

“FROM EVERY SHIRES ENDE”: CHAUCER AND FORMS OF NATIONHOOD

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Despite Geoffrey Chaucer’s longstanding reputation as the English nation’s first writer, his relation to the problem of nationhood has just begun to receive extensive critical attention. This dissertation clarifies the nature of Chaucer’s national imagination by drawing on recent developments in postcolonial critique, in particular the work of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. It argues that Chaucer’s concept of nationhood relies on his engagement with internationalism. It argues further that Chaucer finds the first possibilities for the concept in vernacular language and popular access to British history. The latter characteristically involves anachronism, a tool which, paradoxically, Chaucer uses to reshape the two fundamental components of his national ideals: sovereignty and domesticity. Chaucerian nationhood predates modern nationalism, but they cannot be divorced. The dissertation argues that nationhood can be better understood by comparing historically disparate forms.

The first chapter surveys nationhood’s place in Chaucer’s reception history. Chapter two considers his relation to thinkers like Dante, Marsilius of Padua and Nicole Oresme, and fourteenth-century politics. Chapter three argues that by imagining England as a national homeland in the *Canterbury Tales’ General Prologue* and frame narrative,

Chaucer uses nationhood to understand why people participate in political community even when its costs outweigh its benefits. Chapter four exposes tensions between the *Knight's Tale's* imperial and national ambitions. Chapter five presents the *Man of Law's Tale* and the *Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale* as complementary facets of the Matter of Britain. In its reading of the *Man of Law's Tale*, English national sovereignty depends on anachronistic misreadings of Islam. Chapter five then argues that the Wife of Bath amends the Man of Law's conception of sovereignty, rendering it a cross-class, cross-gender affair that extends expectations of love and continuity from the nuclear family to a larger national family. The dissertation concludes that Chaucer represents England the nation in complementary forms as a sovereign power, a trans-historical community of comrades, and a homeland.

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Inheriting Englishness: Chaucerians Imagine Chaucer

*A historical materialist
cannot do without the notion
of a present which is not a
transition, but in which time
has come to a stop. For this
notion defines the present in
which he himself is writing
history.*

--Walter Benjamin¹

Almost from the moment of his death, Chaucerians have imagined Geoffrey Chaucer as a writer whose Englishness is inheritable and even as a kind of past that authorizes the national character of present and future writing in English. This is to say that the matter of nationhood has been present in Chaucer's reception history from its beginning. Fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Chaucerians demonstrated their understanding of Chaucer as an exemplar and a source of English nationhood mainly through the discourse of laureation. Since the end of the seventeenth century, beginning with John Dryden and Thomas Rymer, the matter of Chaucerian nationhood has become increasingly contaminated by association with simpler and more essentialist forms of modern nationalism. For this reason, some twentieth century critics, including Derek Pearsall, Elizabeth Salter, and David Wallace deny Chaucer's interest in the nation. They are in fact responding to that modern infection rather than to the more complex ways in which Chaucer's own work and that of his fifteenth-century followers actually engages with nationhood. Postcolonial thinking about nations and the particular moves of twentieth century cultural critics away from essentialist models of political and cultural

¹ Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 262.

community and toward processual models have rendered Chaucer's sophisticated imagination of nationhood more recognizable.² After discussing the history of nationhood's roles in Chaucer's critical reception, my readings will follow in the spirit of contemporary Chaucerians such as Suzanne Conklin Akbari, Glenn Burger, Kathleen Davis and Peggy Knapp, who analyze the complexity of Chaucer's national discourse.³

Nationhood is an idea, which—like most historically and theoretically contingent concepts—is always in process. As Akbari writes, “If the discourse of nation is to be described as ‘emergent’ during the Middle Ages, then it is chronically emergent.”⁴ This is not to say that “nation” is an essentially empty term to be filled, emptied and refilled at will with each succeeding generation, but rather that Chaucer's relationship with nationhood has never been a simple one—and it has never been just one. Accordingly when Chaucerian scholars discuss nationhood, we do not always indicate the same thing. This is not only because nation is a concept with multiple historical and theoretical forms, but also because Chaucerian projections of nationhood are as productively unsettled as all of Chaucer's political and social ideas. But the most important reason for the variety of national discourses we have may be the fact that we participate in a tradition that has been unraveling for six hundred and more years and throughout this time the theory and

² I am thinking primarily of Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London and New York: Verso, 1983); Homi K. Bhabha, “DissemiNation,” in *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 139–70; James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988); and Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979).

³ Burger and Knapp have begun to uncover important ways Chaucer's work resonates with and contributes to recent understandings of the nation in Andersonian terms. Glenn Burger, *Chaucer's Queer Nation*, *Medieval Cultures*, vol. 34, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003); Peggy Knapp, “Chaucer Imagines England (In English)” in *Imagining a Medieval English Nation*, *Medieval Cultures*, vol. 37, ed. Kathy Levezzo (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 131–60. Davis also engages Bhabha in “Time Behind the Veil: The Media, the Middle Ages, and Orientalism Now,” in *The Postcolonial Middle Ages*, ed. Jeffery Jerome Cohen (New York: Palgrave, 2000), 105–122; and “Hymenial Alogic: Debating Political Community in *The Parliament of Fowls*,” in *Imagining a Medieval English Nation*, 161–87.

⁴ Suzanne Conklin Akbari, “Orientation and Nation in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*,” in *Chaucer's Cultural Geography*, ed. Kathryn Lynch (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 122.

practice of nationhood —very much like those of Chaucer studies— have been more likely to transform than to become outmoded.

The history of Chaucer's reception is the first part of the matter of Chaucerian nationhood. The second part concerns the stories that Chaucer's writing tells about English nationhood as well as the forms in which he imagines it. Although these two threads in the fabric of Chaucerian nationhood are distinguishable, they are mutually informing and practically inseparable. Laureation holds a unique place in this scheme because while Chaucer brings the word "laureate" into English himself, the discourse of laureation is also the first major way in which his readers identify him with England. Thus, laureation is both part of the story Chaucer tells about nationhood and the beginning of the story his readers tell about his own Englishness. In addition to serving as the foundation for discussions of Chaucerian nationhood, laureation remains the most important discourse through which we might approach the relationship between literature and the nation because it simultaneously depends on and scrutinizes the power of both grand institutions. This is where we will start.

I. Laureation

When John Dryden became the first official English poet laureate in the later seventeenth century, the discourse of laureation had already been shaping ideas of the relationship between England and English poets for nearly two hundred years. Beginning with the earliest reflections on Chaucer's work and authorship, his unofficial laureate status has suggested the interdependence of political with poetic authority in England. It is a particularly rich point of inquiry, moreover, as it dovetails with his role as father of poets and addresses the significance of internationalism at the intersection of nationhood

studies and Middle English literary studies. Chaucer's own presentation of laureation will help us to appreciate the significance of his role as laureate and his readers' use of the discourse.

Chaucer brings the appellation *lauriat poete* into English from Latin in his *Clerk's Prologue*. He introduces it in the Clerk's response to Harry Bailly's eleven line request for a "myrie tale"—one that will inspire neither contrite tears nor "slepe"—told in a style that non-clerkly pilgrims "may understonde" (IV, 9,14, 20).⁵ Here Harry elaborates his previously established understanding of storytelling as a community sustaining activity. Drawing the Clerk out of his private contemplation and studious mood, he stipulates that this scholar draw not on his professional skills of rhetorical technique, his "termes, . . . colours, and . . . figures," but from his store of upbeat and plot driven tales to inspire a merry mood among the pilgrim community (16). The Clerk responds,

I wol yow telle a tale which that I
Lerned at Padowe of a worthy clerk,
As preved by his wordes and his werk.
He is nowed deed and nayled in his cheste;
I preye to God so yeve his soule reste!
Fraunceys Petrak, the lauriat poete,
Highte this clerk, whos rethorike sweete
Enlumyned al Ytaille of poetrie . . . (ll. 26-33)

This exchange between the host and the Clerk not only assigns Chaucer's introspective Clerk a practical social purpose, but also introduces a new, soon transferable, and ultimately institutional identity for the scholar-poet and anticipates a national identity for an English vernacular community. "Fraunceys Petrak, the lauriat poete/ Highte this clerk," Chaucer's own Clerk explains, equating Petrarch with his laureate identity seamlessly through apposition. But despite his apparent compliance with the Host's

⁵ All references to Chaucer's work are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry Benson et al. (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1981). Hereafter cited by line number alone.

request for simple and jargon-free language, he insists that Petrarch's own "rethorike sweete," rather than some less academic element of his art, is what illuminates "al Ytaille." Italy, moreover, appears not only as political unit identifiable by just one name, but also as a land so expansive as to confirm Petrarch's vast worthiness. Thus before launching into a tale that will showcase his skill in translation and interpretation, the Clerk erects Italy as a model of a community that is at once greater and somewhat more cohesive because of the learned achievements, the contributions, and finally the poetically embellished identity of its own laurelled rhetorician and poet.

But the communal significance of Chaucer's introduction of laureateship into English extends even deeper within the English national context than this connection with Petrarch's illuminated and exemplary Italian nation. Larry Scanlon observes that even as "the Clerk is. . . about to bring some [classical] learning to English poetry. . . . he describes the transmission of Petrarch's Latin narrative as an oral, rather than literate, process" experienced not textually, but with "Petrarch personally, while in residence at Padua"— reminding us that this is a shared moment anchored in space and time. Certainly as Scanlon explains, the Clerk returns "Petrarch's ostentatiously literate translation" of Boccaccio's Italian vernacular tale to a different vernacular through an imagined exchange of spoken words. This process "insists on the interdependence between the oral and the literate, the vernacular and the learned."⁶ Scanlon describes what this means primarily for Italy and ultimately for the English:

The vernacular community of Italy seeks the prestige of Petrarch's learned, clerkly, Latinate laureateship. But without that community to illuminate, his laureateship literally has no meaning. The Clerk reaffirms

⁶ Larry Scanlon, "Poets Laureate and the Language of Slaves," in *The Vulgar Tongue: Medieval and Postmedieval Vernacularity*, ed. Fiona Somerset and Nicolas Watson (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 2003), 230-31.

Petrarch's laureateship precisely by bringing it to another vernacular community, the oral tale-telling contest of the Canterbury pilgrims, and by extension Chaucer's English-speaking readership.⁷

Thus, Chaucer introduces the laureateship as position that facilitates genial exchange across linguistically, geographically disparate communities just as it encourages new modes of interdependence and identification within vernacular communities.

With this discourse of laureation and the interdependence it implies, Chaucer's Clerk imports his individual continental experience as precisely that which makes his participation in an English insular and vernacular community possible. What originates as a cross-cultural encounter between clerks and mediated by their common knowledge of a scholarly language is reprojected as confirmation of Petrarch's glory and, simultaneously, as a prehistory—if not a quite a prerequisite—to the Clerk's entry into Chaucer's imagined pluralistic and discursive vernacular community.⁸ As the Host reminds the Clerk, this English community's members tell tales in a mutually understandable language, one that all “may understonde” despite their tendency to disagree about its significance and significations (20). Thus the Clerk's personal interaction with Petrarch bolsters Petrarch's and Italy's triumph of laureation while providing him something to exchange with those pilgrims pulled “from every shires ende/ of Engelond” en route to Canterbury (I. 15-16). Indeed, the Clerk's true entry into his own national and vernacular community of English pilgrims from his former solitary studiousness depends on this earlier international exchange. In Scanlon's crucial formulation, “this contradictory double desire—the learned seeking vernacular

⁷ Ibid., 231.

⁸ This community is characterized by the stylistic diversity of its language and routinely disagrees on the value and meaning of that language, a group Paul Strohm discusses as a “discursive community”. Strohm, “A Mixed Commonwealth of Style,” in *Social Chaucer* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1989), 144-82.

expression, the vernacular striving for unattainable learned prestige” and the interdependence it entails are powerful parts of Anglophone culture’s lasting inheritance from Chaucer.⁹ Such interdependence across social strata is at the heart of nearly every ideal of national community.

From the moment of its introduction into the English language, laureateship is a position necessarily in touch with—though not limited to— personal, intimate modes of communication. And it is through the Clerk’s imagination of symbiotic international as well as inter-personal exchange that Chaucer presents laureateship as a vehicle easily mobilized for nation building. Intriguingly, our Clerk situates this contact not in the Rome of Petrarch’s laureation, which one might associate with past imperial glory, but in Padua: England’s first contact with laureateship is imagined as a personal meeting in an Italian city famed by Saint Anthony’s miracles in the thirteenth century and by Marsilius’s radical political theory in the fourteenth. This is, more specifically, a place known for its association with the rational and cognitive ideas as well as with the mystical or miraculous experiences that bind communities. Marsilius’s concept of communal functionalism rests political legitimacy on the empirical experience of good government, while miracles explain through belief what is not understood through observation.¹⁰ Dependence on shared language— as well as shared time and space— and diverse modes of understanding the community constituting forces of language and experience, then, characterize both the Padua of the Clerk’s Petrarchan encounter and the English vernacular community of his pilgrimage. Chaucerian laureation is best

⁹ Scanlon, “Poets Laureate,” 231.

¹⁰ Although Marsilius of Padua was a strong advocate of the Roman Empire, in the next chapter I will argue that Chaucer actually finds ways to use his signature idea of communal functionalism from *Defensor Pacis* toward national ends.

understood for and through such communal spaces; it is, indeed, a discourse that better expresses the desires and the triumphs of the stratified national community than those of the univocal imperial seat. Through exchange within and across geographic and cultural boundaries, communities that communicate via shared and mutually understandable language—communities resembling Chaucer’s vision of his Canterbury pilgrims, who themselves imagine and re-imagine society in a diverse but yet cooperative style— are able to define themselves against and alongside other vernacular and political communities. Thus, Chaucer’s invocation of laureateship ultimately suggests the nation-building potential of international exchange and places a national and vernacular claim on a position potentially associated with imperial grandeur.

John Lydgate understands Chaucer’s own laureateship along similar lines. In *The Lyf of our Lady*, Lydgate imagines a laureate Chaucer with ties to national, international, and almost supernatural spheres:

And eke my master Chauceris nowe is graue
 The noble rethor Poete of breteine
 That worthy was the laurer to haue
 Of peetrie and the palme atteine
 That made first to distille and reyne
 The golde dewe droppis of speche and eloquence
 In oure tounge throu3 his excellence¹¹

Lydgate suggests that Petrarch’s laureate identity is transferable to Chaucer across national boundaries; thus he presents laureation as something that should not only happen to primarily Latin poets in Rome—but also to English poets “of breteine.” Here again with laureation comes interdependence. Chaucer is dead and buried, yet Britain, an earthly island, easily distinguishable from other lands places a claim on him. That claim

¹¹ Caroline Spurgeon, *Five Hundred Years of Chaucer Criticism and Allusion* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1925), 1:19. All references to *The Lyf of our Lady* are from Spurgeon and cited by line number alone hereafter.

identifies Chaucer beyond the grave, just as Petrarch's laureate identity outlasts his life. As Lydgate's use of the past tense does not apply to the description of Chaucer's national origin, Chaucer is, eternally it seems, "of breteine;" he is also the first great vernacular poet to transform "oure tounge." Despite its dependence on national time and space for other forms of identification and apotheosis laureate poetry communicates beyond such bounds as in Chaucer's reading of Petrarch's Latinate laureateship. Here too interdependence characterizes the relationship between laureation and nation: Britain is a ground on which Chaucer holds superlative titles; Chaucer's lifetime and "oure tounge" make for him a space in which he will always be, and be understood as first, best English poet. Yet both Petrarch's originally Latin laurel and "the palme" are transferable to Chaucer— with all the international resonance that implies— in Lydgate's estimation. Still this discourse of laureation implies national limits: Chaucer brings glory to England as England provides Chaucer with a circumscribed ground on which to claim it.

More striking than the simultaneity of transcendence and interdependence here is Lydgate's imagination of Chaucer's transformative power. Lydgate understands Chaucer's laureateship via national and international relationships, as well as through a lens of transformative possibility. To be in league with Petrarch, the dead Italian laureate is also to share in a magnificent poet-identity whose greatness transcends national boundaries while maintaining the distinctiveness "oure tounge" implies—a greatness that even exceeds the common limits of human death. It is, after all, Chaucer who first makes "to distille and reyne/ The golde dewe droppis of speche and eloquence/ In oure tounge." While transfiguring verbal dewdrops into English rain neither matches the priestly power of transubstantiation, nor equals origination, it does suggest a similar mode of communal

fortification and an important form of productivity just as it links Chaucer to the infamous English weather and thus the land. Certainly as Seth Lerer notes, “appelling Chaucer ‘poet laureate’ is something different from referring to him as ‘master’ or ‘father,’” but these venerable titles are certainly not mutually exclusive nor is it clear which holds the most power, political and otherwise.¹² Here, in Lydgate’s most direct appellation of Chaucer as laureate, we find a bold image of Chaucer as producer and innovator. According to Lydgate, in Chaucer’s own poetry, the roles of laureate, master, creator, and father are also interdependent: it is “throu3 his excellence” that Chaucer refigures English rain, which also corroborates his worthiness of the laurel, all of which explain Lydgate’s admiration and adoption of Chaucer as master. Indeed, facilitating relation and exchange are, from the beginning, among the primary functions of Chaucer’s laureateship as well as his national poetics.

Lerer and Robert Meyer-Lee help us see how Lydgate extends the consequence of this by insisting on the transferability of laureateship. Lerer considers patronage and payment as key factors in this politics of laureation and exchange. Lerer notes that for John Lydgate as for Chaucer, “to be a poet” rather than a maker “is quite simply to be dead.” But Lydgate ultimately “recasts the Clerk’s and Chaucer’s understanding of the place of patron and performer from the here and now of making to the mythic then of (l)aurate poetics,” where he locates Dante, Petrarch, Virgil and Chaucer each within “the political and economic communities that sanction them.” This is to say that Lydgate installs laureates as poets who “write for the state itself, from whose representatives they receive public sanction and monetary reward, and the economics of this idealized

¹² Seth Lerer, *Chaucer and His Readers* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993), 23.

community makes poetry a medium of exchange.”¹³ Lerer points out that Lydgate fashions laureateship with more explicit, more substantial political currency and as a means to enter and energetically participate in newly established political and cultural traditions in a sanctioned way. Although he cannot bestow the title laureate on other poets, he endows the office with a boundary-defying, death-defying force of circulation. Meyer-Lee demonstrates how Lydgate uses Chaucer’s currency to become the supreme poet of the fifteenth-century. According to Meyer-Lee, Lydgate often pitches the position of the laureate in contradistinction to that of the political sovereign / realm of political power: “Ideally the territory governed by the laureate should adjoin, but be independent of this realm, and the poet should serve the public through a cultural excellence that has a bearing on, but is not reducible to political expedience.”¹⁴ Lydgate proceeds with this ideal and its practical impossibilities in mind implicitly claiming to occupy the role of laureate that Chaucer “retroactively defines,” maintaining both a subservient pose vis-à-vis political sovereignty and a fascination with the transcendent force of laureate poetics.¹⁵ Lydgate does to Chaucer what Chaucer ultimately does to sixth-century Britain in the *Man of Law’s Tale* and the *Wife of Bath’s Tale*, as we shall see in the final chapter of this dissertation. For now, it will suffice to say that each poet attempts to fortify national institutions (the laureateship for Lydgate and the church, law and marriage for Chaucer) by projecting their legitimacy into the past. Thus, each poet identifies the capacity for national definition in the past life of national institutions just as he performs continuity with the past, instantiating that indispensable national value.

¹³ Lerer, *Chaucer and His Readers*, 31, 34, 37. Lerer also contrasts Lydgate’s paraphrased laureation of Chaucer with more direct naming by Scottish King James I, who has power as a king and not just a poet to laureate in such an official way, (52-56).

¹⁴ Robert J. Meyer-Lee, *Poets and Power from Chaucer to Wyatt* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007), 16.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 40.

Direct links between Chaucer and Edmund Spenser are abundant and important to understanding the national significance of Chaucer's laureate poetics.¹⁶ Anthony M. Esolen argues that Spenser hears in Chaucer a laureate voice that is at once humble and trenchant in its exposure of national corruption. "Spenser," Esolen writes, "discovered in Chaucer a way to modulate his tone of voice, using various degrees and sorts of self-advertisement and self-deprecation in order to establish himself as a not too bold (but bold!) national poet."¹⁷ Without erasing the differences between Spenser and Chaucer, we must acknowledge that the "affected homeliness" of Spenser's voice, "its odd mixture of rusticity and polish" and the power that comes from this slyly subservient laureate pose owe much to Chaucer.¹⁸ Esolen demonstrates how Spenser uses Chaucer's vernacular laureate poetics to engage politically with the court in a way that maintains national hierarchies as well as national interdependencies.

John Lydgate insists on a relation between laureate poets and their own political communities, linking Chaucer with a living English polity as he ranks England with nations worthy of their own vernacular literatures. As we shall see in the following pages, Thomas Hoccleve adopts Chaucer as father of English poets, intimating that the power of Chaucer's writing is inheritable and bound to communal identity. Both writers take Chaucer's as an innovative legacy, whose meaning within English limits is augmented by its significance elsewhere. Because nations are imagined communities

¹⁶ Chaucer has historically overshadowed Lydgate, despite Lydgate's crucial understanding of him. Yet the question of how we can understand Chaucer's laureateship without Lydgate remains. Meyer-Lee draws an analogy between Spenser's relationship to Elizabeth I and Lydgate's relation to Henry V, through which we might consider Chaucer's influence on Spenser. Meyer-Lee, *Poets and Power*, 81-84.

¹⁷ Anthony M. Esolen, "The Disingenuous Poet Laureate: Spenser's Adoption of Chaucer," *Studies in Philology* 87 (1990), 287.

¹⁸ Ibid.

bound by shared language, and poetry is an imaginative enterprise, the innovative vernacular poet's capacity to facilitate nationhood is vital.

II. National Fatherhood

Geoffrey Chaucer's first readers depict him as laureate and, with less frequency and directness, as a father. While these images are different in obvious ways, both roles renegotiate the community sustaining force associated with national and international boundaries as well as the border between life and death. Perhaps surprisingly, Chaucer has been lauded not only as the father of English poetry, but also as the father of the English nation. While we can make certain distinctions between Chaucer's fatherhoods, we must remember that they each contribute to the foundation of community, and boast influence beyond the borders of Englishness. Chaucer has not been identified as father of any state—at least not in any reasonable fashion, which will become clear shortly. In any case, it is important to note that the nation, unlike many varieties of state, is a political community whose force and particularity are characterized by the symbolic and imaginative bonds and motivations of a people as much as by the technicalities of politics and governance.

Even before the nation was explicitly recognized as an imaginative construction, it was understood as a flowering of familial associations and a living monument capable of assuaging the pain of death and other destructive loss through its continuity. With the modern nation's marginal and exile communities in mind, Homi K. Bhabha writes, "The nation fills the void left in the uprooting of communities and kin, and turns that loss into the language of metaphor."¹⁹ This is not news to the reader of medieval romance. In England's romantic history, loss is at once a great heap of paternal bones and an

¹⁹ Bhabha, "DissemiNation," 139.

opportunity for questing, questioning and cohesion; certainly England's kings, according to Geoffrey of Monmouth's seminal rendition, contribute plenty of mystery and dead bones to the foundations of English nationhood. By some accounts Chaucer becomes a father just as he becomes a laureate— by contributing yet more.

In his *Regement of Princes*, Thomas Hoccleve mourns Chaucer's death with a perhaps unsurpassable personal depth and a breadth that encompasses the English nation and beyond. While the *Regement* obviously participates in the *Fürstenspiegel* and begging poem traditions, its elegiac tone also evokes a nation-building energy and resonates with the ubiquitous trope of loss in Middle English romance. Its troubled narrator is the early fifteenth-century descendent of those brooding dreamer-narrators of Chaucer's early romantic dream visions. Hoccleve juxtaposes Chaucer's personal and professional roles, suggesting a special communal function for the poet where paternal tropes are alternately generative and social—alternately inspiring and reconciling as in the relationship between Hoccleve, the speaker, and his elderly moral guide. Chaucer is not only a close personal relation, a father to Hoccleve, but also an exemplar of public speech, “flour of eloquence,” an infinitely helpful “Mirroure of fructuous entendement” and, a strangely “vniuersal fadir in science”— an almost divine elevation to omniscience, which makes Chaucer a source of boundless knowledge. Hoccleve's Chaucer is ultimately “maistir deere and fadir reverent” (ll.1962-64, l.1965).²⁰ Here as in the romance tradition, vivid language easily inflates personal pain to national proportions. Hoccleve mourns the passing of his master, whose craft is more seemingly a vocation with unknown professional and geographic bounds. Chaucer, moreover, is not only the

²⁰ All references to Thomas Hoccleve's *Regement* are from Charles R. Blyth, ed., *The Regiment of Princes*, (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publication, 1999). Hereafter cited by line number only.

father of English or earthly science—his fatherhood encompasses the entire universe, an outspreading that makes mere epic proportions appear modest. His death, moreover, is at once a painfully lost opportunity and a generative void to which Hoccleve's painful lamentation witnesses. As Chaucer recedes into the past, his loss prompts Hoccleve's nostalgic regret, "fadir, Chaucer, fayn wolde han me taght,/ But I was dul and lerned lyte or naght" (2078-79). Here poetry gets personal for Hoccleve, and with that personalization comes signs of nationalization. His sentimental tone emphasizes Chaucer's significance to the nation and not just the state and its institutions. Hoccleve understands the English nation as a linguistic and social structure that is somewhat larger in size than the traditional biological family, yet mimics that *natio* in form.

Hoccleve masters the shuffling between personal and panoramic scales. Despite testing earthly limits with his raw laments, his explications tellingly pitch his perception of Chaucer's death as "harm irreparable" to and crime against their common nation: "O deth! þou didest naght harme singuleer/ In slaughter of him; but al þis land it smertith" (2082, 1968-69). Here Chaucer's singularity binds his community in his stead; thus he becomes a national resource: when depleted "al þis land it smertith." Chaucer's loss defines and circumscribes the community that feels its deep pain. Not only are personal relationships, and perhaps poetic progress eroded, but also is this father-poet's land painfully marred and changed by his absence. For Hoccleve, Chaucer's fatherhood is alternately personal, a testament to human mortality, and expansive on national and artistic levels. Chaucerian fatherhood transcends English borders, yet insists on their comprehensibility in some way. "But nathelees," Hoccleve continues apostrophizing death,

yit hast thou no power
 His name sle; his hy vertu astertith
 Unslyan fro thee, which ay vs lyfly hertyth,
 With bookes of his ornate endytyng,
 That is to al this land enlumynyng. (1970-74)

Hoccleve imagines Chaucer's name and his virtue as separate things with independent lives, though unlike inheritance in Henry Scogan's contemporaneous assessment, fatherly virtue is more durable than paternal name here.²¹ Still, name carries some force, and we ought not to forget that Hoccleve's announcement of his own name is what conjures Chaucer's in the old man's memory. At any rate, Chaucer's books "of ornate endytyng," replete with poetic and authoritative currency, as well as social meaning comfort his people and light the land whose life it has celebrated.²² In this equation, his death becomes quite useful confirming the urgency of heredity, the impressive reach of his incipient poetic and political traditions, and thus the fatherly role and legacy he leaves. While Lydgate demonstrates that Petrarch's laureateship, transferable across international boundaries and lifetimes, finds its English incarnation through Chaucer, Hoccleve attempts to secure Chaucer's inheritance for an ever unsettled, but still identifiable English land and cultural community.

Chaucer has never disappeared for long, but raising him from near-death experience has produced marvelous currents of energy. As Caroline Spurgeon notes, no edition of Chaucer's work was published between 1602 and 1687—"an interval of eighty-five years. This speaks for itself."²³ Helping to revive interest, John Dryden

²¹ Lee Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 16-17.

²² Anne Middleton, "Chaucer's New Men," in *Literature and Society*, ed. Edward W. Said (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1980), 15-56; includes a detailed explanation of the significance of *endytyng* and comparison with other Middle English poetic terms.

²³ Spurgeon, *Five Hundred Years*, xxviii.

momentously declares Chaucer the father of English poetry, speaking for him and for mankind. Lee Patterson explains that according to Dryden's record, "by returning poetry to the universality of human nature, Chaucer escaped his time. And he was not merely a Renaissance rather than a medieval poet: more to the point, he was the first poet who lived in our own, postmedieval time—the first modern poet and hence the father of English poetry."²⁴ Thus in the curious light of Dryden's reflections on Chaucerian fatherhood, one way modernity's own attempt to stand somewhat outside and above other time becomes more clear:

He must have been a Man of a most wonderful comprehensive Nature, because, as it has been truly observ'd of him, he has taken into the Compass of his *Canterbury Tales* the various Manners and Humours (as we now call them) of the whole *English* Nation, in his age. Not a single Character has escap'd him. . . 'Tis sufficient to say according to the Proverb, that here is God's Plenty. We have our Forefathers and Great Grand-dames all before us, as they were in Chaucer's Days; their general Characters are still remaining in Mankind, and even in England, though they are called by other names . . .²⁵

Dryden's England takes responsibility and credit for not just England but all of Mankind in its own modern national self-construction. The distance now separating Chaucer from Dryden casts a backward shadow that transforms Chaucer and his work into essential, rather than an emotional or exemplary, national resources. But here too Chaucer is less an originary source than an exemplar of totality; he is also less personally missed. (As Dryden has it, Chaucer's own congenial soul lives in him—so what's to miss?) Most striking— though entirely understandable— is Chaucer's intermediary role, which Glenn Burger elucidates as follows, "When in 1700 John Dryden in his 'Preface to Fables Ancient and Modern' designates Chaucer 'the father of English poetry,' he also posits a

²⁴ Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History*, 15.

²⁵ Spurgeon, *Five Hundred Years*, 1:278-79.

relationship between Chaucer's depiction of a universal human nature and the ability of his poetry to transmit the history of the English nation." This insistence on the what rather than the how of Chaucer's poetic transmission makes him a father by overdetermining and leaving Father Chaucer, his characters, and perhaps even human-kind, immediately bereft of possibility. Meanwhile "linking 'Father Chaucer' or 'Chaucer the Man' with 'universal' bourgeois humanist values" helps "colonize Chaucer and his characters in order to fit them into modernist narratives of progressive history and to mobilize them for the reproduction of hegemonic modern identities."²⁶

We find William Blake the engraver rather than the Blake the wordsmith most engaged with Chaucer, as his conception of Chaucer's pilgrims is less interested in language than it is focused on transcendence across space and time. Blake writes,

The characters of Chaucer's Pilgrims are characters which compose all ages and nations: as one age falls, another rises, . . . Of Chaucer's characters, as described in his *Canterbury Tales*, some of the names or titles are altered by time, but the characters themselves for ever remain unaltered, and consequently they are the physiognomies or lineaments of universal human life, beyond which Nature never steps. Names alter, things never alter.²⁷

For Blake, Chaucer's Pilgrims transcend time and nation without completely eliding these specificities or discarding their usefulness. Blake claims that human nature's transcendence is limitless, but yet desires to delimit the nature of human physiognomies, those human qualities that are more real, stable and beyond evolution than names. Thus, Blake limits both human nature and human understanding, setting language up as the changing veil that obscures human understanding of the stability of "things": Blake

²⁶ Burger, *Chaucer's Queer Nation*, xix.

²⁷ William Blake, *Sir Geoffrey Chaucer and the Nine and Twenty Pilgrims on Their Journey to Canterbury*, in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 532-33

insists that there are some things that never change. The danger with Blake and Dryden's moves to freeze the English nation on Chaucer's Canterbury pilgrimage is that they simultaneously elide its earthly significance—its performance of community—in motion. True eternity is not literary, but certain processes can transcend time and space without the usual oppression. Chaucer's pilgrimage is not immortal because one can always understand the Pardoner in the same way—Glenn Burger and others have shown the anachronistic pitfalls of such assumptions. The Canterbury pilgrimage remains immortal rather because it relays the perpetuity of instability on so many levels: the well-known social, personal, professional and spiritual just to start.

The desire to stabilize English nationhood through Chaucer's fatherhood and creative foundational status, however, easily lends itself to essentialism and ultimately exceeds rational limits with hyperbole. Derek Pearsall warns against a danger zone beyond the pale: "An expedition to the remoter heights of lunacy would find G.K. Chesterton. 'Chaucer is the father of his country', he says dizzyingly, 'rather in the style of George Washington'. In the final vision, he sees him as the primordial giant of Albion, 'with our native hills for his bones and our native forests for his beard'."²⁸ As Pearsall notes, Chesterton does seem to be sailing blithely on the remote side of madness. Clarifying his view further, Chesterton shares, "when I think of Chaucer . . . I do not think of a Court poet receiving a laurel from the King or a flagon from the King's butler, . . . but of some such elemental and emblematic giant, alive at our beginnings and made out of the very elements of the land."²⁹ The most common fears of anti-essentialist thinkers crystallize here in Chesterton's Chaucer, who is more of an arbitrary touchstone

²⁸ Derek Pearsall, "Chaucer and Englishness," in *Chaucer's Cultural Geography*, ed. Kathryn Lynch (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 296.

²⁹ G. K. Chesterton, *Chaucer*, (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1956), 201.

than an innovative poet. Chesterton somehow manages to make *blut und boden* nationalism look weak. When we consider that he first publishes his ravings in 1932, between the twentieth-century world wars at a time when the Black Hills of South Dakota, sacred to Native Americans, were being desecrated with the visages of George Washington and three other United States presidents, Chesterton's blithe lunacy appears sinister. In this curious light, Chesterton's desire to see that national face he associated with normality "in nearly everything"³⁰ reflected back to him so concretely from the land seems thoroughly less extraordinary and exceedingly more offensive.³¹ This unhinged view shows how Chaucerian fatherhood, like the worst of romantic paternal tropes, may be aligned with desperate and propagandistic positions, as Pearsall delineates in "Chaucer and Englishness." Yet more nuanced and insightful views of Chaucerian fatherhood are available. These reflect poignant awareness of pain and productivity at the intersections of loss and imagination—which is to say they reflect both sides of an emotional national issue.

We must consider not only stylistic subtlety, but also historical specificity as we evaluate the long-standing relationship between Chaucerian fatherhood and British terrain; indeed Seth Lerer charts a more feasible relationship than that expressed by Chesterton's bizarre vision. In doing so, he poses political and poetic fatherhood as distinct, but somewhat codependent offices:

Chaucer writes as man to man: The father of English poetry writes to the father of his people. In the *Complaint to His Purse*, he addresses Henry IV as "the conqueror of Brutes Albyon," and the fifteenth-century praise of Chaucer as the poet of "Brutes Albyon" was designed precisely to maintain this fiction of a fatherly poet writing to a father-king. Indeed, by stretching the paternity of both poet and royal patron back to Brutus, the

³⁰ Ibid., 121.

³¹ Mount Rushmore was carved between 1927-41.

eponymous father of the British Isles, the fifteenth-century encomiasts could claim that Chaucer and his kings shared in the power granted by the fatherhood of politics and poetry.³²

This “power granted by the fatherhood of politics and poetry” suggests parallel, but very distinct offices and an eerily unified paternal force emanating from a distant, mythic source. As Lerer explains, fatherly tensions between ever-childish Richard II and Henry IV added with the youth and inadequacies of succeeding Lancastrian Henrys propel “a poetry desperately seeking to validate both its infantilized author and its childish patron.”³³ The impulse to burrow back into the primordial British Isles, the prehistory of Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *History of the Kings of Britain*, in search of fathers means to solve this problem by locating an original authority, a source of essential strength and unity. Yet this is not the same as almost literally condensing Chaucer and national authority with island rocks as Chesterton would do.

Even as Hoccleve bemoans what he failed to learn from father Chaucer when he lived, he also suggests that one of the best things about Chaucer and all fathers is that they are not immortal, but tend to die before their progeny and to leave inheritable forms of power when they do. Chaucer’s rustic, yet learned vernacular discourse lives on and authorizes English laureate poetics as that subtle political and cultural currency that Hoccleve, Lydgate, Spenser and others invest and spend. Certainly Ian Robinson is right to warn us of the dilemmas that ensue “when criticism loses sight of the fact that Chaucer belongs to the past as well as to the present,” but we must also remember to carry our critical pasts replete with both mistakes and revelations, with us in the present and with

³² Lerer, *Chaucer and His Readers*, 15-16.

³³ Ibid., 16.

Chaucer's poetry into the future.³⁴ Insofar as poetry is an imaginative medium through which political community becomes national— through which states at once become sentimental associations and achieve continuity— the fatherhood of poetry is a cultural, political and ultimately national fatherhood.

III. Chaucer's English

There has been some intriguing debate over Chaucer's influence on his vernacular. For some time many critics boasted that he purified the English language, while others noted that he actually enriched it by mixing it with French and Latin. Infamous misconceptions about Geoffrey Chaucer's status as the very first writer of the English nation or in the English language aside, such old debates regarding his use of the vernacular continue to be helpful in understanding his place as a founder and innovator of English poetry and various conceptions of nationhood. Dryden translated Chaucer's English despite his avowed admiration, and Spenser mimicked it in effort to secure England's national integrity and authenticate his own values therein. It has been discussed in terms of refinement, purification, defiling, eclectic selection, excessive borrowing, and conquest as well as more sensitive and intimate relation with the foreign. But Chaucerians pursuing Chaucer's use of the vernacular almost always relay a keen sense of the tensions integral to the process in which Chaucer's work is engaged. Even critics with a clear stake in presenting Chaucer as purifier of English belie notions of essential purity with challenging images and tropes of performance and diversity.

In his late 17th century *A Short View of Tragedy*, Thomas Rymer explains that “Chaucer refin'd our English” by gathering numerous languages “like Stum to raise a Fermentation”— and apparently throwing them together like a cornucopia of

³⁴ Ian Robinson, *Chaucer and the English Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1972), 279.

decomposing fruits and vegetables for a compost heap.³⁵ Thus Chaucer does not exactly begin, but rather catalyzes, an ultimately intoxicating, but productive process. Despite connotations of the word, for Rymer, refinement is hardly an essentializing process.

Instead, Chaucer's influence on the vernacular is at once a defiling and an accomplishment occurring simultaneously in a historical past and a literary present.

"Chaucer," Rymer contends, "found an Herculean labour on his Hands; and did perform to Admiration. He seizes all Provencal, French or Latin that came in his way, gives them a new garb and livery, and mingles them amongst our English: turns out English, gowty, or superannuated, to place in their room the foreigners, fit for service, train'd and accustomed to Poetical Discipline."³⁶ Chaucer's language like other sorts of culture is at once a performance, a living history and a re-creation; it is born outmoded, but enlivens older scraps of language with new significance exemplifying the possibilities of trans-cultural interpenetration. Here language is an international, ritualistic, transporting and, certainly, transformative enterprise; and it instantiates cultural change.

Like Rymer, and near the same time, James Harrington reads Chaucer's work with English as a long process in touch with the foreign—a process that demarcates the national through consideration of international border crossings. In the introduction to Anthony à Wood's *Athenae Oxonienses*, Harrington excuses "Chaucer, the Father of our Poets" for the rude and unsettled nature of his expression as "the refining of a Tongue is such a work, as never was begun, and finished by the same hand."³⁷ Here Harrington casts our attention on the collaboration and time involved in such grand projects as "the

³⁵ Thomas Rymer, *A Short View of Tragedy*, (1692; repr., New York: A.M. Kelly, 1970), 78-9.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 78.

³⁷ James Harrington, "Preface," *Athenae Oxonienses* (1691; repr., Hildesheim : Georg Olms, 1969), cixxv-vi.

refining of a Tongue” and the excuses allowed a founding father. Here Chaucer is not the father of our poetry, but of our poets; he starts a project and with it a continuous community of collaborators. Mapping the beginnings and endings of such projects may be even more complicated than Harrington suggests; but regardless of how we conceive of the linguistic vicissitudes of the English literary tradition, Harrington reminds us that all national changes need not happen immediately or in revolutionary ways to characterize and bind a people with a founding father. Rather language— much more than a tool— binds those who share it and change it, just as any project that unravels over generations links those who participate in it. Here language is a cultural component that resists revolutionary change, evolving relatively slowly even when it seems to change most radically— as with the changes seen in English in the century or two post-Chaucer. Harrington may not have seen it in quite this way, but his treatment of incompleteness here suggests openness, possibility and imaginative communal cooperation not unlike the sort of imagination Benedict Anderson makes operative in evaluating communities.

“And as in Clothes, so in words,” Harrington continues, “at first usually they broke in unalter’d upon us from abroad; and consequently, as in Chaucer’s time, come not over like Captives, but Invaders. But then only they are made our own, when, after a short Naturalization, they fit themselves to our Dress, become incorporated with our Language, and take the air, turn, and fashion of the Country that adopted them.”³⁸ In Harrington’s view, language is simultaneously adaptable, exchangeable, and capable of jarring introductions as well as processual redefinitions. This brings to light the importance of performance and collaboration in the experience of becoming national, while still insisting on the violence of change and exchange also present there. The

³⁸ Ibid.

national “us” that coheres in the scheme Harrington imagines is neither pure nor inviolable; but it is still identifiable. Certainly he suggests that language (especially in Chaucer’s moment) is a point of naturalizable, if also violent and unnatural, contact. He posits language’s power to violate and rearrange cultural ethos as part of its communal and ultimately national significance. Thus, Chaucer’s influence on English is neither purification nor a simple diversification; it is instead a more complicated and interactive refining.

On a somewhat different note, in 1781, Isaac Disraeli almost apologizes for England’s nationalization as an unfortunate process that only subverts England’s universal claims to being. Here Chaucer, who is so often charged with being apolitical, is accused of patriotism! Disraeli, with a staunchly belletristic agenda, classifies Chaucer with “Gower, Lydgate, and an infinite number of excellent writers” as “martyrs to their patriotism” and criticizing them for unscrupulously “writing in their mother tongue.”³⁹ This assumes, of course, that good writing is somehow separable from the language in which it is written, which seems to me to be the real literary curiosity. For Disraeli, however, the aim is immortality and easy intelligibility across time and space, goals that seem almost mutually exclusive—undercutting each other and suggesting the particularity of Chaucer’s writing a national literature for a vernacular community.

Many modern critics commend Chaucer’s early followers for more fully and truly appreciating his place in the English literary tradition than any readers between the fifteenth and twentieth centuries. I want to propose that this is because Chaucer’s first followers never made the mistake of severing the links among style, language and Englishness, a mistake that Disraeli insists on making. Chaucer’s first readers praised

³⁹ Isaac Disraeli, *Curiosities of Literature* (London: H. Murray, 1794), 503.

him as a rhetorician, flower of poets, father of a developing tradition, and innovator of the English tongue.⁴⁰ As we have seen, from the very beginning of Chaucer reception, these are relatively diverse, yet conjoined and interdependent functions of his authorship. And by bringing these functions together in some coherent and productive fashion, Chaucer makes a literary, critical and social tradition possible. Ian Robinson suggests, “By seeing England whole, by seeing the connections between the parts, Chaucer created the whole he saw. The thing is not separate from the idea of it.”⁴¹ Style rather than substance is operative here as in Benedict Anderson’s familiar paradigm.⁴² As Robinson explains,

Chaucer’s tales, more than one would have thought possible to a single work, create an idea of England – which we share, in imagination, to the extent that we read Chaucer. Chaucer’s commitment is not to particular opinions or even beliefs, but to the exploration and evaluation of the kinds of life made possible by English. If Chaucer does manage to make his poetry ‘full of humanity’ it is because he manages to concentrate the life of the English language. This is the same as seeing England.⁴³

While Robinson’s equation of the English language’s concentrated life in literature with seeing England whole may be a bit of an overstatement, his observations about the possibilities language and literature hold for peoples and the national life in which they participate are key in conceptualizing Chaucer’s contributions to the force and influence of national imagination. Certainly the community Chaucer imagines and helps us imagine like the role of its founding author himself is effectively understood as an integrated relationship of parts that move together forming a whole and dynamic idea—but but wholeness does not necessarily entail completeness here. Rather, it reflects cohesion

⁴⁰ P.M. Kean, *Chaucer and the Making of English Poetry*, vol. 2, *The Art of Narrative* (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), 238-39.

⁴¹ Robinson, *Chaucer and the English Tradition*, 283.

⁴² “Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/ genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined.” Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 6.

⁴³ Robinson, *Chaucer and the English Tradition*, 283.

and a capacity for communal self-awareness. Chaucer's poetry, like all vernacular and socially interested poetry, always has and will be political because of the sorts of commitment to which Robinson alludes here: "Chaucer's development into 'art-speech'" is "the creation of a literature. It also has to be the creation of the *idea* of a literature: a language in which literature can not only be written, but talked about."⁴⁴ Language capable of fine literature is language capable of revealing possibility; it is a vehicle for communal and national change insofar as it widens the range of choice and ultimately experience available to its readers. Thus for Robinson, self-reflection enters the English literary equation with Chaucer.

Despite insistence on Chaucer's child-like persona by the Victorians and others, Chaucer's work is anything but unaware, and Chaucer's self-conscious authorial self-presentation is anything but straightforward. In fact, the self-consciousness or self-reflection attributable to Chaucer and his text have been among the key issues in critical discussion about the relationship of English nationhood to Chaucer's legacy. Certainly Chaucer's own awareness of his vernacular choice, his poetic aspirations, authority and associations—the limitations and possibilities present in the Chaucerian text and persona—all contribute to his laureate status and even his fatherly role. As Patricia M. Kean shows in her principal study, this self-consciousness also sets him apart from previous Middle English writers and helps establish an English poetic tradition, well-aware of and engaged with the insular and continental traditions from which it flows, but with Chaucer at this point of confluence.⁴⁵ In other words, rather than place Chaucer at the origins of a language or a literature, such lines of thinking leave him at this somewhat

⁴⁴ Ibid., 289.

⁴⁵ P. M. Kean, *Chaucer and the Making of English Poetry*, vol. 1, *Love Vision and Debate*, (London and New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul), 1-30.

new and evolving tradition's inauguration. And while the self-consciousness of his writing provides insights into its particularity, we will see that it works better to indicate networks of subjectivity than to construct points of exclusivity. In other words, Chaucer's work, like much Middle English poetry, converses with itself and with the work around it immediately connecting itself to the world in destabilizing, but productive ways. Indeed, medieval texts always already imagine themselves to be in conversation with diverse texts, traditions and corners of the world.

Recent Chaucerians offer diverse contributions to the conversation about Chaucer's English, a language that remains inseparable from discourses of English nationhood. In "Chaucer's French Inheritance," Ardis Butterfield challenges old modes of source study and complicates ideas of French, Italian and English as simple national languages contiguous with distinct political or cultural borders. Butterfield reads Chaucer as working within a French cultural and linguistic habit of mind that is aesthetic and analytic, and apparently transmittable, though never simply translatable, in English. Ultimately, Butterfield reads Chaucer's literary art as a testament to "the truly international character of his English."⁴⁶ Christopher Cannon protests the uniqueness that many have attributed to Chaucer's lexicon, arguing that his exceptionality is purely stylistic, the result of his own subtle hand in labeling high and low styles and his own reflections on the inadequacies of English.⁴⁷ However, Ralph Hanna usefully critiques Cannon's attempt to distinguish between lexicon and usage, which are not distinct in

⁴⁶ Ardis Butterfield, "Chaucer's French Inheritance," in *The Cambridge Companion to Chaucer*, ed. Piero Boitani and Jill Mann (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003), 34.

⁴⁷ This is an admittedly reductive and partial view of Cannon's meticulous and detailed argument, but the scope and purpose of my chapter warrant no more than this brief sketch. Please see Christopher Cannon, *The Making of Chaucer's English* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998) for more.

Cannon's work.⁴⁸ Hanna puts greater emphasis on the discursive force of Chaucer's diction and uses and on all of the choices that contribute to his discourse. Despite the clear distinctions among their views, Butterfield, Cannon, and Hanna each confirm that the place Chaucer occupies in histories of English and Englishness depends on the effectiveness of Chaucer's own rhetoric.

As we have seen, some critics invest much in rooting Chaucer at a beginning of national being, but this beginning is neither always originary in the same way nor does it always seem to be the best option. For Dryden, of course, Chaucer's greatness and purification of English were not at all at odds with his place at the infancy and origins of English and Englishness as teleological progress. A powerful counterpoint is the image of Chaucer's greatness as a reflection of English's status attained—that is to say, as a pinnacle or a resting plateau marking the end of vernacular progress and real a fitness for international relation and vision; we will explore this idea more carefully below as we enter into the discussion around Elizabeth Salter's assertion that Chaucer's "use of English is the triumph of internationalism."⁴⁹ In any case, whether we see Chaucer's work as catalytic, as an originary point, zenith, culmination or imaginary process that draws in all such energies at once, in the end, perhaps, Chaucer's work reveals more about the methods and functions of national development in general than about the English nation in particular.

IV. Englishness, Internationalism and the sense of Nationhood in Between

⁴⁸ Ralph Hanna III, "Chaucer and the Future of Language Study," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 24 (2002): 309-15.

⁴⁹ Elizabeth Salter, *English and International: Studies in the Literature, Art, and Patronage of Medieval England* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988), 244.

While it is never entirely clear whether Chaucer needs English more than English needs Chaucer, it is hardly possible to think of either without the other. Much of Chaucer criticism imagines Chaucer's nation as so significant because it is in productive communication with other nations; this makes England conceivable and viable as a player on an international stage. Strangely, the more England as a national entity is assumed (and even taken for granted), the less Chaucer's relationship to nationhood seems supportable. Chaucer's work makes an especially compelling contribution to ideas of nationhood, because it puts faith in national cohesion, while also exploring the meaning of nationhood as an unsettled concept—a question or a problem dynamically at issue. Chaucerian criticism is certainly at its best when it keeps this tension between unsettledness and cohesion in sight.

An anonymous writer in the 1837 *Edinburgh Review* argues that Chaucer is a national poet because he embodies the voice of the people. Here Chaucer is less a father than a spiritual exemplar and site of crystallization for a rising nation, which is not to say that Chaucer himself inspires or helps form his nation. This piece is remarkable because it attempts to reconcile the power of folk art with that of high art in Chaucer's work—just as it emphasizes the possibility of national literature performing on an international stage. Describing England after the Norman Conquest, he writes, “until something of the national and popular spirit began to revive under the new shapes which our infant literature had been violently constrained to assume, nothing could be more feeble and wretched than its languid and unhealthful aspect. It was not until a national spirit was once more formed that a national bard arose.”⁵⁰ For this writer, cultural and historical reality transforms writing into national literature. It is not primarily the other way

⁵⁰ Spurgeon, *Five Hundred Years*, 2:155.

around— literature does not transform or imagine political communities as nations. Rather it is the popular spirit that energizes otherwise oppressive literary forms here. This spirit, which comes from the people, as a nation, added to the forms allows literature to transcend “its languid and unhealthful aspect.” Interestingly John Ganim and others have read Chaucer as indicting (rather than *endytyng*) the spirit and voice of the people in his *Canterbury Tales* and *Parliament of Fowls*.⁵¹ In any case unity, this anonymous *Edinburgh Review* piece is important, but the piece makes its observations from a point outside the literature, rather than through the literature. Historical and cultural reality and not authorial imagination are the necessary catalysts here.

But this national literature is not only intelligible or useful within national bounds according to the *Edinburgh Review* writer. While it exists for and because of the popular spirit, its force reaches further. As the anonymous critic sees it:

Unquestionably the extraordinary popularity of the ‘Canterbury Tales,’ and the ‘Troilus and Cresseide’ had a prodigious effect in rendering the language of a conquered people not only familiar, but musical to the conquerors. Chaucer wrote for the people but it was in the style of a gentleman. And he at once familiarized the Anglo-Norman and refined the Anglo-Saxon genius. The sympathies of Chaucer are not with coteries and courts, they are with common and universal feelings. He has a passionate love of nature and his minute and close descriptions are very different indeed from the pastoral affectations of the *Trouveres* and the *Troubadours*. He also has that clear and racy power of discriminating and individualizing character, which springs from an observant eye and a social temper. Chaucer is the earliest writer in modern literature whose characters are strongly marked and distinct.⁵²

Here the national people and the national elite are markedly divorced; the people possess a universal spirit that seems to resonate with Marxian views. Chaucer’s work facilitates a type of exchange different from those we have discussed thus far; here Anglo-Norman

⁵¹ John Ganim, “Chaucer and the Noise of the People” *Exemplaria: A Journal of Theory in Medieval and Renaissance Studies*. 2 (1990): 71-88.

⁵² Spurgeon, *Five Hundred Years*, 2:155.

and Anglo-Saxon gain access to each other, and become more familiar. National literature, then, works not only as an expression of a people's spirit, but also as a point of contact and communication between conqueror and conquered, across borders that separate and define peoples as such, and in a space that Mary Louise Pratt would call a "contact zone"—a zone characterized at least initially by violence as well as highly asymmetrical power relations.⁵³ Following the writer, Chaucer's "sympathies," his "common and universal feelings" and "social temper," simultaneously facilitate distinction (among Chaucer, troubadours, and *trouvères*) and link the individual to the nation as he imagines the nation in communication with an outside. This will be taken up at greater length when we proceed to more direct and extended discussion of Chaucer's text, but in the meantime we would do well to begin rethinking the possibilities for transcendence in Chaucer's work. Here transcending individual, linguistic and perhaps national cleavages does not exclude distinction—nor does it fully erase positions of conquered and conqueror. Instead it presents Chaucer's English, as well as the language that develops from it, as a language of the oppressed made pleasant and understandable to the oppressor. Suddenly language is no longer a typical or simple barrier, but instead a fissured fence or a gate functioning like a tool, and passing familiarities between zones it distinguishes and defines.

Even Mathew Browne, one of the most patriotic of Chaucer's readers, according to Steve Ellis, proposes a Chaucerian Englishness whose fixity is offset by its certain precariousness, whose nationalism is most intelligible in the international context.⁵⁴

⁵³ Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes* (London: Routledge, 1992), 4.

⁵⁴ Steve Ellis, *Chaucer at Large* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 58.

Browne, like so many Chaucerian critics, claims Geoffrey Chaucer as a forerunner to the Englishman of his time for reasons that seem to exceed self-consciousness. His Chaucer

is not only English in the sense of being unable, apparently, to escape things such as ‘frank anachronism’ in the telling of classic or foreign stories, --like a traveler who persists in treating the inhabitants of a strange land as foreigners; he is English in the essential objectivity of his mind, and in the directness of his touch.⁵⁵

Here the particularity that makes Chaucer English is simultaneously a deficiency that locks him into a dominant position. Critical distance and historical imagination are not in his repertoire. His own Englishness, moreover, is a nationality with an immediate and necessary connection to the foreign. Indeed, Browne, like so many exclusivist and nationalist thinkers, delineates Chaucer’s Englishness in a contact zone, where self-definition against some otherness, uneven power relations and an internationalist existence are inseparable. Chaucer’s international and otherwise mixed textual and cultural contexts certainly limit the viability of Browne’s sense of Chaucerian Englishness.

While the easy and strict demarcation between self and foreign on which his comments rest qualify (and disqualify!) Browne’s insights in many ways, his imagination of Chaucerian Englishness warrants more consideration. What is most perplexing is Browne’s insistence that this Englishness is like a trap: it is something that impedes its own escape and locks itself down by its own design, yet has no apparent function if not for contact with foreign creatures. The things it is “unable, apparently, to escape” reflect on some particular, unchanging and present truth; and the “frank anachronism in the telling of classic or foreign stories,” suggests some profound purchase on the past here.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Mathew Browne, *Chaucer’s England* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1869), 45.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 47.

Stories, in Browne's estimation, are like creatures that won't be tamed as they are told, though they are captured as they capture Englishness—that is to say, as they are set in the service of showcasing English style. Indeed the classic and foreign are at once exotic, strangely familiar, and deeply linked, in fact, to Chaucer's imagination of English communities and states. Thus, Chaucer is a gatherer, if also an innovator; his Englishness is very much dependent on the power of transaction here as elsewhere, though the addition of Browne's sense of stubborn self-centeredness reduces the symbiotic force of transaction we have seen above in discussion of laureation. Certainly, Chaucer adds and enlarges the power of English not only by what he includes, but also by how he includes. Neither the matter nor the method is quite the same after Chaucer's influence, yet Browne persists in his view of Chaucer's Englishness as intractable as if national identity hinges on it.⁵⁷

Browne's is an Englishness whose intractable essence as well as its self-proclaimed objectivity in apprehending the world around it is simultaneously a matter of style and inability to change. The Englishman, Browne contends, "when . . . looking at other people, behaves as if they were looking at him, and is rather apt to break out into

⁵⁷ A helpful juxtaposition here might be Suzanne Conklin Akbari's approach to Chaucer's discourse of nation, which actually uncovers the mutability embedded there. Exclusion has been a major problem for scholars trying to reconcile Chaucer's wide perspective with ideas of nation. Akbari historicizes national discourse in a way that emphasizes the separations and categorizations implied by the national, as well as the instability it signifies in the Chaucerian imagination. She shows that the stable and exclusive authority imagined for the nation is not so absolute in the Middle English discourse of nation. Akbari, "Orientation and Nation," 102-34. Certainly as Larry Scanlon, *Narrative, Authority and Power: The Medieval Exemplum and the Chaucerian Tradition*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) has shown, we must interrogate concepts of authority in order to fully appreciate the cultural, ideological, and political, indeed the cultural force of the Chaucerian text. "Redefining Chaucer's authority as exemplary enables us to move beyond his mythic status as the father of English poetry to specify his historical relation to the culture he inhabited," Scanlon maintains. He goes on to show that among the reasons Chaucer's work is so important are the ways it makes possible more didactically and politically charged work by his 15th century followers and the ways it exposes authority's own variability. That is to say that the critical and literary tradition spawned by the Chaucerian exemplum reveals "that authority is not some pure given, but an ideological structure that must be produced and maintained" (25-26).

rude defiance of their observation.”⁵⁸ He is characterized by his confusion regarding his objecthood, yet engaged more deeply in a world full of others for it. Accordingly, Browne’s Chaucer is permanently English. He never becomes something other; he is implacable, objective, and always at once the observer and the observed. For Browne, Chaucerian Englishness is at once fixedly stable and sociable: English “national character is a root of bravery rising to a stem of strong social feeling, gnarled and twisted just above the ground with genuine fun,” it is at once an essence and a feeling generated by social interaction.⁵⁹ Browne seems to undercut his project here suggesting that the twisting agent is what is true and genuine while the root is most distinguished as an energetic, socially and emotionally charged force. This root certainly seems apt to make unpredictable turns and multiple indirect connections not unlike the rhizomatic model of writing Deleuze and Guattari propose.

