

THE PROBLEM OF LANGUAGE AND MEANING
IN
THE "PRIORESS'S TALE" AND THE "SECOND NUN'S TALE"

BY
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A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

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ABSTRACT

This study examines Chaucer's continuing investigation of the relationship between language and meaning, and the difficulty of expressing that meaning through written language. I believe that Chaucer's method of approaching the problems of language and the transmission of his art bears similarities to certain modern methods of approaching literature, particularly in the way that each looks at the tenuous relationship of language and meaning. The thesis applies aspects of the language theories of Jacques Derrida and Robert Scholes to the "Prioress's Tale" and the "Second Nun's Tale," two of *The Canterbury Tales* that are not usually read in terms of their treatment of language problems. Chapter One also outlines some late-medieval theories of literature with which Chaucer could have been familiar, and traces their development from Augustine to the "classicizing friars." By examining the Tales with some knowledge of the way in which the known literary theory of his time corresponds with aspects of modern theories, it is possible to attain a better understanding of some of Chaucer's more problematic texts.

CHAPTER ONE

MODERN AND MEDIEVAL THEORIES OF LITERATURE

1. Introduction

In this study, I will examine what I consider to be the most interesting and complex aspect of the Chaucerian canon: the author's continuing investigation of the relationship between language and meaning and the difficulty of expressing that meaning through written language. I will show that Geoffrey Chaucer was not only aware of the problematic connection between language and meaning but that he gains his awareness by looking back along a critical path, well-trodden by, according to Barry Windeatt, "the footsteps of the ancient poets" (1). Furthermore, as Windeatt says, Chaucer "also worries about textual transmission and future interpretation" (1). That is, he was concerned not only with the long tradition that helped to shape his art but also with the transmission of meaning to his readers and with how his text would be understood in the future¹. In displaying this concern, Chaucer's poetry allows

¹ Paul Strohm expresses a similar opinion to Windeatt regarding Chaucer's awareness of the problems of the transmission of meaning: "While confident in his manner of address to his immediate *hearers*, Chaucer seems less certain about the nature of his reception by those unknown persons who will be readers of his works in manuscript form. His ambition for such an audience has already been noted, in reference to such passages as his closing address to *Troilus* when he imagines his 'bok' entering the larger realm of 'poesye'. This imagined transition is, however, accompanied by certain anxieties, both about simple matters of transcription and also about more fundamental matters of understanding" (12).

us to observe an analogous relationship (although not an identical one) between the late-medieval theories of writing with which he would have been familiar and the type of modern theory that I will incorporate below in examining the two tales. This is not to claim, by any means, that Chaucer was a medieval semiotician or a 'pre-post-structuralist', or that medieval literary theorists were centuries ahead of themselves in devising analytic methods; such an assumption would be an attempt to make Chaucer and his contemporaries into literary prognosticators. Rather, I believe that Chaucer's method of approaching the problems of language and the transmission of his art bears similarities to certain modern methods of approaching literature, particularly in the way that each looks at the tenuous relationship of word and meaning². By examining the work of Chaucer with some knowledge of the known literary theory of his time, and in light of the ways in which that theory corresponds with aspects of modern theories, I hope to attain a better understanding of some of his problematic texts³.

² Robert S. Sturges finds the work of Jacques Derrida helpful in examining medieval literature because "the deconstructive free play of writing may have something in common with, and something to tell us about, interpretation in the Middle Ages, which may have been governed less by any positivist notion of the author's intentions for the integrated text than by something more closely resembling this free play" (3).

³ Louise O. Fradenburg displays her opinion of the questionable tendency of modern theoreticians to equate modern and medieval literary theory: "Defenders of 'theory' have frequently stressed the identity of modern critical issues with medieval concerns, rather than the capacity of modern theory to understand medieval texts in ways sometimes

Two of those problematic texts are the "Prioress's Tale" and the "Second Nun's Tale," and my primary focus here will be on these two *Canterbury Tales* not usually examined for their involvement in studies of language and meaning⁴. Critics seem most often to compare the two tales in terms of their dramatic or thematic commonalities (that is, respectively, as generic examples of a Miracle of the Virgin and as the story of a saint's life and death in martyrdom) while disregarding or missing the way in which the tales treat the difficulties of language and meaning. I intend to demonstrate that these tales exhibit convincing testimony to an examination of those difficulties.

The "Prioress's Tale" and the "Second Nun's Tale" are not the only examples of Chaucer's concern with the problems of language and meaning. Windeatt's statement cited above refers to *Troilus and Criseyde*, where Chaucer, in an attempt to avoid such problems of misreading, assigns the responsibility of insuring correct future interpretation to his contemporaries:

O moral Gower, this book I directe
To the and to the, philosophical Strode,

different from the ways in which those texts seem to understand themselves" (72). Andrew Taylor examines the (mis)reading of Derrida in medieval studies in "Chaucer Our Derridean Contemporary?".

⁴ William E. Rogers, for example, groups Fragments VII, VIII, and IX which contain both the "Prioress's Tale" and the "Second Nun's Tale" under the chapter title "The Problems of Language" although his criteria for doing so seem to be because "all the tales have something to do with literature" (86).

To vouchen sauf, ther nede is, to correcte,
 Of youre benignites and zeles goode. (Tr V.1856-
 9)⁵

Strode and Gower, not surprisingly to Chaucer it seems, were unable to prevent the misreading of the text by at least one reader for, in the *Legend of Good Women*, Cupid accosts the interloping Chaucer and reprimands him for misrepresenting all women in his portrayal of one faithless Criseyde:

And of Creseyde thou hast seyde as the lyst,
 That maketh men to wommen lasse triste,
 That ben as trewe as ever was any steel. (F332-4)

Cupid's response to Chaucer in the *Legend* shows that the concerns of the Narrator of *Troilus* about the misreading of his text were valid.

Chaucer was obviously aware of the problems of misreading and misunderstanding when he wrote these poems. He begins his Prologue to the *Legend* with a statement about textual transmission and the veracity in "olde bokes," ("Wel oughte us thanne olde bokes leve,/ There as there is non other assay by preve" G27-8) and by doing so he indicates that language and its problematic relationship to truth will be the primary focus of the work. As he says (G81-4), his purpose in writing the *Legend* is to "yewe credence" to old books and authorities for proof of things that he cannot see. However, he ends the section with an ominous qualifier:

⁵ All citations from Chaucer are taken from Benson's *Riverside Chaucer*.

For myn entent is, or I fro yow fare,
 The naked text in English to declare
 Of many a story, or elles of many a geste,
 As autours seyn; *leveth hem if yow leste.* (G85-8,
 italics mine)

Such a warning should be heeded, for it suggests that the "autours" cannot always be believed and, here, Chaucer places the lion's share of the responsibility of determining meaning onto the reader⁶.

Commenting on Chaucer's experimentation with language and the use of modern critical approaches to examine his writing, Robert Jordan points out that

[w]e are beginning now to see more clearly that Chaucer could find meaning in the play of language itself, in the varied textual surface that could not only create illusions of life but also make play--often very serious epistemological play--with the capacity of language so to enthrall us in illusion. . . . The evidence points not only to an

⁶ Jill Mann stresses the importance, to Chaucer, of the role of the reader in "The Authority of the Audience in Chaucer:" "These persistent intrusions of a reading presence within the text dramatize not only Chaucer's relationship to a literary past--to the authors whose influence must be reconciled with his own creative independence--but also his relationship to a literary future--to the readers on whom the continuing life and meaning of his work depends" (2). "Elsewhere in Chaucer it is the writer's inability to control what the reader does with his text that is a potential cause of alarm. Chaucer is possibly the only English poet to have been more troubled by the anxiety of exerting influence than by the anxiety of undergoing it; the burden of the future can be more worrying than the burden of the past" (6-7).

unabashed authorial consciousness of the crafting of language but also an acute authorial ambivalence about the nature of language and its validity as an instrument of truth. (Jordan, "Todorov" 54)

Jordan finds this "problem with the contingency of language" (54) evidenced not only in the *Legend* but in many of Chaucer's other works including *The House of Fame* and *Troilus and Criseyde*. In focusing on language and, therefore, its own 'literariness,' Jordan notes that Chaucer's work shares its self-reflexive quality with many modern writers (Jordan mentions Nabokov, Barth, Beckett, and Calvino, 56) and, by extension, modern literary theorists. Jordan correctly maintains that Chaucer contends and experiments with the problems of language and meaning throughout his corpus, and I will present evidence to elaborate on the point by locating examples in several texts in the body of this study.

The thesis is arranged into four chapters. Chapter One describes the theoretical perspectives that I have found helpful in examining the problems of meaning and language in the source tales. My approach incorporates aspects of the language theories of Jacques Derrida and Robert Scholes. Derrida's concepts of "dissemination," "différance," and the "supplément" provide useful insight into the difficulty (if not the impossibility) of locating meaning in language, whereas Scholes's "centripetal" and "centrifugal" methods of

reading help to demonstrate the almost infinite number of intertextual connections a reader can form in an attempt to make sense of the text, connections over which the writer can exert negligible significant influence. The chapter also outlines some of the critical theories that may have been available to a writer in late-fourteenth century England and attempts to trace the passage of such theories from Augustine of Hippo to the theorists of Chaucer's time. Although the process is speculative and necessarily abbreviated because of the enormous scope of the subject, I believe that I can make reasonable assumptions about the theories (or at least of the kinds of theories) of which Chaucer was aware. Chapters Two and Three will analyze the "Prioress's Tale" and the "Second Nun's Tale," respectively, in terms of the theoretical perspective set down in Chapter One. Considering the extent of Chaucer's involvement with the problems of language throughout his corpus, it will be necessary to refer to some of Chaucer's other works that show his concern with language issues. Chapter Four concludes my thesis, restating the claim that many of Chaucer's texts show his concern with the difficulties of establishing meaning through language and that such concerns are not unlike those expressed in some so-called modern theories. The conclusion supports my assertion that, if the literary theories available to Chaucer shared some of their basic concepts with modern literary theory, and if Chaucer was aware of and operated within a literary milieu in which

those theories were prevalent, then modern theoretical perspectives may well provide insight into Chaucer's works in general, and more particularly into some of his more problematic texts.

2. Derrida, Scholes, and the Problems of Meaning

Within the dramatic frame of *The Canterbury Tales*, the characters express different and differing points of view and communicative styles in telling their tales, and Chaucer capitalizes on the intrinsic possibilities of such a multi-voiced text by allowing the characters to misunderstand each other and, on occasion, to misunderstand their own words; such misunderstanding foregrounds problems with language and the transmission of meaning that exists in any situation in which people attempt to communicate with each other. Mikhail Bakhtin uses the term "dialogic" to denote such multiple-voicing that is "characteristic of all speech in that no discourse exists in isolation but is always part of a greater whole; it is necessarily drawn from the context of the language world which preceded it" (Makaryk 537), a "language world" like that occurring in *The Canterbury Tales*⁷. Robert Jordan reveals the utility of Bakhtin's idea to the study of the *Tales* when he says that Chaucer "expands the areas of potential meaning by introducing multiple viewpoints and in general exposing his received materials as

⁷ See Bakhtin's *The Dialogic Imagination* for a complete discussion.

well as his art itself to a variety of interpretations, by no means always credulous and respectful" ("Question" 81). For example, the Wife of Bath in her "Prologue" misinterprets or misquotes the words of the "auctores" to prove her arguments; the Manciple reveals the danger of speaking and having one's words misconstrued; the little clergeon in the "Prioress's Tale" learns by rote to sing the *Alma redemptoris* in Latin but he does not know what the words mean; the Second Nun, according to the generic convention of a Saint's Life, offers different interpretations of the meaning of the name, Cecilia. These, and a proliferation of references to problematic language usage in *The Canterbury Tales*, indicate that, for Chaucer, in his time as it is for ourselves, language and the transmission of meaning is a major issue in literature.

The inherent possibility of mis-reading language in any text, especially one in which different speakers have a voice, is a problem that is recognized by post-structuralist theories of literature which assert that the determination of meaning in language is, at best, illusive. Practically all such theories take their basic premises from the lectures of Ferdinand de Saussure, who demonstrated in *Course in General Linguistics* that meaning in language depends upon a relational sign-system based on the differences among those signs. This fundamental difference, Saussure maintains, begins at the level of the smallest linguistic unit, the phoneme. As he says:

. . . a phoneme by itself plays a role in the system of a language-state . . . [its] presence or absence in a definite position counts in the structure of the word and in the structure of the sentence. (131)

For instance, the replacement of one phoneme with another makes a great difference not only in the signs *cat* and *hat* but also in any sentence or text in which the signs may appear. Saussure uses the word *sign* to denote "the combination of a concept and a sound-image" which he calls, respectively, the *signified* and *signifier* (67). The relationship between signified and signifier is arbitrary in that the sound-image used to represent the signified could just as well have been any other sound-image; however, the system of language (*langue*) is established and maintained by convention, and is already in existence when a speaker comes to it, and therefore it will not allow the substitution of one phoneme for another when in use by individual speakers (*parole*). That is, an individual language user cannot change the system of language in which he/she operates simply by changing phonemic aspects of the language.

Saussure stresses the importance of arbitrariness and difference:

in language there are only differences. Even more important: a difference generally implies positive terms between which the difference is set up; but in language there are only differences *without*

positive terms. (120, emphasis in original)

This difference is caused by the arbitrariness of the sign, which Saussure calls an "irrational principle" (133) and warns that such irrationality

would lead to the worst sort of complication if applied without restriction. But the mind contrives to introduce a principle of order and regularity into certain parts of the mass of signs . . . (133).

Post-structuralist theorists, however, see this potential "worst sort of complication" as occurring in spite of the mind's attempts to impose constancy. Because of the nature of the sign (that is, arbitrary and differential), order cannot be imposed on language.

Jacques Derrida is one such theorist who maintains that language resists all attempts at regulation. He accepts Saussure's basic concept that language is referential and differential; however, Derrida maintains that the signified to which a signifier refers is actually another signifier which in turn requires another signifier for its own definition; and that definition requires yet another signifier; and so on. For Derrida, the signified cannot exist; rather, language is a chain of signifiers unattached to any signifieds:

. . . the signified always already functions as a signifier. The secondarity that it seemed possible to ascribe to writing alone affects all signifieds

in general, affects them always already, the moment they *enter the game*. There is not a single signified that escapes even if recaptured, the play of signifying references that constitute language. (*Grammatology* 7, emphasis in original)

Because of the infinite movement from signifier to signifier, meaning in language is indeterminate. The referential process becomes limitless and virtually unfathomable: Saussure's "worst sort of complication." Derrida further explains his concept when he asks, in *Writing and Difference*:

But is it by chance . . . that the meaning of meaning . . . is infinite implication, the indefinite referral of signifier to signifier? And that its force is a certain pure and infinite equivocality which gives signified meaning no respite, no rest, but engages it in its own *economy* so that it always signifies again and differs? (25, emphasis in original)

The perpetual connection of signifier to signifier, which Derrida calls "dissemination," suggests that language must always lack the certainty of reference it requires to transmit meaning. This centrifugal movement from one signifier to the next means that any signifier must be connected to every other signifier in a language system, and Derrida demonstrates the connection in his examination of the word "*pharmakon*" in the essay entitled "Plato's

Pharmacy" (*Dissemination* 61-171). Here he shows how the word can be linked (eventually) to every other word in the Greek language: "Like any text, the text of 'Plato' couldn't not be involved, at least in a virtual, dynamic, lateral manner, with all the words that composed the system of the Greek language" (129). By looking at the word, or any words, in such a centrifugal manner, it is possible to connect

. . . the words 'actually present' in a discourse with all the other words in the lexical system, whether or not they appear as 'words,' that is, as relative verbal units in such discourse. They communicate with the totality of the lexicon through their syntactic play and at least through the subunits that compose what we call a word.

(*Dissemination* 130)

Derrida questions the traditional view of "Western metaphysics"⁸ which sees oral discourse exempt from the problems of referentiality and privileges the spoken word over the written. Because both speaker and listener are present to each other when an utterance is made, and the speaker's words are (supposedly) an accurate reflection of what he/she means, then the meaning of the words will be present also. But the speaker and listener use oral language

⁸ Barbara Johnson explains that, by "Western metaphysics," Derrida "means not only the Western philosophical tradition but 'everyday' thought and language as well" which "has always been structured in terms of dichotomies or polarities" that privilege one term over another (*Dissemination* viii).

that is subject to the same system of relational difference as is written language, and any language, whether written or oral, "is already constituted by the very distances and differences it seeks to overcome" (*Dissemination* ix). As Derrida says in *Positions*: "Whether in the order of spoken or written discourse, no element can function as a sign without referring to another element which itself is not simply present" (26).

