Chaucer’s Body
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The Anxiety of Circulation in the "Canterbury Tales"

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In piam memoriam

Alma Lucille Clodfelter Shoaf Bowers

June 20, 1922–October 21, 1999
My joly body schal a tale telle.
*Canterbury Tales* II B¹ 1185

Thyng that is seyd is seyd, and forth it gooth.
*Canterbury Tales* IX H 355–56

circulacioun n. [L] *Alch.* The operation or process of changing the “body” (by heating or cooling) from one “element” into another.
*Middle English Dictionary* C: 276

The genius of misfortune
Is not a sentimentalist. He is
That evil, that evil in the self, from which
In desperate hallow, rugged gesture, fault
Falls out on everything: the genius of
The mind, which is our being, wrong and wrong.
The genius of the body, which is our world,
Spent in the false engagements of the mind.
Wallace Stevens, “Ésthetique du Mal”
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In the latter stages of this project, as I have had more occasion to reflect on it whole, I see that it actually began in my formative years at Cornell University, especially 1975–76, when I drafted my dissertation on Chaucer’s *Book of the Duchess*. That study, I see in retrospect, was really my first concerted effort to come to terms with Chaucer as a translator; and the present book, in a very real sense, is a continuation of that effort—as well as, I hope, a step further along in it. I hardly imagine I have finished. Such is not in the nature of the project. But, in the intervening twenty-five years, I have learned more than I knew then, and, I would like to think, I have benefited from the experience of writing, or editing, the nine books that have preceded this one. So, I go forward with the current publication as a kind of culmination, at least on a personal level, of a task begun long ago, one that has sustained my interest and aroused my energy for a quarter of a century.

About half of this book as it now stands was drafted in 1983–85 and parts of it published in the late eighties and early nineties. The other half of the original draft has been jettisoned. Most of that I have replaced with writing I undertook in the 1990s as I was also editing *Exemplaria: A Journal of Theory in Medieval and Renaissance Studies*. The experience of reading and editing for *Exemplaria* has been one of the most exciting as well as challenging paths in my career, and the book I am now publishing I could not have written without that excitement and that challenge. I hope that those who read my book will see the effect, as I have endeavored to leave it visible.

Medieval and Renaissance Studies are different now from what they were twenty-five years ago—more acute and more sensitive to the concerns of the wider profession of literary studies—and this is because of the beneficial impact of literary theory, I believe. Those who have contributed to that impact on me especially are named and often addressed in the chapters that
follow. Here I would like to single out two medievalists, also theorists, and a generalist who have written studies indispensable to my project.

The first is the late Roger Dragonetti (d. 2000), whose articles and books, especially on Dante, have remained with me twenty-five years now a constant inspiration and challenge. The second is H. Marshall Leicester, Jr., whose understanding of the difficulty of poetry, and the meaningfulness of that difficulty, I admire and find repeatedly provocative. The generalist is Harold Bloom, whose *The Anxiety of Influence* I consider one of the greatest works of literary analysis in the Anglophone tradition, not likely to be surpassed in our time. It is important to register here, as I also do elsewhere in my book, that the impetus and insights of psychoanalysis have informed the work of these critics even as they have my own; and, especially in light of Jonathan Lear’s eloquent rebuttals of the psychoanalysis-bashers, I must not let this occasion pass to ally myself with those who seek “open-minded[ly to] work . . . out the logic of the soul.”

**Acknowledgments**

I recognize and thank the following individuals and institutions for the help they have given me during the preparation of this book.

First and foremost, I am grateful to the National Endowment for the Humanities which awarded me a Fellowship in December 1998; without this Fellowship I could not have written my book.

I thank next John M. Bowers and Russell A. Peck who wrote letters of support to the Endowment for my application. I am not only grateful for, but also instructed by, their collegiality.

Next, I would like to recognize the Department of English in the University of Florida, and especially the then chair, Ira Clark, for making it possible for me to take the leave funded by the Endowment. I am also grateful to the then dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, Willard W. Harrison, for his support and encouragement, not only in this but in other initiatives as well.

John M. Hill and Julian N. Wasserman evaluated my manuscript for the University Press of Florida. Between them they generated ten pages of commentary on my book: I have rarely benefited so deeply from critique of my work by my colleagues—I take this occasion to thank them both (*Denken ist Danken*). I assume full responsibility for errors and infelicities that remain.

The Department of English in the University of Bern (Switzerland) invited me to teach a seminar on Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde* in November 1999, and my experiences in this seminar proved instrumental to my think-

1. Lear, *Open-minded.*
ing in the final stages of writing this book. I am deeply grateful to the department at Berne, and, in particular, I thank Margaret Enid Bridges, who arranged the invitation, and Ruth Bigler and Carola Duff, who managed administrative affairs for me so ably during my stay, and Angelina Keller, who wrote a seminar paper for me on “Criseyde as text” that is the most brilliant essay on Chaucer I have ever received from an undergraduate student.

In March 2000 the Sewanee Mediaeval Colloquium of the University of the South honored me with the opportunity to read chapter 1 of my book for the Colloquium, “Celebrating Chaucer in 2000: His World, His Work, His Legacy?” I take this opportunity to thank the organizers, Robert G. Benson and Susan J. Ridyard, for the invitation and to congratulate them on a memorable Colloquium.

The Smathers Library in the University of Florida repeatedly came to my aid in finding and securing for me materials I needed to finish my work on time. I am grateful for this aid, and, in particular, I thank John Van Hook, a Renaissance scholar as well as a very competent librarian, for his solicitude for my project.


To the University Press of Florida, with which I have now published three books, I express not only my gratitude but also my admiration for the professionalism and the humanity its staff have always displayed; in particular, I
wish to recognize Acquisitions Editor Amy Gorelick. I also wish to acknowledge the invaluable contribution of my copyeditor, Elizabeth C. McDonald.

As has been true so often over the years, the magnitude of my debt to my family—Judy, Brian, and Elaine—is incalculable. The magnitude of my debt to the one to the memory of whom I dedicate my book is inexpressible.
ABBREVIATIONS

Unless otherwise noted, all Chaucer quotations are from The Riverside Chaucer, 3rd edition—reprinted with permission. Quotations from The Canterbury Tales (CT) are identified in the text by roman numerals for the fragments, alphabetic letters for the groups, arabic numerals for the line. Other works of Chaucer are also cited by line numbers in the text, with the following abbreviations for their titles:

- **Adam**: “Chaucers Wordes unto Adam his Scriveyn”
- **HF**: The House of Fame
- **LGW**: The Legend of Good Women
- **T&C**: Troilus and Criseyde

Dante’s Comedy is cited from the facing-page Italian in the translation that is used throughout: Allen Mandelbaum, The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri (New York: Bantam, 1982 et seq.).

The following standard abbreviations are also used:

- **ChauR**: Chaucer Review
- **ED**: Enciclopedia dantesca
- **EETS, ES**: Early English Text Society, Extra Series
- **Exemplaria**: Exemplaria: A Journal of Theory in Medieval and Renaissance Studies
- **JEGP**: Journal of English and Germanic Philology
- **MED**: Middle English Dictionary
- **NLH**: New Literary History
Abbreviations

**OED 2**  *Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd edition*

**PMLA**  *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*

**SAC**  *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*

**SAR**  *South Atlantic Review*

**SP**  *Studies in Philology*

The following websites are also relevant:

http://web.clas.ufl.edu/users/rashoaf/
   My homepage

http://www.unc.edu/depts/chaucer/
   The Chaucer MetaPage

http://cwolf.uaa.alaska.edu/~afdtk/ect_main.htm
   The Electronic *Canterbury Tales*

http://geoffreychaucer.org/
   Chaucer: An Annotated Guide to Online Resources
As he begins to tell the story of Philomela in the *Legend of Good Women*, the Narrator laments

as to me, so grisely was [Tereus’s] dede
That, whan that I his foule storye rede,
Myne eyen wexe foule and sore also.

_Yit last the venym of so longe ago,
That it enfecteth hym that wol beholde
The storye of Tereus, of which I tolde._

(VII.2238–43; emphasis added)

In his Prologue, the Pardoner boasts, as he harangues the pilgrims, that

Thus _spitte_ I out my _venym_ under hewe
Of hoolynesse, to semen hooly and trewe.
But shortly myn entente I wol devyse:
I preche of no thyng but for coveityse.

(VI C 421–24; emphasis added)

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The Yeoman in the *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale* vents his resentment against the canon, exclaiming

> Ther is a chanoun of religioun
> Amonges us, wolde infecte al a toun,
> Thogh it as greet were as was Nynyvee,
> Rome, Alisaundre, Troye, and otherte three.
> His sleightes and his infinite falsnesse
> Ther koude no man writen, as I gesse,
> Though that he myghte lyve a thousand yeer.

(VIII G 972–78; emphasis added)

In the Prologue to the *Manciple’s Tale*, the Manciple complains of the Cook’s drunkenness:

> Hoold cloos thy mouth, man, by thy fader kyn!
> The devel of helle sette his foot therin!
> Thy cursed breeth infecte wole us alle.

(IX H 37–39; emphasis added)

In *Troilus and Criseyde*, Pandaras affects some remorse that he “thorugh [his] engyn, / [has] in [his] nece yput this fantasie” (3.274–75; emphasis added).

In all of these examples, the thesis of my book is emergent. Infection, the consequence of contagion, itself the result of circulation, threatens the human body. And the most infectious agent there is, as the first and last examples, especially, suggest, is language itself. Plagues have killed their mil-

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2. Even if infection and contagion are to be construed only metaphorically—this, of course, being a widely debated problem in the history of medicine: see, esp., the essays in Conrad and Wujastyk, eds., *Conceptions of Contagion*, and, in particular, pp. x–xi, 144, 151, 162, 196, 201; see also Bassett, ed., *Death in Towns*, esp. pp. 2, 113, and 138–42, on the medieval understanding of contagion and infection.

It is, from the perspective of this book’s argument, crucially significant that, according to the *Riverside Chaucer* (p. 944), the lines in the *Second Nun’s Prologue*, “troubled . . . by the contagioun / Of my body” (VIII G 72–73) contain “the earliest use of the word [contagioun] in this sense in English.” See also *Boece* 3. Pr. 12.4: “the contagious conjuncion of the body with the soule.” Remember, too, the motive of the pilgrimage in sickness (CT I A 18).

My reading in histories of medicine and in Chaucer’s probable knowledge of related matters includes Porter, *Greatest Benefit to Mankind*; Watts, *Epidemics and History*, which has been particularly useful (esp. at pp. 16 and 22, on quarantines in the Middle Ages); Park, “Medicine and Society”; P. L. Allen, *Wages of Sin*; and Everest, “Sex and Old Age.” I have also consulted Grmek, “Concept of Disease”; Rawcliffe, *Medicine & Society*; G. Olson, *Literature as Recreation*; Getz, *Medicine in the English Middle Ages*; and Alford, “Medicine in the Middle Ages.”
lions. Words have killed more than can ever be counted—we are pleased to call this, history.

"Yet lasts the venom of so long ago" is the one line of Chaucer’s poetry I most hope to take the measure of in my book. For failing to take the measure of it, we have, I will argue, underread Chaucer’s poetry, capitulating too easily to Matthew Arnold’s condescension. 3 So far from lacking “high seriousness,” Chaucer, I propose, is the poet of infection, a survivor of one form of plague (the Black Death) who lived to tell about many other forms. 4 And he has so readily been perceived by us as a postmodern poet because we encounter in his work feelings like those of our own anxiety of circulation—whether it arise from AIDS, or our addiction to petroleum, or our homophobia, or our seemingly endless appetite for murder. 5

I am not writing to tell the story of “genial Chaucer, father of English poetry, proto-humanist prophet of the Renaissance.” I am writing to tell the story of a possible rapist, a man who probably raised his wife’s bastard gotten upon her by their patron, a man who was robbed and beaten while conveying monies for the king, 6 a man who had letters of protection handy while the Lords Appellant were about beheading others of the king’s men, and a man who negotiated business in northern Italy. 7 A man who circulated. And who bore the marks of circulation.

It must be Abstract.

Wallace Stevens, Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction

In order to tell this story, I need an adequate abstraction. That abstraction is circulation. (Chaucer would have encountered the word in his reading in alchemy—see chap. 3.) With the phrase “anxiety of circulation” I mean to provide terminology that will comprehend a number of discrete but related phenomena in the second half of the fourteenth century in England: the

3. “he lacks the high seriousness of the great classics” (Brewer, ed., Geoffrey Chaucer, Volume 2, pp. 219–20).
5. See, esp., the recent study by Sturges, Chaucer’s Pardoner and Gender Theory, which I was privileged to read in press and for which I provided an endorsement. I would like to thank both the author and the press for the opportunity they afforded me.
7. Among many studies of Chaucer’s life and times and among various biographies, I have profited, in particular, from Fisher’s Importance of Chaucer, a book whose rigor and candor I admire. I also regularly consult Howard, Chaucer and Pearsall, Life of Geoffrey Chaucer, as well as Crow and C. C. Olson, Chaucer Life Records.
Black Plague, the increased use of coinage (and the concomitant problem of debasement), the increase in vernacular literacy, the uncontrolled spread of heresy, the restless mobility of the lower classes (culminating in the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381), the gradual and incomplete but distinct empowerment of women, and, finally, in some ways perhaps most significant of all, the shocking circulation of the monarchy itself at the end of the century with the deposition of Richard II. All of these phenomena, and many others, can usefully be understood as instances of a greater, more fluid, and finally more mysterious circulation—of goods and people as well as signs—than had been characteristic of the preceding two centuries in English history. This circulation generated anxiety especially in the writers of the period who, time and again, as scholarship has long recognized, concern themselves with the mobility of media of all sorts, which often is also the lability and hence unreliability of these media.

The autobiographical impulse easily recognizable in Chaucer and his contemporaries is best analyzed as a response to the anxiety of circulation. The desire to express an “I” is also the desire to locate and stabilize the subject in a world increasingly marked by the instability of uncontrolled

8. I have benefited in my thinking from recent studies of Richard and his reign, esp. Saul, Richard II and M. Bennett, Richard II and the Revolution, esp. pp. 68 and 180 of the latter, which cite instances of the prevalent imagery of infection and venom. On such imagery, see also Moore, “Heresy as Disease.”

9. For an important view of such circulation across many sections and functions of society, see Woolgar, Great Household; for the circulation of money, in particular, see Britnell, Commercialisation of English Society, pp. 36–52, 105–15, 185–96, and esp. pp. 113 and 191. It is also important, in this context, to emphasize that, as M. Bennett puts it, “Richard [II] remained very much the ceremonial monarch, and continued to cultivate the liturgical and ideological elements of his kingship” (p. 40)—signs, in other words, of circulation as well as, obviously, circulation of signs. For a fascinating account of circulation from an entirely different but still related perspective, see DeVries, “And Away Go Troubles.” Also, consult Laporte, History of Shit.

I should take this occasion to observe the difference between my approach and that of Greenblatt, as, e.g., in Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England. The reader who contrasts our work will see that the key difference is just the focus on the social; although I am clearly interested in the social, it is neither the motive nor the goal of my inquiry: the difference would perhaps be best intimated by appropriating Kermode’s comment in his review of Shakespearean Negotiations for the New Republic at p. 33: “There is a great quantity of sexological or political sack, but only a pennyworth of interpretative bread.” It is my avowed goal to offer in this book more than “a pennyworth of interpretative bread.”

10. See, esp., the essays collected in Hahn, ed., Reconceiving Chaucer.

11. In preparing this book, I have read widely in theory of autobiography. Most helpful to me have been the following studies: Marcus, Auto/biographical Discourses; Lejeune, On Autobiography; and Sturrock, Language of Autobiography.
circulation. The very abstractness of the phrase “anxiety of circulation” is useful to my point in the measure to which it calls attention to the increased abstractness of the culture of Chaucer and his contemporaries. It is such abstractness that at least partly informs Langland’s restlessness, for example—he writes so many versions of his poem just because his culture has abstracted itself from stable “tradition,” its codes circulating now in ever wider arcs of complexity.

The next century, the fifteenth, when dynastic warfare will interfere with all of England’s cultural movements, is a regression from what I would tentatively call the Europeanization of England that had begun in Chaucer and Langland’s lifetime. This Europeanization that did not quite take place (and repeatedly in English history it seems never quite to take place) may be the most effective way of imagining how the thirty years from 1370 to around 1400 could produce such a group of extraordinary poets as Chaucer, Langland, Gower, and the Gawain-poet, among many others, some of whom are now only anonymous. The anxiety of circulation consequent upon the cultural and social transformations wrought by this Europeanization seems to have called forth analysts of its impact who, if poets in the first instance, were also psychoanalysts in all but name (Hoccleve addressing “thee, / Eerthely god, pilere of lyf, thow Helthe” comes to mind). The very fluidity of people and signs generated the need for a discourse of people and signs in complex (e)motion.

If the late fourteenth century in England is the first great age of autobiographical writing in English literature, this is because it is the age of the anxiety of circulation when the will to witness, on the one hand (the insistence on, and of, Fame, as in Chaucer’s House of Fame), and the emergence of writing, on the other, coincided in an environment of intense consciousness of English linguistic identity (as, for example, in the famous proem to T&C, book 2 [lines 22–49]; or in Thomas Usk’s prologue to The Testament of Love where he vigorously promotes English as the natural medium for his book because it is his “dames tonge” [mother tongue]). Autobiography is the will to witness to one’s own fame in one’s “dames tonge” just when

12. See Zink, Invention of Literary Subjectivity.
13. La male regle, in Selections from Hoccleve, line 8.
external forces are challenging and re-shaping these very notions. Although Chaucer and his contemporaries would not have used the term “autobiography,” they all were concerned to witness to their fame, to assert their merit of praise, to defend themselves against blame—they were thus, inevitably, autobiographers (in the mode of epideictic rhetoric—laudando et vituperando [prais(ing) and blam(ing)]) [see p. 8 and note 26]). To be sure, the confessional contributed to the same impulse, and we can document the importance of the confessional, from the Fourth Lateran Council on, to assessing the increase in autobiographical writing of the period. Then, too, resurgent Augustinianism—with its emphasis on free will, grace, merit, and predestination—plays a crucial part in this development; as does, also, late medieval nominalism’s theological position on personal merit, facere quod in se est [to do what is in oneself to do], which is tantamount to a formula for the will to witness. But to these and other explanations can be added, I propose, the will to witness to one’s own fame, the will to self-expression, just when the self was discovering (and in many ways suffering) its subjectivity.

It is the will, by its intentional operation, that merits either praise or blame, and thus it is the will that, strictly speaking, is the “matter of fame,” and thus it is the will that, witnessing itself, produces what today we recognize as autobiography. But the will is (constrained to be) free. The will chooses its representations. The will subjects itself to identity. And therefore the will is always, potentially, anxious: it cannot know, in advance, the outcome of its subjection; once in circulation, “this storie is also trewe, I undertake, / As is the book of Launcelot de Lake” (Nun’s Priest’s Tale, VII B2 3211-12)—the story of the will (autobiography) may be true but just as a fiction is true.

Such a dialectic of truth and fiction can be found in commonly celebrated fourteenth-century English masterpieces—in particular, in the Canterbury Tales, which is more of an autobiography than is usually appreciated; and in the Confessio Amantis, which is, after all, a confession; but also in Piers Plowman, where the Tearing of the Pardon is an instance of the will to witness;

and in Julian’s *Shewings*, where her radical inventiveness in English, with neologisms especially,22 can be usefully explained by the dialectic as it empowers new circulations of sense and “sentence” in response to the anxiety of circulation. Although I will focus on the *Canterbury Tales* in this book, I will try to remind my reader from time to time of the extent to which Chaucer’s poem is part of this autobiographical milieu.

“It is precisely because desire is articulated that it is not articulable.” 23

Jacques Lacan

The anxiety of circulation is an effect of the separation of bodies that can for that very reason infect each other. Because every body is separate from every other body, communication is necessary, but the mediation by which communication transpires may at any time degenerate into contagion, contamination, infection—STDs, as we in our time know only too well, are the very type of the horror that can attend our elementary condition of separateness: we make love, we contract an STD, we die.

Our separateness begins with the birth trauma itself, and as every parent who has dealt with the “terrible two’s” knows, the anxiety that attends separation escalates remorselessly in early maturation. Compensations for separateness are myriad and for the most part mixed with some form of psycho-pathology to some degree. From nail-biting to promiscuity to nicotine addiction we are always trying to supply a lack, and we never quite get there. Ask Absolon when he’s just kissed.

Mediation always threatens to betray us because our desire perforce contaminates the media we use, especially our words. That’s why we defend ourselves with money and power, to make sure our words are interpreted the way we want them to be. But that takes a lot of money and power. And this is why the ancients set such store by rhetoric, the power (and at least a kind of money) that sways and moves others to our will.24 Rhetoric is how I make my desire your desire. Just watch a 1930s newsreel of Hitler speaking to the masses of National Socialists and you’ll know what I mean. But

22. For example, “impropried”: “All the fair werkyng and all the swete kindly office of dereworthy moderhede is impropried to the second person.” See Barratt, ed., *Women’s Writing in Middle English*, p. 124.


24. See *Rhetorica ad Herennium* I.ii: “The task of the public speaker is to . . . secure as far as possible the agreement of his hearers.” *Ad C. Herennium de ratione dicendi*, ed. Caplan, p. 5.
if rhetoric is how I make my desire your desire, this presupposes that I
know something about what you want (and also therefore lack)—every
good rhetorician knows his audience. There must be some things, as we say,
common to us. (And many of them, we know, are not very pretty.) This is to
say that if we are separate from each other, we are also bound to each other.
Bodies are a lot alike: eating, climaxing, defecating, dying. Every body circu-
lates. That’s why the anxiety of circulation is real and, more, infinitely de-
vious. In Chaucer’s Body: The Anxiety of Circulation in the “Canterbury
Tales,” I hope to make several contributions to scholarship, cutting across several
disciplinary concerns. The book is probably best characterized as an essay in
cultural studies since, necessarily, it combines history, literature, politics,
theology, and philosophy in its argument. But it is also a book about, and
of, rhetoric, because rhetoric, as treacherous as it may be, is our surest phar-
macy—poisons make the best antidotes.25 If rhetoric as mediation is how
one person infects another person with his desire, rhetoric is also how he
talks his way out of the trope.

And I scyde his opinion was good.

CT I A 183

The rhetorical category most important to my argument is epideixis (genus
demonstrativum).26 I assume that the Canterbury Tales depend in part on
epideictic oratory, or praise and blame (laudando et vituperando). The General
Prologue, in particular, can very usefully and helpfully be characterized as
a series of portraits demonstrating praise, often ironical, and blame, often
implicit, of the qualities and related behavior of the pilgrims. This assump-
tion is an axiom of my study.27

If epideixis is the rhetorical category most important to my argument,
metonymy is the rhetorical device, the trope or figure of speech, most im-
portant to it.28 Metonymy means “change of name”29 and it is a trope, we

25. See Derrida, “Plato’s Pharmacy” in Dissemination.
26. I depend throughout my book on Lausberg’s monumental Handbook of Literary
Rhetoric. I have also benefited from Hardison, Enduring Monument. See now also J. Walker,
27. I rely on the studies of J. B. Allen: Ethical Poetic, pp. 20–21, 87–88, 183–84; and, with
Moritz, A Distinction of Stories, p. 41. I believe the implications of these studies for under-
standing Chaucer have yet to be adequately appreciated.
28. Brewer has discussed metonymy in CT in Chaucer: The Poet as Storyteller. Our ap-
proaches and results are different.
29. The OED 2 records: “ad. late L. metonymi-a a. Gr. μετονυμία, lit. ‘change of name,’
f. μετ(α)—meta- + ὄνομα, Aeol. ὄνομα name.”
will see, on which much was written in the early and later Middle Ages (*denominatio* is the common Latin term for it—"unnaming"). Chaucer would have had access to most of this information, too. Since metonymy is usually mentioned in the same breath with metaphor, and the two are indeed closely related, I should pause here to say that though I privilege metonymy in my study (especially in chap. 4), I do not for a moment mean to imply that Chaucer does not use metaphor—any poet who can trope eros as falconry with such fineness of detail as Chaucer does in *Troilus and Criseyde* clearly understood and compassed metaphor in his writing.\(^{30}\) My position rather is that metonymy is a trope fundamental to his writing in the *Canterbury Tales* and that I can make my case about the anxiety of circulation best by focusing on it. It is also true, however, that after years of reading in psychoanalytic theory and cognitive psychology and linguistics, I have become persuaded by the many scholars who now argue that metonymy is by far the more basic trope in human discourse than metaphor.\(^{31}\) I am particularly inclined now to agree with those who suggest that every metaphor may depend on an underlying metonymy: eros can be troped as falconry (metaphor always involves transactions between *two* different spheres of reference) because eros already contains within its own sphere of reference the notion of pursuit, hence hunting, as with falcons (metonymy always arises from associative links within a *single* sphere of reference).\(^{32}\)

30. See my study "The Falcon in the Mew"; see, also, more generally, Orme, "Medieval Hunting."


32. Raymond W. Gibbs, Jr., offers the following very helpful if preliminary set of distinctions (Panther and Radden, pp. 62–63):

Yet metaphor and metonymy can best be distinguished by examining how each makes different connections between things. In metaphor, there are two conceptual domains, and one is understood in terms of another. For example, in

1. The creampuff was knocked out in the boxing match.

the term *creampuff* metaphorically refers to a boxer because the boxer is viewed as "soft" and easy to defeat. On the other hand, metonymy involves only one conceptual domain, in that the mapping or connection between two things is within the same domain, or within the same domain matrix. . . . Thus, in

2. We need a new glove to play third base.

the term *a new glove* refers to a person who would play third base in a baseball game. One general, but not perfect, rule-of-thumb for distinguishing metaphor from metonymy is to employ the "is like," or "X is like Y" test. If an expression makes sense in the "X is like Y" form, then it has metaphorical meaning. For instance, the sentence *The boxer is like a creampuff* makes sense, and thus is metaphorical, while *The third baseman is like a glove* does not, and thus is metonymic.
Metonymy or *denominatio* is so important to my argument because Chaucer’s strategy in the *Canterbury Tales* consists not only in selecting the punctually telling detail from a given pilgrim’s sphere of reference but also in deleting the information that would interfere with the punctuality of this detail—metonymy *unnames* as it renames, and at this, I hope to show, Chaucer is extraordinarily adept.\(^{33}\) He deploys juxtaposition in the *Canterbury Tales* with a precision and comprehensiveness that generations of Chaucerians have felt compelled to notice.\(^{34}\) I intend to offer in this book the theory of *juxtology* as a means of seeing this deployment most completely, a theory that I have been developing for the past twenty-five years and which has emerged principally from my reading of Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde* especially (“By his contrary is every thing declared” [1.637; emphasis added]): Chaucer does not just catalogue, he also *juxtapoluges* characters, events, words, ideas, so that continual surprise—“I said his opinion was good”—disarms and re-arms our attention.\(^{35}\)

**anxiety of influence**

Harold Bloom

To write about the body in Chaucer, even from the relatively narrow perspective of the body in circulation, is to be aware, at this time in the history of humanistic scholarship, of a vast network of similarly engaged scholars, from Bakhtin to Žižek. I need to clarify here at the outset that I am not writing body theory, however. I am writing a study of the body in Chaucer using, in part, what I have learned from others who write body theory. I believe this enterprise has value, but I readily acknowledge that in this particular, my book depends on a host of others.\(^{36}\) This said, I also think I have

33. See especially the evidence collected in chap. 4, in the section on Fragment I.

34. Including, most famously, I suppose, Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition*, pp. 120, 129, 170–71, etc., and continuing most recently with Russell, *Chaucer and the Trivium*, whose idea of the “proficiency formula” (p. 88) is really a response to juxtological adjacency in Chaucer’s metonymic strategy.

35. See, esp., my essays “Play of Puns” and “Hamlet: Like Mother, Like Son.” I spell *juxtology* rather than *juxtalogy* for euphony’s sake.

contributions to make to at least a theory of the body in Chaucer—namely, that in his poetry the body is a *fragmented* body, represented repeatedly in its vulnerability—and that I can from this vantage say something useful, and I hope important, about the relationship between the body and rhetoric in the *Canterbury Tales*—frequently, rhetoric knits up the fragmented body, personal as well as social, when nothing else can. If metonymy is the very rhetoric of fragmentation (“we need a new *glove* to play third base”), it also provokes, in just this way, the (psyche)iatric (*healing*) response to fragmentation—*the game is greater than the fragments* (see chap. 5 for my discussion of the example of Harry Bailey and the Cook and the Manciple). But I am not, all the same, in the first instance, a theoretician of the body in this book. I am in the first instance a theoretician of tropes or figures. *Juxtology* is a method for examining tropes at a very microscopic level. I believe that such examination has ethical and social consequences, and I try to discuss some of these in my epilogue. But in the chapters on the *Canterbury Tales* proper, I concentrate on, to paraphrase Auden, “what makes the contraption work”—that is, how the language of the poems brings the poems to be. I am finally more interested in syllables, how the words and the poems composed of words “are put together” or “woven together” than I am in anything else.

Those inimical to literary-theoretical formalism will pounce on this admission. Since I can hardly counter their totalitarianism here, I will beyond these few remarks ignore it, by an act of will—I refuse to forsake my freedom (and duty) to interpret for someone else’s (ideology and, therefore, theory also of) “history” or “materiality” or “gender” or “religion” or “cultur(-alism)” or what have you—for me theory is above all resistance. One consequence of assuming (responsibility for) my freedom needs special mention before I conclude this introduction.

I have learned a great deal from Harold Bloom’s theory of the “anxiety of influence,” and my notion of the anxiety of circulation depends in part—though only in part—on my reading of his work. I am convinced that early modernists have failed to assess fully the importance of Bloom’s ideas on the

38. For an introduction to a theory of syllabics and a demonstration of its application, see my *Milton, Poet of Duality*, pp. ix–xx.
39. See the remarkable essay, “Love,” by Cottom, which I was privileged to see in typescript, and which is one of the most moving critiques I have read of the cruel and often meretricious conservative backlash against literary theory.
40. Bloom, *Anxiety of Influence* and *Map of Misreading*. 
literature of their period (and, of course, they have their reasons). I assume throughout this book that Chaucer did, in fact, experience something like the “anxiety of influence”—I am reasonably confident, for example, that this is why he never names Boccaccio in his works. I also assume that Chaucer discovered in the course of his writing a way of dealing with this anxiety and that it is closely related to his response to the more global anxiety of circulation he and his contemporaries experienced—it is bound up with his chosen identity as a translator. I intend to do my best in this book to argue the validity and the ground of these assumptions. But like Bloom (though doubtless with much less success than he has enjoyed), I expect an uphill struggle. Poetry is not as “scientific” as the -isms of the hour (for which I am profoundly thankful) and therefore must abide until men and women learn, often very painfully, their need for it:

It is difficult
to get the news from poems
    yet men die miserably every day
for lack
of what is found there.

41. See, e.g., Swiss and Kent, *Heirs of Fame* and my review in *Choice*, where I call attention to the problem.
42. See, in addition to chap. 5, my essay “Notes Toward Chaucer’s Poetics of Translation”; also, consult P. B. Taylor, *Chaucer Translator*.
The following argument, that the Canterbury Tales expresses Chaucer’s anxiety of circulation, I conduct in five chapters, four of which are dual in construction. In the first part of each of these four chapters, I introduce the reader to a certain salience, an issue that “leaps out” (*salire*) of the poem, and I follow that salience until it naturally subsides and leads into another, related salience, but one that would not be so prominent, probably, did it not follow the first. As it happens, this dual construction results in each chapter concerning itself with at least two fragments of the ten of the Canterbury Tales, with one exception: chapter 1, Fragments VII and II; chapter 2 (the exception), Fragment VI; chapter 3, Fragments VIII and III; chapter 4, Fragments V and I; and chapter 5, Fragments IX, X, and IV. The anomalous chapter 2, in some ways, by its very anomaly, confirms the argumentative validity of the overall structure of the book, in part because it concerns itself with what some have called the “floating fragment” of the Canterbury Tales—VI or C: the effect of the argument’s overall structure is to emphasize the circulation of the fragments themselves within the larger poem as a whole.

**Fragment VII**

To begin, then, consider with me the following long passage from the seventh fragment of the Canterbury Tales. Chaucer the Pilgrim has just finished narrating the Tale of Melibee, and Harry Bailey exclaims in reaction to it: 


e: The Care of the Self  
Fragments VII (B²) and II (B¹) 

And wel I woot the substance is in me,  
If any thyng shal wel reported be.  

*CT VII B² 2803–4*
As I am feithful man,  
And by that precious *corpus* Madrian,  
I hadde levere than a barel ale  
That Goodelief, my wyf, hadde herd this tale!  
For she nys no thyng of swich pacience  
As was this Melibeus wyf Prudence.  
By *Goddes bones*, when I bete my knaves,  
She bryngeth me forth the grete clobbered staves,  
And crieth, "Slee the dogges everichoon,  
And *brek hem*, bothe bak and every boon!"  
And if that any neighbor of myne  
Wol nat in chirche to my wyf enclyne,  
Or be so hardy to hire to trespace,  
Whan she comth hoom she rampeth in my face,  
And crieth, "False coward, wrek thy wyf!  
*By corpus bones*, I wol have thy knyf,  
And thou shalt have my distaf and go spynne!"  
Fro day to nyght right thus she wol bigynne.  
"Allas," she seith, "that evere I was shape  
To wedden a milksop, or a coward ape,  
That wol been overlad with every wight!  
Thou darst nat stonden by thy wyves right!"  
This is my lif, but if that I wol fighte;  
And out at dore anon I moot me dighte,  
Or elles I am but lost, but if that I  
Be lik a wilde leoun, fool-hardy.  
I woot wel she wol do me *slee som day*  
Som neighbor, and thanne go my way;  
For I am perilous *with knyf in honde,*  
Al be it that I dar nat hire withstonde,  
For she is *byg in armes*, by my feith:  
That shal he fynde that hire mysdoorth or seith.  
(VII B² 1891–1922; emphasis added)

Although much can be said about these lines, I want to focus in particular on the references to the body in them, the human body, and the animal body as well. If we collect these references into a simple list, what emerges starkly is that the body is broken and breakable, fragile and frangible—beaten, battered, and abused: in a word, fragmented. Or, if not fragmented, reduced to the body of a wild beast, which is itself a form of fragmentation.
My contention throughout this book is that the typical condition of the human body in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* is that of being fragmented or being continually subject to fragmentation (see, for example, I A 942; II B¹ 517; III D 1846; VI C 474; VII B² 999; VII B³ 2088; X I 346; et cetera).¹ Even a cursory survey of the over 170 occurrences of the words *body* and *bodilich* in the poem—such as oaths by *God’s body* (for example, VI C 474), which repeatedly hit on the broken body of God—corroborate this contention; but for the present demonstration, I would like simply to start with our sense of the overwhelming emphasis on battering the body in Harry’s speech.

After his harangue, Harry turns to the Monk to invite him to tell his tale. In this address, the body also figures prominently, but the emphasis for the moment has turned from its fragility to its opulence if not also corpulence:

“My lord, the Monk,” quod he, “be myrie of cheere, For ye shul telle a tale trewely. Loo, Rouchestre stant heer faste by! Ryde forth, myn owene lord, brek nat oure game. But, by my trouthe, I knowe nat youre name. Wher shal I calle yow my lord daun John, Or daun Thomas, or elles daun Albon? Of what hous be ye, by youre fader kyn? I vowe to God, thou hast a ful fair skyn; It is a gentil pasture ther thow goost. Thou art *nat lyk a penant or a goost*: Upon my feith, thou art som officer, Som worthy sexteyn, or som celerer, For by my fader soule, as to my doom, Thou art a maister whan thou art at hoom; No povre cloysterer, ne no novys, But a governour, wily and wys, And therwithal *of brawnes and of bones* A wel fiarynge persone for the nones. I pray to God, yeve hym confusioun That first thee broghte unto religioune!

