

RETRACTION AS REDEMPTION: PENANCE AND PROGRESSION IN
CHAUCER'S RETRACTIONARY FORM

by

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Katie Jo LaRiviere

April 2012

DEDICATION

I wish to dedicate this work to my husband, whose sacrifices toward my success are innumerable. Thank you, Romeo, for your endless support and encouragement; for long days and nights caring for our daughter as I studied; and for your willingness to prioritize my dreams. FTFF.

And also to my parents, whose belief in me has never wavered, and whose lives of hard work and sacrifice have made this possible.

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ABSTRACT

At least four of Chaucer's pivotal texts, *Boece*, *Troilus and Criseyde*, and the *Legend of Good Women*, but especially the *Canterbury Tales*, illustrate Chaucer's navigation of, primarily, a universal-individual tension, among the various problems facing the Church in England in the late 14th Century. I contend that Chaucer's final resolution of this tension centers on the Church's sacrament of reconciliation as he considers themes of discernment and penance through the "Nun's Priest's Tale" and the "Parson's Tale." My reading and analysis of parts of these four seminal texts, particularly the retractions contained therein, contribute to the notion of a Church run in a simultaneously successful and unsuccessful systematized nature through the crisis of the late 14th century. I view Chaucer's retractions as a method of expression of his awareness and judgment of the Church-in-crisis, even as he maintains his orthodoxy.

It is my intention, in this thesis, to elucidate Chaucer's negotiation of the universal-individual tension through analysis of the aforementioned texts, to highlight the dynamism and progression of his work, and to demonstrate an understanding of Chaucer's ultimate comment upon this tension as witnessed in his "Retraction." It is my final argument of this thesis that through a progressive study of retraction as a *form* in Chaucer's work, that form becomes, for Chaucer, a sacramental penance. Rather than a mere recantation or redaction of prior work, or a conventional revision of reader-construction, Chaucer demonstrates the form of retraction itself as a penitential rite, and as such, retraction becomes a satisfying approach, at least for Chaucer, to resolving the universal-individual tension.

CULTURAL PRESSURES IN LATE MEDIEVAL ENGLAND: UNIVERSAL-
INDIVIDUAL TENSION AND CHAUCER, THE SUBJECT

“I die the King’s good servant, but God’s first.”
St. Thomas More, 1535¹

Although the final words of Thomas More come more than one hundred years after the work of Geoffrey Chaucer, they capture with poignant austerity the tensions of the late medieval mind. The circumstances which would bring More to this conclusion are those with which Chaucer’s work is ever in processes of negotiation; they are the two-fold central tension of the medieval Catholic Church institution which can be considered in terms of Power and Authority on the one hand, and the Universal and the Individual on the other. Throughout the Middle Ages, these two essential tensions were revealed in multiple and varying ways, often manifesting themselves as “systems” of Church operation and organization. At times, such systems were created to address the tension, as in the case of the creation of mendicant religious orders. Other times, systems were created by the tension itself, as in the case of what is known as the benefit of clergy. In either case, the balance of tension was subject to the human influence of these various systems and was faced with the regular potential for corruption, heresy, and failure.

From its inception, one of the most significant difficulties facing Christianity, and by extension, the philosophy of the medieval mind, was a carefully balanced tension between the universal and the individual. This motif takes multiple forms, manifesting itself in some of the Church’s most important practices and doctrines along with

¹ These are Sir Thomas More’s reported last words. See the Saint Thomas More Society website.

medieval scholasticism and politics². According to Betsy Price, the “tension and antagonism between the religious and non-religious components of medieval culture, its Church and State, its Latin and vernacular languages, were a creation of the western Christian cultural environment of the Middle Ages” (ix). For, each of the manifestations of the universal-individual tension was the result of the medieval perspective of the divine Will. The universal structures of the world were seen, together, as the manifestation of God’s Will, and as such could be viewed simultaneously as separate “systems” and interwoven parts of the same universal force. Within the framework of late medieval society, many of the institutional systems of Christianity were disrupted—and sometimes corrupted—by those seeking promotion of either side of the tension, rather than maintaining its balance.

The systems I will discuss in this chapter are those which have distinct effects upon the work of Geoffrey Chaucer, whose methods of negotiating a particular understanding of these systems and their balance are the foundation for my arguments regarding his “Retractions.” It is my view that at least four of Chaucer’s pivotal texts, *Boece*, *Troilus and Criseyde*, and the *Legend of Good Women*, but especially the *Canterbury Tales*, illustrate Chaucer’s navigation of, primarily, the universal-individual tension, among the problems facing the Church in England in the late 14th Century. Further, I contend that Chaucer’s final resolution of this tension centers on the Church’s sacrament of reconciliation as he considers themes of discernment and penance through the “Nun’s Priest’s Tale” and the “Parson’s Tale.” My reading and analysis of parts of these four seminal texts, particularly the retractions contained therein, contribute to the

² See B.B. Price’s *Medieval Thought*, page 125.

notion of a Church run in a simultaneously successful and unsuccessful systematized nature through the crisis of the late 14th century. I view Chaucer's retractions as a method of expression of his awareness and judgment of the Church-in-crisis, even as he maintains his orthodoxy. It is my intention, in this thesis, to elucidate Chaucer's negotiation of the universal-individual tension through analysis of the aforementioned texts, to highlight the dynamism and progression of his work, and to demonstrate an understanding of Chaucer's ultimate comment upon this tension as witnessed in his "Retraction." However, immersion in the context of these works is crucial to grasping what David Aers and Lynn Staley have called the "nuance[e] that will be noticed only by those who seek to discover the relation of the writing or action in question to the particular range of discourses and practices it assumes" (4). To understand the socio-religious zeitgeist of the Middle Ages is to begin to understand Chaucer; thus, in this vein, I shall first demonstrate the pressures of Chaucer's social environment in terms of a universal-individual tension so that I might explicate more deeply the progression of his work as well as its final resolution.

The tension defined in Chaucer's time is a result of what Haidu terms the two "models of subjectivity [which] appear early in the Middle Ages" (9). These models of subjectivity are the subject with agency and the subject of abjection; they create the universal-individual tension because these two paradigms have to do with the subject's freedom. That is, while the subject with agency is, in a sense, free to be intentional and to act on intention, the subject of abjection lacks the freedom of action and intent—he is, rather, controlled by his universal. Chaucer's work is steeped in this conflict; some

individuals are subjugated by their oaths to their king, some by their oaths to God, and some, such as our poet, live under both constraints. Chaucer's negotiation of these constraints is a progressive and developing motion, and his texts reflect this evolution in sometimes mysterious ways. Indeed, as Haidu observes, "texts...are strange, unpredictable, polyvocal subjects, as constituted in contradiction as the human subjects who produce them" (5). My intention is to delimit some of the mystery of these texts, such that the final resolution I have determined in Chaucer's "Retraction" will be comprehensible. I begin by examining the socio-religious environment which produced Chaucer, and by extension, his literature.

Perhaps the most effective way to describe medieval Catholicism is as a growing, shifting, and developing set of "systems" which struggled to maintain its balance within Norman Cantor's "Medieval Triangle" of Nobility, Church, and Middle Class (Cantor 1994 xiii). Peter Haidu, in *The Subject: Medieval Modern*, confirms the image of the triangle, yet describes it as inverted, with the nobility and clergy resting on the singular point represented by the peasants and, as Haidu terms it, the "complex" class: "While clergy and nobility both live by capturing the fruits of peasant labor, the value-systems of their ideologies are sufficiently antagonistic to make of them different social agencies" (12-5). This imagery is accurate on multiple levels, but especially as it pertains to the delicate balance of the central tension of the medieval social and political world: that of the universal and the individual.

The Catholic Church found itself coping with sudden social acceptance at the rise of Constantine and a subsequent explosion of membership which grew exponentially until the late 1400's, when a great schism of faith issued in the Protestant reformation. Like the sporadic patching of a breached levy, the Catholic Church's attempts to negotiate growth and diversity were efforts to deal with social tensions mired in politics, war, diversity, and heresy. Indeed, according to Thomas Bokenkotter, "The Church was faced with the problem of how to stay in touch with its origins and preserve its unity and continuity with the original apostolic witness" (30). In the late Middle Ages, the Catholic Church's religion was a collection of doctrinal systems born out of the teachings of Christ and the faith of the apostles; it was theorized and vindicated by Church fathers and doctors, and disseminated to the faithful lay masses. Understandably, the religio-cultural systems created by the early Church were not necessarily created with mindfulness of the unforeseen problems of heresy, diversity, war, or massive and unprecedented growth. Bokenkotter relates the vulnerability of the Church upon these unforeseen circumstances: "There was a real danger of its tradition being swamped in a mass of conflicting interpretations of the meaning of Christ's life and resurrection" (30). Thus, the Church's systems were sometimes rendered dangerous by corruption, necessitating the creation of new systems that could better address the zeitgeist within orthodox doctrine; it is a process that occurred (and yet still takes place) over and again.

The term "systems" signifies the variety of approaches the Church used in order to maintain control and authority in the face of myriad necessary adaptations. Some of these systems included the formation of mendicant orders, some were formulated in

terms of Church law, some manifested in “holy” wars. Each of the systems of the medieval Church was born out of differing circumstances and attitudes, but all were responses to or created by the medieval philosophical tension between the universal and the individual. However, so often individual systems of the Church, whether cultural, moral, or spiritual, are taken to be the entirety of the Church’s religious doctrine. The Church has always stressed, from the beginning, that systematic problems with the human-run Church are not a sign of fallibility of its origin, Jesus Christ, or of its whole. For this reason, any system created by the medieval Church or by her cooperative nations must necessarily be defined in separate terms from her doctrine. Doctrines, or teachings of the faith and its principles, are not equivalent to systems created as interpretations of them. At times these principles exhibit intersection, but they are not wholly correlated. For example, though the doctrine of just war served as a cause (and excuse) for the Crusades, it cannot be said to correspond to the Crusades in their totality (especially the lattermost of these, occurring during the Papal schism³); nor is it defined by them. This distinction is vital to Chaucer’s work in particular, because he consistently demonstrates an acute awareness of his situation within the systems of Catholic religion in terms of their separation from its doctrine; he exalts the systems of orthodox Catholicism through key figures of the Canterbury pilgrimage, even while he satirizes corrupt systems through others, all within the larger framework of what he views as a valid religious doctrine.

One system of the medieval Church illustrated by Chaucer in the *Tales* exemplifies this principle fittingly: that of monastic life and especially its avowed

³ Peter Haidu has even asserted that the Crusades “were a form of export ‘dumping’ of surplus violence” following the Peace Movement of the ninth and tenth centuries (31).

poverty. As Bernard Hamilton observes, “The vow of personal poverty was taken by all monastic clergy, whose way of life was the model to which all lay piety aspired” (65). That is, the monastic brotherhood rejected individual property in order to model their lives on their universal figure, Jesus Christ. However, Hamilton subsequently demonstrates the loophole in the vow of poverty which was the answer of some monastic orders to the hardship imposed by it; the “corporate ownership” of property effectively nullified the vow. Thus, according to Hamilton, the amassed communal property of religious communities “was seen as the abuse of a valid ideal” (65). Chaucer’s ability to separate, in this very situation, particular (worldly) systems from the (divine) doctrine of faith is the distinction upon which his writing hinges; it is the reason Chaucer’s orthodoxy can be maintained despite his shrewd criticisms. Recognition of this particularly Chaucerian move likewise serves as acknowledgement of his own attempts to navigate the central medieval tension between the universal and the individual.

Church doctrine was and is a universal teaching, meant for all believers in all places and times. Yet the Church (its namesake literally meaning “universal”⁴), as its membership grew exponentially during the Middle Ages, also recognized the need to accommodate its new and diverse populations. In her book, *Medieval Thought*, B. B. Price discusses the Church’s constant state of self-definition against numerous other philosophical and faith traditions⁵. Necessarily, the Church was tasked with maintaining its universal self-characterization. To this end, Price demonstrates the Church’s emphasis on two “strands” of Christianity; one is based on the “guidance and redemption for the

⁴ See the Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraph 830, and Price, page 24.

⁵ Price lists Judaism, pagan Roman cults, and Greek philosophy among these.

community,” while the other “would tend to stress change and redemption for the *individual*” (26, her italics). Based on this dual emphasis, Church leaders approved individual systems on more local terms; although not always by the most efficacious or beneficial means, these were motions toward recognition of the individual. Still, the Church also resisted these same systems, which were often individual expressions of universal doctrine, for multiple reasons: they were difficult to oversee, they were sometimes formed in misunderstandings of doctrine at best and heresy at worst, and they occasionally involved entire monarchies. Thus, as Norman Cantor describes the situation in his discussion of medieval social paradox,

Never before and rarely since was there such intense evangelical feeling and popular enthusiasm about the Christian message among ordinary people. Instead of exulting in and channeling this piety and devotion, the top structure of European intellectuals...chose to condemn it as being infected with superstition and idolatry and formulated programs to eradicate much of it in the name of purifying reforms. (1993 564)

While Cantor illustrates this paradox in quite negative terms, his comment demonstrates the essentially panicked reaction of the Church to the unprecedented growth and diversity she experienced throughout the late Middle Ages. Unlike the kings of the burgeoning populations of the major monarchies of England, France, and Germany, along with the multiple city-states of Italy, the Church felt a responsibility and authority over *all* Christians. In order to assert and protect this authority, the Church relied upon lay adherence to strictly hierarchic systems within each of its bureaucracies as well as the central hierarchy of each parish, most notably that of the Vatican.

The medieval Church’s hierarchical arrangement, though often viewed as oppressive in postmodern thought, could actually be a source of comfort in the medieval

paradigm. Early modern humanist ideology only came into view in the late Middle Ages via the Italian Renaissance, and only then allowed social tensions to come to a boil, whereupon the reformation became the manifestation of humanist ideals in conflict with orthodox Catholicism (Cantor *Civilization* 530). Yet, inherent to the collective and universal nature of the lay-person's role in the Church's hierarchy was the question of individual identity; English citizens were particularly affected by this problem as the Middle Ages progressed because, while "they were a Christian nation, they were not a Latin culture" (Gilbaugh, Personal Interview). Questions of identity were the foundation for the growing necessity of balance between the individual and the universal in late medieval England.

In the Church's early stages, identity functioned purely in a universal sense. The ability to identify as part of the Christian discourse was literally vital; at its worst, one's identity as a Christian could easily mean martyrdom. Yet, at best, belonging to this early group was *the* source of identity for those wishing to separate themselves from other group identities of the time: Jew, Roman, or Pagan. The relatively new signs (physical symbols such as the sign of the cross) and rituals (sacraments of the Church and profession of creeds) of Catholicism were ways of creating community and designating those who belonged and those who didn't (Price 16). The necessity for inclusion in such Christian communities stems from the Roman persecution; signs made it easy to identify and support common believers in an oppressive atmosphere. These inclusive and exclusive identifiers necessarily became part of medieval community culture and, simultaneously, a source of personal identity for individuals. The most fitting example of

the necessity of belonging in concurrent contrast and cooperation with the desire for personal identity is the formation of the monastic order, which developed in its mission and form throughout the Middle Ages. According to Price, “in the birth of the monastic movement in the West, attention was focused...primarily on individual spirituality. There was seen to be an urgent need to provide a place for the strong personal expression of faith” (21). However, the personal expression she describes, while initially based on the practice of hermitage, was intentionally practiced in communities; hence the formation of monastic *orders*. Thus the universal and individual, while always in a relationship of tension, worked together to identify the individual until the development of humanist thought and diverse cultural and value-based practices resulting from the Church’s territorial expansion. The consequent confusion of diversity even inspired the desire for a centralized and universal text⁶ which could reflect orthodoxy in “correct” practice and teaching (Price 17). The response of the English Church, and subsequently the secular English government, to this dilemma was the propagation of the twelfth-century political theory and philosophy expounded by John of Salisbury⁷.

The political, moral, and philosophical theory of John of Salisbury, reportedly “the best read man of the twelfth century,” was revolutionary in its approach to “fuse classical and Christian values and to demonstrate a fundamental consistency between ancient moral philosophy and medieval Christian theology” (Nederman xxiii). Moreover, John of Salisbury’s theories introduced the original illustration of the social order in

⁶ A text of this kind did finally appear for the Catholic Church in the 20th century; the promulgation of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* was prompted by Pope John Paul II.

⁷ John of Salisbury had ironically very close ties with Thomas Becket, the Archbishop of Canterbury whose shrine Chaucer’s pilgrims intend to venerate (Nederman xvii).

terms of the human body, an ideology commonly referenced as the “body politic.” The “body politic” philosophy exemplified an exercise in Peter Haidu’s “medieval state-formation,” a practice based on an “increasing reliance on ideology and discipline” (4). The “order” of medieval life is based on John’s moral, philosophical, and political illustration in the *Policraticus* of society in terms of the body. He describes the soul, head, and body parts as the Church, princes, and citizens respectively, giving each individual a share in a “living body whose parts are mutually devoted to and dependent upon one another” (Salisbury 67, Nederman xxi). In this way, “class interdependence was perfectly well understood” (Haidu 14); the metaphorical illustration of the body politic was a way for individuals in the late Middle Ages to view themselves in the balance of the tension between the individual and the universal. It was a view, justifiable at least to the upper class, that if everyone could work as part of a system and had a specific role to play that was “necessary” for the proper functioning of that system, then an individual’s role—no matter how small or seemingly insignificant—could be reconcilable with the seemingly detached and far-away universal. The two points of Cantor’s medieval triangle with the power to enforce this paradigm, the Church and the nobility, were often successful in balancing themselves upon the middle class in this way, thereby theoretically inverting the triangle. If the universal-individual tension was able to be balanced in this way, there might have been very little social upheaval. Yet the Middle Ages did not lend itself well to balance, and a second significant tension, itself a manifestation of the individual versus the universal, consistently prompted instability in the social order. This second tension was one between power and authority.

