Chaucer and His Prioress:

Feigning Silence in the *Prioress's Tale* and *Chaucer's Retraction*

by

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Abstract

This study provides a new reading of Geoffrey Chaucer's *Prioress's Tale* and considers its purpose within the context of the *Canterbury Tales*. I argue that the *Tale*, as an *exemplum*, demonstrates the dangers of tale-telling, and exposes the moral discrepancies of the Canterbury tale-telling competition and the pilgrims' use of stories as verbal assaults against one another. I argue that the *Tale* condemns the unchristian-like "actions" of the Christians within its frame as they respond to the clergeon's murder; the *Tale's* ending presents a cathartic response from this congregation, which indicates their understanding of the clergeon's martyrdom. It also provokes a similar response from the Canterbury pilgrims, which serves to silence them, and to create a paradox that disrupts possible responses to the *Tale*. Further, Chaucer's *Retraction* at the end of the *Tales* is intended to silence the poet's critics through the creation of a similar paradox.

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Introduction

In the following study, I argue that Geoffrey Chaucer's *Prioress's Tale*, as an *exemplum*, demonstrates the dangers of tale-telling, and exposes the moral discrepancies of the Canterbury tale-telling competition and the pilgrims' use of stories as verbal assaults against one another. In order to avoid repeating these moral failures, the Prioress absents her voice from the *Tale* in favour of the divine inspiration of the Virgin Mary. However, because she fails to imitate the faith-inspired silence of the *Tale's* clergeon, she subsequently becomes the negative *exemplum* of her own *Tale*. By means of the violent story of religious persecution and revenge, the *Tale* produces a cathartic effect that silences the Canterbury pilgrims, and causes them to reconsider their approach to the competition and how to communicate without perilous consequences—to others or themselves. In conjunction with an analysis of the *Tales* that follow the *Prioress's Tale*, I argue that the *Tale* foreshadows *Chaucer's Retraction*, in which the author creates a mask of deferral that absolves him of responsibility for eliciting immoral responses from his audience, ultimately silencing the author himself. However, it is also evident, I argue, that such a deferral is intended to satisfy opponents of poetry, and that Chaucer's apology in his *Retractions* is not to be accepted literally.

My approach to the *Prioress's Tale* is dependent upon a medieval theological conception of the relation between morality and fiction. Therefore, Chapter 1 analyses St. Augustine of Hippo's thoughts regarding language and literature, developed primarily from my readings of his *De Doctrina Christiana* and *De Mendacio*. Through my readings of Augustine's theories of lying, speech, and proper living, I establish that poetry is not inherently immoral, and that the value of language is dependent on the

speaker's intent. Further, if immoral acts or thoughts are elicited by the miscomprehension of well intended language, it is the audience who is generally at fault. Because the *Prioress's Tale* is overshadowed with brutal violence, we are left to determine how it intends to produce moral teachings. Thus, I examine the genre of the *Tale* in order to identify how it signifies its intentions differently than the other *Tales*.

Chapters 2 and 3 provide my reading of the *Prioress's Tale*. Chapter 2 examines the internal functions of the poem, in which I look at the progression of violence that comes first from the Jews, then from the Christians. With an examination of the *Tale's* analogues, I argue that it is the actions of the Christians within the frame that are condemned, and that the clergeon's song, *O Alma Redemptoris*, is intended to foreshadow their moral failures. While the Jews' violence results from their (mis)interpretation of the clergeon's intention for singing his song, the Christians' apathy regarding the Jews' punishment is equivalent to revenge. I parallel these actions to the *quiting* tales of the pilgrims to demonstrate the moral discrepancies of the tale-telling competition.

In Chapter 3, I examine the external functions of the poem, paying particular attention to the manner in which the Prioress engages with her tale. I argue that her initial attempts to mime the spiritual perfection of her protagonist fail, yet she becomes more like him than she intended in that she becomes the martyr of her own story. As the Prioress comprehends the message of her tale, she attempts to manipulate it in order to spare her fellow Christians—albeit those within the *Tale's* frame—from scrutiny. Because she does not remain passive while telling the story, her activeness contends with what I call the *intent of the story*. The mysterious agent—be it the Virgin Mary, Chaucer the author, or the story itself—uses the Prioress's failing as a negative *exemplum* in order

to demonstrate the ease with which one can forget the significance of salvation in favour of earthly matters, and that concerns of reception should be secondary to proper intent.

Finally, Chapter 4 examines the impact that the *Prioress's Tale* has on the remaining *Tales*. I question why the *Tales* continue to be told despite the warnings of the *Prioress's Tale* and the silence created by its cathartic effects. The *Tale* demands a responsible, though impossible, response: to denounce the *Tale* is to risk misinterpretation, like the Jews of the tale who are punished; to remain silent, though, is to risk irresponsible ignorance, like the Christian congregation who actively denies mercy to the Jews. In turn, I argue that *Chaucer's Retraction* is intended to produce a similar paradox. More specifically, the *Retraction* prevents moral critics from charging Chaucer for eliciting immoral responses from his audience. One cannot condemn the author because he has repented; yet, to respond to the work, as any reader/listener does, is to validate it.

Chapter 1

Lying (and) Literature

> Perhaps the award of victory should rather be given to Plato, the Greek; for when he was sketching his rational ideal of a perfect commonwealth, he laid it down that poets should be banished from his city as the enemies of truth. He was indignant at the outrages offered to the gods, and at the same time he was concerned to prevent the infection and corruption of the minds of the citizens by such fictions. (Augustine, *CoG* II.14)[1]

In Plato's *Republic*, poetry is banished from the city because "poetical imitations are ruinous to the understanding of the hearers" (Richter 21). The debate between philosophy and poetry, which Socrates identifies as already old in his time, takes as its central focus the proximity of each discipline to truth. In the European Middle Ages, the question of poetry's validity was one of morality. While poetry's relation to truth was still a fundamental question of philosophy, poetry's very existence, its ontology, was a concern for Christian theologians. For many moralists, the question was not one of *relation*, but of *being*: is all poetry composed of *lies*? Similar questions force one to consider content over form since Christ, the Word of God, spoke in parables. If words have the potential to encapsulate either the Truth of God—the path to eternal salvation—or lies—the path to damnation—how does one discern poetry that is appropriate for the Christian soul? To answer the question, this chapter examines the writings of St. Augustine of Hippo (b.354-d.430), an early Father of the Christian Church whose thought was formative in many aspects of medieval philosophy and theology. I first discuss

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[1] All references to Saint Augustine, *City of God*, Trans. Henry Bettenson. London: Penguin, 1972, are abbreviated *CoG* and cited by Book and Chapter numbers.

Augustine's conception of lies, followed by his thoughts on the relation between language and truth, as it pertains to poetry. Next, I look at Augustine's theory of use and enjoyment, against which I consider poetry's function. His discussions, I argue, determine that poetry *can be* a moral product. As a result, I demonstrate how the *Prioress's Tale* differs from the other *Canterbury Tales* by means of its genre. In turn, I identify *why* the other pilgrims have produced tales of dubious morality, and why the *Prioress's Tale* is necessary.

Nearly a millennium separates the lives of Saint Augustine and Geoffrey Chaucer, and Augustine's influence shaped not only the foundations of Western theology and philosophy, but medieval attitudes towards language and literature as well. His widespread influence stems from his writings, "the surviving bulk of which exceeds that of any other ancient author" (Chadwick 1) and was widely available.[2] Further, his works were not confined to his contemporary Italy and Carthage; "[t]he theology and philosophy of the medieval schoolmen and of the creators of medieval universities were rooted in Augustinian ideas of the relation between faith and reason" (Chadwick 1-2). In Medieval England, Augustine's theory of language had a great impact on the Venerable Bede's (b.672-d.735) *De schematibus et tropis*, which was a "direct fulfillment of Augustine's desire that learned men supply the Christian with needed instructional texts" (Huppé 35), and Alcuin of York's (c.735-d.804) *Grammatica* and *Rhetoric*, which stress "the principles of biblical pre-eminence and of the utility of literary study" (Huppé

[2] See Meredith J. Gill, *Augustine in the Renaissance*. Cambridge: UP, 2005, and John Monfasani, "The *De doctrina christiana* and Renaissance Rhetoric" in *Reading and Wisdom: The De doctrina christiana of Augustine in the Middle Ages*. Ed. Edward D. English. Notre Dame: UP, 1995.

46).[3] Later, Augustine's metaphysics would be foundational to the Realism of John Dons Scotus (c.1266-d.1308). And while Augustine's theories of language were not exclusive in Chaucer's England, they were among the dominant, and provide an analytic tool with which to examine the *Prioress's Tale*, particularly in light of the probability that the Prioress seeks an ontological structure that emulates Augustine's neoplatonic thought.[4] Particularly, the Augustinian theory of use and enjoyment—discussed below—helps us to understand the Prioress's interpretation of the tale-telling competition's parameters.

Augustine's thought is also significant for examining an author like Chaucer because of Augustine's affinity for "pagan" literature, much of which can be identified as sources for Chaucer's corpus. Largely influenced by Augustine's position on figurative language, "[t]he Christian theory of interpretive reading made possible the preservation of pagan letters, for the Christian could see in Vergil's poetic mastery the sign, not of the Devil's charm, but of God's eloquence" (Huppé 29). Augustine argued that one must guard himself against the evils of Paganism while extracting the good, rather than dismissing its potential altogether, a topic discussed at length in *De Doctrina Christiana*. While such comments may not reflect Chaucer's perception, early Humanists, such as Francesco Petrarch and Giovanni Boccaccio, regularly appealed to the works of Augustine in order to defend the study of antique literature. My intention in this chapter, however, is neither to validate a humanistic approach to literature, nor to identify a particular theory that Chaucer adopted as a philosophical model; rather, I outline a

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[3] Bede and Alcuin are only a sample of the influence that the Augustinian theory of language had on English thinkers, but they help to demonstrate that Augustine's ideas were not confined to the continent. Retrospectively, Alcuin and "[t]he writers of the Carolingian period [...] throw considerable light [...] on the Augustinian theory as it was developed in England and brought to the continent" (Huppé 46).

[4] The Prioress's philosophical idealism is a matter for another study, though the foundations for this argument are indicated in Chapter 3.

defence of poetry based on Augustine's *De Mendacio* (On Lying) and *De Doctrina Christiana*, through which I elucidate why not all fiction is not comprised inherently of lies.

First, a distinction must be made regarding Augustine's terminology. Augustine uses two terms on a regular basis to classify non-truths: lies and falsehoods. In *De Doctrina*, he defines a falsehood as "something which is not actually in the state in which it is asserted to be" (*DDC* 2.130).[5] Further, falsehoods can be divided into two categories, "one consisting of things which cannot possibly be true, another of things which are not true, but could be" (*DDC* 2.130). For example, "If you say that seven and three make eleven, you are saying something that cannot possibly be true, but if you say, for example, that it rained on New Year's Day, although in fact it did not, you are saying something which could have been true" (*DDC* 2.131). Without context, these examples are somewhat ambiguous, and appear to resemble lies. A distinction, however, can be observed by turning to Augustine's earlier *De Mendacio*:

> For not everyone who says a false thing lies, if he believes or opines that to be true which he says [...] whoever utters that which he holds in his mind either as belief or as opinion, even though it be false, he lies not. For this he owes to the faith of his utterance, that he thereby produce that which he holds in his mind, and has in that way in which he produces it. (*DM* 383-84)[6]

A falsehood may be something that is not universally true, but is believed to be true by the speaker. As a result, the speaker does not differentiate between the thoughts in his

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[5] All references to Saint Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, Trans. R. P. H. Green. Oxford: Clarendon, 1995, are abbreviated *DDC* and cited by Book and Chapter numbers.

[6] All references to Saint Augustine, *On Lying*, Trans. Henry Brown. London: Rivington, 1847, are abbreviated *DM* and cited by page number.

mind and his speech.[7] If, however, the speaker is aware that what he speaks is a falsehood, he is lying.

Liars are condemned by Augustine, for "a liar loves to lie, and inhabits in his mind in the delight of lying" (*DM* 402). A lie is something spoken that is contrary to the belief of the speaker, with the intention of deceiving the hearer. It is not necessarily a falsehood because a speaker "may say a false thing and yet not lie, if he thinks it to be so as he says although it be not so; and, that he may say a true thing, and yet lie, if he thinks it to be false and utters it for true, although in reality it be so as he utters it" (*DM* 384). The distinction between lies and falsehoods, therefore, is the speaker's intent. Augustine it is not primarily concerned that a "man lies, who has one thing in his mind and utters another in words, or by signs of whatever kind" (*DM* 384), "But the fault of him who lies, is, the desire of deceiving in the uttering of his mind" (*DM* 384). A liar intends to deceive someone, and takes pleasure from the deception, "rejoicing in deceit for its own sake" (*DM* 402). However, it is difficult to conceive that all lies are told for the purpose of pleasure, and Augustine concedes that "A man may tell a lie unwillingly" (*DM* 402). It is easiest to grasp the ambiguity of these statements by examining Augustine's categories of lying, which are summarized by Chaucer's Parson:

> Som lesynge is of which ther comth noon avantage to no wight; and som lesynge turneth to the ese and profit of o man, and to disese and damage of another man. / Another lesynge is for to saven his lyf or his catel. Another lesynge comth of delit for to lye, in which delit they wol forge a long tale and peynten it with alle circumstaunces, where al the ground of the tale is fals. /

[7] This distinction is reliant upon Augustine's theory of language, which remained the predominant theory throughout the Middle Ages.

> Som lesynge comth for he wole sustene his word; and som lesynge comth of reccheleesnesse withouten advisement; and semblable thynges. (*ParT* 609-11) [8]

The Parson's interpretation of Augustine's categories exhibits a full range of intentionality, but all examples insist on a degree of deception, of speaking contrary to what one believes. Indeed, in the *Enchiridion on Faith, Hope, and Love*, Augustine asserts, "it seems certain that every lie is a sin," though the severity of the sin is dependent on the "intention and on what subject one lies" (*End* 21).[9] Yet, it is also clear that one need not desire to lie, nor derive pleasure from speaking falsely. In a significant gesture, the Parson associates only the fabrication of tales with "delit," which draws attention to the *Tales* themselves. However, Augustine's position on fiction is not as distinct as the Parson's.

It is difficult to attribute to Augustine a single sustained position regarding fiction. In *De Doctrina*, he admits that "nothing should be thought more peculiar to mankind than lies and falsehoods, which derive exclusively from mankind itself" (*DDC* 2.99). This condemnation is directed towards "the thousands of fictional stories and romances, which through their falsehoods give people great pleasure" (*DDC* 2.99), as well as other forms of mimesis, including painting and sculpture. Similarly, in *De Mendacio*, Augustine confronts those who, when telling stories, "interweave falsehood with truth, where they are at a loss for something sweet" (*DM* 402). People who would harmlessly mislead

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[8] All references to Chaucer's texts are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, Gen. Ed. Larry Benson, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987. Siegfried Wenzel, author of the explanatory notes for the *Parson's Prologue* and *Tale* in *The Riverside Chaucer*, identifies the *Summa vitiorum* (1236) by the Dominican friar William Peraldus as Chaucer's most likely source for these Augustinian categories of lies.

[9] All references to Saint Augustine, *Enchiridion on Faith, Hope, and Love*, Trans. J. B. Shaw. Washington: Regnery, 1961, are abbreviated *End* and cited by page number.

others with exaggerated tales do wrong, for "they want to please people better than the truth" (*DM* 402). Likewise, in *Soliloquies*, Augustine addresses "fables". He explains that a fable "tends to exist and does not succeed" (*Sol* 9:16).[10] With a moderate tone, Augustine distinguishes the difference between liars and "fabulists":

> [W]hat I call the fabulous kind of falsehood is the kind which is committed by those who tell fables. The difference between deceivers and fabulists is this: every deceiver wants to deceive, but not everyone who tells a fable has the desire to deceive. For, farces and comedies and many poems are full of fables whose purpose is to give pleasure rather than to deceive, and almost everyone who tells a joke tells a fable. But, that one is rightly called fallacious or deceiving whose sole aim is to deceive someone. Those, on the contrary, who make something up, but do not do it in order to deceive, no one hesitates to call fabulists, or, if not that, tellers of fables. (*Sol* 9:16)

Fables are still falsehoods, but the severity of their wrong is not as bad as lies. However, like those above who exaggerate their stories, fabulists are guilty of emphasizing pleasure over truth. This question of truth offers a new perspective with which to query fiction. More precisely, we can question whether or not truth can be found in false statements.

In the *General Prologue*, Chaucer reminds his audience that "Crist spak himself ful brode in hooly writ, / And wel ye woot no vileynye is it" (*GP* 739-40). Can humans can do the same? According to Augustine, "when anything is either done or said figuratively, it utters that which it signifies to those for whose understanding it was put

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[10] All references to Saint Augustine, *Soliloquies*, Trans. Thomas F. Gilligan. New York: Cima, 1948, are abbreviated *Sol* and cited by Book and Chapter numbers.
That a fable "tends to exist" suggests that it attempts to present a world infused, in some mimetic manner, by the spiritual reality that permeates and supports the "real" things in a neoplatonic universe. This attempt, of course, must fail, unless the fable is in fact something of a parable and inspired by the divine.

forth" (*DM* 389). In *Contra Mendacium* (Against Lying), Augustine elaborates on the nature of figurative speech, explaining that the words "are covered as it were with a garb of figure on purpose to exercise the sense of the pious enquirer, and that they may not become cheap by lying bare and on the surface" (*CM* 449).[11] Figurative speech, in all of its forms, signifies something important, worthy of being understood by means of "work," and rewarded with pleasure deriving from one's achievement of deducing truth. Conversely, such speech is not intended to frustrate the reader:

> Nor is it that they are begrudged to the learners, in that they are in these ways obscured; but are presented in a more winning manner, that being as it were withdrawn, they may be desired more ardently, and being desired may with more pleasure be found. Yet true things, not false, are spoken; because true things, not false, are signified, whether by word or by deed; the things that are signified, namely, those are the things spoken. They are accounted lies only because people do not understand that the true things which are signified are the things said, but believe that false things are the things said. (*CM* 449)

Figurative speech does not contain lies, and the error is not the author's intent, but rather the reader's miscomprehension. Of course, if what is hidden by figurative speech is in fact a lie, the sin belongs to the author. Although the context of this argument pertains to the Bible, the Word of God, which inherently precludes the possibility of lies, Augustine also recognizes the value of figurative speech in non-sacral, non-divine works as well. As he claims in the Preface to *De Doctrina*, "I say to those who fail to understand what I write that it is not my fault that they do not understand. Suppose they wanted to see the

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[11] All references to Saint Augustine, *Against Lying*, Trans. Henry Brown. London: Rivington, 1847, are abbreviated *CM* and cited by page number.

new moon, or the old one, or a star that was very faint, and I pointed out with my finger but their eyesight was too weak to see even with my finger—surely it would be wrong for them to be annoyed with me for that reason?" (*DDC* Preface:5) Form, therefore, is not grounds for dismissing fiction, and not all false statements are lies, for the language of poets can signify true things.[12]

Thus far I have demonstrated that, for Augustine, poetry does not inherently contain lies, and that the figurative language of poets is not inherently evil. As for the form of poetry, it "has as its roots grammar and rhetoric" (*DO* 317).[13] According to Augstine's *De Ordine* (Divine Providence and the Problem of Evil), "poets were begotten of reason. And, when [Reason] saw in them great achievements, not in sound alone, but in words also and realities, it honoured them to the utmost, and gave them license for whatever *reasonable fictions* they might desire" (*DO* 317, my italics). Poetic license is a product of reason, "and yet, because they took origin from the first of the liberal disciplines, it permitted grammarians to be their critics" (*DO* 317). For this study, it is the interpretation of "reasonable fictions" that is crucial. To determine what may be called "reasonable," I turn to Augustine's theory of use and enjoyment.

