

**A NEW COMPANION
TO CRITICAL THINKING
ON CHAUCER**



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A NEW COMPANION TO CRITICAL THINKING ON CHAUCER

Edited by
STEPHANIE L. BATKIE
MATTHEW W. IRVIN
LYNN SHUTTERS

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	ix
References and Abbreviations	xi
Foreword: Chaucer's Singular Vocabulary CHRISTOPHER CANNON	xiii
Introduction STEPHANIE L. BATKIE, MATTHEW W. IRVIN, AND LYNN SHUTTERS	1

PART ONE

Consent/Assent FIONA SOMERSET	27
Entente CANDACE BARRINGTON	43
Pite GLENN D. BURGER	59
Slider DAVID RAYBIN	75
Response: <i>Consent, Entente, Pite, Slider</i> ARDIS BUTTERFIELD	89

PART TWO

Merveille
TARA WILLIAMS 101

Virginite
SARAH SALIH 113

Swiven
HELEN BARR 129

Craft
BRUCE HOLSINGER 143

Response: *Merveille, Virginite, Swiven, Craft*
SIMON HOROBIN 159

PART THREE

Vertu
HOLLY A. CROCKER 171

Wal
MARION TURNER 187

Thing
STEELE NOWLIN 201

Blak
CORD J. WHITAKER 217

Response: *Vertu, Wal, Thing, Blak*
CAROLYN DINSHAW 229

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PART FOUR

Auctorite/Auctour	
R. D. PERRY	241
Seculere	
CATHERINE SANOK	255
Flesh	
RICHARD H. GODDEN	269
Memorie	
RUTH EVANS	285
Response: <i>Auctorite, Seculere, Flesh, Memorie</i>	
ANDREW COLE	301
Appendix 1: Summaries of the Works of Chaucer	313
Appendix 2: Additional Terms	327
Appendix 3: Coverage by Term	329
Appendix 4: Coverage by Work	331
Index	335

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REFERENCES AND ABBREVIATIONS

References

All quotations of Geoffrey Chaucer's works are taken from the *Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed., edited by Larry D. Benson. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987.

Abbreviations

- AND** *Anglo-Norman Dictionary*. Edited by Louise W. Stone, T. B. W. Reid, and William Rothwell. Publications of the Modern Humanities Research Association, 1977. www.anglo-norman.net/gate/.
- DIMEV** *An Open-Access, Digital Edition of the Index of Middle English Verse*. Edited by Linne R. Mooney, Daniel W. Mosser, and Elizabeth Solopova. www.dimev.net.
- DMF** *Dictionnaire du Moyen Français*, version 2015 ATILF-CNRS & Université de Lorraine. www.atilf.fr/dmf/.
- DMLBS** *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources*. Edited by Richard Ashdowne, David Robert Howlett, and Ronald Edward Latham. Oxford: Oxford University Press for the British Academy, 2018. <https://logeion.uchicago.edu/>.
- LS** *A Latin Dictionary*. Charlton Lewis and Charles Short. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879.
- MED** *Middle English Dictionary*. Edited by Robert E. Lewis, et al. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1952–2001. <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary>.
- OED** *Oxford English Dictionary*. Edited by Simpson, J. A., et al. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. www.oed.com.
- OLD** *Oxford Latin Dictionary*. Edited by P. G. W. Glare. 2 vols. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

FOREWORD: CHAUCER'S SINGULAR VOCABULARY

CHRISTOPHER CANNON

A “COMPLEX WORD” for William Empson was often key to the meaning of a whole poem, and it acquired that centrality as its complexity was “gradually built up” by the other words, an “enriching” of its meanings that occurred as the poem unfolded.¹ A poet would have understood this richness from the start, but a poem was also a process for drawing out a word’s possible meanings through the variety of contexts in which that word was placed, as the sequence of those contexts layered those meanings atop one another. A key word of this kind for Chaucer was “free” as he used it in the *Franklin’s Tale*. It is first introduced there in a legalistic sense, as Arveragus vows that he will never try to dominate Dorigen, and, in order to insist that his oath is valid, says he makes this vow “of hys fre wyl” (5.645). In this case the adjective modifies a term for a human faculty (the will) and means “an absence of constraint.” The word occurs for a second time in the tale as part of a definition of “love”:

Love wol nat been constreyned by maistrye.
Whan maistrye comth the God of Love anon
Beteth his wynges, and farewell, he is gon!
Love is a thing as any spirit free.