Scholar Peter Haidu discusses the difficulty of the power-authority tension in terms of social class, determining the subject or individual in relation to its essential creator: the state. In these terms, Haidu analyzes the medieval subject in existence on a continuum with that of the modern era. At the heart of Haidu's argument are concerns regarding a Marxist version of the image of Cantor's inverted medieval triangle: "The fact is that in the Middle Ages, class structure was enforced by the dominant class to its own advantage" (19). Questions of identity and belonging in the context of the tension between the universal and individual, for Haidu, reduce to questions of a citizen's place within the state and class structure. The structures to which he refers are reactionary: "The Middle Ages were a society returning from a major historical disorganization, a dynamically evolving historical society whose strong class structure was integrally related to its evolution" (20). Similarly, both the individual and collective subject's identity is reactionary. The individual's existence within these structures and "the repetition of choices and actions [determined by medieval ideology and discipline] may construct the identity of a habitus" (3). Haidu argues that a disparate view of medieval and modern subject is due to an overt "othering" of the medieval in order for the modern subject to "claim a reasonable peacability" and that as a result, both in the medieval era and in the modern, "the ideology of chivalry...masked the forced extortion of wealth in unequal violences visited on the peasantry" (26-7). He further contends that the notion of the modern subject was born out of medieval systems and structures and that the tensions faced by medieval citizens—especially as we see them in literature—are reminiscent of those of the modern subject. Haidu's demonstration of the tension between power and

authority is uncompromising. Yet, portrayed in these terms, the tension is necessarily compelling and lends a certain weight to the medievalist's interpretation of Chaucer's work.

In her analysis of Chaucer's *Tales*, Lynn Staley presents questions about social and individual order which fall under Haidu's theories of power and authority (179). *The Canterbury Tales* seem to be, from the beginning, an experiment in addressing these questions, beginning with the "Knight's Tale." Under a historical perspective, Chaucer's concern is clearly reflective of a general concern in the late medieval mind about how power and authority balance within the social and individual order and, of course, his own ideas about social order are arguably based on John of Salisbury's pervasive political theory. Yet, Chaucer's concern is not merely with disparate views of this order. He is particularly interested in a certain kind of resolution to the pilgrims' multivalent expressions. Rosemarie Potz-McGerr illustrates Chaucer's "Retraction" to this end by demonstrating the ways in which Chaucer's "Retraction," modeled on those of Augustine, attempts to correct readers' impressions of his work in order that reader-constructed meanings of the text more closely reflect his intentions. However, Potz-McGerr's analysis neglects discussion of those intentions in terms of Chaucer's attempts to balance the tensions which saturate his socio-cultural environment. While she grants Chaucer's oppositional technique in "holding [negative representations] up alongside the positive ones as partial representations of a larger conception of truth" (111), she does not discuss the concentrated and intentional rhetorical purpose with which he writes his "Retraction;" nor does she examine the tensions in which Chaucer is well steeped toward

the end of his lifetime. Chaucer's negotiation of these tensions is intensely personal, even while his work was widespread and well-read. Even though Chaucer is as much a stander-by as any common man to the inner workings of this tension, the paradigm of personal identity structured by the balance of noble power and Church authority was at stake for all laymen when that balance was ruptured; hence, in the *Tales* we see a passionate internal and external demonstration of his negotiation of this equilibrium.

Chaucer's expressions of frustration and crisis with the struggle between those in power and those with authority are particularly common in late medieval England. Eric Gilbaugh illustrates the feeling associated with this internal struggle for the commoner in terms of the lay-person's construction of identity, one based upon the "ideology and discipline" of his or her manipulating authority (Haidu 3). Even in the most practical examples of the tug-of-war over the individual's loyalties, such as the conflict over which language the individual should speak, the universals of Church and state create a sense of anxiety for the individual:

Can [a person] be an Englishman and a...Catholic? Or are those things foreign to [his or her] essence? It is interesting to note [that] where the reformation really had its greatest successes were in non-Latin cultures. [In] the Germanic-speaking world with Luther, the English-speaking world and then the Scandinavian countries...Catholicism is somehow foreign to what [they] are, but [is also] not⁸. (Gilbaugh Personal Interview)

Certainly, the internal tension exemplified by this particular situation was dangerous to the balance of tension when felt by England's monarchy; however, as the Peasant's Revolt of 1381 demonstrates, common people faced the crisis of unbalance with as much or more trepidation. Chaucer's response, though arguably scathing, is actually much more

⁸ I highlight this rather common observation in an effort to propose a renewed and enriched understanding of the phenomenon of reformation in light of the medieval tension between the universal and individual.

measured and pensive than is sometimes thought. His intense personal struggle between his role as court employee and social climber and common middle-class Catholic is expressly reflected in the “Retraction” through his keen emphasis on discernment and penance.

It is necessary, at this juncture, to note Chaucer’s relationship to proto-reformer, John Wyclif. While Wyclif was Chaucer’s senior by fifteen years and there is no evidence they actually met, many scholars⁹ have made connections between Wyclif and Chaucer through their insistent use of the vernacular in their writing and through what is known as “opin” translation theory. In the sixteenth century, English historian John Foxe even speculated—on the basis of wishful determination and inaccurate appropriation of Wyclif-leaning texts¹⁰—that Chaucer was a “right Wicklevian.” And though we now know the designation of these texts to be mistaken, the desire to align Chaucer with the protestant reform movement of the Lollards is telling of an English society which desired to establish itself in cultural opposition to Rome, even before the English Reformation. In fact, Wyclif was to play a significant role in the imbalance between power and authority during the time leading up to the English Reformation, shaking the identity crisis of the laity, the tension between universality and individuality, to its core.

Perhaps one of the most disputed manifestations of the universal-individual tension is that of the use of the universal language of the Church, Latin, and the various vernacular languages developed by the multiple states involved in Western Christianity.

⁹ See Craig Fehrman’s “Did Chaucer Read the Wycliffite Bible?” and Katherine Little’s “Chaucer’s Parson and the Specter of Wycliffism”. Other scholars include William Kamowski (“Chaucer and Wyclif: God’s Miracles Against the Clergy’s Magic”), and John Tatlock (“Chaucer and Wyclif”).

¹⁰ Texts used to make this determination were, specifically, *Piers Plowman* and *Jack Upland*.

As B.B. Price illustrates, “pontiffs rejected for themselves the use of the vernacular...as barring the access of some to the community of all...Latin clearly raised the individual above the sectarian limits of his local tongue” (113). In this way, Latin was viewed by the pontiffs and their sees as an inclusive and uniting measure. However, as Price also points out, Latin “was ironically seen as a recipe for exclusion,” especially by non-Roman cultures; thus “as the history of the Catholic Church of Rome both during and after the Middle Ages demonstrates, many voluntarily chose the vernacular for purposes of exclusion” (113). The tension between universality and individuality is here revealed: Latin was the institutional means of maintaining the Church’s establishment of orthodoxy, domination, and proper reverence (112) among an ever expanding and diverse population. Yet those very lay masses, for the most part, understood Latin as a second language, at best, and were excluded from a personal understanding of scripture and doctrine at worst. Moreover, the use of Latin became a means of class discrimination between the laity and the priests who were supposed to minister to them due to the fact that Latin was the “clerical language” (114).

Price further explains the social impulse for the vernacular in terms of individual expression, as opposed to work promulgated by the institutional Church: “the vernaculars were a catalyst to stating new religious ideas, to trying new forms of political involvement, and to registering a new literary commentary on medieval life” (4). Because these particular forms of expression were produced by and significant to the individual, the vernacular languages exposed the tension between the individual and the universal modes of expression available to late medieval writers. Although I do not have any

intention of trying to prove Chaucer's heterodoxy through Wyclif (my research actually proves the opposite), I do consider it absolutely necessary to discuss the influence Wyclif may have had on him in the area of translation and the import and utility of the vernacular in his own work. This influence is significant because the Chaucer-Wyclif association illustrates the effect upon the lay middle-class citizen of the tension between the universal and the individual.

Wyclif's insistence on the utility and necessity of the vernacular was a deliberate individualistic expression in the face of the universal mode deemed acceptable by the Church. It was especially so due to the fact that Wyclif's translation and exegesis of religious texts purposefully obscured or opposed Church doctrine. As a result, the delicate stability of the tension between the individual, Wyclif the Englishman, and the universal, the Church and its doctrine, was dangerously upset. We can perceive the effect of the imbalance on the lay person very clearly in Chaucer's work. Craig Fehrman, in "Did Chaucer Read the Wycliffite Bible?" utilizes the "Parson's Tale" to answer the title question, but then asks another, more significant one in the process: Was the Wycliffite Bible a source for Chaucer's *Tales*? For Fehrman, the answer is ultimately "yes." Fehrman's reasoning lies chiefly in the undeniable similarities in both writers concerning their emphasis on using the vernacular and translation theory. For, according to Fehrman, Chaucer's "near contemporaries, based on his vernacularity and biblical translation, might have perceived him as a heretic" (114).

In fact, the availability of Wycliffite and orthodox documents alike would have been relatively unlimited for Chaucer at a time when, according to William

Kamowski, Wyclif's "notoriety was running high" (6). According to Martin Crow and Virginia Leland, Chaucer was a merchant's son whose childhood home was among noble neighbors (xvi). Later, he was employed by noble friends and acquaintances, making him wealthy enough to buy books and enabling him to "receive a good education" (xvii). Although he was nearly two decades younger than Wyclif, Chaucer would have been reading religious literature in Latin and English before Wyclif's partial censure in 1377. Moreover, he had multiple "Lollard-leaning acquaintances" who either owned or had access to the Wycliffite Bible, including John of Gaunt who "pressed [Wyclif] into service in 1377" (Fehrman 113, Staley 195)¹¹. Indeed, Lollardy was gaining popularity "among the gentry and even at Court" for the short period after Wyclif's censure in 1377, extending as late as 1414 (Staley 195, Rex 71). During this short time, and again in reformist periods during the 16th century, England had in Wyclif "a thinker and, above all, a writer who brought together a previously disparate group of reformist views" (Staley 195). Even the relatively limited reception of Wycliffite text and teaching would have been enough to influence Chaucer; not only were his social connections among the gentry and nobles, but he was also undoubtedly a witness to Wyclif's "popularity as a preacher" and the "broadcast [of Wyclif's] ideas through the streets of London" as well as the spread of them "through the city's churches" (Staley 197).

According to Fehrman, the most noticeable link between Chaucer and Wyclif is the "translation, transmission, and efficacy of the English vernacular" (113). For the lay reader, a natural association between the two writers was sure to have formed due to each

¹¹ These included Ralph Strode, John of Gaunt, and Anne of Bohemia. See page 113 of Fehrman's essay "Did Chaucer read the Wycliffite Bible."

author's insistent use of the common language, whether original or translated, and to the religious subject upon which both focused. Fehrman further argues that Chaucer would have gleaned "translation theory" from the Late Version of Wyclif's vernacular translation of the Bible (113). Fehrman's argument is that this theory, more precisely called "'opin' translation theory," is executed in both the Late Version of the Wycliffite Bible and the "Parson's Tale."

Among Wyclif's teachings was an insistence on the use of the vernacular translation of scripture and vernacular preaching, although his "translation theory" lent to inherent problems. Wyclif adhered to a theory termed "opin" translation, which is based on the idea that a vernacular translation need not be technical or literal. Rather, "opin" translation indicates that in translating Latin texts (religious or otherwise) into the vernacular, it is acceptable to produce a translation which is not necessarily verbatim, but instead accounts for the education of the reader and is relative to the audience's ability to relate to the word choice of the translation. Fehrman refers to Chaucer's *Treatise on the Astrolabe* in which Chaucer expresses his reasons for using 'opin' translation:

Key to [the] discussion is Chaucer's and the Wycliffite's egalitarian view of language and their mutual belief that 'þe sentence' can be 'as opin eiþer openere in English as in Latyn,' that is, by catering to...a lay audience and by placing precedence on Latin meaning over Latinate syntax... English translations could retain the import, accuracy, and clarity of their Latin precursors. (113)

In fact, as Rita Copeland demonstrates in *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation in the Middle Ages*, the act of translation in the fourteenth century "was grounded in that of invention, or in interpretation and refiguration" (qtd in Staley 198). Not only does Chaucer "develop" this translation theory right around the time of finishing the *Tales*, but

he also uses specific translations from the Late Version instead of direct translation from Latin (Fehrman 122)¹². It is also possible that, according to Fehrman, the “popularity of the Wycliffite Bible...could offer Chaucer the encouragement to assay an ‘opin’ translation of his own” (123). Still more substantial is the evidence we have that Chaucer “was a shrewd social and political analyst” whose use of the vernacular was highly intentional, thus rendering any of his translations with equal rhetorical intent (Staley 181).

The “opin” philosophy of scriptural translation inevitably led to interpretive and often inaccurate translations. Additionally, the freedom of interpretation involved in “opin” translation was a breeding ground for heresy, as was the case for Wyclif, Ball, and other Lollards and even earlier heretical movements such as the Waldensians and Cathars. Though the Church’s attitude toward the vernacular seems harsh, it was not all-encompassing. The Church did welcome some vernacular movements because it recognized the power of the vernacular as well as the need to reach the laity through their own language. Indeed, “the church did not attempt to prevent lay people from owning and reading such translations, but this changed when, in the late twelfth century, dissident groups...made vernacular translations...and encouraged their followers to understand them in an unorthodox sense” (Hamilton 76). Consequently, though the “idea of a vernacular ‘interpretation’ of scripture was in principle perfectly acceptable to the Church...it became increasingly the belief that the vernacular interpretation could not be

¹² Fehrman’s argument is that translations for the words “wombe,” “savoren,” and “lechery” “mirror” the Late Version of the Wycliffite Bible, which is a much more “opin” than the Early version which adheres tightly to the Latin text (117-20).

orthodox” (Price 113). Thus a rivalry, rather than a careful balance, arose from the tension between the use of Latin and the vernaculars, even to the extent that, for some time, vernacular texts were automatically considered heretical.

The individuality of various vernacular languages and Germanic cultural values presented a fundamental clash of personal identity for the citizen of late medieval Europe. For Chaucer, this breakdown was particularly imminent because of his association with Wyclif through their shared nationality, but more significantly, through their similar techniques of translation. Central to the identity crisis resulting from the use of the vernacular is the idea that the individual—the Englishman—refuses the universal language of his faith in favor of the individual language of his nation. This very intentional move had the potential to relegate the Church’s authority to a lesser position, not only in national power struggles but also within the heart of the common citizen, stimulating enmity between the Englishman and the Church. Chaucer treads very carefully on this uneven ground, and his ability to navigate it becomes his trademark.

No doubt, in the face of this identity crisis, the Catholic Church strictly enforced its doctrine through the use of papal letters and bulls like those eventually incurred by Wyclif. Yet even the Church was having difficulty retaining universality during this period. Indeed, orthodox Catholicism retained a murky characterization in late medieval England since, according to Katherine Little, “orthodoxy was in the process of defining itself in relationship to a heterodoxy that had only recently appeared” (228). That is, as Western Christendom expanded into broader territories, its authority and Latin-based cultural structure were not given to automatic acceptance.

Additionally, orthodoxy existed on unstable terms due, in part, to the Papal Schism of 1378, which only ended after three men simultaneously claimed to be the true Pope (Bokenkotter 165). Hence, the religious and social environments surrounding Chaucer were “a fluid and changing set of practices and not a static set of propositions” (Little 228). In fact, the principles of orthodoxy were in such a process of transition and stabilization that Little characterizes Chaucer’s demonstration of theological and doctrinal principles as “a kind of Chaucerian orthodoxy” (228). Thus the proto-reformation period, a time encompassing virtually all of Chaucer’s lifespan, effectively demonstrated the Church’s and English government’s vacillating efforts to work both in opposition and cooperation with each other as the power of the individual continually shifted in its relationship to the authority of the universal.

The treatment of heresy and heretics by both the Church—together through its presence in England and from Rome—and the English government manifests the universal versus individual tension in a particularly tangible manner. Near the end of Wyclif’s immediate reign of influence, the Church, along with the government’s secular spokesmen—in England, “chancellor, treasurer, justices, justices of the peace, sheriffs, mayor, bailiffs of cities and towns and all other officers having governance of the people” (Aers and Staley 5)—were tasked with the responsibility to protect the faithful by rooting out scandal and exerting dominion over it by whatever means they felt necessary. Often, as this balance was so delicate, things got out of hand. In late medieval England, with the passage of laws from the Leicester parliament of 1414, a veritable inquisition was commissioned with the Lollards as the prime target. As a pendulum swings to its opposite

extremes, the Leicester parliament reacted in the utter reverse of the sentiments of its predecessors toward the reform movements of the time. The zeitgeist of late medieval England was constantly mired in this sort of unrest; it was the predicament facing seemingly every citizen prior to the rupture of the universal Catholic Church.

In *The Civilization of the Middle Ages*, Norman Cantor describes the spirit of the late Middle Ages in terms of a particular dual-culturalism:

Many historians have concluded that the period...was marked by two distinct cultures whose trends contradicted each other—Italy was breaking through to a cultural revolution, while northern Europe was bringing to term the ideas and sensibilities of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries...It was not until the end the fifteenth century that intense efforts were made to reconcile the two cultures, and these efforts produced a monumental intellectual and moral crisis around 1500 that brought on the Protestant Reformation. (530)

And, as Gilbaugh previously illustrated, the Germanic nations played a significant role in the stressed relationship between the Latin and non-Latin cultures due to the vast differences in their cultural values. Thus, as northern Europe made efforts to “resolve some of the conflicts of the great intellectual advances” (Cantor *Civilization* 530) of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries with the major cultural renaissance taking root in Italy, most specifically individualist and humanist ideals characteristic of that Renaissance, the universality and authority of the Church seemed less relevant and held less validity for those Germanic cultures. The Church’s reactions to this resistance were comprehensibly quite negative; yet her inability to cope positively with the ideology of the Italian renaissance and the diversity of its increasing charges in northern Europe paved the way for the subsuming effect of the Reformation as the Middle Ages came to an end.

