It’s an honor, and a considerable burden, to have the responsibility of attempting to sum up, respond to, or otherwise help to end on a good note this large, very long, and multi-faceted conference. Jennifer and my main obligation is plainly to be brief, while my first task here as a respondent is as plainly to echo the congratulations just given all those who put the conference together, on behalf of all the participants.

The New Chaucer Society is an organization whose workings, indeed whose very name suggests, its complicated relation to history: not only to medieval history or even the history of the Society itself but also, and especially, to the history of the scholarly field it represents. I was reminded again of this complexity by the terms in which the two David Lawton, David Wallace, and Robert Edwards invited Jennifer Summit and myself to do this summing up, late last year: for our email invitation suggested that we might be particularly appropriate choices to perform this agonizing task, not for the brilliance of our inventive wits, nor even for our clearly exceptional gullibility, but because we both happen to occupy a strategic place, as the email put it, “on the edge” of Chaucer studies – and so, presumably, might comment on the proceedings with some sort of detachment, as people able at least to pose as semi-outsiders.

Now I’ve no problem with being on the edge: edge is the new margin which, not so long ago, was the new centre. But the terms of the invitation were intriguing because, if my own work, or Jennifer’s, might indeed be considered on the “edge” of the work Chaucerians generally do, the same could be said of some sixty percent of the papers at this conference, which push outwards and forwards – rarely backwards – from Chaucer to cover many of the other writers and topics that current Middle English studies considers important. Wandering around sessions over the last five days, trying to be some of the time in sessions where I’d expect to find myself as well as in others I’d normally be too parochial even to look, I’ve crossed this “edge” over and over again, to the point where I feel quite confident in saying that one of the major, perhaps the major, divide within our discipline is still between its Chaucerian and its non-Chaucerian centripelatisms: between the kind of work in which all roads run to Chaucer and the kind of work in which Chaucer is himself a road leading elsewhere. Perhaps Jennifer and I are really up here because “the edge” of Chaucer studies is the current, somewhat fissured centre of the discipline, which it’s our job to try now to represent back to you, to parse, perhaps to paper over, using this conference as our body of evidence.

Structurally, in its choice of general conference topics, its hosting of the biennial Chaucer lecture, and in the Chaucerian subject-matter still invariably chosen by the Society’s presidents for their address, the New Chaucer Society is still about Chaucer. In practice, as the field of Middle English studies has broadened, and perhaps in particular as jobs have habitually come to be advertised in Middle English, rather than Chaucer, the Society has broadened too, now offering generous room to those many of us “on the edge,” and even to some who, by the standards, say, of the Old Chaucer Society, might have been considered quite beyond the Pale. In this double strategy, the Society has adopted a relatively modest strategy of conservative
pluralism, seeking to reflect, rather than direct, the discipline as it changes, while upholding the 
special value of Chaucer and Chaucerian research both to the intellectual life of our branch of the 
profession and to such institutional and public prestige as it may have: this is both why the 
Society’s conference and its journal, Studies in the Age of Chaucer, offers such a good snapshot 
of the field.

I’m far more nearly persuaded of the intellectual and aesthetic argument here than the 
institutional one. It’s obvious that, for many here, Chaucer remains simply the most interesting 
and demanding of all the writers in our field to study and to think with; and that even for those of 
us whose most passionate attachments are elsewhere, Chaucer is still the place where many of 
our new intellectual perspectives come from or find their ultimate test (the question “does it 
work for Chaucer?” can still make or break in this business), as well as being the bedrock of our 
medieval teaching. Although work on Chaucer can seem inward-looking to the rest of the field – 
just as work anywhere else in the field can look parochially “medieval” to Chaucerians –  as a 
whole Chaucer is also still one of our chief guarantors of methodological pluralism, if only 
because he represents so much the most densely cultivated area of that field: a place where we 
experiment with many of our new ideas and approaches, besides being the place where our 
relationship to other areas of English study is often most likely to seem close and significant.

But to strike my first discordant note with this conference, in this case with David’s splendid and 
thoughtful presidential address, it’s less obvious to me that we can survive indefinitely as a field 
on the coat-tails of Chaucer’s steadily diminishing public fame, however creatively he is being 
read, reinterpreted, and regenerated by contemporary novelists, poets, and performers, most of 
whom are having far more trouble than us making an honest penny. The prestige accorded high 
and popular culture in the world at large has undergone one of those strange inversions over the 
last few decades, and there’s little any of us can do about this: a fact that puts us at a huge and 
structural disadvantage in relation to our early modernist colleagues, who still have Shakespeare, 
a name not hundreds, nor thousands, but tens of thousands of points higher than Chaucer’s (or 
anyone else’s) in the recognition charts, and going to stay that way.

