Textual tradition, monarchy and Chaucer's Lak of Stedfastnes

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Literary interpretation and textual problems should always be considered together in the reading of Middle English literature. Many 'final texts' have not always been compiled with a combined literary-textual interest in mind, no matter how meticulous the editing. Chaucer texts should still be subjected to re-examination. Professor Cross in an attempt to assign Chaucer's Lak of Stedfastnes to a 'genre' accepted the textual conclusions of Professor Pace.[1] This has led to a number of modest, but essentially wrong assumptions in regard to (a) the poem's connection with Richard II, and (b) the poem's relation to Boethius, De Consolatione II.m.8.

The text offered by Professor Cross, and upon which he comments at length, embodies certain Pacean assumptions. The first notion is that this is substantially what Chaucer 'originally' wrote; the second, that the variations between versions are the result of purely scribal causation; the third, that the stemma constructable from this evidence represents some form of 'reality', some pattern of an actual relationship; the fourth, that an eighteenth-century transcript of the poem (possibly in the hand of William Thomas) from Cotton MS. Otho A. xviii (destroyed by fire in 1731) represents a 'transitional version' - a record of Chaucer's desire to change certain expressions.

A distinction should be drawn first between the different nature of some variations. The urge to construct stemmata invariably leads to an equating of all variants to the same level of importance and the same degree of significance. One assumption that lies behind stemma-type classification is that we are in a position to decide that a certain state of the text is 'correct' or 'authentic' as final version. It is entirely possible that certain states of a text are equally 'authentic' in that they were considered 'final' at the time of copying but were later revised by the poet. In fact, later revisions by the poet ipse might revert to earlier, discarded words, phrases, or lines. Some variations, on the other hand, may be purely mechanical and have no reference to what the poet wrote in any of his versions. Other variations may be scribal but not mechanical. That is, the scribe may have misunderstood the material in his exemplar (perhaps may not have been able to understand it) and produced something quite unlike the poet's intention. It should be obvious that this difference in the nature of the variations must affect how we shall begin to classify the bulk of variations. These decisions based on priority are of a literary, interpretative (and hence subjective) order. They cannot come into being merely as the result of collating variants, or as the result of deciding on external evidence about the date and reliability in general of the MS. providing copy. There is, then, an element of 'radical relativity' in the whole editorial process. The goodness of

a text will often be the result of the editor's literary sensitivity, just as much as his training in textual criticism.

The identifying of putative 'versions', distinct and of 'authentic' literary value, becomes easier for the editor if the variation or variations are extensive, either in length, variety, or quality of phrasing. The task becomes difficult where the variations are of no great length and perhaps involve the substitution only of one word for another - a simple and perhaps isolated case of lexical displacement.

In the case of the Lak of Stedfastnes we are faced with exactly this situation. There is a single lexical variation in a verb in the envoi which cannot easily represent an isolated, meaningless instance of substitution, for other variants when classified in the light of whether one accepts verb a or b fall into a recognisable relationship - a related pattern, though not a stemma. More important, the sense of the poem, the tone of the admonition, and the use of a striking and important image are radically affected by the reading of verb a or b. Any classifying of variations must begin with a division of the MS. readings into two groups, a and b - where each group is 'authentic'; that is, represents what Chaucer wrote and considered (at one time or other) 'final'.

The literary intention, although it may be formulated in terms of the poem's 'meaning', cannot be assessed exactly by the external, historical pressures which may have decided the poet to revise. Here we can only offer guesses. The verb in question is that last imperative form in l.28; 'drive' or 'wed'. Change the verb in the syntactical structure and the force and meaning of the image 'swerde of castigacion' are altered. The sense of 'shewe forth' is affected as well as the exact shading of 'castigacion'. Further, the tone of the admonition is changed along with the poet's view of the relation between ruler and subjects and the degree of the culpability of the royal person addressed.

If we allow the literary distinction between 'drive' (a) and 'wed' (b) to determine the category of primary or substantial distinction, the MSS. divide into the following groups:

a	b
Hatton 73 (rubric)	Fairfax 16 (without rubric)
R.3.20 (Shirley rubric)	R.14.51 (without rubric)
Harley 7333 (rubric)	Cotton Cleo. D.vii (without rubric)
R.3.21 (envoi only, Shirley)	Harley 7578 (without rubric)
	Coventry Corp. (without rubric)

Add 22139 unclassifiable since it lacks envoi.

It may be seen at once that in all complete versions, a possesses an addressee rubric whilst b lacks any rubric.

