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Intention and the Idea of the Literary in Chaucer

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

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in the

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University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Steven Justice, Chair

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Abstract

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Far more than any other Middle English author, Chaucer makes frequent and explicit claims about the intention – or “entente” – with which his works are composed. What Chaucer means by proclaiming his intention, however, is not transparent. Voiced by parodic or discursively compromised authorial personae, Chaucer at once asserts the hermeneutic salience of his “entente,” while pressing the term to serve in ways counter to the *intentio auctoris* of scholastic commentaries, whereby the author's intention is circularly defined as identical to a work's moral use. As the first account of intentional hermeneutics across Chaucer's career, this dissertation shows Chaucer supplanting a rhetorical and linguistic conception of the author's intention with one both psychologistic and legal in nature, whereby his works are viewed as intentional acts judged in terms of the author's motives in composing them, rather than as written artifacts whose “menynge,” defined as their moral usefulness, is legible through the compiler's arrangement (*ordo*) of exemplary narratives. Chaucer thus establishes the author's intention not as his purpose legible in the arrangement of a text, but rather as a hermeneutic for explaining and justifying his works viewed as individual acts. My dissertation thus re-frames a longstanding critical debate about the categories of medieval poetry conceived in terms of its fitness as vehicle for ethical edification. I set out to define what Chaucer means by his “entente” by considering his deployment of the term across his fictions, and thus to show how intention defines a category of writing -- at once more ethical and more aesthetically autonomous -- that we know as his literature.

Dedication

For Willow

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Introduction:

“Entente” and Literariness in Chaucer

Lee Patterson has trenchantly noted that Chaucer is “an originator of a national literature in a culture that lacks both the concept of literature and a social identity for those who produce it.”¹ The conundrum of Patterson’s positioning of Chaucer in literary history – as caught in the space between the possibility of literary performance and the existence of a language available to name it – brings into relief a core problem this dissertation addresses: what could literariness mean for a Middle English author such as Chaucer, and how could such a thing be recognized and defined? I argue that literary possibility is for Chaucer intimately bound to the persistent question of poetry’s ethical use, but that Chaucer’s uniqueness lies in his taking up the question of poetry’s use from the vantage of the intentions of the working author, as defined by actions, motives, and the circumstances of production. This approach to the question of literariness is a re-orientation from a broad tradition of Chaucer criticism that has sought the uniqueness of Chaucer’s poetry by categorizing and describing it through the poet’s own favored hermeneutic, by which he divides the *Canterbury Tales* between works of *sentence* or *solas* (i.e., edification or pleasure). I seek an account of Chaucer’s sense of literary possibility that takes the opposition between aesthetics and use as a categorical exercise that Chaucer, throughout his career, expresses and yet transcends through a unique and flexible hermeneutics of his “entente.” I show that Chaucer is, across his career, keenly interested in how the author’s intention defines the uses of poetry, and that the elaboration of this connection is constitutive of his conception of literary possibility.

My account of intention in Chaucer’s poetry begins at the end of its story, with Chaucer’s “Retractions” to *The Canterbury Tales*, a piece that poses as the last issuance from Chaucer, where he revokes and seeks forgiveness for those texts he has written that “sownen into [tend toward] synne” – including certain of the *Canterbury Tales* and *Troilus and Criseyde* – while giving thanks for his “bookes of legends of seintes, and omelies, and moralitee, and devocioun.” The “Retractions” thus marks a founding moment in literary history: as Chaucer revokes what are transparently his literary fictions, he explicitly recognizes these, for the first time, as constituting a category. But absent an idea of “literature,” what can Chaucer understand this group of works to be, and how can he index it? While it is easy enough to see that the group of works Chaucer commends all share an explicit didactic function, no such shared property seems to inform the category that appears to us as his literary fictions. Chaucer’s slippery assertion of his doctrinal “entente,” which in the “Retractions” accompanies the division of his works, suggests authorial intention is somehow important to defining this category.

Chaucer’s separation of his works in the “Retractions” into these categories itself produces the terms of a once-ossified division in critical conceptions of him as a medieval poet. Donaldson’s new critical approach and Robertson’s exegetical criticism symbolize long-standing and polarized views of Chaucer as, respectively, an aesthete or a moralist; these contrasting propositions about Chaucer the man were subsequently fortified or synthesized by accounts that took Chaucer’s heavily thematized antinomies -- *sentence* and *solas*, *fruyt* and *chaff* (loosely,

¹ Lee Patterson, “What Man Artow?": Authorial Self-Definition in *The Tale of Sir Thopas* and *The Tale of Melibee*,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 11 (1989), 135.

edification and pleasure) -- as the primary hermeneutic for defining the nature and purpose of Chaucer's poetry. In part because these characterizations of Chaucer's poetry depended upon (largely tacit) assumptions about the author's intentions, the debate concerning the literary or ethical dimensions of Chaucer's poetry, once at the center of its criticism, largely evaporated in deconstructive and post-deconstructive accounts that aimed to replace the hermeneutic primacy of the historical author with a dialectic between the self and the textual/historical subject. A recent renewed interest in seeing Chaucer as a philosophically and ethically-interested poet has yet to connect what it identifies as Chaucer's interest in practical agency with the critically sidelined figure of the author. My dissertation shows how Chaucer's conception of authorship is germane to assessments of the ethical and literary status of his poems. I argue that intention, not agency, is the heuristic of greatest use in such a pursuit, for it is through a vocabulary of "entente" that Chaucer confects and negotiates the range of ideas pertinent to it, including meaning, purpose, and authorial characterization.

In my first chapter I argue that critical accounts of Chaucer's division of his oeuvre in the "Retractions" as one between "religious" and "secular" works reduce to a prescriptive identification of types of works (as *sentence* or *solas*) an act of categorization whose intelligibility and power depend upon the assertion of Chaucer's "entente" that attends it. While accounts have differed over whether Chaucer's statement of doctrinal intention is spoken ironically or seriously, I suggest that the "Retractions" becomes coherent only when we step back and recognize this question of sincerity as the choice Chaucer offers between two possible readings. In contrast to an exclusively ironic or biographical reading of the "Retractions," I show that Chaucer represents himself as a figure deictically and temporally split across the fictive boundary of the *Tales* itself. His projection of authorial "entente" emerges, therefore, in inverse and competitive relation with the value and autonomy of the imaginative fictions he finally revokes. By forcing a choice between these two mutually exclusive sources of value, the "Retractions" also lead us, by comparison, to acknowledge the inadequacy of its (nevertheless clear) distinction between categories of texts, with its clean split between the ethical and the literary. The "Retractions" implies that such a distinction must come bound to a decision about authorship and intention: it dramatizes the cost of attaching, and of severing, ethics and literature. The "Retractions" is thus not the vessel of a pre-existing conception of "literature"; its moral division is instead used by Chaucer to devise a conception of writing not defined by virtue of a common use (as *sentence* or *solas*), but rather bound by an "entente" embracing aspects of the works, their effects, and their implications for the author. In the remainder of my dissertation I show how Chaucer variously defines this "entente" across his career, and how the author's intention functions for Chaucer as a hermeneutic constitutive of his conception of literary possibility.

My second chapter shows how Chaucer defines his "entente" by breaking the concept's traditional affiliations with the didactic uses and meaning of texts. In *The Book of the Duchess* Chaucer parodies the opposition between ethical and aesthetic value maintained by many critics as characteristic of Chaucer's poetic sentiments. By staging himself as a minstrel-like narrator whose composition of the poem is coterminous with our reading of it, Chaucer renders the didactic aims of the author as expressed in the text identical to the intentions of the author composing in real time. Doing so, Chaucer makes the author's assertions about the use of his work describable through psychological and characterological speculation about his narrator, and shows this narrator's aims wholly at odds with a contingent world of dreams and the stories he relates. In addition to this separation of the author's didactic projects from the aesthetic richness

of the narratives he compiles, in the "Prologue" to the *Legend of Good Women* Chaucer further distances his "entente" from the meanings and uses of the works he composes. Staging himself as the subject of a summary judgment for having written poems representing unfaithful women, the authorial persona attempts to argue, using the traditional defense of the compiler, that his "entente" -- that he means women such as Criseyde to serve as negative exempla -- defines the "menyng" of his works. This scholastic definition of intention is, however, dramatically at odds with the forensic situation the authorial persona finds himself in, since what is at issue is not the moral uses of Chaucer's text, but his own demonstrable motives in composing them. Alceste appropriately secures Chaucer's pardon by denying that these motives may be reliably ascertained, arguing that Chaucer has not provably acted in "malice." In so doing the author's works become defined as actions (as a "dede"), not as texts legible in terms of their "menyng." The qualitative terrain of motives that Alceste introduces defines intentions in a highly individual, psychologistic way; the author's "entente" is no longer synonymous with the meaning of written artifacts interpreted as moral exempla, but has become a forensic standard of dubitability as criminal intent, invoking the necessity of interpreting motives from a given action.

In my third chapter, I argue that Alceste's binding of the author's intention to motives in the *Legend of Good Women* derives from a form of "entente" Chaucer had previously defined through the figure of Criseyde. As each character in *Troilus and Criseyde* expresses his or her "entente" in a unique way, the poem serves as a narrative vehicle to stage the interplay of three distinct models of authorial intention differentiated by syntax, semantics, and generic affiliations. In *Troilus and Pandarus* Chaucer resolves two models of intention he had previously applied interchangeably to his own authorial personae. Troilus is the exemplar of things done "ententifly," an adverbial form of intention which draws on generic affiliations with chivalric love service emphasizing a static disposition, rather than motives, as the determinants of action. Pandarus, meanwhile, exemplifies an instrumental intentionality that transforms characters into texts and reads their actions as means directed toward a single purpose. In Criseyde, however, Chaucer creates a unique form of intention which is not bound to written signs, but which is an efficacious, though transient, synthesis of speech, desire, and action. While numerous critics have sought to assess whether Criseyde exercises her own agency, I suggest that such considerations must depend on the unique autonomy of Criseyde's "entente," as the sole mode of intention in the poem which allows actions to signify in-and-of themselves. For Troilus and Pandarus, by contrast, individual action fails as an explanatory mechanism in the sense that their actions cannot be a structure of causes across time. Binding her intention to discrete actions, Criseyde's intention uniquely carries both private and public consequence, though it fails to establish her as a subject with agency from within a historical narrative. Criseyde is thus a figure with intention but without historical agency, a fact poignantly demonstrated by Troilus' recognition of the civic importance of her "entente" even in the very moment she is given over as an object of exchange between the Trojans and the Greeks.

I turn in my fourth chapter to consider how Chaucer's development of a conceptual vocabulary of "entente" functions as a vehicle of characterization within narrative in cases not explicitly related to the intention of the author. I focus on "The Clerk's Tale," which in Walter and Grisilde offers two characters who approach the polar typologies of explicitly religious tales, where characters are morally indexed through a reductive terminology of good or evil "entente." In "The Clerk's Tale," however, Walter's disenchantment with his subjects' expression of affiliation by virtue of their "trewe entente" leads him to define Grisilde instead in terms of a "wyl" that he equates with her external behaviors, words, and appearances. Walter's

externalization of Grisilde's person as a "wyl" identical to his own is an attempt to secure full knowledge of her in a fashion that avoids the language of intentions that has reduced all of Walter's relationships to political ones, and which is repellant to Walter because it constructs him as a mortal subject within a dynastic lineage. Walter's assays, as well as the narrator's handling of Grisilde, force a gap between Grisilde's external, legible self, and some unexpressed quantity beneath her compliant exterior. But Grisilde's own articulations of her "entente" at the end of the tale, rather than lending coherence to her private self, are an expression of natural intention that offers her as an allegory rather than as a historical subject. Grisilde's "entente," however, only becomes fully meaningful when seen as in a dialogue with Damien's ribald and phallic "entente" in the ensuing tale. Through this dialectic of intentional types, Chaucer demonstrates the limitations of intention as a narrative hermeneutic, and, as with the declaration of his "entente" in the "Retractions," this recognition forms the basis for a particularly literary form of narrative.

The uniqueness of narrative exposition in the *Canterbury Tales* derives at least in part, then, from a conception of intention Chaucer had developed through a sustained consideration of the author as a phenomenological, meaning-bearing, and practical subject. We are thus led to reverse the usual interpretive hierarchy whereby authorial representations within fictions are seen as explainable by their interpretation as personified characters. Rather, it is Chaucer's continued development of an idea of authorial "entente" that provided the narrative vehicle for his most ambitious, and literary, imaginative fiction.

Chapter 1

Chaucer's "Retractions" and the Category of Literature

Thomas Gascoigne's account of Chaucer's death, succinctly recounted in Gascoigne's *Dictionarium Theologicum*, plaits itself so intricately with Chaucer's own "Retractions" at the close of *The Canterbury Tales* that it has become difficult to read Chaucer's text apart from it.¹ Gascoigne's story has itself become commonplace: Chaucer, bitterly repentant at the hour of his death, bewails his sinful writings, "*et sic plangens mortuus.*" Be this authentic biographical record or the novel product of Gascoigne's imagination, the narrative has assumed a prominent place in modern interpretation of the "Retractions," though its value has generally been taken to depend on its status as an independent witness of events that the "Retractions" are also assumed to record. But there are aspects of Chaucer's "Retractions" that remain insoluble in this narrative – and indeed, as this chapter will show, in any narrative. But that allows us to see the most compelling claims of Gascoigne's account as an interpretation of Chaucer's original, as Gascoigne tries to resolve intractable problems of Chaucer's text, through additions and changes that make sense of the "Retractions" where its logic becomes elusive.² These attempts may then be read backwards to shed new light on the "Retractions" itself, particularly with regard to the propositions of the "Retractions" about Chaucer's "entente." Gascoigne assimilates its various contradictory propositions about what the author intends into a single, self-divided character, and allows a glimpse of how the "Retractions" might itself be about intention, and of how intentions

¹ All quotations of Chaucer are taken from Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed. (Boston, 1987). The pertinent passages from Gascoigne and their context may be found in Appendix II of Douglas Wurtele, "The Penitence of Geoffrey Chaucer," *Viator* 11 (1980): 335-359. See p. 335 on the designation "Retractions" to describe the text at the end of the *Canterbury Tales*, the use of which designation dates from 1721. Wurtele's discussion of Gascoigne's text is also the most comprehensive (pp. 343-350), though he uses Gascoigne in an attempt to re-animate an autobiographical reading of the "Retractions," which is contrary to my purposes here.

² The difficulties of Chaucer's text that scholars have noted will be considered in turn over the course of these pages, but for convenience they are organized here. The "Retractions" poses a number of inconsistencies: it seems un-Chaucerian, contextually improbable to have emanated from the author of the *Canterbury Tales*; it retracts an unspecified subset of the Canterbury tales ("thilke that sownen into synne") while securely attached to a work containing (we must assume) those same sinful tales; it characterizes seemingly innocuous works such as *The Book of the Duchess*, or *The House of Fame*, as "giltes." These problems have raised a number of questions: whether the "Retractions" is written by a Chaucer of a different cast of mind, or by someone else; whether it should be taken to express an authorial voice or a structurally ironic persona; whether some parts of the "Retractions" were originally spoken by the Parson; whether Chaucer is retracting in the strongest sense, or merely reviewing without denouncing. These questions have been addressed by forwarding propositions about a number of interpretive loci: the boundary between the "Parson's Tale" and the "Retractions"; whether the "litel tretise" refers to the "Parson's Tale" or to the entire *Canterbury Tales*; Chaucer's meaning in quoting Paul; what is meant by "revoke" and "retracciouns," seen in context with Augustine's *Retractationes*; and consideration of the various works Chaucer names.

inflect evaluation of a literary career, in a far more systematic, reaching way. Gascoigne helps us see that here, at the close of his final work, Chaucer re-casts a problematic that has concerned him throughout his career, of intention as a source of meaning and value, and as a hermeneutic through which literature itself may be defined.

The tendency of Gascoigne's narrative to inflect critical responses to the "Retractions" is a dominant motif in the modern reception of Chaucer's text, beginning with J. W. Hales' 1888 paper, where Gascoigne's account is first offered in print:³ "One would rejoice if this morbid passage" – the "Retractions" – "occurring at the close of the 'Persones Tale,' could be shown to be the interpolation of some monk; but as it is we must suppose that to Chaucer there came an hour of reaction and weakness."⁴ Hales treats the authenticity of the "Retractions" as an unsavory but unavoidable conclusion in the face of Gascoigne's narrative, which is taken as an independent witness of events that the "Retractions" is seen also to record. Skeat's authoritative pronouncement of the genuineness of the "Retractions" a short time later set the new critical standard, and more recent considerations have generally concurred in confirming the authenticity both of the text and of its placement at the close of the "Parson's Tale" and thus of the *Canterbury Tales* itself.⁵

When it was no longer possible to explain away the "Retractions" as a monkish interpolation, a persisting critical skepticism turned its focus to Chaucer himself, posing the question not of text's authenticity but of the author's sincerity, articulated in psychological and biographical terms that have in large part structured critical responses to the "Retractions" for the last century. Tatlock's review of generic precursors to Chaucer's "Retractions," for example, sets out to prove the text's "genuineness" – here meaning its authenticity.⁶ But Tatlock's arguments ultimately coalesce around a question of authenticity in a more familiar sense, that of Chaucer's own "genuineness," which Tatlock must go to great lengths to rationalize as an improbable, yet unavoidable conclusion:

³ The details of the reception history of the "Retractions" I rely on here are those described in Wurtele, p. 337-40. See fn. 19, page 338, of Wurtele, and fn. 3, p. 82 of Vaughan (1999) for guides to the criticism on the "Retractions." For the citation of Hales I quote Wurtele directly: "The *Athenaeum* paper (1.404) was reprinted in J. W. Hales, *Folia litteraria* (London 1893) 110-11, and in the Chaucer Society *Life Records* (1900) pt. 4.332. In the same abbreviated form Gascoigne's remarks appear in *Chaucer Life-Records*, ed. Martin Crow and Clair C. Olson (Oxford 1996) 547."

⁴ Quoted from Wurtele, p. 337-8.

⁵ See Sayce, fn. 4, and Wurtele, 336-7, for citations. Owen concurs in seeing a close link between the "Retractions" and the "Parson's Tale," but argues that both were conceived during an earlier stage of composition, and were not originally planned as a conclusion to the *Canterbury Tales* as we know them (in Charles A. Owen, *Pilgrimage and Storytelling in the Canterbury Tales: The Dialectic of "Ernest" and "Game"* (Norman, 1977), 28-31). Owen argues that Chaucer composed the "Retractions" and the "Parson's Tale" during "a period of religious commitment" before 1394, "a period when Chaucer rejected and abandoned his masterpiece" – and that the bulk of the Canterbury tales were composed afterward (p. 30, 29). According to Owen's theory, then, the "Retractions" was originally an abandonment, and not a conclusion, to the *Canterbury Tales*. Owen's solution is one of several that speaks to the problem that the "Retractions" should renounce works that it is attached to and circulated with.

⁶ John Tatlock, "Chaucer's Retractions," *PMLA* 28, no. 4 (1913): 521-529.

It is clear then that the impulse has shown itself again and again to express regret for and even to destroy works which the over-sensitive conscience of elder years has thought blameworthy. It is true that Chaucer's *Retractions* pass most of these and other disclaimers in solemnity; also that Chaucer was no longer himself if he seriously would have liked to blot out entirely, on religious and moral grounds, the *Book of the Duchess*, the *Troilus*, the *House of Fame*, the *Legend of Good Women*, the *Parliament of Fowls*, and the *Canterbury Tales* ("thilke that sownen in-to sinne"). Certainly no disavowal among those mentioned seems at once so solemn and so needless. Yet Spenser's, Herrick's and Dryden's, if taken literally, seem to a modern needlessly sweeping and strong. With Chaucer there is also to be considered the enormously strong pull of the whole spiritual teaching of the Middle Ages toward the ascetic attitude to worldly pleasure, which often has become stronger on a man as he has aged, which has drawn statesmen and soldiers into such religious houses as the Grande Chartreuse even as late as the 19th century; we may remember also the statement in Gascoigne's *Theological Dictionary* that Chaucer at his death was bitterly penitent for his amorous writings.⁷

Tatlock's focus on the "genuineness" of Chaucer's text enables him to stage his arguments as continuous with the question put to the "Retractions" from the eighteenth century (and even as a redundancy of a now hardened consensus), while masking an argumentative shift born as the "Retractions" are viewed over the shoulder of Gascoigne's narrative. A consensus about the genuineness of a text is silently blended into a notion of a "genuinely," which is to say, an authentically, repentant Chaucer, which is greeted as an improbable yet inevitable conclusion and rendered intelligible by invoking, as a coda, Gascoigne.⁸

And yet Gascoigne is here from the start: in this quotation we can see Tatlock working to reconcile his own sense of Chaucer ("Chaucer was no longer himself") with the Chaucer presented in Gascoigne, whose narrative seeps into Tatlock's representation of the "Retractions" as though the two are complementary and interchangeable records of an identical event. Gascoigne's narrative, then, vouches as an independent witness for the authenticity of the "Retractions," and supplies Tatlock with a narrative rationale to account for whatever remains so problematic about the proposition that the "Retractions" are a text emanating from Chaucer (the same problem(s), presumably, that lay behind its eighteenth century attribution to monks).

Gascoigne's text is most revealing, however, not for how its appearance in print affects scholarship on the "Retractions" (enabling a seemingly un-Chaucerian text to be regarded as authentic), but rather for how it is itself symptomatic of those same interpretive problems we perceive in Tatlock. It is one thing to argue that that the appearance of Gascoigne's narrative has tainted our ability to view the "Retractions" in the absence of the pathetic narrative Gascoigne

⁷ Tatlock, p. 528.

⁸ The bulk of Tatlock's article reviews generic precursors for the "Retractions" from Augustine forward. This establishes that Chaucer might conceivably have written a retraction, having such examples at his disposal. As the article turns toward its conclusions, Chaucer's assumed encounter with such exemplars is narrativized in order to construct a plausible version of Chaucerian motive: "Either [Augustine's *Retractationes* or those of Gerald de Barri] might have served to crystallize a narrowly pious impulse in the sick or aging Chaucer." (Tatlock, 525) The implications of such turns toward narrative, and the relation of such narratives to the notions of intention within the "Retractions," are what most interest me here.

offers. It has, but it is of greater consequence to recognize that the turn toward narrative that is Gascoigne's response to the "Retractions" is itself an early witness to a problem of response which the "Retractions" itself produces.

Set within a broader discussion of penance, the pertinent passage from Gascoigne reads:⁹

Sicut Chawserus ante mortem suam saepe clamavit, "vae mihi, vae mihi quia revocare nec destruere iam potero illa quae male scripsi de malo et turpissimo amore hominum ad mulieres sed iam de homine in hominem continuabuntur. Velim. Nolim." Et sic plangens mortuus. Fuit idem Chawserus pater Thome Chawserus armigeri. Qui Thomas sepelitur in Nuhelm juxta Oxoniam.

Gascoigne's various bids for verisimilitude lend his text the immediacy of a witnessed event. The repetition of expressive elements ("vae mihi, vae mihi") convey pathos while marking this as direct discourse with double certainty. Gascoigne's account gains authority by identifying Chaucer through a lineal descendent whose grave is indexed in the space and time of his own writing. Does Gascoigne have independent knowledge about Chaucer, or is this intimacy with the particulars of Chaucer's death a fiction? And, are the events Gascoigne reports known independently of, or derived from, the "Retractions"?

There is some critical disagreement on the matter.¹⁰ If Gascoigne knows of the "Retractions," he diverges from them considerably. And yet Gascoigne's departures, rather than arguing for the independence of Gascoigne's account, point us ever more strongly back to the "Retractions." One major difference between Chaucer's text and Gascoigne's is that in the former, Chaucer revokes, while in the latter, Chaucer wishes he could revoke. This difference can be seen as a response to – and in turn points to – two complications latent in Chaucer's original gesture. Gascoigne's account neatly resolves the ambiguity of Chaucer's "revoke" (as either recalling/remembering, or as calling back/removing from circulation) through a clarifying addition ("revocare nec destruere"). Having defined the nature of the retraction in this way, Gascoigne presents a Chaucer whose wished-for penance is rendered futile by a conflict between desire and possibility ("revocare nec destruere iam potero"). If we take, as Gascoigne does, that Chaucer would wish to destroy the sinful tales, then Gascoigne is right to see this as an impossible task. No matter what Chaucer was desirous or able to do with the *Tales* upon their completion, many of the individual tales were already in circulation during Chaucer's lifetime, independent of the whole.¹¹ Gascoigne's change also solves a stubborn difficulty of "Retractions" which remains as long as we take it that Chaucer actually does wish to dissociate himself from those texts he calls sinful: that Chaucer should revoke some number of the *Canterbury Tales* through a statement that comes securely attached to the *Tales* itself.¹² By

⁹ The text cited is that printed in Wurtele, 358-9.