But as we have begun to see Browne presents a view of English community in motion that is actually, in many ways, obsessed with its own stagnancy and impervious identity rather than with productive connection. Indeed “an Englishman,” in Browne’s ideal scheme, “though he is so far from a geographer in his patriotism that he knows he must of course exist somewhere, and prefers his island, carries his nationality with him all over the world as a sort of enlarged domesticity.”⁶⁰ In characterizing Chaucer’s Englishness, he explains that the English, “however maladroit their colonial administration may have been, . . . are *par excellence* colonists, missionaries, gatherers together, founders of social groups, makers of history (*i.e.* the story of men and women in groups), wherever they go.” Browne unfolds this list as if these roles were some discrete

⁵⁸ Browne, *Chaucer’s England*, 251.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 250.

and logical set to which Chaucer's poetry must be appended because it "is penetrated with the social spirit."⁶¹ This is a perfect example of Chaucer's reader blatantly adapting his work for colonialism.

There are more domestically interested ways of imagining English and Chaucerian community in motion. Certainly as Paul Strohm has explained, what links Chaucer's obviously diverse and multi-vocal "body of Pilgrims" is their disproportionate representation of the narrow "middle strata" drawn "from the the left hand ('mercatores et fideles mechanici') and the heart ('ciues et burgenses')" of late fourteenth century England's body politic.⁶² And one thing that renders their link more intimate than that is the curiosity and possibility that energizes this body and moves these pilgrims along their way. Christian Zacher, however, has argued that such a link is ultimately no link at all, but rather a divisive force that impedes communal realization.⁶³ Certainly as Alfred David tells us, Chaucer's Canterbury "pilgrims are questers, but they are Englishmen and for the most part common folk, not knights and ladies of ancient Troy, Rome or Camelot."⁶⁴ Thus Chaucer reinvents the traditional romance quest while compounding identities in such a way as to perform an English present while recoding its past—a past that informs it. Instead remaining in the hands of one or many warriors, the quest, which is still integral to the health of society, though in a much more horizontally charged communal sense, is the community: it is undertaken for and by the community and consists most significantly in their communal exchange. It is, moreover, a self-conscious and competitive community in motion. As David explains, Chaucer's "*Canterbury Tales*,

⁶¹ Ibid., 47.

⁶² Strohm, *Social Chaucer*, 4.

⁶³ Christian Zacher, *Curiosity and Pilgrimage* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1976).

⁶⁴ Alfred David, *The Strumpet Muse: Art and Morals in Chaucer's Poetry* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1976), 55.

unlike [his] earlier works, is concerned not only with individuals and their personal goals but with a community of people and the effect upon the community of individual strivings;” and Chaucer enlists his pilgrims not only in a Christian community, but also in “a world of social, commercial, and political action.”⁶⁵ Their pilgrimage is a cultural as much as a spiritual process of change, a pilgrimage that renegotiates the relationship of quest to community, religion to spirit, spirit to culture, and –I would add— religion to nation.

Certainly, from John of Salisbury’s body politic to typical beehive allegories, medieval thinkers most often imagine polities and societies as relationships of parts to whole— in which neither the community nor individual is quite the same without the others.⁶⁶ Echoing this synecdochal sentiment, Marchette Chute explains, “even in his most communal moments the Englishman still thought of himself as an individual, and the change from the old to the new was therefore much less violent than on the continent.”⁶⁷ While one could certainly question this position from a historical perspective, we might see this observation reflected in Chaucer’s imagination, where violence seldom destroys political community without some sense of redemption or some new creation. That is to say, in Chaucerian fiction even violent change is not without productive reorganization. Chaucer’s is a national conversation, always already in progress and never at an end. It proceeds, moreover, like a catechism missing many answers only to heighten the power of its statement as question, as a first and energetic national inquest. As Donald R. Howard writes, “It has self-awareness, shows a tendency

⁶⁵ Ibid., 55, 53.

⁶⁶ Traugott Lawler, *The One and the Many in the Canterbury Tales* (Hamden: Archon Books, 1980) explores this point concluding with a Robertsonian ending despite Lawler’s greater focus on extra-patristic voices and concerns.

⁶⁷ Marchette Chute, *Geoffrey Chaucer of England* (New York: EP Dutton, 1946), 206.

to raise questions about the nature and uses of literature itself.”⁶⁸ History making takes many forms, but Chaucer’s work tells a complex truth about social history; it works at transformation not only through the imaginative channels through which Anderson sees national communities forming, but also in ritualistic ways that might nationalize purportedly international forms of literary and religious culture. Chaucer’s work memorializes and preserves diverse traditions— even and maybe especially literary traditions from beyond England’s borders— changing them, transforming them beyond the borders of cosmopolitanism and conserving shards of them for England. The nationhood evoked by this project is a particularity that defines itself relationally by similarities with as well as differences within and across other national communities; this is the complex model we will test when we read Chaucer’s own text more carefully.

Indeed diversity as a function of communities comprised of individuals has been important in Chaucer’s understanding of the body politic as well as in his reader’s understanding of his Englishness; and the imaginative spirit, as well as a contentious one, characterizes Chaucer’s Canterbury pilgrims in this way. As Peggy Knapp notes,

Chaucer’s crew is far more motley and far more contentious [than Boccaccio’s in his *Decameron*], but also more engaged with one another. They are assembled on and competitive over the distinctive social and economic terrain of late medieval England. To contend this way, they use the varied registers available to Middle English and disclose their various takes on English controversies. To present them this way Chaucer’s text both creates what is not in being and interprets what is.⁶⁹

There is a sense here of a competitiveness that binds Chaucer’s English into a team as well as a league. According to Knapp, the community Chaucer imagines “among the pilgrims is not one of unanimous agreement, but one that shares distinctive beliefs and

⁶⁸ Donald R. Howard, *Writers and Pilgrims* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 83.

⁶⁹ Knapp, “Chaucer Imagines England,” 142.

distinctive controversies over belief”: the Canterbury pilgrimage is more an inquest than a quest.⁷⁰ Thus Knapp explains that what we have here is an active, morphing group in a process of redefinition and reorganization through a process of questioning; and we have an imaginary moment that takes an immediate context and molds it into a present full of new possibilities, thereby defining it against a past that lacks such imagination. Here possibilities are most significantly social possibilities. While the individual is a distinct and integral player on the Chaucerian field, the real dynamism involves relationships among individuals and across communities— in the social realm. This dynamic possibility is not realized or even intelligible on a purely individual level.

Knapp has shown that in order to better understand the processes that render Chaucer’s oeuvre the stuff of English nationhood, we will have to attend to Chaucer’s imagination as well as his readers’ imaginations of him. She maintains that Chaucer’s imagination of community in the *Canterbury Tales*, in accord with Anderson’s “definition of imagining,” involves “bringing forth something previously in existence, though differently experienced.”⁷¹ This observation reminds us that national imagination is so powerful in part because it is able to negotiate transactions between past and present. Knapp’s analysis pushes us beyond the problems posed by superficial glances at language and at the history of “nationalism” versus “internationalism” to a level that probes the nature and function of Chaucer’s intellectual and literary work.

As Frantz Fanon writes, “National consciousness, instead of being the all-embracing crystallization of the innermost hopes of the whole people, instead of being the immediate and most obvious result of the mobilization of the people, will be in any

⁷⁰ Ibid., 148.

⁷¹ Ibid., 132.

case only an empty shell, a crude and fragile travesty of what it might have been.”⁷²

Fanon, and most intellectuals concerned with the problematic politics of nation imagine nationhood and its limitations in a post-colonial world scarred by the ways in which history has failed many marginalized communities. Yet this allusion to “what it might have been” calls us back to a past before the teleology was set, and suggests that a perspective capable of glimpsing the possibilities that lie behind the hegemonic and oppressively hierarchical concretization of the modern nation state is integral to understanding nationhood’s failures. We might begin to unfold Chaucer’s relationship with nationhood by asking in what ways he is the father of English nationhood or—and more importantly—how his unofficial laureateship shapes English discourses of nationhood, but we must not stop there. Instead we must pursue Chaucerian nationhood’s past possibilities and the urgencies that Chaucer bound to the question of the English nation in his day.

While Chaucerians have consistently assumed and elaborated ties between Chaucer and the English nation, some of his most compelling readers question the mutual applicability of Chaucer studies and the study of nationhood. As Ardis Butterfield approaches the matter of nationhood in Chaucer, she is everywhere wary of anachronism, of the supreme standards of “modern views of nation” and the “modern idea of promoting nationalism,” neither of which is so far beyond comparison with moments traditionally considered more or less than modern.⁷³ Nevertheless, she helpfully shows that “Chaucer’s English . . . is capable of registering sharp differences as well as careful

⁷² Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 148.

⁷³ Ardis Butterfield, “Nationhood,” *Chaucer: An Oxford Guide*, ed. Steve Ellis (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005), 56, 57.

appropriations, of articulating the experience of foreignness as well as of homeliness.”⁷⁴

Derek Pearsall and David Wallace, in particular, provide important perspectives on the limitations and drawbacks entailed by common nationalistic readings of Chaucerian social vision. Pearsall reconsiders the views of Primo Levi, for whom “the origin of enmity toward strangers, . . . which informs the more rabid forms of nationalistic consciousness” is “a form of deviance from a normally healthy state, . . . a potential flaw or weakness, like vulnerability to infection,” and proposes “that what [Levi] calls the ‘infection’ is not some rottenness in the system, but part of what makes the system work, indeed part of a ‘system of reason’.”⁷⁵ Thus the nation is primarily a group that constructs itself by defining its strangers— by excluding others both politically and socially, and nationalism is a system that functions for and through xenophobia. Pearsall goes on to describe Chaucer’s use of language including inherited systems of exclusion, but on the topic of Chaucer and Englishness, he maintains, “there is no English poet who is *less* interested in England as a nation.”⁷⁶ Although there is evidence for xenophobia in Chaucer’s writing (Chaucer’s *Prioress’s Tale*, his Man of Law’s contention that Syria is a barbarous nation), Pearsall is right to query the relative lack of xenophobia, which is due in large part to Chaucer’s general failure to step beyond the ironic tone. Nevertheless, by widening our gaze we realize significant possibilities for Chaucerian nationhood.

Unlike nationalism’s ideologies of territorial control and xenophobia, which Pearsall disparages, Chaucer’s conceptualizations of nation and state intersect in the form

⁷⁴ Ibid., 64. See also Butterfield, “Chaucer’s French Inheritance,” 20-35; Butterfield, “England and France,” in *A Companion to Medieval English Literature and Culture c. 1350- c.1500*, ed. Peter Brown (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 199-214.

⁷⁵ Derek Pearsall, “Chaucer and Englishness,” in *Chaucer’s Cultural Geography*, ed. Kathryn Lynch (New York: Routledge, 2002), 282-83.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 297.

of questions rather than platforms or strategies. From Chaucer's retraction of his worldly literary ruminations to the open ending of his *Parliament of Fowls* to the final futility of Theseus's will to order his polity in the *Knight's Tale*, Chaucer's imaginations of nationhood, like most of his political sentiments, are always obliquely pitched, if not even more abstract. Indeed as Winthrop Wetherbee notes, "though profoundly political in their implications, the [*Canterbury*] *Tales* offer no comment on contemporary politics;" thus Wetherbee widens our perspective on the range of politically significant statements that fine literary texts help us access.⁷⁷ Chaucer's work, because of its politically unsettled moment of inception as well as Chaucer's own experimental innovations (ranging from his risky linguistic choices to his geographic imagination) is particularly adept at invoking forms of nation exceedingly less orthodox and more characteristically experimental than those with which we are most familiar. The question remains: must this familiarity entail necessity, or even inescapability?

Emphasizing the pervasiveness of the modern nation-state's ideology, Pearsall writes, "The point of talking about Chaucer and Englishness is to show how the apparently non-political and non-aligned writing of a great poet can become the instrument of an unrelated and historically powerful ideology."⁷⁸ Pearsall does this by reading the intersections of Chaucerian critical history and English national feeling as more intimately bonded with exclusivity and xenophobia than with anything else, nevertheless, these are not the only political and social commitments Chaucer's interest in national writing might promote. Indeed, the criteria by which we judge what is non-political and non-aligned are largely defined by ideology here. The problem of aligning

⁷⁷ Winthrop Wetherbee, *Chaucer: the Canterbury Tales* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989), 1.

⁷⁸ Pearsall, "Chaucer and Englishness," 297.

Chaucer with the most powerful of ideologies is perhaps as ubiquitous as the problem of accepting nation as a discrete and obviously aligned term. My concern about stopping at Pearsall's conclusion is that while it adeptly summarizes one of the urgent lessons learned through Chaucer's relationship with Englishness, it swiftly forecloses many other paths of inquiry including serious scrutiny of nationhood not only as a self-contained ideology but also as a dynamic concept.

Alternative understandings of Chaucer's relationship with nationhood, informed yet unobscured by the shadow of this pervasive form, may help erode the influence of what has become a widely oppressive ideology just as they help us access if not quite recover the sense of possibility that Chaucer's innovations must have inspired. Peggy Knapp has shown that, "Chaucer evokes a sense of English community, at least in part as a result of his seeing certain phenomena as indicative of an English community;" and though this community may not have "generally understood itself as a nation of citizens," we might best understand it as such.⁷⁹ That is to say that Chaucer's work makes known possibilities for some, but not all, recognizably national manifestations of English community. Certainly nationhood, and English nationhood in particular are what they are today, in part, because of Chaucer, his followers, and other writers concerned with vernacularity and political community, yet Chaucerian nationhood as developed in the *Canterbury Tales* can never be exactly the same as nationhood in our and other recent historical moments because of England. Discussing the significance of English modes of expressing and exploring imagination in late fourteenth century England, Knapp illuminates Chaucer's intervention in a particular English moment. As she tells us—and this bears repeating—Chaucer's intervention involves "bringing forth something

⁷⁹ Knapp, "Chaucer Imagines England," 148-9.

previously in existence, though differently experienced.” Because England was a familiar, certainly identifiable, but still culturally-unrecognized political community, it was ripe for a cultural boost that would simultaneously put it in closer touch with its own local registers of expression and push it onto the world stage. Chaucer’s England, just like Chaucer’s imagined national community en route to Canterbury, in Glenn Burger’s incisive language, “must be understood as crucially before the modern nation-state.”⁸⁰ That said, some might be surprised by the continuity across “pre-modern,” “modern” and “post-modern” editions of nationhood. As we will see in the following chapters, Chaucer’s imagination of the English nation as a homeland, as a sovereign polity and as a trans-historical cultural and institutional community weighs heavily on what we know about the nation past and present.

In any case, we should be sure to consider the applicability of Burger’s statement in material as well as more intangible terms. Certainly as Pearsall explains, despite London’s great fourteenth century economic strides, “England, we should always remember, was, in global terms, a backwater of a backwater.”⁸¹ It seems necessary to consider, then, the serious distance both England and English identity had to go before establishing themselves in full-scale and hegemonic forms. England was nation with imperial ambition, but without the stability, boundedness, definition or authority of a modern nation-state. Although it came to be misunderstood narrowly by some as the hegemonic and unfissured bedrock against which progress and modernity could be defined, Chaucer’s England was, in fact, a nation in search of foundations familiar with but not unconditionally synonymous with or limited to the mythic and the exclusive. It

⁸⁰ Glenn Burger, *Chaucer’s Queer Nation*, xx.

⁸¹ Derek Pearsall, *The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 19.

lacked not a culture or an identity, but rather an internationally renowned and thus exchangeable culture as well as clear political definition (partially because of its kings' excessive ambitions in Scotland and in the Hundred Years' War). It lacked, one might say, the accoutrements of an identity that would complicate and ameliorate the simple negligibility of its backwater status. England's lack has been reread as a condition that makes possible a dynamic English identity by several recent examiners of Chaucer's relationship with nationhood via postcolonial theories of time, chronology and the unfixedness of burgeoning communities and polities. We will more properly survey their positions, but we should also focus on the force of national possibility in Pearsall's reading.

Although Pearsall does not explicitly draw on the postcolonial understandings of national possibility that many Chaucerians exploring nationhood do, he does read Chaucer as imagining a community full of international— and so necessarily national— possibility. In Chaucer studies, national possibility is pervasive and multivalent because national identity as an instrument of relation and exchange across distinctive, but negotiable communal boundaries still seemed hopeful when Chaucer was writing. Pearsall points us in this direction as he notes,

A national language is an important constituent element in national identity . . . , but in itself it is more of an enabling condition than a determining characteristic. Chaucer's idea in using English was in any case not to assert an independent national identity but to enable England to take its place among those more advanced nations of Europe—France and Italy—that had already an illustrious vernacular. English is part of Chaucer's European project.⁸²

Pearsall with Thorlac Turville-Petre and Elizabeth Salter reads Chaucer's use of English as an important part of his effort to facilitate relations –and especially a spirit of genial

⁸² Pearsall, "Chaucer and Englishness," 290-91.

competition— among England and France and Italy, the more established continental nations of the late fourteenth century. Though crafting a distinct national identity may not have been Chaucer's intent, if he did envision an England that could "take its place among those more advanced nations," he imagined a political and cultural community whose identity could make it more recognizable and ultimately distinguish it and its place. This does not seem so remote from a national identity. The potential for such recognition was new, and it expanded English identity by simultaneously shrinking distance between England and its neighbors, rendering the English community a nation capable of international recognition, and recognition among English folk— ultimately making England appear as more of a community to its increasingly reflective self. Whether Chaucer's goal was to imbue England with national identity or with the ability to be recognized and recognizable amid the likes of France and Italy, he could hardly have achieved either feat without the other. In fact, a real sense of nationhood seems not simply possible with, but more completely contingent on the interdependence and the communication that Pearsall, Salter and Turville-Petre claim for Chaucer's project. Of course, as we have seen above the discourse and history of laureation expresses such interdependence. In any case, despite the simple efficiency we see here, we should also appreciate the sense of possibility and excitement with which these scholars regard Chaucer's project.

Chaucer's internationalism has been one of the most commended aspects of his work, but the common distinction made between national and international triumphs in this praise is false. Reflecting on Salter's seminal observations, Turville-Petre explains the appearance of late fourteenth century Middle English works as great and diverse as

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and the *Canterbury Tales* as evidence of the “fact . . . that English could now take its place as one of the established vernacular languages of literature. As Elizabeth Salter says of Chaucer: ‘his use of English is the triumph of internationalism.’”⁸³ In the sense that internationalism is an expression of relation between comparable, but discrete ethnic groups, its prerequisite would be nationhood. In the sense that it is triumphant, Englishness rises in company with other triumphing national identities thereby expressing its fitness, its worthiness for competition. And so it seems more than plausible that Chaucer’s successful internationalism ultimately contributes to the triumph of England the nation— just as striving nations contribute to triumphant internationalism. In accord with Pearsall, Salter, and Turville-Petre, I read Chaucer’s project as a participatory one developing from a relational imagination of literary culture and political community, I would add that this is ultimately a relational imagination of nationhood. Pursuing this line a bit further, we might see that Chaucer’s international and national projects are hardly mutually exclusive, but rather part and parcel of each other and reflective of the possibilities nationhood held in Chaucer’s day. Internationalism is simply a kind of nationalism.

All this is not meant to bury the problem of exclusion so interwoven with Chaucer’s national imagination. A quick recollection of the *Canterbury Tales* reminds us that Muslims and Jews appear only in the tales and not among their tellers. And in the case of Mongol Princess Canacee, the Squire’s English does not include words to describe non-European beauty, which is conveniently inapplicable in Syrian Queen Zenobia’s sad story. Meanwhile dark skin appears only as a result of the lower class

⁸³ Thorlac Turville-Petre, “The Brutus Prologue to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,” in *Imagining a Medieval English Nation*, 341.

labors of the Knight's Yeoman and as evidence of alchemical mishaps on the body of the pilgrimage's last addition, the Canon's Yeoman. Ethnic and religious exclusion abound, and such exclusion is as subtly challenging as many of Chaucer's concerns despite its relatively limited place in his oeuvre.

Pearsall, Wallace, Turville-Petre and Elizabeth Salter separate Chaucer's exclusions from the rest of his interest in otherness and the exotic as well as from his internationalism. But internationalism is not necessarily the same as cosmopolitanism, and internationalism (with all of its potential nationalism and all of nationalism's potential provincialism) is the term that the aforementioned scholars admit into this discussion. Ultimately, when they write of his internationalism, they actually seem to mean something more universalist, less provincial, less defined by the too-familiar hatreds that pilgrims like the orientalist lawyer and anti-Semitic Prioress represent—something like cosmopolitanism, although this is not the word they use.⁸⁴ Here we must distinguish between cosmopolitanism, which might pose a threat to Chaucerian nationalism in its assimilation of universal values and customs, and internationalism. As Michael Ignatieff observes, “cosmopolitanism is the privilege of those who can take a secure nation-state for granted.”⁸⁵ Likewise, Chaucer's internationalism is the privilege of those who could take a secure English state for granted. As his frequent apologies for English indicate, Chaucer saw it as part of his project to establish and instantiate a national literary culture as secure as the English military and institutional state that seemed bound to survive, if also to decay, in his day. Regardless of what Chaucerians

⁸⁴ Pearsall, “Chaucer and Englishness,” 281-302; David Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity: Absolutist Lineages and Associational Forms in England and Italy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997); Turville-Petre, “The Brutus Prologue,” 340-346; and Salter, *English and International*, 244.

⁸⁵ Michael Ignatieff, *Blood and Belonging: Journeys into the New Nationalism* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, & Giroux, 1995), 13.

mean when they name Chaucer's attitudes toward the continent "internationalist," Chaucerian internationalism is full of opacities and poses no threat to his simultaneously provincial and national consciousness. In fact, it fails to rule out the exclusions that his Prioress and Man of Law write in.

Exclusion, moreover, is hardly the only mode in which nationalism might be thought to rear its very own ugly and off-color head. Certainly Chaucerians have been troubled by the pressures national boundaries direct inward as well as by border frictions. For David Wallace the question of nation is contiguous with the problem of absolutism. In his formulation, the state feeds on and ultimately destroys communal associative force and forms as part of its process of nationalization—its progress toward attaining the comprehensive reach of the absolutist national state. By this standard Chaucer should be read as a doubtful critic of and marginal commentator on the nation. Comparing Chaucer with Lydgate, Wallace "emphasizes . . . Chaucer's decision *not* to press claims for the 'renoun' of poets, and the 'worshipe' they might bring a 'nacioun,'" evidenced by the *Monk's Tale's* lacking "claims for poetry or authorship as an instrument of state," which are emphatically absent in this *de casibus* poem.⁸⁶ Wallace explains Chaucer's wariness of the state's constraints on the poet and his understanding that "the fortunes of state sponsored poetry follow the fortunes of the state."⁸⁷ But here again, it seems important to ask if the nation and the state are universally and for all times so neatly confluent. Indeed both forms of political community, nation and state, appear in Chaucer's work. At times, as in the *Parliament of Fowls*, the *Man of Law's Tale*, and the *Knight's Tale*, Chaucer seems to consider the possibilities of these two being one form, but while both are

⁸⁶ Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity*, 334.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

familiar, neither is a wholly settled, clear or impermeable form itself.⁸⁸ In any case, it seems important to ask if and how we might characterize nations developing before, after and alongside the rises and failures of modern nation-states.

Though Chaucer's consideration of nationhood is as unique and central to understanding the shape of his oeuvre as most of his engaged inquiries, it is also true that nation takes a more urgent and recognizable place in the work of Chaucer's descendents. Wallace makes this point by contrasting Chaucer's imagination of political community with that of William Shakespeare in *Henry IV*, Parts I and II, where

the nation as an imagined entity is formed through the destruction of local communities and the simultaneous engorging of their ideological gloss: for as Benedict Anderson notes, "the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible . . . not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings."⁸⁹

Thus the associational local community and the nation are mutually exclusive. The nation is synonymous with the absolutist state and these are both chronologically after and parasitic on the medieval fellowship or associational community of Chaucer's vision.⁹⁰ Rather than a synecdochal relationship of parts that stand symbolically for a whole despite their particularity, only the whole or the part, the nation or the fellowship, thrives in this scheme. Certainly this is the prevalent practical and historical model.

⁸⁸ In the *Parliament of Fowls* Chaucer poses the parliament, an innovation of the state, as a way to organize and exchange ideas within a growing community, a nation of disparate, but joined parties. The *Knight's Tale* makes a shaky case for the state's ability to force distinct communities into nations, while the *Man of Law's Tale* witnesses to the power of communally held ideals, like religion, to simultaneously define nation and undo the bonds of family as they renegotiate alliances of state.

⁸⁹ Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity*, 383.

⁹⁰ Kevin Pask "'England's Olde Ennius': Geoffrey Chaucer," in *The Emergence of the Author: Scripting the Life of the Poet in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996), 9-52 offers an important argument regarding how sixteenth-century Chaucerians co-opted Chaucer and fabricated his education to make him into a past precedent of a national poet and linguistic servant and tool for an absolutist state.

I share Wallace's misgivings about the historical nation-state and his nostalgia for a more communitarian Chaucerian political vision. Nevertheless, I also think we may already detect such unorthodox possibilities in Chaucer's imagined Canterbury community. These early models of English community—perhaps unique to Chaucer—are neither wedded to the absolutist state nor completely divorced from national identities. If so, that only intensifies the political responsibility of the critic. Glenn Burger's projection of Chaucerian nationhood, emphasizes just such possibilities, without erasing or idealizing away the exclusions, hierarchies and incompleteness which also characterize Chaucer's imagined community (as they do all nations in process).

V. Postcolonial Critique: The Utility of Presentism

For Burger, Chaucer's is a nation capable of challenging not only its past, but also its present and what has been considered its hegemonic future. His concept of Chaucer's queer nation reclaims— from the nation-state's stale and hegemonic grip— an unknowable and unsettled character that endows national process with dynamic energy. He explains,

the “nation” that the Canterbury project itself imagines must be understood as crucially *before* the modern nation-state. The *Tales*' organization of an imagined community of “gentils” anticipates the later centrality of a London-Canterbury axis that defines a national center founded on a national language, a national polity, and a national religious practice. But the *Tales* simultaneously reveal the complex set of material factors informing and often interfering with the creation of such a social imaginary.⁹¹

Burger shows that because of the way postcolonial theory allows us to imagine the *Canterbury Tales* and because of the way the work imagines itself, it puts us in touch with new visions of English nationhood. The modern English nation-state is neither the

⁹¹ Burger, *Chaucer's Queer Nation*, xx.

simple descendent of Chaucer's pilgrimage community nor a simple betrayal of that community's promise. Burger notes that the *Tales* reveal the complexity and self-subverting force of an English nation imagining itself before the modern nation-state. Such complexity and subversion constitute and "inform" rather than simply threaten or impede community here. Likewise, the Canterbury pilgrims forever en route, but never arriving at their figurative or literal destinations, perform nation as a process of telling their own stories and riding on their communal way.

Chaucer's nation, in Burger's words, is ultimately a community "come together by chance association," a new group composed of characters from the middle strata of English society, "neither aristocratic nor peasant." Indeed, this community derives most of its force from the lines it blurs and its lack of stasis. Burger explains that the group imagines its own unknowable "'beyond', in which" social, religious, and temporal "contradictions . . . could fuse" even as it remains engaged in its complicated present—"gaining some sense of identity and community as the pilgrims of the *Canterbury Tales*."⁹² Thus we have a pre-nation-state nation emphatically in process, whose possible endings challenge each other as they attempt to close down the tale-telling process and move us to a "beyond" that we can not know completely.⁹³ Such a Canterbury community is poised to shed light on both the successes and limitations of the modern

⁹² Ibid., 198.

⁹³ Burger reads the Host's request that the Parson tell the final tale as a call to assume pilgrim identity and end the tale-telling pleasures of the Canterbury project. The Parson's refusal to tell a "fable" and his focus on pilgrimage of the life of man instead is a challenge to the Host's game: "For the Host, the end to tale-telling is bound up not just with filling the stipulated terms of an idle game, but with manifesting the idle web of social relations that such game playing represents—"we han herd of ech degree" (X.18). For the Parson (and the Chaucer of the *Retraction*) the literal end of the story (or life) is nothing but the sign of the emptiness of all human endeavors, and hence, of the need to allow a divine plan to fill and guide it. The "ends" to the *Tales*, then, enact a kind of coercive historicism, demanding that we exceed the boundaries of the *Tales* as we know them in order to fantasize their "beyond" and in order to return to our present "at a thropes ende" in the fullness of such knowledge of the "future" (*Chaucer's Queer Nation*, 188).

nation-state while evading state hegemony as well as models of perfection. So while Chaucer's imagined community participates in the spirit of chance and adventure that liberates romance from epic destiny, it also resists the resolution of romance's known and orderly ends by entertaining a variety of endings and a range of social visions. The old class order is still visible, but boundaries have been transgressed; old identities are still in play, but now the rules of the game are complicated by new pilgrim identities in process. Indeed Burger's reading implies that Chaucer's story of the nation, like the author's own critical history, seems to be a story perpetually in process rather than a story that will end when it achieves some nominal progress. It is a story, as Paul Strohm would say, of a discursive community, and it inhabits a middle space in which chance, change, and new possibilities characterize the ever-prominent horizon.

Rather than looking at the medieval past from a contemporary moment assured of that past's present, future and its relation to imperial history, Burger focuses on the unknowable future that the *Tales* imply, and on its investment in its present, its "presentism," underscoring the significance of imagination to its national self-definition. He writes,

If pilgrimage here continues to promise the "beyond" of typological fulfillment—an enacting of the pilgrimage of the life of man, it also in this context implies something more—the "beyond" of a unified body of "gentils": no longer defined simply as the body of the king or the body of Christ, but as an emergent imagined community capable of articulating its own new "national" identity.⁹⁴

Burger explains that this emergent community has analogues, but no exact copies in fourteenth century England. So the *Tales* imagine possibility that—because it is not reality—depends heavily on imagination. "And I want to emphasize," he continues,

⁹⁴ Ibid., 198.

such an imagined community as something not yet known, and therefore separate from the kind of “English nation” defined a generation later by the fifteenth-century Lancastrian state apparatus. Subsequent early modern and modern attempts to define Chaucer as avatar of Englishness and an English literary tradition, and thus to root the *Tales* in various fantasies of the English nation, are later sedimentations of the kind of “beyond things as they are” that I am arguing is being imagined and given a temporality and topography in the *Tales*.⁹⁵

As Burger tells it, Chaucer creates a national and discursive “beyond” that his fifteenth-century followers long to extend, despite Harry Bailly and the Parson’s narrative ending gestures. Though creating a discursive beyond, Chaucer does not tell us exactly what this beyond is, but insists there is one, thus opening a sense of unpredictable possibility that is only limited by claims that it could be more purely prophetic, a harbinger of the true modern. As Lee Patterson writes, “The Chaucerian imagination is at once caught within the middling world of history and haunted by the dream of origins”: it is less concerned with teleology than with ontology—less sure of purpose and more invested in the process of articulating communal and individual identities via storytelling.⁹⁶

Certainly, as Burger writes, “[h]ere postcolonial theory provides . . . a useful means by which we might, from within the inheritance of modern discourses of nation and empire, challenge their normative power.”⁹⁷ This approach is so powerful in part because it negates the choices among historicist responsibility, historical materialism, and postcolonial or anti-colonial commitment, which no longer seem mutually exclusive. As Burger reminds us, because at this time the *Canterbury Tales* and other contemporary works are in the process of defining “London” English, “English is as likely . . . to signify a colonial history in relation to French and Latin and a fragmenting regionalism as it is a

⁹⁵ Ibid., 198-99.

⁹⁶ Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History*, 20.

⁹⁷ Burger, *Chaucer’s Queer Nation*, xx.

unified, imperially coherent identity.”⁹⁸ Thus he suggests the usefulness of Chaucer studies in helping us understand the nuances of Chaucer’s political moment and how varied national forms of political community could be. Burger also highlights Chaucer’s imagination of time and chronology vis-à-vis nationhood. Inspired by Homi Bhabha’s concept of post-ality, “as an agential ‘middle,’ rather than a progressive historicist ‘after’ or a revolutionary ‘against,’” he reads the middleness of Chaucer’s social imagination as capable of resisting if not subverting “the hegemony of modern social formations” that claim to “always already” know “Chaucer’s world.” Accordingly, this refreshing way of conceptualizing middleness is a means to “think the effects of imperial history differently” and pushes us “to imagine” the “premodernity” of Chaucer’s world “otherwise.”⁹⁹

Benedict Anderson’s concept of the nation lies behind Burger’s use of Bhabha. “Communities are to be distinguished,” Anderson writes, “not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined.”¹⁰⁰ He goes on to delineate the ways in which national communities are imagined:

The nation is imagined as *limited* because even the largest of them, encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite, if elastic boundaries, beyond which lie other nations. . . . It is imagined as *sovereign* because the concept was born in an age in which Enlightenment and Revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely-ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm. . . . Finally, it is imagined as a *community*, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willing to die for such limited imaginings.¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid., xxi.

¹⁰⁰ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 6.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 7.

In the *Canterbury Tales* community is imagined as limited, by time, mobility, religion and discourse. Sovereignty is imagined as national: negotiable, limited and shared because no king ruled without counsel in Chaucer's age. Comradeship too is imagined as negotiable, changeable, and, somehow always necessary, though not always or necessarily something that interrogates a willingness to sacrifice life. Characterized by its signature communal limitations, its fascination with questions of sovereignty, and perpetual reworking of the relationship among community, death and violence, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* fits uncomfortably with Anderson's model, simultaneously interrogating the ground on which it is founded and extending its roots deeper into the past. Anderson's most useful offering is the simple suggestion here that nationalism is first and foremost a style, hence an approach that can be applied to almost any political community: it is a way and not a thing itself. Every thing that is a nation is in some very significant part a product of this way of imagining. Although the traditional form of the capitalist, pro-imperial, xenophobic, and nominally-secular modern nation-state has shaped Chaucer's reception history most, the Andersonian model is the central approach through which Chaucerians have been able to understand Chaucer's own imagination of the nation. Chaucer imagines England along the general lines that Anderson proposes, even when his imagination of England differs from images of the modern nation-state.

Both Burger and Anderson remind us that nationhood is primarily an approach to political community, before a telos or category of anything. It does not preclude multiple perspectives at all. By taking what we can from various tense moments in the critical history of Chaucerian nationhood we might, perhaps, begin to understand how English becomes at once national and international. Indeed Chaucer's imagination of a discursive

community in the *Canterbury Tales*, predominantly characterized by diverse and competing opinions as well as by priorities that hold it together, presents many opportunities for this. It also challenges Fanon's hope for "[n]ational consciousness" as "the all-embracing crystallization of the innermost hopes of the whole people" suggesting those innermost hopes may be too diverse to crystallize as one tangible or mobilizing ethic— and, ultimately too good to be true. Perhaps this is a function of Fanon overstating his case. Still, through our Chaucerian lenses, nationhood's past possibilities are more encouraging than the modern-nation state's future.

VI. The Power of Anachronism

Following Burger and the other recent Chaucerians I have just discussed, this dissertation resists thinking of nationhood as a stable concept. It will consider how Chaucer contributes to ever-emerging ideas of nationhood and even how he participates in nationalism. Chaucerian nationhood predates modern nationalism, yet we cannot fully divorce the two. Chaucer's representation of a variegated political community is complex, drawing as it does on long-standing stereotypes as well as on more sophisticated concepts of the nation. Viewing Chaucer through the lens of postcolonial critique is a somewhat anachronistic project. I justify my approach in part by demonstrating that Chaucer's explorations of nationhood are themselves anachronistic. In its largest outlines, Chaucer's nationalism consists of a complex balance between ideals of sovereignty and ideals of domesticity. Chaucer uses these ideals to describe how the people who make up the English nation relate to each other. In short, domesticity explains their complex familiarities with each other, while sovereignty accounts for the political and cultural hierarchies that stratify them nonetheless.

Anachronism provides Chaucer with the key narrative resource to move between these two ideals. Ultimately his presentation of the English nation as at once a sovereign power, a trans-historical community of comrades, and a homeland, suggests ways in which apparently contradictory forms of nationhood enlighten and facilitate one another.

The relative dearth of exchange between Chaucerians and nationhood scholars testifies that we have understood neither subject well enough. Remedying this lack means reconsidering both orthodox and alternative models of the nation across intellectual history. Neglect of unorthodox forms of nationhood results in providing support to an ultimately untenable nationalism and in the likelihood of missing the national significance of Chaucer's work. Traditionally, criticism has tended to pit Chaucer's internationalism against his nationalism and ultimately to proclaim his internationalism victor. I will demonstrate, however, that Chaucer arrives at his very concept of English nationhood through his engagement with internationalism.

In the pages ahead, I focus on Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* because in it Chaucer imagines England as a set of negotiable relationships, including hierarchies and transcendent loyalties among diverse citizens. Chaucer's earlier works the *Parliament of Fowls* and *Troilus and Criseyde* also shed light on ideas of nationhood. However, the *Canterbury Tales* treats more discretely the case of England and the problem of sovereignty, which has always been significant and more complicated than absolute, despite Anderson's suggestion that the Enlightenment and Revolution have an exceptional purchase on the concepts of nation and sovereignty. I will offer readings of the *General Prologue* and frame tale, the *Knight's Tale*, *Man of Law's Tale* and *Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*. Although other moments in the *Canterbury Tales* come up, the

frame and these early romances focus on the different ways in which we might imagine sovereignty and community, and they offer national community, based on cross-class, cross-gender negotiations of sovereignty as opposed to empire, based on sovereignty through conquest, as the best and most ethical possibility for England. Ultimately, these sections of the *Tales* explore relationships among sovereignty, homeland, history and religion that complicate modern views of these national problems and the attendant issues of love and belief.

Chaucer's grand intervention on the topic of nationhood involves his use of history and, in particular, anachronism in the tale-telling game of the *Canterbury Tales*. Chapter two, "Sovereignty Limited," provides the literary, historical and philosophical background necessary to understanding this intervention. There I consider Dante Alighieri's ideas about human history, sovereignty and the vernacular, which inspire many of Chaucer's own ideas. Despite their general consensus, we find some notable differences between the English and Florentine poets. Historical and cultural knowledge (education) obligate the individual to contribute to Dante's universalist community; but such humanist resources are more fraught and less categorically positive in Chaucer's national community. Rather than education, simple consent, whether mindful or careless, obligates members to participate in the Canterbury-bound community. Actual communal participation, the telling of tales, depends on historical knowledge of "aventures that whilom hanne bifalle"—which is to say that history ultimately serves as the currency in which they make their contributions (I. 795). Such participation is judged by its capacity to transmit *sentence* and *solace*, meaning and pleasure, to the community. Indeed this transmission necessitates shared language, rhetorical skill and cultural knowledge,

especially of the past, the resources that one needs to participate in Harry Bailly's tale-telling vernacular community. As Chaucer imagines it, Harry's tale-telling game transforms universal human history into the currency of communal contribution and the means of national continuity for an English vernacular community.

Nevertheless, education, rhetoric and history are as likely to be liabilities as advantages for the pilgrims who populate Chaucer's community. Bailly ultimately queries command of history and education— and especially rhetorical skill— with his injunctions to the Clerk and the Monk (IV. 15-20, VII. 2780-2805). Before the Clerk can tell his tale, Harry admonishes him about the unintelligibility of rhetorical terms, asking him to save his “termes . . . colours, and . . . figures” for another time and to speak to the pilgrims “so pleyn” that all “may understonde” (16, 19, 20). Similarly, he reprimands the Monk for reporting a series of historical tragedies that “anoyeth al this compaignye;” and he admits that he would have fallen asleep were it not for the “clynkyng of” the Monk's “belles,” declaring that a man loses the opportunity “to tellen his sentence” once he loses his audience (2789, 2794, 2802). Chaucer's nation is not one of clerks, monks, knights and lawyers alone; it is peopled with millers, wives and yeoman as well. Likewise, it is not only founded on historical and rhetorical ideas of national sovereignty, but also on “desport” and “game,” which is to say this community can only endure as long as it includes camaraderies experienced and enjoyed in the present (2791). Harry not only links history with pleasure and meaning in the present, he also tells the pilgrims that they will be judged based on their ability to follow suit. And they can judge him based on their own experiences of pleasure: Harry keeps his head, his judicial sovereignty, only as long as the pilgrims remain happy. In the *Canterbury Tales*, communal participation in

the present is as essential as historical continuity with the past to ensuring sovereignty's legitimacy going forward.

Many of the pilgrims tell tales that recall a legendary past and those tales generally elicit engaged responses in the forms of other tales marked by more contemporary and communally urgent themes and contexts as well as by continuity with the past. For example, the *Knight's Tale* takes us back to classical Athens only to move the Miller and Reeve to squabble over the state of marriage and over stereotypes about their respective trades at their contemporary moment. Yet the themes of male rivalry and desire to control female sexuality continue throughout this series of tales just as they seem to persist throughout history, inspiring community members to contribute their thoughts on these common concerns. By the end of the *Cook's Tale*, three of the pilgrims lowest in the social hierarchy have exposed crises in England's cultural institutions—marriage, the church, and the legal system. This is to say that many of the pilgrims comprehend timeless and universal struggles among men and between men and women in England's contemporary cultural terms. Regardless of any other successes, the *Knight's Tale* only provides a model of sovereignty and domesticity at odds, an Athenian model wherein neither common language nor common history helps would-be community members to feel at home with each other. After a few retellings, the story of Theseus's empire serves best to reveal the crises that riddle the English nation. Aptly, both the *Man of Law's Tale* and the *Wife of Bath's Tale* respond to these contemporary problems as national crises; they respond by calling the pilgrims' attention back to earlier moments of crisis in England's history. The Man of Law considers the political and spiritual foundations of sovereignty in relation to historical questions about the potential

for exchange among pagan Britain, Christian Rome and Muslim Syria. This tale gives way to the Wife of Bath's meditation on sovereignty in a slightly more recent Arthurian Britain, an enchanted space that demands exchange among the diverse mixed class, mixed gender polity that inhabits it. Both the Man of Law and the Wife of Bath revisit the legendary insular past in their efforts to define the foundations of their English nation. In their tales, they reimagine history; they reconsider the values that subtend insular standards of nobility, sovereignty, lineage and marriage (the basic reproductive unit of society). The Man of Law certainly has more formal education than the Wife. Nevertheless, both pilgrims demonstrate rhetorical facility, knowledge of the past and ability to understand some of its continuities and discontinuities with current concerns as they reconsider and contribute their stories to their community. And both pilgrims imagine the past anachronistically, demonstrating that the power to contribute national stories to the group—and ultimately, the ability to shape national history—has less to do with getting facts and dates straight than with making opportune arguments about English sovereignty.

In commissioning his pilgrims to tell England's national history, Chaucer (through Harry Bailly) gives them the poetic license to prioritize cultural truth over historical truth through anachronism. For Chaucer sees sovereignty, like history, as a kind of story that requires collaboration. Meanwhile history, like sovereignty, is a form of power that requires participation. As I argue in chapter five, establishing national sovereignty in the *Man of Law's Tale* and comprehending it in the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, depend on Chaucer's anachronisms, his imagination of a sixth century Islamic Syria that

never was¹⁰² and his projection of Dante's fourteenth-century ideas backwards into the mind of a sixth-century woman in Arthurian Britain. By condoning disorder in time and history, Chaucer suggests that human history is not sacred—but rather, a narrative like any other romance that can be retold, reordered, and thereby reinterpreted for new and urgent “truths” about the past, its present meaning and possible futures. We see, in the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, that Chaucer uses Dante's truths about universal human nature to fabricate a cultural history to match his own England's sovereign political present and to fund its future. But in doing so, he tells stories that cannot possibly be true. Chaucerian national history is less an authoritative model to revere and emulate—and more a story whose authority can be manipulated through retelling. For Chaucer, politics, culture and history gain meaning through negotiation and participation among living community members, who speak for and through the dead. While Chaucer imagines Britain's history according to England's present needs and future potential, Dante imagines the Roman Empire's future according to its past potential and Italy's present needs. This divergence accords with the difference between Dante's and Chaucer's political and cultural environments. Dante lived on a peninsula fractured by competing political sovereignties: empire and church, Florence and Sienna.¹⁰³ While Dante's peninsula had certainly seen better, more unified, more sovereign political days, there was no question about which kingship and kingdom were sovereign on Chaucer's island. Even though the king himself could be deposed, imprisoned or constrained by the Lords Appellate, England would survive. There was, however, deep doubt about the value of the cultural products that island had produced—and apparently, as Chaucer's anachronism belies, some doubt

¹⁰² Islam appears in the seventh century.

¹⁰³ Ferdinand Schevill, *History of Florence* (1936; repr., New York: Frederick Unger Publishing, 1961), 126-27.

about whether the truth of Britain's political and cultural past would be enough to sustain England's future.

The Roman centrality idealized by Dante, Marsilius and other important medieval political thinkers was not so inspiring for Chaucer, a poet who imagines a Cheapside inn as a home and a hub for his political and cultural community—and sets domesticity alongside sovereignty as forms for conceptualizing national relationships. England, in the years following Dante's death, may have been provincial, yet English kings enjoyed more power in their insular kingdom than their continental counterparts. Furthermore, fourteenth-century English chivalric culture presented novel challenges to Rome-centric historiography. Most notably, Edward III, who ascended the English throne about six years after Dante's death, emphasized England's connection with its Arthurian past by stressing the role of chivalric culture at his court and, in particular, by instituting the Order of the Garter. Arthurian legend pivots on Arthur's successful resistance to Roman rule. Renewed awareness of Arthurian tradition could have rendered many in Chaucer's Edwardian and post-Edwardian milieu skeptical of Dante's support for Roman political centrality, regardless of Dante's true intent. The *Wife of Bath's Tale*, Chaucer's most intense consideration of English national sovereignty and his singular Arthurian romance, following on the heels of the *Man of Law's Tale*, is an important instance of such skepticism. There, as in the *Clerk's Tale* and the *Parson's Tale*, Chaucer employs Dante's ideas regarding wealth, poverty and human nobility as expressed in the *Convivio*. In the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, he puts Dante's view of humanity's universal potential for nobility to strange and particular uses. Chaucer ultimately embeds these ideas in English nationhood's sovereign foundation, which his Matter of Britain tales help to construct.

Thus he insists that Dante's ideas are relevant beyond the reaches of the Roman Empire and the Italian vernacular.

In Chaucer's work, sovereignty is a kind of domestic power that grows out of the home; and the home is an intermediate national institution. Like Dante's illustrious vernacular, as described in the *Convivio*, Chaucerian sovereignty sheds light gleaned from domestic relationships on national relationships among governors and the governed. Chaucer's pointed and economical use of the word sovereignty clarifies this relationship. Five of his six uses occur in romantic or household contexts; there they describe relationships between lovers and/or husbands and wives. The one time the word appears in Chaucer's *Parson's Tale* it denotes that God-given power that regulates the greed of the governors in relation to their subjects, where lords and subjects are of one condition, though not one class. In each case, sovereignty mediates relationships among free adults who hold different amounts of power yet share emotional bonds and other common investments. These sovereign relationships are simultaneously hierarchical, negotiable, participatory, reciprocal, domestic and intimate; thus, they outline the basic structure of national relationships.

Sovereignty is intelligible as the type of power that binds nations in these ways. And while we can provisionally understand it as shared ownership and judgment, much more is left unsettled. In each Chaucerian context, sovereignty appears as a nuanced concept with rather unexpected practical applications. Sovereignty's nuances vary with the education and household position of the characters who use the word. Sovereignty's practical application depends on the governor who exercises sovereign power; it depends on both the sovereign's prudent understanding of exchange values and his magnanimity,

his capacity to share power and value as if suspending calculations.¹⁰⁴ Thus, in Chaucer's text, sovereignty is a vernacular idea—a concept, whose meaning changes with use, yet remains recognizable—and a human form of governance, a power limited by human relationships, capacities and emotions as well as by communal considerations. For Dante, the illustrious vernacular works like sovereignty: it enacts ownership and judgment; similarly, for Chaucer sovereignty works like the illustrious vernacular: it appears as some combination of theory, a sort of grammar, and practice, repetitive usage.¹⁰⁵ In the *Canterbury Tales*, theories of sovereignty delineate ways in which ownership and judgment might work; but in practice, sovereignty is always more or less than its theory suggests. There is no precision or accuracy here. Sovereignty always either exceeds or falls short of expectations regarding ownership and judgment.

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri explicate a familiar contemporary understanding of the relationship between the nation and sovereignty: “the nation sustains the concept of sovereignty by claiming to precede it.” That is, in claiming to be sovereign, the modern nation presupposes a particular, yet transcendent experience of national culture, identity and homogenous subjectivity rooted in its own immemorial past. A similar observation might be made about medieval conceptions of nationhood even though medieval thinkers tend to be less fascinated by the transcendent and transformative magic of the immemorial nation, which they regard as a common,

¹⁰⁴ My understanding of magnanimity is influenced by David Starkey's smart discussion of medieval English readings of Aristotle's *megalopsychia* and *phroonesis*, magnanimity and prudence or providence. Starkey, “The Age of the Household: Politics, Society and the Arts c. 1350-1550,” in *The Later Middle Ages*, ed. Stephen Medcalf (London: Methuen, 1981), 225-90.

¹⁰⁵ According to Stephen Botterill, for Dante, in the *Convivio* and *De vulgari eloquentia*, Latin or *grammatica* is “a literary language governed by rules.” By this Dante indicates classical Latin poetry and excludes spoken and prose forms of Latin. In Dante's particular formulation, vernacular language is governed more by usage, while Latin is bound more closely to grammatical rules. Dante Alighieri, *De vulgari eloquentia*, ed. and trans. Steven Botterill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 90n1.

inescapable form of cultural community. The historian Susan Reynolds uncovers the ways in which medieval people understood the nation and their involvement in nations. Her important work informs my study throughout. Indeed, medieval nationalists are generally more interested in sovereignty's own transformative power and efficiency when limited to the familiar space of the nation. Likewise, the relationship between nationhood and sovereignty in the *Canterbury Tales* resembles the relationship between contemporary forms in sequence, for English nationhood appears to be immemorial while Chaucer artfully recounts the moments and the ways in which sovereignty is established. But this relationship does not follow that of nationhood to modern sovereignty in terms of agency— here, sovereignty is the talisman that restores nationhood's moral value. Sovereignty is the agent, and nationhood is the object. Chaucer innovates through anachronism, admitting that the power of nations derives not from their truth, but rather from their professed age, their capacity for continuity and especially from their sovereignty. By radically disordering cultural history, his pilgrims establish a national political history wherein English sovereignty redeems English nationhood through both domestic and foreign networks of exchange. History ultimately appears as a form of currency to be exchanged rather just than a form of authority that limits exchange.

Although they come to rather different conclusions about sovereignty and its relationship with nationhood, the most important postcolonial theory of the nation for my study will be that of Hardt and Negri. This is because their approach to the question of sovereignty resembles Chaucer's in two crucial ways: it challenges strict distinctions between past, present and future and insists that the concept of love commonly restricted to marriage and the family must stretch to include a political community of diverse

members. Of course, Hardt and Negri regard the relationship between nationhood and sovereignty from a very different perspective. Theirs is a twenty-first century vantage point that corroborates empiricist definitions of the term “post-colonial,” definitions informed by the nineteenth-century intensification in the complicity of nationalism with colonial imperialism. In their view, the problem with modern sovereignty is that it neglects to moderate conflicts among the multitude of sundry subjects, depending all the while on the supposed unitary experiences of the nation-subject. They insist that nations are revolutionary and progressive only when they oppose and resist the power of stronger nations, empires and political, ideological or economic structures, and remind us that the same national borders that resist greater power progressively in one direction might exert oppressive force that destroys the multiplicity of the community it ostensibly means to strengthen in the other direction. Likewise, both the *Knight’s Tale* and the *Man of Law’s Tale* explore the tension between national and imperial ambitions, casting a more positive light on the national. Chaucer, however, diverges from Hardt and Negri’s conclusion that when nations become sovereign, they stop being progressive.¹⁰⁶ The *Wife of Bath’s Tale* follows the opposite trajectory. In that tale, only when sovereignty begins to enact senses of national identity, love and solidarity that transcend and mollify differences of class, age, wealth and particular genealogy, do nations become legitimate and progressive. Although Hardt and Negri would likely dismiss the Wife’s tale as a naïve bourgeois fantasy, their own fantasy is no less naïve.

The Canterbury community’s cohesion rests on the principle that Hardt and Negri describe as love: “Love means precisely that our expansive encounters and continuous

¹⁰⁶ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 105-09.

collaborations bring us joy.”¹⁰⁷ But in the *Tales*, such encounters and collaborations are inseparable from the problems of sovereignty and history. While the currency of history and rhetoric fund the pleasurable collaborations of the pilgrim community, this particular history and rhetoric must be intelligible to a vernacular and domestic English national community. So here history both breaks and sets limits, constructing a new national multitude of folk able to make history with their vernacular words and rhetorical imaginations, formal or informal. The *Tales* takes up the historical and philosophical problem of translating sovereignty from theory to practice, focusing on the ethics of national sovereignty. The ethics of nationalism is always dependent on historical and cultural context and nationalism’s force is always awesome, transcendent. In love, as in national politics, the feeling of being understood creates a new being, of feeling understood. In the *Canterbury Tales* that is English national culture, a historically and politically sovereign structure. Sovereignty, like nationhood, is both ideal and practical and always supposes itself to be legitimate. It binds nations institutionally through law and mutual obligation and, on more imaginative levels, through acceptance of a shared history and hope for a common future. Sovereignty in the *Tales* requires consent, though coercion helps speed the political, social and legal processes through which it is established and continues to play a role in the resulting political communities it subtends.

Sovereignty is powerful, but, like humanism, it is undependable; it seldom works as it is supposed to work— rather, it is a tool that can be used in too many ways.

Likewise, humanism claims to make available timeless human wisdom, beauty and salvation to any individual who can grasp it. Nevertheless, as David Wallace writes,

¹⁰⁷ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 351.

“[b]y its very nature, Latinate humanism tends to narrow rather than broaden the audience it speaks for.”¹⁰⁸ Reading sovereignty through England’s fourteenth-century military history and humanism through Italy’s fourteenth-century poets, Chaucer recognizes the potential force and the unreliability of both purportedly timeless concepts. As we shall see in his Matter of Britain romances, Chaucer gives sovereignty particular limits by pulling Dante’s views on universal human nobility into the gap between Constance’s understanding of *nacioun* as the entire pagan world in the *Man of Law’s Tale* and the rapist-knight’s understanding of *nacioun* as immediate family in the *Wife of Bath’s Tale*. Thus he points his readers toward the Old Wife’s understanding of nation as cooperation across lines of class, gender and age and toward her ideals of sovereignty and universal human nobility as the tools for that end. Neither history nor love is true here, but together they alternately fix and extend communal limits, ultimately setting Chaucer’s proper limits for English nationhood and English national sovereignty.

Even though Chaucer never severs love from desire, the Wife of Bath’s revolutionary fantasy of female sovereignty succeeds because of the genre of ostensibly absolute, but ultimately benevolent sovereignty that Dante associates with greedless, desireless love in *De Monarchia*. When the women whose stories the Wife tells, Queen Guinevere, the Old Wife (or Loathly Lady), and the Wife of Bath herself, gain sovereignty, whether over their husbands, their bodies or national courts of law, they behave magnanimously and without greed. Their examples suggest that such absolute sovereign ownership in name can translate to shared ownership and judgment among people who hold different amounts of power in practice. The implication, which I

¹⁰⁸ Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity*, 60. In addition, Wallace’s explication of the Baron-Burckhardt debate about humanism’s relation to despotism has guided my thinking on the relation of humanism to nationhood here. *Ibid.*, 4-5.

consider at length in chapter five, is that the superficially weaker party, the common woman, the poor hag, the injured wife, must play the sovereign role, for it is only a role, in order for things to work out this way. In Chaucer's formulation, is not he who truly owns everything, but she who has historically owned nothing, who is also most comfortable with desire and hence most capable of love (and mercy) when holding the sovereign position.

Ultimately, Hardt and Negri propose discarding sovereignty— which they read as the constant ingredient and specious defender of democracy in all political theory— and replacing it with love: the sovereign utopian ideal. They query modern sovereignty's demand for a unitary perspective/ position from which decisions can be made.¹⁰⁹ And they try to correct the misconception that there is a choice between anarchy and sovereignty, offering multitude, a “new science . . . based on the common” as a point of moderation between the two. Their multitude's critical merit is that it does not subordinate differences, but is, in fact, “composed of radical differences, singularities, that can never be synthesized in an identity.”¹¹⁰ Recognizing sovereignty as a dynamic two-sided relationship is their first step to addressing the contradictions that appear within it: “[p]olitical sovereignty and the rule of the one, which has always undermined any real notion of democracy” is “not only unnecessary, but absolutely impossible. Sovereignty, although it was based on the myth of the one, has always been a relationship

¹⁰⁹ Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, 334-340. Noting that “sovereign power is not autonomous,” Hardt and Negri explain that autonomy and independence have only recently and mistakenly become synonymous with sovereignty (334). They consider the body politic in 21st century terms. Based on neuroscience, they find, the one never rules. It takes a multitude of processes and coordination of billions of neurons forming in a coherent pattern to act or make a decision. Genius is not individual, but only results from the collaboration of the multitude in networks.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 355.

grounded in the consent and obedience of the ruled.”¹¹¹ Likewise, marriage has always been a relationship founded on consent and obedience. The rule of the one and marriage are, at least theoretically, mutually exclusive. Chaucer understands this similarity, and he simultaneously explores marriage, sovereignty and love— as a notion on which they both depend— through his national romances. For Hardt and Negri, love is the answer and the problem— because it has become too private of an affair. “We need to recuperate the public and political conception of love common to premodern traditions,” such as Christianity and Judaism, which “conceive love as a political act that constructs the multitude,” they urge.¹¹² Yet, the former religious tradition tends to hegemonic imperialism and violent proselytizing and the later to nationalist exclusivity as consequences of constructing their multitudes. Neither could survive without claiming to synthesize and erase some important differences beneath a valorized and transmittable identity. Thus, even though they deny their equation’s dependence on the nation, eschatology, metaphysics, or utopian dreams, Hardt and Negri’s invocation of the idea of love is naively utopian and makes an end where Chaucer begins. “Love means precisely that our expansive encounters and continuous collaborations bring us joy,” they write near the end of their second book; and yet, there is so much more to be said about love, its limits, and its demands. Their theory lacks critical perspective on the potentially joyful, yet inevitably painful encounters that we call love.¹¹³ Helpfully, Chaucer takes a realistic look at this illogical and approximate conglomeration of things. Thus, Chaucer addresses the problems of pain and the possible, the questions that disempower

¹¹¹ Ibid., 340.