Although meaning in language is the product of a system of difference, meaning, according to Derrida, is also 'deferred': each sign contains both the trace of the signs that preceded it and the trace of signs to come after it, both of which can modify its meaning for the reader/listener. Each word in a sentence, for example, contains the trace of all the other words in that sentence. Derrida calls this effect "différance," a word he adapts from the French verb, "différer," meaning both to differ and to defer. According to Barbara Johnson, "[w]hat Derrida attempts to demonstrate is that this *différance* inhabits the very core of what appears to be immediate and present" (*Dissemination* ix); and the notion of presence, for Derrida, is the privileged half of the type of unacceptable binary (presence/absence) on which western metaphysics necessarily grounds itself. The determination of meaning is therefore always made problematic by the effects of dissemination and *différance*.

If meaning in language and in writing is made

indeterminate by dissemination and *différance*, then the existence of any solid centre on which to base meaning, which Derrida refers to as the "transcendental signified"⁹, or *logos*, is also an impossibility. As Terry Eagleton explains:

. . . the concept of *writing*, then, is a challenge to the very idea of structure: for a structure always presumes a centre, a fixed principle, a hierarchy of meanings and a solid foundation, and it is just these notions which the endless differing and deferring of writing throws into question. (134, emphasis in original)

Derrida sees such logocentric thinking as a product of western metaphysics, and, while the determination of a "transcendental signified" may be essential in order to establish and ground meaning, the idea of an infinite procession of signifiers seems to preclude the existence of this solid central structure on which communication must be based. Richard Harland defines the *logos* as a word

that illuminatingly brings together in a single concept the inward rational principle of verbal texts, the inward rational principle of human beings, and the inward rational principle of the

⁹ Derrida says "the classical system's 'outside' can no longer take the form of the sort of extra-text which would arrest the concatenation of writing (i.e., that movement which situates every signified as a differential trace) and for which I had proposed the concept of 'transcendental signified'" (*Dissemination* 5).

natural universe. Even more illuminating, 'logos' combines all these meanings with a further meaning: 'the Law'. For 'logos' as an inward rational principle serves to control and take charge of outward material things. (146)

Derrida, as Harland points out, denies the possibility of the *logos* and regards "logocentrism" as a mistaken conception of "Western metaphysical" thought.

Without a solid centre on which to ground meaning, language becomes unpredictable, and the movement of signifier to signifier continues ever outward, pushing the boundaries of language until meaning is virtually impossible to determine with any certainty. This centrifugal motion of signifiers constantly replaces and takes precedence over that which came before. Derrida calls this replacement the "supplément" and says: "The supplément adds itself, it is a surplus, a plenitude enriching another plenitude, the *fullest measure of presence*" (*Grammatology* 144, emphasis in original), which becomes

an infinite chain, ineluctably multiplying the supplementary mediations that produce the sense of the very thing they defer: the mirage of the thing itself, of immediate presence, of originary perception¹⁰.

¹⁰ Barbara Johnson refers to the "two meanings in French" of the word "supplément": "'addition' and 'replacement'." Writing, as compared to speech, Johnson says, becomes "at once something secondary, external, and compensatory, and something that substitutes, violates, and

(*Grammatology* 157)

The "supplément" replaces and yet simultaneously adds to that which it replaces. What was thought to be complete according to Western metaphysical thought, in this case the sign or word, suddenly appears to be incomplete. If the sign can be replaced or added to, it cannot have been complete in the first place. Replacing implies equality; adding to implies difference. The supplément therefore contains a double meaning: it is both different and the same as the sign it replaces. "The doubleness of the word *supplément* carries the text's signifying possibilities beyond what could reasonably be attributed to . . . [the author's] conscious intentions" (Barbara Johnson, *Dissemination* xiii). Derrida views the concept of the completeness of the sign as another product of Western metaphysics which mistakenly privileges speech over writing. Because speech appears to be the most direct connection between the speaker/author and the speaker's words, conventional thinking sees speech as being always present to itself and therefore preferable to the written word which is merely a representation of speech, a method of preserving the vocal sounds, a *supplément*. But if speech can be supplemented by writing, then it cannot be complete in itself and, therefore, writing, for Derrida, takes precedence over speech¹¹.

usurps" (Translator's note, Derrida, *Dissemination*, 110).

¹¹ Jonathan Culler says: "Writing can be added to speech only if speech is not a self-sufficient, natural plenitude, only if there is already in speech a lack or

This favouring of writing as a mode of discourse is expressed by Derrida's phrase "*There is nothing outside of the text* [there is no outside-text; *il n'y a pas de hors-texte*,]" (*Of Grammatology* 158). Derrida here refers to the writing of Rousseau, and, as Barbara Johnson says of the phrase:

. . . what Rousseau's text tells us is that our very relation to 'reality' already functions like a text. Rousseau's account of his life is not only itself a text, but it is a text that speaks only about the textuality of life. Rousseau's life does not *become* a text through his writing: it always already *was* one. Nothing, indeed, can be said to be *not* a text (*Dissemination*, xiv).

Johnson's elaboration of Derrida's phrase indicates that people are a product of the texts that form the culture in which they live and, as such, they become texts themselves in that they are created by writing.

Robert Scholes applies some of Derrida's concepts to the development of a theory of reading in *Protocols of Reading*. Responding to Derrida's phrase, "*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*," Scholes says that:

[i]f Derrida is right, and on this question I think he is, there is no place for us to stand

absence that enables writing to supplement it" and "Writing can be compensatory, a supplement to speech, only because speech is already marked by the qualities generally predicated of writing: absence and misunderstanding." (*On Deconstruction*, 103).

outside of textuality, anyway. When we become aware of ourselves, we are already thoroughly developed as textual creatures. What we are and what we may become are already shaped by powerful cultural texts. (*Protocols* 27)

Or, to state it another way: "Human language intervenes in a world that has already intervened in language" (Scholes, *Textual Power* 111). Here Scholes states succinctly his position on literature, reading, and, by extension, the attempt to determine meaning: We are all products of the culture in which we live and of the powerful system of signs inherent in that culture (its "texts"). We are, therefore, "textual creatures," beings created by the texts we create as a culture when the values and ideology of that culture are passed on in its texts. As we shape culture through our texts, so culture shapes us through the texts we create. We can neither observe the system from within nor can we get outside the system of textuality to observe it because we have no existence outside the system of textuality¹². Scholes's view is in complete agreement with Derrida's: There is nothing outside the text, including (and especially) ourselves.

Scholes, like Derrida, "sees the life of the text as

¹² In *Structuralism in Literature: An Introduction*, Scholes says ". . . the 'subjectivity' of hermeneutic criticism can never be entirely subjective. The critic who 'recovers' the meaning of any given work always does so by establishing a relationship between the work and some system of ideas outside it" (9).

occurring along its circumference, which is constantly expanding, encompassing new possibilities of meaning" (*Protocols* 8), a concept he calls centrifugal reading¹³. His view aligns centrifugal reading with Derrida's ideas of "dissemination" and "différance" in the way both concepts see meaning in language as illusive because of the ever expanding nature of signifiers. Scholes says that it is in the process of opening outward to locate meaning that the reader's own textual references come into play and where the most interesting meanings appear. To read centrifugally is to bring to bear upon the text all the cultural and textual references the reader has, to connect the text to the reader's own system of texts. For every reader, the meanings formed from such connections must, of necessity, be different, for, although we may exist within the same culture and are created in part by the culture in which we live, our experience of that culture will not be the same. As Scholes says:

Readers are constituted differently and different readers perceive different features of the same texts. Both texts and readers are already written

¹³ Roland Barthes in "From Work to Text" refers to this multiplicity of possible meanings in the text. He also incorporates one of Derrida's key terms: "The Text is plural. Which is not simply to say that it has several meanings, but that it accomplishes the very plural of meaning: an *irreducible* (and not merely an acceptable) plural. The Text is not a co-existence of meanings but a passage, an overcrossing; thus it answers not to an interpretation, even a liberal one, but to an explosion, a dissemination" (1007).

when they meet, but both may emerge from the encounter altered in some crucial respect.

(*Protocols* 92)

This is not to say that because a reader is "constituted differently" that any interpretation he or she may devise is a correct one. On the contrary. In *Semiotics and Interpretation*, Scholes explains the limitations that he sees existing on centrifugalism (Derrida's "dissemination") when he says:

we are not free to make meaning, but we are free to find it by following the various semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic paths that lead away from the words of the text. That is, we can't bring just any meanings to the text, but we can bring all the meanings we can link to the text by means of an interpretive code. And, above all, we can generate meaning by situating this text among the actual and possible texts to which it can be related. (30)

The reader can only locate meaning in a text by applying certain "protocols of reading" (Derrida's phrase from *Positions* 63)¹⁴ to that text and by positioning the text in relation to any others which may exist in his or her

¹⁴ Scholes uses Derrida's words as a headnote to Chapter 2 of *Protocols of Reading*. The note reads: "Reading is transformational. . . . But this transformation cannot be executed however one wishes. It requires protocols of reading. Why not say it bluntly: I have not yet found any that satisfy me" (*Protocols* 50).

repertoire.

Both Scholes and Derrida see reading as an intertextual activity in which the reader brings to the present text every other text that he/she has read, but Scholes sees reading as taking place in two directions, backward and forward. The reader reads centrifugally, creating new meanings for the text, but, as Scholes says:

Every text that comes to us comes from before our moment in time, but each text can be read only by connecting it to the unfinished work of textuality. (*Protocols* 6)

Therefore, we as readers must also look back to "before our moment in time" toward the source and context in which the writing was produced in order to situate the text at such a position that we can begin the process of understanding it. The reader must search for a measure of what Scholes calls "centripetality," a place to begin reading. As he says,

reading depends upon some irreducible minimum of recuperation or centripetality in the process of generating meaning. . . . We must look backward and find something there in order to be reading at all (*Protocols* 60).

While the reader looks forward according to the textual resources that he or she brings to the text¹⁵, factors that

¹⁵ By my phrase "textual resources," I do not mean to connect the idea of a reader's understanding of his/her own textuality with Culler's "literary competence" (*Structuralist Poetics* 113ff), a term that I feel denotes a certain cultural elitism in its quest to find that elusive

determine the extent of that reader's freedom and creativity in interpreting text, he/she also must look backward to establish some basis to begin the process of interpretation. If Barry Windeatt's statement that Chaucer "envisages a future for his writing in relation to the past" is correct, as I think it is, then it might indicate that, in Windeatt's opinion at least, Chaucer's view of reading and understanding might not have been unlike the view of backward and forward reading that Scholes expounds.

Scholes appears to depart from Derrida in the concept of "centripetal reading." The problem arises from Scholes's belief in the necessity of looking back toward an intention lying at the base of the text:

Centripetal reading conceives of a text in terms of an original intention located at the center of that text. Reading done under this rubric will try to reduce the text to this pure core of unmixed intentionality. (*Protocols* 8)

By raising the spectre of "intentionality," Scholes seems to be as far from Derrida's point of view as he could conceivably be, for Derrida will not admit to the possibility of any authority, including that of the author. Derrida would contend that "there is no authority in texts or anywhere else, that any configuration of letters which we label a text, or indeed an interpretation of a text, is already self-subverting" (Makaryk 510); that is, any

construct, the 'ideal reader.'

declaration of authority would require the existence of a fixed centre on which to base that authority, and, as we have already seen, Derrida believes that language is not capable of sustaining any such thing. The text already contains within itself the means of its own undermining. But Scholes, I believe, does not mean by "intention" what critics like E.D Hirsch intend the word to mean. Hirsch is vehement in his "attack on the view that a text is a "'piece of language'" and equally vehement in his contention that

[t]he author's or speaker's subjective act is formally necessary to verbal meaning, and any theory which tries to dispense with the author as specifier of meaning by asserting that textual meaning is purely objectively determined finds itself chasing will-o'-the-wisps. (Hirsch 1401)

For Scholes, we ignore the intention of the author at our own literary peril not because the author is the only authority on what the text means, but because reading is "an attempt to grasp meanings that are not ours, meanings that are interesting precisely because they come from outside us" (*Protocols* 50). If we are textual beings, then any text that is 'other' than ourselves, any text which comes from outside our own being and has the power to shape our thought, is significant. Besides, an absolute determination of the author's intention is impossible because intention is both conscious and unconscious; the author may not be fully aware of all that shapes his or her thought process:

. . . human subjectivity is a vehicle for all sorts of cultural meanings that have already shaped any individual human consciousness. Our intentions are neither simple nor entirely our own. Therefore we cannot express exactly what we desire to express so that others will understand us perfectly. (*Protocols* 54)

Scholes leaves us part way between embracing intentionality and dismissing it. We must assume that the author had a purpose in writing but we must also believe that we as readers can never completely understand just what that intention was, a determination that Hirsch declares to be absolutely mandatory in order for any interpretation to occur. Scholes is aware of the position in which the author is left; he says, "Under these conditions, a poet does the best he or she can and then abandons the work with the intention that motivated it still somewhat unfulfilled. The reader does the rest . . ." (*Protocols* 54). It seems safe to say that the reader follows the same path as does the author, but in reverse, in attempting to understand any text; that is, the reader "does the best he or she can and then abandons the work with the intention that motivated it still somewhat" misunderstood. But, misunderstood or not, the reader begins the process of understanding the text by granting some intention, as speculative as the process may be, to the author and then creating his/her own meaning from that point.

Scholes says that "[r]eading is always, at once, the effort to comprehend and the effort to incorporate. I must invent the author, invent his or her intentions, using the evidence I can find to stimulate my creative process" (*Protocols* 9). Both terms are necessary for understanding to take place: an attempt at comprehension of what the author intended to say and incorporation of the new text into the reader's "own textual repertory" (*Protocols* 9). Scholes, however, seems to be suggesting that the ideas of centrifugal and centripetal reading are not substantially different. In claiming that the reader must "invent" the author and the author's intention using whatever the reader can find to effect the process, Scholes demonstrates that such 'invention' is a centrifugal rather than a centripetal process as the idea of the author's intention would suggest. If the reader must "invent" the intention of the author, and indeed the author as well, then the idea of the author and any intentionality appears merely a construct created out of the reader's "own textual repertory."¹⁶ This apparent contradiction has the effect of emphasizing further the importance of the centrifugal nature of reading and so coincides with Derrida's ideas of language and meaning.

To read in the manner suggested by Scholes is to locate some centre in the text and then to expand ever outward, pushing the margins of the text to create meaning according

¹⁶ The idea of the author and "auctoritee" will appear later in this chapter when I look at medieval theories of the author.

to the reader's own cultural and, therefore, textual system of reference. However, the centre, as Derrida makes clear, is subject to the same instability of meaning inherent in all language: the instability caused by the effects of dissemination and *différance*, and the same instability that makes the idea of centrifugal reading so dynamic. The farther the reader proceeds towards the margins (that is, reads centrifugally), or the more the reader 'creates' the author, the more it becomes possible to detect areas in the text where the text itself displays contradictory statements and ideas that naturally set up a series of oppositions. According to Eagleton

such oppositions, in order to hold themselves in place, are sometimes betrayed into inverting or collapsing themselves, or need to banish to the text's margins certain niggling details which can be made to return and plague them . . . [they] come to embarrass their own ruling systems of logic. (133)

Derrida refers to this process of detecting and demonstrating the collapse of the oppositions in a text as "deconstruction," and, although I do not intend to "deconstruct" the "Prioress's Tale" or the "Second Nun's Tale" in the rigorous way that Derrida employs the word, I will be using some of Derrida's and Scholes's methods of examining language and literature among other things to see if these Tales do indeed exhibit certain "niggling details"

that can be shown to "embarrass their own ruling systems of logic."

H. Marshall Leicester, Jr. says of the deconstructive approach to Chaucer, and I agree, that it is possible that Chaucer "like Derrida, is *miming* a certain sort of discourse in such a way as to bring out the assumptions that make it possible and to question them."¹⁷ Further, such a method of reading can profitably lead to

a general critique of all signifying systems, including social and religious institutions and language itself--the whole catalogue of logocentric, or meaning-centered, assumptions.

("Différance" 17)

Shiela Delany, employing Saussure's terminology, would concur; as she says, the determination of meaning in language is always dependent upon

the play of differing/deferring/deference between--on one hand--the ideals of a pristine, stable, absolute, and paradigmatic *langue*, and--on the other--the realities of fallen, contingent, infinitely variable *parole*. (*Naked Text* 75)

Delany's comment relates Saussurean *langue* and *parole* to Derridean *différance* (and therefore to Scholes idea of reading) and also to her examination of Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*, mentioned earlier in this chapter. To continue

¹⁷ Leicester goes too far, I believe, in calling Chaucer "an active deconstructionist" (22); he also incurs the scorn of Andrew Taylor for the suggestion (477).

Delany's statement:

This play of *différance* destabilizes the poem, producing an aura of uncertainty about meaning and the status of language that affects content and structure, narrative and rhetoric. (75)

This destabilization of language and of the poem itself created by the play of *différance* and dissemination that Delany finds in the *Legend* is, as I noted previously, evident in much of Chaucer's work and is the subject of this study.

3. Medieval Literary Theory and Chaucer

Medieval theories of language recognized the difficulties of establishing meaning in writing. That Chaucer was familiar with the language theory of his time is likely, and an examination of his texts shows his involvement with similar problems of language and meaning that writers and readers deal with today. This section of the study outlines some theories of language and writing from the time of Augustine to the 14th century in an attempt to delineate the literary theory contemporaneous with, and, perhaps, known to, Chaucer.

