
INTRODUCTION

Reading Proverbially

In the domain of literature, it is sometimes the smallest things which have the greatest intellectual value.

—ERASMUS, *Adages* I.V

The spark that ignited this book is an apology from Thomas Speght, Elizabethan schoolmaster, to the readers of his 1598 edition of the works of Geoffrey Chaucer. Speght came late to the editorial project, and he wrote that in the rush to publication, certain desirable features had to be forgone, including the marking of Chaucer's "sentences" (from Latin *sententia*) or wisdom expressions. In a prefatory note "To the Readers," he includes "Sentences noted" in a rueful list of projects "undertaken, although never as yet fully finished." He returns to this regret at the end of the book: "Sentences also, which are many and excellent in this Poet, might have ben noted in the margent with some marke, which now must be left to the search of the Reader." A revised edition published in 1602 made good on the omission; its title page proclaims, "Sentences and Prouerbes noted," and a revised letter "To the Readers" reiterates, "Prouerbes and Sentences marked."¹

Speght's 1598 apology for leaving these expressions "to the search of the Reader" hints at a vanished premodern reading practice. What reader

today searches a poem or a work of fiction for its proverbial wisdom? His belief that readers would miss his absent markings in the first edition and welcome them in the second accords with the special attention that Chaucer himself often draws to the abundant supply of “sentences and proverbes” in his work.² As the first book-length study to place Chaucer’s proverb use in the context of a widespread and still growing zeal for proverbs, *Rival Wisdoms* attempts to recover something of the now-alien reading practice that Speght’s 1602 edition supports.³ It argues that a proverb-conscious encounter with the *Canterbury Tales* reveals fresh emphases and meaningful structures in Chaucer’s last and most ambitious work. Attending to Chaucer’s proverbs, as it turns out, brings to light some larger issues about how meaning was made in premodern fiction, as chapter 4 and the conclusion of this book seek to demonstrate.

Speght was not the first to flag proverbs in Chaucer but he was by far the most thorough: at his direction, printers added to the 1602 revised edition many hundreds of marginal pointing hands, also called fists or manicules (☞ from Latin *manicula*, ‘little hand’), about 776 of them in the *Canterbury Tales* alone.⁴ A page from this edition illustrating a particularly dense cluster of these markings serves as the frontispiece to this book. Marking Chaucer’s proverbs was hardly a new development in 1602: from the earliest textual witnesses onward, the manuscripts of Chaucer and his contemporaries bear marginal indicators such as the English word *proverbe*, or, in Latin, the imperative *nota* or *nota proverbium*; some offer Latin equivalents for recognizable sayings, and some identify sources, especially the Bible, the Church fathers, and the Latin classics. In addition to verbal indicators, scribes and readers used various marks to emphasize portions of manuscript texts, including the hand-drawn ancestors of the printer’s fists in Speght’s edition, sometimes sketched with preternaturally long pointing fingers, carefully articulated fingernails, or elaborate cuffs and sleeves. The “index” finger with which they point was already so called in Chaucer’s day: his near-contemporary John Trevisa writes that “the second [finger] is called index . . . with it we announce and show and teach all things.”⁵ With the advent of the new technology, the hand-drawn manicules in manuscripts were soon adapted as printer’s devices.⁶

Marking wisdom expressions in printed books in English was not unusual in the period 1500–1660. It served to emphasize the erudition of works in an emerging vernacular, and it supported the prevalent practice of compiling quotations for commonplace books.⁷ Because other

indicators such as commas, inverted commas, or font changes were more common than manicules for this purpose, Joseph A. Dane speculates that Speght's choice of manicules might have been influenced by those that mark scattered passages in Chaucer's *House of Fame* in the printer's copy from which Speght's 1602 edition was typeset. Dane demonstrates that its printers worked not from Speght's 1598 edition, as one might expect, but from a copy of a 1561 edition by John Stow, annotated by hand.⁸ Whether premodern readers searched out "sentences and proverbes" for themselves in Speght's 1598 edition or were directed to them by manicules in the 1602 revision, my question is how this proverb-conscious reading would have affected their experience of the *Canterbury Tales*.

