the incoming President Margaret Ferguson (who is a Shakespearean) invited members over the next year to reconsider the title of the Chaucer forum. “Chaucer and Shakespeare,” she noted, “are the only forums on this map [i.e. the reorganization of MLA Divisions] devoted to single authors. Colleagues in Chaucer studies have indicated that their work goes beyond what ‘Chaucer’ signifies. We invite members to rename this forum in a way that may better reflect its scope.” That invitation is still very much on the table.

Moreover, the MLA has declared that “Regular five-year reviews by the Program Committee, required by the Executive Council’s charge to the committee but not implemented on a regular basis until now, will ensure dynamic self-study and periodic renewal.” The matter – retaining the existing three medieval English divisions, and retaining the name “Chaucer” for one of them – is far from settled. We need to discuss this as a discipline sooner rather than later.¹

My immediate responses to these issues are the following.

1. The retention of Chaucer as a forum name may be anomalous but it has been strategically vital to our keeping three medieval English divisions/forums in play. The question “Why Chaucer *and* Middle English Language and Literature?” is a political question, not just an intellectual one (of

¹ As Kellie Robertson, who is a member of the [MLA Program Committee](#) for 2014-7, reminded us with some urgency during the Q&A that followed this MLA session.

course, arguably, all the MLA forum names are political), but its answer is far from obvious or transparent.

2. “Chaucer” as a forum does not name a category so much as it indicates a *relation*: that *between* “Middle English, Excluding Chaucer” *and* “Chaucer,” a relation that I discuss in more detail below. It’s hard to see how renaming the Chaucer forum in isolation can do justice to that historical relation – if, that is, we wish to preserve the historical distinction. I have to say that I have not noted any conspicuous interest amongst members of our medieval MLA forums in discussing the relationship between Chaucer and the rest of Middle English, or between Chaucer and those writers that might be included in the category “His Age,” which does not mean that there is not such interest.

3. The Chaucer and Shakespeare forums may be anomalous in terms of the MLA forum structure, but they are anomalous in quite different ways. The uniqueness of Chaucer and Shakespeare as “the only forums on this map devoted to single authors” obscures the fact that the reasons for these two authors having single-author status were historically very different in 1974. I cannot speak for Shakespeare, but I imagine that the special status of his author-function within the MLA was due in part to the fact that his works are universally taught in high-schools, colleges, and universities through the Anglophone world and beyond it, and that he is still regarded in the culture at large as a pre-eminent literary “genius,” transcending cultures, periods, and geographies. The operative set here is English Literature, of which Shakespeare forms the most conspicuous member (or so the story goes). Chaucer, on the other hand, had single-author status, within medieval studies and the MLA, for very different reasons.

Middle English Literature and Chaucer were once separate sets; Chaucer was not a subset of the former. Chaucer is not the most conspicuous member of a set – Middle English Language

and Literature – but rather occupied a set of his own, one that now overlaps with Middle English but that is also, for historical reasons, distinct from it. There might be very good reasons for challenging the distinction between “Middle English” and “Chaucer” as MLA divisions (since, as it goes without saying, Chaucer is also Middle English), but there are significant historical reasons for that distinction, and to some extent they still obtain. Most of Middle English literature remained unknown until the late eighteenth century; Chaucer was the exception, his works having been continuously published, read, and received, admittedly, by a small elite, since his death in 1400. As David Matthews observes, “‘Middle English’ was only constituted as a discipline in the 1870s,” first as “the preserve of the few,” through such subscriber institutions as the Roxburghe Club, and the Early English Text Society, which was established in 1864 and which did **not** publish works by Chaucer.² The term “Middle English” is available (in German) from 1822 but does not come into currency in English until the 1870s. Frederick Furnivall established the Chaucer Society in 1868 to systematically publish Chaucer’s works.

“Chaucer” has therefore historically been separate from the rest of the field of Middle English; “Chaucer” has its own Society (the New Chaucer Society), its own Biennial Congress, and its own journal (*Studies in the Age of Chaucer*; a second journal, *The Chaucer Review*, although unconnected with the NCS, nevertheless very publically carries forward the single-author name). There may be very good reasons for not perpetuating the state of affairs that puts Chaucer out on a limb from the rest of Middle English, but I want to emphasize not only that the analogy between Shakespeare and Chaucer is misleading (they are each configured very differently in relation to the larger field of English Literature of which they are a part) but also that there may be a compelling need to keep Chaucer as a separate field within the new MLA

² David Matthews, *The Making of Middle English, 1765-1910* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1999), xxii.

map of forums, in order to allow for an engagement by medievalists in general with that unique, complex and conflicted history.

Moreover, as David Matthews has observed, Shakespeare's performability meant that from the early modern period onwards his works were on public view – and belonged to the public (and were authored by more writers than Shakespeare) – far more than Chaucer's, which required that readers have access to exorbitantly expensive manuscripts or early printed books.³ Hence the effort to make Chaucer accessible in good editions to the common reader in the nineteenth century.