Before I begin, however, I must explain the word "contemporary." Literary theory in Chaucer's time, as in any other, is a product of the theories that preceded it. It is probable that Chaucer was aware of the theories of writing

and language that were extant during his time¹⁸, and he may have been aware of some of the earlier theorists. However, his direct knowledge of the *auctores* like Augustine is difficult to establish definitively and may not be relevant to his knowledge of contemporary theories except in the way in which the work of the *auctores* influenced the development of those theories¹⁹. As Phillip Pulsiano says:

Although Chaucer nowhere directly addresses the leading language theorists of his day, his poetry reflects an intense awareness of the moral and philosophical dimensions of language, an awareness which gave shape to his own developing poetics.

(153)

My concern is the theory that Chaucer could have known and perhaps considered as he wrote. A.J. Minnis says:

Chaucer often reacted against the literary theory of his day or exploited it in a very unusual way;

¹⁸ It is necessary to use the word "probable" in this context because I believe that, although Chaucer was doubtlessly well-read, there is a high degree of uncertainty about what he did or did not read. Kittredge's remark that, in the late-fourteenth century, "the man of intellect read everything he could lay his hands on; he did not confine his interests to his specialty, even if he had one" (9), is an intriguing idea but essentially unsupportable in its applicability to Chaucer.

¹⁹ Minnis, Scott, and Wallace and also Minnis alone examine the medieval commentary-tradition as a source of knowledge of the *auctores* and which they refer to as "the most fundamental and important [branch of medieval literary theory] of them all within the medieval educational system, and one which has a lot to say about a far wider range of literary matters than those which fall within the terms of reference of the pragmatic and prescriptive 'arts'" (Minnis, Scott, and Wallace 1).

. . . We cannot understand how Chaucer exploited or reacted against the literary theory of his day until we understand what that literary theory was; his extensive "defamiliarization" (notably of literary convention and of genre) cannot be appreciated until we know what was "familiar" to him and what was not. ("Comparative" 54)

Minnis, Scott, and Wallace begin their study with the assertion that late-medieval literary theory acknowledges the teleological nature of writing, that the text is created for a specific purpose. In this regard, it is

concerned with profit rather than with delight as such and assumes that reason is a God-given faculty which should operate to bring the individual into line with the great divine plan. Hence, all that is written is, in the final analysis, written for our doctrine (to echo Rom. 15:4); more specifically, to make us better Christians. (ix)

Medieval theorists saw literature as a way to enlightenment, as a method of delivering the human sufferer from an otherwise potentially miserable existence. Therefore, in terms of the purpose of writing, medieval theories of literature have less in common with New Criticism and are closer to

the ideologically based and philosophically patterned types of "New New Criticism" which are

currently [1988] in vogue; in particular, with formalism, structuralism, semiotics, and reception-theory, and especially with those approaches which have a sharply defined teleology, such as feminist criticism, and political criticism of whatever persuasion. (ix)

According to the authors, modern literary theories share a common interest with those of the late-middle ages, and, in the remainder of this chapter, I will examine some literary theories which could have had a formative effect on Chaucer's literary milieu. I then will attempt to form some connections between his work and the ideas expressed in those theories while making some comparisons between late 14th century literary principles and the speculations of Derrida and Scholes. The discussion will, of necessity, take on a rather historical perspective in tracing the progression (not always chronological) of literary thought from the early to the late-middle ages; however, the focus will always be on literature and the theory that surrounds it²⁰.

St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430) contemplated the relationship of signs and meaning as it pertained to religious knowledge and the study of Scripture. Ernst R.

²⁰ Robert O. Payne takes a new historical approach to Chaucer but stresses the importance of seeing what is there rather than what we want to see: "The first thing we must do to provide a more positive historical criticism is to make it a search, however risky and imperfect, for what can be discovered in the past, whether or not we think it ought to be there" (187).

Curtius acknowledges the importance of Augustine to theologians and scholars when he says in his seminal study *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*:

[Augustine writes that] Everything in the Bible which is not directly concerned with faith and morals has a hidden meaning. In this he follows the precedent not only of late antique Homeric and Virgilian allegoresis but also of the Biblical allegoresis which had been accepted since Origen. He adds support to it by the idea that an effort to unravel the hidden meaning is a wholesome and enjoyable intellectual activity. . . . [H]is theory became a permanent possession of the Middle Ages. (74)

The idea that uncovering the "hidden meaning" of Scripture could be an intellectual pursuit rather than simply an exercise in devotion had positive repercussions on the secular scholars of the later-middle ages. According to Peggy A Knapp:

Augustine focused early Christian thought and transformed a potpourri of sometimes unconnected, even contradictory, stories into a body of doctrine. He did so not primarily by asserting what the Bible meant but by asserting how it conveyed its meaning. ("Wandrynge" 146, emphasis in original)

Augustine developed his theory of signs from the

classical works of Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero. He believed that "an erroneous conception of reality can hinder a person from acting rightly" (Colish 31) and he tried to show that "language is the means by which human beings can move beyond the limits of their understanding and toward the unmediated vision of God" (Sturges 6) and, therefore, Truth. Words were capable of conveying truth because their meaning was guaranteed by the Incarnation: Thoughts are changed into words but not transformed by the change; the ideas remain whole and understood as expressed²¹. Knapp explains that "Jesus, unchanged in substance by his emergence into the time-bound world, is, as the Word, a figure of truth unchanged as it assumes changing expression in human language" ("Wandrynge" 146-7). The Word is the *logos* on which all meaning in language is certified.

This guarantee of certitude does not mean that all words will be understood perfectly. As Augustine says in *On Christian Doctrine*:

There are two reasons why things written are not understood: they are obscured by unknown or by ambiguous signs. For signs are either literal or figurative. They are called literal when they are used to designate those things on account of which

²¹ "But our thought is not transformed into sounds; it remains entire in itself and assumes the form of words by means of which it may reach the ears without suffering any deterioration in itself. In the same way the Word of God was made flesh without change that He might dwell among us" (Augustine *OCD* 1.13.12. Cited also in Knapp, "Wandrynge" 146).

they were instituted; . . . Figurative signs occur when that thing which we designate by a literal sign is used to signify something else . . .

(2.10.15)

Things do not need interpretation and they do not stand for anything else. Signs need no interpretation when they refer only to things, but the sign can be misunderstood when it acquires a metaphoric significance, and, therefore, needs a correct interpretation. Because of the ambiguous nature of the sign, Augustine attempted to establish a system of interpretation whereby the Word of God could be understood by Christians; that is, he saw the need to express the ineffable in terms of language that could be understood, a language which was not equal to the task²².

According to R. Howard Bloch, the idea that language is "an essentially flawed, irrecoverable medium" in need of interpretation can be seen

in Augustine's formulation of an exegetical philology (in the *De doctrina Christiana*) according to which the exegete, "Armed with the science of languages," undertakes to restore the diminutions of sense implicit to Biblical translation. Such a project is also associated with Augustine's vision of history in which naming, reproduction, understanding, and preaching are bound within an

²² Augustine believed that human language could never fully express God to humans because "God always transcends anything that men think or say about Him" (Colish 343).

essentially verbal epistemology based upon the
mediatory power of signs. (213)

Although signs, guaranteed by the Incarnation, have the power to mediate between the object and the perceiver of that object, between the speaker and the listener, interpretation is required ("there is no unmediated access to the text, any text, which, because of the degraded nature of verbal signs, requires interpretation or gloss," Bloch 215).

As Bloch's statements suggest, Augustine's doctrine does not insist on the one true meaning of a sign; in fact, he freely allows for the possibility that Scripture can and does contain a multiplicity of meanings. Augustine says:

When, however, from a single passage in the Scripture not one but two or more meanings are elicited, even if what he who wrote the passage intended remains hidden, there is no danger if any of the meanings may be seen to be congruous with the truth taught in other passages of the Holy Scriptures. . . . For what could God have more generously and abundantly provided in the divine writings than that the same words might be understood in various ways which other no less divine witnesses approve? (*OCD* 3.27.38)

As Sturges says, "all possible meanings are to be held equally admissible, as long as they conform to Christian doctrine: even if they cannot have been intended by the

passage's human author, its ultimate author, God, can inspire the interpreter as he inspired the human author" (7). Augustine's ideas display some similarities to the theories of Derrida and Scholes although, admittedly, Augustine is writing for a very different purpose. Derrida would see the correlation between word and thing as impossible due to the action of *différance* and *dissemination* on language; for him, objective reality cannot exist. Scholes has written that we, as readers, cannot make just any meaning out of the text; however "we are free to find it by following the various semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic paths that lead away from the words of the text" (*Semiotics* 30). Scholes maintains that, by applying such interpretive codes to the text, the reader can connect any meanings that fit: that is, any meanings that are "congruous with the truth taught in other passages" or texts. And, like Scholes or Derrida, Augustine disregards the human author's intention for the meaning of the passage; for him, the human author was simply recording the words of the Divine Author.

Marcia L. Colish considers Augustine's recognition of the difficulty of transmitting meaning through language as one of his significant concepts:

[H]e fused a classical conception of words, both literal and figurative, as the authentic, sensible signs of knowable realities, with the Christian belief that language, redeemed through the Incarnation, was both a necessary and an

inadequate means to the knowledge of God. (81)

Augustine articulated the necessity of spreading the Word of God through language while knowing that language, without interpretation, was incapable of doing what he required of it. Scholes and Derrida grapple with similar issues in their endeavour to locate meaning in texts while admitting that meaning can never be finally determined. But, like Augustine, Derrida and Scholes regard the attempt to reach an understanding of the text as the essence of reading, its goal. R. Howard Bloch says in this regard:

Augustine's ideal moment, which remains indistinguishable from the sacrament itself, is a convergence of the form of knowledge with its object, a recuperation of the names which are the "images of things." (214)

Augustine's influence on the medieval conception of the sign is indisputable; however, other *auctores* had an effect on literary theory and on the way in which artists performed their craft²³. For example, Macrobius's *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*²⁴ was a

seminal description of the fabulous narrative (*narratio fabulosa*), wherein a decent and dignified conception of holy truths, with

²³ Appendix One is a summary of the effects of Scholasticism and the work of some rhetoricians on literary theory.

²⁴ Cicero's *Somnium Scipionis* was not known in the middle ages (Miller 96); however, Macrobius's commentary on Cicero was widely read.

respectable events and characters, is presented beneath a modest veil of allegory. This, Macrobius had declared, is the only type of fable with which philosophers should be concerned. (Minnis, et. al. 118)

Allegory, as a means of literary expression, was also evident in Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, which Robert P. Miller calls "the most important philosophical treatise of the Middle Ages," (289); Ernst R. Curtius refers to the *Consolation* as "a basic book for the entire Middle Ages" (209).

Where Augustine formed his theory of signs in terms of rhetoric and the proper expression of the word, and Boethius demonstrated the utility of allegory in his writing, Anselm of Canterbury (d.1109) expanded sign theory to the study of grammar and "the conscientious and faithful definition of the Word" (Colish 85). Anselm believed that signs "must be energized by the action of God in the mind of the knower in order for them to conduce to the knowledge of their significata" (Colish 84). Curtius calls him "the first original thinker of the Middle Ages" (590) and Dante places him in Paradise among the great minds of the church (Para XII.137). For my purposes, Anselm's importance is his notion that, although meaning is a direct result of God's intervention, meaning and truth are judged on the basis of prior knowledge in the mind of the observer of signs. This idea coincides in its basic premise with the concept of

centrifugal reading as expounded by Scholes and Derrida where the reader understands by applying all prior knowledge available to him/her to the text.

Like Anselm, Hugh of St. Victor used Augustine's work as a basis for his own speculations²⁵, laying out his allegorical method of reading Scripture in the *Didascalion* (c.1120), a work that was used as an educational textbook for centuries (Miller 58). Hugh emphasized the allegorical or spiritual reading of a text over the literal: the spiritual is "the level of singular, authoritative truth" whereas the literal sense was indeterminate and allowed "opposed interpretations" (Sturges 14). Minnis says that this emphasis on the spiritual "helped to bring about a new awareness of the integrity of the individual human *auctor*. Henceforth each and every inspired writer would be given credit for his personal literary contribution" (*Medieval* 84). One of Hugh's contributions to the theory of interpretation for my purposes is his division of the reading of a text into letter, sense, and sentence (*sententia*): the letter is the grammatical construction; the sense is the surface meaning; the sentence is the ulterior meaning in the text uncovered by interpretation. Hugh echoes Augustine's belief in the multiplicity of meanings in a text:

[if] we read some of the Divine Writings and find

²⁵ Miller says that Hugh is referred to as the "Second Augustine" (58) and Dante places him in Paradise with Anselm (XII.133).

them susceptible, in sound faith, to many different meanings, let us not plunge ourselves into headlong assertion of any one of these meanings, so that if the truth is perhaps more carefully opened up and destroys that meaning, we are not overthrown. (Miller 61-2, Minnis et. al. 86)

Scripture can contain any number of meanings and the reader must not be too quick to embrace any one. "Sentence" thus becomes a quality on which to measure a text.

Thomas Aquinas, in the 13th-century, incorporates a different definition of "sense" in his writings than does Hugh of St. Victor. Aquinas reinterpreted the sign theory of Augustine in terms of his own belief in "the foundation of knowledge on sense" (Pellerey 89), that is, on physical sense. Marcia L. Colish says "[Aquinas] is fascinated above all by the conception of the Word, by the attempt to understand how the knowledge of God enters the human mind" (162). He believed that all knowledge begins with the five senses²⁶ which, by "*immutatio spiritualis* . . . [receive] a precise impression or image of the sensible qualities [of an object] . . . This impression constitutes a completely valid and true sign of the object" (Pellerey 87). The data is transferred to the internal senses: first, to the "*sensus*

²⁶ Aquinas says, in *Summa Theologica*, "It is natural for man to reach intellectual things by means of sensible things, because all our knowledge originates in sensation" (Minnis, et. al. 239).

communis" where it is combined and sent to the other three senses, the *imaginatio*, or phantasy; the *memoria*, or memory; and, the *aestimativa* or *cogitativa*, cognitive sense. Of the three, the *imaginatio* is the most significant for it is there that the sense data becomes a "phantasm . . . an abstract and immaterial entity which reproduces perfectly the sensible entities and the qualities of the individual objects" (89). Phantasms are the perfect sign, coinciding completely with that which they represent.

The intellect now takes over from the senses: by the process of "*conversio ad phantasmata*," the "agent intellect" completes the task of "receiving the phantasms from the sense, and performing an abstraction of them--to abstract from them the species of the object, but in immaterial and universal form" (92). It is the "possible intellect" that "effects the subsequent cognitive acts" (93). The final stage of this internalizing process is the acquisition of knowledge:

That which is the universal nature of things, and is the final object of knowledge Thomas properly calls the *quidditas* of things. . . . The quiddity is communicated to the possible intellect as the content of the intelligible species by the agent intellect. (95)

Aquinas's use of logic to prove the existence of God is significant for my purposes because he founds his study in the physical senses, while still sharing his view of

signification with Augustine²⁷. Like Augustine, Aquinas believed that expressing God completely in language was impossible. He says, in *Summa Theologica*,

. . . likenesses drawn from those things which are furthest removed from God give us a truer estimation of God, showing that He is far above any words or thought we may use to describe Him.
(Minnis et. al. 240)

And, regarding the multiplicity of meaning in Scripture:

. . . the fact that there is more than one meaning does not create ambiguity or any kind of mixture of meanings. For as we have said above, those meanings are many, not because one word has many meanings but because the actual things signified by the words can be signs of other things.
(Minnis et. al. 242)

The concepts of Aquinas are also significant because of the influence they exerted on theological writers in Chaucer's time. According to Janet Coleman:

Fourteenth-century theology naturally grew out of

²⁷ While Augustine focused his attention on Holy Scripture, John Scotus Erigena, in the 9th-century, wrote about God's other Great Book, the book of Nature. He proposed, following St. Paul, that every visible sign is a sign of God's "invisibilia" and was therefore an accessible way to understanding God through the human senses (Sturges 8). The significance of Erigena's theory is that the natural world, as a visible example of God's workings, could be considered an object of study by theologians: "the created universe becomes a language, a code that can be interpreted by Christians" (Sturges 9).

the thirteenth-century scholastic synthesis provided by Thomas Aquinas, whose use of Aristotle and the Arabic commentaries on Aristotle's works altered the scope of what theology as a scientific study was seen as capable of achieving. (235)²⁸

Judson B. Allen refers to these fourteenth-century theologians who were influenced by Aquinas as "classicizing friars"²⁹ (4), and he names Robert Holkot, John Lathbury, Thomas Ringstead, John Ridewall, John Bromyard, Thomas Waleys, and Nicholas Trevet among them. It is possible that the friars, as near contemporaries of Chaucer, may have also had an effect on his work; for, while it is too speculative a proposition to assume that Chaucer knew directly the writing of the theorists discussed above, there is evidence that he was familiar with certain of the writers named by Allen. As A.J. Minnis says: "We now know that Chaucer consulted scholastic commentaries, compilations, and fable collections" written by Robert Holkot, Nicholas Trevet,

²⁸ Aristotle's "system of causes" (Minnis, "Comparative" 55) proved an effective method for interpretation in commentaries on authorities, a common source of information for scholars. The *causa efficiens* was the author and the position he took on the work; the *causa materialis* was the source or sources from which the author compiled his information; the *causa formalis* was "the pattern imposed by the auctor on his materials" (Minnis, "Comparative" 56) and included both style and structure; and, the *causa finalis* was the writer's reason for writing, his objective for the work.