In Chaucer's lifetime, and continuing after his death, the vacillating effect of the universal-individual tension was made manifest in very public and very famous cases, one right after the other. This was a situation in which a powerful entity, usually a king or dissenting Church figure, would act in defiance of the Church in an attempt to assert himself on the level of individual power; that action would then be followed by a reaction from Rome which would, in turn, assert the Church's universal authority. It was "a time of disintegration and conflict that...brought about the end of medieval civilization" (Cantor *Civilization* 566). The problem was that, in the late 14th century, these two powerful points of Cantor's inverted Medieval Triangle continually attempted to tip each other over in order to settle the tension. The famous cases of Thomas a Becket, archbishop of Canterbury, and his royal opponent, King Henry II, with Pope Alexander III; Wyclif and his opponent, Pope Gregory XI; King Henry VIII and his battle for the right to divorce with Pope Clement VII and for supremacy with Pope Paul III; Thomas More and John Fisher and their subsequent struggles with Henry VIII are all examples of the back-and-forth movement between power and authority, and between individuality and universality, during the late Middle Ages. There is also, in response to this swinging pendulum, the ever-present question of to whom the individual first belongs. What—or who—is my primary identifier: my King or my God?

It is my view that Chaucer's answer to this query ultimately lies in his final work: the "Retraction" which closes *The Canterbury Tales*. However, in order to arrive at this conclusion, the tales themselves require individual scrutiny within the context of their purpose in the whole of the rhetorical intent of Chaucer's poetic pilgrimage. To this end,

I will examine two of the tales whose significance, though often overlooked, points directly toward Chaucer's exploration of the tension between the universal and the individual. I will argue that, through the "Nun's Priest's Tale" and the "Parson's Tale," Chaucer makes two motions which are different from his treatment of the other religious characters on the pilgrimage, and therefore are noteworthy. Not only are the characters of the Nun's Priest and the Parson the only religious characters regarded by Chaucer (or the narrator) as "goode" men of religion, but their tales are also both directly revered in Chaucer's "Retraction" to the *Tales*. In other words, the "moralitee" set forth by these two priests is put into action by Chaucer in the "Retraction." Unlike any others in the *Tales*, Chaucer enacts the advice of these two characters, paying reverence to their admonishments in a particularly innovative fashion. It is this combined utility which truly sets the two figures apart. First, the two characters demonstrate, within the larger rhetoric of the pilgrimage, that all is not lost for the Church. Despite Chaucer's critical satires of the other religious characters, the Nun's Priest and Parson offer two keen assessments of the murky religious climate of the late 14th Century and delimit two necessary strategies for navigating it. Second, these strategies inform Chaucer's "Retractions" in a way not recognized by current scholarship to date. My intention is to delineate these characteristics within the two tales and then to conjecture a reading of the "Retractions" which, I hope, will enhance understanding of its "problematic" existence.

“RETRACTION” AND RESOLUTION

*“For Seint Paul seith that al that written is,
To our doctrine it is ywrite, ywis”*
 “Nun’s Priest’s Tale,” In 3441-2
*“Why sholde I sowen draf out of my fest,
Whan I may sowen whete, if that me lest?”*
 “Parson’s Prologue,” In 35-6

Chaucer’s answers to questions of identity in the midst of the universal-individual tension of late medieval England are notoriously difficult to ascertain. As Lynn Staley observes, “we tend to...recognize in Chaucer’s poetry, and particularly the Canterbury Tales, evidence of incompleteness, fragmentation, and of process. The issue of deliberate irresolution is crucial” (180). In other words, Chaucer’s *modus operandi* is decisive ambiguity or “middleness.” He is not merely a “journalist [concerned] with what the literary marketplace demanded” as Norman Cantor asserts (*Civilization* 539), a reporter on the outside of public spectacle. Rather, he is intimately and personally invested in his society, his faith, and his death as he “continues to debate and explore his own relationship as a poet to the social body and to its most visible embodiments of authority and order” (Staley 180). As I will demonstrate in the following chapter, one key factor of Chaucer’s development as a poet is that he becomes more and more concerned with the reader’s interpretation of his work. His anxiety about reader-construction is, however, categorically unconventional in its direct concern with his own salvation—rather than that of his audience, and it is betrayed by the progressive quality in his retractions. However, my major argument is two-fold; before I discuss Chaucer’s retractions as a literary form and the progression which takes place among them as he comes closer to his

death, it is necessary to discuss the “Retraction” to the *Tales* specifically, as the capstone of his series of retractions. My approach to this discussion will be to view the *Tales*’ “Retraction” in a certain holistic sense. That is, the “Retraction” of the *Canterbury Tales* cannot be understood separate from the tales themselves. Instead, our reading of it must be principally informed by the two tales most apposite to a complete understanding of the “Retraction:” the “Nun’s Priest’s Tale” and the “Parson’s Tale.” Therefore, in order to discuss any sort of progression of the form of retraction for Chaucer, I will demonstrate the import of the last of Chaucer’s retractions, the one closing the *Canterbury Tales*, in terms of these two imperative readings.

Three considerations of these tales must first be observed: my primary concern regarding the Parson’s and Nun’s Priest’s tales is the fact that the “moralitee” presented by the two priests are inextricable. Significant to my reading of the “Retraction” are these two morals: the Nun’s Priest emphasizes discernment and the Parson advocates for the practice of sacramental confession. Indeed, both priests refer to the final judgment by the separation of wheat from chaff (NPT 3443, ParsP 35-6), prompting both to express the necessity of discernment. In fact, the Parson expands on this theme in his treatise, spending nearly 200 lines explaining its fruits as a necessary element to the sacrament of penance (In 127-315). Because a process of “rightful discernment,” the Boethian philosophic conception of the “true good,¹³” necessarily leads to sacramental confession, and because a “parfit” confession cannot occur without the practice of conscientious

¹³ I will extrapolate upon the Boethian philosophy of discernment in Chapter Three.

discernment¹⁴, the two tales must be considered *together* as influences upon Chaucer's "Retraction."

My secondary concern is the reality that the two tales are translations of earlier works. It is significant because translation is a device used by Chaucer in places wherein he makes some of his most transformative rhetorical moves. As Lynn Staley demonstrates in "Chaucer and the Postures of Sanctity," Chaucer's translations are not merely vernacular renditions of texts; they are instead "particularly intelligent and well-focused interpretation[s] of a text" (206). That is, his very translation is interpretive; and in the end, it says what he wishes it to say. Herein lies "Chaucer's strategy as a translator....he exploits those themes that are embedded in the text itself [while simultaneously] editing what is superfluous to the point he wishes to make" (206-7). Staley further argues that any text Chaucer translates, along with his chosen revision, is used intentionally for a specific rhetorical purpose. Thus the respective translations of "Del cok e del gupil" and *Roman de Renart*¹⁵, along with the *Summa casuum poenitentiae* and *Summa vitiorum*¹⁶, with their strong connection to the *Tales*' "Retraction," should signal major consequence for Chaucerians. If Chaucer is translating, he is saying something more than the original text ever said; and as the Nun's Priest signals at the end of his tale, the reader is wise to look for deeper levels of meaning than what first appears.

¹⁴ The "Parson's Tale" details this connectedness exhaustively. I will discuss this inseparability in detail further on.

¹⁵ See *Riverside Chaucer*, page 936

¹⁶ See *Riverside Chaucer*, page 956

In *The Cast of Character: The Representation of Personality in Ancient and Medieval Literature*, Warren Ginsberg discusses the development of a medieval literary convention he terms “paratactic typology,” which is “an extended analogy between a figure and an earlier archetype [which] would suggest a similarity between the events of...two narratives” (87-8). It was an element of style which could lend “the profoundest truths” to any work without the re-telling of the earlier narrative. Ginsberg further argues that “even when parataxis ceased to be an element of style, it remained an ingrained unit of organization and presentation of both characters and plots. One finds it everywhere in the literature of the Middle Ages” (89); he even designates Chaucer a “master” of this technique. Chaucer very clearly employs parataxis throughout his work; his poetry is saturated with it. However, I contend that Chaucer’s art of translation is an extension of his mastery of parataxis; in so much of his work, the “Nun’s Priest’s Tale” and the “Parson’s Tale” included, he constructs an entirely new text from its original—creating a sense of analogy from its (archetypal) source—with a greater depth of meaning in both its themes and characters, thereby transcending, as Peter Elbow mentions, its oppositions, and even its symbolic typology. Parataxis is the reason Chaucer’s translations are so crucial: when we read the “Nun’s Priest’s Tale” and the “Parson’s Tale,” parataxis whispers in our ears; when we read the “Retraction,” it all but bellows.

My third concern regarding these two particular tales is the similar description by the narrator of their tellers. Whether or not our pilgrim narrator is trustworthy is irrelevant; his treatment of the Nun’s Priest and the Parson is consistent with their significance in the pilgrimage and in Chaucer’s “Retraction.” What is noteworthy about

their treatment is that both characters are the only religious characters in the *Tales* who are described as “goode,” and this status does not seem to depend on the prevalent social attitudes toward the real-life people these characters represent. That is, the narrator treats these characters according to what he sees in them individually (or perhaps the way in which Chaucer envisioned them), rather than according to the popular view of such figures.

Indeed, the deterioration of the mendicant orders of clergy fomented widespread anticlericalism. Initially, clerical groups of priests and nuns were formed after particular models such as Saints Benedict, Francis, and Dominic with the intention of perfecting the spiritual life. From the inception and development of the orders in the previous century, the mendicants “proved to be [the Pope’s] most effective auxiliaries in tackling the new urban apostolate” of the era (Bokenkotter 135). Directly subject to the Pope, and not to the local bishop as were the secular clergy, the mendicants assisted with the education and formation of the laity in growing urban areas where parish priests were too few. They were “the most educated, the most cultivated, and the most respected members of medieval society” during the thirteenth century (135).

Nevertheless, due to scandals such as the Great Schism, and social disasters such as France’s hundred years war and the Black Plague, the mendicant’s status began to deteriorate in the fourteenth century (Bokenkotter 180). Because the mendicants were directly subject to the Pope instead of their local bishops, the schism allowed corruption to incubate and then run rampant without discipline. Mendicant orders were losing hold of their foundations and traditions: “community life had become only a memory; regular

prayer in common was discontinued, and common property gave way to private property” (180). With the suspension of these foundational practices went also the quest for perfection in the spiritual life (Bisson 74) and the mendicant’s dedication to service and example (Bokenkotter 134). Corruption, in the form of extortion, “concubinage,” and worldly obsession with power and wealth (179), permeated monasteries and spread like a spiritual disease. These corruptions did not go unnoticed by the laity of both high and low estate. The mendicants became “favored targets of satirists” and came to be known through the written records of Erasmus as a “pack of indolent ignoramuses” (180).

Chaucer does address the public’s skepticism of the mendicant orders in his dialogue between the Friar and the Summoner by pointing out, in their contentious exchange, the corruptions of each. The growing distrust of the mendicant clergy would certainly have applied to the characters of the Canterbury pilgrimage and thus had reason for address. Chaucer’s choice to criticize the Friar particularly through the Summoner, drawing attention to the Friar’s greed and sexual sin, is a direct commentary on the corruption of mendicant orders, specifically Franciscans. Chaucer’s consistently negative portrayal of friars reflects “the basic features of the antifraternal stereotype” (Bisson 94). Indeed, he may have had personal reasons behind his attitude toward the Friars: “the *Chaucer Life-Records* refer to a lost but tantalizing document that mentions his being fined two shillings for fighting with a friar on Fleet Street. Or perhaps...he was influenced by John Wyclif’s antifraternalism” (94). Yet, in Chaucer’s typical fashion, this criticism is balanced by the Friar’s own tale, in which he has the opportunity to make an attack on the Summoner. Chaucer moves boldly in his criticisms, but as Peter Elbow

observes in *Oppositions in Chaucer*, the poet “see[s] oppositions everywhere, but [deals] with them in such a way that both sides remain affirmed. Additionally, Bisson observes that “Chaucer was reflecting the era’s debates without clearly taking sides” (64).

Yet, Chaucer’s “technique” of equal exchange is not meant to merely point up the diplomat in him. Rather, I wish to assert, along with Elbow, that these cases of opposition ultimately provide clarity in Chaucer’s resolution of them: “at certain crucial points, especially at major endings, Chaucer relinquishes the dialectic and in fact chooses one side as right and rejects the other as wrong” (14). Still, more than simply deciding which of two sides he will take, it is my view that Chaucer sets up the dialectic in order to settle on his own resolution in an often unexpected scenario. While “Chaucer builds this rich opposition only to transcend it” (105), the transcendent resolution is the result of the dialectic itself—not one or the other side of it. This pattern of dialectic and resolution occurs on both the large and small scale within Chaucer’s work, and I will later demonstrate the most significant of these patterns in my discussion of the “Retraction.” In this chapter, I will show how the “Nun’s Priest’s Tale” provides a sense of resolution in this unexpected manner, and how it thereby constitutes part of the greater resolution of the *Tales* in the “Retraction.” First, however, I will discuss the “Parson’s Tale” with respect to the major concerns I have just expressed.

While the “Nun’s Priest’s Tale” begins the last phase of Chaucer’s writing, the Parson’s brings it to a close. Beginning with a reference to the necessity of spiritual discernment, the Parson systematically leads the pilgrims, with the “prophete Jeremie,” to

“stondeth upon the weyes, and seeth and axeth of olde pathes...which is the goode wey,/ and walketh in that wey” (ParsT 75-6). Through discernment of the “goode wey,” examination of conscience, and the sacrament of penance, the Parson is Chaucer’s mouthpiece for further examination of late medieval tensions. What begins to come into view in the “Parson’s Tale” is a concern with closeness to God by way of a pattern of discernment and penance. The tension between the individual and universal becomes strikingly personal in the Parson’s tale; his entreaty to the pilgrims is stark and firm, focused keenly on their salvation. He seems to focus less on the *tension* between a man and his God, and more on the *relationship* between them. Here the Parson demonstrates Chaucer’s concern with the end of his life; the poet’s rhetorical intentions for translating his particular sources become clear when we consider the likelihood that “Chaucer himself made a purposeful compilation and translation from divers sources” (Benson 956). The apprehension and subsequent resolution Chaucer exhibits in the “Parson’s Tale” is arguably a direct follow-up to the message of his other “goode” priest. The Parson initiates his treatise with a directive toward discernment and examination of conscience, and finishes by exhorting his hearers to “stondeth upon the weyes” of goodness by reconciling with God.

“The Parson’s Prologue” states that his purpose for relating such a long meditation is to evangelize rather than to “tellen fables and swich wrecchednesse” (In 34). The Parson says, “Why sholde I sowen draf out of my fest,/ Whan I may sowen whete, if that me lest?” (In 35-6). Here, he puns on the word “draf” which means refuse, garbage, or literally, “hog’s wash” (draf a). The pun is made more evident

by *The Riverside Chaucer's* footnote which replaces “draf” with “chaff” which is the husk of a stalk of corn. In this way, the Parson replies to the Host’s request for a tale by saying that he will tell “a myrie tale in prose” which will “shewe [them] the wey,” rather than relate a frivolous tale like the others (ln 46, 49). Here also, by way of the pun on “draf,” the Parson makes a comparison of the substance of “whete” and “chaff” in reference to the content of his tale. The former makes for a hearty meal; the latter is the discarded part of a stalk of wheat. Thus the Parson makes a direct allusion to the Nun’s Priest’s moral and sets his tale apart from the others, marking its purpose and solemn nature in order to set up a formal discussion regarding a serious sacrament. Moreover, the Parson directly connects the quotation from St. Luke’s gospel (wheat and chaff) with the concept of discernment. In so doing, he makes his tale “perfectly orthodox” (Eberle 863) and solemnizes the ending of the *Tales*; still, more importantly, he confirms for the reader the link between his own tale, that of the Nun’s Priest, and the literal action of discernment occurring in the “Retraction.”

Even in the context of a contentious religious environment, the Parson’s lesson precisely and thoroughly addresses the practice of penance. His meditation systematically reviews the definition of “Penitence” in addition to

how manye maneres been the acciouns or werkynges of Penitence,/ and how manye speses ther been of Penitence, and whiche thynges apertenen and bihoven to Penitence, and whiche thynges destourben Penitence. (ln 81-2)

The Parson explicates the Church’s teaching on the necessary components of the sacrament, the manner of confession, and how one makes a “parfit Penitence” which is pleasing to God (ln 106). He then defines the perfect penance, which contains three main

parts: “Contricioun of Herte [itself a process of discernment], Confessioun of Mouth, and Satisfacioun” of the mind and body (ln 106)¹⁷. In the first extended section of his meditation, the Parson carefully explains the six “causes that moeven a man to Contricioun” (ln 127). These are followed by an extensive segment in which he explains the mode of confession which is the “verray shewynge of synnes to the preest” (ln 317).

Subsequently, the Parson digresses from the central topic on the matter of penance in order to discuss the fruits of discernment as part of the larger process of the sacrament. Here he explicates the seven deadly sins which, according to the Parson, are the “chieftaynes of synnes” (ln 386)¹⁸. This section functions as an examination of conscience and discusses the causes and “braunches” of each fatal sin, along with the “remedie” or best defense against them (ln 387, 475). An examination of conscience such as this recalls the penitent’s sins and fulfills the Parson’s first cause that “oghte moeve a man to Contricion....First a man shal remembre hym of his synnes” (ln 132). This remembrance of sin also necessarily indicates a process of discernment, or separation, between a life of virtue and a life of sin¹⁹. In his explication of each grave sin, the Parson takes liberty to discuss the social issues which exemplify the deadly sins, walking the pilgrims through a literal process of Boethian discernment. The Parson’s emphasis on the examination of conscience—in addition to the fact that Chaucer chose to include this section from an entirely different source—signifies an assured emphasis on

¹⁷ The three components of the sacrament remain a requirement of the penitent to this day. The Parson’s discussion of the sacrament is in keeping with current catechesis of the Church (CCC 1491).

