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Language and Morality After Ockham:
A Study of Chaucer's Engagement with Themes in Jean de Meun

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Abstract

William of Ockham's (1285-1349) influence on medieval philosophy has been generally acknowledged. Little, however, has been written on the possibility that his work had an effect on the arts. His radical reversal of traditional epistemology and ontology raised new questions which had great implications for poetry. This study seeks to establish the extent of his influence on one poet, Geoffrey Chaucer (c.1345-1400), by examining Chaucer's engagement with Jean de Meun (c.1232-1305) on the theme of language and morality.

L'influence de Guillaume d'Occam (1285-1349) sur la philosophie médiévale a été reconnue, mais il y a très peu d'écrits sur l'effet que son travail a eu sur les arts. Son renversement de l'épistémologie et l'ontologie traditionnelles a créé des questions nouvelles avec des implications importantes pour la poésie. Cette étude cherche à établir le degré de son influence sur le poète Geoffrey Chaucer (c.1345-1400), en examinant son engagement avec Jean de Meun (c.1232-1305) sur le thème de la langue et de la moralité.

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INTRODUCTION

In "Lak of Stedfastnesse", Chaucer writes that

Somtyme the world was so stedfast and stable

That mannes word was obligacioun,

And now it is so fals and deceivable

That word and deed, as in conclusioun,

Ben nothing lyk

(1-5).[1]

In its most immediate sense, this passage contrasts a former golden age where people

kept their word with his own contemporary era where they do not. Expanding on

Boethius' notion of the bond of Love (*Consolation* 2.m.8), however, Chaucer makes an

interesting addition in that language is the scale by which to gauge the change that has

occurred. He construes the difference in terms of the golden age when the word was a

bond with the modern world where words have no resemblance to what they are

supposed to signify. In other words what marks the difference between now and then

is the weakening of the connection between sign and signified.

Language fascinated Chaucer. This is nothing new for a poet, but Chaucer's

concern with language differs from his predecessors. He is much more wary of its

power than, for instance, Dante or Jean de Meun. He is less sure of his own ability as

a poet to control his texts, and his opus abounds in examples of language straying from

a speaker's intentions or of plots taking on a life of their own independent of the

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[1]All references are from *The Riverside Chaucer*. Ed. Larry D. Benson. 3rd ed. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987.

plotter's will. He also tends to blame his language itself if his message is

misinterpreted. This contrasts him with de Meun who blames the readers, who must

be "evil-minded" if they do not understand his work correctly (*Romance of the Rose*

70.9).

In the coming chapters I will argue that the erosion of poetic confidence in the

fourteenth century was sparked by the work and influence of William of Ockham and

his reversal of the traditional epistemology and ontology. I should preface the

following remarks by saying that I am certain that Chaucer was not primarily interested

in the medieval debate between realism and what Gordon Leff has termed Ockhamism

(to distinguish it from Nominalism proper) (1976, 12). What did interest Chaucer was

the fallout from these debates which included, among other topics, discussions of

freewill and divine foreknowledge. Additionally, while allegory has been shown to

rely on a realist approach to language,[2] little has been written on the possibility that

allegory's demise in popularity in the fourteenth century was to a large extent due to

Ockham's attacks at the foundations of realism.

Ockham's impact on poetry is also visible in Chaucer's continuation of the

debate on the relation of language and morality. The question of the relation between

language and morality was prominent in the middle ages. Alain de Lille (1125/30-

1203) made it the subject of his *Complaint of Nature* and, as I will argue, Jean de

Meun's (c.1232-1305) continuation of Guillaume de Lorris' *Roman de la Rose* is a

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[2]See Maureen Quilligan's *The Language of Allegory* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1979) and Rodney Delasanta's "Chaucer and the Problem of the Universal," (*Mediaevalia* 9 (1986): 145-63).

response to de Lille's text. When Chaucer enters the debate it is after the Ockhamists had shaken his generation's faith in the reality of the universal and, consequently, in the efficacy of secular allegory. A host of new questions appear as a result of this insecurity; questions which are dealt with in the *Canterbury Tales*. I will trace Chaucer's progress in dealing with these new problems from the *General Prologue* through the *Tale of Melibee*, the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, the *Pardoner's Tale*, the *Parson's Tale*, and finally, to the *Retraction*.

In Melibee, Chaucer illustrates the traditional approach for extracting moral doctrine from a text which contradicts orthodox doctrine. The method was most fully developed by Augustine and was intended for Scriptural exegesis but medieval poets tended to ignore his strictures against applying it to secular texts. In the wake of Ockhamism and its implications for language, Chaucer realized several potential pitfalls in utilizing this method to interpret secular poetry. The *Nun's Priest's Tale*, as I shall argue, is a thorough demonstration of how ambiguity in language can thwart proper exegesis. The *Pardoner's Tale*, by way of an extensive intertextual commentary on de Meun's *Roman de la Rose*, offers another illustration of the potential contained in language to misdirect a moral tale so that it fails in its intended purpose. The *Parson's Tale* is a fitting conclusion as it is the natural outcome of Chaucer's experimentation with language and morality. The Retraction marks the reestablishment of the divide between secular and scriptural exegesis. Chaucer knows that he cannot fully control his language so he must revoke his secular fictions to absolve himself from blame.

CHAPTER 1 Some Definitions: Realisms and Ockhamism

By far the most succinct definition I have encountered for "realism" is Ernest

Moody's according to which realism is

> the doctrine that the human intellect discovers in the particulars apprehended by
> sense experience an intelligible order of abstract essences and necessary
> relations ontologically prior to particular things and contingent events and that
> from this order the intellect can demonstrate necessary truths concerning first
> causes and the being and attributes of God

(Moody 307).

This holds true of Neoplatonic realism but is not quite accurate of the more moderate

realism of Aquinas. The central difference between these competing versions of

realism depends on the location of the universal or essence. Aquinas, following

Aristotle, differs from Augustine in that he held that universal essences have no

existence apart from the individual thing (this is the *universalia in rebus*). For Plato,

the universal exists independent of and prior to the particular (*universalia ante rem*).

Augustine follows Plato but modifies Platonism by locating the source of the universal

in the mind of God. For Augustine, the universals which exist in the human mind are

an inner truths that were instituted by God. They are also signs of their divine

exemplars in the mind of God. Wyclif would later take this feature of Augustinian

realism to an extreme by adding to it that the singular actually participates in its

universal to the point where it is an extension of God Himself.[3] Augustinian realism

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[3]This idea is elaborated in Wyclif's tract *On Universals* (ch.13) and is the basis for his
Eucharist theory because it rules out the possibility of annihilation, even temporarily as is said

also presupposes that a limited knowledge of God is possible through creation, a supposition that Ockham found unacceptable. As his authority, Augustine quotes Paul (Rom 1:18-23): "For the invisible things of Him are clearly seen from the creation of the world, being understood through the things that are made, even His eternal power and divinity" (*On the Spirit* 19). However, even though the "invisible attributes of the Creator" are accessible through the visible works of creation, they are only partially visible and are generally beyond comprehension (*Spirit* 19). As we shall see, the variances in the location of the universal have implications for aesthetics as well.

In the early to mid-fourteenth century William of Ockham stormed onto the scene with his attacks on the foundation of philosophical realism and was excommunicated for his troubles. The Augustinian doctrine of eternal ideas in the divine mind was unacceptable to him because it limited God's freedom. For Ockham, God was absolutely free and could change the world at will unhindered by any controlling and immutable divine exemplars. In his philosophy, the individual is the only real entity; universality is the property of signs and has no existence per se (this is *universalia post rem*). This had several effects. First of all, the problem of universals was now logical rather than metaphysical since they were no longer considered to be real. Secondly, according to Gedeon Gál, "by his interest in singulars rather than universals, intuition rather than abstraction, and induction rather than deduction, [Ockham] prepared the ground for a more scientific approach to reality" (qtd. in Cross

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to occur during transubstantiation. For a singular to be annihilated a part of God would likewise be, which is unacceptable in Wyclif's theology.

1484). By divorcing faith and reason, Ockham permitted a greater exploration within each domain. Contrary to the Neoplatonic Realists, Ockham held that God was completely unknowable and that even his existence could not be proved but must be held only on faith. The other side to his argument was that, with theology now distinct from metaphysics, the world was open to scientific exploration. I will argue that it was this empiricist tendency in Ockhamism which sparked a new interest in the more literal forms of art. Additionally, Ockham had increased the value of the individual and the mundane world in general, since it was no longer considered secondary or as a mere copy of its divine exemplar. This, as we shall see, also had its impact on poetry's subject matter.

It is nearly impossible to give an exact account of the ramifications that changes in philosophy and science can have on the arts (or vice versa, for that matter) and there is usually no consensus of reaction among poets to any given philosophy. All that is clear is that the way we look at the world can be greatly affected by such developments. Despite these difficulties, what I wish to establish is (a) that the allegorical tradition in western literature is highly dependent on a realist philosophy and that (b) its loss of popularity in the fourteenth century was partially due to the change in emphasis that Ockham brought about; namely, a loss of status for the universal that was caused by the new importance given to the individual as the sole bearer of existence. However, this change was not uniformly perceived nor does it suggest a uniformity in thought. Rather, diversity is the keynote for fourteenth century thought, with much borrowing from different philosophies without concern for the

integrity of the systems or for any strict adherence to any one doctrine. As we shall

see, this diversity is mirrored in Chaucer's work as well and he is in keeping with the

spirit of the age with his philosophical pluralism. Fundamentally, Chaucer is a realist

but his work has signs of Ockham's influence.[4]

Allegoresis, Augustinian Realism, and Allegory

According to Christian doctrine, the events in the Old Testament prefigure those

in the New even when the two texts offer contradictory messages. In order to reconcile

any disparity, St. Paul developed the distinction between the letter that kills and the

spirit which gives life (2 Cor 3:6). The system of reading which Paul suggested and

which St. Augustine perfected in *On Christian Doctrine* (3.5.9ff.) is what Maureen

Quilligan has termed "allegoresis". Allegoresis differs from allegory in that while the

latter is a species of text which announces itself "to be about the magic signifying

power of language", allegoresis is a critical procedure that can make any text,

"whatever its manifest literal meaning, appear to be about language, or any other

(latent) subject" (Quilligan 1981, 164).[5] Through allegoresis, the Old Testament is

emptied of all authority and is left with only its literal (historical) meaning, leaving a

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[4]Robert Myles offers convincing evidence of Chaucer's realism although his definition of realism very inclusive. His refutation of those who hold that Chaucer was in some way a Nominalist is also very solid. I will not elaborate on this point because it is not central to my project. My guiding theory is that Ockham had a large impact on poetry because it altered the way people think about the world. I am not arguing that Chaucer was an Ockhamist.

[5]Quilligan has done extensive work in defining allegory as a genre. The preceding quotes are her own summary of her work in *The Language of Allegory* (1979).

shell to be filled wit.. New Testament doctrine.

Of course, for Paul it is not merely a textual practice. The Christian teaching
was always there underneath the literal sense of the Old Testament as if under a veil
which has been "done away with in Christ" (2 Cor 3:14). To recast this idea in
scholastic discourse, the analogy between Old and New is a real bond. It is not an
analogy in our contemporary sense of the word. Rather, in medieval theology,
"analogy" denotes a relation between things that was considered to be as real as Christ.
Allegoresis, for Paul and Augustine, is the means by which this analogy is illuminated.
The reality of the analogical bond is what makes allegoresis more than just one
interpretive technique among many; it the only way to lift the veil that is over the Old
Testament. Augustinian realism, therefore, places a high value on allegoresis.

Even though theologians like Augustine and Aquinas were careful to stress that
the hermeneutic that they had developed was applicable to Scripture only, secular poets
tended to ignore any such strictures.[6] Judson Allen notes that the distinctions
separating "exegesis from interpretation of literary integumenta tended to weaken if not
disappear entirely in practice" (1982, xvi). Dante, for instance, in his *Letter to Can
Grande Della Scalla* applies the fourfold hermeneutic scheme of interpretation, which

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[6]In his *Commentary on Epistle to Galatians* IV, 7, Aquinas stresses that allegorical
signification is "peculiar to sacred writings and no others, since their author is God, in whose
power it lies not only to employ words to signify (which man can also do), but things as well"
(qtd. in *An Aquinas Reader* 412).

Aquinas reserved solely for Scripture, to his own poetry.[7] Boccaccio's insistence that

theology is the poetry of God and that secular poetry "has ever streamed forth from the

bosom of God" suggests a similar disregard for a firm distinction between secular and

sacred poetry (*Genealogy of the Gentile Gods* 14.7).

In addition to increasing the value of allegoresis, Augustinian realism is also the

necessary basis from which the secular allegorist can write. Maureen Quilligan, in her

book *The Language of Allegory: Defining the Genre*, has outlined the manner in which

allegory relies on presuppositions that she terms "suprarealist":

> allegory always presupposes at least a potential sacralizing power in language,
> and it is possible to write and to read allegory intelligently only in those cultural
> contexts which grant to language a significance beyond that belonging to a
> merely arbitrary system of signs. Allegory will not exist as a viable genre
> without this "suprarealist" attitude toward words; that is, its existence assumes
> an attitude in which abstract nouns not only name universals that are real, but in
> which the abstract names themselves are perceived to be as real and as powerful
> as the things named. Language itself must be felt to have a potency as solidly
> meaningful as physical fact before the allegorist can begin
>
> (156).

Augustinian realism creates this atmosphere by naming universals as ontological

entities that exist apart from their individual instances. And it is this consideration of

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[7]Dante also makes the same claim for his poetry in *The Banquet*. Aquinas articulates this system in *The Nature and Domain of Sacred Doctrine* (art. 10). While this particular type of scriptural allegoresis is most commonly associated with Aquinas, the idea is not original with him. Aquinas himself acknowledges that he found the idea in Augustine's *Of the Value of Belief* (*Sacred Doctrine* art. 10, obj. 2).

names as things that underwrites any text in which words become entities moving in a verbal landscape.

Allegory is important to the Augustinian realist because, as a subclass of analogy, it is one of the only ways in which God can be known.[8] Analogy is also important in supplementing or clarifying revealed doctrine. However, the allegorist also relies on a realist ontology. According to orthodox (realist) doctrine, the analogy in things (or, as it is sometimes referred to, the ontological or real analogy) is the basis for all other analogies including grammatical, into which category falls allegory.[9] An example of an analogy in things would be "life". To varying degrees, God, the angels, and plants all have life. God has it in its most absolute sense, the angels have it in an immaterial sense, while plants have it in an organic sense. The resemblance between these three is real as is the analogy between each form of life. The analogy is an ontological bond whereby the lesser forms participate in the absolute. Grammatical analogy, or analogy in terms, designates this ontological analogy.[10] The allegorist relies on the reality of the first type of analogy as an anchor for his grammatical

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[8]"Because of the limitations of human nature, knowledge and perceptions, man knows the nature and perfections of God only analogically" ("Analogy", *The Catholic Encyclopædic Dictionary*, 1961 ed.).

[9]"Analogie", *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique*, 1923 ed. The subsequent discussion of the varying types of analogies is based on this entry.

[10]There is a difficulty in discussing the difference between these two types of analogies because the distinction that would differentiate between words and things can only be made in language. Ockham removes this complication by denying the reality of the first analogy. For him, the only analogy is grammatical.

analogies. This is most vividly portrayed in Alain de Lille's *Complaint of Nature* where the difference between proper and improper sexuality is construed in grammatical terms. His analogy is more than verbal artistry; it is rooted in the belief that there is a real connection between improper language and improper sexuality. The allegorical poet must believe firmly that his or her grammatical analogies refer to ontologically real relations between things. In this manner, allegory hinges on the Augustinian ontology whereby there is believed to be an abstract order behind appearances that is nonetheless real.

Allegory is also dependent on Augustinian epistemology. According to Augustine, knowledge does not derive from experience. Rather, real knowledge is of truths that pre-date experience but were forgotten at birth. Experience does not teach but only reminds (*Confessions* 10.10-13). Symbols, then, should be the same for all people regardless of individual experience because they refer to universals that were pre-installed, so to speak, by God. The implication of this epistemology for the allegorist is that truth can be easily transmitted through signs since the reader should recognize it as such. This gave poets an enormous amount of confidence (as is witnessed by Dante).

