

## Ramona Bressie, the Study of Manuscripts, and the Chaucer Life-Records

Thomas H. Bestul

**R**AMONA BRESSIE was born in Gilman, Illinois, on December 3, 1894, and died in London, England, on April 11, 1970. She received a PhD in English from the University of Chicago in 1928. Her involvement with the Chaucer Life-Records project began in 1927 and, in one form or another, continued to the end of her life. The role she played in that project, little known and lightly acknowledged, opens a vista into the *Chaucer Life-Records*, a standard work of reference published in 1966 upon which all students of Chaucer depend. Her life story also has much to tell us about women's place in the academy from the perspective of one who stood at its margins; and it speaks eloquently to us about the human costs of scholarship. After a promising beginning, Bressie reaped a harvest of bitter disappointments in her career, ending her days in isolation, racked by paranoia and festering resentment. This study is based largely on Bressie's papers, including a remarkable set of diaries, which were deposited in the University of Chicago Library in 1975.

Bressie took her undergraduate degree from the University of Chicago in 1920 and then taught high school English for three years before returning to the University for graduate study in 1923. Her intellectual formation took place during a remarkably energetic period for Medieval Studies there. As most students of Chaucer know, in the mid-1920s John Mathews Manly launched a vastly ambitious undertaking to regroup Chaucer studies on a scientific footing. Edith Rickert joined the project in 1924.<sup>1</sup>

The project consisted of two elements: the first was a new edition of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, the first to be based on all known

manuscripts; the second was a new edition of the Chaucer life-records, which was in turn intended to set the stage for a new “scientific” biography of Chaucer to replace the speculative, sentimental biographies of the Victorian age.<sup>2</sup> Both the Life-Records project and the Canterbury Tales edition were to be supported by exhaustive searches for new manuscripts and archival material. The project was initially funded by a Rockefeller grant, which allowed Manly and Rickert to spend six months of the year in England in full-time research and to hire a team of professional archivists in London as well as a research staff in Chicago. The London archivists searched the Public Record Office for new material relating to the Life-Records, made transcriptions, and sent photostats of relevant documents back to Chicago for analysis and re-editing.<sup>3</sup>

Manly and Rickert’s critical axioms were characteristic of the period—they were convinced that Chaucer could be recovered through systematic research into records which would lead to objective knowledge of Chaucer’s milieu and thereby Chaucer himself. In an historical context, the Manly-Rickert Chaucer project is an indication of the professionalization of literary study that occurred at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries.<sup>4</sup> In a national context, that period at Chicago can be seen as a manifestation of the enormous optimism, ambition, and entrepreneurial spirit that marked American society in the post-Wilsonian era. At the University of Chicago in the 1920s, large-scale reference projects in the humanities seem to have been the order of the day. Besides the Chaucer projects, Manly as head of department was personally involved with the *Dictionary of American English on Historical Principles*, begun in 1924 and published in four volumes 1938–1944, while the University’s Oriental Institute pursued multifarious undertakings such as the Chicago Assyrian Dictionary, begun in 1921 and still in progress.

Bressie wrote her dissertation on Thomas Usk, a contemporary of Chaucer, under the direction of Edith Rickert, following the rigorous, document-based research methods she had learned from Manly and Rickert. Her 1928 article based on its contents has proved seminal and remains of interest to present-day scholars.<sup>5</sup> Bressie was employed by the University of Chicago as a research assistant on the Chaucer Life-Records project from 1927–1932. With the exception of a summer

spent in London in 1929, she conducted her work in Chicago, working alongside such persons as Florence White, Ruth Jackson, Mabel Dean, and others, not always in complete harmony. In a letter to Manly (March 13, 1929), the medievalist James R. Hulbert (1884–1969), who was supervising the work while Manly was on one of his periodic trips to England, reported that, “almost as soon as you left, Miss Bressie approached me with the suggestion that she ought to be getting more money than the two workers associated with her, since the latter were not able to work either as fast or as accurately as she could.”<sup>6</sup> On the whole, though, Hulbert assured Manly that the work was going on “very smoothly and amicably,” although he rebuffed Bressie’s request as likely to cause morale problems for the other workers. Rather callously, Hulbert took the trouble to add: “Quite recently, Miss Bressie’s father has died. Perhaps this event will make her feel less need for increasing her income, and make her more satisfied with what she is getting.”

While Hulbert’s account hints that Bressie’s personality may have been a difficult one, it clearly reveals her not unjustified belief that she was the key member of the Chicago team. A principal task was the organization of the notes and photostats of documents sent from London by the research group working there. Bressie developed genealogical charts of Chaucer’s ancestors and descendents, made detailed chronological reconstructions of Chaucer’s journeys abroad based on the documentary evidence, and wrote a series of research reports summarizing what had been accomplished and pointing out areas that needed further research. She compiled a long list of the names of persons and places mentioned in the already published *Life-Records* collection and then systematically searched for their presence in the printed calendars of the Patent, Close, Fine, and Charter rolls.<sup>7</sup> Many of the findings in her reports eventually found their way into the 1966 edition of the *Life-Records*.<sup>8</sup> The record of her diligence is preserved in the archival boxes of the Chaucer *Life-Records* Collection in the University of Chicago Library.

She worked tirelessly on the problem of the location of the Chaucer tenement in Upper Thames Street, laboriously mapping the ownership of property holdings in the neighborhood to the extent that these could be determined from ancient deeds and other records.<sup>9</sup> In the course of her research, she became convinced the site of the Chaucer tenement

proposed by Vincent B. Redstone and his daughter Lilian J. Redstone (both members of the British archival research team hired by Manly and Rickert) was incorrect, and continued to work on this question to the end of her life.<sup>10</sup> Bressie also searched sale catalogues for records of unnoticed manuscripts of Chaucer and made lists of all the scribes, stationers, and booksellers known to have been working in London in Chaucer's lifetime. Finally, her study of the implications of the document recording Edward III's payment for the ransom of Chaucer after his capture in France, undertaken in connection with her extensive work on Chaucer's journeys abroad, eventually resulted in another important article.<sup>11</sup>

Bressie's indefatigable (and ungenerously remunerated) devotion to the Life-Records project was not without personal cost. She had been warned by Hulbert that taking up the assistantship had its risks and was not the best career move. In a letter to Edith Rickert, written just before her degree was completed, Bressie alludes to Hulbert's concern:

