

Guilt and Creativity in the Works of Geoffrey Chaucer

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Figure 1:

The 'Little Tramp' about to fall. A scene from *Easy Street*, dir. by Charles Chaplin and Edward Brewer (Mutual Film Corporation, 1917) p. 146

List of Abbreviations

<i>BD</i>	<i>The Book of the Duchess</i>
<i>CYT</i>	<i>The Canon's Yeoman's Tale</i>
<i>CT</i>	<i>The Canterbury Tale</i>
<i>HF</i>	<i>The House of Fame</i>
<i>LGW</i>	<i>The Legend of Good Women</i>
<i>NPT</i>	<i>The Nun's Priest's Tale</i>
<i>ParsT</i>	<i>The Parson's Tale</i>
<i>PF</i>	<i>The Parliament of Fowls</i>
<i>SNT</i>	<i>The Second Nun's Tale</i>
<i>Troilus</i>	<i>Troilus and Criseyde</i>

Abbreviated forms are used after one full reference to the text in each chapter.

<i>ChRev</i>	<i>Chaucer Review</i>
<i>PMLA</i>	<i>Publications of the Modern Language Association of America</i>
<i>SAC</i>	<i>Studies in the Age of Chaucer</i>

Abstract

The late Middle Ages saw the development in Europe of increasingly complex, ambitious, and self-conscious forms of creative literature. In the works of poets such as Dante, Petrarch and Chaucer new models of authorship and poetic identity were being explored, new kinds of philosophical and aesthetic value attributed to literary discourse. But these creative developments also brought with them new dangers and tensions, a sense of guilt and uncertainty about the value of creative literature, especially in relation to the dominant religious values of late medieval culture. In this thesis I explore how these doubts and tensions find expression in Chaucer's poetry, not only as a negative, constraining influence, but also as something which contributes to the shape and meaning of poetry itself. I argue that as Chaucer develops his own expansive, questioning poetics in *The House of Fame* and *The Canterbury Tales*, he problematises the principle of allegory on which the legitimacy of literary discourse was primarily based in medieval culture and the final fragments of *The Canterbury Tales* see Chaucer struggling, increasingly, to reconcile the boldness and independence of his poetic vision with the demands of his faith. This struggle, which emerges most strongly and polemically in the final fragments, I argue, runs in subtle and creative forms throughout the whole of Chaucer's work. By seeing Chaucer in this light as a poet not of fixed, but of conflicted and vacillating intentions – a poet productively caught drawn between 'game' and 'earnest', radical ironies and Boethian truths – I attempt to account, in a holistic manner, for the major dichotomies that characterise both his work and its critical reception.

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Introduction: Guilt and Creativity in Late Medieval Literature

. . . I bieseke yow meekly, for the mercy of God, that ye preye for me that Crist have mercy on me and foryeve me my giltes; and namely of my translacions and enditynges of worldly vanitees, the whiche I revoke in my retracciouns: as is the book of Troilus; the book also of Fame; the book of the XXV. Ladies; the book of the Duchesse; the book of Seint Valentynes day of the Parlement of Briddes; the tales of Caunterbury, thilke that sownen into synne;/the books of the Leoun; and many another book, if they were in my remembrance. . .'¹ (X.1080-1087)

It is one of the peculiar ironies of English Literature that the man who was quickly named its father, and to this day still preserves something of that reputation, should have repudiated in this fashion the bulk of the literary accomplishments on which that reputation was based.² Like so much of Chaucer's work, this passage is rich with contradiction and ambiguity, even if unintentionally so. It is at once a strangely assertive and self-erasing gesture, a resolute ending and an inauspicious beginning. Chaucer steps forward here, self-consciously, as author of *The Canterbury Tales*, but only to relinquish that role; he claims ownership of his literary works— his 'giltes' as he calls them— and their meaning, but only in order to give them up. In this sense, guilt and repudiation are problematically present at the heart of the English literary tradition. If Chaucer does indeed stand at its source, that tradition begins not simply with Renaissance self-confidence — not with something like Henry Bradshaw's exclamation 'What were mankynde without lytterature?' or Philip Sidney's defence of

¹ Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. by Larry D. Benson, 3rd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987). All future Chaucer quotations are taken from this edition and cited with Roman numerals (indicating book or fragment number) and line numbers in the main body of the thesis.

² The *Retraction* appears in almost all complete manuscripts of *CT* and is closely linked, both textually and thematically, with *The Parson's Tale* from which it follows. Despite a tendency in eighteenth-century criticism to see both as spurious (see Thomas Hearne and Tyrwhitt), manuscript evidence suggests and critical opinion generally affirms their authenticity; for a good historical overview of critical responses to the *Retraction* see Anita Obermeier, *The History and Anatomy of Auctorial Self-Criticism in the European Middle Ages* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999), pp. 210-11; on the case for viewing the *Retraction* as a document of personal penitence, separate from Chaucer's literary work see Douglas Wurtle, 'The Penitence of Geoffrey Chaucer', *Viator*, 11 (1980), 335-9; on the case for the *Retraction* as sincere utterance, rather than rhetorical or ironical formula see James Dean, 'Chaucer's Repentance: A Likely Story', *ChRev*, 24 (1989), 66-74; conversely for the *Retraction* as chiefly rhetorical and strategic see Olive Sayce, 'Chaucer's Retractions', *Medium Aevum*, 40 (1971), 230-48.

poetry as ‘full of virtue-breeding delightfulness’ – but with a rather more troubling spirit of self-doubt and remorse.³ The tradition has at its beginnings both creativity and guilt, self-assertion and disavowal: not just the joyful welcoming of spring that opens *CT* but also the inaugural sacrifice that closes it. How is this ambivalence to be accounted for?

Part of the answer to this question may lie not just with Chaucer but his successors and what they made of him. For however equivocal Chaucer’s own relation to his work, its future and the literary tradition he was helping to shape may have been, the English poets of the fifteenth century were determined to find in him an impeccable father-figure through whom they could model and authorise their own literary endeavours. What the living father may have lacked in paternal assurance his sons made up for in eulogy. Courtly, authoritative, virtuous, and brilliantly accomplished: Chaucer was fashioned in an image which embodied everything his followers aspired to and felt in need of themselves.⁴ A counter-image of their own insecurities, Chaucer provided the noble lineage on which they relied for validation. Naturally, there was no place for doubt or guilt in this image; there could be no question of Chaucer’s ambivalence toward the laurel crown with which he was being honoured.

Canonical images of Chaucer have altered over the centuries, inflected by the changing values and experiences of different epochs, but a strong sense of this originary self-assurance has persevered. It is implicit, for example, in the famous fifteenth-century frontispiece to the Corpus Christi manuscript of *Troilus and Criseyde*, which illustrates the prestigious poet addressing his courtly audience; in Robert Greene’s late-sixteenth century vision of a jovial Chaucer exclaiming ‘poets’ wits are free’ in response to Greene’s own anxiety about the moral value of his work.⁵ It is there too in the robust and affable ‘sunny soul’ envisioned by Furnivall, in

³ Henry Bradshaw, *Life of St. Werburge* (c.1513) cited by Christopher Cannon, *Middle English Literature* (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), p. 150; Philip Sidney, *The Defence of Poesy* (c.1580) (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 53.

⁴ As Lerer and Meyer-Lee have argued, behind the rhetoric of idealisation, homage and self-abasement prevalent in their depictions of Chaucer, there lay this more complex project of poetic self-definition, what Meyer-Lee calls ‘laureate self-construction’. See Robert Meyer-Lee, *Poets and Power from Chaucer to Wyatt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 3-8; and Seth Lerer, *Chaucer and his Readers: Imagining the Author in Late-Medieval England* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

⁵ Frontispiece to *Troilus and Criseyde*, (Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, MS61) See Joyce Coleman, ‘Where Chaucer Got his Pulpit: Audience and Intervisuality in the *Troilus and Criseyde* Frontispiece’ *SAC*, 32, (2010), 103-208; Robert Green, ‘Green’s Vision’ in *Chaucer: the Critical Heritage*, ed. by Derek Brewer, 2 vols (London: Routledge, 1978), p. 133.

Kittredge's benevolent observer of the 'human comedy', Donaldson's masterful ironist, the assured medieval allegorist proposed by Robertson, and even in more recent notions of a radical Chaucer, at home with indeterminacy and the challenging of established values.⁶ But behind all of these compelling images there remains the problem of guilt that emerges most potently in the *Retraction*, the curious ambivalence of a poet less secure in the value of his literary craft. It is this sense of guilt and ambivalence, its underlying causes and manifestations, the ways it is negotiated, expressed and assuaged, and the importance it has both in Chaucer's poetry and for the development of creative literature in the late medieval period, as it forges new conceptions of literary value, which is the primary subject of this thesis. I consider the implications of guilt not only as a negating or constraining force, but also as something dialectically constitutive and potentially creative, even in its negativity. Indeed, I argue that a sense of guilt and responsibility are constitutive aspects of the development of Chaucer's poetry and late medieval poetry in general. For, as in the wider case of human subjectivity, guilt and the inner tension it creates are existentially integral to the incipient self-consciousness and independence of medieval literary discourse, in its capacity to raise and respond to the questions of its own meaning, value and destiny.

To develop these points, let me return to the problem of the *Retraction*. For the reader who does find lasting "literary" value in Chaucer's major works there is surely something disquieting about the poet's own seeming rejection of that possibility. In the above quoted passage Chaucer lists all his major literary works under the heading of 'giltes' to be retracted, and the only works he affirms are those of a strictly devotional and didactic nature – of these only his translation of Boethius is named. He asks not only for the readers' intercession through prayer, but implicitly that we endorse his own judgment of his works as 'giltes' in need of forgiveness, 'giltes' in which we have been complicit as readers. His meaning, so often difficult to discern, behind layers of irony and persona here seems all too clear, but it is perhaps not the meaning that the modern reader, the advocate of life and literature, wants to hear. The whole question of the worth of literature is uncomfortably thrown open precisely as

⁶ G. L. Kittredge, *Chaucer and his Poetry* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 195), p. 155; E. Talbot Donaldson, 'Chaucer the Pilgrim', in *Speaking of Chaucer* (London: Athlone Press, 1970); D. W. Robertson, *Preface to Chaucer* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963).

the work is closing down and the problem is exacerbated by the general incompleteness of *CT*. Not just in the *Retraction*, but throughout the final three Fragments one has the uncanny feeling that the stage is being dismantled and the audience kicked out before the play is complete—almost as though the director realised mid-performance he had more important matters to attend to. It would doubtless be less problematic and more aesthetically satisfying had Chaucer left us with a well-rounded fiction, a mercurial laugh or a wistful glance back to the waning spring and the promised supper at the Tabard Inn. Something more akin to the pathos of Prospero’s closing words, through which Shakespeare bids farewell to the illusions of poetry and fiction in their own enchanted terms. If the ending of *CT* was always going to be pious and penitential, could it not have been of a penitential sentiment expressed through art, rather than one that strains against it? Working with a text too long gives it an air of inevitability, as though *CT* could only have ended in the way it does, but the evidence of comparable medieval literary works and the various ‘Canterbury continuations’ suggests that other endings were both possible in a medieval context and maybe preferable to Chaucer’s stark dismissal of fable and poetry in Fragment X of *CT*.⁷

Throughout the years commentators have responded to the *Retraction* and Chaucer’s choice of ending in various ways, from questioning its textual authenticity to seeing it as the culmination of a unified spiritual ‘sentencia’.⁸ One obvious strategy has been to dismiss it altogether. There was a tradition in eighteenth-century criticism of seeing both *The Parson’s Tale* and *Retraction* as non-Chaucerian texts appended to *CT* by pious scribes. This view has largely been discredited, but something of its spirit can be felt in the reticence of much humanist and formalist criticism to engage with

⁷ For instance, Boccaccio in *The Decameron* returns his *brigata* to Florence, but offers a spirited defence of their tale-telling games rather than a recantation and Gower’s *Confessio Amantis* may end with Amantis’ penitential turn from love, but neither abandons poetry nor fiction. The anonymous fifteenth-century *Canterbury Interlude and Merchant’s Tale of Beryn* sees the pilgrims safely lodged in Canterbury and follows their activities there before the journey home; Pasolini concludes his 1972 film of *CT* with the mercurial smile of the poet caught mid-composition; and Pedro Guardia’s Spanish reworking of *CT* for children ends with the pilgrims ‘wel esed’ (l.29) in Canterbury, debating the winning tale over supper, with eager anticipation of more tales on the return leg. *Cuentos de Canterbury* (Barcelona: Vicens Vives, 2000), pp. 182-3. It is telling that these writers have all felt the need to alter and supplement Chaucer’s ending with something more aesthetically amelioratory.

⁸ Fuller discussion of critical responses to *ParsT* and *Retraction* follows in Chapter Three. Early critics who interpreted Fragment X as non-Chaucerian or at least not intended for inclusion in *CT* include H. Simon, Wilhelm Eilers and J. M. Manly, ‘Tales of the Homeward Journey’, *Studies in Philology* 28, (1931), 613-7 (p.616); and more recently Charles A. Owen Jr., *The Manuscripts of the Canterbury Tales* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1991), p. 125. Those who find in it the final authorial expression of a spiritual ‘sentence’ that runs through *CT* include Fredrick Tupper, ‘Chaucer and the Seven Deadly Sins’, *PMLA*, 29 (1914), 93-128 and Bernard Huppé, *A Reading of the Canterbury Tales* (New York: New York University Press, 1967).

either text as integral parts of Chaucer's work. Muscatine encapsulates this reticent attitude when he describes Fragment X as 'unrelated to the literary making of the rest of the work'⁹. It signals the point where Chaucer, the great poet, makes way for Chaucer, the man of his times. A similar idea is implicit in Pearsall's claim for the *Retraction* as a personal rather than a literary document, linked more to the spirit and occasion of *ParsT* than to *CT*, and by no means reflecting the poet's final word on his work. He prefers to imagine Chaucer in his final days still 'adding the non-finishing touches to the Cook's Tale rather than sinking into penitential gloom'.¹⁰ These critics' eagerness to draw a clear dividing line between Fragment X and Chaucer's main literary accomplishments only highlights the extent of the interpretative difficulty their actual relation poses.

Other commentators have appealed to biography in different ways. The fifteenth-century cleric, Thomas Gascoigne, encouraged by the evidence of the *Retraction*, elaborated the story of Chaucer's death-bed repentance in which the poet bewails his inability to undo the damage of his wicked writings. Modern critics have doubted the veracity of Gascoigne's account, but often preserved a similar, if less dramatic, narrative of personal repentance to explain the ending of *CT*.¹¹ Dean, Knight and David, for instance, all trace a familiar trajectory of a poet who, with death approaching, turned away from the worldly domain of literary pursuits, and the challenging vision of life his art had revealed, toward conventional piety and the certainties of faith.¹² To some extent this view works similarly to Muscatine's, by separating the artist and the man of his time— the poet of radical ironies and penetrating historical insights from the pious soul of the *Retraction* – but it has the advantage of doing so more gradually and of tracing out the influence of this transition in the poet's works.

In a culture which placed so much emphasis on spiritual values and the necessity of repentance, Chaucer's penitential turn from the world in his later years

⁹ Charles Muscatine, 'Chaucer's Religion and the Chaucer Religion', in *Chaucer Traditions: Studies in Honour of Derek Brewer*, ed. by Ruth Morse (Cambridge: 1990), pp. 256-8.

¹⁰ Derek Pearsall, *The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992) p. 275.

¹¹ In Gascoigne's *Liber de veritatibus* (c.1434-58) Chaucer is said to regret not being able to call back or destroy 'le scripsi de malo et turpissimo amore hominum ad mulieres' and this is given as an example of failed penitence, ominously, beside Judas Iscariot. This citation and details of the critical and textual history of Gascoigne's account can be found in Michael Vaughan, 'Personal Politics and Thomas Gascoigne's account of Chaucer's Death' *Medium Aevum*, 75 (2006), 103-22.

¹² See Stephen Knight, *Geoffrey Chaucer* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1986), pp. 137-56; Alfred David, *The Strumpet Muse: Art and Morals in Chaucer's Poetry* (London: Indiana University Press, 1976), p. 5 and James Deans, 'Dismantling the Canterbury Book', *PMLA*, 100 (1985), 746-62.

may seem unsurprising, perhaps even inevitable. It accords quite naturally, as Brewer notes, both with the authoritative medieval discourse of ‘Contemptus mundi’, and conventional tropes of youth as a time of folly, old age as a time for reflection and contrition.¹³ In these terms critics have sought to explain the *Retraction* not just as a gesture of personal piety, but as a piece of literary convention. As Benson points out, Chaucer ‘was neither the first nor the last great writer to conclude that literature is finally less important than salvation’.¹⁴ Both literary retractions and the general pattern of a penitential withdrawal from worldly to spiritual concerns have strong precedents in medieval literary culture. Obermeier has noted the prevalence of the ‘youth vs. old age’ motif in a long tradition of auctorial self-criticism, which sees mature writers repenting of their youthful literary compositions, especially those of an amorous nature.¹⁵ In this vein, Marbod de Rennes returns to the works of his youth in the first chapter of his *Liber decem capitulorum* (1107) to dismiss them as juvenile indiscretions, and Peter of Blois, a poet of the court of Henry II, reflects upon the pleasures of his misspent youth, concluding– ‘Now it’s time for penitence [...] henceforth I’ll be graver’.¹⁶ Petrarch in his ‘Letter to Posterity’ adopts the same motif to explain how, with age, he turned from the pleasures of poetry to sacred literature, and ‘came to regard the works of the poets as mere amenities’.¹⁷ Similarly, Boccaccio moved from the amorous vernacular works of his youth to the compendious moral productions of his later years and in a letter from Petrarch, seemingly had to be dissuaded from burning his early works.¹⁸ Malory’s *Morte D’Arthur*, Capellanus’ *Art of Courtly Love* and Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde* all end with a form of palinode and both Jean de Meun and John Lydgate wrote penitential testaments to conclude their life’s works.

As Lewis remarked, when reflecting upon this prevailing tradition of literary penitence, ‘the poets are all going to repent when the book is over’.¹⁹ Indeed the closing gesture of apology and retreat from ‘thise wrecched worldes appetites’

¹³ Derek Brewer, *Chaucer* (London: Longmans, 1953), p. 161.

¹⁴ Larry Benson, ‘The Texts’, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, p. 22.

¹⁵ Obermeier, *The History and Anatomy of Auctorial Self-Criticism*, pp. 71-89.

¹⁶ Peter of Blois (1135-1212) ‘Letter XVII [‘A new leaf’]’ in *The Virgin and the Nightingale: Medieval Latin Poems*, trans. and ed. by Fleur Adcock (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1983), pp. 70-1.

¹⁷ Francis Petrarch ‘Letter to Posterity’, in *Selections from the Canzoniere and Other Works*, trans. and ed. by Mark Musa (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 3.

¹⁸ Petrarch’s ‘Letter to Boccaccio’ in *Letters from Petrarch*, trans. by Morris Bishop (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966), p. 225.

¹⁹ C. S. Lewis, *Allegory of Love* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936), p. 43.

(*Troilus*.V.1846) is such a familiar part of medieval literary culture that it could be seen as almost formulaic— an anticipated act of literary decorum, piously yet habitually performed by Christian writers. From this perspective the tradition of retractions and apologies need not imply a great crisis of conscience and literary value, but rather simple acquiescence with or manipulation of a prevailing rhetorical trend. In some cases it could even be interpreted as a means of authorial self-protection and expression: a way of disarming criticism, furtively excusing or even advertising the literary activity it ostensibly renounces. This is the view Obermeier takes of Chaucer's *Retraction*, as she argues that 'the repentant author' is just one more of the ironical personae through which Chaucer explores with 'complete artistic license' the roles available to and expected of the medieval poet.²⁰

Useful as the appeals to biography and literary convention are in helping to contextualise Chaucer's *Retraction*, they are not sufficient as explanations. With regard to the biographical perspective, it may be true that Chaucer became more doubtful of the value of poetic fiction and his literary output more spiritually austere towards the end of his career. The tone and content of the final fragments of *CT* would suggest as much.²¹ However, there is no clear dichotomy between this later, Chaucer and the poet who wrote of the ill-fated love of *Troilus* or the Wife of Bath's cheerful 'heresies'. The sense of guilt which emerges most strongly in the *Retraction* is not unique to that text. Rather, I argue, it is the final stark expression of a self-questioning relation to literary enterprise that runs, in subtler and more mediate forms, throughout the whole of Chaucer's work. It is notable, for instance, in the epilogue to *Troilus* with its stringent 'Contemptus mundi' motif, in the sceptical investigation of the relation between literary tradition and truth in *The House of Fame*, the drama of trial and penance in the prologue to *The Legend of Good Women*, the ascetic Boethian thought that shades, with varying intensity, so much of Chaucer's poetry, the dynamic interplay between order and subversion, game and earnest that structures *CT* and the ambivalence that characterises Chaucer's relation to many of his most intriguing

²⁰ Obermeier, *The History of and Anatomy of Auctorial Self-Criticism*, p. 186 and p. 220.

²¹ The precise chronology of Chaucer's work is uncertain. It cannot be assumed that the works were produced in the order they are arranged in standard editions of *CT*, an arrangement which is itself conjectural. However, internal evidence broadly supports the view that fragments VIII to X were arranged and for the most part composed (excepting the Second Nun's Tale) sometime in the late 1380s-90s, toward the end of Chaucer's literary career. For a fuller discussion and defence of this chronology see Kathryn Lynch, 'Dating Chaucer', *ChRev*, 42 (2007), 1-22; Helen Cooper *Oxford Guides to Chaucer, The Canterbury Tales* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 357, 368-9, 384 and 398-9.

pilgrims. Moreover this spirit of guilt and doubt is not purely restrictive or extraneous to literary invention, but plays a dialectically constitutive part in the development of Chaucer's work. What appears in the *Retraction* is the final exhausted expression of a perhaps irresolvable dialectical tension that has already borne fruit. In that moment the antitheses stand irrevocably apart— a worldly literature that must be renounced and its sacred, didactic alternative, fiction and truth, pleasure and moral purpose, damnation and salvation— but it is in the fraught middle ground between these poles, and in the dialectical effort of mediation and negotiation that Chaucer's poetry has been forged. As Yeats suggested, it is 'out of the quarrel with ourselves that we make poetry'.²² In Chaucer's case, and that of late medieval poetry more generally, this quarrel entails the struggle to reconcile the competing demands of an increasingly ambitious and speculative poetic vocation with the expectations and conceptual horizons of medieval Christian faith. It is in this context that guilt becomes creative: it is one part of a new, uncomfortable but potentially empowering self-consciousness in the poet of his craft and its implications, and it generates the drive towards its own imaginative embodiment, exploration, and attempted expiation in literary form.

Regarding the appeal to literary convention, the fact that there is a long tradition of medieval poets writing palinodes and retractions really only indicates that Chaucer's *Retraction* is part of a more general and deeper running cultural phenomenon, which itself requires explanation. Why did many medieval writers express feelings of guilt and remorse about their works, even to the point of disowning them? If as Lewis and Benson suggest 'the authors are all going to repent once the book is over' and give up literature for the sake of salvation, one must ask why the two principles were seen to be inimical in the first place, and how this affects writers and their works. Furthermore, it would be wrong to assume that all poets approach the convention of literary penitence in a homogenous manner or rehearse it unthinkingly. Dante, Boccaccio, Juan Ruiz and Chaucer, for instance, all respond to the same broad constellation of issues concerning the value of creative literature in the late Middle Ages and the imperative for repentance, but each writer adopts an individual and nuanced relation to these problems particular to the nature of their work and its context. Here again, guilt and penitence are not external to literary activity: creative literature could be a source of guilt – as Lewis suggests a 'temporary

²² W. B. Yeats, 'Anima Hominis', in *Essays* (New York: Macmillan, 1924), pp. 485-506.

truancy' from the demands of faith – but it could also provided a space in which that guilt could be powerfully expressed, explored and even perhaps absolved. The guiltiness of literature was always a step toward a poetics of penitence, but, in so far as it remained poetic, that penitence itself always risked preserving, in subtler forms, the literary sins it sought to renounce.

The crucial questions here are why did medieval poets feel guilt about their work in the first place and how did this guilt inform their poetics? But before tackling these questions, I would like, in the following section, to explain and locate my approach more broadly in relation to the major trends of Chaucer criticism and the interpretive challenges posed by his work. In Section II I will provide a context for my analysis of Chaucer's poetry by returning to the question of the nature and origin of guilt in late medieval poetry and its connection to literary creativity.

I. Critical Contexts and Problems of Interpretation

The first problem that confronts the contemporary critic who chooses to write about Chaucer is the overwhelming array of existing critical material on the subject. Chaucer's work has been read and commented upon for over six hundred years and since the mid-twentieth-century 'Chaucer Studies' has become a veritable academic industry, producing a stream of new articles and books every year. Useful as this abundance of critical material can be, it makes it increasingly difficult to find new ground. As Matthews observes, recent criticism has inevitably tended toward rehearsal, consolidation and qualification of older positions and one may well wonder from where, in this well-worn field of study, 'som newe tydinges' could emerge.²³ To continue his analogy, the situation of the critic who steps into this field is a little like that of 'Geoffrey' in the Houses of Fame and Rumour: adrift in a swirling, accretive world of competing voices, statuesque authorities and supplicants seeking fame; a domain in which 'fals and soth' are inescapably 'compounded' (*HF*.III.2108) and, for all its wealth of 'tydynges' the truth of matters remains unclear.

The problem is not just the abundance of critical voices found in this House of Fame, it is also the multiplicity of 'Chaucers' envisioned therein. Indeed there can be

²³ David Matthews, 'Recent Chaucer Criticism: New Historicism, New Discontents?', *Modern Philology*, 106 (2008), 117-127 (p. 127).

few writers whose works have attracted so diverse and contradictory an array of interpretations. Chaucer is at once the eulogiser of the ‘quiet hierarchies’ of his age and the ironical humanist who peers beyond them; the master allegorist and the good-humoured realist, ‘all womanis frend’ and the traditional medieval misogynist; the voice of a nascent bourgeois spirit and one of its trenchant critics.²⁴ Medieval and modern, radical and reactionary, Lollard sympathiser and defender of orthodoxy, courtly and democratic, the first aureate gilder of our ‘rude tongue’ and the master of self-reflexive artifice— every age has made of Chaucer a poet amenable to its temperament, and Chaucer seems almost at home in every age, as though there were a chameleon quality to the man and his work.

In recent years this diversity of perspective has been encouraged by epistemological changes in literary theory and criticism— the shift from a unitary, author-focused idea of the work and its meaning, to a more relativistic, historicised idea of the text as a thing inscribed by various signifying forces and revealed in relation to the shifting perspectives and values of its readers. ‘Diverse folk diversely they seyde’ (I.3857), as Chaucer knew only too well. But whilst the idea of objectivity in criticism may now seem problematic and authorial intention is no longer held as sacrosanct, most Chaucer criticism, in practice, does not relinquish the claim to be *speaking for* the poet, uncovering his actual intentions and elucidating the objective conditions of their formulation. Everyone wishes, it seems, to answer that question that the Host poses to his inventor— ‘What man artow?’ (VII.695) Thus for Aers Chaucer *is* a political radical responding to the conflicts of his epoch, for Dinshaw Chaucer *is* committed to critically exploring the hermeneutics of patriarchy, just as for Lydgate Chaucer was first ‘laurer of oure englishe tonge’ and for Robertson a poet of ‘quiet hierarchies’. As Trigg has noted there is a long tradition of commentators identifying with Chaucer, of finding in him, explicitly or covertly, a ‘congenial soul’ and using this conjectured affinity to authorise their own perspective in this manner.²⁵ But the question remains— how do all these conflicting perspectives relate back to the one Chaucer they claim to be representing?

²⁴ Robertson, *A Preface to Chaucer*, p. 51; Donaldson, *Speaking of Chaucer*, pp. 99-101; Kittredge, *Chaucer and his Poetry*; Gavin Douglas, ‘Aeneid’, in *The Middle Scots Poets* (Prologue, 449); Elaine Hansen, *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1992); Lee Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History* (London: Routledge, 1991); Greg Stone, *The Death of the Troubadour* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University Press, 1994).

²⁵ Stephanie Trigg, *Congenial Souls: Reading Chaucer from Medieval to Postmodern* (London: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), pp. 3-6.

One explanation for the diversity of conflicting perspectives that surround Chaucer may lie with the ambiguous character of his work itself. Where most medieval literature was didactic in nature and poets were often at pains to make their moral meaning explicit, Chaucer's poetry, as has often been noted, is characterised by an irony and indirectness which often complicates clear didactic statements. In Chaucer's poetics verbal statement is self-consciously *performed*—mediated, for the most part, through a series of limited, situated and ironised personae, all with competing perspectives and claims to authority. Each voice in turn becomes the object of discourse, vulnerable to some degree of irony and misappropriation and Chaucer, himself, seems to withdraw indefinitely behind the play of voices he sets in motion. His own narratorial persona— the affable and naïve 'Geoffrey', for all his ostensible resemblance to the poet, repeatedly signals an ironical difference between the two and is hardly to be trusted as representative of the poet's views.²⁶ Conjectural ideas of authorial meaning can be drawn from this play of perspectives or inferred from historical and biographical context, but never really grasped with the same confidence and clarity with which critics can speak of, say, Gower's political views or his overarching moral intent in the *Confessio Amantis*.

The two poets' respective responses to the Uprising of 1381 is a good case in point. In Gower's *Vox Clamantis* one finds a direct condemnation of the revolt and an affirmation of the existing feudal order – he presents the peasants as anarchic and animalistic, symptomatic of general moral and social disorder which can only be resolved by strict adherence to established values. With Chaucer, whilst the issue of social order and revolt clearly informs the dynamic world of *CT*, one finds only scattered, allusive and ambiguous references to the event itself, articulated by various interlocutors, without definitive judgement. In *The Clerk's Tale*, the people are 'unsad and evere untrew' (IV.995) (though of course their ruler is hardly less problematic) and in *The Nun's Priest's Tale* 'Jakke Straw and his meynee' (VII.3394) are disparagingly alluded to and set beside the sacking of Troy, as part of the comic, mock-epic tumult that follows Chauntecleer's abduction. The Miller's interruption of the tale-telling order and comic 'quiting' of the Knight has been interpreted as 'a peasant's revolt in literary form', but it could equally be read as a satirical critique of

²⁶ See Donaldson, 'Chaucer the Pilgrim' in *Speaking of Chaucer*, pp. 1-12; for a more recent treatment of Chaucer's use of the limited first-person persona, see Geoffrey W. Gust, *Constructing Chaucer: Author and Autofiction in the Critical Tradition* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

churlish presumption as it could a sympathetic response to the emancipatory movement of the lower orders.²⁷ Rather than pronouncing judgements or offering instruction, Chaucer prefers to present reality in its ambiguous, multifaceted and provisional nature. Where Gower's poetry aims to convey with maximum rhetorical force a predetermined 'sentence' Chaucer leaves us with unanswered questions, with tales and dreams whose meaning remains uncertain or unrealised, with a wealth of perspectives and equivocal characters that can be taken in various and contradictory ways. The Wife of Bath, for instance, seems at once to affirm and to subvert the discourse of clerical misogyny; *BD* ends abruptly with the disquieting statement of a death for which no obvious consolation is offered; *HF* with the promise of tidings that never arrive, *PF* with the deferral of the eagle's choice of a mate to the following year. The possibility of some resolving answer or authoritative meaning is repeatedly raised in all these cases, but only to be frustrated and postponed.

This sense of discursive irresolution is compounded by the textual incompleteness of a significant portion of Chaucer's works. *HF* and *LGW* are both left unfinished and *CT* exists in a series of 'fragments' whose overall order remains conjectural. In even the most complete manuscripts pilgrims are left without tales, tales are left incomplete and there are continuity errors and inconsistencies in tale assignment. In short, what we have of *CT* is a *work in progress*, patched up as best can be, by industrious scribes and editors to resemble a more complete aesthetic artefact.²⁸ By establishing the literary text as a singular and determinate hermeneutic structure, aesthetic completion generates a resolving and centripetal force which helps to anchor the process of interpretation. But in *CT*, where completion is lacking, the work, its design, its meaning, the very words it is composed of retain an underlying quality of indeterminacy; a wide array of conflicting meanings and interpretive possibilities remain open and it becomes harder still to link any one of them, with assurance, to the intentions of the author. When combined with the general indirectness of Chaucer's poetry this gives considerable licence for speculation to the

²⁷ Knight, *Geoffrey Chaucer*, p. 91.

²⁸ There is debate over whether Ellesmere or Hengwrt represent the most authoritative manuscript and best copy-text. Blake has argued for the slightly earlier Hengwrt manuscript, whilst general critical opinion opts for the more complete and aesthetically pleasing Ellesmere. I follow the general consensus of privileging Ellesmere; however, the textual diversity and problems that underlie this assumption cannot be ignored and will be discussed where relevant to my argument. For comprehensive treatment of the textual variants of *The Canterbury Tales* see J. M. Manly and Edith Rickert (eds.), *The Text of the Canterbury Tales* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1940) for the case for Hengwrt see N. F. Blake, *The Textual Tradition of the Canterbury Tales* (London: Arnold, 1985).

reader. His work remains enticingly open to scribes, editors and critics who are eager to close the hermeneutic circle on the poet's behalf – to speak for the silences and ellipses of his work and supplement its semiotic and textual indeterminacy with their own more conclusive meanings.

Indeed, this sense of openness, irresolution and multiplicity has often been identified as a central feature of Chaucer's poetry. But even here, with this admission of indeterminacy, there is a need to go back to the authoritative and stabilising source of the poet and his intentions: to render it purposeful in some way. Thus Chaucer, somewhat paradoxically, becomes a poet of *intentional* ambiguities and *determinate* indeterminacy. The notion has a long critical heritage. It plays its part in Kittredge's idea of Chaucer as an observer of the 'human comedy' in all its irreducible diversity and complexity and in the emphasis often placed on Chaucer as a poet who 'fixed his eyes on the road before him'.²⁹ It is discernible too in New Critical ideas of Chaucer's complex ironies, in what Donaldson described as 'that double vision that is his ironical essence'.³⁰ But it is most prevalent in recent criticism of a post-structuralist hue. Therein Chaucer's poetry is taken to evince a spirit of radical epistemological scepticism congenial to contemporary thought. Aers, for instance, sees Chaucer's 'self-reflexive imagination' as exposing the relativism and self-interest that underlies established truths and their claims to objectivity; in less politically orientated terms Jordan ascribes to him a 'flamboyant, self-reflexive style' which continually throws into doubt 'the possibility of arriving at truth through language' and Fyler similarly suggests that in contrast to Dante's endeavour to recover in poetry the stability of the Divine logos, Chaucer 'resigns himself with scepticism and comedy to the ambiguities of fallen language'.³¹ In these terms Chaucer becomes a poet of 'negative capability' at home with unresolved mystery, contradiction and conflicting perspectives, delighting in the creative play of language and meaning this irresolution fosters.³²

²⁹ Kittredge, *Chaucer and his Poetry*, p. 154; Virginia Woolf, 'The Pastons and Chaucer' in *The Common Reader* (London: Hogarth Press, 1948), p. 30. For a later expression of this notion see Donald Howard, *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), p. 215.

³⁰ Donaldson, *Speaking of Chaucer*, p. 12.

³¹ David Aers, *Chaucer, Langland and the Creative Imagination* (London: Routledge, 1980), p. 81; Robert Jordan, *Chaucer's Poetics and the Modern Reader* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), p. 48; John Fyler, *Language in the Declining World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 2.

³² The phrase was coined by Keats, with reference to Shakespeare, to denote a poetic capacity for 'being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason'. John

As a response to the exploratory and mercurial propensity of Chaucer's poetry the post-structuralist view is very persuasive, but it becomes problematic when applied as a general theory. For, whilst there is ample evidence for the presence of these things, there is also an opposing didactic and spiritual strain in Chaucer's work that this view struggles to fully account for. How does the densely moralistic *Tale of Melibee* or the totalising penitential schema of *ParsT* fit into a poem that supposedly relativises and questions received truths? There is little in the way of characterisation or aesthetic adaptation to suggest that these two extensive prose treatise are to be taken in anything but the spirit of earnest which such weighty matters demand. And what of the *Retraction*, the ardent invocations to the Virgin Mary, the recurrent Boethian allusions and the contemptus mundi motif that rises and falls, like a refrain, throughout *CT* – from the Knight's 'this world nys but a thurghfare ful of wo, | And we been pilgrymes, passynge to and fro' (l.2847-9) through the examples of Constance and Griselda, to the Second Nun's poignant words:

In dremes [...] han we be
Unto this tyme [...]
And now at erst in trouthe oure dwellyng is.
(VIII.262-4).

Are these too to be taken in irony as part of one limited and questionable narrator's perspective of an infinitely complex reality or do they touch upon what seemed, to both the poet and his age, a more essential, all-embracing truth?

Not only is this conventional medieval didacticism an important aspect of the content of Chaucer's work, it also strongly informs his main authorial interventions and problematises that notion of an ironical poet content to propagate and dwell in uncertainties. For whilst Chaucer is often keen to avoid or complicate direct authorial statement, when he does step forward, seemingly sans-persona, to claim authorial responsibility for his work and its meaning it is not as a playful sceptic but an earnest moralist, eager to affirm established truths and impute a conventional and univocal spiritual 'sentence' to his work. In the *Retraction* and the epilogue to *Troilus* he looks

Keats, 'Letter to George and Thomas Keats,' 1817, in *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. by M. H. Abrams, 2nd edition (London: Norton & Company, 2000), p. 889.

to close-down, rather than perpetuate, the open-ended play of signification that his exploratory and ironical poetics had previously fostered.

Chaucer even expresses explicit anxiety about the textual and hermeneutic stability of his work. This is notable, for instance, in the short poem ‘Chaucer’s words to Adam His Owne Scriveyn’, in the admonitory Invocation to *HF* (I.80-110) and at the end of *Troilus*, where the narrator, reflecting upon the destiny of his finished poem, proclaims:

So prey I God that non myswrite the,
Ne themysmetre for defaute of tonge;
And red wherso thow be, or elles songe,
That thow *be understonde*, God I biseche!

(*Troilus*.V.1795-1799)

If the poet and his persona can never simply be assumed to be the same, this is nonetheless a moment where their voices, identities and concerns are intimately connected. Chaucer’s immediate fear is for the textual integrity of his words in a linguistic culture where there is ‘so gret diversite | in English and in writing of oure tonge’ (V.1794), but the last line suggests the broader hermeneutic resonance of this problem. When the poet prays ‘That *thow* be understonde’ it is also to his own intended meaning, inscribed in the specific linguistic and semiotic structure of the text that he is referring, but if his words – the form and vessel of that meaning – are subject to change and corruption in the process of transmission, how is his meaning to be preserved and clearly understood? His words become like all other corporeal things in the poem– vain and unstable, ‘slydyng of corage’ (*Troilus*.V.825).

The process of textual and hermeneutic slippage that Chaucer discontentedly anticipates here is an inevitable part of the process of transmission and interpretation in which all literary texts are caught; as a poetic translator and ironist Chaucer exploited its creative potential often enough, but here he wishes only to be free of it, to fortify his words and their meaning from its entropic, pluralising force. His prayer to God and the more general invocation of an allegorical Christian ‘sentence’ is an attempt to transcend the instability and ambiguity of both his work and the fallen world it represents and remains entangled with. It is an appeal to the only source of meaning and authority which is ‘Uncircumscrip, and al maist circumscribe’

(*Troilus*.V.1865). Assuming the epilogue is written in earnest, we find here not the ironist's delight in unresolved ambiguity, fluidity and contradiction, nor the realist's attention to the road before him in all its irreducible particularity, but an opposing will to order, permanence and truth, a striving for that transcendent spiritual order that Chaucer found in the pages of Boethius and Dante, an order which overcomes or perhaps negates the muddle of life and remains entirely inimical to that spirit of 'negative capability' which elsewhere animates his work.

Humanist and post-structuralist critics have sometimes sought to account for this more didactic and totalising dimension of Chaucer's work by ascribing to it the same kind of ironic, provisional and performative quality they find elsewhere. Thus for Donaldson, the epilogue to *Troilus* sees the poet masterfully dramatising his narrator's emotive, disillusioned response to the tragic conclusion of his tale, in order to give poetic expression to a more complex truth. Behind his narrator's stark rejection of this fleeting world and all its pleasure is a deeper human awareness of the sadness and difficulty of that sacrifice, the strange 'necessity under which men lie of living in [and] making the best of a world from which they must remain detached'.³³ Some critics have tried to argue similarly for the ironical voicing of *ParsT* and the *Retraction*, but there are limits to how far such readings can be taken: limits to how far a fourteenth-century poet can be expected to adopt ironical attitudes to the fundamental beliefs of his day. Donaldson's reading is persuasive because it is subtly poised in the tension between the poet's ultimate acceptance of doctrinal truth and his artistic-ironic reflection upon it. But the sententious non-literary prose of *Melibee* or *ParsT* offers little evidence for this kind of poetic nuance or the sustained individuation of narrative voice in which an ironising intention could be posited. If any irony operates amidst their voluminous didacticism it is so oblique as to fall entirely short of the mark. Consequently, when Aers claims that *ParsT* was satirically included in *CT* to 'focalise the inadequacies' of its own 'hopelessly crude' and un-reflexive dogmatism or when Burger speaks of *Melibee*, via Deleuze, as a 'desiring machine' which both expresses and 'continually dismantles [...] attempts to stratify the "gentil" organism', one feels that it is the critics' subversive rendering of a conservative text rather than the poet's that we are being offered.³⁴

³³ Donaldson, *Speaking of Chaucer*, p. 99.

³⁴ Aers, *Chaucer, Langland and the Creative Imagination*, p. 113-4; Glen Burger, *Chaucer's Queer Nation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), pp. 164-5.

The broader question here is how these radical, proto-post-modern notions of Chaucer relate to the dominant, and definitively structuralist, Christian values of late medieval culture – the ultimate belief in an incontestable metaphysical and moral order created by God and revealed through faith and scripture. Whilst Chaucer may exhibit an exploratory attitude toward life and established values, he was still a man of his times, operating within and constrained by powerful epistemic and social structures. In this context could he really be writing a poetry that critiques objectivist discourse or ‘illustrates that there is no singular truth only multiple perspectives’? ³⁵ In so far as Chaucer’s poetry did lead him away from the well worn road of dominant values and beliefs, one must ask– *what were the limits, costs and implications of this transgression?*

But for criticism which ascribes a conservative and didactic intent to Chaucer’s work, there is no problem to account for here at all– no discrepancy or tension between the poet and the ideological context in which his work was produced and first understood. For midcentury critics such as Robertson and Baldwin those above noted passages of conventional piety and didacticism in Chaucer were simply the tip of the allegorical iceberg, the explicit signs of a consistently orthodox spiritual ‘sentence’ that underlay and unified the poet’s work. ³⁶ For Robertson Chaucer’s work not only accorded with the doctrinal values of the Church, it embodied and affirmed those values in intricate artistic form. Innocent of the conflicted passions and ‘dynamic polarities’ which characterise and perturb modernity and its aesthetics, Chaucer’s art reflected, with perfect impersonal assurance, the ‘quiet hierarchies’ of a self-contained medieval zeitgeist. ³⁷ Accordingly, those aspects of Chaucer’s work which for ‘modernist’ readings most persuasively suggested an independent, conflicted, experiential, perspectival, even radical spirit were assimilated back into the rigorous logic of patristic exegesis. The whirling house of rumour, the Miller’s unruly interruption, the Wife of Bath’s unabashed materialism and quest for dominance, those things which could be interpreted as points of indeterminacy or transgression, were viewed as the controlled tensions and staged conflicts of a theoretically complete, if not always fully realised moral and aesthetic structure: gothic ripples and grotesquery incorporated into a transcendent, totalising design, which is all the greater

³⁵ Jordan, *Chaucer’s Poetics and the Modern Reader*, p. 49.

³⁶ Robertson, *Preface to Chaucer*, pp. 501-3; Ralph Baldwin, *Unity of the Canterbury Tales*, pp. 90-2.

³⁷ Robertson, *Preface to Chaucer*, p. 51.

for its accommodation of diversity and disorder. The only ambiguity therein was that of the sign which had lost its discursive context, and must be reconnected through the scholarly exegesis with its original spiritual referent. Baldwin similarly saw in *CT* an underlying and embryonic spiritual teleology realised through the twin motifs of pilgrimage and penance, ‘whose roots thrust through and whose branches overspread the world of the Canterbury pilgrims’.³⁸

Whilst these unifying allegorical readings of Chaucer have become less influential in recent criticism in more flexible and qualified forms the underlying notion of Chaucer as a more conservative poet – a poet working within rather than reaching beyond the established moral, intellectual and aesthetic norms of the fourteenth century– still has its proponents. Lawler, for instance, has contributed to this idea with his emphasis on the principle of platonic unity that guides *CT* from the multifarious particularity of life, witnessed in its early stages, to the oneness of Divine truth with which it concludes.³⁹ It is apparent too, in qualified terms, in Blamires’ recent study, which sees the poet discerningly exploring moral behaviour through the classical and scriptural discourses of ethics available to him.⁴⁰

In recent years the dividing lines have become less clear cut, but the major interpretive binary of Chaucer criticism is still that which runs between what can be broadly termed the ‘modernist’ and ‘conservative’ perspectives outlined above. Each side has been able to draw upon a tendency in Chaucer’s poetry, to stress one half of the dialectic over another, and their limitations most often lie with this one-sidedness. Chaucer has been tugged many times over the medieval-modern divide, but ultimately this is not all that surprising, for his poetry, in itself, expresses that same tension and dwells with a restless, ironic spirit in the fraught terrain between these poles. Chaucer, I will argue throughout this thesis, was *both* a poet of ‘quiet hierarchies’ and ‘dynamic oppositions’: his poetry was shaped and driven by the struggle between the two, and from this struggle grew its distinctive interest and pathos– its moments of bad conscience, its ironic spirit, its will to reconciliation, and its ultimate irresolution. This struggle takes many forms in his work– it is there in the persistent tension between the poetics of ‘game’ and ‘earnest’, carnival and lent, between the inassimilable particularity of experience and the resolving hermeneutics of allegory; between

³⁸ Baldwin, *Unity of the Canterbury Tales*, p. 110.

³⁹ Traugott Lawler, *The One and the Many in the Canterbury Tales* (Connecticut: Archon Books, 1980), p. 170.

⁴⁰ Alcuin Blamires, *Chaucer, Ethics and Gender* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

delight in this multifarious, transitory world and the Boethian will to truth and order which chastens and rises beyond it; between the old feudal hierarchies and the germinal bourgeois spirit, which finds ambivalent expression in several of Chaucer's characters and tales; and most crucially, for this thesis, between different conceptions of the meaning and function of creative literature— between the use of poetry as an autonomous and self-justifying means of exploring, representing and comprehending reality and the religious suspicion of poetry as illusion, distraction, worldly vanity, and the corresponding need to justify poetic enterprise in relation to those 'quiet hierarchies' and stable truths which its evolution begins to unsettle.

This idea of Chaucer's poetry expressing unresolved tensions and reflecting a world in change is not itself new. Over seventy years ago Birney wrote of Chaucer, 'he is neither feudal nor modern, but a strange and perhaps unique synthesis of the two'; indeed some impression of balance and duality has often been a factor in Chaucer criticism.⁴¹ But even in criticism which notes tensions in Chaucer's work there is still a distinct tendency to prioritise one side of the dialectic in accord with the critic's own theoretical predilections. Burger, for instance, speaks of *CT* as 'neither medieval nor modern', but only to discover in its 'queer' middle ground the seeds of a radical postmodern critique of both modern and medieval 'teleologies'.⁴² Knight describes a tension between the progressive 'historical imagination' of Chaucer's poetry and the reactionary spiritual values which gradually overtake it, David suggests a similar tension between the exploratory realism Chaucer is pioneering and the moral didacticism he is forced to retreat to, Dinshaw sees a tension between the subversive 'feminist' hermeneutic at play in his work and the totalising patriarchal hermeneutic it rebels against, but in all these cases the creative agency and literary and historical import of Chaucer's work is broadly aligned with the former 'progressive' principle and against the conservative, totalising and silencing sway of the latter. Here I try to take a more thoroughly dialectical view of the conflicts which inform Chaucer's poetry. Rather than seeing the real creative agency and value of Chaucer's work as lying with either its medieval or latently post-/modern aspect, I will argue that its

⁴¹ Earle Birney, 'The Two Worlds of Geoffrey Chaucer', *Manitoba Arts Review*, 2 (1941), 3-16; more recently that 'unique synthesis' has been explored by Patterson in *Chaucer and the Subject of History*, Carolyn Dinshaw in *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* in relation to gender hermeneutics and by David in *The Strumpet Muse*, in terms of the development of a realist and humanist poetics.

⁴² Burger, *Chaucer's Queer Nation*, pp. xvii-iii.

creative force and distinctive vision is born of the turbulent confluence and tension between these two opposing tendencies and is the sole possession of neither.

This applies especially to the wider question of Chaucer's place in the development of literary culture. Chaucer has often been construed as a bridge from medieval to renaissance culture, a herald of modern literary values. The notion is as old as post-reformation appropriations of Chaucer as a 'good lollard' in a barbarous age, persists in many humanist readings of his work and finds its most recent instantiation in the works of critics like Strohm and Cannon who have viewed Chaucer's work, in the context of a vibrant fourteenth-century vernacular culture, as confidently forging a national literature that spoke to the needs and interests of an increasingly powerful lay and bourgeois audience.⁴³ Chaucer was involved in forging new modes of literary expression and identity. But far from this being a clear and confident process, I argue that here too medieval and modern values are intricately interfused. Literary progress and development exacerbated feelings of guilt and self-doubt that were already a facet of medieval poetry, and fostered a deeper need to seek legitimacy or absolution in the authority of the past. Thus, Chaucer's 'renaissance' progress is distinctively medieval in character, always marked by a hesitant and conciliatory backward glance; and so too his attempts to re-affirm established spiritual and literary values are coloured by a quasi-modern note of alienation and apprehension— as though those 'quiet medieval hierarchies' once transgressed by the curious poet, are not quite so easily re-entered. The result is a restless, self-reflexive, equivocal poetics, deeply concerned with the question of its own value, a poetics shaded by a sense of guilt, which is a product of its own inner tensions and relation to authority. This guilt itself becomes a part of the creativity and depth of Chaucer's work, even as it leads inevitably toward the *Retraction*.

By seeing Chaucer in this light, as a poet not of fixed but of conflicted and vacillating intentions – a poet drawn between the values of a waning medieval and a dawning modern world, encumbered with the spirit of guilt and homelessness which that contradiction brings— it becomes possible to interpret in a more holistic manner the major tensions and dichotomies that characterise his work and its critical reception. In the following section I explore the origin of these tensions in the cultural and philosophical predicament of the late medieval poet.

⁴³ Paul Strohm, *Social Chaucer* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989) and Cannon *Middle English Literature: A Cultural History*, pp. 150-73.

II. The origins of bad conscience in late medieval poetry

To understand the specific tensions that animate Chaucer's poetry it is necessary to view them in the broader context of the development of medieval literary culture and to return to the question posed earlier in this Introduction – why did many medieval poets express sentiments of guilt, regret and ambivalence about their literary works? In answering this question, I first consider the role guilt plays in medieval culture at large, and then, more specifically, in the practice and theorisation of creative literature in the period.

Firstly and most broadly speaking, guilt can be considered as an essential psychological component in the functioning of all human societies. As the desires of the individual will always tend to exceed a society's capacity and willingness to satisfy them, social existence entails the partial frustration and mutual (though not always equal) sacrifice of those desires in exchange for the benefits of preserving and participating in the collective. As Freud and Nietzsche both argued, guilt plays a crucial part in this psychic economy and its cultural manifestation in morality and religion. It provides the means through which individuals regulate their actions and desires in relation to the prohibitions and expectations of the social world– but it comes with its costs.⁴⁴ For both Freud and Nietzsche the essential mechanism of 'the bad conscience' could develop only through the internalisation of those powerful desires and instinctual forces which the individual could not satisfy upon the world and their redirection toward their source in the desiring and frustrated ego. In this way guilt can be understood as a kind of self-division, in Freud's terms 'the tension between the harsh super-ego and the ego that is subjected to it' or in Nietzsche's terms, 'the serious illness [of] an animal soul turned against itself' with all the force of its own 'hostility, cruelty, joy in persecuting, in attacking, in changing, in destruction'.⁴⁵ For both thinkers this internal tension is both productive and damaging. It may have been essential in the 'internalisation of man' and the development of

⁴⁴ As Freud says Civilisation becomes possible only when 'the members of [a] community restrict themselves in their scope for satisfaction.' *Civilisation and its Discontents*, trans. by David McLintock (London: Penguin, 2002), p. 41; for Freud's discussion of the origins of guilt and its link with religion, see pp. 29-56 and 76-82; Friedrich Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, trans. by Carol Diethe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 35-43 and 56-65.

⁴⁵ Freud, *Civilisation and its Discontents*, p. 77; Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, p. 57. In Freud's terms the instinctual forces refer to the ego's libidinal desire, in Nietzsche's terms to the more general life-principle of the 'will to power', but in both cases the process of renunciation and introjection is much the same.

society, it may even be ‘pregnant with a future’, but for Freud it comes at the cost for the individual of neurosis, sickness, inhibition, perpetual anxiety and for Nietzsche, a paralysing will to self-torment and denial, the ‘slave morality’ of Christianity and the nihilistic impulse that he perceives beneath its dogma of eternal life.⁴⁶

If guilt is an essential component of human subjectivity and civilisation, it nonetheless manifests itself differently and with varying degrees of intensity in different historical periods and cultures. Certainly the modern western world is not free from the problem of guilt, but in terms of its dominant values and customs, guilt played a more pivotal and conspicuous role in the Christian culture of the Middle Ages. At the heart of medieval Christian doctrine was the concept of the originary guilt and indebtedness of humankind before God. After the transgression that precipitates the Fall, guilt becomes the existential condition of humankind. We are, left henceforth with the mark of ‘original Sin’, the punishment of death, exile and concupiscence, awaiting, midst the sorrows of this fallen world, an even graver judgement.⁴⁷ Human nature, in its fallen state is perpetually at war with itself, with its own sinful desires: drawn toward God and contrition and yet continually ‘troubled by [...] the wighte| of erthely lust and fals affeccoun’ (VIII.74). What is more, we are incapable of redeeming ourselves from this situation, of making atonement to God. It is only through the intercession of Divine Grace, in the form of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross, that humankind is redeemed from its fallen state and the certainty of damnation. This divine and incommensurable sacrifice has the paradoxical result of freeing humankind from guilt and yet simultaneously re-doubling its burden. For whilst it is the very expression and condition of God’s forgiveness of man, in another sense humankind is now responsible too for Christ’s death: he died *for us, for our sins*, and *in place of us*, and that sacrifice must be continually evoked, given thanks for and borne in mind. Christ’s sacrifice does not so much free us from guilt, but rather makes that guilt meaningful, even redemptive.