Extreme realists such as Alain de Lille and Wyclif often exaggerated the bond between the individual and its universal in the divine mind. Wyclif's Eucharist theory is a case in point. These extreme perspectives serve to highlight the affinity between allegory and realism. Allegory becomes an even more effective vehicle for the extreme realist because the relation between the word, the thing, and the thing's potential to

refer to God becomes almost tangible. For instance, Wyclif believed that every word of Scripture was literally true and that it "was God Himself, an emanation of the Supreme Being 'transposed into writing'" (Robson 146). For Wyclif, to read Scriptural allegory was to be in the immediate presence of God which gave a supreme importance to allegory.

Alternatively, Aquinas' moderate realism devalued the power of allegory. His difference with Augustine lies in the degree to which things in the created world can point towards their divine exemplars. According to the moderate realism of Aquinas,

> there are common natures in individual existing things, distinct from their individuating principles although not separable except in thought. On the psychological side, these doctrines [of moderate realism] held that the human intellect abstracts, from the particular presentations of sense experience, an intelligible species, or likeness, by means of which it apprehends the common nature apart from the individuating conditions (Moody 308).

For Aquinas, the universal, once abstracted, does not point back to God in a direct manner as Augustine held; and Aquinas diminished the extent to which the individual participates in the perfection of its divine exemplar. Unlike Augustine, with Aquinas there is no possible access to the divine mind by following an ascending chain of universals. Because nothing even close to immediate access to the ideas in the divine mind can be gained, allegory is also devalued in the Thomastic outlook.

Accordingly, instead of Augustine's enthusiastic praise of the value of the

symbol to transport the spirit,[11] Aquinas offers a pragmatic defense of allegory: (1)

Corporeal figures are used to allow even the simple to grasp spiritual truths; (2) The

hiding of truth in allegory exercises the mind and defends it from unbelievers; (3) Use

of less noble symbols makes it clear that there is a figurative sense submerged in the

literal surface. These baser signs are also appropriate since, with regards to our

knowledge of God, "what he is not is clearer to us than what he is" (*Sacred Doctrine*

art. 9). Certainly, truth is still contained in Scriptural allegory but Aquinas'

hermeneutic theory, which is underwritten by his moderate realism, is less favourable

to allegory than the Augustinian realism. While Aquinas believed that common nature

or essences were intelligible, in no way did he go as far as Augustine who suggests that

there is a traceable chain of signification which is imperfect but which ultimately leads

back to God.

Ockham's impact on fourteenth century poetics

In the fourteenth century there was a major shift in poetics, with allegory losing

ground to a more literal approach to taletelling.[12] This is not to say that allegory was

considered obsolete, it still enjoyed a certain status, but only that it had been largely

replaced by a more naturalistic style which favoured a literal rather than symbolic

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[11]See, for instance, *On Christian Doctrine* where Augustine writes that a proper understanding of allegorical signs can "raise the eye of the mind above things that are corporeal and created to drink in eternal light (3.5.9).

[12]Cf. Robertson 209: "The reduction of symbolic action to more literal terms may be regarded as one of the most significant features of fourteenth-century style."

narrative mode. This is evident by even a casual comparison of the masterpieces produced at either end of the century: Dante's *Divine Comedy* as opposed to Boccaccio's *Decameron*. The former being allegorical to a degree which, according to Dante himself, approaches Scripture.[13] Alternatively, Boccaccio's style values verisimilitude more than anything else. As Charles Singleton has argued, the *Decameron*'s frame attempts to "justify and protect a new art, an art which simply in order to be, to exist, required the moment free of all other cares, the willingness to stop going anywhere (either toward God or toward philosophical truth)" (qtd. in Howard 1987, 297). In this way, Boccaccio's art is at odds with the prime purpose of religious allegory, which is to venerate to God. And Chaucer too shows a similar lack of interest in any sort of sustained religious allegory, preferring for the most part to emphasize the practical value of theology.

In consideration of the strong affiliation between an allegorical stylistics and philosophical realism, it is not farfetched to assume that the decline in allegory is related to an attack on its philosophical basis. And while it is difficult to assess just how much of Ockham's new philosophy filtered its way down to the artists, the evidence suggests that much of it did. One complication which hinders an exact assessment is that poets are not "merely apes of the philosophers", a point which Boccaccio is at pains to make: "the pure imitator never sets foot outside his model's track--a fact not observed in poets. For though their destination is the same as that of

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[13]See his *Letter to Can Grande Della Scala* vii-viii.

the philosophers, they do not arrive by the same road" (*Genealogy* 14.17). For this

reason, I cannot argue for more than indirect influence.

At Oxford Ockham completed the requirements for his master of theology

degree with his lectures on Peter Lombard's *Book of Sentences* shortly before 1320.

His theories made a deep but not always favourable impression on his peers and his

superiors. Despite excommunication, Ockham's ideas flourished in European

universities. His philosophy was popular enough to compel Thomas Bradwardine

(1290-1349) to write *De Causa Dei contra Pelagium*, a text whose central purpose is to

combat the implications of Ockham's doctrine of God's unknowability. Similarly but

much more fervently, Wyclif's extreme realism is also a reaction to the widespread

Ockhamism of his time and to those theologians he contemptuously referred to as "sign

doctors".

At the foundation of Ockham's theories is the notion that only the individual is

real. Universality is only the property of signs and has no reality: the "universal is not

a thing outside the mind (Ockham *Theory of Terms* 79). This contradicts Augustinian

doctrine which considers the universal to be ontologically real. In this way, Ockham

reversed both the epistemological and the ontological hierarchy of the Augustinian

realists. Instead of "asking how the individual derives from a universal nature or

essence, he sought to explain how in a universe of individuals the intellect comes to

conceptions that are not individual" (Leff 1976, 58). In contrast to a system where the

universal is ontologically prior to the individual, Ockham emphatically denied any such

status to the universal. He insisted that "every universal is one particular thing and that

it is not a universal except in its signification, in its signifying many things" (Ockham

Theory of Terms 78). For Ockham, the universal, once conceived, does not point

towards its ideal counterpart in the divine mind; instead its referent is only a mental

concept.

Within the realist worldview, allegory is a natural tool because it can exploit the

pathway from individual to divine exemplar. Ockham effectively cuts this route off

since the universal is not an indicator of God's presence in the world but is rather a

mere mental concept. Ockham believed that the singular is the only reality and that

experience of it is the base of all knowledge. Accordingly, since we have no direct (or

in Ockham's words "intuitive") cognition of God, we have no evidence of Him and

knowledge of His existence must be held on faith alone. Analogy and, along with it,

allegory are no longer considered valid methods by which to know God. In fact, in the

absence of any real or ontological relations, analogy drops entirely from Ockham's

schema. An analogical word or concept, according to Ockham, can always be shown

to be either univocal or equivocal thus removing the necessity of "analogy" as a

category (Leff 1975, 159).

Ockham's attack of realism undermined the potency of allegory by questioning

the philosophical supports necessary for it to be properly written and read. Effectively,

he severed the reliance of grammatical analogy on ontological analogy by denying the

reality of the latter. Consequently, language is unhooked from any fixed guarantor for

its meaning because it does not denote any ontologically real universals; it refers only

to mental concepts that have been derived from experience. The symbols which

constitute the language of allegory, then, are no longer considered universal. Instead, Ockham has localized them and reduced their universality. To a certain degree, individual intellects will have similar mental concepts because the object of experience will remain more or less constant. However, there is no guarantee of identity as there was in the Augustinian epistemology. One major effect of this change was a diminished confidence in the ability to control one's language. In poets such as Chaucer, this manifests itself as a greater sensitivity to the self-sufficiency of language and its power to betray an author's intentions.

If Ockham undermined the realist position and had subsequently instigated a decline in faith in allegorical method, what promise, if any, does his philosophy hold for poetics? By breaking up the marriage of faith and reason that Aquinas had made, Ockham permitted a greater exploration of the physical sciences than had been previously possible. Rodney Delasanta has argued that the radical empiricism that Ockham initiated translated into a greater attention to detail within the artist's studio (148). Verisimilitude, while not as extreme as in nineteenth or twentieth century writing, began to dominate as the controlling principle in art.

Additionally, while Ockhamist philosophy stressed free will over grace (whence the charges of pelagianism by Bradwardine) his insistence on God's unknowability also made salvation much less certain. This had a double effect on the art of the fourteenth century. As Heiko Oberman has shown, it increased the value of personal experience since one's actions could bring about salvation (145-63). However, since salvation was no longer subject to rational examination there arose a new urgency surrounding

discussions of free will, predestination, and God's foreknowledge (Shepherd 275).

Ockham's theories also led him to stress the practical value of theology (Leff 1976, 56). This emphasis is also visible in the Ricardian poets who, as J.A. Burrow has demonstrated, favoured exemplary fictions which illustrate practical theological issues (82). However, it should be noted that in the later fourteenth century there was a pluralistic tendency to combine systems[14] and Ockhamism did not necessarily mean anti-allegory. For instance, Robert Holcot (c.1300-49) was an Ockhamist but continued to rely heavily on allegorical method for his commentary on the *Book of Wisdom* (Robertson 305-07).

The reduced confidence in allegory also translated into a concern with language in general. With realism having been shaken by Ockhamism, the nature of the relation of word and its referent was also open to question. In "Lak of Stedfastnesse" Chaucer states that the central problem of his era is "That word and deed ... Ben nothing lyk, for turned up-so-doun / Is al this world for mede and wilfulnesse, / That al is lost for lak of stedfastnesse" (4-7). The proper use of language had always been a valid topic of discussion but the ground rules for the debate had been radically altered by Ockham. According to the realists, a word was understood to refer to both a thing and to the mental concept while both were based on exemplars in the divine mind. Under such a conception, language is always connected to God. It could be turned away, or "up-so-doun", but its natural direction, like all things, was towards God. Post-Ockham this

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[14]"If ever an age defied pigeon-holes and categories it is the fourteenth century" writes Gordon Leff (1958, 261).

was no longer assured since the universal indicated only the mental concept and was in

no way connected to an idea in the mind of God. In the coming chapters we will see

the effect this change had on Chaucer.

CHAPTER 2   "The wordes moot be cosyn to the dede"

The issue of the relation of word and thing was crucial to the medievals because

the status of the universal was not considered to be limited to semiotics. Instead, the

question of the universal was of fundamental importance because it had implications for

issues such as the nature of the Eucharist and the Trinity. In the *Consolation*, Boethius

used the hierarchy of universals as an analogy to explain how divine foreknowledge is

compatible with free will (5 pr.4). For the poets, the question of the relation (or lack

thereof) had ramifications for a larger debate concerning art and morality. In this

chapter I wish to examine the history of Plato's maxim that "words are akin to the

matter which they describe" (*Timaeus* 29 b). Then I will establish that its potential was

suggested to Chaucer by Jean de Meun's apology in his *Roman de la Rose* and that

Chaucer has modified it so as to mock a position which can be characterized as extreme

realism.

In the *General Prologue* to the *Canterbury Tales* the narrator offers an apology

for the scandalous tales which are forthcoming (I 725-46). He claims to be a mere

reporter of what he saw and heard on the pilgrimage and that

> He moot reherce as ny as evere he kan
> Everich a word, if it be in his charge,
> Al speke he never so rudeliche and large,
> Or ellis he moot tell his tale untrewe,
> Or feyne thyng, or fynde wordes newe.
> He may not spare, althogh he were his brother;
> He moot as well seye o word as another

(I 732-38).

He is committed to word for word rehearsal of his source material no matter how lewd

it is since, in his opinion, to change one word would be to damage or falsify its

meaning. This suggests that a text's meaning, or sentence, is fragile and is intimately

bound with the words that express it. As justification for his theory he cites Christ

"who spak hymself ful brode in hooly writ" and Plato who said that the "wordes moote

be cosyn to the dede" (I 739, 742). The use of Plato and Christ to justify immodest

speech is obviously ironic and it throws the sincerity of the statement into question.

Indeed, the narrator will later reverse his position on the brittleness of meaning in the

headlink to the *Tale of Melibee* where he is confident that the "sentence" of his moral

treatise can survive variations in its telling. I will refrain from elaborating on the

implications of this reversal until later because the Platonic maxim has a dense history

of usage which first requires untangling.

The phrase ultimately derives from Plato's *Timaeus* (29 b) although Chaucer did

not know it first hand. It had become proverbial by Chaucer's time (Whiting W645)

and Chaucer had seen it in Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy* (3 pr.12), Alain de

Lille's *Complaint* (pr.4 300-01), and de Meun's *Roman* (15182-3). In the middle ages

it was a maxim that suggested a sort of stylistic decorum especially with regards to

base subject matter. It is the "churlish words for churlish deeds" argument where, as de

Lille writes in the *Complaint*, "deformity of expression ought to be molded to ugliness

of subject" (pr.4300-01). This should not be confused with Chaucer's professed

position in both the *General Prologue* and the *Prologue to the Miller's Tale* where it is

the teller and not the tale itself which determines the quality of the subject matter:\the

Miller is a churl and will therefore tell a churl's tale. Characteristically, Chaucer has

complicated the issue by adding the role of the teller into the equation. The playfulness

with which both Chaucer and de Meun manipulate the quotation indicates that it had

become something of a tired saw by the time it fell into their hands. This is not the

case with de Lille, as we shall see, for whom it was a natural expression of his

Neoplatonism.

At any rate, by the later middle ages the phrase had come to mean something

quite different from what Plato meant. Timaeus speaks the line in his own apology in

order to excuse any inconsistencies which might appear in his account of the creation of

the universe. Any such flaws are inevitable, says he, because he is discussing the

imperfect created world and not the ideal Forms. If he were dealing with the

unchanging Ideas his discourse would be more stable but since he is speaking of the

changing copies his account will be necessarily unstable and subject to error. All he

can hope for are "probabilities as likely as any others" (*Timaeus* 29 d). I will quote it

in full to give a more exact sense of its meaning:

> Now it is all-important that the beginning of everything should be according to
>
> nature. And in speaking of the copy and the original we may assume that words
>
> are akin to the matter which they describe; when they relate to the lasting and
>
> permanent and intelligible, they ought to be lasting and unalterable, and, as far
>
> as their nature allows, irrefutable and immovable--nothing less. But when they
>
> express only the copy or likeness and not the eternal things themselves, they

need only be likely and analogous to the real words. As being is to becoming,

so is truth to belief.

(*Timaeus* 29 a-c).

Plato contrasts words which describe the eternal Forms (as apprehended by intelligence

and reason) against those words which describe the created world (as apprehended by

sensation). Inherent in this argument is the prioritizing of the universal over the

singular which marks all Platonic realism. There is a hierarchy of cognition in which

the quality and the stability of knowledge improves as the knower moves from mere

sense perception to use of reason.

Also implied in Timaeus' argument is that there is an ontological link or

relation between the word and that which it describes. Plato states this explicitly in the

Cratylus where he explains that there is a correctness of names when they imitate the

essence of a thing as opposed to the thing itself (423 b-e). That the correctness is

suggested by nature points to an ontological connection;[15] a bond which is inimical to

the Christian conception of language where words have their meaning conventionally,

not naturally.[16] For the most part, the medieval poets ignored the implications of

linguistic naturalism and instead chose to use the maxim as a rhetorical rule rather than

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[15]Plato even goes so far as to say that some individual letters are well suited to certain actions. Plato suggests a sort of visual onomatopoeia when he writes that one character, for instance, is "an excellent instrument for expression of motion" (*Cratylus* 426 d).

[16]In Genesis 2 Adam decides each creatures' name without any aid from God. Of words, Augustine says that we do not "agree upon them because of an innate value, but they have a value because they are agreed upon" (*On Christian Doctrine* 2.24.37).

a more purely semiotic theory.