¹¹² Ibid., 351.

¹¹³ Ibid., 351.

utopianism, up front. In Chaucer's trajectory, love begets sovereignty and the latter is the more ideal concept.

Hardt and Negri, like Chaucer, realize that imagining a brighter political future and a better political community requires living out of synch in time. They write, "[w]e can already recognize that today time is split between a present that is already dead and a future that is already living."¹¹⁴ This generative living out of synch is part of the *Wife of Bath's Tale's* moral. According to L.O. Arranye Fradenburg's seminal reading, through this tale, "Chaucer asks us to consider the possibility that fantasies do not simply separate us from reality . . . fantasies can have the power to remake the social realities in which we live and desire."¹¹⁵ Fantasy, the references to fairies, in the Wife's opening lines reminds us that "[r]eality shifts over time and space;" and here fantasy was once reality, "the archaic reality of England."¹¹⁶ Fradenburg demonstrates how the past continues, lives on in the present. Hardt and Negri are interested in how the living present is already a kind of future. While Fradenburg locates the power of reality shaping force in the past, Hardt and Negri locate that power in the future—recognizing the presence of the future is tantamount to realizing that thriving future. Chaucer is interested in how the present shapes the past and how tendentious history authorizes a renewed future, redeeming the present and fitting it for continuity. When Hardt and Negri use the slogan "Another world is possible," they mean "that sovereignty and authority must be destroyed."¹¹⁷ This is a future imperative. But Chaucer is much less confident about the advantages of such a

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 358.

¹¹⁵ L.O. Arranye Fradenburg, "Fulfilld of Fairye: The Social Meaning of Fantasy in the *Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*" in *Geoffrey Chaucer: Wife of Bath's Tale*, ed. Peter Beidler (Boston: Bedford St. Martin's Press, 1996), 208.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 217.

¹¹⁷ Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, 353.

program, and even less certain about the general parameters of the possible—and, hence, the impossible!). Nevertheless, like Hardt and Negri and most philosophers who take up the question of political sovereignty, Chaucer understands the relevance of trans-historical imperatives to communal identity and survival. Chaucer's imperative, however, is a present imperative that renegotiates the past. As we shall see, Chaucer's anachronism insists on the interdependence of the possible with the impossible, of historical experience with nostalgic revision, and of political practice with political imagination. I hope that the following pages will help convince other readers and scholars that Chaucer must be included in critical discussions concerning nationhood in both English literature and late medieval political thought.

Sovereignty Limited: The Concept in Later Medieval Theory and Practice

Chaucer consistently approaches the matter of English nationhood through questions of sovereignty. Although he uses both terms sparingly— *soverainte* five times in all the *Canterbury Tales* and *nacioun* just four times— the context is telling. *Nacioun* appears twice in the *Man of Law's Tale* and once in the *Wife of Bath's Tale*; *soverainte* appears once in the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* and once in her tale. Taken together these tales represent Chaucer's treatment of the matter of Britain. Both tales imagine England's legendary Briton past and scrutinize the place and nature of sovereignty in it. In Chaucer's work and elsewhere throughout late medieval political thought and literary practice, nationhood makes it possible to understand sovereignty culturally, and sovereignty makes it impossible not to understand nationhood politically. For postcolonial theorists like Hardt and Negri, sovereignty is the unamendable problem. . "The nation," they write, "is a kind of ideological shortcut that attempts to free the concepts of sovereignty and modernity from the antagonism and crisis that define them."¹¹⁸ Ironically, Hardt and Negri hold more nostalgic hopes in regard to medieval ideals of national sovereignty, while for medievalists like Thorlac Turville-Petre, Derek Pearsall and David Wallace, nation is the unredeemable category. In the practical political situations of Chaucer's day, nationalist ideals such as sovereignty and common history were highly contested. The nuances of such ideals were perhaps even more hotly debated in the philosophical contexts, the writings of thinkers like Dante, Marsilius of Padua, William of Ockham, Jean de Paris and Nicole Oresme—although these thinkers all shared the common goal of defining and defending the nature of lay political

¹¹⁸ Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 95.

sovereignty from the papacy. And in many Middle English literary considerations, political antagonisms appear to paralyze English nationhood. As Chaucer tells it, sovereignty actually frees the nation from the crisis that its characteristic antagonisms cause without pretending to erase the contentions and sacrifices that continue to define nationhood.

This chapter surveys the political and the literary backgrounds that contextualize Chaucer's conception of national sovereignty. Ultimately, Chaucer's assessment of national sovereignty relies on diverse intellectual and literary traditions as well as on his own historical experience of political and cultural practice. I will consider his national project through all three contexts, beginning with relevant fourteenth-century political events and struggles. Then, I will provide some philosophical context, reading, in particular, Marilius of Padua's and Dante Alighieri's writings on universal sovereignty and Jean de Paris and Nicole Oresme on national sovereignty. Finally, I will compare Chaucer's with previous and contemporary approaches to nationhood in Middle English literary tradition. These various contexts reflect different yet related understandings of sovereignty and different possibilities for nationhood. While Chaucer's fellow English writers viewed antagonisms between governors and the governed as fixed, though critique-able, contemporary historical events suggest that fourteenth-century people from the signers of the 1320 *Declaration of Arbroath* to the rebels of 1381 believed that relationships between rulers and ruled, hence the very terms of sovereignty, were indeed negotiable. Late medieval political history exposes a range of nationalist ideals, which, while diverse and contested, all revolved around and promoted desires for sovereignty. Medieval political philosophies depend on an even wider range of ideals, yet all work

toward conceptualizing the nature and limits of secular sovereignty. Together these varied contexts reveal a political world defined equally by tendentious claims and more critical attempts to base secular sovereignty on shared ethics.

According to Hardt and Negri, “the nation sustains the concept of sovereignty by claiming to precede it.”¹¹⁹ Fourteenth-century history supports Hardt and Negri’s observation about the interdependence of nationhood and sovereignty. Details of linguistic and military history, in particular, reflect this interrelation. The *Middle English Dictionary* records the first uses of the word *soverainte* in the fourteenth century.¹²⁰ At this time, sovereignty indicated a moderate range of powers and authority applicable in spiritual, political and romantic contexts. Academic political thinkers were actively engaged in distinguishing spiritual sovereignty from temporal sovereignty, divine sovereignty from papal sovereignty, papal sovereignty from regnal sovereignty, and imperial sovereignty from national sovereignty. Both descending and ascending theories of secular sovereignty’s origins were popular, and their practical applications were significant. Richard II’s prolific creation of titles attested to the force of descending kingly power.¹²¹ Meanwhile, Richard’s 1399 deposition and Edward II’s 1327 deposition exemplify the extent to which kingship depended on ascending magnetic power and approval in the period. Institutional history and military history suggest that the law was a central determinant of English political sovereignty beyond England’s undisputed boundaries. For English kings struggling for power in Scotland and France,

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 101.

¹²⁰ The first use with an explicitly political denotation is in 1387. *Middle English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “soverainte,” <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?size=First+100&type=orths&q1=soverainte&rgxp=constrained> (accessed August 18, 2008).

¹²¹ Miri Rubin, *The Hollow Crown: A History of Britain in the Late Middle Ages*, (New York: Penguin, 2006), 169.

the right to hear appeals from smaller courts, duchies and kingdoms was key. Nevertheless, political practice revealed gaps left by understandings of sovereignty derived from both academic political thought and legal precedents.

Despite such evidence of the sovereignty's significance in secular and national terms, the most basic argument against accepting medieval imaginations of political community as national imaginings has been that medieval Christianity, the papacy in particular, nullified the significance of all political distinctions among medieval Christians. Such nullification would have made it impossible for medieval Christians to imagine nations more political than the rapist-knight's family, his kin-based "nacioun" in the *Wife of Bath's Tale* or smaller than the entire Christian world or the whole pagan world, the strange and barbarous "nacioun" to which Custance mournfully goes in the *Man of Law's Tale* (III. 1069, II. 268, 281). And yet, England, a nation that lies between these poles, is the very matter of Chaucer's romances. Indeed medievalists including Thorlac Turville-Petre, Alfred Smyth, R.R. Davies, and Susan Reynolds have disproved this contention. Nevertheless, proximity to Rome and the Vatican did seem to shape political thinkers' imaginations: for the Italian theorists produced much stronger and universally powerful figures of lay sovereignty.¹²² Still, one would be hard pressed to locate a time or place on earth wherein religious community has not shaped both imaginations of political community and political realities. From ancient Israel to modern Israel, medieval France to Lebanon in the twentieth century, and from

¹²² For an important recent examination of geography and its influence on medieval English political and cultural imagination, see Kathy Lavezzo, *Angels on the Edge of the World* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006). There, Lavezzo argues that medieval English folk were highly aware of their cartographical and perceived geographical marginality and that they "actively participated in the construction of England as a global borderland" (7). She explains that "geographic remoteness provided the means to articulate English national fantasy. Geographical otherness premised both the exaltation and the marginalization of England during the Middle Ages" (8).

Elizabethan England to George Bush's USA, the question has never been whether or not religion might actually nullify the value of political distinctions among adherents, but rather how religion influences imaginations and experiences of political community. Religion always plays some role in political community and national identity. We shall see that although Dante, Marsilius of Padua, Jean de Paris and Nicole Oresme each imagine sovereign political community somewhat differently than Chaucer does, the differences are not so vast, for all these late medieval thinkers struggled to define secular authority proceeding from the same tenet: the most noble form of human community is religious community –and the same problem: the monarchical character of the papacy. These terms necessitated both the strength and the special concern with religious identity that characterize the lay models of sovereignty that the aforementioned thinkers construct. Thus, the following discussion of political theory considers not distinct political positions, but rather the nuances that distinguish such late medieval notions of lay sovereignty. Indeed Chaucer demonstrates the relative compatibility of such notions by borrowing successfully so many of their values, ideas and paradigms.

* * *

English claims to kingship in the fourteenth century reveal the simultaneous interdependence and dissonance between sovereignty in theory and in practice. As R.R. Davies explains, Edward I had solidified de facto control of Wales, Scotland, Ireland, and England, four separate countries, as “king of England” by the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century. This name of sovereignty could not erase the lands or the peoples it controlled, but it claimed to control them nonetheless. In the case of Edward I's empire, this claim to sovereignty came first: “once allegiance had been secured, a measure of

political participation and consultation might be considered.”¹²³ In actuality, these lands and peoples, Wales, Scotland, Ireland and England, would never form a nation void of political, cultural and institutional fissures. Nevertheless, in the late Middle Ages, England did dominate the other British nations. One could easily describe this relationship in imperial terms. And yet Chaucer imagines Scotland, a troublesome frontier that an English king must confront in the *Man of Law's Tale*, and conjures Wales, the legendary center of Arthurian England in the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, as integral parts of England's national past, a past based on conflict, camaraderie and cross-class cooperation as well as rape, exile and murder. In any case, in Chaucer's regional context, one major national political power with imperial ambition, England, dominated others that would never be able to claim sovereignty to match that of the King of the English. Because fourteenth century monarchs behaved arbitrarily in the name of sovereignty, which was never absolute in late medieval political theory, sovereignty came to mean something more destructive, less reciprocal, and less limitable than abstract understandings suggest.¹²⁴ Chaucer stabilizes the idea of sovereignty by linking it with a historical and continuous image of the English nation that the fourteenth-century English monarchies would have liked to see; but at the same time, English national sovereignty appears in Chaucer's poetry as a necessarily flexible form of rule, equally redemptive and coercive. For Chaucer, sovereignty implies a negotiable relationship of governed to governor, and the sovereign is a role that is filled by different persons at different times.

Although concepts of sovereignty and concepts of national identity can stand alone, they seldom do. They certainly do not stand alone in the history of the Hundred

¹²³ R. R. Davies, *The First English Empire: Power and Identities in the British Isles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 29-30.

¹²⁴ Susan Reynolds, "Medieval *origines gentium* and Community of the Realm," *History* 68 (1983): 375-90.

Years War, which medieval historians generally regard as the most significant influence on English national identity in our period. Anne Curry ascribes this view to Edward III's claims to the French throne, rather than to some radical escalation of violence.¹²⁵ This war is also the largest stage on which the tension between practical and theoretical sovereignty unfolds. Edward III's moves in the war suggest that sovereignty in name and sovereignty in practical institutional and territorial terms did not always match. Indeed, his sovereignty in Gascony alternately appeared to be titular and compromised, and de facto, yet absolute. Edward first claimed the French throne in 1340 when military and other more practical methods of maintaining legal jurisdiction and territorial control over his Aquitaine lands had failed. He essentially dropped his claims and his use of the French title between 1360 and 1369, when the treaty of Bretigny helped secure the total legal and territorial sovereignty he wanted. Edward resumed his claims to French kingship and use of the title, King of France, when his land holdings in Aquitaine were re-seized and he was no longer in steady control. So in practice Edward lived as a

¹²⁵ Curry, *The Hundred Years War* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), [##-##?]. Curry's is the definitive study of England during the Hundred Years War and in the time leading up to it.. Other important studies of significant thirteenth and early fourteenth century struggles between Plantagenet and Capetian kings for Normandy, Poitou, Anjou and other Angevin domains are John Gillingham, "The Fall of the Angevin Empire," and Robin Studd, "England and Gascony 1216-1337" in *England in Europe 1066-1453*, ed. Nigel Saul (New York: St Martin's Press, 1994), 88-96; 97-108. As Gillingham writes, "Since 1066 England had been ruled by Frenchmen . . . It is not surprising that some modern English historians have, in effect, breathed a patriotic sigh of relief when discussing the [1203-04] loss of Anjou and Normandy. Now at last the Plantagenets were free to become true English rulers." Gillingham goes on to explain that said freedom was not received as such by English kings, rather "both John and Henry III made attempts in 1214, 1230 and 1242, to recover their ancestral dominions" (89, 96). Studd picks up where Gillingham leaves off to discuss the costly and humbling business of maintaining Angevin rule in Gascony, which required Plantagenet kings of England to pledge liege homage to Capetian kings of France and "to provide military service in person if summoned, among other things". In addition, Studd notes that when, in February 1254, Henry III "conferred an appanage upon . . . the future Edward I" granting him "all the remaining territories of the Crown in France—Gascony, Orleon and the Channel Islands— which he was told to hold on such terms 'that they should never be separated from the crown . . . but should remain to the kings of England in their entirety for ever . . . Gascony ceased . . . to be the private property of the king and was formally annexed to the English crown" (103, 104). This attempt to link French territory to the English crown is an early instance in which we can see an English king using the name and the idea of English sovereignty as if it were a tool with a special capacity to break temporal bounds, a conceptual device that might ensure future territorial control.

sovereign duke, without the title of King of Aquitaine or King of France, but with the legal right to hear Gascon appeals, the power of the last word, and solid control of the land. At the times when he used the title King of France, his control over the duchy was severely compromised despite *de facto* legal and patchy territorial control.¹²⁶ Thus, that powerful sign of sovereignty, the name of kingship, and the official practice of sovereignty, instantiated by legitimate legal jurisdiction and territorial control, were mutually exclusive in Edward's pursuit of the French crown. In the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, Edward I and Edward II claimed sovereignty over Wales, Scotland, Ireland and France as a variable tactic, which was ultimately a strategy for extending and conserving control over lands and peoples beyond England's established bounds. Their varied claims, mottled means to similar ends, helped render sovereignty an unreliable yet seductive concept, whose variability matched its force.

Edward III's French campaign is not the only extra-insular theater in which we observe the disjunction between theoretical claims to sovereignty and the practical experience of it in the fourteenth century. In 1378, the year after this King of England and sometimes King of France died, two popes claimed spiritual sovereignty and provided a rallying point for French and English national rivalries. France supported Pope Clement VII in Avignon, while England backed Pope Urban VI in Rome. The papal schism showed that people, lands and leaders could be divided into competing domains with competing and parallel religious hierarchies, while still subscribing to one true faith and Church. Meanwhile the lesson of the 1320 *Declaration of Arbroath* had not been forgotten. By signing this document, Scots barons declared that their people had originated in Scythia, had a history separate from that of the English, observed their own

¹²⁶ Curry, *The Hundred Years War*, 67.

laws and customs, and owed loyalty to their kingdom, rather than to their king, whose sovereignty was decidedly contractual.¹²⁷ Together the *Declaration of Arbroath* and the Papal Schism made it impossible to conceive of sovereignty as a simple or inert concept. The range of available understandings of sovereignty expanded before the English field of vision even as England's kings and lords fought to make Scotland and France part of England's sovereign domain, part of its inheritance, as Philippe de Mézières positioned it.¹²⁸

While the English crown and nobility envisioned an expansive English domain, English dissenters promoted a more limited though no less sovereign England, including a direct and limited relationship between English nation and English sovereignty. Miri Rubin explains that the Rising of 1381 was in large part a domestic response to very tangible tax burdens brought on by the French wars. And yet the rebels' grievances resonated sharply with the symbolic and traditional problems of serfdom.¹²⁹ The rebels' rhetorical appeal to truth and their professed loyalties to the king proposed that society could be significantly reconfigured without de-legitimizing the sovereign or sovereignty. Paul Strohm notes that the rebels' adoption of the name "true commons" seemed to increase the number and significance of the former *menus commons* and erased the middlemen, the barons and those in the House of Commons, while both maintaining loyalty to the king and lamenting that he had been led astray by bad council.¹³⁰ The rebels imagined themselves as much more than feudal subjects; and they envisioned theirs as a sovereign English community capable of existing without strict class

¹²⁷ Reynolds, "Medieval *Origines Gentium* and the Community of the Realm," 385.

¹²⁸ Philippe de Mezieres, *Le Songe du Viel Pelerin*, ed. G.W. Coopland (London: Cambridge UP, 1969).

¹²⁹ Rubin, *The Hollow Crown*, 123-24.

¹³⁰ Paul Strohm, *Hochon's Arrow: the Social Imagination of Fourteenth-Century Texts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 41.

hierarchies and without much mediation. As Rubin writes, the “‘true commons’ . . . asserted themselves as an alternative citizenry, by taking an oath to King Richard.”¹³¹ According to ecclesiastical chronicles, the rebels’ demands included that there be no more serfs, that all be of one condition, that rank be respected, but only the king exercise lordship, and that there be only one bishop in England.¹³² In the Rising of 1381, England’s domestic voice addressed its international political aspirations, calling for an expanded citizenry instead of expanded legal and territorial sovereignty. For the rebels, in Rubin’s words, “the problem was not the country’s laws, but those charged with applying and safeguarding them.”¹³³ The Rising of 1381 protested the huge discrepancies between the theory and practice of English laws and governance. They imagined England differently, while reminding their countrymen that they still imagined England and its king as sovereign. Such a sovereign England, with a free, yet permanently hierarchical citizenry, accords with the Parson’s ideal of sovereignty, as we shall see in chapter four.

Sovereignty, or *soverainte*, exists as both a dynamic political concept in fourteenth century England and new word in Middle English. The history of its use as a new English word carries traces of its practical political functions. John Trevisa’s 1387 Middle English translation of Higden’s *Polychronicon* contains the first use of the word sovereignty in a political context. Here “sovereignty” emerges as a form of governance over the Scots to which the English have no right. The Scots deny sovereignty to the English, by maintaining that cultural and historical legitimization of sovereignty outweighs and limits political and military legitimization. From the beginning, the

¹³¹ Rubin, *The Hollow Crown*, 124.

¹³² Alan Harding, *Medieval Law and the Foundations of the State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 264.

¹³³ Rubin, *The Hollow Crown*, 124

concept of English political sovereignty negotiates boundaries between communities and queries the legitimacy of the authority that binds communities as those communities expand, ultimately shaping a relationship between cultural limitation and political legitimacy. Trevisa imports the word *soverainte* from Old French. Translating for the Latin *superioritas*, he employs it to describe the Scots' challenges to English claims on Scotland. He writes, "The Scottes seide that they knewe non such sovereynte that longed to the kyng of Engelond."¹³⁴ In light of the *Declaration of Arbroath*, this particular insular context evokes the historical and cultural diversity that challenges the legitimacy of such political dominance as national sovereignty implies.¹³⁵ The English cannot have sovereignty over Scotland, because they do not have legitimate authority over that kingdom. Sovereignty within England was not absolute, as the fourteenth-century depositions of Edward II and Richard II suggest; however, the disputability of sovereignty when extended beyond England's accepted boundaries compromises its connotation of legitimate governance here. Thus, the idea of political sovereignty enters the English language as an occasion for debate and a concept whose practical application as an expansive form of coercive power threatens its meaning as legitimate rule. Because England was engaged in efforts to expand its territorial and legal jurisdictions at a moment when new ideas of lay political sovereignty were emerging, fourteenth-century English conceptions of sovereignty reflect a particular concern with its limitations. The concept of sovereignty is perhaps equally powerful and unreliable because its power often derives from its limitations while its nature as power propels its self-subverting

¹³⁴ *Middle English Dictionary Online*, s.v. "soverainte," <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/medidx?type=byte&byte=188944368&egdisplay=compact&egs=188957487> (accessed August 18, 2008).

¹³⁵ Subsequent appearances of the word suggest its spiritual and domestic valences. *Ibid.*

desire to multiply and expand itself, to break its proper limits at any given moment.

Chaucer experiments with this emergent concept of sovereignty in the *Canterbury Tales* by binding it to the idea of nationhood. Chaucerian national sovereignty emerges bonded with an exclusive, insular brand of English national identity. This union seems at some times only to mock cooperation across class and gender lines and, at other times, seems to be England's only real hope for redemption and continuity.

* * *

Chaucer borrows from the various imperial and national discourses of sovereignty current in the fourteenth century, discourses propounded primarily by Marsilius of Padua, Dante Alighieri, Jean de Paris and Nicole Oresme. Although thinkers like Dante and Marsilius argued for a strong Roman Empire, they could not have reasonably expected to see practical manifestations of their ideals. Their notion of empire was nostalgic fiction. The Roman Empire had long ceased to exist; its medieval translation, the Holy Roman Empire, was a creation of the papacy, as the name suggests. The emperors had played a crucial role during the period of the Gregorian reforms and in the century leading up to it. However, by the fourteenth century, the papacy had regained the upper hand. Dante's and Marsilius's arguments for empire are, for all intents and purposes, arguments against papal political sovereignty: they argue for lay as opposed to ecclesiastical political sovereignty.¹³⁶ At roughly the same period, England was actively engaged in imperial

¹³⁶ Michael Wilks, *The Problem of Sovereignty in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1963) primarily distinguishes between advocates of hierocratic papal sovereignty, Augustinus Triumphus and Agedius Romanus, and advocates of lay or popular sovereignty such as Marsilius of Padua, Jean de Paris, William of Ockham and Dante Alighieri. He explains that it is very difficult to categorize different schools of thirteenth and fourteenth century political thought, because despite "superficial resemblance, there was in reality a bottomless ideological gulf fixed between the Christian body of Augustinus Triumphus and the Christian unity of Aquinas, between the *societas christiana* of the hierocrat and the *societas humana* of the Averro-Aristotelian"(17). Although almost all writers attempted to harmonize reason and faith and all "paid lip-service to an all-embracing universalism," there was no consensus on the

pursuits and domination—military endeavors that certainly challenged the national aspirations of other peoples. And yet English kings, poets and political thinkers avoided describing such English influence in Scotland, Wales, Ireland and France in imperial terms. This is to say that the relationship of sovereignty in theory to sovereignty in practice, like many relationships of interdependence, was especially tense in Chaucer’s contemporary context. Chaucer’s national imagination reflects the diversity and the tensions that characterize the field of political thought. He imagines a sovereign English community limited by the geographical and cultural borders that the French nationalists prioritize, funded by the historical, emotional and cultural forces that propel Dante’s universal ideal, and bound to the sort of productive contention that distinguishes Marsilian functional diversity. To understand Chaucer’s interventions on the matter of nationhood best, we must first consider how history, language, religion and love fit into other medieval models of sovereign community. Chaucer extends this formula to nationhood by acknowledging history and language as kinds of currency that negotiate the difference between fantasy and reality, between the transcendent bonds and the corrupt institutions that seem so necessary to love, religion and ultimately to nationhood.

place of universals in society. “Realists” like Augustinus maintained a very realistic correlation between universal spiritual truths and individuals in civil society, while “nominalists” like Marsilius and Ockham reduced “all existence to individual existence” and viewed the religious community as a collection of individuals united by the “oneness of its faith” alone (93, 92). These philosophical views and the institutional question of lay or clerical monarchy shaped thirteenth and fourteenth century imaginations of political community. Ernest Kantorowicz’s iconic study is also relevant. While Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King’s Two Bodies: a Study in Medieval Political Theology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997, first printing, 1957), refers to the same categories that Wilks identifies, he also discusses models of sovereignty developed from the beginning of the twelfth century through the sixteenth as “Christ-centered kingship,” “law-centered Kingship,” the most important proponent of which was John of Salisbury, “polity-centered Kingship” and “man-centered kingship” conceived by Dante (451).

The following discussion will focus on the crucial roles that love, language and history play in late medieval models of sovereignty and sovereign community.

In *De monarchia*, Dante justifies Roman imperial sovereignty with his reading of human history, its lessons, and its exigencies. Here history sets limits as well as standards. Unlike Dante's other works, *De monarchia* seems only peripherally concerned with deadly sin and eternal salvation and hardly considers vernacular community, finding a way to justify secular sovereignty through formal analysis of human history, independent of spiritual and local variables. Dante argues that community is not simply man's *telos*, but more fully his obligation, if he is educated. Education transmits past authority to great men, individual by individual; and this knowledge of the past obligates such men to give something back to the community. Dante is most interested in the way that obligation is passed along diachronically, unidirectionally, from generation to generation. Contemporary community is a third party recipient rather than a relationship or structure formed among significant parties engaged in reciprocal exchange.

Dante's model of history differs from the 1320 *Declaration of Arbroath*, in which the Scots project history as the continuity of their particular community, culture and kingdom. For Dante, knowledge of human history, education in the intellectual tradition that is the common heritage of all men, obligates each educated man to contribute "something to the common welfare" (*ad rem publicam aliquid afferre*) or risk functioning as a "pernicious sink hole that is always taking in and never giving up what it has swallowed" (*potius perniciosa vorago semper ingurgitans et nunquam ingurgitata*

refundens).¹³⁷ For the Scots, history offers rights and has an impact on sovereignty. In *De monarchia*, history imposes obligations without offering rights or access to participation in sovereignty. Dante understands “temporal monarchy” (*temporalis Monarchia*) as “‘empire’” (*Imperium*), “the political supremacy of one, and it is over all things temporal” (*unicus principatus . . . super omnes in tempore . . .*).¹³⁸ According to this theory, only a strong empire delivers peace and through peace, happiness. Happiness is the ultimate and common good; peace fosters happiness; justice fosters peace, and love strengthens justice while greed impedes justice. Because men are individuals, have diverse individual wills, and (if left to their own devices) will behave accordingly, justice depends on a sovereign power (*monarcha*) to reign in human wills and efforts. Only time, as in the end of human history, and the nobility of the sovereign limit this ideal of political sovereignty.¹³⁹

In a sense, Dante equates human sovereignty with the human capacity for love, which he seems to understand as the sum of all the power in this world. Love ultimately defines sovereign nobility: the emperor is a good leader not because he owes something to the community of his subjects, nor because of the communitarian values of exchange or reciprocity, but because his jurisdiction covers the earth and he is thus exempt from desire and most capable of love.¹⁴⁰ This sovereignty’s vastness, its magnanimity, rather than its limitedness justify and empower it. In this scheme, sovereignty and love are related inversely: sovereignty frees love, and love limits sovereignty. Dante explains that

¹³⁷ Dante Alighieri, *Dante’s Monarchia*, ed. and trans. Richard Kay (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1998), I.i.2., pp. 2-3.

¹³⁸ Ibid. I.ii.2., pp. 6-7.

¹³⁹ Hardt and Negri define the end of human history as the end of the Hegalian dialectical relationship of master to slave. But here, my meaning is tailored to Dante’s context: I mean the end of human history, which is contiguous with the end of humanity’s separation from the divine. Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 189.

¹⁴⁰ Alighieri, *Monarchia*, I. esp. iv-xiii.

once the object of desire is removed, the potential for greed is also removed: “the monarch has nothing he can desire, for his jurisdiction has only the ocean as its boundary; which is not the case with other rulers, whose lands border on one another” (*Monarcha non habet quod posit optare: sua nanque iurisdictio terminatur Oceano solum: quod non contingit principibus aliis, quorum pricipatus ad alios terminatur*).¹⁴¹ Dante erases greed from and institutes love in the being of the monarch; accordingly, sovereign imperial power appears as a loving human nature. We must be careful not to read Dante too literally here. This model of sovereign jurisdiction would be difficult, if not impossible, to locate in any historical example. Although Dante associates his ideal of sovereignty with the Roman Empire in its golden age, his description does not resemble that or any empire very closely. Instead he delineates a model of strong secular rule based on a belief in the unity of human power and human potential for goodness. As the universal mortal standard that promotes the good of men, then, the monarch loves mankind more than any other ruler does, although other rulers continue to exist.¹⁴² Dante goes on to ask, “who would doubt that in the doing of justice the monarch is most powerful, unless he did not understand the word ‘monarch,’ since one who is monarch is not able to have enemies”? (*Quod autem Monarcha potissime se habeat ad operationem iustitie, quis dubitat nisi qui vocem hanc non intelligit, cum, si Monarcha est, hostes habere non possit?*)¹⁴³ There is no such human who could actually be what the *monarcha* is supposed to be. Every man has enemies; every man wants something. Hence, the person of the *monarcha* must not exist in a literal sense. However, such a human, such a person, is imaginable. Rather than arguing for the institution of a seat that an individual

¹⁴¹ Alighieri, *Monarchia*, I.xi.12., pp. 56-59.

¹⁴² Ibid., I.xi.18., pp. 60- 63.

¹⁴³ Ibid., I.xi.19., pp. 62-63.

man might occupy, Dante elaborates his theory of sovereignty as a particularly human ideal through this personified figure. We can best understand Dante's "monarcha" as "Secular Human Sovereignty" rather than as "Monarch" or "Emperor". Dante makes love of mankind, based on humanity's essential oneness, integral to sovereignty; and so sovereignty becomes a unitary position from which decisions can be made. This theory is remarkable for its ability to compete with theories of clerical sovereignty, and papal monarchy in particular, because it is based on the sheer strength of lay human goodness as an alternative to clerical claims to have a purchase on goodness and justice.

In some ways this model of community propelled by love resembles Hardt and Negri's multitude, a counter-empire resistant to identity politics and driven by love. But Dante has no intention of doing away with hierarchy or the politics of Classical traditions and historical Roman identity. He ensures benevolent rule by marrying ethical goals to human tendencies toward expansion. Still, love cannot replace sovereignty and the hierarchies it entails as Hardt and Negri hope. Likewise, love's capacity to transform sovereignty into an essentially benevolent power, as Dante imagines it will, does not erase the need for unconscionable sacrifice that seems inseparable from sovereignty itself. Chaucer delivers this point as he particularizes and makes more exclusive, more English and more nationalist, Dante's theory of human sovereignty.

Although Dante maintains great respect for Christianity, he cleanly severs ecclesiastical from secular imperial jurisdiction.¹⁴⁴ Following Orosius, Dante reads Jesus

¹⁴⁴ Nevertheless, as Charles Till Davis explains, Dante does not make a strict distinction between moral and theological virtues. Charles Till Davis, "Dante and the Empire" in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, ed. Rachel Jacoff (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993), 67-79.

of Nazareth's human birth as his divine choice to be born and registered during the time of Caesar's great census, and this choice is tantamount to divine complicity with and approval of Roman imperial authority.¹⁴⁵ Thus *De monarchia* suggests that Jesus' birth confirms Roman authority, which slightly pre-dates the Church.¹⁴⁶ In Donna Mancusi Ungaro's formulation, Dante's reading of history suggests that the political and the spiritual are simultaneously independent and mutually beneficial.¹⁴⁷ From this perspective, human time parallels divine or cosmological time— and Jesus's human birth betokens far more than humanly possible. Most significantly, it suggests that imperial authority precedes the church and thus exists independently.¹⁴⁸ Likewise, in Chaucer's view the nation precedes national sovereignty and exists independently, if not successfully and without the threat of institutional collapse. But here the most significant thing is that Dante's imperial sovereignty is both self-regulating and self-sustaining. Sovereign power becomes independent of any relationship between the empire and pope or church. The imperial community is a community not because of reciprocity or interdependence, but because of the nature of sovereign power, which forces all men to recognize their common interests as the effects that flow from its being, the cause for their union. Sovereign power both depends on participation in political life and facilitates such participation. For lack of participation can indeed be destructive, as in the whirlpool

¹⁴⁵ Alighieri, *Monarchia*, II.x.6., pp. 182-84

¹⁴⁶ According to Davis, "Dante's stylized view of Roman history demanded that it tell the story of a chosen people parallel to that of the Jews. Only Rome, asserts Dante, aimed at the good of the whole human race" ("Dante and the Empire," 71). Thus Dante takes the romance of a national people with a particular culture and particular religion and inflates it to imperial proportions.

¹⁴⁷ Donna Mancusi Ungaro, *Dante and the Empire* (New York: Peter Lang, 1987).

¹⁴⁸ We should note with Davis that, "This grandiose vision of the empire and human history is the central revelation that Dante believed he was called upon to make. It was his particular originality to sacralize secular or at least imperial government without in any way clericalizing it or neglecting its natural function" (Davis, "Dante and the Empire," 78). Chaucer, on the other hand, obsesses over the ways in which a hyper-clericalized religious establishment influences English secular government. It seems in the *Canterbury Tales* that Chaucer is practically unable to imagine secular sovereignty beyond the reach of a clerical dialectic of some sort.

metaphor. Thus, while participation may be less foundational in this model of sovereignty than in some others, it is no less important.

Marsilius of Padua is less in love with love, more sure of history's basic empirical value, and more invested in the possibility of some sort of salient consensus in the present than either Dante or Chaucer. Marsilius's theory of communal functionalism, like Dante's theory of universal monarchy, aims to secure peace on earth under the sovereignty of one, unified temporal power. In fact, Marsilius admits that sovereign national governments, though decidedly not his focus, are most attractive as a form of population control.¹⁴⁹ Communal functionalism is a mode of evaluating community in terms of what works, practically, materially and secularly. In this scheme, the objective and concrete conditions of peace and material sufficiency facilitate good living of the "earthly or temporal" sort. For Marsilius, temporal good living is a rational end. The other type of good living, "the eternal or heavenly," is beyond the scope of his interest and perhaps beyond that of human understanding, because the "whole body of philosophers were unable to prove by demonstration" what it is.¹⁵⁰ *Defensor pacis*, which appeared in 1324, imagines a vast, imperial community, in which reciprocity, participation, and its citizens' observable experience legitimize sovereignty: Marsilian sovereignty depends on communal functionalism. Chaucer's imagination of an English national community, as a negotiation of diversity, consent, participation, imagination and experience, resembles the Marsilian ideal in these ways. But for Chaucer, cultural and individual idiosyncrasies are more thoroughly involved in national political identities. Throughout the *Canterbury*

¹⁴⁹ Marsilius holds that diverse sovereign governments lead invariably to war and writes, "one might think that perhaps that nature, by means of wars and epidemics, has moderated the procreation of men and the other animals in order that the earth may suffice for their nurture." Marsilius of Padua, *Defensor pacis*, ed and trans. Alan Gerwith (New York: Columbia UP, 1951-56), I. xvii.10 p. 85.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., I.iv.3 p. 13.

Tales, Chaucer seems to meld Marsilius's ideas about functionalism with Dante's ideas about universal human nobility and applies them to England, a more discrete and particular political seat than Rome. Ultimately, Chaucer reflects on a nation that resembles the empire that Marsilius idealizes in function, though not in form.

Like Marsilius, Chaucer, is especially interested in internal diversity based on individual functions, what people do.¹⁵¹ Yet, Marsilius's particular melding of functional diversity, civic participation, and law paves the way for meaningful secular citizenship without promoting national particularities. In Marsilian thought, jurisprudential authority is as widely applicable and as perfectible as the sovereign's love in Dante's view. Marsilius does not limit political community geographically or linguistically, ultimately equating the geographical *Romani* with "all the members of the universal empire, or as the name *humanus legislator* suggests, all mankind."¹⁵² Meanwhile, Chaucer's prime concern is a discreet, linguistically limited model of English political community. Marsilius awards the "human authority to make laws . . . to the whole body of human citizens or the weightier part thereof," considering the quality of the citizenry as well as the quantity. Thus, following Aristotle, Marsilian citizenry explicitly excludes women, children, slaves and aliens.¹⁵³

Regardless of what he might exclude, Marsilius exalts a communal model whose extreme utilitarian and flexible structure overshadows its other features. One reason for this is that he preserves a large autonomous, private space for the citizen, who is

¹⁵¹ Chaucer's *General Prologue* to the *Canterbury Tales* is first and foremost an example of estates satire and thus a pointed commentary on the functions and failures of communal diversity. The definitive studies on medieval estates and estates satire are: Georges Duby, *The Three Orders: Feudal Society Imagined*, tr. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1980); and Jill Man, *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire: The Literature of Social Classes and the "General Prologue" to the "Canterbury Tales"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973).

¹⁵² Wilks, *Sovereignty*, 112. Wilks discusses *translatio imperii* in detail on pages 110-113.

¹⁵³ Marsilius, *Defensor*, I.xii.4-5 pp. 45-47.

evaluated primarily on what he brings to the table for exchange. Cary J. Nederman has argued that Marsilius's powerful theory of communal functionalism lends itself to radical possibilities that Marsilius could never have imagined.¹⁵⁴ But the issue is not what Marsilius or others could have possibly imagined. After all, imagination itself redefines the bounds of human possibility. The most remarkable aspect of Marsilius's theory is that it basically equates ethics with functionalism. Functionalism is so important that Marsilian society even includes heretics when heresy does not affect a citizen's ability to perform his function.¹⁵⁵ Marsilius prioritizes diversity and exchange over conformity on individual matters. Experience fascinates Marsilius, who maintains that, in some cases, concrete communal experience trumps metaphysical ideals of authenticity and truth. Thus his values resonate with those of Chaucer's Wife of Bath and Pardoner, his most daring, most community-defining pilgrims. While Marsilian toleration leaves room for diversity of lifestyle and opinion, for Chaucer such diversity is even more integral to the way that public deliberation works.

In some sense, Chaucer is simply more interested in the politics of cultural and personal identity than Marsilius. Yet, Marsilius' focus on observable political experience moves him to admit the merit of asking

whether it is advantageous to have one supreme government in number for all those who live a civil life in the whole world, or whether on the contrary it is at a certain time advantageous to have different such governments in different regions of the world which are almost necessarily separate from one another in place, and especially for men who use different languages and who differ widely in morals and customs . . .¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁴ Cary J. Nederman, *Worlds of Difference: European Discourses of Toleration c. 1100-1550* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2000), 84.

¹⁵⁵ This is especially provocative when we consider the close association of medieval ideas of religion and race, an association that seems to be regaining strength in terms of twenty-first-century notions of ethnicity.

¹⁵⁶ Marsilius, *Defensor*, I.xvii.10, p. 84.

Marsilius is certainly aware of the connections among culture, geography and politics. This passage reveals, moreover, that he is open to the possibility that cultural and geographic diversity render discrete national governments “advantageous,” hence more functional, at certain times. Yet, such cultural and geographic diversity lies beyond his main focus. As Susan Reynolds suggests, Marsilius accepts national diversity as a given. His acceptance of such diversity, however, does not entail a preference for national government or national sovereignty. He prefers government based entirely on reasoned communal functionalism— and, more immediately, on consent. In contrast with Dante, Marsilius effectively dismisses the possibility that his ideal polity might have a “naturally-occurring . . . unitary form,” explaining that “the men of one city or province are called one city or province because they wish one government in number” –not because of some innate identity.¹⁵⁷ Government is sovereign, legitimate and singular not because of the natural unity of a people or the natural diversity of peoples, but because citizens willfully choose a unitary governmental form. Form of law and lawmaking serve as the transcendent, rational bonds that unite a polity, not the content or truth of laws.

As in Dante’s theory of sovereignty, Marsilius’s insistence on imperial unity is more complicated than it first appears to be. Marsilius explicitly notes that the supreme ruler need not “be one in number with respect to person but rather with respect to office. For there may be some supreme, well-tempered government which is one in number, but in which more than one man rules.”¹⁵⁸ In this model, one monarch is not required for unity of decision-making and action, Marsilius’s real priorities. Like Dante, Marsilius puts more faith in the pooled power of men than in any literal man. Marsilius’s

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., I.xvii.11, p. 85.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., I.xvii.2, p. 81.

description of law's virtue indicates his preference for decisions rendered by a multitude of subjectivities over decisions rendered by one person alone. He maintains that judges need law because, "the law lacks all perverted emotion; for it is not made useful for friend or harmful for foe, but universally for all those who perform civil acts well or badly."¹⁵⁹ Marsilius accounts for the affections and animosities that come along with friendship and enmity, suggesting a realistic experience of human affiliation. He explains that, "since . . . the law is an eye composed of many eyes, that is the considered comprehension of many comprehenders for avoiding error in civil judgments and for judging rightly, it is safer that these judgments be made according to the law than according to the discretion of the judge."¹⁶⁰ Hence, law, rather than discretion, founds his ideal polity. Here, Marsilius harnesses individual intellectual diversity for communal advantage. And in doing so, he complicates yet preserves perspective—mitigating, though not curing the ill to which Hardt and Negri allude when they disavow "the rule of the one." At any rate, Marsilius's imaginative rhetoric compels readers to consider the great political and civic rewards that investment in synchronic human experience and reciprocal exchange might yield. These rewards include a smoothly functioning civic community rather than a true church or empire.¹⁶¹

For Marsilius internal functional diversity is natural and community-shaping. He writes, "nature herself initiated this differentiation in the generation of men, producing some who in their natural dispositions were apt for and inclined toward farming, others

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., I.xi.1, p. 38.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., I.xi.3, p. 40.

¹⁶¹ This model of sovereignty exemplifies the idea of the sovereign as a role that can be filled by one or more persons at different times. However, the figure of the king to whom the 1381 rebels appeal disappears. But perhaps a new idea of kingship as an office that can assuage the pains of a poorly functioning society, an ideal that justifies and can only be justified by the support of a community such as the 1381 idea of the true commons represents, appears in its place.

toward military pursuits, and still others toward the other genera of arts and disciplines, but different men toward different ones.”¹⁶² He maintains that, “the community needs various conveniences, repairs and protection of certain common things, and different things in time of peace and in time of war.”¹⁶³ Communal functionalism requires diverse citizens; and nature, by providing diverse citizens, ordains communal functionalism. Accordingly, Marsilian society provides best for its diverse citizens’ because of its intra-communal differentiation, social complexity and reciprocity. In Marsilian society, functional diversity— and toleration of it— are clear goods.¹⁶⁴ Nevertheless, Marsilius is more interested in the nature of functional diversity than in that of diversity of religion, color, language or any of those things that commonly constitute medieval ethnicity. Although he never suggests that such diversity might be beneficial, in theory, his model citizenry could include such diversity as well. Alternatively, his French counterparts emphasized international differences and national similarities in their promotion of self-sufficient national sovereignty— in order to exclude from their national communities the possibility of serious civic diversity.

Diversity is more than a priority in Marsilian society; it is what facilitates communal life and self-sufficiency. Without diversity Marsilian community could not fulfill its purpose. Because, “men were assembled for the sake of the sufficient life, being able to seek out for themselves . . . necessities . . . and exchanging them with one another,” the more diverse and specialized the citizenry, the greater their quality of life. The state is nothing less than the self-sufficient sum of its diverse and specialized parts. Here historical evidence, including the lessons of the past and the materiality of the

¹⁶² Marsilius, *Defensor*, I. vii.1, p. 25.

¹⁶³ Ibid., I.iv.4, p. 14.

¹⁶⁴ Nederman, *Worlds of Difference*, 72-73.

present, limit sovereignty. This is as close as Marsilius gets to truth. Love is beside the point. As Marsilius explains, “this assemblage, thus perfect and having the limit of self-sufficiency, is called the state. . . . [And] diverse orders or offices of men are none other than the many and distinct parts of the state.”¹⁶⁵ Here diverse parts become a whole that is much greater than the sum of their individual capacities and weights. In Aristotelian fashion, the whole conceptually precedes the parts, as both the state and its parts are only intelligible in relation to each other. Thus, citizens and state constitute each other, forming a mutually interdependent unit, a diversified whole.

Community is experienced through exchange among mutually intelligible individuals rather than through simple identification among homogenous constituents. As Nederman explains, for Marsilius, “the parts [of a community] do not perform their functions in isolation, but rather in the context of and in relation to the other elements of the civil community;” and ultimately such “interdependence entails inclusion.”¹⁶⁶ Functionality—not similarity and certainly not hegemonic control over citizens’ personal beliefs—warrants inclusion. This is the sovereign law of Marsilian communal functionalism. Accordingly, “full civic identity” and “a full set of citizen rights” belong to every individual who serves a functional role in providing for a sufficient material life.¹⁶⁷ In Marsilian society, just as in Chaucer’s company of tale-telling pilgrims, a diverse set of fellows with equal rights and responsibilities is bound to contention. Nederman writes, “an extensive, inclusive and participatory form of citizenship represents for Marsiglio the best protection against contention,” yet Marsilius actually admits that interdependence and increased occasion for conflict among diverse citizens

¹⁶⁵ Marsilius, *Defensor*, I. iv.5, p. 14.

¹⁶⁶ Nederman, *Worlds of Difference*, 73, 71.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 74.

arrive in tandem.¹⁶⁸ Marsilius explains that such “disputes and quarrels” as those that arise among sundry citizens “if not regulated by a norm of justice, would cause men to fight and separate and thus finally would bring about the destruction of the state.”¹⁶⁹

Nederman’s point wants refinement: for Marsilius, inclusive and participatory citizenship is the best protection against contention’s destructive potential— not simply against contention. Both Marsilius and Chaucer take up the question of political inclusion and consider contention’s destructive and constructive potentials. Contention regulated by justice facilitates functional diversity according to both Marsilian and Chaucerian ideals. Marsilius argues that jurisprudential sovereignty legitimized by empirical results is the optimal governance for citizens bound to contention. Chaucer also concerns himself with the empirical functional value of diversity, exchange and law, but emphasizes the limitations of such practical ideals.

Marsilius’s resonance with Chaucer corresponds to his dissonance with Dante. Despite sharing scope and goals with Dante, Marsilius’s prioritization of exchange and observable and mundane political experience clashes with Dante’s fundamental focus on grand truths and historical continuity. Thus it seems that Chaucer takes from Marsilius an appreciation for the value of the empirical that he cannot get from Dante. Marsilius distinguishes ecclesiastical law from civil law, recognizing two separate realms, religion and politics and two separate types of transgression, sin and crime. These two separate realms are related like separate individuals in Marsilius’s scheme: functionally. Experience, not truth, suggests that they should continue to coexist somewhat interdependently because religion facilitates politics; the spiritual is irrelevant, save for

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Marsilius, *Defensor*, I. iv.4, p. 13.

the individual. Alternatively, for Dante, the spiritual actually confirms the political regime's validity, and thereby exalts the practical temporal power of lay sovereignty far above that of the pope. The basic result is the same: secular sovereignty independent of the papacy. However, Marsilius is more skeptical of claims to spiritual truth and more enthusiastic about the strategic function of Christianity than about any truth-value one might ascribe to it or another religion. In his historical analysis, political society functions more smoothly when it includes some sort of priesthood. Every state needs a religion, and Christianity can serve that role as well as any other spiritual doctrine. This follows from simple historical observation: "All nations . . . agreed that it was appropriate to establish a priesthood for the worship and honoring of God, and for the benefit resulting therefrom for the status of the present or the future world."¹⁷⁰

Furthermore, while "there are certain acts that the legislator cannot regulate by human law," spiritual law serves to make men more aware of and responsible for their concealable vices –and produces improved and peaceful conditions observable in the present world.¹⁷¹ Thus, in Marsilian thought, Christianity is most valuable as a spiritual means to a secular end: functional lay sovereignty. Through such sovereignty, Marsilius puts the unseen in service the seen: observable good government.¹⁷²

While Marsilius focuses on the benefits of cooperative temporal rule, his English ally, William of Ockham argues for the same basic separation of spiritual and temporal

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., I.v.10, pp. 18-19.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., I.v.11, p. 19.

¹⁷² Wilks, *Sovereignty*, 113-116. In addition we should note that Dante seems to perform the inverse; he puts the seen in service of the unseen. As Davis argues, Dante "believed men must be saved not only from within but also from without, and that the emperor is the essential agent for this task." Davis goes on to explain that Dante does not make a strict distinction between moral and theological virtues. "The emperor too, Dante says in *Monarchia* I, xi, 13, should be moved by 'caritas' in establishing justice, for 'caritas' is the opposite of cupidity. And cupidity is the chief obstacle to justice (I, xi, 13)" ("Dante and the Empire," 67, 70).

realms as well as a set of principles that delineate an exceedingly flexible form of sovereignty. This form of sovereignty incorporates both jurisprudential and discretionary modes of rule, but depends more on reason than on the supremacy of either law or discretion. He promotes his political ideals with more individualist leanings, a focus on Christian religion's particular value (which aligns him with Chaucer) and a stronger emphasis on reasoned truths.

In Ockham's view, sovereignty has multiple origins. In his *Breviloquium de principatu tyrannico*, Ockham suggests that both humans and God have the power to create exclusive lordship over temporal things, thus accounting for and legitimizing political diversity with theology. He explains, "For although God gave man the power of appropriating and dividing temporal things among themselves, he did not transfer such power away from himself but kept it himself . . . And thus it is plain that some exclusive lordships have been from divine law and some from human" (*Quamvis enim Deus dederit hominibus potestatem appropriandi sibi et dividendi inter se res temporales, a se ipso tamen non transtulit huiusmodi potestatem, sed sibi retinuit . . . Et ita patet quod quaedam dominia propria fuerunt ex iure divino et quaedam ex iure humano*).¹⁷³

According to Ockham, such lordship (*potestatem appropriandi . . . et dividendi* and *dominia propria*) is exclusive neither to God nor to the Church and its believers; and it is derived in multiple, but particular ways. Ockham resists easy answers regarding the questionable origins of sovereignty and lists the three main ways in which sovereignty was legitimately established according to late medieval political thought: consent, just

¹⁷³ William of Ockham, *A Short Discourse on the Tyrannical Government*, ed. Arthur Stephen McGrade, trans. John Kilcullen (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992) III.11, p. 94. Latin text from *Opera politica*, ed. H. S. Offler, (New York: Harper and Row) III.11, p. 183. Cited hereafter by line number alone.

war and conquest, and divine ordinance.¹⁷⁴ He holds that “Although [these three ways of establishing sovereignty] can be separated, they can also be mixed with respect to different regions—that is, a ruler may get his rulership over one region or province in one way and over another in another” (*quamvis valeant separari, tamen etiam misceri possunt respectu diversorum, ut scilicet aliquis princeps super unam regionem vel provinciam principatum accipiat uno istorum modorum et super aliam alio*) (iv.10.125). Thus, sovereignty is not an absolute form of power with a simple point of origin, but rather a diversely established, temporally and geographically variable power.

As Ockham describes it, the relationship between political and spiritual rule changes over time, thereby reshaping lay sovereignty. This is to say that sovereignty’s terms are renegotiable over time. Ockham probes beyond sovereignty’s diverse origins as they vary across regions to consider its variability over the course of history and, most significantly for our purposes, its legitimacy. Ockham observes, “sometimes . . . tyrannical and usurped regimes are changed into just and legitimate ones, just as sometimes, according to Aristotle in his *Politics*, royal rule is changed into tyrannical” (*Nonumquam igitur principatus tyrannici et usurpati in iustos et legitimos transmutantur, sicut interdum secundum Aristotelem in Politicis principatus regalis transmutatur in tyrannicum principatum*) (iv.10.125). Here royal rule is definitively legitimate and tyrannical rule is illegitimate and usurped, though not irreparably so. Empire is ideal, though imperial rule is not always legitimate. Ockham’s view of Roman imperial authority exemplifies this dynamism. While he cannot tell us when, how or

¹⁷⁴ Chaucer’s short poem, “The Complaint of Chaucer to his Purse,” reflects this understanding of legitimately established sovereignty, but only in part. Chaucer actually replaces divine ordinance with lineage, addressing his poem to Henry IV like so: “O conquerour of Brutes Albyon,/ Which that by lyne and free eleccion/ Been verray kyng, this song to yow I sende” (23-25).

where the Roman Empire became legitimate, Ockham suggests that it had become legitimate by the time Jesus of Nazareth lived, though it did not start off so auspiciously. Legitimacy is only one historical variant necessary to understanding the nature of lay sovereignty.

Ockham shares both Dante's prioritization of truth as a value and Marsilius's focus on synchronic and empirical communal experience, ultimately emphasizing the special value of empirical truth. He argues, "it is not true that we must always conform to the greater part or to the plurality; and therefore, even if the greater part of Christians wished to appoint several apostolics at the same time, we would not be obliged to conform to them, because the lesser part would rely on greater reason: namely, the ordinance of Christ, who appointed one apostolic alone." (*non semper est standum maiori parti nec pluralitati. Et ideo, licet maior pars Christianorum vellet constituere plures apostolicos simul, non esset standum eis, quia minor maioriratione niteretur, scilicet ordinatione Christi, qui instituit unum solum apostolicum.*).¹⁷⁵ Through this example of clerical sovereignty, Ockham reminds us that decisions rendered according to reason and those made through communal deliberation and consensus are not necessarily the same. For Marsilius, there is nothing truer, nothing more reasonable, than the fruits of communal functionalism and the concord of communal will. Marsilius and Dante establish working models of lay sovereignty; meanwhile, Ockham establishes working ethical principles, which complicate democracy's speciously simple value. In Ockham's view, the right assemblage of people can certainly render a faulty judgment. As Wilks explains, "for Ockham truth was not something handed on by those who had in the past

¹⁷⁵ William of Ockham, *Dialogus*, III. I.ii. 27 l.9, in *A letter to the Friars Minor and Other Writings*, ed. Arthur Stephen McGrade and John Kilcullen, trans. John Kilcullen (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995), 200.

preserved it, but was to be tested by the mind in the light of present experience. The empiricism that is so notable a feature of Ockham's philosophy is here readily apparent. Judgment has to be made by the mind and can only be of real value when made by the individual himself."¹⁷⁶ In any case, Ockhamist thought maintains that consent and jurisprudence as well as discretion and conquest shape sovereignty over time. Ockham sets religious history in service of individual reason; likewise, he supports contemporary learning and thinking about governance with the value of empirical truth. Thus, by promoting both reasoned truth and historical analysis, each of which limits sovereignty in its own ways, Ockham provides for continuity and innovation in statecraft. In this formulation, sovereignty's very legitimacy can be shaped by negotiation over time. English nationhood in the *Canterbury Tales* depends on a similar understanding of sovereignty's negotiability.

While medieval Italian theorists idealize the peace and prosperity that universal empire could bring, according to their French nationalist counterparts, sovereignty is only legitimate in communities of moderate proportions with shared cultural and geographic particularities, criteria which empire always fails to meet. These divergent tendencies certainly correspond with the historical realities experienced by the thinkers who voice them. Tensions between English and French kings in the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries leading up to the Hundred Years War along with the conflict over clerical taxation between Philip IV of France and Pope Boniface VIII put the French crown on the defense. Accordingly, French thinkers Jean de Paris and Nicole Oresme offer theories of sovereignty that could defend French lands, people, culture and kings from English ambitions and papal threats. Their theories include political and cultural

¹⁷⁶ Wilks, *Sovereignty*, 109.

reasons— and more specifically, structural, functional and Biblical reasons— why empire is a poor and unnatural political choice distinct from and inferior to nationhood. Language, culture and geographic size are the legitimating factors for the French. A kingdom's sovereignty depends on its citizen's participation in this scheme. Like their Italian and English fellows, Oresme and Jean de Paris depend on Aristotle and argue for lay sovereignties, but they unequivocally oppose temporal rule by one emperor and justify ideals of sovereignty with what can only be described as national particularities.

In *De potestate regia et papali*, Jean de Paris observes that the Roman empire did not do an especially good job of keeping the peace, but fostered unnatural quarrels instead. He casts negative light on Rome's foundation upon Remus's bones, reminding us that "brother killed brother and mother killed son" throughout the height of imperial power.¹⁷⁷ With support from Aristotle's *Politics*, Jean explains that, "the development of individual states and kingdoms is natural, although that of an empire or monarchy is not."¹⁷⁸ And in Oresme's analysis, a kingdom of excessive size "is not a natural kingdom, but a violent thing, which can not last" (*ne est pas royalme naturel, mes chose violente et qui ne peut durer*).¹⁷⁹ Jean uses Augustine's *City of God* to remind readers that, "the state is better and more peacefully ruled when the rule of any one man extends only to the limits of his own territory."¹⁸⁰ Referencing the books of Numbers and Daniel, Jean concludes that the Roman Empire should collapse once and for all.

¹⁷⁷ Jean de Paris, *De potestate regia et papali*, trans. Arthur P. Monahan (New York: Columbia UP, 1974) 21, p.117.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 3, p. 15.

