

Malone, Kemp, Chapters on Chaucer (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press) 1951
Third Printing 1964

p. 69-70 But the lists or catalogs included in Chaucer's description of the garden call for a few words of comment. The catalog as a literary device is probably as old as literature itself. We get it in Homer, for instance. The oldest poems that we have in English are the three sixth-century catalogs (technically known as thulas) incorporated in the seventh-century poem Widsith. Chaucer names most of the personified abstractions in catalog style, but he uses this form of presentation more strictly in his list of trees and, later on, in his list of birds. In both these lists the name of the particular tree or bird is systematically accompanied by a descriptive epithet or short characterization. The list of lovers (lines 288-292) is given in a form more rigorous still: the names speak for themselves. The lists add to the complexity and therefore to the richness of the artistic effect. In using the, Chaucer was following rhetorical precept but the rhetoricians in turn were only rationalizing a poetic practice that goes back to prehistoric times and needs no justification. Lists are still used by poets, and their poetic value has not changed much down the centuries. If the names mean nothing to you the list becomes a mere sequence of words which you are likely to skip. But if the names are familiar to you they arouse associations in your mind and the list becomes a series of allusions freighted with values beyond calculation.

p. 79 In my opinion the loose ends and inconsistencies in our poem do not support the hypothesis that Chaucer revised his work. He wrote that way in the first place, and what seem to be faults actually serve his stylistic purpose. A conversational style of writing cannot be neat and orderly without spoiling the effect aimed at. With life goes imperfection.