¹⁰ Sayce says that Gascoigne's account is "undoubtedly" derivative, but offers no evidence for this claim (fn. 5, p. 246), while Wurtele suggests that the differences between Gascoigne's account and the "Retractions" argue for its independent derivation (349).

¹¹ For a discussion of the circulation of individual tales during Chaucer's lifetime, see Charles A. Owen, "The *Canterbury Tales*: Early Manuscripts and Relative Popularity," *JEGP* 54 (1955): 104-110.

¹² A persistent problem for critics, and one that Tatlock marshals rhetorically to attenuate the surprising sobriety of Chaucer's retraction, thus rendering it more believable: "Is it so hard to

turning the “Retractions” into a story of the author separated in time and space from the *Tales*, Gascoigne has resolved the problem of the jointure of two seemingly incompatible texts, locating that tension as one between the desires and faculties of a single, constrained character.

Many critical treatments have followed Gascoigne in reading the “Retractions” as an earnest revelation of conscience, and have produced rationales (postulating the influence on Chaucer of medieval views of asceticism, sin, and repentance) to support this conclusion in the face of its seeming incongruity with our accepted notion of Chaucer.¹³ Another line of interpretation, however, has argued that we may see in the “Retractions” something besides a sudden, dramatic change of Chaucer’s spiritual sentiments. Rather than the record of an unaccustomed personal moralism, the “Retractions” are alternately viewed as Chaucer’s final resolution of a conflict between secular and transcendent values that have concerned him throughout his career. For Alfred David, Chaucer’s revocation of works in the “Retractions” is not wholly idiosyncratic, but an admission of the ultimate failure of his attempts, in such works as *Troilus and Criseyde*, to unite religious and secular values; David views the “Retractions” as a “moving statement of the limitations of art.”¹⁴ Similarly, Howard and Brewer see Chaucer’s retraction of many of his fictions as a final instance of a frequent and enabling aspect of his art. Citing the common tension in Chaucer’s works between ecclesiastical and secular values, Brewer views the “almost total victory” of the former in the “Retractions” as an instance of a typical Chaucerian dialectic, thus making the “Retractions” continuous with Chaucer’s poetic sensibilities, not an aberration from them.¹⁵ Brewer argues that the retracted works “are not destroyed, but coexist with the end that denies them, as was characteristic of the sustained tensions of the culture of the time and to be expected from the human condition.”¹⁶ Howard similarly finds that “the contradictions in [the “Retractions”] are not different in kind from the contradictions in all his writings,” and that in retracting his works he “means to ask for our best intentions in reading them.”¹⁷ More recently, Kerby-Fulton has argued for viewing Chaucer’s “Retractions” in the historical context of the ascendant anti-humanism of Lollardy and other conservative strains. Kerby-Fulton sees Chaucer in the “Retractions” rejecting – whether out of personal sensibilities or concerns about his reading public – pagan and classical humanist

believe in at least so much other-worldliness as is shown by adding the passage to a work which he neither suppressed nor reformed?” (529). For details on the manuscript circulation of the “Retractions,” see Rosemarie Potz McGerr, “Retraction and Memory: Retrospective Structure in the Canterbury Tales,” *Comparative Literature* 37, no. 2 (Spring 1985), 100.

¹³ See Sayce p. 230-231, where the preponderance of twentieth century treatments focused exclusively on the “Retractions” take the position that it is “an autobiographical confession on the part of Chaucer” (231). Wurtele, similarly, finds the majority of treatments view the “Retractions” as a “personal revelation” (339). Gordon’s influential review of scholarship on the “Retractions” also attests to this critical tendency (James D. Gordon, “Chaucer’s Retraction: A Review of Opinion,” in *Studies in Medieval Literature in Honor of Professor Albert Croll Baugh*, ed. MacEdward Leach (Philadelphia, 1961), 81-96).

¹⁴ Alfred David, *The Strumpet Muse: Art and Morals in Chaucer’s Poetry* (Bloomington, 1976), 238.

¹⁵ Derek Brewer, “Gothic Chaucer,” in *Writers and their Background: Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. Derek Brewer (London, 1974), 1-32.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

¹⁷ Donald Roy Howard, *Chaucer: His Life, His Works, His World* (New York, 1987), 501.

subjects and genres. As “an intellectually, emotionally, travel-weary soul” at the end of his life, “Chaucer no longer found the wager of trans-historical and trans-Christian culture worth the risk.”¹⁸

Seen together, this group of responses has the salutary effect of opening up contextualized interpretations of the “Retractions” as something other than the direct, confessional expression of a Chaucer beset by a drastically altered moral purview. These accounts, however, also depend on a shared assumption that should give us pause, that there is a distinction legible to Chaucer and modern critics alike between “religious” and “conservative” works on one hand, and “secular” and “humanist” ones on the other. But are such terms of distinction available to Chaucer, and are these the terms by which he divides his works in the “Retractions”? Certainly the allure of the “Retractions” is that it makes with stunning efficiency a distinction between texts in line with “secular” and “humanist” values; but it is not clear whether Chaucer’s designation of his revoked works as “giltes” that “sounen into synne” could reflect or sustain such terms of distinction, particularly for accounts that see little ironic detachment in Chaucer’s characterization of his works. And yet, the “Retractions” retain an undeniably powerful historiographic claim: though Chaucer calls the group of works he revokes sinful, he does recognize them *as constituting a category*, for the first time. Our task becomes locating the terms the “Retractions” provide by which this category may be named.

We need not look far to see Chaucer expressing, throughout his career, a novel sense of aesthetic value predicated on the autonomy of his fictions from certain moral, social, and phenomenological paradigms by which his fictions might be classified.¹⁹ And yet the division the “Retractions” performs between two kinds of texts, though it closely resembles Chaucer’s distinction in the *Canterbury Tales* between tales of *sentence* and *solas*, is different in kind and effect. The performance by Chaucer’s pilgrims, and by the narrator, of tales alternately designated as *sentence* or *solas* point to the insufficiency of these terms to describe the poetic practice and aesthetic sensibility represented by the entirety of the *Canterbury Tales*, pressing the reader to conceptualize Chaucer’s practice outside the discursive bounds of such an antimony.²⁰ By this account, Chaucer’s foregrounding of descriptive antimonies within his works frees his own poems from static classification as this or that pole of a given descriptive binary.

In the “Retractions,” the whole body of the author’s works is divided into two groups, but the difference between them derives from vague and unelaborated aspects both of the author in relation to the works (the retracted works are his “gilts”), and of their likely effects (those that “sounen into synne” and those that do not). That the *Canterbury Tales* are themselves divided in

¹⁸ Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, *Books Under Suspicion: Censorship and Tolerance of Revelatory Writing in Late Medieval England* (Notre Dame, 2006), 357.

¹⁹ A topic I will consider fully in the next chapter. Accounts which forward such a claim have focused on Chaucer’s foregrounding of antimonies such as *sentence* and *solas*, *experience* and *authorite*, *earnest* and *game*, and *fruit* and *chaff*, and have generally concurred in seeing Chaucer drawing such antimonies, and then effecting the interpenetration and/or dissolution of their contrasting terms. In this way Chaucer is seen forging a poetics unique for its autonomy from those traditional hermeneutic and discursive paradigms represented by the terms of these antimonies.

²⁰ Such an account, which is an exemplary instance of the critical orientation I am referring to, is put forth by Lee Patterson in ““What Man Artow?": Authorial Self-Definition in *The Tale of Sir Thopas* and *The Tale of Melibee*,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 11 (1989): 117-175.

the “Retractions” between these two groups does suggest the possibility of naming the two groups of texts Chaucer has created with the *Tales*’ vocabulary of *sentence* and *solas*, and having just progressed through the *Tales*, such terms are readily at hand.²¹ Yet the “Retractions” offers both more and less than would allow us to do so. The “Retractions” does not so explicitly identify the individual works making up its two groups as certain kinds of things – as tales of *sentence* or of *solas* – but rather forges a distinction between works that “sownen into synne” and those that do not. The latter distinction, rather than fixing a definite identity common to every member of each group, proposes a commonality embracing aspects of the works, their effects, and their implications for the author. Chaucer has turned from prescriptive identification of types of works to an act of categorization whose intelligibility and power depend upon the assertion of “entente” that attends it. What is left to determine is what Chaucer might mean by his intention, and how the division of his own works both define, and are defined, by it.

*

Attenuating the severity of Chaucer’s denunciation of his texts as “giltes,” accounts such as I have discussed by David, Brewer, Howard, and Kerby-Fulton make narrowly autobiographical interpretations such as Gascoigne’s appear naïve by comparison. And yet autobiographical readings of the “Retractions” offer their own particular insights. Gascoigne and Tatlock can be taken as paradigmatic examples, in their narrative elaboration of the compositive moment of the “Retractions.” Far from a betrayal of Chaucer’s text, this mode of response is commensurate with its meaning: as a statement of authorial “entente” in prose, offered at the end of a poetic career and accompanied by the speaker’s own evaluation of that career, the “Retractions” invite the reader to ground its meaning by reference to the immediate circumstance of the historical author. If Chaucer elsewhere courts autobiographical reading or misreading by offering his narrators as “a function of the relation between the poet and his contemporary, immediate audience,”²² in the “Retractions” the blurring of the distinction between a fictive and a historically-imagined author becomes a precondition for making meaning at all. Gascoigne’s invented narrative is thus an understandable response to the ontological peculiarity that the “Retractions” projects, as “external” to the *Canterbury Tales*.

Accounts that see in the “Retractions” a final iteration of a Chaucerian dialectic present throughout his career make it clear that Chaucer’s attachment of the “Retractions” to the end of the *Canterbury Tales* need not be interpreted as an insoluble contradiction. For Gascoigne, however, and numerous readers of the text, the association of the “Retractions” and the *Tales* is a problem demanding explanation. We have seen how Gascoigne’s narrativization of the “Retractions” postulates one answer to this problem. A similarly biographical interpretation of the “Retractions” has challenged the accepted division between the “Parson’s Tale” and the “Retractions,” suggesting that the “Retractions” as we have them are the result of a scribal

²¹ And, of all of Chaucer’s antimonies, *sentence* and *solas* is the most likely such candidate. *Fruit* and *chaff* suggests itself as another possibility, but these describe different aspects of a single work to be separated by a moral reader, rather than describing two different kinds of works, a notion that would run counter to the notion of Augustinian hermeneutics the terms evoke.

²² George Kane, *The Autobiographical Fallacy in Chaucer and Langland Studies* (London, 1965), 15.

interpolation of a separate text written by Chaucer into a final speech originally assigned to the Parson.²³ In contrast to these accounts, Sayce has argued that Chaucer's disavowals of sinful works in the "Retractions" should be taken as an instance of ironic voicing.²⁴ Sayce argues that the "Retractions" is a series of confessional commonplaces delivered by a fictive authorial persona, carrying meaning "not personal but aesthetic." But Sayce's account ultimately depends upon its own biographical imagination of an author employing pious commonplaces with "ironic and humorous detachment." This version of an intending author is ultimately just as pious as readings which see the "Retractions" as Chaucer's authentic self-expression, producing a humorous Chaucer immune from ethical considerations as the herald of a "new age" of "secular literature."²⁵ These contrasting forms of biographical interpretation raise a more fundamental question about the "Retractions" whose bluntness does not override its importance: is Chaucer actually serious? Does he actually think of (at least some of) his fictions as "giltes" and "vanitees," or is this imposition of an ethical imperative on his writings staged as a patently ironic argument against such efforts? And do the "Retractions" make available meanings outside of this mutually exclusive interpretive binary?

Getting a handle on these questions requires a re-framing of the question of Chaucer's "seriousness" in the "Retractions," as not merely a biographical problem (how well the sentiments of the "Retractions" fit with the Chaucer we "know") or one rooted in our own interpretive pieties (that we value Chaucer's literature too much to allow its author's repudiation to be true), but one drawn from the internal logic of the "Retractions" itself. It is to an argument for the coherence of this logic – and of its simultaneously literary and ethical suggestiveness – that I now turn. Here Gascoigne provides a further clue, though this time it is a telling lapse in Gascoigne's ability to render a coherent narrative that provides an insight about Chaucer's original. Gascoigne's compact narrative betrays some awkwardness in the handling of time, a dissonance between the attempt to record the repeated and habitual ("saepe," "sic plangens") and the terminal or single event ("mortuus [est]," and direct discourse). As a result the temporal scope of Gascoigne's framing "ante mortem" dilates and contracts in continual oscillation, and the final imagination of Chaucer – "sic plangens mortuus [est]" – similarly condenses two irreconcilable modes of action into a single awkward tableau. Recalling a fundamental difference

²³ Vaughan, for instance, makes such an argument on the grounds that the accepted division between the "Parson's Tale" and the "Retractions" is a scribal invention that poses "complications and interpretive difficulties" in its desire to create a "comfortable" conclusion to *The Canterbury Tales* (Miceal Vaughan, "Creating Comfortable Boundaries: Scribes, Editors, and the Invention of the *Parson's Tale*," in *Rewriting Chaucer: Culture, Authority, and the Idea of the Authentic Text, 1400-1602*, ed. Thomas A. Prendergast and Barbara Kline (Columbus, 1999), 46). The idea that Chaucer's second retraction of sinful texts is an interpolation of a text from Chaucer into a conclusion originally written for the "Parson's Tale" is first expressed by Tyrwhitt in the late eighteenth century (Thomas Tyrwhitt, "An Introductory Discourse to the *Canterbury Tales*," in *The Poetical Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, vol. 1 (London, 1845), 325). The large claim of my argument is that such "interpretive difficulties" arising from contradictions of the authorial voice in the "Retractions" are precisely Chaucer's point, and the source of this text's most potent claims.

²⁴ Olive Sayce, "Chaucer's 'Retractions': The Conclusion of the *Canterbury Tales* and Its Place in Literary Tradition," *Medium Aevum* 40 (1971): 230-48

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 233, 245 respectively.

between Gascoigne's narrative and the "Retractions" (in the "Retractions" Chaucer revokes, in Gascoigne, Chaucer wishes he could revoke) suggests that this temporal dissonance may be responding to an irresolvable ambivalence about action arising from within the "Retractions" itself.

We can begin such a line of inquiry with an observation which, to my knowledge, has never been made about the "Retractions": Chaucer's text presents not a single act of retraction, but two, and these are irreconcilable with each other. Some treatments of the "Retractions" have interpreted Chaucer's text as a retraction much the same as Augustine's *Retractationes*.²⁶ Augustine's *Retractationes* are meant for the correction of extant writings whose errors have become clear in the time since their original publication; for Augustine retraction is understood in the sense of a re-handling or re-treatment, not in the modern sense of denunciation. He does not seek the destruction of works that contain errors, but their correction and defense. By contrast, neither of Chaucer's two distinct postures with respect to his works is identical to Augustine's. At the opening of the "Retractions," the authorial figure prays that his hearers and readers will approach charitably any faults perceived in "this litel tretys,"²⁷ attributing these faults "to the defaute of myn unkonnyng, and nat to my wyl, that wolde ful fayn have seyde better if I hadde had konnyng."²⁸ After aligning this will with his doctrinal "entente," the authorial figure then goes on to "revoke in my retraccions" those works he characterizes as among "my giltes," including those parts of the *Canterbury Tales* "that sownen into synne." There is a clear disjunction between these two actions. In the first instance, the reader or hearer is asked to encounter faults in "this litel tretys" as failings of the author's "konnyng," but not of his "wyl"; this apologetic and precautionary measure of re-tractio sits uncomfortably alongside the subsequent "retraccion" of whole texts as the author's "giltes." Gascoigne – who has Chaucer

²⁶ See McGerr, "Retraction and Memory," 98-9 for pertinent passages from Augustine; and see Tatlock, "Chaucer's Retractions," 522 and 524 on this point.

²⁷ Whether Chaucer refers to the whole of the *Canterbury Tales* or simply the "Parson's Tale" by the designation "this litel tretis" has been a topic of some importance in assessing the meaning of the "Retractions." Robertson argues for the former case (see D. W. Robertson, *A Preface to Chaucer: Studies in Medieval Perspectives* (Princeton, 1962), helpfully noting that "tretis" in Middle English could mean simply a narration, and "not necessarily a formal and systematic treatment of a subject" (368). That Chaucer should here prescribe a charitable and doctrinal reading practice for the whole of the *Canterbury Tales* would support Robertson's reading of Chaucer as a writer of exegetical poetry, but how an exegetical reading of Chaucer squares with the subsequent retraction of parts of the *Tales* as "giltes" is less clear. The reading I will advance can tolerate either possible meaning of "this litel tretis," or the possibility that Chaucer leaves its referent ambiguous. What is critical for my reading is the location of this initial retracting voice within the fictive frame of the *Tales*, a status deriving from the construction of this authorial persona – through deixis and the merely anticipatory sense of potential faults of execution – within the space and time of the *Tales*' composition.

²⁸ While not explicitly called a retraction or a revocation, Chaucer's first, precautionary anticipation of faults in "this litel tretys" may be considered a retraction in the sense that Chaucer is re-handling the work as he presents it to the reader. The main point is less a semantic one, though, and is instead that this first address to his readers represents a discrete action whose temporality and relationship to the fiction of the *Tales* is at odds with Chaucer's subsequent listing of his "retracciouns."

lament that he can neither “revocare nec destruere” his texts – is surely right to see Chaucer using the term here in the strong, un-Augustinian sense of rejecting.

The dissonance in Gascoigne’s account between terminal and continuous actions indicates a further difference between Chaucer’s two acts in the “Retractions,” as Chaucer’s two postures toward his works inhabit different temporal relationships to the act of composing the *Canterbury Tales*. In the first instance, there is no temporal gap between composition and retraction. Unlike Augustine in his *Retractationes*, Chaucer does not indicate specific mistakes revealed to him in the fullness of time, but rather anticipates faults he cannot presently know. The sense this gives of a speaker not quite removed from the space and time of the *Tales*’ composition is reinforced by a subject who produces something in between the spoken and written word: he would “ful fayn have seyde better,” while addressing those who “harkne...or rede.” Meanwhile, the second, explicit act of retraction is offered by a figure at some temporal remove from fictions written in the past, and the fiction of a speaking subject is lost altogether. While the first figure refers with deictic proximity to “this litel tretis,” the second names the *Canterbury Tales* as a casually penultimate member of a list of works making up a surveyed life’s efforts. Chaucer further separates these two self-representations by a consistent difference in form of address. While the first persona refers from the sphere of the fiction to readers and hearers as third-person potentialities (“hem all,” “hem,” “they,” “hem,” etc.), the author conceived at a distance from composing the tales directly addresses a reading public using the second-person (“I beseke yow,” “ye”).

Chaucer’s self-division across temporal and fictive boundaries in the “Retractions” forces us to acknowledge this text as something other than Chaucer’s immediate personal expression. To use an analogy from Robertson’s analysis of medieval iconography, we might imagine that Chaucer offers in the “Retractions” two authorial portraits distinguished by their degree of assimilation within the fiction of the *Canterbury Tales* itself.²⁹ For Robertson such surface incoherence is a central feature of a medieval aesthetic predicated not on dramatic immediacy accomplished through verisimilar representation, but rather offering the audience “a problem to be solved.”³⁰ In Leo Spitzer’s terms, Chaucer has effectively sequestered the poetic and empirical “I” into two separate self-personifications, defining that difference as a divergent relationship to the moment of fictive production.³¹

In the “Retractions,” then, Chaucer reverses the movement from a self to a subject that Leicester has shown for the “General Prologue,” where the fiction of a speaking self, “a shapely,

²⁹ The notion that Chaucer might be offering two insoluble portraits of himself in the “Retractions” takes as its point of departure Robertson’s trenchant analysis of medieval aesthetics as governed by surface incoherence rather than dramatic realism. Reflecting on Augustine’s exegesis of the *Song of Songs*, where Augustine compares the teeth of the woman to flocks of sheep, Robertson notes that “there is no surface consistency between teeth and sheep”; this “incoherence of surface materials is almost essential to the formation of the abstract pattern, for if the surface materials – the concrete elements in the figures – were consistent or spontaneously satisfying in an emotional way, there would be no stimulus to seek something beyond them” (p. 56). See also Robertson’s elucidation of the pertinence of this aesthetic principle to medieval iconography, esp. p. 187.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

³¹ Leo Spitzer, “Notes on the Poetic and Empirical ‘I’ in Medieval Authors,” *Traditio* 4 (1946): 412-422.

self-mastering humanist agent” gives way to “a representation of the agency of an individual subject in its dealings with language.”³² In the “Retractions” a subject caught between spoken and written language who “wolde ful fayn have seyde better” becomes an author fully separated from the text, who surveys the totality of his own fictive productions, and exercises his judgment of them. In doing so Chaucer gives form to the “presence behind and beyond [the text] who somehow guarantees the meaning we find there,” as a figure whose stated “entente” produces not meaning but the revocation of the greater part of his fictions.³³

This statement of doctrinal “entente” composes the link joining Chaucer’s two self-representations: “For oure book seith, ‘Al that is writen is writen for oure doctrine,’ and that is myn entente.” Chaucer’s adaptation of conventional statement about the utility of fictions neatly utilizes the verbal pivot at the center of this boundary to modulate between the two temporally incompatible self-representations.³⁴ This difference in temporality determines the nature of the retraction that each figure performs. Thus each gesture of retraction is internally consistent, but neither is properly Augustinian, and neither can be resolved into the other. Taken altogether, the “Retractions” thus offers two opposing directives for what we as readers are to do with the text we have just read – a charitable reading of the author’s will that would align the text with “doctrine” on one hand, and on the other, the determination, and rejection, of those tales Chaucer must understand as sounding “into synne.”

The question of Chaucer’s sincerity which has influenced critical discussion of the “Retractions” can thus be more rigorously defined as a problem of interpretation arising from these opposing directives. This is not to devalue considerations of Chaucer’s seriousness as a way of responding to the “Retractions.” Certainly one of the effects Chaucer produces by dividing himself in the “Retractions” – and indeed, an effect of the act of retraction itself, in both of the forms in which Chaucer presents it – is to raise questions about the authenticity of his self-presentation. But it is important to see the question of Chaucer’s seriousness as one arising from, and having its terms articulated in, problems of self-division that Chaucer stages in a coherent way. The division of the fictive subject and authorial self, and the distinction Chaucer establishes between them with respect to the act of composition, make the “Retractions” a site of reflection about the relation between the author’s will and his work, and between intentions, meanings, and the uses of texts.

*

Before turning to these issues, however, a nagging problem about the “Retractions” must be addressed. Chaucer’s second, and most memorable, act of retraction, which makes a distinction between a repudiated and a valued group of texts, presents problems of legibility that preexist whatever questions of intention or voicing we might ask of them. By what legible or coherent criteria does the authorial voice presume to separate his oeuvre into two distinct

³² H. Marshall Leicester, *The Disenchanted Self: Representing the Subject in the Canterbury Tales* (Berkeley, 1990), p. 415.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 385.

³⁴ That is, the construction can perform implicitly as a present progressive to describe the actions of a Chaucer writing now: “al that is writen is [being] writen for oure doctrine”; alternately, the construction can apply to a Chaucer considering only what he has written in the past, as, “al that is writen is [having been] writen for oure doctrine.”

categories? What this voice assumes itself to be doing – irrespective of whether that act is read as serious, parodic, or otherwise – is a question whose answer must precede our attempts to interpret this act within the broader context of authorial self-division and intention that the “Retractions” make available.