This is the logic which underlies the dominance of the image of the crucifixion in medieval art and literature and Chaucer’s prayer in the *Retraction* for ‘grace to biwayle my giltes [...] unto my lyves ende’ from he ‘that boghte us with the precious blood of his herte.’ (X.1086-1092). Popular devotional works such as *The Pricke of*

⁴⁶ On the link between guilt and neurosis see *Civilisation and its Discontents*, p. 91-3; Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, p. 57.

⁴⁷ See Genesis, 2:4 and Augustine’s exposition of the doctrine of Original Sin in *The City of God*, trans. by Henry Bettenson (London, Pelican Books, 1972), chapter 14.

Conscience and *On the Misery of the Human Condition* similarly aim to cultivate a powerful sense of man's guilt and abjectness before of God, as a means to salvation. Indeed it is often in the holiest of figures that the thorn of guilt is most deeply buried and the struggle against sin most intense. Thus St. Paul bemoans, 'For the good which I will, I do not; but the evil which I will not, that I do';⁴⁸ St. Jerome, when living as an ascetic in seclusion recounts in a famous letter how he was scourged in a vision and 'tortured more severely still by the fire of conscience' for indulging in the reading of Plautus and Cicero;⁴⁹ in his *Confessions* Augustine repents of the sins of a lifetime and still declares 'I am poor and needy and I am better only when in sorrow of heart I detest myself and seek your mercy';⁵⁰ purportedly, St. Francis said of himself there is 'no greater sinner than I am [...] for which reason [God] has chosen me.'⁵¹ Paradoxically, then, guilt and self-division – the consciousness of one's own indebted and unavoidably sinful nature – becomes a positive, even holy thing: the existential grounds of a relationship with God and the precondition of self-knowledge and salvation, which must be tirelessly sought, dwelt in and repeated.

This sense of the value and necessity of guilt manifests itself in a multitude of forms in medieval culture– in the institution of confession, the practices of asceticism, the doctrine of purgatory and the seven deadly sins, the sale of pardons and indulgences, the emphasis on impending judgement and its eternal consequences, the imagery of the 'dance macabre' and so forth. It is thus no surprise to see that guilt plays a pervasive and powerful role in the creative literature of the period, its theorisation, form and content. To cite just a few obvious examples, Dante's *Commedia* narrates the penitential journey of a single soul enacted through his unfolding visionary comprehension of the schema of divine punishment and reward;; Gower's *Confessio Amantis* is structured around the confession and absolution of a hapless lover; *CT* itself finishes with a lengthy penitential treatise; *Gawain and the Green Knight* concludes with a subtle shift from chivalric exploits to the guilt and contrition of its hero and Henryson's *Testament of Criseyde* complements Chaucer's tragedy with the narrative of Criseyde's punishment and repentance. The way that

⁴⁸ St Paul, Romans 7. 19. *Douay-Rheims Catholic Bible* <www.drbo.org/chapter/52007.htm> [accessed 19 September 2012]

⁴⁹ St. Jerome, 'Letter to Eustochium', in *The letters of Saint Jerome*, Vol. I, trans. by Charles Mierow (London: Newman press, 1963), XXII, s.30.

⁵⁰ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. by R. S. Pine-Coffin (London: Penguin, 1961), p. 249.

⁵¹ Anonymous, *The Little Flowers of Saint Francis*, trans. by T. W. Arnold (London: E. P Dutton, 1898), p. 97

guilt and penitence are portrayed in these works is itself an interesting topic of discussion, but my concern here is not primarily the literary representation of guilt, but rather the way that literary discourse itself, at times becomes a source of guilt, in relation to the Christian episteme discussed above.

Obviously in medieval culture, a significant amount of what can broadly be termed literary discourse was produced in a clerical context and served explicitly didactic and devotional ends. But there were also an increasingly diverse and complex body of secular literature, which had a more tenuous relation to didacticism and religion. The poetry of Chaucer and his major French and Italian precursors, the literature of *fin amor* and vernacular romances all fall very much into this nascent and indistinct category, and it is here that the question of value and status of creative literature and the conscience of its producers becomes pronounced.

In a culture which gave ultimate priority to matters of faith, and viewed reality through the dualisms of the flesh and the spirit, this world and the life beyond, works of poetry and fiction, unless rigorously anchored to spiritual values, were always prone to be viewed with suspicion. There was as yet no humanistic sense of the intrinsic worth of creative literature; that idea – so essential to modern literary discourse – was itself only just emerging, and tentatively so, in the late medieval and early modern period. Works of secular poetry and fiction, in their exploration of worldly concerns, their aesthetic charm and appeal to the imagination and emotions, were thus viewed, in spiritual terms, as a potential source of distraction and temptation. This attitude is implicit in the palinodes already mentioned and it is reflected in a long, prestigious tradition of suspicion and disparagement of ‘poetry’ which runs through classical, scriptural and clerical channels and can be found variously in Plato and Aristotle, in Paul, Jerome and Augustine, in Aquinas, Dominici, and Savonarola. From an ascetic Christian perspective, the basic problem is expressed by Chaucer’s Parson, in his negative response to fiction and the tale-telling contest of *CT* –

Thou gettest fable noon ytoold fro me,
For Paul, that writteth unto Thymothee,
Repreveth hem that wevyen soothfastnesse
And tellen fables and swich wrecchednesse
Why sholde I sowen draf out of my fest,

When I may sowen whete if that me lest

(X.1.30-36)

The Parson's view is based on an uncompromising, puritanical divide between truth and falsehood, spiritual use-value and worldly vanity— something either leads beyond this world toward God or it detains us here, with its false pleasures. In renouncing 'fables' he invokes the same zero-sum divide that Jerome did when he repented of reading 'worldly books' and declared that 'the songs of the poets [were] the food of demons', the same logic that led to the bonfires of the vanities and informed Bernardino da Siena's exhortation, 'avoid the books of the poets because under their veils there lies the venom of evil'.⁵² It is an extreme position and, obviously, more compromising views existed in medieval culture, but it was nonetheless a view that was prevalent and authoritative enough to impact upon the conscience of medieval poets. And, in truth, even beneath more tolerant positions, which ascribed positive moral and spiritual value to literary discourse, there lay the same essential dichotomy and dangers: poetic fiction had either to be justified instrumentally, as a vehicle of moral and spiritual truth, or relinquished as a 'worldly vanitee' (X.1084).⁵³

This same underlying dichotomy and the suspicion of secular poetry connected with it can be seen in the prologue of John Walton's verse translation of Boethius *Consolation of Philosophy* (c.1410). There, Walton begins with a self-depreciating comparison between his own limited poetic skills and the eloquence of Chaucer, 'that was floure of rethorike| In Englysshe tonge'.⁵⁴ But this humble gesture of praise soon turns to frank moral criticism, and provides Walton with the opportunity to distinguish his own pious project from Chaucer's more suspect, worldly craft:

Noght lyketh me to laboure ne to muse

Upon these olde poesyys derke,

⁵² Jerome, *The Letters Of Saint Jerome*, Vol. I, Epistle 21 to Pope Damasus; Benadino da Siena, *La prediche volgari*, cited by Concetta Geenfield, *Humanist and Scholastic Poetics, 1250-155* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1981), p. 246

⁵³ For an alternative perspective see Glending Olson, *Literature as Recreation in the Later Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982). Olson discusses the justification of literature as a legitimate domain of recreation, but himself concedes that this 'secular sensibility' was only just emerging and still fairly tentative in late medieval culture, pp. 230-1

⁵⁴ John Walton, 'Consolation of Philosophy; Prefacio Translatoris', in *The Idea of the Vernacular*, ed. by Jocelyn Wogan-Browne (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), ll. 33-37. Further citations are taken from this edition and given with line numbers in the main text.

For Cristes feythe suche thyng shulde refuse;
 Wytnesse upon Jerom the holy clerke.
 Hit shuld not bene a Cristen mannes werke
 Tho fals goddess names to renewe
 For he that hath received Cristes marke
 Yif he do so to Criste he is untrew. (41-48)

‘These olde poesydes derke’ refers not directly to Chaucer but to the pagan poetry with which Chaucer often engaged. Walton here condemns such unchristian labours and associations. He follows the pattern of the Parson and Jerome in asserting a clear zero-sum divide between humble Christian works of faith and an eloquent, but morally insidious worldly literature, which must be rejected (44). His rhetoric is framed in terms of a series of loaded choices about poetry that all reiterate this fundamental opposition. One can pursue classical eloquence or Christian simplicity, follow Venus and the Muses or Christ, surrender to this ‘foule worldely wrecchydnesse’ (66) or strive through humble devotion to rise above it. Using Chaucer as foil, Walton places himself on the right side of this division and banishes any doubt about the moral legitimacy of his own literary project. The domain of secular poetry, for all its eloquence, is ultimately seen as inimical to Christian aims and values.

Another example of the problematic status of secular poetry in medieval culture can be found in Boccaccio’s *Genealogy of Gentile Gods*, (c.1350) a work deeply immersed in the study of ‘olde poesydes derke’. Therein Boccaccio provides an important early humanist defence of poetry and its pagan inheritance, which implicitly counters the uncompromising zero-sum logic of Jerome and Walton. But his defence also evokes the powerful context of suspicion, in which it was produced and even has about it a note of authorial anxiety, which betrays Boccaccio’s assured humanist rhetoric. Anticipating the negative reception his work will receive, Boccaccio pictures a hoard of enemies tearing it apart. ‘Many’ he declares, ‘will rise up against my work, yelping like mad dogs [...] they will seize it with their impious jaws’.⁵⁵ These enemies are characterised as materialistic lawyers and self-important clerics, who, puffed full of false piety and eager for fame, inveigh against poets ‘in

⁵⁵ Giovanni Boccaccio, ‘Genealogy of the Gentile Gods’, *Boccaccio on Poetry*, ed. and trans. by Charles G. Osgood (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1930), p.18. Future citations are taken from this edition and given with page numbers in the main text

the schools, in the public squares and the pulpits' carrying with them 'the ignorant mob' to whom they preach (36). In a crucial passage he surmises their opinions and criticism of poetry thus –

They say poetry is absolutely of no account, and the making of poetry [is] a useless and absurd craft [...] that poets are tale-mongers or in lower terms liars [...] their poems are false, obscure, lewd and replete with absurd and silly tales of pagan gods [...] Again and again they cry out that poets are seducers of the mind, prompters of crimes, and to make their foul charge, fouler, if possible, they say they are the philosophers' apes, that it is a heinous crime to read or possess the books of the poets; and then [...] they prop themselves up with Plato's authority to the effect that poets ought to be turned out-of-doors. (35)

Here again we see the linking of poetry with falsehood and futility, with paganism, with the expression and excitation of worldly desires. Boccaccio will structure the rest of his defence around refuting these points, but the style of their presentation itself is revealing. As accusation is piled upon accusation, the overall effect is of a compound denouncement so extreme and devoid of distinction that some of its more credible and troubling implications can be elided. These are, he says, the words of 'madmen' provoked by 'irritable spite' (36) – he repeatedly stresses the irrationality and crude self-interest of his opponents. But, as Osgood notes, underlying several of these accusations are the powerful authorities of Plato, Augustine, Lactantius, Boethius and John of Salisbury; these far more formidable and sober opponents represent that long, prestigious intellectual tradition of disparaging poetry mentioned above.⁵⁶

It is worth pausing here to briefly consider some aspects of this authoritative legacy and the overall implications of its criticisms of poetry for the medieval poet. Plato, though known mostly through other sources in the Middle Ages, had condemned poetry in *The Republic* as the enemy of reason and banished 'her' from his ideal state: 'if you grant admission to the honeyed Muses in lyric or epic, pleasure and pain will be lords of your city instead of [...] reason'.⁵⁷ The work itself, and with

⁵⁶ Osgood, *Boccaccio on Poetry*, p. 154.

⁵⁷ Plato, *The Republic*, in *Plato, Complete Works*, ed. by John M. Cooper and trans. by G.M.A. Grube (Indiana: Hackett, 1997), p.1211. For Plato poetry was bound to the sensible illusions of the material world and the anarchy of human emotions; it was thus antithetical to the soul's responsible and transcendent pursuit of the Good.

it the philosophical grounding for Plato's verdict were scarcely known in the Middle Ages, but the general idea of the poet's expulsion was clearly in circulation, as Boccaccio's grudging reference to it illustrates.⁵⁸ In a Christian context, Augustine continued Plato's negative assessment. In the *Confessions*, he condemned his own youthful attachment to Virgil as a form of irresponsible self-forgetting and described the fictions of the poets as 'vain trifles' and 'seductive delights', which distract the soul from its true calling.⁵⁹ Boethius in his *Consolations of Philosophy* adopts a more equivocal view, but still condemns the poetic muses, in the words of Lady Philosophy, as 'hysterical sluts' and 'sirens' (surely an image that struck Chaucer in his translation).⁶⁰ They must be driven away, along with their false consolations before Boethius can begin his redemptive journey, through Reason, to the true understanding of his predicament and the providential order that embraces it.

In all these cases poetry is decisively aligned with the material, transitory world, with illusion, irresponsibility, pleasure, desire and emotion, in short with all that Faith and Philosophy seek to transcend. It is portrayed as a state of arrested development, in which the soul seeks to shirk responsibility and return to what is most immediately pleasurable, to lose itself in the 'sweet poison' of aesthetic experience, and forget its transcendent calling. It is thus defined in contrast to the discipline and self-possession of Reason and Faith, which strive to see through and rise beyond this 'twilight world of change and decay', the 'foule prisoun of this lyf' (CT.I.3061), toward God and the Good.⁶¹ Secular poetry is located on the wrong side of the world-spirit binary which fundamentally underlies medieval thought; and therein lies a major philosophical cause of its suspect and equivocal status.

Boccaccio responds to this problem not by directly challenging these 'auctors' and the value-system that underlies their judgements but by critiquing their misuse in the hands of his opponents (88). He affirms the essential division of world and spirit, *cupiditas* and *caritas*, and the logic of spiritual utility through which secular poetry was often condemned, but at the same time endeavours to illustrate how *true* poetry, both Christian and Pagan, belongs on the right side of that divide –as a 'useful art', replete with virtue, truth and wisdom (39).

⁵⁸ See note 55.

⁵⁹ Augustine, *Confessions*, pp. 17-20, 34.

⁶⁰ Boethius, *Consolations of Philosophy*, trans. by V. E. Watts (London: Penguin, 1969), p. 35; Chaucer gives the translation 'comune strompettis' (*Boece*.49)

⁶¹ Plato, *The Republic*, p.1129 Book VI.

Like other defenders of secular poetry in the late Middle Ages, he turns to the discourse of allegory as a way of aligning it with God and the Good, making poetry a means of transcendence, a vehicle of moral and spiritual education. But even when viewed as moral and spiritual allegory, secular poetry still courts certain dangers and suspicions. It is still precariously placed as an intermediary between the spheres of falsehood and truth, world and spirit, emotion and reason. The beauty and sensual charm of poetry, always risked becoming a distraction, evoking and leading back into the transitory pleasures of this world, rather than pointing the soul beyond them. As Huizinga observes of the visual arts of the Middle Ages, the same could be said of its poetry – ‘all terrestrial beauty bore the stain of sin. Even where art and piety succeeded in hallowing it by placing it in the service of religion, the artist or the lover of art had to take care not to surrender to the charms of colour and line.’⁶² Similarly, in her recent book Knapp has shown how beautiful images were both a source of ‘awe and suspicion’ in medieval thought. They could function as ‘an inducement to insight’, giving through their order and harmony, some intimation of the immaterial, but they could also, in Augustine’s words detain and ‘entangle’ the soul in their ‘perverse sweetness’.⁶³ In these terms, late medieval poetry existed, somewhat like the Christian soul itself, in a peculiar state of tension – struggling against aspects of its own material nature, aspiring towards God, but at the same time caught up in and corrupted by the world it sought to transcend. It is in this state of self-conflict that the complexity of the bad conscience of late medieval poetry resides. The works of poets such as Dante, Boccaccio, Chaucer and Ruiz take on new levels of complexity in their bid to defend, transform, redeem or even renounce themselves relation to the values of Faith and the cultural context of suspicion discussed above.

If this goes some way to explain the religious and philosophical factors that underlay the problem of conscience and the equivocal status of creative literature in late medieval culture there are also more specific, socio-historical factors to be taken into account. It is well established that the late medieval world was not simply one of ‘quiet hierarchies’ and this is especially true of the historical context in which Chaucer wrote. As Aers observes, the fourteenth-century was a period in which,

⁶² Johan Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, trans. by F. Hopman (London: Penguin, 1955), pp. 38-9.

⁶³ Peggy Knapp, *Chaucerian Aesthetics* (New York: Macmillan, 2008), pp. 23-4. The quotation from Augustine is taken from *On Christian Doctrine*, 1.5.5.

‘dominant ideologies, institutions and systems of authority were showing sign of strain and inadequacy’, a period that saw significant changes in the economic base of medieval society and its class relations, and the emergence of new conceptions of social, religious and national identity.⁶⁴ Literary discourse was involved in these transformations, and was itself undergoing significant change in the period. All of this contributes to its precarious status in late medieval culture and exacerbates the problem of bad conscience. For whilst social and intellectual change brought to secular literature new creative energies, new subject matter and opportunities, it also brought with it a sense of uncertainty, unrest and a re-assertion of conservative forces. In literature, as in history, the forces of change and reaction are dialectically intertwined.

In England the late fourteenth century was a time of unprecedented literary productivity, which saw the blooming of vernacular theology and the impressive works of Chaucer, Langland and the *Gawain* Poet. But it was also, unsurprisingly, a time of great social unrest and ideological controversy, the time of the Peasants’ Revolt, the deposition of Richard II, and the Lollard controversy. No one could write in this highly volatile and productive period without responding to, and, to some extent, implicating themselves in these conflicts and crises. The Lollard movement, for example, was a pressing issue in the late thirteen-hundreds and the crucial debates it provoked about lay religious education, Bible translation and the role of the vernacular, impacted, to some degree, on all writing in English.⁶⁵ As Watson and Cannon have argued, this was a period of relative toleration, wherein the lines between orthodoxy and heterodoxy were not so starkly drawn or tightly policed as they would later become. But the mood of controversy and suspicion that led to Arundel’s Constitutions (1409) was still fermenting during this time.⁶⁶ Even before the Constitutions cemented the link between vernacular literary production and sedition, the Lollard debate had brought to the act of writing in English new problematic implications, which required negotiation.

⁶⁴ Aers, *Chaucer, Langland and the Creative Imagination*, p. x.

⁶⁵ Official condemnation of Lollard views dates back to the 1382 Black friars Council. For a fuller discussion of the impact of the Wycliffite movement on fourteenth-century English literature see Andrew Cole, *Literature and Heresy in the Age of Chaucer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

⁶⁶ Nicholas Watson, ‘Censorship and Cultural Change in Late-Medieval England: Vernacular Theology, the Oxford Translation Debate, and Arundel’s Constitutions of 1409’, *Speculum*, 70 (1995), 822-864 (p. 845); Christopher Cannon, *Middle English: A Cultural History*, pp. 153-164.

Consequently, vernacular writers felt all the more need to justify their endeavours, to assert their orthodox credentials, distinguish themselves from controversial or heretical ideas and to ground their work in existing authority. The prologues of vernacular works such as *The Northern Homily Cycle* and *Cursor Mundi* demonstrate this effort of self-justification in their explicit delineation of orthodox pastoral intent. Uncertainty about vernacular writing and its heterodox associations may also have contributed to the opposing trend of authorial reticence and indirection. The rhetoric of humility, the reliance on the role of translator or compiler, the development of an unassuming poetic persona, the use of various other interlocutors and mediating devices, and even the ideological circumspection and pervasive irony often noted in Chaucer, were all self-protective strategies that helped to shield an author from direct accountability for the content of his work or at least complicate the process of attributing authorial intent sufficiently to evade judgment.⁶⁷ Both of these tendencies can be seen in Passus I of *Piers Plowman*, for instance, when close to the start of his visionary journey, Langland invents the authoritative female persona, Holy Church, to voice doctrinal truth, instruct the pliant dreamer-narrator as to the goal of his quest and interpret the allegorical landscape in which he finds himself. It is a way of preemptively grounding his vision in established authority and demonstrating his subservience to it. In *CT* the Parson, with his rigorous and idealized orthodoxy, could arguably be said to assume a similar authenticating role, albeit in much less certain terms.

Where Langland opens his vision with the unequivocal authority of Holy Church, the Parson's 'gloss' on the pilgrimage of life is postponed till the very end of *CT* and the Parson himself remains more of an ambiguous figure— or rather a figure surrounded by ambiguity.⁶⁸ Indeed, in his first brief appearance Chaucer is keen to explore, in comic terms, the potential for misinterpretation, suspicion and the confusion of heterodoxy and orthodoxy that existed at the time. For when the Parson reproves the Host for his swearing the Host jestingly retorts— 'O Jankin, be ye there? |

⁶⁷ On the strategic use of the role of translator, compiler and reporter in medieval writing to evade responsibility see Alastair Minnis, *Medieval Theories of Authorship* (Aldershot: Wildwood House, 1988), pp. 191-4.

⁶⁸ Conversely some critics have seen in the Parson a less orthodox figure, and even hints of Lollard affinities. See for instance Judith Ferster, 'Chaucer's Parson and the "Idiosyncrasies of Fiction"' in *Closure in The Canterbury Tales*, ed. by David Raybin (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2000), p. 119 and Karen Winstead, 'Chaucer's Parson and the Contours of Orthodoxy', *ChRev*, 43 (2009), 239-259.

I smelle a Lollere in the wynd' (II.1172) and the Shipman steps in to stop the Parson sprinkling 'cokkel in our clene corn' (II.1183). It is ironic, that two of the pilgrimage's more worldly characters join forces here to protect the group from the imagined heresy of a figure who is, in the terms of the *General Prologue* the very embodiment of an idealized spiritual orthodoxy – 'riche [...] of hooly thoght and werk' (I.478) a 'noble ensample to his sheep' (I.496) Whereas Holy Church declares her own identity and immediately Wil falls to his knees in recognition praying 'kenne me kyndely on Crist to bileve', Chaucer has the Parson's authority immediately called into question, mistaken, interrupted, postponed, even confused with heresy.⁶⁹ Patterson has plausibly argued that such a postponement of spiritual authority is in fact necessary for the dialogic drama of the tale-telling contest to proceed.⁷⁰ But there is also here a serious intimation of an atmosphere of religious controversy and perhaps an indirect assertion of the orthodox credentials of the *CT* itself– a serious gesture of protection played out behind the Shipman's farcical one. For in the comic absurdity of the Host and Shipman's accusation is inversely written the truth of the Parson's spiritual orthodoxy, an orthodoxy which will have the *final word* in the often wayward and ambiguous verbal contest of *CT*.

Whilst creative literature was responding to and reflecting the broad social and intellectual tensions of the period in which it was caught, it was also itself undergoing significant change and this, I will argue, is crucial to the sense of guilt and uncertainty about literary enterprise which surfaces in Chaucer's work. For as in history, so too in creative literature, progress and change brought with them a counterbalancing sense of reticence and anxiety – a reaching back toward the old certainties, which were simultaneously being challenged and overridden. The late Middle Ages saw the gradual emergence of a sophisticated, expansive and increasingly autonomous vernacular literary tradition and with it an ambitious yet tentative, re-conception of the status and function of poets and their work.⁷¹ This process arguably began with

⁶⁹ William Langland, *The Vision of Piers Plowman*, (B-Text) ed. by A. V. C. Schmidt, I.75-81.

⁷⁰ Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History*, p. 317.

⁷¹ This is a development which has been viewed by scholars in various ways. Spearing considers the transition in terms of a 'Renaissance' engagement with the ancient world which registers both a sense of alterity and the possibility of its recovery through 'skilful imitation', A. C. Spearing, *Medieval to Renaissance in English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 11; Greenfield emphasises the importance of Italian humanist and neo-platonic thought in granting a new dignity and breadth to poetry, Greenfield, *Humanist and Scholastic Poetics, 1250-1500*, pp. 17-36; Minnis stresses the importance of the rediscovery of Aristotelian method in Scholastic thought for the development of a

the cantos of the eleventh-century Occitan troubadours, which brought a new elegance and virtuosity to vernacular poetry and discovered, in *fin amor*, its ennobling pathos and central theme.⁷² It was taken forward by the narrative artistry of Chrétien de Troyes' Arthurian Romances, by the blending of *fin amor* and psychological allegory in *The Romance of the Rose*, and considerably advanced by the philosophically expansive works of the three great Italian Trecento poets, who drew confidently from scripture, clerical learning, classical models and the tropes and ideals of *fin amor* in their literary endeavours of self-definition and authorisation.

But what exactly does this new mode of literature consist of and how is it differentiated from the pre-existing literary culture of the Middle Ages? It is difficult at first to address these questions, even to speak of 'literature' in the Middle Ages, because, the term itself and the constellation of ideas to which it refers, either did not exist or were only just beginning to emerge. As Cannon notes, on the few occasions where the term 'litterature' does appear in Middle English it refers not to a special body of writings of intrinsic and aesthetic value but to book learning of any kind.⁷³ Something approximating the more specialised modern notion of 'literature' as writings of enduring worth and beauty, which articulate the most profound aspirations, sentiments and experiences of human beings, emerges only very gradually. It was the poets of the late Middle Ages who were responsible for giving to that notion an initial voice and shape in their works.

As shall be shown in more detail throughout this thesis, the poets of the period drew (to different degrees) upon existing literary ideas and practices from classical, clerical, courtly and popular sources, and forged them into new experimental constellations that begin to anticipate our modern conception of 'creative literature'. From the clerical world, they adopted the legitimising principles of allegory and also the idea of poetry as a rational and rhetorical craft, illustrated in the Manuals of

more expansive literary theory and practice, A. J. Minnis, *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism c.1100-1375* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), pp. 4-9; more recently Christopher Cannon situates the development of literature in terms of a more general expansion of the 'jurisdiction' of English vernacular writing, and relates it especially to the rise of vernacular theology, Cannon, *Middle English: A Cultural History*, pp. 150-164.

⁷² For discussion of the role of the troubadours in the evolution of late medieval poetics see Joan Ferrante, 'The Craft of the Early Troubadours' in *Vernacular Poetics*, ed. by Louis Ebin (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1984).

⁷³ The *Middle English Dictionary* defines the term as 'Knowledge from books, book learning', <<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/lookup.htm> Accessed 20.09.11>. Cannon identifies what he sees as an important shift in Bradshaw's *Life of St. Werburge* (c.1513) where 'lytterature' is confidently defined as 'a swete cordyall for mannes entent' and essential to the preservation of human knowledge, Cannon, *Middle English: A Cultural History*, pp. 150-1

Matthew of Vendome and Geoffrey of Vinsauf.⁷⁴ From the courtly domain, they developed the expressive potentials of *fin amor* and explored the role of literature as recreation, but also its potential as historical commentary, national discourse and an authoritative medium for the discussion of ethical and political issues.⁷⁵ From the popular sphere they drew upon the vibrant, ephemeral and often comical forms of folk culture – of story telling, minstrel songs and romances, carnival and popular spectacle, and the idiom of ordinary speech itself.⁷⁶ Something of this exploratory work of synthesis and mediation can be seen in action in the experimental eclecticism of *CT*, which draws into dialogue almost every literary genre and style available to the Middle Ages through the device of the tale-telling contest. It is apparent too in Dante's elegant interfusion of *fin amor* and Christian allegory – the canto of the troubadours and the scale of classical epic – in his *Commedia*, and in Ruiz's skilful mixture of devotional, satirical and troubadoric material in *El Libro de Buen Amor*.

In these and other works, something approximating the modern conception of literature is gradually, tentatively taking shape, being forged out of, but also moving beyond the limitations of existing literary values and practices. Crucial aspects of this development include: a new self-awareness on the part of poets about their role in a European and national literary tradition; what Spearing calls 'a new experience of the relationship of the present to the [classical] past', which, registers both a sense of historical distance and the possibility of emulating, even surpassing classical literary models; a heightened sense of authorial responsibility and a related concern for the future reception and textual integrity of their works; an increasing interest in the complexity, beauty and distinctive signifying force of poetic language, and a belief in poetry's value as a vehicle of personal expression and philosophical enquiry.⁷⁷ Thus it

⁷⁴ For discussion of the use of allegory in medieval poetry see Minnis, *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism c.1100-1375* and Robertson, *Preface to Chaucer*, pp.286-317; for discussion of the role of the rhetorical tradition in medieval poetry see, Umberto Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986) and Rita Copeland, (ed.) *Medieval Grammar and Rhetoric, Language, Arts and Literary Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 1-14.

⁷⁵ For literature as recreation see Olson, *Literature as Recreation in the Later Middle Ages*; for the emergence of poetry as authoritative national and political discourse see Meyer-Lee, *Poets and Powers from Chaucer to Wyatt*, pp. 3-4.

⁷⁶ For the role of folk culture in the development of literature see Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, trans. by Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984); for a more cautious position, John Ganim, *Chaucerian Theatricality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), pp. 18-20.

⁷⁷ This is in marked contrast to what Zumthor described as the more fluid and anonymous conditions of textual production and transmission which had prevailed in earlier vernacular literary culture. Paul Zumthor, *Toward a Medieval Poetics*, trans. by Philip Bennet (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1992), p. 71.

becomes possible, in the late Middle Ages, to speak of an incipient, increasingly self-conscious and ambitious species of ‘creative literature’ – a literature *for-itself* – coexistent with yet distinct from literature in its more generic and functional sense; a species to which *Troilus*, for example, belongs, but not straightforwardly *The Pricke of Conscience* though both remain ostensibly ‘poems’. I do not intend to hypostasise this division or uncritically re-affirm some pre-existing notion of ‘high culture’. These two domains of literary production continue to overlap and interpenetrate, but, nonetheless, it is primarily with this more specialised form of creative literature, and the bad conscience that accompanies its evolution, that I am concerned.

For with the advance of this species of creative vernacular literature, with all its new confidence, ambition and consciousness of power, comes the counterweight of guilt, uncertainty and reticence that inevitably accompanies such bold forward strides. In and through its creative development there arises the question of its relation to existing cultural authorities, to the ultimate values of Faith. Its nascent sense of power and independence must be reconciled with, and subordinated to those ultimate values. As previously noted with regard to history, progress and reaction are closely intertwined. Guilt and suspicion are aroused here precisely as new freedoms are being sought and old ties and truths disrupted. They emerge there as the negative correlative to ambition and independence and whisper with the reproachful voice of the old order. But rather than simply stalling the progress of creative literature, this guilt plays a paradoxical part in heightening its self-awareness, sharpening its sense of responsibility, giving impetus to its imaginative endeavour to license, reconcile and redeem itself in relation to the existing cultural hierarchy.

In these terms the development of late medieval poetry is not simply a story of renaissance progress, but a mixture of boldness and reticence, self-assertion and disavowal, creativity and guilt. It finds expression both in the transgressive, enigmatic voices of the Wife of Bath and Dante’s Ulysses, and yet also in the penitential voice of Chaucer’s *Retraction* and Dante’s allegorical systematising of poetry in the *Convivio*. In this same spirit, Petrarch can write confidently of the dignity of Man and yet in his *Canzoniere* lament his own frailty and guiltiness, Boccaccio can write an impassioned and comprehensive defence of poetry and yet contemplate burning all the works of his youth; Botticelli can paint his figures with an intuition of what Pater called ‘the true complexion of humanity’, in all its beauty and ambiguity, and yet freely commit some of those works to the flames; and Chaucer could similarly write

with a deep curiosity and sympathy for ‘men and women in their mixed and uncertain condition’ and yet end by renouncing all but those devotional works, in which that uncertainty is cancelled by Faith.⁷⁸ In their works the values of the medieval world persist and coalesce with the germinal spirit of Renaissance humanism: the misery and the dignity, the guilt and freedom of the human condition, are held in a fascinating and productive dialectic tension.

With these tensions and this broader cultural narrative in mind, this thesis aims to explore the interaction of guilt and creativity in the works of Chaucer. The case of Chaucer offers a perfect opportunity to explore the problem of the precarious status of creative literature in late medieval culture in a concrete and tangible manner, and conversely, by bringing these general concerns to bear on a detailed critical study of Chaucer’s work, I believe that fresh light can be shed on the distinctive qualities, oft-noted tensions and contradictions that characterise both that work and its critical reception.

To outline the structure of this thesis, Chapter One explores the problems implicit in late medieval poetry’s attempt to legitimise itself as a mode of allegory and Chaucer’s equivocal response to that possibility in *HF*. It is here in this perplexing, unfinished poem that Chaucer begins to fully explore his vocation and relation to past culture, to lay claim to the mantle of Poet within that evolving sphere of creative literature described above, and to follow in the footsteps of Dante. Here I explore the ambivalence with which Chaucer sets about this task, the way he both continues and problematises the Italian Trecento poets’ endeavours to construct poetry as an elevated, authoritative allegorical discourse, raising for himself, in the process, the old intractable problem of the value of literary enterprise. This Chapter also considers the ‘anxiety of influence’ manifest in *HF*— the way Chaucer negotiates his relation to literary tradition and finds his own more ironical voice by falling short (with a mixture of purpose and accident, reverence and parody) from Dante’s transcendent and formidable model.

In Chapter Two I revisit the Kittredgean idea of *CT* as a ‘Human Comedy’. This chapter considers the crucial role that comedy plays both in Chaucer’s poetics and, more broadly, in the development of creative literature as a critical and eclectic discourse. As well as its creative potential, I discuss here the moral dangers that come

⁷⁸ Walter Pater, *The Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 36.

with Chaucer's mode of comedy, its problematic relation to earnest, allegorical poetics and to the fundamental principles of medieval Christian thought. Looking at significant comic moments throughout *CT*, I identify a pattern of deflation and dialogisation and go on to analyse how this plays out in two of Chaucer's greatest creations – the comic characters of the Wife of Bath and the Pardoner. This exploration of comedy is crucial in establishing what is both most creative and problematic about Chaucer's poetry in relation to religious values – its tendency toward relativism and sympathetic articulation of unorthodox voices, its spirit of play, irresolution and irony. By opening up this creative and potentially subversive comic field in *CT* Chaucer inevitably raises again the question of poetry's suspect status and aggravates the bad conscience and censorial attitude that accompanies it.

Chapter Three explores the culmination of these tensions, and the final expression of the bad conscience of the poet in the final, often overlooked, three fragments of *CT*. The trecento poets were able to legitimise creative literature by gradually purging it of worldly associations and subordinating it to Christian allegory, Chaucer's more experimental and eclectic literary practice leaves the poet still uncertain as to the value of his craft and leads here to a more pronounced movement of poetic self-questioning and even self-negation. Drawing on Adorno's concept of 'late style', this last chapter considers the moral and artistic implications of incompleteness as Chaucer struggles to 'knit up' and give final 'sentence' to a work which leaves so many unresolved conflicts and unanswered questions. These final tales register both the necessity and difficulty of giving up poetry. They leave us with the image of creative literature as a kind of futile alchemy, and yet strangely they continue that vain, alchemical enterprise, in the very words that seek to give it up. Here again guilt and renunciation are at the heart of a self-conflicted, but always fascinating process of literary creation.

Chapter 1: Allegory and the Anxiety of Influence in the *House of Fame*

Unlike Dante's *Commedia*, on which it was partly based, the *House of Fame* is the account of a 'wonderful drem' (I.62) whose meaning remains uncertain. Indeed, the poem's enigmatic quality has been repeatedly commented upon by critics. Donaldson calls *HF* Chaucer's 'most curious and allusive poem', Muscatine suggests that 'incoherence is the central fact of its character' and more recently, Fyler maintains that within it 'we find unresolved – and unresolvable – debates' and a perspective 'that refuses to rest in certainty.'¹ If ambiguity and irresolution are defining feature of Chaucer's poetry, then *HF*, it seems, is Chaucerian par excellence.

One obvious reason for its perplexing nature is that *HF* remains unfinished and consequently open to myriad conjectures as to its overall meaning and direction. The poem breaks off at a crucial juncture, with the dreamer left stranded in the House of Rumour, having just glimpsed amidst its chaos, the promising image of a man who 'semed for to be | A man of gret auctorite' (III.2157-8).² It breaks off, in short, with a pointed glance toward the possibility of authoritative speech, sentence, explanation and closure which the poem itself has been unwilling or unable to realise. But this problem of indeterminacy is not just limited to the poem's ending– it runs throughout the whole of *HF*, from the original admission of uncertainty about the meaning of dreams (I.1-52), through the conflicting interpretations of Dido's story to the concluding vision of the unreliability of all human speech in the House of Rumour. Ostensibly on a journey to find new tidings, the poem leads the comically hesitant narrator through a chain of puzzling encounters and elaborate allegorical loci, which seem both to promise some resolving meaning and yet perpetually to defer and resist its disclosure– the Man of Authority is merely the last in this series of enigmatic

¹ Donaldson, *Speaking of Chaucer*, p. 2; Charles Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957), p. 144; Fyler, *Language and the Declining World*, p. 70.

² Critics have disagreed about the cause, degree and significance of the poem's incompleteness. Some have seen the poem as essentially complete and read its incompleteness as a deliberate artistic effect – see for example, J. A. Bennett, *Chaucer's Book of Fame* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 185; James Winny, *Chaucer's Dream Poetry* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1973), p. 111 and Sheila Delany, *Chaucer's House of Fame* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press 1972), p. 108. Others have seen its incompleteness as the result of deeper, perhaps unresolvable, structural and conceptual problems within the poem. For a good discussion of the case for and against textual omission, and a review of critical positions see Nicholas Havely, *The House of Fame* (Durham: Durham University Press, 1994).

ciphers, and his silence is perhaps owing to the accumulated burden of explication that, by this point of the poem, rests upon his speech.

Structurally speaking, the poem's lack of an ending may be more a symptom than a cause of its problems. As Jordan argues, its narrative is punctuated by a series of sudden breaks and swerves, moments of impasse and unanswered questions which leave the overall thematic relation between its main loci and phases of action, at times, at least ostensibly, uncertain.³ A similar problem emerges on the level of style and tone, as *HF* shifts abruptly from carefully crafted moments of Dantescan scope and elegance to a colloquial, prosaic register and passages, as Clemen notes, of 'loose and almost careless' construction.⁴ These 'oscillations' in many ways anticipate Chaucer's later style – with its subtle ironies, its dynamic mixture of game and earnest, high style and plain speech, learned discourse and naturalistic detail – but here, the shifts feel generally more discordant and less controlled. It feels as if Chaucer is still in the process of finding his poetic voice – and, in doing so, testing the bounds of expression of the English vernacular and the four-stress line almost 'to breaking point'.⁵ The result is a peculiar and pervasive 'strain of irony' but one which is erratic and, even by Chaucer's standards, difficult to gauge.⁶

Even on the level of its central subject *HF* poses a problem. As its title suggests, it is ostensibly a poem about fame, but even in its broadest sense the term becomes inadequate to describe the poem's 'troublesome abundance of matter'.⁷ *HF* is as much about the whole cultural tradition Chaucer inherited, about authority, language, poetry, vision, interpretation and epistemology, as it is about fame. If it began, like *The Book of Duchess*, with a specific theme or occasion in mind, it soon expanded far beyond it, and like *CT*, to which it serves as a prelude, in its speculative, evolving and encyclopaedic nature – it becomes irreducible to a single theme. In stark contrast to Geoffrey of Vinsauf's famous architectonic image of the poem as a house first *completely* measured out by 'the inner compasses of the mind' before being constructed, *HF* seems more like a product of the free and exploratory exercise of the

³ Jordan, *Chaucer's Poetics and the Modern Reader*, pp. 38-9; in a similar vein, Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition*, p. 114.

⁴ Wolfgang Clemen, *Chaucer's Early Poetry*, trans. by C. A. M. Sym (London: Whitstable Litho, 1963), p. 120.

⁵ Havely, *The House of Fame*, p. 34.

⁶ Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition*, p. 114.

⁷ Robert Burlin, *Chaucerian Fiction* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 46

imagination than of a wholly premeditated design.⁸ It is a *poem in process*, a poem which, again like *CT*, foregrounds and dramatizes the questions of its own meaning and powers of representation, without predetermined limits and answers. Within it one senses the on-going and self-reflexive struggle of form to synthesise and bring order to the sheer profusion of the poem's matter and creative energies – as the narrator ponders, 'Loo, how shulde I now telle al thys?' (III.1341), 'what thing may this sygnifye?' (II.587)

This struggle is made explicit in the three Invocations wherein the narrator reflects upon his inability to fully recapture or comprehend his vision, and appeals for divine assistance 'to tellen al my drem aright' (II.527). At almost every turn he is confronted by a sensory excess – a profusion of image, activity and sound – that passes beyond his ability to describe and points, with a mixture of comic bathos and gothic grandeur, toward the sublime. The beauty of Fame's palace no man has 'kunynge to descrive', it has more windows than 'flakes falle in grete snowes' (III.2056, 1192), more minstrels and musicians on its outer walls 'than sterres ben in hevene' (III. 1254). This sustained and self-conscious emphasis on the problem of representation has led several critics to see *HF* primarily as a poem which explores and questions the very limits of poetry and language's capacity to convey truth and meaning.⁹

But if *HF* remains, for all these reasons, Chaucer's most 'elusive' and problematic poem, it also marks the point at which he discovers his own poetic voice and perspective— a seminal moment in the development of Chaucer's poetry, and English Literature as a whole.¹⁰ Within it one finds, in embryo, all that could be described as characteristically Chaucerian: a pervasive sense of irony and indirection, the sudden shifts of tone and register, the self-deprecating narrator and self-reflexive style, the rapacious, and often parodic, synthesis of a dizzying array of sources, and that willingness to explore contradictory perspectives and dwell in the unresolved.

As has often been noted, this seminal shift is in no small part owing to Chaucer's engagement with the ambitious and expansive poetry of the Italian trecento prior to his composition of *HF*. His two visits to Italy on state business in the 1370s

⁸ Geoffrey of Vinsauf, *Poetria Nova* in *Medieval Grammar and Rhetoric*, ed. by Copeland, pp. 596-7.

⁹ See Jordan, *Chaucer's Poetics*, p. 24; Fyler, *Language and the Declining World*, pp. 139-154.

¹⁰ This view depends on the conventionally accepted chronology of Chaucer's work, which dates *HF* around 1379, after *BD* and his trips to Italy and before his switch to pentameter verse in *PF* and *Troilus*. For more detailed discussion see Havely, *The House of Fame*, p. 9

gave him the opportunity to explore and reflect upon their work and the cultural atmosphere in which it was produced.¹¹ What he found there, and especially in Dante, was the embodiment of that elevated and authoritative conception of the poet discussed in the Introduction, a model of creative literature in the vernacular, not merely as homiletic tool, bardic entertainment or courtly amenity, but as an independent discourse of considerable philosophical scope and spiritual worth. In this chapter I argue that *HF* can be read as Chaucer's ambivalent response to the possibilities and, also, the problems that this model of poetry opened up, especially for a poet working in a vernacular tradition, still very much on the margins of European culture.

Thus, in *HF* we see Chaucer taking on the philosophical range of Dante's epic, its transcendental trajectory and some of its specific imagery and phrasing. Like the *Commedia*, *HF* takes the form of an autobiographical and allegorical vision which leads the poet into the heavens, beyond the realm of human experience. Chaucer's poem sustains, as Fyler puts it, an 'ironic counterpoint' to the *Commedia* and the various details linking the two poems have often been noted and discussed before.¹² But one particular affinity which is worth stressing in this context is both poems' self-conscious engagement with the poetry, culture and authority of the past. Though more obliquely and in less animate form Chaucer, too, encounters many shades and ciphers of the past on his celestial journey. As in the *Commedia*, almost all the great poets, stretching back to antiquity, are found and reflected upon in the architectural schema of his vision and the poem itself is, in one sense, Chaucer's own attempt to negotiate his position in relation to them, including, of course, to Dante. Both poems create within themselves an intertextual space for an engagement with the voices of literary tradition and in doing so explore the nature and value of their own poetic endeavour.

This plays into the main theme of *HF*. For the poem's central preoccupation with fame becomes another means of engaging with literary tradition, and specifically

¹¹ For discussion of Chaucer's engagement with Italian trecento culture see Piero Boitani (ed.), *Chaucer and the Italian Trecento* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) and David Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity: Absolutist lineages and Associational Forms in England and Italy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), pp. 9-64.

¹² Fyler, *Language and the Declining World*, pp. 139-41. In brief, *HF* contains three formal invocations (all echoing Dante), moves through three distinct allegorical *loci* and Chaucer's narrator's guide is drawn from the eagle which seizes Dante in a dream in *Purgatorio* 9; on the case for an earnest parallel between the two see B. G. Koonce, *Chaucer and the Tradition of Fame* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1966), pp. 73-88; for responses which suggest a more ambiguous, even critical relation between Chaucer and the *Commedia* see Karla Taylor, *Chaucer Reads 'The Divine Comedy'* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1989), pp. 20-49.

with that elevated conception of poetry that Chaucer found in the work of his Italian predecessors. The utterly random dispensations of the goddess *fama* who resides at the centre of *HF* suggest, as Koonce has observed, a conventional Boethian critique of the instability and vanity of earthly renown.¹³ And yet this idea is brought into awkward relation with the more positive, humanistic notion of the poet as the preserver and beneficiary of honourable fame found in Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio.¹⁴

Chaucer had clearly encountered this idea in his reading of the Italian poets, and gave expression to it in the fascinating sculptural image of the poets stood high on pillars in fame's palace, bearing on their shoulders the fame of the various peoples (III.1424-1512). His narrator sees in them 'gret noblesse' and 'hy and gret sentence' but Chaucer seemingly adopts a more sceptical and ambivalent attitude toward the humanist idea of the poet as an agent and pursuer of fame than his Italian 'auctors'. For in *HF* the great pillars of the poets stand in the throne room of the goddess Fama. They too are ultimately subject to and even a part of her arbitrary jurisdiction and they play their part in the vicissitudes of rumour, which *HF* both demonstrates and describes. It is consequently no surprise that, when asked 'Artow come hider to han fame?' Chaucer's narrator replies, in contradiction to the Petrarchan ideal of poetic immortality, 'Nay, for sothe [...] Sufficeth me, as I were ded | That no wight have my name in honde' (III.1872-77). There is, though, a sense of irony in these lines, for in his bid to become a successful poet – as Chaucer surely knew – he was inevitably becoming one of fame's many agents and subjects.

Chaucer's ambivalent attitude to fame here is symptomatic of a more general ambivalence in his response to the Italian trecento poets and the elevated model of poetry they were developing. In *HF* he seems to aspire towards the expansiveness and grandeur of their poetics. His self-conscious exploration of his role as a poet and his relation to literary tradition is itself a significant sign of their influence. But at the same time, he seems to hesitate and register an ironic distance from their lofty literary vision. Chaucer finds himself in Fame's Palace but he does not seek fame; he is a poet

¹³ Koonce, *Chaucer and the Tradition of Fame*, pp. 210-15.

¹⁴ Examples include Petrarch's 'Coronation Oration', wherein pursuit of 'personal glory' is described as one of the main inspirations of the poet; for Dante's positive portrayal of the poet's relation to fame see *Inferno* 4, 24, 15 and 32.154-9 and *Paradiso* 17.128-38; for Boccaccio's discussion of fame see, 'The Genealogy of Gentile Gods' in *Boccaccio on Poetry*, p. 26, 32.

granted a celestial vision, but he is no ‘Ennok, ne Elye’ (II.588) nor Dante it seems—though his very expression of this sentiment is taken directly from *Inferno*.2.32.

This ambiguous and erratic stance that Chaucer adopts in *HF* towards his Italian sources and especially to the earnest visionary poetics of Dante’s *Commedia* is one of the poem’s central enigmas. Some critics have seen in it a playful parody, or even a satirical critique of Dante’s visionary ambitions, which, Cooper claims, ‘fascinated and appalled’ the more pragmatic English poet ‘in roughly equal measure’.¹⁵ Others have interpreted it as a result of artistic limitation or Chaucer’s own, at this point, hubristic endeavour to follow in Dante’s footsteps.

In this vein, Spearing, Wallace and Schibanoff have all stressed the difficulty that Chaucer faced in *HF* of trying to follow Dante’s formidable accomplishment and establish an authoritative vernacular poetics to rival Latin and the Classical literature, in a native literary culture with little pedigree.¹⁶ When Dante wrote the *Commedia*, with careful preparation and at the peak of his powers, he had inherited, as he explains in *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, a vernacular which had been ‘exalted by training and power’, tempered by generations of poets, whose honourable labours brought to it the eloquence required for such an epic undertaking.¹⁷ Chaucer, by contrast, was still just developing his talents in *HF* and his native medium was, as yet, simply not equipped with a *dolce stil*, a heroic form, a prestigious legacy, even with the vocabulary required to successfully emulate Dante’s visionary poetics. The attempt to do so, as parts of *HF* go to show, inevitably generated parodic, comical and bathetic effects.

In this chapter I want to focus on this problem of influence and build upon both the ideas of Chaucer as in some way parodying or critiquing Dante and also earnestly seeking to follow his lead. I will do this by bringing two interrelated conceptual focuses to bear on the poem. Firstly, I consider the problem of Chaucer’s engagement with Dante in relation to the Bloomian theory of the anxiety of

¹⁵ Helen Cooper ‘Four Last Things: Ugolino in the House of Rumour’, *New Medieval Literatures* 3, ed. by Rita Copeland (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), pp. 39-66, p. 41; For a review of Chiarini and Rambeau’s early theories of *HF* as English parody see F. N. Robinson, ‘Chaucer and Dante’ *Journal of Comparative Literature*, 1 (1903), 292-97.

¹⁶ Spearing, *Medieval to Renaissance*, pp. 24-29; Susan Schibanoff, *Chaucer’s Queer Poetics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), p. 12; Spearing suggests that *HF* shows a poet intrigued by, but still unable to fully adopt, the Renaissance ideal of the poet; whilst Schibanoff argues that Chaucer responds to the challenge of ‘writing the vernacular’ by following Dante in adopting a queer or ‘hermaphrodite poetics’ in *HF*.

¹⁷ Dante, *Eloquence of the Vernacular*, trans. by A. G. Howell, in *The Latin works of Dante Alighieri*, (New York: Greenwood Press, 1969), p. 57.

influence.¹⁸ And secondly I consider how in seeking to establish his own poetic voice and perspective Chaucer adapts and calls into questions the form of allegory, which underlay his Italian predecessors' endeavours to legitimise and elevate creative literature in relation to the religious values of late medieval culture.

In 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' Eliot spoke of the vital role tradition plays in the development of poetic talent and its critical appreciation. Poets became great, he argued, not by breaking with tradition and asserting their individuality, but by writing with a 'historical sense' of their role within and indebtedness to 'the whole of the literature of Europe' stretching back to Homer.¹⁹ This 'historical sense' – which involves a poetic dialogue with one's predecessors, a sense 'of the timeless and of the temporal together' – is indeed one of the hallmarks of that elevated and self-conscious conception of poetry which was developing in works of late medieval poets.²⁰ We see Chaucer stepping into this same mode of awareness in *HF*, literally and figuratively opening a space (an elaborate palace no less) for engagement with literary tradition and positing himself, however hesitantly, within its continuum. But for Bloom the relationship between the poet and his antecedents is not simply one of creative fraternity and reciprocity. He conceived of this 'historical sense' in more fraught and Freudian terms, as the archetypal struggle of the ego for self-definition – the creative struggle of the living poet to find an original and independent voice in the shadow of his powerful and authoritative precursors.²¹

Bloom theorised that 'strong' poets broke free from the legacy of their immediate precursor through a deliberate misreading of their work. Not a self-sacrifice to and immersion in tradition, as Eliot had envisioned it, but a swerving away from tradition, which simultaneously preserves and transforms, emulates and appropriates, reverences and subverts the authoritative voice of the past, and creates within their closed and accomplished structures the space for new perspectives and forms of expression to emerge. This, I will argue, is precisely the process that we see unfolding in Chaucer's 'ironic counterpoint' to Dante in *HF* and its implications are

¹⁸ Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973). Bloom developed the idea in relation to the Romantic Poets' relation to Shakespeare, but applies it to the whole of poetic history, which he contends is itself 'indistinguishable from poetic influence, since strong poets make that history by misreading one another, so as to clear imaginative space for themselves' (p. 5).

¹⁹ T. S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1919), in *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1932), p. 14.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, pp. 5-19.

far ranging. For in its course, Chaucer risks unsettling the grounds on which the value of poetic tradition had itself only recently been established in the writings of the trecento poets – namely, the notion of poetry as an allegorical discourse which conveys profound moral and spiritual truths beneath the beautiful veil of fiction.

As an allegorical dream-vision whose ‘sentence’ remains uncertain, a vision that dramatises its own search for meaning, even questions the possibility of arriving at truth through language, *HF* resists the correspondence and subordination of image to truth on which allegory depends. In his act of creative misprision, Chaucer brought to bear on the orderly and transcendent hermeneutics of Dantescan allegory, something which Dante either omitted or sought to control– the problem of the instability and prodigality of language: of multifarious and unruly images that resist translation into a singular ‘sentence’, signifiers that cannot be easily marshalled and moved beyond. Accordingly, Dante’s vision leads to greater and greater degrees of order, light and understanding, to the celestial rose and the incommensurable vision of the trinity; Chaucer’s leads to another kind of incommensurability – that of the house of rumour, and its infernal, yet infinitely productive, racket.

It is there – in falling short of Dante’s transcendent vision– that Chaucer finds his own literary material and method, in the world of ‘shipmen and pilgrimes’ (III.2122) of unanswered questions, of ‘fals and soth compouned’ (III.2108). But the question remains – at what cost? For in this process he undermines, at least in his own works, the trecento poets’ endeavours to make poetry a noble, stable and transcendent discourse. He disarms the justification of poetry as a vehicle of truth and risks readmitting the old suspicions of poetry as an irresponsible domain of worldliness and illusion. *HF*, thus, throws the value and function of poetry in Christian culture back into question, or rather it brings into the open some of the inherent problems of poetic discourse in its relation to faith. Chaucer’s response to this, I will argue, is a mixture of playfulness and genuine concern, a liberating sense of new literary power and potential and an anxious reaching after the Dantescan truth and order that this new potential unsettles.