In contrast to the later medieval poets, Boethius does use the *Timaeus* in its correct spirit. In the *Consolation of Philosophy*, Boethius accuses Lady Philosophy of mocking him because she has unfolded her argument concerning the nature of God "without the help of any external aid, but with one internal proof grafted upon another so that each drew its credibility from that which preceded" (3 pr.12). In answer, she says "You have learnt on the authority of Plato that we must use language akin to the subject matter of our discourse" (3 pr.12).[17] And since she was speaking of the eternal and unchanging world of God, her arguments participate in the harmonies of her subject. This is exactly what Plato meant. Her argument has coherence because she speaks of the divine and not of the created. Any description of the created world, as Timaeus pointed out, is liable to error and inconsistency because the subject matter is constantly in flux. This is very different from the medieval notion, where Plato is understood to be endorsing a type of decorum.

Like his contemporaries, Chaucer is not primarily concerned with any ontological relation of words and things.[18] Instead, his Narrator is ostensibly anxious about the accurate representation of another person's story. This also differentiates

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[17] "[C]um Platone sanciente didiceris cognatos de quibus loquuntur rebus opertere esse sermones."

[18]In fact, the Manciple, who also makes use of Plato, implicitly denies the existence of any such bond. According to him, the only difference between a woman of "heigh degree" and a "povre wenche" is that one is called lady, the other "lemman" (IX 207-20). Thus the relation of word to thing is dependent on such things as class and not on any essence, which is in contradiction to Plato even though he is the cited authority.

him from his medieval contemporaries who make use of the maxim; while they are busy matching subject matter with its appropriate expression, the Narrator is worried about reporting another's story word for word. The Narrator also differs in that he is the only one to use Plato as a defense for lewd speech. De Meun and Alain de Lille do not do so. Most of the Narrator's apology is a diatribe against euphemisms which might distort his account of "what really happened". Viewed from such perspective, it does not necessarily seem to be realist in the Platonic sense. However, for the Narrator of the *General Prologue*, meaning is fragile and its transmission requires a slavish copying or recounting of the source so as not to maim it; "He moot reherce as ny as ever he kan / Everich word ... Or ellis he moot telle his tale untrewe,/ Or feyne thyng, or fynde wordes newe" (I 732-36). This suggests an accord between word and the deed described that is an extreme extension of Plato's thought and thereby makes sense of Chaucer's quotation of him here. The word is so close an imitation of the deed it describes that even a minute alteration would affect the meaning. The Narrator suggests that the word and deed are not merely cousins but are in fact twins. Thus, the Narrator's use of Plato is a misuse. He has the right idea but has gone too far with it.

Paul Taylor, in his article "*Chaucer's* Cosyn to the Dede," does an excellent and thorough job of isolating the different strands which have come together in Chaucer's quotation. He first considers Boethius as Chaucer's immediate source and he examines de Meun's translation of the *Consolation* (which Chaucer had open at his elbow as he was working on his own [Hanna 1003]) along with Chaucer's to demonstrate the similarities. Following de Meun's version, Chaucer translates "les

paroles soient cousinez aus chosez dont il parlent" (qtd. in Taylor 321) as "the wordis moot be cosynes to the thinges of whiche thei speken" (*Boece* 3 pr.12). Taylor notes that De Meun's text probably suggested the term "cosyn" to Chaucer (321). However, despite the similarities between these two translations and the *General Prologue*, Boethius is not the Narrator's immediate model. Instead, according to Taylor, it is the following passage, taken from de Meun's apology in the *Roman* (15188-92), which Chaucer had in mind when he wrote his own apology in the *General Prologue*:

> Car, quiconques la chose escrit,
> Se dou veir ne vous veaut embler,
> Li diz deit le fait resembler;
> Car les voiz aus choses veisines
> Deivent estre a leur faiz cousines

(qtd. in Taylor 321).

His evidence is that the "shift of the Boethian *chosez* to *faiz* intimates that the *Roman* passage is the likely source for Chaucer, where *dede* contrasts with his use of *thinges* for Boethius' *res*" (Taylor 321). Hence, verbal similarity is one proof of the connection between de Meun's apology and that of Chaucer's Narrator.

However, there is firmer proof than linguistic coincidence that de Meun's apology is Chaucer's immediate model for his own in the *General Prologue*. This lies in the affinity that Chaucer's usage of the Platonic maxim shares with Sallust. Like Chaucer, Sallust's chief concern is the accurate verbal reproduction of another's deeds. Ironically, this is somewhat different from the main thrust of de Meun's argument. I will quote the relevant passage in de Meun because it adequately demonstrates both his

primary concern and that of Sallust:

> If still there shall remain some words of mine
>
> For which I rightfully should pardon beg,
>
> I pray that you [the reader] will make excuse for them
>
> And make response to critics, as for me,
>
> That they are necessary to the tale, ·
>
> Which leads me to the words by its own traits.
>
> This is the reason why I use such words.
>
> According to the good authority
>
> Of Sallust, this procedure is correct
>
> And proper, as he tells us in these lines:
>
> "Although the glory cannot be the same
>
> Of him who did the deeds and him who wrote
>
> Descriptions of the deeds within a book
>
> As best he could to chronicle the truth,
>
> Yet is the latter of no light renown,
>
> For 'tis no easy thing to write things well.
>
> If he who writes would neither maim the truth
>
> Nor puzzle you, then he must make his tale
>
> Have likeness to the facts; the neighbor words
>
> Should be at least the cousins of the deeds"

(Romance 70.29-48).

De Meun's argument is that there is a natural link between the subject matter and the description that must be utilized. This is similar to Lady Philosophy's defense in the *Consolation.* It is the "churlish words for churlish deeds" argument which is distinct from the Narrator's position in the *Miller's Prologue* where he states that the Miller is a churl and will *tell* a churlish tale. For De Meun, the subject matter supposedly

guides its own expression but for Chaucer all is dependant on the anterior mode of storytelling. De Meun's theory is also a version of linguistic decorum which is primarily realist (in the Boethian-Platonic sense) since there is a bond between word and deed which is supplied naturally and is not merely a stylistic device. De Meun can do no other than use these terms because "they are necessary to the tale." Of course the joke is that there are no bawdy words at the end of the *Roman* even though the metaphoric meaning of the story is extremely lewd. Thus, de Meun is playfully using a Neoplatonic realist argument to protect himself from charges of lewdness.

De Meun's reasoning is different from Sallust's whose concern is to not "maim the truth" and with the difficulty of representing the real in general. For Sallust, puzzling euphemisms and excessively flowery prose are to be avoided since they can confuse the reader and hinder the verbal reproduction of fact. This is also Chaucer's Narrator's professed concern since he too is anxious about the accurate representation of another's deeds and/or story. Chaucer's Narrator and Sallust prefer plain speech over euphemism because the latter can distort their depiction of reality. Thus, even though Chaucer borrowed the quote from de Meun's apology in the *Roman* he did not import it into his own text unchanged. Rather he modifies de Meun so as to be actually closer to de Meun's source than de Meun is himself.

It is not insignificant that Chaucer reassigned the quote to Plato and does not attribute it to Sallust as de Meun had done, primarily because there is an incongruity in both of their citations. De Meun's apology for his book is closer to Plato than Sallust while Chaucer's shares more of an affinity with Sallust than with Plato. For de Meun

and Boethius, the subject matter guides its own expression. This is an altogether

different notion than what appears in Chaucer and Sallust because, for these two, the

prime concern is with the accurate transmission of meaning. Thus, de Meun is truer to

Boethius and Plato but he misstates Sallust while Chaucer is closer to Sallust and

perverts Plato. In both instances this discrepancy serves to alert the reader to a

playfulness and lack of insincerity. In other words, neither poet is willing to stand

behind these theories.

Chaucer also misrepresents Christ in his apology and this brings me to my sole

criticism of Taylor's otherwise fine essay. Chaucer's Narrator says that "Crist spak

hymself ful brode in hooly writ" (I 739). According to the *Middle English Dictionary*,

to speak "ful brode" is to do so frankly or freely and it cites the line in question as an

example ("brod(e" adv. 3c). There are two problems with Chaucer's reference to

Christ. First of all, though he spoke frankly, the fact that Christ's preferred mode of

narrative was the parable undermines Chaucer's use of the reference here because the

parable is not anything close to a direct verbal representation of reality; it is not a

literal transcription but a figurative one. Secondly, none of Christ's stories were

scurrilous. This seems painfully obvious but some critics miss the incongruity in

Chaucer's use of Christ and Plato to justify immodest speech.[19] The effect of

Chaucer's misrepresentation is a comedic undermining of the Narrator's professed

position on this subject. However, as I mentioned above, it is calculated to be taken as

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[19]For examples of critics who do not find the quotation incongruous, see R.W.V. Elliott 368-
69 and Gabriel Josipovici 79-80.

a joke and the Narrator later corrects himself in the *Thopas-Melibee* headlink.

Taylor's mistake is to translate "ful brode" as "speaking as the gods do, in 'amphibologies' (*Troilus* 4.1406), or ambiguities" (Taylor 320). In doing so, he misses the ironic effect that is created by the Narrator's perversion of his authorities and, consequently, he assumes this passage to be another "reaffirmation of linguistic realism" by Chaucer (327). While I agree with Taylor that Chaucer does have conservative tendencies (that is, if Ockhamism is "radical") that could be deemed realist, I do not agree that this is what Chaucer is up to here. At this point, Chaucer is actually mocking an extreme form of realism where word and deed are so closely linked that to change any words, even for the sake of propriety, would falsify the tale such that he might as well tell a different story.

Thus, Chaucer has borrowed the Platonic maxim from de Meun's apology in the *Roman* but has playfully manipulated it in order to mock a form of extreme realism. This is not to say that Chaucer was anti-realist, in fact he reveals himself to be pro-realism on many instances. For instance, in translating Boethius' passage on the nature of universals, itself already a highly realist text, Chaucer adds that the Form exists "perdurablely in the devyne thought" (*Boece* 4 pr.4 166). By adding this clause to the original text, Chaucer indicates that he both knew and believed in Augustinian realism. The question of the relation between word and deed is only a part of a wider debate on morality and taletelling. And in borrowing from de Meun's apology, Chaucer has entered into an argument which will be the topic of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 3   ART AND MORALITY: de Lille and de Meun

Alain de Lille establishes himself as a proponent of extreme realism in his *On the Art of Catholic Faith*: "Alan's view of nature was largely Neoplatonic; he regarded it as the symbol of God in which there was a correspondence between everything and the World Soul. He took up a position of extreme realism over universals" (Leff 1958, 133). This manifests itself in his poetry as an avoidance of immodest speech, in contrast to Chaucer and Jean de Meun. De Lille suggests that the bond between a thing and its universal exemplar is such a strong one that evil words have the power to pollute the speaker's mouth. It is because of this causeway between material word and the spiritual world that caution must be exercised in speaking of corrupt things and should be euphemisms used. To use a lecherous word is to get on the highway in the wrong direction, so to speak. Nature outlines this thinking in her apology:

> For it is fitting to purple the dross of the aforesaid vices with glowing phrase, to perfume the foulness of evil with the odor of sweet words, in order that the stench of such great filth may not go abroad far upon the winds, and bring many to indignation and loathing disgust. Sometimes, no doubt, as we have touched hitherto, since speech should be related to the matters of which we speak, deformity of expression ought to be molded to ugliness of subject. But in the coming theme, in order that evil words may not offend the reader' hearing, nor establish an abode in the mouth of a virgin, I wish to give to these monstrous vices a cloak of well-sounding phrases
>
> *(The Complaint of Nature* pr.4 293-306).

While Nature says that words ought to be cousin to the deed, her position is such that she will not follow this maxim because of the potential for contamination that immodest

speech contains. This implies a bond between word and thing that is very strong and her position can only be characterized as extreme realism.

Alain's Nature consents to fulfil the narrator's request that she elaborate on the nature of Cupid but she does so, characteristically, "in chastened and lofty style" (pr.4 432). Her diatribe against Cupid explains how he changes things into their opposites and how he is thereby able to "transform the whole race of men" (m.5 20). Nature's art of love is not a "How-to" manual but an explanation of the evil effects of love that is couched in a barrage of oxymorons: "Love is peace joined with hatred, faith with fraud, hope with fear, and fury mixed with reason ..." (m.5 1-18). She leaves it up to the dreamer and the "book of experience" to acquire the actual practice (pr.5 3-4). This is in accordance with her stance on the power of language to corrupt, outlined above as extreme realism. Even though she is familiar with the notion that "speech should be related to the matters of which we speak" she opts for euphemism (pr.4 300-01).

This stance also marks her division with Venus, whom she stationed in the created world while she preferred the "grateful palace of the eternal region" (pr.4 370-71). Nature taught Venus the rules of grammatical art by which, using "an especially potent reed-pen" and "suitable leaves", she could govern the "production of progeny" (pr.5 49-69). Nature also forbid Venus the use of metonymic rhetoric "lest if, in the pursuit of too strained a metaphor, she should change the predicate from its protesting subject into something wholly foreign, cleverness would be too far converted into a blemish" (pr.5 180-84). Hence, while Nature prefers the safety of metaphoric

expression, she requires literalism of her under-deputy Venus. This is the flaw in her plan which, as I shall argue, de Meun realized and attempted to counter. Within the realist worldview, allegory points to God but literalism moves towards the opposite direction, and tends towards idolatry and cupidity and Nature should have realized this. This cupidinous tendency is due to the worship of the thing or sign for itself and not for its potential reference to any spiritual truth.

In the *Roman*, De Meun makes the connection between literalism and cupidity clear by associating idolatry with the Lover whose literalism blinds him to the meaning of his own actions. The lover is bound to the literal meaning of the euphemism and is unaware of the real referent. De Lille's Nature does not realize this potential and she attributes Venus' straying to boredom: "since the soul, when glutted from its birth with a saiety of the same thing, comes to loathe it ... the uniform character of the work so many times repeated tired ... and the effect of continued labor took away the wish to perform" (pr.5 195-200). Perhaps monotony played a role but Nature, and de Lille as well, mistake the prime cause of Venus' digression, namely the literalism imposed on Venus by Nature herself. Further, it is the logic of de Lille's own philosophy which dictated this outcome.

Jean de Meun's answer to Alain de Lille

It was Venus' activities which marked the beginning of vice in the world. And the birth of Venus stemmed from the castration of Saturn by Jupiter which also marked the end of the golden age:

> Once Justice reigned, when Saturn was supreme;
>
> But Jupiter the cullions of his sire
>
> Cut off as they had been but sausages
>
> (A cruel and hardhearted son was he!)
>
> And flung them in the sea, whence Venus sprang,
>
> Goddess of Love, as you may read in books
>
> (*Romance* 26.227-32).

Reason speaks these words to the Lover in the context of an attempt on her part to sway the Lover from carnal love to a higher form of charity and love of one's neighbour. The Lover misses her point and instead takes exception to her use of "cullions" which he takes to be a bawdy word. His master, the God of Love, has forbidden him to speak of ribaldry (27.86-7). This aligns the God of Love with Nature in *The Complaint* since neither speak in a direct manner as Reason does here. The difference between Alain and Jean is that the former endorses euphemism while the latter, as we shall see, demonstrates it to be representative of a corrupt view of love.

Reason's defense against the Lover's accusation of bawdiness is multifold. First of all, even if the thing (in this instance, testicles) was evil, which she contends it is not, she may plainly speak of it "[u]nless it tend to sin" (33.37). Secondly, as she tells him,

> The courteous God, lacking all villainy,
>
> From whom all goodness comes, has tutored me
>
> And brought me up and taught me how to speak
>
> (Nor do I think that I have badly learned);
>
> And it is by His will that it's my use

> To call things by their names, and properly,
>
> Without a gloss, whenever I may please
>
> (33.124-31).

De Meun gives to Reason the role of namegiver which the Bible accords Adam

(Gen.2:19). As an additional authority, Reason cites Plato's *Timaeus* where it is

written that "speech was given to make us understand / And willingly to teach as well

as learn" (*Romance* 33.144-45).[20] Reason is not employing Plato in a justification of

lecherous speech since the word is not lewd in her opinion. Chaucer's Narrator, on the

other hand, knows the stories to be scandalous but relates them regardless.