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[12] As a caveat, the reader should be aware that I am not attempting to establish an exegetical method of reading that follows the Christian theory of interpretation noted above by Bernard F. Huppé, nor one in the vein of D. W. Robertson's "cortex and nucleus" approach. As Mary Agnes Edsall notes, "Robertson's 'Historical Criticism' ends up being neither adequately inclusive in its understanding of the historical nor sufficiently Augustinian in its approach" (41-2). In *De Doctrina*, Augustine writes: "As well as this rule, which warns us not to pursue a figurative (that is, metaphorical) expression as if it were figurative, we must add a further one: not to accept a literal one as if it were figurative" (*DDC* 3.33) Rather, I agree with Edsall and Lee Patterson, whom she cites: "[t]he task of a fully informed Chaucerian criticism is not...to fend off Exegetical findings, but rather to place them within a more inclusive understanding" (as cited in Edsall 41).

[13] All references to Saint Augustine, *Divine Providence and the Problem of Evil*, Trans. Robert P. Russell. New York: Cima,1948, are abbreviated *DO* and cited by page number.

In *De Doctrina*, Augustine explains that "there are some things which are to be enjoyed [and] some which are to be used" (*DDC* 1.7). He goes on to distinguish the differences:

> Those which are to be enjoyed make us happy; those which are to be used assist us and give us a boost, so to speak, as we press on towards our happiness, so that we may reach and hold fast to the things which make us happy [...] but if we choose to enjoy things that are to be used, our advance is impeded and sometimes even diverted, and we are held back, or even put off, from attaining things which are to be enjoyed, because we are hamstrung by our love of lower things. (*DDC* 1.7)

The goal of every Christian is to attain salvation; but to enjoy earthly things that should be used impedes a Christian's pursuit of eternal happiness. If someone chooses to enjoy that which should be used, he is unable to use it to attain what he loves, and everything should be loved on account of God. But, "to use something is to apply whatever it may be to the purpose of obtaining what you love—if indeed it is something that ought to be loved (*the improper use of something should be termed abuse*)" (*DDC* 1.8, my italics). In his *Confessions*, Augustine identifies a personal experience that exemplifies such abuse. While reminiscing of his youth, he asks, "which might be forgotten with least detriment to the concerns of life, reading and writing or these poetic fictions, who does not foresee, what all must answer who have not wholly forgotten themselves? I sinned, then, when as a boy I preferred those empty to those more profitable studies, or rather hated the [former] and loved the [latter]" (*Con* 15).[14] It is not because poetry is inherently

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[14] All references to Saint Augustine, *Confessions* Books I – X, Trans. E. B. Pusey. London: Routledge, 1898, are abbreviated *Con* and cited by page number.

detrimental that Augustine scorns his youthful desires, but because, as a child, he was unaware of the manner in which things were to be used or enjoyed: "`One and one, two;' 'two and two, four;' this was to me a hateful singsong: 'the wooden horse filled with armed men,' and 'the burning of Troy,' and 'Creusa's shade' were the vain spectacle most charming to me" (*Con* 15).

Augustine's example does not indicate that he altogether dismisses poetry. Certainly, he would not condemn literature that promotes and teaches doctrinal truth. However, in *City of God*, Augustine condemns the pagan theatre, and suggests that pagan poetical fictions often present immoral conduct. Pagan literature is flawed because it often depicts superfluous human institutions, though such a charge should be recognized as a generalization. Augustine argues that it is not necessary to avoid things solely because they are associated with pagans, because even in such societies "there are two kinds of learning pursued": "One comprises things which have been instituted by humans, the other things already developed, or divinely instituted, which have been observed by them. Of those instituted by humans, some are superstitious, some not." (*DDC* 2.73). Human institutions "are meaningful to humans just because humans have decided that they should be so [...] Some of them are superfluous and self-indulgent, others are useful and necessary" (*DDC* 2.96). The various human institutions that can be found in literature, and that are identified as "superfluous," "self-indulgent," or "superstitious," promote deception or a misunderstanding of divine institutions.[15] The speaker misleads the audience either by means of lies known to him, or falsehoods unbeknownst to him.

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[15] To a small degree, I have conflated the categories of superfluous and superstitious human institutions. Augustine's position on each is the same, though it should be noted that he finds superfluous institutions especially "peculiar." To my knowledge, Augustine does not elaborate on this particular opinion.

In *De Doctrina*, Augustine offers a number of examples of such institutions, such as the art of magic, false remedies, and the various practices of prophecy. These practices are condemned in so far as they cause people to place faith in that which are false:

> Something instituted by humans is superstitious if it concerns the making and worshipping of idols, or the worshipping of the created order or part of it as if it were God, or if it involves certain kinds of consultations or contracts about meaning arranged and ratified with demons, such as the enterprises involved in the art of magic, which poets tend to mention rather than to teach. (*DDC* 2.74)[16]

But, if literature and fiction teach Christian Doctrine and depict moral virtue, certainly they can be used to achieve what one loves. Such literature created for this purpose is often referred to as *exempla*:

> The term *exemplum* (plural *exempla*) designated for late medieval moralists an episode from a saint's life, or a person living a model life or, at its most allusive, the symbolic interpretation of natural phenomena. Whatever the particular designation, the *exemplum* portrayed, as its literal sense indicates, an example to be followed, and its moral force derived from the conception that religious perfection was ultimately determined by one's volition, a volition, to be sure, guided and strengthened by grace [...] the *exemplum* forms a bridge between scholastic and popular theology, verbal and visual or

[16] It is difficult to determine Augustine's intent by ending this passage with a direct reference to poets. In the lines that follow this passage in *DDC*, he does not return to the subject of poets. R. P. H. Green suggests that Augustine "wishes to defend the [classical] poets from blame here" (*DDC* 91 n.73). For the purposes of my discussion, Augustine, once again, seems to be emphasizing intent over utterance, as in the cases of lying and figurative speech.

> Latin and vernacular modes of expression, dogma and natural science, and not least between piety and poetry. (Kircher 1035)

Exempla allow for the education of those who cannot read the Bible, or do not have the capacity to interpret its teachings—if, say, a person is not equipped with Augustine's teachings in *De Doctrina*. As a result, moral teachings are produced by means of stories, which have the further benefit of entertaining. It follows, then, that literature can both be used *and* enjoyed, as long as it is used and enjoyed to further one's love of God.

At this point, I depart from my discussion of Augustine, though his teachings discussed thus far inform the remainder of this chapter and this thesis. It is from an Augustinian perspective that I examine the function and necessity of the *Prioress's Tale*. In fact, echoes of the Augustinian concepts of use and enjoyment can be heard in the *General Prologue* when the conditions of the tale-telling contest are first established. The Host proposes that the pilgrims take turns telling "tales" in order to pass the time on the journey to Canterbury. The pilgrim "that telleth in this caas / Tales of best sentence and moost solaas" (*GP* 797-98) will win a supper at the expense of the other pilgrims. The Host is confirmed as judge and the company sets out on their way.

The parameters of the competition leave much to interpretation, both to the pilgrims and the audience outside the artistic frame. Presumably, "sentence" and "solaas" suggest meaning and pleasure, respectively. From an Augustinian perspective, we can associate the words with use and enjoyment. As such, the tales' teachings should promote doctrinal truths presented in a pleasurable fashion. However, as Paul Beekman Taylor asks of Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron*, "Is *solas* ever commensurate with *sentence*, or are they compatible at all in art?" (122) I attempt to determine Chaucer's

response to this question in Chapter 4, and thus far I believe I have demonstrated that Augustine would respond positively. As for the pilgrims, however, there is not a collective response to be given. The initial problems, of course, are the embedded narratives and the lack of agency attributable to the characters. The former concern sets forth multiple layers of disavowal for the poet who *is* the source of agency for the characters. The more relevant concern for this discussion, though, is the Host's lack of control over his language.

The *Middle English Dictionary* (*MED*) offers six entries and twenty-two variations of the noun "sentence." Among these possibilities, examples from Chaucer's work are found under five entries and fourteen variations. It seems likely that Chaucer was aware of the fluidity of the word. The instance in line 798 with which I am concerned is an example under the fourth entry, third variation: "(c) moral seriousness; also, edifying subject matter; heigh (best, gret) ~" (440).[17] Despite the overt violence and bigotry found in the *Prioress's Tale*, I argue in Chapter 2 that this definition is fairly accurate for the *Tale*. Alternatively, her request for the Virgin Mary to help "gydeth" her "song" in the *Prioress's Prologue* may suggest entry two, variation one: "(a) Doctrine, authoritative teaching; an authoritative pronouncement or teaching" (438).[18] However, one need only consider the sexual exploits and deception found in the *Miller's Tale* or the *Reeve's Tale* to understand that the definition does not explain each pilgrim's individual objectives. For the moment, I leave aside other motivations, and remain concentrated on linguistic interpretations. For example, it seems more likely that the *Knight's Tale*, a tale

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[17] All citations for the words "sentence" and "solas," and their derivatives, are found in *The Middle English Dictionary* Vol 13, Eds. H. Kurath, S. Kuhn, J. Reidy, and R. Lewis. Ann Arbor: U Michigan P, 2001.

[18] This suggestion will become more apparent in Chapters 2 and 3 where I speak of divinely inspired writing.

intended to depict order and societal hierarchy,[19] follows the first variation of entry four: "(a) Understanding, intelligence; knowledge, wisdom" (*MED* 440). The Knight's authoritative description of a perfectly structured social order does not sit well with the Miller, who in turn attempts to invert the language and offer his own view of social order.[20] The Miller, it appears, has interpreted "sentence" as "1. (a) A personal opinion, way of thinking […]" (438). This last entry of "sentence" is the most common interpretation, I argue, though it is also the easiest entry to be conflated with "moral seriousness." From a fourteenth century theological perspective, anything that varies from the authoritative discourse of the Bible could be nothing more than an unsubstantiated personal opinion. However, for pilgrims like the Wife of Bath and the Pardoner who attempt to manipulate such discourse in order to provide new perspectives on matters of "moral seriousness," they indeed believe they are engaging in "edifying subject matter."[21]

Like "sentence," "solaas" is prone to a variety of interpretations. The *MED* lists three entries and eleven variations for the noun. The instance from line 798 of the *General Prologue* is used as an example for entry one, variation two: "(b) entertainment, merrymaking; relaxation, recreation" (126). While all of the variations for the second entry refer to "comfort" or "consolation" in some manner,[22] the more striking variations are found in the first entry. That is to say, entertainment and pleasure are extremely

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[19] For a discussion of the unsettled theological hierarchy of the *KT*, see Robert E. Finnegan, "A Curious Condition of Being: the City and the Grove in Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*," *Studies in Philology* 106 (2009): 285-98.

[20] See Peggy Knapp, *Chaucer and the Social Contest*, New York: Routledge, 1990, Chapter 3.

[21] Certainly, anyone engaging such matters from a nominalist perspective would be of the same opinion as the Wife and the Pardoner.

[22] I would not dismiss the possibility that some pilgrims interpret "solaas" as a reference to consolation. In a peculiar way, the *Pardoner's Tale* certainly exposes regrettable, though exaggerated, decisions. We are never told why individual pilgrims are on a pilgrimage to the shrine of Thomas á Beckett, but certainly many are in search of forgiveness and consolation.

ambiguous terms that are open to subjective responses. It is not surprising that a number of the variations, particularly the first and fourth, have sexual undertones that immediately reflect upon some of the more "vulgar" tales. More significantly, the fourth entry refers to "satisfaction" and personal pleasure.[23] Aside from individual subjective tastes in poetic content, we are left to distinguish the difference between the pleasure that derives from the tales and the pleasure that derives from the *telling* of tales. If the tales contain lies, then, according to Augustine, the tellers are liars because of the pleasure they take from deceiving others. Or, more generally, if the pilgrims are taking pleasure in the tales *for the tales' own sake*, then the pilgrims are *abusing* poetry according to Augustine's theory of use and enjoyment.

The extremity of these moral infractions should not be understated. In terms of lying, it is a sin that breaks one of the Ten Commandments. As for the manner in which the pilgrims use and enjoy the tales, the degree to which many of them abuse tales is significant. Many of the pilgrims use their tales as verbal assaults against one another, which causes a perpetuation of vengeful acts. In Chapter 2, I demonstrate through the *Prioress's Tale* how such assaults challenge and destabilize the identity of tellers. For now, it is sufficient to demonstrate how another ambiguity in the Host's language allows for such attacks.

Following the *Knight's Tale*, the Host asks the Monk to tell "Somwhat to quite with the Knyghtes tale" (*MilP* 3119), but the Miller interrupts and insists that he will "quite the Knyghtes tale" (*MilP* 3127). The former instance of *quite* is cited in the *MED*

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[23] Although these definitions are produced when combined with other words, the connotations are nevertheless remnant in the term: "(d) don ~, to satisfy (sb.) sexually; haven ~, have entertainment, enjoy oneself; take (one's) entertainment; haven ~ of, enjoy (sth.), take pleasure in; maken ~ of, make much of (sb.), rejoice over; maken ~ to, provide an entertainment or amusement for (sb.)" (*MED* 126).

as an example of the third entry of "quĭten v. Also quit(e": "(f) to match (sb., a tale), equal" (102). The latter instance, I argue, takes on a new meaning: "**3.** (a) To take revenge; take revenge on (sb.), get even with, punish…" (102).[24] The Miller, unsatisfied with the *Knight's Tale*, takes advantage of the Host's invitation for a direct response to the tale, paralleling many of its aspects. At the same time, his tale makes a mockery of an old carpenter who is much like the Reeve. In turn, the Reeve *quites* the Miller with a fabliaux that portrays a Miller cuckolded. Similar attacks occur throughout the tales, most notably between the Friar and the Summoner. The significance of these altercations is the degree to which the pilgrims act in decidedly un-Christian ways. Such vengeful tellers hurt their own spiritual standing as much as their targets' reputations, all while on a pilgrimage to the shrine of Thomas á Beckett.

The purpose, then, of the *Prioress's Tale* is to expose the immoral nature of the tale-telling competition as it has proceeded so far.[25] It identifies the connection of the other pilgrims' tales with lies and mal intent, both of which are to be condemned according to Augustine. However, it remains to be demonstrated how the Prioress is able to engage the other pilgrims by means of her own tale, without condemning herself. First, her tale, I argue, must be read as an *exemplum* of the dangers of tale-telling, and not overshadowed by the brutal violence that it depicts.[26] Further, the genre of the *Prioress's Tale* does not subject itself to the same accusations as fables. The *Tale* is a Marian legend that has been identified with thirty-seven analogues. Yet, the Prioress does not

[24] *MED*, vol. 12.

[25] For this study, I am following the order of the *Tales* presented in the Ellesmere manuscript (Ellesemere 26 C9).

[26] While in Chapter 2 I argue that the *Prioress's Tale* functions as an *exemplum* according to the definition cited above, I argue in Chapter 3 that it functions as a negative *exemplum*, presenting the Prioress as an example of how *not to act*.

refer to her tale as a legend, but instead calls it a "storie." Paul Strohm notes that "[*s*]*torie* eventually embraced [. . .] the invented tale with a plausible plot [. . .] in the case of certain narratives of sufficient realism or venerability" (*Genre* 61). However, the *MED* offers for its definition "**1.** (a) A narrative account, oral or written, of events that occurred or are believed to have occurred in the past, a story from history or accepted as history; a narrative drawn from the Bible or a saint's life, an account of a martyr, etc." (834). While the plausibility of the tale's events may be in question, the Prioress grounds the tale in an analogous relation to the story of "yonge Hugh of Lyncoln" (*PrT* 684), which, Lee Patterson explains, " emerged almost 150 years earlier, in a mid-thirteenth-century England that still had a Jewish community" (507). For Augustine, because "[h]istory relates past events in a faithful and useful way" (*DDC* 2.109), it may be used for moral education, which may move its audience towards a love of God. Thus, it comes as no surprise that the Prioress relates her tale to historical narrative, while still being able to engage the other pilgrims in the tale-telling competition.

According to the thought of Saint Augustine, the value of language is dependent upon the speaker's intent. One who intends to deceive is a liar and should be condemned; one who seeks to exemplify, promote, or elucidate Christian Doctrine should be celebrated. Though fiction often appears to present falsehoods and lies, it is not inherently flawed, and its proper use can further the audience's love of God, provided that the audience does not misinterpret its meaning. At the center of this study is the question of intent, and how a speaker proves his intent through speech. In the following Chapters, I examine the intent of the Prioress and her clergeon in order to further examine

the purpose of the *Prioress's Tale*, while arguing that the *Tale* exposes the moral dangers of lies and revenge within the context of the tale-telling competition.