Thou woldest han been a tredefowel aright.
Haddestow as greet a leeve as thou hast myght
To parfoure al thyn lust in engendrure,
Thou haddest bigeten ful many a creature.
Allas, why werestow so wyd a cope?
God yeve me sorwe, but, and I were a pope,
Nat oonly thou, but every mighty man,
Though he were shorn ful hye upon his pan,
Sholde have a wyf; for al the world is lorn!
Religioun hath take up al the corn
Of tredyng, and we borel men been shrympes.
Of fieble trees ther comen wrecched ympes.
This maketh that our heires been so sklendre
And fieble that they may nat wel engendre.
This maketh that our wyves wole assaye
Religious folk, for ye mowe bettre paye
Of Venus paiementz than mowe we;
God woot, no lussheburghes payen ye!"
(VII B2 1924–62; emphasis added)

This long transition to the Monk’s Tale I wish to analyze closely, primarily to isolate and emphasize the figure of the body in Harry’s discourse to the Monk but also to clarify the insistence on circulation, sexual and monetary alike (“Venus paiementz”) that characterizes Harry’s evaluation of the Monk. I hope to show, most particularly, that Chaucer here lays the groundwork for an analysis of the role of the body in the act of reading that he will go on to develop in the Prologue to the Nun’s Priest’s Tale and in the notoriously problematic Epilogue to that tale. It will help if we recall at this point that the Epilogue has long been considered suspect; presumably, Chaucer intended to cancel it.2 I hope to demonstrate that the passage was almost certainly marked for retention in Chaucer’s foul papers, although perhaps not clearly so.

After the Monk has gotten underway with his tale, the Knight, we know, interrupts him finally many lines later. Harry seconds the Knight’s action and proceeds to a discourse on aesthetics, what we might call reception theory, culminating in two lines of great importance to the present argument:

2. Riverside Chaucer, p. 941.
Sire Monk, namoore of this, so God yow blesse!
Youre tale anoyeth al this compaignye.
Swich talkyng is nat worth a boterflye,
For therinne is ther no desport ne game.
Wherfore, sire Monk, daun Piers by youre name,
I pray yow hertely telle us somwhat elles;
For sikerly, nere clynkyng of youre belles
That on youre bridel hange on every syde,
By hevene kyng that for us alle dyde,
I sholde er this han fallen doun for sleep,
Althogh the slough had never been so deep;
Thanne hadde your tale al be toold in veyn.
For certeinly, as that thise clerkes seyn,
Whereas a man may have noon audience,
Noght helpeth it to tellen his sentence.

*And wel I woot the substance is in me,*

*If any thyng shall wel reported be.*

(VII B² 2788–2804; emphasis added)

When the Monk next refuses Harry’s somewhat peremptory suggestion that he tell a different tale, Harry calls on the Nun’s Priest to tell his tale. But when he turns to the Priest, his invitation shows a notable difference, a certain absence, from the one he addressed to the Monk. “With rude speche and boold,” he exclaims:

Com neer, thou preest, com hyder, thou sir John!
Telle us swich thyng as may ourte hertes glade.
Be blithe, though thou ryde upon a jade.
What thogh thyng hors be bothe foul and lene?
If he wol serve thee, rekke nat a bene.
Looke that thyng herte be murie everemo.

(VII B² 2808, 2810–15)

There is no body here (even as there is no portrait in the *General Prologue*). Or, more precisely, there is only the body of a horse, a nag (“jade”) that is “bothe foul and lene”; there is, though, no man’s body. Indeed, the very ostentation of the horse’s body must underscore the absence of the man’s body. But when the Priest has finished his tale, there is suddenly (I cannot resist it) a man (not a horse) of a different color:

[“Sire Nonnes Preest,” oure Hooste seide anoon,
“I-blessed be thy breche, and every stoon!”]
This was a murie tale of Chauntecleer.
But by my trouthe, if thou were seculer,
Thou woldest ben a trede-foul aright.
For if thou have corage as thou hast myght,
Thee were nede of hennes, as I wene,
Ya, moo than seven tymes seventene.
See, whiche braunes hath this gentil preest,
So gret a nekke, and swich a large breest!
He loketh as a sperhauk with his yen;
Him nedeth nat his colour for to dyen
With brasile ne with greyn of Portyngale.
Now, sire, faire falle yow for youre tale!"
(VII B² 3447–60)

This is the disputed Epilogue (I have retained The Riverside Chaucer's brackets), and it tells us that when the Priest has finished his tale, Harry suddenly sees the Priest's body, not his horse—"whiche braunes hath this gentil preest, / So gret a nekke, and swich a large breest." The Nun's Priest speaks and his body comes into view. "My joly body schal a tale telle" could as well have been uttered by him. The Nun's Priest tells his tale, and, in an incarnation of maximum importance for understanding the Canterbury Tales, the word becomes flesh.

In effect, Chaucer has demonstrated that Harry was mistaken or, say rather, that he was only partly correct: the substance is not in him alone. Only after the Priest has told his delightful tale in his unforgettable manner does Harry, perceiving the substance in it and in him, recognize the body of the Priest—the substance is between them. It circulates between them. And it circulates in bodies.

3. The line "my joly body schal a tale telle" occurs in the Epilogue to the Man of Law's Tale (II B¹ 1185); on the crux surrounding its assignment and its position in the order of CT, see Riverside Chaucer, pp. 862 and 1126; see, also, my comments on the Bradshaw Shift in chap. 2.

4. I am, in part, influenced by Heidegger's understanding of the "between" in Being and Time, secs. (H) 132 and 374; in part, by Charles Williams's idiosyncratic but nonetheless powerful notion of "coinherence" (see Figure of Beatrice, e.g., p. 92). Finally, I should note that I also depend on long, if untutored and autodidactic, reading in Nicholas of Cusa, especially De visione Dei (1453), where the "all-seeing image, which [he] call[s] an icon of God," or the trompe l'oeil device by which the face of God so appears that "each of you will experience that from whatever place one observes it the face will seem to regard him alone" serves for me as a brilliant figure of the betweenness of meaning in our experience (see Nicholas of Cusa, pp. 235–37).
I would like to propose that this or something close to it is Chaucer's theory of reading: only when you have read the other (or, as the case may be, heard the other) can you even begin to have an idea of who the other is, what his substance is, what the truth of his being is. If you judge, as Harry did, by appearances, the Monk is a virile, potent, and highly sexed man, but when you listen to him, you hear a very different story—an obsessive, repetitive, overdetermined, and foreclosed view of human life that finally in its very relentlessness oppresses the human beings around the Monk. Furthermore, if you judge, as Harry did, by appearances, the Nun's Priest might as well be invisible—all you see is the pitiful excuse for a horse he's riding. But when you listen to the Priest, your mind is changed, your opinion is revised, your eyes are opened, and you see that the substance is only in you when the thing has been well reported: the tremendous narrative gift of the Priest is a necessary addition to, and condition of, Harry's realizing the substance. If the substance is in the individual auditor when a thing is well reported, in other words, that means just that the thing has been well reported, by someone else, by the partner in the act of narrative communication. Narration is an exchange always involving more than one. Narration is circulation. Stories are the coin of human history—some debased, some sterling, but all, media of exchange.

This is why Chaucer is careful to figure the Monk in terms of coins—the Monk appears as though he would, in his body, circulate as negotiable specie in meaningful exchange, sexual and, presumably, other forms of exchange as well, but, it turns out, contrary to Harry's inference, the Monk pays in counterfeit, a "lussheburghge," no more capable of narrative's payments than he is of Venus's. Without the exchange in narrative communication, the substance fails: there is no-body there. Hence Chaucer's brilliant decision to repeat in the Epilogue to the Nun's Priest's Tale the principal

5. I am willing to attest to Ricoeur's witness: "The autonomy of the self will appear then to be tightly bound up with solicitude for one's neighbor and with justice for each individual" (Oneself as Another, p. 18); see also p. 330: "The very definition of ethics that we have proposed—living well with and for others in just institutions—cannot be conceived without the project of living well being affected by solicitude, both that which is exerted and that which is received." I reserve judgment, however, on his hermeneutic as such since I am as yet unpersuaded by his theory of action, believing he has not adequately addressed Arendt's incisive, and perhaps decisive, analysis in Human Condition, esp. p. 220.

6. See M. Stevens, "Chaucer's 'Bad Art,'" esp. p. 143, where he describes the Monk's Tale—most aptly, I think—as "ponderously monologized."

7. I first addressed this and related issues in Currency of the Word; also accessible as an electronic postprint at www.clas.ufl.edu/~rashoaf/dccw.html.
differentiae of Harry’s earlier description of the body of the Monk: with the Priest’s words ringing in his ears, Harry can actually see what he thought he saw previously. The Priest’s words bring into view the Priest’s body, big and brawny and virile and sexual and potent and ruddily healthy enough of itself not to need any cosmetic makeover—“Him nedeth nat his colour for to dyen / With brasile ne with greyn of Portyngale.” Finally, we have here, I think, the makings of an argument for retention of the Epilogue: my word is made flesh when you have listened to me and assented to my being, but for this to be, I must also listen to you and incarnate your word. So far from being doubtful, the Epilogue is rather a brilliant afterthought to which perhaps Chaucer came when he himself listened to the Nun’s Priest’s Tale. Or, perhaps, it was an option he was exploring but never returned to conclude. Be that as it may, I hope I have shown that it does provide satisfying and coherent closure to a sequence that began much earlier in Fragment VII: it closes the fragment with the restoration of the body to the center of narration—“my joly body schal a tale telle,” wherever we position the line, serves very aptly as the epigraph of Fragment VII of the Canterbury Tales.

The sequence I am isolating in Fragment VII is, at least in part, about the body and the role of the body in reading: if “my joly body schal a tale telle” in Fragment VII, the tales of the fragment also tell the tale, or at least a tale, of the body. In many ways, the Nun’s Priest’s Tale is the culmination of this sequence, not least because of the emphasis in the tale on the body—the body that dreams, copulates, defecates, or constipates, masticates, sings, et cetera. I am hardly the first to think of the Nun’s Priest’s Tale as containing everything Chaucer knew,8 but I would like to add that its contents also privilege a certain idea of the body. I would like next to expand and to refine upon that idea of the body in Fragment VII. Although I do not intend a “reading” of the entire seventh fragment, I do propose that Chaucer’s idea of the body is everywhere in evidence and at work in the fragment, and so I plan to range freely over it in its entirety.

Consider the emphasis on narrowness in the following lines that open the Nun’s Priest’s Tale:

A povre wydwe, somdeel stape in age,  
Was whilom dwellyng in a narwe cotage,  
Biside a grove, stondynge in a dale.  
This wydwe, of which I telle yow my tale,  
Syn thilke day that she was last a wyf

In pacience ladde a ful *symple* lyf,
For *litel* was hir catel and hir rente.
By housbondrie of swich as God hire sente
She fownd hirself and eek hir doghtren two.
Thre large sowes hadde she, *and namo,*
Three keen, and eek a sheep that highte Malle.
Ful sooty was hire bour and eek hir halle,
In which she cett ful many a *sklendre meel.*
Of poynaunt sauce hir neded never a deal.
No deyntee morsel passed thurgh hir throte;
Hir *diete* was accordant to hir cote.
Repleccioun ne made hir nevere sik;
Attempree diete was al hir phisik,
*And exercise, and hertes suffisaunce.*
(VII B² 2821–39; emphasis added)
The idea of the body here evokes a certain image, the image of narrowness, which itself serves a larger ideology of temperance. The opposite of repletion and excess, temperance straitens the body but does not torture it or deprive it; it suppresses rather than represses. Chauntecleer’s owner, the poor widow, thus possesses a certain wisdom that he does not, or at least does not when we first encounter him, rejecting Pertelote’s wisdom, which is not unlike her owner’s. Diet (“the first instrument of medicine”)⁹ and digestion, a certain laxative, although scorned by Chauntecleer, seem quite important to Pertelote, the poor widow, and, I might add, to the Nun’s Priest as well.¹⁰ He, like his inventor, Chaucer, has an idea of the body as humanely dieted, and if Chaucer did not have the chance to read Michel Foucault on “the care of the self,”¹¹ still he had ample “auctoritees” elsewhere, not to mention his own “experience,” to point him toward dieting or reduction as a master trope of the body’s life in the world.

With this idea of the body in mind, you can, I now suggest, survey Fragment VII, even almost at random, and see the dieted or, as the case may be, un-dieted body practically everywhere. Chaucer’s own body, in particular, or at least the body of the character Chaucer, is noticeably un-dieted, to judge from Harry Bailey’s innuendo:

10. I have learned a good deal from the studies of Gallacher, “Food, Laxatives, and the Catharsis,” and “Chaucer and the Rhetoric of The Body”; more generally, I have benefited from consulting Mennell, *All Manners of Food,* and reading Elias, *Civilizing Process.*
11. This is the title of volume three of Foucault’s *History of Sexuality.*
He in the waast is shape as wel as I;
This were a popet in an arm t’enbrace
For any womman, smal and fair of face.
He semeth elvyssh by his contenaunce.

(VII B2 700–703)

And though Harry expects some “deyntee thyng” from this “elvyssh” body, what he gets instead, notoriously, is “drasty rymyn... nat worth a toord!” The circulation of a certain poetry, “rym doggerel,” produces nothing but a comparison with shit (which, note well, has more value than the poetry); and even worse, at least from a successful innkeeper’s perspective, such circulation does “noght elles but despend ... tyme.” Waste, we see, is a concern. The fragment, in fact, is full of shit, most ominously in the Prioress’s Tale. But other forms of waste also fill the fragment, from wasted time to wasted money to wasted life. This is the p - a - t - b - o - s adumbrated by T - b - o - p - a - s. And if Chaucer goes on, at Harry’s urging, to tell “a litel thyng in prose,” the antiphrasis “litel” (the Tale of Melibee is 16,925 words long!) only underscores the difficulty of dieting in a world where Sophie’s body is so vulnerable and frangible. Nor is honey in the mouth (“Melibeus” < “drinking honey”) a diet adequate to a solution—something less is needed. Less waste.

We can understand this best by considering the Prioress’s Tale. Many scholars and critics have noticed the signs of repression in the Prioress’s Tale, especially the excremental—very physical, bodily defilement. But I want to focus on the relationship of such signs to diet, especially given the Narrator’s observation in the General Prologue of what today we would probably call the Prioress’s eating disorder:

12. See, further, Cohen, Of Giants, esp. p. 99:
The doubled reference to excrement (“drasty” is from OE dræstig, Latin feculentus) reduces what seemed a balanced, miniature world into one without proper limit, like a body that had seemed perfect in its delicately miniature scale but ends up being infantile, a body without control, a body that soils itself.

Cohen’s subsequent analysis of the Tale of Sir Thopas (pp. 100–18) rewards close study.

13. I first introduced this anagram at the Bi-annual Meeting of the New Chaucer Society in Seattle, Washington (August 2, 1992), in a session organized by James Rhodes on “The Place of the Melibee” (I would like to thank him here for including me on the panel). I believe the anagram inscribes the very condition of the fragmented body in Fragment VII of CT.

Chaucer would easily have known the word pathos from Quintilian, Institutio oratoria VI.2.20, and from Macrobius, The Saturnalia, 4.1; see, respectively, the translations by H. E. Butler, 2:429, and Davies, p. 254.

14. See Riverside Chaucer, p. 924, on this false etymology.

15. See, most recently, Rambuss, “Devotion and Defilement.”
At mete wel ytaught was she with alle;
She leet no morsel from hir lippes falle,
Ne wette hir fyngres in hir sauce depe;
Wel koude she carie a morsel and wel kepe
That no drope ne fille upon hire brest.
In curteisie was set ful muchel hir lest.
Hir over-lippe wpeed she so clene
That in hir coppe ther was no ferthyng sene
Of grece, whan she dronken hadde hir draughte.
Ful semely after hir mete she raughte.

Of smale houndes hadde she that she fedde
With rosted flessh, or milk and wastel-breed.

But sikerly she hadde a fair forheed;
It was almoost a spanne brood, I trowe;
For, hardily, she was nat undergrose.
(I A 127-36, 146-47, 154-56)

By arguing, in effect, that the Prioress is conflicted about food and diet I hope to show that her tale is also conflicted, cloyed and surfeited, full of symptoms of sexual repression. When, at the end of her tale, the Prioress prays that God “on us his grete mercy multiplie” (VII B2 689), we hear, I suggest, the symptom of a woman who cannot herself multiply and who, as a result, has stuffed herself with food and fantasy, both intemperately.

I can make my case most efficiently by concentrating on the imagery of the open, flowing, and sluice-like in the tale:

And thurgh the strete men myghte ride or wende,
For it was free and open at eyther ende.
(VII B2 493-94)

Twies a day it passed thurgh his throte.
(VII B2 548)

thurghout the Juerie
This litel child, as he cam to and fro.
(VII B2 551-52)

And kitte his throte, and in a pit hym caste.
(VII B2 571)
I seye that in a wardrobe they hym threwe
Where as thise Jewes purgen hire entraille.
(VII B2 572–73)

These passages support the figuration of flow in the tale, flow that ranges from the excremental (and usurious) to the oral and musical to the sexual. They provide us access to the realization of the dammed or blocked flow of sexual energy in the Prioress and thus access as well to the displaced sexuality of the “greyn” or seed on the boy’s tongue. This artificial insemination of the male oral cavity by the female, Mary, mother of God, which reproduces song from a dead body, is symptomatic of the Prioress’s repression. She who is forbidden by the Law (of the Father) to reproduce (but presumably is physiologically capable of reproducing) reproduces a tale in which displaced, “unnatural” reproduction figures the miracle that leads to the wish and prayer that God (the Father) “multiply.” Sexual multiplication blocked in her body returns in the Prioress’s language as oral and verbal multiplication that defies nature and the order of the patriarchy alike. That a pogrom should be the by-product of such displaced symptomatology is the horrific consequence to be expected of typical masochistic unfeeling for the suffering of others—this, after all, is a woman

so charitable and so pitous
She wolde wepe, if that she saugh a mous
Kaught in a trappe, if it were deed or bledde
(I A 143–45),

which is, to my ear, an anticlimax supporting one of the more damning characterizations in the General Prologue—in turn, further supported by the Prioress’s waste of food on her dogs.

But it is the waste of her sexuality that my analysis would finally emphasize the most. Ill-suited for the life of a religious, not cut out for it, the Prioress embodies the failure of humane diet that seems to me to preoccupy

16. Pertinent to multiplication and the Prioress’s obsession with it is the phenomenon of the Host—every fragment of the consecrated Host “multiplies” the Host. See Rubin, Corpus Christi, esp. p. 43, on the housling cloth; and see her Gentile Tales; see, too, the entry under “Host” in the Catholic Encyclopedia (www.newadvent.org/cathen/07489d.htm), which contains abundant information.

Since the “greyn” is also obviously the Host, we should consider that it is not only an insemination but also an ingestion that, every time the Prioress herself partakes of it (the Eucharist), displaces (and replaces) the insemination debarred her by the Law of the Father.
Chaucer throughout Fragment VII. Nor should we overlook the obvious importance of the connection that follows on from her and her tale to her priest’s tale. The Nun’s Priest knows, I surmise, whereof he speaks. Serving such a woman as he does, he tells a tale of “attempree diete,” perhaps suspecting that, were it possible, such would be for his mistress “al hir phisik” (VII B2 2838). And that he tells his tale from the back of his “jade,” directing it to her, from whatever distance, who swears by St. Loy (I A 120), patron saint of farriers and horse-doctors, only underscores the misproportion, the failure of a humane diet.

Diet tempers appetite—this is the “phisik” it provides. But humane diet does not repress appetite; some satisfaction in life is necessary. This is a lesson the merchant in the Shipman’s Tale could usefully learn where his wife is concerned. The sexual appetite is also one of the body’s functions and needs attention, which hers is not receiving:

“I trowe, certes, that oure goode man
Hath yow laboured sith the nyght began
That yow were neede to resten hastily.”
And with that word he lough ful murily,
And of his owene thought he wax al reed.
This faire wyf gan for to shake hir heed
And seyde thus, “Ye, God woot al,” quod she.
“Nay, cosyn myn, it stant nat so with me;
For, by that God that yaf me soule and lyf,
In al the reawme of France is ther no wyf
That lasse lust hath to that sory pley.”
(VII B2 107–17)

In her world, sexual exchange and monetary circulation as well have ceased, but she is prepared to restore them both. She does not hesitate to strike a bargain with the monk, her “cosyn,” which will satisfy both her sexual and her pecuniary appetite.

Fragment VII begins with a tale by a Shipman, it seems to me, in part because it is a fragment about circulation, as in a ship on the sea, and in part because the Shipman serves a group, merchants, whose entire professional identity is taken up in and with circulation. In these respects, it resembles Fragment II, the Man of Law’s Tale, a resemblance I will discuss in the next

18. For further comment, see my Currency of the Word, pp. 13–14.
section of this chapter. But the *Shipman’s Tale* also inaugurates a concern with the particular circulation of money—the exchange of coins and credit—that figures crucially throughout the fragment, culminating, in a moment I have already discussed briefly, with the image of the “lusheburghes” (VII B2 1962), the image of the counterfeit. I have been studying counterfeiting in medieval literature for a very long time: my first book, entitled *Dante, Chaucer, and the Currency of the Word*, is a study of counterfeiting imagery in Dante and Chaucer. And recently others, such as Paul Strohm, have called attention to the signal importance of counterfeiting in the program of Lancastrian legitimation of their new regime following the deposition of Richard II.19 The studies of Strohm and many others, including my own, I trust, have helped us see late medieval England’s sophistication in understanding the cultural import of monetary symbology—it is not only money that circulates but also the sign or image attached to (and detachable from) money. Money has a body, but not, as we might say, a body of its own. Money borrows its body (in particular, its visibility) from elsewhere (hence its susceptibility to counterfeiting) and thus it serves Chaucer’s overall scheme in Fragment VII of determining where “the substance is.”

The Monk, I have suggested, is a counterfeit; the Nun’s Priest is not (recall he needs no cosmetic applications). But how can we be sure? How can we know the substance is in us or, in my elaboration of Harry Bailey’s theory, between us? For Chaucer does imply that there must be a way to make such distinctions, in the contrast between the Monk and the Priest who otherwise share certain differentiae (for example, they both appear to be “trede-foul aright”). And to judge from those differentiae, the means of distinction must lie in the sexualized body. Harry intuits in the Priest, after hearing his tale, a deep sexual potency that he had earlier inferred from the Monk’s appearance; listening to the Priest’s tale has brought Harry to see a body obviously capable of reproduction: “I-blessed be thy breche, and every stoon!”20 The Monk’s body, on the other hand, is “ful fat” (I A 200), and though he may be “in good poynt” (I A 200), I find it difficult to imagine, after listening to his tale, that reproduction much interests him—“He was nat pale as a forpyned goost” (I A 205). The question, then, may be raised, what’s sex got to do with it?

Nearly everything, I think. “Pecunia non parit pecuniam,” goes the standard medieval argument against usury, or the lending of money at interest:

20. “Stoon” is Chaucer’s word for “testicle” (see N. Davis, et al., *A Chaucer Glossary*, s.v.).
“money cannot give birth to money”—money is sterile (ultimately Aristotle’s argument).21 We may want to counter, hah! money gives birth to money every day—create debt and print more paper. But I do not adduce the formula here to debate it or even to instantiate it; rather, I want to observe that the classical and medieval worlds felt (and that is the right verb, I think) the relationship between money and sexuality—both are about breeding, one way or another. Both are about circulation, of specie(s) and seed. Chaucer’s language in Fragment VII interchanges figures of sex and money so frequently, above all in the Shipman’s Tale, in order to insist on their convertibility. This insistence, in turn, can be accounted for, I believe, by the related figuration of language as either or both sex and money. I think, in short, that the numerous configurations of language, sex, and money in Fragment VII serve an idea of the reproductive capacity of language, the fertility of language, if you will, that comes to fruition (nor do I apologize for the pun) in the Nun’s Priest’s tale of fruit and chaff. There is something sterile about the Monk’s Tale as there is something counterfeit about his character.22 There is something fertile about the Nun’s Priest’s Tale as there is something genuine about his character. The one is obsessively repetitive, the other, repeatedly creative; the one degenerates into discord and malcontent, the other produces humor and good will; the one is about tragedy and death, the other about comedy and life; the one is cold and, I

22. At this point I would venture the following hypothesis. With none of the pilgrims’ names does Harry have such trouble as he has with the Monk’s:

But, by my trouthe, I knowe nat youre name.
Wher shal I calle yow my lord daun John,
Or daun Thomas, or elles daun Albon?

(VII B² 1928–30)

When he finally does name the Monk, after the fateful interruption, he calls him daun Piers (VII B² 2792). As is commonly known, “lussheburghe” is William Langland’s word in Piers Plowman:

As in lussheburwes is a luper alay, and yet lokeþ he lik a sterlyng:
The merk of þat monee is good, ac þe metal is feble

(B.15.348–49),

and I speculate that with this allusion, Chaucer is subtly but definitely critiquing Langland and his poem, finding both to be, to borrow a felicitous phrase about the Monk and his tale from M. Stevens, “ponderously monologized” (see above, n. 6). Note also that Chaucer echoes twice Langland’s word “feble” in Harry Bailey’s celebration of the Monk’s apparent virility and everyone else’s inadequacy (VII B³ 1956, 1958)—I take it that this echo further emphasizes Chaucer’s deconstruction of Piers Plowman at this juncture in CT.
will hazard to say, repressed, the other is sexy and content to be so; the one is a fat body so engrossed with the things of this world that it can only show moroseness at the brevity and brutality of life, the other is so healthy a body, of "attempre die," that it rejoices in life, chicken shit and all.

There is no diet by which we will not die (even the believing Christian who eats the flesh and drinks the blood of Jesus must die, initially). All who eat must die (even Jesus). Because they must die, they must also reproduce themselves, one way or another, and their sexuality therefore is urgent upon them, one way or another (Jesus, as Bynum so tirelessly reminds us, is also Mother). But they who not only eat and couple and die but also speak are in a most difficult position. As Lacan so poignantly puts it, "It is precisely because desire is articulated that it is not articulable" (see intro., p. 7). When desire passes through the defile of the signifier, it is attached if not also attacked by culture, society, parents, lovers, governments, tax collectors, and, sooner or later, yes, chicken shit, too. Attached by and encrusted with language, whenever desire would speak it always says "Je est un autre" [I is another (Rimbaud)]. And the other I am the most is, of course, my own body—this, for me, the deepest wisdom of psychoanalysis: the archaic mind I harbor is the body that harbors in turn my consciousness. That Chaucer understood this does not mean he was a psychoanalyst, and certainly he had no need of Freud and Lacan to come to his own understanding of it. But I believe, as I hope I have shown, that Chaucer's body is here before us, in the effectively psychoanalytic language of the Canterbury Tales, and most especially in the Nun's Priest's Tale.

It is a body that evades, insofar as it can, being trapped in the prescripts or categories that precede and define it socially or politically or economically or sexually. Harry Bailey sees a priest, not a man or a man's body, and since, of course, he knows what a priest is (he knows the category or prescript), he ignores the man (recall that he addresses him "with rude speche and boold") and pays attention to the horse. But, as we have seen, the body asserts itself. The body always asserts itself. The body emerges through its language as a distinct, individual, and, finally, insistent being, resisting the "rude speche and boold" of others. Every body has its language, and it is more than just

23. Bynum, Jesus as Mother.

24. If asked, "how psychoanalytic, before Freud," I would not hesitate to respond: "Through Ovid, in the discovery of universal Narcissus in Metamorphoses 3 to the experience of love's sparagmatic sundering with the destruction of Orpheus in Metamorphoses 11, Chaucer, as have done innumerable others, encountered the pathologies of eros which are inevitably as psychical as they are physical."
body language. By means of its language, the body affirms that it is not just another cell of protoplasm adrift in a waste of eating, coupling, and dying. By means of its language, the body claims its right to be respected, if not also loved. No more graphic instance of this demand can be found in the *Canterbury Tales*, I think, than in the *Wife of Bath’s Tale*; here the Knight-rapist, who refuses to respect the maiden’s body when he rapes her, as a consequence, is himself forced into the position—a position like the Wife’s, like Chaucer’s, too, I will eventually argue—of crying out, “taak al my good and lat my body go.” I consider these words momentous for understanding Chaucer and the anxiety of circulation: they are the epitome of his response to the incarceration of the body in the tropes of the world—take all your tropes and let my body go.

**Fragment II**

But before we can take the full measure of their impact, we need to consider, first, arguably the most circulating of all bodies in the *Canterbury Tales*, that of Constance in the *Man of Law’s Tale*. The Man of Law is the archetype of those writers/readers who insist that the “substance is in them”—he is the most resolute hoarder of meaning in the *Canterbury Tales*, the pincher of stories (I A 326) like a pincher of coins, whose “purchasyng myghte nat been infect” (I A 320). The present study argues that his tale was, just so, for Chaucer—who is, to the contrary, a poet of infection—an occasion on which to consider the circulation and corruption of media, especially the medium of poetry, which, in the structure of figuration especially, is neces-

25. In the old and, for most Chaucerians, discredited Bradshaw Shift, Fragments VII and II are closely linked, II being positioned as B1 and VII as B2 (see the notes to *Riverside Chaucer*, p. 1121). While I neither endorse nor reject the Bradshaw Shift, I do, as the following arguments indicate, see a very strong connection between Fragments II and VII, to the extent that I would have no problem with a hypothetical edition of *CT* that treated them as one “super-fragment” about the circulation of media. For more on this matter, see the opening of chap. 2 and notes 1–3 there.

26. Versions of this essay, first drafted in 1984, and subsequently revised many times, were presented, first, at the Mellon Foundation Conference on the Middle Ages, Rice University, February 15, 1986, organized by David Hiscoe; and again at the biennial meeting of the New Chaucer Society in Philadelphia, March 21, 1986, organized by John Fleming; then at the conference on “Reconceiving Chaucer,” at the University of Rochester (1989), organized by Thomas Hahn. I thank the various organizers for their support. The essay was subsequently published in the proceedings of the Rochester conference, *Exemplaria* 2 (1990), at pp. 287–302. In this version of the argument, I have simplified notation to acknowledge only specific debts.
sarily corrupted from any original and originary proper sense. As numerous medieval authors note, metaphor speaks *improprie*: in metaphor, the proper circulates and is changed, altered in the exchanges of difference and identity.\(^{27}\) But Constance, the Man of Law insists, remains always and everywhere “unwemmed”: unchanged, unmarked, unaltered, proper.\(^{28}\) She is thus the ideal sign or marker or medium, on the one hand, for merchants, such as those from whom the Man of Law declares he learned his tale (11.131–33), and, on the other, for lawyers, a class of men who self-evidently desire unchanging, inalterable signs— as, for example, in contracts. Constance, in short, is perfect, atemporal, supraspatial mediation: no matter what happens to her, no matter who handles her, no matter where she goes, she remains always *clean* (propre), proper, “unwemmed.” But such circulation is pseudocirculation—the simulacrum of circulation—and in this pseudocirculation, the Man of Law attempts to evade the finitude of writing as he hoards the substance of meaning.

Constance is a kind of universal or ideal integer, immune (in the Man of Law’s view) to the finitude of writing, who, because she is without peer, cannot therefore be reckoned up, or reckoned with, either:

This was the commune voys of every man:
“Oure Emperour of Rome-God hym see!—
A doghter hath that, syn the world bigan,
*To rekene* as wel hir goodnesse as beautee,
Nas nevere swich another as is shee?*

(II B\(^1\) 155–59; emphasis added)

Though she is clearly to be quantified (“rekene”), those who try to quantify her, even by universal or “commune voys,” can never make the final tally. There is no one to whom to compare her (in this, we will see, she is like but also, crucially, unlike Griselda [chap. 5]); she is a medium that somehow transcends mediation and its finitude.

Even when the Man of Law concedes that corruption, a frequent consequence of mediation, can come near her, in the same breath he manages to deny the concession: “A maner Latyn corrupt was hir speche, / But algates

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27. See, e.g., Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* 8.6.5; St. Augustine, *Contra Mendacium* 10.24; St. Isidore, *Etymologiae* 1.37.2; and consult de Lubac, “Où est le sens ‘propre’?”

28. *Man of Law’s Tale* II B\(^1\) 924. The easiest access to the sense of “unwemmed” is through the Latin equivalent *immaculata*, as this term is applied to the Virgin Mary (who is clearly a figure informing the Man of Law’s idea of Constance); see, e.g., *The Annunciation* in *The Towneley Plays*: “Withouten wem, os son thurgh glas, / And she [sc. Mary] madyn as she was” (37–38; emphasis added); see, further, *CT* VIII G 225.
therby was she understonde’ (II B¹ 519–20). The detail of the “maner Latyn corrupt” he adds for the sake of verisimilitude, but his “algates” in the next breath insists that corruption really has not affected Constance—she can still be understood. Always Constance transcends mediation and its consequences. Indeed, she is herself said to be or to provide “mediacioun” (II B¹ 684)—like, presumably, Christ, the ultimate mediator.

Constance, in a word, is constant. She is an icon of the originary power of the proper name, and she represents for the Man of Law the rational, sane, businesslike, legal, judicious reduction of narrative to tautology. None of this messy business of creativity and deviance and error for him; he will have a story of pristine allegorical tautology—Constance is constant—and such improper business as “rymyng craftily” (II B¹ 48), he will leave to others, like Geoffrey Chaucer.

Chaucer, who is a poet, not a lawyer, knows that the sign must circulate, the coin get dirty, the manuscript corrupted. The poet more than any other person knows that the price of communication (as opposed to, say, legal deposition or ecclesiastical promulgation) is the humility of change and exchange. If I want to understand a person, then I must stand under that person, become (if only for a moment) like that person. But Constance, we know, is never like anyone except herself—ultimately a fictitious tautology (Constance is constant).

The Man of Law, we learn from the portrait in the General Prologue, is a very careful writer: “Therto he koude endite and make a thyng, / Ther koude no wight pynche at his writyng” (1 A 325–26). Chaucer has gone to considerable lengths to inform us that the Man of Law has no tolerance for error—every t crossed, every i dotted—that all his errands always suppress their inception in error—so to evade, he assumes, the finitude of writing. But the poet, unlike the lawyer, cannot afford to be intolerant of error. The poet knows that human being and human knowing are founded on the error of the word’s errand. Not that the poet cultivates error (of which anyway there is no need, it grows of its own, wild and uncontrolled) but that he utters no truth, not even his ownmost, as though it could be immune from error. The poet knows that the person who claims he cannot err has in that claim already erred.

