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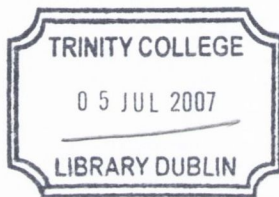
The Profane Poetic of the *Canterbury Tales*

Cliona Carney

Thesis submitted for the degree of Ph.D.
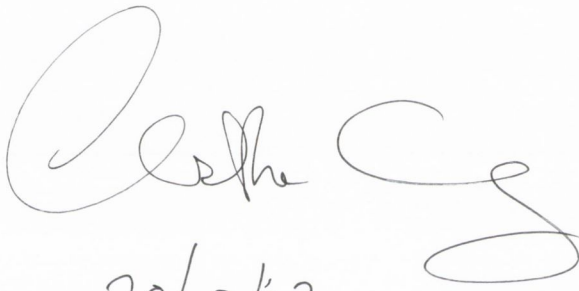
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Summary

The low standing of medieval aesthetics and literary theory is looking increasingly undeserved. The last three decades have been described by Alastair Minnis and Ian Johnson as a 'golden age' for the 'study of medieval literary theory and criticism'. It is in the wake of this scholarship that this thesis undertakes a fresh examination of the place and value of *this world*, as opposed to the next, in the poetics and practice of Geoffrey Chaucer. The thesis is divided into three chapters, and is framed by a substantial introduction and conclusion.

The first chapter is focused upon the two meta-poetic stanzas at the end of *Troilus*, in which the *makere* sends off his *litel bok*. Unlike Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio, Chaucer left behind him no theoretical writings about poetry. Whatever we want to know about his poetics, we must glean from his practice. Into Chaucer's two stanzas are folded a complex of ideas about authorship, causality, inspiration and signification, ideas that his peers and predecessors explored in lengthy and formal Latin treatises. This chapter teases out the extent of the reliance of these stanzas upon prevailing theoretical knowledge, and their freedom from it. The ambivalence of these stanzas, as to the value of earthly appetites – with all their attendant disappointments – relative to heavenly consolation, mirrors the ambivalence figured in the relationship of the 'palinode' to the rest of the poem. The ending of the poem as a whole seesaws between on the one hand, the impulse to redeem this world (and the *litel bok's* future within it), in all its linguistic fallenness, secondariness and materiality, and on the other, the hope for a supramundane apotheosis, where the *bok* will commune with Homer and Virgil, and enjoy a fully realised heavenly existence.

The second chapter moves from *Troilus* to the *Canterbury Tales*, where ambivalence about the value of the world is taken to a new level. The main focus of this chapter is on the apology in the 'General Prologue', and in particular on its dependence upon Jean de Meun's citation of an epigram from the *Timaeus*. The secondariness and materiality against which the supramundane and divine order were posed at the ending of *Troilus* become the very *topos* of the poem. The Platonic injunction that 'wordes moot be cosyn to the dede', which provides the climax of the narrator's apology, as well as the scaffold for the poem as a whole, is literalised, then, as it becomes apparent that the pilgrims' deeds *are* words. The *Canterbury Tales* is

focused on *becoming* rather than *being*, on the *imago* rather than the idea, on chaff rather than wheat. The pilgrims' words are borrowed from elsewhere, re-hashed from Statius, Dante, Macrobius, Petrarch, Cato, and so on, and so on. In this way, the world which is the focus of the tales is a world in which everyone is always already acculturated, and stories twice-told.

The third chapter departs from the concentration upon poetics *per se* that characterises the first two chapters, and deals with Chaucer's practice in the 'Franklin's Tale', in which the Franklin holds up for emulation and admiration an idealised and Christian *gentilesse*, which he says is quite different to the worldly *gentilesse* of *possessioun*. The main argument of this chapter is that the tale that the Franklin goes on to tell actually demonstrates something quite different, and in fact performs a worldly transvaluation of the ideal Christian *gentilesse*. I discuss the Franklin's treatment of *generositas virtus, non sanguis*, partly in conservative historical terms, which draw upon medieval theories of grace, but I also deploy certain modern techniques of analysis and moral genealogy, such as those practised by Nietzsche in his *On the Genealogy of Morality* and Marcel Mauss in his anthropological study, *The Gift*.

A concluding chapter draws together the various strands, and re-states, from a more general perspective, but also with reference to the 'Parson's Prologue' and 'Tale', the 'Retractions', and the 'Wife of Bath's Prologue' and 'Tale', my central argument that the *Canterbury Tales* is a radically worldly poem, albeit one that in the end apologises for its own sins.

Acknowledgements

Contents

Introduction

> 'We may seek a dominant not only in the poetic work of an individual artist and not only in the poetic canon, the set of norms of a given poetic school, but also in the art of a given epoch, viewed as a particular whole. For example it is evident that in Renaissance art such a dominant, such an acme of the aesthetic criteria of the time, was represented by the visual arts. Other arts oriented themselves toward the visual arts and were valued according to the degree of their closeness to the latter. On the other hand, in Romantic art the supreme value was assigned towards music. Thus, for example, Romantic poetry oriented itself toward music: its verse is musically focused; its verse intonation imitates musical melody...In Realist aesthetics the dominant was verbal art, and the hierarchy of poetic values was modified accordingly.'
>
> Roman Jakobson[1]

It is a pity that Jakobson did not define the 'dominant' of medieval aesthetics, but numerous others have filled the gap. Rather strikingly though, they have filled the gap with a hole. The often-repeated view is that the Middle Ages did not produce a real aesthetic, if 'aesthetic' is taken to involve the sensory appreciation of material things. Instead, art, verbal and otherwise, in the Middle Ages exists in an apologetic relationship to pleasure (the means by which instruction is achieved) and to the world itself (a vale of tears, a pilgrimage, a thoroughfare of woe that separates mankind from his real home on high). Medieval aesthetics, from this perspective, is an oxymoron. The Middle Ages did produce great art, of course, but it was 'oriented', to use Jakobson's word, not towards this world, but the next. Hence the very structure of Dante's *Commedia*, its rise up and out of earth towards inexpressible and transcendent divinity, and of the dedication of allegory (often seen as the quintessential medieval mode of signifying) to the expression of a hidden, extra-material meaning beyond an earthly sign. Hence also Robertson's now maligned view of Chaucer's art, as a systematic embedding of intelligible Augustinian meanings in worldly matter.[2] The Old English 'Seafarer' epitomises just such an attitude to the material world. The

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[1] Roman Jakobson, 'The Dominant', in *Readings in Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views*, ed. Ladislave Matejka and Krystyna Pomorska (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1971), pp. 82-87; 83.
[2] D. W. Robertson, *A Preface to Chaucer: Studies in Medieval Perspectives* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1962). Bernard F. Huppé and D. W. Robertson, *Fruyt and Chaf: Studies in Chaucer's Allegories* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1963).

deprivation, loneliness and exile experienced by the Seafarer, while they are
'lamented' in the strict sense, are also courted, and re-valued in the process:

> Þæt se mon ne wāt
>
> þe him on foldan fægrost limpeð,
>
> hū ic earmcearig īscealdne sǣ
>
> winter wunade wræccan lāstum,
>
> winemǣgum bidroren,
>
> bihongen hrīmgicelum;   (12b-17a)[3]

The man who enjoys the things of this earth lacks knowledge – 'Þæt se mon ne wāt'.
A similar collocation later in the poem makes the same point, this time with the focus
on the well-heeled man's lack of understanding, a lack which is directly proportional
to his material prosperity, pride, and the excessive pleasure he takes in alcoholic
drink:

> Forþon him gelȳfeð lȳt, se þe āh līfes wyn
>
> gebiden in burgum, bealosīþa hwōn,
>
> wlonc and wīngāl, hū ic wērig oft
>
> in brimlāde bīdan sceolde.   (27a-30b)

As in Hebrews 11:13-16, the faithful man, the man with his eyes set on God, is a
peregrine, a wanderer, out-of-place among worldly pleasures. Instead of earthly
comfort, he has, in the words of Van Morrison's 'Astral Weeks', 'a home on high'.[4]

A further objection to medieval thinking about aesthetics is that it is second-
hand, poached from the ancient world. In Umberto Eco's adaptation of this
commonplace about the Middle Ages, 'where aesthetics and artistic production are
concerned, the Classical world turned its gaze on nature but the Medievals turned

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[3] *The Seafarer*, ed. I. L. Gordon (London, 1960; repr. Manchester, 1975).
[4] 'I'm nothing but a stranger in this world / I got a home on high / In another land / So
far away / So far away / Way up in the heaven'. Van Morrison, 'Astral Weeks', on the
album *Astral Weeks*, released by Warner Brothers, 1968.

their gaze on the Classical world'. Medieval culture was based 'not on a phenomenology of reality, but on a phenomenology of a cultural tradition'.[5]

These two common assumptions about the Middle Ages, namely, that its theological and aesthetic values were integrated to a degree that inhibited the development of a real aesthetics, and that any aesthetic thinking that did go on was an unoriginal patchwork of ancient ideas on the subject, were given as justifications for the generally low status of the medieval period as measured against the intrinsic interest of other epochs. Civilisation began with the Greeks, fell asleep in the Dark Ages, flickered under Charlemagne, opened its eyes briefly in the twelfth century, fell asleep again during the theologically monolithic scholastic period, and then finally woke up in the Renaissance. To the extent that there was anything good about the Middle Ages, it was its grudging and mealy-mouthed preservation of antiquity, or its anticipation of the Renaissance. But these two good things were also bad, in that they were just shadows of real things, the real things being ancient culture itself, and its revival in the Renaissance. However, the perceived limitations of the Middle Ages (obscurity, difficulty, unoriginality) as they appeared to humankind at large, were exactly what endeared specialists to the period. Difficulty and obscurity were interesting challenges, to be met by discipline, years of training, a polymath's knowledge of several languages, palaeography and philology. Unoriginality was re-conceived as tradition, obscurity as alterity. Just as the Seafarer took some satisfaction from his hard life, sure that he would be rewarded in the next world, sure of the 'hyht in heofonum', so pleasure could proceed from years of application to the decoding of the difficult Middle Ages.

Up until the nineteen-eighties, this immersion in the difficulty and alterity of the Middle Ages characterised one of the most important branches of medieval studies, that of philology itself.[6] From the rich philological ground of studying the manuscripts, studying the language, establishing the canon, editing, glossing and annotating the texts, and the ancillary texts, have come, to speak of Chaucer studies only, the modern editions of Chaucer's poems, the collections of sources and

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[5] Umberto Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*, trans. Hugh Bredin (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), p. 4.
[6] E. R. Curtius describes philology as 'the scientific foundation of all historical investigation'. *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard Trask (1953; with new epilogue, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), from the author's introduction, p. x.

analogues, the linguistic picture of Middle English, the biographical and historical evidence, the literary history, and down the line, the electronic hypertext editions of the *Canterbury Tales*.

The second major branch of medieval literary studies, as it relates to Chaucer, was dedicated to the interpretation of these texts, and if one kind of brilliance and thinking was needed for the philological work, another, more showy kind was required for this other task. Out of this tradition emerged outstanding studies by such scholars as Kittredge, Donaldson, Kolve, Pearsall and Howard, to name just a few. Without wanting to blur the individual characteristics of the work of each of these scholars, I think there is one thing that connects them. Each presupposes the distinctiveness of literature, its difference from other kinds of discourse, and its worthiness as an object of criticism in its own right, and not merely for the light it sheds on the period in which it was written.

To this extent, the most influential interpretative studies of Chaucer before the nineteen eighties participated in the larger intellectual life of criticism as a whole. In these studies can be seen elements of New Criticism's emphasis upon the self-sufficiency of both literature and criticism, its belief that the meaning of literature is inextricably connected to form, to its unique way of telling and knowing. Northrop Frye's insistence on the development of a coherent, unified criticism is also a visible, if usually unspoken influence, as is structuralism's interest in the hierarchy of different codes within the work, the phonic, grammatical, narrative and rhetorical registers and patterns in which meaning inheres.

The fairly happy relationship between this branch of Chaucer studies and contemporary critical practice until the nineteen-eighties should not obscure the fact, however, that much and all as structuralism and New Criticism appear as quintessentially twentieth-century modes, they are themselves developments of a larger, broadly modern attitude to 'Literature with a capital L'.[7] However, I stress the word 'broadly' here, and it might even be more accurate to say 'purportedly modern'. The evolution of '*makere*' into the loftier 'poet', of 'bokes' into 'works of art', is too complicated to do justice to here, but it is obvious that the sacred status of literature

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[7] See David Matthews here on the de-historicisation of Chaucer in the early modern and modern period, where he was claimed for humankind, where his 'medieval-ness' was denied. Matthews, *The Making of Middle English 1765-1910* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. 167.

no more jumped out of the ether in the eighteenth-century than sex did in 1963, for all that Philip Larkin might say.[8] And after all, Deschamps's tribute to Chaucer, 'le grand translateur', does have something in common with Dryden's 'father of English poetry', even if there is also a heap of difference in the focus of the two compliments, the one on poetic art as technique, the other as creation.[9]

In the nineteen-eighties, medieval studies underwent a crisis.[10] For a while, it looked as if everything might be at stake. The 'linguistic turn', which had already caused impressive changes in cognate disciplines within the humanities, began to kick in for medievalists.[11] A stream of studies appeared, with names such as *The New Philology* and *The Past and Future of Medieval Studies*.[12] Behind the bold titles lurked worries about the state of the art. Medievalists were 'wallowing in the question of origins', according to R. Howard Bloch.[13] Eminent medievalists such as Lee Patterson, Siegfried Wenzel, Stephen G. Nichols and Gabrielle Spiegel were working out the history of the discipline, its connection to contemporary cultural issues, and, most importantly, its future.[14]

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[8] For a discussion of the comparative ranges of meaning of the terms 'poet' and 'makere' in the Middle Ages, see Glending Olson, 'Making and Poetry in the Age of Chaucer', *Comparative Literature* 31 (1979), 272-90.

[9] John Dryden, from his 'Preface' to *Fables Ancient and Modern* (1700; facsimile repr. Menston: Scolar Press, 1973), np.

[10] R. Howard Bloch, though, is surely correct when he describes Paul Zumthor's *Lange et techniques poétiques a l'époque romane* (1963), as one of the 'birth certificates of the "New Medievalism"', 'New Philology and Old French', *Speculum* 65 (1990), pp. 38-58; 39. But it was some time before the large-scale impact of this kind of thinking was felt by the discipline of medieval studies as a whole.

[11] The term 'linguistic turn' gained a popular currency partly on the strength of its appearance in the title of Richard Rorty's (ed.) *The Linguistic Turn: Recent Essays in Philosophical Method* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967). Commonly, Ferdinand de Saussure (in his *Cours de linguistique générale*, published posthumously in Paris in 1916) is regarded as one of the founding fathers of the cultural or linguistic turn, with his insights into the differential way in which language signified, by means of reference to other signifiers, rather than to reality.

[12] *The New Philology* was a special edition of *Speculum* 65.1 (1990); John H. Van Engen, ed., *The Past and Future of Medieval Studies* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994). And see also William D. Paden, ed., *The Future of the Middle Ages in the 1990s* (Gainesville, Florida: University Press of Florida, 1994).

[13] R. Howard Bloch, 'The Once and Future Middle Ages', *Modern Language Quarterly* 54:1 (1993), 67-76; 68.

[14] The essays referred to are as follows: Lee Patterson, 'On the Margin: Postmodernism, Ironic History, and Medieval Studies', *Speculum* 65 (1990): 87-108; Lee Patterson, 'The Return to Philology', in *The Past and Future of Medieval Studies*,

These studies on the one hand tended to totalise, referring to 'medieval studies' or 'medievalism' as a catch-all, and on the other, to differentiate very minutely between strands of thought and method. A discipline dedicated to the study and preservation of the past was, from one side, being called upon to modernise and throw off an allegedly 'naïve positivism', and from the other, to re-affirm the traditional values and close ranks.[15]

For a while it looked as if the traditionalists were going to lose out. Philological disciplines were withering away, or were amalgamated into larger schools, where they lost their clout. Old English was disappearing off the curriculum in many American and British universities, so that now the 'well-rounded' graduate, with knowledge of the earliest English language and literature was becoming a rarity. The 'difficult', linguistic component of that now almost obsolete category of 'Old and Middle English' was an obstacle to its survival. A paradox emerged: the 'linguistic turn', which supposedly required practitioners to attend to the specifically linguistic embodiment of cultural artefacts, was making funeral arrangements for a traditional linguistic discipline, that of philology. Modern literature was more appealing than the dour and demanding methodologies where '*Monsieur Procruste*' as Bernard

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ed. John H. Van Engen (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), pp. 231-44; Siegfried Wenzel, 'Reflections on (New) Philology', *Speculum* 65.1 (1990), 11-18; Derek Pearsall, 'The Future of Chaucer Studies', *Poetica* 50 (1998), 17-27; Steven G. Nichols, 'Modernism and the Politics of Medieval Studies', in *Medieval Studies and the Modernist Temper*, ed. R. Howard Bloch and Steven G. Nichols (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), pp. 25-56; Gabrielle Spiegel, 'History, Historicism and the Social Logic of the Text in the Middle Ages', *Speculum* 65.1 (1990), 59-86.

[15] See R. Howard Bloch's discussion of the splitting of philology into two camps in the nineteenth century, whereby the Romantic strain became estranged from the linguistic and positivist: 'New Philology and Old French', *Speculum* 65.1 (1990), 38-58, as well as Peter Richardson's critique of Bloch's view in 'The Consolation of Philology', *Modern Philology* 92 (1994), 1-13; 2-4. Richardson, interestingly, did not remain consoled for long, eventually forsaking medieval studies to focus upon contemporary Californian culture. For a discussion of the larger nineteenth- and twentieth-century political reasons for the current state of philology as it pertains to the study of Old English, see Allen J. Frantzen, 'The Desire for Origins: An Archaeology of Anglo-Saxon Studies', *Style* 20 (1986), 142-156, and also Richardson, *The Consolation of Philology*, pp. 5-7. Richardson quotes Terry Eagleton on the modern academic discipline of 'English' as distinct from philology: Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), p. 29.

Cerquiglini dubbed the *Philologue*, had his domain.[16] Medieval studies had reached what William Paden called 'a perilous ford'.[17]

By contrast, the new methods were thriving during these years. The approaches that reflect what Lee Patterson has called the 'ethic of commitment', such as feminism, queer theory and subaltern studies, became the focus of university courses.[18] In the field of medieval literary studies, courses about canonical authors and major periods, genres and forms, were re-oriented towards political, gendered, theoretical and thematic goals.

Now the dust has more or less settled. Three main camps within medieval literary studies have survived. Philology, in its most positivist incarnation, initially so embattled in the fight for the future of medieval studies, has actually had a fillip in the form of the digital revolution and the hypertext, multi-variant edition.[19] History is now dominant, having been revitalised by the tonic of New Historicism, and a turn towards reflexivity and textuality. Still alive, but sapped of prestige, are such theoretical and 'positioned' or 'committed' approaches as feminism, queer studies, subaltern studies and psychoanalysis.

But one thing has died, or at least fallen by the wayside to die. This is the Romantic strain within medieval studies, the 'literary' species of philology, of 'English' as a discipline practised in university, that treated literature as sacred, mysterious, worthy of endless interpretative effort.[20] This was what defined 'English'

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[16] Bernard Cerquiglini, *Eloge de la variante: Histoire critique de la philologie* (Paris, 1989), trans. by Betsy Wing as *In Praise of the Variant: A Critical History of Philology* (Baltimore, MD.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), pp. 13-32. Suzanne Fleischman deploys Cerquiglini's phrase in her rich essay, 'Philology, Linguistics, and the Discourse of the Medieval Text', *Speculum* 65.1 (1990), 19-37; 19.

[17] William D. Paden, 'Scholars at a Perilous Ford', in *The Future of the Middle Ages*, pp. 3-31.

[18] Lee Patterson, 'The Disenchanted Classroom', in 'Teaching Chaucer in the 90s: A Symposium', *Exemplaria* 8.2 (1996), np.

[19] Bernard Cerquiglini writes that terms such as 'textual criticism', 'draft' and 'variant', which until recently were 'preserved out of conviction' only by 'a few unobtrusive specialists of ancient or medieval languages', are back in use, in the context of 'renewal of interest' in the manuscript and in 'genetic criticism', after 'several years of low water'. *In Praise of the Variant*, p. xi.

[20] Bloch, however, considers that the 'New Philology' of the post-1980s period, is actually very close to the 'Old Philology' that existed before what Bloch calls the 'interlude'. By the interlude he means the years from 'the institutionalization of medieval studies in Germany just before the Franco-Prussian war', up until the

as a subject for undergraduates of the twentieth century. This was what English had in place of History's 'past', in place of science's 'facts' – a beautiful body of work of irreducible significance, that miraculously rejuvenated itself in generation after generation, a real 'friend to man'. This was the English literature in which Chaucer was a father-figure, just as Dryden had claimed him to be.[21]

In this school of thought which goes back at least as far as Dryden, through Chesterton, Kittredge, Donaldson, Howard, and up into the nineteen-seventies, Chaucer is a timeless figure, whose universally valid and valuable poetry speaks to everyone everywhere. Emerson wrote of his 'awe, mixed with the joy of surprise' to find that Chaucer, like Marvell and Dryden, 'who lived in some past world, two or three hundred years ago, says that which lies close to my own soul'.[22] For Dryden, Chaucer is a universal genius defined by his 'good sense', an all-rounder who 'speaks properly on all Subjects', who gave us, in the pilgrims of the 'General Prologue', 'our Fore-fathers and Great Grand-dames, all before us, as they were in Chaucer's Days; their general Characters still remaining in Mankind…though they are call'd by other Names…'.[23] In Chesterton's eyes, Chaucer is distinguished by his sanity, his genius, his naturalism, his championing of the individuality, and his universality, a medieval poet who belies all that is 'meant by medieval'.[24]

This is the kind of amateur meddling in the business of medieval studies that sticks in the craw of today's specialist. Philologist and historian alike will not suffer

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appearance of the influential works of those harbingers of the New Medievalism such as Paul Zumthor and before him, Robert Guiette. Bloch argues that the Old Philology and the New are alike in many respects, including, 'the reinscription of the *mysterium* of poetry, its realignment – whether acknowledged or not, whether through the door of French and Swiss receptions of Lacan, German reception theory, or certain American readings of Derrida – with the domain of ontological thinking, and yes, even with a certain occulted theological underpinning.' 'Old Philology and Old French', p. 39.

[21] Although see David Matthews on the de-historicisation involved in this critical attitude to Chaucer. *The Making of Middle English*, p. 167ff.

[22] Ralph Waldo Emerson, lecture on 'The American Scholar', delivered in 1837, and published in *Centenary Edition: the Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1903-1921), vol. 1, pp. 91-2; excerpt reproduced in *Chaucer: The Critical Heritage*, vol. II: 1837-1933, ed. Derek Brewer (London: Routledge, 1978), p. 34.

[23] John Dryden, from his 'Preface' to *Fables Ancient and Modern* (1700; facsimile repr. Menston: Scolar Press, 1973).

[24] G. K. Chesterton, *All I Survey: A Book of Essays* (1933; repr. Freeport, New York, Books For Libraries Press, 1967), p. 174.

any more the notion that a man of the Middle Ages could be anything less (or more) than medieval, once 'medieval' is understood properly. The popular, timeless and apparently ahistorical view of Chaucer as the father of English poetry,[25] as a champion of the individual, as an archetypal Englishman, as a keen observer of human nature in all its forms and as a brilliant naturalist, co-existed happily and for a long time alongside the specialist (whether philological or literary-historical) view of him as embedded in tradition, steeped in rhetoric, convention and literary decorum, a player in the micro-politics of the Ricardian court, a 'medieval' to his bone-marrow.

The Chaucer who faded away in the 1980s is the Chaucer of Dryden, Chesterton, Kittredge, Emerson and Donaldson. Nowadays, to speak of 'joy', 'universal appeal' or 'timeless characters' is to give up any claim to seriousness.[26] Maybe the book-clubs still deal with such quaint ideas, but no serious critic or scholar would entertain them. In the place of Chaucer the father-figure sat up Chaucer the rapist, Chaucer the anti-semite, Chaucer the feminist and Chaucer the reactionary. Chaucer was measured either on the scales of ahistorical political religions such as feminism or cultural relativism, where he sometimes did well, and sometimes not, or in micro-historical terms, where the poems might precipitate insights into the baronial rivalries of the 1390s, or the fluctuating fortunes of John of Gaunt. While historicism - new and old - has delivered much of the most important work on Chaucer during the last century and a half, and is likely to keep on delivering it, there are things it cannot do.

This study is a conservative hybrid of orthodox literary-historical criticism and the kind of loosely modern, 'literary' philology that considers literary work in larger philosophical and cultural terms than are permissible within a strictly historicist framework. The historical side of the thesis proceeds on the basis of the tremendous work done on the subjects of medieval literary theory, criticism and poetics during the past half-century, and especially the past twenty-five years. The editors of the volume

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[25] Dryden, 'Preface' to *Fables Ancient and Modern*. Chesterton reprises and varies Dryden's famous epithet, describing the 'General Prologue' as 'the prologue of Modern Fiction'. Chesterton, *Chaucer* (London: Faber and Faber, 1932), p. 15.
[26] Bloch considers, however, that the 'New Philology', at least in respect of French medieval studies, does attend to the mysterious, distinctively 'poetic' qualities of poetry, just as philology did before its artificially and narrowly positivist phase between *c.* 1870 and *c.* 1950, although he also concedes that 'a significant sector of the field of medieval studies still labors under the century-old attempt to shed the yoke of the Romantic *mysterium*'. 'Old Philology and New French', p. 42.

of the *Cambridge History of Literary Criticism* devoted to the Middle Ages, describe the period since the 1980s as a '"golden age" for the study of medieval literary theory and criticism'.[27] In the wake of this work, undertaken by such scholars as A. J. Minnis, Judson Boyce Allen, Rita Copeland, Christopher Baswell, O. B. Hardison, Martin Irvine, Mary Carruthers, Peter Dronke, J. J. Murphy, R. W. Hunt, R. B. C. Huygens, Beryl Smalley and R. McKeon, it is no longer possible to pit modern multivalency against pre-modern univocality in the area of medieval poetics, literary theory, rhetoric and aesthetics.[28] The 'ethical poetic' described by Judson Boyce Allen now looks like a roomier mansion than it did in 1982.[29] The sophistication and variety of medieval literary theory and cognate subjects is being revealed by this recent scholarship, and many of the older ideas about a monolithic exegetical model and relentlessly theological aesthetic are being revised.

This study is focused on the place and value of *this world*, as opposed to the next, in Chaucer's poetry and poetics. I use the word 'profane' cautiously, not in the sense that the poetics under discussion are aggressively irreligious, but in the simpler sense that they operate 'outside' the church. That is not to say that the shadow of the church does not fall upon them, nor that the noises and sights from within the church cannot be heard and seen. What is 'outside' the church is no less in relationship to that church than what happens inside. I make no assumptions about Chaucer the man, or Chaucer the historical figure, or Chaucer the client of John of Gaunt, which is not to imply that these subjects are not worthy of discussion; they indubitably are. But when I make the case, as I do from time to time, that a certain tale by Chaucer permits the free expression of transgressive impulses, I am by no means implying that Chaucer the man would have taken anything other than a very dim view of, for example, murder or theft. Similarly, when I speak of the profanity of his poetics, of the radical worldliness of the *Canterbury Tales*, I do not mean to say that it is unlikely that he was a devout communicant.

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[27] Alastair Minnis and Ian Johnson, eds., *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism, Volume II: The Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 3.
[28] See the *Cambridge History of Literary Criticism* for a concise statement of the development of this field over the past half-century, pp. 1-4.
[29] Judson Boyce Allen, *The Ethical Poetic of the Later Middle Ages: a Decorum of Convenient Distinction* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982).

My main point is that a very good, historically valid, case can be made that the *Canterbury Tales* announces a new kind of poetics and poetry for Chaucer and for English literature, a poetics of worldly ordinariness, a poetics that takes the much-maligned characteristic feature of the derivative Middle Ages, namely its second-hand poaching of pre-existing materials, and transforms that feature into a value-neutral quality of culture generally, so that, to use the phrase beloved of deconstruction, everyone in the poem is 'always already' unoriginal, bound to be repeating himself and others, great and small.

Walter Benjamin, describing Proust's work, wrote that Proust did not describe life as it was, nor, even, if one is precise, life 'remembered', but life 'forgotten':

> 'For the important thing for the remembering author is not what he experienced, but the weaving of his memory, the Penelope work of recollection. Or should one call it, rather, a Penelope work of forgetting? Is not the involuntary recollection, Proust's *mémoire involontaire*, much closer to forgetting than what is usually called memory? And is not this work of spontaneous recollection, in which remembrance is the woof and forgetting the warp, a counterpart to Penelope's work rather than its likeness?'[30]

Poetry proclaims *in its own voice* a more secret history, not of life as it was, or as it has been remembered, but life as it has been forgotten. This is the history that unravels itself from the recollected or invented moment, whether in Troy on the brink of collapse, or on the Rialto bridge in Venice, into the culture and language yet to come. This is the kind of timelessness that restores rather than erases historical difference. The status of any given author may depend as much upon his prescience with regard to posterity (although luck plays her part, and reputations do wax and wane) as any other quality. The artist inscribes his work on the future, and his overall

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[30] Walter Benjamin, 'The Image of Proust', in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (1968; London: Fontana, 1992), pp. 195-210; 198. 'Zum Bilde Prousts' was first published in *Literarische Welt* (1929). Susan Buck-Morss discusses this passage from Benjamin, drawing attention to the particular attitudes to memory and forgetting that it involves, and relating them to his project of 'collective history', in *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (1989; Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991), p. 39.

artistic success and even survival depends on how well he does it. 'Van Eyck me fecit', and on the 21st October, 1433, a date otherwise forgotten and irretrievable, declares the frame around the 'Man in the Red Turban'; 'Go litel bok, go litel myn tragedye!' cries the *makere* of *Troilus*. Luminous as both these works are in every other respect, these direct appeals, from the frame of the *made thing*, to viewers and readers not yet born, greatly intensify the *haecceity*, as Gerard Manley Hopkins might have put it, of the artefact as an artefact, as a thing worth looking at, worth thinking about, worth looking at some more. T. J. Clarke, in his study of his own minute and different responses over time to two paintings by Poussin, argues that his own historicism in the face of these paintings was as wrong, as 'naïve, and therefore doctrinaire and uncontrollable', as any less educated approach. Only by looking, and then looking again, did he dispel a historicism that bound him to deterministic responses:

> 'Attention to one complex particular (or two) issuing from the seventeenth century may do more to dislodge the hold of false particulars like "the seventeenth century" than any amount of scholarly piling of fact on fact'.[31]

I have proceeded partly on the basis that close, historically unbiased attention to the details, of, in this case, a few lines from *Troilus*, and a few from the 'General Prologue', can open up the subject of Chaucer's poetics in a fresh way. It is not that these lines have not been looked at before, nor that they will not be looked at again, but that they do repay looking and yet more looking. The little hands that grasp the frames in Memling's portraits do as much as any history of the fifteenth century to disperse our presentism, remind us that there were, are, and will be, *others*. Like the hands on the frames, the few lines in Chaucer's *oeuvre* that refer directly to what we might call meta-poetics, such as those in which the '*litel bok*' is sent on its way at the end of *Troilus and Criseyde*, or those of the apology in the 'General Prologue' invite us to look at the boundary between the artefact and the world.

The first chapter of this thesis examines the two stanzas at the end of *Troilus and Criseyde*, in which the 'litel bok' is sent on its way. Unlike Dante, Petrarch and

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[31] T. J. Clarke, *The Sight of Death: An Experiment in Art Writing* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006), p. 12.

Boccaccio, with whom he has otherwise much in common, Chaucer did not produce, or did not leave behind him, any treatise or explicitly theoretical statements about poetry. That is not to say, however, that meta-poetic questions do not arise in his work. In these two stanzas are condensed many ancient and contemporary medieval ideas about signification, authorship, inspiration and poetic value.

Chaucer does in a couple of stanzas what Dante did in the *Convivio*, *Vita Nuova* and *De vulgari eloquentia*. That is not to imply the superiority of the English poet, merely his taste for tricky concision, as against Dante's greater elaboration. My discussion therefore has a wide range of reference: Plato's ideas about the hierarchy of speech and writing, Dante's theory of signification as expressed in the *Convivio*, and the scholastic Aristotelian revisions of Neoplatonic notions of *exitus* and *reditus*, all of which fold into the late medieval complex of ideas about authorship. The focus of my discussion of these two stanzas in which the '*makere*' sends his '*litel bok*', is on the question of *where* he sends it, *to whom*, and with what sense of the *value of what he sends*.

As the poem's immortality, divine origin and future are being contemplated in these stanzas by its *makere*, the mutable world itself is on the brink of being rejected in favour of the values that never fade. And yet, as Troilus moves from one world into the next, and contemplates the one from the perspective of the other, so the book's future, on the one hand secure in the supra-mundane company of Virgil and Homer, also lies in this world. To the extent that the book participates in a cycle of Neoplatonic procession out of, and return to, its divine source, it resembles the second person of the Trinity. As the poem builds towards its closing Dantean image of commeation within the unity of the Trinity, it appears that perhaps the *litel bok* will be redeemed also by its participation in the divine logic of *exitus* and *reditus*. However, the second stanza, where the poem's fall into earthly signifiers is lamented and also acknowledged as inevitable, envisions a different kind of future for the poem, an imperfect, unstable future, where the common tongue, in all its varieties and unpredictability, threatens to mangle the precious, immaterial poetic meaning. The ambivalence of, and tension between, these two stanzas, in which the poem's fate teeters between absorption back into the divine provenance from which it emerged, and an earthly career in the mouths and at the fingertips of careless, nameless readers and copyists yet to be born, is consistent with the larger tension within the poem between the value of this world and the value of the next. The palinode, if we may

call it that for convenience, enacts these very tensions, between the brittle but entrancing earthly love which takes up so much of the poem, and the disillusionment with mere earthly things that Troilus experiences in his apotheosis. Many readers experience dissatisfaction with the conclusion of the poem, in that it seems to set at nothing the very relationship in which they have been so absorbed, and with which they have had such sympathy. Still other readers mock the un-medieval attitude that such a disappointment betrays: of course the poem will end with disillusionment as to the value of earthly love. Did it not begin with a clear statement of its *topos*, that of the 'double sorwe' of Troilus? What other ending could it have, this poem about human love?

The poem departs from a Boethian perspective on the value of this world, not so much in the matter of human love, although this is surely depicted with uncommon sympathy, subtlety and ambiguity, as in its own meta-poetic self-commentary. The two stanzas about the future of the 'litel bok' mirror the seesawing within the poem as a whole between earthly gratification and heavenly consolation. The final word in these stanzas, however, rests with the *makere's* fragile hope that his poem might yet be understood even in the midst of worldly uncertainty and linguistic instability. Even more, while at one moment in these stanzas, it seems as if the poem's future is best secured by yoking it up to the Trinitarian imagery of circumcession, at another, it looks as if it will be best served by paradoxically connecting it to the crisis of signification that is figured by the 'diversite' in the writing and speaking of the English tongue. The most daring meta-poetic element of the ending of the poem, is its hint that an infinity unrelieved by a guaranteed return to source, an infinity of inaccurate and non-identical reproductions, an infinity of difference, of multiple and unpredictable users and readers, is where the poem is headed, whether the *makere* wills it or not.

In the second chapter, the focus shifts from *Troilus* to the *Canterbury Tales*. The bulk of the discussion is devoted to the teasing out of the significance of the appearance of Timaeus's injunction that 'wordes moot be cosyn to the dede' in the apology of the 'General Prologue'. I also deal at some length with the question of the significance of the apology's dependence upon the passage in the *Roman de la Rose*, where the Platonic epigram is attributed to Sallust, and attached to a quotation from the *Conspiracy of Cataline*. Sallust compares the glory of the man who performs a great deed with that of 'him who wants to set down the deed accurately in a book',

and concludes that while there is a lesser share of glory for the writer, still, 'it is not an easy thing to set down deeds in writing', especially because the writer bears the burden of ensuring that his words must be 'cousin' to their deeds.

The apology, and especially the Platonic epigram which is its climax, sets up the entire structure of secondariness, which, I argue, underpins the *Canterbury Tales*. The ambivalence as to the value of the world, an ambivalence that provides much of the tension and interest of the ending of *Troilus*, is taken much further, and developed in the direction of a radically worldly poetics, worldly both in its object and its linguistic strategy in relation to that object. The nameless ordinary people who threaten to misunderstand and warp the meaning of the 'litel bok', are now themselves the *topos*, but more than that, they are in every sense the poem's subjects, and speak on their own behalf. The tellers themselves are 'sondry folk', mostly undistinguished, ordinary. Those exceptions, those men at the height of their professions, such as the Man of Law, are ordinary in respect of their undistinguished motives, their thinly disguised self-interest. Gone are the classical locations, which now feature only in the second-hand stories of the pilgrims, stories from antiquity and folklore which they re-cycle and invest with personal and local animus, or ambition, or vanity, or hubris. The narrator of the 'General Prologue', in the apology which is the main topic of this chapter, excuses himself for his practice of reproducing exactly the words of the pilgrims, arguing that, as Plato requires, the 'wordes moot by cosyn to the dede'. This relationship of kinship between word and deed is then literalised as the poem unfolds itself into nothing more than the words of these pilgrims, whose deeds outside these words remain undescribed. Their deeds are words. The poem deals not with the supra-mundane order that may underlie this *imago* that is the world, but squarely with the *imago* itself, on its own terms. And the world with which it is concerned, the *imago*, is itself caught up in constant reproduction, of *imagos* within *imagos*.

Where in *Troilus* and in 'Adam Scriveyn', anxiety was focused on the falling-into-embodiment of the immaterial 'bok', whether the noble book of *Troilus* or the philosophical *Boece*, the emphasis at the beginning of the *Canterbury Tales* is on reproduction itself. The narrator disavows poetic invention, refuses to 'feyne a thyng', refuses to be a *makere*. Instead of feigning *things*, he will speak *words*, the words of the pilgrims. He will 'rehearse', tell a tale 'after a man'. The problem of material signification, and the perils of reproduction, which appeared in 'Adam Scriveyn' and the end of *Troilus*, as *exterior* threats to the *inner*, immaterial life of the book, are here

drawn into the foundational logic of the poem. Reproduction is not a thing that happens to ideas any more, but the idea itself. The pilgrims re-hash ideas and stories from Macrobius, Statius, Petrarch, Dante, Ovid, Cato, Jerome, Christ, Paul, proverbial commonplaces, gossip, the man next door. Primary artistic creativity, *ex nihilo*, is nowhere visible, in the practice of either the narrator or the pilgrims. Emerson a long time ago called Chaucer a 'huge borrower'; Arnold denied him 'high seriousness'.[32] The culture of the Middle Ages was often deplored for its lack of originality, its obliviousness to nature, its derivativeness. In the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer takes on the lamented secondariness that appeared to threaten the higher-level survival of his aristocratic or philosophically high-brow works such as *Troilus* and *Boece*, and places it at the centre of his greatest poem. The world, the deeds to which his words are 'cosyn', then, is a world that is itself composed of rehearsals, of twice-told tales. It is not an exterior, extra-linguistic world about which words speak, but the words themselves, and in all their secondariness. In this way, secondariness, re-use, becomes an aspect of the human condition, which is always already acculturated.

Chapter three moves on from the more general questions of poetics, to focus on a particular tale, the Franklin's. The Franklin begins his performance in the Squire-Franklin link with a tribute to the true *gentilesse*, which does not depend upon wealth, eminence or lineage, but on virtue. This *generositas virtus, non sanguis*, the theory of which itself has an impressive pedigree well-known to Chaucer, is apparently therefore an antidote to the worldly, monetary *gentilesse* of '*possessioun*' that the Franklin decries. The argument of this chapter, however, is that the Franklin, having declared his colours as a gentleman of the true, and not vulgar, sort, goes on to 'transvalue' this very value of *gentilesse* that he is purportedly illustrating with his tale. Considering the theory of *generositas virtus, non sanguis* in terms of contemporary late medieval theories of grace, but also drawing upon certain modern techniques of moral genealogy, such as that practised by Nietzsche, in his *On the Genealogy of Morality*, and upon modern anthropological investigations into the social meaning of gift-giving, such as Marcel Mauss's *The Gift*, my argument in this chapter is that the Franklin, while seeming to endorse the value-scheme of the

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[32] Emerson, *Critical Heritage*, vol. 2, p. 35; Matthew Arnold, 'The Study of Poetry' (General Introduction (1880) to *The English Poets*, ed. T. H. Ward), and printed in Matthew Arnold's *Essays in Criticism*, Second Series (1906; new edition, London: Dent, 1964), pp. 235-60; 250.

beatitudes, in fact provides a worldly transvaluation of nobility and virtue. The gestures of modesty, such as the Franklin performs in his prologue and in the Squire-Franklin link, his demurral of rhetoric, his depreciation of his son, his courtesy in the face of the Host's rude rebuke are the signs of his mastery of the rules of the social game of *gentilesse*. As a gentleman he must have nothing to prove. In the tale that he goes on to tell, however, while he appears to dedicate himself to the demonstration of the higher value of the renovated Christian *gentilesse*, he is actually engaged in a quite different kind of valuation. His tale demonstrates that, much and all as *gentilesse* must be seen, like grace, to originate in God, it actually springs, as the pagans he derides knew full well, from power, position, and above all, the capacity to *give*.

The chapter as a whole considers how purely moral and spiritual goods, such as *gentilesse* and *fredom*, are held up for admiration by the Franklin in a tale which then goes on to transvalue them in terms of economics, money and power. The second half of my discussion concentrates on the virtue of *fredom* or generosity, which is the engine for the resolution of the dilemma of the tale. At the critical point where Arveragus has just stated his belief in *trouthe*, in the course of his own *fre* or generous action towards his wife, the narrator interrupts the narrative, and reflects on its past and future turns. He contemplates the level of understanding of his audience, and cautions them to suspend judgement until the results are in. He uses the word '*jupartie*' to describe the situation in which Arveragus, by the '*heep*' of the audience, might be deemed to have placed his wife.[33] This term, '*jupartie*', which derives from chess, and describes the forerunner of the modern chess 'problem', focuses our attention less on the intrinsic value of Arveragus's act, and more on its *outcome*. The actions of the main players are conceived as moves in a game, and the only object of a game is to *win*. I deploy some of the insights of modern game theory to analyse the conflict, and sometimes overlap, between self- and group-interest in the final

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[33] The lines appear only in Ellesmere and British Library Additional MS 35286. For a recent comment on the status of British Library Additional *MS* 35286, see Peter Robinson, 'The History, Discoveries, and Aims of the Canterbury Tales Project', *Chaucer Review* 38 (2003), 126-139; 130. For a more thorough discussion, and a treatment of the various editorial and critical attitudes to lines 1493-8 in particular, see Simon Horobin, 'Editorial Assumptions and the Manuscripts of the *Canterbury Tales*', in Norman Blake and Peter Robinson, eds., *The Canterbury Tales Project Occasional Papers*, Volume II (Oxford: Office for Humanities Communication,1997), pp. 15-21; 18-20. See also Horobin, 'Additional 35286 and the Order of the *Canterbury Tales*', *Chaucer Review* 31 (1997), 272-78.

showdown between the characters, a showdown which demonstrates that virtue derives from power, and not the meekness of the beatitudes. The tale as a whole converts 'the good' into 'goods'.

A concluding chapter draws together the strands of the thesis, and in addition attempts to situate Chaucer's poetic achievement within a broader frame of literary reference than is perhaps usual. Jill Mann, in her brilliant and foundational work on the 'General Prologue' wrote of the way in which the pilgrims are depicted in terms of 'work'. While this is certainly true, it is equally the case that the workers are, for the duration of the *Canterbury Tales*, off-duty. Like Aristotle's workers of the polis the pilgrims are oriented towards pleasure, leisure and interaction.[34] However, where Aristotle provides a happy picture of the good life in an ideal city, Chaucer offers a radically de-idealised picture, but one where the worldly, even wicked man is more interesting and insightful than his good and thoughtful companion. The opening of the *Canterbury Tales* describes, in sexual terms of penetration and secretions, the re-awakening of the natural world in the springtime. But as it builds upwards through the hierarchy of vegetable and animal towards man, it abruptly turns away from nature. In the place of the bird's sleepless, procreative vigil, and the flower's engendering, is man's quest for spiritual regeneration. At first glance, it looks as if, in contradistinction to the onanistic and sexualised humanity that is the climax of

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[34] See Aristotle's discussion in Book VII and VIII of Politics: 'I must repeat once again, the first principle of all action is leisure. Both are required, but leisure is better than occupation and is its end; and therefore the question must be asked, what ought we to do when at leisure? Clearly we ought not to be amusing ourselves, for then amusement would be the end of life. But if this is inconceivable, and amusement is needed more amid serious occupations than at other times (for he who is hard at work has need of relaxation, and amusement gives relaxation, whereas occupation is always accompanied with exertion and effort), we should introduce amusements only at suitable times, and they should be our medicines, for the emotion which they create in the soul is a relaxation, and from the pleasure we obtain rest. But leisure of itself gives pleasure and happiness and enjoyment of life, which are experienced, not by the busy man, but by those who have leisure. For he who is occupied has in view some end which he has not attained; but happiness is an end, since all men deem it to be accompanied with pleasure and not with pain. This pleasure, however, is regarded differently by different persons, and varies according to the habit of individuals; the pleasure of the best man is the best, and springs from the noblest sources. It is clear then that there are branches of learning and education which we must study merely with a view to leisure spent in intellectual activity, and these are to be valued for their own sake; whereas those kinds of knowledge which are useful in business are to be deemed necessary, and exist for the sake of other things'. Benjamin Jowett, trans., *The Politics of Aristotle* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1885), Book VIII.3.

Guillaume de Lorris's description of springtime, the tales will deal with higher things. But generations of readers have soon found that it is quite otherwise. The *Canterbury Tales*, the very name of which pits spiritual goal against worldly diversion, plays constantly with the cross-currents of the spiritual and the physical, the natural and the cultural, the chaff and the wheat, the 'raw and the cooked' as Claude Levi-Strauss put it.

The worldliness of the poetic that informs the *Canterbury Tales*, however, is not absolute, and at the end of the tales, in the 'Parson's Prologue' and also in the 'Retractions', the poetic *oeuvre* is offered up in an ambivalent gesture that combines modesty, penitence and vanity. The *Tales* are a partial, inadequate account, and deal with the world of becoming only, and not with the eternal realm of being. As such, they are an *imago* of an *imago*, a 'churl's tale' indeed. This apologetic stance of the retractions is soon complicated, though, by the counter-justification, taken from Paul, that 'all that is written is written for oure doctrine'.[35] This quotation of Romans 15.4, and the Parson's rejection of *draf* in favour of wheat form a pair, offering different perspectives on the same problem. The poem throbs with vacillation from one impulse to the other. From the opening lines in which human spirituality replaces the sexuality to which the description of springtime appears to be building, to the Miller's barging in on the seemly order of the tale-telling, to the principle of 'quitting' which organises the whole poem, to the tally-stick of the retractions themselves, the hierarchy of chaff and wheat is always in question. The chaff or *draf*, the disposable wrapping, in which the kernel of everlasting truth is nestled, is the main *topos* and method of the poem, which is focused on this world, rather than the next, and on the next only as an aspect of this.

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[35] Minnis has provided the definitive account of the exploitation of Paul's dictum by the compilers, and of Chaucer's further refinement of this process of adaptation. *Medieval Theory of Authorship*, pp. 205-8.

Chapter One: The 'litel bok', the *makere* and the next world

Preamble: Socrates worries about writing

In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates expresses a preference for speaking over writing:

> You know, Phaedrus, that's the strange thing about writing,
> which makes it truly analogous to painting. The painter's
> products stand before us as though they were alive, but if you
> question them, they maintain a most majestic silence. It is the
> same with written words; they seem to talk to you as though
> they were intelligent, but if you ask them anything about
> what they say, from a desire to be instructed, they go on
> telling you the same thing forever.[1]

The passage provides a neat example of what Jacques Derrida notoriously
identified as phonocentrism, against the grain of which he established his
grammatological project.[2] What disturbs Socrates most is that written words
remain fixed, and are inflexible, unable, unlike the living human speaker, to
respond to the precise needs of different readers. If, alongside this Platonic
passage, we rather anachronistically set a couple of stanzas from *Troilus and
Criseyde*, we see a different, but also critical view of writing:[3]

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[1] *Plato's Phaedrus*, trans. R. Hackforth (London: Cambridge University
Press, 1952; repr. 1972), 275d.

[2] Not just *a* neat example, but perhaps *the* neat example, as Derrida focuses
on the treatment of writing in the *Phaedrus* at length, most notably in the
section headed 'Plato's Pharmacy' in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara
Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), pp. 63-171.

[3] As Plato casts his shadow (or light) everywhere in the Middle Ages and
beyond, it would not seem to be too much to find something as unspecific
as 'resonance' between the two passages. Yet there is no positive evidence
for any knowledge of *Phaedrus* by Chaucer or his contemporaries. But in
the light of the Derridean charge of a widespread phonocentrism across the
Western philosophical tradition, the Platonic passage is arguably an
eloquent, and early, exemplification of tendencies found widely elsewhere.
Eric Jager discusses the Neoplatonic background to ambivalent patristic
attitudes to writing in *The Tempter's Voice: Language and the Fall in
Medieval Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993) pp. 62-64.

Go, litel bok, go, litel myn tragedye,

Ther God thi makere yet, er that he dye,

So sende myght to make in som comedye!

But litel book, no makyng thow n'envie,

But subgit be to alle poesye;

And kis the steppes where as thow seest pace

Virgile, Ovide, Omer, Lucan and Stace.

And for ther is so gret diversite

In Englissh and in writyng of oure tonge,

So prey I God that non myswrite the,

Ne the mysmetre for defaute of tonge;

And red wherso thow be, or elles songe,

That thow be understonde, God I biseche!

But yet to purpos of my rather speche: (5. 1786-99)

Here, at the end of Chaucer's great poem, it is the unreliability of the written word that causes anxiety, at the very point where the possibility of immortality for the work of art is raised. Will the poem – as composed by the poet – survive the orthographic variation and scribal idiosyncrasies (the latter bemoaned succinctly, and more unkindly, in 'Adam Scriveyn') that dog the language and its written and oral reproduction? If Socrates is bothered by the inert fixity of the written word, Chaucer's narrator is anxious about its volatility and unpredictability. Severed from the infinite flexibility of the sovereign consciousness of the speaker, the completed written work is for Socrates also finished, extinct. If only the words would stop jumping about, my poem would be safe for generations to come, is the hope expressed in *Troilus*. It is perhaps less than surprising that the peripatetic Socrates would favour living speech over dead letters, but rather more so that the bookish Chaucerian *makere* is so under-confident about the written condition of his poem.

What is missing for Socrates from the written communication is the unity that supposedly characterises speech, a unity in which the spoken word

is the spontaneous and natural sign of the speaker's thought. In the case of writing, the material sign, the written word, is sundered from this vital presence, is cut off and dies as a result: hence its lifelessness in the face of the eager reader's enquiry.[4]

In a discussion of Aristotle, Derrida isolates what he considers to be the assumptions underlying this pervasive phonocentrism:

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[4] Eugene Vance, however, argues in relation to this issue in the medieval period, that 'people of the Middle Ages were basically anti-Cratylistic in their conception of verbal signs (which are the signs proper to the human species), holding that the bond between signifier and signified (*signans* and *signatum*) was merely conventional', *Mervelous Signals: Poetics and Sign Theory in the Middle Ages* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), p. 258. John of Salisbury states that 'grammar is arbitrary and subject to man's discretion', arguing that while it is an 'invention of man', grammar nonetheless 'imitates nature, from which it partly derives its origin'. *Metalogicon*, trans. Daniel D. McGarry (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1971), I. 14. Martin Irvine and David Thompson discuss John of Salisbury's view of the arbitrariness of grammatical rules in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, pp. 22-23. The postmodern theologian Catherine Pickstock takes strong exception to Derrida's reading of *Phaedrus*, arguing that he is mistaken in claiming that Socrates's privileging of orality over writing is done in the context of an association of orality with the king and capital. She argues that in fact it is the sophistic rhetoric rejected by Socrates that apes secondariness, by its unprincipled adaptation to any situation. Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p. 6. She offers a thorough refutation of Derrida's entire reading of *Phaedrus*: 'Phaedrus' concealment of Lysias' scroll beneath his cloak is emblematic of this mystification of the written word as supreme locus of science. It is an act of fetishization realizing a "metaphysics of presence" for the text is at once mysteriously absent and yet explicitly appropriated, as Socrates deftly underlines by his use of the language of ownership and materiality: "Yes, my dear, when you have first shown me what you have (echō) in (en) your left hand, under (hupo) your cloak. For I expect you have the actual discourse (ton logon auton)" (228d-e). Socrates' unexpected preference for a reading of this text rather than a duplicitous oral reproduction is continuous with his understanding of the implications of its fetishization, for Phaedrus' proffered simulated orality would engage a fully metaphysical obsession with a lost original – as if a speech could be sundered from its real occasion and its written recording permitted its identical reproduction. By contrast, an honest reading, confessing its secondariness, would constitute a new and different performance in itself.' *Ibid.*, p. 8.

If, for Aristotle, for example, 'spoken words (ta en tē phonē) are the symbols of mental experience (pathēmata tes psychēs) and written words are the symbols of spoken words' (*De interpretatione*, 1, 16a 3) it is because the voice, producer of the first symbols, has a relationship of essential and immediate proximity with the mind. Producer of the first signifier, it is not just a simple signifier among others. It signifies 'mental experiences' which themselves reflect or mirror things by natural resemblance. Between being and mind, things and feelings, there would be a relationship of translation or natural signification; between mind and logos, a relationship of conventional symbolization.[5]

One of the aspects of deconstruction that has proved most influential is Derrida's point that this supposed 'secondariness' of writing extends beyond writing in the narrow sense, to affect all signifying, including speech, and to affect the signified, as well as the signifier.[6] Writing is the scapegoat or

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[5] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 11.

[6] 'By a hardly perceptible necessity, it seems as though the concept of writing – no longer indicating a particular, derivative, auxiliary form of language in general (whether understood as communication, relation, expression, signification, constitution of meaning or thought, etc.), no longer designating the exterior surface, the insubstantial double of a major signifier, *the signifier of the signifier* – is beginning to go beyond the extension of language. In all senses of the word, writing thus *comprehends* language.' *Ibid.*, p. 6-7; 'The exteriority of the signifier is the exteriority of writing in general, and I shall try to show later that there is no linguistic sign before writing', *Ibid.,*, p. 14; 'What we have tried to show by following the guiding line of the "dangerous supplement," is that in what one calls the real life of these existences "of flesh and bone," beyond and behind what one believes can be circumscribed as Rousseau's text, there has never been anything but writing; there have never been anything but supplements, substitutive significations which could only come forth in a chain of differential references, the "real" supervening, and being added only while taking on meaning from a trace and from an invocation of the supplement, etc.', *Ibid*, pp. 158-9.

The bias of medieval *grammatica* in favour of writing rather than speech could be cited here in support of Derrida's argument that in spite of an official privileging of speech over writing, speech is always already

dumping ground for the difference between meaning and word that the 'great epoch covered by the history of metaphysics' wants to suppress, a difference that is really always already in place.[7]

The obvious paradox in the case of Socrates's distrust of writing is the immortality he achieved because of writing, because of Plato's pinning down of these lively, ephemeral symposia.[8] But contemporary irony aside, Socrates persists with the view that the written word is not only infuriating, but also dangerous:

> And once a thing is put in writing, the composition, whatever it may be, drifts all over the place, getting into the hands not only of those who don't understand it, but equally of those who have no business with it; it doesn't know how to address the right people, and not address the wrong. And when it is ill-treated and unfairly abused it always needs its parent to come to its help, being unable to defend or help itself.[9]

On this point – their attitude to the written work, the immature composition, fallen in with bad company, unable to explain itself, crying for its parent, the 'litel bok', sent into the world with letters of introduction to friends in high places – Socrates and Chaucer's narrator seem to be in agreement. Where

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inflected by writing (although it could also be used to make precisely the opposite point: i.e. to show that in fact, speech did not prevail over writing). See Martin Irvine with David Thomson, 'Grammatica and literary theory' in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, pp. 30-33: 'In general, medieval grammatical theory privileged writing over speech' (p. 30); 'The model for articulate speech is writing, not spoken utterances' (ibid.); 'In grammatical discourse, the Platonic sense of the secondariness of writing has been erased; speech and writing become dual manifestations of a single activity – signifying or the production of meaning' (p. 31). On patristic attitudes to writing as originating in the Fall, see Jager, *The Tempter's Voice*, pp. 62-72.

[7] *Of Grammatology,* p. 14-15.

[8] Or fabrication, or part-fabrication, of the symposia. The question of the extent to which Plato is as much a writer of fiction as a dutiful amanuensis itself enacts the question of the subservience of the sign to a pre-existing *logos.*

[9] *Phaedrus,* 275e.

previously Socrates has disparaged the unresponsive, inert aspect of writing, now he disapproves of its tendency to float free, its delinquency, its vulnerability to limitless dissemination.[10] The written word is excessively limited on the one hand, and on the other, dangerously unregulated.

What follows in the next two chapters is an attempt to trace Chaucer's poetics as they are revealed in a number of elusive remarks scattered across his poems. Unlike Boccaccio or Dante, Chaucer produced, or left behind him, no theoretical writings about poetry. His treatises deal on the contrary with non-poetic matters altogether. In the place of the lengthy theoretical discourses where his fellow poets pinned their colours to the mast, in place of Boccaccio's *Genealogia deorum gentilium*, of Dante's *Convivio* and *De vulgari eloquentia*, of Petrarch's letters, we have in Chaucer's *oeuvre* a few score lines of suggestive but ambiguous poetry.[11]

Whatever we want to know about his poetics we must therefore glean from the poems themselves. There is any number of ways in which one might go about this. What I aim to do is take two (the first from the ending of *Troilus*, the second from the 'General Prologue') of the short, almost parenthetical remarks about poetry that occur in Chaucer's work, and to examine their theoretical yield.[12]

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[10] Catherine Pickstock, in the course of her negative assessment of Derrida's critique of Socrates's view of writing in the *Phaedrus*, describes Socrates's distrust of both writing and sophistic as follows: '…it is precisely a sophistic suppression of genuine difference in favour of commercial and manipulative interests – through the instrumentalisation of language – which Socrates attacks for being inimical to the practice of dialectical differentiation. For both rhetoric and writing can be characterized by their assimilability to any cause and usefulness in any situation: a kind of saturation of difference which, Socrates implies, reduces to the closure of difference or sheer indifference.' Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing*, p. 6.

[11] Although Zygmunt G. Barański points out that Dante's interest in the nature of literature is evident not only in his explicitly theoretical writings, but in his *oeuvre* as a whole: 'what is crucial is the fact that poetics and poetry, "literary criticism" and literature were indissolubly linked in his work'. 'Dante Alighieri: experimentation and (self-)exegesis', in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism: The Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 561-582; 563.