Chapter 2

Pathos and/or Apathy: The *Path* of Salvation

> Strangely, the foreigner lives within us: he is the hidden face of our identity, the space that wrecks our abode, the time in which understanding and affinity founder. By recognizing him within ourselves, we are spared detesting him in himself. (Kristeva, *Strangers* 1)

In a Marian Legend, told by a devout Christian prioress, a privileged position for the Christian is to be expected. Further, it comes as no surprise that the Jew should be vilified to some degree. Thus, in the *Prioress's Tale*, the Jews are condemned as murderous and hating when opposed to the endearing pathos felt for the young clergeon who spends much of his short life worshipping the virgin mother of Christ. The clergeon publicly sings *O Alma Redemptoris* for all to hear, resulting in his death at the hands of a Jewish assassin. When his body is found, the clergeon miraculously continues to sing. The Jews are slaughtered for their deviousness and the boy tells the story of his miraculous powers, giving up his "goost" only after a mysterious "greyn" is removed from his tongue. The privileged position of the Christian is expected, but hidden in the narrative is also a condemnation of the Christian community, who ignore the teachings of Christ, and defer their responsibility to a lone scapegoat. In this chapter, I argue that the *Prioress's Tale* condemns the (lack of) action taken by the Christians, identifying a responsibility for which those who bear witness to acts of atrocity must account. Further, I identify how the *Tale* exposes the dangers of lies and revenge, while emphasizing the significance of intent. First, I consider the anti-Semitism of the *Tale*, insisting that it is not the focal point of the story and that it must be ignored in order to appreciate the story

as it is told. Then, I identify parallels between the clergeon and Christ, and the clergeon and the Holy Innocents, illustrating the extent to which the *exemplum* of the clergeon is intended for all Christians. Next, I demonstrate the foreshadowing effects of the clergeon's song, *O Alma*, and how it is directed at the Christians. I then survey the *Tale's* analogues in order to confirm the Christian focus, and to expose the immorality of congregation's actions. In this discussion, I argue that the *Prioress*, in fact, asserts her own intent over the *Tale's* intent, attempting to mask said immorality. With the true subject exposed, I show how the clergeon's song functions like a tale, and how, when so misconstrued, it may have perilous results. Nevertheless, as the *exemplum* of the *Prioress's Tale* shows, reception is secondary to pure and good intent.

First, I believe it necessary to engage the anti-Semitism of the *Prioress's Tale*. Though I later establish that the *Tale* addresses Christians rather than the Jews, it is important not to let the anti-Semitism overshadow this point. As R. M. Lumiansky notes, "Though anti-Semitism was a different thing in the fourteenth-century from what it is today, the present day reader has modern reactions in literature, no matter when it was written. From this point of view, the Prioress's story of the little choirboy who is murdered by the Jews possesses an unpleasantness which overshadows its other qualities (xxii).[27] Here, Lumiansky notes the fundamental difficulties of interpreting literature due to cultural/temporal distance.[28] Stephen Spector agrees, and notes a significant shift in criticism of the *Prioress's Tale* following the Holocaust: "The fact is that before the Holocaust much informed opinion about the *Prioress's Tale* was undisturbed by her

[27] As cited in Greg Wilsbacher, "Lumiansky's Paradox: Ethics, Aesthetics and Chaucer's 'Prioress's Tale'", *College Literature* 34.5, 1-28.
[28] In no way am I suggesting that modern audiences are capable of interpreting literature from a *purely* unanachronistic position. It is possible, however, to set aside particular values in chains of logic.

treatment of the Jews, which was often not noticed at all. Instead, her tale was praised for its beauty and perfection" (188). In recent decades, though, there has been an "acceptance" of the anti-Semitism,[29] either relating the belief to prejudices of Chaucer's age, or recognizing that the various levels of deferment embedded in the narrative are intended to attribute the opinions to a specific character, not the author. For example, the repetition of "quod she" that breaks the narrative of the *Prioress's Tale* is often accepted as Chaucer's "break in impersonation," which suggests that audiences should be aware that these are the words of the Prioress.[30] Ultimately, it is impossible to determine Chaucer's position regarding Jews, and we must examine the anti-Semitism as it functions in the *Tale*. Stephanie Gaynor, for example, argues that the Jews are necessarily marginalized in order to become totally Other so that the otherwise marginalized Prioress, a women, can have an a voice of authority in a male dominated discourse.[31] In this study, because I am arguing that the *Tale* condemns the actions of the Christians, it is important not to let the anti-Semitism overshadow the manner and reason for the condemnation.

One can understand, perhaps, the attention given to the violent anti-Semitism of the *Tale* as it is juxtaposed to the pathos of the *Tale*, in which numerous parallels and relations to the life of Christ can be identified. The fatherless clergeon, celebrated for his purity and innocence, is killed by Jews for openly practicing and exemplifying the ways of a proper Christian. A single Jew commits the murder, but all Jews are guilty by

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[29] By no means do I suggest a form of apathy, but rather a willingness to accept an analysis of how the anti-Semitism functions as part of the poem, and not as an ideology distinctly separate from the context within which it is found.

[30] See Michael Leicester, Jr. *The Disenchanted Self: Representing the Subject in the* Canterbury Tales. Berkely: U of Claifornia P, 1990: 212.

[31] See Stephanie Gaynor, "He Says, She Says: Subjectivity and the Discourse of the Other in the *Prioress's Portrait and Tale*," *Medieval Encounters* 5 (1999): 375-90.

association (see below). After the clergeon's death, he is put in a tomb, only to rise up again by means of a divine miracle and speak of his recovery. The miracle is accompanied/prompted by the "greyn" placed on the clergeon's tongue, a direct reference to the Eucharistic wafer.[32] Like Christ's, the boy's life is recorded in order to serve as an *exemplum* for mankind. The various parallels, which I will hereafter refer to as Christological patterns, are emphasized by the numerous references to the Holy Innocents, among whom the clergeon is included by the Prioress.

While early critics recognized that the *Prioress's Prologue* is "reminiscent of both the Office and the Little Office of the Virgin", it was Marie Padgett Hamilton who first recognized that the "*Prioress's Tale* and *Prologue*, taken together, either quote or refer to all the chief portions of the Mass for 28 December, Childermas or the Feast of the Holy Innocents" (1). Hamilton's article discusses the significance of the clergeon's age and young boys' roles in the feast's ceremonies. According to Hamilton, the clergeon "is not merely a little child, but rather the representative of childhood itself on the threshold of accountability" (1). While the Christological patterns are apparent, the emphasis on the Holy Innocents is perhaps more significant, for the Innocents were the sacrificial substitution for Christ.[33] By associating the clergeon with the Innocents, the clergeon's death evokes a greater amount of pathos. It becomes analogous to the death of Christ *as a child*, guilty of nothing more than singing a song in praise of his mother. Further, by adopting a "storie" that has a position in history—as seen in its thirty-seven analogues—the Prioress blends theological "history" with more immediate history—reiterated again

[32] The most recent advocate of this interpretation is Kathleen M. Oliver ("Singing Bread, Manna, and the Clergeon's 'Greyn'," *ChR* 31 (1997):357-364).
[33] For a discussion on sacrificial substitution, see Chapter 1 of René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory, Baltimore: John's Hopkins UP, 1977.

with the reference to "yonge Hugh of Lincoln"—drawing a divine sense of time into the conception of human history (see below).

In Chapter 1, I argued that the *Prioress's Tale* is able to engage itself with the other *Canterbury Tales* in the tale telling competition without condemning itself to the same immorality to which the others are subject because of its genre. At the same time, I proposed that its purpose is to expose the immoral nature of the competition as it, the competition, has developed. Although the *Prioress's Tale* does not participate in accordance with the newly established parameters of the competition, it must be understood that my argument is based not simply on the telling of tales, but also, in addition to Augustine's theory of lies developed in the previous chapter, on the implications and dangers of revenge. Revenge, particularly in the context of binary groups, offers itself to infinite limits, in that harm against one group requires a reactionary attack against the other, resulting in a perpetual cycle of violence that proceeds until all but one are dead. This summary, of course, presumes an initial act of murder, but, more significantly, implies the concept of *lex talionis*. It is not my intention to discuss the idea of a vendetta culture, even though the microcosm of the Canterbury pilgrimage seems to invoke very peculiar political codes of conduct. Rather, it is my intention to focus on the verbal assaults that occur between the pilgrims and to acknowledge how such acts are detrimental not only to the attackers' spiritual condition, but also to the victims' identities.

Though it is somewhat obscured, revenge is a principle theme of the *Prioress's Tale*, one that is foreshadowed, I think, in the clergeon's song, *O Alma Redemptoris*. In "Song and the Ineffable in the *Prioress's Tale*," J. Stephen Russell notes that his students

regularly question the absent text of *O Alma* in the *Prioress's Tale*: "Isn't it peculiar, they say, that so much of the action of the tale depends upon the song and the characters' responses to it" (176). Russell argues that there is a difference between performing and speaking praise, and that the words of the song would depreciate the value of performing "laud". While I do not dismiss his argument, I suggest that he, like most critics of the *Prioress's Tale*, overlooks the simplest aspects of the song. That is to say, the content of *O Alma* is significant to that of the *Prioress's Tale*. Such oversight by critics leads to comments such as, "there is nothing especially fitting about the song, which may itself be the explanation for its absence from the tale" (177). The problem with Russell's argument, which focuses on the *act* of singing, is that the song becomes replaceable, substitutable by any song. Such thought dismisses the possibility of Chaucer's active artistry.

More specifically, the idea that Chaucer's choice of song is irrelevant does not find support in the analogues of the *Prioress's Tale*. Of the thirty-eight analogues, only nine contain *O Alma*, while the majority have *Gaude Maria*.[34] While it is true that the two analogues that are generally suggested as possible direct sources for Chaucer[35]—C1(Corpus Christi College, Oxford, MS 32) and C5 (Vernon Version: Oxford Bodleian MS 3938)—both identify *O Alma* as the boy's song, I find it difficult to accept that Chaucer was not aware of at least some variations in the story's tradition, for reasons described below. And, even if Chaucer was not aware of any versions that contained other songs, his attention to detail and regular modifications of sources insist that he, at

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[34] It must be remembered, as well, that the analogues differ in their complexity. For example, analogue NA6 from Trinity College, Dublin, MS 277 is a single sentence in its entirety: "Moreover, a boy killed by Jews sang this after death, *Alma redemptoris mater*..." (as cited in Robert Correale and Mary Hamel, eds. *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales* vol. II, Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2005).
[35] See Correale and Hamel, *Sources*, 597-98.

minimum, *actively* retained *O Alma* as the song that *causes* the dramatic climax of the narrative. Therefore, we must return to the question of *why* Chaucer chose *O Alma*. And to do so, it is necessary to examine the song itself.

Russell provides his own translation of *O Alma*, in "its most familiar form," (176):[36]

> O Blessed Mother of the Redeemer, Gate of Heaven
> ever-open, and star of the sea, come to the aid
> of the fallen people who strive to be raised up again.
> You have given birth—O Wonder of Nature!—
> to your Holy Creator, a virgin both before and after:
> receive the 'Hail, Mary' of Gabriel, and have mercy on us sinners. (177)

According to Hilda Graef, "The *Alma Redemptoris Mater*, the Advent antiphon, often attributed to Hermannus Contractus, a monk of Reichenau (d. 1054), is probably of a later date (late eleventh or early twelfth century) as it appears only in twelfth-century manuscripts. It is obviously inspired by the *Ave Maris Stella*, and itself is a prayer to the Gate of Heaven and Star of the Sea to help those about to fall, and to have mercy on sinners" (229-30). Between Russell's translation and Graef's explanation, there is an inconsistency that sheds light on the *Prioress's Tale*. Whereas Graef suggests that the prayer asks for help for *those about to fall*, Russell's account asks for help for those who have fallen and *strive to be raised up again*. The word "fall" alone helps to indicate to which group in the *Prioress's Tale* the song is directed: the Christians, *not* the Jews. According to Peter Vardy and Julie Arliss, the events in the Garden of Eden involving

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[36] Russell also provides the Latin form of the poem, which he cites from *The Canterbury Tales: Nine Tales and the General Prologue*, eds. V. A. Kolve and Glending Olson, New York: Norton, 1989: 417.

Adam and Eve are interpreted differently by Christians and Jews: "In the garden they were children, now they have to take responsibility for themselves, their decisions and their behaviour. This is seen in the Jewish tradition as a gift, but in the Christian tradition as 'the fall'" (47). It is unlikely that the clergeon's song is meant to anticipate the Jew's sin of murder, for they would not strive to rise up again because, to them, they have not fallen. It is because of the clergeon's disregard of Jewish "lawes" that they have him murdered. If, then, it is not the Jew's sin that is in question, it follows that the song is directed towards the Christians, and foreshadows an event to come.

That the clergeon's song is directed towards the Christians within the *Prioress's Tale* is supported by Lee Patterson's conception of the ahistorical. As a "storie," the tale is an account of an historical event that is believed to have occurred. According to Patterson, however, the Prioress is "blind" to the significance of historical accuracy. He notes the Prioress's reference to "the murder of Hugh of Lincoln in 1255 as having taken place 'but a litel while ago' (*PT* 686)" ("Living Witnesses" 511), a murder that occurred almost 150 years prior to the writing of the *Canterbury Tales*. There is a discrepancy in the fixity of historical occurrences in this reference, destabilizing historical stability. In light of the "Christological pattern of sacrifice" ("Living Witnesses" 510) found in the tale, historical events are appropriated by the Prioress:

> Consistent with this purpose, then, the tale is directed toward an apocalyptic ahistoricism by soliciting a typological or exegetical reading that would appropriate the historical event it records into a timeless pattern of divine action. In the Middle Ages, the Holy Innocents were traditionally understood as types of Christ, who was himself in turn often represented in late medieval

> religious writing and drama as a sacrificial child [...] In thus calling upon a Christological pattern of sacrifice, the action of the Prioress's narrative seeks to abolish the temporality that conditions and constrains the historical life... ("Living Witnesses" 510)

The *Tale* seeks to step out of human history and function as/within divine time and space, in accordance with medieval Christianity's understanding of God's sense of time which *already has/has yet to* occur(red).[37] In Patterson's words, "the *Prioress's Tale* witnesses a drive toward the pure, the immaculate, and the unalloyed—toward, that is, the ahistorical" ("Living Witnesses" 511). Such a drive serves to draw readers' attention *beyond* the clergeon's death, *beyond* the widow's grievance, and *beyond* the congregation's procession, to the *beyond* whence the boy returns and is suspended: "the clergeon's earthly hymning—and his life—are quickly foregone in favour of the immortality he will be granted in heaven and the divine *canticus* that he will sing in the company of the Lamb" ("Living Witnesses" 511).

The Christological patterns and the clergeon's transcendence after the "greyn" is removed from his tongue cause the congregation to grasp for the lost focal point of the narrative. That is, the clergeon, as central point of the narrative, moves first out of the earthly realm within which the narrative is based, and then out of the structure of the narrative entirely, "beyond the historical world" ("Living Witnesses" 511). Despite the perils that the clergeon has faced, his sincere devotion to Mary culminates in his

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[37] For example, Chadwick describes Augustine's understanding of God's relation to time: "of God we must say that he is unchanging and therefore timeless. He knows past and future, but not as we do in a psychological experience of successiveness. Strictly speaking, therefore, it is a misnomer to speak of divine *fore*knowledge. God knows past and future but not, as we do, in a procession of events" (72, Chadwick's italics).

transcendence to Heaven following a moving account of the Virgin's words to the boy that reinforces the words of *O Alma*:

> My litel child, now wol I fecche thee,
>
> Whan that the greyn is fro thy tonge ytake.
>
> Be nat agast; I wol thee nat forsake. (*PT* 667-69)

The erratic pathos and "pitous lamentacioun" (*PT* 621) of the grieving Christians is calmed by the certainty and assurance of the clergeon's words as he lingers between the earthly and divine realms. That is to say, the *narrative* affect is distilled by the words of the clergeon, as he explains in three stanzas the divine powers that allow him to speak, his life of devotion, followed by the confirmation of a divine reward. The child's life of faith becomes an *exemplum* for those who seek the ultimate reward, ignoring earthly consequences, such as being beaten for ignoring one's Primer studies:

> Now, certes, I wol do my diligence
>
> To Konne it al er Cristemasse be went,
>
> Though that I for my prymer shal be shent
>
> And shal be beten thries in an houre,
>
> I wol it konne Oure Lady for to honoure! (*PT* 539-43)

The clergeon's desire to honour the Virgin Mary surpasses all fears, accepting irrelevant earthly violence for divine salvation.

Once the clergeon's privileged movement between time(s) and space is recognized as an *exemplum*, it is left to determine, like the song upon which so much of this movement is dependent, for whom the boy *as exemplum* is intended. What confuses this matter is the general lack of agents within the story. The widow appears as a fine

Christian example; the Jews kill, and then are killed; and the Provost performs his duty according to "the lawe." Like Patterson, we can again turn to the analogues to find clarification:

> In most of the analogues to this tale found elsewhere, the miracle of the postmortem singing acts as an agency of conversion; and in the other tales of Christian sacrifice in the *Canterbury Tales*—those of the Man of Law, the Clerk, and the Second Nun—the conversion of unbelievers is the central purpose to which the protagonists' sufferings are put. But not here: with the Jews already exterminated, the clergeon rehearses his story not before those in need of conversion but before the Christian congregation gathered in the abbey to celebrate the Mass. ("Living Witnesses" 511)

According to Correale and Hamel, in most analogues of Group A, "the Jews convert as a result of the miracle. In some versions, however, they are punished" (587). In Group B, "the Jews confess the crime and are converted before the Christians learn of it" (588). In the analogues of Group C, the group to which the *Prioress's Tale* (C6) belongs, the results are more random. C1, C2, C3, C4, C7, and C8 do not refer to the fate of the Jews. In C5, noted above for its closeness to the *Prioress's Tale*, a single "Jeuh was Jugget for þat Morþere" (114).[38] C10 (from Trinity College Cambridge MS O.9.38) concludes with the conversion of a Jew and his accomplice who commit the murder.

Most significant of the Group C analogues, however, is C9 (from *Fortalicium fidei contra Judeos, Saracenos, aliosque Christiane fidei inimicos*), in which a boy's

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[38]From "Hou þe Jewes, in Despit of Ure Lady, þrewe a child in a Gonge," as cited in Correale and Hamel, *Sources and Analogues*, 624.

murder by Jews is identified as one of the reasons "there was a third expulsion of the Jews from England:"[39]

> And the king of the realm, when he learned of the Jews' unspeakable and horrible crime, and because of many other things the Jews did to the outrage and affront of Jesus Christ our Savior and of his most blessed mother, which he discovered by an inquiry to seek out the truth of the matter, after deliberate and timely consideration, ordered that, on an assigned day, all the Jews found in the kingdom would be killed. Those who thought better of it [i.e., converted to Christianity] were [not killed like the others but only] despoiled of all their goods, and baptised and expelled from the entire kingdom of England. From that time no Jew ever lived, nor lives, nor dared to appear there, since he would be killed immediately, if he were recognized.[40]

C9 shares three particularly important characteristics with the *Prioress's Tale*. First, it is the king of the realm who judges the Jews, like the Provost of the Asian city in the *Prioress's Tale* (I discuss the implications of a secular judge below). The second characteristic is that the judgement is passed on Jews as a collectivity, and not on a single murderer. In the case of C9, such a decree seems less ambiguous than in Chaucer's story, for the boy is slaughtered by a number of Jews, in perhaps the most explicit manner of ritual murder found in the analogues:

> [A Jew] held a meeting with his accomplices, whose hearts the devil possessed, how they might deliver to death and kill the child. They saw an opportune time when the child would pass through their quarter singing the

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[39] Alfonsus a Spina, "The Expulsion of the Jews from England," trans. Priscilla Throop, as cited in Correale and Hamel, *Sources and Analogues*, 632.
[40] Correale and Hamel, *Sources and Analogues*, 636. Emendations are Throop's.

