

CHAUCER OUT OF BOUNDS: CHAUCERIAN CONTINUATIONS,
ADAPTATIONS, AND APOCRYPHA

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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This dissertation explores the boundaries that define the “Chaucerian,” a concept that was as much a product of Chaucer’s later editors, adapters, and imitators as it was a product of his contemporaries and predecessors. In exploring the Chaucerian, this dissertation juxtaposes concepts and materials from different historical periods, including Shakespeare, Spenser, Henryson, and 20th- and 21st-century film. This project not only explores the anachronistic connections that led to the creation of the Chaucerian, but also concludes that anachronism is an essential part of what still sustains it. Anachronistic scholarship that approaches texts and authors from beyond the traditional boundaries that separate them—and which separate us from them—is not only essential to our understanding of Chaucer, but essential to our understanding of our relationship to his work and to the past itself.

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INTRODUCTION

Few authors occupy a position as central to the traditional canon of English literature as Geoffrey Chaucer. While the story of Chaucer's canonical centrality and originating role as the "Father of English Poetry" has been explored extensively, extended considerations of the boundaries separating Chaucer from the "Chaucerian" are less common. This is surprising given the dramatic history of flexibility and change within Chaucer's canon. Indeed, the acknowledged corpus of Chaucerian apocrypha is more than twice as large as Shakespeare's, and a definitive body of work for Chaucer did not coalesce until the late 19th century.

Like any text, Chaucer's written creations were the products of his historical context, and influenced by the social, political, and cultural events of his own time. Uncovering the historical context for Chaucer's creations gives the pointed specificity to his works, and indeed, for those not already familiar with Middle English, makes them legible at all. However, although historical specificity creates much of the pointedness of Chaucer's poetry, his *lastingness* has always been dependent on his ability to be anachronized, to be flung into temporal landscapes that are radically alien to his late fourteenth-century milieu. While the localizing impulse of historicist criticism has resulted in an explosively productive period of Chaucer scholarship and dramatic increases in our knowledge of Chaucer and his own time period, a destructive possibility lies within an exclusively historicist methodology: if we completely historicize Chaucer—that is, if we understand his period so well that we are able to read Chaucer *as if* we were his fourteenth-century contemporaries, or if we were to understand his period

even better than he and his contemporaries understood it—we risk subsuming the anachronizable elements of Chaucer that led to his very lastingness. This project seeks to reconcile the enormous potential of historicist methodology with the fundamental challenge of its increasingly triumphant universality: the closer we get to truly inhabiting the past, the less and less relevant it seems to the present.

This temporal reality was as real to Chaucer as it is to his twenty-first century critics. Even the most traditional, historically-minded critic would be hard-pressed to claim without reservation that Chaucer's poetry was intended for the sole consumption of his immediate historical contemporaries. One does not, for example, place oneself alongside "Omer, Ovid, Lucan, and Stace" if one is interested in never reaching an audience beyond the temporal horizon of one's own lifetime. And it is not merely in the anticipation of an imagined future of readers that we can see Chaucer exceeding the boundaries of his own period. In his engagement with the past, Chaucer, like his medieval contemporaries, blended the past and present together in an anachronistic motely that would embarrass even the most historically naïve twenty-first-century reader. Indeed, part of my project is the examination of just this occurrence of medieval anachronism, and its defense as a legitimate tool of interpretive engagement with the past.

What this project is not, however, is an effort to reject the hard-won techniques of historicist criticism outright, nor is it a rejection of the value of historical context. Each chapter of this dissertation depends on a sustained engagement with a given historical context. What it seeks to correct, however, is the increasingly narrow and specialized pockets of epistemic periodicity that presently divide the discipline, its objects of study,

and its critical practitioners. This project is not an attempt to read without periodicity; it is an attempt to read beyond and against it. Moreover, it is an attempt to return to the idea of writing as reading, to revive the idea that writers writing other writers are as valuable to readers as the original writers themselves, and that their writing can tell us something about all those involved. This project argues that we must often look to the future in order to understand the past, and argues that Chaucer offers us a particularly instructive lesson on this subject.

Indeed, the central argument of this project is that our beloved Chaucer is actually a product of the “Chaucerian”—a loose concept of authorial identity larger than Chaucer’s biography and literary productivity—and that the Chaucerian is itself the product of writers who wrote after the “historical” Chaucer, and who, indeed, *wrote* the Chaucer we know into existence. In each chapter of this dissertation, I explore Chaucer through one or more of these later writers, viewing Chaucer “out of bounds,” beyond the borders of his comfortably medieval episteme. In short, this project reads Chaucer beyond the borders of his traditional period, but because it retains the techniques of historicism, does so by enlarging Chaucer’s “period” to the limits of chronology. In so doing, Chaucer, Henryson, Shakespeare, and Pasolini become “contemporaries,” and, thus, following thoroughly orthodox, historicist practice, each text becomes an intertext for the other. The only thing missing in such juxtapositions is strict causality, but this is often just as absent in more traditionally historicist readings, where the episteme and the zeitgeist provide a uniform, cultural background against which any incumbent text may be read uniformly. I hope in the chapters that follow to show that whatever strictly positivist notion of causality we may lose by stretching and blending historical periods, is

more than made up for in the productive juxtapositions they produce, and in the way these juxtapositions revivify the Chaucerian by exploring the ways in which it has continued to live beyond the boundaries of its flesh-and-blood namesake.

The first chapter of my dissertation pursues this expansive approach by examining the temporal anxieties within Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*. By focusing on the role of "anachronism" in the poem, I explore not only the fears expressed in Book II that works of language might persist into an alienating future, where their very substance will be transmuted into "words wonder nyce and straunge." I compare two responses to the troubling potential for alienation, the first represented by Troilus, and what I call his "monumentalizing" strategy, a strategy that seeks to construct something to resist and defy the mutability and change inherent in temporal progression. Against this, I examine Criseyde's response, which I call a "slydyng" response, one that accepts the inevitability of temporal change and mutability, and which commits to responding to these changes as they occur. I consider anachronism as an example of a "slydyng" response to history, one of the central concerns of the poem, and one that is important for critics responding to increasing questions about the hegemony of historicism. In the final part of the chapter, I consider a contemporary analogue for the very problem of mutability confronted in *Troilus and Criseyde*, the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (or WIPP), meant to safely store America's radioactive waste for tens of thousands of years. A part of the dilemma of WIPP is the construction of a "universal warning sign," which will transmit a legible warning to future generations about the lethality of the material stored within the facility. I conclude that the designers of WIPP are approaching the threat of temporal mutability like Troilus, with the intention to erect a structure which will defy time. Instead, I argue,

we should approach this dangerous mutability using Criseyde's "slydyng" approach to change, and to reconsider how we ourselves must alter and endure in face of the challenges brought about by our past decisions.

The next chapter explores one of the results of Criseyde's enduring "slydyng," Robert Henryson's *The Testament of Cresseid*. In exploring Henryson's "conclusion" or "continuation" of Chaucer's *Troilus*, I use the idea of "correspondence" to shift the teleological thrust of the "continuation" from the hereditary concept of a patrilineal author passing on his artistic spirit to his son, to the idea of two co-equal authors simultaneously engaging the same historical source narrative. By exploring the use of correspondence, particularly written correspondence, in Henryson's poem, I show how the *Testament* reveals the ways in which written correspondence can serve to separate and disrupt rather than unite, and the ways in which such writing can inscribe new meanings onto preexisting literary structures. I conclude by showing how Henryson's authorial identity positions itself alongside *Troilus*, turning the narrative of Cresseid's death into an instructive tale for other women, a doubled correspondence that not only responds to and reimagines the moral valence of Chaucer's *Troilus*, but also redoubles the didactic conclusion to that poem, imagining itself alongside *Troilus* as an instructive document that can replicate through reading.

In the next chapter, I explore the ways in which editors as well as authors played a role in the creation of the Chaucerian persona by considering the role of the 16th-century "Blackletter" editions of Chaucer's *Works*, editions which expanded Chaucer's canon with the addition of apocryphal material. I argue that these early editions continued a late-medieval tradition of openly including material from various sources within

collections of works, and that these editions valued the importance of the collator/scribe's role in not only passively transmitting the contents of a given work, but in shaping and occasionally altering those contents. However, in addition to building on preexisting scholarship of the Chaucerian apocrypha and late medieval scribal practice, my chapter takes as its primary goal the counterfactual reading of an apocryphal "Canterbury Tale," that is, a reading that imagines the counterfeit tale as if it really were an authentic part of the *Canterbury Tales*. I demonstrate that the author of the apocryphal "Plowman's Tale" creates an addition to the *Canterbury Tales* that slyly comments on its own status as an addition, on the additive and uncertain nature of the *Tales* themselves, and on the complex status of their authentic author, Geoffrey Chaucer. In doing so, I argue that Chaucer's 16th-century compilers and editors were not solely motivated by crass commercialism or naïve ignorance of his style, but that they included apocryphal elements into their editions that commented on and complicated existing authentic material as way of interacting with the expansive, productive Chaucerian persona that predated the "biographical" Chaucer that would later come to dominate understandings of the poet.

My final chapter considers two film adaptations of Chaucer's work, Brian Helgeland's *A Knight's Tale* (2001), and Pier Paolo Pasolini's *The Canterbury Tales* (1972), which both also explore the "biographical" Chaucer as a legible and re-legible authorial identity. I consider not only the anachronisms and alterations that make up all adaptations of historical works of art, but also the fundamental anachronism of adapting a text into a genre that did not exist in the original period in which the source text was produced. In exploring the anachronistic elements of Helgeland's and Pasolini's films, I

also show how although each film takes significant liberties with historicity and narrative fidelity, each also takes seriously the role of Chaucer in the creation of its own narrative. Helgeland projects onto Chaucer the anxieties and aspirations of his own artistic position: an artist forced to perform to a mass-audience hungry for spectacle, and uses a playful intrusion of non-diegetic elements to valorize one half of the ambiguous Chaucer “persona” familiar to Critics, the “Chaucer Pilgrim” who serves as the passive re-narrator of other stories. Pasolini’s film, in contrast, focuses on the metadiegetic Chaucer, the poet behind the scenes, and creates a portrait of Chaucer as a beleaguered, naturalistic auteur. The chapter concludes by reflecting on the tension between artistic liberty and academic rigor. For all their inaccuracies, Helgeland and Pasolini create vibrant portraits of Chaucer that speak with the same insistent presence that we found in Chaucer, Shakespeare, Henryson and Spenser. We should recognize in these films the same wholly precedent use of artistic anachronism we find in their medieval source texts.

The final purpose of this project, then, is not just to explore and historicize anachronism, but to explore its productive potential as a methodological tool. In doing so, as I’ve stated earlier, I argue not against the immense value of historical context as a means of understanding artistic production, but rather for a more expansive form of historicism that allows multiple historical periods to provide meaningful context for a given work, and that allows a given work to expand beyond the instant of its inception. This goal has both intellectual and practical motivations, though, for the time is fast approaching when we as critics and educators will be forced to choose, *Criseyde*-like, between pursuing an increasingly mediated fidelity to an ever-receding historical reconstruction, or embracing a more direct, imaginary, and anachronistic figure, a

Chaucer who exists in the negotiated space between a dead past and a living present, and whose works belong equally to every age which has embraced them, and to all the hands they have passed through.

CHAPTER 1

“In Forme of Speche is Chaunge”: Prophecy, Pandarus, and Plutonium

I. Introduction

Strictly speaking, anachronism is error. That is, it is an example of “wrong time”—an error in chronology that places a person, object, or event in a period to which it does not properly belong. In his *The Vulnerable Text: Essays on Renaissance Literature*, Thomas Greene creates what he calls a “typology” of anachronism, and identifies five main types: naive, abusive, serendipitous, creative, and tragic. Greene organizes his typology according to the degree to which an author uses anachronism self-consciously, and the intent of its practitioners to obscure or create. In discussing the first kind of anachronism, “naive” anachronism, Green points toward the European Middle Ages as a notable example of this particular form of “wrong time,” an attribution that says a great deal about many of the assumptions about medieval conceptions of time:

One can distinguish first of all a *naive* category of anachronism produced by a culture lacking a strong historical sense, a culture such as the European Middle Ages. Jupiter as emperor, Mars as knight, Chaucer’s reference to Amphiarus, one of the seven against Thebes, as a bishop, Gavin Douglas’ reference to maenads as “nuns of Bacchus”—these are examples of naive anachronism, and they are not in themselves, surely, artistic blemishes. They help to compose the texture of a work without pretensions to historical control, and they accommodate the available knowledge to the available means. They may appear in such a work as Chaucer’s *Troilus*, which as a whole is anything but naive. (220-1)¹

Greene’s description of the “naive” anachronism of the Middle Ages is worth quoting at length because it nicely summarizes a number of crucial assumptions both about the Middle Ages and about anachronism in general. First, Greene’s identification of the anachronism that appears in the Middle Ages as “naive” rests largely on the fact that, as

he puts it, there are no “pretensions to historical control” there. The medieval author who incorrectly makes Amphiaraus a bishop is not merely making an error, but is doing so as a result of a blissful ignorance of the truth. It is also important to note that although Greene labels medieval anachronism as naive, he is unwilling to label these mistakes as “artistic blemishes.” His willingness to give medieval anachronists an aesthetic “pass” also rests on the sense that there is no *intention* there; given the limited “knowledge” and “means” available to medieval authors, there is no harm in a little anachronism, and so, no foul. Unlike “abusive” anachronism, which Greene describes later, and where an author attempts “to repress history, not out of ignorance but out a misconceived, rigid, and inappropriate decorum” (221), naive anachronism, since it makes no pretense to historical control, cannot be blamed for not having any.

Greene’s identification of medieval anachronism as the “naïve” product of historical ignorance is itself out of place with contemporary criticism, having been replaced by far more nuanced considerations of medieval historiography. Nevertheless, I include his pejorative identification for two reasons: first, because it predicates a far more productive system of considering the literary value of anachronism, and second, because it is itself predicated on a central division that still organizes medieval studies and the broader arc of the historicized of literary criticism, that between the Middle Ages and the rest of modernity. If we can remove the anti-medieval bias in such a typology, and allow that medieval authors *knowingly* included temporally anomalous material in their historical narratives, we will be able to see their choices in a more positive sense, as a vehicle for organizing and nuancing narrative, and as a central function of narrative itself. Creative anachronism is, to Greene, anachronism that “confronts and uses the conflict of

period styles self-consciously and creatively to dramatize the itinerary, the diachronic passage out of the remote past into the emergent present” (221). If we are willing to tease out the thread of intentionality that runs through Greene’s typology, we might find an expansive range of possibility in this type.

Indeed, if we take Greene’s conception of creative anachronism a step further, we can make it apply to any historical narrative, insofar as any exploration of the past by us must, of necessity, include us in it.² We are the observers, and by observing we stick our noses in the past. In this way, we are always anachronistic because our very presence constitutes an unavoidable error in chronology. This unavoidable conclusion is where Greene locates his final type of anachronism, “pathetic or tragic” anachronism. This form of anachronism “is universal in complex societies; all of us and all of the things we wear and make and build and write, our rituals and styles and folkways, are condemned to an anachronism *insofar as we and they endure into an estranging future*” (222, emphasis added).

In this light, we might consider this aspect of anachronism a kind of “tragedy of history,” the recognition of temporal change as something that will render each of us functionally unintelligible to the imagined projection of our future selves. Rather than feeling critical despair in light of this predestination of alienation, the recognition of this tragedy of history can be an empowering tool for critical and historical scholarship. This empowerment must begin, however, by viewing anachronism not as an unfortunate error in chronology, but rather as a necessary precedent for any engagement with the past. Rather than trying to banish anachronism, we should instead understand historical inquiry as a process of negotiating various forms of anachronism. In light of this, the following

chapter aims to juxtapose a medieval text that attempts—with varying degrees of success—to confront and resist the tragedy of history, Chaucer’s epic romance *Troilus and Crisedye*, alongside a seventeenth-century play and a twenty-first-century institution: the first, Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida*; the second, a technological attempt to accomplish the same thing, to confront the tragedy of history with a monument intended to last beyond the horizon of intelligibility, the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant, a long-term storage facility for the United States’ stockpile of nuclear waste located in south-eastern New Mexico.

These anachronistic juxtapositions don’t abandon the critical tools of historicist criticism. Instead, they rely on a more expansive sense of periodicity, one that could encompass both the 14th, 17th and 21st centuries, and which moves back and forth between them, using analogy and difference in order to produce meaning. A productive way to understand this expansive periodicity might be, following a famous description of Criseyde in Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*, to think of it as a kind of “slydyng” of time. Just as Criseyde is described, somewhat ambiguously, as being “slydyng of corage” (5.825), the practice of anachronistic reading and writing follows a “slydyng” chronology, one that allows for a slippery uncertainty between periods, and which thrives on the reflections and refractions, the oscillating identification and alienation that occurs when one confronts the past. Criseyde’s “slydyng corage” has been seen as a criticism of her character, a reflection of the medieval antifeminist conception of female mutability, but I would like to argue that this “slydyng” is, in fact, Criseyde’s chief attribute.³ Criseyde’s instability leads her to pursue a kind of mercenary infidelity, a characteristic that eventually allows Criseyde to escape the closed historicity of *Troilus*

and to remerge into future narratives, including Robert Henryson's correspondent "continuation" of *Troilus and Criseyde*, a work which I explore in the next chapter.

In this chapter, the temporal "slydyngge" represented by Criseyde is precisely what's trying to be overcome by the monumentalizing and totalizing forces represented in Chaucer's poem, Shakespeare's play, and in the technological structure of the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant. Drawing on the work of Carolyn Dinshaw, I argue that in both Chaucer and Shakespeare, Troilus comes to represent that totalizing, monumentalizing force, and that like Troilus, the designers of WIPP are also, in Dinshaw's words, "reading like men." In each example we see a totalizing strategy that seeks "to provide a single, univalent textual meaning fixed in a hierarchical structure."⁴ For Chaucer's Troilus, this becomes the univalent moral contempt he famously hurls toward the world below him during his apotheosis to the heavens, for Shakespeare's Troilus, and for the designers of WIPP, it is a literal "message to the future," a monumental warning about the lethality of the material locked within its concrete confines.

In both cases, the totalizing impulse is one that seeks to transcend temporal mutability by mitigating the mistakes of the past. In both bases cases, however, this is an effort destined to fail. But by grappling with the failure of this impulse—in Chaucer's "littel tragedye," and in the larger tragedy of WIPP—we might better understand the limits of our own ability to project into "future tyme," and to reconsider the necessity of continuously renegotiating the ways in which we commit and recommit ourselves to a time yet to come. And on a metacritical level, this argument against the totalizing attitude toward history should motivate us as critics to embrace a "slydyngge" view of history, a view represented in a more accepting attitude toward critical and literary anachronism.

II. Troilus and Criseyde and the Tragedy of History

Before we begin exploring the tragic narratives that undergird *Troilus and Criseyde*, *Troilus and Cressida*, and WIPP, it's important to pause and reflect on the fundamentally anachronistic narrative which both antedates and encircles the first two examples. The narrative of the Trojan War and of Troy's eventual collapse is one for which temporal periods are consistently stretched to unrecognizable dimensions. Each retelling of the Trojan story is a re-narration of an event that is always already lost to time, but which, through its continuous retelling, is also almost an inherent element of the progression of history, as woven into the warp and woof of Western history itself as any story can be. This quality of the Trojan narrative means that every re-narration of the story must grapple with its folded layers of history, and the competing interests of each moment of retelling. Moreover, however, the story of Troy is the story of a momentous, monumental failure. The fall of Troy was the initiating tragedy in a series of national narratives, the fall that apocryphally foretold the eventual emergence of classical Rome, and pre-Roman Britain.

The national tragedy of the fall of Troy has a medieval analogue that first appears in the biographical examination of the fall of great men. The genre of the *De casibus* narrative (from Boccaccio's *De casibus virorum illustrium*, or "On the Fall of Famous Men") represented a medieval engagement with the form of tragedy. These narratives were stories of powerful men brought low by reversals of Fortune, and they were themselves predicated on an unwavering concession to the inescapable eventuality of decline and collapse.⁵ Indeed, one of the most famous vernacular expressions of the *De casibus* tradition appears in Chaucer's "Monk's Tale," a litany of fallen figures that

stretches from Lucifer to Peter of Lusignan, the king of Cyprus who was killed in 1369 by three of his own knights.⁶ However, just as this compilation of tragedy has a long history, so too does the response to this tragedy, the effort to create in the face of this tragedy a monument intended to remain efficacious long after its creators have ceased to exist, and long after their modes of communication have become alien and strange to any surviving observers. Indeed, we can see just such a recognition of the tragedy of history—and a similar response to it—in Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*.

Troilus and Criseyde is itself a tragedy, but in the proem to Book II, the tragedy shifts from the personal tragedy of the *De casibus* tradition—Troilus’s journey “from wo to wele, and after out of joie”—to a broader recognition of the tragedy of history itself, and the danger such tragedy poses to the efficacy of the “litel tragedie” of *Troilus and Criseyde*.⁷ Here, the narrator turns from Thesiphone—one of the three Furies, and the inspiration for Book I—to Clio, the Muse of History. In doing so, the narrator reveals a stark recognition of the alienation wrought by historical change:

Ye knowe ek that in forme of speche is chaunge
 Withinne a thousand yeer, and wordes tho
 That hadden pris, now wonder nyce and straunge
 Us thinketh hem, and yet thei spake hem so,
 And spedde as wel in love as men now do;
 Ek for to wynnen love in sondry ages,
 In sondry londes, sondry ben usages. (II.22-8)⁸

We can read in the first two lines of this stanza a clear understanding of historical difference and change and of their material effects on the world: “after a thousand years, the ‘form’ of speech changes.” Linguists have confirmed the sensible proposition that a thousand years seems to demarcate the edge of the “horizon of intelligibility” for any language, and this alone might put the lie to the concept of a naive, medieval

“presentism”: the past is not only markedly the *past*, but it is a past that with the passage of times becomes “wonder nyce and straunge.”⁹ But if we look closely, we might see something else here, something lurking beneath this superficial reading. If we take the first line on its own (“in forme of speche is chaunge”) we see a starker commentary on history: speech *is* change; it is its essential quality. Or more accurately, speech is merely one form of a more universal concept: mutability.

But despite the stark recognition of historical change and the fear of unintelligibility, the proem to Book II makes a powerful gesture towards the transcendent and transhistorical, for although the words of the past might seem “wonder nyce and straunge” to us now, living in the present, “yet thei spake hem so / And spedde as wel in love as men now do.” Despite the alienation of the past, the past *was* just as it was: *thei spake hem so*. Here, the irrefutable factuality of the past serves as a rebuke of our alienation from it. No matter how strange the past may seem, we cannot deny its existence. Moreover, the present moment must confront the transcendent functionality of speech: despite our alienation from them, the strange speakers of the past “spedde as wel in love as men now do.”

The stanza’s final couplet pushes this complicated recognition of change and stasis even further by moving from an understanding of historical difference to an understanding of cultural (or spatial) difference: “Ek for to wynnyn love in sondry ages, / In sondry londes, sondry ben usages.” This conclusion conflates historical difference (sondry ages) with geographical or cultural difference (sondry londes). The “sondry usages” vary not only according to the “age,” but also according to the “londes” in which they are practiced. This conflation is expanded two stanzas later, when the narrator

compares the multiplicity of cultural and historical difference to the various paths one might take to get to Rome:

For every wight which that to Rome went
 Halt nat o path, or alwey o manere;
 Ek in some lond were al the game shent,
 If that they ferde in love as men don here,
 As thus, in opyn doyng or in chere,
 In visityng, in forme, or seyde hire sawes;
 Forthi men seyn, ecch contree hath his lawes. (II 36-42)

In a compressed form, this stanza lays out one of the fundamental concerns of historicism: how do we function in a world that is largely alien to us? For the historicist, the past is littered with discontinuity and strangeness; to waltz through the past oblivious to its particular differences is to invite disaster. For the Narrator of *Troilus and Criseyde*, the past is also like a foreign country, and just as we risk having “al the game shent” if we are not attentive to the “opyn doing or in chere, / in visityng, [or] in forme” of an alien land, we risk just as much if we fail to recognize the vicissitudes of history. History has its own laws, and we would do well to follow them.

Notwithstanding this temporal warning, the narrator of *Troilus and Criseyde* seems unable, or unwilling, to offer the reader a cipher for the laws of the past, for the parade of difference introduced in the proem to Book II only seems to continue, with the next stanza beginning: “Ek scarsly ben ther *in this place* thre / That have in love seid lik, and don, in al” (II.43-4, my italics). We emerge into the present to discover just as much worrying difference as we found in the past, for even *in this place* there aren’t more than three individuals who say or do the same thing in matters of love. And the multiplicity of sayings and actions produce a similar variability in response, “For to this purpos this may liken the, / And the right nought, yet al is seid or schal” (45-6). The variation in response

the narrator points to here is given no necessary rationale; one person likes something, while another dislikes it: there's no accounting for taste. And the narrator seems to have no problem refusing to account for taste, for just as individual taste might lead one person to like something that someone else dislikes, individual taste seems to dictate modes of representation as well, for "som men grave in tree, some in ston wal, / As it betit" (47). That some men "grave in tree" and "some in ston wal" is a sign of particularity that finds no explanation; it occurs simply "As it betit": it goes the way it goes.

But this clearly isn't the end of the story. *Troilus and Criseyde* is a poem that is situated within a striated historical context, at once in the deep classical past (the "thousand year" past that disfigures the intelligibility of language), the medieval "present," and the ambiguous near past of the poem's "source": the age of Lollius (is it ten years past, or a hundred?). The "age of Lollius" makes this a story that is always *already* told. If the narrator seems content to wave aside interpretive variability here ("it is what it is"), we should not be so glib as to follow his dismissal without question. Indeed, the narrator's contentment here may stem, in part, from the creative freedom of performative translation, the freedom to subject oneself to an extant work: "but syn I have bigonne, / Myn auctour shal I folwen, if I konne" (49). This passage reveals an almost impulsively causal quality to this storytelling, or perhaps, more accurately, an *impelled* quality, a sense that the poem, once begun, will provide its own rationale for completion. Indeed, its rationale for completion is that it is a poem that is *already* completed. The act of "creating" *Troilus and Criseyde* is really nothing more than an exercise in translation, the only challenge is "keeping up" with the pace of the past.

But if keeping up with the past is part of the narrator's concern—and there are countless moments when this seems to be an overriding concern—the past does not completely constrain the poem. We need only look back to the proem to Book I to see that as much as it is a poem located within the layers of the past, the “presentness” of the poem is also one of its most powerful and immediate features. When we are introduced to *Troilus and Criseyde* in Book I, we see it as a poem composed of “Thise woful vers, that wepen as I write” (7). The narrator presents us with a poem that is an embodied object, or more precisely, as an embodied subject speaking (or weeping) for itself. Indeed, the inherent tragedy of the subject matter (which is explicitly past) makes stylistic demands upon the present object (the poem *Troilus and Criseyde*). And so the “weeping” poem becomes both the object of poetic decorum and the naturalized subject of social interaction: “For wel sit it, the sothe for to seyne, / A woful wight to han a drery fere, / And to a sorwful tale, a sory chere” (12-14). Just as it is fitting for a sad person to have a sad friend, it is fitting for a sad story to bear a sad countenance. It's worth unpacking this comparison further, though. The closing couplet of the second stanza continues to embody the poem, giving it a “sory chere” to go along with its “weeping verses.” But the naturalized connection between a “sad story” and a “sad face” (the one causes the other) is complicated by the pairing of “woful wight” and “drery fere.” “Feere” is “companion,” but the word can run the gamut from “friend,” to “spouse,” to “mate,” or simply “equal.”¹⁰ The overriding concern is one of fit pairing; it is fitting, “or wel sit it,” for a sad person to be matched by a sad equal. We might stretch this to infer that the idea here is that misery not only *loves* company, but *needs* it as well. There is something collective about tragedy that causes it to reach out for a fit audience, and so, just as the text of

Troilus and Criseyde is itself weeping, it reaches out for a weeping audience. In this sense, when we read the poem, we are, in fact, doing it a kind of emotional service, a connection that blurs the historical distance between the text and its audience. This text needs us.

This is clearly not a one-way street, though. For in addition to the presentness represented by the poem's embodiment, and the service that we as members of the weeping audience do to the weeping verses of Book I, we also find there the image of the poem performing a kind of service to the present and to us. The narrator famously claims to serve the "God of Loves servantz," echoing the Pope's role as the "servant of the servants of God," and he outlines the many "services" for lovers that his poem might accomplish. This sense of present service butts up against the dangers of historical distance introduced in the proem to Book II, or we might say that Book II undermines the claims to transcendent presentism outlined in Book I.

III. Prophecy and the Birth of "Future Tyme"

As we saw at the beginning of Book II, the relationship between the past and the present is filtered in *Troilus and Criseyde* through a complex projection into an imagined future. But the future is not only a necessary component of understanding the past in the poem; *Troilus and Criseyde* is witness to the beginning of the future, for it is through the voice of Criseyde that the word *future* is first introduced into the English language. While a hostage in the Greek camp, Criseyde famously laments to Dame Prudence that although she can see into the past and the present, she cannot see into "future tyme":

Prudence, allas, oon of thyne eyen thre
Me lakked alwey, er that I come here!
On tyme ypassed wel remembered me,

And present tyme ek koud ich wel ise,
 But future tyme, er I was in the snare,
 Koude I nat sen; that causeth now my care. (V.743-9)

This first recorded use of the word “future” in the English language registers the extent to which the future begins as a space of inaccessibility; Criseyde’s cares are caused by her profound lack of foresight. But if we pull back from Criseyde’s current predicament, we can see that in a larger sense, her cares are in fact caused largely by a unique moment of foresight: the prophetic foresight of her father, Calkas.

Criseyde’s abandonment at the beginning of the poem by her “calculating” father sets into the motion the entire plot of this “litel tragedie.” As a prophet, Calkas is able to see quite clearly into “future tyme,” and his abilities allow him to make a choice informed by fate; his prophetic “calkulynge” allows him to foresee the fact that “Troie moste ben fordo.” Calkas’s foreknowledge is, of course, merely one example of the central dilemma in the “tragedie” of *Troilus and Criseyde*, for it is a poem haunted by the specter of a future certainty that cannot be avoided: the death of Troilus and the destruction of Troy.¹¹ This future certainty is not only available to Calkas, however; it is an inescapable finality reiterated at length by the narrator of the poem, and it is one that appears, although obliquely, even to Criseyde. Early in Book II, Criseyde is interrupted by Pandarus while she and two other women are reading a book, a book which provides a prophetic analogue to the future fate of Troy itself, the “geste / Of the siege of Thebes” (2.84).

It should come as no surprise that we find Criseyde reading the *Thebaid* in Book II, a book that begins with an invocation to Clio. The story of Thebes is a narrative that provides a kind of pre-history—or a prefiguration—of the tragedy that will eventually

befall Troy. Indeed, Catherine Sanok has noted the ways in which the *Thebaid* operates in *Troilus and Criseyde* as a kind of “frame narrative” for the central events of the poem:

“the narrative of the love of Troilus and Criseyde is bracketed by the *Thebaid*: Criseyde’s reading marks the beginning of the affair, and Cassandre’s explanation of Troilus’s dream marks its end.”¹²

But Sanok also astutely observes that Pandarus’s interruption of Criseyde’s reading group denies her a particularly instructive example of her own condition, the description of “How the bisshop, as the book kan telle, / Amphiorax, fil thorough the ground to helle” (2.104-5). The fate of the Greek seer Amphiaraus, who foretold the miseries to come from the siege of Thebes and who was subsequently swallowed up by the earth, is one that would resonate strongly with Criseyde, who was herself abandoned by her prophetic father, Calkas. Pandarus’s interruption at this precise point in the *Thebaid* not only denies Criseyde a literary analogue for her present condition, it also serves to preempt a potential moment of prophetic reading. As Dinshaw puts it, “It is as if, in this inaugural moment in the affair of Troilus and Criseyde, Criseyde threatens to know too much, to get ahead of the narrative, to read things impossible for her to read, things that must remain hidden from her.”¹³

But Pandarus’s interruption is more than an effort to contain Criseyde’s prophetic potential, for in deferring the prophetic resonance of the *Thebaid*—and the analogous tragedy of Troy itself—Pandarus also pushes Criseyde to instead embrace the romantic narrative that he would make of her, a narrative that he and Troilus have in fact colluded to create:

Quod Pandarus, “Al this knowe I myselve,
And al th’assege of Thebes and the care;

For herof ben ther maked bookes twelve,
 But lat be this, and telle me how ye fare.
 Do wey youre barbe, and shewe youre face bare;
 Do wey youre book, rys up, and lat us daunce,
 And lat us don to May som observaunce.” (II.106-12)

Pandarus’s insistence that Criseyde take off her “barbe”—a kind of headdress worn by widows and nuns—and instead “don to May som observaunce” pushes her to give up the relative freedom of chaste widowhood, and to instead “thrallen libertee,” (II.773). In effect, in asking Criseyde to “do wey” her barbe and her book, he is asking her to remove the only things protecting her from the fated tragedy to which we already know she is bound. This moment of deferred prophetic potential is counterbalanced, however, by a later moment, one that is horrifically realized, and one that will settle once and for all the final course of the narrative.

After she is abandoned by the people of Troy, exchanged for the Trojan prisoner Antenor, Criseyde finds herself alone in the Greek camp, bereft of friends and without the protection of the powerful male authorities who had previously governed her life. It is in this environment that she is forced to confront once again the prophetic certainty that first initiated the narrative of *Troilus and Criseyde*. This prophetic certainty is delivered by the “silver-tongued” Diomedes, who, in one of the most chilling moments in the poem, attempts to “woo” Criseyde by explicating his genocidal plans for her fellow Trojans. After his initial suits are unsuccessful, Diomedes concludes, rightly enough, that Criseyde’s unwillingness to accept his advances are caused by “love for some Troian.” But he points out, in a thoroughly disturbing come on, that such pity is “nought worth the while”:

“The folk of Troie, as who seyth, alle and some
 In prisoun ben, as ye youreselfen se;

Nor thennes shal not one on-lyve come
 For al the gold atwixen sonne and se.
 Trusteth wel, and understondeth me,
 Ther shal not oon to mercy gon on-lyve,
 Al were he lord of worldes twies fyve!

“Swich wreche on hem, for fecchyng of Eleyne,
 Ther shal be take, er that we hennes wende,
 That Manes, which that goddes ben of peyne,
 Shal ben agast that Grekes wol hem shende.
 And men shul drede unto the worldes ende,
 From hennesforth to ravyshhen any queene,
 So cruel shaloure wreche on hem be seene.” (V.883-96)

Diomedes' recitation is brutal both in its merciless cruelty and in its undeniable certainty.

The people of Troy are imprisoned within their walled city, and not a single one will survive the oncoming Greek assault. Indeed, the vengeance intended for the Trojans will be so terrible that even the goddesses of the underworld will be horrified by what is to come. As if to forestall Criseyde's conclusion that his pronouncement is merely a kind of genocidal boasting, Diomedes goes on to note that it is her prophetic father, Calkas, who serves as guarantor of this grisly contract with destiny:

“And but if Calkas lede us with ambages,
 That is to seyn, with double wordes slye,
 Swiche as men clepen a word with two visages,
 Ye shal wel knowen that I naught ne lye,
 And al this thyng right sen it with youre ye,
 And that anon, ye nyl nat trow how sone.
 Now taketh hede, for it is for to doon.” (5.897-903)

This passage is worth quoting at length because it both encapsulates the fundamental dilemma that Criseyde confronts, and also disturbingly mimics an earlier moment of her encounter with prophecy. Like Pandarus, Diomedes also enjoins Criseyde to set aside the horrific potential of prophetic certainty and to replace it with a romantic escape. Here though, the implied tragedy hinted at by the literary analogue of the *Thebaid* is replaced

with the very real certainty of Troy's eventual destruction and the extermination of its people. Here too, though, the certainty of prophecy is mediated through a moment of interpretive choice. Diomedes opens up the possibility of Calchas's prophetic warnings being merely "slye wordes" and "ambages," but in a particularly cruel formulation, he forces Criseyde to make a terrible choice: if Criseyde refuses to accept the certainty of Troy's destruction, she must instead accept that her father is a liar, and that he has abandoned her for nothing.

