

Alexandra Gillespie 2006: *Print Culture and the Medieval Author: Chaucer, Lydgate, and Their Books 1473–1557*. Oxford English Monographs. Oxford: Oxford UP. xiii+281pp, plus 38 black-and-white facsimiles. ISBN 978-0-19-926295-3

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Just as information technologies have in modern times transformed the processes of production, distribution and consumption of texts, the advent of the printing press in the fifteenth century changed the face of written culture in Western Europe by replacing the artisan production of textual artefacts with a mechanical one, thus making books available to a much wider public than hitherto. Eisenstein's seminal work of 1979 contributed to lend significant cultural consequences to this technological development she described as *the printing revolution*. More recently, however, Eisenstein's theses have been revised and qualified in various ways (cf. Johns 1998), and the book under review in part adds to that effort. Instead of favouring a teleological account of print culture as an agent of cultural transformation, Gillespie puts the emphasis on the fact that "changes we perceive as being in some way related to the newness of print ... cannot be detached from old ways of thinking about what it means for a text to be written, copied, or read" (16). That is, in order for the printing press to have the impact it is afforded, it had to come into existence under certain conditions that made the transformation possible, not as a radical change divorced from its cultural background, but instead as a gradual development, as now happens with the implementation of information technologies.

In the introductory chapter of *Print Culture and the Medieval Author* Alexandra Gillespie defines the geographical and chronological limits of her study, circumscribed respectively to the literary culture of England – with special focus on the authors Geoffrey Chaucer (d. 1400) and John Lydgate (d. 1449) – and to the first century of printing in English – specifically from the publication of the first English book in 1473 to 1557, the year of the incorporation of the Stationers' Company of London. But the period between these two milestones in the history of printing in England crosses the conventional boundary that literary scholars use to separate the Middle Ages from the Renaissance, thus contributing to prove the fertility of this kind of foray, as espoused recently by James Simpson (2002). While it is true that there was a general tendency in the printing of literary texts to display authorship, Gillespie argues that Chaucer and Lydgate are not names that figure exclusively in printed books, but were already visible in manuscript form, a reminder that "the author ... was a fully realized historical entity when Caxton started printing" (3). With the premise that the emergence of the author was the result of patterns already discernible in the medieval manuscript tradition and not a consequence of the advent of printing, this monograph explores the implications of the introduction of print for the concept of the medieval author of literary texts.

The first chapter, 'Caxton and Fifteenth-Century English Books', examines in what ways the methods of production and commercialization of texts and manuscripts in late fourteenth- and fifteenth-century England may have served as a precedent to the first English printer, William Caxton, between 1473 – the year when he began his printing activities on the continent – and 1476–77 – the first year he was operating from Westminster. Gillespie notices that in contrast with the usual anonymity of preceding centuries, English vernacular authors from the Ricardian period and beyond show a tendency to name themselves, and she suggests that “the medieval author was a way to limit, mediate, and profit from the movement in vernacular books before Caxton arrived on the publishing scene” (29). These authors, besides, were aware of occupying a place in the public sphere and of their role in promoting the advancement of the English language, as Gillespie shows in the case of John Gower (d. 1408) and Lydgate, who associated their compositions with English monarchs. This authorial stance influenced Caxton in his paratextual explanation of Margaret of Burgundy's patronage of his translation and first English publication, *Recuyell of the Historyes of Troy*.

Significantly, Gillespie argues that Caxton also found a precedent in the London book trade and manuscript culture that in the second half of the fifteenth century had generally adopted fascicular methods of manuscript production. Using the fascicle or booklet as the basic codicological unit added great flexibility to the process of book production and commercialization, since ultimately it allowed buyers to customize the final product. Caxton, whom Gillespie connects with a number of fascicular manuscripts, wanted to replicate the same versatility of the manuscript trade for his printed goods, thus meeting the demands of his customers and improving the marketability of his publications. Proof of Caxton's policy is that George Ferrers, a Tudor courtier and author, owned a tract volume that comprised Caxton quartos printed between 1476 and 1477 containing mainly Chaucerian and Lydgatean texts. As Gillespie states, “[t]he little books that Caxton printed in 1476–7 belonged to a world in which producers made books in pieces and let others worry about the links between them later” (53). Yet there is another aspect worthy of attention that Gillespie passes over: if she is right – and I have my doubts – in that the English manuscript trade was a bespoke one, it should follow that the merchant Caxton would in fact be the first English producer of books on speculation.