Mr. Hulbert seems to think I shall want a teaching position next year if I am going to take my degree. I rather protested and told him I wouldn't take anything that didn't seem to me better than what I've got[...]. Mr. Hulbert says this job leads nowhere. But I'm certainly getting somewhere, it seems to me, if my work is satisfactory to you. And I'm having a perfectly good time.<sup>12</sup>

Hulbert's warning proved to be correct. By the mid-1930s, when funding ran out, the Great Depression had deepened, and Bressie's attempts to find an academic job were futile.<sup>13</sup> She may have been thwarted by the economy and she may also have been the victim of gender bias, but it also seems likely that her age figured in her lack of success—in 1936 she would have been 42 years old and eight years beyond the PhD.<sup>14</sup>

Bressie's youthful optimism, expressed in the letter to Rickert of 1927, gave way to bitterness in later years. She was well aware that her work as an assistant on the Life-Records project had cost her dearly in terms of a career. In a diary entry written when she was 62, she ruefully observes that a fellow student, Martin Crow (about whom more later) had succeeded in landing a job at the University of Texas on the

strength of his work with Manly and Rickert, and complains of his insensitivity toward her:

He [i.e. Martin M. Crow] has complete lack of any feeling, as failure of Life Records project very painful to me as it lost me my chance to teach. When Miss Rickert asked me what I knew of Mr. Crow I mentioned only the best that I knew of him with no adverse criticism. Through my keeping my knowledge of his character to myself, he got job at University of Texas, formerly held by Slover.<sup>15</sup>

Besides her work on Chaucer, Bressie was interested in the bibliography of medieval manuscripts. The diversity and ambition of her research interests is characteristic of her and provoked a warning from her mentor Edith Rickert, who wrote to her in 1930:

You are full of good ideas! But don't get too many. You can't do all, or half, the projects in Chaucer and mediaeval literature that you write me about. It's a fine spirit and you are getting a broad foundation, but try to close in on the subject nearest your heart.<sup>16</sup>

When the assistantship with the Life-Records ended in 1932, her interest in bibliography was encouraged by James Westfall Thompson (1869–1941), a distinguished member of the history faculty at the University of Chicago, who sponsored several applications for fellowships to support her research. She was eventually awarded the Alice Freeman Palmer Fellowship by the American Association of University Women for 1933–1934.

Bressie was especially interested in developing reference tools that would make it possible to associate surviving manuscripts with the medieval libraries that once owned them and in producing sound editions of unpublished British medieval library catalogues and book lists. The AAUW fellowship allowed her to travel to London to work on her manuscript projects. Her grant application outlines an enormously wide-ranging plan of work. She describes her intention to “make a handbook assembling and digesting all available information on MS books in the British Isles in the Middle Ages,” prepared so as to “meet the best

standards of modern scholarship in every detail.”<sup>17</sup> Although most of the information would be drawn from existing printed catalogues, modern and medieval, Bressie correctly recognized the importance of sales catalogues as a largely unexamined source of information on medieval manuscripts, stating her intention also to explore such records as wills, letters, and expense accounts. The tentative title of the book was to be “Manuscript Books in the British Isles: A Bibliographical Manual.” Her application speaks of the need to examine unprinted medieval library catalogues while in England and refers to lists of manuscripts in a “synthetic catalogue” of her own devising of all libraries of religious houses in the British Isles. Almost as an afterthought she adds that she will solve the vexed problem of the relationship between Boston of Bury’s *Catalogus* (now ascribed to Henry of Kirkestede) and a work to which it bears similarities, the *Registrum Angliae* (known as the Franciscan Union Catalogue).<sup>18</sup>

While we may recognize here the inflated rhetoric of the grant application, Bressie’s planned undertaking was truly superhuman in scope and, as the outcome was to show, utterly unachievable for a single person working alone. Bressie’s penchant for grand designs may have been acquired from Manly, or absorbed from the University of Chicago ethos in general. What she had in mind seems to cover what would eventually appear in N. R. Ker’s *Medieval Libraries of Great Britain* (1941), as well as a volume or two in the Corpus of British Medieval Library Catalogues series. Ker’s book on libraries, which accomplished a large part of Bressie’s original project, was the result of collaboration with four other British scholars extending over more than twenty years and serves to illustrate, if such illustration were needed, the over-reaching nature of Bressie’s research plan.<sup>19</sup> As she worked on her project, she seems to have been unaware that Ker was already well along with a similar reference tool.

Part of her manuscript project was to make an edition of the unpublished fifteenth-century catalogue from the Augustinian Abbey of St. Mary, Leicester. Editing this large and complex catalogue—it lists between 900 and 1000 volumes—seems to have been a principal task of the fellowship year and later. In her papers is the typescript of a completed edition, with text, annotations, and a lengthy introduction,

the total running to some 180 pages.<sup>20</sup> Bressie again seems to have been working in isolation. When she began, she surely did not know that M. R. James was preparing an edition of the same catalogue, which was published in 1936–1941, rendering her edition redundant. Her failed effort seems especially tragic, because the James edition was riddled with inaccuracies and was not well done.<sup>21</sup> A sound edition, which perforce took no account of Bressie's work on the catalogue, appeared after many years of labor only in 1998.<sup>22</sup>

The other part of her project was the Franciscan Union Catalogue, or *Registrum Angliae*, a text once again with imposing editorial problems. It does not appear that Bressie made much progress on her proposed edition of this work, probably just as well, since once again, she seems to have been unaware of the ongoing English involvement in the daunting task of bringing the *Registrum* to print, an effort initiated by M. R. James in the early years of the twentieth century and worked on by several teams of scholars through the 1920s and 30s. The definitive edition, made by Richard Rouse and Mary Rouse, building on the work of Roger Mynors, appeared after many years of toil only in 1991.<sup>23</sup> As a result of her work on the *Registrum*, Bressie did, however, publish a technical article on the related *Catalogus* of Boston of Bury,<sup>24</sup> and her work on the bibliography of manuscripts in the 1930s likewise resulted in a chapter on Anglo-Saxon libraries in a reference book edited and largely written by her mentor, James Westfall Thompson.<sup>25</sup> Bressie was painfully out of her element in dealing with the Anglo-Saxon period, and her contribution includes several gross blunders, such as failure to recognize that the *Origines* and the *Etymologiae* of Isidore of Seville are one and the same work.<sup>26</sup> The reviewers were not kind.<sup>27</sup>