²⁹ The term "classicizing friars" comes from Beryl Smalley in *English Friars and Antiquity in the Early Fourteenth Century*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1960 (Allen 4 and 171).

Vincent of Beauvais, John of Wales, the *Ovide moralisé*, and Pierre Bersuire ("Comparative" 59).

According to Allen, the "classicizing friars" were the most important practitioners of literary theory in the early fourteenth century. These friars were primarily academics who taught exegesis and preaching and applied traditional techniques of reading scripture to secular literature. As Allen says:

they applied to the fictions of the classical poets, which they retold and quoted in their religious writings with great frequency and obvious delight, the allegorical method of interpretation that they used for scripture. (4)

Because they were "influential preachers, and teachers of preachers, and therefore were involved in one of the crucial areas through which learning shaped the popular mind" (6), the friars were in a position to exert some influence on contemporary writers also. Their effect was noticeable in the development of the spiritual sense of fiction which Allen claims is

a natural and almost inevitable result of the growing importance and popularity of preaching and of the attendant pressures to produce attractive and effective material for sermons. (43)

In the effort to make more interesting and informative sermons, the friars incorporated fiction and allegorized it for the lessons it could provide; the result was that the

spiritual sense of literature became evident and a legitimate object of study. Literature could contain its own form of truth and therefore have intrinsic value:

The spiritual sense can thus be derived from any text which is true, or which has the shape and appearance of truth, or which is taken for truth for some reason. The spiritual sense of fiction is possible only when truth and fiction look much alike, and when the writer or reader is not inclined to worry overmuch about which is which.

(64)

The "classicizing friars" came at the end of a long line of theorists and are a product of the theories of writing and language that evolved before them. Chaucer was directly familiar with some of the friars' writing, at least according to Minnis; that he felt the influence of their work is at least possible. Indeed, Allen's statement that the spiritual sense could be found in any text that "has the shape and appearance of truth" seems to describe much of Chaucer's corpus, especially *The Canterbury Tales*.

One other figure should be mentioned in this discussion of late-fourteenth century theories of language and meaning: the Nominalist philosopher, William of Ockham (c. 1285-1347) believed in the singularity and individuality of human beings. He theorized that "[s]ince God is separate from humanity, human knowledge of God is severly [sic] limited" (Sturges 27). It follows that, if humans are "radically

individual beings separate from all others" (27), then they cannot know each other any more than they can know God. Ockham wrote extensively about language and signs in the *Summa Logicae*, which Piero Boitani calls "a purely logical analysis of language as a self-contained system of signs" (Boitani, "Labyrinth" 214). One of Ockham's most significant propositions, at least for my concerns, is that humans can know God's works in nature through the orderly and predictable principle of *potentia ordinata*, ordained power.

However, God also has the "absolute power" (*potentia absoluta*) to intervene directly in the created universe. He can, for example, transcend natural law and cause a perception of something that does not exist. (Sturges 27-8)³⁰

Ockham thereby calls into question the possibility of knowing anything with certainty, an idea that appears in the works of many writers medieval and modern, and, as my thesis claims, in the corpus of Geoffrey Chaucer.

I believe that Chaucer was well aware of the illusive nature of generating meaning through language, as an examination of his work shows. Medieval theories of literature originating from Augustine's sign theory, leading up to the writings of the "classicizing friars" and Ockham's

³⁰ Janet Coleman writes: "The *potentia absoluta* ensured God's freedom in all things, no matter what He may have promised to man in the Old and New Testament covenants. The *potentia ordinata* was that relative power God had Himself limited by entering into a covenant with man whereby salvation was promised to those who fulfilled their part of the covenant" (236).

theories of the impossibility of knowing anything with certainty bear strong resemblances to modern literary theories, like those of Scholes and Derrida. In the following two chapters, I will examine the "Prioress's Tale" and the "Second Nun's Tale" by applying some of the ideas of the two modern critics.

CHAPTER TWO

The "Prioress's Tale"

1. Introduction

In his book *The Canterbury Tales*, Derek Pearsall separates the tales into four groups for purposes of convenient examination: Portraits, Romances, Comic Tales and Fables, and Religious Tales. Those in the last group share "the assertion or the implied assertion (in the Monk's Tale) of Christian values as their essential motive and reason for existence" (244). Although other tales incorporate religious themes and imagery, it is the Religious tales alone that assume such a teleological and didactic function. Pearsall further sub-divides the Religious Tales into four groups: the exemplary tales of Custance, Griselda, and Virginia; the prose tales of Melibee and the Parson; the "pointless account" provided by the Monk; and "the most obviously identifiable" (244) as religious tales, the "Prioress's Tale" and the "Second Nun's Tale." Pearsall contends correctly that these tales are the most easily recognized in part because they are generic examples of a miracle of the virgin and a legend of a saint's life, respectively. As the most "obviously identifiable" of the Religious Tales, the 'assertion of Christian values' should be especially conspicuous as the *causa finalis*, the motivating force behind the two Tales and, in fact, this seems to be the case. However, to assert the primacy of any one 'value' over

another, Christian or otherwise, necessitates the existence of a "transcendental signified," or *logos*, on which to base that 'value,' a "signified" which must be accepted unquestionably as the "inward rational principle [that] serves to control and take charge of outward material things" (Harland 146). Jacques Derrida critiques any system of thought that grounds itself on the ultimate Word: such a word would require no interpretation nor would it be subject to misinterpretation because its meaning would be instantly and completely present to its users. However, for Derrida, the effects of *différance* and dissemination create such indeterminacy in language that the "transcendental signified" cannot possibly exist, and, therefore, the privileging of one 'value' over another is simply the mistaken product of a logocentric belief system common to western metaphysics. The *logos* is seen as a fiction, a creation of the system rather than the foundation which substantiates that system. As I will demonstrate, the narrator of the "Prioress's Tale" seems to ground her tale on just such a "transcendental signified."

Pearsall further points out that, because the Tales are so "obviously identifiable," modern critics usually read them in limited ways: dramatically in terms of the

characters' personalities¹, or as "ironically flawed accounts of what they were hitherto thought to be accounts of" (246), a practice he disdains as a substitution of one kind of simplistic reading for another (246). However, according to Pearsall, ironic readings have the positive effect of focusing on "certain kinds of strain" in the narratives and are productive methods of examining the Religious Tales. He is correct in insisting that the reader go beyond simple irony to confront some of the complexities and ambiguities in the Tales that cannot be explained satisfactorily by reading those Tales ironically². Like Pearsall, Terry Eagleton sees the exposing of "strains" to be an effective analytical method. Eagleton says that value systems depending on a *logos* "are commonly defined by what they exclude" (132) and the oppositions that they create in this exclusionary process often "need to banish to the text's margins certain niggling details which can be made to return and plague them. . . . [the oppositions] come to

¹ An example of a dramatic reading at its extreme, I believe, is R.M. Lumiansky's *Of Sondry Folk* where the author bases a reading of the *Tales* on the proposition that "*Chaucer suits the tale and the teller*" (7, italics in original). The author also includes sketches of the pilgrims as if to provide graphic proof of their existence and make the character more real to the reader.

² E. Talbot Donaldson makes an interesting comment on the traditional method of looking at the Prioress and the Tale: "The mere critic performs his etymological function by taking the Prioress apart and clumsily separating her good parts from her bad; but the poet's function is to build her incongruous and inharmonious parts into an inseparable whole which is infinitely greater than its parts" (11-2).

embarrass their own ruling systems of logic" (133).

Following Pearsall's and Eagleton's direction, I will focus on those "strains" and "niggling details" in the "Prioress's Tale" that expose the complexities and ambiguities inherent in the Tale and that thereby question the logocentric belief system supporting the narrator's "assertion of Christian values." When the basis for these "values" is shown to be suspect, the Tale's logocentrism appears to subvert itself leading, as H. Marshall Leicester, Jr. says, to

a general critique of all signifying systems, including social and religious institutions and language itself--the whole catalogue of logocentric, or meaning-centered, assumptions.

(*Différance* 17)

Because the Tale is, of necessity, transmitted through the language employed in its telling, these "strains" and "niggling details" can be detected not only in the language of the Tale but also in the narrative events. By reading the Tale in the centrifugal manner suggested by Robert Scholes, allowing for the free play of language to make connections as the reader's textual system of reference will permit, the oppositions that support the narrator's logocentric beliefs can be shown to collapse and "embarrass their own ruling systems of logic."

2. Logocentrism and the "Prioress's Tale"

In the Prologue, the Prioress shows her belief in the "transcendental signified" that is the Virgin Mary and the "Christian values" embodied in her, but the Prioress's belief may be based on a misunderstanding of the Bible. Madame Eglantine declares that she tells her tale "in laude" (460) of the Blessed Virgin Mary:

For she hirsself is honour and the roote
Of bountee, next hir Sone, and soules boote.

(465-6)

In the Prioress's system of belief, Mary and the "Christian values" she represents are the *logos* on which the Tale depends for its stable transmission of meaning; she is not only the "roote" that emanates from God and the soul's salvation, she is also the guide to Christ her Son; she is the way to the Word:

For somtyme, Lady, er men praye to thee,
Thou goost biforn of thy benyngnytee,
And getest us the lyght, of thy preyere,
To gyden us unto thy Sone so deere. (477-80)

The gospel of John says that Christ is the Word³ made manifest by the Incarnation:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was

³ Peggy A. Knapp says, "For Augustine, the word is ultimately guaranteed by the Word made flesh, Christ, who is Wisdom. For Derrida, the word is not guaranteed at all; it is part of a system in which its significance is marked only by its difference from other signs, and therefore continually in play" ("Deconstructing" 73).

with God, and the Word was God. (John 1.1)
 And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us,
 (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only
 begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.
 (John 1.14)

But the words of the poem may be construed to suggest that the Prioress has not fully understood the biblical verse, believing that God's sapience was conceived in Mary rather than in her Son:

That ravyshedest doun fro the Deitee,
 Thurgh thyn humblesse, the Goost that in
 th'alighte,
 Of whos vertu, whan he thyn herte lighte,
 Conceyved was the Fadres sapience,
 Help me to telle it in thy reverence! (469-73)

Alfred David says in regard to the narrator's putative misreading:

. . . one may question the depth of her understanding of the symbolism she is using. For her the "white lily flower" and the burning bush are beautiful in themselves. . . . But does she grasp what is meant by the fact that through the Holy Spirit, Mary conceived, as the Prioress says, the Father's 'Sapience', that is, the incarnation of the logos? (*Strumpet* 210)

The narrator tells her tale with the assurance that the Virgin Mary and the ideals she represents impart the

stability the Tale needs to be understood. Chaucer's choice of syntax, however, indicates that the Prioress may be misinterpreting or overestimating the role of Mary in the Incarnation. Her possible misunderstanding destabilizes the reader's view of the *logos* on which both her belief and her Tale are based.

Two events in the Tale seem to contradict what the laudatory language of the Prologue suggests: although Mary eventually takes the little clergeon to heaven, she was unable, or chose not, to protect her devout little follower from the evil Jews as he sang the *Alma Redemptoris*. And, later in the Tale, Mary displays an apparent lack of concern for the suffering of the boy's mother over the disappearance of her son. As Judith Ferster points out:

the Virgin Mary does not take much care of the little clergeon's mother, who was the source of the boy's devotion to Mary. After the boy's disappearance the mother is allowed to suffer and beg Mary's aid for almost three full stanzas before *Christ* tells her where to find her son (VII.586-606). ("Praise" 158, emphasis in original)

While the narrator's stated intention is to praise the Virgin, the language and the action of the Tale undermine her purpose by raising a contrasting point of view: Mary is the "roote of bountee" but also a contributor to extreme anguish in her devotees. While it could be argued that the

boy's suffering is part of his road to salvation and everlasting life and, therefore, part of the miracle intrinsic to the genre, it remains with the reader to determine the reason for his torment; and it seems unlikely that the distress experienced by his mother with no relief offered by the Virgin contributes positively to the story of the miracle. The *logos* of the Prioress appears grounded in contradiction, and the double meaning created by the language and action of the Tale undermines the narrator's intended praise.

That language and the meaning of language are important issues in the Tale is made obvious by the narrator's necessary attempt to use words to praise Mary even though, as the Prioress says, "[t]her may no tonge expresse in no science" (476) the Virgin's greatness. In the Tale, one incident in particular exemplifies the problematic relationship of language and meaning: overhearing the *Alma redemptoris* sung by his older classmates, the little clergeon learns by rote to sing the song. However, he does not know what the Latin words mean. He hears the other children singing the song and memorizes⁴ the words without attaching any meaning to them other than that the song is intended to praise the Virgin. He

. . . herkned ay the wordes and the noote,
Til he the firste vers koude al by rote.

⁴ For a discussion of the technique of memorization in the Middle Ages see Beryl Rowland, "Bishop Bradwardine, the Artificial Memory, and the *House of Fame*."

Noght wiste he what this Latyn was to seye (521-3).

The clergeon begs his older "felawe" to interpret the Latin into a "langage" (526) he can understand, but the friend is no help; he too does not understand what he is singing:

I kan namoore expounde in this mateere.

I lerne song; I kan but smal grammeere (535-6).

Were it simply a matter of schoolboys memorizing their lessons, this incident would not be of any great significance; but here it is far more than just a comment on the merit of memorization. Chaucer presents the boy's use of language as the reason for his murder: some Jews are offended by the boy's song and have him killed. Language, in the "Prioress's Tale," is literally a matter of life and death. For the little boy, meaning is never connected to the Latin words that he sings but those words initiate the events that lead to his death. While the Prioress cannot find words to express adequately the "meaning" of the Virgin Mary, the clergeon cannot find meaning for his words.

The inadequacy of language to express the ineffable is neither an original discovery of the narrator nor of Chaucer, as the first chapter of this study demonstrates. Augustine faced the problem and sought to find a way to express in words what could not be comprehended. That, also, is what the narrator of the "Prioress's Tale" attempts to do: express the ineffable truth about the Virgin in a language that is incapable of adequately performing the

task. She says:

Lady, thy bountee, thy magnificence,
 Thy vertu and thy grete humylitee
 Ther may no tonge expresse in no science;
 . . .
 My konning is so wayk, O blisful Queene,
 For to declare thy grete worthynesse
 That I ne may the weighte nat susteene; (474-6,
 481-3)

Donald W. Fritz says that this "topos of the 'inexpressible'"⁵ (166) is "anchored in the Christian concept of divine reality and the means of knowing and speaking about that reality" (168), and, as such, "reflects a long tradition of Christian poets and theologians" (179). The difficulty or, as Derrida would maintain, the impossibility of accurately communicating an experience or concept that is so overwhelming that describing it adequately transcends both the capacity of language and the speaker's ability to use language is a problem that the narrator must overcome in order to express her faith in the Virgin Mary. Fritz contends that Chaucer has the Prioress adopt a position of inadequacy in her ability to communicate to illustrate that the narrow scope of language cannot signify all things, that to express the ineffable requires a kind of "wordless wisdom. The ineffable takes shape in the

⁵ As I mentioned in Chapter One, the term "inexpressibility topos" is Ernst Robert Curtius's (159-62).

language of figures, images or *simulacra*, the only language which the Fathers of the Church conceived of as a means of speaking about the ineffable" (178).

Writing about the Prioress's search for a method of expressing the ineffable, Louise O. Fradenburg says:

The desire of the *Prioress's Tale* is for a language that erases the difference between word and thing, for a language that, in effect, escapes the differences of symbolicity. (94)

However, Fradenburg is incorrect in her assessment because the Prioress is clearly not *erasing* "the difference between word and thing" but *using* the "thing" to express the "word." The Tale will deliver the message that her words cannot through a kind of "wordless wisdom." In describing the relationship between word and thing, Terry Eagleton says: "A text may 'show' us something about the nature of meaning and signification which it is not able to formulate as a proposition," but such language "is always threatening to outrun and escape the sense which tries to contain it" (134). Although the "wordless wisdom" of "figures, images or *simulacra*" may be the only way of expressing what cannot be expressed through ordinary language, they are still signs, and as signs are subject to the continual play of meaning inherent in any language⁶. Fritz is accurate in declaring

⁶ Julia Kristeva sees the late Middle Ages as a period when "thought based on the sign replaced that based on the symbol. . . . these elements (symbols) refer back to one (or several) unrepresentable and unknowable universal transcendence(s); univocal connections link these

that the Truth the Tale attempts to convey about the Blessed Virgin Mary is, as the Prioress says, so far beyond the capability of language and her command of that language that she must resort to "wordless wisdom" in order to 'show' her listeners what she means.⁷ However, as Derrida demonstrates, any form of communication, including that made up of "figures, images or *simulacra*," runs the risk of being misinterpreted. Thus, the "topos" of inexpressibility that Chaucer manifests through the Prioress allows the possibility that her intended meaning will "escape the sense which tries to contain it."

