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The Canterbury Tales and Chaucer's Corrective Form

By

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Abstract

The *Canterbury Tales* and Chaucer's Corrective Form

by

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The long and sharp debate over Geoffrey Chaucer's moral aims for the *Canterbury Tales* has been shelved in recent years, not resolved. The question of his moral aims is unavoidable by design, but it is also irresolvable by design. At least that is my claim: I show that Chaucer's fictional narrative devises a corrective process based on grammatical emendation that was tied, by a long-standing analogy, to moral reform. Through his narrative, Chaucer pushes his reader to retrace the corrective structure in the *Tales*, yet the sort of corrective process he recreates is so closely akin to moral practice as to make any distinction between the two difficult. The resulting form is a defining characteristic of the *Tales* and answers why his moral aims have been irresolvable: in this literary form, the literary and moral are inseparable; they become versions of each other.

Medieval grammatical and textual practice inherited this analogy of *correction* from traditions of classical grammar. Grammatical theory, pedagogy, and practice all developed around the correction of error in several related areas – grammar, pronunciation, style, and (eventually) scribal reproduction. Grammarians and scribes understood correction as a task requiring chronic vigilance and recursive reform, and they treated these various arenas of fault and correction as analogous to each other. But they further used language that suggested an analogy with moral reform, so that evocations of textual emendation could allude to moral correction; in turn, moral error could as easily allude to textual and scribal error. Medieval grammarians and thinkers recognized that errors persist not only despite emendation, but even as a result of emendation. Roger Bacon insisted that correction perpetuated error, and handbooks like the *correctoria*, which listed textual variants to help correct copies of the Bible, themselves fostered errors; they perpetuated what they were designed to eliminate. And just as grammarians and scribes recognized error as inevitable, they understood emendation as recursive: since authors and scribes need chronically to re-correct their work, they could never consider emendation complete. The dissertation's first chapter traces this history of correction: its theory in antique and medieval grammatical arts, its practice in scribal emendation, and the development of the analogy between these unending processes of verbal correction and the process, also unending, of moral correction.

The remaining three chapters treat the *Canterbury Tales*. Chaucer, more than his predecessors, explicitly notes the recursive logic of error, as famous passages in the

Troilus and his “Adam Sciveyn” show. At the same time, he bases his narrative poetics on this recursive logic, developing from it a structure and theme for his *Tales*.

The discussion of Chaucer begins in chapter two, perhaps unpromisingly, with the notoriously unsatisfactory *Tale of Melibee*, where Chaucer recreates the recursive process of correction to suggest both the ambitions and the dangers of his artistic and moral project. The *Melibee*’s narrative – like the rigorous training of the grammar student, like the tireless work of scribal correctors, like a monk’s continual attempts at self-reform – outlines paths of correction while perpetually creating new material for emendation. The tale portrays a slow, incremental repetition that only gradually brings about change. In that way, the tale displays the ambitions of the project. Its dangers are clear enough, because it *is* notoriously unsatisfactory. Chaucer however deliberately stages those dangers in the *Melibee* and contrasts the dangers with a solution.

Chapter three shows this solution at work in the structure of the *Tales* as a whole. The work revolves around topics discussed by the pilgrims, but these topics will either dissolve or change through shifts in the storytelling or by the pilgrims’ interruptions. Indeed, the series of tales soon abandon the very ideas and vocabularies that set them in motion and frame their narratives. The pilgrims not only adopt each other’s terms and ideas, but modify and sometimes distort them, creating the incremental repetition of the *Tales*. But while in the *Melibee* that incremental repetition illustrates literary pitfalls, in the *Tales* it becomes a means for literary innovation: the certainty of error and the corruption of discourse provide an artistic method. What looks on the small scale like accident and entropy proves on the large scale to be recursion, and by this Chaucer shapes the narrative of the *Tales* to the analogy he inherited from classical grammar traditions. Thus the work’s pilgrimage is not strictly anagogical, as Chaucer’s Parson and D.W. Robertson suggested it was, but also literal, errant, and discursive. Through Chaucer’s narrative design we understand that pilgrimage involves going astray, that a moral path must always be redirected. And while the *Tales*’ conclusion indicates an end is near, as the pilgrims approach Canterbury, such a conclusion still leaves the pilgrims in a wandering state; their physical and moral journey remains incomplete.

Still, although he depicts the certainty of error, Chaucer emphasizes that persistent correction leads to renewed possibilities. I make this point clear in chapter four, as I read the *Melibee* in the context of Fragment VII, vis-à-vis both the tale of *Sir Thopas* and the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale*. The *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* presents a singular literary opposition to the *Melibee*, that the recursive process of correction, more than just an analogy for Chaucer’s idea of pilgrimage, is a tool for literary creation. Similarly, rather than just indicating humankind’s perpetual state of sin, the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* points out humankind’s enduring re-creative potential. We can witness how repetition produces the interminable narrative of the *Melibee*, where the protagonist needs constant re-correction. However, synthesizing the surrounding tales, the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* reveals repetition with a difference, an incremental repetition whereby the *Tales* as a whole will revisit topics, but never in the same way. What this recursive process lends to Chaucer’s moral outlook is not doomed repetition or the failure of humankind, but the idea of human renewal, of a society replete with possibilities.

Through this argument, my dissertation resolves a conundrum in critical history: why the question of Chaucer’s moral aims has been widely contested but more recently shelved. The exegetical method of the 1950s and early 1960s in Chaucer studies

presented an approach that relied on Augustinian doctrine and allegorical exegesis to convey a determinate moral message. Those who rejected this allegorical method tended to point instead to Chaucer's artistic complexity. However, an inability either to dispose of or to defend the exegetical method seemed to exhaust that debate, since the question of his moral aims is now largely ignored. Yet the very fact of this debate should make us ask: what is it about his poetry that invites disagreement on a topic so fundamental and leaves it unamenable to resolution? This debate betrays a unique quality of his art: something about it that generates the question of a moral agenda but makes that question irresolvable. I argue that Chaucer develops a method by which he can consider moral concerns without subordinating his art to those concerns. The *Tales*' corrective process and its resulting structure have made his moral aims elusive because the elusiveness of moral clarity is precisely the lesson he learned from this tradition. However, while the *Tales* may evade moral clarity, the recursive nature of correction allows Chaucer to present both texts and humans as ever-malleable subjects, and provides the literary occasion for ongoing intellectual, artistic, and moral exercise.

Introduction

Systematic study of Chaucer's moral aims – indeed, the question whether he in fact had any – seems to have vanished from criticism: he appears before us divested of moral or religious commitments, including political ones. We seem to have wanted him to remain the even-handed poet, without definite convictions. Chaucer has thereby come to resemble the modern critics reading his work; he too does not care much for moral concerns, or much for anything beyond literary creation and artistic pleasure. The odd thing is no serious critic tries systematically to discuss Chaucer's poetry as if moral aims are excluded. But if moral reflection is any part of Chaucer's poetry at all, then criticism should be able to explain how.

Chaucer criticism thus presents an unmistakable about-face from what came before. Perhaps not many remember now – or want to remember – the long and sharp debates between what became known (almost derisively) as Robertsonian criticism and an aesthetically driven school. D.W. Robertson developed a critical approach that took Chaucer to be allegorical. It argued that, following the Christian precept of separating the wheat from the chaff, medieval authors sought to include – and their readers sought to find – the kernel of Christian doctrine beneath the narrative husk. Chaucer, then, is in this view primarily a Christian moralist, whose literary art (the husk) was secondary to the kernel of *sentence*. The opposition, led most famously by E. Talbot Donaldson, did not dismiss exegetical readings altogether; however, they did object that Chaucer's art cannot be relentlessly subjugated to exegetics, and insisted that the tradition of biblical exegesis was not normative for poetry. In fact, as Donaldson showed, Chaucer's poetry was far too complex to be reduced to mere Christian allegory. But while Donaldson did not altogether dismiss Robertson's argument, many of his scholarly descendants did. Donaldson instead conceded that he could not frame a theoretical objection to it, and while Lee Patterson tried, exegetics and the debates it ignited became exhausted or ignored, not resolved, even though they often are treated as resolved.

But in shelving this critical debate an essential feature of Chaucer's poetry has been left unexamined, a feature that the debate itself reveals. Although the question of his moral aims has been irresolvable, that is not due to a lack of critical ability; rather, that is precisely the point: they are irresolvable by design, just as they are unavoidable by design. That is the central claim of this dissertation.

I argue that Chaucer creates a poetic form that allows him to examine moral concerns without subordinating his art to those concerns; however, he does not merely allow himself room to consider morality. Through his poetic form moral practice begins to resemble, and take part in, poetic practice to the point that art and morality become versions of each other. For Chaucer, poetic practice provides an occasion for moral reflection as much as moral reflection provides an engine for artistic creation – making his moral aims both unavoidable and irresolvable. Therefore, many proponents of the exegetical tradition and its opposition were both right and both wrong. Poetic complexity is Chaucer's aim, but that complexity is derived from a certain moral and spiritual complexity he learned from medieval textual and religious culture.

What he learned included an analogy developed by classical grammarians and carried on by medieval grammatical traditions (*grammatica*). This analogy likened error in language (both in writing and in speaking) with moral error, and thus the reform of

language could immediately suggest moral reform. In medieval *grammatica*, this focus on reform became thoroughly articulated as *emendatio*, a tradition that would influence not merely training in composition and literary style but also in the detection of scribal error and its amelioration. And it was this tradition from which Chaucer developed his moral and artistic design, for this tradition allowed him to craft a form best suited to aligning moral work with that of art.

As we shall see in the following chapters, *emendatio* also suited Chaucer's moral and practical view of language: that language is fallen. It cannot through its eloquence, artistry, or reform bring humankind closer to God. It cannot – as Dante suggested it could – begin to draw humankind back to a prelapsarian condition. It cannot save. Yet, the practice of *emendatio* provided an analogue for the continuing work of moral reform, a work that according to Christian doctrine cannot conclude, and a work that therefore stressed total reliance on grace. Language itself cannot enact moral clarity, but it is exactly this elusiveness of moral clarity – and the meditation it provoked – that Chaucer imitated. And in turn, it was this elusiveness that helped to exhaust the critical debates concerning his moral aims.

Chapter one examines the grammatical tradition, specifically *emendatio*, underpinning late fourteenth-century *grammatica* and the conceptual models it provided Chaucer. I investigate several key grammatical treatises and the terminology they afforded future grammarians and scribes. This tradition and the scribal culture that followed developed an analogy that equated good grammar with good humans, allowing the correction of language to suggest moral correction. This analogy, along with the practices of *emendatio*, provided Chaucer the structural logic he would incorporate in his poetry. Chapter two provides a reading of the *Tale of Melibee* that reveals how the conceptual models of the grammar tradition inspire the literary model for the *Melibee*, one which also suggests the structure of the *Canterbury Tales*. Chapter three proceeds to show specifically how the structure of the *Melibee* – a tale that seems to stumble artistically – reflects the *Tales*' structure, and how it is a structure that now shows off Chaucer's artistic ingenuity; the form that the *Melibee* borrows from *emendatio* without apparent success emends itself through the *Tales* as a whole. And finally, chapter four examines how doctrine fits into Chaucer's poetic form with a reading of the *Nun's Priest's Tale* vis-à-vis the *Parson's Prologue* and *Retractions*, along with a brief return to the *Melibee* in the wider context of Fragment VII.

Together these chapters, while re-affirming the complexity of Chaucer's art, uncover the complexity of his engagement not only with grammatical and scribal traditions, but also with medieval traditions of moral practice. Rather than resorting to the common misperception of medieval Christianity and belief as anti-rational or anti-intellectual, this study reveals a complexity that works in tandem with artistic complexity. His use of *emendatio* allows literary practice to take part in Christian moral practice, and vice-versa. As a result the two practices become almost exchangeable and thereby indistinguishable, making the question of his moral aims nearly irresolvable.

Chapter One

Emendatio: Grammatical, Textual, and Moral Correction

There are many different avenues by which one could examine the presence of ethical concerns in medieval grammar. In fact, grammar itself expanded to figure many ideas outside those pertaining strictly to grammatical training. For example, the name *Donatus* not only provided a metonym for grammar study but also for other types of knowledge.¹ Langland has Will go to school, “my donet to lere,”² and has Holy Church explain why he should: “Thow dotede daffe...dulle aren thy wittes. / To lyte leredest þow, y leue, Latyn in thy 3owthe.”³ Without it, he is perplexed by principal truths, impaired in the understanding of his vision, and even troubled in “kinde knowing.”⁴ Indeed, grammar (*grammatica*) is a key to even basic principles of life; it is a foundation not just of knowledge but of ethical reflection.

The principles of writing and speaking correctly (primary grammar) and *scientia interpretandi* (the science of interpreting or advanced grammar) largely compose the study of *grammatica*.⁵ *Scientia interpretandi* primarily contains four subfields: *lectio*, *enaratio*, *emendatio*, and *iudicium*. *Emendatio* dealt with maintaining linguistic correctness and textual authenticity. But like grammar as a whole, *emendatio* expanded in both its meaning and role. How it developed from a cornerstone of grammatical education and textual authenticity to a central aspect of moral and textual exercise will be the focus of this chapter. *Emendatio* offered Chaucer not only a tradition to address his concerns for authenticity, but also a means to conceive of moral and textual practice as analogous activities.

To understand *emendatio*, one must consider why it was integral to the study of grammar. Elementary *grammatica* taught the correct way to read and write – pronunciation, spelling, syntax, etc. – following conventions of Latin that established the textual language of the literary canon.⁶ Early grammatical treatises thus established rules for linguistic correction, identifying errors such as barbarism and solecism.⁷ Even at this elementary level, the grammarian (and consequently the educated writer or scribe) ensured that a text followed conventions by removing mistakes in the rendering of the

¹ David Thomson notes that university students were also referred to as “Donatists”; Thomson, “The Oxford Grammar Masters Revisited,” *MS*, 45 (1983): 309.

² William Langland, *Piers Plowman: An Edition of the C-Text*, ed. Derek Pearsall (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978), VI. 215.

³ *Ibid.*, I. 138-39.

⁴ *Ibid.*, I. 140.

⁵ Martin Irvine and David Thompson, “*Grammatica* and Literary Theory,” in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, ed. Alastair Minnis and Ian Johnson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 16.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁷ Barbarisms, of course, compose words or phrases that depart from (or are alien to) accepted usage. Solecisms are incorrect grammatical constructions.

language itself; learning grammar meant recognizing error. Indeed, so much of grammar study focused on correct usage and style that the history of textual correction is very much tied to the history of *grammatica*.⁸

But for the advanced student, *grammatica* also provided methods for literary study and interpretation that were concerned with style and taste, “directed toward a specific body of texts [a canon] in a specific kind of language.”⁹ Both Donatus and Priscian filled their texts with examples from classical literature. And by the Middle Ages, grammarians themselves were writers of poetry; for example, Alexander de Villa-Dei’s *Doctrinale*, what became a standard grammatical textbook, was entirely in verse,¹⁰ as was the *Graecismus* of Évrard of Béthune. Elementary grammar texts, primers, thus prepared students for studies in both poetry and meter.¹¹ Besides establishing a textual language or correcting linguistic errors, *emendatio* provided a literary tool that supported stylistic norms when applied to advanced grammar studies, which included poetic composition. *Emendatio*, therefore, trained the eye and ear for bringing texts in line with literary taste; it both built and was built by a literary canon and tradition.

Emendatio, as well as *orthographia*, fell under the category of *latinitas*, which largely concerned uprooting faults in literature. Classical *latinitas* “was closely connected to the Stoic theories of etymology and the ‘faults’ of style (solecisms and barbarisms), the avoidance of which contributed to an authentic hellenism or latinity in literary discourse.”¹² Likewise, maintaining a pure literary canon became a primary goal of Christian authors and scribes, as they continued to borrow textual methods from classical *latinitas*. But the new Christian canon did not supplant the classical, nor for that matter did it erase classical methods of reading, writing, and correcting texts. Rather, Christian writers learned Roman grammar for the study and promotion of their own texts. However, borrowing from classical traditions did not come without concerns; after all, as pagan texts, they also contained “false” teachings. Augustine addressed this concern on multiple occasions, and he provided a means for reconciling Christian faith with pagan learning through the example of the Israelites converting Egyptian wealth:

Just as the Egyptians had not only idols and grave burdens which the people of Israel detested and avoided, so also they had vases and ornaments of gold and silver and clothing which the Israelites took with them secretly when they fled, as if to put them to a better use... In the same way all the teachings of the pagans contain not only simulated and superstitious imaginings and grave burdens of

⁸ The ancient grammarians L. Aelius Stilo and Servius Clodius not only corrected texts but also determined the authenticity of plays, a practice that included training the ear to recognize the unique style of particular authors. These textual practices stress the way in which Roman scholars were concerned with the authenticity, accuracy, and correction of their texts; Stanley F. Bonner, *Education in Ancient Rome: From the Elder Cato to the Younger Pliny* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977), 54.

⁹ Martin Irvine, *The Making of Textual Culture: ‘Grammatica’ and Literary Theory, 350-1100* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 3, 21.

¹⁰ James J. Murphy, *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages* (Tempe, Az.: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2001), 145-46.

¹¹ Irvine and Thompson, “*Grammatica* and Literary Theory,” 38.

¹² Irvine, *The Making of Textual Culture*, 76-77.

unnecessary labor...but also liberal disciplines more suited to the uses of truth, and some most useful precepts concerning morals.¹³

The importance of *emendatio*, though, went beyond linguistic and stylistic correction, as it took part in higher levels of learning. In Greece and Rome, grammar masters prepared their students for courses in rhetoric; in turn, rhetoricians assumed that their students had been prepared for correct speaking and writing by the grammar masters. Some grammar schools even offered a course introducing rhetoric to students who had progressed through primary studies of grammar and literature.¹⁴ Rhetoric, therefore, formed the next stage in a freeman's education, the "higher learning" of ancient Rome.¹⁵ Grammar more often dealt with poetry and the interpretation of the poets; rhetoric was typically associated with prose.¹⁶ But the boundary between the two fields was fluid. Grammar training laid the foundation for a future student of oratory by teaching good style in writing and speaking.¹⁷ Thus, grammar, as much as rhetoric, aimed at eloquence. At the same time, though the rhetorician debated actual legal cases, his training often involved fictitious scenarios.¹⁸ Hence, the art of oratory – persuading a live audience – often tended to be "more literary than legal," an aspect shared by the art of grammar.¹⁹ Both in writing and in oratory, eloquence required the recognition of error, and *emendatio* was necessary for both.

The term *emendatio* referred to both grammatical and stylistic correction, as well as to matters of rhetoric – but not always. In the early classical period, *emendatio* primarily designated textual correction.²⁰ As we shall see near the end of this chapter, textual emendation continued to be an important concern, and it helped to clarify the nature of correction. Only later did its focus expand to include the correction of error in general grammatical practice: syntax, orthography, etc. The attention to correction eventually came to focus on most error in language, those of textual matters *and* of writing and speaking. The field of *emendatio* grew. But as it grew, it developed an analogy for the various traditions of correction, as the traditions of correction became analogues for each other. In turn, this analogy, which became a part of the discourse of correction, allowed one, at least metaphorically, to apply the tools and concepts of separate traditions of correction to each other. As the analogy was handed down, it made its way into Christian textual practices and moral discourse, persisting to the point that practices of textual correction regularly suggested moral reform. However, the purview of error and correction transcended the page not only to suggest moral error and

¹³ Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D.W. Robertson (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1997), 75.

¹⁴ Bonner, *Education in Ancient Rome*, 51, 58.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 63

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 58.

¹⁷ H.I. Marrou, *A History of Education in Antiquity*, trans. George Lamb (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1956; 1982), 282.

¹⁸ As with the Hellenistic schools, the Latin schools of rhetoric provided fictional cases for the student, relating the sort of fantastic situations that were more often found in literary works than in everyday rhetorical cases. Such fictional cases included "pirates...kidnapping...remote questions of conscience, [and] imaginary laws." *Ibid.*, 286.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 289.

²⁰ Irvine, *The Making of Textual Culture*, 75.

penitential practice, but also how that practice might become an enduring creative endeavor.

In the following pages I first examine how certain prominent and influential grammatical treatises handled such error, and how the field of *emendatio* continued to expand to include not only stylistic but moral error. I conclude by showing how the analogy of correction makes its way from commentary on biblical correction to early medieval literature.

Grammatical Treatises and the Study of Fault

The foundational grammar text during the Middle Ages was Aelius Donatus's *Ars minor* (4th cen.);²¹ it is the text that students would have likely taken up after receiving basic instruction in reading Latin.²² And although the *Ars minor* does not explicitly examine error, it helped establish what constituted correct Latin, both in basic grammar and in literary studies.

The *Ars minor* exemplifies a school-ready text in many ways. For instance, it reads like a catechism, expounding Latin grammar in question-and-answer form. This method allows the *Ars minor* to provide a brief but thorough exposition of the eight parts of speech, beginning with the noun:

Nomen quid est? Pars orationis cum casu corpus aut rem proprie communiterve significans. Nomini quot accidunt? Sex. Quae? Qualitas comparatio genus numerus figura casus.²³

(What is a noun? A part of speech with case signifying a person or thing, properly or in common. How many aspects does the noun have? Six. What? Mood, comparative, gender, number, form, case.)

The catechetical form makes this treatise well suited for classroom study – for reading aloud, for recitation and drilling. Donatus also includes elements of literary study, taking examples from Virgil's *Aeneid*, and thereby providing a foundation in both grammar and classical literature. As with advanced *grammatica*, a thorough study of elementary grammar imparted an education of the literary tradition. And in turn, this literary study helped establish correct form and style.

The companion piece to the *Ars minor* in popularity and influence was the *De barbarismo*, a section of Donatus's *Ars maior* that focuses exclusively on grammatical error.²⁴ And the way in which Donatus poses barbarism provides an initial glimpse into

²¹ Irvine and Thompson, "Grammatica and Literary Theory," 88.

²² The *Ars minor* and *Doctrinale* were the most popular of the grammar texts used during the Middle Ages, surviving in 360 and 280 incunabular editions respectively. Jo Ann Hoepfner Moran, *The Growth of English Schooling, 1340-1548: Learning, Literacy, and Laicization in Pre-Reformation York Diocese* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1985), 26-27.

²³ Aelius Donatus, "Ars minor," in *Grammatica Latini*, ed. H. Keil, vol. 4. (1855-80; 1961, 1981), 357.

²⁴ Moran, *The Growth of English Schooling*, 27. See also L.J. Paetow, *The Arts Course at Medieval Universities with Special Reference to Grammar and Rhetoric* (University Studies 3.7, Champaign, Ill., 1910), 33.

the work of *emendatio*.²⁵ He opens *De barbarismo* by defining barbarism as “pars orationis vitiosa in communi sermone.”²⁶ As in the *Ars minor*, he classifies parts of speech, but now in terms of their “vices,” their infractions against the rules that govern them. Donatus thus presents the study and practice of *emendatio* as requiring the same serious attention as any systematic study. Beginning his exposition, he specifies such “defective parts of speech” as a problem that is pervasive, appearing in both “pronuntiatione et scripto.”²⁷ And he classifies the types of defect as “adiectio detractio inmutatio transmutatio litterae syllabae temporis toni adspirationis”;²⁸ through additions, removals, substitutions, or changes in the elements of standard written and spoken language.²⁹ This preliminary system for classifying errors, and thereby the more clearly diagnosing them, not only facilitates systematic study, but also makes this treatise a practical tool in the work of *emendatio*.

But the norm of correctness he wishes to inculcate is something more than the mere instantiation of systematic rules. Donatus enriches the grammarian’s sense of possible “vices” of language, which can refer to the deliberate infractions that characterize literary style, such as Virgil’s violation of natural vowel length, writing “unius ob noxam” instead of “unūus.”³⁰ Hence, *pars orationis vitiosa* is not always fault in the sense of what a grammar student needs to avoid or what a scribe must correct; it also represents a list of “anomalies to be found in good authors.”³¹ That is, some nonstandard uses are accepted as imaginative variations or unconventionalities. This alertness to the many senses of fault, we shall see, characterizes Donatus’s works and the tradition they inspire.

One of Donatus’s sharper distinctions, which is carried on in later grammatical treatises, is between barbarism and solecism:

Soloecismus est vitium in contextu partium orationis contra regulam artis grammaticae factum.³²

(Solecism is a fault in the structure of the parts of speech in opposition to the rule of the art practiced by grammar.)

Solecism represents those aspects of language that defy rule (*contra regulam*), residing outside the law of grammar. Unlike barbarism, a faulty part of speech (*pars orationis vitiosa*), solecism refers to a fault (*vitium*) in the connection, coherence, or structure (*in contextu*) of words. Errors, then, are not only made in individual parts of speech, as in

²⁵ There was a fear, stemming from the time of Alexander the Great and his conquering of foreign nations, of alien elements seeping into the language. These alien elements became what we now call barbarism; the analysis of which tended to begin (or augment) studies of the correct use of language. Bonner, *Education in Ancient Rome*, 198, 99.

²⁶ Donatus, “De Barbarismo,” 392.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 392.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 392.

²⁹ Errors were often categorized “according as they arose from addition, subtraction, substitution, or transposition, of letters or syllables”; Bonner, *Education in Ancient Rome*, 199.

³⁰ Donatus, “De barbarismo,” 392.

³¹ Marrou, *A History of Education in Antiquity*, 277.

³² Donatus, “De soloecismo,” 393.

the spelling or pronunciation of words, say, but also in the arrangement of these words. In turn, *emendatio* must also look beyond individual words to their connections and arrangements. Donatus further refines our sense of fault, pointing out the distinction between barbarisms and anomalies, and he now expands on what exactly errs from grammatical rule, what needs correcting.

Yet, while Donatus takes the time to make these distinctions, he soon gathers them under a capacious term. When referring to solecism, he repeatedly uses the word *vitium*: “ex ipsius vitii definition,” “hoc vitium.”³³ And after giving this account, he turns his attention to further faults of language. In a following section, “De ceteris vitiis,” Donatus provides the following list: “Cum barbarismo et soloecismo vitia duodecim numerantur hoc modo, barbarismus soloecismus acyrologia cacemphaton pleonasmos perissologia macrologia tautologia eclipsis tapinosis cacosyntheton amphibolia.”³⁴ Donatus meticulously sets out his terms and provides pertinent examples, but while laying out distinctions and terms such as “tautologia” and “cacosyntheton,” he again groups them under the simple umbrella term *vitia*. He makes clear from the beginning of *De barbarismo* that this section of the *Ars maior* is essentially a study of *vitia*, that, as much as good grammar involves understanding its rules, it hinges on recognizing faults.

Donatus thus shows us how grammarians can make many fine distinctions between types of error in language, yet he still asserts the relationship between these different types of error by classifying them all as *vitia*. In effect, this umbrella term creates the analogy between the separate types of error and traditions of correction. And as the word *vitia* continues to be passed on, it houses further distinctions of error, thereby expanding the purview of the types of error to which *vitia* may refer.

This concentration on *vitia* survives in many popular grammatical treatises of the Middle Ages. A few centuries later in the *Etymologies* (7th cen.), Isidore of Seville inherits Donatus’s terminology and maintains his concern for fault.³⁵ In his treatise on barbarism, also entitled *De barbarismo*, Isidore uses *vitium* when differentiating between barbarism and metaplasm: “Item quando in prosa vitium fit sermonis, barbarismus vocatur; quando in metro, metaplasma dicitur.”³⁶ Similarly, in the course of his *Graecismus* (13th cen.), Évrard of Béthune concentrates exclusively on *vitia* in speech and writing, quoting both Donatus and Isidore in the process.³⁷ He also catalogues the terminology of fault, beginning with barbarism and solecism, and including terms such as *cacemphaton* and *macrologia*, thus providing a list similar to those in prior grammatical treatises. By passing on this terminology, grammarians create continuity in the study of

³³ Ibid., 393.

³⁴ Ibid., 394.

³⁵ Donatus provided an authority and model for Isidore, as can be seen through such phrases as “sicut Donatus exposuit.” And like Donatus, Isidore opens his text by covering the parts of speech and basic grammar, similar to the *Ars minor*’s thorough but brief overview. W.M. Lindsay, ed., *Isidori Hispalensis Episcopi: Etymologiarum sive originum* (Oxford University Press, 1911), *Liber I*, xxxiii, 27.

³⁶ Ibid., xxxii, 14-16.

³⁷ “Vel barbarismus est vitium dictionis.” Évrard also turns specifically to Donatus’s seminal definition for barbarism: “Item Donatus ita definit barbarismum, ‘barbarismus est una pars orationis vitiosa in communi sermone.’” (Évrard revives this adjectival form of *vitium*, *vitiosa*, meaning “filled with fault.”) Anne Grondeux, ed. *Glosa Super Graecismum Eberhardi Bethvuniensis, Capitula I-III: De Figuris Coloribusque Rhetoricis* (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2010), 143.

vitia, and through such continuity develop a fixed lexicon of *emendatio*, which builds upon its distinction as field of study, one that can be taught and learned.

But future grammarians do not merely inherit Donatus's terminology; they continue to refine and to elaborate on it. Isidore, for example, also describes barbarism as a "corrupta littera vel sono enuntiatum."³⁸ The relevant concept here is corruption: a word, letter, or sound that has been debased. Évrard borrows Isidore's definition: "Barbarismus est verbum *corrupta littera sonoque* enuntiatum," and quotes Isidore on solecism: "Unde Isidorus, 'soloecismus est proprie saneque locutionis corruptela'."³⁹ Solecism, then, further carries the meaning of "corrupting influence" (*corruptela*). In his *Doctrinale* (c. 1200), Alexander de Villa-Dei also provides a similar definition: "barbaris. est vocis corruptio facta Latinae: / hoc vitium facimus dicendo domína, domínus."⁴⁰ But Alexander further asserts that barbarism is a corrupt condition that is *made* or *composed* (*facta*). Although writers do not use barbarisms as they would figures of speech, implying a reason or doctrine, barbarisms are still elements in language that have been actively ruined, *made* corrupt. Besides providing an exposition on the faulty parts of speech, these grammarians also imply a change of condition between a correct part of speech and *vitia*. For example, the word *corruptio* etymologically implies a breaking apart of language, and likewise a breakdown in communication and degeneration of sense. *Corruptio* thereby indicates agency. Rather than merely appearing, *vitia* require the action of one composing a work; they are created, either intentionally or unintentionally. Thus, the attention to faults and corruptions eventually turns more directly to the human agents creating error.

Solecism adds to this idea the specific *vitium* of disarrangement: "Soloecismus est plurimorum verborem inter se inconveniens compositio, sicut barbarismus unius verbi corruptio. Verba enim non recta lege coniuncta soloecismus est."⁴¹ Solecism is a dissimilar or ill-matched arrangement (*inconveniens compositio*); in other words, an "unsuitable composition." The verb form *convenio* denotes a "coming together" or "uniting," while *conveniens* refers to something "fitting" or "appropriate." Hence, *inconveniens compositio* gives the sense of a "coming together" that in fact never comes together, where parts do not match and ends do not converge. Similarly, *non recta lege* evokes a crooked path, where an intended goal is either not met or met in a roundabout way, because the words are not joined by a "straight" or "right rule." Besides being a crooked path, it is specifically not straight or upright according to the laws governing language.

Likewise, Alexander de Villa-Dei writes regarding solecism, "est soloecismus incongrua copula vocum, / ut, si dicatur vir bellica, sponsa pudicus."⁴² He provides the phrase *incongrua copula* (unsuitable coupling) to describe the occurrence of solecism, with the examples *vir bellica* and *sponsa pudicus* mixing the genders. *Vitia*, then, are more than defects; they are disorder. The writer has disturbed a logical arrangement of communication. Like *inconveniens compositio*, dissimilarity disjoins communication.

³⁸ Lindsay, *Isidori Hispalensis Episcopi, Liber I*, xxxii, 5-6.

³⁹ Grondeux, *Glosa Super Graecismum Eberhardi Bethvuniensis*, 143, 149.

⁴⁰ Alexander de Villa-Dei, *Doctrinale* ed. D. Reichling, Monumenta germanie paedagogica, 12 (Berlin, 1893), 2371-72.

⁴¹ Lindsay, *Isidori Hispalensis Episcopi, Liber I*, xxxiii, 10-13.

⁴² Alexander de Villa-Dei, *Doctrinale*, 2375-76.

Incongrua copula augments this sense, conveying a misshapen composition, a disharmony or inconsistency in the patterns of language. Through solecism, Alexander characterizes *vitia* by an absence of proper arrangement and rule through incongruity or inconsistency.

These examples have an array of implications for *emendatio*; along with preservation, correction now includes properly redirecting and reconnecting units (words, phrases, clauses, etc.) of communication. We thus have a distinct idea of crooked (*non recta*) paths and dissimilarity (*inconveniens*) – terms that suggest a divergence from the rule (*lege*) of straightforward (or well arranged) communication – and of compositions that are misshapen or ill formed, where its pieces do not fit (*incongrua copula*). *Emendatio* therefore involves making sure conceptual connections maintain a logical shape and order. In effect, *emendatio* straightens the paths of discourse, creating clear relationships between ideas, and redirecting language along the correct route of a sentence, line, or clause.

But regarding such redirection, Alexander expresses skepticism. That is, he focuses on *vitia* as elements entirely outside any sort of rule or doctrine. In the opening of the final section (*Capitulum XII*), he provides a list of terms like those found in the *De barbarismo* of Donatus and Isidore:

pleonasmus, acyrologia
et cacosyntheton et eclipsis, tautologia,
amphilogia, tapinosis, macrologia,
perissologia, cacenphaton, aleoteta.⁴³

He identifies these terms following his reference to figures of speech (*figura loquela*), and he differentiates the above terms from the *vitia* of barbarism and solecism. Concerning these Alexander writes,

sed nequit his soloë. vel barbaris. associari;
sunt etenim vitia nulla ratione redempta.
barbaris. est vocis corruptio facta Latinae:
hoc vitium facimus dicendo domína, domínus.⁴⁴

Like Isidore and Donatus, Alexander defines barbarisms and solecisms as faults (*vitia*) of speech, but he includes a specific distinction: *nulla ratione redempta*, that they are redeemed by no *ratio* (method, rule, or system). Unlike figures of speech, barbarisms and solecisms lie outside reason or law; they are un-ruled, even irrational, aspects of language. And given that Alexander suggests the human agency involved in creating *vitia*, we have a further suggestion of the inability of the human component to always act rationally.

Indeed, Alexander may be implying a certain futility in the work of *emendatio*, that it may not be possible to bring these faults of language under grammatical rule. He does not suggest abandoning correction, but he does suggest the depth to which *emendatio* must reach, where more than just a re-arrangement of parts is necessary to

⁴³ Ibid., 2365-68.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 2369-72.

provide correction. Perhaps a combination of disorder (*non recta, inconueniens*) and corruption (*corruptus*) has occurred. In this case, a much more substantial reworking of the language would be required. It has been important, therefore, for these treatises to provide nuanced descriptions of the types of *vitia* and thereby tools for the grammarian to recognize and correct error, including the sort of anomalies in literature that a scribe would not be expected to correct. Hence, just as *vitia* conveys the plethora of faults and anomalies, it also suggests the complexity of *emendatio*.

Grammatical, Textual Fault and Human Vice

The concerns of *emendatio*, though, soon begin to transcend the page. This shift in focus occurs when grammar masters impute responsibility and culpability for *vitia* directly onto the speaker and writer. These grammarians continue to emphasize the active role of the writer and, in effect, the participatory nature of *vitia*, that such faults do not occur in a vacuum; instead, they include the habits of those who engage in communication. By emphasizing human responsibility, grammarians allow the concept of *vitium* to point to human error as applied to writing and speaking, even the prevention and correction of *vitia* hinge on human action. *Vitia*, therefore, are further defined and augmented through its human origin, stemming directly from the awareness and actions of the writer.