For insight into the reading practice implied by Speght's apology and his later editorial markings, I have benefitted in particular from two sources, one pre- and one post-Chaucer. The first is the thirteenth-century Latin proverb collection assembled by Albertanus of Brescia, translated in the fourteenth century, first into French and then by Chaucer into English as the *Tale of Melibee* (discussed in chapter 4). The second is the work of the preeminent international scholar Desiderius Erasmus (ca. 1466–1536), who spent a good portion of his career scouring ancient Greek and Latin works for "sentences and proverbes." Erasmus's masterwork, eventually called the *Adagiorum chiliades* (*Thousands of Adages*, henceforth the *Adages*), began its long publishing history in 1500, a century after Chaucer's death in 1400 brought an end to the *Canterbury Tales*. The intellectual world inhabited by Erasmus shared with the earlier centuries of Albertanus and Chaucer a veneration for the proverb that extended back to classical antiquity.

With humanistic ardor, Erasmus sought in his readings the Greek and Latin proverbs that he thought of as preserving the distilled wisdom of the ancients. Nearly as important as the wisdom contained in the proverb itself, he makes clear, is the dexterity with which a speaker or writer introduces it into a new context. From his invaluable introduction to the *Adages*, we learn that when skillfully applied, a proverb "will wake interest by its novelty, bring delight by its concision, convince by its decisive power." A proverb possesses "some native authentic power of truth." It secures precious past wisdom that might otherwise be lost: "What vanishes from written sources, what could not be preserved by inscriptions, colossal statues, and marble tablets, is preserved intact in a proverb."⁹ By following Speght's pointing fingers, reading proverbially to the extent it is still possible, I hope to show that in the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer, too, acknowledges these powers of

the proverb, reflecting on its capacity for good and also for harm, and on its potential to expand and deepen—but also to regulate and constrict—the complex multiple meanings of his stories.

Given the prominence accorded to proverbs in the medieval and early modern reception of Chaucer's work—no other stylistic or rhetorical feature of his poetry was ever singled out in the same way—it is noteworthy that the last book-length treatment of this topic was B. J. Whiting's *Chaucer's Use of Proverbs* in 1934. A return to the subject seems timely, given the confluence of three currents of scholarship today. First, a focus in recent decades on the many continuities between medieval and early modern intellectual life in England has helped to lower the once rigid boundary between the two eras, a bright line first imposed by “Renaissance” writers who saw themselves as participating in a rebirth of learning after a time of dark “medieval” ignorance.¹⁰ Brian Stock makes the point aphoristically: “The Renaissance invented the Middle Ages in order to define itself.”¹¹ The training of modern scholars has long reinforced this division by encouraging research in one or the other “period.” I do not see this study as an effort to cross a discernable period divide in order to recover a “Renaissance” reading of Chaucer, newly favorable to proverb-spotting. Rather, I approach proverb-conscious reading as a continuous premodern practice, recommended, for example, by Albertanus's work of 1246, but I focus most of my attention on the timespan between the composition of the *Canterbury Tales* (ca. 1388–1400) and the appearance of Speght's proverb-marked Chaucer edition in 1602. By so doing, I hope to open a more extensive range of contexts for a view of proverbs very different from our own and to show where a proverb-conscious reading of the *Tales* might take us.

With its fresh attention to marginal annotation and other use marks by readers, a second current of scholarly interest connects the material history of the book to the recovery of past reading practices, expanding the available evidence for the transmission and reception of early literature.¹² Proverbs were prime targets for annotation by premodern readers, and my study draws on book history and the history of reading as points of departure for examining the once widespread and now vanished practice of proverb-conscious reading.¹³ Finally, from a third development also related to the history of reading practices comes evidence for the idea, apposite to Chaucer's proverb use in the *Canterbury Tales*, that in comparison to the holistic meanings modern readers commonly seek in works of literature, premodern writing often encourages the discovery of meanings local to a

particular segment of a long work, a propensity carried over from manuscript culture to early modern printed texts. Because premodern works are so often made up of disparate parts creatively reassembled from preexisting sources, readers were more accustomed to dealing with “starts and stops and bumps and skips,” in the words of John Dagenais, and more accustomed to engaging in what Arthur Bahr in *Fragments and Assemblages* calls “compilational reading.”¹⁴ Proverbs themselves could cause starts and stops and suggest local meanings distinct from or even in opposition to the drift of the larger whole, as we will see in the *Canterbury Tales* in the course of this book.