We have already seen a number of critics with a shared sense that Chaucer’s distinction is one between “secular” and “ecclesiastical” works, or otherwise between “conservative” and “humanist” works. As undeniably apt as these descriptions of Chaucer’s two categories of texts may be, we must ask if these are these the terms by which Chaucer understands, or presents, this distinction. An answer to this question holds the potential for illuminating medieval categories of literary thought and production and their relationship to such modern distinctions.

In seeking to align the two categories of texts in the “Retractions” with Chaucer’s generic vocabulary, Paul Strohm notes the reservation of the term “storie” for the *Prioress’s Tale*, the *Monk’s Tale*, and the *Second Nun’s Tale* in order to venture an admittedly provisional notion of the criteria that might lay behind the “Retractions” parsing of a heterogeneous set of texts into two categories:³⁵

One benefit of being aware of such distinctions in Chaucer’s literary terminology is that they offer a way of seeing fundamental differences in such superficially similar narratives as the Second Nun’s “storie” and the Man of Law’s “tale,” the Parson’s “tretys” and the Pardoner’s “tale.” Chaucer’s awareness of the difference between narratives with and without invented plots together with the Parson’s rejection of invented plots may even offer a partial explanation for Chaucer’s *Retraction*, where the works for which he expresses his thanks appear to be mainly “stories” and “tretyses.”

That the second retraction is informed by an implicit generic distinction carried over from the *Tales* between “stories” and “fables” seems an attractive solution to the problem, but it is also one, Strohm signals, whose cleanness will not stand up to inspection. To accept that a distinction between story and fable is informing the “Retractions,” the valences of Chaucer’s moral language would presumably need to map in some relatively neat fashion onto this distinction. Meanwhile, even if the logic of Chaucer’s parsing could be shown to be in some sense generic, the problem of defining the evaluative criteria of the “Retractions” merely comes up again at a second remove: why then reject “fables” and embrace “stories”? Moreover, a return to Chaucer’s “Retractions” shows a gesture far less controlled than the dyad of fable and storie could hope for, with named texts (such as *Troilus*) whose places in this binary are far from straightforward, and named genres and categories that might be indifferent or deeply contradictory – both individually and in sum – with respect to the whatever sort of conceptual distinction(s) we might imagine Chaucer is making. In its presumption to cleanly divide a heterogeneous corpus of texts by some legible principle(s), the “Retractions” brings into relief the overlaps, misfits, and frictions existing between various generic, moral, and discursive vocabularies.

³⁵ Paul Strohm, “Some Generic Distinctions in the *Canterbury Tales*,” *Modern Philology* 68, no. 4 (May 1971): 321-328, at 327-28. Strohm notes that Chaucer “uses ‘tale’ inclusively to describe all the Canterbury narratives. Within the general category of ‘tales,’ Chaucer also uses ‘storie’ in the sense of *historia* to describe narratives with true or exceptionally venerable plots, [and] ‘fable’ ...to describe narratives with invented plots” (322).

I would like to venture an answer to the question that is far simpler, perhaps, than it has a right to be, but which is already implicit in most considerations of the “Retractions”: what Chaucer retracts there is his literature. As Chaucer subjects his works to a division along lines of moral value, an implicit category is tacitly put forward: saint’s lives, homilies, and treatises are categorically distinguished from those of Chaucer’s works that we, at least, would recognize as *literary*. That a category defined by antithesis to works of moral instrumentality should be readily transparent as something like literature is, however, difficult to credit. Judson Allen has shown that the medieval commentary tradition offers no evidence of a category of literary activity conceptualized apart from ethics. The commentaries offer “no intellectual category precisely corresponding to the one we mean when we say ‘poetry,’ or ‘literature’”;³⁶ instead, poems are typically placed within the philosophical category of ethics, and the terms of medieval poetic analysis invoke processes of thought by which poems become practical objects, as the boundaries between text and world collapse. For Allen the aesthetic richness and virtuosity of poetry are not thereby denied, but are seen “not as qualities of poetry but as qualities of ethics.”³⁷ Payne attributes such an ethical view of poetry to a collapse of what were once distinct Aristotelian categories of rhetoric and poetry, and suggests that Chaucer “sees poetry as a part of knowledge and therefore measurable ultimately only in terms of utility or effect.”³⁸ The “Retractions,” and the blunt simplicity of the distinction it makes available, are both confirmation of and affront to such an ethical definition of poetry.

It is thus not clear whether or how what we would call “literature” could serve as a coherent category of production or thought for a medieval writer, let alone for one, such as Chaucer, whose own life works are as various and as interpenetrating across the distinction that the “Retractions” makes available,³⁹ and who nowhere before the “Retractions” makes such a distinction explicitly. The “Retractions” are not the vessel of a pre-existing conception of

³⁶ The quote is from p. 11 of Judson Boyce Allen, *The Ethical Poetic of the Later Middle Ages: A Decorum of Convenient Distinction* (Toronto, 1982). See chapter 1 for Allen’s discussion of the medieval appropriations of Aristotelian poetic terminology. Allen argues that instead of a fundamental division between form and content, medieval commentators such as Averros understand poetic language in terms of *assimilatio*. The poem as object is always understood as a relationship between a likening and that by which the likening is made; as such “the poem’s effect is a part of its content,” and “there is an absolute continuity between the people who read it and the people about whom they read” (33).

³⁷ Allen, *The Ethical Poetic*, 11. Quoting Allen further: “What the medieval critics asked me to do was give up literature, in order that I might get back poetry de-trivialized, delivered from that dismissal into which the category ‘literature’ had put it. Poems, of course, in so far as they are objects, or instances of human behaviour, remained the same – all their decorum, virtuosity, textual richness, emotional power, remain. But under the definitions of the medieval critics, they enjoy a different status, they benefit from a different ideology. They are not literature, but ethics; thus their presence to and in affairs we are pleased to call practical transforms the practical itself into something pleasing as well as useful” (xiii).

³⁸ Robert O Payne, *The Key of Remembrance, a Study of Chaucer's Poetics* (New Haven, 1963), 61.

³⁹ For instance, for a reading that shows the central influence of Chaucer’s work translating Boethius on his poetry, see Derek Albert Pearsall, *The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer: A Critical Biography* (Oxford, 1992), 159-168.

“literature”; their moral division is instead used by Chaucer to devise a conception of what we might call literature, of a class of writing defined not by virtue of a common use (as *sentence* or *solas*), but bound instead by nothing other than a lack of explicitness about the uses to which such works might be put.

The paradox is that the category indexed in the “Retractions” is far more transparently recognizable to us than it would be to Chaucer or his readers. If we cannot invoke literature as an extant concept behind this category, how can we otherwise characterize it? Chaucer makes dazzlingly clear that his terms of distinction concern moral value alone: the *Tales* revoked are “thilke that sounen into sinne.” In what way, though, are these texts sinful? Chaucer’s locution, that the works in question “sounen into sinne,” leaves ambiguous whether it is the content or some other aspect of the tales that is sinful. That Chaucer is addressing the former as sinful seems less and less likely when we consider the particular works named within this group: it is hard to see how *The Book of the Duchess* or the *Legend of Good Women* could be construed, by any reasonable measure, to contain sinful matter.

Chaucer’s locution itself, which he uses often in his works, must certainly derive from Augustine and his prescriptions for exegesis in the *De doctrina*, where Augustine describes what the reader is to do with a text that sounds (“sonat”) charity.⁴⁰ The sinfulness of Chaucer’s works has something to do, then, with their unfitness for yielding charitable exegesis. Does this mean that Chaucer’s second category of retracted texts are unethical (in the sense that they lend themselves to cupidinous reading), or indifferent to ethical description altogether? Allen’s view, and a more generally Robertsonian view of poetry as fulfilling a moral function, might be aligned with the “Retractions” (as some have argued) if we see Chaucer not rejecting his group of sinful texts outright, but rather as signaling the need to interpret these allegorically. By this account, we would still be confronted with two categories of works: one that lends itself to immediate ethical use, and one that would require a process of interpretation to become ethically useful, as on its face – i.e., literally – it is not. But it seems equally plausible that Chaucer is signaling that although Augustinian hermeneutics can delineate the category, it cannot exhaustively explain it, opening a space for conceiving of his intentions outside of such an exegetical paradigm. The “Retractions” holds out both possibilities, and which of the two contrasting directions we choose in defining Chaucer’s poetics depends, again, on whether we take Chaucer to be speaking seriously or not seriously.

But it is confronting us with this choice, I will argue, that is Chaucer’s achievement, and that defines his category of revoked works. The “Retractions,” as I have said, confect a category of writing, which I argue we may think of as Chaucer’s literature, by clear, direct contrast with works of explicit moral content. However, we have seen that what the “Retractions” also do – by presenting us with the figure of the author himself – is force two possible readings of Chaucer’s sincerity, as either earnest or ironic. Interestingly, either reading of Chaucer’s seriousness, taken on its own, produces the self-same category of writing revoked because it does not do the work of morally effective ones; the “serious” and “ironic” readings only differ about whether Chaucer valorizes or repudiates that group. But something happens when we step back and see this as a choice Chaucer is setting up between two readings of his sincerity. If we read Chaucer as

⁴⁰ See *De doctrina christiana*, 3.15.23. The pertinent text is cited and characterized as widely known in late-fourteenth-century England on pp. 78-9 of James Simpson, “Ethics and Interpretation: Reading Wills in Chaucer’s Legend of Good Women,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 20 (1998). The suggestion that Chaucer is referring here to Augustine is my own.

unserious in his repudiation of the revoked texts, then what I have called his literature emerges as a valued category defined against explicitly edificatory texts, while Chaucer the author disappears behind the mask of fiction and irony.⁴¹ If Chaucer is serious, we have to stomach a categorical rejection of a group of his fictions as sinful because of their non-explicitness about their ethical stakes; but meanwhile, we gain an author implicated in, and reflective about the ethical influence of his fictions in the world. In presenting this interpretive binary, the “Retractions” force us either to give up literature, or to give up the author; in pursuing one reading of Chaucer’s sincerity or the other, we cannot make it out of this text with both intact.⁴²

This choice about Chaucer’s sincerity relates to his self-division in the “Retractions” between a fictive and embodied self in a complementary, though not identical, way. Either of these personae might be taken to speak in earnest or in game, as this binary is laid as a choice across the surface of his prose, as a constant flicker in the relation between performance and intention. Chaucer’s division of himself in the “Retractions” into two personae does, however, provide salient terms by which “ironic” or “serious” readings of his voice in the “Retractions” become meaningful. There is a striking affinity between a gamesome form of speaking and his persona not yet removed from the sphere of fiction, insofar as each offers a performance and a body that is a deflection of the author and a deferral of responsibility. Meanwhile, earnest speech and the revoking author share an answerable existence beyond the boundary of fiction.

But how do such affinities between our choices about Chaucer’s voice on the one hand, and about his persona on the other, converge in the “Retractions,” disposed as these are in different ways across the text’s surface? Chaucer forges a concrete difference between two personae, but also makes the experience of encountering those personae subject to a productive instability. Most critically, in taking the “author” Chaucer seriously, we gain a position of reflection and accountability for fictions composed in the past, but in turn must either reject Chaucer’s imaginative fictions, or regard Chaucer merely as the maker of fictions, the valuing of which we must now take responsibility for. In taking this same persona ironically, Chaucer’s literature emerges as a valued category, but in turn we lose the perspective of ethical reflection about them, as the author collapses back into the fiction of the *Tales* itself.⁴³

⁴¹ For a discussion of Chaucerian irony, see chapter 4 of Charles Muscatine, *Poetry and Crisis in the Age of Chaucer* (Notre Dame, 1972). Muscatine sees irony as Chaucer’s characteristic response to a fourteenth century defined as an “age of crisis” (14). As a counterbalance to realism and solemnity, Chaucer’s “controlled irony” allows him to show “contrasting patches of value” and to embrace “contradictions and disparities” of late-medieval life (112). For a view of Chaucerian humor as an “evasive” deflection of social and political conflict, see Pearsall (1992), 147 and 150.

⁴² For a view which sees such a dialectic as I suggest for the “Retractions,” between characters alternately engrossed and detached from the particularities of circumstance, as an underlying structuring feature of medieval literature, see J. A. Burrow, *Ricardian Poetry: Chaucer, Gower, Langland and the 'Gawain' Poet* (London), 121.

⁴³ Though it is less suggestive for the present purpose, a similar operation can be seen for the first persona offered in the “Retractions.” If we take this persona seriously, we gain an ethical purview in the moment of composition in which the author’s will, if not his performance, is measured against doctrine. If we do not take this voice seriously, again, we lose that perspective. This involves a collapse not of the authorial persona into the fiction, since this persona is already presented as a fictive construct; instead it is the author’s will which becomes no longer

Chaucer thus presents us with a series of choices about his seriousness and identity in the “Retractions,” but attaches a cost to making those choices. The projection of authorial “entente” emerges in inverse and competitive relation with the value and autonomy of Chaucer’s imaginative fictions. By forcing a choice between these two mutually exclusive sources of value, the “Retractions” also lead us, by comparison, to acknowledge the inadequacy of its (nevertheless clear) distinction between categories of texts, with its clean split between the ethical and the literary. The “Retractions” imply that such a distinction about texts must come bound to a decision about authorship and intention; the “Retractions” thus dramatize the cost of attaching, and of severing, ethics and literature.

At the same time, it is equally important to see that the division of texts performed by the “Retractions” is a makeable one. It is not the case that Chaucer *must* see his literature as ethical. It seems, rather, quite easy (here in the “Retractions,” at least) to imagine it otherwise. Historicizing Chaucer’s understanding of the literary thus need not depend on Chaucer’s being unaware of the possibility that imaginative fiction might be conceptualized as a sphere of activity immune from ethical consequence. But we have also seen that the “Retractions” foreground a statement about authorial intention that is a direct affront to this possibility. In order to clarify the grounds of Chaucer’s literary practice, we must turn to consider Chaucer’s conception of intention throughout his career to discover the full range in which that term could be meaningful.

accountable for the ethical efficacy of the text, defining a horizon of freedom from the ethical answerability of fictions that entails the abnegation of intention – defined as an operation of the author’s will – as pertinent to ethical consideration.

Chapter 2

Authorial Intention and Meaning: *The Book of the Duchess* and the “Prologue” to *The Legend of Good Women*

The paradox of Chaucer’s “Retractions” is not only that it offers a category of works as simultaneously ethically defined and ethically autonomous; it is also that a distinction so clearly drawn between literary and utilitarian writing is apparently only explicitly made at the end of Chaucer’s career. Is this a distinction that Chaucer maintained all along? It is tempting to believe that it is the perspective of the “Retractions” that makes its knowledge possible, that its recognition of a type of fictive production which I have argued we may call Chaucer’s literature is a discovery achievable only through the renunciation of writing it enacts. And yet, I will argue, the operative term by which the “Retractions” constructs its two categories -- Chaucer’s assertion of his “entente” -- is an idea Chaucer develops with specificity and interest throughout his career, and through which he makes assertions about how the circumstances and acts of an author stand in relation to the uses and values of fictions.

At stake in such an inquiry is an account of the idea of literature itself, and of the terms by which a Middle English poet could conceive of such a thing. In this chapter, I examine two of Chaucer’s works – *The Book of the Duchess* and *The Legend of Good Women* – in which Chaucer stages the failure of the poet’s intention to determine the meanings of his works. In each case the wedge Chaucer drives between authorial intention and a work’s meaning will allow us to define more clearly Chaucer’s conception(s) of his “entente,” and show its usefulness in conceiving of a category of writing we know as literature.

The relationship between poetry and ethics is a topic whose importance to the history of medieval studies can hardly be overstated. Poetry’s fitness as a vehicle for moral instruction may be safely asserted as a defining, if bluntly stated, difference between Robertsonian exegetical criticism and Donaldsonian new criticism.¹ But the question has also served as a focal point for Chaucer criticism more broadly, and it is worth documenting how and why the relation of poetry and ethics became a (if not *the*) central question for a generation of Chaucer criticism, and asking what has happened to the problem since. I do not presume to offer a comprehensive conspectus of all strands of Chaucer criticism of the last fifty years, but rather to identify a broad and sustained convergence around a single problematic, to ask why that endeavor came to seem irrelevant, and to characterize the ways in which it has recently returned with new force. In particular I will focus on how these various characterizations of Chaucer’s poetry as an ethical and/or literary enterprise (and those accounts that find such classification otiose) do so in tandem

¹ The attention I will pay specifically to Donaldson and Robertson in my summary of criticism is slight relative to these critics’ influence on the development of the question at issue and on medieval scholarship more generally, but it is beyond my focus here to treat these critics in full detail. My specific interest is to show the versions of the intending author assumed by each critic. I direct the reader to Patterson’s rich and nuanced account of this chapter in the history of medieval criticism, where Patterson demonstrates the differing assumptions of textual-historical relations understood by these respective critical projects. See Chapter 1 of Lee Patterson, *Negotiating the Past: The Historical Understanding of Medieval Literature* (Madison, 1987).

with, or by means of, differing propositions about the hermeneutic usefulness of the intending author. The question of the author's intention thus provides a thread of continuity throughout this critical dialogue, even when the question of the ethical or literary identity of Chaucer's poetry is sidelined.

For Robertson the aesthetics of medieval poetry, and of medieval art in general – defined by conventionality and the incoherence of surface materials, which Robertson contrasts to the dramatic expressiveness of Romantic notions of character – were designed for the encouragement of ethical reflection, offering spurs to thought rather than dramatic psychological immediacy.² Thus for Robertson there was thus no categorical opposition to be drawn between the aesthetic and moral aspects of a poem, since the sensuousness of poetry is seen not in itself as sinful, but as a necessary part of poetry's moral function. The reader whose will is not able to accept the "formal consolation of the church" must be met by the sensuousness of art at "the place of worldly concern where his will has escaped"; the moral function of art depends upon its ability to direct this reader toward God for His own sake, and to defend against the possibility that the reader may take delight in and consent to the merely sensual.³ Injunctions such as the Nun's Priest that a reader should "taketh the fruyt, and lat the chaf be stille" need not, then, be taken to presume an opposition between the aesthetic and moral aspects of art: the "chaf" of poetic language and figures is necessary to the process of charitable reading, until the point at which it should be discarded by the reader in favor of the Christian truths behind it. Robertson recognized that poetry was different in quality and function from naked doctrine: similitudes and allegory make the pursuit of knowledge more difficult, and pleasurable, and enable new and unexpected discovery of orthodox truth through a process that is ultimately an exercise of the reason, not of the emotions.⁴

Robertson's dual focus, while accounting for the process of allegorical reading and the aesthetics germane to such a process, largely sidelines the question of the author's intention and of the author's procedures in manifesting that intention. As Simpson has noted, within exegetical hermeneutics "the purpose of reading is that readers regain access to their best desires, not that they gain access to authorial intention," except, Simpson notes, insofar as the author's intention is to produce the reader's best desire.⁵ The circularity of such a definition of intention as exegetically defined does not, however, exhaust its interest. The practical prescriptions such an intentional paradigm would offer to the living exegetical author, whose efforts and decisions must be defined as a back-formation from exegetical reading practice, are less certain, and raise questions far richer, than may at first appear. How would such an author proceed in creating a poem that veils doctrine in such a way that its interpretation "ceases to be an exercise in ingenuity and becomes a stimulating discovery of new relationships and unexpected correspondences, of the clear and inevitable unfolding of the truths of Christian consolation"?⁶ Robertson's analysis of medieval aesthetics describes the characteristics of art forms conducive

² D. W. Robertson, Jr., *A Preface to Chaucer: Studies in Medieval Perspectives* (Princeton, 1962), 47-8.

³ Bernard Felix Huppe and D. W. Robertson, *Fruyt and Chaf: Studies in Chaucer's Allegories* (Princeton, 1963), 97.

⁴ See *Ibid.*, p. 6 and p. 95.

⁵ James Simpson, "Ethics and Interpretation: Reading Wills in Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 20 (1998), 75.

⁶ Huppe and Robertson, *Fruyt and Chaf*, 95.

to such reading practices, but he does not consider such speculative questions as I have raised about the practices of the working author. This is because for Robertson the author's intentions are conceived as coterminous with the conditions of meaning through a symbolic vocabulary that is given, not chosen; the exegetical author "could hardly fail to write without an awareness of symbolic meaning, or of the serious purpose of poetry." Since we must begin "with the necessary assumption that the medieval poet intended to be meaningful," the task of interpretation must concern itself with elucidating the "pattern of meaning which underlies words and things used figuratively."⁷ As Patterson has noted, the historicist assumptions of exegetical criticism, by conceiving of meaning as a shared but indeterminate, inarticulated radix, not learned or taught, makes exegetical criticism an interpretive, rather than an explanatory exercise.⁸ In this sense, such practical questions as I have raised about the working author's intentions are superfluous to the exercise of exegetical interpretation. The question we endeavor to ask is whether Chaucer's foregrounding of his own "entente," particularly with respect to the uses of poetry, does or does not invite such speculation, and to what ends.

Such questions as I have raised about how the aims of prescriptive morality could effectively function as practical directives for poets are seen by Donaldson as emanating from a failure to recognize the autonomy of poetry from the didactic aims of the church: "the Fathers of the Church were less expert at devising rules for poets than they were at devising rules for Christians."⁹ Donaldson's conviction was, of course, that the object of the poet was categorically distinct from that of the moralist. The wisdom poems offer is not that of "Christian doctrine," but something close to an "ultimate reality" unique to the experience of encountering "a great work of art."¹⁰ But Donaldson, by design, declines to offer a unified account of the poet's purpose that might stand in contrast to that of the moralist. In his most direct response to exegetical criticism, Donaldson applies the stages of exegetical reading – *littera*, *sensus*, and *sententia* – to three poems, but individually rather than as a sequential process of interpretation. Demonstrating in turn psychological realism in *Piers Plowman*, the rhetorical, rather than moral, interest of the "Nun's Priest's Tale," and the poetic virtuosity of a medieval lyric, Donaldson's task is not to prescribe what a poem is, but rather to argue what it isn't. Rather than offer a comprehensive theory about the aims of poetry, Donaldson's argument, with its divergent readings of the poems he considers, implicitly suggests that the value of poetry lies in its resistance to categorical definition.

That Chaucer's poetry could sustain two readings so diametrically opposed owes at least in part to Chaucer's preferred vehicle for explicitly addressing the matter of poetry's usefulness – the constellation of antinomies which in Chaucer's later fictions become increasingly conspicuous and thematically foregrounded. Accounts subsequent to Robertson and Donaldson that pursued the question of poetry's usefulness did so with the recognition that antinomies such as *sentence* and *solas*, *experience* and *auctorite*, *ernest* and *game*, and *fruyt* and *chaf* might offer keys to Chaucer's sense of the nature of his poetry, defined in terms of its usefulness and of the role of the author. For a large number of critical accounts appearing in the wake of these critics, such antinomies were seen as the means by which Chaucer stages and deflects traditional

⁷ Ibid., pp. 26-7, 9, resp.

⁸ Patterson, *Negotiating the Past*, 27-8.

⁹ E. Talbot Donaldson, "Patristic Exegesis in the Criticism of Medieval Literature: The Opposition," in *Speaking of Chaucer* (New York, 1970), 136.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 152 and 153.

expectations about his poetry, giving that poetry its novelty and power.

Such critics have taken Chaucer's antimonies to represent conflicting forms and aims of poetry, but have differed about whether Chaucer aligns himself with one of the positions staked out by those antimonies over another. Payne elucidates the ideal of "remembrance" as set forth in the *Legend of Good Women* as the synthesis of art, experience, and history.¹¹ While Payne notes that poems such as the *Legend* create a movement back and forth between books and experience, and that the figure of Alceste represents a "possible identity of experience, vision, and books," he sees Chaucer ultimately acknowledging the failure to produce such a synthesis.¹² For Derek Brewer Chaucer's embrace of antimonies is not to be resolved through a Horatian model of *dulce et utile*; rather, argues Brewer, Chaucer's contrasting modes of *sentence* and *solas* define a Gothic style opposed to unity, and by which Chaucer maintained "a wonderfully fluid, easy-going attitude to artistic integrity."¹³ Kendrick and Owen more explicitly define Chaucer's antimonies as a polarization of the moral and ecclesiastical against the gamesome and secular. For Kendrick, *sentence* and *solas* represent the extremes of Christian asceticism and of carnivalesque obscenity that debases the sacred.¹⁴ By this account *sentence* and *solas* are seen as divergent reading practices of the same text by readers conversely gentle or churlish; Chaucer, as medieval goliardic, covers the carnal and obscene with the mask of moral *sentence*, and then un.masks and accentuates these sublimated elements.¹⁵ By Owen's account, Chaucer's antimonies describe an opposition between "medieval didacticism" and "purely aesthetic enjoyment."¹⁶ For Owen, however, Chaucer uses the process of the *Canterbury Tales* to elevate the latter over the former, as "the 'game' of the storytelling replaces the 'earnest' of overt morality as the source of value."¹⁷ John M. Hill and Robert Burlin forward accounts of

¹¹ See Chapter 2 of Robert O. Payne, *The Key of Remembrance, a Study of Chaucer's Poetics* (New Haven, 1963). Payne notes Chaucer's frequent staging of the poet's engagement with old books, and the recurrent old books/new corn motif, as indicative of Chaucer's pursuit of such a synthesis.