Isidore, for example, names *vitia* as elements that must not only be recognized but also avoided: “sed hoc vitium aut suspensione M litterae, aut detractioe vitamus.”⁴⁵ He identifies *vitia* in light of the active role of the grammarian, who must be alert and able to avoid (*vitare*) fault. Similarly, Isidore concludes the section entitled *De vitiis*, “Vitia apud Grammaticos illa dicuntur, quae in eloquio cavere debemus. Sunt autem haec: barbarismus, soloecismus, acyrologia, cacenphaton, et reliqua. Barbarismus est corruptio verbo unius...Soloecismus compositio vitiosa verborum.”⁴⁶ As in Donatus’s work, he enumerates the many different faults in writing. (The adjective *vitiosa* characterizes solecism, and again Isidore uses the term *corruptio* to identify barbarism.) Like Donatus, he brings them together under *vitia*; however, he provides a further admonition. Errors like barbarisms and solecisms, says Isidore, are called faults (*vitia*) in the writings of the grammarians, and these are things that we must guard against (*cavere*). As with *vitamus* above, he employs another cautionary term.⁴⁷ With *cavere* (guard against, keep clear of), Isidore again urges the writer to *keep* from fault, drawing specific attention to the writer’s actions.

In the *Graecismus*, Évrard elaborates on the human implications of *vitia*, from mere action to consequence: “Est autem vitium soloecismi in naturam, ut ibi ‘uir mea’, ‘sponsa meus’, quia ibi natura formatur omnino in materia...[E]t est vitium annexum barbarismo, quoniam peccat contra naturam dictionis.”⁴⁸ When describing solecism, Évrard first covers an instance where it apparently creates a defect against nature (*in*

⁴⁵ Lindsay, *Isidori Hispalensis Episcopi, Liber I*, xxxii, 28-29.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, xxxiv, 3-7.

⁴⁷ Donatus does use a participial form of *cavere* when mentioning *vitia*, but unlike Donatus, Isidore uses *cavare* as a main helping verb of the clause, and he reasserts the sense of *cavere* with the verb *vitare*.

⁴⁸ Grondeux, *Glosa Super Graecismum Eberhardi Bethuniensis*, 149, 150.

naturam). The particular examples he provides are words with mixed genders: for example, *mea* instead of *meus*, an instance of *incongrua copula*. Évrard emphasizes that this *vitium* arises when a word's "natural" gender is inconsistent or, more generally, when a "natural" union is disrupted. The verb "peccat" shows how easily language that describes the transgression of grammatical law suggests transgression as such. A *vitium*, then, is not only itself a fault but to commit *vitia*, according to Évrard, implies that one transgresses against the nature of speaking (*contra naturam dictionis*) or the natural order. Solecism is not only a *vitium*, and therefore an element to guard against, as Isidore admonishes, but also an element that transfers fault on the one committing *vitia*. Évrard thus implicates the writer, emphasizing the participatory nature of *vitia*, where faults are *made*, and those who make them *transgress* natural order.

These grammarians thereby pose *vitia* as errors that are as potentially harmful to the writer as they are to the language. The word *pecco*, for instance, implies a *peccans*, an implication that again extends the overall understanding of *vitia*. That is, if *vitium* makes one in some sense a sinner, *vitia* themselves are more than blemishes or defects of language; to a certain extent they imply human fault. In effect, *emendatio* includes both guiding those participating in communication and *correcting* those "transgressing against nature." The term *vitia* thus begins to house human error alongside grammatical error, further dilating the analogy between types of fault. In this case, *emendatio* looks to prevent a text from falling into corruption and the human from becoming a *peccans*.

John of Garland, a later English grammarian who inherits but attempts to rival prior treatises such as the *Doctrinale* and *Ars minor*, accentuates that human aspect of *vitia*. In his *Parisiana Poetria* (13th cen.), a rhetorical rather than a grammatical treatise, John augments the vocabulary of earlier grammarians. In its prologue he outlines the topics he will cover, including "de uiciis uitandis in quolibet genere dictandi."⁴⁹ That is, he proposes to cover vices (*uiciis*), which we should avoid (*uitandis*) in any genre of speaking. In the section entitled *De uiciis in metro vi specialibus*, he repeatedly uses the term *incongrua*, reflecting Alexander de Villa-Dei's *Doctrinale*, where *vitia* implies an inconsistency in communication, a misshapen or disordered composition: "Sunt ergo uicia sex uitanda in poemate. Primum est incongrua parcium dispositio; secundum, incongrua materie disgressio; tertium, obscura breuitas; quartum, incongrua stilorum uariatio; quintum, incongrua materie uariatio; sextum, finis infelix."⁵⁰ Style itself can possess rectitude: "Est ergo 'stilus' in hoc logo 'qualitas carminis' uel 'rectitudo' seruata per corpus materie."⁵¹ Rather than pointing to a misshapen quality (*incongrua*) of composition, John puts this concept positively – *rectitudo* being in opposition to a crooked or wayward verbal path. In turn, while *rectitudo* opposes *non recta* of composition, in the context of a treatise centered on *uicia*, *rectitudo* also seems to oppose a wayward ethical path.

John of Garland thus proceeds to erode the distinction between moral and stylistic faults. The headings for the *Parisiana Poetria* continue the language of fault, each enumerated according to the vice (*uicia*) it demonstrates: *De quinto vicio*, *de sexto vicio*, etc. And near the conclusion of *De uiciis*, John refers to those vices that may "condemn"

⁴⁹ Traugott Lawler, *The 'Parisiana Poetria' of John of Garland* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1974), 4.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 88.

a poem: *De rebus que dampnant carmen*.⁵² And curiously, the first of these offenses is entitled *De arrogancia vitanda in principio*: “on avoiding arrogance in the beginning.”⁵³ We thus return to the terminology of “avoidance” (*vitare*) or “guarding against” (*cavere*), and the focus on *arrogancia*, though referring to composition, readily resembles a vice (*uicia*) of character.

Turning back to the title, *De uiciis in metro*, we see that John of Garland eventually comes full circle by the end with both crime (*uicia*) and punishment (*dampnant*), setting these stylistic concepts in what appears to be a moral discourse. We have thereby moved from popular grammatical treatises of late antiquity and the early Middle Ages that vaguely bordered on this ethical parlance to a thirteenth-century treatise that further engages a moral vocabulary. The analogy between discourses of correction begins to suggest both grammatical and non-grammatical fault: the errors of language simultaneously imply flaws of character. What further influenced this shift towards moral discourse, and how did this growing analogy of correction influence both moral and textual practices? It is to these questions that I shall now turn.

Emendatio in Moral Doctrine and Practice

For writers and scribes of the new Christian canon, *emendatio* began to carry implications beyond the preservation of Christian texts and doctrine to the correction and preservation of humankind. Providing emendation meant maintaining and preserving religious doctrine, as well as the authority of the Church to dispense that doctrine.⁵⁴ But *emendatio* also reflected Christian moral practice. Irvine provides a striking example of this, where Agroecius of Sens, a 5th century bishop, in the preface to his version of Flavius Caper’s *De orthographia* (2nd cen.), composed multiple puns on the word *emendare*:

You have sent me Caper’s little book on orthography. This subject is agreeable to your purposes and your practices, as you, who wish to correct (*corrigere*) us in the actions of this life, also make corrections (*emendares*) in the pursuits of writing. You believe, therefore, that nothing which pertains to us is outside your correction: all our affairs, even minor ones, you examine with an anxious search and they come to your attention – from living to writing, from the mind to the hand, from the heart to the finger.⁵⁵

Here, Agroecius links the correction of texts to the correction of human “affairs”; *corrigere* (making straight, setting right), in regards to human life, merges with textual *emendare* (to free from faults, to correct). Through such meticulous attention to faults (*vitia*), *emendatio* encompasses the many different manifestations of error, passing from the book to the body: “from living to writing...from the heart to the finger.” Here, *corrigere* and *emendare* have joined, making correct living and correct writing an analogous endeavor.

⁵² Ibid., 104.

⁵³ Ibid., 104.

⁵⁴ Martin Irvine points out that “[e]mendatio is clearly associated with authority – the authority of the text and of the bishop as head of the textual community – and with the preservation of tradition – *emendatio* being required to preserve correctly the bishop’s teaching.” *The Making of Textual Culture*, 76.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 75-76.

Cassiodorus's treatment of *grammatica* explains how *emendatio* gained such importance both to the new Christian canon and to human moral lives. A classically trained theologian, Cassiodorus demonstrates this importance through the way *latinitas* becomes a part of Christian culture.⁵⁶ For example, he believed that the monastic life begins through a mastery of *grammatica*. He viewed Christian culture as largely textual in nature, and therefore wrote two volumes committed to grammatical methodology: *Institutiones* and *De orthographia* (6th cen.). In his *Institutiones*, he enumerates guidelines for the practice of *emendatio*, and elaborates on the application of grammar to the Christian canon and to one's own religious knowledge and salvation: "utilitas vero inesse magna cognoscitur, quando per eos discitur unde et salus animae et saecularis eruditio provenire monstratur."⁵⁷ For Cassiodorus, Scripture and its commentary are steps that one climbs for salvation (a Jacob's ladder), and a medium by which angels ascend and descend:

ista est enim fortasse scala Iacob, per quam angeli ascendunt atque decedunt...quocirca, si placet, hunc debemus lectionis ordinem custodire, ut primum tyrones Christi, postquam psalmos didicerint, auctoritatem divinam in codicibus emendatis iugi exercitio meditentur, donec illis fiat Domino praestante notissima, ne vitia librariorum impolitae mentibus inolescant; quia difficile potest erui, quod memoriae sinibus radicatum constat infigi.⁵⁸

He therefore stresses the importance of corrected texts, not only for the sake of authenticity, but also for comprehending and meditating on divine authority (*auctoritatem divinam in codicibus emendatis*). Because these texts are a divine medium (*scala Iacob*), care must be taken to preserve their order and prevent scribal error (*vitia librariorum*) so as not to hinder one's spiritual development. New converts to the faith must be able to learn from corrected texts so that errors are not committed to memory, for once they settle in memory, they are difficult to remove – "difficile potest erui."

In book one of the *Institutiones*, Cassiodorus devotes an entire section to the theory and method of correcting sacred texts. He distinguishes between correcting according to the rules of the classical grammarians and according to what has been preserved by Scripture: "Nec illa verba tangenda sunt, quae interdum contra artem quidem humanam posita reperiuntur, sed auctoritate multorum codicum vindicantur. corrumpi siquidem nequeunt, quae inspirante Domino dicta noscuntur."⁵⁹ Hence, the authority of numerous copies of sacred Scripture far outweigh the dictates of *grammatica*, since God's word could not have borne corruption. Within just a few lines, however, Cassiodorus urges the scribe to imitate the practice of classical grammarians:

cetera vero quae sunt male praesumpta recorraige, quoniam antiquarii exinde potius probantur offendere, dum elocutioni Latinae linguae nesciunt servire disposite...secundum regulas artigraphorum quae tamen sunt emendanda percurrere, ne articulatae vocis pulchra modulatio peregrinis litteris maculata absona potius et indecora reddatur.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Ibid., 202.

⁵⁷ *Cassiodori Senatoris Institutiones*, ed. R.A.B. Mynors (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1937; 1961),

3.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 4.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 44.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 46, 47.

The authority of *latinitas* is subordinated to that of divine revelation, but it is an authority nonetheless. Cassiodorus fears that the words supplying Christian doctrine will become discordant and jarring to the reader or listener. And because the Christian faith needed to be taught, thus relying on textbooks, eloquence in speaking and writing assumed precedence in Christian culture. Classical training in *grammatica* provided this correct (or standard) model of eloquence that teaching the faith required. By focusing *emendatio* on providing correct texts for the effective teaching of the faith, Cassiodorus gives the discourse of correction a further role of providing correct and effective doctrine. *Emendatio* thereby promotes the spiritual and moral lives of readers, writers, and listeners.

Augustine also supported adopting classical methodology; however, he goes one step further than Cassiodorus as to what the *act* of textual correction should involve. While he emphasizes that it is better to ask forgiveness than to know how to pronounce forgiveness (*ignoscere*), claiming that the “more men are offended by these things [i.e. mispronunciation], the weaker they are,”⁶¹ and while he laments that those who mispronounce “human” are “socially censured more than if” they “were to hate a human being,”⁶² Augustine still concedes that such knowledge is important for understanding Scripture:

A man fearing God diligently seeks His will in the Holy Scriptures...He is prepared with a knowledge of languages lest he be impeded by unknown words and locutions...He is assisted by the accuracy of texts which expert diligence in emendation has procured. Thus instructed, he may turn his attention to the investigation and solution of the ambiguities of the Scriptures.⁶³

For Augustine, a fear of God leads to the study of *grammatica*, the knowledge of which is essential for understanding Scripture. Biblical study thus requires training in languages and accurate texts produced by diligent emendation. He points to the ambiguities (as well as rhetoric) of Scripture and sacred texts that one must be prepared to meet. Such ambiguities could well lead to falsehoods and errors, and when met, the “man fearing God” must be able to emend them.⁶⁴

But an essential aspect of Augustine’s account of *emendatio* is the role belief has in carrying out correction. Yes, expert knowledge in texts and languages is required for the diligent Christian reader and scribe, but this knowledge is insufficient without the guidance of faith. That is, when an ambiguity or faulty construction falls our way, expert knowledge of language can only take us so far in preserving the purity of the Scriptures. The “rule of faith” is necessary to render one blameless in reading or copying the canon.⁶⁵ Therefore, the practice of correction not only assumes a role in teaching the

⁶¹ Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 46, 47.

⁶² Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 21.

⁶³ Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 78.

⁶⁴ “But falsity should be rejected. For those who desire to know the Sacred Scriptures should exercise their ingenuity principally that texts not emended should give way to those emended, at least among those which come from one source of translation.” *Ibid.*, 48.

⁶⁵ In other words, when resolving questions of ambiguity in Scripture, faith ought to be a ruling guide: “When investigation reveals an uncertainty as to how a locution should be pointed or construed, the rule of faith should be consulted as it is found in the more open places of the Scriptures and in the authority of the Church.” *Ibid.*, 79.

faith, but the corrector must also understand the true belief and moral living that the tools of correction now support. Augustine thus adds a distinct component to classical *emendatio*: participating in the meaning of Scripture, or practicing the faith, is essential to rendering the faith textually. To correct Scripture, the scribe must also be corrected according to true belief. The very act of textual correction thereby involves Christian practice, and the analogy of correction begins to assume moral and spiritual action.

Carolingian Reform: The Correction of Language and Society

Carolingian learned society, in turn, arose as an entire culture of correction, having adopted a renewed standard of *latinitas* and having sponsored political, church, and educational reforms. The textual culture of the Carolingians, and their focus on societal reform, is very much associated with the field of *emendatio*, through which Charlemagne and his court attempted to create a uniform Christian culture. Carolingian society thus expands on the practice and analogy of correction that Augustine imagines, that correcting texts can also involve correcting humankind. However, while Augustine concentrates on the scribal corrector, the Carolingians focus on how practices of *emendatio* have consequences for the human community more generally.

The Anglo-Saxon scholar Boniface contributed much to the Carolingian textual culture. Writing an *Ars grammatica* modeled on Donatus's, and following prior grammarians, he stressed the importance of recognizing linguistic errors (*vitia*).⁶⁶ But like Cassiodorus, Boniface viewed *grammatica* as essential to introducing a student to biblical study, and perhaps as a result, error in *latinitas* also had religious significance for him. Indeed, he would include heresy as a "defect" in "textual-grammatical competence."⁶⁷ A fault now had consequences beyond a disruption of *latinitas*; for instance, questionable uses of Latin employed within the precincts of the Church could corrupt, or de-sanctify, religious ritual.⁶⁸ Grammatical error could thereby result in sacrilege.

Boniface gained a reputation as a grammarian, both in his concern for *latinitas* and in his preservation of books, which followed him after his death in a story that books of his, thought destroyed, returned miraculously undamaged.⁶⁹ His concern for *latinitas* and the preservation of books also continued after his death in Carolingian textual culture. The Frankish royal court understood the effect scribal failings had on texts, that such failings produced textual and grammatical errors that could impair a reader's literacy and understanding. The ignorance of a copyist would be transferred to a reader. Charlemagne commented specifically on this scribal failing in a letter referring to the work of "ignorant" scribes who "corrupt" texts.⁷⁰ In another letter that Charlemagne sent

⁶⁶ Irvine, *The Making of Textual Culture*, 300.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 303.

⁶⁸ Boniface believed that grammatical error could bring about error in Christian practice. Such an instance occurred, "documented in a letter from Pope Zacharias in 746," where Boniface considered a baptism "invalid" when a priest mistakenly uttered the words "*baptizo te in nomine patria et filia et spiritus sancti*." Note that the priest allegedly said *patria* (native land) instead of *patris* (of the father), and *filia* (daughter) instead of *fili* (of the son). *Ibid.*, 303.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 305.

⁷⁰ Rosamond McKitterick, *Charlemagne: The Formation of a European Identity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 316.

to official readers (*lectores*), he outlined the need for educational reform *and* correct books.⁷¹ Charlemagne and his court recognized the relationship between emending texts and improving education; skill in reading and writing for the scribe would necessarily influence the skill of the general reader. Errors (*vitia*) could spread, and not only to texts but also to humans, but hopefully so would corrections. With this understanding the work of *emendatio* in Carolingian society began.

Extending these reforms in legislation, Charlemagne issued the *Admonitio generalis* (789) and the *De litteris colendis* (c. 794-96).⁷² These ordinances set an educational standard, ensuring the opening of schools that provided instruction in reading and writing for “boys from every station in life.”⁷³ They further articulated the “ideal” of a “textually learned” clergy ready to educate the public.⁷⁴ To this end, schools that trained local clergy were also opened.⁷⁵ In turn, the *scriptoria* of eighth-century Carolingian society provided the books required.⁷⁶ With a greater focus on education came a related rise in the work of scribal production. In all, these proclamations detailed the ensuing educational reforms, helped to increase book production, and established this culture of correction. The Frankish court created an extensive program for literacy, weeding out error from the pages of their books to the tongues of their citizens.

This focus on textual correction and educational reform, however, went beyond literacy to the very fabric of Carolingian society. According to Rosamond McKitterick, the Carolingian culture of reform included *correctio*, which refers primarily to a collection of societal and ecclesiastical reforms for the establishment of imperial authority. And to accomplish these reforms, Charlemagne employed the correction of language and texts, *emendatio*: “In this, the concept of *correctio*, the acquisition of knowledge and the exercise of power were yoked together.”⁷⁷ Charlemagne likely recognized how textual culture and correction were reflective of the king’s authority.⁷⁸ Unified political power depended on a unified cultural identity, as well as a perception of authority by divine right. In Carolingian culture, an essential unifying bond was the Christian faith, and the clearest way to preserve this bond was to ensure that the texts on which it was based did not fragment into anything resembling heterodoxy. Therefore, scribal interpolations, and any additions that created errors or variations, needed to be removed; indeed, all texts needed to be preserved and corrected according to orthodoxy and the “rule of faith.” Thus, the literary culture of *emendatio*, while helping to establish royal authority (*correctio*), also helped to promote a common Christian identity, one that included a strong ethical component.⁷⁹ As with Agroecius’s preface to his version of Caper’s *De orthographia*, *corrigere* and *emendare* join in the analogy of correction,

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 308.

⁷² Irvine, *The Making of Textual Culture*, 305.

⁷³ Rosamond McKitterick, *The Frankish Church and the Carolingian Reforms, 789-895* (London: Royal Historical Society, 1977), 8.

⁷⁴ Irvine, *The Making of Textual Culture*, 305; see also McKitterick, *The Frankish Church and the Carolingian Reforms*, 1.

⁷⁵ McKitterick, *The Frankish Church and the Carolingian Reforms*, 13.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁷⁷ McKitterick, *Charlemagne*, 294.

⁷⁸ Irvine, *The Making of Textual Culture*, 330.

⁷⁹ McKitterick, *Charlemagne*, 378, 79.

creating a type of moral *emendatio*, where textual correction assumes a direct role in human correction and in disseminating Christian ethics.

The Carolingians thereby provide an early example of how medieval culture manifested the growing analogy of the discourse of correction, how grammatical and textual correction united in moral reformation. While establishing a homogenous Christian society, the Carolingian court, law, and schools (the tools for reform) focused on the religious and moral lives of the pupils. The Frankish

people were to be taught an essentially redemptive philosophy, and told that their lives were fundamentally dedicated to God. All this adds up to a way of life which permitted few compromises and was both designed and destined to become the very bones and spirit of the medieval way of thinking about society.⁸⁰

Charlemagne associated the feudal oath and loyalty to him with the Christian's allegiance to God; being a good Christian included being a good subject.⁸¹ From priests to laymen, Carolingian culture thus turned toward a Christian morality, in the way one lived and performed religious ritual:

Charlemagne's policy from early in his reign was directed towards the transformation of the entire people of the Frankish realm into a Christian people, the salvation of the people, the formation of the whole of society in the territories under Frankish rule within a Christian framework, and the integration of the concerns of the faith with those of society as a whole.⁸²

This concentration on their moral lives appears also in later legislation, where "instruction in Christian morals was perhaps even more important than instruction in the Christian faith."⁸³ McKitterick points out that, in the *De litteris colendis*, "Charlemagne emphasized that 'those who seek to please God by right living may not neglect to please him also by right speaking. We are well aware that, although verbal errors are dangerous, errors of understanding are more so.'"⁸⁴ Charlemagne's policy included the correction of prayer books so that one did not pray badly because of faulty texts.⁸⁵

Emendatio and *correctio* both participated in this Christian moral transformation. Conversion, repentance, and salvation revolved around texts that provided instruction for religious ritual and moral practice: leading flourishing Christian lives depended on correct doctrine, which in turn depended on correct texts. Indeed, a standard of eloquence and literacy was necessary for the "man fearing God."

⁸⁰ McKitterick, *The Frankish Church and the Carolingian Reforms*, 9.

⁸¹ Suggested here are also the far-reaching implications for Christian societies of the Middle Ages, where Carolingian society set a certain standard in regards to how a community ought to adopt a Christian identity. Ibid., 10.

⁸² McKitterick, *Charlemagne*, 309.

⁸³ The people were put in the complete care of the local priests, who were pressed to guide the people by both teaching and setting an example: "They were to live 'godly, righteous and sober lives', and encourage others to come and work in the service of God by their own example. This was reiterated further in a capitulary dating from Charlemagne's third series of legislation, from 811-13"; McKitterick, *The Frankish Church and the Carolingian Reforms*, 7.

⁸⁴ McKitterick, *Charlemagne*, 316.

⁸⁵ McKitterick provides a translation of one of Charlemagne's decrees in the *Admonition generalis* of 789 as follows: "Correct carefully the Psalms, *notas*, the chant, the calendar, the grammars in each monastery and bishopric, and the catholic books; because often some desire to pray to God properly, but they pray badly because of the incorrect books." Ibid., 316.

This strong attention to Christian ethics emphasized correcting those texts that taught Christian doctrine. In fact, much of Charlemagne's energy during peacetime was allocated to his project of Christian reform through the correction of Latin biblical texts – even the early corrections of the Bible were taken up during this time.⁸⁶ Charlemagne persistently ordered the correction of biblical and liturgical texts, perceiving scribal mishandling as a direct threat to the Christian culture he was attempting to establish.⁸⁷ Indeed, the written word's affinity to Christianity was not lost on the Carolingians; the “possession and use of writing were, for the Franks, the keys to faith, knowledge and power,” and the treatment of *logos* by St John's gospel gave the written word added significance to Christian culture and practice.⁸⁸ The Carolingians, therefore, focused on learning correct Latin, and grammars such as Donatus's *Ars minor* and *maior* and Priscian's *Institutiones grammaticae* had wide circulation.⁸⁹ This attention to Latin grammar went hand-in-hand with the reform of the written language. These texts were necessary for the revival of textual culture, but in the hands of the Franks, these grammar texts participated in a revival that carried Christian overtones. That is, while Carolingian moral reform focused on creating a Christian society, it relied on classical grammar texts and literary culture to do so.⁹⁰ The traditions of classical emendation provided the materials for a Christian moral *emendatio*.

A final example of Carolingian moral and textual culture can be found in Alcuin, a scholar and teacher in Charlemagne's court. He regarded *grammatica* as a foundation of knowledge, a craft “to be developed, applied, and practiced throughout the course of life.”⁹¹ And while the *Admonitio generalis* and *De litteris colendis* created a standard for education and *latinitas*, Alcuin's work and distinction among Carolingian scholars directed the textual community towards “general textual and orthographic reform”; this included “his *De orthographia*, admonitions on orthography and scribal practices in his letters, his own revision of texts of the Scriptures and the liturgy, and the development of the Caroline script.”⁹² Like Cassiodorus and Boniface, he viewed *grammatica* as a primer for Christian teachings; *grammatica* provided the literacy necessary to comprehend Christian doctrine. He also considered heresy as an error that “results from defects in textual transmission, tradition, or competence, that is, inadequate knowledge of the right texts read in the right way.”⁹³ Alcuin's work on orthography therefore focused on revising the liturgy and the Bible, two texts that received much correction in Carolingian culture.⁹⁴ For Alcuin, as for Carolingian culture, the concern for corrected texts related to the Christian moral concern for “truth.”

⁸⁶ Ibid., 345.

⁸⁷ When Charlemagne discovered the extent of scribal incompetence with correction, he ordered that an “official” compilation of correct readings “from the sermons of the church fathers, [and] Paul's homily, should be read in the churches”; Irvine, *The Making of Textual Culture*, 307.

⁸⁸ Rosamond McKitterick, *The Carolingians and the Written Word* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 4.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 14.

⁹⁰ This ethical project can also be seen through the way in which Donatus was Christianized during this period.

⁹¹ Irvine, *The Making of Textual Culture*, 316.

⁹² Ibid., 327.

⁹³ Ibid., 318.

⁹⁴ Alcuin's attention to sacred texts can be seen through one of his poems on scribal practice: “May those who write the words of the holy law / and the sacred sayings of the holy fathers sit here. / Here

Alcuin's *Orthographia* covers spelling conventions, providing alphabetized examples throughout the text. Although this work is not strictly a grammar text, Alcuin refers to prior grammarians ("ut Prisciano placet"),⁹⁵ and like Donatus, he takes multiple examples from Virgil. However, he also juxtaposes these classical models and examples with those from the Christian canon. For instance, besides Priscian, Alcuin quotes Augustine, refers specifically to the Psalms ("ut in psalmis"), and points more generally to the Old and New Testaments ("vetus et novum testamentum").⁹⁶ Even some words in his alphabetized study refer to Christian culture; for example, when Alcuin covers *b* he relates instances of *baptismus*.⁹⁷ The new Christian canon thus rose to stand alongside, not replace, the classical.

The classical grammar's terminology of fault also finds its way into the *Orthographia*; however, Alcuin extends the reference of these terms: he uses *peccatum* to mean "fault," but later employs it in a noticeably moral context: "Flagitia quae in deum peccamus, facinora in hominem."⁹⁸ In this example, where Alcuin has reached the letter *f*, we transgress (*peccamus*) through outrages (*flagitia*) against god (*in deum*) and crimes (*facinora*) against men. In addition to Évrard's use of *pecco* to refer to cases of textual *vitia*, Alcuin also employs the term to refer to the crimes and faults of humankind. Something similar happens to *vitium*, which Donatus strictly applied to linguistic faults in *De Barbarismo*. In an example of orthographic error, Alcuin asserts, "hoc est vitium,"⁹⁹ but in another instance, this word slides into an explicitly moral sense: "Ira repentino animi motu nascitur, iracundia perpes est vitium."¹⁰⁰ Alcuin thereby expands the reader's sense of *vitium*, identifying it as a case of continuous anger (*iracundia perpes*), a flaw in character.

Considering Alcuin's work, and the wide circulation of Donatus and earlier texts during this period, it behooves us to look back on the grammar texts that opened this chapter and reconsider the language of fault. Barbarism and solecism were the primary *vitia* of language; elements created by an "ignorant" writer or scribe, or by human imperfection. But in light of Carolingian pedagogical and moral reform, *vitia* began to inhabit the denotations of defect, fault *and* sin, as textual emendation participated in the ethical and spiritual correction of society. In Carolingian culture, the writer who produces *vitia* is potentially committing several types of error: grammatical, legal, societal, moral, and spiritual. The grammatical domain of *vitia* and the analogy of correction therefore continued to dilate, covering both textual and moral error, and the analogy of correction continued to assemble a system of terms and practices for systematic moral emendation, specifically borrowing from classical *grammatica*.

let them take care not to insert their trifling words, / may their hands not make mistakes through trifles. / Let them zealously aim at corrected books, / may their flying pens go along the correct path... / so that the lector does not read in error nor suddenly happens / to become silent before the pious brothers in church."⁹⁵ Ibid., 330-31.

⁹⁵ Albinus, *Orthographia* in *Grammatica Latini*, ed. H. Keil, vol. 7. (1855-80; 1961, 1981), 312.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 306, 310.

⁹⁷ "Baptismus | baptisimi genere masculino, et baptismus baptismatis et baptismum baptismi invenitur." Ibid., 298.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 302.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 301.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 304.

But while the focus on *latinitas* created a standard rule of grammar, thus making *vitia* widely recognizable to the Carolingians, texts still required continual emendation. To preserve this renewed rule of grammar, *emendatio* was necessary to remove the persistent errors of book production. And since ruled, written language was associated with ruling and reforming humankind, *emendatio* could also be said to root out any potential errors in tongue and character. Correct living, speaking, writing, reading, and meaning – “*recte vivendo; recte loquendo, scribendo, legendo; rectus sensus*” – were presented by the Carolingian court as “interconnected manifestations of living by rule.”¹⁰¹ As with the example of Agroecius’s preface to his version of Caper’s *De orthographia*, the sphere of emendation extended “from living to writing...from the heart to the hand.” *Emendatio*, therefore, was essential to the Carolingian project of *correctio* in its secular and religious dimensions. And in many respects, *emendatio* was applied outside of textual culture to become synonymous with different types of reform; for instance, conversion and penitence.¹⁰² Just as texts were a primary tool for promoting the Christian faith, *emendatio* was a means for promoting a Christian life. Hence, the terms of *emendatio* not only enriched the practice of moral correction, but also the very act of textual correction began to form an analogy with moral reform.

Biblical and Literary Correction in the Twelfth Century

Carolingian society sparked a strong preference for correct texts that endured in medieval textual culture. Likewise, the analogy between moral and textual error endured, especially in the twelfth century, as biblical correction became more prominent. At the same time, practices of biblical correction pervaded medieval textual culture more generally. And as they did, correction became an increasingly methodical practice, making it a subject for systematic study. After Jerome’s death, scribal interpolations and errors frequently made their way into biblical texts, and these interpolations increased, since Scripture was often modified to meet individual situations during missionary work.¹⁰³ But such modifications also brought with them inauthenticity and corruption. Thus, the long tradition of biblical correction, from Cassiodorus to Alcuin, continued.

Stephen Langton, for example, a well-known corrector of Scripture, carried out his chapter/verse divisions of the bible during the late twelfth century.¹⁰⁴ But Langton entered a field that had a rich and prior history. The Irish Bible was deemed a reliable exemplar, itself known to have been gone over and corrected many times; the Spanish Bible also bore the “marks of correction,” and in each of these cases, corrections were made from direct comparisons with the Greek and Hebrew versions respectively.¹⁰⁵ But even with this strong concern for correction, errors multiplied. In fact, correctors regularly set about revising the work of prior correctors, who would reproduce errors

¹⁰¹ Irvine, *The Making of Textual Culture*, 309.

¹⁰² A later example would include the work by Richard Rolle, *Emendatio vitae*.

¹⁰³ P.R. Ackroyd and C.F. Evans, eds., *The Cambridge History of the Bible: The West from the Fathers to the Reformation*, vol. 2 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 109.

¹⁰⁴ Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (Notre Dame, IN.: Notre Dame University Press, 1964; rpt. 1978), 220.

¹⁰⁵ *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, 128-29, 130.

rather than emend them; *emendatio* “was a work that always [needed] to be redone.”¹⁰⁶ Correction remained incomplete. Although the Carolingians may have spurred a taste for correct texts, it was a taste that required constant attention, which called into question the practice of *emendatio* itself.

We must note, however, that this constant need for correction does not necessarily point to sloppiness or unconcern for authenticity; instead, it points to a certain rigor and sophistication, a constant willingness to point out errors and then go back to correct them.¹⁰⁷ Henri de Lubac cites several examples of this twelfth-century intellectual rigor and sophistication. For example, Stephen Harding (d. 1134) worked to correct the entire Vulgate for the use of his monks.¹⁰⁸ Others produced entire treatises on the subject of correction, such as Nicholas Maniacoria’s *Libellus de corruptione et correctio*, in which he relates the faults in corrections, pointing to how would-be correctors sometimes “utterly corrupt” texts that were once “merely corrupt.”¹⁰⁹ There was a perceived need for diligent awareness, even in the cases where texts were supposedly corrected; the scribe or writer must always guard against (*cavere*) potential *vitia*.

Although different attitudes were taken regarding how correction should be carried out, the attention and concern for emendation was consistently strong. But as we have seen, biblical emendation also illustrates the deeply recursive nature of correction. The Paris Bible, for example, was infamous for its errors; in fact, the Dominicans created a concordant device known as the *correctorium* to address this corruption.¹¹⁰ The *correctoria* assisted emendation by providing variant readings of the Vulgate. This device, however, was severely criticized by Roger Bacon, who insisted that the *correctoria* more often perpetuated rather than corrected error: these variant readings would eventually seep into the various biblical texts and be taken for authentic Scripture.¹¹¹ And such criticisms did prove true. For instance, while the Paris Bible was emended through this collection of variants, it was sometimes corrupted even further through faulty interpolations that came from attempts at correction.¹¹² And texts from other versions would creep in to complicate further the range of variants.¹¹³

Of course, other scholars recognized the potential proliferation of error and sought to go back and emend those variations. While Stephen Langton sometimes made exegetical and theological use of the wide array of textual variants, adding to his discourse on the many senses of Scripture, he would still emend any that he found.

¹⁰⁶ Henri de Lubac, S.J., *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture*, vol. 3, translated by E.M. Macierowski (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 194.

¹⁰⁷ Cornelia Linde provides an extensive study of the opinions and theoretical debates held by medieval scholars from the 12th to the 15th century, while also examining the role of grammar in emendating the Latin Bible. She shows that early medieval manuscripts of the bible contained pervasive corruptions and variants; however, scribes and scholars were aware of these corruptions and variants, and they developed multiple methods and approaches to biblical correction. *How to Correct the Sacra Scriptura?: Textual Criticism of the Bible between the Twelfth and Fifteenth Century*. (Society for the Study of Medieval Languages and Literature, 2012).

¹⁰⁸ Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis*, 197.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 199.

¹¹⁰ M. Michèle Mulchahey, “*First the Bow is Bent in Study*”: *Dominican Education Before 1350* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies), 506.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 508.

¹¹² Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages*, 331.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 335.

Langton worked to correct extracts of biblical gloss by Jerome through a comparison with Jerome's "original text" (*Ieronimus in originali*), and he revealed faulty interpolations that were added to Jerome's commentary in the extracts.¹¹⁴ And Langton was not alone in this endeavor. Other biblical scholars worked to preserve the gloss "against the negligence of copyists who omit or misplace the names."¹¹⁵ But even still, especially in the case of the gloss, error persisted. Robert of Melun, for example, criticized the gloss, claiming that they can often be altered from "original" commentary "in sense, in diction and in sequence."¹¹⁶ The gloss was just as unstable as (or more than) the texts they commented on.

Roger Bacon insisted on the complete reliance on the original Greek and Hebrew texts as sole exemplars, and he complained of the lack of training in these languages to allow for in-depth scholarship. He even wrote Greek and Hebrew grammars for such study.¹¹⁷ But study in original languages was not a foolproof means of evading faults from scribal errors and interpolations. The use and translation of those works opened the door to mistakes even for those skilled in languages. And such work could not prevent the minor faults of human frailty in the form of eye-skips or other such mistakes in copying.

What perhaps some scholars like Langton understood, and what someone like Bacon apparently did not, is the need to go continuously back to the text, whether in the original language or a translation, to correct error. The process of writing and correcting was recursive. And as we shall see, instead of complicating or undermining the analogy of textual and Christian moral correction, the idea that *emendatio* could never complete the work it set out to do actually corresponds to the medieval Christian perspective of sin and the work of redemption.