When all is said and done, it seems fair to say that, despite a few significant achievements,<sup>28</sup> Bressie's manuscript efforts were an exercise in futility, and one wonders why this had to be so. It is obvious that her research plans suffered from unrealistic, even grandiose, objectives, for which she must bear some responsibility, even if she had been inspired by the Chicago model to think large. One recalls Rickert's early effort to rein her in, as noted above. A more serious matter is that her work seems to have been conducted largely in ignorance of other activity in the field, especially in Britain, despite the fact that she made two extended

visits there. Even a modest amount of “networking” would have saved her from much duplication and waste of effort, granted that the prospect of approaching well-established Oxbridge males (such as M. R. James, provost of Eton College, 1918–1936) might have seemed daunting to a single woman from the American Midwest. Perhaps she was not well served by her mentors, who might have made the introductions or pushed her harder to make connections.<sup>29</sup> Yet it seems clear that much of the failure to network must be ascribed to her “loner” personality, so pronounced later in her life, but well in evidence by the 1930s and before. Independence tantamount to isolation describes a *modus operandi* in which she gloried. In a job application letter she states, as something of a boast, “I found my own subject for my doctor’s thesis, and solved my problem without help, correcting one of the important dates in the history of English literature as listed in the *Cambridge History*.”<sup>30</sup> Along with the independent attitude came a compulsion for secrecy in conducting her research, justified several times in her diaries in nationalistic terms as a need to avoid being “scooped” by the British. None of this mitigates the sadness of her failures, even as, in hindsight, it points to elements of a personality disorder that would become more intense with the passage of time.<sup>31</sup>

In the meantime, work on the Life-Records project continued in London and Chicago, albeit at a greatly reduced pace after Bressie’s formal disengagement in 1931. The Chicago Chaucer enterprise was beset with difficulties almost from the beginning.<sup>32</sup> Rockefeller backing dwindled away, and the arrival of the Great Depression compounded financial difficulties. The position of the Life-Records project was always particularly precarious. Support for the London research team continued in reduced form until the end of 1937, but Manly and Rickert spent their energies on the *Canterbury Tales* edition. Rickert died in 1938, before anything was published, and Manly died in 1940, a few months after the *Canterbury Tales* finally appeared in print; not surprisingly, much remained to be done on the Life-Records project. The advent of war in Europe in 1939 complicated matters and effectively brought work in Britain to a close. To salvage something from the project after the death of Manly, Lilian Redstone was commissioned by the University of Chicago to draw up a draft summarizing what

had been accomplished. The result was a text in longhand running to 2,932 pages, later known as the Redstone Manuscript, which was sent to Chicago in 1941. After the war, the project was taken over by two of Rickert's male students, Martin M. Crow (1901–1997; PhD Chicago, 1934) and Clair C. Olson (1901–1972; PhD Chicago, 1938). Crow and Olson eventually published their work as *Chaucer Life-Records* in 1966, having announced their intentions and claimed their turf in a series of papers and research-in-progress reports submitted to the Modern Language Association of America in the 1950s.<sup>33</sup>

Bressie, who had continued to work on the Chaucer biography on her own, found these developments disturbing. Part of her disquiet was no doubt the result of professional jealousy—it is plain from her diaries that she regarded herself as the heir to the Manly-Rickert Life-Records and felt that Crow and Olson had essentially hijacked the project from her.<sup>34</sup> Somewhat quixotically, she tried to stop Crow and Olson, so strongly did she feel that they were completely misguided in what they intended to do. Her objections are given in detailed reports to the University of Chicago Library and in letters to the Department of English written in 1957 and 1958, drafts of which are found in her papers. The main problem, as Bressie saw it, was that Crow and Olson had misunderstood, or perhaps willfully misrepresented, the true nature of the Life-Records project. A central issue was the Redstone Manuscript. According to Bressie, Crow and Olson mistakenly (or opportunistically) understood this to be a first draft of what Manly intended to publish as the final result of the project. Bressie protested that the Redstone Manuscript was rather a hastily assembled, uncritical summary of what had been done, which Manly never would have approved as the basis of a definitive edition of the Life-Records. In fact, Bressie argued, when the project closed down, the preliminary survey of documents envisaged by Manly had been only half completed, and the systematic search of archives and libraries for new records of Chaucer that was to have been conducted over a period of several years as a follow-up to this had not been begun at all. Thus what Crow and Olson were proposing to do could in no way be seen as the fulfillment of Manly's intentions for the life-records project he had initiated in 1927. Bressie herself, since 1936, and with Manly's blessing, had been working on completing the

preliminary survey of documents that was part of the original plan and on a book-length study of the biographical problems presented by the Manly-Rickert materials that would lay the groundwork for further work on the Chaucer biography.<sup>35</sup>

The misunderstanding of the true status of the Manly-Rickert Life-Records could be traced in large measure, according to Bressie, to the self-serving behavior of Lilian Redstone. Bressie's account of the history of the Redstone Manuscript is particularly disparaging:

The Redstone Manuscript was compiled over about ten years. When Professor Manly died, it had been at a standstill for some time, and Miss Redstone, finding herself in possession of a sizable portion of the property of the Manly project, and considerably behindhand with the Redstone Manuscript, hastily put the Redstone Manuscript together and sent it as quickly as possible to the University hoping it would be published as the final official publication of the Manly project but under Professor Rickert's name, instead of Professor Manly's and under her own name as editor perhaps because she could not venture to put herself forward as editor under Professor Manly [...]. [Miss Redstone] did not adhere scrupulously to the material in the collection but wrote spontaneously from memory, so that the Redstone Manuscript does not show what the work of the project was but rather Miss Redstone's version of it. The bulk of the Redstone Manuscript suggests extensive important re-working of the Life-Records material. But actually it was not reworked at all.<sup>36</sup>