Although there are of course areas in which Chaucer’s name is our standard-bearer for all that, 
particularly with our English department colleagues and in the other, very real, pockets in which 
high culture is still what it was, there are other institutional and intellectual contexts in which 
studying Chaucer is one of the least, not most, comprehensible things that medievalists do; we 
got a whiff of that yesterday, I think, in James Scott’s introductory remarks. We heard from 
Stephanie Trigg on Thursday of a large Australian research grant awarded in part to medievalists 
because they subsumed their identity into a category called Early Europe. Good work in Britain 
is being done that owes its funding to its perceived relevance for the heritage industry. And there 
are other contexts in which a presentation of our field as primarily an archival enterprise, now 
poised for revolutionary advance in the digital era, has clearly been beneficial to us.

In other areas, we are still missing out on opportunities, both for self-advertisement and for 
thinking of our work in new ways, framing ourselves in terms wider than as “Chaucerians,” “
Middle English scholars,” or “medievalists.” We could do more than we do to promote our
collective authority as cultural and intellectual historians, and we could do much more to promote access to our materials, to frame ourselves more as evangelists of our archives and less as keeper of their mysteries. Why, for example, are we not loudly demanding that Early English Books Online take on manuscript books and make Middle English writing available on the web as a whole, rather than confining our energies to furthering the multiple, ever more-detailed reproduction of a few, chosen books and texts? The current gulf between print and manuscript books as these are represented on the Web effectively reproduces the crudest stereotypes about the revolutionary impact of print, allowing a definition of Early Books as early print books to stand, and so suggesting that it’s only print — tidily entering the picture with the rise of humanism and close in time to the reformation — that brings thought and writing into visibility. Medieval manuscript books, indeed the medieval itself, become a Dark Age once again in the process, brilliantly illuminated by only a few, lavishly illustrated and culturally privileged treasures. We should not be allowing this picture to stand unchallenged.

As a single-author society which also represents the interests of a period field (in all senses of the word “interests”), the New Chaucer Society — and that’s not just the organization’s small group of volunteer directors and organizers but all of us here in the decisions we take to attend, the papers we give, the attitudes we hold towards medieval studies in general — has the difficult task of remembering and reflecting all this. Both the difficulty and the importance of continuing to do so have been evident in the conference now coming to its end.

What can be said about our field on the basis of this conference? Where are we trending? Jennifer is going to summarize some of the conference themes in a moment, so my remarks will be confined to a crude summary of the “what’s in, what’s out” variety. At least going by the aspirations reflected in the titles of sessions and papers, and often by the papers themselves, most things seem to be “in” at present, although there does seem to be a drift towards an ever-greater engagement with the patterns of late-medieval political, religious, cultural, and above all material history, and away from the reflective, the philosophical, and theoretical. Fifteen years ago, it would have been hard to credit the emphasis on paleography in particular and textual scholarship at this conference, from sessions on Adam Scriveyn and on Digital Chaucer to an e-panel on the Textual Crux and another on Manuscripts and Textual Culture (I’d have liked yet another panel, on editing itself, for balance); and the rise of the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries as areas of key concern for literary historians, manifested in over a dozen sessions here, is still only just visible as a trend as recently as The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature from 1999.

Panels on Usk and Lydgate as well as Langland and Gower reflect our collective fascination with Chaucer’s aesthetic ambit, but also, probably more strongly, our keen interest in late-medieval London. Non-Londoners, apart from Julian of Norwich, did not get much of a look-in, and Julian was mainly represented as a case study in the modern reception of medieval works (the strength of medievalism in Middle English Studies was on ample and interesting display here). The Gawain poet, still in danger of being renamed the Cleanness poet, currently plays second fiddle to the author of St. Erkenwald. Margery Kempe was uncharacteristically taciturn, and I heard only one paper on provincial drama. Lollards might seem to have been rather loudly
absent but were actually subsumed into sessions on medieval religion in general. Religion has
gained a lot of ground in the last ten years: since this is my own special interest, I want to say
that a sign of the mature place of the religious in our field that I’ve found heartening here is how
far the religious has been normalized, so that rather than being set off against the secular, as used
to be the case, it can crop up anywhere without either assuming too special a prominence or
being represented as the skeleton in the closet. The three sessions on Ethics, for example,
mingled discussion of what would once have been distinguished firmly as “secular” and
“religious” ethics without anyone seeming to notice – although this was unfortunately in part
because the reading of eleven major papers over a period of four and a half hours leaves little
time for noticing anything, a sadly clear instance (I can say this because my own paper fell into
this group of sessions) of the whole feeling less than the sum of its parts. On the other hand,
while there was a good linguistics session on whether or not Middle English is a Creole – the
answer is a qualified no, in case you were wondering – the “vernacular” seems a less urgent
category here than it has in the recent past, perhaps simply because it’s become too mainstream
to merit much comment. This seems, to a lesser extent, also to be the case with the categories of
“gender” and “theory,” terms honored more by the titles of sessions than by their content (though
I attended a gender e-session this morning). Although we were treated to a rich analysis of
Chaucerian orientalism in Susan Crane’s marvelous lecture on inter-species kindness in The
Squire’s Tale, I otherwise looked in vain for work on pre-modern encounters with the non-
Christian, a strange omission in the current political climate.

