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Chaucer and *The Testament of Love*

From 1532 through until the end of the nineteenth century, the long prose work *The Testament of Love* was consistently attributed to Geoffrey Chaucer. *The Testament* was actually written by a contemporary of Chaucer, Thomas Usk (c. 1354–1388), but remained attributed to Chaucer for so long likely because the work contains seemingly biographical elements that appealed to Chaucer's readers and biographers of subsequent centuries, who wanted to imagine were true of Geoffrey Chaucer. In this chapter, I will be examining some of the elements from *The Testament of Love* that so appealed to biographers to see how the biographers made use of the material and how this shaped views of Chaucer through the centuries. First, however, an account of Thomas Usk and *The Testament of Love* is useful.

The Testament of Love is a biographical account of Usk's experience after initially supporting John Northampton's effort to undermine Nicholas Brembre as Lord Mayor of London and was likely written around 1386–1387 (according to Paul Strohm). From around 1381 Usk was working in London as a *scriveyn*, a copyist, at a time of considerable political turmoil in the city. In the aftermath of the Peasants' Revolt, there remained tensions between the powerful guilds of the city. John Northampton (from the Drapers' guild) became the Lord Mayor of London in 1381, and while his motivations may have varied at times, generally he is thought to have used the role to 'alleviate the daily problems of less prosperous Londoners' (Strohm, 2004). Pressure came on his governorship from other factions within London, particularly wealthy merchants unhappy with his policies of permitting greater access to markets. Among the disgruntled were Nicholas Brembre, William Walworth and John Philipot, all of whom were previous Lord Mayors of London (Brembre and Philipot from the Grocers' guild and Walworth from the Fishmongers' guild) and were extensively involved in the Peasants'

Revolt (Walworth, Lord Mayor at the time of the Revolt, is infamously remembered for wounding Wat Tyler, then having him publicly beheaded). Their quarrel with Northampton was likely personal: they benefitted financially from maintaining restricted access to London markets.

Amidst this turmoil, Thomas Usk began in Northampton's employ as a clerk and scribe. By 1384, Brembre returned as Lord Mayor, and Northampton and his associates, including Usk, soon realised they were at risk. In February of that year, many fled to Zeeland (in Burgundian Netherlands), likely including Usk (Bressie, 16). Usk describes in the *Testament of Love* that he even paid the expenses of some of his colleagues:

Paydest nat thou for some of her dispences
tyl they were tourned out of Selande? (728-9)

Usk further notes, somewhat resentfully, that he kept their secrets too:

I wene thou fleddest as longe as thou myght
their pryuite to counsayle
whiche thyng thou helest lenger than thou shuldest. (735-6)

Exactly when he returned to England is unknown, but Usk was arrested between 20 July and 6 August 1384 and imprisoned in London at the request of Brembre. It seems Usk, recognising the danger he was in and the lack of support from Northampton, responded with an *Appeal*, in which he confessed that his job had progressed from that of a mere scrivener to being a full promoter and supporter of Northampton. Northampton, according to Usk, despite being reasonably popular in London, had engaged in a programme to discredit his opposition in order to secure his own re-election:

It was to this end, according to Usk, that they arranged to pack the meetings of the common council with their own supporters, pass legislation designed to reduce the power of aldermen and increase that of the guilds, challenge the retail monopoly of the victualling trades, and whip up feeling among the poor against the senior officers of the city.

(Waldron, 2004)

Usk's motivation for his *Appeal* clearly shows his vulnerability. Northampton was in no position to protect him, so he sought to switch his allegiance to Brembre in return for a pardon. He duly received a pardon, and his *Appeal* was directly used in the trial of Northampton and his partners. According to Strohm, 'Usk's betrayal of his former associates and his subsequent pardon were to ruin his reputation for good' (Strohm, 1989, 87).

Between 1384 and 1387 nothing is known of Usk's activities or whereabouts. Strohm is certain that it was during this time he wrote the *Testament of Love*, and it

seems to me the *Testament* records a shift in attitude from Usk. The tone of *The Testament of Love* suggests that, while he is still bitter about being taken advantage of and then abandoned by Northampton's men, he has now shifted his view to be somewhat hopeful of assistance from Brembre, his associates and their royal supporters in return for his confession.

Indeed, it is during 1387 that Richard II was engaged in gathering as much support as possible throughout the countryside, as a response to a further curtailing of his authority as a result of the Wonderful Parliament of October/November 1386. Nineteen-year-old Richard's popularity had plummeted due to the cost of war with France and the perception of his favouritism in appointing political posts. The so-called Lords Appellant came to the fore during this period.

Thomas of Woodstock, Duke of Gloucester (and the king's uncle); Richard FitzAlan, Earl of Arundel and Surrey and Thomas de Beauchamp, Earl of Warwick, had set their sights on Michael de la Pole, Earl of Suffolk, and Robert de Vere, Earl of Oxford and Duke of Ireland. De la Pole had been appointed Lord Chancellor of England in 1383 and Earl of Suffolk in 1385, considerably elevating his family's social and political standing. De Vere, the initial focus of the Lords Appellant, was clearly the King's favourite, being appointed Duke of Ireland in 1386 and thus elevating him above the other nobles in the royal court.