The third point in Reason's defense is founded upon the orthodox theory that

language signifies by convention. She asks the Lover

> If when I gave the names to all the things
>
> I'd relics 'cullions,' cullions 'relics' called,
>
> Would you who now so snap and bite at me,
>
> Have said that 'relic' is a filthy word?
>
> (33.150-54).

This is in opposition to Platonic linguistics because there is no connection between a

word and the thing or its essence.[21] This is not to say that Reason's position is

nominalistic. The only philosophy even close to Ockhamism that de Meun would have

been familiar with was the so-called nominalism of Peter Abelard (1079-1142) and

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[20]Based on *Timaeus* 47. At the root of the theory is the realist assumption that humans can observe the harmonies of the world and can model their behaviour accordingly.

[21]In Platonic thought the word is an imitation of the essence and not the thing itself.

obviously not that of Ockham, whose birth the *Roman* predates by about eight years.[22]

Furthermore, as Augustine proves, Neoplatonic realism is compatible with a linguistic conventialism that rejects Cratylism. Contrary to Cratylism, for Augustine words have no natural connection with the things that they describe. Augustine can successfully reject this aspect of Platonism without compromising his argument, because he was concerned with only the reality of universals. In Augustinian realism, words which name universals do so by convention and are only secondary in importance.

Reason's fourth and final justification of her use of "cullions" is that she meant it allegorically, as the poets do:

> Within our schools you may learn many a thing
> In parables that pleasant are to hear.
> He'd be a fool who took them literally.
> There was another meaning in the word
> When I discoursed of cullions to you,
> Desiring briefly then to signify
> Something quite other than the sense you got.
> A man of understanding would have seen
> The cloudy fable in a different light
> The truth within had been most clear
> If proper exposition it had had

(33.182-92).

Reason used "cullions" in the context of a greater discussion on higher love. Her

---

[22]De Meun would have had some familiarity with the problem of universals because of his education. Additionally, he translated the letters of Abelard and Héloïse which contain references to the debate (Abelard 60).

thinking is easily traceable as she moves from a discourse on friendship and the love of one individual (23) through to charity and the love of all humanity (26) and ultimately to a love of her namesake (32). She is attempting to move the Lover from his cupidinous love of the Rose to a higher love of God. Where Nature in the *Complaint* prefers euphemism to discuss a topic she feels to be conducive to lechery, Reason uses the word allegorically to indicate a spiritual truth. This points to the distinction between allegory where the word signifies a thing which in turn points to a spiritual truth and metaphor where the word signifies a thing which only refers to another thing. In the *Complaint*, Nature prefers metaphoric expression because she believes that word and thing are bound such that the word participates in that which it names. Reason, on the other hand, stresses that words signify by convention and that because of this they can be used to point beyond the thing named.

The Lover is unable to understand her rationale and it is at this point in the narrative that Reason leaves him and he is completely under the sway of the God of Love. Reason is accused of transgressing the God of Love's commandment concerning proper diction: "Then guard yourself against all ribaldry / And dirty speech; let not your lips unclose / To name a vulgar thing" (9.78-80). According to Reason, this is nonsense since nothing God created is vulgar. The implied message of the book is that the God of Love's position on this topic indicates a corrupt view of sexuality. This is suggested by the Lover's fall into idolatry after he is fully under Love's command.

In the last chapters of the book euphemism is the dominant mode. The result is that the Lover is actually breaking his lord's commandment by relating what they

would both certainly consider obscene. The Lover has been so corrupted that he does

not understand what he is actually describing.[23] If he had accepted Reason's advice

instead of Love's he would at least be able to see what he is doing. Instead he has been

cozened by his own metaphors and the result is idolatry. Following Love's commands

is repeatedly shown to lead to idolatry. For instance, Love's barons swear upon the

"relics" of their weapons in which they believe as much as the Trinity (77.81-88). The

Lover is left worshipping the letter without understanding the spirit of what he is

saying which, according to Augustine, is necessarily carnal. As Maureen Quilligan

points out, de Meun demonstrates that "to speak about sexuality in euphemisms is

simply to limit the nonliteral meaning of language to the carnal, the merely erotic; to

lift the veil of such metaphoric language is merely to lift up skirts" (1981, 170).

Reason uses the naked word as a symbol of a greater truth. Saturn's reign was

an era of justice, community, and love; so his castration, according to de Meun's

Genius, signifies the loss of this state (93). Physical love is rendered impossible and

human nature is debased and perverted into the quest for wealth and power. Reason

wishes to show a spiritual truth and illustrate the cause of wickedness by using

"cullions" symbolically. Alternatively, the Lover propagates debauchery unknowingly

through his accordance with the God of Love's commandments. Reason demonstrates

the connection between the world and the Word of God and the potential that even

"vulgar" things have when used to point to God.

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[23]The Lover's account of the uses for his seamless scrip and his polished staff are but one instance (*Romance* 99).

The Lover's narration purports to be in support of Venal love but it is undermined through de Meun's use of irony. Unlike *The Complaint of Nature* this book *can* be used as a "How-to" manual on the art of love. The techniques illustrated are very sound ones. In fact, this was a source of controversy at the opening of the fifteenth century when Christine de Pizan and Jean Gerson censured the book for, among other things, the blameworthy example that it sets.[24] While the book does seem to beckon readers down the path in the wrong direction (towards what Augustine called cupidity) the pervasive irony leaves silent signposts which read "go back". Christine de Pizan's criticism of the book centres on the misinterpretation that the quietness of the irony fosters (Hill 90).

The Poet's Apology (*Romance* 70), then, is actually slightly misleading because he apologizes for using bawdy words when in fact there are none, only euphemisms. Jean's poem is a witty demonstration that to write about sex through metaphor is to open one's text to corruption whereas writing about truth through the sublimation of plain descriptions of genitals can be morally profitable. The apology claims to rest its authority on a version of Cratylic realism but it is finally discredited.

That Chaucer recognized the morality of the *Roman* is clear from the castigation that the God of Love gives him in the *Prologue to the Legend of Good Women*: "Thou has translated the Romaunce of the Rose / That is an heresye ayeins my lawe, / And makest wise folk from me withdrawe" (F 329-31). The God of Love along with

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[24]For more on this epistolary debate, see Jillian M.L. Hill. *The Medieval Debate on Jean de Meung's* Roman de la Rose: *Morality Versus Art*. Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen P, 1991.

Chaucer (who is supplying his words at the moment) understands that the *Roman* actually leads readers away from the cupidinous love that it depicts. However, the Narrator's stance in the *General Prologue* differs from de Meun's, as I have shown. Through its irony, De Meun's *Roman* suggests that euphemism should be avoided lest it divert a text from its purpose; that to avoid naming something which might be considered bawdy can actually tend towards sin. Reason's alternative is to sublimate a potentially scurrilous term through allegorical usage and to place it in the context of a moral argument. This position is worlds apart from Chaucer's Narrator who avoids euphemism because of the fragility of meaning and the difficulties of transmitting it without losing any of its parts. In the next chapter I will show how Chaucer reverses his theory and replaces it with a sounder one. However, his central problem is still with him, namely how to protect the meaning of one's text or, in Chaucer's parlance, how to deliver one's "sentence" so that it is properly recognized by the audience. As we shall see, he offers the traditional answers to the problem in the *Tale of Melibee* and the *Parson's Tale* only to expose their shortcomings in the *Pardoner's Tale* and the *Nun's Priest's Tale*. Chaucer evinces a strong nostalgia for a former golden age of both the world and literature while at the same time he recognizes that this world is lost. And this tension is played out in the *Canterbury Tales* through his commentary on the topic of morality in taletelling.

CHAPTER 4 **"I wolde fayn knowe hou ye understonde thilke text"**

Melibee **and Augustinian Hermeneutics**

According to Augustinian linguistics, a universal word refers to both the

individual instance of the thing and to the mental concept. In turn, the mental concept

has already been instituted in the mind by God and is only actually remembered after

the thing has been perceived (*Concerning the Teacher* 388). Augustine articulates the

relation between inner concept and outer word as follows: "The word that sounds

outwardly is a sign of the word that gives light inwardly, and the name 'word' is better

suited to the latter" (*On the Trinity* 15.11). Despite the spoken word's subordinate

relation, it still has a privileged position as the outer sign of the inner word. And even

though language signifies by convention, word and subject matter are at least close

enough so that when words are used symbolically or allegorically and they will be

properly understood. This assumption underwrites the confidence of such allegorical

poets as Dante and de Meun, for instance, who have faith in the ability of their

language to hit its mark (albeit they have hesitations concerning the limitations of

human utterance).

By the second half of the fourteenth century something had changed and poets

such as Boccaccio and Chaucer no longer express any such confidence in their ability

as poets. Chaucer is not as sure as Dante that we will be able to follow him and he is

highly aware of his language and its potential to leave the trajectory planned by an

author. As I have argued, the catalyst for this change was Ockhamism and its

undermining of philosophical realism. For Ockham, the universal is only a word and it

refers to the mental concept and no further. Ockham denied Augustine's theory that

the senses and soul have their own separate knowledge (Leff 1975,4). He insisted that

the mind's knowledge is not of pre-installed universals based on the ideas in the divine

mind but is rather of the individual. He therefore denied the validity of Augustine's

epistemology and, along with it, the existence of divinely instituted universals in the

created mind. The implications for communication in general and poetry in specific

are significant. If we do not all have the same mental concepts but are limited to our

own experience then we are that much more isolated from each other. Without those

communally held universals there is no guarantee that a poet's symbol will be

understood in the same way as it was meant. For the poets this led to a depreciation of

allegory since words could stray without the anchor provided by a realist philosophy.

In the *General Prologue* Chaucer plays with the notion that words must be

cousin to their referents. He borrows the idea from de Meun who also manipulated the

notion for his own purposes. However, there is a significant difference between de

Meun and Chaucer's attitudes towards the issue in that de Meun's playfulness is

underscored by the confidence that words can be used symbolically and that their

function will be properly understood. For de Meun, if anything is to blame it is the

corrupt or "evil-minded" reader (such as the Lover) who fails to understand the symbol

properly (*Romance* 70.19). Chaucer, on the other hand, does not share de Meun's

certainty. For Chaucer, the language itself is to blame for any miscommunications.

And, no longer sure of the relation of words and things, Chaucer jokingly says that he

must maintain the exact wording of his sources in order to preserve the meaning.

Just prior to the *Tale of Melibee* the Narrator reverses his position on the

subject in a passage on the sturdiness of meaning and its ability to survive transmission

in a variety of forms. However, there is still a concern for him in that he knows the

relation of word to deed to be precarious. One of Chaucer's prime interests lies in the

potential for words to go astray from their speakers intentions.[25] I will argue that

Chaucer translated the *Tale of Melibee* for two reasons. The first is that it was for the

instruction of the young king Richard II. The second is that *Melibee* contains the

traditional answer to one of Chaucer's primary concerns: how to extract a coherent

sentence from ambiguous material, a problem which is aggravated by the lack of a

guarantor for the bond between word and referent in the wake of Ockhamism.

Many critics have understood *Melibee* to be a parody and that Chaucer's aim

was to prove that doctrine can be undermined by style (Dolores Palomo) or that the

tale's meaning is finally indeterminate (Waterhouse and Griffiths). And while those

who favour the parodic reading have a grasp of one of the text's central concerns, they

are wrong in their belief that Chaucer meant to parody the tale and show that its own

meaning is indeterminable. Instead, I will argue that the tale contains directions for its

own interpretation and that these are modelled on Augustinian allegorical hermeneutics.

In the headlink to *Melibee* the Narrator promises to tell a "moral tale vertuous",

after his *Tale of Sir Thopas* has been interrupted by the Host who apparently does not

appreciate its rhyming (VII 940). The Narrator then offers a new apology for the tale

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[25]Instances where the plot hinges on such a phenomenon appear in the *Knight's Tale*,
Summoner's Tale, and the *Manciple's Tale*.

he is about to relate (VII 937-64) and the ideas expressed in this passage amount to a new semantic theory which contradicts the first one that he proposed in the *General Prologue*. He no longer feels himself to be obligated to report his source material word for word. Instead, he is free to manipulate it and to add anything he believes will "enforce with th' effect of [his] mateere" (VII 958). His authority here, as in the *General Prologue*, is Scripture:

> ye woot that every Evaungelist
>
> That telleth us the peyne of Jhesu Crist
>
> Ne seith nat alle thyng as his felawe dooth;
>
> But nathelees hir sentence is al sooth,
>
> And alle acorden as in hire sentence,
>
> Al be ther in hir tellyng difference.
>
> For somme of hem seyn moore, and somme sayn lesse,
>
> Whan they his pitous passioun expresse--
>
> I meene of Mark, Mathew, Luc, and John--
>
> But doutelees hir sentence is al oon

(VII 943-52).

The Narrator's new position on meaning is that it is not fragile but sturdy. He can grasp a text's sentence and strengthen it by adding, as he says, more "proverbes than ye han herd bifoore" (VII 956). And while this is not an exceptionally innovative theory, it is certainly more reasonable than the one that he first offered in the *General Prologue*.[26]

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[26]The implications of the Narrator's change in theory are multiple. Considered in this light, we begin to see the Narrator not as one unified voice, characterized by many as naive, but rather as a complex and refracted character.

The lines which follow the apology are perplexing because the Narrator apologizes for having added more proverbs, which is something he has not done. His *Tale of Melibee* is actually a close translation of the French *Livre de Melibée et de Dame Prudence* written by Renaud de Louens around 1336 (*Sources and Analogues* 560-614). And Renaud's work is a translation of Albertanus of Bresica's *Liber consolationis et consilii* who wrote it in 1246 for one of his sons who had just come of age (Delong 923). And while Chaucer added some three thousand words to Renaud, who had already reduced Albertanus' work by about one third (Palomo 306), the extra text is not comprised of proverbs but involves stylistic changes. According to many critics, Chaucer's intention in translating the version of the tale that we now have in the manuscripts was to parody the French tale.

The lack of any added proverbs leads Dolores Palomo to the conclusion that the *Melibee* is "a very subtle stylistic parody" (306).[27] Her argument is that Renaud's tale "affected a gravity so close to absurdity" that through only slight changes Chaucer was able to undermine it and thus assure "its demise as moral treatise" (Palomo 320). Chaucer's motives, according to Palomo, are to assert "the primacy of poetic art over doctrinal content" (320). She also maintains that Chaucer

> has shown, by example, that the manipulation of words in contexts can shape meaning purely by formal arrangement even to the point of undermining the ordinary literal meaning of a statement--or indeed, of an entire treatise. Put

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[27]Other critics who favour an ironic reading of the tale are: Trevor Whittock, Paull Baum 1958, Ralph W.V. Elliot, Stewart Justman, Ruth Waterhouse, and Gwen Griffiths.

bluntly, style subverts doctrine. Words are not mere chaff

(306).

However, this reading does not make sense in light of the evangelical example that the

Narrator cites in the headlink nor can it account for Prudence's success in urging

Melibee towards doctrinally sanctioned action. As the Narrator points out, the four

books of the New Testament have the same sentence *despite* stylistic variation. The

style cannot subvert the doctrine because it is the Word of God.

Moreover, the tale is concerned with the problem of deriving morally sound

advice from potentially subversive sources, namely Melibee's flattering counsellors.

The doctrinal content can be subverted but Prudence works to avoid this outcome.

That Prudence is successful is an indication that her methods are to be taken as a model

for interpretation. Neither Palomo nor any of the others who favour the ironic reading

can account for the overall movement in the tale from discord to harmony. *Melibee*

opens with confusion and violence, which is mirrored by the shouting of the unruly

council, and then, through Prudence's efforts, peace and harmony are established both

within Melibee's mind and without in his court. The success of Prudence's advice

hardly suggests parody especially in light of Chaucer's other parodies which end in

chaos.[28] Furthermore, the tale is far too long to support the thesis that it is

intentionally ridiculous. It would make a tedious joke.

Palomo considers the tale to be a parody because of Chaucer's few additions to

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[28]For instance, compare the exquisitely staged chaos at the end of the *Miller's Tale*, a tale
which "quites" the *Knight's Tale* by parodying it.