This monograph is organized chronologically and so the second chapter is concerned with 'Printing and Innovation after 1478'. Gillespie argues that Caxton's presentation of his printed quartos as analogous to manuscript booklets was a sound decision that he later applied to the more expensive folio editions with enhanced paratextual devices. A good case in point is his 1483 edition of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, in whose preface Caxton explains his editorial practices and presents this text as superior to that of his first edition of 1476 (cf. Bordalejo 2005); in addition, Caxton's explicit ascription of the work to Chaucer “is also part of a plan to describe links between some of Caxton's wares” (74). Later on in 1483 Caxton published two other folio editions of texts known to be by Chaucer according to his Retraction, namely *The House of Fame* and *Troilus and Criseyde*; these three folio editions offered a great opportunity for customers to compile a *Sammelband* of Chaucer's works. And so did the contemporaneous London mercer Roger Thorney, who assembled a volume composed of Caxton's folio editions of the *Canterbury Tales* (1483), *Troilus* (1483) and

John Mirk's *Quattuor sermones* (1482–83), together with a manuscript copy of Lydgate's *Siege of Thebes*. This tract volume "opens upon a fifteenth-century pen and ink frontispiece, professionally executed in a continental style" (77). In other words, Thorney's volume is a product of the transition between manuscript and print culture that combines the traditional tasks of scribes and limners with the more novel ones related to printing, thus proving the natural co-existence of the two technologies.

Presumably about 1494 Roger Thorney made his manuscript copy of the *Siege of Thebes* available to Caxton's successor, Wynkyn de Worde, who used it as copy text for his quarto edition of Lydgate's work. Interestingly this edition survives only in a tract volume bound also with other texts by Lydgate printed contemporaneously, *The Assembly of Gods* (1494?) and *The Temple of Glas* (1493?). By choosing the same image of a knight to decorate the title-page, De Worde, who is the first English printer to have made extensive use of woodcut illustrations, favours a connection between *The Siege* and *The Assembly*.¹ While the printer "perhaps meant to offer his customers a selection of Lydgate's texts, ... the author's name is nowhere used to propose this meaning for the products of his press" (88), because to improve the commercial possibilities of his books De Worde preferred to rely on illustrations, title-pages and other devices rather than on authorship. It was not until his 1498 edition of *The Assembly* that De Worde made explicit the ascription of this text to Lydgate, and he did so in a colophon that, as Gillespie perceptively shows, replicates the phrasing of the one used in his edition of the *Canterbury Tales* of the same year, suggesting that both editions might have been marketed as companion pieces. The composition of this colophon suggests that De Worde "deemed it worth investing some effort to make the text a tribute to an English writer" (95).

Chapters three and four discuss the publication until 1534 of texts respectively by Chaucer and Lydgate. Apropos of Chaucer Gillespie follows up a reference by the nineteenth-century bibliographer Thomas Dibdin (1812: 59–60) about the presence of the single copy of De Worde's 1517 edition of *Troilus* in a tract volume.² Whilst being aware that this volume "may represent the work of a much later collector" (115), Gillespie considers the relevance of its association with the other texts possibly bound with it. One can certainly look for links among the texts, published between 1500? and ca. 1540, in the hypothetical Farmer *Sammelband* in order to discover the consumer's literary approach; yet to reveal the more significant attitude of the printer towards *Troilus*, Gillespie fails to examine a more obvious connection in the use of the same woodcut (111, fig. 14) to illustrate the title-page of not only De Worde's *Troilus* but also his editions of *The IIII Leues of the Trueloue* (1510?), Stephen Hawes's *The Conforte of Lovers* (1515), and *Squyr of Low Degre* (1520; cf. Lerer 1998).

¹ This woodcut (Hodnett 1973, no. 214) was used for the first time by Caxton to represent the Knight in his second edition of the *Canterbury Tales*, included in the Thorney *Sammelband*. Gillespie might have further explored the possible implications of this coincidence and consider the reasons that explain this cut's absence from De Worde's 1498 edition of the *Canterbury Tales*.

² This *Sammelband* was sold in the sale of Dr Richard Farmer's library in 1798. It would have been preferable at least to include the description given in the book-sale catalogue (*Bibliotheca Farmeriana*) instead of relying on the second-hand quotation from Dibdin's book.

About 1526 Richard Pynson published, as three separate bibliographical units, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, *Troilus* and *The House of Fame*. While the *STC* considers these publications to represent "the 1st ed. of Chaucer's Works" (under *STC*, no. 5086) Gillespie rightly corrects that view and describes Pynson's editions of Chaucer more accurately with the term "trade *Sammelbände*" (126), since, in spite of being distinctive books, they were marketed together. All the efforts to collect Chaucer's poetical production both in print and in manuscript culminated with the publication in 1532 of his *Workes*, printed by Thomas Godfray and edited by William Thynne. For the first time the *œuvre* of an English poet was assembled in print, a trend that had started on the continent with the publication of the collected works of other vernacular authors such as Dante Alighieri and Alain Chartier. And the poems of Chaucer continued to be printed only as a volume of collected works until the nineteenth century.

