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(In)Completeness in Middle English Literature: The Case of the Cook's Tale and the Tale of Gamelyn

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Abstract

This essay considers the ways in which incompleteness – the de facto status of virtually all of Middle English literature – is both a type of failure and a special characteristic of this literature. The discussion is framed around the incomplete Cook's Tale from Chaucer's Canterbury Tales and the Tale of Gamelyn, a romance frequently misattributed to Chaucer that circulated with the Canterbury Tales, often to fill the gap left by the incomplete Cook's Tale.

Keywords

manuscript studies, Middle English, Geoffrey Chaucer, Canterbury Tales, Cook's Tale, Tale of Gamelyn, textual criticism, incompleteness, failure, material text

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(In)completeness in Middle English Literature

The Case of the Cook's Tale and the Tale of Gamelyn

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THE ESSAY THAT FOLLOWS was originally delivered as an invited lecture at the 6th Annual Schoenberg Symposium at the University of Pennsylvania. Speakers were asked to respond to the topic “Thinking Outside the Codex,” including a focus on “instances of and responses to failure in the history of manuscript production and scholarship,” to think broadly about manuscript studies, and to frame new questions. I take up this challenge below by beginning with a broad consideration of the idea of completeness as an aesthetic concept in Western art and philosophy before moving to a focus on editorial theory and Middle English literary texts. My goals, in keeping with those of the Symposium, are to pose new questions regarding the extent to which incompleteness—the de facto status of virtually all of Middle English literature—constitutes a type of failure and to consider the ways in which incompleteness is a special characteristic of Middle English literature. I will conclude with comments on the ways in which editorial theory and practice have failed to accommodate and represent incompleteness and the promise that digital media hold for addressing this problem.

The concept of completeness has been for some centuries tied to, and at times used interchangeably with, the term *perfection*. Perfection has many nuances of meaning across aesthetics, mathematics, theology, and the sciences. It at one moment concerns ontology, at another teleology; it is used here to evaluate the aesthetic merit of a work of art, and there to address the

potential (or not) of humankind to achieve moral perfection. I am focusing here on aesthetic uses of the term and am most concerned with those moments when the two terms—*completeness* and *perfection*—are aligned. As is so often the case, this philosophic pursuit leads back to Aristotle, who formulated in his *Metaphysics* what is perhaps the earliest, and certainly the most influential, definition of *perfection*:

Things, then, which are called “perfect” in themselves are so called in all these senses; either because in respect of excellence they have no deficiency and cannot be surpassed, and because no part of them can be found outside them; or because, in general, they are unsurpassed in each particular class, and have no part outside. All other things are so called in virtue of these, because they either produce or possess something of this kind, or conform to it, or are referred in some way or other to things which are perfect in the primary sense.¹

From Aristotle forward the concept of perfection—whether used in aesthetics, theology, moral philosophy, or mathematics—was bound up with the concept of completeness, the first requirement that Aristotle mentions. Beauty and perfection were equated by philosophers from Plato to Christian Wolff; beauty, which required proportionality, was not deemed possible without completeness.² Theologians posited that God and God alone—endless, perfect God, without lack or beginning or end—was capable of and representative of perfection. Moral philosophers pondered the possibility of human perfection and which actions could best speed us towards complete fulfillment, lacking nothing. In mathematics the circle—endless, like God without beginning or end—was held up as perfection. As an aesthetic con-

1 Aristotle, *Met.* 5.1021b; translation from Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, vol. 1, trans. Hugh Tredennick (Loeb Classical Library 271; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1933), 267–69.

2 For a summary of the notion of perfection in aesthetics from ancient Greece through the twentieth century, see Władysław Tatarkiewicz, *On Perfection* (Warsaw: Warsaw University Press, 1992), 35–43.

cept, perfection has been remarkably durable in the Western world. We find it in Plato's *Symposium*, where perfect beauty is described as "subsisting of itself and by itself in an eternal oneness, while every lovely thing partakes of it in such sort that, however much the parts may wax and wane, it will be neither more nor less, but still the same inviolable whole."³ (And of course the concept of perfection, which Plato typically termed the "good," is central to his metaphysics more broadly.) The idea remained in force in the medieval West, where we see it, for example, in Augustine's assertion that "unity is the form of all beauty"⁴ and in his Neoplatonic belief that inherent in ugliness are deficiency and a lack of requisite qualities.⁵ A philosophical and aesthetic preoccupation with perfection is found as well in the Renaissance return to classical ideals and beyond, well into the eighteenth century.⁶

Despite this, the history of art is rife with examples of highly esteemed works that in one way or another lack completeness; there is a clear distinction, and at times a dichotomy, between how aesthetic perfection is theorized and the extent to which incomplete (and thus imperfect) works of art are in fact valued. Perhaps the most celebrated example in the visual arts is the Venus de Milo; she is known as much for her missing arms as she is the remarkable artistry evident in the sculpture that survives. In music we have Schubert's Unfinished Symphony, which a number of composers have tried their hands at completing, and Mozart's Requiem, which was finished by Franz Süssmayr, likely with help from others.⁷ In architecture, there is Gaudí's Sagrada Família, begun in the 1880s and still under construc-

3 *Symposium* 211b; trans. Michael Joyce, from Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, eds., *The Collected Dialogues of Plato* (Bollingen Series 71; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), 562.