[12] In the process, the question of the extent to which Chaucer's poetics resonates or not with our postmodern preoccupations about literary

I will begin in this chapter with the stanzas about the 'litel bok' from *Troilus*. Poised as they are at the near-end of one great poem, and announcing the imminent conception of another, they display an astonishing condensation of a long tradition of sophisticated literary theory. Not quite dwarves perched on the shoulders of giants, they are more like conjurers, elegantly concealing their reliance on the laws of literary history while playing with them.

I: *The sending of the book*

In Chaucer's stanzas, the hope is expressed that the work of art, in this case the 'tragedye', will go on its way.[13] But go where, exactly?[14] At first, it seems as if the 'litel bok', personified as a child, presumably, is now ready for the world.[15] The lexical choices behind the lines, though, are worth considering.

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meaning will also be raised. This secondary aspect of the discussion might seem at first glance to involve a departure from good historical practice, and to be altogether too vague to have any value. But, as E. R. Curtius writes, 'Poetry has her own wisdom' and so too must the critical discourse that attends her defer to the difference between poetry and history, no less than to that between poetry and philosophy. Chaucer's work itself raises repeatedly the preoccupation with being read and understood in the distant future. Sometimes he expresses this concern by contraries, as in the narrator's words in the proem to Book II of *Troilus*, where he discusses the changes undergone by a language in the course of a thousand years; at other times, scribal error is damned for its fouling up of the future readability of the work.

[13] In this respect, the two stanzas form a kind of envoy to the poem. However, whereas in 'The Complaint of Chaucer to his Purse', the word 'sende' is used to indicate the *makere's* activity in dispatching his work to the king, in these stanzas from *Troilus*, a reciprocity is envisaged, with one work going out, and another coming in. The word 'sende' is used in these stanzas to describe God's activity in relation to the *makere*. I am grateful to John Scattergood for his advice on the question of these stanzas as an envoy.

[14] J. P. S. Tatlock assumes that no destination is indicated or intended. 'The Epilog of Chaucer's Troilus', *MP*, 28 (1921), 630n. Richard C. Boys cites Tatlock, and adds his own similar view: '*Go* may be interpreted as "go your way" with no destination in view.' 'An Unusual Meaning of "Make" in Chaucer, *MLN* 52 (1937), 351-353; 351.

[15] Cf. Virgil's description, in *Inferno* XX, 113, of his *Aeneid* as 'alta mia tragedia'.

'Ther', the first word in line 1787, is usually described as functioning here as an introductory adverb, translatable as 'may'.[16] The *MED* lists five quotations from Chaucer that exemplify this non-locative, introductory function, three from the *Canterbury Tales*, two from *Troilus* (although it does not cite the lines under discussion here).[17] Chaucer, however, by no means sees the necessity of introducing curses, blessings or wishes in this way, and often goes about the expression of a subjunctive curse or wish without any introductory adverb. For instance, in the stanza immediately prior to the one under discussion, the narrator hopes that misery will be the reward for those who betray women:

> N'y sey nat this al oonly for thise men,
> But moost for women that bitraised be

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[16] *MED, s. v.* 'ther', 3(c): 'As introductory adv. with clauses expressing a wish, blessing, curse, etc.: may (sth. be done, sth. occur); also, may there be (sth.)'. F. J. van Beeck has dedicated an article to the question of the use of *'ther'* as an introductory adverb: 'A Note on *Ther* in Curses and Blessings in Chaucer', *Neophilologus* 69:2 (1985), pp. 276-283, in which he argues that *'ther* functions, syntactically speaking, as the introductory adverb of a main clause involving a curse or a blessing', and specifically seeks to deny that it 'functions as a relative adverb', p. 276.

[17] The *Riverside Chaucer* glosses line 1787 in the same light, with 'Ther God' given as 'may God', and provides an explanatory note for the line which describes 'ther' as 'pleonastic before the subjunctive sende', and Norman Davis *et al.* cite line 1787 as an instance of the introductory adverbial use of 'ther'. Norman Davis *et al.*, *A Chaucer Glossary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), *s. v.* 'ther'. Richard C. Boys discusses the lines as follows: '...*there* is used with the subjunctive in oaths or prayers. *There* seems to point to a subjunctive which follows. It is apparent that *there* need not be translated in such a case, a conclusion which we have reached earlier by means of the *NED*.' 'An Unusual Meaning of "Make" in Chaucer, *MLN* 52 (1937), 352. Van Beeck disucsses thirteen instances (*Troilus* II 586-7, III 946-7, III 964-6, III 1013-15, III 1436-40, III 1455-6, III 1524-6, V 1525-6 and V 1786-8; KT 2815-6, MLT 598-602, FrT 1561-2, and MerT 1307-8) of what he describes as the use of *ther* as an introductory adverb of a main clause. As van Beeck points out, E. T. Donaldson comments on ten instances in his anthology (*Chaucer's Poetry: An Anthology for the Modern Reader* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1975)), W. Skeat (*The Complete Works* (London: O.U.P., 1933) on three, and Robert A. Pratt (*The Tales of Canterbury* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974) on four. Van Beeck, pp. 277-8.

Thorough false folk – God yeve hem sorwe, amen!-

(5.1779-81)

Here no introductory adverb was deemed necessary. This omission of an introductory adverb before a subjunctive wish, curse or blessing is widespread. If we take another subjunctive-rich passage, from the end of the 'Wife of Bath's Tale', we see her make the following sequence of wishes:

> And thus they lyve unto hir lyves ende
> In parfit joye; and Jhesu Crist us sende
> Housbondes meeke, yonge, and fressh abedde,
> And grace t'overbyde hem that we wedde;
> And eek I praye Jhesu shorte hir lyves
> That noght wol be governed by hir wyves;
> And olde and angry nygardes of dispence,
> God sende hem soone verray pestilence! (1257-64)

There is not a 'ther' to be seen, although a 'ther' could easily be substituted in lines 1258 and 1264 as follows – 'ther Jhesu Crist us sende', and 'Ther God hem sende verray pestilence', without seriously degrading the meaning or metre.

Anyway, the point is obvious: 'ther', as an introductory adverb, is not required in the formulation of wishes, promises and curses. It is one lexical option.[18] Those instances where he does use it are worth looking at. In three of the five instances precipitated from Chaucer's corpus by the *MED*, there is no obvious locative connotation. In two cases, there is arguably, at least a locative context, if not a locative connotation. At the end of the 'Knight's Tale', where Arcite's final destination is being discussed, the narrator cautiously refrains from guessing:

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[18] The literature on the subject of 'there' is large, but with good reason focuses mainly on existential 'there-constructions', so that the introductory, non-locative *'ther'* of Middle English usage that is of interest to us here is comparatively neglected. The notes of various Chaucer scholars therefore provide much of the available material on the subject, and van Beeck's article appears to be one of the only dedicated solely to the problem.

> His spirit chaunged hous and went ther,
>
> As I cam nevere, I kan nat tellen wher.
>
> Therfore I stynte; I nam no divinistre;
>
> Of soules fynde I nat in this registre,
>
> Ne me ne list thilke opinions to telle
>
> Of hem, though they written wher they dwelle.
>
> Arcite is coold, ther Mars his soule gye! (1 (A) 2809-15)[19]

The passage is explicitly concerned with locative matters.[20] There is no pressing metrical reason why 'now' or 'so' might not have been used instead of 'ther', but there might be semantic and rhetorical reasons. The lines form a sub-unit in that they treat explicitly the topic of Arcite's whereabouts. The opening couplet produces the rhyming, explicitly locative pair of 'ther' and 'wher'; the closing couplet produces an inverted reflection (non-rhyming) of 'wher' and 'ther'. Even if the final 'ther' of line 2815 is only introductory, without any locative force, still, it is used as an equivalent for, and parallel to, an explicitly locative 'ther' in line 2809, and to that extent, it participates in the production of meaning initiated by the first pair of words.

In the final Chaucerian instance cited by the *MED*, in which Troilus is dismissing Cassandra and her unpalatable prophecy, the context for the use of 'ther' as an introductory adverb is also locative:

> "Awey!" quod he. "Ther Joves yeve thee sorwe!
>
> Thow shalt be fals, peraunter, yet tomorwe!" (*Troilus and Criseyde*, 5.1525)

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[19] As van Beeck notes, this passage, of those presenting this use of the word '*ther*', is one of two (the other being lines 1561-2 of the 'Friar's Tale') that have elicited 'the most numerous comments, receiving attention from Robinson, Baugh, Pratt, Donaldson and Fisher', van Beeck, p. 278.

[20] John H. Fisher considers that the adverb here is quasi-local. See Fisher, ed., *The Complete Poetry and Prose of Geoffrey Chaucer* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1977). Fisher glosses line 2815 with 'wherever, may lead'. Van Beeck disputes his reading: 'Fisher's reading of [the passage] is curious too: if *ther* indeed means "wherever," the modern English rendering would run: "Arcite is cold, wherever Mars may lead his soul." Not very satisfactory', Van Beeck, p. 278.

Norman Davis cites a further example of this use of 'ther', in Criseyde's complaint about the coming of the day:[21]

> "Thow doost, allas, to shortly thyn office,
> Thow rakle nyght! Ther God, maker of kynde,
> The, for thyn haste and thyn unkynde vice,
> So faste ay to oure hemysperie bynde
> That nevere more under the ground thow wynde!" (*Troilus and Criseyde*, 3.1436-40)

In these lines also, the curse involves, not a transformation of the addressee, but a *relocation*. After Criseyde's complaint about the night, Troilus antistrophically produces his own complaint about the day, as follows:

> "Envyous day, what list the so to spien?
> What hastow lost? Why sekestow this place?
> Ther God thi light so quenche, for his grace!" (*Troilus and Criseyde*, 3.1454-6)

Here we see Troilus's questioning of the day's customary habit of locating itself even in the bedrooms of lovers. The irony of Troilus's complaint is of course his sense of injustice at having been *singled out*, when it is precisely the nature of daylight to be general. His specific wish, however, as distinct from his complaint, is for the day's light, i.e. the sun, to be extinguished altogether, an impossible wish for an ontological absurdity (day without light) which is indeed the only means by which the day could be prevented from entering any *particular* location.

In the passage where the 'litel bok' is dispatched, are there grounds for wondering whether 'ther', rather than functioning pleonastically to introduce the wish, actually serves as a locative adverb, modifying both the sending of the book to God, and the hoped-for dispatch of new creative

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[21] Norman Davis et al, *A Chaucer Glossary* (1979; reprint, Oxford: Oxford University Press, The Clarendon Press, 1988), *s. v.* 'ther'.

power by God, and referring to the whereabouts of God (and of the book?). In other words, are there grounds for wondering if 'ther' in this case means something other than a superfluous 'may'? The likelihood is increased by the conjunction of 'ther' with 'so': 'Ther God thi makere yet, er that he dye, / So sende might to make in som comedye!' The *MED* gives the following as the primary meaning of 'so': 'In the aforesaid manner or way, in the way previously described, in this way, in such a way, in the same way.'[22] There is no other definition listed under the word that suits the use made of it by Chaucer in these lines. But, we are then bound to ask, what is the 'aforesaid manner' to which the 'so' refers?

The obvious, primary reading, based on the understanding that 'ther' does indeed function here as an introductory, non-locative adverb meaning 'may', implies that the 'so' of line 1788 must refer to the *sending* of the 'litel bok'. Once the book has gone on its way, the maker of it is 'so' able to make another. The maker cannot embark upon the rearing of a new child until the first one is ready to stand on its own two feet.

An alternative reading of the lines would consider 'ther' as partaking of the common meaning of 'ther' as a demonstrative adverb with a locative function, in which case 'ther' would provide the 'aforesaid manner' referred to by the 'so'. If this reading is valid, then the book is headed towards, or rather, *back*, to God.

In any case, whatever the specific semantic burden carried by the word 'ther' in the passage concerned with the future of the 'litel bok' of Troilus, there is an overall interest in *location* in these stanzas. Even if we are not convinced that the word 'ther' is used as a locative adverb, modifying God's hoped-for sending of the power to write a comedy, there are other grounds for considering the significance of location in these lines.

It is clear that the 'going' (whether to God, as has been proposed above, or simply on an unspecified route) of the book is a condition for the giving by God of the power to make a new book, a comedy. One is bound to infer that the 'might' to make the present book was also sent by God. In order for God to send the power to make a new book, the current book must

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[22] *MED, s. v.* 'so'.

first be dispatched. How does this causal connection between God's power and the making of poetry (and, more vaguely, the suggestion of an economy between God and maker, in which finished book is exchanged for new inspiration) fit with contemporary late medieval theories about the genesis of poetry?

II: *The Genesis of Poetry*

Before we can proceed with our discussion of *Troilus* we need briefly to outline the prevailing theories about the source of poetry's meaning that impinged upon the late Middle Ages. First, we need to look at the allegorical tradition, in which a non-material meaning, from a non-material source, finds its way into a deceptively earthly sign. Second, we need to look at the question of the origin of inspiration. Third, we must consider the author as the source of meaning, and this will involve a brief examination of the different levels of authorship that might be involved in the making of a single work. Fourth, we will turn more specifically to secular poetry, to such *moderni*, and theorising practitioners, as Dante and Boccaccio, to see whether they offered distinctive or new insights into these topics.

(i) *Allegory and Fabula*

The veteran tradition of allegorical interpretation, by which profound natural, scientific, metaphysical, and even religious (as in the case of Virgil's 'Messianic' eclogue) truths could be veiled by a fabular and sometimes perplexingly profane outer layer, had for centuries enabled the conscionable reading of the classics, and of problematic Biblical books, such as the Song of Songs, by Christians.[23] Allegorical writing and interpretation

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[23] On the origins and early development of specifically Christian methods of allegorical reading of Scripture, see Frances Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). For the transmission and development of the ideas of early allegorists such as Origen to the later Middle Ages, see Henri De Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis*, Vol. 1: *The Four Senses of Scripture*, trans. Mark

pre-dates Christianity,[24] and so several traditions – Platonic, Gnostic,

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Sebanc (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, and Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1998).

It is important to register the difference, upheld as a principle, but often formulated illogically, and honoured more in the breach, between the secular kind of allegory practiced by poets, and characterized by mythic or fabular *integumenta*, and that kind of allegory that comes about as a result of divine inspiration, as in the case of Scripture. In the *Convivio*, Dante distinguishes between the allegory of poets and the allegory of theologians, and indicates that he intends to follow the method of the poets (Dante's *Il Convivio* (*The Banquet*), trans. Richard H. Lansing (New York and London: Garland, 1990), Book II, chapter 1, pp. 40-41). However, in the Letter to Can Grande, the authorship of which is still sometimes attributed to Dante, but more usually to a member of his circle, the *Commedia* is described as '"polysemous", that is, having several meanings; for the first meaning is that which is conveyed by the letter, and the next is that which is called literal, while the latter is called allegorical, or mystical.' The author of the letter goes on then to compare this kind of interpretation to that suitable for the understanding of Biblical verses: 'And for the better illustration of this method of exposition we may apply it to the following verses: "When Israël went out of Egypt, the house of Jacob from a people of strange language; Judah was his sanctuary, and Israel his dominion" [Ps. 113: 1-2]. For if we consider the letter alone, the thing signified to us is the going out of the children of Israël from Egypt in the time of Moses; if the allegory, our redemption throught Christ is signified, if the moral sense, the conversion of the soul from the sorrow and misery of sin to a stated of grace is signified; if the anagogical, the passing of the sanctified soul from the bondage of the corruption of this world to the liberty of everlasting glory is signified. And although these mystical meanings are called by various names, they may one and all in a general sense be termed allegorical, inasmuch as they are different (diversi) from the literal or historical; for the word "allegory" is so called from the Greek alleon, which in Latin is alienum ("strange") or diversum ("different").' Dante Alighieri? 'Letter to Can Grande della Scala', in *Dantis Alagherii Epistolae*, ed. P Toynbee, 2nd edn. by C. Hardie (Oxford, 1966), excerpt reprinted in *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism*, pp. 458-469; 459-60.

[24] J. Tate argues, in his work on the origins of allegorical interpretation in the 6th century B.C. and earlier, that divine inspiration was an integral aspect of the allegorical outlook from its very beginning: '…the chief incentive to the use of allegories and etymologies for supporting philosophical dogmas continued down to the Neoplatonists to be the belief that the early poets were divinely wise or else inspired in just the same sense as prophets and oracles.' J. Tate, 'On the History of Allegorism', *Classical Quarterly* 28 (1934), 105-114; 107. In Tate's view, too much emphasis has been placed on the importance of Theagenes of Rhegium to the early development of allegorical interpretation, and that consequently, a misconceived belief that allegory arose out of a 'defensive' or 'apologetic' attitude to the poets became popular. Against this, Tate argues that 'the

Alexandrian[25] and neo-Platonic, amongst others – also operated within a comparable hermeneutic. Through St. Basil, Augustine, Macrobius, Fulgentius, the fourfold method of Biblical exegesis, Bernard of Chartres, William of Conches, the allegorising of the classics by Pierre Bersuire, up to

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function of allegorism was originally not negative or defensive but rather…positive or exegetical.' *Ibid.*, p. 105. Tate draws a suggestive distinction between what he calls historic, or, better, *pseudo-historic* allegorical interpretation, in which the author is presumed to have intended certain allegorical meanings which the exegete then unravels (interestingly, this bears comparison with Wayne Booth's influential idea of the category of 'stable irony', i.e. irony intended by the author) and *intrinsic* allegorical interpretation, in which the words are interpreted 'objectively', without reference to the poet's intentions 'according to the actual significances and symbolisms of the words themselves.' In the case of the former, the poet's insights arise out of his own natural talents; in the latter, the poet can be ever so ignorant himself, since the value of his poems derives from a divine source. (Dawson distinguishes between the kind of allegorical interpretation practiced by the Stoic Cornetus (first century C.E.), who 'uses etymological analysis of the names and epithets of deities to uncover the theological, philosophical, and scientific wisdom expressed in fragments of ancient Greek mythology preserved by the poets', and the kind involved in Heraclitus's interpretation of the *Illiad* and *Odyssey* as 'though Homer had intentionally composed them as allegories', Dawson, p. 23). As Tate says, the existence of these two different kinds of allegorical interpretation gave rise to confusion: 'The didacticism which is the keynote of the Greek attitude towards poetry laid most stress on the divine wisdom of the early poets; but it could also, though somewhat inconsistently, hold that they were directly inspired by the gods in the same sense as prophets and oracles. As the allegorists stand for extreme didacticism they express both these tendencies in an exaggerated form. Perhaps their chief support was the view that poetry is inspired like prophecy (which, if consistently held, would be the standpoint of intrinsic allegorism); but we usually find this view rather inharmoniously combined with an exaggerated respect for the wisdom (in some sense divine) of the poets themselves (standpoint of historic allegorism)'. 'On the History of Allegorism', p. 112. See also Raymond J. Starr on this 'two-sided' nature of allegory, in his discussion of ancient 'biographical allegory' as applied to Virgil's *Eclogues*. Starr, 'Virgil's Seventh Eclogue and Its Readers: Biographical Allegory as an Interpretative Strategy in Antiquity and Late Antiquity', *Classical Philology* 90 (1995), 129-38; 130.

[25] On allegorical reading and Alexandrian culture see David Dawson's historically situated study, *Allegorical Readers and Cultural Revision in Ancient Alexandria* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992). Dawson is always careful to point out that allegorical interpretations, as, for instance those of Philo and Clement, 'emerged in the midst of ancient and diverse pagan hermeneutical practices'. Dawson, p. 23.

the Letter to Can Grande della Scala, Dante's *Convivio* and beyond, the concept of the noble moral or truth wrapped up in outer clothing that is sometimes (in secular fables and myths and in the poetic books of the Bible, such as the Song of Songs) enigmatic, fascinating, even dubious, exercised an enormous influence on the interpretation of texts sacred and secular.[26]

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[26] In the case of many, but not all, of the books of the Bible, the literal level is held to be true, in that it reports events that actually happened, whereas in the case of secular, integumental allegory, the literal level is often, although not always, fabular. A. J. Minnis takes issue with Charles Singleton's argument that Dante in the *Commedia* is using 'clearly, the "allegory of the theologians"' because if he were using the 'allegory of the poets' the literal level of his poem 'ought always to be expected to yield another sense because the literal is only a fiction devised to express a second meaning. In this view the first meaning, if it does not give another, true meaning, has no excuse for being.' (Charles Singleton, 'Dante's Allegory', pp. 95-6). Minnis points out, on the one hand, that in fact, several writers placed on the record their belief that certain secular allegories displayed a true literal meaning (Minnis cites Arnulf of Orléans' discussion of Lucan as 'poet and historiographer combined', 'Boccaccio's elaboration of the Ciceronian/Macrobian category of fiction which comprises events both "literal" and possible', the satirists' rendering of the 'naked truth', the comedies of Terence and Plautus, and the Averroistic assertion that 'literary "likening" should not degenerate into total fiction'), and on the other, that several books of the Bible were assumed to operate in a 'parabolic' or poetic manner (Minnis cites Nicholas of Lyre on the Song of Songs). *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism*, pp. 384-5, and cf. Suzanne Reynolds, in her account of the reading methods applied to the study of satire in the twelfth-century: 'The situation is clear: Integumental or allegorical reading is generically opposed to the satiric mode of writing: the one treats the text as a covering for secrets, the other works by open and naked reprehension'. *Medieval Reading: Grammar, Rhetoric and the Classical text* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p.146. The medieval insistence on a difference between poetic and theological allegory, together with a practical blurring of this difference is perhaps traceable to the pre-Christian history of the development of allegorism, in which, on the one hand, allegory was deemed to spring from divine inspiration, bypassing altogether the natural faculties of the poet, and on the other, the allegorical poet was deemed to be 'wise' and possessed of natural talents. Socrates comically sends up this problem in *Ion* where he basically proves that Ion himself is without natural talent, and is 'only' (whether this is a compliment or an insult is itself part of the joke) a vehicle for divine truth. Suzanne Reynolds considers that William of Conches and Abelard are responsible for taking the 'radical, but entirely logical step of drawing a parallel between the allegorical mode of signifying in the Bible and the integumental structure of some pagan fables. Both act as veils for a deeper truth, though, it should be noted, *integumenta* can only be compared with

Whether figured by the chaff and the wheat, or the seductive veil and the
nude truth underneath, or the captive gentile transformed into the shaven and
pared Hebrew wife,[27] or the Egyptian loot in which lies ancient and valuable
gold,[28] the transformative method of allegorical reading, by which one thing
stands for another *better* thing,[29] itself involved sometimes an explicit,
sometimes an implicit and vague, theory of Divine or supernatural
assistance, even if, strictly speaking, the Bible was alone deemed to have
been divinely *inspired*.[30] Always alongside this tradition, of course, although

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examples of *allegoria in verbis*, since factual allegory is exclusive to the
Bible'. *Medieval Reading*, p. 141. On the subject of the adaptation of the
method of integumental reading to many different kinds of text, see, for
example, D. Dawson, *Allegorical Readers and Cultural Revision in Ancient
Alexandria* (Berkeley, 1992), pp. 3-14; E. Jeauneau, 'L'usage de la notion
d'integumentum à travers les gloses de Guillaume de Conches', *Archives
d'Histoire Doctrinale Littéraire du Moyen-Age* 24 (1957), pp. 35-100, and
Lodi Nauta, ed., *William of Conches and the Tradition of Boethius'
Consolatio Philosophiae: an edition of his Glosae super Boetium and
Studies of the Latin Commentary Tradition* (Rijksuniversiteit Groningen
Ph.D. thesis, 1999; parts later published as *Guillelmi de Conchis Glosae
super Boetium* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1999), pp. xxxiii-xxxvi.

[27] *Deuteronomy* 21:10-13 and see Origen's commentary on same in one of
his homilies on Leviticus (homily 7, n. 6). For a translation of Origen's
homily, see Origen, *Homilies on Leviticus 1-16*, trans. Gary Wayne
Barkley, (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1992), and
see also Henri De Lubac's analysis of Origen's homily in *Medieval
Exegesis*, pp. 211-224.

[28] Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. J. F. Shaw, in *Saint Augustin:
The City of God and On Christian Doctrine*, vol. 2 of *A Select Library of
the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series One, ed. Philip Schaff *et al.*
(Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1887; repr. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans,
1956), II.40.60.

[29] But see Hugh of St. Victor on the difference between the signifying of things and
the signifying of words, the former of which 'is far more excellent than that of words,
because [the significance of words] was established by usage, but Nature dictated [the
significance of things]'. Hugh goes on to assert that the Bible employs the
significance of things. Hugh of St. Victor, *Didascalicon*, ed. Jerome Taylor (New
York and London: Columbia University Press, 1961), V, iii. Christopher Ocker
describes this belief that, as Richard of St. Victor put it, 'not only words, but things
also are representational' (Richard of St. Victor, *Excerptiones*, ii.3, *PL* 177:205), as an
'adaptation of Augustine's description of natural signification', Ocker, pp. 31-2, and
see also pp. 33-71 for related issues. On Augustine's theory of signs, see R. A.
Markus, 'St Augustine on Signs', in *Augustine: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. R.
A. Markus (New York: Anchor Books, 1972).

[30] Friedrich Ohly distinguishes categorically between the 'personifying allegory' of,
for instance, the *Roman de la Rose*, which he says is a 'literary technique which has

often interpenetrating it, co-existed a more conservative, 'sane', rational,

civic and rhetorical understanding of the relationship between surface and

meaning.[31] Also, the spectrum of allegorical interpretation ranged from the

quotidian exercises of the *trivium*,[32] in which the figurative language and

myths of a text would be spelled out,[33] to the more profound understanding

of fabular signification that can be seen in, for instance, Bernard of

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been used since antiquity and is at home in poetics, where its name still lives on in he Middle Ages', and Christian Biblical allegory. Where the former 'is concerned with the arbitrary literary representation of a thing by personification or reification', the latter deals 'with the unveiling of the meaning of the language of God which was sealed into the creature at the Creation, with revelation, with a *spiritualis notificatio* (spiritual knownmaking), as Hugh of St.-Victor calls it (*PL*, 175, 20D), which hears the language of divine proclamation out of the mute universe of things'. Friedrich Ohly, *Sensus Spirtualis: Studies in Medieval Significs and the Philology of Culture*, ed. Samuel P. Jaffe, and trans. Kenneth J. Northcott (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 15.

[31] The everyday attitude to the classics in the educational system emphasised their importance as teaching tools, as repositories of grammatical, stylistic and rhetorical raw materials, rather than as enigmas to be interpreted.

[32] The evolution of allegory from a specific rhetorical trope to a full-blown interpretative method, as well as the distinction and connection between the two is described by Martin Irvine with David Thomson in the *Cambridge History of Literary Criticism: The Middle Ages*, pp. 33-37. Suzanne Reynolds argues that Bede in his *De schematibus et tropis* (in *Opera didascalia*, vol. 1, ed. H. M. King, CCSL 123A, Turnhout, 1985, pp. 142-71) makes a significant step in the direction of this evolution when he branches away from Donatus's scheme, in which '*allegoria* [is] a trope' in order to divide *allegoria* into two types – verbal and factual, the former of which, to which poetry is restricted, involves a 'double meaning' at the level of the words, and the latter of which depends upon a true, or historically factual literal level, which then goes on itself to signify at a higher or deeper level (as in Scripture, where the literal level describes events that actually happened, and it is the events themselves that then bear the second, or even multiple meanings). *Medieval Reading*, p.139. Four hundred years later, Hugh of St. Victor presents a comparable theory in the distinction he draws between words that signify and things that signify, in *Didascalicon*, Book V, chapter 3.

[33] *Ennarratio*, one of the four divisions of *grammatica* as it was taught within the *trivium*, included what Irvine describes as the 'rules for interpretation (tropes, topics of commentary, myth, syntactic and semantic classification)'; *iudicium*, another of the four, involved the 'critical evaluation of ethical, poetic and ideological worth' of the work under consideration. Martin Irvine with David Thomson, '*Grammatica* and literary theory', in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism: The Middle Ages*, p. 16. On the subject of the place of figurative reading within *grammatica*, Suzanne Reynolds writes: '*Ennarratio* not only blurs the boundary of grammar and rhetoric (in what Rita Copeland has termed the "procedural overlap" of the two arts), but also points towards the other way in which grammatical and literary discourses interact in the Middle Ages'. *Medieval Reading*, p. 27.

Chartres's commentary on the *Timaeus*.[34] But it would be fair to say, in terms at least of the practise of literary *interpretation*, if not of the other *artes* governing the rules of poetic composition *per se*, that the allegorical method was supreme.[35]

(ii) *Poetry and theology*

Under the above heading, E. R. Curtius produced one of his famous essays on literary attitudes of the Middle Ages.[36] Describing Albertino Mussato's 'biblical poetics', and the objections raised to it by Giovanni of Mantua, he draws attention to the question of whether a mere poet could ever achieve or

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[34] See P. E. Dutton's attribution to Bernard of Chartres of 'the most popular' twelfth-century gloss of the *Timaeus* in 'The Uncovering of the *Glosae super Platonem*', *Mediaeval Studies* 46 (1984), pp. 192-221, and his edition of this gloss, *The Glosae super Platonem of Bernard of Chartres* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1991).

[35] See Judson Boyce Allen on those whom Beryl Smalley called the 'classicizing friars': 'They were for the most part academics, involved in the teaching of exegesis and preaching. Apparently, they read literature in precisely the way that was traditional for scripture. That is, they applied to the fictions of the classical poets, which they retold and quoted in their religious writings with great frequency and obvious delight, the same allegorical method of interpretation that they used for scripture. In their works, therefore, whatever procedural difference there should have been, and had traditionally been, between exegesis and literary criticism completely disappeared.' Judson Boyce Allen, *The Friar as Critic* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1971), p. 4. Minnis points out, however, that Pierre Bersuire, himself a Benedictine, in his analysis of non-sacred texts, and specifically of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, operated an allegorisation that was 'quite different' to that practised in the fourfold method of Biblical exegesis, although it did inolve a fourfold structure, and the use of comparable terms. *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism*, pp. 323-4. Minnis considers that Bersuire, like Giovanni del Virgilio, was working in the tradition of 'secular allegory established by twelfth-century French grammarians' such as William of Conches and Arnulf of Orléans. *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism.*, p. 321. One of the major arcs that run across Minnis's work as a whole, though, is the constant fruitful interpenetration of the sacred and secular in the field of medieval literary commentary.

[36] E. R. Curtius, 'Poetry and Theology', in *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, rev. ed. with new epilogue (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), pp. 214-227.

aspire to divine inspiration.[37] Giovanni strenuously argues that he could not. Mussato asserts that poetry is an *ars divina*, and, as Curtius puts it, 'even a theology'.[38] In a discussion of the impact on literary analysis of scholastic accounts of the formal cause (*causa formalis*), Minnis makes the following remarks on the subject:

> …scholastic philosophers and theologians described two kinds or series of procedural mode: the modes of human science (involving such logical methods as definition, division, argument-formation, and the application of examples designed to aid the teaching of these methods) and the modes of sacred science (involving such poetic and rhetorical methods as narrative, fiction and parable, affective exhortation and warning, allegory, figure and metaphor, exemplification, etc.). The latter series, the *modi* of sacred science, were found mainly in the Bible; the former, in books supposed to have been produced by merely human agency (e.g. the textbooks of the trivium and quadrivium). This distinction was motivated by the wish to establish theology as

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[37] See Jan M. Ziolkowski, 'Classical Influences on Medieval Latin Views of Poetic Inspiration', in *Latin Poetry and the Classical Tradition*, ed. Peter Godman and Oswyn Murray (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), pp. 15-38, for the ways in which medieval Latin poets 'modified classical conventions to bring them into conformity with Christian doctrine', p. 15. Ziolkowski writes that medieval Latin poets 'although they sometimes discarded the practice of invoking the Muses and Apollo' yet remained 'devoted to the principle of invocation as a means of achieving inspiration, only now they turned to suitable Christian substitutes in their quest for divine assistance: to Christ, to saints, but above all to the Holy Spirit', p. 23. See also Tanja Kupke, who analyses the ways in which antique ideas about the Muses were transmitted and modified in the Middle Ages: 'in medieval thought all kinds of ancient allegorical explanations of the Muses fell on a fruitful ground, since scholars tried to rescue the works of pagan antiquity by discovering their concealed meaning behind the pagan *integumentum*'. Tanja Kupke, 'Ou sont les Muses d'antan? Notes for the Study of the Muses in the Middle Ages', in *From Athens to Chartres: Neoplatonism and Medieval Thought*, ed. Haijo Jan Westra (Leiden: Brill, 1992), pp. 421-438, and E. R. Curtius, 'The Muses' in *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, pp. 228-246.

[38] *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, p. 216.

the queen of the sciences (applying an Aristotelian conception of science) and to identify the ways in which it both differed from and resembled the 'subordinated' sciences which were its handmaidens. Once the suggestion had been made that theology might be basically affective and in some deep sense 'poetic', no historian could avoid considering those aspects of poetics and rhetoric which Alexander of Hales and his successors had deemed appropriate to the subject. Here, then, is the late medieval version of the 'Bible as literature'.[39]

The reference in his final sentence to the fact that what he has just described constitutes a 'late medieval version' of a phenomenon that must therefore have existed in some form prior to the rise of the Aristotelian theory of causes, refers us backwards to a period before the scope of Minnis's study. Versions of this idea that poetry is in some way sacred, and that the sacred is somehow poetic, can be traced at least as far as the sixth century B.C.[40] To some extent the tightly reasoned, highly technical arguments made by scholastic philosophers about the poetic *modi* of theology and Scripture, overlap, however unlikely such an overlap between reason and unreason might look at first glimpse, with the Neoplatonic theories about the frenzy of the poets, and with the allegorical method of analysis outlined above.

O. B. Hardison has remarked that the 'history of Neoplatonism as it impinges upon art is the history of the substitution and elaboration of ideas in the *Ion* at the expense of those in the *Republic*'.[41] And indeed, in the

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[39] *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism c.1100-c.1375*, pp. 3-4. On the Bible as literature see also Christopher Ocker, *Biblical Poetics before Humanism and Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); John B. Gabel, Charles B. Wheeler and Anthony D. York, *The Bible as Literature: an Introduction* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), and David Jasper, 'Literary Readings of the Bible', in *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation*, ed. John Barton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 21-34.

[40] See Tate, 'On the History of Allegorism'.

[41] O. B. Hardison *et al.*, eds., *Medieval Literary Criticism: Translations and Interpretations* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1974), p. 50.

Phaedrus and the *Ion* (although Socrates's theory in the latter is often read as ironic), Socrates advances the idea that poetic madness enables the passage of divine truths to the mortal realm.[42] And in spite of the judgement against poetry delivered by Socrates in the *Republic*, a key Neoplatonist like Proclus argues that Plato makes the very highest of claims for one kind of poetry, the poetry that corresponds to the highest faculty of the soul, and through it, to the 'divine source' itself.[43] Proclus also offers what he says is Plato's theory of poetic causation that, unlike the two-fold *causa efficiens* of the Aristotelian system, emphasises the supreme power of the supernatural source of inspiration:

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[42] *Phaedrus* 244-245 and *Ion* 533d-536d.

[43] Proclus, 'Proclus on the More Difficult Questions in the Republic: the Nature of Poetic Art', trans. Thomas Taylor in the preface to *The Rhetoric, Poetics and Nicomachean Ethics of Aristotle*, ed. Thomas Taylor, 2 vols. (London, 1818), and this translation revised by Kevin Kerrane in *Medieval Literary Criticism: Translations and Interpretations*, ed. O. B. Hardison, Jr. *et al.*, (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1974), pp. 53-63; 53. The significance of Proclus in terms of the role his work played in communicating Neoplatonism to Aquinas, and therefore to the period and ideas that are directly under consideration in this chapter, especially via his *Liber de causis* (on which Aquinas produced a commentary, the *Expositio super librum De causis* in c.1272; Eleonore Stump considers that Aquinas was 'among the first to realize' that the *Liber de causis* was actually 'a compilation of Neoplatonic material drawn from Proclus', Stump, *Aquinas* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 10), and the influence of his take on triadic hierarchies on Aquinas's thought is a further reason to cite here his triadic theory of poetry, with the poetry of the 'mad', divinely inspired poet at the top of the hierarchy, followed by the rational poetry that 'derives its being from a scientific and intellectual faculty' (here we might think perhaps of civic, rational, Roman ethical poetry), and lastly, the 'third species of poetry, subordinate to these…mingled with opinions and phantasies'. *Ibid.*, p. 54. On the subject of Proclus's importance for the later Middle Ages, see E. P. Bos and P. A. Meijer, eds., *On Proclus and his Influence in Medieval Philosophy* (Leiden: Brill, 1992). Jan Aertsen in his essay in that volume, 'Ontology and Henology in Medieval Philosophy', sums up recent work since the 1960s, that shows 'how strongly Neoplatonism, via the *Liber de causis* and the *Proclus latinus*, permeated medieval philosophy', p. 122. Aertsen cites in particular K. Kremer, *Die neuplatonische seinsphilosophie und ihre Wirkung auf Thomas von Aquin* (1966; rev. ed., Leiden, Brill, 1971), in which Kremer, in reaction against Étienne Gilson, argues that Aquinas's whole philosophy of being is profoundly influenced by Neoplatonism. Aertsen, pp. 120-140.

…it is perfectly evident that Plato identifies the original and first-operating cause of poetry as the gift of the Muses. For just as the Muses fill with harmony and rhythmical motion all the other divine creations, both the apparent and the unapparent, so in like manner they produce a vestige of divinity in those souls they take possession of, and this illuminates inspired poetry. I think that Plato calls such an illumination a possession and a mania because the whole energy of the illuminating power is divine, and because that which is illuminated gives itself up to this energy and, abandoning its own habits, yields to the force of that which is divine and uniform. He calls it a possession because the whole illuminated soul surrenders itself to the present effect of the illuminating deity. Plato calls it a mania because such a soul abandons its own proper energies for those of the illuminating powers.[44]

Here, in a portrait of the nature of poetic inspiration that is still influential, the specific individual identity of the poet is unimportant, as it gives way almost entirely to the divine energy flowing through it.[45] There is certainly an overlap then, between the thirteenth-century Aristotelian prologue's

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[44] 'Proclus on the More Difficult Questions in the Republic', p. 55.

[45] O. B. Hardison summarises the unbroken chain of this concept of the poet's abandonment to inspiration from above, from Proclus to Sidney, as follows: 'It is Proclus who first applies Neoplatonic theory to the outstanding problems of literary criticism. Although it is impossible to trace the influence of the essay ['On the More Difficult Questions in the Republic']…the ideas which the essay brings into remarkably sharp focus form a leitmotif in medieval and Renaissance critical thought. They are paralleled in the fourth-century cult of the poet-seer as reflected in Servius and Macrobius, they recur in conjunction with the rediscovery of Dionysius the pseudo-Areopagite following the translation of his work into Latin in the tenth century by Scotus Erigena, they are found in the Platonizing authors of the twelfth-century Renaissance, especially Bernard Silvestris, and they impinge deeply upon humanistic defenses of poetry from Boccaccio to Sir Philip Sidney.' *Medieval Literary Criticism: Translations and Interpretations*, p. 51. E. R. Curtius provides a note on the history of the motif of the poet's divine frenzy in *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, pp. 474-5.

elaboration of a two-fold causation – human and divine – at the level of the efficient cause in the case of Scripture, and the Neoplatonic allegorical method of interpretation that assumed the existence of a divinely motivated poet, who, in the case of the latter Neoplatonic scheme, is not especially valued for his own sake, but rather for the timeless verities which penetrate him and embed themselves beneath the unlikely outer layers of the fable. As with the modesty *topoi* of any era, though, the humble statements both by and about human poets have to be taken with a pinch of salt. The numerous commentaries on Virgil attest that it is not always possible for the commentator to keep his admiration of a great poet in check, however much the point of the commentary is to show the indebtedness of Virgil to divine assistance, and the compatibility of at least some of his ideas with orthodox Christian doctrine.[46]

It is clear that the theory of the supernatural origins of the philosophical or moral (and even sometimes religious) truth of works of poetic fiction, a way of looking at literature that has ancient roots, even while it has a distinctive Christian strand, continued to be influential throughout the Middle Ages, inside and outside academia. The genus of allegorical interpretation endured – in the form of the ancient species of sacred and secular/philosophical/scientific – that then went on to develop distinctive morphologies of their own.[47] The rise of scholasticism and of the

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[46] On the reception of Virgil in the late Middle Ages, see Christopher Baswell, *Virgil in Medieval England: Figuring the Aeneid from the Twelfth Century to Chaucer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). On the earlier commentaries on Virgil see Winthrop Wetherbee, 'The Study of Classical Authors: From Late Antiquity to the Twelfth Century', in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism, Vol II: The Middle Ages*, pp. 99-144, esp. 100-108, and Pierre Courcelle, *Lecteurs païens et lecteurs chrétiens de l'Énéide*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1967; repr. Paris: Gauthier-Villars: Diffusion De Boccard). Servius's commentary is translated as *Servius' Commentary on Book IV of the Aeneid*, by Christopher Michael McDonough, Richard E. Prior and Mark Stansbury (Wauconda, Ill.: Bolchazy-Carducci, 2002).

[47] Tate argues that early allegorical philosophising imitated the language and techniques of the fabular myths which it venerated and expounded, but became over time ever more scientific and rationalising: 'That deeper wealth of meaning, which, as I have explained, they thought to be implied, they attempted to express and amplify for themselves, and later to replace, in language which was at first more than half mythical but which tended to become more and more scientific and precise. The development from

Aristotelian prologue did not put an end to the interest in a supernaturally inspired structure of multiple layers of meaning that can be seen in secular and Biblical exegesis from the early Christian centuries right up to the period directly under discussion in this chapter. That is not to understate, however, the extent to which allegorical interpretation co-existed with, and sometimes was implicitly challenged by, other kinds of emphasis, both biographical and rhetorical.

(iii) *Causality and the human author*

A. J. Minnis, amongst others, has assessed the implications of the spread in popularity of the 'Aristotelian prologue', for the status of the human author of both sacred and secular writings in the thirteenth century.[48] One of Minnis's particular concerns has been to show how the new Aristotelian prologue, together with other scholastic developments in literary theory, far from contributing to an ossification of literary theory, in fact led to an enhanced status for the human, as distinct from the divine, authors of

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Pherecydes to Heraclitus, or, at any rate, to the Heracliteans, represents the general process. Later still, when philosophy had learned to express itself in technical language of its own, the new conceptions were felt by many to be due (as in some small degree they were) to the early poets; and thus allegorism – the reading of scientific or quasi-scientific doctrines into the mysterious language of tradition – became full-fledged.' 'On the History of Allegorism', p. 107. For the post-medieval version of the interaction between philosophy and poetry, see Leitzia Panizza, 'Italian Humanists and Boethius: Was Philosophy for or against Poetry?' in *New Perspectives on Renaissance Thought: Essays in the History of Science and Philosophy in Memory of Charles B. Schmitt*, ed. John Henry and Sarah Hutton (London, 1990), pp. 48-67.

[48] Minnis treats the topic of the Aristotelian prologue in several places, most obviously in his *Medieval Theory of Authorship*, 2nd edn. (1988), pp. 28-29 and 40-72, and in *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism c. 1100-c.1375*, ed. A. J. Minnis and A. B. Scott with the assistance of David Wallace (1988; with corrections and additions, Oxford: Oxford University Press, Clarendon Press, 1991), pp. 2-4 and 197-200. He acknowledges the earlier work on the subject by R. B. C. Huygens, R. W. Hunt, C. E. Lutz and others. For the details of the scholarship on this subject, see Minnis's bibliography in *Medieval Theory of Authorship*, as well as his notes for the pages referred to above.

Scripture.[49] While the divine inspiration of the Bible continued to be a basic tenet of Christian belief, an opportunity for a more profound assessment of the role and contributions of its human authors was now available. Just as the classical schemes of the earlier prologues had come to be applied across the secular/sacred divide, so too Aristotelian theories of causality influenced both Biblical and secular exegesis.[50] Minnis argues that the new technology of the Aristotelian prologue and 'scholastic' methods of literary analysis led not to a betrayal of twelfth-century humanism, but to an overall enhanced status for human-authored works, a point he emphasises in order to correct what he has described as 'an historian's cliché which has largely outlived its usefulness, namely the notion that there is an enormous gulf between

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[49] 'Instead of regarding scholasticism as a malevolent tide which caused the submergence of literary awareness, it can be argued that it actually channelled such awareness into areas of study where it was enabled to enjoy a new prestige. In their philosophical and theological commentaries and treatises, some of the best minds of the later Middle Ages brought their considerable intelligence to bear on matters figurative, fictive, affective, and imaginative.' A. J. Minnis and A. B. Scott, eds., *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism* c.1100-c.1375 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988, 1991), p. 7. For their similar conclusions, Minnis cites Richard Southern, *Platonism, Scholastic Method, and the School of Chartres* (The 1978 Stenton Lecture, University of Reading, 1979), p. 36, and R. H. and M. A. Rouse, *Preachers, Florilegia and Sermons: Studies on the* Manipulus florum *of Thomas of Ireland* (Studies and Texts XLVII, Toronto, 1979). Vincent Gillespie describes the relationship between sacred and secular interpretation in the 'changed topography' of learning in the scholastic thirteenth century: 'The modistic analysis of the written word, developed from the practices prevailing in the exposition of secular classical texts, acquired new subtleties in its application to the literary strategies of the Bible and was again in turn reapplied to secular texts with some added emphases drawn from scriptural commentary. Throughout the thirteenth century a fruitfully symbiotic relationship existed between exegesis of the sacred page and of the secular text, mediated through a common interest in the affective force of all literature.' 'From the twelfth century to c. 1450', in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism: The Middle Ages*, p. 145.

[50] On the 'obscure' origins and rise of the 'type C' prologue, see *Medieval Theory of Authorship*, pp. 18-28, and on the application of it to scriptural exegesis in the twelfth century see pp. 40-72.

twelfth-century humanism and later-medieval scholasticism in terms of their attitude to the deposit of the past.'[51]

The logic underlying the Aristotelian prologue was that of the 'four causes', namely the *causa efficiens*, or efficient cause (the author), the *causa materialis*, or material cause (the author's 'literary materials', as Minnis puts it); the *causa formalis* or formal cause (comprising the *forma tractandi* and the *forma tractatus*, the method and structure respectively); the *causa finalis* or final cause (the reason for the work's existence, the end or purpose of the work).[52]

One aspect of the evolving view of authorship that bears upon our discussion is the concept of a *twofold* efficient cause, in which, in the case of Biblical exegesis, God is the primary efficient cause, and the human author the secondary.[53] Minnis describes the concept in his discussion of the biblical exegesis of Guerric of St. Quentin (at St. Jacques, Paris, between 1233 and 1242) and Nicholas Lyre (*c*.1270-1340) as follows:

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[51] From Minnis's introduction to *Chaucer's Boece and the Medieval Tradition of Boethius*, ed. A. J. Minnis (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1993), p. 3. See Beryl Smalley's ground-breaking work on the revival of the literal sense in medieval exegesis in *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1952). Vincent Gillespie remarks that the new thirteenth-century Paris-based scholasticism of John of Wales and Roger Bacon, rather than abandoning the humanism of the preceding generation, actually went further than ever in the direction of classicism and humanism: 'Bacon's reverence for Seneca and his respect for the intellectual challenges of Aristotle, for example, produced a commitment to the ethical force of literature that was certainly no less absolute than in previous centuries but was explored in his writing with more psychological depth and rigour than before.' 'From the twelfth century to *c*. 1450', in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism: The Middle Ages*, p. 146.
[52] *Medieval Theory of Authorship*, pp. 28-29.
[53] Describing Robert of Basevorn's *Forma praedicandi*, Ralph Hanna *et al.* point out that the 'theory of efficient causality' encouraged 'the description of different levels of authorship and authority', remarking that Robert is 'a self-declared secondary efficient cause working under the primary *causa efficiens*, God.' Ralph Hanna *et. al.*, 'Latin Commentary Tradition and Vernacular Literature', in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism: The Middle Ages*, ed. Alastair Minnis and Ian Johnson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 363-421; 409.

At the beginning of his commentary on Isaiah, Guerric describes the text's two levels of authorship in terms of the 'twofold efficient cause' (*duplex causa efficiens*): the Holy Spirit may be regarded as the 'moving' efficient cause which motivated the 'operating' efficient cause, namely the prophet Isaiah, to write. Similarly, in the 'Aristotelian prologue' to his commentary on the Psalter …Nicholas of Lyre identifies the principal efficient cause as God and the instrumental efficient cause as the prophet David, who composed most of the psalms. In these cases God is regarded as the first *auctor* or the unmoved mover of the inspired text, whereas the human *auctor* is both moved (by God) and moving (in producing the text).[54]

The influence of this idea of the twofold efficient cause can be seen outside the field of Biblical exegesis, in both academic textbooks and poetic practice itself.[55] Such works could not (although Mussato would come close to saying that they could) lay claim to divine inspiration *per se*,[56] but other forms of divine help were invoked and claimed. The adaptation of the Aristotelian prologue to these non-Biblical texts led to interesting variations, in which the modesty *topos* is invoked in tandem with the theory of a

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[54] *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism* c.*1100*-c.*1375*, p. 198; see also *Medieval Theory of Authorship*, pp. 78-81.

[55] On the subject of the level of divine assistance in non-sacred texts, Minnis sees the thirteenth-century allegorisations of Giovanni del Virgilio as representing an 'interesting half-way point between the Thomistic segregation of scriptural metaphor from imaginative poetry ("the most lowly among all methods of instruction") on the one hand, and on the other the claim by later Italian scholars that literature was the result of exceptional, God-given gifts (as in the cases of Petrarch and Boccaccio) or even of divine inspiration (as in the cases of Mussato and Salutati).' *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism*, p. 321. See also Minnis's discussion of the extension of the Aristotelian theory of causality, and of its appearance in the work of Thomas Usk and John Gower in *Medieval Theory of Authorship*, pp. 163-165 and 173-175 respectively.

[56] Although see Ziolkowski for the ways in which medieval Latin poets adapted classical motifs of inspiration to Christian purposes. 'Classical Influences on Medieval Latin Views of Poetic Inspiration', pp. 23-25.

twofold efficient cause.[57] The primary *auctor* of these non-Biblical works is
not God in the sense that He is unequivocally and actually the primary
auctor of the books of the Bible, but in the sense that all good and all power
originate in God. In his commentary on Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Giovanni
del Virgilio puts it like this:

> So I say that the efficient cause is referred to in the words
> 'you were filled', as may be spoken of Ovid, who was 'filled
> with the river of wisdom', something which is quite obvious
> from all the works he wrote. This could be made clearer, if it
> were the appropriate moment, by comparing him to a river.
> But I pass over that. But it can be said that the efficient cause
> was twofold, that which moved and that which was moved.
> The moving cause was God Himself, who is the Prime
> Mover, who holds in His power the ordering of all mutable
> things. But another moving cause could be the ultimate
> objective (*finis*), that is, that Ovid should win the affection of
> the Emperor Octavian, and that his fame should be spread
> more widely through all the world. For, according to the
> Philosopher, in the field of invention the ultimate objective is
> the prime mover. So it [i.e. the ultimate objective] is part of
> the efficient cause.[58]

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[57] *Medieval Theory of Authorship*, pp. 160-167; esp. p. 161 and 163.
[58] Giovanni del Virgilio, 'Commentary on Ovid's Metamorphoses:
Prologue', trans. F. Ghisalberti, 'Giovanni del Virgilio espositore delle
Metamorfosi', *Giornale Dantesco* xxxiv (1933), 1-110; excerpt from pp.
13-19 of this translation in *Medieval Literary Criticism*, pp. 360-6; 361.
Interesting here, although it does not directly bear on our discussion, is the
folding-in of the formally distinct final cause with the moving or efficient
cause (something which Giovanni argues is authorised by Aristotle –
Minnis refers the reader to *Physics* ii. 3 (195b)), which seems to further
serve the purpose of biographical criticism which is directly facilitated by
the category of the human efficient cause. The possibility that the winning
of fame might be a moving cause for a literary work surely opens up the
field of speculative, psychological writing about the intentions, based on
biography, that might be extrapolated about an author. That said, there is
clearly a precedent for the interest in the author's intentions, in the form of
the older category of the *intentio* of the author in the Servian, Type-B

A later and somewhat curious example is John Lydgate's 'On De Profundis', which begins as follows:

> Hauyng a conseit in my sympill wyt
> Wich of newe ys come to memorye,
> The prossesse to grounde on hooly wryt,
> Grace of our lord shal be my Dyrectorye
> In myn Inward hertyly Orratorye, —
> What availleth most while we ben here
> To the sowlys that lyue in purgatorye,
> Fastyng, almesse, massys, or prayere,
>
> Another charge was vpon me leyd,
> Among psalmys to fynde a cleer sentence,
> Why De Profundus specyally ys seyd
> For crystyn sowlys, with devout reuerence,
> Of fervent love, and benyvolence,
> Seid as folk passe by ther sepulturys,
> Though yt so be I haue noon Elloquence
> In hooly wryt, I shall seke out ffygurys
>
> Vnto purpos set in lytyll space,
> Nat konnyngly, but affter my symplesse, —
> To symple folk god sent doun his grace
> Them preferrith, & fortherith for meeknesse, —
> Vndyr whos support I shal my stile dresse
> Onto thys psalme, rehersed here to-fforn,

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prologue. On the Servian prologue, see R. W. Hunt, 'The Introduction to the Artes in the Twelfth Century', in *Studia medievalia in honorem R. M. Martin, O.P.* (Bruges, 1948), pp. 85-112; 94; repr. in *The History of Grammar in the Middle Ages: Collected Papers,* ed. G. L. Bursill-Hall (Amsterdam Studies in the Theory and History of Linguistic Science, ser. 111, vol. 5, Amsterdam, 1980), pp. 117-44; 126; also Minnis, *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism*, pp. 12-13 and *Medieval Theory of Authorship*, pp. 15-16.

With ffygurys, wych I schall Expresse,

Voyde the chaff, & gadryn out the corn.[59]

Here, the first impetus for the creative endeavour arises within the poet's simple mind, and it is the grounding of the idea in orthodox Christian doctrine that requires the assistance of divine grace. The co-occurrence of the modesty *topos* and the idea of the twofold efficient cause is apparent. The modesty is more sincere than in other cases, since it is reinforced by the overall scaling-down of outlook, not just of the status and skills of the poet himself, but also of the divinity, who is here a 'support' who rewards the meek, and assists in humble if worthwhile work.[60]

If, with the rise of the Aristotelian prologue, a theory of a two-fold cause of authorship was employed in the case of Biblical exegesis,[61] as well

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[59] John Lydgate, *The Minor Poems of John Lydgate*, 2 vols., ed. H. N. MacCracken, Early English Text Society, Extra Series, vol. 107, and Original Series, vol. 192 (repr. Woodbridge, Suffolk, 2006 (vol. I), and 1997 (vol. II)).

[60] Lydgate's small-scale, affectionate and sentimental attitude to the relationship between God and man, that seems to anticipate much later developments within English Protestantism, is visible for instance in 'God is myn Helpere'. Lydgate, *The Minor Poems*.

[61] Bonaventure expounds, in dialectic form, this two-fold nature of the efficient cause, in his commentary on Peter Lombard's *Sentences*, as follows: 'Finally, in the interests of greater clarity the question of the efficient cause can be raised. This is said to be Master Peter the Lombard, Bishop of Paris. But it is clear that he should not be called the author (*auctor*) of this book [for the following reasons].

1. He alone ought to be called the author of a book who is the teacher or originator (*auctor*) of the doctrine contained in it. But, as Augustine says in his book *On the Master*, "Only Christ is our teacher." Therefore, he alone ought to be called the author of this book.

2. Likewise, as the Philosopher says in *The Old Ethics*, "Not everyone who produces something which is grammatical or musical should be called a grammarian or a musician, for he may well produce such things by chance, or with someone else putting in his ideas or dictating them." But the Master himself put together this work from the teachings of others, as he himself says in the text: "in this work you will find the examples and the teaching of greater men [than I]." So, he ought not to be called the author.'

Bonaventure later sets out the objections to this reasoning, and concludes in his response: '…In the same way, the man who presents and reveals the knowledge which he has in his soul in word or writing is doing something quite different from He who imprints the condition (*habitus*) of knowledge

as, in a modified form, in the case of poetry and textbooks, what were the other important ideas governing *non-sacred* works?

(iv) *theoretical writings of the* moderni

When we come to review the attitude towards poetic genesis that is expressed in the theoretical writings of the major vernacular poets of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, it is striking that the self-aware stance of novelty and boldness that we see in Dante and Boccaccio, co-exists with a good deal of continuity with the traditions outlined above. Whether this makes their achievement less audacious, or that of their predecessors more

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[on men's souls]. Each is called a teacher and author, but God is the more principal one. The same is true of the book [i.e. the *Sentences*] set before us.' Bonaventure ends the debate with a final remark that defends the dignity of the human author: 'The fact that there are many statements by other writers to be found in his work does not detract from the authorship (*auctoritas*) of the Master, but rather confirms his authorship and commends his humility.' *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism c.1100-c.1375*, pp. 228-30 (the excerpts from Bonaventure are translated excerpts from *S. Bonaventurae opera omnia* (Quaracchi, 1882-1902), i. 9-15). In his commentary on Ecclesiastes, Bonaventure, in an attitude which is arguably comparable with the much earlier enquiry by Abelard into the parity of authority, not only of the writings of the Church Fathers, but also of the books of the Bible themselves (see Minnis's discussion on p. 68 of Abelard's cautious and fleeting expression of doubts in relation to this topic), reconciles the fallibility, moral and otherwise, of the human author, with the authority of the book he produces, in a manner that affirms the two-fold efficient cause, and again defends the human author, while displaying the influence of allegorical exegesis: 'Alternatively, it can be replied that the Holy Spirit speaks that which is true and good not just through the mouths of good, but also of evil men. Wherefore, our Lord says in the Gospel: "do all things that they say to you, but do not do the things they do" [Matt. 23: 3]. Thus, he prophesied in the very plainest of terms through the mouth of Balaam, and likewise said many good things through the mouth of Solomon, carnally inclined though he was. ‹2.› As for the objection that he committed sin, we must reply that the gift of wisdom was entrusted to him more than to all other men. Because he was under obligation not to hide the talent entrusted to him by the Lord he had to teach the people of the Lord by words and by his writing, particularly as he had been ordained to rule over them. Therefore, his sin was not in teaching, but in not behaving as he ought.' *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism*, p. 233. See also Minnis on Bonaventure's discussion of the *threefold* efficient cause (in which God is the primary efficient cause, Solomon the secondary, and the compiler the tertiary) in the case of the Book of Wisdom attributed to Solomon, in *Medieval Theory of Authorship*, p. 95.

so, is a matter of perspective. Part of the significance of the theoretical
writings of Dante, for instance, lies in this very self-awareness itself. The
annunciation, such as we see at the beginning of *De vulgari eloquentia*, of a
new kind of treatise, together with the auto-commentary of the *Convivio*,
and the *Vita Nuova*, and the universalisation of his own personal poetic
strategies that occurs across his work, testify to the conscious wielding of an
existing tradition for the purposes of self-inscription as an innovator. That he
is an inestimably important innovator, both as poet and critic, is beyond
question: my modest point is simply that one aspect of his innovation is the
decisive and authoritative use he made of existing complexes of ideas, and
the re-deployment of this material for the purpose of assuring his own
supreme position in posterity.[62]

Dante's remarks in his critical writing on the role of divine
inspiration in the creation of poetry display an interesting contradiction
between the principled distinction that he draws between the allegory of the
poets, and that of the theologians, and the blurring of the distinction in
practice.[63] In the *Convivio*, Dante first distinguishes between poetic and
theological allegory, then says that he will restrict himself to the 'allegorical
sense according to the usage of the poets', and then expounds the fourfold
method of Biblical exegesis, using Biblical examples for the purposes of
illustration, and *then*, most tantalisingly of all, says that his method will be

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[62] As Barański writes: 'It is now widely accepted that just about all Dante's
works, from the *Vita Nova* onwards (*c.* 1293-5), mark major new
departures in literary history.' *Cambridge History of Literary Criticism:
The Middle Ages*, p. 563. Barański goes on, though, to provide an
additional nuance: 'What basically unites Dante's discussion of literature in
the *Vita Nova*, the *Convivio* and the *De vulgari eloquentia* is the fact that,
regardless of the novelty of so much of his art and of the details of his
critical reflection, he always managed to remain within the broad limits of
established theory.' *Ibid.*, p. 573.