Alan of Lille provides one of the more salient examples of the twelfth-century application of grammatical terminology to Christian moral discourse. In his *De planctu Naturae*, for instance, Nature herself approaches the poet and laments the waywardness of humankind. Humans follow not the decrees of Nature, but Desire until Nature becomes corrupted: "large numbers are shipwrecked and lost because of a Venus turned monster, when Venus wars with Venus and changes 'hes' into 'shes' and with her witchcraft unmans man."¹¹⁸ A few lines later, Alan further explicates this "witchcraft," saying that the

witchcraft of Venus turns him [humankind] into a hermaphrodite. He is subject and predicate: one and the same term is given a double application. Man here extends too far the laws of grammar. Becoming a barbarian in grammar, he disclaims the manhood given him by nature... The figure here more correctly falls into the category of defects.¹¹⁹

Here, Alan equates sins of grammar with sins against nature, where corruption of the language reflects moral and sexual corruption. In *De planctu Naturae*, man is understood

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 227-228.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 226.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 228.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 333.

¹¹⁸ James J. Sheridan, trans., *Alan of Lille: The Complaint of Nature* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1980), 67.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 68.

as subject and woman as predicate; therefore, a corruption that fuses subject and predicate would metaphorically destabilize the distinction between the sexes. In this case, a barbarism does more than make one barbarous in grammar, but also emasculates (or defeminizes) the writer, making him or her a hermaphrodite in grammar. If sex is given by Nature, as Alan understood, then such perversion of grammar not only suggests a possible sexual perversion, but also a crime against Nature. We have already seen a similar comparison in Évrard's *Graecismus*, where barbarisms and solecisms are described as offenses against Nature: "Est autem uitium soloecismi in naturam." Alan, however, makes explicit the nascent concept in Évrard's treatise, which is that by corrupting language humans corrupt both the world and themselves.

Continuing her complaint against humankind, Nature further aligns solecisms with wantonness and lawlessness: "Man, however, who has all but drained the entire treasury of my riches, tries to denature the natural things of nature and arms a lawless and solecistic Venus to fight against me."¹²⁰ In humankind's focus on Desire, wantonness has created a disorder in natural law. Like a sentence suffering from solecism, where the grammatical construction is upended, natural law is thwarted by human desire, leagued with "solecistic Venus":

For the human race, fallen from its high estate, adopts a highly irregular (grammatical) change when it inverts the rules of Venus by introducing barbarisms in its arrangement of genders. Thus man, his sex changed by a ruleless Venus, in defiance of due order, by his arrangement changes what is a straightforward attribute of his...[H]e falls into the defect of inverted order.¹²¹

Humans, therefore, are able to change for the worst, "in defiance of due order." For Alan, this upending of natural law mainly refers to sins of sexuality, "unnatural" acts, which are then compared to wrongly assigned or mismatched genders in Latin composition. Jan Ziolkowski points out that Alan perceived these faults of grammatical construction as indicative of homosexuality.¹²² Just as grammatical corruption indicated natural corruption for Alan, such as the fusion of biological gender, the mismatching of grammatical gender also indicated a confusion of sexual roles. Diverting grammatical order is continually likened to diverting natural order, as if the laws of Nature and the laws of language bear an affinity that equate the two. *Vitia*, then, refer to faults both in and outside of language.

Alan stresses the consequences for such "unnatural" deviations when Genius pronounces a judgment of excommunication: "let everyone who blocks the lawful path of Venus...be separated from the kiss of heavenly love as his ingratitude deserves and merits, let him be demoted from Nature's favour, let him be set apart from the harmonious council of the things of Nature."¹²³ For Genius, these errors deserve separation "from the kiss of heavenly love," therefore separation from God.

According to Ziolkowski, Alan's focus on such "unnatural" deviations is in part due to grammar being "subsumed under the heading of ethics" during the twelfth

¹²⁰ Ibid., 131.

¹²¹ Ibid., 133-34.

¹²² Jan Ziolkowski, *Alan of Lille's Grammar of Sex: The Meaning of Grammar to a Twelfth-Century Intellectual* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Medieval Academy of America, 1985), 14-15.

¹²³ Sheridan, *The Complaint of Nature*, 220.

century.¹²⁴ Both the twelfth-century school curriculum and theology placed an emphasis on grammar. Indeed, the Latin term *grammatica* was much more expansive than our modern sense of grammar. *Grammatica* could indicate the character of the writer and speaker; a well-ordered soul, or *good* soul, would be more receptive to the rules governing grammar.¹²⁵ Hence, “the man who acts properly is [also] a good grammarian.”¹²⁶ The practice of grammar further assumed moral consequence: “Just as immorality subverts good grammar, Alan felt that grammatical and expository errors lead to moral corruption in real life.”¹²⁷ Anyone unprepared by grammar, for instance, could be tricked by disordered discourse that hid wicked ideas. Knowledge of grammar was thus essential to disentangle the web of truth and untruth, heterodoxy and orthodoxy. But for Alan, the tie between bad grammar and immorality went beyond misreading Scripture, bearing equivalence to physical action, as grammatical barbarism bore an analogy to immoral sexual practices, such as rape.¹²⁸

Alan of Lille’s portrayal of virtue also looks to Cicero and the Stoics. In the *Anticlaudianus*, virtue is concerned with external action in society, humankind’s relationship to one another rather than acts of piety alone. According to James Simpson, “[i]n this remarkable humanist ensemble, all the virtues are gifts of Nature, given as potential qualities which become virtues proper when exercised as *habitus*; and all the virtues remain those of Nature, uninformed by Christian charity.”¹²⁹ Katherine Breen also covers this concept of *habitus* and argues that it included the complete internalization of *grammatica*; that is, the internalization of grammatical rule worked to rule the individual: “As he [the pupil] acquires the *habitus* of grammar, the student does not merely learn rules but is himself regulated, made regular, by the language he studies and the discipline of the classroom in which he studies it.”¹³⁰ *Habitus*, therefore, provides a ready structure for humankind to adopt in order to “counterbalance” sinful tendencies.¹³¹ In other words, *habitus* employs writing to train and mold character, making *emendatio* a practice that can train the individual just as it does the tongue or page.

But this concept of internalizing rule also acknowledges the Christian doctrine that man naturally veers towards sin. While such virtue was focused on action and social habit, influenced by classical moral theory, this focus became a strong facet of Christian moral thinking. Because *habitus* applies a student’s training for veering from *vitia* in grammar to the *vitia* of the world, a lack of grammatical training potentially amounts to a lack of Christian moral training, ignorance of *vitia* all around.¹³² Hence, the recursive nature of textual correction asserted Christian moral practice, affirming that humans must

¹²⁴ Ziolkowski, *Alan of Lille’s Grammar of Sex*, 5. See also Philippe Delhaye, “Grammatica et Ethica au XII siècle,” *Extrait des Recherches de Théologie Ancienne et Médiévale* XXV (1958): 59-110.

¹²⁵ Ziolkowski, *Alan of Lille’s Grammar of Sex*, 91.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 91.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 101.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 103.

¹²⁹ James Simpson, *The Sciences and the Self in Medieval Poetry: Alan of Lille’s ‘Anticlaudianus’ and John Gower’s ‘Confessio amantis’* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 52.

¹³⁰ Katherine Breen, *Imagining an English Reading Public, 1150-1400* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 2.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 82.

ever be ready to correct their faults. Grammatical training and practices of textual correction thus maintained this close relationship – and analogy – to moral practice; indeed, textual correction, by analogy, participated in Christian penitence and moral reform.

While Christian theology exerted its influence in the study of ethics, ancient philosophies still inflected moral debate. This is especially the case in the thirteenth century with the focus on Aristotelian ethics, which particularly influenced Thomas Aquinas in his conception of Christian moral theory. Such influence by the Stoics, for example, helped to shift the study of moral theory towards humankind's role in society rather than solely on spiritual life. However, none of the above methods guaranteed enduring moral reform, just as the work of *emendatio* could not stamp out *vitia* entirely. For example, it was possible for a student to subsume a faulty grammar rule or for a scribe to copy or emend using a faulty exemplar. None of the above were an assurance against *vitia*; though *habitus* worked to physically train the body, it too involved the recursive process of correction. A perceived pattern, rule, and exemplar would need to be revisited, and possibly emended, and the disciple would need to re-experience the process of self-correction. But as we have witnessed, rather than undermine, this recursive process forms a central aspect of its analogy. In fact, one of the reasons the analogy works so well is because the training and practice of textual correction remains incomplete. It is a process that requires constant attention, reflecting the work of both penitent and scribe.

These textual and moral traditions were certainly available to Chaucer, but we shall see how they helped to shape his poetic form and ideas of literary practice. The questions to which I shall now turn concern how he implements those traditions in a key tale, one which has often been ignored but has also been regarded as central to his project, and why that implementation is essential for our understanding of his work. We shall find that Chaucer uses the recursive logic of correction to dramatize (and even personify) the steps and practices of both moral and textual correction. However, this key tale, and subject of chapter two, reveals the way aspects of that recursive logic, as a literary form and narrative model, produce a sort of artistic entropy, which Chaucer will contrast through the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole to reveal that logic as an engine for artistic enterprise.

Chapter Two

Chaucer's Corrective Form: The *Tale of Melibee* and the Poetics of Emendation

Any investigation into Chaucer's moral aims reopens an old debate. In the middle of the twentieth century, two tendencies of criticism emerged to address whether he wrote with a moralizing purpose, tendencies that came to stand as symbolic poles of Chaucer criticism: one that saw Chaucer primarily as a Christian moralist, exemplified by the "exegetical" methods of D.W. Robertson Jr., and an aesthetic tradition that largely examined Chaucer's artistic purposes, exemplified by E. Talbot Donaldson.¹³³ Each approach thus made a claim for Chaucer's poetic purpose; either Christian instruction or his art took precedence. Exhausted, with both sides unable to mount a theoretical opposition to the other, the debate was sidestepped, not resolved.¹³⁴ But the fact of this

¹³³ For a more recent account of these critical traditions, albeit focusing on Donaldson, see Ralph Hanna, "Donaldson and Robertson: An Obligatory Conjunction," *The Chaucer Review* 41:3 (2007): 240-249. For a glimpse of this critical debate as it stood in the late 1950's, see Donaldson's "Opposition," R.E. Kaske's "Defense," and Charles Donahue's "Summation" in *Critical Approaches to Medieval Literature: Selected Papers from the English Institute, 1958-1959* ed. Dorothy Bethurum (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960). For further defenses and critiques of Robertson's approach, see R.E. Kaske's review of Robertson's *Preface*, "Chaucer and Medieval Allegory," in *ELH* 30.2 (June 1963): 175-192; A. Leigh DeNeef, "Robertson and the Critics," *The Chaucer Review* 2.4 (Spring 1968): 205-234; Morton W. Bloomfield, "Symbolism in Medieval Literature," *Modern Philology* 56.2 (Nov. 1958): 73-81; F.L. Utey, "Robertsonianism Redivivus," *Romance Philology*, XIX (1965):250-260; Rodney Delasanta, "Christian Affirmation in 'The Book of the Duchess,'" *PMLA* 84.2 (March 1969): 245-251; Stanley J. Kahrl, "Allegory in Practice: A Study of Narrative Styles in Medieval Exempla," *Modern Philology* 63.2 (Nov. 1965): 105-110; Robert O. Payne, *The Key of Remembrance: A Study of Chaucer's Poetics* (1963); for reactions against Robertson's approach and defenses for Donaldson's, see R.S. Crane, *The Idea of the Humanities and Other Essays Critical and Historical* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1967); Beryl Rowland, "Contemporary Chaucer Criticism," *Oxford Journals* 22.112 (1973):3-11; William E. Rogers, "The Raven and the Writing Desk: The Theoretical Limits of Patristic Criticism," *The Chaucer Review* 14.3 (1980): 260-277; A.C. Cawley, ed., *Chaucer's Mind and Art* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1969); Charles Owen, "The Design of the *Canterbury Tales*," in *Companion to Chaucer Studies*, ed. Beryl Rowland (Toronto 1968), 198-201; Donald R. Howard, "Chaucer the Man," *PMLA* 80.4 (Sept. 1965): 337-343, and Howard's review of *Fruyt and Chaf: Studies in Chaucer's Allegories* in *Speculum* 39.3 (July 1964): 537-41, and more recently Robert W. Hanning "No [One] Way to Treat a Text: Donaldson and the Criticism of Engagement," *The Chaucer Review* 41.3 (2007): 261-270.

¹³⁴ While Lee Patterson describes Robertsonian exegetics as "the great unfinished business of Medieval Studies," criticism following the early 1990's largely fails to concern itself with this debate, perhaps feeling that Patterson had successfully buried the "exegetical" approach. *Negotiating the Past: The Historical Understanding of Medieval Literature* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 5. By the time we reach the mid 1980's this debate is already beginning to be dismissed. For example, A.C. Spearing asserts in an endnote, and without addressing particulars of Robertson's argument, that reading medieval poetry as moral allegories for interpretation "is based on a general view of medieval culture which seems to me fundamentally erroneous"; *Medieval to Renaissance in English Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 354 n 22. Carolyn Dinshaw opens her first chapter of *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* with the debate between Donaldson and Robertson, but she quickly moves past their debate to argue how they both participate in a "patriarchal structure of literary activity"; (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 28. Marie Borroff claims that, as much as she enjoys Donaldson's swipes at patristic exegesis, such essays are "now out of date"; "Donaldson and the Romantic Poets," *The Chaucer Review* 41.3 (2007), 225. And Steven Justice points out that, as we crossed into the new century, the debate begins to disappear altogether; for example, *The Cambridge History of Medieval English*

debate should make us ask: what is it about Chaucer's poetry that invites disagreement on a topic so fundamental and leaves it unamenable to resolution?

Robertson focused on the evidence of medieval art and architecture to make a case for reading medieval literature as moral allegory.¹³⁵ Accordingly, Chaucer's characters may inhabit verisimilar settings, but "they are not essentially realistic," and the verisimilar elaboration, indeed all of Chaucer's poetic complexity, is subordinated to the single symbolic and didactic principle of Christian charity.¹³⁶ But to Robertson's assertion that Chaucer's apparent complexity masks a stark simplicity of purpose, the opposing critical approach replies that the complexity is his purpose. Alfred David, for example, claims that the invention of the Canterbury pilgrims is a deliberate device of complexity: Chaucer hides behind the crowd of pilgrims, only making a definite appearance at the end with his *Retractions* and thereby defers the clarity of moral conclusions.¹³⁷ While apparently exhausted, the very fact of this debate points to a unique quality of Chaucer's art: something about it that generates the question of a moral agenda but makes that question irresolvable. I shall argue that Chaucer develops a method by which he may consider moral concerns without subordinating his art to those concerns, and it is his *Tale of Melibee* that most clearly demonstrates this method.

The *Melibee* has spent its share of time near the center of this debate. Lee Patterson's approach to the *Melibee* opposes that of Robertson's, asserting that, rather than the moral linchpin for the *Tales*, the *Melibee* participates in Chaucer's creation of "a space of ideological freedom."¹³⁸ Patterson rightly rejects readings of the *Melibee* that reduce its full complexity by excusing it as "an authentic kind of medieval writing."¹³⁹ He argues instead that, although filled with *sentence* and apparent moral intent, the

Literature mentions neither Donaldson nor Robertson. "Who Stole Robertson?," *PMLA* 124, no. 2 (Mar., 2009): 609. It appears to be a debate that many were anxious to move past.

¹³⁵ *A Preface to Chaucer* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), 211, 216.

¹³⁶ In effect, fourteenth-century art is an art "dominated by ideas"; it does not carry the feeling of the artist as much as it does symbolic and spiritual meaning. *Ibid.*, 228. Robertson points out that at the moment when the Canon and Yeoman join the pilgrims, "the landscape is empty of people other than the pilgrims themselves. No dogs bark at their heels, and no cattle wander across the road. The pilgrims might as well be seen moving against a background of gold leaf." *Ibid.*, 257, 258.

¹³⁷ The "frame story," with its motley collection of storytellers, allows Chaucer to elude any "moral obligations" by shuffling narrators and moral stances "to write exactly as he pleased"; *The Strumpet Muse* (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1976), 75. Jill Mann makes a similar point in regards to how Chaucer obviates the traditional moral focus of Estates Satire. Chaucer provides "detailed enumeration" in his portrayal of the estates, qualities that stem not from Chaucer borrowing from life, but from his experimentation with this literary tradition. Chaucer uses Estates Satire, not for an external commentary on society or morality, but as an engagement with literary genre. His aesthetic focus, then, lifts Estates Satire from a mere focus on societal "failings" or "generalized moral advice" to the "implications of the estates form"; Jill Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire: The Literature of Social Classes and the 'General Prologue' to the 'Canterbury Tales'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 15, 16. According to E. Talbot Donaldson, Chaucerian irony comprises much of his poetic richness, creating a "wonderfully complex...vision of a world." Donaldson does not deny moral aspects of Chaucer's work, but with this poetic complexity it is not possible to determine whether the "moral" or the "naïve" Chaucer "has the last word"; *Speaking of Chaucer* (London: The Athlone Press, 1970), 3, 12. Hence, an explicit moral agenda would oversimplify Chaucer's poetic craft, indicating that he is only replicating a genre (as with Estates Satire) or that the poet is as naïve as his persona.

¹³⁸ Lee Patterson, "'What Man Artow?': Authorial Self-Definition in the *Tale of Sir Thopas* and the *Tale of Melibee*," in *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 11 (1989), 119.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 136.

Melibee represents Chaucer's version of the "specific political interests from which [he] has always sought to escape."¹⁴⁰ While the tale enforces a meditative practice similar to monastic *lectio*, its protagonist, like the Host by the end of the tale, fails to learn from this practice.¹⁴¹ The *Melibee* thus precludes tidy moral teachings or a definite conclusion, and Patterson therefore contradicts Robertson's famous assertion: that Chaucer directs us to "pay attention to the *sentence* of the *Melibee* because it affords a clue to the *sentence* of all the other tales which come before it."¹⁴²

I am proposing, however, that critics like Robertson and Patterson are both right, and both wrong, and that the *Melibee* allows us to see why. The *Melibee*'s protagonist requires constant guidance; his lessons must be revisited, re-examined, and re-taught. But it is this persistent need for guidance that serves Chaucer's moral aims. He creates, not a clear moral message, but an occasion for moral exercise, which requires the reader to recognize the unending, un-concluding, nature of error and the exhaustive enterprise required to address it. Robertson and Patterson each astutely perceive important aspects of Chaucer's poetry, but it is only by connecting their arguments that we can see the intricate involvement of Chaucer's moral aims with his artistic project. Rather than take sides in an old debate, rather than employ the terms and approaches that exhausted themselves a generation ago, I shall use the moral and textual traditions of correction examined in chapter one to show a middle way, the interrelationship between the moral and literary.¹⁴³ And I shall suggest that this "middle way" is Chaucer's way.

Through traditions of *emendatio* and moral correction, Chaucer creates a literary form that integrates moral procedure into literary practice, but in a way that contributes to the work that both his art and his moral aims require: repeatedly re-approaching methods and ideas. The recursive work of correction (as discussed in chapter one) calls for endless repetition and renewal; that constantly re-forms its subject, either re-casting the artifact or redirecting moral character. And while he recognizes that this practice is also a model for amending humankind, Chaucer sees this recursive work as an artistic tool, providing him a method for re-figuring his art. Chaucer uses the analogous relationship between traditions of *emendatio* and moral reform to produce both the moral and creative design of the *Canterbury Tales*: while *emendatio* suggests moral examination, the moral examination provides the structures and methods for his literary, aesthetic practices. Hence, any debate that assumes a distinction between a moral and aesthetic Chaucer

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 123.

¹⁴¹ In the narrative, Prudence advises Melibeus "to pause, to consider, to reflect, to examine his situation and himself." Ibid., 157. In the *Monk's Prologue*, which follows the *Melibee*, the Host responds to the tale: "I hadde levere than a barel ale / That Goodelief, my wyf, hadde herd this tale! / For she nys no thyng of swich pacience / As was this Melibeus wyf Prudence" (VII. 1893-96). The Host's summation indicates that he hardly understands the tale as having any further significance beyond providing his wife with a model for patience. Citations are from Larry Benson, ed., *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).

¹⁴² Robertson, *A Preface to Chaucer*, 369.

¹⁴³ In chapter one I discuss the interrelationship between different types of correction – linguistic, textual, and moral – and how these distinct modes of correction provided conceptual models for each other in medieval grammatical thought.

becomes irresolvable, as he presses the analogy to the point that the literary and the moral become in effect versions of each other.¹⁴⁴ These traditions of correction provide Chaucer a means for applying moral significance to his narrative form, but in a way that demonstrates how moral and artistic practices were equal concerns for him.

Finally, it may seem an embarrassment to my claim that the clearest place to demonstrate it is the *Melibee*, which many readers regard as Chaucer's worst tale. That judgment, however, does not embarrass my claim, but exemplifies it; the *Melibee* not only outlines practices of emendation and moral reform, but in the very judgment of its quality, exemplifies that identification of fault, which is central to practices of correction. However, before we move further in our discussion, we first need to address what exactly Chaucer's moral aims are.

Chaucer, Dante, and the Role of Language

Like Dante's, Chaucer's understanding of language provides a clue to his moral aims in literature. For Dante, as for most medieval thinkers, language mirrors humankind's corrupted state, their distance from God. Like humankind's moral and corporeal substance, language has become debased, and has continued on a downward trajectory of corruption since the fall. The tongue therefore reflects humankind's moral and spiritual condition. Dante thus views poetic construction – a means for improving language – as a means to elevate that moral and spiritual condition. Chaucer however takes a different approach. As we shall see, Chaucer views poetic construction not so much as a means for reconciling humans with God as it is an occasion to examine the unending work of moral self-repair; in turn, this process of renewal aligns the work of poetic creation with moral reform, and vice-versa.

This idea of linguistic degeneracy and its moral counterpart came to Dante in part through classical and medieval traditions of grammar. In the Middle Ages, the teaching of *grammatica* was believed to work in tandem with spiritual and moral development, making the study of grammar and scripture, for a time, nearly synonymous.¹⁴⁵ This connection relies on the classical ideal that the rhetorician is, in Cato's words, 'a good man skilled in speaking.'¹⁴⁶ Quintilian speaks at length of a connection between virtue and language skills: "For I am convinced that no one can be an orator who is not a good

¹⁴⁴ As Patterson asserts, "[u]nable to absorb Exegetics and move on, Chaucer studies instead circles back almost compulsively to an apparently irrepressible scandal, a recursiveness that itself bespeaks a scandalous limitation to its own critical creativity"; *Negotiating the Past*, 5. I shall suggest, however, that any recursive attention to Chaucer's moral aims has more to do with his style of writing than the limits of any one critical apparatus.

¹⁴⁵ "Prayer books were so commonly used for the teaching of reading that they were also known as 'primers' or 'first books,' confirming that a depiction of the reading of devotions and of a reading lesson might amount to the same thing"; Susan Noakes, *Timely Reading: Between Exegesis and Interpretation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 18.

¹⁴⁶ The relationship between "literacy and social status" also implied that "the literate person ought to be urbane, selfless, knowledgeable, and virtuous. This picture is the same as that promoted in rhetorical education, and it seems to have been common at earlier stages of literacy training as well, if the copying of moral maxims by schoolchildren is any indication. Grammatical ethics are part of an established trope of the values that educated persons more generally were supposed to hold"; Catherine M. Chin, *Grammar and Christianity in the Late Roman World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 40.

man; and, even if anyone could, I should be unwilling that he should be.”¹⁴⁷ And he later articulates how language instruction provides moral instruction:

He will daily hear many things commended, many things corrected...emulation will be excited by praise; and he will think it a disgrace to yield to his equals in age; and an honor to surpass his seniors. All these matters excite the mind; and though ambition itself be a vice, yet it is often the parent of virtues.¹⁴⁸

From his account, virtue springs from the commendation and correction of language. Vice, it seems, was a pedagogical analogy to the barbarisms such training sought to correct. This analogy between language skills and moral character would seem to suggest a causal relationship, that grammatical advancement would advance morality, but this idea of progression was not exactly the viewpoint for later Christians. Rather, the medieval analogy depends on the constant correction that both require.¹⁴⁹

That a good man maintains good grammar, while vice works to corrupt both meaning and virtue, is an ideal Dante pushes further. In his *Commedia*, those who come the closest to speaking gibberish are the demons, while during his vision of the “Eternal Light” he sees “ingathered, bound by love in one single volume that which is dispersed in leaves throughout the universe.”¹⁵⁰ The corruption of language suggests moral corruption, while love, or virtue, gathers together and mends the dispersal of text, meaning, and language. Dante also gestures towards the classical ideal of poetry by making Virgil his guide. The standard grammatical textbooks of late antiquity and the Middle Ages used Virgil as the exemplar of literary Latin. To learn correct usage meant following Virgil, and Dante makes clear that he is: “And I to him [Virgil], ‘Poet, I beseech you, by that God whom you did not know, so that I may escape this ill and worse, lead me whither you said just now, that I may see St. Peter’s gate and those whom you term so woeful.’ Then he set out, and I followed after him.” And later: “Now on, for a single will is in us both; you are my leader, you my master and my teacher.”¹⁵¹ Dante makes clear that Virgil is his literary model, much in the way Virgil was employed by the grammarians. But here Virgil also acts as a spiritual guide, leading the way towards heaven. Dante therefore makes an explicit connection between following a

¹⁴⁷ Quintilian, *On the Teaching of Speaking and Writing: Translations from Books One, Two, and Ten of the “Institutio Oratoria,”* ed. James J. Murphy (Carbondale and Edwardville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987), 19.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁴⁹ The Fourth Lateran Council (1215) had fostered a systematic and text-based push for moral correction by making annual confession necessary. To aid this moral emendation of humankind, a large number of penitential handbooks and treatises categorized sin and taught the necessary steps of contrition and repentance to an audience largely outside the academic setting. Although these penitential handbooks made confession a thorough and systematic process, sin endured no matter how thorough the method of correction. According to the doctrine of original sin, humankind inhabits a perpetual state of sin; and therefore, a state of repentance or grace is by no means permanent. Chaucer himself describes this phenomenon: “men fallen in venial synnes after hir baptesme fro day to day” (X.98-99). The inevitability of recidivism thus made penitential handbooks a constant necessity for maintaining a morally correct life.

¹⁵⁰ Dante Alighieri, “Paradiso,” in *The Divine Comedy*, trans. Charles S. Singleton (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 377. See also Glauco Cambon: “Perversion of language...is in Dante’s eyes one of the worst offenses against the spiritual order”; *Dante’s Craft: Studies in Language and Style* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1969), 33.

¹⁵¹ Dante Alighieri, “Inferno,” in *The Divine Comedy*, trans. Charles S. Singleton (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 11, 23.

literary model, which provides grammatical correction, and correcting one's own path towards salvation.¹⁵²

Thus, besides turning to grammatical and textual traditions for literary models, Dante makes use of the paradoxes of these models, embellishing the complications to these textual traditions for literary and theological material. Dante relates corrupted (or imperfect) aspects of language and the written word to the Christian doctrine of original sin, thereby tying the corruption of language to humankind's fall from grace, exemplified through Babel.¹⁵³ But in doing so, he also has in mind the redemptive power of language: when pushed to its limits, poetry may participate in man's reconciliation with God by improving (or correcting) language.¹⁵⁴

Chaucer, however, does not represent language as redemptive – language is fallen; it cannot lift humankind morally or spiritually – nevertheless, he presents the correction of language and texts as a literary model that suggests the work of moral reform. As we shall see, this literary model is most clearly outlined by the *Melibee*, where textual practices exemplify moral and spiritual examination, not redemption. Unlike Dante, Chaucer does not present a straight path to salvation, from hell to heaven. He instead suggests that moral practice is unending and inconclusive, a continual process of recognizing and correcting error. Chaucer's *Melibee* thus requires us to enter a circular, continuous, and exhaustive narrative, but a narrative that also outlines an essential moral concept: the character of moral behavior is itself circular, continuous, and exhaustive. For Chaucer, an ideal moral path or language, while conceivable, is unattainable. Even Chaucer's Parson, who steps forward "To knytte up al this feeste and make an ende" (X. 47) and concludes the *Tales*, places his words perpetually under correction: "I kan no bettre seye. / But nathelees, this meditacioun / I putte it *ay* under correccioun" (X. 54-56). The Parson proposes to "shewe" the pilgrims "the wey, in this

¹⁵² Dante is not the only example of a medieval poet who used aspects of *grammatica* for both a literary and moral model. William Langland, for example, explains humankind's relationship to God and social hierarchy through grammar rules; see *Passus III*, lines 350-406 in the C-Text of *Piers Plowman*, ed. Derek Pearsall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978). John Gower does something similar in the opening of his *Confessio Amantis*, where he compares the loss of a clear connection between words and what they signify to the moral corruption of the world; see the Prologue to *Book I* of *Confessio Amantis*, lines 113-121, ed. Russell A. Peck (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 2000). John M. Fyler argues that Jean de Meun also links the corruption of language to a declining world in his *Roman de la Rose*; see "Love and Language in Jean de Meun," in *Language and the Declining World in Chaucer, Dante, and Jean de Meun* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

¹⁵³ Donald Howard points to Chaucer's awareness of the deterioration of language that allegedly issued from humankind's fall. He argues that what the "articulation of the passing of time [in the *Canterbury Tales*]...provides is a fundamental medieval conception, that of a world in decline from the 'former age' or the Golden Age, growing old, becoming physically and morally weak... While the world is winding down from its first Golden Age, it also 'neweth every day', and men can follow ideals of conduct which would impose upon the world a corrective civilizing influence"; *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1976), 110, 11.

¹⁵⁴ "The *Commedia* makes evident what Genesis proclaimed: the implication of language in the world of sin and death brought about by the Fall. Unsurprisingly, language takes part in the more general rehabilitation in the *Purgatorio*...Divine poetry marks the shift to human salvation"; John M. Fyler, *Language and the Declining World in Chaucer, Dante, and Jean de Meun*, 108, 109. Eric Jager argues that "Chaucer inherited a rich body of lore about language, literature, and the Fall. Patristic culture had maintained an ambivalence toward writing as both a product of the Fall and yet a potentially redemptive medium"; *The Tempter's Voice: Language and the Fall in Medieval Literature* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993), 242.

viage, / Of thilke parfit glorious pilgrimage / That highte Jerusalem celestial” (X. 49-51), yet he still does not presume to be able to convey the “wey” perfectly. Similarly, Chaucer does not prescribe a specific moral path or doctrine, although this does not stop him from having moral or doctrinal concerns. Rather than articulating an ideal, Chaucer’s moral aims initiate an exercise of correction that suggests its ability to renew or reset both humankind and literature – while also revealing that *complete* correction or moral reform is not possible, and indeed “corrections” themselves do not necessarily lead to a good outcome. Chaucer creates a mode of writing that allows him to express these moral aims without subordinating his artistic concerns to a moral, didactic purpose.

Yet a problem remains: the *Melibee* seems to most readers to be a failure, a narrative that produces false starts and persistently delays the tale’s denouement. However, this fact subverts neither Chaucer’s moral examination nor his art. Because the *Melibee* is his clearest expression of the dynamic of moral correction and its failure, the tale also demonstrates why representing correction through narrative alone is not itself an aesthetic principle. Literary fiction requires something more. (And the following chapters will show that the rest of the *Canterbury Tales* reveals what that something is.) Chaucer does not pose language as redemptive, but he does show how it may involve the reader in a process of correction and regression into error. Through his narrative form, he details that process, the trial-and-error, false starts, and precluded endings. The *Melibee* makes correction, failure, and revision its subject rather than a process or experience, which – as I shall argue in the following chapters – the *Tales* as a whole perform and provoke through their structure and arrangement. Chaucer’s *Melibee*, with its inclusion of critical techniques, demonstrates most obviously to the reader how such techniques work as creative devices in the *Tales* as a whole. More ingenious than artful, the *Melibee* states elaborately, and in prose, a literary and moral design; it is a design made possible by the analogous relationship of textual and moral correction, and one that Chaucer will reproduce in the rest of the *Tales* through his poetic craft.

Chaucer and Traditions of Correction

Chaucer consistently reveals his familiarity with practices of *emendatio*. He never hides his concern for the linguistic and textual errors produced by the hands of skilled copyists. In *Adam Scriveyn*, a scribe’s “negligence and rape” takes into account variations of a text’s form (*incongrua materie variatio*), corruptions of language (*verbum corrupta littera*), and the addition to, or subtraction of, an author’s words: “after my making thow wryte more trewe,” commands Chaucer. But he also famously recognizes the possibility of doctrinal as well as aesthetic error. Upon concluding *Troilus and Criseyde*, he places his text under the correction of “moral Gower” and “philosophical Strode”: “To vouchen sauf, ther nede is, to correcte” (V. 1858). Chaucer is not specific concerning what exactly Gower or Strode would “correcte,” but such a gesture – even if part of a humility topos – signals his awareness that authors can in fact corrupt their own texts, and makes clear his investment in practices of correction.

Chaucer further shows that he understands the rigor correction involves, that it requires thorough and routine re-examination. As mentioned, Chaucer’s Parson puts his words “ay under correccioun.” And just as he expects that his words will forever require correction, the Parson also places himself under correction: “I wol stonde to correccioun”

(60). By making himself personally accountable, the Parson not only also emphasizes the meaning of correction as setting right (e.g. by punishment) or admonishing, but also brings together the ideas of linguistic, textual, and human correction. The correction suggested in *Adam Sciveyn* also conveys the analogy between textual and human error. Regardless if the name “Adam” also refers to a definite scribe, Chaucer could not have chosen a more appropriate name in a lyric about the spread of textual error than a name that alludes to an original man who has spread moral error.¹⁵⁵ In this case, Chaucer ties the moral dilemma of original sin directly to the infectious spread of textual error. In both of these examples, he touches on the moral and textual traditions of correction, and thus provides an initial sense of how a poet may employ these traditions in fiction. But as we shall see, Chaucer applies these traditions and analogy of correction beyond content to the very structure of his art.

But curiously, it is the *Tale of Melibee*'s complexity, and even its perceived failure, that enacts, rather than subverts, Chaucer's literary experiment. Indeed, it provides one of his clearest statements of this experiment. The *Melibee*'s perplexing literary structure demonstrates on a smaller scale the broader moral exercise found in the surrounding *Tales*, an exercise that follows Chaucer's own tendency to approach moral judgments while consistently leaving room to re-examine and re-assess. So while he may acknowledge that final answers are elusive, his style imitates and prescribes a continuous process of moral and creative emendation. However, such emendation does not indicate resolution. Conveying the journey toward these goals, for either moral or creative ends, means conveying a journey that is both circular and discontinuous.

Melibeus's tortuous moral journey, a journey containing starts, stops, turns, deviations, and re-beginnings reflects Chaucer's idea of correction. The *Melibee* presents a social, deliberative method that makes the narrative mostly discontinuous. It is only near the end that the central character finds a suitable means for amending his troubles. And as some have argued, the *Melibee* is far from a perfect tale. Patterson asserts that the *Melibee* continually advises, but ultimately forecloses, the sort of meditation that allegedly brings the narrative's conclusion.¹⁵⁶ Nevertheless, it is through these narrative and textual imperfections that Chaucer suggests the *Tales*' narrative form. Chaucer does not foreclose creative or moral meditation; rather, he provides multiple occasions for the recursive practice of correction. The *Melibee*'s narrative – like the rigorous training of the grammar student, like the tireless work of scribal correctors, like a monk's continual attempts at self-reform – outlines paths of correction while perpetually creating new material for emendation.

Therefore, while Chaucer's *Tales* may preclude a final moral message, he does not foreclose the type of moral work initiated by medieval traditions of correction. In a sense, Chaucer's texts, specifically their narrative and formal patterns, reenact a need to begin again, to be re-taught or re-corrected. Indeed, the *Melibee*'s protagonist's inability to get matters right reflects what Patterson recognizes as the planned incomplete and

¹⁵⁵ Carolyn Dinshaw suggests at length the association between Adam Sciveyn and the “first Adam,” while also referencing R.E. Kaske's association between Chaucer's Adam and “Adam primus,” in *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*, 3-7; see Linne Mooney's article “Chaucer's Scribe” for the connection between *Adam Sciveyn* and the medieval scribe Adam Pinkhurst. *Speculum* 81.1 (Jan. 2006): 97-138.