The chronicler Jean Froissart, a contemporary and colleague of Chaucer, describes de la Pole as a 'devious and ineffectual counsellor', whereas of de Vere's intimately close relationship with Richard II, he says 'if he had said black was white the king would not have gainsaid him' (*Euvres*, 12.239). The animosity towards de Vere was not only due to his extreme level of influence with the King. He had also accrued a great deal of money from his royal association, and was also suspected of contributing to a plot to charge John of Gaunt with treason.

In November 1387 both the king and his opponents began to muster their forces. The duke of Gloucester and the Earls of Arundel and Warwick appeared in arms at Haringay in mid-November, and accused de Vere, along with four other associates of the king, of treason. De Vere meanwhile was raising an army in Cheshire, which set out to march south in mid-December. On 20 December 1387 de Vere's army was routed by the Appellants at Radcot Bridge in Oxfordshire. De Vere himself escaped, but many of his followers were killed, and de Vere displayed little military skill. Indeed, one source reports that some of his troops deserted even before they encountered the Appellant army, while Walsingham goes so far as to suggest that de Vere himself contemplated flight before the battle and had to have his courage reinforced by his men. Ralph, Lord Basset, seems to have spoken for many when he remarked that 'I am not going to offer to have my head broken for the duke of Ireland' (*Knighton's Chronicle*, 407).

After the Appellants' victory at Radcot Bridge and before the Merciless Parliament met in February 1388, Michael de la Pole fled to Paris, thus escaping

the fate of Nicholas Brembre and Chief Justice Robert Tresilian. He remained in France for the rest of his life. Sentenced in his absence, his title and estates were stripped from him. Similarly, de Vere was tried in his absence, having escaped to Utrecht. He was accused of accroaching royal power, of benefiting improperly from royal patronage, of encouraging the king to resist the council imposed on him in the parliament of October 1386, and of manipulating the law for his own advantage. He was found guilty and sentenced *in absentia* to death and forfeiture of all his lands and titles. De Vere made his way to France and was with de la Pole at his death in 1389. De Vere himself died in 1392 in Louvain, allegedly from the wounds inflicted by a boar.

In the midst of the high-level drama occurring between Richard II and the Lords Appellant, many accomplices of those accused were also arrested, including Thomas Usk. In the parliamentary proceedings that followed the Merciless Parliament of 1388, Usk is named as an accomplice of Brembre in a conspiracy against the life of the duke of Gloucester, and 'one of the charges against Alexander Neville, archbishop of York, is that of advising the king to bestow lands and offices on Usk. On 4 March Usk himself was impeached of treason in full parliament and condemned to be drawn and hanged. It is reported by the Westminster chronicler that he went to his death with great piety and contrition, reciting funeral offices, but maintaining to the end his loyalty to the king and the truth of his accusations against Northampton. His execution at Tyburn was brutal: "Thomas Usk was hanged and immediately taken down and, after about thirty strokes of the axe, beheaded" (*Westminster Chronicle*, 315)' (Waldron, 2004).

Sentences for treason routinely involved hanging but not until dead, as the convict would be taken down while alive for additional punishment. It is not known in Usk's case if he was dead following his hanging, but it would not have been unusual if he were still alive. Frequently, a convict would be drawn and quartered (but only men, women were burned at the stake). Being drawn following hanging involved disembowelling through the stomach, while the convict was alive. Although the exact details of quartering, or dismembering a body, are not clear, often this was done to the dead body so that the body parts could be paraded in different parts of the city as a deterrent to crime. The heads, as is well known, were placed on view as well. Usk's execution then is somewhat simpler, being hanged and beheaded, but the description of 'thirty strokes of the axe' to behead him does stand out. Is this incompetence from the executioner, or does this indicate a deliberate effort at further punishment? This remains unknown.

Thomas Usk seems to have been an unfortunate associate, attempting to better himself by cosying up to whichever political faction seemed expedient, without ever fully realising the risks he was taking. His death seems the more tragic when it seems likely he did not fully understand the implications of his actions. Indeed,

his death is even more tragic knowing that just a few years later Richard II regained control, having some of the Lords Appellant executed or exiled.

The Testament of Love

Thomas Usk's work is lengthy, nearly 300 pages of dense prose that at times is almost impenetrable. This summary will provide background and context to help explain how later editors made use of the *Testament*, but does not attempt to give a detailed account of the work.

The Testament of Love is compiled as three Books, each of differing length. Book 1 contains a Prologue and 10 sections, Book 2 contains 14 sections and Book 3 contains 9 sections. One frustration for modern editors of the work is that no manuscript copy of the work has survived; the earliest copy is that which appears in William Thynne's 1532 edition of Chaucer's works. This has created a number of problems. Many modern editors believe the copy that appears in Thynne's edition is considerably altered and corrupt to such an extent that it is difficult to comprehend the meaning of the text. The extent of the corruption also means that it is difficult to determine Usk's intention, and whether the textual confusion is a fair indication of Usk's writing or if this is a result of later changes to the text. In addition, the copy in Thynne appears to have its chapters in the wrong order.