The emotional coercion inherent in this choice might lead us to follow the narrator in viewing Criseyde's decision to betray Troilus as one made of necessity, and one that should be pitied, rather than condemned. But I would like to go further than the narrator's meek pity, and, indeed, to go further than Dinshaw, who refuses to allow Criseyde the potential for a reading that fundamentally upsets the terms of patriarchal power. Dinshaw concludes that Criseyde is merely "capable of being used to further the patriarchal social organization: the autonomous sliding of her heart is exactly what fits her for use as a thing passed between men."¹⁴ Instead, I would like to argue that following the narrator's increasing discomfort with his narrative through Books IV and V, we should instead see a dawning realization, or perhaps a dawning *double* realization on his part, one that we too must confront. For just as the narrator seems to shrink from his own troubling complicity in narrating Criseyde's tragic fate, he also seems to shrink from a more troubling realization: that her choice was not just the *necessary* one, but that it was also the *right* one.

Criseyde's initial unwillingness to run away with Troilus in Book IV (1520-96) is not only predicated on her selfless refusal to see Troilus "leten alle [his] frendes, God

forbede / For any womman,” but it is also a product of her abiding concern for Troy itself, for as she rightly points out, “Troie hath now swich nede / Of help” (4.1558-9). Once she is confronted with the certainty of Troy’s destruction, however, her choice is reduced to living outside of Troy’s walls or dying within them, and after a brief attempt to resist the certainty of Diomedes’s recounting of Troy’s fate, Criseyde eventually chooses to accept the tragic circumstances of her present condition, and to persist in the face of them, eschewing death within Troy for a life, however ignoble, without it. Reflecting on her choice in seclusion, Criseyde is forced to recognize the futility of her hopes for Troy, and to recognize the contingent danger of her own social position:

Retornyng in hire soule ay up and down
 The wordes of this sodeyn Diomedes,
 His grete estat, and perel of the town,
 And that she was allone and hadde nede
 Of frendes help; and thus bygan to brede
 The cause whi, the sothe for to telle,
 That she took fully purpos for to dwelle. (V.1023-9)

Criseyde’s concession to the mutability of Fortune and her willingness to abandon her prior commitments in the face of contingent circumstances stands in stark contrast to Troilus’s confrontation with the certainty of prophecy. But although Criseyde’s willingness to abandon Troilus and Troy occurs after her confrontation with the prophetic certainty of their imminent destruction, we should also recognize that her willingness to betray her lover and her native land is prompted by her own history of loss.

In her article on Criseyde’s mobilization of Boethian philosophy, Sashi Nair notes that

Criseyde's suggestion that he who is unaware of the mutability of good fortune is not truly happy, gestures toward Troilus, whose ignorance leads him to believe that his love affair can survive secrecy, the siege of Troy, and, in the end, Criseyde's departure to the Greek camp. He may believe he is happy with Criseyde, then, but

within the Boethian frame of the poem, he cannot truly claim that “he hath verray joie and selynesse”. Criseyde, on the other hand, is always conscious of what she has to lose, and if she experiences “joie”, it is a joy shadowed by the impending downturn of Fortune's wheel.¹⁵

Recognizing the Boethian insistence that within any moment of joy is an immanent and imminent misery, Criseyde perceives all present happiness as transitory, and as a widow, Criseyde's absent husband serves as a constant, spectral prefiguration of the potential loss of her current lover. Able to view her present state through the historical lens of her past experience, Criseyde is able to imagine a future past, or a future which will mirror the past, a looming loss as painful as the one she has already known. Lacking this historical experience, Troilus is unable to project into “future tyme” any mirrored repetition of past loss, and it is this historical ignorance which is later cited as the cause of his misunderstanding of the future when he is forced to confront the returning narrative that initiated his now doomed romance.

After Criseyde's removal to the Greek camp, and after a worrying dream in which Troilus envisions Criseyde kissing a boar (V 1240), the lovelorn Trojan seeks out his prophetic sister, Cassandra, to interpret the meaning of his vision. Before her explication, however, Cassandra chastises her brother for not knowing his history: “O brother deere,” she says with a smile, “If thow a soth of this [dream] desirest knowe, / Thow most a few of olde stories here” (V 1457-8). Cassandra then proceeds to recount to her brother the long history of Thebes, that doomed prefiguration for Troy, and after this history lesson, she quickly summarizes the meaning of her brother's dream in a single stanza:

“This ilke boor bitokneth Diomede,
Tideus sone, that down descended is
Fro Meleagre, that made the boor to blede.
And thy lady, wherso she be, ywis,
This Diomede hire herte hath, and she his.
Wep if thow wolt, of lef! For, out of doute,

This Diomedes is inne, and thou art oute.” (V 1513-19).

Troilus reacts with furious disbelief, a disbelief which is simultaneously the product of another tragically unavoidable fate—by tradition Cassandra was cursed by Apollo, her spurned suitor, with the ability to foresee the future but to never be believed—but also a refusal to concede to the certainty of a future he himself has now seen, but which he cannot interpret through his own past experience. Unlike his tragic paramour, Troilus, the privileged prince and martial hero, cannot accept that “Diomedes is inne” and that he is truly “oute,” because he has no previous experience through which to understand his sudden and dramatic reversal of fortune.

Indeed, despite his sister’s interpretation of his dream and the continuing reality of Criseyde’s absence, Troilus continues to hold out hope for Criseyde’s eventual return, even in the face of Pandarus’s growing incredulity and scorn. It is only when he sees the “ocular proof” of Criseyde’s change of heart (Diomedes wearing a brooch he gave to Criseyde) that he accepts that Criseyde is never coming back. Confronted with the reality of his failed affair, Troilus seeks to undo himself, and to seek his own “deth in armes,” simultaneously robbing the narrative of its central figure, the city of its preeminent warrior, and, if we accept the traditional connection between Troy’s demise and Troilus’s own death, sealing the fate of the city itself. Troilus’s refusal to accept the certainty of his own fate can be viewed through the gendered norms of a “masculine” resistance to the depredations of Fortune, and can be contrasted with Criseyde’s own willingness to consent to her tragic fate. Maureen Fries has pointed out that Criseyde’s fate as a “Bad Woman” is only sealed when she concedes to the pressures of circumstance rather than resisting them to the point of her own death: “Criseyde evades violent death, but destroys

her reputation because she lacks “manly spirit” and “remarkable fortitude”—unlike the Good Woman, the Bad Woman is “slydyng of corage.”¹⁶ Unlike other virtuous women who in the hagiographical tradition of female saints refuse to consent to circumstance, and who are often martyred for their resistance, Criseyde accepts her fate and lives long enough to be remembered in perpetuity as a bad woman, and long enough to be quickly forgotten by her own narrative. Preempting condemnation for his portrayal of Criseyde’s faithlessness, the narrator of *Troilus and Criseyde* beseeches

every lady bright of hewe
 And every gentil woman, what she be,
 That al be that Criseyde was untrewē,
 That for that gilt she be nat wroth with me.
 Ye may hire gilt in other bokes se;
 And gladlier I wol write, yif yow leste,
 Penelopeës trouthe and good Alceste. (V.1772-8)

This double turn shields the narrator from the reflected guilt of Criseyde’s betrayal by first holding up a literary tradition which he presents as having forced his hand—“hire gilt in other bokes”—and then by burying Criseyde’s narrative beneath a future narrative he “wol write,” a narrative of the good women Penelope and Alcestis, characters who indeed appear in another Chaucerian poem, the *Legend of Good Women*. This self-referential denial finds further expression in the next stanza, where the narrator swerves even more dramatically from the present narrative. In the famous “Go litel bok” envoy, the narrator of *Troilus and Criseyde* subjugates his tragedy to the service of a future work:

Go, litel bok, go, litel myn tragedye,
 Ther God thi makere yet, er that he dye,
 So sende might to make in som comedye!
 But litel book, no making thow n’envie,
 But subgit be to alle poesye;
 And kis the steppes where as thow seest pace

Virgile, Ovide, Omer, Lucan, and Stace. (V.1786-92)

Here reconfigured as the instrumental precursor to an imminent “comedy,” the “litel tragedye” of *Troilus* is now made subject to “alle poseye,” and specifically to the illustrious classical poets of the past. Straddling the distant past and the as-yet-unwritten future, Criseyde’s disappearance from the poem is here generalized to a moment when the entirety of *Troilus and Criseyde* disappears beneath a future necessity, the promised “comedy” which will become Chaucer’s unfinished magnum opus, *The Canterbury Tales*.

The narrator’s anxiety about Criseyde’s betrayal may itself betray an anxiety about his own willingness to abandon his tragedy in search of the greener pastures of comedy, but his turn in the next stanza returns us to the threat of mutability that initiated this chapter, for after forcing his poem to stoop to kiss the steps of Virgil and his classical compeers, the narrator suddenly recalls himself to the seemingly forgotten danger of Book II, that his monument of words might itself become as dangerously “slydyng” as Criseyde’s fickle “corage”:

And for ther is so gret diversite
 In Englissh and in writing of oure tonge,
 So prey I God that non miswrite the,
 Ne the mysmetre for defaute of tonge;
 And red wherso thow be, or ells songe,
 That thow be understonde, God I biseche!
 But yet to purpose of my rather spech: (V.1793-9)

In the proem to Book II, the threat of linguistic mutability was mapped out spatially, and the geographical diversity of “sondry londes” served to represent the diverse forms of speech that belonged to various historical periods. Here, however, the threat of linguistic mutability is contracted into a single place and time, and instead of “sondry ages” and

“sondry londes,” the English language itself becomes a fractured land of “diversite,” a place where poems are always in danger of being “mysmetred” through “defaute of tonge.” Whipsawing back and forth between artistic stasis and mutability, the narrator simultaneously recognizes the mutably progressive nature of his own poetic project—that poems can beget other poems—while also holding that project up against imagined figures of transhistorical merit: Virgil, Ovid, Homer, Lucan, and Statius. Here, though, that back and forth threatens to uncover a mutability inherent in the very materiality of his poetic project, as the very stuff of his poetry—the English language—reveals itself as a substance susceptible to transience, as changeable as Criseyde’s “slydynghe” heart, the guilty figure the narrator seems so eager to forget. Seemingly aware of the danger, though, the narrator quickly recalls himself to his narrative once again, and to his “rather speche”: the fate of Troilus.

Troilus, having now demonstrated his “manly spirit” by dying on the battlefield, earns an ascent to the Eighth Sphere, where he finds safe harbor from the “worldes vanitee” and the vicissitudes of mutability. Looking down from this lofty height, his response to the weeping figures below him who mourn his death is to laugh at them, and to damn them, along with “al oure werk that foloweth so / The blynde lust, the which that may nat laste” (V.1823-4). From his lofty perch, Troilus relishes his withdrawal from the “false worldes brotelnesse” (V.1832). And in a turn that seems to demonstrate his assent to this view of the fundamental irrelevance of the tragic love story he has just completed, the narrator provides a conclusion that seems to offer up the entire poem as a kind of “warning to the future,” a future embodied in generations of “yonge, fresshe folkes” yet to be born (V.1835), who should learn from his poem to “Repeyreth hom fro worldly

vanyte” (V.1837), turning away from the false promise of earthly love, and toward the image of God, and of the crucified Christ, who “Upon a crois, oure soules for to beye, / First staf, and roos, and sit in hevене above” (V.1843,4).

Having thus abandoned the tragic love story that served as the dramatic centerpiece of his entire poem, the narrator makes a final turn to the ultimate image of transhistorical stasis, and in the final stanza concludes with a meditation on the Trinity:

Thow oon, and two, and thre, eterne on lyve,
That regnest ay in thre, and two, and oon,
Uncircumscript, and al maist circumscribe,
Us from visible and invisible foon
Defend, and to thy mercy, everichon,
So make us, Jesus, for thi mercy, digne,
For love of mayde and moder thy benigne. (V.1863-9)

In the face of this ultimate imminence, the prophecies of Troy’s destruction and the tragic effects of those prophecies on the lives of Troilus and Criseyde seem to shrink to insignificance. While cities and love affairs may collapse beneath the capricious whims of Fortune, the protective certainty of Christian eschatology offers a place of respite from change and uncertainty, and the tripartite God functions as the boundless, unchanging axis at the center of a swirling mass of mutability. Here is the end of this tragedy, but here too is the end of the threatening tragedy of history, and indeed the end of history itself, for just as the danger of temporal change is rendered impotent in the face of this infinite period, so too is any meaningful distinction in time lost in the face of a temporal singularity that both completes and circumscribes all of recorded history.

IV. “*Oursel the Merchant*”: *Mercenary Translation in Troilus and Cressida*

The projection of a universal period created by the forward-looking narrator at the end of *Troilus and Criseyde* is perhaps even more utopian than he could have imagined

when we consider his future projection from the perspective of a knowing history. As we saw earlier in the chapter, the division between the Middle Ages and everything that comes after is one of historicism's defining features, indeed, often being identified as a division that initiates modern history from medieval atemporalism. We might expect to find, then, that a mirrored text that sits on the other side of that great imagined division to have none of the anachronistic meditations on the past that we see in *Troilus and Criseyde*. However, despite the fact that it falls after the great period divide that long marked out a division between the presumed "naïve" ahistoricism of the Middle Ages and the "self-aware" historicism of the Renaissance, William Shakespeare's dramatic adaptation of Chaucer, *Troilus and Cressida*, displays a wealth of anachronism that reveals a deeper kinship to its medieval predecessor than one might initially suspect.

Although it is, like *Troilus and Criseyde*, a narrative set in the deep past of the Bronze-Age Mediterranean, Troilus's first lines in the play, "Call here my varlet; I'll unarm again" (1.1.1) display the thoroughly anachronistic appearance of a late-medieval/early-modern chivalric role.¹⁷ Later, Ulysses praises Patroclus's mimicry of old Nestor, as he is "with a palsy fumbling on his gorget" (1.3.178). Old Nestor himself pledges, "I'll hide my silver beard in a gold beaver / And in my vambrace put my withered brawns" (1.3.304). Achilles insists to Ajax that he "Tomorrow morning call some knight to arms" (2.1.128), and in a charged scene before Diomedes's tent, after witnessing Cressida's betrayal, Troilus pledges to Ulysses "That sleeve is mine that he'll bear on his helm. / Were it a casque composed by Vulcan's skill, / My sword should bite it" (5.2.200). These anachronistic depictions of military garb might be forgiven as simple accommodations to the realities of the stage (whose actors would be decked in early-

modern costume), but the appearance of religious anachronism in the play can hardly be passed off as a trifling concession to stagecraft. If Thomas Greene can critique medieval narratives for foolishly imagining Amphiarus as a bishop, or the maenads as nuns, then there is surely a reason to fault *Troilus and Cressida* when Pandarus swears “By God’s lid” (1.2.216), or when Paris’s servingman asks Pandarus “You are in a state of grace?” (3.1.15). And there is little sense of a fundamentally modern historical self-awareness when Troilus, in his debate with Hector, claims that Helen is “A spur to the valiant and magnanimous deeds, / Whose present courage may beat down our foes, / And fame in time to come *canonize* us” (2.2.211, my italics).

But for all these individual occurrences of anachronism, there is also the strong sense of a kind of formal anachronism at work in the play, an awareness, like what we saw in *Troilus and Criseyde*, of the immense temporal distances being crossed, the space between the presentness of the play and that pastness of its source material, and an awareness of the ways in which these transhistorical movements situate this edifice of language in a progression stretching on into an uncertain future. In his first soliloquy, Troilus complains aloud about his difficulties in wooing Cressida, and in doing so, subtly gestures towards the slippery temporal frame within which the play is operating.

Peace, you ungracious clamors! Peace, rude sounds!
 Fools on both sides! Helen must needs be fair
 When with your blood you daily paint her thus.
 I cannot fight upon this argument;
 It is too starved a subject for my sword.
 But Pandarus—O gods, how do you plague me!
 I cannot come to Cressid but by Pandar,
 And he’s as tetchy to be wooed to woo
 As she is stubborn-chaste against all suit.
 Tell me, Apollo, for thy Daphne’s love,
 What Cressid is, what Pandar, and what we.
 Her bed is India; there she lies, a pearl.

Between our Ilium and where she resides,
 Let it be called the wild and wandr'ring flood,
 Ourselves the merchant, and this sailing Pandar
 Our doubtful hope, our convoy, and our bark. (1.1.91-106)

Here Troilus wrestles with the cause of the Trojan war, Helen's abduction, and urges an end to the "ungracious clamors" and "rude sounds" of war. The complaint against both the Greek and Trojan soldiers, who Troilus labels as fools for fighting over Helen, rests on the artificiality of her beauty; she is a treasure who "must needs be fair" after she is painted with blood. This sense of artificial worth appears throughout the play, but here too we can see that the futility of combat can also be found in the sense of wearied repetition. Troilus "cannot fight upon the argument" of Helen, as it is "too starved a subject" for his sword. The "starved subject" of Helen's abduction is held up against Troilus's pursuit of Cressida, but the cause seems to be a futile one. Troilus's dependence on Pandarus's intercession and Cressida's own stubborn chastity prevents his suits. But it's important to note the temporal location of these two competing pursuits. In comparing his pursuit of Cressida to Apollo's pursuit of Daphne, Troilus seems to locate it in the classical "past," but his supplication to that fruitless lover, "Tell me Apollo, for thy Daphne's love, / What Cressid is, what Pandar, and what we" opens up a comparison that seems implicitly to slight the present moment. What are Troilus, Cressida, Pandarus and the whole Greek and Trojan camps when held up against this classical analogue? And in the next line, we are suddenly vaulted out of the classical past and into the contemporaneity of the play itself, for Cressida's bed is "India," and she is a pearl, an object of mercantile value. Moreover, set apart from the "there" of Cressida's India, is the Ilium of the "here and now." Ilium is an archaic name for Troy that locates Troilus's here-and-now in the past. Cressida rests as a pearl, geographically and temporally distant

from Troilus's present, and spanning the distance is "the wild and wandr'ing flood," with only "sailing Pandar" to connect them.

Critics have long noted the mercantile imagery in *Troilus and Cressida*, but in addition to casting a cynical shadow over Troilus's love for Cressida from the outset, the appearance of mercantile imagery here is expressly and unavoidably anachronistic.¹⁸ Given the temporal frame of the play, such imagery doesn't belong, and neither, I argue, does Cressida. She doesn't fit within the frame of the Troy legend, and Troilus seems, from the outset, to recognize this. She is distanced from Ilium, and from Troilus. Her stubbornness is not only her insistence on chastity, she is stubbornly *now* in the *then* of the play. What Troilus is proposing in his suit is not just another romantic conquest; he is, in effect, attempting to bridge the divide between the early-modern present and the classical past.

This difficulty bridging temporal periods is contrasted with the typological difficulty within the play itself. On the one hand, the play fits within a literary history, and so confronts, at least implicitly, its medieval forebear, Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*. But in setting the play in a past that predates Chaucer's *Troilus* while staging it long after, *Troilus and Cressida* engages with the difficulty of the Troy narrative with the same complex ambivalence we saw in Chaucer's tragedy. And like Chaucer's tragedy, *Troilus and Cressida* views this problem through the distorting liberation of prophecy and typology.

The typological approach was one that itself had a long history prior to *Troilus and Cressida*. It was typology that allowed Christian exegetes to suture new narratives onto past narratives while maintaining a sense of temporal continuity and contiguity.

Such typology imagines a world that is already written, but which, rather than serving as a peremptory interloper into present, serves instead as a sign of what's to come, the unfilled vessel, an unfulfilled promise. To read typologically is to see what's coming before it has come. It is, in a sense, the ultimate anachronism, but when one considers all of eternity as a single unified "period," then the ability to move backwards and forwards is no great concern. And we can see, the impulse toward typology emerges in a particularly changed scene in Shakespeare's.

When Troilus and Cressida finally come together in Act 3 Scene 2, their meeting is thrust into a moment of disturbingly typological reading. Confronted by the reciprocation of his desire for Cressida, Troilus imagines a "battle of right" between himself and his lover-to-be, with each pledging to be the most faithful:

True swains in love shall in the world to come
Approve their truth by Troilus. When their rhymes,
Full of protest, of oath and big compare,
Wants similes, truth tired with iteration--
"As true as steel, as plantage to the moon,
As sun to day, as turtle to her mate,
As iron to adamant, as earth to th'center"--
<Yet,> after all comparisons of truth,
As truth's authentic author to be cited,
"As true as Troilus" shall crown up the verse
And sanctify the numbers. (3.2.174-84)

Troilus's fantasy takes him to an imminent future. This imminence—the potential space of a world yet-to-come—is one in which Troilus prefigures (or at least precedes) the "true swains" who will follow him, but the construction Troilus imagines, the one that functions in the temporal space of the play, the "here and now" of Act 3 Scene 2, is one in which the future swains serve only to prefigure Troilus; they only exist (they *will* only exist) to exemplify "true Troilus." In this future fantasy, Troilus projects a future

dependent on, and exemplary of, his own faithfulness. Troilus's epitomic role as "truth" has become a kind of ultimate signifier (at the end of the line, when all else has failed—"rhymes / Full of protest, of oath and big compare"—there will be Troilus). We might reflect at this moment on the Troilus that appears in Chaucer, who is equally concerned about creating a lasting monument of love that will extend to the utmost ends of temporality; for all the time that has passed between the two, this is still fundamentally the same Troilus. But we should also see that this present Troilus's reasoning is hopelessly circular, because this future guarantor is entirely dependent on the very present that it guarantees. Troilus provides Cressida with evidence of his commitment to faithfulness in the present that is based on a future which is itself dependent on his continued faithfulness in the present.

But there is something even more troubling in Troilus's construction. In addition to being a double typology, Troilus has also presented us with a doubled or circular system of comparison. For just as future swains will derive from Troilus an exemplum of Truth ("true as Troilus"), Troilus compares this system of comparison to the other tools these "true swains" will use to convince their objects of desire that they will be faithful. In this formulation, "True as Troilus" becomes just another rhetorical tool at the disposal of amorous swains; Troilus is not only epitomized in this formulation, he is formally objectified as a sort of aphoristic simile. As a formal object, to be deployed by the true swains, Troilus imagines himself into a space in which he is both absolved of agency for his epitomization and also bound inescapably to it. Troilus's fantasy allows him to reap the benefits of both the subject and object position without bearing any of the responsibilities of either. In effect, Troilus becomes one of the same "true swains" he

invents in order to bolster his own claims to faithfulness. Troilus becomes both type and anti-type, and in doing so, completely escapes the contingent demands of the present. He doesn't really need to be true to Cressida; he already is.

In claiming for himself the role as the epitome of Truth, however, Troilus essentially forces Cressida to call his bluff. By making himself the epitome of Truth, a kind of self-made apotheosis, Troilus forces Cressida either to "war" with him over the title, or to take something less. It is a difficult choice, and in essence, the only way to vie with him in terms of extremity is to move in the opposite direction, and to take on an identification through negation: if Troilus is going to *be* Truth, then Cressida can only achieve this height by personifying the absence of the absence of Truth. In doing this, Troilus is not only forcing Cressida into a lesser position, but he is also undermining the traditional dynamic of courtly love. The traditional patriarchal hierarchy of gender is noticeably inverted in courtly love, but Troilus seems to pressure Cressida into deploying this "archaic" social code. In a sense, Cressida's concerns are already being realized; now that she has revealed her interest in Troilus, he has resorted to a male-dominated hierarchy that antedates the conventions of courtly love. As she noted in an earlier scene, "Achievement is command" (1.3.300). Once she has been "won" by Troilus, Cressida's power over him vanishes, and she is left under the command of his "achievement" over her. It should come as no surprise, then, that Troilus finishes his epitomization with a kind of imperial triumphalism, in his final words he imagines himself as "truth's authentic author," and in the aphoristic simile, "As true as Troilus," he imagines himself "crown[ing] up the verse / And sanctify[ing] the numbers" of the "true swains" who in times to come will invoke his enduring fidelity.

So what can Cressida do? Without the ability to return to her dominant position in the vertical hierarchy of lovers, Cressida has no choice but to move sideways. In order to match Troilus in the *degree* of his pledge, she cannot be *more* true than Troilus, but she can still prove *more*. Cressida's apotheosis must be one that hinges on the threat of failure: should she ever prove untrue, Cressida will become the very epitome of untruth. By doing this, Cressida seeks to match Troilus not in kind, but in *degree*. In a sense, Troilus has already planted his flag in the prime real estate, and in his prophetic apotheosis he imagines himself as already successful. In comparison, Cressida is left to imagine an unwanted future, and its function and efficacy depends entirely on the extremity of its unpleasantness.

Prophet may you be!
 If I be false or swerve a hair from truth,
 When time is old and hath forgot itself,
 When water drops have worn the stones of Troy
 And blind oblivion swallowed cities up,
 And mighty states characterless are grated
 To dusty nothing, yet let memory,
 From false to false, among false maids in love,
 Upbraid my falsehood! When they've said "as false
 As air, as water, wind or sandy earth,
 As fox to lamb, or wolf to heifer's calf,
 Pard to the hind, or stepdame to her son,"
 Yea, let them say, to stick the heart of falsehood,
 "As false as Cressid."

Like Troilus's pledge, Cressida's pledge predicates itself on an imagined future, but her pledge takes a bleaker view of the "world to come." Indeed, Troilus's "world to come" imagines the future as a space of imminence and potential, but one that continues the practices of the present (ladies will still need to be seduced). Cressida's future, on the other hand, is a space beyond futurity, when even time "is old and hath forgot itself." The walls of Troy have succumbed to time, not to the invading Greek forces; cities are lost to

oblivion, and “mighty states characterless are grated / To dusty nothing.” Cressida’s bleak future is made all the bleaker when this competitive identification is placed within a broader historical context, a context where Troy’s walls have collapsed, and where “false as Cressid” is an epitomic reality.

Left out of this paired system of epitomic identification, of course, is Pandarus. But he is quick to provide a comparable identification for himself. Pandarus’s identification gives the game away, though, and reveals what is behind the scenes of this performance:

Go to, a bargain made. Seal it, seal it. I’ll be the witness. Here I hold your hand, here my cousin’s. If ever you prove false one to another, since I have taken such pains to bring you together, let all pitiful goers-between be called to the world’s end after my name: call them all panders. Let all constant men be Troiluses, all false women Cressids, and all brokers-between panders. Say “Amen.” (3.3.199-206)

Pandarus’s change into “pander” is not only the most concrete transformation among the three (rather than turning into an abstract concept—truth or betrayal—Pandarus lends his name to the very role he plays), it is also the most historically predetermined. The word “pander” is derived from Pandarus—he inhabits his role in a very immediate way, and by the time of *Troilus and Cressida*’s composition, this was a well-established association.¹⁹ That Pandarus in *Troilus and Cressida* should swear to uphold his oath under threat of *becoming* a “pander” is an example of the “tragic” anachronism Thomas Greene identified if there ever was one. Pandarus is hopelessly out-of-date, and like a helpless old man in a dated suit, Pandarus goes on oblivious to the fact that history has left him behind. Or perhaps more accurately, history has captured Pandarus and dragged him beyond his own capacity to alter it, for no matter what he “chooses” to do here, he is already Pandarus, and so is already always a “pander.” This

fear of the future being “bound” to a past that has already been written is concretized in Pandarus, and it is no surprise, then, that his are the last words in the play.

In a later moment, we can see the connection between the “binding” power of the oath and the complex temporal forces at work in the play. Threatened with the possibility of future mutability, Troilus attempts to create a compact that will allow him to prevent the contingency of external circumstance, and the contingency of the will itself, a pledge against change, against mutability and “newfangledness.” But when Troilus enjoins Cressida to be “true” to him before she is sent to the Greeks, he places his finger on the troubling crux of her oath:

TROILUS: But be not tempted.
 CRESSIDA: Do you think I will?
 TROILUS: No.
 But something may be done that we will not,
 And sometimes we are devils to ourselves
 When we will tempt the frailty of our powers,
 Presuming on their changeful potency. (4.4.97-103)

There is a kind of presumption in placing one’s bets against the powers of change, but Troilus’s punning response to Cressida’s shocked “Do you think I will?” also reveals a fear of the alterations of desire that may come about as a result of temporal change, for as Ulysses so famously warns Achilles, “The present eye praises the present object” (185). The natural tendency towards presentism expressed by Ulysses may explain what lurks in the shadows of Troilus’s discomfort, but his pun reveals that he lacks the language to express it clearly. How can one do anything other than what one “wills” except under compulsion? Is Troilus simply expressing his fear that Cressida might be *compelled* to assent to the Greeks (her “welcoming” scene at the Greek camp certainly seems to bear out this fear), or is it rather that Troilus is expressing a fear of what might affect her will?

Troilus's question broaches the possibility that whatever Cressida may swear *now*, her will may waver in the future, especially should she "tempt the frailty of [her] powers."

But what else is there to regulate the will besides our "frail powers"? Indeed, what is the will but our "frail powers" coalesced around a singularity of purpose? Troilus imagines a space beyond desire, or indeed, a kind of choice that would subvert the possibility of a future desire. If we simply choose not to trust to ourselves (our "frail powers" to resist temptation), we might safeguard a kind of eternal present in which our current desire is replicated into perpetuity. Indeed, this seems to be Troilus's plan. When pressured by Cressida's insistent "When will I see you again?" Troilus insists that he "will corrupt the Grecian sentinels, / To give thee nightly visitation" (4.4.75). This arrangement denies the finality of their separation and proposes a fantasy of continuation as a replacement for the trauma of dislocation, an effort to confront the tragedy of history—that anything which lasts must do so by lingering into a future where it does not belong—by imaging a future over which he has almost laughable control.

V. Burying the Past in the Future: The Tragic Lastingness of WIPP

About twenty five miles east of Carlsbad, New Mexico stands the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP), a facility designed as a deep geological storage site for the tons of radioactive material currently kept in temporary facilities across the United States. WIPP is one of only a handful of long-term storage facilities currently in operation around the world, and its uniqueness is a testament to the difficulty of its mission.²⁰ As a permanent storage facility, WIPP presented the EPA with a seemingly insurmountable challenge: to safely store a material which possesses a lethality that will almost certainly outlast the very political and cultural systems erected to store and protect it. EPA regulations

demand that facilities that store radioactive waste include both active and passive controls in order to prevent the unwanted release of toxic materials into the environment.²¹ The passive methods—called Passive Institutional Controls (PICs)—must continue to function even in the event of minor disruptions such as the loss of electrical power, but they are also intended to remain efficacious without any intervention from outside personnel, and they must include warning systems which will remain efficacious as long as the material being stored remains a threat to the public. Since the material can remain lethal for tens of thousands of years, the designers of WIPP were forced to imagine a method of communication that could remain efficacious for an unimaginably long time.

Like the stubborn Troilus's of Chaucer and Shakespeare, the designers of the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant found themselves forced to reconcile the tragedy of history to a future in which objects from the past have become alien and inaccessible, and like the two martial princes, they sought to create a structure that would withstand the ravages of time and remain efficacious into a seemingly infinite future. The edifice they constructed was an effort to protect a material that has an almost infinite lethality, all while simultaneously transmitting an intelligible message to future generations, and their attempt is especially pertinent to those of us who work on material that is markedly past.

In an article on the struggle to conceive of and construct lasting monuments in the face of temporal change, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen nicely summarizes the fundamental problem presented by waste storage facilities like WIPP, and the now-cancelled facility in Nevada's Yucca Mountain, a problem born of the unforeseen consequences of bureaucratic regulations meant to control toxins that had lethal lifespans measure in decades rather than millennia. As Cohen starkly summarizes, "because the waste [at

facilities like Yucca Mountain] will remain lethal for at least ten thousand years, the Environmental Protection Agency enjoined the construction of a warning sign that can remain efficacious across a ten-millennium span.”²²

For the designers of WIPP, these EPA regulations demanded the creation of a system of “Passive Institutional Controls” that would represent some of the most lasting examples of human communication ever conceived in the history of mankind. Faced with this seemingly insurmountable challenge, the designers of WIPP pursued a multi-prong approach, creating a complex series of markers intended to communicate an unambiguous message to individuals who would not be born for thousands of years. These messages were both miniscule and monumental, including tiny ceramic disks buried around the site, inscribed with warnings in dozens of languages, and massive concrete obelisks meant to mark out its dimensions.²³ And while there is perhaps something reassuring about the bureaucratic earnestness with which the designers of WIPP went about their effort at temporal resistance, there lies at the heart of these fantastic strategies for disaster mitigation a stark and fundamental tragedy, for the very necessity of these Passive Institutional Controls only served to reveal the inescapable conclusion that the systems of authority and control that both initiated and necessitated the existence of WIPP seem destined for an eventual collapse.

Indeed, the logic of the Passive Institutional Controls at WIPP demand that we imagine a future that is not only the product of political and social collapse, but that we also imagine a future that sits on the other side of a fundamentally unbridgeable rupture with the present. The PICs of WIPP demand an unrelenting periodization; they are the terrifying and terrified efforts to counter the potential that our words will be made

“wonder nyce and straunge,” but they are also an abject refusal to imagine our own continuation into that future. Like Troilus’s self-negating turn at the end of Book V, the future imagined by the PICs of WIPP are also predicated on a future that longs for death.²⁴ The insistence on providing a “universal warning sign” that will last for thousands of years is a projection into a future space from which we are notably—and I argue, necessarily—*absent*. If the “universal warning sign” of WIPP is intended to delimit a space into which future generations are not to enter, our notable absence from that future, a future that would require such a lasting warning, marks out the limits of a space from which we would absent ourselves.

Just as the monumental drive to create a lasting message that would resist temporal mutability is a representation of the male reading practices displayed by Troilus, this unwillingness to persist in the face of contingency and to confront the lasting consequences of our actions is also representative of Troilus’s model of male reading. Confronted with the inescapable threat of mutability, the designers of WIPP create an object that is intended to last forever, something that can confront mutability and overcome it. However, just like Troilus, they also imagine a future in which they will no longer be forced to persist alongside the mutability they seek to overcome, or the potential for their own submission to that mutability. What they imagine is a fundamental rupture between the *now* of the present and the *soon to be* of the future, the threading together of time that allows for causative connection and reflection. Indeed, what they imagine is nothing less than the end of history itself.

In the conclusion to *Troilus and Criseyde*, the Trinity arrives to initiate the end of history, but in light of the tragedy of WIPP, the danger posed by radioactive waste and

the inescapable collapse that would necessitate a “universal warning” capable of mitigating its devastating consequences, the Trinity can also serve as a productive object for reflection on the historical events that necessitated a facility like WIPP in the first place. While the periodic division separating the Middle Ages from modernity is one that emerges largely out of a process of historiographical backformation, WIPP and its attendant history may well center around a moment of genuine temporal rupture, one that ushered in not just a new series of political, social, and environmental changes, but which changed the very structure of matter itself. Just like the tragic fall of Troy that served as the cornerstone for the new birth of a new period of empire, this new period began with a tragic and incredible moment of destruction. About 180 miles northwest of where WIPP would one day be buried, in the Jornada del Muerto desert, the “desert of the dead man’s path,” the first nuclear weapon on earth was detonated.

Although research on nuclear power and nuclear weapons had gone on for years before “the gadget,” as it was called, was set off on July 16, 1945, this first test blast represented the beginning of a new history, ushering in the “Atomic Age” with a literally earth-shattering explosion. Witness to that event was the man who would later come to be known as “the father of the atomic bomb,” J. Robert Oppenheimer, the man who famously (and perhaps apocryphally) looked out into the artificial dawn of the world’s first atomic explosion and recalled a line from the *Bhagavad-Gita*: “I am become death, the destroyer of worlds.”²⁵ Left in the wake of that first atomic explosion was a substance which shone like a mirror, a substance found within the crater left behind after the explosion itself had passed, a crater more than ten feet deep and one thousand feet in diameter. There, lacquering the sides of the crater, was a layer of desert sand which had

fused together into a bowl of radioactive glass, a bright green substance known as Trinitite, named after the project itself, which was codenamed project “Trinity.”

