Reflections on Editing *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 2007–13

David Matthews
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3108-2112
University of Manchester, U.K.

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Abstract

David Matthews reflects on editing *SAC* from 2007 through 2013.

I probably encountered *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* (*SAC*) for the first time in the early 1980s when I was a student, and both the journal and I were in our respective youths. I was in Australia then and the New Chaucer Society (NCS) was a distant rumour. My relation to it was like that of a fourteenth-century Londoner to Mandeville's Cathay: I was a little sceptical about the fabled New Chaucer Society and its Great Khan, but ultimately it seemed safest to believe it was really there.

I first attended an NCS Congress in 1998 in Paris. When I joined the University of Manchester late in 2006 a colleague suggested we put in a bid for the next Congress (and then promptly left the institution). The Congress instead went to Swansea and I cannot say I was terribly sorry that we were not successful! But out of that came an approach from David Lawton, then executive director of NCS, about applying for the editorship of *SAC*. I put in a bid with Alfred Hiatt as reviews editor; he was then at the University of Leeds, later at Queen Mary University of London. We ran the journal from 2007–2013 which was the first time the editorship had left the United States. I think that was a deliberate attempt to try to bring the United Kingdom into the orbit of NCS. How important that was is something I will come back to. But before 2006 all of the editors had been American and the journal had been located at American institutions. Chaucer was and remains central to the American medieval literature curriculum in a way that, strangely, he has not been for some time in the UK. This perhaps has something to do with the way in which the major modern editorial initiatives in Chaucer studies shifted from Britain (where they began in the nineteenth century under the auspices of the Chaucer Society) to the USA in the twentieth century (with the Robinson/Riverside editions at Harvard, or Manly-Rickert at Chicago). Some of the big critical moves in Chaucer studies—most notably, exegetical criticism versus New Criticism, and the historicism which succeeded—also chiefly reflected the work of American scholars. After Alfred and I completed our stint, the journal stayed in the UK under the editorship of Sarah Salih (2013–18) and now of course it is split between the Netherlands-based Sebastian Sobecki, and Michelle Karnes at Notre Dame in the United States.

In due course, then, I received several boxes of material from the outgoing editor, Frank Grady; almost everything was still on paper at that time. In among this material, I found a note by Frank in which he described his ideal issue, which would contain, he said, something to annoy almost every imaginable constituency: hence an issue should contain something that would aggravate theorists, but something that would also aggravate manuscript studies people, and so on. I stuck to this principle and only realised, looking at it again towards the end of my tenure, that Frank had been joking.

Obviously the journal—like the Society itself—was set up with Chaucer as very much central. In the very first issue of *SAC* there were eight essays and they were all on Chaucer (with two of them linking to other writers, John Barbour and John Gower). Right up until the late 1990s, the journal consisted chiefly of essays on Chaucer and the non-Chaucerian material was usually confined to one or two essays in each volume. That meant that the "age of Chaucer" never really had to be defined. I suspect that at first, it was really another way of saying "Ricardian poets," to use John Burrow's formulation from 1971. The journal's official description on the website of NCS says that it "[p]ublishes articles on the writing of Chaucer and his contemporaries, their antecedents and successors, and their intellectual and social contexts. More generally, articles explore the culture and writing of later medieval Britain (1200–1500)."

By the time I was editor, this question of the "age of Chaucer" was coming into play more and more. I think one of the first submissions I received was on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and obviously that was no problem. I published essays on Gower. But I don't think I ever received anything on *Piers Plowman*, presumably because Langland has his own dedicated journal. It was in fact Chaucer who gave me the most headaches. Chaucer's works, it seemed, were no longer taken for granted as the center of late Middle English studies. Or perhaps it was the case (as I suspect) that there were fewer people who would define themselves as Chaucerians exclusively and more and more who thought of themselves as scholars of Middle English more broadly. In my time as editor there was a risk that it would be all age and no Chaucer. The eight essays in my issue of 2009, volume 31, are evenly divided between Chaucer and not-Chaucer. This was not the result of any decision I had taken about Chaucer. Far from it: it reflected what I received.

I used to try to have the shape of an issue decided by about March each year but there were times when I got to that point, was happy with what I had, but would then realise that I just didn't have much on Chaucer. This did right itself, in general. At least twice, I received substantial submissions out of the blue which I knew as soon as I read them I wanted in the next issue. But they were also hard up against deadline, and had to go through peer review. So it was sometimes very tight. But I did publish two or three of what I regard as major articles which turned up in this way. I was generally lucky, though; one of the best things about being a journal editor is seeing what turns up in the email, usually entirely unexpectedly. I hope that remains an aspect of the job though I have fears for this serendipitous aspect. The entirely automated systems most journals now espouse risk making the whole business extremely impersonal. In addition, many senior scholars do not often send out essays speculatively because so much of what they write is spoken for before they write it—which reflects the proliferation of essay collections in book form. (The demise of this form is often predicted; like the novel, which is also always on the point of death, it shows no signs of going away.)