¹² *Ibid.*, 101. For Payne, this failure is one between intention and effect, borne from Chaucer's acknowledgement of the limitations of the poet in effecting an "adjustment, a reconciliation through language, of tradition, which includes artistic forms and conventions, practical experience, and ideal knowledge" (104). Chaucer, as Payne points out, fails to recognize Alceste. Further, the terms the God of Love sets forth for the justification of the poet involve questions about which books he is to select; the problem for the poet becomes a practical one – "which is the truth that he must (despite human limitations) perceive and illuminate"? (114). Payne suggests that Chaucer's ironic self-presentation derives from his acknowledgement of these limitations.

¹³ Derek Brewer, *Tradition and Innovation in Chaucer* (London, 1982), 114. For Brewer's reading of the "Retractions" as a distinction between *sentence* and *solas*, see p. 112.

¹⁴ The points I make here summarize Chapter 1 of Laura Kendrick, *Chaucerian Play: Comedy and Control in the Canterbury Tales* (Berkeley, 1988).

¹⁵ Kendrick's position is thus a revival of Horatian synthetic reading, but in psychological rather than moral terms.

¹⁶ Charles A. Owen, *Pilgrimage and Storytelling in the Canterbury Tales: The Dialectic of "earnest" and "game"* (Norman, 1977), 6, 3.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 3. Owen reaches this conclusion by asserting that the conflicting objectives of Chaucer's tale tellers create implicit patterns that "contrast with the overt didacticism of the narrators,"

Chaucer's use of antimonies that are, by contrast, synthetic, arguing that Chaucer bridges the gap between his polarized terms in the service of producing works of the greatest epistemological consequence. Hill shares with Owen the sense that Chaucer's framing device deflects the didactic energies of its individual tales, though for Hill this deflection derives from the "imperfect appropriation" of the teller who tries to coerce "univocal meaning" from his tale.¹⁸ Through his tellers' limitations, Hill argues, Chaucer reveals fictions as mixtures of *sentence* and *solas*, *ernest* and *game*, and *auctorite* and *experience*, embracing a syncretic truth function involving both feeling and belief.¹⁹ Burlin proposes a similarly synthetic function for the poems in perceiving Chaucer, over the course of his career, working toward a dissolution of the antithesis between *experience* and *auctorite*, and toward a sense of the inter-relatedness of its terms, effecting "a steady erosion of their epistemological validity."²⁰ For Burlin this process is a window into the uniqueness of Chaucer's process of poetic production, as "the conflict between these opposing forces, between the finished product of 'auctoritee' and the searching process of 'experience,' constitute in Chaucer a tension of poetic consciousness, which may be called the 'intellectual imagination.'"²¹

Divergent as these various accounts are in their conclusions, they all seek in Chaucer's thematization of antimonies a device by which he sets forth assumptions about the nature and uses of poetry, and about the activity and limitations of the poet. The critical movement away from explication of these antimonies coincided with a re-orientation away from a common critical imperative that is at its heart categorical and descriptive, an orientation towards defining Chaucer's poetry that is prescribed once these antimonies are taken as one's object of critical inquiry. In the previous chapter I showed the limits of such an approach in accounting for Chaucer's distinction in the "Retractions." I argued that by foregrounding his "entente" as he makes a distinction between two categories of his works, Chaucer was able to conceive of a category of writing – what I have called his literature – defined not by virtue of shared features that might be indexed, but instead derived from these works' common lack of explicitness about their ethical use defined in terms of the intentions of the author. In the "Retractions" the hermeneutic of his "entente" thus offered Chaucer the freedom to conceive of a category of writing beyond the terms he traditionally makes available to that purpose.

Admittedly at the risk of over-generalizing a diffuse body of criticism, we can see a broad shift in Chaucer criticism in its movement away from what we have seen had been taken as a primary object of study, as a focus on Chaucer's antimonies gave way to a focus on Chaucer's narrators and characters.²² Taking up these topics, Chaucer's achievement was no longer seen in terms of his humane individualism, but traced rather to his interest in dynamic processes of subject formation.

thereby creating "a level of value independent of any one story or any narrator" (3).

¹⁸ John M. Hill, *Chaucerian Belief: The Poetics of Reverence and Delight* (New Haven, 1991), 3, 4.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 5, 7, et passim.

²⁰ Robert B. Burlin, *Chaucerian Fiction* (Princeton, 1977), 22.

²¹ 78 of *Ibid.*

²² I find it useful and more illuminating to characterize this shift in terms of method and focus invoked by a return to various problematics of Chaucer's poetry, rather than as a turn in theoretical orientation toward post-structuralist approaches, though this is also a valid way to characterize this change.

By Kittredge's influential reading of Chaucer's characters as *dramatis personae*, Chaucer's greatness derives from his capacity to grant his characters "an individuality that goes much beyond the typical." According to Kittredge, in Chaucer's hands "conventions are vitalized," so that "Chaucer, unlike his predecessors, shows himself in immediate contact with the facts and experiences of human life."²³ This valorization of Chaucer's movement from text to life is reversed by Lawton, Leicester, and Patterson, who each emphasize the rhetorical, rather than mimetic quality of Chaucer's poetry. Chaucer's achievement comes to be seen as his "invention of a textual rhetoric from a spoken one."²⁴ Lawton begins from the observation that Chaucer's various pilgrim tale-tellers share a tonal kinship; though presumably distinct narrative personae, they "spend most of their time quoting Chaucer." Being so diffused, Chaucer's narrator functions as a stylistic device, not a persona, serving a rhetorical rather than a dramatic end – to "mediate the interplay of the poem and its possible audiences." In giving up the fiction of a speaking persona drawn from didactic models, Chaucer plays a crucial role in the "growth – or invention – of an English literary tradition," conceived in the "movement...from penitent to poet."²⁵ Leicester, like Lawton, suggests that Chaucer offers his narrator not as a "distinct, finished personality," but rather as the voice of the text, defined as a dynamic interplay between "a shapely, self-mastering humanist agent" and "the undoing of that position into the place of a fluid, multifarious polyvocality."²⁶ Such a process results in the "displacement from moral classification to social impression," as the speaker of the poem encounters his own agency in having created, not discovered, the order of society.²⁷ Patterson similarly shows Chaucer's characters as exhibiting not a humanist but a "rhetorical version of selfhood," conceived as a "dialectical movement between a socially undefined subjectivity...and a historically determined role."²⁸

These accounts' emphasis on a Chaucerian dialectic between the self and the textual/historical subject recalls the tensions of accounts focused on Chaucer's antimonies. But whereas those earlier accounts typically congratulated Chaucer for forging a humanist literary possibility against institutional norms, the later treatments trace the dispersal of the humanist self into a subject caught in its dealings with language or history. The processes and tensions referred to the text in accounts such as Leicester's were those previously conceived as tensions of the poet's mind, as the seeds of his creative imagination. As a result, the question of the author's intention diminishes in these later accounts as the figure of the author came to be conceived not as a self apart from and behind the text, but as a subject made by it.

The other major strand of Chaucer criticism that bears on our consideration of intention, ethics, and literature is that oriented toward viewing Chaucer's works in terms of their representation and negotiation of social relations. Such accounts are explicitly positioned in contradistinction to interpretations focused principally on elucidating the aesthetic aspects of Chaucer's poetry. Seeing in Chaucer's fictions "claims and counterclaims of hierarchical and

²³ George Lyman Kittredge, *Chaucer and His Poetry* (Cambridge, Mass, 1970), 154, 70, and 58, resp.

²⁴ David A Lawton, *Chaucer's Narrators* (Dover, N.H, 1985), xiv.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 4, 13, 14 resp.

²⁶ H. Marshall Leicester, *The Disenchanted Self: Representing the Subject in the Canterbury Tales* (Berkeley, 1990), 384-5, 415, resp.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 392, 404.

²⁸ Lee Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History* (Madison, Wis, 1991), 29, 28-9.

antihierarchical ideas about [his characters'] social experience," Strohm considers formal matters such as temporality in narrative as "the bearers of recognized social meaning, that 'aesthetic' contentions may actually be placed, in Chaucer's remarkable hands, in the service of their 'social' understanding."²⁹ Grudin, like Strohm, finds Chaucer's poetry a dynamic vehicle for the representation of social relations, particularly because of his heavy reliance on dialogue in the *Canterbury Tales*. Whereas for Strohm the virtue of Chaucer's engagement with the social lies in his eschewing of utopian forms and opening "a discursive space within which various conceptions of social reality can coexist," Grudin sees Chaucer's engagement in the social in a more revolutionary cast.³⁰ Seeing Chaucer's poetry in the context of contemporary restrictions against speech, Grudin asserts that "Chaucer found a way to sponsor [free speech] through the agency of dialogue, thus working with an instrument which is potentially subversive to all authority."³¹ For Grudin Chaucer's agency, and his greatness as a poet, derives from the consciousness he brings to bear on typically hidden ideological mechanisms. However not all accounts of the social aspects of Chaucer's poetry see the author in such counterhegemonic terms. Dinshaw's elucidation of Chaucer's engagement with gender -- conceived in terms of a masculine author or interpreter of a feminized text -- posits that Chaucer's masculine characters and his modern critics constitute instances of "reading like a man": "each defines the disruptive Other in, and of, the text as feminine and limits it, turns away from it, in order to provide a single, univalent textual meaning fixed in a hierarchical structure."³² In contrast to an alternative form of interpretation exemplified by Criseyde and called by Dinshaw feminine reading -- marked by a deferral of closure, a resistance to exclusion of disruptive aspects of the text, embracing "the entire text, every word of it" -- reading for the author's intention is seen as an activity manifesting patriarchal literary-critical assumptions.³³

The question of the ethical and literary value of Chaucer's poetry, once at the center of Chaucer criticism, evaporates altogether as Chaucer is viewed through the lenses of social, deconstructive, and historical criticism. Meanwhile these later approaches subject to scrutiny the interpretive validity of the author's intention, as a hermeneutic category which seeks meaning through the poet considered as a self, a pursuit common to Chaucer and his critics alike. And yet we have also seen that in earlier accounts, from Robertson and Donaldson through those critics who considered Chaucer's poetry as expressed by antimonies, pronouncements about Chaucer's intentions are not so explicitly made as such. Perhaps this is because the modalities Chaucer was seen to engage with -- *sentence* and *solas*, *experience* and *auctorite*, *fruyt* and *chaff* -- are themselves strong and transparent statements about the uses of poetry.

²⁹ Paul Strohm, *Social Chaucer* (Cambridge, Mass, 1989), xi, xiii.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 181.

³¹ Michaela Paasche Grudin, *Chaucer and the Politics of Discourse* (Columbia, 1996), 25.

³² Carolyn Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* (Madison, 1989), p. 28.

³³ *Ibid.*, 55. Dinshaw makes the link between intentionalist hermeneutics and patriarchy explicit by suggesting that "with its concern to authorize, legitimate, and finally, delimit meanings, the concept of an author as all-controlling locus of meaning promotes patriarchal values of final authority, fidelity, and legitimacy." (37) For an alternate account, see Simpson, "Ethics and Interpretation: Reading Wills in Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*," where Simpson sees Chaucer representing female agency in the *Legend of Good Women* in spite of a hegemonic interpretive directive, by means of his conspicuous excision of such agency from the tales he translates.

On what grounds, then, can intention in Chaucer be considered in its own right? Recently, the topic of ethics in Chaucer's poetry has taken on new life, as questions of subject formation referred to the text have given way to considerations of Chaucer's interest in such things as agency, autonomy, and practical reason. Ethics so defined in Chaucer's poetry describes agency in terms of the will, reason, and desire, seen as distinct from the ideological terms of moral prescription.³⁴ Such accounts as Miller's see Chaucer's engagement with gender as coterminous with his concern with agency, since Augustinian formulations of agency were always elaborated in terms of erotic topoi. J. Allan Mitchell has also argued for the necessity of viewing Chaucer's use of the exemplum in terms of practical agency, rather than through ideological or sociopolitical lenses that "by their very nature displace and erode the subject of ethics."³⁵ Mitchell emphasizes the extradiegetic function of exemplarity in Chaucer and Gower as the key to an ethical poetics predicated on the questions of practical agency.

My present purpose is to raise the question of intention as Chaucer makes the concept explicit, asking how Chaucer conceives of the ethical function of his poetry in terms of aspects of its production. In doing so, I hope to fill a lacuna in current considerations of ethics in Chaucer's poetry by explicitly raising the hermeneutic category of authorial intention, whose fortunes seem to have foundered in the wake of deconstructive and social accounts. It is my contention that Chaucer is, from his earliest poetry, keenly interested in the relationship between the author's intention and the effects of poetry, and that the elaboration of this connection is constitutive of his conception of literary possibility.

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The opposition Donaldson proposes between art and conventional ecclesiastical didacticism posits two mutually-exclusive projects for medieval texts, and two identities – the moralist and the poet – for their producers. Such a conflict is projected onto the single person of Chaucer himself in Alfred David's conception of the author split "between what his intellect as a medieval moralist tells him ideally should be and what his feelings as a poet tell him actually is true."³⁶ For David, the greatness of Chaucer's poetry derives from this internal struggle "between the moralist who calls for judgment and the artist who refuses to judge, a struggle in which the artist usually prevails." The problem that David locates, and reconciles by dividing Chaucer's conscious and subconscious aims, is how to describe a single action, or sequences of actions by a single author, with apparently mutually-exclusive intentions and values.

The resemblance of the self-division David imagines for Chaucer in the process of composition and the division Chaucer performs of his own texts in the "Retractions" is provocative. But a large and unaddressed question is thereby raised: does Chaucer conceive of poetics and ethics, or of aesthetics and conventional didacticism, as opposed? Rather than asserting that Chaucer takes a single position on the question, I will argue that Chaucer, from

³⁴ Mark Miller, *Philosophical Chaucer: Love, Sex, and Agency in the Canterbury Tales* (Cambridge, UK, 2004). Miller distinguishes considerations of practical ethics from ideology by seeing the two as interrelated, yet distinct, forms of normativity.

³⁵ J. Allan Mitchell, *Ethics and Exemplary Narrative in Chaucer and Gower* (Rochester, NY, 2004), 2.

³⁶ Alfred David, *The Strumpet Muse: Art and Morals in Chaucer's Poetry* (Bloomington, 1976), 30.

early in his career, makes the question of the relationship between poems and ethics a subject of his poetry, and that Chaucer's characteristic approach to the question is to consider it in light of the intentions of the maker.

The syntax and versification of the narrator of the *Book of the Duchess* bears the unmistakable stamp of what Burrow has characterized as the minstrel style of Ricardian poetry. A set of inherited native poetic conventions, such style utilizes stock phrases, superlative language, and appeals to the audience that are together productive of an "underwrought" poetry of a "loose-woven, open texture."³⁷ The *Book of the Duchess* is a rendering of minstrel style that looks forward to the hyperbolically parodic narrator of "Tale of Sir Thopas." Chaucer's framing device – a garrulous insomniac wishes to recount a tale read to him out of a book of romances – establishes the narrator as a dramatic personage; we are subsequently surprised when the narrator identifies himself as "I, that made this book."³⁸ At this moment the fiction of oral delivery is overturned by an assertion of the narrative's ontological status as a "book," despite this claim's incongruousness with the genre and style of the narrative.

There is no question, however, of the high ambition with which the narrator front-loads his work. The narrator's purposefulness is conspicuous and intrusive, as he breaks off the story of Alcione at its emotional height in order to relate his "first matere... / Wherefore I have told this thing."³⁹ Though "hyt were to longe for to dwelle" on the final words of Alcione, just as she learns of her husband's death and shortly preceding her own, the narrator, after informing us that he has read the tale well and "overloked hyt everydel," relates his wonder at finding mention in the story of a god of sleep, which he "had never herd speke of tho," and to whom he promptly prays for relief.⁴⁰ The narrator's attempts to derive significance from what he reads come off as an instance of horribly inept reading, his *forma tractatus* (abandoned as quickly as it is introduced) revealing a naïve sense of the purpose, expository contour, and historical alterity of the fiction he relates. The narrator's failure to recognize the emotional shape of Alcione's story is reinforced by his over-investment of affect during the story's initial stages exposition: as Alcione wonders what has become of her long-delayed husband, the narrator "Had such pittee and such rowthe / To rede hir sorwe that, by my trowthe, / I ferde the worse al the morwe / Aftir to thenken on hir sorwe."⁴¹ The narrator out-does these eccentricities of investment and proportion with another, more dramatically humiliating, as he attempts within his dream to solicit from the Black Knight what he takes to be an unfolding romance plot: "But wolde ye tel me the manere / To hire which was your first speche – / Thereof I wolde yow beseche – / And how she knewe first your thought, / Whether ye loved hir or noght?"⁴² The narrator's mistake is not just his failure to recognize that Blanche has died, but his wholesale generic misreading of the Black Knight's story, which has by this time transformed from a conventional romance into a far different kind of story.

Chaucer's narrator is equally flat-footed at handling the exposition of the narratives he

³⁷ J. A. Burrow, *Ricardian Poetry: Chaucer, Gower, Langland and the 'Gawain' Poet* (London, 1971), Chapter 1; quoted material from p. 44, 43 respectively. The use of minstrel style in the *Book of the Duchess* is so frequent and diffused as to defy comprehensive citation.

³⁸ *BD*, l. 96.

³⁹ *BD*, l. 218-9.

⁴⁰ *BD*, l. 217, 232, 234, resp.

⁴¹ *BD*, l. 97-100.

⁴² *BD*, l. 1130-34.

relates. His introduction of the story of Alcione and Ceyx (“This was the tale: There was a king / That highte Seys, and had a wif, / The beste that mighte bere lyf, / And this quene highte Alcyone. / So it befil thereafter soone / This king wol wenden over see...”) ⁴³ is parodically simplistic in both its stylistic execution and its unconcern with the originating circumstances of the narrative and its characters. In contrast, the narrator takes pains to ensure the reader’s understanding of his own narratorial acts, explaining in no fewer than six ways that he is performing an utterly conventional shift in frame to relate the contents of his dream. ⁴⁴ The intrusiveness of the narrator as he relates this shift (“Loo, thus hyt was; thys was my sweven. / Me thoghte thus: that hyt was May, / And in the dawenyng I lay / (Me mette thus) in my bed al naked...”) ⁴⁵ make his self-insinuation into his narrative come off as the actions of a callow and over-anxious expositor. Such tedious exposition vanishes altogether, however, once the narrator turns to relate his dream, where descriptive passages of the Trojan story wrought in glass, and the *Romance of the Rose* painted upon his walls, convey the contingency of a world of disorientation, chance, unconstraint, and a density of evocative, if opaque, story wrought upon unaccustomed media. We have crossed a threshold into a world of fiction so aestheticized as to resist the narrator’s attempts to put it to use. The end of the *Book of the Duchess*, an abrupt ten lines in which the narrator relates how he awoke and resolved to write down his dream, is devoid of the ambitious *forma tractatus* promised by the narrator’s initiatory gestures. ⁴⁶

The *Book of the Duchess* is thus a parody of writerly ambitions derailed by the richness of an aestheticized world of stories beyond the capacity of Chaucer’s narrator to use them to his limited purpose. In doing so Chaucer has paradoxically produced a sense of contingency around the act of fictive production itself – his narrator’s assertion of an organized *forma tractatus*, as a numerical sequence of “matere,” wilts before the richness of imaginative fiction. We might observe the similarity in this version of the working author with that imagined in accounts such as David’s, in which the overt project of the moralist is overcome in the process of composition. In the *Book of the Duchess* Chaucer shows that he is aware of just such an account of literary production, and gives substance to its structuring opposition between ethical and aesthetic values. The narrator’s instrumental treatment of story is shown as a form of reading and writing bereft of sensitivity to the aesthetics and pathos of fiction. The attempt of Chaucer’s narrator at *assimilatio* – to assert the “matere... / Wherfore I have told this thyng,” misconstrues the significance of what he reads to the point of absurdity. ⁴⁷

The *Book of the Duchess* thus portrays the instrumental use of fiction as an abuse of its most concrete aims, as visible in genre, expository arc, and characterization; his efforts thus involve a failure to recognize the virtuosity of written story. This is hardly a surprising conclusion to draw from Chaucer, whose elevation of chaff over fruit in the “Nun’s Priest’s Tale” has long been recognized as expressive of a fundamental Chaucerian poetic principle. ⁴⁸ But the peculiarity of the *Book of the Duchess* is that the contrast between aesthetic and ethical

⁴³ *BD*, l. 62-7.

⁴⁴ see *BD* ll. 274-293.

⁴⁵ *BD* ll. 290-3.

⁴⁶ *BD*, l. 1334. Not all critics have read the ending of the poem as so asymmetrical. Kittredge (*Chaucer and His Poetry*) sees the ending as fittingly demonstrative of the detachment of the artist, in contradistinction to the consolation of the dream (38).

⁴⁷ For an explanation of *assimilatio* as described by Allen, see fn. 35 of Chapter 1.

⁴⁸ See Donaldson, “Patristic Exegesis in the Criticism of Medieval Literature: The Opposition.”

aspects of the text is imagined in terms of the consciousness and intentions of the working author. As pedestrian an idea as this might seem for us, it would not be so for Chaucer. Though *intentio auctoris* was a standard analytic category for medieval academic prologues, it did not in practice encompass the kind of psychological and characterological speculation Chaucer encourages about his narrator. Rather, commentary about an author's *intentio* typically involved advancing allegorical readings of classical pagan literature; as such, intention in scholastic prologues is often substantively identical to statements of the text's moral *utilitas*.⁴⁹ And for its part, the weighing of the relative merits of fruit and chaff in the "Nun's Priest's Tale" is an activity pertaining to the reader's approach to the text, as are, we have seen, Robertsonian accounts of the moral function of art. By presenting an author who is also a reader and commenter, Chaucer has made the uses of poetry pertain to its production, not only its consumption by readers and commenters.

Of course, it is also the case that Chaucer's use of a parodic narrator in the *Book of the Duchess* adds a further wrinkle to how we might interrogate the relationship of literature and ethics as described within the conceptual terrain of the author's intention, involving questions about the intentions of Chaucer, rather than those of his narrative persona. In the analysis above I have sought to show Chaucer foregrounding intention as a subject of the poem. The *Book of the Duchess* presents an interesting test case for how such a reading might relate to our speculations about the intention of the historical author.

The *Book of the Duchess* presents itself both as a text and as the act of that text's composition. The narrator tells us that what we read is a "book," yet its narrator's artlessness and style evoke the fiction of his speaking presence. Together, these lend a sense of our reading as coterminous with the book's composition by a present narrator/writer; at the poem's end, reading and composition come to an abrupt and simultaneous end, as the narrator tells us he had decided to commit his dream to "ryme," and that "now hit ys doon."⁵⁰ The fiction of composition in real time, complemented by the artlessness of the narrator's attempts at *forma tractatus*, produce the sense of a narrative persona who is also the author, an author marked by a lack of dissimulation, whose intentions and meanings (which I have characterized as unartful) are fully legible on the text's surface.