The content of *The Testament of Love* is difficult to summarise, being a conspicuously convoluted text. What follows is largely drawn from Stephen Medcalf's summary, which gives both a sense of the structure of the book and an outline of the narrative (Shoaf, 44–45).

The work begins with a Prologue, in which Usk explains the need to write in English, not French or Latin. This might seem surprising today, but the choice of language in England in the fourteenth century was not inevitably English, depending on the target readership. Here, Usk does seem to be making a point by using English, insisting it is necessary for fully understanding his work.

What follows in Book 1 is an account in which Usk is visited by lady Love. She shows Usk the pearl Margarite, but two obstacles prevent Usk from attaining her: false slanders and her preciousness compared to his unworthiness. Usk outlines the false slanders made against him, and lady Love explains that neither these nor his perceived unworthiness are a barrier to him reaching Margarite.

The pearl Margarite symbol is the most significant of the book and is not unique to Usk. The symbol is common in other literature in England and France at the time and can symbolise many things. Most literally, it might be a symbol of love for an actual person, though that seems unlikely in this case. More commonly, the pearl Margarite symbolises a seemingly unattainable good, whether physical or spiritual

or both. Usk's work is dense with Christian allusion, so pearl Margarite very likely is connected to striving for spiritual good. But the symbol could have a more worldly interpretation alongside the spiritual. The *Testament* does reveal Usk's very real frustrations with the way Northampton's men treated him, and so the pearl Margarite symbol is surely connected moral goodness.

The character of lady Love is certainly an imitation of Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*, a work written while Boethius was under arrest in which he imagines a character named lady Philosophy who provides him with consolation and mental support in a situation he believed he was wrongly accused. The similarity with Usk's circumstances is obvious, and so there is no doubt he is drawing the same conclusion: he, too, is wrongly accused.

In Book 2, lady Love and Usk express their praise of women, a long episode that might seem somewhat disjointed from the work as a whole. The episode is prompted by Usk looking to a future where he can be with Margarite. Lady Love speaks of heaven and that Usk is on his way there, thanks to his virtue and reason.

Usk explains in Book 3 that the work as a whole corresponds to the three ages of the world: Error, Grace and Joy, and its subject also divides into three topics: Law, Philosophy and Love. Lady Love assures Usk that he will be rewarded for his faithfulness, and Usk recognises what lady Love has taught him.

In his edition of the *Testament*, R. Allen Shoaf acknowledges the relative incoherence of the work, but does so in a generous manner:

I urge the reader to consider, as a sort of charitable minimum, that many of the more impenetrable moments in *TL* may actually be the result of a quirky and unpolished learning that cobbles words together haphazardly but not without some degree of what we today would call imagination.

(Shoaf, 8–9)

C. S. Lewis was less complementary: 'All that he has to say can be found, much better, elsewhere' (Lewis, 1936, 228).

However, the singular feature of *The Testament of Love* that has ensured its continued publication is its attribution to Geoffrey Chaucer. The work's autobiographical elements have lent themselves to later biographers of Chaucer, eager to find information about the poet, however spurious the content.

The Testament of Love Through the Centuries

While William Thynne's 1532 edition of Chaucer's works first published the *Testament of Love*, and it was subsequently included in John Stowe's 1561 edition of Chaucer's works, it was not until Thomas Speght's 1598 *Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*

that the first comprehensive attempt at producing a biography of Chaucer occurred, which secured the *Testament of Love* in the Chaucer canon and in Chaucer's biography for the next nearly 300 years. Speght's reliance on the *Testament of Love* as a biographical account of the poet's life indicates how secure the *Testament* was in the Chaucer canon. From here, nearly all editions of Chaucer's works were published with Speght's *Life of Chaucer* attached, thus ensuring the longevity of the idea that the *Testament of Love* was authored by Chaucer and that it provided a genuine biographical account of the poet's life.

The beginning of Thomas Speght's *Life of Geffray Chaucer* thrusts the readers directly into a debate about Chaucer's world. From the first moment, the readers' impression is that scholars, learned men, historians and antiquarians have been debating the birthplace of Chaucer for some time, and the present iteration here in Speght's work is only one among many that have already occurred. I think this is useful to bear in mind that Speght is not an outlier in his work, but rather well connected in his field, and thus when he was brought in, late in the piece, to complete the 1598 *Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, he would have been very familiar with the edition, very familiar with the works of Chaucer and very familiar with other people with a vested interest in the publication. Indeed, by the time of the edition's second printing, four years later in 1602, Speght provides an additional preface in which he recognises the valuable insights of Francis Thynne (son of William Thynne), who had published his *Animadversions* in 1599, thoroughly criticising the earlier 1598 edition.