One could ask what difference it made to have the journal based in the UK, in an age of globalised scholarship. As I noted above, when I inherited the journal its workings were almost entirely on paper. And the journal itself was still very much a book: a hard copy that appeared in members' mailboxes. By the end of my first year, naturally, all the correspondence was being done by email and submissions were rarely printed out. Just before I took over, the Society had been approached by Project Muse and in due course, an issue of *SAC* went online for the first time—this must have been around 2010. By the time I finished—though it was Ruth Evans rather than I who saw this through—the back issues had become available online. I don't feel that the shift to the UK ultimately made a huge difference—not in the sense that it unlocked a new stream of contributions. Despite its physical being, the journal is really virtual, and global, and hence not tied to any location in a very meaningful way.

The shift to an online presence was obviously great in most imaginable ways. It also brought a new revenue stream to the Society. But it raised some uncomfortable questions for me. Not only was my entirely unremunerated labour helping to generate that revenue, but much more to the point, so was the research and writing of numerous scholars, including those who had never imagined, when they wrote, that one day people would be able to download their essays off the internet.

We stayed resolutely analogue in other ways, though. I have never regretted that we did not switch to one of the software programs that are now standard among journals (including this one) for handling the submission process. I have already mentioned the impersonality involved. Indeed, while

I was writing this piece I was contacted by an algorithm and invited to assess something for a journal. There had been no previous contact from a human being, which was a first for me. I think that is regrettable. I turned the invitation down, partly because the essay in question was out of my area. I told the algorithm that, too. But did it listen?

I always had an editorial assistant, who handled the bulk of the correspondence. There always was personal correspondence. The process of peer review continued unchanged: after an initial vetting, with the possibility of a desk rejection, an essay went out to two readers, and sometimes a third in cases of disagreement. Peer review is certainly more of a contentious issue now than when *SAC* was founded. I began, myself, with a fair bit of scepticism about it as a process. Like most people, I had been on the wrong end of it at times. But I was certainly a convert to it by the end of my editorship. It is relatively rarely abused, in my experience. I think it is a form of quality control, too, which is perhaps even more worth defending at the moment, when there is a growing sense among students that all information is the same.

The situation for *SAC*, and for many established journals, is in many ways promising: submissions continue to roll in, editors can draw on a pool of dedicated reviewers, the articles are widely available in digital form, and revenues from Project Muse and EBSCO are very handy indeed. Moreover, the journal has done and is doing important work in the discipline, not just in publishing essays, but in mentoring junior scholars, from whom the majority of the submissions arrive. For me this mentoring was the implicit mission of *SAC*—helping authors through the process, bringing their work along.

But I do wonder about the future. Institutions of higher education in the UK (and this is probably true in the US as well) have become much more wary about hosting journals. The editorship of *SAC* requires a great deal of work, but not all institutions are interested in funding such work. NCS contributes of course by bearing the cost of production and printing, but does not otherwise support the editor. I never had any genuine course release, though I should say that I did receive funding from the School of Arts, Languages, and Cultures at the University of Manchester and later from my department for an editorial assistant. I would not have done the job without such an assistant. When I was first considering the editorship the Head of School wanted to know "what are we going to get out of this?" That is a difficult question to answer in material terms. Yet at the same time, you are supposed to have such editorships, such markers of prestige, on your CV, particularly when it comes to promotion. And in the UK, the "environment narrative" associated with a departmental REF (Research Excellence Framework) submission can only be enhanced by the presence of a major journal (UKRI 2020).

A second, more inchoate challenge has to do with the range of submissions and therefore the degree to which the journal is representing the field. My experience was that senior scholars —as I suggested above—tend not to submit essays to journals unless directly invited. It is true for many of us that most things we write have a destination before we write them. And, at the same time, the journal is largely dependent on the submissions that arrive, since *SAC* does not officially solicit essays, except for the Colloquium (usually biennial). While it may be tempting to solicit essays, then the editor would be more directly shaping the content, a role that the editor has not typically played at *SAC*.