[63] 'The slight clumsiness and rather tentative nature of Dante's account of
allegory in the *Convivio* is invaluable to the historian of literary criticism
because it provides an indication of the unusualness of what is happening.
Dante was the great innovator who saw the possibilities with an insight that
no one else had shown. The very introduction of theological allegory into a
discussion of the meaning of secular poems was something new, or at least
something which was done with a definite sense of occasion.' Minnis,
Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism, p. 386.

to expound first the literal, then the allegorical (presumably in the restricted, singular sense of the allegory of the poets), but that he will from time to time *'touch upon the other senses'* (my emphasis).[64] So, having just announced his belief that he is dealing, in his exposition of the *canzone*, with the allegory of the poets, in which one allegorical level only is intended, he then, after an account of the sacred fourfold method, relents that he will occasionally draw upon this logic too. In the letter to Can Grande della Scala, which may or may not have been written by Dante, the fourfold method of Biblical exegesis is outlined, but immediately the three allegorical senses traditionally precipitated of sacred allegory are folded back into one allegorical level, which is distinctive for its difference from the literal level. This doubling-back in the letter to Can Grande leads Minnis to argue that the epistle is more conservative than is sometimes thought, and more consistent with the more obviously cautious remarks of the *Convivio*.[65]

In the *Convivio*, in a comment not directly related to the composition of poetry, but rather in relation to the question of the level of the ancients' understanding of the spiritual order, Dante says that, in spite of the teaching of their prophets, they could only have had a partial understanding, deprived as they were by preceding the coming of Christ.[66] This attitude to the level

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[64] *Convivio*, Book II, chapter 1. Dante Alighieri, *Il Convivio*, ed. G. Busnelli and G. Vandelli, 2nd ed. (Florence: Felice Le Monnier, 1964). Trans. by Richard Lansing as *Dante's Il Convivio (The Banquet)* (New York: Garland, 1990), p. 40-41 and 42 respectively.

[65] 'In the final analysis, then, the author of the Can Grande epistle does not seem to be going very far beyond the "allegory of the poets" as described in the Convivio, which type of allegory had a definite ethical intent.' Minnis, *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism*, p. 386. Minnis accepts that his own view is at odds with that of Charles Singleton, for instance, who strongly argues that the allegorical method of the *Commedia* is definitely theological. *Ibid.*, p. 384. Barański endorses Minnis's view, writing that 'there is little to distinguish this particular ethical interpretation of Dante's poem from all the other moralizing literary analyses of classical and medieval texts pursued under the aegis of the "allegory of the poets". *Cambridge History of Literary Criticism: The Middle Ages*, p. 586.

[66] 'It has been said that because of a lack of instruction the ancients did not perceive the truth concerning spiritual creatures, even though the people of Israel were in part taught by their prophets, "through whom, by many manners of speech and in many ways, God had spoken to them," as the Apostle says. But we have been taught about this by him who came from

of wisdom that a person who lived before Christ could achieve is confirmed later in the *Purgatorio*, where the ancient philosophers and poets admired by Dante are placed in Limbo. This raises the question of whether or not pagan literature written before Christ, and then secular literature written after Christ, could be the product of divine inspiration, and could therefore partake of the allegory of the theologians.

Boccaccio, in his *Genealogia deorum gentilium,* strikes a defensive note with his negatively phrased claims for poetry, such as his refutation of the notion that poets are liars, or that poets do not convey serious meanings beneath the surface of their fictions, or that poetry should be discounted because of its obscurity. Against these misperceptions, he asserts several times that poetry proceeds from the bosom of God;[67] he says that both the

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him, by him who made them, by him who preserves them, that is by the Emperor of the Universe, who is Christ, son of the sovereign God and son of the Virgin Mary, the true woman and daughter of Joachim and of Adam, the true man who was slain by us, by which he brought us to life. "He was the light that shines for us in the darkness," as John the Evangelist says; and he told us the truth concerning those things which without him we could not know nor truly perceive.' *Il Convivio*, trans. Lansing, Book II, chapter 5, p. 50.

[67] Giovanni Boccaccio, *Genealogie deorum gentilium libri*, ed. Vincenzo Romano (Bari: G. Laterza, 1951). Books fourteen and fifteen trans. by Charles G. Osgood, *Boccaccio on Poetry, being the Preface and the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Books of Boccaccio's Genealogie Deorum Gentilium libri* (Princeton: Princeton U. P., 1930). Excerpts, with minor modernization of spelling, in O. B. Hardison, ed., *Medieval Literary Criticism*, pp. 192-212; 192 (Book XIV.V). All quotations are taken from the latter. It appears that by John Skelton's lifetime at least, such ideas as Boccaccio expresses in his *Genealogia* had been absorbed into the native English tradition. Skelton's 'A Replycacion Agaynst Certayne Yong Scolers Abjured of Late', contains the following defense of poetry against those who have '…disdayne / At poetes, and complayne / Howe poetes do but fayne?' (351-3). In respect of his own (presumed lost) 'Boke of Good Advertisement', he writes: 'With me ye must consent/ And infallibly agre/ Of necessyte,/ Howe there is a spyrituall,/ And a mysteriall,/ And a mysticall/ Effecte energiall,/ As Grekes do it call,/ Of suche an industry/ And suche a pregnancy,/ Of hevenly inspyracion/ In laureate creacyon,/ Of poetes commendacion,/ That of divine myseracion/ God maketh his habytacion/ In poetes whiche excelles,/ And sojourns with them and dwelles.' (362-78). I am grateful to Skelton's modern editor, John Scattergood, for drawing my attention to these passages as evidence for the transmission to England by the end of the fifteenth century anyway, of ideas promulgated on the continent in the fourteenth. John Skelton, *The*

ancient Virgil and the modern Dante concealed truth beneath their fictions
(again, at this point, the question of whether Boccaccio means here that
Virgil and Dante were divinely inspired, or 'merely' in possession of
prodigious natural gifts, is uncertain); he unequivocally pronounces Dante to
be 'a great theologian as well as a philosopher';[68] he argues that those who
would discard poetry would have to discard 'nearly the whole sacred body
of the Old Testament'; he defends both the 'utility' and the high claims of
poetry on the grounds that it is a 'science' grounded in immutable reality; he
compares the Muses with the Holy Spirit; he defends the obscurity of poetry
and fables by arguing that it is also the method of the Holy Spirit to be
enigmatic, and he describes the ancient pagan poets and mythologisers as
'old theologians'. Having gone this far, however, he balks at the possibility
that the name 'sacred' should be applied to these 'old theologians' from
before the time of Christ, and then almost in the same breath, defends the
nomenclature:

> No more is there any harm in speaking of the old poets as
> theologians. Of course, if any one were to call them sacred,
> the veriest fool would detect the falsehood.
>
> On the other hand there are times, as in this book,
> when the theology of the ancients will be seen to exhibit what
> is right and honourable, though in most such cases it should
> be considered rather physiology or ethology than theology,
> according as the myths embody the truth concerning physical
> nature or human. But the old theology can sometimes be
> employed in the service of Catholic truth, if the fashioner of
> the myths should choose. I have observed this in the case of
> more than one orthodox poet in whose investiture of fiction
> the sacred teachings were clothed. Nor let my pious critics be

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Complete English Poems, ed. John Scattergood (Harmondsworth: Penguin,
1983).
[68] *Genealogy*, Book XIV.x.

offended to hear the poets sometimes called even sacred theologians.[69]

This brief review of late medieval attitudes to the origins of poetry provides a context for Chaucer's suggestive lines in his stanzas about the 'litel bok' in *Troilus*. I have already suggested above that the stanzas' opening exhortation to the 'litel bok' to 'go'- 'Ther God thi makere yet, er that he dye,/ So sende myght to make in som comedye!' – perhaps involve the double-meaning of the word 'ther', producing the effect that the book is being sent, not just out into the world, but also, back to its origin in God. Certainly, these first three lines partake of the logic of circulation: one book goes out (or back to source, as I think is implied); a new book is invoked. The Trinitarian imagery in the very last stanza of the poem, of the circumscribing, but uncircumscribed triune God, an image that attempts to describe the mysterious procession from unity of the persons of the Trinity, and the return to source that guarantees unity, is mirrored in the cycle of procession and return that seems to characterise the process of poetic composition, and the relationship of God, the supreme creator, and the human *makere*.

III: *Procession and Return*

At first glance, the poet's wish that God will send him the *myght* to write a new book seems to conjure up the familiar Aristotelian concept of the first unmoved mover, who provides the energy or power for the movement of other secondary movers. We have already touched upon the role played by Aristotelian causality in the evolution of such ideas as the twofold efficient cause. The author of the letter to Can Grande della Scala, provides a neat application of the scholastic version of the theory, together with a reference to Aristotle, to the production of literature:

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[69] *Genealogy*, Book XV.viii.

And so we should go on to infinity along a line of effective causes, as is proved in the second *Metaphysicorum*; and since this is impossible we must at last come to the prime existence, which is God, and thus mediately or immediately everything which is has its being from him; for it is by what the second cause received from the first cause that it has influence upon that which it causes, after the fashion of a body that receives and reflects a ray. Wherefore the first cause is cause in a higher degree; and this is what the book *De Causis* says, to wit, that 'every primary cause is more influential on that which it causes, than a universal secondary cause'. So much as to being.[70]

The extent, if any, of the admixture of Platonism in this scholastic Aristotelian theory of causality is hard to measure. Marie-Dominique Chenu argued for the influence on Aquinas's structuring of the *Summa Theologiae*, of the Platonic idea of *exitus* and *reditus,* a view which was influential, but met with resistance in the 1960s, in, for example, the Aristotelian critique and modification of these views, by Ghislain Lafont.[71] This debate, as to the

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[70] Dante? 'Letter to Can Grande della Scala', in *A Translation of the Latin Works of Dante Alighieri*, trans. A. G. Ferrers Howell and Philip Henry Wicksteed (London: Dent, 1904), 20 (pp. 354-5).

[71] M.-D. Chenu, O.P., 'Le Plan de la Somme théologique de Saint Thomas', *Revue Thomiste* 47 (1939), 93-107, and see also his *Toward Understanding Saint Thomas* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1964); Ghislain Lafont, *Structures et Méthode dans la Somme Théologique de Saint Thomas d'Aquin* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1961; repr. Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1996). Chenu writes that beyond 'the scientific world of Aristotle, Saint Thomas appeals to the Platonic theme of emanation and return. Since theology is the science of God, all things will be studied in their relation to God, whether in their production or in their final end, in their *exitus et reditus*'. *Toward Understanding Saint Thomas*, p. 304. Earl Muller provides an account of this debate, including Chenu's elaboration of what he sees as Aquinas's dependence upon a Neoplatonic scheme of procession and return, Étienne Gilson's endorsement of this view, and Lafont's critique, in 'Creation as Existential Contingency: A Response', *The Saint Anselm Journal* 1.1 (2003), pp. 65-78. But see also Gilson's serious reservations about the compatibility of Christian and Neoplatonic thought. While he considers, in a discussion of the angels, that

level of Platonism in orthodox Aristotelian scholasticism, has recently taken an interesting turn in the direction of an alliance between theology and postmodernism. Postmodern theologians, Roman Catholic and Anglican, such as Jean-Luc Marion, John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock, have sought to discover common ground between on the one hand Heidegerrean and post-Heideggerean critiques of Western ontology, the postmodern 'linguistic turn', and the postmodern assault upon the sovereign individual, and upon a binary relationship between subjectivity and objectivity, and on the other, pre-modern, Platonist-tending, transcendental and henological (as opposed to ontological) '*théo-onto-logie*' (the phrase is Jean-Luc Marion's, and refers to a theology that has come out from under the deadening weight of the metaphysics of being).[72]

The alleged excesses of these Platonizing, neo-Augustinian radical theologians have been robustly countered on the one hand by traditional Roman Catholic theologians and on the other by atheist postmodern philosophers. It is not only a theological or philosophical avant-garde that has been calling for a re-examination of the influence of Platonism in the Middle Ages, however. Scholars such as Stephen Gersh have been arguing over the past decade or so that the extent of the Platonic influence within scholastic thought and in the Middle Ages generally, needs to be urgently

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'metaphysical speculation on the hierarchical grades of being, very important here, originates in the neo-Platonic doctrine of emanation', (*The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas* (New York: Random, 1956), p.161), he also makes it clear, in a discussion of the difficulties posed by Meister Eckhart, that 'one cannot think, at one and the same time, as a Neoplatonist and as a Christian', *Being and Some Philosophers* (Toronto, 1952), p. 5. For Chenu's account of the development in the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century of studies that concentrated on the role of Neoplatonism in relation to scholasticism, see M.-D. Chenu, 'L'équilibre de la scholastique médiévale', *Revue des Sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 29 (1940), 304-12. For a recent discussion of the logic of procession within the Trinitarianism of the *Summa*, see Gilles Emery, *La Théologie Trinitaire de Saint Thomas d'Aquin* (Paris: Cerf, 2004).

[72] See Stephen Gersh, *From Iamblichus to Eriugena. An Investigation of the Prehistory and Evolution of the Pseudo-Dionysian Tradition* (Leiden: Brill, 1978), pp. 7-13, for an account in the growth in interest in Proclus and Neoplatonism during the twentieth century.

revisited.[73] And the classicist Wayne Hankey has written a series of articles that critique what he sees as the distortion of history and historiography involved in postmodern theology's determination to fashion pre-modern theology into a source for its own postmodern, anti-Cartesian, anti-modern views.

Hankey's critique bears on our discussion insofar as it leads him to re-investigate the question of the degree to which Aquinas's theory of causality, of *actus purus* and of the procession of the persons of the Trinity, actually does involve the Platonist structure of emanation and return, or of *exitus* and *reditus*. His conclusion is conservative, shoring up the notion of an Aquinas, who, contrary to the best wishes of postmodern theologians, is embedded in *theoria*, metaphysics and philosophy, but offering the view that Aquinas's concept of the Trinity, and of being, and of creation, operates according to the Neoplatonist logic of *exitus* and *reditus*. Hankey interrogates the idea (which he associates in fact with John Milbank, one of the postmodern theologians for whom Aquinas is an Aristotelian dead-end, rather than the heroic *théo-onto-logian* that Jean-Luc Marion considers him) that the Thomist version of Aristotle's theory of *actus purus* is incompatible with the more 'differential', postmodern and linguistic hopes of Milbank, wondering if the term *actus purus* 'adequately translates' the Greek *entelecheia*, 'a notion which requires the thought of a self-relation'. Hankey argues that Aquinas's theory of creation, being, and divine and human self-knowledge, is more dynamic than the rather static *actus purus* adequately conveys, but that it nonetheless remains within the 'undifferentiated unity of essence'.

In brief, then, Hankey offers a half-way house between what he sees as the extremes of postmodern theology, which either hails Aquinas as a long-lost Platonist champion of difference, or rejects him as a stodgy,

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[73] See also Vivian Boland, who argues that on the basis of recent work on the connection between Proclus and Aquinas, via Dionysius, that there has been a resultant 're-assessment of the structure of [Aquinas's] theological synthesis'. Boland, *Ideas in God According to Saint Aquinas* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), p. 9.

irremediably ontological Aristotelian.[74] In the place of these extremes,
Hankey presents Aquinas as an 'onto-theologian' (Aristotelian) who is
nonetheless 'modified by Neoplatonism' and argues that only a moderate
view of Aquinas does justice to him:

> However, if trinitarian difference requires only that difference
> is essential to divinity and not just once but twice, then
> Thomas's trinitarian theology is fuller and richer than an
> antiphilosophical and anti-Greek polemic can think.
>
> If, however, its rich logic be set in opposition to the
> Aristotelian *actus purus*, and if an opposition to onto-
> theology be also required, we are in a bad way. For this
> would exclude from view the continuity between Aristotle's
> ontological theology and the systematic henological theology
> in which it was conveyed to Thomas. It is just these which

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[74] Hankey defends his views of the extent of the Platonism in Aquinas's
work in his essay on Aquinas and Platonism, in which he states that the
'profound influence of Platonism on Thomas' own thought is evident from
the beginning. His always growing knowledge of the tradition derives from
Aristotle and from the diverse Middle and Neo-Platonist pagan, Christian,
Arabic and Jewish.' Wayne J. Hankey, 'Aquinas and the Platonists', *The
Platonic Tradition in the Middle Ages*, ed. Stephen Gersh and Maarten
J.F.M. Hoenan (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2002), pp. 279-324; 285.
However, Hankey does not only itemize the various Platonic commentaries
and texts by which Aquinas came to *know* Plato (the corpus of Platonic
works known by Aquinas was largely set out by Richard J. Henle in his
*Saint Thomas and Platonism: A Study of the Plato and Platonici Texts in
the Writings of Saint Thomas* (The Hague, 1956)), but also argues for the
thoroughgoing indebtedness of Aquinas's work to many key features of
Platonic thought. He also argues for a basic sympathy between Aquinas's
view of philosophy and that of the later Neoplatonists, arguing that the
'major genres of his work – both the commentaries on philosophical and
religious texts and also the total theological systems reconciling philosophy
and religion as well as the contradictions between authorities – develop
from within the pattern [the Platonists of late Antiquity] established.' *Ibid.*,
p. 282. The last decade has seen an accelerating interest in the re-
investigation of the extent of medieval Platonism, and especially of the
influence of Platonism within scholastic thought. Stephen Gersh, in his
introduction to this same volume of essays, sets out his own project as
follows, arguing that the 'widely held assumption[s]...that Aristotelianism
is more significant than Platonism during the medieval phase ' is 'in urgent
need of re-examination' (p. xi).

make difference fundamental, all pervasive, and
understandable.[75]

Hankey's conclusion, and it is a conclusion that harmonises with recent re-appraisals of the extent of Platonism within scholastic thought, re-affirms the significance of *exitus* and *reditus* within Aquinas's thought, as much as it corrects the wishful extremes, as he sees them, of postmodern theology.

How does all this bear upon the ending of *Troilus*, which is usually approached by critics in terms of the question of whether it is or is not a palinode? This question requires a comparative evaluation of, on the one hand, the earthly life to which the bulk of the poem is dedicated, and on the other, the Christian values which are asserted at the poem's conclusion. Of course, the Robertsonian view of the poem would refuse to accept in the first place that there is anything other than an unambiguously ethical plan for the entire poem from the very get-go. What follows below is an analysis of the ending of *Troilus*, not with a view to understanding the comparative relationship between mortal striving and the everlasting life, but more to figure out the connection between the earthly and divine origins of the 'litel bok' itself, and its future, mortal and immortal, and to consider whether the depiction of the poet's secondary 'makyng' is affected by the motif of primary emanation and return that I think dominates the closing images of the poem.

Chaucer's stanzas are interesting in themselves, for their condensation of intractable problems in poetics into a few lines. But their significance is heightened by their position, where all but the final episode of the long *double sorwe* of Troilus has been told, and where the shift in perspective that has for so long baffled readers of the poem, is just in process. The meditation on the origin and future well-being of the book, just at the point where the world's treacherous instability, by comparison with the security of Christ's love for creation, is about to be finally spelled out, is

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[75] Wayne J. Hankey, 'Theoria versus Poesis: Neoplatonism and Trinitarian Difference in Aquinas, John Milbank, Jean-Luc Marion and John Zizioulas', *Modern Theology* 15:4 (1999), p. 408. On the subject of Aquinas's relationship to Neoplatonic henology, see also Hankey, 'Aquinas' First Principle: Being or Unity?' *Dionysius* 4 (1980), 138-172.

all the more interesting for the company it keeps in terms of the poem's content at this point.

The motif of return to source of the 'litel bok' is immediately succeeded by the *makere's* instruction of the book in manners, warning it not to envy other 'makyng', to defer to poetry, and to 'kis the steppes where as thou seest pace/ Virgile, Ovide, Omer, Lucan, and Stace.' It is clear that these two lines echo Dante's meeting with the 'bella scola' of poets in *Inferno* IV:

> When the voice paused and there was silence I saw four great shades coming to us; their looks were neither sad nor joyful. The good Master began: 'Mark him there with sword in hand who comes before thee as their lord; he is Homer, the sovereign poet. He that comes next is Horace the moralist, Ovid is the third, and the last Lucan. Since each one shares with me in the name the one voice uttered they give me honourable welcome, and in this do well.
>
> Thus I saw assemble the noble school of that lord of loftiest song who flies like an eagle above the rest. After they had talked together for a time they turned to me with a sign of greeting, and my master smiled at this; and then they showed me still greater honour, for they made me one of their number so that I was the sixth among those high intelligences.[76]

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[76] 'Poi che la voce fu restata e queta,/ vidi quattro grand'ombre a noi venire:/sembianza avean nè trista nè lieta./ Lo buon maestro cominciò a dire:/'Mira colui con quella spada in mano,/ che vien dinanzi ai tre sì come sire./Quelli è Omero poeta sovrano;/ l'altro è Orazio satiro che vène;/ Ovidio è il terzo, e l'ultimo Lucano./ Però che ciascun meco si convene/ nel nome che sonò la voce sola,/ fannomi onore, e di ciò fanno bene.'/ Così vidi adunar la bella scola/ di quel signor dell'altissimo canto/ che sovra li altri com'aquila vola/. Da ch'ebber ragionato insieme alquanto,/ volsersi a me con salutevol cenno;/ e 'l mio maestro sorrise di tanto:/ e più d'onore ancora assai mi fenno,/ ch'e' sì mi fecer della loro schiera,/ sì ch' io fui sesto tra cotanto senno.' *Inferno IV*, lines 82-102. Text and translation are from John Sinclair's dual edition, *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: Inferno*, trans. John D. Sinclair (New York: Oxford University Press, 1939).

The echo of the Dantean passage at this point makes perfect sense. The narrator-maker of Troilus is trying to establish the value and secure the future of his poem. Dante, as one of the *moderni*, is establishing his worth as co-equal with those ancient poetic authorities that he, together with medieval culture generally, most admires. Chaucer is more modest, it seems, in that where Dante is invited to join the noble school, Chaucer advises his book to be submissive to it. There are several questions raised by Chaucer's lines. First, where does the encounter occur? Where Chaucer fudges such questions as the final resting place of Arcite and Troilus, Dante has with gusto located just about everyone in his acquaintance, together with notables of long-past generations. Dante's passage, then, is noteworthy for its locative precision: the ancient poets are in Limbo, free from active suffering, but deprived of beatitude. Chaucer's lines are interesting because they envisage an encounter between the book and the great classical poets that is quite concrete in some aspects – the bowing down to their footsteps, the kissing, the moving procession – but tantalizingly vague in others.

However, perhaps the most significant difference between the Dantean and Chaucerian passages, however much they resemble each other, is the fact that in the *Inferno*, it is the human poet himself, who, appropriately enough, is meeting other human poets, whereas in Chaucer, it is the *bok*, otherwise so vulnerable and small, that penetrates the supernatural realm in a return to divine source, and in the meeting with the departed poetic eminences.

Chaucer's attitude to the *litel bok* proceeds in part by contraries. In cautioning it to be properly deferential to the classics, he assumes that it will be in the same company as the classics. By openly worrying about its future, by allying its fate with that of the vernacular language as a whole, he is aggrandizing, rather than depreciating its status. The future and value of the *litel bok* are vulnerable at this point in the poem to being yoked *either* to *brotelnesse* and worldly infirmity (which would be a logical association,

given the stated anxiety about the *bok* in its written, material form),[77] or, to divinity, to the source of meaning and creativity, and above all, to the overwhelming act of love for creation, fallen as it is, that is expressed in the incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection of Christ.

The oblique and tricky fascination of Chaucer's passage, then, by comparison with the dazzling brilliance of Dante's, lies in Chaucer's restraint, and in his seeming to doubt the claims he is advancing for his poem. He takes away with one hand, and gives with the other.

When he comes, as he does in the second stanza, to ponder the likelihood of his book's surviving the unreliability of language (which mirrors Criseyde's unreliability, which itself is mirrored in the running-down of the language of honour and fidelity in the poem by its protagonists),[78] there is an unmistakeable echo of the poem's other main meditation upon the proneness of language to change over time, that of the proem to Book II.[79]

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[77] In the 'Retractions', the 'book of Troilus' is classified as one of those 'enditynges of worldly vanitees' which are revoked by their *makere.*

[78] Eugene Vance asks: 'How can the syntax of historical narrative complete itself except at the expense of everything a priori that is spiritual, perfect, or universal – all the more since the very economy of narrative itself involves reversals, negations, or transformations of whatever material is subjected to structuration in narrative? In a suggestive article, the late Adrienne R. Lockhart shows, precisely, how ethical absolutes that are named in the Troilus – *honour, worthinesse, manhood, gentillesse,* and *trouthe* – do indeed become subject to a "pattern of semantic deterioration" and a "debasement of meaning" as Chaucer carries these universal moral values into the accidents of mortal affairs'. Vance, *Mervelous Signals: Poetics and Sign Theory in the Middle Ages* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), p. 307-8, citing Adrienne R. Lockhart, 'Semantic, Moral, and Aesthetic Degeneration in Troilus and Criseyde', *Chaucer Review* 8 (1973), 100-118; 101.

[79] The concern with accurate transmission that is seen in 'Adam Scriveyn' and the stanzas about the *litel bok* in *Troilus*, and which appears in another form in the proem to Book II of *Troilus* does not stand in the way of Chaucer's own use of the past. He is only selectively scrupulous, i.e. when scrupulosity serves the meaning of his own poem. Otherwise, he displays a practical attitude to the works of Petrarch, Boccaccio, Statius, etc., and to other sources. He requisitions, incorporates, utilizes; his emphasis is upon the demands of *use,* rather than preservation, deference or accuracy.

There, the narrator addresses the reader who might be displeased with his transcription of the 'Latin' into his own 'tonge'.[80] He disavows any personal emotional involvement in the material, and also any primary responsibility for its creation, arguing that it pre-exists his rendering of it, and warning also about the tendency of language to change dramatically over time:

> Ye know eek that in forme of speche is change
> Withinne a thousand yeer, and wordes tho
> That hadden pris, now wonder nyce and straunge
> Us thinketh hem, and yet thei spake hem so,
> And spedde as wel in love as men now do;
> Ek for to wynnen love in sundry ages,
> In sundry londes, sundry been usages.[81]

Now, what is worth noticing here is the assertion that in spite of the changeability of the language, essential processes of communication go on unhindered, across the span of a thousand years.[82] This is a bitter and ironic

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[80] His actual source is written in Italian. The *Riverside Chaucer*, in its note on the line, refers to Larry Benson's point that writers of romances often claimed that they were working from a Latin source. Larry D. Benson, *Malory's Morte D'Arthur* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976), pp. 8-9. Cf. the reassurance offered to 'Lyte Lowys, my sone', in the introduction to the *Treatise on the Astrolabe*, that an English rendering will serve just as well as a Hebrew version will for the Jews, or an Arabic for the Arabians (28-35). Here also, is a statement of the survival of the purpose and meaning of the treatise in spite of linguistic difference: 'And God woot that in alle these langages and in many moo han these conclusions ben suffisantly lerned and taught, and yit by diverse reules; right as diverse pathes leden diverse folk the righte way to Rome' (36-40). Cf. the 'Thopas-Melibee link' for the narrator's discussion of the consistency of purpose and 'sentence' across the linguistic variation of the four gospels (VII. 943-55):
"'As thus: ye woot that every Evaungelist
That telleth us the peyne of Jhesu Crist
Ne seith nat alle thing as his felawe dooth;
But nathelees hir sentence is al sooth,'"
[81] Book II, Proem, 21-28.
[82] This trope of the changes in a language over a thousand years occurs in Dante's *Convivio* (Book I, Chapter 5, 55-66 and Book II, Chapter 2, 83-

point, though, because the lovers do not ultimately 'speed well' in love, regardless of the narrator's reassurances at this stage of the poem where they have yet to consummate their love. We know from the very first lines of the poem of the dismal result of the protagonists' love, a result partly brought about by manipulation of, and reliance on, an intrinsically unreliable worldly language. If we jump forward again to the stanzas on the *litel bok*, what we notice is, on the one hand, the similarity in content between the two passages, but on the other, the very different effects produced by each. Where the narrator sets out to reassure his readership, as he does in the proem, of the survival of signification even in the midst of signifying flux, his reassurance is undercut by our knowledge that the love affair in question has a tragic outcome. Where the narrator, as in the stanzas on the *litel bok*, dispatches his book into the arms of God and into the company of the great poets, and *in the same breath* also frets about the poem's prospects in an environment of linguistic instability, the worry is placed, gestalt-style, alongside the great hopes, and the hint of beatitude and a glorious posterity. The shift in focus in the two passages, from a need to reassure the readership of his poem in the proem to Book II, to an objectification in the stanzas on the *litel bok*, of his readership as a *problem*, is also worth noticing. The first passage, from the proem to Book II, bears comparison with the similar material in the thirteenth-century *Cursor Mundi*:

> Efter haly kyrc state
>
> Þis ilk bok it es translate
>
> In to Inglis tong to rede
>
> For the loue of Inglis lede,
>
> Inglis lede of Ingland,
>
> For the commun at understand.
>
> Frankis rimes here I redd,
>
> Comunlik in ilk[a] sted,
>
> Mast es it wroght for frankis man:
>
> Quat is for him na frankis can?

89); the source may be Horace's *Ars poetica* (70-71). For a note on the transmission of this idea, see the *Riverside Chaucer*, p. 1031.

Of Ingland the nacion,

Es Inglis man þar in commun;

Þe speche þat man wit mast may spede,

Mast þar-wit to speke war nede;

Selden was for ani chance

Praised Inglis tong in france;

Giue we ilkan þare langage,

Me think we do þam non outrage.

To laud and Inglis man i spell

Þat understandes þat i tell.[83]

Here, as John Thompson points out, the poet's 'words are taken as representative of an important moment in the history of English as a literary language, a story that is itself often characterized as an evolutionary process. Working with the benefit of hindsight, we can see that this history is punctuated with many half-understood but obviously important episodes, such as the one described above where English is apparently being used "for the commun at understand", or some three quarters of a century later, the moment when, without a word of explanation, Chaucer decided to write courtly poetry in English rather than French.'[84] The passages from the *Cursor Mundi* and the proem to Book II have a number of motifs in common, most importantly, a concern for the readership and a dedication to translation in the light of the differences between languages, and in readerships' abilities to understand them.

The passage about the *litel bok*, however, has a different focus. The *Cursor*-poet tries to justify the use of English as a popular tongue, without the use of which a certain audience would be neglected. In Chaucer's

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[83] This is the passage quoted by John Thompson, 'The Governance of the English Tongue', in *Individuality and Achievement in Middle English Poetry*, ed. O. S. Pickering (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1997), pp. 19-37.; Richard Morris, ed., *Cursor Mundi*, 7 vols, EETS OS 57, 59, 62, 66, 68, 99, 101 (London, 1874 – 93), 231-50. I am following Thompson, who quotes from the Cotton text, British Library MS Cotton Vespasian A.3.

[84] John S. Thompson, 'The Governance of the English Tongue', p. 20. For more on this subject, see Thompson, *The Cursor Mundi: Poem, Texts and Contexts* (Oxford: Society for the Study of Mediaeval Literature, 1998).

passage, by comparison, it is the future of the poem that is of concern, its security, given the mangling of the tongue in both its written and oral forms. He is not worried for his audience, but *by* his audience. He is worried for his poem.

This elevation of the poem so that it is made equivalent to the overall question of linguistic signification,[85] together with the lack of faith in the readership of the poem, tends to overcome the doubts so explicitly raised about the poem's survival, and to connect the poem rather to the eternal order where it originated, and which it ultimately appears to have penetrated. However, this association of the poem with a divine origin and terminus does not come about at the expense of the work as embodied in material signifiers. Rather the maker is worried that the exact lexical configuration which represents the matter of the poem, and to which its spiritual aspect is conjoined, that this whole – a material and spiritual composite (more Aristotelian than Platonic at this point) – will be damaged by worldly mistreatment. The sacred quality of the poem is partly displayed in its tendency to suffer on this earth. An implicit association is being set up, blasphemous if it were to be spelled out, between the poem and the second person of the Trinity. Christ proceeds from the Father, the known from the knower, the Word; the emergence of the persons of the Trinity, and their commeation provides the structural basis for creation *ex nihilo*, and for the ongoing relationship of that creation with its creator. Chaucer has set up a series of images about his poem which involves a claim that it originated in the sending of power from God to the maker, that it is sent back upon completion to that Divine source, that it will suffer on this earth, be mouthed and gestured, sung and read, miswritten and mispronounced, but he hopes, with an invocation to God, ultimately understood. The images about the *litel bok* verge, if not on the claim for the *bok* of two existences, then of two natures, one social, human and earthly, one heavenly.

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[85] Paul Zumthor remarks on the relationship of speech to writing in the Middle Ages: 'Even when the text is not sung to a tune it is spoken, not by accident, but by virtue of a deeply functional characteristic. The text thus constitutes an act of the language as a whole, not just of the written medium.' Paul Zumthor, *Toward a Medieval Poetics*, trans. Philip Bennett (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), p. 20.

These two stanzas invoke a claim of divine inspiration on behalf of a secular poem. The specific articulation of this invocation emphasizes not just a giving by God of the will or grace to make the book, but, as we have seen, a structure of *exitus* and *reditus* that itself reflects the primary emanation and return that characterizes *actus purus* itself. The two stanzas express anxiety about the future of the book, in the form of what we might call, post-Derrida, the impossibility of the self-identity of the book. In practically the same breath, however, a claim for the perfecting and realization of the book, together with an implicit suggestion of its similarity to the second person of the Trinity, is made with the image of completion and entelechy suggested by the sending-back of the book to its divine source.

John Milbank has tried to overcome the post-modern nihilism with respect to the impossibility of self-identity for the written work, by suggesting that the 'infinite deferment of self-identity through the mediation of a linguistic work which "passes away from us" may be originally the mark, not of alienation (which it merely makes possible) but of our being rhetorically transported through history by the testimony of "all of the others"'.[86] Whether or not this is too strained an insistence on a super-sophisticated Christian meaning in the face of postmodern oblivion, it certainly appears that Chaucer's stanzas have a *double effect*. On the one hand, as we have seen, the stanzas display the worry that the poem will not survive as intended; on the other, they claim a perfection of being for the poem, in its return to source, that mimics the structure of *difference within unity* that characterizes the Trinity itself.

Three panoramic movements occur in parallel at the end of Troilus: first, the *makere* of the book distances himself from the content of his tragedy and provides a perspective on it as a total achievement – he becomes a spectator; second, Troilus has his own apotheosis, and looks down at earth,

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[86] John Milbank, 'The Second Difference', in *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1997), p. 189. Hankey discusses this and related passages by Milbank in 'Re-Christianizing Augustine Postmodern Style', *Animus* 2 (1997), p. 17. *Animus* is an electronic journal (the page reference is to the PDF version of the article) available at www.swgc.mun.ca/animus

with a quite different affect to before; third, the audience of the book is invited to turn its eyes away from 'worldly vanyte' and look instead upon God, and specifically, Christ on the cross.

All three movements involve a shift in perspective, a heightened role as spectator, first for the poet himself, then for his hero, and finally for his audience. The first two are hierarchical and Platonic, and the movement is obviously upwards: in the first shift, the poet disengages himself from his tragic material, and adopts a final perspective on his work, from which he sends it upwards to the pinnacle of the Christian and Platonic hierarchy. In the second, Troilus is provided with a perch from which he can see the human incarceration in which he suffered for so long, but from which he is now released. The hierarchical upwards direction in both, however, is modified also by the sense of return and release. Books are first sent into embodiment in precarious material signifiers, and then, in the gesture that completes and perfects them, returned to their source; Troilus also has passed *through* embodiment, and his final journey is a return. The third image, of the triune God, is both transcendent and hierarchical on the one hand and all-inclusive and intrinsically circular on the other, at one and the same time: *Uncircumscript, and al maist circumscrive*. Here, at last, is the longed-for release. The all-too-brief consummation of the love of Troilus and Criseyde, that, depending on how one looks at it, is either a glimpse of perfection, or a mere distraction from true perfection, is itself returned to in the final relaxation of tension.[87]

These final shifts also involve the overlapping of being and knowing. By pre-exiting his poem, just before its formal conclusion, the narrator-poet

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[87] See Christian Turner, *The Reception of Plato and Neoplatonism in Late Medieval English Literature* (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of York, 1998), for a defence of the idea that the Boethian hymn at the end of Book III of *Troilus* brings Troilus closer, rather than further away, from enlightenment. Minnis argued recently, against an older view which read Chaucer's appropriation of Boethius at this point of the poem as 'a blatant confusion of cupidinous and charitable love, revealing the absurdity of elevating passion to a metaphysical, even mystical, plane', that Chaucer's point is really that 'Troilus's feelings...have actually helped this virtuous heathen rise to the highest of his philosophical achievements'. A. J. Minnis, '"I speke of folk in seculer estaat": Vernacularity and Secularity in the Age of Chaucer', *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 27 (2005), pp. 23-58, 49-50.

sees it in its entirety, assesses it, and dispatches it: his knowledge of it is incorporated therefore into the last stage of its enactment, just as Troilus's self-knowledge occurs in the last, extra-terrestrial stage of his existence that can be written. It is in the dispatching of the poem to its source that its being is perfected and fulfilled. The positioning of Troilus's own self-knowledge confronts us with a bittersweet paradox: only by leaving the world can he know it. Now this is problematic on a number of counts. First, it confronts us with the difficult question as to what, if any, kind of salvific knowledge a pagan could acquire (a question that echoes the question raised above as to the possibility that a pagan or secular poem might be divinely inspired); second, it raises the borderline-heretical position that it is not possible to acquire true knowledge (in the sense, in a Christian context, of knowledge of God) before death; third, it requires us to weigh up the extent to which we consider that Troilus has achieved knowledge during his lifetime; fourth, it creates a divide between us and the protagonist, in which we can benefit from his tragic example, but he cannot.

The Boethian rejection of embodiment and the world that this would seem to suggest, is an echo of the worries about the embodiment of the *litel bok* that we have discussed above. Like those worries, the question-mark over the value of earthly knowledge and human sexual love is quite unmistakeable in the poem. However, as in the case of the *litel bok*, there is a strong counter-current to this rejection of fleshly embodiment and fragmentation. This counter-current becomes ever clearer if we read the Chaucerian invocation of the image of the uncircumbscribed triune God alongside its Dantean source.

The source in Dante is *Paradiso* 14:

> As, impelled and drawn by increase of happiness, dancers in
> a round raise their voices all together and quicken their steps,
> so at the eager and devout petition the holy circles showed
> new joy in their wheeling and in their wondrous song. Whoso
> laments that we die here to live above has not seen there the
> refreshment from the eternal showers. That One and Two and
> Three who ever lives and ever reigns in Three and in Two

and in One and uncircumscribed circumscribes all, was sung

three times by every one of these spirits in such a strain as

would be fit reward for every merit.[88]

Dante's lines occur close to the centre of the *Paradiso*. The immediate

context is of a secure and sanctified scholastic Aristotelianism (in the form

of Thomas Aquinas's speech, which has just concluded). The setting is

heavenly. Chaucer's description of the triune God occurs after the protracted

telling of the tragic human story of Troilus: the context is of human shuttling

between misery and uncertainty on this earth, on the one hand, and hope for

enlightenment, knowledge and salvation on the other. Dante's words are

spoken by a heavenly chorus, those who are not caught up in the same

difficult composite of spirit and matter as human beings;[89] they are

theoretical and hyperessential. Chaucer's words occur in the midst of tragic

praxis; they are a consolation and a hope.

The stanzas about the *litel bok* signal a shift in attitude, from tragic to

comic, to the fact of earthly 'incarceration'. Chaucer is already far from

Dante at the end of *Troilus*, at the very moment where he appears to be

imitating him most closely. The controversy about whether the ending is a

true palinode or not, regardless of where the merits lie, is itself revealing

about the meaning of the poem, in that it requires us to ask: what place do

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[88] 'Come, da più leitzia pinti e tratti,/ alla fïata quei che vanno a rota/ levan
la voce e rallegrano li atti,/ così, all'orazion pronta e divota,/ li santi cerchi
mostrar nova gioia/ nel torneare e nella mira nota./ Qual si lamenta perchè
qui si moia/ per viver cola su, non vide quive/ lo rifrigerio dell'etterna
ploia,/ Quell'uno e due e tre che sempre vive/ e regna sempre in tre e 'n due
e 'n uno,/ non circunscritto, e tutto circunscrive,/ tre volte era cantata da
ciascuno/ di quelli spirit con ta melodia, ch'ad ogni metro sarìa giusto
muno.' *Paradiso*, ed. and trans. Sinclair, XIV.18-33.

[89] Aquinas describes angels as relatively infinite in the sense that they are
'finite in respect of existence itself' but 'as forms they have a certain
infinity inasmuch as here the form is not received into a subject other than
itself', and he argues against Avicebron's assertion that angels are
composed of both matter and form, citing in his support Dionysius's *Divine
Names*, 'that to think of the first creatures as incorporeal is to think of them
as immaterial'. *Summa theologiae*, Ia,50,2. All quotations from and
references to the *Summa theologiae* relate to the dual language edition of
Thomas Gilby *et al.*, *Summa theologiae*, 60 vols. (London: Blackfriars,
1964-1981).

supernatural comfort and transcendent truth have in relation to the earthly world that is the poem's obvious subject? It is not enough to assert that the ending either is or is not a palinode. The polarized understanding of the poem is part of its meaning. *Troilus* gives so much of itself over to human suffering and experience, and such a small, if significant, part to heavenly consolation, that we become aware of the difference between Chaucer's concerns and Dante's. Chaucer invokes the *Commedia* at the end of his tragedy, but goes on to write not a divine, but a human comedy in the *Canterbury Tales*.

Troilus and Criseyde has lent itself to what used to be called, pejoratively (and this was a big injustice to Robertson) Robertsonian readings, in which Troilus was blind to where his happiness really lay, and placed all his faith in an earthly good which of course, inevitably disappointed him.[90] Like the Orpheus of late-medieval Boethius commentary (and of Chaucer's own translation of the *Consolation*), he oriented his eyes towards the *putte of helle*. This reading of the poem has been seen as too moralistic, too didactic, too obsessed with *sentence* at the expense of the sensual texture and human empathy of the poem. Readers are divided because the poem does seem to be devoted to the humane telling of a human dilemma, and yet it clearly does have this Boethian undercurrent, and this Christian ending, in which one is directly advised to learn from the story of Troilus that one should set one's sights, not on this world, but the next.

The Boethian undercurrent in Troilus is undeniable. The poem accomplishes what its protagonists finally cannot – it spans a bridge across the divide between the human striving for happiness and the cosmic perfection out of which these humans have fallen into embodiment. The poem's perspective is indeed higher than that of its protagonists, but this fact need not lead us to conclude that there is a solemn *rejection* of this world and its falseness. The ending of the poem, as much as it leads us to detach

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[90] D. W. Robertson discusses the ending of *Troilus* in *A Preface to Chaucer*, pp. 501-3, and *Troilus* in general in 'The Probable Date and Purpose of Chaucer's Troilus', *Medievalia et Humanistica* 13 (1985), 143-71. For a good cross-section of his views over three decades of his work, see his *Essays in Medieval Culture* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980).

ourselves from the story of Troilus, also gives his story bite, by means of the technique of relief. The final motif of eternity and timelessness functions not so much to disparage the frail slaves of time that are the protagonists, as to give their story the sense of an eternal presence.[91] Our attention is explicitly drawn to the need to substitute faith in Christ for faith in frail human beings, but this technique of *substitution* invokes the logic of *equivalence*. If I recommend that in the place of one kind of faith, one should substitute another, I am certainly implying the superiority of the recommended substitute, but I am also drawing attention to the equivalence in function and value of the two kinds of faith. The 'palinode', if we call it that for reasons of convenience, short as it is, is *parallel,* and *semantically equivalent to* the whole long five books of Troilus. The 'poetic function', as Roman Jakobson taught, involves the transfer of the 'principle of equivalence' from the atemporal 'axis of selection' into the usually temporal 'axis of combination' with the effect of a subliminal sense of unchangingness, of, as T.V.F. Brogan puts it, the '*re*-creation of the now which came before in the now which is now'.[92] Nietzsche writes similarly of the effect of the chorus in tragedy:

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[91] Walter Clyde Curry, in a line quoted approvingly by A. J. Minnis, rightly and elegantly argues that Chaucer 'bestowed dignity upon ephemeral human relationships by linking them up with the processes of cosmic forces'. *Chaucer and the Medieval Sciences*, 2nd ed. (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1960), p. 267, cited by Minnis, '"I speke of folk in seculer estaat": Vernacularity and Secularity in the Age of Chaucer', p. 51.
[92] Roman Jakobson, 'Linguistics and Poetics' in *Language in Literature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987), pp. 62-94; 71; T. V. F. Brogan, *s.v.* 'equivalence', in *New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Alex Preminger and T. V. F. Brogan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993). In the same essay, Jakobson writes about the difference between a poetic artificact and other kinds of linguistic message: 'The repetitiveness effected by imparting the equivalence principle to the sequence makes reiterable not only the constituent sequences of the poetic messages but the whole message as well. This capacity for reiteration whether immediate or delayed, this reification of a poetic message into an enduring thing, indeed all this represents an inherent and effective property of poetry'. 'Linguistics and Poetics', p. 86.

...that in spite of the flux of phenomena, life at bottom is
indestructibly powerful and pleasurable, appears with
objective clarity as the satyr chorus, the chorus of natural
beings, who as it were live ineradicably behind every
civilization, and who, despite the ceaseless change of
generations and the history of nations, remain the same to all
eternity.[93]

The ending of *Troilus*, for all its undeniably full revelation of the poem's
latent Boethianism, signals, first, a recuperation, by the means outlined
above, of the very tragic history it relates, and second, the end altogether of
a tragic outlook on the facts of embodiment on this earth, and a move
towards an encompassing logic, where all the forms of human living are
explored for their own sake.[94] The beginning of the *Canterbury Tales* echoes
the ending of *Troilus*, in the form of the 'Knight's Tale'. But the 'Knight's
Tale', as much as it is a reworking of an attitude that greatly appealed to
Chaucer for much if not all of his life, is now embedded in a much larger
game. The 'Knight's Tale' is thrown down as a challenge at the beginning,
and is answered in the course of a poem that makes the marginal (game-
playing on the way) central, and the central (the devotions in Canterbury)
marginal and unrealized. The diversionary is made into the real thing. The
ending of Troilus directs the poem's audience towards the Word made flesh.
The *Canterbury Tales* will deal with theology not in its own right as a divine

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[93] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music*, in
The Philosophy of Nietzsche, translated Clifton P. Fadiman (New York:
Modern Library, 1927). My reference is to the reprint, *The Birth of
Tragedy*, trans. Clifton P. Fadiman (New York: Dover, 1995), pp. 22-3.
[94] Anne Middleton describes Langland as anti-Boethian, a point of view endorsed and
amplified by Winthrop Wetherbee, who goes further again: 'What Anne Middleton
says of Langland's project is true of Ricardian poetry in general: it is anti-Boethian,
and expresses the situation of men who seek not to accept and transcend their
alienation from the world but to reclaim possession of their identity and history as
worldly beings.' Winthrop Wetherbee, 'Chaucer and the European Tradition', *Studies
in the Age of Chaucer* 27 (2005), pp. 1-21, 17, citing Anne Middleton, 'Narration and
the Invention of Experience: Episodic Form in Piers Plowman', in *The Wisdom of
Poetry: Essays in Early English Literature in Honor of Morton W. Bloomfield*
(Kalamazoo, Mich.: Medieval Institute Publications, 1982), p. 104.

science, but as an aspect of the science of this world, not with God, but with the human belief in God.

Chapter Two: The Timaean epigram and the representation of this world
in the *Canterbury Tales*

In the first volume of *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, the narrator
describes how the two different walks taken by him and his family when he was
a boy came to form his mind:

> For there were, in the environs of Combray, two 'ways' which
> we used to take our walks, and so diametrically opposed that we
> would actually leave the house by different doors according to
> the way we had chosen: the way towards Méséglise-la-Vineuse,
> which we called also 'Swann's way' because to get there one had
> to pass along the boundary of M. Swann's estate, and the
> 'Guermantes way'… But, above all, I set between them, far more
> distinctly than the mere distance in miles and yards and inches
> which separated one from the other, the distance that there was
> between the two parts of my brain in which I used to think of
> them, one of those distances of the mind which time serves only
> to lengthen, which separate things irremediably from one
> another, keeping them for ever upon different planes. And this
> distinction was rendered still more absolute because the habit we
> had of never going both ways on the same day, or in the course
> of the same walk, but the 'Méséglise way' one time and the
> 'Guermantes way' another, shut them up, so to speak, far apart
> and unaware of each other's existence, in the sealed vessels –
> between which there could be no communication – of separate
> afternoons.[1]

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[1] The omitted section of the passage is as follows: 'Of Méséglise-la-Vineuse, to tell the
truth, I never knew anything more than the way there, and the strange people who would
come over on Sundays to take the air in Combray, people whom, this time, neither my
aunt nor any of us would "know at all," and whom we would therefore assume to be
"people who must have come over from Méséglise." As for Guermantes, I was to know

The argument in this chapter concerns the differences between the poetics expressed towards the end of *Troilus and Criseyde*, and those that provide the foundation for the *Canterbury Tales*. I am not however, trying particularly to assert a *progression*, or *break*, but rather to stress the parallel and sometimes overlapping existence of two distinct *ways*. There is no definitive evidence that the comedy invoked at the end of *Troilus* is in fact the *Canterbury Tales*,[2] and

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it well enough one day, but that day had still to come; and, during the whole of my boyhood, if Méséglise was to me something as inaccessible as the horizon, which remained hidden from sight, however far one went, by the folds of a country which no longer bore the least resemblance to the country round Combray; Guermantes, on the other hand, meant no more than the ultimate goal, ideal rather than real, of the "Guermantes way," a sort of abstract geographical term like the North Pole or the Equator. And so to "take the Guermantes way" in order to get to Méséglise, or vice versa, would have seemed to me as nonsensical a proceeding as to turn to the east in order to reach the west. Since my father used always to speak of the "Méséglise way" as comprising the finest view of a plain that he knew anywhere, and of the "Guermantes way" as typical of river scenery, I had invested each of them, by conceiving them in this way as two distinct entities, with that cohesion, that unity which belongs only to the figments of the mind; the smallest detail of either of them appeared to me as a precious thing, which exhibited the special excellence of the whole, while, immediately beside them, in the first stages of our walk, before we had reached the sacred soil of one or the other, the purely material roads, at definite points on which they were set down as the ideal view over a plain and the ideal scenery of a river, were no more worth the trouble of looking at them than, to a keen playgoer and lover of dramatic art, are the little streets which may happen to run past the walls of a theatre. But, above all, I set between them, far more distinctly than the mere distance in miles and yards and inches which separated one from the other, the distance that there was between the two parts of my brain in which I used to think of them, one of those distances of the mind which time serves only to lengthen, which separate things irremediably from one another, keeping them for ever upon different planes. And this distinction was rendered still more absolute because the habit we had of never going both ways on the same day, or in the course of the same walk, but the "Méséglise way" one time and the "Guermantes way" another, shut them up, so to speak, far apart and unaware of each other's existence, in the sealed vessels – between which there could be no communication – of separate afternoons.' *In Search of Lost Time*, vol. 1, trans. C. K. Scott-Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin and translation revised by D. J. Enright (London: Chatto and Windus, 1992).

[2] Lee Patterson describes Chaucer's post-*Troilus* artistic choices, and writes that the *Legend of Good Women* is the 'road not taken after the *Troilus*', arguing that 'in its representation of character (the self as object), principle of organisation (an externally imposed homology), historical siting (antiquity), and social valence (aristocratic) it

the *Canterbury Tales* themselves incorporate so many re-workings of material from previous years, and took perhaps decades to 'write' in their final form, that any claim that there is a clear turn away from one long-term practice in favour of another is likely to be frustrated by more powerful evidence of continuity. What does appear is the alternation between two different attitudes, an alternation that occurs throughout Chaucer's work, but becomes an active aspect of the structure and meaning of the *Canterbury Tales*.[3]

In the course of his apology towards the end of the 'General Prologue', the narrator cites Plato in his defense:

> Eek Plato seith, whoso kan hym rede,
> The wordes moot be cosyn to the dede. (741-2)[4]

The reference is problematic for many reasons, but most obviously because its few spare words summon up the whole question of the level and kind of access to Plato that was available to Chaucer. On the one hand, the *Timaeus* in the Middle Ages was the object of serious, albeit periodic interest, interest which issued in the intellectually heavyweight commentaries by, for instance, Proclus and Calcidius in the fifth century, and Bernard of Chartres and William of

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represents all that the *Canterbury Tales* is not', *Chaucer and the Subject of History* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 236.

[3] Although I am not arguing that Chaucer's poetics undergo a revolution in the *Canterbury Tales*, still my position is at odds with that of Robert Jordan, who writes: '[W]hen we analyze the text of the Canterbury Tales and Chaucer's "moulding" of his verbal materials…it becomes apparent that when Chaucer changed his subject matter from dream to pilgrimage, he did not employ a new poetics' (my emphasis), Jordan, *Chaucer's Poetics and the Modern Reader* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), p. 118.

[4] The Timaean epigram appears, to different effect, in another Chaucerian apology, in the 'Manciple's Tale', where the Manciple defends his 'knavyssh speche' in using the word 'lemman' to describe the lover of Phebus's wife. For a persuasive analysis of the layers of verbal ingenuity in the Manciple's apology see V. J. Scattergood, 'The Manciple's Manner of Speaking', *Essays in Criticism* 24 (1974), 124-46; esp. 138-9.

Conches in the twelfth.[5] On the other hand, for large tranches of the Middle Ages, the *Timaeus* was, as Paul Edward Dutton puts it, 'a largely forgotten book'.[6] The somewhat doxographic nature of the transmission even of this influential dialogue that was, in the much-used phrase, 'available to the medieval west', requires us to look, at the very least, not just at Plato, but at Calcidius's translation of, and commentary on the *Timaeus*,[7] at the *Consolation of Philosophy*, at Bernard of Chartres's, William of Conches's and Nicholas Trevet's commentary on the same, and at the *Roman de la Rose*.[8]

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[5] Paul Edward Dutton made the case for the attribution to Bernard of Chartres of the *Glosae super Platonem* in 'The Uncovering of the *Glosae super Platonem* of Bernard of Chartres', *Mediaeval Studies* 46 (1984), 192-221, and in his subsequent edition of the commentary, the *Glosae super Platonem of Bernard of Chartres* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1991). Calcidius's translation of the *Timaeus* and commentary was edited by J. H. Waszink, *Timaeus a Calcidio translatus commentarioque instructus*, vol. IV of *Plato Latinus*, edited Raymond Klibansky (London and Leiden: Warburg Institute and Brill, 1965). E. Jeauneau edited the *Glosae super Platonem* of William of Conches (Paris: Vrin, 1965).

[6] 'In the case of the Middle Ages the *Timaeus* had become by the year 1000 a largely forgotten book. Between Boethius' death and the eleventh century, a period of some five hundred years, there had been little sustained interest in the *Timaeus*.' Dutton, *Glosae super Platonem of Bernard of Chartres*, p. 3.

[7] Édouard Jeauneau describes Calcidius's partial translation of the *Timaeus* as one of 'les grandes voies' by which ancient Greek philosophy reached the Middle Ages. 'L'héritage de la philosophie antique durant le haut Moyen Age', in *La cultura antica nell' occidente latino dal VII all'XI secolo* (Spoleto, 1975), pp. 17-54 ; 27; repr. with additions and corrections in Jeauneau, *Études érigéniennes* (Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes, 1987), pp. 133-72 ; 145. Robert D. Crouse assesses the widespread influence of Calcidius, and differentiates between the 'explicit' influence it had on William of Conches, and the 'implict' (by way of 'Platonic commonplaces') impact that it had on for example, Gilbert of Poitiers' *Expositio in Boecii de Trinitate*. Robert D. Crouse, '*Hic sensilis mundus*: Calcidius and Eriugena in Honorius Augustudensis', in From *Athens to Chartres: Neoplatonism and Medieval Thought, Studies in Honour of Édouard Jeauneau*, ed. Haijo Jan Westra (Leiden: Brill, 1992), pp. 283-288; 283. Dutton describes the place of the Calcidian *Timaeus* in the Middle Ages and echoes Jeauneau's words when he describes it as 'the central portal through which the Latin West visited the *Timaeus*, though there were side entrance-ways through Macrobius and Boethius'. Dutton, 'Medieval Approaches to Calcidius', in *Plato's Timaeus as Cultural Icon*, ed. Gretchen J. Reydams-Schils (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), pp. 183-205; 183.

[8] Dutton remarks: 'Aristotle, Theophrastus, Cicero, Plutarch, Apuleius, Porphyry, Calcidius, Proclus, Boethius, al-Fārābī, Yahyā ibn Adī, al-Rāzī, William of Conches, Petrarch, Marsilio Ficino, T.H. Martin, A.E. Taylor, Francis Cornford, and Luc Brisson:

We will look at this doxographic tradition in the course of this discussion, but let us simple-mindedly start with the *Timaeus*. The narrator, after all, refers us explicitly to Plato, not to Boethius, not to Trevet, not to Jean de Meun, and not without a good measure of awareness as to the troublesome nature of the reference – 'whoso kan hym rede'. In part, of course, this acknowledgement of the difficulty of reading Plato is itself conventional by this time, and reflects the remoteness of this *auctoritee*, by the mention of whose name, nonetheless, the audience is invited to be impressed.

In the passage which provides the remote but original source for Chaucer's quotation, Timaeus is raising the question of the origin of the created order, the world, of whether it is fashioned on that which is eternal, or on that which is already created, i.e., whether on the original or on a copy.[9] He asserts that it is unquestionably on the eternal and original that the world is based. So it is a discussion of the primary Platonic imitation, the imitation of the eternal to produce the world, that is the cue for the doxographic tradition which culminates, for our purposes, in Chaucer's apology.[10] Timaeus provides a

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the roll of those who have devoted themselves to exploring the meanings of Plato's *Timaeus* is rich, but far from closed.' *Glosae super Platonem of Bernard of Chartres*, p. 1. Rosamond McKitterick assesses the level of knowledge of the *Timaeus* in the Carolingian period in 'Knowledge of Plato's *Timaeus* in the Ninth Century: The implications of Valenciennes, Bibliothèque Municipale MS 293', in *From Athens to Chartres,* pp. 85-96. McKitterick modifies Margaret Gibson's view that the *Timaeus* was only a 'curiosity' in the Carolingian period: Margaret Gibson, 'The Study of the *Timaeus* in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries', *Pensiamento* 25 (1969), 183-194; 184. For the earlier phase of transmission, i.e. from Plato himself up to Philo, see David T. Runia, *Philo of Alexandria and the Timaeus of Plato* (Leiden: Brill, 1986), esp. pp. 38-57.