With care and historical imagination, we can work back toward a fuller understanding of the position of proverbs in the intellectual world of medieval and early modern Europe and thus share more fully in the cultural products that draw on their powers. In the late fourteenth century, when Chaucer was writing the *Tales*, interest in proverbial wisdom was still growing in intensity toward its zenith in the sixteenth century. Chaucer is justly heralded for literary innovation of many sorts, but his success at catching this particular wave, the surge of interest in proverbs that crested over a century later with the multiple editions of Erasmus’s *Adages*, has gone largely uncelebrated because it is hard for us now to imagine that proverbs mattered as much as they once did.

As befits a foundational work, the primary accomplishment of Whiting’s 1934 study *Chaucer’s Use of Proverbs* was to identify Chaucer’s proverbs and link them in his introduction to then-current scholarship on the proverb, to which he was already a significant contributor. The majority of the book consists of a work-by-work list of Chaucer’s wisdom expressions, divided into “proverbs” and “sententious remarks,” and lightly interspersed with commentary, most often in the form of brief references to the fictional contexts in which they are uttered. Whiting’s commentary proceeds primarily proverb by proverb; analysis is relatively sparse and often rudimentary: “Chaucer used proverbs to cap a climax, to emphasize a situation; he used them seriously and he used them humorously.”¹⁵ His magisterial contribution to the study of Middle English proverbs came much later in the form of a 1968 index, *Proverbs, Sentences, and Proverbial Phrases from English Writings Mainly Before 1500*. Compiled in collaboration with Helen Wescott Whiting, this volume remains essential to the study of Chaucer’s proverbs; it must be the most frequently cited work of scholarship in what is still the standard critical edition, the *Riverside Chaucer*. Letter and

number combinations keyed to the Whitings' index appear in abundance throughout its explanatory notes, and I supply these "Whiting numbers" for the proverbs treated in this book. Decades have passed since these tools became available, and yet the poet's proverb use remains surprisingly underexplored.¹⁶ Consider Douglas Gray's apt description of Chaucer as "the medieval English poet who shows the greatest skill in their handling," possessed of "an intimate knowledge of proverbs and an instinctive awareness of their nature and literary possibilities."¹⁷

An aspirational model for this study is a readable volume by the late art historian Walter S. Gibson, *Figures of Speech: Picturing Proverbs in Renaissance Netherlands*. Readily accessible to nonspecialists with an interest either in proverbs or in premodern Northern European painting, Gibson's book begins with the observation that all of us hear proverbs every day, but we rarely think much about them as a form. He notes that if we use them in serious writing, we tend to apologize for lapsing into " clichés, bromides, and platitudes—the ultimate sins in our search for originality."¹⁸ Tellingly, none of these derogatory terms for the proverb even existed in Chaucer's English; the *Oxford English Dictionary* shows *cliché* derived from modern industrial printing, *bromide* comes from a nineteenth-century sleeping draught, and *platitude* was borrowed from French in the eighteenth century, just as proverbs were becoming *déclassé*. Gibson's book demonstrates that, contrary to our modern biases, influential premodern Netherlandish painters saw proverbs as fertile ground for creativity, humor, and fresh thought. Many of the features that attracted painters like Bosch and Bruegel to the proverb appealed also to Chaucer and his contemporary audiences. In the chapters that follow, I argue that the special qualities of the proverb and Chaucer's extraordinary skill in wielding them make these tiny expressions not just vital to his dialogue and character drawing but also an underacknowledged asset to his poetic art as a whole.

Chaucer was fond of issuing disclaimers to manage the expectations of his readers, and, before going further, here are mine. Both Chaucer studies and proverb scholarship have long been flourishing fields, accumulating immense bibliographies, and I have been very selective in citing previous scholarship, especially readings of Chaucer. Many excellent companion guides offer accounts of the lively controversies among specialists, including problems of dating, tale order, and establishment of the text, as well as providing well-selected bibliographies.¹⁹ I have attempted to make this book persuasive to Middle English specialists and yet still welcoming to

any reader interested either in proverbs or in the *Canterbury Tales*. Much of my argument relies on historically contextualized close reading, and in a practice that may seem to be a deterrent to nonspecialist readers, I quote extensively from Chaucer's poetry, in most cases glossing obsolete words and expressions instead of offering full "translations" into modern English, as is now increasingly the practice even in specialist studies.²⁰ Chaucer's English is a wonderfully expressive linguistic medium, well worth the effort by those unaccustomed to reading it. If my glossing succeeds, the reader should find that unglossed words mean what they sound like; only the spelling differs.