¹⁸ Additionally, a description of the seven deadly sins can be found under the term “Capital Sins” in the Catechism of the Catholic Church (1866).

¹⁹ I will give this process of discernment due explanation in the next section of this chapter and following chapters. For sources of this Church dogma, see Chapter Four of Session VIII of the Council of Trent in *Sources of Catholic Dogma*.

this process. Moreover, it should stand for the reader, by way of parataxis, as a reminder of the Nun's Priest's ultimate moral lesson.

Finally, the Parson completes his meditation by discussing the third and final component of penance. Here the Parson illuminates the notion of Satisfaction, "that stant moost generally in almesse and in bodily peyne" (ln 1028). The penitent completes his or her sacrament by performing either a charitable work or by physical self-sacrifice such as "forberynge bodily mete and drynke," or fasting (ln 1048). In Satisfaction lies the fundamental meaning of the sacrament of penance. The word "satisfaction" actually *means* penance in that penance makes satisfaction for, or repays, the debt incurred by one's sin (satisfaction 2). The final paragraph of the "Parson's Tale" confers the "fruyt of penaunce" which is "the endeles blisse of hevene" and "the sighte of the parfit knowynge of God" (1075-9). At the conclusion of the tale the reader has meditated, along with the Parson, upon the necessity of penance for salvation. Further, if the Parson's objective is realized, as it certainly was for Chaucer in the "Retraction," the reader will be moved to practice the sacrament itself.

While the relationship between the "Parson's Tale" and the "Retraction" has been discussed by scholars such that mention of the bond borders cliché, the relationship between the "Nun's Priest's Tale" and the "Retraction" has not yet been given due exploration. It is unavoidable, in my view, to consider the effect of the Nun's Priest's moral on the "Retraction" in parallel with that of the "Parson's Tale" because the practices of discernment and penance are necessarily inextricable. Here I will

demonstrate the moral of the “Nun’s Priest’s Tale” to be discernment itself and, subsequently, will demonstrate its relationship to the composition of Chaucer’s final “Retraction.

A mendicant priest by definition, the Nun’s Priest could have been another target for Chaucer’s satire, if the prevailing social attitude toward mendicants had any marked power over Chaucer’s writing. Instead, in sharp contrast to the sarcastic representations of the Friar and the Summoner, the Nun’s Priest is simply described as a “sweete preest, this goodly man sir John” (NPP 2820). And, though the Host provides a rather crude and provoking epilogue to his tale, the Nun’s Priest cannot be said to actually reflect in his character the distinctions the Host provides him. Bailly draws attention to the physical features of the Nun’s Priest, referencing his “breche, and every stoon,” indicating his virile appearance, and playing on the theme of the Cock in the “Nun’s Priest’s Tale” (NPE 3448). These particular observations on the part of Harry Bailly could possibly point to a connection with the Friar of the *Tales* whose corruption is largely based in sexual sin, or to the Prioress whose worldly power may be subverted by the Nun’s Priest’s physical “strengths.” Yet the comments made in the epilogue are not the narrator’s, and thus speak to a wholly different perspective—one perhaps less trustworthy—and are the only potentially damaging remarks made about the Nun’s Priest. They are not sufficient to characterize him in a similar light with the Friar, let alone with any social criticism of mendicant clergy, especially considering the content of his tale. Moreover, it is Chaucer’s peculiar habit of diminishing the “perfection” of each of his characters that vindicates the Nun’s Priest in the face of Bailly’s mocking

criticisms. For, just as the Parson—though “goode” and orthodox—is accused as a “Jankin” and a “Lollere” (MLE 1172-3), the Pardoner admits the evil intention behind his holy tale, and as Chaucer, himself, admits his “sin” in the “Retraction,” so does the Nun’s Priest deliver a “goode” message, despite his projected failings. As we shall discover in the coming pages, Chaucer is working to separate the partial good from the one true good, the individual systems of the universal from their universal foundation in the divine. And so, though his characters sometimes reveal their faults, their tales don’t necessarily lose all value²⁰.

The fact that scholars have addressed the problem of the Nun’s Priest from a variety of angles indicates the difficulty in ascertaining Chaucer’s intentions for him. This priest seems to appear out of nowhere in the context of *The Canterbury Tales*; he is mentioned in passing only once in the general prologue, but then is granted an opportunity to narrate a tale part-way through the pilgrimage²¹. The lack of descriptive detail in the General Prologue poses the particular problem of the Nun’s Priest: it has scholars simultaneously confused and obsessed with coming to an understanding of the presence of the Nun’s Priest and his Tale within the larger context of the *Tales*. Some have attempted to read the Priest’s tale from a feminist perspective, claiming Chaucer’s retelling of Pierre de Saint Cloud’s *Roman de Renart* is a way for the Priest to express his frustration with his place of humility under the Prioress’ power (Broes). Scholars have also noted the multiplicity of genre within the “Nun’s Priest’s Tale,” and have argued as

²⁰ The debate about the “holy” message, despite the possibly “unholy” preacher, was a major point of contention for Wyclif and the Lollards, and continues to be discussed in modern religious contexts.

²¹ Though, theoretically, each of the speculated twenty nine pilgrims is granted this opportunity, the Nun’s Priest is one of twenty four who actually do.

many multiple interpretations regarding the way Chaucer might use these genres to comment upon the state of humankind in the late Middle Ages (Finlayson, Gallick, Shallers). Susan Gallick, in “A Look at Chaucer and His Preachers” demonstrates that “most critics find it difficult to fit the “Nun’s Priest’s Tale” comfortably into any literary genre, and the most they can do is point out what they consider to be the main element and categorize it on that basis” (471). Gallick’s argument is also plausible regarding the approach of scholars to the numerous moral directives imbedded in the tale. Scholars like D. E. Myers and John Friedman have chosen one of the many morals available in the story, addressing it only, and arguing for its prominence among the others in the tale. These scholars have also endeavored to characterize the Priest with their interpretations of these various “moralitee” even though, as A.C. Spearing states, “Many such suggestions have been made, but their multiplicity and contradictoriness tell against them, and there is no obvious evidence that Chaucer intended any of them” (207). Still others have coalesced the religious figures in the *Tales*, throwing the Nun’s Priest into the pool with the Friar, Summoner, and Pardoner (Dahlberg, Williams). This final move is neither textually nor contextually supported and signals a tendency by some scholars to box Chaucer into a spirituality on one or the other side of the religious debates of his era.

I will venture that the range of interpretive approaches made available by this tale illuminates the possibility of yet more opportunity for understanding. While many have discussed Chaucer’s negative attitude toward Friars in reference to tales such as the Friar’s, Summoner’s, and Monk’s, as well as addressed Chaucer’s treatment of religious figures throughout the *Tales*, there is little evidence of interpretations directly connecting

the zeitgeist of late medieval England with the Nun's Priest. Indeed, the abstruse nature of this Priest makes such an analysis difficult. However, although the Nun's Priest is indeed an ambiguous character who complicates the *Tales* with his indistinct moral lesson, multi-genred approach, and variably themed attempt at Bailly's request for humor (NPP 2811), he is in fact a fitting example of an attempt by Chaucer to negotiate the tensions within the landscape of Catholicism in the late medieval era. The context of "Nun's Priest's Tale," taken together with its content, conveys the struggles of both laymen and clergy to adhere to an Orthodoxy that existed only in flux in the late Middle Ages. Through Chaucer's treatment of this clergyman, a direct contrast to others in the *Tales* and to the pervasive attitude toward mendicants during his era, we can determine this tale to be noteworthy in its ultimate "moralite," especially because of its distinct effect upon Chaucer's "Retraction."

Chaucer's lack of commentary on the personality and moral character of the Nun's Priest is no doubt puzzling, in light of the fact that he is granted the space to tell his own tale. Yet it is precisely here, in this space between criticism and praise—the space wherein Chaucer leaves undefined the character of the Nun's Priest—that Chaucer has the most freedom to make his statement regarding the troubling and confusing nature of his socio-religious environment. He can make this statement using a humble and non-descript character, one to whom little attention is paid in the *Tales* or in real life. Chaucer uses the Nun's Priest, a chaplain of a convent whose role in the medieval world is rather unremarkable, to negotiate the tensions within an ever-shifting orthodoxy. Chaucer displays intentionality in maneuvering through the late medieval religious world using

the “Nun’s Priest’s Tale;” the Priest’s final statement is the argument that hearers of this tale should “taketh the fruyt, and lat the chaf be stille” (ln 3443). In other words, they should discern the difference between that which provides spiritual nourishment and that which can be considered refuse in the tale itself, but more importantly, in the midst of the socio-religious turmoil which undoubtedly consumed their lives.

The Nun’s Priest’s call for discernment comes on the tail of an extended beast fable in which more than the standard singular moral is presented through various exempla. A.C. Spearing discusses the popularity and implications of “ensample” in Chaucer’s works, especially the *Canterbury Tales*:

The idea that doctrines can best be taught by stories has a long history in Christian thought...Chaucer or his characters repeatedly follow the same practice in the *Canterbury Tales*, whether or not for homiletic purposes. ‘Ensamplis many oon’ can also provide the basis for complete literary works [and] Chaucer frequently exploits the idea that stories can be justified if they exemplify doctrines. (Spearing 196)

And, as Michael Delahoyde points out in “The Nun’s Priest’s Tale,” “Despite the simple plot underneath all the other ‘matere,’ the ending holds *several* morals, depending on whether you’re a fox, or a chicken, or a pilgrim, or a narrator” (his italics). The most explicit morals of the Nun’s Priest’s “fable-exempla” (Shallers 322) include the example of simple and humble living by the old woman upon whose farm Chanticleer lives (ln 2821-46); the significance of dreams as “warnynge of thynges that men after seen” (ln 3125-26); the value (or lack thereof) in a woman’s advice (ln 3256-57); the dangers of submitting to vanity and flattery (ln 3436-37); and the risk in straying from duty to “jangleth whan [a person] sholde holde his pees” (ln 3435). Each of these lessons is given

its own exemplum, a “short, moralistic tale” (Shallers 322), demonstrating its significance to the priest, as narrator of the tale, and to the other pilgrims.

Resulting from these many moral lessons, the argument has been repeatedly made by scholars who claim, as Spearing does in “*The Canterbury Tales IV: Exemplum and Fable*,” that “the Nun’s Priest advises ‘taketh the fruyt, and lat the chaf be stille’ (3443), but his tale offers such a selection of fruits that we are at a loss to know which to select as ‘the moralite’” (Spearing 208). This false conclusion, if accepted, leads to another that is also the result of this misconception: “The beast-fable has become a mock-exemplum as much as a mock-tragedy, mocking that determination to find meaning in stories that seems to be a permanent part of human culture” (208). Yet these two determinations are both based in what can only be called a misreading of the final lines of the “Nun’s Priest’s Tale.” Indeed, the moral of the last stanza, discernment between fruit and chaff, makes purposeful mockery of the tales’ multiple exempla, but the Nun’s Priest does not implore his hearers to disregard stories altogether on that basis; rather, he tells multiple stories in the service of his moral directive. I shall explain this rhetoric shortly; however, there is yet another mistaken interpretation which is pertinent to our discussion of the Nun’s Priest’s moral that I must first discuss.

An alternate interpretation of the tale is based on scholars’ answers to the question Peter Elbow stages in *Oppositions in Chaucer*: should we take the poem seriously? Elbow’s response to this question unfortunately points up a trend in the study of the “Nun’s Priest’s Tale” which misses the point almost completely. Elbow asserts that Chaucer “allegedly answers the question by exhorting us to take the poem as serious

doctrine,” but that the last stanza is “lamely tacked on at the end” which ultimately directs the reader not to take it seriously (108). However, while Elbow recognizes the change in tone at the last stanza, he does not appreciate the nuance in the oppositional device of those last few lines. The final lines of the tale do not direct the reader to “take the poem as serious doctrine;” in fact, the stanza does quite the opposite. And rather than being “tacked on” to the end of the story, these final lines are a direct statement from narrator to audience, necessarily changing the tone of the tale. The Nun’s Priest is not concerned with our serious understanding of the allegory of the “fox, or a cok and hen” (3438); he is concerned with whether his audience is willing and able to discern the truth of his tale. Thus Chaucer employs a strategy in which he purposefully “skirts, transcends, or even anticipates structural closure in favor of an engagement between the narrative and its responding audience that fundamentally works against closure” (Grudin 1160). In order to highlight the real moral of his tale, the Nun’s Priest subverts the convention of traditional closure to the fable (Chauntecleer and Pertelote lived happily ever after...) by directly addressing the audience’s responsibility to discern the fruit of the tale.

If we understand the call to discernment made in these final lines as *the* “moralite,” we do not give into the mistake of assuming the beast-fable to be “mocking of the determination to find meaning in stories,” and we avoid missing the point of the last stanza by getting caught up in the possible allegories of the tale. Spearing judges rightly that this desire for meaning is part of human culture; and yet, this desire still stands legitimately in the face of the “Nun’s Priest’s Tale” *if* we ascertain the proper lesson from the Priest’s address at the end.

Rather than wallowing in Elbow's or Spearing's confusion about which moral to select, we must take to heart the final stanza of the tale. All the doctrines of the previous moral lessons depreciate when the Priest utters the final moral theme:

But ye that holden this tale a folye,
 As of a fox, or a cok and hen,
 Taketh the moralite, goode men.
 For Seint Paul seith that al that written is,
 To oure doctrine it is ywrite, ywis;
 Taketh the fruyt, and lat the chaf be stille. (In 3438-3443)

The Nun's Priest accomplishes a number of directives in this closing address. First, he redirects the tone of his tale by calling his fellow pilgrims back from the rowdy humor of the story's chase scene ("folye") to the seriousness of moral teaching characteristic of a sermon. As he makes this statement, he aligns the fox, cock, and hen with the folly in his tale, thereby separating those characters from the central message of his story. In making this distinction, the Nun's Priest draws the moralistic attention away from the characters in his story, thus discrediting scholars'²² claims to their often exaggerated symbolic significance. He reveals that his tale is a "parody of exemplary tragedy" (Spearing 206) as he turns the moral focus away from the characters themselves and redirects the pilgrims' attention toward their own lives. Having done so, he directs his listeners to glean "the moralite" from his tale. In doing so, the Nun's Priest makes another key distinction: this is the first time the Priest makes explicit reference to the moral of his tale, thereby distinguishing this explicit moral from all others implicit in his tale. The Nun's Priest provides the many previous moral exempla in order to allow his hearers

²² These are scholars such as Charles Dahlberg and Peter Elbow, whose readings focus centrally on the possible allegorical significance of particular animal characters in the tale.

practice in discernment throughout his tale, and then calls their attention to that discernment in the end.

The Priest then turns his listeners' attention, with their minds on morals, to the letter of Saint Paul to the Romans (RSV Rm 15:4). The focus of the particular passage quoted by the priest is a didactic set-up to the next passage quoted from the Gospel of Luke wherein the separation of wheat and chaff illustrates the final judgment (notably, this reference to Saint Paul is also explicitly re-stated in the "Retraction"). The Priest juxtaposes these two scriptures in order to make the ultimate consequence of his intended moral of discernment even more pressing upon his audience. The Nun's Priest uses this rhetorical device keenly; the tale's hearers should heed the advice suggested by the Nun's Priest, but more importantly that of Saints Paul and Luke. This resolution is a clear example of Chaucer's oppositional set-up which gives way to decisive transcendence at the end; his entire tale and all its illustrations of worldly life are meant to conclude with the Priest's plea—that his hearer should discern the folly from the moral, the wheat from the chaff—and that discernment is the fundamental key to surviving worldly chaos.

Looking retrospectively through the tale, having established the moral of discernment, each individual exemplum becomes an opportunity for discernment for both the characters in the tale, as well as for the pilgrims. Each time an exemplum is given, the reader is also given an opportunity to winnow the wheat from the chaff. For example, Chaucer provides two options from which the hearer of this tale must discern when Chanticleer tells his wife Pertelote of his ominous dream. For her part, Pertelote derides his fear and withdraws her love from him saying she "kan nat love a coward" (ln 2911).

She then begs him to forget about the dream, blaming it on his humors being out of sorts, and advises that he “taak som laxatyf” (ln 2943) to aid in his digestion. The four humors were part of the medieval scientific paradigm regarding medicine and physical science and would serve to validate Pertelote’s argument. On the other hand, Chanticleer gives multiple examples from literature and the Bible to substantiate his claim which “affermeth dremes” as prophetic messages (ln 3125). Chanticleer, so proud of his defense, forgets the dream altogether and proceeds to make a gaudy display of his masculine prowess. Once the Nun’s Priest presents both arguments he calls the listeners’ attention back to himself as narrator: “Leve I this Chauntecleer in his pasture,/And after wol I telle his aventure” (ln 3185). The purpose of this recall is to leave space for the hearers of the tale to make their own judgments on Chanticleer’s pride and to discern whether or not to heed their dreams based on the “scientific” argument of the humors or the Christian argument of the prophetic dream. The narrator does not direct the audience toward one conclusion or another; and through intentionally leaving that judgment to the reader, he highlights the necessity of the process of conscientious discernment itself. The pattern of argument and recall demonstrated in this first moral debate is repeated throughout the “Nun’s Priest’s Tale” with each presentation of a new moral lesson; these moments of recall, in which the Nun’s Priest makes an aside to his audience, correspond with moments in which he either implicitly or explicitly asks the hearer to discern. They can be observed on line 3185, after the arguments presented for and against dreams; from line 3234 to 3251, following the famous argument over “necessitee;” from line 3256 to 3266, when the Nun’s Priest presents the debate regarding women’s council; and in line

3436, after Chauntecleer escapes the grasp of the Raven which ends the argument concerning duty and flattery. Every time the Nun's Priest reorients the listener's attention, he makes the rhetorical statement that the stories themselves are teaching tools—thus his invocation of Saint Paul—and that the series of morals, at its heart, is a contemplation on discernment, despite its frivolity.