[9] *Timaeus* 27d-29a. All references to the *Timaeus* are to the dual-language edition by R. G. Bury, *Plato: Timaeus; Critias; Cleitophon; Menexenus; Epistles* (1929; repr., Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005). See Bernard of Chartres's commentary on *Timaeus* 29b: 'Continuatio. *Naturae imaginis et exempli distinguendae sunt.* Supple: per causas. Quae causae, id est quae rationes, sunt *consanguinae*, id est similes earum rerum quae sunt, quia ita est in omnibus. *Itaque.* Quia omnium rerum rationes consanguinae sunt ipsis rebus, igitur idem reperitur in ratione intelligibilis mundi. Et hoc est: *itaque constantis.*' *The Glosae super Platonem of Bernard of Chartres*, ed. P. E. Dutton (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1991), p. 162.

[10] According to Runia, Philo apparently read this final section of the *proœmium* to mean that the 'creation of the sensible cosmos' was a 'demonstration (or proof) for (the

concise statement of the Platonic ambivalence to a world whose value rests on the fact that it is based on a perfect and eternal original model, and the imperfection of which arises from its being only a copy. The world is good because it is like goodness, perishable and incomplete because it is not goodness; good in its becoming, precarious in its not being.[11]

After this part of the speech (the whole of which is the prelude, as Socrates immediately points out, to the cosmology offered by Timaeus, and delivered without interruption thereafter), Timaeus proceeds with an example of the modesty *topos*. He has already, partly at Socrates's prompting, invoked the gods,[12] and the exordium continues in apparently conventional terms, towards an apology for the limitations of the argument to follow.

It is this apology that serves as the remote model for Chaucer's apology at the outset of his grand undertaking, the *Canterbury Tales*. Timaeus, it turns out, is on his way within this speech, to defending the only partial truth of any account which seeks to deal with this world, this copy of the unchangeable original pattern:

> Now if so be that this Cosmos is beautiful and its Constructor good, it is plain that he fixed his gaze on the Eternal; but if otherwise (which is an impious supposition), his gaze was on that which has come into existence. But it is clear to everyone that his gaze was on the Eternal; for the Cosmos is the fairest of

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existence) of the intelligible cosmos'. See Runia, pp. 119. For a discussion of Philo's interpretation of the Timaean passage that deals with the epistemology of the account Timaeus is about to offer, see Runia, pp. 122-130.

[11] Not that there appears in Plato's work to be any prospect of a world which is identical with its model, or of becoming which perfectly achieves being. Socrates quotes Diotima in the *Symposium*, as she describes Eros as 'halfway between mortal and immortal'. *Symposium*, trans. Michael Joyce, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (1961; corrected edn., Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), 202d. The idea of 'metaxy', or of the in-between status of existence between the two poles of the concrete and the ideal, is described by Eric Vogelin in *Plato and Aristotle* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1957).

[12] At *Timaeus* 27c.

all that has come into existence, and He the best of all the Causes. So having in this wise come into existence, it has been constructed after the pattern of that which is apprehensible by reason and thought and is self-identical.

Again, if these premises should be granted, it is wholly necessary that this Cosmos should be a Copy of something. Now in regard to every matter it is most important to begin at the natural beginning. Accordingly, in dealing with a copy and its model, we must affirm that the accounts given will themselves be akin to the diverse objects which they serve to explain; those which deal with what is abiding and firm and discernible by the aid of thought will be abiding and unshakable; and in so far as it is possible and fitting for statements to be irrefutable and invincible, they must in no wise fall short thereof; whereas the accounts of that which is copied after the likeness of that Model, and is itself a likeness, will be analogous thereto and possess likelihood; for as Being is to Becoming, so is Truth to Belief.[13]

Four categories (in two variable sets) are outlined in this passage. Two of them are ontological (being and becoming, or *ousia* and *genesis*); the other two are both epistemological and linguistic (truth and belief or *alêtheia* and *pistis*). Timaeus sketches out four distinct relationships between the four categories, two of which relationships cut across the sets that he establishes at the outset.[14] First, he isolates the eternal, original, intelligible order of being, and puts it in

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[13] 29a-c. See A. E. Taylor's note on this passage, in which he offers the following translation for 29b 5-c 2: 'we must lay it down that discourses are akin in character to that which they expound, discourses about the permanent and stable and apprehensible by thought themselves permanent and unchanging (so far as it is possible and proper for discourses to be irrefutable and final, there must be no falling short of that –), discourses about that which is itself a likeness likely and corresponding to their objects'. Taylor, *A Commentary on Plato's Timaeus*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1928), p. 74.

[14] He does not formally enumerate these distinctions as distinctions, but moves unproblematically from one category and relationship to the next.

relationship to the created world of the copy. This is a relationship of imitation. The created world is a likeness of the original eternal. Second, he describes the relationship between the eternal original and the words (as invincible and irrefutable as words can be) that express it. Third, he describes the relationship between the created order of the copy (the world) and the words that express it (likely). Fourth, he compares the likely words that express the copy with the irrefutable words that express the eternal and intelligible order of being. After he has articulated these four relationships, he compares the ontological ratio of being to becoming with the epistemological and linguistic ratio of truth to belief.

The epistemological and generic status of Timaeus's cosmology, together with the terminology used to describe the kinds of discourses possible in the respective cases of the eternal original order of being, and the order of becoming (the copy, the world) have received a great deal of attention, to which it would be difficult to do justice here.

A brief sketch of some of the more important views might be useful though. A. E. Taylor describes Timaeus's cosmology as a myth, rather than science, on the grounds 'that it is the nearest approximation which can "provisionally" be made to exact truth'.[15] Francis M. Cornford takes issue with Taylor's view, arguing that it is 'a modernism' that arises from a belief in the possibility of 'an exact truth in physics, to which we can constantly approximate', a belief that Plato 'denies'.[16] Cornford does not object to Taylor's label of myth *per se*. He argues that there are 'indeed two senses in which the Timaeus is a 'myth' or 'story' (because 'no account of the material world can ever amount to an exact and self-consistent statement of unchangeable truth'

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[15] A. E. Taylor, *A Commentary on Plato's Timaeus*, p. 59.

[16] Francis M. Cornford*, Plato's Cosmology: the* Timaeus *of Plato* (Routledge, 1935; reprint, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1997), p. 29. A. F. Ashbaugh offers a similar view: 'Should we suppose that a divine knower would speak truly about the cosmos? Not at all. No sensible object admits knowledge in the strict sense in which intelligible things are called knowable.' A. F. Ashbaugh, *Plato's Theory of Explanation: A Study of the Cosmological Account in the Timaeus* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), p. 12.

and because the account can 'never be more than "likely", because of the changing nature of the object').[17] Cornford accepts then that the *Timaeus* deserves to be described as a myth, but he prefers to describe it as a 'poem, no less than the *De rerum natura* of Lucretius, and indeed more so in certain respects.'[18] G. E. R. Lloyd also objects to Taylor's views, on the similar grounds that 'Taylor's claim that Plato was offering merely a provisional account falls foul of the objection that an account of the physical world can, in Plato's view, under no circumstances be converted from a merely probable into a certain one'.[19]

A good deal of the discussion of the status of Timaeus's cosmology, as to whether it is myth, science, or poetry, or something else again, has centred on the kind of use made by Timaeus of the words *muthos*, *logos* and *eikos*, and their cognates.

Following on from the passage quoted above, Timaeus, partly on grounds of decorum, recommends his cosmology as being the best that can be accomplished under the circumstances of the constant state of becoming of the world which is his topic, and of his own mortality, and that of his listeners:

> Wherefore, Socrates, if in our treatment of a great host of matters regarding the Gods and the generation of the Universe we prove unable to give accounts that are always in all respects self-consistent and perfectly exact, do not thou be surprised; rather we should be content if we can furnish accounts that are inferior to none in likelihood, remembering that both I who speak and you who judge are but human creatures, so that it becomes us to accept the likely account (*eikota muthon*) of these matters and forbear to search beyond it.[20]

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[17] Cornford, p. 29.
[18] *Ibid.*
[19] G. E. R. Lloyd, *The Revolutions of Wisdom: Studies in the Claims and Practice of Ancient Greek Science* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), p. 136.
[20] *Timaeus* 29c-d.

Timaeus's choice of terms (his description of the cosmology he is about to offer as a 'likely story' or *eikota muthon*) has caused endless debate. Lloyd describes the problem as follows: 'When Plato comes to discuss the generation of the physical world, in the *Timaeus*, he refers to this repeatedly as a "likely story" εἰκὼς μῦθος but quite how we are to interpret this expression or evaluate the account we are given has been and continues to be much disputed.'[21] What meaning does *muthos* have in the context created by Timaeus, and is it used in contradistinction to *logos*?[22] After stating the problem, Lloyd goes on to argue that *muthos* and *logos* are in fact used 'indifferently' in the *Timaeus*, and 'at *Ti.* 59c-d, for instance, μῦθος and λόγος are clearly equivalent. This is not to deny that there are many figurative, as well as narrative, elements in the account for which the term μῦθος is suitable enough. These figurative elements include, for example, the relationship between the Demiurge and the lesser divine craftsmen, if not also aspects of the description of the former himself...'[23]

Kathryn Morgan, after analyzing the way in which the Atlantis myth retold by Critias just prior to Timaeus's speech, 'confronts *mythos* with *logos* and examines the means by which one may be transformed into the other', goes on to argue that the 'problematic status' of Timaeus's account is 'signalled by referring to it as a *mythos*, but there is considerable slippage between this term and *logos*'.[24] She devotes considerable time to the question of whether there is a 'consistent distinction' observed between the terms *muthos* and *logos*, and takes issue with what she considers to be Brisson's rigid differentiation between

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[21] Lloyd, p. 135.

[22] The words *muthos* and *logos* are juxtaposed by Socrates in *Timaeus* 26e, although there is the complicating factor in this passage that each word is qualified by a different modifier (the *logos* is *alêthinon* or true; the *muthos* is *plasthenta*, moulded or made). As Morgan and Lloyd argue, however, the overall 'slippage' (Morgan, p. 277) that occurs between the two words makes it difficult to sustain the view that they are being used *consistently* by Timaeus to mean different things.

[23] Lloyd, p. 136n.

[24] Kathryn Morgan, *Myth and Philosophy from the Presocractics to Plato* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 271; 277.

them.[25] She also shows that it is not only myths that are described by Timaeus as only likely or probable, but that in fact 'Vocabulary items deriving from the participial form *eikos* (probable, likely, or fitting) occur twenty-nine times. Of these instances, three qualify the word *mythos* and thirteen qualify the word *logos*'.[26]

A. F. Ashbaugh is less interested in the distinction between *muthos* and *logos*, and more in the question of how best to render *eikōs logos*.[27] Unlike the many commentators and translators who render *eikos* as 'likely' or 'probable', Ashbaugh argues that it is best translated by 'verisimilar',[28] and and argues that Timaeus's stipulation at 29b that words be akin to the objects they explain involves a 'subtle requirement' that the 'the account must share the same *archē* as the objects it explains'.[29] Her reasoning leads her to conclude that 'versimilitudes are not images of physical things, they are akin to physical things by being images. As their name suggests, they mirror truth. If verisimilitudes were images of images – i.e., images of sensible things – they would be objects of *eikasia*. As such, they could not shed light on the sensible objects because they would be mere shadows of physical things. They could exemplify but never explain phenomena. Plato, therefore, situates verisimilitude

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[25] *Ibid.*, p. 275. Morgan is referring to L. Brisson, *Platon, les mots et les myths* (Paris, 1982), pp. 162-3.

[26] *Ibid.*, p. 272. Morgan also provides citations for all of these instances.

[27] As Morgan argues, on thirteen occasions in the *Timaeus*, the word *logos* is qualified by 'vocabulary items deriving from the participial *eikos*'. Morgan, p. 272.

[28] Ashbaugh, p. 139-140n.

[29] 'Although bipartite, the soul's cognition depends primarily on the work of *nous*. Whether the soul moves from thinking to defining, or from sensing to judging, at the end of either motion, *nous* produces a *logos* to complete the activity (*Tim.* 37a-c). An account is akin to its object when it springs from the *logos* with which *nous* completes the cognition of the object. In the cosmic soul this kinship readily obtains. Both when the soul senses and when it thinks, the whole soul is stirred (resembling the vibrations of a monochord) and it tells (*legein*) "what the object is identical with and from what it differs, and in what relation, where and how and when, it happens that each thing exists and is acted upon by others..." (*Tim.* 37a-b). What the cosmic soul tells amounts to a complete explanation of the object. In the case of the human soul, on the other hand, there seems to be a time-lag (a time for recollection) between cognition and explanation. That delay notwithstanding, the recollected *logos* was born with the cognition (*Tim.* 37a-c; *Theaet.* 206c-209c; *Soph.* 252e)'. Ashbaugh, pp. 11-12.

above sensation to function as a light to illume, not a figure to illustrate, the being of the cosmos. Since they are images of truth – i.e., of intelligible objects – yet treat sensations, verisimilitudes are objects of *dianoia*. Whatever else it is, the Timaean cosmology is not, strictly speaking, poetry. Verisimilitude follows *noēsis*'.[30]

Ashbaugh's argument brings us back to the four categories, and the interrelationships between them, that are deftly set out in Timaeus's preamble to his cosmology at *Timaeus* 29b-d. As we have seen, the world is a copy of the eternal order of being (a relationship of imitation, of likeness). There are two orders of discourse, one invincible and irrefutable that expresses the original and eternal order of being, and one that expresses the copy, the world, and is possessed only of likelihood or probability (or verisimilitude, if we follow Ashbaugh's thinking). There is though, the further interrelationship, that exists *between* the two different kinds of discourse. This is a relationship that possesses the same proportions as the relationship of likeness and imitation that exists between being and becoming, or between the eternal and original model, and the copy that is the world: 'as Being is to Becoming, so is Truth to Belief' (29c). Thus Timaeus starts out with the question of the relationship of the model (Being itself) to the world (the copy, becoming), and ends with the relationship between the robust and invincible words used to describe the one, and the probable or likely words that describe the other. He says: 'But when [words] express only the copy or likeness and not the eternal things themselves, they need only be likely and analogous to the former words' (29c). This leaves us less in the ontological territory where Timaeus began, and more in the linguistic and epistemological dimension.

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[30] Ashbaugh, pp. 13-14. C. Osborne makes a comparable argument, quoted approvingly by Morgan (p.278n) saying that Timaeus uses language 'not as a pictorial imitation of the particular reality of the sensible world but as a world with a meaning of its own, structured to match the world of the senses'. C. Osborne, 'Space, time, shape, and direction: creative discourse in the Timaeus', in Gill and McCabe, eds., *Form and Argument in Late Plato* (Oxford, 1996), pp. 179-211; 208.

This last point is worth considering, not least because of the use made of this Platonic passage by various writers from Boethius to Jean de Meun to Chaucer, which use tends to emphasise the epistemological, rhetorical, and linguistic implications of Timaeus's speech, as opposed to its ontological and metaphysical qualities. The relationship of analogy and likelihood with which Timaeus concludes his preamble is that which exists between the truthful discourse that describes the intelligible and unchanging order, and the likely story or *eikota muthon* that describes the world.[31] In spite, then, of the tortured and partial nature of the transmission of Plato's work in the Middle Ages, and the amputated form in which this passage from the *Timaeus* tended to crop up in medieval literary works, the epistemological and linguistic emphasis to which Timaeus's preamble builds, is to some extent honoured, however accidentally, in the much later quotations and references to it. As we shall see, the apology in the 'General Prologue' is concerned, in spite of the nomenclature of word and deed, with the relationship between secondary (reported, rehearsed) words and primary (spoken) ones.

Dante's magpie

Dante makes the distinction, close to the beginning of *De vulgari eloquentia*, between signifiers in their sheer materiality, and signs imbued with meaning, presence and intention.[32] His remarks come at the end of a section in

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[31] Although, as we have seen, Timaeus by no means exclusively uses the word *muthos* to describe his account of the world, and in fact many times deploys instead *logos* or its cognates.

[32] Dante Alighieri, *De vulgari eloquentia*, ed. and trans. Steven Botterill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), Book I, ii (all references are to this edition and translation). I am not suggesting that *De vulgari eloquentia* was known by Chaucer (the number and circulation of extant manuscripts suggests otherwise). John Lerner writes that 'the manuscript tradition of both the *Convivio* and the *De Vulgari Eloquentia* suggest that neither work was well known in the fourteenth century'. Lerner, 'Chaucer's Italy', in *Chaucer and the Italian Trecento*, ed. Piero Boitani (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 7-32; 21. But, quite apart from the fact that Chaucer knew and imitated other works of Dante's, including arguably, the partly theoretical *Convivio*, the

which he demonstrates that speech (*locutio*) is unnecessary both for angels and animals. Angels do not require speech because of their 'sufficiency of intellect by which one of them is known in all respects to another, either of himself, or at least by means of that most brilliant mirror in which all of them are represented in the fullness of their beauty'. Individual animals of the one species have no need of speech because they are united in mutual knowledge of each other by virtue of 'natural instinct alone'. Speech between species is both unnecessary and harmful, the latter because 'there would have been no friendly intercourse between them'. Dante doesn't leave things there, though. He continues to refute various possible objections to his theory, including one that might arise from a reading of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*:

> But if any one should argue in opposition, from what Ovid says in the fifth book of the *Metamorphoses* about magpies speaking, we reply that he says this figuratively, meaning something else. And if anyone should rejoin that even up to the present time magpies and other birds speak, we say that it is false, because such action is not speaking, but a kind of imitation of the sound of our voice, or in other words, we say that they try to imitate us in so far as we utter sounds, but not in so far as we speak. If accordingly any one of us were to say expressly 'Pica' and 'Pica' were answered back, this would be but a copy or imitation of the sound made by him who had first said the word.[33]

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theoretical views of one of the greatest and most influential medieval poets, can at least be said to be part of the picture of literary theory in this period.

[33] *Ibid*. Dante is quite correct when he says that Ovid is speaking figuratively here (*Metamorphoses*, Book V, 294ff.), and is not dealing with the capacity of animals to speak. The magpies in question are the arrogant nine daughters of Pierus, who dared to compete in eloquence with the Muses, and upon losing, dared to insult them, and were transformed as a punishment. Their human power of speech remained with them after their transformation.

Dante has earlier described the process of the acquisition of the vernacular language as a natural (*sine omni regula*) one of imitation (*imitantes*).[34] He compares this easy and unregulated process, which occurs on the laps of nurses, with the Latin grammar, acquired by means of 'assiduous study' and much time. However, when he comes to the magpies, he speaks pejoratively of mere imitation as insufficient for the production of meaning, even of speech. So, for Dante, the material signifier can be reproduced exactly, *without producing any meaning whatsoever*. Although Dante is talking here only of meaningless oral reproduction, his point is reminiscent of the passage in *Phaedrus*, where Socrates disparages the reproduction involved in the writing process, and where separation from the intending, meaning-producing mind of the speaker, condemns the written reproduction to empty but harmful dissemination.[35]

Having established that 'speech has been given to man alone', Dante continues in the next section to spell out the metaphysical underpinnings of his theory of human language. Unlike animals, humans are moved by reason, rather than collective instinct.[36] The absence of this instinct leads to the inability of one man to understand another 'by means of his own actions or passions'. In

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Rousseau's *Essay on the Origin of Languages*, according to Derrida, similarly distinguishes between the non-speaking animal and the speaking human. But whereas Dante, in his comparison of non-speaking animals and angels to speaking humans, places the angels in the realm of the gaze, Derrida, following Rousseau, places animals there: 'The difference between the glance and the voice is the difference between animality and humanity.' *On Grammatology*, p. 195.

[34] *De vulgari*, I, i.

[35] Like the dangerous poets judged so harshly by Socrates in the *Republic*, at, for example, 377e- 391e (his reservations are echoed with an interesting nuance by Macrobius in chapter 2.11 of his *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*) the nine daughters of Pierus tell stories that damage the prestige of the gods.

[36] Cf. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine,* II.2. *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. J. F. Shaw, in *Saint Augustin: The City of God and On Christian Doctrine*, vol. 2 of *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series One, ed. Philip Schaff *et al.* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1887; repr. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1956).

other words, a man cannot generalize from his own case, since another man might think or do differently, free, as they both are, from a set pattern of behaviour dictated by a common instinct. And unlike the angels, man cannot simply gaze into the soul of his fellow man, because 'the human spirit is held back by the grossness and opacity of its mortal body'. Having neither the companionability produced by instinct and commonality, nor that produced by freedom from physicality, mankind therefore needs 'some sign, at once rational and sensible, for the intercommunication of its thoughts, because the sign, having to receive something from the reason of one and to convey it to the reason of another, had to be rational; and since nothing can be conveyed from one reason to another except through a medium of sense, it had to be sensible; for, were it only rational, it could not pass; and were it only sensible it would neither have been able to take from the reason of one nor to deposit it in that of another.'[37]

Whether this theory pertains to the pre- or post-lapsarian situation is rather hard to say. In the next section Dante sets aside what he says is the written evidence that Eve spoke first (to the serpent, in response to his question), and argues instead that it must have been Adam who did so, in praise of God, rather than in response to Satan.[38] On the one hand, therefore, it is the incarceration of the human spirit in the 'grossness and opacity' of the mortal body that necessitates the kind of sign that marries rational sense with material signifier. On the other, the first utterance was a pre-lapsarian, innocent expression of joyful praise: 'For as since the transgression of the human race, every one begins his first attempt at speech with a cry of woe, it is reasonable

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[37] *De vulgari*, I.iii, and cf. Augustine's foundational discussion of signs in Book II of *On Christian Doctrine*.

[38] There are many precedents for this belief that Adam rather than Eve talked with God before the Fall. Dante's account is interesting in part because of the attention he draws to his decision to override scriptural evidence to the contrary. Eric Jager discusses Ambrose's description of Adam as God's 'conversational intimate' (in *Epistola* 45.16; *PL* 16:1144) and his view that Eve only learned of God's command from Adam, and not directly from God Himself (*De Paradiso* 12.54). Eric Jager, *The Tempter's Voice*, pp. 28-29. Jager goes on to discuss Augustine's argument that Eve 'despised' God's word. *Ibid.*, p. 37.

that he who existed before that transgression should begin with joy; and since there is no joy without God, but all joy is in God, and God himself is wholly joy, it follows that the first speaker said first and before anything else "God"'.[39] Having articulated a theory of signification based on what seems to be a post-lapsarian view of the gross and opaque physicality of man as an obstacle to pure, wordless mutual knowledge, Dante then presents this idyllic Edenic situation in which God and his creature relate to each other in a cycle of life-giving and praise-giving. In the following section, Dante describes how, upon receiving the breath of life from God, the first man directed his speech first of all to the Lord himself, in a spontaneous reciprocal utterance. What we might call the last section in the treatise's foundational treatment of language (after which Dante moves on to more particular, technical matters that occupy the rest of Book I, such as dialectal differences) deals with the fragmentation of human speech that came about in the aftermath of the building of the Tower of Babel.

The sequence of Dante's arguments in the first six sections of Book I is worth looking at, because it appears to confound and complicate the questions both of the origin and purpose of human speech. To summarise, first, Dante describes the wholly human and practical situation whereby infants learn the vernacular from their nurses, and then go on to be educated formally in Latin and grammar. Next, he differentiates between angelic, animal, and human signifying. Third, he offers a theory of human signifying in which a material signifier carries an immaterial signified, and bases this theory on the ontological grounds that man is a similar composite of spirit and 'gross' and 'opaque' matter. Fourth, he describes the Edenic situation in which man spoke his first word in joyful acknowledgement of his maker. Next, in the fifth section, he describes the cycle of reciprocal giving that exists between God and his creature, in which man is first inspired, vivified by God's breath, and then, without hesitation, spontaneously speaks to God, 'in order that, in the unfolding

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[39] *Ibid.*, iv.

of so great a gift, he himself who had freely bestowed it might glory.'[40] Having

wrested the scene of man's first word away from the circumstances of Satanic

temptation in which Dante concedes it is placed in the Bible,[41] and having

instead invented an idyllic one-to-one context of God and man as the occasion

for the first utterance, Dante effectively postpones the moment of linguistic

contamination, if not of the Fall itself, until the episode of the Tower of Babel.[42]

In the course of only a few pages, Dante constructs several variations on

a theme, and goes so far as to tamper with what he regards as the Biblical

chronology of the origin of speech.[43] He produces three originary linguistic

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[40] *Ibid.*, v. Dante's account of this relationship, whereby God inspires the first man, who then reciprocates by using that same originally divine breath to glorify his maker, appears to partake of the Platonic rhythm of *exitus* and *reditus* that characterises Chaucer's dispatch of his 'litel bok' at the end of *Troilus*.

[41] Dante overrides what he says is the Biblical evidence that Eve spoke first, and to the devil, as follows: 'Now, according to what we read in the beginning of Genesis, where the most sacred Scripture is treating of the origin of the world, we find that a woman spoke before all others, I mean that most presumptuous Eve, when in answer to the inquiry of the devil, she said, "We eat of the fruit of the trees which are in Paradise, but of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of Paradise God has commanded us not to eat, nor to touch it, lest peradventure we die." But though we find it written that the woman spoke first, it is, however, reasonable for us to suppose that the man spoke first; and it is unseemly to think that so excellent an act of the human race proceeded even earlier from woman than from man. We therefore reasonably believe that speech was given to Adam first by him who had just formed him.' *Ibid.*, iv.

[42] Although in section VII he characterises mankind as shamelessly recidivist: 'Did it suffice for thy correction that, deprived of light through thy first transgression, thou wast banished from thy delightful native land? Did it suffice, did it suffice that through the universal lust and cruelty of thy family, one house alone excepted, whatsoever was subject to thee had perished in the Flood, and that the animals of earth and air had already been punished for what thou hadst committed?' Eric Jager remarks on the discrepancy between *De vulgari* and the *Paradiso* on this question of the duration of the survival of the first speech, pointing out that in the former 'Dante holds that Adam's language survived after Babel in the speech of the Israelites', while in the *Paradiso* (26.124-29), 'Adam states that his language disappeared even before Babel, as a result of natural change and human fallibility.' *The Tempter's Voice: Language and the Fall in Medieval Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 55.

[43] The Vulgate text of Genesis 3:2-3, while it does give the first direct speech to Eve, in the form of her response to the serpent ('cui respondit mulier
de fructu lignorum quae sunt in paradiso vescemur
de fructu vero ligni quod est in medio paradisi

scenes: first, the practical scene of child and nurse that explains the beginnings
of speech in the individual and, by extension, in any group of people; second,
the ontological scene in which human language was brought into being in
conformity with the nature of man; and third, the idyllic scene in which man
first acknowledges God with a simple, joyful declaration of his name. A fourth
kind of origin, the disenchanted origin of linguistic difference, and thereby of
the world's many vernaculars, is located in the aftermath of the Babel episode.[44]

Dante also displays ambivalence as to the relative values of the
vernacular and Latin (the language in which the treatise is written). On the one
hand, he celebrates the vernacular, comparing it favourably to the 'secondary'
grammar and Latin that is taught at school, because it is natural, unregulated,
God-given. On the other, the vernaculars of Dante's day arose out of mankind's
sin of pride at Babel, and they display the variousness that confuses men, and
that makes communication across the lines of languages impossible. At this
point it is the vernacular, rather than Latin, that is stained with secondariness,
because it comes in the wake of the loss of the first vernacular, and coincides
with the dispersal and break-up of an original unity. In the second book of the
treatise, he sets out to try to impose some Latin-style standardization on the
vernacular situation, and to choose a particular vernacular (his own) for the
communication to posterity of his own genius.[45] The opening contradictions as

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praecepit nobis Deus ne comederemus et ne tangeremus illud ne forte moriamur'),
nonetheless has previously (2:19-20) already attributed the naming of the animals to
Adam, albeit not in the form of direct speech: 'formatis igitur Dominus Deus de humo
cunctis animantibus terrae et universis volatilibus caeli
adduxit ea ad Adam ut videret quid vocaret ea
omne enim quod vocavit Adam animae viventis ipsum est nomen eius appellavitque
Adam nominibus suis cuncta animantia
et universa volatilia caeli et omnes bestias terrae
Adam vero non inveniebatur adiutor similis eius'. All references to the Vulgate are to
Robert Weber's edition, *Biblia Sacra Iuxta Vulgatam Versionem* (1969; rev., Stuttgart:
Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994).
[44] On Babel and linguistic change, see Jager, *The Tempter's Voice*, pp. 1-2, 34, 55 & 58.
[45] Barański writes: 'The poet's desire to transcend Italy's dialectical fragmentation was,
in part, born from the experience of his exile. It was expressed as a desire for linguistic
unity to counter both the country's political factionalism and the widespread external

to the origins of speech serve as a basis for Dante's return, having 'levelled' or democratized human speech by preferring the people's vernacular to the academic Latin, to the project of choosing one superior vernacular, which he then ennobles by means of the terms '*illustre*' (illustrious), '*cardinale*' (cardinal), '*aulicum*' (courtly) and '*curiale*' (curial). This prince of vernaculars is implicitly comparable then, both to the first perfect vernacular given by God to man (and returned in the form of prayer to God by man in his first utterance), and to the language spoken by Christ Himself.[46]

Reason's defense of proper speaking

The apology in the 'General Prologue' is indebted to Jean de Meun in a number of ways: first, it is possible, although some scholars have argued for the greater influence on Chaucer's *Boece* of Trevet's Boethius commentary,[47] that Chaucer's word *cosyn* is an echo of Jean de Meun's *cousinez* from the latter's translation of the *Consolatione*;[48] second, and more definitely, the apology

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interference in its affairs...' *Cambridge History of Literary Criticism: The Middle Ages*, p. 570.

[46] Dante appears to assume that Christ spoke Hebrew, an opinion that is not confirmed by any of the evidence on this subject. He writes: 'Hac forma locutionis locutus est Adam; hac forma locutionis locuti sunt omnes posteri eius usque ad edificationem turris Babel, que "turris confusionis" interpretatur; hanc formam locutionis hereditati sunt filii Heber, qui ab eo dicti sunt Hebrei. Hiis solis post confusionem remansit, ut Redemptor noster, qui ex illis oriturus erat secundum humanitatem, non lingua confusionis, sed gratie frueretur. Fuit ergo hebraicum ydioma illud quod primi loquentis labia fabricarunt.' *De vulgari*, VI.

[47] See especially E. T. Silk, *Cambridge MS. Ii.3.21 and the relation of Chaucer's Boethius to Trevet and Jean de Meung* (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Yale, 1930). More recently though, scholars such as A. J. Minnis, Ralph Hanna III, Traugott Lawler, Mark Gleason, Tim William Machan (at Minnis's count), have argued that Chaucer's *Boece* is 'heavily indebted to Jean de Meun's *Li Livres de Confort*'. A. J. Minnis, 'Chaucer's Commentator: Nicholas Trevet and the Boece', in *Chaucer's Boece and the Medieval Tradition of Boethius*, ed. A. J. Minnis (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1993), p. 85.

[48] 'Mais de nous avons demené raisons non mie prisez dehors l'avironnement de la chose que nous trections, mais misez dedens, il n'I a riens pour quoy tu te doies merveillier, comme tu aies apris par la sentence de Platon qu'il couvient que les paroles soient cousinez auz chosez dont il parlent.' Jean de Meun, *Li Livres de Confort de Philosophie*

appears to be influenced by Reason's disquisition in the *Roman* on 'proper speaking' at 7063-7184; third, it echoes Amant's apology at 15129-15242.[49] Jean de Meun's involvement in the transmission of Timaeus's defense of his 'likely story', itself depends upon an earlier vital stage in that process, and that is Boethius's citation of the Platonic passage in Book III, prosa xii of the *Consolatione*. There we see the adaptation of the Platonic collocation of idea and word to a new purpose: Philosophy's defense of her reliance, in her account of the Divine governance of the world, on purely rational argumentation, and her corresponding independence of new extraneous data or *exempla*:[50]

III. Prose. Xii., 99-103 in V. L. Dedeck-Héry, 'Boethius' *De Consolatione* by Jean de Meun', *Medieval Studies* 14 (1952), 165-275; 231-2. Where Jean de Meun has *cousinez*, Trevet's commentary has *consentaneos*, Boethius *cognatos*, Calcidius *consanguinae*, and Plato *sungeneis*. E. T. Silk, however, takes issue with the view that Chaucer much relied, in the preparation of his own *Boece*, upon Jean de Meun's translation of the *Consolatione*, arguing that Chaucer was 'greatly dependent upon the commentary of Nicolas Trivet and not, as often has been supposed, upon the translation of Jean de Meung. The signs of Chaucer's indebtedness to Trivet and of his independence of Jean de Meung are apparent throughout his translation. An interesting confirmation of Chaucer's relation to Trivet is afforded by the Cambridge University Library MS. Ii.3.21.' Silk, p. 1 (see also pp. 7, 27, 36 and 61). Minnis considers that Chaucer drew 'sporadically' from Trevet's commentary. Minnis, *Magister Amoris: The* Roman de la Rose *and Vernacular Hermeneutics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 129.
Minnis tentatively allows for the possibility that Chaucer's *cosyn* drew upon Jean de Meun's *cousinez*: 'Indeed, Trevet's glosses 'consentaneas'/ 'consentaneos', 'proprios' and 'rei de qua loquimur' could lie behind Chaucer's phrasing 'cosyn' and 'proprely a thyng', although the case for the influence of Jean de Meun's 'cousinez' may also be made.' *Magister Amoris*, p. 130. See also V. L. Dedeck-Héry himself: 'Cependant le problème n'est pas résolu et Trivet n'est pas le seul commentateur que Chaucer ait pu consulter.' Dedeck- Héry, 'Jean de Meun et Chaucer, Traducteurs de la Consolatione de Boèce', *PMLA* 52 (1937), 967-991; 972.
[49] There is a good literature on the subject of Chaucer's indebtedness for the apology to Jean de Meun. See especially Minnis, *Magister Amoris,* pp. 119-163; P. B. Taylor, 'Chaucer's Cosyn to the Dede', *Speculum* 57.2 (1982), 315-27; esp. 321-3;
[50] Minnis takes the different view, however, that Trevet's commentary on this passage, on which 'Chaucer had drawn sporadically in the course of his translation of the *Consolatio*', asserts 'that here Plato is excusing himself for offering not rational demonstrations but assertions which are consonant with the thing or subject ("assertiones magis esse rei de qua loquimir consentaneos")'. *Magister Amoris*, p. 129.

If we have been dealing with arguments not sought from without but within the bounds of the matter we have been discussing, there is no reason for you to be surprised. You have learnt on the authority of Plato that we must use language akin to the subject matter of our discourse.[51]

Her remarks are in part a response to Boethius's worry that Lady Philosophy is 'playing' with him, and his description of her method as one independent of 'external' evidence:

You are playing with me, aren't you, by weaving a labyrinth of arguments from which I can't find the way out. At one moment you go in where you'll come out, and at another you come out where you went in. Or are you creating a wonderful circle of divine simplicity? Just now you began with happiness and said it was the highest good, and you said it was to be found in God. Then you began arguing that God Himself was also the supreme good and perfect happiness and added as a kind of bonus that no one could be happy unless he was also divine. You said that the very form of the good was identical with the substance of God and of happiness. And you taught us that unity itself was the same as the good, because all things had a natural inclination to it. Then you argued that God rules the universe by the helm of goodness, that all things obey willingly, and that evil is nothing. All of which you unfolded without the help of any external aid,

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[51] 'Quodsi rationes quoque non extra petitas sed intra rei quam tractabamus ambitum collocatas agitauimus, nihil est quod ammirere, cum Platone sanciente didiceris cognatos de quibus loquuntur rebus oportere esse sermones'. *De Consolatio Philosophiae*, Book III, prosa xii, 38. Quotations are from G. Weinberger's text of the *Consolatio* (Vienna, 1935), vol 67 of the *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum*. Translation in V. E. Watts, *The Consolation of Philosophy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969).

but with one internal proof grafted upon another so that each
drew its credibility from that which preceded.'[52]

Boethius's account of Philosophy's method, an account with which she appears
to concur, describes quite neatly Socratic reasoning. The discussion, moreover,
involves a philosophical account of divine governance, and so requires no
myths, no fabulous narratives, no integuments, no allegory (there is though,
figurative language throughout, as for example, in Boethius's metaphor of the
labyrinth). This question of *what it is* that Boethius's Platonic citation actually
serves to support is a vital one. It is, however, hard to answer without first
considering the nature of Timaeus's original topic. P. B. Taylor draws the
Boethian topic and the Platonic together, when, having quoted *Timaeus* 29b
('Accordingly, in dealing with a copy and its model, we must affirm that the
accounts given will themselves be akin to the diverse objects which they serve
to explain'), as the source for Boethius's citation goes on as follows:

> The 'accounts' referred to are myths, and the point is well made
> in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, also influenced by the *Timaeus*, when
> Raphael explains to Adam the difficulties in describing human
> speech, to one of limited experience and knowledge, the origins
> of this world. Raphael explains that in order to do so he must
> make a concession:

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[52] 'Ludisne, inquam, me inextricabilem labyrinthum rationibus texens, quae nunc quidem
qua egrediaris introeas, nunc uero quo introieris egrediare, an mirabilem quendam
diuinae simplicitatis orbem complicas? 31 Etenim paulo ante beatitudine incipiens eam
summum bonum esse dicebas, quam in summo deo sitam loquebare. 32 Ipsum quoque
deum summum esse bonum plenamque beatitudinem disserebas, ex quo neminem beatum
fore nisi qui pariter deus esset quasi munusculum dabas. 33 Rursus ipsam boni formam
dei ac beatitudinis loquebaris esse substantiam ipsumque unum id ipsum esse bonum
docebas quod ab omni rerum natura peteretur. 34 Deum quoque bonitatis gubernaculis
uniuersitatem regere disputabas uolentiaque cuncta parere nec ullam mali esse naturam.
35 Atque haec nullis extrinsecus sumptis, sed ex altero [altero] fidem trahente insitis
domesticisque probationibus explicabas'. Book III, prosa xii, 30-35.

What surmounts the reach

Of human sense, I shall delineate so,

By likening spiritual to corporeal forms. (5.571-73)[53]

Rather strangely, though, given the detailed nature of the rest of his discussion, Taylor appears not to consider that Timaeus is talking, not about one species of accounts, but two. While Taylor may well be right to describe the accounts indiscriminately as 'myths' (although, as we have seen above, a distinction between the terms *muthos* and *logos* in the dialogue is sometimes observed, and sometimes elided), nonetheless, the whole point of Timaeus's discussion at this stage is to differentiate between two ontological levels, and two corresponding levels of discourse. Moreover, although Timaeus is talking about two levels or species of discourse, he refers fleetingly to a third.

This third kind of discourse corresponds to the highest ontological level, which itself is genuinely beyond human intellection. Timaeus refers to it when he remarks at 28c: 'But the father and maker of this universe is past finding out, and even if we found him, to tell of him to all men would be impossible.' The various oblique and reticent Platonic hierarchical references to this kind of ontological vanishing-point were formalized and systematized by neo-Platonists such as Plotinus and later Proclus, and clearly influenced the kind of 'negative' theology of the pseudo-Dionysian tradition. It is to some such unreachable realm that Macrobius refers when he confirms what he says is the philosophers' prohibition on the use of 'fabulous narratives' to describe 'the Highest and Supreme of all gods, called by the Greeks the Good and the First Cause, or to treat of the Mind or Intellect, which the Greeks call *nous*, born from and originating in the Supreme God and embracing the original concepts of things, which are called Ideas, when, I repeat, philosophers speak about these, they

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[53] P. B. Taylor, 'Chaucer's *Cosyn to the Dede*', *Speculum* 57.2 (1982), pp. 315-27; 323. See also Mark Pelen, 'Chaucer's "Cosyn to the dede": Further Considerations', *Florilegium* 19 (2002), pp. 91-107.

shun the use of fabulous narratives.'[54] Questions of the identity of *nous* and the
Ideas, and the extent to which Plato, as opposed to his neoplatonist interpreters,
believed that knowledge of the forms is available to human intellection, are too
large for the present discussion. What is directly relevant though, is
Macrobius's argument that there is a level of reality that cannot be expressed
through the use of fabulous narratives, and that is 'impossible for the human
mind to grasp'.[55] The resistance of this highest level to verbalization or even
thinking necessitates the use of what Macrobius calls 'similes and analogies'.
As an example, Macrobius cites Plato's casting of the Good as the sun.[56] So
how apt is Taylor's comparison of what Timaeus is doing with what Milton's
Raphael is doing? Raphael's topic is the struggle between the angels and God;
i.e. as he says, he is discussing another world, albeit one of which this mortal
world may be a shadow. Timaeus, however, and the range of references to the
Timaeus throughout the Middle Ages demonstrate this, is describing this
world.[57] He is offering a cosmogony of this physical world, where Raphael is

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[54] Macrobius, *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, trans. W. H. Stahl (1952; repr. New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), II.14 (p. 86).
[55] *Ibid.*
[56] *Ibid.*, II.15.
[57] The central importance of the doctrine of *forma natiuae* in the commentary on the *Timaeus* of Bernard of Chartres (whom Dutton describes as one of the two, the other being Bernard's student, William of Conches, 'most influential medieval commentators on the *Timaeus*') is suggestive of the way in which the *Timaeus* was read as dealing first and foremost with the natural world, even if a full explanation by a Christian expositor of a Platonic text, must also and necessarily refer to the creator of that order. The *forma natiuae* are the intermediary forms, not to be confused with the immutable ideas or forms which exist independently of this world in the mind of God, which come into matter to form things. They are, in Dutton's words, 'the images of the exemplars or ideas' and are 'created together with individual things by nature', 'The Uncovering', p. 215. Dutton argues that the doctrine of the *forma natiuae* in fact 'assumes a predominant importance' in Bernard's commentary (*ibid.*, p. 216), and he connects the fact of the importance of the *forma natiuae* to Bernard with the larger twelfth-century Chartrian project, probably instigated by Bernard, of an attempt to reconcile a naturalist Aristotle and a mystical Plato (*ibid.*, pp.217-18). Lodi Nauta, writing about William of Conches's commentary on Boethius, argues that the *Timaeus* played an important part in 'the interest in and self-confidence about nature and the rational approach with which the natural world began to be explained in the late eleventh century', and that William's commentary 'underscores this role' played by the *Timaeus*. Lodi Nauta, *William of Conches and the Tradition of*

offering a glimpse into another dimension. Raphael goes on to tell of the conflict in the heavens between the angels and God, and on the one hand, as Taylor observes, he says that language is inadequate to his topic, but on the other, he suggests that this world is perhaps a shadow of the next, and that in this way, human language might serve to give expression to it. This topic has been developing momentum throughout Book V of *Paradise Lost*. The idea of the body as a stepping stone to the spirit, of reason as the substance of soul, of this world as a passage to the next recurs throughout Raphael's speech. But is the object of Timaeus's discourse comparable to that of Raphael? Jeffrey Hirshberg assumes a position similar to that of Taylor when he writes:

> Rational discourse, said Timaeus, though capable of apprehending and expressing eternal truths, cannot do so directly. The immediate referent of such discourse must be this world. Yet this world is a microcosmic image of the eternal order. Insofar as words accurately and literally represent this world, then they, too, may become images – the word, we recall, is Chalcidius's – of eternal verities.[58]

Peter Dronke provides numerous kinds of illustration for the view that the *imago*, and the *fabula*, can provide access to truth, and to an understanding of an order of being beyond the world of sense. In his discussion of William of Conches's development of Macrobius's distinction between the two kinds of discourse, Dronke writes of William's finding in the Latin Calcidian *Timaeus*, that 'because we have only the image (*imago*) of the physical universe to go by, and not the archetype (*exemplum*) in the divine mind, we cannot offer an

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Boethius' Consolatio Philosophiae: an Edition of his Glosae super Boetium and Studies of the Latin Commentary Tradition (Rijksuniversiteit Groningen Ph.D. thesis, 1999), p. lxxiv.

[58] Jeffrey Hirshberg, *"Cosyn to the Dede:" The* Canterbury Tales *and the Platonic Tradition in Medieval Rhetoric* (unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1977), pp. 362-3. Hirshberg's point bears comparison with that made by Ashbaugh (see discussion above).

account of the creator and his creation of the cosmos which would be consistent, evident and unassailable (*ratio constans perspicuaque et inexpugnabilis*). The best we can hope for is "an imagined account, as of an image, the semblance of an account, borrowing an inexact likeness" (*utpote imaginis imaginaria, simulacrumque rationis, perfunctoriam similitudinem mutuatur*).'[59] The point of view that this world is the shadow or *imago* of a higher reality, and that we can only understand that higher reality in terms of this world, is unarguably pivotal to the entire Middle Ages.[60] The question for our purposes is *whether it is* this important point of view that is given expression, first, by Timaeus, second, by Boethius's citation of Timaeus, and third, by the various commentators and poets that transmitted the Timaean perspective to Chaucer.

In his comparison of the Miltonic and Platonic passages, Taylor suggests that Raphael and Timaeus are doing similar things, i.e. that they are trying to express supramundane realities in mundane forms. But in fact, while Raphael does appear to be doing just this – he is, after all, relating to humans, in human language, the story of the struggle of the angels with God – Timaeus is expressly talking *not* about the higher realities, the supramundane pattern, or archetype, but about the world itself, on its own terms. It is certainly possible, and defensible, for a commentator on the *Timaeus* to choose to emphasise the extent to which Timaeus believed that this world is shaped upon the eternal pattern, for Timaeus makes this belief of his clear at a number of points. However, the underlying assumptions of the *Timaeus* to one side, the cosmology as a whole is just that, a *cosmology*, and this is (largely) how it was

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[59] Peter Dronke, *Fabula: Explorations into the uses of Myth in Medieval Platonism* (Leiden: Brill, 1974), p. 33.

[60] Dronke is careful to point out, though, that there is only *one* order of cognition: 'Plato does not think he can set the knowledge striven for by way of the *imago* or *simulacrum* against a loftier sort, one that works by analogies but leaves images behind. For to him the *imago* is no lesser thing, no mere effigy: it is the very condition of human knowledge. In William's words, paraphrasing Plato: "this world is called simulacrum of the divine wisdom… and thus the world is image of the divine wisdom."' Dronke, p. 34.

seen in the Middle Ages.[61] Timaeus sets aside the kind of discourse that he says is reserved for treating higher matters, and at several points distinguishes his own account from these more certain and invincible discourses pertaining to the original and eternal pattern. What kind of language would be involved in these higher-level accounts, such as those that would deal with the eternal archetype rather than the world, he does not specify. But perhaps we can extrapolate, if not from Timaeus's own views, then from Plato's as expressed elsewhere, as to what such a discourse might involve. At several places across the dialogues, Plato does deal with the highest matters, as for instance, when he considers the relationship between this world and the world of ideas or forms. To explain this ontological hierarchy, he uses at one point in the *Republic* the famous imagery of the three different kinds of couch. At another point in the same dialogue, in order to represent the human condition in relation to truth and reality, he employs the imagery of sun and shadow, as for example in the allegory of the cave. Where Macrobius approves of this Platonic use of 'similes' and 'analogies', when they are used in the service of the highest reality, Aquinas

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[61] Although the modern ambivalence which comes across in the fact that Timaeus's achievement is described sometimes as a *cosmology* (an account of the world), as in Cornford's title, and sometimes as a *cosmogony* (an account of the origins of the world), itself expresses the difficulty in classifying science *avant la lettre*. Kathryn Morgan, amongst others, differentiates between the myth of the *Timaeus* and that of the middle dialogues, arguing that the 'standard of scientific probability is paramount for Timaios, and the systematic scientific elaboration of the myth does mark a progression from the narrative elaboration of the middle dialogues, where the myths drew on a mixture of ethical presuppositions and logical argumentation.' Morgan, p. 277. She does not neglect to point out, though, that Timaeus's own 'narrative premises' are 'based upon ethical and religious criteria' (*Ibid.*). Vivian Boland, in his study of the hellenisation of Aquinas's thought, describes the *Timaeus* as 'an account of the making of the universe', thus emphasising that aspect of the *Timaeus* which deals with creation, rather than the created order itself. Boland, *Ideas in God according to Saint Thomas Aquinas* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), p. 17. P. E. Dutton provides an account of the place of the Calcidian *Timaeus* in the Middle Ages as a whole in 'Medieval Approaches to Calcidius', in *Plato's Timaeus as Cultural Icon*, ed. Gretchen J. Reydams-Schils (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), pp. 183-205. A. E. Taylor describes Timaeus's 'lecture' as covering 'the whole ground of natural knowledge from astronomy to pathology and psychophysics'. Taylor, *Plato: The Man and his Work* (London: Methuen, 1960), p. 440.

treats the subject of the use of metaphor to refer to God rather more cautiously.[62]

But the *Timaeus* itself, although it both employs myths and reflects upon their function, value and capacity for embodying truth,[63] is to a greater degree than other Platonic dialogues dedicated to the description of natural, physical phenomena themselves, rather than to the archetype of which they are the image. It may well be, from both a Platonic and a medieval perspective, that the dignity of this world was seen to repose in the fact that it is made in the image of the eternal paradigm, but it is clear that Timaeus deliberately demarcates both his subject-matter and his method, drawing a distinction between the eternal pattern and the world, and between an invincible discourse suitable for the highest level of reality and thought, and a worldly discourse suitable for the description of the world.

The overlap between cosmogony and cosmology in the *Timaeus* is to some extent present also in that section of the *Consolatione* in which Boethius cites the passage from the *Timaeus*, although what is immediately at stake in Boethius is the question of the governance of the world, rather than its genesis. Lady Philosophy is standing over her method, delighting in dialectic, somewhat

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[62] Aquinas discusses the application of metaphorical terms to refer to God in *ST*, Ia.13,3. In 1a2æ.101,2, he argues on the grounds of the failure of 'human reason to grasp the import of poetical utterance on account of its deficiency in truth', and its comparable failure to 'grasp divine things perfectly on account of their superabundance of truth', that 'therefore in both cases there is need of representation by sensible figures'. Aquinas justifies, in 1a.1,9, the use of figurative language in Scripture, on the grounds that it protects the higher levels of truth from the ignorant who are not ready or able to understand it', and in the same article he points out that poetry 'employs metaphors for the sake of representation, in which we are born to take delight', while holy teaching 'adopts them for their indispensable usefulness.' In 2a2æ.111.1, he discusses figures of speech and considers whether they are lies. He cites Augustine to support the view that they are not necessarily lies, and can be used 'as a figure of something else we want to portray'.
[63] Kathryn Morgan writes that the '*Timaeus* and *Critias* present a series of nested levels of myth corresponding to varying levels of truth and usage', and goes on to say that '[P]aradoxically, then, the more "scientific" account is described in a cautious formulation as a likely myth/account, and the more obviously fabricated story is marked by insistence on its "truth". Morgan, p. 278.

to Boethius's frustration.[64] When it appears that he is too complacently agreeing with her, she stings him into opposition, polemicising their interaction with an overt, if playful reference to the giants' storming of the heavens in 'fables'. Boethius rises to her provocation, and accuses her of playing with him, objecting to her labyrinthine argumentative method. It is at this point that Philosophy defends her method, which involves the use of arguments (*rationes*; Chaucer has 'resouns')[65] drawn from within rather than without the *ambit* (Chaucer has 'compas')[66] of the object of the discussion (Chaucer has 'thinge of whiche we treten').[67] And it is in this regard that she cites Plato: 'cum Platone sanciente didiceris cognatos de quibus loquuntur rebus oportere esse sermones'.[68]

Lady Philosophy cites the passage from the *Timaeus* at this point in order to bolster not a certain *class* of account, but a *method*. While there is indeed a pleasing congruence between her topic (the divine uncircumscribed circle of perfect simplicity by which the world is governed) and the rational argumentative method that she employs (which Boethius describes as a labyrinth,[69] and Chaucer as a kind of *entrelacement*),[70] her main point is that the metaphysical object of discussion dictates the purely intellectual, substantial and rational nature of the matter and mode of the discussion, and that the latter must arise from within the compass of the former. The air is too thin and too refined for Boethius at this point. He wants and needs more matter. Lady Philosophy obliges in the *metrum*, providing fabular content for the topic which she has just treated in purely rational mode.

Where Timaeus differentiated between two kinds of account, the one suitable for the description of higher reality, the other, his own, for the physical world, Lady Philosophy defends a rational argumentative method as suitable for the discussion of the intellectually knowable realm of divine attributes. In this

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[64] *Consolatio*, Book III, prosa xii, 24 ff.
[65] *Boece*, Book III, prosa xii, line 200.
[66] *Boece*, 203.
[67] *Consolatio*, Book III, prosa xii, 38.
[68] *Ibid*.
[69] *Consolatio*, 30.
[70] *Boece*, 157.

difference between Timaeus's defense and that of Lady Philosophy, we can see
the translation of Platonic hierarchies into Christian terms. A higher degree of
knowability, a stronger premise for a sound Divine science, can be evinced from
Boethius's work. The level of tentativeness that attends the treatment of the
highest reality in Plato's work, and that of his followers, certainly left its mark
on the Christian traditions that descended from it, in the form of the mysteries,
of negative theology and of pseudo-Dionysian uncertainty as to the possibility
of meaningful verbalization about God. That said, though, Christianity also
produced a counter-balance to the unknowability of God, in the form of the
incarnation itself, which provided a model for a more general cultural
overcoming of dualism and transcendentalism.

The redeployment in the *Rose* of the Platonic epigram and associated
issues for the purposes of a debate about obscenity has been vigorously
analysed in recent scholarship. A. J. Minnis, having already argued in a
discussion of the last section of Reason's speech in Chapter 4 of the *Rose* (a
passage that does not cite the passage from the *Timaeus* (29b) discussed above,
but that does raise related issues, is a likely source for Chaucer's apology in the
'General Prologue', and does cite another passage from the *Timaeus* (47c) about
the function and origin of speech), that 'Jean's poem had managed to shift the
agenda from discussion of eternal verities to talk of *coilles*',[71] also points out, in
relation to the same passage, that Chaucer takes 'the process of broadening,
demystification, and empiricization even further, accommodating the *sententia*
regarding the kinship of *voiz* and *fez* to the words and deeds of a far wider
(fictional) group of speakers and listeners, which included male and female
personae who spoke *ful brode*.'[72] This same section of Reason's speech, which
begins with her refusal euphemistically to gloss the word '*coilles*' (testicles), a

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[71] *Magister Amoris*, p. 130. P. B. Taylor also discusses this question, in relation to
Reason's speech at 7099-105, and to Jean's later 'apology' at lines 15159-194, and
considers that Chaucer continues in this knowingly incongruous vein when he has the
Manciple cite the Timaean passage at 9.203-10, as a defense for using the word 'lemman'
instead of 'lovere'. Taylor, p. 321-3.

[72] *Magister Amoris*, p. 128.

word she has previously used,[73] together with the simile '*andouilles*' (sausages),
in her description of Jupiter's revolt and castration of his father Saturn, has her
defend 'proper' speaking and naming of the 'works of [her] father', yet
concludes with her justification of integuments, as used by philosophers and
poets.[74]

Jean returns to the theme in lines 15129-15242 where he defends what
he says might seem like bawdy speech, on the grounds that his 'subject matter
demanded it',[75] a defense that echoes *Timaeus* 29b *via* Lady Philosophy's
argument that her method conforms to her subject matter at the end of Book III,
prosa xii of the *Consolation*.[76] He follows up on this with another apparent

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[73] *RR*, 5507-8. See Jill Mann's discussion of this section of the *Rose* in 'Jean de Meun
and the Castration of Saturn', in *Poetry and Philosophy in the Middle Ages: a festschrift
for Peter Dronke* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), pp. 309-26.

[74] With characteristic perspicacity, A. J. Minnis has treated the status of the literal in the
Rose, arguing that 'Jean was a plain-style poet whose main (though by no means only)
modes of procedure are narration and exemplification rather than enigmatic fable and
allegory ("personification allegory" or prosopopoeia being, of course, a different thing
altogether, and fundamental to the poem). The language of the *Rose* is frequently
outspoken, explicit, literal.' *Magister Amoris*, p. 85. He makes his argument in the face of
a widely-held view of the poem as quintessentially allegorical (although Minnis hails the
work of Winthrop Wetherbee and H. R. Jauss as a precedent for his own). Minnis devotes
a large section (pp. 82-163) of this book to the *Rose's* complicated and shifting attitudes
to literal language.

[75] The question of the identity of the speaker in these sections of the poem, and whether
to refer to him as 'Jean de Meun', 'Jean', the 'lover' or 'Jehan de Clopinel' is very much
alive in scholarship on the poem. See Eva Martin for her summary of this scholarship,
and for her own argument that the designation 'Jehan le Clopinel' is 'layered' with the
roles of 'poet, narrator and lover, dreamer'. She also addresses the question of the
soldering of the two parts of the poem, and of Guillaume and Jehan. Martin, 'Away from
Self-Authorship: Multiplying the "Author" in Jean de Meun's *Roman de la Rose*',
Modern Philology 96 (1998), 1-15; 4.

[76] Cf. the Manciple's apology ('Manciple's Tale', 205-22), which mischievously draws
on the passage from the *Timaeus*, and in which he begs to be excused for his 'knavyssh
speche' in calling the lover of Phebus's wife her 'lemman'. He goes on, having begged
the forgiveness of his audience, to justify what he has done on the grounds that one might
as well call a spade a spade, even if she is a high-born lady. John Scattergood analyses
the many turns and feints of the Manciple's performance here, arguing persuasively that
'with a fine show of verbal skill he denies the importance of verbal niceties and leaves his
disparaging word intact', concluding that the Manciple 'is deliberately and mockingly
hypersensitive to the word. In the *Prologue* he showed a lack of sensitivity in speaking

reference to *Timaeus* 29b, which overlaps with, and is embedded in, a larger quotation from Sallust:[77]

> I beg you to pardon me and to reply to them through me that my subject matter demanded these things; it draws me toward such things by its own properties, and therefore I have such speeches. This procedure is just and right according to the authority of Sallust, who tells us in a true judgment:
>
>> "Although there may not be the same glory for him who performs a certain deed and for him who wants to set down the deed accurately in a book, the better to describe the truth, still it is not an easy thing to set down deeds in writing; it requires great strength of technique, for if anyone writes something without wishing to rob you of its truth, then what he says must resemble the deed. Words that are neighbours with things must be cousins to their deeds."[78]

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too "openly" to the Cook; here, with the elaborate defence of an innocuous word he offers a reduction ad absurdum of verbal sensitivity'. V. J. Scattergood, 'The Manciple's Manner of Speaking', *Essays in Criticism* 24 (1974), 124-46; 138 & 139.