But the Man of Law would never betray his hand as grossly as that. Hence the error of the Man of Law’s Table of Chaucer’s Contents. We have known

29. See Dagenais, Ethics of Reading, esp. pp. 16–17, and Greetham, Theories of the Text. Cf., more generally, Serres, Parasite, pp. 12–14, for example.
30. On the paradoxes of likeness, see my essay “Hamlet: Like Mother, Like Son.”
all along that the Man of Law includes some legends that Chaucer does not include in his *Legend of Good Women* and that he omits some that Chaucer does include. I would observe here only that this Table of Contents is thus not constant. The Man of Law’s Table of Chaucer’s Contents is inconstant, and it is inconstant designedly, I believe, so that Chaucer can achieve a careful ironic effect—namely: the punctilious lawyer, whose writing no one can pinch at, on the verge of telling a tale of the ultimate proper, commits an error on a subject that all the same he gives every appearance of being very well informed about. This is Chaucerian irony, of course (irony: the error of meaning from sense), and it alerts the reader to be cautious if not skeptical of the Man of Law’s writing—we must pinch at it if we would not be pinched by it.31

And once we begin to pinch at it, we discover just how pinched and pinching it is. The Man of Law’s writing is a form of hoarding. Three words—“keep,” “hold,” “save,” each occurring several times—form in the Man of Law’s vocabulary an obsessive structure of retention and domination.32 The structure betrays the greed, the *avaritia sui*, which consumes the Man of Law—

Of fees and robes hadde he many oon.
So greet a purchasour was nowher noon:
Al was fee symple to hym in effect,
His purchasyng myghte nat been infect.
(I A 317–20)

Consumed by this *avaritia sui*, he, in turn, would consume experience, to reduce it to tautological certainty, predictability, and control, immunized against infection.

We first encounter “hold” in Harry Bailey’s words in the Introduction to the *Man of Law’s Tale* (it is a variant reading):

“Sire Man of Lawe,” quod he, “so have ye blis,
Telle us a tale anon, as forward is.
Ye been submytted, thurgh youre free assent,
To stonden in this cas at my juggement.
Acquiteth yow [and holdeth] youre biheeste.”
(II B1 33–37)

32. I rely for my statistics here on the Tatlock-Kennedy *Concordance*; I have also consulted Benson, *Glossarial Concordance*.  

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32  * Chaucer’s Body
To see the importance of the word and of the pattern that it inaugurates, we need at this point to remind ourselves of the peculiar emphasis that Harry Bailey establishes as Fragment II opens:

Lordynges, the tyme wasteth nyght and day,
And steleth from us

As dooth the streem that turneth nevere agayn,
Descendynge fro the montaigne into playn.
Wel kan Senec and many a philosophre
Biwaillen tyme moore than gold in cofre;
For “Los of catel may recovered be,
But los of tyme shendeth us,” quod he.
It wol nat come agayn, withouten drede.

(II B 20–21, 23–29)

Time is more valuable than gold: time itself then, Harry’s words suggest, is a kind of currency, and this currency is to be kept, saved, held—not allowed to run out, to flow. But time does flow. Just like the stream to which Harry alludes, time descends and never turns again. What in fact can it mean “to save time”? We never “save” time; we only spend less (or more) of it on any given endeavor or habit.

Unless it be that art saves time. That narrative somehow conserves time. In art the flow of time becomes negentropic. It does not cease but neither does it dissolve into complete randomness. Art, in short, is the coffer of time, and therein it is most dangerous. For in “saving” time, structuring its flow to negentropic closure, art can also hoard time, package it, turning it into the return of the same. Art and in particular narrative can rehearse the already said, the pre-dict-able; and thus art, especially narrative, can become predictable, allegorical (in the pejorative sense so frequently emphasized by the romantics). Narrative can become not only the coffer but also the coffin of time—consider the many romances that Chaucer parodies in Sir Thopas. Narrative, in short, can serve the interests of those with the power to speak before, the power, awesome and usually vicious, to prejudge.

Such a one as, for example, the Man of Law:

33. For my understanding of the importance of flow in human experience and perception (and of its consequences, especially corruption), I am indebted not only to Serres but also to Turner, especially his concept of liminality (see, in particular, From Ritual to Theatre, esp. the first section). I have also learned from Douglas, Purity and Danger; and Hyde, The Gift.
"Hooste," quod he, "depardieux, ich assente;
To breke forward is nat myn entente.
Biheste is dette, and I wole holde fayn
Al my biheste, I kan no bettre sayn." 
(II B1 39–42)

The Man of Law will hold (that is, keep) his promise. He is a man who holds
(and keeps and saves): he never lets go (if he also never breaks). He always
knows exactly what is forward, he always knows exactly what he owes (after
all, a promise too is a debt), and he is always ready to do his duty—no more,
no less. He lives his practice (and practices his life) obeying the law he ex-
pects others to obey, promoting the same wherever he goes:35

For swich lawe as a man yevedi anodier wight,
He sholde hymselven usen it, by right;
Thus woleoure text.
(II B1 43–45)

"Thus wole our text," and far be it from the Man of Law to wander from the
prescript, the predicted (and predictable) conventional behavior. No one
will pinch at his writing. His writing will hold its own; and if, self-deprecat-
ingly, he disclaims in the next breath having a "thrifty tale" (II B1 45–46),
Harry Bailey, to the contrary, his bourgeois instincts in this matter acute,
will nevertheless correct him at the end of his tale, saying, predictably, "This
was a thrifty tale for the nones" (II B1 1165).

For the Man of Law, then, narrative is a thrift, a means of saving time, a
savings bank of sorts. And it is, thus, incidentally, no small part of Chaucer’s
irony that the Man of Law is one of the most prolix narrators in the Can-
terbury Tales—for all the emphasis on thrift in his tale, he arguably wastes a
great many words.36 And in this savings bank of narrative, what the Man of

35. The Man of Law’s words here ask to be compared with those of Aleyn in the Reeve’s
Tale:

“For, John, ther is a lawe that says thus:
That gif a man in a point be agreved,
That in another he sal be releved.”
(I A 4180–82)

The lex talionis of the Reeve’s Tale gives way to the statement of equity in the Man of Law’s Tale,
but note how both expressions of the law insist on and reduce to sameness—an eye for an eye
and the same law for everybody. On revenge versus forgiveness in Chaucer, see chap. 5 and
the epilogue.

288–92.
Law hoards is (to follow one gloss on “thrifty”) a certain proper, both “property” and “propriety” (narrative for the Man of Law is the space of both).

A “thrifty” tale is a “proper” tale, economical (supposedly) and above reproach. And the Man of Law, at all costs, must be above reproach, proper: there must be no impropriety in his life or in his career, at least none visible. Like the Franklin, who travels “in his compaignye” (I A 331), the Man of Law’s appearance, his surface; must be just so: for him, although not exactly in the way Valéry meant the phrase, “le plus profond, c’est la peau” [the deepest thing—it’s the skin]. And whether he is in motley or in judge’s robes, he must always be neat and clean and proper. Else his clients or his peers or his business associates might suspect him of some “infection,” whereas, we know, “His purchasyng myghte nat been infect” (I A 320)—the Man of Law is too clean for any legal technicality or any disease to mar his parchment or his skin. He is as immune from circulation and its effects as is his heroine—and is thus as unlike Chaucer as he is like her, for, as I am arguing in this book, Chaucer is a poet of infection (who would be a poet of affection), trying to work through it just because he sees it everywhere around him, in many different forms.

If, then, for the Man of Law narrative is a thrift, it is only appropriate that he should tell a tale in which holding, keeping, saving—all, modes of thrift—are prominent, so prominent, in fact, as to suggest that his “thrifty tale” is also a tale of thrift, a tale of the proper. Thus, for example, announcing his theme in the very first stanza, after insisting that he would be “now of tales desolaat, / Nere that a marchant, goon is many a yeere, / [Him] taughte a tale” (II B1 131–33), he declares of the merchants of Surrye that “Hir chaffare was so thrifty and so newe / That” (II B1 138–39; emphasis added). Then, he proceeds to insist on the ways and the times in which Constance was held, kept, or saved—in which she was made an object of “thrift.”

Describing her shipwreck in England, for example, the Man of Law says: “Under an hoold that nempnen I ne kan, / Fer in Northhumberlond the wawe hire caste” (II B1 507–8; emphasis added). The castle near the point of her shipwreck is called a “hoold” in keeping with the Man of Law’s insistence on holding and saving Constance. Or take the following example:

Constance prays “Me fro the feend and fro his clawes kepe, / That day that I shal drenchen in the depe” (II B¹ 454–55). Later in the same prayer, Constance also addresses the cross, saying “Victorious tree . . . / Me kepe” (II B¹ 456, 462). And then, almost as if on cue, the Man of Law launches into the following exclamation:

Now sith she was nat at the feeste yslawe,
Who _kepte_ hire fro the drenchyng in the see?
Who _kepte_ Jonas in the fisshes mawe
Til he was spouted up at Nynyvee?
Wel may men knowe it was no wight but he
That _kepte_ peple Ebrayk from hir drenchyng,
With drye feet thrughout the see passyng.

That fro the tempest ay this womman _kepte_
As wel whan she wook as whan she slepte.
(II B¹ 484–90, 496–97; emphasis added)

In the same vein, Alla “to a bisshop, and his constable eke, / . . . took his wyf to kepe” (II B¹ 716–17). And Constance herself cries out:

“He that me _kepte_ fro the false blame
While I was on the lond amonges yow,
He kan me _kepe_ from harm and eek fro shame
In salte see, althogh I se noght how.”
(II B¹ 827–30; emphasis added)

And the final two occurrences of “keep” are the Man of Law’s trumps: “And thus hath Crist unwemmed kept Custance” (II B¹ 924) and, at the very end of the tale, “Now Jhesu Crist . . . kepe us alle that been in this place!” (II B¹ 1160–62).

If, after these examples, the following list of examples of “save” should seem superfluous, that is precisely my point. We begin at a moment a few stanzas before the first repetition of “Who kepte?”:

Men myghten asken why she was nat slayn
Eek at the feeste? Who myghte hir body _save_?
And I answere to that demande agayn,
Who _saved_ Danyel in the horrible cave . . . ?
(II B¹ 470–73; emphasis added)

Next, we turn, predictably, to a prayer by Constance: “Immortal God, that savedest Susanne . . . / My socour be, for ellis shal I dye!” (II B¹ 639–44).
Twice more, the Man of Law will use “save” in a very similar way, for similar effects. On both occasions he refers to God “that saveth al mankynde” or merely “the peple of God” (II B¹ 907 and 942–44). And by the time we have accumulated these instances, we can hardly doubt any more that there is some compulsion toward retention in the Man of Law.

If the Man of Law is obsessed with retention, this is also to say, by way of the obverse, that he is anxious about circulation, afraid of the flow of things, of media, be they money or women or words; he would control or, perhaps better, predict and prescribe the flow of life itself. For the Man of Law nothing is free—which is why, incidentally, he so loudly and self-betrayingly bewails and condemns poverty in his Prologue (II B¹ 99–121). For the Man of Law the free is an illusion to be eschewed at all costs—hence his recourse to astral determinism (which, by the way, he figures, predictably, in terms of writing and of books [II B¹ 190–203]). In the illusion of the free, cost itself, as he sees it, is lost. The equivalence of payment made for goods received is nullified by the free—the free is imbalance, disequilibrium, a-tautology: the free is flow.

And the proper will always be dissolved and reconstituted, reconstituted and dissolved in the flow of the free. 41 To “save” the proper, then, or preserve the proper sense, a narrative must be found that appears to flow, in the dynamics of plot and character, but in which all the same nothing happens, or say, in which happening is illusory—Constance is constant. A narrative must be found in which the necessity of movement, dynamism, flow, is checked at every point by a prediction or prescription of the same, a guarantee of its return—Constance is constant. Such a narrative will be allegorical, obeying a prescription of predicted meaning; it will be tautological, discovering nothing new, rehearsing the already said; it will be, finally, incestuous, as well as (predictably) about incest, for in order to ensure the return of the same, it will be always and only about itself. It will be a self-explicating, self-referential tautological allegory: it will be, in short, a man of law’s tale—a law unto itself.

But anyone or anything that would be a law unto itself, abjuring every other, refusing or subverting circulation, risks the predictable certainty of death. The Man of Law knows this (he is too shrewd not to know it) and that is why he provides us with pseudocirculation, the simulacrum of circulation—a medium that looks exactly like a medium except that it does not change. When we ask, who is Constance?, what we hear in reply is always,

41. Cf. Serres’s remarks on Penelope the weaver (Hermes, pp. 49–52). More generally, see the remarkable study by Scheid and Svenbro, Craft of Zeus.
unchangingly—she is constant, she is constancy itself, immune from the other, able to evade the finitude of writing.

If the Man of Law can provide his public with the illusion of circulation, with stories or documents that appear to flow but never suffer the consequences of flow (such as corruption, change, defacement), then under cover of this illusion he can pretend to control and predict the end of either story or document and thus remain safe (and be saved) from the awesome responsibility, confronting every human being, of freedom—the risk of committing errors. Not having to run this risk, he can predict and maintain the truth of all his transactions (“his purchasyng myghte nat been infect”) because the constancy, the unchangeableness of his pseudocirculation, accumulates for him the authority to proclaim (and pre-claim) “what I say is true.” After all, we are told: “Discreet he was and of greet reverence—/ He semed swich, his wordes weren so wise” (I A 312–13). So it is, incidentally, that Chaucer must have him err with his, Chaucer’s, Table of Contents, so that that Table is inconstant, because were it not for this error, the Man of Law’s great authority—his perfectly safe, perfectly intelligible ecclesiastical allegory—would overwhelm and silence us. We could only in this case, like Harry Bailey, say the predictable thing, return the same, for we would hesitate to ask, how can this be a tale, a narrative at all, in which the character of the protagonist never changes, or changes only to remain the same, in which nothing ever really happens to her in spite of all that happens to her?42 But if we ask this question, or one similar to it, we dispel the tautological illusion, expose the pseudocirculation, and realize that incest, the avoidance and abjuring of the other, is the crux of the work for Chaucer.43

The Man of Law protests that he will have nothing to do with such tales as those that speak of incest:

But certeinly no word ne writeth [Chaucer]
Of thilke wikke ensample of Canacee,
That loved hir owene brother synfully—
Of swiche cursed stories Isey fy!—
Or ellis of Tyro Appollonius,

42. As will be clear by this point, we can think of Constance as the ultimate in Christian sanctity, in a body but not of a body—an indifference to the body so complete that when the Man of Law apologizes for her sexual penetration (she must, he tells us, “leye a lite hir hoolynesse aside, / As for the tyme” [II B' 713–14]), we have no difficulty conceding it is only a little” and only “for the time.” Hers is not Chaucer’s (typical) body.

43. See my remarks on incest and poetics in Milton, Poet of Duality, pp. 85–100 and in “Hamlet: Like Mother, Like Son.”
How that the cursed kyng Antiochus
Birafte his doghter of hir maydenhede,
That is so horrible a tale for to rede,
When he hir threw upon the pavement.
And therfore he, of ful avysement,
Nolde neveere write in none of his sermons
Of swiche unkynde abhomynacions,
Ne I wol noon rehearse, if that I may.
(II B¹ 77–89)

But clearly he protests too much, especially since he goes on to tell a tale, no matter how attenuatedly so, of incest. In fact, he tells a tale of incest (the two mothers clearly do not want to circulate their sons) that he has “cleaned up,” appropriated in more senses than one. He tells a tale in which just enough of a trace of incest remains to satisfy his fascination, his obsession, but not enough to betray his hand to an unsuspecting audience.

In this way, he is able to promote his pseudocirculation: Constance appears to have circulated but none of the effects of flow, no flaws, have touched or marked her; and thus the Man of Law has achieved what the two mothers failed to achieve—he has held or kept or saved his creature as his own (he knows and can predict exactly what Constance means) even though she has passed through the hands (or minds) of others, and thus he has committed the (almost) perfect incest (it is hard to pinch at his writing).

If we seek the ground of the Man of Law’s obsession and consequent narrative strategy, we need look no further than the fact, universally recognized in the Middle Ages, that there is no proper sense of words apart from human contract or convention. In other words, there is no meaning that has not passed through the hands or minds of others—all meaning is “infect.” But the Man of Law cannot abide this truth. He as a lawyer would write flawlessly. But if he would write flawlessly, he must also then write

44. See, e.g., Archibald, “Flight from Incest”; also Dinshaw, “Law of Man,” 142 n. 3.
45. The Man of Law’s Constance thus closely resembles Boccaccio’s Alatiel (Decameron 2.7) who, “despite the fact that eight separate men had made love to her on thousands of different occasions,” returns to her father and then to her appointed husband, as we might say, “unwemmed”: “she entered his [the King of Algarve’s] bed as a virgin and convinced him that it was really so” (p. 191).

The irony inherent in such a comparison underscores the brutality of the Man of Law’s representation of women: whether Constance or Alatiel, “she” is a male fantasy.
flowlessly. He must (try to) efface the contractuality or conventionality of his words, take them out of circulation where the public contract can always be rewritten. In this way he can insert them in a structure that ensures the return of the same, where no matter what they say they always refer to the predicted and prescribed meaning that he retains in his control. Thus, for example, the Man of Law’s words say that so many different catastrophes befell Constance, but everything they say, each catastrophe, refers always to the same end: Constance is constant, she is proper, and the proper.

Perhaps the most impressive instance of the Man of Law’s psychopathology of retentiveness and control occurs in his condemnation of Donegild. Recall at this point that Donegild, mother of King Alla, who has wed Constance, forges letters to replace those written to inform him of the birth of his son, her grandson, by Constance. Note, especially, that this episode hinges on forged letters, letters appalling to him at whose writing no one could pinch. Donegild’s forgeries misrepresent the child as a monster and Constance as an “elf” (II B1 754). Alla replies that he will accept the will of God, but Donegild forges letters to replace these also, letters commanding Constance and Mauricius to be exiled upon the sea. It is thus that the Man of Law is moved to exclaim:

O Donegild, I ne have noon English digne
Unto thy malice and thy tirannye!
And therfore to the feend I thee resigne;
Lat hym enditen of thy traitorie!
Fy, mannysh, fy! — o nay, by God, I ly—
Fy, feendlych spirit, for I dar wel telle,
Thogh thou heere walke, thy spirit is in helle!
(II B1 778–84; emphasis added)

The allusion here to Dante’s Inferno exposes the Man of Law’s anxiety.47

In the famous dialogue in canto 33 between Dante the pilgrim and Alberigo dei Manfredi (Inferno 33.109–50), Dante learns that a soul can be thrust into hell before its body dies, the body being assumed by a devil who manipulates it on earth for a certain space. In exchange for this and other information, Alberigo has asked Dante to clear the ice from his eyes so that he may weep a moment, and Dante has replied

Se vuò’ ch’ì’ ti sovvegna,
dimmi chi se’, e s’io non ti disbrigo,

47. See, further, my study, “‘Noon Englishh Digne.’"
al fondo de la ghiaccia ir mi convegna.

(Inferno 33.115–17; emphasis added)

[If you would have me help you, tell me who you are; if I do not free you, may I go to the bottom of the ice (but, literally, let it be necessary, or let it be agreed, for me to go to the bottom of the ice).]

Dante, in effect, makes a contract (convegno) with Alberigo. To be sure, convegno here means primarily “be necessary,” but this meaning does not mute or cancel the other meaning of contractuality or conventionality, a meaning important in many of the ten occurrences of the word in the final four cantos of Inferno. And this is crucial since Dante breaks the contract with Alberigo:

“Ma distendi oggimai in qua la mano; aprimi li occhi.” E io non gliel’ apersi; e cortesía fu lui esser villano.

(Inferno 33.148–50)

[“But now reach out your hand; open my eyes.” And yet I did not open them for him; and it was courtesy to show him rudeness (lit., it was courtesy to be rude to him).]

But Dante does not break only the contract with Alberigo; he breaks another contract, too. Dante also breaks the contract or convention of language, according to which “cortesía” means “courtesy” and “villano” means “rude.” Dante, in fact, commits an error—“cortesía” does not mean “villano” (though Dante writes “esser” [to be])—but this error is necessary to the truth: this flaw promotes the flow of truth. Here, in short, Dante insists that there is no a priori, immutable property of words: their property is a fiction agreed to (“convenire”) by the community, and it is the poet who, on extraordinary occasion, must disturb the fiction, break the convention (contract), in order to establish anew what is proper to the word. It is the poet who must forge letters—if, finally, in a different sense from that of Donegild’s forgeries.

Chaucer, then, has cited Dante at just that moment in the Commedia when Dante’s poem exposes most clearly the Man of Law’s anxiety. If we pursue the allusion, it leads us to the ground of that anxiety and the Man of Law’s consequent narrative strategy; namely, there is no proper sense apart from human contract or convention: a signifier can be empty like the body of

48. See my study “Crisis of Convention in Cocytus.”
Branca, filled now with a demon—all signifiers are, ontologically, forgeries. And note how Chaucer reinforces this idea so alien to the Man of Law by means of the pun in “resigne”: the Man of Law not only resigns, he also re-signs Donegild to the fiend; his words, even in his curse, are not completely in his control. We can pinch at them—he would say, forge them. And they exceed his control (we can pinch at them), because there is no proper sense apart from convention.

The Man of Law, because he is afraid of flows and flaws, is also afraid of poetry. He is afraid of poetry’s capacity, illustrated so vividly in the episode in *Inferno*, to change the meanings of words. Hence his curious diffidence at the end of the Introduction, with its very incriminating allusion:

> But of my tale how shal I doon this day?
> Me were looth be likned, doutelees,
> To Muses that men clepe Pierides—
> *Methamorphosios* woot what I mene;
> But nathelees, I recche noght a bene
> Though I come after hym with hawebake.
> (II B1 90–95)

For vying in song (that is, poetry) with the Muses, the Pierides were changed, mutated, into magpies. For speaking improperly, in more senses than one, for assuming the metamorphic, polysemous power of words, the Pierides suffered change. Note well at this point that the Man of Law does not actually say what happened to these Muses (who were, of course, not muses); rather he lapses into periphrasis and circumlocution—“*Methamorphosios* woot what I mene”—as if he feared contamination by their mutability if he named it, as if the proper name of the book would preserve him from the impropriety of the Pierides. Moreover, he goes on to declare, “I speke in prose, and lat him rymes make” (II B1 96), and I have no doubt that this is exactly what he means.⁴⁹ In other words, this is no oversight on Chaucer’s part but just that sort of creative error that the Man of Law so deeply fears and does not at all understand. Chaucer writes “prose,” which is perhaps literally an error, because this “error” is the way to the truth in the case of the Man of Law: even when he uses verse and rhymes, the Man of Law feels and needs to believe that he is speaking in prose and not in rhyme. And this because he is afraid of poetry, its flows and its flaws.

Hence also his crude, mechanical employment of legal terms, terms of

rhetoric, and tropes of exegesis.\(^50\) To begin with the latter first, consider how in the following stanza the Man of Law uses the very conventional tropes of exegesis to eschew ornament and its excess:

Me list nat of the chaf, ne of the stree,
Maken so long a tale as of the corn.

The fruyt of every tale is for to seye:
They ete, and drynke, and dauce, and synge, and pleye.

(II B\(^1\) 701–7)

The Man of Law’s writing is as ever thrifty, economical, conservative—or so he claims; we, however, hear only too well the prolixity in his protest. As much can be inferred from his rhetorical terminology, too. He uses it also for thrift—as he sees it: for example, “What nedeth gretter dilatacioun? / I seye, by tretys and embassadrie” (II B\(^1\) 232–33). But perhaps the most important item on this agenda is the Man of Law’s near obsession with the “ende.” He frequently tags his narrative with the formula, “this is the ende” (see II B\(^1\) 145, 255, 965) and often calls attention to the end or to making an end (II B\(^1\) 423, 424 [“fyn”], 952, 1116, 1139, 1159). The Man of Law is trying to control the end before it happens, before it is reached, even as, at times, it seems that he is trying deliberately to defer it as long as possible, to keep us in thrall to his prolixity. He is trying to appropriate the end as predicted or pre-scripted, where he is the author who has already written the script or where he is at least privy to the authority (God?) who has written the script. If, as Pandars says, “th’ende is every tales strengthe” (T\&C 2.260), then the Man of Law is strong in the measure in which he always already possesses the end of his tale. Like Pandarus he can predict, prescribe, perhaps proscribe, what can be said, what will be said—and at his leisure. Like Pandarus, he is a property master (see chap. 5).

And the property he most wishes to master is originality. If the Man of Law strives to control the end, if he desires to predict the end, it is ultimately because he also desires to name the origin. For the owner of the origin is secure from time, its flows and its flaws. The appropriator of the origin can always claim to be prior and therefore more powerful. Even when, as inevitably he must, he succumbs, dying, to time’s flows and flaws, he remains powerful by his significance in and as the original, the originary, the owner of the origin. And this is why the \textit{Man of Law’s Tale} to some seems to be the

new beginning of the *Canterbury Tales* or at least a tale demanding to be near the beginning.\(^{51}\) It is very much a tale with the aura of an origin about it. The *Man of Law’s Tale* is a tale that would compete for the beginning, to be original: it is the ecclesiological or exegetical allegory that, by that very authority, would establish itself as more important and more original than any tale before it.

This, in turn, suggests that the *Man of Law’s Tale* may be positioned strategically, to expose the Man of Law’s fear of belatedness; and such fear would then be recognizable in the Man of Law’s comparison of himself, to his detriment, with Chaucer:

> But nathelees, certeyn,  
> I kan right now no thrifty tale seyn  
> That Chaucer, thogh he kan but lewedly  
> On metres and on rymyng craftily,  
> Hath seyd hem in swich English as he kan  
> Of olde tyme, as knoweth many a man.  
> (II B1 45–50)

In short, Chaucer in the Man of Law examines as he exercises a certain legalistic, prescriptive, and avaricious response to the inexorable fact of belatedness.\(^{52}\) In this way he continues to purge himself of, and thus redeem himself from, mere competition even as he recognizes that competition in art is inevitable if not also necessary.\(^{53}\) But he also, just so, recognizes and allows for the inevitable error that attends art, especially verbal art (such, I believe, is the burden of *The House of Fame*)—Chaucer’s, in short, is a different errand from the Man of Law’s or a lawyer’s.

And that errand, in a very strict sense, is the errand of error. What generations of readers have responded to in Chaucer under the useful but limited rubrics of “skepticism” or “elusiveness” is probably best characterized as his metaphysics of error. He is not only an ironist, he is also an erronist. Understanding that error is structural in human knowing and human being saved Chaucer from one error, the error of the Man of Law, or the notion that any man as man can hold, save, and keep himself from error all of the time. Such hoarding is anathema to Chaucer, an attempt to foreclude the *fortuna* of

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\(^{51}\) See Kolve, *Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative*, p. 296, for example.

\(^{52}\) This argument gives new point to the fact that the Franklin and the Man of Law are traveling companions (*CT I A* 331): it can be argued that the Franklin also suffers from a fear of belatedness and a desire, born of status anxiety, to compete with the Knight (see chap. 4).

\(^{53}\) Here, again, my reader will note the proximity of my position to Bloom’s (see intro.).
language. Such lust to control the signifier, its polysemy and indeterminacy, is a breach of that ethics of conventionless and codeless behavior that Dante and Chaucer, as Catholic Christian poets, would have intuited in the parabolic ministry of Jesus: except the word fall into the field (of the hearer) and die, how shall it yield meaning? (compare John 12:24–25)—“consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they labour not, neither do they spin, but I say to you, that not even Solomon in all his glory was arrayed as one of these” (Matt. 6:28–29). The whole problem with conventions and codes is that they do not die but suck the life out of humanity as they harden into rules and regulations by which power is hoarded (such power as the institutionalized religion that killed Jesus because he threatened it and its institutionalization with the freedom of love, which is the only code [on which “dependeth the whole law and the prophets” (Matt. 22:37–40)]). Or, as the Nun’s Priest, Chaucer’s consummate deconstructor of codes, so exquisitely puts it, “thise been the cokkes wordes, and nat mine” (VII B² 3265).54

54. See Pizzorno, “Chauntecleer’s Bad Latin.”
The Pestilence of the Sentence

Fragment VI (C)

Thus spitte I out my venym under hewe
Of hoolynessee.

CT VI C 421–22

In the previous chapter, I mentioned in passing the relationship between Fragment VII and Fragment II (part of a nineteenth-century argument known as the Bradshaw Shift); I pointed out that, one, I do not adopt or endorse any particular order of the Canterbury Tales and that, two, by the same token, I am open to exploring numerous possible orders of the fragments and tales. It happens that the case I wish to make about Fragment VI involves the order postulated by the Bradshaw Shift, but I wish to emphasize that I do not think my case is any argument, much less proof, for the Bradshaw Shift—my interests lie elsewhere.¹

In the Bradshaw Shift, Fragments II, VII, and VI of the generally accepted order of the Canterbury Tales appear as Groups B¹, B², and C, preceded by Fragment I (Group A) and followed by Fragment III (Group D). This order, B¹, B², and C (Man of Law, Shipman, Prioress, Thopas, Melibee, Monk, Nun's Priest, Physician, Pardoner), I will propose in this chapter, enables an understanding of C (VI) and its relationship to the last two tales of B² that offers important insights into the ontological status of poetic discourse in the Canterbury Tales, insights that, in turn, I believe, facilitate a grasp of the remaining groups of the Canterbury Tales as poems that develop and elaborate the poetics nascent in the first four groups.²

¹ I should note, in concert with the Riverside Chaucer, "the nearly complete absence of manuscript evidence to support" (p. 1121) the Bradshaw Shift; at the same time, though, as the Riverside Chaucer also notes, it "has inspired a substantial critical literature."

² Some have referred to Fragment VI as the "floating fragment" (see F. N. Robinson, Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, p. 726; and Howard, Chaucer, pp. 488, 614). If it is thus the circulating fragment of CT, I find this some corroboration of the argument I am about to make; but I do not think my argument depends on such an identity.
These remarks in place, let me state the thesis of this chapter. Group C contains two tales that repeat in a different and darker perspective the same binarism or duality as the last two tales of Group B, the Monk’s Tale and the Nun’s Priest’s Tale; in a (dispensable) shorthand, we can say that the Physician’s Tale is to the Pardoner’s as the Monk’s is to the Nun’s Priest’s, where the Physician’s and Monk’s Tales are to be seen as instances of unisemy (or “ponderous monology”) and reductive formulaicism (the Physician reduces experience to his “sentence,” the Monk to his definition of tragedy) and the Pardoner’s and the Nun’s Priest’s as instances of polysemy and disseminative impropriety (in the Nun’s Priest’s Tale, fruit can be seen as chaff, in the Pardoner’s Prologue and Tale a “ful vicious man” can tell a “moral tale” [VI C 459–60]). In each case, the C-member of the pair (or the dual) is a darker and despairing version of the B member; and it seems a tenable suggestion at least that each B member provokes its specter, whose spectral repetition of the predecessor is necessary to any understanding of either. The Physician’s Tale complements the Monk’s, the Pardoner’s, the Nun’s Priest’s, as their others: each is the shape or the figure of the first that can (and often does) become full of a different force—in the Physician’s Tale, unisemy becomes the rigid “sentence” of Apius that Virginius repeats when he “sentences” Virginia to death and which the Physician repeats when he “sentences” sinners at the end of the tale (VI C 285–86); in the Pardoner’s Tale the playful polysemy of the Nun’s Priest’s becomes the play-ful indeterminacy of rhetoric and sexuality combined as the Pardoner proves with a vengeance that “the substance is in me” (VII B2 2803), only to be reduced subsequently to angry silence by the main proponent of that literary theory, Harry Bailey.

That the Physician in the beginning of his tale impersonates the goddess Natura is of considerable importance to the argument. The discourse of Nature, as he impersonates her, continues the concerns of Fragment VII (B2) in the crucially related terminology of counterfeiting, forging, engraving, painting. The text of the Canterbury Tales is moving from an exploration of

3. I first developed the argument of this chapter and of part one of the next chapter in 1983, when I was working closely with my late teacher, Judson B. Allen (d. 1985). Then, as now, I follow him in his, I believe, acute understanding of the medieval inclusion of irony under allegory (as, e.g., in Isidore, Etymologiae 1.37.22–3)—allegory and irony are always at least double-voiced. Indeed, if Judson Allen had lived, I think he might have come to argue that poetry finally is voicing (hence our inability, in the end, to constrain it to closure by coercion with codes).

4. The study of Nature in the Middle Ages is a vast enterprise in scholarship, and my knowledge is perforce selective. I have learned a good deal from Wetherbee, Platonism and Poetry, but I am also strongly drawn to the work of Leupin, Barbarolexis, and Stone, Ethics of Nature. On the relationship between writing and nature, I am most indebted to the work of Dragonetti, especially Aux frontières du langage poétique.
of circulation, corruption, incest, the proper, and polysemy to a testing of the processes of figuration themselves, the actual making of images. From this point on, the tales, with notable consistency, return to such terms as marking (Walter, for example, is a “markys”); engraving (Dorigen is “engraved,” in the Franklin’s Tale); alchemy (Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale); impressing (Merchant’s Tale); et cetera, to problematize and test how art itself comes to be.

The Physician’s barely covert attempt to co-opt the power of Nature “to forme and peynten erthely creaturis” (VC C 22)—so that, we assume, he too could then boast “ech thyng in my cure is”5—will become now the type of all perversion of artwork: no earthly artist is made the way nature is made by God—

For Nature hath with sovereyn diligence
Yformed hire in so greet excellence,
As though she wolde seyn, “Lo! I, Nature,
Thus kan I forme and peynte a creature,
Whan that me list; who kan me countrefete?
Pigmalion noght, though he ay forge and bete,
Or grave, or peynte; for I dar wel seyn
Apelles, Zanzis, sholde werche in veyn
Outre to grave, or peynte, or forge, or bete,
If they presumed me to countrefete.
For He that is the formere principal
Hath maked me his vicaire general,
To forme and peynten erthely creaturis
Right as me list, and ech thyng in my cure is
Under the moone, that may wane and waxe,
And for my werk right no thyng wol I axe;
My lord and I been ful of oon accord.
I made hire to the worshippe of my lord;
So do I alle myne othere creatures,
What colour that they han or what figures.”
Thus semeth me that Nature wolde seye.
(VI C 9–29)

—and thus no mortal artist can impose on the already made “whan that [hym] list” (VI C 13), for the already made in its own substantiality resists

5. Already in the fourteenth century, “cure” possessed its medical sense as well as its ecclesiastical sense—see the OED 2, s.v. “cure” 1 II.
subjection to the hand of the merely mortal—Griselda, Alisoun, May, Cecilia, even Dorigen, all resist in various ways being molded by the hands of others. And insofar as the literary text is also marked in Chaucer's writing as in the female position, as I believe it is (see esp. TwC 3.1356–57, and chap. 5, p. 114), neither is it subject to willful, arbitrary manipulation by the artist. In fact, such manipulation, such perversion of artwork, can only be counterfeit. Any artist, such as the Physician or Walter or January, who attempts to manipulate the already-made according to his private will (arbitrarily) can only produce a “counterfeit”—that is, an item or thing or person that purports to be original but which, like a copy, is subject to any subsequent copier (such as Damyan, for example). (The laws of copyright in the modern age of mechanical photoreproduction, of course, acknowledge the inertia of the copy toward the possession and manipulation of the copier; the rights of the original and the originator have to be protected precisely because they are weak, always already at risk to the independence and unpredictability of the copier.) Virginia or May or Griselda or Alisoun, as the perverse artists see them, are creatures to make over into echoes, or mimics—they are, as the artists manipulate them, counterfeit persons (for example, the “perfectly obedient” daughter or wife). But no person (or text) will for long submit to being counterfeit or counterfeited. Already made (“feit” < “fait”), she or it refuses ultimately to be “made again” or, if you will, “made against” her original making. Its, or her, original making will out, sooner or later, or, as in the case of Virginia, she will die.

The original must have its chance to live, too, or it will die; very likely, in the end, if nothing else, it will die fighting for this very chance. The artwork and the lifework must be co-work (the “opera” a “co-opera”). The marriage, the trope, and the text—each is a co-operation, or it is a totalitarian counterfeit, masking its usurpation probably with the politics of realism (Walter is a good case in point [see chap. 5]). The marriage, the trope, and the text each, in short, is unnatural: each is a convention by mutual accord. That is why each is difficult and rare, requiring repeated renewal and revision.