But I take it we are here to debate not only the viability of Chaucer as an organizing category within the MLA but also the status of the author in literary studies – and of Chaucer's author-function. One can come at this topic from several different angles: critical theory, which killed off the author in order to privilege *écriture* and the reader, but which in some quarters – especially gender studies – is now very much interested in the author;⁴ the Anglo-Saxon bibliographic tradition (sometimes called book history), which had often joined with New Criticism to proclaim the death of the author, but which now evinces a strong interest in her;⁵ the French tradition of the history of the book, which for long had removed both readers and authors from its purview, but which now also evinces a strong interest in the author;⁶ and traditional

³ Private email.

⁴ For examples of biographical approaches to literature that refuse the idea of the Romantic author but which explore the pressures of gender and institutional history on the figure of the author and on the production of her texts, see Jacqueline Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1993) and Toril Moi, *Simone de Beauvoir: The Making of an Intellectual Woman* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).

⁵ Roger Chartier, "Figures of the Author," *The Order of Books: Readers, Authors, and Libraries in Europe Between the Fourteenth and the Eighteenth Centuries*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1994), pp. 25-59 (pp. 25-6).

⁶ *Ibid.*

biography, which still displays a lively fascination for the figure of Chaucer the author.⁷

Chaucer's author-function crucially organizes our current thinking about texts, readers and scribes in the Middle Ages: in literary history, in history of the book, in traditional bibliography, in paleography. For example, the debate instigated by Lawrence Warner about the scribe Adam Pinkhurst, a debate that is currently swirling around in the Facebookosphere, concerning whether or not Pinkhurst is the Scribe B that copied the Ellesmere and Hengwrt manuscripts of *The Canterbury Tales* (as was argued by Linne Mooney in 2004), only has the tremendous cultural and literary-historical import that it does, and as the original identification by Mooney did, in relation to Chaucer's author-function.⁸

But Chaucer's author-function can also operate negatively: not to reinvigorate debates about scribes but to cast a heavy shadow over certain intellectual spaces. The history of sexuality might be one such instance. Glenn Burger, for example, pondering Chaucer's canonical status, wonders whether queer subjects today might not be "better off without Chaucer altogether," given his status as foundational for English poetry, for heterosexuality and conventional gender difference (think the opening lines of the *General Prologue*), and for modernity – and the ways in which this status obscures or compounds the problem of finding queer subjects in the fourteenth century.⁹ Yet Burger concludes that a clean break with canonicity is a "fantasy," and that we cannot and should not imagine that by purging ourselves of all the "dead white males" we will somehow have "purged ourselves of the effects of canonicity." In any case, canonicity is

⁷ Recent examples (which are perhaps not so traditional) include Paul Strohm's "microbiography" of Chaucer, which appeared last year: *Chaucer's Tale: 1386 and the Road to Canterbury* (New York: Viking, 2014), and Ardis Butterfield's forthcoming biography of Chaucer: *Chaucer: A London Life* (London: I.B. Tauris, forthcoming).

⁸ See <https://www.facebook.com/lawrence.warner/posts/10204972305014638>. Mooney made her startling identification of Adam Pinkhurst as Chaucer's scribe at the 2004 Biennial Congress of the New Chaucer Society: Linne R Mooney, "Chaucer's Scribe – on the Discovery of Adam Pinkhurst," paper delivered at the Biennial Congress of the New Chaucer Society, Glasgow, 2004. See also John Ezard, "The Scrivener's Tale: How Chaucer's Sloppy Copyist Was Unmasked after 600 Years": <http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2004/jul/20/highereducation.books>.

⁹ Glenn Burger, *Chaucer's Queer Nation*, *Medieval Cultures* 34 (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2003), p. 2.

not the main problem in recuperating Chaucer's texts for queer literary history; the resistance to historicization by queer cultural studies is arguably a more formidable obstruction, and one that therefore resonates all the more ironically in the context of MLA's proposals to erase or elide important areas of literary history to make room for new disciplinary fields.

I turn finally to one important rewriting of Foucault's "What is an Author?" that is relevant to Chaucer's author-function.¹⁰ In his 1994 chapter "Figures of the Author," Roger Chartier first argues that within both book history and history of the book there has been a reconnection of the text with its author and with her/his intentions and positions; not the Romantic figure of the sovereign author, but one both "dependent and constrained," for example, by factors such as the 1709 Statute of Anne, the earliest copyright legislation.¹¹ Although Chartier is primarily concerned with the author-function in relation to printed works, what's interesting for medievalists is that Chartier's argument offers a reconsideration of the contexts in which the concept of literary property first appeared. Foucault argues that pre-1700 literary texts did not need authors, whereas scientific texts did, and that this situation was then reversed in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century. Whatever the validity of Foucault's identification of the moment of change, Chartier reminds us that, according to Foucault, "*for certain classes of texts*, reference to the author was functional as early as the Middle Ages."¹² And Chartier notes that "By moving the figure of the author back in time [before the 1709 Statute of Anne watershed] Foucault's essay invites us to a retrospective investigation that gives the history of the conditions of the production, dissemination, and appropriation of texts particular pertinence." This is an invitation that medievalists and biographers of Chaucer need to take up. Nevertheless,

¹⁰ Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" [1969], trans. Josué V. Harari, *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), pp. 101-20.

¹¹ Chartier, "Figures of the Author," p. 28.

¹² Chartier, "Figures of the Author," p. 31: emphasis mine.

arguing for the continued usefulness of the figure of the author within our discipline is not at all the same thing as arguing for the viability of Chaucer as a category for an MLA forum.