[77] Taylor considers that the attribution to Sallust is on the one hand apt, as Sallust 'was concerned with the historical word as an equitable reflection of great deeds' (and Taylor cites *De conjuratione Catilinae* 3 to support this: 'Mihi quidem tametsi haudquaquam par Gloria sequitur scriptorem et auctorem rerum, tamen inprimis arduum videtur res gestas scribere; primum quod facta dictis exaequanda sunt'), but on the other comic and incongruous, in that the 'exigencies of "historical narrative" to which the epigram is traditionally applied are replaced by the figuring of a Prudentian allegory in mocking tone' [i.e. the 'battle of the abstractions']. Taylor, pp. 321-2. Minnis cites the same passage from Sallust in his explanation of the attribution, and goes on to offer the possibility that Jean de Meun 'may also have in mind Boethius, *De consolatione philosophiae*, iii, pr. xii, 111-12', which brings Minnis to Jean's translation of the *Consolation*, and then to the Calcidian *Timaeus. Magister Amoris*, p. 123-4.

[78] The passage from Sallust is as follows: 'Sed in magna copia rerum aliud alii natura iter ostendit. Pulchrum est bene facere rei publicae, etiam bene dicere haud absurdum est; vel pace vel bello clarum fieri licet; et qui fecere et qui facta aliorum scripsere, multi laudantur. Ac mihi quidem, tametsi haudquaquam par gloria sequitur scriptorem et auctorem rerum, tamen in primis arduum videtur res gestas scribere: primum quod facta dictis exaequanda sunt, dehinc quia plerique quae delicta reprehenderis malivolentia et

While Sallust's passage itself includes a statement of the need for deeds to be accurately represented by words, Jean renders the idea in such a way (emphasizing the relationship of cousinage between words and deeds) so as to produce an unmistakable echo of the Boethian citation of the Timaean epigram, which he translates in his *Livres de Confort*.

Jean re-jigs Sallust's injunction so that it literally embodies the Boethian citation of the *Timaeus*. It does not appear to have been enough for Jean that Sallust's and Boethius's prescriptions are semantically very similar. Instead of simply translating Sallust, he adjusts him, substituting Boethius's words, and thereby making Sallust and Boethius (and *via* Boethius, Plato) conform at the level of the letter as much as at the level of sense. To complicate matters further, in a passage which deals explicitly with the achievements of authors, and which itself depends upon authority, he omits mention of Plato or Boethius, although as the translator of the *Consolation*, he himself rendered into French Boethius's Latin version of the Timaean epigram, and is here responsible for producing the direct echo of *cousinez* with *cousinez*. The apparent influence of this passage from the *Rose* on Chaucer's apology in the 'General Prologue' becomes all the more interesting, given the latter's emphasis upon the *proper* speaking of the words of others.

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invidia dicta putant, ubi de magna virtute atque gloria bonorum memores, quae sibi quisque facilia factu putat, aequo animo accipit, supra ea veluti ficta pro falsis ducit.' Gaius Sallustius Crispus, *De coniuratione Catilinae*, ed. Jared W. Scudder (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1900), iii.
J. S. Watson translates the passage in this way: 'To act well for the Commonwealth is noble, and even to speak well for it is not without merits. Both in peace and in war it is possible to obtain celebrity; many who have acted, and many who have recorded the actions of others, receive their tribute of praise. And to me, assuredly, though by no means equal glory attends the narrator and the performer of illustrious deeds, it yet seems in the highest degree difficult to write the history of great transactions; first, because deeds must be adequately represented by words; and next, because most readers consider that whatever errors you mention with censure, are mentioned through malevolence and envy; while, when you speak of the great virtue and glory of eminent men, every one hears with acquiescence only that which he himself thinks easy to be performed; all beyond his own conception he regards as fictitious and incredible.' *The Conspiracy of Cataline*, trans. J. S. Watson (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1867).

As discussed above, Jean's incorporation of the Timaean epigram into a debate about obscene language appears to have influenced the form taken by Chaucer's apology. So too does Jean's intermingling of the Platonic citation, the obscenity debate, and a complicated attitude to glossing, integuments and literal language, provide a precedent for the nexus of ideas in Chaucer's apology. What of the Sallust citation itself?[79] What does the embedding of the Platonic epigram in the Sallust quotation accomplish? Does Jean's Platonised, Boethianised putative 'quotation' of Sallust provide a cue for Chaucer?

Perhaps the first point to make is that Chaucer has placed his re-working of this complex of material (from Plato, Boethius, the *Rose*, as well as the less conspicuous commentaries on Boethius) in a very important position, towards the beginning, and within the frame of a new kind of poem.[80] Without wanting

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[79] On the transmission of Sallust to the Middle Ages, see Beryl Smalley, 'Sallust in the Middle Ages', in *Classical Influences on European Culture A.D. 500-1500*, ed. R. R. Bolgar (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), pp. 165-69. See also: L. D. Reynolds, ed., *Texts and Transmissions: A Survey of the Latin Classics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), pp. 341-9; Robert H. Lucas, 'Mediaeval French Translations of the Latin Classics to 1500', *Speculum* 45 (1970), 225-253; 244. Peter Burke's survey of the relative popularity of Roman historians includes a discussion of the late medieval period. Burke, 'A Survey of the Popularity of Roman Historians 1450-1700', *History and Theory* 5 (1966), 135-152. In the earlier period covered by Burke's survey, Sallust's *Catiline* is the most popular classical history, as measured in terms of numbers of editions. Burke goes on to look at translations into the various vernaculars (although here he does not distinguish periods), and notes the dominance of French translations in the case of Sallust. Writing about Jean Lebègue's early fifteenth-century involvement in the production of illustrated manuscripts of Sallust's *Catiline* and *Jugurtha*, Donal Byrne comments on the place of Sallust within the earlier medieval French curriculum: 'The *Catiline* and *Jugurtha* were known throughout the Middle Ages. Manuscripts of the works increased in number from the ninth century onwards, and by the eleventh many were annotated or glossed. The scholastic character of many notes and glosses, and the frequent inclusion of the works in the ars grammatica sections of libraries, show that Sallust was used as a curricular text.' Byrne, 'An Early French Humanist and Sallust: Jean Lebègue and the Iconographical Programme for the *Catiline* and *Jugurtha*', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 49 (1986), 41-65; 44.

[80] I use the term 'new' here cautiously. On the one hand, I am reluctant to feed into the erroneous idea that Chaucer is valuable precisely because he is not typical of his time, or because he 'anticipates' humanist, individualist values that are sometimes purported to have evolved in the Renaissance. I do not share this view, as I hope this chapter as a

to lump together the 'others' against which Chaucer's achievement or novelty can be measured, a comparison of Chaucer's techniques with those of his peers, or near-peers working with similar formats can help to isolate, if not the superiority, then the distinctive features of Chaucer's approach. Examined alongside the comparable *Decameron* of Boccaccio, *Novelle* of Sercambi and *Confessio Amantis* of Gower, Chaucer's narrative strategy in the frame of the *Canterbury Tales* presents a number of noteworthy elements. Both Boccaccio and Sercambi go to considerable lengths to produce an historically plausible premise for the telling of the stories. Boccaccio's occasion for the gathering of ladies and gentlemen is the historically verifiable event of an outbreak of plague in Florence; Sercambi's is an outbreak in Lucca. Both Boccaccio and Sercambi, to varying degrees, also take pains to describe the people who, in the case of the *Decameron*, occupy the villa and tell the tales, and in that of the *Novelle*, go on the journey through Italy, and form the audience for the tales. This is not the place to go into a detailed account of Chaucer's 'naturalism' – as evidenced in the 'roadside drama', the elaborate frame, comprising the Host, the storytelling competition, the interactions between the pilgrims, the portraits of the pilgrims, the well-developed character of the pilgrim-narrator, the dovetailing in many cases of the character and profession of the storyteller to the story told. What I want to focus on instead is the way in which the fiction of the *Canterbury Tales* has been shored up against leaching from the *hors-texte*, a shoring-up that is so successful that the poem itself comes across as the *hors-texte*, as a world, infinitely capacious.[81] The fiction of the frame, the fiction, to adapt Robert

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whole demonstrates. On the other hand, I do not subscribe to the view that the Middle Ages, early or late, were characterised by stasis, conformity and immunity to innovation.
[81] On literature as a microcosm, see James A. Coulter, *The Literary Microcosm: Theories of Interpretation of the Later Platonists* (Leiden, 1976). See also Remi Brague's discussion in 'The Body of the Speech: A New Hypothesis on the Compositional Structure of Timaeus' Monologue', in *Platonic Investigations*, ed. Dominic J. O'Meara (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1985), pp. 53-84; 58-9, and also Brague's reference to Macrobius, *Saturnalia*, ed. J. Willis (Leipzig: Teubner, 1963), V, 1, 19. And see S. K. Heninger, Jr., *Touches of Sweet Harmony: Pythagorean Cosmology and Renaissance Poetics* (San Marino, Calif.: 1974), pp. 364-97.

Hollander's remark about the *Commedia*, that it is not a fiction, is preserved almost entirely, from opening to end.

Boccaccio, by comparison, although he has constructed a verisimilar frame, in the form of the plague, the retreat to the villa, the aristocratic tellers, and the motivation for the tale-telling of pleasant diversion, and although he has largely passed on to the tellers the role and activity of telling, and of chatting and debating in the between-times, nonetheless does interrupt the proceedings, at approximately the halfway point, speaking in *propria persona* as he does so, to explain that the stories 'have been written by me, not only in vulgar Florentine and in prose and untitled, but also in as humble a style as might be'.[82] Chaucer's narrator, on the other hand, because of the ennabling narrative strategy behind the 'General Prologue', can do more or less what he likes, and still remain within the same fictional environment that was established at the outset. Chaucer's narrator can incompetently tell a third-rate tale, a maneuver that is aesthetically justified because in this context such a tale is mediated, and is a comical expression of the limitations of the teller's personality and skill. We find the least entertaining thing in itself (e.g. a boring or longwinded speech) entertaining when it contained within a larger context, and presented from a definite perspective as might be provided in a skit or play (e.g. Polonius's laborious disquisition on brevity).[83]

Sercambi, after establishing the quite elaborate premise, including the Host-like figure of the *preposto*, for the journey through Italy which forms the occasion for the tale-telling, intercepts the very structure he has established, by having the *preposto* nominate, by means of an acrostic sonnet, 'he who (comprehending the words and verses of the sonnet) found his name and surname therein. Without saying anything further, he understood that he had to

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[82] 'il che assai manifesto può apparire a chi le presenti novellette riguarda, le quali non solamente in fiorentin volgare e in prosa scritte per me sono e senza titolo, ma ancora in istilo umilissimo e rimesso quanto il piú si possono.' Fourth Day, introduction, 3.
[83] *Hamlet*, Act II, scene 2, lines 86-94. Although, to be sure, Polonius's point, devoid of brevity as it is, is otherwise constructed with flair on the basis of isocolon, synecdoche, diacope and metaphor.

be the author of this book; without saying anything further, he remained like the others, silent.'[84]

These interventions, whereby a narrator of an otherwise verisimilar fiction, whose *identity* with the historical author is spelled out in the text, punctuate Sercambi's and Boccaccio's story collections. They are absent from Chaucer's. While Chaucer has been hailed by many critics over the past couple of decades as a pre-modern writer whose work presents modern, and specifically post-modern features, such as intertextuality, play with the limits of text and world, relativism and denaturalization, it might, if the case is worth making at all, be more correct to attribute such qualities to Boccaccio or Sercambi, in whose work there appears a more characteristically medieval contentment to let fiction and fact co-exist on the one page, and to share the same terms of reference.

Chaucer, in his lifelong dedication to the perfection of narrative strategy, a dedication that produces extraordinary results in many of his poems, but that surely reaches its summit in the *Canterbury Tales*, creates a more *massive* fictional effect. Boccaccio's defense of poetry in the *Genealogy of the Gentile Gods*, where he insists that poetry 'proceeds from the bosom of God', an assertion that endeared him to later scholars looking for truffles of renaissance in the dark woods of the Middle Ages, as much as it appears to prop up the claims of fiction, also places fiction in an apologetic stance of rivalry with other discourses and disciplines. And indeed, the *Genealogy* was and is often regarded as part of the tradition that linked Aristotle's theoretical defense of poetry as superior to the rival sciences of history and philosophy, to that of Sidney and later Shelley. Chaucer's action, in his 'apology' in the 'General Prologue' does something quite different. Instead of apologizing for poetry, the narrator never for a moment countenances the possibility that poetry is even involved. Instead, in what is partly a redeployment of the 'compiler's stance', as

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[84] Giovanni Sercambi, *Novelle* ed. Giovanni Sincriopi, 2 vols. (Bari: G. Laterza, 1972). Excerpt trans. by Cosimo Corsano in *The Canterbury Tales: Nine Tales and the General Prologue* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1989), pp. 251-55; 255.

Minnis describes it, the narrator of the 'General Prologue' abjures fiction, insisting that he is reproducing the world as he found it.[85]

Chaucer has earlier in the prologue managed to create the effect of 'present time', even though the narrator is formally describing a past event. A rhetorical sleight of hand has succeeded in making the substantial content of the 'General Prologue', i.e. the portraits themselves, look like parenthetical asides, produced while the narrator has 'tyme and space'. 'Tyme and space' from what, though? Logically, given that the narrator is formally recounting a past event, the 'tyme and space' must refer to the spatial and chronological limitations of the posterior writing moment. However, he produces no evidence of any pressing concerns in his life that might impinge upon his taking as much time as he likes in the telling of the events. The only bustle and press that we have been exposed to is the bustle and press of the pilgrims in the inn on the night before they set off for Canterbury. The intensity and extremis of this situation is transferred to an undefined present moment, so that it appears that the narrator is struggling in the real-time of the night in Southwark to tell things as they happen.[86]

'Er that I ferther in this tale pace' reinforces this effect, and anticipates the later insistence upon the cousinage of word and deed. Given the equations described above, the line achieves a double signification, referring *both* to the pilgrim-narrator's re-telling of the tale, *and* to his participation in the events being told. An equivalence, or even identity of the tale and the telling of the tale, is being set up even in these early lines of the poem, and it is in the apology that a more deliberate meditation on an equation already enacted in the poem will be provided.

Eugene Vance has argued in relation to *Troilus* that 'what is perhaps less easy for modern readers to understand is that because, for the medieval poet, the subsemantic strata of meter and rhyme are tied up not merely with physiology

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[85] See Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship*, pp. 96-7 and 190-210.
[86] Later, however, for instance in the 'Miller's Prologue', the textuality of the work is acknowledged, in the appeal to the reader to turn over the leaf to another tale, if he wants to avoid the 'churl's tale' that is about to be rehearsed.

of phonemic production but also with transcendental cosmic and metaphysical principles – of which language is only one intelligible surface among others – medieval poetics presupposes a notion of mimesis unfamiliar to us. It is, namely, one where the "reality" to be understood in a poem such as the *Troilus* is thought to lie neither primarily in the non-linguistic world of created things to which language seems to refer (for these are contingencies and accidents), nor in the individual consciousness, but more properly in those intangible laws of the cosmos that are embodied, if only faintly, in the transcendent "harmonic" resources of poetic language.'[87] Whether this is an accurate representation of a medieval bias or not, I would contend that in the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer is decisively *not* referring to a supra-mundane order. This is not to question his orthodoxy, nor to attribute to him any denial of the existence and supremacy of a higher order of reality. It is simply to say that in the *Canterbury Tales*, he is not dealing with this higher order, except insofar as the higher order appears as an aspect of the discourses of the pilgrims. His topic, and this is what the Platonic epigram in the apology underlines, is this world, not the next.

No reason is given for the telling of the *Canterbury Tales*. At line 34 of the 'General Prologue', the narrator says that the pilgrims made a pact '[T]o take oure wey ther as I yow devyse'. Here he simply says *what* he is doing, not why. Immediately afterwards, he appears to break off from this telling, to describe the pilgrims:

> But nathelees, whil I have tyme and space,
> Er that I ferther in this tale pace,
> Me thynketh it acordaunt to resound
> To telle yow al the condicioun
> Of ech of hem, so as it semed me, (35-9)

He does provide a reason for this parenthetical telling – such a telling is in accord with reason. Later, just on the verge of the apology at the end of the

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[87] Vance, p. 277.

prologue, the narrator says that he will 'after telle of oure viage / And al the remenaunt of oure pilgrimage'. Again, he provides no motivation or purpose for his telling. He does spend a lot of time in the apology on the motivation for his *method*, but again, offers nothing at all on the question of the larger purpose of the work.

The medieval prologues to classical authors demonstrate the importance to the interpretation of classical literature of the categories of '*utilitas*' and '*intentio auctoris*' (in the 'type C' prologue), and of the category of the '*causa finalis*' in the Aristotelian prologue. In his earlier narrative poems, and indeed, in many of the individual tales that make up the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer does provide a reason for his telling.[88] In some cases, if a poem partakes of a well-known genre, such as the dream-vision, it does not need to spell out its reason for existing, because each new example of the genre carries with it the premise of the genre as a whole. Even then, the intrinsic interest of the material of the particular case is usually pointed out.

In the *Book of the Duchess*, the premise is twofold. First, there is the conventional premise. The poem is a dream vision, and therefore is pre-explained generically by its following in the footsteps of all its predecessors. Then there is the particular reason for the telling of this particular dream, and also a reason for the preamble in which the story of Ceys and Alcione is recounted. Both the tale of Ceys and the narrator's own dream are described as wonderful things,[89] the latter so wonderful that it would have tested Joseph's powers of dream-interpretation.[90] In both cases, the epithet of 'wonder' or 'wonderful' is applied immediately prior to the telling, the implication being, as seems quite natural, that a wonderful thing is worth telling.

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[88] Chaucer's lyrics, and lyrics generally, have little time or space to meditate formally on their individual *raisons d'être*. They speak directly, not so much on their topic as from it, or to it. That said, of course, a lyric can meditate a problem or present a thought, on the value of poetry, as much as on anything else.
[89] At line 61, the dreamer describes the tale of Ceys as 'a wonder thing'.
[90] 'Book of the Duchess', 276-290.

In the *House of Fame*, following upon a meditation about causality and dreams, the narrator describes his own dream, which he is about to recount, as 'wonderful', more wonderful that any dream before.[91] Moreover, he invokes the assistance of the god of sleep, an invocation that also serves to provide a foundation, along established classical lines, for the material to follow.

Troilus begins with a statement of intent, in which the telling of the 'double sorwe' is the narrator's 'purpos'. And this statement of purpose is duly followed up with an invocation of Thesiphone. A further, secondary purpose is the service to lovers that the telling will provide, and an additional, if only implied reason for the telling is also present in the sheer intrinsic interest and extremity of the material, which the narrator emphasizes at numerous points throughout the poem, and which affects him emotionally. Together with all these reasons, the narrator also points out that the story has been told elsewhere. This authentication of the material, if not quite a reason for re-telling it, at least also enhances the sense of its worthiness, and fitness for re-telling.

The *Canterbury Tales* begins with a generically over-determined description of spring, that displays features of the lyrical *reverdie*, of Latin and perhaps vernacular histories of Troy, of the romance, of the narrative poem, and of Virgilian and encyclopedic scientific descriptions of Spring.[92] As has often been observed though, this virtuoso opening quickly gives way to the local, the immediate, the *vulgar*. The *topos* is abandoned.[93] The pretext for the making of the poem – the premise arising out of scholarly training in rhetoric and grammar – is set aside in favour of the indecorous naturalism of the night in the inn. That is not to accord an actually higher level of reality to that 'night in the inn' as against the *topos* – both are only textual and graphic entities, marks on a page. But the structure of the prologue, in its turning away from a floridly poetic

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[91] 'House of Fame', line 62.

[92] See Robert R. Raymo's concise account of the sources for the opening of the poem in his essay on 'The General Prologue', in *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales*, 2nd ed., ed. Robert M. Correale and Mary Hamel, vol. II (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2005), pp. 4-7.

[93] That is not to suggest that the springtime setting is not justified on grounds of verisimilitude as well. Pilgrimages were undertaken in spring.

opening, and then of the tales as a whole, its framing of fictional stories with the interactions of the tellers, creates the effect that the pilgrims are more real than poetry,[94] and that the tellers are more real than the tales they tell.[95]

A now out-of-favour theory about Dante's poetics runs like this: Dante appropriated the fourfold apparatus of Biblical exegesis and applied it to the *Comedy*, aggrandizing the value of the latter in the process, and surreptitiously conferring a pseudo-sacred status on his own poem. Charles Singleton is perhaps the most famous exponent of this idea.[96] While influential, Singleton's view of the matter was challenged within a few years of publication by, for instance, Richard Hamilton Green, and more recently, Alastair Minnis.[97] Green argues that Dante's views are actually explicable (and perfectly orthodox and traditional), as aspects of the practice of Dante the *poeta Christianus*, whose method of poetic signifying relies upon *analogy* to, rather than usurpation of, the sacred mode of signification.[98] Minnis refutes the view implied in Singleton's article, that the theory of medieval secular literature always necessarily assumed a *fictional* literal level. He argues that, in fact, commentators such as Arnulf of Orléans considered that Lucan was poet and historiographer at the same time, and thus employed an historical first sense,

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[94] Six hundred years of criticism testify to the believability of the pilgrims, the tendency of the most intellectual and skeptical of scholars to attribute psychological integrity to the Wife, the Franklin, etc. The popularity, over much of the twentieth century, of the 'roadside drama', even if it has come in for criticism from textually-oriented scholars, is still obvious. More recently, as theoretically-oriented a critic as Susan Crane was charged with an un-textual failure to realize that Alison is not a real person, and that her 'strategies' are actually Chaucer's strategies. See Esther C. Quinn's letter to the editor in *PMLA*, 102 (1987), p. 835.

[95] Of course, these effects themselves are produced not *ex nihilo*, but out of pre-existing genres (such as the estates satire as described by Jill Mann) and stances (such as that of the compiler, as described by Minnis). The novelty, whatever about the brilliance, of the 'General Prologue' could not be said to lie in its actually having abandoned generic or rhetorical precedent, but in its re-combinative intelligence, and especially in its deployment of apparently off-hand and parenthetical remarks about method.

[96] Charles Singleton, 'Dante's Allegory', *Speculum* 25 (1950), 78-83.

[97] Richard Hamilton Green, 'Dante's "Allegory of Poets" and the Mediaeval Theory of Poetic Fiction', *Comparative Literature* 9 (1957), 118-128; A. J. Minnis, *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism*, pp. 384-5.

[98] Green, p. 123, 124-5.

and that Boccaccio outlined a 'Ciceronian/Macrobian category of fiction which comprises events both "literal" and possible'.[99]

In view of the blows inflicted on Singleton's theory from the two different positions outlined above, it might seem foolhardy to suggest that the literal level of the *Canterbury Tales*, especially given that it *is* fictional, succeeds in signifying in a way that bears comparison with Scripture. On the one hand, as Green might say, there are ways of explaining the kind of signifying achieved by a medieval poet without recourse to this theory of a heterodox appropriation of Scriptural signifying; on the other, as Minnis points out, there is actually nothing that extraordinary about there being a factual (in this case, pseudo-factual), first level of sense in a 'poetic' work.[100]

The 'General Prologue' achieves its extraordinary level of verisimilitude, in spite of the existence within it of numerous devices that stem from normal grammatical, rhetorical and generic conventions, by means of what is often described as the 'frame', but more specifically, by means of the narrator, the effect that he is 'telling' events in the same 'now' as that in which those events unfold, the apology, the storytelling competition, the departure from the stylistic and generic expectations created by the opening lines, and the 'decoy-premises' that I will explain below. The term 'frame' is actually an unfortunate one in a sense, although it is suggestive and useful in its own way. A 'frame' surrounds a work of art proper. It enhances the work of art, and forms a transition between the artefact and the world. Chaucer's frame is both the premise for the fictions nestled within it (the tales), as well as being the primary fiction itself. As the storytelling competition diverts attention away from the goal, in favour of the way, so the outside (the frame) insinuates itself into the

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[99] Minnis, p. 384.

[100] On this point, Minnis provides a reminder of the Averroistic Poetics' stipulation 'that literary "likening" should not degenerate into total fiction', and says (quoting Cecil Grayson, 'Dante's Theory and Practice of Poetry', in id., ed., *The World of Dante: Essays on Dante and his Times* (Oxford: Oxford Dante Society, 1980) p. 155): 'Fiction, then, may be defined in its most comprehensive sense as "simply what the poet makes within him as opposed to what is created or exists outside him'. Minnis, *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism*, pp. 384-5.

inside. As we have seen above, Chaucer's frame shares several elements with the frames of Boccaccio's *Decameron*, and Sercambi's *Novelle*. However, the distinctive features of Chaucer's frame are also the elements that lend the 'General Prologue', and through it, the *Canterbury Tales*, a heightened effect of what critics of a later period, describing literature of a later period, called realism.[101] The frame appears to be the pretext for what lies within, but is in fact, the main course itself. By omitting the statement of purpose, or description of the *utilitas* or premise for the poetic work, it appears that no poetic work is being undertaken. By having the pilgrims tell fictions, it appears that they are distinguishable from fiction. By replacing the statement of poetic purpose or premise with other purposes, such as the purpose of the pilgrimage itself (so that the pilgrims can thank the martyr who helped them), the purpose of the story-telling competition (diversion, *delectatio*), and the purpose of his *method* (rather than reason) of re-telling, the narrator avoids the customary poetic transformation of reality into subject-matter. He appears to refuse to cook reality, serving it instead raw and apparently unmediated. This effect, to which the remarks on the randomness of the gathering, the chance meeting of the narrator with the other pilgrims, his taking of 'tyme and space' to describe the

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[101] Oscar Wilde describes, though, the paradox of high realism, knowing that the intensely believable and knowable world created by a Balzac, or in the visual arena, a Holbein, is not one jot less its author's *creation* than the most obviously fantastical art: 'A steady course of Balzac reduces our living friends to shadows, and our acquaintances to the shadows of shades. His characters have a kind of fervent fiery-coloured existence. They dominate us, and defy scepticism. One of the greatest tragedies of my life is the death of Lucien de Rubempré. It is a grief from which I have never been able completely to rid myself. It haunts me in my moments of pleasure. I remember it when I laugh. But Balzac is no more a realist than Holbein was. He created life, he did not copy it.' 'The Decay of Lying: a Dialogue', in *The Nineteenth Century: A Monthly Review* 25 (January-June, 1889), pp. 35-56; 41 (the speaker is Vivian, one of two interlocutors). Vivian has just distinguished between the 'unimaginative realism' of Zola's *L'Assommoir* and the 'imaginative reality' of Balzac's *Illusions Perdues*. From Victor Cousin's dictum of 'art for art's sake', to Pater's aestheticism, to Hitchcock's quip that his films were 'not a slice of life, but a slice of cake', the case for art's independence of the mimetic function has been well made since the early nineteenth century. It is rather less clear-cut in the fourteenth, but Chaucer's achievement in the *Canterbury Tales* is partly the creation of a world that rivals the real world, and that mounts this competition in terms of its very denial of its own fictionality.

pilgrims, and his own vacillating attitudes of concurrence with the perspectives of the various pilgrims, all contribute, reaches its acme in the apology.

In the apology in the 'General Prologue', the narrator insists that he must reproduce the pilgrims' words *proprely*, so far as he is able.[102] In the *Rose*, as we have seen, in Reason's disquisition, Reason refuses to 'gloss' on the grounds that the words and the things they name are beautiful and good, and second, that these words are in fact often used figuratively as integumental coverings for hidden truths. Later, Jean defends his use of bawdy speeches on the grounds of decorum, arguing that his 'subject matter demanded these things'. Lady Philosophy in the *Consolation* had previously, in a passage well-known to Jean de Meun, defended her argumentative *method* on the basis that it reflected her subject-matter. Chaucer's narrator, however, makes no appeal to literary decorum, nor does he even distinguish or seek to correlate subject matter with style or method. At no point does he allow for the possibility that he is *choosing* words or method at all. Rather, as Minnis points out, he adopts, and adapts, the compiler's stance, arguing that he is merely reproducing what he found, or in this case, heard. His adaptation of the compiler's stance, however, involves a metaphorical shift from the visual realm of read words to the aural realm of heard words. Chaucer's narrator is not *making selections* from the

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[102] Derrida, in a passage immediately preceding his discussion of Curtius's chapter on the book as symbol, uses the word '*propre*' to describe the 'bad', literal writing opposed by Phaedrus: 'Thus, within this epoch, reading and writing, the production or interpretation of signs, the text in general as fabric of signs, allow themselves to be confined within secondariness. They are preceded by a truth, or a meaning already constituted by and within the element of the logos. Even when the thing, the "referent," is not immediately related to the logos of a creator God where it began by being the spoken/thought sense, the signified has at any rate an immediate relationship with the logos in general (finite or infinite), and a mediated one with the signifier, that is to say with the exteriority of writing. When it seems to go otherwise, it is because a metaphoric mediation has insinuated itself into the relationship and has simulated immediacy; the writing of truth in the soul, opposed by Phaedrus (278a) to bad writing (writing in the "literal" [*propre*] and ordinary sense, "sensible" writing, "in space"), the book of Nature and God's writing, especially in the Middle Ages; all that functions as metaphor in these discourses confirms the privilege of the logos and founds the "literal" meaning then given to writing: a sign signifying a signifier itself signifying an eternal verity, eternally thought and spoken in the proximity of a present logos.' *Of Grammatology*, p. 15.

written works of various *auctores*, nor is he copying their *ipissima verba*. He is, in a word whose connotations are more phonetic than graphic, more aural than visual, *rehearsing* the words of the pilgrims. The element of processing, of written mediation is hinted at in the questions he raises about his competence, but elided in the oral and aural verbs used throughout the passage: *speke, telle, reherce, seye*. Christ *spoke* broadly; Plato (in spite of the reference to the difficulty in reading him) *says* the words must be cousin to the deed;[103] the narrator himself tells, speaks, says and rehearses. By comparison, the preoccupation with written accuracy in the short poem 'Chaucer's wordes unto Adam', is emphasised in the use of the words 'wryte' and 'wryten' and in the verbs which draw attention to the making of marks (in order to erase other marks on the page) on the page – 'rubbe' and 'scrape'.[104] The passage in *Troilus*, where the 'litel bok' is sent out by its maker, also displays an alternation between oral/aural verbs and graphic verbs: the narrator hopes his book will not be either mis-metred *or* mis-written. The worrying diversity of the English language is evident in both its spoken and written forms.

In one respect, then, the stance of the narrator of the 'General Prologue' is modest, unassuming. This is an apology, after all. He is not playing, or confessing to, the role of poet, or maker. He declines to engage in the activities of *makyng*. Instead he assumes the secondary role of re-telling. His method is based on such negatively-phrased motives as the avoidance of invention, and respect for words as they were first spoken: lest he tell his tale unfaithfully, lest he invent a thing, lest he find new words. This secondariness affects the whole apology: he is telling 'a tale after a man'; rehearsing the words of others. The narrator's whole performance is justified on the grounds that it is a re-telling, not a telling in its own right. On the other hand, it is out of this secondary and subservient position of re-telling that the poem as a whole unfolds.

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[104] While the verb 'wryten' is used in Adam Scriveyn to describe the *copyist's* work of copying the makere's 'makyng', the verbs of revision – *correcte, rubbe* and *scrappe* – refer to the *makere's* own remedial work on the material page.

The Platonic epigram arises in the service of the narrator's defense of secondariness, and his repudiation of fiction. Important enough as it is in the *Consolation*, and even more so in the *Rose*, Chaucer had upped its significance still further by placing it in a prime position in a new kind of poem, that re-tells, without much governing commentary, a putatively random, or self-selecting set of discourses, and the discourses attendant upon these discourses, uttered by putatively real people, among whom the re-teller himself is numbered.[105] The apology comprises three major features: first, the narrator's defense of his method of re-telling; second, a repudiation of fiction and invention; third, the Platonic requirement that 'wordes moot be cosyn to the dede'. The interpretation of this Platonic stipulation provided by the *Canterbury Tales* differs from that offered in the *Rose* and *Consolation*. As we have seen, in the *Consolation*, Lady Philosophy defends the method of argumentation that she employs (wholly rational) on the grounds that her subject matter is wholly intelligible and immaterial also. Reason in the *Rose* defends the use of the proper words for sexual organs on the grounds of the good and beautiful relationship between the thing indicated by the word 'penis' (line 7081 ff.) and the word itself. Later, Jean argues, on the grounds of decorum, that certain kinds of language are demanded by certain kinds of *subject matter* (15159 ff.) In all three cases, the Platonic epigram is cited in the context of a relationship between words and subject matter, or between words and things, or words and the world. In the 'General Prologue', the deeds in question *are themselves words*.

In this context, the epigram, as allied to the narrator's defense of secondary re-telling, assumes a central position in the poem as a whole. It serves to support the second-hand reproduction by the pilgrims of stories and ideas from elsewhere, and to support the whole structure of the poem, as the *re-*

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[105] Not that some of the portraits might not have been in part inspired by actually, rather than putatively, real people. But 'begun' is the critical word here. The work of transformation, whereby Tolstoy *becomes* Levin, or the ostler in Southwark *becomes* the master of ceremonies of the *Canterbury Tales*, is not much less mysterious than artistic creation *ex nihilo*, if such a thing exists.

presentation of representation. The pilgrims, second-hand consumers of culture and stories as they are, reproduce words and tales from elsewhere, just as the poem reproduces their words and stories. The narrator has repudiated invention in his apology, and in its stead has argued for reproduction. He has insisted upon the need for faithful, interpolation-free, euphemism-free, reproduction, but has also hinted at the limits of his abilities to accomplish perfect reproduction. In the place of poetry, then, in the place of fiction, there will be re-telling of previous tellings. The ideal kind of re-telling will be one that accurately re-enacts and restores the previous, unavailable telling. But the apology veers between conviction and doubt as to the achievability of this accurate reproduction. Reproduction is on the one hand ennobled by that which it seeks to reproduce, and on the other, beset with problems such as the limits of the reproducer's ability, and by the receding in comprehensibility of sources such as the *Timaeus* itself.

If Chaucer had a Eureka moment when he came up with the idea for the *Canterbury Tales*, as Balzac reportedly did when he conceived of the *Comédie Humaine*, and ran down the street declaring that he was a genius,[106] then perhaps it was this: to make a poem with a multiplicity of tellers, refracting and refracted in, a multiplicity of other people's tales and words. The embedding structure, a kind of *entrelacement*, in which a story is re-used, re-figured, re-deployed, is shown to happen not just to texts, but to people too, as the Wife of

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[106] Laure Surville's (Balzac's sister) account of this episode is reported by Albert Keim and Louis Lumet, *Honoré de Balzac*, trans. F. T. Cooper (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1914), chapter 7: "'The day when he was first inspired with this idea was a wonderful day for him,' Mme. Surville has recorded. "He set forth from the Rue Cassini, where he had taken up his residence after leaving the Rue de Tournon, and hurried to the Faubourg Poissonière, where I was then living. 'Salute me', he cried out joyously, 'for I am on the high road to become a genius.' He then proceeded to unfold his plan to us, although it still rather frightened him. In spite of the vastness of his brain, time alone would enable him to work out such a plan in detail. 'How splendid it will be if I succeed!' he said as he strode up and down the parlour; he was too excited to remain in one place and joy radiated from all his features. 'From now on they are welcome to call me Balzac the tale-smith! I shall go on tranquilly squaring my stones and enjoying in advance the amazement of all those purblind critics when they finally discover the great structure I am building'''".

Bath demonstrates. Roman Jakobson writes that 'virtually any poetic message is a quasi-quoted discourse with all those peculiar, intricate problems which "speech within speech" offers to the linguist.'[107] By making 'speech within speech' the structural premise for his poem, he sucks the usual antinomy between words and deeds, language and reality, into the interior of the fiction itself.[108]

Jean de Meun's interweaving of Sallust and Plato in the course of Jean's apology for the harmonisation of his diction to his subject matter, works to defend the purportedly secondary activity of writing, and to find some glory in it.[109] Chaucer's narrator engages in a secondary activity of rehearsal, of telling 'a tale after a man', and this secondary activity in turn rehearses the activity of the other pilgrims, in their re-tellings, not just of Petrarch, Macrobius, Statius,

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[107] Roman Jakobson, 'Linguistics and Poetics', p. 85.

[108] Jakobson asks the following question: 'Why is it necessary to make a special point of the fact that sign does not fall together with object? Because, besides the direct awareness of the identity between sign and object (A is A1), there is a necessity for the direct awareness of the inadequacy of that identity (A is not A1). The reason this antinomy is essential is that without contradiction there is no mobility of concepts, no mobility of signs, and the relationship between concept and sign becomes automized. Activity comes to a halt, and the awareness of reality dies out'. Roman Jakobson, 'What is Poetry?' in *Semiotics of Art: Prague School Contributions*, ed.. Ladislaw Matejka and Irwin R. Titunik (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1976), pp. 164-175; 175.

[109] E. P. Dutton discusses the 'entanglement of Plato and Calcidius', which he believes to be the result of 'Calcidius intruding into and encompassing the *Timaeus* materials the Middle Ages received'. 'Medieval Approaches to Calcidius', p. 193. Dutton also describes the interesting and 'clever' way in which Calcidius may have courted just such an 'entanglement', by means of his preface, where he explained that he wrote the commentary on the *Timaeus* because 'the image of a profound thing will sometimes be obscurer than its model without the explanation of an interpretation' (*Epistle* 6.8-9 Waszink; quoted by Dutton on p. 189). As Dutton points out, the translation alone 'would make of Calcidius as translator...the pale image of Plato the author', a possibility that Calcidius circumvents by producing the commentary, which then gets incorporated into a single Timaean package that includes the translation of the text proper. Dutton goes on as follows: 'The commentary was designed to bridge and repair the gap between exemplar and image, but it also elevated Calcidius the commentator from the ranks of an imperfect image-maker to that of author. One could argue that from the medieval reader's point of view the entanglement of Plato and Calcidius began as soon as s/he read the preface.' Dutton, p. 189.

Boccaccio, Dante, Cato, Theophrastus, Jerome, Ovid and Scripture, but of gossip, rumour, reported speech, hearsay, judgments, history, marital arguments, nagging, and in all the wording and re-wording which are the only *deeds* of theirs that we can ever know through the medium of language.

Timaeus, as we have seen, describes two ontological levels, one of being and one of becoming, and two corresponding levels of discourse. While it may be that the two levels of ontology are linked to each other as an object is to its shadow, and that the two levels of discourse are correspondingly associated not just with each other, but with the original and eternal pattern without which nothing is possible, either in the Platonic or Christian scheme, it is also the case that the *Timaeus* is first and foremost concerned with the nature of this world, not with the archetype upon which it is based. Chaucer has re-worked the Platonic epigram, so that the deeds to which the words bear a relationship of cousinage are themselves words, thereby heightening the extent to which the poem deals not just with the world, but with the cultural world, which is the world of representations. There is *sacra doctrina* in the *Canterbury Tales*, there is eschatology, there are the last things, but they exist only within a watertight fiction of representations, which is so capacious within itself that it appears to be the *hors-texte* that it excludes.

Chapter Three: The Franklin, the Doctrine of Grace, and the Good Life

I: *A Genealogy of Morals*

In his defense of the Franklin's *gentil* status, Henrik Specht reviews the critical
literature that has seen the character as a parvenu and social climber, who
imitates 'the ways of the gentry without mastering them'.[1] Specht, following
Gerould's article of 1926, argues that the historical franklins of the fourteenth
century were definitely 'gentle', and he laments the judgements of a long line of
scholars from Lumiansky to Spearing who have argued otherwise.[2] Specht
summarises their views as follows: 'The Franklin emerges, moreover, as a
person of shallow materialistic instincts, who, unable to penetrate to the essence
of such concepts as *gentilesse*, *franchise*, and *trouthe*, is incapable of grasping
the implications of his own tale, contenting himself with the mere appearance of
character and behaviour'.[3] Unsurprisingly, Specht describes this view of the
Franklin as 'depreciatory', and hopes that his study will go some way towards
reversing it.

Specht makes a very convincing case both for the *gentil* status of the
historical franklins and for the *gentilesse*, wealth, eminence and social ease of
Chaucer's Franklin specifically, and I don't want to argue here with his main
conclusions. He goes on also, to celebrate the humane, *gentil*, and honourable
treatment of the moral issues in the poem, implying that there is a natural
connection between the high birth of the teller, and the moral loftiness of the
tale he tells. This assumption has underwritten many of the studies of the
Franklin and his tale. To the extent that he is a gentleman, his tale is idealized,
harmonious, successful, both artistically and ethically.[4] To the extent that he is

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[1] Henrik Specht, *Chaucer's Franklin in* The Canterbury Tales (Copenhagen: Akademisk
Forlag, 1981), p. 144.
[2] G. H. Gerould, 'The Social Status of Chaucer's Franklin', *PMLA* 41 (1926), 262-79.
[3] Specht, p. 144.
[4] See, for example: G. L. Kittredge's famous article in which 'The Franklin's Tale' is
seen as a harmonious resolution to the questions raised by the 'marriage group' of tales,

an upstart, his tale is suspect, its *gentil* message as doubtful as the Franklin's own rank.[5] (There are exceptions to this view in the middle way of such scholars as Alfred David, who have emphasised the Franklin's 'middling' status as a bourgeois or proto-bourgeois possessed of a moderate, humane, kindly materialism and pragmatic ethical sensibility.[6])

What I would like to propose, without going in great detail into the question of the Franklin's social status, is the somewhat Nietzschean possibility that a 'shallow', materialistic Franklin is not necessarily 'depreciatory'. Nietzsche raises the question, in *Zur Genealogie der Moral* and elsewhere, of the very value of values.[7] An interest in the origin and value of values

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'Chaucer's Discussion of Marriage', *Modern Philology* 9 (1911-1912), 435-67; R. J. Pearcy, 'Chaucer's Franklin and the Literary Vavasour', *The Chaucer Review*, 8 (1973) 33-59, in which the Franklin is compared favourably with knights and vavasours; Gerald Morgan, ed., *The Franklin's Tale* (London, 1981), pp. 12-14, and his articles, 'A Defence of Dorigen's Complaint', *Medium Ævum* 46 (1977), 77-97, and 'Boccaccio's "Filocolo" and the Moral Argument of the "Franklin's Tale"', *Chaucer Review* 20 (1986), 285-306; Mary Carruthers, 'The Gentilesse of Chaucer's Franklin', *Criticism* 23 (1981), 283-300; Jill Mann, 'Chaucerian Themes and Style in the "Franklin's Tale"', in *New Pelican Guide to English Literature*, Vol. 1 *Medieval Literature, Part One: Chaucer and the Alliterative Tradition*, ed. Boris Ford (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), p. 135.
[5] See, for example: R. M. Lumiansky, *Of Sondry Folk* (Austin, 1955), pp. 180-93; Donald R. Howard, 'The Conclusion of the Marriage Group: Chaucer and the Human Condition', *Modern Philology* 57 (1960-61), 223-32; D. W. Robertson, *A Preface to Chaucer* (Princeton, 1962); Alan Gaylord, 'The Promises in "The Franklin's Tale"', *ELH* 31 (1964), 331-65; Robert B. Burlin, *Chaucerian Fictions* (Princeton, 1977); Douglas Wurtele, 'Chaucer's Franklin and the Truth about "Trouthe"', English Studies in Canada 13 (1987): 359-74; Judson Boyce Allen, *A Distinction of Stories: The Medieval Unity of Chaucer's Fair Chain of Narratives for Canterbury* (Columbus, Ohio, 1981); Judith L. Kellogg, '"Large and Fre": The Influence of Middle English Romance on Chaucer's Chivalric Language', *Allegorica* 9 (1987-88), 221-48; Susan Crane, 'The Franklin as Dorigen', *Chaucer Review* 24 (1990), 236-52; Joe Green, 'Chaucer's Genial Franklin', *Platte Valley Review* 21, Winter (1993): 6-16.
[6] Alfred David, 'Sentimental Comedy in *The Franklin's Tale*', *Annuale Mediaevale*, 6 (1965), 19-27.
[7] 'So let us give voice to this *new demand*: we need a *critique* of moral values, *the value of these values should itself, for once, be examined* – and so we need to know about the conditions and circumstances under which the values grew up, developed and changed (morality as result, as symptom, as mask, as tartuffery, as stimulant, inhibition, poison), since we have neither had this knowledge up to now nor even desired it'. *On the Genealogy of Morality*, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson and trans. Carol Diethe (Cambridge,

themselves is already present in the Christian medieval transvaluation (loathed by Nietzsche) of the value of nobility, and especially in the discourses on the subject of *generositas virtus, non sanguis*.[8] And in 'The Franklin's Tale', we have a work that is explicitly, from the outset (it takes no anachronistic hermeneutic conjuring tricks to see it) busied with the value and origin of *gentilesse* (specifically the value of unegoistic or generous behaviour). The argument of the pages that follow is that the Franklin is both genealogist and genealogised. The Franklin conducts his own genealogy of morals in the tale that he tells, and he is also the object of a moral genealogy conducted at a higher level in the tales as a whole.

In his effort to defend the Franklin's moral sense, Specht likens his view of *gentilesse* in the Squire-Franklin link to that expressed in the short poem 'Gentilesse': 'It throws a certain light on Chaucer's intentions that the ideal of conduct which he thus makes the Franklin represent in this dramatic context is expressed in strikingly similar terms, turning also on the image of the father and son, in the "Moral Balade of Chaucier", one of the personal lyrics which come

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1994), p. 8. The German text of *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, first published in 1887, is published in vol. 9 of *Friedrich Nietzsche; Sämtliche Werke. Kritische Studienausgabe,* edited by G. Colli and M. Montinari (Munich and Berlin, 1967-7). All quotations in this chapter are from Carol Diethe's translation in Ansell-Pearson's edition.

[8] Chaucer's other direct treatments of *virtus, non sanguis* occur in WBT 1109-76; ClT 155-61 and in the short poem 'Gentilesse'. The topic is treated by Dante in the canzone that precedes *Il Convivio* 4 and also in *Il Convivio* 4.3, 10, 14, 15, and in *Le Roman de la Rose* 6579-92 and 11607-896, and in *De Consolatione Philosophiae* 2. pr. vi.; 3. pr. iii - met. iii; 3.pr. vi and 3. met. vi. (A. J. Minnis argues that the *locus classicus* of the distinction between 'nobility of soul' and 'nobility by ancestry and rank' is Book III, pr. iii-met. iii of the *Consolation*; A. J. Minnis *et al*, eds., *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism c.1100-c.1375* (1988; with corrections and additions, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 381). The trope is thoroughly traced by G. McG. Vogt, 'Gleanings for the History of a Sentiment: *Generositas virtus, non sanguis*', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 24 (1925), 102-24. The post-medieval history of the trope is discussed by Mervyn James, *Society, Politics and Culture: Studies in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 1986), 310, 375-83 and by M. Misztal, 'Generositas virtus, non sanguis? The importance of noble birth in Castiglione's Perfect Courtier', *Studia Romantica I,* ed. Regina Lubas-Bartoszyńska (Cracow, 2001), 95-102.

closest to what has been termed the Chaucerian "ethos"'.[9] Mary Carruthers
makes a similar point in her influential essay.[10] Basing her conclusions more on
the literary than the social evidence for the status of the Franklin, and of the
'vavasour' in particular, she moves directly from a statement of the worthiness
of the Franklin to an approving account of the 'wholesome results' produced in
his dignified tale.

The tendency to make an equation between high social standing, and a
high (in our received sense) moral outlook, is evident in much of the literature
on the Franklin.[11] There have been several studies of the socially unfit and low-
born, demonstrating, as in the case of Griselda, a capacity for morally superior
behaviour.[12] And, at the other end of the spectrum, there are such high-born
transgressors as the Monk, who fall short, in moral terms, of high social status
and office. That there are people (or characters) who are poor-but-decent or
rich-but-wicked, however, is surely unobjectionable in all but the most snobbish
of circles. And while literary scholars have been happy for some time to
entertain the idea of the 'open work', the values themselves of the 'good' and
the 'moral' remain somewhat uninterrogated, with the result that Nietzsche's
attempt to transvalue the value of the good still looks quite fresh, at least as far
as the practice of literary scholarship of the Middle Ages goes. The vanguard of
the post-linguistic turn in literary studies tended for many years to eschew moral
issues in favour of the morally neutral activity of tracing internal inconsistency
and hermeneutic complexity, or at the more new-historical end of things, of
politicised faultlines of gender and class. Even while philosophers and
deconstructionists themselves were actually devoting more and more time and
space to moral and ethical questions, literary critics were busy either reacting

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[9] Specht, p. 156.
[10] Mary Carruthers, 'The Gentilesse of Chaucer's Franklin,' *Criticism* 23 (1981), 283-
300.
[11] See note 4 above.
[12] See, for example, Marjorie Swan, 'The Clerk's "Gentil Tale" Heard Again', *English
Studies in Canada* 13 (1987): 136-46; Bernard Levy, 'Gentilesse in Chaucer's "Clerk's"
and "Merchant's" Tales', *Chaucer Review* 11 (1977): 306-18; Mary Carruthers, 'The
Lady, the Swineherd, and Chaucer's Clerk', *Chaucer Review* 17 (1983) 221-34.

against the incursions of theory, or frantically updating the discipline of literary study so that all problems became linguistic. The discussion of purely moral issues and values in literature has been largely left to more methodologically and philosophically conservative critics, with the result that the moral approach has for some time looked distinctly old-fashioned.

Nietzsche objected, in *On the Genealogy of Morality* and elsewhere, to the argument, which he associates with 'these English psychologists' that what is now valued as 'the good' was originally that which was useful or beneficial to the beneficiaries of the acts in question: '"Originally" – they decree – "unegoistic acts were praised and called good by their recipients, in other words, by the people to whom they were *useful*; later, everyone *forgot* the origin of the praise and because such acts had always been *routinely* praised as good, people began also to experience them as good – as if they were something good *as such*"'.[13] Instead, he maintains that what is now the good was originally the powerful, and that the powerful in fact disposed the values of good and bad, and right and wrong: 'it has been "the good" themselves, meaning the noble, the mighty, the high-placed and the high-minded, who saw and judged themselves and their actions as good, I mean first-rate, in contrast to everything lowly, low-minded, common and plebeian. It was from this *pathos of distance* that they first claimed the right to create values and give these values names: usefulness was none of their concern!'[14]

Nietzsche's ultimate target in this work is what he sees as a Judeo-Christian 'morality of pity', in which victims and 'recipients' get to see their values, bred out of *ressentiment*, triumph over the pagan, aristocratic, cruel, realistic and magnificent values of the elite, the hale, the hearty.[15] We could see the same thing in other, more medieval terms as the quiet, internal, invisible

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[13] *On the Genealogy of Morality*, p. 12.

[14] *Ibid.*

[15] E. R. Curtius points out, however, with reference to Cicero (*De inventione*, I, 16, 22), that in the field of rhetoric at least, 'humility is a pre-Christian term'. Curtius, p. 83. He goes on to describe the 'transfer of a pagan formula of self-disparagement to Christian use'. *Ibid.*, p. 85.

triumph of the imprisoned Boethius over the might and show of the apparently victorious Empire. It is the morality of the Beatitudes, and of the group for whom Nietzsche saves up his greatest loathing, the priests, who originally were one with the aristocratic rulers at an earlier phase of morality, but split from them to become their deadliest enemies. It is the official morality (and Chaucer was one of several artists who lampooned the clerics who betrayed this morality) of the medieval Church.

But was there room in the Middle Ages, and specifically, in the Chaucerian debates on the nature of *gentilesse*, for something like the Nietzschean enquiry into the very origin of moral values themselves? Three of Chaucer's most explicit treatments of the nature of *gentilesse* occur in 'The Wife of Bath's Tale', in the short poem 'Gentilesse', and in the 'Squire-Franklin link'. In all three cases what is advanced is a theory of a 'verray gentillesse' that is not determined by rank or wealth or inherited prestige, a *gentilesse* that is superior to and more abiding (in the private, non-material sense) than the social *gentilesse* which prevails in this shifting world of mutable material prosperity and inconstant Fortune. The former has a higher ontological status, in the Christian sense that it is the only *gentilesse* that finally counts in the ultimate test before God, but the latter has the edge in this world, and is the *de facto gentilesse* that governs the passage of wealth and prestige from generation to generation. The theme of *generositas virtus, non sanguis*, of a kind of *gentilesse* that is to be distinguished from the worldly tarnished thing that bears the same name, is of course commonplace by the time it reaches Chaucer. As G. McG. Vogt has shown, the trope appears in Seneca, Juvenal, Boethius, Andreas Capellanus, Jean de Meun, in Arthurian romances, in religious and devotional tracts, and in a wide range of popular French and English poems.[16] One well-

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[16] G. McG. Vogt, 'Gleanings for the History of a Sentiment: *Generositas virtus, non sanguis*', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 24 (1925), 102-24.

known instance of the trope appears in Dante's *Convivio*.[17] There Dante
distinguishes *gentilesse* from the wealth with which it is associated:

> riprovanda 'l giudicio falso e vile
>
> di quei che voglion che di gentilezza
>
> sia principio ricchezza. (15-17) [18]
>
> (refuting the false and base beliefs
>
> Of those who claim that riches
>
> Are the source of true nobility)

He does likewise with social rank and lineage, describing those who insist on an
intrinsic link between lineage and nobility as follows:

> Né voglion che vil uom gentil divegna,
>
> né di vil padre scenda
>
> nazion che per gentil già mai s'intenda;

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[17] Is it likely that Chaucer had any familiarity with the *Convivio*? Circulation of the
unfinished work appears to have been sparse in the period we are discussing, although
there is quite a number of fifteenth and late fourteenth century manuscripts. J. L. Lowes
argues for Chaucer's acquaintance with Book I ('Chaucer and Dante', *Modern Philology*
14 (1917), 734-5; also see his 'Chaucer and Dante's Convivio', *Modern Philology* 13
(1915), 19-33), and Piero Boitani argues that he must have known at least Book IV, and
the canzone that precedes it. Piero Boitani, 'What Dante Meant to Chaucer', in *Chaucer
and the Italian Trecento*, ed. Piero Boitani (Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 116
and 139. Howard H. Schless writes: 'The discussion of "gentilesse" by the loathly lady in
The Wife of Bath's Tale represents Chaucer's most explicit use of one of Dante's
doctrines. For this, Chaucer turned once more to tractate 4 of the *Convivio*, and, while
this borrowing might well be as much as twenty years after the *Invocacio*, the essential
method of interweaving found in the verbal synthesis of the Second Nun's Marian prayer
is found here in the synthesis of concepts drawn from many sources, but centering
principally on Dante, Boethius, and the interpolations in *The Romaunt of the Rose*'. So
while Schless concludes that Chaucer clearly did use the fourth tractate of the *Convivio*,
he considers that it would be foolish to attribute Chaucer's depiction of gentilesse
exclusively to his reading of Dante. Howard H. Schless, *Chaucer and Dante: A
Revaluation* (Norman, Oklahoma: Pilgrim Books, 1984), p. 170.

[18] Dante Alighieri, *Il Convivio*, ed. Giovanni Busnelli and Giuseppe Vandelli, 2 vols.
(1934; 2nd ed., Florence: Felice Le Monnier, 1964), from the canzone preceding Book 4,
Le dolci rime d'amor chi'i' solia. Translation by Richard H. Lansing, in *Il Convivio* (*The
Banquet*), pp. 138-47.

> questo è da lor confesso; (61-4)
>
> (Nor will they grant that one born base may yet
>
> Be noble, nor that a low-born father's progeny
>
> Be every thought to qualify as noble;
>
> For this is what they claim.)

Instead, Dante sets out to find the nature and origins of true nobility –

> e dicer voglio omai, sì com'io sento,
>
> che cosa è gentilezza, e da che vène, (78-9)
>
> (And now I wish to say, as I do feel,
>
> What is nobility and where it comes from,)

- and concludes that nobility is wherever virtue is: 'É gentilezza dovunqu'é vertute' (101) (Nobility resides wherever virtue is).

The most extensive Chaucerian account of this true *gentilesse* is that offered by the old woman towards the end of 'The Wife of Bath's Tale'. In response to the knight's charge that she is come of 'so lough a kynde' she denounces the identification of *gentilesse* with lineage and 'old richesse',[19] and argues instead that it is virtuous behaviour – 'gentil dedes'– that makes the gentle man. The *gentilesse* out of which these 'gentil dedes' grow comes from Christ: 'Crist wole we clayme of hym oure gentilesse' (1117). She distinguishes between the riches and lineage bequeathed by our ancestors, and the 'vertuous lyvyng' that earned them the title of gentle men in the first place.

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[19] John Scattergood points out, in his discussion of the phrase 'Old richesse' in 'Gentilesse' (line 15), that the origin of the phrase might lie in Jean de Meun's 'richeces ancienes' (*Roman de la Rose*, 20,313). John Scattergood, 'The Short Poems', in A. J. Minnis, V. J. Scattergood & J. J. Smith, *The Shorter Poems* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 484.

She provides therefore an analysis of *gentil* status and argues that it must be broken down into its components: the material property and social status that arose originally from the virtuous living of the ancestors, and the virtuous living itself, which cannot be passed on. In doing this, she assumes that social rank and wealth grow out of goodness as rewards. So, in one sense, she is doing what Nietzsche objected to in his comments on the English psychologists in his *Genealogy*: assuming that prestige, power, respect and wealth attach themselves in the beginning to virtuous persons.[20] This unity is not prone to inheritance however. The goods can be bequeathed, but not the virtue, nor the virtuous disposition, which proceeds from God alone. She continues and gives the example of the wicked son of a noble man: 'For, God it woot, men may wel often fynde/ A lordes sone do shame and vileynye' (1150-51).

The distinction that is being drawn then, is between *gentilesse* as rank, name, prestige and wealth, and *gentilesse* as virtuous behaviour and disposition. It is clear the latter comes about as a result of grace, and it is at this point that the special connection between grace and *gentilesse* is revealed:

> He nys nat gentil, be he duc or erl,
> For vileyns synful dedes make a cherl.
> For gentilesse nys but renomee
> Of thyne auncestres, for hire heigh bountee,
> Which is a strange thyng to thy persone.
> Thy gentilesse cometh fro God allone.
> Thanne comth oure verray gentilesse of grace;
> It was no thyng biquethe us with oure place. (1157-64)

The old woman concludes with a statement of her hope and belief that she might still be *gentil*, if God should so favour her with grace:

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[20] *On the Genealogy of Morality*, p. 12.

Al were it that myne auncestres were rude,

Yet may the hye God, and so hope I,

Grante me grace to lyven vertuously.