The poet, such as Chaucer, whose deepest inspiration derives from “olde bookes” (LGW Prol. 17–27), can ill afford merely to re-work the precedent text or just to usurp it: he must, on the contrary, co-operate with, or co-work, the precedent text. The translator, such as Chaucer is, and the origi

6. See, further, M. Rose, Authors and Owners.
7. OED 2, s.v.: “f. L type contrā-fascre to make in opposition or contrast, hence, in opposing imitation. (Contrāfactio, setting in opposition or contrast, occurs in Cassiodorus, and the verb in med.L.).”
nal, must co-operate to produce, not a counterfeit, but a co-work that in the event will be a new work, in which, however, the old or original is still visible, still viable, neither suppressed nor repressed but newly expressed. In terms of the Clerk’s Tale, if Griselda is “translated” (IV E 385) into Walter’s world, she remains and retains her original self, which ought not be repressed; this, however, we know, is exactly what Walter fears, that she remain and retain her original self, and this is why he repeatedly “assaye[s]” her (IV E 454, for example)—he wants his Griselda, not Griselda’s Griselda. (More on the Clerk’s Tale in chap. 5, the conclusion to my book.) For now, observe first that we are again discussing, as we did in the case of the Man of Law’s Tale, originality, and second, that we are approaching Chaucer’s personal or individual resolution of the anxiety of influence. In the co-work, begetter and begotten, father and son, husband and wife, do not castrate each other; they talk to each other, using the space between them as the substance of the new.  

But it is different for the Physician. For him everything must be closed and close, for the open may let life flow and circulate—in the open, the new is possible, but like the Monk, the Physician is obsessed with the old, that is, death (there’s more money in it). And so he seeks to close, to shut, and to shut up. For him, propriety is a rigid closure of meet to meet: “Heere may men seen how synne hath his merite” (VI C 277). Even his citation of exegetical tradition closes with, adheres to, his sense of fixed propriety:

\[
\text{save Envye allone,} \\
\text{That sory is of oother mennes wele} \\
\text{And glad is of his sorwe and his unheele.} \\
(\text{The Doctour maketh this desciption}) \\
(VI C 114–17)
\]

He cites one, a doctor, just like himself.  

\[
\text{Therfore I rede yow this conseil take:} \\
\text{Forsaketh synne, er synne yow forsake.} \\
(VI C 285–86)
\]

The Physician like the Monk possesses a formula—what I will in a moment suggest we should call a “sentence”—and the formula admits of no error:

8. I propose, then, this revision to the Freudian “family romance,” not the denial of the castrating impulse nor its sublimation but its Aufhebung, or transformative synthesis into the in-between of a meaning-full relationship. See, further, Milton, Poet of Duality, chap. 7.  

9. The “doctour,” as the Riverside Chaucer notes, is St. Augustine (p. 191).
Heere may men seen how synne hath his merite.
Beth war, for no man woot whom God wol smyte
In no degree, ne in which manere wyse;
The worm of conscience may agryse
Of wikked lyf, though it so pryvee be
That no man woot therof but God and he.
(VI C 277–82)

For be he lewed man, or ellis lered,
He noot how soone that he shal been afered.
Therfore I rede yow this conseil take:
Forsaketh synne, er synne yow forsake.
(VI C 283–86)

It admits of no error because it is a formula of flawless (and flowless) equilibriuim: every sin is punished, repaid; the balance sheet always tallies; there is no escape.

The tale that the Physician tells illustrates the same rigid formula, or so he believes and would have us believe. But Chaucer has written the tale in such a way as to subvert this belief. Six times in the tale the word “sentence” occurs.\(^\text{10}\) Also, and crucially, the final syllable of this word, -ence, occurs in rhyme pairs or in line collocations six times, as I have emphasized below, beginning most significantly in the portrait of the Physician in the General Prologue:

And yet he was but esy of dispence;
He kepte that he wan in pestilence.
For gold in phisik is a cordial,
Therefore he lovede gold in special.
(I A 441–44)

The other occurrences are as follows:

For Nature hath with sovereyn diligence
Yformed hire in so greet excellence.
(VI C 9–10)

With alle humylitee and abstinece,
With alle attemperaunce and pacience.
(VI C 45–46)

10. At lines 157, 172, 177, 190, 204, 224.
Of alle tresons sovereyn pestilence
Is whan a wight bitrayseth innocence.
  (VI C 91–92)

The juge answerde, “Of this, in his absence,
I may nat yeve diffynytyf sentence.”
  (VI C 171–72)

O gemme of chastitee, in pacience
Take thou thy deedi, for this is my sentence.
  (VI C 223–24)

Hir heed of smoot, and by the top it hente,
And to the juge he gan it to presente.
  (VI C 255–56)

In the last occurrence, I should observe, although the termination is different, -te rather than -ce, the sound is still echoing clearly enough to be heard. I should also, finally, note the return of this sound, this syllable, in conscience, “the worm of conscience” (VI C 280).11

With the word “sentence,” and the echolalia in which it participates, Chaucer has articulated a persuasive proof of the mutability and inconclusiveness (nonclosure) of language in a tale intended by its teller to preclude or, at least, deny any such lability in language.12 In a word, any “sentence” that the Physician or any of his characters would pass as immutable, fixed, and permanent, finds its immutability, fixity, and permanence undermined, compromised, and disproved by the labile ubiquity of the sound -ence. No sentence can be permanent, fixed, and rigid, when -ence slides and smears through so many different words, many of them often of no pertinence to the sentence at all. The circulation of sound denies the finality of sentences.13

But against this fact the Physician counterfeits his sentence: his sentence looks like any other sentence but in reality has none of the meaningfulness, the circulation, and mediation (which implies lability) of true sentences. His sentence, like that of Apius, which Virginius executes (saying himself, “This is my sentence” [VI C 224]), would reiterate itself unerringly from mouth

11. It also occurs in “necligence” at line 98.
12. On problems of closure in CT, see M. Stevens, “Chaucer’s ‘Bad Art,’” p. 146, and, more generally, McGerr, Chaucer’s Open Books.
13. Here I should also note that the termination -unce functions in much the same way in the tale: see lines 65, 66, 73, 74, 95, and 96, three couplets rhyming on -unce.
to mouth eternally. But reiteration does not a truth make. And when the Physician claims,

(\ldots this is no fable,
But knowen for historial thyng notable;
The sentence of it sooth is, out of doute),
\(\text{VI C 155–57}\)

the tag “out of doute,” if we have let Chaucer train our ears, should, by its very sound, not to mention its denial of uncertainty, betray the Physician’s error: in his economy, which counterfeits God’s (“Forsaketh synne, er synne yow forsake”), there are no fissures, even though we, in “out of doute,” hear the possibility of confusion and therefore of fissures and errors. In the Physician’s economy, the doctor is always in.

If for the Physician there are no fissures, for the Pardoner there is nothing but, and, supremely, there is the fissure between his words and his “entente” (VI C 432). This fissure is already evident in the notorious “or” of the Narrator’s surmise: “I trowe he were a geldyng or a mare” (I A 691). There in the “or,” where none of us is sure exactly what the Pardoner’s sexuality is, the fissure of uncertainty and indeterminacy exposes the fissure in all our discourse: to say what anything is, we must also say, tacitly or aloud, what it is not. What it is not always influences (and frequently infects) what something is—and we can only know X by also acknowledging the deferral of not-X, where if we are insecure of that acknowledgment we are also insecure of our knowledge. Without the gap between not-X and X, there would be no discourse: we say, either it is X or it is not.\(^{14}\)

But once this is said, the dilemma in the Pardoner’s case is suddenly clear: the “or” following the Narrator’s “I trowe” does not distinguish or differentiate—on the contrary, it only defers such distinction or difference. Note especially that the pair “geldyng” / “mare” does not offer discrete alternatives—homoerotically, it is possible that a “geldyng” could be a mare—and we are left precisely in confusion. The point is not to know the Pardoner’s deviancy but rather to know that we do not know it. We cannot locate the fissure that would give us the proposition, “there is” (compare German “es gibt”) here some X. Sexual indeterminacy thus becomes the “determinate” sign of linguistic indeterminacy.

The Pardoner could be a “geldyng,” he could be a “mare,” he could be something else (the Narrator is not sure—“I trowe”). There are so many

\(^{14}\) I develop this position, which is Derridean, at greater length in chap. 5.
alternatives, the Pardoner could be anything or nothing. In short, a proliferation of possibilities obscures the fissure and the salience that would give us the truth about the Pardoner. And in this way Chaucer explores the flaw in language, that to flow it must flaw: /p/ and /b/ must be flaws and flows of each other for us to understand the “gift of gap”—/b/ is present by its absence in /p/ (both are plosives, but one is voiced and the other is not—so they are distinguished as embodied).

Determination demands exclusion. Thus human intelligence: necessarily partial, subtractive, and flawed. Indeterminacy, on the other hand, admits of inconclusiveness. Thus human imagination: flexible, additive, incorporative (but also therefore itself flawed). Determined by his physical nature, whatever it is, as one thing (and one name), the Pardoner imagines himself as a host (and a parasite) of other names and things—he can play any role he is called upon to play, he will do or be anything he is prompted to do. He is language’s capacity to say anything by meaning nothing but itself, and as such he is both the poet’s poison and his spice (see chap. 5).

As much, however, we can see now, should also be said of the Nun’s Priest, whose other the Pardoner is. Or say, what in the Pardoner is poison in the Nun’s Priest is spice. But then what marks this difference, we must next ask? Two so nearly identical as to be parts of the same whole must differ if they do differ in some radical way. And this radical difference is not far to seek. Harry Bailey, we recall, found the Nun’s Priest, after his tale, to be a most virile, potent man (see chap. 1). The Nun’s Priest is fertile, the Pardoner (I infer) sterile—spice enhances life, poison destroys it. But this difference is not sexual, or, more accurately, physiological; it does not derive in the first place from sexual difference. For the Nun’s Priest, like the Pardoner, is supposed by ecclesiastical and exegetical convention to be sexually sterile. The Nun’s Priest and the Pardoner both are supposed to deny the fertility of the body for the fertility of the spirit. The Nun’s Priest, although not physically or naturally, is nonetheless identical to the Pardoner, a eunuchus dei (this, I think, is the very ground of Chaucer’s perception of the relationship between them). And after reading his tale plus Harry Bailey’s self-correction, we can see that the Nun’s Priest is what the Church envisioned in the figure of the eunuchus dei: his ascesis in the flesh has generated an abundance of spirit, the magnanimity of his wit and wisdom, which inspires and begets charity in his audience. What Harry Bailey sees as sexual potency is

18. R. P. Miller, “Chaucer’s Pardoner”; see also Sturges, pp. 36–41.
also and equally spiritual potency, and both potencies in a body ruddy with physical health.

The Nun's Priest, then, is the figure of which the Pardoner is the antifigure and in a very different body. Having said this, we can also say that the difference between them is precisely not one of sexuality (how could we be sure, anyway?) but one of intention. The Pardoner's "entente" is "nat but for to wynne" (VI C 403); the Nun's Priest, in keeping with St. Paul's teaching, is for "oure doctrine":

Taketh the moralite, goode men.
For Seint Paul seith that al that writen is,
To oure doctrine it is ywrite, ywis;
Taketh the fruyt, and lat the chaf be stille.

(VII B² 3440-43)

As is also, importantly, Chaucer's:

For oure book seith, "Al that is writen is writen for oure doctrine," and that is myn entente. (XI 1083)

The difference, I hope I can say now, on the strength of my just concluded resistance to oversimplification, is the difference between cupiditas and caritas. Caritas seeks not its own, but, except for this difference, it is just like cupiditas, seeking and speaking to fill and fulfill the desires of the human.

The language of caritas and the language of cupiditas in their structure are the same: they both demand and depend on figuration—on, that is, the fruitfulness, the fertility, and the productivity of words. But caritas turns that productivity toward the other, while cupiditas turns it toward itself (a cancer, in effect); and in this latter turn, the productivity becomes the antiproduct, Death.¹⁹ Structurally, "thise been the cokkes wordes and nat mine" (VII B³ 3265) and "thus spitte I out my venym under hewe / Of hoolynesse" (VI C 421-22) are alike—both depend on the figurative, the extraliteral: the venom is not real venom and the rooster is not really talking. The difference is one, if you will, of direction (that is, circulation): the one is directed toward the other and "game"; the other toward the self and "ernest." The one is certainly comic (and communal); the other, in my opinion, tragic (and privative).²⁰ But both demonstrate that speaking must always be a seeking—if the letter kills (2 Cor. 6) it is because the letter never changes, all questing having ceased with the cessation of the question; only

the spirit changes, and the spirit welcomes the questing circulation of language ("the wind blows where it will and you hear the sound thereof and know not whence it comes or where it goes" [John 3:8]), for only so can there be healing, forgiveness, pardon (we say, do we not?, "pardon me"). But so also will there always be the risk of contamination and infection, a flaw in the flow, such that the flow turns back upon itself, stagnates and dies, becoming in effect poison. At such an impasse, we have reached one of the limits of the human; and at such a limit only love will work, for only love will let go to start another flow—unlike wrath, which can only block and dam and mute:

This Pardoner answerde nat a word;
So wrooth he was, no word ne wolde he seye.
(VI C 956–57)

If "the substance is [only] in me," then, as Harry and the Pardoner demonstrate, "vengeance is mine, saith the hoarder"—violence and muteness are the only alternatives when the fortuna of language is foreclosed.22

The substance must be between us, and it must circulate. In the end, there is just the flow. Both the Physician and the Pardoner are doctors: the one, a doctor of the body, the other, a doctor of the soul.23 Not the least of Chaucer's ironies in Fragment VI (irony is the flow of discourse that makes a flaw a flow) is that the two professionals who most should understand and nurture flows are themselves in flows the most flawed, in need of much love.

22. Notice here the possible logic of the Bradshaw Shift order of the CT: Harry is less likely to boast "the substance is in me" after his encounter with the Pardoner, who stings him so with the accusation that he is "moost envoluped in synne" (VI C 942)—"well reported" by the Pardoner, indeed.
23. See Henry, Duke of Lancaster, Le Livre de Seyntz Medicines; see, also, Arbesmann, "Concept of 'Christus Medicus.'"
Of alle thise names now wol I me reste.

CT VIII G 859

circulacioun n. [L] Alch. The operation or process of changing the “body” (by heating or cooling) from one “element” into another, or an instance of it.

MED C: 276

The neologism in my title for this chapter looks to the defining characteristic of Fragment VIII or the sense of a search for a secret, a clue to a mystery. Both etymology and alchemy seek the elixir, the essence, that unlocks the power of stones or names.¹ Neither, however, is successful, but the story of their failures yields as its paradoxical but powerful by-product the realization that poetry, the telling of stories, is more successful than either of them at discovering the truth of secrets, if not also the secret of truth.

Fragment VIII

The most obvious relevance of Fragment VIII to an argument about the body and circulation in the Canterbury Tales is that it contains the tale, the Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale, which interrupts or breaks the internal sequence of tales and tellers, inserting a new teller and his body (if not also a new pilgrim) into the group and an apparently unpremeditated addition into the collection.² The arrival of the canon and his yeoman clearly breaks whatever

1. I developed the thesis of this part of my argument during my first Fellowship of the National Endowment for the Humanities (1983) and subsequently tested it in the classroom in the fall term of 1983; I would like to recognize and thank my students in that course in Yale College (on Chaucer) for their attention and their comments.
patterns have established themselves by this point in the poem, and thus it suggests that the frame of the poem is open-ended, capable of expansion and new circulation. But this is only part of the story. In the later Middle Ages and the Renaissance, the alchemical opus was regularly conceived of as a journey toward purification and redemption, that is, a pilgrimage, in effect. And Chaucer interrupts the Canterbury Tales with the Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale probably to explore the similarities and differences between the “pilgrimage” of alchemy and the pilgrimage of the various characters he has invented. In a sense, then, they can be seen as “metals” (“If gold ruste, what shal iren do?” [I A 500]) mixed in the “crosselet” (VIII G 1147) of the pilgrimage to Canterbury, the opus which Chaucer would have us remember as we read the version of it that is the Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale.

Such dual focus on the Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale and the Canterbury Tales at one and the same time is also called for by Chaucer’s frequent auto-citation in the words of the Yeoman. This takes several forms, from indirect reference to explicit quotation. As an example of the former, he has the Yeoman refer to his craft as “elvysshe” (VIII G 751), a term Chaucer has used earlier, of course, in reference to himself (VII B 703). Then, too, he repeats phrases or groups of words that have figured prominently in previous poetically self-conscious utterances; for example:

Why is thy lord so sluttissh, I the preye,
And is of power bettre clooth to beye,
If that his dede accorde with thy speche?
(VIII G 636–38; emphasis added)

And this should be compared, of course, with the Narrator in the General Prologue (I A 742), “the wordes moote be cosyn to the dede.” Or again, he has the Yeoman exclaim just before beginning his tale:

3. Here it is worth pausing to recall the number of interruptions that figure and figure crucially in the construction of the CT: from the Miller’s interruption of the Monk, to the Pardoner’s interruption of the Wife of Bath, to the Friar’s interruption of her, to the Merchant’s interruption of the frame of his tale to refer to the Wife of Bath, to the Franklin’s interruption of the Squire, to Harry’s interruption of Chaucer the Pilgrim’s tale of Thopas, to the Knight’s interruption of the Monk, to the Canon’s Yeoman’s eruption onto the scene, we have, it seems to me, a program of interruptions serving to punctuate the representation of circulation by means of which Chaucer deals with the anxiety of circulation.


5. My first, and enduring, introduction to auto-citation in a major poet was through the essays on palinodic structures in Dante by Freccero (see Dante: The Poetics of Conversion).
He that me broghte first unto that *game*,
Er that he dye, sorwe have he and shame!
For it is *ernest* to me, by my feith;
That feele I wel, what so any man seith.
(VIII G 708–11; emphasis added)

Here the Yeoman confesses that he has made "ernest" of "game"—in direct contradiction of what the Narrator advised his audience earlier (I A 3186)—and this confession signals an extraordinary self-examination on Chaucer's part, to be analyzed at greater length later.

Finally there is direct auto-citation:

Ther is also ful many another thyng
That is unto oure craft apertenynge.
Though I by ordre hem nat reherce kan,
By cause that I am a lewed man,
Yet wol I telle hem as they come to mynde,
Thogh I ne kan nat sette hem in hir kynde.
(VIII G 784–89)

This passage asks to be set beside the Narrator's apology in Fragment I:

Also I prey yow to foryeve it me,
Al have I nat set folk in hir degree
Heere in this tale, as that they sholde stonde.
My wit is short, ye may wel understonde.
(I A 743–46)

These auto-citations suggest that we must ask why Chaucer represents himself here, near the end of the *Canterbury Tales*, in the Yeoman—how might the Yeoman be a figure of Chaucer the poet? What motivates the auto-citations? There are, we shall see, many possible responses to these questions, but chief among them, I will argue, is the Yeoman's unblinking, unrelenting, if also terrified, vision of duplicity in all forms of mediation. Chaucer's concern with contraries (binarisms, oppositions) betrays its darkest compulsion now:

Al to symple is my tonge to pronounce,
As ministre of my wit, the doublenesse
Of this chanoun, roote of alle cursednesse!
He semed *frendly* to hem that knewe hym noght,
But he was *frendly* bothe in werk and thoght.
(VIII G 1299–1303; emphasis added)
In this binarism, where *freendly*, but for the *r*, smears into *feendly*, which infects it, Chaucer confronts both the instability and the destabilizing influence of the medium in which he writes. And if he sharply interrogates this medium in these concluding tales, as readers have felt he does, it is primarily because he is prepared to accept the full consequences of being a man who sweats at the crucible of language where the truth, like “quiksilver,” is unstable and always potentially conducive to infection.

Chaucer’s auto-citation in the *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale*, then, suggests that the tale is, among other things, an essay in poetics and the uses of poetry. Once we have reached this position on the tale, we can immediately recognize other evidence in support of it. Most important here are the several references in the tale to the inconcludability of the alchemical *opus*:

For alle oure sleightes we kan nat conclude.
(VIII G 773)

For bothe two, by my savacioun,
Concluden in multiplicacioun
Ylike wel, whan they han al ydo;
This is to seyn, they faillen bothe two.
(VIII G 848–51)

But, be it hoot or coold, I dar seye this,
That we conclude everemoore amys.
(VIII G 956–57)

Alchemy, these passages suggest, never reaches its goal, and the only sane thing the would-be alchemist can do is simply stop, cease, without having concluded his search—if there is anything “out there,” he cannot find it.

Similarly, poetry, although it may sometimes reach a goal or end, often does so, as Chaucer’s career bears witness, without coming to an end, without concluding, other than by merely stopping, breaking off, leaving texts in fragments. Moreover, even when poetry has achieved its end, or appears to have achieved it, having done so may only serve to expose another end — higher, different, more complex, possibly more human, certainly enticing. The philosopher’s stone of meaning, the *elixir vitæ* of significance, which poetry seeks, may be just as unattainable if not also fabular as the stone or elixir that alchemy seeks. Poetry, like alchemy, may be a fascinating, engrossing means whose primary if not only meaning is never to reach an end.

6. See, e.g., Cox, “Jangler’s ‘Bourde.’”
Poetry, even more than alchemy—which tinkers with every metal and most other substances under the sun—may be absorbed in and obsessed with its medium, or words, more than with its end or conclusion. Think for a moment of all the exuberant lists of wild and wonderful words Chaucer indulges in the *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale.* Poetry’s “idiot fooling with the sound of things” (Howard Nemerov, in a public reading I once heard him give), which we hear to delightful excess in these lists, disqualifies it from technology’s rage for predictable and predicting conclusions. Poetry in this regard may be more alchemical than alchemy itself, for it may also secretly never want to conclude.

But why? The answer to this question provides another datum in support of the position that the *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale* is an essay in poetics. Poetry’s only conclusion is itself, or, to put this more discursively, poetry’s “conclusion” is its repeatability. That poem is great which is inexhaustibly repeatable. But it is inexhaustibly repeatable and therefore great because it never reiterates the same thing—somehow in its persisting identity it is always different and capable of generating difference. When a poem stops, ceases, it threatens its own principle of being or the polysemy or indeterminacy, the inconclusiveness, which amounts to the repeatability, of words. The being of the poem is suggested in the disciple of Plato’s startled response to his master:

Ye, sire, and is it thus?  
This is *ignotum per ignocius.*  
What is Magnasia, good sire, I yow preye?  
(VIII G 1456–58)

Poetry too is “the unknown through (or as) the more unknown”: poetry too substitutes one word (“magnasia”) for another (“titanos”), exploiting the

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8. I have held this position throughout my career. Of statements of it by other critics, I admire most, in my reading, Stewart’s, in *Reading Voices.* Of statements of it by other poets, I am moved most by those of Wallace Stevens, especially in *The Poems of Our Climate*:

There would still remain the never-resting mind,  
So that one would want to escape, come back  
To what had been so long composed.  
The imperfect is our paradise.  
Note that, in this bitterness, delight,  
Since the imperfect is so hot in us,  
Lies in flawed words and stubborn sounds.  
(Sec. 3)
capacity of *as* to suggest the infinite variety of *is.* And if poetry is cornered, forced to cease, then it will respond—it can only respond—as "Plato" does:

"Nay, nay," quod Plato, "certein, that I nyl. The philosophres sworn were everychoon That they sholden discovere it unto noon, Ne in no book it write in no manere. For unto Crist it is so lief and deere That he wol nat that it discovered bee, But where it liketh to his deitee Men for t'enspire, and eek for to defende Whom that hym liketh; lo, this is the ende.”

(VIII G 1463–71)

This is the end: the secret is to let the secret be.10

But to let the secret be is to continue with the search (else the secret would not be), however wearying the search may prove—the poet does, we need not doubt him, want to rest from all these names (VIII G 859). But he must rest the way a long-distance runner rests, by alternately speeding up and slowing down, not by stopping. For if he stops, it is the end. But, of course, everyone does stop in the end. This is why Chaucer structures the *Canterbury Tales* in the way he does. Because everyone must stop in the end, Chaucer figures an end that does not stop. The sequence *Second Nun's Tale, Canon's Yeoman's Tale, Manciple's Tale, Parson's Tale,* and *Retraction* concludes or ends the *Canterbury Tales* without stopping it, completes the poem without finishing it, by insisting on the medium of the poem, language, in such a way as to put the end permanently in brackets. The way the poem ends always re-inaugurates the question, what does it mean? We find ourselves once again repeating the poem and its many parts. The success of the poem's structure is to suspend the end in the (dis)solution of meanings.


More harassing master would extemporize Subtler, more urgent proof that the theory Of poetry is the theory of life,

As it is, in the intricate evasions of *as,*
In things seen and unseen, created from nothingness,
The heavens, the hells, the worlds, the longed-for lands.

10. See further Hill, *Chaucerian Belief,* p. 56.
My own language, of course, is double (I would prefer to say, dual),\(^{11}\) and with it I am accepting Chaucer's challenge to regard the \(r\); the fissure between *freendly* and *feendly*. I am reading the poem in such a way as to write a commentary on it that repeats it without reiterating it. My own discourse repeats Chaucer's fascination with the instability of the medium (but does not reiterate or replace it). Practically, this should have the effect of renewing our care for Chaucer's language: this is a poet, we realize, who pays attention to \(r\)'s. Theoretically or speculatively, it should have the effect of encouraging us to continue in the hypothesis of a certain anxiety about language on Chaucer's part, from which hypothesis we can then proceed to pose and consider a number of questions.

For example, why does the Yeoman three times say:

Of his falsnesse it dulleth me to ryme.  
(VIII G 1093)

It dulleth me whan that I of hym speke.  
(VIII G 1172)

It weerieth me to telle of his falsnesse?  
(VIII G 1304)

In the legend of Philomela, recall, the Narrator had spoken in a similar fashion:

And, as to me, so grisely was his dede  
That, whan that I his foule storye rede,  
Myne eyen wexe foule and sore also.  
Yit last the venym of so longe ago,  
That it enfecteth hym that wol beholde  
The storye of Tereus, of which I tolde.  
(*LGW* VII.2238-43)

Obviously, we are addressing something that concerned Chaucer more than in passing. Language, it seems, can be proper to its referent indeed; language can even be infected by its referent (recall the numerous allusions to infection and contagion in the *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale* [VIII G 667, 727–28, 889, 1095, et cetera] — alchemy and the canon both are contaminants). The very instability or mutability of language can occasion its transformation into, or momentary identity with, a referent such as the canon ("he is here

\(^{11}\) See *Milton, Poet of Duality*, pp. 2–3.)
and there; / He is so variaunt, he abit nowhere” [VIII G 1174–75]), and it can then transform even the “colour” of the speaker (VIII G 667). It is as if language itself were a chemical circulating into different relationships and causing various reactions depending on the catalyst supplied.

If language is so mutable, the obvious reaction to it on the part of ordinary users would be to stop it, to make it stand still. Here we have a suggestion for an answer to another important question raised by the hypothesis—why does the Yeoman’s canon insist so on the notion and the term “mortifye”?

For ye shul seen heer, by experience,
That this quyksilver I wol mortifye
Right in youre sighte anon, withouten lye,
And make it as good silver and as fyn
As ther is any in youre purs or myn.
(VIII G 1125–29)

To “mortifye quyksilver” would be to “congeal and harden it”12 in a new form, to make it stand still, to fix it in one meaning, enduring without change. Analogously, to “mortifye” language would be to make it stand still, to fix it in one meaning, enduring without change. But this would be, in the case of language, to make it dead and deadly, to “mortifye” it literally into the letter that kills, depriving it of the spirit that quickens (2 Cor. 3:6).

But the poet, in his awe of language, knows that such a response to its mutability is not admissible, is in fact to be feared more than the mutability itself. For he who mortifies language seeks a magic talisman with which to control the flux of history and the nature of substance—he seeks, in short, the tyranny of predictability. Such an alchemist, a totalitarianist, is to be feared above all because he would eliminate the play in language.

We come to the third and final question raised by the hypothesis, and by means of it we return to a crucial passage mentioned earlier:

He that me broghte first unto that game,
Er that he dye, sorwe have he and shame!
For it is ernest to me, by my feith;
That feele I wel, what so any man seith.
(VIII G 708–11)

Why does Chaucer repeat the “ernest”/“game” opposition in the Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale? Because in his anxiety about language, by no means incom-

12. Baugh’s gloss, in Chaucer’s Major Poetry, p. 519; or “harden, make nonvolatile,” which is the gloss in Riverside Chaucer, p. 277.
patible with his poet’s reverence for it, he understands that if language can be perverted into alchemy, made contagious and deadly, it can also in just this way, be made terrifyingly earnest, losing all its play, in both senses, the ludic and the spatial. Deprived of its play, of its fictiveness and its manipulability, language hardens into a single-minded, obsessive, monotonous quest for power, usually disguised under the name “truth.” Language become alchemy is language become “science,” without the saving knowledge that science itself is rhetorical, and such language, we today know perhaps even better than Chaucer, no matter how frendly it appears, is feendly indeed (each of us could name numerous disasters resulting from this oblivion—the one that haunts me the most is the Challenger explosion).

To leave some play in language, to let language play: this is the poet’s dream and it is also his duty. Hence the Second Nun’s Tale, of St. Cecilia, the other, first member of Fragment VIII, with its “etymological essay” for part of its Prologue. This “essay” demonstrates—and herein lies one of the connections between the two tales in Fragment VIII—that there is, so to speak, no “philosopher’s etymon,” no elixir verbi, that will reduce a word to one enduring proper substantive. “Cecilie,” quite the contrary, has a variety of possible etymons:

First wolde I yow the name of Seint Cecilie Expowne, as men may in hir storie see. It is to seye in English “hevenes lilie,” For pure chaastnesse of virginitee; Or, for she whitnesse hadde of honestee, And grene of conscience, and of good fame The soote savour, “lilie” was hir name. Or Cecilie is to seye “the wey to blynde;” For she ensample was by good techynge; Or elles Cecile, as I writen fynde, Is joyned, by a manere conjoiynynge Of “hevene” and “Lia”; and heere, in figurynghe, The “hevene” is set for thoght of hoolyneses, And “Lia” for hire lastynge bisynessee. Cecile may eek be seyd in this manere, “Wantynge of blyndnesse,” for hir grete light

13. See, further, Holland, 5 Readers Reading, pp. 137 and 229–30, commenting on Winnicott and the transitional object.
Of sapience and for hire thewes cleere;
Or elles, loo, this maydens name bright
Of “hevene” and “leos” comth, for which by right
Men myghte hire wel “the hevene of peple” calle,
Ensample of goode and wise werkes alle.

For “leos” “peple” in English is to seye,
And right as men may in the hevene see
The sonne and moone and sterres every weye,
Right so men goostly in this mayden free
Seyen of feith the magnanymytee,
And eek the cleernesse hool of sapience,
And sondry werkes, brighte of excellence.

(VIII G 85–112)

And just as no one of them is the “true” touchstone of Cecilie, so “Cecilie” is not a magical talisman for transforming them—indeed, in bringing them together, “Cecilie” shows how different they are. In fact, the relation between them and “Cecilie” is like the relation between “magnasia” and “titanos”—one word substituted for another in the signifying chain.15 Similarly, Cecilie, though she is like the philosopher’s stone in her bath of flames,16 cannot convert everyone to Christianity: she is not the philosopher’s stone because there is an unconverted residue, pagans she cannot transform. Even the greatest possible sanctity, then, can not universalize or totalize a meaning or an effect. And this, I believe Chaucer feels, is a blessing, if often a blessing in disguise.

For were it to do so, it would hardly differ from the stone statues that Cecilie mocks:

for thyng that we seen alle
That it is stoon—that men may wel espyen—
That ilke stoon a god thow wolt it calle.
I rede thee, lat thyn hand upon it falle
And taste it wel, and stoon thou shalt it fynde,
Syn that thou seest nat with thyne eyen blynde.

(VIII G 499–504)

The idol—of stone or wood or gold or words, should it come to that—is dead and dumb just because it has no body, even a fragmented body, no

15. On this important metonymy in the CT, see the next chapter.
16. See Grennen, “Saint Cecilia’s ‘Chemical Wedding’” and “Canon’s Yeoman’s Alchemical ‘Mass.’”
warm cavities or recesses from which life in its essential secrecy might emerge and flow and be different. A body without flow is dead even as faith without works is dead (James 2:17), for what are works but the flows and thus also possible flaws through which faith expresses its life? A living faith must be a faith that can flaw or fail because in fact it flows. A living faith does not refuse to live in, though it may transcend, the fundamental “contraries” that structure human being:

And for to putte us fro swich ydelnesse,  
That cause is of so greet confusioun,  
I have heer doon my faithful bisynesse  
After the legende in translacioun  
Right of thy glorious lif and passioun,  
Thou with thy gerland wroght with rose and lilie—  
Thee meene I, mayde and martyr, Seint Cecilie.  
(VIII G 22–28)

A living faith, in short, is a faith both of and in translation—translation understood as the flow from one language to another language through the juxtological adjacency mediating between them. “Bisynesse” admits its connection to “ydelnesse” by the very “contrariness” between them. And if the Second Nun’s Tale is a translation (VIII G 25), it is just so a work of faith, not of magic (see chap. 4), for it conjoins what it knows to be apart and different, even as Cecilie conjoins Roman and Christian or Jesus conjoins God and man, in a new body—it does not seek to transmute one thing into another, it seeks only to conjoin or combine two things in a new whole.

Translation is not magical transformation, not a philosopher’s stone; translation is rather a work of faith uniting by means of what divides, or language. Language divides “word” and “sentence” in order to unite them, and there simply is no magic to make them one and identical—they would then be stone, mute, and such magic would be black indeed. But the poet works no such magic; the poet translates, from one language into another, one word into another, in the continual quest (and question) of the opus after the corpus.

Fragment III

From the perspective of etym-alchemy, Fragment III of the Canterbury Tales is one of the most searching examinations in English poetry of the circulation of the signifier in human relations and of human efforts to control that circulation. The Summoner’s Tale, from this perspective, is the story of the
etymology of arsmetrik ("arse" "metrics") as the division of a fart circulating across the spokes of a wheel; the Friar's Tale is the story of construing intention as the motive of signs—really mean it when you say it and the devil take the hindmost; and the Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale is the story of who gets to define the meanings of the sign (and the dispensing of sex)—who gets to rip pages out of the book and then set it on fire.17 None of the three poems reduces to only this perspective—such a claim would commit the error against which the poems implicitly and ironically argue, a rape of the sign, a misappropriation of its value—but each of the poems examines the conditions of desire that compel individuals to wrest the meanings of the signifier, especially the body, to private, and thus privative, use. When the Wife of Bath fumes that

By God, if wommen hadde written stories,
As clerkes han withinne hire oratories,
They wolde han written of men moore wikkednesse
Than al the mark of Adam may redresse
(III D 693–96),

Chaucer exposes, I think, one of the darkest recesses of human behavior: not just revenge but revenge as precisely the absence of alternative.18 If, as I think, and as I will argue later, Chaucer believed that forgiveness is our only real alternative to the animality we inherit through our nature, Fragment III, for all the riotous humor it undeniably contains, is also one of Chaucer's most somber essays in the human condition—rape is difficult to forgive (the Wife of Bath's Tale), assault on an elderly woman of limited means is difficult to forgive (the Friar's Tale), and exploitation of the death of someone's child

17. In my first book, Currency of the Word, which I drafted in 1977, beginning with the chapter on the Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale, I studied the efforts at controlling the signifier from the perspective of the ubiquitous economic imagery in the poem. I will not repeat those arguments here (they can be found at www.clas.ufl.edu/~rashoaf/currency/ten.html), but I will pause long enough to observe that the inevitable residue of subjectivity in economic valuation is the psychic reality Chaucer exploits as a parallel to the same residue in the "expenditure" of signs—see now, further, the extraordinarily detailed study of commensuration and its relativity and subjectivity in monetized late-medieval society by Kaye, Economy and Nature, esp. pp. 218–20 and 196–99.