This radioactive mirror left at Trinity Test Site was eventually buried to prevent souvenir-seeking tourists from scavenging the site, but while it remained, it served as a mid-twentieth-century *Fürstenspiegel* for the princes and potentates of Oppenheimer’s era, a reflection of the new and terrible power now at their disposal. But for all the destructive potential unleashed by “the gadget,” the more frightening danger of the Atomic Age would emerge later, not from the sudden effects of the atomic explosions themselves, but from the slow, creeping changes wrought by the invisible materials at the heart of these atomic devices. The radiation that both powered and resulted from the new technologies of the Atomic Age was itself nothing more than the product of change and decay, but it was a decay that occurred on a temporal scale that would dwarf all previous measures of human achievement. Alongside the extraordinarily rapid changes that followed soon after the detonation of the first atomic bomb, this slow, inexorable mutability was the radioactive “fallout” of that initial disruption.

If the tragedy of WIPP demands that we imagine a future without us in it, it makes such a demand because we are hard pressed to imagine that anything we might erect to contain our radioactive leavings could ever outlast the enduring lethality of the waste itself.²⁶ In describing the efforts of a team at WIPP to imagine a means of communicating to generations yet to be born about the dangers that we the living will be forced to bequeath to them, Jeffrey Cohen notes, in a startling aside, that “The team’s first, practical thought was to allow the materials to lie exposed, creating in the desert an ocean of corpses, an instantly readable sign that no one should draw near.”²⁷

Understandably, this initial plan was quickly swept under the rug. However, if we reflect on that other prophecy of death, the one that prompted Criseyde's infamous act of mutability, we might recall the manipulative possibility that Diomedes offers up to the lonely widow, the prophesized destruction of Troy which will be and therefore *must be*, unless, of course, one accepts that her Father Calcas's prophecies were no prophecies at all, but merely "ambages" and "double wordes slye," the two-faced words "with two visages" of a lying huckster.

This is the lurking potential that lies at the heart of the efforts at WIPP to create a "universal warning sign," and it is the same danger that emerges again and again throughout the "littel tragedie" of *Troilus and Criseyde*. Words can mean more or less than what we would intend, for there is nothing more "slydyng" than language itself. And more troubling still, we must confront the reality that even if we could transcend the fractured "diversite" of contemporary speech, the inescapable mutability of temporal change will eventually transmute all our serious sentiments into something "wonder nyce and straunge," the disconnected echoes of a bygone age.

We might then turn despairingly back to Diomedes, brought to terrible life by the "father of English poetry," and see reflected in his brutal visage that second father, who saw in the reflected glow of a second sun the ineffable truth of another terrifying act of becoming. If Diomedes is right, then there is no hope of ever communicating the invisible dangers of nuclear radiation into a future we cannot imagine. The only option would be to abandon the safety of reference and burial, and to expose our future selves to the awful lethality of decay: to allow our warning gesture to become death itself, a message that speaks with the unambiguous message of its own destruction.

But rather than submit to despair, or to the self-negating contempt of mutability displayed by Troilus, we might instead turn to embrace Criseyde's "slydyng" instability, and to embrace change itself. The "universal warning" of WIPP is by the nature of its conception an attempt to read the future with the unbending, "manly fortitude" of Troilus. This reading indulges in a fantasy of immense authority over the contingencies of the future, and like Troilus's self-negating turn at the end of Book V, it is also a fantasy that longs for the withdrawal of death. The insistence on providing a "universal warning" that will last for thousands of years is a projection into a future space from which we are notably and necessarily absent. If the "universal warning" of WIPP is intended to delimit a space into which future generations are not to enter, our notable absence from that future, a future that would require such a lasting warning, marks out the limits of a space from which we seek to absent ourselves, a swerve as guilty and guileful as the narrator's turn away from Criseyde at the end of his poem.

But Criseyde's faithlessness suggests an alternative. If we would truly confront the catastrophe of our own actions and their consequences, we must, like Criseyde, commit ourselves to a continuous process of renegotiation, a process that reasserts not only our own culpability as the authors of tragedy, but one that also reevaluates the central assumptions of that tragedy: that the "future tyme" we cannot now project ourselves into is one that we will therefore never reach. If instead we truly embrace the mutability of temporal change, we might see the unifying thread that ties together three-eyed Prudence and the three-personed God, the mirror for princes of the *De casibus* tradition and the radioactive mirror of a bowl of Trinitite. That thread is history, which despite the disruptive imagination of periods and epochs, actually runs unbroken through

the centuries, whatever alterations and mutations might punctuate it. If we are willing to refuse the lure of stasis and instead embrace a process of ongoing mutability, we might in a “future tyme” yet unknown and unimagined come to discover new techniques to mitigate those changes we would rather bury and forget.

NOTES

¹ Thomas Greene, *The Vulnerable Text: Essays on Renaissance Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

² We might also consider this in the light of Gadamer's *Horizontverschmelzung*. If one accepts that an observer can never entirely shed the prejudices and biases of his or her observational position when encountering an alternate position, and that observations occur within a historicized consciousness, then anachronism becomes the necessary precondition for any act of historical inquiry. For a discussion of the relationship between Gadamer's theory of intersecting horizons and the use of "creative anachronism", see Murray McGillivray, "Creative Anachronism: Marx's Problem with Home, Gadamer's Discussion of 'The Classical,' and Our Understanding of Older Literatures," *New Literary History* 25, no. 2 (1994): 399–413.

³ Mureen Fries, "'Slydyng of Corage': Chaucer's Criseyde as Feminist and Victim," in *The Authority of Experience*, ed. Arlyn Diamond and Lee Edwards (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1977).

⁴ Carolyn Dinshaw, "Reading Like a Man," in *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 28–29.

⁵ Larry Scanlon, *Narrative, Authority, and Power: The Medieval Exemplum and the Chaucerian Tradition* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994). Scanlon describes this tradition as "an offshoot... of the Fürstenpsiegel – where human history is starkly depicted as an incessant and unerring engine of downfall" (81).

⁶ The Monk succinctly describes the nature of tragedy according to the De casibus model thusly:

Tragedie is to seyn a certeyn storie
As olde bookes maken us memorie,
Of hym that stood in greet prosperitee,
And is yfallen out of heigh degree
Into myserie, and endeth wrecchedly. (VII, 1973-7).

This and all quotations of Chaucer are taken from Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).

⁷ For a consideration of *Troilus and Criseyde* as a "tragedy," see Monica McAlpine, *The Genre of Troilus and Criseyde* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978).

⁸ All passages from *Troilus and Criseyde* will be from *The Riverside Chaucer*.

⁹ See Jeffrey J. Cohen, "Time out of Memory," in *The Post-Historical Middle Ages* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 37–63. Cohen is citing linguist Frederick Newermeyer through an article on the Yucca Mountain Nuclear Waste Depository by R.C Baker, "Deep Time, Short Sight: Bracing for Yucca Mountain's Nuclear Forever," *The Village Voice*, May 25, 2002, <http://www.villagevoice.com/news/0222,baker,35183,1.html>. It's interesting to note, though, that in citing the fact that languages become unintelligible after 500-1000 years, Baker uses Chaucer as the example.

¹⁰ See MED for fere, n.1, but also n.5, where it can mean "appearance," or "manner," also "expression" and "companion."

¹¹ For a discussion of the connection between Troilus's death and the destruction of Troy, see Jill Mann, "Shakespeare and Chaucer: 'What Is Criseyde Worth?,'" in *The European Tragedy of Troilus* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1989).

¹² Catherine Sanok, "Criseyde, Cassandre, and the Thebaid: Women and the Theban Subtext of Chaucer's *Troilus and Crisedye*," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 20 (1998): 41.

¹³ Dinshaw, "Reading Like a Man," 53.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 58.

¹⁵ Sashi. Nair, "'O Brotel Wele of Mannes Joie Unstable!': Gender and Philosophy in *Troilus and Criseyde*," *Parergon* 23, no. 2 (2006): 48–49.

¹⁶ Fries, "'Slydyng of Corage': Chaucer's *Criseyde* as Feminist and Victim."

¹⁷ See OED, varlet.

¹⁸ See, for instance, T. McAlindon, "Language, Style, and Meaning in 'Troilus and Cressida,'" *PMLA* 84, no. 1 (1969): 29–43; C.C. Barfoot, "Troilus and Cressida: 'Praise Us as We Are Tasted.'" 39, no. 1, *Shakespeare Quarterly* (1988): 45–57.

¹⁹ See the OED, pander. For a history of panders or "go-betweens" in medieval literature, see Gretchen Mieszkowski, *Medieval Go-Betweens and Chaucer's Pandarus* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

²⁰ A detailed description of the facility and its history can be found online at wipp.energy.gov.

²¹ Active Institutional Controls are intended to be maintained as long as is feasibly possible, however, EPA assessments of waste isolation do not take into consideration the effects of such active controls more than 100 years after disposal, see United States Environmental Protection Agency, Title 40, Code of Federal Regulations, §191.14a.

²² Cohen, "Time out of Memory," 44.

²³ PICs at WIPP were designed using five stages, with each increasing level communicating an increasingly complex message. The final level consisted of stored archival material describing the site, located in state and local facilities away from the WIPP complex itself. The WIPP website includes a PDF containing an in-depth description of the PICs and the rationale behind their design, which can be accessed online here: *Permanent Markers Implementation Plan* (Carlsbad, New Mexico: United States Department of Energy, August 19, 2004), http://www.wipp.energy.gov/picsprog/test1/Permanent_Markers_Implementation_Plan_rev1.pdf.

²⁴ Troilus's longing for death can be viewed in light of the rejection of futurity described by Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004). Edelman's theory represents a kind of negative image of Troilus's fate in *Troilus*. Denied the heteronormative relationship with Criseyde, Troilus's expressions of contempt for human affairs mirror Edelman's call to reject socially-sanctioned "reproductive futurity." However, the eschatological turn at the end swoops in to replace what Troilus denies, and the didactic turn toward "yonge folk" represents a kind of return of the child that undermines the truly transgressive potential of Edelman's anti-futurism.

²⁵ See James A. Hijiya, "The Gita of J. Robert Oppenheimer," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 144, no. 2 (2000): 123–167.

²⁶ Although WIPP was constructed to contain transuranic waste in a geologically stable location in perpetuity, the chance that an unforeseen event might upset its geological safeguards represents a real and unavoidable risk. Moreover, although the geological safeguards of the site could theoretically offer a lasting protection against radioactive isotopes with half-lives measured in many millions of years, some measures of the danger of radioactive isotopes are now based on not on “half-life” but on “hazardous life” rather than “half-life,” a measure that can stretch to 10-20 half-lives. Even if we use the more conservative figure, the hazardous life of a sample radioactive isotope, U 235, would reach the staggering sum of roughly seven billion years, longer than the expected remaining life of the earth itself. For one definition of “hazardous life,” see 25 Pa Code §236.2.

²⁷ Cohen, “Time out of Memory,” 44.

CHAPTER 2

Correspondence and Transfusion:

Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid* and Spenser's *Faerie Queene*

I. Introduction

Like the previous chapter, this chapter explores a literary connection that transcends a potential temporal disruption. In this case, the literary correspondence is one between a dead author, Geoffrey Chaucer, and two living ones: the fifteenth-century Scottish poet Robert Henryson, in his *Testament of Cresseid*, and the sixteenth-century English poet, Edmund Spenser, in his *Faerie Queene*. Both works are often considered as examples of literary completion, moments when one author engages with another with the explicit or implied purpose of concluding what seemed previously unfinished. This chapter argues, however, that there exists a crucial difference between these two acts of “completion,” a difference that has to do with the way in which these two authors understand their relationship to the Chaucer, and to the corresponding antetexts that they are claimed to have “completed.”

In setting these two authors side by side and by exploring the distinctions between their two acts of textual engagement with Chaucer, we can see a dramatic shift from the doubled, equivalent Chaucer in Henryson's poem, an author that stands shoulder to shoulder with other authors, but whose authorial identity is not yet the necessary antecedent to the English literary tradition, toward the view that emerges in Spenser, and which became the predominant view of Chaucer, and indeed, of the English canon itself, as the product of a fatherly progenitor of an unbroken line of descendant authors.

However, we will also see that the two seemingly distinct moments of literary engagement share strong similarities. I also argue that a more profitable way of understanding the two authors and their relationships to Chaucer would be to consider their works as moments of literary “correspondence” and literary “transfusion” rather than as explicit acts of completion. This distinction recenters the act of creation on the present of these two authors rather than on the historical past of their Chaucerian antetext. In tracing this developing view of authorship, I will also pay attention to the materiality of transmission and explore just what it is that passes back and forth between two individuals when they are engaging in an act of correspondence. For Henryson, this will mean exploring not only the materiality revealed in the narrated poem of the *Testament*, but also considering the materiality of that poem’s reception, particularly its inclusion in the early printed editions of Chaucer’s *Works*, an act of inclusion that played a crucial role in guaranteeing the poem a wide audience, and for linking it inextricably with Chaucer. For Spenser, I will examine the transmission of literary “spirit” that is made explicit in his introduction to his completion of the “Squire’s Tale” in Book IV of *The Faerie Queene*, a transmission that helps to support Spenser’s literary project, and which becomes the dominant narrative of English poetics in future centuries.

II. Henryson’s Equivalent Correspondence

Robert Henryson’s relationship to Chaucer was unique among his literary contemporaries. As George Edmonson has argued, although Henryson’s most famous work corresponds directly to his English predecessor, unlike other fifteenth- and

sixteenth-century “Chaucerians,” Henryson makes no other explicit references to Chaucer in his other works:

[F]ifteenth-century English and Scottish poets inevitably looked to Chaucer as their father or master. To be sure, a number of fifteenth-century poets, including Hoccleve, Lydgate, James I, and, in the early sixteenth century, Dunbar and Douglas, do pay homage to Chaucer as “maister deere / and fadir reuerent,” “my maister Chauser,” “venerabill Chauser,” “O reverend Chaucere,” and so forth. But the same cannot accurately be said of Henryson, who never refers to Chaucer outside of the *Testament*--that is, never in a work not written in direct response to Chaucer’s own.¹

Edmondson argues that Henryson comes to think of Chaucer not as his contemporaries and near successors do, as a literary father figure, but as a “neighbor” poet, one whose national identity as a Scottish rather than English poet, sees in Chaucer an equal, perhaps, but certainly not a father.

While Edmondson’s identification of Henryson’s “neighborly” poetics is an extremely useful critical intervention in the traditionally “filial” view of Henryson’s relationship to Chaucer, my examination of Henryson’s *Testament* inverts Edmondson’s configuration, exploring the ways in which the correspondence between the two poets meditates on the ways in which correspondence is a response to distance rather than their neighborly proximity, and the ways in which the *Testament* imagines correspondence as a meditation on the very act of transmission at the heart of writing itself, and the ways in which authors communicate with readers beyond their reach.

Henryson’s poem repeatedly recalls a number of Chaucer’s other works, with the primary source being, unsurprisingly, his *Troilus and Criseyde*, a text to which it undoubtedly owes its very existence. Critical opinion of Henryson’s work has thankfully shifted from earlier conceptions of Henryson as an untalented forger who piggy-backed on one of Chaucer’s greatest works and adulterated his legacy with a feigned imitation. By exploring Henryson’s correspondence with Chaucer rather than his dependence on

him, I show that the fundamental equivalency between the two is a crucial centerpiece of Henryson's poem.

This equivalency exists not only on the extradiegetic connection between Henryson and Chaucer as literary near-contemporaries, but also makes an immediate appearance in the opening lines of the poem. From the outset, the *Testament* locates itself within an astronomical and meteorological frame that depicts a fundamental correspondence between the tone of a given narrative and the nature of its immediate environment:

Ane doolie sessoun to ane cairfull dyte
Suld correspond and be equiualent:
Richt sa it wes quhen I began to wryte
This tragedie; the wedder richt feuent,
Quhen Aries, in middis of the Lent,
Schouris of hail gart fra the north descend,
That scantlie fra the cault I micht defend. (1-6)²

In this introductory stanza, the “doolie sessoun” of the *Testament* corresponds to the “cairfull dyte” that will emerge later in the poem. This correspondence engages with more than the medieval tradition of seasonal and astronomical introduction, though, it offers a doubled correspondence to the poem that will emerge as the central antetext to the *Testament*, Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*.

There, the narrator also describes the decorous correspondence between a sorrowful subject and the “woful vers, that wepen as I wryte” (I.7).³ But the narrator of Chaucer's poem goes further, and also invokes a sorrowful reader, who is similarly appropriate to the sorrowful tale, noting that “For wel sit it, the sothe for to seyne / A woful wight to han a drery frere, / And, to a sorwful tale, a sory chere” (I.12-14). In the opening moment of correspondence between the “doolie sessoun” and the “cairfull dyte,”

Henryson's poem points towards Chaucer, and involves itself in the same act of woeful discourse that Chaucer's poem initiates. In a sense, then, the *Testament* becomes the "drery frere" to Chaucer's own tragedy, and engages in an act of correspondence between the written text and the emerging subtext, the sad-faced friend appropriate to the sad tale of Chaucer's tragedy.

But Henryson's poem seeks more than a compassionate friendship with Chaucer's tragedy. One can see this in the actual correspondence that appears in the first stanza of this new tragedy. Although the correspondence between sadness would certainly put a reader familiar with Chaucer in mind of *Troilus*, the narrator of the *Testament* pushes this correspondence further. The astronomical equivalence between "ane doolie sessoun" and "ane cairful dyte" makes this a discourse between matters greater than the relationship between texts, and instead makes a larger argument about a naturalized decorum inherent in the genre of tragedy.

In so doing, however, the *Testament* again alludes to another Chaucerian intertext, the "shoures soote" of the *Canterbury Tales*, and its famous April pilgrimage. Here, though, the correspondence is between two radically different depictions of spring, one of warmth and rebirth, and the other of frigid cold and blistering heat. These stark differences between Chaucer's benign spring and the threatening spring of Henryson's *Testament* have been explained as the naturalistic reflection of Henryson's less temperate, Scottish climate.⁴ But the shift does more than simply reflect the difference between a spring near the Thames and a spring near the Firth of Forth. In choosing to begin the poem with a reference to the season, and to April at that, Henryson also invites a comparison between the instrumental value of the temporal locus that is shared between

the *Testament* and the *Canterbury Tales*. Through this comparison, the *Testament* works to preempt Chaucer by narrating a moment that exists before the emergence of the narrative itself. The *Testament* reveals the “doolie sessoun” as an object instrumental not only to placing the individuals who will appear in the poem within temporal context, but to *creating* them, and indeed, to creating the narrator of that poem as well. The narrator naturalizes the meteorological description and temporal locus in the same way that Chaucer naturalizes his repetition of the pilgrim’s tales, making it seem as if the description is nothing more than an unmediated reflection of the world as it is, “Richt sa it wes quhen I began to wryte / This tragedie,” but this naturalizing moment is itself preempted by the subjunctive correspondence between the “sessoun” and the “dyte.” We hear about the decorous correspondence before we hear about the naturalized relation, and the first explanation serves to undermine the unmediated reflectiveness of the second. The correspondence between the narrator of the *Testament* and the narrator of *Troilus* sets the stage for the explicit citation of the Chaucerian intertext where, in order to “cut short” what has now become a “winter nicht,” the narrator “tuik ane quair—and left all vther sport— / Written be worthie Chaucer glorious / Of fair Creisseid and worthie Troylus” (39-41).

The appearance of “Chaucer glorious” makes explicit what had up until this point been an implicit and allusive reference. We are here presented with the physical presence of the book of “fair Creisseid and worthie Troiylus,” the “quair” taken down to interrupt the narrator’s seemingly endless night. After a brief summary of the story of that book, the narrator turns to another book, and in so doing, crystallizes the purpose of this new

tragedy, and the scope of this correspondence between “glorious Chaucer” and Henryson himself.

Of his [Troilus’s] distres me neidis nocht reheirs,
 For worthie Chaucer in the samin buik,
 Compylit hes his cairis, quha will luik.
 To brek my sleip ane vther quair I tuik,
 In quhilk I fand the fatall destenie
 Of fair Cressid, that endit wretchitlie. (57-63)

At the center of this stanza is an “vther quair,” and which is, of course, Henryson’s own poem. This moment serves not only as a correspondence between Chaucer’s tragedy and this new poem, but also a subtle critique of Chaucer’s work. Readers of Book V of *Troilus and Criseyde* were sure to notice Criseyde’s sudden disappearance from the tragedy. The invocation from Book I of makes clear the fact that *Troilus* is explicitly *not* the story of Criseyde, but instead, seeks only “The double sorwe of Troilus to tellen” (I.1). Troilus’s double sorrow of loss, possession, then a return to loss is here spun around and used to mark out the unspoken absence of Criseyde from the tidy conclusion of Chaucer’s tragedy. While the narrator insists that there’s no need to retell Troilus’s fate, something Chaucer has already done “in gudelic termis and in ioly veirs,” the laudatory gesture in this stanza also serves as a critique of Criseyde’s absences from the conclusion of *Troilus*. If the *moralitas* that concludes Chaucer’s epic tragedy provides an authorized reading of what we should make of Troilus’s loss, Criseyde’s missing “equivalent” undermines the universal message of such a moral reading. Here, however, the narrator of the *Testament* conveniently discovers a story of Cresseid that will correspond to the equivalent narrative of Troilus that appears in Chaucer.

But the correspondence between the *Testament* and *Troilus* is complicated by the sudden materiality of this new poem. Indeed, the book that will become the *Testament* is,

in fact, already a book. Pulled from the shelf in exchange for Chaucer's tragedy, this "vther quair" challenges the comprehensive narrative of its Chaucerian antetext by materializing alongside Chaucer, complete, entire, and ready to be read. Moreover, the "other" book the *Testament's* narrator pulls down challenges the original book of *Troilus* not only in its mere presence as equivalent object, a book as physical and accessible as Chaucer's own, but also in the response it creates in the imagined reader. The "vther quair" of the *Testament* simultaneously criticizes Chaucer and draws on him as a source, because the motivation for this "other" book is itself a startlingly physical one: it's brought down to break the soporific effects of its Chaucerian equivalent.

One could hardly blame Chaucer if he were a bit put off by the notion that his monumental tragedy had the effect of putting his readers to sleep, but the narrator's insistence that this "other" book serves to "wake up" a drowsy reader is more than just a slight. Indeed, even a reader who nodded off after a few pages of Chaucer would be able to recognize the correspondence between sleep and reading as an allusion to a similar correspondence that appears often in Chaucer's poetic works. This reference has particular resonance to the beginning of the *Parliament of Fowles*, where the narrator is lulled to sleep reading Macrobius's meditation on the Dream of Scipio. Again, though, this is more than just a polite way of saying that Chaucer is boring. In reimagining Chaucer's work as a kind of soporific that needs to be "broken" up with an "vther quair," the narrator of the *Testament* intervenes in the narrative of Chaucer that was even then in the process of being written, that of Chaucer as the fulsome source of learning. Chaucer's scholarly plenitude was one of the characteristics of his poetry that was most often used to laud his greatness in his early reception. Edmondson, citing Seth Lerer, notes that

Henryson's contemporaries often framed their laudatory references to Chaucer around his erudition, not just his poetic and linguistic merit.⁵ Here, that learned quality seems to be turned on its head, and the tragedy of *Troilus* becomes, through this allusive critique, the equivalent to a learned treatise on dreams, one that famously puts Chaucer to sleep in his own poem.

Coupled with this stanza's emphasis on the noticeable absence of Criseyde is the fact that the "vther quair" of the *Testament* literally interrupts Chaucer's own tragedy. The portrait of Chaucer's *Troilus* that emerges early on in the *Testament*, then, is one of incompleteness, and of an incompleteness that serves to drive and to validate the desire for corresponding equivalence that powers Henryson's own poem. Lacking an internal correspondence between Troilus's death and Criseyde's equivalent end, the *Testament* narrates a textual interruption that justifies the creation of that missing equivalent. In a sense it becomes the textual incarnation of the "drery fere" that the invocation to Chaucer's own tragedy called into existence.

In light of the *Testament's* opening, however, we can see that this equivalent materiality is actually a clever sleight of hand. In the first stanza, we are narrated a story of creation, the "doolie sessoun" that itself serves as an astronomical equivalent to the "cairfull dyte" which is being written as we read, presumably as the hail falls outside the narrator's window. Now, though, we are presented with the text not as a "dyte" but as a "quair," a book already written, seemingly completed in the space of eight stanzas, and with no narrated temporal break. The sudden transition from text-in-process to finished book seems to foreclose the possibility of Henryson's new tragedy being subsumed under the pre-existing authority of Chaucer's; rather than presenting his work as a

chronologically subsequent text, the narrator of the *Testament* elides the act of creation initiated in the earlier stanzas of the *Testament* and presents his text as one equivalent in its material form to Chaucer's own "quair."

But the next stanza complicates the material correspondence between the *Testament* and *Troilus* by revealing the immaterial uncertainty common to both:

Quha wait gif all that Chauceir wrait was trew?
 Nor I wait nocht gif this narratioun
 Be authoreist, or fen3eit of the new
 Be sum poeit, throw his inuentioun
 Maid to report the lamentacioun
 And wofull end of this lustie Creisseid,
 And quhat distres scho thoillit, and quhat deid. (64-70)

This sudden challenge to Chaucer's narrative veracity seems to leap out of nowhere, but the question may not have seemed as surprising to Henryson's contemporaries. Carolyn Ives and David Parkinson identify an anxiety surrounding Chaucer's veracity as a characteristic of the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century "Scottish Chaucerians":

The evidence for Scottish reception of Chaucer is rather more complex and extended than critical commonplaces allow. Given the recurrent fascination in Scottish writings of the earlier sixteenth century with curious, unstable, and problematic combinations of genres and voices, the Chaucer who emerges (and is copied and reprinted throughout the century) is predictably often the one whose authority compels doubt ("Quha wait gif all that Chauceir wrait was trew?"), and whose affiliation with the threateningly deceptive suggest he may be just as untrustworthy.⁶

This stanza of the *Testament* certainly casts doubt on the trustworthiness of the Chaucerian "quair," but it also does much more than this. In wondering whether or not what Chaucer wrote was "trew," the narrator of the *Testament* not only seems to undermine Chaucer's authority with a challenge to his truthfulness, but in the next line, he similarly undoes his own authority by turning the critical question toward his own text, "this narratioun."

The issue at stake is this question is clearly the nature of authority itself, for the question is whether or not the poem in the process of being revealed to us is “authoreist, or fen3eit of the new.” These alternate possibilities seem to create an explicit antagonism between “authority” and what we would term, “invention,” or “novelty.” The word “fen3eit” creates a link between the two conflicting terms, as it can mean to “invent” or to “compose,” as in the case of a story, but it includes the sense of such inventions being “false” or mere “pretenses,” exactly the sort of narrations that would cause a reader to question the truthfulness of the source.⁷ But the antagonism may not be as clear as it immediately appears, for as the stanza continues, we find a new term that seems to reconcile the two antagonistic options: “inuentioun.”

The rhyming correspondent to the “narracioun” in question, the narrator’s use of the term “inuentioun” links both “authoreist” and “fen3eit of the new,” for “inuentioun” is the Middle Scots equivalent of the Latin *inventio*, a centerpiece of classical rhetoric, and a term that linked what we would consider creative “invention” with the sense of “discovery,” the bringing up of something preexistent.⁸ As an “inuentioun,” the *Testament* seems to straddle the divide between an unauthorized, or “fen3eit” work of novelty, and an authoritative “discovered” work of invention. Indeed, the shape of the stanza seems to confirm the fact that the entire question of authority hinges on this one term, for following its appearance (which comes in the fourth line, the center of the stanza), the tone shifts to what quickly becomes the introductory summary of what will be the narrative of the *Testament*, “the lamentacioun / And wofull end of this lustie Creisseid, / And quhat distres scho thoillit, and quhat deid.”

The connection between invention and authority is also a correspondent concern in Chaucer's *Troilus*, a poem which is presented through the mouthpiece of a narrator who himself mediates his retelling of the story of Troilus through the presumably invented authority of "Lollius." The narrator of *Troilus* continuously hangs the "truth" value of his narration on this invented authority. This recourse to an imagined authority becomes particularly explicit when the narrator of *Troilus* is forced to recount Criseyde's betrayal of Troilus, and so becomes doubly important here, in an invented continuation of that abruptly interrupted narrative. And as we will see, the *Testament's* treatment of Cresseid will hinge on the same complex and uncertain relationships between modes of correspondence that circle around the narrator of the poem.

III. "Lybell," *Dream, Testament, Monument: Cresseid's Correspondence*

Cresseid's formal introduction into the narrative of the *Testament* is initiated through an act of written correspondence. Turning immediately from his narrative summary of the "invention" of the poem, the narrator of the *Testament* quickly sets up the initiating tragedy of the poem, a tragedy which is itself a wholly equivalent correspondence to the narrated tragedy in Chaucer's *Troilus*:

Quhen Diomeid had all his appetyte
 And mair, fulfillit of this fair ladie,
 Vpon ane vther he set his haille delyte,
 And send to hir ane lybell of repudie
 And hir excludit fra his companie.
 Than desolait scho walkit vp and doun,
 And sum men sayis, into the court, commoun. (71-7)

Cresseid's introduction begins with a moment of abandonment, a theme that closely corresponds to her treatment in Chaucer's *Troilus*, but in the *Testament* her abandonment by Diomedes is initiated by a pair of remarkable correspondences. The first, and most

obvious one, is the verbal echo that appears in Diomedes's casting aside of Cresseid for the novelty of an "vther" woman. It was only two stanzas prior that the narrator recounted his own abandonment of Chaucer's tragedy in favor of another—and as revealed a stanza later, potentially more "novel"—alternative "quair." This verbal equivalence only further complicates the authorial correspondence between the two poems. A charitable reading of this verbal echo might imagine a corresponding similarity of satisfaction: just as Diomedes exchanges Cresseid for an "vther" woman after he has "had all his appetyte, And mair, fulfillit of this fair ladie," one might see in the narrator's turn from Chaucer's *Troilus* to the "vther quair" of the *Testament* a similarly mercenary dismissal. The negative implications of such a correspondence, however, seem a good deal easier to imagine than this more pleasant scenario. Just as Diomedes abandons Cresseid after taking his fill of her, but long before having fulfilled his legal and ethical responsibilities to her, so too does the narrator describe his own act of abandoning the narrative of *Troilus*, a description that seems to point toward a similar form of narrative unfulfillment, for the description we get of the narrative of *Troilus* ends well before Troilus's death and apotheosis to the Eighth Sphere. Indeed, the narrator of the *Testament* passes off responsibility for re-telling this narrative to Chaucer himself, noting that

Of his distres me neidis nocht reheirs,
 For worthie Chauceir in the samin buik,
 In gudlie termis and in ioly veirs,
 Compylit hes his cairis, quha will luik. (57-60)

The narrator of the *Testament*'s willingness to break off contact with *Troilus* well before its final conclusion must be considered alongside Diomedes's abandonment of Cresseid as an equivalent act of interrupted correspondence. Indeed, the sense of equivalence here

couldn't be more obvious: both men simply grow tired of what's in front of them, and as a result, turn to something new.

But Diomedes's material correspondence to Cresseid is also telling, for it isn't just a verbal repudiation, but a written "lybell of repudie" that he sends to her to break off their relationship. This "lybell of repudie," or *libellum repudii*, corresponds to the biblical "letters of divorce" described in the Deuteronomy, Jeremiah, and Matthew.⁹ Cresseid's exclusion from Diomedes's company immediately precedes one of the most infamous lines in the poem, the second-hand narration of Cresseid's promiscuity following her abandonment by Diomedes, where she ends up, "sum men sayis, into the court, commoun" (77). Whether one reads the phrase "into the court, commoun" as explicitly signifying Cresseid's transformation into a prostitute,¹⁰ or merely an indication of her increased promiscuity, the next stanza makes clear the narrator's harsh opinion of the transformation:

O fair Cressied, the flour and A per se
Of Troy and Grece, how was thow fortunait
To change in filth all thy feminitie,
And be with fleschlie lust sa maculait,
And go amang the Greikis air and lait,
Sa giglotlike takand thy foull plesance!
I haue pietie thow suld fall sic mischance! (78-84)

In pitying Cresseid for her transformation, the narrator once again mimics the narrator of *Troilus*, who describes Criseyde as so beautiful that "Right as oure firste lettre is now an A, / In beaute first so stood she, makeles" (I.171-2). The description of Criseyde as "makeles" is here turned into a doubled slight on Cresseid, as she becomes both literally "makeles," in the sense that she has just lost her "make" or spouse, and in the sense that such a loss has transmuted her into something "commoun" to all the Greeks.¹¹

But it is only one stanza later that the narrator seems to backtrack from these crass denunciations, and instead offers a blanket justification for Cresseid's behavior:

3it neuertheles, quhat euer men deme or say
 In scornfull langage of thy brukkilnes,
 I sall excuse als far furth as I may
 Thy womanheid, thy wisdom and fairnes,
 The quihilk fortoun hes put to sic distres
 As hir pleisit, and nathing throw the gilt
 Of the--throw wickit langage to be spilt! (85-91)

It's hard to square these two stanzas, each of which seems to be making a different argument about Cresseid. The first is dripping with material disgust at Cresseid's fallen state, and deploys all the language of medieval critiques of female mutability and immoderate sexuality to paint a picture of a Cresseid as little more than an oversexed whore. The narrator's "pietie" for her situation seems to straddle the border between piteous compassion and pious condemnation. How then to reconcile this with the following stanza, which refers contemptuously to men who speak of Cresseid with the "langage of thy brukkilnes" as if the narrator hadn't just used the same language a few lines earlier?

One explanation again returns to the idea of the narrator as locked in a back and forth correspondence with his Chaucerian predecessor, and justifies his defense of Cresseid as merely the analogous replication of the defense of Criseyde that appears in *Troilus*:

Ne me ne list this sely womman chyde
 Forther than the stoyre wol devyse.
 Hire name, allas, is publysshed so wide
 That for hire gilt it ought ynough suffise.
 And if I myghte excuse hire any wise,
 For she so sory was for hire untrouthe,
 Iwis, I wolde excuse hire yet for routhe. (I.1093-8)

However, the terms of the defense in the *Testament* make it clear that this defense is even slipperier than Chaucer's apology for Criseyde. Indeed, what's noticeably absent in this section of the *Testament* is the explicit recourse to a prior narration, something the narrator of *Troilus* emphasizes in this apologetic stanza. While the narrator of *Troilus* ends the apology for Criseyde on the basis of his "routhe" and her "gilt," the earlier sections makes clear the fact that another guiding factor in limiting the chastisement of Criseyde is the absence of a textual authority to whom he must defer; he refuses to go "Forther than the storye wol devyse."

Of course, going 'forther than the storye wol devyse' is exactly what the narrator of the *Testament* does, and without the recourse to a preexisting authority, which, as we have already seen, was elided with the narration the narrator seeks to present, the narrator's choice of mechanism to effect a similar "excuse" for Cresseid is shifted from a pre-existing textual authority to a personified, feminized "fortune," and an amorphous gesture toward "wickit langage." The narrator's "excuse" presents another example of the doubled, correspondent logic of the *Testament*. A reader unaware of Chaucer's *Troilus* would miss the shift in the *Testament*, which repeats the language of the narrator's "excuse" but emphasizes, through that repetition, the fact that this poem is intentionally moving "forther than the storye wol devyse," and in doing so, corresponding with the Chaucerian antetext without explicitly rejecting it. But the narrator's excuse also raises another important issue, one that will sit at the center of the *Testament*, and which represents one of the greatest moments of correspondence in the entire poem: this is the correspondence between action and reaction, and it circles around the fundamental moral question of the poem: why is Cresseid punished in such an extreme way? Is she punished

for betraying Troilus, or for blaspheming against Cupid and Venus? The answer hinges on the interpretation of a dream.