Scholes's concept of "centrifugal" reading is an effective method of showing how the language of the Tale 'escapes' the sense that the narrator is attempting to

transcendences to the units evoking them; the symbol does not 'resemble' the object it symbolizes; the two spaces (symbolized-symbolizer) are separate and do not communicate. . . . the symbol's function (its ideologeme) antedates the symbolic utterance itself. . . . The transcendental unity supporting the symbol--its otherworldly casing, its transmitting focus--was put into question" (991). In contrast, "the sign refers back to entities both of lesser scope and more *concretized* than those of the symbol. They are *reified* universals become *objects* in the strongest sense of the word.... The semiotic practice of the sign thus assimilates the metaphysics of the symbol and projects it onto the 'immediately perceptible.' The 'immediately perceptible,' valorized in this way, is then transformed into an *objectivity*--the reigning law of discourse in the civilization of the sign" (992, emphasis in original).

⁷ Roland Barthes says: "We must not forget that an object is the best messenger of a world above that of nature: one can easily see in an object at once a perfection and an absence of origin, a closure and a brilliance, a transformation of life into matter (matter is much more magical than life), and in a word a *silence* which belongs to the realm of fairy-tales" (*Mythologies* 88).

convey. Any sign is subject to misunderstanding even if that sign is intended to convey meaning figuratively through the symbolism of the Tale. One of the symbols original to Chaucer's version of the Tale⁸ is the "greyn" that is placed on the tongue of the little clergeon by the Virgin.⁹ Sherman Hawkins, in his analysis of the "Prioress's Tale," says:

It would seem, then, that the "greyn" is the word of God. . . . In the mouth of a child who has just completed infancy, who begins to speak with understanding, the Virgin places the Word, and thus perfects his praise. (617-8)

Hawkins claims that Chaucer uses the "greyn" to represent the *simulacrum* that will express the ineffable. I agree; however, I also contend that, by following the image of the "greyn" through a process of "dissemination" and centrifugal reading, the *simulacrum* appears problematic. The "greyn" becomes one of Eagleton's "niggling details" which returns to plague the Tale and its logocentric system of belief.

The narrative of the Tale directs the reader towards

⁸ The Tale is not original to Chaucer although certain of the details he includes are of his own invention. Chaucer changes the age of the little clergeon from ten to seven, adds the character of the "felawe," (Bryan and Dempster 465), and uses the image of the greyn instead of a lily, a gem, or a stone (457-8).

⁹ Sister Nicholas Maltman, O.P., offers a comprehensive treatment of the grain as it is used in the Sarum Breviary of the Feast of the Holy Innocents. She sees the grain as a symbol of the separation of soul and body, where "the soul separated from the chaff is gathered into the divine granary" (169). With any critic who would see no symbolic function in the grain, she disagrees, "respectfully, of course" (163).

the "greyn" that the Virgin Mary places in the little clergeon's mouth (662). This narrowing of focus leads the reader through a structural labyrinth from "this large world" in the second line of the "Prologue" (454) to the "greyn" at the centre. The path leads through an array of sites that decrease in size: "Asye, in a greet citee" (488), "a Jewerye . . . open at eyther ende" (489-94), "an aleye" (568), "a pit . . . a wardrobe" (571-2). As a negotiator of the literary maze of the "Prioress's Tale," the reader would be confused indeed not to notice that, by the last stanzas, the Tale concentrates on the "greyn" in the child's mouth. The word "greyn" is used four times in the space of ten lines (662-671), and the repetition should announce the potential significance of the image. Following the trace of "greyn" through Tatlock and Kennedy's *Chaucer Concordance* reveals sixteen occurrences. Of these, all but five refer to "greyn" as used in agriculture; of the five that refer to the "greyn" as a seed or kernel, four are found in the ten lines of the "Prioress's Tale" and the other appears in the "Miller's Tale" where Absolon

. . . cheweth greyn and lycorys,

To smellen sweete, er he hadde kembed his heer

(3690-1)¹⁰.

¹⁰ As mentioned above, the grain is unique to Chaucer's version of the Tale; at least one of his possible sources uses a small flower (Bryan and Dempster 457-8) and, likewise, Absolon in "The Miller's Tale" uses a flower in addition to the "greyn" to freshen his breath: "Under his tonge, a trewe-love he beer" (3692).

The "greyn" is used as something placed directly in the mouth only in these two tales. The initial connection made by exposing the coincident use of one image in both the "cherles tale" (Milt 3169) told by the Miller and the "obviously identifiable" Religious Tale told by the Prioress leads the reader to the discovery of other links. By reading the two tales centrifugally, allowing for the free-play of signifiers to open other connections in the language and the action of the tales, new possibilities of meaning are created. In this case, by forming connections between two tales that are in apparent opposition to each other in terms of subject matter, language or events in one may be used to question or undermine the implicit logocentricity of the other.

Several of these connections can be made through Absolon: the narrator often refers to the "parissh clerk" (Milt 3312) as a small child, using phrases similar to those found in the description of the little clergeon:

Yclad he was ful smal and proprely (3320)

A myrie child he was (3325)

He syngeth in his voys gentil and smal (3360)

The little boy kneels before the statue of the Virgin to say his *Ave Maria* (507-8) and Absolon "doun sette hym on his knees" (3723) to kiss Allison. The clergeon says that, for not learning his lessons, he "shal be beten thries in an houre" (542); and, after mis-kissing Allison, Absolon swears revenge "And weep as dooth a child that is ybete" (3759).

The virginal little boy and the clerk are motivated toward different ends, however, and the image of the clergeon as a *similacrum* of purity and devotion for the narrator may be undercut for the reader by the verbal echoes connecting the two characters. While the clergeon wants to show his love for the Virgin Mary and is innocent in his intention, Absolon desires a purely physical and adulterous love with Allison, and is anything but innocent in his objective.

In addition to the links between the two characters, there are other connections between the two tales through Absolon. The Miller says that he played the role of Herod in a mystery play (3385), and the Prioress laments, "O cursed folk of Herodes al newe" (574). Chaucer names "Herod" only three times in his entire corpus (Tatlock and Kennedy)¹¹. Also, infuriated after the 'kiss,' the clerk has a change of heart: he says, "My soule bitake I unto Sathanas" (3750), the same "Sathanas" that maintains his nest of wasps in the hearts of the Jews according to the Prioress (558-9)¹². Finally, in the "General Prologue" (144-5), the narrator says that the Prioress would weep if she saw a mouse caught in a trap; the Miller says that, upon first seeing Allison, Absolon was smitten and

. . . if she hadde been a mous,

¹¹ The "Pardoner's Tale," 488.

¹² The mixed metaphor of a serpent and wasps may be another representation of the narrator's dubious understanding of the iconography and symbolism that she uses.

And he a cat, he wolde hire hente anon. (3346-7)

One other significant intertextual (or perhaps, intratextual) link between the two tales occurs in the parody of the Annunciation and of Solomon's "Song of Songs" that Beryl Rowland finds explicit in the "Miller's Tale."¹³ Chaucer, Rowland claims, substitutes Nicholas for the angel Gabriel and Allison for the Virgin Mary. In the parody of Solomon's "Song of Songs" (3698-3707), Absolon incorporates lines from the "Song" in his attempt to seduce Allison who is already in bed with Nicholas. His reward is the 'misdirected kiss.' As Rowland says, here Absolon is "casting himself as the bridegroom (Christ and God) and Alison as the bride (Holy Virgin or Church)" ("Churl" 50). She concludes:

Through the parody, the ephemeral world of trivial lust and vulgar jest is set against the cosmic and timeless background of divine ordinance. ("Churl" 51)

Rowland's statement about the contrasts within the "Miller's Tale" could be applied to the contrasts between the "Miller's" and "Prioress's" Tales where Madame Eglantine's "divine ordinance" is linked to the "ephemeral world" of the Miller and undermined by the connection.

Absolon's intended proposal to his 'virgin Mary' Allison quickly turns from a song of veneration to vengeance

¹³ "Chaucer's Blasphemous Churl: A New Interpretation of the 'Miller's Tale'" in Rowland, ed. (43-55).

as he fetches a hot iron with which to return her 'kiss.' It appears that he and the Prioress share a common desire for revenge: the would-be lover apparently has another "darker side"¹⁴ (Tripp 211); Madame Eglantine, a devotee of the Blessed Virgin Mary, has a "darker side" too that requires brutal revenge on the evil Jews who arranged the boy's murder. While a motivation for revenge may be expected in the lecherous Absolon, such a characteristic seems incongruous in a prioress who shows an affinity for dogs and small children, and that incongruity raises questions about the depth and quality of her belief. She refers to Mary as "This welle of mercy, Cristes mooder sweete" (656), while denying mercy to the Jews. As Sherman Hawkins remarks, "It may be asked why in a tale about mercy the Jews are so unmercifully punished" (614, n48)¹⁵. While the Prioress claims to tell her tale in praise of the Virgin Mary and the Christian ideal of Mercy, her apparent lack of the very ideal she praises serves to destabilize her position. The Virgin guides the little boy to heaven as a reward for his devotion. However, the little boy probably would not have been slain in the first place were it not for the very mechanism of praise that the Prioress describes: some of the

¹⁴ Tripp says, "There is, thus, a darker side to Absolon's dawn visit, and the heart of this darkness is the savage survival of the self" (211).

¹⁵ Hawkins concludes, somewhat sardonically perhaps, that "[t]he punishment itself, though savage, is not exceptionally so" (614, n48) by the standards of the other analogues.

Jews¹⁶ are angered by the little boy's singing and arrange to have him killed.

The fundamental principle of Mercy that the Virgin Mary represents is set in sharp opposition to hatred and vengeance in the Tale. The Prioress says, "'Yvele shal have that yvele wol deserve'" (632), forgetting, perhaps, that the "new law" of Christian mercy and forgiveness has replaced the "old law" of 'an eye for an eye.' This opposition calls attention to one of the more problematic elements in the Tale: its anti-Semitism. Many critics acknowledge that "Chaucer was using the Jews in this tale as conventional figures. He was able to do so because it was a convention known and accepted by most, if not all, of his audience" (Zitter 278). But, according to Alfred David, "[t]o dismiss the anti-Semitism in the tale as 'conventional' is to beg the real question why it should have become conventional, for the Jews were not always so despised in the Middle Ages" ("An ABC," 156). David writes that Chaucer included Jews as villainous characters for reasons of an emerging literary style that "finds aesthetic

¹⁶ John C. Hirsh makes the distinction, following Thomas Aquinas, between all Jews and those involved directly in the murder. "Aquinas's discrimination among the Jews finds its analogue in the Provost, who puts to death only those Jews 'That of this mordre wiste' (1820). The implication is that these are the ones who hired the 'homicide' (1757) to kill the boy; neither the Provost nor the Prioress institute a pogrom" (40). The boy's killing is therefore not ritualistic but a "simple homicide . . . It is the fact of the child's death, his martyrdom that is significant, and throughout the Jews are treated briefly, as of secondary interest" (40).

satisfaction in religious experience" (157):

Their [the Jews] turpitude is the stylistic counterpart of the child's innocence and the Virgin's mercy. Their presence is required to give the tale the emotional character that matches its formalism. (156)

Donald R. Howard takes what to me is a more accurate view of the anti-Semitism of the Tale, given the apparent contradictions in which the Prioress as a character seems to abound:

True, antisemitism was a way of life in the Middle Ages. True, the Jews had been officially banned from England since 1290. But the Church took a position against the persecution of the Jews, and insightful men saw the base economic motives behind those persecutions. (277)

Howard includes Chaucer with those "insightful men" because his employment at the Customs house would have made him familiar with such "base economic motives." Indeed, according to Florence H. Ridley, the Jews played an important role in the financial world of medieval England; although disenfranchised officially, "Jewish colonies were protected for the taxes they provided and for money lending, usure, forbidden in canon law, but essential for business" (Benson, *Riverside* 914). The "Prioress's Tale" depicts a "Jewerye" (489) located among the Christian population of the city and, for business purposes, "Sustened by a lord of

that contree" (490). Evidently, the Jews were despised but tolerated and supported as an economic necessity¹⁷.

These contradictions seem to coincide with contradictions in the Tale itself. The Prioress's anti-Semitism is not officially condoned by the Church and, therefore, reflects on her misunderstanding of Church doctrine. Edward A. Synan writes that, in 1348, Pope Clement VI commanded that

the Jews were not to be struck, not to be wounded, not to be killed, and that all those who did these things put themselves under the ban of the Church. Last, if any had quarrels with the Jews, there existed both a law and judges competent to hear the suits. (134)

Although persecution of the Jews took place in the Middle Ages, the position of the Church was stated by Gregory IX (1227-41): Christians "ought to show Jews the kindness Christians desire at the hands of pagans" (Synan 158)¹⁸. Chaucer depicts the Prioress as an anti-Semite whose opinion

¹⁷ Hardy Long Frank writes that a prioress was essentially "an estate manager; a mother superior charged with both the spiritual and the physical well-being of the inhabitants of her convent" (230-2). Chaucer probably would have been aware of the important economic function that a prioress would play in the day-to-day operation of an abbey or convent; occupying such a position, a prioress could not afford to be financially naive. Whether he considered this in creating the character of Madame Eglantine with her anti-Semitic prejudice is speculative.

¹⁸ Pope Martin V (1417-31) presents what may be the economical side of the Church's position: "contact with Jews is 'useful' to Christians because of the services they render" (Synan 158).

does not coincide with that of Rome; she seems not to fully understand the doctrine of her church. She refers to the little clergeon's grieving mother as "This newe Rachel" (627) apparently without realizing that, as Alfred David says, the biblical Rachel is "the archetype of the sorrowing Jewish mother" (*Strumpet* 213). John C. Hirsh expands on David's view when he comments that Christ died for the sins of all humanity, not just the non-Semites: "The sense that the Jews are themselves the object of Christ's sacrifice is of course lost on the Prioress" (41). The Prioress's misinterpretation of the Church's doctrine is another "niggling detail" that undermines her credibility.

Like its anti-Semitism, one of the more troublesome details about the "Prioress's Tale" is the violence of the crime and, specifically, the descriptions Madame Eglantine seems to relish providing:

This cursed Jew hym hente, and heeld hym faste,
And kitte his throte, and in a pit hym caste.
I seye that in a wardrobe they hym threwe
Where as thise Jewes purgen hire entraille

(572-3).

By repeating the location in which the body is disposed, the narrator focuses attention on the coarse details of the crime. If the words are intended to establish a sense of affective *pathos* for the suffering of the boy, they do so only in part; the words direct the reader's attention toward the repugnant aspects of the crime rather than toward the

boy's torment and the subsequent miracle. Mikhail Bakhtin regards this mixing of lofty philosophy and earthy vulgarity as an important element of Menippean satire, and he refers to the contrast as "slum naturalism" (*Problems* 115).¹⁹ Menippea parodies the human penchant for creating philosophical systems to account for and explain other philosophical systems such as the logocentric viewpoint that the Prioress maintains by emphasizing the contrast between the high and the low. The Tale attempts here, I believe, to set-up an opposition between the evil of the Jews who sanctioned the crime and the piety of the little clergeon, an opposition on which the Prioress's ideological *logos* depends. But the Virgin Mary and her salvific qualities are mixed with the scatological functions of those responsible for the child's murder, and Chaucer's detailed and grisly description effectively calls attention to the details themselves, subverting the narrator's intended communication of her own praise for the Virgin and collapsing the opposition.

The Prioress's inclusion of the horrific peculiarities of the crime contradicts her description in the "General Prologue." Chaucer presents Madame Eglantine as capable of

¹⁹ Northrop Frye refers to a character like Madame Eglantine as a "philosophus gloriosus" in his discussion of Menippean satire which sees "evil and folly... as diseases of the intellect, as a kind of maddened pedantry which the *philosophus gloriosus* at once symbolizes and defines" (Frye 309). Pearsall refers to texts that exhibit these traits as "stories that might have their own access to 'truth'" ("Lydgate" 51). F. Anne Payne examines some of Chaucer's poems as examples of Menippean satire.

telling perhaps the most violent tale of all the pilgrims (the Second Nun excepted) but, according to the narrator of the "General Prologue:"

She wolde wepe, if that she saugh a mous
 Kaught in a trappe, if it were deed or bledde.
 Of smal houndes hadde she . . .
 But soore wepte she if oon of hem were deed,
 Or if men smoot it with a yerde smerte (144-9).

It appears that the Prioress extends the Christian ideal of Mercy only to small animals and children. Once again, the opposition created by the text seems to contradict the belief system founded upon the Virgin Mary, and of those who would praise her.