¹⁷⁹ Nicole Oresme, *Le livre de politiques d'Aristote*, ed. A.D. Menut (Philadelphia: the American Philosophical Society, 1970), 292.

¹⁸⁰ Jean, *De potestate*, 3, p. 15.

Jean's attitude toward the Roman Empire accords with his emphasis on human cultural diversity and everyday conditions of life. Jean presents Christianity as a religion available to all nations, while maintaining the Church community's distinction from national community and its supernatural transcendence above the natural particularities of human culture. Despite contrasting readings of Roman imperial history, Jean, like Dante, holds that the Church can be central without wielding temporal or material power. In fact, its centrality depends on its avoidance of such political power; according to Jean, "[i]t is easier to extend a word than a sword."¹⁸¹ In a sense, abstract force travels where concrete power cannot go; concrete powers create unnecessary problems for the Church. Only words and ideas are needed to command spiritual obedience, while the sword is essential to temporal power. And furthermore, because the physical, geographical and cultural conditions of humanity are exceedingly more diverse than the spiritual conditions, or souls of men, it follows that various forms of government and temporal leaders should be more numerous than spiritual leaders. Such diversity is good, necessary, natural and ultimately political. In this way Jean links the obvious and natural diversity of climate, language and culture among the world's peoples with a need for political sovereignty, with the legitimacy of self-determination. Thus, he describes a form of sovereignty that accommodates particularity and cultural diversity, a sovereignty that we can understand as national. Jean's ideas, based on experiential diversity, lead to a more complete separation of Church and State than we see elsewhere. He distinguishes kingdom from the empire; and he recognizes kingship as the form of government that best serves the political and cultural needs of people, while also representing the diverse

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 3, p. 14.

conditions of human life.¹⁸² In this way, Church and political power are discrete, elegant, focused and effective.

On a similar note, Oresme cites natural geographic disparateness and linguistic diversity to show that empire could never work nor was ever meant to work according with God's plan. He contends that, if God and nature had wanted such a universal monarchy the world would not be divided into so many regions "separated by seas or by great rivers or swamps, by forests, by deserts, by mountains, by inhabitable or inaccessible places because of which people can not communicate with one another in such a way that is required among the people of a kingdom or a polity" (*separees par mers ou par grans fleuves ou palus, par forests, par desers, par montaignes, par lieux inaccessibles ou inhabitables pourquoi les uns ne pevent converser avec les autres de tele conversation comme requise est entre gens d'un royaume ou d'une policie*).¹⁸³ Here, Oresme directly connects geography and communication. Geography reads as an authoritative text that reflects divine intention and natural law. It is also a practical factor that shapes political community by circumscribing the most significant form of political experience, communication, within culturally and geographically discrete areas. Indeed Chaucer's commitment to English and the tri-lingual culture of England in his day suggests a similar desire for national language, despite the possibility of contrary responses to the problem of political experience and shared language.

Oresme concludes that since political communication is the primary purpose and unifying force among political communities, it is unnatural that "a man reign over people who do not understand his maternal language" (*comme hors nature que un homme regne*

¹⁸² Ibid., 3, pp. 12-15.

¹⁸³ Oresme, *Livre de politiques*, 291.

sus gent qui ne entendent son maternel langage).¹⁸⁴ John of Salisbury expresses similar sentiments regarding the requisite affinities of leader and people, rendering kingship contingent on cultural similarity and pseudo-familial affection: a sort of love that sets limits and sustains national communities. Quoting Deuteronomy, he explains, “you cannot make a foreigner—one who is not your brother— king over you.”¹⁸⁵ Both Salisbury and Oresme suggest that cultural affinities and familial feeling bind a legitimate king to his legitimate community, his people. King and people should understand each other and feel invested in each other as members of the same family. Chaucer reflects this sentiment by choosing to treat sovereignty almost exclusively in romantic and marital contexts, commenting on the family as the basic and symbolic unit of society. For Chaucer as for these national thinkers, sovereignty makes the most sense in familiar communities bound by emotional, linguistic and intellectual bonds. Neither judgment, which depends on political communication, nor true ownership, which hinges on the king’s ethnic identity and familiarity, is possible in a community led by a foreigner who speaks a foreign tongue. Here, the truth that limits sovereignty is a familial network of love and cultural and historical particularity.

For Oresme communal purpose, functionality and any sense of obligation arrive in tandem with synchronic, regional, vernacular communication. Alternatively, for Dante the primary sort of obligation, which holds together political and cultural community, is the obligation of educated men to transhistorical and transnational community. This is largely unidirectional, diachronic obligation. Jean and Nicole imagine smaller and more

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ John of Salisbury, *Policraticus*, IV. 4., in, *The Statesman's Book of John of Salisbury: Being the Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth Books, and Selections from the Seventh and Eighth Books, of the Policraticus*, tr. John Dickinson (New York: Russell and Russell, 1963), 35.

interdependent communities, wherein obligation is based on contractual, consensual agreements and enterprises such as debate, communication and exchange. Local particularities and facts of contemporary life legitimate national sovereignty for Nicole and Jean; however, for Dante sovereignty itself which is closely bound to the power of humanity's essential unity, both embodies legitimacy and enforces obligation.

As we have seen, Dante produces a model of imperial sovereignty dependent only on the individual emperor, separating political and cultural participation from the sovereign structure. Oresme's ideal of sovereignty is democratic by comparison, and it lends itself most easily to polities bound by time, space, language and geography. Oresme intensifies Aristotle's notion of political community as mankind's *telos* by specifying that not only is political community man's *telos*, but political communication is the purpose of all forms of political community. He maintains that Jesus Christ's "kingdom will be without end" (*royalme sera sans fin*), but no other kingdom "lasts for all time, no other ought to stretch itself to all places" (*dure tous temps, nul ne se doit estendre par tous lieu*). And so it follows that just "one [being] could be prince of all the world, and that is God" (*un soit prince de tout le monde, et ce est Dieu*). In agreement with Jean de Paris, Oresme maintains that, while the entire world might be a spiritual body, it is not a political body: "the multitude of all men is not a body nor a thing that can be ordained under one man" (*la multitude de tous les homes ne est pas un corps ne chose qui ne puisse estre ordenee sous un homme*).¹⁸⁶ Although communities have heads, the purpose of each community from the household to the kingdom is not hierarchical ordering, but rather communication. Oresme offers alternate names for the household,

¹⁸⁶ Oresme, *Politiques*, 292.

“gens d’un potage” or *“gens d’une fumee,”* to describe the cooperation and communal benefit that defines this sort of community. The household here is political, hierarchal and functional, but its purpose and legitimating factor is communication—all parts of the household are needed and communication, above all, is the glue that holds the household community together. The household community communicates about daily life; cities and kingdoms communicate about matters of justice. In each case cooperative participation and common language are necessary.

In Oresme’s formulation, a kingdom, like the modern nation, is partially natural and partially artificial. It does not need to be one or the other, purely organic or engendered through consent, reason and will. It is both organic and contingent on communal deliberation and participation. This point seems to be at odds with Marsilian principles; a sovereign kingdom is so simply because its citizens will it to be so, as Marsilius would have it. But according to Oresme, a kingdom is sovereign because its people’s culture predisposes them to consent to political unity, political structure, and to participate in politics, and they do. The kingdom is simultaneously a body politic made of individual people and a republic, a new thing that actually belongs to the public and is brought into being by the people’s ability to communicate as distinct individuals in vernacular voices about local issues. This fundamental focus on the relationship between cultural and linguistic particularity and political functionality renders linguistically homogenous national communities legitimate, while large, multicultural, polyglot empires appear illegitimate and tyrannical

Even though Dante does not insist on the interdependence of vernacular language and political sovereignty in quite the same way as the French nationalists do, his nuanced

ideas regarding the relative merits of Latin and the vernacular contextualize Chaucer's insistence that the universal human capacity for nobility and vernacular eloquence are relevant to the politics of national sovereignty. Francis Petrarch, another of Chaucer's Italian influences, grew to favor Latin over Italian language through the course of his career. Petrarch was unabashedly elitist about his preference, which was motivated by his disapproval of popular interpretation of vernacular literature. Dante, alternatively, balances his admiration for the essential stability that renders Latin sovereign with an appreciation for the universal processes that render the vernacular language nobler than the classical, according to his own formulation. Chaucer refuses Petrarchan elitism and embraces vernacular eloquence in his prologue to his *Clerk's Tale*, the tale in which a representative of an Italian duke's people compares sovereignty with the marriage yoke. David Wallace has argued that Chaucer aligns Petrarchan humanism with Lombard tyranny and reads Boccaccio and Dante as proponents of Florentine polity.¹⁸⁷ We must also note that throughout the *Tales*, Chaucer draws Dante's ideas about human nobility and the vernacular together, emphasizing their useful political import for the English nation. In translating Dante's ideas about the vernacular to the English context, Chaucer emphasizes the nationalistic value of Dante's position. He does this by imagining English national sovereignty as a political and cultural structure.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁷ Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity*, 1.

¹⁸⁸ There is some debate over how to describe Chaucer's reading of Dante vis-à-vis Petrarch and humanism. While Petrarch is commonly considered the father of Renaissance humanism, some scholars consider Dante an important precursor to humanism proper. Steve Ellis, "Chaucer, Dante, and Damnation," *Chaucer Review* 22 (1988): 282-94; Richard Neuse, *Chaucer's Dante: Allegory and Epic Theater in the Canterbury Tales* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); R.A. Shoaf, "'Noon Englissh Digne': Dante in Late Medieval England," in *Dante Now: Current Trends in Dante Studies*, ed. Theodore J. Cachey, Jr. (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 189-203; Glenn Steinberg, "Chaucer in the Field of Cultural Production: Humanism, Dante, and the House of Fame" *Chaucer Review* 35 (2000): 182-203; Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity*, 261-98. I agree with Steinberg and those who maintain that Chaucer sought to

In his *Convivio*, Dante defends the Italian language in which he writes. He holds that Latin has a permanent form, while the vernacular changes. Latin is nobler by nature of its stability and sovereign because of this stability (*sovrano . . . per la nobilita e per vertu e per bellezza*) (I.v.7 p. 56).¹⁸⁹ Yet Dante is prepared to defend Italian against the likes of Provençal.¹⁹⁰ The vernacular is a personal language, which is close to people because they learn it first, because it unites them with those they most love. Dante goes as far as to suggest that the vernacular does bind a sort of national political community on a personal level because “it is part of the people closest to him, such as his relatives, his own fellow citizens and his own race.”¹⁹¹ Nevertheless, Dante’s beloved vernacular expresses ideas at best “almost as well as Latin itself.”¹⁹² Here, the vernacular is defensible and useful, but it will always be subject to Latin’s “sovereign” virtue, its capacity to communicate essential ideas, and Latin’s sovereign nobility, its constant stability. Hence we can infer that the vernacular is culturally and politically subordinate, as Dante’s conception of the limited kingdom is subordinate to universal sovereignty, based on his understanding of such sovereignty’s greater potential for stability. Latin’s noble and sovereign stability, moreover, is constructed for a particular purpose: universal intelligibility. Alternatively, the vernacular, in *De vulgari eloquentia*, is the nobler language because of a different sort of universalism, because it is common to all. Every

reign in Dante’s classicism. I want to suggest that Chaucer puts Dante’s particular humanism to uses very different from those of Petrarch and the Renaissance Humanists.

¹⁸⁹ Direct references to the *Convivio* are from Dante Alighieri, *Convivio*, ed. Giorgio Inglese, (Milano: Biblioteca Universale Rizzoli, 1993) and will be cited by book, chapter, line and page numbers alone hereafter. See also Dante Alighieri, *The Banquet*, trans. Christopher Ryan (Saratoga: ANMA Libri & Co., 1989), I.v.7-15, pp.22-23.

¹⁹⁰ Dante’s best defense may be his inclusion of Sordello, a thirteenth-century Lombard poet who wrote in Provençal, in the *Purgatorio*. In *Purgatorio VII*, Sordello delivers some very important, very eloquent words on universal human nobility not in Provençal, but in his native Italian vernacular—or something much closer to it—the language of Dante’s great poem.

¹⁹¹ Alighieri, *Banquet*, I.xii.5, p.36.

¹⁹² Ibid., I.x.12, p.32.

human has this natural form of language; every human participates in the process of acquiring and refining it. This allows for international linguistic and literary diversity. In *De vulgari eloquentia*, processes of continuity and perfectibility replace essential and static stability as the criteria for nobility.¹⁹³ Direct reference to sovereignty, however, falls away.

But nobility is only a side issue and a gloss vis-à-vis the national political value of Dante's illustrious vernacular. The illustrious vernacular, which is not fully established at the time of Dante's writing, is simultaneously innate, cultivated, and shared. Dante uses the adjectives, illustrious, cardinal, aulic, and curial, to describe the vernacular he hopes to establish for the Italian nation (*illustre, cardinale, aulicum et curiale vulgare*). This vernacular is illustrious because it enlightens by reflecting light that it receives from another place. Thus it exalts its users in honor and glory (*suos honore sublimat et gloria*). Dante explains, "That it is exalted in power is plain. And what greater power could there be than that which can melt the hearts of human beings, so as to make the unwilling willing and the willing unwilling, as it has done and still does?" (*Quod autem exaltatum sit potestate, videtur. Et quid maioris potestatis est quam quod humana corda versare potest, ita ut nolentem volentem et volentem nolentem faciat, velut ipsum et fecit et facit?*).¹⁹⁴ This vernacular is illustrious because it reflects the light of justice and charity (*iustia et karitate*) in new directions and powerful because this reflection has the force to reverse human wills. Dante adds the adjective cardinal to the illustrious vernacular's epithets because, like a door hinge, which controls the direction of the door,

¹⁹³ For more on Dante's views on Latin and vernacular nobility, see Cecil Grayson, "Nobilior est vulgaris: Latin and Vernacular in Dante's Thought," in *Centenary Essays on Dante*, ed. Colin Hardie, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), 54-76.

¹⁹⁴ Dante Alighieri, *De vulgari eloquentia*, ed. and tr. Steven Botterill (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996), I. xvii, pp. 40-41.

this vernacular controls the direction of other Italian vernaculars. Here Dante presents a national language fit for the political communication that Nicole Oresme and Jean de Paris idealize; he describes a national language strong enough to negotiate the sort of dynamic sovereignty that Ockham theorizes and that Chaucer imagines for England. It remains for Chaucer to apply vernacular eloquence to English national sovereignty—to elaborate the link between cultural and political discourse.

The final two modifiers add more to our understanding of this vernacular's national import than the first two. Dante calls the vernacular "aulic" because its dwelling-place would be the royal court, "the shared home of the entire kingdom" (*aula totius regni comunis est domus*). It is closely associated with this home and, accordingly, associates those who use it with that home, despite and because of its portability. This vernacular "is common to all yet owned by none" (*omnibus sit comune nec proprium ulli*); thus, it ultimately belongs to all. Everyone has a claim on it, yet no claim excludes the claims of other members of the kingdom. Dante goes on to associate the illustrious vernacular with the law courts, dubbing it "curial" (*curiale*). He explains, "the essence of being curial is no more than providing a balanced assessment of whatever has to be dealt with; and because the scales on which this assessment is carried out are usually found only in the most authoritative of tribunals, whatever is well-balanced in our actions is called 'curial'" (*quia curialis nil aliquid est quam librata regula eorum que peragenda sunt: et quia statera huiusmodi liberatonis tantum in excellentissimis curiis esse solet, hinc est quod quicquid in actibus nostris bene libratum est, curiale dicatur.*)¹⁹⁵ Dante suggests that this illustrious vernacular is both capable of providing assessments of important matters and well-balanced itself. But most significant to our study is that in associating

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., I. xviii, p. 42-43.

this language with both the royal courts and the law courts, he relates it to communal ownership and authoritative judgment. Although Dante does not explicitly link ownership and judgment with sovereignty here, either ownership, judgment or both subtend most late medieval theories of sovereignty, including his own as laid out in *de Monarchia*. Indeed both ownership and judgment are at the heart of Chaucer's conception of sovereignty, although ultimately judgment seems most important. In *De Vulgari*, then, Dante broadens the group of people who might participate in sovereignty by linking vernacular language and sovereignty—a move that Chaucer imitates in the *Tales*.

As we have seen, for Jean de Paris and Nicole Oresme, linguistic particularity legitimates political sovereignty. Dante's illustrious vernacular is both linguistic and literary, because it depends on poets and cultivation to reach its potential. This language, in its illustrious form, binds a people by representing a common home (including shared ownership of that space/idea) and by serving as a common faculty for both authoritative judgment and rhetorical persuasion (hence its epithet, illustrious). Dante's illustrious vernacular is a tool through which its users might enact sovereignty: the legitimate ownership and judgment of public goods and ideas. This vernacular's power is in its potential to facilitate a common future for those who share it. In this way the illustrious vernacular's nobility, based on continuity and particularity, is more national—politically and culturally—than Latin nobility, based on universal intelligibility. Because the vernacular is not only aulic and curial, but also illustrious, reflecting light from other places, it might also connect its users with spaces beyond the limits of their homeland. It is not simply insular or universal, but rather distinct and driven by light from distant

realms.

In the *Canterbury Tales*, as well as in the writings of fourteenth century political thinkers Dante, William of Ockham, Jean de Paris and Marsilius of Padua, political sovereignty indicates shared ownership and judgment, and entails both hierarchy and limitation. Considering the values implicit in the wider field of medieval political thought, drawn from institutional history including secular legal treatises and evidence of lay judicial procedure, Susan Reynolds explains that medieval “Kings were . . . never absolute in theory, however arbitrary they might be in practice.”¹⁹⁶ Likewise, in the *Canterbury Tales* sovereignty is never absolute in theory, though it often seems arbitrary in practice. Such sovereignty is cultural as well as political, for it is national. It is also a working model, a vernacular form of power, equally dependent on theory and practice; such sovereignty changes like the vernacular language through which Chaucer describes it. A tool like Dante’s illustrious vernacular, Chaucerian sovereignty complicates the relationship between universality and particularity rendering its users simultaneously more distinct, more closely engaged with each other, and more dependent on distant authorities— foreign sources of ownership and judgment, which distinguish its legitimate boundaries.

* * *

The following look at the place of nationhood in wider English literary context will complete our view of the backgrounds of Chaucer’s nationalism and help us to understand better the value of Chaucer’s interventions on the matter. Geoffrey Chaucer’s contributions to concepts of English nationhood, like many of his literary and cultural

¹⁹⁶ Reynolds, “Medieval *Origines Gentium*,” 381; see also Reynolds, “Law and Communities in Western Europe, c. 900-1300,” *American Journal of Legal History*, xxv (1981): 205-24.

accomplishments, diverge from trends we find among his contemporaries. The *Canterbury Tales* engages with prevalent national themes and problems we find elsewhere among fourteenth and fifteenth-century literary approaches to English nationhood— though unlike these, it pitches itself neither on the front lines of battle nor in the utopian visions of dreams, but rather on the hopeful side of bitter human realities and disappointments. In the following section, I will briefly compare Chaucer's approach to nationhood with those of his contemporaries.

In the *Canterbury Tales* Chaucer demonstrates most clearly his dedication to writing in English, his fascination with diversity and his relative lack of enthusiasm for xenophobia. This odd combination of attitudes toward the familiar national questions of language and tolerance (inside and outside communal boundaries) renders Chaucer's conception of nationhood difficult to comprehend— and more difficult to categorize. The *Tales* offers readers the possibility of a nation whose exclusions and hierarchies are somewhat negotiable, whose language is its strongest statement, whose experience of diversity both within and across state boundaries is its greatest strength, and whose consciousness of sovereign political power and cultural heritage are distinct threads in the same fabric of national identity. Thus, cross-cultural relations help characterize Chaucerian nationhood, both accentuating its particularity and explicating its internationalist affinities. In these ways Chaucer's imagination of English nationhood resembles postcolonial models of linguistic nationhood.¹⁹⁷ And, like Matthew Paris's

¹⁹⁷ For example, Edouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, trans. J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999). Glissant, a Martinican writer, theorist and critic, conceives of “national literature as the urge for each group to assert itself: that is not the need to disappear from the world scene and on the contrary to share in its diversification” (99). For Glissant, cross-cultural poetics (*une poétique de la Relation*) and imagination, like the Bahktinian notion of carnival, provides opportunities to affirm the power and reality of cultural relativity. Ngugi wa Thiong'o's work also adds usefully to this discussion. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: the politics of language in African*

thirteenth-century model of English nationhood, Chaucer's national imagination accommodates England's local variation.¹⁹⁸ The *Tales* is, moreover, suspicious of traditional political, religious and cultural authorities, yet thoroughly invested in the cultures such authorities produce.¹⁹⁹ This text does not offer what most Middle English meditations on English nationhood prepare us to expect. Nor does it present an exact model of an English nation. Nevertheless, through it, Chaucer does introduce us to a rather diverse group of English folk, who behave like citizens of an English nation. The *Tales* both elaborates an eclectic concept of nationhood and works as an experimental model of English nationhood; and it isolates and probes national controversies by setting its pilgrims into relation with each other under the particular circumstances of their pilgrimage, marked by Harry Bailly's rule and their tale-telling agreement.²⁰⁰ These controversies include the significance of sovereignty as it concerns competing views of the law, kingship, dissent, history, and camaraderie, and the ways in which narrative imagination relates these nationalizing factors to each other. Ultimately, English

literature (London: James Currey Ltd, 1986). Ngugi, a Kenyan writer bids farewell to writing in English in order to cultivate a literature in Gikuyu, a Kenyan national language. Ngugi explains the mutually constituting interrelation of language and culture. He argues that when a child first reads literature in her mother tongue (national language), only then can she "learn other languages and even enjoy the positive humanistic, democratic and revolutionary elements in other people's literatures and cultures without any complexes about his own language, his own self, his environment" (28-29). For Ngugi, national languages and literatures are prerequisite for healthy cross-cultural relations and perspectives. And "African writers are bound by [their] calling to do for [their] languages what Spencer, Milton and Shakespeare did for English; what Pushkin and Tolstoy did for Russian . . ." (29). Although Ngugi mentions reading Chaucer, he does not consider the similarities between what Chaucer did for English and what he does for Gikuyu. At any rate, we should pause here and meditate on the striking changes English experiences between 1386, when Chaucer begins to write the *Canterbury Tales* in it and 1986, when Ngugi decides to stop writing in it. We should also consider the enduring need for and obligation to national writing to which Ngugi's project, like Chaucer's, attests.

¹⁹⁸ Thorlac Turville-Petre, *England the Nation: Language, Literature and National Identity, 1290-1340* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), 1-2.

¹⁹⁹ Examples of this critical involvement with tradition include the Monk's pessimistic experimentation with history and narrative form, the Physician's questioning of a judicial system's overall usefulness despite its obvious unifying power, the Shipman's presentation of the familiarities that territorial and legal loyalties foster, and the Wife of Bath's incredible ability to reconstruct sovereignty as a negotiation of language, law and lived experience.

²⁰⁰ Knapp, "Chaucer Imagines England," 131-160.

nationhood is a narrative that helps explain how language and history intersect with political and religious community in the *Canterbury Tales* and an experiment, which tests the significance of such intersections.²⁰¹ National identity derives from accepting this basic narrative, part fiction, part fact, and developing it through vocal participation in this experiment. In practical terms, participation means sharing a home, a language, a past and a hope for a future together.

Both the dream vision tradition and the *Canterbury Tales* query the national role of dissent, which complicates the meaning of sovereignty with the problems of class diversity, open debate, and disorder. Where dream visions avoid clear resolution and decisive social action, the *Tales* assumes both the change and the new social and political possibilities that dissent and disorder incite, even if clear resolution remains impossible. Take, for example, *Wynnere and Wastoure*, a mid-fourteenth century poem that pits England's law, its clerks and domestic concerns against a chivalric tradition of spending and expansionist ambitions. The dreamer-narrator recalls a vision wherein Wynnere, leading an army of clerks, merchants and lawyers faces Wastoure and his "sadde men of armes" before their judge-like king (193).²⁰² The two sides seem bound for a battle that would validate either Wynnere's domestic concerns or Wastoure's spending and martial goals. But instead, as Maura Nolan has shown, "the disputants take up and abandon rhetorical positions as if they were lances in a joust;" and their mutual debates and interactions with the king and his herald only obscure national concerns such as the legal

²⁰¹ We must remember that though we can distinguish between types of nationalism --and even between varieties of nationalism, which is more fully established and hegemonic in its influence, and forms of nationhood, which indicates less totalizing experiences of national identity and existence-- there is a great deal of slippage and overlap between categories. Our discussion will include these various forms of nationhood as they do shed important light on one another despite their obvious differences.

²⁰² *Wynnere and Wastoure* in *Alliterative Poetry of the Later Middle Ages: an Anthology*, ed. Thorlac Turville-Petre (Washington, D.C.: Catholic Press of America, 1989). Hereafter cited by line number alone.

definition of treason, the meaning of chivalry, the usefulness of battle, and the value of charity.²⁰³ *Wynnere and Wastoure* outlines a set of national debates and performs a need for change, but makes its strongest statement by refusing to deliver any substantial change or resolution. Conversely, change drives Chaucer's national imagination.

Consider as well the early fifteenth-century *Mum and the Soothesegger*, which debates whether an individual's silence or his truth-telling best serves England and its potentates. This Langlandian dream-vision is on a quest to establish an exemplary communal voice, a paradigmatic speaker—one who is most worthy to advise the king, and most worthy of public emulation. The narrator's ostensible choices are Mum, who stands for flattery and self-interested silence regarding the misdeeds of others and affairs of state, and the Soothesegger, who represents willingness to speak truthfully about affairs of state regardless of personal, social or political gain. Unsurprisingly, the narrator considers this extreme dichotomy and finds that soothsaying is a community's most rare and most valuable asset. Of course, he comes to this conclusion through a dream. The problem here is that he self-censors his account of his dream unapologetically, leaving the reader with questions regarding his own trustworthiness, what he stands to gain through this particular hush, and the meanings of truth-telling and openness in public debate. Thus *Mum and the Soothesegger*, like *Wynnere and Wastoure*, equivocates national values. And as their ends draw near, both poems effectually suspend resolution of national debates. *Wynnere and Wastoure*'s king makes no real judgment; instead he knights Wynnere's clerkly retinue (erasing only the most symbolic and overt difference between them and their chivalric opponents) and

²⁰³ Maura Nolan, "With treson within: Wynnere and Wastoure, Chivalric Self-Representation, and the Law," *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 26 (1996), 17.

encourages both parties to carry on with their agendas. Similarly, *Mum and the Soothsegger*'s narrator risks little for reformation and chooses to offer (what should be) his own honest national criticisms through the books of others rather than by authoring his own book. These dream visions are remarkable for their ability to avoid immediate change while voicing a certain need for it.²⁰⁴

The *Canterbury Tales*' attitude toward social change is more extreme, though also more subtly pitched than that of the above mentioned dream visions. Its inclination toward both communal and narrative flexibility facilitates a bold re-envisioning of dissent's role vis-à-vis the chivalric class, public speech, and rule of law. For example, Harry Bailly installs himself as a judicial authority for and apparent sovereign of the Canterbury-bound community only to yield (swiftly and tellingly) to the Miller's disorderly demand to speak. Soon we see that Harry's main concern is that all the pilgrims continue together on the same path, which leads not only to Canterbury, but also back *homward* through the Tabard Inn. As the pilgrims amble on, he welcomes a disobedient and garrulous Cannon's Yeoman into the tale-telling fellowship. This would-be final arbiter even obeys the Knight's request that he "kisse the Pardoner," shortly after condemning the Pardoner's speech with violent threats (VI. 965). At this point in the frame tale, the Knight is a domestic peacemaker; he plays a very different role from that of the international war-wager, described in the *General Prologue*. Each of these community-shaking events suggests that here sovereignty is participatory: here dissent, flexibility, and cooperation are nationalizing communal values; together they ensure

²⁰⁴ Chaucer's own *Parliament of Fowles* dramatizes the debate poem/dream vision's penchant for stasis. It definitively suspends the national business of royal marriage-making by postponing the bride-to-be's decision-making for one year. Thus through the *Parliament of Fowles*, Chaucer acknowledges that in the dream vision tradition dissent and debate commonly represent only the possibility of national reconfiguration.

communal cohesion notwithstanding differences of status and opinion regarding Harry's rule. Despite H.B.'s promises of punishment for rebels, he consistently accommodates would-be rebels, rendering their rebellion less threatening dissent. Thus flexibility secures the continued exchange of *sentence*, *solace*, and tales that relate a common history, "aventures that whilom han bifalle" (I. 795). When such exchange takes the form of angry *quiting*, in fact, the pilgrims seem most invested in their debates and most engaged with each other. Certainly, the pilgrims' insistence on constantly reinterpreting nationally significant issues through their tales requires the Canterbury-bound body's cohesion, which in turn demands both its flexibility and some sort of authoritative arbitration. Here cohesion and utter stability are disparate; it is both more common and more conducive to cohesion for order to change than to stagnate.

Chaucer's narration reinforces the sense that important national questions are truly debatable. Chaucer, the pilgrim-narrator of the *Tales*, claims to tell the uncensored story of what he hears and encourages the reader to decide what to make of it. His narration is strikingly different from that of *Mum and the Soothsegger's* dreamer-narrator, who casts doubt on himself by claiming paradoxically to have "slepte sadly seven houres large," and prefaces his recollections with the assertion, "mette I of merveilles mo than me luste/ [t]o telle or to talke of, til I se tyme," while maintaining that he alone will decide which of "the silde-couthes [he] wole shewe here-after" (870-73). If we accept Chaucer the pilgrim-narrator's declaration, "Whoso shall telle a tale after a man,/ He moot reherce as ny as evere he can," and his following words (ll.), any untrustworthiness we can attribute to him would be due to either his slow wit or the very nature of storytelling, and certainly not indicative of his self-interested choices or his

desire to keep things to himself (I. 731-32). Chaucer does not retell tales exactly as his sources tell them, suggesting that interpretation and change are parts of the hearing and telling process. In any case, Chaucer's presentation of diverse opinions through a narrator's imagined communal experience and a narrative marked by surprise changes as well as by collaborative moves invites the reader to participate in national debates. Conversely, the dream-vision tradition's presentation of such national debates through a dreamer's recollections generally impedes readerly participation by insulating debates within one persona's veiled dream world.²⁰⁵ Chaucer's presentation does a better job of absolving the author from responsibility for radical ideas (and the mistrust that comes with them) and simultaneously urges the reader to seriously consider the exciting communal possibilities at hand. Here Chaucer transports familiar national questions of public debate, social order and diversity from a context that presents national business in suspension to one that performs English nationhood as a communal, experiential and processual exchange regarding these particular national concerns. This emphasis of the collaborative nature of interpretation and deliberation is among the *Tales*'s important innovations on the matter of English nationhood.

The *Canterbury Tales* also addresses the romance tradition's concerns with the local losses and imperial ambitions that compromise the legitimacy of English national sovereignty. Drawing on earlier texts by Geoffrey of Monmouth and Gerald of Wales, Patricia Clare Ingham shows that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, the late fourteenth century Arthurian romances, mourn the destruction of

²⁰⁵ *The Vision of Piers Plowman*, however, is an important and extreme exception to this rule according to Larry Scanlon. Scanlon's reading of William Langland's concept of national sovereignty and discussion of the "radical promise that Langland and his rebel readers found in nationalist ideals" (225) can be found in "King, Commons, and Kind Wit: Langland's National Vision and the Rising of 1381," in *Imagining a Medieval English Nation*, 191-233.

local communities— losses nationhood typically demands— even as they tout national unity. National unity, local loss, and imperial ambition, though not quite conflated into one category, are inseparable in the *Morte Arthure* and in postcolonial criticism that understands “‘nation’ and ‘empire’ as mutually defined and defining.”²⁰⁶ Chaucer, however, imagines the survival and participation of local affiliations within a functional English nation. His *Knight’s Tale*, we shall see, actually opposes imperial and national interests, suggesting that the imperial and the national are exceedingly more disparate than they appear in either medieval or postcolonial romance.²⁰⁷ As the Knight tells it, moreover, Theseus’s polity pales in comparison with the national model of community enacted by the Knight himself and the other pilgrims in the frame tale. In spite of their initial appreciation for the Knight’s tale, the Canterbury-bound pilgrims turn away from Theseus’s imperial model of community building through conquest in order to more seriously consider the significance of consent, the nature of sovereignty, and the experience of being understood, which the *Knight’s Tale* does not fully appreciate. Subsequently-related romances, the *Man of Law’s Tale*, *Wife of Bath’s Tale*, *Squire’s Tale*, and *Franklin’s Tale* focus keenly on these issues, accentuating the *Knight’s Tale*’s failure and elaborating the pilgrim-company’s serious interests in consent, sovereignty and the forms of nationhood such principles subtend.

The *Richard Coer de Lion* manuscripts are also notable among Middle English romance performances of English nationhood. The romance of *Richard Coer de Lion* regards foreign communities (French and Saracen) with bitterly xenophobic attitudes and

²⁰⁶ Patricia Clare Ingham, *Sovereign Fantasies: Arthurian Romance and the Making of Britain* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 100-01.

²⁰⁷ For more on the interrelation of the national and the imperial in post-colonial, or late-imperial, romance, see John McClure, *Late Imperial Romance* (New York: Verso, 1994).

constructs English national community through its strident visions of Englishness. Like most Middle English Saracen romances, *Richard Coer de Lion* overdetermines Englishness as everything England's enemies are not. In this romance the true Englishman shows no mercy, proudly eats pork, cannibalizes Saracens, and (if we take the text literally) has a tail! Chaucer's depictions of Englishness alongside other ethnicities confront his readers with more subtle similarities and complementary differences as well as irreducible and vexing disparities not only across, but also inside English bounds.²⁰⁸ For example, in his tale, the Squire models Cambyuskan's court on Arthur's, with one significant exception: he adds curious exotic dancers; meanwhile the Man of Law makes Custance and her vicious mother-in-law speak very similar lines regarding oppression (II. 286, 338), but paints the former as a paragon of passive femininity and the latter as a virago, who breaks the rules that Custance exemplifies. These forays into the Muslim world, moreover, provide a relatively unthreatening view of it. By neglecting to supply an embodied pagan other against whom all faith can be mounted, Chaucer allows readers to more carefully and less desperately contemplate the correlation and competition among belief in religion and belief in English national life.

The English nation represented by Chaucer's pilgrims interrogates the relationship between religious discipline and sociability in national culture—a relationship particularly unsettled and open to multiple possibilities. Here belief in religion and belief in community each demand a good deal of faith and thus seem bound to rival each other. We should be careful not to confuse rivalry with mutual exclusion.

²⁰⁸ His *Canterbury Tales* ultimately naturalizes change and the power of choice in national polity formation. This is to say that much like postmodern forms of nationhood, which expose and exist alongside national discontent, imperfection, and fictions of easy sociability, Chaucerian nationhood preserves otherwise sacrificed particularities and dramatizes processes of constructing, choosing and maintaining national identity.

Thorlac Turville-Petre has shown that medieval Christian identity and English national identity need not “exclude or diminish” each other; he maintains that they more often “overlap,” “coexist,” and reinforce one another than conflict, and that the universal Christian Church, nation and state are separate, but overlapping entities.²⁰⁹ I would even extend Turville-Petre’s understanding of the coexistence of Church and nation, which he demonstrates through his readings of late thirteenth and early fourteenth-century texts such as Manning’s *Handlyng Synne* and the *South English Legendary*, to the *Canterbury Tales*. According to Turville-Petre, “the concept of the universal Christian family is a very faint presence” throughout *Handlyng Synne*, which approaches sin primarily “as a cause of social evil.”²¹⁰ Likewise, Chaucer is most concerned with sins such as adultery and clerical abuse of power and wealth, the social ills propagated by a decadent English Church in his first fragment fabliaux and elsewhere in the *Tales*. Meanwhile the *South English Legendary* presents Thomas Becket “as a champion of the people in his resistance to the despotism of the king” and ultimately as an example of how the Church might resist despotic power on the people’s behalf.²¹¹ The presence of this particular hagiography on the English cultural scene makes Chaucer’s choice to tell the story of English nationhood en route to Canterbury shrine so much more apt.

As R.R. Davies has written, “Countries are not defined merely by power and political sovereignty, but by the traditions, sentiments and aspirations of those who live in

²⁰⁹ Turville-Petre, *England the Nation*, 41.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 52, 49.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, 63–65, 63. Turville-Petre continues to read the *South English Legendary*’s portraits of humble saints such as Dunstan, Edmund and Chad, concluding that their “humility, so constantly emphasized, is the expression of the saints’ identification with simple folk. In this way, by locating national identity among the people of England, a clerical writer can demonstrate the central part that the Church has played and still plays in representing national interests” (67).

them.”²¹² Middle English literary tradition demonstrates this point by crafting images of an England in touch with all of these forces. Chaucer’s innovative contributions in particular suggest that powers as seemingly absolute as political sovereignty are not always distinguishable from more fluid national traditions, sentiments and aspirations, which exert their own force in national communities. Because nations are imagined communities bound by shared language, and poetry is an imaginative enterprise, the innovative vernacular poet’s capacity to facilitate nationhood is vital. As the foregoing survey aims to show, Chaucer’s innovations engage not only with insular traditions and historical events, but also with philosophical, literary and political trends that span his international world.

Of all of Chaucer’s engagements, his engagement with Dante may reveal the English national significance of his work best. Ernst Kantorowicz explains that while “theologians, jurists, and political philosophers” of Dante’s age set forth “conceptions of kingship centering in the God-man, in the ideas of justice and law, in the corporate bodies of political collectivities or institutional dignities . . . [i]t remained to [Dante,] the poet to establish an image of kingship which was merely human and of which man, pure and simple, was the center and standard.”²¹³ Chaucer shares Dante’s commitment to purely human forms of sovereignty, independent of ecclesiastical or clerical influence. But the English poet lacks confidence in his centrality. Instead, from his backwater, he imagines himself, his language and his homeland as odd and complicated particularities, rather foreign to Dante’s ideal of Roman centrality, envisaged in the *Convivio* and *De*

²¹² Davies, *The First English Empire*, 82.

²¹³ Kantorowicz, *King’s Two Bodies*, 451.

monarchia.²¹⁴ There, Dante— unapologetically, if also ironically, imperialist— imagines Rome as a runner, who simply won the race against all of its rivals for world domination.

²¹⁵ Dante’s universal humanism provides tools and imperatives that the English vernacular poet will use motivate his readers to contribute to their community. But Chaucer must first adjust these tools to his particular task. Dante’s zealous espousal of Virgil, Livy, Euclid, of classical intellectual and literary tradition, would render marginal Chaucer’s enthusiasm for English and vernacular writing in general. Nevertheless, Dante’s defense of the Italian vernacular in the *Convivio* significantly challenges the cultural politics of Latin learning. Chaucer’s unapologetic use of English throughout his writing and especially in the *Canterbury Tales* is a powerful English counterpart to Dante’s defense of the vernacular. Indeed, Chaucer’s conception of sovereignty as a form of power both human and domestic owes a debt to Dante’s slightly older ideas about sovereignty and the vernacular. Likewise Chaucer’s imagination of the community such sovereignty governs, an English community bounded not only by linguistic and territorial particularities, but also by time, shares much with those communities that Jean de Paris and Nicole Oresme idealize.

Despite their differences, all of the above-mentioned thinkers posit models of community that reflect a burgeoning interest in the contributions that citizens must make in order to sustain their sovereign communities. Along with this interest come questions regarding the limits of sovereign power, the obligations and emotions sovereignty entails, and the relationship among historical possibility, community and sovereignty. When

²¹⁴ Kathy Lavezzo, “Beyond Rome: Mapping Gender and Justice in *The Man of Law’s Tale*,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 24 (2002): 149-180 analyzes Chaucer’s view of England in relation to ideas of Roman centrality.

²¹⁵ Alighieri, *Monarchia*, II.vii-viii, pp.147-63.

Hardt and Negri write, “the nation sustains the concept of sovereignty by claiming to precede it,” they mean to pull nationhood’s old and authoritative skin away.²¹⁶ They think that the nation makes a false claim, that nations actually follow sovereignty. And they aim to reveal that nations are unfit to legitimate the politics of sovereignty, because nations insist on identifications that deny diversity of perspective, fail to moderate conflicts, and cover over a mottled network multiplicity. Instead of nationhood and sovereignty they propose multitude and constituent power: “Constituent power . . . is a decision that emerges out of the ontological and social process of productive labor; it is an institutional form that develops a common content; it is a deployment of force that defends the historical progression of emancipation and liberation; it is, in short, an act of love.”²¹⁷ Such an act of love is the only thing that can set historical life right, the only thing that can take living out of synch— living in a “present that is already dead and a future that is already living”— to the next level by pushing beyond historical limits, propelling human political community “like an arrow into that living future.”²¹⁸ Thus, Hardt and Negri offer love as salvation just as they oppose love and modern sovereignty.

Alternatively, medieval political theorists tend to see a necessary connection between love and sovereignty, whether imperial or national. Chaucer, in particular, exposes love and history, in a spirit of revelation similar to that of Hardt and Negri’s exposure of the nation. Chaucer reveals that in leading to sovereignty, love and history function as political concepts that do legitimate national politics. Legitimization is what love and history are best suited to do, regardless of any truth one might ascribe to them. In this context, love is a decisive problem, which turns on the question: does love set

²¹⁶ Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 101.

²¹⁷ Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, 351.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 358.

limits or extend limits? The same question applies to history. Does history set or break beyond limits? Medieval political thinkers understand history in a variety of ways: synchronically, diachronically, as obligation, as the domain of the educated or popular inheritance, an aspect of cultural particularity or as a universal narrative that binds the world. Ultimately, in his Matter of Britain romances, Chaucer writes a history that— true or false, for better or worse— breaks its own limits, just as it renders love interdependent with national sovereignty. Despite their ideal regalia, love and history turn out to be strategic instruments in Chaucer's work. Chaucer debunks fictions of sovereignty, whether they be national fictions of perfect solidarity and identity or imperial fictions of truth, love and the guarantee of peace, instilling a new value, continuity: a cyclic telling of history partially instantiated and further symbolized by the tale-telling agreement of the *General Prologue*. This is to say that sovereignty never appears to be fair, perfect or even perfectible through Chaucer's eyes, but it ensures the nearly unquestionable goal of continuity. Continuity is less ideal than these other values, and it propels national existence through national sovereignty without fully justifying any of it, without homogenizing time, truth or communities of individuals. Thus the past only makes sense when read through the present; the future and history's very cogency depends on present rereading, on anachronism.

At Home on the Road: English Nationhood in the *General Prologue* and Frame of the *Canterbury Tales*

*Le Même, c'est la différence sublimée; le
Divers, c'est la différence consentie.*

--Edouard Glissant²¹⁹

*Like the Latin domus, the English word
"home" functions unlike any other common
noun, acting like an adverb, a peculiarly
ambiguous, unsettled word that establishes
our place in the world as both a place and a
mode of being. More disturbingly, the
double discourse of the domus suggests that
we are neither of those things, or that we
exist somewhere in between them, between
objects and existence, between a real place
and a place we cannot grasp because we
cannot ever fully be ourselves.*

-- D. Vance Smith²²⁰

*I guess whoever Bailey was—if there was a
Bailey—he knew this place had to be real real
mobile.*

--Gloria Naylor²²¹

In the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer imagines English nationhood primarily through tropes of sovereignty, anachronism, and domesticity. Of England's manifestations as a sovereign kingdom, a trans-historical cultural community and a homeland, this final national form is in many ways its most complex and least optimistic. Chaucer's look at the relationships that English folk have with their home and with each other on that

²¹⁹ Edouard Glissant, *Le discours antillais* (Gallimard, Folio, 1997), 328.

²²⁰ D. Vance Smith, *Arts of Possession: The Middle English Household Imaginary* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), xiii.

²²¹ Gloria Naylor, *Bailey's Café* (New York: Vintage, 1992), 28.

terrain exposes the disappointment and contention that marks national communities. But at the same time Chaucer's grand narrative binds these drawbacks with the more laudable aspirations of belonging and being understood that motivate participants to consent to such flawed political relationships. As Thorlac Turville-Petre notes, "The very act of writing in English is a statement about belonging. . . . The desire to belong to [a] larger protecting community is the urge behind nationalism."²²² The *Canterbury Tales* is such an act of writing—but it is more fully an act that interrogates this desire for belonging, confirming the appeal of belonging while demonstrating that neither belonging nor exclusion is as straightforward as we might assume. The members of Chaucer's English pilgrim community are as likely to protect as to require protection from each other. They inhabit their English home as both as a geographic place and as a mode being and traveling together through time and space by telling stories in English. In the *Tales*, almost every home appears as a political and cultural space that ensures both comfort and contention, both being understood and being harshly judged, if also nominally accepted. By imagining England as a national homeland, Chaucer demonstrates that nationhood is not a simple category, but rather a complex approach to understanding why and how people live together in political community—despite evidence that its costs may actually outweigh its benefits.

While some nationhood scholars dismiss the possibility of medieval nationhood because they see the medieval Church's influence as outright erasure of secular communal identities, Chaucerians generally doubt the place of nationhood in the *Canterbury Tales* not because of their understanding of Church power, but rather because of their negative impressions of nationalism. As we see in the introduction, the critical

²²² Turville-Petre, *England the Nation*, 11.

history of nationhood in the *Canterbury Tales* after Chaucer's fifteenth-century followers is largely a story of unfounded cooptation by proponents of exclusive, essentialist and stridently xenophobic concepts of an ethnic English nation countered by refusal of any and all Chaucerian interest in nationhood. Yet the latter argument, presented most compellingly by Derek Pearsall and David Wallace, depends on the former camp's particular concept of nationalism, and fails to consider nationhood more thoroughly. Pearsall and Wallace treat the prospect of Chaucerian nationhood as that of all nationalism: progressive, teleological and absolute, conflating modern nationalist ideologies, sentiments and categories with concepts of nationhood in general. But unlike absolutism, neither nationhood nor even nationalism is a finished or finishable project. For Wallace, guild consciousness rather than national consciousness "generates and sustains the *felaweshipe* of the *Canterbury Tales*."²²³ This guild consciousness is one way of approaching the pilgrims' mode of being together. Wallace presents "the medieval guild as a shape-shifting phenomenon, forever responsive to and generative of new cultural and economic pressures, rather than as an ideal, hence ahistorical, form," yet his formulation tends to idealize the guild, associating it with fellowship and flexibility, while relegating nationhood to its associations with absolutism and tyranny.²²⁴ In

²²³ Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity*, 76.

²²⁴ Ibid., 84. Wallace chooses the guild and a model in part because of its temporary, "protean" nature. This is a very attractive angle and certainly corresponds with the pilgrim company's expected trajectory. Such a temporary community would hardly fit with the modern nation's ambition for continuity. Of course, the prominent specters of Troy and Thebes (fallen nations of sorts) in medieval English literary tradition, characterize nationhood as an inevitably temporary thing itself. So too, postcolonial formulations of nationhood like Glissant's revel in temporary association and change. Oddly enough, while the pilgrim community has no aims for eternal or continuous incorporation, we never see the pilgrims go their separate ways. One could attribute this to the supposedly unfinished nature of the *Tales*. Nevertheless, the *Parson's Tale* and "Retraction" of fragment X certainly provide a firm book end for this gap-ridden set of volumes, and when the Parson offers his contribution, our pilgrims are still on the road not quite at a "thropes ende." This leaves us in a suspension that prolongs the unity of the imagined community, even as the author steps out of his imagination to retract it.

Wallace's formulation guild consciousness and national consciousness seem to intersect: "guild membership nurtures political intelligence through the internal workings of corporate procedures, and also through the imagining of local, national, and transnational structures of authority."²²⁵ Wallace's idea of "guild consciousness," like Andersonian national consciousness, is both imaginary, linking members who will never meet, and transcendent, conjuring a community composed of living and dead members.²²⁶ And so it seems to work as a displaced form of national consciousness. I want to suggest that Wallace's important observations about guild consciousness are in fact indicative of a national horizon beyond what guilds themselves instantiate. Guild consciousness is simply one part of late medieval English national consciousness, a part that points toward a more fissured and more transcendent national whole. The Canterbury bound community evokes the possibility of a sort of simultaneously historical and ideal, local and transcendent nationhood.²²⁷

Although Pearsall's emphases differ from Wallace's, taxonomy impacts his understanding of the *Canterbury Tales*'s representation of English nationhood as well. According to Pearsall, medieval English nationalism is a system that functions for and through xenophobia. Chaucer reflects the nationalistic chauvinisms of his historical moment, but is relatively uninterested in them. Pearsall admits that through the reference to pilgrims from "every shires ende/ Of Engelond" in the *General Prologue*, England is

²²⁵ Ibid., 83. Wallace's understanding of the Chaucerian polity as set of associations driven by the value of fellowship and guild mentality, resonates with Benedict Anderson's imagined national community.

²²⁶ Ibid.

²²⁷ Bhabha, "DissemiNation". The Canterbury-bound pilgrims seem to be both pedagogical objects and performative subjects in Homi Bhabha's formulation. The landscape of the *Canterbury Tales* is one on which "the scraps, patches and rags of daily life" are "repeatedly turned into the signs of a coherent national culture, while the very act of narrative performance interpellates a growing circle of national subjects" (145).

“being fully *recognised*, so to speak, perhaps for the first time, as a real place” (I. 15-16), and yet, he reduces this to a basic innovation of setting. Nevertheless, the *Canterbury Tales*’s invocation of England as both the place from which its characters are drawn and the spatial and sentimental setting through which its considerations of sovereignty, domesticity and history unfold is ultimately a statement of national awareness, with international, political, cultural, religious and geographic implications, as we shall consider in more detail upon turning to our text. Indeed, Pearsall alternately eschews English nationalism and searches for an ideal portrait of England the nation, which he expects would be “a place for which we are encouraged to feel a particular affection, as a beloved land or heritage site.”²²⁸ While this is a reasonable expectation, not every national portrait is a flattering one. Not every pilgrim’s experience of home is a comforting one. Likewise, the most memorable performances of patriotism seem motivated as much by deep feelings of disappointment as by affection or love. In fact, in the tradition of the Socratic gadfly, a nation’s most credible characterizations and critiques often come, from those who do not only love, but also scrutinize the meaning and history of their own communities.

Regardless of how Pearsall would finally define the English nation, he seems certain that it could not include the pilgrims and the characters of the generally “unsavory” sort he finds in both the frame tale and those of their tales set in England. Pearsall locates the unsavory cast of characters that helps disqualify the *Canterbury Tales* from the category of nationally-focused literature in the fabliaux of the first fragment: the *Miller’s Tale*, the *Reeve’s Tale* and the *Cook’s Tale*, the exempla of fragment III: the

²²⁸ Derek Pearsall, “Chaucer and Englishness,” 282-83.

Friar's Tale and the *Summoner's Tale*, as well as the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, the *Man of Law's Tale*, the *Nun's Priest's Tale* and the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*.²²⁹ While these tales do introduce some of the most selfish characters we meet, they also enact a debate regarding selfishness and its affects on the English nation. These tales consider crimes (murder, rape, adultery and theft), laws and traditions related to these crimes, and civic institutions (from marriage to the university). Thus, the larger debate about selfishness proceeds through examination of the specific legal boundaries and particular chosen associations that characterize English national life. Of course, the above-listed tales are also the tales told when pilgrims are most engaged with one another in competitive circuits of *quiting*. England seems to be the place to go (in the narrative imagination) when the pilgrims want to send each other the boldest messages they can muster. These tales bare the cracks in Harry Bailly's initial fantasy of camaraderie and present England as neither dystopia nor utopia, but rather as the familiar homeland and the common landscape through which the pilgrims best communicate with one another just as English is the language through which they best understand and are understood by each other. We cannot juxtapose these tales without noting both the professional rivalries that mark the historical English setting of the frame tale, as communicated by fabliaux and the exempla, and the real struggle over British historiography, which the pairing of the *Man of Law's Tale* and the *Wife of Bath's Tale* suggests.

While the *Tales* does relatively little to promote xenophobia and exclusivity, its complicated presentation of England does quite a lot to reveal the value of the debates, civic associations and other relationships that English language and nationhood make

²²⁹ Ibid., 299, n. 34.

possible. Chaucerians, including Glenn Burger, Ardis Butterfield and Peggy Knapp, have already begun to elaborate this point, making a place for nationhood in Chaucer studies. My reading employs their insights on the frame tale to locate one story of English nationhood in the tension between the pilgrim company's plan and its practice. Butterfield calls our attention to the cultural and political circumstances of the Hundred Years War and the linguistic diversity of Chaucer's times and text. She suggests that late fourteenth-century Englishness was an especially capacious and dynamic concept, to which Chaucer contributes with both his linguistic innovations and his examinations of prejudice and tolerance in the *General Prologue*.²³⁰ According to Burger, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* reflects a pre-nation-state nation, which is perpetually in process and unpredictably moving "beyond things as they are."²³¹ Burger shows that because of both the flexibility with which the *Tales* imagines an English national community and the oppositional ways in which postcolonial theory allows readers to imagine the *Tales*, Chaucer's work illuminates the successes and limitations of the modern nation-state. Knapp reads the *Tales* as an imagination of England that "both creates what is not in being and interprets what is," creating and revealing national possibility based on the linguistic affinities and common beliefs of an engaged citizenry.²³² Each of these Chaucerians suggests ways in which the *Canterbury Tales* scrutinizes and intervenes in an evolving narrative of English nationhood, ultimately helping to uncover Chaucer's experimentation with national ideals and questions. These contributions to Chaucerian critical history remind us that nations sustain and are sustained by a range of ideas and institutions beyond xenophobia and absolute government.

²³⁰ Ardis Butterfield, "Nationhood."

²³¹ Glenn Burger, *Chaucer's Queer Nation*, 199.

²³² Peggy Knapp, "Chaucer Imagines England," 142.

Similarly, Susan Reynolds encourages scholars to reconsider narrowly drawn definitions of the nation in her discussion of the lack of commerce between medieval historians and nationalist ideas. She writes,

Most medieval historians would deny that they are nationalists, but that is because . . . they see [nationalism] as something aggressive, xenophobic, and deplorable, but do not look hard at the ideas which underlie it. Nationalist ideas, however, are more widespread than the unpleasant manifestations of nationalist emotions. The most important is the belief, widely held though seldom recognized and articulated, that ‘the world is naturally divided into nations, each of which has its own particular character and destiny’ and that nations by their very existence have the right to be self-governing and independent. The nationalist’s nation is therefore a corporate body, with essentially political rights. The nation is ‘the body which legitimizes the state’, whether the state is governed by democratic or authoritarian means, and the nation-state, however governed, is the one sort of state which is by its nature both legitimate and internally cohesive.²³³

Here Reynolds reminds us that regardless of its reprehensible condition, nationalism is more than the sum of its most offensive manifestations. If it were not more than this, nationalism could not be as infectious as it is. The attractiveness of the natural groupings, communal identities, common pasts, destined futures, and sociable cohesion that nationhood proffers, however, is strong enough to warrant the acceptance, excuses, and overlooking its uglier traits enjoy. As Reynolds implies, nationalism by definition never willingly separates itself from these basic attractions or from rights of self-determination and sovereignty that legitimate and define all forms of nationhood. Every nation appears most legitimate when its political power is confluent with its historical and cultural cohesion; of course, political power and purported legitimacy usually dictate such conditions. From this perspective, Chaucer’s imagination of England as a cultural,

²³³ Susan Reynolds, *Kingdoms and Communities in Western Europe 900-1300*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), 251.

linguistic and political community includes enough other significant criteria to render the lens of nationhood quite useful even for those who do not find any significant xenophobia or exclusion in his writing.

Such an approach might help readers appreciate how Chaucer's work queries the meaning, function and extent of national cohesion itself without completely, uncritically or axiomatically adopting it. As Reynolds suggests, most familiar European forms of nationhood take internal cohesion as a given, despite practical experience to the contrary.

²³⁴ Alternatively, Chaucer dramatizes processes of internal association, laying bare the dynamic networks of difference, familiarity, and negotiation that make nations cohere. The *Canterbury Tales* ultimately debunks easy fictions of national communities as associations based on either pure aggression or uncompromised cohesiveness. Chaucer pushes beyond the Arthurian double performance of celebrating the cohesion nationhood signifies while mourning the lost local particularities such cohesion entails and complicates the meaning of national cohesion by insisting that it actually entails diversity, adaptability and angry debate. In the *Canterbury Tales*, camaraderie and conflict are typically ingrained and inseparable parts of the same national body.

Chaucer's imagination of English nationhood as homeland upsets divisions among more recent national formulations as well as among those of his own time, reminding us that despite significant variations, sundry types of national experience and widely disparate concepts of the nation do coexist and shape each other in many cases. Michael Ignatieff's distinction between civic and ethnic nationalism is very helpful here. Ignatieff, whose primary concern here is twentieth-century ethnic tensions in the Balkans

²³⁴ Meanwhile Glissant's Caribbean-inspired theory of nationhood understands difference across national lines as a widely unspoken, yet foundational truth.

and beyond, describes civic nationalism as a doctrine of belonging based not on some exclusive identity, ethnic or otherwise, but on citizens' subscription "to the nation's political creed," and ultimately on common law.²³⁵ In contrast, ethnic nationalism claims to bind people through ethnicity. Ignatieff offers post-Napoleonic occupation Germany as the prime and exceptional example of Western ethnic nationalism:

What gave unity to the nation, what made it a home, a place of passionate attachment, was not the cold contrivance of shared rights but the people's preexisting ethnic characteristics: their language, religion, customs, and traditions. . . . Ethnic nationalism claims . . . that an individual's deepest attachments are inherited, not chosen. It is the national community that defines the individual, not the individuals who define the national community.²³⁶

Turville-Petre holds that medieval English forms of nationhood are ethnic in this way—and even racial. Thus it follows that some Chaucerians continue to resist the possibility that medieval English nationhood could be a substantial concern in Chaucer's work. But Chaucer's view of England as a national home resonates with Turville-Petre and Ignatieff's terms, yet revises them. Chaucer imagines a nation that becomes a home through both chosen and inherited attachments. This English national home appears as a place characterized by "passionate attachment" as well as by passionate attachment, prejudice and rivalry—and even by comfortable detachments.