After returning to her father, who in the *Testament* has been transformed from a priest of Apollo to a seemingly more appropriate role as a priest of Venus, Cresseid complains bitterly to Cupid and Venus, charging them, in essence, with a breach of contract, noting that she believed that she was being promised eternal success in love:

“3e gaue me anis ane deuine responsaill
That I suld be the flour of luif in Troy;
Now am I maid ane vnworhtie outwaill,
And all in cair translatit is my ioy.” (127-30)

Cresseid’s choice of language here corresponds to the legal bill of divorce she has just received from Diomedes. The “responsaill” from the gods is a term often used to describe a promise from a deity, but the term also had a number of more mundane, bureaucratic and legal connotations, particularly in matters of debt and financial disputation.¹² Here, then, Cresseid is offering a formal complaint to the gods, accusing them of backing out of a previously settled agreement, and placing the blame for her “translatit” cares on their own fickle mutability. Within the system Cresseid presumes, her logic seems sensible enough: her complaint points out the very lack of correspondence between her lived experience and the understood “promise” made to her by Cupid and Venus. As we shall see, however, Cresseid’s legal logic of correspondence fails to reconcile itself to a larger framework that transcends the seemingly broken “responsaill” made to her.

Immediately after her complaint, Cresseid is struck down by “ane extasie,” and “Rauischit in spreit, intill ane dreame scho fell” (141-2). In the dream, Cupid calls the seven gods down from their spheres and after a lengthy description of each, lays out his formal complaint against Cresseid, mirroring back to her the legal language that she used

to chastise him and his mother for their broken “responsaill,” and centering the core of his argument against her around a kind of theistic correspondence, the idea that as gods, each of the others were equally slighted by her blasphemy against him and his mother:

“Lo,” quod Cupide, “quha will blaspheme the name
Of his awin god, outhir in word or deid,
To all goddis he dois baith lak and schame,
And suld haue bitter panis to his meid.
I say this by 3one wretchit Cresseid,
The quhilk throw me was sum tyme flour of lufe,
Me and my mother starlkie can reprufe.” (274-80)

Cupid’s terms should seem remarkably familiar. The logic of his complaint not only hinges entirely on the concept of correspondence, that as co-equal gods, each suffers any slight made against any other, but his language against Cresseid throws back at her the language of Cresseid as a “flour,” a term used by the narrator (and by the narrator of *Troilus*) to describe Cresseid’s beauty. What Cresseid has missed, however, and what is explicit in Cupid’s complaint against her, is that the continuation of her beauty is governed by a force larger than she seems to comprehend, and that although she seemed to be engaging with the gods as co-equal parties in a legal contract, that this was only a fiction.

In her article on the *Testament* and its connection to the genre of the dream vision, Kathryn Lynch notes that although the *Testament* “self-consciously locates itself within the realm of Fortune and the pagan gods, and thus suggests a link with Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy*, the late classical vision that established many of the medieval dream vision’s conventions,” Cresseid and the narrator are fundamentally limited by their apparent ignorance of the larger Christian frame that surrounds such narratives: “one of the most basic and profound changes that Henryson brings upon the dream vision of the

earlier Middle Ages is to deprive both his narrator and his heroine of the explicit comforts of Christian philosophy.”¹³ Cupid’s remark that Cresseid was “sum tyme” the flower of love (a term that Troilus will darkly repeat at the end of the poem), points to the missing element in Cresseid’s legalistic calculations: her beauty may have been temporarily granted to her by a “diuine responsaill” from Cupid and Venus, but its maintenance lies under the jurisdiction of a much more powerful force, that of Fortune.

Continuing his complaint, Cupid maintains the doubling correspondence between Cresseid’s own complaint against himself and his mother, and the earlier description of her exclusion from Diomedes:

“Saying of hir greit infelicite
I was the caus, and my mother Venus,
Ane blind goddes hir cald that nicht not se,
With sclander and defame iniurious.
Thus hir leuing vnclene and lecherous
Scho wald retorte in me and my mother,
To quhome I schew my grace abone all vther.” (281-7)

Here, Cupid and Venus are the ones being subjected to damaging words and “sclander,” and Cupid is quick to revive the portrait of Cresseid as a promiscuous woman, “leuing vnclene and lecherous.” The idea that Cresseid would “retorte” her promiscuity onto them seems like a particularly aggrieving point, but we should also note that the idea of Cresseid “returning” is here itself returning for a second time, because it was Troilus who we first saw sitting in wait of Cresseid’s “retour”: “Of hir behest he had greit comforting, / Traisting to Troy that scho suld mak retour” (50). The return of the love-lorn Troilus at this point, however, only serves to muddy the possible interpretation of what Cupid’s complaint is really about. Is Cresseid being punished for her promiscuity and faithlessness, or would these sins have been forgiven entirely had she simply kept quiet

about the whole business and not provoked the wrath of the gods? Critics have puzzled over the meaning of Cresseid's dream, with some concluding that it's impossible to determine which medieval dream archetype it belongs to.¹⁴

The answer has to wait, because after delegating the judgment to Saturn and Cynthia—not the most auspicious advocates for Cresseid's cause—the sentence is handed down, and Cresseid is notoriously struck with leprosy. The connection between Cresseid's immaterial crime and her material punishment fits the medieval commonplace of the body making sin legible.¹⁵ Cresseid's own reading of her dream seems at first very straightforward. After looking at her suddenly disfigured image in a polished mirror, she bemoans her fate and quickly concludes that she has been punished for blaspheming against the gods:

“Weiping full sair, “Lo, quhat it is,” quod sche,
 “With fraward langage for to mufe and steir
 Our craibit goddis; and sa is sene on me!
 My blaspheming now haue I bocht full deir;
 All eirdlie ioy and mirth I set areir.
 Allace, this day; allace, this wofull tyde
 Quhen I began with my goddis for to chyde!” (351-8)

Cresseid's reflexive reading doesn't last, however. After putting herself into a self-imposed exile with a community of lepers, Cresseid's life deteriorates, and alone in a dark corner of the leper house, she begins a long complaint, mirroring in tone, at least, her earlier complaint to the gods, but here it is a complaint turned inward in which she bewails her own transformation, and the very fickleness and mutability that she seemed to ignore previously. In one stanza, we can see the beginning of what will be Cresseid's final transformation from self-sufficient moral subject to the complementary correspondent that she will eventually become:

“O ladyis fair of Troy and Grece, attend
 My miserie, quhilk nane may comprehend,
 My friuoll fortoun, my infelicitie,
 My greit mischief, quhilk na man can amend.
 Be war in tyme, approchis neir the end,
 And in 3our mynd ane mirrour make of me:
 As I am now, peradventure that 3e
 For all 3our micht may cum to that same end,
 Or ellis war, gif ony war may be.” (451-60)

Cresseid’s lament seeks to turn her tragic fate into an exemplary lesson about the fate of all women, the universality here represented by the inclusion of both Trojan and Greek women. The “retour” of the mirror, though, shows the transformation that Cresseid is in the process of undergoing, for the mirror is no longer the solipsistic instrument that it was before, returning her own image back to her and instructing her on the physical manifestation of her moral transgression. Instead, Cresseid seeks to turn her own experience into a mirror for others, and in this stanza emphasizes the universally correspondent theme that will echo throughout the rest of the poem: as I am, so too will you be. We are all going to end up just like Cresseid.

But before Cresseid becomes the tragic mirror for ladies, she first must make her life correspond to her new condition as a leper. Again drawing on the language of the law, one of her fellow lepers confronts Cresseid weeping in solitude and enjoins her to make the best of her bad situation:

“Sen thy weiping dowbillis bot thy wo;
 I counsall the mak vertew of ane neid;
 Go leir to clap thy clapper to and fro,
 And leif efter the law of lipper leid.” (477-80)

The leper woman’s comments point out the ways in which Cresseid’s sorrows still haven’t escaped the solipsism of self-pity, for her complaints only serve to “dowbillis” her sorrow. Indeed, we see here how Cresseid’s immaterial complaint still fails to serve

the morally correspondent purpose that she is beginning to accept for herself. Locked away in solitude, Cresseid is both *auctor* and *lector* of her misery, pushed out into the world again, where she will be forced to correspond both with those like and unlike her, and to confront her own position as a leper according to the “law” of her kind.

It’s through this compelled act of acceptance that Cresseid has one of the most surprising encounters of the poem, for while she’s out swinging her clapper, she runs into Troilus, back from a successful military campaign. What’s startling about the encounter is the way it dramatizes on the one hand an utter failure of one kind of correspondence—neither one recognizes the other, “not ane ane vther knew” —but on the other hand, demonstrates a continuing theme throughout the *Testament*, the ways in which correspondence can bridge gaps and negotiate the present-absence at the heart of written, as opposed to oral communication. Troilus doesn’t recognize Cresseid, but her disfigured present face reminds him of her beautiful absent face, the one he recalls from Troy: “The idole of ane thing in cace may be / Sa depit imprentit in the fantasy / That it deludis the wittis outwardly” (506-9). This remembered absence motivates Troilus’s knightly benevolence, and he gives freely to her, and thus to the entire leper community to which she is a member. It is only after being told by another leper man that the knight who passed is, in fact, Troilus, that Cresseid finally lapses into the fit of mourning that will lead to her death, and to her most lasting contribution to the poem, her final transition to a fully correspondent entity. Bemoaning her own falseness, with the twice repeated line, “O fals Cresseid and trew knight Troylus,” Cresseid finally sits down, seeming to foresee her own impending death, and writes out her testament, a legally binding expression of her final wishes:

Quhen this was said, with paper scho sat doun,
 And on this maneir maid hir testament:
 “Heir I beteich my corps and carioun
 With wormis and with taidis to be rent;
 My cop and clapper, and myne ornament,
 And all my gold the lipper folk sall haue,
 Quhen I am died, to burie me in graue.

“This royall ring, set with this rubie reid,
 Quhilk Troylus in drowrie to me send,
 To him agane I leif it quhen I am deid,
 To mak my cairfull deid wntow him kend.
 Thus I conclude schrotlie and mak ane end:
 My spreit I leif to Diane, quhair scho dwellis,
 To walk with hir in waist woddis and wellis.” (575-88)

The description of Cresseid’s testament makes explicit materiality of the testament itself, which is written on paper,¹⁶ and of the materiality of its desires. But Cresseid’s testament not only moves from the material to the immaterial, but from mutability to immutability, from the transitory object of her own body, which she gives to the worms, to her tangible possessions, which she gives to her community of lepers, and finally to the immaterial and eternal substance of her soul, or “spreit,” which she leaves to Diana, here not the changeable goddess of the moon, but the chaste huntress of the “woddis and wellis,” the same goddess to whom Emilye prays for an escape from the confines of marriage in Chaucer’s “Knight’s Tale.” This poignant echo points to Cresseid’s equivalent position as the source of contention between two competing men, Diomedes and Troilus, but Cresseid is unlike Emilye in that her request for escape is made after she’s already entered into the system of sexual exchange.

Cresseid’s other distinction from the corresponding woman in Chaucer’s “Knight’s Tale” lies in her choice to accept Diomedes after being handed over to the Greeks, a choice for which she is to be eternally condemned, and which is expressed in

her final words before dying: “O Diomeid, thou hes baith broche and belt / Quhilk Troilus gaue me in taking / Of his trew lufe’, and with that word scho swelt” (589-91). Cresseid’s last thoughts enmesh her two lovers into her own tragic fate, and in turning in the end to Diomedes, who she evokes as a symbol of her betrayal of Troilus, Cresseid concludes with this symbolic gesture towards her own lasting infamy, a measure of the material objects she is no longer free to give, having already been given to Diomedes, and the immaterial matter of her “troth,” which she loses in their transmission to her faithless Greek lover.

Cresseid’s death finalizes the process of transition she has been undergoing throughout the poem, from self-concerned subject to the merely reflective correspondent to her own actions. In her afterlife, this transition becomes materialized through the three physical objects she leaves to posterity: her lifeless body, her written testament, and Troilus’s ring. Each of these items combine together to create the final meaning of Cresseid’s life and death in the rest of the stanza which follows. Immediately after dying, her ring is taken by one of the lepers:

And sone ane lipper man tuik of the ring,
 Syne buryit hir withouttin tarying;
 To Troilus furthwith the ring he bair,
 And of Cressied the deth he can declair. (592-5)

The speed with which Cresseid goes from living, speaking subject to the object of narration and the source of transmitted material is startling, as surprising as the swiftness with which the narrator of *Troilus* narrates Troilus’s sudden death. Indeed, the swiftness is explicitly part of the description of her treatment following her death. The leper man buries her “withouttin tarying,” and Troilus’s ring moves from a pledged object of transmission to realized object of transmission in the space of a few lines. Following the

material and legal injunction of her testament, the leper man gives her body to the worms, and her ring to Troilus. Along with this, however, he also relays a narrative of her death, which “he can declair” to Troilus now that he also has the ring, which serves as material guarantor of his tragic narration. The ring both corresponds to this narration, and also, in a sense, comes to stand in for it, for we are not re-narrated the story of Cresseid’s end. Instead, Troilus is only able to recognize Cresseid through the physical object of his own ring, passed to him through her and then back to him again.

Troilus’s response to this narration itself corresponds to Chaucer’s description of Troilus, whose heart is broken with grief, “For greit sorrow his hart to brist was boun” (600). But aside from this particularly dramatic material description of the effects of Cresseid’s death, the actual narrated response from Troilus is again remarkably brief. One would expect more expression of woe given Troilus’s broken heart, but he does more than to reiterate the lasting exemplum of Cresseid, which will be all that is left of her for the final two stanzas of the poem: ““I can no moir; / Scho was vntrew and wo is me thairfor”” (601-2).

Here, Troilus’s woe is circumscribed entirely by Cresseid’s faithlessness. He isn’t sorry that she’s dead, he’s sorry that she was “vntrew.” The correspondence between her death and her untruth is entirely the point. This is what has become of Cresseid, indeed, it’s what she has been in the process of becoming for the entire poem, a figure shifted from a subject to an object, from a reflection of her own mutability reflected back on herself, to a mirrored reflection of all mutability, reflected out to the world around her. Troilus’s response to this is to further materialize Cresseid, by finding her burial place and placing an authoritative statement over it.

This moment of material conclusion, when Troilus literally buries Cresseid under a marble monument, is the most lasting act of correspondence one could imagine, and it's not surprising that in doing so, the narrator makes a gesture that corresponds to the same authorial deference that appears when the narrator of *Troilus* "buries" Criseyde by refusing to say anything more about her. Like the narrator of Chaucer's *Troilus*, the narrator of the *Testament* refuses to claim explicit authority for Troilus's tomb to Cresseid, instead, claiming that "Sum said he maid ane tomb of merbell grey." Troilus's final step is to make the monument an ever more explicit act of correspondence, for after erecting the tomb, Troilus writes Cresseid's name on it, along with a "superscriptioun," a term that could refer to the epitaph on a tomb, but which could also refer to the addressee's name on a written letter.¹⁷ This act becomes Troilus's final correspondence to Cresseid. His final gesture is to erect a monument above her grave and to engrave on it a final "superscriptioun" to her.

Further emphasizing Cresseid's transmutation into a purely relational object of correspondence is the fact that Troilus's final act of correspondence with Cresseid is not really an act of correspondence between Troilus and Cresseid at all, but is instead one made between the rotting exemplum of Cresseid's buried corpse and the living witnesses to the monument that sits on top of it. The nature of those living witnesses is made clear by the words of that final superscription, "Lo, fair ladyis, Cresseid of Troy the toun, / Sumtyme countit the flour of womanheid, / Vnder this stane, lait lipper, lysis deid" (607-9). Even Troilus turns his late paramour into a message to the "fair ladyis" who will see her monument and think not of her, but of their own mortality reflected in her buried

image, and in doing so, mirrors the language of Cupid's complaint that initiated her eventual death.

After Troilus writes over the most mutable of her material remains, her buried body, he participates in a process that the narrator has been working on the entire time, not only transmuting Cresseid into a monumental mirror for all women, a reflected correspondent that can serve as a warning for any who would forget the overwhelming power of temporal mutability, but also by writing over Cresseid's notorious absence from Chaucer's *Troilus* after her act of betrayal. Troilus's architectural palimpsest makes a monument of Cresseid, and as we saw earlier, turns her final resting place and epitaph into a kind of letter written to other ladies, who are instructed to learn from Cresseid's fatal example. The lesson is one about making something lasting out of something mutable, but the lesson is also about the price one pays for being mutable, or changeable, in the first place. Troilus's "superscription" to women, written over Cresseid's corpse, makes clear that his reading of her seeks to make her into a lasting model not only of women who change, but of women who fail to recognize the inescapable eventuality of their own impending mutability.

The warning is clear, with mutability written over twice, the doubled fall of Cresseid herself, inscribed first over her buried body, which of course, due to her leprosy, began to rot away even before she had died, and also over the infamous locus in which she is here eternally situated. She is now and forever "Cresseid of Troy the toun," and the fallen town becomes a localized equivalent of her fallen status, itself rendered painfully mutable in the final two lines: "Sumtyme countit the flour of womanheid, / Vnder this

stane, lait lipper, lyis deid.” Cressied was “Sumtyme countit” the flower of femininity, but her time is passed, just as time will pass over Troy.

David Benson notes that it is impossible to see the temporal inversion of Chaucer’s *Troilus*—to see Troilus stand hale and healthy over Cresseid’s grave—without also reflecting on the prophetic correspondence between Troilus’s own life and the life of his city, a connection that Criseyde is at pains to emphasize in Chaucer’s tragedy. Troilus’s heroic re-emergence into the narrative of the *Testament*, a return that reaches its exaltation here, when he is allowed to literally lay down the narrative’s final stone, is actually an illusion:

The medieval histories of Troy, however, reveal that [Troilus’s] heroic entrance is deceptive. If Troilus is now chieftain of the city, Hector must already be dead and Troilus’s own end fast approaching. The victory over the Greeks from which Troilus is here returning is but a temporary stay of Troy’s fall. Troilus’s military success will soon suffer a cruel and complete reversal when he is treacherously slain by Achilles and then, according to the medieval history, dragged around the walls of Troy. With the death of her two principal heroes, Hector and Troilus, the city cannot long stand.¹⁸

But in the final stanza of the *Testament*, the narrator seems to intentionally obscure this final correspondence. The narrator looks back on both Troilus and Cresseid, but in the voice of authority, redoubles Troilus’s expansive superscription, making the poem explicitly a correspondence between women:

Now, worthie wemen, in this ballet schort,
Maid for 3our worschip and instructioun,
Of cheritie, I monische and exhort,
Ming not 3our lufe with fals deceptioun:
Beir in 3our mynd this sore conclusioun
Of fair Cresseid, as I haue said before.
Sen scho is deid I speik of hir no moir. (610-16)

The narrator’s refusal to follow through with the implied correspondence between Cresseid’s punishment for her own mutability, the fall of Troy, and the death of Troilus represents a swerve away from the precedent set by his own correspondent antetext,

Chaucer's *Troilus*. That tragedy ends with a pointed reflection on the mutability not only of individuals, but of language itself, and the ways in which passing time can render even the monumental efficacy of the written word "wonder nyce and straunge." In stopping short of this correspondence, we see, perhaps, Henryson's reflection on his own potentially Cresseid-like fate, for in making his *Testament* the correspondent equivalent of Chaucer's tragedy, he also fails to make the conclusion to his poem correspond to the more probing and critical moments of its own inception. For we need only remember the verbal echoes at the beginning of the *Testament* to recall that the Cresseid-Henryson connection is one that Henryson himself explores through the voice of his narrator when he links Cresseid's abandonment by Diomedes, described as the movement from one woman to an "vther," to the narrator's own fickle exchange of "worthie Chauceir" for that "vther quair." By sparing himself the critical reflection of this correspondence, Henryson may have been more successful in avoiding the fickle inconstancy of mutability than he realized. His incorporation into the body of Chaucer's work made his poem one of the most famous Scots poems of his day, although, in a *contrapasso* that would have surely pleased Henryson's Saturn, he was only included at the expense of his own identity. As we will see, however, the inclusion of Henryson into early printed editions of Chaucer may well have also realized the deeper strains of correspondence between Henryson and Chaucer that would have been impossible had his poem stood on its own.

IV. *The Testament's Print History and Penitential Correspondence*

It's useful, before turning to Spenser and his radically alternate view of Chaucer's authorship and his own relation to it, to briefly consider the reception of Henryson's

poem itself. It becomes exactly the “sore conclusioun” that Henryson intended, and indeed becomes the necessary conclusion to Chaucer’s own tragedy. Henryson’s success is certainly due in no small part to the editorial practices of sixteenth-century editors of Chaucer, who, following Thynne’s 1532 edition of Chaucer’s *Works*, included the poem immediately after *Troilus*. Many critics would later see in this inclusion an incompetent act of perversion that ruined Chaucer’s literary reputation for centuries to come.

But the impulse to attribute the apocrypha to the shoddy editorial work of amateur scholars is an unsatisfying reflex, one that denies apocryphal works like the *Testament* the full credit they deserve, and which denies the authority of interpretation itself. Editors who placed Henryson’s *Testament* alongside Chaucer’s *Troilus* did so not only because it would help sell books (more “dyverse” bits of Chaucer to add to the swelling collection of his *Works*), but because they found the narrative engaging and satisfying, and because they believed the correspondence between the two works was worthy of precisely the act of material equivalence that the narrator of the *Testament* explicitly performs at the beginning of his poem. These editors provided their readers with the very option that the narrator of the *Testament* is provided, to move between the one narrative and the “vther,” and to make decisions about each in reflection of the mirrored image of its correspondent narrative. That dialogue between the two texts is precisely what Henryson intended.

It’s also important to note that the *Testament* didn’t “pervert” Chaucer’s tragedy, although it may well have thwarted some of his intentions. Indeed, it was a mark of just how successful Chaucer’s narrative was that it seemed to call for Henryson’s correspondence. Leaving Criseyde unaccounted for made a poem like the *Testament* all but a certainty. The missing correspondence being Troilus’s death and Criseyde’s death

was an empty space waiting to be filled. Moreover, one hardly needs to locate the impulse to correct such an omission in the wild, unattributed free-for-all of sixteenth-century editing. Chaucer may only explicitly deputize “moral Gower” and “philosophical Strode” to “correcte” his tragedy, but the gesture opens up his work to further emendation; it makes his tragedy an explicitly “unfinished” work, one that acknowledges the possibility of its own mutability.

As we’ve seen previously, Chaucer is particularly anxious about just such a possibility. His gesture in the proem to Book II about the nature of linguistic change, which transmutes all language into “wordes wonder nyce and straunge” demonstrates this. As does his description, at the end of Book V, of the “gret diversite / In Englissh and in writyng of our tonge” (V.1793-4). But Chaucer’s acknowledgement of the possibility of change doesn’t immunize his own work from that possibility, and it certainly failed to stop Robert Henryson from taking up his tragedy as a ripe source of continuation and change.

But it’s also important to realize that for many readers, Henryson’s poem was a desirable correspondent to *Troilus* precisely because it shut down the open-ended possibilities left unresolved in Chaucer’s tragedy. By deferring indefinitely a description of Criseyde’s death, which he introduces early in the poem (“And how that she forsook him er she deyde” [I.56]), Chaucer may be making a deferential gesture to his imagined audience, sparing Criseyde a narrated demise, but his act of deference also opens up the possibility of an interpretation that Criseyde’s choice was a necessary and even valuable one. This reading hinges on a recognition of the precarious position of Troy itself, and on the historical fate of that city. As discussed in the previous chapter, Criseyde is narrated

the unavoidable certainty of Troy's eventual collapse (with the vouchsafe of her father Calchas's prognosticating "calkulynge"). Her decision to abandon Troilus, then, is wrapped up with the political and historical fate of her native city, and this realization moves her choice out of the space of a purely individual and romantic relationship between Troilus and Criseyde as lovers, beholden to each other solely through the social code and gendered expectations of late-medieval notions of courtly love. This is the love affair that Troilus would have, but it's one that Criseyde explicitly rejects. In Chaucer's tragedy, Criseyde's resistance to Troilus's plans to elope, and her eventual exclusion from Troy, rests on her civic-minded commitment to her home and its people. Her choice to abandon Troilus, then, is not simply the fickle inconstancy of a flighty woman, or even the passive malleability of a weak-willed one. Instead, Chaucer's narrative surrounds Criseyde's choice in the political realities of two peoples at war, the necessity of one side being the loser, and Criseyde's realization that her attempts to act in the best interest of Troy are for nothing. This personal realization casts an equivalent shadow over the political narrative of a stable, immutable state, and frustrates attempts to keep the story in the space of the intimate and personal.

That Chaucer feels as if he has wronged Criseyde, and his audience, is made explicit when he offers a kind of literary penance, promising to write about good women in a future poem. Indeed, Chaucer seems at pains to deny the very monumentalizing of Criseyde that Henryson (and his Troilus) make every effort to erect at the end of the *Testament*. In the final stanzas on Criseyde in *Troilus*, the narrator begs his imagined female readership not to be angry with him, but to blame his imagined source, and the myriad other descriptions of Crisedye, that already exist:

Bysechyng every lady bright of hewe,
 And every gentil womman, what she be,
 That al be that Criseyde was untrewe,
 That for that gilt she be nat wroth with me.
 Ye may hire gilt in other bokes se;
 And gladlier I wol write, yif yow leste,
 Penolopees trouth and good Alceste.

N'y sey nat this al oonly for thise men,
 But moost for wommen that bitraised be
 Thorough false folk -- God yeve hem sorwe, amen! --
 That with hire grete wit and subtilte
 Bytraise yow. And this commeveth me
 To speke, and in effect yow alle I preye,
 Beth war of men, and herkneth what I seye! (V.1772-85)

These two stanzas make clear that Chaucer's tragedy of *Troilus* imagines a kind of correspondence that would draw from Criseyde's betrayal a double correspondence, one that equally enmeshes men and women, both as potential agents of betrayal and the objects of betrayal.

V. Chaucer and the Transmission of Genius: Spenser's "Well of English Undefil'd"

As we have seen, Henryson's engagement with Chaucer in the *Testament* resists any effort to produce a genealogical or hierarchical relationship between text and antetext. The narrator of the *Testament* makes his own work correspondent to Chaucer, creating two equivalent texts that relate to each other as equals, and make equal claims on the narrative material they both produce. His ability to straddle the boundaries between a Chaucer who is both present and absent was already an anomaly by the time Henryson wrote the *Testament*. Many of his contemporaries participated fully in the efforts to erect Chaucer, along with Gower and Lydgate, as the strongest part of a three-legged throne of English authorship. That effort would initiate what would become the view of Chaucer as the patrilineal founder of the English literary canon. This process was hastened by the

development of an “omnipresent” Chaucer, one who was increasingly materialized through the addition of biographical and prefatory material in his earliest printed editions, the product of a number of social and religious factors that have been discussed elsewhere.

Spenser’s relationship to Chaucer in his continuation of the “Squire’s Tale” represents a particularly advanced example of this process, and is an explicitly different act of literary engagement than we see in Henryson’s *Testament*. Spenser makes it clear that he not only views Chaucer as a literary predecessor, but that he sees his continuation of Chaucer’s lost tale as the reincarnation of Chaucer’s spirit, and sees himself as the literary reincarnation of Chaucer himself. However, as we will see, Spenser’s use of Chaucer’s patrilineal potential is not a slavish or desperate reference to a stronger literary predecessor. Although couched in filial terms, we will see how Spenser’s use of Chaucer eventually creates a relationship that moves beyond the equivalence of Henryson, and instead erects Spenser as the triumphant and superior inheritor of the Chaucerian spirit.

The introduction of the “Squire’s Tale” into the narrative of the *Faerie Queene* happens over the course of two stanzas, the first of which details a chance encounter between a motley collection of characters from earlier in the epic, the two false knights, Blandamour and Paridell, their accompanying ladies, Duessa, the False Florimell and Ate, and two pairs of knights and ladies, Cambell and Cambine, and Triamond and Canacee:

Thus as they marched all in close disguise,
 Of fayned loue, they chaunced to ouertake
 Two knights, that lincked rode in louely wise,
 As if they secret counsels did partake;
 And each not farre behinde him had his make,
 To weete, two Ladies of most goodly hew,

That twixt themselues did gentle purpose make,
 Vnmindfull both of that discordfull crew,
 The which with speedie pace did after them pursew. (IV ii 30)¹⁹

The inadvertent meeting between these two groups sets into motion the intersection of Spenser's epic and Chaucer's unfinished tale, but at this stage, the reader knows only that this is another encounter between a group of knights and ladies, encounters that seem to come every other stanza in Spenser's epic. It's only in the next stanza that the identities of these two pairs are revealed, and the full implication of this chance encounter becomes clear.

Who as they now approached nigh at hand,
 Deeming them doughtie as they did appeare,
 They sent that Squire afore, to vnderstand,
 What mote they be: who viewing them more neare
 Returned readie newes, that those same weare
 Two of the prowest Knights in Faery Lond;
 And those two Ladies their two louers deare,
 Couragious *Cambell*, and stout *Triamond*,
 With *Canacee* and *Cambine* linckt in louely bond. (IV ii 31)

In this stanza, the identities are still withheld until the last two lines, and it's only then that the connection to Chaucer's "Squire's Tale" is made clear. What is apparent in this stanza, however, is the theme of interlinking and balanced doubleness that will continue throughout the inset story of Cambell and Canacee. This is nothing new to the *Faerie Queene*, but this section takes the doubleness of the epic, which constantly switches between knights and their shifting and exchangeable ladies, and between the "true" and "false" versions thereof, and shifts it into a meditation on authority and literary inheritance.

Connecting this doubleness in Spenser, particularly as it appears in Book IV, to the Mannerist art movement, Marvin Glasser describes this as a kind of aesthetic “inbreeding,” something

evident in Spenser’s poem in, among other things, the relationship of the narrator to his subject. His voice is more than a framing device, a means by which control and judgment can be established. The blurring of lines of distinction between narrator and character between cantos nine and ten, together with the fiction repeatedly employed by the narrator of his being on an exhausting journey--a fiction that parallels the quest trope of the knights--sets up a mirror image that is analogous to, among other contemporary paintings, that of “The Maids of Honor” of Velazquez where the artist is both painter and subject. Self-reflexivity of course can be found in earlier humanist literature, in More’s Utopia for example, but it is used here less for reasons of psychological self-revelation than as a rhetorical device for setting up conflicting points of view. The author’s persona, like that of Chaucer in *The Canterbury Tales*, functions merely as a dramatic or ironic frame of reference.²⁰

It should come as no surprise, then, to see this doubling emerge at the moment when the narrator begins to suture the filial story of Cambell, Triamond, Canacee and Cambine onto its narrative sire. The reference to Chaucer, however, is still implicit, it is only in the next stanza, when the references to Chaucer move beyond the inclusion of characters to a direct citation of a key part of its initial tale, that we see the truly generational aesthetic and familiar relationship more clearly outlined:

Whylome as antique stories tellen vs,
 Those two were foes the fellonest on ground,
 And battel made the dreddest daungerous,
 That euer shrilling trumpet did resound;
 Though now their acts be no where to be found,
 As that renowned Poet them compyled,
 With warlike numbers and Heroicke sound,
 Dan *Chaucer*, well of English vndefyled,
 On Fames eternall beadroll worthie to be fyled. (IV ii 32)

The first line of this stanza is, short of a single modified word, “antique” for “olde,” a direct citation of the opening lines of the “Knight’s Tale.” The replacement of “olde” with “antique” is itself a noteworthy alteration, as it exchanges a word with a long,

etymological pedigree (of Anglo-Saxon extraction), for a relatively recent—by Spenser’s standards—and Latinate word. One could hardly ask for a more appropriate linguistic turn to represent Spenser’s project of merging the classical epic with medieval romance. But it’s also important to note that the citation of the “Knight’s Tale,” in the introduction to what will be a three stanza meditation on Chaucer’s role as Spenser’s literary progenitor, inverts the famous familiar relationship of the *Canterbury Tales*, for the Squire of the eponymous “Squire’s Tale” is of course the son of the Knight. Here, Spenser cites the father of the author of the tale he will complete, while simultaneously lauding the literary father figure he is in the process of creating. The inversion is telling; if Spenser is indeed drawing on Chaucer’s “well of English vndefyled,” he is also performing a complex act of familial mediation. If Dan *Chaucer* will become the father to Spenser’s poetic project, and the continuation of the “Squire’s Tale” a test case in the spiritual harmony between the two, then the use of the opening line from the “Knight’s Tale” also reveals a more assertive understanding of the familial relationship between the two. The correspondence between Spenser and Chaucer is not explicitly the equitable exchange of corresponding poets that we saw in Henryson, but this citation of the “Knight’s Tale” also shows that it will not be a subservient relationship between a domineering father and a doting son.

The next stanza makes clear this complex relationship, as the speaker meditates on the same issue we saw give so much trouble to the narrator of *Troilus*, the ways in which works of art are altered by the universal mutability of passing time:

But wicked Time that all good thoughts doth waste,
 And workes of noblest wits to nought out weare,
 That famous moniment hath quite defaste,
 And robd the world of threasure endless deare,

The which mote haue enriched all vs heare.
 O cursed Eld the cankerworme of writs,
 How may these rimes, so rude as doth appeare,
 Hope to endure, sith workes of heauenly wits
 Are quite deourd, and brought to nought by little bits? (IV ii 33)

One can also see a potential motivation for the replacement of “olde” with “antique” here, for it’s the more Anglo-Saxon “Eld” which the speaker here describes as “the cankerworme of writs,” destroying writing with each passing year. “Olde” stands in opposition to “antique.” Time as a destructive, effacing power is mediated through the Latinate “antique” into something identifiably “past” but still lasting and efficacious. The question raised in this stanza, however, how anything as “rude” as the poetry even now being spun out by the speaker can survive when the works of “heauenly wits” like Chaucer’s are destroyed is answered in the following stanza, and the answer is itself not at all surprising given the familial dynamic set up earlier, but also remarkable in its bold claims.

Then pardon, O most sacred happie spirit,
 That I thy labours lost may thus reuiue,
 And steale from thee the meede of thy due merit,
 That none durst euer whilest thou wast aliue,
 And being dead in vaine yet many struie.
 Ne dare I like, but through infusion sweete
 Of thine owne spirit, which doth in me surviue,
 I follow here the footing of thy feete.
 That with thy meaning so I may the rather meete. (IV ii 34)

In this stanza the familial relations between a fatherly Chaucer and his literary scion become even more enmeshed, and for all the gestures of deference to Chaucer, the full meaning of the stanza is boldly self-aggrandizing and direct. Spenser’s relationship to Chaucer’s unfinished tale is predicated on metaphysical connection between the dead author and his living successor.

The idea of an “infusion” of spirit will become even more meaningful when we are later narrated the origin story of the three paired brothers, Priamond, Diamond, and Triamond. Spenser’s attempts to portray himself as the heir-apparent to Chaucer’s poetics here figure Chaucer as a kind undead force that flows through Spenser and into his poem. But the final line also returns us to the kind of correspondent poetics we saw in Henryson. For although the final alexandrine can be read as a conceptual encounter, “That I will agree with your meaning,” it can also be read as the imagination of a real encounter between the two, “That through your meaning I may meet with you.” That this should happen in this final line, which so abruptly departs from the very metrical “feet” that Chaucer becomes famous for instituting as the English default, the five stress iambic line, is even more telling. If the speaker of the *Faerie Queene* “meets” Chaucer in this stanza, it happens in a line that literally pushes beyond the boundaries of Chaucer’s most famous metrical legacy. Here, the final foot of Spenser’s stanza doubles back over its Chaucerian predecessor and steps over it, not alongside it.

In doubling back over Chaucer’s meter, however, Spenser also manages to preempt the narrative of his putative literary progenitor. For his continuation of the “Squire’s Tale” not only takes up where Chaucer leaves off, with Cambell’s battle for the love of his sister Canacee, it also moves beyond this narrative by including the story of the three brothers, Priamond, Diamond, and Triamond. These three brothers serve as concretizations of the familial transmission between Spenser and Chaucer that appeared earlier, but they also serve as the primary means of disrupting the initial narrative intent of Spenser’s Chaucerian source text. By weaving the three brothers into the tale, Spenser creates a way of sanitizing the potentially incestuous battle over Canacee’s love,

inventing a competitor able to overmatch Cambell's initial invulnerability through a complex backstory.