18. I assume that the spite between the Friar and the Summoner, because of which each seeks revenge upon the other, is a principal explanation why the two tales join the Wife's in Fragment III. Fragment III is very much an extended meditation upon revenge and whether humans can actually manage some alternative to vengeance and spite—is Alisoun's reconciliation with Janekin a real alternative or is it just fantasy? See chap. 5 for further comments on this matter.
is difficult to forgive (the *Summoner's Tale*). And yet, if forgiveness is difficult, it is not impossible—“Lord, increase our faith” (Luke 17:3–5).

Of the many metonyms Chaucer deploys in the *Canterbury Tales*, one of the most expressive, and for my purposes here, instructive, is the title by which friars were known, “lymytour.” This metonymy, I suggest, bespeaks a central concern of Fragment III, how to *limit* the circulation of signs (coins and sex, too)—how to appropriate and control it. Convents set a limit for begging, and the mendicant becomes known, by change of name, as a limitor. But this new name, this metonymy, serves to convey information far beyond the sphere of mendicancy:

For now the grete charitee and prayeres
Of *lymytours* and othere hooly freres,
That serchen every lond and every streem,
As thikke as motes in the sonne-beem,
Blessynges halles, chambres, kichenes, boures,
Citees, burghes, castels, hye toures,
Thropes, bernes, shipnes, dayeryes—
This maketh that ther ben no fayeryes.
For ther as wont to walken was an elf
Ther walketh now the *lymytour* hymself
In undermeles and in morwenynges,
And seyth his matyns and his hooly thynges
As he gooth in his *lymytacioun*.
Wommen may go saufly up and doun.
In every busshe or under every tree
Ther is noon oother incubus but he,
And he ne wol doon hem but dishonour.

(III D 865–81; emphasis added)

“This maketh that ther ben no fayeryes”—the “lymytour” eliminates fairies from the land, and “ther as wont to walken was an elf / Ther walketh now the *lymytour* hymself” Fragment III explores the elimination of mystery from human intercourse. Mystery in Fragment III is quantified, coined, codified, commodified, exegetic-ized, scatologized, everywhere demystified—and yet, it returns, somehow it always returns, if only in ars metrik. For the deepest mystery is the signifier itself, the name that can change, and change, as

20. In the technical vocabulary of metonymy, the action of limiting substitutes for the agent as the deverbal noun “lymytour” is formed.
well, what surrounds it. This, I take it, is the burden of the loathly lady’s sermon to the knight-rapist (even as I also recognize the fraught irony of her transformation into a beautiful young woman).

But even though that transformation be problematic, the capacity for mystery and change in the signifier remains for Chaucer both real and important. The pun in the knight-rapist’s final concession to the loathly lady is crucial here:

“Cheseth youreself which may be moost plesance
And moost honour to yow and me also.
I do no fors the theweather of the two,
For as yow liketh, it suffiseth me.”

(III D 1232–35; emphasis added)

In “do[ing] no fors,” the knight-rapist says, idiomatically, “I don’t care,” but the language also says “I do no force.” He who forced a young woman to surrender her sex now says “I do no force”; and the language bespeaks a transformation perhaps as important as any in the *Canterbury Tales*. But if so, it does so by punning—that is, by not limiting the sense of the words; and thus, it could be objected that the knight-rapist is hardly conscious of what he’s saying and so has not changed at all—this, I take it, would be the way of cynicism. But if one were to choose not to be cynical (a difficult choice, to be sure, one that most cannot endure), one could argue that forgiveness, which in effect he has received, has transformed the knight-rapist and transformed him there where it matters the most, in his capacity to think, to reflect, on what he’s saying and doing. For if he should be conscious of what he’s saying, he is not only a changed man, he is also a less limited man. “Lord, increase our faith.” By the same token, we, Chaucer’s readers, should be less limited, too; we should be more open-minded about what can emerge from the etym-alchemy of *arsmetrik*. Shit happens, to be sure, but so does grace, too. And not by magic.


22. I first wrote about this pun in 1971, for a paper at the University of East Anglia. I was a Secretary of State George C. Marshall Scholar at UEA from September 1970 until June 1972. I take this occasion to recognize and thank the British government for the Marshall Scholarship Program, which made those extraordinary two years possible for me. I would like to recognize, in particular, David Aers, A. E. Dyson, Michael Hollingsworth, Priscilla Martin, and Peter Mercer for their teaching during those years. I wish also to remember and thank Peter David Morris and Bridgett Sabrina Morris, dear friends of my youth, who made Norwich home for me.
Magic and rhetoric are the concerns of this chapter, the next step in my argument about Chaucer and the anxiety of circulation. Magic changes the appearances of things; rhetoric, metonymy especially, changes the names of things (Greek “meta-onomos”; Latin “denominatio”). Chaucer tells tales of magic and is drawn, as we saw in the last chapter, to alchemy, astrology, and other “sciences” because he is a rhetorician: he changes the names of things and wonders, therefore, about magic, that it might change things themselves, but understands finally that magic changes only the appearances of things.

Surely, though, it will be objected, that is all that rhetoric does—do we not speak of “rhetorical sleight of hand”? Rhetoric is just magic of a more commonplace sort. Yes, and that is the point. Rhetoric is magic that every man can practice to some degree.1 And this is why, I believe, it is important to insist, even after all that has been written on this subject, that Chaucer is a rhetorical poet.2 To make my point efficiently, I will focus on the rhetorical device I consider most important to Chaucer, or metonymy. Metonymy is rhetorical “magic,” but convention and usage dull our sensitivity to the wonders and the weirdness that it works.


2. I wish to acknowledge here an enduring debt to Muscatine’s *Chaucer and the French Tradition* and Payne’s *The Key of Remembrance*. 
Before proceeding with this argument, it will be helpful to recall that in the last chapter we considered a passage that is one of the most exaggerated metonymies in all of Chaucer:

And this was his demande in soothfastnesse:
“Telle me the name of the privee stoon.”
And Plato answerde unto hym anoon,
“Take the stoon that Titanos men name.”
“Which is that?” quod he. “Magnasia is the same,”
Seyde Plato. “Ye, sire, and is it thus?
This is ignotum per ignocin.
What is Magnasia, good sire, I yow preye?”
(VIII G 1451–58)

We could almost think of this as Chaucer’s “classic case” of metonymic de-nominatio or “change of name”—the slide of the signifier along the metonymic chain is out of control here, but, even so, it demonstrates the undeniable importance of metonymy to the mind: we (think we) know things (and sometimes control them) by (changing) their names.

Fragment V

Save that the name of soveraynetee,
That wolde he have for shame of his degree.

CTV F 751–52; emphasis added

The Franklin’s Tale and its partner in Fragment V, the Squire’s Tale, are tales of magic; reading them we can see, I will argue, Chaucer’s understanding of the difference between magic and rhetoric. I will focus primarily on the Franklin’s Tale, but I will call attention to certain moments in the Squire’s Tale that corroborate my argument, especially the overtly self-conscious rhetorical proclamations the Squire makes. Magic attempts privately and secretly to effect changes in the world that rhetoric attempts publicly and openly to effect; but the difference is sharper than that, ultimately: magic works upon the external world without changing the practitioner (or, at least, so he thinks—that is why he practices it); rhetoric, though, just because it is public, never leaves the practitioner unchanged.

The Franklin, famously, goes to great lengths to (appear to) disown rhetoric and dissociate himself from its effects and practices:

I am a burel man,
At my bigynnyng first I yow biseche,
Have me excused of my rude speche.
(V F 716–18)

In part, of course, he is swiping at the Squire, who has gone to lengths just as great to display his rhetorical knowledge and savoir faire (for example, V F 401–8)—though the adverb “horsly” (V F 194) might be said to justify some disgruntlement from the Franklin (and others, too, perhaps). But be that as it may, the Franklin, I will argue, is someone who wants to use rhetoric as if he were not using it; with this attempt at magic, he becomes, I think, an anti-Chaucer. Practicing rhetoric as if it were magic, he seeks to control his world and the circulation within it, especially his own circulation as a “new man.” Chaucer himself, we may surmise, was also a “new man,” not unlike Arveragus and the Franklin, having risen above his station and, perhaps, paid the price for it (see chap. 5); and I think it is imperative to test the hypothesis that the Franklin is to some extent autobiographical for Chaucer—this hypothesis goes a long way toward accounting for rhetoric’s mobilization in the tale and in the fragment. As anti-Chaucer (that is, like Chaucer but to radically different ends), the Franklin’s first maneuver is to hide his rhetoric by a rhetorical sleight of words:

Colours ne knowe I none, withouten drede,
But swiche colours as growen in the mede,
Or elles swiche as men dye or peynte.
Colours of rethoryk been to me queynte;
My spirit feeleth noght of swich mateere.
(V F 723–27)

This is the design of rhetoric throughout the tale, to take back with one hand what it gives with the other (“now you see it, now you don’t’’): “Save that the name of soveraynetee, / That wolde he have for shame of his degree” (emphasis added). In order to demonstrate this design and its consequences, I will focus initially on Dorigen and the imagery of the Medusa that attends her in the tale. My eventual aim is to distinguish the kinds of

3. Middleton, “Chaucer’s ‘New Men.’”

4. Versions of the essay included here, first drafted in 1984, and subsequently revised many times, were presented, first, at the Annual Meeting of the South Atlantic MLA, Atlanta, Georgia, 29 October 1985; next in the Chaucer Section of the MLA, Chicago, 28 December 1985; and then at the Annual Meeting of the Medieval Academy of America, 17–19 April 1986, Albuquerque, New Mexico; I would like to thank, respectively, John Alford, John Hurt Fisher, and the Medieval Academy officers who organized the academy’s session in memory of Judson B. Allen. The essay was subsequently published as “Chaucer and Medusa: The Franklin’s Tale,” Chaucer Review 21 (1986): 74–90; and it has since been reprinted in New Casebooks, ed. V. Allen and A. Axiotis, pp. 242–52. In this version of the argument, I have simplified notation to acknowledge only specific debts.
rhetorical strategies Chaucer recognized and the kind, in particular, he favored for himself—the opposite of the Franklin’s.5

One particularly vexed problem that Chaucer addresses time and again in his poetry is the question of the exact relation between the letter and the spirit, the literal and the metaphoric. His reading of Dante sharpened his awareness of this problem, and especially his reading of Inferno, cantos 9 and 10. These cantos, which are the cantos of the heretics, especially the Epicureans, are also the cantos of Medusa. And in Dante’s figure of the Medusa, Chaucer found an adequate image for his own understanding of the dynamics of the letter and the spirit. This image and the understanding implicit in it help to articulate, in particular, the structure of the Franklin’s Tale. The Franklin’s Tale in certain ways is a palimpsest of Inferno, cantos 9 and 10, especially in its concern with Epicureanism, petrification, illusion, surfaces, and magic.

After Aurelius has told Dorigen that “the rokkes been aweye,”

He taketh his leve, and she astoned stood;
In al hir face nas a drope of blood.
She wende nevere han come in swich a trappe.
“Allas,” quod she, “that evere this sholde happe!
For wende I nevere by possibilitee
That swich a monstre or mervelle myghte be!
It is agayns the proces of nature.”

(V F 1339–45; emphasis added)

In the following remarks, I want to suggest that the word “monstre,” which occurs only three times in the Canterbury Tales, only eleven in all of Chaucer’s works, authorizes our understanding here a pun in astoned—namely, a-stoned, that is, “turned to stone.” I will propose that the monstre which Dorigen “sees” is the Medusa, she who turns to stone those who look on her.6 I will go on to suggest that the Franklin’s Tale is an essay in the astonishment/a-stone-ishment of surfaces. Dorigen is so astoned by the surface of Aurelius’s words that she does not even bother to go look at the coast so as to see and to investigate the truth of his claim. She is astoned by the

5. The Franklin’s words are not unlike Pandarus’s, “wordes white” (T&C 3.1567), and to the Franklin, we might say what Criseyde says to Pandarus: “O, whoso seeth yow knoweth yow ful lite” (3.1568); see, further, Currency of the Word, pp. 137.
6. For Medusa as monster, see Ovid’s Metamorphoses 5.216–17, trans. F. J. Miller.
monstre of the letter, and this Medusa inhibits her asking (really, a simple question), what does it mean?

In this tale, Chaucer explores the effects, uniformly ambiguous and problematic, of appearances or illusions on those who cannot penetrate either or both, and the end of his exploration is to recommend, however obliquely, a certain moral vigilance to his readers, an attitude of preparedness that never shrinks from going beneath the surfaces, or literal meanings, of texts, to isolate and identify the hidden motives that mobilize their rhetoric—especially the drive for originality.

Medusa serves Chaucer’s exploration as a figure of literalism, of the letter that kills (2 Cor. 3:6), and, correspondingly, of that kind of reading that insists on the letter and resists figuration, that reading which refuses to lift the veil or, if need be, to rend the veil, to see underneath. The crucial moment in Dante’s Commedia, which Chaucer must have known, occurs in the ninth canto of Inferno.

After the Furies have threatened Virgil and Dante with Medusa (Inferno 9.49–54) Virgil hides the pilgrim’s eyes (Inferno 9.55–60), lest he be turned to stone, and then, in one of his famous addresses to the reader,8 Dante the poet exclaims:

O voi ch’ave te li ’ntelletti sani,
mirate la dottrina che s’asconde
sotto ’l velame de li versi strani.

(Inferno 9.61–63)

[O you possessed of sturdy intellects, / observe the teaching that is hidden here / beneath the veil of verses so obscure.]

Dante does not, in other words, want his text to astonish his readers; he does not want it to be stony (petrosa—as were his rhymes to the Donna petrosa)9 or to turn others to stone; he does not want it to inhibit the necessary penetration of the letter that reading requires of “sani intelletti”; he does not want it, Medusa-like, to induce either oblivio or blindness.10 Quite the con-

7. See Freccero, “Medusa”; also available in his Dante: The Poetics of Conversion.
8. See Auerbach, “Dante’s Addresses to the Reader”; also Spitzer, “Addresses to the Reader.”
9. Freccero, in the article cited, has shown that Inferno, canto 9, is a palimpsest of Dante’s earlier rime to the “stony lady” (pp. 11–13); for further comment, see Mazzotta, Dante, Poet of the Desert, pp. 275–95.
trary, he wants it to awaken vigilance in his readers; he wants it to open their eyes, that they not be blind to the significances beyond the letter. Hence he urges his readers to lift the veil, to penetrate the text, to see underneath—all of which are procedures of right reading that Chaucer’s Dorigen omits because Aurelius and the clerk of Orleans’s “text” has “astoned” her, turned her to stone.

Following the lead in Dante’s text, I want to propose that Chaucer wrote the *Franklin’s Tale* as an exposure or penetration of literalism, the word *monstre* and the pun in *astonéd* being two of the many clues to this design. Hence the importance, now clearly evident, of the fact that Dorigen never *sees* the illusion on the coast of Brittany: all she “sees” is Aurelius’s word, his narrated “text”—that is, the letter. And this letter, a Medusa, so blinds her, so astonishes her, that she can not even bother, once under its literalistic, gorgonic spell, to test whether it refers to any reality. She cannot bother even to try to read.

As the Franklin observes, she is already like a stone in that she is easily engraved or impressed:

By proce, as ye knowen everichoon,
Men may so longe graven in a stoon
*Til som figure therinne emprented be.*
So longe han they conforted hire til she
Receyved hath, by hope and by resoun,
The emprentynge of hire consolacioun,
Thurgh which hir grete sorwe gan aswage;
She may nat alwey duren in swich rage.
(V F 829–36; emphasis added)

This likeness to a stone only hardens as events develop. And such stoniness is Chaucer’s target in the tale. He would isolate it and circumscribe it so as to purge it from his reading and also from his readers’ reading. The tale is written, in short, and is to be read as, an instance of how writers and readers should *not* read and write. It is a figure of the abuses of figuration.

Let me introduce another of the clues to Chaucer’s design not only as a corroboration of the reading I am proposing but also as an orientation within it. The Franklin says of Aurelius, languishing in lovesickness for Dorigen, that

His brest was hool, withoute for to sene,
But in his herte ay was the arwe kene.
And wel ye knowe that of a *sursanure*
In surgerye is perilous the cure,
But men myghte touche the arwe or come therby.
(V F 1111–15; emphasis added)

The word sursanure provides almost an emblem for the poem. The poem, I want to suggest, is like a wound “healed over on the surface” (sursanure).\(^\text{11}\) The whole of the Franklin’s Tale is a surface healing of his, the Franklin’s, wound of pride, the pride of the status-anxious, the parvenu, the guy on the make, circulating his way up in society.\(^\text{12}\) To be sure, the Franklin systematically tries to deflect our attention away from the “arwe,” that is, his insecurity and anxiety, and he almost succeeds. The illusion must be strong enough, in other words, to be seen finally as an illusion.

The wound that the Franklin wants to hide and the “arwe” beneath the surface of his tale, we can see, if we will look, in the exchange between him and Harry Bailey right after the Squire’s Tale:

“What, Frankeleyn! Pardee, sire, wel thou woost
That ech of yow moot telden atte leste
A tale or two, or breken his biheste.”
“That knowe I wel, sire,” quod the Frankeleyn.
“I prey yow, haveth me nat in desdeyn,
Though to this man I speke a word or two.”
(V F 695–701; emphasis added)

The words “haveth me nat in desdeyn” are crucial; they are just the overreaction, just the exaggeration, one would expect from the guy on the make, the man with too much at stake in how he appears before those whom he

\(^{11}\) See N. Davis, A Chaucer Glossary, s.v.

\(^{12}\) These remarks will indicate that I am not persuaded by Specht’s defense of the Franklin in Chaucer’s Franklin. I am a member of what Specht calls the “Lumiansky ‘school’” of critics, a “school” with serious misgivings about the Franklin’s character. In this “school,” Specht includes Robert B. Burlin, Alan T. Gaylord, Charles A. Owen, Jr., D. W. Robertson, Jr., and A. C. Spearing, among others. See p. 143 n. 3 of Specht’s study for a convenient bibliography of the works of these and other scholars on the Franklin’s Tale.
feels he must at all costs impress. Everything the Franklin does hereafter is intended to make as sure as possible that the pilgrims do not "have him in disdain." From this point on, he will concentrate all his efforts on presenting as smooth and glossy a surface as he can, for if we are astonished by the surface, we will not be moved to investigate the depths.

We can explain his behavior, in part, at this point, by recourse to his Epicureanism. As we learn in the General Prologue, the Franklin is "Epicurus owene sone" (I A 336), and for the present argument, the most important consequence of this genealogy is his implication in Epicurean epistemology. Epicurus taught that "all sensations are true"; only reasoning or judgment can err. The importance of this position for understanding the Franklin's Tale is obvious; it is a major source of the irony in the poem. In fact, the characters rely principally if not exclusively on the evidence of their senses, especially the sense of sight, but that evidence and those senses are almost always unreliable. Moreover, the judgment of each character and finally of the Franklin himself in one way or another at one time or another errs. Furthermore, this reliance on the senses is also a dependence obviously on surfaces—again, especially in regard to sight—and thus the Epicurean genealogy of the Franklin serves Chaucer's exposure or penetration of his superficiality, of his status-anxious flight from all depths.

Finally, I should take this occasion of discussing the Franklin's Epicureanism to observe again that cantos 9 and 10 of Inferno are the cantos of the heretics and that the principal heresy Dante confronts in them is Epicureanism (see Inferno 10.13–15). Chaucer, then, turns for his encounter with Epicureanism in the Franklin's Tale to that moment in the Commedia when Dante is most involved himself with this ideology: Chaucer is reading Dante on Epicureanism while he is writing his own exploration of it; and, in particular, like Dante, Chaucer is concerned in his exploration of Epicureanism with the problematic of interpretation, or the lifting of the veil and penetration of the surface.

We may see this more clearly by investigating further clues in the portrait. I assume that everyone would agree that the emphasis on the Franklin's appearance, and especially on the finery he wears (I A 357), contributes to the exposure of his superficiality. Equally ready agreement should also come

13. Two studies of Epicureanism pertinent to my argument are R. P. Miller, "Epicurean Homily on Marriage," and E. Brown, "Epicurus and Voluptas."
15. On Epicureanism and the problematics of interpretation, in Boccaccio as well as in Dante, see Durling, "Boccaccio on Interpretation"; see also, Stone, pp. 107ff., "The Upspringing of Metaphor."
for the similar significance of his professional pursuits. He is a minor politician, a sheriff, and (probably) an “accountant” or “auditor.” He is, in short, a man who must always appear in the best possible light and without any depths. If the Franklin had discernible depths, he might be held accountable for them, a situation that would compromise his designs. The Franklin must have no depths or, at least, appear to have no depths—it is his sauce that must always be poynaunt (I A 351–52).

His depths, or say profundities, are illusions that he masks to appear as profundities, and these masks are visages of Medusa: if we look into them, we will be petrified, afraid to question the Franklin, convinced rather that he is right. The most important instance of the paradox of illusory depths, depths that are surfaces and Medusas, is the sleight of hand by means of which the Franklin tries to deflect attention away from Arveragus’s desperate expediency:

Paraventure an heep of yow, ywis,
Wol holden hym a lewed man in this
That he wol putte his wyf in jupartie.
Herkneth the tale er ye upon hire crie.
She may have bettre fortune than yow semeth;
And whan that ye han herd the tale, demeth.
(V F 1493–98)

The perfect Epicurean gesture. Wait until all the evidence is in, let your senses collect all the idols, and then judge (demeth). But while we are thus on hold—playing this waiting game and gazing at this Medusa, petrified by the illusion of honor, gentilesse, and noble self-sacrifice—precisely what we are not doing in our petrification is investigating, penetrating, and prodding the tale, to ask the one question sure to betray the Franklin’s hand if he fails to keep the Gorgon in our faces: why does Arveragus threaten Dorigen’s life if she reveals to anyone what has happened to her?

In one breath, Arveragus claims, in lordly fashion, “Trouthe is the hyeste thyng that man may kepe,” but no sooner is that out than “he brast anon to wepe” (V F 1479–80); then, in the very next breath, he goes on, compounding his expediency and hypocrisy, to command her:

I yow forbede, up peyne of deeth,
That nevere, whil thee lasteth lyf ne breath,
To no wight telle thou of this adventure—

As I may best, I wol my wo endure—
Ne make no contenance of hevynesse,
That folk of yow may demen harm or gesse.
(V F 1481–86; emphasis added)

These speeches issue from the desperation of a man whose principal concern is to save his face (to preserve his name), no matter what the cost, even if the cost should be the life of his wife (for shame of his degree). But the Franklin has managed to create with his aside the illusion of a depth—there’s more here, he implies with this Medusa, than meets the eye—in order, paradoxically, to keep us from lifting the veil (the veil of his rhetoric) at this point. If we were to lift the veil at this point, if we were to awaken from the stony silence in which the Franklin has cast us, the game would be up: we would see Arveragus for what he is. Hence, we are promised a depth, but the promise of a depth is only a surface, a Gorgon, which astonishes us. And thus astomed we will not, the Franklin presumes, expose Arveragus or him. However, this depth, despite all the Franklin’s prestidigitation, does prove, inevitably, to be just one more surface—like the depth of Arveragus’s soveraynetee, which is only the name thereof (V F 751), a Medusa of a name to astonish all who look on the marriage between Dorigen and him.

The Franklin distracts us from Arveragus’s moral compromise in order to secure his own name of gentillesse. For if he can bring the tale to its bizarre conclusion, with its improbable reconciliations, then he can pose his demande d’amour or questione d’amore (typical of medieval love debates)—“Which was the mooste fre, as thynketh yow?” (V F 1622)—in emulation of the Knight (I A 1347–48), and this will be to suggest his parity with the Knight (whose son, incidentally, he has interrupted in order to tell his tale) and thus it will also imply that the quality and degree of his gentillesse are as good as the Knight’s. Moreover, having thus slyly sidled up alongside the Knight, he also and just as slyly takes center stage since his demande d’amour also asks, “Which was the most frank [free]?”—that is, which is the most like me, the Frankleyn?18 All of the Franklin’s rhetorical strategies, in brief, conspire to set him before our eyes: we never do not see the Franklin. Like his disclaimer of familiarity with the colors of rhetoric (V F 726–27), which instantly assures us that he is very acquainted with them, and like his interruption of his tale to gloss his own figures (“th’orisonte hath reft the sonne his lyght—/ This is as muche to seye as it was nyght” [V F 1017–18]), his demande d’amour tells us that the Franklin is quite up on the gentle art of fin’amors. His sauce is always poynaunt.

18. For an exhaustive etymological essay on the word franklin, see Specht, pp. 32–36.
The Franklin's Tale is, we should be able to see now, an idolatry of sorts.19 He, the Franklin, comes first, takes precedence. And precisely by appearing to put his readers first. That is, he must appear when he appears to put his readers first. Thus his art is not hidden under his art; quite the contrary, his art conspires to extrude his art—to make sure we see it. But his art otherwise is in keeping with the Ovidian formula (“ars adeo latet sua arte” [Metamorphoses 10.252])—that is, there is art and then there is the art of that art—so much so, in fact, that we could almost make the epigraph of his tale “ars adeo patet sua arte.” And if we did, one thing we would immediately see is that the Franklin is a magician who wants us to see his gimmicks. But the Franklin does not want to expose himself in his self-display—rather, he wants to conceal himself in it. He wants to appear artless—a “burel man” of “rude speche” (V F 716, 718)—in such a way as to declare his artfulness, so that we will not see his real artlessness: he is “a burel man.” If we see the art of his artful artlessness, we will have seen him as what he wants to be, a gentil man.

But immediately we see it this way, we also see what the Franklin is up to and what Chaucer wants us to see—namely, that the Franklin would intercept and misdirect the supplementation of interpretation.20 The Franklin would detour our interrogation of the signifier, by which we constantly substitute a later signifier for an earlier one in our search for the momentary probability of meaning, because he knows that, in his case, the signifier has hardened, has petrified, into the idolatrous signified of his own self-aggrandizement. If he does not intercept and misdirect our interrogation of the signifier, he knows we will discover, to our (not to mention his) dismay, that he does not signify, having long since ceased signifying, already and forever signified in the έτέκτων of his senses. An idolator, he has petrified the process of signifying, prematurely arrested it, wresting the probability of meaning into an illusory and self-serving certainty. Think of his table that “dormant in his halle alway / Stood redy covered al the longe day” (I A 353–54)—fixed, in other words, or frozen in place to be an icon of his wealth. The Franklin is all surface—what you see is what you get, “poynaunt sauce.” Hence his desperate attempt to persuade us that his surface, a finished signified, is a depth, a mysterious signifier, crying out for interpretation. The Franklin must, in short, sign us up as co-conspirators in his literalism. The Franklin's rhetorical ploy, then, is “look this way, not that way.” If we look that way, we will see the idolatrous signified and be undeceived. Medusa will not petrify us. If we look that way, we will see, for example, that

20. See Derrida, Of Grammatology, pp. 144–45.
Arveragus, noble and gentle and free though he appear, is really self-serving, caring far less that his wife adulterate herself and their marriage than that she might betray her adultery to the public, thus shaming him. Hence, the Franklin tries to make us look this way, his way: don’t judge Arveragus yet; what he is doing signifies more than you see; it signifies, if you will but wait, the generosity of Aurelius and that, too, of the clerk of Orleans; what he is doing is indeed a pregnant signifier, not an idol but a true sign. The Franklin, in short, tries to create a pseudodepth for Arveragus’s brittle surface, a Gorgon to frighten us off, lest we probe that surface and find out how shallow it really is, the wound festering just beneath. He must make us slide over the surface until we reach the pseudodepth, itself just more surface.

He must astonish us. Even as Aurelius astounds Dorigen, causing a sight that she sees only in his words to petrify her, such that she will not probe the surface—the surface, note well, of his words (which is the surface of the letter)—for its probable meaning but rather invents meanings, pseudodepths, astonished as she is by the Medusa of the letter, which, in turn, promptly terrify her even further by their gorgonic aspect, moving her to contemplate suicide (V F 1360–66, 1458). In both cases, the necessary intelligence to convert signifiers into other signifiers—to ask, in short, what does it mean?—is inhibited. In both cases, questioning is intercepted and either suppressed altogether or purposely misdirected. In both cases, literalism prevails.

Literalism, we should be able to see by now, is a difficult matter. According to Scripture, “the letter kills, but the spirit gives life” (2 Cor. 3:6). I would like to construe this Scripture literally, I hope not literalistically, in light of my argument so far, to mean that literalism kills by stopping, by terminating, the process of signifying, which is, on the other hand, the very process that the spirit promotes. The spirit gives life because it keeps the process of signifying, which is co-incident and co-terminus with life itself, going. The spirit of life is the process of signifying, the spirit of life is the making of significance.

Literalism, however, kills by prematurely reducing the signifier, any signifier, to the signified of desire. Literalism stops life by stopping the quest and questioning for meaning; it replaces the question with a premature answer, which is all too often a law. Literalism is the residue of exhausted desire. (Hence, the converse: love, quickened desire, is the origin of figuration, of the inspiriting of language—as in fin’amors.) Literalism is the despair of significance, of the quest for meaning.

21. See Covino, p. 8; and Feyerabend’s arguments against the “tyranny of universals,” pp. 262–64.
Opposed to literalism is the power of the trope, the energy of poetry. Poetry is the scripture of desire, the writing of unexhausted love. Poetry exists to destabilize the signified, to randomize the meaning, to start the quest and the questioning all over again. Every religion, *qua* institutionalized rite, has always feared poetry, for poetry knows that God is always elsewhere. When literalism or legalism or institutionalism or conventionality of any sort threatens to rigorize or harden or petrify the signifier in the text of desire, poetry returns (re-tropes) to set the signifier free, to break the stone, to open the text (or, as it may be, to feed the faithful the Word or send them into the desert). Whether by irony or by allegory or by symbolism or by puns or by some other rhetorical device, poetry re-convenes its signifiers in a new text of desire and a new desire of the text (which is, I think, the deep structure of metonymy). Poetry is not religion, it is above all not an idol, precisely in order that it may keep religion alive, save it from idols and idolatry.

The proper use of poetry, then, is as an antidote to the idolatry of the letter (one of the forms of the “venom of so long ago”). Poetry melts the letter down and puts it back into circulation. This is why it is feared: the Republic, such as Plato’s, can never be a republic of letters. Chaucer’s Franklin, in particular, fears especially the vivifying of the letter in the conventions by which he has achieved and maintains his status. If the Host will not respect (or worship?) the idol of *gentillesse*, then the Franklin may find himself in *disdeyn*.

Hence the many maneuvers he deploys to keep his idols always preeminent in our senses lest we see what we want to see. The Franklin would have us agree with him that thought or reflection is unnecessary: “For hooly chirches feith in oure bileve / Ne suffreth noon illustioues us to greve” (V F 1133–34). The apparent piety will not stand up to scrutiny. Note well, the “feith” in our “bileve” does not lead to the disproving or even dispelling of illusions; quite the contrary, the syntax clearly says that illusions exist, that they remain—only they cannot “grieve” us, we are somehow immune. Perhaps since we do not think about the illusions, we do not risk being contaminated by them, even as we also do not risk penetrating, understanding, and dispelling the illusions. Be that as it may, obviously we are not supposed to think, according to the Franklin—the magician has spelled us of that duty—for if we did we might also think about him and see what we want to see, seeing thus through him.

The Franklin, in a sense, cannot afford poetry, for the signifier in poetry is too volatile, too unstable, too full of thought, and will always betray its premature reduction to the signified of desire. And yet, to assuage his status
anxiety, the Franklin must afford the illusion of poetry, else his audience will “have [him] in disdeyn.” Clearly, he is on dangerous ground. Hence, he must do with us as the clerk of Orleans does with Aurelius: “Sire, I releesse thee thy thousand pound, / As thou right now were cropen out of the ground, / Ne nevere er now ne haddest knowne me” (V F 1613–15; emphasis added). He must treat us, address us, as if we had been, as the saying goes, “born yesterday,” or even more recently, a moment ago. He must deal with us, as a magician would, as if we were complete innocents, without any past, without any beginning, without any depths—other, that is, than the hole from which we had just emerged completely whole.22 Only so can he indebted us to him, as the clerk indebted Aurelius to him, by appearing to bestow freedom on us (our freedom to interpret him and his tale). Only so can he appropriate a trope of “originality”—the power to treat us as if we “right now were cropen out of the ground”—which excuses him from any further “depth”: we need consider no other text but his, we know no other text but his. Thus he becomes original. With his demande d’amour, he begets us his readers as specular wholes in which his surface, the signified of his desire, disappears as ultimate depth, becoming the signifier of our desire—our desire to know “which was the most free?,” our desire to interpret. With his demande d’amour, the Franklin subsumes our judgment in his idols, converts us into his signifiers, and emerges a very profound man, full of wisdom and mystery. Just look at all the excellent minds that through the centuries have tried to answer his demande, that have thus contributed to his appearance of profundity and originality—by giving him significance, the significance of their effort at signifying.

The Franklin, we can observe now, must be more original than the Knight. It is with the Knight, clearly, that he competes. It is the Squire, the Knight’s son, whom he interrupts. A “new man,” he must become “older” than the Knight, socially and poetically alike. The Franklin must make his origin original, so as to surpass the Knight in gentilless e and thus assuage his status anxiety, his anxiety of circulation. Because of his anxiety, the Franklin

22. The question of magic and the imagery of emerging from the ground are almost certainly further dimensions of the palimpsest that Chaucer is writing on Inferno, canto 9, where magic is a crucial element in the design (see Mazzotta, pp. 286–90). Early in the canto, Virgil explains to Dante that the witch Erichtho had sent him to the “cerchio di Giuda” (“circle of Judas”), or circle of the traitors to benefactors, to bring back a soul to its body (Inferno 9.19–30). Chaucer may be alluding to this moment when he composes the clerk of Orleans’s “releesse” of Aurelius. See also the Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale, VIII G 1042–46.
must work his magic lest we have him in disdain. For many, no doubt, he succeeds—(magical) charm, after all, goes a long way. But Chaucer, I argue, had even farther to go.

**Fragment I**

Rhetoric is “real magic.” Metaphor and metonymy, in particular, transform the world by changing the names of the world.

> In the beginning was the Word.  
> John

> Veni, vidi, vici.  
> Caesar

> “What do you think of Western civilization?”  
> Anonymous interlocutor  
> —“I think it would be a good idea.”  
> Mohandas Gandhi

> I have a dream.  
> Martin Luther King, Jr.