As can be surmised from the above, Bressie's reservations about the viability of the Crow-Olson project had also to do with the quality of the underlying research performed by the British archival team, including Lilian's father, Vincent B. Redstone.<sup>37</sup> Bressie regarded the elder Redstone as hopelessly mired in the speculative excesses of romantic antiquarianism, one whose methods were the antithesis of the "scientific" principles espoused by Manly. Bressie's judgment of Lilian Redstone was no less severe: an amateur with no capacity to understand scientific research methods, who seemed to think that the purpose of the Life-Records project was to produce yet another fanciful biography

suitable for use in schools. Bressie's low opinion of the Redstones was compounded by the fact that she had come to regard them as mercenaries, exploiting Manly and Rickert for personal gain when they were at their most vulnerable, even demanding pay at their usual rate per page for an article in *Speculum* which Manly had recommended to the journal on their behalf.<sup>38</sup>

The following assessment of Lilian Redstone is taken, not from public correspondence, as the quotations above, but from Bressie's private diaries, which were begun in 1957 and continued to 1964. The diaries, never intended for public view, were undertaken partly to ward off loneliness after the death of her mother, who had lived with her in Chicago for many years. Bressie's diary entries on the Redstones, Edith Rickert, Martin Crow, and the Life-Records project therefore should certainly be understood in the psychological framework of her grief, loneliness, isolation, and advancing years, all of which must have colored her view of her former collaborator:

Miss Redstone certainly appears different to me now. I think I didn't know much until recently! She was getting all she could out of Miss Rickert. When I was giving Miss R notes free for nothing, Miss Redstone was holding her up for every penny she could get out of her, even pay for writing an article that was published in *Speculum*. Out of £400, there wasn't enough for any more than £50 for Miss Jamison's search of the Plea Rolls, and all the rest went to the Redstones, £200 to LJR [= Lilian J. Redstone], £50 to Mabel [= Mabel Redstone, another daughter, also employed by the Project], and the rest to VBR [=Vincent B. Redstone] for his invaluable charts of the Chaucer pedigree, etc.! By this time 1935-36 Miss Rickert was getting very peculiar, so that Miss Redstone's crowding her seems all the more sordid and mean and calculating[...]. Nothing ever could be made out of Miss Redstone's work. It is excruciatingly boring because it is all "spraddled out" in form and phrasing. She couldn't boil anything down and she couldn't make a chart at all. She had no sense of organization.<sup>39</sup>

Bressie's strongest antipathy, however, was directed against Martin

M. Crow, whom she accused of underhanded tactics in his takeover of the Life-Records project.<sup>40</sup> She had a very low opinion both of Crow's intellect and of his character. She thought he had latched onto the Life-Records project to advance his own career.<sup>41</sup> Her anxieties and resentment are evident in the following entry from her diary:

Have resolved to get all material for Chaucer book together, order photostats, and begin at beginning. Idea to beat CO [= Martin M. Crow and Clair C. Olson] to publication, diddle them into taking their time. Crow to my mind a typical example of narcissism as defined by psychologists. Meant to get more books on this. Have feared taking any definite step against CO for fear C might commit suicide when his mad dream of being Prof. Manly incarnated collapses, but book says his type incapable of suicide. My view is that Crow has sub-mediocre mind, not a living mind to begin with, but in environment which gives him contact of his mental superiors. Result his ambition to create a theocracy among Chaucerians with himself the object of worship.<sup>42</sup>

Much of their struggle over the Life-Records project was carried out in the aforementioned annual reports of work in progress published by the Chaucer section of the Modern Language Association. Throughout the 1950s, Bressie thought that Crow was using these reports as a means of self-promotion, that he was deliberately prolonging the editing of the Redstone manuscript to give the impression that he had done more work on the Life-Records project than he actually had. She also accused him of "skullduggery" in deliberately suppressing her research reports, or doctoring them so that it was not clear from reading them that she was working from the Manly-Rickert Chaucer materials. Crow was on the MLA committee that prepared these reports for much of the time, so she felt she had good reason for concern.

Bressie's resentment of Crow reached such a point that she avoided attending the MLA convention, fearing an ugly confrontation. Of the 1957 meeting, she remarked:

MLA meeting at Christmas in Chicago. Mean to stay home and

avoid encounter with CO [= Martin Crow and Clair Olson], likely to bring on hostilities, besides my sense of humor not equal to witnessing Crow's strutting as the reincarnation of JMM [= John Mathews Manly].<sup>43</sup>

But her darkest hour came in August 1955, when the Department of English at the University of Chicago, at the instigation of Crow, voted to give Crow and Olson an exclusive monopoly on access to the Life-Records materials in the university library. This had the effect of derailing her research and of giving Crow and Olson valuable time to move ahead with their project without worrying about a rival undertaking. Bressie, now debarred from access to the very material she had been instrumental in assembling, fought back, addressing numerous letters of appeal against the restriction. She finally prevailed. The restriction on access to the Life-Records collection was lifted in September 1958, and Bressie immediately resumed her study of the material in the University of Chicago library. But the delay was enough. Bressie worked on her Chaucer project until the end of her life, but never brought any of it to publication. Crow and Olson reaped the glory of fulfilling the Manly and Rickert legacy with the long-delayed publication of *Chaucer Life-Records* in 1966. Bressie's contribution is acknowledged in the Preface in a single sentence.<sup>44</sup> There is no record of what she thought of the published edition.

Opposing Crow and Olson was costly to Bressie in terms of time and energy, and, more poignantly, in terms of her mental health. Her diaries reveal that the struggle had transformed into an all-consuming obsession, pathological in the clinical sense of that term. By this time, she had clearly demonized Crow to the point of paranoia, describing him as her "mortal enemy number 1"<sup>45</sup> and regarding him as Iago to her Othello.<sup>46</sup> The struggle continued for nearly ten years, and if Bressie's judgments of Crow's behavior have substance, the conflict illustrates the ruthlessness of academic power politics in the 1940s and 50s. The triumph of a well-connected male professor over an isolated female seems a foregone conclusion. Furthermore, Bressie's struggle for the Life-Records also deeply unsettles the notion of a "community of scholars," which, for various reasons, is a particularly cherished illusion among

Chaucerians.<sup>47</sup> It also serves to deconstruct the triumphalist teleology of the Life-Records project chronicled in the preface to Crow-Olson. A tale is told there of heroic effort conducted over forty years to overcome obstacles and setbacks—including illness, death, war, and lack of funding—that stood in the way of achieving the final goal. One wonders if, among the “many difficult situations” they referred to that threatened the outcome, Crow and Olson had in mind the clash with Bressie over control of the project extending from 1948–1958.<sup>48</sup> But the main issue is Bressie’s critique of the Life-Records research. It must not of course be accepted uncritically, but if it has any credibility, it raises questions about the validity of the underlying scholarship upon which the 1966 edition is based, potentially destabilizing what has been accepted as a fixed anchor of positivist scholarship.<sup>49</sup>