To understand how exactly Chaucer adopts and subverts the allegorical mode of his Italian predecessors it is first necessary to consider the nature of that mode of poetics in itself and the reasons for its development. Section One of this chapter accordingly analyses the theoretical development of allegory in the works of the Italian trecento poets and its role within Dante’s *Commedia*. Section Two

contextualises my position within existing critical discussion of the poem and Section Three provides a close-reading of *HF*, in relation to the *Commedia* and its use of allegory, developing the ideas outlined above. By adopting this approach I hope to shed some new light on the puzzling nature of *HF* and at the same time, to demonstrate how Chaucer's poetics developed in a highly productive yet problematic relation to the dominant aesthetic and religious values of late medieval culture.

I: Allegory as Defence of Poetry in Boccaccio and Dante

Understood in its broadest terms, allegory, as Lewis writes, 'belongs not to medieval man but to man, or even to mind in general'.²² It can be found, variously, in Aesop's fables and Plato's philosophy, in the poetic works of late antiquity, in scripture and the practices of scriptural exegesis, in the macabre imagery of the *Trauerspiel*, in Orwell's twentieth-century political allegories, and in literary theory and criticism, which work under the assumption that a fiction may express in some form a deep and numinous significance beyond its 'literal' meaning, a significance which must be sought through exegesis. Throughout history allegory has been used and theorised in very different ways, from Augustine's conception of scriptural allegory as a sensible veil behind which lay the unity of spiritual truths – to Benjamin's conception of allegory, in relation to modernity and the imagery of the *Trauerspiel*, as a self-reflexive expression of melancholia and dislocation from meaning, which belied the redemptive unity of both Christian and enlightenment teleology.²³

Ideas and practices of allegory in the Middle Ages varied considerably, and some critics have discerned a shift from stricter towards more experimental and questioning forms.²⁴ But it was still the ideas of allegory found in classical rhetoric and the tradition of scriptural exegesis – and perhaps best exemplified by Augustine's *On Christian Teaching* – which were the dominant influence in medieval thinking on

²² Lewis, *Allegory of Love*, p. 44.

²³ Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. by John Osborne (London: Verso, 1977), see especially pp. 145-76.

²⁴ Akbari discerns a transition from 'vertical' allegory, which maintains a fixed relation between figure and truth, to 'horizontal' forms where that relation is less decided, Suzanne Akbari, *Seeing through the Veil* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2004), pp.13-16; whilst Tambling finds a spirit of melancholy and even 'a desire to abolish meaning' at work in the allegories of late medieval poetry. Jeremy Tambling, *Allegory and the Work of Melancholy, The Late Medieval and Shakespeare* (New York: Rodopi, 2004), pp. 24-30.

the matter. It is not a sense of the allegorical image as melancholy fragment, but its value as a didactic tool, a fitting veil and vehicle of truth, which is repeatedly stressed in the clerical and literary writings of the period.²⁵ Indeed, in Augustinian terms, it is only where allegory breaks down, where the ‘letter’ of the text is pursued for its own sake and severed from the galvanising force of the ‘spirit’ that its rhetorical association with death, sterility and dislocation begins to emerge.

It was this logocentric model of allegory, derived from clerical sources, which Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio adopted in their endeavour to justify and elevate literary discourse. The extensive use of images, rhetorical tropes and parables in Scripture and their justification by the Church Fathers as a means of conveying spiritual truths offered a powerful moral precedent for poetic fiction itself, and a way of counteracting the kinds of criticisms of secular poetry discussed in the previous chapter. Rather than being a form of ‘worldly vanity’ that excites emotion and desire and distracts the soul from its true calling, poetic fictions could potentially be legitimised, like the allegories of Scripture, as an elaborate rhetorical vehicle of doctrinal truths. Their aesthetic appeal and cryptic nature could be justified – just as Augustine justified the sensual allegory of the *Song of Songs*: as an incitement to higher understanding– for ‘it is much more pleasant to learn lessons presented through imagery and much more rewarding to discover meanings that are won only with difficulty’.²⁶

The Italian trecento poets were not, of course, the first to appeal to allegory in this way. The idea that poetry ‘conveys moral doctrine by feigned fables and allegorical similitudes’ was ubiquitous in medieval clerical thought, and was employed both to aid the Christian appropriation of Classical Literature and in the defence of its study.²⁷ The idea can be seen at work, for example, in Silvestris’ *Commentary on the Aeneid* and the popular moralisations of Ovid; it was also already being expounded and applied as a method of composition in the neo-platonic

²⁵ For illustration see Robertson, *Preface to Chaucer*, pp. 286-317.

²⁶ Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* (II, VI. 13) p. 33; The scriptural image was thus a way of both suggesting and withholding truth, so as to draw the mind on to greater understanding through struggle. It encouraged the mind not to rest with surfaces, images and figures but to actively reach toward the truth they veil, just as the soul reaches, ‘with difficulty’, beyond the world toward its creator.

²⁷ John the Scot, cited by Robertson, *Preface to Chaucer*, p. 345. For further examples of this defence of poetic fiction as a veil of truth in medieval clerical writing see Copeland (ed.), *Medieval Grammar and Rhetoric*, pp. 35-8.

allegories of the twelfth-century School of Chartres, such as Alan of Lille's *Anticlaudianus* and in the *Romance of the Rose*. What makes the trecento poets' treatment of this principle different is that they used it self-consciously as the basis for a more expansive, ambitious and philosophical conception of the poetic vocation.

For the trecento poets the analogous allegorical character of Scripture and poetic fiction, meant more than simply providing the grounds for an instrumental validation for the study and composition of poetry: it was used to stake a more much radical claim for their own poetic practice as a divinely inspired discourse— not merely an 'appendage to the arts', but a 'science', as Boccaccio says, of eternal significance, belonging to 'the bosom of God'.²⁸ For if Holy Scripture was in some ways poetical, the case could also be made that poetry was in some way holy. Petrarch stresses this point in a letter to his brother, wherein he restates the allegorical nature of both scripture and poetry and inverts the terms of the analogy to say 'that theology is poetry written about God'.²⁹ And whilst Dante in the *Convivio* is careful to preserve a formal distinction between the 'allegories of the poets' and the 'allegories of the theologians', in the *Commedia* he is already in the process of crossing that line— claiming for poetry the capacity to engage with theological questions and convey spiritual truths of the highest order, on both a literal and an allegorical level.³⁰ Boccaccio makes this point explicit when he describes the *Commedia* as revealing 'the deep and holy meaning of Christianity' and calls its author 'more of a sacred theologian than a myth maker' (53, 113).

The ambitious claims of all three poets reiterated and rested upon the fundamental idea of poetry as allegorical and the underlying dualities of letter and spirit, surface and depth, sense and sentence on which allegory depends. In the *Convivio* Dante called poetry 'truth hidden under a beautiful falsehood' and in *Inferno* 9, he advises the reader to 'mark the doctrine that is hidden under the veil of the

²⁸ Boccaccio, *Boccaccio on Poetry*, pp. 39 and 24, further references to this text are given in parenthesis; Hugh of St. Victor classed the songs of the poets as mere 'appendages to the arts' cited in Minnis (ed.), *Medieval Literary Theory*, p.122.

²⁹ Petrarch, *Familiari* 10. 4, in *Letters from Petrarch*, trans. by Bishop, p. 45.

³⁰ Dante, *Il Convivio*, 2, 1, trans. by Philip Wicksteed (London: J M Dent, 1940). Dante's argument is that the allegories of poetry carry only a moral not a anagogical sentence, but in the 'Can Grande Epistle' Dante in fact encourages the reader to interpret the *Commedia* by adopting the same four-fold method of exegesis used for Scripture. See Robert Hollander, *Dante's Epistle to Can Grande* (Michigan: University of Michigan, 1993) for debates about the letter's authenticity.

strange verses'.³¹ Similarly Petrarch advises his brother, 'Concentrate on the meaning. If it is true and wholesome take it to yourself, irrespective of the style'.³² Telling here is the assumed divisibility between poetry and truth-content. The act of reading itself becomes a process of distillation— a drawing of truth from falsehood – and it is in the hermeneutic movement from the latter to the former that poetic fiction is both vindicated and yet strangely surpassed. Here the trecento poets are following the hierarchical Augustinian model of the relation between letter and spirit. The poet aims to impart truth under the veil of fiction and it is the duty of the reader to read *through* the fiction – the 'letter' of the text – to uncover the moral or spiritual 'kernel' that lies beneath. The fourteenth-century cleric Berchorius describes this hermeneutic process with the analogy of drawing honey from the honeycomb and Chaucer evokes the same fundamental principle (if more equivocally) in the Nun's Priest's exhortation, 'taketh the fruyt and lat the chaf be stille' (VII.3443).³³ In these terms, where the 'letter' is dwelt upon for itself and enjoyed without reference to the 'spirit' it becomes not a vehicle of truth, but a worldly distraction in which all the old dangers and dubious associations of poetic discourse remain. One risks falling into what Augustine calls the 'miserable slavery' of reading 'in a carnal way' – of being unwilling to raise the mind's eye beyond the literal.³⁴ Thus, although allegory provides a powerful justification for poetic fiction, it remains only a conditional one, and it does not rid either fiction or poetic language of their deeper moral ambivalence. The 'beautiful falsehood' of poetry if used correctly can point beyond itself to spiritual truth, but its aesthetic charm can also still be a source of distraction and confusion, which has to be controlled and guarded against, by writers and readers alike. It is this hermeneutic valency of the 'letter' and the tension it creates in the trecento poets' theory and practice of allegory that I want to consider here in more detail.

The nature of this tension can be seen in Boccaccio's defence of poetry in the *Genealogy of the Gentile Gods*. Boccaccio initially defines poetry as 'fervid and exquisite speech and writing'. 'The fervour of poetry', he writes, 'compels the soul to a longing for utterance, it brings forth strange and unheard of creations of the mind' (39) but this quasi-mystical and affective concept of poetic inspiration is no sooner

³¹ Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, trans. by Charles Singleton (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970) future references are taken from this edition, and given in parenthesis in the main text. (*Inf.* 9.62). Quotations in Italian are also taken from this text; Dante, *Convivio*, p. 30.

³² Petrarch, *Familiari* 10.4.

³³ Berchorius, cited in Robertson, *Preface to Chaucer*, p. 303.

³⁴ Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, (III.21) p. 84.

evoked, than Boccaccio begins to qualify and counteract it, by stressing the rational, practical and allegorical nature of poetic composition. Poetic 'fervour' is characterised not as a Dionysian but an Apollonian force, which somehow arranges the 'strange', 'unheard of' apparitions it calls forth into a 'fixed order [...]' and thus veils truth in a fair and fitting garment of fiction' (39). Boccaccio is here, it seems, attempting to integrate two conflicting tendencies within poetry – the affective and the rational– but it soon becomes clear which of these principles is dominant.

Poetic fervour, he writes, 'rarely accomplishes anything commendable if the instruments by which its concepts are to be wrought out are wanting' (41). It is a natural resource which must be channelled by the moral and intellectual faculties of the poet, the instruments of rhetoric and disciplined study of the Liberal Arts.(40) Thus the fictions of the poets do not convey truths by accident or inspiration, but by the rational and moral agency of the poet. As Boccaccio explains, the poet utilises fictions like the Philosopher uses syllogisms, to 'illustrate or prove an idea' (47-8). And 'once [their] superficial aspect is removed, *the meaning of the author is clear.*' In these terms the redeeming, predetermined substance of truth is consciously disguised and veiled in fiction and the reader must exercise a similar moral and intellectual discipline to uncover it (62). Fictions without this underlying truth-content are unequivocally dismissed by Boccaccio as 'idle nonsense' and 'old wives tales', entirely removed from true poetry (48-9).

Thus, for Boccaccio, poetic fiction is still only justifiable as a vehicle of truth and where it fails in this regard, he is just as unforgiving as its staunchest critics. On these grounds he draws an absolute distinction between the legitimate allegorical model of poetry described above and its debased, immoral antithesis, represented by the 'dregs of the 'comic poets' (93), who 'pander to licentious tastes [...]' and abandon themselves to literary fooleries' (38). Such figures are responsible for defiling the name of poetry with 'their filthy creations' and 'must not only be expelled but exterminated'. (93) The assertion of this absolute binary between 'two kinds of poetry' – 'the one worthy of praise [...]' the other obscene and detestable' (94) serves an important function. It allows Boccaccio to project all the dubious associations and authoritative criticism of literary activity onto the 'bad poet' and cleanse and strengthen the legitimacy of 'the good'. But these neat distinctions between the good and the bad poet, between poetic allegory and licentious fictions devoid of truth, elide the more mixed and problematic reality of literary discourse. In the writings of Jean

de Meun, Boccaccio, Ruiz and Chaucer, for example, one finds at times, a seemingly earnest allegorical intent, and at other times a more equivocal, playful attitude to the conveyance of truth, even a mixture of game and earnest.

The point here is not just that these poets do not fit into Boccaccio's neat categories, but that the dubious element of poetry which Boccaccio identifies with 'the comic poets' can not be so conveniently isolated and expunged. It is not simply a degenerate 'kind of poetry' which can be disowned, but a deep-rooted tendency within literary discourse as a whole, something integrally linked to the valency and seductive power of the 'letter'. It is, in Augustinian terms, the 'carnal' tendency to enjoy the play of language and fiction *for its own sake*, to dwell in the ambiguity, the multiplicity, the affectivity, the sensuousness and beauty of poetic language at the expense of the moral, transcendent, instrumental call of allegory.³⁵ Hence, for any practice of poetry that seeks to conform to the allegorical and moral poetics outlined in Boccaccio's *Genealogy*, what is required is a deep sense of self-regulation, a resistance to the lure of poetic 'fervour' and ambiguity. The potential waywardness and sensuous charm of poetic language (along with its fascinating ambiguities and the powerful imaginary world it can conjure) must be controlled, guarded against and subordinated to its vehicular function, much as the rational soul must guard against the sinful tendencies of the body. What we have here is an implicit tension in poetic allegory between letter and spirit, fiction and truth. The truth-content, which fiction veils, must also somehow be secured and made clear: preserved from distorting affects of the poetic language through which it is communicated and the pluralising force that inheres in the act of interpretation, through which it is understood. The allegories of the poets, in these terms, remain precariously open and vulnerable to misconstrual. As Dinshaw argues, the sensuous 'letter' of the text had always to be marshalled, glossed and ultimately transcended for it to serve its legitimate function.³⁶

There was a consequent need to find some means of hermeneutic control and regulation, a way of guiding and stabilising interpretation, which could lead both the poet and the reader safely through the ambiguities of the 'letter' to the certainty of the truth it veiled. One of the ways this need for hermeneutic control manifested itself

³⁵ Jean-Paul Sartre in his study of literature evokes something similar when he says it is characteristic of poetry, unlike prose, to 'treat words as things and not as signs', not to use language as an instrument, but to dwell upon its sensuous particularity, *What is Literature*, trans. by Bernard Frechtman (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 5-8.

³⁶ Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*, pp. 22-3.

was in various forms of authorial commentary, both internal and external to the literary text. The apparatus of prologues, invocations, epilogues, palinodes, glosses and commentaries provided a means of guiding interpretation, neutralising dangerous implications and making clear the ‘truth’ content behind the literary veil. This can be seen, for example, in Boccaccio’s *Genealogy* itself, with its moral decoding of pagan mythology, in Chaucer’s Clerk’s glossing of his tale (IV.1142-1155), in the pious and sententious epilogue to *Troilus*, the penitential and expositional poems that preface and conclude Petrarch’s *Canzoniere* and in Dante’s self-reflexive use of prose commentary in *La Vita Nuova* and the *Convivio*.

In these last two works by Dante the hermeneutic stability of prose provides a means of counteracting the indeterminacy of poetic language and closing down the distance between fiction and truth. In the *Convivio* Dante’s systematic verse by verse commentaries break down the *Canzone* under consideration into their constituent parts and spell out their precise meaning, in literal and allegorical terms.³⁷ There is nothing here of the mysterious opacity and sanctity granted to the image in the modern poetics of symbolism, no suggestion of a fragile ‘inexplicable meaning’ that defies translation, or an openness to the transformative potential of the reader’s subjective response, but rather a complex, precise, almost mathematical, correspondence between the literal and allegorical meaning of the poem, the text and its author’s intentions. As the poem is systematically decoded and explained, it is revealed to be a determinate and rational signifying structure, and the aspect of ‘fervour’ or inspiration within it is thus subordinated to the sphere of reason and responsibility. The *canzones* analysed are shown to be not merely expressions of an overpowering love, but the means of reflecting upon, articulating and exercising control over this love, and finally of translating it from an erotic into a spiritual and philosophical concern. As the allegorical exposition of ‘Voi che ’ntendendo il terzo ciel movete’ makes clear – the ‘new lady’, before whom thoughts of the former, terrestrial love ‘flee’, is Lady Philosophy – ‘Who wishes to see bliss, Let his eyes on this lady gaze’.³⁸ Dante’s act of self-commentary thus not only asserts authorial control over the meaning of his amorous poems, it subsumes them into the broader

³⁷ As Minnis notes, this is also part of a more general attempt to elevate vernacular poetics. In the *Convivio* Dante treats his own *canzone* ‘through techniques of exegesis which for generations had been reserved for the Latin *auctores*’, A. J. Minnis, *Translations of Authority in Medieval Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 3.

³⁸ *Convivio* Chapter II, p. 79.

moral and spiritual narrative of transcendence that is brought to fruition in the *Commedia*.

With the *Commedia* there are no such external systems of exposition, rather the process of commentary and hermeneutic control is actually played out within the poetic fiction itself, and this creates a more nuanced, but at times also more problematic relationship between the letter and spirit of the text. Dante builds the process of interpretation into the poem and dramatises its development through the Pilgrim's spiritual education, under the guidance of Virgil and Beatrice, and his deepening comprehension of the meaning of his vision. This is what Freccero refers to as the consummate allegorical 'process' of the *Commedia*— its movement, through the spiritual growth of the pilgrim, from 'the problematic and humanistic' to 'the certain and transcendent', 'from novelistic involvement to epic detachment'.³⁹ The figures of Virgil and Beatrice provide both the internal means of guiding and illustrating this process and a vital counterbalance to the potential ambiguity and seductiveness of poetry. They lead the pilgrim both literally and semantically through the complex, cryptic, sometimes deceptive, field of signs that constitutes his vision and provide a standard of interpretation against which the pilgrim's errors and progress as a reader of his vision can be measured.

This semiotic authority is immediately apparent in Virgil. In *Inferno*.1 he is recognised as 'maestro' and 'autore' (*Inf*.1.85). He provides a concise gloss of the pilgrim's predicament, which renders explicit the significance of the allegorical landscape in which he is stranded and outlines the 'altro viaggio' he must take (*Inf*.1.55-78). As an embodiment both of natural reason and of a responsible and transcendent poetics, Virgil helps the pilgrim to decipher the 'strange tongues' (3.25-6) of the *Inferno* in relation to the 'good of the intellect' (3.18) they lack. His presence counteracts the bleak, subversive play of voices that the *Inferno* sets in motion and preserves the pilgrim, perhaps even the poet, from their affective lure. With Beatrice the process of internal exegesis continues. She is not merely a guide, but the very medium of grace, the veil of truth, 'the lady who does not separate the lover from God' but reveals, through herself, the way towards Him.⁴⁰

³⁹ John Freccero, *The Poetics of Conversion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp. 25-6.

⁴⁰ Teodolinda Barolini, 'Dante and the Lyric Past', in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, ed. by Rachel Jacoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 19.

For all this, Virgil and Beatrice remain part of the ‘letter’ of the text they help to decipher. They are themselves poetic images who must be translated and transcended, once their vehicular function in the fiction is served. In Augustinian terms, they must not be valued ‘carnally’ as ends-in-themselves, but taken as signs that point toward a higher truth; and it is thus that they are both respectively left behind, as the Pilgrim progresses towards God. In *Paradiso*.31, at the culmination of the Pilgrim’s spiritual journey, Beatrice’s departure is not experienced as loss, but as divine necessity. Though the Pilgrim still cries out when he turns to find Beatrice gone (31.64), there is no sustained distress in her departure, for all that he loved in her is contained, in purer form, within the Eternal Light into which he finally gazes. This understanding is expressed in the final prayer he addresses to her, which stresses Beatrice’s redemptive role as spiritual guide – ‘It is you who have drawn me from bondage into liberty’ (*Paradise*.31.79-90) – rather than her status as the exalted source and object of his love.

The loss of Virgil, on the other hand, is not experienced in such smooth and conciliatory terms. Here, as elsewhere in *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*, the pilgrim is still in the process of ‘conversion’, still susceptible to moral lapses and worldly attachments, and the transition from letter to truth is consequently more hesitant, traumatic and fraught with tension. This is especially so in the *Inferno*, where the shades the poet encounters are themselves more opaque, seductive and confused, and the Pilgrim is, as Foster, writes, ‘still deeply disturbed by evil’.⁴¹ In the pilgrim’s encounters with such shades as Francesca de Rimini, Ulysses and Ugolino and even ultimately Virgil there is a dalliance of sorts with the seductive charms of the ‘letter’, a tension between fervour and responsibility, humanistic involvement and allegorical detachment. It is here that the dubious valency of poetic fiction is most apparent – its capacity to signify in both a carnal and a spiritual way, to point toward the Good but also, through its sensuous beauty and multiplicity, to detain and mislead the questing soul of the pilgrim, and perhaps also the reader and poet.

In *Inferno*.5, for instance, the Pilgrim is sympathetically drawn to and becomes caught up in the ill-fated passions of Francesca and Paolo de Rimini and their state of torment in the ‘bufera infernal’ of the lustful (5.31). He is overwhelmed with pity and grief for their plight, and this powerful affective response mirrors the

⁴¹ Kenelm Foster, *The Two Dantes and other Studies* (London: Darton, 1977), p. 19.

surrender of the reason to desire for which they, and their companions in the fifth circle are damned. Rather than interpreting their story in responsible, allegorical terms as a warning against the passions it describes, the pilgrim, and arguably here the poet, is lured in by its poetic intensity and human pathos. As Francesca and Paolo themselves found in reading together the story of Guinevere and Lancelot, poetic fiction becomes a dubious 'galeotto', a go-between, (5.137) an incitement to illicit desires. For it is not the foul lasciviousness of lust which is focused upon here, but the poignant, aestheticised plight of the lover, conveyed through the delicate beauty of Dante's poetry.

Though the storm is full of 'lamentation' (5.35), Paolo and Francesca seem 'so light upon the wind' (5.75) and there is a note of elegance in the imagery of the souls swept along like cranes 'chanting their lays' (5.47, 82) or returning like doves 'with wings raised and steady to the sweet nest' (5.82). Francesca speaks in the dulcet terms of *fin amor* and beyond her narrative (which itself breaks off at the moment where the mediated sensuality of language and fiction yields to sensuality itself) no moral commentary is submitted, no explication offered other than Dante's poignant and wondering lament 'how many sweet thoughts, what great desire, brought them to the woeful pass!' (5.112-4). The line is only slightly more moralistic in implication than the Wife of Bath's own 'Allas, allas that ever love was sinne!'

Thus, Dante expresses the full human pathos and ambiguity of the scene, and explores his own artistic attraction to it. He gives rein to the sensual force of the 'letter', of poetic fiction itself, but at the same time there is also a crucial movement of dissociation. For it is precisely here, where the seductiveness of the letter is most pronounced, that Dante begins to restore a sense of responsibility and hermeneutic control, which transcends his pilgrim's affective response, and points to a corrective way of reading this encounter, to the truth behind the beautiful veil. This re-assertion of order is signalled paradoxically by the collapse of the narrator's perspective, and the cautionary moral it conveys. The canto ends, or rather breaks off, with the pilgrim fainting under the weight of emotion, 'as if in death' (5.141-2). His deathly collapse is the culmination of the process of irresponsible self-abandonment which has run throughout *Inferno*.5, and hints towards the spiritual death that is the ultimate consequence of this subjection of reason to emotion and desire.

Like the lovers he laments with, the pilgrim is shown to have been drawn into a spiritually fruitless mode of 'carnal' reading. He has become absorbed with the

letter of the text (and the desire that haunts it) not as sign of truth but as a beautiful, sensuous, enigmatic and ultimately deathly fragment, a thing-in-itself. Foster and Freccero have argued that in such moments the poet and the pilgrim stand clearly apart – the former portraying with moral detachment and didactic intent, the errors and lapses of his fictive persona.⁴² But I would argue for a more equivocal and dynamic relationship between Poet and Pilgrim here. By *dramatising* the Pilgrim's dangerous drift into a carnal perspective, Dante both explores and acknowledges this tendency in himself, but at the same time is able to control, critique and rise above it. *Inferno.5's* flirtation with the seductiveness and ambiguity of the letter is thus reprocessed as a cautionary moral narrative which can be re-assimilated into the poem's allegorical movement. Curiously the act of flirtation is thus preserved, given meaning and even covertly licensed in the very process through which it is chastened and transcended. The play of the letter is conveniently explored and then reined back in to serve the allegory of the *Commedia*.

A similar pattern of license and restraint repeats itself in the encounter with Ulysses in *Inferno.26*, though arguably here the dalliance with the letter is less easily re-assimilated into the allegorical 'process' of the poem. There is sadly not space here for a full exploration of this scene, but as in the story of Francesca, there is a perilous movement of identification with the ancient flame, a dalliance with the 'letter' as deathly unredeemed 'fragment'. Ulysses is condemned to the eighth *bolgia* with the 'false counsellors', but his tale concerns, another, more profound and ambiguous form of transgression. His sin is the desire to know at all costs, to test himself against the world (26.98-9,115). The bleak narrative of his final 'mad flight' (26.125) expresses a tragic courage and pathos, which cannot entirely be subsumed into allegory. There is something in the boldness, the inscrutability, and remoteness of this primordial figure of European poetry which captivates both the pilgrim and the poet and resists assimilation to any neat moral or metaphysical 'sentence'. He seems as much guarded as tormented by the veil of his flame, and somehow even remote from the eternal judgment which binds him— indifferent or perhaps oblivious to damnation. As such, Ulysses remains within the *Commedia*, but only as fragment. He represents a significant moment of difference in the unfolding allegorical narrative, wherein

⁴² Foster, *The Two Dantes, and Other Studies*, p. 19; Freccero, *The Poetics of Conversion*, p. 25.

fervour and responsibility, letter and spirit, exist in a state of creative and unresolved tension.

But if the alluring figure of Ulysses cannot entirely be assimilated into the allegorical order of the *Commedia*, Dante makes sure, nonetheless, to maintain a safe sense of distance and hermeneutic control. Thus the encounter is prefaced with the cautionary lesson that Dante draws from it – to ‘curb [his] genius [...] lest it run where virtue does not guide it’ (26.19-24) – and in the pilgrim’s initial request to his guide for permission to speak with Ulysses (26.67), there is an innate acceptance of Virgil’s (and beyond him, God’s) jurisdiction, which contrasts with Ulysses’ own wilful transgression of divinely sanctioned limits. Akin to Homer’s Odysseus, Dante takes care to bind himself to the mast, before he harkens to the Sirens’ call. Through Ulysses he gives a powerful hearing to poetic fervour and the ambiguity of the letter, but one that is still ultimately circumscribed by the responsible poetics of allegory.

Perhaps the clearest example of Dante’s strategy of both licensing the play of the letter and subordinating it to allegorical purpose is the scene of Virgil’s departure in *Purgatorio*.³⁰ In the garden of earthly delight, the Pilgrim again hesitates and is drawn back to a figure he must transcend. As he glimpses Beatrice for the first time he turns confidently back to Virgil, with a line of the *Aeneid* on his lips, only to discover his absence. The difficulty always implicit in Virgil’s exclusion from redemption is heightened by the sudden revelation of his departure. Here there is no assured and timely farewell as in *Paradiso*.³¹ but only a sense of trauma, interruption, bereavement. The Pilgrim stands ‘bereft’ (30.50) and ‘nor did all that our ancient mother lost keep my dew-washed cheeks from turning dark again with tears’ (30.52-54). He falls back into a moment of grief and distraction, the transgressive quality of which is underlined by the evocation of original sin in its portrayal, and the allusion to the infernal dust and tears that were washed from his cheek in his baptism in *Purgatorio*.¹

Allegorically speaking, Virgil has served his function and the pilgrim’s grief represents a familiar moment of hesitancy, a carnal attachment to the ‘letter’ not as a means to God, but a humanistic end-in-itself. But, here again, it is not simply the case that the poet is disinterestedly portraying the error of the Pilgrim; he is also expressing his own complex attachment to Virgil and the tension in his thought regarding the fate of the Virtuous Pagans. There is throughout the *Commedia* a deep sympathy and respect for Virgil and a subtle discomfiture concerning his fate. But to dwell too long

in this tension, to let the pathos of his departure gather the force of a question, would be to risk implicitly questioning Divine Providence. Such doubts must be relinquished to faith.

Dante thus gives to his own hesitancy a dramatic and allegorical form that simultaneously expresses it and moves beyond it. He projects his own ambivalence onto the erring pilgrim and then chastens and disavows it through Beatrice's rebuke – 'Dante, because Virgil leaves you, do not weep yet, do not weep yet, for you must weep for another sword!' (30.55-57) The force of her reprimand and the profound guilt and contrition which it induces (30.75-8) redirects the pilgrim towards the question of his own salvation and reasserts the divine order which had been momentarily problematised by Virgil's loss. For in the intensity of the pilgrim's guilt – which is expanded in Beatrice's continuing indictment to include not only this latest transgression, but all previous distractions which kept him from 'passing onward' toward the ultimate Good (31.25-63) – his previous, misplaced grief is forgotten. In the process Virgil is transcended, the questions surrounding his departure sidelined and the attachment Dante feels towards him becomes itself a part and prelude of the more pressing drama of penitence and self-overcoming that subsequently unfolds. Dante thus transforms his own equivocal attachment to Virgil and the letter of the text into a useful allegorical device, a symbol of human frailty transcended by grace. His grief and hesitancy is voiced and preserved, but here in the image of its own overcoming.

In these three illustrations we see Dante's essential strategy of dealing with the tensions implicit in poetic allegory. He explores the lure of the letter but never loses sight of the truth it serves, gives rein to ambiguous voices and then re-imposes hermeneutic order, dramatises the tensions and carnal tendencies within his own poetics, but in doing so makes them a part of the unfolding 'process' of allegory. In this way he is able to justify poetry as a discourse capable of expressing the most profound truths of Christianity, whilst still exploring the full complexity of human reality and avoiding the restrictiveness of Christian didacticism. Dante's subtle handling of allegory in the *Commedia* thus represents a crucial evolutionary step in the development, justification, and expansion of creative literature. It is this formidable and auspicious literary accomplishment which Chaucer contemplates and attempts to follow in *HF*. In this poem, Chaucer adopts and explores the same underlying tensions in poetic allegory between the letter and the truth it serves. Like

Dante, he uses allegory to craft a vernacular poetics capable of engaging with the most profound questions and truths of Christian culture, but also flexible enough to explore the tensions and complexities of human experience and language. But Chaucer, I will argue, does not maintain the same careful balance observed in Dante. In his hands, the letter slips increasingly away from the truth it supposedly serves and allegory becomes more open, equivocal, and fragmentary: the overall sentence of *HF*, and with it the value of poetic enterprise itself, remains fascinatingly open to question. It is this relationship between Dante and Chaucer's use of allegory which is central to my discussion of *HF* in the following sections. I proceed by contextualising these issues in relation to existing criticism of the poem and then move on to provide my own reading.

II. Searching for 'sentence' in *The House of Fame*

HF, like the *Commedia*, is a visionary poem, of tremendous cultural scope and philosophical ambition, which takes the poet on a journey to the heavens, through a richly conceived allegorical landscape that promises some redeeming 'sentence'. It is teeming with strange images, 'curiouse portreytures', 'queynte maner of figures' (II.125-6) allegorical personae, 'diverse lingue', (*Inferno*.3.5) 'old jests' and crowds of human shades, all of which seem to have some 'sentence' to impart, a message that requires decoding. But the allegorical 'process' that in the *Commedia* translated, ordered, made use of and ultimately moved beyond this vast and teeming world of poetic fictions is in Chaucer's poem far less secure. The 'dottrina' behind the 'versi strani' (*Inferno*.9.61-3) of *HF* remains opaque, undisclosed, incomplete. The poem is rather more like an allegory under construction, which dramatises its own equivocal search for meaning and the difficulty of moving from the ambiguity of the letter to the certainty of truth. Chaucer seems at once to follow the transcendent trajectory found in the *Commedia* and yet also to resist and frustrate it.

The poem's pre-occupation with the question of its own 'sentence' becomes immediately apparent in the narrator's opening discussion of the meaning of dreams, and his ominous warning to the reader about misinterpretation. He threatens those readers who 'mysdeme' his vision with the grim fate of Cresus 'that high upon a gebet dyde' (I.97, I.106) but at the same time confesses, himself, to being uncertain of

its cause and meaning. He can only say that it is the most ‘wonderful’ and ‘sely an avision’ that any dreamer yet has ‘mette’ (I.62, II.513-517) and his preceding discussion of the origin of dreams, only compounds the uncertainty (I.1-11). As his assiduous enumeration of categories and possible causes goes to show, dreams can promise prophetic, even divine, truth and yet they can just as well be meaningless ‘fantomes’ (I.11) engendered by a range of arbitrary, physiological, subjective, or supernatural factors. They hover undecidedly between the possibilities of truth and illusion, divine purpose and material contingency, and the narrator leaves his own vision suspended precariously between these poles.

Even the narrator’s cautionary address to the reader is itself difficult to interpret. It seems to be an attempt to guard against misreadings, to exorcise hermeneutic control over the letter of text and yet, it offers little in the way of actual interpretive guidance. In its wildly dichotomous and exaggerated terms, it is shot through with Chaucerian irony and ultimately only serves to further exacerbate the problems of interpretation which it ostensibly seeks to foreclose. Is Chaucer speaking here in game or earnest? In the narrator’s blessing of those who ‘take [his vision] wel and scorne hyt noght’ (I.91) is there a subtle gesture toward the allegorical truth behind the veil, or is this simply another guise of the suggestive play of the letter, revelling in its own convolution? Once again, *HF* remains drawn between these possibilities – between the fascinating but fragmentary play of the letter and the redeeming allegorical image, ‘fals and sooth’, ‘fantome’ and ‘revelacioun’ (III.2108 and I.8).

Generations of critics have attempted to follow the narrator’s advice, to ‘take hyt well’ and sought in the poem some sense of unifying order, meaning, intention, a ‘dottrina’ of some form from behind the ‘beautiful falsehood’. What has inevitably emerged from this critical endeavour is not some final, unanimous ‘sentence’, but precisely the kind of proliferation of meanings which the narrator’s warning both anticipated and sought to foreclose. What emerges is more ‘tidings’, rumours and interpretations – more signs to be interpreted in the inescapable and ever-expanding play of language which *HF* speaks of and to which it belongs. I consider some of the most influential of these readings here as a way of contextualising my own analysis, and also of illustrating the problematic valency of the letter which the poem explores.

In response to early charges of its incoherence, both Kittredge and the Dutch scholar Ten Brink stressed the formal and thematic unity of *HF*. Ten Brink read it as a

personal allegory for the poet's literary development (an idea which continues into later criticism) and Kittredge saw in it a humorous critique of the human passion for fame.⁴³ He described the central action of the poem as 'a transparent allegory of universal application', but for Kittredge the meaning of this allegory was broadly humanistic.⁴⁴ It was Koonce, writing in the 1960s, from the Robertsonian perspective, who provided a sustained and more systematic account of *HF* as Christian allegory, in line with the principles of exegesis noted above in Boccaccio and Dante.

Koonce explained the poem's 'air of deliberate obscurity' as a 'normal device of medieval allegory', intended to 'stimulate the mind' and cultivate a reverence for truth.⁴⁵ Beneath its 'intentional obscurity of surface detail' he discerned a 'unified vision' and a spiritual sentence which was no less clear, consistent and orthodox than Dante's. Indeed, for Koonce, the allegory of the *Commedia* provided the crucial formative and interpretive model for *HF*. Despite their apparent differences, when 'viewed allegorically' *HF* is also a visionary narrative that describes the pilgrim soul's spiritual reform in the course of a journey through the three realms of 'hell', 'purgatory' and 'paradise'.⁴⁶ Like Dante's pilgrim, Chaucer's narrator gradually becomes a more morally astute reader of his vision – more able to turn from the letter to the spirit, from an earthly to a spiritual understanding of both love and fame. Thus, for Koonce the temple of Venus and the narrator's carnal misreading of the *Aeneid* is analogous to Dante's identification with Francesca in Hell, the ascent to the heavens and vision of the fame's palace are conceived of as a purgatorial experience, and the 'glad tidings' that Chaucer's narrator approaches in the House of Rumour ultimately 'fulfil a prophetic content as profound and purposeful as that of the *Paradiso*'.⁴⁷

That *HF* broadly involves a critique of worldly fame is easily demonstrable, but Koonce's claim for a more comprehensive Christian allegory rests on more tenuous grounds. The poem primarily allegorises the human world of fame, language and culture and the hints of spiritual meaning found in images like Venus' Temple, the mountain of ice, fame's palace, the 'glad tidings' are too vague and disconnected

⁴³ Bernhard ten Brink, *Chaucer: Studien zur Geschichte seiner Entwicklung und zur Chronologie seiner Schriften* (Munster: Russel, 1870). For a recent summation and critique of his reading of *HF* and the broader narrative of Chaucer's artistic development he inaugurates see Schibanoff, *Chaucer's Queer Poetics*, pp. 5-14; Kittredge, *Chaucer and his Readers*, pp. 80-8.

⁴⁴ Kittredge, *Chaucer and his Poetry*, p. 88.

⁴⁵ Koonce, *Chaucer and the Tradition of Fame*, pp. 5-6.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

to shoulder the all-embracing anagogical perspective that Koonce attributes to them. Nor is there convincing evidence for the spiritual transformation of the narrator's perspective which Koonce describes or the transcendent movement from confusion to clarity and truth. The House of Rumour, far from being a mirror of *Paradiso*, only opens up a deeper and ultimately unresolved level of human confusion and semiotic indeterminacy. What Koonce uncovers, I would argue, is not a unified allegorical 'sentence', but rather the furtive hints and fragments of a transcendent, Dantescan order, which the poem both gestures towards and resists.

Critics of a humanist and formalist disposition were more inclined to follow ten Brink and describe the poem's sentence in terms of a broader narrative of artistic development. Muscatine saw *HF* as an early, imperfect expression of the poet's ongoing attempt to synthesise courtly and bourgeois stylistic conventions,⁴⁸ whilst Bennett viewed it more positively as work of great accomplishment. 'The whole work', Bennett writes, 'is a 'vindication of poetry', which in its presentation of the poets as 'sole preserver's of men's fame anticipates Ariosto [...] and indeed rivals Petrarch.'⁴⁹ This sense of *HF* as an early work of Renaissance culture, a confident and self-reflexive exploration of the role of the poet, and a personal negotiation with literary tradition continues strongly in later criticism. Winny, for example, describes *HF* as a psychological allegory for the creative development of the poet and his discovery of his true subject matter. Fame's palace, in which the narrator shows little interest, represents the staid world of 'courtly formality', whilst the house of rumour, with its vibrant 'mass of impressions' and ordinary speech, represents the 'workings of creative imagination' and the raw material of his art.⁵⁰ Spearing reads *HF* similarly as an exploration of the nature of poetry, but in the broader context of Chaucer's engagement with early Renaissance culture and the elevated and expansive conceptions of literature fostered by the Italian trecento poets. He sees, throughout the poem, Chaucer negotiating a transition between medieval and renaissance ideas of poetry and notes a degree of unease in this negotiation, specifically in Chaucer's appropriation of Dantescan tropes and prophetic aspirations, of which I will say more

⁴⁸ Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition*, pp. 101-114.

⁴⁹ Bennet, *Chaucer's Book of Fame*, p. 12.

⁵⁰ James Winny, *Chaucer's Dream Poems*, pp. 104-105.

in my own analysis.⁵¹ Like Muscatine he is inclined to see *HF* as a work-in-progress, the working out of an as yet unsettled relationship with his Italian sources.

In contrast to Spearing, Boitani sees Chaucer as dealing more self-assuredly with his sources to realise a profoundly original and ‘imaginatively unified’ vision.⁵² Chaucer, he argues, draws eclectically upon the rich traditions of representing fame found in classical, medieval, and proto-renaissance culture to explore the nature of language, art and reality itself, and construct his own ‘imaginary world and mythology’.⁵³ It is in his willingness to play various aspects of the tradition against each other that the originality of *HF* lies. Its author is described as a ‘Daedalus figure’ who ‘countrefeteth kynde’ by writing a poem which is a maze where signs are lost and confused’.⁵⁴ The significance of the poem thus becomes, for Boitani, its questing, indefinite, exploratory nature, its irreducibility to any ‘sentence’ – and the power of art to sustain ‘so wonderful dreem’ (I.62.) In the terms of the previous section, he sees Chaucer purposefully stepping away from the resolving hermeneutic force of allegory and embracing the creative ambiguity of the letter. My own reading of *HF* is closely connected to this view, but aims to bring to it a sense of the dangers and costs that come with the exploratory approach that Chaucer adopts and the tension that informs his relation to literary authority. If Chaucer is indeed a second Daedalus, one must ask is he content to lose himself in the maze of art, or does he also attempt to fashion for himself some wings?

Criticism of *HF* has also been shaped by literary theory. Interpretive models drawn from marxist, feminist, psychoanalytical and post-structuralist theory have also been applied to the poem and in the process new forms of ‘sentence’, new underlying structures of meaning, have been found or posited beneath its suggestive ‘letter’. A broadly marxist interpretation was provided by Knight, who read *HF* as the first full expression of Chaucer’s ‘historical imagination’, and his reflection upon the changing socio-economic realities of late fourteenth-century England.⁵⁵ For Knight *HF* represents the decisive moment when the poet breaks from ‘the contentedly aristocratic ideology of *The Book of the Duchess*’ and realises his own social vision.⁵⁶ In his dream the narrator rejects the courtly world of feudal aristocracy, as embodied

⁵¹ Spearing, *Medieval to Renaissance in English Poetry*, p. 23.

⁵² Boitani, *Chaucer and the Imaginary World of Fame*, p. 164.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 161.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 216.

⁵⁵ Knight, *Geoffrey Chaucer*, p. 20.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

in the false grandeur of the House of Fame and its arbitrary rulings, in favour of the bustling House of Rumour – ‘the world of medieval productivity, of peasants and artisans and merchants, with all its contemporary complexity and inherent threat to the feudal world’.⁵⁷ In these terms, Knight projects upon the poem a purposeful socio-historical narrative which explains and resolves the openness and ambiguity of the text. *HF* remains an allegory, but now a political allegory, whose unified ‘sentence’ is (behind the protective veil of dream) one of urgent historical import and a herald of the radical poetics that Chaucer brings to fruition in *CT*.

In its day Knight’s was a legitimate polemic response to the domination of more formalistic and conservative modes of literary criticism, but this polemic purpose led him to make some significant exclusions and reductions of his own, which ultimately compromise the plausibility of his reading. He reads, in the mode of the allegorist, as though the poet’s multifarious veil of images yields smoothly to an underlying and unitary socio-historical ‘sentence’ which his analysis makes explicit. But in its ‘inextricable conundrum of images’ *HF*⁵⁸ exhibits much less of a conscious social vision and purpose than Knight ascribes to it. He relies, for example, on the conflation of the poem’s multifaceted treatment of fame with a singular political and practical concept of ‘honour as social force’,⁵⁹ but whilst the image of the arbitrary governance of Fama in her opulent abode may have some interesting political implications, it is a long way from being a ‘searching attack’ on the operations of feudal society and ideology.⁶⁰ Similarly, the House of Rumour, whilst politically resonant, is not so straightforwardly a ‘marketplace’ or site of new productive social forces. It is more like an anarchic engine room of ‘tydinges’, its inhabitants speakers and listeners, not labourers as such. One finds there ‘shipmen, pilgrims, and pardoners’ – anyone with a message or story – but never directly do we see the merchants and peasants that Knight envisages. Indeed, it seems to function in symbiosis with the House of Fame and its anarchic rulings, rather than to subvert it. Ultimately, like Koonce before him, Knight is guilty of conflating a part of the poem with its whole – taking a suggestive hint of order for a fully realised ‘sentence’ that reflects his own perspective as much as the poet’s.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 22.

⁵⁸ Boitani, *Chaucer and the Imaginary World of Fame*, p. 161.

⁵⁹ Knight, *Geoffrey Chaucer*, p.16.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 21.

In Hansen's feminist reading of *HF*, gender replaces history as the primary concern and source of meaning in the poem, the 'sentence' behind the elusive veil. Where for Knight the poet is a historical agent, for Hansen the 'development of the poetic self, of subjectivity itself [...] both constructs and depends upon the gender system as we know it' and *HF* gains it meaning and direction, as an expression of this system.⁶¹ Responding to a trend in Chaucer criticism and feminist readings which has tended to view Chaucer's gender politics as fairly progressive, Hansen rejects the notion of Chaucer as 'evir all womanis frend'. Chaucer, she argues, explores and deploys certain archetypes of female passivity ultimately so as to affirm his own masculine identity: 'he lays claim through the very act of sympathetically representing a woman to the authority of his own imagination and discourse'.⁶² His 'good women' become means to depict and explore his own 'feminised' position as a writer subordinate to the masculine power of literary authority and the court, to self-consciously adopt and dramatise the stance of the dominated so as to overcome it.

Hansen's analysis of *HF* thus gives primary significance to the Dido episode, and views the rest of the poem in relation to it. The narrator initially is identifiable with Dido. They share a similar sense of disempowerment before male authority and language itself, 'neither can trust words, nor the appearances they create, though both are eager to do so'. It is precisely this 'rhetorical innocence' on Dido's part which leads to her demise.⁶³ But it is at this troubling point of identity, of potential gender confusion, that the fiction of an essentialising gender difference is re-asserted. 'We wreched *wymmen* konne noon art' (I.335): the very words of helplessness Dido speaks in her lament re-assert this difference and lay the grounds for the poet's escape. For in the performance of his subordination and femininity he paradoxically asserts his masculine right 'to play the game of language with other men', to exploit its ambiguities rather than to remain passively subject to them as Dido is.⁶⁴ At the same moment as he identifies with Dido, Chaucer is making his own intervention in a tradition of competing male writers who hold her name and fame in hand, exploiting the epistemological ambiguity she lamented and the conflicting accounts of other male interpreters, to stake his own self-empowering claim to authority and to join the fraternity of writers he finds in Fame's Palace.

⁶¹ Elaine Hansen, *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender*, p. 92.

⁶² Hansen, *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender*, p. 106.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

It is thus the inaugural sacrifice of Dido and femininity that allows ‘the male poet’s dream of enabling and story-worthy discourse’ to continue, the dream which leads to the House of Rumour and thence to Canterbury.⁶⁵ For all his sympathy with Dido, Chaucer becomes another Aeneas, leaving her in the course of his epic journey. On one level Hansen is right: Chaucer is using this narrative, rehearsing and misreading tradition, so as to stake his claim to a literary authority which remains, at this point in history, the privilege of a certain class of men; but his approach entails more than simply using Dido to bolster his own masculine identity and get beyond her. As Koonce explains, the story of Aeneas leaving Dido was commonly glossed in medieval commentaries as an allegory for the responsible soul’s movement beyond the lure of the sensual. From this perspective Dido becomes a potent symbol of cupidity and unconstrained passion, of all that holds the soul back from its moral and spiritual journey of ascent.⁶⁶ But it is interesting to see that in his handling of the scene Chaucer resists the reductive and misogynistic implications of this redaction and is eager to give Dido a voice.

Chaucer begins and ends with Virgil’s epic narrative – to ‘synge, yif I kan, | The armes and the man’ (I.143) – as he finds it portrayed in immutable brass tablatore on the walls of the Temple of Glass. But in his rendition of the Dido episode he swerves considerably from Virgil and is more indebted to Ovid’s elegiac revision of the narrative in *Heroides* as a story not of ethical responsibility recollected, but of romantic love betrayed. There is also a hint of Dante’s influence in the way Chaucer moves from the silent and immobile ‘table of bras’ to the animate presence of Dido as a living, speaking figure – rendering her story from her own perspective. Chaucer’s Dido speaks like Francesca and Ulysses from within a narrative and allegorical frame she cannot fully grasp, she encounters the ‘alteri’ will of Virgilian epic, like Ulysses does the wind that topples his ship, but its necessity, its ‘sentence’, Aeneas’ ethical motivation, all remain unknown. All she can do is interpret the narrative in which she is caught from her own point-of-view. From this perspective Aeneas is not the epic hero, but the unfaithful lover, not a figure for the responsible soul in search of truth, but a representative of the falsity and fickleness of male romantic affection – ‘O, have ye men such godlyhede | in speche, and never a del of trouthe?’ (I.330-1).

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 96.

⁶⁶ Koonce, *Chaucer and the Tradition of Fame*, pp. 109-21.

The traditional medieval allegorisation of the scene is ironically inverted; it is here Dido who remains faithful and constant, and epic narrative is awkwardly reprocessed as tragic romance. Dido's reading of the situation, of course, involves its own limitations and the reader is encouraged to suspect it. There is something almost comic in the reduction of the high epic-motive of Aeneas' departure to the base pursuit of another woman, for sake of 'fame', 'friendshippe' or 'delyt' (I.305-10) –a deflation which is also conveyed, as Clement notes, in the mixed style and tone of the passage.⁶⁷ But, nonetheless, by positing this personal, fragmentary, elegiac perspective in the midst of the Virgilian 'table of brss' (I.142) Chaucer problematises both epic narrative and those conventional allegorical readings, which made of Dido another alluring obstacle and an image of lust and emotion to be overcome.

Far from being objectified as a figure of feminine passivity and straightforwardly moved beyond in a masculine narrative of poetic self-empowerment, Dido here becomes a spanner in the works of classical epic and medieval allegory– a deathly fragment. She anticipates the kind of self-reflexive female voice that emerges more powerfully in *Criseyde* and the *Wife of Bath*, and like those later characters, she is given the crucial power to interpret, to read and misread, to allegorise experience on her own terms and in ways that problematise and pluralise the dominant modes of interpretation in which she is caught. Her helplessness to prevent her appropriation into the cycle of fame and rumour, reading and misreading, may, as Hansen suggests, have gender implications, but it is ultimately no more avoidable than it is for Chaucer, his narrator, or anyone else, man or woman, whose name becomes a commodity in the houses of fame and rumour. In this respect the problem of interpretation explored in Book I is not reducible to an underlying issue of gender politics. As with Knight, I am suspicious of the totalising tendency in Hansen's approach, the tendency to assimilate the text into a predetermined and self-consciously selective theoretical framework.

This same problem emerges in Schibanoff's reading of *HF*, which finds there a queer poetics repressed by the traditional narratives of Chaucer's progress from French courtly models to his own 'virile', 'natural' decidedly English voice.⁶⁸ Schibanoff posits that Chaucer's main objective in *HF* is to inaugurate a vernacular poetics like Dante's, but instead of being liberated by engagement with the normative

⁶⁷ Wolfgang Clemen, *Chaucer's Early Poetry*, p. 82.

⁶⁸ Schibanoff, *Chaucer's Queer Poetics*, pp. 1-5.

and authoritative force of Dante's verse as traditional criticism has it, Chaucer is 'engulfed by the sexual poetics of the vernacular'. He follows Dante in adopting a 'hermaphrodite poetics' – responding to the challenge of 'writing the vernacular' by self-consciously playing the role of Ganymede.⁶⁹ Schibanoff's case is intriguing, but rather than demonstrating an underlying queer dynamic in the poem it demonstrates the power of criticism to effectively allegorise a literary text in accordance with its own predilections. Chaucer's narrator does associate himself with Ganymede, and there are queer resonances here that can be explored, but in the same verse the narrator also associates himself with Enoch, Elija and Romulus (I.588) and the narrative soon moves on to other concerns. Schibanoff takes this single queer association and extrapolates from it a unifying interpretation of the poem.

Knight's, Hansen's and Schibanoff's readings illustrate precisely what Chaucer's narrator feared in the Proem – the inevitable process of creative misconstrual that comes with the interpretation of such an open-ended and ambiguous dream-vision. They also illustrate that the tendency to allegorise, to subordinate the suggestive letter of the text to the logic of a predetermined 'sentence', does not only belong to the medieval cleric and more traditional modes of criticism. *HF*, it seems, both encourages and frustrates these unifying gestures of allegorisation, it presents signs of order only, as Boitani suggests, to lose them in its own labyrinthine structure and holds open conflicting interpretive possibilities without choosing between them.⁷⁰

This sense of *HF* as a poem of 'purposeful obscurity' that self-consciously problematises the attribution of a definitive 'sentence' has been taken up in readings of a sceptical or post-structuralist character. Delany, for instance, interprets *HF* as a work of 'sceptical fideism', 'which poses the problem of choice among conflicting traditions and shows such choice to be impossible and unnecessary'.⁷¹ Contradictory authorities are repeatedly drawn together without being synthesised and resolved. Instead a leap is made from this irresolvable domain of rational enquiry to the certainties of faith and revelation, which provides the 'sentence' and structuring principle of the poem. In this manner Delany is convincingly able to describe *HF* as embodying a radical epistemological scepticism whilst remaining within the structuralist Christian episteme of its day.

⁶⁹ Ibid., pp. 149-57.

⁷⁰ Boitani, *Chaucer and the Imaginary World of Fame*, p. 216.

⁷¹ Delany, *Chaucer's House of Fame*, pp. 112-13.