To what extent, then, does a journal represent the field? To what extent should it? The very first issue of *SAC* in 1979, handily enough, opened with a survey of the state of the field by Florence Ridley. Needless to say this survey made reference to the opposition between New Criticism and

exegetical criticism that then held sway in Chaucer studies. The following essay was Paul Strohm's "Form and Social Statement in *Confessio Amantis* and *The Canterbury Tales*" (1979) and one might see this title as foreshadowing two great preoccupations of Chaucer studies in the following years: form on the one hand, and a sociology of form on the other. One can certainly see the theoretical winds blowing into medieval studies through the 1980s in the contents pages, and, in particular, a preoccupation with what would later be thought of as new historicism as it entered the field. So we see Stephen Knight, in volume 2 (1980), uncompromisingly addressing "Chaucer and the Sociology of Literature." A selection from the volume of Proceedings of the Fifth International Congress (1986) reveals a more diverse range of theoretical investments: Derek Pearsall's essay on "Criseyde's Choices" appeared, sitting alongside Robert M. Jordan's "Todorov, Vinsauf, and Chaucerian Textuality," John Ganim's "Bakhtin, Chaucer, Carnival, Lent," Peggy A. Knapp, "Deconstructing *The Canterbury Tales*: Pro," and Traugott Lawler's "Deconstructing *The Canterbury Tales*: Con." There is hardly a hint of the old exegesis versus New Criticism dichotomy here. In the same issue, we find William Askins's "*The Tale of Melibee* and the Crisis at Westminster, November 1387," which points to the newer form of historicism. By 1988 we find what I think could be called the first fully feminist issue, with essays in particular by Susan Schibanoff and Kathryn Lynch along with Richard Firth Green's "Chaucer's Victimized Women."

If *SAC* was marked by its apparent transcendence of the old debates in Chaucer criticism, it is not at all clear that there was any single dominant strain of criticism in the following years. Rather, the contents pages register catholicity through the late 1980s and into the 1990s, and *SAC* never did become the house journal of any particular style or fashion. Certain critical trends were registered, to be sure. But they always sat alongside more traditional disciplines. Chaucerians may have been fully aware of the currency of self-fashioning while reading Lee Patterson's "'What Man Artow?': Authorial Self-Definition in *The Tale of Sir Thopas* and *The Tale of Melibee*" in 1989. But the evidence suggests they were also just as much at home with manuscript and textual studies. I would add that I think that lack of a particular critical direction has been a strength, particularly as this is a yearbook and a kind of attempt at a journal of record.

There are other ways in which the contents pages are surprising. On a quick count, it seems that in *SAC*'s forty-plus years the Wife of Bath's *Prologue* and *Tale* have been the most written about of the *Canterbury Tales* overall (around a dozen times). That will probably surprise nobody, but it is perhaps a little more surprising to find the next most common appearances are the tales of the Clerk, Franklin, and Man of Law. Chaucerians tend to teach the fabliaux and talk about them at conferences. But why then are they less inclined to write about them in *SAC*? Is there a lingering sense here of the kind of art that is appropriate to such a journal? Contributors to *SAC* have written far more often on Gower and Hoccleve (around a dozen times in each case) than on all of the fabliaux put together. In the earlier days of the journal we might attribute that to a hangover from New Criticism and its preoccupation with a kind of verbal icon which the fabliaux don't so easily represent. But in more recent years, it's something of a puzzle.

It is not entirely a matter of attitudes to the fabliaux, however. *The Knight's Tale* is also somewhat under-represented in SAC with just five essays focusing on it over the years, which puts it only one ahead of such works as *Thopas*, *The Summoner's Tale*, and *Melibee*; *SAC* has also printed five essays on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in that time. Whatever the reasons, it could be said that regardless of

critical fashions over the years, authors in the journal have tended to focus on a relatively narrow canon of Chaucerian works. The same tends to be true beyond the *Canterbury Tales*: there are many more essays on *Troilus and Criseyde* than there are on *The Legend of Good Women*. Of course this tends to have a self-perpetuating logic. If you can't find good articles on a text it discourages you from teaching that text, which in turn makes you less likely to write on that text…

If I had my time again as *SAC* editor (I'm not offering), I would want to think about the balance of Chaucer studies and think harder about that "age of Chaucer." When Dan Birkholz (2009) submitted his essay on Harley 2253 during my tenure, he noted that it would be the first essay on that manuscript to appear in *SAC*. One of the external assessors did ask whether it really qualified as the age of Chaucer. Obviously, I thought it did. But what then of Wyclif, who is firmly in that age and is rarely touched on in *SAC*; of John the Blind Audley, or even Charles D'Orleans (who has never been written on)? As I suggested above, it is possible that the pure "Chaucerian" is rare these days and most of us are more broadly in Middle English studies. That should bring the "age of Chaucer" more thoroughly into play. But what an "age" is, and how far it stretches, temporally and spatially, is a task for another editor.

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