(5.764–67)

“Free” also means “unconstrained” here but it now refers to a more absolute sense of freedom: the Franklin’s point is not so much that “love” is an unconstrained emotion but, rather, that it is the diametric opposite of compulsion; it is not the condition of a feeling or act but a fundamental property (love is not love if it is compelled). “Free” occurs only one more time in the poem when readers are asked to judge which of its main characters was the “mooste fre” (5.1622): was it Arveragus, when he allowed Dorigen to keep her promise to Aurelius, or Aurelius, when he released Dorigen from that promise, or the philosopher, who released Aurelius from his obligation to pay the debt of a thousand pounds Aurelius had incurred when trying to ensnare Dorigen? The word has acquired one wholly new meaning here—and it is one that we have actually lost—since in Middle English, “free” could mean “generous” and the simplest way to read this question is “who was the most generous of these three?” “Free” also retains the legalistic sense with which the poem began (who of the three is the least constrained), but now a fourth meaning also shadows all the others, because the meaning of “free” also begins to swing around to something very like the first meaning’s opposite. As we are asked to consider which of these related actions is the more *uncompelled* we are also made to see how each one of them *is* compelled by the generosity of the action that preceded it. Precisely because they are so generous to each other, neither Arveragus, Aurelius, nor the philosopher are

1 Empson, *Structure of Complex Words*, 74.

constrained by prior actions, but those constraints—in their very generosity—still compel, even if what they compel is more freedom.

A word may also be “key,” as Raymond Williams defined it, because its range of meanings opens a window onto a whole culture particularly as that range is contested or in flux.² “Compagnie” was such a key word for Chaucer. Although derived from French, it had been used in English since the twelfth century to describe a “multitude” or “group of people.” Alongside that meaning it had also developed a more intimate sense of a large group bound together by a shared interest or purpose, a “fellowship,” and it is in this sense that Chaucer described the Canterbury pilgrims as a “compagnie.”³ But in the early fourteenth century a culturally important third meaning was also making its way into general use as the idea of a bounded multitude became increasingly useful for describing “a professional group.”⁴ At first such groups were religious and the term referred to clergy, but, at precisely the moment Chaucer was writing the *Canterbury Tales*—and calling its pilgrims a “fellowship”—the term had begun to be used to describe a craft guild such as the “company of grocers” in London. Chaucer uses the term in just this way in the *Man of Law’s Tale* to describe a “compaignye of chapman” (2.135) or a guild of merchants. “Compaignie” in this last sense was fast on its way to becoming complex in an Empsonian sense insofar as guild membership was as much about exclusion as it was about fellowship. But it is this growing complexity that also gave this word a growing political and ethical force: it was a keyword because “its meanings [had become] inextricably bound up with the problem it was being used to discuss.”⁵ When Chaucer begins the *Canterbury Tales* by describing his pilgrims as “wel nyne and twenty in a compaignye” (1.24) he means that they are “in felaweshipe,” almost an ecclesiastical body because “pilgrims were they alle” (1.26), but he also quickly begins to sort them into professional groups and, in the process of that sorting, quietly insists that “work as a social experience” has thoroughly shaped their perspectives and even their definition of the good.⁶ When Chaucer projects these differences into a variety of genres and narrative forms as the *Tales* unfold he is making the subtle but crucial claim that a world grouping itself into “compaignyes” was a world that increasingly defined lives by work.