4 "Omnis . . . pulchritudinis forma unitas," *Epist.* 18, PL 33 c. 85. Quoted in Władysław Tatarkiewicz, *History of Aesthetics*, vol. 2, *Medieval Aesthetics* (The Hague: Mouton, 1970), 60.

5 Tatarkiewicz, *History of Aesthetics*, 2:53.

6 For a chronological summary, see Tatarkiewicz, *On Perfection*, 35–43.

7 For details on the role of Süssmayr and the complexities caused by the Requiem's unfinished state, see Christoph Wolff, *Mozart's Requiem: Historical and Analytical Studies, Documents, Score* (trans. Mary Whittall; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

tion today. Examples abound in all forms of artistic expression and media. Sometimes it is unclear whether a work of art is finished or not—or which version is finished—because its author produces multiple versions or never stops revising. This is the case, for example, with Anton Bruckner's symphonies. Musicologists refer to the confusing tangle of multiple versions of his works as the "Bruckner problem";⁸ the third symphony alone survives in six states reflecting revisions by the composer as well as interventions by publishers and others.

Such fragmentation is all too well-known to editors of Middle English texts. Even our best textual evidence, which comes in the form of scribal copies and, on occasion, in early printed editions based on such copies, is usually conspicuously incomplete. Loss, damage, and incompleteness are endemic to Middle English literature, so much so that it is difficult to think of an example of a literary work of substantial length that does not come to us incomplete (although many shorter lyric poems seem more or less whole). Of longer works, perhaps the best candidate would be *Pearl*, which seems remarkably complete by numerological, metrical, and artistic standards, a fitting circumstance given the circular perfection of its central allegorical symbol and the poem's preoccupation with the possibility of human perfection in the New Jerusalem. The reasons for the incompleteness of the Middle English corpus are manifold: manuscripts are lost or damaged; scribes have been careless or meddled unhelpfully; authors might never have finished works, have moved on to other projects, have left revisions midstream, or died while working on a poem. There are many agents at work—fire, mold, time, water, editorial intervention, erasures, cropping, overwriting, and missing leaves, inter alia. In many cases, no physical copies of an intact work survive because the work itself never existed in a finished state that could be transmitted by even the most careful of copyists.

In spite of, and perhaps because of, this state of affairs, the editing of Middle English texts, like other varieties of textual criticism, had from an

8 For a good introduction to this debate, see the following series of essays in *Nineteenth-Century Music*: Paul Hawkshaw, "The Bruckner Problem Revisited," 21 (1997): 96–107; Benjamin M. Korstvedt, "The Bruckner Problem Revisited (A Reply)," 21 (1997), 108–9; and Margaret Notley, "Bruckner Problems, in Perpetuity," 30 (2006): 81–93.

early date held as its chief aim the recovery and presentation of as complete a text as possible; A. S. G. Edwards notes that “in seeking and using exemplars, both medieval scribes and early printers were primarily affected by issues of completeness and intelligibility.”⁹ What exactly is meant by a complete text, however, and how one might best recover it, are questions for which there are rarely clear or easy answers. In the broader context of textual criticism, this might seem a truism. But it is worth restating in the context of the editing of Middle English because our field presents a special set of circumstances with respect to completeness and the pursuit of it as an editorial goal, because these circumstances remain relatively unexamined, and because we so often lack a satisfactory means of turning multiple fragmented scribal texts into single printed versions that meet our scholarly needs. These special circumstances include the scribal culture of medieval England, where extensive scribal intervention was the norm in the copying of literary texts and where it was customary for scribes to copy texts in a way that resulted in a blend of their own dialects and those found in their exemplars. Editors of Middle English also suffer from a poor fit between the prevailing tendencies and practices of the field of textual criticism and the realities that we often face when editing literary texts and manuscripts. This has been addressed most eloquently by Tim William Machan, who argues that “while traditional criticism has provided an inescapably humanist framework for editing Middle English materials, that same framework expressly excludes Middle English” due to the “resumptive embrace of Antique ideals” found in Renaissance ideology and the rejection of medieval traditions, “from which the humanists most wanted to dissociate themselves.”¹⁰ Machan’s study is a welcome exception in the field; Edwards has depicted the history of editing Middle English as “a curiously unreflective one” that “has not generated any substantial body of literature on general or methodological editorial problems.”¹¹ It is in this context that I

9 A. S. G. Edwards, “Middle English Literature” in *Scholarly Editing: A Guide to Research*, ed. D. C. Greetham (New York: MLA, 1995), 184.

10 Tim William Machan, *Textual Criticism and Middle English Texts* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1994), 39.

11 Edwards, “Middle English Literature,” 184–86.

turn to the *Cook's Tale* and the *Tale of Gamelyn* as a case study that provides particularly good examples of the difficulties that incompleteness poses to editors of Middle English. I will follow this with a consideration of the ways in which editors are using, and might begin to use, digital technologies to mitigate these problems.