> said antiphon in a high voice. Suddenly, as if by roaring lions, he was seized and shut up in a certain house, while they plotted the means of his death. And they determined that his tongue, with which he praised the blessed Virgin, should be pulled out from the opposite side of his head. Secondly, that also his heart, with which he thought about the chant, should be ripped out, and finally that his body be thrown in a very deep and very unclean place and one full of stench: that place was their adjoining latrine; so that not a single trace of him could be found.[41]

While the story may only include a handful of Jews, we are reminded (as above) that this event was only one of many that led the king to the decision for expulsion. Further, we are told, in the preface to the story, "There was a third expulsion of the Jews from England. A two-fold cause is given for this expulsion, the first of which I read in certain miracle stories as follows."[42] The distinction I am drawing is that C9 and the *Prioress's Tale* are the only analogues in Group C in which Jews are held collectively responsible for the murder, resulting in the third similar characteristic, a mass death sentence.[43]

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[41] Correale and Hamel, *Sources and Analogues*, 634.
[42] Correale and Hamel, *Sources and Analogues*, 632.
[43] Although the *Prioress's Tale* does not explicitly state that *all* of the Jews in the community are executed, there is, likewise, a lack of textual evidence suggesting that the Provost only punishes a group of Jews. Yet, the Jews in the *Tale* are always referred to as a single unit, either with the direct article "the,"as "Hebrayk peple" (*PT* 560), as "cursed folk of Herodes al newe" (*PT* 574), or simply with a third person plural pronoun. Most convincing, however, is that during the widow's search for her missing son "[a]mong the cursed Jues" (*PT* 599), she asks "*everyJew that dwelte in thilke place* / To telle hire if hir child wente oght forby" (*PT* 601-2, italics mine). Every Jew denies having seen him, even though it is made clear that Satan's address is directed to all Jews in the "Juerie." Immediately following the Jews' denials, the clergeon is found "in that place" (the "Juerie"), to which the other Christians come to gather, and "*the* Jewes" are bound. No individual Jew is found guilty, but rather the Provost "heng *hem* by the lawe" (634, italics mine). If Chaucer had wanted to limit the number of Jews punished, it is likely he would have had the clergeon discovered within one of the Jew's homes, as is the case in many of the analogues. Rather, I think the ambiguity is intended so as to correlate with, and question, the collective responsibility placed on Jews for the death of Jesus discussed above, and again below.

It is necessary to note, however, that the connections between C9 and the *Prioress's Tale* are tentative. C9's manuscript (*Fortalicium fidei contra Judeos, Saracenos, aliosque Christiane fidei inimicos*) is dated between 1458-60, over half a century after Chaucer's death. Further, as it was written by Alphonsus a Spina, who was Doctor of Theology in the Franciscan College at Salamanca when he wrote the *Fortalicium*, questions of geography arise. It is impossible to determine whether previous copies of this analogue existed, or if it was based on analogues that have been lost in history. What C9 allows us to do, nevertheless, is identify a second tradition to which Chaucer may be alluding. Among the new analogues group (NA), analogues discovered since Carleton Brown's study in 1941, NA3, NA4, and NA6 do not declare a judgement for the murder of the boy. In NA2 and NA5, the miracle causes Jews to convert to Christianity. In NA1, however, all of the Jews are killed, and "the one who had struck the boy they burned in the fire, saying: 'He who commits such a deed reaps such a reward'."[44] Not only does NA1 share with C9 a mass death sentence—though it should be noted that there is no sovereign in NA1—but both stories are set in England, whereas most analogues do not include a location. Even more striking is that NA1 was also written by a Spaniard, Alfonso El Sabio, between 1257 and 1283 (Correale and Hamel 595). The possibility that a secondary tradition within the *Prioress's Tale* analogues exists, one in which Jews are treated collectively, murdered on a mass scale, but all in a locale other than the author's, grants a new position from which to analyse the *Prioress's Tale*.

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[44] Alfonso El Sabio, *Songs of Holy Mary*, trans. Kathleen Kulp-Hill, as cited in Correale and Hamel, *Sources and Anaolgues*, 608.

Although there are enough differences between NA1 and the *Prioress's Tale*—and enough similarities between the *Prioress's Tale* and other analogues—to dismiss the notion that NA1 was *the* source from which Chaucer was working, there are particular similarities that cannot be disregarded. First, as I have already mentioned, the singing boy is murdered by a single Jew in both stories, yet all Jews become guilty by association. In the *Prioress's Tale*, it is the Prioress, in an apostrophe, who redirects the focus from the singular to the plural:

> An homycide therto han they hyred,
>
> That in an aleye hadde a privee place;
>
> And as the child gan forby for to pace,
>
> This cursed Jew hym hente, and heeld hym fast,
>
> 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. (*PT* 567-73)

The swiftness with which the Prioress passes from "This cursed Jew" to "they hym threwe" is hardly noticeable, particularly when accomplished by means of masking the pronoun switch with the filth of excrement in a claim that not only repeats the previous line, but demands the attention of an "I" statement. After the switch, the plural is used in every reference to Jews in the story. Merrall Llewelyn Price suggests "that, as in the death of Christ, all Jews bear collective responsibility for the act" (201). Certainly, following the Christological patterns discussed above, there is reason to accept this claim, and John Archer, noting Boethius' *De Fide Catholica*, adds that "in the Middle Ages [...]

the Jews were held not only perpetually guilty of deicide but perpetually in the state of committing the crime" (47).

In light of the collective responsibility to which both NA1 and the *Prioress's Tale* postulate, we must acknowledge another similarity between the works: the mode of punishment. That is, in both stories, the Jews are punished in accordance with the Old Law of *lex talionis* (Exodus 21:23-27). In NA1, the Christians proclaim, "he who commits such a deed reaps such a reward," while the Provost in the *Prioress's Tale* declares, "Yvele shal have that yvele wol deserve" (*PT* 632). Inasmuch as these phrases mirror each other, the distinction between speakers is fundamental. Whereas in C9 the Jews are either killed or converted and exiled by decree of a secular, though Christian, king, the Christians who murder the Jews in NA1 disregard the New Law of Matthew 5 for the *lex talionis*.[45] Yet, the Christians of the *Prioress's Tale* exercise no law of their own. It is the Provost of the city that "heng hem by the lawe" (*PT* 634). Edward H. Kelly notes this distinction,[46] and suggests that the Provost may not be a Christian, but Sheila Delany points to the Provost's reaction upon being sent for, and argues, "obviously he is imaged as also a Christian" (n.8 200):

> The Cristene folk that thurgh the strete wente
> In coomen for to wonder upon this thyng,
> And hastily they for the provost sente;
> He cam anon withouten tariyng,

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[45] Through this thesis, when I speak of the New Law, I am speaking generally of New Testament Law over Old Testament Law; when I speak of Matthew 5, I am speaking generally of Christ's Expounding of the Law (part of the Sermon on the Mount). In particular, I note two passages: *You have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth. But I say to you not to resist evil: but if one strike thee on thy right cheek, turn to him also the other* (Matthew 5:38-39); and, *You have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbor, and hate thy enemy. But I say to you, Love your enemies: do good to them that hate you: and pray for them that persecute and calumniate you* (Matthew 5:43-44).

[46] Edward H. Kelly, "'By mouth of innocentz': the Prioress Vindicated," *PLL* 5 (1969), 362-74.

> And herieth Crist that is of hevene kyng,
>
> And eek his mooder, honour of mankynde,
>
> And after that the Jewes leet he bynde. (*PT* 614-620)

Delany's reaction is reasonable given the Provost's praise of Christ and the Virgin Mary, but we must not dismiss the details of the story. In the opening lines of the tale, we are given the context:

> Ther was in Asye, in a greet cite,
>
> Amonges Cristene folk a Jewerye,
>
> Sustened by a lord of that contree
>
> For foule usure and lucre of vileynye... (*PT* 488-91)

If the Jews are managed for money, it is difficult to accept that they should be exterminated so easily. Moreover, it seems likely that the Provost would answer to the Lord, thereby complicating his swift reaction to condemn the Jews. At this point, a game of speculation begins regarding the religion and context of the region and its people; however, I would argue that these are the actions of a man affected by a miracle—a miracle that converts an excessive number of people in the analogues—but has yet to learn the ways of a Christian—hence, acting in accordance with "the lawe" (634) of the land appears to be the appropriate course of action.

Whether we accept this latter suggestion is of little consequence; what we must acknowledge is the peculiar chronology of this section. In stanza 19 of the tale, the Christians gather around the murdered clergeon and call for the Provost, who praises Christ and Mary and binds the Jews. In stanza 20, the clergeon is carried "unto the nexte abbay" (624) along with his grieving mother. It is only after everyone has left the scene

that, in stanza 21, the Provost has the Jews, "With torment and with shameful deeth echon" (628), quartered by horses and hanged. Stanza 22 returns to the narrative of the clergeon. Each of these stanzas is efficiently closed off, and the events in each do not "bleed" into the adjacent stanzas following the departure of the Christians. The precision with which these divergent plots insist that the Christians are ignorant to the fate of the Jews is curious, as though the Christians—or the Prioress—insist on ignorance, and suspend the need to consider the New Law of Matthew 5. As a result, the Prioress defers the Christians' responsibility to the Provost. In effect, the Christians take revenge on the Jews by turning their backs to responsibility, refusing the Jews mercy through inactivity disguised as ignorance.

If, instead, we accept Delany's position that the Provost is already a Christian, the current discussion does not alter. In fact, what occurs is an inversion of the same logic that condemns all of the Jews to punishment. In the stanza in which the Jews' punishment is described, the third person singular pronoun is retained:

> With torment and with shameful deeth echon,
> This provost dooth thise Jewes for to sterve
> That of this mordre wiste, and that anon.
> He nolde no swich cursednesse observe.
> "Yvele shal have that yvele wol deserve";
> Therfore with wilde hors he dide hem drawe,
> And after that he heng hem by the lawe. (*PT* 628-34)

Such tasks, of course, would be impossible to accomplish alone, but by retaining the singular pronoun, the narrative insists that the Provost alone bore responsibility for the

fate of the Jews. Instead of all Jews bearing the guilt of a single murderer, a single executioner bears the responsibility of killing all of the Jews, resulting in an exaggeration of the fallout that occurred in history due to the death of Jesus. The Provost functions as a sort of scapegoat who uses his secular position to execute the law of the land, rather than the merciful law of Matthew 5.

It should not be surprising, therefore, that the clergeon is left to address the Christians at the end of the tale, as though it is determined that the Christians will turn a "blind eye" to the persecution of the Jews. It is not a surprise that those who are "hateful to Crist" commit an atrocity, repeating a Christological pattern; but it is a surprise that the Christians ignore the teachings of Mathew 5, and dismiss some of Christ's final words on the cross: *Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do* (Luke 23:34). When we recall Graef's interpretation of *O Alma*, we understand that the song foreshadows the Christians who are *about to fall*. Without the miracle of the clergeon's living-dead speech, the Christians would not be chastised for their actions, nor receive the boy as an *exemplum* of how to move beyond the material realm to the divine. In his speech, the clergeon even reminds the congregation of where they can find the teachings of Christ: "But Jesu Crist, as ye in books fynde, / Wil that his glorie laste and be in mynde" (*PT* 653-53). In closing the tale, before her apostrophe regarding "yonge Hugh of Lyncoln" (*PT* 684), the Prioress states, "Enclosen they his litel body sweete. / Ther he is now, god leve us for to meete!" (*PT* 682-83). The proper destination is acknowledged, along with the example of proper living. But more significantly, the final stanza identifies precisely the fault of the preceding congregation:

> O yonge Hugh of Lyncoln, slayn also

With cursed Jewes, as it is notable,

For it is but a litel while ago,

Preye eek for us, we sinful folk unstable,

That of his mercy God so merciable

On us his grete mercy multiplie,

For reverence of his mooder Marie. Amen (*PT* 684-690)

The Prioress's triple reference to mercy, exaggerated with the word "multiplie," is overly elaborated to the point of disbelief, as though something is being disguised, or overcompensated for. I argue that this compensation is intended to cover the ignorance of the Christians who dismiss Mathew 5. There is a false modesty in the Prioress's declaration that "*we* [are] sinful folk unstable" (*PT* 687, italics mine).

To suggest that Chaucer is presenting the Prioress as attempting to cover up and manipulate discrepancies in her own story has great implications. I will discuss the function of the Prioress in greater detail in Chapter 3, but for now I wish to identify two separate intents: the intent of the Prioress, and what I will call the *intent of the story*. If we were to remove all of the Prioress's apostrophes, I believe we would receive a distinctly different story. As I noted above, it is the repetition of the Prioress's apostrophe that displaces the guilt of one Jew to all Jews. Further, as I have been discussing, the Prioress's final apostrophe overcompensates for the Christians' inactivity. It is not my intention to start assigning the voice of Chaucer to the tale,[47] but I find that there is a distinction between the Prioress's narrative voice and her commentary, as

[47] My position on this matter is similar to Leicester's, who argues that the Canterbury tales are "individually voiced, and radically so—that each of the tales is primarily (in the sense of 'first' that is, the place where one starts) an expression of its teller's personality and outlook as embodied in the unfolding 'now' of the telling" [sic] (6). However, his position is not consistent with my reading of the Prioress's performance, which I discuss in more detail in Chapter 3.

though the latter becomes aware of what the former is saying as the tale unfolds. Before the death of the clergeon, the Prioress interrupts only twice: once when she remembers Saint Nicholas, and again to repeat the sweetness of the clergeon's song. After the murder, the Prioress interrupts more frequently, the first time for twelve full lines. This indicates, I think, that there is a tension between the Prioress's intentions and the story itself. According to the text, this tension can be explained by considering the Prioress's request in her prologue:

> My konnyng is so wayk, O blissful Queene,
> For to declare thy grete worthynesse
> That I ne may the weighte nat susteene;
> But as a child of twelf month oold, or lesse,
> That kan unnethes any word expresse,
> Right so fare I, and therfore I yow preye,
> Gydeth my song that I shal of yow seye. (*PP* 481-87)

The Prioress asks the Virgin Mary to inspire her song because the Prioress is incapable of praising the Virgin's worthiness, and incapable of speech. In the midst of the inspired story, however, the Prioress finds herself manipulating the story in the midst of her apostrophes. Thus, I argue that she attempts to manipulate the inherent intent of the story, though unsuccessfully.

At this point, it is important to recall the discussion of lies and intent found in Chapter 1. The *Prioress's Tale* serves to emphasize intent, particularly in relation to the spoken word, or song, as it were. As noted above, the Prioress identifies herself as a child and refers to her tale as a song. Within the tale, of course, is the clergeon who sings

a song. We can begin to consider, then, that the clergeon's song is intended to act analogously to the *Canterbury Tales*. In Chapter 1, I explained what constitutes an improper tale. Here, I argue that the clergeon's song demonstrates the danger of lies, and the significance of intent.

To a Christian, there is no reason to consider any part of *O Alma Redemptoris* as a lie. For the Jews who hear it, however, its "sentence" dismisses their "laws reverence" (*PT* 564). A praise to the Virgin Mary confirms her existence and role, and thereby all that is associated with her, including Christ as Saviour. If Christ's existence and role as Saviour are true, then that means that the Jewish faith is incorrect, and an originary aspect of Jewish identity is false. If such is the case, the identity of the Jews is fractured to such an extent that the Jews are no longer "themselves." Against this threat to meaning, to self, a verbal assault on character not unlike those of the *quiting* pilgrims, the Jews react in an exaggerated manner, brutally killing the clergeon, and thereby confirming their own existence. However, it must be understood that the Jews do not sacrifice the clergeon for the purposes of annihilating the Other, but to solidify their own identity: not to destroy the binary Jew/Christian, but to emphasize that difference. And thus begins an escalation of violence that results in the extinction of one community.

Yet, the clergeon's song can hardly be condemned by a group of pilgrims on their way to the shrine of Thomas à Beckett. After all, the song is a devotional antiphon in praise of the Virgin Mary. What is striking is the exuberant manner in which the clergeon becomes determined to learn the song, and the peculiar relation he has to it. When the boy hears the song at school, "he drough hym ner and ner, / And herkned ay the words and the noote, / Til he the firste vers koude al by rote" (*PT* 520-22). Because

of his age, "noght wiste he what this Latyn was to seye" (*PT* 523). The words are incomprehensible to the clergeon, yet the song maintains a power over him that draws *his* attention.[48] Twice the clergeon prays to his schoolmate "T'expounden hym this song in his langage" (526), "Ful often tyme upon his knowes bare" (529). The clergeon figuratively prays to the song, even before he knows its meaning. Despite the schoolmate's "small grammeere," the clergeon learns that the song praises the Virgin, and becomes determined to learn it by "Cristenmasse." Though the clergeon does not understand the words of the song, his *intent* is to praise the Virgin Mary.

The clergeon's intent is perhaps the most pure form imaginable. Taught by his widowed mother to worship the Virgin from a very young age, the clergeon knelt before every image of Mary—just as he kneels before the song—and said *Ave Marie*. We are told that he never forgot to worship Mary, and that he is equated with Saint Nicholas, "For he so yong to Crist dide reverence" (515). Once he learns the antiphon, he "ful murily" sings the song twice a day passing through the "Juerie":

> His felawe taught hym homeward prively,
>
> Fro day to day, til he koude it by rote,
>
> And thane he song it wel and boldely,
>
> Fro word to word acordynge with the note. (544-47)

Although the clergeon does not understand the words, he is still able to sing it from memory. Thus, the words alone for him have no meaning, but are inscribed with the meaning of his intent. We can see, then, in relation to Chapter 1, that the clergeon does not lie because he truly believes his intent. Because Chaucer does not provide the words

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[48] That this particular song has power over *this particular boy* can be explained as a foreshadowing of the events to come, but this explanation alone is somewhat insufficient.

to the song in the text, we witness the significance of intent in its purest form. Clearly, intent communicates sincerely, which is evident in the clergeon's role in the miracle, and his divine reward at the end of the tale. Therefore, the offence that the Jews feel is an exaggeration of miscomprehension. They perceive the song to tell lies, but are ignorant to the truth on their own account. In the *Canterbury Tales*, then, we understand that the assaults and lies between pilgrims are dependant not only on the intent of the speaker, but the understanding of the audience as well.

