In a 1984 essay for the journal *New Literary History*, Umberto Eco distinguishes between the tasks of dictionary and encyclopedia by stating that "a dictionary-like representation of knowledge should concern merely linguistic competence, while an encyclopedialike representation should take into account (…) the whole of our world knowledge." (Fn. 1) The less discriminating reader, used to resorting to reference books as supreme authorities on their respective subject matters, will probably consult Rosalyn Rossignol's volume as a mélange of both genres, regard it as a handy companion to reading and explicating Chaucer's texts and as meant to provide "important information about many features of the poet's life and work" not only to students and scholars, but also to a general public of literary enthusiasts (p. xi). The presence of illustrations, a map, and several indexes suggests that the faithful recording of factual detail is intended and that only where the heading "Commentary" appears opinions, theories, or interpretations will have their proper place. Thus, for most of this volume, facts are supposed to speak for themselves, and all the author presumes to have done is to have collected and organized the available facts for the audience's independent perusal. A complete reading of this reference book on Chaucerian literacy, however, reveals that despite the outwardly innocuous logic of alphabetically ordered entries ranging from "abbreviatio" to "Zeuxis," the compiler's subjective glossing has left its irruptive marks on the process of selection and description.

The personal involvement of the author with this volume and its content becomes obvious as soon as the careful reader realizes that the "artist's renderings" (to avoid copyright costs?) of the illustrations of the Chaucerian pilgrims from the Ellesmere manuscript were produced by "Rich Rossignol," presumably the author's own son. The author's deplorably short introduction, which quotes Dryden's famous dictum that Chaucer had given "us" "God's plenty," mentions that the poet "almost single-handedly" rescued English from literary obscurity, and addresses an audience which enjoys "great literature" (p. xi), implicitly prepares for some of the methodological and ideological preferences palpable throughout the text.

A tendency toward the simplistic moralizing of genres, fictional characters, and plots cannot be missed, as when the fabliau is dismissed as a "dirty story" (p. 62) or as "silly" (p. 37), when the parson is called "undeniably the most admirable of the pilgrims" (p. 275), and when Boccaccio's Pandaro is described as "less sleazy" than Chaucer's Pandarus (p. 266). Rossignol once comments that "any reading of any (...) text" is going to depend "on what the reader brings to the text in way of his or her own intellectual,
emotional and ideological baggage” (p. 92). In the case of this publication, her own "baggage" has led to the marginalization of a whole host of contemporary critical voices. As a rare exception, the section on the *Canterbury Tales* mentions Priscilla Martin, Carolyn Dinshaw ("provides an enjoyable and enlightening read"), and Peggy Knapp's studies as representing "feminist" and "recent literary theory" (p. 65). Knapp's *Chaucer and the Social Contest* is correctly characterized as drawing on the writings of Bakhtin and Foucault, but these two critics' relevance for recent Chaucer criticism is silenced as neither of them is ever mentioned again or appears in Rossignol's index. In general, a combination of (old) historicist, biographic, Robertsonian, allegorical, and Christian readings is favored while aesthetic observations are rare and new historicist, Marxist, linguistic, or psychoanalytic theories (esp. the latter would have been extremely helpful for adding convincing explanations for the origins of what Rossignol terms the "philosophy" of courtly love, p. 100.) are almost entirely banned from the book.

While one might defend this underlying exclusionary strategy as a way of avoiding overly abstract or theoretical answers to questions in a book dedicated to presenting facts only, Rossignol is not consistent in following her own suggestions about leaving the answers to certain questions "veiled in mystery" since "Chaucer himself is unavailable to answer them" (p. 348). Indeed, she is convinced that the poet is a good medieval Christian and that, consequently, to give just one illustrative example, his conclusion to the *Canterbury Tales* can only be interpreted as a serious act of repentance for "writing those of his works which display vanity or are conducive of sin" (p. 81). To prove her point, Rossignol repeats and cites the actual textual facts, namely that Chaucer names each and every one of his vain and sinful texts but subsumes the virtuous ones (in addition to the *Boece*) as "othere bookes of legendes of seintes, and omelies, and moralitee, and devocioun". However, the poet's strategy can just as easily be understood as his ingenious use of the conventions of the *Ars Moriendi* for committing to memory the less didactic and more experimental of his literary texts. Don Howard has reminded readers of the "Retraction's" potential for Chaucer's paradoxical desire to have things both ways:

We may see him here faltering, in a moment of confusion, possibly fear. He has, in his last hour, one eye on God and the other on posterity, one on salvation and the other on fame. The contradictions in the passage are not different in kind from the contradictions in all his writings: with his ironic self-effacement he turns to meet his Maker, carefully reminding the reader of the exact titles of those works he would 'retract', by which he means to ask for our best intentions in reading them, and they are the works for which, six centuries, we do remember him. (...) The belief of Chaucer's age that dying can be an art reveals, more than anything else, its new feeling about art. Death is no longer only the beginning of eternal life; it is one's last moment of artful glory in the world. (Fn. 2)

"Words in a dictionary do not refer to anything except all the other words in a dictionary; and to understand the definition of one item, it is necessary to understand the code of which the item is a part." (Fn. 3) Due to a similarly circular structure in Rossignol's volume, her preference for a religious reading of the "Retraction" not only appears in the entry on the "Retraction" itself, but is reiterated and reinforced
over and over in other entries which, more often than not, refer back to the entry on the "Retraction" or the "Parson's Tale" (e.g., p. 65: "he asks God's forgiveness for those things that he has written, including some of the foregoing tales, that contain elements of sin"; p. 85: "Chaucer begs forgiveness for and revokes all his secular poetry"; p. 179: "a retraction (...) wherein the poet asks God's forgiveness for having written tales 'that sownen into synne'"; p. 205: "He refers to the work by this title in the Retraction (...), listing it among those works that he asks God to forgive him for writing because they seem too caught up in worldly vanities"). For the reader consulting the reference book over time and on a variety of topics, an essentializing picture of an exclusively moral and Christian Chaucer evolves, a dominant paradigm which obstructs the path toward other, variant interpretive possibilities.

A strongly idiosyncratic or subjective streak also informs the well over 60 entries on Chaucer scholars. While most of the Chaucerians included are obvious and useful choices, one does wonder about the criteria which made Rossignol reserve a space for John Norton-Smith, but to deny similar space to Henry Ansgar Kelly (esp. on Chaucer and tragedy), David Lawton (e.g. on Chaucer's narrative perspective), Marshall Leicester (on the representation of the subject in the Canterbury Tales), or David Wallace (on Chaucer and Boccaccio; see Fn. 4). She describes Edith Rickert as "one of the earliest women to make an outstanding contribution to Chaucer studies" (p. 310), but Eleanor Hammond who, earlier than Rickert, produced the most comprehensive reference book on pre-20th-century scholarship on Chaucer, is not mentioned anywhere (Fn. 5). A number of amusing but irrelevant trivia such as Rickert's "near fatal heart attack" from too much work on Chauceriana (p. 310), E.T. Donaldson's deathbed work on the B-text of Piers Plowman (p. 118), and Francis P. Magoun's book on History of Football from the Beginnings to 1871 have wiggled their way into these short passages, but one of the most acclaimed (albeit controversial) creative readings of the Canterbury Tales, Pier Paolo Pasolini's film Il racconti di Canterbury (1971) has not been deemed worthy of incorporation. Perhaps that is not surprising, however, as only one Italian (Piero Boitani) and one German scholar (Wolfgang Clemen) have found acceptance among a restrictively Anglo-American phalanx of important Chaucerians. Even for the time period between 1870 to 1920, when German universities produced almost as many doctoral dissertations, monographs, and essays on Chaucer as British and U.S. institutions together, not one single German scholar made the cut. Bernhard Ten Brink, author of the first truly academic investigation on Chaucer's Sprache und Verskunst (1884; English trans., The Language and Meter of Chaucer, 1901) and of the first thorough monograph on Chaucer's development as a writer and the chronology of his texts (Chaucer. Studien zur Geschichte seiner Entwicklung und zur Chronologie seiner Schriften) (1870), would have been the most obvious choice. Rossignol claims that J.S.P. Tatlock's The Development and Chronology of Chaucer's Works was "the earliest serious effort" to "establish a chronology for most of Chaucer's writings" on the basis of internal and external evidence (p. 350) although Ten Brink's internationally acclaimed book was published 39 years before Tatlock's. Furthermore, one look at the survey charts in Traugott Naunin's Der Einfluss der mittelalterlichen Rhetorik auf Chaucers Dichtung (1929) demonstrates that the development and chronology of the poet's texts was one of the central obsessions of Chaucer philology in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century and, thus, dozens of