Perhaps the best-known example of an unfinished literary work, and certainly an unfinished work of Middle English literature, is *The Canterbury Tales*. It is difficult for a partial work to become canonical, especially one missing as much as *The Canterbury Tales* evidently is, and yet it is also difficult to find an author or work more unarguably canonical than Chaucer and his *Tales*. The frame narrative structure of the work explains much of this, as we are provided with a prologue and retraction, and this structure could accommodate any number of tales. But uneasiness with endings is evident across the whole of Chaucer's oeuvre and manifests itself in a spectrum, from the fragment to the ambiguous ending designed to invite glossing.¹² While the *Cook's Tale* is the most fragmentary of *The Canterbury Tales*, ending midstream after fifty-seven lines, it is not the only tale that is unfinished: the Franklin interrupts the *Squire's Tale*, the Host stops Chaucer's *Tale of Sir Thopas*, and the Knight puts a merciful end to the Monk's ponderous series of tragedies. Problems with closure and completion are evident in Chaucer's other works as well. *The House of Fame* stops further along than the *Cook's Tale*, but just as abruptly. *The Legend of Good Women*, like *The Canterbury Tales*, provides a frame that promises more texts than are delivered. *The Parliament of Fowls* wraps things up, but defers on answering the central question being debated by suggesting that the birds will reconvene in a year for resolution (which is admittedly in part due to the *demande d'amour* conventions that the poem draws upon). Even *The Nun's Priest's Tale*, which concludes with an invitation for the audience to supply an exegetical reading of an animal fable, seems to toss a number of possible endings in the air and ask us to decide which interpretation fits. To the cock the moral is "he that wynketh, whan he sholde see, / Al wil-

12 For a detailed discussion of this topic, see Rosemarie P. McGreer, *Chaucer's Open Books: Resistance to Closure in Medieval Discourse* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998); and E. G. Stanley, "Of This Cokes Tale," *Poetica* 5 (1976): 36–38.

fully, God lat him nevere thee!" (VII.3431–32). To the fox, it is "God yeve him meschaunce, / That is so undiscreet of governaunce / That jangleth whan he sholde holde his pees" (VII.3433–35). The narrator, meanwhile, concludes "Lo, swich it is for to be reccheles / And negligent, and truste on flaterye" (VII.3436–37).¹³ Despite (or perhaps because of) having these options to choose from, "one after another, scholars have come forward with their individual and irreconcilable insights" concerning the tale's moral.¹⁴

While we get nowhere near the 120 tales promised in the General Prologue of *The Canterbury Tales* (each of thirty pilgrims telling four tales, two on the way to Canterbury and two returning), the Retraction does bring closure and, as Larry Benson has noted, "leaves us in no doubt that, unfinished, unpolished, and incomplete as *The Canterbury Tales* may be, Chaucer is finished with it."¹⁵ Chaucer may (or may not) have been finished, but the problems caused by the incompleteness of the *Cook's Tale* are anything but resolved; as John Bowers has noted, the abrupt "breaking off" of the tale after fifty-seven lines "offers the first instance of a 'loose end' in Chaucer's grand scheme," and "medieval scribes—and modern critics—have been struggling with this unhappy circumstance ever since."¹⁶ Whereas the total number of tales being less than promised presents a problem, it is one that Chaucer might have straightened out with a little revising of the prologue and bits of the connective tissue between tales. But the *Cook's Tale* is aborted midstream, and demands more drastic intervention or explanation by subsequent compilers and editors hoping to transmit something resembling an artistic whole.

The surviving manuscript evidence shows a wide variety of scribal responses to this problem. Some manuscripts do not include the tale at all. Manly and Rickert list eight copies that are lacking both the Reeve-Cook

13 Citations are to Larry D. Benson, ed., *The Riverside Chaucer* (3rd ed.; Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).

14 Maurice Hussey, "Introduction" to *The Nun's Priest's Prologue & Tale* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 35.

15 Benson, *The Riverside Chaucer*, 22.

16 John M. Bowers, ed., *The Canterbury Tales: Fifteenth-Century Continuations and Additions* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1992), 33.

link and the *Cook's Tale*, two that lack the link due to loss of leaves, and another two that lack the tale due to loss of leaves.¹⁷ In those cases where the missing text is not attributable to lost leaves, it is possible, probable even, that at least some of these omissions were editorial in nature: since the *Cook's Tale* is clearly not finished, one way to tidy things up would be to omit the fragment. Perhaps like the master in the tale, the scribes thought of this bad apple that “it is ful lasse harm to lete hym pace” (I.4409). But of course it might also be the case that text is missing in these copies because it was missing in the exemplars in question, whether because of loss of leaves, intentional editorial omission, or otherwise. In a more dramatic form of omission, leaf 193 of Cambridge Gg.4.27 has been almost completely cut away, taking with it the imperfect *Cook's Tale* and the first nine lines of the *Man of Law's Prologue*,¹⁸ an act that may or may not have been motivated by the problems surrounding the *Cook's Tale*.