The third kind of “keyword” Chaucer used—and the one I will focus on here—was unique to him and it fundamentally defined his style. Such words were “key” because they were *singular*: used in only one poem in all of Chaucer’s writing. They were sometimes what are called “nonce” words (used only once), but Chaucer often repeated them in a given poem, not least because they were (or became) central to its plot or meanings. Such words are particularly characteristic of, and common in, the *Canterbury Tales* for

² Williams, *Keywords*, 9.

³ *MED*, s.v. “compagnie, n.,” 2(b), 1, and 3 respectively.

⁴ *MED*, s.v. “compaignie, n.,” 1(e).

⁵ Williams, *Keywords*, 13.

⁶ Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire*, 202.

the reasons I have just described: narrowing a poem's vocabulary, wedding it to the tale told by a particular speaker, tended to produce a "special kind of poetry" for that speaker and his or her subject.⁷ A simple example here would be the Miller's use of the word "ferring" only in this tale where it is at once an indication of his churlishness but also central to the poem's action: it is Absolon's squeamishness about this particular bodily function, that so enrages him when Alisoun farts in his face, that makes his retaliation the linchpin of the poem's entire plot.⁸ "Cliket" (the latch of a door or gate) and "pirie" (pear tree), words unique to the *Merchant's Tale*, also have a defining role to play in that poem's vulgar plot: each names a crucial aspect of the setting for the conclusion of that tale's action (the pear tree in the locked garden) and the site of the betrayal with which the plot concludes. Some of these key words are placed under such scrutiny by their repeated use that they become complex in the Empsonian sense. "Creauncen" ("to borrow money or obtain credit") is a word Chaucer only uses in the *Shipman's Tale* where it describes the work of the merchant, but, since the tale is finally about the very nature of economic activity (and the wife's bold strategy for insisting that sex within marriage has monetary value) it is a word that finally contains within it the poem's bracing analysis of value. "Buxomli" and "sad" in the *Clerk's Tale* might be said to be "key" in the sense Raymond Williams defined such words, since these terms are not only used in this text to describe the most important attributes of Griselda's character but also, as the Clerk suggests in conclusion, to persuade all the tale's readers to "be constant in adversitee / As was Grisilde" (4.1146–47).

In many cases the singular words Chaucer used in the *Tales* were already common in the language, but on many other occasions Chaucer invented them for the purpose:

Loo Adam, in the feeld of Damyssene
 With Goddes owene fyner wroght was he,
 And nat bigeten of mannes sperme unclene
 And welte al paradys savyng e tree.
 Hadde nevere worldly man so heigh degree,
 And Adam, til he for *mysgovernance*
 Was dryven out of hys hie prosperitee
 To labour, and to helle, and to meschaunce.
 (7.2007–14)

Here, for example, in the first stanzas of the *Monk's Tale*—a poem that the Monk has said will be about the "tragedie" that comes when someone in "greet prosperitee" is "yfallen out of heigh degree" (7.1975–77)—Chaucer derived the word "*mysgovernance*" from "governance" for the first time in recorded English in order to announce a central theme of his poem: that these great and tragic falls were very often self-inflicted, that "tragedie"

⁷ See Benson, *Chaucer's Drama of Style*, especially 20.

⁸ Here and throughout I am drawing on statistics and an argument in chapter 3 of my *Making of Chaucer's English*, 91–135. That chapter contains further statistics surveying the patterns I will outline here, and part 2 of that book provides a profile of each one of the words I mention including its derivation and patterns of use in Middle English.

is often particularly wretched because it can be avoided. A similar lexical process can be observed in the *Knight's Tale*:

Ful ofte a day han thise Thebanes two
 Togydre ymet, and wroght his felawe wo;
Unhorsed hath each oother of hem tweye.
 Ther nas no tygre in the vale of Galgopheye
 Whan that hir whelp is stole whan it is lite
 So crueel on the hunte as is Arcite
 For jelous herte upon this Palamoun.
 (1.2623–29)