Thanne am I *gentil*, whan that I bigynne

To lyven vertuously and weyve synne. (1172-6)

II: *'For unto vertu longeth dignitee': Grace and* gentilesse

A similar belief that 'genterye/ Is nat annexed to possessioun', is displayed, to different effect in each case, in 'The Clerk's Tale' and 'The Merchant's Tale'. But perhaps the next most succinct example of Chaucer's version of the theory of *generostitas virtus, non sanguis* occurs in the short poem 'Gentillesse'. There has been some argument as to whether the 'firste stok' in line 1 refers to God the Father, or Christ, or Adam.[21] In one of the few interpretative studies of the poem, Valerie Allen objects to the identification of the 'firste stok' with Adam on the grounds that it robs the poem of the very force of its central metaphor, by which blood kinship (such as that of Adam and the human race) serves as the image for spiritual kinship (that of God and man):

[Adam] is already the literal progenitor of man; and if he is also named by the ballade as 'fader of gentilesse' then the entire

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[21] Valerie Allen, 'The 'Firste Stok' in Chaucer's *Gentilesse*: Barking up the Right Tree', *Review of English Studies* 40 (1989): 531-37; Aage Brusendorff, *The Chaucer Tradition* (London, 1925), p. 257; V. J. Scattergood, 'The Short Poems', in A. J. Minnis, V. J. Scattergood & J. J. Smith, *The Shorter Poems* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp. 483-6. There has been a number of articles on the question of the identity of Adam. John Scattergood considered the poem from the perspective of genre in 'The Jongleur, the Copyist and the Printer: The Tradition of Chaucer's "Wordes unto Adam, His Own Scriveyn"', in *Courtly Literature: Culture and Context*, ed. Keith Busby and Erik Kooper (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1990), 499-508.

structure of heredity as the metaphor for moral relationship collapses.[22]

According to Allen, 'Chaucer uses an image of heredity to indicate a moral as distinct from blood, relationship. The exemplar of this virtue is called the 'fader of gentilesse' (1) and those who emulate his virtue are his heirs (12; 20)'. For her the phrases 'firste stok' and 'fader of gentilesse' refer to God. She goes on to discuss the question of whether or not Chaucer is drawing a distinction between God the Father and God the Son, and concludes that the phrases 'fader of gentilesse' (1) and 'fader in magestee' (19) describe God the Father, while Christ is referred to as the virtuous 'firste stok' of stanza two, although 'Chaucer is not working any strict distinction between them. He alludes to Christ qua exemplar and human model of *gentilesse* and to God qua father of the virtue; fatherhood is the image of spiritual rather than blood kinship'.[23]

But does the poem really describe the relationship between God and man in the metaphoric terms of the blood kinship of a natural father and son? Is Christ in fact depicted in the poem as an exemplar and model for human emulation? Might it not indeed be Adam that the poem depicts in its references to the 'firste stok' and the 'fader of gentilesse'?[24] Blood kinship is explicitly not the

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[22] Allen, p. 534.

[23] *Ibid*, p. 533.

[24] Is there any corroborating support elsewhere in Chaucer, or indeed in contemporary medieval references to Adam, to sustain the argument that the virtuous 'firste stok' of Chaucer's ballade, is indeed Adam? John Lydgate certainly read Chaucer's poem in this way, if his own 'Thoroughfare of Woe' is indeed the nod to Chaucer that it appears to be:
Oure fader Adam bygan with sore travaille,
Whan he was flemed out of Paradice.
Lord! What might than *gentilesse* availe,
The first[e] stokke of labour toke his price;
Adam in the tilth whilom was holden wyse,
And Eve in spynnyng prudent was also,
For to declare as be myn advise,
How this world is a thurghfare of woo. (33-40)

metaphor for the spiritual relationship between God and man, although it surely does govern the relationship between the natural generations of man. Something quite other than either blood kinship or the system of inheritance that springs from blood kinship is needed to describe the relationship between God and man. The first two stanzas of the ballade are concerned with this 'firste stok' and his heir, and the fact that *gentilesse* is not passed down from father to son:[25]

John Lydgate, *The Minor Poems*. Here we can see the unambiguous use of the term 'firste stokke' to describe Adam. Also we see the attribution of *gentilesse* to the pre-lapsarian Adam (even if he soon jettisoned his natural advantages). See Julia Boffey on the circulation of Chaucer's poems in the fifteenth century in 'The Reputation and Circulation of Chaucer's Lyrics in the Fifteenth Century', *Chaucer Review* 28 (1993), 23-40. In William of Shoreham's 'On the Trinity, Creation, the Existence of Evil, Devils, Adam and Eve &c' William attributes wisdom and virtue to pre-lapsarian Adam: 'þare-fore god made hym god and wys, / And mayster ouer al paradys,' (601-2), *The Poems of William of Shoreham*, ed. M. Konrath, 2 vols. (London, 1902). *Piers Plowman* contains a very wide range of nuanced references to Adam, including the following positive reference to Adam as the father from whom humanity took its forms of organization: 'Wedlok and widwehode with virginite ynempned,/ In tokenynge of the Trinite was taken out of o man - / Adam, oure alle fader; Eve was of hymselve', William Langland, *Piers Plowman: a critical edition of the B-text based on Trinity College Cambridge MS B.15.17*, ed. A. V. C. Schmidt (London: J. M. Dent, 1995), XVI, 205. Describing the medieval attitudes to the question of Adam as ancestor, Vogt makes the following point: 'the tendency, on the whole, was to accept, without question, Adam as the unique ancestor of the human race and to believe, therefore, that all men were originally noble and might become so again so far as there was anything in the nature of the structure of society to prevent them', 'Gleanings for the History of a Sentiment', p. 109. Vogt also presents numerous variations on the motif of the delving Adam, and makes the following remark: '"When Adam delved" did yeoman's service in medieval literature in connection with our sentiment. Dante's use of it in the present work [*Convivio*] is as follows: He argues, with considerable complication, that those who insist that baseness and nobility are qualities planted non-transferably in different men from the beginning really deny our descent from Adam; for their contention postulates the belief that there must always have been more than one man on the earth: which, of course, (and as Dante himself adds), was not generally tenable in his day', p. 108. V. J. Scattergood makes the point that the poem is 'in some sense polyvocal', and that Lydgate's reading of the poem makes sense. See V. J. Scattergood, 'The Short Poems', p. 485. Lee Patterson discusses the late fourteenth-century political uses made of the idea of a pre-lapsarian noble Adam in *Chaucer and the Subject of History*, pp. 264-5.

[25] In Chaucer's head-on treatments (in 'Gentilesse' and WBT) of the means by which nobility is achieved, the focus tends to be entirely upon inheritance, blood kinship, old families, etc. In these sections of his work, Chaucer does not really deal at all with the fact that many people, including arguably himself, achieved (social) *gentilesse* on the

> And, but his heir love vertu as dide he
>
> He is noght gentil, thogh he riche seme (12-13)

The hypothetical young man referred to in these lines is an heir, irrespective of whether he is virtuous or not. Human inheritance is seen as something that is automatic and almost natural. It is based on blood kinship, which is certainly natural. It is easy to be an heir. What is tricky is the ascent to *gentilesse*. What is not bequeathed is the love of virtue that indicates true *gentilesse*.

Allen, as we have seen, is sure that God (whether God the Son or God the Father) is referred to by the phrases 'firste stok' and 'fader of *gentilesse*', and that the poem is a meditation on the spiritual relationship between God and man, in the metaphorical terms of the natural relationship between human father and son. However, what the first two stanzas of the poem make clear is that *gentilesse* is excluded from the relationship of blood kinship and the process of inheritance. In line with Dante's exposition in the *Convivio*, and the old

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basis of services rendered (or trade, for that matter) rather than pedigree inherited. The related evidence (see S. J. Payling, 'Social Mobility, Demographic Change, and Landed Society in Late Medieval England', *Economic History Review* XLV, I (1992), pp. 51-73, especially p. 63-4, and K. B. McFarlane, *The Nobility of Later Medieval England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), pp. 276-7) that primogeniture declined as a basis for inheritance in the fourteenth century is also unacknowledged in these explicit treatments of the topic. The result is that the old, social *gentilesse*, against which the Christian verray *gentilesse* is defined, is little more than a straw man and a literary cliché. The evidence of the period offers little corroboration for the notion that the passage of worldly wealth and prestige is primarily governed by a kind of default natural human mechanism of inheritance (primogeniture is implied). In fact, the roads to nobility were many. Now, in the less sermonly treatments of this issue, such as that in 'The Franklin's Tale', and elsewhere in the roadside drama of the poem as a whole, much more attention is paid to the complexity of the phenomenon of the acquisition of *gentilesse*. K. B. McFarlane describes the relationship between wealth and nobility in *The Nobility of Later Medieval England* (Oxford, 1973). Nigel Saul has argued that Chaucer is more interested in the gentility of virtue than that of birth or wealth, in 'Chaucer and Gentility', in *Chaucer's England: Literature in Historical Context* ed. Barbara Hanawalt (Minneapolis, 1991), pp.41-55. David Burnley describes the development of aristocratic ideas of nobility in the Middle Ages, as they appear in Anglo-Norman and English writing, in *Courtliness and Literature in Medieval England* (London and New York, 1998). See E. F. Jacob on the 'rising generosus' in the fifteenth century, *The Fifteenth Century 1399-1485*, p. 343.

woman's in 'The Wife of Bath's Tale', this short poem contrasts the mechanism of human inheritance with the phenomenon of true *gentilesse*. Certainly the poem plays with the terms of worldly inheritance and blood kinship, but to the extent that it deploys these terms metaphorically, it serves to reveal the lack of resemblance between natural and supernatural relations. The poem has a progressive structure, rather than a singular metaphoric unity.

This progression is apparent in the relation between the first two stanzas and the third, which not only clarifies and summarises ideas already expressed, but also delivers an answer to the problem of the source of *gentilesse*. In the first two stanzas, it is the difficulty of achieving *gentilesse* that is stressed: *gentilesse* is not part of the bequeathed goods and benefits passed down from ancestor to descendent. It is its non-availability that is stressed, together with its desirability. *Gentilesse* is greatly to be desired, but elusive.

In the second stanza, it is very clear that only by loving virtue will the heir (be he good, bad or indifferent) be *gentil*: 'And but his heir love vertu as dide he, / He is noght gentil, thogh he riche seme.' The first two stanzas deal with human inheritance, and with the irony that the first man, although he was himself sinless before the fall, nonetheless bequeathed nothing of his own original nobility to his offspring. While the poem is not at all directly concerned with the fact that Adam actually deprived his own offspring of the legacy of natural integrity that they would have inherited had it not been for the fall, the logic of this sequence of events is nonetheless consistent with the poem's logic. It is in the ballade's concluding stanza that the shift from natural to supernatural relations occurs. The world of natural blood relations between human generations is left behind with the phrase 'But ther may no man…' from the stanza's opening lines:

> Vyce may wel be heir to old richesse,
> But ther may no man, as men may wel see,
> Bequethe his heir his virtuous noblesse (15-17)

The nub of the matter is here: the capacity for *gentilesse* does not spring from humanity, even from humans who are good themselves. No amount of good example (in the form of the virtuous pre-lapsarian Adam) can have even the slightest effect on the tendency of fallen man to favour vice over virtue. Allen's argument that the 'firste stok', whom she identifies as Christ, is an 'exemplar' and 'human model for *gentilesse*' overlooks the fact that the poem stresses in the climactic third stanza that there is only one way of achieving *gentilesse*, and that involves not achieving it, but rather being given it, by God. God gives *gentilesse* (which is a kind of secular stand-in for grace) to man, in view of the sacrifice of Christ, which made amends for the taint of original sin.[26] 'Gentilesse' describes a virtuous and *gentil* first ancestor, who does not bequeath his *gentilesse* to his son, who is his heir in all other respects. This ancestor is Adam. Adam was originally virtuous (Aquinas says that he possessed 'in one way or another...all the virtues').[27] and that 'just as the first man was established in perfect bodily maturity, capable of immediate procreation, so was he established in perfect maturity of soul, capable of immediately instructing and directing others'),[28] but because of his sin, rather than passing his *gentilesse* on to his descendants, he deprived them, even tainted them. The first two stanzas of the poem reproduce the logic of this story: the unhappy paradox of the *gentil* father who passed on everything but his *gentilesse*. This lack, this privation, must be healed, but man cannot heal it himself.

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[26] The pre-medieval and medieval versions of the *imitatio Christi* appear to have focused on the affective and inner spiritual life, i.e. on identification with the suffering and deprivations of Christ's way of life, and especially, his way of death, rather than on the notion of positive, practical moral example. The philosophy of 'What would Jesus do?' (sometimes abbreviated to WWJD?) popular within modern American Protestantism is a feature of a later, post-reformation, more pragmatic phase of the Christian religion. Giles Constable assesses the late medieval tradition of the imitation of Christ in *Three Studies in Medieval Religious and Social Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 143-248, and he provides a survey of the literature on the subject.

[27] *ST*, 1a.95,3: 'So the rightness of the first state demanded that man in some way or other should have all the virtues'.

[28] *ST*, 1a.94,3.

Thereafter, in the final stanza, the poem has to move beyond mere human ancestors and their heirs: after all, no man can bequeath his *gentilesse* to his heirs. The sequence of ideas in the poem culminates here: the power to give *gentilesse* lies with one power in the universe only, and that is the supreme power:

> (That is appropred unto no degree
> But to the firste fader in magestee,
> That maketh hem his heyres that him queme) (18-20)

God, (in all three persons, as Aquinas makes clear),[29] makes or *maketh*, as Chaucer has it, his heirs. The relationship between God and man is best described not by the metaphor of blood kinship or natural sonship, but by that of adoption. God's adopted sons, and thus, his heirs, are made, and not begotten.[30] This adoptive sonship comes about as a result of the operation of grace on the soul, and only the mysterious supernatural cycle of grace and merit, culminating in supernatural adoption, explains the treatment of *gentilesse* in the poem. Allen plays up the importance of the 'firste stok' as an exemplar, and argues for a 'moral rapport' between God and man, as well as a 'moral aristocracy' of the heirs of the 'fader of *gentilesse*'. But one of the points of the poem is to show how little (nothing at all in terms of achieving salvation) man can do on his own, or, for that matter, in co-operation with other men. The final stanza gives expression to the cycle that begins and ends in God: He makes into his heirs those who please him ('that him queme'), but the capacity of these heirs to please God itself originates with God. Augustine gives eloquent expression to this cyclicity of grace: 'If, then, your good merits are God's gifts, God does not

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[29] *ST*, 3.23,2: 'Therefore it belongs to the whole Trinity to adopt men as sons of God.'
[30] *Ibid*: 'There is this difference between an adopted son of God and the natural Son of God, that the latter is 'begotten not made'; whereas the former is made, according to John 1:12 "He gave them power to be made by the sons of God".'

crown your merits as your merits, but as His own gifts'.[31] Even the love of virtue referred to in lines 2 ('What man that desireth gentil for to be') and 12 ('And, but his heir love vertu as dide he') begins with God, in the form of prevenient grace, as we see in Aquinas:

> Man's turning to God does indeed take place by his free decision, and in this sense man is enjoined to turn himself to God. But the free decision can only be turned to God when God turns it to himself, as it says in Jeremiah, Turn me, and I shall be turned; for thou art the Lord my God, and in Lamentations, Turn us, O Lord, to thee, and we shall be turned.[32]

The man of the first stanza, then, who 'desireth gentil for to be' can do nothing on his own:

> It is the part of man to prepare his soul, since he does this by his free choice. And yet he does not do this without the help of God moving him, and drawing him to Himself, as was said above.[33]

Only once the way has been prepared can the will start to co-operate with the grace that acts upon the soul, and ultimately do meritorious acts.

What this short poem affirms, then, is the gratuitousness of the gift of grace that enables man to perform meritorious acts, and the essential link between this gift of grace and the human quality of *gentilesse*. Allen describes *gentilesse* as 'a virtue' in several places, but *gentilesse* is more properly to be thought of as, like grace, a quality, disposing one, in the case of what came to be

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[31] Augustine, 'On Grace and Free Will', chapter 15, in *Saint Augustin: Anti-Pelagian Writings*, trans. Peter Holmes and Robert Ernest Wallis, vol. 5 of *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Series One, ed. Philip Schaff *et al.*, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1887; rev. ed. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1956), p. 450.
[32] *ST,* 1a2æ.109,6.
[33] *Ibid.*

known in the post-medieval period as sanctifying grace, towards virtue.[34] The poem distinguishes between the virtuous acts that the *gentil* man performs, and *gentilesse* itself, which enables the performance of these acts. The pleasing and meritorious acts of virtue do not come into existence without the direct operation of grace. Augustine asserted the unequivocally gratuitous nature of the gift of grace and the cyclical relationship between this gift and the acts of virtue that it enables: 'For it was by the self-same faith in the one Mediator that the hearts of these, too, were cleansed, and there also was "shed abroad in them the love of God by the Holy Ghost," "who bloweth where He listeth," not following men's merits, but even producing these very merits Himself'.[35] The use of the word 'appropred', from the Old French *aproprier* in line 18 is interesting in that it refers first to the fact that only God disposes *gentilesse*, and second, it suggests that the gifts he gives come back to him as pleasing and meritorious acts.

The point reiterated in the medieval theories of true nobility is thus that *gentilesse*, like grace, is a pure gift from God, and any meritorious results which this infused capacity for virtue produces redound to the glory of God. This is the view of *gentilesse* (and grace) that informs Chaucer's short poem, and it is a view that conforms more or less to the doctrine of grace taught in the schools.

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[34] Aquinas describes grace as a quality of the soul in *ST*, 1a2æ.110,3, and objects to the identification, which he attributes to Peter Lombard, of grace with virtue: 'Just as then the natural light of reason is something apart from the acquired virtues which are characterized with reference to the natural light itself, so too that light of grace, which is a participation in the divine nature, is something apart from the infused virtues, which are derived from that light and directed to that light. And so Paul says, *Once you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord; walk like sons of light.* For just as the acquired virtues perfect a man so that he may walk in a way which befits the natural light of reason, so the infused virtues perfect a man so that he may walk in a way which befits the light of grace.'

[35] Augustine, 'On Original Sin', chapter 28 [XXIV], in *Saint Augustin: Anti-Pelagian Writings*, trans. Peter Holmes and Robert Ernest Wallis, vol. 5 of *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Series One, ed. Philip Schaff *et al.* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1887; rev. ed. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1987), p. 247.

So much for the ideal. But the specifics of the theological tendencies of Chaucer's short poem aside, there were less pure, less theologically respectable views of *gentilesse* in circulation when Chaucer was writing. Try as the Franklin might to differentiate his view of the new Christian *gentilesse* from the snobbish social version, for instance, he cannot rid his speech on true *gentilesse* of the marks of money and material prosperity. He says 'Fy on possessioun!' but nonetheless considers that his son could not possibly learn true *gentilesse* from a mere page. The theoretical rigour that we see in the scholastic teaching on grace and merit, in the work of Dante, and on a smaller scale in Chaucer's lyric, is conspicuously absent in the Franklin's own treatment of *gentilesse*. This co-existence in Chaucer's work of the idealized theory of *gentilesse* and the idiosyncratic articulation of this theory by an individual character brings us to the question of whether, in our attempt to understand *The Canterbury Tales*, we would be better off looking at the popular practice of religion in the late Middle Ages, rather than the teachings of theologians. Was there a popular view of grace that did not coincide with the ideas promulgated in the schools? It goes without saying that one compelling reason for preferring to focus on Aquinas, or Eckhart, or Abelard, rather than the inhabitants of Eastcheap is the vast documentary evidence in the case of the former, and the much more elusive and patchy information available about the latter. However, we do have a substantial document concerned with popular devotion in *The Canterbury Tales* itself. One of the things that Chaucer seems to have set out to do in the poem is represent the making of culture by relatively unimportant people. The big names are there – Dante, Boccaccio, Boethius, etc. – but they are contained within the discourses of little people. The design of the poem as a series of articulations and discourses by sundry ordinary people, in which articulations one finds a range of ideas running from Boethian philosophy to dream theory, underlines the shift in interest away from ideas for their own sake to ideas as handled and presented by a variety of selves. The overall interest of the poem, revealed in its structure and organization, is in the participation in the making of the world by non-entities.

Michel de Certeau has written in *The Practice of Everyday Life* of the ways in which the supposed consumers of culture in fact perform a kind of production of their own.[36] Now Chaucer's poem depicts consumers of a kind – consumers of philosophy, of theology, and more literally, of relics and of pilgrimages. Yet above all, the poem represents these suppliants as providers – of cheer, entertainment, moral 'sentence', laughter, noble stories, *gentilesse*, morality, harlotry and holiness. While they need the gift of the grace of God to enable them to achieve salvation, they're damned if they're going to sit around waiting for it to come to them. While the theologians are insisting on the absolute gratuitousness and freedom of the gift of grace, the pilgrims are going to Canterbury in order to say their prayers of intercession, to attach their votaries, even maybe to confuse the intermediary of St. Thomas with the God they are trying to reach. A century and a half later these behaviours would be condemned by reformist thinkers as attempts to bribe the Almighty God, who dispenses grace as He alone wishes. The relics, the indulgences, the statues, the favours, even the prayers as they were commonly understood, all came to be seen as manifestions of a weak-minded and superstitious system of abuses in need of serious correction.

<center>III: <i>The Gift</i></center>

In the theory of what has come to be known as 'the gift', after Mauss's essay, it is the non-existence of the gratuitous gift that is most important.[37] Hence such paradoxical phrases as the 'gift economy', and the emphasis in Mauss's writing on reciprocity and cyclicity. Derrida has taken this into the philosophical and philological realm and written of the impossibility of the gift: since the gift

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[36] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), pp. xiv-xvii and 15-44.

[37] Marcel Mauss, 'Essai sur le Don. Forme et Raison de l'Échange dans les Sociétés archaïques', *L'Année sociologique*, I (1923-24), 30-186, and trans. as Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. W. D. Halls (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1990).

always invites return there can be no gift.[38] Arguably, in trying to

programmatically create from the top down a theory of a gratuitous and

unmerited gift, reformers like Calvin in particular, were trying to overcome the

very impossibility of the gift that Derrida detects. By suppressing the myriad

little ways in which the devout had shown God that they were inclined to Him,

that they sought his grace and his mercy, the reformers tried to impose a

theoretical rigour on the gift, that simply did not exist in practice.[39] In popular

Catholic practice, as Eamon Duffy and others have shown, there was no end to

the offerings that the devout individual might make to God, from the sacrifice of

the mass, to the penitential behaviours and deprivations, to the pilgrimages and

devotions, to the paying of tithes, to the lighting of candles and the offering of

alms.[40] Strictly speaking, as we have seen, the doctrine of grace elaborated by

Aquinas, and formally ratified by the Church on several occasions both pre- and

post-Reformation, acknowledged no such reciprocity. God was in no way bound

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[38] Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 1-70.

[39] On this subject of Calvin and gifts, see Natalie Zemon Davis's excellent essay, *The Gift* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 187-208.

[40] Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), pp. 91-130, 266-98 and 368-76; R. N. Swanson, *Religion and Devotion in Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 136-190; Barbara Abou-El-Haj, *The Medieval Cult of Saints: Formations and Transformations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 19; Edward J. Kilmartin, *The Eucharist in the West: History and Theology*, ed. Robert J. Daly (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1998), pp. 109-15 and 165-68. Kilmartin describes both the development of the offertory procession, and the rise of the 'mass stipend', and the impact of these two phenomena in the later Middle Ages. On the changes in the nature of the offertory, he makes the following comments: 'However, an important distinction must be made between two first-millennium understandings of the practice of offering a gift to a priest in order that an intention might be included explicitly in his intercessory prayer in the Mass. One of these understandings is based on the old Roman notion of gift-giving which does not entail reciprocity. Gifts freely given are freely received without the obligation of recompense. From this point of view the priest who accepts the gift given in view of a special remembrance at Mass is considered to be bound in charity – but not, strictly, in justice – to remember the donor's intention. But there is another understanding of gift-giving which gave rise to a different understanding of the relationship of the priest to the donor of a gift. In this other understanding, the gift is made with the request for a special remembrance in the Mass', p. 112.

to give grace to those who sacrificed to Him, or sought to please Him. In this respect, the pre-reformation formal teaching of the Catholic Church was really not much less exacting than the reformers' insistence on the irrelevance of good works to the process of justification and salvation.

If the tales seem to be informed both by a popular view of grace, in which the emphasis is less on the gratuitousness of the gift, and more on the reciprocity and cyclicity of the relationship between God and man, and a more radical view, at once Augustinian and voluntarist/reformist, in which God gives a purely gratuitous gift to the undeserving sinner, how does this split between theory and practice affect the human virtue of generosity, whereby man gives gifts to others?

The Franklin asserts unequivocally his belief in the superior status of *verray gentilesse* over worldly *gentilesse* in his words to the Squire in the Squire-Franklin link. He aligns himself with the morally superior code of *virtus, non sanguis* when he declares 'Fy on possessioun,/ But if a man be virtuous withal!' And unlike those villeins whom Postan describes as accepting villein status in order to retain their manorial land-holdings the Franklin prefers to refuse land (albeit hypothetically) in favour of true *gentilesse* for his wayward son.[41] In a demonstration of the Franklin's ostensible attachment to the theory of *virtus*, *non sanguis*, the son has not taken automatically after the *gentil* father, and instead of attending to *gentilesse*, prefers to waste his worldly inheritance on extravagant consumption and gambling (although we might see something of the father in the prodigality of the son).

From the lines on *gentilesse* in the 'Squire-Franklin link', the Franklin moves on in the tale to an examination of the working of *gentilesse* and specifically of *fredom*. The etymology of the words *fre* and *fredom* brings us back to the question of the two kinds of *gentilesse*, and also back to the Nietzschean question of the origin of the value of 'the good'. The Old English

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[41] M. M. Postan, 'Medieval Agrarian Society in its Prime: England,' in *The Cambridge Economic History of Europe*, Vol. I, 2nd ed., ed. M. M. Postan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), pp. 613-4.

word *fréo* originally signified kinship with the head of the household.[42] Later it detaches itself from this origin and comes to mean the virtue with which nobility is especially associated – liberality or generosity. The etymologies of *generosity*, of *liberality* and *fredom* all seem to demonstrate, as we will see, the Nietzschean claim that power precedes virtue, that it in fact defines and disposes virtue. The generous man was originally the man who was materially able to give, in the sense that he possessed a lot of wealth, and was free and/or noble. Later, in the system of Christian morality that Nietzsche despised, the generous man is the man (or widow with her mite) who is spiritually able to give, regardless of his material wealth, or lack thereof. He has virtue but not necessarily blood (although he might coincidentally have both, of course, the difficulty of the camel and the needle notwithstanding).

IV: *Economic Man*

Nietzsche's assault on what he sees as a Christian delineation of a realm of pure morality has been vindicated in the twentieth century. Nineteenth and twentieth century economics and political science tend to agree with Nietzsche as to the impossibility of such a thing as purely unselfish, unegoistic behaviour. Nietzsche's tendency, however, is to exaggerate the novelty of his own insights (when it is actually the vigour and beauty of his expression of them that is often of the greatest interest). He likes to set up straw men, such as 'those English psychologists' whom we mentioned earlier, those moralists who are obsessed with finding the good, the 'partie honteuse' in the inner life of mankind.[43] He sets up these intellectual clods (in his preface he reveals that he actually had in mind the German Paul Rée, his onetime friend and author of *The Origin of Moral Sentiments*) in his opening paragraph, describing them as possibly motivated by 'a secret, malicious, mean instinct to belittle man, which is perhaps unacknowledged?' That Nietzsche probably had a malicious and mean

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[42] *OED*, 2nd ed., s. v. 'free'; *MED*, s. v. 'fre'.
[43] *On the Genealogy of Morality*, p. 11.

instinct in the direction of Paul Rée by the time he came to write *On the Genealogy of Morality* he himself does not acknowledge.[44]

In fact, in and around the time that Nietzsche was writing his *Genealogy*, there were plenty of people who took the view that man basically acts in his own self-interest when it comes to the goods of the earth. It is the mistaken belief (and sometimes part of the charm) of extreme thinkers of every era that most other humans are naively and single-mindedly devoted to a fallacy. That communists, and a breed of 'new' economists had been arguing for a more equal distribution of wealth from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards, should not obscure the fact that Whigs and Smithsonians of every hue were combating this dewy-eyed (but also dangerous) progressivism with a strong repeat prescription for *laissez-faire, laissez-passez*. The 1880s and 90s (*On the Genealogy of Morality* was published in 1887) saw the publication of numerous articles and books defending the perfect fit between liberal, non-interventionist economics, and 'homo economicus' himself. The natural 'economic man', according, for example, to a prominent Irish-American advocate of free trade, E. L. Godkin, writing in 1891, 'desires above all things, and without reference to ethical considerations, to get as much of the world's goods as he can with the least possible expenditure of energy on his part. The fact that he is not humane or God-fearing no more affects his usefulness for scientific purposes than the fact that the first law of motion would carry a cannon ball through a poor man's cottage.'[45]

From the point of view of the interest of Nietzsche's writings, it is probably just as well that he paid little attention to the facts of what was and wasn't current thinking. How else, but by ignoring the diversity of opinion on earth, could he have come up with his prophetic isolated madman on the

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[44] The triangular relationship between Rée, Nietzsche and Lou Salomé finally collapsed in November, 1882. This brought to an end Nietzsche's friendship with Rée. Ronald Hayman describes this phase of Nietzsche's life in *Nietzsche: A Critical Life* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980), pp. 244-254.

[45] E. L. Godkin, 'The Economic Man', *The North American Review* 153, Issue 419 (October, 1981), 493-503; 494.

mountaintops? In any case, the opinion that man is intrinsically self-interested, an opinion that would seem to be borne out by the example of many of the pilgrims in the *Canterbury Tales*, especially by those officially dedicated to self-denial, is neither new nor outmoded. The question is, is it possible that the *Tales* could have been conceived (in part) as an enquiry into the material causes and historical origins of values, values which were more usually treated in the late Middle Ages under the rubric of man's relationship to God, rather than man's relationship to other men? Now Chaucer's text is so rich, and the ingenuity and sophistry of scholars so boundless, that it could be made to support virtually any hypothesis under the sun. A glance at any Chaucer bibliography will demonstrate that it not only could, but does, support hugely contradictory theses. After all, there is a plenitude of text, and an infinitude of possible methods to deal with it. So not only is a whole range of anachronistic methods and theories applied to the text, but a concomitant flood of anachronistic authorial attitudes is precipitated from it. For at least a decade before the advance of new historicism, it was quite acceptable for a literary critic to entirely ignore history, and to concentrate on the application of theory to the text. This wasn't necessarily a bad thing. Many superb readings of Chaucer and other writers were accomplished because of the linguistic turn that criticism took. But what if we do want to test a particular view of the text against history, in this case, the theory that the *Canterbury Tales* is profane, not in the sense that it is anti-religious, but in the sense that it is concerned with man-as-the-maker-of-meaning rather than man as the recipient of a fundamentally divine order and meaning? Would history support this kind of claim? Could a person be having such thoughts in the 1380s and 1390s?

The academic curricula of the Middle Ages clearly did not display categories such as sociology, political science or economics. But does that absence mean that a person could not have an 'economic' thought, before the isolation of economics as a distinctive body of thought or study, or before the 'financial revolution'? In the compendia of the early Middle Ages, in for instance, a work like Macrobius's *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, dream-theory, literary

theory, proto-physics and astronomy are all within the pages of the same book, although none bears the name we give it today, and each leaks into the other with an absence of that specializing rigour that we demand today.[46] The materialist emphasis of the kind of historical literary criticism that is practiced today certainly provides an indispensable corrective to the universalizing tendency of new criticism's belief in the unchanging mind of man. Yet perhaps it too is in need of correction, lest it overstate the dependency of the individual human mind on the specific culture in which it flourished.

One of the problems with the theory of 'economic man', as it was developed in classical economics, is the limitation of its descriptive and predictive usefulness. Other human sciences (such as sociology and psychology) will have to supplement economics if we are to explain non-self-interested behaviour (sometimes known as altruism), and irrationality in decision making. Where the usefulness of 'economic man' ends, philanthropy, politics, welfare economics or ethics take over. Godkin, like many nineteenth-century neo-classical liberal economists accepts this state of affairs and considers that 'ethics, and religion in so far as it furnishes a sanction for ethics, exists for the purpose of deflecting [economic man] from his natural course.'[47] More recently though, economists have sought to bring irrationality and altruism into the economist's remit. James Coleman is dissatisfied with the incapacity of classical economics to clarify the extent and nature of 'self-interest': 'Classical economic theory always assumes that the individual will "act in his interest"; but it never examined carefully the entity to which "his" refers.'[48] The fact that people do behave in ways which do not directly fulfil

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[46] Ambrosius Theodosius Macrobius, *Commentary on the 'Dream of Scipio'*, trans. William H. Stahl (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952).
[47] *Ibid.*, p.494.
[48] James S. Coleman, 'Individual Interests and Collective Action', *Papers on Non-Market Decision-Making* 1 (1966), 49-62; 55. Quoted by Howard Margolis, *Selfishness, Altruism and Rationality: A Theory of Social Choice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 1. I am indebted to Jo Ann Burgess of the Public Choice Society for bibliographical advice on this citation.

their immediate self-interest (such as vote), has for a number of decades been of great interest to economists. Howard Margolis, for example, tries to bring altruism under the control of a reliable theory:

> Of course, one can 'account for' giving to public television by assuming that the individual has a taste for giving to public television; account for bothering to vote by assuming the individual has a taste for voting; and so on. This kind of theorizing is able to explain everything but predict nothing. Substituting 'duty to' in place of 'taste for' changes nothing essential. A nontrivial theory will have to say something about what governs the taste for or duty to perform altruistic acts.[49]

A dissatisfaction with the failure of prominent thinkers, specifically philosophers, to come up with an adequate theory to explain non-egoistic actions is also present in the very essay by Paul Rée that excited Nietzsche's ire. Rée writes:

> But how are non-egoistic actions possible? How does a person come to care for others as much as for himself? This question was not even raised by Hutcheson, even though he strongly defends the existence of non-egoistic actions. He merely says that we act in that way because of an innate feeling. But now the question arises again of where this innate feeling comes from. Hume too says only, 'From the original frame of our temper, we feel a desire of another's happiness or good,' without further explaining the existence of this benevolence.[50]

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[49] Howard Margolis, *Selfishness, Altuism and Rationality: A Theory of Social Choice* (Chicago and London, 1982), p. 12.
[50] Paul Rée, *The Origin of the Moral Sensations*, in Rée, Paul, *Basic Writings*, ed. and trans. Robin Small (Urbana and Chicago, 2003), p. 91.

Only Schopenhauer, via Kant, according to Rée, provides an explanation of the possibility of selfless actions:

> Now, in compassion, when a person cares for others as for himself, the semblance as if things were fundamentally divided into individuals disappears momentarily. The oneness of things breaks through, the compassionate person feels himself one with the object of his compassion and identifies himself with that other person.
> Non-egoistic actions are thus possible.[51]

Rée's basic point is that man has two drives, the egoistic and the non-egoistic. Rée associates pleasure and satisfaction with the gratification of the (more powerful) egoistic drive, and utility with the less powerful non-egoistic drive. He provides a pseudo-history of archaic man, and concludes that the unlicensed fulfillment of the egoistic drive would be so detrimental to communal living (due to the war of 'all against all' that would be its result), that mankind was obliged to begin to place a positive value (good) on non-egoistic behaviour, and to encourage it with a combination of carrot (praise and honour for selfless, 'good' behaviour) with stick (punishment for selfish, 'bad' behaviour). The problem of reconciling what is accepted by most people as the intrinsic self-interest of the individual (variously configured from era to era, and from discipline to discipline; sometimes it appears as ego, sometimes in the guise of the 'economic man' that we have discussed), with the fact that this very self-interest is jeopardized by the self-interest of others, and by extension, by the failure of a grouping of humans to construct a generally supportive social organization, gives rise in different periods to a whole range of solutions or balancing acts. Most solutions assume that man's happiness is part of the answer: Rée, as we have seen, argues that it would be harmful to man's well-being if everyone were to act in his own self-interest, and so he forgoes that

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[51] Rée, p. 92.

primary self-interest, in order to serve another interest (the social, communal well-being), which in turn supports his own self-interest. Hobbes comes up with the Leviathan, or state, to which each man sacrifices a bit of his own pure self-interest, so that the whole social order (in which he also has an interest, in that it allows him to flourish), might thrive.

The 'trivial' and circular theory described (and rejected) by Margolis, i.e. that in which the performance by an individual of altruistic acts is put down to his desire to do altruistic acts, may be trivial in the sense that it indeed 'explains everything but predicts nothing', but in another sense it is not trivial at all. It is a theory that makes the interesting assumption that the individual does only what he wants to do. Many a teenager has delighted in discomfiting his parents with a discovery of this kind, an amoral discovery that seems to disturb the normative view that goodness (Rée argues that goodness is nothing less than non-egoistic behaviour) is possible at all: if one is motivated to do an altruistic act, then one must want to do an altruistic act; if one wants to do an altruistic act, then one must get pleasure from doing it; if one gets pleasure from doing an altruistic act, then one is not being truly altruistic, because the behaviour is self-interested and self-gratifying after all.

At this point in the discussion, we can distill the following questions from what has gone before: first, how does self-interest relate to group-interest (or generosity, or non-egoistic behaviour, or altruism – there are many possible synonyms)? second, how is happiness or pleasure involved in the performance of good acts or altruism, or virtuous action? third, and most pertinent, how does all this relate to the 'Franklin's Tale'?

Modern economics provides some interesting ways of answering the first question. As we have seen above, James Coleman and Howard Margolis express dissatisfaction with the assumption made by classical economic theory that man is bound by nature always to act in his own self-interest, not least because such a theory fails to account for many aspects of human behaviour, for example the fact that people vote, or that they are honest in situations where they could get away with being dishonest. According to the rational model

expounded by the physiocrats, by the classical economic school and by many nineteenth century neo-classical and liberal economists, man acts to maximize his own share of the goods of the earth. Communism, according to this point of view, is unrealistic and untenable in the long run, because it depends upon an exaggerated estimate of group interest, or non-self-interested behaviour (Rée also shares this attitude, claiming that 'the communist's error is taking human beings to be good, when they are bad'[52]; Godkin stresses the similarity between communism and religion in his description of 'the substitution in nearly all the churches of the "gospel of social endeavour," as it has been called, for the old theological gospel', and in his statement that the 'socialist view of what social arrangements ought to be is very much like that of the early Christians, and the clergyman's imagination is naturally touched by finding it held by large bodies of his contemporaries'[53]). Economic theory is split between the cynical but tolerant realists who see man for what he is (Smith, Mill, Hobbes) and the extremist improvers and progressives, from Christ through nineteenth century 'reforming' clergymen to Rosa Luxemburg.

Margolis argues that the theory of the purely self-interested 'economic man' is contradicted by the evidence of individuals' actual behaviour in relation to goods:

> Mosca gives the key to a solution: to recognize the futility of supposing that utility to society can be understood as congruent with utility to the individual. If individuals are observed to be acting in a manner that seems rational from a social but not an individual point of view, then – without prejudice yet to the conventional model of choice – we can say that they are acting as if they had two different utility functions.[54]

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[52] Rée, 'Origins of Moral Sentiment', p. 97.
[53] Godkin, 'Economic Man', p. 503.
[54] Howard Margolis, *Selfishness, Altruism and Rationality*, p. 2.

The gulfs between disciplines are at their most gaping when they look at identical phenomena from the point of view of their own distinctive methods and terminologies. A philosopher might be interested in the question of human happiness, and how it can best be achieved. An economist, talking about much the same topic, will call it 'maximisation of utility function'. Each specialism seems to its own practitioners to provide the only rigorous way of looking at a problem. The conversion of a psychological problem into mathematical quantities might seem to a mathematician to be a necessary step in finding a resolution; to the less pragmatic, less solution-oriented philosopher it is more likely to be seen as naïve reductionism. Aspects of human behaviour which, for Aquinas, fell under the broad rubric of 'theology' and the narrower ones of human virtue and vice, and whose minute subdivisions are discussed over hundreds of questions, appear in twentieth century economic texts in almost unrecognizably reduced forms (that's not to say that they are actually simplified, or that one kind of thinker is less profound than another, but that the complexity is expressed in different terms, i.e. in primarily numeric terms; the verbal aspects of the discussion are secondary to the numeric).

So, the mathematician and game theorist John Harsanyi, following the model of classical economic theory, will distinguish between the following situations in which individuals make choices: first, a simple situation of certainty, in which 'the outcomes of alternative actions are known to the decision maker in advance, because they cannot be influenced significantly by chance or by the actions of other individuals'; second, situations of risk and of uncertainty, 'where the outcomes of some or all of the available actions depend on unpredictable chance events – with the difference that in the case of risk the decision maker knows at least the objective probabilities associated with all possible outcomes, whereas in the case of uncertainty even these objective probabilities are partly or wholly unknown to him'.[55] The fact that in a situation of uncertainty, as described above, the individual will weigh in with his own

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[55] John C. Harsanyi, *Rational Behavior and Bargaining Equilibrium in Games and Social Situations* (Cambridge, 1977), p. 8.

estimate of the likely outcome, becomes a factor: 'In the case of uncertainty, in which some or all of these objective probabilities are unknown to the decision maker, these unknown objective probabilities have to be replaced by his own subjective probabilities as probability weights. Fundamentally the subjective probabilities that a given decision maker assigns to different events – in the same way as the utilities he assigns to different goals – must be inferred from his actual choice behavior. But intuitively they can be interpreted (at least if the corresponding objective probabilities exist) as the decision maker's personal estimates of these objective probabilities, whose true numerical values are unknown to him.'[56]

The quotations above, from Harsanyi's book on bargaining and rational behavior set out very confidently (and briefly) the distinctions between different kinds of situations in which individuals make choices. The descriptions assume that rationality is the basis upon which individuals choose both between different means and between different ends. Also, the descriptions are based on the belief that utility is the key to understanding human choices. The situations outlined above, however, relate only to 'individual decision theory,' where self-interest, expressed in terms of utility-maximization, is primary. Harsanyi also describes two other systems, in which the setting in which the individual behavior takes place, is decisive in some way: 'In contrast to individual decision theory, both game theory and ethics deal with rational behavior in a social setting.'[57]

Game theory, which has been of great importance in late twentieth century economics, is described by Harsanyi as follows: 'game theory deals with individuals who rationally pursue their own self-interest (as well as all values, both selfish and unselfish, to which their own utility function assigns positive utility) against other individuals who just as rationally pursue their own self-interest (as well as their other values included in their own utility functions).' He distinguishes this from ethics as follows: 'On the other hand,

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[56] *Ibid.*
[57] *Ibid.*, p. 10.

ethics deals with a rational pursuit of the interests of society as a whole. The basic concept is that of moral value judgements. As I have stated in earlier chapters, making a moral value judgement is equivalent to comparing different social situations in terms of the arithmetic mean of all individuals' cardinal utility levels in the society. Thus we may say that the arithmetic mean is the quantity that we are trying to maximize when we are making a moral value judgement.'[58] This view is problematic, however, in that it tends to conflate the moral with the ethical, the private with the public good.

However much the categories used by mathematicians trample upon the fine distinctions drawn by moral philosophers (and vice versa, of course), though, what I want to concentrate upon here is the potential applicability of what might seem to be the very alien discourse of game theory, to Chaucer's 'Franklin's Tale'. As I argued at the beginning of this chapter, in spite of the officially démodé status of the moral approach to literature since the so-called linguistic turn, nonetheless, there is a certain tendency for studies of 'The Franklin's Tale' to be either moral or disenchanted, according, often, to whether the Franklin himself is or is not seen to be securely *gentil*. By 'moral' I do not mean morally prescriptive or moralistic - many a 'moral' study of the poem does nothing more than evaluate the behaviour of the character or teller (or both) in terms of some contemporary medieval standard, for example, scholastic teaching on promises, or chivalric notions of *fraunchise*. Disenchanted studies of the poem see it as reflecting discreditably on some supposed norm or ideal, such as *fraunchise* or *fredom*.[59]

Game theory purports to assign numeric or symbolic values to aspects of complicated human situations that involve moral, ethical and economic considerations. It does so in order to find elegant ways of describing and predicting the workings and outcomes of these situations. While its beauty at the theoretical level is perhaps of most interest to the mathematician, it is its usefulness as a predictive and analytic tool that is most important when it is

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[58] *Ibid.*

[59] See above for discussion of this question.

applied in the business world, to, for example, the practice of bidding for public utilities in a closed-bid process. The modern social sciences have performed a kind of alchemy. What was once the preserve of theologians, and later philosophers, now belongs to economists, sociologists and psychologists. Edmund Burke writes on the sublime, using the discursive essay as an epistemological tool;[60] Pierre Bourdieu elicits data on the taste for the sublime by using the questionnaire, the survey.[61] The *Canterbury Tales* performs its conversions – the sexual energy of the vegetative and animal orders is expressed as spiritual zeal in the opening of the poem; that spiritual zeal is itself diverted into the creativity of the tale-telling competition, which is in turn rejected by the final teller, the Parson, only to reappear in the retractions as authorial responsibility/ apology. A more concrete and explicit conversion occurs in the prelude to the poem we are about to discuss. In the 'Squire-Franklin link', the Franklin holds up for emulation and admiration the non-material, the purely moral and spiritual quality of true *gentilesse*. But then, in a rhetorical gesture designed to demonstrate the pricelessness of the *discrecioun* and virtue which are the mark of this *gentilesse*, he puts a price on them (twenty pounds worth of land):

> I have a sone, and by the Trinitee,
>
> I hadde levere than twenty pound worth lond,
>
> Though it right now were fallen in myn hond,
>
> He were a man of swich discrecioun
>
> As that ye been! Fy on possessioun,
>
> But if a man be vertuous withal! (V (F) 682-7)

The Franklin just cannot seem to achieve rhetorically what he says he is trying to demonstrate, i.e. that the only kind of *gentilesse* worth having is one that is

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[60] Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), ed. Charles W. Eliot (New York: P. F. Collier, 1909).
[61] E. g., Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984).

not based on money, land, status or inherited prestige. What most worries him as a father, and causes him to compare unfavourably his own son with the squire, is his son's tendency to squander his worldly heritage, and to associate with a page rather than with a 'gentil wight.' There are ten uses of the word 'page' in *The Canterbury Tales*, and nowhere is the word associated with villainy or churlishness; rather it is variously associated with one or more of the following: masculinity, servility, service, poverty, ignorance (in the strict sense of lack of knowledge or education, rather than boorishness).[62] Social and financial lowliness, rather than any unpleasant personal traits, seem to be the distinguishing features of the page as he appears in Chaucer's work. According to the philosophy of *virtus, non sanguis*, which the Franklin is expounding here, the page's lack of wealth and social position should be no impediment to his being truly *gentil*. But the Franklin's exposition of true *gentilesse* is nothing if not illogical.

In the prologue to his tale, the Franklin bemoans his lack of rhetorical skill. For some readers, given the eloquence and stylistic excellence of the tale that follows, his demurral is itself rhetorical, an instance of *diminutio*, or what we more commonly call false modesty.[63] For others, it is a part of Chaucer's larger critique of pointless ornamentalism.[64] In the 'Squire-Franklin link', one might be tempted to fault the Franklin for the incoherence of his attempt to differentiate true *gentilesse* from the *gentilesse* that is based on possessioun. At

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[62] KnT, 142; KnT, 303; MilT, 33; RvT, 397; SumT, 21; MerT 14; SqT, 692; PardPro, 449 ; PardT, 6; ShipT, 4.

[63] See Stephen Knight, 'Rhetoric and Poetry in the Franklin's Tale', *Chaucer Review* 4 (1969), 14-30; 17; also Gerald Morgan, ed., *The Franklin's Tale* (1980; repr., Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1992), pp. 87-9.

[64] Rodney Delasanta argues that there is a connection between a degenerate kind of stylistic excess, 'religious exhibitionism' and other fallacies, in the 'Man of Law's Tale'. Delasanta, 'And of Great Reverence: Chaucer's Man of Law', *Chaucer Review* 5 (1971), 288-310. See also Walter Scheps, 'Chaucer's Man of Law and the Tale of Constance', *PMLA* 89 (1974), 285-95. Lois Ebin considers several tales, including the Franklin's, in terms of the connection between stylistic skill and moral intention as storyteller. Ebin, 'Chaucer, Lydgate and the "Myrie tale", *Chaucer Review* 13 (1979), 316-35.

the rhetorical level the two kinds of *gentilesse* are terminologically entangled. In one sense this is the point: the new true *gentilesse* is both unlike and like the old kind. The two *gentilesse*s are similar at the level of language – hence the verbal playfulness of the short poem 'Gentilesse' – but, supposedly, different at the level of sense, or spirit. We can see Chaucer perform a neat balancing act in 'Gentilesse' between the various meanings and terms relating to the two *gentilesses*: John Donne could do it better, but only just. Why is the Franklin unable to manage it?

The Canterbury Tales is about practice, not ideals, and while it does depict ideals, these depictions are themselves seen as aspects of discourse and personality. The ideal that the Franklin sets out as his topic - the new, Christian, *verray gentilesse* – is dogged by its verbal ancestor, the old *gentilesse* of *possessioun*. Yet in all the Chaucerian, Dantean and Boethian accounts of the true nobility based on virtue, a belief in the distinctive ontology of this true nobility is expressed. Even as it shares a name with the old *gentilesse*, it is essentially different. 'The Franklin's Tale' seems to be setting out to demonstrate just this difference and the reality of the new *gentilesse*, not by means of a treatise or a sermon, or a lyric poem, but in action. In 'The Parson's Tale', in 'The Wife of Bath's Tale', in the *Convivio*, in *Le Roman de la Rose* and in *De Consolatione Philosophiae* the topic of *virtus, non sanguis* is treated in the genre of a treatise, a lesson, or a sermon. In 'The Franklin's Tale', there is some preaching, in the description of the ideal marriage towards the opening of the poem, and in Arveragus's concise statement of the primacy of *trouthe*, but the major theme of the tale, that of *gentilesse*, is treated in phenomenological rather than ontological terms. It is displayed rather than defined or analysed. And in focusing on the workings or phenomenology of *gentilesse*, rather than on its ontology or essential nature, 'The Franklin's Tale' breaks with the theoretical treatments of the topic. Instead of trying to define the nature of *gentilesse*, 'The Franklin's Tale' sets out to show us *gentilesse* in operation.[65]

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[65] As does Boccaccio, of course, in both *Il Filocolo* (4. 31- 4) and the *Decameron* (tenth day, fifth tale). However, in his more lengthy treatment of the theme in *Il Filocolo*, a

But the phenomenology is altogether more slippery than the ontology, and resists handling. What could, disparagingly, be called the illogic or lack of rigour, and more neutrally, the cylicity or softness, of the Franklin's treatment of the topic of *gentilesse* in the Squire-Franklin link emerges again in the tale. The Franklin's demurral of rhetorical prowess is interesting in that the problem of giving a worthy account of real *gentilesse* is in one way a linguistic one: how is the co-incidence of name between the old and the new *gentilesse* to be dealt with rhetorically so that the full meaning and reality of the new Christian *gentilesse* comes pouring out of the old word? While the short poem 'Gentilesse' manages the problem very well, 'The Franklin's Tale' is more concerned with displaying the complexity of the phenomenon of the new *gentilesse*, than in definitively nailing down the thing itself.

V: *La Règle du Jeu*

In 'The Franklin's Tale', *fredom* is used as a metonym for *gentilesse*, and given the connection between grace and *gentilesse* in the literary *topos* of *generositas virtus, non sanguis*, it is not by chance that it is the virtue of generosity, and not, say, fortitude, or temperance, that is examined in this tale of *gentilesse*. *Gentilesse*, like grace, is freely given by God to man. And man in turn is enabled by the gift of grace, and by the gift of *gentilesse*, to behave virtuously, and to behave generously to others.

The question arises however, as to whether we are in fact justified in rendering the Middle English word *fredom* as generosity in Modern English? Is there anything in the lexicon of Modern English which corresponds perfectly to

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substantial *debate* on the levels of nobility displayed by the characters occurs in the wake of the narrative itself. *Il Filocolo*, ed. Antonio E. Quaglio in *Tutte le opera di Giovanni Boccaccio*, ed. V. Branca, vol. I (Milan: Mondadori, 1964-83) pp. 396-410, and the relevant excerpt trans. in *Sources and Analogues of* The Canterbury Tales, ed. Robert M. Correale and Mary Hamel, vol. I (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2002), pp. 220-238; *Decameron*, ed. Vittore Branca (Milan: Arnoldo Mondadori, 1985), pp. 877-82, and the relevant excerpt translated in *Sources and Analogues*, vol. I, pp. 238-44.

the sense communicated by the word *fredom* and its cognates in 'The Franklin's Tale'?

The word *fredom* (fre + suffix dom), is descended from Old English 'fréo', on the Teutonic etymology of which adjective the *OED* provides the following note: 'The primary sense of the adj. is 'dear'; the Germanic and Celtic sense comes of its having been applied as the distinctive epithet of those members of the household who were connected by ties of kindred with the head, as opposed to the slaves. The converse process of sense-development appears in Lat. līberī 'children', literally the 'free' members of the household.'[66] In Chaucer, the word *fre* (and/or its cognates) is used with four major senses: first, to indicate free status, as in 'not in bondage'; second, to indicate that the *fre* person is not confined or restrained physically; third, to indicate decisively noble status and character; and fourth, to describe virtuous, and often specifically generous behaviour. A study of the various uses of the words *fre*, *fredom* and *frely* in Chaucer bears out this basically fourfold set of meanings. A problem arises, however, in the connection between the last two meanings on that list: i.e. between *fredom* as noble status and character, and *fredom* as a virtue, and specifically, in the case of 'The Franklin's Tale', the virtue of generosity. Part of this problem in turn springs from the fact that our rather generalized word 'generous' and its cognate 'generosity', are late, and do not occur in Middle English at all. While we can use the word 'generous' to indicate anything on the spectrum from a monetary or material act of giving, to a kind of graciousness in social or moral matters, there is no corresponding word in Middle English (*fredom*, arguably, in one of the four incarnations in which it appears in Chaucer's oeuvre, does display such a range, but the fact that the same word has three other distinct meanings complicates matters). Also, to describe someone as generous in the early twenty-first century, is to make no assumptions as to his or her social standing. This is the case in spite of the fact

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[66] *OED*, s. v. 'free'

that the word 'generous', much more even than the words *fre* and *fredom*,
originally meant noble or high-born (from Latin *genus* meaning stock or race).[67]
Chaucer, in common with other writers of his period, does have at his disposal
various words to denote what we might now recognize as one of the basic,
although narrower and more materialist, meanings of generous, i.e. being
bountiful. The two most obvious words are 'liberal' and 'large'. Both of these
words tend to be limited to material giving (again, in spite of the fact that
'liberal' comes from *līberālis* meaning 'pertaining to a free man', itself from
līber 'free')[68] and describe the giving (virtuous, in the case of liberal, and
sometimes foolish in the case of large) of money or gifts or other material
goods. When Aquinas comes to discuss the virtue of *liberalitate*, he does so
exclusively in terms of material giving, and he regards the virtue (an aspect of
justice) as the giving of wealth and goods, the freeing up of possessions in
favour of others.[69] It is therefore a virtue concerned with money and with goods.
He is following Aristotle in this, who describes liberality (*eleutheriotês*) as 'the
mean with regard to wealth'.[70] There is nothing in either Aristotle's or
Aquinas's descriptions of liberality that corresponds to our modern use of
generosity to mean not only the giving of material goods and money, but also a

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[67] See E. F. Jacob for the application of the term '*generosi*' to the 'gentle folk' of the
fifteenth century. Jacob describes as 'fiercely competitive' the society of families that
gathere around noble patrons: 'personal favour, connexion through marriage, gratuitous
service, and a dozen other methods were invoked to enable the patrimony to be retained
and enlarged'. Jacob, *The Fifteenth Century* 1399-1485, vol. IV of *The Oxford History of
England*, ed. George Clark (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), pp. 305-346; 343.
[68] *MED*, s. v. 'liberal'
[69]*ST.*, 2a2æ.117,3: 'Wealth being its proper objective, generosity has as its function the
good use of wealth for what it is'. And Aquinas writes in the same article about
magnificence: 'As for magnificence, its function is to make good use of money in
relation to a highly specialized interest, namely expenditure for the accomplishment of
some grand enterprise. In this sense, magnificence stands out as a kind of superlative
generosity, as we will point out further on.'
[70] Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. H. Rackham (Harvard University Press,
1934), IV, 1. With reference to this passage in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Stephen R. L.
Clark remarks: 'The virtue of the freeman, *eleutheriotes*, is to make proper, *generous*, use
of property, and "generosity", in turn, is the virtue of those "with breeding".' Clark,
'Deference, Degree and Seflhood', *Philosophy* 80 (2005), 249-60; 249.

more diffuse kind of graciousness, and largeness of spirit. There is no Middle English or Latin word to quite capture this modern sense of the word generous (bar, arguably, the word under consideration: *fre*). Neither 'magnanimity' (greatness of soul) nor 'magnificence' (greatness in doing) has the same resonance. When Chaucer, or Aquinas, talks about 'magnanimity' or 'magnificence', the emphasis is on the tendency towards, or capacity for, or performance of, great deeds, deserving of honours.[71] A generous person, in our parlance, does not have to be a great person, or a person capable of greatness, nor does he have to be a very wealthy or high-born person.

So, to return to the question, is the Middle English word *fredom*, as used in 'The Franklin's Tale', well served by the modern translation 'generous'? Alan Gaylord has suggested that *fredom* is 'generosity writ large. In the ethical sense, it is a largeness of deed and attitude which is neither niggardly, petty, nor self-seeking.'[72] Judith L. Kellogg, in her discussion of the terms 'large' and 'fre' in Thomas Chestre's 'Sir Launfal' and Chaucer's 'Franklin's Tale', provides a background for the term 'large' and the related 'largesse': she describes the way in which a French term like 'large', when dislocated from the original French chivalric context, and adapted for use in an English version of an Anglo-Norman romance like 'Sir Launfal', ends up being emptied of the idealistic, holistic chivalric content that it possessed, and comes instead to describe much narrower, pecuniary, and materialistic values.[73] She does not,

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[71] Aquinas discusses '*magnanimitas*' in *ST*, 2a2æ.129, and '*magnificentia*' in *ST*, 2a2æ.134. In 'The Parson's Tale', as in *ST,* both magnanimity and magnificence are classified as aspects of fortitude, with *magnanimitee* being described as 'greet corage' (ParsT, 730), and *magnificence* as 'whan a man dooth and perfouneth grete werkes of goodnesse; and that is the ende why that men sholde do goode werkes, for in the accomplissynge of grete goode werkes lith the grete gerdoun' (ParsT, 735).

[72] Alan Gaylord, 'The Promises in "The Franklin's Tale"', *English Literary History* 31 (1964), p. 339.

[73] See, for instance, lines 27-33 of 'Sir Launfal':
'Launfal forsoth he hyght;
He gaf gyftys largelyche,
Gold and sylver, and clothes ryche,
To squyer and to knyght.
For his largesse and hys bounté,

however, provide a corresponding description of the word *fredom*. However, a good deal of her discussion of Chaucer's use of the word is concerned with the inadequacy of the Franklin's understanding of it. Like Thomas Chestre, she argues, Chaucer's Franklin 'misunderstands aristocratic categories relating to generous behaviour'.[74] Just as Chestre 'fails to understand…that largesse has not to do with money in a strict economic sense, but exists as a sign of something else, of a whole attitude toward graciousness, magnanimity, beneficence, and solidarity in the noble community. It involves moral generosity as well as economic', so Chaucer's Franklin 'cannot distinguish between true nobility and the poses of nobility'; he 'thinks he is speaking of noble and selfless magnanimity of spirit and *trouthe*, but he relates a tale where legalistic, contractual obligation supersedes civilized, sensitive, pious, and honest behaviour.'[75] Kellogg's judgments of the Franklin bring us back to the opening remarks in this chapter. Like many critics, Kellogg argues that 'The Franklin's Tale' is essentially ironic, a tale about noble values told to us by a man who is not qualified to understand the nature of nobility. His narrow, pecuniary materialism, like that of Thomas Chestre, and like that of Chestre's 'crass' Launfal, is described as a distortion of the chivalric ideals given expression in the French originals.