Bressie’s story also challenges the emerging consensus on Edith Rickert. In recent years Rickert’s scholarly reputation has been burnished, particularly in feminist accounts. Much of this work has been valuable, rescuing Rickert from undue neglect and underlining the importance of her contributions as a full partner in the Chicago Chaucer projects. Bressie, on the other hand, looking back from the perspective of her old age, offers a markedly unflattering estimate of Rickert as scholar:

Yesterday I felt so baffled—thought of Miss Rickert—at my age, or alleged to be my age, old, heavy, frumpy-minded—romantic notions still rife in her mind about marrying Prof. Manly. Fantastic and pitiful and nothing ahead of her in following up research because all she ever had was pilfered from others. At our last encounter she was trying to maneuver me into yielding up my work on Life Record no. 34 for her to publish as *hers*. What a mess she and Lilian J. Redstone would have made of that!<sup>50</sup>

Bressie’s diaries show that her relationship to Rickert was psychologically fraught on many levels.<sup>51</sup> She may well have envied Rickert’s comparative success in the profession in comparison with her own situation. While Bressie’s judgment of Rickert should not of course be taken at face value, it certainly complicates the prevailing view, and is perhaps especially unsettling coming from a woman.<sup>52</sup> Notions of

sisterhood, of a community of women joined together in common purpose inside a male-dominated profession, are perhaps no more than a consolatory fantasy. Or perhaps Bressie's comments remind us of the truism that competition, jealousy, and sheer nastiness exist across the axis of gender.

Bressie's diaries give a vivid picture, not only of her skirmish with Crow, but also of the many obstacles she faced and the difficulties she contended with in order to continue her scholarship. Bressie never married (she said she wanted it that way),<sup>53</sup> and her father and only sibling (a sister) had died many years before the death of her mother in 1957. By the time the diaries begin, Bressie, at the age of 62, had no gainful employment, and supported herself frugally on a \$50 a month annuity from her mother's life insurance policy and the income from a farm in southern Illinois, also a legacy from her mother.<sup>54</sup> She lived alone in a modest flat in walking distance of the campus of the University of Chicago, a community to which she belonged yet did not belong. She lived in almost complete isolation from other human beings, an isolation compounded by encroaching deafness.<sup>55</sup> She rationalized her loneliness as an asset for a scholar—"free of meddling, chattering busybodies."<sup>56</sup> Bressie suffered from chronic insomnia and spent her wakeful hours in reading everything from Natalie Sarraute to Agatha Christie; alternatively, she passed the time by playing hymn tunes on her mother's harmonica. Her trips back and forth to the public library gave her rare opportunities for human interaction, as in this poignant excerpt from her diary:

Girl in library asked if I read all the books I returned. I told her I'd lost all my family and was all alone now and to keep off depression I turn on light as soon as I woke and read, that variety of books helps and showed her which of my books I especially liked. To my great astonishment her eyes filled with tears! If I could only get up steam to work!<sup>57</sup>

Bressie's third floor walk-up apartment was ill-heated in winter and infested by mice and cockroaches in all seasons. Her diaries record a losing battle to keep them at bay:

The roach powder excellent, far better than liquid spray[...]. It makes the roaches seek water: about a hundred of them in a pail of water I happened to leave standing in the bathroom.<sup>58</sup> [...] High stench in front, swept bathroom with no result. Decided it was a dead mouse.<sup>59</sup>

She lived through the racial transformation of her neighborhood from white to African American, holding on as the last white occupant of her apartment building. The neighborhood she lived in grew increasingly crime-ridden and violent. Bressie herself was several times the victim of crime. On one occasion she was knocked down on the stairs leading to her flat and robbed of her grocery money. Another time her basement storage locker was rifled—even her offprints were stolen. Yet in these challenging circumstances, Bressie persisted in her research on the Chaucer biography. Every day, in worn-out shoes, an unstylish hat, patched clothing, and with a game knee, she made the sometimes dangerous walk from her flat on Blackstone Avenue to the University Library, where she pored over microfilms and photostats to continue the research on Chaucer she had begun as a graduate student some forty years before.

The lifting of the restriction on the Life-Records collection seems to have energized her, as she resolved to redouble her efforts in order to beat Crow and Olson to publication. She began almost immediately to lay plans for an extended trip to Britain as the culmination of her research efforts. However, a most serious roadblock was thrown in her way at the end of 1960, when a despised cousin (having “the mind and soul of a codfish” according to Bressie) succeeded in having her involuntarily committed to the Illinois State Psychiatric Institute on the grounds that she was “mentally deranged.” Bressie thought he was after her property; but an objective reading of the diaries reveals personality traits that might well have alarmed an outsider. Even while institutionalized, Bressie displayed indomitable will and determination. She managed to get herself released after three months, certified as “without psychosis”—no mean feat in the American mental health environment of the 1960s.<sup>60</sup> On her release from the mental hospital, Bressie once again resumed her research on Chaucer.

The deterioration of her neighborhood and an increasingly difficult living situation, combined with her fear that war with the Soviet Union was imminent,<sup>61</sup> placed the long desired trip to London much on her mind. Finally, at the end of 1964, at the age of 70, she left her decaying apartment and sailed for England. There is no record of her activities there. On April 11, 1970, at the age of 75, she collapsed of a stroke and died.<sup>62</sup> She had confided to her diary that "One of my great worries is that nobody would look after me at death."<sup>63</sup> Bressie's body was unclaimed; it is buried in an unmarked grave in East Finchley, North London.<sup>64</sup> If she accomplished any scholarly work during her five years in London, no trace of it survives. It is likely that her research notes were consigned to the rubbish bin by her London landlord, who billed the American consulate for expenses in cleaning her flat after her death. In a final irony, Bressie died intestate, despite her intention, often expressed in the diaries, to leave everything to the American Association of University Women, the agency that had awarded her a fellowship in 1933. Her estate, which consisted primarily of her mother's farm in Roberts, Illinois, was tied up in probate for ten years, finally being distributed, in allotments as small as 1/1008, to some sixty cousins and second cousins about whom she cared nothing and whom, in many cases, she had never seen.<sup>65</sup>