¹⁵⁶ Lee Patterson, “‘What Man Artow?': Authorial Self-Definition in the *Tale of Sir Thopas* and the *Tale of Melibee*,” 117-76.

circular trajectory of Chaucer's writing.¹⁵⁷ However, it is also this quality that reflects the anxieties attendant upon *emendatio*: the inability to get matters *right*, that complete or final correction is unattainable – an essential quality to Chaucer's creative work.

The Tale of Melibee: A Brief Outline

Although long, the *Melibee*'s narrative is simply retold. Melibeus, a “yong man,” both a father and husband, leaves his home defenseless and engages in “pleye.”¹⁵⁸ In the meantime, three of his enemies break in and beat his wife and daughter, Sophie, leaving her “for deed” (VII. 972). Melibeus returns to learn what has happened, and the remaining narrative pertains to how he should respond: should he take vengeance, or is there an alternative course of action? To help decide this dilemma, Melibeus's wife Prudence assumes the prominent role of advisor. While many from the surrounding community gather to counsel Melibeus, Prudence acts as a judge and counterpoint to the various advice he receives. And of the primary options that emerge, “vengeance” and “werre” or the possibility for “pees,” Prudence tirelessly guides Melibeus towards the latter, eventually leading him to an act of forgiveness.

Such guidance is certainly pertinent to the tale's theme of “grace and mercy” (VII. 1880). Near the tale's conclusion, Prudence further augments this theme, drawing on a biblical precedent:

And ye knowen wel that oon of the gretteste and moost sovereyn thyng that is in this world is unytee and pees. And therefore seyde oure Lord Jhesu Crist to his apostles in this wise: “Wel happy and blessed been they that loven and purchacen pees, for they been called children of God.” (VII.1678-80)

This declaration seems straightforward enough: unity and peace are the most supreme things of this world – indeed, according to Prudence, those who love that “moost sovereyn thyng” are called “children of God.” It is difficult to deny the meaning of such a direct statement. Yet the *Melibee* itself does not efficiently convey the ideas of “unytee and pees.” Melibeus himself begins as one who “in herte he baar a crueel ire, redy to doon vengeance upon his foes” (VII.1009), and it takes Prudence many tries before she is able to convince him to set aside “vengeance” in favor of “unytee and pees.” In fact, Melibeus must be taught, re-taught, and corrected numerous times before he performs a final act of “grace and mercy.” And as we shall see, along with his tortuous moral journey, the tale presents that journey with tortuous prose. Many of its passages follow the scheme of the passage just quoted: maxims followed by references to authorities. Thus, while the *Melibee* names “unytee and pees” as a primary theme and doctrine, the tale delivers this doctrine in a way most readers have found tedious. The *Melibee*'s style

¹⁵⁷ For Patterson, there is a certain circular quality to Chaucer's works, a formal pattern of new beginnings, or un-endings. For instance, *Sir Thopas* is incomplete by design, and many of Chaucer's other works are purposely “incomplete.” In turn, Patterson views the incomplete shape of Chaucer's writing as a “circumambulatory immobility”: “Both *Troilus and Criseyde* and *The Knight's Tale* enact circular patterns of action, and the thwarted first fragment of *The Canterbury Tales* as a whole is then reenacted in the next four tales, those of the Man of Law, The Wife of Bath, the Friar, and the Summoner. Chaucer is a habitual broacher of grand schemes. . . which are then immediately subject to self-reflective amendment and revision. Circling back and rebeginning is virtually Chaucer's modus operandi.” Ibid., 126-27.

¹⁵⁸ Although Chaucer never specifies what this “pleye” involves, he further reveals that Melibeus journeys out for “disport” (i.e. amusement, pleasure) (VII. 967, 968).

therefore presents a problem: is Chaucer complicating the tale's moral, or is he in some way furthering it, enriching its meaning through a seemingly dull style? I hope to show that he does both.

Through its repetitious maxims the *Melibee* exemplifies the genre of wisdom literature, an occasion for the recitation of proverbs. Chaucer's text is likely a translation from a French version of the *Liber consolationis et consilii* by Albertano of Brescia, where many of the collected sayings stem from the Stoic tradition, with excerpts from Seneca and Cicero. It follows a tradition of pedagogical texts, *miroirs de prince* and proverbial works, such as Cato's *Distichs*, which formed part of the grammar-school curriculum, where students practiced reading, writing, and elementary grammar through proverbial sayings.¹⁵⁹ As pointed out in chapter one, these primer texts also taught moral doctrine. Chaucer's sources juxtapose these proverbs from the Stoic tradition with quotations from St. Paul and others from the Christian canon. Pagan and Christian doctrine thus intertwine in the course of the *Melibee*, demonstrating what we have already learned about the grammar tradition in chapter one; that is, under the influence of figures like Justin Martyr and Augustine, medieval writers regularly adopted classical ideas and learning to promote both a new canon and moral instruction.

And following the medieval grammatical tradition, Prudence's counsel also covers much ground, touching on matters of public life and virtue, as well as literary theory. But she is able to cover so much ground because she must continually *re-counsel* Melibeus, drawing on multiple ideas and methods. On many occasions Prudence intervenes to lead him from error, as when she corrects his faulty notions of wealth: "And therefore wol I shewe yow hou ye shul have yow, and how ye shul bere yow in gaderynge of riches, and in what manere ye shul usen hem" (VII. 1575). However, these occasions are often followed by Melibeus's inability to follow or comprehend her counsel, as when she must re-explain the law of contraries: "that in maladies that oon contrarie is warissed by another contrarie" (VII. 1277), or when she must re-explain why he should not display his grief, for "it aperteneth nat to a wys man to maken swich a sorwe" (VII. 981), or when she must even redirect him to follow her counsel: "sire, if ye wol triste to my conseil, I shal restoore yow youre doghter hool and sound. And eek I wol do to yow so muche that ye shul have honour in this cause" (VII. 1110-11). Of course, this narrative aspect, the need for consistent repetition, makes the *Melibee* (as Patterson suggests) a school-ready text, one that introduces and re-introduces instruction to a novice student. While redirecting Melibeus, Prudence uses many examples and models to make herself clear. Yet, Melibeus often does not comprehend or apply Prudence's advice, suggesting that he is either especially slow witted or propelled by error. But Chaucer is not merely exaggerating the ignorance of a character; rather, he uses Melibeus's repeated errors as both a conceptual and structural method – and to a surprising effect. In the case of *Melibee*, the protagonist's characteristic errors create the tale's own structural and stylistic character: its tedium, its exhaustive repetition of sententious moralizing, its fault or *vitium*.

However, Chaucer is able to stress both his artistic and moral aims because he is more concerned with method than with moralizing. Instead of merely referring to scribal practices, he uses them to create his literary structure. For example, in the *Tales*' frame

¹⁵⁹ Patterson, "'What Man Artow?': Authorial Self-Definition in the *Tale of Sir Thopas* and the *Tale of Melibee*," 139, 148.

narrative, he adopts methods of *compilatio*, assuming the persona of a compiler who humbly denies ownership for the words presented, while his *auctores* are not venerable figures of the past, but common pilgrims.¹⁶⁰ This aspect alone turns traditional references to *auctores* on its head, but these pilgrims are also imaginary characters in a poetic narrative; instead of *auctores* of an intellectual or theological field, Chaucer proposes to recite faithfully the words of fictions. As he petitions in the General Prologue:

But first I pray yow, of youre curteisye,
That ye n'arete it nat my vileynye,
Thogh that I pleyedly speke in this mateere,
To telle yow hir wordes and hir cheere,
Ne thogh I speke hir wordes properly.
For this ye knowen also wel as I:
Whoso shal telle a tale after a man,
He moot reherce as ny as evere he kan...
Or ellis he moot telle his tale untrewe,
Or feyne thing, or fynde wordes newe. (I. 725-32, 735-36)

Chaucer again famously disavows ownership of his words in the *Miller's Prologue*:

I moot reherce
Hir tales alle, be they better or worse,
Or ells falsen som of my mateere. (I. 3173-75)

In each instance he denies the role of *auctor*, asserting instead the narrator's act of "rehercing." The narrator then does not compose but compiles the pilgrims' stories – "hir wordes and hir cheere" – in a mock medieval miscellany. Rather than "feyne" material or "fynde wordes newe," he claims to bring together words shared to while away the time, the *obiter dicta* of pilgrimage. By employing *compilatio* as creative technique, Chaucer dissolves the boundaries perceived between creative work and the work of textual practices. The scribal techniques thus help to explain his poetic choices.

In fact, Chaucer regularly draws on aspects of scribal techniques and language study (literary, grammatical, and rhetorical theory) as devices in his literary structure and narrative. For example, Chaucer employs rhetoric (the higher learning of grammatical study) "for articulating a theory of form."¹⁶¹ According to Rita Copeland, Prudence's advice to Melibeus is "deeply rooted in rhetorical thought" in regards to her timing and ability to judge the "conditions of the moment": "This is the principle of *kairos*, adjusting speech – argument, diction, arrangement, voice, verbal ornament, level of style – to the immediate circumstance at hand, judging the emotional condition of the audience, as well as any other factors."¹⁶² From Copeland's analysis, the techniques behind the *Melibee's* literary form have a firm relationship to a rhetorical training preceded by grammatical study. Thus, rather than an isolated instance, such uses of *compilatio* and *auctores* are just a sample of Chaucer's literary habits.

¹⁶⁰ Chaucer specifically refers to himself as a lewd compiler in his *Treatise on the Astrolabe*. A.J. Minnis points out that Chaucer's pilgrims assume the role of *auctores* for his *Tales*. *Medieval Theory of Authorship: Scholastic Literary Attitudes in the Later Middle Ages* (London: Scolar Press, 1984), 202.

¹⁶¹ Rita Copeland, "Chaucer and Rhetoric," in *The Yale Companion to Chaucer*, ed. Seth Lerer (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006), 137.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 136, 137.

Chaucer's acquaintance with medieval grammatical and textual practices is beyond question; that he includes such practices in the details of his work is supported by recent scholarship. Likewise, his interest in pondering doctrinal issues is well-attested by his translation of the *Consolation of Philosophy*, his inclusion of Boethian themes (such as free will) in *Troilus and Criseyde*, and his composition of the *Parson's Tale*. And the fact that theologians borrowed heavily from classical and medieval grammatical theory was not lost on Chaucer. What remains is whether he specifically uses such textual practices, as discussed in chapter one, not only to create the aesthetic details, but also the moral details of his work, instituting both an artistic and a moral practice within the structure and content of the *Tales*.

Sir Thopas and the Melibee's "Pleye"

Although the *Melibee* incorporates the medieval grammatical tradition, adopting classical ideas and learning, Chaucer's introduction to the tale seems to undermine that tradition. He introduces the *Melibee* by interrupting the prior tale of *Sir Thopas*: the Host cuts off the narrator on account of his "verray lewednesse" and "drasty speche" (VII.921, 923). Seemingly the narrator responds to the charge of "lewednesse" – the uncouth and unlearned quality of *Thopas* – with the exhaustively learned treatise of the *Melibee*. However, the interruption sets up the questionable quality of the *Melibee's* prose: a tale that follows a rhyme "nat worth a toord" (VII. 930), and is told in a way that, for the vast majority of Chaucer's readers, does not accomplish this task without again falling into "drasty speche." And while the Host ends up praising the tale, it is not for its form or *sentence*, but as a tale his wife should hear: "I hadde levere than a barel ale / That Goodelief, my wyf, hadde herd this tale!" (VII. 1893-4). It is doubtful, therefore, that the Host has learned anything substantial from the tale, as it stands for him more as a model for female patience than a learned treatise, which could make us wonder if the narrator has done anything more than "despendest time" (VII. 931). Of course, the *Melibee's* dry style and the fictional misunderstanding of its meaning are not accidental; Chaucer creates them. But more importantly, we shall find that these qualities actually support his moral and artistic agendas.

Thopas provides a counterpoint that helps us understand what Chaucer intends to accomplish with the *Melibee*. Following the *Prioress's Tale*, the Host asks the narrator for "a tale of myrthe" (VII. 706), and he responds with "a rym [he] lerned longe agoon" (VII. 709), its first stanza introducing *Thopas* as a tale "Of myrthe and of solas" (VII. 714). Meant to amuse and entertain, the tale's light subject matter is readily apparent. The Host later characterizes *Sir Thopas* as "rym dogerel" (VII. 925), likely referring to its ballad form of short stanzas and tail-rhyme:

Sire Thopas wax a doughty swayn;
Whit was his face as payndemayn,
His lippes rede as rose;
His rode is lyk scarlet in grayn,
And I yow telle in good certayn
He hadde a semly nose. (VII. 724-29)

This tail-rhyme stanza conveys descriptions both cartoonish and empty of *sentence*; indeed, both the protagonist, who is called a "Child" (VII. 811), and the verse appear fit

for a nursery.¹⁶³ Playing on popular romance, *Thopas* begins a tale about a young knight who “priketh thurgh a fair forest” (VII. 754) and dreams of an “elf-queene” (VII. 795), with whom he falls in love, and whom he must defend from the giant “sire Olifaunt” (VII. 808). The joke of this tale is already apparent as our child knight intends to arm himself with a “launcegay” (VII. 821) to do battle with a Sir Elephant. The rest of the tale scarcely moves past this joke, as its remaining verses focus on whimsical descriptions that might be found in “romances that been roiales” (VII. 848), such as Thopas’s mead “in a mazelyn, / And roial spicerye / Of gyngbreed that was ful fyn” (VII. 852-54); there are even allusions to the popular romances that *Thopas* parodies: “Of Horn child and of Ypotys, / Of Beves and sir Gy” (VII. 898-99).

The *Melibee*, however, defines itself against *Thopas* in both style and substance. If *Thopas* is concerned solely with “mirthe and solas” to the level of parody, the *Melibee* is concerned with *sentence*. While *Thopas* extends its rhyming in whimsical detail, the *Melibee* multiplies its aphorisms in such a repetitive manner that the repetition suggests an inefficient pedagogy, and while the substance of *Thopas*’s verses are playful to the extent of being substance-less, the *Melibee*’s sentences contain didactic information packed into most of the lines until they present thorough, repetitious chains of expository prose. In fact, Prudence often enumerates her aphoristic counsel, as when she explains why we must be without ire whenever we deliberate:

The firste is this: he that hath greet ire and wratthe in hymself, he weneth alwey that he may do thyng that he may nat do. And secoundely, he that is irous and wrooth, he ne may nat wel deme; and he that may nat wel deme, may nat wel conseille. The thridde is this, that he that is irous and wrooth, as seith Senec, ne may nat speke but blameful thynges, and with his viciouse wordes he stireth oother folk to angre and to ire. (VII.1124-28)

Such spare and unadorned enumerations fill the pages of *Melibee*. Rather than illustrations or parables, fictional or historical accounts, Prudence tends to multiply lists of proverbs in direct, subject-verb-object statements. Rather than creating poetry, or any apparent verbal artistry, she relays information. However, these non-literary qualities of the *Melibee* will demonstrate how *emendatio* structures the tale’s narrative form, and how the tale’s inefficient and repetitive nature actually contributes to its artistic and moral enterprise.

After the Host condemns his “drasty speche,” the narrator proposes to tell a “moral tale vertuou” (VII.940), and after excusing himself that he will “telle somewhat moore / Of proverbes than ye han herd bifoore” (VII.955, 56), he begins the *Melibee*. Yet curiously, while it is a tale of *sentence*, the *Melibee*’s narrative begins in play: “Upon a day bifel that he [Melibeus] for his desport is went into the feeldes him to pleye” (VII.968). The narrator never defines what this “pleye” entails, yet this word has many associations, including game, jest, dramatic performance, and sexual intercourse.¹⁶⁴ Indeed this brief list of possibilities includes what many pious clerks might consider as topics that “sownen into synne.” At the very least we can surmise that Melibeus engages in amusement or “disport” – something he shares with the fictional premise of the *Tales*,

¹⁶³ Patterson notes the child-like qualities of Sir Thopas and the resemblance of the tale to children’s literature. “‘What Man Artow?’: Authorial Self-Definition in the *Tale of Sir Thopas* and the *Tale of Melibee*,” 132-33.

¹⁶⁴ These definitions were taken from the *Riverside* glossary.

and that Chaucer later professes to retract. And the narrative's condemnation of this "pleye" also seems to be clear: it is while Melibeus engages in "pleye" that his enemies break into "his hous" (VII.969), beat his wife, and leave his daughter for dead. The names of Melibeus's wife (Prudence) and daughter (Sophie) establish a seemingly straightforward allegorical reading: Melibeus's "disport" has injured his prudence and wisdom. However, this exegetical reading will indicate its own insufficiency. While initiating an allegorical reading, Chaucer's *Melibee* suggests the need for further interpretive methodologies throughout the tale.

Prudence provides this allegorical reading by explaining that Melibeus's "hous" represents his body through which humankind's enemies (vices) have entered, harming his *sapience* (Sophie):

for certes, the three enemys of mankynde – that is to seyn, the flessh, the feend, and the world – thou hast suffred hem entre in to thyn herte wilfully by the wyndowes of thy body, and hast nat defended thyself suffisantly agayns hire assautes and hire temptaciouns, so that they han wounded thy soule in fyve places; this is to seyn, the deedly synnes that been entred into thyn herte by thy fyve wittes. (VII. 1421-24)

These "fyve wittes," of course, refer to his five senses, which Melibeus compromised during his "disport." As a result, "synnes" enter his heart. Allegorically, then, Melibeus's own *sapience* has been wounded, he has further erred through a sin as yet unnamed, and he must now rely on Prudence to direct his way. This allegory of the body as a house of the soul appears widely in the Middle Ages: in St. Bonaventure's work, *Ancrene Wisse*, and *Piers Plowman*, to name a few. *Sawles Warde*, for example, represents the body as the soul's house with its senses serving as windows: "Þis hus þe ure Lauerd speked of is seolf þe mon; inwid þe monnes wit i þe hus is þe huse-lauerd."¹⁶⁵ The fourteenth-century mystic Walter Hilton describes sin entering humankind through unguarded bodily senses, such as sight.¹⁶⁶ Thus, if a physical sense remains unguarded by will, reason, or reliance on God, sin enters the body as through an open door. Melibeus's own sin is never identified, but we do have Prudence's explanation for why his enemies were allowed to enter his "hous": "And peraventure Crist hath thee in despit, and hath turned away fro thee his face and his eeris of misericorde, and also he hath suffred that thou hast been punysshed in the manere that thow hast ytrespassed" (VII. 1418-19). Being "punysshed in the manere" that he has trespassed includes allowing his *sapience* (Sophie), which he has not used, to be beaten. But what seems to be important is not his particular sin, but that he has "ytrespassed" *because* his senses were unguarded. Alone, this allegorical interpretation is reductive, but this interpretation is also unavoidable for the very reason that Prudence presents it. However, this allegory does not suffice to guide him. Melibeus cannot understand why he continues to err or even the best way of correcting his errors. Therefore, this allegorical reading, reductive in itself,

¹⁶⁵ "Sawles Warde" in *Early Middle English Verse and Prose*, ed. J.A.W. Bennett and G.V. Smithers 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968; rpt. 1991), lines 8-10.

¹⁶⁶ Hilton, for example, wrote the following: "Lifte up this lanterne and see in this ymage fyve wyndowis bi the whiche synne cometh into thi soule... These wyndowes are oure fyve wittes, bi the whiche oure soule gooth out from himsilf and sicheth his delite and his feedyng in ertheli thynges, agens his owen kynde: as bi the sight, for to se corious and faire thynges; bi the eere, for to heere wondres and newe tydynges; and so of the othere wittis"; *The Scale of Perfection* ed. Thomas H. Bestul (Kalamazoo, MI: Western Michigan University, 2000), 120.

underpins the need for further methodologies to help guide and correct him, demonstrating that no one approach can entirely correct Melibeus, nor for that matter provide a complete moral account of the tale – as we shall see, only repeated failure and correction can.

Prudence's Counsel: A Marriage of Literary Criticism and Technique

From the tale's beginning Prudence assumes a central role, both comforting and directing Melibeus, and the first place she turns to provide this guidance is literature: "This noble wyf Prudence remembred hire upon the sentence of Ovide, in his book that cleped is the Remedie of Love" (VII.976). Literary authorities play a significant role in the *Melibee*; indeed, authoritative texts fill the very content of her thought, as she quotes figures and works such as Seneca, Cicero, Ysopus (*Aesop's Fables*), Cassiodorus, Cato, and Petrus Alphonsus. They constitute a guiding force through Prudence, a primary means for correcting Melibeus. And she not only relies on classical texts but also on the scripture. Counseling Melibeus to temper his weeping, she cites Paul's epistle to the Romans: "Man shal rejoyse with hem that maken joye and wepen with swich folk as wepen" (VII.989). Following traditions of medieval pedagogy and textual practice, Prudence combines the teachings of both classical and Christian canons, taking examples and sayings from the Gospels, Solomon, David, and Paul. However, she not only interweaves their *sentence*, but also their literary and critical techniques, illustrating the way Chaucer brings together literary, textual, and moral practices throughout his work.

The most salient example of a critical technique in the *Melibee* is the Aristotelian prologue (*causa scribentis*), which explicates a text's conceptual and material "causes" – its origin, purpose, style, and structure. To help Melibeus understand and examine the wrongs he has suffered, Prudence introduces what "Tullius [Marcus Tullius Cicero] clepeth 'causes'" (VII.1393), saying:

[T]hou shalt understonde that the wrong that thou hast receyved hath certeine causes, whiche that clerkes clepen *Oriens* and *Efficiens*, and *Causa longinqua* and *Causa propinqua*; this is to seyn, the fer cause and the ny cause. (VII.1394-95)

These "causes" originate with Aristotle's *Metaphysics* and *Physics*, where they provide a means for examining all phenomena, not only texts.¹⁶⁷ Chaucer appropriates the notion of "causes" and, following the model of 13th-century scholars and theologians, redirects its application from physical experience to textual study. The names for Aristotle's causes – *causa efficiens*, *causa materialis*, *causa formalis*, *causa finalis* – are their Middle English equivalents in the *Melibee* (cause material, cause formal, and cause final), and they are used in much the same way. Since these "causes" are found neither in Chaucer's French source, nor in the Latin original (with the exception of *efficiens*), it is

¹⁶⁷ Minnis helps to characterize this aspect of the prologue through commentary by Thomas Aquinas, who applies the four causes to a statue: "the formal cause of a statue is its shape, i.e. the proportions and disposition of the constituent part, while its material cause is the bronze from which it is made. The efficient cause is the artificer or craftsman who made the statue, while the final cause is his reason for making it." (Taken from *The Commentary on Aristotle's Physics* by Thomas Aquinas, trans. R.J. Blackwell. R.J. Spath and W.E. Thirlkel [London, 1963], p. 87.) Here, the causes are applied to a statue, but when applied to a text, the causes provided a thorough examination, from the author to his materials and intention.

likely that their use in the *Melibee* originates with Chaucer.¹⁶⁸ He therefore employs the Aristotelian prologue to explicate a fictional narrative, demonstrating the application of textual practice to lived experience. But this application not only broaches the distinction between living and reading, it also suggests how such analytical tools, like the Aristotelian prologue, influence the narrative's form. Applying the Aristotelian prologue to a fictional narrative shapes its trajectory; as Prudence elucidates the "causes," she defines prior, and plans for future, narrative action.

Beyond dissolving the boundary between living and reading, as well as shaping the narrative form, the Aristotelian prologue suggests moral practice. Thirteenth-century scholars adopted the Aristotelian prologue to analyze the author, his materials, and his purpose in writing. But while the prologue allowed them to examine such things as the authority of an author (*causa efficiens*), or what sources, works, or words, he based his text (*causa materialis*), or the design he gave his materials, style, and arrangement of a work (*causa formalis*), these scholars also moralized the prologue.¹⁶⁹ For example, the *causa finalis* is an author's intention or end purpose, and medieval scholars often used the *causa finalis* as a means to discuss an author's moral intention, even his ability to provide a means for salvation.¹⁷⁰

Medieval theologians further used the Aristotelian prologue to analyze scripture and to produce moral explications of literary texts; the prologue thereby became so central to textual analysis that it was employed "long into the Renaissance."¹⁷¹ But Chaucer's elaboration of the Aristotelian prologue through Prudence is not restricted to textual analysis; instead, he reveals its practical, real-world, application:

The fer cause is almyghty God, that is cause of alle thynges. The neer cause is thy thre enemys. The cause accidental was hate. The cause material been the fyve woundes of thy doghter. The cause formal is the manere of hir werkynge that broghten laddres and cloumben in at thy wyndowes. The cause final was for to sle thy doghter. (VII.1396-1401)

One cannot help noticing the moral quality of Prudence's analysis: she uses the Aristotelian prologue to examine the social and ethical issues in the attack on herself and Sophie – the "hate" of "enemys." And Chaucer applies the prologue not only to moral issues, but also to concrete actions, the "manere hir werkynge," the mundane act of bringing "laddres" to climb in at "wyndowes." By making the prologue relevant to concrete action, he suggests the application of medieval textual practices to moral issues outside fictional narrative, to physical, everyday experience. This creative use of the Aristotelian prologue goes beyond blurring boundaries between criticism and literary device; it reveals how tools like the Aristotelian prologue function not only as self-referential modes of criticism, but also as portable tools of social and moral practice.

¹⁶⁸ Notes to the *Riverside Chaucer* point out this fact. Jill Mann also notes this point in her edition of the *Canterbury Tales*. Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, ed. Jill Mann (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 1009.

¹⁶⁹ According to Martin Irvine, "Aristotelian theory on poetry became the standard equipment of the grammatical tradition, providing the discursive foundations for treatments of literary genres"; *The Making of Textual Culture*, 33.

¹⁷⁰ "In the context of commentary on secular *auctores*, this meant the philosophical import or moral significance of a given work; in the context of Scriptural exegesis, it means the efficacy of a work in leading the reader to salvation"; Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship*, 29.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 29.

Chaucer demonstrates that he understood analogies that related literary, critical methodologies to human, moral concerns, as he creates those analogies himself.

Chaucer's techniques, however, are not limited to the Aristotelian prologue; he employs other features of textual study both as literary devices for facilitating narrative action and as methods for examining human action. For example, Prudence uses the etymological study of names to analyze Melibeus's troubles: "Thy name is Melibee; this is to seyn, 'a man that drynketh hony.' Thou hast ydronke so muchel hony of sweete temporeel richesses, and delices and honours of this world that thou art dronken and hast forgotten Jhesu Crist thy creatour" (VII.1410-12). This technique was the tool of literary criticism, not a literary device. But instead of a textual commentary, in or outside the margins of the text, Melibeus's name suggests his error *inside* the tale: he has drunk too much of "temporeel richesses," perhaps indicating what Melibeus's "pleye" at the opening of the tale involved. The commentary thus becomes part of, and develops, the fictional narrative, while Prudence demonstrates how another critical technique might apply to human experience. Just as Chaucer employed the Aristotelian prologue (*causa scribentis*), etymological analysis becomes a narrative technique.

Each of these critical techniques provides Prudence with tools to counsel and correct Melibeus. But as Chaucer deploys these techniques, they guide not only Melibeus and the narrative but also Chaucer's artistic and moral purpose. Tools like the Aristotelian prologue and etymological study function not only as self-referential modes of literary criticism, but also as portable tools of moral and social theory that have relevance in and outside the text. Indeed, one of his key preoccupations in the *Melibee* is to show, repeatedly, how literary criticism and practice may apply to the world outside the book. And while this use of literary theory may not be unique to Chaucer, it provides us a means for understanding how he imagines these critical tools working, as well as a precedent for recognizing that such uses of literary theory are not isolated or random occurrences in his work. Rather, he creates an expectation for their further inclusion in the narrative.

Emendatio and the *Melibee's* Style of Fault

The *Melibee's* narrative, characterized by repeated cycles in which Melibeus errs and is corrected by Prudence, evokes a key technique of medieval practical criticism: *emendatio*. Indeed, given the critical commonplace that Chaucer is most creative when he alters and revises conventional formulas and genres, it is clear that *emendatio* might offer many opportunities for invention: the need to begin again, to go back and correct enables him to produce creative turns in the narrative trajectory, sometimes allowing for unexpected or even comic twists. In other words, a literary style and structure resembling aspects of *emendatio*, a style that takes into account the need to re-visit or re-describe narrative moments, can allow for an inventiveness that may otherwise be lacking from a static, formulaic structure (as with estates satire), or even a logical and linear plan.

However, the *Melibee's* use of *emendatio* – in its moments of correction – does not produce creative turns or literary invention. Rather, in its moments of correction, the *Melibee* recapitulates; instead of turning to a new style, or narrative voice, the *Melibee* multiplies its aphorisms; instead of progressing through creative turns in the narrative, the characters often find themselves back where they started; and instead of interruptions that

allow Chaucer to depart from a largely tedious and didactic narrative, the corrections only reiterate the tale's strict schematization of information, further enabling Prudence to enumerate categories of knowledge. Rather than departure from the norm, the *Melibee's* moments of *emendatio* are unmistakably redundant.

This redundancy emphasizes how the *Melibee* is not conducive to literary enjoyment; a well-known aspect of its style is how its narrative houses a collection of aphorisms, resembling such biblical texts as Proverbs or The Wisdom of Solomon. In these texts, we encounter successive declarative statements that resemble each other in form and diction. However, the repetition in these biblical books allow for the parallelism, contrast, and development of the sayings that creates a particular literary style and music, an economy and delivery of expression readily seen as artful.¹⁷² Thus, the sense of mere repetition is not as strong as in the *Melibee*, since the *Melibee's* repetitions of aphorisms are merely juxtaposed. And instead of detracting from its sequence of proverbs, the *Melibee's* narrative corrections only multiply the tale's proverbial strands, as with Prudence's repeated call for patience:

Also the grete pacience which the seintes that been in Paradys han had in tribulaciouns that they han ysuffred, withouten hir desert or gilt, oghte muchel stiren yow to pacience. Forthermoore ye sholde enforce yow to have pacience, considerynge that the tribulaciouns of the world but litelwhile endure and soone passed been and goon...Also troweth and bileveth stedefastly that he nys nat wel ynorissed, ne wel ytaught, that kan nat have pacience or wol nat receyve pacience. For Salomon seith that "the doctrine and the wit of a man is knowen by pacience." (VII. 1504-7, 1510-11)

Prudence multiplies aphorisms until she creates drawn out, sententious monologues that even tend to suppress the tale's movement to the next topic and series of proverbs. Indeed, this repetition of *sentence* stagnates any progression of the narrative, but it is precisely because the *Melibee* engages the expectations of narrative that the proverbs seem to retard any narrative momentum in a way they do not in the biblical books. And just as Prudence multiplies aphorisms, she also pauses to provide definitions for many of the terms she employs: "Lat us now examyne the thridde point, that Tullius clepeth 'consequent.' Thou shalt understonde that the vengeance that thou purposest for to take is the consequent" (VII. 1387-88). These definitions, of course, echo Prudence's dry exposition of the tale's proverbs, and as they are also multiplied by her corrections of Melibeus in the narrative, the definitions further give the sense of suppressing the narrative momentum.

The *Melibee's* repeated textual references, its expositions and paraphrases of quotations, used to instruct and correct, also stymie the narrative. Before the storytelling can move forward, we are often directed to yet another authority:

Wherfore Tullius seith, "Amonges alle the pestilences that been in freendshipe the gretteste is flaterie"...Salomon seith that "the wordes of a flaterere is a snare to

¹⁷² The following is a sample of a repetition of aphorisms found in Proverbs: "The blessing of the Lord is upon the head of the just: but iniquity covereth the mouth of the wicked. The memory of the just is with praises: and the name of the wicked shall rot. The wise of heart receiveth precepts: a fool is beaten with lips. He that walketh sincerely, walketh confidently: but he that perverteth his ways, shall be manifest. He that winketh with the eye shall cause sorrow: and the foolish in lips shall be beaten." (*Douay-Rheims* Prov. 6-10.)

cacche with innocentz”...And therefore seith Tullius, “Enclyne nat thyne eres to flatereres, ne taak no conseil of the wordes of flaterye.” And Caton seith, ‘Avyue thee wel, and eschue the wordes of swetnesse and of plesaunce.” (VII. 1176-81) These persistent textual references elicit further explanatory exposition, which Prudence’s corrections only multiply. Apart from the violence at the beginning, narrated after the fact, and the gathering of the surrounding community, the tale’s action consists of a concentrated discourse between Melibeus and Prudence. But instead of resolving itself efficiently, this discourse, through moments of correction, creates an ongoing catechism for the subjects covered. And while the assorted bits of information revealed by their discourse are from a variety of sources, this variety does not displace the rigid schematization that structures the exposition. For example, when explicating any information, Prudence lays out her explanations in controlled segments, sometimes detailing her counsel in orderly lists:

The firste is this: he that hath greet ire and wratthe in hymself, he weneth alwey that he may do thyng that he may nat do. And secoundely, he that is irous and wrooth, he ne may nat wel deme...The thridde is this, that he that is irous and wrooth, as seith Senec, ne may nat speke but blameful thynges. (VII. 1124-27)

This structure makes the narrative systematic, and entirely conventional; Prudence tends to enumerate strict aphoristic expressions, quoting from various sources. But although she uses a variety of sources and literary techniques, such as metaphors, her rigid schematization dulls their work. In fact, many of her rhetorical devices or figures of speech are overwhelmed and contained by similar schemas. The tale’s structure, Prudence’s delivery of expositions and corrections, consistently defies the literary enjoyment that the *Melibee*’s expectation of narrative and the surrounding tales seem to promise.

The *Melibee*’s style is therefore more becoming to didactic rather than to narrative discourse; Prudence repeats aphorisms and formally interprets them. Indeed, the tale’s narrative style, its continuous repetitions, re-examining of proverbs and theory, make for a markedly discursive tale. But what is most peculiar about Prudence’s style is that, while the Horatian model of composing works that teach and delight stands behind Chaucer’s own articulation of telling tales of best *sentence* and most *solaas*, she eschews the delight of *solaas*, although the Horatian model would typically be expected. The fact that she does not use ornamentation effectively to make her message easier to understand is itself striking and begs explanation. However, given Chaucer’s larger tendency to re-examine and re-assess moral judgments, we shall find that the *Melibee*’s style provides a precedent and an appropriate though complicated demonstration of his moral aims. The *Melibee* does not provide a linchpin for the *Tales*, but it does articulate – elaborately, laboriously, and explicitly – a moral and artistic purpose with which he engages throughout the *Tales*, that of addressing continued error through recursive correction.

Chaucer’s Drama of Error

Emendatio plays a central role in articulating this moral purpose, at the level of both form and content. Indeed, it is the characteristic inefficiency of *emendatio* that lends itself to the kind of moral investigation Chaucer aims to establish. The moments of reoccurring error on the part of Melibeus, the subsequent retracing of steps, and

Prudence's constant corrections not only echo the recursive practice of *emendatio*, but also practices of moral correction. As I described in chapter one, scribal correction is always already incomplete; a perfect text is unattainable. Because error endures, scribes must go back and re-correct even after a text has been emended. The *Melibee* dramatizes this process by personifying it in the figures of Melibeus and Prudence, the text and its corrector.

An example of this dramatization occurs when Prudence first redirects Melibeus after he accepts bad advice. She begins her counsel by combining sayings from the classical and Christian canons (proverbs from "Senec" and "Salomon"), but she soon moves to a critique of Melibeus. After reviewing the counsel he receives, she re-examines him and enumerates a host of errors he has committed, and will continue to commit:

First and forward, ye han erred in th'assemblynge of youre conseilours... And eek also ye have erred, for ye han broght with yow to youre conseil ire, coveitise, and hastifnesse... Ye han erred also, for ye han shewed to youre conseilours youre talent and youre affeccoun to make werre anon and for to do vengeance... Ye han erred also, for ye ne han nat examyned youre conseil in the forseide manere, ne in due manere, as the caas requireth. (VII.1241, 46, 49, 54)

While recounting the wrongs of Melibeus's counselors, and his own shortcomings in heeding them, Prudence repeats the phrase "ye han erred" multiple times. In fact, several more instances occur along with those quoted above. And when she concludes, Melibeus simply concedes "that I have erred" (VII.1261), and he immediately determines to alter his course: "I am al redy to chaunge my conseilours right as thow wolt devyse" (VII.1263). But while he attempts to amend his ways, he persists in errant choices and deviates from the guidance Prudence extends. Indeed, it seems that the only consistency he can demonstrate is consistent error. Melibeus thus becomes a regular subject of criticism, embodying error.