The *Prioress's Tale* is, therefore, an examination of the dissemination and reception of language. The fate of the clergeon demonstrates that moral language is a product of intent. We understand by means of the Jews how miscomprehension is the fault of the audience, yet speakers must be aware of the dangers that may arise due to others' ignorance. Ultimately, however, it is better to face these dangers if one's language is true, because the heavenly reward that the clergeon receives outweighs the possibility of earthly violence. At the same time, those who bear witness have a responsibility to interject, which becomes evident in the Christians' lack of participation regarding the Jews' punishment. Their ignorance functions as revenge, which begets more violence, much like the reciprocal violence of the *quiting* pilgrims. However, despite the Prioress's attempt to gloss the Christians' actions, she is not unaware of the teachings of her own tale. In fact, in the following chapter I argue that she actively engages the immorality of the tale-telling contest, and presents herself and her tale as sacrifices in order to alleviate the injustices thus far committed, and re-establish a moral competition.

Chapter 3

Faith in Silence, Silent Faith

> If I believe what I say, even if it is false, even if I am wrong, and if I am not trying to mislead someone by communicating this error, then I am not lying. One does not lie simply by saying what is false, so long as one believes in good faith in the truth of what one believes or assents to in one's opinions. It is the question of faith and of good faith that we must treat this evening. (Derrida, *Without Alibi*, 31)

At stake in this chapter is the faith of the Prioress, her faith in her silence, and her faith in her Faith. The extent to which the Prioress desires to imitate the perfection of her *exemplum* requires her to offer both her silence and her complacency to the Faith she attempts to invoke. However, in the midst of her tale, the Prioress's faith wavers, and she attempts to manipulate the tale she tells in order to influence the audience's reactions and to avoid retributive responses that may arise from misinterpretations of the *Tale*. The Prioress becomes concerned with earthly perception rather than spiritual truth, thus deviating from the model of the clergeon. In terms of the tale-telling competition, the Prioress's actions are similar to those of other pilgrims, though she is *quiting* herself, in effect. I begin by examining the similarities of the clergeon and the Prioress in order to identify the Prioress's initial intent to follow the *exemplum* of her protagonist, as she offers herself as a silent vessel through whom Mary can inspire the *Tale*. I then examine her increasing involvement in the story, and demonstrate that the Prioress's faith fails as she becomes discontent with the message being related. As a result, the Prioress attempts to reconstitute the story with linguistic binaries that formulate her understanding of the

world, yet contradict the *exemplum*. In her *Portrait*, I find further evidence for her investment in perception and her misplaced compassion. Next, I consider the Prioress's failed faith in relation to the tale-telling contest and argue that she is established as a negative *exemplum* that shows the ease with which a person can falter, and how faith can help determine how to respond correctly to, or face, injustice and danger.

The *Prioress's Tale* presents the character of the "litel" clergeon as a figure of spiritual perfection who is not distracted by earthly concerns. While the comparisons to Christ and the Holy Innocents identified in Chapter 2 serve to establish the clergeon as an archetypical figure, he is individualized in the *Tale* by means of his desires and decisions. The clergeon's devotion to the Christian faith is exemplified by his adherence to his mother's teachings of *how* to live a proper Christian life. She teaches him to venerate the Virgin Mother by kneeling down and saying *Ave Marie* whenever "he saugh th'ymage / Of Christes mooder" (*PT* 505-06), and to "worshipe" always the "blisful Lady." Yet, as a seven year old, the clergeon is on the brink of accountability, and he must decide for himself how best to live as a Christian. When he first encounters *O Alma Redemptoris* and his devotion comes into conflict with the authorities of his Christian school, he is faced with the decision to do as he is told by his teachers and learn his "prymer," or to honour the Virgin through song and face a violent punishment. Without hesitation, he chooses the latter: "Though that I for my prymer shal be shent / And shal be beten thries in an houre, / I wol [Alma Redemptoris] knonne Oure Lady for to honoure" (*PT* 541-43). The clergeon's decision privileges the spiritual over the earthly—as both "category" and authority—and it would seem that his earlier devotion to Mary makes the decision easier since, seemingly, it is with help of the Mother, by means of the mysterious powers of the

song, that (s)he "decides."[49] Whether he is aware of the dangers involved, the clergeon decides to sing proudly twice a day "thurghout the Juerie" (*PT* 551). Whereas the clergeon initially praises the Virgin in private prayer before her image, he later praises her publicly "wel and boldely" (*PT* 546) through song.

The movement from private to public devotion is what instigates the danger the clergeon faces. His sole intent is to praise Mary, which is evident by his lack of knowledge regarding *O Alma*; he knows that the song honours Mary, but he does not know what its words mean. This devotion is celebrated in the *Tale*, but we must be careful not to confuse devotion with innocence. The clergeon's innocence derives *from* his devotion as he focuses on spiritual matters rather than earthly concerns. His earthly perspective is evident in his linguistic comprehension of the world, ignorant of value constructions. The concepts of good and evil hardly exist for the child, and it is because of the geography of the Jewry, perhaps, that he does not identify it as a hostile space. Because the Jewry is open at both ends, it is not an enclosed space; it resists borders and definite categorization. For the clergeon, the world as binaries is beginning to unfold: right and wrong, violence and non-violence, etc. However, he resists these implications by adhering to pre-linguism, ignoring the grammar lessons of his primer to learn *O Alma*,

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[49] It is difficult to attribute agency to the clergeon, here, for the power of the song, which derives from Mary herself, entrances and attracts the clergeon:

> This litel child, his litel book lernynge,
> As he sat in the scole at his prymer,
> He *Alma Redemptoris* herde synge,
> As children lerned hire antiphoner;
> And as he dorste, he drough hym ner and ner,
> And herkned ay the words and the noote,
> Til he the firste vers koude al by rote. (*PT* 516-22)

The word "dorste" is problematic; it is unclear whether a transcendental power such as Mary beseeches the clergeon through the song, or if he must move closer to be able to hear the words in order to memorize them. It is for that reason that I have written "(s)he 'decides'," because Mary's involvement denies the clergeon's agency, and any form of decision. It is clear, however, that it is the clergeon who decides to learn the antiphon before Christmas, according to the story.

and directing all of his attention to worshipping Mary while ignoring earthly consequences.

As the teller of the *Tale* who depicts the *exemplum* of the clergeon, it is not surprising that the Prioress attempts to imitate the perfection of her protagonist. Like the clergeon, she praises the Virgin through song. Whereas he learns *O Alma Redemptoris* by "rote" from a schoolmate, she beseeches Mary to "gydeth" her song. Both the Prioress and the clergeon are presented as empty vessels through whom the virtues of Mary can be praised without taint: while the clergeon does not know the meaning of the words he sings, the Prioress insists her words are divinely inspired because, she admits, her "konnyng is so wayk" (*PT* 481) and "[t]her may no tonge expresse in no science" (*PT* 476) Mary's "vertu," "grete humylitee," and "grete worthyness." The *Prioress's Prologue* and *Tale* present language as fallible, incapable of encapsulating that which it describes, and subordinate to intent. They glorify the pre-material, pre-historical divine realm of spirit, a point of origin still most pure at the stage of infancy because a child on earth is less defiled than one who has been subject to the potential "filth" of earthly influences. While the clergeon is only beginning to see the world in binary oppositions (indications of human judgement), the Prioress comprehends it through such distinctions. Her perspective, however, is contrary to the celebration of the clergeon's devotion.

As a result, the Prioress needs to offer herself in the pure form of pre-linguistic infancy in order to offer herself as a silent vessel through whom Mary can speak. In her *Prologue*, she attempts to invert time in order to associate herself with the celebrated characteristics of the clergeon, which Edward I. Condren demonstrates by tracing references to the various stages of life from adulthood to spirit. The first stanza, Condren

argues, "reverses the process of natural growth, beginning with mature men, pausing at a suggested image of praying children, and concluding with suckling infants" (197). In the second stanza, "[t]ime retreats even farther...as its central image—bearing and labouring—take us back to gestation" (197). Finally, in the third stanza, "the combined motifs of intimate fleshly activity and regressing time arrive at a still earlier stage, the central paradox of Christianity, the metaphysical conception through which the Spirit became flesh" (197). He later concludes that "[w]hereas God originated the process from his eternal state in spirit to become flesh in Christ, the Prioress begins in the flesh. She must diminish, deny, rarefy out of existence, the flesh in which she originated to become the pure spirit to which she aspires" (199). I do not deny such aspirations of the Prioress, but we must not forget that they are confined and constructed themselves by language. Not only does she outline her desire through the intricate metaphor, but she attempts to overcome the flawed nature of her desires through her repeated references to the flawed nature of language; that is, she is caught in a circular trap in which she attempts to overcome language through language itself.

Nevertheless, the Prioress's awareness of pre-linguism and affinity towards it are evident in her prologue. In the first stanza, the word "parfourned" appears twice, both occurrences related to praising the Lord:

> For noght oonly thy laude precious
> Parfourned is by men of dignitee,
> But by the mouth of children thy bountee
> Parfourned is, for on the brest soukynge
> Somtyme shewen they thyn heriynge. (*PP* 455-59)

It is conceivable that the former instance refers principally to the male clerics' "power to preach and praise" since, as Elizabeth Robertson notes, "from Innocent III's 1210 decree on, abbesses and prioresses were forbidden to exercise the clerical roles of preaching, blessing nuns and hearing confession" (153).[50] Still, the relation between the two instances clarifies that the verbal and non-verbal components are irrelevant. Rather, the emphasis is placed on the *intent* with which something is done. True, the Prioress is neither man nor babe, but I argue that this statement is intended to be inclusive rather than exclusive. Because the former is indicated by means of the negative ("noght oonly"), the statement suggests that praise is not reliant upon something that "men of dignitee" *have*, which I presume to be knowledge and/or experience. The youngest and most (in)capabale humans are able to praise the Lord through the most basic activity. Indeed, the Prioress later reminds her audience of "Seint Nicholas," who "so yong to Crist dide reverence" (*PT* 515).

According to the Prioress, language itself is inadequate, or even irrelevant, as "Ther may no tonge expresse in no science" (*PP* 476) the grandness of the Virgin's virtues. Despite the highly nominal tendencies of such a statement, though, we are assured that our prayers do not fall on deaf ears:

> For somtyme, Lady, er men praye to thee,

[50] Robertson reads in this stanza "that children have *authority* to speak despite the fact that men usually are the 'performers' of praise" (153), and "by comparing herself to a child" in the final stanza of the prologue, "the Prioress claims her own authority to speak despite her simultaneous acknowledgement of her own worthlessness" (152). Other critics, like Gaynor, whose position I have already discussed, likewise seek to validate and authorize the Prioress's speech. My position on the matter is that the Prioress does not need to validate herself given the conditions of the tale-telling contest. When the competition is established, the pilgrims agree to the Host's position as "governour." Each pilgrim forgoes his or her social ranking, and subjects him/herself to the same laws and rules as his/her counterparts. As such, within the microcosm of the pilgrimage, each pilgrim should be seen by the others as an equal from the outset of the journey. Whether they do is another matter; but when the Host politely requests that the Prioress tell a story, a courtesy not shown to many, she accepts a space of authority—a space in which her authority is not questioned, unlike other pilgrims who are interrupted.

> Thou goost biforn of thy benyngnytee,
>
> And getest us the lyght, of thy preyere,
>
> To gyden us unto thy Sone so deere. (*PP* 477-80)

Although the syntax of this sentence is somewhat obscure, it suggests that the Virgin is capable of understanding people's prayers before they are articulated. As Augustine would argue, the "idea" is in the mind before being spoken as a "thing." Thus, Mary is capable of comprehending a person's true *intent*. Further, she is able to direct men's prayers, guiding them to the Son. Thus, in the context of lies, if a person dismisses his intent and speaks falsely, he is potentially dismissing the thoughts and intent of Mary.

The Prioress's use of the word "somtyme," once in relation to men's prayers (*PP* 477) and once in relation to non-verbal praise by children (*PP* 459) remains a problem. Because the Prioress does not offer an explanation for such selectivity, I argue that we can deduce that she does not know. A mystery, or secret, surrounds the matter, which suggests that one cannot presume to understand the divine will. At the same time, this ambiguity allows the Prioress to defer responsibility to the greatest of authorities: God, Christ, and Mary. After all, the Prioress is just as mortal as the other pilgrims. She realizes the limitations of her own capacity, regarding which Louise O. Fradenburg writes, "The Prioress's story-telling 'labour' has in fact no capacity to *produce* ('encressen') the honour of the Virgin, for honour itself (the disembodied, abstract quality) *is* the Virgin; likewise she is the 'roote,' the origin of whatever 'bountee' the Prioress's own creativity might produce" (212). Yet, by openly requesting Mary's aid to "gydeth" her "song," the Prioress defers responsibility for her own tale to divine authorities:

My konnyng is so wayk, O blissful Queene,

For to declare thy grete worthynesse

That I ne may the weighte nat susteene;

But as a child of twelf month oold, or lesse,

That kan unnethes any word expresse,

Right so fare I, and therfore I yow preye,

Gydeth my song that I shal of yow seye. (*PP* 481-87)

Implied in this final stanza of the *Prologue* is the Virgin's agency throughout the tale that follows. The Prioress, argues Kathleen M. Hobbs, "sees her speech, coming as it does from the body that binds her to sin, as inadequate for prayer, and so she prays for the voice of the Virgin [...] to take over for the purposes of her prayer" (187).[51] Not only does this allow for divine intervention regarding historical inaccuracies of the "storie"—which I identified in Chapter 1 as a genre dealing with events perceived to be historically accurate—it allows the Prioress to be unsuccessful. If language alone cannot demonstrate the "worthynesse" of Mary, and Mary does not aid the Prioress, then the Prioress is not at fault if the *exemplum* fails to move the pilgrims. Further, if the *exemplum* fails, the Prioress cannot be held accountable *spiritually*, for she still completes her "labour." One must understand that she is not a "child of twelf month oold, or lesse", but "*as* a child of twelf month oold, or lesse" (*PP* 484, my italics) she does her "labour," attempting to insist upon her childlike pre-linguism. As the simile indicates, language can only make a

[51] Hobbs' argument, intended to focus on the Prioress's body as female, continues: "Thus we see the Prioress in the impossible state of all monastic women: holy enough to identify herself with the mother of God but too sinful in her mortality to reach the heavenly ideal that Mary represents" (187). Although my argument does not require a theoretically gendered framework, nor do I identify the same gendered references in the *Prologue* that many feminist readings have suggested, I believe that Hobbs' reading of the sinful body functions just as well gender unspecific.

promise; it cannot fulfill that promise. The Prioress desires to *perform* her story *as* an infant without language, speaking only the pure signifier of Mary's words while remaining silent herself—like the clergeon.[52] But this promise requires continuous affirmation which the Prioress fails to provide.

Although the Prioress's initial intentions are morally and pedagogically sound, her increasing role in her story becomes problematic. Her attempts to refocus the story's message reveal that she has abandoned her initial intentions. In the closing stages of the *Tale*, there are increasing irregularities regarding the purpose and agency of the miracle, evident in the narrative's lack of continuity and the teller's attempts to manipulate the story. It was not uncommon in the Middle Ages for a teller of an *exemplum* to provide commentary, but the extent to which the Prioress is present in her story contradicts her self-identified role in the *Prologue*. Thus, it becomes evident that her intent competes with the *intent of the story* that I first identified in Chapter 2. The Prioress, in effect, *quites* herself.

Here, I must first clarify the terms "present" and "absent." Generally speaking, critics use the term "present" to indicate the recognition of a particular individual's voice, typically the narrator. To hear the voice of the Prioress by means of her style, pathos, and use of the first person pronoun is to understand that it is she who is telling the *Prioress's Prologue* and *Tale*. Richard H. Osberg, however, argues that the voice of the *Tale* is not the Prioress's, but is rather "simply a style":

[52] While most critics recognize the Prioress's self-comparison to the clergeon, Spector also notes that she more specifically "places herself at the age of the innocents to whose slaughter her tale refers" (192). The significance, I argue, is that the Innocents are already established as transcended souls before the language of the *Prioress's Tale*, and securely established through the authority of the Bible.

> The voice we hear is not hers [...] but that of a textuality which conceptualized her as its audience. The Prioress has been characterized as a Woman of Style; I [argue] here that the Prioress is simply a style, a style recognizably feminized for its largely female audience, but one constituted nonetheless of a masculine textuality. The style itself, in its recursiveness and its incremental repetitions and oppositions, subverts its implicit claim to represent a consistent fictive voice. (53)

Osberg identifies an inconsistency in the narrative voice of the *Tale*, which he attributes to a "self-cancelling fiction":

> Rhetorical oppositions—particularly in the representations of time and space and in the association between the revulsion toward the body (cesspits, torture, anti-Judaism, and the theme of virginity)—present serious distortions in the narrative voice. The *Prioress's Tale* represents itself in a series of oppositions, social and spiritual, natural and supernatural, in which mutilation and magical transformations, dung and salvation, scatology and eschatology are the polarities of a self-cancelling fiction. These oppositions suggest that the chief rhetorical strategy by which the verse identifies its provenance as a feminine "voice" also functions as the language by which it subverts itself and its claims to authenticity, laying bare the absence of a voice, an absence that, ironically, the rhetoric of apostrophe attempts to obscure. (27-28)

According to Osberg, the "style" that narrates the *Tale* subverts itself, which results in absence. The rhetoric of apostrophe, which must, presumably, be attributed to the Prioress, serves only to mask her inactivity through the *Tale*. However, I argue that the

Prioress's apostrophes attempt not only to obscure, but, in fact, to manipulate and erase the story.