> In the beginning was the pun.  
> Samuel Beckett

Unlike the Franklin—whom nonetheless he understands very well, himself circulating in social status even as the Franklin does—Chaucer practices “magical” rhetoric rather than rhetorical magic: Chaucer does not hide his tricks. In fact, what makes him so difficult, as well as endlessly fascinating, is that his tricks are always on display. This is why I think it is as true to say of him as it is of Shakespeare that Shakespeare has come to be read as if he taught us how to read, as if his texts are the wellsprings of those specifically literary inflections of language that are at once most prized and most often appraised in the pro-

24. See *Currency of the Word*, p. 137.
cessing of a poetic text, whether by reader or critic. The term “Shakespere” thus stands in retrospect as the primary manifestation of that sustained and extreme verbal originality, that driven invention, density, and obliquity, which is literary language. With “his” lexical and syntactical eccentricity, concatenation of imagery, and sustained verbal opacity, “Shakespere” names an exemplary case of that working of words beyond their referential service which has come to be called poetic. . . . The exemplary status of Shakespearean textuality resides therefore in the fact that such textuality defines for the act of reading not predominantly the modern discursive subject but, more decidedly, the modern subject-position of the reader, adrift amid a constant play of signifiers, a subject split, doubled, ambivalent, layered, elided, and in flux, moving forward only by doubling back, proceeding by reprocessing, reading by rewriting.25

The only real difference is, of course, the great fifteenth-century vowel shift—if we bother to listen to Chaucer, we understand why Spenser declared that in him “the pure well head of poesie did dwell” (Faerie Queene, “Mutabilitie Cantos,” VII.9.3–4); and we can readily admit that Shakepere differs only in degree, not in kind, from the “poesie” of Chaucer.26

In order to substantiate these claims, I am going to concentrate on metonymy in Fragment I of the Canterbury Tales; and in order to convey why I think metonymy is so important to understanding Chaucer’s art and in order to go beyond work already done, I would like to begin with the common Latin word for metonymy, denominatio, which I have introduced briefly already (in the introduction). Denominatio is almost a literal translation of the Greek that means “change of name”—metonymy denominates, that is to say, “takes the name away.” It would be difficult to exaggerate how important this definition is, and Chaucer would have been able to find it easily; for example, in the Rhetorica ad Herennium (IV.xxxiii.43), we read:

Denominatio est quae ab rebus propinquis et finitimis trahit orationem qua possit intelligi res quae non suo vocabulo sit appellata.

[Metonymy is the figure which draws from an object closely akin or associated an expression suggesting the object meant, but not called by its own name.]

25. Stewart, p. 64.
26. See Chesterton, Chaucer, p. 17: “Shakespeare’s old English was near enough to be easily modernized; Chaucer’s old English was just remote enough to make it hard to do so while preserving the accent and melody.”
Notice, in particular, in this passage the emphasis on the absence of vocabulary—"quae non suo vocabulo sit appellata." Metonymy is very much the trope of absence.

Thus, for example, Kenneth Burke calls metonymy one of the four master tropes and lists its operation as reduction; and David Lodge hypothesizes that the basic operation of metonymy is deletion.27 I strongly suspect also that Lacan argues that desire is metonymy just because every time I name my desire, I also delete or absent something else it might be—and might better be. If the symbol is the death of the thing, metonymy as symbol most obviously murders the thing by denominating it something else. Thus Puttenham in the sixteenth century claims:

[we] do as it were wrong name the person or the thing. So neuerthelesse as it may be vnderstood, it is by the figure metonymia, or misnamer.28

Since, moreover, most things do not have a proper name but only a figural name, metonymy as “change of name” may well be, as many have argued in recent years, the most fundamental of all figures of speech, more fundamental even than metaphor.29

Before proceeding further with the definition and ontology of metonymy, I would like to introduce the metonymy in the Canterbury Tales that will most concern me. It is the metonymy “cut” that plays a very important role in the General Prologue, the Knight’s Tale, and the Pardoner’s Tale. I will be arguing that the metonymy “cut” is a radical of Chaucer’s meaning in the poem.

We first meet the word “cut” at the end of the General Prologue when Harry invites the Knight to “draw cut”:

“Now draweth cut, er that we ferrer twynne;
He which that hath the shortesteshal bigynne.
Sire Knyght,” quod he, “my mayster and my lord,
Now draweth cut, for that is myn accord.”

(I A 835–38)

We then learn that “the cut fil to the Knight” (I A 845), and finally the Knight says “welcome be the cut, a Goddes name” (I A 854). I am here

27. Lodge, Modes of Modern Writing, p. 76; Burke, Grammar of Motives, pp. 504–5; see also Lanham, Handlist of Rhetorical Terms, s.v.
29. See, in addition to the reference above to Panther and Radden (intro., n. 31), Culler, Pursuit of Signs, pp. 197–205, and also Hoey, “Name on the Coin.”
construing the metonymy as the classic cause-effect type, where the cause, or the act of cutting, replaces the effect, and thus deletes the name of the thing that is cut—we are never told, note well, what the material was that Harry used for the drawing. And this is highly characteristic of metonymy—the name if not also the thing disappears in metonymy, deleted (to use Lodge’s term) by the name that remains.

If we ask why just this metonymy in just this place, the answer seems obvious—though perhaps best given in the form of another question: what does a Knight do for a living? He cuts people. When the cut falls to the Knight (and we change his name to “he who cuts”), the method as well as the meaning of Chaucer’s poem emerges: the metonymy has deleted all but the essential datum that we need to understand the Knight. He who has spent his life cutting others and who will tell a tale about cutting others is cut out by this metonymy for us to see the cut he has suffered in becoming who he is. And we may go ahead even this soon to see that when the Knight interrupts the Monk, he does indeed cut him off; and when the Knight reconciles Harry Bailey and the Pardoner, it is, just as we would expect from the metonymy, a reconciliation over the threat of a cut—Harry’s threat to cut off the Pardoner’s testicles; and, finally, it will help the argument to register here as well that exactly what the Knight cannot do in telling his own tale, as generations of Chaucerians have observed, is cut himself off at the appropriate place. The Knight’s famous predilection for occupatio is his ironic failure to cut just when he most needs to cut. With this example in mind, we can explore further the dynamics of metonymy as figure and thus prepare ourselves better to understand how the metonymy “cut” functions in Chaucer’s poem.

30. I am not persuaded by the hesitations expressed in the OED, 2nd edition, s.v., primarily because, as also acknowledged there, we have no viable alternative to the explanation from metonymy. I would like to recognize here and thank James Marchand who discussed the metonymy “cut” with me (by e-mail) and agreed that, in the current state of our knowledge, it is best understood as a metonymy of the cause-effect type.

31. To follow Burke—“The basic ‘strategy’ in metonymy is this: to convey some incorporeal or intangible state in terms of the corporeal or tangible” (p. 506)—“cut” deletes the material (straw, or what have you) and leaves behind the very tangible effect (a cut) to suggest the intangible trauma that the Knight has suffered in becoming who he is.

32. Important to my thinking here is Lacan’s understanding of the coupure (“cut”) in the formation of the subject (see “Subversion du sujet et dialectique du désir,” Écrits, pp. 793–827, esp. 801 and 816–18). The subject is never whole except as sutured across a cut in the fabric of being—a kiss is an exquisite example since bodily orifices are the most primal “cuts” in our experience. Denial of the cut is always pathological.

33. On the Knight’s fondness for occupatio and the way in which it subverts his narrative, see, e.g., Andersen, “Canterbury Tales ‘Rethors.’”
Like all students of metaphor and metonymy in the twentieth century, I am indebted to Roman Jakobson. No discussion of metonymy really can begin without acknowledging his contribution, in the classic study he published in 1971.\textsuperscript{34} In this essay, he aligns metaphor with the paradigmatic axis of speech and metonymy with the syntagmatic: metaphor is a function of similarity, and metonymy, a function of contiguity; metaphor selects similar units from within the paradigm of the code (\textit{langue}); metonymy combines related or contiguous units from the syntactic chain (\textit{parole}). These are now virtually universal assumptions in literary criticism and literary theory in our time; they are fertile and remarkably resilient definitions that have permeated many literary, philosophical, and psychoanalytic practices, most notably, among the latter, that of Lacan.\textsuperscript{35}

I am personally most attracted to the applications made by Lacan, which I intend to discuss at length elsewhere, but I am also instructed by the work in the late 1970s of David Lodge, on which I will draw now:

Metonymies . . . are condensations [or deletions] of contexture. The sentence, “Keels crossed the deep” (a non-metaphorical but still figurative utterance) is a transformation of a notional sentence, \textit{The keels of the ships crossed the deep sea} (itself a combination of simpler kernel sentences) by means of deletions. A rhetorical figure, rather than a précis, results because the items deferred are not those which seem logically the most dispensable. As the word \textit{ship} includes the idea of keels, \textit{keels} is logically redundant and would be the obvious candidate for omission in a more concise statement of the event, and the same applies to \textit{deep}. Metonymy and synecdoche, in short, are produced by deleting one or more items from a natural combination, but not the items it would be most natural to omit: this illogicality is equivalent to the coexistence of similarity and dissimilarity in metaphor.

This very efficient explanation will help us better to grasp what is actually poetic in Chaucer’s metonymy “cut.” Lodge’s explanation not only accounts for the operation of metonymy but also intimates the mystery of metonymy, what he calls “illogicality”—namely, the apparently random choice of what to delete, what to retain. The term I have coined for this phenomenon in my own work over the past twenty-five years is juxtology, by which I mean to convey just that mystery of combined elements that is otherwise illogical and irrational.\textsuperscript{36} Juxtology suggests that what appears initially illogical in

\textsuperscript{34} Jakobson, “Two Aspects of Language.”
\textsuperscript{35} See Siboni, \textit{Les Mathèmes de Lacan}.
\textsuperscript{36} See my studies cited in the intro. n. 35.
metonymy may have, to the contrary, deep structure of relationships beyond coincidence, beyond logic—there is connection where naive perception sees none and where logic fails to secure entailment. The affront to reason in a metonymy is actually the confrontation with the juxtologic of the imagination in its restless energy of adjacency.37

It is universally recognized among students of metonymy that its involvement in and dependence on contiguity and association relate it to the contingent and the accidental, or more precisely, the conventional, which sutures the contingent and the accidental into the recognizable and familiar. The change of name that is metonymy means just that, the exchangeability of names deriving from their conventionality and accidental relationship to things.38 We have here the main reason that many rhetoricians suspect that metonymy is more primordial than metaphor.

Be that as it may, to denominate, as in metonymy, is to delete, apparently at random, and to leave behind a name or names that must be accounted for just in terms of why they were selected instead of others. To raise this into a theoretical axiom, we can say that metonymy forces the reader to supply something missing; metaphor forces the reader to deal with something supplied.39 From which it follows, and I can hardly overemphasize this, that in metonymy the audience is engaged in finishing the text, supplying connections amongst the data of the text. In the formulation of Lodge, “the metonymic text . . . deluges us with a plethora of data, which we seek to unite into one meaning.” Indeed, it is a plethora just because something is missing, or that, perhaps unifying, principal that governs what was deleted, what was retained. It is the absence of such a principle that allows the data to proliferate and to give that sense of the random and the accidental that all agree is associated with metonymy.40

37. Consult on this point the splendid essay by Percy, “Metaphor as Mistake.”
38. See Culler, Pursuit of Signs, pp. 198–99.
39. Lodge writes (p. 111):
If it is asked why we should value literature written in the metonymic mode, . . . we should probably answer that it is the very resistance which the metonymic mode offers to generalizing interpretation that makes the meaning we do finally extract from it seem valid and valuable. No message that is decoded without effort is likely to be valued, and the metaphoric mode has its own way of making interpretation fruitfully difficult: though it offers itself eagerly for interpretation, it bewilders us with a plethora of possible meanings. The metonymic text, in contrast, deluges us with a plethora of data, which we seek to unite into one meaning.
40. Here one can demonstrate the relevance of metonymy and metaphor to psychoanalysis. Following Lacan, who associates metonymy with displacement (metaphor with condensation), in his reading of Freud’s articulation of the dreamwork, we can see that frequently
Lodge like numerous others depending on Jakobson observes that metonymy is preeminently the rhetoric of realistic fiction, the novel in particular (whereas metaphor is the rhetoric preeminently of lyric poetry). The insight expressed here can be expressed in terms of juxtology to say that metonymy juxtaposes apparently random and accidentally arranged details into patterns whose gaps and absences demand the reader’s labor of supplementation. Realism, the novel, cinema, and other forms regularly categorized under the rhetoric of metonymy achieve their effects by this accumulation of juxtological detail that compels the reader’s participation in suturing the disparate elements into meaning (hence the reader contributes the “feeling” of reality).

The foregoing discussion, besides seeming forbiddingly theoretical, may also seem irrelevantly modern, having no immediate bearing on Chaucer. Such an inference, however, would be mistaken. Consider the following discussion of metonymy by Geoffrey of Vinsauf, whose famous Poetria Nova we know Chaucer read and emulated.

**METONYMY** (denominatio).

What does fear produce? Pallor. What does anger cause? A flush. Or what, the vice of pride? A swelling up. We refashion the statement thus: *Fear grows pale, anger flushes; pride swells*. There is greater pleasure and satisfaction for the ear when I attribute to the cause what the effect claims as its own.

Let the comb’s action groom the hair after the head has been washed. Let scissors trim away from the hair whatever is excessive, and let a razor give freshness to the face. In this way, art teaches us to attribute to the instrument, by a happy turn of expression, what is proper to the one who uses it. So from the resources of art springs a means of avoiding worn-out paths and of travelling a more distinguished route.

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psychopathology displaces the subject along the syntagmatic chain, deleting one identity with another, afflicting the subject with a plethora of identities, into which the subject must supply a word—his word, not his parents’ or society’s or the church’s or the state’s, but *bis*—before he can suture identity into meaning and recover from the disastrous slippage. The subject achieves this result, however, only in the “talking cure,” i.e., with another, who negotiates the transference and its crises—the substance is *between them* in order eventually to be *in him*. When Lacan declares, “le moi, c’est le metonymique,” he is attempting to teach the subject the true consequences of changing names. See, further, *The Psychoses*, pp. 214–30, esp. p. 227; and the discussions in Chaitin, *Rhetoric and Culture in Lacan*, pp. 12–57; and in Fink, *Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, p. 26.
Again, a statement expressed in the following way adds luster to style: *We have robbed their bodies of steel, their coffers of silver, their fingers of gold.* The point here is not that zeugma adorns the words with its own figure of speech, but that when I am about to mention something, I withhold its form completely and mention only the material. Whereas a less elegant style mentions both, art is silent about one, and conveys both by a single term. This device brings with it three advantages: it curtails the number of words required, . . . It curtails the number of words in that a single term is more succinct than a word-group; . . . In the figures given above there is a common element of adornment and weightiness, arising from the fact that an object does not come before us with unveiled face, and accompanied by its natural voice; rather, an alien voice attends it, and so it shrouds itself in mist, but in a luminous mist.41

I have emphasized in this remarkable passage those numerous instances where Geoffrey insists on deletion, excision and concision, curtailment, withholding, silence, and mist—in short, the work of metonymy as the work of cutting. Metonymy cuts the text as it cuts from the text by denomination, “misnaming” (Puttenham) the words and the things that the reader must then supply from his or her own imagination and feelings so as to “knytte up” (X I 47) and complete the text, suture it, to be able to understand it.

Let me now illustrate quickly with what I take to be one of the most vivid metonymies I can cite. I mean my skin. Pause with me for a moment to think about it. The largest organ in my body, my skin, is denominated by the verb that means to cut my skin off, to flay me, to strip me of it. I can think of no more arresting metonymy to make my point. Any dictionary of the English language will tell you that the noun “skin” is immediately derived from the verb “to skin.” It is a metonymy of cause-effect, just like “cut”—the effect of the verb, the result of its action, is applied as name to that which undergoes or suffers the action of the verb. My skin is not that at all; that is to say, if you skin me what is left is, on the one hand, a dying organism suffering hideously, and, on the other, a hide or pelt—the covering that was an organ of my body is dead, skinned. The word “skin” saves us a lot of other words—the covering that contains my body and protects my vital organs from exposure to the elements, for example—but it also, as I hope you can clearly see now, eliminates a very great deal as well—it skins the language.

41. *Poetria Nova*, lines 974–1050, trans. Nims, pp. 51–54; italics are Nims’s; double underlinings are mine.
At this point, two more steps are necessary in our analysis of metonymy before we can apply our work to Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*. The first step is to acknowledge as many other critics have that metonymy is closely allied to irony. Hayden White, for example, following Kenneth Burke, is one among many who have demonstrated that metonymy leads directly to irony in the measure to which the cause-effect relationship generates discrepancy that can then be read off as ironic: in other words, given this cause, that effect is so discrepant that the relationship can only be read as ironic.\(^{42}\) White, in particular, shows that history written in the mode of metonymy inevitably ends in irony—so great a cause, for example, some revolution, ends in so disappointing a result, the return of tyranny, perhaps. We can also see the ironic consequence when we consider the container-contained metonymy. This container contains that substance. This container is such and such, but it contains something else, perhaps of higher value. To take an example from the *Canterbury Tales*, the content “nun” is a recognizable ideal, but the container, Madame Eglantyne, is a less than ideal substitute for the thing itself. You can see, then, the deep relationship between metonymy in Chaucer and the irony for which he is renowned. Those effects in his poetry often studied as estates satire or category failures or discrepancies between the universal and particular (nominalism, in effect) are rhetorically most usefully construed as products of metonymy, in particular the container-contained metonymy—every one of the pilgrims can be understood as a particular container denominating (changing the name of) an ideal content, with results predictably discrepant if not disappointing or, on occasion, offensive (I think of the Summoner, for example). I should observe before leaving this point that this metonymy-irony could also usefully be characterized in terms of cause and effect: for example, the Church causes the Summoner; if then the Summoner denominates the Church, the irony resulting is palpable. But as we can also see from this example, one could read this off as a container-contained metonymy (the Church contains the Summoner).

The final step to be taken follows on naturally, I think, from the last one. As many others have observed, metonymy is intimately bound up with property. Metonymy associates (the names of) the properties of things with (the names of) the properties of other things. Metonymy invariably raises the question of what is proper to a thing and/or its name. Thus, to continue with a metonymy from Geoffrey of Vinsauf, when I say “pride swells,” I am actually saying that swelling is a property of pride. Here we can see how

\(^{42}\) White, *Metahistory*, pp. 315–16.
modern theory has developed and pursued a notion of the conventional and the contingent in the trope of metonymy, for the question inevitably arises why such and such should be the property of a thing. Pride may swell. But it may also hide itself behind a mask of hypocrisy, for example. Evidently, there is some trick (or at least convention) to choosing which property to emphasize. More profoundly, there is a trick, perhaps a trope, to naming a property in the first place. When metonymy deletes one name in favor of another, the crisis of property is, in fact, on display. Why should this property and not that property be deleted? Why should the cut fall to the Knight rather than the straw or some other material that might have been used for the drawing? The metonymy "cut" deletes the material from which the cut is made, but it also, when applied to the Knight ("the cut fil to the Knyght"), deletes, say, the property of healing or of praying or the Cross. The subtlety of the poetry should not be underestimated, but neither should be the obviousness of the rhetorical strategy—it is a cut, a metonymic cut, and when we suture it, we learn, as I hope to show, what, if not who, the Knight is.43

To begin this work, I would like to cite the next instance in the *Canterbury Tales* of the metonymy "cut"; in this instance, it is what I will call a "submerged metonymy." In the course of his tale, the Knight tells us that Theseus has a great urge to go hunting:

The destinee, ministre general,
That executeth in the world over al
The purveiaunce that God hath seyn biforn,
So strong it is that, though the world had sworn
The contrarie of a thyng by ye or nay,
Yet somtyme it shal fallen on a day
That falleth nat eft withinne a thousand yeer.
For certeinly, oure appetites heer,
Be it of werre, or pees, or hate, or love,
Al is this ruled by the sighte above.

(I A 1663–72; emphasis added)

Here the word "cut" appears submerged inside "executeth." He who by profession cuts and who by profession seeks everywhere order and rule—this latter point, of course, is a commonplace about the Knight in Chaucer studies—seeks order and rule by cutting, even as Theseus cuts between Arcite and Palamon or between the Theban women and Creon, and so it follows—but the consequence, you see, is juxtological—that he would use a word to describe the minister general of the world, destiny, that says at one and the

43. Notice how at this point I also am applying my theory of the "substance between us": if Chaucer uses "cut," I meet him in the in-between to construct a meaning of two minds.
same time, “carry out” and “cut” (we should remember also that traditionally the Fates cut the thread of life). And he uses it because it is proper to him—that is, it is a property of his character—to cut as well as execute.

Of course, it will be objected that this is either merely an accident, or not really possible given the pronunciation of Middle English or, if possible, inaudible to Chaucer’s audience, et cetera. These are the objections of those who, I believe, mistrust the hidden lawfulness of poetry. Like Garrett Stewart, Christopher Ricks, Geoffrey Hartman, and many others, I believe it is precisely poetry that works this way: it is the property of poetry to suture such a cut. Or, you can put it this way: it is the work of poetry to hear the sound of things, and the sound of things is frequently illogical, irrational, unpredictable, not subject to intention. And I deliberately conclude my list with intention since, of course, typically that is the most allegedly powerful objection to any reading that is not safe and coolproof. But to reduce a text to an author’s intention is to deprive that author of the elementary body of the unconscious not to mention the imagination. I believe that the slide of “cut” into “executeth” is a movement of imagination if not also unconscious juxtology that transcends logical, conscious, rational entailment. It is the kind of freedom of mind that the Knight himself does not enjoy: he would if possible consciously make his cut before such juxtology could take place (he would already have cut me off, exercising his class and military superiority to silence me); and that, I propose, is why he is less good a poet than Chaucer.

But Chaucer did, after all, invent the character of the Knight. Chaucer was attracted to order, precision, and structure. But he was not so obsessed with them that he sacrificed either his imagination or his unconscious mind to a prescript(ion) of order. As I have argued at length elsewhere on numerous

44. See, in particular, Hartman’s “Adam on the Grass with Balsamum,” pp. 137ff., where the juxtology of cadence in “Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds” helps make the telling point.

45. One of the most convincing as it is also one of the most astonishing instances of juxtology in medieval English writing I know is that discovered by my student William Stephenson in my 1991 graduate seminar Studies in Middle English, and subsequently published as “The Acrostic ‘Fictio’ . . . in The Testament of Cresseid”:

57: Of his distres me neidis nocht reheirs,
58: F or worthic Chaucer in the samin buik
59: I n gudelie termis, and in joly veirs
60: C ompylit hes his cairis, quha will luik.
61: T o brek my sleip ane vther quair I tuik,
62: I n quhilk I fand the fatall destenie
63: O f fair Cresseid, that endit wretchitlie.

When we remember that Henryson follows this stanza in the next one asking, “Quha wait gif all that Chaucer wrat was trew?” (line 64), we see, I think, the power of juxtological adjacency—beyond intention, beyond entailment—to compel a meaning of two minds. I cite the text of Testament of Cresseid, ed. Kindrick.
Chaucer does not write according to a prescript. He is not, in other words, his character Pandarus, who devises a prescript(ion) for how the romance should go and then pretends to read the book (T&C 3.979–80) when it appears to have come to pass as he imagined it, ignoring that this conclusion to the romance could well be premature and not necessarily the definitive conclusion (there are two more books of the story to go). Chaucer is such a good storyteller just because he has a constitutional suspicion of conclusions—this, of course, is evident at the end of Troilus and Criseyde. The Knight, on the other hand, is quite sure of his conclusions—it is just the means to his ends that repeatedly escape his control, his cut.

No one, arguably, is more frustrated by the Knight’s failure to cut his narrative than the Miller, who tells a tale, we know, that is a version of the Knight’s Tale, only much shorter, far faster, and hugely funnier. The Miller has cut the Knight’s Tale, with a vengeance we might say (“I kan a noble tale for the nones, / With which I wol now quite the Knyghtes tale” [I A 3126–27]). He tells, in effect, a parody of the tale—complete with an old man who is a father figure, two suitors, a pretty young woman for them to compete over, et cetera—and we can, with considerable benefit, think of the relationship between the two tales as a metonymy of the container-contained type. The Miller’s Tale denominates the Knight’s Tale as a fabliau: the genre “change of name” entails a different view of most of the issues encountered in the Knight’s Tale.47 The precision of the parody is astounding—right down to the repetition of astrological machinery in Nicholas’s involvement with the stars. One could almost imagine that Chaucer set out to answer the question, can I tell the very same story twice but in a different genre each time? And the answer was, yes.

When we consider the two poems in this light, what emerges, I think, is a clue to the motive behind Chaucer’s experimentation: the repetition is symptomatic of his anxiety of circulation. He desires to understand the dissolution and the resolution of the aristocratic world in the bourgeois world. For the circulation of status, money, sexuality, and language has reduced the

46. See Currency of the Word, pp. 115–22; also “‘Noon Englissh Digne.’”
47. See, further, Hines, Fabliau in English, pp. 109–10, esp. p. 109:

However doubtful we should be about attempts to associate the emergence of the medieval fabliau with any particular social class, it is significant that Chaucer wishes to represent the fabliau in precisely such terms.

This, in my opinion, is an important principle, clearly articulated here, one that, I think, is most expansively articulated by Leicester in “Art of Impersonation”—Chaucer, in other words, along with much else, is also an excellent social historian, from whom we can learn as much history as we can from any other source.
distance between the classes (although it has not eliminated it), and the resultant anxiety seeks expression in society's different denominations. Exactly what is the difference between the Knight's world and the Miller's?

Less perhaps than we think. If we focus for the moment on the character Absolon, we can perhaps see the point most clearly. First, he aspires to noble demeanor, he puts on airs; he is ambitious in the church; he dresses if not above then certainly outside his station (his pretensions are perhaps clearest and loudest in his dress). He is, in short, circulation run amok. In the measure to which he is a social climber and in the measure to which, as his biblical namesake (2 Sam. 14.26) implies, he is an overreacher, he represents the excesses of representation that were beginning to plague the fourteenth century—this perhaps is most visible, literally, in his shoes:

Now was ther of that chirche a parish clerk,
The which that was ycleped Absolon.
Crul was his heer, and as the gold it shoon,
And strouted as a fanne large and brode;
Ful streight and evene lay his joly shode.
His rode was reed, his eyen greye as goos.
With Poules wyndow corven on his shoos,
In hoses rede he wente fetisly.
Yclad he was ful smal and proprely
Al in a kirtel of a lyght waget;
Ful faire and thikke been the poyntes set.
And therupon he hadde a gay surplys
As whit as is the blosme upon the rys.

(I A 3312–24)

That is, "his shoes were 'windowed,' i.e., the uppers were cut and latticed so that they resembled the windows of St. Paul's Cathedral in London." A representation of representation in a representation in a representation. Note that I am not trying to turn him into a personification nor do I think allegory is at issue. Rather, like the pangolin studied famously by Mary Douglas, or that creature that being both of land and trees, both of hair and scales, is of neither, Absolon is a category disturbance, a noise in the system that focuses the signal in a way that cannot be avoided. Obviously, he does

49. Riverside Chaucer, p. 845a.
not belong in the Miller’s world any more than he belongs in the Knight’s, and yet there he is, sharing characteristics of both. But just because he does not fit, he conveys a very great deal of information if we pay attention to his character and his body.

Absolon is the instrument who measures incidents of discord in the tale. On the one hand, of course, he is the agent of the main discord—he brands Nicholas’s behind. But, in addition, and ultimately more important, he exposes the failure of category-making itself, the discord latent in system as system. We see this most vividly and hilariously in his famous kiss:

This Absolon gan wype his mouth ful drie.
Derk was the nyght as pich, or as the cole,  
And at the wyn dow out she putte hir hole,  
And Absolon, hym fil no bet ne wers,  
But with his mouth he kiste hir naked ers  
Ful savourly, er he were war of this.  
Abak he stirte, and thoughte it was amys,  
For wel he wiste a womman hath no berd.  
He felte a thyng al rough and long yherd, 
And seyde, “Fy! allass! what have I do?” 

This is Absolon’s kiss from “Absolon is the instrument who measures incidents of discord in the tale.”

Absolon is so certain, following the one-sex model of human being, that a woman has no beard that his first thought upon kissing Alisoun’s behind is just that, the Miller tells us, “wel he wiste a womman hath no berd.” But, of course, every woman does have a beard, only around a different mouth from a man’s. The ignorance betrayed by Absolon’s offended certitude in the one-

51. See also William Shakespeare, Troilus and Cressida, where Thersites calls Ajax a “land-fish”:

Why, he stalks up and down like a peacock,—a stride and a stand: ruminates like an hostess that hath no arithmetic but her brain to set down her reckoning: bites his lip with a politic regard, as who should say “There were wit in this head, an ’twould out”; and so there is, but it lies as coldly in him as fire in a flint, which will not show without knocking. The man’s undone forever; for if Hector break not his neck i’ the combat, he’ll break ’t himself in vain-glory. He knows not me: I said “Good morrow, Ajax”; and he replies “Thanks, Agamemnon.” What think you of this man that takes me for the general? He’s grown a very land-fish, language-less, a monster. A plague of opinion! a man may wear it on both sides, like a leather jerkin (3.3.244–56)

—Absolon is a similar “monster” of “both sides,” just like Ajax, in his “vain-glory,” not knowing himself, until perhaps it is too late.

52. Cadden, Meanings of Sex Difference; Jacquet and Thomasset, Sexuality and Medicine.
sex model is just the ignorance of someone who does not know the reality of a situation because he has been going by an already written script, a prescript(ion) as to what women are, what they have and do not have, where they might have it, and, I dare to speculate, what they might do with it. In short, Absolon can not cut it because he does not know where to cut it. In effect, idea replaces reality here. And although we can hardly help laughing at Absolon, his innocence and arrogance combined, we are left feeling, at the same time, I think, a certain discomfort at his plight. We measure that discomfort, I think, by the severity and single-mindedness of his revenge: he causes a lot of pain in the end.

It is possible that Absolon is mixed up because he is mixed, a mixture of aspirations and illusions and self-deceptions that can only arise in a society beginning to dissolve in the perverse fluencies of circulation. Absolon has a courtly idea of a woman’s body (that has little to do with an actual woman’s body) at the same time as he experiences very non-class-specific glandular appetites for a woman. That he should have come by such ideas in his social circumstance and in his economic class is evidence, no matter how funny his predicament may seem, of a crisis that Chaucer is analyzing in the two tales and the relationship between them. Moreover, the analysis continues in the Reeve’s Tale where the crucial term “disparage” (I A 4271) alerts us to the class crisis, which is a crisis of circulation, that vexes Chaucer. If I were to try to graph the terms of the crisis and Chaucer’s analysis of it, the graph would look like this:

metonymy ↔ reduction ↔ complexity ↔ anxiety of circulation

where metonymy is the rhetorical response, and reduction the psychological response, to the complexity in human affairs that circulation, increased and increasingly lawless, generates—metonymy and reduction, in short, are the defenses by which the psyche deals with the anxiety of circulation. You have to put people and things, as we say, “in their place,” if you want to survive. But, then, where exactly is their place? Where do you put someone who

54. Any resemblance between this graph and Bloom’s map (Map of Misreading, p. 84) is superficial only; I am here not following Bloom but rather Burke (followed, in part, by Bloom as well).

I also should note at this point that reduction is not the same thing as simplification. Metonymies do not simplify; their adjacency, or psychological (co)laterality, compacts meaning into singularities of insight (cf. this explanation with Bloom’s idea of metalepsis, Map of Misreading, p. 102)—hence the example of metonymy so popular among cognitivists, “the ham sandwich in the corner wants his check,” is by no means simple, but it is singular.
“swyv[eth] for hir sustenance” (“screwed [that is, copulated] for their living” [I A 4422])? Perhaps only at the end where you cut the narrative off because you cannot go any lower (or, if you do go any lower, you’re Boccaccio).

Stadluft macht frei.

The epigraph I have chosen for the conclusion to this chapter is a famous declaration in the history of the development of European cities—“The air of the city makes [a person] free.”56 If you can make it to the city, circulate there, for a year and a day, you are free. But freedom is a tricky attribute: freedom from does not necessarily mean freedom to—just ask Alisoun of Bath. When the Knight-rapist in her tale cries out, “Taak al my good and let my body go,” he is, to be sure, free from a sentence of death, but he is not free to choose as he will. Having raped a maiden, stolen her most intimate bodily property, he is suddenly faced himself with a stark reminder of just how intimate and how precious bodily property is—no amount of goods is worth the bondage of your body, and Alisoun, who has been exchanged for goods since she was twelve years old, knows this only too well. Delete—nay, strip yourself naked—if it will save your body.

And yet, there frequently is not much of an alternative (as most women, I speculate, understand better than men). Rape does not have to be physically violent to be still rape, which, let us remember, also means “theft.” Chaucer’s name is forever associated with rape, of course,57 and it may be that the Wife of Bath’s Tale is ultimately best analyzed in that context. But it also seems to me that Chaucer underwent in his life and career the moral, though perhaps not physical, equivalents of rape and that our focus should perhaps be here if we want to understand his anxiety of circulation and the related psychopathologies he engaged in his writings. In particular, and I think most telling, is the likelihood that Thomas Chaucer was John of Gaunt’s bastard got upon Phillippa, Chaucer’s wife.58 Sexual circulation, indeed, if we are look-

55. Swyve (“to copulate with”) is from the same Anglo-Saxon verb (swifan) as yields “swivel,” and so I choose a term (“screwed”) from a similar sphere of artisanal reference in modern parlance to translate it—see, OED 2nd ed., s.v. “swive.”

56. See the helpful entry in Lexikon des Mittelalters, ed. Auty, et al., vol. 8 (1997): 23; but cf. also Britnell, Commercialisation of English Society, p. 67 with p. 224. The phrase has had a long life: see Bruning, “Stadluft macht frei!”

57. See Crow and C. C. Olson, chap. 15, pp. 343ff.

ing for a proximate example of it. “Take all my goods and let my body go” is the cry of a man, at no matter how many removes, who has been the victim of the circulation of goods in a hierarchical society that punishes rebellious self-assertion swiftly and brutally.\(^{59}\) He simply had to live with it. And he lived with it, I want to suggest, by learning to write not only \textit{about} but also \textit{in} his (which is also our) body. He lived with it, I have tried to demonstrate here, by giving it a name: the magic that would transform a hag into a beauty is perhaps doubtful, but the rhetoric that enables a hag to counsel beautiful wisdom is arguably less so.

\(^{59}\) As, e.g., in the Merciless Parliament of 1388 when the Lords Appellant beheaded many of Richard’s followers, some of whom were Chaucer’s friends or acquaintances (see the discussion in Green, \textit{Crisis of Truth}, esp. pp. 221–23; see also M. Bennett, pp. 31–35).
Chaucer spent most of his career translating the works of others—Boethius, Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio, Machaut and other French writers, et cetera. Deschamps called him “grant translateur.”1 I hope to suggest in this final chapter that the psychology of someone who defends against the anxiety of circulation with metonymy and reduction is also the psychology of a translator: not an originator, the translator creates fragmentarily out of the archive of others’ originals that, like the story of Tereus, threaten to “infect” and “envenom” him unless he inoculates himself with his own versions of them. Ultimately, it is the psychology of the belated, and although I have already indicated my stance vis-à-vis Bloom’s ratios, it is well for me still that I acknowledge here the bearing of those ratios on my argument by recalling Chaucer’s most acute expression of “the anxiety of influence”:

But helpeth, ye that han konnyng and myght,
Ye lovers that kan make of sentement;
In this cas oghte ye be diligent
To forthren me somwhat in my labour,
Whethir ye ben with the leef or with the flour.
For wel I wot that ye han her-biforn
Of makyng ropen, and lad awey the corn,
And I come after, glenyng here and there,

1. See Brewer, Geoffrey Chaucer, Volume 1, p. 40.
And am ful glad yf I may fynde an ere
Of any goodly word that ye han left.
And thogh it happen me rehercen eft
That ye han in your fresshe songes sayd,
Forbereth me, and beth nat evele apayd,
Syn that ye see I do yt in the honour
Of love, and eke in service of the flour
Whom that I serve as I have wit or myght.