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scholars were busy contributing to the discussion of this very paradigm (Naunin collates the continually changing theories and attempts at dating Chaucer's texts in the scholarship of well over 30 Chaucerians from 1866 to 1927). Germanicum, non legitur? This impression is certainly supported by Rossignol's version of Wolfgang Clemen's biography which she Americanizes/Englishes to the point of caricature: Clemen never "rewrote" an English study called *The Young Chaucer*, as Rossignol's description suggests, but he revised and slightly enlarged his originally German study, *Der junge Chaucer* (1938) into another German study, *Chaucers frühe Dichtung* (1963), and this book was translated and published in English under the title *Chaucer's Early Poetry* (1963); while it is true that he was "educated at German universities and at Cambridge," mentioning Cambridge by name (although he only spent one year there) and subsuming the five years at Heidelberg, Freiburg, Berlin, Munich, and Bonn (taking courses with philosopher Karl Jaspers and philologist Ernst Robert Curtius, to name only two of the more illustrious of his teachers) misrepresents the major influences on his university education; his middle name, Hermann, which he (like most Germans) almost never used and which was probably given to him to honor his grandfather, Hermann v. Wätjen, Rossignol's text has altered into the English spelling "Herman"; and finally, the entry claims that Clemen is still alive, although he died almost ten years ago, on March 16, 1990 (Fn. 6). In an age where information is easily verifiable by sending a simple e-mail message to a colleague overseas, avoidable factual errors like these are problematic, and one has to wonder about the exactitude and reliability of the information in other entries.

A few other comments on specific sections in the volume: the list of common Chaucerian words on p. 79 is much too short (Peter G. Beidler's list in the introduction to his "Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism" edition of the "Wife of Bath's Tale" (1996) might serve as a model; even more suitable as general resources are the lists provided by Albert C. Baugh, in *Chaucer's Major Poetry*, 1963, and by R. A. Shoaf, in *Geoffrey Chaucer: Troilus and Criseyde*, 1989); on Chaucer's Pronunciation, Helge Kökeritz's handy volume might be recommended as still the best and most concise approach especially for students; the entry "Latinus" centers on Turnus as the exclusive cause for hostilities against Aeneas and his Trojans in Vergil's *Aeneid* although the Fury Allecto, sent by Juno, and Queen Amata, Lavinia's mother, are certainly as important for the outbreak of the war; John Gardner's *The Life and Times of Chaucer* is indeed a "very entertainingly written biography" (p. 72), but any fact-seeking student of the novelistic rendering should be aware that reviewers of Gardner's study have found a host of problems with it and would not recommend its use without caution; many of Walter W. Skeat's suggestions for a Chaucer canon were indeed accepted by many twentieth-century scholars, but his much too mechanistic and pseudo-scientific "rhyme tests" were not (as the entry on p. 335 seems to suggest); based on the evidence of such a rhyme test, e.g., Skeat had originally argued against the authenticity of Chaucer's translation of the *Roman de la Rose*; John Norton-Smith is said to be "probably the only scholar" to argue against the critical view that *Anelida and Arcite* is an unfinished poem; Larry Sklute's fine study, *Virtue of necessity: Inconclusivness and Narrative Form in Chaucer's Poetry* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1984), provides a convincing alternative reading to Norton-Smith's, one which sees inconclusiveness as a kind of authorial evasion of closed, authoritative
determinations of meaning and moral values--corresponding to the cognitive indeterminacy of late-medieval nominalism; while it is true that Chaucer appears to write his *Treatise on the Astrolabe* for a ten-year-old boy, his son Lewis, Edgar Laird has argued persuasively that this dedication may be in part a "pretense by which Chaucer could write plainly and simply for a wider audience, including courtly personages, without seeming uncourtly or condescending." ("Astrolabes and the Construction of Time in the Late Middle Ages," *Disputatio* 2 (1997), p. 57); his prologue speaks, after all, not only to "Iyte Lowis" but also to "every discreet persone that redith or herith this litel tretis," and fifteenth-century manuscripts of the Treatise suggest a heterogeneous readership; any entry on "Lollius" should make note of the various aesthetic and authorial consequences the choice of this perhaps fictitious source provided to the poet (see, e.g., John V. Fleming, *Classical Imitation and Interpretation in Chaucer's Troilus*, 1990, pp. 179-200); an English translation of "Pandaro" (p. 266) would explain Boccaccio's choice of this telling name as a go-between; as Joseph A. Dane has recently demonstrated ("The Chaucerian Reception of Henry Bradshaw," *Archiv* 235 (1998), 48-64), Henry Bradshaw deserves recognition as an eminent Chaucerian not only because of the (in)famous "Shift" (to which a full entry is given on p. 51f.); unlike the illustrations/renderings of the pilgrims or of the Peasants' Revolt, the relevance of a large drawing of Triton, the son of Neptune (p. 360), for Chaucer studies definitely needs some explaining.