Although I agree with Osberg's formulation of the absent voice, I attribute it—and, therefore, agency—to the silent, divine voice of Mary, invoked in the *Prioress's Prologue*.[53] Whereas Osberg suggests the *Tale's* working binaries create a "self-cancelling fiction," I demonstrate below that the deconstruction of these terms constitutes a return to pre-linguism. Because this new linguistic order does not correlate with the Prioress's understanding of the world, she attempts to reconstitute the binaries through her interjections, as she attempts to manipulate the story's message. Thus, it is the Prioress's *activeness* with which I am particularly concerned. For this study, I am using the terms "present" and "presence" to indicate the Prioress's active engagement with the tale as she speaks. So, though it is obviously the Prioress speaking, I consider her voice *present* during her interruptions and the moments in which she attempts to manipulate the story, yet *absent* when she relates the tale as it has been inspired. As I examine the various instances, it becomes apparent that we can associate the *intent of the story* with her absence, and the intent of the Prioress with her presence.

In what follows, I examine the Prioress's present voice. Gaynor writes: "In each interruption voiced in the first person, the Prioress shows herself as maker, guiding her audience, marking what they should focus on, and emphasizing the important parts of the story. Thus she actively attempts to control the significance of her narrative" (382). The distinction between our approaches, however, is that I look beyond the first person

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[53] The presence of a divine voice is, of course, confined to the narrative of the *Canterbury Tales*. Osberg is not entirely misled to identify the absence of the Prioress's voice. In the absence of a speaking narrator, we are left with only the author, Chaucer—*not* the voice of Chaucer, which I have clearly stated I will not identify, but simply the "Word" of the author. I consider this concept in more detail in Chapter 4.

pronoun, and suggest that the Prioress does not want to be identified as a maker. Gaynor's assertions are correct, but they do not correlate with the Prioress's deferral of responsibility. If the Prioress is identified as a maker, her passive role as a vessel through whom Mary can speak is undermined because it exposes her attempts to manipulate the *intent of the story*. Nevertheless, the manner in which she engages with the *Tale* unveils her active role and motivation.

The first interjection[54] by the Prioress occurs in lines 500-01: "This is to seyn, to syngen and to rede, / As smale children doon in hire childhede." These last two lines of the second stanza of the *Tale* are intended to clarify the initial term "doctrine" of line 499. The lack of a pronoun allows the audience to pass over the phrase quickly, but it is curious that the Prioress would prefer to secularize a word associated with religious instruction, particularly in a story devoted to the Virgin. It seems likely, however, that because the following stanza introduces the clergeon's religious instruction from his mother, the Prioress is attempting to distinguish knowledge from faith. The stanza break between the description of school learning and the introduction of the clergeon and his family education emphasizes the distinction, which is later enhanced by the clergeon's decision to forego his grammar to learn *O Alma Redemptoris*, despite fears of violence. We must also recall that, in her prologue, the Prioress has dismissed the notion of "science" as a means of communication capable of encompassing the religious. Thus, faith is distinguished from knowledge, but, also, the sacred is distinguished from the secular.

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[54] I am using the word "interjection" to identify the Prioress's *presence* as I have established it, and thereby to avoid the categorical definitions used by the critics I cite in order to avoid confusing my argument with theirs.

The Prioress's next interjection occurs in lines 513-15, when she recalls Saint Nicholas through the use of a personal pronoun. According to Gaynor, "[t]he 'I' which breaks into its own narrative rhythm in favour of a direct address constitutes a compelling affirmation of the Prioress's position as a speaking subject" (382).[55] Strangely, however, the Prioress's phrase indicates a contradiction: "But ay, whan I remembre on this mateere.." (513). If she remembers the material, rather than thinks upon it, then clearly she already knows the story. The implication is that, indeed, language is fallible, not only for humanity, but for divinity as well. Mary does not inspire the Prioress with new words and a new story; rather, her aid comes in the form of a mysterious power, a secret, much like that of *O Alma's* attraction over the clergeon. Such intangibility is troublesome to the Prioress, a point I elaborate below.

Once the clergeon has learned the song, he begins to walk through the Jewry singing each day. The Prioress ends the ninth stanza explaining his route and confirms that his "entente" is set on Mary. She begins the next stanza by again rephrasing her last words:

> As I have seyd, thurghout the Juerie
>
> This litel child, as he cam to and fro,
>
> Ful murily than wolde he synge and crie
>
> *O Alma redemptoris* everemo.
>
> The swetnesse his herte perced so

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[55] Gaynor does not give the same degree of authority to the Prioress's "I" as I do; her next sentence reads: "However, it is the Jews and the fantasy of their murderous impropriety that provides the stable ground upon which this 'I' is fixed—even repaired to itself" (382). Whereas Gaynor argues that the Jews' act in the story serves to subvert them in order to allow the Prioress, as female, to be an authorized Christian speaker, I argue that it is through the Prioress's agency, which requires no authorization due to the terms of the Canterbury competition, that the Jews are subverted.

> Of Cristes mooder that, to hire to preye,
>
> He kan nat stynte of syngyng by the weye. (*PT* 551-57)

This stanza is problematic for a number of reasons. This time, the Prioress combines the re-phrasal of the first interjection ("This is to seyn") with the first person pronoun of the second interjection as she becomes more aware of the words she speaks. She repeats for the third time that the clergeon must pass through the Jewry to go between home and school, though this time asserting that it is the clergeon who must pass through. Previously, the clergeon is not juxtaposed to the word "Juerie," and the time he spends learning the antiphon from his schoolmate is done "homward prively" (544). The Prioress purposely re-phrases the later reference in order to sharpen the binary Jew/Christian, as the following stanza presents the conversation between Satan and the Jews. Further, despite the twice daily walk through that space, the clergeon's "entente" is exaggerated to the point that his song is so sweet, it pierces his heart and causes him to be unable to stop singing.[56] Naturally, this is done for greater pathos once the clergeon is murdered, but we must not lose sight of the fact that the binaries are being constructed by the language of the Prioress, a language that was deemed insufficient for the purposes of the *Tale*.

The fourth major interjection by the Prioress, first discussed in Chapter 2, occurs as she changes the responsibility for the clergeon's murder from the single Jewish assassin to all Jews through a pronoun change. The stanza begins with a personal pronoun and a re-phrasing: "I seye that in a wardrobe they hym threwe / Where as thise Jewes purgen hire entraille" (*PT* 572-73). Not only does the Prioress change the pronoun

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[56] I have interpreted "kan" as "to be able" instead of "to know", or to forget, because the stanza, as well as those that follow, identify that he continued to perform daily until he is killed.

to include all Jews, she changes the "pit" into which the clergeon is thrown into a privy of humiliation and filth. She associates with the Christian/Jew new criteria in the effort to broaden the gap between the privileged and the subverted. Following the initial two lines, the remainder of the stanza and the entirety of the next are taken up with an apostrophe. The first five lines are a direct address to the Jews, which, beyond its emotion, demonstrates the extent to which the Prioress is invested in her story. Likewise, the following stanza directly addresses the clergeon, celebrating his ascension to Heaven and reception by the Holy Innocents. The distinction between reality and fiction, between time and space, begins to break down for the Prioress, and is later elaborated by the Prioress's two interjections regarding the abbot (*PT* 643,670), who "was a hooly man, As monkes been—or eles oghte be" (*PT* 642-43). These clarifications have long been identified as means of distinguishing the abbot from the monk in the *Shipman's Tale*, and Gaynor posits that they "may for a moment threaten the coherence of the narrative" (383). In the context of my argument, not only are reality and fiction blurring, but there is a fear that multiple fictions may blur together to create yet another space, or "reality."[57] Or, rather, the Prioress is attempting to insist that her tale belongs to the realm of reality, unlike the fictions of the other pilgrims. She is caught up in the ahistoricity of the story, which is demonstrated by the "quod she" in line 581.

The "quod she's" in and around the *Prioress's Prologue* and *Tale* have received much attention by critics. In Chapter 1 I noted their use in arguments that suggest Chaucer defers responsibility for the anti-Semitism of the *Tale*. Here, I argue that it is also used to distinguish between the voice of the Prioress and the narrative voice: that is, it helps to distinguish between the intent of the Prioress and the *intent of the story*. While

[57] The allusion to the Canterbury frame is obvious, but noteworthy.

the first two occasions (*ShT* 452, *PP* 454) establish the link, this third occasion is presented in the midst of the Prioress's confusion. Because of her affinity for the clergeon, she is happy that the clergeon's proper living allows him to join the Innocents:

> O martir, sowded to virginitee,
>
> Now maystow syngen, folwynge evere in oon
>
> The white Lamb celestial—quod she—
>
> Of which the grete evaungelist, Seint John,
>
> In Pathmos wroot... (*PT* 579-583)

The problem, of course, is that the clergeon is not yet dead, properly speaking. Recall, the Prioress has identified that she already knows the material when she speaks of Saint Nicholas. Thus, to break the story for fourteen consecutive lines in a two hundred and three line poem seems extraneous. I argue that, at the conclusion of these stanzas, the Prioress would be content to end her tale. However, the story is not complete, and the Jews must be punished.

For the following three stanzas, the Prioress is able to focus on the story. The clergeon's mother goes in search of her son and is turned away by the Jews. Through the grace of Christ, she receives a thought as to his whereabouts. The stanza beginning on line 607 starts with an *exclamatio* by the Prioress regarding the "myght" of God, followed by an association of the clergeon with a "gemme of chastite, this emeraude, / And eek of martirdom the ruby bright" (*PT* 609-10). While these references serve as terms of endearment, they also indicate the Prioress's inability to comprehend the nature of the miracle, to isolate the "dead" clergeon as either alive or dead. Likewise, the clergeon's ability to sing with a cut throat but inability to move disables the distinction between

animate and inanimate. As a result, confined by language, the Prioress posits the clergeon as *both* subject and object because she cannot comprehend a third concept.

The following four stanzas I discussed in Chapter 2. The precise stanza breaks between the actions of the Christian congregation and the Provost serve to disassociate the Christians from responsibility for the judicial/retributive justice. The distinction between justice and revenge collapses here because all of the Jews are killed for the single murder by a single assassin. True, it is "by the lawe" (*PT* 634) that the Jews are killed, but it was due to the Jews' "lawes reverence" that the clergeon was murdered. Here, secular law trumps sacral law, not only because the sacral is Jewish, but because the Prioress disassociates the congregation from the proceedings, thus ignoring the Christian's new sacral law of Matthew 5. The inverted hierarchical privileging is all the more ironic because, early in the *Tale*, the Prioress actively distinguishes between secular education and religious faith, as I noted above. At the same time, because the Christians disregard the new law, their lack of activity functions as revenge because it results in the death of the Jews. Thus, the Jew/Christian binary, based on good/evil, violence/mercy, etc., collapses.

The language of hierarchical binaries that I have employed over the previous pages is important not only because it describes the Prioress's perspective of the world, but because it is the binding thread that distinguishes the Prioress's intent from the *intent of the story*. The Prioress appears to be uncomfortable with uncertainty and anything that challenges her simple understanding of the world, thus we witness her grasping to re-establish binaries that are commonplace in Christian theology. She attempts to posit good and evil, Christ and Satan, and purity and filth within the *Tale's* distinction of

Christian and Jew, respectively. As Denise L. Despres remarks, "The Prioress offers her audience univocal rather than polysemous symbols and imaginatively conjures a world without tangible ambiguities and bodily corruption" (424). Despres's identification correctly describes the Prioress's *desires*, but the examination above suggests that such desires are not realized.

The distinction between desire and result is fundamental to the *Prioress's Tale*, and to confuse them allows for incomplete readings. For example, Sherman Hawkins focuses on an allegorical reading of the *Tale*. He begins by quoting a passage on figurative language from Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana*, and proposes that the *Prioress's Tale* "belongs to a world of the allegorical and supernatural rather than the world of literal reality" (599). Further, "[w]hen we begin to explore the figurative implications of this tale of death and resurrection, interpreting its scriptural allusions as Augustine and his medieval successors might have done, problems of sentimentality and prejudice recede. Instead there emerges a clear symbolic pattern" (599). Like Condren, Hawkins argues that the Prioress seeks to escape earthly materialism and return to spiritual essence. His argument emphasizes symbolic praise and metaphorical significance. Thus, in the story, "*the enemy are represented* by the Jews," (606, my italics); the Prioress's "Jews are symbols, drawn, not from life, but from the Pauline epistles and the Gospel of St. John" (604). Likewise, in light of nominalist reductionism that created a mid- to late-fourteenth century culture in which "one hears sounded again and again the note of ritual and the ascendancy of the emotional over the rational" (138), Carolyn P. Collette writes:

> Set in the proverbial long ago and far away of "a greet cite" in Asia, the tale is introduced almost as a fable, a romance. There is no effort to create a realistic setting, no attention to the possibilities and inevitabilities of life in such a place. The Jews in the Jewry are shadowy, not real. (142)

While I am not sure what Collette would require to develop a "realistic setting," her general position can be associated with Hawkins', which includes among the figurative language of the tale nearly all of its aspects.[58] Thus, there are no grounds on which to condemn the Prioress; she is either successful or not, with little consequence.

The problem with such readings in the context of the tale-telling competition is that they do not take into account the impact of the Prioress's success or failure. Like Despres, the above critics correctly identify the Prioress's desires, but do not provide a resulting significance. This is principally problematic because the *Prioress's Tale* is an *exemplum*. As such, I assert that within the context, the Prioress plays an integral role in the *exemplum* as she becomes involved *within* the story as an active participant. She invests an inordinate degree of compassion in her *Tale*, mistakenly focusing on and emphasising the story's emotional affect, rather than its moral lesson. The Prioress, in Augustinian terms, has chosen to enjoy the *Tale* rather than use it. This act is not surprising, perhaps, given her *Portrait* in the *General Prologue*, in which the narrator represents her as a superficially constructed woman with a misdirected sense of maternity.

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[58] I acknowledge that for Collette, "reality" is a subjective term: "With the myopia characteristic of her approach to life and religion, the Prioress focuses on the center of the tale, that which *for her does have reality*, the 'wydwes sone' who will be the martyred child-hero and in so dying will become an example for us of true love and devotion" (142, italics mine).

The *Prioress's Portrait* is a source of ambiguity. Indeed, almost every line suggests either a degree of grandeur or incompetence.[59] For example, the "Frenssh she spak ful faire and fetisly" (*GP* 124) was not that of Paris and the royal court; "Ful seemly after hir mete she raughte" (*GP* 124) implies that she either reached courteously for her food, or she belched discreetly after her meal;[60] the curious phrase "*Amor vincit omnia*" found on her broach may refer either to divine or earthly love. Through the 45 lines of the *Portrait*, the word "ful" is used ten times, all of which are related to perception: "hir smylyng was ful simple and coy" (*GP* 119); "Hir mouth ful small" (*GP* 153); etc. The overuse of the term questions its value and suggests an attempt to overcompensate. Further, of the ten occurrences, three are accompanied by the word "semely," suggesting a sense of doubt. Perhaps more striking, though, is the absence of these terms in three sentences over nine lines found near the middle of the *Portrait*. These nine lines are the only lines that do not address appearance and presentation, but rather suggest a misplaced maternal compassion:

> But for to speken of hire conscience,
>
> She was so charitable and so pitous
>
> She wolde wepe, if that she saugh a mous
>
> Kaught in a trappe, if it were deed or bledde.
>
> Of smale houndes hadde she that she fedde
>
> With rosted flessh, or milk and wastel-breed.
>
> But soore wepte she if oon of hem were deed,
>
> Or if men smoot it with a yerde smerte;

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[59] For a summary of notable interpretations of the *Portrait*, see Spector (185-86) and Condren (192-195).

[60] Condren traces the etymology of "raughte" as a derivative of the OE *hræctan* (to belch) (194, 214 n.14)

And al was conscience and tender herte. (*GP* 142-150)

Implied in these lines are excessive pity and misdirected charity. The Prioress treats small animals like infants, parallel to the pathos with which she treats the clergeon. While such treatment may suggest compassion worthy of celebration, it should not overshadow divine will and the pursuit of spiritual reward. The clergeon's ascension should be celebrated, not mourned. Thus, the ambiguity surrounding the Prioress's broach is fully realized because it should signify divine love, yet her actions suggest a misplaced investment in the earthly that the Prioress is unwilling to dismiss.

Although the Prioress clearly desires to imitate her protagonist and openly admits to the fallibility of language, she is incapable of relinquishing control to an apparently absent authority. Whereas the dangers of singing unknown words in the presence of non-Christians do not cause the clergeon to hesitate, the Prioress seems struck with anxiety over the responses that she may incur by telling a story that condemns the (in)action of a Christian congregation. The Prioress's faith waivers as she realizes that despite her efforts to defer responsibility for her tale to a divine authority, her pilgrim audience's reactions will be directed, nevertheless, toward her. Her appeal to a divine authority is as intangible and immeasurable as the mysterious power surrounding *O Alma* and the divine will that "sometyme[s]" devises man's intent before prayer. As a result, she does not adhere to the *exemplum* of the clergeon, who privileges spiritual reward over earthly concerns, but instead prioritizes her own earthly well-being over the rewards promised to her by her Faith. Suggestively, the Prioress does not have faith that Mary will come to her aid in a potential time of trouble, and mistakenly recedes into the comfort of language

with which she is most familiar, and which presents her in the best light: as a compassionate and sympathetic maternal figure of religion.

Given the Prioress's unstable position, it now remains to understand her role in the Canterbury tale-telling competition. From the outset, I argued that the purpose of the *Prioress's Tale* is to demonstrate to the other pilgrims the dangers of revenge and lies. Though the Prioress's intent and the *intent of the story* differ, the purpose of the *Tale* remains the same. What I have addressed more directly in this chapter, however, is the relation between these concepts and proper response. In effect, the Prioress has attempted to *quite* herself; unsatisfied with the message being presented, and fearful of possible responses, she attempts to gloss a favourable outcome for the Christian congregation by manipulating the Virgin's inspired story. As a result, I believe that Chaucer presents the Prioress as the victim of her own *exemplum*. Mary heeds the Prioress's request from the *Prologue*, and speaks through her to those who have, or are about to, fall(en) on the pilgrimage. But, in order to ensure that the connection between the *Tale* and the tale-telling competition is sufficiently acknowledged, Chaucer sets up the Prioress, an admirable figure whom the Host addresses with respect, to demonstrate the ease with which one may lose faith. Faith, here, becomes a central concern. First and foremost, the *Tale* instructs its listeners to focus on spiritual reward rather than earthly concerns. Thus, pilgrims should consider the content and relevance of their tales. If the content in question is useful, in Augustinian terms, and truthful, there is no reason to fear revenge, for one looks forward to the next world. Surely, the Prioress approached the story in order to engage the question of revenge, for she allows the initial murder that results from a miscomprehending audience, the Jews, to occur; but the story is intent on

addressing the continuous cycle that results from revenge. If it did not, then *quiting Tales*, such as the Reeve's, would be justified in their responses. Rather, the pilgrims should look to the new law of Matthew 5 and turn the other cheek. The concerns that remains, and which I will address in Chapter 4, are whether the *Prioress's Tale* successfully influences the Canterbury pilgrims and competition, and how the *Tale's* implications affect the author himself, given that the *Canterbury Tales* are themselves liable to response.