Renaud. We, like Chaucer's contemporaries, are supposed to recognize that Dame

Prudence's advice is "repetitive, contradictory, arbitrary, and fundamentally simple-

minded" (Palomo 306). Much as it might sound so to the modern ear, to Chaucer's

contemporaries it would have seemed much less so especially if we consider the

specific audience for which it was written. Not only did Albertanus write his work for

his young son but Cicero's *De officiis* (which is one of the tale's main sources) is

likewise addressed to his own son Marcus. It must have occurred to Chaucer (or to

any other Lancastrian) that the tale would be perfectly sound instruction for the young

king Richard II whose choice of advisors was often flawed.[29]

That Chaucer had young Richard in mind as a potential member of his audience

is suggested by the omission of a quote (at VII 1199) which states "Woe to the land

that has a child as a lord" (Eccles. 10:16). This proverb appears in both the French

and the Latin versions and Chaucer's deletion implies that Richard was a potential

audience member. Donald Howard suggests that Sir Simon Burley, the king's tutor

and friend of Chaucer, might have asked Chaucer to prepare *Boece* and possibly even

Melibee for Richard's education (1987, 379, 383). Further, a treatise which

demonstrates the adverse effect of anger on one's judgement would have been ideally

suited for Richard, whose temper was infamous.[30] And even if it did seem repetitive to

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[29]Robert de Vere and Thomas Mowbray, often referred to as Richard's "favourites", were extremely hostile to the house of Lancaster to which Chaucer was attached. This would have given Chaucer ample motive to urge more caution on the king in listening to advice.

[30]Donald Howard recounts one instance of Richard's temper flaring after Richard was told by a friar that John of Gaunt was supposedly conspiring against him: "Richard, now eighteen, flew

the rest of Chaucer's audience, one can imagine them being more tolerant if only for the fact that if Richard took the message to heart the tale might have curbed his temper.

Two other critics, Ruth Waterhouse and Gwen Griffiths, have updated Palomo's thesis in a recent article. According to them, this tale is different from most works, all of which can be deconstructed, since *Melibee* is said to deconstruct itself and that this was Chaucer's purpose in writing the tale:

> Chaucer's adjustments ensure that an alert and perceptive audience will come to recognize that, as a moral lesson, the tale's "sentens"/signification is finally indeterminable
>
> (Waterhouse and Griffiths 339).

I have no problem accepting that a work's final meaning can be shown to be indeterminate; I have seen enough examples of this type of reading to believe it. What I will argue against is that Chaucer's goal in the *Melibee* is an intentional demonstration of this modern theory.

Melibee is an illustration of the traditional, Augustinian method of exegesis. This particular tale is about how to avoid ambiguity in interpretation, and is not a parody whose "joke is that a single definable meaning has disappeared in *Melibee*" (Waterhouse 61). Prudence's implied methodology is thoroughly Augustinian in that she first prepares her reader according to Augustine's precepts and then proceeds to interpret Melibee's counsel in accordance with Augustine's distinction between

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into a rage, during which he threw his hat, and then one shoe after the other, out a window. He ordered Gaunt killed at once" (Howard 1987, 339). When Gaunt's name was cleared Richard ordered the Friar killed.

figurative and literal where the figurative interpretation is restricted to the theme of charity. By "Augustinian" I do not mean that Albertanus had Augustine open at his side as he first composed the *Liber consolationis et consilii* but rather that he was guided by the traditional medieval approach to exegesis which was first articulated by St. Paul but was perfected by Augustine. Prudence is not Augustinian only because she advises mercy; rather her interpretive technique duplicates that of Augustine in that she insists on reinterpreting her materials until they promote charity. Hence, she is Augustinian in both the content (the theme of charity) and in the mode of arriving at her message (Augustine's brand of allegoresis).

I will thoroughly discuss Waterhouse and Griffiths' argument because their central perception as to Chaucer's concerns in *Melibee* is ... :ect but their understanding of his intentions is not. And while these two critics show how easily susceptible allegory is to deconstruction, their claim that Chaucer's audience would have understood this process is unlikely, considering the religious nature of medieval society. The medievals did have a Transcendental signifier (God) and they lived in an extremely logocentric society but they would not have considered this a problem but a blessing. Waterhouse and Griffiths' error is not that their interpretation is overly secular but rather that they then project their understanding onto Chaucer's audience. To make claims for a specific audience's reception of a fiction requires that we try to understand it in the same spirit as they did.

Waterhouse and Griffiths reiterate Palomo's thesis that *Melibee*'s stylistic embellishments serve to undercut the tale's ostensible surface meaning (Waterhouse

339). In addition to Palomo's proofs they point to several other passages which, according to them, indicate that the tale is to be understood ironically. Their first argument concerns the scene where Prudence begins "to maken semblant of wratthe" as she reproaches Melibee (VII 1687). Waterhouse and Griffiths view this as a contradiction of *Melibee*'s surface meaning if "the tale is to be seen as a treatise against the adverse effect or [sic] ire upon one's judgement" (354). In actuality, this is not a contradiction since Prudence's anger is feigned and is not therefore affecting her judgement. Additionally, in *De officiis*, Cicero explicitly states that *to seem* angry is permissable if it performs a corrective service:

> Reproaches may sometimes be necessary, in which we may perhaps be obliged
> to employ a higher strain of voice and a harsher turn of language. Even in that
> case, we ought only to seem to do these things in anger

(1.38).

Hence, Prudence's argument is not contradictory but is actually more coherent than it would appear since she is in accord with passages from her source which do not appear in the body of her argument.

Waterhouse and Griffiths equate Prudence's actions with those of Melibee's "feyned" friends (Waterhouse 354). The difference between Prudence and the false counsellors is that she is open about her feigning whereas the counsellors are deceptive. Prudence admits that she must fake anger and tells Melibee the reasons why: "I make no semblant of wrathe ne anger, but for youre grete profit" (VII 1706). Indeed it would not be possible for her to be angry since as an allegorical persona she is

prohibited from acting against her namesake. This is why she does not cry when her daughter is almost killed. Unlike psychological naturalism, where a character's personality is the source of his or her actions, in allegory behaviour is determined by the character's name tag. Prudence cannot act other than in a careful and discreet manner.

Waterhouse and Griffiths' strongest proof that *Melibee* deconstructs itself involves the biblical exempla which Prudence uses to demonstrate that a woman's counsel can be sound and is not inherently weak (VII 1098-1101). The women are Rebecca (Gen. 27:1-29), Judith (Judith, chapters 11-13; apocryphal in A.V.), Abigail (1 Sam. 25:1-35), and Esther (Esther 7:1-10). It is their strongest argument because Chaucer lists these same women elsewhere in a negative context. The Merchant cites them sarcastically in his tale as good wives who are "so trewe and therwithal so wyse" (IV 1359). From the Merchant's exaggerated tone, bitter character, and recent history[31] we are to understand that he is using these women in a negative light as examples of deceivers of men.

When these women are once again cited in *Melibee*, Waterhouse and Griffiths understand their function as similarly ironic. The humour in *Melibee*, as in the *Merchant's Tale*, is supposed to arise from the fact that each of the biblical women deceives her husband (Waterhouse 55). Additionally,

Prudence's inclusion of these *exempla* functions to set up an opposition between

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[31]He says that he has just married a woman who could outmatch the devil (IV 1220).

her overt stance and the audience's perception of her especially in view of the
gap being opened up between the signifier of her name and what it is coming to
signify

(Waterhouse 55-6).

However, these exempla are not particular to Chaucer; they appeared in both the

French and the Latin versions as positive examples. In fact, they are commonly cited

as examples of noble women. Dante, for instance, places Rebecca and Judith in

Paradise just below Mary because of their prominent roles in the story of Redemption

(*Paradise* 32.10). Judith also appears in the *Man of Law's Tale* as an example of

righteousness (II 939-44).

The Merchant uses the women as examples of bad wives through his sarcastic

praise of them. We are to understand that while Rebecca did help Jacob, it was by

deceiving Isaac. The Merchant emphasizes the deception and not the larger picture.

His bitter irony leads the reader to consider each woman only as a deceitful wife. The

humour derives from the implicit denial of their status as significant figures in the

history of Redemption.

Unlike the Merchant, Prudence offers the women as examples of people who

offered good counsel and she focuses on the ends rather than the means in that, while

the women were deceptive to various degrees, it was for the greater good: Rebecca

helped Jacob receive his father's blessing; Abigail saved her husband; and Esther and

Judith saved the people of Israel. Instead of focusing on the women as deceitful wives,

she emphasizes their abilities as counsellors. Their actions brought about Redemption

just as Prudence can redeem Melibee who has "doon synne agayn oure Lord Crist"

(VII 1420). If Melibee is like the men in the exempla and trusts her counsel, then a

redemption will be wrought on him and Sophie (his wisdom) will be restored to him

"hool and sound" (VII 1110).[32] Hence, Prudence's comparison of herself with the

Biblical exempla does not undermine her position, as Waterhouse and Griffiths hold.

Palomo, Waterhouse and Griffiths emphasize the headlink because it is the only

substantial proof that Chaucer was parodying the tale, since he did not alter his source

very much. However, there is another possible reading of this passage. Its purpose is

not to signal the tale's auto-deconstruction but rather to highlight Chaucer's concern

with interpretation of ambiguous or conflicting material. Melibee must choose between

two contradictory interpretations of the same advice. His problem is an inversion of

the theory that the Narrator offered in the headlink. Instead of four differing texts with

the same sentence, he has one with two possible meanings. In solving the problem,

Prudence first prepares Melibee according to Augustine's guidelines and then leads

Melibee through Augustine's exegetical techniques.

Prudence must ready Melibee so that he can properly understand the advice

which is given him. In *On Christian Doctrine* Augustine lists the seven steps which are

necessary to take in order to understand scripture: (1) fear of God; (2) meekness

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[32]Possibly Chaucer hoped that his advice could rectify the situation in the English court of the 1380's by urging Richard to adopt a more careful attitude in choosing his advisors. If so, then *Melibee* would have been offered in the same spirit as the envoy to "Lak of Stedfastnesse". In the envoy, Chaucer urges Richard to restore steadfastness and, along with it, the bond between word and deed.

through piety; (3) knowledge of the central message of Christianity which is charity or love of all for the sake of God; (4) fortitude and a thirst for justice which occasions an extraction from mortal joys; (5) mercy and love of one's enemy; (6) cleansing of the eye through which God may be seen by deadening the eye which sees the world; (7) the ascent to wisdom (2.7.9-11).[33] These can be further divided into overcoming pride (1 and 2), love of all for the sake of God (3 and 5), and a rejection of earthly riches (4 and 6), all of which lead to wisdom. It is only after the first six stages have been met that the reader is ready to read Scripture and thereby reach the seventh stage.

In *Melibee* Prudence guides Melibee through these stages by first overcoming his pride, then his inclination to inflict vengeance, and finally by showing him to be too much in this world. It is only after Melibee shows himself to be meek and humble, willing to grant mercy to his enemies, and realizes that he "hast ydronke so muchel hony of sweete temporeel richesses" (VII 1410) that his "cleer sighte" (VII 1701) can be restored and he can regain Sophie, or his wisdom. Hence, we see Prudence readying Melibee, according to Augustinian precepts, as a reader who can then interpret the text before him.

Once Prudence has prepared Melibee, he is ready to interpret his counsel. The physicians of Melibee's council had advised him "that right as maladies been cured by hir contraries, right so shul men warisshe werre by vengeaunce" as a sort of homeopathic code of action (VII 1017). When Prudence later asks Melibee how he

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[33]This is also known as the schema of the Sevenfold gifts of the Spirit, drawn from Isaiah 11:2-3, and used in the rite of Confirmation.

understands "contrarie" he answers "that right as they han doon me a contrarie, right so sholde I doon hem another" (VII 1281). Prudence then offers corrective advice based on Scripture and reinterprets "contrarie" as "opposite" and tells Melibee that "the wordes of the phisiciens ne sholde nat han been understonden in thys wise" (VII 1284). Instead of doing them *a* contrary, Prudence suggests that Melibee do *the* contrary and answer a wrong with a right.

Waterhouse and Griffiths are correct to point to a rift between the contradictory significations of the word "contrarie". However, they ignore Prudence's solution because they view her advice as unsound and place it accordingly on a par with that of the false counsellors. In doing so they fail to appreciate the ideology behind Prudence's method. Prudence is thoroughly Augustinian and she urges Melibee to interpret his advice according to the principles which Augustine lays out in *On Christian Doctrine*:

> Therefore in the consideration of figurative expressions a rule such as this will serve, that what is read should be subjected to diligent scrutiny until an interpretation contributing to the reign of charity is produced.
>
> *(On Christian Doctrine* 3.15.23).

It is not only her recommendation that Melibee be charitable which marks her as an Augustinian; this virtue is supposed to be common to all Christians. What does indicate that she knows her Augustine is that she insists on a figurative reinterpretation of the advice given to Melibee which is limited to the theme of charity. She does not dismiss the counsel but reworks it until it accords with Christian doctrine in the same

manner that Augustine encourages Christians to read the Old Testament. According to

Augustine, if a passage in the Bible does not literally encourage virtue, it should be

reinterpreted until it does. Prudence accomplishes this despite the fact that the

counsellors who offered the advice meant it in much the same spirit as Melibee

interprets it; that he should revenge himself and make preparations for war.

Prudence follows Augustine's axiom once again when she asks Melibee for his

interpretation of the counsellor's advice that he "warnestoore [his] hous with gret

diligence" (VII 1330). Melibee understands only its literal sense that he should prepare

for war. Prudence shows him its figurative sense in an implicit illustration of

Augustine's command that "whatever appears in the divine Word that does not literally

pertain to virtuous behaviour or to the truth of the faith you must take to be figurative"

(*On Christian Doctrine* 3.10.14). Since following the physician's advice would have

led Melibee further into sin, Prudence suggests that he look for a figurative sense

behind the literal. According to her, Melibee should not make physical preparations

for war but should defend himself by securing the love of his subjects.

The principle that underlies Prudence's practice was first articulated by St. Paul

and was also quoted by Chaucer twice in the *Canterbury Tales*: "Al that is writen is

writen for oure doctrine" (Rom 15:4; VII 3441-2; X 1083). It is also behind

Augustine's interpretation of St. Paul's admonition that "the letter killeth, but the spirit

quickeneth" (2 Cor. 3:6 quoted in *On Christian Doctrine* 3.5.9). Augustine assumes

that everything in Scripture can be made to accord with the party line, so to speak.

Prudence has secularized Augustine's approach much as Chaucer does in the *Nun's*

Priest's Tale and the Retraction. The problem of deriving a proper sentence from a text which contradicts doctrine was an issue central to early Christian teaching which had to reconcile elements, often conflicting, in the Old Testament with the New. The method that St. Paul initiated and St. Augustine perfected was to make any contradictions figurative or allegorical. *Melibee* illustrates this method and it offers its own answer to this problem not only by urging Melibee to follow the doctrine but also by appropriating Augustinian hermeneutics.

Prudence is analogous to Augustine who instructs the Christian Melibee as to how to interpret advice which contradicts Christian teaching. When the counsellors tell Melibee to answer the wrong done him with another contrary act and to fortify his house, Prudence explains that he should understand the words figuratively: he should turn the other cheek and fortify his house with the love of his subjects. The counsellors meant the advice in its literal sense just as the authors of the Old Testament presumably meant "an eye for an eye" when they wrote it. Essentially, Paul, Augustine, and Prudence hollow the words out and insert Christian doctrine by making the New Testament the figurative core of the Old. In this way they reconcile contradictions and transform everything that was written into doctrine.