The problems mentioned above are not meant to distract from Rossignol's generally sound plan to create an all-encompassing *summa* of what heretofore has been distributed among various volumes such as glossaries, name dictionaries, gazetteers, and commentaries to editions. Rossignol displays not only a thorough knowledge of Chaucer's texts, but also shows impressive general learning in the area of medieval culture. Her plot summaries of the Chaucerian texts are excellent, and entries such as the ones on "childhood," "diet," and "education" in the Middle Ages provide concise and solid information. At the same time, however, these problems demonstrate that the maker of a dictionary or encyclopedia is never merely the proverbial Johnsonian "harmless drudge" who would simply record words or facts which then speak for themselves. Rather, the selection process and the particularly circular structure of a dictionary-like approach have created a book which -- while claiming objectivity -- is abundantly informed by its author's "Weltanschauung" and methodological preferences. There is nothing wrong with those preferences per se, but the outward factuality of the publication, authenticated by a 16-page, small-print, general index and appendices presenting characters and historical figures mentioned or quoted in Chaucer (I), places mentioned in Chaucer (II), a chronology of Chaucer's life with significant historical and literary events (III), a list of works by Chaucer (IV), and a map of the "Canterbury Highway" (V), conceals the compiler's subjective judgments and transmutes them into the one authoritative view of the medieval writer. There is no doubt that, due to its position as the first truly universal reference book on Chaucer's biography and texts, *Chaucer A to Z* will make its way into most high-school and many college and university libraries where librarians, obliged to make a budget-induced choice between the most recent postmodern study of Chaucer's poetry and this factophile "Facts-on-File" volume, will opt for the latter as the more lasting investment. The few times this reviewer tested the facts presented in the volume, however, indicate that

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even in this respect a thorough revision is needed before the book will be entitled to its claim of being "the essential reference" on the Chaucer's life and works. In addition to being more inclusive about widely-accepted critical paradigms, such a revision of the existing text should also correct the following minor errata: several names (e.g. Aurelius, Henry Bradly (sic), Peggy Knapp, and Caroline D. Eckhardt) appear in the text on pp. 225, 241, 244, and 317, but are not indexed for these pages; misspellings/typos include: De caus(e) Dei (p. 52); residence i(n) north of Paris (p. 53); Canterbury(g)e (p. 56); the Italian peninsula(r) (p. 68); masterpiece (p. 87); Ostr(a)gothic (p. 160); PALAMON (and) ARCTIE (p. 199); Aibur Be Condit(o) (p. 218); capitol (p. 219); De Nuptiis Mercurii et Philologiae (should read "Philologiae", p. 232); Middleburg(h) (p. 236); principle characters should read "principal" (p. 254); Nun(s)'s Priest's story (p. 256); a series of DREAM VISION(s) (p. 292); Robinson believes (should be "Robertson", p. 307); principle character (p. 333) and principle parts (p. 359) should read "principal"; Lat(t)er 14th Century (map title on p. 413).

Notes:


6) Wolfgang Weiss's essay honoring Clemen, originally published in Anglia 108 (1990), 281-91, is accessible on the internet at: http://www.anglistik.uni-muenchen.de/clemen.htm. Dr. Ingeborg Boltz, a Librarian at the Munich Shakespeare Library, informs me (in an e-mail dated January 18, 2000) that in the 20 years of her collaboration with Professor Clemen she cannot remember him "using the first name Hermann ever. If he ever used it, he seems to have done so at the beginning of his career, and then he only used the initial (scil. "H.")."