Bressie's life invests with poignant meaning the term "independent scholar." In many ways she is the model of the oppressed female academic *par excellence*. Yet it would be facile to see her merely as the victim of an unjust system. Recent studies of scholars of her generation have told of women more successful than she in negotiating their way in a male-dominated academy despite the reality of diminished opportunities and open discrimination.<sup>66</sup> It is clear that Bressie's self-reliant, reclusive personality caused problems for her almost from the beginning, with results that can only be described as tragic, both personally and professionally. Neither was she well-served by her overly ambitious, indeed delusional, research goals, about which Rickert had cautioned her early on; nor could she have been helped by a disdainful attitude toward almost all her colleagues and associates, with the single exception of Manly. And over her final years hovers the specter of mental illness, of paranoia induced or compounded by isolation. While one may deplore

the ham-handedness of her imprisonment in a mental hospital, the need for psychiatric intervention is likely to have been real. Bressie's life might be regarded as marked by futility, depression, and misery that was in part self-inflicted. Yet it has another dimension too. She never flagged in her complete devotion to the life of the mind, never questioned her scholarly commitments or the value of the work she felt she was born to do. She left behind an enduring body of research on medieval literature and, in the face of tribulation, followed her scholarly pursuits until the last day of her life. In all her human complexity, let us remember her.

*University of Illinois at Chicago*

## ∞ END NOTES

1. Elizabeth Scala, "John Mathews Manly (1865-1940) and Edith Rickert (1871-1938)," in *Medieval Scholarship: Biographical Studies on the Formation of a Discipline*, vol. 2, ed. Helen Damico (New York: Garland, 1998), pp. 297-311; Elizabeth Scala, "Scandalous Assumptions: Edith Rickert and the Chicago Chaucer Project," *Medieval Feminist Forum* 30 (2000): 27-37; Elizabeth Scala, "Miss Rickert of Vassar' and Edith Rickert at the University of Chicago (1871-1938)," in *Women Medievalists and the Academy*, ed. Jane Chance (Madison: U Wisconsin P, 2005), pp. 126-45.

2. The new edition of the Life-Records was intended to replace *Life Records of Chaucer*, ed. W. D. Selby, F. J. Furnivall, E. A. Bond, and R. E. G. Kirk, Chaucer Society Publications, 2nd series, nos. 12, 14, 21, 32 (London, 1875-1900). The result of the Chicago project eventually appeared as *Chaucer Life-Records*, ed. Martin M. Crow and Clair C. Olson from materials compiled by John M. Manly and Edith Rickert with the assistance of Lilian J. Redstone and others (Oxford: Clarendon, 1966); hereafter cited as Crow-Olson. A brief history of the project appears in the Preface, pp. v-xii. The edition of the *Canterbury Tales* was published, after many delays, as *The Text of the Canterbury Tales, Studied on the Basis of all Known Manuscripts*, ed. John M. Manly and Edith Rickert, 8 vols. (Chicago: U Chicago P, 1940).

3. Roy Vance Ramsey, *The Manly-Rickert Text of The Canterbury Tales* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1994), pp. 57-166 (especially pp. 132-33 for the Life-Records); Virginia Leland, "Miss Rickert, Mr. Manly, and the Chaucer Laboratory," *The Chaucer Newsletter* 9.2 (1987): 1, 7-8; articles by Scala cited in n. 1 above.

4. Sealy Gilles and Sylvia Tomasch, "Professionalizing Chaucer: John Mathews Manly, Edith Rickert, and the *Canterbury Tales* as Cultural Capital," in *Reading Medieval Culture: Essays in Honor of Robert W. Hanning*, ed. Robert M. Stein and Sandra Pierson Prior (Notre Dame: U Notre Dame P, 2005), pp. 364-83; Chauncey Wood, "John Mathews Manly: Some Old Light on Chaucer, Being an Exposition on the 'Abhorrent Doctrine' and the 'More Abhorrent Doctrine,'" *Medieval Perspectives* 15 (2000): 1-10.

5. Ramona Bressie, "The Date of Thomas Usk's *Testament of Love*," *Modern Philology* 26 (1928): 17-29, cited in Paul Strohm, "Politics and Poetics: Usk and Chaucer in the 1380s," in *Literary Practice and Social Change in Britain, 1380-1530*, ed. Lee Patterson (Berkeley: U California P, 1990), pp. 83-112; p. 100 n. 22; Thomas Usk, *The Testament of Love*, ed. R. Allen Shoaf (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1998), pp. 22, 28; Anne Middleton, "Thomas Usk's 'Perdurable Letters': The *Testament of Love* from Script to Print," *Studies in Bibliography* 51 (1998), 63-116; pp. 63-64, 69-70.

6. University of Chicago Library, Special Collections Research Center, English Department Papers, box 8, folder 10. Quotations from all collections held by the Special Collections Research Center of the University of Chicago Library are with the kind permission of the University of Chicago Library.

7. University of Chicago Library, Special Collections Research Center, Chaucer Life-Records Collection, box 18, folder 1.

8. One small example: "Among the *dona* [gifts] is recorded a gift of a pair of slippers to a person named . . . ni Dauterne. This can hardly be other than Alice Dautre, a damsel of Elizabeth who later had a royal grant of a pension for her service to Elizabeth" (Bressie, "Notes on MS. Add. 18632," Chaucer Life-Records Collection, box 4, folder 2); compare "Possibly the person named Dauterne in the account [...] is to be identified with Alice Dautre" (Crow-Olson, p. 17 n. 4). Bressie's contributions are concentrated in chapters 2-4 of Crow-Olson.

9. Crow-Olson, pp. 8-12.

10. Thomas H. Bestul, "Did Chaucer Live at 177 Upper Thames Street? The Chaucer Life-Records and the Site of Chaucer's London Home," *Chaucer Review* 43 (2008): 1-15.

11. Ramona Bressie, "Was Chaucer at the Siege of Paris?" *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 39 (1940): 209-21 (utilized in Crow-Olson, pp. 23-28, especially p. 26 n. 2).

12. Draft of a letter (presumably to Edith Rickert, about 1927), University of Chicago Library, Special Collections Research Center, Ramona Bressie Papers, box 2, folder 5.