The concept of discernment is one upon which Chaucer focuses largely in the last years of his life and can be assessed in conjunction with his other spiritual focus, repentance²³. Here, as in the Parson's tale, Chaucer references the biblical line from Luke (RSV Lk 3:17) to make a key distinction. While the Parson uses the metaphor to distinguish his "tale" from the others of the pilgrimage, the Nun's Priest uses the metaphor to separate this most crucial lesson from the other morals in his story. Yet Chaucer employs the metaphor even more deeply; in both cases he makes a statement about judgment, echoing John the Baptist in the original scripture. What seems a jovial "folye" (ln 3438) is indeed a way for Chaucer to quietly express his own methods for navigating, and thus surviving, the social and religious turmoil of his era. He is able to make this statement legitimately through the Nun's Priest because he deliberately remained neutral toward this particular character, one "who is underdeveloped for a reason" (Gallick 475).

The Nun's Priest's careful delivery of these multiple exempla and metaphor gives him control of his audience rhetorically, even while obediently serving the Host and Knight who request 'swich thing as may oure hertes glade' (NPP 2811). In other words,

²³ This is a concept for which another of the tales I have discussed, The Parson's, is written in these last four years of Chaucer's life.

regardless of the raucous plot in his tale, he is nevertheless able to bring his hearers along with him in a meditation which centers on the practice of righteous discernment. Brantley L. Bryant muses about Chaucer's bureaucratic skill in "'By Extorcions I Lyve': Chaucer's Friar's Tale and Corrupt Officials," a skill which, I argue, is transferrable from his professional life to his writing. The "Nun's Priest's Tale" exemplifies Chaucer's ability to negotiate difficult social situations using his pen. As narrator of his tale, the Nun's Priest satisfies his very diverse audience, providing a "murie" story while at the same time fulfilling the expectation of him as a priest to sermonize and provide a lesson to his hearers. His use of multiple genres allows him to respond appropriately to his audience. As Gallick states, the "sermon features [found in the tale] do not add up to a sermon, but rather contribute to the humorous attempt of this fable to reflect the entire literary tradition of the fourteenth century—including the sermon" (471). In addition to the structure and the genre of his tale, the Nun's Priest makes the possibility of allegory visible for his audience, touching on various scandals of the late fourteenth century. Through his intentional lack of characterization of the Priest, Chaucer is able to employ his own rhetorical expertise to convey the imperative of discernment throughout the tale through the voice of the Priest's character in the *Tales*.

Additionally, other interpretations of the text, those not based on the morals of the story but on their allegorical possibilities, are validated by the theme of discernment. Specifically, only through the lens of discernment does any "hidden" allegorical significance come to light. The details of the allegory, whether Chanticleer is seen as a priest or the first man, Adam, or the fox is portrayed as the devil, a heretic, or a friar, do

not really matter because none of these interpretations is “correct.” What makes any of them valid at all is a concentration on discernment; whichever allegory one chooses can be validated if further interpreted through the kind of spiritual discernment emphasized in the last passage of the tale. For example, if we were to accept the oft-proposed theory that the old woman exemplifies the Church, Chanticleer a secular priest, and the fox a Friar, we could only see the good or evil of each character’s symbolic representation through conscientious discernment of the moral standing of each. For instance, we would have to discern whether all Friars could be accurately portrayed by such a character as the Fox. Only as a result of our discernment does the allegory hold meaning.

Conscientious discernment is precisely what seems to be guiding Chaucer through the end-years of his life and career. Not to be confused with the notion of mere choice or judgment, the discernment for which the Nun’s Priest advocates, and which Chaucer eventually adopts for our witness in the “Retraction,” has a specific spiritual qualification. As I will examine in the third and fourth chapters of this thesis, discernment, for Chaucer, is based on the Boethian ethic of “rightful discernment”—the choice between partial goods, and the “one true good.” The “Nun’s Priest’s Tale” is part of a speculated set of 5 tales written, along with a few short poems, in the final fragment of Chaucer’s life (Benson xxix). The tales in this set are keenly focused on personal moral concerns, rather than critical pursuits of various social figures. A final set of writings with themes such as these seems to lend itself toward a theory of “end of life concerns.” Indeed it may, though we may never be able to prove that Chaucer knew his life was ending. There is some loose evidence to this theory: he was sixty years old, had

undoubtedly witnessed a number of deaths (he had survived the Black plague through his childhood and the Peasant's revolt in adulthood), and was likely to have lived beyond the average life-expectancy of his time. Yet perhaps the strongest evidence we have for his own awareness of old age and death can actually be found in his writing. The "Nun's Priest's Tale" is dedicated to discernment between the fruit and chaff; the Second Nun's tale is focused on the spiritual danger of the "vanity of worldly learning" and philosophy, given in the context of a *saint's life* (Benson 19); the Canon's Yeoman's tale is concerned with humility before God and the necessary boundaries of human exploration into science and the field of alchemy; the Manciple's tale is itself a "warning against telling tales" (21); and the Parson's tale is really not a tale as much as a treatise on the benefits and necessity of penance and sacramental reconciliation with God. These themes, taken together with the "Retraction," can be understood as a collection of reflections which not only round out the pilgrimage of the *Canterbury Tales*, perhaps delivering a moral to the entire collection of stories, but also the life of our poet whose diverse and prolific writings deserve a conclusion begun with the "moralite" of the "Nun's Priest's Tale."

The "Nun's Priest's Tale" marks a shift in the content and purpose of the *Tales* from social critique and commentary to internal reflection and moral didacticism. It is a shift that further validates the intentionality with which Chaucer identifies and negotiates the tumultuous religious atmosphere of his time and speaks to his desire to resolve the dialectic with which he grapples for most of the *Tales*. Without the constraints of patronage—his income in these last years consisted totally of royal grants for services

already rendered and gifts of both cash money and wine²⁴—he continued to write careful analyses of figures both secular and religious. In this final phase of the *Tales*, our poet reveals a deliberate attempt to sort through the ideological and theological messages which confused orthodoxy and stemmed heterodoxy in the late fourteenth century. The effort to resolve the disorder, even if only for his own mind, begins explicitly with the moral of the “Nun’s Priest’s Tale.”

Theories abound as to the reasons behind the inclusion of the “Retraction” in the *Canterbury Tales*; some even speculate that it was not originally written for the *Tales* (Eberle 863, Wolfe 427-31). In fact, Matthew Wolfe demonstrates the possibility, through Holland’s MS. Gg.4.27, that the “Retraction” was not necessarily meant to close the *Tales*, and could easily be placed at the end of the entire Chaucer codex (430). Wolfe points up the discrepancy between possible theories²⁵ for placement of the “Retraction” by posing the question this way: “It is obvious from the first lines that Chaucer meant what we call the *Retraction* to provide closure of some sort; the question is, closure for what?” (431). The question is apt; it would have been *practical* for Chaucer to include this tale at the end of the pilgrimage, not only because it was the end of the characters’ journey and, chronologically the last thing we know he wrote, but perhaps this debate of placement becomes less important when we consider that the “Retraction” signals the end of Chaucer’s own life pilgrimage (Benson xxix). Regardless of the particular placement of the “Retraction,” these points of conclusion are just the

²⁴ See the introduction to the *Riverside Chaucer*, edited by Larry Benson.

²⁵ See Wolfe’s “Placing Chaucer’s ‘Retraction’ for a Reception of Closure,” page 427-8.

kind of “major ending” to which Elbow refers²⁶; Chaucer has exhibited a framework of oppositions in order to present his trademark device—the final “moralite.” Moreover, aside from the “Retraction,” included in the latest surviving works of Chaucer are the “Nun’s Priest’s Tale” and the “Parson’s Tale” (Benson xxix). The proximity of content, theme, and structure of these two tales and Chaucer’s “Retraction” suggests that Chaucer wished to complete a written act of penance, such as the “Retraction,” when his final work was completed. Thus, the answer to Wolfe’s question is that the “Retraction” has a “dual function:” both are appropriate placements and both possibilities should be considered together (Potz-McGerr 100).

The narrator’s structural shift signals the sense of “closure” felt by Wolfe and others; yet, in typical Chaucerian fashion, it tends to leave scholars with still more questions. First, he shifts focus to initiate the “Retraction;” the tales are as finished as they will ever be and the final words are those of Chaucer himself, signaled by his self-reference throughout the retraction: “Heere taketh the makere of this book his leve” (Benson 328, Wolfe 427)²⁷. He now addresses the reader directly, modeling the sacrament for the reader, rather than for the pilgrims. Additionally, the didactic emphasis of the narrator shifts from the pilgrims to the reader, even as Chaucer continues the message of the Parson. The “Retraction” also marks a shift between mere spiritual meditation and the tangible action of the orthodox doctrine on penance.

As in *Troilus and Criseyde*, Chaucer offers a prayer to Christ “of whom procedeth al wit and al goodness” (ln 1080). However, he extends this epilogue to include more

²⁶ See Peter Elbow’s *Oppositions in Chaucer*, page 14.

²⁷ Although the “makere of this book” could also be a persona, he is nevertheless separate from the pilgrims.

than his typical prayers and dedications. Ginsberg's parataxis presents itself on a third level here; the "Retraction" evokes the goodly priests, who in turn evoke their archetypal sources, along with all that the form of medieval retraction brings to the surface, especially Augustine's *Retractationes*²⁸. At least in Benson's order, Chaucer's final retraction immediately follows a lengthy meditation on penance, and so, as an example of the discernment for which the Nun's Priest advocates, and the penance his Parson has preached, he models the sacrament as the final statement of the *Tales*.

Chaucer's penance begins with a humble prayer, crediting Christ with "any thyng in [the *Tales*] that lyketh" the reader (ln 1080). He then excuses himself for his "unkonnyng," stating his intent to write the *Tales* in keeping with the scriptures (ln 1082). Yet, we must immediately note that the initial address in the "Retraction" is a direct reference toward the two goodly priests of the preceding tales. The "Retraction" must be understood through these two pilgrims because they clearly inform his resolution to the oppositions he presents throughout the *Tales*.

Though not explicitly (and how often can we expect Chaucer to be explicit?), Chaucer pays homage to the Nun's Priest and Parson by structurally and thematically following their advice. First, Chaucer quotes Saint Paul's letter to the Romans, directly alluding to the Nun's Priest's moral and to the strategy of the Parson, whose quotations of the apostles, prophets, and Church fathers are in abundance. The quotation, "al that is writen is writen for our doctrine" (Retraction 1082), demonstrates that what is written is meant to teach the reader; it requires the reader to construct meaning for didactic purposes, and it is the very reason Chaucer goes to the trouble of writing out his own act

²⁸ I will discuss further the "heritage" of retraction in Chapter Three.

of penitence. Through Chaucer, the reader can access the scriptures, and through the scriptures the reader can access God. Secondly, the initial prayers of the “Retraction” are a literal act of separating the wheat from the chaff among Chaucer’s works. These lines directly recall the “moralitee” of the two good priests: the Nun’s Priest directly quotes the same verse from Saint Luke, instructing the reader to carefully discern the “fruyt” of life so that the Lord can bring her to “heighe blisse” (ln 3446), and the Parson spends countless lines of his treatise examining the conscience for our “verray penitence.”

The remainder of the “Retraction” literally enacts the steps of the sacrament as prescribed by the Parson. Significantly, Chaucer beseeches the reader to pray for God’s forgiveness “of [his] translacions and enditynges of worldly vanitees” (ln 1084). This request evokes the ancient practice of reciting the *Confiteor*²⁹ as part of the penitential rite of the Mass (Knight), a practice wherein the faithful publicly request the prayers of their community for God’s mercy. In keeping with the Parson’s lesson, Chaucer’s supplication operates simultaneously as an examination of conscience and an act of contrition. Thus the first of the six causes for contrition, that “man shal remembre hym of his synnes,” is fulfilled by calling to mind the Parson’s meditation on the seven deadly sins (ln 132). Chaucer commits his own act of confession by “confessen hym of alle the condiciouns that bilongen to his synne” which are the written works he wishes to retract (ln 318, 1085-6). Notable is that the following statement is careful to withhold from retraction all the translations and “bookes of legendes of seintes, and omelies, and moralitee, and devocioun” which contain religious matter and are credited to Christ and his “blisful Mooder” (ln

²⁹ “Confiteor” literally means “I confess.” See Knight’s “Confiteor” in the Catholic Encyclopedia.

1087). Finally, Chaucer states his intended satisfaction, that he might “studie to the salvacioun of [his] soule, and [be granted] grace of verray penitence, confessioun and satisfaccioun” (ln 1089). Chaucer’s final retraction ends with an invocation of God’s grace and worship, exemplifying for the reader a “verray parfit penitence.”

Thus, as the penultimate conjecture of this thesis, I propose that viewing Chaucer’s “Retraction” as a literal model of the Parson’s meditation solves the much debated difficulty posed by the “Retraction,” as expressed by Albert Hartung: “fitting the [Parson’s] tale comfortably into the work poses a problem. The problem is caused by the Retraction” (62). Hartung further argues that the “Retraction” “is really a conclusion of ‘this lytel tretys’ on penance, which we call *The Parson’s Tale*, rather than *The Canterbury Tales* as a whole” (64). However, Hartung’s argument (though somewhat popular in early Chaucer scholarship), as well as the other theories discussed by Wolfe, undervalue the Retraction’s more complex purpose³⁰. Not only does the “Retraction” conclude “The Parson’s Tale” and *The Canterbury Tales*, it also concludes Chaucer’s career. I would propose that the Parson’s meditation and Chaucer’s “Retraction” are placed deliberately at the end of the *Tales* as the capstone of the pilgrimage, the Parson’s meditation, and the life of our poet; their presence does not merely conclude them. Chaucer’s final statement, a penitential retraction of his works written in the last four years of his life, follows “The Parson’s Tale” which is the most rigorous religious meditation of his surviving texts. This ending to the *Tales*, and to Chaucer’s life, “gives rise to a moment of moral clarity” whereupon the reader can be “replenysed

³⁰ According to Hartung, other scholars who argue this point include the prominent Siegfried Wenzel and early Chaucerians such as Thynne, Stow, and Speght.

with the sighte of the parfit knowynge of God” and is inspired to pursue the example of the poet (Allen 91, ln 1080).

Although the narrator performs a “parfit” act of contrition, according to the conventions of the sacrament, the “litel tretys” leaves scholars confused. We are left wondering about closure to the *Tales*, to the codex, and of course the “death-bed repentance” first proposed by Thomas Gascoigne (Benson 965). Michaela P. Grudin even suggests that Chaucer purposefully leaves us with a sense of *refusal* to conventionally close his works in the name of “realism,” stating that

Chaucer’s sense of closure, which indeed seems different from and more powerful than the traditional one, is intimately bound up with the idea of a *response* to the structural narrative itself. (1159, Grudin’s italics)

This assessment is true in many cases; Chaucerians endlessly profess the poet’s comfort with ambiguity and irony. Yet, it cannot be enough to present, as Grudin does, Chaucer’s intentional lack of closure as simply a determination of his “attitude toward discourse...inquiry and knowledge” (1165). That his “epistemology...is marked by interaction, dialectical relations, and open process” (1165) is obvious in his work, but his final “Retraction” nevertheless betrays that he *is* concerned with closure—and a particular kind of closure at that. After all, the “Retraction,” no matter where it is placed, draws a line in the sand; there are some works retracted and some works spared. Not only this, but here, of all places, Chaucer uses the most “conventional ending” possible (Benson 965), the closing prayer of the liturgy: “Qui cum Patre et Spiritu Sancto vivit et regnat Deus per omnia secula. Amen” (1091). If Grudin is correct, and Chaucer’s brand of “closure” always flies in the face of convention, then his unconventional approach—

up to the point of the “Retraction”—serves to prove that this final penance is his method for reconciling the tensions he previously illustrates. In the “Retraction,” Chaucer closes Elbow’s “oppositions” and “works against closure” simultaneously; he juxtaposes the *finite* (the *Tales* themselves) with the *infinite* (Grudin’s “discourse, inquiry and knowledge”), providing closure and openness at the same time. Ultimately, Chaucer’s method is not so much “deliberate irresolution” (Staley 180), or a refusal to close, as it is a decided middleness—and contentment with balancing both at the same time. Here, Chaucer finally resolves that ever-pressing socio-spiritual tension between the individual and the universal, valuing simultaneity until the very last.

THE GENRE: CONVENTION AND REINVENTION IN CHAUCER'S

RETRACTIONARY FORM

*"Go, litel bok, go, litel myn tragedye,
Ther God thi makere yet..."*

Troilus and Criseyde, ln 1786-87

"...That I may been oon of hem at the day of doom that shulle be saved."