In sum, those who believe that Chaucer's intent in translating *Melibee* was to mock it overlook the prevailing attitudes of his audience who would have appreciated the text to a much greater extent than we might be inclined. They also mistake the importance of the issues discussed in the treatise. A tract on the proper method for choosing and listening to counsellors would have been extremely relevant to national

politics in the 1380's. Finally, the methods illustrated in the tale for the proper

extraction of doctrine also spoke to Chaucer's interest in the problem of the word's

relation to its referent. However, the answer which *Melibee* offers, and which I have

characterized as Augustinian, is not perfect and its shortcomings were rather obvious in

post-Ockham England. It is sound advice for a young king but it does not cover all of

the problems which an experienced poet would have encountered. This is not to say

that the tale is parodied by Chaucer nor does it indicate nominalist or anti-realist

inclinations on his part. In the coming chapters I will argue that the *Nun's Priest's*

Tale and the *Pardoner's Tale* constitute Chaucer's examination of the possible failures

of the system that is outlined in *Melibee*.

CHAPTER 5   "I shal telle yow what I mente"

The Nun's Priest's Conundrum

At the end of his tale, the Nun's Priest reminds his audience of St. Paul's axiom

that "al that writen is,/ To oure doctrine it is ywrite" and he invites his listeners to

"Taketh the fruyt, and lat the chaf be stille" (VII 3441-43). At first glance he seems to

be encouraging the same type of exegesis as Prudence teaches to Melibee. However,

we must beware because the Nun's Priest has carefully laid traps within his narrative.

Many critics have read the Nun's Priest's Tale "as a play between antitheses that

cannot finally be adjudicated" (Harwood 1986, 196).[34] At several points in the tale the

Nun's Priest offers the reader two contradictory truth claims and not only does he

prevent us from cancelling one but he demonstrates both to be true. I will discuss the

particular instances later. It is in this respect that the *Nun's Priest's Tale* is a critique

of the system which is articulated in *Melibee*. Whereas Prudence illustrates how two

conflicting texts can be made to have the same sentence through Augustinian exegesis,

the Nun's Priest exploits ambiguity in language in order to make the same text have

two meanings which are antithetical to each other. However, it is not a full assault on

Augustine's hermeneutic system because, where *Melibee* is concerned with how to

form a code of behaviour, the *Nun's Priest's Tale* is more about the ambiguous nature

of the sign and the subsequent difficulties in making truth claims about the world. I

will argue that the *Nun's Priest's Tale* is designed to provoke questions about how we

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[34]Others include Charles Muscatine, R.T. Lenaghan, Jill Mann 1975, and S.N. Brody.

understand the world and the extent to which language shapes our perception.

The tale told by the Nun's Priest also indicates the gap that had opened between de Meun and Chaucer with regards to the power of poetry. De Meun's Reason is certain that a reader can understand her symbols and will thereby be referred to a spiritual truth as a result. If this truth is missed, as with the case of the Lover, it is the reader's fault and not the sign's. Reason's assuredness is supported by the Augustinian ontological scheme, according to which true knowledge is of those forms or universals which are modelled on the divine ideas. The universals in the mind pre-exist the experience of things in the world. Experience does not cause the universal but rather reminds the memory that it already knew of them but had forgotten them at birth (*Confessions* 10.10-13). The implication of this system for poetry is that truth can be communicated easily because it will be recognized as such by listeners because it is already in place within their minds. Thus the poet reminds but does not teach. Further, because the symbol refers to a universal that is common to all people it should also have the same meaning for all healthy and uncorrupted minds.   Ockham denied the universal any such status; it is only a mental concept and nothing more. Moreover, the concept itself is dependent on the intuitive cognition of the thing, hence the universal derives from experience. This means that knowledge can be faulty if the cognition upon which it is based is flawed. To a certain degree, one person's concept will be similar to another's because the concept is formed through the experience of the thing, which is the same for everyone. But there is no guarantee that these concepts will be identical in all people (as there is under Augustine's epistemology).

The ramifications of Ockham's refutation of Augustinian realism are visible in the change of emphasis in the poetic apologies of de Meun and Chaucer. De Meun, secure of his symbol, blames the readers who must be "evil-minded" if they do not understand his allegory. Chaucer locates the source of the problem in his words and he tends to blame language itself rather than the audience for any failings. The Tales told by the Knight, the Summoner, and the Manciple are three examples of the power of language to derail from the course laid by a speaker. In each case a speaker's intentions are betrayed by the language that is designed to express them. In this manner, Chaucer demonstrates that the rules of the game had changed since de Meun wrote his poem by showing that an author's control over meaning is tenuous at best.

Unlike Arcite, the Summoner's Friar, and the Crow, the Nun's Priest has control over his language. He exploits ambiguity to create three conundrums. The first involves language in translation and Chauntecleer's mistranslation of the Latin saying "*Mulier est hominis confusio*" (VII 3164). The second instance is the Priest's discussion of free will under divine foreknowledge where, through a manipulation of descriptive language, he is able to imply that Chauntecleer is both fated and free. The third example occurs in the Priest's apology where he shows how he can create two opposed meanings within the same phrase (VII3252-66). In each case, the Priest offers us two possibilities but prevents us from deciding which one is the correct one because both are true despite the fact that they are antithetical to each other. He then draws attention to the paradoxes that he has crafted by quoting St. Paul and inviting us to decide on the tale's doctrine. In doing so the Priest leads the reader to a consideration

of ambiguity in language and to an understanding of its potential to deceive both

speaker and audience in the hope that we, like Chauntecleer, will not "wynke[n], whan

[we] sholde see" (VII 3431).

The Word Unsteady

The Fox's entry into Chauntecleer's yard has a very interesting effect not only

on the inhabitants but on their language as well. Prior to Russell's appearance, words

had a very precise meaning. For instance, when Chauntecleer crows, the text does not

record the semi-onomatopoeic "cockadoodledoo" but rather "The sonne ... is clomben

up on hevene/ Fourty degrees and oon, and moore ywis" (VII 3198-9). In her notes to

the *Nun's Priest Tale*, Susan Cavanaugh writes that the

> Kalendarium of Nicholas of Lynn, which Chaucer probably used here ... shows
> that on May 3 the sun was at 21°6' of **Taurus** (the bull, the second sign of the
> zodiac) and that at 9 A.M. in the latitude of Oxford the sun was at a height of
> 41°17'
>
> (939).

Chauntecleer's speech has a precise meaning and an extremely close relation to that

which it describes. After the Fox appears this changes; words become mere sounds

without meaning and language is limited to onomatopoeia. When Chauntecleer first

sees Russell he cries "Cok! cok!" (VII 3277). Even the humans are largely restricted

to noise: "Out! Harrow and waylaway!/ Ha, ha! The fox!" (VII 3380-1). The Fox's

entrance into the yard disrupts the close relation of words and their referents such that

words become mere imitations of sounds.

The Fox is adept at making things seem to be how he wants them to be and his language cloaks the deeds it describes rather than represents them. For instance, the Fox flatters Chauntecleer by telling him that he "han in musyk moore feelynge/ Than hadde Boece" (VII 3293-4) which is a misrepresentation of Boethius for whom music was more mathematical than emotive. He also says that he had Chauntecleer's parent's at his house without mentioning that they were dinner (VII 3297). The Fox is entirely confident in his ability to mask his deeds with ambiguous language so as to serve his own purpose even after his intentions have been exposed. When Chauntecleer escapes the Fox's maw, Russell once again tries to control appearances through language and he tells Chauntecleer "I dide it in no wikke entente./ Com doun, and I shal telle yow what I mente" (VII 3223-4). Even when the truth is readily apparent to all involved, the Fox tries to disguise it along with his intentions with a verbal explanation. His ability to turn almost any situation to his favour would make him an excellent political spindoctor.

I believe that it is because of the Fox's own attitude towards language that his presence is a catalyst that turns language into mere sound. The Fox's practices suggest that he understands that signifiers do not always have a clear or univocal relation with their signified and that this ambiguity is something that he can exploit. Through his ability to manipulate language, Russell can cover a deed with words in order to deceive his audience. The deed is obscured rather than illuminated by the word. As a consequence, words lose their precise meaning since they are no longer related to the deed. This is also what troubled de Meun about euphemism; because it screens the

action, the potential is always there that the reader will focus on the surface and not see through the screen to understand what is really being described. The Fox takes advantage of this and he uses euphemism to camouflage his wicked intentions.

Attitudes towards language had changed since de Meun's time with the result that poets such as Boccaccio and Chaucer lacked the surety of their literary forefathers. And where de Meun was confident that the language of his secular allegory could be used as a symbol by which to venerate the divine,[35] the *Nun's Priest's Tale* challenges this possibility. As is evidenced in "Lak of Stedfastnesse", Chaucer felt the disjunction of word and deed to be prevalent in his society. In "Stedfastnesse" Chaucer is primarily concerned with people failing to live up to their promises but the problem also extends to flatterers (like daun Russell) whose words do not accurately reflect reality but are aimed at manipulating others.

Chaucer's lack of confidence in the bond between word and referent is also manifest in the *Nun's Priest's Tale*. The threat that the Fox represents (for both Chauntecleer and language) is not temporary or occasional, instead the Priest demonstrates that it is omnipresent. This is signalled by two facts. First of all, Russell has been in the grove for three years which is probably most of Chauntecleer's life (VII 3216). Thus, the threat was already there waiting to puncture the protective enclosure of the yard even though the Fox only appears later. Secondly, at the end of the tale the

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[35]Remember that Reason used the word "cullions" in the context of a discussion designed to turn the Lover away from cupidinous love towards a love of all his fellow humans and, finally, God.

former order is not restored. Instead, Chauntecleer learns to navigate his way through

the world of the Fox by using the Fox's own methods against him. The Fox's ways

are thus shown to be the necessary mode of operation in this world. Hence, even

though the Fox's presence seems to be an anomalous intrusion into the yard, the Nun's

Priest illustrates that it is the norm.

The attitudes suggested by the Nun's Priest's narrative techniques also lend

credence to the notion that the ambiguous sign is the standard. The Priest is as adept at

manipulating language as the Fox is. The main difference between the two is, as I

shall argue, that the Nun's Priest's motives are to instruct us on the ambiguous nature

of language. The Fox puts his own spin on events so that there are two conflicting

accounts. Either Chauntecleer's parents were at his place for dinner, as he suggests, or

they were dinner. He then tries to pass his counterfeit version as real.

Like the Fox, the Nun's Priest can skilfully work his language. The first

example of his skill involves the Latin epigraph, *"Mulier est hominis confusio"*, and

Chauntecleer's erroneous translation (VII 3164-66). Chauntecleer's failing is that

while he can interpret the dream he does not apply its potential lesson. He tells

Pertelote that he "shal han of this avisioun/ Adversitee" but he then allows himself to

be diverted by her beauty (VII 3152-3). In doing so he proves the Latin epigraph to be

true even though he has misinterpreted it to mean "Womman is mannes joye and al his

blis" (VII 3166). His mistranslation of the epigraph completely transforms the meaning

so that the English contradicts the Latin.[36] However, the English translation is also

true of the situation since Pertelote is all of Chauntecleer's joy and bliss. The irony

stems from the fact that because the English version is true the Latin is also proved

since Chauntecleer's attraction to Pertelote leads him to "diffye both sweven and

dreem" which precipitates his fall (VII 3170). Thus, though antithetical to each other,

the Nun's Priest's narrative proves the two meanings to be nonetheless true. Paull

Baum's comment on Chaucer's puns also applies to this situation: "there is first a

recognition of the two or more possibilities, and a rapid balancing between them; then

the pleasure of seeing that either will fit; then the increased pleasure of seeing that both

will fit" (1956, 227). The Priest has made it impossible for the reader to decide which

interpretation is the right one since both work.

The Priest's allusion to the question of free will under divine foreknowledge is

another good instance of the Priest's ability to manipulate ambiguous material in order

to produce two conflicting but equally valid interpretations. He refers to the great

medieval debate on how to reconcile freewill with divine foreknowledge but states that

he "ne kan nat bulte it to the bren" and will therefore leave the issue to doctors of

divinity such as Augustine, Thomas Bradwardine, and Boethius (VII 3240). While

none of these thinkers dispensed with the notion of free will since it was crucial to the

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[36]I do not believe Chauntecleer's mistranslation to be manipulative mainly because he has
nothing to gain by it. For the opposite view, see Arthur T. Broes.

idea of merit and sin,[37] Augustine and Bradwardine stressed the primacy of grace over all. For Augustine, it is grace and not acts which makes eternal life possible ("On Grace and Free Will" 750). Indeed, merit is not even possible without grace ("Grace" 744).[38] Following Augustine, Bradwardine reasserted the primacy of grace over works in predestination as a challenge to the prevailing attitude of his contemporaries who held that "we are masters of our own free acts" (*De Causa Dei* XXXV, cited in Shepherd 278).

The problem for most medievals was how was divine foreknowledge compatible with free will? If God knows all that has happened, is happening, or will happen can we not infer that our future has already been mapped out? Yet, if this is so then there is no point to deliberating about our actions since we have no real choice. This is the dilemma that Boethius brings to Lady Philosophy in Book 5 prosa 1 of the *Consolation*. The compelling nature of Philosophy's answer accounts for the popularity of the *Consolation*. It hinges on two points. One is that all three modes of time are eternally present to God. The second is the distinction between conditional and simple necessity which the Nun's Priest alludes to in his discussion of the problem (VII 3245-40). Simple necessity involves necessary truths such as "all men are mortal" whereas

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[37]Without free will there can be no sin or merit since the source of the act is not in the person's will. If people have no choice then they cannot really be praised or blamed for their actions.

[38]Augustine expresses a similar notion in "On the Predestination of the Saints" where he writes that the "special calling or the elect is not because they have believed but in order that they may believe" (809).

conditional necessity is inferential, for example, "if you know someone is walking, it is

necessary that he is walking" (*Consolation* 5 pr.6). In the latter case, the observer

does not cause a action by observing it. In a similar manner, just because God knows

that a person will act a certain way does not mean that he causes that action. Thus, in

His eternal presence God sees (but does not cause) acts which have their source in the

human free will.

For Boethius, the notion that "the necessity of events is consequent upon their

being foreseen" is an error, the cause of which "is that people think that the totality of

their knowledge depends on the nature and capacity to be known of the objects of

knowledge" (*Consolation* 5 pr.4). Boethius stresses that this is not true and that

knowledge depends on the capacity of the knower to know. He then illustrates the

problem by way of an analogy which has its source in Augustinian Neoplatonism:

> man himself is beheld in different ways by sense-perception, imagination,
> reason and intelligence. The senses examine his shape as constituted in matter,
> while imagination considers his shape alone without matter. Reason transcends
> imagination, too, and with a universal consideration reflects upon the species
> inherent in individual instances. But there exists the more exalted eye of
> intelligence which passes beyond the sphere of the universe to behold the simple
> form itself with the pure vision of the mind
>
> (*Consolation* 5 pr.4).

Each level has its own capacity to know which includes those inferior manners but not

its superior. The point behind the analogy is to prove that knowledge does not depend

on the object but on the knower's capacities.

In the *Nun's Priest's Tale* Chauntecleer's ability to know is hampered, but the objects of knowledge (in this case, his dream along with the Latin epigraph) remain constant. The Fox knows that he can take advantage of Chauntecleer and that his signs can mask what they are supposed to represent. However, he cannot alter reality with his language, a point he seems oblivious to when he yells at his pursuers. In opening his mouth to say that he will eat the rooster he loses that possibility. Just as the Latin epigraph remains true despite Chauntecleer's mistranslation, Russell's words cannot alter reality; that is, he cannot eat Chauntecleer merely by saying that he will do so.

With regards to the problem of free will under foreknowledge, the Priest refrains from attempting a solution; he "wol nat han to do of swich mateere" (VII 3251). His fable likewise forces the reader from making any conclusions since either position is plausible, based on the evidence that the narrative offers. That the dream comes true seems to favour the Augustinian-Bradwardian view that "what that God forwoot moot nedes bee" (VII 3234). But Chauntecleer could have avoided his fate since it was within his means to do so. This suggests the Boethian notion that even though God foresaw, He did not cause the events to transpire. However, the fact that Chauntecleer does not avoid Russell leaves this latter possibility forever unactualized and therefore beyond our reach. Both solutions to the dilemma are possible but we as readers are left unable to decide based on the evidence that the Nun's Priest supplies. He has thereby created two possibilities, drawn attention to them, and then left it impossible for the reader to decide which is correct.