We have suggested that there will be other categories of characteristics in a relative scale of importance - although the order in the scale may differ with the state of text of individual poems. In the case of this poem, I choose the following variation to occupy the category of secondary and substantial distinction: the grammatical construction plus idiom in l.5. Two points are involved here: (1) two distinct and well-attested ME idioms (vb + oon/lik) are employed in conjunction with (2) the verb to be. The second part of the point, the 'grammaticalness' of the idiom, is important. Chaucer never uses 'is' as a plural marker.[2] Further, the sense and poetical force of the passage requires a plural verb to establish the distinctness of 'word' and 'deed'. Chaucer's usage does not permit 'is' to be used in this grammatical position. The presence of 'is' in the initial position of l.5 may be explained as a scribal mechanical error; its presence has nothing to do with what Chaucer wrote. This is one of the easiest errors in copying to commit: the anticipating of a form by seeing it in the same position in the exemplar in an adjacent line, and where the substituted form makes sense and is identical in grammatical function. Since this error could occur independently in each instance of copying, we should allow the variation in idiom oon/lik to divide the manuscripts into another grouping:

(x = ben nothing oon
(y1 = are nothing lik
(y2 = is nothing lik

x

(a) Hatton 73
(a) R.3.20
(a) Harley 7333

y1. y2

(b) Fairfax 16 (y2)
(b) R.14.51 (*corrupt with scribal substitution: 'Is nothing else butt')
(b) Cotton Cleo. D.vii (y.2)
(b) Harley 7578 (y2)
(b) Coventry Corp. (y.1)
( ) Add 22139 (y1)

Of the b group, the incomplete Add 22139 and the late and queerly-arranged Coventry Corp. manage to combine Chaucerian grammar with the idiom nothing/lik. The eighteenth-century transcript of MS. Cotton Otho A xviii, the 'transitional' version of Professor Pace, reads 'Is no thynge oon' - which shows clearly that it belongs to group a. But again, the presence of 'is' may be nothing more than an isolated mechanical error. Unfortunately, Professor Pace provides the solution for the 'transitional' nature of this transcript when he reflects that the original text of Otho A xviii might have been a Shirley

copy - in view of the peculiar rubric to 'Fle fro the Prece'. He might have noticed that the use of the adjective 'Poeticall' and the spelling of Chaucer's name 'Chaucyer' in the rubric to our poem is typical of Shirley. Miss Hammond pointed out years ago that Shirley often substitutes forms in his copies either from faulty memory or memory of other versions he has seen. Any conflation between group a and b in the transcript may be due to a characteristic Shirley substitution. This is supported by Shirley's memory of the envoi copied into Lydgate's Prayer for the People in MS. R.3.21: in l.29 Shirley writes 'folke', just as he had in Pace's Otho transcript. In other words, Pace's so-called 'transitional' version in an eighteenth-century transcript is simply another member of group a. Since it almost certainly represents a Shirley copy, this means that the influence of Shirley is very strong in any poem occuring in group a, the 'drive' version.

It may be seen that versions reading 'nothing oon' invariably are associated with group a. Versions employing 'nothing lik' are associated with group b. This variation would appear to be a Chaucerian variation not dependent on a cause arising from transmission.

The next variation I should like to consider is the distinct verbal variation in l.10: 'For now adayes'/'For among us now'. In the absence of any factors contributing towards mechanical error, the wording may suggest a Chaucerian variation. If we allow:

d = now adayes

e = among us now

the manuscripts divide in the following way:

d		e
ax Hatton 73	Fairfax 16	by2
ax R.3.20.	R.14.51.	by2 (with scribal corruption, omission of now)
ax Harley 7333	Cotton Cleo. D. vii	by2
	Harley 7578	by2
	Add. 22139	by1
	Coventry Corp.	by1

Pace's transcript of Otho A xviii shows e: 'Amonge vs nowe' and represents the first of two cases of conflation between version a and b. This has been explained above. R.14.51 continues to show a very poor standard of copying.

The fourth category I wish to assert would be that of a scribal misunderstanding in l.11, whereby the noun 'collusioun' becomes 'conclusioun'.