It is this narrative focus on identifying errors, correcting them, but still finding more, that dramatizes the recursive aspect of *emendatio*. Melibeus continually retraces his steps and amends his choices, but he also consistently returns to errant choices, deviating from the counsel Prudence reveals. Only towards the end of the tale does Melibeus approach a resolution and begin to apply her counsel of forgiveness. If, as Patterson points out, the *Melibee* continually advises but forecloses the sort of meditation that allegedly brings about the tale's denouement, and if monastic *lectio* were the primary means of moral practice in the tale, Chaucer's *Melibee* would end on a note of moral inadequacy.¹⁷³ However, rather than simply precluding this meditation, by continually foreclosing meditative or moral success Chaucer demonstrates Melibeus's persistent need to begin again. Indeed, the entire narrative emphasizes its need for *emendatio*; the tale's counsel must begin again (or be corrected) in order to follow its own moral and meditative prescriptions.

The narrative structure that emerges consists of an oscillation of contraries. Before Prudence employs the Aristotelian prologue, and after Melibeus agrees to change

¹⁷³ Patterson argues that "Melibee counsels self-reflection but enacts a pedagogical program that forecloses true understanding, aspires to leisurely exploration but can never evade the pressures of a linear temporality"; "What Man Artow?": Authorial Self-Definition in the *Tale of Sir Thopas* and the *Tale of Melibee*," 160.

his counselors, she attempts to explain the law of contraries, provoking a surprisingly humorous exchange: ““And as touchynge the proposicioun which that the phisiciens encreesceden in this caas – this is to seyn, that in maladies that oon contrarie is warissshed by another contrarie – I wolde fayn knowe hou ye understonde thilke text, and what is youre sentence”” (VII. 1276-78). Here, Prudence explains how contraries (or opposites) are “warissshed” (cured, cancelled) when one meets the other; for example, love would cure hate and generosity would cancel greed. Yet, while provided a clear account, delivered in prose, Melibeus somehow misses the point. He responds to Prudence in comic fashion:

“Certes,” quod Melibeus, “I understonde it in this wise: that right as they han doon me a contrarie, [i.e. injury] right so sholde I doon hem another. For right as they han venged hem on me and doon me wrong, right so shal I venge me upon hem and doon hem wrong; and thanne have I cured oon contrarie by another” (VII. 1279-82).

Rightly, Prudence responds ““Lo, lo...how lightly is every man enclined to his owene desir and to his owene plesaunce!...For certes, wikkednesse is nat contrarie to wikkednesse, ne vengeance to vengeance, ne wrong to wrong, but they ben semblable”” (VII. 1283, 85). Either in his haste or utter single-mindedness, Melibeus misinterprets Prudence’s use of “contrarie” (opposite) to his own ends (vengeance) – turning the law of contraries into a rule of revenge or violence. And while this misinterpretation may provide the reader with brief comic relief, Prudence must now laboriously go back and correct Melibeus’s understanding, when such an action should have been unnecessary. Here, the reader could either understand Melibeus as especially slow witted or recognize that his role in the *Melibee* is meant to be, in part, one of Error – or at least one who is consistently guided by error. The work Melibeus produces (in an almost two-dimensional fashion) is to create mistakes, and in fact – as in the example above – go to great lengths to make these mistakes for Prudence, the persistent corrector, to amend.

The *Melibee*’s narrative form is created almost entirely through the constant contraries of Prudence and Melibeus – of error and emendation, of corrector and one who mishandles “thilke text.” Although one contrary is meant to “warisssh” (cure) the other, it is questionable whether error in the *Melibee* can ever be cured completely. In fact, if there is anything that the exhaustive exposition, proverbial redundancy, and interminable narrative accomplish – besides literary failure – it makes us recognize the indefatigable nature of error. And by allowing this concept to permeate both the form and narrative of the *Melibee*, Chaucer presents a narrative that is not only fatigable but also an object for correction, a work littered with literary error. Thus, as with *compilatio* and the Aristotelian prologue, he employs *emendatio* as a literary technique. Yet, it is the relationship between moral reform and *emendatio* that reveals how he suggests the interplay between textual and moral practices in the content and structure of his narrative. As I shall show in the following pages, *emendatio* initiates a moral exercise of correction that Chaucer attempts to inculcate through his literary structure.

Emendatio and the Work of Moral Reform

Chaucer does not use the Aristotelian prologue’s terminology merely to create literary criticism; instead, the prologue’s methodology provides tools both for the readers

to analyze the text and for the characters to understand their own actions (reflecting Aristotle's original application of the causes as a method for examining all phenomena). Using the prologue Prudence schematizes human action and moral questions. Chaucer thereby poses the prologue as a methodology that examines tangible events, not only a tool used with and solely for texts. He thereby blurs the distinction between where the reading ends and living begins, just as his act of authenticating his fictional pilgrims as *auctores* blurred this distinction. He does so in order to suggest that the techniques used in medieval theological and literary criticism can both authenticate and analyze lived experience. In a similar fashion, he applies textual practices to lived experience through the concept of *emendatio*, an application that has a strong precedent through classical and medieval confluences of textual and human *vitia*.

Following this comparison of textual *vitia* to the corruption of humankind and the natural world, the *Melibee* focuses on the persistent need for human correction – that no matter the corrections, straying is inevitable. Put another way, for Chaucer, an ideal path may indeed exist, but our ability as humans will always be inadequate to define perfectly or comprehensively that path, since language is fallen. While Melibeus places himself under the advice and correction of Prudence, she emphasizes how he has continually “erred.” And after pointing out these errors, Prudence finally reveals how he has committed a prior error, one that in fact created the context for his current misfortunes: Melibeus has “doon synne agayn oure Lord Crist” (VII. 1420). The resemblance between this concept and Christian doctrine is striking; the concept that one error is the catalyst for consistent future errors works as an obvious allusion to original sin and human imperfection following the expulsion from paradise. However, the doctrine of original sin also elicits medieval theories of language: that following original sin, language has deteriorated along with humankind – we are equipped with a fallen tongue.¹⁷⁴ Human language persists in error. Indeed, the way Melibeus continually slides back into error strongly resembles that persistent nature of linguistic and moral error, as well as the enduring need for correction. As Chaucer will demonstrate throughout the *Tales*, returning to, or even finding, a “correct” path is an irresolvable process. We can never rely fully on moral dicta or final answers; rather, we must always be prepared to reset that path and start anew.

Just as the Aristotelian prologue applies so directly to human “matere,” Melibeus's own re-corrections, tediously articulated and readdressed, dramatizes those practices of textual correction (i.e. Melibeus's trial-and-error, regression into sin, and the foreclosure of leisure meditation, which allegedly brought the conclusion of his journey, as well as the fact that the tale itself stands as a work in need of correction). Chaucer provides a human, moral performance to explicate those abstract issues so central to the medieval scribe and theologian. By revealing the persistent nature of error and the irresolvable work of correction, all through a fictional narrative, Chaucer is not necessarily subverting moral concerns or doctrine. However, he does promote a tireless process of moral questioning and re-examination. Rather than subverting moral concerns, he does suggest that definite answers or *moralizing* is not compliant with a fallen language, and not coincidentally it also leads to bad art. Language can only

¹⁷⁴ See John Fyler, *Language and the Declining World in Chaucer, Dante, and Jean de Meun* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

accomplish the moral exercise of continued examination, of resetting and starting anew, and it is through such exercise that the work of art and morality may come together.

It is through the *Melibee's* stylistic imperfections that Chaucer betrays the narrative and (as we shall see) literary form that emerges from a conceptual overlap of textual and moral correction. Prudence continually provides guidance, yet Melibeus proceeds to err, forcing her to expatiate further corrections. A reader familiar with the traditions of *emendatio* would no doubt perceive how this meandering narrative reveals corrections following further corrections that litter a text with stylistic error – ironically producing a text requiring emendation. But as these moral corrections produce the stylistic faults of the *Melibee*, the narrative's moral corrections begin to overlap with textual error; that is, as textual correction produces new, and respective, errors, the moral corrections in the narrative are followed by both moral *and* textual error. The traditions of correction (linguistic, textual, and moral) meet and intertwine. In the *Melibee*, returning to correct textual problems also means returning to the narrative's moral problems. Any reader seeking to emend the *Melibee's* interminable narrative would also need to analyze or pick apart the detailed proposals for moral correction. In fact, under these conditions, the correction of style allows for the constant re-examination and re-assessment of the tale's moral exploration. For Chaucer, re-evaluation is an integral part of both moral and literary practice.

Endless correction, while a discursive and daunting practice, is something the *Melibee* prepares for at its close. By the tale's conclusion, Melibeus decides to forego war, but he still plans a severe punishment for his enemies: "to desherite hem of al that evere they han, and for to putte hem in exil for evere" (VII. 1835). Here, just as she has done throughout the tale, Prudence steps in to dissuade Melibeus from a potentially harmful course of action, first calling Melibeus's intent a "cruel sentence" (VII. 1836). Again, she rises to correct him, but in this instance, she provides a template for ongoing work, not a final or self-contained moral message. Considering the moral exercise outlined by the narrative, Prudence appropriately asserts that one's name and character must be continually renewed:

And everi man oghte to doon his diligence and his bisynesse to geten hym a good name. And yet shal he nat oonly bisie hym in kepyng of his good name, but he shal also enforcen hym alwey to do somthyng by which he may *renovelle* his good name. For it is writen that "the olde good loos or good name of a man is soone goon and passed, whan it is nat newed ne *renovelled*." (VII. 1843-46)

Here, we may compare Chaucer's *Adam Scryveyn*, where he identifies scribal copies and their following corrections as "writing new" and "renewing." In this case, the *renovelle* of someone's character closely resembles the language Chaucer establishes concerning the ongoing correction of texts. Appearing near the tale's close, these words suggest that, although the tale must end, the moral exercise outlined by the tale's narrative and structure has no conclusion. In other words, one cannot read the *Melibee*, adopt a moral message, and call it quits; instead, the reader must be prepared for the constant *renewal* that the *Melibee's* elaborate structure outlines. And for Chaucer, such exercise is also the work of literary artistry, as we shall see in the following chapters.

However, the *Melibee* must also reconcile the moral exercise and doctrine it has put forward – that regression into sin is inevitable, and humankind must always be ready to renew their name and character. The question then becomes, how does one live under these stark terms? While continual self-correction is necessary, Melibeus points to one final injunction in regards to how one may cope in a world of endless regression into sin:

Wherfore I receive yow to my grace, and foryeve yow outrely alle the offenses, injuries, and wronges that ye have doon agein me and mine, to this effect and to this ende, that God of his endeless mercy wole at the time of oure dyinge foryeven us oure giltes that we han trespassed to him in this wrecched world. For doutelees, if we be sory and repentant of the sinnes and giltes whiche we han trespassed in the sighte of oure Lord God, he is so free and so merciabile that he wole foryeven us oure giltes, and bringen us to the blisse that nevere hath ende.
(VII. 1881-87)

Faced with such a moral dilemma, and surrounded by humankind that will continue to err, one must exercise patience, practice self-correction, but above all, one must be ready to forgive. Indeed, the only way we can cope with the endless need for correction – in terms of the tale's doctrine – is through the knowledge that the very opportunity for correction, and indeed final correction, depends on the endless mercy of God. This constant need for correction underscores the Christian doctrine of grace, an idea for which Chaucer develops a literary analogue in the structure of his *Tales*.

Chapter Three

Chaucer's Corrective Journey: Pilgrimage and the Straight Path

While Chaucer's knowledge of textual correction is clear from his oeuvre, his literary engagement with correction is much more subtle than either his excoriation of *Adam* or his submission of *Troilus* to Gower and Strode. Ralph Hanna asserts that "fastidious" correctness was an endeavor that Chaucer could not achieve.¹⁷⁵ And I would further say he knew he could not. Having pursued authorial correction as far as he could, Chaucer turned correction's unachievability into a creative pursuit, an intellectual and artistic exercise, a poetic design that his readers could trace. Through the *Canterbury Tales*' structure, he has his audience experience a narrative that retraces the anxieties inherent in textual correction, its persistent and recursive nature. Thus, what some critics might see as a thorn in his side, a necessary practice that also threatens to corrupt his authorial voice, he turns into a technique that proliferates literary material.

Chaucer's design for the *Tales* imitates that recursive nature; however, unlike the *Tale of Melibee*, which exemplifies the entropy and artistic failure of that design, the *Tales* as a whole reveals its success. The work's structure takes shape through series of tales connected by the frame narrative, which establish narrative trajectories that regularly stray from – but also return to – their promised directions. Chaucer however both revisits and revises those directions. His concerns therefore are not fixed; they are mutable, shifting through tales that re-explore and transform prior concerns. At the same time, he makes such revisions appear accidental, as if his structure were guided by the whims and faults of his characters. This appearance of aimlessness, or even of faulty structure, is an intentional exploration of ideas and artifice. Chaucer derives this form in part from the idea of correction exemplified in the *Melibee*, where Melibeus and Prudence dramatize its recursive process, and where faults not only occur through human error, but also remain or spread after acts of correction.¹⁷⁶ But whereas Melibeus forces Prudence to make repetition a principle of her prose, the recursive aspect of the *Tales*' structure allows the pilgrims to revise content through their own peculiar voices. Instead of a lengthy and didactic prose narrative, the *Tales*' recursive form provides for the disquiet of narrative concerns, the discarding, recovering, and re-imagining of content – the repeated occasion for literary experimentation.

This suspension and resumption of topics, debates, vocabularies, and discourses is most famously illustrated in the discussion of marriage. G.L. Kittredge identified a "Marriage group," but a "group" for him means a category rather than a narrative unit.¹⁷⁷ And instead of clearly defined categories, the *Tales*' indirect and discursive narrative trajectories create what I shall call incremental series. In Chaucer's design, an

¹⁷⁵ Ralph Hanna, *Pursuing History: Middle English Manuscripts and Their Texts* (Stanford, CA.: Stanford University Press, 1996), 175, 178.

¹⁷⁶ For a full account of this argument, see chapter two of this dissertation.

¹⁷⁷ George Lyman Kittredge argues that there are moments ("acts") in Chaucer's *Tales* "so completely wrought that we may study their dramatic structure with confidence," which includes a Marriage group: "It begins with the Wife of Bath's Prologue and ends with the Tale of the Franklin. The subject is Marriage, which is discussed from several points of view, as the most important problem in organized society." *Chaucer and His Poetry* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1915; 1970), 167, 185.

incremental series involves sequences of tales revolving around set topics pursued by the pilgrims, sequences that however devolve when a narrative interruption shifts the focus of these topics, diverting the narrative and altering the pilgrims' discourse. Certain concerns and terminologies open tales and links, but the *Tales*' narrative trajectories will change, introducing new narrative concerns and designs. These interruptions sometimes coincide with the end of fragments, but they also occur within them, through the pilgrims' own actions and dialogue. The pilgrims often appropriate prior concerns and redirect them to new and different ends, carrying on the concerns of prior storytellers while changing them.¹⁷⁸ The *Tales* thus return to prior concerns only to revise them, creating a recursive narrative that resembles the incremental repetition of the *Melibee*; however, the incremental repetition produced by Chaucer's series of tales markedly diversifies and expands that repetition, creating enjoyment rather than fatigue, novelty rather than longeur, and literary renewal rather than entropy.

Lee Patterson makes a similar observation regarding the "replays" of terms and organization, and suggests that Chaucer thereby institutes a number of "false starts"; the understanding of his moral project that I shall offer explains these "false starts" and "replays."¹⁷⁹ The recursive structure establishes that project; the phenomenon of the incremental series reveals the *Tales*' corrective form. Its narrative shifts represent alterations in the narrative discourse. These are, in a sense, corruptions, in that a meaning and purpose established by one fictional pilgrim is appropriated by another, their terms and topics changed in the act of taking them over; instead of unintentionally getting matters wrong, as with Melibeus, they often willfully get them wrong, or they interrupt, but in either case they force the narrative and storytelling in a new direction. It may then take multiple storytellers to return an original point, and when they do, that point will have been reshaped. And it is the similarity between these narrative disruptions and incremental repetition to processes of textual correction that produces the *Tales*' moral design. The analogy of textual and moral correction allows Chaucer to integrate moral exercise in a structure that also emphasizes literary creation – he not only reconciles art and morality, but also allows each to engage the work of the other, making it difficult to determine when the work of one ends and the other begins.

Moral Indeterminacy in Chaucer's Fragments

But how can we infer a complete structure from an incomplete work like the *Tales*? The fragments confuse any attempt to determine a recursive structure, seeing that they themselves disrupt the storytelling. In other words, the incomplete nature of the *Tales* might itself seem to leave indeterminate the decisions of where to place, and how to understand, the topics, terms, and tales, so how do we separate those aspects created by incompleteness from Chaucer's design?

¹⁷⁸ For a discussion of how the pilgrims' interruptions and responses to each other reflect academic debate, see Ann W. Astell, *Chaucer and the Universe of Learning* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1996).

¹⁷⁹ Lee Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 40.

The question of completion and tale order, of course, loom large in Chaucer criticism; indeed, many critical approaches to the *Tales* hinge on that very question.¹⁸⁰ Helen Cooper contends that, while tale order is provisional, Chaucer did care about an order, and worked on that order continuously, ultimately leaving the *Tales* incomplete. The fragments are thus movable, and like his editors, Chaucer experimented with the order until one began to seem right.¹⁸¹ Against grand theories of unity, the freedom left to readers to read or skip tales at will demonstrates the tales' "degree of autonomy," which defies "systematic interpretation," and performs the artistic work of the *Tales*, involving the reader in a "creative process" of discovery.¹⁸²

But just as the *Tales* produce a "creative process," they are also evasive.¹⁸³ The autonomy, "the freedom granted to individual tales, and the constant shifting of points of view," dissolves any fixed shape or interpretation.¹⁸⁴ Instead, Chaucer is more concerned with his readers' intellectual activity. What these arguments point to is the difficulty not only of establishing a substantial account of the poem, but also of establishing a definitive moral message: how can the *Tales*' incompleteness and discontinuity provide a definitive moral message when its resulting ambiguity seems to displace serious convictions? For example, because of the *Tales*' incompleteness, a critic like Charles Owen can imagine a finished journey, where "the storytelling contest supplants the pilgrimage," and where a literary focus supplants the moral.¹⁸⁵ The characters accordingly take on a life of their own, directing the pilgrimage and interactions on the road, giving the sense of a real journey:

[Chaucer's] fiction would have continued beyond the Parson's vision to the concluding supper at the Tabard, where the comedy of literary judgment and of human interaction would have reaffirmed men's freedom to choose for themselves and the inevitable meaning their choices inadvertently create.¹⁸⁶

Owen thus creates his own ending to the *Tales*, and suggests that Chaucer wrote the *Parson's Tale* and *Retractions* during an earlier "period of religious commitment."¹⁸⁷ His finished version replaces the Parson's conclusion, allowing him to shift its moral focus to the background.¹⁸⁸ Chaucer then stresses an aesthetic over a moral purpose, "game" over "earnest."

¹⁸⁰ Robert M. Jordan, *Chaucer and the Shape of Creation: The Aesthetic Possibilities of Inorganic Structure* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 117; Laura Kendrick, *Chaucerian Play: Comedy and Control in the Canterbury Tales* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 162; Robert J. Meyer-Lee, "Abandon the Fragments," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* vol. 35 (2013): 47-83.

¹⁸¹ Helen Cooper, *The Structure of The Canterbury Tales* (London: Duckworth, 1983).

¹⁸² Derek Pearsall, *The Canterbury Tales* (Boston: George Allen & Unwin, 1985), xii and xiii.

¹⁸³ Cooper, *Structure*, 71.

¹⁸⁴ Pearsall, *The Canterbury Tales*, xiv.

¹⁸⁵ Charles Owen, *Pilgrimage and Storytelling in the Canterbury Tales: The Dialectic of "Earnest" and "Game"* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1977), 8; idem, "The Alternative Reading of *The Canterbury Tales*: Chaucer's Text and the Early Manuscripts," *PMLA* 97.2 (1982): 237-250.

¹⁸⁶ Owen, *Pilgrimage and Storytelling*, 31.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹⁸⁸ For the opposition to readings that focus on the drama of the *Tales* by such critics as Kittredge and Owen, see C. D. Benson, "Their Telling Difference: Chaucer the Pilgrim and His Two Contrasting Tales," *The Chaucer Review* 18.1 (1983): 61-76. See also C. D. Benson, *Chaucer's Drama of Style: Poetic Variety and Contrast in the Canterbury Tales* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1986).

But such a procedure assumes that incompleteness can authorize us to make up stories about what Chaucer did not do, and in fact E.T. Donaldson gives strong reasons to think that Chaucer had established a definitive order, represented in the Ellesmere. Donaldson maintains that the question of a finished structure and tale order is merely editorial and should be handled accordingly. In this case, while Chaucer may not have finished the *Tales*, he conceived of a final order, which important manuscripts support.¹⁸⁹ Aside from critics' clever ideas, all we can know about the text is found in the manuscripts; anything else is conjecture.¹⁹⁰ Although the fragments that result from either incompleteness or editorial choice emphasize the *Tales*' discontinuity, both Chaucer's fiction and deliberate structure give that discontinuity meaning: the recursivity of his poetic structure finds an artistic and moral model in the analogy of correction. Chaucer's game will depend on an earnest design, while *sentence* will support *solaas*.

Narrative Discontinuity and Chaucer's Corrective Design

No matter arguments concerning the *Tales*' incompleteness, the storytelling ends neither at Canterbury nor at the Tabard; no matter what Chaucer's design for the *Tales*' final form, a final destination was not a part of it: the *Parson's Prologue* makes that as certain as a conclusion can be. He may have imagined a different order for the *Tales*, but neither an intended order nor its incompleteness determine the discontinuities Chaucer programmed into the text.¹⁹¹ Discontinuities obtain within as well as between the fragments, and notably Fragment VII presents a wandering but thorough narration through genres ranging from fabliau, mock romance, didactic treatise, *exempla*, to beast epic.¹⁹² These generic discontinuities, shifts in tone and register, arise from Chaucer's design, rather than from the experience of an unfinished work. And the criticism illustrates the sheer intellectual enjoyment of overlaying an order to make sense of these discontinuities. It is one pleasure of this text.

Here Donald Howard's distinctions between idea and structure, and between works complete and incomplete, are helpful. "We can never know the idea in its final embodiment," true.¹⁹³ But we can identify central and pervasive methods with which

¹⁸⁹ E.T. Donaldson, "The Ordering of the *Canterbury Tales*" in *Medieval Literature and Folklore Studies* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1970). Donaldson points out that most MSS support the Ellesmere arrangement, and that Ellesmere produces the fewest problems for the reader and editor. He concedes the *Tales* unfinished state, but asserts that this does not allow for various conjectures regarding its order. See also L.D. Benson, "The Ordering of the *Canterbury Tales*," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 3 (1981): 77-120.

¹⁹⁰ Donaldson, "The Ordering of the *Canterbury Tales*," 203.

¹⁹¹ For a discussion of the *Canterbury Tales*' structure and discontinuities as a symptom of Chaucer's literary habits, see Paul Strohm, "Form and Social Statement in *Confessio amantis* and the *Canterbury Tales*," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 1 (1979): 17-40; Paul Olson, *The Canterbury Tales and the Good Society* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 70-71; Michaela Paasche Grudin, "Discourse and the Problem of Closure in the *Canterbury Tales*," *PMLA* 107.5 (1992): 1157-1167; Jerome Mandel, *Geoffrey Chaucer: Building the Fragments of the Canterbury Tales* (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1992); Barry Windeatt, "Literary Structures in Chaucer," in *The Cambridge Companion to Chaucer* eds. Piero Boitani and Jill Mann 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 214-232.

¹⁹² I shall discuss this example in greater detail later in the chapter.

¹⁹³ Donald R. Howard, *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 27.

Chaucer was working, and thereby obtain a good understanding of his design. And according to it, planning typically goes awry in the *Tales*. To be sure, he lays out a final vision of humankind's celestial journey before the pilgrims reach Canterbury. However, the bulk of the work is consumed by a storytelling journey both disruptive and digressive. Although Chaucer includes an ending that points to a final destination, it only points; the *Tales* concentrate instead on the origin and straying of the storytelling contest and pilgrimage, not their completion.

And it is this straying of the pilgrims – their digressions and disruptions – that institutes the recursive design. As we shall see, shifts in the narrative discourse come about through action or dialogue in the narrative frame (e.g. the Miller's and Host's interruptions or the Canon's and Yeoman's unexpected arrival). These shifts each interrupt one narrative trajectory, only to occasion a new one, and with it new directions and perspectives. Moreover, this recursive structure explains both why critics would consider the *Tales*' structure as open to revision and why Chaucer himself could continually experiment with tale order. These narrative discontinuities help create what many critics have recognized as Chaucer's permission to the reader to begin the *Tales* anywhere, as with his famous lines introducing the *Miller's Tale*: “whoso list it nat yheere, / Turne over the leef and chese another tale” (I. 3176-7).¹⁹⁴ In a sense, these shifts reset the narrative; they create a means by which the storytelling may begin again.

The *Man of Law's Prologue*, for example, suggests how a new trajectory may claim the status of a new beginning.¹⁹⁵ Typically placed after fragment one, the *Man of Law's Prologue* presents a narrator who complains that Chaucer has already told all “thrifty” tales:

I kan right now no thrifty tale seyn
 That Chaucer, thogh he kan but lewedly
 On metres and on rymyng craftily,
 Hath seyde hem in swich Englissh as he kan
 Of olde tyme, as knoweth many a man. (II. 46-50)¹⁹⁶

This meta-narrative joke then initiates a catalogue of Chaucer's works:

In youthe he made of Ceys and Alcione,
 And sitthen hath he spoken of everichone,
 Thise noble wyves and thise loveris eke.
 Whoso that wole his large volume seke,
 Cleped the Seintes Legende of Cupid,
 Ther may he seen the large woundes wyde. (II. 57-62)

¹⁹⁴ Cooper, *The Structure of “The Canterbury Tales,”* 69. Alongside the famous example from the *Miller's Prologue*, see *Lenvoy de Chaucer a Bukton*, where Chaucer advises Bukton to read the Wife of Bath in regards to the hardships of marriage, and the reference to the “love of Palamon and Arcite” (F 420) in *The Legend of Good Women*. Each of these suggest not only that the tales were read in isolation, but also that some tales, like the *Knight's Tale* of Palamon and Arcite, had independent circulation outside the *Tales*' frame narrative.

¹⁹⁵ While the *Man of Law's Prologue* and *Tale* is usually placed after the *Cook's Tale*, no known material explicitly links these two pieces together. Its position as Fragment II is uncertain. Regarding *The Man of Law's Tale's* relation to tale order, V.A. Kolve argues that the opening fragment and the *Man of Law* indicate the shape of the rest of the pilgrimage. *Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative: The First Five Canterbury Tales* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1984), 85.

¹⁹⁶ See A.C. Spearing, “Narrative Voice: The Case of Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale*,” *New Literary History* 32.3 (2001): 715-746.

These lines, of course, refer to *The Book of the Duchess* and *The Legend of Good Women*: “And if he have nought seyde hem, leve brother, / In o book, he hath seyde hem in another” (II. 51-2). This catalogue resembles a *vita auctoris* in the academic prologues of the grammar tradition.¹⁹⁷ But this inclusion is peculiar. A *vita auctoris* usually came in the preface of a text, opening it with a critical commentary.¹⁹⁸ The Man of Law thus presents a satiric general prologue to Chaucer’s work, an introduction that characterizes his skill as a poet – “though he kan but lewedly / On metres and on rymyng craftily” – and a list of works that presents a rudimentary chronology: “In youthe he made of Ceys and Alcione.” He even provides a concise moral commentary on Chaucer’s literary habits: “Nolde nevere write in none of his sermons / Of swiche unkynde abhomynacions” (II. 87-88). With this thorough, albeit satiric, introduction to Chaucer’s life and works, this prologue and tale suggests a revised opening.¹⁹⁹ Likewise, the *Man of Law’s Prologue and Tale* are typically presented in isolation, since no material in the frame narrative links them to any other tale. Any trajectory created by the Man of Law is foreclosed, but such foreclosure is largely present notwithstanding the fragments. Indeed, the *Tales’* unfinished state serves only to heighten, not create, these qualities, placing them in greater relief, as each fragment both forces a stop and contains a new series of tales.

The order, therefore, may appear only provisional since other tales may step forward as possible openings; however, Chaucer’s discontinuities also suggest that apparent misdirection, as well as the problem of determining a precise order, are a part of the structure. The *Tales’* ability to reset narrative trajectories and, as we shall see, to leave behind and return to narrative topics, not coincidentally resemble the narrative progression of the *Melibee*. But the *Tales* recursion works differently from this tale’s, and it is everywhere, so that many arguments concerning tale order indirectly register its effects. As critics disagree about that order, they agree about something more basic: that this perceived indeterminacy of order, indicative of the discontinuity of topics and ideas, is central to Chaucer’s design. That inability to determine narrative direction emphasizes the *Tales’* constant resetting, re-beginning, and disruptive tendency. Considering the work’s series – their digressive and shifting nature in genre and register – practices of *emendatio* guide the overall trajectories. The purpose of Chaucer’s recursive design is to create the experience of discontinuity, to place the reader in a fictional process of recursive trial-and-error.

Social Accident and the Pilgrims’ Scribal Error

But while Chaucer designs narrative discontinuities, he makes these discontinuities appear as social accidents. After the conclusion of the *Second Nun’s Tale* of St. Cecilia, a Canon and his Yeoman suddenly appear. They divert the moment and hijack the storytelling:

¹⁹⁷ See A.J. Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship: Scholastic Literary Attitudes in the Later Middle Ages* (London: Scholar Press, 1984); *Magister amoris: The ‘Roman de la Rose’ and Vernacular Hermeneutics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

¹⁹⁸ On the *accessus*, see Martin Irvine, *The Making of Textual Culture: ‘Grammatica’ and Literary Theory, 350-1100* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 121.

¹⁹⁹ See similar suggestions in Cooper, *The Structure of “The Canterbury Tales,”* 63; Alfred David, *The Strumpet Muse: Art and Morals in Chaucer’s Poetry* (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1976), 130.

And whan that he [the Canon] was come, he gan to crye,
 “God save,” quod he, “this joly compaignye!
 Faste have I priked,” quod he, “for youre sake,
 By cause that I wolde yow atake,
 To riden in this myrie compaignye.”
 His yeman eek was ful of curteisye,
 And seyde, “Sires, now in the morwe-tyde
 Out of youre hostelrie I saugh yow ryde,
 And warned heer my lord and my soverayn,
 Which that to ryden with yow is ful fayn
 For his desport; he loveth daliaunce.” (VIII. 582-592)

This appearance, of course, conveys the fictional pretense of being unexpected. That the Canon and Yeoman are not part of the original group of pilgrims, and therefore not included in the *General Prologue*, leaves the reader unable to predict what sort of tale will follow. The Yeoman’s pronouncement that his “lord and [his] soverayn” is eager for “desport” and “daliaunce,” however, soon suggests the direction their appearance will lend the storytelling contest. The Canon’s Yeoman veers from the prior tale by following the saint’s life with a tale about an alchemist swindling a priest.²⁰⁰ Indeed, the Canon himself abandons the pilgrims just as suddenly as he arrived – “He fledde away for verray sorwe and shame” (VIII. 702) – leaving his Yeoman gleefully to divulge his secrets: “heere shal arise game” (VIII. 703). Chaucer contrives these accidents to create an indeterminacy of direction – narratively, poetically, and generically. Readers’ natural and inveterate habit of predicting narrative trajectories, a habit fiction encourages, is met with consistent and discursive turns in narrative content. All fiction of course uses the contrived appearance of accident; Chaucer uses it to help build his recursive structure.

One corollary of this use is that Chaucer regularly has these interruptions come full circle; one interruption sidetracks a topic, another brings it back. But because this incremental repetition reframes what it repeats, the topics are kept restive. So while the pilgrims alter prior concerns, continued re-visitations allow for new formulations that may or may not provide a more adequate expression. For example, the successive tales of the Friar and Summoner divert the discussion of marriage introduced at length by the Wife of Bath. In fact, the Summoner begins to interject before she finishes her prologue – “This is a long preamble of a tale!” (III. 831) – which leads to the initial sparring between the Summoner and Friar. But the problem of marriage reappears in the Clerk and Merchant, and in the Franklin, who thinks that he has solved it: “Love wol nat been constreyned by maistrye” (V. 764).²⁰¹ Despite his confidence, the *Manciple’s Tale* – usually presented as the penultimate tale – presents a case of marital infidelity. Moreover, by disappointing the Franklin’s confidence, Chaucer suggests that the richness of reconsideration and reformation itself is his point. And by using the disappearance

²⁰⁰ Though some critics have found a thematic coherence between the *Second Nun’s* and *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tales*. Glending Olson, “Chaucer, Dante, and the Structure of Fragment VIII (G) of the ‘Canterbury Tales,’” *The Chaucer Review* 16.3 (1982):222-236; James Dean, “Dismantling the Canterbury Book,” *PMLA* 100.5 (1985): 746-762. But the kind of coherence they urge is one seen most clearly in retrospect, from the perspective of Fragments IX-X.

²⁰¹ G.L. Kittredge asserts that the Franklin’s Tale brings the marriage debate to a “triumphant conclusion”; *Chaucer and His Poetry*, 205.

and reappearance of topics to provoke it, he avoids the stagnation of repetition that stalls the *Melibee*.

The fictional premise of the pilgrimage involves oral discourse, but the way the pilgrims share these discourses resembles the faulty performance of textual composition and transmission. Chaucer's pilgrims dramatize the transmission of error, and further illustrate the analogy of this dissertation: that scribal error suggests human, moral error and vice-versa. Assuming the role of Chaucer's own *Adam*, the pilgrims, like so many copyists, change and corrupt each other's concerns, ideas, and words.²⁰² The frame narrative, therefore, not only reveals trajectories of indirection, but also the mishandling of discourse.

An instance of pilgrim-scribal mishandling occurs early on with the altercation between the Host and Miller. In the *Miller's Prologue*, the Host calls for a tale that will "quite" with the Knight's and so provide a sense of decorum. But the Miller's revision of the Host's meaning – "I wol now *quite* the Knyghtes tale" (I.3127) – suggests rebuttal or revenge rather than reward. This initial appropriation leads to downright degradation in the word's use through the Reeve and Cook – like a faulty transmission carried down the line of pilgrims – and in this way closely resembles a proliferation of error. Thus, the mechanism appears by which meddling or faulty scribes begin to misconstrue, and then "improve," their exemplars. The Miller even implies that he recognizes his corruption of the Host's discourse, saying that "if that I mysspeke" the ale of Southwark is to blame (I.3139-40). Hence, the Miller's use is no error at all: it is a deliberate and aggressive appropriation of the Host's attempted gentility. Yet, it is the sense of the word, not its form, which becomes corrupted, and this word "quiten" and the way in which it is corrupted conveys ethical relations through ideas of reciprocity and justice. When he asks the Monk to "quite" the Knight's tale, the Host invokes a tacit ethic of reciprocity, whereby the pilgrims view the Knight's tale as a gift that has provided both pleasure and instruction, and so to "quite" it would be to offer a tale that would similarly profit the Knight. The Miller's appropriation, then, subverts the moral implications of the *Knight's Tale* and Host's guidance. Yet, the moral is not merely subverted, as the Miller's own diversion is itself suspended with the abrupt conclusion (or fragment) of the *Cook's Tale*. As we shall see, neither diversions considered moral or corrupt maintain a firm hold on the tales' narration, but that is exactly what will institute the *Tales*' recursive design and moral exercise.