And yet we have also seen that the narrator's deficiencies are juxtaposed with a densely and richly rendered world within the dream. Where does this richness come from? In the *Book of the Duchess* Chaucer has taken pains to render a narrative persona that is not easily dissolvable in the fictive world he relates, which is a modification from his French sources, which offer the narrator as a handsome clerk or lover.⁵¹ We are instead offered the narrative persona as a bookish author, an identity which sets him off from the content he narrates. But unlike his later fictions, Chaucer does not identify himself as that narrator, a fact we might impute to the inchoateness of what would become Chaucer's reading public.⁵² Chaucer thus offers the hermeneutic anchor of

⁴⁹ See Chapter 1 of A. J. Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship: Scholastic Literary Attitudes in the Later Middle Ages* (London, 1984). The latter observation about the similarity of statements of *intentio auctoris* and *utilitas* is my own. Compare, for instance, the commentary headings of *intentio auctoris* and *utilitas* for a text by Lucan, printed in Minnis, p. 21.

⁵⁰ *BD*, ll. 1332, 1334.

⁵¹ This point is made by Lawton, *Chaucer's Narrators*, p. 55.

⁵² For an account of Chaucer's audience and reading public, see Chapter 3 of Strohm, *Social Chaucer*.

the realized author, and yet demurs to identify himself with it.

Thus we can draw conclusions about the historical author's intentions in the *Book of the Duchess* in two ways: though our interpretive conclusions about the poem are necessarily conclusions about the author's intentions, we can also see that Chaucer wishes to evoke the figure of the historical author, whose intentions are rendered parodically inartful and with whom he defers to identify himself. We are asked to ascribe the richness and virtuosity of the poem outside of the narrator's control to the contingent world of dreams and the stories the narrator relates – stories with no author.⁵³

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Of course, Chaucer does, in later works, frequently present himself as their author, and as he does so his stated "entente" is offered as an explicit hermeneutic key for evaluating his literary activities and career. In considering the "Retractions" we have asked what Chaucer might mean in declaring his "entente," and to continue seeking an answer I turn now to the prologue of the *Legend of Good Women*, in which Chaucer's works are similarly divided and judged. In contrast to the division in the "Retractions" between those works contributing to the furtherance of "doctrine" and those that "sounen into synne," in the *Legend of Good Women* Chaucer is upbraided for his translation of the *Romance of the Rose* and for making *Troilus and Criseyde*, activity which the God of Love calls a "heresy ayeins my lawe,"⁵⁴ while Love's queen Alceste intercedes, seeking pity on his behalf, and citing a number of his other works that she claims have furthered Love's "lawe."⁵⁵ I have provisionally asserted that the "Retractions" produces a distinction between Chaucer's literary and non-literary works by means of the author's assertion "entente," but we still lack a definite sense of Chaucer's sense of the term. As a precursor to the "Retractions," in which Chaucer also argues the relevance of his "entente" to the judgment of his works, the *Legend of Good Women* foregrounds a division of texts that is at once more narratively developed, yet less obvious in its rationale.

To understand both this rationale and the terms by which the authorial persona defends himself, we must recognize the dramatic situation of the *Legend of Good Women* prologue as that of a summary judgment.⁵⁶ Alceste's defense of Chaucer is thus not an attempt to prove his innocence – the entire dramatic situation of the "Prologue" is predicated on the assumption of his guilt – but rather to propose circumstances pertinent to the mitigation of his punishment. By staging an evaluation of his works in a forensic context, Chaucer foregrounds a contrast between

⁵³ Such would be at least a conceivable conclusion for medieval readers. Though in Chaucer's time the anchoring of narrative to the historical author became more pronounced, the traditional assumption was that stories, because of their status as histories, rather than invented fictions, "simply exist in their own right" without the need to infer a subject behind their production: A. C. Spearing, *Textual Subjectivity: The Encoding of Subjectivity in Medieval Narratives and Lyrics* (New York, 2005), 25.

⁵⁴ *LGWF*, I, 330.

⁵⁵ *LGWF*, I, 413.

⁵⁶ My thanks to Steven Justice for this characterization of the specific legal nature of the "Prologue," and for various of the consequences that I draw here from it, which he describes in a forthcoming book on Adam Usk.

legal and rhetorical notions of intention as these apply to his fictions.

Alceste's arguments seeking Chaucer's pardon propose that his lack of intention in writing the *Rose* and *Troilus* stand as a mitigating circumstance in his "caas":

Or elles, sire, for that this man is nyce,
He may translate a thyng in no malyce,
But for he useth bokes for to make;
And taketh non hed of what matere he take,
Therefore he wrot the Rose and ek Crisseyde
Of innocence, and nyste what he seyde.
Or hym was boden make thilke tweye
Of som persone, and durste it not withseye;
For he hath write many a bok er this.
He ne hath not don so grevously amys
To translate that olde clerkes wryte,
As thogh that he of maleys wolde endyte
Despit of love, and hadde hymself ywrought.⁵⁷

Alceste's intercessory response on behalf of the author resembles the compiler's defense that Chaucer will later adapt in the *Canterbury Tales*, but her argument represents a substantially different notion of his actions and responsibilities. As described by Alasdair Minnis, the *compiler* accepted responsibility for the manner of arrangement of his sources (*ordinatio partium*), a topos of humility that served to deflect ethical responsibility back to the *auctoritates* rehearsed by the compiler, and to the reader himself, conceived as having freedom of choice (*lectoris arbitrium*) about the *materia* before him, and thus responsibility for its potential ethical consequences.⁵⁸ However the compiler's abdication of responsibility is not absolute, as the compiler's *ordinatio* – also known as the text's *forma tractatus* – involved the organization of subject matter according to Aristotelian branches of knowledge, and into stages of argumentation. This *ordinatio*, selected and arranged by the compiler, was seen as the key to defining the *utilitas* of the text.⁵⁹ The compiler thus retains an important node of responsibility for determining the uses to which the text may be put. In the conceptual terms provided by scholastic *causae*, then, the activities and responsibilities of the compiler stop at the conceptual boundary separating the text's use from its intrinsic features, or *forma tractandi* – those features pertinent to defining *intentio auctoris*.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ LGW G, ll. 340-352.

⁵⁸ Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship*, 192, 201-2. For a discussion of Chaucer's self-presentation as a compiler throughout his fictions, see Minnis, p. 190-210.

⁵⁹ For these details, see M. B. Parkes, "The Influence of the Concepts of *Ordinatio* and *Compilatio* on the Development of the Book," in *Medieval Learning and Literature, Essays Presented to Richard William Hunt*, ed. J. J. G. Alexander and M. T. Gibson (Oxford, 1976), 115-141

⁶⁰ See Minnis, Chapter 1, for a discussion of terminology within various forms of scholastic *accessus*. The division of *intentio* and *utilitas* into distinct categories of textual *causae* is a ubiquitous feature of these schemes. See the discussion of the common 'type C' prologue (Minnis 18-28), which distinguished between *intentio auctoris* and *utilitas*; similarly, the

Alceste's arguments in favor of mitigating Chaucer's punishment, then, are different in quality and kind from the compiler's defense. Rather than an argument concerned with aspects of the texts Chaucer has written that would articulate Chaucer's responsibility by observation of the arrangement and *utilitas* of the censured texts, Alceste trains her focus on the lack of causes, reasons, and motives accompanying Chaucer's actions of making the texts in question. Alceste thus makes Chaucer's responsibility depend not on what might be inferred about the arrangement and usefulness of his works, but upon an analysis of the circumstances surrounding his actions; these circumstances, and his demonstrable lack of intentions in acting, are the key to her argument.

Alceste offers various possible characterizations of Chaucer's actions in seeking to mitigate his punishment. Alceste suggests that Chaucer, who is foolish ("nyce"), might have made the two books in question without any consideration of the sources he used (he "useth bokes for to make," and may "taketh non hed of what matere he take"). The *Rose* and *Troilus* are argued to be the unexceptional products of a habitual practice performed mindlessly by Chaucer; thus he may be considered to have written "of innocence," his actions carried out "in no malyce," since he "nyste what he seyde." Another possibility put forth by Alceste is that Chaucer wrote the *Rose* and *Troilus* at another's behest, whom he "durste...not withseye." Finally, reprising her first point, Alceste asserts that Chaucer has not acted in "maleys" because he has merely translated "that olde clerkes wryte," not acted with "maleys" in "despit of love." Alceste's conjectures offer plausible circumstances under which Chaucer might have acted without an intent to transgress Love's law.

Both Alceste's argument and her rhetorical procedure are jurisprudential in nature. She concedes that Chaucer has performed an illicit act, but argues that his punishment be mitigated (that Love "oughte to ben the lyghter merciablen") because he has not acted with "maleys."⁶¹ Rather than refer her conjectures about Chaucer's circumstances and motives to the author himself, she instead proffers her various hypotheses in a cumulative way, to attain a threshold of doubt about Chaucer's motives in acting. Her aim is not to define Chaucer's motives, but rather to raise doubt that these may be stated with any certainty.

Characterizing Chaucer's unlawful acts as conducted without malice, Alceste suggests that Chaucer has "mysseyde" in making the *Rose* and *Troilus*.⁶² Misspeaking, which we may remember from Chaucer's first exculpatory gesture in the "Retractions,"⁶³ assumes a gap between a verbal act and what I have been loosely and interchangeably referring to as the agent's intentions or motives in performing it. We can now refine these terms as they are applied by Alceste to the author, considered as a criminal subject. Chaucer's defense of himself in the *Legend* prologue constitutes a misunderstanding of the legal situation in which he finds himself, as he attempts to establish his innocence by describing his "entente" in translating. Alceste, by

Aristotelian Prologue distinguished between *causa efficiens* and the *causa finalis* (28-29).

Another scholastic division between intrinsic features of a text (title, material, intention, and mode) and extrinsic features (including name, quantity, divisions, and use) frames the distinction between use and intention as one located in the difference between the text itself, and the ethical discourse of which it is a member (30-33, 63-72).

⁶¹ *LGF*, I, 410.

⁶² *LGF*, I, 440.

⁶³ Where Chaucer says that he "wolde ful fayn have seyde bettre if I hadde had konnyng" (*Canterbury Tales* X (I) 1082).

contrast, who seeks Chaucer's pardon for a crime she presumes he is guilty of, makes no direct conjectures about Chaucer's "entente," "resoun," "motyf," or the like;⁶⁴ in the absence of such explicit language which would define the mitigating terms of his punishment by indexing some quality of his action, we must instead infer from her argument the version(s) of agency that would be pertinent to a legal subject.

As I've discussed, Alceste offers three arguments which might stand as mitigating circumstances. In the first and third, Chaucer's composition is figured as a habitual activity during which he "taketh non hed of what matere he take"; as such he may "translate a thyng in no malyce." What would be necessary, then, for Chaucer to translate something "in malyce," would be an awareness, and presumably an exercise of choice, about which "matere" he translated. We may note that Alceste has taken a node of responsibility conventionally applied to the reader (*lectoris arbitrium*) and made it the one critical determinant of the ramifications warranting punishment of Chaucer's actions, which are envisioned less as compilation than as the mindless copying of a mere scribe so detached from the meaning or potential consequence of his translation that he "nyste what he seyde." Are the terms of Chaucer's pardon predicated on defining Chaucer's intention, his motive, or both?

Alceste denies that Chaucer has acted "in malyce," which is a characterization of his motives in acting not unlike what Anscombe has called motive-in-general, which "is to say something like 'See the action in this light.'"⁶⁵ But Alceste further denies that Chaucer has taken heed of which texts he translates, or that he was aware of what he said. The obverse picture of a translator who truly did act "in malyce" thus would bind motive to choices about texts and an awareness of one's actions, aspects of action that seem indisputably directed toward particular ends and consequences in the future. To act "in malyce," then, is a version of motive that Anscombe shows is synonymous with intention.⁶⁶ Motive and intention are, then, for all practical purposes indistinguishable. In denying Chaucer's motive Alceste is also denying that he acted with an intention. Alceste's second example is rather easier to decipher. By suggesting that Chaucer may have made the two texts under compulsion, Alceste locates an external cause of his actions, a factor that seems to trump any consideration of his motives or intentions in acting.

Alceste's plea thus proposes Chaucer's motives, rendered in an internal and psychologistic way ("maleys"), as coterminous with his intentions, and places both of these as

⁶⁴ Both "entente" and "resoun" are commonly used in Chaucer; according to the MED, Chaucer uses the word "motyf" twice in the sense of advice or counsel; its modern connotation as motive seems a slightly later development of the mid-fifteenth century (See the MED entry for motif, b and c).

⁶⁵ G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention*, 2nd ed. (Ithaca, N.Y., 1963), 21. Anscombe has argued that philosophical and popular applications of motive and intention make an artificial distinction between intentions as the object of an action, and motive as that which determines the choice of an object.

⁶⁶ That is, this is forward-looking motive. See *Ibid.*, p. 19-20 on forward-looking motive as synonymous with intention. In order to qualify as an intention, Chaucer would have to be said to be acting in such a way that we could answer the question "why" he has done what he has done by supplying a reason, not a cause. The exercise of choice about translated texts places malicious translation under such a description of action, and thus as intentional.

distinct from a discourse that would seek the causes of Chaucer's actions. There is no direct link running from Chaucer's motives to his actions in a causal sequence as there would, perhaps, be, if Alceste had proceeded by proffering an alternate motive and argued that as the cause of Chaucer's actions. Instead Alceste's sequence of hypothetical conjectures work to cast doubt on the idea that we may reliably infer Chaucer's motives and intentions (and further, that Chaucer may have had no intentions whatsoever) by examining his translations, which are viewed not as texts considered in terms of formal or linguistic properties, but as discrete actions. Alceste begins with the fact of these actions, and uses conjectures about the circumstances surrounding those actions to show the impossibility of inferring from them motives and intentions against Love's law. This explanatory procedure frames motives not as causes or determinants of actions, but rather as a way of explaining and justifying them.⁶⁷

On the basis of Alceste's argued denial that Chaucer has acted with malicious motives, and her promise that he will swear to "no more agilten in this wyse," and compose a work "of wommen trewe in lovyng al hire lyve," Love proffers the author his pardon.⁶⁸ At this moment Chaucer rises to offer an outright defense of his innocence, which Alceste interrupts and censures as a breach of legal decorum: "Lat be thyn arguynge, / For Love ne wol nat countrepleted be / In ryght ne wrong."⁶⁹ Chaucer's self-defense, in both its timing and content, is entirely at odds with the legal situation in which his actions have been considered. Chaucer's defense attempts to align his intention and the meaning of his works by arguing he offers examples of vice that the reader may learn from and avoid:

But trewly I wende, as in this cas,
 Naught have agilt, ne doon to love trespas.
 For-why a trewe man, withouten drede,
 Hath nat to parten with a theves dede;
 Ne a trewe lover oght me not to blame
 Thogh that I speke a fals love som shame.
 They oghte rather with me for to holde
 For that I of Creseyde wroot or tolde,
 Or of the Rose; what so myn auctour mente,
 Algate, God woot, yt was myn entente
 To forthren trouthe in love and yt cheryce,
 And to ben war fro falsnesse and fro vice
 By swich ensample; this was my menyng.⁷⁰

In Chaucer's self-defense we can see the traditional argument for the moral activity of the compiler. Chaucer argues that it should be clear that his representation of false lovers is to be used by the reader as a negative moral exemplum. Such a moral use of his text is his "entente," and thus his "menyng," despite what his "auctour mente." Chaucer thus asserts he is a "trew man" who has not committed a "theves dede." Chaucer asserts his innocence by defining his

⁶⁷ For Anscombe, this is an important step to locating intention in action, rather than through narratives of internal causality; see *ibid.*, pp. 18-19.

⁶⁸ *LGWF*, ll. 436, 438.

⁶⁹ *LGWF*, ll. 475-7.

⁷⁰ *LGWF*, ll. 462-474.

works in terms of his intention, but unlike Alceste, who sought not to prove Chaucer's innocence but to articulate terms amenable to his pardon, Chaucer presents his intention as intimately bound to aspects of his text that define its moral use; the principle hermeneutic for considering a text is not to see it as an action (as a "dede"), but rather in terms of its "menynges."

But what can we make of the difference which separates Chaucer's assertion of his innocence, predicated upon the assertion of his intention as identical to his meaning, from Alceste's attempt to secure an already-guilty Chaucer's pardon by conceiving his works as actions devoid of motives and intentions? This conflict between forms of intention, alternately conceived in terms of actions and of meaning, is refracted in the concern that runs through the prologue to situate books with respect to the empirical world. The authorial persona's pieties about books emerge from his assertion that "olde bokes" are "of remembraunce the keye," and the receptacle for doctrine which "by assay ther may no man...preve."⁷¹ The narrator proposes a division between books and the empirical world that also structures his own life, as only "seldom on the holyday" is there a reason "that fro my bokes maketh me to goon."⁷² The privilege the narrator imputes to books over the empirical world is overturned once he enters into his dream, where the reclusive author is rudely shown that his works are a highly public act that influences and distorts a world of real people that pre-exist his representations. Love characterizes Chaucer's works, including the *Legende of Good Women* which he will next undertake to write, as "balade[s]," in contrast to the "bookes" that are his sources.⁷³ The nineteen ladies that Chaucer is to take up as his subject matter, which Love says he may "fynde" in his "bookes,"⁷⁴ are representatives of an entire world-full of women brought forth by Love, previously unknown to the author:

For here ben twenty thousand moo sittyng
Than thou knowest, goode wommen alle,
And trewe of love for oght that may byfalle.⁷⁵

A world of women and their goodness that Chaucer now knows "by pref" is to guide his selection of subject matter.⁷⁶ In contrast to the author's conception of his efforts as transpiring at a pre-lapsarian remove from the world ("this werk is al of another tonne, / Of olde story, er swich strif was begon"),⁷⁷ stories about women are to be measured against the world, as they are taken by their readers to directly exemplify it. The perspective of the *Legend of Good Women* which sees Chaucer's works principally in terms of his representation of women thus re-orientes the hermeneutics of Chaucer's "entente" away from meanings grounded in the uses of books as vehicles of moral exemplification, and toward seeing his works as intentional acts measured in terms of their "kindness" to a pre-existing world.

This is a conclusion that provokes questions in two directions: how did Chaucer arrive at the point where his works, considered in terms of his intentions, have become (guilty) acts

⁷¹ *LGWF*, ll. 25, 26, 9.

⁷² *LGWF*, ll. 35, 34.

⁷³ *LGWF*, ll. 328, 555-6, and cf. l. 539.

⁷⁴ *LGWF*, l. 556.

⁷⁵ *LGWF*, ll. 559-61.

⁷⁶ *LGWG*, l. 528.

⁷⁷ *LGWG*, ll. 79-80.

pardonable by virtue of his motives (conceived as something other than the causes of those actions), and what forms of writing issue from intention so conceived? In Chapter 3, I will address the first question, arguing that in *Troilus and Criseyde* Chaucer defined a novel form of authorship, exemplified by Criseyde, which locates intention in actions in such a way that those intentions are no longer coterminous with linguistic meaning. In my final Chapter, I will argue that the uniqueness of narrative and characterization in the *Canterbury Tales* owes to such an action-bound conception of intention.

Chapter 3

Intention, Agency, and Authorship in *Troilus and Criseyde*

Intention and Criseydan Agency

Among critics that have considered Criseyde's agency in *Troilus and Criseyde*, there is general agreement that Chaucer opens up the possibility that her intentions, actions, and language could connect in a coherent and autonomous way, but that the poem ultimately renders this possibility illusory. For Patterson, the failure of Criseyde's agency derives from a conflict between social ideals and unconscious desires that constitutes the inner world of all of the poem's characters. Rather than "singular, self-identical, and self-present individuals," argues Patterson, Chaucer offers characters in *Troilus* whose divided "entente" is a synecdoche for the recursive patterns of history to which Criseyde, like all of the characters, is subject.¹ For other critics, Criseyde's ultimate lack of agency derives from her status as a woman excluded from patriarchal narrative and hermeneutic regimes.² It is hard to argue otherwise, given that the promise of Criseyde's autonomy only folds back into the story we have been told to expect. She seems, despite her assertion that she is her "owene womman," to be subsumed, despite herself, into a historical narrative in which she plays as both a traitor to Troilus and a woman exchanged between men.³

These various accounts treating Criseyde's agency or autonomy share at heart the question of her responsibility in acting. Critics differ about whether Criseyde is the cause of her own "slyding" betrayal of Troilus: she is either unable to do anything in the face of patriarchal social forces; or she is as subject as any of the other characters to the pattern of history; or she participates in the rhetorical violence against language occurring throughout the poem, a disruption of sign and signifier that undermines socially cohesive values.⁴

In focusing on Chaucer's use of a vocabulary of "entente" in *Troilus and Criseyde* my primary goal is not to set out to state whether Criseyde has agency or does not, but rather to explain what it could mean to Chaucer for a character to have an intention and/or to act intentionally, and to suggest how this places one in relation to history, action, and authorial

¹ Lee Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History* (Madison, 1991), 142.

² Dinshaw's seminal account advances this claim (Chapter 1 of Carolyn Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* (Madison, 1989)). Subsequent accounts that have also attributed the failure of Criseyde's agency to her exclusion from male discourse and hermeneutics include Elizabeth Archibald, "Declarations of 'Entente' in *Troilus and Criseyde*," *The Chaucer Review* 25, no. 3 (1991): 190-213; Jennifer Campbell, "Figuring Criseyde's 'Entente': Authority, Narrative, and Chaucer's Use of History," *The Chaucer Review* 27, no. 4 (1993): 342-358; and Elaine Tuttle Hansen, *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender* (Berkeley, 1992), Chapter 6.

³ *TC* II, 750. Though see Aers' account of Criseyde's exclamation of autonomy as an accurate expression of the rights she holds as an unmarried woman, and which would be denied her if she married (David Aers, "Criseyde: Woman in Medieval Society," *The Chaucer Review* 13, no. 3 (1979), 185.

⁴ This final account is that in Chapter 9 of Eugene Vance, *Mervelous Signals, Poetics and Sign Theory in the Middle Ages* (Lincoln, Neb., 1986).

activity. To do so, I will need to begin by showing how Chaucer deploys “entente” in *Troilus and Criseyde*, the concerns it carries and its ontological status in relation to desires, actions, meaning, and thoughts. Rather than asking if Criseyde has agency, we can thus ask a more preliminary (and less anachronistic and terminologically vague) question of what it means for Criseyde (as well as Troilus, and Pandarus) to act intentionally, or have an intention, and what the difference between these might be.

We can begin by observing that in representing Criseyde at moments of choice (most notably her decision in Book V to take up with Diomedes), Chaucer consistently revises his main source text, Boccaccio's *Il Filostrato*, in an interesting way. Chaucer greatly expands Criseyde's deliberations about her immanent actions, but then goes on to disrupt clear lines that would connect such deliberations to the subsequent action she takes. By contrast, in Boccaccio Criseyde moves in a fairly transparent way from deliberation to decisive action.⁵ Pearsall notes this difference between Chaucer and Boccaccio as well, and emphasizes in Chaucer's version the accumulation of reasons for Criseyde's choices conveyed by the narrator.⁶ Pearsall suggests that these reasons, bound together through an “urgent, unformulated, uncalculating syntax” of *and*'s, though spoken by the narrator, are a representation of Criseyde's thoughts; Chaucer uses a particular form of parataxis, Pearsall suggests, to offer something akin to *style indirect libre*.⁷ Noting that Criseyde does not seem to move in a linear operation of reasoning reaching toward a decision, Pearsall suggests Criseyde is involved in an exercise of self-justification, as she posits reasons for her actions outside of herself such that her eventual action is cast as inevitable, protecting her from responsibility for a choice “that is already more than half made.”⁸

I agree with Pearsall that Chaucer suffuses Criseyde's moments of choice with a multiplicity of paratactic reasons, placing cosmic causes alongside Criseyde's own various rationalizations. But by characterizing these reasons as justifications Criseyde marshals after she has already made (or “half made”) her decision, Pearsall leaves obscure how Criseyde has in fact made that choice. In making these choices, Pearsall sees Criseyde acting on motives and desires that are at odds with various standards of propriety (as when she decides to allow Troilus into her room, and to take up with Diomedes). Pearsall's account of Criseyde's decisions and her subsequent rationalizations thus starts to resemble Patterson's account of the word “entente” in *Troilus and Criseyde*, wherein Patterson sees Chaucer's characters as subjects beset by discrete, conflicting intentions consisting of avowed ideals on one hand, and suppressed and illicit longings on the other. Patterson sees Chaucer utilizing “entente” in the poem as a synecdoche for the characters' conditions of subjectivity – a putative unity for a self actually composed of conflicting impulses which pit personal desires against professed social ideals. For Patterson and Pearsall, then, intention is (or rather, intentions are) seen in *Troilus and Criseyde* as a permanent problem of characters as subjects split between two mandates, while lacking full consciousness about this self-division. For Patterson, this subject is a compound of idealism and appetite that reflects two incommensurable historicisms Patterson sees Chaucer evoking through the interpersonal conflicts of the narrative. The failure of characters to acknowledge their desires means that desire is never fulfilled, and “the cause whi” they act as they do is never available to them, which in turn leads to recursive patterns of behavior borne out in a narrative of doubled

⁵ See *Il Filostrato* VI, 33-34.