Chaucerian nationhood is neither wholly ethnic nor purely civic in Ignatieff's terms, but rather a peculiar combination of both national forms. For Chaucer as for Nicole Oresme, the nation is partially natural and partially artificial. It does not need to be one or the other, purely organic or engendered through consent, reason, will and other

²³⁵ Ignatieff, *Blood and Belonging*, 6.

²³⁶ Ibid., 7-8. Ignatieff's use of the word "creed" reminds us that national belonging does depend on belief akin to that which founds membership in religious bodies such as the Catholic Church.

such faculties of choice alone. It is a cultural community that is both organic and contingent on communal deliberation and political participation. The following readings show that Chaucer's pilgrims behave in ways that suggest real investment in both ethnic and civic modes of belonging to the insular English community from which they are drawn. The community formed in the *General Prologue*, moreover, depends on both pre-established ethnic national characteristics ("language, religion, customs and traditions") and faith in what could come of the chosen solidarities and flexibilities that civic nationhood entails.

* * *

Setting in the *Canterbury Tales* is always somewhat random, but never simply a matter of chance. Like the home, here setting is equally a real place, a collection of people and their modes of living together. The pilgrims' portraits, setting, and the tale-telling agreement certainly warrant our attention, even if, as Wallace notes, the portraits have perhaps unjustifiably garnered the lion's share of critical attention.²³⁷ The following section reads the setting and some of the pilgrims' portraits before concluding, in the final section, with a closer analysis of Harry Bailly's part in emphasizing the national potential implied by the setting and portraits.

The details of the *Canterbury Tales*' setting suggest that England and Englishness may be most intelligible in relation to foreign shores. From the start of the *General Prologue*, the narrator shows that productivity and renewal depend on relationships that do not operate conventionally within discrete temporal or spatial boundaries: geographic, cultural, spiritual and temporal spaces are distinct yet connected. Chaucer juxtaposes

²³⁷ Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity*, 65.

concrete, conceptual, insular, continental, conventional and particular details of English life, reflecting nationhood's practical and theoretical double nature. He describes a natural whole that continually transcends conventionally expected restraints and divisions. Chaucer's *mise en scène* is a string of causes and effects that span time and space, yoking together disparate earthly forces as well as spiritual forces beyond the earthly realm. April's "shoures soote" reach back to March and reverse its "droghte," penetrating the roots of plants as well as the ground, undoing its dryness, and ultimately yielding flowers (I. 1-2). Meanwhile Zephyrus imports classical culture, sweeping across the land and inspiring crops in "every holt and heeth" (I. 5). Continental influence renders this insular land is the very particular place that it is. Here Old English vocabulary describes the land; the image of interplay between Zephyrus and "every holt and heeth" suggests that classical, continental culture and rustic, insular foundations are discrete, but symbiotic elements. Likewise, natural and cyclic regeneration fosters the spiritual and cultural phenomenon of religious pilgrimage in Chaucer's scheme.

While the practical advantages of making pilgrimage in the spring rather than in dead of winter are obvious, the narrator fails to note them. Instead he offers, "Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages," erasing practicality beneath deep yearning and association with transcendent, widespread desires, which drive folk to "straunge strondes" as well as through more local, familiar and oft-trodden paths (I. 12-13). Thus, the pilgrims' personal impulses, which predate their association under Harry Bailly's guidance, invest them in a venture that crosses cultural and spatial terrains alike. Even as they set out individually and in small groups, they respond collectively to spring. But spring moves them to pilgrimage— rather than to personal romance or biological forms

of reproduction. This break with expectations suggests that purely biological modes of ensuring continuity and more conceptual models of imagining community such as English nationhood are fungibles. Most readers would agree that the pilgrims' journey ultimately acquaints them with new and challenging perspectives on the traditional foundations of society, which include the church, marriage, chivalry, monarchy and family. At the same time, the curiosity and wanderlust these pilgrims display are natural impulses from the outset: both the natural world and the pilgrims' response to it seem amenable to cross-pollinations of many sorts. Thus, the *General Prologue's* setting works as a sort of mixed landscape on which physical and conceptual spaces coexist in rough relation to each other. To be a pilgrim on this rather experimental landscape is to be willing to cross the psychological, emotional and intellectual borders of the self as well as to venture actually beyond physical and geographic boundaries including those of hometown and neighborhood. Drawing on the work of Jill Mann and that of H. Marshall Leicester, Jr., Lee Patterson shows that Chaucer's "pilgrims are usually conceived less as objects to be detailed than as subjects caught in the very process of self-construction."²³⁸ Indeed their pilgrimage transforms our pilgrims' familiar social roles. To be a pilgrim here is ultimately to question one's own identity by placing oneself in situations and spaces that complicate and broaden that identity.

The diverse sorts of identity that Chaucer's pilgrims bring to bear on each other alternately obscure and refine visions of the pilgrim-company and England as national

²³⁸ Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History*, 27-30; citing H. Marshall Leicester, Jr., "The Art of Impersonation: A General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales," *PMLA* 95 (1980), 221, 217; and Mann, *Chaucer and the Medieval Estates*, 66, 194. Both Leicester and Mann argue that the pilgrims are at once intensely individual and clearly drawn from pools of similar folk. The *General Prologue* and frame tale have one of the richest reception histories in all English literature. Critics will always find it difficult to exhaust this apparently fragmentary and unfinished work, also laudable for its plenitude.

communities. Their destination, the shrine of St. Thomas at Canterbury, draws disparate members “from every shires ende / of Engeland” into a communal pilgrim-body (15-16).²³⁹ Of course, the narrator asks readers to imagine communities larger, more expansive and more conceptually motivated than the immediate one and, in the same breath, specifies smaller, more narrowly drawn and practically experienced shires, which would contain yet smaller districts themselves. Shires are durable intermediary political units that helped hold together smaller communities regardless of changes at the national or royal level. By invoking the shires, Chaucer reminds us that in England, a range of communities exist within and alongside each other and that these communities experience both change and continuity over time. The Old English derivation of most of the vocabulary used throughout lines 13 and 14 (*seken*, *strondes*, *ferne*, *halwes*, *kowthe*, *sondry*, *londes*) reinforces this emphasis on the long and enduring insular cultural history of which shires are an important part.²⁴⁰ But England’s cultural and spiritual affinities are supranational as well as subnational. While nature motivates “folk to goon on pilgrimages,” it spurs “palmeres for to seken straunge strondes/ To ferne halwes, kowthe in sondry londres” (I. 13-14).²⁴¹ The narrator locates our Canterbury-bound pilgrims “from every shires ende/ of Engeland” in a “sondry londres” milieu, simultaneously drawing them into closer familiarity with each other and reminding us that they are not the only devotees—or even the only sort of devotees—about in the world. Chaucer

²³⁹ Turvill-Petre, *England the Nation*, esp. 63-65. As noted above, Thorlac Turville-Petre’s reading of St. Thomas Becket in the *South English Legendary* confirms the national import of this detail.

²⁴⁰ Interestingly only the words *straunge* (OF) and *palmeres* (Anglo-Norman), words that gesture beyond insular boundaries, come from languages other than Anglo Saxon. Reynolds, *Kingdoms and Communities* offers useful and detailed information on the history and functions of shires and hundreds (esp. 224-229).

²⁴¹ Wallace reads this reference to palmeres as a “somewhat” gratuitous allusion “to the dominant theme of the division of labor” in the *Canterbury Tales*, noting that “even pilgrimage has its professional specialists.” (*Chaucerian Polity*, 67). Nevertheless, these lines also address the issue of foreign/local affinities and divisions.

juxtaposes the less bounded link of general religious devotion that draws people to shrines beyond their own shores with the particularly local affiliations that draw our pilgrims to the English shrine of a martyr known for his troubled life and death at the hands of an English king. Thus, readers realize their special, basic familiarity with each other, with England and with the shrine at Canterbury not in a vacuum, but in the context of its relation with other familiarities. This basic familiarity distinguishes an eclectic yet discrete and common group, whose members' diversity is limited by their Englishness as well as by a modicum of devotion. And so the *General Prologue* sets the scene for our understanding of the Canterbury-bound community as both new and known, both insular and expansive, both rooted in physical geography and adaptable because characterized by spiritual and cultural affinities and practices; the *General Prologue* prepares us to encounter a homeland community that is perhaps best appreciated in relation to distant shores.

Geography itself is a highly resonant factor, which some credit with “naturally” sculpting communities and communal identities. Geographic boundaries, which are neither simply natural nor solely cultural, are of special significance, because as John Armstrong points out, they “are not only tangible” but also intensely “symbolic.”²⁴² This explication further clarifies the national homeland that the *Canterbury Tales* ponders. The fact that there are palmers who travel far to “straunge strondes” attests to the widespread and boundary-defying nature of religious devotion. At the same time, this presentation of pilgrimage confirms the reality of these boundaries with all their attendant symbolic and physical force. To be more specific, Chaucer’s invocation of “straunge strondes” evokes

²⁴² John A. Armstrong, *Nations Before Nationalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina UP, 1982), 9.

the symbolic, cultural distance that strangeness implies as well as the tangible, physical distance that both the image of seashores and the expanse of land and water that separates said “sondry londes” suggest. Familiarity is most recognizable in contrast with strangeness, just as home is most recognizable from abroad.

We must focus more intensely on this appearance of the word *straunge*; for here Chaucer complicates the associations of strangeness.²⁴³ The concept of strangeness in the *Canterbury Tales* is not to medieval nationhood simply what the condition of “Otherness” is to modern and postmodern national forms; nor does it suggest oppositeness. A closer look at lines 13-16 reveals a more nuanced relationship between strangeness and nationhood. When spring comes,

Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages,
And palmeres for to seken straunge strondes,
To ferne halwes, kowthe in sondry londes;
And specially from every shires ende
Of Engeland to Canterbury they wende, (13-16)

The *General Prologue* introduces strangeness, or foreignness, particularly in the context of crossable distances and penetrable borders. This introduction affirms shared identity among diverse pilgrims and palmers even as it testifies to the real distinctions among them. The disparateness of “straunge strondes” is indelible, but the shared knowledge of “ferne halwes” does the important conceptual work of bridging the otherwise mysterious physical distance that necessitates pilgrimage in the first place. Strangeness is a real difference, to which physical geography undeniably contributes, and strangeness makes

²⁴³ Pearsall “Chaucer and Englishness,” 283-85. In unfolding the implications of the concept “strangehood” Pearsall explains, “[a] stranger is one who is identified as ‘other’ in relation to a group that perceives itself or desires to define itself as the opposite of that ‘other’, that is, as ‘one’” (283). Pearsall notes Chaucer’s use of the word “straunge” suggesting that its embedded resonances import the sense of exclusivity that determines nationhood—in an ultimately pernicious fashion. This linguistic importation occurs whether the user actively desires to emphasize such xenophobia or not. Pearsall maintains that although Chaucer uses this word and shares the biases of his time, he neither elevates nor resists its xenophobic pitch.

visible the sameness of those things that belong to the nation by contrast. Strangeness also accommodates important abstract affinities and potential for edifying travel between *straunge* spaces. Here, and throughout the tales, both concrete and abstract considerations color the way we see communal identity; such factors appear alternately as obstacles for each other and as opportunities for understanding the tensions that mark (rather than simply mar) Chaucer's expansive yet distinct presentation of English national identity.

Chaucer presents his pilgrims and constructs their identities, communal and individual, by juxtaposing concrete and abstract details, demonstrating that here English nationhood must be both lived and imagined. Before we ever meet the pilgrims we learn that there are “wel nyne and twenty” of them (I.24-25). This practical description, flawed as it may be, confronts us with a number first. Thus they are primarily a group of like things that fit into a category. Next we see them as a more cohesive “compaignye” and then immediately as “sondry folk,” ultimately a testament to cohesion's compatibility with diversity. Similarly chance and destiny combine to ensure that these individuals fall “by aventure” into fellowship (I. 24-25). But the interplay of present and future is even more striking here. Soon we learn that “pilgrimes were they alle,/ That toward Caunterbury wolden ryde” (I.25-27). Here their pilgrim identity precedes the journey that characterizes it and on which it partially depends. Their most basic commonality is, in fact, pilgrim status: they are travelers toward a shared goal— but one we never see them reach. Just as this grand and ever unrealized outline of their association comes into view, the picture shifts, and Chaucer— as if randomly— adds some new material information, “the stables and the chambers weren wyde” (I.28). This jostling between the abstract and concrete conditions of their togetherness gives readers a sense of a

community that is neither perfectly practical nor primarily ideological, but some necessary combination of both. The pilgrim community is introduced via material memories, intangible beliefs, and plans for a shared future, which all suggest that this community— in accord with Anderson’s concept of the imagined community— is held together by lived experience as well as by imagination, by the physical places and cultural modes of being together that characterize the space of home.

The pilgrims’ lived experience remains important even as they join a fellowship that often encourages them to both take on unfamiliar roles and to idealize, romanticize, sensationalize and otherwise break with reality in their tales. Regardless of whether or not our pilgrims come with groups or from named locales, most of them seem to participate rather actively in small local hometowns and communities. Several pilgrims do hail from specific places and directions such as Norfolk and Dartmouth, yet many of those whose dwelling in places that remain unnamed are still recognized for their local affiliations. The narrator reports the Friar’s familiarity with franklins in his vicinity (ll.), while our own Franklin is, thanks to his great hospitality, known as “Seint Julian . . . in his contree;” the Summoner is a fine “felawe” and— for better or worse— confidant and advisor to “[t]he yonge girles of the diocise” (I. 340, 648, 664). These examples reflect the place of sociability and local affiliation in the lives of these English folk regardless of their other character traits and flaws. Chaucer’s inclusion of these details suggests that the pilgrims bring their local experience with them as they enter the Canterbury-bound fellowship. These local experiences shape the pilgrims’ identities and prepare them to engage with each other.

Many of the pilgrims do quite literally bring their local experiences with them; they do not need to break completely with their everyday experiences of communal life to join the pilgrimage. As noted above, Chaucer describes the pilgrims not simply as “twenty-nine,” but rather “nyne and twenty,” an expression that emphasizes the divisibility of subgroups within groups. The Knight-Squire-Yeoman unit, composed of male members of one household, is the first subgroup we meet. The Parson and the Plowman are brothers, the Summoner and the Pardoner are friends (and singing partners), the Man of Law and the Franklin arrive together, and the Prioress brings along another nun and three priests (presumably all members of the same order and priory). A faceless parish guild, reified by fine livery, “[f]ull freshe and newe . . . geere,” as well as wisdom and bearing enough render its five members “burgeys” or even aldermen, also appears at the Tabard Inn with a cook hired for the occasion (I. 365, 369). Here we have subgroups defined by biological, spiritual and social ties. This particular induction of whole groups as well as individuals into the pilgrim body cogently expresses the *Canterbury Tales*’ interest in federal organization of diverse smaller communal units. Although these smaller units exist for a variety of reasons, the pilgrims seem to join the fellowship for the same reasons. In any case, the pilgrims’ incorporation into one body accomplishes a limited federation of their own subgroups, making each subgroup more significant to the other subgroups and individuals if also less significant in itself. The subgroups make each member-pilgrim more real and tangible.

The associations noted above are primarily practical and local. These practical groups are not the only ones that the pilgrims represent and bring into the Canterbury-community’s ambit. Throughout the *General Prologue*, in fact, it seems almost as if it

were impossible to describe an individual person without setting that individual in relation to the several groups she helps populate. Many of these groups are imagined; likewise many of the pilgrims also exist as ideals or exemplars on rather expansive fields. Chaucer describes the pilgrims' greatness and their spheres of knowledge with a string of diversely demarcated ranges, which leave us to consider the extent to which authoritative spheres overlap. For example, our Friar is the most articulate and social friar to be found among all four fraternal orders, and "[n]oher so bisy a man" as the Man (or Sergeant) of Law "ther nas;" the Shipman's skill is unparalleled from Hull to Carthage, and he, moreover "knew alle the havens . . . /From Gootlond to the cape of Fynyster,/ And every cryke in Britaigne and in Spayne" (I. 321, 407-9). Of course, "in al this world ne was ther noon" like our own Physician, meanwhile the Manciple deceives a dozen lawyers "[w]orthy to been stywardes of rente and lond/ Of any lord that is in Engeland;" and the Pardoner is unique "of his craft. . . fro Berwyk unto Ware" (I. 412, 579-80, 691). Finally our Host appears, and we are assured that there is no fairer burgess in all Cheapside. The narrator refers to these various intersecting pools to impress the reader with each pilgrim's extraordinary scope: whether he signifies the space between the Swedish coast and the Galician or that between Jutland and Brittany in the Shipman's portrait, he means that the Shipman really knows his way around the sea; so too the space from Berwick to Ware indicates the Pardoner's vast peculiarity; likewise all of Cheapside is the field on which the narrator establishes the Host's exemplary fairness. Each of these units has the capacity to corroborate the narrator's claims for exemplarity and greatness. Meanwhile, the narrator insists that these various expanses are both authoritative and relative, refusing to use any such unit consistently. There is no final resolution or circumscription

of all these ranges into one definitive super-space; it is not clear which space is the most outstanding. Rather than insist that the entire world or all of England is the field on which greatness must be proven to matter, the narrator leaves all of the suggested options before us for comparison. Readers could interpret this as a missed opportunity to name a new nation's proper limits. We might instead understand this string of spaces as an apt expression of the open attitude toward internationalism so crucial to Chaucer's conception of English nationhood. Specific pilgrims represent these spaces, ranging from the neighborhood to the universal, and thus bring them into continuing and unfixed relation with each other. At any rate, Chaucer is less concerned with demarcating England's limits than with considering the ways English folk negotiate them and the ideas, opinions and experiences—foreign and local—that they gather within the space of their home community. Here geographic spaces are significant not only because they unite people through practical experiences of local life, but also because they imbue identity with symbolic values, even and especially when they characterize individuals with consequence that transcends their local and practical existences.

The Knight's portrait certainly exemplifies geography's significance, reinvoking and personalizing the reality of crossable borders suggested earlier in the *General Prologue*. His world is divided into two expansive domains in which he proves himself as a knight and vassal: "Ful worthy was he in his lordes were,/ And thereto hadde he riden no man ferre,/ As wel in cristendom as in hethenesse" (I. 47-49). Chaucer does not present these territories geographically or politically, but rather in terms of their inhabitants' beliefs. In this context, the real matter at hand is our Knight's oft-cited "worthynesse," thus such difference seems rather negligible as the dimensions of these

disparate lands equally offer distances for the Knight to cross and thereby distinguish himself (I. 50). Nevertheless we can discern various beliefs and interests here; even the divisibility of the Knight's interests from those of his lord is evident in the reference to "his lordes were." When matters of belief come into sharper focus, stark distinctions between "cristendom" and "hethenesse" fade among more nuanced and intermediate communal distinctions. Although the Knight sweeps from Russia to Morocco, as Larry Benson explains, "only campaigns against Muslims, schismatics (Russian Orthodox), and pagans are enumerated," which is to say that Chaucer is especially interested in the ways in which religious identity shapes political identity, military conflict and cultural boundaries.²⁴⁴ This crusader's portrait ultimately confronts readers with divisions among Christian folk as well as divisions across more disparate religious communities. We see at last a multihued spectrum of religious difference and conflict. Chaucer reifies the Knight's identity and the English identity he, among others, represents in relation to a range of linguistic and religious communities.

Likewise, Chaucer stages similarity in multiple ways and immediately offsets it with internal difference. We apprehend the Knight's superlative worthiness first through comparison with peers from "alle nacions" and then in the narrower league of Christians of his own rank:

Ful ofte tyme he hadde the bord bigonne
 Aboven alle nacions in Pruce;
 In Lettow hadde he reysed and in Ruce,
 No Cristen man so ofte of his degree. I. 52-55

We might note in passing that this is the first time Chaucer uses the word *nacioun* in the *Canterbury Tales*. Here it clearly indicates England, but the later more ambiguous

²⁴⁴ Larry Benson, ed., *The Canterbury Tales Complete* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Co, 2000), 338.

appearances of the word clarify English nationhood's significance in relation to larger and smaller identity-bearing communities. This first illustration of the Knight's worthiness ceremonially casts knights as national representatives, temporarily neutralizing their individuality, just as it reminds us that chivalry reaches across national boundaries. We cannot be sure whether our Knight sits in the place of honor because of his nation's worthiness or because of his own, but this honor increases the glory of both the individual and his nation. For a moment the individual is inseparable from his nation; their worth is intertwined. In any case, here engaged readers are conscious of the Knight as both a participant in the international institution of knighthood, a trained and noble warrior with important ties to international counterparts, and as a member and representative of his own English nation, synecdochically standing in for his nation. The second example of his worthiness sets him above and apart from those in his group; the Knight is an exception in this instance, enjoying honor because he is unmatched by any in his religion and class based category. We understand his prominence, nonetheless, through his categorization with Christian men of his own rank, a category that includes those beyond the borders of Englishness, yet within the limits of Christianity as well as those of knighthood. In this context, the Knight is more standout than representative. Thus, before we reach the sixtieth line of this poem, he instantiates two different ways to exist as a communal constituent, as one part of greater, more expansive wholes. What is most striking here is the way affinity operates in tandem with exception: the knight stands above and apart from groups to which he clearly belongs. By naming, isolating and juxtaposing various pools of comparison—national on one hand and religious and class-based on the other, Chaucer again asks us to think about their divisibility as well as the

ways in which they dovetail with each other. He delineates individual identity primarily in context of comparable identities; likewise he defines English national identity in relation to other nations.²⁴⁵

Just as general geographic space is both concrete and symbolic and can help signify identity, exemplarity or nuanced relation, home space in the *Canterbury Tales* has material and immaterial significances that identify its inhabitants closely with each other as members of an English national community. The figures of the Prioress and Friar suggest an intricate relationship among language, attitudes toward language, home space and national identity. Here language reflects the range of cultural practices that the pilgrims' diversity brings to the communal table and anchors them to their own home spaces, explicating some ways in which senses of home render geographic spaces national. The words and languages that the Prioress and Friar speak in their home spaces differentiate them from their international milieux, magnifying their Englishness, while also reminding us of their extra-English associations.

The Prioress's use of language ultimately makes two statements about English nationhood. Her tale indicates that those who stay closest to their homes tend to be the most xenophobic, and her Stratford French reveals that one need not look beyond England for worthwhile culture. These statements fit uncomfortably together revealing the roles that home space and language play vis-à-vis English nationhood, thereby defining nationhood more clearly and finally questioning whether nationhood, so defined, could be a good thing. We first encounter the Prioress between the Knight-Squire-

²⁴⁵ This is one example of how in the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucerian national identity, like Glissant's national literature, call its own existence into question by revealing itself through its particularly confusing cross-cultural relationships.

Yeoman household and the lone out-riding Monk. While she actually leads one of the two largest (five-member) groups, the other four members of her priory are covered in just two lines. As W. Rothwell notes, the Prioress's juxtaposition with two "different brands of uncompromising masculinity" and her French "of Stratford atte Bowe" (which, through his analysis, is only misunderstood as an inferior form), relate her "insular horizon" and, ultimately, portray her as "an intelligent upper-class woman who is cultivated but not versed in the ways of the world" (I. 125).²⁴⁶ Regardless of whether or not we accept her Stratford variety of French as "proper" French, that language testifies to England's cultural and linguistic diversity. Indeed the notion that one can be cultivated in England, but not quite versed in worldly ways affirms the particularity and reality of English cultural and national identity effectively, yet modestly. As the Prioress's French presents a particularized view of multilingual English culture, her elegant mastery of it reminds us that this society includes home-spaces, like convents, that one need not leave in order to garner a small, but noteworthy degree of cultivation. But, in any case, this French spoken "[a]fter the scole of Stratford atte Bowe" is at once borrowed and home-spun. It is never simply the Prioress's own, though it may be most particularly hers, and ultimately obscures distinctions between worldly and domestic spheres of knowledge. Although "Frenssh of Parys" might always remain "to hire unknowe," the Prioress's ability to speak Anglo-French "ful faire and fetisly" at home contrasts with the fields of knowledge and skill exemplified by the men presented before and after her (I. 124-6). While it is often noted that Chaucer's pilgrims are well-traveled roamers about, scant attention has been paid to what we learn from their association with those who miss opportunities to travel far from home. Madame Eglentyne appears here

²⁴⁶ W[illiam] Rothwell, "Stratford Atte Bowe Re-visited," *The Chaucer Review* 36 (2001), 186, 201, 187.

between a monk, who won't be kept in his cloister, and a household of men known for their crusading voyages across seas and channels. Yet she is both the pilgrim most closely linked to a language with extra-insular roots and the one who tells the most xenophobic tale. This should, first and foremost, suggest that the forms of English nationhood Chaucer engages are not simple and predictable constructs: although xenophobia and insularity arrive in tandem here, even the Prioress's isolationist subjectivity is not without its important conduits to far-flung sites. England's history and culture ensure that, and Chaucer accentuates it through his particular national imagination.

The Prioress's language is notable because it is neither her native tongue nor a proper, stable or predictable import. The Friar's language is remarkable because of his uncompromising ownership of it and all it wins him: his language asserts his claims to Englishness and to less particular cultural assets alike and simultaneously insinuates him into the local networks of power, rendering his country his home. "So plesaunt" is "his *In principio*" that it wins him farthings even from shoeless widows (I. 254). He fashions "his Englissh," moreover, to match his other accessories making it "sweete upon his tonge;" he thereby concretizes the language just as it helps actuate his Englishness—indeed here each symbiotically reifies the other. Whether the Friar's language is this utterly oral English or his fragmentary, scriptural Latin, it belongs to him and signifies his belonging. Perhaps most significant is "his absolucioun," ritual words that do important spiritual work and, here, also ensure that the jovial friar is "ful wel biloved and famulier . . . with frankeleyns over al in his contree" (I. 215-16). Thus he is comfortably at home among the franklins of his own local community, who optimally represent and benefit

from new English forms of land ownership, as well as with the town's upstanding women. In other words, this pilgrim's command of language garners him power and ownership ranging from absolution (which is incontestably valuable, yet utterly intangible, spiritual and extra-national) through the favor of important local community members (which is potentially less steadfast and surely less assessable, but also quite useful) to farthings (which if trivial— at least for the worsted-wearing friar— are exceedingly concrete and monetary). The Friar claims and objectifies language from his lisped and vernacular English to his sacred and learned Latin, making it unquestionably his own —despite his requisite vocational disavowal of material ownership. His portrait and that of the Prioress remind us that all three of England's languages are most useful at home, and that home space is the space in which one is best understood and treated with the most generosity for that understanding. (The Prioress's French would be more generously accepted at home, than in Paris, while the Friar's language obtains for him more materially generous receptions than it possibly could in mono-linguistic or more fluently Latinate societies). These two different pilgrims, their various languages and ways of speaking affirm that language is a cultural tool that helps to forge communal and trans-national affinities as well as a cultural marker that imparts distinctiveness and individuality to those who use it.

Language links the Friar and Prioress to their homes and accentuates their English national identities as well as their connections beyond the boundaries of Englishness. Yet home-based affinities and nationhood are not always indicative of each other in the *Tales*. In addition to these pilgrims, Chaucer emphasizes the concept of hometown or home community in his characterizations of the ever-hospitable Franklin ("Seint Julian he was

in his contree”), the Wife of Bath (identified by the town near her residence), and the Parson (I. 340). The Prioress, the Friar, and the Parson are also closely identified with the Church; this suggests that local and Church affinities are compatible. While the Franklin’s and the Wife of Bath’s hometown ties do little to enhance their Englishness,²⁴⁷ the Parson’s portrait suggests that such local commitments may be incompatible with national ones. Chaucer introduces him as “a povre Persoun of a Toun” rather than of a parish or some more religiously evocative designation. The area is later designated in this fashion as we learn that despite the fact that “[w]yde was his parisshe, and houses fer asunder” the Parson links it tightly together by traveling to the furthest reaches himself when needed there (I. 491). As the narrator explains, London was no great magnet for this holy man, rather he “dwelt at hoom, and kepte wel his folde;” thus the Parson demonstrates that personal interaction at the local level— rather than logistics, topography or infrastructure— advances communal welfare and draws a town or a parish together as the same home (I. 512). The necessity of personal interaction and irrelevance of London here indicate that perhaps the most significant communal relationships are those experienced practically, locally, and in person. He does go on to contribute the “tale” that most clearly aspires to inspire spiritual transcendence. This is, of course, a tale that aims to save souls rather than outline political, social or cultural units—though it can hardly accomplish one task without the other— complicating once again any hard and fast distinctions one could hope to make between local investment and transcendent reach. At any rate, the senses of home we find in the pilgrims’ portraits present home space as a highly resonant, yet equally unstable concept through which Chaucer imagines

²⁴⁷ The Wife of Bath does outdo cloth-makers in Ypres and Ghent, representing insular talent and thereby embellishing England’s status. Compared with the figures of the Friar and Prioress, however, this detail adds little to our understanding of the relation between home and English identity.

community in the *Tales*. Chaucer's concepts of home and domesticity constantly query the nation's importance as a communal form, while never letting it slip out of focus.

Chaucer introduces a range of professions, hometowns, spheres of knowledge and languages along with his pilgrims thus establishing Englishness as one among many important markers of cultural identity, establishing Englishness as a form of nationhood largely through cultural relationality, but also through physical reality and everyday experiences of it. The *Canterbury Tales*' *mise en scène* and its pilgrims' portraits— like the most effective national literature in Edouard Glissant's formulation— scrutinize the national by expressing “le rapport d'un peuple a l'autre” in the spirit of diversity.²⁴⁸ Some Chaucerians, as mentioned in the introduction, would see this as a form of internationalism that is mutually exclusive with nationalism. But Glissant considers such internationalism one ingredient that is absolutely essential to any viable national literature— this is no essence, of course, but rather “sa fonction analytique et politique,” effected by a certain set of essential literary processes, “laquelle ne va pas sans remise en question de soi-meme.”²⁴⁹ For Glissant diversity is that which “signifie l'effort de l'esprit humain vers une relation transversale, sans transcendance universaliste.”²⁵⁰ Both Chaucer and Glissant work to establish literatures in languages, Middle English and Creole respectively, changing rapidly in the shadow of a more stable French language and literature. Each writes for a nation that is culturally marginal on the international scene at the moment in which he writes. And both nationalist writers work to increase the cultural capital of their mother tongues, although their historical contexts and ethnic otherness in relation to Frenchness are obviously different and unique. Glissant, a twentieth-century

²⁴⁸ Glissant, *Le discours antillais*, 332.

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

²⁵⁰ Ibid., 327.

black Martinican writer, is (and should be) more wary of what universal transcendence could do to his national identity. For Chaucer, though transcendent moments do contribute less problematically to communal experience, communal cohesion equally depends on corporate consent, flexibility, sociability and enduring connections to particularities like hometown and profession. Nevertheless, the important similarities shared by Chaucer and Glissant remind us that internationalism— rather than being a threat to nationalism— is absolutely necessary to the nationalist efforts of culturally marginal nations.

* * *

Marriage fails Harry Bailey, leaving him without the home and domestic comforts it promises, without the feelings of belonging and security it implies. The *Canterbury Tales* is in many ways the story of Harry searching for and sometimes finding such needs and their approximations in English society. Thus it engages with yet diverges from common tropes in similar works. Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron*, perhaps the most immediate formal model for the *Canterbury Tales*' frame narrative and tale-cycle, is propelled by the conventional expectation that marriage shapes and redeems social and historical life. The ten Florentine nobles who flee their plague-ridden city appear to be ripe for romance and marriage with each other, though no marriage comes of their retreat away from their political and cultural center. *Alf Layla wa Layla*, the thousand and one *Arabian Nights*, unravels in the heart of King Shahrayar's court: his bedroom. There his last wife, Shahrazad, the teller of all of the main cycle tales, redeems his faith in women and the stability of his kingdom by keeping him engaged with the strangest and most wonderful characters and places she can conjure. A victim of adultery,

Shahrayar had instituted the practice of marrying for one night and executing his bride in the morning, thus depleting his kingdom of its supply of women and protecting himself from infidelity. While hope for marriage sustains the limited society of the *Decameron*, it is Shahrazad's brave hope for society that propels her marriage and ultimately sustains society. In typical ironic fashion, the *Canterbury Tales* is premised on the plan of an innkeeper who seems to be most at home on the road: most interested in how tales that invest belief in English national community can be told on the move, away from his conventional home and marriage.

Late in the *Canterbury Tale's* seventh fragment, in the "Prologue of the Monk's Tale," we learn that it is the hopelessness of one man's marriage that positions him to invest his hope in the story of English national society. After Chaucer's *Tale of Melibee*, wherein the consummate prudent wife teaches her husband the ways of peace, forgiveness and the common good, Harry explains that His wife demands that he fight to defend her very extreme and individualistic sense of the honor owed her by the English Christian society around them. Harry Bailley bewails his own situation:

"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 neighebor, and thanne go my way . . .
 (VII. 1913-18)

Harry's wife, ironically-named Goodelief, routinely turns his attention away from national life and human community and turns his body out of doors, out of their home. She does her best to render him a lion, a sovereign among beastly creatures and a menace to neighbors, rather than an arbiter among fellows. Harry's association with the pilgrims

compensates for his failure to find the senses of home, security and belonging that he needs through his marriage. As Ignatieff writes, “nationalism is the [cultural] claim that while men and women have many identities, it is the nation that provides them with their primary form of belonging . . . The political idea that all peoples should struggle for nationhood depends on the cultural claim that only nations can satisfy [their] needs.”²⁵¹ Harry’s need to belong to and participate in the sort of comradeship that the pilgrims represent instantiates his nationalism.

Perhaps we can understand Bailly’s failure to satisfy his need for belonging in his marriage as the back-story that prepares him to recognize by contrast the national potential for such satisfaction extant among Chaucer’s English pilgrims.²⁵² In addition to emphasizing this potential, and that of the diverse English communities the pilgrims represent, Harry’s tale-telling proposition raises the social and economic stakes that national considerations— such as language, exchange, belief, camaraderie and home space— already imply when we meet the pilgrims. Harry adds catalytic energy to associations already in place before he arrives on the scene. But, as we shall see, he cannot control the new characters that these developing associations produce any more reliably than the pilgrims can affect him. Harry’s plan requires their belief in their own unity, and elicits their individual narratives, which simultaneously compromise that unity and increase its national significance by binding the entire community to a shared communal past and future. In other words, through their execution of Harry’s plan, the pilgrims perform English nationhood— they explicitly act as a community that is new

²⁵¹ Ignatieff, *Blood and Belonging*, 5.

²⁵² Harry Bailly has been read as a pseudo-ruler of the pilgrim body and an authorial voice in the *Tales*. David R. Pichaske and Laura Sweetland “Chaucer on the Medieval Monarchy: Harry Bailly in the *Canterbury Tales*,” *Chaucer Review* 11 (1977): 179-200; Judith Ferster, *Chaucer on Interpretation* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 139-156.

and limited, yet linked indefinitely by its members' pasts, present and futures. The pilgrim body converges from a familiar Christian and insular background, where each has lived a distinct, but mutually recognizable past. Most of the pilgrims do not know each other before meeting at the Tabard Inn, but they know—or at least know of—others like their fellows. These individuals more fully share a present, although they retain their distinctiveness, and their paths will presumably diverge after returning to the Tabard. The pilgrims' changing functions and the relative amorphousness, suggested by the range of categories they instantiate, embody and represent, characterize them more than the ternary estates model or any other strict taxonomy. Accordingly, where the pilgrims are (in terms of their travels, their expertise and attitudes) and where they are going—together as individuals—better express the import of their association than do the entrenched social positions from which they come.

We meet the pilgrims before they decide to incorporate themselves under Harry's rule; this sequencing clarifies the necessity of will in creating and sustaining their community. Will, integrating both consent and belief, legitimates the corporate and mottled nation we see in the *Canterbury Tales*. Belief is a key to understanding both medieval and modern nations as Susan Reynolds describes them. Reynolds' insights help us to move beyond the stasis medieval historians have encountered when considering the place of medieval national communities among other national forms and, ultimately, illuminate the force of belief in Harry's proposal. She explains,

National character is that which is attributed to any group thought of as a nation: the nation itself is the product of its members' belief that it exists. In medieval terms, it was the fact of being a kingdom (or some lesser, but effective, unit of government) and of sharing a single law and government which promoted a sense of solidarity among its subjects and made them describe themselves as a people—irrespective of any relationship we can

now trace between the medieval ‘people’ and its kingdom on the one hand and the modern ‘nation’ and its state on the other.²⁵³

By reversing a common teleological trajectory (a nation exists, hence its members believe that they are part of it, behave as if they are part of it, and obey its laws and leaders), Reynolds elucidates the interdependence between the practical facts and abstract theories that hold nations together. Both the facts of nationhood (for example, inhabiting the same homeland, speaking the same language, using the same currency, “sharing a single law and government”) and the theory of nationhood, “its members belief that it exists,” render the nation extant. In the *Canterbury Tales*, Harry Bailly’s governance and his rules function much like laws or other facts of communal existence in Reynolds’ formulation. We shall see that Harry’s “laws” advance the pilgrims’ sense of solidarity and, ultimately, educe their avowed belief that they are one company with “oon assent” and their own “conseil” to offer, for Harry’s governing structure encourages the future-looking oaths the pilgrims make. Yet, the process through which this solidarity grows is laced with coercion and contradictions, suggesting that even communities founded on consent and belief are not free of corruption.

Whether we find it menacing or not, Harry’s presentation seems incongruous, suspect, and even contrived, because it promotes aptness with overzealousness. Meanwhile his words to the pilgrims imply that he understands the power of language in community building, but misunderstands his ability to circumscribe it. The pilgrim company, moreover, eventually shows that judgment is inseparable from camaraderie, because of language’s role in both; this is an important national lesson. As Harry frames things, the pilgrims’ jovial spirit inspires him, and by formalizing their inevitable social

²⁵³ Reynolds, *Kingdoms and Communities*, 253.

behavior he is only responding aptly to the merriest group of pilgrims to assemble at his inn:

And wel I woot, as ye goon by the weye,
 Ye shapen yow to talen and to pleye;
 For trewely, confort ne myrthe is noon
 To ride by the weye doumb as a stoon;
 And therefore wol I maken yow disport,
 As I seyde erst, and doon yow som confort. (I. 771-776)

In the above entreaty Harry matches the seeming gratuitousness of his guidance with the predictability of the pilgrims' playful tale telling. Nature and necessity are not directly related here, but the pilgrims' predilection for comfort and happiness and the inability of silence to deliver those things warrants Bailly's intervention. He presents himself as both judge and insurer, though innovation seems far from his aims. Because it seems natural for the pilgrims to be sociable, Harry will organize them. He continues, announcing,

And if yow liketh al by oon assent
 For to stonden at my juggement
 And for to werken as I shall yow seye
 Tomorowe, whan ye ridden by the weye,
 Now, by me fader soule that is deed,
 But ye be myrie, I wol yeve yow myn heed!
 Hoold up youre hondes, withouten moore speche. (I. 777-783)

It is unclear whether Harry's prohibition of "moore speche," is self-reflexive or aimed at the pilgrims; and readers are left wondering whether this is his way of putting an end to his pitch or ensuring that it works. Regardless of his intent, the ban works in both directions, and it complicates the obviously positive value of speech to which Harry points in lines 772 and 773 ("For trewely, confort ne myrthe is noo/ To ride by the weye doumb as a stoon"). Thus after marking silence with a negative value and the playful exchange of tale telling with a positive one, he closes down discussion of his governorship, thereby designating verbal exchange for the realm of merry-making rather

than for that of decision-making. Decision-making beyond the simple offering of consent—which would be any decision-making that entails deliberation and judgment—is formally left to Harry. Despite these relegations, the diverse and multiple opinions of the Canterbury pilgrims as well as those of the imagined readers of the written tales are seldom, if ever, beyond the text’s perspective. In fact, the elaborate and deliberative judgment the pilgrims pass on each other in their narrative offerings prove more powerful and more lasting than any official arbitration or trophy-meal (the supposed stakes of the game) could be. If we read Harry as a pseudo-king of a pseudo-nation—which I find less helpful than reading Harry as catalyst—he is a king without absolute jurisdiction. His power is ultimately shared and limited, regardless of what sort of force he expects to wield at the nativity of his community.

The failed circumscription of decision-making is neither the only overturned premise nor Harry’s most extreme attempt to control the especially uncertain future before the pilgrim company. Harry’s oath, “Now, by me fader soule that is deed,/ But ye be myrie, I wol yeve yow myn heed!” is bolder and begins to make demands on the past and future (781-82). This oath binds his integrity to his father’s soul and promises the pilgrims’ his head if his plan fails, and they are not merry. Thus we should understand that Harry ultimately rests not only his own fate, both literally and figuratively signified by his head, but also all that remains of his dead father— thus by extension his ancestral integrity— in the pilgrims’ hands, on their tale-telling abilities and on their future happiness. His oath suggests fervent willingness to reinvest whatever he and his paternal heritage—body and spirit, past and future— may be worth, in the pilgrim company’s sociability and their common future. In this way, Harry binds his own identity to the

pilgrim body's ability to behave as a national group. Regardless of whether Harry's fervor is a mark of desperation or earnestness, he is the first person to publicly admit that he believes in the pilgrim body. He believes that together they will be something more than what they immediately and individually appear to be.

Harry's desire for "oon assent" early in the record of such nuanced and diverging positions on social life and issues, accentuates the following lack of unanimity, multiplicity of judgments, and diversity of the pilgrim's opinions.²⁵⁴ Yet here, the pilgrims do accept his self-proposed governorship unanimously, relatively quickly, and without debate— but with a sort of resignation. Their unanimous assent, whether voluntary or coerced, at once performs their unity and cohesion and indicates that they, with Harry, believe in their communal potential. As Chaucer the pilgrim remembers it: "Oure conseil was nat longe for to seche./ Us thoughte it was not worth to make it wys, /And graunted hym withouten more avys" (I. 785-6). It is almost as if the pilgrims could not muster the energy to make a good decision, so they opted for an easy one. For the moment, this pilgrim community would seem to agree that speech is a mode of merry-making and pleasure seeking rather than the public tool for decision-making it aspires to be in so many of their tales. While this uncharacteristic apathy facilitates the incorporation of the pilgrim body, such apathy ceases to be helpful and effectively vanishes as the tales go on to test the meaning of consent and its legitimacy as decisive factors in building social structures. Here we have a strange moment indeed: Harry's zealous enthusiasm is met with the pilgrims' apathy as well as their unanimous decision. This exchange dramatizes the place of zealousness in community building, specifically willingness to die or to sacrifice honor for sociability's sake. Conversely, but no less

²⁵⁴ Paul Strohm notes the rarity of *oon assent* (*Social Chaucer*, 176).

significantly, it examines the function of apathy in nation formation. The pilgrims' formal relationship begins with this sentimental disjunction, which poses the following national question: who must believe in an imagined community to make it exist? Of course, this dissonance is essentially forgotten before readers learn of it. The pilgrims' ability to render "oon asset," to offer their "conseil" and to formally become the merry group their catalyst recognizes them to be depends on their emotional disconnection from him. And so readers are left to ponder whether communal cohesion is most powerfully demonstrated through matching character (evident merriness), unanimous decision-making, consonant communal sentiments, working sociability or some other marker. At this first stage, the pilgrims seem to be— at the least— at home enough with each other not to protest against continuing and strengthening their association.

Interestingly, after Harry explicates the rules of the game, the pilgrims voice a more enthusiastic acceptance of him and his project. As in Reynolds's explanation of the relationship between practical government and belief in nationhood, the institutionalization and regulation of the pilgrims' relationship energizes their sense of solidarity. But Harry offers more than governance; his rules commit the pilgrims to a narrative past and a performative present. They swear their own oaths only after they learn that they will be judged on their abilities to put the group in productive contact with both. This simple and symmetrical plan unites the pilgrims as a community of tale-tellers and listeners through the details of their competition. Harry explains,

This is the point, to speken short and pleyn,
That eche of yow, to shorte with oure weye,
In this viage shal telle tales tweye
To Canterbury-ward, I mene it so,
And homward he shal tellen othere two,
Of adventures that whilom han bifalle.

And which of yow that bereth hym best of alle—
 That is to seyn, that telleth in this caas
 Tales of best sentence and moost solaas—
 Shall have a soper at oure aller cost
 Here in this place, sittynge by this post,
 Whan that we come agayn fro Canterbury. (I. 790-801)

Thus the pilgrims share a set of rules and standards and look to a common future, if not quite a grand destiny. Harry makes the rules of this competition and its projected course abundantly clear; one might even say that he belabors them by interjecting clarifying phrases such as “to speken short and pleyn,” “I mene it so,” “That is to seyn,” and “in this caas.” At the onset, the Canterbury journey seems so tightly scripted so as to preclude the unexpected: the start point and the end point are the same, and tales that recount “aventures that whilom han bifalle,” while striving to deliver the “best sentence and moost solaas,” will pave the road. Thus Harry invests the pilgrims simultaneously in a narratable past and a present at once ideally and emotionally charged; they will strive to contribute narratives of the past that deliver “best sentence and moost solaas” to the present moment. Harry asks the pilgrims to enact their national unity: he asks them to imagine— and share— a past that will sustain their present communal life. Despite the proposed simultaneity of these investments, the pilgrims often seem to shuffle, at least in the first fragment, between the seemingly divergent values of past/historical and present moments even as they make oblique gestures toward an indeterminate future— a future, which, as Glenn Burger has explicated, is uncertain but all the more full of possibility for that uncertainty.²⁵⁵

The pilgrims ultimately perform community through both monetary and psychic investments. The material and the imaginative fuse in the concept of home, which is more

²⁵⁵ Burger, *Chaucer's Queer Nation*, 186-207.

developed at the end the *General Prologue* than it is in the portraits of the Prioress, the Friar, Parson or any of the pilgrims. Yet home, the concept, the setting and the mode of being, continues to develop and change throughout the tales. Although Harry is the sole and official judge in this case, all the pilgrims are invested in the competition not only because they rely on the tales to “shorte” their way, but also because they are bound to share the cost of the winner’s dinner at Harry’s own Tabard Inn. While he first claims that the merry-making plan and the pilgrims’ “ese” will “coste noght” in the final analysis such comfort and camaraderie will surely cost each pilgrim a little and potentially cost gainsayers much more (as rebels pay all they “spenden by the weye”) (I.768, 806). Thus, regardless of who wins the tale telling competition, Harry wins all of their business. Indeed this association, like the historical English nation from which its constituents are drawn, requires not only belief and civil obedience to government, but also monetary investment. In this context, Harry’s failure to mention the costs of this comradeship immediately and his earlier refusal of deliberation reveal that even flexible and participatory national communities (communities bound by law, belief, a shared past and future) rest on foundations of coercion and dishonesty.

With dishonesty and financial obligation comes an even grander notion of communal rooted-ness. Harry not only binds them to return to his place of business, but—and this is most significant—also makes it pivotal in their journey. He goes so far as to designate his inn as a sort of home for them, for the way to it from Canterbury is “homward,” it is a place of comfort as well as a place in which they must invest (794).²⁵⁶ Indeed the Tabard is home to the Canterbury fellowship as such, which certainly suggests

²⁵⁶ For a different view see Akbari, “Orientation and Nation,” esp. 104-05.

that the term's mutability correlates with social mutability— as the pilgrims add a new communal identity they also add a new home. We have already begun to see that home is not a simple term, but rather one that means many things in the *Tales*, even before the telling commences. Through this concept of “home” Chaucer begins to show that national communities that are actively constructed are neither less potentially nurturing nor less fissured by pressures of friction and obligation for that construction.

At any rate, as Harry positions it, the end point of this journey is a homecoming to be marked at once with the comfort of a meal and with a victory, which will cost the losers and introduce a new and hierarchical factor to their relationship. In the frame tale as in the pilgrims' tales, home is equally a space of tense disparities and of comfort. We must also note that the winner's place of honor in this scheme is actually the most specified and anchored locus of all: she will have her meal “Here in this place, sittynge by this post” (I. 800). Harry Bailly marks this spot with the precision of a post, invoking a precise physical space as well as authoritative standing, which is more meaningful though less tangible. In sum, Harry promises not only connection with the past, but also meaning in the present, plain fun and a bit of ceremony as in the designation of a place of honor. That honor, of course, would import a new form of disparity to the group. By the time our Canterbury crew swear their “othes . . . [w]ith ful glad herte” they seem to be mindfully accepting a competition wherein playfulness, contention and ceremony are not mutually exclusive, but rather common ingredients in Harry's particular communal recipe (I. 810-11). At this ceremonial juncture the pilgrims show presence of mind and interest enough to negotiate “a soper at a certeyn pris” and to reiterate and strengthen many of

their compact's original terms as well as their unanimity. Their oaths, moreover, express their own belief in the community they form.

This scene not only helps characterize the pilgrim body, but also reveals deep functional similarities between oath-making and other modes of national constitution. Linking Anderson's imagined national community with Chaucer's "nine and twenty in a *compagnie* assembled at the Tabard and on the road to Canterbury—for centuries," Peggy Knapp posits, "One might say that the community the pilgrims form is *only an imaginary* one—nobody will fight a war for it. But then again, people who will fight wars have to encounter images of those of their fellows whom they have not met, and those images must resonate with their sense of those they have in order for a community to form."²⁵⁷ Here Knapp elucidates what both Chaucerian and Andersonian conceptions of community suggest: what is truly essential to the formation of national communities is a combination of imagination, familiarity with some fellow community members, and enough belief in the community to generate willingness to fight for it. The question of who will fight a war for a nation is important because, as the romance tradition consistently shows us, war simultaneously depends on and feeds a transformative triumvirate of camaraderie, imagination and sacrifice.

Of course, we might still question the prevailing theory that this trio changes small, face-to-face groups into more lasting, expansive and meaningful nations. The willingness to sacrifice human life in war is perhaps the most extreme prerequisite (for anything!) imaginable. War and sacrificed lives help build nations by anticipating a people's common future and—perhaps more consistently—by providing an opportunity to demonstrate belief in the nation and its future. As his constant swearing testifies, Harry

²⁵⁷ Knapp, "Chaucer Imagines England," 132.

is fascinated with oaths' potential to negotiate the future. His first oath juxtaposes and submits, for his share in the compact, integral material (his head) and immaterial (his voice and father's soul) components of his identity. While it would be impossible to equate oath making with war waging, here Harry Bailly undoubtedly risks himself for communal cohesion. Likewise, by making their oaths and swearing to be guided by one ruler and by particular rules, our pilgrims perform their belief in an uncertain future. In theory, their belief in the same contestable, unpredictable and uncertain future reality unities them like warriors, although they also retain distinct beliefs of their own, which they share in the spirit of domestic diversity through tale telling. By competing against each other for a meal, the pilgrims diffuse the harm posed by difference and enjoy opportunities to preserve, assert and share their local and personal peculiarities in meaningful ways.

As we have already begun to see cohesion, diversity and sameness in the Canterbury community are not always related in predictable or typical ways. In *The One and the Many in the Canterbury Tales*, Traugot Lawler considers the interplay of multiplicity and unity in this community.²⁵⁸ Lawler's Robertsonian conclusion suggests that Chaucer prefers unity, but understands it as an ideal that is difficult to achieve. I mean to suggest that the *Tales* focuses more precisely on cohesion than on unity: cohesion, which entails multiplicity, is more realistic and useful than ideal unity or unqualified multiplicity. Accordingly, the pilgrims' curiosity shapes their identities and prepares them to exchange stories and opinions with each other through the tale-telling

²⁵⁸ Lawler, *The One and the Many*. Lawler also suggests that the Body of Christ, rather than any English body politic, occupies Chaucer's communal imagination (28-30).

game.²⁵⁹ The high values of cohesion and flexibility rather than simple unity or unconditional multiplicity flow from the solidarity that Harry catalyzes in the pilgrim body. These values, nothing more or less, characterize the pilgrimage's durable sense of being at home together. Once the fellowship is formed, subtracting members is impossible, despite the surprising and community reconstituting consequences of keeping the contentious pilgrim body intact. Although he can follow through on neither, Harry Bailey, like any governor or law enforcer, threatens both physical violence and monetary penalty as a means of redressing disobedience among the pilgrims. At the same time, it seems clear that he would want the community to stay together in order to avoid violence (even Harry would be hard-pressed to match the drunken Miller fist to fist— especially if drunkenness improves his fighting skills half as much as it seems to improve his story-telling skills!) and to assure that he gets all the business he expects on return to the Tabard. Instead, controlling members' speech continues to be the primary mode Harry and others use to aggregate and stabilize the community. This is not to say that Harry obsessively regulates or effectively circumscribes speech; in fact, the negotiability of its boundaries and constant revision of its rules best characterize this community. Members affect their community and redress wrongs primarily through speech here— which is to say that silencing is perhaps the worst punishment we see. And, significantly, the community stays together regardless of the fact that its rules are unenforceable.

“It is the magic of nationalism to turn chance into destiny,” writes Benedict Anderson, invoking the randomness that subtends national communities.²⁶⁰ Nations are not essentially determined communities predestined to spring magically from the land to

²⁵⁹ Zacher views curiosity as a divisive force: “for a short while these errant Christians have traveled together, but their unison was mostly physical” (*Curiosity and Pilgrimage* 129).

²⁶⁰ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 12.

wield political force, but rather those whose constituents believe some approximation of this powerful fiction— those able to translate their communal memories, through cultural performance into communal identity and national narrative, thereby rendering their phenomenological circumstances politically significant—and finally adding meaning to the accidental and everyday occurrences of communal existence. Borrowing more of Reynolds’ words, I mean to suggest that “units which are perceived as nations” are “the product of history rather than its primary building-blocks” in the instance of the Canterbury-bound pilgrim community as elsewhere.²⁶¹ Take for example the Knight’s chance ascendancy to the inaugural tale-telling position in the *Canterbury Tales*, which the pilgrims receive gladly as if it were indeed destined “were it by aventure, or sort, or cas” (I. 844). Likewise, Chaucerians typically consider the Miller’s forceful usurpation of the Monk’s supposed place in the order of tellers formative and even reflective of Chaucer’s communal imagination, despite its initial appearance as a strange and unfortunate mistake. The pilgrim body does not disintegrate when the rules are broken and the Miller refuses to abide by Harry’s judgment usurping the Monk’s “rightful” position in the tale-telling cycle. But codes of conduct and interaction do change: tale-telling fast becomes a tool— more precisely a weapon—for insult and repayment, and a string of interruptions that in the end seem almost traditional commences early.

In the *Tales*, the most effective shows of force take the form of limitation of excess via intervention, where the health and continuity of the pilgrim body is concerned. For example, the Franklin limits the Squire’s excessively descriptive narrative, while the Summoner tries and fails to limit the Wife of Bath’s confessional effusions. Harry puts an end to Pilgrim Chaucer’s “drasty” rhyming in his *Tale of Sir Thopas*, whose extreme

²⁶¹ Reynolds, *Kingdoms and Communities*, 253.

adherence to overplayed romance conventions is unsurpassed in the *Tales*. The formidable share of annoyances and opportunities for intervention on the road to Canterbury reflects the surviving diversity of the pilgrims, the trials that come with communal comforts and ultimately their level of investment in each other and the community in which they have all pledged belief. The Knight, of course, intervenes at one of the most pivotal moments in the story. At this point, the infamous tension between the Harry and the Pardoner erupts. Harry's tyrannical anger silences the fast and free talking Pardoner. Of course he actually threatens to strip the Pardoner of not only his right to speak, but also of his testicles, which may be more or less abstract than his right to speech in this case—reminding us once more of the combination of material and immaterial assets on which communal identity and continuity rest. This is a prime example of how the bodies, voices and the rights of community members might be juxtaposed as part of the same community constituting deal. Here the most personal effects and components of community members' beings (spanning the range from most painfully and threateningly tangible to most powerfully abstract) are parcels in the same contract that incorporates individuals into a newer, more expansive and meaningful body. At any rate, Harry threatens physical punishment in the form of dismemberment, which strongly echoes communal disintegration. But the situation does not progress in that direction because of the Knight's strange and telling intervention.

After Harry's threat of dismemberment stunts the Pardoner's previously unstemmable tide of exhortations and we learn that, "This Pardoner answered nat a word," Harry announces that he "wol no lenger pleye/ With [the Pardoner], ne with noon oother angry man" thereby reaffirming his view of verbal exchange as an instrument of

entertainment rather than a tool for disputation or problem solving (VI. 956, 958-59). He also presents the Pardoner as an example, though “the peple” are unimpressed with the threatening nature of his message (VI. 961). In any case, here the Knight follows the community’s immediate impulse and neutralizes any social constraints Harry implies by initiating a gesture that silences both Pardoner and Host. While language is at once most formative and most threatening through its interventions in the contemporary social dynamics of the pilgrimage, traditional gesture easily reverses it and more language complicates it:

. . . right anon the worthy Knyght bigan,
 Whan that he saugh that al the peple lough,
 “Namoore of this, for it is right ynough!
 Sire Pardoner, be glad and myrie of cheere;
 And ye sire Hoost, that been to me so deere,
 I prey yow that ye kisse the Pardoner.
 And Pardoner, I prey thee, drawe thee neer,
 And, as we diden, lat us laughe and pleye.”
 Anon they kiste, and ryden forth hir weye. (VI. 960-968)

We never hear apologetic words pass between these men; yet we witness the rare power of gesture in their kiss, which— corroborated by the vital news that they “ryden forth hir weye”— performs their reconciliation (VI. 968). Thus the final result is a durable community characterized by flexibility and negotiable rules. The pilgrim body, like the individual pilgrims (once sick, now on pilgrimage to give thanks for healing), is above all resilient—so too is the desire to believe in the transcendent power of communal relationships. This scene also exposes the place of affection in the pilgrim company. In the process of inverting his warrior identity to make peace, the Knight admits that Harry

has “been to” him “so deere” (965). This particular acknowledgement of a personal relationship built during the immediate time of the pilgrimage in progress evinces the growing importance of the community’s lived communal past, pilgrims’ changing roles and the transformative power of their union.