"Retraction," ln 1091

Our poet is consistently looking for ways to live in two worlds. Paull F. Baum explains in his comments on the "*Troilus* Epilogue" that "over and over again, the language of one religion [Courtly Love] is transposed into that of the other [orthodox Christianity] without any sense of incongruity or blasphemy" (146). Chaucer's tendency toward simultaneity, a concept to which I will sometimes refer as "middleness," is ambiguous, even maddening, and yet poignant. The central social and religious tension of his day is that between the individual and universal, a tension with which Chaucer struggles throughout his career, and a stimulus for his own desire to exist in the middle of these two worlds. As we have examined through the work of Peter Elbow and Michaela Grudin, Chaucer utilizes oppositions as a device to demonstrate and navigate this tension in all of his important work; thus, this particular tension is arguably his most fundamental source of opposition. Furthermore, even though Chaucer usually "relinquishes the dialectic" to reveal a side that is "right" (Elbow 14), the oppositional tension between the universal and individual is one for which he endeavors to create a workable state of simultaneity. For, despite the medieval emphasis on "moralite," Chaucer was nonetheless free to suggest simultaneous existence of these forces by the medieval paradigm wherein

oppositional concepts could hold simultaneous validity³¹ (17). Among its many interpretations, the “Retraction” is a prime example of this middleness; it is the reason scholar Krista Twu observes that the end of the *Tales* “offer[s] a process through which one can live a spiritual life in the world, rather than a choice between the worldly and the spiritual” (342). Moreover, the final “Retraction” comes to serve this function for Chaucer in a markedly particular and profound fashion. As an act of sacramental penance, the “Retraction” provides a kind of personal paradigm shift which emphasizes simultaneity in the face of the universal-individual tension, even while the forces of Chaucer’s world so strongly advocate for loyalty to one side or the other. The key to his sense of balance is Chaucer’s determination, witnessed by the “Retraction,” of the proper relationship between the two poles.

Still, the form of retraction did not always serve this purpose for Chaucer. As a genre, the form of retraction had already established conventions and rhetorical functions by Chaucer’s time; it was a rhetoric with origins as early, for Chaucer’s purposes, as Augustine. That the “retractionary” pieces in the Chaucer codex signal a rejection of the world and return to God is part of this conventional heritage. Yet, for Chaucer, the genre of retraction takes many forms which progress over the span of his career, finally arriving at the form in which the “Retraction” is written. By the time Chaucer arrives at his final retraction, his understanding of the genre has transformed considerably, even becoming an expression less literary, and more exemplary, than any of his previous work.

³¹ The notion of “moralite” and “simultaneous opposition” is itself an example of this oxymoronic paradigm.

In this penultimate chapter, I intend to illustrate two chief points: first that four of Chaucer's texts which can be considered to contain "retractions"—*Boece*, *Troilus and Criseyde*, the "Ballad" in *The Legend of Good Women*, and the *Canterbury Tales*' "Retraction"—demonstrate a mode of progression in the form of retraction; and secondly that the ultimate form of the "Retraction" is rendered by Chaucer's final understanding of rhetorical purpose for retraction. It is my final argument of this thesis that through a progressive study of retraction as a *form* in Chaucer's work, that form becomes, for Chaucer, a sacramental penance. Rather than a mere recantation or redaction of prior work, or a conventional revision of reader-construction, Chaucer demonstrates the form of retraction itself as a penitential rite, and as such, retraction becomes a satisfying approach, at least for Chaucer, to resolving the universal-individual tension.

Chaucer's first exposure to retraction was likely a reading of Augustine's *Confessiones* and *Retractationes* (Taylor 117, Potz-McGerr 97). Rosemary Potz-McGerr demonstrates the allusion between Augustine's *Retractationes* and the "Retraction" at the end of Chaucer's *Tales*:

Not only does Chaucer's "Retractions" follow Augustine's lead in reviewing a literary career, but it helps show that the *Canterbury Tales*, even in its unfinished state, embodies Augustine's ideas about the workings of memory, experience, and literature. (98)

In her references to Augustine's retractionary work, Potz-McGerr defines a certain convention and rhetoric by which medieval retraction can be defined, with Augustine's work as its standard. According to Potz-McGerr, Augustine's view of the genre was not "in the modern sense of recanting or renouncing [works]" (98). Rather, for Augustine, the retraction "meant 'reviews' or 'revisions,'" a view which placed a particular concern

upon the readers' construction of the work. The revisions in Augustine's *Retractationes* are a method by which he corrects his readers' misinterpretations; his "concern is his responsibility, before God, to ensure that readers come away from his works with the right ideas" (99). Thus his corrections are made with the "intent to lead readers to the truth" (99), and, as the genre of retraction is formed, this concern provides its basis.

In the genre of retraction since Augustine, but before Chaucer, developments were made by the poets whom Chaucer later translated: Boethius and Boccaccio. These advances were the results of varying concerns: on the one hand, the *Consolatio de Philosophia* reveals that Boethian retraction is concerned with the relationship between the poet and the "true good," which is God; on the other hand, for Boccaccio the anxiety lies mainly in reader-construction and proper transcription. In *Il Filostrato*, the concern is that he will be "rightly understood" (Baum 144) through his desire to win the graces of the Holy Virgin (*Troilus* 428). Consequently, contributions from these two poets to Chaucer's work are significantly different. While both provided content for translation, Boethius had more influence on Chaucer's philosophy than had Boccaccio. It was Boethius, after all, "who made Chaucer a philosophical poet, and not simply a courtly maker" (Hanna and Lawler 396). Yet, Boccaccio's impact is equally significant due to the lasting effect of the technique of the "historical romance" he provided Chaucer (Barney 471)³².

Many conventional devices resulted from the central Augustinian concern of "proper" reader construction of a "retracted" work, as well as the adaptations made by

³² Notable is the fact that despite the gravity of these contributions to his work, Chaucer is responsible for the complete transformation of these works. See Steven Barney's introduction to *Troilus and Criseyde* in the *Riverside Chaucer*.

both Boethius and Boccaccio; they can be observed in Chaucer's many "apologies." First, in the name of convention, the writer of such a retraction stated his intent in writing the piece, which was almost invariably to lead the reader to holiness. Most times, when a retraction was present, the writer admitted that his words did not fulfill his intent; hence the apologetic theme of retraction became the default. Potz-McGerr lists other conventions, including a bibliography of works and an extensive review of those works (100). Kemp Malone contributes to the list of conventions with devices such as a declaration of the poet's modesty³³, the poet's reference to or invocation of the classic poets³⁴, and the polite entreaty by the poet to his colleagues and friends to "correcte" the work³⁵. Chaucer's use of these conventions becomes clear in the canon of his work, but it was not automatic. Indeed, a closer look at both *Boece* and *Troilus and Criseyde* will demonstrate his learning and practice of these conventions. However, I contend that Chaucer progresses even beyond the conventional use and understanding of retraction by the time the *Tales* are finished. Thus, henceforward I will refer to the genre of retraction in differing terms; for the times when Chaucer is writing his retractions with the style and purpose of Augustine, Boethius, and Boccaccio, I will refer to his *conventional retractions*; whereas, once Chaucer has developed a changed view of the genre of retraction, and moves beyond its conventions, I will refer to a truly *Chaucerian retraction*.

In order to demonstrate the contrast between the conventional and Chaucerian retractions, I will first examine Chaucer's translation of Boethius' *Consolatione de*

³³ Chaucer's "unkonnyng" on line 1081 of the "Retraction."

³⁴ The narrator of *Troilus and Criseyde* refers to "Virgile, Ovide, Omer, Lucan, and Stace" in line 1792.

³⁵ See the *Troilus*, ln 1858

Philosophia, which Chaucer names, simply, *Boece*. Chaucer learned much from Boethius in translating this work, the entirety of which is essentially a retraction in the conventional sense. Indeed, much of Chaucer's concern with the universal-individual tension is found in Boethius:

The vision of the physical universe in many of poems [of *Boece*] is of opposing forces bound and reconciled; and it is precisely such a reconciliation of the oppositions in human experience—success and failure, joy and sorrow, good and evil, stability and change, liberty and bondage, affirmation and skepticism—toward which the play of ideas in the proses progresses. (Hanna and Lawler 396)

In fact, the concerns which arise in *Boece* have the effect of shaping the remainder of Chaucer's work in some way or another. As Bernard Jefferson remarks in *Chaucer and the Philosophy of Boethius*, "Chaucer's thoughts must have been afire with the Boethian philosophy" as he moved on to the *Troilus* after finishing his translation of *Boece* (120). The primary manifestation of this influence can be seen in the enduring motifs of discernment and penance in the endings of works such as *Troilus and Criseyde*, *The Legend of Good Women*, and *The Canterbury Tales* through Boethius' approach to his principal retractionary convention: the concern with a return to God.

In large part, the inextricable motifs of discernment and penance in *Boece* are exemplified in the "machinery by which fate operates;" it is a mechanism which reappears in the *Troilus*, and is, according to Jefferson, "entirely Boethian" (121). Central to its working, for Chaucer, is the notion that humans are bound to fate, and therefore also to fortune; it is a theme which proves a stumbling block upon which countless Chaucerian oppositions are based. Fate puts humans at risk of falling victim to Fortune's wheel which necessarily gives the character of Boece occasion to be consoled. Chaucer's

emphasis, through translation, is the discernment of *rightful* consolation. Through Dame Philosophy, and her dismissal of Fortune, Boece has cause to contemplate whether the consolations he seeks are the true good or merely partial goods. It is here that we see the beginnings of Chaucer's exploration of this same theme in the *Troilus*. While Troilus worships the partial good of human love throughout the epic, he realizes, after his death, that the "one true good" is not in the world: "this world that passeth soone as floures faire" (*Troilus* V.1841). Moreover, we see the beginnings of an emphasis on discernment; what consoles Boece in the end is not that he is freed from prison or from his mental torture. Rather, it is his discernment toward the "one true good," the God who has chosen his fate—a fate that should be fitting to him for that reason alone. The *Consolation* is, primarily for Chaucer, an exercise in conforming the human will to that of God; it is a demonstration of potential reconciliation of the universal-individual tension—a way to see oneself in relation to the universal, and along with Augustine's *Retractationes*, a philosophy which Chaucer cultivates for the rest of his career.

Also from Boethius, Chaucer draws a lasting theme of opposition between words and intent. Not only does this particular opposition become manifest in his conventional retraction, it is also the seed of an idea which grows and develops in significance for Chaucer, resulting in strong thematic tension throughout the *Tales* and contributing largely to the "Retraction" itself. In fact, Dame Philosophy's emphasis on the proximity between speech and deed³⁶ is echoed very closely in the pilgrim-narrator's "apology" in the *Tales*' "General Prologue"³⁷, a purely conventional passage which emphasizes the

³⁶ *Boece*, III.206-7. See also P.B. Taylor's "Chaucer's Cosyn to the Dede," page 321.

³⁷ "General Prologue," line 741-2.

narrator's innocence in conveying "the complex relations between intent, word, and deed" (Taylor 319). It seems that in *Boece*, Chaucer's concerns regarding the disjunction between word and deed coincide with his understanding of retraction in ways that can't help but fuel his considerations of the universal-individual tension as well as contribute philosophically to the remainder of his work.

Still more than simply appropriating Boethian philosophical convention, Chaucer gained from Boethius "a capacity to focus on fundamental general questions, augmenting his sense of character, his human touch, and his tolerance" (Hanna and Lawler 396). It is in the *Consolation* that he learns the spiritual benefit of "patient suffraunce"³⁸, the concept which informs, before any other, the notion of Chaucer's pilgrimage in both its fictional (the *Canterbury Tales*) and personal (the "Retraction") embodiments. The translation of Boethius' *Consolation* very possibly lends to Chaucer's curiosity with the form of retraction, perhaps providing the impetus to attempt one of his own.

Scholars have noted the proximity in philosophy between *Boece* and the *Troilus*, pointing up the Boethian influences included in this study among others³⁹. Corinne Saunders observes a "deep sense of transience" correlating the two works, a "concern with the universal" particularly in "Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, which Chaucer drew on so extensively in *Troilus*" (140). Indeed, according to Benson's chronology of Chaucer's works, both *Boece* and *Troilus* were written in the early 1380's, with the former shortly preceding the latter. The relationship between the two works is

³⁸ See Hanna and Lawler's introduction to *Boece* in the *Riverside Chaucer*.

³⁹ See especially Bernard Jefferson's *Chaucer and the Consolation of Philosophy of Boethius*, Paul Baum's *Chaucer: A Critical Appreciation*, and E. Talbot Donaldson's chapter, "Troilus and Criseyde: Critical Extracts, The Ending of *Troilus*," which can be found in *Chaucer*, edited by Corinne Saunders.

immediate and fosters a certain propensity in Chaucer to make *exempla* of the works he translates in his subsequent works. In fact, according to Baum, “Chaucer’s poem on the twin sorrows of Troilus is but the *De Consolatione de Philosophiae* writ new” (154). Indeed, the relationship between the two is arguably the beginning of at least one major Chaucerian signet; the rhetorical move between *Boece* and the *Troilus* is one of translation and imitation, and it is characteristic of Chaucer’s *modus operandi*. This pattern of interchange can also be seen between the “Parson’s Tale” and the “Retraction;” it signals a transition in Chaucer’s understanding of his world—one significant enough to influence his subsequent translations in ways that their original texts could never achieve. In both cases, the movement from translation-to-imitation is transformative and permanent. Also in both cases, the exchange illustrates a growth in Chaucer’s negotiation of the universal-individual tension.

Stephen A. Barney comments on “Chaucer’s handling [of] the story, especially the text of his chief source [for the *Troilus*], the *Filostrato*” (472), marking Chaucer’s “radical” transformation of Boccaccio’s original: in the *Troilus*, Chaucer has “redistribute[ed] the weight given [to] various parts of the story...wholly re-imagining the characters of Troilus, Criseyde, and Pandarus...which alter[s], especially under the influence of Boethius, the tone of the poem” (Barney 472). Consequently, the imitation of Boethius, “Chaucer’s authority” (Baum 150), in the *Troilus* demonstrates Chaucer’s lasting considerations of the philosophical material of the *Consolation*. Moreover, his ensuing translation of Boccaccio is an imitation of the *Consolation* which practices Boethian philosophy; it essentially permits Chaucer to negotiate the human relationship

with his universal authority using a character—Troilus—whose “folly of submitting to Fortune,” is the very struggle of the character of *Boece* (Baum 154⁴⁰). That is, the Boethian character spends the *Consolation* working with Dame Philosophy to discern the “one true good” and reconcile himself to it, in order not to succumb his virtue to the worldly and partial good of Fortune. Similarly, Troilus devotes the entirety of his energy to the partial good of “human love” which is “unstable and illusory” (Donaldson 142), until the epilogue in which he is permitted to see his own folly as he rises into the eighth sphere.

Of course, we are left with the feeling that Troilus does not succeed as well as Boece in rejecting the partial goods of the world, as his sporadic and somewhat reproachful poetics demonstrate:

And in himself he lough right at the wo
Of hem that wepten for his deth so faste,
And dampned al oure werk that foloweth so
The blynde lust, the which that may nat laste,
And sholden al oure herte on heven caste; (In 1821-25)

Technically, Troilus becomes aware of his folly here, but his “peal of celestial laughter” in reaction to his observation of the “wo” of the world is grotesque (Qtd in Baum 159); and it is certainly in opposition to all that we have seen of Troilus thus far. This incongruity is necessarily separate from Elbow’s Chaucerian opposition; while the opposition does, indeed, exist as a device for our “doctrine,” this kind of opposition inadvertently draws more attention to the strangeness of this second of Chaucer’s major retractions. I argue that this strangeness is a result of Chaucer’s experimentation with the

⁴⁰ Consubstantial to this theory is the fact that Chaucer added eighteen stanzas of Boethian philosophy on the subject of what becomes known as “Chaucer’s determinism” (Baum 148).

form, and as I shall demonstrate, is indicative of the multitude of conventions Chaucer was working to address in this retraction.

The predominant convention to which Chaucer adheres at the end of the *Troilus* is a result of Chaucer having been “a medieval;” and, as Baum observes, “we might find ample extenuation [for the very presence of the *Troilus* epilogue] in literary convention and in the medieval principle that a good story deserves a good moral” (160). The impetus for a moral was certain because Chaucer was working within the constructs of medieval literary conventions. Yet, he was also working within the narrower construct of retractionary form, having just translated the wholly retractionary *Consolation*. Thus, for Chaucer, medieval conventions required a moral, but the conventional retraction required that the moral be of a certain kind. For this reason, as Baum explains, “the religion of Love and the religion of the Church, each orthodox in its place and each heterodox to the other, are continually blended all through the poem, *until* the Epilogue” (145, italics mine). When the moral comes in at the start of the Epilogue, it is necessarily a Christian-leaning one, but as Baum further observes, “Chaucer was not content...to leave it so” (160). Rather than ending the poem at Troilus’ rising to heaven and conventional Christian “return” to God, Chaucer follows the lead of Boccaccio, whose own retraction also adheres to the dictates of a conventional retraction. For seventeen convoluted stanzas, Chaucer navigates his way through his first legitimate attempt at retraction as a result of having observed it in *Boece*.

The general consensus for the beginning of the *Troilus* Epilogue is line 1744 (“Grete was the sorwe and pleynte of Troilus...”), because it is here that the narrator

strays from his stated intention to tell “in lovyng, how his adventures fellen” (ln 3), in order to tell of Troilus’ final battles, death, and afterlife. However, the narrator achieves much more than the telling of these events through his long retraction⁴¹. The narrator brings his discussion of the many “cruel bataille” (ln 1751) to a screeching halt by recalling his original intent to write “of his love” (ln 1769). Then, for two stanzas, the narrator interrupts this purpose by discussing Criseyde’s infidelity, and then apologizing for his harshness with her by warning women to “beth war of men, and harkneth what I seye!” (ln 1785). This attempt at apology can be viewed as a somewhat trepid attempt at conventional apology, although as E. Talbot Donaldson remarks at this juncture, “it is perhaps inconsiderate of the narrator to implore us to take his sense when he has been so irresolute about defining his sense” (145). The reader is even further confounded when the narrator again switches his subject to an address of the writer to his poetry, another mark of the conventional retraction. “Go, litel bok, go, litel myn tragedye,” the narrator panders, echoing Boccaccio’s address to his “piteous song” (Chaucer ln 1786, IX.1). In this same stanza, Chaucer utilizes a second convention, that of the narrator’s homage to the classic poets of antiquity⁴². Subsequently, the narrator digresses once more to follow closely Boccaccio’s rendering of the convention which requires the narrator’s plea “that thow be understonde” (ln 1898). In this stanza, the narrator beseeches God that his work will be properly transcribed and rightfully understood, mirroring the convention of such a plea given him by Boccaccio.