Another simple solution was to proceed straight to the next tale, moving from the last line of the *Cook's Tale* directly to the *Man of Law's Prologue*. Manly and Rickert document twenty-one manuscripts in which this is the case. A number of these, some of which will be discussed separately below, acknowledge or seek to address the problems presented in the *Cook's Tale* in some way, but others move forward with no comment or acknowledgment that there was any problem to be solved. One possibility with this latter group is that those scribes understood the tale to be complete and not in need of repair as it stood. This has been the position as well of some modern critics. E. G. Stanley argues that the ending fits unproblematically with the other tales that precede it in Fragment I, concluding that the Cook ends his tale because “there is no more for him to say on that subject.”¹⁹ Jim Casey similarly argues for the possibility “that the *Cook's Tale*, rather than being an ‘incomplete’ story, can be understood within a larger framework, concluding in a manner wholly appropriate within the thematic context

17 John M. Manly and Edith Rickert, *The Text of The Canterbury Tales: Studied on the Basis of All Known Manuscripts*, 8 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1940), 2:165.

18 W. W. Skeat, ed., *The Tale of Gamelyn* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1884), xiii–xiv.

19 Stanley, “Of This Cokes Tale,” 59.

of Fragment I.”²⁰ But those scribes and critics who thought that there was nothing awry that demanded some sort of explanation or action form a distinct minority. As Andrew Higl notes, “No other fragmented part of the *Tales* resulted in quite the range and number of responses as the *Cook’s Tale*. . . . [A]ll but eight of the fifty or so complete manuscripts of the *Canterbury Tales* have something to say about the *Cook’s Tale*. What is more, the scribes of 33 of the manuscripts interact in some explicit way.”²¹

The two most famous and, by most accounts, textually accurate, manuscripts containing *The Canterbury Tales*, the Hengwrt and Ellesmere manuscripts, leave blank spaces at the end of the fragment, apparently in expectation of finding the tale’s conclusion at a later time and adding it there. The Ellesmere manuscript features approximately one and a half blank pages, while the Hengwrt has a ten-line space, at the bottom of which is written “Of this Cokes tale maked Chaucer na moore.” These lacunae are particularly intriguing, as both of these manuscripts are believed to be the product of Adam Pinkhurst, a scribe known to have had a personal relationship with Chaucer.²² Three other manuscripts—Egerton 2864, Harley 7333, and Physicians 388—similarly note that Chaucer had written no more, a claim that they may have been duplicating from Hengwrt.²³ The idea that Chaucer either had completed the *Cook’s Tale* or intended to do so but was prevented from finishing has been a constant refrain in Chaucer scholarship. In a brief essay published in the *Chaucer Review*, for example, M. C. Seymour offers the hypothesis that “Chaucer completed the *Cook’s Tale* in approximately 700 lines but the final quire of the booklet that contained the tales of Miller, Reeve, and Cook was lost very early in the manuscript tradition.”²⁴ Manly and Rickert, meanwhile, offer the unsupported but oft-repeated claim that Chaucer was “not only master of a matchless technique but too thoroughly master of his story-material to stop,” concluding that

20 Jim Casey, “Unfinished Business: The Termination of Chaucer’s ‘Cook’s Tale,’” *The Chaucer Review* 41 (2006): 185.

21 Andrew Higl, *Playing The Canterbury Tales* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 141.

22 Linne R. Mooney, “Chaucer’s Scribe,” *Speculum* 81 (2006): 97–138.

23 Manly and Rickert, *The Text of The Canterbury Tales*, 2:169.

24 M. C. Seymour, “Of This Cokes Tale,” *The Chaucer Review* 24 (1990): 260.

“only sudden illness or some other insurmountable interference could have prevented him from going on.”²⁵

Another possible strategy for dealing with the *Cook's Tale* was rearranging the tale within the frame narrative or rearranging the text within the tale itself. Additional 35286 is unique in placing the *Cook's Tale* after the *Manciple's Tale* rather than at the end of Fragment I. Higl argues against Manly and Rickert's suggestion that this arrangement was an unintentional scribal mistake attributable to a reshuffling of gatherings, noting that “this relocation may have been a conscious decision on the part of the scribe to reconcile the references to the Cook in the prologue to the *Manciple's Tale* with the Cook's abruptly ended tale much earlier in the frame narrative.”²⁶ This theory is supported by the fact that the Cook features prominently in the *Manciple's Prologue*, where he is invited by the Host to tell a tale but is too drunk—“ful pale and no thyng reed” (IX.20)—to do so. If indeed this relocation were an editorial effort by the scribe, it is not a bad solution, as the brevity and sudden cessation of the Cook's story would be attributable to his extreme drunkenness. But it would have required more editorial effort than was provided, as the lines that begin the *Cook's Prologue* make direct reference to the Miller's and Reeve's tales; this text is present in Additional 35286, but makes little sense following the *Manciple's Tale*.