Faulty transmissions also occur through textual commentary. The *Wife of Bath's Prologue* draws out the analogy of correction to include *enarratio*, a division of the medieval grammar tradition that concerns practices of interpretation, including marginal and interlinear glosses, to elicit a correct reading.²⁰³ The Wife of Bath makes clear the

²⁰² Compare Carolyn Dinshaw: "'Adam Sciveyn' focuses, however, not only on the basic constituent of written literary production, the relationship between maker and scribe, but also on the basic constituent of all social relations: the human body. Chaucer threatens Adam with a future of itchy scabs on his head because he himself must 'rubbe and scrape' the scribe's defective work...[T]he rubbing and scraping that must be done to both suggests a figurative identification here between the human body and the manuscript page, the text." *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 4.

²⁰³ For a full discussion of *enarratio*, see Irvine, *The Making of Textual Culture*, 17. Concerning how Chaucer imagines the *Tales* as open to "rereading and reinterpretation," see Rosemarie McGerr,

connection between texts and humans, that the manipulation of discourse has damaging consequences for both. However, she censures these misinterpretations as she herself manipulates the words of the “gentil text” – “wexe and multiplie” (III. 28, 29) – and glosses it: “But of no nombre mencion made he, / Of bigamy, or of octogamy” (III. 32-3). Later she cites the apostle Paul, who “badoure housbondes for to love us weel” (III. 161), without mentioning Paul’s admonition to wives to be subject to their husbands in the same scripture. Although she condemns “glosing,” she uses it to assert her own dominance on the bodies of her husbands, to “have the power duryng al my lyf / Upon his propre body, and nocht he” (III. 158-160). As many critics have observed, she demonstrates the abuses of glossing, so does the friar of the Summoner’s Tale who mishandles the discourse “of hooly writ” (III. 1790) by using it for the purpose of fleecing his listener.²⁰⁴ These points are well known. It has been less generally noticed that the Wife describes such abuses and tries to avert them. She draws a clear connection between herself and the texts she cites:

But in oure bed he was so fressh and gay,
And therwithal so wel koude he me glouce,
Whan that he wolde han my *bele chose*. (III. 508-10)

Just as she misreads or misquotes, she too may be altered or misrepresented by another’s words. Anticipating the attempted fraud of the Summoner’s friar, the Wife of Bath asserts that humankind (and womankind specifically) as well as texts can be manipulated.²⁰⁵

And she suggests that practices of *emendatio* are themselves subject to such abuse; that we often misread, mis-portray, and mis-correct those around us. For instance, she describes how she resisted the change Jankyn attempted to force on her, asserting “Ne I wolde nat of hym *corrected* be” (III. 661). One could guess that she has not been completely innocent, since in the very next line she exclaims that “I hate hym that my vices telleth me” (III. 662); however, she argues that those changes are abusive – or at best manipulative. A generous reading might suggest that Jankyn intends to set her right according to an ideal model – through his “proverbes” and “olde sawe” (III. 660) – but according to the Wife of Bath the alterations he attempts are misapplied, suggesting error rather than correction. The Friar builds on this idea through his tale of a summoner, who has “thurgh his jurisdiccoun, / Power to doon on hem *correccioun*” (III. 1319-20). Here, “correccioun” refers to punishment that means to set right those who fall into error. But

Chaucer’s Open Books: Resistance to Closure in Medieval Discourse (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998), 132.

²⁰⁴ Dinshaw argues for the feminine role of the text, whereby women metaphorically receive the gloss of a male readership. However, Chaucer continues to express how such glossing prevails throughout society, or as Dinshaw would argue, anyone can inhabit the role of a “masculine” or “feminine” readership. *Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics*, 30.

²⁰⁵ Dinshaw makes a similar point concerning the Wife’s dual role as text and *glossator*: “The Wife... appropriates the methods of the masculine, clerkly glossators themselves, thus exposing techniques that they would rather keep invisible.” *Ibid.*, 120. See also Mary Carruthers, “Letter and Gloss in the Friar’s and Summoner’s Tales,” *The Journal of Narrative Technique* 2.3 (1972):208-214; K.V. Donaldson, “Alisoun’s Language: Body, Text and Glossing in Chaucer’s *The Miller’s Tale*,” *Philological Quarterly* 71.2 (1992): 139-153; Martin Irvine, “‘Bothe text and gloss’: Manuscript Form, the Textuality of Commentary, and Chaucer’s Dream Poems,” *The Uses of Manuscripts in Literary Studies* (1992): 81-119; D.K. Coley, “‘Withyn a temple ymad of glas’: Glazing, Glossing, and Patronage in Chaucer’s House of Fame,” *The Chaucer Review* 45.1 (2010): 59-84.

as this summoner makes plain, these corrections are themselves errors, since he wrongly applies “correccioun” to those who have not gone astray: “I wol sompne hire unto oure office; / And yet, God woot, of hire knowe I no vice” (III. 1577-78). His attempt to mis-apply correction, of course, proliferates error through his own vice, which allows the devil who accompanies him to “correct” his soul.

The narrators do not just portray misinterpretations of other texts, nor do they just portray characters who commit such misinterpretations and corrections on each other; they also misinterpret their fellows’ tales. In other words, those misinterpretations and corrections are not just talked about *in* the tales, but happen to the tales, suggesting what effect our own reading, interpretation, or copying, may have. For example, the Clerk tells the story of Griselda, whose “pris” “no man koude...amende” (IV. 1026). Indeed, she seems to establish an ideal, incorruptible model of female patience and virtue. Unlike those around her, “Ay undiscreet and chaungynge as a fane!” (IV. 996), she is so unchangeable that “nevere koude he [her husband, the marquis] fynde variance” (IV. 710). Yet while Griselda presents a possible feminine exemplar, the Clerk asserts that she should not be mistaken for one.

L’envoy de Chaucer following the *Clerk’s Tale* declares Griselda “deed, and eek hire pacience, / And bothe atones buried in Ytaille” (IV. 1177-78). If any wedded man is so bold as to test his wife’s patience “to fynde / Grisildis, for in certein he shal faille” (IV. 1181-82), and the Clerk seems to urge wives to react if they do: “Ne suffreth nat that men yow doon offense...Ay clappeth as a mille” (IV. 1197, 1200). Like the Wife of Bath, he attempts to thwart female subjugation; Griselda is thereby posed as no exemplar at all. But famously, the Host and Merchant misunderstand or ignore the Clerk’s admonition. At the close of the tale the Host exclaims, “Me were levere than a barel ale / My wyf at hoom had herd this legende ones!” (IV. 1214-15).²⁰⁶ Though Griselda is not intended as an exemplar, the Host still takes her for one, and the Merchant carries on this error. In his tale of the old knight, January, the Merchant describes a feminine ideal that both comically and chillingly resembles Griselda:

She kepeth his good, and wasteth never a deel;
Al that hire housbonde lust, hir liketh weel;
She seith nat ones “nay,” whan he seith “ye.”

“Do this,” seith he; “Al redy, sire,” seith she. (IV. 1343-46)

Like the Host, the Merchant conceives of an exemplar that appropriates Griselda and subverts the Clerk’s intent. Besides making the Clerk’s point, that Griselda should not be taken as a model, both the Host and Merchant demonstrate that errors in reading occur in the *Tales’* various levels of narrative. Mishandling discourse or deviating from an intended interpretation is not merely talked about. In the fiction of the pilgrimage, it actually occurs.

Chaucer shows that tales’ acts of correction can be misread; he also shows that the misreading itself can generate new tales. In contrast to the Clerk’s marquis, Walter, who marries from the desire of his people, January “folwed ay his bodily delyt / On women, ther as was his appetyt” (IV.1249-50). January does not seek a Griselda, being instead consumed by youth and beauty: “Hir fresshe beautee and hir age tendre...Him thoughte

²⁰⁶ This quotation appears in a stanza not found in most MSS of the *Tales*, but nevertheless survives in two authoritative witnesses: El and Hg.

his choys myghte nat ben amended” (IV.1601, 1606). He deviates from the would-be exemplar in the *Clerk’s Tale*. The reaction to the *Clerk’s Tale* thus produces two errors: the Merchant misperceives Griselda as an exemplar despite the Clerk’s admonition, and then January chooses wrong by measure of this mistaken exemplar. And while the Merchant suggests January may be making a conjugal error, January is unable to identify this error or correct his choice. In fact, his wife, May, explicitly deviates from Griselda’s example. While initially described in a way that could reflect Griselda – “This fresshe May hath *streight* hir wey yholde” – the very next line identifies her deviation: “With alle hir women unto Damyan” (IV.1932-33). May succumbs to Damian’s importuning, abandoning the ideal of marriage presented in the tale. Through this succession of lines, Chaucer mimics the process of not following an *exemplar*, demonstrating, perhaps comically, that May requires correction.²⁰⁷

These examples repeatedly witness the appropriation, alteration, and corruption of discourse, even creating and corrupting an ideal that was never meant to be taken as a model. And not only are words and tales changed to suit new purposes, but characters themselves can be glossed as a text, and face correction that is either misplaced or negligently applied. Indeed, Chaucer’s pilgrims dramatize – sometimes humorously – the frustrations of what he witnessed as an author: that words and discourse, when passed from one hand to the next, are inevitably altered, even through practices of correction.

The Road to Canterbury and the Design of Discontinuity

So far we have traced how Chaucer suggests a narrative analogy to errors in scribal transmission, and even mistakes made by authors, through the way his pilgrims carry on narrative concerns and terminology. They do the same with genre: the Miller notoriously turns the design of the Knight’s romance into the structure of his own fabliau, courtly love to adultery, chivalry to base tricks. The vulgar response of the Miller represents an appropriation of discourse and a corruption of narrative intent (at least of the Host’s intent). He pulls the Knight’s courtly love to earth, creating something like a narrative barbarism, and his appropriation of the word “quite” continues through the narrative series. Chaucer will continue these seemingly random and shifting series, only ending when the entire journey has been displaced by the celestial pilgrimage outlined by the Parson. Besides the definite opening (*General Prologue*) and ending (*Parson’s Tale* and *Retractions*), the substance of the *Tales* consists of these cycles of narrative discontinuity, the appropriation and resetting of narrative terminology and content. Still, while Chaucer works to create the appearance of social accident, he provides by its means a working design – and thereby his poetic structure – that strengthens its connection to the anxieties attendant upon *emendatio*.

In the *General Prologue*, the Host’s method of governance at first seems to be aleatory: “Now draweth cut, er that we ferrer twynne; / He which that hath the shorteste shal bigynne” (I. 835-36). Any appearance of a clear organization dissolves, as he initiates a chance opening, and calls attention to the *Tales’* apparently random shape.

²⁰⁷ According to E.T. Donaldson’s reading of the *Merchant’s Tale*, it is May who remains for the longest time unsullied, “and the fact that everything else is sullied makes her descent seem inevitable even while it is shocking.” *Speaking of Chaucer* (Durham, NC: The Labyrinth Press, 1983), 37.

However, he soon attempts to overlay a new design onto the storytelling. After the Knight finishes the first tale, the Host exclaims,

This gooth aright; unbokeled is the male.
Lat se now who shal telle another tale;
For trewely the game is wel bigonne.
Now telleth ye, sir Monk, if that ye konne,
Somwhat to quite with the Knyghtes tale. (I. 3115-19)

Putting aside the aleatory construction, he calls upon the Monk to “quite” the *Knight’s Tale*. He now imagines the storytelling following social hierarchy. At the same time, he sees the first tale and his newly imagined structure as going “aright.” The phrase (“gooth aright”) proposes a spatial/topographical, directional, and narrative design, not only indicating a course has been struck, but also a literary standard. The word “aright” (*properly, correctly, or rightly*) is derived from the Latin *rectus* (*straight or upright*). Likewise, the pilgrims have a clear geographical destination: they aim to go straight to Canterbury and back. And so far their path has not deviated from that plan. But the term “aright” also suggests a straight course through the storytelling. For the Host, at least, the clear course is to move directly from the Knight to the Monk, setting up a chain of storytelling based on decorum.

Yet as the *Tales* proceed, we find that its structure and narrative do everything but “go aright.” Soon after the Host makes this pronouncement, the Miller interrupts and swears he “kan a noble tale for the nones, / With which [he] wol now quite the Knyghtes tale” (I. 3125-27). The Host attempts to quiet the Miller into deference to a “bette man” (I. 3130), but his imagined decorum has been upended, as a “bette man” will not tell the next tale. The storytelling venture decidedly strays, just as the word “quite” will shift in meaning. As traditions of *emendatio* demonstrate, maintaining a correct text, one that does not stray from its original diction or design, is nearly impossible, and the *Tales’* structure follows suit.

The Miller disrupts the Host’s principle of design; we cannot use social hierarchy to understand or specify the sequence of tales. The scholarly debate concerning the position of the fragments, especially arguments regarding the Bradshaw Shift, show that we cannot use geographical sequence to specify whether the pilgrims “go aright.” Indeed, the geographically nonsensical mention of Sittingbourne preceding that of Rochester may have been a deliberate choice on Chaucer’s part. Even the tales of the Manciple and the Parson, in what seems to be the concluding sequence, do not provide an indication of a straightforward trajectory. Although the *Parson’s Tale* presents the *Tales’* conclusion, it nearly stands alone (besides its doubtful reference to the Manciple).²⁰⁸ Each series of tales has an opportunity to set a stable trajectory, and from there go “aright,” but they instead simulate a recursive practice indicative of *emendatio*. Expectations arise only to be knocked down.

²⁰⁸ There are problems linking the *Manciple’s Tale* with the Parson’s: namely, as pointed out in the explanatory notes to *The Riverside Chaucer* (pp. 954-55), their disagreement in time (the Manciple begins in the morning and the Parson at four in the afternoon) and the fact that the word *Manciple* is written over an erasure in the Hg MS and that some later MSS provide the names of different pilgrims to fill that space. However, there has been no doubt as to the concluding order of the *Parson’s Prologue/Tale* and Chaucer’s *Retractions*.

However, the Host's premature pronouncement of going "aright" still articulates a key principle of design.²⁰⁹ The planned deviation from going "aright" provides the occasion for the *Tales*' corrections. It also illustrates how error may be not just a failure but an opportunity, and correction not just a restoration but a discovery. The *Tales*' recursive structure not only forces endings and new beginnings, but also provides occasions for creative turns in register and design; indeed, it is by this means that the *Tales* acquires its famous diversity of genres. The constant threat of an alteration in the narrative trajectory, and the efforts to avert that threat, provides changes in design and form, a creative promise of being remade. Chaucer recognizes not only the ubiquity of error, but also the creative work that practices of correction may achieve.

Fragment VII provides the fullest example of this creative aspect of *emendatio*. Any attempt at organization based on stylistic or social hierarchy has been given up: this leg of the journey promotes a variety of voices and tales. Indeed, the Host himself now works by indirection. Instead of drawing straws or attempting to create an order that hinges on decorum, he orchestrates that variety, moving freely from the Shipman, who offers another tale of cuckoldry, to the Prioress, who relates a miracle of the Virgin Mary.²¹⁰ The Host even stages his own interruption in *Sir Thopas*, cutting off the tale's "drasty speche" with a demand for a new style: "se wher thou kanst tellen aught in geeste, / Or telle in prose somewhat, at the leeste" (VII. 923, 933-4).²¹¹ He also calls attention to the unpredictable nature of his method in the *Prologue to Sir Thopas*, with his abrupt and unexpected turn to the narrator: "And thanne at erst he looked upon me" (VII. 694). He then focuses on the narrator's alien appearance – "He semeth elvyssh by his contenance, / For unto no wight dooth he daliaunce" (VII. 703-4) – and his evident discomfort: "Thou lookest as thou woldest fynde an hare, / For evere upon the ground I se thee stare" (VII. 696-7). By stressing how the narrator does not fit with the surrounding company, the Host emphasizes the extent to which the storytelling now strays from any clear direction, socially or stylistically.²¹² The "elvyssh" narrator, alien and to a degree unrecognizable, lends to the indiscernible direction of storytelling, in that

²⁰⁹ Lee Patterson also discusses the Miller's role in the structure of the *Tales*, see "'No man his resound herde': Peasant Consciousness, Chaucer's Miller, and the Structure of the *Canterbury Tales*," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 86 (1987): 457-95.

²¹⁰ For an early discussion of the Host's role in the unity of Fragment VII, as he applies the concepts of *sentence* and *solaas*, see Alan T. Gaylord, "Sentence and Solaas in Fragment VII of the *Canterbury Tales*: Harry Bailly as Horseback Editor," *PMLA* 82 (1967): 226-35. See also L.M. Leitch, "Sentence and Solaas: The Function of the Hosts in the 'Canterbury Tales,'" *The Chaucer Review* 17.1 (1982): 5-20; Ann W. Astell, "Chaucer's 'Literature Group' and the Medieval Causes of Books," *ELH* 59.2 (1992): 269-287.

²¹¹ Karla Taylor argues that this aesthetic discourse along with the following *Tale of Melibee* institutes a civic vocabulary that presents a solution to the problem of a fragmented society, see "Social Aesthetic and the Emergence of Civic Discourse from the *Shipman's Tale* to *Melibee*," *The Chaucer Review* 39.3 (2005), 299.

²¹² Lee Patterson argues that Chaucer uses the *Melibee* to sketch an identity for a new type of authorship: "he is the originator of a national literature in a culture that lacks both the concept of literature and a social identity for those who produce it. Lacking a recognizable role within the social whole, Chaucer is obliged to locate himself outside it"; "'What Man Artow?': Authorial Self-Definition in *The Tale of Sir Thopas* and *The Tale of Melibee*," in *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, edited by Thomas J. Heffernan. Vol. 11 (Knoxville: The New Chaucer Society, University of Tennessee, 1989), 132, 133. For the purposes of my argument, the ways in which Chaucer emphasizes his new and widely unrecognizable role also emphasizes the *Tales*' deviation from social and literary expectations – not going "aright."

no one might be able to guess the type of tale he will tell, and the same can be said for his stare “upon the ground.” His distracted stare could indicate his contemplation of England and the making of a national literature, but the narrator’s gaze also suggests as much about the nature and direction of the storytelling, a certain bemused contemplation of the road, while he also appears to not pay attention to the direction he is going.

But however we interpret the narrator’s appearance and distracted stare, it is clear that what previously required an interruption by another pilgrim, or an abrupt end to a series, to introduce new genres and topics, the Host now asserts himself, freely re-directing the storytelling. The *Melibee*, of course, continues with a very different genre, to be followed by the Monk’s *exempla*, which are then broken off by the Knight, who interrupts with the agreement of the Host, “Ye seye right sooth; this Monk he clappeth lowde” (VII. 2781), and who re-directs the storytelling to the *Nun’s Priest’s Prologue and Tale*. Indeed, the Hosts now seems to revel in his new-found freedom of not going “aright.” Chaucer no longer conveys even a pretense of a linear plan or arrangement, while this longest running fragment demonstrates just how much creative material can be produced by not going “aright.” But a question we must now answer is whether that design, with its necessary straying, actually subverts any moral reading.

Moral Correction and the *Canterbury Tales*’ Poetic Design

Chaucer is not just working with concepts of textual *emendare*, but also human, moral *corrigere*. Indeed, he employs the analogy of textual and moral correction from the start. In the *Knight’s Tale*, he clearly describes how the world undergoes constant alteration: “bothe up and doun, / Joye after wo, and wo after gladnesse” (I. 2840-41), and the inability to stabilize a condition in which “we been pilgrymes, passynge to and fro” (I. 2848). The beginning of the *Tales* introduces the idea that humankind must endure, not necessarily overcome, their circumstances, revealing “Death” as the conclusion of “worldly soore” (I. 2849). As I point out in chapter one, while practices of *emendatio* promised correction, uniform perfection was impossible; the process remained incomplete. Likewise, according to the *Knight’s Tale*, all worldly existence is subject to instability, whereby any alterations (corrections or corruptions) do not last.

We have seen how the phrase “gooth aright” articulates by contrast the *Tales*’ poetic design: the incremental series and their narrative trajectories do not “go aright”; they shift in topic and register. However, while the irony of that phrase reveals a poetic design, it also lays out a moral design. It sets up a spatial, directional model, but suggests by that the moral sense of Latin *rectus* (*virtuous* and *good*). Hence, if one goes “aright,” he or she may be said to follow a *good* path, which does not require correction. The Host perhaps intends a literary standard of decorum, but “aright” also suggests an upright, moral quality for the storytelling, and calling on the Monk to follow the Knight may be an indication of the moral trajectory the Host plans. Therefore, the Host not only intends to lead the pilgrims straight to Canterbury, but also seemingly attempts to lead them via an *upright* path of storytelling.

However, according to the analogy of correction we have considered, even a moral path cannot maintain a straight course; it will always include some amount of faltering. In fact, Chaucer delineates such a journey in the *Knight’s Tale*:

We faren as he that dronke is as a mous.

A dronke man woot wel he hath an hous,
 But he noot which the righte wey is thider,
 And to a dronke man the wey is slider.
 And certes, in this world so faren we;
 We seken faste after felicitee,
 But we goon wrong ful often, trewely. (I. 1261-67)

The drunkenness the *Knight's Tale* uses as a figure becomes literalized almost immediately as the “dronke” Miller who kidnaps the storytelling. Chaucer of course knows what paths will come, but leaves unclarified to us what they will be. And while he sets up this analogy and design, he also does not indicate which paths, morally or spatially, are the “righte wey.” As with textual correction, we may lose sense of what constitutes a correction and what constitutes a corruption. He purposely creates moral and spatial disorientation, a certain narrative drunkenness, and his allusions to correction indicate constant faltering as a sort of rule for the *Tales*.

But rather than subverting a moral agenda, *emendatio* suits Chaucer's moral aims precisely because correction must be revisited: *emendatio* illustrates the recursive nature of penitence and Chaucer's own idea of pilgrimage. This idea is not just pilgrimage in its anagogical sense, or the common medieval concept of the one-way journey, but pilgrimage as a wandering path and a journey that remains incomplete. Chaucer's narrative design indicates that pilgrimage involves going astray, creating paths that must be reset. And even taking into account the Parson, a pilgrimage that ends by pointing the way still leaves the pilgrims to wander. An end may be in sight, and the *Parson's Tale* provides an anagogical idea of pilgrimage, but we are nevertheless left to grapple with the terrestrial road.²¹³ Pointing rather than arriving emphasizes the journey – the way there – and the method or means of getting there. For Chaucer, completion is not the essential aspect of pilgrimage, just as the return journey was not an essential aspect for most medieval writers.²¹⁴ The *Tales'* pilgrimage is not only one-way, but also a recursive journey that emphasizes the work in this life, not the next.

Indeed, a focus on life in this world is exactly what the practice of correction calls for. As Donald Howard points out, “Chaucer was no less a poet of the secular world... In the secular world, the way to the eternal one is penance, and Chaucer fastens upon penance as the subject of the Parson's address at the end; a pilgrimage itself was, officially, a penitential act.”²¹⁵ If we take correction in both its textual and moral senses, it is a process that allows for no conclusion. A definitive conclusion, or perfection, according to Christian doctrine, can only occur through an act of God: grace or heavenly union. For Chaucer to focus on the “secular world” will mean that he will never convey the end of correction or pilgrimage. And for both the author and reader, the idea that they could bring about this end would be a gross presumption.²¹⁶

²¹³ Lee Patterson, “The ‘Parson's Tale’ and the Quitting of the ‘Canterbury Tales,’” *Traditio* 34 (1978): 331-80.

²¹⁴ Howard points out that it was customary in medieval depictions of pilgrimage “to declare the Jerusalem pilgrimage finished at the destination”; *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales*, 30.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 43.

²¹⁶ Seth Lerer argues for a very different understanding of Chaucerian correction in his book *Chaucer and His Readers: Imagining the Author in Late-Medieval England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993). Lerer suggests that Chaucer's call for correction may very well be directed to no one, that the call for correction effectively provides closure to the poems rather than creating an open text,

Chaucer, Dante, and the Straight Path

Dante's *Commedia* provides an apt counterpoint to Chaucer's recursive moral structure. In the *Inferno*, the narrator Dante has deviated from the *straight* path: "che la diritta via era smarrita" (*Inferno* 1. 3).²¹⁷ He identifies this path as the true path – *la verace via* – (1. 3), which he has abandoned (*abbandonai*). Virgil, in turn, will restore him to it by the most roundabout of courses.

It is a course in which language and poetry are central. When the narrator Dante hesitates to begin this journey, Virgil describes in detail his meeting with Beatrice, and the reason why she chose him as a guide:

Or movi, e con la tua parola ornata
e con ciò c'ha mestieri al suo campare,
l'aiuta si ch'i' ne sia consolata. (2. 67-9)

Beatrice points directly to Virgil's eloquence, his "parola ornata," suggesting that language can steer one towards salvation. Language and poetry may therefore serve as correctors of human error. Dante soon confirms this suggestion – "fidandomi del tuo parlare onesto, / ch'onora te e quei c'udito l'hanno" (2. 113-14) – revealing the affect Virgil's words have on him:

Tu m'hai con disiderio il cor disposto
si al venir con le parole tue,
ch'i' son tornato nel primo proposto. (2. 136-8)

Dante thus provides a clear course and moral plan for his literary work. Besides experiencing threats of being blocked or chased from his path, or the path's twists and gaps, he remains on course from hell into heaven. His path both narratively and figuratively leads the reader from damnation to salvation, while suggesting the salvific power of language.²¹⁸

Chaucer, like Dante, structures the narrative sequence of his *Tales* as a geographical sequence along a particular road. Chaucer almost certainly borrowed this type of geographical sequence from Dante, almost no one before Dante had made narrative progress a function of geographical progress. And besides a journey along a particular road, Dante imagines this journey as representing the journey of life: "Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita" (Midway in the journey of our life) (1. 1). Similarly Chaucer's Parson re-imagines the pilgrimage as a greater spiritual journey: "thilke parfit glorious pilgrymage / That highte Jerusalem celestial" (X. 50-51). Chaucer not only conceives of his narrative sequence as following a particular road, but according to the Parson this sequence also becomes a metaphor for a spiritual journey that we ought to commit our lives to. Yet, while each journey (Chaucer's and Dante's) follows a road, these roads differ in implication. One could argue that Chaucer ultimately wants us to

that in the "wholly internal world" of the poem "the plea for correction can have no social meaning"; in other words, Chaucer is more or less invoking a literary trope rather than a social practice (210, 218). However, given the strong analogy of textual emendation to moral reform, as well as Chaucer's awareness of this analogy, calls for a reconsideration of the social implications of Chaucerian correction.

²¹⁷ Quotations taken from Charles S. Singleton's edition of *The Divine Comedy*. (Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press, 1970).

²¹⁸ John M. Fyler, *Language and the Declining World in Chaucer, Dante, and Jean de Meun* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 108, 109.

focus on the terrestrial journey he lays out, not the Parson's celestial pilgrimage – and indeed the bulk of the *Tales* lives in the secular world. But it ends looking toward the heavenly one, and it is improbable in the extreme that his deep encounter with Dante did not shape this choice.

For Dante, the organization of road and narrative are intertwined. The language of travel is important throughout; the very first instance is “dritto” – which comes up in the first sentence of the *Commedia*; Chaucer's “aright” echoes it not only in meaning, but also very closely in its placement near the beginning of the pilgrims' journey. Likewise, Dante claims that this straight path was lost (“era smarrita”), and that even as he attempts to move forward, his path is impeded (e.g. by the leopard, lion, and she-wolf) so that more than once he is forced to turn back the way he came (“anzi ’mpediva tanto il mio cammino, / ch’i’ fui per ritornar più volte vòlto” [1. 35-36]). Not coincidentally this inability to follow a straight path is something Chaucer concentrates on. Both the narrator Dante and the pilgrims continue to move along their path, although the way may become lost or impeded. But rather than a leopard or lion, it is the pilgrims themselves who block their own path and their own storytelling. Dante, led by Virgil, continues on his path, a straight trajectory from hell to heaven, while the pilgrims, led by the Host, continue on from the Tabard to Canterbury. At the same time, the differing ability of each of these guides is immediately apparent: the Host cannot, like Virgil, straighten the pilgrims' path, and it is even questionable whether he gets them to Canterbury. This difference is essential to Chaucer's project. Like a scribe correcting a text, in Chaucer's understanding, neither the Host nor the pilgrims themselves can definitively correct their path.

While Chaucer provides the groundwork for an orderly path (direct to Canterbury) and orderly storytelling (initially based on decorum), he overturns each of these. As we have seen, he not only interrupts the opening scheme, but the recursive nature of the *Tales* also disorients the reader as to where the pilgrims are on the road to Canterbury, besides the fact that they never reach their destination, nor return to the Tabard. Chaucer was certainly influenced by Dante, and builds upon that influence a different approach in his poetic structure.

The same can be said for their moral aims. Dante strongly asserts the power of poetry: that is, while he acknowledges its powers of seduction, as with the case of Paolo and Francesca, language through poetic eloquence (“parola ornata”) also has the potential to correct, leading Dante and his readers on a path towards Paradise. A clear mark of this power of eloquence is the fact that Dante arrives at his destination – much more than can be said for Chaucer's pilgrims – as well as the fact that Virgil cannot accompany Dante into Paradise, which suggests the greater power of Dante's own poetry, moving past Virgil, in providing for the final vision of Paradise in the *Commedia*. Beatrice's entreaty to Virgil to use his “parola ornata” to set Dante on the right path therefore refers both to Virgil's words in Dante's fictional narrative and to Virgil's words more broadly; that is, Virgil's poetry, which Dante used as a model for his own. Dante thereby suggests that poetry itself can provide a moral guide. But Chaucer neither points to a definite moral message, nor does he give language this power. Indeed, if anything, he emphasizes the inability of words to effect action or determine or describe what is taking place: “The word moot nede accorde with the dede” (IX. 208). In *Lak of Stedfastnesse* “word and deed” that “[b]en nothing lyk” is the sign of the world in decline; words are not usually

binding, and accordingly nor can they achieve moral gains. Likewise, in the *Tales*, language cannot maintain a straight or upright journey nor correct the pilgrims; rather, there is a constant regard to “Kepe wel thy tonge” (IX. 362).

Yet, while Chaucer and Dante part ways over the power of language to provide decisive moral gains, they both use the same metaphor of correction, of straightening out one’s progress. “Aright” and “dritto” are not only related etymologically to each other. “Rectus,” though distantly cognate with “aright,” is usually translated by it, and is the origin of “dritto.” A prefixed form of “regere” is of course “corrigere”: to make straight, to set right, to correct. This meaning has direct application in the *Commedia* when the narrator loses the straight path (“la diritta via”), and whose way must now be corrected by Virgil and Beatrice. But while they both make use of a corrective logic, Chaucer uses the idea of *corrigere* to a separate effect.

In the *Commedia*, Dante outlines a clear course from hell to heaven because he conceives of language as having the power to help save and condemn. Chaucer, however, is skeptical of language’s ability to signify accurately, and thereby its ability to support an upright path. Asserting that the “word moot nede accorde with the dede” acknowledges the likelihood that words often stray from our intended meaning. For Chaucer, it does not matter if words initially “go aright”; ultimately, all things – including language – are never stable:

For nature hath nat taken his bigynnyng
Of no partie or cantel of a thyng,
But of a thyng that parfit is and stable,
Descendynge so til it be corrupable. (I. 3007-10)

The *Knight’s Tale* conveys this worldly instability, how we “faren as he that dronke is as a mous,” and how “this worldes transmutacioun” changes “bothe up and doun” (I. 2839, 40). Humans live in a fallen world; language too is fallen, and likewise undergoes “transmutacioun.”²¹⁹ Under such conditions, language cannot always find its mark nor effectively correct, and even when it does it is not immune from corruption.

Chaucer suggests such worldly “transmutacioun” through the apparent instability of his literary form. He not only expresses caution in regards to language, but also that language itself is not salvific; poetry cannot close the distance between humans and perfection, nor reconcile them with God. He is not concerned with how language may point the way to salvation, but rather how it facilitates moral exercise. He develops the analogy of fallen language and worldly deterioration to textual emendation: as words on the page must always be re-corrected, the world continuously slides back into error, needing to be set “aright.” It is this recursive practice that he imitates in his tales, revealing that the pilgrims cannot “go aright,” that their storytelling must persistently be corrected, even while “corrections” or resetting of the narrative do not necessarily provide a moral correction. Yet it is this inability of language to save or correct that allows the *Tales* to exemplify moral work: while humans are destined to miss the mark repeatedly, they also hold the continued possibility of renewal.

²¹⁹ Howard points to Chaucer’s awareness of the way “this worldes transmutacioun” was believed to produce a similar deterioration of language, like the world declining from a former Golden Age. *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales*. See also Eric Jager, *The Tempter’s Voice: Language and the Fall in Medieval Literature* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993), 242.

Recursive Correction and the Promise of Moral and Literary Renewal

Emendatio could not achieve permanent correction, and neither could moral correction achieve human perfection. Although penitential handbooks made confession both thorough and systematic, the moral work of repentance was still recursive; sin endured no matter how thorough the process of penitence, as Chaucer himself describes: “men fallen in venial synnes after hir baptesme fro day to day” (X. 98-99). Even according to the doctrine of original sin, total correction lies outside human capabilities. This inevitability of recidivism made penitential handbooks essential.

Nevertheless, belief in the endurance of sin did not discontinue the work of moral correction; it merely encouraged that work to endure as well. And while one may point out that conversion, renewal, and forgiveness are not cures for frailty – one is always led astray – humans are never without redemption. Likewise, while the *Tales*’ structure dramatizes the endurance of error, it also persists in renewing the storytelling. For Chaucer, it is not a matter of language drawing us toward salvation, but that language reflects the moral work that demonstrates the need for grace. During the Carolingian Renaissance, for instance, correction was believed to facilitate the work of divine grace.²²⁰ Similarly, Chaucer provides an errant path, but as long as the reader follows the pilgrims on this path, he or she is shown, again and again, the essential moral and creative work of starting anew, the need to retrace our steps.

At the same time, one might say that these incremental series merely point to the errant paths, and that the idea of worldly deterioration, as well as poetry’s inability to point the way to salvation, paint a bleak portrait of human life. Chaucer shows the reformation of language and humankind to be unending. However, while his analogy does not present decisive moral gains, he does present literary gains. Recursive correction, more than an analogy for his idea of pilgrimage, is a tool for literary creation. We first witnessed how Prudence’s recursive correction produces the exhaustive narrative of the *Melibee*. But with the surrounding tales, we experience repetition with a difference, a type of incremental repetition whereby series of tales revisit concerns, but never in the same way. What this incremental repetition lends to Chaucer’s moral agenda is not anything like doomed repetition or failure as much as renewed potential – perhaps even hope.

Although we see continuous disruptions of narrative trajectories, these very disruptions emphasize the *Tales*’ ability to pick back up and begin again, to retrace and restart the journey. For example, the series including the *Physician’s Tale* concerns a treacherous judge, Apis, who attempts to defile a young maiden, Virginia. After Virginia’s father kills her to protect her from corruption, the tale concludes by calling on the reader to “Forsaketh synne” (VI. 286). However, the storytelling proceeds to the Pardoner, who, though he tells a moral *exemplum*, declaring “*Radix malorum est cupiditas*” (VI. 334), confesses his own avarice. As the Pardoner asserts, he cares only to gain and nothing for *correccioun*: “For myn entente is nat but for to wynne, / And nothyng for correccioun of synne” (VI. 403-4). He intends only “to semen hooly and trewe” (VI. 422). The storytelling thus falls into moral pretense: while the tale seems to

²²⁰ Giles Brown, “Introduction: The Carolingian Renaissance” in *Carolingian Culture: Emulation and Innovation*, ed. Rosamond McKitterick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

accord with the *Physician's Tale's* call to “Forsaketh synne,” it instead presents a moral *exemplum* told by one who only seems “trewe.”²²¹ The moral exercise thus rests on how subsequent tales continually divert from and re-approach the ethical concerns and designs of prior tales. It involves altering directions and renewing the journey, but at the same time not necessarily pointing out a “correct” path. Series may be reset, but they are not necessarily set *right* in a moral sense. Chaucer is less concerned with moral dicta, as can be found in the *Melibee*, than he is with modeling moral problems and concerns. He will show repeatedly that resetting is a necessary and unavoidable process, but he is also quick to show that when we reset we are not necessarily getting everything right, nor may we be trying to. As with *emendatio*, any correction may be followed by further errors. Indeed, corrections may perpetuate error. This is in part why the Parson concludes the *Tales*: the only achievable pilgrimage for complete penitence is a final celestial pilgrimage. The *Tales'* can only prepare for rather than guarantee salvation, as humankind can only carry out, not complete, the process of correction. But regardless of success, it is a process that Chaucer laboriously recreates, presenting correction as a condition of textuality, morality, and human endeavor.