This is probably not a mechanical error, although it may be assisted by an area strong in mechanical factors. The original misunderstanding probably arose due to the extreme rarity of the noun in ME prior to the second decade of the fifteenth century. There is only one recorded example before Chaucer (this passage), and that in legal usage. Literary use after Chaucer suggests restriction to Lydgate. Non-literary prose usage becomes common after c.1420. The scribe may not have expected or understood the noun in this literary context. His decision to write 'conclusioun' may have been influenced by having written that noun in l.4 in riming position. If we allow
A = collusion
B = conclusion
the manuscripts divide thus:

A			B	
axd	Hatton 73		by2e	Fairfax 16
axd	R.3.20	by2e9	by2e	R.14.51
axd	Harley 7333		by2e	Cotton Cleo D. vii
			by2e	Harley 7578 (corrupt)
			by1e	Add. 22139
			by1e	Coventry Corp.

One would not expect Shirley to commit this error (since he got it right in his other copying), so Pace's Otho transcript reads with A. If we allow that some of the original independent errors of transmission were perhaps themselves 'mechanically' passed on, the manuscript groups are remarkably consistent. If we wish to present a 'final text' to the reader we should make certain that the two 'editorial' final versions are distinct in Chaucerian verbal aims, and free of mechanical error. The Pace version (with the possibilities of error in eighteenth-century transcription, and the equally strong possibility of Shirley's substitutions of memory) should be disregarded. Whatever minor variations, the two versions must preserve Chaucer's original and substantial variations, e.g.,

a	b
1. 'drive', l.28.	1. 'wed', l.28
2. 'ben nothing oon', l.5	2. [ben] nothing lik', l.5
3. 'For nowe adayes', l.10	3. 'For among us now', l.10
4. 'collusioun', l.11	4. co[l]usion,. l.11

From this selection, a is textually cleaner and requires less adjustment for mechanical error or scribal misunderstanding. b shows a higher proportion of emendable cases, but all cases are explicable and do not argue a less 'correct' archetype. R.14.51 is honeycombed with mechanical errors and scribal adjustments which reduce its value as an authority. Add. 22139, which preserves Chaucerian grammar in l.5, and otherwise is a good copy, alas, omits

the envoi. Coventry Corp. is rather late, misplaces the envoi, and commits one bad howler.[3] The reconstructed text of Professor Pace's upon which Professor Cross comments cannot represent what Chaucer wrote since it (1) conflates characteristics of both versions; (2) admits non-Chaucerian grammar; (3) makes it virtually impossible either to accept or reject the rubric.

The last point is not a quibble, since Professor Cross (relying on Professor Pace's conclusions) accepts the notion of one 'authentic' final version - conveniently for him the 'version' or 'text' for which it may be argued no rubric appears. Professor Pace repeats this misunderstanding in 'A New Chaucer Manuscript', PMLA 83 (1968), pp.31-2. Of Robinson's three groups he says: 'One of these is unquestionably correct, and it is to it that the Coventry belongs ... The basis for this group is an error in line 11, conclusion for collusion'. This is, of course, no evidence at all. He goes on: 'Both texts (i.e., Coventry and Add. 22139) have unique readings ... of Coventry's almost unrecognizable Cherise'. Cherise/cherish is a common fifteenth-century spelling in my experience. I am supported by the OED. We cannot say how Shirley (the probable originator of the rubric) came by his copy, but it is no more or less 'authentic' or 'final' than the b group which seems never to have had a rubric attached to it. Even in Professor Pace's 'transitional' Otho transcript Shirley (if I am right) was still sticking to his story. Look again at the putative Shirley rubric: 'Balade Ryalle made by ... Chaucyer ...' This use of the phrase 'Balade Ryalle' surely connects with Shirley's 'Balade Royal' in his rubric to the poem in R.3.20. Should it not mean 'a balade sent to a monarch'?[4] One can only discredit the validity of the reference to Richard II in Shirley's rubric (and other rubrics) by arguing on historical and literary grounds that the association is inappropriate. There is no kind of evidence in the present state of our scholarship which is not unaffected by subjective and interpretative values in arguing this point. As for external evidence, none of the manuscripts is demonstrably earlier than the first quarter of the fifteenth century. No amount of textual manoeuvering can bridge the twenty-five odd years between a text possibly circulating during Chaucer's lifetime and the copies which formed the basis of the fifteenth-century manuscript tradition. There is a gap and we must recognise this fact.