Even a small rearrangement of text could produce a significant result, as Richard Beadle's intriguing account of a lost *Canterbury Tales* manuscript once owned by John Selden demonstrates. While the current whereabouts of the manuscript are unknown, Selden published a transcription of portions of the *Tale of Gamelyn* and the end of the *Cook's Tale* in *De synedriis praefecturis juridicis veterum Ebraeorum*, a study of rabbinical law; as Beadle remarks, “It is difficult to think of a less likely place to find a discussion of Chaucerian textual criticism.”²⁷ In most manuscripts, the final couplet

25 Manly and Rickert, *The Text of The Canterbury Tales*, 3:446.

26 Higl, *Playing the Canterbury Tales*, 153.

27 Richard Beadle, “I wol nat telle it yit’: John Selden and a Lost Version of the *Cook's Tale*,” in *Chaucer to Shakespeare: Essays in Honour of Shinsuke Ando*, ed. Toshiyuki Takamiya and Richard Beadle (Cambridge: Brewer, 1992), 58. *De Synedriis* was published in England in 1653 and “reissued in a ‘corrected’ edition from Amsterdam in 1679” (59).

of the *Cook's Prologue* announces the beginning of the tale itself: "And therwithal he lough and made cheere, / And seyde his tale, as ye shul after heere" (I:4363–64). Instead of this usual arrangement, Selden's transcription of his lost manuscript places this couplet following the final line of the tale ("A shoppe, and swyved for hir sustenance").²⁸ The effect of this is to make the Perkyn Revelour material part of an extended prologue, and to identify the *Tale of Gamelyn* more clearly as the Cook's contribution to the tale-telling game being played by the pilgrims. The Selden manuscript also reminds of us another, more complete, form of omission: we are haunted by the knowledge of manuscripts that once bore witness to this and other textual traditions, the losses of which seem total and permanent, and thus of the resulting irreparable incompleteness of the surviving corpus.²⁹

In addition to omission, proceeding straight to the next tale, leaving space in case the remainder of the tale was found, and relocation of text, the fragmentary nature of the *Cook's Tale* also inspired a number of textual interventions. The most ambitious effort of this sort is found in Bodley 686, where forty-five lines have been added, twelve lines of which are a new conclusion and the remainder added interlinearly.³⁰ The added lines tend to stand out because, as Higl has observed, they imitate long-line alliterative meter and introduce new allegorical characters, including "Waste" and "Drynke-more."³¹ The additions are moralizing in nature, as seen in the first four lines of the added conclusion:

What thorowe hymselfe and his felawe that sought,
 Unto a myschefe bothe they were broght.
 The tone y-dampned to presoun perpetually,
 The tother to deth for he couthe not of clergyre. (ll. 87–90)³²

The passages that Beadle quotes are from the 1679 edition, Lib. II, Cap. 14, 360–61.

28 Higl, *Playing The Canterbury Tales*, 62.

29 Manly and Rickert attempt to trace a number of such copies of *The Canterbury Tales*; see *The Text of The Canterbury Tales*, 1:606–45.

30 This text has been Burrows in *The Canterbury Tales: Fifteenth-Century Continuations and Additions*, 33–39.

31 Higl, *Playing The Canterbury Tales*, 167.

32 Higl, *Playing The Canterbury Tales*, 37.

Regenstein 564 (*olim* McCormick) is more “concise and abrupt,”³³ but adds a four-line conclusion that wraps up the career of Perkyn Revelour in much the same fashion:

And thus with horedom and bryberye
 Togeder thei vsed till thei honged hye
 For who so euel byeth shal make a sory sale
 And thus I make an ende of my tale.³⁴

The most common strategy, however, and one that was employed in twenty-five surviving manuscripts, was to place the *Tale of Gamelyn* after the Cook’s fragment. Most manuscripts offer brief passages that seek to offer a sense of conclusion to the *Cook’s Tale* and a bridge to the *Tale of Gamelyn*. A representative example of the most common of these is found in the Petworth manuscript, where a two-line transition reads “But here of I wil pas as nowe / And of yonge Gamelyn I wil telle 3ou.”³⁵ Manly and Rickert document such a link in all but eight of the twenty-five manuscripts containing *Gamelyn*.³⁶ Royal 17 D.xv, meanwhile, follows the final line of the Cook’s Tale with “Her endeth o tale of the Cooke and her folowyth another tale of the same cooke,”³⁷ while the Lansdowne manuscript offers the following four-line link:

Fye þer-one it is so foule I wil nowe tell no forþere
 For schame of þe harlotrie þat seweþ after
 A velany it were þare-of more to spell
 Bot of a knyght and his sonnes My tale I will forþe tell.³⁸

33 Manly and Rickert, *The Text of The Canterbury Tales*, 2:169.

34 Manly and Rickert, *The Text of The Canterbury Tales*, 2:170.

35 This manuscript is available in full online from John Rylands University Library at http://enriqueta.man.ac.uk/luna/servlet/view/search?q=Reference_Number=Petworth%20486026.

36 Manly and Rickert, *The Text of The Canterbury Tales*, 2:171.

37 Skeat, *The Tale of Gamelyn*, xvi.

38 Manly and Rickert, *The Tale of Gamelyn*, 2:171.

Characterized by its editors as either a long ballad or a “rough and ready romance,”³⁹ *Gamelyn* is not reminiscent of Chaucer’s writing. It has been widely speculated that the tale was circulating with Chaucer’s papers and that he intended to rework it for one of the pilgrims, perhaps most fittingly as a tale for the Yeoman; this idea was posited by W. W. Skeat and has been popular since, even though there is little evidence to support it.⁴⁰ As it comes down to us, the tale has much more affinity with the corpus of Robin Hood legends than with Chaucer’s courtly poetry. Although Robin himself does not make an appearance, Knight and Ohlgren include it in their anthology *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales*. The tale is likely also related to “Robyn and Gandelyn,” a brief Robin Hood ballad; in his 1884 edition of the *Tale of Gamelyn*, Skeat asserted that the name “Gandelyn” was “a mere corruption of Gamelyn.”⁴¹