Sons of a fairy, Agape, who was raped by a wandering knight, the three brothers Priamond, Diamond, and Triamond are from the start represented as examples of the power of familiar inheritance. After they reach adulthood, "Then shewing forth signes of their fathers blood, / They loued armes, and knighthood did ensew" (IV ii 46.3,4). Their sudden militancy prompts their mother to find a way to know when their lives might end, and to seek to extend them. Unable to alter the fixed lifetimes ordained by Fate, she instead asks the Parcae to stitch their lives together:

That since (quote she) the terme of each mans life
For nought may lessened nor enlarged bee,
Graunt this, that when ye shred with fatall knife
His line, which is the eldest of the three,
Which is of them the shortest, as I see,
Eftsoones his life may passe into the next;
And when the next shall likewise ended bee,
That both their liues may likewise be annex
Vnto the third, that his may so be trebly wext. (ii 52)

The filial transmission that prompted the boys' mother to seek out the Parcae has here been transmuted into fraternal transmission, as each brother is linked to the other. This shift from filial to fraternal transmission is also doubled in the ambivalent language used to describe the action of moving two brothers' souls into the body of the living third, an action described as being "annext." While the older meaning of *annexed* referred specifically to joining two things together without any sense of subordination, by the early sixteenth-century, this had shifted to mean making one thing "appended" or "subordinate or supplementary" to another.²¹ This ambivalent reading blurs the line between the equivalent translation and the subordinate supplementation of these

transmigrating souls. This formulation begins to complicate the initial reference to transmigrating spirits in Spenser's paean to Chaucer earlier in Book IV. What seemed at first to be an explicit departure from the co-equivalent authorial correspondence we saw in Henryson to the strictly filial and deferential relationship in Spenser becomes, through this ambivalent language, less clear in its distinction.

The lack of clarity only increases when this transmigratory contract finds its realization during the gory tournament in Canto iii. After having his throat cut by Cambell, Priamond gives up the ghost, but unlike other shades, his spirit does not travel directly to Pluto's "grisly" kingdom,

But through traduction was eftsoones deriued,
Like as his mother prayd the Destinie,
Into his other brethren, that suruiued
In whom he liu'd a new, of former life depriued. (ii.13)

In this stanza, deprivation is conquered by derivation, and like the "infusion" of spirit that transmits Chaucer's spirit into Spenser, Priamond's soul moves by "traduction" into his brother Diamond's body, the word carrying with it the connotations of physical "transmission," textual "translation," and the generational "propagation" through reproduction.²² Priamond's soul has become transfused spirit, translated text, and passed down inheritance, each reflecting a different facet of the authorial relationship between Chaucer and Spenser.

However, this transmigration leaves the deferential relationship between the two essentially unchanged. Later, after Diamond is likewise fatally wounded by Cambell, his soul flees his body as well, and enters his brother, Triamond, but in this transmigration, both his soul and Priamond's soul enter Triamond's body, giving the third brother "double life" (ii.22.3). The sense of increasing potency is clear in this line, and

concomitant with this is the sense that these progressive transmissions are not equivalent acts of exchange. Indeed, as each former brother passes, his inheritor becomes stronger than he was on his own. The implications for Spenser's own "spiritual" inheritance are equally clear, and through the transmission of souls from Priamond to Diamond and finally to Triamond, we see narrative equivalent to the formal juxtaposition of Chaucer's "feet" and Spenser's alexandrine earlier in Canto ii: just as Spenser formally outdoes Chaucer by "meeting" his iamb with an alexandrine, Triamond encounters his slain coequals and in this encounter surpasses them.

Triamond's surpassing power allows him to battle Cambell to a draw—and in the process lose his two extra lives—but the sudden appearance of his sister Cambina's chariot and magic wand puts an end to the fighting. Triamond wins Canacee's hand through the magic intercession of his sister, thus also putting an end to the incestuous potential that emerged in Canto ii, and, through his loss of his brothers' souls, also preventing a polyamorous, spiritual threesome between himself and Canacee. Clearly impressed by her magical intercession, Cambell weds Triamond's sister Cambina, and harmony returns, temporarily, to the narrative. The geometrical tidiness of the final arrangement between the four—Triamond marries Cambell's sister, Canacee, while Cambell marries Triamond's sister, Cambina—obscures the notable absences in this arrangement: the brothers Priamond and Diamond. It is only through their deaths that this stable arrangement can be created. In a sense, Triamond enjoys the "prize" that all three sacrificed to achieve. Again, we can see a resonance between this distribution of "meed" and the problematic distribution that occurs earlier in Book IV, when the narrator confesses that he is stealing from Chaucer "the meede of thy due merit" (ii.34.3). Like

Spenser's relationship to Chaucer, Triamond's "meede" depends on the existence of his coequal predecessors, but also like this authorial relationship, Triamond's happy marriage to Canacee also depends on the *absence* of his dead brothers. Triamond can only have Canacee after his brothers are dead. Likewise, Spenser's "Dan" Chaucer must first and foremost be a *dead* Chaucer. Chaucer's absence underwrites Spenser's continuation of his incomplete tale, but also, like the tidy pairings between Triamond, Cambell, Canacee and Cambina, his continuation of the "Squire's Tale" leaks away little by little like the departing souls of the two slain brothers, until, late in Canto iv, after a brief victory on the second day of the tournament for Florimell's girdle, when the two exchange roles and wear each other's armor, both Cambell and Triamond are flattened by Arthegall, and then left in the dust, overshadowed by the final victor of the tournament, Britomart.

In the end, Spenser's "continuation" of the "Squire's Tale" is no continuation at all, because like Henryson—Spenser's goal is not, brief protestations to the contrary notwithstanding—to "revivify" Chaucer or to continue his unfinished tale. Like the transmigrating souls of the Priamond and Diamond, Chaucer's "spirit" only enters Spenser as a means toward a larger end, and once that end is achieved, the narrative of the "Squire's Tale" is left as unceremoniously as are the two friendly knights, Cambell and Triamond. Indeed, the friendship that emerges in Book IV is not a stable, immutable one, but a transformational shift from the imperfect to the perfect.

In his reading of the allegorical exploration of friendship in Book IV, David Pichaske notes the mutable and heterogeneous nature of this allegory, noting that

The transfusion of souls among Priamond, Diamond, and Triamond represents an Aristotelian set of values given a Platonic mode of allegorical expression. In the mind of Spenser, familial love must be subsumed into love of woman, which is itself subsumed finally into true friendship. But we note that the spirits of Priamond and

Diamond pass from Triamond's body before he is reconciled with Cambell, just as Priamond and Diamond, both as individuals and in combination with Triamond, find themselves in conflict with Cambell. The love of true friends is, in its perfect expression, purged of the earlier two forms of friendship: growing from them, it first subsumes and then surpasses both.²³

The need to "purge" Triamond's body of the filial and fraternal love represented by his two dead brothers' spirits may make allegorical sense when viewed through the lens of Aristotelian, Platonic and Christian philosophy, but it also makes sense in light of the authorial allegory represented by the relationship between the three brothers' transmigration of souls and the "infusion" of spirit in Canto ii. Like Triamond, Spenser makes use of his infusion of familial spirit to elevate himself above the ranks of his dead relatives. Indeed, there is no doubt that Spenser's extraordinary deference to Chaucer as literary progenitor was often coupled to his own advancement of himself as Chaucer's successor. Reading the Bloomian anxiety of early-modern authors in relation to Chaucer, Misha Teramura notes the ways in which Spenser's analogous reference to the "infusion" of spirit from Chaucer in *The Shepheardes Calender*, ties his elevation of Chaucer to his own elevation: "The anointing of Spenser's avatar to succeed Tityrus, the English Virgil, is an explicit act of self-laureation."²⁴

But it's also important to note that in describing Virgil in the *October* eclogue, Chaucer doesn't become the "English Vergil" so much as Virgil becomes the "Romish *Tityrus*."²⁵ The inversion demonstrates that for as much as he was hitching his coattails to Chaucer's "loadstarre," Spenser was also in the process of *creating* Chaucer's authorship and authority. Indeed, we can see, then, that like the previous authors we have discussed, Spenser was not just reading Chaucer, but writing Chaucer. And not just *re-writing* Chaucer, but writing Chaucer anew. In the next chapter, however, we will see a change between the looser rescriptability of the anonymous author of the "Plowman's Tale" and

the “writerly” engagement Spenser displays in the *Faerie Queene*. The process of laureation and the elevation of Chaucer as the “Father” of English Poetry necessitated a certain absence; Chaucer first had to be truly dead before he could come back to life. Despite Spenser’s inclusion of “Dan Chaucer” in the Book of Friendship, it was only much later—with the emergence of the jovial, bawdy, “congenial” Chaucer—that authors could truly engage with Chaucer as a friend as well as an absent father.

NOTES

¹ George Edmondson, *The Neighboring Text: Chaucer, Boccaccio, Henryson* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011), 40.

² All citations of the Testament are from Robert Henryson, *The Poems of Robert Henryson*, ed. Denton Fox (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1981).

³ All citations of Chaucer are from *The Riverside Chaucer*.

⁴ For an overview of some of the “climatalogical” readings of Henryson’s introduction in the *Testament*, see Edmondson, *The Neighboring Text: Chaucer, Boccaccio, Henryson*, 45. Fox sees the meteorological shift as a reflection of Cresseid’s change in the poem, *The Poems of Robert Henryson*, xcii.

⁵ Edmondson, *The Neighboring Text: Chaucer, Boccaccio, Henryson*, 42.

⁶ Carolyn Ives and David Parkinson, “Scottish Chaucer, Misogynist Chaucer,” in *Rewriting Chaucer: Culture, Authority, and the Idea of the Authentic Text, 1400-1602*, ed. Thomas A. Prendergast and Barbara Kline (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1999), 188.

⁷ See the Middle English Compendium entry for “feinen.” “Inventio” also had a long history of being associated with the material “discovery” of physical objects, particularly the cross. See, for example, Christina Heckman, “Things in Doubt: Inventio, Dialectic, and Jewish Secrets in Cynewulf’s *Elene*,” *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 108 (2009): 449–480.

⁸ See Middle English Compendium entry for *invencioun*.

⁹ For a brief description of the number of biblical references and a corresponding reference to the more general term, *repudium*, see Henryson, *The Poems of Robert Henryson*, 345. In his edition, Robert Kendrick notes that, absent an explicit description of Diomedes and Cresseid as a married couple, the term must be taken as a more generic reference to a forced separation, but given the other lacunae in the poem, I’m less inclined to agree that one can assume that Henryson does not intend the reader to assume that the two were never married: Robert Kendrick, “The Testament of Cresseid,” in *The Poems of Robert Henryson*, ed. Robert Kendrick, TEAMS Middle English Text Series (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1997).

¹⁰ This is Kendrick’s reading, “The Testament of Cresseid.”

¹¹ See Middle English Compendium entry for “make” (1).

¹² See the Dictionary of the Scots Language entry for “responsall,” particularly (2).

¹³ Kathryn L. Lynch, “Robert Henryson’s ‘Doolie Dreame’ and the Late Medieval Dream Vision Tradition,” *JEGP, Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 109, no. 2 (2010): 179.

¹⁴ See, for example, Ralph Hanna, “Cresseid’s Dream and Henryson’s Testament,” in *Chaucer and Middle English Studies, in Honour of Rossell Hope Robbins*, ed. Beryl Rowland (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1974), 288–97. Using Vincent of Beauvais on the nature of prophecy in *Speculum Naturale* as a guide, Hanna argues that it is difficult to classify Cresseid’s dream according to Macrobian dream theory, and that its status as either a meaningless *insomnium*, or as a prophetic and revelatory *visio* or *oraculum* is unclear.

¹⁵ For a reading of Cresseid's dream as both a moral and material revelation, see Steven Kruger, "Medical and Moral Authority in the Late-Medieval Dream," in *Reading Dreams: The Interpretation of Dream from Chaucer to Shakespeare*, ed. Peter Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 51–55.

¹⁶ For the use of paper in letters, as opposed to formal legal documents, see Jennifer Douglas, "'Keep Wysly Youre Wrytyngs': Margaret Paston's Fifteenth-Century Letters," *Libraries & the Cultural Record* 44, no. 1 (2009): 31.

¹⁷ See Middle English Compendium for "superscripcioun."

¹⁸ C. David Benson, *The History of Troy in Middle English Literature* (Woodbridge, UK: D.S. Brewer, 1980), 145.

¹⁹ All quotations from the Faerie Queene are from Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, ed. Albert C. Hamilton et al. (Harlow, UK: Pearson Education, 2001).

²⁰ Martin Glasser, "Spenser as Mannerist Poet: The 'Antique Image' in Book IV of The Faerie Queene," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 31, no. 1 (1991): 29.

²¹ See OED, annexed.

²² See OED, traduction.

²³ David Pichaske, "The Faerie Queene IV.II and III: Spenser on the Genesis of Friendship," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 17, no. 1 (1977): 91.

²⁴ Misha Teramura, "The Anxiety of Auctoritas: Chaucer and the Two Noble Kinsmen," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 63, no. 4 (2012): 554.

²⁵ Edmund Spenser, "The Shepheardes Calender," in *The Yale Edition of the Shorter Poems of Edmund Spenser*, ed. William A. Oram et al. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 173.

CHAPTER 3

“Take It as a Tale”: Reading the “Plowman’s Tale” as if It Were

I. Introduction

For more than two centuries, the “Plowman’s Tale” was indisputably a part of the *Canterbury Tales*, and Geoffrey Chaucer was its author. Then, in 1775, it wasn’t. Thomas Tyrwhitt excised the tale in his edition of the *Canterbury Tales*, and with few exceptions, the “Plowman’s Tale” has since that time been considered a particularly egregious example of Chaucerian apocrypha; another “spurious” addition to Chaucer’s canon.¹ By excluding the “Plowman’s Tale” from the Chaucer canon, and by starting the process of exclusion that would eventually prune Chaucer of all of his embarrassing pieces of apocrypha, Tyrwhitt became the “founder of modern traditions of Chaucer editing.”² But in doing so, he also turned away from a preexisting system of editing Chaucer, a system that was itself a negotiation between two computing modes of authorships—between Chaucer’s living presence as a court poet in a manuscript culture, and his retrospective image as an English *auctor* collected in increasingly “authoritative” printed editions.

The results of these negotiations were the blackletter editions of Chaucer’s *Works*, which attached the apparatuses of authoritative editing (glosses, prefatory material, biographies) to a loose, organizational sense of authorship reminiscent of the earlier manuscript collections.³ These editions created an authorized version of the poet while simultaneously imagining his authorial identity using not only the literary products of the man himself, but also the productive and interpretive interventions of his scribes, contemporaries, imitators, and critics.⁴

It was precisely this kind of inclusive and accretive editorial practice that Tyrwhitt and his successors rejected. Tyrwhitt's insistence on using manuscript evidence as the sole source for his editions led him to approach Chaucer's canon *de novo*, "as if his author had never been published before."⁵ However, this willingness to leap over more than three centuries of print tradition—a willingness that was central to the "modern" editorial practice⁶—was only one half of Tyrwhitt's revisionary ethic. In addition to seeking out unmediated manuscript authorities for his edition, Tyrwhitt also engaged in an act of historical imagination that was central to what would become a new formulation of authorship itself. For it was not only the suspicious lack of manuscript authority that Tyrwhitt found distastefully "un-Chaucerian" about the "Plowman's Tale"; Tyrwhitt also used as support for his exclusion of the apocryphal tale an explicit appeal to an historicized sense of Chaucer's "manner," and to the beliefs and expectations of his imagined fourteenth-century audience. Indeed, after concluding that there was no manuscript support for the "Plowman's Tale," Tyrwhitt went on to note that

We can therefore only judge of it by the internal evidence, and upon that I have no scruple to declare my own opinion, that it has not the least resemblance to Chaucer's manner, either of writing or thinking, in his other works. Though he and Boccace have laughed at some of the abuses of religion and the disorders of Ecclesiastical persons, it is quite incredible that either of them, or even Wicliff himself, would have railed at the whole government of the Church, in the style of this Plowman's Tale. *If they had been disposed to such an attempt, their times would not have born it;* but it is probable, that Chaucer (though he has been pressed into the service of Protestantism by some zealous writers) *was as good a Catholick as men of his understanding and rank in life have generally been.* The necessity of auricular Confession, one of the great scandals of Popery, cannot be more strongly inculcated than it is in the following *Tale of the Person.*⁷

As Tyrwhitt's complaint against the "Plowman's Tale" makes clear, the problem with the tale rests squarely within the realm of historical possibility. For Tyrwhitt, it was simply impossible that a fourteenth-century audience would have "born" a poem as critical of the

institutional church as the “Plowman’s Tale.” Moreover, Tyrwhitt insists that a man of Chaucer’s “understanding and rank in life” would have undoubtedly been a good Catholic. Tyrwhitt’s understanding of Chaucer is predicated on his understanding of his imagined audience, an audience that shared Chaucer’s own imagined tastes, beliefs, and expectations, and which was “courtly, refined, genial,” and thoroughly orthodox.⁸ This connection between the limiting expectations of a projected audience and the construction of an imagined author has been described by Kathy Cawsey, borrowing from Foucault, as a kind of “audience function,” a concept that explores how an imagined audience limits the possibilities of interpretation. Under the “audience function”

interpretations must fit within the historical limitations which the critic has used in defining the audience. Like the “author function” the “audience function” makes criticism manageable and understandable. It defines the limits of what interpretations are acceptable and viable, eliminating other interpretations because they are not plausible according to the parameters with which the critic defines the audience. Indeed, the “audience function” is in some cases anterior to the “author function.” Many critics use the “audience function” in constructing the “author function”: they conclude that an author could not have written a text to mean a particular thing, because his/her audience would not have understood that meaning.⁹

It is precisely this kind of limiting “audience function” that helped Tyrwhitt to initiate the steady process of excising the “spurious” works of Chaucer’s canon, works that diverged from Tyrwhitt’s own expectations of Chaucer’s fourteenth-century readers. Having created an imagined audience for Chaucer’s canon, Tyrwhitt set out to mold that canon according to the limitations of his constructed audience. It was not, however, the interpretive limitations themselves—which are inherent in any “audience function”—that led Tyrwhitt and his successors to their goal of a dramatically reduced and regularized Chaucer canon. Instead, it was a particular shift in audience function that led to the removal of texts like the “Plowman’s Tale.” Tyrwhitt’s edition can be seen as a shift away from an expansive (and *expanding*) conception of Chaucer’s canon—one that

functioned through continual accretion and addition. The works abandoned in this shift in audience function were assigned “apocryphal” status, and once removed from the authentic Chaucer canon, were shunted off into a peculiar place in the history of Chaucer and his reception, a space neither wholly Chaucerian nor wholly un-Chaucerian.¹⁰ Russell Peck has aptly described the curious double standard against which Chaucer’s apocryphal works are held:

having once enjoyed an unwarranted esteem by having been included in the blackletter editions of Chaucer in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, they were then beset with scurrilous opprobrium, as editors, beginning with Tyrwhitt, plucked them from of their false glories and cast them out. Once so chastened and flung aside, their curse has been a chilly oblivion. Since they are neither one thing or the other, few literary judges have given them so much as a literary hearing.¹¹

As Peck notes, an association with Chaucer allowed many of these apocryphal works to comfortably reside for more than two centuries within the blackletter editions of Chaucer’s canon; however, once identified as “apocryphal,” they became simultaneously unworthy of consideration alongside their feigned progenitor and unworthy of consideration on their own merits.¹²

The unfortunate fate of the apocrypha—cast into a kind of interpretive limbo—has obscured many of the particularly rich and informative aspects of Chaucer’s long history of reception, a history that has received attention as a precursor to the modern Chaucer canon, but which is very often limited by the boundaries of that modern canon.¹³ The limiting force of the modern Chaucer canon has been particularly unkind to the dramatic interpretive openness of the blackletter Chaucer. Indeed, the distinction between a canon defined by limitation and one defined by open potential has led Alexandra Gillespie to call the productive potential of the blackletter Chaucer a kind of “Chaucer effect,” a category that imagines the author as a figure who is “a ‘function’ of

the creation, circulation, and interpretation of his texts, paratexts, and others' texts about his work."¹⁴ Like Cawsey, Gillespie uses the Foucauldian "author function" as a springboard for her understanding of Chaucer's pre-modern authorship, but she explicitly distinguishes this Chaucer "effect" from Foucault's "author function" by emphasizing the productive, expansive potential of the former, as opposed to the restrictive sense of limitation and control inherent in the latter. For Gillespie, it is "the difference between a reductive category—one that manages, controls, answers—and a category that is *also* productive, that proliferates, energizes, and changes."¹⁵

Building on both Cawsey and Gillespie, this article examines the "audience function" of the blackletter Chaucer, and in particular, that test case for its eventual undoing: the apocryphal "Plowman's Tale." In doing so, it reads the "Plowman's Tale" through the eyes of these sixteenth- and seventeenth-century readers of Chaucer, and it also reads the "Plowman's Tale" as if it really were what we simultaneously affirm and deny that it is—an authentic and meaningful part of the Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. In exploring the "Plowman's Tale" through the more inclusive audience function of its sixteenth- and seventeenth-century readers, we can not only recover some of the complex interpretive force of this neglected poem, but also recover some of the productive potential of the expansive, accretive "Chaucer effect" that undergirded the pre-Tyrwhitt Chaucer.

II. Reading Chaucer, Writing the "Plowman's Tale": A Critical and Textual History

Despite its long association with the *Canterbury Tales*, since its exclusion from the Chaucer canon, critical opinion of the "Plowman's Tale" has generally ranged from negative to nonexistent.¹⁶ Tyrwhitt's low opinion of the tale was not unique. W.W. Skeat

believed that the “Plowman’s Tale” would never have been accepted as an authentic work of Chaucer’s had it not been, through an editorial sleight of hand, shifted from a position after the “Parson’s Tale” (where it’s inauthenticity was apparently clear enough) to a position before it, where it was able to fool centuries of readers, including “no less a person than Dryden.”¹⁷ Andrew Wawn, in his seminal work on the text, “The Genesis of the *Plowman’s Tale*” (a thorough examination of the tale and a theory of its historical origin), remarks with unconcealed incredulity that it seems hard to believe that the “Plowman’s Tale” was ever seriously mistaken for an authentic work of Chaucer’s:

For a modern reader, the briefest acquaintance with [the “Plowman’s Tale”] would be sufficient to occasion bewilderment that so unsophisticated a piece could ever have been seriously thought of as Chaucer’s. There is little enough sense of a cultivated controlling spirit at work behind the abrasive exterior of *The Plowman’s Tale*. Judged by the standards of its putative author, the poem stalks its ideological prey with leaden-footed ponderousness rather than with spring-heeled ingenuity.¹⁸

Despite his apparent distaste for it, Wawn’s work is the preeminent study of the “Plowman’s Tale,” and in it he forwards the now accepted view of the tale as the combination of a fifteenth-century Lollard satire and a forged, sixteenth-century prologue.¹⁹ It is through this forged prologue that the “Plowman’s Tale” made its way into blackletter editions of Chaucer’s *Works* as an authentic part of the *Canterbury Tales*, and it is the prologue that is the main focus of this investigation, in part because its obviously apocryphal status has meant that it has rarely been the subject of focused attention, but primarily because it demonstrates a remarkably complex reinterpretation of the larger text onto which it sutures itself. The prologue to the “Plowman’s Tale” represents a bold reinterpretation of the *Canterbury Tales*, and a clever commentary on the construction of authority that critics so often recognize as one of the hallmarks of Chaucerian poetry. To read the prologue to the “Plowman’s Tale” is to read one poet—

most probably an anonymous, sixteenth-century forger—speak with, about, and *as* Chaucer. And by reading the prologue through the audience function of the contemporary readers of the blackletter Chaucer, we can see an alternate sense of what Chaucer could have been, and indeed, what he actually *was* for at least two hundred years of pre-Tyrwhitt textual history: not just “Chaucer” the biographically and historically situated author but a “Chaucer effect,” an expansively productive authorial concept, and an idea about authority and authorship itself.

Before we begin, though, it will be helpful to start with some endings—the end of the period in question, and the end of the text itself. The last one first: at the end of the “Plowman’s Tale,” the narrator, ostensibly the same Plowman who appears in the “General Prologue,” denies all responsibility for the poem (1300 lines of scathingly anti-ecclesiastical verse spoken in the voice of a talking Pelican) and instead, asks his readers to blame the talking Pelican for the heterodox opinions they’ve just heard:

Wyteth the Pellican, and not me,
For herof I nyl not avowe,
In hye ne in lowe, ne in no degre,
But as a fable take it ye mowe.
(1373-6)²⁰

Thanks in large part to the inclusion of Chaucer’s *Retractions* in modern editions of the *Canterbury Tales*, a palinodic moment at the end of a putatively Chaucerian poem seems a particularly fitting form of conclusion. But the connection between Chaucer and the palinode was not always so strong; the *Retractions* were absent from editions of Chaucer’s *Works* for much of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries,²¹ and in a heavily annotated and glossed 1606 edition of the “Plowman’s Tale,” the anonymous editor of the poem (possibly Anthony Wotten²²) insists that his readers refuse to accept the poem’s

final retraction. Noting the narrator's request that readers of the "Plowman's Tale" take it merely "as a fable," the anonymous editor of the 1606 edition demands: "But yee must take it as a tale. Chaucer declineth the enuie, and auoydeth the rage of the Popish Cleargie, for his writing thus plainly and boldly."²³

The religious significance of this editorial pronouncement is not terribly subtle, and given the subtitle to this particular edition, "Shewing by the Doctrine and Liues of the Romish Clergie, That the Pope Is Antichrist and They His Ministers," it is painfully clear that this anonymous editor is reading the "Plowman's Tale" as an explicit rebuke of the Catholic church, and an example of late-medieval proto-Protestantism. But there is more at stake in the editor's distinction between "fable" and "tale" than we might initially conclude. Although the editor seems interested in explaining away the narrator's retreat into fabularity as an act of religious necessity, the way he revises this retreat, by shifting from "fable" to "tale," is intriguing. What does it mean to replace a "fable" with a "tale"? On one level, it seems clear that the description of this text as a "tale" implies a connection between this text and its putative context, between the individual work of the "Plowman's Tale" and a larger collection of works, the *Canterbury Tales*. But this connection does more than simply "place" the "Plowman's Tale" within a literary context. It also describes the particular nature of the text itself, and, as we will soon see, the nature of its author as well.

Marginal commentary on the religious implications of Chaucer's writing was not unique to the 1606 edition of the "Plowman's Tale." In the 1542 edition Chaucer's *Works*, beside the Parson's detailed (and wholly orthodox) description of late-medieval penitential practice, we find the following note: "This is a Canterbury Tale."²⁴ Alexandra

Gillespie has shown that the term “Canterbury tale” had a complex set of meanings in the sixteenth-century. Describing some of the contemporary uses of the term, Gillespie notes that

[t]he preface to a 1549 John Day Bible is among many sermons and treatises of the period that exhort idle readers to “spare an hour or. ii. in a day, from theyr worldly busines, empling it about the reading of this boke, as they haue bene vused to do in Cronicles & Canterbury tales.” In a sermon of the same year, [Thomas] Cranmer asks why, if people believe the Gospel to be true, they do not live according to it; and “[i]f we take it for a Canterbury tale, why do we not refuse it? Why do we not laugh at it out of place, and whistle at it?” The term “Caunterbury tale” had taken on some of the semantic range of the term “tale” itself: in 1540s England it could point to fictions that were worthless, even perilous, distractions from the serious business of pious life.²⁵

In light of Cranmer’s comments, it would seem at first glance that the distinction made by the editor of the 1606 edition of the “Plowman’s Tale” between “fable” and “tale” is largely a meaningless one. If a “Canterbury tale” is a “worthless, even perilous” fiction, then it seems largely synonymous with the “fable” into which the narrator of the “Plowman’s Tale” seeks to escape. But although the term “Canterbury tale” could mean “a trifling distraction” (drawing on the semantic distinction between a “tale,” or fiction, and the “truth”) it simultaneously carried with it a particular value not associated with all fictions.²⁶

The effects of this particular value may stand out in greater contrast if we look back a little more than half a century from the anonymous editor’s injunction to the year 1543. In that year, a statute entitled “An act for the aduancement of true religion and for the abolishment of the contrary” was passed with the intent of restricting the publication, distribution, and public reading of the bible, but which also included a broader system of doctrinal exclusion, indeed, essentially limiting any printed or oral discussion of religious

doctrine not sanctioned by the religious authorities. Included in this statute was a list of exceptions to the prohibition, including the provision that

all bookes in englishe, printed before the yere of our lorde.M.D.xl.intiteled, the kynges highnes proclamacions, iniunctions, translacions of the Pater noster, the Aue maria, and the Crede, the psalters, prymer, prayers, statues and lawes of the realme, cronicles, Canterbury tales, Chaucers bookes, Gowers bookes, and stories of mennes lyues, shall not be comprehended in the prohibition of this acte, onlesse the kinges said maiestee shall herafter make speciall proclamacion for the condemnacion and reproving of the same, or any of them.²⁷

Here, “Canterbury tales” and “Chaucers bookes” are included, along with the works of Gower, and the “stories of mennes lyues,” as a group of texts specifically exempted from prohibition. Inside this single regulatory text is a complex web of exclusion that links seemingly disparate texts: royal proclamations, biblical and religious translations, laws, statutes, chronicles, Canterbury tales, the works of Chaucer and Gower, and “the stories of mennes lyues.” Understanding how the “Canterbury tale” managed to be included into this exceptional clause helps to explain Chaucer’s position in early-modern England.

Some of the exceptions are self-evident. For example, given the statute’s theological regulation, it seems clear why simple and authorized biblical and religious translations (like the Crede and the Pater Noster) would be exempted. And the effort by the state to exempt its own regulatory texts and promulgations is equally unremarkable. But why include the other exceptions? At first glance, it may seem the permissive attitude toward Chaucer’s and Gower’s works can be located entirely in their historical distance; here are things too old and irrelevant to bother worrying over. This would also explain the inclusion of “chronicles”—the unadorned records of past events—and may even explain the inclusion of the “stories of mennes lyuves,” for “story” and “history” were semantic twins for much of the late-medieval and early-modern period (up until the late

seventeenth century, a “story” would almost always imply the truthful retelling of an event located in the distant past).²⁸

Seth Lerer argues that this historicist impulse, the effort to draw a sharp, temporal distinction between the past and the present, was a crucial part of the early-modern understanding of authors like Chaucer, and indeed, of the early-modern conception of authorship itself. Lerer claims that after the fifteenth century

Chaucer’s authority shifts between a remembered presence and a buried absence, from that of a “maker” in the constantly rescripted manuscripts of entertainment and instruction to that of a “poet” in the printed volumes of the library. Chaucerian citation thus moves from evocation to invocation. The listing of his works or the appeals to his verbal mastery are no longer designed to evoke his presence on the page or conjure his discerning visage over the impersonator’s shoulder. Rather, such references move toward establishing the distance of the poet and his world from the contemporanities of courtly life or typographical production. Chaucer becomes, in [Stephen] Hawe’s later term, “antique” as he begins to share with Virgil and the classics a deep past recoverable not by the memories of cult or coterie but by the work of individual readers.²⁹

Lerer’s point about the shift from “evocation” to “invocation” is important, and it is certainly the case that by the end of the seventeenth century, Chaucer’s role had changed from “maker” to “poet.”³⁰ But the break between late-medieval “maker” and early-modern “poet” is not a clean one.³¹ And Lerer’s argument that the early-modern reader of Chaucer was no longer forced to confront the dead maker’s “presence on the page,” or that the early-modern imitator, unlike his late-medieval counterpart, no longer had to confront Chaucer’s ghostly visage lurking over his shoulder, is complicated by editorial and authorial practices evident in the early-to mid-sixteenth century.

When the editor of the 1606 edition of the “Plowman’s Tale” insisted that his readers take the text not as a “fable” but rather as a “tale,” he was making a generic distinction between two types of fiction: the one, a “fable,” was a demonstrably false and deauthorized account, while the other, a “tale,” was both meaningful and authorial. The

fable into which the narrator of the “Plowman’s Tale” attempts to escape is a space without attribution and responsibility, the semantic opposite of a story, which is conceptually and etymologically tied to “history” and to accurate, verifiable recollections of the past. The semantic opposition between fable and story is, in fact, the primary source of context for the former term: the fable exists primarily as a sign of that which it is not: namely, the verifiable truth of an occurrence (story/history). But the editor of the 1606 edition demands that we put this text, which is described as a fable by its own narrator, into its textual context rather than into the semantic context of a fable, and in doing so, that we recognize it as a “tale,” a unit coequal with the other tales in the *Canterbury Tales*, and which deserves the same serious—and *meaningful*—interpretive deference.

In this sense, the tale is not a story because it makes no pretense to absolute or historical veracity, but neither is it a fable. Indeed, according to this formulation, the tale exists precisely within the conceptual space *between* the fable and the story. And like the 1606 editor of the “Plowman’s Tale,” we might see this tale as a space of textual potential that refuses to assert a veridical or historical fact while it simultaneously prevents its own fiction from retreating into fabular deauthorization. When the narrator of the “Plowman’s Tale” ends his poem by insisting that his readers “Wyteth the Pellican, and not me, / For herof I nyl not avowe,” the speaker is refusing to “avowe,” or to *vouch*, for his own narrative (1373-4).³² Instead, the Pelican stands in for the reluctant speaker, and so we are directed to take this narrative “as a fable” (1376). Like the 1606 editor, though, we should instead consider the “Plowman’s Tale” as a “tale”: a fictional narrative that straddles the divide between the deauthorized fable and the veridical story.

In following the desire of the 1606 editor of the “Plowman’s Tale” to resist the deauthorizing qualification represented in the tale’s palinodic end—a desire that was almost certainly driven by a religious interest in the tale’s reformist potential—we should also recognize that the initial inclusion of the “Plowman’s Tale” into the text of the *Canterbury Tales* had as much to do with *literary* authority as it did with disputes about the perceived corruption of the Catholic church. Similarly, we should resist the urge to see the inclusion of apocryphal material like the “Plowman’s Tale” into the Chaucer canon in purely commercial terms, for the commercial explanations for the inclusion of the “Plowman’s Tale” in the *Canterbury Tales*—that Chaucer’s name became a kind of “brand” useful for selling books—ignore the potential literary and interpretive work that went into the creation and inclusion of the “Plowman’s Tale.”³³ The inclusion of the “Plowman’s Tale” in the *Canterbury Tales* was the result of a lingering late-medieval notion of authorship, one that participated in the “rescriptable” impulse Lerer describes, and which blurred the neat, ontological distinction between reading a text and writing (or re-writing) it.³⁴ Lerer sees this impulse dying out after the fifteenth century, after the transition from manuscript to print, and after the initiation of the humanist process of authorial historicism, but as critics like Gillespie have shown, this “rescriptable” impulse to view Chaucer as an “effect” rather than as an “author” remained in effect well into the sixteenth century, and reappeared, textually, even in the earliest printed editions of Chaucer’s works.³⁵

This rescriptable impulse is surely what led an anonymous sixteenth-century poet to write the prologue to the “Plowman’s Tale,” grafting itself, along with a preexisting religious debate poem, onto the *Canterbury Tales*. Although critics since Tyrwhitt have

had precious little praise for the “Plowman’s Tale,” criticism of the tale has largely focused on the material of the tale itself rather than on the material of its prologue (which is generally ignored). Wawn’s conclusion that the prologue was almost certainly the least “authentic” part of the “Plowman’s Tale” may explain the scant critical attention paid to it. Given the explicit one-sidedness of the religious debate between the talking pelican and the talking griffin that appears in the tale itself (there never seems to be any doubt that the reform-minded Pelican will win out in the end) we might be forgiven for concluding that the entirety of the “Plowman’s Tale” is just as simplistic and didactic as Wawn so pointedly argues. But if we set aside the tale itself and focus instead on its neglected prologue, we will find an amazingly complex reinterpretation of the role of the character of the Plowman in the *Canterbury Tales*, and an intricately nuanced negotiation between various modes of authorship that self-consciously calls into question the univocal and historically bounded authority of Chaucer himself.