Lady Philosophy's discussion of free will does not accidentally include an

analogy which centres on universals; the theory of universals was crucial to problem of

free will because it at the root of the debate. For instance, for Ockham the question of

predestination is like that of the universal because we must ask of its ontological status

in the same way.[39] Boethius' distinction between the two necessities can also be framed

in terms of the universal and the individual; simple necessity operates at the level of the

universal while conditional applies to the individual. Simple necessity is that which can

be predicated of many,[40] for instance, the proposition that "all men are mortal" is a

universal truth. Conditional necessity is predicable of one.

De Meun toys with this same distinction in his apology, where he attempts to

evade blame for any of the anti-feminist sentiments in his text. He prevaricates by

telling his readers that his criticism is of women as a species and not as individuals:

> If you have found some words included here
> That seem malicious or satirical
> Against the ways of womankind, [I pray] that you
> Will not blame me therefor, nor scorn my book,
> Which is but written for instruction's sake.
> For certainly I have not said one thing,
> Nor would I say, in drunkenness or ire
> Or hate or envy, 'gainst a living dame;

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[39]Ockham's answer to the question of predestination is the same as his theory of universals since, according to him, neither is a real thing or possesses ontological status (*Predestination, God's Foreknowledge, and Future Contingents* 45).

[40]Cf. Aristotle's definition of "universal" as "that which is of such a nature as to be predicated of many subjects" (*On Interpretation* 5.17 a). The dispute in the middle ages concerned the status of the universal and not this definition which was accepted as authoritative.

> Since no man but the vilest of the vile
>
> Would have the heart a woman to despise.
>
> Men write such things that you and I may have
>
> Acquaintance with ourselves and know the truth
>
> When we find you and me described in books.

(*Romance* 70.52-64).

By shifting the emphasis onto the universal "womankind" as though it were distinct

from the individual instances, de Meun tries to escape charges of male chauvinism. If

jokes can have a philosophical bias, this one is realist because only an Augustinian

realist who believes in the ontological reality of the universal and its separation from

the individual could conceive of such a thing.

When Chaucer borrows from this passage he neglects to make de Meun's

distinction:

> My tale is of a cok, as ye may heere,
>
> That tok his conseil of his wyf, with sorwe,
>
> To walken in the yerd upon that morwe
>
> That he hadde met that dreem that I yow tolde,
>
> Wommennes conseils been ful ofte colde;
>
> Wommannes conseil broghte us first to wo
>
> And made Adam fro Paradys to go,
>
> Ther as he was ful myrie and wel at ese.
>
> But for I noot to whom it myght displese,
>
> If I conseil of wommen wolde blame,
>
> Passe over, for I seyde it in my game,
>
> Rede auctours, where they trete of swich mateere,
>
> And what they seyn of wommen ye may heere.

> Thise been the cokkes wordes, and nat myne;
>
> I kan noon harm of no womman divyne

(VII 3252-66).

Chaucer borrows his appeal to the anti-feminist authorities along with his claim to be
merely playing from de Meun (*Romance* 70.68-77) but leaves out de Meun's disclaimer
that he is not speaking of any living individuals, only womankind in general. Instead,
the Priest hides behind the guise of the reporter just as the Narrator does in the *General
Prologue*. He professes to be only a transcriber of the "cokkes wordes" and not their
source, even though it is patently clear that this is not true. Chauntecleer is enamoured
of his wife and, with the exception of the Latin epigraph which he does not understand,
nowhere does he utter anything hostile to women or their counsel. Further, it was not
Pertelote's counsel but her attractiveness which led Chauntecleer to defy his dream.
He does not take her advice that he should "purge ... bynethe and eek above" (VII
2953). He continues to believe that his dream is prophetic but ignores his
interpretation because of his attraction to Pertelote. Thus, Chauntecleer's downfall is
not due to the "conseil of his wyf" as the Priest maintains (VII 3253).

The Nun's Priest is misleading his audience at this point, perhaps because his
comments would insult the Prioress. Many critics have understood the Priest's
statement that he "kan non harm of no womman divyne" as a slight to the Prioress.[41]
The line has several potential meanings because of the ambiguous nature of both "I
kan" (which can mean either "I am able" or "I know") and "divyne" (which could be a

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[41]See, for instance, Lawrence Besserman, S.N. Brody, and Arthur T. Broes.

verb or an adjective). The two principle possibilities which arise out of this ambiguity
are: (1) "I am not able to declare (foretell, guess) any harm (wrong, sin, slander) of
any woman"; and (2) "I know no harm (sin, etc.) of any religious (godly) womman"
(Besserman 70). I will limit my commentary to the first option because I am not
convinced that the second sense ("Divine" adj.) was intended by Chaucer. "Divine" is
much more commonly used as a verb in his works than as an adjective and when it
does appear as an adjective it is only in connection with religious services (I 122, III
1719) or with God (*Boece* 5.m1 22, 4.pr6 161) and not with people.

To "divyne(n)" means both "to practice divination or foresee" and "to guess or
conjecture" but in this case it most likely indicates the latter. Consider, then, the
following possibilities: the Priest is saying that he cannot conjecture any harm of any
woman either because he does not know of any or because he is not in a position to do
so since he is the Nun's Priest and does not wish to insult her. Within the same line he
has both exculpated himself from blame by pleading ignorance of any sinning women
while simultaneously indicating that he does know of female sinners but cannot say,
thereby condemning the Prioress (possibly for her morals).[42]

Like the Fox, the Nun's Priest is able to manipulate ambiguous material to his
own ends. He ends his apology with a line which both supports his claims and
undermines them by saying, in effect, that he does not know of any sin done by any
woman but hinting at the opposite. By deploying this kind of doublespeak he is able to

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[42]The Prioress "clearly violates many of the rules of her order" (Florence Ridley 803). The
morality in her tale is likewise questionable.

declare that he is not a male chauvinist while at the same time condemning women.

Further, this is characteristic of his narrative as a whole as can be seen by his use of

the Latin epigraph and the discussion on free will under divine foreknowledge.

The Nun's Priest calls upon his audience to consider the paradoxes that he has

crafted when he quotes St. Paul:

> But ye that holden this tale a folye,
>
> As of a fox, or of a cok and hen,
>
> Taketh the moralite, good men.
>
> For Seint Paul seith that al that writen is,
>
> To oure doctrine it is ywrite, ywis;
>
> Taketh the fruyt, and lat the chaf be stille

(VII 3437-43).

Perhaps for our instruction (but also perhaps a little perversely) the Priest asks of us an

impossible task. In doing so he has entered into the debate which began in the headlink

to *Melibee* and which the Monk bumbled into with his lengthy parade of micro-texts

that all have the same sentence.

The Priest prompts the reader to decide on a moral even though he has carefully

crafted his narrative so that it contains irreconcilable but equally plausible

contradictions such that neither option can be cancelled. Perhaps the moral is that

making truth claims about the world is tricky business because our perception is

coloured by language which is necessarily ambiguous. In this way, the *Nun's Priest's*

Tale stands as counterpoint to the *Tale of Melibee*; while *Melibee*'s Augustinianism is

designed to control potentially contradictory interpretations, the *Nun's Priest's Tale*

points out that ambiguity cannot always be controlled. He demonstrates how multiple

morals can be derived from the same text by exploiting ambiguity. In doing so he calls

attention to the way language can take on a life of its own and multiply meaning

beyond the scope planned by the author. We are asked to pay attention to the dangers

involved in the author / text / reader paradigm, dangers which Chaucer indicates are

located in the language of the text itself. We can be duped like Chauntecleer unless we

become sensitive to the potential deceptiveness in language. The *Nun's Priest's Tale*

makes us aware of this problem so that, like Chauntecleer, we can avoid traps.

At the focus of Ockham's theory of terms, as well as his epistemology, is a

fundamental asymmetry between terms and things (Leff 1975, 237). This is of major

importance to a poet because it points to an absence of limitation on spoken and written

terms,[43] which in turn implies that signs can always change their meanings (Leff 1975,

126). The *Nun's Priest's Tale* offers its own signs that Chaucer, while still maintaining

a belief in orthodox realism, was also affected by the implications of Ockhamism.

Consider Chauntecleer's dream once again. It is couched in the language of

analogy, which as I have indicated previously, assumes a realist basis. Chauntecleer

sees something that is "lyk an hound" and whose colour is "bitwixe yelow and reed"

(VII 2900, 2902). The only way he can describe the beast is by analogy because he

has never seen a fox before. The question that he and Pertelote debate is whether this

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[43]Ockham also considered mental concepts to be "terms". They differ from spoken or written words, though, because concepts are natural terms which cannot change meaning (Leff 1975, 126).

dream signifies something real that exists outside of Chauntecleer's mind or within, as a symptom of indigestion. The Fox appears, suggesting the reality of the analogy but Chauntecleer cannot control it. The reason for his inability is his blindness to equivocity in language. Only once he learns how to use language deceitfully is he successful.

The Nun's Priest, as a narrator, asks us to decide on a moral for his fable. In other words, he wants us to decide on an analogy (fables fall under the subcategory of analogy that is subsumed under metaphor).[44] However, as I have argued, we are prevented from choosing, because the ambiguous nature of his language prevents any attempt at allegoresis from producing one single line of interpretation. There are several analogies that can be made but the Nun's Priest's ambiguity deliberately obscures them. Thus, the tale marks a sensitivity to the hazards of multivalence in language. Further, this awareness is not present in de Meun and can only be explained by the intercession of Ockhamism.

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[44]Parables are another example of this type of analogy. The two other subcategories of grammatical analogy are synecdoche and metonymy ("Analogie" *Dictionnaire de Théologie*).

CHAPTER 6   Turning Substance into Accident

The Pardoner's Tale

At the close of the *Pardoner's Tale* the Host threatens the Pardoner with

castration:

> I wolde I hadde thy coillons in myn hond
> In stide of relikes or of seintuarie.
> Lat kutte hem of, I wol thee helpe hem carie;
> They shul be shryned in an hogges toord!

(VI 952-5).

While these words have been recognized as a possible echo of Reason's defense against

charges of lewdness in the *Romance* (33.150-3), they are most often understood as a

reference to the Pardoner's supposed eunuchry.[45] I believe the allusion to the *Roman* to

be more than casual and that it signals the implicit but thoroughgoing comparison that

Chaucer has made with de Meun's text. The impetus behind Chaucer's engagement

with the *Roman* is once again his concern with the question of language and its relation

to morality and the problems subsequent to Ockhamism's upheaval of realist

philosophy. And where the *Nun's Priest's Tale* was concerned with the problem raised

for hermeneutics by the inherent ambiguity in language, the *Pardoner's Tale* examines

the obstacles that a hypocritical tale-teller places in between an audience and a moral

text. Further, I will argue that the Pardoner's hypocrisy represents a fundamental

disconnectedness between word and its referent in general which can jeopardize the

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[45]For instance, see Curry 67-8. As indicated by my qualifier, I do not believe the Pardoner
to be a eunuch for reasons which I will elaborate on shortly.

moral content of a tale.

After delivering his exemplum, the Pardoner requests that the pilgrims kiss his relics and ask for absolution. The reply that Harry Bailly offers does not accidentally centre on a threat to transform the Pardoner's "coillons" into relics. Instead, it is meant to call to mind the passage in the *Roman* where the Lover accuses Reason of lewdness because she used the term "coilles" in one of her fables. Reason, in her defence, argues that since language signifies by convention there is nothing inherently lewd about a word; if she had "relics 'cullions,' cullions 'relics' called" the Lover would now be objecting to "relic" as a filthy word (*Romance* 33.151).

Reason then explains that she meant the word symbolically in the context of a fable that was designed to prove that charitable love is superior to justice because, while love alone will suffice to maintain peace between people, justice will not. Justice reigned under Saturn's rule because mutual love held people together. Jupiter ended this golden era because he instituted a law which gave people over to their appetites, to their desires (*Romance* 93.38-49). As Chaucer writes, it was "Jupiter the likerous,/ That first was fader of delicacye" ("Former Age" 56-7). Under Jupiter, charitable love was replaced by cupidinous. In a sense, Jupiter's act of lawgiving is the equivalent of the content of the law itself because, according to Christian theology, it is only by the law that the sin is known (Rom 7:7). To create the law is already to have conceived the sin. This theological truth is symbolized by Jupiter's castration of Saturn. By throwing Saturn's testicles into the sea, Jupiter has cut off humankind from charitable love, thereby giving birth to venal love.

Reason's fable was supposed to illustrate to the Lover that love is superior to justice because love by itself will suffice, but justice alone (symbolized by Jupiter) will not. Reason then reinforces her point by relating a story about crooked judges.[46] In her defense she explains to the Lover that he should have understood that the literal meaning of the fable was only a vehicle for the expression of doctrinal truth. In other words, "cullions" was the chaff in which she expressed a higher truth. The Lover fails to appreciate her method and he misses her point because he has been corrupted by the God of Love's commandments concerning the proper language of sexuality. Her moral seed is rejected and it fails to engender spiritual fruit in her listener. As I have indicated previously, the Lover is a literalist. In this instance, his literalism manifests itself in his inability to see through the outer fable in order to perceive its inner truth. His eye is caught by a detail on the surface and, trapped at the literal level of signification, he rejects Reason and her message and continues to propagate that base form of venal love that was initiated by Jupiter's act.

After Reason has left him, the Lover continues on his quest, completely unable to understand anything beyond the literal. As a result he is blinded by the euphemisms which the God of Love requires him to use. Eventually, this leads him to the point where he venerates his "relics" without knowing that they are really genitalia:

> A little then I pushed aside the shroud

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[46]The tale that Reason tells is the story of Virginius and his daughter which is the source for the *Physician's Tale*. This offers further proof that Chaucer had Reason's speeches in mind when he was composing the two tales that make up fragment VI.

> That curtained the fair relics, and approached
>
> The image that I knew was close within.
>
> Devotedly I kissed the sacred place.

(Romance 99.203-6).

De Meun implies that the Lover's corruption stems from his views on what constitutes a proper language of sexuality. For de Meun, language is a neutral medium and, because it signifies by convention, slang terms like "coilles" can be sublimated towards a higher purpose. If the process goes astray, it is the fault of listeners like the Lover whose abashment prevents him from a fuller understanding.

Normally, we are told, the Pardoner's dupes find themselves in a position that is analogous to the Lover's as they venerate his relics without knowing what they are. As the Host says, the Pardoner would make him kiss his "olde breech,/ And swere it were a relyk of a seint" (VI 948-9). However, there is more to the connection between the Lover and the Pardoner's audience than this similarity, in that all are shown to be literalists who reject the spiritual or figurative meaning of the fables they are told. In his prologue, the Pardoner explains how he caters to his listener's desires by promising that his relics can multiply material goods (VI 347-75). He tells people that they cannot benefit from his relics unless they have first been absolved (by him, of course). Hence, he prompts his audience to penitence by offering them material gain, despite the fact that his sermon is always aimed against covetousness. Through an appeal to their appetites the Pardoner encourages his listeners to neglect the figurative meaning of his exemplum. The moral becomes as inconsequential to them as it is to him. In this

manner the Pardoner stands like the Old Man in his tale as he points his audience up

the "croked wey" towards death in the form of material wealth (VI 761).

Within the *Canterbury Tales* the Pardoner reveals his hypocrisy and the

fraudulent nature of his relics. However, as I shall argue, even though the pilgrims are

now in the know they still miss the moral import of the Pardoner's tale and can still be

characterized as literalists. Further, the *Pardoner's Tale* is designed to manoeuvre its

audience into a position analogous to that of the Lover. It accomplishes this feat by

turning Reason's argument (that language signifies by convention) against her.