13. In her papers are two job application letters, one to Oklahoma City University (box 1, folder 1) and the other to MacMurray College in Jacksonville, Illinois (box 5, folder 10). They date from July 28, 1936, and January 4, 1938, respectively.

14. Age discrimination was at the time undoubtedly a real obstacle; for example, Bressie was ineligible to apply for an American Council of Learned Societies Fellowship. Manly wrote a letter on her behalf to the ACLS protesting the restriction that Fellowship candidates be no older than 37 (letter, October 28, 1932, English Department Papers, box 2, folder 13).

15. Ramona Bressie, Diaries, September 15, 1957. Bressie's diaries, bundled according to year, are found in box 1 of her papers, and are hereafter cited by date. Ironically, Manly had hoped to hire Crow as a research assistant on the Chaucer projects, but funds were not available (undated letter from Manly, English Department Papers, box 4, folder 9).

16. Postcard, London, June 2, 1930, Bressie Papers, box 1, folder 1.

17. "Report on a project," Bressie Papers, box 3, folder 19.

18. *Catalogus de libris authenticis et apocryphis*, ed. Richard H. Rouse and Mary A. Rouse, Corpus of British Medieval Library Catalogues, vol. 11 (London: British Academy, 2004), p. xxix; *Registrum Anglie de libris doctorum et auctorum veterum*, ed. Richard H. Rouse and Mary A. Rouse, the Latin text established by R. A. B. Mynors, Corpus of British Medieval Library Catalogues, vol. 2 (London: British Academy, 1991).

19. Neil R. Ker, *Medieval Libraries of Great Britain: A List of Surviving Books* (London: Royal Historical Society, 1941; 2nd edition, 1964, Supplement, 1987); Kevin S. Kiernan, "N. R. Ker (1908–1982)," in *Medieval Scholarship*, ed. Damico, pp. 425–37; pp. 427–28.

20. Bressie Papers, box 4, folder 8.

21. M. R. James, *Catalogue of the Library of Leicester Abbey*, Transactions of the Leicestershire Archaeological Society (Leicester: Leicestershire Archaeological Society, 1936–1937; 1940–1941); Richard Pfaff, *Montague Rhodes James* (London: Scolar, 1980), pp. 322–24.

22. Teresa Webber and Andrew Watson, *The Libraries of the Augustinian Canons*, Corpus of British Medieval Library Catalogues, vol. 6 (London: British Academy, 1998), pp. 104–399.

23. Rouse and Rouse, *Registrum*, pp. xxi–xxix. As late as 1960, Bressie

still claimed to be at work on her edition, as she states in a letter to Richard H. Rouse (February 29, 1960); the letter also suggests that by this time she was aware of Mynors's interest in the *Catalogus* and *Registrum*. I am grateful to Professor Rouse for sharing this letter with me.

24. Ramona Bressie, "Modern Textual Corruption in MS Cambridge Additional 3470," *Modern Language Notes* 60 (1945): 248–54, cited by Rouse and Rouse, *Catalogus de libris authenticis*, p. ccix.

25. Ramona Bressie, "Libraries of the British Isles in the Anglo-Saxon Period," in *The Medieval Library*, ed. James Westfall Thompson (Chicago: U Chicago P, 1939), pp. 102–125.

26. Bressie, "Libraries," p. 112.

27. For instance, Blanche Boyer in *Library Quarterly* 10 (1940): 396–415.

28. She published a brief booklist from a manuscript in the British Library (Ramona Bressie, "MS Sloane 3548, Folio 158," *Modern Language Notes* 54 [1939]: 246–56, re-edited by Webber and Watson, *Libraries of the Augustinian Canons*, pp. 414–26), identified several manuscripts from Leicester on the basis of *secundo folio* evidence (reported in the *Times Literary Supplement* [October 24, 1935, p. 671] and incorporated—with due credit—into Ker's *Medieval Libraries*), and suggested, in her best-known article on Chaucer, that William de Clowne, Abbot of Leicester (1345–1378), famous for his love of hunting, might have been a model for Chaucer's portrait of the monk (Ramona Bressie, "A Governour Wily and Wys," *Modern Language Notes* 54 [1939]: 477–90, cited in the notes to *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed., ed. Larry D. Benson [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987], p. 806).

29. Manly and Rickert certainly had full access to the British academic establishment, yet it is hard to fault them for failure to mentor; even if they had recognized it as a professional obligation (and it is not clear that aggressive mentoring would have been regarded as standard practice by the American professoriate of the time), both were in failing health and occupied with the race to complete the *Canterbury Tales* edition.

30. Draft of a letter to President A. G. Williamson, July 28, 1936, Bressie Papers, box 1, folder 1. The force of her boast must be understood in the context of an era in which it was customary for dissertation directors to assign topics to their students (Scala, "Miss Rickert of Vassar," p. 128).

31. It must be stressed that the available evidence shows Bressie still engaged with other scholars as late as 1937, when she corresponded with Manly on manuscript questions (letter of Manly to Bressie, November 9, 1937, English Department Papers, box 18, folder 10), and received a warmly

inscribed offprint from Seymour de Ricci, dean of American manuscript scholars (Bressie Papers, box 3, folder 3). In 1940 she conducted a spirited, if ill-tempered, exchange in print with J. S. P. Tatlock (at that time president of the Modern Language Association) over his accusation that in her article on Clowne (above n. 28) she had ignored the distinction between a monk and a canon (J. S. P. Tatlock, "Chaucer's Monk," *Modern Language Notes* 55 [1940]: 350-54; Ramona Bressie, "Chaucer's Monk Again," *Modern Language Notes* 56 [1941]: 161-62).

32. Ramsey, *Manly-Rickert Text*, pp. 72-95.

33. Martin M. Crow, "Materials for a New Edition of the Chaucer Life-Records," *Texas Studies in English* 31 (1952): 1-12 (based on a paper given at the MLA convention, December 1950); Clair C. Olson, *The Emerging Biography of a Poet*, Third Annual College of the Pacific Faculty Research Lecture (Stockton, CA: College of the Pacific, 1953), pp. 1-20.

34. The narrative that follows reflects Bressie's understanding of the matter; her account, including the judgments she makes of Crow, Olson, Rickert, the Redstones, and others, naturally requires evaluation.