III. Reading the “Plowman’s Tale,” Writing Chaucer: The ‘Rescriptable’ Impulse

The introduction of the character of the “Plowman” into the prologue to the “Plowman’s Tale” begins a process of rewriting the terms of the *Canterbury Tales*, altering its poetic structure, refocusing it on the particular practices and effects of agricultural labor, and even going so far as to shift its temporal landscape:

The Plowman plucked up his plowe
 Whan mydsommer mone was comen in,
 And sayd, “His beestes shuld eate ynowe,
 And lyge in the grasse, up to the chyn.
 They ben feble, both oxe and cowe,
 Of hem nis left but bone and skyn.”
 (1-6)

The “Plowman’s Tale” here presents us with a dramatic temporal shift, from the “shoures soote” of April in the “General Prologue,” to “mydsommer,” or the summer solstice, which generally occurred in mid-to-late June.³⁶ And if we place the tale in an agricultural context, the “mydsommer” date takes on a particularly pointed meaning. For the late-medieval peasant farmer, both spring and summer were periods of hard work, but the summer could be much worse. Spring labor would involve plowing, sowing and manuring the fields, and although plowing could be difficult and dangerous, it was not nearly as difficult as the work that would begin in the early-to-mid summer. Barbara Hanawalt has used medieval coroner’s reports to show that forty-seven percent of all men’s accidents occurred between the months of June through September, when harvesting, hauling, and sorting crops were the primary modes of labor.³⁷ We can see then, that the shift from spring to summer provides a temporal context for the difficulty and danger of late-medieval agricultural labor.

Moreover, it is the logic of agricultural labor that sends this Plowman on his pilgrimage in the first place. The Plowman is unable to continue his work because of his emaciated livestock, which are both so “feble” that there is little left of them but “bone and skyn.” Here again, the realities of peasant life dictate the narrative impulse, and the Plowman has a very practical reason to be concerned about his starving livestock. For peasant farmers, the health of one’s livestock was of crucial importance to one’s own productive value. Livestock were critical instruments of agricultural labor, both as beasts of burden and as sources of agricultural raw materials. Their labor allowed the farmer to till his fields, and their manure was an important source of nutrients for his crops.³⁸

Given this agricultural context, it makes sense that the Plowman of the “Plowman’s Tale” should show such concern for his livestock. However, although the Plowman decides to spare his feeble cattle, this does not mean that he himself is given a respite. After setting his livestock out to pasture, the Plowman decides to make a spiritually productive use of his new-found free time, and he sets off to visit St. Thomas Becket:

He toke his tabarde and his staffe eke,
 And on his heed he set his hat,
 And sayde he wolde Saynte Thomas seke.
 On pylgremage he goth forth plat.
 In scrippe he bar both breed and lekes,
 He was forswonke and all forswat.
 Men might have sene through both his chekes,
 And every wang-toth and where it sat.
 (9-16)

Here, too, the stark realities of agricultural labor are painfully apparent. The Plowman is as frail and emaciated as his livestock, and his cheeks are so thin that one can see each molar (wang-toth) through his skin. Again, this description fits with the shifted temporal scheme of the “Plowman’s Tale.” For the peasant farmer, the hungriest months of the year would have come in early summer, just before the autumn harvest, when grain supplies stored up for winter and spring would be at their lowest.³⁹ But although this stark description of the Plowman certainly reshapes the view of peasant laborers in the *Canterbury Tales*, the particular details of this Plowman do more than simply provide the *Tales* with an unvarnished view of agricultural labor, it also forces the *Tales* to participate in a literary tradition that modern editors of Chaucer—including Tyrwhitt—took pains to strip away from the author’s “authentic” canon: the “Piers Plowman tradition” and the tradition of Lollard literature of religious reform.

The hungry, work-weary plowman that appears in the prologue to the “Plowman’s Tale” draws on a tradition of plowman literature which developed from William Langland’s fourteenth-century alliterative poem, *Piers Plowman*. Langland’s work spawned not only literary analogues, but also sank deep into the late-medieval consciousness, became a rallying point for political and religious dissenters of the period: “Even while Langland was still engaged in its composition, *Piers Plowman* was used as a watchword for serious civil disobedience.”⁴⁰ Out of the many examples of plowman literature in the *Piers Plowman* tradition, a late-fourteenth-century alliterative poem, *Pierce the Ploughman’s Crede*, is a particularly important intertext for the “Plowman’s Tale.”⁴¹

Pierce the Ploughman’s Crede describes the narrator’s search for someone to teach him his “Crede,” a task eventually accomplished by a plowman named “Peres.” The description of Peres the plowman in the *Crede* is remarkably similar to the description that appears in the “Plowman’s Tale,” for in addition to his tattered clothes (421-9), Peres also has the same sickly, emaciated livestock as the plowman of the “Plowman’s Tale” (431, 2).⁴² This isn’t the only connection, though, for in the process of reaching Peres, the narrator encounters members of each of the four fraternal orders, each of whom display the hypocrisy, venality, and arrogance characteristic of late-medieval antifraternal satire. The savage criticism of the friars opens up a space for the idealized portrait of Peres, who unlike the corrupt friars, serves as “[t]he only stable picture of the archetypal Church of Christ.”⁴³ This comparison between a corrupt church and an idealized plowman has obvious resonance with the “Plowman’s Tale,” but the tale makes a more explicit connection than this. During the long debate between the Griffin and the

Pelican in the “Plowman’s Tale,” and after an extended discussion of how monks have fallen away from the original rule of St. Benedict, the Pelican notes that “Of freres I have told before / In a makynge of a Crede” (1065-6). This description of “a Crede” attacking the friars makes it clear that this is a reference to *Pierce the Ploughman’s Crede*.

The connection between *Pierce the Ploughman’s Crede* and the “Plowman’s Tale” has been discussed elsewhere, and even Skeat noted the many similarities between the two poems.⁴⁴ But in order to understand the importance of the “Plowman’s Tale” to the Chaucer canon, it is more helpful to focus on one of the most obvious differences between the *Crede* and the “Plowman’s Tale”: the alliterative long line of the *Crede* and the stanzaic rhyme of the “Plowman’s Tale.”⁴⁵

The end-rhymed, stanzaic “Plowman’s Tale” hews more closely to the stylistic qualities of the other elements of the *Canterbury Tales*, and differs from the alliterative long line of both *Pierce the Ploughman’s Crede* and *Piers Plowman* itself. In making explicit reference to the *Crede*, however, the “Plowman’s Tale” simultaneously calls attention to and notes its divergence from this exemplar of the *Piers Plowman* tradition. In a sense, then, the “Plowman’s Tale” views the *Piers Plowman* tradition through the lens of the “Chaucer effect,” both incorporating the ideals of that tradition—the reformist plowman who criticizes the corruption of the institutional clergy—while also separating out this particular tale from that tradition through its poetic structure. The “Plowman’s Tale” becomes Chaucer’s vision of the *Piers Plowman* tradition, extending the copiousness of the “Chaucer effect” to encompass this famous—and for the readers of the blackletter *Works*, religiously attractive—literary tradition.

But the connection between these two literary traditions is made even more explicit later in the prologue, for after being introduced to the tattered plowman—clearly lifted straight out of the *Piers Plowman* tradition—we get an unmistakable link to the larger narrative structure of the *Canterbury Tales*:

Our Hoste behelde wele all about,
 And sawe this man was sun ybrent.
 He knew well by his senced snout,
 And by his clothes that were to-rent,
 He was a man wont to walke about,
 He nas nat alway in cloystre ypent;
 He coulde not religiousliche lout,
 And therefore was he fully shent. (17-24)

The sudden appearance of “Our Hoste” in this stanza makes explicit the textual space in which the prologue has been operating, but it also reveals the nature of the prologue’s narrative voice. However, in order to understand this narrative voice, it’s helpful to take a brief detour, and to look at an analogue to this moment: the prologue to John Lydgate’s *Siege of Thebes*.

There are clear similarities between the two texts. In the *Siege of Thebes*, Lydgate’s narrative persona is incorporated into Chaucer’s magnum opus through a chance encounter with the pilgrims at Canterbury. In his description of this meeting, the narrator of the *Siege of Thebes* happens upon the Host, Harry Bailly, and describes the encounter as a man approaching a pilgrimage already under progress:

The same tyme her governour, the Host,
 Standing in halle ful of wynde and bost,
 Lich to a man wonder sterne and fers,
 Which spak to me and seide anon, “Daun Pers,
 Daun Domynyk, Dan Godfrey, or Clement,
 Ye be welcom newly into Kent,
 Thogh youre bridel have neither boos ne belle.”
 (*Siege of Thebes* 79-85)⁴⁶

The Host's pseudonymous greeting allows Lydgate, the narrator of this poem, to introduce himself to his audience, and he presents his reworking of the *Canterbury Tales* as a kind of *ex post facto* addition to a preexisting narrative. Indeed, when John Lydgate the poet re-writes himself into the *Canterbury Tales*, appearing at Canterbury before the Host and company, he imagines the Host's response to his presence as a complex repetition of the social dynamics in the *Canterbury Tales* itself (the Host hurls the same mildly epithetic pseudonyms at Lydgate that he hurls at the Monk of the "General Prologue"). But like the narrator of the "Plowman's Tale," in rescripting himself into the *Tales*, Lydgate also reconfigures their preexisting social dynamics. For despite their shared epithetic allusions and social function, John Lydgate, Monk of Bury, is clearly *not* the Monk of the "General Prologue": as the Host's observations make clear, the Monk of the "General Prologue" has a sumptuously arrayed horse, but Lydgate's bridle has neither "boos ne belle." Lydgate creates a space in which to introduce himself as a *new* Monk, and as a *better* one, and through the Host, he is given even more opportunity to expand on this favorable introduction:

"Besechinge you that ye wil me telle
 First youre name and of what contré
 Withoute mor shortely that ye be,
 That loke so pale al devoyde of blood,
 Upon youre hede a wonder thedbar hood,
 Wel araied for to ride late."

(Siege 86-91)

In rescripting Harry Bailly, Lydgate produces a Host that helpfully interrogates him—all the better to introduce himself to his readers—but the interrogation is simply an addendum to the social identification that has already occurred before this point. Lydgate is, first and foremost, a monk. More specifically, he is a monk of ostentatious austerity, a

virtuous counterbalance to the depiction of monastic dissolution that appears in the “General Prologue.” In this sense, both the *Siege of Thebes* and the prologue to the “Plowman’s Tale” appear to be engaged in a process of re-imagining the terms of the “General Prologue,” but the Host’s response to the Plowman in the “Plowman’s Tale” moves well beyond the playful tinkering on display in the *Siege of Thebes*.

The prologue to “The Plowman’s Tale” refuses to submit to the kind of *ex post facto* temporal scheme used by Lydgate, and instead, we find ourselves confronted with *our* Host rather than *the* Host. This altered pronoun is important, as it simultaneously asserts a position *within* the text of the *Canterbury Tales*, and identifies the narrator’s voice as a preexisting element of the Canterbury pilgrimage.⁴⁷ In fact, given the obvious association between the narrator of the *Canterbury Tales* and Chaucer himself, this altered pronoun seems to tempt us to conflate the narrator of the *Canterbury Tales* and the narrator of the “Plowman’s Tale,” thus identifying the narrator of the “Plowman’s Tale” *as* Chaucer. But this implied identification is itself complicated in the “Plowman’s Tale” by the Host’s remarkable response to the new pilgrim.

Although the “sun ybrent” plowman in the “Plowman’s Tale” clearly displays the physical markers of other hard-working and virtuous plowman of the *Piers Plowman* tradition, the Host of the “Plowman’s Tale” insistently refuses to identify this clear allusion.⁴⁸ Instead, the Host’s conclusions about the Plowman go only so far as to draw a distinction between this “man wont to walke about” and his social antithesis, those “alway in cloystre ypent.” It’s clear, then, that the Host is already imagining the Plowman as something other than just a plowman; his social position is not an absolute value but a relational one, and this position serves both to highlight his own deprivation and to subtly

criticize those who are spared this deprivation by their social (and physical) position, “ypent” up in their cloisters. Here, again, we can see the intertextual references to the *Piers Plowman* tradition, and again, a particular reference to *Pierce the Ploughman’s Crede*: while the *Crede* savaged the depredations of the wandering mendicants, the “Plowman’s Tale” is, from its outset, a critique of the more institutionally localized elements of the church, particularly the monastic orders.

But the Host’s first words to the newcomer pilgrim also reveal the extent to which the “Plowman’s Tale” is attempting to enlarge this new pilgrim’s role beyond the scope of the *Piers Plowman* tradition, for when confronted with the extreme, social legibility of this plowman—a figure who practically begs for an identification with the preexisting character trope of the religiously pure plowman who serves as a foil for the corrupt clergy—the Host makes an explicitly illegible interrogative statement: “Our Host him axed, ‘What man art thou?’” (25). The Host has no idea who this man is. In addition to defying the expectations of association between this plowman and the plowmen of the *Piers Plowman* tradition, this seemingly innocuous interrogation reproduces, word for word, one of the most central moments in the *Canterbury Tales*: the Host’s first words to Chaucer the Pilgrim in the “Prologue to the Tale of Sir Thopas.”⁴⁹

The explicit quotation in the “Plowman’s Tale” of this famous moment, the introduction of Chaucer’s pilgrim character into the frame narrative of the *Canterbury Tales*, has, to my knowledge, never been discussed. If the reference to *our* Hooste was not enough to make it clear that the “Plowman’s Tale” is imagining itself as a functional part of the *Canterbury Tales*, then this brief interrogative seems to seal the deal.

However, unlike the explicit connection Lydgate creates between the *Siege of Thebes* and

the *Canterbury Tales*, the “Plowman’s Tale” performs this connection with a subtle yet bold allusiveness that marks it as a fundamentally different narrative project. While the *Siege of Thebes* inserts its author into the pilgrimage to Canterbury through an explicit act of revision, the “Plowman’s Tale” insinuates itself into the *Canterbury Tales* by narrating the tale as if it were still by Chaucer. However, given that the Host’s interrogative is not of the narrator of the “Plowman’s Tale,” but of the Plowman himself, this moment presents the reader with a dizzyingly fractured portrait of authorship: we are narrated a Prologue (ostensibly by Chaucer) describing a Plowman who is himself greeted by the Host *as* Chaucer. The Prologue to the “Plowman’s Tale” essentially collapses the role of author, narrator, and character into a kind of singularity of attribution, and like the singularity at the center of a black hole, where the laws of physics dissolve, here, the standard rules of attribution begin to break down, and narrator/author/character blur together into an inexplicable and undifferentiated mass.

To understand why this happens, it’s helpful to consider the Host’s words to Chaucer in the “Prologue to the Tale of Sir Thopas.” Lee Patterson has noted the oddness of the Host’s formulation to Chaucer the pilgrim—no other pilgrim is interrogated in such a fashion—and has pointed out that the strange question is followed by a number of unique physical and behavioral observations on the part of the Host. For Patterson, “this identification in terms of manner and body shape is a substitute for the identification in terms of vocation applied to the other pilgrims. Recognizable as a knight, a miller, a reeve, and so forth, the pilgrims are identified by their social position.”⁵⁰ Patterson sees a clear connection between the Host’s baffled attempt to “place” Chaucer the pilgrim, and Chaucer’s own attempt to fashion for himself a unique authorial identity in the comedy of

the *Canterbury Tales*. This identity is one that is trapped between two competing modes of authorship: that of “maker” and “poet.” These are, of course, the same two modes of authorship we witnessed earlier in Lerer’s description of Chaucer’s authorial reception. In Lerer’s construction, Chaucer shifts from a courtly “maker” to a proto-renaissance “poete,” and in doing so, loses the rescriptability so characteristic of late-medieval manuscript authors, only to gain the authority of antiquity and the canonical fixity of print. For Patterson, who is here interested in Chaucer’s conception of himself and his artistic production more than he is interested in Chaucer’s immediate or posthumous reception, the arc of Chaucer’s career does not reach the lofty heights of “poetry” in his lifetime. Instead, Chaucer’s authorial identity is one that “is inevitably in opposition to that of courtly “maker” but that can now lay no claim to the august title “poete.”⁵¹ Unable to achieve the heights of classical “poetry,” and unwilling to stomach the ideological constraints of “making,” Chaucer attempts to carve out a space between the two.

Patterson finds Chaucer’s struggle to produce this unique, authorial position best expressed in the opposition between the two tales that the Chaucer pilgrim tells us: the “Tale of Sir Thopas” and the “Tale of Melibee.” Patterson sees in “Thopas,” rather than “Melibee,” a microcosm of Chaucer’s authorial ambitions, for it is the parodic romance of “Thopas”—long considered little more than Chaucer’s self-effacing jab at his own poetic talent—that we find

the attributes and values that are central to the “comedy” of *The Canterbury Tales*, while *Melibee* articulates by contrast exactly that mode of writing constrained to specific political interests from which Chaucer has always sought to escape. Moreover, the juxtapositioning of the two tales, and the dramatic context in which they are located, should lead us to the conclusion that Chaucer is disowning not the childish frivolity of *Sir Thopas* but the pragmatic didacticism of *Melibee*, and that he is defining his authorial identity not according to the decorous role of princely adviser

but rather in terms provided by the obsolete and disregarded tradition of minstrel performance.⁵²

So, unable to create his unique authorial position out of whole cloth, and unable to reproduce the historical antecedent of the classical “poete,” Chaucer instead returns to the traditional mode offered by the “minstrel identity” represented in “Thopas.”

That this kind of tension should develop from an attempt to create a unique form of authorial identity, and that it should produce a tense negotiation between a popular, traditional form and an elite, emergent form should come as no surprise to us, since this is precisely what we see in the “Plowman’s Tale.” As we have seen above, the “Plowman’s Tale” reconsiders and rewrites (or to use Lerer’s term, “rescripts”) crucial elements of the *Canterbury Tales*, while simultaneously performing the role of its famous author. It is, in a sense, exploring the space between Chaucer as a malleable, rescriptable “maker,” and Chaucer as the antique, authoritative “poet” of classical antiquity. But just as the “Plowman’s Tale” attempts to negotiate these two forms of authorship, we can also see it negotiating the boundary between two competing generic systems. One is expressed in the formal characteristics of the poem’s metrical structure, which incorporates the traditional forms of fourteenth-century poetry, including a strong use of alliteration, the tetrametric stanzas of Middle English popular romance, and the refrain of the French *ballade*.⁵³ But these formal elements are deployed in a poem that is simultaneously a medieval debate poem, an anti-ecclesiastical satire, and a Lollard sermon.⁵⁴ The fraught intersection between these generic and formal characteristics mirrors the tension between modes of authorship displayed in the prologue to the “Plowman’s Tale.” In both instances, the “Plowman’s Tale” integrates preexisting, traditional forms (anonymous fourteenth-century authorship and verse forms) with emergent, radical ones (the

“individualized” authorship of the fifteenth century and the Lollard satire and sermon). The result of this combination is a tale that simultaneously asserts an explicit connection to the authorial voice present in the rest of the *Canterbury Tales*, while also subtly calling attention to the very “constructedness” of that voice, daring its audience to read it as if it already were what it dramatically reveals itself to be in the process of becoming.

IV. Rewriting Chaucer: The Counterfactual Imagination

To conclude, we might profitably return to an earlier moment, and to the editor of the 1606 edition of the “Plowman’s Tale,” who insisted, quite forcefully, that his readers refuse the poem’s final retraction, and that they “take it as a tale” instead of a “fable.” It seems like the time is right to take that seventeenth-century editor’s advice, or more precisely, to recollect ourselves to a time when we once did just that. Read as a “tale,” the “Plowman’s Tale” resists both the historical and biographical veracity of the modern Chaucer and also the fabular deauthorization that was the product of its relegation to the ranks of the Chaucerian apocrypha. As a tale, the “Plowman’s Tale” is not the “story” of Chaucer as we now know it, but neither is it an embarrassing and inconvenient “fable” worthy of critical neglect. By exploring apocryphal works like the “Plowman’s Tale” through the audience function of their prior readers, we can rediscover just how much these works had to offer, and recognize the enormous interpretive potential of the more expansive understanding of Chaucer’s authorship at work for these readers.

Indeed, the very openness and incompleteness of the authorship of the blackletter Chaucer, its copious “Chaucer effect,” compelled generations of authors to fill in its gaps, taking part in its productive rescriptability. In light of this, it is perhaps unsurprising to note that even that paragon of editorial selectivity, the Reverend Walter W. Skeat, felt

compelled to dabble in a bit of Chaucerian imitation, composing, along with a number of other pseudo-Middle English poems, a complete Canterbury Tale, “The Deyers Prologue” and “Deyers Tale.”⁵⁵ Skeat’s attempt to add his own voice to the Canterbury pilgrimage places him in a long line of Chaucerian imitators and interpolaters, but the fact that the same man who was responsible—perhaps more so than any other—for “pruning” the Chaucer canon of its “unauthentic” material could also labor in his private hours in the creation of an apocryphal Canterbury Tale demonstrates just how enticing such acts of “rescripting” can be. It might be taken as a sign of Skeat’s editorial success and influence that we would never now mistake his Canterbury Tale for an authentic work of Chaucer’s, but in another sense, Skeat’s Canterbury Tale only works if we forget everything he has taught us. For it to matter, we must read it as if it were really written by Chaucer.⁵⁶ Indeed, Skeat’s composition *demand*s a reader capable of simultaneously imagining that it is—and acknowledging that it isn’t—what it claims to be: another *Tale* in the *Canterbury Tales*. Without the imaginative play of the former, Skeat’s imitative prowess is largely wasted, and his Canterbury Tale becomes a lost, decontextualized piece of poetic dress-up; without the practical recognition of the latter, his skill at imitation undermines the very editorial method he himself developed, which presupposed that one could accurately distinguish the “authentic” works of Chaucer from the “spurious” pieces of apocrypha, and that the difference mattered.

Skeat’s Canterbury Tale should remind us that even one of Chaucer’s strictest editors imagined a reader capable of indulging in a bit of counterfactual imagination. This imaginative reading is also the kind of practice that is required in order to fully engage with the “Plowman’s Tale,” to understand it on its own terms, and to reap the full benefits

of its re-interpretive potential. To take the “Plowman’s Tale” as a tale is to accept that it is—and always has been—a Canterbury Tale, a genre of fiction with a complex history of interpretation and re-interpretation, of admiration, imitation, and exclusion, and one that perseveres only insofar as it is able to inform, to circumscribe and to escape the historical ambit of its long-dead progenitor.

NOTES

¹ It seems helpful to begin with a brief textual history of the “Plowman’s Tale.” The earliest extant copy of the “Plowman’s Tale” is Library of the Univ. of Texas at Austin MS: 8. This manuscript is sixteen folio pages long and was found attached to a 1532 edition of Chaucer’s Works, printed by Thomas Godfrey and edited by William Thynne (STC 5068). The text is written in double columns, and it is probably in a mid-16th-century hand. The differences between this text and other printed editions have led A.S. Irvine to conclude that the Texas manuscript was prepared from a separate, pre-existing manuscript, and not from other printed editions. See A.S. Irvine, “A Manuscript Copy of ‘The Plowman’s Tale,’” *Studies in English* 12 (1932): 27–55. The next edition is Godfrey’s edition, printed in 1535 or 1536. It exists in only one copy, in the Huntington Library, and is missing the first thirty six lines of the poem, which are written in by hand on inserted leaves at the beginning of the book (STC 5009.5). The poem next appears in Thynne’s 2nd edition of Chaucer’s Works, after the “Parson’s Tale” (STC 5069), and appears in every subsequent edition of Chaucer’s works until Tyrwhitt’s 1775 edition. It appears twice again outside of editions of Chaucer’s Works, in a quarto edition printed in 1548 (STC 5100), which ends with the explicit, “Thus endeth the boke of Chaunterburye Tales.” It also appears in a 1606 edition which contains a number of marginal notes and glosses, and which, it has been argued, was edited by Anthony Wotton, and which is the subject of some attention in this paper. For more on the Wotton connection, see n22.

² B.A. Windeatt, “Thomas Tyrwhitt,” in *Editing Chaucer: The Great Tradition* (Norman, OK: Pilgrim Books, 1984), 119.

³ I use the general description of these editions as the “blackletter” editions, even though the distinction between these early editions and the later, “roman” typeface editions of the eighteenth century is not a particularly exact one. For more on this distinction, see Joseph A. Dane, *Who Is Buried in Chaucer’s Tomb?: Studies in the Reception of Chaucer’s Book* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1998), 62–65. Dane takes issue with the neat division between the earlier “blackletter” editions (named for their use of textura, rotunda, and bâlard typefaces) and later editions using the roman typeface. This distinction is often also used to differentiate the “amateur” editions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries from the more “scholarly” and “modern” editions of the eighteenth century. I continue to use the term “blackletter,” when describing these editions, however, for the sake of clarity.

⁴ See Seth Lerer, *Chaucer and His Readers: Imagining the Author in Late-Medieval England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); Peter J. Lucas, *From Author to Audience: John Capgrave and Medieval Publication* (Dublin: University College of Dublin Press, 1997); Ralph Hanna, *Pursuing History: Middle English Manuscripts and Their Texts* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996); Kathleen Forni, “Richard Pynson and the Stigma of the Chaucerian Apocrypha,” *The Chaucer Review* 34, no. 4 (2000): 428–436.

⁵ Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales of Chaucer*, ed. Thomas Tyrwhitt (London, 1775), 1.

⁶ Windeatt, “Thomas Tyrwhitt,” 119.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 184–185, emphasis added.

⁸ See Kathleen Forni, *The Chaucerian Apocrypha: A Counterfeit Canon* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2001), 148.

⁹ Kathy Cawsey, *Twentieth-Century Chaucer Criticism* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011), 6.

¹⁰ Dane notes that although Tyrwhitt began this shift in editorial practice by rejecting the “additive” blackletter editions, the process of pruning Chaucer’s canon of “spurious” works was continued by Skeat with his quantitative tests, *Who Is Buried in Chaucer’s Tomb?: Studies in the Reception of Chaucer’s Book*, 149. See also Forni, *The Chaucerian Apocrypha: A Counterfeit Canon*, 150–164.

¹¹ Russell A. Peck, *Chaucer’s Romaunt of the Rose and Boece, Treatise on the Astrolabe, Equatorie of the Planetis, Lost Works, and Chaucerian Apocrypha* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), 243.

¹² Forni has discussed the particular qualities of the Chaucerian apocrypha that make them different from the apocryphal works of author canonical authors, including their prodigious quantity, *The Chaucerian Apocrypha: A Counterfeit Canon*, 15–20.

¹³ See Lerer, *Chaucer and His Readers*; Stephanie Trigg, *Congenial Souls: Reading Chaucer from Medieval to Postmodern* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2001); Steve Ellis, *Chaucer at Large: The Poet in the Modern Imagination* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000); Candace Barrington, *American Chaucers, The New Middle Ages* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Alice S. Miskimin, *The Renaissance Chaucer* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975).

¹⁴ Alexandra Gillespie, *Print Culture and the Medieval Author: Chaucer, Lydgate, and Their Books, 1473-1557* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 19.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁶ A discussion of the major criticism of the “Plowman’s Tale” must include two seminal works of Andrew N. Wawn, the first on the structure and history of the tale and the second on its connection to religious propaganda, “The Genesis of The Plowman’s Tale,” *Yearbook of English Studies* 2 (1972): 21–40; “Chaucer, The Plowman’s Tale and Reformation Propaganda: The Testimonies of Thomas Godfray and I Playne Piers,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library* 56 (1973): 174–192. Robert Costomiris explores the “Chaucerian” aspects of the “Plowman’s Tale” in “The Yoke of Canon: Chaucerian Aspects of The Plowman’s Tale,” *Philological Quarterly* 71, no. 1992 (n.d.): 185–198. Although his work notes some striking continuities between the “Plowman’s Tale” and the *Canterbury Tales*, he rejects the tale on aesthetic and stylistic grounds. He is particularly critical of the “Plowman’s Tale’s” lack of rhetorical or interpretive complexity, noting that “[t]here are few fine turns of phrase and even fewer of the delicate ambiguities we expect of Chaucer” (194). Costomiris’s conclusion is that Chaucer’s sixteenth-century editors viewed him primarily as a “moral poet with a reformist bent” (195), which explains their inattentiveness to the “delicate ambiguities” that he believes characterize a truly Chaucerian work. More recently, Paul J. Patterson discusses the 1606 edition of the “Plowman’s Tale”—printed separately from Chaucer’s Works—with a particular focus on the religious marginalia and glossing included in the edition, Paul J. Patterson, “Reforming Chaucer: Margins and Religion in an Apocryphal Canterbury Tale,” *Book History* 8 (2005): 11–36.

¹⁷ W.W. Skeat, *The Chaucer Canon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1900), 99.

¹⁸ Wawn, "The Genesis of The Plowman's Tale," 25.

¹⁹ See also Margaret Aston, *Lollards and Reformers: Images and Literacy in Late Medieval England* (London: Hambledon Press, 1984), 228.

²⁰ All citations from "The Plowman's Tale" are taken from J. Dean, "The Plowman's Tale," in *Six Ecclesiastical Satires* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1991). I've chosen to use Dean's edition of the "Plowman's Tale" because it is edited and presented in a way that makes it similar to more regularized editions of Chaucer, particularly the Riverside Chaucer. The impact of such editorial presentation is more important than one might guess, and as scholars of "lesser" Ricardian poets have claimed, editorial practice may be partly responsible for the charges of inferior quality leveled at these poets. This is particularly true in the case of punctuation, which is often left unchanged in some editions of 14th- and 15th-century poetry. For one such argument about the poetry of John Lydgate, see Phillipa Hardman, "Lydgate's Uneasy Syntax," in *John Lydgate: Poetry, Culture, and Lancastrian England*, ed. Larry Scalon and James Simpson (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006). A more recent edition by Mary Rhinelander McCarl presents a much less edited text of the poem (it does not replace virgules with commas, for example), but I have chosen not to use this version, for the reasons stated above, *The Plowman's Tale: The c.1532 and 1606 Editions of a Spurious Canterbury Tale* (New York: Garland, 1997).

²¹ Dane discusses the Retraction at length in his sixth chapter of *Who Is Buried in Chaucer's Tomb?: Studies in the Reception of Chaucer's Book*, 115–135.

²² This association was derived initially from a note in a copy of the 1606 edition found in the Harvard University Library naming Wotton as its editor. For a detailed contextual argument supporting this attribution, see Patterson, "Reforming Chaucer: Margins and Religion in an Apocryphal Canterbury Tale," 27–31.

²³ Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Plough-Mans Tale Shewing by the Doctrine and Liues of the Romish Clergie, That the Pope Is Antichrist and They His Ministers* (London, 1606), quoted in McCarl, *The Plowman's Tale: The c.1532 and 1606 Editions of a Spurious Canterbury Tale*, 86.

²⁴ Gillespie, *Print Culture and the Medieval Author*, 191. The marginal note occurs alongside a discussion of penitential practice in response to venial sin; in particular, it occurs right after a discussion of the role of the "blessynges of byshops and prestes, and other good werkes."

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 194–195.

²⁶ OED, fable, sense 1.a,c,d. The second sense of fable, "a short story devised to convey some useful lesson; esp. one in which animals or inanimate things are the speakers or actors; an apologue," is attested, but less common. See also MED, fable, where the association between fable and falsehood is even stronger. Indeed, the two Chaucerian examples of fable attested each draw specific contrast between the false fable and a true, historical narrative (1.a).

²⁷ Quoted in Jackson Campbell Boswell and Sylvia Wallace Holton, eds., *Chaucer's Fame in England: Stc Chauceriana, 1475-1640* (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2005), 46.

²⁸ See OED, story, which did not come primarily to mean a specifically fictional account until the late seventeenth century; and MED, story (n.1), senses 1 and 4.

²⁹ Lerer, *Chaucer and His Readers*, 151.

³⁰ One can trace out, for example, the shifting attitudes towards Chaucer as author in the printed editions of his works. With each subsequent edition there is a growing accretion of contextualizing apparatuses, including biographies, histories, and glosses. These serve as key indicators of the shift from maker to poet Lerer describes, but my point is to show how the earlier conception of Chaucer as the living, “rescriptable” author of the manuscripts continued to influence early-modern conceptions of Chaucer, and his early blackletter editions.

³¹ See MED, maker, sense 2 and 3. The mechanistic overtones of maker are often noted to distinguish it from the more literary poet. Critics have also noted a temporal difference between the courtly maker of the late fourteenth century, and the late fifteenth and sixteenth century humanist poet. On this point, see Lee Patterson, “‘What Man Artow?’: Authorial Self-Definition in The Tale of Sir Thopas and The Tale of Melibee,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 11 (1989): 117–75. For more discussion of the courtly maker and Ricardian poetry, see Anne Middleton, “The Idea of a Public Poetry in the Reign of Richard II,” *Speculum* 53 (1978): 94–114.

³² MED, avouen, sense 2: to “confirm (a story)” and “to stand by (one’s words).” The OED entry for avouch provides a similar definition.

³³ See, for example, A. Higl, “Printing Power: Selling Lydgate, Gower, and Chaucer,” *Essays in Medieval Studies* 23 (2006): 72.

³⁴ For example of the impulse of late-medieval readers to revise, alter, or as Lerer describes it, to “rescript,” the texts they read, see Barbara Kline, “Scribal Agendas in the Text of Chaucer’s Tales in British Library MS Harley 7333,” in *Rewriting Chaucer: Culture Authority and the Idea of the Authentic Text*, ed. Thomas A. Prendergast and Barbara Kline (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1999), 116–144.

³⁵ Gillespie argues that the “Plowman’s Tale” was not firmly considered a Canterbury Tale even as late as 1550, when it was moved from its terminal position in the 1542 edition of The Works, to its position before the “Parson’s Tale.” She uses as evidence for this the printing of a separate quarto edition of the “Plowman’s Tale” in 1548, but she also notes that this edition is explicitly connected both to Chaucer, and to the *Canterbury Tales*: Geoffrey Chaucer, The Ploumans Tale Compylled by Sir Geffray Chaucher Knyght (London, 1548). This edition ends with the words “Thus endeth the boke of Chaunterburye Tales.” Whatever separation is implied by the separate printing of this edition, the explicit attribution to “Sir Geffray Chaucher Knyght,” and the explicit to the edition, which connects it directly to the *Canterbury Tales* itself, makes clear that there was a strong connection between the “Plowman’s Tale,” Chaucer, and the *Canterbury Tales* at least as early as 1548.

³⁶ The somer season was generally defined as the warmer part of the year, but was often variously dated, and could even begin in what we would consider late spring. The solstitial part of summer was known as mydsommer, and this often occurred toward the end of June. See MED, somer, (n.1).

³⁷ Barbara Hanawalt, *The Ties That Bound: Peasant Families in Medieval England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 126.

³⁸ For the general importance of livestock to peasant farmers, see David Stone, *Decision-Making in Medieval Agriculture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 263.

For the importance of grazing land to animal growth and quality, see James Greig, “Plant Resources,” in *The Countryside of Medieval England*, ed. Greenwille Astill, Annie Grant, and Brian Williams (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), 121.

³⁹ For seasonal fluctuations in grain prices and corresponding supplies, see Elizabeth Gemmill, “Town and Region: The Corn Market in Aberdeen, 1398-1468,” in *Agriculture and Rural Society after the Black Death: Common Themes and Regional Variations*, ed. Ben Dodds and Richard Britnell, vol. 6, Studies in Regional and Local History (Hertfordshire, UK: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2008), 56–73.

⁴⁰ Helen Barr, *The Piers Plowman Tradition: A Critical Edition of Piece the Ploughman’s Crede, Richard the Redeless, Mum and the Sothsegger, and The Crowned King*, Everyman (Rutland, VT: Orion Publishing, 1993), 4.

⁴¹ For a textual history, see Helen Barr’s introduction to *Pierce the Ploughman’s Crede*, *Ibid.*, 8–14.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 61–97.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁴⁴ See Wawn, “The Genesis of The Plowman’s Tale,” 28. Barr also discusses connections between the two poems in her notes on the *Crede*.

⁴⁵ Barr, *The Piers Plowman Tradition*, 10.