I conclude this introduction with an outline of the book's structure. Chapter 1 begins with the historical circumstances that fostered the pre-modern passion for proverbs and then offers a theory of how proverbs work. It examines the goals of the proverb-marking in Speght's 1602 edition and ends with a preview of the special contributions that proverbs make to the *Canterbury Tales*. In chapter 2, a proverb-conscious reading highlights a series of ideological duels between clerics and *cherles* (working men, peasants) in the tales of the Miller, Reeve, Friar, Summoner, and, climactically, the Canon's Yeoman. Although we can know little about the historical realities of peasant speech, the widely shared belief that peasants were adepts in proverb use serves in Chaucer's fiction as a means by which the work's many aggrieved *cherles* challenge the clerical claim to a monopoly on wisdom and assert alternative sources of truth. A subtler dimension of the work's overt anticlericalism emerges when we note that a series of fictional churchmen imply or declare their possession of all the truths and all the knowledge that matters. The unusually broad social vision Chaucer adopts in the *Canterbury Tales* compels the poet, in giving voice to his *cherles*, to imagine what it would be like to be categorically excluded from the culture's highest wisdom. These fictional *cherles* use their proverbs to reveal and to contest their exclusion, championing the value of other forms of knowledge, other wisdoms.

Chapter 3 focuses on the *Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*, in which Chaucer draws a harrowing portrait of the harmful effects of antifeminist proverbs on women, also largely excluded from Latinate culture and clerical wisdom. The chapter offers something largely absent from the vast scholarship on the Wife's performance: consideration of its antifeminist proverbs *as proverbs*. The special powers of the proverb—its ready familiarity, apparent communal acceptance, and ability to name and transform

situations—make it an ideally efficient instrument for asserting masculine superiority and containing the threat posed by recalcitrant women. But proverbs also provide strategies for challenging and resisting antifeminist *auctoritees*. Like Chaucer's younger contemporary, Christine de Pizan (1364–ca. 1430), the fictional Wife reinterprets antifeminist proverbs, reappropriates their abuse as praise, and wields proverbs of her own. Offering a fresh perspective on the tale that follows, I argue that the *Wife of Bath's Tale* features a feminine wisdom figure who models a healthier, less invidious form of proverb use than is practiced either by the battered Wife herself or by the clerks whose proverbs have demoralized her so deeply.

Chapter 4 addresses the *Tale of Melibee* and the intriguing question of why, in a fictional setting in which travelers on a pilgrimage entertain one another with stories, Chaucer includes this enormous proverb collection, closely translated from a French version of a sprawling 1246 Latin work by Albertanus of Brescia. Chaucer explicitly juxtaposes *Sir Thopas*, the only tale with no proverbial wisdom at all, with the *Tale of Melibee*, where over two hundred proverbs, the most of any tale, overrun a slender storyline. Judged as a story, *Melibee* is even more problematic than the parodic *Sir Thopas*, but once it is recognized that its proverbs are the main event and the framing story only secondary, it can be seen to offer instruction in how to use proverbs critically, advocating “free choys” for the reader in adopting or rejecting wise counsels (VII.1083). In the *Tales*, *Melibee* represents the riches of the international proverb tradition, Chaucer's great unsung source (unsung by modern critics but not by premodern readers), a trove of sayings ripe for reapplication elsewhere in the work, both in earnest and in game.

My conclusion addresses larger questions about the role of proverbs in Chaucer's poetic art. It takes up the pairing of the Monk's lugubrious lock-step tragedies with the universally admired *Nun's Priest's Tale*. While proverb use in the former consists largely of harping repeatedly on the same *moralite* about the untrustworthiness of Fortune, in the latter, widely recognized as the closest Chaucer comes to articulating his mature goals for his fiction, readers are famously enjoined, “Taketh the fruyt, and lat the chaf be stille” (VII.3443). From this revealing pairing, the proverb emerges as a potent tool that can provide vital support for an authorial viewpoint. At the same time, however, its capacity to pronounce with devastating brevity on what a story *means* can threaten to narrow and restrict the multiple significations carefully built up within Chaucer's fictions and deprive

readers of some of the pleasure of discovering them. But by being given a plethora of contradictory proverbs, readers of the *Nun's Priest's Tale* are provided with the means to plumb a fiction's depths of meaning for themselves, equipped to exercise the "free choys" in proverb use advocated by *Melibee*. Thus, far from banishing "sentences and proverbes" as incompatible with the highest reaches of poetry, the *Nun's Priest's Tale* places them at the center of the liberating possibilities the *Canterbury Tales* extends to its readers.