The Prioress's description in the "General Prologue" also makes mention of the inscription on her brooch: the crowned letter 'A' which reads, *Amor Vincit Omnia*. But the Prioress's involvement in secular life suggests that the words do not refer to sacred love: her table manners are as immaculate as her attire; she keeps dogs as pets; and she is conversant in a local French dialect. Her praise of the Virgin's "grete humylitee" (PrT 475) seems to be in contradiction to her refined lifestyle presented in the "General Prologue," and the opposition challenges the reader's view of the quality of her belief.

The Tale contains other oppositions that appear, at first, to support the logocentric belief system of the Prioress but, upon closer analysis, contradict themselves.

For instance, every day, when the little clergeon goes to school, he kneels before "th'ymage / Of Cristes mooder" to say his Ave Maria (504-8). However, the likeness is located in the Jewish ghetto. It seems improbable that an "ymage" of the Virgin Mary would be found in a Jewish section of the city; the existence of such a likeness would, however, exacerbate the animosity of the Jews toward the Christian populace and to the little clergeon who honours the Virgin in innocent ignorance. Also, the word "pray" is depreciated by overuse and this reduction in value undermines the narrator's implicit assertion of prayer as a mode of communication between the human and the divine: in the Prologue, the Prioress prays to the Virgin Mary to guide her telling of the Tale (486-7); at the end, she beseeches Hugh of Lincoln to pray for the souls of the sinful (687). However, the little clergeon also prays to his friend to teach him the *Alma redemptoris* (525-6), and, later, the mother

. . .preyeth pitously
To every Jew that dwelte in thilke place,
To telle hire if hir child wente oght forby.

(600-3)

The Prioress prays to Mary and to the martyred Hugh but the word "pray" takes on a diminished sense when the clergeon prays to his "fellawe" and his mother prays to the Jews whom the Prioress has already pronounced as being Satanically inspired. The multiple meanings inherent in the language of

the Tale reveal the "strains" that question the logocentrism of the narrator.

A.S.G. Edwards writes that meaning in the Religious Tales is recovered where "feeling intersects with doctrine to inform it with an intensity of experience" (65). Meaning connects to language through its emotional impact on the reader and, therefore,

words become a way of affirming the Word, or articulating doctrine without formal exposition. They dramatize the protagonists's consciousness of their relationship to God, and make their suffering emotionally compelling and doctrinally intelligible, within the structure of Christian faith. (65)

The Tale appears to be an attempt by the narrator to express Christian doctrine through "wordless wisdom," and without the direct use of doctrinal language. However, even without the "formal exposition" of doctrine, language is the medium in which both the Prioress in her Tale and the poet outside the frame of the Tale must communicate. That language, as Derrida and Scholes maintain, is subject to misreading and misinterpretation because of the effects of "dissemination" and the process of centrifugal reading. Chaucer's description of the pilgrims' response to the Tale is fitting in light of the demonstrated difficulties of expressing meaning in language; they are temporarily stunned into silence, presumably by the affective piety of the Tale,

until Harry Baily begins to joke:

Whan seyð was al this miracle, every man
 As sobre was that wonder was to se,
 Til that oure Hooste jopen tho bigan (691-3,
 "Prologue To Sir Topas").

The Host's reaction to the Tale seems to be in contrast to the solemnity of the others. While it is his role to keep the story-telling contest in motion and, therefore, in his best interest to break the "sobre" mood, perhaps the Host is an exemplification of Augustine's statement that "the same words might be understood in various ways" (*OCD* 3.27.38).

By reading centrifugally, different readers can indeed understand the same text in different ways. And, by discovering the "strains" and "niggling details" in the text, certain ambiguities can be exposed that question the basis on which the text founds itself. The "Prioress's Tale," as a Religious Tale that claims the "assertion of Christian values" as its reason for existence, grounds itself on the "transcendental signified" that is the Virgin Mary and the "Christian values" she represents; or perhaps more correctly, the Tale bases itself on the Virgin and her "values" as the narrator sees them. However, the language and the narrative events of the Tale leave exposed many ambiguities that question the logocentrism on which the Prioress bases her beliefs, and these "strains" subvert those logocentric ideas; as Eagleton says, they "embarrass their own ruling systems of logic." Chaucer's choice of

language in the Tale allows the reader to examine the relationship between language and meaning by questioning the basis on which the Tale establishes its meaning. That relationship, however tenuous, becomes more interesting because of the multiplicity of potential meanings available to the reader.

CHAPTER THREE

The "Second Nun's Tale"

1. Introduction

Derek Pearsall's classification of the "Prioress's Tale" and the "Second Nun's Tale" as "the most obviously identifiable" (244) of the Religious tales seems especially true in the case of the tale told by the Second Nun. While the former combines two generic types, a miracle of the virgin and a legend of a saint's life¹, the "Second Nun's Tale" appears to be dedicated exclusively to the legend of the life of St. Cecilia and is easily "identifiable" according to genre. However, while the Tales may both be easily "identifiable," the narrators do not share an equal degree of recognition. Unlike the Prioress, who is described explicitly, the Second Nun's presence as a character is barely detectable in the "General Prologue" or in her prologue and tale. She is made "identifiable" only by her connection to the Prioress as "Another Nonne with hire hadde she,/ That was hir chapelyne" (GP 163-4).

J.M. Manly compared the two Tales in 1926 and noted that they show the same "style of workmanship" but differ in their effect upon the reader. In asking why this effect should be different, Manly touches upon the problem of

¹ The Tale is clearly about a miracle of the Virgin but the little clergeon is also a "saintly" character. The narrator also refers to St. Nicholas, 514, on which account, see Ann S. Haskell, "St. Nicholas and Saintly Allusion" in Robbins, ed. *Chaucer at Albany*.

identification:

is it not because in the one tale Chaucer has failed to visualize or to make his readers see the principal characters--Cecilia, Valerian, and Pope Urban remain to him and to us mere names--whereas both he and we have a vivid and charming picture of the little choir boy as he goes singing to his death? (Brewer, *Critical Heritage*, Volume 2, 401)²

Manly believes that Chaucer's failure to develop the characters adequately in the "Second Nun's Tale" contributes to the reader's inability to visualize the characters. However, it is not Chaucer who has "failed to visualize" but Manly himself, for it seems that if he cannot visualize the figures mentally--that is, if he cannot translate the words into mental images--then they are less present to him than those that he can see in his mind.

Seeing and not seeing are problematic throughout the Tale, and an enigma that Manly shares with Valerian: Cecilia's husband refuses to believe that she has a guardian

² David Benson compares the two tales in terms of style also: "The literary variety of the *Canterbury Tales* occurs even among tales that ought to be most alike. . . . the radical stylistic differences among stories of the same genre are the clearest proof of the unique poetic sensibilities created for each of the *Canterbury Tales*. . . . The *Prioress's Tale* and the *Second Nun's Tale* both tell of an innocent martyr whose death is a triumph of Christian faith, yet the first is a lyrical exercise in affective piety, while the second is an austere and intellectual work that makes complex use of dialogue and imagery" (*Canterbury* 106).

angel (and not a lover) unless he can see it. He says, "If I shal trusten thee,/ Lat me that aungel se and hym biholde" (163-4). Because he is not a Christian, Valerian cannot translate Cecilia's words into a visual image. He cannot experience visually what Cecilia says without being converted spiritually; but without visual experience, Valerian, and Tiburce later, cannot be converted. Carolyn P. Collette, writing on the contrast between physical and spiritual sight, says:

In Chaucer's version of the life of Seinte Cecile we learn that the apparently real, that perceived by the senses, is only a shadow, while that perceived by the eye of the soul is truly real. More importantly, we also learn that physical sight, unless it is an agent of spiritual inquiry, is linked to confinement in the realm of experience. ("Closer" 337-8)

Collette is correct in her description, but she seems to disregard the most important element in the process of conversion exhibited in the Tale: it is Cecilia's words that fail to convince Valerian of the angel's presence. She cannot describe what she sees in words that are sufficient to effect conversion.

The failure of Cecilia's words to describe her experience in a language adequate to the task is synonymous with the problem that the narrator, and the poet, too, must face; and, as the preceding discussion has shown, it is also

a problem that troubled Augustine. This translation/conversion of experience into words, I believe, is the dominant concern of the Tale. Language is the medium by which the Tale is transmitted to the reader; however, in the Tale, it is language that fails in its objective of conversion. The converts must first experience for themselves before they can believe the words of Cecilia. Chaucer may here be addressing the problem of expressing meaning through language.

My approach to the "Second Nun's Tale" will employ a strategy similar to that with which I examined the "Prioress's Tale." The logocentric idea on which the Tale depends is the "glorious lif and passioun" (26) of St. Cecilia and her ability to convert others to Christianity. Sight and other sensory experience as reliable indicators of what is true, whether or not such experience is, as Collette says, "an agent of spiritual inquiry," support that *logos* and set up the opposition between seeing and not seeing, or between experiencing and not experiencing. However, the description of the experience must be transmitted through the language of the Tale; and, as the previous chapter demonstrated, language and the actions it describes contain those "strains" and "niggling details" that can be used to uncover ambiguities in the Tale. Once exposed, the ambiguities and complexities question the logocentric basis for the Tale, causing that logocentrism to collapse. Not only do sight and sensory experience become suspect, but the

language used to describe such experience does also. The ability of language to adequately describe what one experiences through the senses--to translate the visual and non-visual into words--and then to translate those words into meaning, appears unstable. By reading the Tale centrifugally as Robert Scholes suggests, allowing language to make connections freely according to the reader's textual system of reference, the oppositions that support the narrator's logocentrism can be undermined and shown to "embarrass their own ruling systems of logic."

2. "Translacioun" and the "Second Nun's Tale"

The translation of language into meaning seems to be important in the Tale from its beginning. While the Prioress claims to tell her tale in praise of the Virgin Mary, the Second Nun has a different motivation:

And for to putte us fro swich ydelnesse,
That cause is of so greet confusioun,
I have heer doon my feithful bisynesse

After the legende in translacioun (22-5).

She will use the legend of St. Cecilia "in translacioun" as an admonition to avoid idleness. It is never clear, however, how the Tale will dissuade people from an idle life and encourage a life of "werche" (14). While the narrator claims

to have translated the words of her source³, the translation of her words by the listener into a lesson in the avoidance of idleness is more problematic and undermines the ability of language to do what the narrator requires of it. Outside the frame of *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer, the author, faces an analogous problem in 'translating' his sources into a form that the reader can comprehend using language which may not be able to do what he requires of it. As the beginning of the Prologue demonstrates, such a translation is a risky business. Indeed, the narrator seems to acknowledge the risks of translation at the end of the *Invocatio ad Mariam* when she closes the section with a plea that the reader allow for errors in the Tale since the narrator is only following the source:

For bothe have I the wordes and sentence
Of hym that at the seintes reverence
The storie wroot, and folwen hire legende,
And preye yow that ye wole my werk amende. (81-4)

The appeal is reminiscent of Chaucer's request to Gower and Strode cited at the beginning of this study. Chaucer may here be recognizing the important role the reader/listener

³ The primary source seems to be Jacobus de Voraigne's version of the *Legenda aurea* for the Tale up to line 358, and possibly Mombricitus after that point (Bryan and Dempster 669). References to Dante can also be detected in the *Invocacio* (664). "No source has been discovered for the four stanzas on idleness, with which the prologue begins, nor need one be sought, since the device they embody has been shown to be a convention frequently used in Chaucer's time and later" (664).

plays in translating the text into meaning.

The narrator supplies in the *Interpretacio* the information necessary for the reader to "amende" the text and translate it into meaning by providing the etymology of the name Cecilia. As Bernard F. Huppé points out:

The interpretations of the name proceed not as in modern etymologies from the word itself, the signifier, but from the signified. This etymological procedure is based on the theory that the word is 'cosyn' to what it signifies. Thus, to find the meaning of a word is to discover how it reflects the signified. (228)

This apparent reversal in the process of deriving meaning seems to coincide with the post-structuralist view that one signifier leads to another rather than to a signified. As Huppé describes the etymological process of the Tale, the signified becomes a signifier which points back to the original signifier. By attempting to attach meaning to the name "Cecilia," the narrator initiates a process where one word supplements, and is supplemented by, others. Derrida says that the *supplément* replaces and yet simultaneously adds to that which it replaces. What was thought to be complete, the sign "Cecilia," now appears to be incomplete. Because the word is both different and the same as its supplement, it contains a double and, therefore, contradictory meaning. The possibility of contradiction is

compounded by the large number of mistaken etymologies⁴ which obfuscate the process of attempting to recover meaning in the name. As Carolyn P. Collette says:

That the etymology the Second Nun attributes to the name Cecile is clearly errant, and that Chaucer likely knew it to be so, is not the question. The attitude with which one regards the name alone matters . . . ("Closer" 342).

However, in the context of language and meaning with which I am dealing, the "errant" meaning of the name is more significant than is the conventional methodology of such an etymology. Further, Collette's view would allow for such an "attitude" to be based upon a falsehood, regardless. The narrator has undercut the process of establishing the true meaning of the name by basing the whole *Interpretacio* on false information, thereby destabilizing what should be unshakable since the name refers to the most prominent character in the Tale.

According to Alfred David, the *Interpretatio* is important for another reason: it is possible to draw a parallel between one of the etymologies and the role of the poet.

One could draw an analogy between the work of St. Cecilia and what is supposed to be the work of the medieval poet. It is his business, too, to be

⁴ Florence Ridley says, "These etymologies are all wrong, the name perhaps deriving from *caecus*, (blind)" (Benson, *Riverside*, 944).

caecis via, to give vision and to increase the number of the blessed. . . . In writing the Second Nun's Tale early in his career, he was emulating his heroine in showing the way to the blind.

(*Strumpet* 233)

The poet may be "showing the way to the blind" but Cecilia and *caecis via* have been connected mistakenly, for her name does not derive from the phrase. David has made what would be an apt analogy if the derivation were correct; Chaucer would seem to be portraying the poet as a guide for the unenlightened but, because of the errant etymology, a guide who is no more enlightened than his followers. Perhaps Chaucer actually has made an important point about the role of the medieval poet, but not as David intended the point to be taken.

The prominence of sight and seeing found in the *Interpretacio* is evident also in the Tale, where Cecilia tells Valerian on their wedding night that, because she is a Christian, she has a guardian angel; and, the angel is prepared to kill him if he touches her "in vileynye" (156)⁵. Valerian, on the other hand, cannot see the angel and he

⁵ David Aers sees the demands of a celibate marriage made by Cecilia on Valerian as contrary to the progression of a medieval community: "such clerical models are hardly compatible with the ethos and reproduction of courtly communities, together with the 'normal' masculine and feminine identities they fashioned. . . . there is no grounds for seeing Chaucer as seeking to subvert and transform courtly communities or the class and gender arrangements bound up with them" (150).

will not believe in the angel's existence on the strength of Cecilia's words alone; Valerian must see him. The angel, however, does not have to see Valerian behave imprudently in order to execute him, he need only "feelen" (155) that the unconverted pagan has formulated sexual desires towards his bride. The three characters are operating on different levels of experience: Cecilia can see; Valerian cannot; the angel does not need to see. However, it is the spiritually-blind Valerian who has the most to lose in the situation: if he refuses to believe in the angel because he cannot see him, he could be killed. Valerian demands the experience of sight, but he must accept on the authority of Cecilia's words that the angel exists and that he will be able to see the angel upon conversion. Although sight supports the logocentric idea on which the Tale depends, Valerian must rely on language in order to ascertain the truth, and this apparent contradiction undermines the power of the *logos*.

Valerian demands to be given visual experience to confirm the claims of Cecilia's language, but instead he must accept the authority of her words without such ocular proof. Reading the Tale centrifugally, as Scholes suggests, could direct the reader to the Wife of Bath who asserts her preference for experience over authority; she says in her Prologue:

Experience, though noon auctoritee

Were in this world, is right ynogh for me. (WBPro

1-2)

Her stance is in direct opposition to those clerks who would claim the preeminence of authority in place of experience, and she shows her disdain for such authority in the action she takes against Jankyn's "book of wikked wyves" (WBPro 685). Clerks, she says, will never speak well of women unless those clerks are telling legends of "hooly seintes lyves" (690), and, provoked by his verbal assaults as he reads aloud from the book, she attacks the authority it represents:

Al sodeynly thre leves have I plyght
 Out of his book, right as he radde, and eke
 I with my fest so took hym on the cheke

That in oure fyr he fil bakward adoun. (790-3)

Jankyn's words fail to convert Alisoun to his misogynous way of thinking, and she responds by knocking him into the fire. Likewise, Cecilia's words are unable to convert Almachius and he commands his soldiers to "Brenne hire right in a bath of flambes rede" (515).