Here Chaucer coined the word “unhorsed” from “horsed” (“to seat oneself on horseback”) for a narrative filled with combat on horseback in order to specify a key event in the final confrontation between the tale’s competing heroes, Palamon and Arcite (it is just after the lines I have quoted that Palamon is taken to the stake which signals his loss and Arcite’s victory in this tournament). “Chuckken,” which Chaucer coined to describe the sound of the chickens in the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale*, is an imitative word that not only neatly describes the sounds made by the tale’s central characters (the rooster, Chaunticleer, and his wife, Pertelote) but, as it contrasts with their rhetorically elaborate speech, keeps squarely before its readers the tale’s defining interrogation of “nature”: are the chickens’ anthropomorphic behaviours as “natural” as their sound? “Caunterburyward” in the *General Prologue* to the *Tales* is a word Chaucer coined from “Canterbury” and used only there to take in the whole of the *Tales’* purpose: to take the twenty-nine pilgrims, by means of the unfolding stories in the collection, “to Canterbury.”

It makes sense that Chaucer should use singular words of this kind in the *Canterbury Tales*, but this technique was a resource in all of Chaucer’s writing, even in his prose.⁹ In his more technical writings the phenomenon may seem to be a direct consequence of the specialized nature of the subject he was writing about. It was almost inevitable, for example, that Chaucer should use words such as “altitude,” “elevacioun,” “meridian,” “plum-rule,” and “zodiak” only in the *Treatise on the Astrolabe*, a work that describes the intricacies of using an astronomical instrument. It seems inevitable too that he should use words such as “destinal” and “eternite” only in his translation of Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy* whose central subject is the relationship of human life to the larger cosmos. It makes sense that he only had reason to use the names of some birds (“stork,” “tercel,” “hei-sugge”) as well as their characteristic sounds (“queken”) in the *Parliament of Fowles*. And if he used the word “bitraisinge” (betraying) only in the *Legend of Good Women* it was doubtless because Chaucer defines “good women” there as women whom “false men” have betrayed (Pro.F.484–46).

But the creation of a singular vocabulary of the shape Chaucer produced involved a second technique—really a kind of discipline—allied to the acts of invention that produced or discovered new words for each text. To ensure that a particular set of words were confined to a single text Chaucer had to *keep* that vocabulary unique by forbearing

⁹ See Benson, *Chaucer’s Drama of Style*, especially 20.

to use these key words ever again. So, when Chaucer writes of the Phoebus (or the sun) climbing in the sky to an angle of forty-five degrees in the introduction to the *Man of Law's Tale*, he could have so easily described what he does call the sun's "highte" (2.12) as its "altitude"—using the word from the *Treatise on the Astrolabe*—but he does not. In *Troilus and Criseyde* when Troilus considers, at length, his "destinee" (4.959) and the extent to which his events "shul comen by predestyne" (predestination) (4.966), he has every opportunity to take the word "destinal" from the *Boece* but he never does. The temptation to use words from the *Parliament of Fowles* must have been particularly great in the extraordinary scene of barnyard chaos that follows the seizing of a farm's prize rooster by a fox in the *Nun's Priest's Tale*:

Ran cow and calf, and eek the verray hogges,
 So fered for the berkyng of the dogges
 And shoutyng of the men and wommen eeke
 They roone so hem thoughte hir herte breeke
 They yolleden as feendes doon in helle
 The dokes cryden as men wolde hem quelle
 The gees for feere flowen over the trees;
 Out of the hyve cam the swarm of bees.