⁶ Derek Pearsall, “Criseyde's Choices,” *SAC Proceedings* No. 2 (1986), 17-29.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 25.

acts that replicate the “embarrassment of history.”⁹

In seeking to augment these accounts, we can note further features of the narrator’s descriptions of Criseyde’s choices. As Criseyde makes what for the poem becomes her most consequential choice – to betray Troilus for Diomedes – the narrator opens up a temporal gap between Criseyde’s deliberation and her subsequent action: “But trewely, how longe it was bytwene / That she forsok hym for this Diomedes, / Ther is non auctor telleth it, I wene.”¹⁰ This is a different gap from the one Pearsall proposes between Criseyde’s already-made choice and her subsequent justificatory deliberations. Here we see the narrator opening a space on the other side of her deliberations – between those deliberations and the action she ultimately takes – which raises a different sort of question about how Criseyde’s deliberation relates to her eventual course of action, and where we should locate her intention within this process.

Furthermore, this lacuna between deliberation and action is not unique to Criseyde: what the narrator does to Criseyde he does to Hector at the opening of book 4, where he opens up an indeterminate space between Hector’s planning and the act of raiding the Greeks. As with Criseyde, after paratactically stacking numerous explanations for Hector’s decision, from personal to cosmic causes, the narrator says, “Not I how longe or short it was bitwene / This purpos and that day they issen mente.”¹¹ As with Hector, in Criseyde’s case the narrator expresses uncertainty about the chronology of events between Criseyde’s moment of deliberation (during which “bygan to brede / the cause whi... / she took fully purpos for to dwelle”) and the point at which her betrayal of Troilus is undeniable.¹² Not only does the narrator disclaim knowledge of the temporal interval between the events, but in describing this shift the narrator abandons a chronological narrative, sparsely describing Criseyde’s gifts to Diomedes, and then backtracking to Troilus not yet ten days removed from Criseyde’s departure from Troy. The example of Hector’s raid is particularly loaded, because it forms the juncture between Books 3 and 4, and sets in motion a sequence of events (the trading of Antenor for Criseyde) with ultimate consequences for the love story and for Troy. Why should Chaucer be interested in producing uncertainty about the connection between deliberation and action, particularly at those moments of choice with greatest consequence for the narrative?

One consequence of Chaucer’s separation of deliberation and action is to raise a question about the ontology of intentions, of what (and where) they are: are they a feature of deliberation, or of action, or something else entirely? Nearly all of the critical accounts I noted above assert that Criseyde’s lack of autonomy derives from her exclusion from masculine rhetoric and hermeneutics, and that this exclusion from language disables Criseyde from acting on her intentions. This linking of intentions and discourse bears our scrutiny, in its assertion that Criseyde’s agency is coterminous with her agency through language. But the gap Chaucer inserts between deliberation and action suggests that, for this poem, the potency of intentions might not depend upon meaning through language. Again, we are left with the preliminary question of what intentions are in this poem, in the most fundamental sense.

To return to the question of Criseyde’s agency, critics see Chaucer’s usage of “entente” as an exercise in trying and failing as a rubric for (particularly female) agency. This is because, considered colloquially, to act intentionally – which would entail an individual’s autonomous

⁹ Lee Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History* (Madison, Wisconsin, 1991), 153.

¹⁰ *TC* V.1086-88.

¹¹ *TC* IV.36-7

¹² *TC* V.1027-9.

choice to act with a certain purpose in mind – suggests a self-identical agency that is inimical to our understanding of historical subjects. But is “entente” in *Troilus and Criseyde*, as Patterson suggests, a site of conflicting directives coterminous with and productive of the historical subject? To answer this question we will need to consider how Chaucer deploys the term within narrative, in not only its thematic but also syntactic meanings. In contrast to Patterson, I argue that Chaucer clarifies distinct discursive and generic forms of “entente,” and distributes these among the characters of *Troilus and Criseyde* such that the narrative brings these differences into productive relief. Rather than a dialectic within each character that equally defines them as historical subjects, this chapter will demonstrate that Chaucer assigns unique forms of intention to distinct characters, allowing the narrative to distinguish various modalities of intention that had in Chaucer’s earlier works been only roughly articulated. Most conspicuously, Chaucer separates and reifies in *Troilus* and Pandarus two forms of intention that had overlapped in his previous self-representations as an author.

On a methodological point: as blunt and obvious a way of proceeding as it may be, I focus much of my thinking about intentionality in *Troilus and Criseyde* on Chaucer’s use of a single word in its various forms and contexts. While I do consider a number of other features pertinent to intentionality, particularly the manner in which Chaucer relates moments of choice and actions, close attention to “entente” and its uses is useful in that *Troilus and Criseyde*, probably more than any other Middle English text – and certainly more than any other text of Chaucer’s – gives “entente” pride of place as a rubric for characters’ thoughts and actions. Its uses are conspicuous and pivotal, and bear on some of the most persistent concerns of *Troilus* criticism. My approach takes it that this vocabulary is as important a place as any for Chaucer in negotiating the concerns that attend intentionality. The semantic range of intention as Chaucer uses it, and (as I hope to show) the systematic way he exploits that range, make this term worth the scrutiny.

The Syntax of “Entente”

The best place to begin a description of “entente” in Chaucer is to ascertain the notion of intention implicit in its syntax, a grammar of intention that tells us about how Chaucer understands and deploys intention in his fictions. While intention broadly describes a property of directedness or about-ness in relation to objects or events the world, intentionality as the term is understood by modern critics is a large umbrella of concerns at best loosely related: it is about planning and purpose, about psychological states, about descriptions of reason in actions, about how we perceive objects, and about meaning. In the face of such a broad spectrum of possibilities, it is good to hold in mind as we look at Chaucer the question: when we look for intention, what are we looking for?

The most helpful way to start is with a wide view of all of Chaucer’s usage of “entente” in *Troilus*, to see what kinds of descriptions we can glean from its syntax. One large observation which emerges from this is that “entente,” with the exception of its uses by Pandarus, appears in verbal and adverbial, rather than nominative, constructions. To encounter “entente” in *Troilus* is thus most often to witness an act itself (as intending), or a description of a disposition in acting – the way in which something is done – rather than as an index to a set of discrete motives or causes (as “intentions”) that lie behind and explain action. Criseyde is the only character who

“entend[s]” as an act of perceiving.¹³ Meanwhile Troilus is the exemplar of an adverbial form of intention: he does things “ententfulliche” (this is not the same as saying he does things intentionally),¹⁴ and he is often described as, or instructed to, do things with good entente.¹⁵ Such constructions affiliate intention to action in a surprising way: characters so described aren’t doing things with certain intentions *in mind*. This latter, more familiar way of thinking about intentions makes discrete reasons for acting the key to describing one’s intentions. Instead Chaucer’s locutions describe the way in which action is performed – a disposition or commitment to the task that seems to stand alongside, rather than behind, the action itself. It is as though the most crucial thing is that actions be carried out in the right spirit, rather than that they be done for a particular reason or toward a particular end.

Alternately, when it is used in nominative constructions, “entente” functions in two main ways within *Troilus*. It can occasionally describe something like a faculty of understanding: Pandarus reports that Troilus says he has been a “rebel in his entente”; Troilus refers to the plan that is best “in myn entente”; and the narrator once refers to man’s “entendement” as the seat of consideration.¹⁶ The other, and more consequential, nominative use has to do with purpose, and its chief proponent and exemplar is Pandarus. Pandarus continually affiliates “entente” with ends, final causes, and purpose, as when he memorably instructs Criseyde that “som men hem delite / With subtyl art hire tales for to endite, / Yet for al that, in hire entencioun / Hire tale is al for som conclusioun.”¹⁷ Pandarus additionally refers to his “entente” in describing his plans to do certain things; the narrator speaks of the “fyn” of Pandarus’ entente; and once it is clear Troilus and Criseyde are going to be intimate, we are told that Pandarus “hath fully his entente.”¹⁸ No other character, with the interesting exception of Diomedes, associates intention with purpose in this way. There are several exceptions that prove the rule: Criseyde, projecting a Pandaran notion of intent onto Troilus, wonders about the “fyn of [Troilus’] entente. / Yet wist I nevere wel what that he mente,” but Troilus’ answer re-directs meaning and intention away from the Pandaran language of objectives to one of actions, as I’ll discuss below.¹⁹ Also, when Troilus and Criseyde speak about “entente” in the way of plans or ends, all three instances are negations or about keeping their actions secret: Criseyde’s “entente” is to love Troilus “unwist”; Troilus says that to ravish Criseyde is “nat myn entente”; and to tell Pandarus about his love was “nat [Troilus’] entente.”²⁰ These instances make use of Pandaran intentional semantics as rebuffs to Pandarus’ plans or surveillance.

This consistent rift in usage depending on the character gives interpretive direction to some uses of “entente” whose meanings are far from clear; these are, perhaps not coincidentally, among the most interpretively rich and crucial instances: the Narrator’s characterization of Troilus’ “blind entencioun”;²¹ Pandarus and Troilus’ hopes of finding out Criseyde’s “entente” after the parliamentary decision to give her to the Greeks in trade for Antenor; Troilus’ insistence

¹³ See *TC* II.853, IV.1649.

¹⁴ *TC* I.332.

¹⁵ *TC* I.345; II.1060; I.935.

¹⁶ *TC* II.524; IV.1525; IV.1695-6.

¹⁷ *TC* II.256-259.

¹⁸ *TC* III.553; III.1582.

¹⁹ *TC* III.125-6.

²⁰ *TC* II.1294; IV.635; I.738.

²¹ *TC* I.211.

that Criseyde's gift of his brooch to Diomedes was meant "outrely to show [her] entente."²² Two crucial Criseydan uses will also concern us: at the point of their first sexual encounter, as Boccaccio has Criseyde taking off her clothes, Chaucer's less graphic translation has it that Criseyde "opened hire herte and tolde [Troilus] hire entente"²³; and perhaps most memorably, Criseyde's cryptic assertion in her letter to Troilus – in which she appears to lead Troilus on even though she has, at this point, begun her relationship with Diomedes – that "Th'entente is al, and nat the lettres space."²⁴ These instances all offer intention in the nominative, but in the context of Chaucer's use of the term in less ambiguous cases, we must pause before automatically attributing a Pandaran semantics of purpose to these instances. How we would otherwise describe these meanings is less clear at this point, but the relevance of such descriptions – of Criseyde's "entente" and Troilus' "blind entencioun" – to large interpretive questions of this poem is clear.

We can make one more point about the syntax of intention. Chaucer never uses the term in the plural (as "ententes" or "entenciouns"), and so it never functions as a rubric for describing discrete and conflicting motives, purposes, or dispositions in acting. This is remarkable for a text with characters in situations such as Troilus and Criseyde find themselves in, and suggests an important difference between intention and the will as Chaucer deploys these.²⁵ The singular logic of "entente," whether this is taken to mean purpose or disposition in acting, is an important component of characterization and narrative in Chaucer's fictions more generally. Chaucer's characters are commonly said to act with "full entente," "good entente," or "yvel entente," or, as is the case with Pandarus, all discrete acts are said to be performed with a single goal "in hir entencioun." This seems a surprising and delimiting way to represent characters in narrative. Given that Chaucer is interested in portraying conflicted and divided subjectivities (Troilus and Criseyde frequently give voice to their self-division), why should Chaucer so privilege a vocabulary of the self's relation to objects and events in the world that only allows for the expression of a unified wholeness? I will argue that the singular nature of intention means different things to the different characters it is applied to; it is particularly suited to Troilus and Pandarus, though in different ways. Criseyde, however, uniquely pressures a formulation of intention as defining a wholeness and indivisibility about intention.

The Semantics of "Entente"

This section will examine the narrative context of statements of "entente" to show various meanings Chaucer attaches to the term. I will begin, however, by noticing a connection between two large points I have made thus far. We have said that Chaucer, with the notable exception of Pandarus, uses "entente" verbally and adverbially, to describe a disposition in acting, rather than as discrete motives for acting; and we also began by noticing that in moments of choice (Criseyde's and Hector's), Chaucer imposes an uncertain temporal gap between deliberation and actions. Both of these features work against a view that would see intention as

²² *TC* V.1694.

²³ *TC* III.1239.

²⁴ *TC* V.1630.

²⁵ Though it is somewhat beyond the scope of the present chapter, one might consider how for Augustine the bifurcated will (*voluntas*) stands in pointed contrast to *intentio*, the latter of which conveys a process of focusing the mind – see the discussion of the two wills in *Confessions* 8.5.

completely legible as motives generated and held in an agent's reasoning – i.e., that would see characters doing things with certain objectives or reasons in mind. Action is narratively sequestered from the deliberating mind in Chaucer, even as Chaucer frontloads these actions with expansive deliberative and cosmic causes. The oddity is that Chaucer commits himself to elaborating causes both within and outside of the character's reasoning prior to action, only to withdraw his narrator from cognizance about when or how that action is taken – whence the narrator proclaims his ignorance about how long it took Criseyde to decide to be with Diomede, or took Hector to initiate his raid. In doing so Chaucer seems to be setting up a friction between (to use Searle's terms) prior intentions and intentions in action.²⁶ Why Chaucer would have an interest in doing so is not yet clear, but we can note at this point that a main feature of intention in action (for Searle, as for Anscombe) is that the agent need not be conscious of the intention in acting. This allows us to read the withdrawal of Chaucer's narrator from the deliberating mind of the character, and his disclaimers of ignorance, as not necessarily the refusal to portray Criseyde's point of view, but potentially as an attempt to simulate poetically the character's own conditions in acting, to portray an intention in action as no longer accessible through the narrative architecture of motives and thought. Such a hypothesis seems all the more valid given that the "entente" of Criseyde and of Troilus is, as we have noted, consistently described in an adverbial and dispositional, rather than a deliberative, way.

Troilus and Pandarus

In *Troilus and Pandarus* Chaucer resolves and reifies two versions of intention that he has interchangeably applied to his own self-portrayals in his fictions. By constituting these intentional forms as separate characters, Chaucer differentiates two forms of intention and shows their contrasting alignments of language, action, and purpose.

Troilus is a character defined in much the way Patterson reads all of the characters in *Troilus*, caught in a dialectic between reason and love, desire and calculation. The description of his "blynde entencioun" aligns his intention with one pole of this dialectic as reason subverted by love: "Love, ayeins the which whoso defendeth / Hymselven most, hym alderlest avaylleth."²⁷ This dialectic between two incommensurable imperatives make Troilus a figure of stasis and inaction, but this is not counter to, but rather productive of, the form of "ententfulness" of which he is the ultimate exemplar, and which Chaucer has elsewhere applied to himself as an author. This is the figure of the vassal to love, whose "ententfulness" is a state of persistent servitude without reward. In the *House of Fame* the eagle explicitly applies this generic type to the ententful author:

Certeyn, [Jupiter] hath of the routhe
That thou so longe trewely
Hast served so ententyfly
Hys blynde newew Cupido,
And faire Venus also,
Withoute guerdon ever yit,

²⁶ See John R. Searle, *Intentionality: An Essay in the Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge, 1983), Chapter 3.

²⁷ *TC* I.603-5.

And never-the-lesse hast set thy wit –
Although that is in thy hed ful lyte is –
To make bookys, songes, dytees,
In ryme or elles in cadence,
As thou best canst, in reverence
Of love and of hys servantes eke,
That have hys servyse soght, and seke;
And peynest the to preyse hys art,
Although thou haddest never part.²⁸

This good intent is a readiness to serve that is also an unfulfilled stasis, a love-longing that partakes in the paradoxes of autonomy as conceived through topoi of male erotics. As Mark Miller has described, figurations of autonomy as traditionally portrayed through male sexual topoi produce a paradoxical dialectic between a voyeuristic, objectifying eroticism that is a norm for masculine subjectivity, and an abject, perverse masculinity longing for the autonomy it locates in the female figure.²⁹ By describing himself as author in the terms we see in the *House of Fame*, Chaucer loosely overlays the generic model of love servitude onto poetic production. Here and in similar self-representations (*The Book of the Duchess*, “L’Envoy de Chaucer a Scogan”), Chaucer conceives of himself as a physically abject, sexless figure, who yet labors as a poet in the service of love. Thus Chaucer’s labor at poetry is a proxy for the sexually abject author’s actual participation in the sensuous world.

In *Troilus*, however, Chaucer has placed this intentional topos back into the genre from which it was culled, producing a thoroughly masculine figure who is thus all the more threatened by the unmanliness of inactivity. Such a paradox defines the adverbial nature of Troilan ententfulness, as a readiness to act rather than action itself. And yet while narrativizing his favored authorial topos through *Troilus*, Chaucer distances this character from his authorial self-representations, since *Troilus* does not have recourse to poetry as a compensatory activity. Instead, Chaucer positions Troilan ententfulness as contrary to meaning conceived in terms of language and purpose. In Book III, for instance, Criseyde asks that *Troilus* would “telle me the fyn of his entente. / Yet wist I nevere wel what that he mente.”³⁰ *Troilus*’ response re-frames Criseyde’s equation of *Troilus*’ “entente” with a meaning synonymous with his purpose by re-defining meaning not as a linguistic property, but as germane to the actions of chivalric love service:

“‘What that I mene, O swete herte deere?’
Quod Troilus, ‘O goodly, fresshe free,
That with the stremes of youre eyen cleere
Ye wolde somtyme frendly on me see,
And thanne agreeen that I may ben he,
Withouten braunche of vice on any wise,
In trouthe alway to don yow my servise,

²⁸ *HF*, ll. 614-628.

²⁹ See p. 12 of Mark Miller, *Philosophical Chaucer: Love, Sex, and Agency in The Canterbury Tales* (Cambridge, 2004).

³⁰ *CT* III.125-6.

....
 ‘And I to ben youre – verray, humble, trewe,
 Secret, and in my paynes pacient,
 And evere mo desiren fresshly newe
 To serve, and ben ylike diligent,
 And with good herte al holly youre talent
 Receyven wel, how sore that me smerte;
 Lo, this mene I, myn owen swete herte.’”³¹

This resistance to an attempt to affiliate Troilus’ “entente” with a speakable meaning equal to his purpose is consonant with Chaucer’s use of “entente” in earlier works such as *The Parliament of Fowles* and *The House of Fame*, where – in contexts other than his self-representations – “entente” is repeatedly juxtaposed with “sentence”; the latter of these Chaucer associates with written texts, while “entente” has a closer affiliation with non-verbal affect that carries a sense of deferral (the Formel’s declaration of her “entente,” rather than a “sentence,” as a deferral of a decision, in one striking example of this difference). The irony of Troilus’ “entente” is that Chaucer has taken a preferred authorial topos and reified it into a character who becomes, in many ways, the obverse of his authorial caricature: rather than his books and poetry compensating for a lack of worldly experience, Troilus makes his actions a proxy for language, his way of meaning, and yet that action is only conceptualized as static service.

The fetishization of texts over sensuous experience typical of Chaucer’s self-characterizations is, however, exemplified in Pandarus, who is the exemplar of a distinct form of “entente” that turns all actions into means directed toward a single end that is conceived rhetorically. Pandarus memorably describes this and indicates his essentially rhetorical conception of human action to Criseyde: “How so it be that som men hem delite / With subtyl art hire tales for to endite / Yet for al that, in hire entencioun / Hire tale is al for som conclusioun.”³² Pandarus’ conception of the sphere of action and of meaning is exclusively calculative, as he views all actions as parts leading toward an ultimate purpose. Pandarus is thus a perverse instance of *liberum arbitrium*, which operates to select means to ends, while he also embodies the fantasy of there being no question about the good sought (as opposed to Criseyde, who must choose between goods). It is not, then, that Pandarus has closeted motives, but that he has none: his character is an embodiment of an insistence that present actions do not carry their own meanings, but are rather legible only in terms of the ultimate purpose they serve. In contrast, then, to some critics that have seen Pandarus as ruled by base, voyeuristic, or incestuous desire, his form of intention admits of no motives or desires, because he does not select the ends towards which he tirelessly works. He has no moods, constantly speaks in proverbs, and does not respond when Troilus offers him a tryst with a woman. Of course, Pandarus’ actions always carry the whiff of potential ulterior motive, which Criseyde herself is continually wary of. But Pandarus defies the expectations she and we as readers would apply to such a character– when Pandarus asserts that his “entent is cleene...for I non yvel meene,” he means by this that he has no ulterior motives; in fact he seems to have no motives at all.³³

That Pandarus is thus not fully a character is re-enforced by his frequent association of

³¹ *TC* III.127-33, 141-47.

³² *TC* II.256-9.

³³ *TC* II.580-1.

his “entent” with the act of reading. Pandarus’ advice to Criseyde about reading the “entencioun” of writers as equal to their “conclusioun” spills over in Pandarus’ interactions with the other characters: he turns Troilus into a text as he asks him, in the terminology of academic prologues, “what is th’ enchesoun / And final cause of wo that ye endure”; Pandarus withdraws as Troilus and Criseyde begin their flirtations “As for to looke upon an old romaunce”; and Pandarus talks about himself as having “bicomem, / Bitwixen game and earnest, swich a meene / as maken wommen unto men to comen.”³⁴ Whereas for Troilus meaning resides in embodied actions, Pandarus turns people into texts, legible by reference to their “entent,” which he defines as an ultimate rhetorical objective. The actions Pandarus interprets signify only in relation to their “fyn,” not in-and-of themselves. For Pandarus all meaning is a “mene” to an end he seeks but does not choose.

Criseyde

To return to the question with which we began: what does it mean for Criseyde to act intentionally, and/or to have an “entente”? That Criseyde is ultimately criticized for being “slydyng of corage” suggests that an elaboration of Criseydan intentional action will illuminate to the intersection of ethics and gender in the poem.³⁵ To ask about her ultimate objectives in acting would be to read her as a text in the way Pandarus does, and as a woman her intention defies the generic model of love service that constitutes Troilan intention. I will argue that Chaucer establishes through Criseyde a form of intention that works against these discursively and ethically encrusted formulations.

I have noted that Criseyde is the only character who *entends* as an act of perception or approach, and that she is also the only character who has to choose between goods. How does Criseyde make these choices? The narrator provides a version of Criseydan choice to account for how she initially falls in love with Troilus. The narrator does so as he interrupts Criseyde’s consideration of Troilus’ many virtues:

Now myghte som envious jangle thus:
 “This was a sodeyn love; how myght it be
 That she so lightly loved Troilus
 Right for the firste syghte, ye, parde?”
 Now whoso seith so, mote he nevere ythe!
 For every thing a gynnyng hath it nede
 Er al be wrought, withowten any drede.

For I sey nought that she so sodeynly
 Yaf hym hire love, but that she gan enclyne
 To like hym first, and I have told yow why;
 And after that, his manhod and his pyne
 Made love withinne hire for to myne,
 For which by proces and by good servyse

³⁴ *TC* I.680-81; III.980; III.253-5.

³⁵ *TC* V.825.

He gat hire love, and in no sodeyn wyse.³⁶

The process the narrator suggests is that Criseyde initially “encline[s]” and is then “myne[d]” by love. Chaucer elsewhere uses “encline” to describe the natural movement of objects and waves.³⁷ This account, then, is as passive as Criseyde’s own sense of things, as when, upon seeing Troilus, she asks “who yaf me drynke?”³⁸ Criseyde is described as subject to something akin to a natural force, and is then penetrated by Troilus’ “manhod.” Criseyde’s autonomy in her choices seems very far-afield indeed.