Chapter 4

The Paradox of Response

In the previous chapter, the faith of the Prioress was called into question. Here, Chaucer's faith in his craft is addressed. At the end of the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer retracts the majority of his corpus and apologizes, asking for forgiveness for his "translacions and enditynges of worldly vanitees" (*Ret* 1085). He seems to conclude that poetry cannot communicate morality. Based on the implications of the *Prioress's Tale*, however, I argue that the *Retraction* is nothing more than a layer of deferral to silence opposition. I first continue my discussion of the ending to the *Prioress's Tale* and indicate its cathartic effects. While the effects silence the pilgrims, we are left to consider why the *Tales* continue, and how one responds to a tale that denounces lies and revenge. I then argue that the *Tales* continue due the Host's misinterpretation of the *Prioress's Tale*, and that the pilgrims' reaction allows him to re-establish order in the competition. However, dissention continues, and a parallel to the unstable relationship between an author and his audience is drawn. Thus, Chaucer attempts to find an authority on which to ground meaning throughout the remainder of the *Tales*, so as to avoid further miscommunication. Although these attempts fail, and Chaucer's humble *Retraction* appears to be a concession, I argue that Chaucer's intent is not to condemn his fiction. Instead, the *Retraction* serves to silence critics in the same manner that the *Prioress's Tale* silences the pilgrims. As the latter attempts to suggest the impossibility of response, we are not to assume the former functions any differently. And, due to the manner in which Chaucer constructs the *Retraction*, he is able to distinguish Chaucer the man from

Chaucer the poet, thereby attributing the poetry to the latter in order to avoid the punishment of judgements.

As the *Prioress's Tale* nears its end, the abbot removes the "greyn" from the clergeon's mouth and the boy "yaf up the goost ful softely" (*PT* 672). As a result, the abbot's "salte teeris trikled doun as reyn, / And gruf he fil al plat upon the grounde, / And stille he lay as he had ben ybounde" (*PT* 674-76). Patterson describes the abbot's reaction: "Pathos, to be sure, but also immobility, a deathlike trance that prefigures the death that will ultimately reunite him with the clergeon" ("Living Witnesses" 511). This response is not the abbot's alone, though, as "[t]he covent eek lay on the pavement / Wepynge, and herying Cristes mooder deere" (*PT* 677-78). What has occurred is a moment of clarity in which the abbot and the congregation have been substituted for the previously indefinable clergeon. That is to say, whereas the clergeon was previously suspended between subject and object, it is now the congregation who is suspended in their "deathlike trance." The initial subject/object, the clergeon, has transcended as "goost," into spiritual material, and his speech has sufficiently reminded the congregation of their obligation to Christ's teachings. And included among this group is the Prioress herself, who states: "Ther he is now, God leve *us* for to meete!" (*PT* 683, italics mine) Because she includes herself among the plural, she appears to associate herself—and potentially her fellow pilgrims—among the misguided congregation of the *Tale*. Hence, the Prioress hopes that "of his mercy God so merciable" (*PT* 688) will enable them—the congregation, herself, and, likely, the pilgrims—to be reunited with the clergeon in the future.

The story's ending, however, is not simply an affective farewell to the clergeon, and the congregation's emotions are not solely comprised of sadness and grief. Hobbs explains: "The death of the little clergeon is a cathartic moment for all of the elements that have been building in intensity from the beginning of the tale. It is the moment in which the exercise of violence and the celebration of martyrdom are placed side by side. Jews and Christians alike play the double role of persecutor and persecuted" (193). Pity and fear: the abbot and the congregation come to realize that they are the target of the clergeon's speech as he explains that, "Whan that the greyn is fro [my] tonge ytake" (*PT* 668), the Virgin will return for him. It follows, then, that the clergeon would remain on Earth until the Christians found him, thus allowing him the opportunity to speak of Christ and Mary. The necessity of this occasion is suggested by the clergeon as he speaks of his devotion to Mary and "Jesu Crist, as ye in books fynde, / Wil that his glorie laste and be in mynde" (*PT* 652-53). Those who listen to the clergeon have erred in their Christian teachings, having ignored the new law of Matthew 5 in respect to the Jews' prosecution. The congregation is put in a position to fear disregarding the divine reward that the pitied clergeon has received before its eyes. Thus, catharsis, to be sure, provided that we define the term according to Aristotle's *Politics*: "Those who are influenced by pity or fear, and every emotional nature, must have a like experience, and others in so far as each is susceptible to such emotions, and all are in a manner *purged* and their souls lightened and delighted" (as cited in Richter 41, my italics). Catharis, here, serves as a warning for the congregation, illuminating their earlier misdeeds and cleansing any desires to engage further in un-Christian activity.

The congregation is not alone in feeling the effects of catharsis; it is clear in the following *Prologue to Sir Thopas* that the Canterbury pilgrims have been similarly affected: "Whan seyd was al this miracle, every man / As sobre was that wonder was to se, Til that oure Hooste japen tho bigan" (*PSirT* 691-93). Here, sobriety is more than a simple expression. As the pilgrimage has progressed, alcohol has been consumed in quantity—presumably by most of the pilgrims—which is made evident early, for example, in the Miller's drunken display, and later by the Cook. Sobriety, here, indicates purgation: catharsis. And when we consider what has caused this reaction among the pilgrims, it reasonably corresponds with the same cause of the congregation's reaction within the tale. The pilgrims have been witness to what we can call today "shock and awe." Silence falls over the pilgrims as they do not know how to respond to the *Tale*, and they reflect introspectively upon the horror of the story that has followed the mirth of the Shipman's fabliau. Amidst a pilgrimage in which the pilgrims have disputed amongst one another, *quiting* each other's tales, the *Prioress's Tale* is the only one that explicitly results in silence.

For that reason, I argue that the pilgrims have not only been subject to the affective sentimentality of the Prioress, which invokes responses of pity, but, further, that they have acknowledged the *sentence* of the *Prioress's Tale*. The pilgrims have witnessed the effects of revenge on the *active* subject—whom they pity—and, in turn, they have witnessed the dangers to the soul made possible by *inactivity*; the clergeon actively worships Mary, but his "truth" is construed as lies by *others* and results in his death, and the congregation ignores its Christian duties. How, then, does a person *respond* to the *Prioress's Tale* without putting his soul in jeopardy? To *quite* is to

denounce its doctrine, and, more generally, to speak is to subject oneself to misinterpretation, and death. More specifically, how does one tell a tale following the *Prioress's Tale* given the same conditions and in light of the altered parameters of the tale-telling contest that I outlined in Chapter 1? At this moment on the pilgrimage, the contest faces an abrupt end.

While the immediate effects of the *Prioress's Tale* leave the pilgrims in silence, the *Tale* produces more than a momentary response. From a formalist perspective, one notes that the *Prologue to Sir Thopas* continues in the rhyme royal of the *Prioress's Tale*. The only other prologues that are written in rhyme royal are those of the Prioress and the Second Nun, while the only tales written in rhyme royal are those of the Prioress, the Second Nun, the Man of Law, and the Clerk. Yet, for the prologue of the pilgrim whose tale is ended due to its "drasty speche" and "rym dogerel," Chaucer the author uses his "highest" form of verse.[61] Suggestively, some significance has carried over from the preceding tale, and the pilgrims' silence in the prologue suggests that they have been impacted by the moral teachings of the Prioress. However, it is the Host who breaks the silence after an unspecified amount of time and his joking manner serves to end the silence and lighten the mood as he goes on to request of Chaucer the pilgrim "a tale of myrthe" (*PSirT* 706), a tale in direct contrast to the serious *sentence* of the *Prioress's Tale*.

[61] For this chapter, it is necessary to distinguish between the three "Chaucers" to which I refer: Chaucer the author, Chaucer the narrator, and Chaucer the pilgrim. Chaucer the author is the poet outside of the artistic frame; Chaucer the narrator is a fictional construct who speaks the narrative of the *Tales*, "reporting" the events and the words of the pilgrims "accurately"; Chaucer the pilgrim is Chaucer the narrator in the context of the pilgrimage, which means the pilgrim is as much of a construct as the other pilgrims. This distinction becomes important as I discuss the implications of intent.

Perhaps, because the Host is first to break the silence, he is able to reassert his sovereignty over the tale-telling contest. As the dangers of *quiting as revenge* are exposed and abandoned, a new structure is necessary, and the pilgrims subject themselves again to the authority of the Host, whose initial proposal had once been agreeable. As a result, there is a general change in the content of tales told. *Sir Thopas* ends abruptly because it appears to have no moral value to the Host, and is then followed by a "moral tale vertuous" (*SirT* 940). *Melibee* addresses serious concerns and repeats the theme of revenge found in the *Prioress's Tale*. The Monk then offers a catalogue of "tragedies" from which to learn, and the Nun's Priest offers a beast fable that addresses divine providence. These tales conclude Fragment VII and, Alan T. Gaylord believes, comprise "the Literature Group" (227). He argues that, in this fragment, the Host's "words show him to be concerned with an alternation between mirth and morality; as his own kind of literary critic, he keeps the two terms apart so that they become labels for two types of literature. He is thus continuing and extending what he had said at the pilgrimage's inception" (228). While Gaylord's study of the words chosen by the Host in the links is accurate,[62] he does not acknowledge that such terms preface neither the *Shipman's Tale*—since there is no prologue for the Shipman—nor the *Prioress's Tale*—the Host does not specify what kind of tale he would prefer the Prioress to tell. Further, Gaylord does not acknowledge the earlier disruptions of the Host's authority. Thus, his suggestion that the Host is "continuing and extending" his earlier parameters is inaccurate. Instead, the Host is attempting to reconstitute his earlier desires with greater specificity, exchanging the words *sentence* and *solaas* with others, such as *doctryne* and *myrthe*, in order to avoid misinterpretation for a second time.

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[62] For a complete list of the terms the Host uses to modify the kind of tale the pilgrims tell, see Gaylord.

It would be foolish, however, to suggest that the Host's sovereignty reigns for the remainder of the *Tales*. As Mary Hamel notes, the minimized interaction between the pilgrims in Fragment VII allows for the greatest fluidity during the pilgrimage:

> In this group the reins are most clearly in the Host's hands, as he turns from the Shipman to the Prioress, from the Prioress to Chaucer the narrator, from Chaucer to the Monk, and from the Monk to the Nun's Priest, with no rebels or overeager volunteers among the pilgrims to threaten his orderly control. (251)

Gaylord examines the same links and concurs, in part:

> In this fragment, the links do much more than sketch that kind of conflict between characters which introduces "quitting" tales or serves to stimulate the reader's interest in what is to follow; they concentrate attention on a common subject, upon the very struggle to get the tale told properly and with understanding and appreciation, which the contentiousness of the pilgrims and the varying scope of their wits make so perplexing and prolonged. (226)

The distinction between these two positions is that Gaylord notes dissention among certain pilgrims, notably Chaucer the pilgrim and the Monk. While Chaucer the pilgrim agrees to tell another tale, the Monk does not. Whereas the Host's interruption of Chaucer the pilgrim may suggest his control over the proceedings, the Knight's interruption of the Monk quickly disputes the Host's sovereignty. The Knight interrupts the Monk's cataloguing of tragedies and the Host must assent in order to appear in control. And, in a short time, the Host's authority is questioned once again. [63]

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[63] One could easily speculate on the various implications of Chaucer the narrator's agreeability and the Monk's refusal, but they are not necessary for this study. Similarly, the Knight's outburst that interrupts

I believe that the Host loses ultimate control as soon as he entertains the possibility of accepting the Canon and the Canon's Yeoman into the company. Not only does the acceptance of new members suggest that anyone who has a tale to tell is free to do so; it also allows the entrance of people unfamiliar with the rules previously set out and the implications of previous tales, such as the *Prioress's Tale*. The *Canon Yeoman's Tale*, which slanders the Canon, is not privy to the Prioress's lessons on lies and revenge. As a result, following the tale, the Manciple and Cook engage in yet another squabble, which results in the Host's warning:

> But yet, Manciple, in feith thou art to nyce,
> Thus openly repreve hym of his vice.
> Another day he wole, peradventure,
> Reclayme thee and brynge thee to lure;
> I meene, he speke wole of smale thynges,
> As for to pynchen at thy rekenynges,
> That were nat honest, if it cam to preef. (*ManP* 69-75)

Seemingly, the Host has learned something about lies and revenge, despite his questionable conduct following the *Prioress's Tale*.[64] Unfortunately, the Host understands too late, and the *Manciple's Tale* denounces revenge and promotes the

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the Monk, in conjunction with the Monk's refusal to tell a different tale, suggests that the class equality of the pilgrimage (see n.50) has fractured. Placed in contrast to the Miller's original dissention following the *Knight's Tale*, the former incidents suggest that the pilgrims' original failure to adhere to the rules of the game is not solely the fault of "cherles," and would happen inevitably. Further, one could speculate that the cause for the new found dissention is a reaction to the Host's cynical humour. His mockery of Chaucer the narrator is tolerated, but the Monk, a higher ranking person in society, wastes no time with the Host: "I have no lust to pleye" (*PNPT* 2806).

[64] It seems peculiar that the Host now understands the dangers, whereas he did not when mocking Chaucer the pilgrim, the Monk, the Nun's Priest, etc.

concept of keeping one's mouth shut, just as the *Tales* come to a close with the doctrine of the Parson.[65]

While I have argued that the *Prioress's Tale* condemns revenge and lies and almost culminates in the end of the tales, one is left to wonder why the *Canterbury Tales* would continue if they are to end in the manner I have just outlined. What we witness in the *Tales* following the *Prioress's Tale* are Chaucer's repeated attempts to give language definite meaning, so as to avoid misinterpretation. Misinterpretation, after all, can cause the truth to be perceived as a lie and result in revenge. As a result, in the *Second Nun's Tale*, Chaucer attempts to ground meaning in religion, after which he similarly attempts to ground meaning in science in the *Canon Yeoman's Tale*. Finally, in the *Manciple's Tale*, he attempts to ground meaning in language.[66] All of these attempts fail, however, and confirm Ann W. Astell's assertion regarding the *Melibee*: "Melibee's inability to derive the correct *sententia* in a tale full of sentences and proverbs dramatizes the difficulty of the pilgrim poet who seeks to convey 'the sentence of this tretys lyte' and thus achieve his final cause" (277). Similarly, Judith Ferster notes, "No matter how [Prudence] tries to determine the meaning of her words, she cannot control Melibee's interpretation of them" (21). These difficulties, I argue, lead Chaucer to pursue various methods of stabilizing meaning.

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[65] I will not go into detail on the *Parson's Prologue* or *Tale*; the Parson's position on fiction and the tale-telling contest are evident. Simply put, the Parson plays the role of moral critic, denouncing the competition, and provides access to the *Retraction*.

[66] Alternatively, it is possible to suggest that these *Tales* are explorations of misinterpretation. In the context of my argument, however, I find it difficult to comprehend why Chaucer would set up the *Prioress's Tale*—a tale with the potential to end the competition—to be followed by a series of examinations of misinterpretation, only to retract his whole corpus afterwards. The *Prioress's Tale* puts Chaucer the author in a difficult position: in as much as the pilgrims are faced with the question of how to respond to the *Tale*, so too is the author. Here, we begin to see the foundations for my discussion of silence below. And, faced with the question of how to respond, the Host asks Chaucer the narrator, "What man artow?" (*PSirT* 695)

The problem with this reading, however, is that it insinuates Chaucer's failure—intended or not—and, therefore, provides a reason to have ended the *Canterbury Tales* after the *Prioress's Tale*. The solution to this dilemma, I believe, can be found in the *Prologue to Sir Thopas*. In the prologue, the Host's request for a merry tale amidst his mocking of Chaucer the pilgrim is put in direct contrast to deeper concerns indicated by the continued rhyme royal stanza form of the *Prioress's Tale*. Barbra Nolan argues:

> [I]n his *Canterbury Tales* Chaucer rigorously and systematically links the seven-line stanza with its three interlocked rhymes and concluding couplet (ababbcc) to spiritual transcendence of mortal limitation and to the form of prayer. The rhyme-royal stanza, like the theme of transcendence to which Chaucer attached it, implies completion and finality in a way that his 'riding rime' in most of the other Canterbury tales patently cannot. (23)

While Nolan's argument does not consider the *Prologue to Sir Thopas*, it nonetheless draws our attention to the significance of transcendence in the *Prioress's Tale*. It is, therefore, peculiar that in the first seven-line stanza of the following prologue, words referring to sight occur five times (692, 694, 696, and twice in 697) and words referring to speech occur four times (691, 693, and twice in 695). Perhaps it is mere coincidence that Chaucer directly references material senses at least once a line in a stanza form linked to transcendence, but the implications become even more apparent through Nolan's further examination of the stanza form:

> At the same time, [Chaucer's] protagonists use the stanza *only* to utter their devotional vows, pleas, praises, spiritually motivated dispraises, and meditations. And these formal utterances always involve or imply the theme

> of facing and transcending human, mortal fragility, usually as it depends upon the exemplary, paradoxical 'pitous joye' of Christ's passion and death or Mary's suffering as Christ's mother. (23)

While the comedy of the prologue suggests that Chaucer is making fun of himself by means of the self-reflexive narrator, the idea that he is in some manner praising himself is not unfounded.[67]

The cathartic state that the pilgrims experience is interrupted by the Host's jokes—an indication that he is either greatly disturbed by the *Prioress's Tale*, that he is dismissing its message, or that he *misunderstands* the message—followed by his question to the previously unnoticed pilgrim, "What man artow?" (*PSirT* 695). While his simple line may read, "Who are you?," or "What kind of man are you?," I suggest the implications also suggest, "What kind of man could tell such a story?,"[68] or, "What kind of poet are you?"[69] While the authority behind the *Prioress's Tale* is identified *in the tale* as the Virgin Mary, it is ultimately Chaucer the poet who wrote it. While the pilgrims may be able to accept this deferral of responsibility, the audience outside the frame

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[67] It should be noted that there is no conclusive evidence to identify the narrator of the *Canterbury Tales* as Geoffrey Chaucer. Yet, critics regularly identify the narrator as a "doppelganger" of the author, principally because of the headlinks that identify the pilgrim's name as "Chaucer" in some of the manuscripts, including the Ellesmere. While this may be an editorial decision by the scribe, Chaucer's involvement in the decision can now be considered probable, due to the studies of Linne R. Mooney. Because Mooney has identified Adam Pinkhurst—who is addressed in Chaucer's poem "Chaucers Wordes Unto Adam, His Owne Scriveyn"—as the scribe of both the Ellesmere and Hengwrt manuscripts, which were likely produced, or in production, when Chaucer was alive, it follows that Chaucer was consulted in editorial decisions, or that Adam had intimate knowledge of the author's intent. See Linne R. Mooney, "Chaucer's Scribe," *Speculum* 81 (2006): 97-138.