Harry Bailley is the primary author and enforcer of rules as well as the pilgrim who most strongly believes in the transcendent emotional potential that relationships based on such practicalities might produce. He also depends most desperately on the domestic and other comforts the mobile home of the pilgrimage offers. David Wallace reads Harry’s emotional history on this pilgrimage as a threatening track record of confusion and fantasy:

His tendency to confuse the visceral reactions of his own body with the interests of the corporate body he supposedly governs poses dangers for the *compagnye* throughout the *Tales*. In fragment 6, for example, when the *Physician’s Tale* brings him to the brink of cardiac arrest (“cardynacle,” 6.313), he turns in desperation to “thou beel amy,” the Pardoner, desperate for some “myrthe or japes” to restore him (his body) to health. Similarly in fragment 7, the narrative leaves him in a state that calls for immediate treatment. Forced to contemplate his own life (This is my life,” 7.1913), Harry is overcome by a sense of sexual and marital, hence social, failure. And so he delivers himself into the hands of a strong man, a “maister” or “governour” –or rather, to his own fantasy of a virile man, since the Monk has yet to speak.²⁶²

Wallace concludes, “Neither the Monk . . . nor the Pardoner can sustain the saving fantasies conceived by the Host in his moments of personal crisis,” and yet Harry’s interactions with both provide valuable glimpses into the physical and abstract tensions that hold the members of the Canterbury community (and many such corporate bodies) in fascinating and fascinated proximity.

²⁶² Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity*, 310.

Despite its alleged failures, the Monk's tale simultaneously brings Harry back from the solitude of personal introspection and depression and insists that disorder is inevitable in political life and cultural history— that disorder is an ordinary component of nationhood. The Miller's interruption of the tale-telling sequence ostensibly inverts social order because it displaces the Knight's hierarchically correct successor, the Monk. But when the Monk finally tells his tale, disorder rises to a new level by sinking deeper into the past, into the subject of history. The Monk's orderly telling would have upheld the ternary estates model of social order; nevertheless, the *Monk's Tale* inverts high social positions of the sort the estates model promotes. The solitary downfall of worthy historical figures, especially great leaders and warriors, is as natural and guaranteed in the *Monk's Tale* as healing and regeneration are in the *General Prologue*. As Wallace notes, this tale follows Chaucer's *Melibee* and Harry's desperate mediation on his own domestic failures with his vicious wife; it also defies Harry's hopes and expectations for a performance of triumphant masculine virility. The Monk's *de casibus* collection confronts the pilgrims, particularly the Knight, with a terribly threatening view of ongoing instability in human history. The tale does this through, in Wallace's words, its "tendency to dwell upon the making and undoing of history in the present moment," which "is exemplified by Chaucer's most significant departure from the Petrarchan model: his decision, following Boccaccio, to add 'modern instances' to his ancient, biblical, and classical *exempla*."²⁶³ This very medieval collection of tragedies unmoors any remaining order or predictability in which a noble and worthy man like the Knight might trust by insisting that time periods commonly considered discrete are neither fully disparate nor fundamentally different. As Wallace stresses, the Monk does this precisely

²⁶³ Ibid., 313.

by disordering his own sequence of tragic narratives. Thus the *Monk's Tale* dramatically challenges order, suggesting that tale collections obey no sense of proper order and proving that social order will be challenged with or without participation like the Miller's. National communities last as long as they can continue to cohere, despite this possibility and through such moments of upheaval—whether citizens and members know this or not.

If Fortune struck the Canterbury pilgrims in her way, the Knight, because of his estate, would have more to lose than the others with the possible exception of Harry (when we read his leadership role in the Canterbury community as characteristic). In the Monk's collection, Fortune bothers only to topple famous, powerful and aristocratic political players; she has no time for folk of average repute. The Knight's particular interjection is exceedingly curious in this light:

“Hoo!” quod the Knyght, “goode sire, namoore of this!
 That ye han seyde is right ynough, ywis,
 And muchel moore; for litel hevynesse
 Is right ynough to mucche folk, I gesse.
 I seye for me, it is a greet disese,
 Whereas men han been in greet welthe an ese,
 To heeren of hire sodeyn fal, allas!
 And the contrarie is joye and greet solas,
 As whan a man hath been in povre estaat,
 And clymbeth up and wexeth fortunat,
 And there abideth in prosperitee.
 Swith thyng is gladsome, as it thynketh me,
 And of swich thing were goodly for to telle.” (VII. 2767-2779.)

Old and simple schemes of privilege and self-interest are not very helpful here. Although downward-spiraling narratives unsettle the Knight, we must note that he is not averse to tales of upward mobility, which would benefit him the least. This is yet more evidence that, within the frame of the *Canterbury Tales*, pilgrims are very different from what their established estates and positions dictate. Meanwhile Harry heckles the Monk to protest his tedium; he avers, “youre tale anoyeth al this compaignye” and “For sikerly, nere clynkyng of your belles/ . . . I sholde er this han fallen doun for sleep” (VII. 2789, 2794, 2797). And Wallace explains that the friendless Monk’s “failure [to find friends on the pilgrimage] enacts something of a mimetic fallacy: in telling of the fall of *virī illustrs*, this physically ‘myghty’ and putatively virile Monk reenacts their isolation from human ‘compaignye’ through the monotony of his narrating, and so becomes doomed to repeat their fate.”²⁶⁴ Perhaps Harry and the Knight implicitly recognize that the Monk’s vision and enactment of singularity and friendlessness is most threatening to the community here. The Monk’s tale and social performance show that the comforts, pleasure and protection that community proffers are by no means guaranteed. This community-shaking thread is more visible when we combine the above noted reactions and see that, as Aranye Fradenburg explains, the *Monk’s Tale* is simultaneously “terrorizing and stupifyingly boring.”²⁶⁵ Thus, the tale is absolutely threatening to this particular community, a group gathered together for comfort and entertainment, because it shakes these very underpinnings. The Knight (speaking for himself) and Harry (speaking for all the company) must terminate this tale for it enacts instability more efficiently and pointedly than either the Miller or the Pardoner do. Nevertheless, from a critical

²⁶⁴ Ibid., 312.

²⁶⁵ L.O. Aranye Fradenburg, *Sacrifice Your Love* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 146.

perspective, this is quite a successful tale: this boring and annoying tale does, after all, inspire two specific and nuanced responses and reminds us that the camaraderie that nationhood proffers might fail at any moment. Indeed the Monk has one “friend” here, Chaucer the pilgrim, who once “seyde his opinion was good, ” and finally transmits the national meaning of his tale through its failure to deliver aesthetic and philosophical pleasures (I. 183). The confusion and disorder with which the *Monk’s Tale* threatens Harry Bailley’s domestic fantasies of belonging and camaraderie exemplify the tensions at the heart of most national aspirations.

Chaucer’s multi-vocal communal imagination underlies Harry’s deceptively simple wish for domestic sociability. In order for this imagination to flourish, citizens who can make edifying tales into sharable English poetry must supercede the lone dreamers and scholars of Chaucer’s earlier poetry; and they must invest themselves in a community that lives on such poetic language. Harry envisions a band of fellows journeying on horseback and carrying a portable sort of domesticity, which pulls them back to the costly comforts of his home, the Tabard Inn.²⁶⁶ He cleverly makes his pitch for this community by contrasting “confort” with the disadvantages of silent isolation (I.841). As this national imagination flourishes in the *Canterbury Tales*, Harry and we readers of the *Tales* get a Knight who is primarily a peacemaker rather than a war-wager, a Physician who appears more apt to cause than cure cardiac arrest, a Pardoner who is so memorably pardoned, and a Monk who upsets rather than preserves communal history and security. These English pilgrims become new things to themselves and to each other,

²⁶⁶ In Matthew Browne’s ideal scheme, of all of Chaucer’s characters, Harry Bailley is perhaps most like “an Englishman,” who “carries his nationality with him all over the world as a sort of enlarged domesticity” (*Chaucer’s England*, 251).

transcending their usual identities through the demands and policies of their transformative association. The nation Chaucer imagines is not one wherein the ruler's body and the community are seamlessly synonymous. He presents, rather, an experiment that exposes the pitfalls, failures and impossibilities of such national formulations, even as it dramatizes the need and attraction subjects made of language must feel for each other— and for the contentious material and conceptual homes they inhabit.

Phantom Homes and Unhappy Homecomings: National Disaster in the *Knight's Tale*

*A common language is a powerful part of
that sense of belonging and (literally also)
of being understood that is at the heart of
nationalism.*

-- Thorlac Turville-Petre²⁶⁷

Before Chaucer directly approaches the matter of English national sovereignty, he considers imperial sovereignty through the *Knight's Tale*. Conquest and conquest alone establishes sovereignty here. Empire established through conquest fails to deliver the feelings of belonging, of being understood and ultimately of being at home with sovereignty that English nationhood represents elsewhere in the *Tales*. Thus the *Knight's Tale* works as a foil that sets off Chaucer's national project, which is most apparent in the frame narrative and the Matter of Britain romances. And yet outlines of the Canterbury project's prevailing national concerns remain visible in the *Knight's Tale's* margins.²⁶⁸ This chapter examines the significance of homeland, an idea that haunts the borders of Theseus's scheme, yet refuses to materialize within his imperial city. Comparing Chaucer's idiosyncratic imagination of community with those of his sources, we can see that the Knight and his characters crave an ever-elusive sense of home, a sense of home that Chaucer leaves out of his translation. Chaucer's characters attempt to create or recreate a national homeland, wherein belonging is experienced through dialogue and mutual understanding –and sovereignty is both legitimate and intelligible to national subjects. Blighted by rapacious wars, even characters' conceptions of homeland shift and

²⁶⁷ Turville-Petre, *England the Nation*, 19.

²⁶⁸ As Patterson writes, "the *Knight's Tale* functions in an important sense as the other against which the project of the *Canterbury Tales* is ultimately defined" (*Chaucer and the Subject of History*, 169).

disappear, suggesting that imperial violence cannot establish communal identity without also destroying homes and other nation-sustaining cleavages. Their unfulfilled desires witness not only to the inadequacy of these affinities in the tale, but also to substantial social potential lingering undeveloped in the margins of their adventure.

A shared sense of home is not only a marker and catalyst of national consciousness as Chaucer imagines it in the *General Prologue* and frame tale, but also the Knight's primary goal for his characters. Despite his presumably noble ambitions and community-focused concerns, Chaucer's Knight tells the story of an empire that impedes the community-sustaining aspects of national comradeship, which we see in his sources and elsewhere in the *Tales*. In his tale, imperial order trumps home's stability. Chaucer's *Knight's Tale* is a free and condensed adaptation of Boccaccio's *Teseida*. Like the *Teseida*, the *Knight's Tale* extends the story of the fall of Thebes past Theseus's association with the widows of the Seven Against Thebes, as described in Statius's *Thebaid*. Both sources present Athens as a new nation poised to escape and reprove the failures of old Thebes, owing to its own diverse and cooperative citizenry. But the *Knight's Tale* excludes communal activity of the sort we see in these sources. The Knight transports the *General Prologue*'s fascination with national bonds formed through shared experiences of home and sustained dialogue to this very different Athens. There, the waning and the ultimate failure of such experiences of national cohesion affirm the interdependence of homeland, dialogue and people. This failure, moreover, unravels through a plot Boccaccio originally offers as both an overt indictment of war and an illustration of Thebes's ongoing national disintegration.²⁶⁹ Chaucer's Athens is an

²⁶⁹ Jane Chance, *The Mythographic Chaucer* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 184-213.

imperial seat without a new nation to redeem old Thebes. Here war structures an orderly empire, but fails to secure a national community or homeland.

Charles Muscatine's 1957 formalist reading identifies a "subsurface insistence on disorder" as "the poem's crowning complexity, its most compelling claim to maturity" as well as a testament to Chaucer's understanding of Theban history as "a struggle between chaos and noble designs." He asks that we read the work as a symmetrical whole rather than dwell on its surface, its lack of characterization or the "incomplete perception of the wailing women" still audible from its corners.²⁷⁰ Muscatine's reading precludes discussion of the fragmentary as such, yet readers continue to miss those missing parts that define the total object of the *Knight's Tale*. In fact, the Knight's frequent use of *occupatio* insists that we understand the tale as a fragment of a larger story. At the same time the meaning and experience of homeland and homecoming appear as loose ends and marginalized projects that question the value of the tale's symmetry, forcing readers to reconsider the communal implications of the characters' failings as citizens and comrades. Belonging instantiated through shared senses of home and attendant experiences of dialogue is marginalized, circumscribed and stunted, along with the *Tale's* women and prisoners. Here, dialogue is a crucial and bewildering undertaking, which Chaucer's characters most often assume in marginal social spaces from prison cell to borderland forest—places that are decidedly not homes. These are not simply spaces of chaos, but rather spaces of difficult and fragmentary communication—and ultimately of readerly understanding that is incomplete but revelatory. In these settings and in the Knight's *occupatio*, his marginal narration, we find the aspirations for homeland and

²⁷⁰ Charles Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition: A Study in Meaning and Style* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957), 189-90.

sympathetic dialogue that contextualize the *Tale's* plot of combat, destruction of edifices, imprisonment, exile, construction of edifices, destruction of forests and forced marriage. We encounter this context, this yearning for home, only in fleeting moments of feminized sensation and in superficially absurd dialogues of the deaf, which substantially challenge the orderly plot through the poignant misunderstandings they perform. These failed exchanges refigure the concept of home, asking if national homeland might be defined in the wilderness, in prisons, in those spaces explicitly outside of society. The answer here is no.

Alternatively in the frame tale, marginal subjectivities transcend isolation and reemerge as socially intelligible, communally productive voices and ultimately as identities visible across a national horizon. While the pilgrim community is no paragon of perfect order, it never arrives at utter chaos— thanks in large part, to the Knight.²⁷¹ In the Knight's own tale, however, the notorious "struggle between noble designs and chaos" emerges as a universal human problem, an episode, as Robert Hanning might say, in "the tense relationship between the human capacity to control and order life and the forces, internal and external, that resist or negate order" —and even as a cosmic problem.

²⁷² Several commentators illuminate Theseus's part in aggrandizing proportions of strife and chaos in the *Knight's Tale*.²⁷³ Following their general insight, I argue that Theseus

²⁷¹ Here, we must recall that at the most heated moment in the frame tale, the Knight persuades Harry Bailley and the Pardoner to kiss and make up by reminding them of their social past and future potential. And he derails the Monk's catalogue of tragedies before the Monk unmoors all hope in the power of camaraderie. Likewise, the Miller's threat to go his own way convinces Harry Bailley that is better to let him speak than to lose him. Thus, sociability and a real commitment to the pilgrims' shared path, bound by both the shrine of St. Thomas à Beckett and the home of the Tabard, keep the company on track.

²⁷² Robert Hanning, "'The Struggle Between Noble Design and Chaos': The Literary Tradition of Chaucer's Knight's Tale," in *Geoffrey Chaucer's The Knight's Tale*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1988), 70.

²⁷³ Chance, *The Mythographic Chaucer*, 184-213; Hanning, "'The Struggle Between Noble Design and Chaos,'" 70-89; Sylvia Tomasch, "*Mappa Mundi* and 'the Knight's Tale': The Geography of Power, the

intensifies this instability expressly by misinterpreting the Theban national “struggle between noble designs and chaos” as a universal human problem. In the frame tale, national values of camaraderie and investment in both a shared past and common path ahead keep the pilgrim body together and encourage dialogue. Juxtaposed with the simple successes of the frame tale, Theseus’s recourse to international battle and botched Boethian philosophy, both of which end dialogue and negate the force of marginal voices, appear as grand failures doomed by their excessive ambition.

While medieval political thinkers routinely list consent, divine ordinance, and just war and conquest as the ways in which sovereignty is legitimately established, the *Knight’s Tale* asks if any warfare is just, lifting consent and the sense of belonging and being understood that derives from sympathetic dialogue above other modes of establishing sovereignty. By negative example, Chaucer prioritizes nationhood, a condition of being at home with sovereignty, over empire, a force that warps lines of communication between governed and governor. The Knight’s exaggeration of Palamon and Arcite’s diverging pathways and sympathies clarifies this choice. Elizabeth Fowler reads the dissolution of the Thebans’ bonds as a serious consequence of Athens’s imperial affront to the ideal of consent. She writes, “The empire built upon the grounds of Theseus’s conquest is not society in general, but a particular kind of society. Its justification by conquest has a number of consequences.”²⁷⁴ Fowler considers Chaucer’s Knight’s meditation, “Ful sooth is seyde that love ne lordshipe/ Wol noght, his thanks,

Technology of Control,” in *Chaucer’s Cultural Geography*, ed. Kathryn L. Lynch (New York: Routledge, 2002), 193-224.

²⁷⁴ Elizabeth Fowler, “The Afterlife of the Civil Dead” in *Critical Essays of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. Thomas C. Stillinger (New York: G.K. Hall & Co., 1998), 68, 66.

have no felaweshipe,” uttered in response to the Theban cousins decision to forsake both kinship and sworn brotherhood in their vying over Emelye (I. 1625-26). She concludes,

The kind of tyrannical love and lordship generated by conquest are equally intolerant of the horizontal social bonds that securely bind the good society. “Felaweshipe” is an important word for Chaucer: like Aristotle’s earlier *philia* and Edmund Spenser’s later “friendship,” Chaucer’s “felaweship” is a general word that covers all kinds of voluntary social bonds—from the marital to the political. Whether it is expressed in sexual or political arrangements, dominion by conquest dissolves such voluntary bonds.²⁷⁵

In this scheme imperial and national bonds are mutually exclusive. Just conquest may found empires, but nations are a different matter. I want to particularize and elaborate Fowler’s important insight by showing that here, in the *Knight’s Tale*, voluntary bonds dissolve concomitantly with the destruction of home—as both an identifiable place and a concept—and the degeneration of dialogue—as both an expression of voluntary nation-sustaining relationships and an experience of understanding and being understood. Voluntary social bonds, circuits of friendship or fellowship, as Chaucer depicts them, entail meaningful dialogue and are moored in familial and territorial foundations. Take for instance the trend that Harry Bailey identifies and catalyzes in the *General Prologue*. Here Theseus’s empire performs its inverse. Despite their constant competition, the Canterbury-bound pilgrims stick together, losing not even a Miller and gaining a Yeoman. Meanwhile the Thebans’ split trajectories dramatize the possibilities of political transformation and the pattern of their losses alerts readers to distinctions between national and imperial community. Likewise, Theseus’s failure to enter Athens with his Amazon captives seals their captive identity, their seemingly untamable natural resistance to being at home with Theseus’s sovereignty.

²⁷⁵ Ibid., 68.

Homecomings

The start of the *Knight's Tale*, like the end of the *General Prologue*, imagines a homecoming that never actually transpires. Both missed homecomings encourage revision of home as a concept, but while the pilgrims' failure to return to the Tabard Inn facilitates transcendent concepts of home as heaven on one hand and as a social body in constant communicative (if also argumentative) motion on the other, deviations from the Knight's fantastic homecoming render it a more complete failure. Here social bodies and paths diverge with great consequence. And although strange reconvergences help shape the narrative, cohesion around any sense of home or belonging—or any affinity other than bellicose desire—is scarce. Home in Chaucer's *Knight's Tale* is a direction, a destination and a central, albeit unsteady, concept. Yet home never succeeds as an inhabitable or reachable place of communal cohesion, much less an idea or feeling capable of uniting Theseus's new nation. From the first moments of the Knight's narration, home speciously promises a cohesive future, where Theseus and his bride will lead a new nation. But as the tale proceeds, the shared senses of ownership and belonging that home indicates grow more and more distant. A loosening of these important affinities among the tale's denizens marks the move from nations to empire; Amazon and Theban nations fall as an Athenian empire rises. As the plot progresses, Athenian rule tightens and place-based bonds deteriorate alongside the meanings of *hoom* and *hoomcomyng*. At the same time communication's faltering success suggests the disintegration of the linguistic affinity integral to Chaucer's national imagination. In the *Knight's Tale* home and dialogue regress together, becoming less stable both practically and conceptually. Finally, the Athenian polity remains a fraction of what it aspires to be.

This trajectory exposes imperialism as inimical to nationhood, and through it nation and empire emerge as discrete and opposing forces.

We can glean a very simple understanding of home's conceptual and practical instability in the *Knight's Tale* by considering diction and grammar alone. As Vance Smith explains, "In the history of the household, the words *domus* and *familia* intertwine around each other like twin strands of DNA, reminding us that the household is neither simply a space nor a collection of people."²⁷⁶ According to the *MED*, the Middle English word *hoom* denotes both homes smaller and homes larger than those signified by *householde*, a word new to Middle English in the fourteenth century. *Hoom*, from the Old English *ham*, includes a deeper emotional resonance that the political and territorial places indicated by the word *countrie*, which comes from the Old French *contree*, also common in the *Knight's Tale*. In Middle English, home indicates a set of polarized ideas that reveal the interdependence of prudential management of owned property and the emotional bonds and expectations that together foster communal senses of belonging and, ultimately, national cohesion. These binaries include native land and final resting place, individual abode and communal homeland, household estate and congenial atmosphere.

In the *Knight's Tale*, the word *hom*, or *hoom*, appears twelve times, including its appearances in the compound words *homward* (1217, 1879, 2956) and *homcomynge* (884, 905). In every instance, *homward* is used as an adverb and *homcomynge* works as a noun. The other seven uses of *hom* are adverbial and modify verbs of motion, bringing or sending. For example, after Palamon and Emelye make their offerings to their gods in

²⁷⁶ Smith, *Arts of Possession*, 1. The *Knight's Tale* comments on the spaces and the networks of people signified by the late medieval English institution of the household. The English household in the fourteenth through sixteenth centuries was the basic unit of the national economy. According to David Starkey, the significance of the late medieval household was founded on primarily on the family's prudential attachments rather than its presumed emotional affinities ("The Age of the Household," 225-90).

part three, we learn, “with glad herte [Palamon] wente hym hoom ful soone,” “[a]nd hoom [Emelye] gooth anon the nexte weye” (I 2270, 2365). While home consistently denotes directions and destinations that describe ways of traveling, it never actually names an established place— or even an actively inhabited space. So although the language of this narrative emphasizes the sort of gravitational pull that “home” exerts and, as we shall soon see, exaggerates the performative value of a homecoming that does not happen, home, itself, never appears stable enough for a community to collect there.

Moving beyond grammar, we see that the very first description of Theseus’ homecoming attempts to perform a new political structure. Of course, the Knight sets out to narrate Theseus’s story, but he can hardly do this without relating Ypolita’s as well:

What with his wysdom and his chivalrie,
He conquered al the regne of Femenye,
That whilom was ycleped Scithia,
And weddede the queene Ypolita,
And broghte hire hoom with hym in his contree
With muchel glorie and greet solempnytee,
And eek hir yonge suster Emelye.
And thus with victorie and with melodye
Lete I this noble duc to Atthenes ryde,
And al his hoost in armes hym bisyde.

(I 865-874)

One can grasp neither the magnitude of Theseus’ victory nor the power of suggesting that Athens is now Ypolita’s “hoom” without also hearing Ypolita’s story, meeting her sister, contemplating her “regne” (the sovereign community she led) and imagining her homeland, “That whilom was ycleped Scithia.” Yet here, with his use of the past tense, the Knight ostensibly aims to inter “al the regne of Femenye” sealing its homeland existence hermetically in the past. Instead he conjures that polity’s defunct political and territorial parameters. And, switching to the present tense in line 873 (“Lete I this noble

duc to Atthenes ryde”), he leaves Theseus with “al his hoost in armes hym bisyde,” his proper political body, incessantly on the road. Though the Knight envisions a triumphant Athenian entry, in which Ypolita, Emelye, Theseus, and “al his hoost” arrive as one body, such a ceremonial homecoming never seals Theseus’ victory over the reign of women at the level of plot: this homecoming remains completely imaginary. Thus Chaucer leaves us with the Knight’s desire to deliver this homecoming, two possible homelands (Athens and Scythia), but no definitive homecoming.

Both the Knight’s own inability to focus on one plot line and Theseus’s inability to focus on Athens interrupt this fantastic homecoming, which is supplanted first by *occupatio* and then by an interruption that moves the plot proper toward separate homecomings and an intervening war. Taken together the ensuing narrative turns and digressions offer evidence of deep misapprehension where sympathetic exchange could be. We will examine the *occupatio* first, but before tackling its primary message, we should consider the Knight’s personal explanation for it. He says,

I have, God woot, a large feeld to ere,
And wayke been the oxen in my plough.
The remnant of the tale is long ynough.
I wol nat letten eek noon of this route;
Lat every felawe telle his tale aboute,
And lat se now who shal the soper wynne;
And ther I lefte, I wol ayeyn bigynne.

(I 886-892)

Precluding a fuller version of Theseus’s homecoming expressly to avoid disrupting the pilgrims’ tale-telling game, The Knight juxtaposes the duke’s conquest of the sovereign Amazon polity with his own awareness of what it means to be a member of a consensual social body. Imagining himself in a plowman’s shoes, the Knight claims to sacrifice his urge to deliver a sprawling tale and instead defers to the rules of his mixed-class

fellowship. This most highly ranked pilgrim figuratively steps into the shoes of the lowliest pilgrim— walking with those who work most humbly. In doing so, he momentarily abnegates the expansionist predilection of those who fight (at least on the “feeld” of his own narrative). While the pilgrim body could be more stratified, this metaphor emphasizes and even exaggerates the company’s class diversity. Here the Knight dramatically crosses class lines with a metaphor that identifies him, if only in this rhetorical way, with his most distant fellow. The Knight’s refusal to interrupt his fellows, of course, simultaneously delays Theseus’s imperial march and performs class transcendence, a feat of communal transformation the duke never truly means to transact. Thus he subverts his narration by asserting values that fissure admiration for imperial Athens and for the historical *auctorite* through which readers learn of it in favor of the roaming Canterbury body’s contemporary experience almost as soon as Athenian expansion begins. Looking forward to his own homecoming meal and celebration with his fellows at the Tabard, the Knight shows how Theseus’s project pales against the pilgrimage’s diverse spectrum— for as soon as the Knight leaves the Scithian past for an imperial Athenian present, that present gives way to the pilgrims’ own contemporary communal moment. This trajectory suggests that the Athenian past may have as much to learn from the English present as that present learns from “aventures that whilom han bifalle” (I 795).

But this *occupatio*’s most striking accomplishment is its extended memorialization of Scithia. Focusing on his compeers’ hearing rather than his own telling, the Knight begins,

And certes, if it nere to long to here,
I wolde have toold yow fully the manere

How wonnen was the regne of Femenye
 By Theseus and by his chivalrye;
 And of the grete bataille for the nones
 Bitwixen Atthenes and Amazones;
 And How asseged was Ypolita,
 The faire, hardy queene of Scithia;
 (I 874-882)

With this, the *Knight's Tale's* first two stanzas have named Ypolita's original home community five times by three different names thereby perpetuating its memory long enough to compromise the contrived insistence on Athens as Ypolita's home. In this passage, the Knight not only superfluously conjures the "regne of Femenye" and its Scithian homeland, but also invokes the cultural force of "Amazones," which is inseparable from this name meaning "breastless." This name, of course, reminds us that the Amazons remove their own breasts clearly and irrevocably prioritizing their capacity to defend their insular community over the capacities for motherhood, for fostering biological forms of national continuity and forging traditional exogamous bonds. Only here, digressing from the narrative he wishes to tell, the Knight remembers that Theseus's "faire, hardy queene" is an Amazon queen, the leader of an entirely female warrior community. For a moment the absurdity of the tale's fantastic wish to make one functional, patrimonial community of "Atthenes and Amazones" is clear. Our narrator cannot describe the battle or the siege, yet he indicates the dubiousness of what might be achieved via this conquest quite poignantly. In this light, Athens's homeland potential fades.

Taken in sum, the first *occupatio* alerts the reader to the deep instability of Theseus's imperial project. Furthermore, by pitting "Atthenes" against "Amazones," so variously described, Chaucer pits a conquering duke, his army and city against a queen

and her whole more thoroughly ensconced nation. Elaine Tuttle Hansen traces Chaucer's "striking" choice of "the term 'Femenye'" to a "place name (from Latin *femina*, woman)" and argues that with "its generalizing abstracting, quality" it "equates Amazons with women in general and with Woman as an idea and a territory."²⁷⁷ With Hansen's insights, we see that in the first twenty-three lines of this poem Ypolita's *regne* conjures her feminist polity, the territory of Femeye as well as that of Scithia, and the power of women generally along with the force and particularities of Amazon culture. Theseus conquers all this with his "wysdom and his chivalrie," whose values and meaning are ambiguous at best (865). After ten narrative years and the poem's remaining 2226 lines roll away, the wisdom of Theseus's chivalry remains suspicious— even six-hundred years of sustained critical attention have not settled the matter. Peggy Knapp helps explain why. Not only does the Knight complicate Theseus's expansionist goals with his own deference to his Canterbury-bound fellows, but the meaning of the word *chivalrye* is especially variable. Certainly as Knapp explains,

If the word would just hold still, these expressions [of Theseus's chivalric grandeur] could be unequivocally taken to mean that these kingdoms [Scithia/Femenye and later Thebes] were overcome by the recognized values of wisdom and valor . . . of which the chivalric hero was the authorized figure. But of course the word could also signify mounted troops themselves, and its valence would then vary with the behavior of known armed cavalries—if enough of them were merely marauding mercenaries, the meaning of the word would shift. At the middle point, Theseus's whole project is fair game for scrutiny of its ideology— do his victories signify his moral ascendancy, or are they merely the next turn of Fortune's political wheel?²⁷⁸

As this question lingers, one thing is certain: it would be a mistake to simply accept Athens' conquest and Ypolita's homecoming as clear and positive values.

²⁷⁷ Elaine Tuttle Hansen, *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 217.

²⁷⁸ Peggy Knapp, *Chaucer and the Social Contest*, (New York: Routledge, 1990), 22.

Correspondingly, the parallel line structure of the Knight's additions to what he will not tell, "And of the feste that was at hir weddyng, / And of the tempest at hir hoom-comyng," subtly suggests the interchangeability of the words "feste" and "tempest" (883-884). The tempest at Ypolita's Athenian arrival is clearly more apt than the noted feast at her wedding, a consequence of her defeat rather than a celebration of her love. One easily finds other fitting meanings in this couplet by interchanging the above-suggested words thereby retheorizing—or perhaps detheorizing—Ypolita's "homcoming." These lines subversively propose the appropriateness of a tempest at Ypolita's miserable wedding and a feast at a true homecoming, a return to her unforgotten homeland, which could replace the defeated entry to Athens so mislabeled. This deep troubling of "home" and "homecoming" early in the tale affirms indelible difference and hostility among the diverse homecomers in question and queries the project of imperial community building at hand in defiance of the absorption of cultural and political difference we see ahead. By beginning his tale with such a homecoming—an event that aims to put all wanderings to rest, yet offers only an unsettled clash of values and cultures on the domestic front—the Knight reveals that the significance of home is up for grabs. Chaucer's diction, his syntax and his assignment of this story to the Knight, who earnestly represents both a putatively moribund chivalry and our nascent Canterbury pilgrim body, all demand that we seriously consider the concepts of home and the home-centered affinities that distinguish various forms of political community, the imperial from the national, the national from the aristocratic and beyond. Indeed concepts of home, homeland and homecoming emerge quite early as a stress points that the imperial thrust of the tale and its mournful margins will struggle to define.

At Home and at War

Both the placement of Athens's monuments and its simple lack of civic activity indicate its character as an imperial seat rather than a national homeland in the *Knight's Tale*. Likewise, the Knight's peculiar narration of Theseus's encounter with the widows of the Seven Against Thebes exemplifies the precarious position of women and compassion in his tale. We can best appreciate the significance and interdependence of these points vis-à-vis Chaucer's sources. Chaucer's Athens is one whose territorial limits fall short of the temple of Clementia. Here moving the temple of Clementia, or Mercy, from city-center to city-periphery amounts to changing Athens from a home to a mere imperial seat—from a space of sympathetic dialogue, emotional investment, and mutual understanding to a space of missed national opportunity. In Statius's account, we find that Athenians who regard Hypolite with bitterness during Theseus's homecoming parade and resent what they perceive as her share in Athens's glory. This acrimonious homecoming occurs just before Theseus's encounter with the widows of the Seven Against Thebes; they accost him at a temple of Clementia that is "midmost in the town," ("urbe fuit media,") of Athens (*Thebaid* XII.481).²⁷⁹ Although Boccaccio does not specify such centrality for the temple itself, he leaves it inside Athens—and Athens does seem like home. Boccaccio's Athens encompasses a warmly hospitable and civically active Athenian society complete with women available to keep the widows company at the temple, yet more Athenian women ready to adorn themselves for public celebration, and even elites, who bestow a custom-made chariot, laurel and robe upon the conqueror

²⁷⁹ Statius, *Thebaid Books 8-12, Achillied*, ed. and trans. D. R. Shackleton Bailey (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003). All following *Thebaid* citations will be given by line number alone.

(*Teseida* 2:17-21).²⁸⁰ For better or for worse, Athens in both of Chaucer's sources seems populated with capable, opinionated and involved, yet hierarchized citizens. The Athenians of Chaucer's Latin and Italian sources actually resemble the English folk of the *General Prologue* much more closely than Chaucer's own Athenians.

In contrast, the *Knight's Tale* gives us none of this civic life. No sooner does the Knight resume just where he first interrupts himself via *occupatio* than the "compaignye of ladyes, tweye and tweye" enlist Theseus in avenging Creon (I 898). Before he can reenter Athens, when he is "almost unto the toun," the widows, installed in an evidently outlying "temple of the godesse Clemence," change his direction ultimately rendering his trajectory all the more rapacious (I 894, 928). After their meeting, the Athenian is off: he heads "To Thebes-ward, and al his hoost beside. / No neer Atthenes wolde he go ne ride" (I 967-68). Because Chaucer's redaction finds the bereaved widows (and the temple) posted just outside rather than inside the city, here Theseus's diverted attention derails the Knight's desired performance of merger between Athens' and Scithia. Theseus does not enter Athens here. Instead he continues warring under "his baner" and sends Ypolita "unto the toun of Atthenes to dwelle" in the company of Emelye, her sister and fellow Amazon (I 965). In the *Thebaid* and the *Teseida*, Theseus's homecoming with Hypolita works as an opportunity to magnify both the significance of their union and his own greatness. Here Ypolita's "hoom-comynge" is a missed opportunity at best. According to Chaucer's nuanced plot, the Amazon warriors' "hoom-comynge" and that of Theseus and "his hoost" are discrete events (I 884, 1026). With one breath the Knight wishes to combine them, but with the next he exposes the incompatibility between constant warring

²⁸⁰ Giovanni Boccaccio, *Teseid of the Nuptials of Emilia*, ed. and tr. Vincenzo Traversa (New York: Peter Lang, 2002). All following *Teseida* citations will be given by line number alone.

and a more complete experience of domestic community. Our Knight ultimately takes this opportunity to reveal the great disparity between imperial warfare and national life; his narration suggests that when human sensations such as mercy are peripheral, the center fails its national potential.²⁸¹

Just as the Knight's first *occupatio* insinuates the mutual threat posed by fellowship on one hand and conquest on the other, the appearance of this new "compaignye" has both pro and anti-imperial resonances (I. 898): the widows encourage Theseus's imperialism in the name of cultural preservation (observation of funerary ritual) and at the same time reveal the shakiness of the ground on which all allegiances are sworn and all alliances are built. Focusing more closely on the language of homecoming as the plot proceeds, we see that the widows' intervention reorients the meaning of homecoming, checking it and preserving some of its integrity. They also expose dialogue's incipient failure and push Theseus along his rapacious path. Theseus's fresh capture of "the regne of Femenye," of course, proves him to be hostile to female self-determination. He is happy to help the wretched widows, and they are thankful for his help. But regardless of this limited alliance, their meeting negates his contrived homecoming and in this way suggests their affinities with their fellow Amazon and Theban "caytyves" and victims of war (I 924). Even as Theseus appears to rescue them, these women rescue the concept of homecoming from meaninglessness—at least for the

²⁸¹ In the *Thebaid*, the central temple of Clementia is a shrine dedicated to the human capacity for compassion rather than to a lordly god or goddess. The propensity to befriend those abandoned by the protections of fortune and class is characteristic of Athenian society there. Chaucer twists this ethos of camaraderie in translation to the *Knight's Tale*. Here, Clemence is a goddess and compassionate human exchange is not truly or characteristically part of Athenian culture. Conquest and aristocratic rank outweigh national ideals such as inclusion and camaraderie. Thus, Theseus's realm contrasts with the ideal of the sovereign realm expounded by Chaucer's Parson in his tale. According to the Parson, sovereignty renders obligatory mercy and measure, compassion and reason. In chapter five of this dissertation, I argue that the Parson's idea of sovereignty pertains particularly to the nation rather than to the empire or any other sort of polity.

moment. Because the widows intervene, the *Knight's Tales's* main characters enter Athens in three separate groups. The Knight's language reflects the significant differences in this situation. As he tells it, Theseus "sente" Ypolita and Emelye not home, but rather "[u]nto the toun of Atthnes to dwelle," likewise the duke "sente" Arcite and Palamon, survivors of the Theban conquest, "to Atthenes to dwellen in prison," and finally "He took his hoost, and hoom he rit" (I 971, 973, 1023, 1026). In this way, the Knight equates the Amazon captives' undue passing of time in Athens with the Theban prisoners' jail-stay and contrasts their respective entries with Theseus's own homecoming. In narrating plot progression, the Knight's language invents neither agency nor Athenian home where there is none. The widows instigate the divergence of Theseus's and the Amazon's paths, thus shaping this particular narration. Their intervention ultimately reworks the reader's understanding of "homecoming," but also encourages a trajectory that actually destroys Theban homes and homeland.

In the process of sending Theseus and his Amazon spoils in opposite directions, the widows engage the duke in a telling dialogue of cultural signs. This exchange reminds us that not only territorial details, but also cultural affinities facilitate the belonging and camaraderie that might make a national homeland of political jurisdiction. It also suggests that imperial projects and partnerships can proceed even when such affinities are faulty and unsatisfying, in which cases, it seems, there will always be destructive ramifications. The mourning women do not (as in the *Teseida*) march to Thebes with Theseus, yet he famously emerges from his decisive encounter with them as a gentle and deeply feeling friend who, "in his armes . . . hem alle up hente,/ And hem conforteth in ful good entente" (I 957-58). He even swears "his ooth" to avenge Creon (I

959). The story, nevertheless, is not so simple. Casting his gaze askance, the duke first sees the widows kneeling “in the heigh weye/ A compaignye of ladyes, tweye and tweye/ Ech after oother clad in blake” (I 897-99). While our Knight relates their cries as “waymentynge,” clearly sorrowful lamentation, Theseus hears only simple “crynge,” suggesting a thoroughly less particular experience of their obvious mournfulness; and he even fails to interpret their black clothing and kneeling, conventional signs of mourning and deference. Instead, he reads their sorrow as jealousy and puzzles over their apparent unity as folk:

“What folk been ye, that at myn homcomynge
 Perterben so my feste with crynge?”
 Quod Theseus. “Have ye so greet envye
 Of myn honour, that thus compleyne and crye? . . .”
 (I 905-908)

Here he misreads the widows at first sight and takes his misunderstanding quite far supposing that the women are spiteful of his honor. Theseus is so focused on his own ceremonial homecoming that he does not perceive the loss of life and of Thebes that the widows mourn via their own conventional ritual. Although the eldest widow addresses Theseus aptly as “Lord” and “conqueror,” he understands their ritual mourning of death as simple envy (I 915-16). From his perspective it seems that the widows hail from the opposite end of the earth; their cultural customs of mourning and deference are completely unfamiliar to him. Theseus’s intuition, or lack thereof, negates the possibility of reading him as the widow’s natural ally or kindred spirit.

At this point, we should note that although death ultimately represents Theseus’s most profound awareness of both the human condition and divine order, he profoundly misapprehends the widows’ conventional commemoration of death when he first

encounters them “in al his wele and in his mooste pride” at the borders of his Athenian homeland (I 895). Of course, as David Aers reminds us, “Theseus offers the inevitable death of all generated things ‘in this wreched world’ as the experiential proof of a stable and eternal first mover who binds all in a chain of love” in his famous “First Mover” speech (I 2987-3074).²⁸² But here his conqueror’s subjectivity renders him less human and more detached, while his eventual ability to defend the values of those who initially confuse him so witnesses to the constructability of loyalty and cooperation. The contrast between warm alliance and this unsound first assessment proves that one cannot gauge affinity reliably simply by looking at other folk and concurrently suggests that language must facilitate transcendent, personal and emotional transformations here. Both basic human communication in the form of tears and the cultural signs of black clothing and formal kneeling fail to convey feeling from the hearts of the mourning women to the mind of their prospective protector. It is finally left to “the eldeste lady” to explain in no uncertain terms why her company makes “al this lamentacioun,” using an even more particular term for mournful outburst than the Knight’s “waymentynge” (I 912, 935, 902). This decisive scene finally presents communication, linguistic and ritual, in critical decline and signals that now, in order for political and social alliances to form, language must become more than what it is in the *General Prologue*. It must be more than a marker of cultural specificity and ownership and even more than an entertaining, edifying link with a community-sustaining past. Language must facilitate sympathy.

This is only the first time an oral outburst and a misunderstanding mark a plot turn; indeed we find a pattern along these lines. This pattern, which includes Arcite and

²⁸² David Aers, *Chaucer, Langland and the Creative Imagination* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), 189.

Palamon's split and Ypolita and Emelye's forest plea, is a series of communication gaps that must be hurdled if the plot will advance. A cursory read suggests that the characters do bridge these gaps, but closer scrutiny reveals that they plod along with only minor success and doubtful accuracy. And the question of whether forward movement equals progress in any moral, ethical or nationally fruitful sense remains. I will show that although the plot progresses, the characters are progressively less adept at understanding each other. Thus their "progress" is incrementally less satisfying. But first let us more thoroughly consider the Theban disaster's political implications, which will help clarify the catastrophic proportions of what follows.

The political identity of the widows themselves has some illuminating implications. They identify themselves by their nobility in all accounts, but while Statius's version stresses their Argive home ("*domus Argos*") as well (*Thebaid* XII.549), Boccaccio's widows petition Theseus adding that their husbands, "were born of the same blood as you and like you they are still called Greeks," ("*efurno teco gia dun sanghue nati/ echome tu anchor greci chiamati*") (*Teseida* 2:34). In Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*, neither the widows' birthplace nor their current home, but rather the site of their husbands' demise unites them. As the former "wyf to kyng Cappaneus" explains and exclaims, their men "starf at Thebes—cursed be that day!;" she continues "[w]e losten alle oure housebondes at that toun," affirming that Thebes is no longer a nation so great as to warrant such a war, but rather the time and space of loss that they mourn (I 932-33, 936). Certainly in this tale women most keenly realize the toll these painful ruptures take on political community. Accordingly, Cappaneus's widow insists, "For certes, lord, there is noon of us all/ That she ne hath been a duchesse or a queene/ Now be we

caytyves, as it is wel seene” (I 922-24). While Statius and Boccaccio’s widows emphasize the kings’ former humanity and status, our widows’ own emotional experience of their husbands’ deaths and their own past nobility, their falls from queenship to wretchedness, from sovereignty to thralldom, are more noteworthy. These emphases render social unity an increasingly dismal enterprise, for here only loss and defeat link community, and memories of a once-coveted homeland are deeply troubled. The *Tale*’s other budding relationships follow suit, having only to do with death and war.

Understanding the problem of the widow’s political identity depends less on the loss that unites them and more on recognizing the inconsistency with which Chaucerians refer to them. For example, Patterson calls them the “widows of Argives”; Fowler’s widows are “Athenian widows,” and Hansen styles them “Theban widows.”²⁸³ This inconsistency reflects not only the women’s various homelands as indicated by classical lore, but also the deracination that Chaucer’s emphases and lack thereof convey. Though the women do come from various cities and nations in Chaucer’s sources, I want to suggest that one reason Chaucerians have not settled on some standard mode of identifying them (acknowledging this diversity or not) is that their national affiliations are less explicit and ultimately hazier here than elsewhere. This haziness has two important functions: it deflects attention from internationalist coalitions beyond Theseus’s own imperialist design and emphasizes the overall costs of war. Here war costs the women part of their identities. The widows do not demand the dignity of being understood particularly according to their values and or investments in any homeland. They are most precisely bereaved women.

²⁸³ Fowler, “Afterlife,” 61; Hansen, *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender*, 217; Patterson *Chaucer and the Subject of History*, 198.

Correspondingly, although Theseus finally manages a cursory understanding of what the widows want him to do, his treatment of Thebes reflects misunderstanding of both their surviving cultural values and their national losses— the loss of homeland and of political integrity that Thebes now embodies. Thus Theseus’s awkward dialogue with the widows is only approximately successful. The widows’ ceremonial signs and words to Theseus launch a reckless final devastation of Thebes and its folk. As Chaucer has it, although slaying Creon does help fulfill Theseus’s promise to the widows, the exploit is not linked with the powerful unity of any homeland or national community. Rather, as diction and syntax indicate, this assassination is most closely associated with the escalating destruction of one such community. The detail that Theseus slays Creon “in pleyne bataille” is a favorite example of his nobility; yet the structure of the passage containing this positive note more effectively signals this conqueror’s de-prioritization of domestic life. In another hasty moment, the Knight discloses more evidence of the incompatibility of constant warring with national endurance:

But shortly for to speken of this thing,
 With Creon, which that was of Thebes kyng,
 He fought, and slough hym manly as a knyght
 In pleyne bataille, and put the folk to flyght;
 And by assaut he wan the citee after,
 And rent adoun bothe wall and sparre and rafter;
 And to the laydes he restored again
 The bones of hir freendes that were slayn,
 To doon obsequies, as was tho the gyse.
 (I 985-93)

Here the Knight immediately remembers Creon, “which that was of Thebes kyng,” by his sovereignty, forgetting his tyranny completely (I 986). The Knight, moreover, lingers on this simple description for almost an entire line, distending it beyond predictable proportions. And while the following line and a half relate courageous and honorable

battle, this activity flows directly into admission of the morally irreconcilable destruction of Thebes. Each bit of action here is inseparable from the rest. Instead of protecting the Thebans from the tyranny the widows bemoan, Theseus “put the folk to flight.” And although he may honorably slay Creon, he continues past this original (perhaps justifiable) martial goal to win “the citee after.” If the gratuitousness implied by this sequence were not enough, we learn that Theseus takes Thebes explicitly “by assault,” which, as the *MED* reminds us, suggests “evil” or “unlawful” attack. Here Theseus exacerbates Theban loss by emptying the territory of its “folk” and rending down its homes and public buildings “bothe wall and sparre and rafter.” This sentence’s final lines, however, intimate that communal disbursal and territorial ruin are quite commonly inseparable from upholding the “gyse” or custom of ritual burial, and thereby fulfilling what one’s affectionate social bonds demand. Choosing the rather general word, “freendes,” to describe the widows’ husbands, moreover, Chaucer poignantly and generally queries the place of militarism vis-à-vis affectionate bonds in political community.²⁸⁴ Theseus’s case seems impossible, but so does the overall political struggle between noble designs and chaos: for the moment it seems that this flow is natural or at least unavoidable. The road from tyranny to cultural preservation necessarily destroys the folk in their homes and towns— this trajectory cannot help but devastate the foundations of national community. To make matters worse, however, Theseus leaves to scavengers “a taas of bodyes dede” not unlike the unburied “bodyes on an heep” that so offended the widows’ cultural sensibilities in the first place (I 1005, 944). Indeed Theseus’s rapacious ways and imperial agenda trivialize networks of

²⁸⁴ Fowler explicates the special significance of this general word and its indication of a range of voluntary social bonds (“Afterlife,” 68).

affection, communication and local experience. In the end, it is no shock that he simply does “with al the contree as hym leste” (I 1004).

This is not, however, the only way this story could go. Chaucer’s divergence from his sources here reinforces the idea that though militarism sometimes builds nations, warfare in the *Knight’s Tale* does not. For example, in the *Teseida* Creon’s tyrannical and cultural offenses become a national rallying point for a new Athens. Meanwhile Hypolita offers absolute support for Teseo’s project via her stated willingness to risk her life in battle, but defers to his assumed wishes that she refrain from fighting; and Teseo even rallies his troops reminding them that their purpose is to make their “memory famous among the new nations of the future” (“*mimorie famose/ alle foture ennuove nationi*”) (*Teseida* 2:45). Boccaccio’s respectful duke ultimately buries the dead and even gives the widows control of Thebes— they decide to burn it and leave for Argos, rendering that utter destruction their own responsibility. Correspondingly, Statius maintains that Theseus’s folk join the effort from all corners of Athens; and some actually “hang up their plows and go forth to grim battle” (“*horrida suspensis ad proelia misit aratris*”) (*Thebaid* XII.628). He also claims that Hypolite would have led her Amazon troops against Creon if not for her pregnancy. All this testifies to a well-established domestic existence, common Athenian values and a national willingness to sacrifice in the interest of upholding them. The *Knight’s Tale* purges such national concerns from our characters’ consciousnesses. Even the possibility of national continuity represented by Hypolita’s pregnancy is absent from Chaucer’s narrative. In this tale of sweeping national decline, as the conqueror’s influence extends, both the intelligibility of home and the reliability of dialogue disintegrate, indicating that here

nationhood and imperial militarism are at odds. We have seen how conventional war destroys the practical experiences of home and homecoming; in the following pages, we will consider how war's aftermath and its atypical forms erode experiences of belonging and being understood that elsewhere unite fellows around a shared sense of home.

Divergence and the Death of Communication

The relationship patterns we find as the tale rolls on vivify this erosion. The *Knight's Tale's* new blossoming loyalties, those of Theseus to the widows and of Arcite and Palamon to Emelye, form in spite of misconceptions and in denial of ultimately unelideable differences. While this point might imply that Athens' blooms into an exemplar of national transcendence by aggregating diverse individuals into fellowship under a sympathetic sovereign—that is not the case. These new affections, which are warlike even in the guise of love, have more to do with aggression and selfishness than with dialogue, common local investments, territorial loyalties or reciprocity. Meanwhile preexisting relationships, those between Ypolita and Emelye and Palamon and Arcite, are voluntary relationships based on longstanding oaths in the Theban case, and kinship, homeland, and feminist values in the Amazon case. These fall apart and are replaced to varying degrees. While the trajectories Arcite and Palamon take suggest dramatic socio-political possibility, they diverge around problems of communication and home-based identity. This divergence marks the resulting society's limits.

As Theseus destabilizes national affinities practically, the other characters adjust—sometimes silently, sometimes passionately, yet still perplexingly. The resulting political fluidity demonstrates imperialism's perpetual destruction and reconstruction of relationships founded on affiliation and identity. And as imperial time rolls on, national

affinities grow progressively less coherent; concurrently Theseus's subjects become less and less articulate. When we focus on persistent desires for true dialogue and homeland, however, the tale appears to be a subversive presentation of imperial fantasy as a thinly veiled impediment to social health, to understanding and being understood. All things considered, Athens is a foil: as we shall see, it is the other variety of political and cultural flexibility against which the pilgrim community's specific variety of flexible fellowship emerges. Neither the Canterbury fellowship nor the English national society from which it springs eliminates asymmetrical or hierarchical politics— but yet the pilgrims are free to enter into their new, voluntary relationship, which both reflects and particularizes their existing affinities as English-folk. In the frame tale, debates regarding the orderliness, use, and meaning of speech produce fluidity and even transcendent solidarity among the pilgrims, who continue together along the same path despite their deep disagreements. Indeed their linguistic and home-based affinities prepare them to understand each other well enough for incisive engagement and debate, narrative and otherwise.²⁸⁵ But here in Athens, communication is not even that sophisticated. The characters of the *Knight's Tale* struggle to use language to explicate rather simple emotions. In the *Canterbury Tales* consensual associations ranging from marriage to the tale-telling fellowship subtend national relationships already in process. While the *Knight's Tale* subverts concepts of alliance based on the essential affinity of kinship, it also complicates the frame tale's ideals by showing that flexibility and alliance forging across diverse subjectivities does not yield national potential when such movements destroy rather than sustain both concepts and practical experiences of home. Here, imperial ambition interrupts both frankness and sympathy, which foster and reflect national consciousness

²⁸⁵ Knapp, "Chaucer Imagines England," 131-60, esp. 142-57.

elsewhere in the *Canterbury Tales*. Thus, this tale proposes limits regarding the types of political fluidity that sustain national trajectories.

The trajectories Arcite and Palamon take, for instance, suggest more possible valences for the affinities of homeland and dialogue than their comradeship can bear. When we meet the Arcite and Palamon they are “liggyng by and by,” in a “taas of bodeyes dede” (I 1005, 1011). “Nat fully quyke, ne fully dede,” they walk the line between life and death together, still communicating their kinship, class and Theban identity: “Both in oon armes,” “and of sutren two yborn” “[t]he heraudes knewe hem beste in special/ As they that weren of the blood roial/ of Thebes” (I1015, 1012, 1019, 1017-19). Theseus naturally regards “Palamon and his felawe Arcite” in the same way (I 1031). Hence, their sentence, life without ransom together in an Athenian prison, is the same, “[f]or everemoore; there may no gold hem quite” (1032). This looks like the end of a common road, but it is not.

Emelye enters, and suddenly neither love, nor loyalty, nor dialogue follows precedent or expectation. Chaucer stages Palamon and Arcite’s sighting of Emelye as a burlesque of romance’s standard love at first sight scene. He creates a moment that simultaneously mocks the possibility of love at first sight, insists on Emelye’s Amazon identity, and demonstrates the decadent state of communication in this narrative. Although Cupid would be the conventional arrow bearer in such a scene, with an Amazon princess on site, Cupid’s services are unneeded. Emelye is equipped to wield her own arrows. Susan Crane observes that in this moment the Thebans interpret (an oblivious) Emelye’s attractiveness as aggression, further compounding the valences of interpersonal communication and querying the reliability of all its forms. She explains,

Courtship in the *Knight's Tale* begins with Palamon and Arcite interpreting their own desires as the onslaught of a life-threatening adventure. From their first sight of Emelye the lovers perceive her attractiveness as aggression. Their unreturned gaze upon her becomes her act upon them: 'I was hurt right now thurghout myn ye/ Into myn herte, that wol my bane be,' Palamon declares, and Arcite later echoes, 'Ye sleen me with youre eyen, Emelye!/ Ye been the cause wherefore that I dye' (lines 1096-97, 1567-68).²⁸⁶

Through this lens, Emelye appears as both a captive, wandering in a courtyard far from

Scythia, and an obstinate Amazon warrior, whose war-like mien will not be effaced.

Emelye is a very dangerous woman. This dense moment in which Emelye first appears to Palamon and Arcite tells the truth of her national identity and signals the disintegration of the Thebans' national affinities. While the Thebans experience their love as an attack, the aggression does not stop there—they will have to attack each other to win their love. Their experience of Emelye as a natural and national warrior reverses both their experience of each other as comrades and their shared understanding of home. Emelye becomes their central, yet divisive focus.

Most relevant to this reading is the failure of Arcite and Palamon's ability to engage in a coherent—much less productive—dialogue. The cousins and brothers "[y]sworn ful depe" are also the only mentioned Thebans to survive Theseus's assault on their homeland (I 1132). But even after years of living closely together in their Athenian prison, Arcite misreads Palamon's cry heralding their relationship's first fissure and ensuing deterioration. Thus Arcite's inability to understand Palamon not only marks the beginning of an epic rivalry, but also demonstrates a progressing failure of Theban communication and ultimately leads to the collapse of a national camaraderie. While Boccaccio's Emilia sings, luring Arcites to the window where he and Palaemon

²⁸⁶ Susan Crane, "Medieval Romance and Feminine Difference in the *Knight's Tale*," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 12 (1990), 50.

eventually discuss her loveliness in musing agreement, here we have a moment of instantaneous misunderstanding. This moment revisits the communication problems that Theseus's exchange with the widows exposes. In this redaction, Palamon spots Emelye from "a chamber an heigh (I 1065):

And therewithal, he bleynte and cride, "A!"
 As though he stongen were unto the herte.
 And with that cry Arcite anon up sterte
 And seyde, "Cosyn myn, what eyleth thee,
 That art so pale and deedly on to see?
 Why cridestow? Who hath thee doon offence?
 (I 1078-1083)

Arcite arises almost at the moment that Emelye's stinging wound reaches Palamon's heart—as if in perfect empathy. But rather than wait for an answer to his own questions, like Theseus opposite the widows, Arcite imagines he knows Palamon's heart. He proceeds to console Palamon for nearly ten successive lines acknowledging the horror of their prison, advising patience and admitting of Fortune's power, "[w]e must endure it; this is the short and playne" (I 1091). Arcite's is a wasted consolation because he and Palamon have ceased to understand their environment and their respective relationships to it in similar or even sharable ways. In fact, Palamon's announcement, "Cosyn, for soothe, of this opinion/ Thow hast a veyn ymaginacioun" is followed by his own exceedingly ridiculous imagination of Emelye as Venus (I 1093-94). Nevertheless, this proclamation exposes their disconnect, insisting that language is more crucial to their relationship than Arcite foolishly imagines. This scene, like Theseus's encounter with the widows, testifies to the characters' deep desire for understanding and shared imagination. In both scenes, the desire for sympathy appears most clearly at the very

moment in which the capacity for dialogue that might sustain such sympathy seems to be fading most severely.

The Thebans' past and current familial, national, and consensual affinities render this scene both a more telling and more tragic communicative impasse than the one between Theseus and the widows. Arcite's quick attempt to comfort Palamon supposes that he feels what is in his cousin's heart, but their ensuing attempts at explanation only push this level of intimacy further and further from experience. Their prison cell is no home. Indeed Palamon's twenty-line rant (I 1130-50) about the meaning of sworn brotherhood and the intimate "conseil" that Arcite betrays calls attention to this deterioration (I 1141, 47). On viewing Emelye, Arcite announces,

‘The fresshe beautee sleeth me sodeynly
Of hire that rometh in the yonder place;
And but I have hir mercy and hir grace,
That I may see hire atte leeste weye,
I nam but deed; ther nis namoore to seye.’
(I 1118-22)

Palamon bemusedly counters “Wheither seistow this in earnest or in pley?” (I 1125). Thus their understanding continues to deteriorate; at this point plain English is almost as perplexing as Palamon's inarticulate cry lines before. These sworn, legally bound brothers no longer imagine and judge their world in synch, which signals the unraveling of ties that once strengthened their nation. Our Thebans, moreover, never empathize in their love as Boccaccio's do, but experience Emelye differently: Palamon loves her as a goddess, Arcite as a woman, and the two debate her nature. Their disagreement takes on greater and greater proportions until at last they abandon linguistic dialogue altogether and meet in a tournament round; there they serve as entertainment for a primarily

Athenian audience, who watch them lead two opposing armies that perform Thebes' division into two small nations.