It is from John Leland's and John Bale's work that Speght has drawn the first statement in his *Life of Chaucer*:

‘This famous and learned Poet Geffrey Chaucer Esquire, was supposed by Leland to have beene an Oxfordshire or Barkeshireman borne. For so reporteth John Bale in his Catalogue of English writers: Quibusdam argumentis adducabatur Lelandus, ut crederet, etc. Some reasons did move Leland to thinke, that Oxfordshire or Barkshire was his native countrey’.

John Leland (c. 1503–1552) was a significant antiquarian at a time when antiquarianism had not yet reached its peak, and certainly he came to be known as ‘the father of English local history’. Leland's later mental illness and subsequent death prevented him from completing his self-appointed task of creating a detailed map of the realm, engraved on a silver table, to be presented to the King, accompanied by a written description identifying British place names, a history of England and Wales, and a catalogue of British royalty and nobility. But he was able to complete his work *De uiris illustribus*, a biographical encyclopaedia of British writers in four books, arranged chronologically. It is from here that we come to know about Geoffrey Chaucer.

Leland had completed the work, but left it unpublished. John Bale (1495–1563), writer, church minister and colleague of Leland, took up the task of revising Leland's work. Bale published his own work *Illustrium Maioris Britanniae scriptorum, hoc est, Angliae, Cambriae ac Scotiae summarium* (Summary of the Famous Writers of Great Britain, that is, of England, Wales and Scotland) in 1548, and he includes Chaucer in his account briefly, with a list of works. Leland's more substantial work, *De uiris illustribus*, is not published until 1709 by Anthony Hall and contains a great deal about Chaucer. It is this source, in its unpublished form, that circulated and influenced early biographers of Chaucer, such as Speght.

There is much to consider in Speght's opening statement, most notably the scepticism that Speght appears to show for the veracity of Leland's assertion. Apparently, Chaucer 'was supposed' to have been from, and 'some reasons' moved Leland. Both phrases give the impression that Speght himself did not share the views of Leland. Certainly both phrases may have arisen from the lack of evidence from Leland, but Speght does not explain this to us. Regardless, the phrases certainly encourage a level scepticism from readers' that Leland is not to be trusted.

The opening paragraph is followed by a quotation from the *Testament of Love*, beginning 'as it is evident by his own wordes in the *Testment of Love*, he was borne in the Citie of London ...', followed by another passage, beginning: 'Also in the Citie of London that is to me so deare and sweete, in which I was fourth growen ...'.

He does tell us that he was born and reared in London, which he describes with evident affection: 'the cytie of London, that is to me so dere and swete, in whiche I was forthe growen - and more kyndely love have I to that place than to any other in erthe, as every kyndely creature hath ful appetite to that place of his kyndly engendrure and wylne reste and peace in that stede to abyde' (1.6.86-90).

Here Speght directly and clearly uses the *Testament of Love* as evidence to refute Leland's assertion. As a reader, one might weigh the two arguments: Leland versus the *Testament of Love*. But how can one decide? Speght has already given away his own views with his scepticism that Leland has no evidence to support his claim. The evidence for the *Testament*, however, is that it is Chaucer's own work. Speght stresses 'it is evident by his own wordes', as if this evidence trumps all others. If the author himself says that he is from London, then this must indeed be the case. This seems clear-cut, but it mustn't have been so in Speght's world, because he goes on to provide additional evidence to support the *Testament of Love*: 'In the Records of the Guild Hall in London' Speght finds evidence of Richard Chaucer, Vintner and likely father of Geoffrey, followed by a nun of Saint Helen's in London, Elizabeth Chaucer, perhaps a sister of Chaucer, and finally, Geoffrey Chaucer was himself, a customs controller in London 'as after out of the

Recordes shall appeare'. 'Other dealings hee had in the Citie, as we may plainly see in the *Testament of Love*, all the which may moove us to thinke, that he was borne in London'.

The culmination of the first section of Speght's *Life of Chaucer* is ostensibly that Chaucer was born in London, that much is clear. However, underlying this is the other assumption that Speght may never have known he was asserting: that the *Testament of Love* was written by Geoffrey Chaucer. Quite coincidentally, the evidence of Chaucer's birth in London agrees with a spurious text asserting the same thing of its author. Together, they reinforce each other.

In 1561, John Stowe edited an edition of the works of Chaucer, entitled *The Woorkes of Geffrey Chaucer, newly printed, with divers addicions, whiche were never in printe before*. The complete title is relevant here, because I believe that Stowe knew full well that at least some of the texts 'newly printed' were not authored by Chaucer at all, but the title allows him just enough ambiguity to include whatever he liked. It seems to me that Stowe spotted a marketing opportunity and took it. But this is, I believe, a contrast from William Thynne, who likely believed that the works he included in his 1532 edition were actually authored by Chaucer.

Many of the printers' copies of manuscripts that were used by Thynne to set the printing for his edition have survived (some of these manuscripts were housed at his brother John Thynne's Longleat House), but a source manuscript for the *Testament of Love* has never been found.