Other critics have been keen to take the sceptical and deconstructive implications of the poem further. Jordan, for instance, responds to the issue of the poem's interpretative difficulty by arguing that *HF* has no 'sentence', no inner meaning at all. In the terms of the hermeneutics of allegory, it is all letter and no truth, all 'dazzling surface' and in these terms, Jordan likens it to the self-reflexive fictions of post-modernism.⁷² *HF* becomes a poem of self-conscious rhetorical play and illusion, with 'no ulterior meaning other than its own design, its delight in artifice'.⁷³ Jordan views *HF* and postmodern fiction together as formalistic enterprises that playfully undermine received truths. But even if this spirit of scepticism and aesthetic autonomy is apparent in certain postmodern fictions, it cannot be unproblematically attributed to *HF*, a poem immersed in the values of late medieval thought and culture. As argued in the Introduction, the modern notion of creative literature as an authoritative discourse, let alone a self-sufficient and self-justifying activity, was only just beginning to emerge in the late Middle Ages, and tentatively so. In *HF* Chaucer may indeed be pushing at the bounds of the allegorical model of poetics, testing the limits and possibilities of poetic fiction as a mode of enquiring into reality without a fixed 'sentence' or an instrumental purpose. But this alternative poetics is still very much under construction and beholden to the prevalent models of literature and literary value as vehicle-of-truth discussed above. It is not a category which can be comfortably inhabited and spoken from with the kind of postmodern aplomb that Jordan ascribes to Chaucer. Truth, authority, allegory, instrumentality, may all be problematised in *HF*, but they cannot entirely be given up.

Fyler similarly stresses the sense of new literary potential in Chaucer's equivocal relation to language and truth, but does so in a more balanced way. For Fyler *HF* remains a poem of 'pervasive scepticism', but one which developed in response to Dante's more hopeful model of a redeeming and transcendent poetics.⁷⁴ Where Dante laboured to overcome language's fallen nature, to recover its pre-Babylonian clarity and return it to its divine source, Chaucer, in *HF*, explores and remains decidedly within the domain of fallen language subject to its unstable, arbitrary, multifarious and entropic nature.⁷⁵ Rather than turning from the chaotic world it portrays toward metaphysical 'realities beyond language and fiction', *HF*

⁷² Jordan, *Chaucer's Poetics and the Modern Reader*, p. 48.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

⁷⁴ Fyler, *Language and the Declining World*, pp. 101, 154.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

‘celebrates, in a backhanded way, the generative powers of fallen language itself, the cacophony that perpetually underlies and undermines human efforts to impose unity, clarity, and order on the evanescent words of human memory and art’.⁷⁶ The picture is similar to that of *HF* which Fyler presented in *Ovid and Chaucer* where ‘we are left with an awareness of impermanence – but also the vitality, comic exuberance and poignant beauty of things’.⁷⁷ Fyler is right, I think, to see both of these elements at play in the poem – both a spirit of concern and comic celebration. In my own reading I lay more emphasis on the problems and anxieties that come with this affirmation of human life, language and art in their fallen, indeterminate state.

It is precisely by exploring the unstable nature of human language, the problematic valency of the allegorical letter, that Chaucer is able to find his own poetic voice, to both follow and swerve away from Dante’s authoritative model and avoid becoming merely a pale imitation. He finds amidst the disturbing anarchy of the house of rumour, no celestial vision or final ‘sentence’, but the profligate chattering of ‘shipmen, pardoners, pilgrims’: the potential for the more open, explorative poetics that comes to fruition in *CT*. But this is not an entirely self-assured and unproblematic discovery. That which frees Chaucer from the formidable shadow of Dante and inaugurates his own poetics also exposes him to the indeterminacy of human language, throws the possibility of attaining truth through poetry into question, and fuels the bad conscience which finally leads him to dismiss *HF* along with his other ‘translacions and enditynges of worldly vanitees’ in his *Retraction* (X.1085). In the following reading of the poem I chart both the ways in which Chaucer purposefully misreads and playfully parodies the *Commedia* in the bid to create something new, and the countermovement towards preservation and emulation of Dante’s allegorical poetics, the earnest pursuit of some redeeming ‘sentence’ in the poem’s ‘inextricable conundrum of images’.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 154.

⁷⁷ John Fyler, *Chaucer and Ovid* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 64.

⁷⁸ Boitani, *Chaucer and the Imaginary World of Fame*, p. 161.

III. The Equivocal Allegory of *The House of Fame*

Chaucer's equivocal relation to Dante and the transcendent mode of poetics he represents is already apparent in his engagement with the *Aeneid* in Book 1. Like Dante's *Commedia*, Chaucer's vision begins with a portending encounter with Virgil. Though it may be presented as such, the choice of Virgil in both narratives is not accidental. For the increasingly ambitious and self-conscious mode of literary culture that Dante and Chaucer were pioneering, Virgil was the model of classical literary accomplishment and virtue, par excellence. In the elegance, intellectual scope and national character of his *Aeneid*, there was much that both Dante and Chaucer were aspiring to reproduce on their own terms in the vernacular. In this respect the engagement with Virgil for both poets already involves a certain anxiety of influence: Virgil is a sign of the great potential of literary discourse, a 'guide' to be respected and followed, but he is also a marker of the distance to be travelled, a classical 'auctor' whose greatness and ancientness render him formidable and remote.

Dante responds to this predicament by imagining and constructing Virgil as an actual, living presence, dramatising, in an idealised form, his own relationship to him as a fatherly guide – 'mio maestro e'l mio autore' (*Inferno*.1.85) - who comes to the poet in his hour of need. By taking this approach Dante is adopting what Spearing characterised as a renaissance attitude toward classical culture, whereby historical distance is overcome by imaginative association and the *auctors* of antiquity are seen not as towering, unattainable cultural monuments, but as kindred spirits in a timeless cultural fraternity, who could be admired, talked with, emulated and even surpassed.⁷⁹ Chaucer, on the other hand, adopts a more distanced, 'medieval' relation to his classical *auctor*. In place of Virgil's living presence we have the more mediate relation to a book, a site, an elaborate and awe-inspiring edifice. We have the *Aeneid* itself, reprocessed in the poet's imagination as a majestic, yet eerily vacant 'temple of glass' of unknown origin and uncertain 'sentence'. Its author is conspicuously absent. This distinction between presence and absence is a crucial one and represents the first major swerve from the trajectory of Dante's poetics. As a living, authoritative presence Virgil helps Dante to correctly interpret the ambiguous signs and speeches that constitute his vision, to move from the letter to the spirit of his text. He provides a

⁷⁹ Spearing, *Medieval to Renaissance in English Poetry*, p. 15.

principle of hermeneutic control within the *Commedia* that counteracts the ambiguity of the letter. Chaucer, on the other hand, is left stranded in an elaborate, silent edifice of signs with no stable principle of interpretation –

Yet saugh I never such noblesse
Of ymages, ne such ricesse,
As I saugh graven in this chirce;
But not wot I whoo did hem wirche,
Ne where I am, ne in what contree

(I.471-75)

Along with the sense of wonder and admiration for the Virgilian epic materialised in this temple, it is the narrator's quizzicality and disorientation which are stressed. For all its 'noblesse' it leaves the narrator with questions and not answers, 'ymages' with no resolving sentence. Chaucer is not led by Virgil, but rather lost within the labyrinth, the 'selva oscura' (*Inferno*.1.2) of his masterpiece.

Dante evokes the living, speaking presence of Virgil to help secure meaning, but in the temple Chaucer's narrator finds only the signs that refer back to an author, an origin, a source of meaning that is no longer present. It is toward this speaking presence and the hope of explanation it offers that he reaches in his search for 'any stiryng man' in or outside of the temple (I.476-9). In lieu of such a presence the temple remains within the indeterminate field of textuality and the narrator is left himself to read and inevitably 'misdeem' the ambiguous images found therein: in the terms of Saussure's semiotics, to perpetuate the slippage of language away from an originary source of presence and meaning.⁸⁰

In these terms, the absence of Virgil as stable centre and source of meaning in Book 1 presents both a hermeneutic problem and a new opportunity. Whilst it raises troubling questions about the meaning and direction of Chaucer's vision, it also enables the poet to bring his own authorial voice into play within the authoritative structures of the Virgilian and Dantescan text, and, in doing so, take on the anxiety of influence he feels towards his formidable predecessors. It is precisely the absence of

⁸⁰ In Saussure's theory speech is the mode of language in which meaning and intention, sign and signified are most closely united – held together by the living presence of the speaker; writing is the domain of difference and dispersal. For further discussion see Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1974).

Virgil that liberates Chaucer to re-imagine the Dido episode, to bring speech and motion to the ‘tables of bras’ and problematise the epic trajectory of the *Aeneid* on no basis other than his own authority – ‘Non other auctour alegge I’ (I.314). It is through this same absence that he begins to mark his poem’s difference from Dante’s *Commedia*, and introduces its own central interest in the problems of language and interpretation, its more open-ended search for meaning.

But just as it creates the potential for new readings and texts to emerge, this initial absence of a guiding presence, a ‘man of gret auctorite’ (III.2158) remains a cause for concern and anxiety within *HF*. Indeed, Chaucer’s new writing grows from and is itself an expression of concern about the absence of meaning and presence. This logocentric impulse is already apparent in the narrative of Book 1. The dreamer is not content to dwell within the temple, fabricating his own readings within its rich tapestry of images, he reaches beyond it looking for answers, co-ordinates, origins, the living presence ‘that may me telle where I am’ (I.479). The search for meaning leads him outside of the Virgilian text and temple but there too he finds no Virgil, no ‘fount [...] of speech’ (*Inferno* I.79), ‘no maner creature | That is yformed by Nature [...] me to rede or wisse’ (I.489-91): in fact he finds nothing but a vast and empty desert – the same ‘gran desierto’ Dante had encountered in *Inferno*.¹ – an allegorical dead-end, which seems in Chaucer’s vision, to augure the death of signification itself.

With the realisation that the dreamer and the temple are marooned in this desert, the sense of dislocation, unease and interpretive anxiety that was already apparent in the temple crystallises into something more explicit. The temple’s silent, mineral beauty, now utterly isolated from organic life, takes on a perturbing deathly quality. In its sudden divorce from life-process and nature it becomes like one of Benjamin’s allegorical fragments – a ruin, a petrified image, severed from the redemptive, assimilative force of the Spirit. This fear and anxiety over the breakdown of allegorical meaning finds expression in the narrator’s prayer to be saved ‘fro fantome and illusion’ (I.493), that is, from dreams and images which bear no connection to truth or meaning.

Critics have suggested various readings of this scene, but there is a general consensus that it signals a moment of crisis and poetic impasse.⁸¹ The poem’s sense of

⁸¹ Koonce suggests it signifies the spiritual sterility of the narrator’s carnal reading of the *Aeneid*, *Chaucer and the Tradition of Fame*, p. 127, Delany that it represents a point of contradiction in human knowledge which can only be transcended by a fideistic leap, *Chaucer’s House of Fame*, p. 59 and

narrative progress, its teleological drive towards self-comprehension, is itself threatened by the blankness of the desert – which is not only empty of meaning and presence, but of potential for further signification that might at least gesture towards them. The severance of fiction from truth is here not as liberating as Jordan suggests; without the possibility of meaning – the preservation, however strained, of the dialectical relation between letter and truth – the poem risks breaking down altogether.

Aiming to escape this breakdown the narrator reaches, as Delany has argued, with a fideistic gesture of ‘devocion’ (I.494) towards God– the ultimate source of presence, meaning and guidance. His prayer is answered with the appearance of a new sign in the wilderness, a new promise of progress, life and meaning, in the form of a majestic golden eagle soaring in the sky above him like a second sun. This golden eagle that comes swooping down toward the narrator is borrowed directly from the pilgrim’s dream in *Purgatorio*.⁹ and signals the continuing play of difference and identity with Dante’s poem. Having swerved away from Dante and the logic of allegory in Book 1 only to be faced with an unresolvable crisis of interpretation, Chaucer returns here, at least temporarily, to the transcendent, celestial and allegorical trajectory of his predecessor’s vision.

Dante’s pilgrim, after all, had begun his journey in similar fashion with a sense of crisis and impasse; he needed Virgil to appear and show him the ‘altro viaggio’ toward poetic vision and redemption, and it seems that Chaucer may now have found his own Dantescan guide and way. This return to shadowing Dante’s narrative is mirrored on the level of form, with the subtle elevation of style that occurs around the end of Book 1. This is not simply limited to the more formal and complex rhetoric of the Invocation (though certainly here too Chaucer is echoing Dante and specifically elaborating upon *Inferno*.II.7-9 in his address to ‘Thought, that wrot al that I meete’ [I.523-28]): it is also apparent in the imagistic precision and complexity of the tropes with which he depicts the eagle. There is a distinctive Dantescan poise and limpidity in the following description:

Schibanoff that it registers the failure of the narrator’s first attempt at ‘writing the Vernacular’, *Chaucer’s Queer Poetics*, p. 157.

Hyt was of gold, and shon so bryghte
That never sawe men such a syghte,
But yf the heven had ywonne
Al newe of gold another sonne

(I.503-06)

It echoes, as far as English octosyllabics can, the precision and gravity of Dante's style and is a far cry from the more prosaic register that dominates in the earlier narrative rehearsal of the *Aeneid* and Dido's lament. The closeness to Dante can again be sensed in the use of the imagery of lightning and flame (borrowed directly from *Purgatorio*.9.29-32) to describe the eagle's terrifying descent toward the dreamer (II.534-40). However, this proximity to Dante in form and content does not last long. No sooner has the eagle arrived, than the process of curvature from Chaucer's authoritative source is again under way.

In *Purgatorio*.9 the dream specifically represents the pilgrim's ascent, through the intercession of grace, to the Gates of Purgatory and it may seem, in form and content, that Chaucer is being lifted towards a similar visionary destiny. In one sense he is – the palace of fame awaits him; but from within this very closeness to Dante there begins a subtle insinuation of difference. The curvature is first notable in the slight diminution of style that occurs in the reference to the eagle as 'this foul' (II.533-9). Coming as it does at the culmination of the elaborate Dantescan trope of lightning, which turns a tower to dust and 'in his swifte comynge brende', the monosyllabic English noun has a conspicuously literalising and bathetic effect. Where in Dante's dream the eagle itself is suffused in a visionary fire that 'scorches' the dreamer (*Purgatorio*.9.32), here the flame resides only in the analogy.

The contrast quickly develops into a more complex pattern of divergence and adaptation. Dante locates his dream within an entirely symbolic sphere and plays down its literal implications: the dreamer is engulfed in a visionary fire so intense that he is immediately startled awake. Chaucer, on the other hand, is keen to pick up where Dante leaves off, and stress the physicality of the eagle, his seizure of the narrator and their subsequent interaction. He omits all reference to the scorching fire which brings an end to Dante's dream and instead mentions four times the 'grim pawes strong' of the eagle in which the narrator is literally carried away (II.541-578). It is as if Chaucer were following-up on an interrupted thread in the *Commedia* and

adapting it to his own ends. But Dante's dream broke off where it did for a reason: there was nothing more that could be said without a diminution of visionary force. By extending the dream sequence beyond the climactic moment of rapture, making it merely the starting-point of his own celestial vision, Chaucer subjects it to a comic demystification. This is made all the more apparent when the narrator awakens from his swoon and the 'fowl' begins to speak.

It is hard to imagine any voice that would be suitable to Dante's eagle, but by giving the eagle the incongruously colloquial and comical voice that he does Chaucer continues to undermine the mystical and majestic quality of the image he inherited. The Eagle's first word 'Awak!' sounds curiously close to the squawk of a bird, and when he begins 'to disporte' with the narrator – 'Seynte Marye, | Thou art noyous for to carye!' (II.573-4) – the original visionary force and 'high seriousness' of the scene is comically deflated. The eagle's jesting complaint concisely brings home the inherent ludicrousness of the scene – a plump and petrified narrator dangling in the clutches of a talkative bird – and in the process Chaucer again marks both his indebtedness to and difference from his 'auctor'.

In one sense Chaucer's narrator actually finds here the authoritative, speaking presence that he was searching for in Book 1 but, as becomes immediately apparent, the eagle is no Virgil: 'hyt is not al gold that glareth' (I.272). Where Virgil's speech is always clear, concise and imbued with a natural and unassuming authority, the eagle's discourse is conspicuously mannered and verbose. His eager 'O yis, yis!' (II.706) when he sees the opportunity to commence his lecture, his labouring of the stages of his 'worthy demonstracion' (II.728), his transparent plumping for positive feedback and his self-congratulatory – 'lo, so I can | Lewedly to a lewed man speak' (II.865-6) all expose a personal investment, a comical enthusiasm, a smug, self-serving delight in his own powers of persuasion, quite at odds with the conventional equanimity expected of the celestial guide. As Jordan and Fyler note, these gestures foreground the rhetorical, performative and self-invested nature of his speech in a way that actually serves to cast its content and its speaker in some doubt– to make the reader and narrator suspicious of his 'worthy demonstracions', even of language itself.⁸² Here again Chaucer is interweaving 'fals and sooth', 'game and earnest', in such a

⁸² Jordan, *Chaucer's Poetics and the Modern Reader*, pp. 46-7; Fyler, *Language and the Declining World*, p. 147.

way that the ‘sentence’ of the eagle’s speech is left open: full of promise, but lacking in Dantescan certitude.

In Book 1 it was the eerie silence and vacancy of the temple and desert that threatened a kind of interpretive aporia, but in the narrator’s dialogue with the eagle, Chaucer shows that the immediacy of speech can be just as problematic. Speech is shown not to have any privileged and resolving hermeneutic status, but to remain, in Derrida’s terms, another form of ‘textuality’, another site of ‘dispoite’, difference and ambiguity predicated upon absence and the endless multiplication of its own terms.⁸³ This is manifest in the scientific content of the eagle’s speech. Eager to prove to the narrator how all speech is received in fame’s palace, he delivers a lecture that defines speech in material terms as sound, and sound as ‘noght but eyr ybroken’ (II.765-768). It is indeed ‘a good persuasion’ (II.872). He describes, through a series of proofs, an aspect of the physical order and logic of the universe, but in the process speech – the very vehicle of his proofs – is comically reduced to ‘eyr ybroken’ and its rational and spiritual significance undermined. As Fyler explains, in its materiality, its endless verbosity and openness to double meanings, his lecture actually points to the worrying instability and multiplicity of language.⁸⁴ In a qualification of Dante’s notion of speech as a divinely granted tool of reason, the Eagle’s discourse suggests that we are subject to language, not its masters, that our efforts of communication and truth-seeking are themselves caught up in its Babylonian confusion, in the arbitrary play of fame and rumour.⁸⁵

Book II thus moves from its initial promise of visionary ‘sentence’ back into a state of semiotic indeterminacy, from a Dantescan eagle bright as a second sun to a garrulous and suspect lecturer. Its allegorical signs do not lead steadily as Dante’s did from the ‘problematic and humanistic’ to the ‘certain and transcendent’, from the letter to the truth it veils, but to more signs and letters in need of translation. In this movement Chaucer is in the process of defining his relationship to Dante, to the poetic tradition as a whole and he is also making a virtue out of some inherent limitations.

Where the *Commedia* is the triumphant and carefully planned culmination of Dante’s poetic career, *HF* is the work of a poet who was still in the process of

⁸³ See Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, pp. 352-4.

⁸⁴ Fyler, *Language and the Declining World*, p. 147.

⁸⁵ This idea of language is implicit throughout the *Commedia*, and stated explicitly in the *Convivio* and *Eloquence of the Vernacular*, see Fyler, *Language and the Declining World*, pp. 101-2.

developing his style and perspective in a fledgling vernacular tradition. Thus, although Chaucer sets about responding to Dante in *HF*, such a bold enterprise is, at this stage of his career, inevitably and self-consciously hubristic. Chaucer cannot confidently proclaim as Dante does, ‘You see well, reader, that I uplift my theme: do not wonder, therefore, if I sustain it with greater art’ (*Purgatorio*.9.70-2). For, as yet, he lacks the art to support his flight. He risks becoming not so much a second Ganymede as another Icarus, ‘that fleigh so highe that the hete | Hys wynges malt’ (II.921-2). As Wallace points out, Chaucer was working with ‘the defects of a lightweight and recalcitrant medium’: with the confines of octosyllabic verse and the limitations of Middle English diction.⁸⁶ His models of native eloquence and prosody were vernacular romances, whose colloquial, sing-song style was not a congenial medium for the ‘high seriousness’ of celestial vision. Hence, although there are pockets of Dantescan high style in *HF* it is never too long before these are absorbed back into the more prevalent rhythms and verbal gestures of the English romances.

In his bid to follow Dante in *HF* Chaucer cannot avoid these difficulties, so he makes them a conspicuous and deliberate facet of the poem’s style and meaning. He dramatises his own inevitable slippage away from Dantescan style and visionary profundity, and in the process begins to assert his own distinctive voice and perspective. He may not attain to ‘high seriousness’, but by exploiting the ironic and hubristic implications of his visionary project he brings to *HF* a self-questioning sense of humour and a stylistic versatility which were absent or even purposefully excluded from his primary source and the elevated literary discourse of the Italian trecento poets.

This drama of falling short and the new possibilities of expression it affords are apparent in the Eagle’s comically deprecating description of Chaucer’s predicament as an amateur poet, who must work at his rekenynges’ (II.653) all day and devote all his evenings to a humble and solitary service of Cupid –

. . . thou wolt make
A-nyght ful ofte thyn hed to ake
In thy studye, so thou writest,
And ever mo of love enditest

(*HF*.II.631-634)

⁸⁶ David Wallace, cited in Schibanoff, *Chaucer’s Queer Poetics*, p. 156.

The introduction of this prosaic description of the narrator's life and literary endeavours serves to comically underline his incongruity as a visionary figure. Recalling how Dante, Boccaccio and Petrarch all defined the role of the poet, one can see how far Chaucer is venturing from them in this ironical self-portrayal. Chaucer's narrator is not like Boccaccio's ideal poet – a free and aristocratic spirit who can scorn 'places like the greedy and mercenary market' for the solitude and tranquillity of nature.⁸⁷ He is a bourgeois figure, a court bureaucrat caught up in the humdrum world of business, who must finish his 'reckonings' before he can turn his attention to poetry. Even when he does find time for literary endeavour, it is not to some beautiful rustic spot he returns, not 'to the melodious band of the Muses moving in stately dance' but to 'his hous anon' where he immures himself in a claustrophobic world of books, 'tyl fully daswed ys [his] look' (II.658).⁸⁸ The ascetic spirit found in Boccaccio and Petrarch's idea of the poet, his devoted service to truth, is curiously transformed in Chaucer's self portrayal into something more comical and mundane – the narrator must endure a headache for the sake of his devotion to his books. It is true, he 'lyvest thus as an heremyte' but his 'abstynence ys lyte' (II.659) and the value of his labours remains questionable.

His vision does not proceed, as Dante's does, from profound spiritual calling or crisis, but from Jupiter's pity for his humble, clerkly service of 'loves folk'. And he is not himself a lover (another powerful model of poetic identity in the Middle Ages) but merely a clerkly servant of love (II.628, 639-40). Indeed, the narrator's mediate, remote and bookish relation to love – his preference for reading and writing rather than experiencing – is a facet of his beholdenness to the past and to literary tradition. Poet and narrator both immerse themselves in a dense and formidable world of old books that convey the lives, experiences, and wisdom of the past, but potentially at the expense of being able to encounter and create 'newe thynges' (II.654). Boccaccio spoke of the 'gentle society of books' as renewing 'the power of the poet's genius', but Chaucer's narrator is left 'daswed' and 'dumb as any stoon' (II.655-59) by his nights of reading – he is not so much creatively stimulated, as stupefied and overawed.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Boccaccio, *Boccaccio on Poetry*, p. 57.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid. p. 59.

This expresses in comic form the problem of influence. As an aspiring, fourteenth-century English poet, a vintner's son, working on the margins of European culture in an as yet unproven vernacular, how could he fail to be slightly 'daswed' by the grand accomplishments of his cultural predecessors? How could he avoid feeling encumbered by some sense of indebtedness to the authority of the past? The challenge Chaucer faced in *HF* was to find a way of relating creatively to the vast and formidable weight of past culture that would not leave him dumb as a stone and cut off from contemporary life. He needed a way of overcoming that sense of cultural beholdness dramatised in the plight of his narrator; not of abandoning past culture, but of drawing its powerful authoritative voices and precedents into dialogue with his own developing poetic vision: a way of questioning and adapting as well as revering and preserving his 'auctors', insinuating into the formidably closed and authoritative 'glass temples' of their works a living voice that speaks of its own personal and historical moment.

As Hansen argued, it is actually by dramatising and ironising his own beholdness to authority through the figure of the narrator that Chaucer begins to move beyond it.⁹⁰ It may not be possible for Chaucer to follow Dante in earnest as a visionary-poet, an allegorist, a noble lover. But by dramatising both his pursuit and falling off from these lofty models of literary identity, *HF* enacts a misreading of the *Commedia* and his literary inheritance as a whole, which creates the space for his own more ironical and self-questioning poetics to evolve. The necessary cost of this poetic freedom was however, the loss of 'high seriousness' and the undermining of the more stable allegorical poetics found in Dante's poetry. Chaucer may find his own poetic perspective in swerving from his authoritative models, but it is one which can lay no simple claim to truth and spiritual worth: one which leaves the question of its own meaning, and the value of poetic enterprise as a whole, dangerously open.

The perils of Chaucer's approach, and the instability it opens up, become increasingly apparent in the final unfinished book of *HF*. When he reaches fame's palace, what he first finds there is another Dantescan image of great splendour and promise, another herald of sentence and purpose, which, like the eagle and temple of glass before it, slides back into indeterminacy. The house of fame itself is an intricate

⁹⁰ Hansen, *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender*, p. 106.

allegorical construction, which follows and develops in imaginative scope, Dante's portrayal of the 'nobile castello' and the eminent company of virtuous pagans in Limbo (*Inferno*.4.106-144). Just as Limbo was for Dante, the palace of fame is for Chaucer an opportunity to concretely represent and reflect upon his relation to past culture and poetic tradition.

From the outside, fame's palace is guerdoned, like a gothic church, with the innumerable figures of greater and lesser musicians, performers, magicians and 'alle maner of mynstralles and gestiours that tellen [...] of all that longeth unto Fame' (III.1197-1200). Functioning as both fame's facilitators and beneficiaries they underlie the intimate connection between poetry and worldly renown found in the writings of Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio. After describing the uncanny goddess *fama* herself, Chaucer returns to this theme in his detailed description of the statues of poets and historians on pillars that run the length of fame's palace, bearing the fame of nations and other worthy subjects on their shoulders. Like the 'spiriti magni' (*Inferno*.4.119) who inhabit Dante's Limbo, these 'folk of digne reverence' (III.1426) are described in reverential terms and said to carry with them 'hy and gret sentence' (III.1425.) They present another important model of poetic identity in the poem for Chaucer to reflect upon, contend with and seek to follow. Here it is not the poet as visionary, or lover, but as noble preserver of history and cultural tradition which is presented in the image of Homer, Statius and Virgil bearing the fame of Troy and Thebes and Rome upon their shoulders.

As previously noted, this idea of poetry as a form of remembrance and of the poet as both an agent and deserving beneficiary of fame was an important aspect of the humanist poetics of the Italian trecento.⁹¹ It is telling once again, how Chaucer both aspires towards and swerves from this model. In Limbo, Dante, with remarkable self-assurance, places himself amongst the living company of the great poets of antiquity – 'they turned to me with a sign of salutation and [...] made me one of their company' (*Inferno*.4.98-105). Symbolically he is accepted into their timeless poetic fraternity. Chaucer, like Dante, brings himself before this company and walks amongst them in fame's palace, but here the poets are remote, silent and formidable statues, not living, conversing shades. Like the 'temple of glass' before them they are

⁹¹ See fn.14.

signs that point toward an absent origin and living presence; they can neither perceive nor welcome the aspiring poet who wanders quizzically in their midst.

Moreover the value of this poetic fraternity is itself rendered ambiguous by its location in fame's palace. The humanist ideal of the poet is hinted at in these 'folk of digne reverence' bearing 'hy and gret sentence' but it is equally undermined by their presence beside the dais of so unstable and morally suspect a deity. As becomes apparent in the brilliant set-piece of Fama's judgement of the crowd of supplicants (III.1520-1867), her authority is uncontested and her dispensations, like those of her 'suster, dame Fortune' (III.1547) seem entirely random. In this context, the poet's moral capacity to preserve the 'trewe knowyng' of 'thinges passed' – as Lydgate puts it – to sever the 'verrie trewe corn [...] from the chaf' of fable and rumour – remains ultimately subordinate to the whims of Fama.⁹² It may even be that the poets, like Aeolus, are not the preservers of truth, but the very vehicle for the dissemination of her arbitrary judgements and misrepresentations.

The problem deepens in the House of Rumour. There Chaucer's narrator sees how human tidings – the raw material of poetry and culture – are engendered in a process of random multiplication, distortion and fabrication, before they even arrive in Fama's palace. In this vast, ceaselessly whirling receptacle of all human discourse, nothing can be communicated without being arbitrarily transformed and expanded (III.2059-75). 'Aventure' is shown to be 'the moder of tydynges' (III.1983) and amidst the chaos whatever truth may be spoken is lost, corrupted and inextricably interfused with falsehood. As the tidings of 'soth and fals' themselves proclaim on their way to fame's palace:

we wil medle us ech with other,
That no man, be they never so wrothe,
shal han on [of us] two, but bothe
At ones

(III.2102-54)

The scene underlines the instability of speech and language already witnessed in the Eagle's discourse and marks another decisive departure from Dante's

⁹²John Lydgate *Troy Book*, lines 105-10, cited in *The Idea of the Vernacular*, ed. by Wogan-Browne, p. 44.

allegorical poetics. For allegory depends upon the severability of truth and fiction. For the letter to serve its function as a vehicle of truth, it must be responsibly controlled and decoded so that the ‘meaning of the author’ can be grasped.⁹³ Chaucer here though presents an image of ‘fals and soth compouned’ (III.2108) in which there is no possibility of distillation or decoding, no separation of the ‘verrie trewe corn [...] from the chaff’.⁹⁴ The House of Rumour thus becomes the domain of unruly, multifarious ‘letter’, a ‘maze of cupidity [...] in which the voice of truth and clarity has been lost.’⁹⁵ In its absence the letter plays and proliferates indefinitely and for its own sake, endlessly generating new combinations of meaning, and moving further from an originary sense of order, presence, purpose and truth. As Koonce argues, Chaucer is drawing here on scriptural imagery of the ‘abuses of the tongue’, but the House of Rumour is also curiously similar to Derrida’s more affirmative conception of language as the indefinite play of the supplement in the enabling absence of origin, presence and truth.⁹⁶

Through cautious regulation of the valence and lure of the letter, through its subordination to spiritual truth, Dante progressed to the final redemptive vision of universal order and love that concludes the *Commedia*. Therein all veils are lifted and the pilgrim sees ‘ingathered, bound by love into one single volume, that which is dispensed in leaves throughout the universe.’ (*Paradiso*.33.85-7). By contrast, Chaucer’s disinclination to subordinate the ambiguities of the letter to a clear, redemptive ‘sentence’, his persistent complication of the allegorical movement from fiction to truth, leads to a final vision at the opposite extreme of language: not of divine order and harmony, but of a seemingly inescapable human cacophony which questions the very possibility of finding truth in poetic fiction, or even in human language.

It is to this Babylonian chaos that Chaucer’s drift from Dante, his quest for ‘newe thinges’ (III.1887), has brought him. And what he finds here is both a source of new literary potential and a cause for serious moral and spiritual concern. As several critics have noted, it is here in the company of ‘shipmen’ ‘pilgrimes’ and ‘pardoners’ (III.2122 and III.2127) amidst the infinite ‘rounynges’ and ‘jangles | of werres, of pes, of mariages | of reste, of labour, of viages’ and every other subject under the sun

⁹³ Boccaccio, *Boccaccio on Poetry*, p. 48

⁹⁴ John Lydgate, *Troy Book*, Prologue, ll. 105-10.

⁹⁵ Koonce, *Chaucer and the Tradition of Fame*, p. 263.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 260-3; Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, pp. 352-4.

(III.1960-1976) that Chaucer finds the seeds of *CT*.⁹⁷ In this respect the narrator's dream delivers on its promise of providing the poet with 'new tydynge' to write of. It is in falling from the rarefied heights of Dante's vision into the productive anarchy of the House of Rumour that Chaucer finds the grounds for his own poetics – for a style itself based in the interfusion of 'olde gestes' (III.151) and new voices, and the playful, irreducible confluence of 'fals and sooth'.

But, liberating as it is, the semiotic anarchy which Chaucer encounters in the House of Rumour is also a cause for serious concern. The endless multiplication of tidings found therein is ominously compared to a fire that spreads 'from a sparke spronge amys | Til al a cite brent up ys' (III.2079-2080). It suggests the endless multiplication of tidings, does not simply create new meanings, but tends in its arbitrariness and excess towards destruction, overdetermination and meaninglessness, a return to speech as naught but 'ayr ybroke'. Within the ever-expanding midst of tidings there is no reliable principle for judgement, selection or interpretation of the kind Dante found with the help of Virgil among the 'diverse lingue' of hell– no kind of speech or interpretation of speech which is not itself pulled into the endless, corruptive play of rumour. As such Chaucer and his narrator are left stranded in this indeterminate domain, unable to regain the high-road of Dantescan allegory which leads from the subversive babel of hell to the logos of *Paradiso*.³³

This goes some way to explain the unfinished state of *HF*. There is no kernel of truth, no transcendent 'sentence' that can be reliably drawn from within this entropic semantic field. Once entered into there is no way out of the play of the letter: 'ne never rest is in that place' (III.1956). There remains an open question of how far this field of semiotic indeterminacy extends, of its relation to the religious truths that underlie medieval thought and culture. Chaucer's imagery in both houses is tactfully limited to the secular world, but the implications of his theory of language and culture stretch further. As the Eagle explained, all human discourse, 'be hyt rouned, red, or songe' (II.722) goes through the dubious processing-houses of rumour and fame: there is no mention of an alternative route. So what then of the teachings of the Church, of science and philosophy, those discourses with an authoritative and imperative claim to truth? Either in transmission they too are infected by rumour's endless cycle of distortion, interfusion and multiplication or Chaucer has in mind

⁹⁷ For earlier statements of this position see Kittredge, *Chaucer and his Poetry*, p. 102; Knight, *Geoffrey Chaucer*, pp. 22-3; Winny, *Chaucer's Dream Poems*, p.107.

another kind of relationship between the anarchy of human culture and the providential order. There is still the hope that the human indeterminacy of fame and rumour is ultimately encompassed by and subordinate to the deeper providential order of ‘he that mover ys of al, | That is and was and ever shal’ (I.81-2) – by a redeeming order akin to that which Boethius discerned behind the seemingly random operations of fortune, or Dante found in the ‘diverse lingue’ and deathly fragments of hell. If so, the nature of this relationship presently escapes Chaucer and his narrator. In *HF* it is no more than a fideistic appeal, an indistinct hope that ‘God [will] turne us every drem to goode’ (I.1). It is a reaching from human confusion to divine order, from the play of the letter to an inarticulate truth, as oppose to Dante’s allegorical mediation of the two.

In *Writing and Difference* Derrida spoke of two conflicting responses to the questions of structure, origin and meaning which underlie metaphysical thought and both I believe can be felt at work in *HF*. On the one hand there is the ‘joyous affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth and without origin’.⁹⁸ This is seen in the productive anarchy of the House of Rumour, in Chaucer’s exploration of the ambiguities of human experience in its search for meaning and his parodic sliding from Dantescan order. But there is also, in Derrida’s terms the ‘saddened, nostalgic, guilty side of the thinking of play’ which manifests itself in the drive to restore a sense of order, to ‘decipher [...] an origin or truth which escapes play and the order of the sign’.⁹⁹ This logocentric impulse has been noted already in the obstructed pursuit of ‘sentence’ that runs throughout *HF* – in the hope that it may be an ‘oracle’ not merely a ‘fantome’ (I.493, I.11) in the promising signs of the temple of glass, the Dantescan eagle, and the monuments of the poets that all gesture towards some redeeming point of origin, presence, meaning, resolution, just as they postpone its realisation. It finds its final frustrated expression in the ‘man of gret auctorite’ (III.2158) who appears amidst the chaos of the House of Rumour, just as the poem breaks off. Poised so portendingly on the brink of the poem, he seems to be a herald of the truth and order which Chaucer’s vision has both pursued and failed to deliver. His presence promises an authoritative speech which could explain and redeem the fragments of the poem and provide a way out of the play of language in which poet, narrator and reader are caught. But this promise is premised upon its unrealisability.

⁹⁸ Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, pp. 369-70.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 369.

For were he to speak his voice would be instantly absorbed into and mutated by the endless play of rumour. What is required to truly close this play is a voice outside of the poem, outside of language itself, a voice beyond representation. And as such the ‘man of gret auctorite’ must remain (like the temple of glass and the Dantescan eagle before its fall into earth and language) another sign of ‘a lost or impossible presence’, ‘an absent origin’ that *HF* can only gesture toward in its incompleteness.¹⁰⁰ One is reminded of the moment of K’s execution at the end of *The Trial*, wherein he glimpses inconclusively someone reaching out a hand from the open window of a nearby apartment ‘a human figure, faint and insubstantial [...] a good man?’.¹⁰¹

HF thus finishes not with the ‘joyous affirmation of the world as play’ but – as *Troilus* and *CT* will do – with a glance toward an unrealisable redemptive presence and ‘realities beyond language and fiction’.¹⁰² But where Dante’s assured use of allegory enabled him to enter into and communicate something of those realities through poetry, Chaucer can only point toward them as his own equivocal art falls silent, wistfully marking the distance between human writing and the Divine Logos it seeks. Without an authoritative ‘sentence’ or conclusion to galvanise and give spiritual utility to its parts, *HF* remains a broken allegory, a series of allegorical fragments, suspended between the hope of redemption and the lure of the infernal play of language.

The shifting in *HF* that I have noted between these poles – between play and responsibility, the carnal and the spiritual modes of reading, ‘joyous affirmation’ of the letter and the sober will to use and transcend it in the name of truth – is something which runs throughout Chaucer’s poetry. It is not, however, a tension that is dialectically mediated and resolved as it is in the allegorical ‘process’ of the *Commedia*. In Chaucer’s work it takes a more acute, unreconciled form. For by swerving from Dante’s allegorical poetics in *HF*, Chaucer explores the possibility of poetry not as a vehicle of predetermined truths, but an autonomous and critical means of exploring the multiplicity of human culture and experience, without definitive answers. Whilst Chaucer thus discovers his own voice and vocation, it is one which can no longer lay claim, in orthodox terms, to truth and spiritual worth. He unsettles the principles of allegory which gave the Italian trecento poets their moral assurance

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Franz Kafka, *The Trial*, trans. by Idris Parry (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 249.

¹⁰² Martin Irvine, ‘Medieval Grammatical Theory and Chaucer’s *House of Fame*’, *Speculum*, 60 (1985), 850-76 (p. 876).

and enabled them to make of poetry an exalted science, expressive of the highest values of Christian culture. In doing so he opens himself up to the old suspicions of poetry as a carnal and irresponsible discourse and fosters the bad conscience which will eventually lead him to dismiss *HF* as another one of his ‘worldly vanitees’ (X.1084). The ultimate value and meaning of his ‘wonderful drem’ remains productively, yet precariously open to question.

Chapter Two: Chaucer's 'Human Comedy'

In the previous chapter I spoke of two conflicting tendencies that were evident in *HF* – one a playful inclination to subvert the transcendent motion of allegory, to linger in the indeterminate domain of the 'letter', the other, a will-to-truth, which seeks to restore a sense of moral and hermeneutic order and 'bring an end to play'. This dialectic tension runs throughout Chaucer's work and the balance of power between its terms can vary considerably. At the end of *Troilus* and *CT* for instance, it is the latter principle which comes to dominate, as Chaucer seeks to 'knytte up wel a greet mateere' (X.28) by imposing an authoritative spiritual sentence upon his poetry. I consider this totalising tendency in Chapter Three, but here I want to focus primarily upon its antagonist: the cheerful affirmation of the 'play of the world [...] without fault, without truth and without origin' which finds expression in the comic spirit and style of *CT*.¹

The evolution of Chaucer's distinctive comic style was already under way in *HF*: it was apparent in his erratic, sometimes parodic relation to Dante, his sense of irony and deliberate courting of ambiguity, his humorous self-portrayal, his vibrant mixture of high and low voices and perspectives. It was in developing this comic style that Chaucer began to craft an original vernacular poetics, rooted in the linguistic and cultural potentialities of contemporary English, and to lay the grounds for his own epic project in *CT*. In this process Chaucer was helping to shape a mode of literary discourse related to, but in many ways distinct from, the noble 'science' envisioned by the Italian trecento poets: a literary discourse which was more open-ended and eclectic, less concerned to convey doctrinal truths than to explore a variety of conflicting voices, genres and perspectives.² Whilst the Italian poets were attempting, in one sense, to narrow the concept of poetry in a bid to elevate it, in *CT* we see Chaucer expanding it to encompass popular forms and speakers, creating a stylistic 'commonwealth', as Strohm suggests, in which hierarchy is suspended and a range of voices – bourgeois and aristocratic, lay and clerical – freely compete.³

¹ Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, pp. 369-70.

² Boccaccio, *Boccaccio on Poetry*, p. 48. Boccaccio is a problem case, for whilst in the *Genealogy of Gentile Gods* he affirms this elevated allegorical notion of poetry, the *Decameron* presents a more liberal and eclectic model of creative literature.

³ Strohm, *Social Chaucer*, p. 182.

Chaucer's achievement, in this respect, was not isolated or unique, but part of a broader process of cultural transformation, which can also be seen in works such as the *Romance of the Rose*, *El Libro de Buen Amor*, the *Decameron* and later in the poetry and prose of Villon, Rabelais and Cervantes. All of these writers played a crucial role in shaping modern literary discourse. Their works share a certain questioning, comic spirit, a cheerful embrace of the multiplicity of life, and, as Bakhtin argued, they all crucially involve the productive interfusion of the 'culture of folk humour' with high and serious modes of literary and philosophical discourse, drawn from the elite spheres of clerical and feudal culture.⁴ Along with the opposing endeavour to purify and elevated poetry, this 'fusion of the official and non-official' played a constitutive role in the development of European Literature.⁵ It brought in its diversity and polyvocality a new kind of depth to creative literature – the potential for it to develop not as a sphere of 'unitary language', and bastion of existing ideology, but a hybrid discourse, in which a range of idioms, identities, ideas and perspectives could be explored, performed, parodied, and brought into critical dialogue with each other.⁶ In this dialogic field – this veritable house of rumour – as Bakhtin argues, dominant language and ideology were stripped of the aura of universality. All 'languages' were revealed as 'masks' and the poet was at liberty to play amongst them, to parody, to experiment, to adopt that lively ironic and questioning relation to language, identity and values one finds in *CT* and the aforementioned works.⁷ In the course of analysing the comic poetics of *CT* I will be exploring its role within this broader literary genealogy and considering its problematic relation to the dominant beliefs and values of the late medieval world.

Indeed it is not hard to see why this comic and dialogic mode of writing becomes a source of tension and moral difficulty for Chaucer. For all its creative potential, the incorporation of 'folk humour' and its interfusion with serious discourse in *CT* undoubtedly problematises the noble allegorical model of poetry discussed in the previous chapter. The 'lewed dronken harlotrye' (I.3145) of the 'cherls' and the scatological imagery of their tales do little to support the notion of the poet as a lofty figure and refiner of an illustrious vernacular. They evoke instead precisely what

⁴ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p. 72.

⁵ Ibid., p. 72.

⁶ Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four essays*, trans. by M. Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 271.

⁷ Ibid., p. 271.

Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio endeavoured to downplay – the poet’s more ignoble association with the common entertainer, the minstrel and ‘janglere’. One recalls in this context how Boccaccio condemned those ‘comic poets’ who either out of desire for popularity or innate foulness of mind abandoned the pursuit of truth, in favour of the creation of ‘dirty stories’ and ‘literary follies’.⁸

Chaucer’s comic poetry is obviously more than mere ‘dirty stories’ but, in its inclusive and dialogic character, it too entails a refusal or complication of the didactic function and obligation of poetic fiction. Its playful shifting between conflicting voices, idioms and perspectives unsettles the idea of truth as something fixed, absolute and universal, and remains ‘hostile to all that [is] immortalised and complete’.⁹ But whatever positive value one ascribes to this ‘gay relativity’, whatever profundity may lie in its playfulness, from the sober theological perspective it remains another form of worldly vanity and distraction.

For these reasons the comic spirit that finds expression in *CT* was not something which could be straightforwardly endorsed, or given unconditional licence. It had, in some way, to be excused, justified, rationalised, counter-balanced and contained in the broader context of serious discourse, in order to be permitted. This can be seen in the overarching structural dynamics of many works of a comic nature: *El Libro de Buen Amor*, for example, ends with the Archpriest finally giving up on ‘loco amor’ and presenting a series of hymns to the Virgin, the *Decameron* ends by returning the cheerful brigata to the sorrows of plague-ravaged Florence, Cervantes’ Don Quixote finally repents of his folly and the play of *CT* is brought to a close by the Parson’s sober treatise on penitence. This dynamic can also be seen in the localised vacillations between game and earnest, ‘solas’ and ‘sentence’ that runs throughout the *CT* and provides its main ordering principle. In this vein *The Miller’s Tale* is preemptively disowned by Chaucer’s narrator as the ‘harlotrie’ of a ‘cherl’ (I.3167-3186), the Cook’s unfinished ‘jape’ is followed by the authoritative and pious intervention of the Man of Law, and the Wife’s carnivalesque inversion of traditional gender power-relations is answered by the Clerk’s re-imposition of moral orthodoxy. But whilst seriousness is ultimately given the upper hand, the balance of power between game and earnest within the tales is more nuanced and complex than this might suggest. It is also the case that ‘game’ can answer, qualify and subvert earnest

⁸ Boccaccio, *Boccaccio on Poetry*, p. 38.

⁹ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, p. 12.

discourse – as with the Miller’s parodic ‘quiting’ of the Knight’s ‘noble tale’, or the Nun’s Priest’s playful repost to the Monk’s solemn and seemingly interminable tragedies. Much as earnest discourse functions in *CT* to close and contain comic play, it could also be read as covertly accommodating and enabling its subversive voice and perspective – a perspective which might otherwise be excluded altogether. Thus, in *CT* both game and earnest are locked in a fascinating state of tension.

They are often presented and contend as opposites, as is implied in the Host’s repeated distinction between tales of ‘sentence’ and ‘mirth’ (I.798, IV.15-18, VI.318-326) and the rhetoric of ‘play’ which is adopted by Chaucer’s narrator and several of the pilgrims. As the Friar warns the Wife of Bath, when her speech broaches upon more serious, clerical matters:

. . . here as we ryde by the weye
Us nedeth nat to *speken but of game*
And lete auctoritees on Goddes name
To prechyng an to scole of clergie

(III.1274)

And yet throughout *CT* game and earnest are subtly interfused in ways which belie this clear division. Seemingly serious discourse can be infected with an ironic, questioning spirit and equally, something truthful and profound (in its own distinctive fashion) can spring from the midst of ‘game’. Though Chaucer’s pilgrim-narrator asks us to ‘nat maken ernest of game’ (I.3186), in the dialogic and comic poetics of *CT* the two are creatively blurred and interlaced in such a way that it is often impossible to tell them apart; we are led repeatedly back, as Kendrick put it, to the ‘crossroads of intention, where history and game seem to meet’: as the Host says to the Cook, ‘A man may seye ful sooth in game and pley’ (I.4355).¹⁰ So although the focus of this chapter is on the comedy of *CT*, this must be thought through dialectically, in relation to its seriousness: to the sphere of truth, responsibility and faith. In this chapter I explore the creative and transgressive quality of comedy in relation to the dominant religious values of late medieval culture, and Chaucer’s equivocal relation to the

¹⁰ Laura Kendrick, *Chaucerian Play: Comedy and Control in the Canterbury Tales* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. 152.

comic play he sets in motion in *CT*. But in order to do this it is first necessary to define more clearly the way I am interpreting comedy and its manifestation in *CT*.

The idea of Chaucer as a comic poet has a rich critical heritage, and has played an influential role in his reception, especially over the last hundred years. Though the emphasis, meaning and function ascribed to it has altered, there has been abundant mention of the comic aspect of Chaucer's work – his 'pleasing wit', 'genial humour', 'pervasive irony' – from the fifteenth century to our own.¹¹ It was, however, Kittredge, in his seminal study of 1915, who gave decisive impetus to the idea of Chaucer's major work as essentially and distinctively comic in character. Kittredge was building upon existing notions of Chaucer's 'robust and vibrant style', his 'keen observation of nature', his break from courtly and didactic literary modes, but his achievement was to forge them into a comprehensive and attractive thesis.¹² Chaucer's peculiar genius was for the realistic, impartial and nuanced portray of human character and his major work was a 'moving, living', 'human comedy' of a kind which had never before existed in European literature.¹³ In *CT* life in all its comic variety and vitality, splits the staid mould of medieval didacticism and allegory. Others critics of the period elaborated on this notion and contributed to the consolidation of an enduring image of Chaucer as a merry, wise and sometimes mischievous observer of humanity, of a poet with a special skill for comic characters and tales of ribaldry, of his style as one of vibrant, pragmatic and distinctively English naturalism, and of *CT* as a work expressing with charm and equanimity the festive, communal spirit of the Middle Ages.¹⁴ This image was quickly challenged in academic circles from a variety of angles, but in broader culture and popular consciousness, it became and has largely remained the prevalent model for thinking about Chaucer. Indeed, the images conjured by mention of Chaucer's name, outside of academic quarters, are still most likely to be of the fellowship of pilgrims setting forth in festive spirit one fine April morning and the Miller's bawdy tale; not of

¹¹ Richard Puttenham, 'The Arte of English Poetry', in *Chaucer: the Critical Heritage*, ed. by Derek Brewer, 2 vols (London: Routledge, 1978), I, p. 127; Donaldson, *Speaking of Chaucer*, p. 3.

¹² Kittredge, *Chaucer and his Poetry*, pp.152-154; George Crabbe, 'Preface to the Canterbury Tales', p. 265; William Hazlitt, 'Lectures on the English Poets', p. 276 in *Chaucer the Critical Heritage*, ed. by Brewer.

¹³ Kittredge, *Chaucer and his Poetry*, p. 154.

¹⁴ See J. Lowes, *Geoffrey Chaucer* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932) and G. K. Chesterton, *Chaucer* (London: Faber, 1932).

patient Griselda or the penitential treatise that brings the game to a close. As Garbáty suggests, in popular consciousness, ‘Chaucer represents the teller of dirty tales, the agent of bawdy comedy.’¹⁵ The prioritisation of comic tales and incident in Pasolini’s *Canterbury Tales* (1972), Jonathan Myerson’s animated film version (1998) and Mike Poulton’s recent staging of *CT* (2010) all underline and reinforce this idea; as, in its own way, does the peculiar depiction of Chaucer as a drunken bard and gambler, a kind of English Villon, in Brian Helgeland’s *A Knight’s Tale* (2001).

The general notion of Chaucer as a cheerful comic poet has endured in popular consciousness but it was soon challenged by critical perspectives which stressed the overriding seriousness and literary complexity of Chaucer’s work and this emphasis has continued into the more theoretically orientated criticism of recent decades. Whether it was as a medieval allegorist, a masterful literary craftsman or a writer engaged with the conflicted fields of history, language, psychology and gender, Chaucer generally became a more serious figure. Comedy and humour were still acknowledged, but they became just one aspect of his work: a form or device subordinate to broader purposes, rather than one of its defining features.

In elaborating his own rhetorically orientated reading of Chaucer, Payne, for instance, took issue with the Kittredgean overemphasis on the naturalistic and the comic, pointing out that there are only six comic tales in *CT* and overall ‘there is more than four times as much “serious” poetry in the tales than there is “humorous” poetry’.¹⁶ When put in these terms one might well question the logic of describing *CT* as a ‘human comedy’, but this quantitative and atomising approach is itself somewhat misleading. It assumes a very narrow definition of comedy and fails to account for the interfusion of game and earnest, the permeability of comic and serious styles, perspectives and genres, which is integral to Chaucer’s art. It should also be added, in response to Payne’s point, that the dominant mode of the frame-narrative itself – as first noted by Kittredge – is one of comic drama, and this drama, with its play of lively exchanges, rivalries, competing perspectives and satirical revelations, has a formative bearing on all but the most earnest of tales.

As such, the comedy of *CT* cannot be straightforwardly bracketed and anatomised; its scope and meaning cannot be wholly grasped through examination of

¹⁵ Thomas Garbáty, ‘Chaucer and Comedy’ in *Versions of Medieval Comedy*, ed. by Paul G. Ruggiers (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1977), p. 173.

¹⁶ Robert O. Payne, *The Key of Remembrance* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1963), p. 158.

what are generically defined as the ‘comic tales’. It is better interpreted less as a specific form or genre and more, to borrow Stott’s phrase, as ‘an identifiable mode or tone of writing that manifests itself in a multitude of media’.¹⁷ As Leonard argues, Chaucer’s ‘comic vision of life [cannot] be restricted to one tone or one kind of laughter’ – be it the laughter of political satire, slapstick, irony or farce.¹⁸ It is part of the fascination of Chaucer’s comic art that he is able to draw upon and blend together multiple comic forms, voices, tones and devices. However, I want to avoid the opposite extreme of Payne’s narrow definition of Chaucerian comedy. The comedy of *CT* may be remarkably diverse, but Chaucer is not merely a compiler of comic forms, and his comic style does still have its distinctive character. Though strict and totalising definitions are unhelpful, what is needed here is a more precise and philosophically informed analysis of the nature, orientation and implications of Chaucerian comedy – one that unites its various manifestations, and links to the question of the nature of ‘the comic’ in general and its role in the late medieval world. To these ends, in the following section I propose the idea of Chaucer’s comic style as a form of deflation, based in the creative and incongruous interfusion of game and earnest, letter and spirit, worldly and spiritual voices and perspectives. In order to demonstrate the pervasiveness of this model of comedy in *CT* I do not limit my enquiry to a specific tale or group of ‘comic tales’, but draw on a range of illustrations from across the whole work. In doing so, I return to the idea of *CT* as a ‘human comedy’, and the comic as a defining characteristic of Chaucer’s accomplishment and significance for the development of creative literature. Lowes is right in saying that ‘when Chaucer conceived the idea of his pilgrimage’ with its ‘motley company of tellers’ talking, jesting, arguing along the way ‘a new thing appeared under the sun’.¹⁹ Though, like all new things, it was born not simply with cheerful ease, but with a measure of uncertainty, conflict and loss.

Through discussion of examples from *CT* the following section expounds the idea of comic deflation as a defining characteristic of Chaucer’s style. Section Two contextualises my approach in relation to the reception of Chaucerian comedy from the late medieval period to the present day. Section Three explores how deflation operates in Chaucer’s construction of the comic characters of the Pardoner and the

¹⁷ Andrew Stott, *Comedy* (New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 2.