Concerning Chaucer's structure, Howard asserts that: “Morality is not a part of the plan or the structure – those who tell tales are chosen by lot in the Prologue, and tales are arranged in what seems a haphazard way, surely not under headings as in Gower.”²²² Still, Howard does claim that the structure is not as “haphazard” as it first appears. He argues that Chaucer constructs a labyrinth design for his *Tales*, a design he likely encountered in continental cathedrals during his travels.²²³ Using this structure as a model, a strategy of apparent randomness became a part of his design.²²⁴ Howard argues that this labyrinth design, which creates an “interlaced” structure, explains a relationship between the tales: that everything is interconnected, that, while it seems one could get lost in this tangle of tales, this tangle reveals a unified image of the world. The labyrinth appears to lead the reader on a disorienting path, but this path turns “back upon itself” –

²²¹ Another shift occurs when the Pardoner's disingenuous call for the pilgrims to “assoille” themselves is disrupted by the Host: “[I]t shal nat be, so theeche! / Thou woldest make me kisse thyn olde breech, / And swere it were a relyk of a seint, / Though it were with thy fundement depeint!” (VI. 939, 947-50). The *Pardoner's Tale* and the Host's following disruption of the Pardoner's conspicuous attempt to cheat his fellow pilgrims have garnered much commentary. Not the least is Dinshaw's assertion that the Pardoner's performance “destabilizes the project, [and] calls into question the possibility of making morally redeeming tales or interpreting tales in Christian, spiritual terms”; *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*, 182. Regarding what this could mean for the *Tales'* recursive textual and moral design is the very idea that the *Tales* will need to begin again from the Pardoner's destabilizing performance. Indeed, the Knight's attempt to re-induct the Pardoner into the social group may well indicate that destabilizing performance and the need to restart the storytelling venture: ““And ye, sire Hoost, that been to me so deere, / I prey yow that ye kisse the Pardoner. / And Pardoner, I prey thee, drawe thee neer, / And as we diden, lat us laughe and pleye.” / Anon they kiste, and ryden forth hir weye” (VI. 964-68).

²²² Howard does not claim that Chaucer was not a moral poet, but that Chaucer's morality differed in “quality and tone” and was ultimately “more subtly and tentatively raised than in Gower”; *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales*, 47.

²²³ *Ibid.*, 226-27.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, 218.

what seemed chaos becomes a unified idea of order – representing the world, its many paths, and the eternal peace that all may find.²²⁵

However, the process by which Chaucer creates this unified structure rests in part on the principles of correction. Howard astutely describes what he sees as the “degeneration” in the first fragment, and the way in which the reader, by the fragment’s end, is “led only to something else.”²²⁶ And Howard rightly claims that this structure would have stood even if the first fragment continued beyond the *Cook’s Tale*. But it is the *Tales’* incremental series that help compose what he recognizes as an “interlaced” structure, whereby a model of storytelling is changed, reset, and renewed by following pilgrims. Thus, rather than not being part of the moral plan, the literary structure is central. While Charles Owen sees the *Parson’s Tale* as an important moment, one that asserts the *Tales’* moral intent, we see that it is not the Parson who provides the *Tales’* primary moral exercise; such exercise has already been built into the *Tales’* very form. Indeed, readers encounter moral exercise many times before reaching the *Parson’s Tale*. Therefore, the question of “which finally won the day in Chaucer’s imagination, pilgrimage or storytelling?” is really a false choice. The storytelling creates the framework for moral exercise, just as the method for moral exercise provides the occasion for literary invention. Chaucer’s art becomes entwined with and inseparable from moral work, and his analogy of correction thus becomes strikingly optimistic.

According to Chaucer, sin brought humankind’s fall, but it is the act of penance and reform – beginning anew – that promises a continuation of human history and storytelling. Thus, the creative process that he develops through the *Tales’* structure does not foreclose moral activity; instead, practices of moral and textual correction become irresolvable. Its structure brings together moral and artistic practices in a way that not only has them work alongside of each other, but also allows each practice – the moral and the artistic – to engage in the work of the other. The moral exploration allowed by the analogy of correction turns back on literary form and narrative, so that literary practice is, to an extent, guided by those very concepts of moral correction and reliance on grace. While engaging his audience in textual problems, Chaucer soon calls upon the reader to participate in moral reflection. In a sense, this literary form matches the needs of its Christian audience, who, like so many manuscripts, is in perpetual need of amendment.

²²⁵ Ibid., 329.

²²⁶ Ibid., 245, 247.

Chapter Four

Correction of Sense, *Sentence*, and Doctrine

On most medieval understandings, correct doctrine follows truth; however, our articulations of doctrine can stray. And from a Christian perspective where the world, humankind, and their tongues have fallen, language can never perfectly articulate true doctrine.²²⁷ Language will always fall short; we cannot be sure that it will convey doctrine efficiently or understandably.²²⁸ And while doctrinal truth is important to someone like Augustine, and while he must recognize that doctrine manifests itself through our articulations, articulation, at least in its most literal sense, is not important to him: it is better to know how to love a fellow human than know how to pronounce “human” correctly.²²⁹ “True” doctrine, then, finds its fruits in its moral practice, not in its utterances.²³⁰ But the whole tradition assumes also that articulations of doctrine ought to be as clear and accurate as possible. Chaucer has his Manciple recall the chestnut that words must “nede accorde with the dede” (IX. 208), but knows that often they will not. As with the *Summoner’s Tale* and the *Pardoner’s Prologue*, Chaucer depicts a coercive articulation of doctrine and its deliberate distortion. In regards to true doctrine, although it is allegedly at hand, he suggests that language may only approximate it at best, and that these approximations will always leave one searching for a better articulation. We can imagine that such inconsistency between words and their sense (doctrine) would be especially apropos to a poem concerned with correction, so how does Chaucer treat the inconsistency between doctrine and its articulation?

As we have established earlier, because the articulation of doctrine is subject to corruption, it needs emendation, but emendation itself may also corrupt. Regarding text, a truly correct one is always an ideal, though one only grasped at, not obtained. Regarding sense, Chaucer recognizes the danger of its distortion, but he also suggests the difficulty of determining errors in it; sense can vary when words do not, as happens when the Miller corrupts the sense of “quiten.” With attempted gentility the Host has been using this word to convey accord before the Miller turns it to revenge.²³¹ While there

²²⁷ John M. Fyler points out how late medieval poets make use of a Christian concept that language reflects humankind’s fallen, decrepit state. Therefore, although poets like Dante assert that language may also participate in humankind’s rehabilitation, language is commonly understood as not being as effective as it may once have been. *Language and the Declining World in Chaucer, Dante, and Jean de Meun* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

²²⁸ Seeds of this thinking can be found in early Christian controversies such as the Montanist heresy, the belief that God’s words came to biblical writers through their ears, syllable by syllable. Rather, figures like Jerome believed that God inspired through the heart; therefore, “though God supplies the content, the language and the choice of metaphor depend on the writer’s environment and education”; Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1964), 22.

²²⁹ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 21.

²³⁰ A.J. Minnis points out that Gregory, as well as many other theologians, refused to accept the idea that “the words of the heavenly oracle” should be restricted by the “rules of Donatus”; *Medieval Theory of Authorship: Scholastic Literary Attitudes in the Later Middle Ages* (London: Scolar Press, 1984), 33.

²³¹ As I argue in chapter three, Chaucer reveals the elusive quality of signification through a poetics of correction.

may be an idea of perfection, Chaucer assumes it will be achieved only outside the realm of human power, either through grace or the heavenly reunion with God. Correction is our lot here. On the other hand, with *sentence* and doctrine there is an ideal truth, thought to be attainable now through media such as the church or scripture. So while corruptions and flaws exist in the words or genres articulating doctrine, corrections should bring one to truth. But as we shall see, Chaucer also reveals these types of corrections as recursive; the formal, linguistic corruptions of doctrine accord with his depiction of textual and moral correction.

For Chaucer's *Tales*, textual correction not only provides a literary and moral, but also dogmatic, paradigm. He represents what he knows to be an unending search for doctrine's best articulation. Indeed, one of his main purposes for Fragment VII (with its narrative diversity) is to show how genre, style, and the vernacular contribute to such a search. He reveals how our attempts to convey true doctrine always leaves us looking for another discourse, and that what may often seem like good discourse is in fact flawed. This search thereby institutes a corrective model, whereby words and phrases only approximate and may always be improved upon. Chaucer shows that conveying true doctrine – finding its best articulation, as we witness a series of progressions and reversals – is as recursive as practices of correction and embodies the process in a recursive form. Therefore, while he mostly refrains from articulating doctrine directly, he still presents ideas of doctrine in artistic and human moral enterprise. Chaucer reveals that language may only approximate true doctrine, but since the articulations of doctrine may need to be re-examined, he also suggests that doctrine itself can and should be re-examined.

Through the analogy of correction, finding the best articulations for doctrine is yet another way in Chaucer's poetics that art and morality, and now doctrine, become versions of each other. And the way he treats the articulation of doctrine is pertinent to those tales whose moral purpose is not clear. Chaucer was aware of critiques like those in *A Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge*, and so faced the question how literary pleasure, even the coarse joke, can be oriented toward a higher human good, how the act of reading, and reading for the sake of a good story, can take part in directing that good?²³² A joke purely for its own sake may not have any redemptive qualities; however, jokes and literary pleasure may be understood to bear redemptive qualities if they are a part of an exploration of salvation and grace. One simple answer would be that, in the context of words, it would be the fault of the reader to focus solely on the letter, literal level, or the flesh. This is not to resurrect D.W. Robertson's argument for interpreting this literature strictly through the lens of charity, but only to re-assert that representations in literature, and the enjoyment they produce, have multiple ends that the reader who would read adequately must work to discern. Just as Chaucer collapses the distinction between his

²³² According to Sharon Aronson-Lehavi, the *Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge*, a late medieval document that criticized medieval mystery plays, re-enforced a stringent religious perspective: one in which "play" (which also connotes fleshly pleasure, as derived even from art and games) "and the various etymological meanings of the word that can be derived from the Bible – [are] all understood to be negative"; *Street Scenes: Late Medieval Acting and Performance* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 23. Indeed, under these terms a moral Chaucer would seem to rub against the arguments exemplified so very well by George Lyman Kittredge of a dramatic Chaucer, who wrote a "Human Comedy" where the "Knight and the Miller and the Pardoner and the Wife of Bath and the rest are the *dramatis personae*;" *Chaucer and His Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1915; 1970), 154, 155.

artistic and moral aims through the *Tales*' literary form, the way he engages in literary pleasure has separate but parallel concerns with Christian moral doctrine.

However, all discussions of Chaucer's moral and doctrinal concerns must confront the dichotomy of earnest and game: a supposition that this dissertation has attempted to refute is that Chaucer's readers must choose between them, that for a full appreciation of Chaucer's artistic achievement, moral aims must be diminished or ignored.²³³ And vice-versa, to focus on morality one cannot fully appreciate or find enjoyment in Chaucer's less morally explicit moments; the *sentence* of Christian, moral doctrine seemingly cannot suffer worldly *solaas*.²³⁴ Derek Pearsall, for example, asserts that writers of the Middle Ages faced "a medieval orthodoxy that required either assent or jest ('earnest' or 'game') but could not tolerate the two together."²³⁵

Instead of trying to resolve this antinomy in all its instances, I shall examine how *emendatio* allows Chaucer to fulfill his moral and artistic aims, and to create a corrective form through *sentence*, *solaas*, and doctrine. To create a poetics of correction of the sort examined in chapter three, the literary extremes exemplified by *Sir Thopas* (*solaas*) and the *Melibee* (*sentence*) are necessary. Chapter three presents instances of narrative corrections that institute changes in formal register, thus invoking a comprehensive range of medieval literary genres. According to Chaucer, one cannot convey narrative corruptions and corrections without *sentence* and *solaas*. Because no one genre can get it right – all the pilgrims' discourses are subject to correction – various registers and genres are required to communicate.

Still the question may persist as to whether Chaucer uses fable and *fabliau* for the sake of correction, or does he also want us to enjoy the tales for their own sake. Does his human comedy become what a moral critic might regard as self-serving, depicted merely

²³³ Most critics do not explicitly suggest such a choice, but some readings of the *Tales* have pushed aggressively against moral readings, so much so that morality is relegated to a position where it can be ignored. Alfred David, for example, argues that Chaucer "has drawn the portrait of a whole society and composed his essay on worthiness, but in doing so he creates a world that becomes autonomous. In the conclusion of the Prologue, Chaucer steps back and allows the pilgrimage to proceed without any guiding moral purpose and, for the most part, without the controlling voice of the narrator"; *The Strumpet Muse: Art and Morals in Chaucer's Poetry* (Bloomington & London: Indiana University Press, 1976), 74. For David, Chaucer meant for his readers to appreciate the tales for their own sake and not for the sake of moral learning. Charles Owen also pushes against what he sees as earnest being emphasized at the expense of game. Owen argues that the "'game' of the storytelling became for Chaucer more important than the 'earnest' of pilgrimage; it yielded a more vivid experience of value; in the interaction of its elements it had an almost autonomous growth"; *Pilgrimage and Storytelling in the 'Canterbury Tales': The Dialectic of "Ernest" and "Game"* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1977), 14. In each of the above cases, in order to fully appreciate Chaucer's aesthetic achievement, his moral aims need to be set aside.

²³⁴ According to J. Allen Mitchell, "it is a marked modern tendency to emphasize the mischief rather than morality in [Chaucer's] work"; *Ethics and Exemplary Narrative in Chaucer and Gower* (Rochester, NY: D.S. Brewer, 2004), 83. Helen Phillips makes a similar point, arguing that "everywhere in Chaucer's writing in complex and implicit ways incites its readers to moral questioning"; "Morality in the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer's Lyrics and the *Legend of Good Woman*" in *Chaucer and Religion*, ed. Helen Phillips (Cambridge; Rochester: D.S. Brewer, 2010), 156.

²³⁵ *The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer: A Critical Biography* (Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell, 1992), 252.

for the sake of its depiction rather than for moral edification? And if he is creating his comedy for moral edification, does this fact deaden the comedy or pleasure of his literary art? While most critics will not dismiss a moral agenda altogether, such questions suggest an either/or alternative. For instance, while a critic like Charles Owen does not completely ignore the *Tales*' Christian moral aspects, such as the *Parson's Tale*, he does relegate any moral focus into the background in order to focus on Chaucer's aesthetics, as if focus on one leaves no room for consideration of the other.²³⁶ So while hardly any critics will apply an either/or approach to the question of Chaucer's moral aims, even if some may treat it as such, what needs to be explained is how his literary performance preempts such an alternative. Indeed, an either/or alternative would caricature Chaucer with two extremes: Either he was completely subversive towards his religious content, didn't really mean it, and was all game, or he depicted irreverent material but didn't really mean it, and was ultimately pious in a way that left no room to enjoy jokes simply as jokes. My hope is that this discussion demonstrates how Chaucer's poetics collapses the above alternative, showing how he conceived and created a kind of poetry that could be both/and.

The Role of Doctrine in the *Canterbury Tales*: The *Parson's Prologue*, Chaucer's *Retractions*, and the *Tale of Melibee*

Along with a moral reading, the presence of Christian doctrine in Chaucer's *Tales* has been the subject of much debate. For Anne Middleton, the good of literature is "realized in worldly performance"; its good comes not in "the kernel of content, but in the virtues required to derive pleasure from it."²³⁷ Its good is thereby distanced from doctrine per se and instead exists as a social medium, "to display the virtues of the civilized man."²³⁸ Performance and style are key, as they are concerned with virtue rather than doctrinal truth. The atmosphere these stories create, the literary performance and its rhetorical methods are what convey virtue, not didactic moralizing or doctrine's sententious kernels. Accordingly, not only is articulating doctrine not a literary goal for Chaucer, but also the role of literature in salvation is questionable at best. For Middleton, "Chaucer is quite clear about this: no work of literature can, by its very nature, have *as a deed* the kind of efficacy that the smallest prayer has."²³⁹ Any moral or social good of literature comes not through its doctrine, "but rather lives we can examine. Stories are social parables whose power lies in the quality of talk they create."²⁴⁰ It is thereby the

²³⁶ In chapter three I argue that Owen creates his own ending to the *Tales*; he suggests that Chaucer wrote the *Parson's Tale* and *Retractions* during an earlier "period of religious commitment"; *Pilgrimage and Storytelling in the 'Canterbury Tales'*, 30.

²³⁷ "Chaucer's 'New Men' and the Good of Literature in the *Canterbury Tales*" in *Literature and Society: Selected Papers from the English Institute*, ed. Edward W. Said (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 16.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, 18.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, 38

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 44; see also "The 'Physician's Tale' and Love's Martyrs: Ensamples More than Ten as a Method in the 'Canterbury Tales,'" *The Chaucer Review* Vol. 8, No.1 (Summer, 1973), 15. In analyzing the *Physician's Tale*, Middleton claims that the "'sentence,' the valued and valuable action the story offers, is not Virginia's or her father's, nor the Physician's nor Harry Bailly's, but ours, in receiving 'solas' from them all."

actions that literary art induces – the examinations, sympathies, and “talk” – that form the *good* of literature.

However, a question remains as to whether a concern with doctrine is separate from the performance of virtues promoting social good. The way Chaucer addresses moral doctrine and literary genre closes the gap, often presupposed by critics and indeed by the Host, between doctrine and aesthetic pleasure. But while Chaucer may engage moral doctrine via its articulations through multiple genres and styles, and through the practices of correction he imitates, the Parson nevertheless criticizes fictiveness in regards to how it conveys doctrine:

Thou getest fable noon ytoold for me...
Why sholde I sowen draf out of my fest,
Whan I may sowen whete, if that me lest?...
I wol yow telle a myrie tale in prose,
To knytte up al this feeste and make an ende. (X. 31, 35-36, 46-47)

For the Parson, plain speaking – not only without gloss, but also without fables, alliterations, or rhyming, indeed without any adornments we associate with the literary – is the way to articulate doctrine and show the way “in this viage, / Of thilke parfit glorious pilgrymage / That highte Jerusalem celestial” (X. 49-51). Yet we soon witness the Parson place his treatise “ay under correccioun” (X. 56) since he is “nat textueel” (X. 57), which acknowledges the way his discourse may fail of reliable articulation.

Indeed, arguably, it does fail: with its length, its reference to *auctores*, its enumerations, its prose, and its didactic explicitness, the *Parson’s Tale* resembles the *Melibee*. And as I point out in chapter two, while the *Melibee* is thorough, it demonstrates that such plain speaking does not always bear its message efficiently.²⁴¹ That is, while the *Melibee’s* plain speaking may best seem to make its point because it is unadorned, it in fact has disadvantages. The *Melibee* and *Parson’s Tale* together embody the limitations of plain speaking. And while holding up what may seem to be the best means for conveying doctrine, Chaucer invites us to re-examine the *Tales* for better forms.

This invitation may present a problem for some; namely, that many of the tales we would re-examine are those that seem to leave behind moral doctrine and focus on the sins of humankind. For Pearsall, this structure may simply reassert his idea that “when one compares Chaucer’s design for the *Canterbury Tales* with other medieval designs for collecting tales, it seems that he has deliberately set out to create a form which will defy systematic interpretation, and which will preserve the maximum of provisionality and openness.”²⁴² But for a critic like Donald Howard, this structure challenges any moral intent:

²⁴¹ Lee Patterson suggests that Melibeus’ failure in the tale to learn reflects a failure on the part of Prudence’s teaching: “it [Melibeus’ failure to learn] casts a dark shadow on the effectiveness of her teaching, a shadow to which Chaucer draws attention with Harry Bailly’s misreading of the tale he has just heard: just as Melibee has learned nothing, neither has Harry”; “‘What Man Artow?’: Authorial Self-Definition in *The Tale of Sir Thopas* and *The Tale of Melibee*,” in *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, ed. Thomas J. Heffernan vol. 11 (Knoxville: The New Chaucer Society, The University of Tennessee, 1989), 158. The tale then is not only a failure of style, but also of pedagogy.

²⁴² *The Canterbury Tales* (New York: George Allen & Unwin, 1985), xii.

Morality is not a part of the plan or the structure – those to tell tales are chosen by lot in the Prologue, and tales are arranged in what seems a haphazard way, surely not under headings as in Gower. Where Gower made the whole explicitly penitential by using a lover’s confession for his frame [in *Confessio amantis*], Chaucer used the pilgrimage, which was penitential in its goal but involved “wandering by the way.”²⁴³

Read as part of a seemingly “haphazard” arrangement that involves “wandering by the way,” the *Tales*’ redirections could be seen as purposely straying from moral reflection, or even as subverting those tales centered on morality and doctrine.

The reasons for this view are less clear. Perhaps the idea is that unless the work maintains a consistent moralizing tone throughout, or leads to a clearly visible moral outcome, the explicitly moral tales cannot be taken seriously. Some seem to think that the failure of the moral tales to control the discourse either reneges on their moral promise or shows that promise to be empty. But their proximity to ribald tales does not give the latter a privilege: juxtaposition alone does not subvert, and if it did, the subversion could work either way. In any case, mere subversion is not Chaucer’s endeavor. Rather, he provides guidelines in his *Retractions* for thinking about the variety and placement of his tales, and how they work in a poetics of correction.

In his *Retractions*, Chaucer never condemns a genre; in fact, while he names specific works in his *Retractions*, he does not name specific Canterbury tales. And regarding those works he revokes, he does not condemn them as sinful, but as “sown[ing] into synne” (X. 1086). This formulation proves central to his poetics of correction. To say that some tales lead to sin acknowledges that other tales may “sowen” or redirect the reader *from* sin. Chaucer’s *Retractions* therefore do two things: first, they do not identify the tales themselves as sinful, and thereby do not foreclose a moral purpose for them. And because he cannot truly *retract* these tales in the sense of *revoke*, since the tales are already circulating, the *Retractions* encourage a type of moral reflection. Chaucer asks pardon for those tales that “sowen into synne,” but not having said which those are, he leaves room for the reader to discover whether a particular tale has brought him or her into sin. He thereby initiates not only a consideration of each tale’s morality but also moral self-reflection. Indeed, by not naming specific tales, the *retractions* do more to operate on the reader than to comment on the intrinsic morality of individual tales.

As to the second point, the *Retractions* effect a type of correction: that while some tales may lead towards sin, others do not and indeed may lead away from sin or correct. Chaucer further suggests a relationship between doctrine and his poetics of correction, citing Paul’s epistle to the Romans: “‘Al that is writen is writen for oure doctrine,’ and that is myn entente” (X. 1083). This passage gives no reason to conclude that Chaucer is winking at the reader here, creating a moment of mock seriousness. We are instead left to grapple with a plain statement of his proposed intention of integrating doctrine into his work.²⁴⁴ But we also have a declaration from Chaucer that partly reveals how Christian

²⁴³ *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 47.

²⁴⁴ The difficulty in spotting any insincerity on Chaucer’s part can be seen in Pearsall’s reading of the *Retractions*, in which he grapples with Chaucer’s plain statement and provides two alternate readings. *The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 270.

moral doctrine works in his poetics of correction. Just before he asserts his “entente,” he says the following: “And if ther be any thyng that displese hem, I preye hem also that they arrette it to the defaute of myn unkonnynge and nat to my wyl, that wolde ful fayn have seyde better if I hadde had konnyng” (X. 1082). This remark is especially telling: in the *Tales*’ depiction of error and correction, it is not always that one might get doctrine wrong – doctrine itself, correct doctrine, is believed not to deviate from truth – but that one’s ability to convey doctrine in language could go awry, in the sense of being ineffective, inefficient, or unsuccessful. Chaucer, then, does not claim that doctrine ought not be present, but that the means of conveying it could be faulty. In acknowledging the inability of language to express truth, he also concedes the necessity of exploring language in all its colors and variety – a continuous search – to find the best articulations of doctrine.

And *emendatio* plays a part in this exploration of language and doctrine. In the *Thopas-Melibee Link* Chaucer refers to the gospels and their textual variations, asserting that the *sentence* remains the same even though the words may change:

For somme of hem seyn moore, and somme seyn lesse,
 Whan they his pitous passioun expresse –
 I meene of Mark, Mathew, Luc, and John –
 But douteles, hir sentence is al oon. (VII. 949-52)

While this passage suggests that divergent articulations may share the same *sentence*, if we look at the way the pilgrims and characters appropriate discourse, especially the Miller’s appropriation of the Host’s “quiten,” or when Chanticleer mistranslates *In principio mulier est hominis confusio*, claiming “the sentence of this Latyn is, / ‘Womman is mannes joye and al his blis’” (VII. 3165-6), they often use identical articulations with divergent or false meanings. Therefore, unlike the *Thopas-Melibee Link*’s reference to the gospels, words may remain the same, but their meanings have been changed, a point that makes clear that word forms by themselves do not guarantee correct sense. Chaucer suggests the danger of distorting doctrine through language, while also making clear that word forms may vary but still preserve sense. He thus reveals a relationship between practices of correction and the corrupt articulation of doctrine.

But before we can accept Chaucer’s exploration of language for doctrine’s best articulation, we have to contend with the Parson’s criticism, which is that fictions “weyven soothfastnesse” (X. 33). We could hardly take the Parson’s rejection of fables for Chaucer’s, since he has told an abundance of such fables. Still, Chaucer does not subject the Parson to mock or ridicule; in fact, the Parson is allowed to tell his tale without rebuttal and thus conclude the work. This is a serious criticism, and Chaucer treats it as such. What is his answer to it? While his tale puts the whole poem to the test of plainly articulated doctrine, the Parson also makes a connection between practices of correction and doctrine. By telling fables we can “weyve” truth suggests that certain forms of language are not compatible with truth, which requires us to alter or correct our mode of discourse. The Parson warns us that we must not “weyve,” and nor should our own language “weyve,” but that we should beware lest false or corrupted articulations of *sentence* take us from “the wey” (X. 49). For these reasons the Parson forsakes rhyming, alliteration, and proposes to speak plainly, in prose and without “glose,” in order to

“shewe [us] the wey, in this viage, / Of thilke parfit glorious pilgrymage / That highte Jerusalem celestial” (X. 49-51). But, as I observed above, the Parson also submits to the correction “Of clerkes” (X. 57), and this fact both clarifies and complicates the Parson’s role in Chaucer’s poetics of correction. As we know from chapter one, submitting material to the correction of “clerkes” emphatically does not guarantee definitive correction. So what is Chaucer’s purpose here?

Having the Parson place his treatise under correction concedes a relationship between *sentence* and *solaas*. That is, direct renditions of *sentence*, even when unadorned, still risk “weyving” truth; prose or plain speaking is not a guarantee for preserving *sentence*. The Parson seems to assume that they are the closest humankind can come to absolute assurance that sense is preserved. But this is his formulation, not Chaucer’s, and submitting to correction shows that he knows its limitations. In fact, Chaucer’s concession through the Parson, that sense may be corrupted in both earnest and game, elides some of the distance between the *Tales*’ genres associated with either *sentence* or *solaas*. It is not as if one can guarantee uncorrupted truth, even though an author may choose prose in order to be as clear as possible.

C.D. Benson suggests that the juxtaposition of *Thopas* and the *Melibee* demonstrates that *sentence* and *solaas* are both required for a successful Christian poetics; delight is necessary for instruction (you do not want to lose your audience), but instruction is also necessary to provide substance to *solaas*.²⁴⁵ The *Thopas* and *Melibee* therefore present two extremes between which the Christian poet must walk. As long as it does not confuse true doctrine, form matters only to the extent that one may convey *sentence* better than another. Thus, precise fidelity to an exemplar – as long as it is not biblical – is not as important as preserving the sense. Yet the question remains as to how exactly correction applies to this idea of *sentence* and what it teaches us concerning Chaucer’s artistic and moral project.

Since he never singles out one tale as an exemplar – and we never find out who wins the storytelling contest – Chaucer imagines the *Tales* as exemplifying an ongoing correction of style and form. He holds up two extremes, the *Thopas* and *Melibee*, and invites the reader to explore which tales present the best synthesis of *sentence* and *solaas*, as Chaucer himself articulates: “Tales of best sentence and moost solaas” (I. 798), in regards to which pilgrim “bereth hym best of alle” (I. 796). Benson suggests that this depiction of styles promotes choosing the best one for conveying *sentence*, and in regards to practices of correction, a similarity is clear: choosing the best style presents a process of ongoing, recursive selection to make the *correct* choice. Yet something remains to be said regarding the *Melibee*. To be sure, it provides one of the stylistic extremes that Chaucer holds up to guide us on the road between best *sentence* and most *solaas*. And as I point out in chapter two, the *Melibee*, while perhaps flawed, indicates the corrective

²⁴⁵ C. David Benson articulates this notion as follows: “The subject of the *Thopas-Melibee* unit is not so much the difference between art and meaning (*solaas* versus *sentence*) as it is the need to combine the two...*Melibee* itself shows an awareness that style is as necessary as substance if an audience is to be genuinely reached and moved...*Melibee* is not the ideal of Christian art. Because it is so abstract, dull, and repetitious, the reader is less likely to absorb or act on its thoroughly admirable message...*Melibee* contains much of the truth of Christianity, as Chaucer saw it, but there is a real question of how effectively, then or now, it is able to convince an audience of that truth”; *Chaucer’s Drama of Style: Poetic Variety and Contrast in the ‘Canterbury Tales’* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 32, 41, 42, 43.

structure in the surrounding tales. Although the style of the *Melibee* (or the *Parson's Tale*) is not what one would likely or logically select when choosing a style, Chaucer sees it as one that nevertheless must be examined.

But while presenting a work where correction forms a central means by which the tales proceed and proliferate, based on the idea that perfection is never achievable – that throughout the free play of forms, genres, and voices, where mistakes are made, followed by adjustments, forms will always bear marks of imperfection – Chaucer does not deny that correct doctrine exists. It is present even if ignored. But to make sure one grasps it, it needs to be articulated and re-articulated. He sportively boils down the *play* in *Thopas* – that which adorns the *Tales* – but he at least twice articulates moral doctrine. It would, however, be a mistake to understand the *Melibee* as acting as a foundation or linchpin for the *Tales*; indeed, it constitutes a crucial yet flawed discourse in Chaucer's poetics of correction.

The *Melibee* and its Placement in Fragment VII: Doctrine in Chaucer's Corrective Design

So I now return briefly to the *Melibee*, placing it in its immediate context to understand, from the perspective of the poetics of correction I have described, what positive function it has in the work. While some critics have treated it as central to Chaucer's idea of his role and of the *Tales* – Robertson said that to understand its *sentence* is to understand the *sentence* of the *Tales* – others think that it displays Chaucer's struggle to define his role and the work.²⁴⁶ I do not presume to resolve this debate entirely, but examining the *Melibee* in its immediate context in Fragment VII provides a better understanding not only of how the *Melibee* fits into Chaucer's poetics of correction, but also of how moral doctrine takes part in his artistic process.

In the *Thopas-Melibee Link*, the Host requests that the narrator's tale contain “som murthe or som doctryne” (VII. 935). The narrator proceeds to tell a tale replete with “doctryne,” calling it a “moral tale vertuous” (VII. 940), “told somtyme in sondry wyse / Of sondry folk” (VII. 941-2). That “sondry folk” can agree he suggests by the four evangelists, who “alle acorden as in hire sentence, / Al be ther in hir tellyng difference” (VII. 947-48). With regards to *sentence* or doctrine what particularly matters is that “hir sentence is al sooth” (VII. 946); they convey truth regardless the manner of their “tellyng.” Albeit the necessary work of grammatical, textual, and stylistic correction, and although word forms and choices may vary, Chaucer conveys the importance of sense remaining constant.

This very explanation in the *Thopas-Melibee Link* gives some of the rationale for Chaucer's poetics of correction:

[T]hough that I telle somewhat moore

²⁴⁶ D.W. Robertson advises us to “pay attention to the sentence of the *Melibee* because it affords a clue to the sentence of all the other tales which come before it”; *A Preface to Chaucer: Studies in Medieval Perspectives* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), 369; on the other hand, Lee Patterson argues that the *Melibee* takes part in Chaucer's struggle for authorial self-definition by representing “that mode of writing constrained to specific political interests from which Chaucer has always sought escape”; “‘What Man Artow?': Authorial Self-Definition,” 123.

Of proverbes than ye han herd bifoore
Comprehended in this litel tretys heere,
To enforce with th'effect of my mateere;
And though I nat the same wordes seye
As ye han herd, yet to yow alle I preye
Blameth me nat; for, as in my sentence,
Shul ye nowher fynden difference
Fro the sentence of this tretys lyte... (VII. 955-63)

Here we have the Augustinian idea: that while the chaff may vary the kernel or core truth remains invariable. The essence of tales should remain consistent regardless of its articulation and ornament. This is not to say that ornament is unimportant for conveying *sentence*, though *Thopas* shows what a tale all ornament might be. But if we think he varies his “speche” (VII. 954), he does not vary his *sentence*. The narrator reminds us of his own stake in making *sentence* discernible; he makes clear what should remain intact.

This understanding may explain why, apart from the obvious self-deprecating joke, Chaucer assigns himself this tale and why it is found in the middle of Fragment VII. However, some of these answers prove unsatisfactory. For instance, it could be argued that in a stretch of storytelling so diverse that the *Melibee* would of course be on the menu, but such an explanation does not hold when we consider that Chaucer neither obliges himself to represent every possible genre nor does he. Another reason has to do with *sentence* and its relationship to correction. It could be argued that in a collection of tales closely imitating the work of correction through their indirection, where forms are constantly changing, and the chaff variegated, an anchor is required; it both articulates the *sentence* of the *Tales* and offers itself up as an object of correction.

And that reason – although it may look like Robertson *redux* – may be tempting. More than any stretch of storytelling found in the *Tales*, Fragment VII conveys the sort of variety found throughout the whole work, from earnest to game. Indeed, through its show of diversity, Fragment VII may be regarded as a mini-*Canterbury Tales*. And set nearly in the middle of this diverse fragment, in a stretch of storytelling where the Host now guides by indirection, where decorum has been tossed aside, and where the reader very much sees the *Tales*' incremental series at work, sits the *Melibee*. Thus, a work committed to correction and “difference” in poetry, a work that mimics and dramatizes correction repeatedly, can articulate the *sentence* upon which this human comedy is based in, and precisely because of, its most richly diverse section: in it, the *Melibee*'s clarity itself is part of the diversity while also giving a plain statement of its motive and logic.

But we are left with a problem. Even if we accept that Chaucer uses the *Melibee* to make a clear case for the *sentence* of the *Tales* – a point on which many would disagree – still it is a case made of schoolboy proverbs. That is, if the *Melibee* is anchoring the *Tales* at all with *sentence*, it is doing so with the sort of proverbial wisdom that an educated reader would regard as elementary, making it doubtful that the *Melibee* is acting in any serious capacity as a moral anchor.

However, a more satisfactory answer may be found in the *Melibee*'s placement within the *Tales* as a whole. The *Melibee* follows *Sir Thopas*, a tale that J.A. Burrow describes as exemplifying the “vigorous wild stock upon which were grafted Chaucer's other more literary and sophisticated styles,” and which Lee Patterson describes as “what

medieval moralists would have called a *ludus juvenilis*, an expression of the illicit waywardness of the child.”²⁴⁷ As I argue in chapter three, through the *Tales*’ structure of correction, *Thopas*’ thorough expression of “waywardness” is corrected, perhaps overcorrected, through the *Melibee*’s prose didacticism. But while a correction, or at least a redirection, the *Melibee*’s placement in the middle of Fragment VII, rather than asserting the *Melibee* as the *Tales*’ linchpin, suggests that Chaucer believes the *Melibee* can be corrected or improved upon. It is not allowed a final say, since the *Tales* will again redirect the storytelling once the *Melibee* is finished, just as it is questionable whether the Parson has the final say since he places his treatise under “correccioun.”