All of this means a number of things: *The Testament of Love* has certainly been in circulation since 1532, and very likely before that, and if Speght's tone is anything to go by, the text has been regarded as a convincing source for information about Chaucer's life for a lot of the time. In addition, Leland's account of Chaucer's life seems to have held some sway as a source for the lives of authors as well, but it is no match for the author's own attestation of his birth.

To add weight to his claims of reliability for the *Testament of Love*, Speght (or his printer) has included a creative way to persuade his readers. The quotation from the *Testament*, in which the narrator asserts he is from London, is printed in Blackletter typeface, where the rest of the text is printed in Roman typeface. The effect adds veracity and gravitas to the quoted text, as though it holds a kind of ancient-ness that must surely be true. Speght's printer was not the first to do this, it appears in other texts, for exactly the purpose outlined above: it is a feature that creates a sense of credibility in the text. Interestingly, it is not the only instance of altering the typeface in this edition to create a particular effect. When Speght quotes any other source or writer except Chaucer, the Roman font is italicised. The effect of course is that Chaucer's text is prioritised and valorised, raised as the most ancient and important text.

Speght's edition of Chaucer's works is reprinted and updated in 1602, and then reprinted again, unchanged, in 1687, and so this is the edition of Chaucer's works

that would have been known throughout the seventeenth century and well into the eighteenth century. Its position as the definitive edition of Chaucer at the time is not challenged until 1721 when John Urry's *Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* is published by Bernard Lintot. Even though John Dryden had published his *Fables Ancient and Modern* in 1700, and was itself extremely influential, it only contained a few of Chaucer's tales from *The Canterbury Tales* in amongst a range of other texts.

To suggest the Urry's edition was ever a definitive edition would be to invite a great deal of scholarly criticism, from the seventeenth century right through to today. But John Urry's edition has a unique history that significantly changes how we should consider its contents. John Urry (1666–1715), urged by colleagues to compile a new edition of Chaucer's works, endeavoured to re-edit the texts from as many medieval manuscripts as he could obtain, and records show he did manage to examine many. It seems also that he was attempting a new editorial method in his work, although exactly what that was is unclear, as he did not write his method down anywhere. This is unfortunate because in 1715, Urry died unexpectedly, leaving the project unfinished. The work was then taken up by brothers Timothy and William Thomas – rather reticently, it seems – and while they brought the work to publication in 1721, they also made very clear that the finished product was not as they would have wished. William Thomas even had his own copy rebound with blank pages interspersed between the leaves of text, where he then meticulously went through and noted every single error in the volume. He then gifted his volume to the British Museum for their collection.

The problem with Urry's editorial method is largely that it is unknown. He has intervened in the text in a way that had never happened before, and that modern editors would not do detailed without explanation. In attempting to reconstruct his method, it appears he believed that Chaucer's poetry was always perfectly metrical, and whenever Urry encountered verse that did not meet his metrical expectations, he would 'correct' it with a spelling alteration or even a word alteration or addition. Very few of the changes he made can be found in any manuscript source, but it seems he believed the errors came about through scribal copying error. Such intervention in the text has caused remarkable complaint from scholars over the centuries, most notably from Thomas Tyrwhitt, who went on to edit *The Canterbury Tales* in 1775. Tyrwhitt famously said:

The strange licence, in which Mr Urry appears to have indulged himself, of lengthening and shortening Chaucer's words according to his own fancy, and of even adding words of his own, without giving his readers the least notice, has made the text of Chaucer in his Edition by far the worst that was ever published.

(Tyrwhitt, xiii)

While criticism of Urry's method is valid insofar as the unwarranted changes he made to Chaucer's text, it must be acknowledged that we don't exactly know what Urry's intention was, and whatever it was, he never got to finish it. Furthermore, it strikes me that Urry might have been responding to the increasing number of modern English translations that were appearing in print during the eighteenth century, and so some of his textual changes might have been an effort to either make the text simpler for readers to understand, or, conversely, give the text an archaic feel by introducing spelling that sounded 'old world', to meet the expectations of his readers.

As noted, William and Timothy Thomas continued work on the edition in the wake of Urry's untimely death. In addition, William Dart was brought into the project to provide a *Life of Geoffrey Chaucer* as part of the work's introductory material, although quite what Dart's contribution was is difficult to determine. In William Thomas' copy is a handwritten note, saying 'Digested into this order, from various collections of Mr Dart, by my brother William Thomas. T. T', suggesting that William Thomas may have written the text using Dart's material. The *Life* is unlike anything that had come before. While Speght's *Life* is noted for being reasonably substantial in its content, Dart takes this a step further, and, in addition to adding material to the *Life*, he also weaves it into an extensive narrative. The narrative form may be William Thomas' contribution to Dart's material.