And yet that is not the whole story. At the consummation of their affair, Criseyde is presented as an amalgam of trepidation and assertion:

And as the newe abaysed nyghtyngale,
That stynteth first whan she bygynneth to synge,
What that she hereth any herde tale,
Or in the hegges any wyght stiryng,
And after siker doth hire vois out ryng,
Right so Criseyde, whan hire drede stente,
Opned hire herte and told hym hire entente.³⁹

Telling her “entente” is partly an indication of Criseyde’s consent, but it is more importantly a forward action, a synthesis of desire and reason that Troilus is incapable of. In lieu of Boccaccio’s description of Criseyde removing her last garment, Chaucer thus offers an uncovering of Criseyde’s “entent.” We may certainly feel that the effect would not have been the same were Criseyde to have conveyed to Troilus her “menyng.” But what does this capacity for sexualization tell us about the nature of Criseyde’s “entente”?

Criseyde seems uniquely capable of marshaling her desire into action; the pleasure that attends the revelation of her “entente” is that it is, unlike Troilus or Pandarus’ intent, the thing itself, a synthesis of language, action, and desire. But this immediacy of action, meaning, and purpose is purchased at a cost: Criseyde’s “entente” is transitory, inimical to fixation as a text or a permanent disposition. This is what I take Criseyde to mean when she says, in her letter sent to Troilus from the Greek camp, “Th’entente is al, and nat the lettres space.”⁴⁰ This is to say that making Criseyde’s intent into a text improperly fixes it across time and space. Instead, Criseyde’s intentions are linked to discrete actions, and so ask to be read in a fashion distinct from Pandarus or Troilus’ intentional hermeneutics. By this account the brooch Criseyde gives to Diomedes is not the text which Troilus takes it to be. Upon seeing the brooch, Troilus exclaims: “Non other cause, allas, ne hadde ye / But for despit, and ek for that ye mente / al outrely to shewen youre entente.”⁴¹ The brooch is an overdetermined text, but Troilus’ readiness to read it as a revelation of Criseyde’s “entente” shows the difficulty of fixing Criseyde’s intent in signifying texts.

³⁶ *TC* II.666-79.

³⁷ See, for instance, *HF* 734, 749, 825.

³⁸ *TC* 2.651.

³⁹ *TC*, 3.1233-39.

⁴⁰ *TC* V.1630.

⁴¹ *TC* V.1692-4.

Criseyde's "entente" as it relates to her autonomy is foregrounded in one other instance. After the Trojan parliament has made its pronouncement that Criseyde will be traded for Antenor, Troilus deliberates about the best course of action. He decides to:

Telle his lady first what that they mente;
And whan that she hadde seyde hym hire entente,
Therafter wolde he werken also blyve,
Theigh al the world ayeyn it wolde stryve."⁴²

Why does Troilus seek Criseyde's "entente," which is echoed in more legalistic terms in what follows as her "assent"? Pandarus suggests that Troilus abduct Criseyde, which Troilus refuses to do, because he does not wish to repeat the act of abduction that started the Trojan war. Soliciting Criseyde's "entente" is thus necessary to enacting the right kind of public act. Ironically, it is as she is traded to the Greeks that Criseyde's "entente" matters in more than a sexual way. Unlike Pandarus and Troilus, Criseyde's entente thus carries both private and public significance.

This irony could not more pointedly illustrate the difference between Criseyde's intention and what critics have thought of as her "agency" (or lack thereof) as she is traded to the Trojans. This difference allows us to appreciate how Criseyde's intentions offer a way of reading action within *Troilus* distinct from the question of causes that Patterson and Giancarlo have showed are pertinent to Chaucer's consideration of historical subjectivity in the poem.⁴³ By creating a matrix of intentional types among characters, Chaucer creates characters that, though similarly historical subjects, are unique as subjects of practical reasoning. Whereas for Patterson and Giancarlo individual action fails as an explanatory mechanism in *Troilus*, in the sense that it can't be a structure of causes across time, Criseyde presents us with a form of intention that is bound to discrete actions, the legibility of which depends on a relation between action and agent, not on a relation of acts in a causal, connected chain. Chaucer thus allows us access not only to characters or subjects, but also to intentional actions – actions that signify in-and-of themselves, without the need of a temporal apparatus of meaning-making, or even the coherence of a character behind them.

⁴² *TC* IV.172-5.

⁴³ See Patterson (1991), Chapter 2, and Matthew Giancarlo, "The Structure of Fate and the Devising of History in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 26 (2004): 227-66.

Chapter 4

“The Clerk’s Tale” and the Limits of Intention

Our examination of Chaucer’s focused exploration of types of “entente” in *Troilus and Criseyde* saw Chaucer using narrative to place into relief several distinct forms of intention as directedness in relation to language, action, and purpose. Chaucer’s achievement in *Troilus*, anatomizing several strands of intention and distributing these among separate characters, is to clarify and distinguish a set of ideas about agency, phenomenology, and literary production only loosely affiliated under the common Middle English term “entente.” In this chapter I will turn to consider *The Canterbury Tales*, where Chaucer’s use of intention as a narrative device is more widely diffused within the work, yet less systematic.

In Chapters 2 and 3 I have argued that by placing his narrators in situations that open a gulf between authorial intention and a text’s meaning, and through the novel form of intentional action exemplified by *Criseyde*, Chaucer conceives of “entente” as a feature of actions, in contradistinction to linguistic meaning. The *Tales* may be seen as fulfillment of this line of thought, as an experiment in loosing “entente” from writerly concerns almost entirely by treating intention within a world of characters who have at best a fleeting connection to writing or narrative expression. For example, in the tale I will consider in depth, “The Clerk’s Tale,” letter writing descends from the deeply personal, if ultimately impossible, form of self-revelation exemplified by *Criseyde*, to a merely vestigial expository mechanism. In this chapter I will explore the manner in which “entente” persists as a feature of characterization within the tales, bereft of its defining opposition with linguistic meaning.

Though I will largely focus on articulations of “entente” by and about characters within tales, it is of course the case that Chaucer’s narrators themselves occasionally voice their “entente”; conspicuously, for example, the Pardoner (who claims that, despite the sometimes salubrious effects of his sermons, his “entente is nat but for to wynne”),¹ and the Wife of Bath (who asks that her hearers “taketh not agrief of that I seye, / For myn entente nys but for to pleye”).² These exclamations by the Pardoner and Wife of Bath carry added salience in light of the critical hermeneutic popularized by Kittredge, which saw the pilgrims as *dramatis personae*, and their tales as “long speeches” whose function was primarily the expression of the teller’s character.³ By such an interpretation, each tale is viewed as an intentional performance, explicable by reference to the teller’s motives and designs within the social frame of the unfolding pilgrimage.

Leicester has pointed to the inadequacy of such naturalistic, psychologizing interpretations of Chaucer’s tellers and their tales, which presume access to a characterological self as a touchstone for interpretation. In the Pardoner, Leicester argues, Chaucer offers “the representation not of an entity but of an activity,” and apart from this activity – which Leicester sees as deconstruction of traditional literal and typological regimes of meaning – we have no

¹ CT VI 403.

² CT III 191-2.

³ George Lyman Kittredge, *Chaucer and his Poetry* (Harvard, 1970), 154-55.

access to the Pardoner's self.⁴ Thus, argues Leicester, rather than attempting to characterize the Pardoner's intention(s), it is more useful to speak of the Pardoner's intentionality, viewing the effects of his telling as neither unconscious symptoms or planned subversions, but as "the operation of practical consciousness as it monitors the stream of conduct of the telling, functions of how the teller 'goes on,' provided we see that the practice in question is that of deconstruction."⁵

Leicester is certainly correct to characterize the assignation of intention to a character such as the Pardoner as an act of retrospective interpretation based on what the Pardoner says and does, drawn from our assumptions about who the Pardoner is. And he is also correct to assert that the effect of Chaucer's portrayal of the Pardoner (and of the Pardoner's portrayal of himself) is to invite speculation about his body, self, and intentions, rather than to provide definitive evidence of what these are. Along these lines, we can note that both the Pardoner and Wife of Bath assert their intentions in almost identical forms, proffering an "entente" by way of denying any alternate interpretations of their narrative acts. Certainly these denials only serve to unsettle the characters' declarations of "entente" that attend them, and the validity of interpretations that would attempt to assign a single intention to their performances.

But it is also the case that the particular form of "entente" voiced by the Pardoner and Wife of Bath – a broad statement by a tale's narrator of the motive or disposition we are to ascribe to their narrative acts – is only one of the ways intention functions and signifies within the *Tales*. And to replace, as Leicester does, intentions with *intentionality* cannot take the question of intention off the table altogether: while one may portray intentionality without thereby giving access to concrete intention(s), one cannot portray it without thinking about how intention works, and presuming that it does work in some form or other. Taken as a whole, the *Canterbury Tales* offers formulations of "entente" both simpler and more complex than those voiced by the Pardoner and Wife of Bath. Within the explicitly religious tales we commonly encounter characters who are morally typologized by reference to their good or evil "entente," such as the Jews of "The Prioress's Tale," as well as Tiburce and Almachius from "The Second Nun's Tale."⁶ Given these instances, it is hard to avoid the sense that a reference to a character's "entente" becomes, in its application to the characters within tales, a simplifying hermeneutic lens, polarizing characters along a moral spectrum for exemplary purposes. In this chapter I have chosen to focus on "The Clerk's Tale," both for its concentration of intentional description, and also for the tale's dialogue with the kinds of polarized idealizations of "entente" within the explicitly religious tales. In "The Clerk's Tale" we are offered in Walter and Grisilde two characters that flirt with typological extremes, but whose explicit intentionality exposes them to, rather than cuts them loose from, the operations of contingency. By examining more closely how Chaucer adapts and ironizes such synechdochal forms of "entente" as are seen in the religious tales, we can appreciate both the range and usefulness of this characterological hermeneutic to Chaucer's narrative practice.

⁴ H. Marshall Leicester, Jr., *The Disenchanted Self: Representing the Subject in the Canterbury Tales* (Berkeley, 1990), 62.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 176.

⁶ The Jews of "The Prioress's Tale" are characterized with "yvel entente" (*CT* VII 575); in the "Second Nun's Tale" Tiburce decides to get christened "in good entente" (*CT* VIII 349) and Almachius orders Cecilie killed "with ful wikke entente" (*CT* VIII 524).

At the conclusion of “The Clerk’s Tale,” as Grisilde is restored to a position of honor after enduring Walter’s trials, the narrator asks the reader to follow Grisilde in “humylitee,” not as a literal model for wives (such constancy to earthly trials would be “inportable”), but as an example to all of “suffraunce” of the proofs of God.⁷ The comparison of Walter’s testing of Grisilde to the “governaunce” of God is a surprising turn, in light of the narrator’s previous disapproval of the extremities of Walter’s actions and the suffering he inflicts.⁸ The narrator does suggest that the application of Grisilde’s narrative to God involves some adaptation, since God’s scourges, sent “as for oure exercise,” are meant “Nat for to knowe oure wyl, for certes he, / Er we were born, knew al oure frelettee.”⁹ Later I will discuss how the tale’s move to typologize Grisilde’s narrative re-casts her as an intentional subject. First, however, I’d like to pause over the narrator’s implication, here at the end of the tale, that Walter’s assays, unlike God’s, have been meant to discover Grisilde’s “wyl.” Far more transparent are the assertions within the tale, by Walter and the narrator, that what is being tested is Grisilde’s “constance,” which connotes something both generally about Grisilde’s virtue in the face of adversity, and specifically with regard to her fidelity to the verbal contract she accepts as a condition of marriage to Walter.¹⁰ Analogously, Walter is also spoken of as tempting Grisilde “hir sadnesse for to knowe.”¹¹ These articulations frame Walter’s assays as a determination made about Grisilde in terms of a single virtue that expands synechdochally to define her as a virtuous woman; to test such virtues is for Walter “t’assaye in thee thy wommanheede.”¹² But it is less clear how the goal of Walter’s actions could be stated as knowledge of Grisilde’s will, or what her will signifies in this context.

Though Walter variously describes the goal of his assays as a determination of Grisilde’s “constance” or “sadnesse,” he reaches his greatest height of self-congratulatory amplification as he considers what his tests of Grisilde have revealed about her will. He is pleased to find that Grisilde betrays no sign of complaint, which he takes as a sign that her will is identical to his own:

For which it semed thus: that of hem two
 Ther nas but o wyl, for as Walter leste,
 The same lust was hire plesance also.
 And, God be thanked, al fil for the beste.
 She shewed wel, for no worldly unreste
 A wyf, as of hirself, nothing ne sholde
 Wille in effect, but as hir housbonde wolde.¹³

In these lines of Walter’s represented thought that arrive at a proverbial assertion of wifely behavior, Walter concludes that he and Grisilde’s share “o wyl.” This is apparent to Walter

⁷ *CT IV*, 1143, 1144, 1162.

⁸ *CT IV*, 1161; for the narrator’s disapproval of Walter’s needless assays, see lines 456-62.

⁹ *CT IV*, 1156, 1159-60.

¹⁰ *CT IV*, 452. For the contract between Walter and Grisilde see 351-7. For Walter’s perception of Grisilde’s “constance” see 668; for the narrator’s attribution of “constance” to Grisilde see 1008 and 1145-7, where all men are enjoined to be “constant in adversitee / As was Grisilde.”

¹¹ *CT IV* 452.

¹² *CT IV* 1075.

¹³ *CT IV*, 715-21.

through his perception of Grisilde's "plesance" in performing a "lust" that conforms to his "leste." By this association of terms, Walter proposes to know Grisilde's will by means of her affect ("plesance") in holding desires ("lust") that are identical to his own. Walter has satisfied himself that Grisilde's will is identical to his own, and not "of himself," by observing whether "if by word or contenance / That she to hym was changed of corage, / But nevere koude he fynde variance. / She was ay oon in herte and in visage...."¹⁴ The equivalence Walter makes between Grisilde's "herte" and her "contenance" constructs her as a character that wears her heart, and what Walter takes as her "wyl," on her "visage." Thus the tale's carefully orchestrated surveillance of Grisilde's face and demeanor stages Walter's assays as an exercise in reading a will that seems neither independent from, nor anterior to, Grisilde's actions or expressions – there seems to be no space in between Grisilde's physical manifestations and what Walter calls her will. Though Walter returns repeatedly in the tale to examine these aspects of Grisilde for any "variance," he strangely betrays no curiosity to probe beyond or beneath them: as long as Grisilde "shewed wel," Walter emerges, if only momentarily, satisfied.

But what, exactly, does Walter assume he has access to in his concentration on Grisilde's "wyl"? While it is clear that by Grisilde's "wyl" Walter means to say something about her fidelity to his commands, there is a tension in his usage between seeing Grisilde as guided by some unitary principle ("o wyl"), and his attempt to locate that will in discrete choices, affects, and expressions. Walter's concentration on "wyl" as the language to describe Grisilde's virtue conglomerates her desires, intentions, and individual actions under a single banner. In doing so Walter has taken the range of *voluntas* philologically considered – its potential connotation of intention, competing desires, choices, and principles guiding such choices¹⁵ – and inserted a homogenizing interpretation which reduces all such things in Grisilde to one single thing. The usefulness of describing Grisilde in terms of her "wyl," then, is this ability to subsume so much of her – her thoughts, plans, actions, and intentions – into a single synechdochal descriptor that Walter can easily align with his own "leste."

Though it may seem a distinction without a difference, Walter's statement is not a denial of the existence of Grisilde's "wyl," but rather an assertion that the will she has is now one with his own. There is a strange disconnect in Walter's character between the almost beatific quality of the "o wyl" he believes he and Grisilde share, and his persistent suspicions that drive him to ever more monstrous actions to test Grisilde. Perhaps this is because Walter's convictions about Grisilde's will are expressed in a fashion devoid of process, leaving no sense of how exactly he and Grisilde's will have come to be "o." That is, while Walter is painstakingly precise in his stipulations of Grisilde's comportment in the "tretys" of preconditions he enumerates before their marriage, he seems to have no interest in considering how Grisilde is to become the woman he demands.¹⁶ This is not exactly surprising, given both Walter's motives in marrying Grisilde and his tendency to think of her only in terms of her external behaviors: while Walter's stipulations to Grisilde enjoin that she is not to "grucche" his demands "Neither by word ne frownyng contenance," it is Grisilde who offers that she will not disobey Walter "in work ne thoght."¹⁷ For

¹⁴ CT IV 708-11.

¹⁵ For a discussion of the Thomistic understanding of *voluntas* and its relation to *intentio* as stages in practical action, see Daniel Westberg, *Right Practical Reason: Aristotle, Action, and Prudence in Aquinas* (Oxford, 1994), chapters 8-9.

¹⁶ CT IV 331.

¹⁷ CT IV 354, 365, 363.

Walter such assurance seems otiose: his putative concern is neither why or how Grisilde would comply with his orders, but merely that she do so.

And yet Grisilde's repeated proofs of fidelity to Walter's demands fail to quell his ever-present suspicion that these demonstrations are not conclusive. It is my contention not simply that this is because Walter is a particular kind of character who can't help being suspicious, but that his "condicion" emerges from a fundamental contradiction in how he thinks of Grisilde.¹⁸ Walter's particular view of Grisilde as an inside-turned-outside leads him to scour her countenance for the presence of any dissent. But he never seems to be able fully to trust that the absence of any such outward signs constitutes conclusive proof that there is not some further aspect of Grisilde that lies outside of his sight. The recursive quality of the plot of "The Clerk's Tale" derives from this epistemological bind:

For now gooth he ful faste ymaginyng
If by his wyves cheere he myghte se,
Or by hire word aperceyve, that she
Were chaunged; but he nevere hire koude fynde
But evere in oon ylike sad and kynde.

As glad, as humble, as bisy in servyse,
And eek in love, as she was wont to be,
Was she to hym in every maner wyse;
Ne of hir doghter noght a word spak she.
Noon accident, for noon adversitee,
Was seyn in hire...¹⁹

Grisilde's external behaviors provide a certain degree of satisfaction to Walter: she is here, and elsewhere, "bisy" in demonstration of her allegiance to Walter.²⁰ But it is what Grisilde does not show, say, or do that continues to puzzle Walter. That Grisilde betrays "noon accident" of dissent cannot fully satisfy Walter, and seems to beg all the more whether this abundant conglomeration of demonstrations can be taken as a satisfactory representation of Grisilde's person, or whether she conceals within herself some substance without "accident."

Walter's need to externalize Grisilde's will is not an attempt, then, to deny her a will, but an insistence that no part of her should be private. His assays are designed to force to the surface any part of her that might remain unexpressed, to tempt her "to the outtreste preeve of hir corage."²¹ The contradiction inherent in Walter's procedure is that while he insists upon conceiving of Grisilde as a character completely legible on her surface and without an interior selfhood, his assays – designed to force a radical gulf between what he knows Grisilde feels (for instance, that she loves her children) and the compliant actions he demands of her – work to produce the private self he forbids. But rather than turn his attention to that private self, Walter waits for Grisilde to betray her dissatisfaction. Grisilde's unvarying, affectless compliance to Walter's wishes thus at once confirm Grisilde's fidelity, and yet raise ever more troublingly the

¹⁸ *CT IV* 701.

¹⁹ *CT IV* 598-608.

²⁰ See also 1009 and 1029 for descriptions of Grisilde as "bisy" in service to Walter.

²¹ *CT IV* 787.

possibility that she maintains a private emotional world. When she fails to manifest an “accident” corresponding to what he suspects she should feel, he emerges both pleased by her compliance, yet increasingly uncertain of whether there is not some part of her that lies yet hidden from his sight.

Curiously, while we have seen that Walter’s externalizing hermeneutic locates Grisilde’s “wyl” exclusively in accidents, his notion of his own “entente” is quite the opposite. Again and again, the language of intention in the tale as it is applied to Walter describes plans and purposes veiled in secrecy. Walter tells his “entente” “prively” to the sergeant that carries out his plans; he enjoins the sergeant “that no man sholde knowe of his entente” to convey his children to Bologna; and in the tale’s only epistle, Walter “writen hath in special / A lettre, in which he sheweth his entente, / And secreely he to Boloigne it sente.”²² Walter’s “entente” thus figures in two ways: the “entente” that he communicates to his sergeant connotes the means by which he will carry out the larger purpose he communicates to his sister, to whom he “sheweth his entente,” or what we must believe is his ultimate objective with respect to his children. In some ways, then, Walter views himself as we have seen Pandarus views texts, insofar as Walter’s present actions, however monstrous, are seen as meaningful not in-and-of themselves, but as a means toward the just “entencioun” of testing Grisilde’s fidelity. But while Pandarus is so absorbed in means that his own character disappears entirely into them, Walter’s “entencioun” becomes so fixed upon his ends that the cruelty of his tactics ceases to be visible to him. The narrator faults Walter for this inability to divorce himself from an end once he has decided upon it:

But ther been folk of swich condicion
That whan they have a certein purpos take,
They kan nat stynte of hire entencion,
But, right as they were bounden to that stake,
They wol nat of that firste purpos slake.
Right so this markys fulliche hath purposed
To tempte his wyf as he was first disposed.²³

The narrator faults Walter for an “entencion” perversely fixed to a “firste purpos” which has been fulfilled beyond any reasonable doubt (“He hadde assayed hire ynogh bifore / And foonde hire evere good; what neded it / Hire for to tempte, and alwey moore and moore...”).²⁴ The pathological recursivity of Walter’s behavior seems to derive not only from his inability to “stynthe” of his “entencion,” but also from his attachment to a “purpos” that is a constantly vanishing horizon.

We have already considered some of the reasons why Walter’s “purpos” is constantly frustrated, including the peculiar way Walter attempts to read Grisilde only in terms of her external manifestations. The curiosity is that while Walter thinks of his own “entencion” in terms of his singular and private purpose, he never seems concerned to view Grisilde in this way: Walter never speaks of Grisilde’s “entente,” or wonders about such things as her “purpos.” Walter, in other words, never reads Grisilde through a Pandaran lens, which would make her

²² *CT IV* 517; 587; 761-63.

²³ *CT IV* 701-7.

²⁴ *CT IV* 456-8.

“accident” signify something larger – a coherent purpose that binds specific behaviors into a comprehensible end. Indeed, the virtues that Walter celebrates in Grisilde – her “sadsnesse,” “stedfastnesse,” and “constance” – are those that live or die by their continued duration. Such virtues matter only insofar as they persist in a continual present, and are thus wholly incompatible with the kind of “entente” Walter ascribes to himself, in which discrete acts are legible only in terms of some future purpose.

We have thus seen that Walter both defines Grisilde as a set of virtues constituted solely by their present articulations, and insists that these actions are impregnated with her “wyl.” Walter asserts Grisilde retains a will despite her own contrary statement that she, upon coming to live with Walter, “lefte...my wyl and al my libertee.”²⁵ Given Walter’s demand for perfect compliance from Grisilde and his desire to see her only in terms of her behaviors and expressions, it seems curious that he would insist upon her having a “wyl” at all. Perhaps this can be explained as Walter’s attempt to ward off a danger that the tale itself betrays metaphorically as Grisilde is characterized as “sad and constant as a wal.”²⁶ That is, Walter’s nuptial “tretys” with Grisilde threatens to turn her into something inanimate as stone, though why this should threaten Walter is as yet unclear. For her part Grisilde not only proclaims the loss of her own “wyl,” but turns herself into an equally inanimate object, responding to Walter’s enjoined submission by twice referring to herself as “youre owene thyng.”²⁷

The roots of Walter’s resistance to thinking of Grisilde as a mere “thyng” can be traced to aspects of his character apparent from the tale’s inception. Walter’s unwillingness to marry is articulated by the narrator and his subjects not only in terms of well-worn topoi of spousal power relations (“Boweth youre nekke under that blisful yok / Of soveraynetee, noght of servyse...”), but also as a precondition to continuing a dynastic line.²⁸ Walter’s subjects fear that “thurgh youre deeth youre lyne sholde slake, / And that a straunge successour sholde take / Youre heritage.”²⁹ Additionally, the narrator opens the tale with both a geographic focusing which locates Walter’s kingdom within the larger political sphere of “Ytaille,” as well as a temporal distention that frames Walter as the successor of a “lynage” of “worthy elders.”³⁰ In this context Walter’s refusal to marry and propagate emerges a particular kind of narcissism that refuses to acknowledge his own mortality, which the narrator faults him for:

I blame hym thus: that he considered noght
In tyme comynge what myghte hym bityde,
But on his lust present was as his thought,
As for to hauke and hunte on every syde.³¹

As Walter concocts his plans to test Grisilde, he reveals this self-absorption as a fantasy of a boundless self, first faking infanticide and then staging an incestuous marriage to his daughter that also displaces his own son as his heir. For Walter any successor is a “straunge” one, and if

²⁵ *CT IV* 656.