While Cecilia calls upon the authority of her logocentric belief system to effect conversion, that authority is undermined by the failure of language to convert Almachius. Jankyn calls upon the written authority of his book to effect a conversion of sorts in Alisoun, and that authority is so undermined by her resistance that she "made hym brenne his book anon right tho" (WBPro 816). Authority represented in language is not just depicted by Chaucer as being ineffective, it is literally destroyed by

its opponent, Alisoun, when she throws the pages into the fire. Cecilia, too, as an embodiment of authority is destroyed by her opponent, Almachius, in a bath of flames.

However, in the "Wife of Bath's Tale," we do see an apparent conversion, and that conversion is effected, paradoxically, by the authority of words. Russell Peck points out that

the Wife of Bath's old hag transforms realities in the mind of her knight with verbal arguments which substitute new concepts of gentillesse, old age, and beauty for his intuited responses. (755-6)

The hag transforms herself into a young and beautiful woman after first transforming the knight's attitude towards their marriage. While the Wife professes her faith in experience in her Prologue, it is authority that holds the power to convert the knight in her tale. But, it is significant that the hag's authority is grounded on her ability to shape-shift; the knight's conversion is accomplished through magic and chicanery. The parallel to the hag, uncovered by reading centrifugally, undermines Cecilia's transformation of Valerian for the reader. Chaucer presents the reader with one of Eagleton's "niggling details" that questions whether the Christian conversion and transformation that the "Second Nun's Tale" treats as its centrepiece is possible.

The knight must be converted before he sees his beautiful bride and Valerian must be converted before he is able to see the guardian angel. The angel is visible to the

true believers but hidden to those who lack faith. Likewise, Tiburce is able to smell the "corones two" (221) thanks to the prayers of his brother (256). One physical sense tells him that the flowers are present but his sense of sight is no help; he cannot see them. Tiburce has not experienced conversion and therefore cannot experience the actual presence of the flowers. Although he detects the smell of flowers, he knows that at "this tyme of the yeer" (246) he must be mistaken. Without conversion, he can only misread the situation. As Peck says, "The value of experience as a registrar of individual truth will be contingent upon the accuracy of the registrar's perception" (748). Tiburce's perception is both accurate and mistaken, for although he can smell the flowers they are not actually there, at least to him. He cannot see what is there. The idea of sight as an indicator of truth is undermined by its failure to provide accurate information.

Scholes's centrifugal method of reading can reveal that seeing and failing to see what is really there is at issue also in the "Merchant's Tale" where Chaucer examines the problem of trusting experiential data and of expressing that experience in language. Pluto returns sight to Januarie just in time to observe May and Damyan in *flagrante delecto* in the tree. The Merchant says that he cannot express the experience in words:

Up to the tree he caste his eyen two,
And saugh that Damyan his wyf had dressed

In swich manere it may nat been expressed,

But if I wolde speke uncurteisly. (2360-3)

But the narrator's idea needs no further expression because he has already told his audience in some detail what May and her lover were doing in the tree. May convinces the old knight that his newly-returned sight is defective by using "suffisant answer" (2266) supplied by Proserpyne. Januarie is converted by May into believing that he has not seen what he thinks he has seen:

For certainly, if that ye myghte se,

Ye wolde nat seyn thise wordes unto me.

Ye han som glymsyng, and no parfit sighte. (2381-3)

As Tiburce cannot "see" until he is made "[p]arfit in his lernynge, Goddes knyght" (SNT 353) through the Word of God, May supplies the "parfit" knowledge that her knight, Januarie, needs to see 'correctly.' Being converted from blindness to sight, May tells him, is like

. . . a man that waketh out of his sleep,

He may nat sodeynly wel taken keep

Upon a thyng, ne seen it parfitly. (2397-9)

Once again, Januarie is like Tiburce who has been living "[i]n dremes" (SNT 262) prior to conversion, according to Valerian. Januarie's sight is not made "parfit" by his conversion to sight via May's language. He has read the situation correctly but is convinced that he has actually misread what he saw, and, according to May: "He that

misconceyveth, he mysdemeth" (2410)⁶. The narrator of the "Second Nun's Tale" would like her listeners/readers to believe that Tiburce has been given perfect sight, but the connection made by the reader to the bawdy scene from the "Merchant's Tale," in which no true conversion takes place, weakens her argument by the association and shows how language can be read in ways other than that which the creator of the text intended.

The issue of conversion and translation is an important part of the "Second Nun's Tale," for without conversion the Christian faith cannot be spread. Indeed, the Tale begins with the conversion of Valerian and ends with the conversion of Cecilia's house into a church (550-1). Cecilia's failure to convert Almachius when she has been so successful in converting others merits examination because it is her only miss, but also because, in the confrontation between the two characters, the misreading of language predominates. A.S.G. Edwards says that the scene displays "the problem of the spoken word" where we see

a demonstration of the power of the spoken word to initiate a process of conversion in the first part of the Tale to a demonstration of its failure to do so at the Tale's climax. The dramatic set piece

⁶ Carolyn P. Collette sees the Tale as belonging to "the long history of literature dealing with the role of sight in gaining spiritual wisdom and salvation" ("Closer" 338) leading from Plato, St. Augustine, and Prudentius which she summarizes as "how one sees determines what one believes" (341).

of the narrative is Cecilia's dialogue with her enemy Almachius (424-511). Here the effect is to present Cecilia in her own words as an embodiment of Christian constancy. But the demonstration of such constancy derives from the ultimate failure of her words to function in Christian terms; they fail to convert. (65-6)

Almachius begins his interrogation of Cecilia with an echo of the Host's request for a tale from Chaucer, the pilgrim, in the "Prologue to Sir Topas": "What man artow?" (695); "What maner womman artow?" (SNT 424) says Almachius⁷. Chaucer does not answer the question; there is no need, for the Host describes him and answers the question himself. The tale of "Sir Topas" follows until the Host's ears are sore from Chaucer's "drasty speche" (923) and the poet is harangued into substituting "a moral tale vertuous" (Thop 940). The "drasty ryming" (Thop 930) that Chaucer, the pilgrim, submits initially as a tale ("Sir Topas"), when linked through the verbal echo to Almachius's address of Cecilia, alerts the reader to the possibility that Chaucer, the author, has purposely made the connection and raises an expectation that perhaps the forthcoming speech of Cecilia

⁷ John C. Hirsh finds a reflection of the *Interpretacio* in Almachius's first question: "These meanings address the inner, not the outer person, and their effect is less to express a single moral significance than to engage the whole issue of definition, of fixing persons by things external, as Almachius will attempt to do in the tale. But an epistemology like his is false and deceptive, and finally without power" ("SNT" 169). Perhaps Hirsh does not realize that the narrator's epistemology is also "false."

will also be "drasty."

What does follow is Cecilia's evasion or misunderstanding of most of what Almachius says. Rather than respond to his first question, Cecilia objects to his method of questioning, saying that "ye axed lewedly" (430) in posing one query that requires two answers. He does not press for a response but asks about the origin of her non-response, to which Cecilia says that her rudeness comes "[o]f conscience and of good feith unfeyned" (434)! When the tyrant remarks at her apparent lack of concern for his magisterial power, she denies his authority as merely an earthly aberration, "lyk a bladdre ful of wind" (439), that may be released with the application of "a nedles poynt" (440). Here Chaucer seems to allude to the eagle's philosophy in *The House of Fame* where he informs Geoffrey that speech is only broken air ("Thus wost thou wel what thing is speche," HF 781). If his power is only a bag of wind, Cecilia's words are the pin prick that can set the wind free like "air ybroke" (HF 770). The eagle's Boethian philosophical speech makes the bird appear like the "philosophus gloriosus" in Menippean satire, as mentioned in Chapter 2. As such, he is like Cecilia in her words to Almachius. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Northrop Frye points out that humans seem to thrive on creating philosophical systems to account for and explain other philosophical systems, a process he calls "diseases of the intellect" (309) from which Cecilia appears to suffer.

The misreading continues until Cecilia catches Almachius on a point of semantics and attempts to prove him a liar because of his choice of words. He claims to have the power "[t]o maken folk to dyen or to lyven" (472). His meaning is clear on a figurative level but Cecilia takes the phrase literally and disputes his ability to "quyken a wight" (481). Here, she is like the Summoner in the "Friar's Tale" who "remains throughout an entrenched literalist. For him words only denote, never connote" (Edwards 60). When he hears a carter, in cursing, offer his stuck hay wagon to the devil, the Summoner urges his fiend companion to take the offer, but the devil refuses, knowing that the carter does not mean what his words suggest (FrT 1541-68). The attitude of the devil towards the carter's oaths, Edwards continues, offers a radically different perception about the relationship between utterance, meaning and intention from that proposed by the summoner. The devil perceives that words do not necessarily reflect intended meaning through actual utterance: 'The carl spak oo thing, but he thoghte another' [1568]. (61)

The devil is evidently aware of the problems of language and the danger of accepting words only at the literal level; the Summoner sees only a literal denotation for words, and that view causes his condemnation to hell.

Cecilia's literal view of Almachius's statement ultimately brings about her condemnation because she

exhausts his patience with her words and then insults his idols by calling a stone a literal stone. The prefect considers himself a "philosophre" (490), but, as J.D. Burnley says:

Almachius is no ordinary tyrant, for he claims for himself the philosophic virtue of patience. Like the Stoic *sapiens*, he can suffer insults to himself. . . . But his actions belie his words, and it is an outburst of fury which finally sends Cecilia to martyrdom. The pretensions of the pagan to objective justice based upon philosophical patience are demonstrated to be false and, as the Christian God is superior to his stone idols, so the saint's virtue makes nonsense of the philosophical aspirations of the judge. (83)

Though Cecilia "makes nonsense" of Almachius's words, she also martyrs herself in the process, condemned to a painful death. Although it is likely he would have executed her in any event, assuming she would not relinquish her belief in a Christian God, Cecilia's misreadings of language hasten her demise and expose Almachius's "philosophical aspirations." Her words cannot convert the pagan, in part because she seems to have been more intent on refuting his arguments and insulting him personally than on being *caecis via* and guiding him in his blindness. Cecilia cannot provide spiritual sight to the tyrant and it is language that causes her ruin.

Cecilia's words, ostensibly meant to convert, ultimately bring about her death because the speaker cannot control the hearer's perception or understanding of the words. Scholes's concept of centrifugal reading is again effective in demonstrating how the language of the Tale escapes the sense that the narrator is attempting to convey. Language is always subject to misreading or misinterpretation by those who would hear or read it because once uttered or written, as Scholes and Derrida maintain, the reader has the sole responsibility for making sense of the words; and the reader makes sense of the words, according to Scholes, by bringing to bear all the textual resources at his or her disposal. In my examination of the "Prioress's Tale," I followed the trace of a word, making associations intertextually to show that meaning is an unstable affair. I believe a similar, although abbreviated, method will work with the "Second Nun's Tale." I use here the idea of "transformation" or "conversion" rather than a specific word to show how language escapes the ability of the user to control its perception by the hearer/reader. I have made reference to various other works by Chaucer so far in this chapter, and I believe that connecting the Tale to yet another by uncovering a coincident use of an idea can lend some further insight into Chaucer's opinion of the problems of language and meaning.

Because the "Second Nun's Tale" and the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale" are the only two tales in Fragment VIII, they

are occasionally compared with each other⁸, although they do not appear to have much in common other than collocation⁹. Robert M. Longworth connects the two tales in the way that they deal with transformation. While the saint hopes to transform pagan souls into Christians and the alchemist attempts to transform base metals into silver and gold, the poet transforms words into meaning in the mind of the reader. As Longworth says, "The poet, then, is no less concerned than the alchemist or the saint with the process of transformation" (87)¹⁰.

But Chaucer also shows a substantial interest in another arcane practice, astrology¹¹, a craft that, like

⁸ For example, William E. Rogers considers the two tales in Fragment VIII together with Fragment IX, the "Manciple's Tale," in a chapter called "The Problem of Language, Continued;" Donald R. Howard lumps Fragments VIII and IX together as "The Closing Tales."

⁹ The "Canon's Yeoman's Tale" is located in fragment VIII in the Ellesmere manuscript of *The Canterbury Tales* but it is missing from the Hengwrt (Pearsall, *Tales* 12).

¹⁰ Referring to the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale," Robert B. Burlin says: "Like the alchemical, fictional experimentation remains firmly within the bounds of the experiential world, and its rationale, too, is flimsily built upon linguistic ambiguities. The vitality of the created world is deduced from the immanence of its divine Author, while the transforming power of the human creator or scientist depends upon his ability to alter or reorient the dynamic energies of nature, either human or material" (243).

¹¹ John Reidy says in his introduction to the *Astrolabe* that "in this treatise we find the same interest in an intellectual pursuit that Chaucer evinces elsewhere in his knowledge of literature, philosophy, natural philosophy, medicine, and alchemy. As with these subjects, so with astronomy; Chaucer is the well-read, interested layman" (Benson, *Riverside*, 661).

alchemy, displays transformative powers of its own. The astrologer hopes to transform his divinations and calculations into an accurate vision of the future. That Chaucer's interest in the transformative power of words extends to the would-be transformations inherent in alchemical and astrological studies is not surprising; with his concurrent interest in human nature, it is also not surprising that he should find the abuse of such practices to be of interest. The "Canon's Yeoman's Tale" is, therefore, less concerned with extolling or denying the powers of alchemy to transform than it is with the propensity of the alchemist to hoodwink those who do not understand its intricacies. In fact, the Yeoman's narrator's reason for telling the Tale is to warn others about such men as the Canon:

. . . the doublenesse

Of this chanoun, roote of alle cursednesse! . . .
 It weerieth me to telle of his falsnesse,
 And nathelees yet wol I it expresse,
 To th'entente that men may be war therby (1300-1,
 1304-6).

Like the presentation of alchemy in the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale," the "Miller's Tale" makes no attempt to glorify or to dispute the power of astrology as a craft to transform its proponents; it is concerned only with the misuse of astrology for illicit purposes. The "Miller's Tale," like the "Second Nun's Tale," is, according to its

teller, "a legende and a lyf/ Bothe of a carpenter and of his wyf" (MilTPro 3141-2)¹². In the Tale, "Hende" Nicholas concocts an elaborate scheme to dupe John the carpenter and bed his wife, and he bases that plan on his knowledge of astrology. John suspects that something terrible has happened to Nicholas because the clerk appears to be in a daze and, distrustful of intellectual pursuits, he immediately blames Nicholas's studies:

This man is falle, with his astromye,

In some woodnesse or in som agonye. (3451-2)

As part of his plan, Nicholas predicts the end of the world in a second flood, and to add authority to his prophecy he says "I wol nat lye;/ I have yfounde in myn astrologye" (3513-4).

If, as Longworth says, the poet "is no less concerned than the alchemist or the saint [or the astrologer, for that matter] with the process of transformation," then it may be possible to see Chaucer's treatment of the misuse of such power as extending to writing and the creation of meaning through language. Can language do what the poet claims--that is, express meaning accurately--or is it merely a sham like alchemy in the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale" or astrology in the

¹² The phrase occurs in various forms in *The Canterbury Tales* including (according to Tatlock and Kennedy):

"Thanne wolde I telle a legende of my lyf" (ShipT 145)

"Myn housbonde hadde a legende of his wyf" (WBPro 742)

"He knew of hem mo legendes and lyves" (WBPro 686)

"Miller's Tale"?¹³ While the narrator of the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale" believes in the power of alchemy to transform base metals even though he has been unable to understand its workings, the Tale does not demonstrate that real transformations occur. Similarly, in the "Miller's Tale," Nicholas claims to have transformed his astrological data into a real vision of the future, for he is a believer and can "see" what the unconverted John cannot; but his vision is inveigled for lecherous purposes and there is no evidence of any divination taking place.

As Nicholas uses astrology and the Yeoman uses alchemy, Cecilia uses language to effect her conversions. Likewise, the narrator of the "Second Nun's Tale" must express Cecilia's miraculously inexpressible transformation from woman to saint in words to the members of the pilgrimage. Cecilia must present to her potential converts a higher authority, but, since they lack the faith to believe, they cannot see that authority. Therefore, to invoke the power of that authority, she must first appeal to the experience of those she intends to convert by presenting sensory

¹³ Astrology plays a major role in the "Franklin's Tale" also where, unlike Nicholas or the alchemist, the clerk uses his craft properly in predicting the advent of a high tide necessary to cover the rocks, but he does so in order to accomplish Aurelius's disreputable objectives. The Franklin claims to see the craft as "jogelrye" (1265) and says "I ne kan no termes of astrologye" (1266), then goes on to describe the astrological process in great detail. In so doing, he raises the question of why he knows so much about something he claims is blatantly false. Perhaps Chaucer is using the Franklin, too, to show the potential for abuse in the craft.

information: Valerian must be "*shewen*" Urban (177); Tiburce must *smell* the crowns (248); Maximus must *hear* Cecilia's "*loore*" (372); to prove that his idol is only stone, Almachius is instructed to "*lat thyn hand upon it falle/ And taste it wel*" (502-3); italics mine. It seems that words have the power to transform only when supported by experience. Similarly, the narrator is able to tell the story of the saint's life and transform the legend into a form that her audience can understand by appealing to the pilgrims' experience of those same sensory images that Cecilia uses in the Tale. However, the images are created by the narrator's words alone; they are signifiers that do not benefit from the presence of the signified objects that appear to the characters in the Tale. They are signifiers that point, in Derridean fashion, to other signifiers.