⁴¹ I have termed the “Epilogue” a *retraction* because it not only attempts to make use of the conventional retraction, it also contributes to the progress of Chaucer’s retractions throughout his career.

⁴² In this case, the narrator refers to the classic Greek writers, “Virgile, Ovide, Omer, Lucan, and Stace” (ln 1792).

Finally, after this extensive and (painfully) conventional digression, the subject matter returns to the events surrounding Troilus' death and the rising of his soul. At around line 1828, the narrator begins to reflect the conventional Boethian *volta*, the character's return to God, or as Boece terms it, the return to the "one true good" (Hanna and Lawler 395). It is here that Chaucer diverts completely from Boccaccio's ending, Christianizing the epilogue of this otherwise pagan tale, and railing against the "payens corsed olde rites" (ln 1849). However, the narrator then returns to his practice with the conventional retraction, directing the work to his poet-colleagues, Gower and Strode, for correction (ln 1856-9). Even the address to "that sothfaste Crist" (ln 1860) is a rehearsal of the conventions of retraction.

The retraction to *Troilus and Criseyde* demonstrates the attempts Chaucer was making at appropriating the genre; it contains all the conventional practices necessary to the form in addition to the elements of Chaucer's signature transformative translation. It mirrors the moves of Augustine in its concern for his readers' constructions of the work:

And for ther is so gret diversite
 In Englissh and in writing of oure tonge,
 So prey I God that *non miswrite the*,
 Ne themysmetre for defaute of tonge;
 And red wherso thou be, or ells songe,
That thou be undersonde, God I biseche! (ln 1793-1798, italics mine);

It evokes Boethian convention in its volta:

For he [Christ] nyl falsen no wight, dar I seye,
 That wol his herte al holly on hym leye.
And syn he best to love is, and most meke,
What nedeth feynede loves for to seke? (ln 1845-8, italics mine);

And it emulates Boccaccio's use of conventional retraction in its view toward its own poetic nature and purpose:

But litel book, no making thow n'envie,
 But subgit be to alle poesy;
 And kis the steppes where as thow seest pace
 Virgile, Ovide, Omer, Lucan, and Stace. (In 1789-92)

Yet, despite its evident adherence to convention, this retraction is simultaneously innovative, for it serves as a space for Chaucer to examine his station as an individual in relation to the universal. In Christianizing the ending of the *Troilus*, he provides the convention required by the Western medieval literary tradition (Malone 139). But because the Christian ending was not required by Boccaccio's text, the simple prayer in the last few lines of the poem would have sufficed to fulfill the medieval convention. Instead, Chaucer effectually "baptizes" Troilus, Christianizing the character rather than the narrator. This move allows Chaucer to give Troilus the narrative of redemption we lack the opportunity to witness in *Boece*. In so doing, Chaucer is able to utilize a certain freedom to negotiate the space of the universal (heaven), and the individual's role in that space. When the narrator tells of Troilus' "lighte goost" floating into the "holughnesse of the eighthe spere," (In 1808-9), he examines the notion of the beatific vision—the idea that all will be revealed after death—with the result that Troilus is finally able to comprehend his folly. At last, Troilus' vision confirms the lesson of Dame Philosophy, that "God, [is the] byholdre and forwytere of alle thingis" (V.6, In 294), and returns the focus of the poem to Chaucer's enduring internal negotiation with the tension between the universal and the individual.

From his experiments with retraction at the end of the *Troilus*, Chaucer takes a number of lessons. Troilus may have been undeserving of his entrance into the heavenly realm, due to his failure to reject the grips of worldly Fortune. Still, Chaucer grants him the beatific vision, I contend, as a kind of thought-experiment, with Boethian philosophy as its foundation. What Troilus sees, finally, in this vision is the sovereignty of the “one true good” in relation to the apparently laughable “partial goods” of his earthly life. As Potz-McGerr has illustrated, “the conclusion of the *Troilus* necessitates the reevaluation by the reader of his experience of the poem, for his understanding of the material is not complete until he has reviewed the whole in light of the end” (109). That is to say, the beatific vision granted to Troilus is granted, in kind, to the reader. The essential lesson of this thought experiment leads directly to the rhetorical framework of the Canterbury pilgrimage, whereupon the characters (along with the reader) will ultimately “stondeth upon the weyes,” discerning “which is the goode weye” (ParsT In 76). In Chaucer’s working and re-working of retraction, we might observe that he recognizes the conventional retraction, and uses its devices to some effect, but also that he cannot let go of his primary philosophic and spiritual concerns for the sake of that convention. As Chaucer’s career continues, the progressive effect of his retractions is enriched with the revelation that his concern with his relationship to the universal becomes more critical to his understanding of the form of retraction than his regard to literary convention.

Nonetheless, Chaucer is dealing with a very practical and worldly concern even as he examines his role in the tension between the individual and universal; this is the problem of reader-reception. That is, Chaucer is constantly apologizing for his work and

writing new poems to make up for old ones. And, immediately following the *Troilus*, he has a lot of making-up to do. Here, Chaucer is obligated to write yet another retraction in order to “repent” for his scathing treatment of Criseyde. This retraction is made manifest in the “Ballad” in the beginning of the *Legend of Good Women*. And though the *Legend of Good Women* is not typically seen as a retraction, as much as an apologetic nod⁴³ to his female audience, I will argue briefly that the “Ballad” reflects still further progression in Chaucer’s practice with retraction⁴⁴.

At this juncture, it will be beneficial to demonstrate the difference between “apology” and “retraction,” because, for Chaucer, these are different formulae despite each form’s evocation of the other. Thus, while the form of retraction is necessarily apologetic, in that it must make up for something not previously achieved in the work (whether in the Augustinian-conventional sense, or in the Chaucerian sense), an apology is not necessarily retractionary due to the fact that an apology does not require “satisfacioun,” a revision, or recantation. As I examine the *Legend of Good Women*, it will be my intent to demonstrate this difference as it pertains to the progressive pattern of Chaucer’s retractions⁴⁵. Aside from this basic difference is the fundamental *Chaucerian* variant; the progression toward the final “Retraction” signals an increasing concern among the retractions with the practice of penance. In fact, it is in the *Legend* that we witness, for the first time, an explicit reference to repentance as a part of the act of

⁴³ See M.C.E. Shaner’s introduction to the *Legend of Good Women* in the *Riverside Chaucer*.

⁴⁴ In fact, the *Legend of Good Women* contains no such apology. Instead, the narrator argues with Alceste that his treatment of Criseyde is justified on the grounds of “truth,” a justification flatly rejected by both the god of Love and his queen, Alceste.

⁴⁵ Unfortunately, due to the relatively small scope of this thesis, I will be unable to examine the *Legend of Good Women* to the extent that I would like. I hope to be given that opportunity in a later project. For now, I will discuss, briefly, the ways in which the *Legend* contributes to the progression of Chaucer’s retractions as space allows.

retraction⁴⁶. Though Chaucer is still serving two masters, as it were (the god of Love and the God of Christianity), this explicit reference betrays a peculiar line of thought between *Troilus and Criseyde* and the *Legend of Good Women*. On the one hand, the epilogue to the *Troilus*, as we have discovered, is an attempt at the conventional retraction, with a twist of invention wherein Chaucer explores the relationship between the individual and the universal by means of a celestial thought-experiment. On the other, the *Legend* is Chaucer's move toward redemption with his audience, as he practices the form of retraction yet again. However, in the *Legend's* retraction, Chaucer, for the first time, uses the narrator's relationship with the god of Love to explore the penitential rite; from the *Troilus'* retraction to the *Legend's*, Chaucer is refining his navigation of the universal-individual tension. That is, the *Troilus* Epilogue demonstrates Chaucer's celestial end, whereas the *Legend* is an attempt at his means. Thus, in this progressive study, the retraction of the *Legend of Good Women* becomes a clear step between Chaucer's use of retraction in the *Troilus* and that at the end of the *Tales*.

Yet, how can we determine the "Ballad" to be a retraction, and not simply a narrative about penance? Simply put, the "Ballad" contains signature conventions of the form of retraction, as exemplified by Augustine: the bibliography of works (given by Alceste) in lines 414-30, and the Augustinian "revision" of the reader's construction of the work (the defense of the narrator) in lines 455-74. Furthermore, the entire ballad acts as the poet's conventional declaration of innocence for its content. There is no real apology in this retraction, which marks its Augustinian conventionality, and the conversation which occurs between the god of Love, Alceste, and the narrator serves to

⁴⁶ Lines 339, 368.

justify—in advance—the contents of the *Legend*, an echo of the conventional “statement of intent.” The rhetorical framework of the “Ballad” is, therefore, retraction, due to these conventions. Specifically, the conventions demarcate the difference between a narrative of penance (a work such as the “Parson’s Tale”) and a Chaucerian retraction. Yet it is also characteristically transformative in that the events of the “Ballad” serve the progressive understanding Chaucer is developing of the form.

The retraction of the *Legend* is essentially the “Ballad” which precedes the legends. In it, the narrator is chastised by the god of Love, who is dismayed at the narrator’s prior treatment of love and women in two of his major works: *The Romaunt of the Rose* and *Troilus and Criseyde*. Angered by the damage the narrator has done when he “hindrest hem [Love’s servants], with [his] translacioun” (ln 324), the god of Love performs the penitential rite’s verbal listing of the narrator’s “sins.” The narrator is made to perform an act of “penance” by Alceste (ln 479) which entails the required “satisfaction” be the composition of a legend which will relate tales of women that “weren trewe in lovinge al hir lyves” (ln 485). Thus, although this retraction occurs in a pagan setting, and lacks the necessary action of verbal confession by the penitent⁴⁷ (and perhaps even the penitent’s requisite contrition) the rite of penance is clearly visited by Chaucer in this retraction by means of his use of the conventions of the sacrament and through his explicit references to it.

That the *Legend*’s retraction evokes the penitential sacrament is indicative of a progression of thought between the *Troilus* and the *Legend*, namely Chaucer’s realization that the function of retraction is redemption. In other words, the retraction to the *Troilus*

⁴⁷ Instead, the God of Love performs this function *in place of* the narrator in the “Ballad.”

arrives at the *product* of redemption, Troilus' beatific vision, without requiring the salvific *process* of the sacrament of penance; the problem is that Troilus is already dead at the point when he finally realizes that product (his relationship as individual to the universal). When Chaucer arrives at the retraction to the *Legend*, he is working toward an understanding of that relationship wherein his narrator can remain among the living. The conundrum for Chaucer is thus distilled: if the lesson of the beatific vision is that God is sovereign, and that the individual must understand his relationship to God as a part of the plan of the sovereign Will, then the objective is to understand that Will while he is still alive, in order "that [he] may been oon of hem at the day of doom that shulle be saved" (Retraction ln 1091). The impetus for Chaucer's continuation of this experiment through retraction is here revealed: that the form of retraction, quite literally, saves his head from a doomed encounter with the chopping block is clear, but it is also conventional; that a retraction could save his *soul* is utterly transformative. What Chaucer is learning through his experimentation with the form is that, on the most worldly levels, retraction prevents him from ending up in serious trouble. It redeems him with his fellow men (and women), and as he writes his final retraction—arguably his most sincere—he finds that it redeems him with his God. Thus, for Chaucer, retraction itself finally becomes *about* penitence.

Nevertheless, it is not until the *Tales* that we see a retraction with such particular penitential intention. This "Retraction" is so intimately tied to the "series of complicated and unresolved questions about social and individual order" in the *Tales* (Staley 245), and so clearly demonstrates the acts of discernment and penance as Chaucer's suggested answers to those questions, that it simply cannot be mistaken for a conventional

retraction. When he reaches the point in his career at which he writes the final “Retraction,” Chaucer has nothing at stake in the world; his concern is not apologizing for ruffling the feathers of his social higher-ups. Instead, Chaucer’s anxiety revolves around those of his works which were not “hooly,” those not pleasing to God. For, at this point, it is not his social status which is in danger, it is his soul. Through the inextricable orthodox practices of discernment and penance, the methods which the Parson proclaims are “ful noble...and ful covenable...weyes esprituels that leden folk to oure Lord Jhesu Crist and to the regne of glorie” (X.77-80), Chaucer develops a sense of balance within the tension. He arrives at peace in the final “Retraction,” looking, as Donaldson puts it, “towards heaven, indeed, but towards heaven through human experience” (149). Finally, for Chaucer, discernment of the Will of God is, at its core, the method by which an individual understands the universal God in relation to him or herself, and penance is the method by which the individual then aligns his or her will to that of the universal. Chaucer’s objective for the “Retraction” is to assess the macrocosm of this tension and to distill it into a meaningful application of the microcosms of his book, his career, his life, and, ultimately, the meaning of his death.

The conclusion I have been working toward in this thesis is one which posits the progression of Chaucerian retraction as one moving from *convention* to *reinvention*, resulting in the complete transformation of the form in the final “Retraction.” Yet this is not merely one of many feats of invention for which Chaucer is so revered⁴⁸; it is,

⁴⁸ For further discussion of Chaucerian invention, see Harold Bloom’s *The Western Canon*, chapters one and four.

additionally, the re-formation of a genre in which the poet finally arrives at a sense of conclusion upon the subject of his foremost internal conflict.

What I have attempted here is not to project Chaucer as some kind of literary saint; it is instead to cast him as a man of conscientious spirit, concerned with the end of his life (especially as he is writing the Retraction to the *Tales*), and concerned with his salvation. This casting is not, I think, much of a stretch. Many medieval writers demonstrate a high level of apprehension toward eschatological theories and events⁴⁹. After all, the zeitgeist is, as Peter Haidu has observed: “Death weighs on the living” in the Middle Ages (13). In the late medieval era, the tension between the universal and individual is significant precisely for this reason; accordingly, Chaucer is concerned with end times, but more specifically, his *own* end times as witnessed by the invention in his final “Retraction.”

⁴⁹ See Norman Cantor's *The Civilization of the Middle Ages*, pg. 481-4.

THE “RETRACTION” REVISITED: *CHAUCERIAN RETRACTION* AS REDEMPTION

The religious language of the period was both powerful and extraordinarily flexible, because of its enmeshment in the social and political networks of conflicting communities and interests, which were encountering a very specific, unprecedented, and thoroughly contingent set of problems. It comprised a rich resource for thinking, for exploring, for addressing a wide range of seemingly intractable conflicts. These resources could certainly be used in most unsubtle and aggressively polemical ways... but they could also be used with great complexity, with self-reflexive criticism and with the kind of nuances that will be noticed only by those who seek to discover the relation of the writing or action in question to the particular range of discourses and practices it assumes.

David Aers and Lynn Staley, *The Powers of the Holy*⁵⁰

The difficulty with previous studies of Chaucer’s retractions is the oversight to which Aers and Staley allude in *The Powers of the Holy*, wherein scholars fall short of the complexity and nuance with which Chaucer treats the religious discourse of penance in his final “Retraction.” Not only this, but explorations into Chaucer’s retractions have been limited to the work explicitly termed “Retraction,” and have not endeavored to “discover” those works which lend to our poet’s development of the retractionary genre. I hope to have contributed some insight toward this end, and to have truly sought the relationships between Chaucer’s writing and action and the religious “discourses and practices [they] assume” (Aers and Staley 4). I fear leaving my reader in a lurch, however, as to an explanation of the particulars of Chaucer’s final “Retraction;” and so, I will now revisit the “Retraction” with the ambition of illuminating the convention and reinvention contained therein, along with providing analysis of the distinctions Chaucer makes between those “enditynges of worldly vanitees” and the “hooly” works, that I

⁵⁰ See the introduction, page 3-4.

might demonstrate the “self-reflexive criticism” and “nuance” in this, Chaucer’s final address.

In her analysis of Chaucer’s dealings with authority in the *Canterbury Tales*, Lynn Staley demonstrates a medieval paradigm by which “the king, the church, and Parliament each sought to appropriate the language of devotion” with the aim of gaining political leverage (181). According to Staley, “Chaucer was privy to this conversation and refracted it in the writing that engaged him” throughout his career (181). However, Chaucer’s aims were not as much to gain political leverage, as they were to “use the codes of his own world as a means of exploring those destructive impulses that underlie social and civil institutions” (181). These observations come into play distinctively in the “Retraction” as Chaucer endeavors to explore those impulses in himself and his work. In a strict literary sense, Chaucer examines these “impulses” through convention: retraction is a convention which contains conventions, Christian endings are conventional, translations are conventional—even the sacrament of penance is a convention by the late fourteenth century⁵¹. And, as Staley observes, “convention—whether literary or cultural—offers a disguise, particularly if a writer wishes to examine the nature of authority from within the confines of a hierarchical society” (182). By the time of the “Retraction,” Chaucer’s concern with hierarchy and authority are less political and more theological; if it is a disguise, his use of convention disguises the fact that his repentance is a certain “betrayal” of the authority of the worldly universal in favor of the authority of his God. However, in the final “Retraction,” even his use of convention is

⁵¹ In fact, the sacrament was made obligatory by the year 1215 in the Fourth Lateran Council. See Denzinger’s *Sources of Catholic Dogma*, page 173.

unconventional. That is to say, Chaucer's "true meaning" is not *disguised* by his appropriation of devotional language, the language of penance; it is, instead, laid bare. What he means to do in the "Retraction" is, for once, finally congruent with his "entente." And his uses of the conventions of the genre to achieve that aim serve to enrich his reinvention of the form.