⁴⁶ John Lydgate, *The Siege of Thebes*, ed. Robert R. Edwards, TEAMS Middle English Text Series (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2001), 31.

⁴⁷ The word Host (host/hoste/hoost/hooste) appears fifty seven times in the *Canterbury Tales* (in reference to Harry Bailly). Although he is occasionally (ten times) called “sire Hooste” or just “Hoost” by the other pilgrims, in every instance in which the narrator refers to the Host, the pronoun used is “oure.” This quantitative measurement was based on information obtained from the Glossarial DataBase of Middle English (which can be found at <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/g/gloss/>) and which was then verified using *The Riverside Chaucer*. All quotations from the *Canterbury Tales* are also taken from this edition.

⁴⁸ In addition to physical markers such as his sunburned nose, the Plowman’s tattered clothing is an important marker of his social status. As Barbara Hanawalt notes, “For the poorer peasants and wanderers... clothing was often inadequate, and it is instructive that the authors of ‘The Man in the Moon’ and the ‘Song of the Husbandman’ chose to comment on the inadequate clothing of the peasants they depicted.” Hanawalt, *The Ties That Bound: Peasant Families in Medieval England*, 62.

⁴⁹ The specific lines from the “Prologue to the Tale of Sir Thopas” are as follows:

When seyde was al this miracle, every man
As sobre was that wonder was to se,
Til that oure Hooste jopen tho bigan,
And thanne at erst he looked upon me,
And seyde thus: “What man artow?” quod he.

(VII.692-5)

⁵⁰ Patterson, ““What Man Artow?”: Authorial Self-Definition in The Tale of Sir Thopas and The Tale of Melibee,” 118.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 123.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ The rhyme scheme of the “Plowman’s Tale” is similar to that used in the “Monk’s Tale,” and is also very similar to the ballad form. However, there are a number of places where the meter changes throughout the poem. Schematically, the poem can be divided into five sections as follows: 1st section: ll. 1-53 (the Prologue) are eight-line stanzas rhyming a b a b; 2nd section: ll. 53-476 are eight-line stanzas with a final refrain (foule fall) rhyming a b a b c b; ll. 476-700 have the same stanza with a new refrain (thys amende); 3rd section: ll. 717-733 are the same meter as the preceding sections with a new refrain (Hys grace) ; 4th section: ll. 733-1269 (often called the “long interpolation” by critics who believe they were added by a sixteenth-century forger) has the same eight-line stanza as the rest of the poem but lacks a refrain, and has the same rhyme scheme as the Prologue a b a b. Robert Costomiris has also noted that the rhyme scheme of the “Plowman’s Tale,” although it differs from much of the rest of the *Canterbury Tales*, has a peculiar stylistic affinity with the “rym dogeral” of “Thopas” (Costomiris, “The Yoke of Canon,” 191-2).

⁵⁴ For a study of the Middle English debate poem, see Thomas L. Reed, Jr., *Middle English Debate Poetry and the Aesthetics of Irresolution* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1990). For Lollard polemic and sermon, see Anne Hudson, *English Wycliffite Sermons* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983); Anne Hudson, ed., *Selections from English Wycliffite Writings*, MART: The Medieval Academy Reprints for Teaching (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997).

⁵⁵ See James D. Johnson, “Walter W. Skeat’s Canterbury Tale,” *The Chaucer Review* 36, no. 1 (2001): 16–27.

⁵⁶ Skeat imagined that his “Deyers Tale” would follow the “Tale of Gamelyn”—a tale assigned to the Cook in a number of manuscripts and which, ironically enough, is now considered apocryphal. Skeat assigned “Gamelyn” to the Yeoman, which he believed Chaucer intended for inclusion, after revision, in the final version of the *Canterbury Tales*. For a description of Skeat’s methodology in this assignment, see *Ibid.*, 21–22.

CHAPTER 4

“Slydyngge” Diagesis: Chaucerian Film Adaptations

I. Introduction

In the introduction to his exploration of film adaptation, *Film Adaptation and its Discontents*, Thomas Leitch provides a Barthesian summary of the central obstacle facing adaptation criticism:

For half a century and more adaptation study has drastically limited its horizons by insistence on treating source texts as canonical authoritative discourse or readerly works rather than internally persuasive discourse or writerly texts, refusing in consequence to learn what one might have expected to be the primary lesson of film adaptation: that texts remain alive only to the extent that they can be rewritten and that to experience a text in all its power requires each reader to rewrite it.¹

Leitch’s focus on the “writerly” nature of the source text should resonate with the examples we have seen in the previous chapters. Whether it is the “rescriptability” of the Blackletter *Works* or the correspondence of Henryson’s *Testament*, the writerly method of textual engagement is not only the dominant mode of encountering Chaucer, it is indeed central to the “Chaucerian” itself. But film adaptation offers us a particular window into the writerly textual engagement with Chaucer, and as we have seen earlier, with the inherently writerly form of engagement that constitutes the Chaucerian.

On the one hand, film might seem to be one of the unlikeliest candidates for adaptation of a fourteenth-century Middle English poem. The “categorical distinction” between film and the novel was a hallmark of early theorists of film adaptation, and while the assumption of the aesthetic and interpretive primacy of literature is now seriously questioned by many critics, the broader division, “according to which the two media are

essentially different in that the novel is linguistic, conceptual and discursive, while film is primarily visual, perceptual and presentational,” still remains.² However, as we will see in the following two examples of Chaucerian film adaptation—Brian Helgeland’s *A Knight’s Tale* (2001) and Pier Paolo Pasolini’s *The Canterbury Tales* (1972)—the visual and perceptual nature of film does not prevent it from being able to engage with many of the same complex themes we might find in written literature. While the two film adaptations we will explore are separated from their original source text by more than five hundred years, and are separated from each other by almost three decades, both engage with Chaucer in a similar way. Both films explore film auteurship by dramatizing Chaucer’s own authorship on the screen, but each film also explores the multivocality that is one of the hallmark features of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* by deploying the multiple levels of diegesis available to the filmmaker.

For Helgeland, the figure of Chaucer becomes a way of negotiating the tension between his high-art aspirations—before directing *A Knight’s Tale*, Helgeland had received an Academy Award for his screenplay in *L.A. Confidential* (1997)—and the popular and market-driven necessities of big-budget film production. Through his use of explicit anachronism and diegetic playfulness, however, Helgeland manages to recreate an authentically “medieval” anachronism which, very like the anachronism we saw in the first chapter, writes the present over a preexisting past narrative, rather than working within the confines of a limited, fully historicized past. For Pasolini, on the other hand, the figure of Chaucer becomes an ambiguous figure who is at one moment a passive observer of the natural world around him, and the next a playful and mischievous manipulator of other texts, a manipulation that occurs within the diegetic frame of the

film, and external to it, through Pasolini's own alterations of the tale order and inclusion of an original tale.

This diegetic "slydyngge" performs a role similar to the historical slydyngge we saw in the first chapter: it puts what appears to be a fixed, unchangeable past into dialogue with an insistent, mutable present, privileging the latter over the former, and creating the "anachronistic" infidelities so often used to criticize such adaptations. I hope to show in this chapter, though, the ways in which such adaptations, although they may often swerve from the perceived historical zeitgeist constructed by historicist criticism, stay true to the spirit of the other Chaucerian texts we have seen. Indeed, insofar as film speaks with a voice more directly attuned to contemporary necessity, the anachronism present in film adaptations of Chaucer become even more highly Chaucerian than other more "literary" modes could hope to achieve.

II. Setting the Score: Brian Helgeland's A Knight's Tale

Released in the late spring of 2001, Brian Helgeland's *A Knight's Tale* was a big-budget film with a handsome leading man—Heath Ledger—and a rather unlikely backstory.³ Set sometime in the late 14th-century, the film follows Ledger—who plays a well-meaning squire named William Thatcher—through a rags-to-riches tale that wanders from Rouen to London, and which encounters along the way Edward, the Black Prince, the anonymous Summoner and Pardoner from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, and Chaucer himself, played as a rakish gambling addict by Paul Bettany. While the shifted article in the film's title serves as an indication of the fact that this will not be "*The Knight's Tale*," the film was nevertheless taken to task by medievalists for its lack of fidelity to its source text, and for its explicit and unapologetic anachronism.⁴

In her article on the *A Knight's Tale*, Kathleen Forni notes that “for those Chaucerians who anticipated Brian Helgeland's *A Knight's Tale* as a faithful screen version of Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*, the film must surely disappoint” (253).⁵ Forni rightly points out that in the absence of any sustained verbal or narrative connection between the film and its putative source text, the term “adaptation” seems ill-suited to Helgeland's effort. Indeed, if it has a primary literary analogue at all, *A Knight's Tale* is more than likely derived from a short story by George R. R. Martin, “The Hedge Knight,” which first appeared in a collection of short stories from popular fantasy writers in the late 1990s, and which bears a striking resemblance to the narrative of *A Knight's Tale*.⁶

Helgeland's 2001 film follows the basic story of Martin's novella, but it adds to it the struggle between the two suitors that is central to Chaucer's fourteenth-century poem. In it, a peasant squire, William Thatcher, takes over for his dead master, Sir Ector, and goes on to compete in, and to win, jousting tournaments (under the name Sir Ulrich von Lichtenstein), first in order to win fame and fortune and to “change his stars,” later as an effort to pay off the gambling debts of the man whose forged letters of patent allow him to compete in the nobles-only tournaments (a man who just happens to be Geoffrey Chaucer), and finally as a means of competing with a rival suitor for the love of a lady, Jocelyn. After being found out (and outed) by his rival, Count Adhemar, William is put in the stocks, only to be saved by the Black Prince himself (who was impressed by William's willingness to face him in a previous joust). Made a noble on the spot by Prince Edward, William is allowed to compete again (against Adhemar) whom he defeats, winning the hand of his lady, and living happily ever after.

From the moment of its release, Helgeland's film was noted—and often criticized—for its self-consciously anachronistic combinations of temporally localized forms and subjects. But if we consider the doubled source text of the film, Martin's late-twentieth-century novella and Chaucer's late-fourteenth-century poem, we can see that there is perhaps something more complicated in the film than merely “dressing up” a modern story with medieval chausses. Helgeland's film is an “adaptation” of “The Knight's Tale” only insofar as it involves two vaguely “medieval” men fighting for the love of a woman. But while the film does not “adapt” much more of the plot from Chaucer's “Knight's Tale,” nor almost any of the ideological or narrative particularities of Chaucer's fourteenth-century poem, it does create a series of analogies that can help not only to reshape our understanding of the film itself and of our reception to it—both as audience members that inhabit its broadly defined historical “period,” and as scholars of the Middle Ages—but which can also help to illuminate the film's “source” text, and its fourteenth-century author. In particular, I would like to focus on Helgeland's playful use of music and dance in order to blur the “historical” diegesis of the film with the contemporary non-diegetic moment of its observers, and his decision to make Chaucer himself a starring character in the film. I argue that Helgeland uses the blend of diegetic and non-diegetic elements to minimize the historical alienation of a period piece, but also to protect himself, as a kind of ironic prophylactic, against charges of “inauthenticity” or historical inaccuracy. Coupled with this, I argue that Helgeland's choice to dramatize Chaucer, who is portrayed in this film as a bombastic performer and scheming huckster, is a way of slyly referencing his own imagined authorial position, a way of also slipping in some metadiegesis within the rather conventional narrative of the film.

Before analyzing the film, itself, however, it might help to first figure out what to call *A Knight's Tale*, for as I've already noted, in many ways the film can hardly be considered a genuine "adaptation" of "The Knight's Tale" as written by Geoffrey Chaucer. Forni considers the film under the rubric of "literary symbiosis" (a term she borrows from David Cowart), a form of intertextuality that occurs "when the meaning in an original text is affected by its invocation, adaptation or continuation in a later text" (254). Forni refuses to call *A Knight's Tale* a "productive" moment of literary symbiosis, instead claiming that Helgeland's film only succeeds in "transforming a Boethian exploration of human happiness and divine justice into a predictable vulgar myth of fulfillment" (254). One potential generic application would be to consider *A Knight's Tale* as a kind of early example of the remix or the mashup. Like the "literary symbiosis" Forni describes, the mashup creates an interpretive back and forth between the two texts being combined. The literary mashup often combines classical source texts (widely-known and often very popular works of fiction⁷) with more contemporary generic interests. The most famous example of the literary mashup would be *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (Quirk Books, 2009). In this example, the original text of *Pride and Prejudice* is literally spliced together with original sections of writing that make the resulting text fit into the popular, contemporary genre of "Zombie fiction." Like the literary mashup, Helgeland's film takes Chaucer's poem and, after stripping it of much of its historically-determined ideological and narrative content, recombines it with the more popular, contemporary genre of the "80's teen movie," producing the film we know as *A Knight's Tale*.⁸

However, some might point out that the classic literary, video, or musical mashup contains, if not the entirety of the original source text, at least a large portion of it. The most famous examples of video mashups, the popular YouTube creations that take scenes from original films and, through editing, voiceovers, and suggestive music, produce a film preview which completely (and usually comically) alters the original genre of the film. Indeed, video mashups are often accomplished entirely through editing two preexisting texts, with no original material included. It would be hard to argue that there is any original material from Chaucer's "The Knight's Tale" remaining in Helgeland's film (if we assume that the "materiality" of the source text is fourteenth-century iambic pentameter composed in some dialectal form of the language we know as Middle English). Given this fact, the mashup in Helgeland's film comes not from combining the original material and some new or imported material, but from mashing together an interpretation of that source text and a popular contemporary genre (in this case, we see "medievalism" mashed together with the 80s teen film).⁹

Ostensibly, it is this brash mashup of two radically different temporal modes and artistic genres that leads critics like Forni and Barrington to dislike *A Knight's Tale*. But I would like to argue that such criticism has less to do with the failure of the modern adaptation to literally "adapt" its source material to a contemporary historical period and culture, but has more to do with the fact that the critics seem to strongly dislike the culture to which the source text is being adapted. In her essay, Forni goes on to claim that *A Knight's Tale* "fails as a constructive form of literary symbiosis, rewriting Chaucer's Boethian exploration into a vulgar capitalist myth" (254). On the one hand, her critique of *A Knight's Tale* is quite accurate. It does rewrite Chaucer's Boethian tale into

one that reasserts a capitalist ideology of personal success through risk-taking and self-assuredness.¹⁰ Indeed, I would even go so far as to agree with Forni that *A Knight's Tale* is a “vulgar” reassertion of capitalist ideology, insofar as we take the term “vulgar” to mean “common, popular, or widespread.” However, I think it would not be unfair to assume that Forni’s use of the term “vulgar” carries with it more than a whiff of the pejorative, and that her criticism of *A Knight's Tale* rests on more than the fact that it’s not a historically “accurate” recreation of Chaucer’s original text, but that the criticism derives largely from the fact that Forni thinks *A Knight's Tale* is a bad film harboring (or forwarding) a bad ideological message.

Such a blanket assertion is not only unfair to the film, but it’s also unfair to its ostensible literary analogue.¹¹ To assert the idea that *A Knight's Tale* is a “capitalist myth” seems as pointless (or perhaps, more charitably, as pointed) an assertion as the assertion that Chaucer’s “The Knight’s Tale” is a Boethian myth. It’s hard to believe that Forni or other critics of the 2001 film would sincerely assent to the philosophical manipulation displayed by Theseus at the end of Chaucer’s poem. Instead, the point seems to be that Chaucer “explores” Theseus’s oppressively Boethian philosophy and the ideological conclusions that attend to it in “The Knight’s Tale,” while Helgeland simply plops his ideology down without a second thought.

Moreover, critics of the film who focus entirely on its rampant commodification are being drawn away from its more complex and nuanced interventions by the red flag of their own political concerns. Those shocked that a film produced by a major film company, arguably released with a young target audience primarily, and written and directed by an American director, should display continuous traces of the consumer

culture that saturate its historical period are failing to historicize in just the way that they criticize in Helgeland. In his essay on Helgeland's film, George Edmonson proposes that witnessing the fantastic, transhistorical anachronisms of a film like *A Knight's Tale*—the constant reaffirmation that the past and the present are linked in some essential way—is simultaneously wrong and right. It is “wrong” in that it exposes for all to see the historically inaccurate anachronisms underpinning contemporary understandings of the Middle Ages, but that also, in a productive way, the experience of witnessing these anachronistic fantasies “is jarring enough to reveal just how far from timeless those fantasies really are.”¹² Edmonson believes that experiencing the anachronism of a film like *A Knight's Tale* will allow us, as scholars of the Middle Ages, to come fully to grips with “how thoroughly the late-medieval form of life has decayed, and how completely its ruins have become overgrown with our own desires” (152).

I would like to add to Edmonson's observation, however, with the somewhat contradictory observation that in this construction, the past and the present are actually twinned in a kind of transhistorical elision, for we are just as likely to paper over the troubling persistencies of the present with our immediate desires as we are to paper over our difficulties with the past. Indeed, I'd like to argue that medievalist critics of *A Knight's Tale* who fault the film for its capitalist hegemony are performing a kind of strange, neo-Robertsonian reductionism. If the Robertsonian model of criticism privileged the exegetical Middle Ages over all other modes of interpretive textual engagement, the ideological criticism of critics like Forni rests on a similar monochromatic reduction. To see a film like *A Knight's Tale* as a capitalist hymn to

materialistic, meritocratic individualism is at once to see the film as it really is, and simultaneously to miss everything else there is to see about it. It is historicism run amok.

A Knight's Tale is undoubtedly the product of 21st-century America, and as such, it reflects many of the broad cultural trends of this historical moment. But it is also more than *just* an “American” movie. To take a film like *A Knight's Tale* seriously means approaching the film as an artistic object that can offer us, as scholars of the Middle Ages, something worth looking for. I hope to show that doing so will provide some measure of both “sentence” from the film, and perhaps increase the “solaas” that seems to be missing in many of the critical examinations of it.

III. The “Once Contemporary World”: Making Then as Now

One of the most famous scenes in *A Knight's Tale* comes near the beginning of the film. After Sir Ector is discovered dead, William takes his place to compete in the tournament. After the cold open segment in which William, Wat, and Roland discover that Sir Ector has died, the film introduces the audience to the two central elements of the film's plot: the jousting competition and the class limitations that go along with it. Cutting from a medium shot of Roland holding his hands out wide while proclaiming that “You have to be of noble birth to compete [in the tournament],” the camera cuts back to William, kneeling over the dead body of Sir Ector, while hurrying to put on his armor; looking up at his worried colleague, William replies with a glib dichotomy: “A detail. The landscape is food. Do you want to eat or don't you?” The difference between the mere “details” of the social restrictions on jousting highlighted by Roland and the “landscape” of necessity William describes is an important distinction throughout the film, but it is also one that provides an intriguingly metatheatrical valence here.

According to William's construction, the "details" which concern Roland (that only nobles can joust) must give way to the more pressing "landscape" which affects all three of the men in the frame: without the money from the tournament, they will not be able to eat. Such a dichotomy might be said to extend across the film itself, incorporating into it the competing interests of historical and literary fidelity to its fourteenth-century analogue and the financial pressures of artistic production impelled by early twentieth-century film-making. If Roland is asked by William to choose between following the constraints of decorous (and by later implication, legal) behavior and the natural impulses of his body, we might see in the film a similar choice between the constraints of generic and historical decorum and the financial impulses of a profit-driven film industry that understands the financial impossibility of a fully historicized "medieval" film. When Roland responds with resignation, "If the nobles find out who you are, there'll be the devil to pay," William's cheeky grin could be a stand-in for Helgeland as he knowingly flouts the boundaries between an acceptably authentic "medieval" period piece and bubblegum pop cinema. "Then pray that they don't."

It is at this line that we suddenly hear the unmistakable rhythmic stomping and clapping of Queen's rock anthem, "(We Will) We Will Rock You." The scene immediately cuts to an establishing shot of the lists of a joust, and in the background, lining the raised stands for spectators, we can see people clapping and stopping in time to the music. We follow in a tracking shot as two men carry a lance to a knight seated on horseback, all the while, as the opening lyrics to the song blare, the camera is lifted up, panning to the left along the central fence of the lists and revealing a "pop-medieval" landscape. People are lined up along the fence surrounding the tournament grounds. Two

platforms are on the right, with one covered, clearly holding seated nobility, the other with raised stadium-style seating, open to the air with people sitting and standing. In the immediate background to the right a green and gently sloping hill rises up and disappears offscreen, and in the distant background, the crenelated turrets of an ahistorically “medieval” castle. The entire panorama is straight out of central casting, and it reads “medieval” in bold colors. Indeed, without its soundtrack, this scene could have been lifted out of any number of “pop-medieval” films, but with Queen rocking out behind it, in the seemingly extradiagetic space behind or beyond the narrative scope of the film, the scene presents a startling contrast of temporal landscapes and genres.

But then, of course, as the scene holds for a moment on the lists, the stands, the castle in the background and the fans in the seats, the audience is forced to confront an irrefutably obvious fact: as the crowd stomps and claps as one, it’s clear that they are responding to the same music that we in the audience are hearing.¹³ We see three successive midlevel closeups: of armored gauntlets tapping together in time, of an armored gauntlet tapping against a breastplate in time, and then a set of bare hands banging against the wooden railings of the stands in time. As the music continues and the camera cuts to fans clapping and dancing, knights waving to the cheering fans, and a group of overweight, shirtless men, waving steins of beer and gesticulating rowdily, it becomes entirely clear that we are seeing an unmistakably contemporary image of a modern sporting event, complete with hawkers, children in face paint, and, in a short tracking shot, spectators performing “the wave.”

We see a man in a helmet and chestplate, holding a pike, singing along to the music (“We will, we will, rock you!”), his voice is clearly audible above the crowd, and

it's clear again that the music is both *here* and *there* simultaneously, here and now in the theater, and there and then in the unmistakably medieval scene playing out on the screen. As the camera cuts back to the crowd, it tilts left and right while simultaneously panning back and forth and tracking left. The effect places the viewer within the raucous, swirling atmosphere of the joust, blurring the line between the viewer as a passive observer of the event and as an active participant. We cut to images of a man eating a large turkey leg, and happy spectators milling about and dancing. As William and company suddenly reenter the scene, with William now astride Sir Ector's horse and wearing his armor, it's almost impossible to make out the lead actor. For a moment, framed by upright lances in the foreground, and obscured by his armor, we might mistake Heath Ledger for just another knight at the tournament. Almost immediately after entering, Roland reminds William to put down his visor, and Wat notes that they are late. The effect is to again obscure one of the film's main commodities, its star, and to place the audience in the anticipatory position of the crowd. We are waiting for the arrival of our star just as they are awaiting the arrival of their knight. Without this man, the tournament (and the film) can't go on, but for a moment the film seems to take pleasure in delaying the progression of the narrative. If scholarly critics of *A Knight's Tale* are right in identifying the film as a shameless proponent of American consumerist culture,¹⁴ then one way of viewing this non-narrative interlude is as a kind of commercial interruption of the main program.¹⁵ Indeed, the interlude functions like a classic television commercial, displaying an array of happy people enjoying the product being offered, and like many television commercials since the late 1980s, is accompanied not by an original jingle, but by a famous popular song.¹⁶ In this case, I would like to argue, the product being sold is the "Middle Ages"

itself, and like any good ad, it makes its viewers believe that they want what is being sold, and simultaneously believe that what is being sold is something they *already* want (and already know).

A cynical reading of this sequence would, following Forni, point out the immensely reductive result of such a commodification; in a sense, a thousand years of history is distilled into a minute-long commercial. But such criticisms of the film tend to rest on the fundamental assumption that there is something inherently wrong with commodifying a historical period, and that turning the Middle Ages into a product fit for consumption by a twenty-first century consumer audience somehow cheapens (or to use Forni's term, "vulgarizes") both the period being sold and the medium being used to sell it. Again, it would be hard to argue with Forni and other critics that twenty-first-century consumer culture isn't plastered all over Helgeland's film, nor would I argue that such an interpolation of fourteenth- and twenty-first-century elements isn't wildly anachronistic. Instead, I want to argue that for all its anachronism and consumerist triumphalism, this segment (with perhaps the exception of a later dance scene that is equally if not more anachronistic) is perhaps one of the most *pleasurable* scenes in the entire film.

Its pleasure derives, in large part, from the playful mashup of medieval scenery and twentieth-century rock and roll, but it also stems from the unbridled pleasure on display in the scene: the people we see preparing for the tournament are having a lot of fun. Even the bored nobles (who early in the scene are depicted impassively surveying the performance their wealth has ostensibly authorized) are eventually carried away enough by the festivities to clap along with the music. Like any good commercial, Helgeland's sequence creates a tangible space, time, and lifestyle, and then makes the

viewer want to *be* there. While the brash commercialism of such maneuver clearly offends some critics, there is undeniably something attractive about it. Helgeland creates a Middle Ages of freewheeling, happy-go-lucky charm; there is none of the dirty oppressiveness or hyper-religiosity characteristic of many modern stereotypes of the period. It is a Middle Ages that makes the viewer want to come along for the ride, and moreover, one that in a rather surprising gesture of temporal tolerance, asks to viewer to come as they are.

The ideological system underpinning Helgeland's cross-temporal tolerance is a brand of transhistoricism that appears in interviews the director gave after the release of the film. In each, when asked about the blending of fourteenth-century period elements with twentieth-century elements, Helgeland replies with some variation of the following sentiment:

What I always wanted to get across was obviously it's not an epic film, but as far as a period film, I always think that they lose sight of the fact that people don't change, but times change, and all of those anachronisms and post-modern [elements] and music was all to try to get across that 1372 was once a contemporary world, and the people that lived in it didn't think they were old-fashioned. They thought they were living in modern times, and were the hippest, most modern people that ever lived. I think the new stuff is in the spirit of that, but I don't think it changes things one way or another.¹⁷

Helgeland's transhistorical ideology here is clearly circumscribed by the partial and incomplete nature of the medium. But if we focus on the central message, that "people don't change but times change," and recall the anachronistic continuity present in previous medieval and early-modern text we have explored, then we might see that Helgeland's transhistorical reductionism is not really that much of an anachronism.

The idea that "people don't change but times change" found ample expression in the Middle Ages. When Palamon and Arcite bash each other to pieces in "The Knight's

Tale,” they don’t do so with historically accurate Iron Age implements, but “With mighty maces the bones they to-breste” (2611). Some critics might note that while Chaucer and Helgeland both engage in this kind of willful anachronism, Chaucer, unlike Helgeland, displays a more appropriately reverential attitude toward the past, or in Maura Nolan’s terms, that he and his fourteenth-century ilk “tended to stage the primal tension between ‘sameness and difference’ ... with some frequency.”¹⁸ According to Nolan, medieval anachronists were unlike present-day anachronists because they “operated with a concept of the literary work as a privileged aesthetic zone for the encounter of past and present, sameness and difference” (69-70). Setting aside the lack of obvious “difference” staged in a poem like “The Knight’s Tale,”¹⁹ it may at first seem hard to argue that Helgeland’s film engages with the past (or stages the tension between “sameness and difference”) in any meaningful or sustained way, or with its supposed source text, Chaucer’s “The Knight’s Tale.” However, as many critics, including Forni have noted, one of the most surprising and spirited engagements with the past comes in the form of an embodiment of the text’s putative source, the character of Geoffrey Chaucer himself.

Played by Paul Bettany, Chaucer first appears in the film naked and penniless, walking (or “trudging,” as he puts it) down the road where he encounters the trio of William, Wat, and Roland (with William now playing the role of Sir Ulrich von Lichtenstein). Appearing from screen right, we first see Chaucer’s naked backside as he walks between the trio and their wagon, patting the horse’s flank and wishing “good morning” to the three of them. We cut to William’s shocked expression, as he dismounts and says “Hoy, sir!” Cutting back to the naked man, we see him turn around, with the bottom of the screen just barely cutting off at his genitals. The camera cuts again to a low

shot with Chaucer's naked buttocks in the foreground right, and the trio standing in a line looking back at him. "What are you doing?" William asks, and after cutting to a closeup on the naked man, he replies, "Uh, trudging." After the naked man explains what it means "to trudge" with a kind of wearied pedantry, the naked man continues walking down the road, praying "Christ save me from my tribu..." when he is interrupted as he steps on a thorn. Bending over to pick the thorn out of his foot with his teeth, Roland asks him who he is. "*Lilium inter spinas*," he replies, spitting out pieces of thorn. Pausing for a moment, he elaborates, "The lily among the thorns... Geoffrey Chaucer's the name," turning his back he continues down the road, "Writing's the game."²⁰

And thus we are introduced to the "Father of English Poetry." Chaucer's naked insertion into *A Knight's Tale* has received a great deal of critical attention.²¹ Forni, although she's generally critical of the film, feels Chaucer's character is a potentially productive element in the film, succeeding in producing the kind of "literary symbiosis" she feels the film as a whole fails to produce.²² Forni also notes that the inclusion of Chaucer's gambling habit (which is responsible for his nakedness and pennilessness) is an entirely original inclusion. One would think that the "originality" of that moment would only serve further to damn Helgeland's film, as there is absolutely no historical precedent or evidence for its inclusion. However, there is one historically authorized inclusion that I think represents one of the most important and most complex engagements with what medievalist scholars view as the actual, historical Middle Ages: Chaucer's role as a literate functionary.

In the film, Chaucer's inclusion into the narrative occurs not because of his artistic prowess, but because of his technical skill. Indeed, after announcing to William

and company that “writing’s the game,” Chaucer is forced to explain what it means to be a “writer,” a term which is met with the same blank stares that attended to his unceremonious unveiling, and to which Wat (the redheaded comic relief of the trio) responds with a eponymously Cockneyfied, “Wot?” To explain, Chaucer replies that as a writer, he can write, “You know, with ink and parchment.” “For a penny” he explains, “I’ll scribble you anything you want, from summons, decrees, edicts, warrants, patents of nobility.” At this the camera cuts to William, suddenly looking interested. “I’ve even been known to jot down a poem or two if the muse descends,” Chaucer continues. It’s only then that the visibly self-satisfied author announces that “You’ve probably read my book, ‘The Book of the Duchess.’”

The fact that Geoffrey Chaucer identifies himself as a “writer” could be added as one more tidbit on the pile of woefully anachronistic “errors” in the film. Clearly the category of the “writer” as a touring, artistic professional—one able to smugly announce “You’ve probably read my book”—did not exist in any recognizable way in the fourteenth century. But it’s crucial to note that the artistic sense of the writer as one to whom “the muse descends” is *secondary* to the first definition Chaucer provides: the writer as “scrivener,” the writer as someone who can write. Here we see the romantic “writer” reduced to a mere “scribe,” a literate functionary whose ability is put to use by others in exchange for financial compensation. This Chaucer will work for a penny, and the products of his literacy are the interchangeable slips of paper of a bureaucratic system that needs material manifestations of its authority. This is *auctor* as a working subsidiary of true *auctoritee*, and whether intentionally or unintentionally, Helgeland has here hit upon one of the most important “historical” complications of Geoffrey Chaucer: the

Father of English Poetry almost certainly was not the “full-time” poet of the Romantic ideal. Chaucer’s bureaucratic professionalism (and functional poetry), although it is an essential element of his contemporary historicist identity, is not a particularly common element of his popular image. Helgeland’s (re)interpretation of Chaucer as a scribe/functionary first, and a “writer” in the Romantic sense of the word second, paradoxically rehistoricizes and de-authorizes him as the controlling force in the narrative of the film.

This construction makes the “historical” Geoffrey Chaucer—naked, penniless and desperate—subordinate to Helgeland’s fictional construction, William Thatcher, the squire masquerading as the knight, Sir Ulrich. The nature of Geoffrey’s value to the trio of ne’er-do-well’s rests for the moment entirely within his technical ability as a writer, and forger, of patents. As we will soon see, this image of Chaucer as a crafty forger contrasts sharply with Pasolini’s “writerly” Chaucer, perched at his desk, pen in hand, and differs even more strongly from the boasting, performative Chaucer that will later emerge in Helgeland’s film.

As Louise D’Arcens points out, the inversion of authority between the source text and the adaptation is one of the truly remarkable aspects of Helgeland’s film.²³ When the character Geoffrey Chaucer announces late in the film that he “should like to write some of this down,” it becomes clear that *A Knight’s Tale* is not so much an adaptation of “The Knight’s Tale” as it is a *source* for it. We can see then that using this kind of an inversion, Helgeland has Geoffrey Chaucer as an employee of his own artistic creations. The idea that Chaucer based *The Canterbury Tales* on actual encounters with living people is a product of the 19th century, and the biographically-minded criticism of the

period, and isn't something that any serious scholar of Chaucer would forward today. But Helgeland's taste for musty scholarship aside, the way in which he stages this inversion of narrative authority should be of interest to Chaucerians. Through the diegesis of *A Knight's Tale*, Helgeland succeeds in naturalizing the metadiegesis of the *Canterbury Tales*, in a sense, taking Chaucer's I-persona "Chaucer Pilgrim" at his word, and narrating to us a "backstory" of the tales. Like Helgeland's mashup of the diegesis of the historical "Middle Ages" and the non-diegetic rock anthem, this shift in diegesis opens the narrative up to a wider audience. Just as seeing medieval characters stomping along to Queen heralds this as a film that will allow its viewers to "be themselves," the focus on the metadiegesis of the biographical "Chaucer Pilgrim" makes the multivocality so valued in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* a naturalized product, simultaneously minimizing the artistic skill of Chaucer the Poet (who is here shrunk down to nothing more than a kind of skilled chronicler), and increasing the authenticity of the multiple voices present in the tales.

In a sense, Helgeland takes the naïve, artless "Chaucer Pilgrim" at his word, and foregrounds this "Chaucer" at the expense of the clever poet behind the scenes, carefully shaping and crafting his characters with a particular artistic goal in mind. As we will see in the next section, Pasolini pursues a related strategy, eventually revealing the "Chaucer Pilgrim" as the fictional creation of the master poet, and identifying himself rather with Chaucer the individual auteur. The ambiguity central to contemporary critical attitudes toward Chaucer is lost in both of these versions, but before we turn to Pasolini, it's important to recall that although neither of these Chaucers offer the critic the *whole* portrait of the poet, neither are they complete fabrications. Helgeland's Chaucer is drawn

from a portrait that is narrativized by Chaucer himself, and speaks to the 21st-century concerns of Helgeland and his audience. Similarly, the auteur Chaucer Pasolini creates may not be the full picture, and may flatten some of the narrative complexity and multivocality of the *Canterbury Tales*, but he does reflect a historical figure most Chaucerians agree was responsible for creating the *Canterbury Tales*. As we have seen in previous chapters, as well, the portrait of Chaucer selected by a given artist is always a selection of the whole. In reflecting on this selective process, critics may lament not being able to see the fullness of the abundant, scholarly Chaucer, but may also be forced to confront the fact that such a heterogenous figure may make for good scholarship, but bad art.

IV. Stripping Down to Chaucer's Bawdy: Pasolini as Selective Auteur

Pier Paolo Pasolini's film adaptation of *The Canterbury Tales—I racconti di Canterbury* (1972)²⁴—was, and is still, known first and foremost for its direct and controversial representations of sexuality. The film was released in the US in 1980, and was the recipient of one of only three “X” ratings handed out between 1974 and 1990 (when the “X” rating was replaced with “NC17”). The other films to receive the “X” rating were *Inserts* (1974), and Pasolini's third installment in his “Trilogy of Life,” *Arabian Nights* (1980).²⁵ The tension between the discomfort with the explicit sexuality of Pasolini's films and their critical recognition is reflected in two competing news stories on the film's reception at the 1972 Berlin Film Festival. As reported in *The New York Times*, Pasolini's film is given glowing praise after winning the “Golden Bear” at the Festival—“The jury praised the Italian director for the ‘mastery and vitality with which he transposed great literature into the medium of film’”—and then, in a Reuter's

addendum directly following this article, it is reported how audiences at the Festival “booed and whistled when Mr. Pasolini accepted the award.”²⁶

This public gesture of disapproval may find a more developed expression in the Times’ own review of the film, which appeared after it was released in the US, some nine years after Pasolini’s mixed reception in Berlin. In the review, Pasolini is criticized for his method of handling the “bawdily comic” elements of his fourteenth-century source, a method the reviewer described as “show everything possible, short of hard-core porn, embellished with 20th-century kinkiness that are the director’s own obsessions.”²⁷ This focus on the sexually explicit and “bodily” dimensions of Pasolini’s films has tended to overshadow to the other filmic techniques of his works.