¹⁸ Frances McNeely Leonard, *Laughter in the Courts of Love* (Norman: Pilgrim Books, 1981), p. 171.

¹⁹ Lowes, *Geoffrey Chaucer*, p. 159.

Wife of Bath, and considers both its creative force, but also its moral and epistemological dangers.

I. Chaucer's Art of Comic Deflation

Comedy is a notoriously difficult thing to define. It manifests itself in a vast array of different forms and tones and attempts to provide an overarching theory of comedy have led in multiple and conflicting directions. Indeed, by its very nature comedy seems to resist the sober, universalising business of theorisation and to involve the interpreter in a kind of epistemological contradiction. One cannot laugh and theorise in the same moment – and whatever *gai saber* there is in comedy cannot be easily written of in the language of seriousness – it belongs distinctively to the sphere of laughter, and one denatures it by transposing it into this analytical environ. Comedy is playful, irreverent, contradictory and allusive, and dwells as such in ‘a certain freedom from definition’ – a freedom from the obligation to make sense.²⁰ As Bergson said it ‘is like the spume of the wave that once captured leaves little of the sought for thing itself’.²¹ I begin by acknowledging this problem and the inevitable limitations in all theorisations of the comic, but it still necessary, precisely because of the wealth of existing ideas and associations surrounding the term, to continue such theorising, and provide a clear conceptual sense of how I am interpreting comedy in *CT*.

To begin with, it is necessary to distinguish my interpretation from the strict and more conventional conception of comedy as a dramatic mode, which has its origin in classical drama and the Aristotelian tradition. In his brief and fragmentary comments in the *Poetics* Aristotle had defined comedy, in contrast to tragedy, as ‘an imitation of inferior people’ producing the effect of laughter, and ending not in pain and death but in ‘reconciliation’.²² The *Poetics* was largely unknown in the middle ages, but via the examples of Plautus and Terence and the commentaries of the Latin Grammarians, especially Donatus, this conception of comedy, with added emphasis

²⁰ Kirby Olsen, *Comedy after Postmodernism* (Texas: Texas University Press, 2001), p. 6.

²¹ Henri Bergson, ‘Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic’ in *Comedy*, ed. by Wylie Sypher (London: John Hopkins University Press), p. 190.

²² Aristotle, *The Poetics*, trans. by Malcolm Heath (London: Penguin Books, 1996), pp. 9 and 22.

on its didactic function, was carried into medieval learning.²³ In a clerical context removed from the dramatic practices that had given rise to it, it is no surprise that the concept of comedy became increasingly abstract. Its structural opposition to tragedy and its moral function were both amplified and became detached – in some cases completely – from a normative sense of comic content and effect. This can be seen in Lydgate's summation of comedy in his *Troy Book*, where he writes, 'a comedie hath in his gynnyng [...] a maner compleynyng and afterward endeth in gladness'.²⁴ It is also illustrated in the fact that Dante could give the title 'commedia' to his profoundly serious Christian epic – and use it there in a theological sense, to signify the soul's joyful journey from sin to redemption. It is perhaps in these spiritualised terms that the Parson's serious moral treatise can be described as a 'myrie tale' (X.46); 'under these liberal conditions', as Garbaty writes, 'all of Chaucer's finished works can be defined as comedy'.²⁵ But at this point the concept of 'comedy' has clearly morphed into something very different from and in many ways antithetical to the festive rites and comic plays of antiquity, upon which Aristotle based his theory.

These clerical and classically derived conceptions of comedy have their part to play in an overall analysis of *CT*. It is, of course, possible that when Chaucer prayed for 'myght to make in som *comedy*' (V.1788) at the end of *Troilus* he had in mind that broad structural and spiritual sense of the term he found in Dante and, in one sense, *CT* does entail an 'imitation of inferior people'; but ultimately I think these ideas are limited in their ability to explain the internal comic dynamics and humorous effects of *CT*. Applied too rigidly they become misleading, for both ascribe a static, didactic, harmonising and conservative character to comedy that occludes its more ambiguous, fluid and subversive nature. Also, both these approaches exclude the variegated field of comic practices that existed in the Middle Ages, the diverse and adulterated comedy found in both official and unofficial, written and oral culture – in fabliaux, goliardic verse and popular romances, in the ludic aspect of the mystery plays, in the world of popular spectacle and carnival, in the parlance of the fool, the bard and the 'janglere' (I.560). There is no clear evidence Chaucer had read Donatus or Plautus, but there are ample signs in *CT*, as Ganim has demonstrated, that he was

²³ For discussion of this transmission see Carol Heffernan, *Comedy in Chaucer and Boccaccio* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2009), pp. 31-7.

²⁴ John Lydgate, *Troy Book: Selections* (2.847), ed. by Robert Edwards (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1998)

²⁵ Garbaty, 'Chaucer and Comedy', p. 174.

drawing upon this living, comic world, letting it inspire his own literary imagination and style and at the same time interfusing it with the high culture of the court and church.²⁶ Whilst the literary term ‘comedy’ is never used in *CT*, Chaucer repeatedly uses the popular vocabulary of ‘game’, ‘play’, ‘japes’, ‘myrthe’ and ‘harlotrie’ to describe the comic world he engages with and helps to shape.

I also take issue with the strong emphasis placed on the reconciling and morally conservative character of comedy in its classical and Christian conception. Whilst this structural dynamic is undoubtedly a discernable aspect of some comic fictions and whilst comedy can certainly be turned to conservative social ends, I concur with Bakhtin and Olson that there is a deeper and more fundamental aspect of the comic, which is opposed to formal reconciliation, thrives in the disruption of social, moral and rational order, and remains resistant to all that is serious, responsible, transcendent, and complete.²⁷ This aspect of the comic does not serve a didactic end, but rather actively subverts moral norms, parodies serious discourse and ‘prevailing truths’ and revels in folly, contradiction, irresolution, ambiguity. It may be that one finds in *CT* an equivocal mixture of this subversive comic spirit with the more conservative, unifying and moral ideas of comedy noted above. But it is this latter spirit which is the active ingredient, the dominant creative principle and source of humour in Chaucerian comedy. In what follows I describe more specifically how I see this principle operating in *CT* through the notion of comic deflation.

To introduce this perspective let me turn briefly to a simple non-Chaucerian example, from a great comedian of a later age. There is a memorable scene at the beginning of the film *Easy Street* (1916) in which Charlie Chaplin, playing the ‘Little Tramp’, emerges, in profile, from a church service at the ‘Hope Mission’, possessed with a newfound and somewhat unlikely religious serenity. So much a changed man that he hands back the collection box he had earlier hidden in his pants, he steps out of the church door, hands clasped, eyes skyward and a slow angelic measure in his step. He takes just two paces and falls down a set of stairs, with that brilliant mixture of clownish clumsiness and artful dexterity that defined Chaplin’s style.²⁸ In that moment his whole aspect changes, all his newfound grace crumples into flailing limbs

²⁶ Ganim, *Chaucerian Theatricality*, pp. 20-9.

²⁷ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p. 10; Olson, *Comedy after Postmodernism*, pp. 5-6.

²⁸ See figure 1, p.146, *Easy Street*, dir. by Charles Chaplin and Edward Brewer (Mutual Film Corporation, 1917).

and flustered incomprehension. The joke itself is as old, and perhaps as timeless, as a man slipping on a banana skin, but what interests me about this scene, in relation to Chaucer's own comic techniques, is its quality of deflation: the way it presents a serious, aspiring gesture only to undermine it and render its pretensions absurd. Deflation is generated here through the skilful interplay and sudden, unexpected shift between opposing facets of reality: between the earnest and the ludicrous, the high and the low, the short lived moment of elevation, control and spiritual composure and then its interruption by the physical and accidental. There is, in the moment of falling, a stubborn reassertion of the material world with all its traps and limits and with it a reassertion of the irreducible materiality and fallibility of human beings as part of that world. The comic effect of the scene lies neither with the skyward glance or the material world that interrupts it, but the swift, unexpected movement that simultaneously unites them and thrusts them apart. One laughs at this scene not out of a sense of superiority or vindictive delight, but because of its incongruity, and the sudden shift which has taken us by surprise. One experiences a correlative fall into laughter: a slip from comprehension and propriety into a pleasurable and peculiarly liberating moment of confusion.

A comparable interplay between earnest aspiration and comic deflation occurs throughout *CT*, and is characteristic of Chaucer's comic style on both a macro and a micro level. It has already been noted in the structural and stylistic dynamics of *HF*, and it is there again in the broad oscillations between earnest and game that pattern *CT*, for example, in the unrepentant self-interest and elaborate cursing that overtakes the sober moral conclusion of *The Pardoner's Tale*, in the Wife of Bath's profane glossing of religious authorities, in the Miller's drunken interruption of the tale-telling order, and his parodic 'quiting' of the Knight's 'noble storie', through which its courtly and philosophical sentiments are reprocessed in the ludic terms of fabliaux humour. What gives comic force to these exchanges is that same incongruous and sudden shift between the high and the low, the orderly and the anarchic, the spiritual and the physical and the sense of bathos and absurdity it generates.

The intricacies of comic deflation can be seen in *The Miller's Tale*, in the carnally motivated restaging of the scriptural narrative of Noah's Ark, which casts John the Carpenter as an unlikely second Noah. The trick is devised by Nicholas, ostensibly so as to have his way with Alison, whilst her loyal husband is stowed away in a tub awaiting the great flood, but in reality the entire invention has about it a kind

of extravagance, a delight in comic play for its own sake which makes it quite distinct from the concise tricks typical of the fabliaux genre. Its humorous effect comes chiefly from the incongruous interfusion of two radically opposing figures and situations – on the one hand that of the noble, ancient patriarch who spoke with God and was tasked with the preservation of humankind in a narrative of universal significance and, on the other, this gullible ‘gnof’ in a tub, tied to the rafters of his little house in ‘Oxenford’, saying his ‘pasternoster’ while his wife is ‘swyved’ by a wily Clerk (I.3638-3652). It is the ingenious way that Chaucer weaves the two situations together, the play of identity and difference between them and the bathetic shifts between sacred and profane, epic narrative and provincial debacle, the Carpenter’s belief and the underlying reality of the situation that makes the scene so funny.

This interplay can be traced in the details of Nicholas’ revelation of his prophecy to John. The passage broadly echoes God’s words to Noah in Genesis 6:13-22, with Nicholas in the role of God, warning of the flood that ‘shal mankynde drenche’ (I.3521) and providing John with practical instructions about the construction of a vessel and provision of victuals. But at the same time as Nicholas’s speech follows the Genesis narrative, it comically distorts and deflates it, with continual reminders of its own provincial context and carnal motives. In Nicholas’ hyperbolic prophecy of a downpour ‘so wilde and wood that half so greet was never Noes flood’ (I.3518) there is already a conspicuous note of absurdity. This is brilliantly amplified by his assurance that all that is required to survive such apocalyptical devastation is a few tubs, ‘withouten mast and seyl’ (I.3532), and ‘vitaille suffisant but for a day’ for (unlike Noah’s flood) ‘the water shal aslake [...] aboute pryme upon the nexte day’ (I.3554). The absurdity of the idea, the continual shifting of scale and the mismatching of biblical narrative with contemporary provincial reality reaches its triumphant climax in Nicholas’ picture of their escape – they will ‘breke an hole an heigh, upon the gable’ and float out of ‘over the stable’, where John can then ‘swymme as myrie [...] As dooth the white doke afer hire drake’ (I.3569-3583). Both the light-hearted, pastoral quality of the image and the attention to domestic detail comically underlines the incommensurability of the two carpenters and their worlds in the very same instant in which they are imaginatively fused.

Comic deflation works here on several levels. As regards the reader, we are repeatedly invited to entertain two incompatible ideas simultaneously – to picture

together Noah and John, God's will and a clerk's lewd trick – and the result is a pleasurable break down in our efforts of comprehension, a surrender to the absurdity of the proposition. In narrative terms, this ludicrous and hubristic fabrication sets up both Nicholas and John for a fall, as inevitably the deception cannot be sustained and comes (literally) crashing down to earth in ways that even the 'hende' clerk cannot anticipate or control (I.3815-3823). In the final dénouement, external forces intervene in human scheming, demonstrating our fallibility, our lack of ultimate control.

As Kolve has argued, part of the comedy of the tale derives from this deflation of its protagonists' respective presumptions, but its meaning is not fundamentally moral. 'The tale moves towards adjustment not judgement' and 'celebrates the possible sovereignty of comic order in daily life'.²⁹ I would add that the divine narrative they ape is itself caught up in this process of deflation and celebration. It too is brought down to earth and rendered momentarily comical, even absurd in its profane and parochial re-staging. The scene of John, Alison and Nicholas hanging chastely in their respective tubs, and the 'revel and the melodye' (I.3652) that then follow, entails a kind of divine parody. In Bakhtin's terms, it is an example of grotesque realism: the 'lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract [...] to the sphere of earth and body'.³⁰

A similar, and indeed more strident, form of deflation is under way in the Miller's appropriation of the discourse of courtly love, which played so prominent a part in the Knight's 'noble stories' (I.3110). Here again Chaucer's comic imagination works thorough the dynamic interfusion of incongruous aspects, both on the level of situation and language. Thus, it is with the amorous ordeals of Palamon and Arcite still in mind that we hear Nicholas's plea to Alison 'for deerne love of thee, lemman, I spille' (I.3278). The sentiment echoes Palamon's words on sight of Emily, 'but I have hire mercy [...] I nam but deed' (I.1121) and would not have seemed entirely misplaced in the mouth of either knight, but one must reconcile this correspondence with the fact that Nicholas has simultaneously 'caughte [Alison] by the queynte' (I.3276). A comical collision is engineered between the high-minded conventions of *fin amor* and the physicality and impropriety of Nicholas' approach, something which offends all courtly sentiment, but perhaps points out an underlying equivalence of

²⁹ Kolve, *Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1984), pp. 215-6

³⁰ Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, p. 21.

motivation, which the gestures and rhetoric of courtly love elide. Nicholas is not himself a disciple of *amour courtois*, but a 'hende' clerk in a fabliaux tale, and his words here are pragmatic and parodic.

By contrast, Absolon seems more earnest in his aspirations to the status of courtly love (a proposition itself absurd enough for an Oxford 'parissh clerk' [I.3657]) and consequently provides a more sustained source of parody and deflation. Through Absolon's involvement, the tale is full of bathetic and already vulgarised allusions to the conventions and rhetoric of *fin amor*. As Donaldson has illustrated, his appearance, behaviour, and the source of his amorous language owe far more to the Harley Lyrics and vernacular romances of the kind which Chaucer parodies in *Sir Thopas* than to Capellanus' *Art of Courtly Love* or Dante's *La Vita Nuova*.³¹ In him, as in *Sir Thopas*, we find that the courtly idiom has already undergone a process of degeneration to become a string of tired, superficial and almost inherently comical clichés. But the 'popular idiom' which is displayed and ironised in Absolon's 'love-longing', his nocturnal habits, his 'eyen greye as goos', still refers back to those high and serious courtly ideals. As Donaldson argues, Chaucer is here parodying the style and values of popular romance but also, those of true 'courtly romance': both 'are subjected to the harshly naturalistic criticism of the fabliaux'.³²

This process of parody and deflation is nowhere more apparent than in the crucial scene of the misplaced kiss at the shot-window. Here again we see the dynamic interfusion of incongruous perspectives and discourses: the styles of courtly love, popular romance, colloquial speech and the fabliaux are all intertwined, culminating in one brilliant moment of physical comedy. Comic incongruity is registered first on the verbal level: in the contrast between Absolon's mannered and ludicrously overwrought address to Alison and her concise, colloquial responses. He appeals to her with a stream of hackneyed romance metaphors – 'ye hony-comb, sweete cynamome' 'my faire bryd', 'like a turtle trewe is my moornynge' (I.3698-3707), and she replies 'Go fro the window, Jakke fool [...] And lat me slepe, a twenty devel wey!' (I.3708-3712). When Absolon is promised a kiss in return for his departure, he sees his greatest opportunity yet to play the role of the courtly lover – with all due ceremony, reverence and seriousness he falls to his knees and utters by way of prologue – 'I am a lord at alle degrees [...] Lemman, thy grace, and sweete

³¹ Donaldson, *Speaking of Chaucer*, pp. 25-27.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 29.

bryd, thyn oore!’ (I.3725-6). The extravagance of his courtly parlance and performance is re-emphasised by Alison’s curt colloquial reply and then, of course, by the sudden introduction of reality –

Derk was the nyght as pich, or as the cole,
And at the window out she pute hir hole
And Absolon, hym fil no bet ne wers,
But with his mouth he kiste hir naked ers
(I.2731-34)

The lewd ‘jape’ to which Absolon here falls victim in what seemed his moment of triumph is narrated with a stark economy of expression typical of the fabliau style. Here again we see the kinetic quality of Chaucer’s comic art at its finest moments: the sudden yet subtly managed and meticulously prepared for collision of incongruous styles and perspectives, the fall from high aspirations to low realities and the fall into laughter it generates. There is a conspicuous semantic shift from Absolon’s courtly hyperbole, his appeal to the longed-for ‘grace’ of the Lady, to the unadorned fabliau discourse of physical action and bodily parts and there is a corresponding conceptual shift from the imagined grace of the courtly lady to the reality of a young carpenter’s wife sticking her ‘hole’ out of the window to be kissed.

In these terms Alison’s ‘jape’ involves the comic deflation of courtly ideals of *Frauendienst*. We are invited in this scene to imaginatively hold together the idea of the beautiful, debonair courtly lady evoked by Absolon’s courtly parlance (one thinks back to Emily gathering flowers, singing ‘as an aungel, hevenysshly’ in the enclosed garden (I.1055)) and Alison’s crude trick. We are left with an image of the courtly lover’s self-abasement before his Lady triumphantly materialised. In contrast to Emily’s withdrawn and ethereal grace, Alison’s trick has an air of jovial defiance and vitality about it, quite in keeping with the comic tenor of *The Miller’s Tale*. In Bakhtin’s terms, it is a perfect example of ‘degradation’ – a triumphant re-assertion of the universal and positive bodily principle, with its festive and regenerative force, against all that is ‘high, spiritual, ideal abstract’, a reminder perhaps that even the

courtly lady behind the veils of literary artifice has ‘a thyng al rough and long yherd’ (I.3738).³³

These iconic scenes from *The Miller’s Tale* provide striking examples of comic deflation, and lend themselves well to Bakhtin’s notion of ‘grotesque realism’, but I want to qualify this by saying that the mode of deflation I am tracing in *CT* is often more ambiguous and does not always entail the triumphant assertion of the ‘bodily principle’, in the way that Bakhtin suggests. Deflation often operates on a subtle and localised stylistic level amidst more serious content. For example, in *The Knight’s Tale*, when Palamon and Arcite are battling together in a ‘grove’ like a ‘wood leoun’ and ‘cruel tigre’ (I.1656-7) Chaucer deflates the seriousness and intensity of the scene by taking its already heightened rhetoric to the point of comic absurdity, adding ‘up to the ancle foghte they in hir blood’ (I.1655-60). With the arrival of Theseus, further comic light is thrown upon the knights’ epic struggle, as he observes, bemusedly, the ‘heigh folye’ that love will lead its servants into, against the call of reason and self-interest. What is more, he adds, in a tone more reminiscent of the Host than of Boccaccio’s Teseo, ‘she for whom they han this jolitee [...] woot namoore of [it] than woot a cokkow or an hare!’ (I.1806-10). Again we see that typically Chaucerian shift of style and perspective, the move from the ideal to the pragmatic, which throws the knights’ endeavours into relief, but here its application and comic effect are more restrained.

Similar subtle and incipiently comic shifts of style can be found throughout *CT*, for example in the Clerk’s praise of Petrarch who ‘Enlumyned al Ytallie of poetrie’ but is ‘now deed and nailed in his cheste’ (IV.29), in the curious migration of the line ‘pity renneth soone in gentil herte’ from its Dantescan origins in the pathos of *Inferno*.5.100 through its adaptation in praise of Theseus’s magnanimity, to its final sardonic appropriation by the Merchant, in description of May’s adulterous intent (IV.1986). Something similar occurs, as Cooper points out, in the transposition of the expression ‘drunk as a mouse’ from its initial metaphorical application by Palamon in his lofty ruminations on human destiny (I.1261) to its colloquial, domestic use by the Wife of Bath, to berate a literally drunken husband (III.2460).³⁴ These instances of stylistic incongruity have a more muted and equivocal comic resonance than those

³³ Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, p. 19.

³⁴ Helen Cooper, *The Structure of the Canterbury Tales* (Athens: University of Georgia, 1984), pp. 88-89.

noted in *The Miller's Tale*. They too involve a kind of deflation, a clash of styles and perspectives, but they cannot be adequately explained in terms of the 'lowering of all that is high and serious' or the triumph of the 'material bodily principle' found in Bakhtin's theory of grotesque realism.³⁵ Rather than giving absolute priority to the 'sphere of earth and body' over the serious and spiritual, they hold these two opposing spheres together and through the dynamic juxtaposition of styles and perspectives they create a dialogic field in which high and low, spiritual and material, earnest and game, complicate and qualify each other, without either side becoming entirely dominant. Hence, although comic deflation in *CT* often involves the festive re-assertion of the bodily sphere, it can also be understood as a hermeneutic principle. It involves the complication and undercutting of all manner of monological and universalising voices and perspectives – whether idealising or materialistic – and can be characterised more as a movement from singularity to multiplicity and contradiction than from spirit to earth.

This is best illustrated in *The Nun's Priest's Tale*, in its persistent vacillations between multiple stylistic registers and between the human and bestial qualities of its central characters. Chauntecleer is at once a cock who 'chucks' when he finds 'a corn in the yerd' and happily 'treads' (VII.3172-3178) his seven hens; and a self-important scholar who can cite Macrobius and Scripture, from his perch. His 'paramour' Pertelote is at once a hen and a 'damoysele', 'curteys [...] discreet and debonaire' (VII.2870-1). Chaucer never lets us lose sight of either of these conflicting perspectives and much of the humour of the tale derives from the subtle confluence and movement between the two.

Chaucer is here parodying and extending to the point of absurdity the convention of the beast fable, which, for the purpose of a moral point, grants to animals the basic power of speech and reason, but only as appropriate to their situation. He takes that license but abandons all sense of generic proportion, so that his chickens become almost as human, as opinionated, as learned and loquacious as his pilgrims, and their world just as full of unanswered questions, drama and significance. As Muscatine writes, 'animal and human, fiction and truth severally join and separate, change partners and flirt here'.³⁶ The whole of human history and

³⁵ Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, pp. 20-22.

³⁶ Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition*, p. 239.

culture, which has been explored throughout *CT*, is parodically rehearsed within this little barnyard simulacrum.

Certainly, one of the effects of the continual shifting of perspective – from the heights of human philosophy to the smallness of the barnyard drama, from the fall of Troy and the fall of Man, to a fox snatching a cock – is to cast the high seriousness of the human world in a comical light. A kind of deflation is taking place, when questions of providence and predetermination are applied to the fate of a cock. But this does not entail the unequivocal lowering of all that is ‘high and serious’ to the sphere of animality – it does not say, as the Miller well might, that beneath all human strivings and high speculation is only the clucking of chickens – nor does it entail, as Stephen Knight has argued, a politically conservative discarding of ‘the complexities of late medieval thought’.³⁷ Rather it serves to hold both high and low perspectives together; to present simultaneously in its full incongruity and richness *both* the profundity and the absurdity, the nobility and the folly of human life. What is deflated here is the effort of thought to give priority to either side of this irresolvable equation, to draw from this complex reality a single, univocal ‘sentence’.

The materialist perspective and bodily principle, celebrated by Bakhtin, has its part to play within this drama, and its representative is, ironically enough, the ‘faire damoysele Pertelote’ (VII.2870). For in another of the tale’s many incongruous shifts of perspective, this hen, who is described initially in terms of courtly elegance, soon morphs into something like the Wife of Bath in feathered form. Hers is the language of colloquial, effusive, belligerent and unashamed materialism. Her response to Chauntecleer’s frightful dream is to berate him for his cowardice, reduce all dreams to an issue of bodily humours and advice him to ‘taak som laxatyf’ to purge him ‘bynethe and eek above’ (VII.2908 and VII.2969).

Her prosaic, bodily discourse provides a comic contrast to Chauntecleer’s rhetorically elaborate, esoteric and long-winded speeches, but it is not given priority. It too is just one voice, set in play amongst many, and its strident, universalising naturalism is equally subject to parody and deflation as Chauntecleer’s scholarly ruminations. Here, then, it is not ‘grotesque realism’ but the Bakhtinian idea of ‘dialogism’, which is most useful in interpreting Chaucer’s comic style. Pertelote’s lively, colloquial materialism and Chauntecleer’s sophistic pedantry are both

³⁷ Knight, *Geoffrey Chaucer*, pp. 141-3.

parodically performed and set in play along with the numerous other languages and genres of the tale: from romance and vernacular lyric, to sermon and exemplum and the philosophical discourse of ‘symple necessitee’ and ‘necessitee condicioneel’ (VII.3245-3250), from the high style of divine invocation, apostrophe and lament – ‘O destinee, that mayst nat been eschewed! . . . ’ (VII.3338-3374), to the pastoral and fabliau idiom of the barnyard chase – ‘Out! Harrow and welaway! | Ha, ha! The fox!’ (VII.3375-3392). All these various modes and levels of discourse, clash, collide, sometimes interpenetrate in the same semantic unit, as in ‘O woful hennes, right so criden ye’ or Chauntecleer’s own ‘conclusioun’: ‘I seye forthermoor | That I ne telle of laxatives no stoor, [...] I hem diffye’ (VII.3150-3156). Chaucer maintains an ironic and dynamic relationship to all of these utterances, these fragments of language, as he fuses them into a new hybrid and accretive aesthetic form. As Bakhtin writes of the dominant mode of the comic novelist, Chaucer is involved in ‘a lively to-and-fro movement in his relation to language, [...] a continual shifting of the distance between author and language, so that first some, then other aspects of language are thrown into relief’.³⁸ And in the process all languages are dialogised and brought to the level of reflection. They are revealed in relation to each other to be perspectival and limited, to embody predetermined investments, choices, predilections, exclusions, revealed in such a way that no one language can convincingly claim a natural and absolute authority.

For Bakhtin it was in this capacity of literary ‘heteroglossia’ to denature and decentralise the ‘authoritarian word’ of official culture that its radical and creative potential lay.³⁹ Bakhtin, though, identified this potential predominantly with prose, and broadly saw the major poetic genres of the late middle ages as conservative forms, influenced by and contributing to the ‘unifying, centralising, centripetal forces of verbal-ideological life’.⁴⁰ He omits all mention of Chaucer and focuses instead on the prose of Boccaccio and Rabelais, but had he considered *CT*, and especially *NPT* he would have found an early and remarkably sophisticated example of precisely the kind of ‘dialogised heteroglossia’ he saw as essential to the development of the novel and its radical potentialities. Not only would he have found this on the localised level of stylistic shifts explored above, but also writ large, in the contest of diverse tales and

³⁸ Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, p. 301.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 258.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 259.

perspectives, the ‘commonwealth of styles’ that structures the work as a whole. Here the competing voices of the pilgrims are mutually dialogised through the vehicle of the tale-telling drama, so that no one voice gains the ascendancy, and in the process, as Ganim and Aers have already argued, language itself becomes the object of critical reflection.⁴¹ Fundamentally, what is deflated throughout *CT* is every single interpretive effort to unify, order and fit reality into a given semantic and conceptual model. Every pilgrim’s attempt to control and inscribe reality through their narratives is undermined by the always more complex play of voices in which it is caught and by the ironical potentiality of every utterance in this community of discourse.

NPT functions, in this respect, as a microcosm and parodic summation of *CT*. Within its ‘commonwealth of styles’ no single perspective is entirely embraced, but equally none are relinquished; all are held together in an ironic, questioning manner that gives, as Muscatine wrote, ‘a humane suggestion of the relativity of all things’.⁴² At the end of the tale, as at the end of *CT*, we are asked to take ‘the fruyt and let the chaff be still’ (VII.3443). An equivocal attempt is made to re-establish the ‘authoritarian word’, to close the play of language and give it a purpose, a meaning, but this effort is itself dialogised by the complexity of the tale it seeks to close. The final generic and hackneyed morals provided by the cock, the fox and the Nun’s Priest – do not put trust in flatterers, keep your eyes open, know when to be quiet (VII.3426-37) – are inadequate to describe the complexities of a tale, which has transcended the binary and instrumental terms of both beast fable and moral allegory. The tale itself ‘cannot’, as Fyler writes, ‘be reduced to a simple, univocal moralitee’.⁴³

This deflation of univocal meaning does not entail a superficial acceptance of meaninglessness, a revelling in pure ‘folye’ (VII.3438), it is not reducible to mere chaff, nor is it a lowering of all serious intellectual efforts to the earth and body. Rather, it has its own comic and paradoxical significance. By persistently subverting the fixed binaries of fiction and truth, game and earnest, low and high values, the animal and the human world, *NPT* presents a vision of the full incongruity of human life which exists in the irresolvable tension between these terms. It finds in the ‘tale of a cock’ the perfect comic image of human life in all its smallness and its grandeur, its folly and profundity, suspended between the barnyard and the heavens, aspiring to

⁴¹ Aers, *Chaucer, Langland and the Creative Imagination*, p. 82; Ganim, *Chaucerian Theatricality*, pp. 15-18.

⁴² Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition*, p. 242.

⁴³ Fyler, *Language and the Declining World*, pp. 58-9.

meaning, order and purpose and yet always caught in realities beyond its control and comprehension. It captures the contradictory nature of the human being as both a philosophical being and a material creature of desire and instinct, prone to falls and misadventures. Here, and throughout *CT*, we are asked to see at once both sides of this unsolvable equation, to see life *simultaneously* as the ‘tale of a cock’ and a ‘pilgrimage’ of profound and unfathomable significance. It is in expressing and returning us to this essential incongruity, this absurd middle, of human life that the philosophical depth of Chaucer’s art of comic deflation lies. It does not affirm ‘high’ over ‘low’ values or vice versa, rather it dwells in the liminal, contradictory terrain between these poles, in the *in-between* which metaphysical thought, in all its forms, has sought to escape and disguise. It is the ‘gay science’ which dances, as Nietzsche wrote ‘between holy men and whores, between god and world beneath’ and laughing affirms *this life* in all its wonder and its folly.⁴⁴

But the problem for Chaucer as a medieval poet is that this comic vision cannot be expressed harmoniously within the hermeneutic framework of allegory discussed in Chapter One. Chaucer’s art of comic deflation does not lead us beyond this world, toward God and the Good, but implicitly subverts such transcendent aspirations by blurring the essential binaries on which that narrative of spiritual progress depends – returning us to the inescapable incongruities and contradictions of life in this transitory, material world. It was in this spirit that Baudelaire described the comic as ‘one of the clearest signs of the devil in man, one of the numerous seeds contained in the symbolic apple’.⁴⁵

Indeed the kinds of humour, play and comedy that Chaucer draws upon and explores in *CT* were themselves a source of long-standing suspicion in Christian thought. In *Ecclesiastes* it is written that ‘the heart of the wise is where there is mourning, and the heart of fools where there is mirth’.⁴⁶ Similarly Saint Paul renounces ‘filthiness’, ‘foolish talking’ and ‘jesting’ as part of the ‘unfruitful works of darkness’ (Ephesians 5.4) and, amongst the early Church Fathers, Tertullian and Augustine both condemned comic practices as incitements to irrationality and immorality, incompatible with Christian piety and self-control.⁴⁷ These ascetic

⁴⁴ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), p. 375.

⁴⁵ Charles Baudelaire, ‘De l’essence du rire’ cited by Kendrick, *Chaucerian Play*, p. 1.

⁴⁶ Ecclesiastes 7.2 Douay-Rheims Catholic Bible <www.drbo.org> [accessed 19 September 2012]

⁴⁷ See Tertullian, *Apology; De Spectaculis*, trans. by Walter Ker (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931), p. 17; Augustine, *The Confessions*, pp. 36-7.

criticisms were carried forward into medieval clerical responses to the comic. An early fifteenth-century homilist writes, for example, that ‘worlde myrth makyth a man to forgete his God and hymselfe also’ and in the *Cursor Mundi* (c.1300) we are reminded that ‘thris [Christ] wep [...] but we find never quar he logh’.⁴⁸ These ideas are given expression within *CT* itself by the Parson who, in his penitential treatise, reprovably categorises comic behaviour under the sins of tongue, as speech ‘that is withouten profit’ (X.645-650). ‘Janglylynge’, which, rather ominously, could describe a good part of *CT*, is called ‘a synne of apert folye’ and ‘japerers’ [that] ‘maken folk to laughe at hire japery’ are said to ‘been the develes apes’ and ‘travaillen in the service of the devel’ (X.650).

That *CT* is bound up with this world of jangling and japing and the irreverent parodying and questioning of established truths could do little to strengthen the poet’s conviction in the ultimate spiritual legitimacy of his work. Here suspicion of the comic compounds and coalesces with those deeper religious suspicions of literary discourse discussed in the introduction to this thesis. For Chaucer, comedy is both a powerful creative force and a source of moral tension. In the comic, as in creative literature itself, there remains something essentially problematic, subversive, recalcitrant, something that needs to be excused, counterbalanced, contained, even perhaps ultimately renounced. This can be seen in the two apologies that Chaucer’s narrator makes for the churls and their tales of ‘harlotrie’ (I.725-736, I.3170-86) and I will return in Section Three to consider these and other ways in which Chaucer seeks to rein in the comic play he sets in motion. But the need to explain, contain and legitimise the comic, to locate it safely within the broader terms of serious and official discourse, does not just belong to the poet wrestling with concerns of reception and questions of the value of his literary enterprise. It is also an imperative which continues in critical responses to Chaucer’s comedy, both in its early reception and in the criticism of more recent years. In the following section I discuss the various ways in which commentators and critics throughout the centuries have sought to neutralise, negotiate or explore the problematic aspect of Chaucerian comedy. I use their positions to contextualise my own theory of comic deflation and lay the grounds for a full discussion of its role in Chaucer’s portrayal of the Wife of Bath and Pardoner.

⁴⁸ Anonymous fifteenth-century homily and *Cursor Mundi*, both cited by Kolve, *The Play called Corpus Christi* (Stanford: University of California, 1966), p. 126.

II. Legitimising Comedy

The need to contain the subversive implications of Chaucer's comedy was especially pronounced for his immediate cultural heirs. For the poets of the fifteenth century Chaucer was not a comic poet, but, first and foremost, the revered founder of English letters. As such, the colloquial style and lascivious comic content found in *CT* presented, implicitly, a problem to be dealt with. The process of legitimising and downplaying Chaucerian comedy begins in Lydgate's Prologue to *The Siege of Thebes* (1421). There Lydgate ascribes the tales of 'ribaude' to their fictional narrators who 'a quyte hem-silf [...] boystously in her termes rude', and exonerates Chaucer as the 'chief register of this pilgrimage'.⁴⁹ By continuing the 'fiction' of the poet as a reporter initiated by Chaucer himself, the troubling comic elements of *CT* can be disavowed and the rhetorical purity of the noble laureate preserved. Implicit here is that didactic and classically derived conception of comedy, discussed at the beginning of the last section, whereby 'inferior people' are presented with their vices and follies as the object of ridicule and moral criticism. Lydgate's is, in this respect, the first in a long line of moral readings of Chaucer's comedy. By sustaining the fiction of Chaucer as 'chief registrer', Lydgate gives the poet both the role of reporter and moral commentator. Whilst, according to Lydgate, Chaucer wrote 'forgetting noght', he was simultaneously 'voiding the chaf [...] Enlumynyng the trewe piked greyn', pointing to the true Christian path amidst the competing voices of the pilgrims and their tales.⁵⁰ The potentially troubling comic inclusivity and irresolution of *CT* is thus closed down by the assumption of a governing moral perspective.

This moralisation of comedy was not however sufficient to remove all doubt about the status of the comic tales. Whilst Caxton maintains, in a similar fashion, that Chaucer 'wrote no void word', it is intriguing to note the selective emphasis that still accompanies and subtly qualifies this claim. For example, when surveying *CT*, Caxton alludes only once to comedy, with a single, euphemistic reference to 'tales of myrthe' squeezed amidst the more stately matter of 'noblesse, wysedom, gentilesse

⁴⁹ Lydgate, Prologue to *The Siege of Thebes*, in *The Canterbury Tales: Fifteenth-Century Continuations and Additions*, ed. by John Bowers (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1992), 1. 25-48.

⁵⁰ Ibid. 1.56

[...] holynesse and vertue'.⁵¹ When Lydgate, in the Prologue to *The Fall of Princes*, offers an extensive review of Chaucer's literary career a similar bias emerges. Special mention is made of the translation of Boethius, the *Tale of Melibee*, 'Griseldis parfit pacience' and the 'pitous tragedies' of the Monk whilst there is only a single reference to 'tales of disport'.⁵²

This kind of marginalisation hardly bespeaks an unflinching confidence in the value of comedy. But whilst Chaucerian comedy was moralised and downplayed in early responses, it was not entirely excluded. In the fifteenth century 'Canterbury Continuations' there are also real signs of appreciation of the comic spirit of Chaucer's work. Despite its moralising strategies, the Prologue to *The Siege of Thebes* shows some sympathy for the festive spirit of *CT* and, in Lydgate's exchanges with the Host, a genuine feeling for the comic style of the tale-telling frame. The anonymous author of 'The Canterbury Interlude' and 'Tale of Beryn' exhibits an even keener appreciation of the comic potentialities of *CT* in his own narrative of the Pardoner's ill-fated amorous encounter with a young tapster at the inn where the pilgrims are lodged. In its skilful combination of sexual trickery, nocturnal mishaps, mock-courtly language and farcical domestic violence it is a brilliant rehearsal of the fabliau antics found in the first fragment of *CT*, 'though' as the narrator acknowledges, with typical Chaucerian ambivalence, 'it be no grete holynes to prech this ilk matere'.⁵³ The significance of these two medieval continuations of Chaucer's comic legacy should not be underestimated, but, as Lewis said, they are notably isolated, 'a small harvest beside the innumerable imitations of his amatory and allegorical poetry'.⁵⁴

In the early modern period the trend toward ethical readings of Chaucer's comedy continued, and was invigorated by the development of Renaissance ideas of comedy. Stephen Hawes (1509) wrote of how Chaucer's 'golden beames of rhetoric | all abroad doth shewe our vyces to clense' and William Webbe (1586) of how his most 'lascivious workes' sought rather to 'withdraw mens mindes [...] from such foul

⁵¹ William Caxton, the 'Proheymye' to 'The Canterbury Tales', 2nd edn (1484) in *Chaucer, the Critical Heritage*, ed. by Brewer, pp.75-6

⁵² Lydgate, *The Fall of Princes*, in *Chaucer: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Brewer, ll. 1431-9 and ll. 344-50.

⁵³ 'The Canterbury Interlude and Tale of Beryn', line 120, in *The Canterbury Tales: Fifteenth-Century Continuations and Additions*, ed. by Bowers.

⁵⁴ Lewis, *The Allegory of Love*, p. 162.

vices than to embrace such beastly follies'.⁵⁵ The fullest early treatment of Chaucerian comedy as moral satire came from Francis Beaumont who defends Chaucer's 'incivility' by pointing to the precedent of Plautus and Terence, and the rhetorical 'decorum' observed by these writers in 'giving to their comical persons such maner of speeches as did best fit their dispositions'. The representation of the 'filthie delights of the baser sort of people' is ethically justified as a means to 'discover all vices of that Age'.⁵⁶ Here, as in Lydgate and in later ethical readings of Chaucer's comedy, the humorous depiction of 'inferior people' does not function to deflate 'all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract' but rather to reaffirm a conservative sense of moral and social distinction. The 'low' characters of comedy are presented not as agents but objects of ridicule and moral critique.

As Beaumont's efforts to justify Chaucer's comedy suggest, there was also emerging throughout the early modern period an increasing intolerance for the crudity of the comic aspects of *CT*. This coalesced with a growing sense of the outmoded nature of Chaucer's language and post-reformation notions of the ignorance and barbarity of the Middle Ages. Harrington notes, for example the poet's 'flat scurilitie' and Defoe blames the 'unpoliteness of the Age' for the fact that Chaucer is 'not fit for Modesty to read or hear'.⁵⁷ Dryden, in his translations, set about salvaging Chaucer from the crudity of his own language and age. He praised what he saw as the timeless poet in Chaucer, but could find no moral or artistic legitimacy in the 'obscene words' and unseemly behaviour of some of his characters. Thus, he confines his choice of tales 'to such as savour nothing of immodesty', explicitly disowning all associations with the comic profanity of the fabliaux.⁵⁸ Here again is that same bias against comedy in favour of serious, transcendent poetic matter noted in earlier responses.

From my perspective the most intriguing response of the early-modern period is one which eschewed moral readings and perceived a more intimate and problematic relation between Chaucer's artistic accomplishments and his comic spirit: a little known dream-vision attributed to the late sixteenth-century dramatist Robert Greene. In 'Greene's Vision' the dramatist, who is depicted struggling with his conscience about the moral worth of his literary output, is visited by Gower and Chaucer who

⁵⁵ Hawes and Webbe, in *Chaucer: The Critical Heritage*, p. 82 and p. 125.

⁵⁶ Francis Beaumont, 'Letter to Thomas Speight, in *Chaucer: The Critical Heritage*, p. 138.

⁵⁷ John Harrington, 'An Apologie of Poetrie', Daniel Defoe, 'Mist's Weekly Journal' in *Chaucer: Critical Heritage*, p. 69 and p. 174.

⁵⁸ John Dryden, *Preface to Fables*, in *Chaucer: Critical Heritage*, p. 167.

come to represent, respectively, the poles of sober didacticism and comic aestheticism. In the debate which ensues Chaucer cheerfully defends both Greene's and his own comedies from moral criticism, insisting with a laugh 'that poets wits are free, and their words ought to be without checke [...] let myself suffice for an instance, whose Canterbury tales are broad enough before'. Gower retorts to Greene and implicitly Chaucer 'thou hast sowed chaffe and shalt reape no harvest [...] thy books are baits that allure youth [...] good phrases without any profite'.⁵⁹ Through this opposition Green envisions comedy as an integral aspect of Chaucer's work, but more than this, he connects the irreverent spirit of Chaucerian comedy to an idea of the autonomous value of poetry, its freedom from moral judgements and commitments. The point is stressed through the contrast with Gower's own sober, allegorical art of commitment, wherein poetry is always ultimately subordinate to and given value through some moral goal that lies beyond itself; for Greene's 'Chaucer', the moral is subordinate to an aesthetic imperative: 'poet's wits are free'.⁶⁰

But Greene's vision does not end with the triumph of aesthetic autonomy. Ultimately the dreamer sides with Gower's 'grave sentences' over Chaucer and his own 'amorous trifles'.⁶¹ Greene's gesture toward aesthetic autonomy was, in this respect, untimely and bound up with feelings of guilt. Like Chaucer himself, he was restrained by and ultimately beholden to a framework of morally orientated aesthetic values that could not, as yet, be confidently challenged— his imaginary 'Chaucer' expresses a jovial and unrepentant aestheticism that neither Greene nor Chaucer himself could fully endorse. Nonetheless, in Greene's vision there is an appreciation of the value and subversive potential of Chaucer's comic art, even as it is ultimately disavowed.

With the broad social and intellectual shifts of the modern era, the ground was laid for a more positive appraisal of Chaucerian comedy. In nineteenth-century responses there was a growing emphasis placed on Chaucer's sense of humour, his 'keen observation of nature' and his skill for 'dramatic characterisation'.⁶² What was previously seen as the indelicacy of his verse was recast as robust vivacity and faithfulness to life unadorned. In this context the critical significance of those

⁵⁹ Robert Green, in *Chaucer: the Critical Heritage*, p. 133.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² George Crabbe, 'Preface to the Canterbury Tales'; William Hazlitt, 'Lectures on the English Poets' in *Chaucer: the Critical Heritage*, p. 265 and p. 276.

characters that Dryden had frankly dismissed as ‘profane’ could be re-evaluated. It was Kittredge, in the early twentieth century, who brought together the various strands of Chaucerian naturalism, humanism and humour in his theory of *CT* as a ‘human comedy’, whose artistic purpose was not to pass moral judgement but to observe and explore human reality, as an end-in-itself.⁶³ In Kittredge’s thesis the comic characterisation found in the frame – the ‘road-side drama’ – was taken from the margins, and became the living heart and major accomplishment of Chaucer’s poetry. As the main ‘*dramatis personae*’, characters like the Wife and Pardoner were given centre stage and they were no longer moral-types, ‘inferior people’ satirically portrayed, but living, breathing, complex characters, infused with the ineffability, the tension and particularity of life.⁶⁴ Lowes continued this line of thought, arguing for Chaucer’s comic characters and tales as his major accomplishments. The Host, the Wife, the Miller, the Friar, the Pardoner – these ‘engaging rascals’ – were Chaucer’s ‘greatest creations’, though the intriguing question Lowes raises as to why Chaucer’s genius shone through in these comic rascals rather than more virtuous characters he chooses not to answer.⁶⁵

Kittredge and Lowe brought humour and comedy to the heart of discussions of Chaucer, but their conception of the comic itself requires further scrutiny. What exactly did they mean by calling *CT* a ‘human comedy’ and how did they characterise the comic spirit of Chaucer’s work? In using the term ‘human comedy’ Kittredge may have had in mind Balzac’s *Comedie Humaine*, with its encyclopaedic scope and aspiration toward complete and impartial social analysis. He may also have been thinking of the relation between *CT* and Dante’s ‘divine’ *Commedia*. But one key sense of the term that emerges strongly in both Kittredge’s and Lowes’s analysis is that of comedy as a dramatic and unifying form, derived from Aristotelian aesthetics.

Despite its incompleteness, Kittredge envisioned *CT* as implicitly united by this underlying structural principle of comic drama and Lowes spoke similarly of its ‘organic wholeness’.⁶⁶ One can thus see why the ‘marriage group’ – with its web of personal conflicts (supposedly) resolved in the idealised conjugality of *The Franklin’s Tale* – became the cornerstone of Kittredge’s thesis. The triumph of human generosity and the ‘ideal marriage’, which concludes this ‘one act of the human comedy’ not

⁶³ Kittredge, *Chaucer and his Poetry*, p. 155.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 218.

⁶⁵ Lowes, *Geoffrey Chaucer*, p. 176.

⁶⁶ Kittredge, *Chaucer and his Poetry*, p. 167; Lowes, *Geoffrey Chaucer*, p. 178.

only creates a sense of formal order, it also fits neatly with the traditional model of Comedy as a festive form ending with marriage: as the symbolic celebration of life and the happy accommodation of human beings within the prevailing social order.⁶⁷ It was, in this respect, a fairly conservative and contained idea of comedy which Kittredge made central to *CT*. He was keen to stress, in his own fashion, its harmonising spirit and sense of decorum rather than its contradictory, parodic and potentially subversive nature. Indeed, Kittredge and Lowes in no way saw Chaucer's comedy as in tension with the dominant social or spiritual values of his epoch; quite the reverse; for them its cheerful spirit of tolerance and equanimity rested upon the complete assurance of his faith and conservatism. 'Chaucer', Kittredge writes, 'submitted himself to the rules [...] and was all the better for it': the laughter of his 'human comedy' is the healthy laughter of a world at ease with itself.⁶⁸

Whatever criticisms can be levelled against it, the overall significance of Kittredge's theory should not be underestimated. He effectively discerned in the comic drama of *CT* the emergence of a new mode of literature, a literature rooted in the free and multifaceted exploration of human character and social life, without didactic purpose or fixed moral answers. This essential idea recurs in various forms throughout later humanistic criticism; it was however strongly contested by Robertson and those who shared his perspective. Robertson saw in this mode of interpretation an imposition of modern values and redefined the comic elements of *CT* as emblematic aspects of the didactic and spiritually orientated structures of medieval aesthetics. Far from expressing the originality of the poet, they became formulaic manifestations of late-gothic style, specifically related to the figure of the 'grotesque' found in church architecture, wall painting and manuscript marginalia.⁶⁹

'The influence of the gothic' Robertson remarks 'is unmistakable' in characters such as Chanticleer, the Monk, the Miller and the Prioress.⁷⁰ What makes them 'grotesques' is their incongruity, an 'unresolved conflict in their make-up.' But, as Robertson points out, this is a purely iconographic and static conflict of values, with none of the dynamic passions and psychological tensions which Kittredge discerned in Chaucer's characters. The grotesque, in its deformity and morbid paralysis, is a monster not a human being; its function is to 'call attention to abstract

⁶⁷ Kittredge, *Chaucer and his Poetry*, p. 185

⁶⁸ Ibid. p. 30 and pp. 154-7.

⁶⁹ Robertson, *Preface to Chaucer*, p. 252-7.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 250.

concepts' with 'the added spice of humour'.⁷¹ Where I argue that the element of incongruity in the Chaucer's comic imagery has a deflating effect – complicating, and subverting what is 'high and serious' and provoking a laughter which is itself a kind of fall from order – Robertson draws the opposite conclusion. For him the comic incongruity of the grotesque image produces a sense of spiritual understanding and superiority, which leads the mind beyond the literal to 'a beauty which transcends corporal modulations'.⁷² In their comic discord and perversion Chaucer's 'grotesques' thus form a part of the overall spiritual hierarchy they superficially oppose. In arguing this Robertson effectively diffuses not only the moral and spiritual dangers of comedy, but the problem, which vexed earlier responses, of its questionable taste. Appealing again to the alterity of medieval aesthetics, he explains the surface vulgarity, evident for example in Nicholas' grabbing of Alison 'by the queynte' (I.3276) as part of the 'outward decorum of the Gothic style'; like the grimace of the gargoyle, in its perverse physicality it spurs the mind to rise above it.⁷³ As Robertson demonstrates, even in its moments of greatest mirth, licentiousness and folly, *CT* can be allegorised and moralised, but this sober and didactic mode of allegoresis, I would argue, is incompatible with the spontaneity, levity and unruliness that inheres in the comic. One cannot deduce the profound spiritual meaning that underlies Chaucer's comic imagery and laugh at the same time.

Robertson's approach not only turns Chaucerian comedy into a very serious, abstract affair, it also tends toward a rather reductive view of the comic characters of *CT* by treating them as emblematic figures, isolated from their development in the dramatic context of the tale-telling contest. Huppé's Robertsonian reading of *CT* goes some way to rectifying this problem by giving more ground to the dramatic character and psychological realism of the work. He describes the comic characters as voicing their tales in a manner reminiscent of Kittredge, but harnesses the ironic implications of this process to Robertson's allegorical schema. Thus, the Miller attempts to assert his naturalistic vision of reality, but *actually* 'his story serves to reveal the dark ignorance of his own soul'; similarly with the Wife of Bath 'Chaucer searches with humour and with sympathy the mind of a worldly woman whose vivacity and laughter

⁷¹ Robertson, *Preface to Chaucer*, p. 258.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 136.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 193.

hide the soul of a lost and wandering pilgrim'.⁷⁴ The evident humanist traces in Huppé's rhetoric of drama, sympathy and human character distinguishes it from Robertson's more dispassionate and iconographic analysis; however, the same transcendent movement from literal to spiritual meaning is still affirmed. It is the Wife and Miller who are here the misguided 'realists' – absorbed in the pleasures and illusions of *this world* – whilst Chaucer consummately expresses, through their own wayward narratives, his transcendent, otherworldly meaning. The Wife's worldly laughter is turned against itself and becomes the object of a deeper transcendent Christian 'humour', derived from the 'divine comedy' of humanity's fall and redemption.

Other critics have continued, with varying emphases, to discern in Chaucerian comedy an overarching moral and didactic purpose. Lawrence argues that the comic serves its purpose by mixing instruction with delight and Thompson has seen in the diversity of the tales an invitation to ethical discrimination.⁷⁵ Most recently in this line of morally orientated readings Heffernan has explored the connection between Chaucer's comedy and its Classical and Italian sources. Adopting the ethical conception of comedy expressed by Donatus, she says of Chaucer's comic tales 'they are all of them moral' and places them in a 'common European comic tradition' which secures their intellectual, ethical and aesthetic legitimacy.⁷⁶

The playful and equivocal nature of Chaucerian comedy leaves it open to both high and low, spiritualising and deflating modes of interpretation. It is part of its character, as has been shown, to bring conflicting discourses and perspectives into play without resolution. In these terms, the ethical readings discussed above represent a legitimate response to Chaucerian comedy and have an important part to play in an overall analysis of *CT*. But I maintain that by seeing Chaucer's comedy in essentially serious and moral terms (by reading, for example, through the verbal and situational comedy of the fabliau tales, in search of a responsible moral sentence) they occlude and misinterpret its spirit. To appreciate the comedy of *CT* it is necessary to enter into its playful and indeterminate nature, not just to assign it a function in a predetermined moral framework. This is borne out by a range of critical perspectives that have

⁷⁴ Huppé, *A Reading of the Canterbury Tales*, p. 135.

⁷⁵ Lawrence, *Laughter in the Courts of Love*, p. 23; N. S. Thompson, *Chaucer, Boccaccio and the Debate of Love* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 82.

⁷⁶ Heffernan, *Comedy in Chaucer and Boccaccio*, p. 129 and p. 133.

endeavoured to explore the comedy of *CT* in terms other than those of serious moral and spiritual sentence.

Around the same time that Robertson was applying his allegorical method to the comedy of *CT*, Donaldson provided an alternative approach based in close attention to the verbal nuances, ironies and ambiguities of Chaucer's poetry. He was in some senses continuing Kittredge's legacy of the 'human comedy', of an art whose *raison d'être* was the free and imaginative exploration of human reality, but his critical emphasis shifted from dramatic realism to sophisticated literary artifice. The crucial concept in his analysis was that of irony – the tendency of Chaucer's poetry to say one thing and mean another, to evade precise exposition, or rather to hold together multiple and contradictory meanings at once.