(7.3385–92)

It is particularly effective poetically to have the ducks "cry" here since the whole point of this passage is to make the farmyard animals resemble a rioting mob, and yet the dogs "bark," and so, when these ducks do not "quack," as they did in the *Parliament of Fowls*, Chaucer is not so much distinguishing the sounds these birds make in the different poems as distinguishing these two *poems* (each has a singular word for this sound). The rigour of the discipline involved in creating a vocabulary of this kind is revealed best in the very first line of what was probably Chaucer's first attempt to write a poem of any length, his translation of the *Roman de la Rose*: "Many men sayn that in sweveninges / Ther nys but fables and lesynges" (A.1–2). This couplet stays very close to the sense of the French of Guillaume de Lorris ("Maintes genz dient que en songes / N'a se fables non et mençonges") although, for the rhyme words, Chaucer replaces two French terms with very familiar English terms, "sweveninges" (dreams) and "lesynges" (lies). It is remarkable, however, that Chaucer never uses the word "sweveninges" again, even though many of the poems he wrote after this one recount the contents of dreams (the *Book of the Duchess*, the *House of Fame*, the *Parliament of Fowles*, and the *Legend of Good Women*). It may not be that Chaucer was fully aware of this discipline of course: it may have been a consequence of a general fecundity of language (a boundless capacity for lexical invention) and a capacity to use that abundance for careful specifications in each poem. But the discipline resides in its effects, in the way that confining certain key words to a single work of prose or poem makes the whole of Chaucer's vocabulary singular, work by work.

One of the more extraordinary consequences of this discipline, and the best way to take the measure of its rigour, are the words Chaucer sequestered to particular poems that had no possible thematic purpose. A revealing instance here can be found near the end of the *Franklin's Tale* when Aurelius assures the philosopher who helped him that he will indeed pay him what he owes, whatever it may cost him:

[...] Maister, I dar wel make avaunt,
 I failed nevere of my trouthe as yit.
 For sikerly my dette shal be quyit,
 Towardes yow, howevere that I fare
 To goon a-begged in my kirtle bare.
 (5.1576–80)

“Kirtle” is an unusual word to modern ears here though it was quite common in Chaucer’s English. “Abegged” (which simply means “begging”) is also unusual to us and probably was to Chaucer’s audience too, since it is one of those singular words that Chaucer only uses in this poem. But it is also the case that the simple and common adverb “however,” in the penultimate line of the passage, is also unique to this poem and this passage. And so too is the simple and common adjective “nomore” or “namo” as it is spelled here in the first sentence of Chaucer’s description of the Yeoman in the *General Prologue* to the *Canterbury Tales*:

A Yeman hadde he and servantz namo
 At that tyme, for hym liste ride so,
 And he was clad in cote and hood of grene.
 (1.101–3)

This adjectival form of “nomore” is more unusual than the common adverb, which Chaucer has just used to describe the Squire: “He sleep namoore than dooth a nightingale” (1.98). But the adjective was common in Chaucer’s day—he has not invented it here—and yet, Chaucer never uses this simple word again. In other words, the sequestration of words in particular poems—the ensuring that particular words were key because they were singular—was not always a means to a signifying end for Chaucer but an end in itself.

There is also a further element to the building of such a vocabulary even more subtle than the discipline that confined certain words to a single poem once Chaucer had used them. That discipline might be envisioned as the drawing of a line in time after a word has been used beyond which it will not be used again. But Chaucer also drew such lines in front of or before his poems restricting his vocabulary sufficiently in each poem to leave many words in the language unused *until* later or even late in his career. This phenomenon cannot be detected unless Chaucer’s poems are put into some order, although, given the nature of the phenomenon it does not matter so much what that order is. I have elsewhere called this category of words a “reserved vocabulary” because another way to think about these words is as “reserved” by Chaucer for later use.¹⁰ How could we ever know that Chaucer was holding back words in this way, and why would it matter in the larger scheme of a language in which no poet could ever hope to use all the words? The answer to both questions is to be found in Chaucer’s aggregate vocabulary over the course of his career. Surveying all of Chaucer’s words and the poems they are and are not used in tells us nothing about intentions, but knowing all the words that Chaucer finally *will* use once he has written all his poems, it becomes both generally and specifically interesting to see just how carefully these words were apportioned—as if,