35. Bressie, Letter to the University of Chicago Department of English, undated (presumably 1958), Bressie Papers, box 2, folder 12.

36. Carbon copy of typescript, undated (presumably 1958), Bressie Papers, box 2, folder 15.

37. Vincent Redstone also has a place in history as a key player in the Sutton Hoo ship burial discovery; it was he whom Edith Pretty asked for advice on investigating some mounds on her property in 1937.

38. Vincent B. Redstone and Lilian J. Redstone, "The Heyrons of London: A Study in the Social Origins of Geoffrey Chaucer," *Speculum* 12 (1937): 182-95.

39. Diaries, September 14, 1959.

40. In fairness to Crow's memory (he died only in 1997), Bressie's judgments should be balanced against the laudatory assessment of his life and career in the memorial resolution prepared by his Texas colleagues, James Wimsatt, Elizabeth Scala, and Thomas Cable (under "Memorials" at <http://www.utexas.edu/faculty/council>).

41. Her doubts about the Crow-Olson team arose in part from her reaction to their first effort, *Chaucer's World*, compiled by Edith Rickert, edited by Clair C. Olson and Martin M. Crow (New York: Columbia UP, 1948): "He and Olson determined to have me among those enjoying their patronage in Rickert's *Chaucer's World*, but I was determined to stay out of it. Glad

I did, for atrocious book. Unconscious humor at Miss Rickert's expense. Schoolboy bibliography, and boast of high percentage of unpublished documents shows Crow and Olson can't find out whether document published or not" (Diaries, September 15, 1957). Her rejection of what seems to have been an offer to participate in the project is consistent with her loner personality.

42. Diaries, August 25, 1957.

43. Diaries, December 4, 1957.

44. Crow-Olson, p. vi.

45. Diaries, December 15, 1957.

46. "I dared to oppose Mr. Crow, so he is punishing me. He is like Iago, a complete egoist, does not understand that some people need not be cribbers. . . . I am Mr. Crow's Othello" (Diaries, September 15, 1957).

47. Stephanie Trigg, *Congenial Souls: Reading Chaucer from Medieval to Postmodern* (Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 2002), pp. 23–28.

48. Crow-Olson, p. xi.

49. For an analysis of Bressie's critique, see Bestul, "Did Chaucer Live," pp. 11–12.

50. Diaries, November 22, 1961. Bressie's work on Life-Record 34 was published in Bressie, "Was Chaucer at the Siege of Paris?"

51. The diaries record several revealing dreams about Rickert, of which the following is a startling example (September 10, 1957): "Fantastic dream about Miss Rickert of all people, as very strangely crippled so that she had to be carried, and I had to carry her, no weight. Dream began with Miss R only a head, when picked up by me she was suddenly a whole person. This from sentences in Bradley that Lear comes on stage carrying the dead Cordelia. Miss R alive, and association altogether pleasant, no spite or resentment or recrimination."

52. Bressie's strictures must be read against the robust assessments of Rickert's work by Elizabeth Scala (especially "John Mathews Manly and Edith Rickert," pp. 301–08), by Roy Vance Ramsey (*Manly-Rickert Text*, pp. 59–61, 132–34), and indeed by Manly himself (Preface, *The Text of the Canterbury Tales*, vol. 1 pp. vii–vii).

53. The following diary entry from November 9, 1957, illuminates her psychological makeup: "All these obvious books have women characters who are either exquisitely cherished or want to be. M [= Mother] trained me from the time I could begin to be trainable, never to touch anybody or let anybody touch me. I wonder if I am exceptional in this? She thought I was so over-affectionate that I would make myself obnoxious by my

demonstrations of affections. The result is that by long habit it is practically impossible for me to endure any contact. She thought when I was grown that I had no heart. I didn't like to have *her* touch me when she helped me with the clothes I tried on. All the psychology books make one neurosis conscious. When I was thirteen, I read the famous passage in St. Paul on marriage and continence and made up my mind I'd not waste my efforts on marriage, having no inclinations whatever to incontinence. I never have read of anything at all like my experience in any book."

54. It is not clear from her papers how she supported herself in the years 1936–1957; although she had briefly taught high school English before starting graduate work, there is no further evidence of teaching employment.

55. See Diaries, April 14, 1962: "I reflect on my anonymity and wonder if absolute escape from records could be possible. I am not in the census nor the social security records, nor income tax, nor roll of alumni of the U of C, nor register of voters! This makes me laugh. Is it really funny? I don't subscribe to any magazine."

56. Diaries, December 3, 1961.

57. Diaries, October 15, 1957.

58. Diaries, September 14, 1959.

59. Diaries, November 12, 1959. Bressie's diaries are replete with the quotidian, including item-by-item accounts of expenses for groceries; menus of meals eaten; plans for sewing her own clothes, baking bread, making soap, etc.

60. The phrase is a term of art, and is taken from a letter to her cousin Gertrude (which makes for harrowing reading) in which Bressie also asserts: "The doctor said I am a well-balanced personality" (Bressie Papers, box 1, unfolded sheet). For Bressie's judgment of her cousin, Russell Hollingsworth, see Diaries, December 3, 1961.

61. Bressie's fears were not entirely irrational; these were the years of the Berlin wall and the Cuban missile crisis.

62. Information on her life in London is taken from her estate file, Ford County Court House, Paxton, Illinois.

63. Diaries, September 17, 1961.

64. In a strange twist of fate, Rickert too was buried in an unmarked grave; a movement by members of the New Chaucer Society led eventually to the purchase of a headstone (*The Chaucer Newsletter* 18.1 [1996]: 5; *The Chaucer Newsletter* 19.1 [1997]: 7).

65. See her estate file; the lawyer handling the estate offered what remained of her papers to the University of Chicago Library in 1975.

66. One may note the careers of women medievalists with Chicago doctorates of Bressie's generation or a little later, such as Virginia Everett Leland (PhD 1940), who taught for many years at Bowling Green State University, Mary Giffin (PhD 1939), who taught at Vassar and Cleveland State University, and Margaret Ogden (PhD 1935), who never held an academic position but made major contributions to the Middle English Dictionary at the University of Michigan (Michael Adams, "Articulating the Middle English Lexicon: Margaret Ogden (1909–1988), Medieval Medical Texts, and the *Middle English Dictionary*," in Chance, *Women Medievalists*, pp. 697–710).