But what if Chaucer is actually conducting (to borrow the phrase from Nietzsche) a *genealogy of morals*, a transvaluation of value itself, whereby the good (the unegoistic, the generous, the *fre*) falls back into the category from which it purportedly was liberated, i.e. power, money and prestige? And what if he is doing so not with some ironic purpose, not to lament the inadequacies of his Franklin-narrator, nor to castigate power, money and prestige, but to faithfully represent the working of the world? In which case, his use of the

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The kynges stuward made was he
Ten yer, Y yow plight'. Thomas Chestre, 'Sir Launfal', in *The Breton Lays in Middle English*, ed. Thomas C. Rumble (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1965).
[74] Judith L. Kellogg, ''Large and Fre': The Influence of Middle English Romance on Chaucer's Chivalric Language', *Allegorica* 9 (1987-88), 222.
[75] Kellogg, pp. 240-41.

words *fredom* and *fre* is advised: like the word *gentilesse*, these words are dual: they originally denote power, wealth, and status; later they are reborn as renovated Christian concepts, freed of their earthly taint.[76] Of course, the old, vain, pagan words and ideas still inhabit the world. As they are of the world, they will never leave it. But the newly healed words – the new *gentilesse*, the new Christian *fredom* – these are looking up, not down, looking up at the non-material City of God, and away from the things of this world. *The Canterbury Tales*, however, while it is compendious, and often looks skyward, is Chaucer's human, not divine, comedy, and fittingly, he provides human explanations for human situations.

A fairly sensible, non-ironic *précis* of the last third of the 'Franklin's Tale' might run like this: the knight Arveragus insists, at his own cost, and for Dorigen's sake, on the principle of keeping one's word with the famous lines, 'Trouthe is the hyeste thyng that man may kepe'; he thereby breaks the deadlock lamented by Dorigen, and his generous act inspires the generosity of the squire and the clerk in turn, thereby resolving the dilemma, and allowing for the restoration of equilibrium. I am not setting this account up as a straw man. It is not a naïve reading of the tale. The primary function and meaning of the tale runs along these very lines: the tale is first and foremost a demonstration of the principle of *virtus, non sanguis*. It would not be a good idea to lose sight of this clear point, however much what follows below is an attempt to show how the new virtue-based *gentilesse* praised by the Franklin cannot be isolated (my metaphor is drawn from chemistry) from the old social *gentilesse* whose name it shares.

At the end of the 'Franklin's Tale', we are asked to compare the protagonists, to assess them, and to consider 'whiche was the mooste fre, as

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[76] The Man of Law offers his theory of the connection between wealth and esteem:
'Herkne what is the sentence of the wise:
"Bet is to dyen than have indigence";
"Thy selve neighebor wol thee despise."
If thou be povre, farwel thy reverence!
Yet of the wise man take this sentence:
Alle the dayes of povre men been wikke."

thynketh yow?' Clearly there are literary conventions at the back of the appearance of this *demande*, as well as the precedents in Boccaccio's versions of the story, but leaving them to one side for the moment, let us consider the impact of the question. On the one hand, the effect of the invitation to compare the characters' *fredom*, suggests that each one is *fre*, even if one is more *fre* than the others. On the other hand, it encourages us to scrutinize each supposed instance of *fredom*, and allows us to contemplate the possibility that some of the characters are not *fre* at all (in Boccaccio's versions of the story, we can see the latter effect).

Arveragus's *gentil* dede arises in response to Dorigen's dilemma, to the clash of values which has so tormented her, and to which she has given expression in her second complaint:

> But nathelees, yet have I levere to lese
> My lif than of my body to have a shame,
> Or knowe myselven fals, or lese my name;
> And with my deth I may be quyt, ywis. (1360-3)

The absolute commitment to marital *trouthe* and wedded chastity on the one hand clashes with the commitment to a vow to Aurelius on the other, the fulfilment of which would shame her body, and jettison her reputation for marital fidelity and chastity. The very economic phrasing of 'knowe myselven fals, or lese my name' applies to the breaking of either vow. Only by the sacrifice of her own life, Dorigen thinks, will she balance the scales again, and be 'quyt'. And so, in this impossible situation, Dorigen addresses herself to Fortune, and comes close to despair.[77]

However, and this is important, she does not quite despair, and we may read in her turning to Arveragus, a faith which he will later reproduce, that

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[77] See Gerald Morgan, 'Boccaccio's *Filocolo* and the Moral Argument of the "Franklin's Tale"', *Chaucer Review* 20 (1986), 285-306, and also Morgan, 'A Defence of Dorigen's Complaint', *Medium Aevum* 46 (1977), 77-97.

things may be resolved after all. Arveragus does, in the eyes of many readers, the noble or *gentil* thing, and asserts the primary value of keeping one's word. The fact that the keeping of her word to Aurelius necessitates the breaking of the marriage vows is not dwelled upon in the text, so we have only limited licence to speculate on it. Arveragus does not so much provide a moral insight that Dorigen does not have – she already knows that one must keep one's word – but a pragmatic one. He asserts the urgency and necessity of keeping the promise. But, as her lengthy complaint illustrates, Dorigen already knows that she must keep the promise. The point for her is that the keeping of the promise compromises her other *trouthe*, as well as her bodily integrity and her reputation. Arveragus, interestingly, overlooks, except insofar as he feels the pain associated with it, the breaking of the marriage vows. He urges her to keep one promise, and identifies *trouthe* with respect for one vow rather than another. This is the critical point in the tale, the original act of *fredom* and *gentilesse* which allows the wheels to turn again. And it is at this very point, where self-interest is set aside for the sake of another's moral integrity, that a new dimension of interest begins to open up in the tale. As he altruistically comforts his wife, downplaying the seriousness of the matter, Arveragus raises the question of outcome: 'It may be wel, paraventure, yet to day' (1473). Without going as far as to say that Arveragus knows that things will work out well, it is the case that he offers encouragement to Dorigen that there might be a happy conclusion. Nor is Arveragus the only one to feel somewhat optimistic. The narrator, having just described Arveragus's generous and unselfish act, intervenes with a meditation of his own. We might expect him also to assert the higher value of the code that Arveragus is observing, just as earlier in the tale, he follows up his description of the marriage of Arveragus and Dorigen with a thoughtful reflection on the merits of the kind of marriage they have embarked upon. But Arveragus's statement that 'trouthe is the hyeste thyng that man may kepe' is not duplicated or seconded by the narrator. Instead, the narrator suggests that actually, self-interest may be served after all, and that we should wait until we see how things turn out, before we jump to conclusions:

> Paraventure an heep of yow, ywis,
>
> Wol holden hym a lewed man in this
>
> That he wol putte his wyf in jupartie.
>
> Herkneth the tale er ye upon hire crie.
>
> She may have bettre fortune than yow semeth;
>
> And whan that ye han herd the tale, demeth. (1493-8)[78]

So rather than being encouraged to make a moral evaluation of the situation, we are being advised to hold off from calculating the final balance until all the figures are in. Arveragus has been much criticized, especially in feminist readings of the tale, in which his supposedly unselfish deed has been seen as self-serving, competitive and even cruel.[79] He has been seen as motivated by a shabby preoccupation with externals, rather than essentials (witness his interest

[78] The lines appear only in Ellesmere and British Library Additional MS 35286. For a recent comment on the status of British Library Additional *MS* 35286, see Peter Robinson, 'The History, Discoveries, and Aims of the Canterbury Tales Project', *Chaucer Review* 38 (2003), 126-139; 130. For a more thorough discussion, and a treatment of the various editorial and critical attitudes to lines 1493-8 in particular, see Simon Horobin, 'Editorial Assumptions and the Manuscripts of the *Canterbury Tales*', in Norman Blake and Peter Robinson, eds., *The Canterbury Tales Project Occasional Papers*, Volume II (Oxford: Office for Humanities Communication,1997), pp. 15-21; 18-20. See also Horobin, 'Additional 35286 and the Order of the *Canterbury Tales*', *Chaucer Review* 31 (1997), 272-78.

[79] David Raybin considers that Arveragus fails to protect his wife, that he delivers a 'murderous threat' to her in the form of the ban on her disclosing their plight to a third party, and that 'he preserves the all-knowing male voice of absolute marital authority, but he dissipates his power in the production of empty phrases.' David Raybin, ''Wommen, of kynde, desiren libertee': Rereading Dorigen, Rereading Marriage', *Chaucer Review*, 27 (1992), pp. 67-69; Joseph D. Parry argues that the tale 'shows us Arveragus's strategy for sovereignty in marriage; and this becomes even more disturbingly clear when, after his comforting words to Dorigen uttered with "glad chiere, in freendly wyse," Arveragus revises his smiling manner, and tearfully forbids his wife, on pain of death, to tell anyone this terrible thing has happened.' Joseph D. Parry, 'Dorigen, Narration, and Coming Home in the *Franklin's Tale*', *Chaucer Review* 30 (1996), 262-93 (p. 283); Parry is following Susan Crane's influential article, in which she argued that Dorigen is occluded in the course of a competition between the three male protagonists: Susan Crane, 'The Franklin as Dorigen', *Chaucer Review* 24 (1990), 236-52.

in having the 'name of soveraynetee' in his otherwise egalitarian marriage, and his concern with reputation when he warns Dorigen not to reveal to anyone the nature of her plight);[80] he has been described as anxious about his own social standing;[81] he has been accused of breaching the marital agreement that neither spouse impose his or her will on the other and of downright cruelty for forcing her to do something which for her (as we know from her complaint) represents ruination.[82] The debate about Arveragus's character does tend to swing from extremely positive readings (in which he is benign, honourable, generous, and performs the deadlock-breaking *gentil* deed which saves all the characters from harm) to very negative ones (in which he is a warmongering, selfish, reputation-obsessed, masculinist bully). But the narrator's defense of Arveragus is not concerned with the possibility that he might be seen to be cruel, selfish or vain, but with the possibility that he might be considered 'lewed' (a word that Chaucer uses variously to mean foolish, ignorant, uncouth or ill-bred), because he has placed his wife in 'jupartie'.

The narrator interrupts the narrative at this high point and tries to influence our understanding and interpretation of events. He defines the part of the audience to which he is addressing himself: 'an heep of yow'. Coming together in these few lines then, are the following elements: intrusion by the narrator at a climactic point in the narrative; heightened awareness of audience, and by implication, of the tale as performance, whether written or oral; an

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[80]Gaylord, 347. Gaylord describes Arveragus's 'fanatical literalism', a phrase approvingly quoted by Judith Kellogg, who also considers that Arveragus has 'an obsession with appearance', Kellogg, 233.

[81] In his interesting article, John Fyler argues that 'Arveragus is ashamed because of his degree – because of his relatively *low* degree – for which the 'name' of sovereignty will provide at least partial compensation. John Fyler, 'Love and Degree in the *Franklin's Tale*', *Chaucer Review* 21 (1987), 321-37 (p. 323).

[82] Francine McGregor argues that in the decisive verbal interaction between Arveragus and Dorigen, 'we find a profound illustration of the way Dorigen's agency is subsumed by her husband's', and that 'Arveragus's reputation is at stake if Dorigen refuses to keep her word to Aurelius. What is particularly chilling here is that, although Dorigen is devastated by what she has been commanded to do, Arveragus manages to figure his will as hers.' Francine McGregor, 'What of Dorigen? Agency and Ambivalence in the Franklin's Tale', *Chaucer Review* 31 (1997), 363-77 (p. 369).

attempt to redirect the audience's interpretation of the unfolding events, and in particular, to postpone calling the result, before the result is in. Taken together, these elements encourage us to give priority to the outcome or results of the characters' behaviour, and to consider the dilemma of the characters as a game, in which their choices are moves.

Now the ending of the tale does provide for a (somewhat contracted) form of the literary game of the *demande*, when the narrator asks the question:

> Lordynges, this question, thanne, wol I aske now,
> Which was the moost fre, as thynketh yow? (1621-2)

In Boccaccio's versions of the story, the audience does debate the question of the comparative morality of the protagonists. In Chaucer's tale, however, the game played by the audience is abridged (insofar as the audience does not directly take up the *demande* and participate in the proposed *débat*), while the actual interior content of the tale itself, i.e. the characters' dilemma and their choices, *is* represented as a game.

The decision to use the word *jupartie* to describe the situation in which Arveragus has placed his wife, together with the fact that we are urged not to prejudge the situation until we know the outcome of the events, together with the fact that Arveragus is defended by the narrator against the charge of folly, rather than vice – these three elements seen in conjunction with each other at the crux of the tale, and a point where the best way to interpret the tale is being raised, encourage us to go against the grain of the surface narrative and the ostensibly purely moral quality of the problem, and to read the tale as a study of tactics and game-plan. Instead of a tale concerned with individual moral choices, and their impact on others, we have instead a tale interested in a dynamic, in a social situation, organized for our pleasure, and played by its participants as a game.[83]

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[83] Richard Lanham has made a persuasive case for the importance of the game in understanding Chaucer's *modus operandi* in *The Canterbury Tales*, *The Book of the*

Jupartie, from OF *iu parti*, meaning literally 'divided game', from Latin *jocus partitus*, was originally a term used in chess and other games.[84] Chaucer uses the word on several occasions, in *Troilus and Criseyde*, in *The Romaunt of the Rose*, in the 'Canon's Yeoman's Prologue', in the 'Canon's Yeoman's Tale', and in *The Book of the Duchess*. Chaucer's is the earliest recorded deployment of the word in English.[85] Sometimes he uses it, much as it is commonly used in Modern English, to mean 'danger' or 'risk' simply; sometimes, as Jenny Adams has shown, it is associated with gambling, and therefore with the cultivation,

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Duchess, *Troilus* and elsewhere. See Richard A. Lanham, 'Game, Play and High Seriousness in Chaucer', *English Studies* 48 (1967), 1-24; 'The Chaucerian Biogrammar and the Takeover of Culture', in *Literacy and the Survival of Humanism*, ed. Richard A. Lanham (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1983), pp. 41-57; *The Motives of Eloquence* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1976). Stephen Manning builds on Lanham's work in 'Rhetoric, Game, Morality and Geoffrey Chaucer', *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 1 (1979), 105-18, applying game theory to 'The Pardoner's Tale' and 'The Franklin's Tale'. G. D. Josipivici offers a somewhat different take on game in 'Fiction and Game in the Canterbury Tales', *Critical Quarterly* 7 (1965), 185-97, and more recently, Malcolm Arnold has provided an overview of the literature on Chaucer and game in 'Games', in *A Companion to Chaucer*, ed. Peter Brown (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 167-79. Laura Kendrick's *Chaucerian Play* (Berkeley, Calif., 1988), is a full-scale study of Chaucer and play. Other studies include: Glending Olson, 'Chaucer's Idea of a Canterbury Game', in *The Idea of Medieval Literature*, ed. James M. Dean and Christian Zacher (Newark, N. J., 1992), 72-90; Michael Olmert, 'The Parson's Ludic Formula for Winning on the Road [to Canterbury]', *Chaucer Review* 20 (1985), 158-68; with reference to *Troilus*, Richard F. Green, 'Troilus and the Game of Love', *Chaucer Review* 13 (1979), 201-20, and Tison Pugh, 'Christian Revelation and the Cruel Game of Courtly Love in Troilus and Criseyde', *Chaucer Review* 39 (2005), 379-401. On the more general question of play in culture, see Johan Huizinga's classic study, *Homo Ludens: Vom Ursprung der Kultur im Spiel* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1956), trans. as *Homo Ludens: a Study of the Play-element in Culture* (London: Routledge, 1949; repr. 1998).
[84] *OED*, 2nd ed., s. v. 'jeopardy'; *MED*, s. v. 'jupartie'. See the related use of the term *jeux-partis* to describe the argumentative poems of the troubadours, in which, as Helen Cooper puts it, 'two poets would argue a *demande d'amour*'. Helen Cooper, 'The Frame', in *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales*, vol. I, pp.1-22; 19. See also Arthur Långfors, ed., *Recueil general des jeux-partis français* (Paris: Firmin Didot, 1926).
[85] Guillemette Bolens and Paul Beekman Taylor, 'The Game of Chess in Chaucer's "Book of the Duchess" ', *Chaucer Review* 32 (1998), 325-34; 330.

rather than mere existence, of risk.[86] While the *OED* lists its primary meaning as 'problem', the word sometimes was simply coterminous with chess, or other games involving different sides, or with an uncertain outcome.[87] The word appears in the course of an extended chess metaphor in *The Book of the Duchess*:

> But God wolde I had oones or twyes
>
> Ykoud and knowe the jeupardyes
>
> That kowde the Grek Pictagores! (665-7)

Here, a jeopardy would seem to be the equivalent of the modern chess term 'problem', which presents the player with a particular arrangement of the pieces, and requires him to achieve a specified result.[88]

Chess, whether in its distinctive medieval or modern form, requires its expert players to be able to consider simultaneously, and choose from, a wide range of possible scenarios and outcomes, and to pick the optimal tactic to arrive at the desired result. The setting and solving of chess 'problems' develops the players' ability to think ahead. While the novice might be thinking only of

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[86] 'Gambling on chess games by players and bystanders, a practice that lasted into the sixteenth century became so popular in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries that players often used dice to expedite the game's conclusion…' Jenny Adams, 'Pawn Takes Knight's Queen: Playing with Chess in Chaucer's "Book of the Duchess"', *Chaucer Review* 32 (1999), 125-38; 132. See also Adams, Jenny, 'Pieces of Power: Medieval Chess and Male Homosocial Desire', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 103 (2004), 197-214, and Margaret Connolly, 'Chaucer and Chess', *Chaucer Review* 29 (1994), 40-44.

[87] Already in the thirteenth century '*juparti* (jeopardy) appeared in England in courtly French as a synonym for chess.' Bolens and Beekman Taylor, p. 331.

[88] *The Oxford Companion to Chess* confirms this view of the medieval meaning of *jupartie*: 'Jeopardy: in medieval times a chess position that seemed in the balance, the kind of position that appears today in newspapers and chess magazines as a mental exercise for the reader, the forerunner of the problem. The word is derived in various ways from the Old French jeu parti, literally a divided game of uncertain issue; in English this was corrupted in various ways, e.g. juperty, and eventually disappeared from chess to pass into general usage with its current meaning.' *The Oxford Companion to Chess*, ed. David Hooper and Kenneth Whyld (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), np.

the move at hand, the expert weighs up his and his opponent's every move in terms of their long-term implications and his overall game-plan. The Black Knight laments the fact that he does not possess more of this long-range strategic ability that would have come from doing chess problems.

Arveragus, however, while he might seem to the heap of the audience to be doing something very foolish, by placing his beloved wife in jeopardy, at risk, is actually, as both he and the narrator intuit, doing something rather clever. While his deed is ostensibly a generous one, which by definition involves the subordination of personal self-interest to the interest of another, the narrator's preoccupation is with showing that actually, he will not have lost anything at all, just you see. Yes, he is risking something, as a gambler does in the hope of a big win, yes, he is in a state of genuine uncertainty (his tears are real), yes, the stakes are very, very high, and yes, he is doing the right thing, morally speaking. But he is also doing what the tale will show to have been the most effective thing, from the point of view of pure self-interest (which in Arveragus's case, includes the interests of his wife).

That it is the winning strategy is proven by the outcome, but also indicated by the desperation that precedes his taking this action. Dorigen is on the brink of destroying herself: she perceives her choices to be intolerable in every direction. There is no low-risk, sensible option that will get them out of their plight. We know the importance to both of them of honour, *trouthe* and wedded chastity. If the promise is fulfilled, and she is joined to Aurelius, she loses her honour, her chastity and her *trouthe* to her husband. If she refuses to fulfil the promise, she loses her honour (a prospect which gives Aurelius's brother some satisfaction), and her *trouthe* to Aurelius. In the face of this level of threat, Arveragus follows a high-risk strategy, and the reward is commensurate with the risk.

The optimism expressed by Arveragus, and by the narrator is justified: however we explain it, the transformation that Aurelius undergoes once he learns of what he calls Arveragus's *gentilesse* to Dorigen is extraordinary. He comes immediately to his senses. Why? The pagan gods referred to in 'The

Franklin's Tale' have no real existence, according to the narrator, although his tale is officially set in pagan times. The illusion conjured by the clerk is just that, an illusion, a despicable one, and calculated to deceive, but still, nothing more than a trick. But there is a power that the Franklin and Arveragus and, ultimately, Aurelius, believe in: that of the refined, subtle and complicated social game of self-sacrifice and reciprocity.[89]

Aurelius's initial response to Dorigen's promise is one of dreadful disappointment and demented self-pity. In this condition, his impulse is to imagine ways of tricking Dorigen, in order to gratify his desire for her. Gerald Morgan has persuasively argued that Aurelius is in no doubt that Dorigen's intention is to emphatically reject him, and that he therefore fully understands the spirit of the promise.[90] When Aurelius returns home after the dance, he falls into the second and more deadly phase of his love-sickness. Before her rejection of him, he had hope. Afterwards, he has no realistic expectation of possessing Dorigen and he comes dangerously close to despair. In fact, in one sense, he could be said to actually despair, in that, while he does not kill himself, he is described as departing from the realm of reason and sanity. His last remark before quitting Dorigen's presence is

> 'Madame,' quod he, 'this were an inpossible!
> Thanne moot I dye of sodeyn deth horrible.' (1009-10)

Thereafter Aurelius retreats into solitude, where he descends into raving madness, which is quickly succeeded by torpor and depression. In his raving, he prays to Apollo, and imagines cosmic manipulations that would result in the flooding of the coastline and the consequent covering of its rocks, or their sinking down underground. While he does not know what he is saying, he says it nonetheless:

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[89] See appendix 1.

[90] See Gerald Morgan, 'Boccaccio's 'Filocolo' and the Moral Argument of the "Franklin's Tale", *Chaucer Review* 20 (1986), 285-306.

He nyste what he spak, but thus he seyde (1028)

It is Aurelius, rather than Dorigen, who is given to speaking rashly. Both here and in the promise he makes later to the clerk, he fantasises and promises on a large scale that is not in keeping with reason, the laws of nature, his abilities or his assets. Aurelius's supposed literalism, by which he seeks to trick Dorigen by exploiting the letter of her promise, at the expense of its spirit, is itself illusory: the spirit and the letter of Dorigen's promise are in agreement, as both terms of the promise are incapable of being fulfilled. Dorigen is as unable to switch her affections over on command to another man, as Aurelius is to remove, stone by stone, the rocks from the coastline. Aurelius's fantastic prayer to Apollo reveals not just his madness, but the way in which his narrowly conceived self-interest (to possess Dorigen, at any price to him or to her) is also highly self-destructive. What happens to this desperate, self-pitying man when he hears of Arveragus's gentle deed is therefore of the greatest interest. He is immediately cured of his love-sickness. He construes Arveragus's response to Dorigen's plight as a message not only to her (of love, of generosity), but also to himself. This is the second of three instances in the tale where people take action, or insist on action because of a stimulus which was not directly intended for them (Arveragus's interpretation and advice on hearing of his wife's promise to Aurelius is the first; the clerk's delivery of Aurelius from debt when he hears of Aurelius's gentle deed in relation to Dorigen and Arveragus is the third).

Arveragus, confronted by the illegitimate desire of Aurelius for his wife, legitimizes it, forgoing his own marital rights, and delivering Dorigen up to him. In the process, he generates another desire in Aurelius – the desire to be thought of highly and to behave nobly.[91] This desire displaces the first desire. A

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[91] In Christian terms, Arveragus's behaviour could be said to display the operation of the three graces of faith (in his respect for Dorigen's fidelity to the 'trouthe' pledged to Aurelius), hope (in his sense that things might still work out well) and love (in his kindliness towards Dorigen, and his belief that her *trouthe* is worth more than his romantic security). Viewed purely from the perspective of the nominally pagan (but

man of honour who has coveted another's wife in the husband's absence could only do what Aurelius does when handed her on a plate. Arveragus's *gentil* deed is an affront to Aurelius's honour which he must repudiate. As Aurelius's sexual desire is nullified by Arveragus's gesture, his other energies, asleep for many years, are rudely and effectively woken up. If his erotic member has been cowed, his noble rectitude is now bristlingly alive.

When Aurelius hears, to his surprise, that Arveragus has directed Dorigen to fulfil her promise, he responds by elaborately releasing Dorigen from her supposed obligation to him. In spite of the fact that he is clearly moved by the extent of Arveragus's commitment to *trouthe*, and by his new sense of the virtue and fidelity of Dorigen, he does not use the opportunity to disabuse her or Arveragus of their belief that he has removed the rocks. Instead, he plays up the legal aspect of his 'release' of Dorigen, diverting attention away from the simple fact that the pact was a private one between just the two of them based on his own importunate desire, and one, moreover, that was willfully misinterpreted by him and his brother. He pretends instead, and Dorigen lets him pretend (she knows her part too), that it is a legal issue, in which he has no real interest, except insofar as a right-minded person wants to see right done. He thereby deflects attention away from the heady sexual compulsion under which he has been operating until then. But all his desire is as extinguished by Arveragus's gesture, as surely as Absolon's is by Alison's. His whole concern now is with the debt he owes to the clerk – 'Aurelius, that his cost hath al forlorn' (1557).

The *gentilesse* that is described by *generositas virtus, non sanguis*, involves the removal of virtue from all worldly and social context. It is an idealized and purified virtue that is isolated in this process, untainted by inheritance, position or prestige. The Franklin asserts his belief in this kind of *gentilesse* in his words to the Squire in the 'Squire-Franklin link'. What 'The Franklin's Tale' actually accomplishes, however, is a reversal of this isolation,

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actually largely Christian) code of values of the pseudo-historic setting of the poem, his behaviour illustrates the knightly code of *gentilesse*.

purification and idealization of virtue. 'The Franklin's Tale' brings virtue back to its home, back to its complicated social context, back to the dubious friends of wealth, position and inheritance, from whom Christianity and the code of *virtus, non sanguis* had encouraged it to part company.

What follows below then, is not intended as a judgement of Aurelius. It is instead an attempt to describe his behaviour against the standard of *virtus, non sanguis* officially promulgated by the Franklin, and to determine whether or not his act of *fredom* does in fact involve the putting aside of his own self-interest.

Aurelius himself is very keen to point out that he behaves *gentilly*, and that he is giving up a great deal. He acknowledges and pays tribute to Arveragus's gesture, and it stings him into a corresponding awareness of the 'cherlyssh wrecchednesse' that his partaking of the dish offered by Arveragus would amount to. While in his release of Dorigen, he speaks in formal and legal terms, removing himself from the centre of the action to the dispassionate and objective edge, ignoring entirely his own role in bringing Dorigen into the trap in the first place, he is nonetheless determined that she should carry away with her a sense of the enormity of his own selflessness:

> 'I have wel levere evere to suffre wo
> Than I departe the love bitwix yow two.'(1531-2)

His words bear comparison with the similar but rather more understated words spoken earlier by Arveragus:

> 'As I may best, I wol my wo endure – '(1484)

What is intriguing about the attention that Aurelius draws to the scale of his own sacrifice in giving up Dorigen, is that it coincides with the vanishing of his desire for her. Up to the point at which he hears of Arveragus's *gentil* deed, the tale has given us numerous accounts of Aurelius's love-sickness and his life-

threatening suffering. After this point we hear no more of his condition. It is not so much, then, that Aurelius behaves selflessly than that his powerful need for Dorigen is dissolved by the message from Arveragus. It reappears as his need to reassert his claim to *gentilesse*, and to address his dire financial situation. From this point onward in the tale, Aurelius is entirely concerned with himself and his money. At the high point of his display of generosity, he is most interested in himself. At the high point of his assertion of his adherence to *trouthe*, he is mendacious (in allowing Dorigen to continue to labour under the false belief, generated by himself, in collusion with his brother and the clerk, that the rocks really are 'aweye'; this mendacity is a feature of Aurelius's behaviour throughout the tale, and is showcased in his disingenuous challenge to Dorigen to keep her promise in the first place). His claim therefore, to *gentilesse* and to selflessness, is not warranted, not if we are thinking in terms of *virtus, non sanguis*. That is not to say that either his deed or his claim is worthless though. They are indeed efficacious and helpful, both for himself and others, as the tale goes on to demonstrate.

The tale's preoccupation with outcome, with the patterning, rhythm, succession, sequence and results of the protagonists' acts is everywhere evident. Throughout the tale, human deeds are seen in terms of economy, conversion and exchange, and cyclicity. One character after another assumes the position of injured party. First, Aurelius considers himself to be Dorigen's victim, because of the desire he feels for her: according to the conventions of *amore hereos*, he thinks of her as the cause of his inevitable death. Second, Dorigen considers herself to be the victim of both Fortune and Aurelius. Third, Arveragus takes the burden onto his shoulders, sacrificing his marital rights and his happiness. Next, Aurelius reads Arveragus's behaviour as a message to him, which he would be a boor not to understand, and so he makes the next gesture of self-sacrifice, becoming the victim of Dorigen again, but also of Arveragus and the clerk. Finally, in a gesture that realises the tale's ongoing latent conversion of moral qualities into monetary quantities, the clerk is appealed to by his victim, Aurelius, and forfeits his fee. For a tale that appears to show up the inadequacy

of measure-for-measure, and that lauds the virtues of gracious generosity and *gentilesse*, it is to a strange degree interested in equivalence and conversion, and in the occupation by each character in turn of the tale's set sequence of positions of strength and weakness, of giving and receiving.

As we have seen, when it becomes apparent to Aurelius that Dorigen and Arveragus are prepared to stoically see Dorigen effectively raped (and after all, the sexual congress which Aurelius's desire is revealed to entail, and which Dorigen's impossible promise is boiled down to by Aurelius and his brother in their preoccupation with seeing Aurelius 'lissed' and 'warrished' by means of a week-long illusion, is not that far from the violent ravishing that Dorigen's *exempla* detail) by Aurelius, Aurelius's ardour and love-sickness disappear. His return to fiscal rectitude is instantaneous. The fantasy of an illicit relationship with another man's wife, which Aurelius entertains, and Dorigen refers to disparagingly at the time of her promise, depends upon the non-realisation of any cost. It is risk and not cost that is exciting in the fantasy of this adultery, which the reality of a husband-sanctioned rape explodes. Further, there is the monumental insult to Aurelius in the suggestion that his sexual appetite is monstrous and must be slaked by the right-minded couple who are prepared to make a huge sacrifice to it because of their superior *gentilesse*. In 'The Miller's Tale', Nicholas and Alison wait until the husband is in town to make love, so as to maximize the danger, and extraordinary lengths are taken to deceive the cuckold while having sex under his nose. In 'The Franklin's Tale', however, the husband sanctions the adultery, even insists upon it, and takes the initiative, quashing Aurelius's ardour, and insulting him to boot.

Dorigen has previously defined herself to Aurelius as 'another man's wife' thereby pinpointing the moral chaos of his choice but also the very object of his desire. When a message from that same husband, however, comes back to Aurelius in the garden, in the form of a *gentil* deed, his sexual desire is converted into anxiety about his social and financial standing. Now it is the husband who is paramount, and Dorigen only the bearer of her husband's moral code. Dorigen is to have adulterous sex, insists Arveragus, but it will be

legitimate, authorized by her husband, who, although he feels the pain, yet brings things back from the brink of despair over which Dorigen has been tottering. The sex is thereby controlled by the husband and it loses its lustre for Aurelius in the process. Dorigen goes to meet Aurelius bearing the adulterous sex that her husband has authorized, and Aurelius sends it right back again to Arveragus. Does Arveragus then have the sex that never transpired between Aurelius and Dorigen? The narrator hints that it might be so:

> And be ye siker, he was so wel apayd
> That it were impossible me to wryte. (1548-9)

That confidential 'you may be sure' to the audience, together with the tactful refraining from further elaboration, points to sex, and a very satisfying kind of sex, in fact the adulterous sex, years in the making, sent back to Arveragus from Aurelius via Dorigen. The dangerous sexuality that is represented by the anticipated adultery, and which threatens the institution of marriage, is brought back into a legal and principled sphere by cooperation between the two main males of the tale. A game of exchange is underway, exchange between the protagonists, but also between the values in circulation in the tale. Arveragus's gift and selflessness come back to him; in the end he has lost nothing – he is 'wel apayd' for the risk he took, and his happiness is restored. For Arveragus, the optimal hedonic outcome, as game theory might have it, has resulted from a non-self-interested act. From this point onward in the tale, the focus on conversion, cyclicity, reciprocity and circulation sharpens even further. Rather than expanding in a linear fashion, or accumulating new details, the tale folds ideas and values over each other, highlighting equivalences and depicting morality as economy.

Arveragus's deed, as we have seen, effectively cures Aurelius's love-sickness, and is therefore made equivalent to the sexual union with Dorigen for which he has longed. Over and again, the tale has emphasized that what Aurelius wants is to be cured. Rather than depict his love-longing in terms of

positive fantasies of love-making or intimacy, the tale describes him (and his brother) as focused on the need for release from suffering. To some extent, the emphasis that is placed on Aurelius's suffering, the pains, the deathly torpor, is consistent with other Chaucerian and medieval depictions of *amore hereos*.[92] But there is a distinctive quality to Aurelius's suffering, and it lies in the preoccupation with relief, cessation, cure. Aurelius's brother, as he plans the trip to Orleans, says to himself -

'My brother shal be warisshed hastily;' (1138)

- and a little later, expresses a similar private hope about the efficacy of the anticipated illusion:

'Thanne were my brother warisshed of his wo;' (1162).

Lest it appear that it is only Aurelius's brother who takes this view, the narrator attributes a similar motive to Aurelius himself, who finally manages to make it out of bed for the journey south for this reason:

In hope for to been lissed of his care. (1170).

Later still, Aurelius urges the clerk to do his best to create an effective illusion and to thereby 'bryngen hym out of his peynes smerte' (1259). These lines resonate with Dorigen's utterance during her mournful inspection of the rocky coastline during Arveragus's absence –

'Thanne were my herte
Al warisshed of his bitter peynes smerte.' (855-6)

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[92] On lovesickness, see J. L. Lowes, 'The Loveres Maladye of Hereos', *Modern Philology*, 11, no. 4 (April 1914), 491-546, and M. F. Wack, *Lovesickness in the Middle Ages: The Viaticum and Its Commentaries* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990).

– but they also define Aurelius's desire as oriented towards what he wants not to have, rather than what he wants to have. He wants to be cured. He wants recovery and relief from suffering. He wants to be out of pain.[93] It has been argued above that Aurelius sends back to Arveragus the sex which Arveragus has authorized Aurelius to have. But if Aurelius recompenses the bereft Arveragus by returning his wife to him unmolested, then Arveragus's action simultaneously offers a sexual gift to Aurelius, but not the one he was planning. Instead of sex with Dorigen, he gets relief. He is given the ultimate object of his desire (the terminology of the poem suggests that Dorigen was only the penultimate one, the means to the end) - a cure from his 'peynes smerte'. He has come out of pain, out into the world, and the fatal love-sickness from which he has suffered since we first encountered him is entirely gone, replaced by the much more manageable problem of his financial standing.

In a tale ostensibly about generosity, Aurelius's preoccupation with his finances once he has performed his own *gentil* and selfless deed, is a further indicator that we are really being treated to a scrutiny of the value and meaning of the apparently unegoistic, disinterested act. Aurelius is careful to point out that he is performing a *gentil* deed. In this way, while he is, strictly speaking, on the grounds that he is a squire, already *gentil* from a social point of view, nonetheless, the poem represents his response to Arveragus's deed as the occasion of his ennoblement. An examination of Aurelius's behaviour from the point of his *gentil* deed onwards reveals the following: Aurelius undergoes a generalized transformation and identification with (for him) new, and, it would seem from the official logic of the tale, noble values. He stops shirking, lying

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[93] Clearly, the words *warisshed* and *lissed* have another meaning also, in that they convey the reduction of Aurelius's grand love to a purely sexual need, which a quick period of sexual consummation (the illusion is to last only a week or two) will cure. This latter effect of these words is very significant in its own right as it further shows up the lack of concord between the conditions stipulated in the promise ('Thanne wol I love yow best of any man'), and the actual event being planned by Aurelius and his allies (a week or two of sexual activity with a reluctant woman).

around, being sick, obsessed with love. He has some get-up-and-go; he rationally addresses the problem of paying the magician; he starts to worry about his finances, the practical basis of his life, and actually works out a strategy to solve his problems. His own response to Arveragus's *gentilesse* has now become a precedent for him, a basis for expectation as to how others will act, and it is on this premise that he appeals to the clerk for grace. Instead of lollygagging about in bed, he assumes responsibility for himself; his brother no longer has to act for him.

A comparison of this set of Aurelius's new qualities with descriptions of noble characters in other Chaucerian narratives is salutary. In 'The Knight's Tale', the two knights are going to pointlessly fight to potentially mutual destruction for love. Neither Arcite nor Palamon display very much responsibility or pragmatism in the tale. The few actions they do undertake are usually prompted by forces outside of themselves – a family friend, Perotheus; the gods; a dream of Mercury, Theseus. Helplessness is a constant characteristic of both knights. In the battle scene, the active martial prowess is diverted away from Palamon and Arcite onto the two champions, Lygurge and Emetreus. In the end, Arcite is killed because of the intervention of the gods, and Palamon's marriage to Emelye is orchestrated by Theseus. In *Troilus and Criseyde*, Troilus is weak as a kitten on the point of the much-longed-for consummation of his love for Criseyde; the work of actually possessing Criseyde is at least half accomplished by his panderer, Pandarus; no sooner does he taste happiness than it is taken away from him by forces outside his control; and when he is abandoned by Criseyde, he succumbs to depression and places himself in the path of death.

Aurelius therefore, bears comparison with Chaucer's three most famous noble characters only up to the point of his ennoblement. Thereafter, the qualities he displays are ambiguous: as we have seen above, his display of *gentilesse* coincides with the following: preoccupation with money and inheritance, a new gumption and energy, a faith in human solutions to human problems. Instead of falling to his knees in a frenzied prayer to Apollo,

Aurelius, having learned from Arveragus's example, and more importantly, from his own response to Arveragus's example, sticks to the human and social realm, and appeals in person to his creditor.

Are Aurelius's new qualities typically *gentil* or are they proto-middle-class? This is not an easy question to answer. On the one hand, there are the numerous examples in medieval literature of unambiguously *gentil* characters who are uninterested in money and material prosperity generally, or, more accurately, can see-saw in terms of their material prosperity, from magnificence to poverty, without there being any implications for their nobility. From the shaggy Sir Orfeo in the wilderness with nothing but his harp and his animal skins, to Chaucer's shabby Knight in 'The General Prologue' with his worn clothes and equipment, and his meekness and modesty that belie his great achievements, the truly noble man does not care overmuch for what he eats or wears or possesses.[94] The abuse of noble status that we see in the monk and the prioress, is displayed variously in fatness, beautiful clothing, poise, rich food, fastidiousness. Arveragus's *gentilesse*, on the other hand, is demonstrated by his letting go of what belongs to him.

Lack of interest in material possession is still regarded as a paradoxical sign of prestige and refinement. The shabbily dressed hunting-shooting-fishing aristocrat in the crumbling house is in our own time a familiar type in popular culture. Pierre Bourdieu offers the following observations on the phenomenon:

> Here, no doubt, one touches on the principle of the opposition between all rising classes, the bourgeoisie in an earlier period, now the petite bourgeoisie, and the established classes, the aristocracy or bourgeoisie. On the one hand, thrift, acquisition, accumulation, an appetite for possession inseparable from permanent anxiety about property, especially about women, the object of a tyrannical jealousy which is the effect of insecurity;

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[94] Also a sign of nobility of course, is the magnificence of which Theseus is capable in his grand schemes and hunting expeditions.

on the other, not only the ostentation, big spending and
generosity which are some of the conditions for the reproduction
of social capital, but also the self-assurance which is manifested,
in particular, in aristocratic gallantry and elegant liberalism,
forbidding the jealousy which treats the loved object as a
possession – as if the essential privilege conferred on the
possessors of inherited wealth were freedom from the insecurity
which haunts self-made men, Harpagon as much as Arnolphe,
who are perhaps too aware that 'property is theft' not to fear the
theft of their property.[95]

Why is 'The Franklin's Tale' constructed in such a way that Aurelius's act of
giving one thing coincides with his fear of losing another? On the one hand, he
displays the noble 'self-assurance' in respect of a woman that Bourdieu has
described, and that Arveragus has in spades; on the other, he is newly subject to
thrifty anxiety about his finances and his future.

The Franklin's view, as we can extrapolate from the portrait in 'The
General Prologue', is that nobility consists in having the power to give and
bestow and provide the goods of the earth. The noble man both possesses and
gives: hence the dormant table, the latent, endless potential power of gift. He
has created a (logically impossible) situation of practically miraculous giving –
it snows in his house with meat and drink – that never drains the resources dry.
But while the Franklin is personally interested in giving and magnanimity and
the power to give, for his son he is interested in keeping, conserving, stopping
the leaking away of the inheritance. The tale displays a similar range of
attitudes, and it exists in a kind of a loop with the 'Squire-Franklin link' and the
portrait in 'The General Prologue', in that for Aurelius, ennoblement, or the
awakening of supposedly true *gentilesse* in him, coincides with fiscal concern
and a desire to conserve his inheritance. The Franklin wishes his own son would

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[95] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans.
Richard Nice (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 330.

attend to true *gentilesse*, and stop throwing away 'al that he hath', a phrasing
that points to the need to conserve existing, hereditary wealth. The Squire-
Franklin link begins with a statement of the superiority of true *gentilesse* over
the old kind of *gentilesse* in which possessioun was paramount, and the Franklin
tells a tale that seems to demonstrate this, with its three characters of different
degree each displaying *gentil* behaviour. The Franklin starts out in the 'link' by
measuring a spiritual, non-monetary quality in terms of money (twenty pounds
worth of land); he ends up with a character, Aurelius, whose new awakening to
true *gentilesse* coincides with worry about the loss of 'a thousand pound'.
The Franklin shows how economic interest lies behind the moral, but, by doing
so, he is adding interest, rather than taking it away. Matthew Arnold's infamous
criticism of Chaucer, charging him with lacking seriousness, in a sense is
justified.[96] Chaucer is interested in the leakage of what we might be tempted to
call the lowest Darwinian motives into the highest places. But the hierarchy of
values characterised by such terms as 'lowest' and 'highest' or 'worst' and
'best' is exactly what the relativising structure of *The Canterbury Tales* is
interested in dismantling. Everywhere you have the office of priest, you have a
human in that office: this is one of the points made by *The Canterbury Tales*,
and Chaucer is no more lamenting this than he is lamenting the greenness of the
grass.

VI: *The Happy Ending and the Good Life*

Once Aurelius has done his *gentil* deed, as we have seen, he becomes aware of
his financial predicament. Why is he so appalled by the prospect of relying on
others, of becoming a beggar? This may seem like a silly question – who in his
right mind would not shrink from the condition of beggary? But why, on the

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[96] Matthew Arnold, 'The Study of Poetry' (General Introduction (1880) to *The English Poets*, ed. T. H. Ward), and printed in Matthew Arnold's *Essays in Criticism*, Second Series (1906; new edition, London: Dent, 1964), pp. 235-60; 250; Richard Lanham makes just such a point in his essay, 'Game, Play and High Seriousness in Chaucer's Poetry', *English Studies* 48 (1967), 1-4; 24.

other hand? If you have just defended the virtue of *fredom*, why not assume that *fredom* will bail you out in turn, and provide you with a living, albeit a humble one? Aurelius, it seems, though, having apparently given up his self-interest for the sake of others, does not want to throw himself at the mercy of the human species as a whole. He is not a Griselda, or a Saint Francis. His faith in *fredom* extends only to the clerk. Aurelius contemplates his future, and the possibility of appealing to the clerk, as follows:

> 'Allas!' quod he. 'Allas, that I bihighte
> Of pured gold a thousand pound of wighte
> Unto this philosophre! How shal I do?
> I se namoore but that I am fordo.
> Myn heritage moot I nedes selle,
> And been a beggere; heere I may nat dwelle
> And shamen al my kynrede in this place,
> But I of hym may gete bettre grace.
> But nathelees, I wole of hym assaye,
> At certeyn dayes, yeer by yeer, to paye,
> And thanke hym of his grete curteisye.
> My trouthe wol I kepe, I wol nat lye.' (1559-70)

Then, in the very next line, he goes to the clerk, and makes his appeal. The appeal corresponds very closely to the content of Aurelius's private considerations, and goes as follows:

> With herte soor he gooth unto his cofre,
> And broghte gold unto this philosophre,
> The value of fyve hundred pound, I gesse,
> And hym bisecheth, of his gentilesse,
> To graunte hym dayes of the remenaunt;
> And seyde, 'Maister, I dar wel make avaunt,

I failled nevere of my trouthe as yit.

For sikerly my dette shal be quyt

Towardes yow, howevere that I fare

To goon a-begged in my kirtle bare.

But wolde ye vouches auf, upon seuretee,

Two yeer or thre for to respiten me,

Thanne were I wel; for elles moot I selle

Myn heritage; ther is namoore to telle.' (1571-84)

The same elements appear in Aurelius's private planning of the appeal, and the appeal itself: the tribute to the *gentilesse* of the clerk; the threat of beggary for Aurelius; the dismal prospect of selling the heritage; the suggestion of a plan for staggered repayments; the declaration of his unwavering attachment to *trouthe*; the fear of becoming a beggar; the hope for grace. Aurelius has an idea, then, and carries it out rationally. Like Arveragus, like the narrator, he is optimistic, even though he is also worried. He does, less subtly, to the clerk what Arveragus has done to him, *via* the interaction with Dorigen in the garden: represents himself as victimized, self-sacrificing and morally principled. This is a gambit, and it is carried out exactly according to the mental calculations that Aurelius has just made. Arveragus puts his wife in *jupartie*; Aurelius decides to assay the clerk. Now the clerk's turn to play the game comes around, and he shows that he knows the rules of the game. Aurelius expresses his fear of becoming a beggar, a condition in which he would really be dependent upon *fredom* pure and simple, not on *bihestes* or conjuring tricks. He plays the game by going to the magician and allowing him to infer that in fact he (the clerk) would be begging (in the sense of getting something for nothing) if he took money off Aurelius, when Aurelius has not had his pleasure. And so each privately contracted promise is seen in terms of a larger economic cycle. It would be degrading for the clerk to accept the money so extravagantly promised for his services, when his services did not bring about the effect for which his services were bought. Strictly speaking, the money should be his – he did the

work, and has a right to be remunerated, but because he accepts his position in an economic continuum, he gives up his interest in the money. The money was to be paid for an illusion which would obtain Dorigen for Aurelius. Aurelius did not obtain Dorigen, and so the promise that was so hollow in the first place (in that he did not have the money) is presented disingenuously to the clerk as also unfulfilled on his side, as the clerk is invited by the laying out of the circumstances to infer that he would be receiving money for nothing if he were to accept the thousand pounds under the new circumstances.

Aurelius's insistence that he is characterized by attachment to *trouthe* is curious. Unlike Arveragus, who simply asserts the higher principle of keeping one's *trouthe*, and unlike Dorigen, who professes her attachment to specific *trouthe*s that she has undertaken, Aurelius depicts himself as a man defined by his unwavering respect for his *trouthe*: 'I failled nevere of my trouthe as yit', as he says to the clerk. He also menacingly warns Dorigen, when he tells her the rocks are 'aweye' that she is obliged to keep her *trouthe*: 'Avyseth yow er that ye breke youre trouthe.' Yet in his recapitulation to the clerk of the reasons why he did not consummate his love for Dorigen, he reveals that he knows that she made her *trouthe* to him innocently:

> 'And that hir trouthe she swoor thurgh innocence,
> She nevere erst hadde herde speke of apparence.' (1601-2)

Unlike Dorigen and Arveragus, Aurelius has heard of 'apparence' and knows that the condition of the promise, however literally it be interpreted, has not been fulfilled. He has tricked Dorigen (she herself experiences her dilemma as a 'trappe' and she thinks that the rocks really have been removed), yet he warns her to keep her *trouthe*, even as he himself is false (insofar as he knows the rocks have not been removed, and that he understood that the intention of her promise was to reject him). Once he has done his own *gentil* deed, Aurelius gets even more exercised about *trouthe*. But whereas before he paid for magical illusions to get his way, now he restricts his *jogelrye* to rhetoric and

interpersonal games. Aurelius's attitude to time is a case in point: in his response to Dorigen's promise that, should he remove all the rocks from the coastline stone by stone, she will love him best of any man he prays for a miracle that will cause the coastline to be flooded for two years. By the time the clerk has been hired to perform the illusion, the rocks will appear to have disappeared for a week or two. Here we see the shrinking, from the superlative phrasing of the promise 'best of any man', which does not specify any time limit, to the two years of Aurelius's *orisoun*, to the week or two of the illusion that is finally conjured. This contraction of time corresponds to the reduction of the best kind of loving in the world, to a shortlived sexual consummation, on which the hope for *warisshing* and *lissing* is based.

When it comes to the paying of the debt to the clerk, instead of contraction, we see the expansion of the original timescale. Aurelius was extravagant in his promise, in that he promised what he did not have, and declared that he would give the world, were he master of it. Of course, he is not master of the world, but neither does he seem to be lord of the thousand pounds that he does actually promise to pay, with the words that speak of agitation and excitement:

> 'This bargayn is ful dryve, for we been knyt.
> Ye shal be payed trewely, by my trouthe!' (1230-1)

From this certain and unambiguous guarantee of unproblematic payment, Aurelius wanders away in the course of the tale, so that, when it comes to the time to pay the debt, he is able to produce only half the agreed sum, and he pleads for 'dayes of the remenaunt'; this is swiftly followed up by a request for two or three years respite.

Aurelius's modification of the timescales involved in the various pacts he has contracted is not the only instance of his skillful rhetorical sleight of hand. In the same speech to the clerk, Aurelius states his intention to pay his debt even if it entails his impoverishment, and reduction to begging in his 'kirtle

bare'; a moment later, he asks (or begs?) for respite, on the basis that he would otherwise be impoverished, lose his heritage, and presumably have to beg, presumably in his 'kirtle bare'.

Like the Franklin in his prologue, who rejects the use of fancy rhetoric, Aurelius presents himself to the clerk as a simple, ingenuous, noble and vulnerable man. Aurelius's initial laying out of his situation to the clerk flatters the clerk, intimating that there is a similarity between the two men (between the clerk's *gentilesse* and Aurelius's commitment to *trouthe*). He provides very few details in his first presentation of the case, and ends, having asked the clerk to postpone for years the calling in of the debt, with the heroic '…for elles moot I sell/ Myn heritage; ther is namoore to telle.' What a tantalizing and sparse account he has presented to his creditor of his inability to pay an enormous debt: it is surely intended as a cue for the clerk, who certainly takes it up that way, asking question after question until the full extent of Aurelius's nobility is well out from under the bushel:

> 'And right as frely as he sente hire me,
> As frely sente I hire to hym ageyn.' (1604-5)

What is the clerk going to do? The challenge of first-rate behaviour by both the knight Arveragus and the squire Aurelius has been put to him, together with the intimation that he too is a rare creature of *gentilesse*. Aurelius has hinted at a comparison between himself and the clerk, as well as giving the clerk the rules of the game of gallant-move-and-gallant-response already underway. He is effectively prompting the clerk: 'Your move.'

The complexity of the game increases with Aurelius's subtle invitation to the clerk to act like him. Aurelius stresses the cooperation of Arveragus and Dorigen, and in response, he and the clerk do form a pseudo-aristocratic coalition. The clerk gives up his own immediate self-interest (being paid) in order to express a group interest (which, ultimately feeds into his self interest

again, in the sense that being seen to be capable of first-rate behaviour is more valuable capital than the thousand pounds he gives up).

If it seems like I am crassly reducing the morals of the tale to mere quantities, I would point out in defense that the tale is explicitly doing this. It is deliberately organized so that Arveragus's action of releasing Dorigen from her marriage obligations in order that she protect her moral integrity is made equivalent in the tale to a thousand pounds. Just as the Franklin tries in the Squire-Franklin link to express the non-monetary (*gentilesse*) by means of a monetary amount (twenty pounds worth of land), so the tale shows the convertibility of *gentil* deeds with money.

But because the humans in the tale are seen to be involved in a kind of giving that expects return, and a kind of altruism that furthers self-interest, does not mean that they are not worthy of the name *gentil*. 'The Franklin's Tale' is not an *exposé* of crass materialism lurking beneath aristocratic *fredom*. It is not intended to shock, to criticize, to sting into reform. 'The Franklin's Tale' is, again, to borrow Nietzsche's phrasing, a genealogy of morals. It shows the cyclicity of what we like to call 'high' and 'low' motives, the admixture of egoism in selflessness and of so-called vice in so-called virtue. But, above all, it shows the complicated ways in which our self-interest overlaps with our group-interest. 'The Franklin's Tale', like its teller, is social.

The happy ending of 'The Franklin's Tale' is the result of the deployment by all players of the (risky and complicated) optimal and altruistic strategy rather than the dominant, narrowly self-interested one. Aurelius is *banking* on the clerk's gracious response to his appeal. Arveragus hopes that things might yet work out well. The narrator advises us not to jump to conclusions until we see how things work out. Dorigen is about to destroy herself, but she does not; she holds off.

Each character in the tale learns how to hope, and to behave better (in the pragmatic sense of more adaptively) from experience. The optimism in the tale is not religious, however. 'The Franklin's Tale' depicts a purely human, purely social kind of hope and trust and expectation. Dorigen, for instance, in

her long complaint to Fortune, compares various strategies for responding to her dilemma, and in the end reaches this conclusion:

> Thus pleyned Dorigen a day or tweye,
> Purposynge evere that she wolde deye. (1457-8)

She holds off, however, so that, although her complaint has occupied a day or two, by the third night she is still alive, and tells Arveragus her problem. Now much of the first half of the tale has been concerned with a different anxiety suffered by Dorigen, during her husband's long absence from home. The tale makes much of her suffering at this time, and also quite carefully charts her recovery:

> By proces, as ye knowen everichoon,
> Men may so longe graven in a stoon
> Til som figure therinne emprented be.
> So longe han they conforted hire til she
> Recyved hath, by hope and by resound,
> The emprentnyng of hire consolacioun,
> Thurgh which hir grete sorwe gan aswage;
> She may nat alwey duren in swich rage. (829-36)

The tale is beautifully patterned throughout, with repetitions, variations, rhythms and counter-rhythms, and just as Dorigen's two complaints are illuminated by being compared with each other, so are her two griefs. Dorigen is shown to have survived one very painful grief that nearly brought her to question her belief in the providential order of the world, although not quite, and then, she is shown to have decided to commit suicide, although not quite. Dorigen has come to know that there is a possibility of living, and having some happiness, or coming to have some happiness, even in the midst of general unhappiness. She has experienced a recovery of sorts, from grievous

unhappiness, and so, she is well placed to believe that she is capable of experiencing a similar recovery, even from the depths of shame that would be the outcome of fulfilling or not fulfilling her promise. So, even after the apparently convincing evidence of the *exempla* of the other women who preferred death to dishonour, Dorigen would still prefer to live, and chooses to live rather than to kill herself. The precedent of unhappiness survived has modified her 'hedonic expectations' of the future. Because of the precedent of her first recovery, she knows that even an unhappy future might yield a future self some happiness, while suicide yields no future self and no happiness at all, a zero outcome. Like Arveragus, who hopes things will work out, like the narrator who thinks likewise, like Aurelius who hopes he might be shown grace by the clerk, Dorigen has some optimism. The tale highlights this by bringing her close to destruction – she is, after all, 'purposynge' to die – but pulling back at the brink.

The Franklin, as we have seen, promotes the Dantean ideal of true *gentilesse* that is to be distinguished from the actual *gentilesse* in operation in society on the following counts: first, it is not connected to lineage or wealth; second, it does not pass automatically from human ancestor to heir; third, it does not originate in the man himself, but is a gift from God. His tale ostensibly sets out to illuminate the operation of this *gentilesse*-based-on-grace, and specifically the virtue of *fredom* or generosity. What the Franklin actually accomplishes, though, in miniature form in the 'Squire-Franklin link', and then, on a large scale in the tale itself, is a transvaluation of the value of *gentilesse*. He begins his performance in the 'link' by isolating *gentilesse* from *possessioun*, and by implication, from other signs of eminence; he goes on in the tale to resituate *gentilesse* back in society. *Gentilesse* appears in 'The Franklin's Tale' as a complicated social phenomenon, one that can be described in terms of the logic of what Marcel Mauss has called 'the gift'. But the kind of gift involved in the generous actions of Arveragus, Aurelius and the clerk is not at all gratuitous, and is made in the expectation and hope, if not full knowledge, that it will be returned. That is not to say that the generous deeds described in

'The Franklin's Tale' do not deserve the name 'good' or *gentil*. What is social intrigues the Franklin, and the self-interest involved in the unegoistic act, while raising a logical contradiction, poses no threat to the Franklin's philosophical equilibrium.

The formal theological explanations of grace, from Augustine up to Calvin, vary not that much in the extent to which they emphasise the gratuitousness of the gift of grace. Augustine is famously clear at several points that the gift is freely given and unmerited: 'And if this divine assistance, whereby the will is freed, were granted for its merits, it would not be a 'grace' – a gratuitous gift – for it would not have preceded the willing.'[97] Aquinas is not far behind him on this, and the reformers certainly wished to quash the notion that there is any question of earning salvation, or placating or reconciling God. But in practice, as the studies of popular devotion of the period tend to show, Christians of the late Middle Ages assumed they were in relationship to a God, who must be honoured, appealed to, appeased, sacrificed to, and thanked in a myriad of material ways. The pilgrims of *The Canterbury Tales* are, after all, on their way to thank a saint who has helped them when they were sick. The winner of the competition for the best story will be awarded a meal to be paid for by all the company. The story-telling competition itself quickly establishes itself as reciprocity or 'quitting'. And at the end of the *Tales*, there is the final tally of the 'Retractions' themselves, in which the moral debits and credits of the creative process are calculated. The theory of the strictly gratuitous gift of Divine grace that Augustine advances requires the system of the two cities, the one worldly and profane, the other the true city of God. As in Boethius, the righteous man must be willing to suffer in material and physical terms if he is ever to achieve the true felicity which the Franklin finds in a well-stocked larder. After describing the terrible things that man suffers and endures and does, Augustine writes: 'For though in this life there are great consolations

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[97] Augustine, *The Retractations*, trans. M. Inez Bogan (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1992), I: 9. 4.

when cures are wrought by holy objects and holy saints, still even those benefits are not always granted to those who ask, lest religion be sought for their sake.'[98]

Arveragus cultivates religion, in the form of the virtue of generosity, but in 'The Franklin's Tale', the happy ending is the justification of the virtuous act. The narrator and Arveragus share the same view of virtue: if a thing is worth doing, it is worth doing because it will create human happiness, not eternal felicity in union with the ineffable Godhead, nothing mystical of that sort, but happiness, peace, and a restoration of order. While to some extent the happy ending is to be explained in generic terms, we nonetheless have the fact of the conflation of the invisible, moral world, with the world of earthly delights, and reward and plenty. It is not enough, for the Franklin, that the individual is privately, secretly, as a result of God's grace working within him, truly disposed towards virtuous action. Nor is it enough that he does a virtuous deed. He must be seen to be thus dignified by the gift of grace, and by the virtuous deed. Things must work out well, and not in the Boethian sense that a man in a dark cell awaiting his execution has made peace with himself through a dialogue with Philosophy. No, for the Franklin wants a more concrete, visible, even edible form of 'working-out.' His own *gentilesse* is manifest in his hospitality, the abundance of food he has in stock, his readiness to entertain, and his belief that earthly pleasure is identical with true felicity, not, as in Boethius, a delightful bauble that distracts one from salvation and beatific happiness. Only a crude person, one of the 'heep' of the audience, will be so preoccupied with measure and strict justice as to condemn Arveragus because he insists so extravagantly on the keeping of a promise that did not need, according to the prevailing teaching on promises, to be kept. To be truly *gentil*, according to the Franklin, we must be bountiful, excessive in our gestures, and magnificent. And the only proof of our *gentilesse* is the outcome, whether the outcome is the liberality in which the Franklin lives, or the resolution of the dilemma in the tale. The Franklin maintains a state of permanent potlatch in his house, and

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[98] Augustine, *The City of God Against the Pagans*, 7 vols. (London: Heinemann, 1957-1972), vol. 7, Books XX1-XXII, trans. William M. Green (1972), XXII.22.

generosity in the form of hospitality is his defining virtue. It is also the topic of his tale, and he reveals in both his person and his treatment of his theme, that virtue is social, that virtue is knowing, that virtue is power, not weakness, and that 'the prejudice', as Nietzsche puts it, 'which takes 'moral', 'unegoistic' and 'désinteréressé' as equivalent terms' is only an '*idée fixe*' of our culture, without historical or philosophical reality.