As is the case with so many extant Middle English poems, the survival of the *Tale of Gamelyn* is a remarkable coincidence. Maurice Keen calls it “the first outlaw legend which has survived in the English language,”⁴² and this survival may be attributed almost entirely to the unfinished status of Chaucer’s work—to that work’s imperfection—as all twenty-five copies of *Gamelyn* are in *Canterbury Tales* manuscripts. The tale, which centers on problems of inheritance and fraternal strife, is not well known, so I will briefly summarize it here. It opens with Gamelyn’s father on his deathbed seeking to divide his estate among his three sons, of whom Gamelyn is the youngest. His father insists on an equal inheritance for each son, contrary to both the normal practices of primogeniture and the advice of a group of knights whom the father has called together to serve as executors of the estate. The father dies immediately thereafter, but his will is not carried out

39 For a summary of responses to the tale, see Stephen Knight and Thomas Ohlgren, eds., *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publication, 2000), 185.

40 Skeat, *The Tale of Gamelyn*, xiii–xv. An example of this idea being repeated in recent scholarship may be found at Knight and Ohlgren, *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales*, 191.

41 Skeat, *The Tale of Gamelyn*, xi. “Robyn and Gandelyn” is included by Knight and Ohlgren in their collection (*Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales*, 277–34).

42 Maurice Keen, *The Outlaws of Medieval Legend* (London: Routledge, 1961), 88.

due to the greed and dishonesty of the eldest brother and the young age of Gamelyn, who is still a child. Gamelyn grows up in the care of this eldest brother and soon exhibits remarkable strength and skill with arms. It eventually becomes clear to him that he has been cheated, and he demands his inheritance from his brother. What ensues is typical fare for a Robin Hood ballad: Gamelyn and a sidekick encounter (and pummel) corrupt churchmen, best the sheriff's men in combat, and go into hiding in the forest, where Gamelyn leads a band of outlaws. The older brother pays bribes to jurors and judges to keep the legal heat on his brother, but is eventually killed, along with all of the corrupt jurors, leaving Gamelyn and the middle brother, Sir Ote, as heirs. The chaos created along the way is cleaned up at the end when the king forgives Gamelyn, restoring all property to the middle brother and making Gamelyn the king's "cheef justice of his free forest" (l. 888).

The romance is concerned with late medieval "legal practices and conflicts,"⁴³ including the problems and benefits of primogeniture and corruption of the legal system. All of these come back to the question of Gamelyn's rightful inheritance—what should be his, by decree of his father, by law and tradition? The tale is about setting things in order, and ends with everything resolved; the bad are punished or killed while the good are rewarded and resume their place in the social order. It even solves Gamelyn's problem without upsetting the social practice of primogeniture, as his new position in the service of the king means that all lands revert to his surviving older brother. Gamelyn is converted from outlaw poacher to the sanctioned position of forester, where he will presumably have the responsibility of ensuring that the forest is safe from the efforts of other poachers. While this story in the medieval romance form outlined above is not widely known, it later achieved much greater popularity, first in Thomas Lodge's reworking of it in *Rosalynde*, published in 1590, and later in Shakespeare's reworking of Lodge in *As You Like It*.⁴⁴

43 Knight and Ohlgren, *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales*, 185.

44 For more details on this tradition, see John Scattergood, "The Tale of Gamelyn: The Noble Robber as Provincial Hero," in *Readings in Medieval Romance*, ed. Carol M. Meale (Cambridge: Brewer, 1994), 161–62; and Keen, *The Outlaws of Medieval Legend*, 88–89.

Editors of Middle English texts find themselves, like Gamelyn, with an inherited mess that needs straightening out. The problems that early scribes and editors of the *Cook's Tale* struggled with have not gone away, nor has our need to accommodate and, if possible, fill lacunae and gaps, to mend what is broken. Editors, particularly those working on eclectic texts, strive to produce that which they cannot, namely a complete text that comprises only "correct" (which usually means "authorial") readings, a task that, like other kinds of restorative work, involves judicious combinations of removal and addition. We remove layers of dialect change, miscopying, and mistaken scribal readings and supply what is missing, including cropped words, readings pointed to by source texts, and those introduced to restore meter or clarify meaning. Canonicity and much literary criticism, meanwhile, rely to a large extent upon this process; as Ralph Hanna notes, "Most modern readers require the singularity of A Text and, . . . canonicity in some sense demands one."⁴⁵ In the case of the *Cook's Tale*, the impossibility of the editor's task is abundantly clear. As V. A. Kolve notes, "We cannot hope to finish what Chaucer left incomplete, or to resolve the problems he had not yet solved."⁴⁶ Indeed, if those critics who argue that Chaucer intentionally abandoned the text and meant to strike it from *The Canterbury Tales* entirely are correct, perhaps we should not attempt to include the *Cook's Tale* in the first place.⁴⁷ In *De natura deorum*, Cicero notes that only the world itself, which he equates with the divinity, is perfect, and that within the world "there is no thing that does not lack something and that is harmonious, perfect and finished in every respect and in all its parts."⁴⁸ As

45 Ralph Hanna, "Producing Manuscripts and Editions," in Hanna, *Pursuing History: Middle English Manuscripts and Their Texts* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 75.