Perhaps most prominent in Dart's *Life* is his acknowledgement of his source material. Throughout the 21 pages of densely packed text, Dart cites his sources with extensive footnotes and quotations. The first among these is John Leland, whom Dart favours above all others' testimony because Leland 'came nearest to his time', that is, Leland's is the oldest account of Chaucer's life. As a result, Dart makes extensive use of Leland, and even when referring to other sources, he returns to Leland as a comparison. For instance, when attempting to establish where Chaucer is from, he says:

Pits positively asserts (without giving any reasons) that *Woodstock* was the Place, which opinion Mr. Camden seems to hint at, where he speaks of that Town. *Pit's* authority is not so well established as to deserve credit on his bare word; but on the contrary, he and his colleague *Bale* (who are poor copiers from *Leland*) abound with such numerous falsities, that it is not safe even to quote them in some particulars. I suspect *Pits* had no other grounds for his assertion than *Chaucer's* House at *Woodstock*, and his mentioning the Park and his Works; and therefore with a turn too frequent with Biographers, raises an assertion upon a very slender supposition, and thought the darkness of the times would conceal the deceit, and leave no footsteps to trace the contrary. *Ewelme* and *Hocknorton* have

an equal right with *Woodstock*, both belonging to Chaucer's family, and the first is said by *Leyland* to be the inheritance of the Chaucers ... (8)

Here, Dart outlines Pitt's and Camden's suggestions for where Chaucer lived, but rejects these in favour of Leland's assertion. Dart makes a particularly pertinent observation about biographers in the process, that too frequently they assert something without sufficient evidence, and hope no one will notice!

Dart continues outlining the same range of material as in previous biographies, but with greater detail than previously seen, and throughout largely deferring to the authority of Leland, but also acknowledging Camden, Stowe, Dugdale, Speght and Rymer. In addition, Dart gives a great deal of credence to the internal authority of Chaucer's poetry. Thus when a poem seems to offer either evidence about Chaucer's life or seems to corroborate another authority about Chaucer's life, Dart includes this.

As such, Dart absolutely accepts the contents of the *Testament of Love* as a biographical account of Chaucer's life, and gives a dramatic summary of what he believes is Chaucer's escape to Europe and subsequent arrest. In terms of tone, this is no different from the rest of the *Life*, and so I do not believe Dart is attempting to overly dramatize this particular episode compared with any other portion of the *Life*. However, I do wonder if Dart is keen to present this episode in such detail because it gives the impression of Chaucer as a daring, radical figure who challenged authority. Despite truncating Dart's words, this extract remains lengthy, but this displays the detail that Dart included in the episode as well as the breathy, almost excitable tone that he conveys:

By these means several popular Commotions ensued, and particularly that in the City of *London*. As in this affair our Poet was no unartful Prompter behind the Curtain, so he felt the consequences of it in his downfall and ruin. One *John of Northampton*, a Creature of the Duke of *Lancaster*, was at the head of those Disturbances, who having been Lord Mayor the year before, made strong interest to be again chosen This occasioned Insurrections; and our Poet being then Comptroller of the Customs in that Port, ... joined in Party with *Northampton* ... But this Disorder did not continue long; ... and *Northampton* [was] taken into custody. Strict search was made for *Chaucer*, but he made his escape into *Hainault*, and afterwards into *France*, and ... he fled thence into *Zealand*, with his intent chiefly (as he says) *their privitie to concele*.

Several of the Accomplices in this affair were with him ... while the chief Ringleaders (except *Northampton*, who was condemned at *Reading*, upon the evidence of his Clerk) had here at *London* made their peace ... and had now forgot the Honour and Integrity of *Chaucer*, who suffered Exile to

secure their Secrets. ... The Government still pursuing their Resentment against him and his friends, they were constrained to leave *Zealand*; and *Chaucer* ... returned into *England*.

He had not been long here before he was arrested by order from the King, and imprisoned (as it is probable) in the Tower of *London*. ... [The] *King and his Princes* (to use his words) having obliged him upon Oath to declare what he knew, and *with huge words and grete* urged him to confess, and ... he very freely disclosed all he knew, and impeached the Persons concerned with him ...

It brought upon him the ill will of most people, who (as he says) called him *false, lyer, base, ingratefull, etc.* But the King regarding him as a person beloved by his Grandfather, and a faithful servant to himself, pardoned him.

This miserable condition ... gave occasion to his writing that excellent Treatise called *The Testament of Love* ...

As will be clear, Dart's account follows Thomas Usk's explanation of his experiences accurately, even to the extent of noting that Northampton was 'condemned on the evidence of his clerk'. Dart might have known that Northampton's clerk was Thomas Usk, but he hasn't the slightest suspicion that Usk is the author of the *Testament of Love*. Dart's description of this episode reveals how much the *Testament* had become established as documentary evidence of Chaucer's life, usurping all other accounts.

Proving Authorship

One question that might arise from this is why would anyone think the *Testament of Love* was written by Chaucer at all? Among the answers are some obvious ones: the dating of the work seems to fit within Chaucer's life, making his authorship plausible. While the work is written in prose and is not at all in any style recognisably used by Chaucer, there is no doubt the author of the *Testament* is well versed in English literature. Its connection with *The Consolation of Philosophy* is clear, and we know that Chaucer translated Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*. All of these are fairly weak explanations, but it is worth considering this point a little further.