Several sessions announced a return to “close reading,” or to a “new formalism,” to an extent
representing themselves defensively, as bastions against what I believe Arenye Fradenburg
referred to as a “hegemonic historicism.” There are quite persistent signs at present of
dissatisfaction at how the aesthetic, the appreciative, is putatively being squeezed out by the
field’s emphasis on political and cultural analysis, and trend-spotters may be right to prick up
their ears, since this dissatisfaction seems to have successfully shed its former “old guard”
image. But it does need to be remarked that close reading, far from being a forgotten art at this
conference, remains what it always was, the bread and butter of large numbers of papers,
particularly papers on Chaucer. The opposition between historicism and close reading is also
likely to surprise the several professional historians in attendance here, since the one area in
which literary scholars have demonstrably influenced historical work is in just this area. I
suspect the real issues at stake in this opposition are different and worth more thought. Objections to historicism may have more to do with a dislike of the aestheticisation of history, of
the substitution of cultural poetics for literary poetics, involved in many current modes of literary
history. I don’t think anyone actually objects to formalism any more, although it is true that our
collective expertise in the traditional kinds of formal analysis is much diminished.

However exhausting it’s been, I’ve had a marvelous time running round trying and failing to
encompass this conference in all its variety and intellectual richness. I’d like to conclude,
though, with two concerns with which this experience leaves me, one to do with the matter of
periodization, the other with the relative lack of the abstract, or the theoretical and philosophical,
in what we’ve heard. Partly inspired by the formidable energies of some of the people most in
evidence here, including Paul Strohm and especially my colleague James Simpson, a great deal
of attention is currently being paid, both to the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries as areas of study and to the more abstract question of the relationship between the late medieval and the early modern. James in particular calls for a retrenching of the field back within its disciplinary boundaries – for a suspension of our efforts to talk to medievalists in other disciplines – in favour of generating more engaged conversations with our department colleagues working on later literary periods. I could not agree more about generating the new conversations – though I haven’t yet heard many early modernists talking back – just as I could not agree less with his call to deemphasize the interdisciplinary traditions of our field, for all that it is high time to revisit the terms on which interdisciplinary conversation is conducted. But whatever the rights and wrongs of this disagreement may be, I do want to draw urgent attention to an unintended consequence of our current interest in the moment of transition between the medieval and the early modern: its downgrading of work on the 300 years of vernacular writing, Middle English and Anglo-Norman, before Chaucer, and its reinscription of the false and multiply exploded view that Chaucer is the place where discussion of English literature can legitimately begin. For Middle English scholars, and for the New Chaucer Society, Chaucer and the late fourteenth-century are our inevitable centre of attention, but must be considered the fulcrum of our period, not the moment when it gets interesting enough to talk about. Where, then, was the early medieval at this conference, even the early fourteenth century? Its absence, in the face of the brilliant work that is being done in that part of the field, by far too few people, has been my biggest disappointment over the last few days.

My other disappointment has been with the extent to which our current interest in material culture runs the risk of sidelining what I think of as the philosophical side of the field: its interest in the history of ideas, in literary theory, and in the other modes in which we engage directly, as intellectuals, with the thinking our medieval texts are doing. I do think it’s significant, and a pity, that the only non-literary scholars who feel it worth their while to attend this conference are social historians. Although I learned a good deal from the historical plenary on Sunday, next time we meet, it would be good to be addressed, say, by a political theorist, a theologian, a philosopher with medieval interests; and wonderful if, instead of summoning these extra-disciplinary intellects to speak at us through the medium of the plenary – informing us of what we need to know to practice our own craft better, surely an awkward situation in which to place a visiting expert – they came and could engage with us and our papers in dialogue. However this suggestion goes down, I do derive from this meeting the lesson that Chaucer studies, or Middle English studies, can have too much historicism, if by historicism we refer to the local enterprise of literary history.

I’ll hand over now to Jennifer, after adding that I do hope that the discussion that follows this will include some thoughts from people about the form of the conference, its conduct as an intellectual event. Do we really want our panels so stuffed with papers there is so little time for discussion? How can we get around that, given everyone’s need for a turn to speak? How does this NCS’s innovation, the un-themed conference, work? Might it be worth focusing, next time, not on one but on three or four areas of field concern, and reserving really substantial discussion and response time for panels dealing with each of them? These and other questions are for the next conference’s program organizers to decide, but now would be the time for everyone to make
suggestions.