46 V. A. Kolve, *Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1984), 257.

47 One such critic is Donald Howard, who imagines Chaucer censoring his own work in dramatic fashion by tearing the *Cook's Tale* from a manuscript: "Possibly Chaucer or someone else suppressed it, ripped it out of an early copy leaving only what was on the same folio with the ending of the Reeve's Tale." See his *The Idea of The Canterbury Tales* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 244.

48 *De natura deorum* 2.37. Quoted in Tatarkiewicz, *On Perfection*, 45.

editors we strive against this truth, but it is a truth that keeps us in business; if failure and incompleteness were not such ubiquitous features of the written word, there would be little need for editors, after all.

Together, the *Cook's Tale* and the *Tale of Gamelyn* provide examples of a wide variety of types of incompleteness and failure, including omission, deletion, reordering of text, interpolation, and problems of attribution and authorial intent. Having documented these, I will turn once again to a broader philosophical consideration of perfection and its connection to textual criticism. Władysław Tatarkiewicz, whose work *On Perfection* is perhaps the best single study of this topic, articulates a persistent duality that results from “the coexistence in language of two concepts of perfection, one precise and one colloquial.”⁴⁹ That is, there is *perfection* in the Aristotelian sense, a concept that “has never been a comparative or relative” one, and there is the word as it is used in the more common colloquial sense, in which it means something that is excellent or possessing great virtues.⁵⁰ Moreover, “from the coexistence in language of two concepts of perfection, one precise and one colloquial, stem certain paradoxes.” Tatarkiewicz traces this idea through two early modern writers, Lucilio Vanini and Joseph Scaliger, back to the pre-Socratic philosopher Empedocles (5th c. BC). In their works we find the paradoxical idea that true perfection is found only in progress, “in ceaseless improvement, constant elaboration, in enrichment, in the appearance of new things, properties, values.” The “world is perfect through its imperfection”: *perfectus propter imperfectionem*.⁵¹ This idea emerges repeatedly in Western philosophical thought. For example, St. Augustine argued that “perfection is a man’s knowledge of his own imperfection,” while in Meditation IV Descartes notes “I cannot gainsay that a greater perfection would in a way reign in the universe if certain of its parts were free from errors, and others not so, than if all were completely similar.”⁵²

To a certain extent, aiming for perfection and completeness in editions is simply a commonsense move; obvious mistakes might profitably be fixed

49 Tatarkiewicz, *On Perfection*, 18.

50 Tatarkiewicz, *On Perfection*, 16.

51 Tatarkiewicz, *On Perfection*, 18.

52 Tatarkiewicz, *On Perfection*, 19.

and lacunae filled if we have the available evidence. But our training as editors goes far beyond the commonsense, and equation of completeness and perfection with aesthetic merits is a deeply ingrained and deeply influential aspect in Western thought that is rarely addressed explicitly in editorial theory. The ideas are so fundamental that they remain below the surface, unexamined. D. C. Greetham has called textual criticism “the most ancient of scholarly activities in the West. Before the theoretical literary criticism of Plato and Aristotle, unknown Greek scholars had, by the end of the sixth century BC, established the text (or more properly *a* text) of the Homeric epics by an admittedly subjective reading in order to remove the errors that had crept in as a consequence of continued oral transmission.”⁵³ According to legends, Aristotle himself prepared an edition of Homer. These early textual editions were “a conscious attack on the claim of the rhapsodes, or professional reciters of poetry, to have preserved the Homeric text *perfectly*” (emphasis mine).⁵⁴ The first great editorial project of the early medieval period was of course the establishment of biblical texts from the manuscript tradition, a field in which perfection of a text could be equated to uncovering its revealed state; after all, we are told in the Second Epistle of Peter that “no prophecy of Scripture . . . was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Pet 1:20–21). The idea of perfection, the debates regarding it, the explicit statement of perfection as a goal, even Aristotle himself, have been with us from the start, then, in textual criticism.

These connections between philosophical and textual perfection extend well beyond the classical era. For example, the sixteenth-century scholar Joseph Scaliger, cited earlier as a proponent of the “paradoxical idea that true perfection is found only in progress,” produced the magisterial edition of Manilius’s *Astronomica*, a work that prompts Greetham to label him the “founder of modern textual criticism.”⁵⁵ Even A. E. Housman, not an easy man to impress, stated that “perhaps no critic has ever effected so great and

53 D. C. Greetham, *Textual Scholarship: An Introduction* (New York: Garland, 1994), 297.

54 Greetham, *Textual Scholarship*, 297.

55 Greetham, *Textual Scholarship*, 313.

permanent a change in any author's text as Scaliger in Manilius.⁵⁶ Perfection has been a central idea, and perhaps *the* central goal, of textual criticism from the beginning, not only as a commonsense practical goal—replace what is missing, make the text the best it can be—but also as an explicitly discussed philosophical preoccupation of those engaged in textual studies. Modern printed editions have had a way of crystallizing this impulse, for they demand and reproduce a single, authoritative text with competing and dissenting voices omitted or suppressed to highly technical and abbreviated critical apparatus and appendices. The idea of a single authoritative version of a text was by no means foreign to manuscript culture, but this culture also produced an “extraordinary evidential plurality.”⁵⁷ This is not the case with virtually all modern print editions, which render this plurality singular through editorial endeavor. And while of course those of us studying manuscript culture owe much to printed editions of texts originating in manuscript culture, we also lose much by studying these works in the print medium.