Definitively identifying an author's works has and continues to be a fraught exercise. What, after all, does it take to be absolutely certain of a person's authorship? Even a handwritten manuscript apparently signed by an author is not conclusive. Where Chaucer is concerned, the debate has existed for centuries, and indeed it still continues within academic circles (did Chaucer write the *Tale of Gamelyn*, for instance?). The editions claiming to contain the complete works of Chaucer, from the sixteenth century onwards, are the best place to examine the

debate. William Thynne's 1532 edition contained what was then thought to be all of the works of Chaucer and is a useful starting point, but one should note that earlier fifteenth-century manuscripts containing Chaucer's works are important too, because they are where we start to see a concerted effort at gathering together the works of a single author, rather than using any other kind of category (such as love poetry, religious poetry, etc). Thynne's edition of Chaucer was reprinted at least twice, and each time additional texts were included. In particular, a text known as *The Plowman's Tale* was included in Thynne's second edition of Chaucer's works, as part of *The Canterbury Tales*, in 1542. This poem is considered part of a small group of anti-fraternal texts, beginning with *Piers Plowman*, and including *Jack Upland* and *Piers the Plowman's Crede*, among others. *The Plowman's Tale* is of interest here because it is the start of a long tradition of, what can only be described as, Chaucer fan fiction. Along with *The Plowman's Tale*, *The Cook's Tale*, *The Tale of the Pardoner and the Tapster*, *The Tale of Beryn* and the aforementioned *Tale of Gamelyn*, these are all late Middle English poetic tales that have, at various times, been appended to *The Canterbury Tales*. Fan fiction may not be the best terminology here because these texts are contemporary or near-contemporary with Chaucer's works and could be described as potential forgeries. All of the texts are anonymously written, and the authors may have been attempting to have their poems included as though they were Chaucer's works. However, this is a long bow to draw without much evidence. It seems more plausible that later editors recognised the potential connections and saw an opportunity to include these texts for a range of socio-political reasons.

The inclusion of *The Plowman's Tale*, for instance, is very likely strongly related to the sixteenth-century urge to connect Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and Geoffrey Chaucer himself, with the long poem *Piers Plowman*. It seems *Piers Plowman* (with its authorship also in question) was attributed to Geoffrey Chaucer from the sixteenth through to the eighteenth centuries. If this were a possibility, then *The Plowman's Tale*, a clear connection between *The Canterbury Tales* and *Piers Plowman*, was likely Chaucer's as well (<https://www.historytoday.com/who-wrote-piers-plowman>).

What is more important to this discussion, however, is why editors and readers in these centuries would be so keen to see *Piers Plowman* and *The Plowman's Tale* authored by Chaucer. Nearly all academic scholarship introduces *The Plowman's Tale* as a Wycliffite tale or an anti-fraternal tale, carefully positioning its religious sentiment as originating from the Wycliffite movement of the late 1300s. There is no doubt that this poem (and others connected to it) does have an interest in criticising the Church as an institution, in line with the interests of the Wycliffites, but of greater interest to editors and readers from the sixteenth century was the similarity between the sentiments expressed in the poem and by the Wycliffites with the newly created Anglican Church. For editors and readers, *The Plowman's Tale*

will have appeared to be a poem foreshadowing the Reformation. *The Plowman's Tale* and other poems of this kind will have been a reassuring confirmation of the changes that occurred in the English Church. Thus it is not surprising to see poems like *The Plowman's Tale* become attached to the name of Geoffrey Chaucer. From the sixteenth century, editors and readers will have been only too willing to see their beliefs confirmed and supported by a poet as great as Chaucer. Texts like *The Plowman's Tale* will have been happily included in editions of Chaucer's works from the sixteenth century onwards, because readers of this period wanted to see Chaucer presented as a proto-reformist.

Attribution of these texts to Chaucer has certainly been encouraged by editors over the centuries. Famously, John Stowe, whose edition of the works of Geoffrey Chaucer was published in 1561, added 20 poems newly attributed to Chaucer. Stowe is an important figure in the history of Chaucer's reception, as an antiquarian and as a book lover. He is perhaps most famous for his history of London, but he was well known to have owned or to have had access to a considerable number of medieval manuscripts (Edwards, 2004, 110). Stowe's access to medieval manuscripts resulted in the inclusion of a significant number of short English poems into Chaucer's canon, often on the topic of love or women. It is unclear whether he genuinely believed the additional poems were authored by Chaucer or not. Certainly of some poems he will have been aware of the genuine authorship (for instance, he included the *Siege of Thebes*, but acknowledged its authorship as John Lydgate). The remainder, however, is less clear. One could suggest that his ploy to assert the edition contained poems never before printed was done solely to improve sales, but it is impossible to know. The impact of Stowe's edition, however, was significant. By adding so much literature into the canon of Chaucer, Stowe dramatically increased the number of poems attributed to Chaucer, and called into question the authorship of many others.