¹⁰ Cannon, *Making of Chaucer’s English*, 114–17.

again, an important part of that distribution was to have a unique set of words for each poem. In his earliest poems such sampling is uninteresting because it converges with the whole of that poem's vocabulary (there being no prior poem or poems to measure that vocabulary against). Later in Chaucer's career, however, the unusual nature of these words becomes statistically clear. In a relatively late poem such as the *General Prologue* to the *Canterbury Tales*, for example, Chaucer still found 247 different words that he had never used in any other poem to use there. In the *Clerk's Tale*, another relatively late work, he found sixty-one such words. Even in a 49-line lyric like *The Envoy to Scogan* (usually assumed to be written near the end of Chaucer's life because he refers to himself as old and grey) Chaucer finds four words he had never used before in almost 40,000 lines of poetry. The singular vocabulary Chaucer fashions for each of his poems is both a subset of such words and a function of this technique. That is, Chaucer seems always to have been searching for new words for each poem, and another way to accomplish this (besides finding a set of new words) was to leave some words behind.

The effects of Chaucer's reserved vocabulary and the singular vocabulary they made possible were historically dramatic. Almost from the minute Chaucer died, his language was described not only as unique and original, but as foundational because of its originality. Hoccleve called him the "first fynder of our faire language" in 1412, and he was only the first in a chorus of imitators and acolytes which extended well into the twentieth century, when even scholars of Chaucer continued the tradition, often insisting as the very measure of his importance that he had "naturalized into English a new poetic mode and language."¹¹ The language of a poet who fashioned something like a new vocabulary for each of his poems is bound to look this inventive, and, of course, viewed out of the context of other poets' work—that is, irrespective of the relationship of the novelty of that language when measured against the English language in general—it is inventive. But the general impression of originality can also be seen as the way all of Chaucer's readers tend to register the relative novelty of his language in each poem and of the unusual way in which Chaucer made certain words "key." As I have shown here, such words are often complex in the ways Empson described, and they are often keywords in the sense Raymond Williams used the term, central to larger cultural concerns and debates beyond Chaucer's poetry. But they may be both of these things, significant because of their rarity, and also key to the meaning of the poem they as a result tend to define. All of these attributes can be found in usefully condensed form in the simple word "twinning" in book 4 of *Troilus and Criseyde*:

The soth is this: the twynnyng of us tweyne
 Wo us disese and cruelich anoye,
 But hym byhoveth somtyme han a peyne
 That serveth Love, if that he wol have joye.

(4.1303–6)

Criseyde is here trying to persuade Troilus that their parting is only a temporary nuisance by making the word "twinning" mean that their separation is nearly its opposite

¹¹ Hoccleve, *Regement of Princes*, line 4978; Fisher, "Chaucer and the French Influence," 178.

("complex" because it describes only a temporary annoyance before an inevitably rejoining). But haunting this local argument—and drawn into it by this word—are all of the historical and political actors who have, on the one hand, regarded the "twynning" of these two lovers as of little importance, in part by discounting Criseyde's wishes, while, on the other hand, insisting that greater ends are (and must be) served by this sacrifice. Because the word is made so instantly rich in its meanings—and also in all the ways the poem's plot leads up to this particular moment—this is a poem about "twynnyng" and it therefore makes sense that Chaucer would have reached this common noun off the shelf for the first time when writing this stanza and pressing hard on all of these points so late but also at such a crucial join in this poem. Having made it key to *Troilus and Criseyde* in this way, Chaucer maintains a kind of conceptual and lexical pressure on this word for the rest of his career by refusing ever to use it again. It is in this way that Chaucer crafted a vocabulary that was distinctive in its difference from the language of any other poet. But it was also distinctive with respect to itself, singular not only in general, but poem by poem throughout Chaucer's entire career.

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