Details that alternately confirm and confuse the significance of both homeland and camaraderie mark the road to Theseus's tournament round. When Perotheus, a mutual friend of Arcite and Theseus intercedes, Theseus frees Arcite— and furthermore forbids him from even visiting “any contree of this Theseus” (I 1214). In place of Boccaccio's peculiarly grateful Arcites, our Arcite cries, “Allas, that evere knew I Perotheus!” (I 1227). Thus, bewailing this one apparently viable social tie as well as this small victory of friendship over enmity, he queries the value of such bonds altogether. Before he leaves Arcite exacerbates the confusion by using domestic language he does not seem to comprehend. This paradox implies deep internal fissures to match those separating him from Palamon. His Boethian lament continues with a meditation on the elusiveness of true happiness, in which he uses tropes that stress the baseness of greed (which resonates most clearly with Theseus's rapacious imperial encroachment and extravagance) alongside the value of recognizing the politics and location of one's proper home. He muses,

Some man disireth for to han richesse,
 That cause is of his mordre or greet siknesse;
 And some man wolde out of his prison fayn,
 That in his hous is of his meynee slayn.
 Infinite harmes been in this materre.
 We witen nat what thing we preyen here;
 We faren as he that dronke is as a mouse.
 A dronke man woot wel he hath an hous,
 But he noot which the righte wey is thider,
 And to a dronke man the wey is slider.

(I1255-1264)

Following dialogue's pathway, monologue's coherence declines in this tale. Here Arcite seems to miss his own literal message: happiness and health here depend both on knowing the way home and on trustworthiness among members of the same household. Whether home is a metaphysical or physical location, Arcite seems bound to lose his way. Even as he hurries "homward" to Thebes, he construes his banishment as exile (I 1244, 1272) and locates his "wele" with Emelye in Athens (II 1217, 1272).²⁸⁷ By framing the pursuit of happiness in largely domestic terms, Arcite intimates the relevance of searching for a lost sense of home even as he obfuscates an already unstable concept of home. Thus Arcite's journey away from Palamon is marked first by the failure of communication, next by Perotheus and the broad testament to the power of affectionate bonds and concurrent challenge to them he represents, and finally with this thorough subversion of home's significance. A more valiant and systematic attempt to unmoor Palamon and Arcite's lingering Theban national affinities is hardly imaginable.

Once the cousins' paths diverge, Palamon imagines Arcite's feelings and intents with comparable inaccuracy. Palamon ultimately seals the end of Theban communal imagination with an imagination of Thebes that is only imaginary, bearing no resemblance to reality. From his cell Palamon imagines that Arcite "walkest now in Thebes" aiming to "assemblen alle the folk of oure kyndrede" for war against Athens. But Arcite actually assumes a false name and identity, leaves these imaginary (dead) kindred to Palamon, and returns to Athens! There "Theseus hath taken hym so neer" that he seems part of the Athenian regime "in pees and eek in werre" but still collects "ful pryvely his rente," which "men broghte hym out of his contree/ From yeer to yeer" (I

²⁸⁷ In Middle English as in English, the primary connotation of exile is separation from homeland. Though it can be used more figuratively, as it is here, it obviously still carries important connotations having to do with homeland and nation.

1439, 1447, 1443, 1442-3). Thus, Arcite's homeland is a collection of fragmentary concepts and comforts that does not add up to any one place of stability or allegiance. Meanwhile Palamon, yet a prisoner stripped of all civil capacities, somehow manages to find a "freend" as well as some "nercotikes and opie of Thebes fyn," with which he drugs his jailer (I 1468, 72). He escapes and heads "Thebes-ward, his freendes for to preye/ on Theseus to help him to werreye," hoping bonds with his original community will help him win Emelye. The cousins' paths, imaginations and values seem opposed now: while Arcite thoroughly destabilizes both the value of friendship and the Thebanness that originally identify him, Palamon still clings to these values, but has utterly lost touch with both Arcite and reality. Yet by chance the two meet in the no-man's land of the grove "at unset stevene" (I 1524). There is no correct or incorrect sense of home or community here; we have only different ones strategically aligned against each other—for as Arcite asks, "who shal yeve a love any lawe" (I 1164)? With no common law or lexis, Arcite and Palamon fight "[u]p to the ancle . . . in hir blood" (I 1660). As they fight, the Knight amplifies their fall from articulacy by comparing them to animals as well as to Thracians, known in classical lore for their stubborn refusal to learn Greek (I 1638, 1656-57).

The next turn depends on willfully denying what verbal communication makes clear. Hunting in the woods, Theseus, Ypolita, and Emelye come upon the thrashing cousins, and Theseus blocks their combat. Opening his speech with the question, "Sire, what nedeth wordes more?" Palamon concisely admits his and Arcite's guilt, discloses their love, and asks for death:

Ne yif us neither mercy ne refuge,
 But sle me first, for seinte charitee!
 But sle my felawe eek as wel as me
 Or sle hym first, for though thou knowest it lite,

This is thy mortal foo, this is Arcite,
 . . .
 For sith the day is come that I shal dye,
 I make pleylnly my confessioun
 That I am thilke woful Palamoun
 That hath thy prisoun broken wickedly
 I am thy mortal foo, and it am I

(I 1715, 1720-24, 1732-36)

Agreeing with this uncommonly clear analysis Theseus says, “This is a short conclusion./ Youre owene mouth, by youre confessioun,/ Hath dampned yow, and I wol it recorde” (I 1743-454). The following events, however, amount to a grand feat of forgetting. All hope for sympathetic communication dies, though Palamon makes a fine speech and both Arcite and Palamon live on— for the moment.

Rather than acting on this rare mutual conclusion, Theseus again pauses to translate feminine cries for mercy into an elaborate bellicose spectacle. Here Ypolita, Emelye and their attending ladies chime in crying, “Have mercy, Lord, upon us wommen alle!/ And on hir bare knees adoun they falle/ And would have kissed his feet there as he stood” (I 1757-59). Although they simply ask for mercy and even specify that they, the women should be the object of this mercy, uttering only these words, both Theseus and the Knight read their plea as a tribute to love’s significance and to the Thebans’ nobility. The scene, however, does not support such a reading. We have already seen that mercy is neither a central, simple nor simply emotional concern in this tale. In line with the strategic impulses of Theseus, who conquers Thebes to show compassion for the widows, and the cousins, whose “love” for Emelye conveniently reinstates them into the courtly position of noble lover, it seems that the Amazons, surmising that they are next to be

condemned, attempt to preempt trouble.²⁸⁸ Given Palamon and Theseus's astoundingly lucid affirmation that enmity is mortal in addition to the status they share with the Thebans as displaced persons and spoils of war in Athens, the Amazons should indeed fear a fate similar to Arcite and Palamon's. They perform this fear by behaving as the captives they are. Thus they offer to kiss Theseus's feet "[t]il at the laste aslaked was his mood" (I 1760). Such conduct could hardly be taken as the proper stance for members of an equitable community in Chaucer's day. Though somewhat verbal, this performance is neither as dignified nor as incisive as either wifely counsel or a gadfly's sting would be. Of course, the Amazons do not expect a dialogue. This tearful moment is the best they can offer; thus we have an instantaneous outburst of fear and pain that exposes communication's escalating futility and true dialogue's retreat beyond the pale of possibility.

This deterioration is reflected by the fact that once Arcite and Palamon pledge allegiance to Theseus, their amusing repartee (I 1078-1186, 1234-74, 1580-1620) and all attempts to settle the meaning of their bond die. In fact, once they reconcile with Theseus, they never address each other directly again. To make matters worse, after the Thebans pledge "nevere mo" to "dere" Theseus's "contree," accept his lordship, and even become his "freendes in al that [they] may," he pardons them (I 1822, 24). And while Emelye persists in her desire to remain a virgin, Theseus arranges for them to fight officially in a tournament for her hand. He may be assembling a polity of sorts, but at this rate it will never produce a fellowship with communicative and interpretive capacities anything like those of Chaucer's tale-telling English pilgrims. Here, friendship

²⁸⁸ Fowler includes a cogent discussion of the power of erotic love vis-à-vis the Thebans' recovery of courtly positions ("Afterlife," 67-69).

and enmity are so flexible that they finally seem absurd. Similarly the project of understanding and being understood, belonging, ultimately, to a community that feels like home, appears farcical although it initially seems passionate and sincere.

The *Knight's Tale's* awkward attempts at communication bring symmetry along with absurdity. Regardless of what they mean to do, the wailing women on Athens's outskirts again send warring men straight to Thebes. Their ambiguous outburst, like others before it, reroutes trajectories, restating the question, "which way is home?" This is certainly what we wonder as Arcite and Palamon, together once more, head "homward . . . to Thebes with his olde walles wyde" in preparation for Theseus's tournament (I 1880). Can this be the same Thebes Theseus "rente adoun bothe walle and sparre and rafter" (I 990)? In Boccaccio's telling, Thebes remains more or less ruined, but here it is exceedingly capable of regeneration and continually needs to be recaptured—the grove scene is, after all, the second time Theseus apprehends Arcite and Palamon. As William F. Woods writes, "When Palamon and Aricite enter at opposite sides of the vast amphitheater, each heads a body of one hundred picked knights—small armies, reminiscent of small nations."²⁸⁹ Thebes, absolutely unable to house a nation at one moment and yet well-equipped to support its ex-patriots at another, finally breaks into two small, strange nations.

"a world in minature"²⁹⁰

Focusing closely on the tournament, we see that the knights whom Arcite and Palamon enlist in their struggle epitomize the bifurcation Woods identifies. With

²⁸⁹ William F. Woods, "Up and Down, To and Fro: Spatial Relationships in *The Knight's Tale*," in *Rebels and Rivals: The Contestive Spirit in The Canterbury Tales*, ed. Susanna Greer Fein *et al.* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1991), 53.

²⁹⁰ Tomasch, "*Mappa Mundi* and the Knight's Tale," 209.

Palamon comes “Lygurge hymself, the grete kyng of Trace,” a man who looks about like a griffon with eyes “glowden bitwixen yellow and reed” (I 2129, 32). This Thracian is certainly not summoned for his communication skills. Nonetheless, he imports more than his martial prowess: Lygurge arrives standing in a golden chariot, “as the gyse was in his contree,” and thus widens the rift between the Thebans by wedging in his own national traditions. Meanwhile Arcite enlists “[t]he grete Emetreus, the kyng of Inde,” the ends of the earth according to Chaucer’s imagination, to fight against his cousin (I 2156).

Emetreus looks even stranger than Lygurge:

His nose was heigh, his eyen bright citryn,
His lippes rounde, his colour was sangwyn;
A few frakenes in hys face yspreynd,
Bitwexen yelow and somdel blak ymeynd;
And as a leon he his lookyng caste.

(I 2167-70)

Here the Theban knights, who enter the tale “[b]ooth in oon armes,” prepare to battle each other under banners of different colors and are represented by foreign kings who wear their difference, their hostility and inscrutability on their faces and in their eyes (I 1012). Although linguistic dialogue has failed, and the Knight mentions it less and less, the eyes still confirm that Thebes has split into two strange nations. Despite Theseus’s proclaimed concern with reuniting “eyther syde ylik as ootheres brother,” he is most successful at providing a venue for the performance and proliferation of the difference that separates the Thebans (I 2734). Here we see that Theseus’s supposedly magnanimous gesture takes what might be condensed into a personal or purely familial feud and clothes it in international regalia, exposing rather than assuaging the proportions of the Thebans’ particular struggle.

Chaucer's readers interpret the functions of this tournament and theater in diverse and interesting ways. Each of these readings reminds us that the tournament and tournament round attempt to make broad pronouncements about the world and even chivalric history. Bruce Kent Cowgill reads the twelfth- and thirteenth-century style tournament as an "identification with the old order and its more exalted concept of chivalry,"—ultimately an indictment of "the debased nationalistic ideals of the Hundred Years War" and "a quiet plea for peace."²⁹¹ Hanning describes Theseus's tournament round as "a true *theatrum mundi*: an image of the universe, with men below and gods above," which either controls or intensifies human suffering depending on one's perspective.²⁹² Sylvia Tomasch, unlike Cowgill, highlights the tournament's failure, and with it Theseus's failure to reorder the world. She describes the tournament round as a failed T-O *mappa mundi*—a medieval world map with Jerusalem as its center. It fails for lack of a Jerusalem, a consequence of Theseus's paganism. A successful *mappa mundi*, however, "uses scenes of the visible world" to "intimate the invisible" thereby leading "pilgrims to territory beyond" the map.²⁹³ This view in tandem with visions of the tournament round as a place where problems intensify beyond original boundaries, still leads us to look to the margins. In the margins, we hear not exactly Cowgill's "quiet plea for peace," but rather the sounds of dissonance, inarticulate pain and failed dialogue—proclamation that war is not working. War, in all its forms, is a strategic failure when the desire is for national community and homeland rather than mere empire.

²⁹¹ Bruce Kent Cowgill, "The *Knight's Tale* and the Hundred Years War," *Philological Quarterly*, 54 (1975), 674, 677.

²⁹² Hanning, "The Struggle Between Noble Design and Chaos," 82.

²⁹³ Tomasch, "*Mappa Mundi* and the *Knight's Tale*," 217.

Let us look briefly at three additional instances of muddled communication on the sidelines. No matter how we read the details of Theseus's plans, his rules fail to determine a victor in the fight for Emelye. When Arcite (the tournament champion) dies, we get a devastatingly cacophonous scene. "Shrighte Emelye, and howleth Palamon," as if she were a bird and he a hound (I 2817). These two hardly seem to be peace-weaving-couple material, yet that's how Theseus styles them. Emelye becomes socially intelligible as a wife and a widow simultaneously. And at this moment it seems obvious that she and Palamon will soon be married. Her desire to remain a virgin coupled with Palamon's desire for her suggest two immediate interpretations for their dissonant chorus: their animal-like cries simultaneously mock true dialogue and respond to the failure of Theseus's order, which leaves subjects with loss and confusion where some sort of unity should be. Emelye and Palamon voice this confusion inside Theseus's palace as Arcite dies. It is as if dissonance and indecipherability draw closer and closer to the center of Theseus's empire as his imperial ambitions are realized.

Meanwhile in Athens-town a new set of mourners addresses Arcite. Amid "Cracchyng of chekes, renting eek of heer/ 'Why woldestow be deed,' thise wommen crye,/ And haddest gold ynough, and Emelye?" (I 2834-36). By the time that these mournful women apostrophize dead Arcite, true dialogue has become a sham. Their performance drives that home. Why not talk to Arcite? The dead man's chances of engaging in a productive dialogue with these women are better than Theseus's chances given his past performance— alive though he may be. Muscatine's reading of the women's perception as "incomplete" is tempting, because they seem so absurd. Their perception is fitting and optimal for the same reason. Theirs is an apt response to the

ridiculous fantasy of community building around them; indeed their truest function in Theseus's imperial society is their capacity to simultaneously demonstrate and address his failure. Finally, their words to lifeless Arcite stress the futility, wastefulness and absurdity of Theseus's martial plan to reconfigure Thebans and Amazons into a national society. These mourning women demonstrate how Theseus's imperial project destroys true dialogue and with it the possibility of understanding and being understood, the experience of belonging and sharing a sense of home.

Arcite's funeral exceeds all reasonable proportions, requiring so much sacrifice for its aristocratic display. As the Knight explains, this morbid pageant causes widespread homelessness. Arcite's state funeral requires a pyre so large that the felled trees produce a collective eviction. "Nymphes, fawnes and amadrides," spirits and animals alike, are "[d]isherited of hir habitacioun" (I 2928, 2926). The Athenian knack for destabilizing national resources is one of the most dependable forces in the *Knight's Tale*. Here we have a fresh instance of homelessness that reaches above and beyond the human sphere, compounding the profligacy of the tournament.²⁹⁴ As its imperial strength grows, Athens appears less and less to be a home to come home to, triumphantly or otherwise. Athens, far from nationhood, exists as and amid an expansive state of homelessness.

In significant legal and philosophical ways, Theseus's final speech surpasses all of the communal destruction that comes before. After the waste and passing of years, Theseus finds that he still does not "have fully of Thebans obeisaunce" (I 2974). And so he concocts a new plan. This time he announces his plan publicly in parliament: Palamon

²⁹⁴ Fowler provides an important reading of the political and cultural implications of the destruction of the grove and its trees ("Afterlife," 74).

and Emelye will marry. But as Fowler reminds us, regardless of their reported happiness, neither bride nor groom formally consents.²⁹⁵ With this final move, Theseus shakes the foundations of “marriage, an institution founded entirely on consent,” completing his assault on affectionate nation-sustaining bonds.²⁹⁶ He continues with his famed “First Mover” speech (I 2987-3093), which aims to prove the power and love of “thilke Movere stable . . . and eterne” via the inescapable death and corruptibility of all creation (I 3004). As Aers has shown, this speech leaves much to be desired from a philosophical perspective. And as mentioned above, Theseus might seem more credible in basing his deepest wisdom on his awareness of death if not for his earlier failure to read the ritual mourning of the widows of the Seven Against Thebes. Aers explains,

One hardly needs to be familiar with fourteenth-century criticism of traditional metaphysical proofs of God’s existence to notice the incoherence of this particular version of the argument from design, vulnerable enough in any form and place let alone in the contexts established by the *Knight’s Tale*. From a ‘wretched world’ in which all is subject to decay and death the last thing one can simply read off is the existence of a loving, omnipotent and eternal first mover.²⁹⁷

We either settle for Theseus’s speech or reject it. The best option may be to accept it as a final testament to the incoherence of communication —rhetorically verbose or inarticulate, dialogue or monologue. Here all social communication, especially Theseus’s polished form, fails to join his ultimately imaginary community through shared registers of emotion. In any case according to basic standards of Chaucer’s day and ours, Theseus’s last act is neither philosophically nor legally sound.

Although the *Knight’s Tale* offers only disappointingly unreliable intuition and incoherent rhetoric, language and imagination gain new potential through the power of

²⁹⁵ Ibid., 74-79.

²⁹⁶ Ibid., 60.

²⁹⁷ Aers, *Chaucer, Langland and the Creative Imagination*, 189-90.

suggestion despite these failures. In the *General Prologue*, language is a cultural marker, exemplified by the Prioress, a valuable tool, wielded by the Friar, and a communal link bonding the pilgrims with each other, in competitive *homward*-plodding sociability, and with the past, through the narrative terms of Harry's game. Language in the *Knight's Tale* must laboriously explain rather simple emotions, compensate for grand misconceptions and struggle to assuage the painful social disparateness that prevails in its own absence. The tale's most poignant scenes each include an outburst and a facile reading that belies the need for language to do these things.²⁹⁸ Clarity, however, remains elusive, and the one thing oral expression consistently conveys is the communal need for a dying form of dialogue. Furthermore, here the meaning of home and homeland disintegrate alongside the decadence of such communication. Tellingly, the first stanza of the *Knight's Tale* imagines a homecoming that is never realized. The tale's missing parts, true dialogue and homeland, seem ever more deficient in view of this fruitless imagination. Theseus's imagined imperial community is only imaginary. The tale's denizens do not experience belonging to a national community, though they seem to yearn for it, ever pursuing phantom dialogues. Likewise, a national homeland is a phantom that never quite materializes yet remains the imaginary target of a holographic arrow pointing homeward. The possibility of home and the desire for nations, past and future, each defines the other, tracing and retracing nationhood's shifting shape. Ultimately, nation appears as a discourse of desire and home appears as multivalent concept rather than as a practical experience. Neither one is successful. Thus the

²⁹⁸ I mean to indicate Theseus's encounter with the widows, Arcite's response to Palamon sighting Emelye, Ypolita and company's forest intervention, and Emelye and Palamon's reaction to Arcite's death. Two of these outbursts imagine an ultimately unsatisfied level of social intimacy while the third mocks earnest emotional communication and the fourth suggests absolute social deterioration via a complete failure of articulation.

Knight's Tale queries the extent to which homeland and national alliance are re-imaginable and at the same time insists on the indispensability of dialogue, of understanding and being understood to the experience of national belonging.

In the *Knight's Tale*, as Theseus's imperial reach lengthens, existing allies and would-be partners express their emotions and intentions less and less reliably; and as sympathy requires more and more work the possibility of true dialogue fades and both the force and meaning of communal cohesion disintegrate. According to Hanning, Chaucer not only expands our understanding of Theban history to reflect human possibility more generally, but also contracts it by allowing the Knight to transmit it and thereby expose the tensions he could see in late medieval chivalry more specifically. But the unceasing "struggle between chaos and noble designs" is neither so tightly circumscribed nor a universally human problem.²⁹⁹ It is, more accurately, a national problem appropriate to the demands of nations: legitimate sovereignty and a sense of comfort and cohesion, a feeling of being at home with sovereignty, among truly diverse subjects. The nation makes these demands, which require martial force as well as moral authority. These requirements, in turn, depend on some order. In the *Knight's Tale* order is all we get—and order alone is incomplete. My reading attempts to show that order is no substitute for the shared sense of belonging, the national affinities, that energize and sustain horizontal fellowships of the sort that grow extinct throughout this tale. Accordingly, Theseus's systematic conquest obstructs rather than promotes national consciousness. Although the plot ideally yields a well-ordered empire led by a sort of transnational aristocracy, the most decisive turns are marked by moments that reveal the impossibility of communication between would-be allies. These failures signal serious challenges to

²⁹⁹ Hanning, "'The Struggle Between Noble Design and Chaos,'" 70.

the value and practicality of the imperial order on which Theseus insists.³⁰⁰ Theseus's assiduous ordering superficially sutures together a world of desire and pain that is not truly under his control, ultimately demonstrating, by its poignant failures, that empire can neither control national community's most meaningful experiences, nor can it forge the nation's most human allegiances.

³⁰⁰ Romance is a literary tradition of approaching history by putting reality in touch with fantasy and finding meaning in the chance alliances and adventures that ensue. Likewise, nationalism is a political tradition of imagining history by putting reality in touch with fantasy and thereby linking power with the chance alliances and adventures that have begun to assemble a people. While the romance tradition informs the *Knight's Tale*, we must also admit that Theseus's understanding of power and meaning here is anything but romantic—and Theseus's perspective superficially overpowers the others. Theseus's perspective is epic and imperial order, and thus too overdetermined and unitary to allow experiences of national homeland and sympathy. The scope of this chapter prevents me from discussing genre thoroughly here. For useful discussions of the question of genre in the *Knight's Tale*, please see Susan Crane, *Gender and Romance in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 169-79; Robert Hanning, "The Struggle Between Noble Design and Chaos," 88-89; Peggy Knapp, *Chaucer and the Social Contest*, 28-31; Robert M. Stein, "The Conquest of Femenye: Desire, Power, and Narrative in Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*" in *Desiring Discourse: The Literature of Love, Ovid Through Chaucer*, eds. James J. Paxson and Cynthia A. Gravlee (Selinsgrove, Penn.: Susquehanna University Press; London: Associated University Presses, 1998), 188-205.

The Matter of Britain: Anachronism and England's Future Past

I. The *Man of Law's Tale*

Following the traditional Ellesmere order of the *Canterbury Tales*, the matter of Britain romances respond to crises that threaten national institutions in the *Tales'* first fragment fabliaux, which trace a well-known trajectory of decline. There we find clerks and a parson who are more interested in extra-marital sex than Christian morality, a Miller who would rather steal wheat than sell his services, and a wife who is all too ready to sell her services. Thus, the first fragment exposes a contemporary English nation characterized by pathological transgression of the order that church, law and marriage impose. Both the Man of Law and the Wife of Bath respond with memories of sovereignty's salvation in sixth-century Britain. The first part of this chapter argues that the *Man of Law's Tale* uses this past to address two sets of contemporary national concerns, anxieties about the future of English institutions in crisis and questions about England's place in the world, given its insular pagan history and claimed continental inheritances. The Man of Law renders the British past capable of producing an English future by citing a past episode of crisis and redemption that signals contemporary redemptive potential. He ultimately presents a historical case for national sovereignty as the antidote to the problems plaguing England in his own moment.

Earlier readings proclaim the *Man of Law's Tale* a new beginning for the entire Christian community and evaluate its treatment of Islam as sympathetic and tolerant, but recent criticism shows how this tale speaks for a comparatively narrow and exclusive

English national community.³⁰¹ Most recently Geraldine Heng and Kathy Lavezzo consider the relationship between England and empire. Lavezzo reads the tale as an assertion of English legal and geographic sovereignty as opposed to Roman sovereignty.³⁰² She shows that even though the English need Custance, the Roman Emperor's daughter, to reach their sovereign "religio-juridical potential," the Man of Law obtains Roman legal and religious authority for England without the usual burden of obligation to the empire.³⁰³ I follow Lavezzo in reading Custance's providential arrival on England's strange shores with only a Christian identity and no trace of her Roman imperial lineage as part of the Man of Law's attempt to wrest legal sovereignty for England from Rome.³⁰⁴ Focusing less on opposition and more on continuity, Heng argues that English nationalist impulses help re-found England when contiguous with ancient imperial civilization in the *Man of Law's Tale* as in other Constance saga romances.³⁰⁵ Viewed in wider context of the *Canterbury Tales*, however, continuity

³⁰¹ On the tale as a new beginning important works include Helen Cooper, *The Structure of the Canterbury Tales* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1984); V.A. Kolve, *Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative: The First Five Canterbury Tales* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1984); and Derek Pearsall, *The Canterbury Tales* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1985). On Islam, see Morton W. Bloomfield, "Chaucer's Sense of History," *JEGP* 51 (1952): 301-313; and Roger Ellis, *Patterns of Religious Narrative in the Canterbury Tales* (Totowa, NJ: Barnes and Noble, 1986). Susan Schibanoff, "Worlds Apart: Orientalism, Anti-Feminism and Heresy in Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale*," *Exemplaria* 8 (1986): 59-96; turns the critical tide with a reading of the tale's orientalist and sexist rhetoric, poised to reunify the Christian Englishmen of the Canterbury pilgrimage after the class-based antagonisms of the *Canterbury Tale's* first fragment. Kathleen Davis, "Time Behind the Veil," probes the Man of Law's orientalist discourse, concluding that his orientalism "works *through* women," because women bear their communities' collective ethnic and religious identities (116). Davis holds that English identity emerges through a world order wherein an unconvertible Islamic East opposes Christian Europe, including England.

³⁰² Kathy Lavezzo, "Beyond Rome," 149-80.

³⁰³ *Ibid.*, 167.

³⁰⁴ As Lavezzo explains, the Man of Law "simultaneously references and resolves the shortcomings of his class of legal professionals by depicting Custance both as the potential victim of a flawed Anglo-Saxon legal system and the means by which that system achieves judicial supremacy" (*Ibid.*). Also relevant are pages 156-62, where Lavezzo explains that for secular English lawyers in Chaucer's time, Rome, home to both canon law and mother church threatened English common law, as the purported exemplar and guardian of supreme Roman "juridical universalism" (158).

³⁰⁵ Geraldine Heng, *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 178-237.

between sixth-century Britain and Chaucer's own moment seems more crucial to the national re-founding—or, more precisely, redemption—at the heart of the *Man of Law's* project. Beginning with sovereignty's significance in the frame narrative and the *Parson's Tale*, we shall see how the *Man of Law's Tale* imagines English national sovereignty through anachronism and internationalism. My reading extends Lavezzo's point to national sovereignty, which is historical and political as well as legal and geographic.

Both the *Man of Law* and the *Wife of Bath* present sovereignty as a talismanic agent that redeems England's failing political and cultural institutions, yet neither pilgrim offers this key to redemption without also querying the viability of sovereignty as a political plan. English images of sovereignty come into focus only after the tale-tellers excuse violence and invoke the help of internationally influential texts that have not yet been written. Chaucer imagines sixth-century Britain situated in a world, whose political and cultural contours have already been shaped by the seventh-century Quran in the *Man of Law's Tale* and by Dante's fourteenth-century works the *Commedia* and *Convivio* in the *Wife of Bath's Tale*. These works shape the sovereign structures that redeem the English nation, implying that the only power that might possibly redeem England and ensure its continuity is the power of a British past that could not possibly have happened. In this light, the *Man of Law's Tale* reads as both a declaration of history's necessity to nationhood and an admission that this necessary history need not be true to be useful.

Chaucer's imagination of the English nation here resembles Hardt and Negri's understanding of the relationship between modern nationhood and sovereignty, wherein the nation frees and redeems a fraught concept of sovereignty by claiming to precede

it.³⁰⁶ The Chaucerian nation, like the modern nation claims to precede sovereignty by presupposing that its particular and transcendent national culture, identity and subjectivity are rooted in its own immemorial past. The difference here is that for Chaucer sovereignty itself helps a decadent nation to recover from the institutional crises that plague it. Nevertheless, the omnipresence of violence and coercion in both national romances puts sovereignty's legitimacy continually at stake, confronting critical readers with ethical questions about national sovereignty. Chaucer leaves it to his Parson to address the ethics of sovereignty directly.

Although he does not focus on English national sovereignty, the Parson shows that sovereignty itself governs relationships among folk, such as the fourteenth-century English, who share both religious and political identity. In such communities, ethical demands extend past what is basic to humanity to the particular demands of the nation, reason and mercy: intellectual and emotional reciprocity. In the *Parson's Tale*, sovereignty prescribes how rulers are to rule subjects who share their religious identity, a crucial part of fourteenth-century national identities. Even so, sovereignty preserves rather than abolishes hierarchical inequalities among them.

The Parson presents the relationship of lords to slaves in anti-Aristotelian, Christian terms. Undue oppression of slaves, who are in such condition not by nature, but because of sin, appears as an extreme case of avarice, an abuse of ownership privilege. The Parson emphasizes the limitations implicit in Dante's ideal of sovereignty by juxtaposing his ideas of sovereign ownership with his view of mankind's common origin and nobility. In *Convivio IV*, Dante challenges Aristotle, maintaining that the human race is descended from one man and that nobility is variable among man's

³⁰⁶ Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 101.

descendents based on virtue and irrespective of particular lineage.³⁰⁷ Likewise, quoting Augustine citing Genesis, the Parson explains, “the first cause of thralldom is for synne” (X 755). The Parson continues, “as the lawe seith that temporeel goodes of boonde-folke been the goodes of hir lordshippes, ye, that is for to understonde, the goodes of the emperour, to deffenden hem in hir right, but nat for to robben hem ne reven hem” (X 757). Here, imperial ownership imposes rather than resists obligation. In Dante’s *De monarchia*, beneficence flows from the emperor’s absolute ownership, seemingly without obligation.³⁰⁸ God limits the emperor’s ownership and judgment, yet imperial word is law— and limitless on earth. Chaucer draws together Dante’s Christian proto-humanism and his apparent imperialism, thereby emphasizing the emperor’s capacity for mediation instead of his absolute temporal sovereignty. From this perspective, imperial ownership interpolates obligation between lords and thralls, requiring lords to defend bondsmen. The Parson notes that, “thilke that thou clepest thy thralles been Goddes peple, for humble folk been Cristes freendes; they been contubernyal with the Lord;” and, moreover, “of swich seed as cherles spryngen, of swich seed spryngen lordes. As wel may the cherl be saved as the lord” (X 759-60). Thus all humanity holds the same political and spiritual potential. The emperor acts as a mediator, whose supreme ownership limits lordly treatment of thralls in accord with their common humanity and the impermanence of thralldom.

The emperor mitigates in cases of thralldom, but countries in which there is shared religious identity are a separate matter, the matter of *soverainte*. Chaucer’s final use of the word pertains to situations in which shared religious identity overwrites

³⁰⁷ Alighieri, *Banquet*, IV.xiv-xv pp. 157-64.

³⁰⁸ Alighieri, *Monarchia*, I.x-xiii pp. 47-73.

thralldom and subjects share the same condition, though not the same rank or degree.

The Parson explains, “in somme contrees ther they byen thralls, whan they han turned hem to the feith, they maken hire thralls free out of thralldom. And therefore, certes, the lord oweth to his man that the man oweth to his lord” (X 771). Freedom comes with shared faith and mutual obligation with freedom, yet freedom is not equality. Here religious identity works much like contemporary forms of secular national identity, bonding people to their co-religionists, while both mitigating and preserving hierarchies that define them. Sovereignty maintains hierarchies as thralldom disappears and folk share a decisive form of cultural identity, religious identity, in this case. The Parson continues,

The Pope calleth hymself servant of the servantz of God; but for as much as the estaat of hooly chirche ne myghte nat han be, ne the commune profit ne myghte nat han be kept, ne pees and rest in erthe, but if God hadde ordeyned that som men hadde hyer degree and som men lower, therefore was soveryntee ordeyned, to kepe and mayntene and deffenden hire underlynages or hire subgetz in resoun, as ferforth as it lith in hire power, and nat to destroyen hem ne confounde.

(X 772-73)

According to the Parson, the Pope, by his own admission, occupies the bottom rung of this hierarchy of lords and free servants. God sits at the top followed by his faithful, who are served by the Pope. Here, political sovereignty is lay sovereignty. The line is direct between lay citizens and God’s lordship; neither Pope nor Church mediates. Thus, God ordains sovereignty for rule among believers, but it remains a secular, reasonable and human power distinct from papal jurisdiction. Sovereignty particularly pertains to communities wherein members share a faith, but not a class; in fact, sovereignty ensures that they do not ever share a class. In Chaucer’s national romances, sovereignty institutionalizes hierarchy as it hierarchizes the institutions of marriage, the court and the

church, which are always composed of people who hold disproportionate amounts of power. Even though shared faith and the communal identity that implies are crucial to political identity in sovereign polities, conversion may found such identity, as the Parson has it — and even when all subjects share this identity, this freedom that resists equality, religious leadership does not translate directly into political sovereignty.

The distinction between religious leadership and political sovereignty is clearest when we view sovereignty's ethics in the simplest terms. Sovereignty is an ethical form of governance, because of its earthly function, ensuring "commune profit . . . pees and rest in erthe," and because of "resoun," not because of faith, even if God is its source, even if it averts the sin of avarice. Source, earthly function and spiritual function are all distinguishable. Not faith, but reason rules members of hierarchical, religiously homogenous communities. Sovereignty maintains legitimate order in a multi-class society, imposing mutual obligation among governed and governors, and promises to secure common profit and earthly peace as well as the property and condition of the church. The Parson holds that God's ordinance is intelligible in human terms: sovereignty is ethical for observable reasons. The last three clauses in the passage above delineate sovereignty's earthly nature as legitimate ownership and judgment; men of higher degree may neither destroy nor confound "hire underlynges or hire subgetz." The verbs *destroyen* and *confounden* distinguish between the material and intellectual interests of subjects in the sovereign realm. The nouns *underlynges* and *subgetz* suggest animate and inanimate, human and material, components of a kingdom. So sovereignty precludes absolute ownership of communal resources and absolute judgment in intellectual matters without regard for common profit; but because citizens of sovereign

realms hold different ranks, we must not assume that they will profit equally. The most resonant point is the humblest, hidden in a subordinate clause that admits sovereigns only maintain their subjects “as ferforth as it lith in hire power.” Earthly sovereignty has discrete spatial and temporal limits; it only goes so far ahead. Chaucerian sovereignty’s functionality and legitimacy derive from particular limits rather than universal breadth, as in the case of Dante’s imperial sovereignty, limited only by time and the sovereign’s own nobility.³⁰⁹ Thus the *Parson’s Tale* marks Chaucer’s human sphere of sovereignty.

Beyond sovereign realms lie rule by “lordes that been lyk wolves, that devouren the possessiouns or the cattle of povre folk wrongfully, withouten mercy or mesure” (X 774). Wolfish lords behave as if outside the human community of “povre folk,” outside the bounds of legitimate ownership. In contrast, sovereignty renders obligatory mercy, measure, compassion and reason. Next, the Parson raises the issue of mercantile agency, using the negative example of “deceite bitwixe marchant and marchant” (X 276). Distinguishing between “bodily” and “goostly” merchandise, he describes only the former as “honest and leveful,” suggesting that the nature of goods legitimizes or delegitimizes the exchange (X 776). The Parson continues, “Of thilke bodily marchandise that is leveful and honest is this: that there as God hath ordeyned that a regne or a contree is suffisaunt to hymself, thane is it honest and leveful that of habundance of this contree, that men helpe another contree that is moore nedy. And therefore ther moote been marchanutz to bryngen for that o contree to that oother hire merchandises” (X 777-78). Merchants act not as official citizens of a country, but as agents marking the boundaries

³⁰⁹ Alighieri, *Monarchia*, I. esp. iv-xiii. According to Dante, love defines sovereign nobility: the emperor is a good leader not because he owes something to the community of his subjects, nor because of communitarian values of exchange or reciprocity, but because his jurisdiction is absolute and he is thus exempt from desire and most capable of love.

separating self-sufficient, sovereign countries as well as their valuable intersections with each other. Exchange beyond essential need defines relationships across sovereign boundaries, wherein ownership is not shared, but changes hands. Only material goods may be exchanged across sovereign boundaries legitimately. A principle of fair economic trade (rather than mercy or reason) legitimizes mercantile exchange. Discussing sovereignty primarily in marital situations concerning adults who hold different types and amounts of power, Chaucer marks relationships governed by sovereignty as those that require both emotional and intellectual engagement among participants. Here sovereign rule does not approach divinity and fails its purpose when it falls short of humanity's emotional depths.

The *Parson's Tale* gives the fullest definition of sovereignty in all Chaucer's *oeuvre*.³¹⁰ The term implies legitimacy and indicates shared ownership and judgment, yet acknowledges that ownership and judgment are never easily or evenly shared. Sovereignty puts ethical pressure on the relationships it governs as it exposes the inequalities that facilitate that very government. The Parson presents sovereignty as a cultural, political and perhaps spatial boundary within which there is no legitimate outside religious or political intervention. His trajectory accentuates distinctions among ownership mediated by imperial power, ownership within sovereign domains, where compassion, reason and reciprocity mediate, and ownership exchanged across self-sufficient domains. Here, sovereignty is mutually exclusive with both thralldom and equality, because it requires both freedom and hierarchy. The term pertains particularly to

³¹⁰ Susanne Sara Thomas, "The Problem of Defining Sovereignty in the *Wife of Bath's Tale*" *Chaucer Review* 41 (2006): 87-97; considers the problem of defining sovereignty in the *Wife of Bath's Tale*. Although the Parson does not offer a direct and systematic definition of sovereignty, it is considerably more definable in his view.

national realms wherein ownership is not mediated by emperors, merchants or popes, but rather wherein men of different degrees and shared religious identity are bound hierarchically in mutual obligation. The question of sovereignty is particularly difficult in these cases, because universal human rights are too broad to represent ethical imperatives— and principles of fair economic trade are too narrow. Hence, sovereignty remains a necessary, yet unreliable indicator of how and how fairly national government will work in the *Tales*.

The word sovereignty does not appear in *Man of Law's Tale*, yet images of sovereign English and Syrian nations do, while concepts of political, legal, territorial and cultural sovereignty thrive there. The narrative begins as benevolent Syrian merchants relay stories about Custance, the Roman emperor's daughter, to the Syrian Sultan, who falls in love with her reputation immediately. Neither Nicholas Trevet's *Life of Constance*, nor John Gower's *Tale of Constance*, the closest analogues, specifies Syria, which Chaucer mentions seven times by name (II 134, 173, 177, 279, 387, 441, 955). Chaucer's specificity renders Syria and Syrians (II 153, 394, 435, and 963) a more particular nation than we find in his sources: Trevet's merchants and Sultan hail from "la grande Sarazine," while Gower's occupy an even more generic "Barbarie" (Trevet p.165, Gower l. 599).³¹¹ After the Sultan and his barons convert to Christianity in exchange for Custance's hand, his steadfastly Muslim mother claims sovereignty, preserving Islamic law and culture by killing her son and the converts. She sends Custance off on a rudderless boat that takes her to Saxon England. There, Custance inspires more bloody

³¹¹ All references to Nicholas Trevet's "Life of Constance" are to Margaret Schlauch's 1941 edition, printed in *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales*, ed. W.F. Bryan and Germaine Dempster (New York: Humanities Press, 1958) and are noted by page number alone hereafter. Gower's *Tale of Constance* also appears there; I note Gower's text by line number alone. *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales*.

crimes, and more conversions. She also rehabilitates the nation's feeble institutions by querying the judicial system's capacity to protect marriage and life and, simultaneously, exposing the knighthood's corruption. Custance ultimately marries the converted Saxon king Alla, who (like fellow sixth-century king, Arthur) should know better than to leave the homeland vulnerable with relatives like his— but he is away fighting the ever-troublesome Scots when Custance delivers their son. Donegild, Alla's mother, exiles Custance and son; so Alla kills her upon his return. Years later, Alla seeks the Pope's absolution in Rome, where he is reunited with his family. When his grandfather dies, Maurice, son of an English king and Roman princess, becomes Roman emperor. Thus, England provides continuity for Rome though Maurice, while Rome imparts Christianity, order, and justice to England through Custance. Finally, England appears as a sovereign Christian nation, interdependent with, yet distinct from Rome's empire.

This final image of England is all the more powerful when we consider that the *Man of Law's Tale* begins with both merchants and the possibility of conversion, two important posts along the trajectory through which the Parson explicates sovereignty in his tale. In Chaucer's analogues, Constance converts the merchants. Although Chaucer lingers over the merchants' description, it is business as usual as they go back to Syria, unconverted, "[a]nd doon hir nedes as they han doon yore" (II 174). They are distinctly outside of Christian community or any national community that the Sultan and Custance might create. By the Parson's standards, theirs is a purely mercantile mediation, the sort that is unnecessary where sovereignty mediates among those who share a religious identity. But these merchants are absolutely necessary. In fact, the Sultan falls in love

with Custance based solely upon her repute as they convey it. The Man of Law explicates the Sultan's adoption of Custance's religious identity thus,

. . . the Sowdon and his baronage
And alle his liges sholde ycristened be,
And he shal han Custance in marriage,
And certein gold, I noot what quantitee;
And heer-to founden sufficient suretee.
(II 239-43)

This agreement presents particular problems. A dowry seems apt and reasonable, but Chaucer matches spiritual conversion with an unknown, yet quantifiable "quantitee" of gold. This inter-cultural exchange resembles simony. The deal and its promise to "founden sufficient suretee" elicits questions of conversion, politics and continuity: can any amount of gold legitimately be involved here? What can we expect from this marriage: love, fidelity, continuity? If a Sultan and his barons become Christian, how will Christianity alter their sovereign nation's character?

Chaucer always joins concepts of nation and sovereignty through women who are intimately involved in hierarchical relationships with men.³¹² Thus he constantly reminds his readers that national sovereignty depends on both cooperation and inequality among citizens of different sexes and genders. This pattern reminds us that both marriage and the nation-state attempt to institutionalize love (*eros* and patriotism) and harness that emotion's stratum-blurring force for the purpose of continuity through the logic of sovereignty. What we learn about sovereignty in marriage applies to sovereignty in larger political contexts; likewise, what we learn about sovereignty in the national context applies to sovereignty in marriage. Perhaps the most difficult of Chaucer's messages

³¹² Take for example, Troilus and Criseyde, Custance and her husbands, the Wife of Bath and hers, The Old wife and the Knight, Dorigen and Arveragus, and Griselda and Walter.

about love is his insistence that sovereignty and love belong together.³¹³ Both concepts function through structures of expectation, but never turn out to be what they themselves are expected to be; still, Chaucerian nationhood depends on these undependable concepts for continuity. Even though this marriage promises to promote “Cristes lawe deere” and is arranged with “the popes mediacioun” and mediation “by tretys and embassadrie / . . . all the chirche, and al the chivalrie,” neither the Man of Law nor Custance appears hopeful as Custance turns toward Syria (II 237, 234, 233, 236).

We find Chaucer’s second and third uses of the word *nacioun* in this hopeless and dubious context. To the Man of Law’s mind, it is no wonder Custance “wepte, / That shal be sent to strange nacioun/ . . . to be bounden under subjeccioun” of a mysterious husband (II 267-68, 270). As he sees it, neither sanction by church and social hierarchy nor diplomatic attempts will familiarize the Sultan’s strange and particular nation. He has already reported the great diversity between “bothe lawes,” Christianity and Islam (II 221); the lawyer now assumes that the cultural and legal particularity represented by each religious law will yield a relationship characterized by subjection, the opposite of sovereignty. Here cultural particularity seems stronger than the possibility of legal universality: the Sultan’s nation remains strange, foreign, unassimilable, regardless of legal and clerical mediation. Even his grasp for Christianity, a purportedly universal religion available to all mankind, is met with nationalist xenophobia.

Custance’s words take the Man of Law’s skepticism even further. In her opening address to her father she describes herself as an exile, a “wrecched child” (II 274). Custance idealizes the home she leaves, condensing all of its comforts into the figure of her “mooder, [her] soverayn plesance” (II 276). Referencing father, mother and child,

³¹³ Not even the Franklin escapes it in the end (V 1481).

Custance invokes the biological family— the basic reproductive unit of society, on which national continuity traditionally depends. Although Custance presumably leaves home to start her own family, she sees family exclusively as her family of origin; she sees herself as a daughter and child and mourns her exile to a foreign nation, as if it could have no redeeming consequence. She associates her mother with both the homeland from which she is exiled and with sovereignty, the highest state on earth— and the furthest from thralldom. Proclaiming her exile as a consequence of her sex and her condition, Custance explains, “Wommen are born to thralldom and penance, / And to been under mannes governance” (II 286-87). Custance has, in fact, enthralled the Sultan so much that he has agreed to convert to her religion and compelled his barons to do the same, yet she perceives this marriage as the beginning of her own painful political and cultural alienation rather than as a way to spread her religion and ensure Roman, Christian continuity, dynastic or otherwise. Neither her own potential motherhood nor the conversion she inspires, interests Custance, who believes her womanhood trumps the specific details of her situation. Female sovereignty (or subjection) vis-à-vis national affiliation and residence is at issue. As she leaves a realm where she can associate sovereignty with motherhood and, by extension, womanhood, Custance not only insists that exile from mother and homeland is a negative consequence of her own womanhood, but also suggests that this exile is tantamount to thralldom and suffering. Thus womankind is a transnational underclass with no right to freedom or stability of homeland, for when women marry they must leave home. Woman is a political category, a class outside nationhood’s promises of continuity and justice, yet needed for both.³¹⁴

³¹⁴ Like the exile in Edward W. Said, *On Late Style* (New York: Pantheon, 2006), 146, the women of the *Man of Law’s Tale*, whether exiled away from the nation or murdered within it, deliver meaning to national

Custance understands that she is being sent to a different nation, but she describes a realm beyond foreign, a realm that exceeds the usual limitations of national boundaries in Chaucer's text. Syria is not simply strange—it is “the Barbre nacioun,” which Larry Benson translates as “pagan world” (II 281). But here Custance suggests a community much larger than “nacioun” might reasonably indicate in any of its other *Canterbury Tales* contexts. To call one a barbarian is to define him as other; a barbarian is ostensibly one whose utterance is absolutely outside the bounds of the name-caller's linguistic comprehension. Nevertheless, this particular tag of barbarity belies the distinctive otherness with which Custance means to label the Syrians. In Trevet's story, Constance complains that she must live “entre estraunges barbaryns” (“among strange barbarians”), but Chaucer's Custance evokes a national group (166). In its other *Tales*' contexts, *nacioun* indicates a rather refined group: the knight in the *Wife of Bath's Tale* uses it to indicate his noble family, and we first see it in the *General Prologue*, where the pilgrim-Knight represents England above other nations (III 1068; I 53). But now Chaucer joins ideas of nationhood and barbarity. As Custance describes her future husband's nation with an onomatopoeic word that imitates the flat, repetitive sound of indecipherable nonsense and denotes foreigners whose speech sounds like babble, she also admits the common, if not universal, human experience of hearing other languages as nonsense. Her use of *nacioun* reminds readers that that which sounds barbarous to one may be another's national language—indeed, what strikes some as barbarity, strikes others as nationalism.

This reference to the barbarous or Barbary is among the first in English.³¹⁵

Although the word *barbre* comes to English directly from Old French and Latin and to Latin from Greek, it has synonymic homophones in Arabic. The Arabic root beh, alif, ra, pronounced *bara*, a verb (or beh, waw, ra, pronounced *bur*, an adjective) indicates the state of being uncultivated in Arabic. *Bur'bara* (feminine) and *bur'bar* (masculine) are colloquial Lebanese pejoratives that designate a person who talks too much and incomprehensibly. According to the *OED*, the relation among the Greek, Arabic and English words (as well as the English word's cognates) remains unclear.³¹⁶ The onomatopoeic quality of this repeated syllable helps to explain its ubiquity across language; it is sound that is outside of, but not prior to language. *Barbre* mimics sound that is audible to those who have a particular language, but incomprehensible to them as language, indecipherable in the ways that its hearers' decipher their language. Of course, no language, linguistic group or nation holds the key to deciphering all others. All language must be cultivated and those who are not learned in a certain language hear that language as babble, as barbarous ciphers of sound.

Custance does not mean to invoke such basic human ways of understanding and failing to understand. Nevertheless, at the very moment that she attempts to draw a line between her culture and the Sultan's, she unwittingly proclaims this culture-defying similarity. Those who call others barbarians would rather not admit such human

³¹⁵ The *MED* gives the *Wicliffite Bible* ca. 1384 as the first reference. *Middle English Dictionary Online*, s.v. "barbar," <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=byte&byte=11358984&egdisplay=compact&egs=11362340> (accessed August 20, 2008). The *OED* names an English Psalter of 1300. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. "barbary," http://dictionary.oed.com.jerome.stjohns.edu:81/cgi/entry/50017481?query_type=word&queryword=barbar&first=1&max_to_show=10&sort_type=alpha&result_place=1&search_id=cpkm-OD5TIz-5882&hilite=50017481 (accessed on August 20, 2008).

³¹⁶ The *OED* also tells us that in the sixteenth century "barbarousness" came to indicate vulgarity and uncultivated speech or diction as opposed to classical or refined culture and language (*Ibid.*).

similitude. Though in this case, the trans-cultural similarity that *barbre* discloses is especially poignant due to the Muslim and hence Arabic context. Custance persistently ignores anything that might facilitate assimilation with the Sultan and other Syrians, insisting instead on Syrian alterity. Benson's translation of "Barbre nacioun" as "pagan world" corresponds with Custance's later equation of "Surrye" with "hethenesse" (II 1108-12). Here she forecloses the possibility of conversion as a means of interdependence or collaboration between Syrians and Romans. Custance refuses to calculate her husband's conversion, the expectations marriage implies, or his willingness to assimilate to her ways. Her prejudice against his as a barbarous nation resists empathy and sympathy, despite his stated intentions, and her reference to barbarism conflates linguistic and religious difference, rendering the overall national difference between hers and the "Barbre nacioun" insurmountable.

Barbre's mixed etymology and onomatopoeic quality subvert this obvious function of othering, of rendering Syria foreign and incomprehensible. At the same time, anachronism makes religious conversion a larger problem than it would have been, if Chaucer were historically consistent. The sixth-century Syria to which Custance goes may have seemed foreign and incomprehensible to a historical Roman Christian princess; but it was not uncultivated—nor was it pagan or even Muslim, as Muhammad did not receive his first prophetic revelation until the early seventh century. Syria was in fact one of the more Christian places on earth in the sixth century. Its Christians certainly did not need to be initiated through the baptism that our Sultanness imagines.³¹⁷ Chaucer's Syria is

³¹⁷ Kamal Salibi, *A House of Many Mansions: the History of Lebanon Reconsidered* (Berkeley, 1988), 87-90, explains, that sixth-century Syrians belonged to many churches and were primarily Monophysites. They believed that Christ had only one (divine) nature, rather than two (human and divine) natures, and were thus heretics according to Byzantine and Roman orthodoxy. According to Bernard Lewis, *The Middle*

an imagined community that is only imaginary. Like most images of the nation, it works optimally as a space for considering how questions of language, religion, conversion, sovereignty, subjection, and gender distinguish one nation from another. Thus the *Man of Law's Tale's* anachronistic setting reminds us that national identity depends more on identifying, producing and prioritizing criteria that distinguish or assimilate peoples than on true historical difference between them.

Despite Custance's words, Chaucer does not present Syria as a particularly barbarous place— it is violent, but it is neither uncultivated nor lacking sophisticated language. Chaucer neglects details about sixth-century Syrian religion and language as he presses his English nationalist case for Britain's exceptional inheritance of Roman religious and legal authority, yet he points toward real fourteenth-century English anxieties regarding Islamic culture. His romance acknowledges that by the sixth century, Latin had begun its decline. While Trevet's Constance speaks "Sessoneys" (Saxon), Custance speak her own "Latyn corrupt" when she washes up on Briton shores, simultaneously indicating Italian and noting Latin's declining state (Trevel p. 168, II 519).³¹⁸ Meanwhile those who would later become the first Muslims spoke an Arabic

East: a Brief History of the Last 2000 Years (New York, 1995) 33-47, "After the death of the emperor Theodosius in 395 CE, the [Roman] empire was split into two, a western empire ruled from Rome, and an Eastern empire ruled from Constantinople. Within a comparatively short time, the western empire was submerged in a series of barbarian invasions, and in effect ceased to exist. The eastern empire survived these difficulties, and was able to maintain itself for another thousand years" (34). While we can not be sure exactly how Lewis means to qualify these "barbarian" invaders, it seems certain that the historical sixth-century Syria had been no more touched by barbarians than Custance's Roman home. Furthermore, Mount Lebanon, Antioch, Aleppo, and other cities in what Chaucer would have meant by Syria have been home to Ghassanite, Maronite and other small Christian communities since Jesus of Nazareth's first followers established the church at Antioch in the first years following his death. According to Salibi, "by the sixth century, most if not all of [the Arab tribes of Syria] were Christian" (89). So the sixth-century Syria that Chaucer imagines as a potential and then impossible site of Christian conversion was already Christian. In fact, it had been Christian before Rome was Christianized.

³¹⁸ Chaucerians read Custance's language in diverse ways; it appears in a variety of forms, from an attempt at historical verisimilitude to the gift of xenoglossia. Christine F. Cooper, "But algates therby was she

language that was rising toward its classical Quranic perfection. The Sultanness, the most anti-assimilationist figure in this tale, understands Syria as a sovereign nation and defends it as such. She reveals the oxymoronic quality of Custance's "Barbre nacioun" by stressing the refinement that comes with national particularity, with the culture than Custance reads as barbarously heathen. The Sultanness's Syria is too cultivated and too defined by the "hooly lawes of our Alkaron" to succumb to Christianity (II 332). This reference amplifies the anachronism in Trevet's and Gower's tales. Although it did not exist at the time of Alla's Britain, the Sultanness names the Quran, known (throughout the Muslim world, including medieval Spain) not only for its powerful religious rhetoric, but also for its poetic perfection as a complete classical text revealed to Muhammad directly by God and set to revolutionize Arabic. In this way, "Alkaron" might epitomize Arabic culture's challenge to the fourteenth-century vernacular poet struggling to perfect a fledgling English language.³¹⁹ Chaucer's anxieties about English appear most clearly when the Man of Law denounces Custance's second mother-in-law as a traitor so far beyond English's pale that he can not describe her treachery to his fellows in English. English does not reach her behavior, either because England's Queen Mother is so base a

understonde': Translating Custance in Chaucer's Man of Law's Tale," *Yearbook of English Studies* 36 (2006): 27-38, provides a thorough discussion of Custance's language and critical response to it.

³¹⁹ On the place of Arabic culture and language in medieval England and Spain see Dorothee Metlitski, *The Matter of Araby in Medieval England* (New Haven, 1977); and Maria Rosa Menocal, *The Ornament of the World* (New York, 2002). Both Menocal and Metlitski discuss Peter the Venerable's commissioning of the first translation of the Quran, from Arabic to Latin. This translation was completed by the Englishman Robert of Ketton in 1143 and includes a biography of Muhammed (Menocal, 179-181; Metlitski, 30-35). They also note Chaucer's important references to Petrus Alfonsi, author of *Disciplina Clericalis* and practically the first professor of Arabic in England (Metlitski, 18-19; Menocal, 147-54), and to Pedro of Castile, whom Chaucer visited in Spain in 1366 (Metlitski, 159). Menocal writes, "Virtually everywhere in Peter's kingdom was the musty smell of old books that Chaucer already knew well, the books of the old Arabic libraries translated into languages men like Chaucer could read, as well as the fresh smell of new stucco, carved out in arabesques and in Arabic" (243). Although we cannot be absolutely sure what Chaucer knew about Arabic, Muhammed and the Quran, there is no reason to suspect ignorance. Indeed, Europe's writers and thinkers persistently struggled with the formidable force of Arabic learning from the twelfth-century onward.

creature or, more aptly, because English language lacks sophistication. In any case, the Sultanness references law three times (II 336, 337) in her plan to subvert her son's conversion (II 330-43). She insists on her nation's virtue, legal cultivation, and particularity, showing readers that Syria's barbarity, and barbarity in general, is relative at best. Through the Sultanness, Chaucer imagines that the Syrian people might already be armed with a Quranic law, language and culture capable of challenging Roman Christianity, a well-founded anxiety among fourteenth-century crusading nations.

Historical sixth-century Syria was not a nation against which Chaucer could easily distinguish Roman or English religious identity. It was a largely Christian land, populated by Christian sects, whose clerics' power never extended beyond the region, whose rites never assumed imperial proportions— unlike Roman Christianity. Many sixth-century Syrian Christians spoke Syriac, the western Aramaic language that Jesus of Nazareth himself spoke. Of those who spoke an Arabic vernacular, all used Aramaic as a liturgical language. At any rate, Aramaic, Jesus's own language was the *lingua franca*.³²⁰ But this does not deter Custance from describing sixth-century Syria as the “Barbre nacioun,” hopelessly unresponsive to Christian conversion. Custance imagines a threatening pagan world, a crude empire whose power and alterity are impossible to limit. At the same time, by presenting it as a land ruled by Quranic legal and linguistic perfection, the Sultanness imagines Syria as a formidable and particular nation, prepared to resist the expansion of imperial Roman religion and culture. The truth about sixth century Syria must lie somewhere between these imaginary cultural poles. In the *Man of Law's Tale*, explaining Custance's inability to stay in Syria, her arrival in Northumberland, and,

³²⁰ Salibi, *A House of Many Mansions*, 85, 90; Lewis, *The Middle East*, 24-25, 44.

ultimately, English nationhood means obfuscating Syria by revising its history anachronistically and polarizing its culture in one or more directions.