I wish to conclude by suggesting a way that we might rethink the editing of Middle English texts and how we encounter and interact with our evidentiary plurality. Printed critical editions usually strive for the precise idea of perfection, an Aristotelian perfection that editors know cannot be achieved but one that they believe that we should draw as near to as we are able. That is in fact a good goal, and I do not intend to quibble with it here. We *should* continue to produce such editions. But digital media offer us a wealth of other options, options that we have only begun to explore. I have written elsewhere about a number of ways that digital media are transforming the editing of Middle English texts by enabling the presentation of competing textual versions in a simultaneous and mutually reinforcing way rather than forcing a choice between a best text or eclectic edition, by providing the ability to maintain multiple sites of authority (e.g., author, scribe, and editor) within one edition, and by offering flexibility in presenting authorial intention alongside other important versions of a work, such

56 A. E. Housman, *Selected Prose* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), 23. Quoted in Greetham, *Textual Scholarship*, 314.

57 Hanna, “Producing Manuscripts and Editions,” 74–75.

as individual manuscript versions.⁵⁸ I will not repeat those points here, but will instead add to them one additional promising path forward: we have begun to witness in digital archives and editions a much more satisfying and enriching means of grappling with the incompleteness of the surviving literary record, one that envisions a scholarly edition not only as a means of resolving incompleteness and imperfection to whatever extent is feasible and practicable, but as a tool that enables the navigation of, and provides a fuller awareness of, these realities of our material and textual heritage.

We have already begun to see these possibilities realized in digital archives and editions such as the *Piers Plowman* Electronic Archive (PPEA) and the Canterbury Tales Project. The PPEA has published eight documentary editions of *Piers Plowman* manuscripts on the web and has nineteen new editions underway. The recent publication of Bx, an electronic edition of the archetype of the B text tradition of the poem edited by Thorlac Turville-Petre and John Burrow, demonstrates how critical and documentary texts can be unified within one edition in a mutually reinforcing way.⁵⁹ For any of the more than seven thousand lines of the B text, the user may launch a collation window that lists in full the parallel readings from nine manuscript copies and one incunable already edited and transcribed by project editors. In similar fashion, editions published by the Canterbury Tales Project make available extensive documentary texts. *The Miller's Tale on CD-ROM*, for example, offers transcriptions and digital images from fifty-four manuscripts and four incunabula containing versions of the text.⁶⁰ More recently, the Canterbury Tales Project has become part of the larger Textual Communities project, and has announced its aim of transcribing

58 See Timothy L. Stinson, "Makeres of the Mind: Authorial Intention, Editorial Practice, and *The Siege of Jerusalem*," *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 24 (2010): 39–62; Stinson and Jim Knowles, "The *Piers Plowman* Electronic Archive on the Web: An Introduction," *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 28 (2014): 225–38.

59 *The Piers Plowman Electronic Archive*, vol. 9, *The B-Version Archetype*, ed. John Burrow and Thorlac Turville-Petre (*Piers Plowman* Electronic Archive Series A.12; Charlottesville: Society for Early English and Norse Electronic Texts, 2014), <http://piers.iath.virginia.edu/exist/piers/crit/main/B/Bx>.

60 Peter Robinson, ed., *The Miller's Tale on CD-ROM* (Leicester, UK: Scholarly Digital Editions, 2004).

“all 30,000 pages of the 88 surviving pre-1500 manuscripts and incunables of the Canterbury Tales.”⁶¹

As Stephen Nichols has noted, the mechanical press played a large role in the “movement away from the multiplicity and variance of a manuscript culture, thereby rejecting, at the same time, the representation of the past which went along with medieval manuscript culture: adaptation or *translatio*, the continual rewriting of past works in a variety of versions, a supplementation rather than faithful imitation.”⁶² Editions such as those produced by the PPEA and the Canterbury Tales Project present texts in a manner that accords well with the type of perfection espoused by Scaliger, the purported father of textual criticism. Although his notions of perfection—“the paradoxical idea that true perfection is found only in progress, ‘in ceaseless improvement, constant elaboration, in enrichment, in the appearance of new things, properties, value’”—were not espoused in the context of his work as an editor, it seems very fitting that they should apply so well today. We can build new editions that emphasize the process of working with our textual evidence, editions that admit the impossibility of Aristotelian perfection given the fragmentary evidence available and instead provide access to tools, images, and texts that equip readers to explore the constant elaboration, the polyvalent properties and voices of manuscript texts.

61 <http://www.textualcommunities.usask.ca/web/canterbury-ales>.

62 Stephen Nichols, “Introduction: Philology in a Manuscript Culture,” *Speculum* 65 (1990): 3.