Donaldson argues that Chaucer's irony was generated by the indefinite relation between the poet and the poetic-persona he adopted.⁷⁷ Crucially he distinguished between the naïve and fallible pilgrim-narrator through which *CT* are focalised and the discerning ironical perspective of the poet who pulls the strings behind him, exploiting his comically conspicuous limitations to ironical effect. Chaucer's persona is described by Donaldson as a well-meaning but credulous observer – a comic 'every-man', easily wooed by the superficial charms of the world – and the true characters of the pilgrims and the complexity of Chaucer's appraisal of them is revealed indirectly through his omissions, prejudices and misappraisals. 'Chaucer the Pilgrim', for example, is entirely enchanted by the social graces of the Prioress, whereas the poet, whilst not insensible to her charms, sees through them, in moral and spiritual terms. Chaucer's ironical perspective is not, however, that of the moralist:

. . .the poet arranges for the moralist to define austere what ought to be and for his fictional representative [...] to go on affirming affectionately what is. The two points of view, in strict moral logic diametrically opposed, are somehow made harmonious in Chaucer's wonderfully comic attitude, that double vision that is his ironical essence.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Donaldson, *Speaking of Chaucer*, pp. 3, 8 and p. 15.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

What distinguishes this model of irony from the mode of ethical satire described by Huppé is that here the poet's ironic perspective is neither that of the 'latent moralist' or 'naïve reporter', rather it embraces them both. Where Huppé always gives the victory to the moral perspective – the satirical 'high sentence' cancels and overcomes the literal utterances of the Wife – for Donaldson, both contradictory meanings coexist in a complex aesthetic 'harmony' without either one *entirely* gaining 'the last word'.⁷⁹

This notion is significant for my own notion of comic deflation in Chaucerian comedy and its dialogic character. For in the unresolved simultaneity of meanings that Donaldson describes – as in Chaplin's pious fall, or Nicholas's absurd re-staging of biblical narrative – there is a similarly equivocal vacillation between high and low perspectives woven into the fabric of Chaucer's ironic style. With it comes the potential for a similar comic deflation of the reader's efforts to resolve and rise above the incongruity this generates. But Donaldson, in accordance with the values of New Criticism, moves in the opposite direction, to assert the unifying and transcendent quality of Chaucer's 'ironic vision'. Whatever tensions and contradictions it embodies are paradoxically overcome by the formal harmony of their artistic expression. Chaucer's irony ultimately becomes not an expression of unresolved contradictions but the assured artistic synthesis that rises beyond them. It leads the poet (and his attentive reader) away from the fray of limited and conflicted perspectives expressed within *CT* to an always more encompassing and complex point-of-view, even to an 'almost god-like detachment'.⁸⁰ In this respect Donaldson's perspective shares with Robertson and Kittredge alike that sense of the ultimately harmonising orientation of his comedy: be it in the divine comedy of Christian allegory, the 'human comedy' of 'the road-side drama' or the aesthetic complexity of Chaucer's 'ironic vision'.

However, as Lawton has argued, Donaldson's conception of Chaucerian irony was always in some ways straining against this sense of harmony, and the new critical framework in which it was expressed.⁸¹ The interfusion of irreconcilable perspectives Donaldson discerns in *CT* can be interpreted as leading not to a stable, reconciling and elevated authorial vision, but to a more radical and indeterminate play of views and personas; for once a 'pervasive irony' is acknowledged the status of *all* speech

⁷⁹ Ibid. p. 12.

⁸⁰ Donaldson, *Chaucer's Poetry*, 2nd edn (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley & Sons, 1977) pp. 238-9.

⁸¹ David Lawton, 'Donaldson and Irony', *ChRev* 41 (2007), 231-9 (p. 235).

becomes suspect and uncertain and it is then impossible to draw a line between poet and persona, to tell where game ends and earnest begins, to discern a final authorial perspective. In these terms Chaucer's irony can be interpreted as a kind of dialogism in which all voices are parodied and all attempts to assert a transcendent, serious encompassing vision deflated. The only way to escape this is to step out of the field of irony altogether, to return, as Chaucer finally does, to the earnest discourse of faith and spiritual responsibility that closes *Troilus* and *CT*.

With its attention to the artful confluence of incompatible perspectives and the performative use of language in *CT*, Donaldson's work remains extremely useful. His notion of a harmonising 'ironic vision', that draws together the multiple styles and perspectives of *CT* became a dominant motif in later criticism, and its more radical and indeterminate potential has been fruitfully explored, in post-structuralist terms, by critics such as Ferster, Lawton and Gust.⁸² But with the emergence of Marxist, Feminist, and Psychoanalytical readings of Chaucer from the nineteen-eighties onwards, Donaldson's notion of the disengaged master-ironist came under challenge. Chaucer became instead a writer of political, sexual and psychological investments and his irony was legitimately re-evaluated as a response to the turbulent socio-ideological world in which he was inescapably caught. In these terms, Aers' 'self reflexive imagination' could be read as a politicised take on Donaldson's irony and similarly in Hansen's feminist reading of Chaucer and Tyson's queer reading of the figure of the Host, irony and humour become tools in a broader economy, concerning the construction of sexual and gender identities.⁸³ Whatever their other merits, these approaches generally entail a return to that sense of the comic found in earlier moral readings as a subordinate device for the expression of more serious concerns.

Where most theoretically orientated readings have turned away from the 'human comedy' to the notion of Chaucer as a more serious and conflicted poet, Ganim and Kendrick stand out as two critics who have drawn upon theory to explore the comic spirit of *CT* more fully and on its own terms. Both have illustrated how comedy itself can be a sphere of social conflict, psychological tension and literary experimentation, without ceasing to be comic. Ganim focuses on the self-conscious

⁸² See Howard, *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales*, p. 40 and p. 55 and Gust, *Constructing Chaucer: Author and Auto-fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

⁸³ Aers, *Chaucer, Langland and the Creative Imagination*; Hansen, *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender*; Tison Pugh, 'Queering Harry Bailly: Gendered Carnival, Social Ideologies, and Masculinity Under Duress in the Canterbury Tales', *ChRev* 41 (2006), 39-69 (p. 40).

‘theatricality’ of *CT*, and discerns within it an appropriation of the provisional, ‘improvisational and performative qualities’ found in medieval spectacle, carnival and popular culture.⁸⁴ *CT*, Ganim argues, mimics the carnival spirit of spontaneous interaction and ‘interchange between audience and performer’ and ‘shares with medieval popular theatricality a tendency to dramatize the process of signification itself.’⁸⁵ In arguing this he draws directly on Bakhtin’s notions of dialogism and sees Chaucer structuring *CT* around the primordial and yet strangely ephemeral popular forms of rumour, gossip and story-telling. Yet Ganim remains suspicious of Bakhtin’s high estimation of folk culture’s role in the development of European literature and posits instead a productive but decidedly uneasy relationship between Chaucer and his popular sources. Chaucer both releases the ‘anarchy’, the ‘real power’, of popular culture into high literary discourse, but at the same time ‘distances himself from it’.⁸⁶ He is keen to preserve his literary work and identity from the anarchic and distortive forces of the popular culture it absorbs and explores, and to guard against their dubious moral implications. Ganim’s stress on the tension between the unruly world of popular, comic forms and Chaucer’s aspiration to poetic order and authority recalls those two opposing interpretative modes (the will to play and the will to truth) discussed at the beginning of this chapter. It is relevant to my own concern with the sense of guilt and anxiety that emerges from, and at times impacts upon, the playful indeterminacy of Chaucer’s comedy.

Kendrick too, in her analysis of Chaucerian comedy is concerned with this dialectic of subversion and containment. She explains how the status of *CT* as ‘literary play’ – its relative freedom as fiction from the laws, obligations and consequences of reality – opens a cathartic field in which repressed libidinal energies and social frustrations can be articulated, enjoyed and ultimately diffused. She thus ascribes to Chaucer’s comedy a reconciling function: it seeks ‘to stabilize the late-fourteenth century social order’ *in reality*, by ‘destabilising it in play’.⁸⁷ Kendrick is here some distance from Bakhtin’s notion of the subversive spirit of carnival, but her idea of ‘controlled play’ is not a return to the harmony of Kittredge’s ‘human comedy’. The unifying potential of comedy she describes remains tentative, born of intractable social and psychological conflicts, and the lines of power between subversion and

⁸⁴ Ganim, *Chaucerian Theatricality*, p. 4.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 20, 41 and p. 180.

⁸⁷ Kendrick, *Chaucerian Play*, p. 161.

control, pleasure and moral purpose can still run in both directions. Thus comedy offers a way of accommodating, even taking pleasure in, the vices and seditious voices of the Miller, Wife and Pardoner, even whilst it simultaneously censures them. As Kendrick writes, ‘to read for sentence enables not prevents, a covert appreciation of solas’.⁸⁸

Kendrick’s notion of the comic – and indeed of creative literature more generally – as a field of licensed play in which subversive energies can find safe expression is intriguing. To some extent they do serve this purpose, but, in the case of Chaucerian comedy, I would resist the ascription of a socially reconciling function and ‘completely consoling’ effect.⁸⁹ This would risk retuning us to the conservative, legitimising notions of comedy, discussed in its various guises throughout this section. I do not believe that Chaucer’s comedy follows that reconciling pattern in stylistic, structural or philosophical terms. I am more inclined to concur with Ganim, and stress its indeterminate and subversive nature: to observe how play often oversteps its licensed bounds, dialogising and deflating rather than ultimately re-affirming established values. Comedy is as much a creator as a resolver of problems. There is certainly a movement of containment, a will to reconciliation, that acts upon and perhaps at times even coalesces with the comedy of *CT*, but I would argue that it remains, in spirit and design, external to it. In analysing Chaucer’s construction of comic characters in the following section, I explore in more detail this unresolved dialectic of subversion and containment and relate it back to the principle of comic deflation outlined above.

III: Chaucer’s Comic Characters

The Wife of Bath and the Pardoner are often considered to be two of Chaucer’s greatest and most distinctive creations. Typically of Chaucer’s works, they are both comic figures of ambiguity and contradiction, forged out of opposing voices, styles and perspectives, and open to a range of contradictory interpretations. They have often been seen as objects of moral satire, yet in Kittredge and other humanist criticism they have also been hailed as some of the first realistic and psychologically

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 30.

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 162.

complex characters in English Literature.⁹⁰ In most recent theoretically engaged criticism, they are discussed primarily as serious figures, expressive of socio-political, psychological, hermeneutic and gender conflict. In Patterson, for example, the Wife of Bath and Pardoner become experimental embodiments of a nascent bourgeois subjectivity, for Dinshaw the Wife is a subversive ‘incarnation of literality, carnality, and femininity from within a patriarchal paradigm’ and the Pardoner functions to disturb the essential gender and semantic binaries on which that patriarchal paradigm is premised.⁹¹ A good deal of attention has been paid to the question of the Pardoner’s sexuality and the gender politics of the Wife’s performance, and in the process the sense of these characters as comical creations has often been overlooked or subsumed into broader theoretical issues.

Without rejecting the interest and validity of these approaches, I want to return here to the essential idea of the Wife of Bath and Pardoner as, first and foremost, comic characters, who, in their mercurial and contradictory natures, resist reduction to any one of these interpretive models. I view them here as agents of comic deflation, whose identities are constituted by a continual incongruous shifting between high and low, spiritual and carnal, elite and popular values and idioms. In this vein, I interpret them as belonging to a long legacy of comic characters, which has its roots in the archetypes of the trickster, fool and clown, and includes figures ranging from Rabelais’ Gargantua and Shakespeare’s Falstaff, to Leonard Rossiter’s Rigsby and Steve Coogan’s Alan Partridge. Like all of these characters the Wife and the Pardoner are ambivalent figures—both laughed at and laughing, victims and tricksters, attractive and repulsive, quick-witted, crafty, perceptive, malleable by nature and yet also absurdly myopic, dogmatic and rigid, to the point of self-parody; in them wild imagination and narrow self-interest, cleverness and folly, philosophy and pragmatism, high and low values and voices are all ingeniously intertwined. Perhaps above all else, and in spite of all their many faults and follies they are engaging and creative figures. Whilst they all exist in different historical and generic worlds, they operate according to certain shared comic principles which can be illuminated by comparison, and which, in terms of both immediate comic effect and philosophical implications, are intimately connected to the notions of comic deflation outlined in

⁹⁰ Huppé, *A Reading of The Canterbury Tales*, p. 134; Kittredge, *Chaucer and his Poetry*, p. 218.

⁹¹ Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History*, see especially p. 281 and pp. 420-1; Dinshaw, *Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics*, pp. 158-9.

Section One of this chapter. They all have obvious moral flaws and could, of course, be read satirically, as models of behavior to scorn and avoid. But they operate, as Kendrick's reading of comedy suggests, in a field of play and according to comic principles that lie outside of, or at least in a skewed relation to, the province of morality. The Wife and the Pardoner are not simply 'inferior people', possessed of certain defects and vices in relation to which we can feel superior, any more than one can feel superior to Oedipus or Hamlet on account of their tragic flaws. Rather in their complex, contradictory nature, with its absurd interfusion of high and low values, they reflect something essentially comic about the human predicament itself, caught as it is between this barnyard world and the heavens, souls and bodies, poise and accident, nobility and folly. Reading the Wife and Pardoner in relation to this shared comic inheritance and the notion of comic deflation can hopefully shed some new light on the web of contradictions involved in their portrayal. It can also help to explain the profundity of these two characters in terms which do not overlook their comic nature, but rather see comedy as integral to their depth and significance.

What then makes the Wife of Bath and Pardoner distinctly comic characters? There are several key characteristics to be noted here, but one of the most obvious and striking points is the quality of exaggeration, exuberance and outright peculiarity that pervades their depiction and performance. In this respect they are akin to those other comic figures mentioned above, all of whom have about them an air of grotesquery, of caricature, of excess or discordance, of being somehow bolder and larger than life – whether that be in the painted face of the archetypal clown, the exaggerated nervous mannerisms of Rigsby, the wild eyes of the Pardoner and his busy tongue (I.684, VI.399), the enormity of Gargantua and corpulence of Falstaff, the shuffle of the Little Tramp in his oversized shoes or the Wife of Bath's extravagant apparel and insatiable volubility (I.470). These are all the ostensible markings of the comic character, and many of them could be plausibly interpreted in the Bakhtinian terms of 'grotesque realism', with its stress on the unruliness and dominance of the 'bodily principle'.⁹²

But there is more to this peculiarity and exuberance than the purely physical – it also applies to a certain comic attitude and disposition which is best described, to borrow Ganim's phrase, as a kind of 'theatricality'. Like many comic characters, the

⁹² Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, p. 22.

Wife of Bath and Pardoner are self-conscious performers, egoists, ‘jangleres’ (I.560) and sermonizers, and what they chiefly perform is themselves, their own identity, even their very role as performers. Performance and self-dramatization is for them both a matter of livelihood, but it is also something in which they take an active, almost artistic, delight. In his prologue the Pardoner revels in rehearsing, in intricate detail, his theatrics on his pulpit, describing how he affects ‘an hauteyn speche’ and takes pains to ‘strecche forth the nekke’ and nod ‘est and west upon the peple’ (VI.330. 91-6.) ‘Myne handes and my tonge goon so yerne’ he says ‘That it is joye to se my bisynesse’ (VI.399). Similarly the Wife of Bath adeptly performs each of the various stereotypes of womanly conduct she has at her disposal – the belligerent nagging, gossiping, jealous wife, the irrational, carnal woman, the ‘enchanted’ lover (III.575), the grieving widow (III.591), the fragile damsel (III.796-802) – and delights in rehearsing her performances for the pilgrims.

Their performances are marked by a distinctive quality of self-aggrandizement, boldness and extravagance that helps to identify them both as comic characters and to qualify one’s response to their dubious conduct. For example, the Wife’s triumphant exclamation concerning her first three old husbands, ‘As help me God, I laughe whan I thynke | How pitously a-nyght I made hem swynke!’ (III.201-2) and her tale’s strident addendum (III.1257-63), the Pardoner’s professed willingness to scam even the ‘povereste wydwe in a village’ of her last penny (VI.450) and his claims about how fortunate his fellow pilgrims are to have a ‘suffisant pardoneer’ in their company in case of fatal accident (VI.932-40) all involve a kind of rhetorical excess and flagrant rascality that borders on self-parody and invites laughter rather than serious moral contemplation. This is perfectly illustrated in the Pardoner’s flippant admission concerning the spiritual welfare of his customers – ‘I rekke nevere, whan that they been beryed, | Though that hir soules goon a blackeberyed!’ (VI.405-6). The incongruous image the Pardoner conjures creates a moment of comic deflation and absurdity which modulates the whole tone of the line, diffusing its darker moral implications. Something similar could be said of Falstaff’s extravagant boasts, *Southpark*’s Eric Cartman’s wild and selfish scheming, Blackadder’s unrelenting mistreatment of Baldrick or Nicholas’s duping of John in *The Miller’s Tale*. Moral judgments are not here entirely suspended – as they may be, say, in the world of pure clowning and slap-stick – but they are certainly qualified, complicated and muted by the comic field in which all these speeches and actions are performed.

Indeed, as much as one is led to criticize these comic characters for their morally dubious behavior, one is also led into a strange comic sympathy with them, one shares a certain delight in their wit, their scheming, their cheerful freedom from moral norms.

The consistently hyperbolic and self-dramatizing quality of their discourse raises the question of how much anything they say can be taken in earnest. How much of the self-revelations of these self-professed deceivers is itself ‘play’ and performance? It also has the effect of putting the Wife of Bath and Pardoner in a peculiarly self-conscious and even ironic relation to the roles they assume, even to their own identities. They possess something of that same self-conscious theatricality which Ganim observed of the fools and villains of medieval drama and, as with those figures, ‘their language alternates between impersonation and interpretation’ between playing a role and reflecting upon their performance.⁹³ In this respect they are quite different from the conventional allegorical personae from which they evolved. Where La Vielle and Fals Semblant, along with figures like Slothe and Wrathe in Langland’s *Piers Plowman*, proclaim their natures in accordance with their allegorical function, the Wife and Pardoner begin to reflect upon them, to consciously shape and perform their own identities and, as Mann has noted, to negotiate their sense of ‘individuality’ in relation to ‘what others assume them to be’.⁹⁴ Set in the more naturalistic context of *CT*, the conventional allegorical persona’s unabashed, confessional and declamatory nature is thus psychologised and transformed by Chaucer into a more complex and adaptable form of self-dramatization, indicative of a philosophy which sees life itself as a matter of play and performance. Even the Pardoner’s self-acknowledged status as a ‘ful vicious man’ (VI.599) and the Wife’s embodiment of misogynistic stereotypes are roles to be played out— and this awareness, this subtle, ironic distance between performance and the self that performs— brings a new level of complexity to their characters.

This element of self-conscious performance in the Wife and Pardoner is closely connected to another archetypal facet of comic character – a sense of adaptability, a capacity for deception and disguise, even a protean nature, which enables them, like the trickster-figures of world mythologies, to inhabit multiple and conflicting roles. This aspect of the Wife and Pardoner can be seen by way of contrast

⁹³ Ganim, *Chaucerian Theatricality*, p. 37.

⁹⁴ Jill Mann, ‘Antifeminism’, in *Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. by Knight (New York: Harvester, 1991), p. 293.

with Chaucer's portrayal of virtuous figures. Constance, Griselda, St. Cecilia for instance, all faultlessly embody certain fixed and idealized moral types. They do not perform virtuous identities; rather their identity is a transparent expression of their virtuous natures. They *are* simply virtuous – their hearts 'verray chambre[s] of hoolynesse' (II.167). All the world changes around them and puts pressures on them to change, but they remain constantly virtuous and virtuously constant, regardless of the costs. Indeed the trials they endure function to reveal the immutable moral essence of their characters. Walter's cruel and obsessive testing of Griselda is, at least in part, an attempt to assay this moral constancy of character– to see that there is not the slightest element of performance or variability in her 'virtuous' wifely conduct. The Wife and Pardoner on the other hand, have no such determinable essence of character – they are, by nature, opportunistic performers, who become whatever it is expedient for them to be in a given moment– nagging wife, cheated lover or moral philosopher, zealous preacher against the sin of greed or its self-proclaimed chief practitioner. Beneath these multiple and contradictory roles is no single fixed identity but rather an enigma, an absence, a potential for being-as-performance, artifice, stylization. It is no surprise that Chaucer found the potential for a richer and freer exploration of human psychology in the more malleable and indeterminate domain of comic characterization than he did in the conventional portrayal of virtue.

But whilst both the Wife of Bath and Pardoner do exhibit a comic malleability and parodic relation to their own identities, it would be wrong to characterize them in terms of an absolute plasticity and freedom from definition. There is also in them something of the opposing comic principle of rigidity, myopia, predictability and exaggerated determination, which Bergson saw as central to the dynamics of humour.⁹⁵ But this point does not lessen their complexity; it does not reduce them to the static, risible 'grotesques' that Robertson describes, or to the forms of 'atrophied consciousness' which Stott associates with comic character.⁹⁶ For what gives then the quality of dogmatism, what motivates, guides and unites their various performances and proclamations is not a specific vice, but something which is an essential driving force in almost all comic characters – material desire and self-interest. Where the moral figures mentioned above pursue truth and virtue at the expense of material self-interest, the guiding passion of the comic character is, generally, the opposite – the

⁹⁵ Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, p. 155.

⁹⁶ Robertson, *Preface to Chaucer*, pp. 250-1; Stott, *Comedy* p. 41.

satisfaction of carnal desires, the sensual enjoyment of life and pursuit of material self-interest, regardless of moral or spiritual imperatives.

This essential passion takes on different and subtly individuated forms. It can manifest itself directly, for example, in the sensual indulgence of Falstaff or the rampant and perpetually frustrated sexual ambitions of Richie and Eddie in the BBC comedy *Bottom*, but it is also apparent, in the more mediate desires of the ego for wealth, status and power, which one finds in figures like Plautus' Pesudlous, Chaucer's Friar or Molière's Harpagon. Both pursuits are equally and unashamedly worldly in their orientation.

In the case of the Wife of Bath, both carnal desire and more mediate forms of self-interest are subtly combined. The Wife, as she says, is 'Venerien' by nature, and 'that made me I koude noght withdrawe | My chambre of Venus from a good felawe' (III.609-18). She reflects with delight upon the 'ragerye' and 'jolitee' of a youth spent in drinking, dancing and making love (III.455-468) and is still on the look out to continue these pleasures in her autumn years. Her quest for 'maisterye' in marriage has often been interpreted as a form of resistance to the patriarchal values and gender inequalities of medieval society.⁹⁷ Undoubtedly it has significant bearing on these issues, but I would argue it belongs more to the spirit of comic self-interest. The Wife is not primarily a fighter for women's rights, but for her own. She challenges the inequality of gender relations and patriarchal values, but only in so far as they obstruct her ability to pursue her material self-interest. She strives for mastery in marriage primarily so as to have the freedom and the means to follow her desires without restriction – to 'ben at oure large' to freely enjoy life, its carnal pleasures and the trappings of wealth (III.322-336). But also, in the process of her marital struggles, the Wife begins to find a subtler fetishised form of pleasure in power and mastery over others for its own sake. She delights in the acts of cunning and manipulation which enable her to keep 'an housbonde [...] which shal be bothe my dettour and my thral, | And have his tribulacion withal | Upon his flessch' (III.154-59).

In the Pardoner the same fundamental principle of material self-interest is at work, though perhaps in a more distasteful fashion because of its conflation with spiritual service. The 'entente' of his phony preaching and pardoning is as he repeatedly declares, 'nothyng but for coveitise' (VI.433, 403). In keeping with the

⁹⁷ See Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*, p. 130; Mary Caruthers, 'The Wife of Bath and the Painting of Lions', *PMLA*, 94 (1979), 209-22.

unabashed self-interest and materialism of the archetypal comic character he ‘wol have moneie, wolfe, chesse and whete, Al were it yeven of the pvereste page’ and ‘licour of the vyne, and a joly wenche in every town’ (VI.448-53). As with the Wife, his pursuit of self-gratification goes beyond the mere satisfaction of bodily drives to include a more mediate delight in power, self-aggrandizement and the exercise of his own considerable skills of persuasion and deception for their own sake.

Like so many comic figures, both the Wife and Pardoner are driven by, and give triumphant expression to, this same comic principle of unrepentant and uncompromising hedonism. In Freudian terms they could be described as aesthetic figurations of the desiring ego, liberated from the bonds of conscience – agents of powerful libidinal energies, which in ordinary social existence have to be repressed and restrained. This may also help to explain something of their curious fascination and appeal. For whilst on a moral level we obviously see the folly of their attitude and actions, on a deeper comic level we recognize some element of ourselves, and of all human nature, in their rapacious egoistical and sensual strivings. In the carnival sphere of comedy, with its temporary suspension of moral laws we can actually take a vicarious pleasure in their rascality, their brazen carnality and egotism, precisely because we must deny ourselves such irresponsible freedoms in reality.

Viewed in Bakhtinian terms, the Wife and Pardoner’s exaggerated physicality and unrepentant hedonism become central facets of ‘grotesque realism’ – not so much symbolic of the individual desiring ego, as of the communal and festive ‘bodily principle’ that unites all life in its cycles of generation and decay.⁹⁸ Their unrepentant delight in material pleasures essentially entails the festive affirmation of this immanent, transitory world over the next, of the flesh over the spirit, of drunken merriment over penitential sobriety. It is a deliberate and triumphant refusal of high-minded moral and spiritual ideals, of all that is transcendent, serious, immortal and complete. That the Wife was shaped to express this comic, life-affirming attitude can be seen from the changes Chaucer made to his source. For where La Vieille is a ‘wrinkled crone’ who bitterly laments the loss of beauty and youth, and dreams vainly of vengeance on those who scorned her, the Wife – who is pictured in her autumn, not her winter years – is free of all such resentments and regrets.⁹⁹ Instead she celebrates

⁹⁸ Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, p. 21.

⁹⁹ *The Romance of the Rose*, trans. by Frances Horgan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), l. 12825.

with comic *joie de vivre* her successes in love and marriage and looks forward to more. Her beauty is fading but not vanished, and though ‘the floor is goon’ she is still determined to sell the ‘bren, as best [she] kan’ and ‘yet to be right myrie’ (III.476-80). In these words she expresses that same unwavering materialist sentiment as the goliardic Archpoet who wrote in his ‘Confession’ ‘let wine to my lips be nigh | At life’s dissolution’ or as Falstaff, who is similarly determined, though he is old, to drain life to the dregs.¹⁰⁰

It is not only that the Wife and Pardoner put this transitory life and its sensual pleasures ahead of all transcendent values and obligations, but as comic characters, as figures of ‘grotesque realism’, they actively parody and deflate those high and serious values. Both the Wife and Pardoner are not simply carnal, dissolute figures but philosophers of the dissolute life, in whom one finds a complex and incongruous interfusion of high imagination and base desire, sacred language and profane intentions. Their intelligence, their rhetorical skill, their knowledge of scripture and clerical learning are all placed unflinchingly in the service of material self-interest and in this subordination of intellect to bodily desire, this materialistic appropriation of clerical discourse, a process of comic deflation is under way.

The Wife’s opening efforts to justify her bigamy, for instance, involve a kind of carnivalesque materialization of scriptural authority and a parody of the methods of scholarly debate and exegesis. In defense of her five marriages she calls upon the Judaic edict ‘to wexe and multiplie’ and the examples of Solomon, Lameth, Abraham and Jacob, who each ‘hadde wyve mo than two’ (III.28, 57). Already here a sense of comic incongruity is generated in the audacious conjunction of her own suspect marital history with the lineage of the Jewish Patriarchs. This incongruity is accentuated and the true carnal gist of her thinking exposed when she speaks with relish of the ‘wise kyng, daun Salomon’ and the ‘many a myrie fit’ he had with his wives (III.42). The casual confluence of sacred history and carnal imagination, combined with the Wife’s conspicuously colloquial turn of phrase, generates an effect of comic deflation, comparable to that already seen in Nicholas’s parochial re-telling of the story of Noah. The same pattern repeats itself, with more pronounced comic emphasis, in the Wife’s wild misappropriation of the authority of Saint Paul – he who wrote, ‘I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to use authority over the man’ (1.Timothy

¹⁰⁰ ‘The Confession of Goliath’, Symonds in *Women, Wine and Song*, trans. by John Addington (London: Chatto and Windus, 1884), l. 1160.

2.12) – to justify her dominance over her husbands (III.154-162), in her use of the example of ‘Jobes pacience’ (III.436) to persuade her husband to forebear her misbehavior, and in her joke that by being her fourth husbands ‘purgatorie’ on earth, she sped his soul to glory (III.490). In all these cases spiritual discourse is irreverently misappropriated for material ends and high and low styles and perspectives are interfused. This has the double-effect of deflating and relativizing the spiritual authorities the Wife draws upon and elevating her own bodily discourse to the status of a sermon of sorts. In the carnival sphere of the tale telling contest the Wife becomes a ‘noble prechour’ (III.165) and her parodic sermonising, as Cooper writes, ‘appeals to the whole area of festive liberation, of the Rabelaisian cocked snook, of which mockery of the rational and the proper and the ascetic is an integral part’.¹⁰¹

A similar process of parody and deflation unfolds in relation to the Pardoner’s collection of relics and, more subtly, in his sermonizing on the sins of the tavern. Chaucer here exploits the materializing tendency which is already implicit in the practice of trading and venerating relics, and takes it to absurd comic lengths. The Pardoner has a ‘pilwe-beer’ that he claims is ‘Our Lady veyl’, a jar full of pigs bones (I.694-700), a ‘sholder-boon’ of a ‘holy jews sheep bone’ (the identity of the holy Jew himself remains a mystery!) with the magical power to cure diseased cattle, multiply stock and blind a husband to his wife’s infidelities (VI.350-65). In each of these images comic effect is achieved by the absurd and tenuous conjunction of supposed spiritual significance with material dross, base self-interest and domestic realities. The comic disjunction between holiness and corporality reaches its extreme limit with the Host’s exclamation

Thou woldest make me kisse thyn olde breech,
And swere it were a relyk of a saint,
Though it were with thy fundement depeint!’
(VI.948-50)

It is primarily here the Pardoner’s pretensions that are being deflated by a comic wit no less sharp than his own, but ‘the Host’s parody’ as Patterson writes also ‘unwittingly reveals how easy it is to imagine St Thomas’ holy breeches as fouled

¹⁰¹ Cooper, *Oxford Guides, Canterbury Tales*, p. 151.

garments'.¹⁰² It thus perpetuates the mode of deflation and the semantic instability of the Pardoner's discourse, which Patterson sees the Host's intervention as an attempt to disarm.

The Pardoner's speech itself follows a similar pattern of parody and deflation to that observed in the Wife's mock-sermon. Like her, he effortlessly appropriates 'hooly writ' (VI.483) to his own carnal ends and calls upon a seemingly inexhaustible supply of Christian and Classical exempla and authorities. Adam, Lot, Herod, Seneca, Stilbo, Saint Paul, Matthew and Jeremiah are all concisely assimilated in his condemnation of the sins of the tavern. Moreover, where the Wife's predominant style is colloquial and pragmatic, the Pardoner's sermonizing is more consistently elevated and rhetorically elaborate. With his generous use of apostrophe – 'O glotonye' 'O Paul', 'O wombe! O bely!' 'O dronke man' – his incantatory rhythms and complex metaphorical conceits (VI.532-540), he attains, at times, a gravity of utterance befitting a 'noble ecclesiaste' (I.708). But this gravity of utterance is also simultaneously undermined by the Pardoner's rhetorical extravagance, by the particularity of his imagery and the reader's knowledge that this whole moral sermon is spoken by a self-professed bawd and drunk, with a 'draughte of corny ale' still on his breath (VI.546). As a result not only is the Pardoner's brazen hypocrisy comically dramatized but the idiom of the Sermon itself is ironised and infused with the carnal energy and delight in sins that it chastises. The visceral language of grotesque realism of 'wombe', 'golet', 'stynkyng cod, | Fulfilled of dong', of the stamping and straining and grinding of cooks (VI.534-43) is brought into the sphere of the sermon and carries with it a sensuous energy that threatens to exceed its moral function, and turn condemnation into comic celebration.

His fervid sermonizing builds toward a brilliant moment of comic release when, after extended use of apostrophe and the neat conceit of 'dronkenesse' as 'verray sepulture | Of mannes wit' (VI.558-9) the Pardoner casually interrupts his high rhetoric to make special mention of the 'white wyn of Lepe | That is to sele in Fysshstrete or in Chepe' (VI.564-5). Deflation comes here not only from the downward shift into a more naturalistic, locally focused register and jovial tone, but the implication that the Pardoner is talking from personal experience with this particularly potent vintage. He momentarily drops the mask of 'noble ecclesiast' and

¹⁰² Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History*, pp. 409-10.

indulges in insinuating into his high rhetoric a colloquial joke that belongs more to the experienced inebriate than to the sober preacher, for whom such distinctions of ‘fumositee’ can have little import. The Pardoner, however, *knows* that this particular wine is so potent that a man drinking it at home in Chepe will find himself snoring ‘in Spaigne, right at the toun of Lepe’ (VI.565-72). No sooner said, the Pardoner is back on track, quoting from the ‘Olde Testament’ (VI.575). The sound of snoring – ‘Sampsoun, Sampsoun’ (VI.572-5) – which concludes his joke, seamlessly returns him to task. But the momentary lapse into a drinker’s jest helps to underline the parodic and hypocritical nature of his whole performance.

Whilst in all these examples the ‘lower bodily principle’ does assert itself strongly, deflation has here too a crucial hermeneutic character. It entails not simply a downward movement from spirit to earth, but rather creates, through the interfusion of high and low languages and perspectives, a state of comic indeterminacy in which both sets of terms are mutually ironised and deflated, and no single view gains the ascendancy. The Wife and Pardoner may be fervent materialists but Chaucer’s comic poetics, whilst giving full and compelling expression to this perspective, remains always more capacious and equivocal. Thus, in the case of the Wife’s misappropriation of scripture, we are not asked to endorse her views. But whilst the comic partiality and self-interestedness involved in her materialist exegesis is itself ironised and deflated, it also emphasizes, as Cooper argues, the opposite one-sidedness and self-interest found in the spiritualizing exegesis of male clerics and homilists.¹⁰³ By asking ‘who peyntede the leon, tel me who?’ (III.692) and illustrating how authorities can be read in multiple, contradictory ways the Wife of Bath problematises all univocal claims to objectivity and truth.

Both the Wife’s and Pardoner’s discourse open up a rich dialogic field in which ‘hooly writ’ and clerical authority jostle with colloquial expressions, folk proverb, naturalistic and domestic detail; Jerome finds himself mixed up with the Wife’s own domestic wisdom, Socrates with ‘pisse upon his heed’ (III.728), the ‘soverevyn acts’ of the Old Testament (VI.574.) with the dubious wines sold in Fysshstrere or Chepe. Fragments of speech borrowed from high and low, elite and popular, sacred and profane sources all clash and blend and form new unities, like tidings in the House of Rumour or the various rhetorical postures of *The Nun’s*

¹⁰³ Cooper, *Oxford Guides, Canterbury Tales*, p. 145.

Priest's Tale and, in the process, all voices are robbed of the illusion of immutability, naturalness and absolute authority.

The characters of the Wife and Pardoner themselves are forged in this dialogic field and animated by its rifts and tensions. They are walking palimpsests, composed of scavenged fragments of pre-existing discourse – the writings of Meun, Jerome, Deschamps and countless others voices overheard in churches, taverns, marketplaces – all ‘distilled’ and given new life, as Lowe writes, in the ‘alembic’ of Chaucer’s imagination.¹⁰⁴ Elsewhere in his work Chaucer brings together a similarly compendious array of materials, without always being able to synthesize them so effectively, but with the Wife and Pardoner, he accomplishes the remarkable task of drawing all these conflicting voices, styles and perspectives together into the consciousness of two engaging and irreducibly complex comic personalities. Much more than the sum of their textual parts, the Wife and Pardoner are, as Lowe writes, ‘Chaucer’s masterpieces of characterization’.¹⁰⁵ As David argues, they exceed the category of the fixed moral type and become living, conflicted, multi-dimensional characters, irreducible to a predetermined allegorical function.¹⁰⁶ In the hermeneutic terms of allegory discussed in Chapter One, they are embodiments of the seductive letter in all its multiplicity, images that have become conscious of their own signifying potential, and refuse to be transcended, to yield up a clear, resolving sentence.

Chaucer found in these two comic characters – in their individuality, their self-reflexive and performative natures and the dialogic interplay of styles and languages that constitute their discourse – a powerful new vehicle of literary expression. Not only did he find here a means of exploring human character with a depth and sophistication seldom previously touched upon in medieval literature, he also tested new possibilities for creative literature as an eclectic, independent, even potentially subversive mode of enquiry into human reality and the systems of thought and language which condition it. For in the Wife and Pardoner’s speech, poetic fiction becomes a stage on which established values and idioms are not simply rehearsed and aestheticised, but actively explored, dialogised, challenged and brought into debate with unorthodox and marginalized voices.

¹⁰⁴ Lowes, *Geoffrey Chaucer*, p. 190.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 186-7

¹⁰⁶ David, *Strumpet Muse*, p. 5.

But, as seen already in *HF*, this new potential brings with it new dangers and concerns; for the pattern of comic deflation involved in the Wife and Pardoner's discourse leads Chaucer further away from the noble ideal of poetry found in the *Commedia* and the *Genealogy*. In place of the principle of poetry as a refinement of the vernacular found in Dante we have here poetry as a repository and mixing-pot of all kinds of speech. In place of the idea of poetry as an authoritative, allegorical vehicle of truth we have a discourse that complicates rather than conveys moral truths and received authorities, a speculative enquiry into life which has no straightforward claim to spiritual legitimacy.

The voices of the Wife and Pardoner point not beyond this world to the clarity of spiritual truths, but are born of and draw us back into the 'human comedy'. As such, they are two of Chaucer's most portending and problematic creations, and he had reason enough to feel ambivalent about them. Whilst his instincts as a poet led him to explore and give full expression to their subversive comic natures, his conscience as a Christian required that they also be controlled, surpassed and ultimately disavowed. Indeed, one can see how the counterbalancing force of conscience and responsibility plays an informing and paradoxically enabling role in their presentation. In one sense, Chaucer is following here the path of Dante: entering into a productive but precarious relationship with the seductive letter of the text. As with Dante's treatment of Francesca and Ulysses, a space is created for the Wife and Pardoner's subversive discourse within *CT*, a space which enables the poet to express and enter into the complexity of these equivocal, subversive characters, to harken to their siren's call, whilst at the same time retaining a distance from them. But without the strong assimilative and resolving force of Dantescan allegory, the sense of moral distance and hermeneutic control at work here is ultimately far less secure.

To license his subversive dalliance with the Wife of Bath and Pardoner, Chaucer relies upon both the framing device of the pilgrimage and the sense of irony which accompanies it. As with the churls' tales, he can claim, with the Wife and Pardoner, to be merely reporting the words and opinions of others. The initial apologies issued in fragment one – 'I moot reherce | Hir tales alle or elles falsen som of my mateere (I.3173-5 and I.725-738) still apply, and the Wife herself adds a personal note of disavowal – 'taketh not agrief of that I seye, | For myn entente nys but for to pleye' (III.192-3). In both cases a dissociation is made between speaker and

speech, which simultaneously enables something problematic to be expressed and withdrawn from.

Chaucer's characteristic sense of irony and indirection also helps here to distance the author from his subversive creations. As Chaucer refrains from direct authorial comment on the Wife and Pardoner and allows them to speak for themselves, a wide array of interpretative options remains open and the responsibility of choosing between them falls to the reader. One can simply 'turne over the leef' (I.3177) and be re-assured by the wealth of unpolluted 'moralitee and hoolynesse' (I.3180) found elsewhere in *CT*, or one can, as Kendrick suggests, 'read for sentence' and see in the Wife and Pardoner a satirical condemnation of vice and the inverted signs of Christian redemption, in the manner of Robertson and Huppé.¹⁰⁷ As Ruiz has his *Book of Good Love* proclaim, so too could Chaucer say of *CT* – 'you will find in me whatever you choose to find'; 'blameth nat me if that ye chese amys'.¹⁰⁸ In both cases this manoeuvre serves to take the burden of responsibility for morally ambiguous matter away from its creator whilst holding open the possibility of a legitimizing moral sentence.

The Wife's aforementioned claim to be speaking in 'pleye' is a part of the legitimizing logic of comedy, game and carnival that runs throughout *CT*. As Olson writes, 'the entire inner frame can be seen as a manifestation of the special spirit of carnival with Harry Bailey as a kind of Lord of Misrule'.¹⁰⁹ The pilgrims are plucked from the pre-occupations, hierarchies and restraints of ordinary life and set together in a motley, festive 'companye', with special dispensation 'to talen and to pleye [...] to shorte with oure weye' (I.772, 791) In this 'play' far more of a problematic nature can be said than could be tolerated in earnest discourse. 'A man may seye ful sooth in game' (I.4354) as the Host declares, but only on the grounds that it does not demand to be taken seriously, that it ultimately disavows itself and its claim to truth. In *CT* Chaucer continually exploits and stretches this logic. He creates a fertile, carnival space of 'temporary liberation from the prevailing truth' in which such comic voices as the Wife and Pardoner can be given compelling expression, and authoritative values can be parodied and deflated.¹¹⁰ But there is always inherent in this 'pleye' the price and precondition of its freedom – the sense that the time of carnival is only ever

¹⁰⁷ Kendrick, *Chaucerian Play*, pp. 5-19.

¹⁰⁸ Juan Ruiz, *The Book of Good Love*, Copla 70.

¹⁰⁹ Olson, *Literature as Recreation*, p. 161.

¹¹⁰ Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, p. 10.

temporary and that ‘engaging rascals’ like the Wife and Pardoner must ultimately be overcome and subordinated to the demands of responsibility, conscience and faith.

In this same spirit Boccaccio’s ‘brigata’ are returned from their literary games to the sober realities of plague-ridden Florence and Falstaff is ultimately rejected as Harry takes on the burdens of moral and political responsibility. To his triumphant comic proclamation, ‘banish plump Jack, and banish all the world’, Harry portendingly responds, ‘I do; I will’ and a similar logic of renunciation is at work in Chaucer’s response to the Wife and Pardoner.¹¹¹ Carnival must be brought to an end, its chief agents disarmed and transcended. In *CT* this takes the form of a gradual shift away from game and play toward faith, responsibility and penitence in the final fragments, but there is also a more localized form of containment and overcoming at work in relation to the Wife and Pardoner.

As Kittredge observed, *The Clerk’s Tale*, with its re-affirmation of the conventional wifely virtues of obedience and patience, entails an attempt to ‘quite’ the Wife’s cheerful ‘heresies’ and ‘abusive raillery’, to restore an orthodox sense of moral and spiritual order.¹¹² Whether it is as successful in this endeavor as Kittredge believes is another question, but it is interesting that, at the end of his tale, Chaucer has the Clerk address the Wife directly with a satirical song in celebration of ‘al her secte’, sung with ‘lusty herte, fressh and grene’ (IV.1169-76) The tables are turned, for just as the Wife used the mode of comic play to parody and deflate clerical authority, the voice of earnest discourse now takes up the mantle of irony and play, to skillfully undermine her own presumptions – ‘O noble wyves, ful of heigh prudence, | Lat noon humylitee youre tonge naille’ (IV.1183-4). The Wife herself is not given right of reply to this gesture of ridicule, veiled in a verbal trickery equal to her own. This is perhaps surprising considering her determination to have the last word in every debate (III.425): to ‘evere answereth at the counteretaile’ (IV.II90), as the Clerk puts it. Her silence may entail, in this respect, a subtle slip of verisimilitude, but it is entirely in accord with the logic of moral containment and disavowal that she is here deprived of the final word. Her eventual silence was always the precondition of her speech.

¹¹¹ William Shakespeare, *Henry IV, Part I*, III.1.485-6, *The Oxford Shakespeare, The Complete Works*, ed. by Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p. 467.

¹¹² Kittredge, *Chaucer and his Poetry*, p. 194.

A similar, if perhaps more pointed, form of silencing and containment awaits the Pardoner. In the debacle with the Host it is the Pardoner's own egotistical presumptions which become, perhaps justly, the object of parody and deflation. The Hosts' elaborate and obscene insult – his offer to make a relic of the Pardoner's 'coillons' 'shryned in an hogges turd' (VI.951) – at once exposes the Pardoner's relics for the material dross they are, casts aspersions on his vaunted virility and matches him at his own game of rhetorical extravagance. It is the silence of the Pardoner, his inability to respond in 'play', which is here stressed. Once a veritable fountain of crafty, self-advancing speech, he is reduced by the Host's insult to a silent, impotent rage: 'So wrooth he was, no word ne wolde he seye' (VI.957). The true demise of the comic character is perhaps not death itself, but this fall into seriousness: this loss of humour and wit and the perverse courage to treat all life – even one's own – as a source of laughter and play. This is the fate which Chaucer reserved for the Pardoner.

Thus, with the Host's response to the Pardoner, as with the Reeve's response to the Miller and the Clerk's mock-ode to the Wife, the spirit of carnival is turned upon itself and the 'gylor' is 'bigyled' (I.4321). In one sense this points to another archetypal feature of the comic character: they are like Nicholas of *The Miller's Tale*, like Falstaff, the Little Tramp, Blackadder and Eric Cartman, both agents and objects of laughter and ridicule, tricksters and the victims of tricks. In their comic vacillations between moments of self-control and accident, wit and blindness, triumph and debasement, they express in the language of comedy something of the human predicament which exists between these terms, which is always both aspiring and falling down. But in the case of the Wife and the Pardoner, this definitive and one-way shift from being the joker to the butt of the joke also serves an important function in the moral economy of *CT*. Their carnival authority must be revoked; these masters of comic deflation must, themselves, be deflated and rendered mute. And in this process of containment we see how the will to truth and order and the moral conscience of the poet add their own peculiar shade and texture to the comedy of *CT*.

The Wife and Pardoner are thus ultimately silenced, but it remains an open question as to how far the subversive comic force of their voices is really controlled. Like Dante's Ulysses, these complex, opaque figures may be left behind, but they still have about them an irreducible poetic and human quality which cannot be entirely subsumed into the resolving logic of conventional morality and allegory. The comic deflation of high and serious values and the dialogic play of voices they set in motion

take on a momentum of their own. They go on to haunt the rest of Chaucer's poetry and to subvert any straightforward appeal to unitary and orthodox 'sentence'. Indeed they contribute significantly to the sense of guilt and anxiety about literature and the will to moral and hermeneutic order that emerges with increasing rigour in the final fragments of *CT*. For whilst the comic spirit explored in this chapter produced in Chaucer some of his greatest and most distinctive poetry, whilst it brought new possibilities to literary discourse and new productive freedoms to the poet, it was also straining against the dominant aesthetic and religious values of late medieval culture. In his own penitential vision, Robert Green has Chaucer proclaim with a laugh that 'poets' wits are free', but in reality laughter and literary freedom exacted a certain toll on the conscience of the poet.¹¹³ What I turn to consider now is how Chaucer expresses and negotiates this problem of conscience; how he attempts to relate his speculative, equivocal 'human comedy' back to the absolute and encompassing values of his faith.



1. The 'Little Tramp' takes a fall. Charlie Chaplin, *East Street*, 1916

¹¹³ Green, 'Green's Vision, in *Chaucer: The Critical Heritage*, p. 133.

Chapter 3: Closure and Repentance in the final fragments of *The Canterbury Tales*

In the final three fragments of *CT* there is a notable shift away from the open, exploratory, and equivocal poetics discussed in the previous two chapters, toward a more sober poetics of didacticism, penitence and piety. Knight describes this in terms of ‘a steady movement of withdrawal from art, poetry, the subtle voice, the secular arts’ and Irvine as a ‘turning toward realities beyond language and fiction’.¹ After the worldly ambiguities and indeterminacies courted in much of Chaucer’s earlier poetry there is a palpable, perhaps inevitable, drive in these final tales to restore a sense of moral order, certainty and purpose— to once and for all escape the ‘house of rumour’, for surer spiritual grounds. It is here too that Chaucer struggles most intensely with the question of the value and meaning of his poetry and its ultimate relation to the truths and imperatives of Christian faith. In this struggle there emerges a powerful sense of guilt and self-conflict, which runs in veiled forms throughout the tales of fragments VIII and IX and culminates in the rejection of poetry itself in *The Parson’s Tale* and Retraction.

In this chapter I argue that this penitential re-orientation is not merely a belated, conventional gesture of piety, extrinsic to the real literary business of Chaucer’s poetry, but rather the final expression of a dialectic which has informed and run throughout his work. It is, in many ways, the consequence of the literary freedom and experimentalism that has preceded it. Through the equivocal use of allegory found in *HF*, for example, or the comic dialgoisation of high values witnessed in the comedy of *CT*, Chaucer was discovering new possibilities for creative literature as a comprehensive and autonomous mode of enquiry into human life and culture, but this kind of literary experimentalism had no clear role in the prevailing scheme of fourteenth-century thought and aesthetics. In its resistance to the terms of moral and spiritual utility it risked falling on the wrong side of the Augustine divide between *caritas* and *cupiditas*, of being a worldly distraction, rather than a means of transcending this world. Thus, in the final fragments, where the question of ultimate value is most pressingly raised, Chaucer is left to wrestle with the old clerical doubts

¹ Knight, *Geoffrey Chaucer*, p. 137; Irvine, ‘Medieval Grammatical Theory and Chaucer’s *House of Fame*’, p. 876.

and suspicions of secular poetry, discussed in the Introduction— the idea of poetic fiction as a ‘worldly vanitee’ (X.1084) and ‘draf’ (X.35), a useless craft, a field of carnal illusions and idle, atavistic pleasures that distracts the soul from its true situation and draws it further into worldly confusion. These doubts and suspicions find expression in the motifs of idleness, jangling and futile alchemy which run through the tales of the final fragments and the contrast with the spiritual fructuousness of Saint Cecilia and the Parson’s speech. Chaucer sees his work hanging precariously in the balance between these poles and endeavours here to disavow its worldly aspect and align what remains with the spiritual productivity of the latter two figures.

This penitential move is the final and most pronounced expression of a tendency which has always been apparent in Chaucer’s poetry. It is an expression of the earnest will to truth and transcendence – what Derrida called the search for the ‘impossible presence of an absent origin’² – seen in the epilogue of *Troilus*, in the gestures towards an unrealisable ‘sentence’ in *HF*, in the potent Boethian strain of thought that runs through many of the tales of ‘moralitee and hoolynesse’ (I.3180) and in the moral ballads in praise of truth, gentillesse and steadfastness, which say of this unstable world – ‘her nis non hoom, her nis but wilderness, Forth, pilgrim forth’ (*Truth*.17-18). Throughout Chaucer’s work this tendency exists in dialectical tension with the opposing will to irony, play and indeterminacy discussed in previous chapters, but in the final fragments the balance of decisively power shifts, and it is the sober will to truth and order which becomes dominant. Besides its penitential character it also manifests itself as a powerful drive toward closure: a drive to bring an end to the carnival play of *CT*, to ‘knytte up’ (X.28) its inconclusive fragments and furnish them with some definitive, unifying and redeeming ‘sentence’. Chaucer seeks, once and for all, to impose the Truth which has so often been problematised and postponed, upon the wayward, multifarious letter of the text, to save his work from the fate of interminable and futile multiplication which bedevils the Canon’s alchemical experiments. But it is the passionate drive to closure, not its calm accomplishment, that becomes the main focus of the final fragments.

This drive to closure can be seen explicitly in ‘The Parson’s Prologue’. There, with the pilgrims at an unspecified ‘thropes end’ (X.12), with the setting sun and

² Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p.369.

lengthening shadows indicating that the day is fast approaching its conclusion; the Host calls time on the whole elaborate ‘play’ of *CT*. Content that ‘every man save [one] hath toold his tale’ and that his ‘ordinaunce’ is ‘almoost fulfild’ he turns to the Parson, for one final tale, a ‘fable anon, for cokkes bones!’ to ‘knytte up wel a greet mateere’ (X.19-29).³ In his response the Parson adds further to the sense of imminent and timely closure by refusing poetic fiction altogether and concluding the tale-telling contest with a penitential prose treatise which points the way to the ultimate *terminus* of the pilgrimage of life, not at Canterbury or the Tabard Inn, but ‘Jerusalem celestial’ (X.51). The ‘myrie tale’ (X.46) he has to offer does not so much contribute to as rise above, ‘quite’ and disband the game of fiction. With Christian sobriety it casts a long reproving glance over much of what has passed before it. It provides the orthodox, incontestable answer to the questions posed by the dying Arcite in the very first tale – ‘What is this world? What asketh men to have?’ – and it unifies, through its encompassing anagogical perspective, the diverse and often fractious brigade of pilgrims into a single Christian community of shared plight and purpose, a community which ultimately moves beyond its fictional instantiation, and reaches with didactic force to encompass reader, audience and poet. In the words of Ralph Baldwin, *The Parson’s Tale* ‘recapitulates and musters into dramatic unity all the silent symmetries of the other tales and the viage as such’.⁴

Or so it might seem. Critics such as Tupper and Baldwin have certainly interpreted the Parson’s intervention in this way, as representing the orderly and assured culmination of *CT*, the realisation of a predetermined moral and artistic unity.⁵ Such perhaps was the impression which Chaucer, in the final penitential phrase of his career, was hoping to create. But, as his poetry so often reminds us, the intentions of the teller and the meaning of the tale are not always of one accord. The question of the unity and completion of *CT* and the extent to which the Parson’s contribution provides a genuine resolution to the formal and thematic problems posed by this sprawling, heterogeneous work are considerably more vexed than either Chaucer’s rhetoric of ‘fulfilled[...] sentence’ (X.17) or Baldwin’s reading implies. Beneath the surface image of timeliness, balance and unity, beneath the rhetoric of

³ The distinctively English, literal-sounding phrasal verb to ‘knit up’ is repeated twice and in this context implies not just a bringing to a close, but simultaneously a binding together, a synthetic intertwining and unifying of all preceding material into a fruitful whole.

⁴ Baldwin, *The Unity of the Canterbury Tales*, p. 99.

⁵ Ibid. 77-85; Frederick Tupper, ‘Chaucer and the Seven Deadly Sins’, *PMLA*, 29 (1914), 93-128.

‘fulfilled sentence’ and assured endings, one finds the reality of more tangled, conflicted and incomplete work.⁶ The stress on closure in the Parson’s intervention in fact reveals a deeper sense of irresolution.

Firstly, in textual terms, *CT* is not as well ‘knit up’ as the Parson’s Prologue suggests. The Host may claim that ‘every man [...] hath told his tale’ but of the thirty-one named pilgrims (including the narrator and Canon’s Yeoman) only a total of twenty-three tell tales, and not all of those are finished. As the Host speaks of ‘fulfild’ ‘ordinaunce’ (X.19) the reader may also ask, what of the original scheme of four tales for each pilgrim of which the Host now seems oblivious. What of the return leg, the result of the tale-telling contest and the ‘soper at oure aller cost’ promised at the Tabard Inn (I.791-99)?