It is within this context that *The Testament of Love* appears in the editions of Chaucer's works. Usk's work is not an isolated case amongst the works of Chaucer, but among many others whose attribution was dubious. Because the *Testament* appears in Thynne's 1532 edition, it has had a level of certainty that *The Plowman's Tale* has not. One can easily examine the 1532 and 1542 editions of Thynne's Chaucer and see that the *Plowman's Tale* is an addition. Indeed, the c. 1550 edition of Thynne's work repositions *The Plowman's Tale*, from the end of *The Canterbury Tales* to between the Manciple's Tale and the Pardoner's Prologue, reiterating a level of instability with this poem, which does not occur for the *Testament of Love*. Despite the manuscript exemplar no longer being extant, the presence of *The Testament of Love* in all printed editions of the works of Chaucer from 1532 until the late nineteenth century will have added to a sense of certainty that it ought to be present.

Curiously, a reference directly to Chaucer in the *Testament of Love* ought to have signalled that he was not the author. At one point, the God of Love states:

‘I shal tel thee this lesson to lerne: myne owne trewe servaunt the noble philosophical poete in Englissh whiche evermore hym besyeth and travayleth right sore my name to encrease, wherfore al that wyllen me good owe to do him worshyp and reverence bothe, trewly, his better ne his pere in schole of my rules coude I never fynde; he, “quod she”, in a treatise that he made of my servant Troylus, hath this mater touched, and at the ful this questyon assoyled’.

(Book three, 559–564)

The ‘noble philosophical poete in Englissh’ should certainly have been recognisable as Chaucer, particularly as the God of Love describes Chaucer as her ‘servaunt’ who has ‘travayleth right sore my name to increase’. If that had not been clear enough, the God of Love continues to explain that she is speaking of the ‘treatise that he made of my servant Troylus’. Indeed, Chaucer was well regarded in his lifetime as the author of *Troilus and Criseyde*. Such a clear indication that the *Testament of Love* was not written by Chaucer suggests to me that later biographers must have wilfully ignored this evidence, in order to present the persona they wanted to see. The *Testament of Love* offers biographers a vision of what biographers seem to have wanted Chaucer to be: a dynamic, radical figure, challenging authority, rather than the significantly more cautious and reserved writer he certainly was.

A final point to raise as to why the *Testament of Love* was attributed to Chaucer at all lies in its supposed mention in John Gower’s early recension of his *Confessio Amantis*:

... now in hise dales olde
 Thow schalt him telle this message,
 That he upon his latere age,
 To sette an ende of alle his werk,
 As he which is myn owne clerk,
 Do make his testament of love,
 As thou hast do thi schrifte above,
 So that mi Court it mai recorde (VIII.2950*-57*)

Here, it appears that Gower is instructing Chaucer to ‘make his testament of love’. Where Gower’s instruction is likely to have been a general encouragement to continue writing about love as a topic, it seems that biographers were keen to interpret this as evidence that the *Testament of Love* was recognised by Gower as being

authored by Chaucer. As noted earlier, this seems like another instance of biographers being only too keen to latch on to ‘evidence’ that suits the image they wish to have of Chaucer.

Conclusion

The Testament of Love points to a fascinating instance of misguided understanding, perhaps even a wilfully misguided understanding, of the life of Chaucer. I have focused on the impact of the *Testament* in the early biographies, when it is included in Chaucer’s works for the first time (1532), and then is used to create biographies of Chaucer in Thomas Speght’s *Complete Works* (1598, 1602, and 1687) and then John Urry’s edition of 1721. But its impact was long felt. *The Testament of Love* was included in all editions of Chaucer’s work until finally being removed prior to the publication of Walter Skeat’s late nineteenth-century edition. Thanks to the deductions of Skeat and Henry Bradley, the acrostic found at the start of each chapter, spelling MARGARETE OF VIRTW HAVE MERCI ON THIN VSK, revealed that Thomas Usk was indeed the author of the text (Skeat, 1897 ‘The Author’). Bradley had postulated Usk’s authorship previously, but it was only revealed once the chapters were rearranged into an order that made more sense to the narrative (Forni, 270, n.8). Without a manuscript copy of the text, recognising this error in the printed text was not quite as easy. As to the meaning of the acrostic, this remains unclear. Indeed, despite what popular culture might tell us, acrostics in Middle English literature are not common. Cutler and Shawver/Leyerle identify a total of 21 instances, and while there are undoubtedly more, this still suggests an uncommon occurrence.

Later biographies of Chaucer repeat the errors of Speght’s first efforts, intertwining the *Testament* with other accounts and records of Chaucer, even where they clearly contradict. There is a sense in the centuries subsequent to Speght that the accretion of information is what creates Chaucer’s life rather than the logic. To some extent this process was already happening since Thynne’s 1532 edition, as all of the paratextual material in Thynne’s edition was added into all subsequent editions of Chaucer’s works. It is an interesting observation: that in the dearth of information, Chaucer’s life seems to have been constructed gradually with each edition of his works.