The Pardoner's attempt to sell his admittedly fake relics after his confession has

proved to be a source of consternation to critics, many of whom have offered various

psychological explanations for his behaviour.[47] I suspect that the Pardoner is less of a

psychologically real persona than many of these explanations suggest. David Lawton

has written that "the relation of the Pardoner to Faux-Semblant is so close that he can

scarcely be considered, in his *Prologue*, as an entirely independent creation" (29). I

would tend to agree with this statement and add that the Pardoner, more than the other

pilgrims, is a textual creation like his allegorical forefather. Once the Pardoner is

considered as a part of the *Pardoner's Tale* rather than a separate entity, the problem of

motivation clears up. Instead of trying to justify his erratic behaviour we can see that

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[47]Rationalizations for the Pardoner's confession and subsequent attempt to sell his fake relics have ranged from Kittredge's explanation that the Pardoner has had a "Paroxysm of agonized sincerity" (216-17) to Donald Howard's idea that the Pardoner's attempt is an extravagant gamble motivated by an unconscious will to lose (1976, 353). Surveys of the various attempts to explain the Pardoner's motivation appear in Sedgewick and Halverson.

the confession plays a role in the tale as a whole and that Chaucer meant to make the

Pardoner's Tale a problem for us.

The Pardoner's Relics

False relics posed a serious problem in the middle ages. Because a relic was

needed to consecrate an altar the issue of a relic's authenticity was involved (quite

literally) with the Church's foundations. Aviad Kleinberg has shown that there was a

similar difficulty with regards to the canonization of saints in the later middle ages.

Because candidacy for sanctity often relied on potentially fallible eye-witnesses there

could be no absolute certainty that the candidate actually deserved canonization. As a

solution to the dilemma, theologians such as Innocent IV proposed that even though

error seems unavoidable it is not a damnable error to venerate a false saint because

"still God would accept prayers offered, in good faith" (qtd. in Kleinberg 197).

Boccaccio echoes this belief in his tale about the fraudulent master Ciapperello da Prato

who was venerated as a saint after he convinced his confessor of his worthiness on his

deathbed:

> great is God's mercy towards us; who, not regarding our errors, but the purity
>
> of intention, whenever we make choice of an improper mediator, hears us as
>
> well as if we had applied ourselves to one truly a saint
>
> *(Decameron* 1.1).

Thus, even if a saint was erroneously canonized the "faithful believer acquires merit

through the mediation of the papal sentence" which declared the sanctity in the fi st

place (Kleinberg 198). Similarly, according to *The Catholic Encyclopædic Dictionary*, honour "given in good faith to a false relic is nevertheless profitable to the worshipper and in no way dishonours the saint" ("Relic").

Even when the Pardoner's audience is unaware that his relics are fakes, he does not encourage this sort of good faith. Rather, he appeals to their desire to accumulate wealth. In the case of the Canterbury pilgrims, the Pardoner preempts the necessary faith by being forthright about his dishonesty. The Pardoner takes Reason's argument and turns it inside out in two ways. The first involves Reason's mention of the orthodox notion that signification is based on convention. The Pardoner's relics mimic this system in that his relics have their signification grounded in human will; they mean what he says that they mean. There is a difference between Reason's role as original name-giver and the Pardoner's practice in that she is naming whereas he is altering people's perceptions through a fraudulent renaming. However, in a world with a lot of faith and no carbon dating it would be next to impossible to distinguish between a real and a counterfeit relic. In addition, after a papal bull had been issued, the bones would be, for all intents and purposes, that which the Pardoner said they were. The Pardoner's revelation of his relics' fraudulence has the effect of inducing scepticism in his audience. And, by revealing that his relics, like Reason's "coilles", have their meaning grounded in human will the Pardoner manages to make "relic" a filthy word. This is evidenced by the Host's words after the Pardoner requests that they all kiss his relics where he swears by the true cross, that arch-relic, and then associates relics with excrement.

The Pardoner's Cullions

The Pardoner shares many similarities with the cooks whom he cites in his

sermon for accommodating gluttonous appetites:

Thise cookes, how they stampe, and streyne, and grynde,

And turnen substaunce into accident

To fulfille al thy likerous talent!

(VI 537-40).

When he does not reveal his true nature he fuels appetites, encouraging his audience to

neglect the moral of his tale. When he does confess, his immorality taints the message

and his audience discards the moral sentence along with the teller. In either case, his

message fails to engender fruit. However, he can produce the seed; the tale is moral.

In this sense it is important to note that the Pardoner is not a eunuch, as popular

conception would have it. Walter Curry was the first to uncover the Pardoner's

"secret" but many have followed, not realizing that Curry's own evidence does not

prove eunuchry.[48]

Curry finds an analogue for the Pardoner's physical description in Antonius

Polemon Laodicensis' works on physiognomy. According to Polemon, "glaring eyes

prominently set ... indicate a 'man given to folly, a glutton, a libertine, and a

drunkard'" (qtd. in Curry 57). Curry also cites the Middle English version of the

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[48]Other critics who believe the Pardoner to be a eunuch include Carolyn Dinshaw, E. Talbot Donaldson, and Robert Miller. The notion is widespread, however. For a very convincing refutation of the Pardoner as eunuch theory see C. David Benson. He also challenges those critics who hold that the Pardoner is a homosexual.

Secreta Secretorum, which states that eyes such as the Pardoner's signify shamelessness

(Curry 57). Additionally, Polemon writes that

> Long and soft hair, immoderately fine in texture and reddish or yellow in colour
> "indicates an impoverished blood, lack of virility, and effeminacy of mind; and
> the sparser the hair, the more cunning and deceptive is the man"
>
> (qtd. in Curry 58).

Thus Curry accounts for the Pardoner's glaring eyes and long thin yellow hair.

However, none of this information provides any clues concerning the Pardoner's

reproductive capacities.

As the basis for his claim that the Pardoner is a eunuch, Curry begins with the

description of the Pardoner in the *General Prologue*:

> A voys he hadde as smal as hath a goot,
>
> No berd hadde he, ne nevere sholde have;
>
> As smothe it was as it were late shave.
>
> I trowe he were a geldyng or a mare
>
> (I 688-91).

Curry extrapolates from this statement that the Pardoner is a gelding or "what is known

to mediaeval physiognomists as a *eunuchus ex nativitate*" (59). His specificity derives

from the distinction made by physiognomists between man-made eunuchs, who can still

retain noble characteristics, and the natural eunuch who is usually evil. Curry does not

delve into the implications of the other option to gelding, namely that the Pardoner

might somehow be a mare.

A more serious problem with Curry's theory is that, in actuality, he has not

proven that the medieval audience would have recognized the Pardoner as a eunuch based on physiognomy. The evidence that Curry himself provides identifies the Pardoner with folly, gluttony, etc., and not with eunuchry as he would have us believe. G. G. Sedgewick noted this discrepancy in 1940 but still accepted Curry's conclusion.[49]

As further proof for his theory, Curry cites another of Polemon's texts which describes a eunuch who had wide open eyes, "a prominent forehead, a long, thin neck, and his cries were like those of a woman. He took particular care of his person by nurturing his abundant hair (qtd. in Curry 62). The similarities between Chaucer's and Polemon's descriptions are close enough for Curry to suggest that Chaucer might have had a copy of Polemon at his elbow as he wrote (63). However, there are discrepancies. The Pardoner does not have a prominent forehead and his hair is very thin (I 676-79) as opposed to Polemon's thick haired eunuch. As for the long, thin neck, the Pardoner's description says nothing. The only mention of his neck is by the Pardoner himself who only says that he stretches it when preaching (VI 395) which indicates nothing about its length. Furthermore, the similarities between the two characterizations do not necessarily indicate that the Pardoner is a eunuch. As C. David Benson points out, the Pardoner's high voice (I 688) does not necessarily point to castration; Absolon, of the *Miller's Tale*, whose singing voice is "gentil and smal" (I

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[49]Sedgewick writes, "[w]ith every deference to Mr. Curry, for instance, one may again point out that his researches do not reveal the 'secret' of Chaucer's Pardoner" (195). However, Sedgewick accepts the fact that the Pardoner is "defective physically" and he bases his reading of the Host's words at the end of the *Tale* on the Pardoner's lack of testicles (212, 216).

3360) is an effeminate man who is presumably sexually functional (Benson 340-41).

As Curry has already made clear, the Pardoner's glaring eyes (I 684) associate him

with shamelessness and not eunuchry. The Pardoner does take care of his appearances:

"Hym thoughte he rood al of the newe jet" (I 682) but, once again, this is not an

indication of eunuchry. Hence, none of the coincidental attributes point to any

anatomical abnormality.

Curry's evidence is not as strong as one would assume, considering the wide

acceptance of his theory by critics. There is no conclusive proof that would justify

specifying that the Pardoner is a eunuch (let alone a *eunuchus ex nativitate*).

Moreover, the specificity of his argument overdetermines Curry's interpretation of

certain elements. For instance, Curry's reading of the Pardoner as eunuch forces him

to read the Pardoner's claims to virility as ironic. There are two such claims: the

Pardoner interrupts the Wife of Bath to say he almost wed a wife (III 166) and later

boasts that he will "have a jolly wenche in every toun" (VI 453). For Curry, these are

nothing but "pathetic attempts" to conceal his eunuchry (68).

The Pardoner is neither literally or figuratively a eunuch. At the figurative

level he can produce seed but the problem is that it is cast aside never to give fruit

because his immorality stands in the way of his moral text. According to Reason,

writing is supposed to be both pleasing and instructional. If the doctrine is not readily

apparent, we should apply allegoresis to make it so. With the *Pardoner's Tale*,

Chaucer has inverted Reason's theory so that the audience rejects the moral along with

the teller rather than discarding the fictional shell. Once again, the Pardoner's listeners

are in a position that is analogous to that of the Lover since they cannot pierce the outer

shell to reach the fruit. In sum, Chaucer is able to turn Reason's system on its ear by

way of a demonstration of how a lack of alignment between word and deed can

discount any moral a tale might hold.

Furthermore, the Pardoner's hypocrisy is representative of a more general

problem in language as it was perceived after Ockham. Once Ockham severed the

dependence of grammatical analogy on analogies in things, the relations that language

denoted were no longer considered to be ontological realities. Signs lose this guarantor

for their referents and all that is left to hold signifier and signified together is

convention.

False Seeming is similar to the Pardoner in his hypocrisy. However, the lack of

connection between word and deed that False Seeming represents still has an anchor.

We understand his role in the story and can depend on the analogy for clarification;

when we read the False Seeming is needed to slay Evil Tongue, we understand that a

certain amount of deceptiveness is required if the love affair is to be consummated

since gossip could ruin the Lover's chances.

With the Pardoner, we have no such point of reference. We do not know if he

is a gelding, a mare or something else, or if he is even a cleric.[50] As Lisa Kiser has

pointed out, he might even be lying about the success of his lies (144). Chaucer has

accomplished this irreferentiality in the Pardoner by permitting him to fashion himself

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[50]As the Pardoner himself says, he "stonde lyk a clerk in [his] pulpet" (VI 391). The use
of the simile suggests that he is counterfeiting and is not a real cleric.

entirely out of words. As Lee Patterson writes, both the Wife of Bath and the

Pardoner are distinct from the other pilgrims because they, more than any other,

"create themselves not merely in language but as language, giving to a generalized

mode of speaking a unique voice that implies character (360-01). The same argument

can be made for False Seeming and Duenna, the prototypes for Chaucer's creations.

The differences between False Seeming and the Pardoner offers further evidence of the

ways in which Ockham had altered people's perception about the nature of language.

False Seeming as language still maintains a clear point of reference, while the Pardoner

does not.

CHAPTER 7   "To knytte up al this feeste and make an ende"

Conclusions

After the Manciple has told his tale the Host requests a fable from the Parson in order to end the contest. To this the Parson answers the Host as follows:

> Thou getest fable noon ytoold for me,
>
> For Paul, that writeth unto Thymothee,
>
> Repreveth hem that weyven soothfastnesse
>
> And tellen fables and swich wrecchednesse.
>
> Why sholde I sowen draf out of my fest,
>
> Whan I may sowen whete, if that me lest?

(X 31-6).

His reply and subsequent tale have been understood by some to be ironic.[51] However, the general consensus today is that the *Parson's Tale* is unironic in its meaning and that it is, in Robert Knapp's words, a "perhaps fully appropriate, even decorous" c'ose to the *Canterbury Tales* (45).[52] However, it is more than decorous; the *Parson's Tale* and Chaucer's Retraction are the natural conclusion of his engagement with the question of language and its relation to morality. Further, it marks the reestablishment of the distinction between secular and Scriptural exegesis.

The four-fold Christian hermeneutic that was first mentioned by Augustine and later elaborated by Aquinas was supposed to be applicable to the Bible only, according

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[51]For an ironic reading, see Judson B. Allen. Similarly, John B. Finlayson argues that the tale is satiric and is therefore not authoritative.

[52]Others who believe the tale to be a sincere utterance include Lee W. Patterson, James Dean, and Paul G. Ruggiers.

to them. The poets glossed over this prohibition to claim (as Dante does) that this type

of exegesis could be applied to their poetry. In doing so, they accord a generally high

status to secular poetry. For poets such as these, poetry could be a bearer or carrier of

truth and they placed it within the same realm as Scripture. The assumption behind

such assertions is that these poets are secure in their belief that they can control their

texts once they had been released into the world. De Meun's Reason has a moral

behind her fable and she is confident that the reader should understand it, no matter

what type of language it is encased in (unless, of course, the reader has been corrupt,

in which case he or she must be turned around before true understanding can occur).

This confidence, as I have argued, was demolished by Ockhamism. The

transformation is clearly visible in instances where Chaucer borrows from Dante. For

instance, compare Chaucer's use of a passage from Dante. Dante describes his

activities as a writer using the following metaphor:

> For better waters heading with the wind
> My ship of genius now shakes out her sail
> And leaves that ocean of despair behind.

Dante (*Purgatory* 1.1-3).

Chaucer uses the same metaphor but with telling changes:

> Owt of thise blake wawes for to saylle,
> O wynd, of wynd, the weder gynneth clere;
> For in this see the boot hath swych travaylle,
> Of my connyng, that unneth I it steere

(*Troilus* 2.1-4).

Whereas Dante is guided by the heavens in his poetry, Chaucer is on his own, and he knows that he does not have full control over his poem and that he can barely steer it.

Ockham's reversal of Augustinian epistemology effectively localized the universal symbol. De Meun and Dante counted on their language to illuminate those symbols which were supposedly universal to all people. Since, for Ockham, the universal is derived from experience of things in the world and not from models in the divine mind, there is no guarantee that a poet's symbol will mean the same thing to any given reader. Language thus becomes the focus of the poet's concerns, because it is the locus for the potential misunderstandings. The increase in international communication and relations in the latter half of the fourteenth century would have substantially increased the size of an author's community as well, placing an added stress on an author's sense of communal ties and his ability to communicate his message effectively through common values and assumptions. This would have strengthened faith in the Ockhamist epistemology because it would have proven that the universality of the universal symbol is not necessarily a self-evident truth.

Accordingly, when Chaucer engages the problem of morality in fiction that he encountered in de Meun, he shifts his concerns onto the nature of language itself. The *Nun's Priest's Tale* exemplifies the many ways in which the inherent ambiguity in language can prevent a reader from truly understanding a poet's intentions. The *Pardoner's Tale* is an illustration of a problem that was endemic to the post-Ockham conception of language. Because of the Pardoner's hypocrisy his moral is cast away. His hypocrisy symbolizes the fundamental irreference of language because it involves a

lack of connection between word and deed (or reference in general). Through a sustained involvement with the *Roman de la Rose*, the *Pardoner's Tale* shows the marks of Ockhamism and the changes that it had wrought on conceptions of epistemology, linguistics, and the question of language's relation to morality.

The Retraction is not mere convention, designed only to establish an author's canon; rather it is attached to the *Canterbury Tales* because Chaucer meant what he said. It is the natural outcome of his thinking about fiction and morality. In sum, it is not so much a repudiation of fiction as evidence of Chaucer's understanding that he cannot control his fictions and prevent them from "sown[ing] into synne" (X 1086). This is why he can do nothing other than revoke them. Unlike Scripture, his fictions lack any sort of guarantor of meaning. Whereas Scriptural allegoresis will always point to the Word, Chaucer's fictions refer only to other words. This is why he can do nothing other than revoke all of his fictions which do not unambiguously venerate Christ.

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