(LGW Prol. F 68–83)

I accept, in short, that Chaucer felt the anxiety of influence, but I maintain,
as I have been arguing, that for him it is only one reflex of a much larger
anxiety of circulation endemic to his time and place, an anxiety, moreover,
that afflicted him not only in his art but also in his life—his marriage, in
particular.

Fragment IX

Chaucer’s anxiety of circulation, we know, is most acute when the circula-
tion threatens as infection. We have seen that Chaucer returns to infection
and disease frequently in his writing, reflecting, I am arguing, an obsession
in his life. Infection is the form of circulation that most frightens him (be-
cause of the Black Plague). As the Canterbury Tales draws to a close, Chaucer
develops a new narrative of infection that aligns several issues of circulation
in one structure. At the same time, he shows a development in the character
of Harry Bailey that nears its culmination. The text in question is the pro-
logue to the Manciple’s Tale, and in it, Chaucer aligns and complicates the
tropes of infection, disease, game-and-earnest, alcohol(-ism), and belated-
ness in a single narrative of circulation as reconciliation.

The key passages initially involve the Manciple’s condemnation of the
Cook’s breath:

And, wel I woot, thy breeth ful soure stynketh:

...........

Hoold cloos thy mouth, man, by thy fader kyn!
The devel of helle sette his foot therin!
Thy cursed breeth infecte wole us alle.

(IX H 32, 37–39, emphasis added)

Intoxicated to the point of falling off his horse, the Cook has fouled his
breath until it has become contagious, an infectious agent. Spiration, so far
from inspiration, has become contamination. Moreover, the Manciple fears not only contamination but also consumption:

See how he ganeth, lo, this dronken wight,
As though he wolde swolwe us anonright.

(IX H 35–36)

It is important not to underread this couplet: the anxiety of circulation is also, we have seen, the anxiety of borders and boundaries; and the Manciple’s fear of being consumed is consistent with Chaucer’s exploration of the ways in which both individuals and society maintain the boundaries that define property and the proper, including the proper(ty) of the body. To be swallowed by another being is possibly the most frightening of all threats to bodily integrity; and cannibalism in Chaucer is an issue that deserves closer study.²

The violence barely contained in the encounter between the Manciple and the Cook should not be underestimated: the Cook is so angry at the Manciple that he attempts to attack him but instead falls off his horse so intoxicated is he (IX H 48). Others on the pilgrimage must pick him up and reseat him on his horse, which proves a laborious as well as unpleasant task (IX H 50–55). Circulation here is graphic, corporal, and inescapably social, not to mention funny (at the Cook’s expense). But it is also violent. And this violence threatens to render a dark meaning for the name of the nearby “litel toun... Bobbe-up-and-doun” (IX H 1–29—a brilliant instance of Chaucer’s gift at juxtologuing, not just cataloguing, scene, action, and language). Such darkness does not descend, however, because of Harry Bailey’s intervention.

Harry not only excuses the Cook from telling a tale:

He hath also to do moore than ynoth
To kepen hym and his capul out of the slough;
And if he falle from his capul eftsoone,

2. He omits, recall, Tereus’s cannibalism on the body of his son, Itys, because, I think, of his revulsion, betraying his anxiety. But, at the same time—and, not impossibly, because of the same anxiety—he has Absolon mourn:

I moorne as dooth a lamb after the tete.
Ywis, lemman, I have swich love-longynge
That lik a turtel trewe is my moornynge.
I may nat ete na moore than a mayde.

(I A 3704–7; emphasis added)

where the vulgar pun, if distasteful, can hardly go unheard. Obviously, the matter is not a simple one. Consult, further, the fine study by Kilgour, From Communion to Cannibalism.
Thanne shal we alle have ynogh to doone
In liftynge up his hevy dronken cors.
Telle on thy tale; of hym make I no fors.

(IX H 63–68)

He also intervenes to reprove the Manciple for his reproof of the Cook:

But yet, Manciple, in feith thou art to nyce,
Thus openly repreve hym of his vice.
Another day he wole, peraventure,
Reclayme thee and brynge thee to lure;
I meene, he speke wole of smale thynges,
As for to pynchen at thy rekenynges,
That were nat honest, if it cam to preef.

(IX H 69–75)

The image from falconry of the lure and the reclaim is crucial to understanding Chaucer and the anxiety of circulation. Falconry is a frequent source of tropology in late medieval vernacular literatures; each instance repays close study in its own context. Here, in the Manciple’s Tale, the key is the suggestion that the Manciple and the Cook are closely allied if not actually somehow “attached” to each other—neither circulates (or “soars”) entirely free of the other; there may not be literal jesses but there is a (social) connection that obligates them. By reminding the Manciple of this connection, Harry initiates a reconciliation that is momentous for the closure of the Canterbury Tales and Chaucer’s response to the anxiety of circulation.

The Manciple attempts to make up for his behavior by offering the Cook more wine. To be sure, his action is not unmixed with the sardonic (“right anon ye shul seen a good jape” [IX H 84]). Nor is his motive in any sense pure: “No,” quod the Manciple, “that were a greet mescheef! / So myghte he lightly brynge me in the snare” (IX H 76–77). But the result is nonetheless conducive to peace.

And whan he hadde pouped in this horn,
To the Manciple he took the gourde agayn;
And of that drynke the Cook was wonder fayn,
And thanked hym in swich wise as he koude.

(IX H 90–93)

3. See my study, “The Falcon in the Mew,” and also Cummins, Hound and the Hawk.
4. On the relations between manciples and cooks, see the note in Riverside Chaucer, p. 953.
This reconciliation prompts Harry Bailey to observations that deserve close attention:

Thanne gan oure Hoost to laughen wonder loude,  
And seyde, “I se wel it is necessarie,  
Where that we goon, good drynke with us carie;  
For that wol turne rancour and disese  
T'acord and love, and many a wrong apese.  
O Bacus, yblessed be thy name,  
That so kanst turnen ernest into game!  
Worshipe and thank be to thy deitee!”  
(IX H 94–101)

Here one might adduce the Bacchus myth (complete with Silenus falling from his horse) or one might study late medieval medicinal lore of wine, among doubtless other approaches. But from the perspective of the present argument, most significant is the conversion of contamination and infection into agents of accord and love: circulating the gourd of wine to give the Cook another drink and thus connecting with him, the Manciple has afforded spirit(s) the opportunity to “turnen ernest into game.” In the penultimate fragment of the Canterbury Tales, circulation, just a moment ago contagion and (threatened) cannibalism, metamorphoses into secular communion, even as Harry Bailey becomes less a bailiff and more a peacemaker (in stark contrast with his earlier dealings with a drunk—namely, the Miller [see IA 3134–35]). It follows, then, by the bodily juxtologic we have been studying, that the next (and last) fragment would be that of the Parson, intermediary of spiritual communion, who tells a tale, I will argue, of “care of the self” in the form of a treatise on the seven deadly sins.

But before that argument can be made, the question must be addressed of the content of the Manciple’s Tale and its injunction against speech. Leaving to one side for the moment the complicated issue of Chaucer the poet’s opinion of this injunction (I will return to it), I want first to call attention to the ways in which the Manciple’s Tale punctuates the argument I have been making:

Lo, heere hath lust his dominacioun,  
And appetit fleemeth discretion.  
(IX H 181–82; emphasis added)

5. Ibid.
Thyng that is seyd is seyd, and forth it gooth,
Though hym repente, or be hym nevere so looth.

(IX H 355–56; emphasis added)

Speech circulates. It goes forth. If you talk, someone is likely to talk back or, even worse, out of turn:

He is his thral to whom that he hath sayd
A tale of which he is now yvele apayd.

(IX H 357–58)

Because the “thing that is said is said and goes forth,” language itself is the supreme example of circulation in human affairs and the anxiety circulation can generate (see also, and perhaps especially, T&C 5.1793–98). And because “appetite drives out discretion” (no diet can always and everywhere control appetite), something somewhere sooner or later will be said to someone that enthralls the speaker if not also the hearer. It may be true that “ther is no difference” (IX H 225) between the tyrant and the outlaw, but the tyrant has enough money to buy enough power to kill you if you indiscreetly mention that he’s no better than an outlaw. He can buy the meanings of words, at least temporarily. This does not make him right (in fact, it makes him wrong, which needs saying), but it does give him might. And he can kill you. Or change your color and remove your power of speech (IX H 292–302).

But if the meanings of language can be bought, because language goes forth, the meanings of language can also be contested, if at some peril.

The wise Plato seith, as ye may rede,
The word moot nede accorde with the dede.
If men shal telle proprely a thyng,
The word moot cosyn be to the werkyng.

(IX H 207–10)

The circulation of this Platonic dictum from the General Prologue to the penultimate tale of the Canterbury Tales is important for many reasons but among them must rank high the sense Chaucer’s reader will by now probably have gathered that to “telle proprely a thyng” costs a very high price. Not only is the truth seldom pure and never simple, it is also expensive, sometimes costing not less than everything. Expenditure is needed then, as of effort, to accord the word with the deed, to relate (“cosyn”) the word to the working—these things don’t just happen. One can, it’s true, remain si-
lent. But that is to concede the point. “Qui tacet, consentire videtur.”

It may also be, from time to time, to escape the point. But it does not remove or even approach the real problem, which is that language is structurally social and yet used by individuals. I have *my* meaning but must express it in *our* language.

The Manciple twice protests that he is not “textueel” (IX H 235, 316), and a few lines later, the Parson will do the same (X I 57). Both, I suspect, protest too much. But the more important observation, I think, by far, is Chaucer’s implicit recognition in this formula of what today we call, after Derrida and others, “écriture,” or writing, the mark(s) of deferral and non-self-coincidence, from which speech would differentiate itself, as here, but in which it finds itself nonetheless always already implicated, as also here (the Manciple is, of course, precisely making a “textueel” point when he disclaims being “textueel”). Speech and writing infect each other, each is contaminated by the other. I cannot speak from a place where there is no writing. And where there is writing, there also, inevitably, must be wrong. Ambiguity needs only one unscrupulous speaker to exploit it, and s/he is never far away.

And here, I think, is the key to Chaucer’s opinion of the injunction against speech. He is, I take it, vividly aware of the paradox of the injunction: silence is not an option just in the measure to which the insistence on silence requires speech, the opposite of silence—even as the Manciple counsels silence, he violates that counsel. Thus Chaucer shows his reader, through unambiguous ambiguity, that he, Chaucer, accepts responsibility for his speech and his writing. He is not silent. And he does not consent. If the *Manciple’s Tale* is at one level about Chaucer’s dismay and pain at his cuckoldry by John of Gaunt with his wife Phillippa—sexual circulation that presumably would have infected Chaucer’s entire well-being—then it is also the case that Chaucer finds a way in it to condemn the tyrant without paying with his life for doing so. It is indirect, to be sure. But it is not silence.

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6. Quoted by Chaucer’s contemporary and, probably, friend, Thomas Usk, in Testament of Love, book 1, line 788; see also Walther, ed., In Proverbia Sententiaeque, no. 24843a (part 4, Q-Sil, p. 291).

7. My appropriation of Bakhtin is evident; see Morris, ed., Bakhtin Reader; esp. “A Glossary of Key Terms,” under addressivity (p. 245) and dialogue (p. 247). See, further, on Bakhtin and the Clerk’s Tale, McClellan, “Bakhtin’s Theory.”

8. See Derrida, Of Grammatology, and also Barthes, Writing Degree Zero.

9. See the studies by Delany and Fisher (cited in chap. 4, n. 58).
Fragment X

Chaucer's body is also bawdy, as anyone who has read this book knew already. But I hope that the book has shown that Chaucer's bawdy is also very much (of the) body. It is, however often funny, a serious examination of the body and of how we live in our bodies. We live in them, like Billy Pilgrim, from time to time. At other times, we try to rise above them, like Theseus, or we sink beneath them, like the Cook. We are never 100 percent comfortable in them. Even at the best of times, we are a little hungry or a little horny.

We would say today, perhaps, that it's a matter of entropy: like all beings generating friction, we are always wearing out. I think of cancer, which has taken so many loved ones from me, as wearing out accelerated to lethal speed. Because we wear out—sometimes faster, sometimes slower—we often are prompted or driven to do strange things in and with our bodies. We get drunk. We marry a spouse far too young for us. We refuse laxatives when we need them. And sometimes we really lose it and, for example, kill a loved one in a fit of rage. We are dangerous animals, living in hostile environments, always draining our energies.

We have forgiveness, Hannah Arendt argues, to release us from mistakes of the past that cannot otherwise be amended. And we make promises, she suggests, to bind for ourselves an otherwise unpredictable and intractable future. Forgiveness and promises are our best hopes for surviving (in) our bodies. Chaucer, I think, understood as much. The Tale of Melibee, for example, is, in my opinion, one of the most eloquent arguments in English against revenge, or return of the same, and for forgiveness, or return of difference:

"And as touchynge the proposicioun which that the phisiciens encreesceden in this caas—this is to seyn, / that in maladies that oon contrarie is warished by another contrarie—/ I wolde fayn knowe hou ye understonde thilke text, and what is youre sentence."/

10. See also Ross, Chaucer's Bawdy. More generally, the reader may wish to consult Ziolkowski, ed., Obscenity; the essay by Bloch, "Modest Maidens and Modified Nouns," is especially pertinent to my arguments in its emphasis on euphemism, which, for several years now, I have been teaching (in my graduate seminar, Sexuality in Medieval Literature) as a very important key to the ontological and epistemological status of figurative discourse in fourteenth-century writers, especially Chaucer and Boccaccio (see, further, Stone, pp. 116–21).


“Certes,” quod Melibeus, “I understande it in this wise: / that right as they han doon me a contrarie, right so sholde I doon hem another. / For right as they han venged hem on me and doon me wrong, right so shal I venge me upon hem and doon hem wrong; / and thanne have I cured oon contrarie by another.” /

“Lo, lo,” quod dame Prudence, “how lightly is every man enclined to his owene desir and to his owene plesaunce! / Certes,” quod she, “the wordes of the phisiciens ne sholde nat han been understonden in thys wise. / For certes, wikkednesse is nat contrarie to wikkednesse, ne vengeance to vengeance, ne wrong to wrong, but they been semblable. / And therfore o vengeance is nat warished by anodter vengeance, ne o wrong by another wrong, / but everich of hem encreesceth and aggreggeth oother. / But certes, the wordes of the phisiciens sholde been understonden in this wise: / for good and wikkednesse been two contraries, and pees and werre, vengeance and suffraunce, discord and accord, and manye othere thynges; / but certes, wikkednesse shal be warished by goodnesse, discord by accord, werre by pees, and so forth of othere thynges. / And heerto accordeth Seint Paul the Apostle in manye places. He seith, ‘Ne yeldeth nat harm for harm, ne wikked speche for wikked speche, / but do wel to hym that dooth thee harm and blesse hym that seith to thee harm.” (VII B2 1275–92; emphasis added [see also VII B2 1532–35])

It is also, and in just this way, one of Chaucer’s greatest achievements as a writer (which is why, juxto logically, he assigns it to himself as his pilgrim-narrator’s “litel thyng in prose”). I think also that the Canterbury Tales end the way they do because of Chaucer’s understanding of forgiveness and promises. This is to say that the poem ends with a treatise on penance because a treatise on penance is, just so, a manual on the care of the self—on dieting, with forgiveness and promises, the bawdy body.13

For the sake of argument, consider the seven deadly sins not theologically or morally but sani-tarily. For the sake of argument, that is, imagine for a moment that, although the Parson has an agenda, to be sure, Chaucer may have other, additional agendas. Pride is not very sane because someone somewhere someday is going to get you for it. Envy is not very sane because it eats up your emotional energy as you resent others and what they have. Wrath is not very sane because it can kill you, either with a heart attack or the other guy’s revenge. Sloth is not very sane because if you don’t use it, you lose it. Gluttony is not very sane because if you use it just to stuff it, you also

13. Of the over 170 occurrences of the words body and bodilich in CT, 80 are found in the Parson’s Tale.
lose it. Avarice is not very sane because there is no way to stop it once it has hold of you—no matter how much you have you will always want more. And lust is not very sane because it will infect you, one way or another. If, for the sake of argument, we read the seven deadly sins this way, what we get is an idea of health or sanity that depends on moderating (not repressing) the circulation of the body and the spirit. Contagion is the culprit; contamination undoes us.

But the matter is more complicated than that, too. Consider, thus, for example, the “Remedium contra peccatum Invidie”:

Now wol I spes to remedie agayns this foule synne of Envye. First is the love of God principal and lovyng of his neighebor as hymself, for soothly diat onon ne may nat been withoute that oother. /... Thy neighebor artow holden for to love and wilne hym alle goodnesse; and therfore seith God, “Love thy neighebor as thyselfe”—that is to seyn, to salvacioun bothe of lyf and of soule. / And mooreover thou shalt love hym in word, and in benigne amonestynge and chastisyng, and conforten hym in his anoyes, and preye for hym with al thy thynge. / And in dede thou shalt love hym in swich wise that thou shalt doon to hym in charitee as thou woldest that it were doon to thyne owene persone. / And therfore thou ne shalt doon hym no damage in wikked word, ne harm in his body, ne in his catel, ne in his soule, by entissyng of wikked ensample. /... Certes, thanne is love the medicine that casteth out the venym of Envye fro mannes herte. (XI 514–31; emphasis added)

The “ven’y/m” of envy (notice that the two words in Middle English are near anagrams) needs the medicine of love (see, further, the epilogue); this is as much as to say that one form of circulation, contagion, needs another (a kind of homeopathy, perhaps), or the energy of love. For if contagion is the culprit, neither can we live without intercourse. The body must be dieted but not repressed to the point that it dies. There is a world of understanding in Chaucer’s idiom “sownen into” (“sound toward; tend toward, prompt in the direction of”); he uses it brilliantly to convey the sense of our inevi-

14. OED II: “sound” (v1), ↑5: “to have a suggestion or touch of, a tendency towards, some connexion or association with, a specified thing. Obs. Used with a variety of constructions: a. With in (see also 6), into, to (or unto), towards, etc. . . . (a) c.1386 Chaucer Prol. 307 Sownynge in moral vertu was his speche.”

For my purposes, it is important to pause a moment over this word and its usage. The verb meaning to “make or emit a sound” is the verb Chaucer uses to suggest “tendency” or “connection” or, I will add without demur, “circulation.” I find in the verb, arguably the verb of poetry, a ground of my argument and a promise of its validity—if you circulate toward something to connect with it, you sound toward it.
table circulation in life (the promises we make) always verging on our not necessarily inevitable contamination, of self or other (the forgiveness we practice).

I am suggesting, then, that we abstract from the Parson's Tale a certain regimen for sanity. Neither I nor Chaucer is interested here in any form of puritanism. What interests us, to the contrary, is intercourse, without which there can be no life. Chaucer is a love poet. People have been saying this for a long time. But perhaps we have forgotten how to hear it. In a letter to Romain Rolland, dated 1926, Sigmund Freud writes, “long years before I saw you, I had honoured you as an artist and as an apostle of the love of mankind. I was myself a disciple of the love of mankind, not from sentimental motives or in pursuit of an ideal, but for sober, economic reasons, because, our inborn instincts and the world around us being what they are, I could not but regard that love as no less essential for the survival of the human race than such things as technology.” This or something like it may be one sense in which Chaucer ought to be thought of as a love-poet. Love is our best hope for sanity given what we are and what we are capable of doing to each other and to ourselves: “Certes, thanne is love the medicine that casteth out the venym of Envye fro mannyn herte.” Because individuation and subjectivation are inseparable from some degree of violence, to ourselves if not also to others, we are under some obligation to have a care for each other best reckoned as love. Otherwise there is no stopping anyone from taking all she or he can get. Many women will know this well enough from sexual predators who have abused them—I once listened to a student an entire morning try through her tears to put her life back together after predation by another of her teachers whom she had trusted; bright as she was, she could hardly do it. And this is relevant because it is precisely intercourse that we are talking about here. Intercourse is the type, as well as a fact, of circulation among us, and so it is that I think Chaucer is rightly called a love poet because he is a poet of the anxiety of circulation.

I have cited before now some of the instances in Chaucer's writing where the fear of contamination by writing is expressed. I want to repeat one of them now, the narrator's anguish at narrating the tale of Philomela, perhaps the archetypal victim of rape in the Western tradition:

as to me, so grisely was [Tereus's] dede
That, whan that I his foule storie rede,
Myne eyen wexe foule and sore also.

Yit last the venym of so longe ago,
That it *enfecteth* hym that wol beholde
The storye of Tereus, of which I tolde.
(VII 2238–43; emphasis added)

If Chaucer is a poet of infection, who would prefer to be a poet of affection, the infection I find most corrosive and venomous in all of his writings is that of Pandarus:

And were it wist that I, thorough myn engyn,
Hadde in my nece yput this fantasie,
To doon thi lust and holly to ben thyn,
Whi, al the world upon it wolde crie,
And seyn that I the werste trecherie
Dide in this cas, that evere was bigonne,
And she forlost, and thow right nought ywonne.

(*T&C* 3.274–80)

Pandarus has *put into* his niece this fantasy—and we all know, of course, what engine (a feminist of my generation would not hesitate to say, what *tool*) men put into women. I first analyzed this passage in a book I drafted in 1979 (and subsequently published in 1983). Since then I have taught it many times to undergraduate and graduate students alike. And yet, even so, I still can feel the frisson (and each new generation of students feels it too)—"yet lasts the venom of so long ago."

Pandarus’s logic and his phallogocentrism are best understood in terms of his epistemology:

By his contrarie is every thyngh declared.

For how myghte evere swetnesse han ben knowe
To him that nevere tasted bitternesse?
Ne no man may ben inly glad, I trowe,
That nevere was in sorwe or som destresse.
Eke whit by blak, by shame ek worthinesse,
Ech set by other, more for other semeth,
As men may se, and so the wyse it demeth.
Sith thus of two contraries is o lore.

(*T&C* 1.637–45)

17. I here draw on my paper, "*Rose Oser Sero Eros,*" 1–9; accessible as an electronic post-print at [www.clas.ufl.edu/users/rashoaf/rosev.htm](www.clas.ufl.edu/users/rashoaf/rosev.htm) as well.
The totalizing urgency in Pandarus’s “sith thus of two contraries is o lore” marks all his dealings with Troilus and Criseyde: in order to produce the “o lore” of his “romaunce” (3.980), Pandarus will scruple at no “engyn” (3.274) or “fantasye” (3.275) of seduction or reduction (as of two to one). This is reading (“and fond his contenaunce / As for to loke upon an old romaunce” [3.979–80]) that Chaucer found insufficiently critical, I believe: lacking any scruple to differentiate and distinguish (Criseyde’s needs from Troilus’s, for example), Pandarus’s reading refuses to acknowledge that if discourse is a kind of intercourse, intercourse is also a kind of discourse, a dialogue and dialogic that can ignore one of the partners (Criseyde, in this case) only at the risk of discovering too late that she can speak for herself, and of herself. If Pandarus’s dealings with Criseyde are morally suspect, it is in part because he is himself critically suspect—recall that he interrupts and stops Criseyde and her women reading when he enters her chambers at the opening of book 2 (2.94–95): he tropes the prior “text,” Criseyde (whom he treats like a text) with no anxiety about the text’s priority (recall also Troilus’s exclamation: “Though ther be mercy writen in youre cheere, / God woot, the text ful hard is, soth, to fynde!” [3.1356–57]). Chaucer, however, I am arguing, was always anxious about the precursor text’s priority. He seems to have been a man preternaturally sensitive to the corrosive effects of mediation on all our relationships with each other. We put the damnedest things into each other. Including, as Pandarus makes clear, poetry.

The anxiety of circulation in Chaucer is starkest where the effects of language are the least predictable and hence the most capable of turning into poison. The Pardoner is the obvious case in point:

Thus spitte I out my venom under hewe
Of hoolynesse, to semen hooly and trewe.
But shortly myn entente I wol devyse:
I preche of no thyng but for coveityse.
Therfore my theme is yet, and evere was,
Radix malorum est Cupiditas.
Thus kan I preche agayn that same vice
Which that I use, and that is avarice.
(VI C 421–28; emphasis added)

I can think of no more telling example in the Canterbury Tales of the reflex in Chaucer of the anxiety of circulation. Apart from any analysis of the Pardoner’s character (or noncharacter), there is in the language itself of this passage a recognition, indeed an acknowledgment, of the potential of language to become “venom,” poison, pernicious and contagious contamina-
tion. That this is not “pretty” hardly anyone could deny. I would contend, however, that we do Chaucer or ourselves no favor by turning away from it in revulsion. We should be as courageous as he was. All verbal artifice is potentially poison.

But then, as we have learned from Derrida and Plato, this means that it is also potentially antidote (pharmakon). Consider, thus, the lines that immediately follow:

But though myself be gilty in that synne,
Yet kan I maken oother folk to twynne
From avarice and soore to repente.
But that is nat my principal entente;
I preche nothyng but for coveitise.

(VIC 429–33)

Although by his own confession a “ful vicious man” (VIC 459), the Pardoner not only infects, he also inoculates. Is it any wonder that circulation and mediation generate such anxiety in us?

Anxiety, we know, differs from fear in that fear always has an object, but anxiety does not—it is rather a sense of dread permeating consciousness, which finds no relief just because there are no obvious boundaries to lean on, no places into which the dread cannot leak. For me the character in the Canterbury Tales suffering anxiety the most is Walter, who has no real reason to dread Griselda but does so anyway, constantly, and as a result torments her with tests beyond, precisely, reason. He puts the bizarrést fantasies in her. In spite of the many excellent studies of the Clerk’s Tale in the past generation, I think it is true still to say that many feel somehow unconvinced or at least unsatisfied that we have accounted for the monstrousness in the

18. See Derrida, “Plato’s Pharmacy” (see intro. n. 25):

Socrates compares the written texts Phaedrus has brought along to a drug (pharmakon). This pharmakon, this “medicine,” this philter, which acts as both remedy and poison, already introduces itself into the body of the discourse with all its ambivalence. This charm, this spellbinding virtue, this power of fascination, can be—alternately or simultaneously—beneficent or maleficent. The pharmakon would be a substance—with all that that word can connote in terms of matter with occult virtues, cryptic depths refusing to submit their ambivalence to analysis, already paving the way for alchemy—if we didn’t have eventually to come to recognize it as anti-substance: that which resists any philosopheme, indefinitely exceeding its bounds as nonidentity, nonessence, nonsubstance; granting philosophy by that very fact the inexhaustible adversity of what funds it and the infinite absence of what founds it.

tale (and to historicize the monstrousness is still to leave it monstrous—explained, perhaps, but not accounted for). My sense of the matter is that we have as yet to take the full measure of the many clues in the poem that Walter is a type of the poet, acting out the anxieties of the poet who is also a translator—such a poet as Chaucer is.

Fragment IV

My book ends here, with Chaucer the translator. The translator always does some violence to the body of the original. The translator is always at some risk of becoming a rapist. Traditore traduttore, as Italian has it. The translator betrays the body of the original by effacing it, substituting his own body for the original's—he puts his in (the place of) the other. The Clerk's Tale seems to me to be a parable of this violence and, in this way, one of the most intensely autobiographical moments in the Canterbury Tales: it is the autobiography of Chaucer the translator, how he became a writer other than and better than Walter (in part, by coming to terms with the Walter in him).

The Clerk's Tale narrates the story of translation as the marriage of the original with the translator. The translator takes the original as his mate. He may treat the original like wax—this is the story narrated by the companion tale to the Clerk's Tale in Fragment IV, or the Merchant's Tale, in which January literally refers to young women like May as wax (IV E 1430). Or he may treat the original like an independent, individual body with its own agency. But in that event he will never be sure of what he has done, what he has acquired, and what his meaning is; the substance will be between him and his original in just such a way that the anxiety of circulation repeatedly threatens their relationship. Thus, just so, Walter insists that Griselda submit to numerous conditions and limits, but, as events show, these are never enough: the original is always and still original—that is to say, full of the potential to

20. I developed the thesis of these remarks first in the spring of 1984, I wrote the first draft of them that summer, and I taught the argument first in the spring of 1985, to my first graduate seminar in Chaucer—I wish to thank the students of that seminar, especially Maggie Kilgour, Jahan Ramazani, and Deborah Elise White for their stimulating responses to my teaching. I subsequently presented a version of the argument, under the title, “Chaucer, theologus-poeta?,” to the Chaucer Division of the MLA, at the Annual Meeting in San Francisco on December 30, 1991. I would like to thank Lee Patterson for inviting me to participate in the session.

originant and be new. In the end, in between is all we have (which is why marriage, inadequate as it may be, lingers among us still), and Walter, even he, cannot eradicate that space.

The text of the Clerk’s Tale makes it abundantly clear that Walter is a translator:

Of hire array what sholde I make a tale?
Unnethe the peple hir knew for hire fairnesse
When she translated was in swich richesse.

(IV E 383–85)

Griselda is to be seen as a sign translated from one system into another. Other evidence supports the concentration on the self-reflexivity of the translator, or what we might call metatranslation in the Clerk’s Tale. For example, frequently the verb “shoop” is predicated of Walter’s behavior, especially his behavior with and toward Griselda (IV E 198). A word meaning “to shape” or “arrange” or “order,” and used of literary and musical composition as well as of other types of construction (MED s.v. branch 3f, and the examples cited there), “shoop” suggests Walter’s status as writer, a “shaper” of words, and a translator (not unlike an Old English scop). Next, we should observe that when Walter prepares to “translate” Griselda,

this markys hath doon make
Of gemmes, set in gold and in asure,
Brooches and rynges, for Grisildis sake;
And of hir clothyng took he the mesure
By a mayde lyk to hire stature,
And eek of othere aornementes alle
That unto swich a weddyng sholde falle.

(IV E 253–59)

Griselda, in short, is an interchangeable unit; she can be compared with another unit like her and thus, allegedly, she will be translatable—she should “fit” in the new system. Moreover, it is important to observe here that Walter is called a “markys,” and it can hardly be accidental that we hear in his name the metonymy “mark,” the one who marks; in this regard, I should also note that the text reinforces the wordplay when Griselda exclaims:

“Fareweel my child! I shal thee nevere see.
But sith I thee have marked with the croys
Of thilke Fader—blessed moote he be!—
That for us deyde upon a croys of tree,
Thy soule, litel child, I hym bitake,  
For this nyght shaltow dyen for my sake.” 
(IV E 555-60; emphasis added)

Much is confirmed about the kind of translator Walter is by the insistence on “mark” and “marking” in his title. He is an “imposer” or “impositor”: in keeping with the ubiquitous medieval Latin formula for sign-making, *impositio ad placitum* [imposition at the pleasure or will (of the one using the sign)], Chaucer has suggested that Walter is the arbiter of signs in his world.

Next, we should note the name of Griselda’s father, or Janicula (IV E 208): this name is Latin for “little doorway” and it derives from Janus, the two-faced god of entry in Roman mythology. The name thus also insists on the “translatability” of Griselda: she passes to the Markys across and through her father, who gives his assent (IV E 319-22), and she is in this way to be seen as the sign passing across (“trans-latio”) from one system of discourse to its obverse, both being “sides” of the same structure, or language. Janicula figures the “two-sidedness” of translatable discourse, with one of his faces (as it were) toward the original and the other toward the new language.

In keeping with this figure, we should also have in mind the comparison of Griselda to a wall:

> And she ay sad and constant as a wal,  
> Continuynge evere hire innocence overal. 
> (IV E 1047-48)

A wall communicates between two spaces; it looks in two opposite directions. And thus, like her father, Griselda would have two sides—the sign mediating in the direction of its original(-ity) and of its new language. Here, too, we should not forget the remarkable emphasis on Griselda as one who *atones* (at-ones):

> Though that hire housbonde absent were anon,  
> If gentil men or othere of hire contree

22. The phrase will be found in Dante, e.g., in *De vulgari eloquentia* 1.3.3; see, further, Engels, “Origine ... ‘secundum placitum.’”

23. I am currently preparing a study of walls in some fourteenth-century poetry, tentatively entitled “Moral Gower” and ‘Mural’ Chaucer: Body Politics in *Confessio Amantis* and *Troilus and Criseyde*,” a version of which I read at the 33rd International Congress on Medieval Studies, Kalamazoo, Mich. (May 7, 1998)—I thank R. F. Yeager for inviting me to participate in the Gower sessions.
Were wrothe, she wolde bryngen hem *aton*;
So wise and rype wordes hadde she,
And juggementz of so greet equitee,
That she from hevene sent was, as men wende,
Peple to save and every wrong t'amende.

(IV E 435–41; emphasis added)

Like language itself, Griselda is a mediator, uniting (but also therefore separating) parts of the community.

Next to be considered is the crucial emphasis in the tale on blankness and erasure. The most important instance is when Walter sends Griselda back to Janicula’s hut:

“Wherfore, in gerdon of my maydenhede,
Which that I broghte, and noght agayn I bere,
As voucheth sauf to yeve me, to my meede,
But swich a smok as I was wont to were,
That I therwith may wrye the wombe of here
That was youre wyf. And heer take I my leeve
Of yow, myn owene lord, lest I yow greve.”

“The smok,” quod he, “that thou hast on thy bak,
Lat it be stille, and bere it forth with thee.”

(IV E 883–91)

Griselda in her smock would seem to return to her father’s hut erased of Walter’s mark, blank, ready to be marked again. However, the smock that appears an erasure is also a covering, a covering of the marks that cannot be erased (the stretch marks of birthing) because they are already an erasure—namely, the erasure of Griselda’s virginity. No matter how faithful a translation is, the original always suffers this loss. It is no longer intact (*virgina intacta*). It has been violated (even if it returns), and it can never deny the mark with which it has been marked: namely, the mark of its incapacity to be immediately and universally intelligible (the curse of Babel)—it had to be broken, ruptured, to be intelligible in the other language. When a translation witnesses to the fertility of its original, it does so always only thus, by

24. My thinking on translation theory is variously informed, but I rely most on the following: I. A. Richards, “Toward a Theory of Comprehending,” in Berthoff, pp. 176–89; Derrida, “Roundtable on Translation,” esp. pp. 95 and 131; see also Derrida, “Des Tours de Babel.” See also Benjamin, “Task of the Translator,” esp. p. 73; helpful, provocative, commentary on Benjamin is found in de Man, “Conclusions”; also useful, though different in approach, is Haas, “Theory of Translation,” esp. pp. 223, 228.
interrupting its singularity. But the interruption, if it marks the original, also attests the original's originary power. The translator thus is always secondary to the original because dependent on the original.

By these demonstrations we arrive, I want now to propose, at a crucial juncture for understanding not only the Clerk's Tale but also the Canterbury Tales as a whole. The autobiography of Chaucer the translator is, I suggest, the story of how Chaucer is not Petrarch. We know that as Chaucer writes the Clerk's Tale, he is translating various sources into English and, moreover, continuing that contest between Latin, or patriarchal discourse, and the vernacular, the "parlar materno" (Purgatorio 26.117), that Dante and Petrarch and Boccaccio were engaged in so deeply.25 Here is how Petrarch addresses Boccaccio in his famous letter about the tale of Griselda:

So one fine day, when, as usual, my mind was distracted by a variety of occupations, discontented with myself and my surroundings, I suddenly sent everything flying, and, snatching up my pen, I attacked this story of yours ["Itaque die quodam, inter varios cogitatus animum more solito discerpentes, et illis et michi, ut sic dixerim, iratus, vale omnibus ad tempus dicto, calamum arripiens, ystoriam ipsam tuam scribere sum aggressus"]. I sincerely trust that it will gratify you that I have of my own free-will undertaken to translate your work, something I should certainly never think of doing for anyone else, but which I was induced to do in this instance by my partiality for you and for the story. Not neglecting the precept of Horace in his Art of Poetry, that the careful translator should not attempt to render word for word, I have told your tale in my own language ["historiam tuam meis verbis explicui"], in some places changing or even adding a few words, for I felt that you would not only permit, but would approve, such alterations. Although many have admired and wished for my version, it seemed to me fitting that your work should be dedicated to you rather than to anyone else; and it is for you to judge whether I have, by this change of dress, injured or embellished the original ["Quam quidem an mutata veste deformaverim an fortassis ornaverim, tu iudica"].26

Petrarch, it is clear, treats Boccaccio's original the way Walter treats Griselda: distracted and discontented, he attacks and wrests the story into his own

25. See, e.g., Pagani, *La teoria linguistica di Dante*; see also the important work of Mengaldo, *Linguistica e retorica di Dante*.