Appendix to Chapter Three (page 178; n. 89):

Because of this complexity, the chess metaphor only goes so far. Chess, in the terminology of modern game theory, is a zero-sum game, i.e. one player wins at the expense of the other, so the sum, once the game is over, is zero. No value has been generated by the game. Game theory is more interested in positive-sum games, i.e. games in which more than one player gains. Most of the complicated human situations that game theory seeks to describe involve co-operation, and gain by more than one player. If we metaphorically describe the dilemma and its resolution in 'The Franklin's Tale' as a game, it is obvious that we are talking not about a zero-sum game but a positive-sum game, in which more than one player can benefit. Additionally, the chess metaphor is limited because chess is an example of a 'complete information' game, i.e. a game in which both players have full access to the information relevant to the playing of the game. However, few human situations fulfil this condition. There is any number of possible turns that could be taken, in the course of, say, a marriage tested by trickery and adultery. It is possible to write a computer program that will seriously test the expertise of Gary Kasparov or Vladimir Kramnik, but only in relation to their expertise in chess. The positive-sum game, or non-zero-sum game, as it is awkwardly called, is exemplified by the textbook 'Prisoner's Dilemma', in which two suspected criminals are arrested. There is not enough evidence at first glance to decisively charge them for the serious crime of which they are suspected. There is enough existing evidence, however, to charge and imprison them on a much more minor charge. They are separated, prevented from communicating, and interviewed separately. During the interviews each prisoner is told that if he confesses while his alleged accomplice remains silent, he will be set free, while his accomplice will be imprisoned for a set number of years (say 10). If he remains silent, while the accomplice confesses, then he will be imprisoned for ten years, while the accomplice will be freed. If both confess (i.e. DEFECT from the accomplice's coalition), both will be imprisoned for five years. If both remain silent (i.e. COOPERATE with accomplice), then both will be imprisoned for a much smaller period (say one year). It is clear that from a purely selfish point of view, the best outcome for the individual prisoner (A) is his own freedom. The condition which secures his freedom is his own confession

together with the refusal to confess of his accomplice (B). The worst outcome, sometimes described in informal literature on the subject as the 'sucker's payoff' is his own remaining silent, while his accomplice confesses. The second best outcome occurs when both accomplices co-operate by remaining silent. They are then imprisoned for six months each. The third best outcome is where both accomplices confess and each is imprisoned for five years. So the rank of choices, viewed purely in terms of self-interest of one party (A), is as follows:

A confesses (**defects**); B denies (**co-operates**): freedom for A; 10 years for B

A and B both deny (**cooperate**):six months' imprisonment each for A and B

A and B both confess (**defect**): five years' imprisonment each for A and B

A denies (**co-operates**); B confesses (**defects**): A is imprisoned for ten years; B is freed

Considering the situation, therefore, from the purely selfish perspective, then, the best tactic for the individual (A) is always to defect (i.e. confess). B can only either defect or cooperate. If A always defects, then if B co-operates, A is freed entirely. If B defects, then at least A will be spared the maximum penalty, although he will still be subject to the second worst penalty. It seems then, that A should always defect. Of course, individual B can be presumed to think in similar ways (assumption of rationality). However, if both accomplices do think in this way, and both defect, the second worst outcome occurs. Had both accomplices taken the risk of cooperating, then the second best outcome would have occurred. Defection is the 'dominant strategy', i.e. the apparently most rational strategy to adopt, given ignorance of the accomplice's strategy. But the dominant strategy is not identical with the *best* strategy, the latter being the mutual co-operation of A and B. Hence the dilemma.

An important development of the classical Prisoner's Dilemma is known as the Iterated Prisoner's Dilemma, in one branch of which the same participants play the game of Prisoner's Dilemma again and again. Clearly, the major intriguing aspect of the original classical Prisoner's Dilemma, is that it suggests that co-operation is not likely to be chosen as a tactic, in spite of the fact that mutual co-operation leads to the second best of four possible outcomes, whereas the most rational strategy, the 'dominant strategy', if

deployed by both players, leads to the second worst of four possible outcomes. So the most obviously self-interested strategy actually does not lead to the best possible outcome (although it avoids the worst), if, as reason suggests, both participants adopt it. And the altruistic or co-operative strategy, while it is most risky (in that it can lead to the very worst outcome, if not adopted by both participants) will, if both players adopt it, lead to the second best outcome. One of the points of the Iterated Prisoner's Dilemma is to see if there is a way in which players can learn to co-operate, in the course of repeated plays. Anatol Rapoport, to whose account of the Prisoner's Dilemma this brief discussion is indebted, summarises the results of the experimentation into repeated plays of the game: 'Perhaps the most interesting result of Prisoner's Dilemma experiments with iterated play is that even if the number of iterations to be played is known to both subjects, nevertheless a tacit agreement to cooperate is often achieved. This finding is interesting because it illustrates dramatically the deficiency of prescriptions based on fully rigorous strategic reasoning'. Anatol Rapoport, 'Prisoner's Dilemma', in *The New Palgrave: A Dictionary of Economics*, ed. John Eatwell, Murray Milgate and Peter Newman (London: Macmillan, 1987), p. 580. Robert Axelrod's book, *The Evolution of Cooperation* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), describes Axelrod's invitation to programmers to come up with programs for repeated plays of Prisoner's Dilemma, and the results of the ensuing contest between the various programs. As the title of Axelrod's book suggests, altruistic and cooperative strategies actually did better over many plays, as evaluated solely in terms of self-interest. Axelrod's findings have themselves been taken up by other disciplines, for instance, by evolutionary biology, and the viability of apparently less-than-rational, altruistic strategies (such as, in the examples provided by Rapoport, 'backward-curved horns or behavioural inhibitions' in the animal world), puts a dent, by extension to the human world, in the previously robust theory of 'economic man', i.e. that man is likely to behave selfishly in relation to goods and wealth. Rapoport draws the following conclusion: 'Models derived from Prisoner's Dilemma point to a clear refutation of a basic assumption of classical economics, according to which pursuit of self-interest under free competition results in collectively optimal equilibria', p. 583.

Conclusion: 'People have to make do with what they have.'[1]

I argued above at the end of chapter two that the apology in the 'General
Prologue' is indebted not only to the Timaean epigram *per se*, but specifically to
the context in which it appears in the *Roman de la Rose*, where it is embedded
within the quotation from Sallust. While Timaeus insists on the kinship of word
and deed, Sallust defends the secondary act of writing: even if it is inferior to
the glorious deeds that it documents, it deserves its own measure of glory.
Chaucer's apology appears at the head of what can fairly be called a new kind
of poem, one that does not so much recount deeds, as words. The deeds of
Emelye and Theseus, of Dorigen and Aurelius, are not directly narrated, but told
by tellers whose telling is the main topic of the poem. And so Sallust's defense
of a secondary activity, that of telling, is a cue for the poem's strategy of telling,
and specifically for the narrator's apology for re-telling the telling of the
pilgrims. His words should be cousin to their deeds, he avows, but then again,
their deeds are words. Even the 'roadside drama' is wordy. There is no running
head-first into doors, no physical scuffles, no rapes, no tournaments, no
alchemy. Tempers are provoked and scores are settled by means of words,
however much the portraits of the pilgrims suggest lives full of action.

The secondariness of re-telling, and of tellings within tellings, that
provides the structural scaffold for the poem has its complement in the
ordinariness of the pilgrims. It has often been remarked that the very highest
courtly circle is unrepresented in the cast of sundry folk thrown together in the
Tabard. The Knight, the Prioress and the Monk are certainly *gentil*, but not top
drawer. The Monk is apparently eligible to be an abbot, but is not one. The
Knight is distinguished, but no John of Gaunt. The Prioress is a gentlewoman
with inadequate French. Bar these three, there is not much that is *comme il faut*,
as Tolstoy might have understood it, about this group. In part the make-up of
the group of pilgrims is appropriate, and confirms the verisimilar ambition of

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[1] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley:
University of California Press, 1984), p. 18.

the poem. After all, is it likely that a man of the very highest degree would undertake his pilgrimage in this fashion?

What kind of literary expression of ordinary life does medieval English literature provide before Chaucer? The *Wanderer* and *Seafarer* depict the peregrinations of marginalized or dispossessed speakers, but their lives are extreme ones of deprivation and alienation. The peasant and the poor man certainly recur in otherwise courtly poems, sometimes in magical settings, sometimes as counterpoints to kings or noblemen, sometimes, as in *Orfeo*, as kings in disguise. The *fabliaux* present the ignoble lives of lowly people, although this presentation is complicated by the possibility that they were, at least before Chaucer, intended for the entertainment of quite strictly courtly audiences. Satire, including Estates satire, targeted low- and high-ranking occupations. The mystery plays stand out in that they were enacted by and for a mixed social group. And above all, lyrics allow for the voicing of any and all subject positions.

But the devotion of an entire, lengthy poem, of the masterwork of an indisputable master, to the topic of ordinary people, realistically depicted, is new.[2] Chaucer may be 'courtly' in many respects, in both his poetic output and his own career and personal life, but he makes a massive adjustment to European literature by populating his greatest work with undistinguished characters. Michel de Certeau has written of the appearance of the 'ordinary man' in the 'ironical literature proper to the northern countries' who embarks upon the 'crowded human ship of fools and mortals, a sort of inverse Noah's Ark, since it leads to madness and loss'.[3] De Certeau's remarks refer rather to the early modern than the medieval period, but are suggestive when considered in relation, for instance, to John in his tub, his 'inverse Noah's ark' in the

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[2] But see Helen Cooper on the possible influence of Langland's 'feeld ful of folk', and specifically the 'pilgrymes and palmeres' that 'plighten hem togidre/ For to seken Seint Jame and seintes at Rome;' upon Chaucer's Prologue: 'one of the references closest to Chaucer occurs in the Prologue to *Piers Plowman*, a work he probably knew'. 'The Frame', in *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales*, Vol. 1, pp. 1-26; 21. Cooper cites as evidence the B-text of the Prologue, 46-9.

[3] *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 2.

rafters, or to the anonymity of the neighbours who assemble to mock him as he lies helplessly on the ground in a disgrace from which he cannot exculpate himself. The nobodies that populate the work of modern literature, the *inconnu* that stalks Poe, Kafka, Dostoevsky, Camus, Coetzee, the voices and notes from underground, the man who went missing, the man of the crowd, should properly tip their hats not just to the trope of *Narrenschiff* hailed by de Certeau, but to Chaucer's Canon's Yeoman, his Absolon, his John, his Miller, to the whole crew of underdogs whose only dominion is that they spoke in the *Canterbury Tales*.

At the end of *Troilus*, as we have seen, the narrator worries that his poem might be mangled and misunderstood. In grammatical terms, his fears are expressed negatively, in the form of a prayer that 'non' will mis-write or mis-read his poem. In 'Adam Scriveyn', the ur-man Adam is blamed for his clumsy failure to transcribe accurately such high-brow works as *Troilus* and *Boece*. In both of these poems, anonymous and unimportant people threaten to get in the way of the transmission of a great work of art. De Certeau writes that the name *Everyman* 'betrays the absence of a name', so that '*Chacun* becomes *Personne*, or the German *Jedermann Niemand*'.[4] Likewise, it may be that the Adam of 'Adam Scriveyn' is Everyman, or Nobody, just as the 'non' of the narrator's prayer in *Troilus* also effaces identity.[5] In the proem to Book II of *Troilus*, the narrator suggestively hints at the incomparable diversity of human speech and behaviour:

> For every wight which that to Rome went
> Halt nat o path, or alwey in o manere;
> Ek in som lond were al the game shent,
> If that they ferde in love as men don here,
> As thus, in opyn doing or in chere,

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[4] *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 2.
[5] Not that there may not have been an historical 'objective correlative' for the scrivener cursed in Chaucer's poem. Linne Mooney persuasively argues for the case that Adam Pinkhurst was Chaucer's scribe. See 'Chaucer's Scribe', *Speculum* 81 (2006), 97-138.

In visityng in forme, or seyde hire sawes;

Forthi men seyn, 'Ech contree hath his lawes.'

Ek scarsly ben ther in this place thre

That have in love seid lik, and don, in al;

For to thi purpose this may liken the,

And the right nought; yet al is seid or schal;

Ek som men grave in tree, some in ston wal,

As it bitit. But syn I have bigonne,

Myn auctor shal I folwen, if I konne. (II. 36-49)

But for the time being, for the course of this poem, this is as much as we will hear about the many, *every wight* on the path to Rome, whose variousness, beyond these tantalizing hints, remain unexplored.

The opening of the *Canterbury Tales* gives us another lot of migrants, on their way this time, not to Rome, but to Canterbury. Hardly has the phrase 'sondry folk' been uttered, however, than it is opened up, and unfolded, into the Knight, the Squire, the Yeoman, the Prioress, the Second Nun, the Nun's Three Priests, the Monk, the Friar, the Merchant, the Clerk, the Sergeant of the Law, the Franklin, the Haberdasher, the Carpenter, the Weaver, the Dyer, the Tapestry Maker, the Cook, the Shipman, the Doctor, the Wife of Bath, the Parson, the Reeve, the Miller, the Summoner, the Pardoner, the Manciple, and the narrator himself. I list them all deliberately, because this is precisely what the poem does. The blockheads who mangle language, who misquote, who don't just twist the waxen nose of authority, but batter it, the uncouth, the sly, the devious, the low-ranking, the adulterous, the ignorant, are now the subject of the poem, and more than its protagonists, its *makeres*, in the sense that the whole fictional premise for the poem is that the narrator is doing no more than transcribe *their* words, *their* tales, as Adam Scriveyn once transcribed Chaucer's. If it is natural for a man in Villon's position to write of vagabonds and gallows, it is equally natural for Chaucer to write, brilliantly as always, of

courtly matters, of heroes and dukes, of tournaments and Troy. But for Chaucer to give over his masterpiece to commoners, as he more or less does in the *Canterbury Tales*, is to baffle decorum and literary precedent. It's not so much pearls before swine, as swine spewing pearls.

Many of the abiding problems in Chaucer criticism stem from just this problem. How can the drunken, thieving, abusive Miller tell a tale that Tillyard describes as arousing 'feelings akin to those of religious wonder'?[6] How can the selective quotation, scriptural manipulations, bowdlerization of classical myth and self-confessed lying of the Wife of Bath be considered good literature, unless the whole meaning of her prologue is that it is a joke on her? Recent criticism has tried to address this problem by jettisoning the theory of the 'roadside drama' altogether, and relegating the theory of a psychological fit between teller and tale to the dustbin of old-hat, soft Freudianism. Criticism of this school believes that its function is to break the spell cast by literature, to get behind the magic, and *explain* it in scientific terms. The magician does not really cut the lady in half, no more than the Knight has a *real* psychology that expresses itself in his tale. The duty of the alert critic is to rouse himself from the suspension of disbelief, and to see *how the thing was done*.

In a previous chapter, I argued that a swinish, 'mercenary' Franklin, who believes in the efficacy of subtle social and economic machinations, can be something other than a victim of Chaucer's satirical portraiture. I suggested that the 'Franklin's Tale' presents a transvaluation of the value of *gentilesse*, from which *gentilesse* emerges not as a disembodied, immaterial quality, capable of being possessed by the low-born as much as the high (even if this is the visible value which it bears in society at large, and at the explicit level of the Franklin's own discourse), but as an expression of power, or of the will to power. The idea, that recurs across the criticism of this tale, that a vulgar, 'ugly' character, who is motivated by gain and self-interest, could only be the object of the author's (and his vigilant readership's) mockery, is a sign of a refusal to understand the way

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[6] E. M. W. Tillyard, *Poetry Direct and Oblique* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1945), p.92, and quoted by Lee Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History*, p. 259.

in which poetry, as against all other forms of linguistic expression, is first and foremost *creative*, rather than analytic, descriptive, or investigative. The characters and scenarios that it depicts can come to have lives that are independent of those of their makers.

This latter idea is now mostly scorned in educated circles, although it remains *popular*. When people send letters to 221b Baker Street, addressed to Sherlock Holmes, or visit the parsonage in Haworth, to look for Cathy's ghost on the moor, or eat kidneys on the sixteenth of June, or say 'Ahhrr, Jim lad!' when they see a parrot, they are showing that they believe, just a little bit at least, that literary characters do walk abroad amongst us, and independently of their long-dead authors. There was a time, not that long ago, when a similar view was acceptable within literary criticism, when the *universal appeal*, and *timelessness* of works of art were praised by specialists, when that was part of the function of criticism, to hail Shylock or Iago or Leopold Bloom as our enduring contemporaries. A further manifestation of this idea has been in modernist and post-modernist literature, as when, for example, the author's characters conspire against him in Flann O'Brien's *At-Swim Two Birds*, or when the boundaries of text and world are explored in the service of de-familiarization in Brechtian theatre.

This idea of the independence of the created of their literary creator, as likely as not to be viewed now as a foolish popular delusion, or as a quaint attitude of out-of-date naïve criticism, or as an aspect of the philosophical coming-of-age of early twentieth century theatre and fiction, has had a renaissance in the fiction of the most avant-garde of living novelists, J. M. Coetzee. In *Foe*, in *Elizabeth Costello*, and most recently, in *Slow Man*, the safe world of the *real fictional* characters is worrisomely invaded by the *fictionally real*. Paul Raiment, the protagonist of *Slow Man*, is pestered by Elizabeth Costello, a kind of decoy-author, who will not let his story progress according to his own, or the reader's desires.[7] In his acceptance speech for the 2003 Nobel

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[7] J. M. Coetzee, *Slow Man* (London: Secker and Warburg, 2005); *Foe* (London: Secker and Warburgh, 1986); *Elizabeth Costello* (London: Secker and Warburg, 2003).

prize, Coetzee reprised and inverted the dyad of Daniel Defoe and Crusoe. Crusoe, growing old in Bristol, wonders whether 'the other one, that man of his', finds writing any easier than he does himself, and wonders how 'are they to be figured, this man and he? As master and slave? As brothers, twin brothers? As comrades in arms? Or as enemies, foes? What name shall he give this nameless fellow with whom he shares his evenings and sometimes his nights too, who is absent only in the daytime, when he, Robin, walks the quays inspecting the new arrivals and his man gallops about the kingdom making his inspections?' The effect of Coetzee's ruminations is to disturb conventional hierarchies of creator and created, writer and written, master and servant, and to oppose the direction of modern criticism in the process, by means of a cold, hieratic, re-mystification of the process of literary creation.

Coetzee's oblique revision of a popular and old-fashioned notion that a writer's literary creations live independently should give us pause. If one of the best living novelists writes again and again, for whatever reason, of the persistence and unpredictable existence of literary characters, why is sophisticated literary criticism so set against just such a notion? Where an older generation of critics *fell for* literature, succumbed to it charms, our own breed is immured, determined to avoid foolishness at all costs.

Nabokov has a short story in which a posthumous commemoration of an old poet named Perov has been arranged by his high-minded admirers.[8] During the eulogies, an old man claiming to be Perov turns up, demanding a share of the money raised, and rejecting the work of his youth. The organizers of the event are embarrassed and irritated, and unsure as to whether the old man is just an imposter, or if there is the whisker of a possibility that he really is Perov. They decide to have him thrown out, rather than risk the embarrassment of being conned. Allusion is made to 'The Emperor's New Clothes', and the action of the story moves on. To avoid one foolish thing, the organizers do a much more foolish one.

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[8] Vladimir Nabokov, 'A Forgotten Poet' (1944), *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov* (1995; repr. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1996), pp. 569-79.

Modern literary criticism is concerned to appear super-sophisticated at all times, to be in control of its object, literature. So the modern critic dealing with Yeats's belief in the spirit world, in the presence of types, and cycles, and daimons, does not feel that his job is either to propagandize on behalf of Yeats's beliefs, or to determine whether or not they are really valid. The onus he feels is rather to explain where these beliefs came from. Whom did the poet meet in a particular year who might have communicated such ideas to him? What was he reading? What psychological purpose did his belief serve? Maybe this is just how it should be, most of the time. One discourse should not try to duplicate another, after all, and criticism should perhaps stick to its element of dispassionate elucidation.

But as Coetzee shows, once a literary character and situation has been set in motion, there is a sense in which it now has a life of its own. De Certeau makes the comparable point that 'when elitist writing uses the "vulgar" speaker as a disguise about itself, it also allows us to see what dislodges it from its privilege and draws it outside of itself: an Other who is no longer God or the Muse, but the anonymous. The straying of writing outside of its own place is traced by this ordinary man, the metaphor and drift of the doubt which haunts writing, the phantom its "vanity," the enigmatic figure of the relation that writing entertains with all people, with the loss of its exemption, and with its death.'[9] The miscomprehending people, readers and scribes, who in *Troilus* and 'Adam Scriveyn' threaten the survival and the 'exemptions' of Chaucer's poems with their negligence and with the differences amongst themselves in their speaking and reading, are given their voices in his greatest poem and become the 'vulgar speakers' of the *Canterbury Tales*.

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[9] *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 2.

How to say 'I'[10]

The major paradox about the Wife of Bath is that she is at once the most robust of Chaucer's literary characters and the most paper-thin. She is one of the most famous literary characters to have emerged from English literature, has endured for six hundred years and is often cited as the most perfect example of Chaucer's skills of naturalistic portraiture and of burgeoning individualism. At the same time as she is clamouring for our attention, demanding that we listen to her very personal story, however, she is a patchwork of other writer's words. Outside of the fact that much of the verbal content of her prologue originates elsewhere – in Scripture, or in Jerome, or in Theophrastus – even the very idea for the character appears to be imported, perhaps from Ovid or more directly from Jean de Meun. Her famous opening cry that she will draw only upon her own experience can be found amongst la Vielle's own boastful autogenies. Structurally identical paradoxes crop up all over the criticism on her prologue. Feminist criticism has been especially active, and indeed, the Wife's case does seem miraculously to provide scope for post-modern discussions of abjection and the very possibility of authentic feminine speaking and selfhood: is the Wife trapped within phallocentric discourse? Can she 'selve' herself? Does the poem allow for the possibility of a feminine, semiotic kind of speaking that is a genuine alternative to the masculine symbolic kind?

I suggested above in chapter two that in the *Canterbury Tales* Chaucer takes what Roman Jakobson says is a basic feature of poetry, its 'quasi-quoted quality', by which it offers 'all those peculiar, intricate problems which "speech within speech" offers to the linguist',[11] and extends it into the governing structural concept of his poem. Partly by this means he consolidates the

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[10] '...the pictures of the lyrist are nothing but his very self, and as it were, only different projections of himself, by force of which he, as the moving centre of this world, may say "I".' Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music*, trans. Clifton P. Fadiman, in *The Philosophy of Nietzsche* (New York: Modern Library, 1927). Reprinted as *The Birth of Tragedy* (New York: Dover, 1995), p. 15.
[11] 'Linguistics and Poetics', p. 85.

importance of his poem *qua* poem – if it is a poem that not only has, like other poems, a topic and a mode, but has, *for its topic and its mode*, that which *makes poetry poetry*, then he has made a very big poem indeed. I further suggested that Jean de Meun's integration of the Timaean epigram (where words must be cousin to the deeds) within the quotation from Sallust (where the writing of deeds is apportioned its modest share of glory) appears to give Chaucer a cue for this undertaking. What implications does this scheme of secondariness, of tellings-within-tellings, have for the depiction of character in the *Canterbury Tales*?

The critically over-determined figure of the Wife of Bath may seem like she can support no more on her crowded shoulders. Yet her very availability to so many different theoretical and critical approaches, over so many years, is the ultimate sign of Chaucer's success. James Joyce, in a boast that now looks conservative, promised that *Ulysses* would keep the professors guessing for a hundred years. Chaucer - admittedly out of the blocks first - has an advantage over Joyce in this regard, and there is no end in sight. The Wife of Bath, having lent herself to just about every theoretical method and approach under the sun, is a little bit like the *organon* of the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole. If we can make a fist of appreciating her prologue, we are halfway to at least a metonymic understanding of the tales as a whole. In her prologue are crowded the qualities that endeared Chaucer to previous generations of readers (individuality, naturalism, humour, misogyny) and to modern (polysemy, theoretical sophistication, inter-textuality, feminism).

What are we to make of this multivalency? And how and why did Chaucer come to make his liveliest character out of bits of old stuff? One plausible, now old-fashioned reading went as follows: the wife rails against misogynistic *auctoritees*, but actually demonstrates their accuracy in the process. In this interpretation, the poem is itself an early contribution to a kind of good-humoured, long-suffering English attitude towards nagging wives. Twentieth-century critics had no problem recognizing it as such because so many modern contemporary examples of the same thing abounded, from the

Brighton pier comedy of 'Take my wife. Please do', to Benny Hill's sketches of
husbands who discover to their delight that they can manipulate their scolding
wives by means of the television's remote control, turning down the volume,
and rewinding her out of the room altogether when it suited. For the past couple
of decades, if I can extrapolate a prevailing strand from the numerous articles
and chapters on the wife, the wife's incessant quoting of others is a sign either
of her complete captivity within masculine symbolic language, or, à la
Kristeva's semiotic, a skilful and subversive manipulation of the only tools at
her disposal.

These two major strands in the interpretation of the Wife of Bath,
polarized though they may be, display comparable levels of interest in the
dependence of the prologue upon quotation, mis-quotation or citation of other
sources. Given the thorough coverage of the prologue provided by the
representative best of these two main approaches, is there anything further to be
gained by returning to the question of the secondariness of the Wife's prologue?

The Wife's opening lines distinguish between self and world, private
and public, ordinary life and *auctoritee*. As we know, however, this battle-cry of
subjectivity and experience is itself drawn from the compendious *Roman de la
Rose*. And if this fact alone is not sufficient complication, the Wife's method
soon looks like it will dissolve her annunciatory taxonomy altogether. In even
the first seventy-five lines of her prologue, for instance, she has quoted or
referred to the following *auctoritees*: the legal/eccelesiastical stipulations as to
marriageable age, Jerome's *Adversus Jovinianum* (repeatedly), St. Paul's first
letter to the Corinthians (several times, and as cited by Jerome), Matthew's
gospel (again, as cited by Jerome), and the Book of Kings. The number of lines
that does not involve either reference or quotation is very few. This pattern,
established at the outset of her prologue, is continued more or less to the end.
Her subject, the largely private one of marital unhappiness, is treated by means
of the procedures of disciplines unrelated to her own occupation of Wife. So, as
has often been observed, and as the Pardoner himself points out, in her
exhortations, didacticism and use of exempla, she resembles a preacher. Also,

and feminist criticism has made much of this, in her glossing and exegesis, she resembles a clerk.

Her combined animus and ambition towards clerical activity is one of the most pronounced features of her prologue. From early on, she draws attention both to her disdain for clerical glossing, and her own practice of it.[12] She cites clerks, argues with them and ultimately, marries one, upon which marriage she is confronted with a book-load full of clerks. The swing between resentment and desire for clerks that is visible in her personal life appears also in her argumentative style, where her selective quotation and exegetical casuistry alternate with her condemnation of clerical sophistry and deception.

Her ambivalent encroachment of the clerical discipline, which earns her the rebuke that is the Clerk's tale, brings up the whole question of *limits*, which appears to be a significant topic of the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole. The poem's treatment of clerks in particular displays a preoccupation with disciplinary boundaries, and with the boundary between private and public life. An idealized clerk is presented in the 'General Prologue'. He is poor, grateful, modest, obedient, unworldly, chaste, scholarly and quiet. He is a good student and a good teacher. This brief glimpse of the good clerk is pretty much the last we will have in the *Canterbury Tales*, though, bar the Clerk's own austere performance in his tale. The first clerk we meet, Nicholas of the 'Miller's Tale', is intelligent, certainly, but applies that intelligence not in the study of grammar, or rhetoric or theology, but in astrology and sexual gratification. Like the clerk of the 'General Prologue', he has withdrawn, but not in favour of collective masculine celibacy. Instead, where the ideal clerk refuses one kind of public life (the physical, the self-interested) for another kind of public life (the collective, the intellectual), Nicholas retreats almost entirely into privacy, where sexual desire can be coaxed and relieved, where intellectual life is furtive, and where clerical intelligence and aptitude is always already inflected by the demands of

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[12] E.g.:   'Men may devyne and glosen, up and doun,
            But wel I woot, expres, withoute lye,
            God bad us for to wexe and multiplye;
            That gentil text kan I wel understonde.' (24-29)

the body. A comparable disruption of the idea of the clerk as presented in the 'General Prologue' occurs in the portrayals of Alayn and John in the 'Reeve's Tale', and of the clerk of Orléans in the 'Franklin's Tale'.

Even as the 'General Prologue' highlights the processes of consolidation and specialization through which professions such as the law, and medicine, are going in the late Middle Ages, it also draws attention constantly to the leakage between the various specialized terminologies and interests.[13] So, for instance, the wealth and prudence of the Man of Law, rather than being *signs* of his professional excellence, are in fact shown to be connected to his ability to exploit his public and visible specialist knowledge for the purposes of private self-enrichment in the form of land-purchasing. The very professionals who seek, like the Man of Law and the Summoner, to impose and enforce limits, like to use their professional and public expertise to gratify their private selves. This problem is oddly topical today, as we see the modern Catholic Church's confrontation with the secular legal system, and as it sells off land acquired largely through the donations of the congregation, to pay the penalties for the private sexual misdemeanours of its members. The Church is puzzled and irritated. In what kind of topsy-turvy world do the representatives of the ultramontane universal church of Christ on earth have to turn up at court on Monday to answer charges arising out of what is now popularly called the 'abuse of their position'? The leakage between public clerical office and private desire, a leakage that appears to have always in fact been in place, now finds its painful objective correlative in the form of the priest called to account in a secular courtroom. But, as I have argued in an earlier chapter, the *Canterbury Tales* is not a progressive social policy document, and the tone of its insights into such matters is revelatory rather than condemnatory.

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[13] Jill Mann elegantly shows that the narrator 'assumes that each pilgrim is an expert, and presents him in his own terms, according to his own values, in his own language.' Jill Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire: the Literature of Social Classes and the* General Prologue *to the* Canterbury Tales (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), p. 194.

The Wife of Bath's occupation of the ideally ethereal clerical domain is doubly interesting because of the way in which her method itself enacts one of her most explicitly stated points, i.e. that the rarefied, purely intellectual clerk is a myth. In her amateurism, playfulness, troubling admissions of lying, manipulation of sources, selective and self-serving glossing, telling of her tale with her 'joly body', conflation of the sexual and intellectual, of objectivity and subjectivity, of private and public, she is a parodic version of a clerk and her target is the serious version of the clerk. Moreover, her insight into the physicality and lust that is concealed behind a veneer of clerical abstention from the world is borne out by the tales as a whole. The demystification of an ideal, when shown together with the ideal, does not necessarily work, however, towards a satiric goal. This is a point upon which I would part company with an earlier generation of critics who argued that the conspicuous methodological aberrations in the Wife's pseudo-clericalism marked her out as a figure of fun. When she argues that the clerk 'whan he is oold, and may noght do/ Of Venus werkes worth his olde sho,/ Thanne sit he doun, and writ in his dotage/ That women kan nat kepe hir marriage!' she could of course be said to be perversely projecting her own relentlessly sexual view of human motivation onto the innocent clerical class.[14] And after all, this is just what Theophrastus and Jerome warned of: women will drag men down to their debased level; they will not allow a man to pursue a spiritual or intellectual life.[15] Onto the supremely rational head of Socrates what did his wife pour?[16] Cyril Connolly wrote that the pram in the hall is the most 'sombre enemy of good art'; Francis Bacon that he 'that hath wife and children hath given hostages to fortune; for they are

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[14] WBP, 707-10.

[15] Theophrastus, 'Liber de Nuptiis', in Ralph Hanna III & Traugott Lawler, eds. and trans., *Jankyn's Book of Wikked Wyves* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1997), pp. 150-1.

[16] Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum* 1.48, in *Jankyn's Book of Wikked Wyves*, p. 176-178. Chaucer heightens the contrast between masculine intellectualism and feminine physicality by converting Jerome's 'dirty water' (*acqua...immunda*) into *pisse*.

impediments to great enterprises'.[17] From Theophrastus in the fourth century
B.C. to Connolly in the twentieth, the idea that women get in the way of
masculine spirituality and intellectual achievement is a mainstream and
respectable one. It is no great wonder that twentieth century critics of Chaucer
assumed that it is also the point of view from which Chaucer wrote the Wife of
Bath's prologue.

But on the other hand, the Wife's critique, despite, or more accurately
because, of its being conducted by means of obviously flawed (if measured
against the disembodied ideal we have discussed above) argumentative
methods, and personal animus, and private sexual preoccupations, has
considerable force. After all, the clerks we see scattered across the *Canterbury
Tales* do appear to act under similar pressures themselves. Even the highly
intellectual Clerk of the 'General Prologue', when he comes to tell his tale,
appears to be motivated by the same kind of compulsion to 'quit' and compete
that sets the other pilgrims against each other. His 'Adversus Uxorem', the tale
of Griselda, is a cold, rebarbative attempt to repel the Wife's invasion of his
disciplinary territory. In fact, so strictly does he appear to re-assert his authority
over exegesis and glossing,[18] in the form of the interpretations he insists on
providing at the conclusion of the narrative, that the whole flow of the
Canterbury Tales, which up to this point has been flawlessly naturalistic, jumps
and skips a beat, so much so that at some point in the transmission of the poem,
the final address to the 'archewyves' was deemed to be in Chaucer's own voice,
rather than that of the Clerk.[19] Larry D. Benson rejects this scribal assumption,
as do many others, including Robinson, and Elizabeth Salter in a well-known
essay. If Benson and the others are correct, as they seem to be, then the austerity

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[17] Cyril Connolly, *Enemies of Promise* (1938; rev. ed., London: André Deutsch, 1998),
'The Charlock's Shade', p. 127. Francis Bacon, 'Marriage and the Single Life', in *The
Essayes or Counsels Civill and Morall*, ed. Michael Kiernan, (Cambridge, Mass.:
Harvard University Press, 1985).
[18] On exegesis see Peggy Knapp, 'Knowing the Tropes: Literary Exegesis and Chaucer's
Clerk', *Criticism* 27 (1985): 331-45.
[19] See John Ganim on carnivalesque aspects of the ending of the tale in 'Carnival Voices
and the Envoy to the Clerk's Tale', *Chaucer Review* 22 (1987), 112-27.

of the 'Clerk's Tale' is followed up by a level of good-humoured cheerfulness
on the part of the Clerk that would seem to temper the edge of his tale.[20] And
the heartiness of the Clerk's self-presentation at this point is certainly
surprising, belying as it does the desiccated austerity of the portrait in the
'General Prologue'. Where his portrait shows him to disdain music in favour of
Aristotle, here he will provide a 'song'. Where in the 'General Prologue' he is
thin to the point of emaciation, sober, quiet, reverent and dedicated to the
sowing of 'moral vertu' in all that he says, here in his song, he is all 'lusty
herte', unaccountably 'fressh and grene'. The effect of his sudden invigoration
is disarming, of course, and the several interpretations he offers, the
multivalency of his own voice at this point is suggestive of his openness to
others and the likely reasonableness of his ideas. He is human after all, it seems.
He does, however, commit one strange and major omission, in an otherwise
fairly attentive account of the meaning of the tale as Petrarch provided it:

> This storie is seyd nat for that wyves sholde
>
> Folwen Griselde as in humylitee,
>
> For it were inportable, though they wolde,
>
> But for that every wight, in his degree,
>
> Sholde be constant in adversitee
>
> As was Griselde: therfore Petrak writeth
>
> This storie, which with heigh stile he enditeth.

> For sith a woman was so pacient

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[20] Although Elizabeth Salter goes on to read the Clerk's song as highly ironic, and as
actually shoring up the harsh values of the tale: 'The [Clerk's] taking of a common-sense
view (such as the Wife of Bath, with her reliance upon "experience" would have
approved) and the exaggeration of it until it becomes entirely ludicrous and grotesque are,
in fact, ways of defending the basic premise of the Griselda story. Realism is pressed so
far that idealism begins to seem desirable – even accessible...If the companionable
reference to the Wife of Bath gave pilgrims and readers any sense of relief, of relaxation,
the Clerk's "finale" shows them how false it was.' *Chaucer: 'The Knight's Tale' and
'The Clerk's Tale'* (London: Edward Arnold, 1962), pp. 64-5.

Unto a mortal man, wel moore us oghte

Receyven al in gree that God us sent;

For grete skile is he preeve that he wroghte.

But he ne tempteth no man that he boghte,

As seith Seint Jame, if ye his pistel rede;

He preeveth folk al day, it is no drede,

And suffreth us, as for oure exercise,

With sharpe scourges of adversitee

Ful ofte to be bete in sundry wise;

Nat for to knowe oure wyl, for certes he,

Er we were born, knew al oure freletee;

And for oure beste is al his governaunce.

Lat us thanne lyve in vertuous sufferance. (IV (E) 1142-62)

The Clerk's account of Petrarch's interpretation of the tale isolates the following: the story is not related so that human women should follow the clearly unrealistic and unacceptable model of Griselda; her story is a figure for the relationship between us and God, who does not tempt but does test people; God suffers us to be scourged, not in order to discover our will, for He knows that already since before we were born; His governance is for our own good, and we should therefore live in virtuous sufferance. Petrarch's actual interpretation goes as follows:

> This story it has seemed good to me to weave anew, in another
> tongue, not so much that it might stir the matrons of our times to
> imitate the patience of this wife – who seems to me scarcely
> imitable – as that it might stir all those who have read it to
> imitate the woman's steadfastness, at least; so that they may have
> the resolution to perform for God what this woman performed
> for her husband. For He cannot be tempted by evil, as says James

the Apostle, and He himself tempts no man. Nevertheless, He
often proves us and suffers us to be vexed with many a grievous
scourge; not that He may know our spirit, for that He knew
before we were made, but in order that our own frailty be made
known to us through notable private signs.[21]

Petrarch's account of the way in which the story of Griselda is to be understood,
and of why it was written, coincides to a very great extent with the Clerk's,
even down to the sequence in which the various elements occur. It is the only in
the final hermeneutic advice that a substantial difference appears between the
two accounts. Petrarch's, as we can see, goes like this: the story was worth
telling again in the high style not in order to encourage women to emulate

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[21] I am indebted to Dr. Mark Stansbury of the Foundations of Irish culture project at the
Moore Institute of the National University of Ireland, Galway, for his advice on the
construal of Petrarch's passage. I am drawing (I have made a few minor and insignificant
modernizations) upon the translation of Petrarch's text by Robert Dudley French, *A
Chaucer Handbook* (1947), pp. 291-311, which is reproduced in V. A. Kolve and
Glending Olson, eds., *The Canterbury Tales: Nine Tales and the General Prologue* (New
York: W. W. Norton, 1989), pp. 378-388; 388). The Latin text is as follows: 'Hanc
historiam stilo nunc alio retexere visum fuit, non tam ideo, ut matronas nostril temporis
ad imitandam huius uxoris pacienciam, que michi vix imitabilis videtur, quam ut legentes
ad imitandam saltem femine constanciam excitarem, ut quod hec viro suo prestitit, hoc
prestare Deo nostro audeant, qui licet (ut Jacobus ait Apostolus) intentator sit malorum, et
ipse neminem temptet. Probat tamen et sepe nos multis ac gravibus flagellis excerceri
sinit, non ut animum nostrum sciat, quem scivit ante quam crearemur, sed ut nobis nostra
fragilitas notis ac domesticis indicijs innotescat.' Petrarch, *Epistolae Seniles*, Book XVII,
Letter III, 69-81 (reproduced in *Sources and Analogues*, Vol. 1, pp. 108-129, with facing
translation). It appears that Chaucer depended upon both Petrarch's Latin letter and an
anonymous French prose translation (*Le Livre Griseldis*, from Paris, Bibl. Nationale, MS
franc. 12459) of it when he came to compose the 'Clerk's Tale'. The French translation
of the same passage is as follows: 'Ceste hystoire est recite de la pacience de celle
femme, non pas tant seulement que les femmes qui sont aujourd'uy je esmeuve a ensuir
ycelle pacience et constance, que a paine me semble ensuivable et possible, mais aussy
les lisans et oyans a ensuiir et considerer au mains la constance d'icelle femme, afin que
ce qu'elle souffrist pour son mortel mary, facent et rendent a Dieu. Lequel, comme dist
Saint Jaque l'Apostre, ne tempte nul, mais beine appreuve et nous sueffre maintes foiz
tres griefment pugnir. Non pas qui'il ne congnoisse nostre couraige et entencion devant
que soyons nez, maid pour que par jugemens clers et evidens recongnoissions et veons
nostre fragile humanité.' *Sources and Analogues*, Vol I., pp. 140-167, with facing
translation.

Griselda, who is inimitable, but so that readers will be stirred by her example to behave towards God with the constancy she displayed towards her husband; God does not tempt man but does test him, as James says; he tests us and allows us to suffer, not in order to discover the state of our souls, as he knew that before we were born, but in order that our own frailty be made known to us.[22]

Where Petrarch concludes his account climactically with the real reason as to why God tests man, the Clerk's version simply peters out, giving the first part of the problem – God doesn't test us in order to find out what we are really like, because he knows that anyway - but then following up not with the *real and specific reason that the syntactical structure demands*, but with a bathetic and much more general statement that because God's governance is for our benefit, we should put up with the sufferings that are sent us.

Given that the Clerk otherwise follows the tenor and sequence of Petrarch's ideas about interpreting the story of Griselda, why does he omit the final and important element, and in the process undermine the pleasurable climax of the sequence?[23] What the clerk erases from his otherwise faithful redaction of Petrarch's account, is the phrase '*sed ut nobis nostra fragilitas notis ac domesticis indicijs innotescat*' ('that our own fragility be made known to us through notable private signs'). Why does he absent himself for the homecoming of the moral of his tale? Why does he dodge the implications *that*

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[22] Augustine's remarks on John 8:48-59 chime with James, as follows: 'As regards that which deceives, God tempteth not any man; as regards that which proves, the Lord your God tempteth you, that He may know whether ye love Him. But here again, also, there arises another question, how He tempteth that He may know, from whom, prior to the temptation, nothing can be hid. It is not that God is ignorant; but it is said, that He may know, that is, *that He may make you to know*' (my emphasis). Augustine, Tractate 43, in volume 7 of *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*, Series One, ed. Philip Schaff (1888).

[23] The Latin gloss at line 1142 itself concludes where the Clerk's close dependence upon Petrarch ends, at 'quem scivit ante quam crearemur etc.' The gloss in this instance therefore appears to follow Chaucer's text, including its omissions, rather than supply what is missing. The *Riverside Chaucer* draws attention to the omission within the gloss of Petrarch's final sentence, but not to the omission of the second half of his *penultimate* sentence. The omission of the final sentence, while interesting in itself, is not that directly relevant to the discussion underway here, in that it is a moral recommendation, based on, but not integral to, the hermeneutic which has just concluded. *Riverside Chaucer*, p. 883.

his own tale has for himself? One simple answer would be that Chaucer is here displaying a generally valid psychological insight: which one of us does not find it easier to counsel than to accept counsel, to analyse others before ourselves? But is there any more specific, contextual reason for the Clerk's evasion?

The climax to Petrarch's hermeneutic guide to the tale of Griselda, his point that the reason why God tests us is not so that He can know himself what we are like, since He knows that already, but, as Augustine puts it in his discussion of John's treatment of the same theme, 'that He may make you to know', bears a sublime resemblance to the Wife of Bath's vulgar challenge to clerks. She confronts them, by means of certain 'private signs', with their 'human fragility'. She does this, not by aggressive and theoretical means only, although she certainly employs these, but largely in the form of her parodic, vulgar, and sexualized embodiment of clerical attitudes and practice. The Clerk's response is multi-faceted. At first it appears that he is offering a simple rebuttal of the Wife's carnal encroachment of clerical territory in the form of his tribute to an impossibly biddable femininity. But he is not so simple-minded, nor so confident in the straightforward dynamic of blow for blow, eye for eye, to leave it at that. Instead, he adopts a buxomness that is worthy of Griselda,[24] and ameliorates, as his Petrarchan model requires, the harsh gender-politics of the tale by means of universal tropological advice, *the punch-line of which he then deflects*. The Wife's challenge to clerks, her insight into the fact of their embodiment, in spite of all their rarefied and anti-matrimonial discourse to the contrary, is not refuted straightforwardly by the Clerk, much and all as it might look at first like he is trying simply to silence her with his tale. In fact, the Petrarchan hermeneutic climax to his own tale, *to which he builds, but then omits*, actually *replicates* the Wife's challenge, albeit in a more succinct, elegant, and *absent*, form. In structural terms, by omitting the parallel Petrarchan challenge, he erases the Wife's. The Wife's assumption of clerical

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[24] Warren Ginsberg draws attention to the Clerk's stratagems at this point, describing him as 'donning a docility' that associates him with the 'heroine of the tale of obedience'. *Chaucer's Italian Tradition* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), p. 266.

practice has inflected a purportedly disinterested, purely intellectual kind of activity, with the very lowest (according to the hierarchy of Jerome or Theophrastus) motives. *You are as human, sexual and spiteful as I am* is the upshot of her unlawful intrusion into the clerical discipline. God tests you so that you may come to know your *human frailty* by means of *private signs*, goes the intended dénouement of the Clerk's Petrarchan tale, a dénouement that he suppresses.

In the place of Petrarch's conclusion, is the Clerk's (or 'Chaucer's', if we accept the scribal assumption) envoy, one of the most problematic passages, in terms of voice and tone, of any in the *Canterbury Tales*. It is difficult, therefore, to fault the many critics who overcome the tonal ambiguity of the passage by reading it as highly ironic.[25] And in the very largest sense of that word, by which words bear a relationship of difference as much as similarity to their avowed referents, the envoy may well be 'ironic'. But if by 'ironic' is meant that the Clerk really intends (and supposes that his audience, including the Wife will realize this), when he disparages feminine 'humylitee', to recommend it, and contrariwise, when he celebrates feminine bullying, to condemn it, then the envoy is not ironic, although, to be sure, I am not claiming that the envoy provides a straightforward access to his actual opinions on these subjects.

The most striking feature of the envoy is that it is more brilliant, verbally and otherwise, than anything else in the 'Clerk's Tale', superior as that tale may itself be. That it should mark a stylistic departure is not surprising, as the Clerk is now speaking in *propria persona*, where before he has been following his master Petrarch. Also the formal difference is explained beforehand: what follows is a 'song'. But neither of these two facts can prepare the reader for the metaphoric energy and variousness of the stanzas themselves, which culminate in the following lines:[26]

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[25] See, for example, Elizabeth Salter, pp. 64-5 and Warren Ginsberg, pp. 266-67.
[26] Although there is a question-mark as to the order of the stanzas. See the *Riverside Chaucer*, p. 883, which provides references to the literature on this subject.

> Be ay of chiere as light as leef on lynde,[27]
>
> And lat hym care, and wepe, and wrynge, and waille! (IV (E) 1211-12)

Here, at last, is verbal ingenuity to rival the Wife of Bath's. Here, in the envoy, is his rebuttal of the Wife's incursion of his clerical discipline, and, appropriately enough, he plays it out on *her turf.* Her claim on the attention of the pilgrims and posterity, is her polemical, over-the-top mastery of the subject of marital trouble. Her technique has melded personal experience with an audacious annexation of clerical authority. Now the Clerk presumes to muscle in on her discipline – wifely terror. He goes one better than her, clerically systematizing and theorizing her polemical darts. Now, here, provided by the Clerk, is *his textbook on her subject.* There is a game that already angry young children sometimes play to infuriate each other, in which one child tells the other to do what he or she is already on the point of doing: 'That's right, go to your friend's house/ eat the sweet/ play with your toy, yes, just like I said'. The outrageous, unapologetic, incorrigibly garrulous Wife of Bath has just been bettered by the Clerk's bitter-sweet exhortation to her to be outrageous, unapologetic, incorrigibly garrulous. How galling for her to be patted on her disobedient head by her nemesis. How maddening, after all her mischief, to be told, by a clerk of all people, that she is a good girl after all. His counter-appropriation and counter-encroachment is perfect and complete.

Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's *Axël* famously dismissed quotidian, unsung, life with the words: 'As for living, the servants will do that for us'.[28] The *Canterbury Tales* begins with a tale that is continuous with the grand, classical poetic tradition, whose heroes are noblemen, and which is told by a Christian Knight, who marries all that is best in pagan militarism with a most refined

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[27] If the comparison itself is proverbial, the deployment of it, as in the case of the Wife's own borrowings, is full of life.

[28] 'Vivre? les serviteurs feront cela pour nous.' Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, *Axël*, in *Oeuvres Complètes*, ed. Alan Riatt, Pierre-Georges Castex, and with the collaboration of Jean-Marie Bellefroid (Paris: Gallimard, 1986), pp. 531-677; 672.

version of the Christian ethos. The Knight blends Statius with Boethius, obscuring his dependence, significantly, on the rather more ready-to-hand model of Boccaccio's *Teseida*, and his noble tale is duly appreciated by the *gentils* in particular. Chaucer is an established virtuoso of this tradition of vernacular re-workings of classical material. But, for all its brilliance, the 'Knight's Tale' is something to be prescinded from, as the Miller so emphatically demonstrates. From that point on, elite tales will be rather less successful – the Monk's and Squire's being the damp squibs of the lot. From that point on, the personal, everyday motives for using classical resources will be made more visible. What Michel de Certeau calls the 'poaching' that defines 'everyday living' becomes the new protocol of the tales. Each specialism, each discipline and occupation, seeks to shore itself up against incursion, and against mockery, and theft. But just as surely, a stronger counter-current, of near-constant inter-disciplinary quotation, appropriation, borrowing and competition threatens to swallow up the pretensions of any one specialism that thinks itself exempt. The principle of secondariness, of re-telling, then, which is voiced in the apology of the 'General Prologue', and that appears to have been partly inspired by Jean de Meun's enclosure of Plato in Sallust, is linked to the principle of 'quitting' which is initiated by the Miller and which organizes the to-and-fro corrections, and counter-corrections of the pilgrims' own tellings.

It is impossible to make any claims regarding the multi-vocalism of the *Canterbury Tales* without paying some attention to the apparent backlash against representation that is the 'Parson's Prologue' and the 'Retractions'.[29] A glib, if not entirely erroneous response to the challenge posed by the Parson's dismissal of tale-telling, is to point out that he is himself a fiction. To some extent this kind of extra-textual perspective on the po-faced rejection of the fictional and textual world may be worth assuming. A more convincing rejoinder, and one that stays within the frame of reference of the tales, however,

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[29] For a recent representative sample of views as to the significance of the placing of the 'Parson's Tale' see the collection of essays edited by David Raybin and Linda Tarte Holley, *Closure in The Canterbury Tales: The Role of The Parson's Tale* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 2000).

lies in the fact that the Parson's perspective is not superior to that of the other pilgrims, and that his own tale relies for most of its material upon existing sources. That his character is unimpeachable, in the opinion of the narrator and as depicted in the 'General Prologue', seems not be in question. But the ramifications of his excellent character for the status of his tale are not straightforward, given the thorough-going consistency with which the intricate scaffold of numerous distinct narrative voices is sustained throughout the poem.

Still, the Parson's rejection of tale-telling does occupy a prime position, as the ultimate statement about representation that the poem offers. His dismissal of the chaff, in favour of the wheat, disguises itself as a seemingly non-fictional abandonment of the whole poem's worth of fiction, of layering, of stories within stories. It also implies a confrontation with the narrator's avowed technique of faithfully reporting '[e]verich a word, if it be in his charge'. Now, the Parson asserts, only the *sentence* is worth preserving, the rest left to blow away on the barn floor. Narrator and Parson are of course in agreement as to the low status of fiction, of feigning things. The Parson's intervention threatens to blur the clean lines of the poem, from inside of which he speaks. Why is it not simply possible to dismiss what he says on the grounds that he too is a fiction, speaking from within that fiction, pontificating about other aspects of that fiction? Because that is to assume an extra-textual position on the goings-on of the poem, to look in upon the poem from the world. And to do that at this point, however much medieval visual art and other medieval literature seems to provide ample precedent for just this sort of co-existence of fiction and reality in the force-field around the created artifact, and however much post-modern criticism would be delighted to alight upon just such a 'play' between textual and extra-textual existence, is to refuse the offering of the *Canterbury Tales*, which is neither medieval, nor post-modern, but realist in its orientation. To reclaim fiction from the Parson's critique, therefore, it is necessary to confer the Parson, not with fictional status, but with real. To recover the pleasure to be taken in the drunken Miller, or the garrulous wife, we should listen very

attentively to the sober words of the Parson, and become very afraid as the penitential challenge looms.

The *Canterbury Tales* is born out of the story-telling competition, which in turn forms the beginning of the *Canterbury Tales*. This cyclicity, this playing off of every reader's constant awareness, whatever book he is reading, that he has one foot in the book and one in the world, is a sign of the new level to which Chaucer takes literary representation and its standing in the world. The pulsing, 'quitting' motion of the tales, by which each perspective achieves a temporary prominence that is quickly succeeded by a correction or adjustment, reaches its apotheosis in the Parson's rejection of fiction itself, by means of which rejection he is aligned both to the annunciatory logic of the narrator's apology in the 'General Prologue', and to the extra-textual world which the reader partly inhabits.

The very dullness of the Parson's performance, seen from this perspective, is an aspect of the larger brilliance of the tales as a whole. That it remains unread by many otherwise enthusiastic readers of the tales, that its quality is often called into question, that it is seen to spoil the sport of the poem, all of this adds rather than takes away from the compendiousness of the *Canterbury Tales*.[30] The pulsing motion which is set in play at the outset of the poem, in the story-telling competition, a motion which the Miller then more formally inaugurates with his 'quitting' of the Knight's tale, is the major structural premise of the poem. Just as the winter heightens the value of the summer, the waxing and waning of perspectives as one pilgrim 'quits' another lends a natural seasonality to the tales. And great works have their *longeurs*. From the *Faerie Queene* to *Ulysses* and *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, these longeurs (who enjoys Book IV of the *Faerie Queene* as they do Book III? How many readers sigh that they don't get past the first hundred pages of *Ulysses*, and never past the first sentence of *Finnegans Wake*? The most beloved passages in Proust are crushed into the first of seven volumes), in spite of the

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[30] On the unpopularity and allegedly 'boring' qualities of Melibee, see Edward E. Foster, 'Has Anyone Here Read Melibee?', *Chaucer Review* 34 (2000), 398-409.

alleged tedium they result in for the readers who complain of them, actually add to the reputation and greatness and beauty of the work, by making it seem more elusive, more difficult to master than it would be if it were all equally well-realised.

Nabokov counseled his students to skip the 'hymn to wheat' as they prepared to read *Anna Karenina*.[31] But even if Tolstoy's pastoral moralising has little of the warmth and sheer delight of say, Oblonksy's waking up on the couch having been booted out of the marital bed, nonetheless, it adds grandeur and ambition and scope to the book, makes it seem as if it is really a world, all of Russia in the nineteenth century, within a set of covers. One way of introducing cryptic infinitude into a work is to make it long, various and of inconsistent quality. This may sound plain silly – it is not like anyone sits down and determines to write a boring chapter (although this might explain the plethora of boring chapters in existence) – but it may be that there is a tendency to *refuse to perfect* great works. Brilliant works of art, at their most brilliant points, tend to be simple, in appearance, if not in the effort taken to make them so; the less popular bits tend to be more complicated, or more learned, or both (and the examples above, from the 'Parson's Tale' to *Ulysses* to *Sodom and Gomorrah* bear this out). These inaccessible parts, which remain less well known, for the very reason that they are dubbed 'boring' or 'difficult' then take on a mystique of their own, and contribute to the enlargement of the work as a whole. Galgacus, according to Tacitus, said that 'the unknown always passes for the marvellous', and the same can be said for these less well-travelled sections of great works.[32]

The repudiation of fiction in the Parson's prologue and Tale, in its dullness, and 'correction' of the forces expressed elsewhere, provides the tidal

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[31] Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature*, ed. Fredson Bowers (San Diego: Harvest, 1981), p. 143.

[32] 'nunc terminus Britanniae patet, atque omne ignotum pro magnifico est'. Cornelii Taciti, *De Vita Agricolae*, ed. R. M. Ogilvie and Ian Richmond (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967), 30.25-6. Translation in Tacitus, *The Histories*, trans. Alfred John Church and William Jackson Brodribb (London: Macmillan, 1888).

pull which enables the flow of the other tales. A beautiful confession at the end of a hell-raising life may be risky, if one is looking for guarantees of salvation, but it surely makes for a better story. 'Taak the siker wey', warns the Parson, but his own penitential negation follows upon just such a risk-taking life, in the form of the pilgrimage and tales so far.[33] The 'Retractions' follow on in spirit from the Parson's Tale, much and all as they are formally unconnected to the *Canterbury Tales*. There, the *makere* displays a comparable ambivalence about his poetic output, offering it, and apologizing for it in the same breath. There, in the final tally, the work of art, in all its words, is presented as a sin, as a deed, for which its *makere* begs forgiveness. Yet for all his penitence, there is a note of self-justification. After all, as that puritan Paul said: 'Al that is writen is written for oure doctrine'. But where the sacrament of reconciliation really does expunge sins, really does wipe the slate clean, the 'Retractions' boldly re-inscribes its *makere's* sins, listing them for posterity. In the *Canterbury Tales*, the sinful ordinary characters are shown to adapt the materials around them, to 'make do with what they have', to re-represent the representations that impose on them. And in this way, just as the 'Retractions' represents exceptional works of art as ordinary sins, so the *Canterbury Tales* connects ordinary living to artistic creation.

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[33] 'Parson's Tale', 93.

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