It is conceivable that Chaucer never intended to bring the Host’s ambitious scheme to fruition, that *CT* was always intended to document a one-way journey.⁷ But still, the incompleteness of several tales, the absence of linking passages and various inconsistencies in the frame-narrative all suggest a work far from completion. Rather than bringing to fruition an order that was always implicit within *CT*, the Host’s and Parson’s discourse, in its very insistence on order and completion, reminds us of the more open and conflicted textual history it seeks to elide and highlight a significant change in its direction and design. Beneath the impression of ‘fulfilled sentence’, the evidence of the fifty-five extant manuscripts reveals that *CT* is not so much a complete literary artefact, governed by a single authorial intention, as a tangled and fragmentary palimpsest in which various text and changing intentions, both authorial and scribal, are problematically overlaid and interfused.⁸ It is partly because of this textual indeterminacy that *CT* has remained invitingly open to such a wide range of creative, editorial and interpretive interventions.⁹ Throughout the six hundred years of

⁶ Lewis, *Allegory of Love*, p.43.

⁷ For the argument that Chaucer did intend to follow the plan outlined by the Host see J. M. Manly, ‘Tales of the Homeward Journey’, *Studies in Philology*, 28 (1931), 613-17 and Charles A. Owen, ‘The Plan of the Canterbury Pilgrimage’, *PMLA*, 66 (1950), 820-6; for the opposing position, Ralph Baldwin, *The Unity of the Canterbury Tales* and Donald Howard, *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales*, pp. 20-22.

⁸ For discussion of the textual history of *CT* see L. D. Benson, ‘The Order of The Canterbury Tales’, *SAC*, 3 (1981), 77-120 and Derek Pearsall, ‘Authorial Revision in Some Late Medieval English Texts’, in (eds.) Minnis and Brewer, *Crux and Controversy in Middle English Textual Criticism* (1992).

⁹ This can be seen, for instance, in the fifteenth-century ‘Canterbury Continuations’ and various scribal additions, which seek to fill in textual gaps or even revive the narrative of pilgrimage and take it beyond the ‘thrones end’ where Chaucer was content to leave it. With different emphasis, it continues in the work of scholarly editors and generations of literary critics who have, in various ways, sought to resolve the indeterminacy of *CT* by elucidating its incipient form and meaning.

its reception it has been added to, edited, adapted and interpreted by a range of writers all eager to bring their own idea of closure and 'sentence' to the work. Ironically, though, in the Parson's Prologue it seems to be precisely this openness to the continuation and multiplication of meaning which Chaucer was seeking to foreclose.

In seeking belatedly to close the dialogic field of *CT*, to impose upon it a clear, definitive 'sentence' and to limit the play of meaning beyond his authorial control Chaucer was also inadvertently adding to its diversity, its contradictions, its underlying irresolution. This dynamic is apparent not only in the textual terms noted above, but also on an aesthetic level. For whilst the Parson does, in one sense, knit up *CT* through the universalising force and incontestable spiritual authority of the final 'sentence' he offers, this 'knitting up' is only achieved through a significant violation of aesthetic decorum and the introduction of an entirely different order of discourse. *ParsT* does not represent the smooth culmination of an order that was always implicit, rather, it entails a kind of overcoming, rejection and interruption of *CT*, of poetic fiction itself, which decisively overrides the Host's request, 'ne breke thou nat oure play' (X.24). As Lee Patterson suggests, the paradox of *ParsT* is that 'whilst [it] issues into the clear light of reality, its takes its beginnings in the imprecision of fiction, and is itself a part of the whole it dismisses'.¹⁰ It thus exists in a curiously antagonistic relation to the whole poetic work of which it is a reluctant part. In smooth iambic pentameter, both poetry and fiction are flatly rejected by the Parson – himself a fiction – in favour of a work of 'moralitee and vertuous mateere' (X.38) communicated in plain expository prose, which soon dispenses of the illusion of a fictive teller and audience. It is the sheer length of the treatise which finally proves fatal to the impression of aesthetic coherence. As it proceeds with its sobering and compendious analysis of sin, it not only provides an unambiguous framework for the moral disavowal of much of the preceding matter and method of *CT*, it actually dismantles the compelling mimetic illusion created by the poet. The drama of the pilgrimage, its performers and their tale-telling contest, even the Parson himself, all fade away under the weight of the more pressing reality to which the treatise refers, one in which we are moral and spiritual participants, not mere spectators. As Donald Howard puts it, the pretending is over and 'at the end of *CT* we are given a book to

¹⁰ Lee W. Patterson, 'The Parson's Tale and the Quitting of the Canterbury Tales', *Traditio*, 34 (1978), 331-80 (p. 370).

read'.¹¹ This process of de-aestheticisation culminates in the Retraction, where Chaucer speaks finally, without any fictive intermediaries, to renounce on moral grounds the vast majority of his literary accomplishments. Thus, to borrow Dean's phrase, Fragment X is as much a rejection and 'dismantling' of *CT* from within, as it is a 'knitting up'.¹²

It is always tempting to read a pattern of necessity into what happens to be the case. Baldwin, for instance, writes of the 'logical inevitability of a treatise on penance as the artistic end of a pilgrimage', as if this were not at all an unusual way to conclude a work of poetic fiction.¹³ (Imagine, say, if Dante had ended the *Commedia* with a prose tract or George Eliot resolved to end *Middlemarch* with a lengthy work of moral philosophy!) It is important to remember that there was no major precedent, no absolute necessity to this mode of ending, in moral or aesthetic terms, and just how jarring it actually is. For whilst medieval poetry often moves towards explicitly moral and penitential conclusions, this movement is usually mediated through the language of poetry itself; Chaucer could have ended *CT* in this vein, with a moral tale, tone and sentence, that did not quite so violently disrupt and call into question the dramatic and aesthetic unity of the work. In fragment X, however, there is no effort to achieve a synthesis of art and morality, fiction and truth, of the kind found, for example, in Dante's *Commedia*, Gower's *Confessio Amantis* or the final book of Chaucer's own *Troilus*. It is as though by this point in his career Chaucer had abandoned the possibility of poetry – at least his own mode of poetry – as a reliable vehicle of moral and spiritual sentence. The legitimising dialectic of allegory which was always being strained and problematised in his work here finally collapses back into the poles of explicit didacticism and an irresponsible, worldly poetics – the 'whete' and 'draf' described by the Parson in his Prologue (X.35-6) and re-affirmed in the evaluative division of works found in the Retraction. In this final 'knitting up' poetic fiction and truth stand opposed, and the former is ultimately sacrificed to the latter.

It would be easy to look upon this final, penitential bid for closure as essentially negative and destructive, to see *ParsT*, in Donaldson's words, as 'bad-mannered, pedantic and joyless', and inimicable to the creative spirit of Chaucer's art,

¹¹ Donald Howard, *The Idea of The Canterbury Tales*, p. 74.

¹² James Dean, 'Dismantling the Canterbury Book', p. 746.

¹³ Baldwin, *Unity of the Canterbury Tales*, p. 77.

but I want to resist that temptation.¹⁴ Whilst acknowledging its destructive aspect, I explore in this chapter how the drive towards closure and repentance in the final fragments is intimately and problematically connected to what is most creative and original in Chaucer's work, both how literary creativity becomes a source of guilt and how that guilt finds complex and conflicted literary expression. In the bid to re-evaluate and close down the open, dialogic field of CT, new creative tensions and ambiguities emerge and the play of signification is paradoxically continued. The line between dismantling and unifying, renouncing and redeeming CT becomes curiously fine. Perhaps, ultimately, as with fallen humankind in the narrative of salvation, the work is paradoxically redeemed in the very process of its self-denial and castigation. What emerges from the struggle to bring final order and truth to a work that has so often resisted the univocality of those terms is a poetics curiously turned against itself and its own instincts: a poetics darker, more jaded and self-doubting than that discussed in previous chapters and certainly less congenial to modern ears, but in many ways just as fascinating, as complex, as self-conscious, as full of contradictions and ambiguities, even if reluctantly so.

In analysing this self-conflicted poetics I draw upon the notion of 'late style' developed by Adorno and Said to describe a peculiar quality of irresolution and untimeliness that inheres in the late works of certain great artists.¹⁵ Whilst the exact chronology of Chaucer's work will always remain open to debate, I follow general critical consensus here in seeing the content of fragments VIII-X (barring *The Second Nun's Tale*) and its overall organisation as the product of Chaucer's later years.¹⁶ These fragments constitute what could be described as Chaucer's own 'late style' and belong to a distinctively penitential and retrospective phase in the evolution of his poetics, which can be usefully illuminated through Adorno and Said's conception of lateness. Both these thinkers resisted the generic conception of the late work as embodying 'a spirit of reconciliation and serenity' and explored instead the possibility of late style as an expression of 'intransigence, difficulty, and unresolved

¹⁴ Donaldson, *Speaking of Chaucer*, p. 173.

¹⁵ Edward W. Said, *On Late Style* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), pp. 6-7; Theodor W. Adorno, 'Beethoven's Late Style' in *Essays on Music*, trans. by Susan H. Gillespie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

¹⁶ Even if aspects of the tales were composed earlier, their overall organisation shows signs of a poet retrospectively evaluating and seeking to close his work. This issue is discussed in more detail in the following section. See fn.62.

contradiction'.¹⁷ Here the passage of time does not bring with it the wisdom and equanimity of age, but a more restless, questioning spirit, that finds embodiment in a style riven with internal strain, disharmony and disjunction. The mastered craft gives way to an aesthetics of fragmentation and crisis. In the final fragments I believe Chaucer is caught somewhere between these two modes of lateness— aspiring to the assurance and unity of the former, whilst, in the process, creating something which resembles more closely the latter. What emerges is not, as Baldwin envisioned, a poetics of measure, timely wisdom and assurance, a serene submission to those 'quiet medieval hierarchies' before which 'the ripeness is all', but a more strained, fragmentary self-conflicted poetics, haunted by those lengthening shadows so neatly observed in the Parson's Prologue. If the ostensible measure and piety of the Parson's Prologue provides one of the faces of Chaucer late style, then so too does the sweating, bedraggled and discoloured alchemist of *The Canon's Yeoman's Tale* – a symbolic figuration of the guilty artist – whose tormented efforts to transform incoherent matter into the resplendent form of gold are doomed to 'concluden everemoore amys' (VIII.957).

In this chapter I explore the relationship between these two opposing faces of lateness: the ideal of closure and the difficulty of its realisation. The following section discusses the question of closure and unity in the context of existing debates in Chaucer Studies and Section Two explores Chaucer's late style through detailed analysis of Fragments VIII-X. I leave consideration of the Retraction and Chaucer's final verdict on his art to the Conclusion of this Thesis, where the themes discussed in this chapter are related back to wider questions of the value and status of creative literature in late medieval culture and Chaucer's place therein.

I. Critical Perspectives on the Final Fragments

Turne over the leef and chese another tale [...]

Blameth nat me if that ye chese amys (I.3177-81)

Arguably both medieval and modern audiences have followed the narrator's advice and chosen to read *CT* selectively. But whilst the greater abundance of manuscript

¹⁷ Said, *On Late Style*, p. 7.

copies of overtly moral tales and the comments of Chaucer's literary successors suggests that Chaucer's near contemporaries preferred to dwell on those 'storial thyng[s] that toucheth gentillesse, | And eek moralitee and hoolynesse' (I.3180), modern literary tastes have leant in the opposite direction, and found interest in the more irreverent and unorthodox aspects of Chaucer's work. There have been several sustained efforts to appreciate *CT* in its entirety and in relation to the cultural epoch to which it belongs, but nonetheless, with a work so vast and multifaceted some selectivity becomes inevitable. Broadly speaking, it has been the first seven fragments, the initial joyous setting forth of the pilgrims and the first lively acts of the tale-telling game which have been the focus of critical debate. Thanks to the contributions of Kittredge and others, the comic tales, the dynamic drama of the frame-narrative and the personal revelations of the Wife and Pardoner have taken centre stage, whilst the final fragments, where complex characterisation and humanist drama generally pale into more conventional literary modes and overtly didactic matter, have received comparatively little attention.

The dramatic mode identified by Kittredge reached its zenith in the middle fragments with the Wife and Pardoner; in the final fragments characterisation both within and between tales is less fully realised and the notion of an essential dramatic unity becomes increasingly difficult to maintain.¹⁸ The gradual return to more conventional form and matter in *CT* and especially its conclusion with the anti-aesthetic and resolutely medieval block of *ParsT* was inconvenient for advocates of Chaucerian dramatic-realism and humanist readings more generally. Partly for this reason there has been a long-standing tendency to downplay the final fragments, to see much of their matter as disconnected or antithetical to Chaucer's real, 'human' accomplishments. Kittredge closed his seminal study not with the impersonal narrative of morality and redemption represented by the Parson, but the conflicted and artistically captivating figure of the Pardoner, 'the tragic face behind the satyr's mask'

¹⁸ Kittredge follows the 'Bradshaw shift' model of tale order which takes the invitation of the ambiguous attribution of the Wife/Shipman's prologue to shift Fragment VII to before Fragments III-VI. This in itself is a crucial example of the unfinished nature of the text and the interpretive difficulties it creates. Bradshaw's model is based largely on deduction from geographical reference. That it is replicated in none of the existing manuscripts speaks against it. Most editors, including Robinson and Benson, follow the Ellesmere order. Variant tale order withstanding, Kittredge still evades the closing fragments by stopping with the Pardoner. For a defence of Bradshaw's case see George. R. Keiser, 'In Defence of the Bradshaw Shift', *ChRev*, 12 (1978), 191-201.

and a good deal of later criticism has followed his lead.¹⁹ Part of the enduring appeal of his reading is to have crafted a unit of design and meaning that allows the reader to temporarily evade the problematic incompleteness of the whole. Ironically, one senses here the same desire for closure, however different its values and manifestation, that led Chaucer away from the Pardoner and toward the Parson. Neither approach can satisfy this desire without making the exclusions and renunciations that shut down an always more open and difficult reality.

Kittredge is just one example of a general trend in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Chaucer criticism, which either evaded the final fragments or viewed them suspiciously. Many readings of the period implicitly constructed a Renaissance-narrative that celebrated the progressive, latently modern and humanistic element of Chaucer's art, his artistic transcendence of the limitations of medieval forms. That in the end Chaucer should have turned his back on this progress and achievement disrupted that neat teleology. Far from 'knyting up wel a greet mattere' (X.28) the Parson's sententious treatise posed an unspoken threat to both the aesthetic unity of *CT* and the ideological unity of the humanist construction of the poet.

There was thus a tendency not only to downplay *ParsT* but to dismiss it outright as un-Chaucerian, both in spirit and textual origin. Following late-Victorian critics such as Simon and Eilers, Manly asserts *ParsT* 'was probably never composed by Chaucer' but was installed at the end of *CT* by his literary executors, 'only because [his] chest contained no other piece of prose that seemed appropriate'.²⁰ Whilst their arguments were persuasively challenged at the time and both the composition and placing of the tale are now widely accepted as authorial, the habit of doubting the validity of *ParsT* in relation to *CT* has persisted.²¹ Most recently David Lawton and Charles Owen have continued to see it as an independent work of Chaucer's assigned to the end of the *CT* by fifteenth-century editors, spurred by the desire for textual and hermeneutic closure.²²

¹⁹ Kittredge, *Chaucer and his Poetry*, pp.167 and 211; other notable works that follow this pattern include Dinshaw's *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* and Patterson's *Chaucer and the Subject of History*.

²⁰ J. M. Manly, 'Tales of the Homeward Journey', *Studies in Philology*, 28 (1931), 613-7 (p. 616).

²¹ See Patterson, 'The Parson's Tale and the Quitting of the Canterbury Tales' p. 332, for details of the tradition dismissing *ParsT* as inauthentic and its refutation by German philologists Emil Koeppe and Heinrich Spiers.

²² Charles A. Owen Jr., *The Manuscripts of the Canterbury Tales* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1991), especially p. 125; David Lawton, 'Chaucer's Two Ways: The Pilgrimage Frame of The Canterbury Tales', *SAC*, 9 (1987), 3-40.

The tendency to disparage and dismiss *ParsT* continued into mid-century scholarship of a ‘new critical’ orientation, with its own distinctive preoccupation with aesthetic harmony and closure. What happens in the final fragments of *CT* is just as jarring for proponents of the ‘well wrought urn’ as it is for those of the ‘human comedy’ and both responded with a mix of artistic distaste and scholarly suspicion to the narrowing and jarring conclusion of Chaucer’s poetic masterpiece. Donaldson condemned *ParsT* as ‘ill tempered, bad-mannered, pedantic and joyless’ and Muscatine similarly called it ‘an inveterately enumerative, circumstantially punitive list of sinful acts [...] unrelated to the literary making of the rest of the work’.²³ Whilst this curious renunciation of Chaucer’s renunciation of secular literature is these days expressed less forthrightly, the same trend of evasion, dismissal and disparagement has in various ways persisted into the criticism of recent years. It is a tendency best captured in Patterson’s remark that for most readers, Chaucer provides a conclusion to *CT*, ‘that is at best drab, at worst a betrayal of all that is thought to be Chaucerian’.²⁴

Alongside the unsympathetic ‘modernist’ response, which saw the closing fragments as antithetical to Chaucer’s genuine artistic achievement, there developed a diametrically opposing ‘historicist’ approach, which found in them, and especially in *ParsT*, the key to the definitively ‘medieval’ meaning and unity of *CT*. Fredrick Tupper made a seminal contribution to this perspective, arguing that *CT*, like Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*, was a systematically didactic work structured around the exemplification of the seven deadly sins. Each tale related precisely to a particular sin or remedial virtue, often embodied by the allegorical persona of its teller. This unifying moral framework was elucidated in ‘the close connection between the tales and Chaucer’s own detailed discussion of the Sins in the Parson’s sermon’.²⁵ For Tupper the Parson was the final arbiter of value, his tale the moral and formal fulcrum of *CT*, wherein the poet’s intentions – elsewhere problematically veiled and elusive – were made explicitly clear.

The essential problem with Tupper’s thesis is the reductiveness of its schema. Tales are anatomised and inflexibly assigned to singular sins in a mechanical manner

²³ Donaldson, *Speaking of Chaucer*, p. 173; Muscatine, ‘Chaucer’s Religion and the Chaucer Religion’, pp. 256-8.

²⁴ Patterson, ‘Quiting the Canterbury Tales’, p. 332.

²⁵ Tupper, ‘Chaucer and the Seven Deadly Sins’, p.114; for a recent, balanced discussion of the implications of Tupper’s perspective and his debate with Lowes see Alcuin Blamires, *Chaucer, Ethics and Gender* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 4-7.

which does not do justice to their aesthetic particularity or moral complexity. Interrelations and nuances of morality, even in the strict, abstracting terms of medieval ethical discourse, are overlooked. Nonetheless, Tupper's thesis remains crucial because it attempted to articulate, rather than overlook, the relation between the final fragments and *CT*, and it did so by locating the work in its medieval cultural context rather than drawing it toward the present. Implicit here again is the powerful desire to close and 'knit up' *CT* already observed in humanist interpretations, but far from seeing the unity of the work in its teleological drive toward some facet of modernity or trans-historical value, Tupper saw that its unity lay with the medieval zeitgeist and made it the aim of his critical endeavour to grasp that alien and unperturbed principle of coherence. In this respect Tupper anticipates central elements of Robertson's comprehensive project of 'exegetical criticism' and Baldwin's nuanced application of this model.

Both sought to close *CT*, to uncover its implicit unity and 'sentence', by applying to it the previously mentioned model of the ideal, self-enclosed, densely figurative artefact of medieval aesthetics, which reflected the hermetic unity and boundedness of divine creation. Where Tupper's moral framework seemed to straightjacket the aesthetic complexity of *CT*, through their more encompassing and ambitious exegetical schema, Robertson and Baldwin were able to delineate in Chaucer's work the tantalising semantics of a more complex, icy and alien beauty, nourished on the heart blood of the medieval zeitgeist, expressive of its profoundest thoughts and sentiments.

Baldwin claimed to have discerned the true medieval 'nucleus' and teleological backbone of the unfinished work, by studying the symmetrical and finished units of its beginning and ending (conveniently leaving, in a manner reminiscent of Kittredge, the problematic incompleteness of the work drifting somewhere in between). What he called the 'specific action' of the tale-telling contest was symbolically subordinate to the 'enveloping action' of the spiritual pilgrimage, the journey of the soul towards God. The Parson and his tale still represented the spiritual apotheosis of the work, but in place of Tupper's moral schematising Baldwin's analysis focused on the subtle shift in the pilgrimage motif from the worldly to the spiritual, the gradual yet inexorable emergence of an anagogical perspective in the final fragment that both embraces and transcends the drama of the

literal journey. In the process, he struck a productive balance between the didactic and the poetic aspects of *CT*.

Each pilgrim and his story combine with the Parson's homily to make a momentary
– and moving – diptych, a story and gloss, action and passion.²⁶

Baldwin thus preserves, in altered form, much of the dramatic nature of the *CT*. The final moral and spiritual dénouement 'is happening here on the level of characterization' and the characters 'reflectively take on new depths' as the drama of penitence and salvation is played out through the pilgrims themselves. Baldwin is almost reminiscent of Kittredge in his imaginative elaboration of the implicit, road-side drama – sensing the 'unspoken yet surely uttered' absolution the Parson would perform over each of the pilgrims.²⁷ Ultimately a more sensitive and mediated unfolding of an allegorical order is realised, one which captures something of the pathos of the dwindling material world just as it rises above it.

But whether *ParsT*, as Baldwin suggests, really does unite character and spiritual meaning 'without losing either' is open to question. In the transcendent hermeneutics of allegory and certainly in the Parson's lengthy, abstract discourse is the former not sacrificed to the latter? Robertson and Baldwin could account for the movement toward overtly religious form and matter in the closing fragments as the gradual unfolding of orthodox 'sentence', but the intensity and dissonance of this movement disrupts their notion of *CT* distinctively medieval aesthetic unity. If *CT* was indeed – in essence if not in execution – a unified medieval artefact, 'designed through [its] figurative devices [...] and very workmanship, to lead the mind toward a beauty which transcends corporal modulations', if all that was written truly was written 'for oure doctrine', then why does the poet conclude by tearing at and renouncing meaningful parts of that unity, as 'worldly vanities' (X.1084), undermining, in the process, the binding, redeeming and transcending force of the allegorical method?²⁸ Fundamentally, the sprawling, multifaceted and ambiguous edifice of *CT* does not fit the unifying model of the allegorical medieval artefact with its intricate figures and mathematical symmetries, any more than it does the 'human

²⁶ Baldwin, *The Unity of the Canterbury Tales*, pp. 103-4.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Robertson, *Preface to Chaucer*, p. 137.

comedy'. The point becomes clear if one compares *CT* to the formidable formal and ideological totality of Dante's *Commedia*, which both smoothly fits and self-consciously promotes the allegorical method, or Gower's less dynamic but certainly more finished *Confessio Amantis*. Indeed, by the conjectured standards of medieval aesthetics, in which unity, order and completion are preeminent values, *CT* could hardly be considered a great success. Baldwin concedes as much, saying that discernable as it is, the 'sovrassenso' of *CT* remains 'rough and unrealised' and 'betrays a certain *indecision of growth*'.²⁹

Both humanist and historicist criticism has sought to resolve the indecision and supplement the incompleteness of *CT* with its own closing, unifying and mutually opposing 'sentencias'. We have seen in both cases how the unfinished work itself resists their totalising strategies, but this does not invalidate the insights of either perspective. I believe what these opposing critical perspectives reflect is a tension or *indecision* within *CT* itself, between tradition and innovation, authority and experience, faith and poetry. This is something which Chaucer himself was struggling with and attempting to resolve. Each critical party has drawn upon one tendency in *CT*, stressed only one half of an unresolved dialectic which has run throughout Chaucer's poetic career and comes now to an urgent, tumultuous head. More than ever, in his late works, Chaucer is a poet caught between 'quiet hierarchies' and 'dynamic oppositions'— it is in the reaching for the former that he cannot help but reaffirm the latter.

Whilst in recent decades the humanist-historicist debate has subsided, it is still, broadly speaking, between the poles of these two perspectives that recent criticism on the final fragments has taken shape. There has generally been a softening and qualifying of these extremes, but still on the one hand critics have continued to see here a diminution of the human and artistic interest of *CT* and on the other some critics have followed the historicist pattern, in seeing in the final fragments the culmination of a moral and formal order which had been implicit throughout *CT*. Here I outline four recent approaches, which all in some ways preserve and others challenge the binary terms of earlier criticism and its desire for closure.

²⁹ Baldwin, *Unity of the Canterbury Tales*, p. 29.

Adapting mid-century humanist suspicions of the closing fragments, critics such as Knight, David, Patterson and Strohm have argued persuasively for a gradual movement of disavowal and retreat in the closing fragments from a socio-historically engaged realism, from nascent forms of bourgeois subjectivity, from the exploratory and radical potential of poetry itself into medieval convention and religious quietude. This continues the trend of sensing something ‘unchaucerian’ in the form and content of the closing fragments, but rather than evading or dismissing them outright, it attempts to understand the nature of the transition that they reflect. David described this transition in terms of a tension between the innovative realism and incipient humanism of Chaucer’s poetics and his moral obligations as a medieval court poet: ‘although [Chaucer] set out in the service of truth he came to realise something equivocal in the truth of his poems that led him to retract the best of them’.³⁰

Knight sees Chaucer withdrawing not just from poetry, but from the socio-historical realities it was able to express. From fragment VII onwards, he argues, Chaucer disavows, with increasing severity, the historical vision of his earlier work: a vision which had revealed both the weakness of the feudal order and the dynamism of the bourgeois socio-economic forces which were undermining it. For Knight, *The Second Nun’s Tale* ushers in, for the first time, the naked, unquestioned voice of orthodox Christianity, which is amplified by the Parson. The forces of realism and secular self-interest, reflected now in degenerate form, are ‘raised only to be rejected in that final sequence of increasingly overt conservatism both secular and religious’.³¹ For Knight, the violence of this transition is pronounced, as history, poetry and even intellectual reflection are steadily evacuated from *CT*. The humour and complex irony of *The Nun’s Priests Tale* becomes ‘no more than the genial front for a cultural holocaust’.³² Strohm describes a similar, historically orientated process of retrenchment, with *ParsT* representing the attempted reassertion of conservative clerical authority over ‘the horizontal world of new social arrangements’ which had found expression in the dialogic field of the *CT*.³³

The strength of these three perspectives is that they are not restricted to a single, fixed and unifying ‘idea’ of the work, but rather trace within it the development of a series of competing and evolving authorial intentions. There is a

³⁰ David, *The Strumpet Muse*, p. 6.

³¹ Knight, *Geoffrey Chaucer*, p. 132.

³² Ibid, p. 144.

³³ Strohm, *Social Chaucer*, pp. 178-80.

tendency to think of authorial intension as timeless, abstract and resolving, a way of ‘furnishing the text with a final signified’.³⁴ But if one considers the sheer scale of *CT* and recalls the length of time over which it was produced, the notion of the work *as process*, as something that evolved with the life of its creator – accruing new ideas and meanings whilst imperfectly casting off old ones, reflecting the poet’s changing circumstances and thoughts across the final decades of his life – becomes persuasive. *CT* could almost be viewed as a living thing, self-questioningly charting the lines of its own development, in a similar manner, if less directly autobiographically, to Wordsworth’s unfinished epic *The Prelude*, or Ezra Pound’s sprawling and multifarious *Cantos*: a ‘rag-bag to stuff all the world’s thoughts in’.³⁵ As all three testify, the more there is of the muddle of life and world crammed into a work, the more difficult it becomes to maintain the aesthetic principles of unity and closure. Irresolution and incompleteness are the inevitable result.

David, Knight, and others too, have supplemented the absence of an overarching aesthetic unity in *CT* with the unity of a biographical narrative, a narrative of artistic disenchantment and retreat which helps to explain the tensions evident in the work. Some earlier versions of this narrative of retreat stressed its appropriateness in relation to the values of medieval culture. For Brewer and Lewis, that the medieval poet approaching death should turn from the world and his craft towards the care of his soul, is only right and natural.³⁶ But, more attuned to the conflicted nature of *CT*, Knight and David are less inclined to see in this movement of retreat something so smooth and inevitable. For both critics, it involves the surrender of much of the creative value of Chaucer’s art. Their interpretations take the shape of qualified renaissance-narratives, charting a bold modern departure and eventual retreat back into the restrictive gravitational field of ‘quiet medieval hierarchies’. Knight and David thus situate *CT* in a dialectical tension between its latently modern and medieval facets, but the terms of value in this opposition are never really in question: the modern is the liberating, affirmative principle, the medieval that of restriction and negation. From this perspective, the final fragments remain marked with much of the negativity apparent in earlier humanist assessments. The final tales

³⁴ Roland Barthes, ‘Death of the Author’, *Image, Music, Text* (London: Fontana Press, 1977), p. 147.

³⁵ Ezra Pound, *A Draft of XXX Cantos* (London: Faber, 1997), p. 7

³⁶ Lewis, *The Allegory of Love*, p. 43; Derek Brewer, *Chaucer* (London: Longmans, 1953), p. 161.

become the site where inspiration yields exhaustedly to convention, meaningful only in negative terms, as a reminder of the true creativity they seek to efface.

Patterson's treatment of *ParsT* brings an important sense of balance to this perspective. He also situates *CT* in the tension between incipiently modern and orthodox medieval values: the Parson and his tale still represent a conservative cancelling of Chaucerian poetics, but Patterson strives to balance this with a sense of the intellectual accomplishment and paradoxical craftsmanship of this closing manoeuvre. Through detailed textual analysis he argues against assumptions that *ParsT* is an inauthentic, early or defective work. He focuses on the ways Chaucer edits the penitential manuals which were his sources: ruthlessly cutting away literary and affective detail in pursuit of purely intellectual and systematic argumentation. This methodical process of abstraction is aimed at establishing a theoretical framework capable of accommodating and ordering the multiplicity of the preceding tales and, ultimately, all human reality. The particularity of human experience, with its seeming disorderliness, is coolly categorised in terms of species of sin and resolved in 'a vision that sees all of experience as reflecting a universal and rationally apprehensible order'.³⁷

In this respect, whilst *ParsT* represents a negating, absolutist force 'that renders the game unplayable', Patterson sees it as a necessary correlative to the openness of the game itself, something which appropriately 'quites' *CT*, and was implied, if withheld, within it all along.³⁸ The Parson thus defines the limits within which fiction can operate, representing the law which somehow both refuses and enables play. After the ambiguities and long deferrals of literary discourse, the Parson heralds 'a conclusiveness that is profoundly satisfying and thoroughly medieval'.³⁹ The idea of reciprocity between the carnival play of *CT* and its final, sober rejection is intriguing. Something similar was discussed in the previous chapter in terms of the temporary liberation offered by carnival, on precondition of its relinquishment, but Patterson's application of this idea is too neat and harmonious. Akin to Baldwin, he accepts the unity and resolving authority of *ParsT* too readily on its own terms, and overlooks the sense of trauma and discord involved in the transition to this perspective. Does 'the digression' of poetic fiction really 'lead inevitably if eventually

³⁷ Patterson, 'Quiting of *The Canterbury Tales*', p. 343.

³⁸ Ibid. p. 376.

³⁹ Ibid.

to the goal' of the Parson's transcendent discourse as Patterson suggests?⁴⁰ It is an interesting prospect; but, as Patterson says little of the process through which this paradoxical resolution is achieved and chooses, instead, to end his *magnum opus* with discussion of the Pardoner, the question remains open.

Patterson is perhaps best situated between those advocates of transition or retreat and those who see in the final fragments the culmination of an immanent medieval unity. There have also been, in recent years, several more accommodating variations of the latter perspective. Jordan, for instance, adapted Robertson's approach to medieval aesthetics to propose a model of 'inorganic structure' for *CT*, which consisted of 'the fitting of fixed, often autonomous parts into preconceived and predated totalities'.⁴¹ As with Patterson, *ParsT* remained 'the pinnacle, reaching heavenward, upon which the diverse earthly tales converge' in a mutually enforcing resolution.⁴² Similarly for Lawler the essential movement of the final tales was 'a thrust away from the many and toward the one',⁴³ from human plurality and experience toward divine unity and authority. The 'clash between experience and authority', and the final victory of the latter, is dramatised by the Canon's failed experimentation and the Yeoman's conversion narrative.⁴⁴ It is one in a series of poetic reprises that gradually shift from the experiential world of fiction toward the transcendent adjudication of *ParsT*. Religious authority is given the final word, but as Lawler says, with a touch of humanist nostalgia, Chaucer 'also grants the way of experience its full value'.⁴⁵

Like Lawler, other critics have offered more flexible or hybrid versions of the argument for a complete and premeditated order emerging in the final fragments. Leyerle, for example described the closure and order of *CT* in less emphatic terms as a pattern of thematic interlace, arguing that the *ParsT* 'contributes to the total design by tying up the threads' but not necessarily, 'resolving the issues'.⁴⁶ David Raybin has recently argued that the unifying authority of *ParsT* actually entails an affirmation and

⁴⁰ Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History*, p. 317.

⁴¹ Robert Jordan, *Chaucer and the Shape of Creation*, p. 236.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Traugott Lawler, *The One and the Many*, p. 172.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* p.132.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* p.134.

⁴⁶ John Leyerle, 'Thematic Interlace in "The Canterbury Tales"', *Essays and Studies*, 29 (1976), 107-21 (p. 109).

celebration of human multiplicity, rather than its negation. The diversity of lives and perspectives offered in the tales are not cancelled out, but preserved and redeemed in the embrace of the ‘inclusive and tolerant spirituality’⁴⁷ expressed in the Parson’s penitential treatise. For Raybin the theme of penitence is the key to this spiritual and aesthetic reconciliation, a way of seeing unity in *CT* without losing the Chaucerian ‘fascination with multiplicity’ and ‘tolerance for flawed human nature’.⁴⁸

This is somewhat similar to Baldwin’s claim that both character and moral meaning are preserved in *ParsT*, Lawler’s preservation of the ‘full value’ of experience in its overcoming, and Patterson’s notion of the Parson’s deferred judgement enabling the game of fiction in the very terms that dissolve it. There is something similarly tempting and suspicious in Raybin’s notion of a final aesthetic resolution and spiritual absolution in *CT*, which is inclusive and non-negating. Raybin’s case is based on the slippery dialectical interdependence of sin and salvation – ‘grace would have no place in the striving for perfection were human behaviour naturally proper’, thus *ParsT* is called forth by the diverse human ways it chastens, absolves and paradoxically affirms – it is ‘a handbook for those who have enjoyed the life and vitality of the predominantly worldly tales.’⁴⁹ But that sin is a prerequisite of penitence and grace cannot mean that it is thereby accepted and licensed in the ‘all’s-well-that-ends-well’ manner Raybin suggests. Rather, true penitence demands a more remorseful and heart-felt renunciation of sin, something of that spirit found in the Retraction, where Chaucer writes ‘. . . from hennesforth unto my lyves ende sende me grace to biwayle my giltes’ (X.1083-95). Both in form and meaning *ParsT*’s abstract classifications of sin do not so much celebrate as dissect and condemn that rich ‘variety that defines the human’.⁵⁰

Raybin and Patterson are right to discern the interplay of licence and renunciation in the final fragments, but this affords no utopian and self-assured unity, nothing so neat and harmonious. If there is salvation for humankind, for Chaucer, for *CT*, it comes at a price: it requires the negation and sacrifice of earthly life and art, as nothing more than ‘worldly vanitees’ (X.1084). The aforementioned critics overlook the destructive and absolutist force of this sacrifice and the paradoxical salvation it

⁴⁷ David Raybin, “‘Manye been the weyes’: The Flower, Its Roots and the Ending of *The Canterbury Tales*” in *Closure in The Canterbury Tales*, ed. by David Raybin (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2000), p. 11.

⁴⁸ Raybin, ‘*The Flower, Its Roots and the Ending of The Canterbury Tales*’, pp. 11-12.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

offers. In all four cases there is a tendency to resolve the contradictions and violent contours of *CT* into a harmonious best-of-both-worlds unity, which is at once aesthetic and supra-aesthetic. This tendency itself perhaps derives from that same utopian desire for closure and unity which *CT* expresses, elicits and ultimately frustrates.

These arguments have all involved what Siegfried Wenzel calls a 'teleological' perspective of the final fragments, whereby the domain of irony, play and poetic fiction is decisively closed and transcended by an increasingly transparent and earnest discourse of religious truth.⁵¹ One critical alternative has been to resist this assumption, and see there a continuation of the fiction and of Chaucer's ironic, exploratory and democratic poetics. The Parson, in these terms, becomes just another tale-teller, constructed through and limited by his ideological perspective, and *CT* retains its unity as a dramatic work exploring the multifariousness of human perspectives, their interrelation and means of expression, without giving ultimate priority to any.

Arguing for the consistent radicalism and self-reflexivity of Chaucer's poetry, Aers offers a bold formulation of this perspective. He describes the Parson as a 'one dimensional and unself-conscious' adherent of the clerical establishment. Fundamentally unable to appreciate his subjective role in the construction of his 'objectivist' moral discourse, the Parson demonstrates 'a weakness of critical intelligence and imaginative engagement which we have no good reasons to attribute to his creator'.⁵² By placing this reductive and narrowly punitive tale within the broader context of his self-reflexive work, Chaucer both encouraged it to be read as a part of the fiction and 'gave readers the means to penetrate the disastrous limitations of such discourse'.⁵³

Like Aers, Ferster sees in *ParsT* 'a voice amongst the others, one marked by the preoccupations and social context of its speaker', but she is more sympathetic in her analysis of this speaker and his tale.⁵⁴ Ferster notes how the Parson constructs a point-of-view within orthodoxy and detects an undertone of social critique in his

⁵¹ Siegfried Wenzel, 'The Parson's Tale in Current Literary Studies', in *Closure in The Canterbury Tales*, p. 6.

⁵² Aers, *Chaucer, Langland and the Creative Imagination*, p. 109.

⁵³ *Ibid*, p. 114.

⁵⁴ Judith Ferster, 'Chaucer's Parson and the 'Idiosyncrasies of Fiction'', in *Closure in The Canterbury Tales*, p. 119.

rejection of the corruptions and inequalities of historical reality. His vision of Heavenly reward, with its stress on utopian sociality and the abolition of material want ‘echoes the ideas that make up the framework for the complaints in the Rising of 1381’.⁵⁵

Both Aers and Ferster support their case with attention to the ‘dramatising’ alterations Chaucer makes to his sources – the conspicuous stress on the denigration of the body, the introduction of first person pronoun and other rhetorical formulations that imply an aural context – but set against the length, form and overall effect of the treatise these fairly minor changes do not suggest a significant effort to craft a character of either radical or reactionary inclinations, much less to integrate *Parson’s Tale* into an ironising literary context. Indeed, *Parson’s Tale* is followed by the Retraction, which reaffirms rather than problematises the treatise’s ascetic rigour and totalising perspective.

The points of irony and tension that Aers and Ferster discover are less, then, those intended by the poet, than those uncovered by a modern reading which rubs against the religious grain of the text. That is not to say they are illegitimate. Much of Aers’s critique of the unreflexive and life-denying dogmatism of *Parson’s Tale* remains valid, only it should not be aligned with an underlying authorial intention. It becomes more convincing, in fact, when that separation is made. As *CT* shows only too well, tales carry implications and tensions beyond the will of their tellers, and audiences too recast what they are told in light of their own perspectives.

Chaucer often exploited and explored this hermeneutic valency, and, thinking in these terms, Grudin has argued for the ‘dialogic and social’ nature of Chaucerian poetics, its resistance to closure and habit of revealing ‘the process of discourse itself’.⁵⁶ But this very self-consciousness of discourse – the tendency of words to arc away from original intentions, the openness of texts to a range of unintended meanings and the inevitability of miscommunication, was, I would argue, something

⁵⁵ Ferster, ‘Chaucer’s Parson and the ‘Idiosyncrasies of Fiction’, p. 147. Ferster’s image of a ‘progressive’ Parson is reminiscent of interpretations that pick up on the earlier accusations of the Cook and associate the Parson’s character and discourse with Lollardy, and a sign of Chaucer’s sympathy with the proto-reformist movement. For this position see for example Anne Hudson, *The Premature Reformation: Wycliffite Texts and Lollard History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 391-92 and Andrew Cole, *Literature and Heresy in the Age of Chaucer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). For a qualified expression of this perspective see Karen Winstead, ‘Chaucer’s Parson and the Contours of Orthodoxy’, *ChRev*, 43 (2009), 239-59.

⁵⁶ Michaela P. Grudin, ‘Discourse and the Problem of Closure in the Canterbury Tales’, *PMLA*, 107 (1992), 1157-67 (p. 1164).

that the poet was struggling against in the final fragments. The shift from the ambiguities of poetry to the transparent prose of *ParsT* and to a mode of discourse with a strong claim to transcendent authority reflects the poet's desire to finally escape and close the dialogic field of *CT* in which numerous writings, voices and perspectives blend and clash. But as Aers' reading goes to show, even in this closing endeavour words can slide away from their originary intentions. *ParsT* continues to be haunted by and inflected through that indeterminate discursive field which it seeks to renounce. The poet's self-reflexive relation to language, his awareness of its mutinous potential, serves only to exacerbate this predicament, both intensifying the need for a resolving authorial sentence and complicating its realisation. Chaucer tries to write his way out of *CT*, out of fiction, out of the web of writing itself, but if all Chaucerian language is in some way open to corruption, if the effort to escape is part of the trap, then the only ultimate answer is the renunciation of language altogether. This final, unutterable solution is anticipated in the immaculate reserve of 'the man of Great authority' in *HF*, the bleak warning of the Manciple's Tale to 'kepe wel thy tonge' (IX.362) and the disavowal of creative literature in the Retraction – the rest is silence.

Something of this fraught relation between openness and closure in the final fragments is explored by Burger in a reading informed by postmodernist and queer theory. Burger describes *CT* as a 'non-teleological, non-heterosexual, desiring machine', refusing the hegemonic structures of both medieval feudal values and secular modernity.⁵⁷ In Fragment X the Host and the Parson attempt to close *CT*, to furnish it with a final meaning, the former as a modern literary project, the latter as a medieval religious narrative. For Burger, both strategies reflect a similarly hegemonic and universalising impulse: an impulse also apparent in both modernist and historicist critical approaches. Burger sees *CT* and the 'queer nation' it envisions as purposefully situated between these two totalising strategies, between Parson and Host, medieval and modern teleologies, in 'a productive middle-space [...] a disjunct and displaced present', which resists the closing, universalising pull of either extreme.⁵⁸

In that Burger locates *CT* in the tension between the medieval and modern his perspective is reminiscent of Knight, David and Patterson, but he also contends the renaissance narratives implicit, to varying degrees, in their analysis. For Burger the

⁵⁷ Burger, *Chaucer's Queer Nation*, p. xiii.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, p. xxiv.

‘queer nation’ is neither one thing nor the other, and the ‘modern’ offers no more a sense of progress or liberation than does the ‘medieval’.⁵⁹ Indeed the liberating quality of *CT* comes precisely from this state of resistance, of being *undecided, in-between*, of being ‘queer’. But I am not convinced that *CT* is as self-assured about its indeterminacy as Burger maintains. In so far as Chaucer’s poetics do occupy this liminal position, I would argue, that they do so problematically and often anxiously. As Burger shows in relation to the fictive pilgrims and critical traditions that have variously sought to complete and transcend *CT*, there is a powerful desire for the resolving simplicity of the extremes, for a final distillation of values, which breaks away from this awkward middle. I believe that this desire applies equally to the poet himself and it is just such an attempt at distillation that takes place in the closing fragments. If some ‘productive middle’ can be said to persist there, it is in spite of Chaucer’s intentions, through his very struggle to resist, renounce and transcend it; and from this struggle the curiously self-conflicted nature of Chaucer’s late style emerges.

It is this unresolved dialectical struggle, not the victory or negation of either of its terms, which animates the final fragments. There is no smooth Augustinian or Hegelian transcendence, however much poet or critic might wish it so; if one can speak of synthesis it is only in the faltering, incomplete and discordant terms of the work itself. As such, I want to resist both the historicist notion of an assured medieval unity in the final fragments and the humanist temptation to see in them either a narrowing and static reassertion of medieval values or a smooth and mutually-beneficial transition. Rather, I believe, it is from the troubled confluence of nominally modern and medieval values, the tensions and anxieties this confluence generates, that the fascinating drama of Chaucer’s late style emerges. As Adorno says of Beethoven’s late works, it is ‘like a ‘bitter, ravaged fruit’:⁶⁰ a poetics of trauma, of

⁵⁹ In this respect Burger can be linked to a recent critical trend in Medieval Studies which has adopted a more questioning relation to the medieval-modern binary of modern historiography and the values which underpin it. See for example James Simpson’s study, *Reform and Cultural Revolution The Oxford English Literary History, Vol.2, 1350-1547* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) and Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (London: Duke University Press, 1999)

⁶⁰ Adorno, ‘Beethoven’s Late Style’, p. 564. Adorno noted the shift from the masterful synthesis of Beethoven’s middle works to the fragmentary, difficult nature of his final compositions. Previous formal control is replaced by caesura and starkly conventional ornamental devices which remain conspicuously unintegrated. It is as though the work is enacting the open struggle of form to master its materials, testifying through its ‘fractured landscape’ to a truth which resists ‘harmonious synthesis’. The terms of his analysis resonates fascinatingly with Chaucer’s own late work.

violent extremes brought together, of self-reflexivity turned upon itself into urgent and anxious self-evaluation, a poetics in the process of collapse that speaks through its tears, fissures and disjunctions even as it ostensibly seeks to 'knytte up wel a greet mateere' (X.28) In its own self-sacrificing and paradoxically redeeming form it expresses something of the deep inner conflicts of Christianity and Western culture. For like fallen human nature before the Divine, the work is ambiguously saved through its renunciation, but also renounced in the process of its salvation.

There is, in the final fragments, not a mood of calm and pious resignation but rather an untimely agitation, a sense of restive activity as the poet reflects upon his work and struggles to justify it in relation to the Eternal, the measure of all values. Ultimately unsure of its value, Chaucer seeks both to transform and step free of *CT*, to dissolve that always problematic and evasive poetic subjectivity which has animated the work into the orthodox and impersonal discourse of faith. As Adorno put it,

The power of subjectivity in the late works of art is the irascible gesture with which it takes leave of the works themselves. It breaks their bonds, not in order to express itself, but in order, expressionless, to cast off the appearance of art.⁶¹

Something of this troubled process of departure and fragmentation can be traced in the final fragments, but where for Adorno the late works signal a kind of self-willed estrangement, an abandonment of the existing social and musical order of communication, with Chaucer – in a very different cultural predicament – it is the struggle to restore and seek refuge in the ordering force of convention and communality that generates the self-conflicted and dissonant character of his late style. The problem is that Chaucer attempts to make this restoration in the medium of poetic fiction which remains itself questionable and polluted. The drama of Chaucer's late style emerges from this inner-conflict of a poetics turned against itself, as the very attempt to close the work, to give it some redeeming, 'virtuous sentence' risks pulling it apart and exposing its emptiness. As Adorno writes 'in the history of art, late works are the catastrophes.'⁶²

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 566.

⁶² Ibid., p. 567.

II: ‘Dismantling all the fragrant towers’– The Poetics of Penitence in Fragments VIII-X

When does a sense of lateness creep into *CT*? In the final four tales there is a mounting concern with endings, with death and judgment, with the passage of time and the pressing moral and religious questions of how time is wasted or fruitfully spent. But it would be wrong to assume that this penitential movement is something which only emerges in the final four tales, that it arises unexpectedly or even that these four tales can be viewed chronologically as a straightforward expression of Chaucer’s late style.⁶³ If we can speak of a late style in *CT*, it is rather more ambiguously as the end-game and final bitter flowering of a dialectic which has run throughout the entirety of the Chaucer’s poetic career.

As early as *The Knight’s Tale* – with the song of spring still fresh in our ears – questions about the meaning and value of human life in the face of death had been raised, and met by Egeus’ stoical council– ‘This world nys but a thurghfare ful of wo, | And we been pilgrimes passynge to and fro’ (I.2857-8); the theme is returned to with the Reeve, who laments in warped elegiac style how ‘the streem of lyf now droppeth on the chymbe’ (I.3895) and the Wife of Bath, who amidst her jovial worldliness strikes a comparable, if less bitter, elegiac note (III.472-476). But in the early fragments these wistful, elegiac moments are scattered, without overt didactic force, amidst a range of competing perspectives, generic modes and voices. In the case of both the Reeve and the Wife they are plaintive digressions in personal narratives heavily orientated toward worldly satisfaction. It is only as the pilgrimage progresses beyond ‘the marriage group’ that these notes start to strike more insistently and crystallise into an ideological formation, which questions not only the value of the transient, secular world but strains against the literary work of which it is a part.

One could point to the dense moralising and anti-aesthetic quality of the Melibee or the Monk’s interminable, almost mechanical list of tragedies, but it is *The*

⁶³ Out limited knowledge about the dating of the final tales makes the claim for a ‘late style’ slightly conjectural. We know for example that *The Second Nun’s Tale* was an earlier independent composition, the evidence of the Canon Yeoman’s and Manciple’s Tales would suggest a late date, but of this there can be no certainty. The dating of *ParsT* remains an issue of contention. Early humanist critics, eager to disparage the tale, often ascribed to it an early date. See Patterson, ‘Quiting of the Canterbury Tales’ for a persuasive rebuttal of that position. I concur with Patterson and would argue further that the evident continuity of thematic concerns in fragments VIII-X means that when viewed as a whole they can be taken as evincing an internally consistent late style and pattern of intention, even if elements of this whole were appropriated from earlier materials.

Physician's Tale and *The Prioress' Tale*, with their violent narratives of sacrifice and transcendence, that stand out for me as harbingers of the final fragments and the drama of Chaucer's late style. Both the questionable sacrifice of Virginia by her father, abruptly narrated by the Physician and the gruesome murder and miraculous redemption of the 'little clergeon' in *The Prioress' Tale* vividly illustrate that movement to the extremes, the absolute separation of worldly and spiritual values previously alluded to. On the one hand are the transcendent values of virginity, virtue and innocence, on the other hand, the degraded materiality of Apis' lecherous desires and, more vividly still, the Jewish privy where the murdered child is cast (VII.573-5). Both narratives not only affirm this stark binary, but also testify to the necessary sacrifice through which the spirit is purified and the contagion of materiality transcended. They show that it is paradoxically through death, the very negation of life in the name of the Eternal, that redemption is achieved, and in this respect they anticipate the process of self-sacrifice and distillation which *CT* must eventually undergo.

However, just as they point the way to the self-negating and penitential poetics of the closing fragments, these tales also stand more firmly in the fictive and dialogic world of *CT* and remain subject to its more equivocal and questioning spirit. So whilst Virginia may hint toward a model of transcendent sacrifice, there is something in her severed, unredeemed life and narrative which mourns the spiritual logic it ostensibly enacts. Her question 'shal I dye? | Is ther no grace, is ther no remedye?' (VI.235-6) resonates with an ambivalence that reaches beyond her death and the questionable moral resolution offered by the narrator.⁶⁴ The narrative of virgin martyrdom and transcendence in *The Prioress's Tale*, whilst more assured and complete in its Christian context, is similarly complicated by the mediating presence of the Prioress as narrator and the intellectual limitations of the genre.⁶⁵ As with the Man of Law and Clerk before them, it seems that Chaucer is at once drawn to these conventional religious narratives of sacrifice and transcendence but still inclined to insinuate a spirit of inconclusiveness and irony into their narration. In their mixture of game and earnest and their complicity in the tale-telling contest these tales point towards a

⁶⁴ For discussion of the self-conflicted nature of *The Physician's Tale* and the inadequacy of its ending see Blamires, *Chaucer, Ethics, and Gender*, pp. 199-204.

⁶⁵ For a fuller discussion of the meditating role of the narrator in the Prioress' Tale see Cooper, *Oxford Guides, The Canterbury Tales*, p. 294; for the argument against ironic readings see Ian Bishop, 'Gems of Chastity' in *The Narrative Art of the Canterbury Tales: A Critical Study of the Major Poems* (London: Dent, 1998).

model of transcendence that they also resist. They are in this respect transitional tales, operating within *CT* dialogic mode, whilst offering flashes of a religious truth which will eventually supersede it.

By the time we reach *The Second Nun's Tale* (hereafter *SNT*) this transitional character is no longer apparent. In many ways this tale completes the shift away from the world and Chaucer's world-orientated poetics, and marks the beginning of an unambiguously pious, sober and penitential vision. It was in all likelihood written well before either the Physician or Prioress's tales, but through its late placing in Fragment VIII it offers a final and triumphant rehearsal of the sacrifice-transcendence motif, devoid of the ambiguities, limitations and ironies of earlier manifestations.⁶⁶

The tale's ability to do this is in no small part due to its relative autonomy from the 'road-side' drama and the dialogic tale-teller dynamic that has hitherto informed *CT*. There is no introductory link or closing remarks to set the tale in dramatic context and draw our attention to the personal agendas involved in its narration and reception. The tale has an almost ethereal presence and stands, like *ParsT*, oddly removed from and oblivious to the fabric of the fictive pilgrimage in which it speaks and is contained, free of its morally and semantically compromising influence. Its teller is entirely anonymous and generic: she is given no personal description in the *General Prologue* and her narrative is devoid of any personal interjection or rhetorical idiosyncrasy from which an individual character could be inferred. She is perhaps the closest thing in *CT* to a neutral or objective teller; a pure, self-effacing vessel within which can be found that other pure and effective vessel of religious truth, the martyred Saint Cecilia.

Although the narration may be free of explicit characterisation regarding the fictive pilgrimage, this is not to say that it is without rhetorical character or poetic import. The voice of the prologue is the voice of elevated religious address; whilst it has all the smoothness of Chaucer's poetry at its finest, and the compact conceptual force of the Dantescan poetics from which it is partly inspired and partly borrowed, it also strongly echoes the conventional tone and content of medieval liturgical hymns and prayers to the Virgin. As such, it is the voice of every 'unwothy son of Eve'

⁶⁶ The reference to the 'Lyf of Synt Cecile' in the Prologue to *The Legend of Good Women* suggest an early date of composition. The most authoritative manuscripts follow Ellesmere in placing it along with *The Canon Yeoman's Tale* after *The Nun's Priest's Tale*. Hengwrt is anomalous in this regard placing it between the Clerk and Franklin. The reference to 'Boughton-under-Blee (VIII.566)' would put the two tales close to the end of the pilgrimage and thus supports the later placing. On the dating and placing of the tale see Cooper, *Oxford Guides, The Canterbury Tales*, pp. 357-9.