²⁶ *CT IV* 1047.

²⁷ *CT IV* 501, 652.

²⁸ *CT IV* 113-14.

²⁹ *CT IV* 137-9.

³⁰ *CT IV* 57, 71, 65.

³¹ *CT IV* 78-81.

Walter must propagate for the sake of his people, he also fantasizes about the possibility of inserting himself as his own dynastic heir.

Seen in this light, Walter's notion that he and Grisilde share "o wyl" can be seen as an attempt to fuse completely with his wife. To consider her as a distinct person with an inside he cannot fully and immediately know is to encounter her strangeness, and yet to consider her no person at all – a "wal" – is to receive a version of his own power that is wholly instrumental, and which reflects too closely the power relations that define his political role as head of state. Janicula's own deference to Walter demonstrates how closely the terms of Grisilde's behavior as dictated by Walter's marriage "tretys" can resemble common political obeisance:

This sodeyn cas this man astonyed so
That reed he wax; abayst and al quakyng
He stood; unnethes seyde he wordes mo,
But oonly thus: "Lord," quod he, "my willynge
Is as ye wole, ne ayeynes youre likyng
I wol no thyng, ye be my lord so deere;
Right as yow lust, governeth this mateere."³²

Thus while Walter attempts to orchestrate a marital relationship in which his own power and control is tantamount, he runs the risk of instantiating a version of that power that is merely political, and which renders all of his relationships identical. This is not so much a threat to some erotic ideal Walter holds, for Walter seems to have no erotic desire whatsoever (he first glimpses Grisilde, while out hunting, "nought with wantown lookyng of folye...but in sad wyse").³³ Instead, the objectification of Grisilde as a political pawn runs the risk of Walter's encountering a form of resistance that masks its motives behind an idealized language of affiliation: as Walter's subjects demand that he marry because they anticipate his death, they petition that he "accepteth thanne of us the trewe entente, / That nevere yet refuseden youre heeste."³⁴ I do not think it too much of a stretch to see in Walter's response ("nathelless I se youre trewe entente") a mocking echo that reveals Walter's disenchantment with the idealized language of political statecraft. Such withdrawal from the matters of state by the ever-on-the-hunt Walter would explain the otherwise improbable assumption by Grisilde of the functions of statecraft following her marriage.³⁵ Forced to become a political subject as propagator of his own dynastic line, Walter desires complete control over Grisilde, but also wishes to set her apart from the same political machinations that have threatened his own vision of himself.

While in previous chapters I have argued that the novelty of Chaucerian interiority derives from his attempts to locate intentions in actions rather than the mind or as a feature of linguistic meaning, what is striking here is how Walter's desire to locate Grisilde's legible self solely in her actions emerges as the self-interested recourse of a monstrously solipsistic character. Pushing back against his own tendency to externalize intentions, Chaucer uses Grisilde to point to the limitations of such an intentional hermeneutic. The enigma we are left to consider

³² *CT IV* 316-22.

³³ *CT IV* 236-7.

³⁴ *CT IV* 127-8.

³⁵ See *CT IV* 428-434 for Grisilde's unmitigated success in appeasing parties to eliminate "discord" and promote the "commune profit."

is Grisilde herself, and how her “wyl” or “entente” might be conceptualized, or rendered legible, if not through an exclusive focus on her words, actions, or expressions. What kind of subject is Grisilde, if not that proposed by Walter, and what resources does “The Clerk’s Tale” offer for making such a determination?

Of course, Walter’s fantasy of his wife’s will as identical to her “plesance” in performing compliant acts is both an injunction against a wife willing “of herself” and a recognition that such an independent self, with the capacity to will (even if not with *a will*) might exist. Further, it is also clear that Grisilde’s “wyl” as portrayed in the tale cannot be identical to Walter’s confident representation of it. While Walter is pleased at her “constance” in words and actions – the lack of “variance” in her behavior despite the suffering she endures – he is also aware that her “plesance” is not the totality of her emotional world. As Walter’s sergeant delivers the order to Grisilde that she must relinquish her daughter (as she believes) to her death, the compassion she shows even as she complies with Walter’s orders causes the narrator, and even Walter, to pity her – (though the latter does so only “somewhat”).³⁶ And as we have seen, Walter’s insistence on forcing Grisilde’s whole person outward does not prevent him from fearing what might remain hidden from his sight, and thus to warn Grisilde “that ye nat sodeynly / Out of youreself for no wo sholde outreie.”³⁷ Thus it is the disjunction between how Grisilde feels and how she acts that is the mark of her constancy to Walter’s “lest,” and what lends her compliance its virtue. It is this ability to control the outward manifestations of her feelings that Walter calls Grisilde’s “wyl,” and in those terms Grisilde, indeed, does not will “of herself” but rather as Walter “wolde.”

And yet Walter’s warnings that Grisilde is not to “outreie” her “wo” “out of [hir]self” is not necessarily an acknowledgement of her complete internal subjectivity. At the end of the passage I quoted above linking Grisilde’s “wyl” to her “plesance” in performing Walter’s “lest,” Walter’s satisfaction that he and Grisilde share “o wyl” blossoms into a broad injunction which is a continuation of his represented thoughts, that “a wyf, as of herself, nothing ne sholde / Wille in effect, but as hir housbonde wolde.” Here the wifely will, and Grisilde’s will by extension, is rendered verbally, and as before she is not conceived to have *a will* in a phenomenological sense, but rather to be capable of willing; the content of this willing is further delimited by its enjoined adherence to that which her husband “wolde.” What might otherwise be conceived, as willing, as the capacity for full-fledged action is made grammatically equivalent to the modal “wolde”; Grisilde’s exercise of will is thus reduced to a form of acting that is circumscribed not only by the literal content of Walter’s commands, but also by the grammatical limitations inherent in that which Walter *would* that she do.

Walter’s emphasis on Grisilde’s identical will, then, opens up a space between that will – a will not signified by, but rather wholly contained within her compliant words and countenance – and some unexpressed quantity which Walter’s assays are meant to force to expression. What is this other part of Grisilde’s character? It is unclear whether the tale conceives of this unexpressed part of Grisilde’s emotional world as “hirsself,” in the sense of a self as Leicester has defined it, as a “distinct, finished personality,” or a “central consciousness.”³⁸ For Leicester, of course, the self in Chaucer (particularly the authorial self) is not independent but caught in continual dialectic with the author-as-subject in its dealings with language, and thus continually

³⁶ CT IV 561-567; 579.

³⁷ CT IV 642-3.

³⁸ Leicester, 384; 415.

met by “the undoing of that position [of the self] into the place of a fluid, multifarious polyvocality.”³⁹ It is the case that, as with Leicester’s view of the author undone by his encounter with institutionalized language, Grisilde’s externalization of herself through words or expressions entails, as a result of her pact with Walter, a privation of her own thoughts, needs, and desires. But what are these thoughts, needs, and desires, exactly? Do they cohere in such a way as to grant Grisilde a self, and if not, how can we describe Grisilde as a narrative entity?

At stake in such an inquiry is not only how we might anatomize such a thing as character within *The Canterbury Tales*, but also how such determinations at the level of character impact our interpretive approach to the narrative as a whole, and in turn, to the ideological positioning of such a narrative. Understanding the tale’s conception of a character such as Grisilde would allow us to determine whether “The Clerk’s Tale” asks to be read, for instance, as a moral exemplum (as the tale’s ending seems to suggest), or as a narrative of a woman’s abuse at the hands of male prerogative and institutional control. The question lurking here is whether Grisilde is primarily an ideological construction – an idealized woman who functions to legitimate the power structures within the tale – or whether she maintains some difference from, and resistance to, the idealizations foisted upon her. As we might expect, the answer to such a question is far from clear-cut. For what is so troubling about “The Clerk’s Tale” is not only the brutality of Walter’s assays, but the difficulty of determining Grisilde’s attitudes about the ordeals she endures. Part of this difficulty, as I have suggested, is that while the tale’s master-conceit of assaying Grisilde’s superficial fidelity to Walter’s commands constructs her as a character with an inside and an outside, Grisilde herself seems to work against such a dichotomy: while Walter calls Grisilde’s outward compliance her “wyl,” Grisilde draws this will, which Walter has externalized, back into herself as she tells Walter that “this wyl is in myn herte.”⁴⁰ In doing so Grisilde re-enforces the nearly exclusive concentration of “The Clerk’s Tale” upon her will as distinct from her intellect, as in Walter’s formulation, to will fully is not to have an attitude apart from the actions one takes.

And while Walter’s obsession with Grisilde’s words and demeanor create the expectation that the narrative might offer a glimpse of Grisilde’s private self, what inwardness we do see is not only devoid of any disdain at Walter or her circumstances, but is also wholly impersonal. While her care for her children is a source of great pathos, it does nothing to distinguish her beyond the feminine idealizations that make her so attractive both to Walter and the narrator. In this Grisilde’s constitution seems to take its cues from the metaphor with which Walter’s subjects describe her as they congratulate Walter on his prudent choice, as “under low degree / Was ofte vertu hid.”⁴¹ Grisilde’s depths would seem to contain little other than those same idealizations of female virtue that have made her attractive to Walter in the first place.

Does “The Clerk’s Tale” offer us any more of Grisilde, any view of her that emerges from Grisilde herself? While the narrative is intimately bound to Walter’s inner world, seamlessly rendering Walter’s represented thoughts, it offers decisively less access to Grisilde. In two exceptional cases, however, the narrative offers glimpses of Grisilde’s interior world. Early in the story Grisilde’s thoughts are related as she waits to see whom Walter will choose as his bride:

³⁹ Leicester, 415.

⁴⁰ *CT IV* 509.

⁴¹ *CT IV* 425-6.

She thoghte, “I wole with othere maydens stonde,
That been my felawes, in oure dore and se
The markysesse, and therfore wol I fonde
To doon at hoom, as soone as it may be,
The labour which that longeth unto me,
And then I may at leyser hire biholde,
If she this wey unto the castel holde.”⁴²

Here the move to relate Grisilde’s thoughts through direct discourse (rather than as represented thought) marks the exposure of Grisilde’s inner world as a narrative aberration, and what we see of her only serves to heighten the drama of her selection as Walter’s bride by showing her as unassuming and mindful to perform her duties. In another instance, however, the narrative does break from its typical handling of Grisilde by offering her represented thoughts, at the moment when Walter’s sergeant arrives to take her daughter:

Grisildis moot al suffre and al consente,
And as a lamb she sitteth meke and stille,
And leet this cruuel sergeant doon his wille.

Suspecious was the diffame of this man,
Suspect his face, suspect his word also;
Suspect the tyme in which he this bigan.
Allas! Hir doghter that she loved so,
She wende he wolde han slawen it right tho.
But nathelees she neither weep ne syked,
Conformynge hire to that the markys lyked.⁴³

Here we are allowed, if only for a moment, to see behind Grisilde’s stony, silent, and compliant exterior, to glimpse feelings that run counter to what she must “suffre and...consente.” The cadence of the three lines which open the second stanza (“Suspecious was the diffame of this man...”) give an impression of Grisilde’s mind that, for an instant, rises from than the merely typical virtues with which she is otherwise characterized, to give a sense of a mind with richness and depth. But this depth is fleeting: it is just as quickly interrupted by her pathos-laden ejaculation, which drops Grisilde back into a type of self expression that is no more than situationally appropriate, no more than generic. And even if this moment confirms that Grisilde has thoughts and feelings contrary to her compliant facade, it ultimately raises more questions than it answers: how does Grisilde “[conform]” herself while at the height of grief? And what does she feel toward the man who would inflict this woe upon her? While giving us a slender handle for sympathetic identification, we are left with precious little of Grisilde herself.

Far more typically, the narrator treats Grisilde just as Walter does, as an epitome of female virtue seen and defined in terms of generic externalities. The opening tableau which introduces Grisilde to the reader extols her exceptional virtue legible by, and formed through, her quotidian labor:

⁴² *CT IV* 281-7.

⁴³ *CT IV* 537-546.

But for to speke of vertuous beautee,
Thanne was she oon the faireste under sonne;
For povreliche yfostred up was she,
No likerous lust was thurgh hire herte yronne.
Wel ofter of the welle than of the tonne
She drank, and for she wolde vertu plese,
She knew wel labour but noon ydel ese.

....
A fewe sheep, spynnynge, on feeld she kepte;
She wolde nocht been ydel til she slepte.⁴⁴

Grisilde is celebrated by the narrator as a pastiche of pastoral and georgic topoi, her virtues residing in behaviors – drinking “of the welle,” and working “til she slepte” – naturalized by dint of her being “povreliche yfostred.” The narrator’s only characterization of Grisilde beyond these descriptions of her behavior renders her in an equally material way – she is virtuous because “no likerous lust was thurgh hire herte yronne.” This description establishes a perspective maintained throughout the tale that treats Grisilde as a variously legible (or illegible) surface, while opportunities for dramatic elaboration of Grisilde’s private thoughts are passed over – perhaps most poignantly when she returns to her father’s house at Walter’s behest, as “she fro wepyng kepte hire eyen dreye, / Ne in this tyme word ne spak she noon.”⁴⁵

And yet Grisilde is not a silent character, and if we consider carefully what she has to say, we can see more of her than do the narrator or Walter. We have seen that Grisilde’s characteristic response to Walter’s demands involves a denial of her own agency and the objectification of herself as Walter’s “owene thyng.”⁴⁶ And while in these moments Grisilde’s language rises in style and affect (“Thy wyl is in myn herte, and ay shal be; / No lengthe of tyme or death may this deface, / Ne chaunge my corage to another place”), such that Walter finds himself “glad...of hire answeyng,” it is also the case that Grisilde’s parallel framings of herself as an object that Walter controls are a calculated departure from Walter’s requests which precede them.⁴⁷ In asking her to give up her daughter and then son, he posits his own helplessness in the face of his subjects’ demands, painting his actions as a necessary and lamentable thing, that he must “doon with thy doghter for the beste, / Nat as I wolde, but as my peple leste.”⁴⁸ Grisilde’s response, by contrast, voices her compliance while restoring the responsibility for the decision to Walter, whom she says “werketh after [his] wille.”⁴⁹ And in language that satisfies Walter and yet lodges a barely audible complaint, Grisilde asserts that she complies not only with Walter’s will, but also his “plesaunce,”⁵⁰ his “list,”⁵¹ and his “lust.”⁵² Thus Grisilde’s compliance is

⁴⁴ *CT IV* 211-17, 223-4.

⁴⁵ *CT IV* 899-900.

⁴⁶ See *CT IV* 504 and 652.

⁴⁷ *CT IV* 509-11; 512.

⁴⁸ *CT IV* 489-90.

⁴⁹ *CT IV* 504.

⁵⁰ *CT IV* 501, 658, 663.

⁵¹ *CT IV* 647, 653.

performed, though not without expressing her own account of Walter's control as the gratification of his own desires in a fashion that renders her his inanimate object.

In one other instance some part of Grisilde glimmers momentarily through her obedient exterior, in the request she makes to Walter's sergeant of how to dispose of her daughter's body:

“Gooth now,” quod she, “and dooth my lordes heeste;
But o thynge wol I prey yow of youre grace,
That, but my lord forbad yow, atte leeste
Burieth this litel body in som place
That beestes ne no briddes it torace.”⁵³

Of particular interest here is Grisilde's tense, as she asks that the sergeant carry out her request “but my lord forbad yow.” Grisilde does not ask the sergeant to seek Walter's assent, but rather seeks an outcome that does not betray anything Walter has previously said. In doing so Grisilde attempts to secure her own purpose while technically fulfilling the terms of her “alliance” to Walter.

I have mentioned that Walter privileges the “wyl” as a way of describing Grisilde and never speaks of her “entente,” though Grisilde herself has quite a bit to say on the subject. In contrast to the moments I have enumerated in which she momentarily emerges as a character with her own desires and purposes, her articulations of her own “entente” assert her allegiance to Walter in nothing but the most idealized forms. Even more improbable is that Grisilde speaks increasingly of her true “entente” to Walter as his treatment of her becomes ever more inhumane. As he dismisses her in favor of a new wife, Grisilde tells him that never “in word or werk I shal repente / That I yow yaf myn herte in hool entente.”⁵⁴ And as Walter calls Grisilde back “the chambres for t'arraye” in preparation for his new marriage, Grisilde responds:

“Nat oonly, lord, that I am glad,” quod she,
“To doon youre lust, but I desire also
Yow for to serve and plese in my degree
Withouten feynting, and shal evermo;
Ne nevere, for no wele ne no wo,
Ne shal the goost withinne myn herte stente
To love yow best with al my trewe entente.”⁵⁵

And lastly, as Walter puts Grisilde into the shameful position of welcoming guests to a wedding that displaces her, she “ne stente / This mayde and eek hir brother to commende / With al hir herte, in ful benyngne entente.”⁵⁶ Whatever part of Grisilde may have been visible in spite of her earlier compliant language seems to have disappeared, replaced by expression of an “entente” that conveys an impossible magnanimity which strains her identity as a credible character to the breaking point. And unlike her earlier compliance during which she was able to express at least

⁵² *CT IV* 658, 660, 662.

⁵³ *CT IV* 568-72.

⁵⁴ *CT IV* 858, 860-1.

⁵⁵ *CT IV* 967-73.

⁵⁶ *CT IV* 1023-25.

some difference from Walter, Grisilde's expression of her love of Walter and care for her children in "hool," "trewē," and "ful benyngne" entente leaves no credible room for seeing her as participating in the kind of ironization of marital ideals that subsequently permeate "The Merchant's Tale."

If there is a narrative rationale that would explain Grisilde's turn to idealized expressions of her "entente," it is the naturalism inherent in the situational irony constructed by Walter, whereby Grisilde acts in a fully gracious fashion toward what turn out to be her own children. The tale's turn to fashion Grisilde as a naturalistic character is in keeping with the narrator's increasing desire to make her into a subject of theological import, as he compares her to Job and, as we have seen, ultimately holds her up as an exemplary ideal for humanity in relation to God.⁵⁷ Perhaps surprisingly, Grisilde's typologization by the narrator is coincidental with her transformation into a character of extreme affect. As Grisilde's "ful," "hool," and "trewē" entente construct her as a character who acts without thought or self-division, the heretofore ever-composed Grisilde, upon learning the identity of her children, is overcome by "mazednesse," "swownynge," "traunce," and extreme outbursts of emotion.⁵⁸ That this shift in Grisilde is accompanied by pronouncements of her "entente" that render her in ever more idealized and integrated form frames this change in her demeanor not so much as an outpouring of repressed emotions as a shift in her character to become an avatar of natural intention or *synderesis* – her actions emerging not from deliberation about means and ends but as the effortless, natural inclination to the good.⁵⁹

Ironically, then, it is as Grisilde reaches her most affective height that she is farthest removed from the plane of worldly action in which "The Clerk's Tale" transpires. Grisilde is ultimately fashioned instead into a personification of natural "entente" which she herself gives expression in its clearest form. By focusing on these declarations of her "entente" at the end of "The Clerk's Tale" we raise a problem for readings that have seen in Chaucer's adaptation of Grisilde a correction of Petrarch's tendency to allegorize or moralize her character in such a way that her historical experience as a woman is elided. Both Wallace and Dinshaw assert that Chaucer's version of the tale undercuts the primacy of masculine hermeneutic regimes exemplified by Petrarch and, within the tale, by Walter, which in attempting to translate Grisilde alternately into allegory and the rhetorical space of court represent "a turning away from female experience."⁶⁰ Both Wallace and Dinshaw see Chaucer resisting Petrarch's tendency to treat Grisilde as a text to be domesticated and allegorized; for Wallace, Chaucer's Grisilde "contains a world of private feeling, an individuality that Walter, operating through the methods and assumptions of a passion-driven courtly rhetor, cannot comprehend or take possession of."⁶¹

It is difficult to align such readings with Grisilde's expressions of her own "entente" which present her as so undividedly allied to Walter at the conclusion of "The Clerk's Tale," in a fashion that replaces her complex privacy with an open magnanimity so mortally improbable.

⁵⁷ For the narrator's comparison of Grisilde to Job, see *CT* IV 932-38.

⁵⁸ See *CT* IV 1060-1110.

⁵⁹ For a description of the Thomistic account of *synderesis* and its alignment with the affective will, in stimulating one toward good and away from evil, see Daniel Westberg, *Right Practical Reason: Aristotle, Action, and Prudence in Aquinas* (Oxford, 1994), p. 104.

⁶⁰ Carolyn Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* (Madison, 1989), 148.

⁶¹ David Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity: Absolutist Lineages and Associational Forms in England and Italy* (Stanford, 1997), 288.

But the meaning of Grisilde's "entente" is also made and re-made by what follows it. For in "The Merchant's Tale," which works in so many ways to comically ironize in a ribald fashion the marital ideals voiced in "The Clerk's Tale," Grisilde's saintly "entente" is replaced by an "entente" shared between May and Damian that capitalizes with full literalism on the sexual possibilities of the word. We are told that, as the two orchestrate their tryst in January's garden, "by writyng to and fro / And privee signes wiste he what she mente, / And she knew eek the fyn of his entente."⁶² Any doubt about what "privee signes" are used to indicate May's desires and the "fyn" of Damian's "entente" may be dispelled by the literalism of their conjugal act as described by the narrator ("this Damyne / Gan pullen up the smok, and in he throng") and as witnessed by January ("Ye, algate in it wente!").⁶³ As Grisilde's smock is reprised to a startlingly different purpose, the phallic *entendre* of Damian's "entente" is fully realized, even as it receives a scatological valence by its association with "privee" letter writing (as we recall, earlier in the tale May has cast Damian's letter "in the pryvee").⁶⁴

The effect of these startlingly juxtaposed echoes of "The Clerk's Tale" is not only to deliver Grisilde's saintly and sexless "entente" down the scale of propriety, but also to point to the limits of intention as a rubric to represent an interiority such as Grisilde's, or any interiority. While Chaucer follows Petrarch in deifying Grisilde at the conclusion of the tale, his subsequent treatment of the language of intention – the primary language through which that deification is performed – makes it retrospectively clear that by doing so "The Clerk's Tale" falls into the same trap that Walter does by conceiving of her exclusively in terms of her 'wyl.'

Through the dialectic form made possible by the frame-tale structure of *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer has pointed up the inadequacy of intention as a means of fully describing Grisilde, as one tale's term of art – Grisilde's wholly magnanimous and familial "entente" – is replaced by Damian's hyper-masculine and literally phallic "entente." We may recall that Criseyde's "entente" lay somewhere between these extremes, capable of conveying as far more nuanced, though more fragile, combination of directedness and female sexuality. Criseyde's binding of intentions to actions themselves skews in *The Canterbury Tales* to Damian, whose "entente" becomes a comic bodily apparatus; and Criseyde's resistance to a Pandaran intentional semantics which reads all acts in terms of ends finds Grisilde as its extreme exemplar, in whom there are no vested ends, and where "entente" fails to credibly convey the complex interiority otherwise represented within the tale. Nevertheless, *The Canterbury Tales* is less a retreat from the subtleties of intentional types Chaucer demonstrated in the *Troilus* than a demonstration of the limits of intention as a narrative device and hermeneutic, and a definition of literariness which emerges from those limitations. As with the *Retractions*, where Chaucer's stated authorial "entente" allowed for the definition of a category of literary writing that it could not itself be the source of, Chaucer commits himself heavily in the *Tales* to a descriptive language of "entente" as a means to compose characters whose meanings involve a varied interplay of purpose, motives, and actions, while simultaneously proposing the inadequacy of that language to convey the full plenitude of their narrative existence.

⁶² CT IV 2104-6.

⁶³ CT IV 2352-3; 2376.

⁶⁴ CT IV 1954.

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