Even though Custance's passivity and the Sultanness's aggressiveness push them toward opposite poles of femininity and confirm the difference between their nations, the two display comparable aversions to assimilation, deep attachments to their own religions, and speak remarkably similar lines—Chaucer's addition.³²¹ Custance's lament, "Wommen are born to thralldom and penance, / And to been under mannes governance" is echoed by the Sultanness's instructive query, "What sholde us tyden of this newe lawe/ But thralldom to oure bodies and penance/ And afterward in helle to be drawe" (II 286-87, 337-39). Each responds to imminent melding of their cultures; each voices concern about her changing political condition; each expects thralldom. But looking more closely, we find grave ideological disparity. While, Custance thinks that birth causes thralldom, the Sultanness understands that living outside of proper religious law (sinfulness) causes first earthly thralldom, a condition that strips away political identity, and next condemnation to hell. Custance reflects the Aristotelian idea that some humans (women) are simply born to thralldom. Surprisingly, the Sultanness represents the Parson's views that religious identity grounds political identity and that shared religious law and political condition coincide. Thus, their most philosophically serious difference aligns Custance with Aristotle and pre-Christian ideas of human nobility and the Sultanness with the Parson.³²²

³²¹ As noted above, feminist critics including Schibanoff and Davis explain the relation between feminine and national alterity in the *Man of Law's Tale*. See also Kathryn Lynch, "Storytelling, Exchange and Constancy: East and West in Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale*," *Chaucer Review* 33 (1999): 409-22; and Brenda Deen Schildgen, *Pagans, Tartars and Jews in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales* (Gainesville, 2001).

³²² Of course the Sultanness is from Syria, a country much closer to Jerusalem, the focal point of Christianity, while Custance is from Rome, a city closer to Athens than Jerusalem, the focal point of Aristotelian philosophy. From a geographic perspective, informed by Nicole Oresme's view of the link

This alignment does not erase the particularity of Syrian Muslim nationhood. The Sultaness's certainty about the mutual exclusion of correct faith and thralldom simply suggests that the principle the Parson uses to legitimize national sovereignty legitimizes Muslim national sovereignties as well as Christian national sovereignties. At least in theory, such sovereignties are distinct and interdependent, analogous in form, but not in content. Heng has argued that "the Constance romances show no interest whatsoever in imagining a re-beginning for the Islamic nation and its people as a newly (re)formed Christian community, suggesting the unimaginability—the unspeakability—of the project."³²³ I agree with Heng up to the point of Christianity, which is no part of Chaucer's agenda for Syria. In fact, Chaucer's agenda depends on his anachronistic break with reality, for Christian Syria is utterly useless in distinguishing England as the strangely sovereign Christian nation that Lavezzo brings into focus. However, in paving the way for English national exceptionalism, Chaucer fails to prevent the Sultaness's imagination of a distinctly Muslim redemption for Syria, the nation. Heng's observation underestimates the *Man of Law's Tale's* perspective on nationhood at large and its imagination of Syria in particular. The Sultaness interprets adherence to proper religious law as salvific and explains to her countrymen that keeping their law "shall make us sauf for everemoore" (II 343). She assumes her nation's sovereign seat in the name of salvation, a concept inseparable from redemption and re-beginning. Here the Sultaness

between geography, language and political communication as expounded in his commentary on Aristotle's *Politics*, it seems fitting that the Sultaness would find Christian ideas about thralldom more appealing than Aristotelian ideas, and the Roman Emperor's daughter would find Aristotle more persuasive than Christianity. This subverts the idea that Rome is the rightful inheritor of Christianity, before we even approach the issue of England's inheritance from Rome. Antiochean Christianity, let us remember, predates Roman Christianity. I do not mean to suggest that Chaucer consciously challenges Rome's claim to Christianity, here. But, whether Chaucer knew it or not, his Sultaness's accordance with the Parson and Custance's quasi-Aristotelian understanding of birth as thralldom's cause does just that: it subverts the idea of Rome as Christianity's true home.

³²³ Heng, *Empire of Magic*, 227.

redeems Syria from her son's Christianity, his decadent abandonment of "his olde sacrifices" (II 325). Save for her insistence on Islam as the true faith, in this instance, the Muslim woman is more in line with Christian views about politics, religious identity, thralldom and the redemptive power of faith than our most Christian princess.

Although the Sultanness understands the form of Christian politics better than Custance, she has no faith in Christianity. Still, she understands Christianity so well that its rituals neither intimidate nor persuade her. She and her cohort even "feyne . . . Christendom to take" and pretend to be baptized, confident that "coold water shal nat greeve us but a lite!" (II 352). The Sultanness refuses to let "Makometes lawe out of [her] herte" and so must defend her nation— demonstrating that in temporal national struggles religion motivates feelings of patriotism, yet knowing all the while that running human blood is more powerful than holy water (II 336). She murders her son, his Syrian converts, and the Roman Christians attending Custance, thereby preserving Islam in Syria, but allows Custance to live and sends her off in a new direction, though in a rudderless boat. For better or worse, the Sultanness instantiates the difference between faith and intellectual understanding. Despite Custance's intention when she labels Syria a barbarous nation, Syria, embodied by the Sultanness, understands Custance, her religion and the politics of conversion well enough to subvert and divert them all— at least for the moment.

Custance's father destroys the Sultanness and her queendom before the tale ends, yet as "Surrye" recedes into the distance, its form matches the image of the Andersonian nation much more closely than England ever does in this romance. No nation is eternal, but all nations imagine themselves to be so, holding fast to the value of continuity. At this

moment, Syria has been defended by its sovereign and her community of comrades, men who swear and consent “to lyve with hire and dye, and by hire stond,” forming a cross-gender, hierarchical, yet cooperative fellowship willing to kill and be killed for their nation (II 345).³²⁴ It remains a polity ruled by a sovereign strong enough to defend its law, order, and religion—the supreme cultural element that directs the others—by killing all traitors. The Syrians proceed with one faith among them, having rejected a mercantile deal, confirmed by imprudent religious and political authorities, a deal to exchange a woman and some money for the spiritual conversion of folk with a perfectly functional national religion. Syria remains free, a sovereign domain resistant to thralldom by both its sovereign’s own standards and the Parson’s formal standards. Here Syrian nationalism resists Roman Christianity and imperialism. Syria disproves Custance’s charge of barbarism, yet refuses her culture, remaining a sovereign, self-determined realm supported by a hierarchical comradeship. For, as the Man of Law explains, the Sultaness “hath with hir freedes doon this cursed dede,/ For she herself wolde al the contree lede” (II 433-34). The virtue of the deed is relative at best. But, according with Jean de Paris and Nicole Oresme’s nationalism, Syrian cultural and political confluence amounts to self-sufficiency and self-determination, an ethical objective that legitimates national sovereignty.

The nation in which Custance arrives is hardly such a sovereign realm. By some standards, it is more barbarous than Syria. While the Sultaness redeems Syria from Christianity, Christianity redeems England: Saxon England needs Custance, her faith,

³²⁴ This reading of the Sultaness may seem implausible (given the vituperative speech that the Man of Law dedicates to her), yet it complements Chaucer’s sympathy for the other non-Christian, Levantine queens, Dido and Zenobia. While Chaucer’s portrays the Sultaness as a devious nationalist killer, some sympathy remains for her.

religion, and law. The people she meets there already form a nation, but without her they fail to grasp the redemptive potential that sovereignty holds for their nation. As Lavezzo has observed, even though the English need Custance to reach religious and juridical sovereignty, the Man of Law's telling of her story effectively obtains this Roman authority for England, through Custance, without incurring the usual obligations.³²⁵ She does not come to England as she did to Syria, as an Imperial princess. Custance's worldly political identity is unknown when she lands alone on a strange island surrounded by a "wilde see" and ruled by a king whose troubles with the Scots routinely distract him from domestic matters (II 506). She lands, moreover, amid a decadent community fissured by religious difference, among pagan Britons, with pagan leaders, a secret Christian minority, and a Welsh Christian refuge at the border. The Church has virtually vanished.

While Custance's British arrival brings quick conversions, her presence also exposes a lack of honor in the knighthood and crisis in the institutions of marriage and the law. Custance's devotion inspires lust and violent crime as readily as conversion. Soon a young Briton knight comes to "[I]ove hire so hoote, of foul affeccioun" that he must, "of hire . . . ones have his wille" (II 586, 88). It gets worse. Custance will not consent to his illicit extra-marital desires, so the knight concocts a plan to take revenge. He stabs and kills Hermengyld, the constable's sleeping wife, placing the bloody knife beside Custance, her bedfellow. He then falsely accuses her of the crime. Taking this knight as typical, we see that both England's knighthood and its institution of marriage are in trouble. In the courtroom, King Alla sits as a judge who is unsure of whom to trust: Custance, exemplar of justice, or one of his own knights. Custance "hast no champioun;" her lineage is unknown, and her accuser is a ranking knight (II 631).

³²⁵ Lavezzo, "Beyond Rome," 167.

Thankfully, when Custance testifies, swearing on “A Briton book, written with Evaungiles” the hand of God smites the knight, ejecting his eyes; then the voice of God proclaims Custance’s innocence (II 666). Now it is as if the marriage of this Roman princess’s pledge with the Briton bible, a remnant from the isle’s first Christian days, summons God’s judgment direct.

So Alla condemns the knight and many Britons convert. But what need is there of Alla’s judgment, when God has given his? Alla’s judgment appears redundant:

A hand hym smoot upon the nekke-boon,
That doun he fil atones as a stoon,
And bothe his eyen broste out of his face,
In sighte of every body in that place.

A voys was herd in general audience,
And seyde, “Thou hast desclaundred, giltelees,
The doghter of hooly chirche in heigh presence;
Thus hastou doon, and yet holde I my pees!”
(II 670-76)

Here, God smites the false knight (usually all it takes to kill a character in Middle English romance and elsewhere), forces his eyes out of his face, and declares Custance’s innocence, hence, his guilt. The public witnesses this, yet sovereign mediation is required. Alla must pronounce a judgment and a sentence. Apparently the knight even needs to be killed again: “This false knight was slayn for his untrouthe/ By juggement of Alla hastifly” (687-88). If Alla/ *Allah* is only the name of God, as it is in Arabic, these lines simply report what has taken place in the preceding stanzas. But, if Alla is the newly converted Christian king of an English nation achieving judicial supremacy, these lines suggest that he must distribute justice in his sovereign nation as an independent human agent of sovereign judgment, regardless of its divine source or revelation. In that case, through his conversion (II 685-86), King Alla gains the strength and judicial

confidence to keep order, protecting the innocent and punishing the guilty, but he acts discretely. Thus Custance, embodying justice, helps Alla to revitalize England's flawed legal system. Nevertheless, in Chaucer's romance, English national sovereignty depends on distinguishing King Alla from God, maintaining that here, as in Dante's scheme, divine and temporal power are independent and mutually beneficial.³²⁶

After the Man of Law shows that the legal system is recovering, he implies that the other English institutions, the church and marriage, as well as the closely related household, follow suit. King Alla emerges from Custance's trial a Christian king, with a Christinaizing people, and a faith worth defending, according to medieval English standards. He marries Custance and after the wedding feast:

They goon to bedde, as it was skile and right;
For thogh that wyves be ful hooly thynges,
They most take in pacience at nyght
Swiche manere necessities as been plesynges
To folk that han ywedded hem with rynges,
(II 708-712)

This marriage heralds redemption for the entire institution. The false knight's transgressive, destructive and unfulfillable desire is replaced by sex within marriage's holy bonds: fulfilled desire and reproduction for folk compliant enough with cultural expectation to wed with rings. When Alla leaves for Scotland, he leaves Custance with both "a bisshop and his constable eke," suggesting that the institutions under siege in the *Canterbury Tales'* first fragment, the church and the household, are on the mend (II 716). Thus, Custance helps redeem the church, which had nearly disappeared from England, and marriage, which the false knight disrespected.

³²⁶ In Chaucer's poetry, English national sovereignty also entails distinguishing God, the "heigh presence," from *Allah* (675). If God and Allah are indistinguishable, Islam becomes more difficult to distinguish from Christianity and it becomes more difficult to distinguish Syria from Rome and England.

In this tale, the protections of constable and bishop fail against royal traitors. Sovereignty never equals invincibility, but Alla's sovereign rule resembles the Sultanness's most at its most destructive. Like the Sultanness, Alla does not shrink from parricide when traitors threaten his nation. When he learns that his mother has exiled Custance and his would-be heir, he has her killed, "[f]or that she traitour was to her ligeance" (II 895). Custance's exile adds pressure to ideas of national allegiance, pushing the destructive potential of sovereign power to parricide again. In the first nation Custance visits, she inspires a mother to kill her son, reversing the natural flow of life from mother to child. In the second, a son kills his mother, the source of his own life. She repeatedly destroys or inverts the intense and logic-defying love that is expected to bind families into communities of extraordinary identification, causing members to be loyal to each other despite the costs. In each case, Custance motivates a sovereign leader to eliminate a traitor to whom s/he is closely related in favor of national values, religious law and continuity. In this way, Chaucer acknowledges that no emotional bonds, not even familial love and loyalty, are assured.

Custance presents situations that clarify inevitable conflicts between national belonging and familial belonging. Nations, although modeled on the family and often perpetuated by patriotic families and inter-familial alliances, provide competing centers of home, love and allegiance. Only after Alla kills his mother does he have occasion to repent, make pilgrimage to Rome, and ultimately rediscover Custance and their child. England comes most clearly into view on their way home from Rome. Now Alla learns the lesson that Custance refuses at the beginning of the tale: one must first abandon her family of origin in order to begin a new family, in order to treat that family lovingly and

loyally. However, by the time that sovereign England comes clearly into focus, Alla's own family is incomplete: Alla and Custance only turn toward "Englond," so-named, after we learn that their "child Maurice was . . . Emperour/ Maad by the Pope" (II 1130, 1121-22). The Man of Law explains that readers will have to look "in the olde Romain geestes" for his story (II 1126). There is no mention of Maurice's reign in England, no mention of his story in English—Rome owns the rights to his Latin story. But England comes plainly into view as Custance and Alla sail there from Rome. England trades Maurice for Constance, institutional continuity, and an image of itself as a geographically, historically and juridically sovereign nation. England gets institutional redemption and continuity from Rome through Custance's gift of jurisprudential sovereignty. Rome gets dynastic continuity from England through Maurice's discretionary sovereignty as emperor. Although Alla may exercise national sovereignty distinct from divine sovereignty in the courtroom, here Roman sovereignty and English sovereignty are distinct and interdependent. The *Man of Law's Tale* demonstrates how national sovereignty can be interdependent with, yet distinct from other sovereignties such as the Roman Empire and Church. Medieval national sovereignty never indicates autonomy; it only redeems and sustains national institutions.

In any case, sovereignty always requires sacrifice: England loses Hermengyld and Maurice, but gains an image of itself as a sovereign nation. Other national ideals, like camaraderie, counsel and continuity obfuscate hierarchy and sacrifice, but sovereignty both exposes and preserves the hierarchy involved in these ideals by revising and claiming to limit hierarchical structure. Chaucerian sovereignty excuses the indelible inequalities that nationhood entails without erasing them. National cultures and

solidarities are never as large and limitless as Custance's imagination of the "Barbre nacioun" leads us to believe; nor are they as cohesive and dependable as Chaucer's use of "nacioun" to mean family in the *Wife of Bath's Tale* suggests (III 1068). Here all political sovereignties desire continuity and require sound institutions to achieve it, yet none can guarantee sovereignty without anachronism and parricide.

In the national romances, Chaucer addresses his English nation through narratives that work as both pedagogical imaginations of impossible pasts and performative claims on foregone actualities that can no longer be chosen, on the facts of nationhood, the chance encounters and coincidences that have already assembled a people. He mythologizes history, dramatizing the actual, and simultaneously reifies myth, codifying and concretizing the imaginary. Chaucer's employment of an impossible past in his narration of national continuity here exposes the paradoxes of nationhood: continuity depends on anachronistic revision; temporal disorder produces cultural order; national experience and national imagination are equally authoritative, often interdependent and, alternately, mutually exclusive. What's more is that exile, murder, and treachery all come with sovereignty and are all funded by love in the *Man of Law's Tale*. Neither love nor history is true; but in Chaucer's trajectory, love begets sovereignty and the latter is the more ideal concept.

II. The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale

Constituent power . . . is a decision that emerges out of the ontological and social process of productive labor; it is an institutional form that develops a common

*content; it is a deployment of force that
defends the historical progression of
emancipation and liberation; it is, in short,
an act of love.*

--Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri³²⁷

*[C]ountries are not defined merely by power
and political sovereignty, but by the
traditions, sentiments and aspirations of
those who live in them.*

--R.R. Davies³²⁸

Both of Chaucer's national romances use notions of sovereignty to define nationhood. In the *Man of Law's Tale*, sovereignty comes from such grand and transcendent sources as Rome, Christian divinity, and Constance's saintly virtue. The Man of Law responds to the institutional and moral decadence of the *Canterbury Tales'* first fragment by suggesting a national sovereignty comparable with, yet distinct from the imperial sovereignty of Rome and the sacral sovereignty of the Church. By contrast, the *Wife of Bath's Tale* focuses more closely on domestic solidarities, suggesting that state-sponsored institutions such as the court and the church do not operate without more immediate connections to the lived experience of English folk of all classes. As Chaucer's only Arthurian romance, the *Tale* locates the authority for its universalizing national fictions in such alternative and intermediate institutions as gossip, the household and folk magic. Here we might note in passing that Arthurian legendary history turns on Arthur's successful fight against the obligation to pay tribute to Rome. If sovereignty descends from international sources in the *Man of Law's Tale*, it ascends from domestic institutions in the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale*. My reading is informed by those of

³²⁷ Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, 351.

³²⁸ Davies, *The First English Empire*, 82.

Karma Lochrie and Paul Strohm, who identify gossip and the household as the alternative and intermediate institutions through which the Wife's plot unravels.³²⁹ The tale's engagement with these two institutions can certainly be taken on its own terms. Nevertheless, I want to argue that Chaucer also reads these domestic relations as emblematic of the larger national structures in which they are imbricated. In other words, Chaucer finds an emblem of the English nation and its history in vernacular exchanges between husbands and wives.³³⁰ English national sovereignty becomes a cross-gender, cross-class relationship working through the Wife's fantastic, anachronistic re-imagination of Arthurian romance.

Strohm notes that in 1352 Parliament declared the rebellion of wives against husbands treasonous, classing it with rebellion against other persons thought to have special responsibilities and thus to be owed faith and obedience. He considers this application of the idea of treason as a "protective deterrence to a category of previously unprotected institutions," that is "'intermediate' institutions— the guildmaster's

³²⁹ Karma Lochrie, *Covert Operations: The Medieval Uses of Secrecy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), 56-92; Paul Strohm, *Hochon's Arrow: The Social Imagination of Fourteenth-Century Texts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 121-44.

³³⁰ Much has been written about the Wife of Bath's feminist and anti-feminist moves. The following works have been particularly helpful in informing my reading and thinking on the Wife and feminism: Glenn Burger, "Female Masculinity and the Wife of Bath," in *Chaucer's Queer Nation*, 79-100; Susan Crane, *Gender and Romance in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales*; Carolyn Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 113-31; Ruth Evans, "The Devil in Disguise: Perverse Female Origins of the Nation," in eds. *Consuming Narratives: Gender and Monstrous Appetite in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, ed. Elizabeth Herbert McAvoy and Teresa Walters (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2002), 182-95; L.O. Aranye Fradenburg, "Fulfuld of Fayerye"; Patricia Clare Ingham, "Pastoral Histories: Utopia Conquest and the *Wife of Bath's Tale*" *Texas Studies in Language and Literature* 44 (2002): 34-46. Kathleen Davis's work on the way the *Man of Law's Tale's* orientalism "works through women" also influences my reading of the *Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*. According to Davis, the Man of Law suggests that women bear their communities' collective ethnic and religious identities and are thus the sites through which a distinct English identity emerges in a world order wherein an unconvertible Islamic East opposes Christian Europe, including England ("Time Behind the Veil," 116). I will argue that the Wife of Bath makes women similarly necessary to defining Englishness, but in her view women are needed to challenge the constraints of temporality and to help make decisions, as participants in sovereignty rather than as simple bearers of identity or of children. See also Elaine Tuttle Hansen, *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 26-57; and Lee Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History*, 280-321.

workshop or merchant's salesroom, the husband's household or private chamber, the parish church or college or chantry or monastic precinct." This legal extension "recognizes the political character of these ostensibly non-political institutions, asserting that the master in his shop and the husband in his household and the priest in his parish participate analogically and symbolically in the regality of the king." According to Strohm, "Royal and other [patriarchal] interests alike are ultimately served by the institution and protection of an accessible and influential model of hierarchy at a level close to the lived experience of most of the middle strata."³³¹ He goes on to argue that by linking Allison of Bath's erotic and economic desires, Chaucer makes her an example of a fourteenth-century treasonous wife. Lochrie argues that gossip constitutes her mode of resistance. I want to suggest that for Chaucer national sovereignty is neither fully intelligible nor fully achievable without cultural institutions like the household and gossip— that it depends on vernacular language and domestic bonds.

The Wife of Bath is the only Chaucerian character to use the word sovereignty twice. She uses it first in her prologue, where she clarifies the human, domestic and negotiable nature of this power, and again in her tale, where she reveals its concurrently public and national import. The trajectory that the Wife takes in her fifth marriage (ownership, sacrifice, near death, renegotiation, and sovereignty) shows how women can ultimately win sovereignty despite the fact that whatever power they hold is always unequal to the physical and cultural power of the men with whom they must negotiate. Early in the story of her fifth marriage, we learn that the Wife gives Jankyn "al the lond and fee" that she inherited from her first four husbands (III. 630); she also names him "oure sire," indicating his authoritative and institutional role in their household (713).

³³¹ Strohm, *Hochon's Arrow*, 124-25.

But when Jankyn abuses this power by ceaselessly reading disparaging assertions to her from his misogynist book of wicked wives, Alison takes matters back into her own hands and slaps him hard enough to cast him into their hearth, the proverbial center of their home. Recovering swiftly, Jankyn knocks Alison out with a blow to the head. Upon returning to consciousness, she asks, ““O hastow slayn me, false thief?/ And for my land thus hastow mordered me?”” (III. 800-01). The Wife’s rhetorical question construes Jankyn’s physical violence in legal and economic terms, accusing him of murder and naming him a thief. He may be physically stronger, but she better understands both the confluence of economic, legal, ideological and physical domination and the contemporary institutional discourses through which Jankyn achieves such dominance. Thus, playing on Jankyn’s fear of his crime’s consequences, Alisoun rises from her near-death experience with “al the soveraynetee” (818).³³²

Mercifully, when the Wife regains sovereignty she does not abuse it; she is immensely kind and true to Jankyn, as he is to her. But however ideal her portrait of their life without “debaat,” we cannot discount the difficulties and irreparable costs she incurs, costs which her husband does not share (822). The most important thing Chaucer tells us about the Wife is that “she was somdel deaf;” and she mentions twice herself that Jankyn’s blow leaves her deaf (I 446; III. 636, 668). What’s more, the Wife introduces herself as a voice authorized by lived experience in spite of written authority and as a gossip, which means that she relies heavily on her ears for access to cultural and political information. The sensory damage and the physical and emotional trauma of this domestic

³³² Ultimately, Alison multiplies her power by interpreting Jankyn’s cultural attitudes as emotional oppression, translating emotional oppression into physical violence and naming that physical violence in terms of familiar legal and economic violation. In *Chaucer’s Queer Nation*, Burger makes a similar equation and concludes that the Wife’s performance in the brawl with Jankyn expresses “a desire to make the most of the *present* based on a clear-sighted, multiple understanding of that present moment” (99).

violence are irreparable; but since the first fragment tales have already suggested that the decline of marriage as an institution is a problem, this marriage's recovery bodes well in terms of *Tales'* running commentary on the state of English society and institutions. The Wife's resurrection, like Christ's own, has redemptive force. Her domestic story imitates the Passion of Christ, taking the same trajectory: love, sacrifice, quasi-death, and glorious resurrection. Despite her imitation, the Wife is not Christ; and so her resurrection's redemptive value beyond her marriage is more limited. Alisoun's glorious resurrection redeems the human institution of marriage rather than the souls of the faithful. Likewise, the Wife's earth-bound sovereignty, rather than being ordained by God, is achieved only through human rhetorical strategies and irrecoverable physical losses. Her story provides a thoroughly human explanation of how worldly sovereignty is won at great cost, divulging this truth: what is gained with sovereignty never exactly equals what is lost. Deciding whether sovereignty is worth the cost is a separate judgment. The Wife finally shapes sovereignty and the commitments it entails through negotiations that render legal, verbal, emotional, material and cultural assets exchangeable. This sovereignty might be absolute, or extreme, in that at first the Wife held the ultimate power, then it was Jankyn's to use and abuse, and then the Wife regained it— but it is neither an eraser of multiple wills and agencies, nor a permanent role. It is political in the Aristotelian sense, because it changes hands. The Wife of Bath's domestic story focuses closely on the practical ways in which power changes hands in an ordinary world. Thus, Chaucerian sovereignty emerges as a human variety that works through negotiable relationships, through consent and exchange, rather than through absolutely autonomous individuals.

Chaucerian sovereignty's temporary and negotiable nature resists the utopian and fantastic terms of the Arthurian world to which the Wife of Bath transports it.³³³

The *Wife of Bath's Tale* reads Arthurian England, that epitome of English nationhood, through the Wife's experience of contemporary marital relations.³³⁴ She begins by nostalgically invoking "th'olde dayes of the Kyng Arthour,/ Of which that Britons speken greet honour," acknowledging the common opinion that the Arthurian past was a golden age for the island, that pastness plus kingship practically equal honor according to Briton opinion. But she also complicates that opinion. The *Wife of Bath's Tale* is an Arthurian romance in which one of Arthur's knights rapes a soon forgotten maiden, yet ends up married to a lovely and faithful woman. Of course, he must first marry an old hag and then learn a lesson: female sovereignty is to be respected. But the tale has a happy ending, which seems a bit too happy for the rapist-knight, no matter what he has learned. Even before the plot begins, the Wife of Bath reminds us of lessons

³³³ In "Pastoral Histories," Ingham addresses the value of the Wife of Bath's particular utopian imagination. Ingham departs from a critical history that has paid relatively little attention to the idealized Arthurian setting of the *Wife of Bath's Tale* and emphasizes the ways in which the "Wife of Bath's pastoral medievalism . . . encode[s] a particular scene of conquest and political resistance between England and Wales occurring around the time of Chaucer's writing" (37). Her postcolonial reading takes "the utopian dreams of the medieval colonized as a serious strategy of resistance" and draws on the work of Raymond Williams, demonstrating how the Wife's pastoral can point us toward a time before the capitalist "commodification of land, people, and things" before capitalism's link with colonialism (37, 40). Ingham argues further that "[p]astoral histories can be revolutionary insofar as they help us see alternatives to the institutions we have been taught to think of as necessary, as unavoidably 'real'" (40). She reminds us that the Wife's story, despite being criticized for its unrealistic and utopian view of love, "suggests that affairs of love are the intimate sites wherein social institutions are destroyed or changed" –even though the tale raises structures of erotic desire and political conquest "at their most oppressive, their least utopic" (41, 43). My reading picks up on the Wife's awareness of the limitations of romantic utopianism where Ingham leaves off, taking it further and, perhaps, in a new direction. As the rest of this chapter will demonstrate, I read the Wife's relatively sober views of love and sovereignty as admission that neither of these concepts can be experienced as ideals. Love and sovereignty ultimately take institutional forms whose content always depends more on laborious and often tedious negotiation than on idealization. In my reading, such national institutions as marriage and the law are both necessary and necessarily revisable.

³³⁴ Arthurian legend was the main vehicle for English nationalism in the later Middle Ages. Although Camelot seems also synonymous with utopia, Arthurian literature was particularly adept at mourning the sacrifices that come with English nationhood. For recent and thorough analyses of Arthurian literature and legend see Catherine Batt, *Malory's Morte Darthur: Remaking Arthurian Tradition* (New York: Macmillan Publishers, 2002); Ingham, *Sovereign Fantasies*; and Michelle Warren, *History on the Edge: Excalibur and the Borders of Britain, 1100-1300* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

learned from the domestic violence in her personal story: women generally live their lives in greater danger of physical violence than men. And sex, which is often idealized as the ultimate consummation of love, the ultimate utopian ideal, is very closely related to violence against women. Sex all too often takes the form of violent crime against women, as in rape; and in other cases, sex excuses and assures the continuity of destructive relationships, as in the Wife of Bath's relationship with Jankyn, the youngest, most sexually attractive and most physically violent of her husbands. In the Wife's view of history, this genre of violence is inescapable. According to the wife, the main difference between Arthurian past and clerical present is the nature and source of violence against women. In the past women had to beware of the supernatural malevolence of incubi; in the Wife's moment, "Wommen may go saufly up and down" with nothing to fear but the "dishonour" that friars might do to them (III. 878, 881). Here the Wife draws our attention to the social nature of the harm that clerical authority poses for women and to the fact that when a woman is sexually violated, she both loses honor and suffers physical violence. Thus the Wife points out that women also live their lives in greater danger of violence to their reputations, their social standing and honor, than men. Whether or not this is any less a threat than the supernatural threat that fairies and incubi pose is obscured by Chaucer's ever-ironic tone. The questions of exactly how supernatural force, fantasy, and the human name of sovereignty affect structures of public opinion, social honor and national power remain open until the end.

The action begins when one of Arthur's knights, in lieu of some friar or incubus, rapes a maiden. The Wife's presentation first associates the knight closely with Arthur and then makes a one to one equation between his personal integrity and that of the

woman he violates. The knight seems at first to be Arthur's responsibility; as the Wife says, "this kyng Arthour/ Hadde in his hous a lusty bachelor" (882-83). But the question of free will and a knight's relationship to his sovereign comes quickly into play as we learn that despite the fact that Arthur houses this knight, he rapes a maiden all on his own after hunting waterfowl one day: it "happed that, allone as he was born, / He saugh a mayde walkynge hym biforn" (885-86). Here it is impossible to decide whether the phrase "allone as he was born" applies to the knight or to the maiden. The phrase could indicate that the knight himself was as alone as when he was born when he saw the maiden. Or, it could report that, when he first saw, he perceived her to be as alone as he was when he was born. This ambiguity reminds us that every human being enters this world as alone as the next. Of course, every human needs the help of a woman, a mother, but the Wife deemphasizes this fact. Instead, she introduces these two characters as individuals, invoking their singular and parallel arrivals on earth; their particular families of origin are not important. All we need to know is that they live in Arthur's kingdom, under Arthur's law. Next we learn that "maugree hir heed,/ By verray force, he rafte hire maydenhed" (887-88). We must then ask, since these two people come into the world in the same lonely manner, how is it that the will of one can ever come to outweigh that of the other? The knight never pauses to consider the ethics of this question, but rather uses force to overcome the maiden, bringing dishonor upon her, himself and Arthur's house: the entire national kingdom.

This beginning swiftly resets Camelot on earth. Despite its own utopian desires, the tale thus acknowledges that—nostalgic or forward-looking—there has never been a utopian time or place on earth, not even in Camelot. Like the *Man of Law's Tale*, the

Wife of Bath's Tale takes place in a Britain characterized by disrespect for the institutions of marriage and the law. The Church seems to have disappeared. There is nothing fair about the state of affairs in Camelot: the most honorable King's own honor is compromised by his association with a dishonorable knight, and women live in extreme danger of violence. As Harry Bailey indirectly admits, woman's virginity like time is irrecoverable: time "wol nat come agayn, withouten drede,/ Namooore than wole Malkynes maydenhede" (II. 29-30). Nevertheless, the tale offers sovereignty as a form of mitigation. In response to the Queen's entreaties, Arthur will share his sovereignty and that changes the course of justice. The rape cannot be undone, but sovereignty can still redeem marriage, and, more indirectly, national community. The Wife, having made her own sacrifices for marital sovereignty, translates the rape into more general "oppressioun," sacrificing the maiden's personal sovereignty for a more communal version:

For which oppressioun was swich clamour
 And swich pursute unto the kyng Arthour
 That dampned was this knyght for to be deed,
 By cours of lawe, and sholde han lost his heed—
 Paraventure swich was the statut tho—
 But that the queene and other ladyes mo
 So longe preyden the kyng of grace
 Til he his lyf hym graunted in the place,
 And yaf hym to the queene, al at hir wille,
 To chese weither she wolde hym save or spille. (III. 889-898)

This passage presents justice as dependent on civic intervention, proceeding neither from the law nor the queen's discretion. First, popular "clamour" and legal "pursute" bring the rapist to be damned "by cours of lawe." Arthur, the sovereign, seems likely to have remained otherwise oblivious. Next, "the queene and other ladyes mo/ . . . longe preyden the kyng" until he "yaf" the knight to the queen. The king can delegate his sovereignty

because it depends on the civic will from the very beginning. Arthur's delegation essentially produces a feminine reduplication of the same dynamic. The knight's life belongs to her, speaking for herself and the other ladies. She does according to a new statute, one oriented specifically toward this newly established form of public female sovereignty: to live he must tell her what "wommen moost desiren" within "twelf-month and a day" (905, 909).

As the knight rides through the kingdom asking what women want, he encounters no dragons, no monsters, no Saracens, no Scots, no treacherous relatives nor any of the other usual occupational hazards. Diversity of public opinion provides the only obstacle. He will find an authoritative solution in the network of feminine gossip, which, as Lochrie argues, "offers a rival interpretive community to that of conventional medieval *auctoritas*."³³⁵ After more than twenty-five lines recounting the various things that "some seyde women loven best" and about thirty more relaying an Ovidian story that proves woman's inability to keep secrets, the knight gives up and turns, sadly, "homward" (925, 987).³³⁶ At this point, it seems that the knight will never learn what he needs to know to save his life. All he has learned is that women form a community at once too vocal and too diverse for him to comprehend. However, on the way home, he meets the "olde wyf," who understands this alternative institution. As Lochrie explains, gossip's "primary distinguishing feature is exchange."³³⁷ The old woman presents this feature as both a lesson and a secret—that is, as something offered in exchange for an as yet unnamed favor. She assures the knight that no woman will gainsay "of that I shall

³³⁵ Lochrie, 59.

³³⁶ The classic discussions of the Wife's Ovidian revision are Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History*, 280-321; and D. W. Robertson, Jr. "The Wife of Bath and Midas," *SAC* 6 (1984): 1-20.

³³⁷ Lochrie, 65.

thee teche;” and “[t]ho rowned she a pistel in his ere” a message which, conflating authority and experience, is at once a letter, an epistle and a whisper—an article of both written and spoken authority (III 1019, 1021). The knight learns that sovereignty is what earthly women desire. As it resolves the opposition between written authority and experience, the principle of exchange this knowledge instantiates enables sovereignty to return from the feminine to a more fully public form, and enables marriage to become a fully competent model for a national community.

The knight returns to find “[t]he queene herself sittynge as a justice” (1028). She has become “lige lady” and “sovereyn lady queene,” because of the clamor and legal suits that bring the knight to public justice in the first place, and because of the ladies who joined her in praying for the King’s grace (1037, 1048). To this forum the knight must tell “[w]hat thing that worldly women loven best” (1033): he is constrained to act as an emissary from the feminine world of gossip. The secret he now reveals, that women desire sovereignty, certainly looks back to Alison’s agreement with Jankyn. But in the current context it also affirms the public—as opposed to domestic—character of this desire, for he now speaks before a queen sitting in judgment as if she were the king. Almost as soon as the rapist-knight announces that every worldly woman wants “sovereynetee,/ As wel over hir housbond as hir love,” the old woman appears and demands that the “sovereyn lady queene” force the knight to comply with his agreement to grant her next request (marriage) in exchange for teaching him this answer (1038-39, 1048). While this exchange returns the tale’s main focus to the domestic, it will also make the domestic into the origin of a revaluation of national community. The knight’s response to the Old Wife is unequivocal: ““My love?” quod he, “nay, my dampnacioun!/

Allas, that any of my nacioun/ Sholde evere so foule disparaged be!’” (1067-69). As the end rhyme of “dampnacioun” with “nacioun” suggests, the knight assumes that his fortune, his identity, his reputation and the continuity or demise of it all, his very damnation and redemption, are bound to that of his aristocratic family: the exceptionally particular “nacioun” he invokes. The lady meets this objection on its ground. With an anachronistic invocation of Dante she redefines the rapist’s knight’s “nacioun” to include poor, ugly and common English folk like her.

The anachronism of the appeal to Dante is nearly as significant as its content. In this tale the Wife of Bath equates the ubiquity of fairies and incubi with the contemporary ubiquity of friars and clerks. As Aranye Fradenburg observes, such a comparison shows us that “[r]eality shifts over time and space, and what can seem the very touchstone of reality in one context will seem an elaborate dream in another.”³³⁸ Similarly, as Robert Blanch has shown, the Wife of Bath’s “deliberate invocation of the present through the use of anachronism (fourteenth-century penalty for rape) blurs the pastness of the tale—the remote Arthurian setting.”³³⁹ The Old Wife’s anachronistic reference to Dante in her bedroom lecture also blurs the pastness of Arthurian Britain. However, here the purpose is to clarify England’s national future. As the archaic fantasies of the *Wife of Bath’s Tale* return to the problem of female sovereignty, a discourse at once learned and vernacular, intimate and institutional, they reveal a truth about historical continuity. The Old Wife speaks through Dante, helping the knight to decide which values are worth carrying from the past to the present, which solidarities should shape future reality, and what kind of “gentillesse nys but renomee” (1159). Her lecture urges us to see that what can seem the

³³⁸ Fradenburg, “Fulfuld of Fayerye,” 217.

³³⁹ R.J. Blanch, “Al was this land fulfuld of fayerye”: The Thematic Employment of Force, Willfulness, and Legal Conventions in Chaucer’s *Wife of Bath’s Tale*” *Studia Neophilologica* 57 (1985): 44.

very touchstone of gentility, of political and cultural solidarity in one context, will seem an obstacle to English redemption, an elaborate excuse that deters national continuity, in another. The knight will submit to her sovereign judgment, agreeing to ally himself with her and, by extension, with folk like her.

Responding to the knight's concern for his family's reputation, the lady acknowledges the knight's aristocratic ties and explains why they are inadequate. She reminds her "deere housbonde" of this and of the fact that he is participating in the institution of marriage (1087). "Fareth every knyght thus with his wyf as ye?/ Is this the lawe of kyng Arthures house?" she asks (1088-89). The knight has, of course, already broken the law of Arthur's house by committing rape, and yet he complains out of loyalty to his house. Now he is married to the lady before him; she is "his [own] wyf" and he her "deere housbonde." The knight has failed to honor his loyalties to the *nacioun* he invokes above, but the wife's reminder offers another chance. He can honor the law of Arthur's sovereign nation by honoring the symbolic and analogous solidarities of his own lawful household. "I am youre owene love and youre wyf;/ I am she which that saved hath youre lyf," she explains (1091-92). There is a form here, a protocol, and the Old Wife means to follow it. She also offers additional help, a fantastic combination of her elvish shape-shifting and Christian redemption. She assures the knight that she "koude amende al this," her loathliness, her age and her base-lineage "er it were dayes thre," alluding to the mythical amount of time it took Christ to rise from the dead (1107). The conflation of magic and religion locate redemption in this new form for nationhood.

The Old Wife begins her lecture by attacking the supposition that lineage ensures gentility, a point that Dante and other contemporaries refute. As she professes, lineage

grants “old richesse,” but “Crist” makes it possible for men to do “gentil dedes,” the source and sign of gentility, respectively (1110, 1117, 1115). She seems certain of this opinion, which was widespread by the fourteenth century, and goes on for twenty-five lines before mentioning Dante. When she does mention Dante, she makes it count, dragging on the citation for three lines: “Wel kan the wise poete of Florence,/ That highte Dant, speken in this sentence. / Lo, in swich maner rym is Dantes tale” (1125-27). Here she follows the *Man of Law’s Tale’s* Sultanness in defining national community through an anachronistic reference to a text that had not been written by the moment of her tale’s setting. The sixth-century Sultanness defines her Syrian community by the “hooly lawes of our Alkaron,” decades if not quite a full century before the Quran appeared (II 332). Likewise, the Old Wife insists that her English community will be defined by spiritual (rather than economic or social) nobility through lines that directly translate Dante’s *Purgatorio* 7: 121-23: “Rade volte risurge per li rami/ l’umana probitate; e questo vole/ Quei che la da, perche a lui si chiami,” lines which could not possibly have been composed until seven or eight centuries after Arthur’s supposed sixth-century reign, under which the character speaking lives (*Purgatorio* 7: 121-23).³⁴⁰ She does not preserve Dante’s rhyme as suggested, perhaps admitting that Dante’s Italian is only fully accessible in Italian, but she does a fine job of translating his meaning line by line saying, “Full selde upriseth by his branches smale/ Prowesse of man, for God, of his goodnesse,/ Wole that of hym we clayme oure gentillesse” (III 1128-30). The Old Wife does not need to cite Dante in order to substantiate her argument with credible *auctoritee*. Her subsequent chronologically-correct references (“Reedeth Senek, and redeth Boece”) do

³⁴⁰ “Rarely does human worth rise through the branches./ And this He wills who gives it,/ so that it shall be sought from Him,” Dante Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, ed. and trans. Jean Hollander and Robert Hollander (New York: Anchor Books, 2004) 7:121-23, pp.152-53.

just that, rendering hers a learned discourse, and even a Christian discourse in the case of Boethius (1168). This gratuitous dropping of Dante's name does two things that the other references can not do: it confirms Chaucer's earlier suggestion that anachronism is central to his definitions of national community and sovereignty, and it demonstrates how thoroughly the spiritual and national spheres interpenetrate with each other through the domestic.

Dante's name calls us back to the original context in which the lines appear. Dante originally puts these Italian lines of wisdom to into the mouth of Sordello, a thirteenth-century Italian poet who wrote in Provençal and appears in the *Purgatorio* to lead Dante and Virgil through the Valley of Princes. Sordello makes his wise digression in his native language as he identifies the souls of eight international Christian princes who all happen to have died in the late thirteenth century, and all happen to be singing the hymn "*Salve, Regina*," in honor of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Queen of Heaven. We learn that some of them produce sons and heirs less noble than themselves and others, notably England's own Henry III, produce sons who surpass them in nobility.³⁴¹ But these various kings, emperors and dukes all depend on the Queen of Heaven for spiritual salvation, as they spend their time in purgatory singing her praise. The dead princes' hopes for salvation rest on the Queen of Heaven's saintly sovereignty, reinforcing the respect for female sovereignty that the Old Wife and Queen Guenevere attempt to teach the rapist-knight. Sordello implies that family lines of aristocratic and royal nobility are worth very little in comparison with the Virgin's heavenly sovereignty— and his wise

³⁴¹ Ibid., 134, nn. 61-63, 157, nn. 82-84; Turville-Petre, *England the Nation*, 3-9, 110. While Henry III compromised English national sovereignty by favoring foreign French nobles in England and submitting as a vassal to the king of France in order to keep his lands in Gascony, his son Edward I proved to be a nationalist hero who blamed the French for wanting to exterminate the English language.

analysis seems to depend on the collection of thirteenth century examples that immediately inspires it in the *Purgatorio*. Thus, Chaucer does the impossible by transmitting this historically-inspired fourteenth-century wisdom backward to ancient Britain. In any case, Dante offers the same ideas about the relation of human nobility to God and spiritual nobility in his earlier *Convivio*; and the earlier context may be even more important to understanding the stakes of Chaucer's borrowing.

In the *Convivio*, Dante explains that nobility does not descend from "l'antica ricchezza," or "old riches" through family lines: "che' l divino seme non cade in ischiatta, cio in stirpe, ma cade ne le singolari persone . . . la stirpe non fa le singolari persone nobili, ma le singolari persone fanno nobile la stirpe" (IV. iii. 7 p. 227 ; IV.xx. 5 p. 294).³⁴² Dante is everywhere wary of the particular threats to spiritual and public nobility that all familial ties—and especially an inflated impression of the value of aristocratic lineage—might pose. In fact, he begins the *Convivio* by explaining that the philosophical wisdom he is about to deliver is inaccessible to many not only because of internal causes such as physical deafness or spiritual obsession with vices, but also because of external causes such as family and civic responsibilities or living in a land remote from learned people and institutions—a land such as England may have appeared to be to continental intellectuals in Chaucer's day. The external causes that obstruct learning are most suggestive:

Di fuori da l'uomo possono essere similmente due cagioni intese, l'una de quail e induttrice di necessitate, l'altra di prigrizia. La prima e la cura

³⁴² Direct references to the *Convivio* are from Dante Alighieri, *Convivio*, ed. Giorgio Inglese, (Milano: Biblioteca Universale Rizzoli, 1993) and will be cited by book, chapter, line and page numbers alone hereafter. Translations are from Christopher Ryan's edition, as elsewhere throughout this dissertation: "the divine seed does not descend into a stock or family; it descends, rather, into individual people . . . it is not a family line that makes individuals noble, but individuals who ennoble a family-line," (Alighieri, *Banquet*, IV.xx.5 p. 172).

familiare e civile, la quale convenevole a se tiene de li uomini lo maggior numero, sic he in ozio di speculazione esser non possano. L'alta e lo difetto del luogo dove la persona e nata e nutrita, che tal ora sara da ogni Studio non solamente privato, ma da gente studiosa lontano.

(*Convivio*, I.i.4, p.42)³⁴³

Dante originally offers the wisdom that moves the rapist-knight to ally himself with the Old Wife as a gift to those who are too busy to learn it on their own because of civic and family responsibilities, “la cura familiare e civile,” which he classes together. As we have seen, Arthur’s knight needs to reconsider the value and meaning of this link. By taking this wisdom from the *Purgatorio* and *Convivio* back to sixth-century Britain, Chaucer simultaneously mitigates his own familiar anxieties about English institutions of learning, Dante’s concern about the distractions that family and civic affairs necessarily present to searching minds, and the rapist’s knight’s misunderstandings about his national responsibility. Chaucer imagines a learned Briton wife who somehow brings her husband closer to the very wisdom that wives and other family and civic responsibilities obscure in Dante’s *Convivio*. Thus Chaucer imagines a way in which family and civic responsibilities can actually lead one to, rather than away from, wisdom. That wisdom, that sinless living rather than aristocratic lineage and wealth equals nobility, in turn leads Arthur’s wayward knight to understand how his civic and family responsibilities are indeed classed together, and they have little to do with aristocratic or economic ideas of class. He must find solidarity with his wife— this is his legal, civic, family and ultimately national responsibility. Through this vernacular exchange with his common

³⁴³ “Likewise two causes external to man can be specified, one resulting in unavoidable constraint, the other in laziness. The first is family and civic responsibilities, which quite properly absorb the energies of the majority of men, with the result that they cannot find the leisure required for cultivating the mind. The other is the deficiency in the place where a person is born and raised: this is sometimes such that it not only lacks any institute of higher learning, but is even remote from the company of learned people,” (*Banquet*, I.i.4 p.13).

wife, Arthur's rapist knight becomes more civically, spiritually and philosophically aware.

Because of this reference, we can say that English sovereignty and English solidarity become visible through Dante. The old woman uses Dante as an ally and a lens through which English folk can recognize those with whom they must share sovereignty and forge national solidarities: each other, regardless of class or wealth. Only after this Dante-inspired bedroom lecture is the knight able to put himself under the sovereign judgment, the "wise governance," of his lower-class wife (1231). Only then do this husband and wife follow the model of Arthur's house, where sovereignty is negotiable and shared between man and wife. The household of rapist knight and Old Wife, who each stand for a number of English Christian identities, elaborates the make-up of English sovereign community: it includes men, women, old, young, aristocratic, poor, lowborn, learned, vernacular, criminal and loathly. This national community signifies redemption and solidarity across sundry identities and classes. Once the knight accepts his wife's sovereignty, England's institutions, marriage, the law and the knighthood, begin to look healthy again—and she begins to look young again. Although the Old Wife is married to a rapist, she improves the case for lower-class women, because even as she transforms into the picture of a sovereign lady, the knight's decisive submission to her judgment, which she proves has nothing to do with youth, lineage or wealth, still implies that common English-folk belong to England's sovereign national future.

The knight comes to his lecture under the impression that his gentle identity is bound to his family, passed down the line genealogically like possessions or titles. His wife sets him straight, informing him, possessions, titles, renown, the sum of ancestral

goodness “is a strange thing to thy persone” (1161). Thus she echoes the Wife of Bath’s understanding that every human being enters this world as alone as the next—the view the Wife expresses at the beginning of the tale when she describes the scene in which the knight spots the maiden he rapes, “allone as he was born” (885). Particular families of origin are unimportant, as “men may wel often fynde/ [a] lordes sone do shame and vilenye” (1150-51).³⁴⁴ The rapist-knight is the prime example of this: regardless of the titles and things he owns, “al” the “good” that he offers the Old Wife in place of his body when she demands marriage, his impoverished judgment leads him to commit churlish deeds, shame and villainy, when he is alone with the maiden in the forest (1061). The Old Wife’s rhetoric demonstrates that the knight’s identity is bound to hers just as his integrity is bound to that of the woman he raped. They are each individual Britons living in Arthur’s realm under Arthur’s law, where judgment appears to be even more important than ownership in determining the nature and make-up of sovereign community. The knight’s new wife teaches him that the identity he believes he inherits from his family, his *nacioun*, is not his national inheritance, but rather a strange, foreign identity that he cannot claim through familial relation.

Here national continuity, like gentility, depends on breaking with the idea of the nation based in ancestral history and taking to an idea of nationhood based on shared ethical standards of virtuous living. National solidarity, like national sovereignty requires collaborative decision-making and the sort of shared identity that people choose when

³⁴⁴ This reading supports and is supported by Burger’s observation that “The Wife does not mention lands or movable goods provided by her family as dowry, nor indeed anything at all about the social situation of her family. Her autobiography would insist that she is only able to draw on what is “natural” to her as a woman, that is her body, as her equivalent to family name, movable goods, or land in the marriage business,” (*Chaucer’s Queer Nation*, 88). By consistently denaturalizing aristocratic views of the family as nation, as all that matters and it inheritable socially, economically, institutionally and finally politically, the Wife is able to begin to tell her story of an emerging cross-class, cross-gender English nation.

they consent to marriage. When, in response to the knight's complaint about her appearance and age, the Old Wife asks the knight to choose whether she be young, beautiful and potentially unfaithful or old, ugly and absolutely faithful, he, like the pilgrims to Harry Bailey in the general prologue, consents to his wife's sovereign rule realizing that it is at once the best and the least that can be done:

This knyght avyseth hym and sore siketh,
But atte laste he seyde in this manere:
“My lady and my love, and wyf so deere,
I put me in youre wise governance;
Cheseth youreself which may be moost plesance
And most honour to yow and me also.
I do no fors the wheither of the two,
For as yow liketh, it suffiseth me. (1227-1235)

Although the knight's bitter sighing might easily be taken as a sign of his disingenuousness, his air of resigned consent matches the resignation of the pilgrims as well as that of Alisoun and Jankyn in the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*. Resigned consent, whether careful or careless, regularly establishes sovereignty in the *Canterbury Tales*. This form instantiates collaborative judgment, signals both a history and an expectation of love, affection, congeniality; thus it commits to shared identity and continuity. Here the knight admits that his honor and his pleasure are bound to that of the Old Wife. He participates in the institution of marriage, the form of love, which— in the *Canterbury Tales*— is never more than an expectation that serves a political and cultural function: national continuity. Whether he means it or not, the Old Wife has supplied the content: this ethics of national sovereignty, wherein judgments are particularly English cross-class, cross-gender affairs that instantiate solidarity and promote continuity.

After the knight consents to the Old Wife's sovereignty, both temporality and the threat of national decline disappear with the old woman's moribund body. In the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, the Old Wife does away with the threat of temporality. She refuses to wait for generations, refuses to rest her hopes for continuity on any line of ancestry such as that on which her husband originally depends. Instead she embodies a sort of presentist nationalist dream, enacting continuity by regenerating her own body, her own youth, and magically transforming herself into a woman young, beautiful and true. National sovereignty makes the old woman's transformation into a young woman possible; but hers is a new, non-reproductive, erotic and intellectual continuity of youth. This is the opposite of the genealogical, biological and dynastic continuity that Custance reproduces for Rome in Maurice. This fantastic and impossible transformation tells a truth about human nature: women can turn the clocks back in ways that men cannot. Women can reproduce life in ways that men cannot. The transformation tells us yet more about human culture: national continuity depends on real or feigned belief in impossible transformations such as the Old Wife's, real or feigned belief in the transcendent force of love, despite proof that what humans call love can sometimes be as lack-luster as the resignation that establishes political sovereignty. National continuity depends on a suspension of disbelief that accepts anachronism as national history. A national community is one that joins in such irrational hope across familial, age, gender, class, and intellectual divides. This is the moral of national sovereignty in the *Wife of Bath's Tale*: sovereignty matters because it compares ownership and judgment and ultimately finds judgment to be a little heavier, a little more useful. Sovereignty extends the expectation of solidarity and love from the family, which conserves wealth and things owned, to the

nation, which pools judgment toward a common wealth. Thus sovereignty legitimizes extant institutions and unions, and upsets hierarchical structures by demanding consensual cooperation across lines of difference. In Fradenburg's words, "The old woman's magical changability works to reassure the knight—and by extension the aristocracy—that it can mingle, even in marriage, with the common (poor, ugly) body without losing its own identity."³⁴⁵ Although the final image of the young and happy couple suggests that cooperation across lines of difference will actually produce a homogeneous noble identity for all involved, we cannot escape loss and sacrifice here. No reader forgets the maiden whose virginity is stolen at the beginning of this relatively short tale. Like Heremgyld in the *Man of Law's Tale*, the maiden represents the cost of English national sovereignty. English national redemption, like Christian redemption, requires both sacrifice and believing in stories that could not possibly have happened.³⁴⁶ This is the most dependable and most certain moral of Chaucer's matter of Britain romance: neither love nor history is true, but we cannot imagine a sovereign future without also resigning ourselves to routinely believe these sovereign and institutional lies.

National institutions represent the possible and practical ways, the most tangible ways, in which all members of the nation might experience and influence national sovereignty. Sovereignty needs institutions—it is nothing more than an idea without them. However, sovereignty is seldom compelling on a national scale without claiming to found or be founded on fantasy, unlivable experiences, anachronism, a past that could not have been. The Wife of Bath's Arthurian legendary history is not only utopian, but also tendentiously anachronistic and shrewdly in touch with the real power of Chaucer's

³⁴⁵ Fradenburg, "Fulfuld of Fayerye," 219.

³⁴⁶ One difference here is that missing female bodies (Heremgyld's, the maiden's, and now the old hag's body) take the sacrificial place of Jesus's body, as in the *quem quaeritis* trope of the medieval liturgy.

institutional realities.³⁴⁷ Her national memory is selectively nostalgic, sick for a home that never was and all the more determined to make it present. Indeed, Chaucer's imagination of English national sovereignty is anachronistic in both the *Wife of Bath's Tale* and its herald, *the Man of Law's Tale*. The double discourse of nation's narration paves a way for anachronism. We imagine and address nation-people as both performative subject and pedagogical object, living out of synch, simultaneously in the present and in a transcendent, diachronic history.³⁴⁸ At the same time that the Man of Law and the Wife of Bath represent immediately accessible and historicized institutions, the legal system and marriage, the household, and gossip, respectively, they also try their hands at anachronistic national romance, unlocking the powerful significance of an otherwise inaccessible and impossible history. Their pilgrimage performances admit that remembering a past that could not have actually happened is the only way to ensure a national future, while participating in unreliable, imperfect institutions is the only way to live a national present, a present continuous with both past and future. The Man of Law and the Wife of Bath reveal that local, synchronic experience and transcendent anachronistic imagination are not only compatible, but aid and abet each other in the project of reifying and realizing national fantasy.

Although Chaucer's anachronism in the Wife's national story funds the continuity of a relatively pluralistic and inclusive national community, we can see that the moral of Chaucer's national romances is hardly one of absolute or uncomplicated tolerance.

Together the Man of Law's anachronistic location of the Quran in the sixth century and

³⁴⁷ Burger, *Chaucer's Queer Nation* offers an important analysis of the wife's female masculinity, her manner of behaving like one of Ann Middleton's new men by using "the forms of another's institutional power to further her own ends (rather like an upwardly mobile "gentil" man who will act like his betters to further his own ends)" (95).

³⁴⁸ Bhabha, "DissemiNation".

the Wife of Bath's reference to Dante associate England with an emerging Christian West, against an emerging Muslim East.³⁴⁹ These tales confirm that English national community depends equally on the existence of international allies, instantiated by Dante and his wise writings, and international enemies, embodied by the Sultanness and her Quran. Regardless of what many Chaucerians would like to see, an exclusive and xenophobic form of national identity appears here: Christian nobility, which has a particularly national and social valence in this English cross-class, cross-gender model of nationhood. In the matter of Britain romances, Christian nobility is the key to delivering English sovereignty as well as to reaching the more traditional and sentimental aspirations without which the tales' leading ladies live for so long. In the *Canterbury Tales*, English nationhood is "not defined merely by power and political sovereignty, but by the traditions, sentiments and aspirations of those who live" in Chaucer's England.³⁵⁰ But after listening to the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, it is difficult to imagine how one might distinguish political sovereignty from even the most intimate sentiments and softly whispered aspirations of Chaucer's English pilgrims.

³⁴⁹ I note that the cultural contours of this world order were not then as seemingly stable and dichotomized as they are now.

³⁵⁰ Davies, *The First English Empire*, 82.

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