Chaucer's decision to change the emphasis of meaning in his poem may stem from some pressure outside the immediate aesthetic necessity of the poem. It may well be that the a version ('drive') was written to Richard II (as Shirley suggested) and has an appropriateness for the lawlessness (of both subjects and ruler) in the last vexed years; by the same token, the b version ('wed') may have been written for Henry IV, the more conciliatory tone being more appropriate for that political situation. But it is impossible to say which version was finalised first. a, reading 'drive' in the final line of the envoi, shows a more aggressive note in the admonishment. There is a sense

of urgency in the final command. The sense of 'drive' must be 'compel'. There are no neutral senses in ME which fit the context. The ruler's sword of justice, his sign of authority and power, amounts to a form of castigating compulsion in this reading. Yet change the verb to that of the b version and the symbolic conciliatory role of the gladius legis emerges. So, too, a subtlety in tone and syntax perhaps obscured by the more aggressive 'drive'. For the envoi the syntactic periods lengthen. The tone is softer and more intimate (notice the absence of adjectives or adjectival phrases to modify 'Prince'). The tone swells in l.27 with the emphatic tricolon series of imperative verbs and direct objects, each unit of equal duration of syllable and accent. This climactic unit is beautifully broken by the softening 'and worthynesse' leading to a more intimate, rhythmically smoother l.28. The rhythm and tone is accompanied by the steady Boethian reminiscence:

> Hic sancto populos quoque
> Junctos foedere continet:
> Hic et conjugii sacrum:
> Castis nectit amoribus
> Hic fidis etiam sua
> Dictat jura sodalibus. (De Cons. II.m.8.)
>
> (Love halt togideres peoples joined with an holy bond, and knitteth sacrement of marriages of chaste loves; and Love endyteth lawes to trew felawes.)

In other words, 'do law ... love truth ... wed thi folk ayen to stedfastnesse'. 'Castigacioun' in this context is softened. 'Shewe forth' indicates not a corrective physical image, but the sword as legal power, carried by the king's deputy, the 'merum imperium'. The king will need only to display his symbol of law and conciliatory authority and the people will have their correction. So will the king. I have slipped into referring to a monarch in my exegesis. Whatever doubts Professor Cross has about Shirley's evidence, I prefer Shirley when he appears to be sound. I fear Lydgate thought these lines were directed to a monarch, too. For in his Coronation Balade to the young Henry VI, the opening lines of the envoi (121-2) are a re-working of Chaucer:

> Prynce excellent, be feythful, trewe and stable;
> Dreed God, do lawe, chastyce extorcyon.

Of course, all the manuscripts of this poem (together with its very accurate rubric) are in Shirley's hand - but no one has, as yet, suggested that these lines were not written by Lydgate to the young king. If the Chaucerian lines had not been directed at a monarch, there would have been little point in Lydgate's introducing the verbal echo into his own poem.

Lydgate's and Shirley's view of the person addressed in the Lak of

Stedfastnesse is supported by two passages in Gower's verse letter to Richard II (Vox Clamantis VI). The combination of direct address to a monarch, using the imagery of the symbolic sword of justice is parallelled by VC VI. 709-10. The following advice is directed at Richard:

> Precipitur gladius vibratus semper haberi,
> Prompcius ut crimen iudiciale ferat:
>
> (It is bidden that the sword always be brandished, in order that it may carry out judicial punishment the more promptly.)

Compare also the rhetorical use of tricolon in three imperative verbs and direct objects in Gower's next opening chapter (II.733):

> Sperne malos, cole prudentes, compesce rebelles ...
>
> (Spurn the wicked, cherish the wise, curb the rebellious ...)

The very Boethian passage I see behind Chaucer's admonition, Gower himself possibly refers to in II.589 ff. of book VI.

On the evidence of Professor Cross's notes, his 'topos-hunting' breaks down entirely in the face of particular poetic characteristics. He provides no notes whatever to the envoi stanza of the Lak of Stedfastnesse. And for a very good reason: in this stanza we have left the realm of moral commonplaces (not topoi) associated with a wide variety of genres in medieval Latin and ME, and are moving away into the heart of the poem's particular and local meaning.

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NOTES

1. J.E. Cross, Saga Book, vol.xvi (part 4), 1965, 283ff.; G.B. Pace, Studies in Bibliography, vol.iv, 1951-2, 105ff.

2. Chaucer's grammatical usage is consistent. The only deviation from his normal usage occurs in The Reeve's Tale in the first and second singular, where the artistic intention is to give a northerly dialect colouring.

3. In the initial line of the envoi the scribe writes 'Princes', which is either a mistaken plural (and will not square with the singular possessive adjectives) or it represents 'princess', which does not make sense historically, unless it has been adjusted much later to refer to Henry VI's queen, Margaret of Anjou.

4. The MED mistakenly confuses 'rime-royal' with Shirley's 'balade royal'. They should not be identified automatically.