26. I use the translation of this section of Seniles xvii.3 by J. H. Robinson and Rolfe, pp. 191–96, that can be conveniently found in Kolve and G. Olson, pp. 388–91; the Latin I cite parenthetically is taken from Severs, *Literary Relationships*, p. 291.
language, changing its dress as he does so, to make it his own, whereupon he can challenge Boccaccio with the telltale envy of the anxiety of influence, “many have admired and wished for my version” (emphasis added).²⁷ Petrarch is a more tyrannical translator than either Boccaccio or Chaucer, seeking in his writing precisely “one mind”:

it seemed there was but one mind between them [Walter and Griselda], and that not common to them both, but, to say truth, the husband’s alone; for the wife had declared, as has been said, that she had no wishes of her own.²⁸

This is not, I think Boccaccio and Chaucer would say, a marriage; it is a dictatorship.²⁹ And neither is it a translation that Boccaccio or Chaucer would endorse or themselves reproduce. It is the tyranny of the patriarchal (Petrarch-al?), institutional Latinitas with which Petrarch—and the men to whom alone he shows the tale—would constrain and control the circulation of women and literature alike; for the parlar materno [mother tongue], as Dante’s Commedia supremely attests, threatens the hegemony of the one mind.³¹

The Clerk’s Tale is the story of how Chaucer learned he was not Petrarch nor wanted to be. The fundamental issue for the translator, as Chaucer saw it (Boccaccio, too, I think), is whether the translation will be a dictatorship

²⁷. The reader may find it instructive to compare my selection of passages from Petrarch’s letter with that of Dinshaw (pp. 149, 151): hers, I think, misses the real struggle going on, the psychopathology of competition—the violence not only toward women but toward the Other as well, which fairly seethes just beneath the surface elegance of Petrarch’s Latin (emphasis added):

Itaque die quodam, inter varios cogitatus animum more solito discernentes, et illis et michi, ut sic dixerim, iratus, vale omnibus ad tempus dicto, calamum arripiens, ystoriam ipsam tuam scribere sum aggressus.

²⁸. I use the translation of this part of Seniles vii.3 by French in A Chaucer Handbook, pp. 291–311, that can also be conveniently found in Kolve and G. Olson (in this case at p. 384).

²⁹. And Petrarch’s association with the tyrants of Milan should not be overlooked here; see Wallace, Chaucerian Polity, p. 53, esp., and 268.

³⁰. Kolve and G. Olson, pp. 390–91, and see also Wallace, Chaucerian Polity, 275ff.

³¹. Is it any wonder that Petrarch claims he never finished reading the Commedia? See Fam. xxi.15 and consult also Minnis and Scott, eds., Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism, p. 454; see also the excellent entry on Petrarch in the ED by Michele Feo (s.v.), who writes ably about “la storia tormentata dell’inconfessato dialogo petrarchesco con D[ante]” (4:452).

On the popularity of Dante’s Comedy, so distasteful to Petrarch, see Ahern, “Singing the Book,” esp. p. 215.
or a marriage, mutuality or tyranny.\textsuperscript{32} If, as we know, marriage is such a great concern to Chaucer throughout his poetry, it is, in part, because of the structural homology between translation and marriage: both translation and marriage are modes of circulation that hold out some hope for human relationships that are more about affection than they are about infection. And yet, if this is so, it is not without its irony: Chaucer’s marriage was likely less than ideal, and like his great successor, Shakespeare, unhappily married as well, I speculate, Chaucer turned to translation and adaptation with a sense of inevitable compromise. He tells Alceste and the God of Love that

\begin{quote}
what so myn auctour mente,
Algate, God woot, yt was \textit{myn entente}
To forthren trouthe in love and yt cheryce,
And to ben war fro falsnesse and fro vice
By swich ensample; this was \textit{my menyge}.
\end{quote}

\textit{(LGW Prol. F 470–74; emphasis added)}

But, as they make clear to him, he can only push this “my menyge” so far—any farther and he may become a Petrarch, “nailed in his chest.” Petrarch is “nailed” in his own name: “He is now deed and nayled in his cheste” (IV E 29) — \textit{arca} means “chest”\textsuperscript{33} — and Chaucer brilliantly conveys the autotelic, self-referential closure of the Petrarchan translation program with this (in many ways) bizarre half-line.\textsuperscript{34} Chaucer, I am proposing, does \textit{not} want to be nailed in anybody’s chest:

\begin{quote}
Sufficeth me, as I were ded,
That no wight have my name in honde.
I wot myself best how y stonde;
For what I drye, or what I thynke,
I wil myselven al hyt drynke,
Certeyn, for the more part,
As fer forth as I kan myn art.
\end{quote}

\textit{(HF 1876–82)}

And yet, as his entire career attests, Chaucer is anxious about just this, the circulation of his name and his fame, his words and the manuscripts that

\textsuperscript{32} See Stone (chap. 2, n. 78); I evaluated the manuscript of this book for St. Martin’s Press in 1997, and I found its arguments on gender and interpretation to be its greatest strength.

\textsuperscript{33} On Petrarch’s name and its history, see Feo’s entry in the \textit{ED} (4:450).

\textsuperscript{34} And note that the Clerk’s/Chaucer’s praise for Petrarch is consistent with this argument since Chaucer can admire Petrarch’s achievements elsewhere without necessarily agreeing with his translation program.
contain them.\textsuperscript{35} he desires independence (and surely his achievement suggests he attained it), and yet he understands clearly that tyranny is not the way to it. Like his Clerk, he realizes that if you want to teach, you have first to learn (I A 308).

So it is that the Clerk submits (every student must). Harry Bailey instructs the Clerk:

\begin{quote}
But precheth nat, as freres doon in Lente,
To make us for oure olde synnes wepe,
Ne that thy tale make us nat to slepe.
Telle us som murie thyng of adventures.
\end{quote}

\textit{(IV E 12–15)}

The Clerk then responds:

\begin{quote}
This worthy clerk benignely answerde:
“Hooste,” quod he, “I am under youre yerde;
Ye han of us as now the governance,
And therfore wol I do yow obeisance,
As fer as resoun axeth, hardly.”
\end{quote}

\textit{(IV E 21–25)}

Clearly the Clerk is to Harry Bailey as Griselda is to Walter. To appreciate fully what this means, recall that Harry has circumscribed what the Clerk can say and how he can say it:

\begin{quote}
Youre termes, youre colours, and youre figures,
Keepe hem in stoor til so se ye endite
Heigh style, as whan that men to kynges write.
Speketh so pleyn at dis tyme, we yow preye,
That we may understonde what ye seye.
\end{quote}

\textit{(IV E 16–20)}

In short, the Clerk has to get his word in (so to speak) edgewise, even as, we shall see shortly, Griselda only makes herself heard in the gaps of Walter’s discourse.\textsuperscript{36} Moreover, Harry has likened the Clerk explicitly to a maid “newe spoused” (IV E 2–3), underscoring thus even more the implication that the Clerk, like Griselda, must submit.

\textsuperscript{35} See \textit{Adam} and \textit{T&C} 5. 1793–98; also \textit{Currency of the Word}, pp. 147–49.

\textsuperscript{36} In terms of the theory of reading I have been arguing we should ascribe to Chaucer, Harry is trying to ensure that “the substaunce” is \textit{between} the Clerk and his audience and not in the Clerk alone—“That we may understonde what ye seye.” If, then, Harry in the analogy occupies Walter’s position, he is not, I think, all the same, identical in behavior to Walter—Harry is never a tyrant, though he is at times violent.
But note that if the Clerk is to Harry Bailey as Griselda is to Walter, he is to his source, "Petrak," as Walter is to Griselda: he can, if he chooses, treat his material, his original, the way Walter treats Griselda, the way Petrarch treated Boccaccio. But he does not. To the contrary, he shows utter respect for his source:

I prey to God so yeve his soule reste!
Fraunceys Petrak, the lauriat poete,
Highte this clerk, whos rethorike sweete
Enlumyned al Ytaille of poetrie.
(IV E 30–33)

And what's more, when he alters his source, he does not "Walter" it but carefully leaves its dress visible:

But forth to tellen of this worthy man
That taughte me this tale, as I bigan,
I seye that first with heigh stile he enditeth,
Er he the body of his tale writeth,
A prohemye, in the which discryveth he
Pemond and of Saluces the contree,
And speketh of Apennyn, the hilles hye,
That been the boundes of West Lumbardy,
And of Mount Vesulus in special,
Where as the Poo out of a welle smal
Taketh his firste spryngyng and his sours,
That estward ay encresseth in his cours
To Emele-ward, to Ferrare, and Venyse,
The which a long thyng were to devyse.
And trewey, as to my juggement,
Me thynketh it a thyng impertinent,
Save that he woyle conveyen his mateere;
But this his tale, which that ye may heere.
(IV E 39–56)

If the poet-translator tries only to impose his own will upon the original or source (to "Walter" it), if he refuses to co-operate with his material, then the marriage or conjunction of source and successor, original and version, can only end in conflict and separation. If we the readers cannot access the original in the new version, we can only suspect it of tyranny. If, on the other hand, we do see the original in the new—if the Clerk tells us he is abbreviating Petrarch's "prohemye"—then we can compare the new with the original
and understand the relation, the *betweenness*, that has made this marriage possible. The copy can be original, the translation fresh and new, just because it has an original from which to differ (no counterfeiting here). The copy or translation is strong in the measure to which its source is evident, available, and co-operating.37

The Clerk is likened to a maid “newe spoused” (IV E 2–3) because every writer must similarly submit to the dominance of the past. But just because the Clerk has been in Griselda’s position, he does not treat the text the way Walter treats Griselda—he does not strip it naked and cover it with his new clothes. By understanding translation as a marriage rather than a tyranny, Chaucer at least imagines a relationship between original and copy, precursor and successor, past and present, that is more than just a spasm of anxiety. Co-presence, co-operation, as in a marriage, may be fleeting, unstable, and only irregularly repeatable, but the effect, when it does happen, is worth the travail (this is probably why people do try to tough out their marriages).

As a type of the poet-translator, Walter is also a certain type of obsessive—trying by revision always to be sure he’s got it just right and finding himself repeatedly amazed at how the original continues to submit but still remains itself (see, for example, IV E 687ff.). Walter fears and distrusts Griselda, but also desires her, because she is so very original, so very herself. Poets like Chaucer who are translators fear their material because they know it is prior and they must violate it. At the same time, however, they desire the material just because it is prior and they suspect or believe that it will therefore survive (in) the new version. If they would teach, they must learn. And it might as well be gladly.

As Griselda understands, though difficult it is. Griselda always tries to cooperate with her original, but He is not Walter, rather He is God. Griselda knows that she is a copy, a copy of the image of her Creator, and that her originality is therefore derivative.38 Every original is always already a copy. But in this very way she is free to be just what she is, her copy of God. Griselda is Griselda. She is unquestionably patient, her endurance awesome. But her suffering is by no means silent. In fact, whenever Walter imposes (“shoop”) another burden on her, she responds with some version of “Do with your own thing as you will” (see IV E 652–53). This, to be sure, is to be patient, but it is also to lay the responsibility at Walter’s feet; it is to

37. The supreme instance in Western poetry of this *co-opera* (if I may so call it) is Dante’s *Comedy* and Virgil’s *Aeneid*—struggle between them there is, yes, but it is never without avowal of Virgil on Dante’s part.

38. I assume that this is why so much imagery of Jesus and of Mary, mother of Jesus, attends the representation of Griselda (see, e.g., IV E 206–7, 218–222).
say, “you are doing this thing, not I.” The most moving as it is the most challenging of these patient assertions, as it were, between Walter’s lines is, “Death may noght make no comparisoun / Unto youre love” (IV E 666–67).39 Here Griselda is both obedient and devastatingly critical of Walter: his love cannot be compared with Death, and the duality of this utterance— “your love is more important to me than death,” but also, “your love is worse than death”—convicts Walter of his obsessiveness. However reverent, Griselda is also referent40—she tells the truth about Walter.

We are in a position now to understand the paramount role of comparison in the Clerk’s Tale. Neither a person nor a text can be original without a precursor with whom he or she or it can be readily and easily compared (even if this has to be death itself). Without comparison, which is the minimal dual or binarism of intelligence, either person or text risks violating the bounds of intelligibility. Thus Walter risks violating these bounds—his subjects cannot understand him (IV E 85ff.)—by persistently refusing the crucible of comparison with, for example, a wife, together with whom he would be, in his marriage and its fruit, compared with other men, other rulers, and other husbands. But Walter does not want to be like other men: he wants to be different, unique; in the extreme of this desire, however, he encounters (and through him, Chaucer also explores) the paradox of uniqueness, that it depends entirely on comparison and hence on more than one. Your very best poet, as Shakespeare so stunningly proves, is likely to be your translator of other writers’ plots, characters, figures, et cetera—Keats has it just right, “negative capability.”41

Comparison is the minimal structure of intelligence and the ground of every figure. It is especially important to the poet, then, and Chaucer, I think, makes it his innermost concern in Fragment IV, the Clerk’s Tale and the Merchant’s Tale (in the latter, January’s self-absorption becomes the parody of personal uniqueness). The two tales in a fundamental sense are about comparison (“oold fissh and yong flessh” [IV E 1418]). Near the end of the Clerk’s Tale, the Clerk remarks:

> It were ful hard to fynde now-a-dayes
> In al a toun Grisildis thre or two;
> For if that they were put to swiche assayes,
> The gold of hem hath now so badde alayes

40. See Currency of the Word (pp. 31ff.), for my introduction of this pun into critical vocabulary.
41. The phrase is from Keats’s letter of 21, 27 December 1817, The Letters of John Keats.
With bras, that thogh the coyne be fair at ye,
It wolde rather breste a-two than plye.

(IV E 1164–69)

In other words, Griselda is a standard of comparison. And Griselda’s constancy\(^{42}\) is the ground of her capacity to serve as a standard of comparison. She is the original, because self-aware copy, against which the successor is to be measured and compared, and as such she is the one character in the poem who really understands the experience of comparison. It is from her that we learn what comparison is.

Comparison is “assaying,” or the “trying” (OFr “essayer”), of one thing by another; it is relation, measuring, and adjustment. Comparison tries one thing by another to adjust them to each other. Comparison, for example, is closely akin to buying.\(^{43}\) Buying involves measuring or comparing one thing in terms of another—goods in terms of money, for example. Griselda is a standard of comparison both within the tale, and within the tale as a space of inquiry for Chaucer, because she is always and everywhere with a whole will willing to be assayed: she is so little afraid to be compared with others that she is in fact unique, proving always to be herself.

So secure is she in who she is that she does not want to be anyone else and thus everyone else can trust her to be herself—hence

Nat oonly this Grisildis thurgh hir wit
Koude al the feet of wyfley hoomlinesse,
But eek, whan that the cas required it,
The commune profit koude she redresse.
Ther nas discord, rancour, ne hevynesse
In al that land that she ne koude apese,
And wisely brynge hem alle in reste and ese.

Though that hire housbonde absent were anon,
If gentil men or othere of hire contree
Were wrothe, she wolde bryngen hem aton;
So wise and rype wordes hadde she,
And juggementz of so greet equitee,
That she from hevene sent was, as men wende,
Peple to save and every wrong t’amende.

(IV E 428–41)

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42. Not to be confused with Constance’s constancy (see chap. 1; and consult Delany, *Impolitic Bodies*, pp. 190–91).
43. *Comparo* in medieval Latin also means “to buy” as does *comprare* in modern Italian.
This does not mean that she is, like Constance, a personification allegory looking for a place for happening not to happen to her; quite the contrary, she changes (her constancy [IV E 1057–58] is precisely not an allegory of constancy); she suffers and is not the same in the end. Nor is it to say that she merely capitulates to Walter’s imposition, or anyone else’s, as if she were (what January believes all women to be) wax to assume any shape the impositor desires. To the contrary, so very much herself is she, not wanting to be anyone else but to serve everyone else, that whenever Walter perpetrates another cruel trial upon her, she obeys even, as we have seen, unto telling him, “this is your thing, do with it as you will,” or, a different but equally powerful example:

“My lord,” quod she, “I woot, and wiste alway, How that bitwixen youre magnificence And my poverte no wight kan ne may Maken comparison; it is no nay.”

(IV E 814–17; emphasis added)

Griselda always tells him the truth, reverently and referently. She knows exactly how things stack up, how they compare.

Her father, on the other hand, thinks like Walter:

For out of doute this olde poure man Was evere in suspect of hir mariage; For evere he demed, sith that it began, That whan the lord fullfild hadde his corage, Hym wolde thinke it were a disparage To his estaat so lowe for t’alighte, And voyden hire as soone as ever he myghte.

(IV E 904–10; emphasis added)

In other words, he assumes a momentary “parage,” lasting but a while, to give way to “disparage.” Griselda, on the contrary, thinks differently, never assuming anything but comparison or unequal relationship:

“I nevere heeld me lady ne mistresse, But humble servant to youre worthynesse, And evere shal, whil that my lyf may dure, Aboven every worldly creature. That ye so longe of youre benigne bee Han holden me in honour and nobleye, Where as I was noght worthy for to bee,
That thonke I God and yow, to whom I preye
Foryelde it yow; ther is namoore to seye.
Unto my fader gladly wol I wende,
And with hym dwelle unto my lyves ende."
(IV E 823–33)

But in this assumption she is wholly secure, knowing who she is, not wanting to be anyone else.

Whereas Walter desires “fully to han experience and loore / If that she were as stidefast as bifoore” (IV E 788–89), betraying in this desire an emptiness, a vanity of self-knowledge that is ultimately characteristic of the obsessive, Griselda has no desire to “assay” others in this way, to this end. She is who she is, herself and free. Hers is the gift Jesus gave: love thy neighbor as thyself—always be willing to put yourself in your neighbor’s place, for then assuredly you will have had a place in this life. Griselda is willing to put herself in Walter’s new bride’s place, to compare herself with her, and in exchange she, Griselda, receives herself back, in the end, with all that is due her. Griselda learns first, and always: “so wise and ripe wordes hadde she.”

To raise this argument to the level of poetics, or metatranslation theory, we can say now that every figure is fundamentally a comparison in which a word or a phrase, say, “cut,” resigns its place, its proper sense, gives it up, to an otherwise absent (and often ineffable) entity, which thereafter occupies that place together with the original owner (/proper)—if there is no joint occupancy, there is no figure, only a précis (Lodge’s argument, above). We know that in Latin translatio translates the Greek metaphor—a metaphor speaks “translatively.” Translatio as the name of metaphor is already figurative, as is metaphor itself, in that the spatial image of “bearing” one thing “across” to another is an effort to picture the construction of a metaphor as the transfer from one sphere of reference to another, different sphere. As such, “metaphor” is actually a metonym (metalepsis) of cause and effect: a deverbal noun, “translation” (action or cause) substitutes for the effect of imagining or envisioning a relationship between two discrete spheres of reference. The “transfer” is a material, tangible substitute for the intangible mental act that results in the figure. This “transfer” is thus a “change of place” (the removal of a saint’s relics is also a translation, for example). This change of place is very much a resignation and re-sign-ation. Griselda is

44. See Aristotle, On Rhetoric, p. 222 n. 25.
45. The OED, e.g., cites Caxton: “Caxton St. Wenefr. 13 Her bones were broughte to thabbay of Shrewsbury, whiche translatacion is halowed the 19 day of Septembre.”
46. See my Milton, Poet of Duality, chap. 3.
resigned/re-signed, when she is “translated” from her home like a “stalle” (IV E 207): she does not complain or even comment, and she is also a new sign. She becomes in this moment good at changing places: now she and others can occupy their place together to discover their meaning—even obsessives like Walter, whose meaning is lamentably self-absorbed. Her place is now and always will be a place where translation and resignation take place, and she will be the co-operative sign (and sign of co-operation) in that place. Hence, she will speak and talk back if necessary—she is no echo, not for her the “countretaille” (IV E 1190)—but her reference will always be with reverence.

So also with the original. It resigns its place to, the source becomes the space of, the new work: the property of the old and the property of the new jointly occupy the place of the former, and this is new space as of many dimensions co-inhering together reciprocally (so, supremely with Dante’s Commedia and Virgil’s Aeneid). The new version, because the old is also there, is a comparison that we can understand—its very structure promotes understanding. And the “assay” of the old by the new (and of the new by the old, which is not, to repeat, voiceless) is free to all: each reader can judge and compare old and new and decide what for him succeeds, what for him fails, what the value of the difference is.

To ensure that the reader sees his, Chaucer’s, hand in his translation of the Clerk’s Tale, Chaucer adds the envoy to the Clerk’s Tale, “Lenvoy de Chaucer.” There can be no mistake: this is Chaucer’s writing. And to make doubly sure we see him at work, Chaucer speaks with characteristic irony, counselling the opposite of what he believes. To echo, to answer at the countertally (IV E 1190), is only to repeat and to repeat only half of what is said; it is not, Griselda-like, to create the new even as the new re-creates the old; it is to let someone “Emprent... wel this lessoun in youre mynde” (IV E 1193). And Chaucer further underscores this irony by writing one of the most rigid rhyme schemes he ever attempted: ababcb. The same three rhymes always repeat themselves in the same order over six stanzas and rhyme c in one stanza is echoed only in the next stanza at the same place. This is poetry such as Walter would write, rigid and imposed, and Chaucer writes it only so that we understand that it is more like Walter than like Chaucer (though Chaucer being a brilliant craftsman can “do” Walter as well as he “does” the Wife of Bath or the Knight, et cetera). I go so far as to argue, in fact, that the double ballade he has written here\footnote{Riverside Chaucer, p. 883.} is Chaucer’s version of a sestina (one of
Petrarch’s favorite forms, highly complex),48 with which he can the more vividly underscore the comparison with Petrarch whose understanding of translation he is critiquing. Petrarch nails the Griselda story in his chest (Latin) to restrict its circulation. Chaucer sets it in motion again. Whether it is the Clerk or Chaucer who “speaks” the Envoy,49 what matters is the strain in the poem between the form and the content—the more restrictive the form (the more like a Petrarchan sestina), the more deliriously the content strains against it. This is not only not the way a marriage is made, it is also the result of trying to make a marriage the Walter-way (as in the modified Petrarchan rhyme scheme)—it is tyranny, not co-operation, with women now the tyrants rather than men.50 And it is “Lenvoy de Chaucer” to show that Chaucer can “do” Walter or Petrarch but mean the opposite by it: by filling the Petrarchan form with delirious misogyny, Chaucer deconstructs both—and demonstrates just how much he has learned in order to teach.

The preceding argument on the *Clerk’s Tale* is obviously relevant to the *Merchant’s Tale* in several ways, and the relevance derives from the overt similarities between the two tales. January is a distortion or, perhaps better, perversion, of Walter; May is a version in wax (IV E 1430) of the stone-like or wall-like Griselda (IV E 1057–58); Justinus and Placebo correspond to the townspeople of Saluzzo, subjects of Walter; marriage in both tales is seen as a kind of tyranny or absolute power of the male over the female, though in the *Merchant’s Tale*, it is even more obviously a contract (IV E 1698, “felfed”) for the male’s convenience; and, also, in the *Merchant’s Tale*, comparison is reduced to painful and painfully obvious “disparage”: winter marries (compares itself with) spring (January and May); old age compares itself to the laurel tree; marriage is compared to heaven on earth; the Song of Songs to an old lecher’s seduction song, et cetera. In fact, from the present perspective, we can say that comparison in the *Merchant’s Tale* is “disparage,” or, more precisely, that in the *Merchant’s Tale* comparison is

48. See Akehurst and J. M. Davis, eds., *Handbook of the Troubadours*, pp. 284, 287 (the article on Italy by Martinez); and see also Wimsatt, *Chaucer and His French Contemporaries*, pp. 30, 169.
50. Cf. again the Wife of Bath’s spleen:

By God, if wommen hadde written stories,
As clerkes han withinne hire oratories,
They wolde han written of men moore wikkednesse
Than al the mark of Adam may redresse.

(III D 693–96)
perverted—it is only a mockery of itself, or disparity—and Chaucer in this tale is exploring what happens to poetry when comparison loses its ground. What kind of poetry do you get when you combine or compare “old fissh and yong flessh” (IV E 1418)?

You get a poetry, such as the Merchant practices, with no regard for the appropriateness to each other in a comparison of the terms compared, a poetry in which there is no propriety, or, as an older critical tradition would have put it, a poetry without decorum. It is indecorous for the Merchant to sneer, “Damyan / Gan pullen up the smok, and in he throng?” and only the more so because he apologizes for such language immediately before lapsing into it—

Ladyes, I prey yow that ye be nat wrooth;
I kan nat glose, I am a rude man—
And sodeynly anon this Damyan
Gan pullen up the smok, and in he throng
(IV E 2350–53)

—as if he would make indecorousness decorous and impropriety proper. The Merchant’s poetry yokes together by violence the most heterogenous of things, and this violence accounts for the feeling more than one reader has had that the Merchant is a disturbed man. A merchant’s craft is, of course, yoking together heterogenous things. A merchant’s craft is distinguished by the ability to get a precious object cheap (thus yoking together a lot with a little) or to sell a cheap object dear (or, the same yoke in reverse, a little with a lot). If the Merchant’s craft is yoking together heterogenous things, comparison in short, this is also ipso facto the craft of his narrative; narrative also depends on comparison. The Merchant’s narrative is his craft, too, or at least analogous to it. And in this perversion, narrative serves only to compare things inappropriate to each other, unrelated, incongruous. The bitterest instance of such perverted comparison, in my opinion, is when the Merchant compares the Song of Songs to “swiche olde lewed wordes” (IV E 2149), likening them by implication to the drivel of an old lecher. In this comparison, or merchandizing, the words are, exactly, cheapened. But

51. Lausberg, *Handbook of Literary Rhetoric*, §1055–62, §1074–77. For more on the proper and propriety, see the essay by Derrida, “White Mythology.” From one perspective, this is among the oldest problems in Western philosophy. Plato is concerned with it, for example, in the *Cratylus*. Heidegger addresses it especially in the essays collected in *Early Greek Thinking*, in particular, the essay “Logos (Heraclitus, Fragment B 50).” See also, for historical overview, Parker, *Literary Fat Ladies*, pp. 36ff. Finally, consider my earlier remarks in chap. 2 (Fragment II) and chap. 4 (Fragment I).
whatever instance we choose, we will always find the same result, the abuse of comparison, the parody of exchange in discourse, such that we are compelled, as E. T. Donaldson observed long ago, to accept “the positive as the negative” in the Merchant’s worldview.52

If we consider the Merchant’s Tale as the appendix to the Clerk’s Tale, where the Clerk’s Tale is the autobiography of Chaucer the translator, we see, I think, what Chaucer learned in the course of his career as a translator. A translator can never be merely the “sorwful instrument [who] rymes wel” (T&C 1 and 2)—he must “other art . . . use” (T&C 2.11); but neither does he have to become a Pandarus, a Petrarch, a Walter, or a January-Merchant—he can “other art . . . use” to cut a better figure.

52. Donaldson, ed., Chaucer’s Poetry, p. 1086. On the tensions in the Merchant’s Tale’s narrative, see Edwards, “Narration and Doctrine.”
Chaucer, near the end of *Troilus and Criseyde*, bidding his book farewell, urges it: “no makyng thow n’envie, / But subgit be to alle poesye” (5.1789–90). Again, in the *Treatise on the Astrolabe* (662: 59–64; emphasis added), he writes:

I ne usurpe not to have founden this werlc of my labour or of myn engyn.  
I n’am but a lewd compilator of the labour of olde astrologiens, and have it translatid in myn Englishh oonly for thy doctrine. *And with this sword shal I sleen envie.*

I have always been moved and troubled by this last sentence.¹ I certainly can understand why envy needs to be slain. But the sword? If it were modern English, I would credit the juxtology on word in s/word. But in Chaucer here I think there is something in addition to metaphor and metonymy. I think there is pain and fear of envy—that inability to see (*invidia* < *in-videre*) the good of others that blinds and binds the soul in misery.² I think Chaucer suffered the infection of envy, both others’ envy of him and his envy of others (I have already said that I think this is why he never names Boccaccio—Boccaccio is just too much of a threat). But I also think he really tried, he labored, to slay this plague; he resisted it, as best he could, with the sword of a certain humility. That he did not finally and fully succeed means that he was human and, if you like, all too human; but, as I have tried to demon-

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¹. We are told that “the disavowal of envy was conventional” (*Riverside Chaucer*, p. 1056), and this is no doubt correct, but I assume as a matter of course that a competent poet can transform the conventional, and a gifted one, sublime it. See, further, Tupper, “Envy Theme” (cited by *Riverside Chaucer*).

². Dante’s is the most memorable figuration of this condition (and etymology), in the *Purgatorio*, canto 13.
strate in this book, his humanity was nonetheless great. He did not merely resign himself to the anxiety of circulation.

I have no agenda to sanitize Chaucer’s life or career. He was as evil or as good as you need him to be for your own agenda. I will say, however, that I intuit in him, as I believe Spenser and Shakespeare also intuited in him, an aspiration if not also inspiration for wholeness that enabled him at one and the same time to distrust the partiality of language and to revere language as the best means at our disposal to overcome the partiality of mere being.3 I have for nearly twenty-five years started my classes in the Canterbury Tales by suggesting to my students that we call the General Prologue the Category Tales, following the Narrator’s lead—

Me thynketh it acordaunt to resoun
To telle yow al the condicioun
Of ech of hem, so as it semed me,
And whiche they weren, and of what degree,
And eek in what array that they were inne

(I A 37–41)

—and they quickly see the point of this metonymy, this denominatio, so much so that when I introduce the metonymy cut, I can propose for further argument that category is also cut-egory, a proposal they find the more convincing in that I also teach them the etymology of category, which is, namely, “to speak against.”4 As the Greek etymon teaches us, the categorizer is the

3. Spenser tells us that in Chaucer “the pure well head of Poesie did dwell” (Faerie Queene, “Mutabilitie Cantos,” VII.9.3–4) and Shakespeare writes from Chaucer in Troilus and Cressida that play of all the plays that most violently represents the crisis of likeness and doubling that stalks him throughout his career (5.2.141–46):

Troilus: If there be rule in unity itself,
This is not she. O madness of discourse,
That cause sets up with and against thyself!
Bifold authority! where reason can revolt
Without perdition, and loss assume all reason
Without revolt! This is and is not Cressid.

Shakespeare learned the “madness of discourse,” in part, from Chaucer.

4. ad. L. catēgoria, a. Gr. κατηγορία accusation, assertion, predication, abst. n. from κατηγορ—ος accuser, etc.: see categorem.] ad. Gr. κατηγόρημα accusation, (in logic) predicate, f. κατηγορέω to speak against, accuse, allege, assert, predicate; cf. κατήγορ—ος accuser, etc., f. κατά against + ὁράσ assembly, place of public speaking; cf. ὁρόριζεν to speak in public, harangue.] —OED 2, s.v. “category” and “categorem.”
“accuser,” the one who speaks against a person or a thing so as, we today would say, to compartmentalize or pigeonhole that person or thing. We know the full horror represented in this ancient root of the word, of course, in racial slurs. All categorizing cuts. As we say, “he cut me with his words.” And it is quickly and helpfully clear to students in a Chaucer course that the General Prologue is about cutting: Chaucer cuts each of the pilgrims out, often to show that they are leading lives they were not cut out for (again, I follow a theory of the “substance between us” toward a meaning of two minds).

The direction of my argument will be clear to you now and hardly less clear the conclusion toward which I rapidly draw. I believe Chaucer believed he was cut out to be a poet, but a certain kind of poet, a misnamer-poet, known more conventionally as a translator. Chaucer’s response to the anxiety of circulation is to practice translation—not as Walter did but rather, learning from Walter’s error, in a more humane and generous fashion. Your translator is your surest misnamer, metonymist from the beginning, misnaming the precedent text (fragmenting its body) as he takes it into his mother tongue. But, just so, translation is circulation in which some control of the anxiety is possible—though hardly as much control as totalitarian Walter sought. The translator, though infected (“yit last the venym of so longe ago” [LGW VII 2241]), can turn the poison, if slowly, into an antidote.

5. If we pursue the etymology further, we can better appreciate the potency of the word. “To speak in public, harangue,” is best imagined as haggling—“You call that a knife! You couldn’t cut butter with that thing! Here, I’ll give you a nickel for it.” “A nickel? Just look at the craftsmanship. It’s worth $100 anyway.” Categorizing accuses the object, or the person, of being this, not that, even if it is obvious to everyone that it is that and not this. And therein lurks the horror, the violence breeding in the contest of interpretations. The only alternatives are promises and pardons.

6. Housman has it, I believe, just right, in “Terence, This is Stupid Stuff” (A Shropshire Lad LXII):

Therefore, since the world has still
Much good, but much less good than ill,
And while the sun and moon endure
Luck’s a chance, but trouble’s sure,
I’d face it as a wise man would,
And train for ill and not for good.
’Tis true, the stuff I bring for sale
Is not so brisk a brew as ale:
Out of a stem that scored the hand
I wrung it in a weary land.
But take it—if the smack is sour,
The better for the embittered hour;
The practice of translation also provides a certain immunity to the anxiety of influence. The translator works between the lines of the precursor and can find there a co-terminus that telescopes two times into one. In this telescoping, not unlike a telepathy, belatedness is troped as a certain freedom, a freedom to revise and renew the precursor although, just so, not a freedom from the precursor's answering influence—as Griselda makes so abundantly clear. The translator's position must be humble, but here, as elsewhere, humility can be strong.

From such a position, in the in-between of ordinary human folly and extraordinary human grandeur and human malice alike, the translator can increase his tolerance, even as Harry Bailey, chastened by the Pardoner's rage and enlightened by the Nun's Priest's incarnate spirit, becomes a less imperious and supercilious editor by the end of the pilgrimage, more tolerant, even of drunks. Gradually, the translator can partner the past and thus find his way into the future. The translator, because he does not have to create ex nihilo, can create without writ(h)ing in the void. But he must, all the same, welcome the foreign body into his body (as Walter did not want to do). He must open himself to circulation. Such must be how he die(t)s.

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It should do good to heart and head
When your soul is in my soul's stead;
And I will friend you, if I may,
In the dark and cloudy day.

There was a king reigned in the east:
There, when kings will sit to feast,
They get their fill before they think
With poisoned meat and poisoned drink.
He gathered all that springs to birth
From the many-venomed earth;
First a little, thence to more,
He sampled all her killing store;
And easy, smiling, seasoned sound,
Sate the king when healths went round.
They put arsenic in his meat
And stared aghast to watch him eat;
They poured strychnine in his cup
And shook to see him drink it up.
They shook, they stared as white's their shirt;
Them it was their poison hurt.
—I tell the tale that I heard told.
Mithridates, he died old.


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