Regardless of whether or not Chaucer fulfilled his intentions for the *Tales*, his stated intention for the retraction is, as P.B. Taylor terms it, "cosyn to the dede"⁵². Drawing from the Nun's Priest's reference to St. Paul's letter, he states his "entente" to write for the "doctrine" of his reader. Of course, not only is this statement itself conventional, but this particular intention is also a signature convention in medieval literature, evidenced by Augustine's *Retractationes*. Joseph Gallagher illustrates the moral pressure of the late Middle Ages on the writer in terms of the inherent involvement of sin in the action of writing; Chaucer's work, according to Gallagher, ought to be considered "an act of composition, subject like all human acts to moral judgment" (46). The reason the poet is so concerned with intent, and its degree of fulfillment, is his medieval understanding of sin, which itself is a reflection of the medieval tension between the individual and the universal. In fact, Gallagher describes medieval sin as "the choice of the known transitory and inferior over the known eternal and superior" (46). For Chaucer, sin comes down to will, and as we have discovered through his development of the genre of retraction, his desire to perform a righteous "act of composition" is in a process of progression. As he writes the final "Retraction," Chaucer demonstrates an understanding that—as the Nun's Priest proclaims—a declaration of his

⁵² See Taylor's article, "Chaucer's Cosyn to the Dede" in *Speculum*.

intentions is a verbalization of his will. And rather than use the conventional statement of intent to excuse himself for “sin,” as he has previously used it, his conventional use of the “entente” to write for the doctrine of the reader (In 1082) is also unconventional by being fully intentional. In other words, by this point in his retractions, Chaucer’s intent for his “act of composition,” by its rhetorical purpose as a performance of the penitential rite, is to align his will to the holy will of St. Paul, and imperatively, to the Will of God. Here Chaucer both uses the convention and reinvents it, fashioning it to serve his newly developed understanding of the purpose for this final “Retraction.”

Instances of this convention-reinvention make up the entirety of the “Retraction.” In the initial address, the poet’s declaration of modesty is related to his statement of intent:

And if ther be anything that displese hem, I preye hem also that they
arrete it to the defaute of myn unkonnyng and nat to my wyl, that wolde
ful fayn have sayed better if I hadde had konnyng. (In 1081)

Here, Chaucer accomplishes two directives. First, he admits his “unkonnyng,” or his human fallibility. At the same time, he draws a distinction between ignorance and will⁵³. The two-fold convention in this verse evokes the definitions of penitence found in the “Parson’s Tale” (In 83-93). Thus the use of this convention not only fulfills the requisite “humility” of the conventional retraction, it also demonstrates the humility required for a person to be of penitential disposition.

Similarly, Chaucer’s address to his readers, and request for their prayers, exemplifies his re-invented use of a conventional retractionary device. Rosemarie Potz-

⁵³ An extensive demonstration of this can be found in Gallagher’s “Theology and Intention in Chaucer’s ‘Troilus.’”

McGerr argues that Chaucer's "appeal to the reader's judgment" is strictly Augustinian, and reflects a deep concern for the reader's construction of his work, betraying a sense of "responsibility for the reader's choices in his search for nobility, morality, and holiness in literature" (111). We witness Chaucer's enriched understanding of this responsibility in his use of a dual meaning of the word "sownen" in his reference to the "sin" in the *Canterbury Tales*. By this pun, Chaucer's qualifier places *some* tales very certainly into the "worldly vanitees" category. "Sownen" is a derivative word of "sound," meaning to imitate, to resound, or to be consonant with something—in this case, "synne" (sowne, v). However, Chaucer also uses the same spelling in the "Parson's Tale" to signify something being sewn, or attached, to something else (sew, v.1). "Sownen," as Chaucer uses it in the "Retraction" is actually not a recognized term⁵⁴; his use of it here suggests a possible combined definition such that those tales which either "sound" like sin, and which may potentially "sew" sin into the reader must be revoked. Hence, Potz-McGerr's assessment of conventional responsibility is certainly valid. As we have seen through his development of the genre, Chaucer undoubtedly reflects the tradition, and even theology, of Augustine in the "Retraction." Yet, to limit our analysis to this conclusion is to limit Chaucer to the Augustinian convention. Alternatively, we must recognize Chaucer's nod to the convention along with his reinvention of it. In this case, the conventional appeal to the reader serves a double purpose: it recognizes his responsibility for the reader's construction and use of literature, but it also serves the tradition of the rite of penance by evoking the ancient practice of the *Confiteor*, as I have demonstrated in chapter two.

⁵⁴ No meaning of it can be found in the Oxford English Dictionary, and the meaning given in the *Riverside Chaucer's* Glossary is also the same given for "sound." There are no textual notes for this word.

Moreover, Chaucer's avant-garde use of the conventional literary device is paratactic. Not only does he simultaneously pay homage to the convention itself and use it to reinvent the genre of retraction, he is also able to evoke the ancient orthodox practices which inform his innovation. In the "Retraction," he utilizes paratactic typology to recall the rite of the Mass, as he does with the *Confiteor*, to mark a definitive closure to the canon. When Chaucer writes in language that "appropriate[s] the language of devotion" (Aers and Staley 181), he is not merely using that language, as others did, to gain power. Rather he is writing in paratactic language for the purpose of drawing the reader to multi-faceted meanings; Chaucer knew that he could say much more with parataxis because "when used in secular texts, [it] offered the means whereby a character could be made the epitome of his history" (Ginsberg 87-8). In the case of the "Retraction," Chaucer's "character" is himself and his "history" is not only the convention of literary retraction, but also the practice of sacramental confession and the universally recognized—at least in Western Europe—rite of the Christian Mass. Chaucer's use of archetypal language in the "Retraction" is a direct echo of the "sending" rite of the Mass: "Qui cum Patre et Spiritu Sancto vivit et regnat Deus per Omnia secula. Amen" (In 1091). Indeed, according to Siegfried Wenzel's notes, these words are also the "conventional ending of liturgical prayers and sermons" (965). I have discussed them in chapter two as the signal of Chaucer's concern with closure. Consequently, for Chaucer, convention *is* reinvention due to his very intentional placement and contextualization of conventional device.

However, in paratactic fashion, the Latin phrase at the end also serves to highlight the extended penitential poetics of the “Retraction.” That is, if this “Retraction” were not meant to signal Chaucer’s developed understanding of the genre as a penitential sacrament, the short Latin phrase above would be enough to serve the convention of the retractionary form; Chaucer would have looked no further than this prayer to end the “Retraction” as he does in the *Troilus*⁵⁵. Conversely, the “Retraction” contains two and a half lines of “satisfaccioun” which are not necessary to the conventional retraction and yet they complete the rite of penance Chaucer has been diligently practicing for the entire “Retraction.” If, as the Parson explains, a “verray parfit Penitence” consists of “Contricioun of Herte, Confessioun of Mouth, and Satisfaccioun” (ln 106-7) of the mind and body, then Chaucer has duly demonstrated these three tenets: First, Chaucer’s contrition is demonstrated by his statement of intention on line 1082 as well as his recitation of the *Confiteor*. Chaucer then demonstrates a confession of mouth by listing his “sins” or “enditynges of worldly vanitees.” Finally, he offers prayers of satisfaction which are distinguishable from his prayers for mercy because they ask for the “grace to biwayle [his] giltes and to studie to the salvacioun of [his] soule” (ln 1089). That is, he promises the obligatory *action* involved in satisfaction: to bewail of his own faults and to study toward his salvation. Moreover, in the same line, he asks specifically for the “grace of verray penitence” and the three essential parts to a “parfit” confession so that he might “doon [them] in this present lyf,” here exhibiting his intent to continue to practice the sacrament until he dies. Thus, in this ending, Chaucer clearly does more than merely

⁵⁵ See lines 1860-1870. Note that the ending prayer in the *Troilus* is for mercy only; it does not signal “satisfaction” at all.

“Christianizing” the ending of his poem. Indeed, he re-invents and refigures the very meaning of “Christian ending.” In this final “Retraction,” Chaucer’s closure is not just conventionally Christian, it is unmistakably penitential.

Previous to this revamped “Christian ending” and immediately following Chaucer’s recitation of the *Confiteor*, Chaucer presents his bibliography of works, a passage directly reminiscent of Augustine’s *Retractationes*. I have saved this discussion for this particular juncture because this rhetorical move is the most demonstrative and significant instance of Chaucer’s multivalent use of convention; the listing of works is conventionally retractionary in the Augustinian sense, as Potz-McGerr has discussed in detail; yet it also very clearly adheres to the conventional recitation of sins in the confessional. Thus the key departure from Potz-McGerr’s theory, in this particular listing of works, is that Chaucer’s concern for the reader’s construction is decidedly lacking compared to the extensive revisions present in Augustine’s retractions. Whereas Augustine “makes a careful review of all the books he has written since becoming a Christian⁵⁶” (98), Chaucer, in the fashion of the penitential rite, divides them into separate lists: those “enditynges of worldly vanitees” and those “books of legends of seintes, and omelies, and moralitee, and devocioun” (ln 1087). Thus, the theory that Chaucer merely “follow[s] Augustine’s lead in reviewing a literary career [and] embodies Augustine’s ideas about the workings of memory, experience, and literature” (98) is crippling to Chaucer’s potential for multivalent and multi-dimensional expression—a potential upon which he capitalizes not only in his major body of work, but with refined

⁵⁶ An extensive explanation of Augustine’s retractionary process can be found on page 98 of Potz-McGerr’s “Retraction and Memory: Retrospective Structure in the *Canterbury Tales*.”

brilliance in the “Retraction.” Certainly, allusions to Augustine present themselves here, but Chaucer’s allusions are likewise to Bede, Boethius, Boccaccio, Dante, numerous classical poets, and rhetors who do not even exist—signaling Chaucer’s humble reinvention of these writers’ conventions and his genius for paratactic synthesis. Moreover, Chaucer’s efforts toward reinvention are more complex than scholars have often determined. This “conventional” listing of his works is not only doubly conventional in its homage to both Augustine and the penitential rite, it is also exemplary of Chaucer’s complicated reinvention in that the use of double-convention itself *creates* a new paradigm for the purpose of the genre. That retraction is penitential—truly reconciliatory—in the manner of sacramental confession, is a wholly original notion; it is an act of invention of which, perhaps, only Chaucer is capable.

What then, of these two categories? What are scholars to make of them, and of our posthumous readings of those works “revoked?” It serves us well, I think, to harken our studies back to one of the central conventions of influence to Chaucer: Boethian philosophy. Evidenced by the didacticism of the Nun’s Priest and Parson, Chaucer is clearly still working with an understanding of this philosophy in the *Tales*, an ethic which is concerned with “rightful discernment.” In fact, the “Nun’s Priest’s Tale” marks a particular influence on the “Retraction” with respect to Boethian philosophy when the Priest directly connects the moral of his tale (“Taketh the fruyt, and lat the chaf be stille”) with the “wille” of God, which “As seith [his] lord, [is to] make us alle goode men” (In 3444-5). This coupling marks, with particular intention in the *Tales*, the separation of ideas into two categories, one of which is aligned with God’s will. The notion that the

will should seek the “one true good” rises to the surface of the “Retraction” in Chaucer’s bibliographic listing. Indeed, this philosophy shapes his penitential understanding of the retractionary form most completely in this “Retraction.” When he distinguishes the two categories, Chaucer certainly acknowledges the convention of the Christian ending by casting off those works not “Christian” enough. However, as before, his use of this convention is multivalent; he makes a conventional Christian ending, and at the same time, he adapts the Boethian convention of the “one true good” to fit his newly sacramental understanding of the form. The categorization of his works allows him to demonstrate his rejection of the partial goods (and, perhaps, evils) and his reservation of those works which exemplify the “one true good,” in order that he may make a “parfit confessioun.”

If viewed through Chaucer’s use of the Boethian philosophical convention, we can begin to understand the reasons for Chaucer’s recantation of some of his most beloved works. Especially pertinent to this study is the reality that among the works revoked are the *Troilus* and the *Legend*, but not *Boece*. Joseph Gallagher explains this choice in terms of “the medieval Christianity by which [Chaucer] condemns himself in the *Retraction*,” stating that “as author he is morally responsible for the effect of whatever character he creates” (61). Gallagher continues, citing Boethian philosophy and pointing up the fact that the *Troilus*, and I will add the *Legend*, fails to follow the Boethian morality which ultimately saves *Boece* from revocation (63).

Similarly, we can understand Boethian morality to be the standard by which the *Tales* are judged, though Chaucer does not specify which individual tales belong in which

of the respective categories. Nonetheless, his one qualification confirms the Boethian philosophy as his measure in that “the tales of Caunterbury, thilke that sownen into synne,” are necessarily those that do not proclaim the “one true good.” Moreover, it is reasonable to suspect that the tales he might have spared are at the same time “legends of seintes [such as the “Second Nun’s Tale”], and omelies [clearly exemplified in the “Parson’s Tale”], and moralitee [as seen in the “Nun’s Priest’s Tale”], and devocioun [as seen in “The Clerk’s Tale”]” (In 1087). Therefore listing them over may have been redundant for Chaucer.

That he revokes some of the work for which he is best known—and most appreciated—has been a source of distress for Chaucerians. In my view, their upset is evidenced by the overwhelmingly common treatment of the “Retraction” by scholars as simple deference to retractionary convention. Especially in this century, scholars as recent as Michael Kuczynski and as early as J.S.P. Tatlock have relegated the entire “Retraction” to mere literary convention, evoking the pessimism of postmodern criticism. Yet, as I have worked to demonstrate, Chaucer’s use of convention is utterly innovative. Nonetheless, to recognize his innovation is to admit Chaucer’s modern subjectivity—both as historical individual and literary symbol. Indeed, Peter Haidu argues against the “exclusive alterity of the ‘modern’ and the ‘medieval’,” (9) in favor of a view that I propose is true of Chaucer: “the modern subject was invented in the Middle Ages” (8). If we are to accept Haidu’s argument, we can no longer separate our poet into the oppositional category of “medieval,” and we can no longer view his profoundly

developed and inventive “Retraction” as “flatly self-identical” to those of his medieval contemporaries, or even to his own previous works (8).

However, at this juncture, I will venture that the lack of perspective toward Chaucer’s development and reinvention of the form of retraction is a fearful reaction⁵⁷, not as much to Haidu’s merging of our binarisms, as it is to having our diligent academic work “revoked” by Chaucer himself in this “Retraction.” In other words, scholars spend their careers working assiduously toward understandings of the very works Chaucer retracts, and that revocation creates a reasonable sense of umbrage. James Dean’s analysis of the “Retraction” in “Chaucer’s Repentance: A Likely Story,” is a case which serves to illustrate this resentment: It was Boethian philosophy which sparked the motivation for Chaucer’s own retractions, and it is that philosophy and convention which, according to James Dean, he “alters” (65). Dean’s assessment of Chaucerian invention is exhaustive; it outlines a certain conventional heritage which Chaucer may have followed in order to arrive at a penitential end to the *Tales*⁵⁸, and the ways in which he *strays* from a pattern of journey, to stories, and to repentance established by Chaucer’s relative contemporaries⁵⁹. Yet, ultimately, Dean claims that this pattern makes the “Retraction” a “likely story” (75), a mere nod to convention. I would propose that Dean and other examiners of Chaucerian retraction, ignore, or at the very least overlook, the depth of meaning available in this “Retraction.”

⁵⁷ Haidu asserts that our postmodern tendency to “other” our “opposite” is “job security” for academia; he admits straightaway that his views are “destined to disturb medievalists and modernists (including postmodernists) alike” because the implications of such a theory undermine authoritative work in both— all—fields of literary criticism (8).

⁵⁸ See James Dean’s “Chaucer’s Repentance: A Likely Story” in *The Chaucer Review*.

⁵⁹ These include Guillaume Deguileville, Boccaccio, Mandeville, Langland, and Gower, who all participate in what Dean terms the “Ricardian form” of storytelling.

It is this tendency, in Chaucer scholarship, to which Aers and Staley refer with seeming regret; and indeed it is regrettable. Even the revered Chaucerian, J.S.P. Tatlock, asserts that

Chaucer was no longer himself if he seriously would have liked to blot out entirely, on religious and moral grounds, the *Book of the Duchess*, the *Troilus*, the *House of Fame*, the *Legend of Good Women*, the *Parliament of Fowls*, and the *Canterbury Tales*. (528)

And, while he means to say that the “Retraction” very well “was not meant to be taken seriously” (526), I contend that the same statement can be used to prove the opposite. The meaning of the “Retraction” is to demonstrate precisely its seriousness because it is a changed Chaucer who writes it. The “auctor” of these revoked works is one, as I have attempted to establish, whose approach to his work is ever in a process of development, and always working toward resolution, even as his oppositional irony signals otherwise. If Chaucer had not meant for us to take seriously his final “Retraction,” his strategic and brilliant reinventions of the conventional form are for naught. Enhanced by a progressive study of Chaucer’s development of the retractionary genre, my reading of Chaucer’s “Retraction” strives to elucidate the same “complexity and self-reflective criticism” to which the religious discourse of the late Middle Ages lends itself (Aers and Staley 4). To cast off these nuances in the name of literary convention or popular criticism is a mistake; whereas to maintain these nuances—even if they complicate all established readings of Chaucer’s work—enlivens our discussions of literature and criticism and restores an often diminished humanity to our illustrious poet.

As if in prophetic response to Michaela Grudin’s plea for closure—“after all, do not readers, like lovers, hope for a satisfying consummation?” (1159)—Chaucer, in the

“Retraction,” grants the most supreme closure he has ever devised. Consummation is a distinct achievement of the “Retraction,” and it is realized in a truly Chaucerian fashion: simultaneously. That is to say, the “Retraction” completes the *Tales* and its pilgrimage, it closes the Chaucer canon, and it resolves the oppositions Chaucer has worked so meticulously to arrange. But more than all this, the “Retraction,” as a penitential act of composition, is the consummate alignment of the poet’s will to the Will of his God—the true resolution of Chaucer’s enduring struggle to understand himself in relation to the universal.

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