If we do regard Fragment VII as a mini-*Canterbury Tales*, we can also understand it as something of a nucleus of the entire work. The *Melibee* lies at the center of this fragment only to be shown its own limitations, while the tale that does have the final say – at least for this fragment – is the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* (here on NPT), which presents a stylistic leap. This structure seems to be diametrically opposed to the *Tales* as a whole: Fragment VII ends with the NPT, the *Tales* with the Parson; and within the center of the *Tales* lies a plethora of genres, Fragment VII with two diametrically opposed tales, *Thopas* and *Melibee*. In a sense, the structure of the entire *Tales* looks to be something of a rethinking of what occurs in Fragment VII, or vice-versa; Fragment VII could be something of a model for correcting the *Tales*. This circular logic resonates with the recursive practice of correction but also gets to a fundamental question concerning correction, doctrine, and the roles of *sentence* and *solaas*. Which wins the day, *sentence* or *solaas*, game or earnest? Through their respective positions in the *Tales*, the NPT or the Parson are given a final say, but Chaucer never indicates that one is a correct model, which leaves the reader between a stylistically pleasing and a dull tale, between entertainment and moral seriousness. But rather than viewing this situation as a reader’s no-man’s land, perhaps we can understand this as a position of both contemplation and enjoyment.

What the juxtaposition of *Thopas* and *Melibee* accomplishes, besides enacting stylistic overcorrection, or the literary extremes between which the good poet must walk, is helping us think about how much form can vary in relation to sense. Indeed, besides presenting form as an object for correction, they push the reader to think about form, content, and the best way of bringing the two together. For example, Chaucer questions how suitable a form the *Melibee* really has. Soon after Melibeus turns to his community for advice, up rises an “olde wise” to lend his counsel, calling for patience and “greet deliberacion” (VII. 1042) before embarking on war. This counsel is not far from Prudence’s own when she later counsels thoughtful meditation, peace, and forgiveness. However, it is not long before this “olde wise” is interrupted: “And whan this olde man wende to enforchen his tale by resons, wel ny alle atones bigonne they to rise for to breken his tale, and beden hym ful ofte his wordes for to abregge. For soothly, he that precheth to hem that listen nat heeren his wordes, his sermon hem anoieth” (VII. 1043-44).

Just as with the telling of *Thopas*, the “olde wise” is interrupted, while the narrator reminds us that when we “precheth” to those who wish not to hear our words (“listen nat”), our “sermon” will annoy, and if our words annoy we will lose our audience. Here we have an echo of the Horation idea that to succeed as poetry the words

²⁴⁷ J.A. Burrow, *Ricardian Poetry: Chaucer, Gower, Langland, and the ‘Gawain’ Poet* (New York: Penguin Books, 1971), 21; Lee Patterson, “‘What Man Artow?’: Authorial Self-Definition,” 133.

must instruct and delight, but we also have an internal criticism of the *Melibee*.²⁴⁸ The narrator claims that the “olde wise” “wende to enforchen his tale by resons,” a claim that echoes the narrator’s earlier pronouncement introducing the tale: that he has included more proverbs to “enforce with th’effect” of his “mateere” (VII.958).²⁴⁹ Chaucer thus indicates that the *Melibee* is also in danger of not being heard or in danger of being interrupted. But notably, he does not interrupt the tale. As Patterson suggests, Chaucer provides no indication of irony, and although one can read his humor here, the tale is not merely the butt of a joke.²⁵⁰ He acknowledges the tale’s weaknesses but includes it anyway – not only, as I suggest in chapter two, to give an indication of the *Tales*’ corrective structure, but also to provide an instance of a morally explicit tale. It is a tale that he takes seriously, while also acknowledging the weakness of its form, that it may not best convey *sentence*, even if it might be the clearest articulation; its style is suited neither for art nor for moral doctrine.

An objection may arise that if Chaucer does convey the inadequacy of language to articulate doctrine fully and goes ahead with his literary experimentation, could not this fact more or less support Middleton’s assertions? Is it possible that Chaucer acknowledges language’s inadequacy to give himself free rein to convey the good of literature through performance, leaving doctrine aside? While such objections should be considered, we must recognize that the *Tales*’ many forms and genres also convey a need for multiple articulations. While Chaucer does not always deal in didactic maxims, his concerns still lie with the articulation of doctrine; rather than an absence, there is a search, a corrective process, for the best means of articulating moral and doctrinal concerns. At the same time, his indirect handling of these concerns allows him to avoid the literary pitfall of sententious moralizing. The proliferation of genres by means of the *Tales*’ narrative frame forms a core part of Chaucer’s artistic achievement and self-contained artistic concerns, but it is also an achievement that cannot be divorced from his doctrinal concerns. Understanding that perfect articulation is unachievable, he initiates an artistic enterprise that uses literary performance to examine societal and doctrinal issues. To ignore this emphasis on doctrine would diminish Chaucer’s project. The expression of doctrine is not the sole purpose of his experimentation, but establishes the problematic that gives life to his literary exploration.

Sentence Versus Solaas and the Nun’s Priest’s Tale: The Tension between Earnest and Game in Chaucer’s Corrective Design

In many ways the NPT seems in direct opposition to the *Melibee*, succeeding artistically where the *Melibee* falls short. But like the *Melibee* it also conveys the problems of articulating *sentence*, although the conclusion to the NPT only appears to address doctrine and correction:

²⁴⁸ Charles Muscatine has taken to task the Horatian idea as a strict model for medieval literature, that such a “purely historical view” condemns “most medieval poetry [with] an incredible obtuseness”; however, Muscatine still concedes that “passages of didacticism, learning, are a major component of Chaucer’s poetry”; *Chaucer and the French Tradition* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1957; 1964), 93.

²⁴⁹ Patterson points out this connection, although he comes to different conclusions. ““What Man Artow?”: Authorial Self-Definition,” 155-56.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 152.

Taketh the moralite, goode men.
For Seint Paul seith that al that writen is,
To oure doctrine it is ywrite, ywis;
Taketh the fruyt, and lat the chaf be stille.
Now, goode God, if that it be thy wille,
As seith my lord, so make us alle goode men,
And brynge us to his heighe blisse! Amen. (VII. 3440-46)

Here Chaucer cites Paul's epistle to the Romans, which asserts that all scripture, all written word, is inspired by God for the benefit of "oure doctrine," and includes the Augustinian precept of separating the wheat from the chaff, core truth from ornamentation. Now, no critic will take this passage entirely straight; indeed, its very presence in the NPT, a tale E. Talbot Donaldson identifies as one of Chaucer's "most elusive," and where we witness chickens debate the seriousness of dreams, a straightforward injunction to take the morality and leave the chaff is suspect.²⁵¹ And even if Chaucer himself takes these scriptural precepts seriously, it is not so clear that he subscribes to these precepts to the letter. However, I do resist the nearly unanimous conclusion that Chaucer is being completely ironic – that is, ironic to the point that leaves no room for any serious consideration of the passage. Such clear allusions to doctrine, and to the nature of reading and writing through the Christian lens of "fruyt" and "chaf," while even half serious is still half serious. Regardless of the humor and irony, which Chaucer means for us to enjoy, the passage invites us to think about the tale vis-à-vis doctrine and to think about whether doctrine can in fact be articulated here. Indeed, critics have had to think about doctrine's presence in the NPT.

At the same time, while the injunction to take the "moralite" directs our thinking toward doctrine, the "fruyt," Chaucer does not actually want us to leave behind the "chaf." Instead, I contend that he considers how ornamentation (the "chaf") and enjoyment may be used in the articulation of correct doctrine. Indeed, the NPT provides a model for the union of *sentence* and *solaas*. This model suggests that, like practices of correction, searching for the best form is also a recursive process, whereby forms and genres will never perfectly convey the truth they are meant to contain. So while it might not be clear what the moral of the NPT is, that is precisely the point in a poetics of correction: just as the *Retractions* do not identify specifically which tales "sownen into synne," an unspecified moral lends itself to a moral search and contemplation, one that is recursive. Chaucer experiments with most styles and genres within the *Tales*, providing the reader a diverse palette from which to choose forms to match the sense, but never pointing to an exemplar. Such experimentation can be found throughout the NPT and situates it firmly in Chaucer's poetics of correction.

²⁵¹ *Speaking of Chaucer* (Durham, NC: The Labyrinth Press, 1983), 146. The seriousness of this reference to the NPT's moral has long been a point of debate. For instance, Helen Cooper argues that the "problem at the end of the Nun's Priest's Tale is that it is impossible to discover quite what *doctrine* one is supposed to be extracting"; *The Structure of The Canterbury Tales* (London: Duckworth, 1983), 240. John M. Ganim also asserts that "the tale entertains profoundly under the guise of a moral, but that moral could be replicated or separated or read in a thousand ways;" *Chaucerian Theatricality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 104.

The NPT follows the *Monk's Tale*, the reaction to which resembles the response elicited by the *Melibee's* "olde wise" and the warning as to annoying one's audience. The Host responds, "Sire Monk, namoore of this, so God yow blesse! / Youre tale anoyeth al this compaignye" (VII. 2788-89). The Host continues to upbraid the Monk, saying that if it were not for the bells jingling on his "bridel" he "sholde er this han fallen doun for sleep, / Although the slough had never been so deep" (VII. 2797-98), coming to the pronouncement: "Whereas a man may have noon audience, / Noght helpeth it to tellen his sentence" (VII. 2801-2). These assertions, of course, echo the warning exemplified by the "olde wise," and so it seems that the Monk – at least in the eyes of the Knight and Host who interrupt – does not heed the warning. The Knight, who appears to take the criticism of the "olde wise" into account, proposes an antidote to the Monk's "greet disese" (VII. 2771) of a tale by having someone tell a contrary tale:

And the contrarie is joye and greet solas...
Swich thyng is gladsom, as it thynketh me,
And of swich thyng were goodly for to telle. (VII. 2774, 2779-80)

The idea of a cure by contraries has already been proposed and explained by Prudence in the *Melibee*, providing one of the many points of commonality between these two tales.²⁵² In the NPT's prologue, this cure by contraries seeks a literary reversal of the genre and narrative trajectories found in the Monk's collection of "Tragedie"; indeed, the Knight proposes a stylistic revision or correction that for the Knight is "goodly for to telle," to "quite" the *Monk's Tale*. And as the Knight advances this literary correction, the Host enjoins the "sweet preest, this goodly man sir John" (VII. 2820) to tell the next tale.²⁵³

Traditionally, the NPT has been understood as a beast fable, where the moral comes at the conclusion: "Taketh the moralite, goode men" (VII. 3440). However, this moral assertion is more complicated than it first appears, as is the NPT's genre, since its status as a beast fable has been disputed.²⁵⁴ But like Chaucer's other tales, its summary is simple enough: A rooster, Chanticleer, has a dream vision warning him of eminent danger. This dream startles him, causing him to groan. Upon noticing his alarm, his hen,

²⁵² I elaborate on Prudence's exposition of the cure by contraries ("that in maladies that oon contrarye is warissshed by another contrarye" VII. 1277) in chapter two.

²⁵³ Through his diction Chaucer here seems to be creating a relationship between *goodly* tales and *goodly* humans, a relationship that echoes the classical grammar tradition, whereby those who speak or write well are also expected to live well. Catherine M. Chin points out that the relationship between "literacy and social status" also implied that "the literate person ought to be urbane, selfless, knowledgeable, and virtuous. This picture is the same as that promoted in rhetorical education, and it seems to have been common at earlier stages of literacy training as well, if the copying of moral maxims by schoolchildren is any indication. Grammatical ethics are part of an established trope of the values that educated persons more generally were supposed to hold"; *Grammar and Christianity in the Late Roman World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 40.

²⁵⁴ Jill Mann argues that the NPT is not beast fable but beast epic. Mann points us to the problem of the moral in the NPT, namely that the tale does not articulate a specific moral, but that the "moral of the story is in the eye (and the immediate circumstances) of the beholder." If the declaration in Paul's epistle to the Romans is true, that all is written for our doctrine, "then there is no need to build a moral into the narrative at all"; *From Aesop to Reynard: Beast Literature in Medieval Britain* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 259, 260.

Pertelote, chides him for fearing a dream, citing authorities that he is merely experiencing an imbalance of humors and should take herbs for his digestion. Chanticleer rejects Pertelote's dismissal of the importance of dreams and retorts with extensive authorities as to their substance. Nevertheless, after making his point, justifying the dream's warning, he flies down to the barnyard and carries on with his day, as if the prior discussion had not occurred, crowing and copulating with his hens. The figure from his dreams, the fox, soon arrives, and Chanticleer displays a natural reticence to the predator. The fox however flatters him into singing, and while his eyes are closed and his neck outstretched, the fox snatches Chanticleer. Pandemonium ensues as an old widow and company chase the fox to the edge of the woods. To escape, Chanticleer suggests that the fox gloat before departing, and once the fox opens his mouth to reply, Chanticleer flies to safety, unwilling to be tricked by the fox a second time.

Populated with talking animals and filled with jokes and parody, the *solaas* of the tale is readily apparent. Still, if the NPT represents a tale of "best sentence and moost solaas," what might determine the success of this tale outside of *solaas*? I will argue that the NPT addresses the flaws of the *Melibee* by following a structural process of correction that the *Melibee* suggests but struggles to follow itself. Thus, a reason why the NPT succeeds artistically is because it follows the practices of correction tied to Chaucer's moral enterprise.

Not long after Chanticleer appears, we witness his distress regarding a dream: he "gan Gronen in his throte" (VII. 2886). Taken aback by his display of fear, Pertelote upbraids him, saying "What eyleth yow, to grone in this manere? / Ye been a verray sleper; fy, for shame!" (VII. 2890-91). Her condemnation of Chanticleer's "hertelees" (VII. 2908) groaning initiates a debate, whereby Pertelote intends to correct Chanticleer's belief that dreams are consequential: "Allas! And konne ye been agast of swevenys? / Nothyng, God woot, but vanitee in sweven is" (VII. 2921-22). Pertelote's discussion of dreams contains a lengthy catalogue of the physical ailments that cause bad dreams, "the greete superfluytee / Of youre rede colera" (VII. 2927-28), and their cures, "digestyves" (VII. 2961), and she cites an auctor in her defense: "Catoun, which that was so wys a man" (VII. 2940). And if we compare this moment to the *Melibee*, we have similar scenes where a wife instructs and corrects her husband. Indeed, the lengthy citations of authority by a wife in such close proximity to the *Melibee* calls for comparison. However, the NPT contradicts the dynamics established in the *Melibee*, where Prudence's counsel continues to win out, where she must continually guide and correct Melibeus, and where she turns out to be right. Chanticleer instead turns the tables on Pertelote and *enforces* his matter with more authorities, including Cato, *exempla*, as "the lyf of Seint Kenelm" (VII. 3110), Macrobeus, biblical figures, such as Daniel and Joseph, as well as classical figures, such as Hector's wife, Andromache. As opposed to Melibeus, Chanticleer dismisses his wife's counsel, curtly concluding the debate: "Shortly I seye, as for conclusioun, / That I shal han of this avisioun / Adversitee" (VII. 3151-53).

Chanticleer thus becomes something of a foil to Melibeus, and similarly the NPT becomes a foil to the *Melibee*. As I argue in chapter two, the *Melibee* establishes a narrative concerned with correction and suggests what is taking place in the rest of the *Tales*. However, as pointed out by Patterson, while the *Melibee* is concerned with pedagogy, the tale's teaching never becomes fully realized in the narrative, except

perhaps at the end, and even there it is debatable.²⁵⁵ And just as the correction of Prudence is never fully realized, the *Melibee* becomes a narrative in need of correction: that is, Melibeus's continuous mistakes force Prudence – the personified emendator – to assert and re-assert the didactic prose that soon overwhelms the narrative.

And as the *Melibee*'s form and style suggests its concern with correction by inviting emendation, we soon find that the NPT's form and style also concerns correction, but in a way that produces its stylistic achievement. At the same time, the NPT is not exactly the *Melibee*'s literary opposite, nor does the NPT completely succeed at its formal and stylistic depiction of correction. Chaucer still reserves judgment. Rather the NPT opposes the *Melibee* in a way that establishes a qualified success, emphasizing the *Melibee*'s shortcomings, while still posing the limitations of all practices of correction.

We have witnessed how the NPT corresponds to the *Melibee*'s narrative, not only by reversing the instructor-pupil roles of Prudence and Melibeus through Chanticleer and Pertelote, but also by having Chanticleer abruptly end the discussion of authorities, saying “Now let us speke of myrthe, and stynte al this. / Madame Pertelote, so have I blis” (VII. 3157-58). The narrative then shifts to Chanticleer's admiration of Pertelote before flying from the beams and carrying on as if the prior conversation had not occurred; he seems to forget his own protestations regarding the consequence of dreams. And here is where we get a qualification for Chanticleer's role as a foil to Melibeus. In this moment Chanticleer forgets the lessons he has just expounded, seemingly incautious of the dream's warning for which he had just lectured on the importance of heeding. It is therefore questionable how much better able he is than Melibeus to learn or stand correction.²⁵⁶ At the same time, Chanticleer's abrupt “stynting” of his prior citation of authorities provides just one of the many narrative shifts in the tale, shifts that help define the NPT's structure of correction.

But before analyzing the NPT's structure, I must point out that the observation of the NPT's narrative diversity is not new. Peter Travis has observed that the genre of NPT has often been associated with Menippian Satire, which is multifarious in its forms and registers.²⁵⁷ For Travis, however, Menippean *parody* allows for the NPT's imitation of multiple forms within its single narrative: *disputatio*, mock epic, and other genres culled from the grammar school curriculum.²⁵⁸ The curriculum also included *enarratio*; Travis

²⁵⁵ Patterson, “‘What Man Artow?’: Authorial Self-Definition,” 158.

²⁵⁶ Edward Wheatley points out the “ethical implications” of Chanticleer's poor reading in “forgetting the primary import of the text” of his dream vision. Wheatley asserts that “‘translation’ of texts into ethical behavior was one of the purposes of reading in the Middle Ages.” If this is the case, Chanticleer's apparent forgetfulness to follow the line of action suggested by his own commentary of the dream – namely, that of caution – indicates a moral lapse beyond his obvious carelessness. *Mastering Aesop: Medieval Education, Chaucer, and His Followers* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000), 112.

²⁵⁷ Peter Travis asserts that the NPT “is a potpourri of genres and registers: it could be seen as a comedy, *tragedie manqué*, mock epic, sermon, epyllion, debate, fabliau, exemplum, romance, beast fable, a form of wisdom literature, and much more”; *Disseminal Chaucer: Rereading ‘The Nun’s Priest’s Tale’* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), 74.

²⁵⁸ Rita Copeland also points out the NPT's diversity of form: “The *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* yields up the teaching of the arts poetriae in comically concentrated form. It is both product and illustration of the catalogues of precepts about form, a kind of distilled exercise in every formal possibility known to the

shows that Chaucer knew this. And from chapter two, it is now apparent that Chaucer was very familiar with *emendatio* as well, so while Menippean parody provides an occasion for a multiplicity of forms, the way Chaucer shifts between these forms in the NPT emulates the practice of narrative correction I discuss in chapter three.

Chanticleer's "stynting" thus resembles the actions of the Host when he interrupts and redirects the storytelling in the frame narrative. And in a sense, Chanticleer himself inadvertently acts as a corrector, since these shifts will give the NPT a narrative pacing, diversity, and stylistic success that do not exist in the *Melibee*.

The first distinct narrative shift in the NPT occurs within the first 100 lines. The tale opens with "A povre wydwe, somdeel stape in age" (VII. 2821), and Chaucer continues to describe her home, property, family, and diet in some detail; indeed, these initial details of the "povre wydwe" anticipate a narrative concerning her. However, just as Chanticleer later interrupts the lengthy recitation of *auctores*, this recitation of the "wydwe" is suddenly dispensed with, and we find that it was all along something of a preamble, introducing one of her livestock:

A yeerd she hadde, enclosed al aboute
With stikkes, and a drye dych withoute,
In which she hadde a cok, hight Chauntecleer. (VII. 2847-49)

From this point the "povre wydwe" is forgotten until the story's climax, although the opening 29 lines focus exclusively on her life and means. But as we shall see, these shifts become a staple of the narrative.

By "stynting" and starting again, the NPT reconstructs the discontinuous aspect of the *Tales*' corrective form, as discussed in chapter three: when a narrative series runs its course or becomes interrupted, a new narrative series begins, creating the slowly changing incremental series of the entire work.²⁵⁹ After an initial description of Chanticleer, taking close to as many lines as the description of the "povre wydwe," the tale appears to start again: "And so bifel that in a dawenyng" (VII. 2882) suggests a new day and initiates the description of Chanticleer's "dreem," which causes him to "grone" and leads to Pertelote's censure. Thus commences the recitation of *auctores* noted above, after which comes the deliberate shift made by Chanticleer: "Now let us speke of myrthe, and stynte al this." And these shifts continue. After Chanticleer "styntes" that debate, he flies from the beams and we return to a mundane barnyard scene, where Chanticleer struts about and "feathers" his hens and "chukketh whan he hath a corn yfounde" (VII. 3182). Yet the narrator again appears to redirect the narrative:

Leve I this Chauntecleer in his pasture,

literary curriculum"; "Chaucer and Rhetoric," in *The Yale Companion to Chaucer*, ed. Seth Lerer (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2006), 138.

²⁵⁹ Wheatley recognizes a similar pattern, which he ascribes to a "character-voiced commentary" in the text. Wheatley argues that Chanticleer's "lengthy comments threaten to displace the fable text from a position of centrality to one of marginality. Studying these markers can help us understand how Chaucer exploits tension between his contemporaries' expectations about when and how the fable plot would unfold and the displacement of the plot by delaying the action in order to comment upon it"; *Mastering Aesop*, 104. Although Chaucer no doubt made use of the commentary tradition, he kept other textual practices in mind (*compilatio*, *enaratio*, and *emendatio*) while experimenting with his writing and presentation.

And after wol I telle his aventure.
Whan that the month in which the world bigan,
That highte March, whan God first maked man (VII. 3185-88)

The narrator does not actually leave the story of Chanticleer behind but appears to restart the tale once more (so far we have had at least two beginnings), and the tale's register seems to change, as the narrator refers to the beginning of humankind. Thus, with the change in registers, the sharp shifts in storytelling, and the clear indications of a new beginning, where everything that has come before seems a preamble, the tale persistently redirects itself and starts anew.

Travis claims that the NPT would have reminded educated readers of their prior grammatical training.²⁶⁰ A grammar school curriculum would include assignments that spanned multiple genres, registers, and styles; likewise, the NPT switches genre and register, but in a way that also resembles the *Tales*' incremental series. As the tale's indirection affords narrative rebeginnings, it also changes in form and register, as the NPT suddenly drops its narrative thread and loses itself in parodies of apostrophe. For example, soon after the fox is introduced, the narrator shifts not only to apostrophe, but also to other literary subjects:

O false mordrour, lurkyng in thy den!
O newe Scariot, new Genylon,
False dissymulour, o Greek Synon,
That broghest Troye al outrely to sorwe! (VII. 3226-29)

Although the narrator will soon redirect attention to Chanticleer's story, such narrative asides are both sudden and frequent. For instance, a few lines after the narrative returns to Chanticleer, the rooster is left behind again as the narrator begins to ponder free will and *auctores*:

But I ne kan nat bulte it to the bren
As kan the hooly doctour Augustyn,
Or Boece, or the Bisshop Bradwardyn,
Wheither that Goddes worthy forwrytyng
Streyneth me nedely for to doon a thyng -
"Nedely" clepe I symple necessitee -
Or elles, if free choys be graunted me
To do that same thyng, or do it noght,
Though God forwoot it er that I was wroght;
Or if his wityng streyneth never a deel
But by necessitee condicioneel. (VII. 3240-50)

Several more narrative shifts occur before the NPT concludes, but we can already observe a marked difference from the *Melibee*. Shifts or corrections occur in the *Melibee*, but they only continue the same didactic prose; Prudence must assert and re-assert her *sententia*. The NPT's digressions, however, provide the stylistic and register

²⁶⁰ Travis, *Disseminial Chaucer*, 53.

variations that the *Melibee* lacks. The *Melibee* therefore suggests through its repetition what the NPT accomplishes through poetic diversity.

This contrast between the *Melibee* and NPT continues through the sharp distinction between the learning and correction of both Melibeus and Chanticleer. As I point out in chapter two, Melibeus is not always able to understand and apply the lessons of Prudence; he must be retaught and redirected. Only at the end, and through the constant guidance of Prudence, does Melibeus resolve the conflict with his adversaries. However, with Chanticleer's climatic encounter with the fox, we seem to have a much better student. While the fox is able to trick Chanticleer once, flattering him to sing and thus causing him to close his eyes and stretch out his neck, he refuses to be tricked again: "And first I shrewe myself, bothe blood and bones, / If thou bigyle me ofter than ones" (VII. 3428-29). He genuinely seems to learn from his mistake, saying "For he that wynketh, whan he sholde see, / Al wilfully, God lat him nevere thee!" (VII. 3431-32). The NPT thereby presents a much more apt a pupil, one that does not require exhaustive correction and recorection – of course, a second mistake on Chanticleer's part would not allow for another chance at self-correction.

But why create this similarity and opposition between the *Melibee* and the NPT? An initial conclusion might be that Chaucer wants to show how the NPT can succeed where the *Melibee* cannot in order to subvert the explicit moral nature of the *Melibee*. Indeed, this may be an appealing reading for those who question the sincerity at the close of the NPT, when the narrator asks his readers to take the morality and let the chaff be. The idea that Chaucer once again stresses the artistic shortcomings of the *Melibee* via the success of the NPT could very well appear to undermine the *Melibee* and the *sentence* that comes with it.

However, we must understand that while the NPT conveys *solaas*, it is nothing like the *Thopas*. As previously discussed, just as the *Thopas* presents the reader with pure *solaas*, the *Melibee* contains something like pure *sentence*. Thus, the *Thopas* is really the *Melibee*'s literary opposite, not the NPT. In fact, the ways the NPT opposes the *Melibee*, through its style and structure of correction, demonstrates that it is a tale of much more substance than *Thopas*. The very fact that the NPT parodies the structural and moral content of the *Melibee* is not to say that it is subverting that content; indeed, the way that the NPT parodies the *Melibee* is as much as to demonstrate that the NPT has learned a lesson that the *Melibee* imparts. Even the *Thopas*, from the interruption Chaucer stages to the Host's vitriolic criticism of the tale, suggests that pure *solaas* is not *solaas* at all. There cannot be enjoyment without some level of intellectual or moral engagement, and therefore "moralite" in some form is necessary for good art.

So if it is not merely subverting the *Melibee*'s *sentence*, what exactly are the lessons the NPT takes from the *Melibee*? So far we have discussed the importance of not losing one's audience; that is, in order to receive a hearing you must in some respects delight in order to teach. Chaucer guides his attentive readers to follow this lesson by inviting them to find a middle way between the styles of *Thopas* and *Melibee*. Likewise, by its very stylistic success, the NPT demonstrates the necessity of correction for finding that middle way. While the *Melibee* demonstrates the need for correction through its own

stylistic shortcomings – it repeats and recorrects, but always recreates the same styles and formulas – the NPT models success through its ability to correct or change the style and formulas within the tale. The NPT therefore teaches the value of correction while entertaining and retaining its readers.

As I have pointed out, moral and artistic practices become almost indeterminate in the course of the *Tales*: the moral structure of correction participates in the poetic structures of the *Tales*, and vice-versa. The NPT thus shows how the practice of correction creates literary pleasure, but it is also a pleasure directed towards the good and preservation of humankind. But even so, if Chaucer regularly directs the reader to a higher good, is it possible that moments of pleasure are discrete units within the *Tales*, units by which Chaucer is able to pause any moral commitments and just focus on pleasure and recreation? Can certain narrative sections detach themselves from the surrounding frame of pilgrimage and focus on the inner frame of the pilgrims' storytelling game?²⁶¹ And if they can detach themselves or refocus on an inner frame, cannot readers claim sections of Chaucer's work devoted exclusively to game and literary pleasure? A restful diversion from the pilgrims' moral cares?

For instance, one could detach the NPT from the surrounding frame; however, while doing so may afford some entertainment, the reader will miss what Chaucer accomplishes through the NPT's relationship to the *Melibee*. Only by reading these tales as part of the same fragment and incremental series will the reader understand the extent to which their structure and content respond to one another, and the artistic and ethical ideas their relationship evinces. Their relationship demonstrates the structural component of Chaucer's moral aims and how the incremental series of tales, their changes and throwbacks, rely on the way Chaucer masterfully threads his tales together. One could also read the *Thopas* out of context for amusement or as a curiosity – and it is difficult to argue against anyone who claims that they are thoroughly entertained and satisfied by such a reading; indeed, they very well may be. Nevertheless, such a detached reading would ignore Chaucer's structural purpose in having the *Thopas* precede the *Melibee*. Their relationship is crucial to Chaucer's corrective structure and hence his moral and artistic aims. A complete understanding of these aims, and even his individual tales, requires a complete account of his work, which means reading the NPT and the *Melibee*, the Parson as well as the Miller.

Like most surrounding tales the NPT does not present clear moral dicta. However, while Chaucer's injunction toward the end of the tale to take the fruit and leave the chaff may be taken less than seriously, and while an explicit moral dictum does not come to the fore, we still witness a poetic structure that emphasizes the importance of correction, of beginning again, and noting the possibility, unlike the *Melibee*, of more quickly learning from our mistakes. At the same time the tale indicates that Chanticleer

²⁶¹ Glending Olson argues that “there are two framing devices in the *Canterbury Tales*, an outer frame which is the pilgrimage, and an inner frame which is the storytelling contest.” This inner frame “is equally an artistic choice on Chaucer's part and which accordingly deserves the same sympathetic attention and consideration for the particular atmosphere it creates”; *Literature as Recreation in the Later Middle Ages* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1982), 156, 157. However, while one can conceive of an outer and inner frame, Chaucer's poetics of correction, as outlined in chapter three, demonstrates the interconnected and interdependent nature of the *Tales*. To grasp Chaucer's overarching poetic structure and aims, readers must see each tale as a part of Chaucer's larger poetic project. Only then can the scribal practices and concepts of correction that Chaucer thought deeply about come forward.

must experience error in order to learn, making clear, from a Christian moral perspective, how much correction is also necessary to human understanding. Just as it has the potential to renew creative form, correction has the potential to renew our human form, our character and choices.²⁶²

Thereby, in a slightly mocking but endearing manner, Chanticleer becomes something of a model human, one who falls into a snare through his imperfection (vanity), but who also finds redemption – a second chance – not to make the same error. Indeed, Chanticleer’s human comparisons arise comically throughout the tale. He not only is apparently well read, but also conducts himself “as a prince is in his halle” (VII. 3184), a prince in his own barnyard, ruling the roost, so to speak. Another comparison appears when Pertelote asks him whether he has a “berd” (VII. 2920), a reference to a rooster’s wattles, but also a rhetorical question asking whether he is a man. Even Pertelote, at least initially, appears as a model lady: “Curteys she was, discreet, and debonaire, / And compaignable, and bar hyrself so faire” (VII. 2871-2), and she reminds Chanticleer how to be a model husband: to be “hardy, wise, and free, / And secree – and no nygard, ne no fool, / Ne hym that is agast of every tool” (VII. 2914-16). Thus, comically yet persistently, these comparisons show how practices of correction are posed as necessary for both successful art and human living. Therefore – artistically, structurally, and morally – it would be wrong not to ascribe a certain amount of seriousness to the NPT’s final injunction:

But ye that holden this tale a folye,
As of a fox, or of a cok and hen,
Taketh the moralite, goode men. (VII. 3438-40)

Just below this passage Chaucer concludes the NPT, saying

Now, goode God, if that it be thy wille,
As seith my lord, so make us alle goode men,
And brynge us to his heighe blisse! Amen. (VII. 3444-46)

Our concern here is “make,” a word with various meanings in Middle English.²⁶³ In its immediate context in the passage, it has the connotation of “causing” or “bringing about”; it even has the meaning of “build” or simply the modern “make,” as in making us into “goode men.”²⁶⁴ But through its many contexts, we can understand that there is either

²⁶² Such an understanding corresponds to what Karla Taylor points out as one of the noticeable differences between Dante’s *Commedia* and Chaucer’s *Tales*; that is, while the *Tales*’ structure and technique of reporting the journey resemble the *Commedia*, the “world of *The Canterbury Tales*, though, embraces neither heaven nor hell. Its inhabitants live within the world and time, and hence can change right up to the moment of death. Because of this mutability, Chaucer utters no final judgments... Whereas Dante had written a divine comedy, Chaucer writes an earthly comedy about people still in the process of becoming”; *Chaucer Reads ‘The Divine Comedy’* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989), 2-3.

²⁶³ For instance, Lee Patterson notes that “Chaucer’s court poetry, both the largely vanished ‘ditees and songes glade’ and the extant longer poems, are examples of what he and his contemporaries called *makyng*”; *Chaucer and the Subject of History* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 52.

²⁶⁴ Anne Middleton discusses poetry-making, and argues that “making” denotes a style particular to Ricardian poets, a “middle style” that conveys “a homegrown eloquence, an elected plainness of expression, associated with active commitment to worldly service.” But Middleton also goes on to claim

good “making” or poor “making,” or as in the context of *Adam Sciveyn*, “making” more or less true according to an exemplar.²⁶⁵ In this case, while an Adam scribe, and humans in general, have a penchant for erring and “making” less true, the NPT – exemplifying the work of correction in the *Tales* – looks forward to a time when humankind will be remade – rewritten – into something more true in “heighe blisse.”

The *Tales* offer pleasure; this simple point is undisputed; however, it is disputed whether Chaucer has a moralizing, corrective aim in the *Tales*. But as I have repeatedly pointed out, the work – in the tales of individual pilgrims, in the *Melibee*, in the linking material, and in the *Retractions* – touches on matters of moral, intellectual, and spiritual weight, matters that are often the subject of didactic and corrective discourse in the Middle Ages. It is only by insisting on a singular, chief design that one can assume that such weighty matters must be relentlessly dramatized, rendered as aspects of the pilgrims and their discourses. And by this logic, the pleasure given by the individual tales would have to be regarded simply as goals of the individual pilgrims who tell them, not as Chaucer’s own. On the contrary, I have explored how Chaucer utilizes language, in its many varieties and colors, to show humankind’s fantastic journeys and failures at finding truth, ultimately requiring grace and correction. And while Chaucer took this lesson and concept seriously, that *sentence* could be misunderstood or corrupted, it is also apparent that he took joy, and wanted his reader to take joy, in this depiction. It is a joy that revels in the human comedy, not because of its failures, or as a means to subvert the serious matter, but because of the idea depicted throughout the whole work, throughout the pilgrims’ misadventures and redirections, the idea that forgiveness and repentance are always at hand.

that, in the case of *Piers Plowman*, “‘making’ appears at best a harmless solace until full knowledge somehow comes by other means. It is not, in other words, itself a way to truth, a distinct mode of knowing, either for the makers or for his hearers”; “The Idea of Public Poetry in the Reign of Richard II” *Speculum* Vol. 53, No. 1 (Jan., 1978), 101, 104. Middleton also cites an instance of “making” in Chaucer’s *Legend* where he “implies an exercise of craftsmanship for the social pleasure and refreshment of others”; “Chaucer’s ‘New Men,’” 31. These arguments challenge many of the assertions made in this chapter, although the act of correction and waiting for grace and divine correction is not synonymous with obtaining truth. Chaucer’s directives do not provide authoritative answers as much as they point the way to a journey of starts, stops, and throwbacks – a journey that only looks forward to a time when questions may be answered and correction fulfilled.

²⁶⁵ Carolyn Dinshaw elaborates on this reading of Chaucer’s Adam scribe: “Chaucer castigates here an Adam who is definitely fallen, an Adam whose letters do not accord with the intent behind them... The language that Adam sciveyn uses is a fallen language: when mankind disobeyed God in the garden, the word was cut off from the Word, and the continuity of language and being was disrupted”; *Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 5.

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