(VIII.63) beseeching grace, as passionately personal as it is entirely universal. What Leo Spitzer argued for the 'I' of medieval poetics is certainly applicable here: it represents a universal subject position into which any medieval reader can step.⁶⁷

For this encompassing and potentially transcendent voice to be created there must already be a kind of sacrifice – a sacrifice of the particularity and ambiguity of the speaking subject to something wider and, in Christian terms, more valuable. And yet as it is re-located here, to the beginning of the end of *CT*, this voice also assumes an intensely personal character, as a penitential break with and reflection upon the work that precedes it. As Adorno suggested of Beethoven's late style, it remains subjective, paradoxically, in its attempted escape from subjectivity.⁶⁸

Already in the poetic formality and urgency of the Prologue, in its ascetic condemnation of idleness, 'that porter of the gate is of delices' (VIII.3) and the Dantescan invocation to the Virgin from 'a flemed wrecche, in this desert of galle' (VII.58) there is a decisive re-orientation of values and an incipient critique of *CT* that prepares the way for the Parson. The theme of the rejection of earthly life for the sake of the Eternal, which has been rising throughout *CT*, is here expressed unequivocally:

And of thy light my soul in prison lighte,
That troubled is by the contagioun
Of my body, and also by the wighte
Of erthely lust and fals afferccioun'

(VIII.71-4)

As Knight has argued here, 'the orthodox voice of Christianity is heard without apology, embarrassment or irony', and almost without fictive mediation.⁶⁹

Cecilia too in her actions, her words and her eventual death represents the decisive triumph of Christian orthodoxy, the Spirit over Flesh. Where the Clerk's, the Physician's and Prioress's Tales all retained a troubling sense of deathliness and loss in their rehearsal of the dialectic of sacrifice, Cecilia banishes such doubts. She is not at all like Virginia or the 'little clergeon', a passive victim sanctified by death. Cecilia is the ceaselessly moving and remarkably effective agent of Christian conversion and education, setting in motion an exponential chain of conversion and spiritual growth

⁶⁷ Leo Spitzer, 'Note on the Poetic and Empirical 'I' in Medieval Authors', *Traditio*, 4 (1946), 412-22.

⁶⁸ Adorno, 'Beethoven's Late Style', p. 567.

⁶⁹ Knight, *Geoffrey Chaucer*, p. 147.

that reaches far beyond the tale itself. The sense of the martyr as a passive vessel of divine truth, prevalent in the previous religious narratives, is tempered by Cecilia's role as an industrious, self-willed and commanding rational agent. Her martyrdom, whilst still important as an image of the victory of the Spirit, is merely the last act in a life of 'leveful busynesse', with neither the narrative nor affective weight accorded to the death of Virginia or the clergeon. If anything, Cecilia approaches her death with the same industrious composure and pragmatism she lived her life. In the bath of flames she 'sat al coold and feeled no wo' (VIII.521) and she lives for three days more with her head almost severed, but this miraculous resilience is only so she might continue her ministry to those 'that she hade fostred' (VIII.539).

Thus for all the transcendent implications of her narrative it retains a refreshingly pragmatic orientation: its focus is the militant struggle and furtherance of Christianity in this world through the growth of the early Church. The miraculous elements of the tale – its angels and eternal flowers – form an important and well-integrated symbolic backdrop, but in narrative terms, they are just as much *means* in Cecilia's spiritual-historical praxis as they are the symbols of Christianity's glorious ends.

Throughout the tale the focus is on deeds of faith, and the Prologue's moral emphasis on 'ydelnesse' and 'leveful bisynesse', as Blamires has stressed, attunes the reader to this perspective.⁷⁰ Cecilia is described as 'ful swift and bisy evere in good werkynge' (VIII.116); the ideal model of the active Christian life, her relentless militant industry conveys something of the evangelical zeal of the early Church. In place of the surrender of selfhood through intense devotion to a greater power, as is found in the previous religious narratives of *CT*, Cecilia's mode of transcendence comes, almost in the manner of the Bolshevik Revolutionary, through active commitment, the making of one's life into a self-conscious, efficacious tool in the unfolding of Christian history; the self becomes the means which is sacrificed and given meaning in relation to a transcendent end. Cecilia's self-possession and rigorous intellect can be best seen in her assured teaching of doctrine to the newly converted Tiburce, her allaying of his fears about martyrdom and her theological debate with the Roman governor, Almachius. In all cases there is a pervasive clarity, economy and directness to her speech. There is even a notable belligerence in her dealings with

⁷⁰ Blamires, *Chaucer, Ethics and Gender*, p. 208.

Almachius, which evinces an absolute confidence in her own correctness. There is none of the ambivalence, the openness to alternative perspectives, the digressiveness, reflexivity and indirection that characterises so much of Chaucer's previous poetics in *CT*. Hers is a discourse devoid of the possibility of irony. Like her life, her speech and the intelligence it embodies is a tool to be used in the service of Christ, and, as such it has the no-nonsense practicality, transparency and univocality that fits it to the purpose of teaching and persuasion.

The spirit of efficacy that pervades Cecilia's life and language is reflected in the style and structure of the tale itself, in the remarkable economy, terseness and order of the narrative. The sum of an industrious saint's life, including numerous conversions and martyrdoms, is brusquely covered in just over four hundred lines. In no piece of Chaucerian fiction are there fewer digressions, descriptive passages or narratorial asides. Rhetorical ornament and embellishment are kept to a minimum. Every single word of the tale is single-mindedly conscripted to the unfolding of the narrative. Direct speech is the dominant mode of the tale, allowing for the effacement of the mediating presence of the narrator, a transparent emphasis on Cecilia's rhetorical abilities, and the generation of a dramatic sense of action and immediacy. It is as if the narrator were seeking to reveal through her own negation the unmediated truth of Cecilia's life: to make of herself, in the spirit of Cecilia, an efficient means-to-an-end. The narrator confirms this sacrificial logic when she claims in the prologue 'I do no diligence | This ilke storie subtilly to endite', but aims instead to faithfully follow the 'wordes and sentence' of her source (VIII.79-81). Style is here opposed and sacrificed to the simple and effective communication of content. The role of the teller and translator becomes that of a neutral medium of pre-existing truth, a role which Chaucer's previous narrators have so seldom been able or willing to fulfil.

Here, though, Chaucer and his narrator remain faithful to that role: the tale follows its two sources scrupulously, summarising content to effect brevity, but without significant variation or addition.⁷¹ Moreover, in spite of its pragmatic emphasis, the poetic limitations of the genre and the conventional modesty topos employed by the narrator, the tale remains impressively well-crafted. The prologue certainly contains some of Chaucer's finest religious poetry and throughout the tale,

⁷¹ For discussion of Chaucer's use of his two Latin sources see G. H. Gerould, 'The Second Nun's Prologue and Tale', in *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tale*, ed. by W. F. Bryan (New York: Humanities Press, 1953).

in moments such as Tiburce's conversion – with its subtle handling of the rhyme royal stanza and the invisible flower motif – there is a simple and moving lucidity, almost a Dantescan quality, which contrasts refreshingly with Chaucer's more characteristically mixed and equivocal style. It is hard to convey this spirit in isolation, but the stanza which ends

The sweete smel that in myn herte I fynde
Hath changed me al in another kynde

(VIII.251-2)

epitomises the simple elegance of the tale at its best. It also illustrates the tale's well measured handling of symbolism: the motifs of worldly blindness and spiritual sight, the eternal crown of flowers and the stone idols are neatly woven into the narrative and overarching 'sentence' of the poem. Not unresolved and equivocal but bound together in a clear, self-enclosed pattern of meaning, these symbols and motifs are evocative of that concept of figurative harmony and balance which Robertson and Jordan lauded in medieval aesthetics.

Where then, one might ask, is the so-called disharmony, anxiety and inner conflict of Chaucer's late style in this formidably closed and fruitful tale? Arriving late as it does in the pilgrimage and tale-telling contest, this earnest and insistent voice, whilst unified and replete in itself, evokes a troubling contrast with the rest of *CT*. Where previously tales were problematised by the dialogic context of the frame, here the lines of force are reversed. The strong critique of 'Ydelnesse' – and implicitly those activities which are seen to accompany it – reaches beyond the tale to question the value of its fictive and literary surroundings.

Next to Cecilia's 'leveful busyness' and the uncompromising zero-sum spiritual economy it establishes, the tale-telling contest, maybe even the whole sprawling and ambivalent edifice of *CT*, is implicitly called into question. In a cultural context which does not countenance the notion of *l'art pour l'art*, it risks being reduced to what in Harry Bailey's mind it was all along – a way of killing time, 'to shorte with oure wey' (I.791), an entertaining but ultimately futile game, which distracts its participants from the true spiritual goal, of which Cecilia offers a timely reminder. The same grim allegation might be made against it which she levels at the pagan idols:

Thise ymages, well thou mayse espy.
To thee ne to hemself mowen noght profite
For in effect they been nat worth a myte

(VIII.510-1)

This crisis of value which in various forms has animated the entirety of Chaucer's works becomes especially urgent here, as the work draws towards its close and the sobering threshold of reality beckons; it becomes interwoven with the problem of how to end fruitfully and draw some conclusive moral value from an as yet inconclusive work.

Written as the narrator tells us, out of the humble desire to follow in the 'feithful bisynesse' (VIII.24) exemplified by its heroine, *SNT* is a fine example of fruitful literary endeavour, compact and effective in its delivery of moral and spiritual 'sentence', and yet all this is accomplished by the stripping away of the customary digressions, embellishments, ambiguities and ironies of Chaucerian poetics. Ironically, by offering this alternative model of legitimate literary activity, the tale heightens and highlights the latent formal and thematic problems of *CT*, the very thing that its inclusion seeks to forestall. In its very purposefulness and completion there is also a subtle spirit of violence, disjunction and censure, lodged as it is, thorn-like, in the more diffuse and disorderly body of *CT*. The early work might itself have seemed austere and alien, possessing something of the fixity and intangible completeness of the past, in the hands of the older poet who returned to it and installed it in *CT* without significant alteration, or contextual accommodation. Its simple eloquence and 'stately confidence' – perhaps now unrealisable and bespeaking a literary path not taken – are certainly not sustained or developed in the tales that follow it, and so the tale remains discordant in its very harmony, a brilliant but unassimilated fragment of an older order.⁷² Baldwin or Kittredge might argue that the lack of integration is an accident of incompleteness, but there is something quite deliberate and symbolic in this incompleteness, when considered as a character of Chaucer's late style. Imported but not synthesised, the tale could be compared to the unassimilated musical ornaments – trills and appoggiaturas – which punctuate the fractured surface of Beethoven's late

⁷² Knight, *Geoffrey Chaucer*, p. 146.

compositions. These, ‘bald, undisguised, untransformed, fragments of convention’ have the quality of stark objectivity, of unanimated matter ‘no longer penetrated and mastered by subjectivity’; somehow alien to the will that implants them.⁷³ This drawing apart of the previous terms of aesthetic synthesis reflects the gradual attenuation of the shaping force of subjectivity and charts its troubled departure from the work. It is as though the poetic subject now comprehends that the unity it seeks lies beyond its powers. In this respect the sombre unity of *SNT* is one which excludes the compromising influence of living subjectivity, the interference of pilgrims and poets alike, it is almost as objective and remote as the Saint’s life it venerates and those miraculous early days of the Church to which she belongs.

For all its immaculate unity the tale speaks equally through the fissures and tensions it exacerbate in *CT*. The final ‘sentence’ it heralds does not evolve organically from *CT* but is experienced as a series of jolts and re-orientations that interrupt and finally cancel the framing fiction. Thus whilst *SNT* interjects a fixed order of value with which to conclude the tales, it does so by rejecting their former, more equivocal mode of existence. Its stark binary of spiritual utility verses worldly futility blows apart the unresolved dialectics of game and earnest, *solas* and *sentence* which had previously animated and held the tales together. Everything henceforth is pushed to one extreme or the other with an almost apocalyptic energy of determination. There is no longer, straightforwardly, a ‘productive middle’ as Burger maintained, no longer the ambivalent interfusion of voices and values witnessed in the early-middle fragments, rather now ‘a catching fire between extremes, which no longer allows for any secure middle ground of harmony’.⁷⁴

Both this polarisation toward the extremes and the gradual process of surrender and re-orientation that accompany it are reflected in the relation between *SNT* and the Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale (hereafter *CYT*). The self-enclosed and redemptive poetics of *SNT* is not developed but juxtaposed with what could be called a disenchanted and penitential poetics, in which character, realism and fiction are returned to, but now in darker, more self-questioning tones. The disjunctive and elliptical quality of Chaucer’s late style can be seen in the way that he introduces *CYT* into the frame narrative.

⁷³ Adorno, ‘Beethoven’s Late Style’, p. 566.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

Whilst the two tales of fragment VIII are connected symbolically there is no attempt to establish an explicit dramatic interrelation. *SNT* ends without any contextualising remarks from its narrator or other pilgrims – thus adding to its peculiar sense of remoteness in the frame – and the arrival of the Canon and his Yeoman, two figures entirely external to the ‘joly compaignye’ (VIII.583) and the tale-telling contest, constitutes another curious kind of disruption and adaptation of a previous aesthetic order. This is the only time that Chaucer introduces an external agent of any sort into the self-enclosed play of *CT* and one might wonder why he does so here, so close to the end of proceedings and with so many other pilgrims still to speak. Part of the reason for this is that the intervention of an outside influence is exactly what is required to enact the shift away from the speculative and festive field of tale-telling toward a more urgent, penitential perspective. It is as though the game can’t be closed from within its own comfortable carnival sphere and its ending must be prepared for by these extraneous figures, these staged retreats from fiction. *CYT* is not even a tale, in the terms of play established in the *General Prologue*, but a personal confession, a true revelation of the Canon’s ‘pryvetee’ and his dubious craft (VIII.701). ‘Swich thyng as that I knowe, I wol declare’ as the Canon’s Yeoman says (VIII.719). Thus here again, the very striving toward aesthetic and moral closure in the final fragments works paradoxically to create and perpetuate disruption, tension and discord in the pre-existing aesthetic project. *CYT* may herald a deeper order, but this herald comes in the form of interruption, accident, contingency, and the frantic energy of these two bedraggled, sweating alchemists. It is as though a higher set of meta-aesthetic priorities now impose themselves upon the unfinished work, as though the poet were resigning the possibility of a final aesthetic synthesis in the name of a higher order, authority and meaning.

The relation of the two tales of fragment VIII, as critics have suggested, is not dramatic, but abstract and symbolic.⁷⁵ *CYT* continues the distillation of spiritual and worldly values by expressing the other, infernal side of that opposition– contrasting Cecilia’s fruitful spiritual endeavour with the workings of a self-destructive, worldly labour, without grace or order, doomed to ‘concluden evermore amys’ (VIII.957).

⁷⁵ Several critics have commented upon the close connection between the two tales, seeing them as opposing representations of fruitful spiritual work and fruitless worldly endeavour. See Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition*, p. 216; Joseph Grennen, ‘St. Cecilia’s chemical wedding: The Unity of CT, Fragment VIII’ and Jennifer Sisk, ‘Religion, Alchemy, and Nostalgic Idealism in Fragment VIII of the *Canterbury Tales*’, *SAC*, 32 (2010), 151-77

Where in much of Chaucer's previous work spiritual and worldly values are equivocally interfused, here they are starkly opposed, and the poet finds himself caught between them. *SNT* offers a model of literary and spiritual efficacy that *CT* fails to live up to, and *CYT* offers a frightening image of what it risks becoming. The frenetic confessional narrative of the Canon's Yeoman provides a darkly satirical critique of alchemy, but also a subtle critique of the alchemy of art. In it Chaucer finds an objective correlative for the exploration of his own penitential relation to his craft, his desire for endings, and his doubts about its ultimate worth. This reflects again the crisis of conscience that animates the final fragments as the end approaches and Chaucer struggles with increasing urgency to bring some redemptive 'sentence' to a work in which the possibility of completion seems increasingly remote. In this context it is not surprising that Chaucer found in the interminable hope and frustration of the alchemist an image of his own problematic craft. After labouring over *CT* for many years, Chaucer may well have come to suspect that the fragments could not be made to cohere, that all might be in vain, or in the ominous words of the Canon's Yeoman,

We blondren evere and pouren in the fir
And for al that we faille of oure desir

(VIII.670-1)

From this perspective what is required is not further experimentation, but an exit strategy from alchemic and literary projects altogether: confession and repentance.

As David and Bruhn have argued, Chaucer establishes an implicit but powerful imaginative affinity between alchemy and his own 'elvyshe craft' (VIII.751).⁷⁶ Both are experimental humanistic vocations, with pretensions to philosophical, even spiritual, significance – as the Canon's Yeoman says, 'we semen wonder wise, | Our termes been so clerghal and so queynte' (VIII.751-2). Both require great dedication and attempt, perhaps hubristically, to peer into and emulate the hidden processes of creation. But in spite of their high ambitions, from the disenchanted perspective of the final fragments, both are shown, ultimately, to be empty illusions, working through the crafty manipulation of language and appearance.

⁷⁶ David, *The Strumpet Muse*, p. 236 and Mark J. Bruhn, 'Art, Anxiety and Alchemy in the Canon Yeoman's Tale', *ChRev*, 33 (1999), 288-315.

The full complexity of the analogy is realised when one recalls that alchemy in the Middle Ages was not considered entirely to be a sham.⁷⁷ In both pursuits there is the glimmer of something noble, the equivocal aspiration towards a transcendent goal: in alchemy, the pursuit of the philosophers' stone, the transmutation of base matter into the gold; in Chaucer's art, the comparable attempt to fuse the raw matter of text, speech, past authority and personal experience into the transcendent, permanent, and meaningful unity of the artwork. But in both cases these bold teleological aspirations prove to be vain and misplaced. As the Canon's Yeoman repeatedly laments 'for alle oure sleights we kan nat conclude', and 'lost is al oure labour and travaille' (VIII.773, 781). Final 'sentence' and aesthetic unity eludes Chaucer in *CT* as much as the philosopher's stone alludes the alchemist – 'altough we hadden sworn, | It overtake, it slit away so faste' (VIII.682) – and hovers always, just out of reach, on the horizon of the next tale, the next experiment. Instead of the resolving unity of gold and 'sentence', their experimental labours end in further disunity and indeterminacy, in the muddle of unredeemed words and matter, the inconclusive fragments of a tale-telling game which interminably multiplies and perpetuates itself. It is this same disturbing sense of interminability which was witnessed at the end of *HF*, where the resolving words of a 'man of greet auctoritee' (*HF*.III.2158) were gestured towards but never disclosed. It was there too in the Old Man of *The Pardoner's Tale*, who could not find death and so went on living perpetually; and it returns here, in its most troubling form as the fate of the alchemist and worldly poet, who 'for evere [...] lakken [their] conclusioun' (VIII.672). They are both trapped in a nightmare of eternal recurrence, endlessly failing in their enterprise and endlessly spurred on by fresh hope that 'crepeth in [the] herte' (VIII.870). Here that sense of play and indeterminacy which has been so productive throughout Chaucer's work assumes its final, guilty and despairing form.

From the penitential perspective of the final fragments, the enterprises of the alchemist and secular poet are doomed to 'concluden everemoore amys' because their efforts are misplaced. They pursue a unity and transcendence, which can only ultimately be realised through faith and spirit, in human and worldly terms. Their futile efforts point to the vanity and limitations of humanistic endeavour and are juxtaposed with the productive and clear-sighted spiritual labour of Cecilia, whose

⁷⁷ For discussion of Alchemy as humanistic science see Howard, *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales*, pp. 292-6.

actions, by contrast, entail a continual reaching beyond the illusions of this human, material world, to the transcendent spiritual reality vouchsafed by Christian faith: beyond marriage to chaste spiritual union, beyond the temporal power of Almachius to the omnipotence of God (VIII.434-441) the pain of the martyred flesh to the eternal ‘corone of lif that may nat faille’ (VIII.388).

Cecilia is continually asserting this fundamental distinction. The alchemist and the poet by contrast are both engaged in a peculiar confusion of the material and the spiritual. Medieval alchemy was premised upon the notion that mere matter could yield something higher; as Muscatine notes, it ‘was nourished on hylozoism, the feeling that matter was instinct with life’ and as *CYT* (and the alchemical treatise of Arnaldus of Villanova upon which it draws) illustrate, alchemical discourse drew a mystical confluence between the chemical and the spiritual in order to validate its central subliming principle.⁷⁸ Analogously, Chaucer’s poetry, as previously seen, often functions through a dynamic confluence of worldly and spiritual perspectives and voices. In contrast to Dante’s transcendent allegorical poetics, it seeks meaning in and through the flux of earthly life, the multiplicity of language and experience, in the creation of what Burger called the multiple, unresolved ‘productive middles’ of *CT*. But it is just such middle grounds which are necessarily torn asunder in the apocalyptic reorientation and polarisation of values in the final fragments.

In *CYT* Chaucer’s eclectic style and conflation of values, in one sense, continues. There is a deflation of sorts at work in the movement between the high pretensions and pseudo-spiritual rhetoric of Arnaldus of Villanova (VIII.1431-1471) and the Canon’s base ingredients and motivations, a lowering to the level of earth, but this movement is certainly not ‘regenerative’ in the Bakhtinian sense.⁷⁹ Nor does it aim to produce that more complex, multifaceted picture of human reality explored in the comedy of earlier tales. Rather it functions to affirm on a deeper level the stark antithesis of material and spiritual values found in *SNT*. In the Yeoman’s narrative of failing experiments it is matter itself that clearly becomes the dominant principle: stubborn, contingent, inert, and irredeemable matter. Through its exhaustive, technical lists of ingredients, physical details and experimental practices *CYT* cultivates a sense of dense and obdurate naturalism. As Muscatine argues: ‘nowhere else in Chaucer is

⁷⁸ Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition*, p. 218.

⁷⁹ Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, p. 21.

there such a solid, unspiritual mass of ‘realism’.⁸⁰ ‘Unskelled lym, chalk and gletre of an ey, | Poudres divers, assches, donge, pisse, and cley [...]’ (VIII.806-7) – the list of random ingredients poured into the alchemist’s pot goes on, and the effect of incongruent and interminable accumulation emphasises both the sheer profusion of matter and its ultimately chaotic and unproductive nature. Chaucer’s sharp eye for detail is still at work here, but this is a far cry from the animate naturalism that opened the General Prologue or the joyous sensuality in the Miller’s description of Alison. We have instead, as Knight has noted, an art of realism turned against itself.⁸¹ *CYT* functions as the graveyard of Chaucerian realism, a field of deathly irredeemable fragments, of re-processed ‘mullok’ (VIII.938) utterly disconnected from the galvanising force of spirit. By now all meaning and productivity has been evacuated into the realm of the spirit, leaving behind only the self-deceiving alchemist and artist toiling without conclusion amidst the wrecks of their boldest schemes, their broken pots (VIII.920), the worldly chaff of ‘assches, donge, pisse, and cley’.

But whilst Chaucer retrospectively implicates his own equivocal poetics in the Canon’s Yeoman’s narrative of failed experimentation, he is in that very gesture endeavouring to re-orientate his work, to save it from the grim fate of alchemy, and bring to it some redeeming spiritual purpose and meaning. He follows the Canon’s Yeoman, who in freely declaring what he knows of his craft seeks freedom from it and, through the act of narration and confession, turns his experience of futile labour into the productive moral lesson ‘withdraweth the fir, lest it to faste brenne; | Medleth namoore with that art’ (VIII.1423-4). In these terms one can see the penitential perspective of the final fragments taking shape – progressively critiquing and disengaging itself from *CT* as secular and aesthetic project, whilst at the same time still labouring to re-orientate that work toward the Divine truth, in which alone it can achieve the unity and conclusion it seeks.

At this point of proceedings the penitential spirit of the final fragments remains itself equivocal. Chaucer may be turning toward a critique of worldly poetics in the *CYT* but this is still enacted under the veil of fiction; the experimental alchemy of poetry is still ambiguously continued, its illusory goals pursued, in the very words through which it is critiqued. In *CYT* one finds, admittedly in dark and jaded form, the signs of all Chaucer’s old ‘elvysshe craft’ – his interweaving of high and low idioms

⁸⁰ Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition*, p. 219.

⁸¹ Knight, *Geoffrey Chaucer*, p. 148.

and perspectives, his complex appropriation of sources, his attention to naturalistic detail and exploration of the ironies and ambiguities of language. There is here, as Fyler writes, ‘play at the very heart of desolation’ and a dark humour and artistry in the vivid portrayal of the alchemists debating their botched experiments and scraping the ‘mullok’ from the walls (VIII.915-945).⁸² Though the experiment fails and the alchemists are left with fragments of worthless matter, Chaucer still succeeds in bringing poetic life to the scene. Thus it seems that Chaucer is still drawn back to the equivocal, ‘elvysshe craft’ that he is in the process of renouncing.

Something of this ambivalence is also expressed in the figure of the Canon’s Yeoman. Whilst he senses the danger and futility of alchemy and his desire to repent is genuine, he remains one of those wayward souls still responsive to the unquenchable ‘good hope’ that creeps into the alchemist’s heart (VIII.870). His repentance is itself compromised, like his author’s, by the fact that it is saturated in the very discourse it seeks to renounce. In the concluding lines of his tale, it is ironically through the words of Arnaldus of Villanova that he formulates his final rejection of alchemy. The result is unsurprisingly ambiguous. Quoting a passage which traces, with brilliant anachronism, the untold secret of the Philosopher’s Stone back to a consortium of Hermes, Plato and Christ, the Yeoman preserves much of the false hope and spiritual glamour of alchemy in his bid to reject it. He condemns not the ideal itself but only the practice: since God and the ancient philosophers have withheld the secret and the means of success from alchemists, ‘I rede, as for the beste, lete it goon’ (VIII.1475). The question of the truth of alchemy, the ideal behind the pursuit, is left curiously, invitingly open.

Thus, as Allen writes, the Canon’s Yeoman presents an ‘imperfect paradigm’ of penitence – a model of penitence in process.⁸³ Like the poet, he has recognised his situation as one of crisis but has not yet found the key to its resolution. There is no certainty that he will not return to his Master and his infernal art. *CYT* is in these terms a fascinating study of the psychology of sin and addiction and the Canon’s Yeoman is the last of Chaucer’s complex and equivocal human characters. Neither poetry nor alchemy is here decisively renounced, though the need for such a renunciation becomes increasingly apparent. Ultimately it remains uncertain whether

⁸² Fyler, *Language and the Declining World*, p. 177.

⁸³ Mark Allen, ‘Penitential Sermons, The Manciple’s Tale and the end of CT,’ *SAC*, 9 (1987) 77-96 (p. 94).

the old alchemy of Chaucerian poetics is here being rejected or covertly preserved: whether poetic fiction is saved, purified, finally made useful or the discourse of penitence is surreptitiously being misused to perpetuate, in ever subtler guises, the ‘worldly vanitees’ (X.1084) it seeks to overcome. It is, after all, through the language of poetry and tale-telling – with all its potential for ambiguity and misinterpretation – that the penitential reorientation of fragment VIII is conducted. There is no simple movement of transcendence; Chaucer’s penitential poetics, like the beleaguered Yeoman, remains haunted by and drawn back into the unruly, interminable work it seeks to chasten and transcend.

It is this problem that leads Chaucer to pursue the ever more stringent and less equivocal forms of distillation and renunciation that close *CT*. As the language of poetic fiction, even when turned toward penitential ends, continues to court ambiguity, Chaucer looks for a purer, more stable and authoritative language, free of such contaminations, for a way out of the cycle of irony and misinterpretation which his poetry has previously explored and exploited. This is the chief concern of *CT*’s final piece of fiction, *The Manciple’s Tale*, with its stark warning against the dangers of speech and its final call to silence: ‘be noon auctour newe | Of tidynges’ (IX.360). The tale itself is another example of the difficult, conflicted and disjunctive quality of Chaucer’s late style. It stands as another fragment, disconnected in time and space from *CYT* and the summa which follows it, though this fragmentariness may be as much owing to a wilful abandonment of the ideal of aesthetic synthesis and naturalistic illusion, as to any issue of textual incompleteness.⁸⁴

The Manciple’s Prologue begins with another kind of silence and another blow to the tale-telling game. It begins with a final turn to the comic poetics discussed in the previous chapter. As if in one last attempt to return to the field of ‘jape and pleye’ (IX.4) the Host calls upon the drunken, slumbering Cook for a tale – reminding us, perhaps, of his distant promise of a tale of a ‘hostileer’ (I.4360). But the Cook is barely able to speak, let alone narrate a tale: ‘there is falle on me swich hevyrnesse’ | Noot I nat why’ (IX.22-3). The carnival poetics of *CT* is here symbolically exhausted. Where once was the Dionysian loquaciousness and jovial materialism of the drunken Miller, Wife and Pardoner there is now only inertia, collapse, inarticulacy, ‘lakke of

⁸⁴ Powell argues something similar about the connection between fragments IX and X, saying ‘the combination of continuity and discontinuity may be essential to the meaning of the end of *CT*’. Stephen Powell, ‘Game Over: Defragmenting the End of the *Canterbury Tales*’, *ChRev*, 37 (2002), 40-58 (p. 41).

speche', a 'hevy dronken cors' (IX.48, 67). Comedy itself is decisively deflated in the Cook's fall from the horse – but not without one final sardonic touch – 'This was a fair chyvachee of a cook!' (X.50).

The Manciple's Tale is itself preoccupied with the issue of speech and silence. As Astell notes, it represents in an 'intensely reflexive' manner, the final impasse of Chaucerian poetics, the point at which a higher, resolving discourse must take its place.⁸⁵ Similarly for Powell, the tale implies 'that story telling itself can never be productive' and thus anticipates the Parson's critique of fables and withdrawal from art.⁸⁶ In these terms the tale continues the self-recriminating dynamic of Chaucer's late style and forms an important part of the anxious penitential re-orientation of the final fragments. As with *CYT* it depicts a world of coarse and self-destructive materialism, devoid of spiritual life and value; Phoebus – god of poetry and reason – is reduced to a capricious fool, whose wrath leads him to kill his adulterous wife, 'brak his mynstralcie' (IX.267), blacken the beautiful crow and reduce his song to an inarticulate squawk – all fitting symbols for the imminent rejection of poetry.

As language, like all aspects of the degraded world of *The Manciple's Tale*, is shown to be misleading and destructive, the pragmatic moral drawn by the Manciple is to caution silence: 'kepe wel thy tonge', 'in muchel speche synne wanteth naught' (IX.360, 338), but whilst this reductive moral conclusion casts a questioning shadow over the whole tale-telling enterprise of *CT*, it is itself problematised in the process of its demonstration. It may seem to the Manciple that silence offers a way out of the cycle of language and misinterpretation, but as a tale against tale-telling, a speech praising silence, *The Manciple's Tale* and the penitential poetics of which it is a part remain inescapably caught up in the activity they seek to escape, a point sardonically illustrated by the plethora of needlessly repeated proverbs on the virtue of silence with which the tale concludes (IX.316-362). In this gesture of absurd repetition, words are turned against their ostensible meanings and reduced, by arbitrary accumulation, first to senseless platitudes and then to mere prattle. It is as if the call to silence, and perhaps even poetry itself, were caught now in an endless self-refuting, and decaying loop. Another conspicuous example of Chaucer's late style, this is reminiscent of the piling up of names and fragments of inert matter in the alchemical lists of *CYT* and could also be compared to what Adorno described as the unsynthesised, almost

⁸⁵ Anne Anstell, 'Nietzsche, Chaucer, and the Sacrifice of Art', *ChRev*, 39 (2005), 323-40 (p. 323).

⁸⁶ Powell, 'Game Over: Defragmenting the End of the *Canterbury Tales*', p. 49.

carelessly repeated figures, ‘splintered off’ and left wilfully ‘unmastered’ in Beethoven’s late works.⁸⁷ In both cases incompleteness itself becomes expressive. The needless accumulation of proverbs returns the reader’s attention to the problem of interminability dramatised in the *CYT*. It reflects the impossible task Chaucer faces in meaningfully closing *CT*; for whatever is written toward this end entails more tales, more proverbs, more language, more potential for misinterpretation. But even on its own terms, the silence advocated by the Manciple provides no genuine solution. As Allen notes, it implies a purely negative withdrawal from language, world and meaning, which threatens to short-circuit the possibility of a ‘fructuous’ ending for *CT*.⁸⁸

The Manciple’s Tale thus represents another significant point of rupture and self-reflexive crisis in the final fragments, the point where the allegorical signifying potential of poetic fiction breaks down into dark self-parody and the unmediated extremes of debased fiction and inexpressible truth. But, in keeping with the paradoxical nature of Chaucer’s late style and Christian salvation, it is in these very terms of failure, trauma and disjunction that *The Manciple’s Tale* becomes meaningful. It points through the irresolvable tensions and insufficiency of its own poetic discourse toward the divine truth and meaning it lacks, and opens the way to the Parson’s resolving, resolutely non-poetic discourse.

As such, in *CT* there is no smooth Dantescan rising through the ‘beautiful falsehood’ of fiction to truth. It is, rather (as with the Christian soul before God) through the very sickness and penitence of Chaucerian poetics, its now entirely sombre self-consciousness of its inability to save itself from the House of Rumour in which it has always been caught, that the possibility of transcendence and completion arise. In a manner quite at odds with the Robertsonian notion of the unity of the medieval literary artefact, *CT* rises toward divine completion by falling apart.

It is in these terms that the final withdrawal from poetry to the authoritative, non-poetic discourse of *ParsT* can be understood. The unequivocal prose of the Parson’s treatise offers an effective escape route from the ambiguity and interminability of Chaucerian poetic discourse. It represents the final stage in the penitential movement of Chaucer’s late style and its bid for transcendence, a stage seemingly beyond the contaminations of poetry and fiction themselves. Throughout

⁸⁷ Adorno, ‘Beethoven’s Late Style’, p. 567.

⁸⁸ Allen, ‘Penitential Sermons, the Manciple and the End of the Canterbury Tales’, p. 77.

the final fragments the world-spirit opposition has been asserted with increasing rigour, renouncing the ambiguous dialectical middle-ground of Chaucer's earlier work. *ParsT* takes this process of distillation and re-orientation of value to its logical conclusion by rejecting altogether the compound dialectical character of poetic fiction: the idea of allegory that binds together fiction and truth and on which the moral and spiritual justification of late medieval poetry hinges.

Dante's *Commedia* and Gower's *Confessio Amantis* both trusted in and depended on the transparent communicability of truth through images and used it to construct their own morally meaningful and transcendent narratives, whereas *CT*, by persistently problematising this hermeneutic process – blurring the lines between truth and fiction through its ironic and dialogic style – ends at a point where it has radically called into question the value of its own discourse and the possibility of a moral and transcendent conclusion. Where Beatrice and Amans's Confessor exist as principles of internal authority within their respective narratives, able to morally direct the protagonist by progressively interpreting the truth of the images and fictions they are a part of, the only such figure of authority within the *CT* is inimical to and plays no part in its development. As Patterson notes the 'absolutist' intervention of the Parson and the zero-sum spirituality he represents must be postponed to enable the compound and unruly game of Chaucerian fiction to take place at all, and where he is restored it is not as a final facilitator and vindicator of Chaucerian allegory, as Baldwin believed, but as an external, voiding authority, who refuses and supersedes the terms of poetic fiction altogether.⁸⁹ Ultimately the only truth 'drawn' from fiction at the end of *CT* is of fiction's insufficiency. Truth, in the Parson's terms, is best spoken directly; it need not be conducted through glosses, fictions and honeyed words in the manner of all preceding tales. Rendering explicit a suspicion which was always lurking in Chaucer's equivocal and self-questioning poetics, the Parson asserts 'Why sholde I sowen draf out of my fest, | Whan I may sowen whete, if that me lest?' (X.35-6).

His own 'tale', a penitential manual, functions as a corrective and antidote, both in form and content, to the indeterminacy of Chaucerian fiction. Drawn primarily from the *Summa de poenitentia* of Raymund of Pennaforte (c.1220) and late thirteenth-century Latin redactions of William Peraldus' *Summa vitiorum*, its expository analysis of the nature of penitence and forms of sin is conducted in the

⁸⁹ Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History*, pp. 316-17.

rigorously clear, focused, abstract and systematic style of the medieval philosophical summa, devoid of the possibility of irony, digression or ambiguity.⁹⁰ The treatise's overriding 'theoretical cohesion', its abstracting force and scrupulous method of logical division and explanation aims, as Patterson has argued, at subsuming all the confusion and multifariousness of human behaviour and reality, to which the previous tales bear witness, into a 'single, peculiarly intense and authoritative perspective.'⁹¹ In this respect it represents the culmination of the teleological drive toward closure and final 'sentence' which has animated the final fragments, a drive which has led out of the indeterminate world of fiction and experience, toward an eschatological rather than an aesthetic conception of unity and closure.

With the stately and incontestable spiritual authority augured in the Parson's Prologue, *ParsT* rises above the tale-telling game and is not ostensibly affected by its dialogic and ironic resonances. As with the Second Nun, the voice of the tale is marked by its impersonal, generic and ostensibly neutral character. Aers noted with disapproval this aspiration to objectivity in the Parson's discourse, its most unchaucerian inability to acknowledge its own subjective role in the 'truth' it discloses.⁹² This sacrifice of personality – along with the sacrifice of poetry itself – is, however, precisely what is required for *ParsT* to remain free of the destabilising influence of Chaucerian fiction. It is what gives it, at least in its own terms, the transcendent authority to rise above and call *CT* to an end.

In this respect I concur with those critics who have interpreted *ParsT* from what Wenzel termed the 'teleological perspective' as by intention separate from, and of a different order from, the fictive pilgrimage and tale-telling contest it closes. The tale is the last and most powerful reflex of that will to truth and order which has always been an integral aspect of Chaucer's poetry. It is an attempt to establish a transcendent position from which it is possible to have the final word: to 'knit up', pass judgment and furnish *CT* with a final, redeeming moral meaning, without any further interruptions or interpretations. The result of this endeavour is another matter; for whilst *ParsT* decidedly ends *CT*, it can only do so through aesthetic violence, disjunction, fragmentation and renunciation.

⁹⁰ For discussion of the source history of *ParsT* see Siegfried Wenzel, 'The Source of Chaucer's Seven Deadly Sins', *Traditio*, 30 (1974), 351-78.

⁹¹ Patterson, 'Quiting of the Canterbury Tales', p. 347.

⁹² Aers, *Chaucer, Langland and the Creative Imagination*, pp. 106-7.

Indeed, in its uncompromising bid for closure and its complete rejection of the terms of poetic fiction, *ParsT* becomes the most pronounced expression of the disjunctive quality of Chaucer's late style. If it succeeds in 'knitting up' *CT*, it does so by changing the terms of the game, by exposing it to the sobering light of reality. It imposes upon the still unfinished work of fiction a different order of value, a different narrative teleology, one which supersedes rather than resolves the work's aesthetic problems. The question of the judgment of tales, the return journey, even the completion and internal consistency of the fictive pilgrimage to Canterbury, all fade away along with its fictive participants, to be replaced by the only question that ultimately matters: the question of salvation, the eternal distillation of values.

The idea of aesthetic order is sacrificed to a divine order and moral meaning and the incompleteness of the work as aesthetic artefact intriguingly becomes a part of that meaning. It no longer matters that tales are unfinished, that the work is in fragments and no unequivocal moral 'sentence' can be drawn from the muddle of competing voices, for the inexorably ordering force of *ParsT* makes clear that unity and transcendence are only achieved through supra-aesthetic means. There is a more pressing spiritual reality to attend to, one which bears on us all directly. In this sense it is fitting that Chaucer leaves the pilgrimage unfinished, at an unspecified 'throps end' for this deprives us of the illusory completion and assurance of the aesthetic, returning us to a reality which is still precariously unfolding, still undecided, and demands our moral and existential involvement, not our disengaged aesthetic contemplation. For all its differences as a poem, *Piers Plowman* ends similarly: not with a unifying Dantescan vision, but a sudden awakening and return to the undecided middle-way of human life and its on-going quest 'To seken Piers the Plowman'.⁹³ It is thus by decisively leaving poetry and fiction behind in the name of a higher transcendent aspiration and by accepting the aesthetic incompleteness of *CT* that Chaucer closes the work and gives to it its final, pressing meaning.

Whilst this shift of perspective is anticipated throughout the final fragments one cannot underestimate the formal difficulty it creates for *CT* as a literary work. I concur with Dean that there is a common penitential trajectory in late medieval literature – a movement that leads from the temporal to the eternal, from worldly pleasure of story-telling to a reflection upon the fleetingness of all worldly pleasure

⁹³ Langland, *The Vision of Piers Plowman* (B-Text), ed. by Schmidt, Passus XX, 383.

and the need for contrition and absolution.⁹⁴ Such a movement can be observed, for example, in the epilogue of *Troilus*, which interprets the work it closes as a moral condemnation of ‘wrecced worldes appetites’ (V.1851). Similarly Ruiz’s *Libro de Buen Amor* ends with the narrator abandoning his pursuit of ‘loco amor’⁹⁵ and *Confessio Amantis* with an analogous transcendence of earthly love, as Amans is finally cured and absolved of his romantic affliction by Venus, beholds his haggard face in a mirror and vows ‘Fro this day forth to take reste | that I namore of Love make’ and to turn his intention instead to the love of God in which the only genuine solace is found.⁹⁶ The same penitential shift is also repeated in the final sonnets of Petrarch’s *Canzoniere* wherein the poet writes ‘I go my way regretting those past times/ I spent in loving something which was mortal instead of soaring high’.⁹⁷ In this context the penitential shift that occurs in *CT* can be seen as an expression of a shared predicament of conscience and a general trend in late medieval literature, which allegorically, through its own re-orientation, reflects the transcendent movement of the soul from *cupiditas* to *caritas*, from ‘false worldes brotelnesse’ (V.832) to the eternal constancy and truth of the spirit. But there is a crucial distinction to be made here.

In the works mentioned above the motion of transcendence and penitential reorientation is conducted smoothly through the language of poetic fiction, so even as there is an allegorical movement beyond the aesthetic to the moral truth it signifies, the aesthetic work is validated and completed as morally meaningful in the process. Poetic fiction remains a reliable vehicle of truth and viable means of spiritual ascent. But for Chaucer the rot of worldly instability runs deeper, into the very signifying processes of poetic language itself. The final penitential movement of *CT* is consequently far more turbulent and problematic. *CT* ends not just with renunciation of ‘cupiditas’ but with the rejection of the means through which this renunciation can be made: the rejection of poetry itself and its transcendent potential. Chaucer is left with the problem of how to draw a closing moral meaning from a work and a mode of discourse that has persistently questioned its own ability to convey such meaning.

⁹⁴ James Dean, ‘Chaucer’s Repentance: a likely story’, p. 67.

⁹⁵ See Juan Ruiz, *The Book of Good Love*, copla 1520 onwards.

⁹⁶ Gower, *Confessio Amantis* Book 8, in *John Gower Selected Poetry*, ed. by Carole Weinberg, (Manchester: Fyfield Books, 1983), l. 890.

⁹⁷ Petrarch, *Selections from the Canzoniere*, ed. & trans. by Mark Musa, Sonnet 365, lines 1-2.

Gower, close to the end of *Confessio Amantis*, writes in similar terms to Chaucer of the need to make ‘conclusioun final’, to ‘knette – This cause’ and ‘make an ende’.⁹⁸ He even similarly seeks to take authorial responsibility for and pass judgment on his poem, describing it as a work standing ‘between earnest and game’ which ‘axe forto ben excusid’.⁹⁹ In both cases the approach of the formal terminus of the work echoes the spiritual terminus of human life and invites humble contemplation of the value of the work in relation to that ultimate end. However, the ‘beau retreat’ (408) from his poem that Gower makes is one concerned with content and not with form. He is able to conclude his poem and assert its moral meaning without disrupting its formal unity or turning to a radically different mode of discourse. *CT*, by comparison, is concluded with a prose work of almost two thousand lines that breaks with both the affective and narrative character of the poetic work that precedes it. Jordan has argued that the formal disjunction of *ParsT* can be understood as part of the broader unity of a ‘non organic’ medieval aesthetic, that functions through the addition of ‘autonomous parts into preconceived and pre-stated totalities’ but I can think of no other poetic work of which the principle of unity involves quite such a dramatic disjunction, nor such a questioning relation to the signifying potential of its own discourse.¹⁰⁰ Rather the meta-aesthetic unity that *ParsT* brings comes at the expense of the aesthetic, through its rupture and sacrifice. *ParsT* enacts the final violent and apocalyptic distillation of value, a tearing apart of the allegorical bond between fiction and truth on which poetry depends. What are left are the fragments of an unrealisable order and the unmediated extremes of *solas* and *sentence*: a futile, worldly aesthetic endeavour on the one hand and a transcendent religious truth on the other, without the grounds for a redeeming synthesis. This opposition is finally ratified in the Retraction wherein *CT* and Chaucer’s work as a whole is divided along the lines of that world-spirit binary which has dominated the final fragments, into the opposing camps of ‘worldly vanitees’ (X.1084) to be renounced and works of an explicitly didactic or devotional nature, of which only *Boece* is named.

Thus, as an aesthetic phenomenon and the culmination of an aesthetic work fragment X is a catastrophe: not so much a ‘knitting up’, as a breaking apart. The monolithic unit of *ParsT*, in its intentionally disengaging and anti-aesthetic relation to

⁹⁸ Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, Book 8, ll. 2070-3.

⁹⁹ Ibid. Book 8 ll. 62-7 and ll. 855-60.

¹⁰⁰ Jordan, *Chaucer and the Shape of Creation*, p. 236.

the work it closes, is comparable to the deliberate refusal of integration and harmony Adorno discerned in Beethoven's late compositions, with their pointed excess of unintegrated matter. In both cases there is a similarly turbulent rejection of the middle ground of aesthetic synthesis and a surrender of subjectivity, that is, of the artist's form giving power over his work. Paradoxically, in both cases, this defeat and departure from the aesthetic becomes the very ground for a new and fragile form of expression; or as Adorno put it, 'the power of subjectivity in the late works of art is the irascible gesture with which it takes leave of the works [...] it leaves only fragments behind, and communicates itself, like a cipher, through the blank spaces from which it has disengaged itself'.¹⁰¹

It is in this curious tension between surrender and expression that the aesthetic fragmentation and inevitable incompleteness of *CT* becomes meaningful. Where Dante elevated poetry to the level of the divine and let the immaculate unity of the work reflect and celebrate the divine totality of which it felt itself to be a part, in *CT* it is inversely through the ultimate admission of insufficiency, the demonstration of the limitations of the synthetic powers of the poetic imagination and the aesthetic artefact to reflect or comprehend the divine unity and truth that underlies reality that its redeeming, transcendent moral meaning is revealed. It is in this manner that the final fragments are able to paradoxically recuperate and redeem the aesthetic project they ostensibly sacrifice, shatter and renounce. For the *CT*, in its incompleteness and disunity, at last becomes useful both as a symbol of the vanity, insufficiency and instability of worldly endeavour – doomed to 'concluden everemoore amys' – and the powerful human desire for its transcendence. The artwork is not a resting point but a herald, 'a little light like a rushlight to lead back to splendour'. In its fragmentation and irresolution it finally points beyond itself, beyond the aesthetic, beyond the interminable struggle with words and meanings, beyond the muddle of the human world it sought to comprehend and represent and finally became a symptom of, to the unfinished pilgrimage of the soul toward that 'Jerusalem Celestial' in which unity, resolution and closure alone reside.

¹⁰¹ Adorno, 'Beethoven's Late Style', p. 566.

Conclusion

In my own bid to ‘make an ende’ I conclude this thesis with a return to the curious problem of the Retraction with which it began. Following smoothly on from *ParsT* in theme and tone, the Retraction is the logical conclusion of the penitential poetics that took shape in the final fragments. It is the culmination, and final frank expression of a sense of guilt and uncertainty about the value of literary creativity, which has subtly informed the whole of Chaucer’s work. And it is also the poet’s final attempt to bring an end to the equivocal play of languages and perspectives his work has opened and explored: if not to close, at least to wash his hands of that play, and leave behind one final, unambiguous authorial meaning.

Here, in accordance with the world-spirit binary which has asserted itself with increasing rigour throughout the final fragments, Chaucer, as David writes, ‘repents of having written the works for which we primarily read him’.¹ The literary works on which his great reputation is founded here become ‘giltes’ ‘worldly vanitees’, chaff for the fire (X.1083-4). Gone are the ‘productive middles’ of Chaucerian poetics, abandoned for the stark Augustinian poles of flesh and spirit, cupidity and charity, which they once blurred and problematised.² The exhausted alchemist finally leaves behind the bits-and-pieces of his experiments, he puts aside all masks and fictions, even the fictions of penitence, and prays in earnest, in his own voice, for ‘grace to biwayle my giltes and to studie to the salvacioun of my soule’ (X.1086-7).

Chaucer is not, of course, the first or only writer to have retracted or come to doubt the validity of his works in later life. As previously discussed, several medieval poets issued palinodes of a comparable nature and looking beyond the Middle Ages, Virgil is famously alleged to have requested that his *Aeneid* be burnt and Tolstoy turned to moral philosophy and rejected his novels in his final years. The gesture of retraction may reflect, on one level, a general anxiety on the part of authors about the interpretation and dissemination of their work as it passes out of their hands, into the field of transmission and interpretation so effectively portrayed in *HF*. They may also reflect a sense of frustration with the inevitable limitations and failings of all human literary projects; for all great writers are in some way inspired by and seek to express an ideal of order, necessity, unity and meaning, which is ultimately unrealisable in

¹ David, *Strumpet Muse*, p. 238.

² Burger, *Chaucer’s Queer Nation*, p. 207.

human thought and writing, being as they remain a part of this contingent, fallen world. Like the alchemists of *CYT*, they pursue a dream, a conclusion, a ‘certeyn thing’ (*PF*.20) they cannot capture, and ‘although we hadden it sworn, | It overtake, it slit away so faste’ (VIII.681-2.) Perfection, totality, the immutable idea eludes them and in reaching a point of conclusion, in looking back upon their work there is a feeling of frustration and regret, a despondency towards creation, which is palpable here in the Retraction and the final fragments. In the Canon’s Yeoman’s words: ‘swich supposyng and hope is sharp and hard’ (VIII.873).

But Chaucer’s Retraction has also a pointed historical and cultural meaning, related, as has been argued throughout this thesis, to the development of creative literature in late medieval culture and its relation to Faith. This is notable in two ways. Firstly, in the Retraction, we see Chaucer assuming the role of author and taking moral and textual ownership of his works. This reflects a significant shift in ideas of vernacular poetry in the Middle Ages: a shift from the more fluid, plural and anonymous forms of authorship which Zumthor describes in earlier vernacular poetry, to the singular humanistic notion of the literary Author as a prestigious figure, a creator of fixed, authoritative and meaningful works – a notion which comes to play an essential role in modern ideas of Literature. But with this proto-modern conception of the Author, as Foucault argues, also comes a new sense of moral, political and psychological accountability. Chaucer as an author-figure can be venerated for his work, but he can also be held to account for them, both in actuality and in his own conscience.³ In the Retraction, we see Chaucer responding ambivalently to this new literary role: simultaneously stepping forward as the author of a collection of works which will continue to circulate and carry his name, but also expressing the guilt and anxiety that comes with this authorial identity. He accepts the heady mantle of author and claims ownership of his works, but only so as to disavow them and retreat to a more orthodox, penitential mode of subjectivity.

The Retraction can also be understood as the logical consequence of the aesthetic and philosophical ambition of Chaucer’s poetry. As discussed throughout this thesis, Chaucer’s resistance to the terms of didacticism and allegory, his willingness to parody and explore dominant ideologies and bring a range of

³ Michel Foucault, ‘What is an Author?’, in *Authorship, From Plato to the Postmodern*, ed. by Burke (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), pp. 233-46 (p. 238).

conflicting voices and perspectives into debate is crucial to the emergence of literature as a rich, independent and potentially subversive discourse – more than just a eulogiser of established values. But this freedom came with its costs. In the process Chaucer undermined the chief grounds on which poetic fiction could be legitimised in medieval culture and threw the value of his own work into question. Such a bold poetic vision ultimately demanded an equally stark and uncompromising rejection – and this is precisely what one sees in the Retraction and the crisis of conscience that precedes it, in the final fragments.

The Retraction could thus, in one sense, be viewed as a final gesture of defeat and negation – a symbol of Chaucer's failure to reconcile the conflicting demands of his conscience and his art. We are returned to the notion of secular poetry as a suspicious, distracting, carnal pursuit, irredeemably bound up with this transitory world, as opposed to productive, didactic works of 'moralitee, | and devocioun' (X.1081-2). But, in the spirit of this thesis, I resist viewing the Retraction in these stark binary terms and point instead to the more nuanced, conflicted, curiously symbiotic interrelation of guilt and creativity that underlies it. For whilst the Retraction expresses genuine repentance, it is not an absolute and unequivocal rejection of Chaucer's work; within it is the implicit acceptance that those 'giltes' themselves will go on circulating, being read and bearing the poet's name. The Retraction itself can only be read and understood in the context of the works it renounces; and as Anstell suggests there is something 'profoundly anti-sacrificial' within its ritual of sacrifice.⁴

Chaucer here steps free of his literary works and the unanswered questions and problems they have posed. He is finished with them but they remain unfinished and open to posterity, to the future tales and interventions of his readers. As Chaucer knew only too well, the process of signification, of tale-telling, would continue. The Retraction itself is the final 'disjunction' and enigma of Chaucer's late style.⁵ In its earnest bid for closure it cannot help but raise the questions of the nature and value of literary discourse which has run throughout Chaucer's work and return us to those very 'giltes' it renounces. In spite of itself, to us it has the feel of a final question

⁴ Anne Anstell, 'On the Usefulness and Use Value of Books', in *Medieval Rhetoric, A Case Book*, ed. by Scott Troyan (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 58-9.

⁵ Jordan, *Chaucer's Poetics and the Modern Reader*, p. 149.

mark, a fascination, an invitation to discussion and new beginnings, which leads not beyond but somehow back to ‘Aprill with his shoures soote’ (I.1).

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