Pasolini’s understanding of the nature of film focused on precisely the relationship between film and reality, and also on the discontinuous, fragmentary nature of such narration, and the practical procedures and constraints that surrounded it:

[Pasolini] seeks a semiotic language that may account for the work of the film-*parole*, and not only for cinema as a *langue*, as well as accounting for the transformation of the real into narrative. For Pasolini, it is editing, as it fragments, selects, and links in coordination, that performs this operation, transforming the idea long take of the cinema-*langue* into the film-*parole*. A process of fragmentation, juxtaposition, and deconstruction, epitomized by montage, enacts historicity for cinema: montage interrupts the continuum present of cinema and life, and changes it into the “historical present” of film and death.²⁸

The *Canterbury Tales* offered Pasolini a unique literary vehicle for exploring the “fragmentation” and “juxtaposition” of montaged narratives. More so than even the *Decameron*, which served as the literary analogue for his previous film in what came to be known as his “Trilogy of Life” sequence. The *Canterbury Tales*, owing to the famously unsettled and incomplete status of its constituent narratives, provided Pasolini

with a source text that allowed him to exert a more muscular editorial and authorial role in shaping the dramatic and narrative scheme of his film.

Sadly, critical commentary on Pasolini's editorial and authorial role in *The Canterbury Tales* is often obscured by extensive discussion of the explicitness of the sexuality and the overwhelmingly "bodily" nature of the film. In an article on Pasolini's film, Kathleen Forni discusses the film's critical neglect, and the most obvious reasons for it, noting that "as it is poorly dubbed in English, grainy, avant-garde, and rated X, most [Chaucerians], I believe, have dismissed it as, at best, cartoonish and inaccurate, and, at worst, irreverent and grotesque."²⁹ Forni's criticism of Pasolini's film is much milder than her critique of Helgeland's, but the attitude is still that of a disappointed medievalist forced to confront a reductive example of contemporary "medievalism," one that not only fails on an intellectual and artistic level to be true "to the spirit if not the letter of [its] sources," but also fails on a critical and pedagogical level, by failing to help scholars "to disabuse our students, or, in some cases, our colleagues, of the assumption that Chaucer is primarily memorable for his unrestrained vulgarity" (256). Forni's criticism rests not only on Pasolini's explicit depiction of sex and his use of nudity throughout his film, but it seems more keenly focused on the editorial selection at work in the film. As Forni notes, Pasolini's adaptation of the *Canterbury Tales* focuses exclusively on the fabliaux, a selection that colors the resulting work, not only recasting Chaucer as the "bawdy" poet that earned him such reprobation by squeamish moralists,³⁰ but also creating a medieval world that "is depressing and grotesque, a place where hypocrisy and viciousness reign" and which are not even particularly true to the "spirit" of the fabliaux he so intentionally over-selects:

Copulation in the fabliaux is usually motivated by sexual desire, but in Pasolini the motives of greed, retribution and sheer maliciousness often prevail, and his versions seem to lack both the cheerful amoralism characteristic to the medieval genre and the more profound philosophical implications and complex ironies found in Chaucer's fabliaux. (261-2)

Like Forni's critique of Helgeland's film, this criticism of Pasolini has a doubled edge.

On the one hand, Pasolini is guilty of misrepresenting Chaucer by over-selecting his fabliaux at the expense of his moral and philosophical tales. On the other, Pasolini's use of the fabliaux is overly "depressing," not only doing an injustice to Chaucer, but to the genre itself. There is more than a hint of a personal disappointment in this, and arguably in most scholarly engagements with "medieval" film. In his overview of "medieval movies," David Williams distinguishes the more scholarly questions of "authenticity" with the more personal demands of a taste and expectation, some of which may ask more of a film than it is capable of delivering. Reflecting on the fatalistic conclusion of Siegfried Kracauer that film and history are "at cross-purposes," Williams insists that

before engaging in specific criticism, or coming to such simplistic conclusions, we need to ask just what we expect of a screen version of an ancient poem, or a representation of the past, and to make sure that what we look for is reasonable or even possible. Such questions can have a surprisingly personal edge to them. It is less a matter of asking 'Is it authentic?' than 'what does my Middle Ages look like? What kind of movie can give it me?'³¹

In the case of Pasolini's film, we might instead ask "what does my Chaucer look like?"

Forni and other critics who take Pasolini's film to task for its focus on the fabliaux are surely right that this is not "their" Chaucer—gaunt-cheeked Pasolini certainly doesn't look the part of the portly Chaucer that inhabits the scholarly imagination—nor would any respectable medievalist or Chaucerian recognize Pasolini's film as a responsible or scholarly piece of criticism. But given the fact that *our* Chaucer has dozens of books, articles, scholarly conferences and tenured members of the professoriate behind him, we

may well wonder just what responsibility a filmmaker like Pasolini has in recreating *our* Chaucer in *his* film.

My answer, in case it isn't already obvious, is that Pasolini has no such responsibility. Indeed, in this section of the chapter, I hope to refocus critical attention on another Chaucer, *Pasolini's* Chaucer, a role that Pasolini famously plays himself. However, I will also show that critics of Chaucer—*our* Chaucer—can benefit from examining this alternative character. By comparing this film with Helgeland's treatment of the dramatized character of Chaucer in *A Knight's Tale*, I hope to demonstrate that Pasolini's authorial identification with Chaucer is not just an outgrowth of his critical insistence on the role of the singular author, or filmic *auteur*, but is a more nuanced negotiation between the fragmented pieces of narrative that make up the *Canterbury Tales*. Pasolini's film moves beyond the playful back and forth between a diegetic past and a non-diegetic present which we saw in Helgeland's anachronistic *A Knight's Tale*. Rather, the uncertainty surrounding the role of the frame narration in Pasolini's film unsettles the very notion of a demarcation between diegesis and metadiegesis. This not only makes untangling the individual "tales" from the overall narrative of *The Canterbury Tales* difficult (even for skilled Chaucerians like Forni), but it also provides an interesting analogue for scholarly discussions of Chaucer's eventual plan for the *Tales*, and the role of non-authorial sources in shaping and dictating the presentation and reception of Chaucer's unfinished magnum opus.

Pasolini's Chaucer enters the film without fanfare, and indeed, unless one is familiar with Pasolini already, there is no indication that the film's central authority has just entered the frame. Appearing toward the opening of the film, where we are given a

kind of “General Prologue” in the round as we are briefly shown a selection of the Canterbury pilgrims waiting in an open-air marketplace, Chaucer (Pasolini) suddenly appears framed by the gate leading into the marketplace alongside another pilgrim (the Cook). After the two make a scene of deferring to each other the privilege of going through the gate first, Pasolini is pushed into the Cook by a skittish horse, bumping his nose into the Cook, leading to harsh words, and then an apology. The scene seems strangely out of place, and it’s only later that the scene’s importance becomes apparent, a revelation that shows the complex relationship between the multiple levels of diegesis at work in Pasolini’s film.

The disjointed presentation of the tales in Pasolini’s film makes it difficult to follow the larger frame narrative binding the individual tales together. Forni, for example, claims that, like Pasolini’s earlier film, *The Decameron*, the filmmaker here dispenses with the pilgrimage frame narrative entirely, seeking instead to pursue a narrative that is

elliptical, disjointed, surrealistic and impressionistic, producing an effect of disequilibrium and serving to distance the reader from the text. In contrast to Chaucer’s linear narratives, the film is more like modern poetry; that is, the audience is expected to work, to rise to the auteur’s vision. (257)

Forni’s description of the “disjointed” quality of Pasolini’s narrative is accurate, and the comparison between Pasolini’s expectations of his audience and those of a modernist poet are particularly apt, but although the frame narrative is hard to tease out, the “Pilgrimage to Canterbury” is there in Pasolini’s film, and indeed, continues from the beginning all the way to the end.

What makes this frame narrative hard to decipher, however, is the way in which Pasolini’s choice to play Chaucer himself is reflected in his choices about narrative presentation. We might understand Pasolini’s choices better if we consider first his

medieval predecessor, and explore the various levels of “narration” and diegesis present in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*. We are presented, first and foremost, with the diegetic level of the frame narrative itself, presented through the voice of the narrator. We might call this the “primary” level of diegesis, the baseline from which each other level is derived. Outside of this level of diegesis is what we might call the “metadiagetic” level, the narrative of the narrator, which we are also offered in the opening moments of the *Canterbury Tales*, most famously when the narrator apologizes for presenting the Miller’s “churlish” tale, noting that

M’athynketh that I shal reherce it here.
 And therefore every gentil wight I preye,
 For Goddes love, demeth nat that I seye
 Of yvel entente, but that I moot reherce
 Hir tales alle, be they better or werse,
 Or ells falsen som of my mateere.
 And therefore, whoso list it nat yheere,
 Turne over the leef and chese another tale. (I.3170-77)

This famous section reveals the level of narration occurring along the “metadiegetic” level, the level at which the reader of the tales encounters the world of the narrator, and conversely the world in which the narrator of the tales chooses (or refuses to choose) what he records. Of course this level of narrative depends on the level beneath it, because the narrator’s selective narration must engage with the “actual” pilgrimage which we have just been previously presented. We might consider these two levels operating together as a kind of “paradiagetic” level, the combination of the diegesis of the narrator who participates actively in the pilgrimage, what came to be known, following E. Talbot Donaldson’s work on Chaucerian personae, as “Chaucer the Pilgrim,”³² and the more shadowy voice behind that, the one pulling the strings “above” the narrated pilgrimage, a less embodied voice, often identified as the “narrator” of the *Canterbury Tales*. Below

these voices lie the voices of the narrated “pilgrims,” and through them the “hypodiegetic” narratives of the individual tales.

As anyone who has ever taught an undergraduate course on the *Canterbury Tales* can attest, this makes for a lot of productive confusion and complication. But of course one must also accept that all of these levels of diegesis really dissolve into a single level, the production of “Chaucer the Man” (or “Poet” or “Civil Servant”), the historical figure identified as the artist responsible for the coming-into-being of all the other levels of diegesis. This is the Chaucer who exists within the narrated diegesis of biography, and who all Chaucerians believe existed at one point in the now inaccessibly extra-diegetic space of actual historical occurrence. However, the fact that all the otherS levels of diegesis that appear within the *Canterbury Tales* are simply the fictional creations of this single authorial source in no way limits the potential for perceiving “multivocality” in the tales, and indeed, in identifying voices that would seem to complicate or contradict the presumed ideological expectations and biases of that unitary, authorial source.

This multivocality has been wonderful for Chaucerians and for scholarly studies of Chaucer. As Geoffrey Gust notes, in a collection celebrating the work of legendary Chaucerian E. Talbot Donaldson, this acceptance of Chaucer’s multivocality has created a lasting view of Chaucer and his work that is now

less stable and confined than it ever has been. We not only read the author’s varied personae today, but in fact we freely “read” Chaucer as well. Thus, “Chaucer” is no longer a mere poet and civil servant; “he” is, perhaps, a friend of women, a queer sympathizer, and an eco-friendly versifier. “He” is virtually *anything* we might imagine him to be, so that countless “Chaucers” have been constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed in recent years. More often than not, it is the persona-construct that allows us, if you will, to depict “him” through a range of societal colors and a variety of interpretive shades.³³

The flexibility with which Chaucerians discover new voices within the varied levels of diegesis within the *Canterbury Tales* is truly remarkable, but of course, most Chaucerians also always recognize, even if only implicitly, that these multiple voices are all creations, either direct or indirect, of that single, authorial voice, the “historical” Chaucer. Contrary to the arguments about Pasolini’s “abandonment” of the frame narrative, the film version of the *Canterbury Tales* does not dispense with the multivocality of its fourteenth-century analogue entirely. Instead, Pasolini simply films the fiction of that multivocality through the diegetic frame of the unitary authorial voice. What we see in Pasolini’s film is a representation of the “historical” Chaucer, a man who creates the other voice around him, even as he presents these voices to his audience as naturalized and unmediated representations of actual individuals.

To see this in action we can return to the scene of the “General Prologue” that starts the film. After we see the montage of the various pilgrims, we cut to a scene within the Tabard Inn. There, an emaciated Harry Bailly presents the pilgrims with heaping trays of food and invites them to engage in a tale-telling game, as the trip to Canterbury might be “dreadfully dull.” This scene cuts immediately into the “Merchant’s Tale,” and it is only once the audience recognizes January’s long-winded justification for getting married that the shift between the diegetic and hypodiegetic narration becomes clear. The hypodiegesis continues unbroken from the “Merchant’s Tale” to the “Friar’s Tale,” which itself includes a long introductory narrative of Pasolini’s invention that includes a corrupt Summoner extorting two homosexual men—one wealthy enough to pay him off, the other unable to do so—who is then burned on a griddle, all while a character who has been watching the whole narrative from behind the scenes sells “griddle cakes” to the

spectators who watch the execution. This character “behind the scenes” is played by actor Franco Citti, famous for also playing Oedipus in Pasolini’s *Oedipus Rex*. The hypodiegetic interlude ends after the mysterious watcher, who turns out to be the devil from the “Friar’s Tale,” leads the corrupt summoner off to hell.

The narrative then cuts back unannounced to what seems to be the inside of another inn. There, the pilgrims are arranged in a circle, either lying in beds or on mats on the floor, and it is unclear whether they are still at the Tabard, and not yet on their way to Canterbury, or are resting at another inn, weary from their journey. Pasolini, playing the role of Chaucer the Pilgrim, sits up on a cot, removes a pen from a bound collection, and dips it into an inkwell ingeniously attached to the top of his walking stick. He proceeds to write in an open book, which the camera cuts to observe, and below the already written words, “Appunti per un libro sui racconti dei Pellegrini verso Canterbury” [Notes for a book on the stories of pilgrims going to Canterbury] we see Pasolini’s hand writing “Rocconto del Cuoco” [The Cook’s Tale]. This scene seems to return us to the diegetic baseline of “Chaucer the Pilgrim,” but insofar as it reveals this character taking “notes” that will become “un libro sui racconti dei Pellegrini verso Canterbury,” we are also offered a glimpse of the metadiegetic level as well. Indeed, this scene raises an important question, one that is all the more pressing because Pasolini does *not* give us the direct narration of the hypodiegesis of the individual tales: are we supposed to understand this scene as depicting Chaucer the Pilgrim taking “notes” on a tale that he has already heard—the narrative that will become the hypodiegetic “Cook’s Tale”—or is this scene meant to represent the blurring of the metadiegetic and the diegetic levels, what I’ve called the “paradiegesis” of the *Canterbury Tales*?

The “Cook’s Tale” which follows is one of the most original creations of the film, and as Forni discusses, in this Pasolini has plenty of medieval and early-modern company. There were numerous “completions” of the “Cook’s Tale,” and Pasolini’s version follows suit by continuing the exploits of Perkyn the Revelour, who is in Pasolini’s treatment made into a Charlie Chaplin-esque figure, played by Pasolini’s former lover, Ninetto Davoli. The “Cook’s Tale” is not only one of the most jovial and good-spirited sections of the film, displaying none of the “darkness” that critics have identified as being the overall tone of Pasolini’s *Canterbury Tales*, the “Cook’s Tale” is also one of the first of its assertively “authorial” moments, here, “where we first see Chaucer in the act of writing, is a celebration of this sense of artistic freedom, given that Pasolini (who himself plays the Chaucer figure in the film) here makes his lengthiest interpolation into the original.”³⁴ At the end of the “Cook’s Tale,” we once again return to Pasolini as Chaucer, but here, we no longer see Chaucer in the diegetic space of the pilgrimage, but instead we are presented with Chaucer sitting at a desk in a brightly-lit room surrounded by books. Leaning over a pile of books on the floor, we see the character reading and laughing, and after cutting to a close up, we can see the title of the book that Chaucer finds so amusing, “Il Decameron.”

The joke is on us, of course. In this moment, the multiple levels of diegesis collapse into a single level. Just as we saw in the previous chapter, where the anonymous author of the *Plowman’s Tale* collapses the authorial identity into a single source that swallows up all the various possible authorial identities, this scene presents us with Geoffrey Chaucer, who we had witnessed in an earlier scene as the author/character known to Chaucerians as “Chaucer the Pilgrim,” but who is here, removed from the

diegetic space of the Canterbury pilgrimage, secluded in a book-filled study, more clearly a reflection of Chaucer the “Author” or “Poet.” We see this figure reading the *Decameron*, the literary predecessor of his magnum opus, which he is clearly in the process of writing, and laughing hysterically. But of course at the same time that we are seeing the conflation of the diegetic and metadiegetic author (Chaucer the Pilgrim/Poet) we are also aware that we are seeing Pier Paolo Pasolini, the director of *The Canterbury Tales*, who, having just finished a film adaptation of *Il Decameron*, is laughing along with us, the audience, who he expects to be in on the joke. The visual pun of having Chaucer/Pasolini reading the *Decameron* not only rewards the knowledgeable reader/viewer, but it also pushes the observer to reconsider previous scenes. The visual reference to the *Decameron* not only reminds the viewer that the performer we are watching is also the director of the film, a director who is self-referentially pointing to his own prior work, but we are also, more profoundly, confronted with a symbol of the dependent authority that lies behind the scenes of this film.³⁵ We are forced to recall, if we had ever forgotten, that the literary source-text for the film currently underway was itself dependent on a prior work, and that it was not, despite the explicitly naturalized description given us in the General Prologue, an act of mimetic representation.

The mimetic pretensions of the General Prologue are here punctured by the diegetic realities of the author/filmmaker, both of whom are being played with (and by) Pasolini’s characteristically parodic realism. Rather than slipping into the comfortable fiction that we are being told the story of stories actually told on an actual pilgrimage, we are instead shown the “man behind the mask(s),” sitting in his study, observing nothing more than the words of other writers. The medieval scholar may take issue with the tone

of this newly revealed metadiegesis—particularly the moment when the napping Chaucer is rudely awoken by his scold of a wife—but the message is undeniable to any save those who would remain adherents to the antiquated notion of an “auto-biographical” basis for the Canterbury pilgrimage and its pilgrims. Pasolini reminds his audience that the Canterbury pilgrimage is really nothing but an elaborate put-on, even if the author expects the audience to be in on the illusion. It’s really nothing but Chaucer all the way down, no matter how much scholars may credit the “multivocality” of the various pilgrims. Chaucer may have been an incredibly successful literary ventriloquist, but it’s still his hand moving the puppets’ mouths.

This unmasking may seem hopelessly reductive to any scholar trained in detecting and interpreting the multiple strains of competing discourse at work in a text as complex as “The Wife of Bath’s Prologue.” Indeed, I argue that this, more than the overwhelming sexuality, is what so offends medievalists who approach Pasolini’s film. Pasolini’s Chaucer is resolutely the creation of Pier Paolo Pasolini, and as result, is not in any way *our* Chaucer, the haltingly ambiguous weaver of uncertainty always ducking just out of the view of our scholarly gaze. Pasolini’s Chaucer is right there, writing the *Canterbury Tales* in his study, even penning a helpful explanatory endnote to the whole affair. After we are given the final scene of the Canterbury pilgrims standing before Canterbury Cathedral, a scene which is preceded by a grotesquely irreverent interlude depicting the corrupt Friar from the “Summoner’s Tale” being led through a Boschian hell, complete with a devil’s ass spitting out furry friars, we see Chaucer sitting at his desk, thinking pensively and smiling. The camera cuts to his book, again, and we can see written there, “Qui finiscono i Racconti di Canterbury raccontati per il solo piacere di raccontare.

Amen.” [Here ends the *Canterbury Tales*, told solely for the pleasure of telling.] This ending reveals that for all the dark imagery, we are pushed at this moment to believe that Pasolini’s *Canterbury Tales* is really all *solas*. What’s missing is the ambiguity so characteristic of the scholarly Chaucer. This unitary vision is characteristic of Pasolini’s view of film, and artistic production in general, but it is not a view that is alien to scholarly interpretations of Chaucer. Pasolini’s *Canterbury Tales* locates its authorial center in the metadiegetic “Chaucer” who is constructing the tales, not the “Chaucer Pilgrim” or narrator who we witness through that collection. As a unitary figure, we are led to believe that the key to understanding the narrative object that is the *Canterbury Tales* lies not in understanding the various strains of discourse brought together therein, but rather to understand the single authorial identity that brought them together in the first place.

This focus on the singular voice of the author fits Pasolini’s self-identification as an *auteur* filmmaker, but it does not match the critical movement away from autobiographical criticism that ushered in the era of “modern” Chaucer criticism, and it opens the film up to the criticism that it is more about Pasolini than it is about Chaucer or the Middle Ages, “a narcissistic escape into the shock of scatology and sexual organs.”³⁶ However, I hope that I’ve shown how Pasolini’s presentation of diegesis in the film is a more self-aware and nuanced exploration of the relationship between the “Chaucer Pilgrim” and his flesh and blood creator than the charges of “narcissism” allow. Pasolini’s *Canterbury Tales* is absolutely a film about Pasolini, but it is also a film about sex and repression, and about Pasolini’s steadfast opposition to what he believed were the corrupting influences of bourgeois consumerism.³⁷ Pasolini’s choice to use the

Canterbury Tales and the figure of Chaucer to tell a story about himself and the world around him is telling, and is largely dependent on the authorial identity that Chaucer himself created. Pasolini doesn't play Boccaccio in his adaptation of the *Decameron*, and indeed, his film adaptation of the *Decameron* dispenses with the frame narrative entirely. However, in his *Canterbury Tales*, the figure of Chaucer is too appealing to pass up. In a strange twist, it may well have been the view of Chaucer as an "open, multivocal" narrator, one who could be inhabited by a number of different social positions, which allowed Pasolini to imagine himself as Chaucer, and to create the more closed, individual, auteur Chaucer. If Helgeland's Chaucer is the pandering performer, the Chaucer who pulls in an audience by giving them whatever it is they want, Pasolini's Chaucer is the secluded auteur, writing for himself, and demanding an audience that comes to him on his own terms.

Like Helgeland's Chaucer, Pasolini's Chaucer speaks to a particular filmmaker in his particular historical moment, and although Pasolini was also criticized for his overly personal and "anachronistic" approach to Chaucer, both efforts to "rewrite" Chaucer represent not only an authentically medieval modes of textual engagement, but as I have been arguing throughout this project, each also represents a more authentic form of "reading" Chaucer. To read Chaucer solely as he *was* is to miss completely what it is to be Chaucerian, and robs Chaucer's works of the ability to mean continuously into an ever-expanding present. By putting the past and present into dialogue, authors like Helgeland and Pasolini not only create meaningful works of art that speak to their present moment, they also reinscribe the continuously changing understanding of Chaucer that

together form the Chaucerian itself, a shifting understanding that should be of interest to those who work to study this author and his lasting creations.

NOTES

¹ Thomas Leitch, *Film Adaptation and Its Discontents: From Gone with the Wind to The Passion of the Christ* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 12.

² Mireia Aragay, "Reflection to Refraction: Adaptations Studies Then and Now," in *Books in Motion: Adaptation, Intertextuality, Authorship* (New York: Rodopi, 2005), 12–13.

³ See IMDb entry for *A Knight's Tale*, imdb.com.

⁴ Recent scholarly articles on Helgeland's *A Knight's Tale* include, Kathleen Forni, "Reinventing Chaucer: Helgeland's *A Knight's Tale*," *The Chaucer Review* 37, no. 3 (2003): 253–264; Candace Barrington, "Fightin' and Rockin' with Geoff," in *American Chaucers* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Louise D'Arcens, "Deconstruction and the Medieval Indefinite Article: The Undecidable Medievalism of Brian Helgeland's *A Knight's Tale*," *Parergon* 25, no. 2 (2008): 80–98; Helen Dell, "Past, Present, Future Perfect: Paradigms of History in Medievalism Studies," *Parergon* 25, no. 2 (2008): 58–79; David Matthews, "What the Trumpet Solo Tells Us: A Response," *Parergon* 25, no. 2 (2008): 119–127; Stephanie Trigg, "Medievalism and Convergence Culture: Researching the Middle Ages for Fiction and Film," *Parergon* 25, no. 2 (2008): 99–118; George Edmondson, "Naked Chaucer," in *The Post-Historical Middle Ages*, ed. Elizabeth Scala and Sylvia Federico (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); David Matthews, "Chaucer's American Accent," *American Literary History* 22, no. 4 (2010): 758–769.

⁵ Forni, "Reinventing Chaucer."

⁶ George R.R. Martin, "The Hedge Knight," in *Stories by the Masters of Modern Fantasy* (New York: Tor Books, 1998).

⁷ They are also usually works of fiction that have moved into the public domain, thereby preventing lawsuits from angry authors with claims of copyright infringement.

⁸ For the characterization of *A Knight's Tale* as fitting this generic category, see Barrington's *American Chaucers*, 145, which cites a 2001 review by Elvis Mitchell of *The New York Times*.

⁹ See Barrington, *American Chaucers*, for a discussion of *A Knight's Tale* and the "80s teen flick."

¹⁰ See *Ibid.*, for the connection between Helgeland's *A Knight's Tale* and late twentieth-century "edgework" or risktaking.

¹¹ Louise D'Arcens points out that Forni's critique of *A Knight's Tale* simultaneously condemns the film for not seriously engaging with "The Knight's Tale," and then criticizes it for not meeting the standards of Chaucer's analogue. I hope to show that the "standards" to which critics like Forni hold the film are as unrealistic if applied to Chaucer as they are if applied to Helgeland.

¹² Edmondson, "Naked Chaucer," 152.

¹³ For a description of the diegesis of the moment, see David Matthews, "What the Trumpet Solo Tells Us." Matthews argues that the moment when the audience realizes that the apparently non-diegetic music (Queen) is actually part of the diegesis of the film occurs when the trumpet players lower their trumpets and the music abruptly stops. This

clearly cements the idea, but as I argue here and later, I think the diageitic quality of the music exists prior to this point, even as early as the first establishing shot of the lists.

¹⁴ See for example Forni, “Reinventing Chaucer,” and Barrington, “Fightin’ and Rockin’ with Geoff.”

¹⁵ For a history of the television commercial, see William M. O’Barr, “The Rise and Fall of the TV Commercial,” *Advertising & Society Review* 11, no. 2 (2010).

¹⁶ For a discussion of the use of popular music in advertising and the death of the advertising jingle, see David Allen, “An Essay on Popular Music in Advertising: The Bankruptcy of Culture of the Marriage of Art and Commerce?,” *Advertising & Society Review* 6, no. 1 (2005); Valerie Block, “Death of the Advertising Jingle: How Pop Music Licensing Is Killing an Old Craft,” *AdvertisingAge* (2003), <http://adage.com/article/news/death-advertising-jingle/36741>.

¹⁷ Brian Helgeland, Interview with IGN Movies, October 13, 2005, <http://dvd.ign.com/articles/658/658341p1.html>.

¹⁸ Maura Nolan, “Historicism after Historicism,” in *The Post-Historical Middle Ages* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

¹⁹ Short of an Iron Age storyline and Greek names, I would argue it’s hard to find any kind of genuine engagement with the “past-as-past” in the poem, and that it’s a thoroughly “modern” (i.e. 14th-century) poem directed at a 14th-century audience.

²⁰ For a discussion of medieval concepts of “play” and “game,” see Laura Kendrick, “Games Medievalists Play: How to Make Earnest of Game and Still Enjoy It,” *New Literary History* 40, no. 1 (2009): 43–61. On the one hand, Geoffrey’s description of writing as his “game” is merely the idiomatic rhyming second half of a cliché turn of phrase (“_____’s the name, and _____’s the game”), but the connection between “work” and “game” is a particularly loaded one in the context of the *Canterbury Tales*, not only because of the commercial connections between the tale-telling enterprise and the financial success of its organizer (we can recall that Harry Baily offers a meal paid for by all the other pilgrims at his inn as the reward for the competition—a reward that of course benefits him as well), but also because of the specific criteria for judging the winner: the measure of “sentence and solas” that will determine the best tale(s) on the pilgrimage combine the sense of “work and play” into a single standard. In this sense, again, whether intentionally or not, Helgeland has placed his finger on a crucial concept in the literary work that serves as his intertextual analogue.

²¹ See, for example, Forni, “Reinventing Chaucer”; Barrington, “Fightin’ and Rockin’ with Geoff”; Edmondson, “Naked Chaucer”; David Matthews, “What the Trumpet Solo Tells Us.”

²² Forni, “Reinventing Chaucer,” 258.

²³ D’Arcens, “Deconstruction and the Medieval Indefinite Article: The Undecidable Medievalism of Brian Helgeland’s A Knight’s Tale.”

²⁴ Pier Paolo Pasolini, *The Canterbury Tales* (Aidart Distribution Company, 1980).

²⁵ Kevin S. Sandler, “Showgirls and the Fate of the X/NC17 Rating,” *Cinema Journal* 40, no. 3 (2001): 69–93.

²⁶ “Passolini Booed,” *The New York Times*, July 5, 1972.

²⁷ Victor Canby, “Caterbury Tales: Chaucer à la Pasolini,” *The New York Times*, May 30, 1980.

²⁸ Giuliana Bruno, "Heresies: The Body of Pasolini's Semiotics," *Cinema Journal* 30, no. 3 (1991): 34.

²⁹ Kathleen Forni, "A 'Cinema of Poetry': What Pasolini Did to Chaucer's Canterbury Tales," *Literature Film Quarterly* 30, no. 4 (2002): 256.

³⁰ For an analysis of the cognitive dissonance produced by critical attempts to reconcile Chaucer as both "the Father of English Poetry" and a "lecherous old man," see Donald C. Green, "Chaucer as Nuditarian: The Erotic as a Critical Problem," *Pacific Coast Philology* 18 (1983): 58–69.

³¹ David Williams, "Medieval Movies," *Yearbook of English Studies* 20 (1990): 3.

³² Geoffrey W. Gust, "Chaucer the Pilgrim," *The Chaucer Review* 41 (2007): 311–323.

³³ *Ibid.*, 321.

³⁴ Ellis, *Chaucer at Large: The Poet in the Modern Imagination*, 126.

³⁵ The "Chaplin-esque" "Cook's Tale" that precedes this moment also reminds the viewer that Pasolini is also working within a tradition of auteur director-performers.

³⁶ Forni, "A 'Cinema of Poetry': What Pasolini Did to Chaucer's Canterbury Tales," 262.

³⁷ Pasolini famously renounced his film, along with the rest of his "Trilogy of Life," as examples of sexuality co-opted by the bourgeois. One can see in this rejection a sign of Pasolini's steadfast commitment to the ideological message of his art, but one could also possibly see a strong commitment to the roles he inhabited in the films, particularly the middle film. What could be more Chaucerian than rejecting your work as ideologically unfulfilling? See Patrick Allen Rumble, *Allegories of Contamination: Pier Paolo Pasolini's "Trilogy of Life"* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996).

CONCLUSION

As the preceding chapters have shown, Chaucer's afterlife was as vibrant and productive a period as his own living history. The creation of the Chaucerian was a synthetic process that involved the interplay between an original writer and his successive writer/interpreters. Without Chaucer's successors, there would be no Chaucer as we know him, but while Chaucer's critical and artistic afterlives have been the focus of this study, it might be worthwhile in closing to also consider his pedagogical afterlife, for the schoolhouse Chaucer is both a reflection and a refraction of the critical and artistic views of his authorship. Indeed, the modern Chaucer emerged in part from late nineteenth-century efforts to move Chaucer into the classroom, and the construction of the contemporary Chaucer canon is itself a product of efforts to edit and regularize a body of works that could make Chaucer approachable to a student audience.

However, Chaucer's pedagogical life has narrowed along with the historical period into which he has been cast. It is increasingly rare to find Chaucer in the secondary-school curriculum, and indeed, his eventual banishment from the undergraduate curriculum is not altogether unimaginable. This retrenchment may be a symptom of a broader reduction in the scope and influence of the humanities, and of English literature in particular, and the threat to Chaucer may seem simultaneously overblown and inconsiderate to those who work primarily with less canonical medieval authors, but nevertheless, the reality is that canonicity alone is no bulwark when the canon itself is uncertain. Having witnessed some sliver of the creation of the canonical Chaucer in the previous chapters, it should be clear that Chaucer's elevation to his present status was not solely the inevitable result of his innate genius. Rather, it was a

negotiation between a dead author and his living successors, who, like himself, wrote *of* and *as* the past, but never *to* the past.

For educators, walking the line between a commitment to the reality of the past and its unmediated pastness and the necessity of serving the needs of the present is an enormously challenging but also enormously productive endeavor. One need only search YouTube for “Canterbury Tales rap” in order to find earnest, and often insightful, efforts to make poetry written by a man who has been dead for more than six hundred years seem relevant and engaging to individuals who may have never heard his name before. Such efforts, for all their anachronistic inexactitude, engage with the very back-and-forth between present and past that lies at the heart of the Chaucerian. But as the time between then and now increases, we must Criseyde-like confront the fundamental reality that we witnessed in the opening proem to Book II of Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*. Let enough time pass, and even the most well-wrought words will become “wonder nyce and straunge.” For teachers of Chaucer, this reality is an inescapable fact etched onto the face of every new student during that first encounter with the alien phonology of “Whan that Aprill...” There are worse things, though, than “wonder nyce and straunge.” Indeed, the “strangeness” of the Middle Ages has long been one of its chief selling points. However, strangeness depends on the fundamental equality of divergence. If we insist on the bare factuality of the past, that strangeness can only be the reminder of our own disappointing presentness, the revelation that we remain stubbornly unconverted to our particular period of study, and that we have yet to understand the past as purely itself. If we embrace anachronism as a productive mode of engaging with the past, however, we can see that our presentness not only belongs in the past, it is the *only* way in which we can ever

authentically engage with it. Recognizing historical difference requires recognizing that which is other in ourselves, and accepting that difference as a productive tool of engagement.

Finally, a consideration of the pedagogical Chaucer will confront the troubled pedagogy of present scholarship itself, and of the ways in which we as critics alienate ourselves from each other by struggling to render the past less alien. The increasing historical specialization of the discipline has meant that each individual critic, if she or he is to communicate in any meaningful way with another critic outside her or his particular historical period, must become a kind of eternal pedagogue. However, what seems like pedagogy between individuals of differing status and erudition quickly becomes pedantry when the two individuals involved are equals. Moreover, the requirements of rigorous historicist scholarship leave little time for external pursuits: one's own little plot of history has more than enough in it to take up all the time one has. Calls for interdisciplinary communication seem somewhat utopian when discussions between individuals in chronologically contiguous periods can seem foreign encounters. Worse than the cross-period alienation, however, are the ways in which a focus on historical detail and "rigorousness" can empower pedantry at the expense of mutually-supportive and productive criticism. Specialization might separate two individuals in different periods, but within a given disciplinary episteme, individuals are often expected to know just about any tidbit of historical knowledge. Indeed, those who omit such a tidbit can be assured that their ignorance will be pointed out to them by those not so unfortunate.

An acknowledgement of the role that anachronism plays not only in the historical development of the Chaucerian, but in its methodological application as well, would help

to turn such critiques in a more productive direction. By reducing the inherent epistemic value of each and every fact of historical context, simply observing the absence of history would no longer suffice as a productive act of criticism. Indeed, embracing the full implications of anachronistic criticism would make the potential epistemic period so infinitely vast—anything and everything becomes immediately “contemporary”—that the pretense to comprehensive knowledge would dissolve in the face of the simple realities of scale.

Whether such potential shifts are possible, likely, or even broadly advisable, I have endeavored through my project to explore how a canonical author situated firmly within a historical period can be reshaped and reconsidered by an examination of the textual manifestations of his work that extend beyond the boundaries of his recognized historical period. Whatever the value of such a project may prove to be, I hope at the very least that it has stimulated the reader to consider other ways in which thinking about the past can be accomplished. If we would not, Troilus-like, expect our works to contribute to an everlasting monument of meaning, we must instead concede that we, like Criseyde, are free to change what we witness as we confront the contingent necessities of the present, but that we must then also be free, like Criseyde, to be changed by it.

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