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# MEDIA REVIEW

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*Chaucer: Life and Times*. CD-ROM. Woodbridge, CT: Primary Source Media Limited, 1995.

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Although no Luddite, I include myself among those traditionalists and techno-skeptics for whom the “desktop” will always be a literal one, annoyingly cluttered with actual scraps and no “scrapbook” and where that confounded electric box will continue primarily to be in my way when I’m trying to research such dire matters as where precisely the Pardoner carries his pouch of documents and what was the *Book of the Lion*. Nevertheless, I am impressed with what is so far the definitive Chaucer CD-ROM, developed in England by Cristina Ashby, Geoff Couldrey, Susan Dickson, et al. and recently advertised in the U.S. This resource tool does not for me supersede the only item of any value in my Last Will and Testament, but this may be due merely to the eleven-year head-start my *Riverside Chaucer* has had towards heavy annotation.

For using the CD-ROM, the developers recommend 8 Mb RAM (but 4 will do), a 486 DX/50 processor (whatever that means), and Windows 3.1 or higher. The User’s Guide, a lucid and manageable 25 pages, provides efficient instructions for installation and for navigating through the materials which on the screen appear, appealingly, as books placed on a wooden desk or as other tools in a drawer below, in shelves alongside the drawer, and in cubbyholes at the back of the desktop.

Most importantly, the *Riverside Chaucer* serves as the centerpiece, and clicking on this image brings up the complete works as they appear in the 1987 Houghton Mifflin tome. An assortment of fonts is also available for viewing the text. Translations of the major works are accessible either instead of, or next to, the Middle English versions. Overviews of the works comprise another desktop resource: these are not the *Riverside* ones, but instead rather general and sometimes disappointing perspectives such as “Chaucer the Unfinisher,” an arbitrarily titled piece assessing, among other matters, Chaucer’s status in the English poetic context and his tendency towards the dramatic; or “Women and Marriage in the *Canterbury Tales*”; or the then seemingly redundant “Marriage? No Thank You,” which quickly and enigmatically enumerates four *CT* women who attempt to eschew matrimony. The “Life and Times” discussion is more valuable, providing a bio-

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graphical sketch of Chaucer and some historical and literary context; but this too seems skimpy ultimately, focusing only on the long-established biographical factoids. Clicking the last item on the desktop, a small hourglass, brings a time line, a useful if minimal plotting of Chaucer family history amid primarily 14th-century political, religious, and cultural events.

Beneath the desktop and tucked into shelves and the desk drawer are numerous other materials, including a "Glossary" similar to that of the *Riverside*, and a tutorial titled "How To Read a Medieval Manuscript," which, when one clicks on the spectacles icon, discusses literacy, the history of printing, and textual problems. A "Critical Essays" book contains 17 articles with pop-up footnotes, mostly the oft-anthologized old chestnuts such as George Lyman Kittredge's "Chaucer's Discussion of Marriage" from *Modern Philology*, 1911-12; Morton W. Bloomfield's 1957 *PMLA* article, "Distance and Predestination in *Troilus and Criseyde*"; Mary Carruthers' 1979 *PMLA* article, "The Wife of Bath and the Painting of Lions"; Jill Mann's "Troilus' Swoon" from a 1979 *Chaucer Review*; and other articles from such luminaries as Tatlock and Wimsatt. A "Further Reading" list provides seminal resources through 1994: bibliographies and other print sources on specific subjects such as alchemy, the Bradshaw shift, manuscripts, the Peasants' Revolt, and women. More exciting, of course, is the inclusion of visual materials, such as a map of the major English pilgrim routes (from London, west to Winchester and southeast to Rochester and Canterbury), which one views in the manner of an unfurling scroll and which is linked to pop-up text and images. The CD-ROM's collection of pictures, from the Huntington, Bodleian, and British Libraries, from the Tate, and other galleries and museums, includes images of the relevant cathedrals and kings, pilgrim badges, frontispieces, and, most delightfully, the famed Ellesmere illuminations of the pilgrims (something the *Riverside* cannot do). Also included are the Caxton illustrations of the pilgrims and the May 1378 memorandum of Chaucer's appointment of a deputy controller to the wool quay in the Port of London, the document J.M. Manly theorized may be in Chaucer's own hand. A quick click brings up the relevant captions and copyright information for proper documentation, too. Unfortunately, although I explored the CD-ROM on no shabby machine, I was still frustrated by the mediocre quality of the images and the inability to blow them up or to zoom in on details. Nevertheless, the mere availability of these materials is delightful.

Special tools, located in cubbyholes to the back of the desktop, anticipate my old-fashioned adherence to a hardcopy *Riverside* and therefore provide both matching capabilities and attractive extras. Beyond bookmarking, the CD-ROM incorporates well the more important Chaucerian need and obsession for note-

taking. One may store one's own commentary on the text, and an icon shows up in the "Comment" cubbyhole if any notes have indeed been saved. With a click on an inkwell icon, more extensive addenda can be attached using *Windows Write*<sup>™</sup>. The CD-ROM provides sound recordings in Middle English of excerpts from the General Prologue and a few of the Tales, and one may also attach one's own recordings to the texts. A "Search" feature actually does remarkably well in absorbing the functionality of the Tatlock and Kennedy *Concordance to the Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, and it offers more, since Boolean searches are also possible. The developers seem particularly pleased with their "Thematic Routes," a feature which navigates through relevant materials (individual discussion and relevant works) organized around themes such as authority, chivalry and courtly love, dreams, language, marriage, religion — better described as "Customisable paths through the contents which students can create and annotate with oral or written notes." So although the sample themes seem vast in a manner that would threaten to inspire vague blab in student writing, one can create one's own more precisely focused modules.

The User's Manual kindly provides "Teaching Applications" with suggested assignments (and a charted version of lesson possibilities in Appendix 2), but I have always seemed to be constitutionally unable to read such well-intentioned pedagogical materials. And by this point in my exploration of the *Chaucer: Life and Times* CD-ROM, I find myself uncharacteristically delighted by the technological integration of so many resources and already able to declare my approbation for this multimedia tool for Chaucerians. ✨