In the case of Chaucer, Gillespie has documented the gradual stabilization of this author's poetical production, whereas in relation to Lydgate she reveals the political use that some of his texts were put to until 1534. Pynson's 1511 edition of Lydgate's *Secrees of Old Philisoffres*, a medieval mirror for princes, appears as a product of the desires of Charles Somerset, Lord Chamberlain of Henry VIII, already from the very title-page, which includes an illustration with his heraldic insignia (see fig. 23, p. 162). However, nowhere does the book stress Lydgate's identity as the main author of this work; instead Pynson preferred to highlight his own position as king's printer and the noble patronage of this printing. In 1513 Pynson issued the first printed edition of Lydgate's *Troy Book* in which "[i]deas about authorship are subsumed within a paratextual framework that stresses the propagandistic and topical value of the author's text and the work of printer and monarch in realizing its political potential" (166). Gillespie argues that the Tudor ruling class had become aware of the propagandistic power of the printing press, which they were willing to use for political purposes. In 1527 Pynson printed a new edition of Lydgate's *Fall of Princes* that states the author's name on the title-page but has erased the allusion to Duke Humphrey as initiator of his previous edition of 1494, because Pynson either "deem[ed] a distant and disgraced Lancastrian prince an unsuitable source of authority for this book, or ... intend[ed] that this text be loosened from its ties to a specific history" (172–73). In place of this outdated reference Pynson chooses to print a woodcut where the figure of Cardinal Wolsey is easily distinguishable on top of the wheel of fortune (see fig. 27, p. 174). Finally Gillespie discusses the publication of Lydgate's religious writing in the context of the commercial relationships that some London printers had established with religious communities.

The final chapter of this study, 'The Press, the Medieval Author, and the English Reformations, 1534 to 1557', analyzes how the new context for English religion affected the dissemination and reception of these two medieval writers, who obviously composed their works in more Catholic times. Gillespie agrees with other scholars that reformation printers gave us a Lollardized version of Chaucer's texts. He was ascribed Lollard texts as early as 1536 with *Jack Upland*, printed by John Nicholson, although this is an octavo edition with no resemblance to the texts contained in the 1532 *Workes*. The same happened with *The Plowman's Tale*, although this text was conceived to be integrated into the frame of the *Canterbury Tales*, as Grafton did in his edition of Chaucer's *Workes* of 1542. In addition, Gillespie uses Grafton's edition to illustrate more subtle ways of mediating between Chaucer and his reform-minded audience: next

to the unapologetic endorsement of pilgrimage in the *Parson's Tale*, Grafton printed a note in a smaller fount that reads, "Thys is a Canterbury tale" (see fig. 31, p. 191). With this paratextual device Grafton alerted his readers that this passage should be considered a 'Canterbury tale', a term that in the 1540s was used to describe "fictions that were worthless, even perilous, distractions from the serious business of pious life" (193; cf. *OED* s.v. *Canterbury* n. A.1). As regards Lydgate, the Reformation had lasting effects on his early popularity in print, because from 1534 to 1553 only one edition of *Saint Albon and Saint Amphilabus* and one of *Stans Puer ad Mensam* were attributed to Lydgate. As Gillespie suggests, "[t]here was no reason in these decades to impress readers of printed books with the author Lydgate" (209). It was not until 1554, after Queen Mary's accession to the throne, that the presence of the monk-author was restored with the publication of two attributed editions of *The Fall of Princes*. Lydgate's Marian revival also included a new edition of Pynson's *Troy Book* in 1555 by Thomas Marshe and three separate editions of Lydgate's *Songes and Sonettes* in 1557 by Richard Tottel. Oddly, Gillespie chooses not to close her study with a conclusion but instead with a brief and unrelated afterword devoted to Lydgate's tomb.

Print Culture and the Medieval Author succeeds in proving convincingly that the process of generation of the idea of the vernacular author in England was a cultural phenomenon independent from the technological development that transformed the production and dissemination of the written culture. Gillespie does so in a commendable way, since the argument of the book advances on safe ground, always supported on hard bibliographical evidence – always so elusive and difficult to pin down – that she expertly interprets and contextualizes, making it available to the reader in the numerous high-quality facsimiles that illustrate the book. But this monograph achieves much more than that. This is the first book I know of to provide a comprehensive and detailed account of the transition of English medieval literary culture from script to print (cf. more recently Schoff 2007). Comfortably crossing the arbitrary categories of medieval/Renaissance and the incunabular period, Gillespie has written with scholarly rigour an important chapter in the history of the book in England that not only throws light on the printed afterlife of two central medieval English writers but also explains how historical circumstances impinged on print culture.³

³ I have noticed typographical errors when transcribing primary materials that should be corrected if and when the book is reprinted: when transcribing the colophon to De Worde's 1498 edition of *The Assembly of Gods* (fig. 12, p. 98), Gillespie gives "this lyttyl moralized treatyse" (100) when the text visibly reads "this *lytyll*"; Grafton's marginal remark on his edition of Chaucer's *Workes* clearly reads "Thys is a Canterbury tale" (fig. 31, p. 191), not "This" (190). The quotation on p. 123 from one of the poems by Robert Copland is also inaccurate: "Bound" is given instead of "Bounde," and "art" for "arte." In addition, Hodnett numbers should always be provided when discussing the woodcut illustrations in early English printed books, and Gillespie fails to do so on p. 84.

This review is part of a research project funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation (ref. FFI 2008-02165), whose support is hereby gratefully acknowledged.

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Received 18 September 2008

Accepted 24 October 2008

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