The answer to the question posed above about whether or not language can express meaning accurately is complicated by the potentiality for the misuse of language, as the glances at other of Chaucer's works attested: the Wife of Bath misquoting authorities to prove her point; May using "*suffisant answer*" to outwit Januarie; the friar in the "*Summoner's Tale*" using his preaching to obtain a "*gift*" from Thomas, and then Jankyn, the squire, speaking "*[a]s wel as Euclide*" (2289) to help the friar divide it fairly; the Pardoner's admission of the way he uses language to

manipulate his listeners to increase their contributions¹⁴; the Manciple who says "the word moot nede accorde with the dede" (208), "only to conclude that the wisest course is to say nothing at all" (Burlin 243); the list could go on. Given the extent of the apparent misuse of language in *The Canterbury Tales*, it appears that the authority of language to express meaning is severely compromised. That, however, is not the conclusion that the "Second Nun's Tale" reaches. The Tale suggests that meaning in language is dependent on the experience of the reader/listener; the characters in the Tale cannot be transformed until they experience for themselves what the authority, Cecilia, presents as truth. However, their experience, once gained, supports the authority of her words. As Thomas Aquinas believed in "the foundation of knowledge on sense" (Pellerey 89), that through the senses, the *quidditas* of things may be attained, so, in the Tale, the characters accept the authority of language once their experience supports the truth of Cecilia's words.

Unfortunately, the readers/listeners of the Tale do not have the privilege of experiencing what the characters do, and they must accept the authority of the narrator's

¹⁴ H. Marshall Leicester, Jr. says that, in the "Pardoner's Tale," Chaucer is able "to exercise as well as exorcise his own attraction to the power of the poet's medium, language, over reality, and his fascination with the possibilities of typological symbolism. It also provides him with an opportunity to satirize the abuses of religious language he finds around him" ("Pardoner's" 49).

language if they are to understand the Tale. Some things can never be experienced directly; that is where the power of language to transform experience into words so that others may benefit becomes crucial, although problematic. While sight and other sensory experience are intended to support the logocentric notion of St. Cecilia's power to convert, the description of the experience must be transmitted through language. However, language in the "Second Nun's Tale" is destabilized by ambiguities and complexities that undermine the experience that language is supposed to describe. As the language becomes suspect, so does the reader's perception of the experience described by it. Language in the Tale seems capable of transforming experience into meaning, but the potential always exists for the words to be understood in a way different than the author or narrator intended. The ability of language to describe experience and to transform physical data into words that can be understood does exist, but unless readers can bring their own experience to the text, they cannot know definitely that the words are true.

CHAPTER FOUR

CONCLUSION

A maner Latyn corrupt was hir speche,
But algates therby was she understonde. (MLT 519-
20)

I concluded the previous chapter with the suggestion that acquisition of meaning in the "Second Nun's Tale" is dependent on experience, that the characters in the Tale are only transformed once they experience for themselves what Cecilia claims is real. But the reader cannot experience what the characters in the Tale do and, therefore, must either accept what the narrator claims or deny it. Because some things can never be experienced directly, the reader can only gain certain experience from "bokes," and it is at this point that the problem of expressing meaning through language becomes most troublesome. If the reader is to gain experience otherwise unavailable, he or she must turn to, and trust, the writing of the *auctores*.

The "Second Nun's Tale" and the questions it raises about authority and experience reflect Chaucer's exploration of the problems of language and meaning. The narrator of the Tale faces, as does Augustine, the task of expressing the ineffable by using a language that is incapable of doing what is required of it. Cecilia uses the language of authority to express her meaning and convert her listeners,

but ultimately she must appeal to their senses, to their experience. The Second Nun appeals to the experience of her readers/listeners by including sensory elements in the Tale, but ultimately she must resort to the authority of her words to describe those elements. Chaucer seems to suggest that language may not be capable of adequately expressing experience, but it is all that is available to both the writer and the reader when the reader cannot experience something first hand.

Chaucer presents his faith in "bokes" in *The Legend of Good Women*:

But God forbede but men shulde leve
 Wel more thing then men han seen with ye!
 Men shal not wenen every thing a lye
 But yf himself yt seeth or elles dooth;
 For, God wot, thing is never the lasse sooth,
 Thogh every wight ne may it nat ysee. (F10-5)¹

However, the problem of transmitting meaning through language is no easier for the writer who must find the most accurate words to describe what he/she sees and then hope that the reader will not misconstrue the words. Robert Scholes's phrase sums up the dilemma faced by the writer, and I repeat it here: "a poet does the best he or she can

¹ Shiela Delany says "The passage [LGW F10-16] echoes John 20:29: 'Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.''" (*Naked Text* 48). No character in the "Second Nun's Tale" would, by these criteria, be blessed.

and then abandons the work with the intention that motivated it still somewhat unfulfilled. The reader does the rest . . . " (*Protocols* 54). But it is "the rest" that is the problem for the writer who cannot guarantee that the reader will understand correctly what the writer has written.

I began this study with a statement by Barry Windeatt about Chaucer's concern with the problem of textual transmission and the interpretation of his work by future readers. Chaucer was aware of "the footsteps of the ancient poets" in which he walked, and he knew how the words of the *auctores* could be misread. When the narrator sees those poets who wrote about Troy elevated to the tops of iron pillars in *The House of Fame*, he says:

Oon seyde that Omer made lyes,
 Feynyng in hys poetries,
 And was to Grekes favorable;

Therfor held he hyt but fable. (1477-80)

Out of "a litil envye" (1476), at least one reader disagrees with what Homer has written and accuses him of lying. The critic, Geoffrey suggests, has purposely misread Homer because he detects a pro-Greek bias in his work. Homer was known in Chaucer's time only by his reputation and not by his writing, but Chaucer suggests that Homer, too, would have been misunderstood had his works been available. Later, in the labyrinthine House of Rumour, he learns why words are misunderstood when he sees truth and lies impossibly intertwined and released into the world. Under such

circumstances, how can the reader hope to interpret correctly what the writer has written?

Chaucer's works are so abundant with characters misreading language that it appears he considers remote the possibility of understanding another's words. His view may be summed up by the eagle in *The House of Fame* who says that "soun ys air ybroke" (770), and that when a person speaks, it causes "the ayr tobreketh" (779); therefore, "wost thou wel what thing is speche" (781). Absolon in the "Miller's Tale" can attest to the eagle's assertion for, when he asks Alisoun to "'Spek, sweete bryd'" (3805) so that he might locate her in the dark by the sound of her words, ". . . Nicholas anon leet fle a fart/ As greet as it had been a thonder-dent" (3806-7). In this case, the 'speaker's' meaning (and Chaucer's, we assume) is loud and clear, without the encumbrance of language.

Chaucer shows, elsewhere, how language is virtually incapable of sustaining meaning because it either refers to too much or is too restricted in its reference. A.S.G. Edwards notes:

In the Friar's Tale we see words employed to create a moral universe so narrow and unreflective that it generates its own punishment for its creator. In the Summoner's Tale we see a world where speech and meaning have become capable of limitless expression. They serve no needs, address no reality beyond private selfishness. (62)

In the "Prioress's Tale," the narrator attempts, like the Second Nun, to make language do too much, to express the ineffable about the Virgin Mary by using language to describe an event so miraculous that it stuns the other pilgrims into silence. But the language that Chaucer provides for the narrator is fraught with problematic elements. The reader is able to connect much of what the narrator says to other texts, and those links undermine the Prioress's words intended to support a position that is shown to be logocentric and ultimately fragile. Paule Mertens-Fonck, for example, shows how Chaucer's name for the Prioress connects her to a character from the French and Anglo-Norman poems *Hueline et Aiglantine* and *Melior et Ydoine* written in the 12th and 13th centuries (106). The verses describe a debate, while on horseback, between "two young ladies on the respective merits of clerks and knights as lovers. . . . Once summoned, the image will linger at the back of the mind, leaving an impression which will guide and influence the reader's response and understanding" (107). And, as Mertens-Fonck indicates, that impression is not favourable to the Prioress's devout image and message. Robert Scholes would agree with Mertens-Fonck's centrifugal connection of a narrative from the reader's textual repertoire to the "Prioress's Tale." The possibility of connecting the text to other texts is, as Peggy A. Knapp says, "an effect of the language [s]he uses that [s]he

cannot fully command" (76)².

There is, of course, a dialectical process at work in reading Chaucer in this centrifugal way. While the reader brings to bear all the textual resources at his/her disposal in order to understand a work, that work alters the totality of the reader's textual resources as it becomes part of them; as Scholes points out, the reader is part of a particular culture and subject to the ideological perspectives and conditioning of that culture. Judith Ferster takes a hermeneutical approach to her subject while stressing the importance of dialectics to the understanding of a text:

The interpreter can step out of his own situation in order to interpret the text on its own terms; his definition of 'its own terms' will be informed by his identity and his position in a particular culture in a particular time. The interpreter's identity and location therefore contribute to the meaning of the text. However, the process is not self-enclosed or solipsistic because the world and the text also shape the interpreter.

(Interpretation 4)

² Derek Brewer makes a related point: "Although oral poetry uses metaphor, mainly in brief and proverbial form, it relies more on metonymy, that is, on the associations of words. By metonymy words can be relied on to evoke particular associated accepted ideas and feelings. These naturally depend on social, moral, and intellectual structures, some of which we have lost" ("Style" 235).

We are both readers and writers, Ferster suggests; as we read, so we also create the text we read by bringing our textual resources to bear on the text.

However the reader attempts to make sense of the text, the process finally comes down to understanding the words, which is a concern that Chaucer shares with writers from Augustine to the present time. Augustine's discussions of the theories of signs influenced writers up to and beyond Chaucer; as Curtius has said, "his theory became a permanent possession of the Middle Ages" (74). The theory of signs is also the basis for Jacques Derrida's theories of language, as my first chapter indicates. Derrida, of course, examines signs for a different reason than does Augustine: Derrida studies language as a system of signs in order to examine the relationship of language and meaning; Augustine's intention was to enable readers to understand and benefit from the word of God as presented in Scripture.

Chaucer, too, is concerned with the way meaning is derived (or not derived) from language. Literary theories contemporary to Chaucer are a result of a long tradition of writing about words that seems to derive from the work of Augustine. That tradition culminates in the late-middle ages with the work of the "classicizing friars" who accepted the possibility of multiple levels of meaning in a text and the existence of a spiritual level in fiction. Modern literary theories share many of their basic concepts and objectives with the theories prevalent in the late-fourteenth century.

Theories like those of Derrida and Scholes that I have incorporated in this study can be useful in examining Chaucer's works, and part of their utility comes from their resemblance to theories to which Chaucer could have been exposed when he created those works. While there can never be a direct correlation between theories spanning six hundred years, there exist enough similarities to make the connection meaningful. Modern theories can be applied effectively to the study of Chaucer.

The headnote to this chapter is taken from the "Man of Law's Tale" in which Custance is shipwrecked on the shores of Northumberland. Because the land is foreign to her, she does not know the language well, but somehow makes herself "understonde." She makes herself "understonde" so well that she is able to convert the constable and his wife to Christianity before she sails off. In Custance's limited competence in creating and grasping meaning, she is like any user of language: she is subject to the instability inherent in any such attempt to comprehend. However, as the Man of Law says, "But algates therby was she understonde." As difficult as it may be to understand the language of others, or to make others understand our own words, meaning is exchanged at some level.

APPENDIX ONE

SCHOLASTICISM AND THE RHETORICIANS

The rise of scholasticism¹ (the study of logic and reason as a means of gaining truth and knowledge) and the study of rhetoric that emerged during the 12th century were influential in establishing both the role of the writer and the forms that writing could take. As A.J. Minnis says:

Scholastic literary theory did not merely provide these poets [Gower and Chaucer] with technical idioms: it influenced directly or indirectly the ways in which they conceived of their literary creations; it affected their choice of authorial roles and literary forms. (*Medieval* 160)

Unlike Aquinas, who saw the way to God and understanding as occurring through logic, John of Salisbury, in the 12th century, followed Augustine in his belief in the importance of rhetoric in the liberal arts, and there followed several writers who had an influence on literary theory and on the poet's craft. In his educational treatise the *Metalogicon* (c.1159), he concludes that the arts have their origin in Nature (Curtius 482) and that "[r]hetoric is the beautiful and fruitful union between reason and expression. Through harmony, it holds human communities together" (Curtius 77). Geoffrey of Vinsauf shared

¹ Scholasticism is a movement which, according to Curtius, "is not interested in evaluating poetry. It produced no poetics and no theory of art" (224).

Salisbury's view of rhetoric in his *Poetria nova* (c.1200), examining the proper uses of rhetorical devices including *amplificatio* and *abbreviatio* as a choice the poet must make. Curtius says of the theory of the period as exemplified by Geoffrey:

The art of the poet has first and foremost to prove itself in the rhetorical treatment of its material; for this he can choose between two procedures--either he ingeniously draws out his subject, or he dispatches it as briefly as possible. (490)

Sturges comments on the interest in the technical aspects of writing: "In the repetition and amplification advocated by rhetoricians, the multiplicity of words, rather than the singular word of God, is emphasized" (17-8). This "multiplicity" is central to the problems of language and meaning.

The rising interest in the techniques of writing coincided with the elevation of the author's status as the work of Hugh of St. Victor indicates. Curtius says, "all the authors of the program [of writing in the middle ages] are considered as of the same rank. All the authors were authorities. They form the imposing block of tradition" (590). By the later-middle ages, the idea that only the work of a Scriptural author could be worthy of study because divinely inspired was changing to one in which the role of the contemporary writer took on greater importance and

value: "the human author possessed a high status and respected didactic/ stylistic strategies of his very own--in short, *auctoritas* moved from the divine realm to the human" (Minnis, *Medieval* vii). Vincent of Beauvais saw that even secular and pagan authors could be of value to Christian readers. According to Sturges, in the *Speculum historiale*, Vincent

situates the opinions of pagan authors side by side with those from Scripture, without trying to make them agree, but nevertheless asserting that the Christian ones have greater authority (16).

The new recognition of authors from outside the Christian tradition had far-reaching effects. For one, it meant that pre-Christian and pagan writers could be used as a legitimate source of inspiration or information for the medieval writer. Minnis claims that where 12th-century scholars saw *auctorite* as part of a continuous tradition, in the later-middle ages scholars saw it as part of a hierarchy in which Scripture contained the highest degree of *auctorite* and the pagan philosophers and poets, the lowest². Referring to Vincent's *Speculum maius*, a compilation of the works of several *auctorites*, Minnis says that Vincent

² Peter Abelard (d. 1144), like Vincent of Beauvais, believed that there was a hierarchy of authority but he gave the reader the right to object and disagree with the authorities ("not all writings are of equal authority. All the patristic writings are to be read with full freedom to criticize, and with no obligation to accept anything without question" Minnis, et. al. 68).

did not attempt to make his *auctores* agree with one another, to make them all speak with one voice. They differ fundamentally; the pagans need not agree with each other or with the revealed truth of Christianity. Therefore, Vincent was content to 'repeat' or 'report', and not to 'assert' as true, the views expressed in different philosophical texts and in the Apocrypha, leaving the reader to judge for himself. . . . The human *auctor* has arrived--still lacking in personality, but possessing his individual authority and his limitations, his sins and his style. He has been met by a discriminating and sophisticated reader.

(*Medieval* 158-9)

This responsibility of both the *auctor* for his own writing and of the reader with his/her experience for interpretation is significant in its import for literary theory, both medieval and modern³. Meaning is removed from the text and placed in the hands and mind of the "discriminating and

³ Martin Stevens says that medieval and modern views "share some fundamental attitudes about the nature of art, not the least among which is the artist's own image of his centrality within his created universe" (210). The presence of the author within his own work "is very much a symptom of both the medieval and the modern scenes. For the poet or even the painter in our own time the device is a useful anti-illusionist one designed to break a too steadily-held fictional perspective" (211). The illusion of the writer's presence "is there at all times to realign the worlds of 'auctoritee' and experience" (211).

sophisticated reader."⁴ The "human faculties' interpretive abilities" were given credence over "spiritual authority" (Sturges 19). Paraphrasing Romans XV.4 (and "Chaucer's Retraction"), Minnis says, "St Paul did not say that all that is written is true: he said that all that is written is written for our doctrine. The onus is therefore placed on the discriminating reader" (*Medieval* 205).

⁴ J.D. Burnley stresses the importance of the medieval reader's ability to use and understand language in any view we may have of Chaucer within an historical context: "If we are to place the poetry of Chaucer in a historical situation in which the complex architecture [structure of the language] we have presumed can be used for poetical effect, we must presuppose the existence of an audience whose language use shows a comparable complexity. Chaucer must be an isolated genius only in his exploitation of what the language had to offer him, and not in his unique possession of such linguistic competence" (8).

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