[68] The *Prioress's Tale* describes a young child brutally murdered, thrown into a privy and defecated upon, after which Christians are condemned for not exercising mercy upon the clergeon's assailants. It is not difficult to believe that Medieval reactions would be similar to modern reactions, if even for different reasons.

[69] Patterson argues that "*The Tale of Sir Thopas* and *The Tale of Melibee* represent a further attempt on Chaucer's part to define both the kind of writing that constitutes *The Canterbury Tales* and, more tellingly, the kind of person who wrote it" ("What Man Artow?" 120). Unfortunately, although Patterson's article illuminates my own argument, I do not have the space to engage his elaborate theories.

knows the obvious: the Prioress is a fictional character, thus the tale is fictional. As a result, any form of misinterpretation could easily result in reactions not unlike those of a modern audience sensitive to the anti-Semitism found in the *Tale*. Because the Host's question is accompanied in its stanzaic line with two references to speech—"And *seyde* thus: 'What man artow?' *quod* he" (*PSirT* 695, my italics)—the self-reflexive connotations of the questions are enhanced. On one hand, the Host questions the metaphysical existence of the pilgrim/narrator; on the other hand, Chaucer pre-empts critics of fiction who might challenge the morality of the *Prioress's Tale*. It is left to Chaucer the poet, therefore, to find an authority outside of the frame, or something tangible—like the material senses repeatedly referenced in the first stanza of the *Prologue to Sir Thopas*—on which to ground the meaning of the *Prioress's Tale*.

Thus, the *Canterbury Tales must* continue. Chaucer the pilgrim first tells *Sir Thopas*, a tale that parodies "the plot structure" (Hamel 256) of the *Prioress's Tale*. Hamel demonstrates a convincing parallel between the two tales' plots and symbols and suggests that *Sir Thopas* fails to match the *Prioress's Tale* "because of the inappropriateness of [its] material" (256), most notably due to the replacement of the Virgin Mary by an elf-queen.[70] Chaucer the pilgrim has seemingly attempted to reproduce the *Prioress's Tale* as a secular poem, but to no avail, suggesting that "the beste rym [Chaucer] kan" (*SirT* 928) is not equivalent to the divine inspiration of Mary. As a result, his next attempt appears in prose. In the *Melibee*, Chaucer the pilgrim avoids the poetic mechanics of the *Prioress's Tale*, but returns to the theme of revenge. Further, he begins his attempts to ground meaning by alluding to the authority of the Scriptures:

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[70] See Hamel for a complete comparison of *topoi* and technique utilised in the *Prioress's Tale* and *Sir Thopas*.

> As thus: ye woot that every Evaungelist
> That telleth us the peyne of Jhesu Crist
> Ne seith nat alle thyng as his felawe dooth;
> But nathelees hir sentence is al sooth,
> And alle acorden as in hire sentence,
> Al be ther in hir tellyng difference. (*SirT* 943-48)

Chaucer the pilgrim's suggestion is that the pilgrims should pay attention to his *sentence*, and not the specific words of the proverbs he will speak in his tale. But, as I noted above, despite Prudence's repeated attempts, Melibee simply does not comprehend her, regardless of her various attempts to make him understand. Judith Ferster identifies Prudence's difficulties as similar to the relationship between authors and audiences:

> The *Melibee* [...] shows how the dialectic between mind and world pertains to authors and audiences. It describes perfectly the author's dilemma: He may have some effect on his audience, but he cannot hope to control that effect. His book may intrude on readers' lives in ways that are very different from his intentions. Although on one level the tale is about the inappropriateness of revenge, on another level it is about advice. The person who requests and receives advice must decide what to do with the piece of the outside world he has let in: accept or reject it. (19)[71]

Certainly, the Host's discussion of his wife following the tale indicates that he has not comprehended Chaucer the pilgrim's intended message. The Host describes her as an

[71] The same concerns are evident in other *Tales*, such as the *Nun's Priest's Tale* and the *Manciple's Tale*. In the former, Chauntecleer, advised by his wife, dismisses his prophetic dream, putting him in danger when it comes to fruition. In the latter, Pheobus accepts his bird's account of the events that have passed, becoming enraged and impulsively killing his wife.

angry and abusive wife who does not share Prudence's patience. Instead of considering the *Melibee* as a story about communication and counsel, he has understood it as a treatise on marriage and conduct, demonstrating clearly the concerns noted by Ferster. And because the Host does not grasp the implications of the *Tale*, he requests a tale from the Monk, and the competition continues.

While it is now clear at this point of my argument that an author does not have control over his audience's reactions, the question that must ultimately be re-addressed is whether or not Chaucer believed that the immoral reactions an audience may exhibit are the responsibility of the audience or the author. Paul Beekman Taylor suggests that "Chaucer is reluctant to leave his tales to the judgement of men since the effects of his words, those which 'sownen unto synne,' are his responsibility [...] Chaucer turns away from the nominalistic implications of his own work and back to orthodoxy, repeating the traditional intent to write 'for our doctrine'" (128). While I agree that Chaucer is anxious about misinterpretation, I disagree with this and similar comments by critics, such as Olive Sayce, which suggest that Chaucer abandoned his approach for an appropriately "edifying conclusion" (Sayce 235).[72] To read the *Tales* in this manner is to ignore the fact that Chaucer continues the *Tales* after the effects of the *Prioress's Tale*. I will return to this point later; for now, it is worth noting Patterson's assertion that "[c]ircling back and rebeginning is virtually Chaucer's modus operandi" ("What Man Artow?" 127). Taylor's "nominalistic implications" can be related to Chaucer's struggle to control what

[72] Sayce's conclusion that the *Parson's Tale* and *Retraction* appropriately provide edification is not surprising given the methodology with which she works. Sayce compares the *Retraction* to a tradition of retractions, confessions, and epilogues and identifies parallel *topoi* in order to verify Chaucer's work concurs with the tradition, which invokes the general intent of his predecessors. While the flaws of this structuralist conclusion are clear to modern critics, it is still striking that one would accept so eagerly such a conclusion from Chaucer, who regularly breaks with the traditions in which he wrote. As Evan Carton explains, "The insidious resistance of all strict categories and complacent certainties is the perpetual task of Chaucer's language" (59).

Ferdinand de Saussure would term his signifier and signified, while Chaucer's circling back becomes a mission to resolve this problem, at times, and finally "exploding" in the *Manciple's Tale*, which results in the author's silence.

Because Chaucer continues to write after the *Prioress's Tale* and continues to re-examine the function of language and revenge in the following *Tales*, I do not believe Chaucer felt responsible for his audience's responses. Rather, his concerns were more self-interested, and his fear of misinterpretation culminated in the symbolic gesture of Pheobus breaking his instruments in the *Manciple's Tale*. In Chapter 1, I discussed Augustine's position on the matter and identified that the responsibility of interpretation falls upon the audience. Karla Taylor summarizes Augustine's position:

> In *On Christian Doctrine*, he adopts the corollary approach by appealing to the doctrine of use. Nothing is bad of its own nature, but some things should be enjoyed, others used. The problem arises when an individual, exercising his free will, chooses to enjoy a lesser good that he should instead use. Thus, a reader is positively or negatively affected by a work of literature according to his moral state. Even scripture can be read to ill effect, but the fault does not lie with the text itself. The responsibility belongs to those who use or abuse it, for God's authorial intent is *a priori* impeccable. When Augustine appealed to utility to determine moral worth, he still assumed that an object, whether rightly or wrongly used, had been well meant. (2)

For a secular position, one can also consider Chaucer's Italian contemporary, Giovanni Boccaccio, who writes, "Like all other things in this world, stories, whatever their nature, may be harmful or useful, depending upon the listener" (799). Boccaccio

devotes the entire epilogue of his *Decameron* to defending his work against accusations of immorality, often echoing the words of Augustine:

> No word, however pure, was ever wholesomely construed by a mind that was corrupt. And just as seemly language leaves no mark upon a mind that is corrupt, language that is less than seemly cannot contaminate a mind that is well ordered, any more than mud will sully the rays of the sun, or earthly filth the beauties of the heavens. (799-800).

Paul Beekman Taylor writes of these last lines, "Putting aside the implicit notion here that each man is born into an unchangeable—by words, at least—moral state, Boccaccio argues that it is not words that are responsible for the deeds they incite, but rather the moral propensity of the mind incited" (122). What the *Decameron's* epilogue forces us to consider is why Boccaccio devotes space to denouncing accusations of immorality while Chaucer instead retracts the majority of his corpus. The answer, I argue, is silence: Chaucer seeks to silence both his moral critics and those who would respond in literature to their misinterpretations of his work. This argument will make up the remainder of this chapter.

If the authority of the Host once again becomes questionable and the *Tales* come to a close earlier than predicted by the guidelines set out in the *General Prologue*, are we to take Chaucer's *Retraction* seriously?[73] Chaucer writes:

> And if ther be any thyng that displease [the audience], I preye hem also that they arette it to the defaute of myn unkonnynge and nat to my wyl, that wolde ful fayn have seyd better if I hadde had konnynge. / For oure book seith, "Al that is written is written for oure doctrine," and that is myn entente. /

[73] I read the voice of the *Retraction* as Chaucer the author's.

> Wherfore I biseke yow mekely, for the mercy of God, that ye preye for me that Crist have mercy on me and foryeve me my giltes; / and namely of my translacions and enditynges of worldly vanitees, the which I revoke in my retraccioouns: / as is the book of Troilus; the book also of Fame; the book of the XXV. Ladies; the book of the Duchesse; the book of Seint Valentynes day of the Parlement of Briddes; the tales of Caunterbury, thilke that sownen into synne; / the book of the Leoun; and many another book, if they were in my remembrance, and many a song and many a lecherous lay, that Crist for his grete mercy foryeve me the synne. (*Ret* 1081-86)

If we consider these lines from what we understand about Augustine's position on lies, Chaucer clearly identifies that the result—"*if*" it displeases the audience—was not a product of his "wyl," and must be attributed to his lack of knowledge. It follows, then, that Chaucer may have produced a falsehood, but he did not *lie* because his *entente* was not to deceive. Instead, according to the *Retraction*, it was his intent to follow the Pauline doctrine and write for the glory of God. Thus, if his work does not accomplish its task, it is because his words are *not* "cosyn to the dede" (*GP* 742).

In light of the *Prioress's Tale*, though, how can one blame Chaucer for his shortcomings? Chaucer asks his audience to attribute his displeasing stories to his lack of "konnynge," which he "wole ful fayn have seyde better if [he] had konnynge." But would knowledge or ability really have made a difference? Consider, the Prioress's "konyng is so wayk" (*PT* 481), but still she performs her "labour" despite the fact that "Ther may no tonge expresse in no science" (*PT* 476) the glories of Mary. Similarly, neither the clergeon nor his schoolmate can "expounde" the Latin of *O Alma*

Redemptoris; yet, due to his devotion, the clergeon becomes a martyr and is likened to the Holy Innocents. If, like the clergeon, "On [Christ and] Cristes mooder set was [Chaucer's] entente" (*PT* 550), then there appears little fear that Chaucer would be in danger of not attaining salvation, presuming the *Prioress's Tale* is a moral teaching. In the *Retraction*, Chaucer thanks Christ and Mary for inspiring "the translacion of Boece de Consolacione, and othere books of legends of seintes, and omelies, and moralitee, and devocioun" (*Ret* 1087). Ultimately, it is impossible to determine whether the *Prioress's Tale* belongs to this latter group or "thilke that sownen into synne." Arguably, this ambiguity was Chaucer's intent, allowing the audience to accept as little or as much as they wished.

The greatest cause for confusion surrounding the *Retraction*, however, is that it has been foreshadowed, I argue, since the *Prioress's Tale*. As I discussed above, the conclusion of the *Prioress's Tale* threatens the end of the tale-telling competition, but it continues due to the Host. Nevertheless, potential criteria are established for a future end to the *Tales*. Further, in the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, the Nun's Priest concludes with lines later found in the *Retraction*:

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

As seith my lord, so make us alle goode men,

And brynge us to his heighe blisse! Amen. (*NPT* 3438-46, my italics)

At the end of Fragment VII, Chaucer, it appears, finds it necessary to help direct his reader's interpretation of the *Tales*. This reference to Saint Paul, though, can also be interpreted in a number of ways. First, it may be a simple directive to equate the beast fable with the parables of the Bible, rather than something "superfluous." Second, it may indicate that *sentence* and *solaas* are, in fact, commensurate. And third, the Nun's Priest may be suggesting that such fables are of value to Christian Doctrine provided that people do not misuse them, as Augustine's theory of use and enjoyment would suggest. Ultimately, I suggest that Chaucer the author intends all of these ideas to be realized and considered in regards to all of the *Tales*—if not here, then certainly in the *Retraction* where he repeats the phrase;[74] again, we are reminded of Chaucer's lines in the *General Prologue*: "Crist spak himself ful brode in hooly writ, / And wel ye woot no vileynye is it" (*GP* 739-40). Christ spoke in parables, but his deeds were recorded by the authors of the Bible who were inspired by the Holy Ghost, just as the Prioress is inspired by the Virgin Mary.

Despite the lines of Saint Paul, though, the *Retraction* is not presented as a defence; rather, it is a spiritual appeal. Chaucer offers his thanks to "oure Lord Jhesu Crist and his blisful Mooder, and alle the seintes of hevene" for his works that *clearly* promote Christian Doctrine. I emphasize "clearly" because doctrine and morality appear

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[74] Sayce suggests that "In the context of the 'Retractions' the phrase seems to have a double meaning. On the one hand in its scriptural sense it is connected with the contrast between divine truth and secular falsehood already alluded to in the *Parson's Prologue* and about to recur in the literary confession. On the other hand, Chaucer appears also to be hinting at its wider significance and thus to be justifying his own work on the grounds of its generally instructive purpose" (237). Chaucer's ability to teach morality is evident—the *Melibee* and the *Parson's Tale* are exemplary models—but I do not believe he viewed himself as a teacher.

to be Chaucer's only concern in the *Retraction*, and the idea that poetry has secular value is intentionally overlooked. What I believe we can construe from the *Retraction* is a target audience for whom Chaucer's last words were intended. If the end of the *Tales* are foreshadowed at least twice—first by the *Prioress's Tale* and again in the *Nun's Priest's Tale*—and yet Fragments VIII and IX contain secular stories—the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* and the *Manciple's Tale*—it seems curious that Chaucer would continue the *Tales* if he truly believed that his secular works were sinful. Although the *Retraction* is foreshadowed, we must not confuse the technique with a predetermined plan to close the *Tales*. Indeed, it is just as likely that the *Retraction* was formulated around the preceding tales, and that Chaucer selected the Saint Paul quote from a tale that most clearly, and safely, articulated his agenda. But, as I have been arguing, the *Prioress's Tale* and Nun's Priest's quote indicate that Chaucer was aware of the accusations he might face later.

The targets of the *Retraction*, then, are those who do not recognize the *Prioress's Tale* as a story that identifies the dangers of lies and revenge, those who cannot separate the "chaf" from the "fruyt," and those who generally misinterpret Chaucer's works and intentions. As we witness throughout his corpus, such people gave Chaucer intense anxiety, as did those who react in haste to words, such as Pheobus in the *Manciple's Tale*. Thus, the *Retraction* is intended for those for whom the *Tales* were not. Chaucer was aware of the implications of dissemination; J. W. Saunders describes an author's paradox: "The audience the poet *wants* and the audience he knows he will *get* are seldom identical. Usually, he has to look two ways, keeping one eye on the chosen few who will understand his aspirations, and the other on the general public who will not" (81). What becomes further problematic for the modern scholar, however, is the ability to determine

precisely who comprised this target audience. Strohm identifies four different audiences of Chaucer's work: the fictive, the implied, the intended, and the actual.[75] The pilgrims are the fictive audience with whom readers associate themselves, while the implied is an audience that can be determined based on the directives within the text. The intended are those identified in the text, often by means of addresses or dedications, while the actual are those who ultimately read or hear(d) the text. The latter group is further "distinguished between Chaucer's *primary* audience (the immediate circle which encouraged his efforts) and his *secondary* audience (of persons who have read him since)" ("Chaucer's Audience(s)" 142). Strohm suggests that Chaucer wrote for both audiences at times: "when he worries about the survival of his *tonge*, he is looking past his primary audience and in our direction. Still, the primary audience—the one which initially encouraged his verse—must intrigue us the most, even though it is the one about which we finally know the least" ("Chaucer's Audience(s)" 142). Certainly, the historical records reveal little about individuals' interpretations of Chaucer; however, Strohm suggests that by piecing together information from the other three audiences, we can agree that "Chaucer's primary audience consisted of a group of persons in and about the civil service of Richard II—knights, esquires, and clerks, in situations like his own or just to one side or the other on the social scale" ("Chaucer's Audience(s)" 143).

The problem with the current formulation of an audience, though, is that civil occupations reveal little about what could be said to offend.[76] Rather, our energy is better spent considering personal morals and an ecclesiastical audience. According to Strohm,

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[75] Paul Strohm, "Chaucer's Audience(s): Fictional, Implied, Intended, Actual," *ChR* 18 (1983): 137-45. This particular article focuses on Chaucer's relationship with his audience, but it is part of a wider project.
[76] Although most, if not all, civil servants were clerics, it is difficult to generalize about the degree of religious training each would possess. More specifically, this group appears to be more diverse than others, thus making corresponding ideological claims too difficult (as opposed to, for example, moralists).

ecclesiastics in Chaucer's audience "might well be implied by some of the humor of the Nun's Priest and others" ("Chaucer's Audience(s)" 144). The alternative, of course, would be to examine the teachings of moralists. Sayce explains that "denunciations of secular literature have a very long tradition behind them. They occur frequently in the Church Fathers, in ecclesiastical prohibitions of various kinds, and in sermons" (235). She goes on to cite Caesarius of Arles, Otfrid, and others. Clearly, I would not include Saint Augustine among this group—Sayce does not state explicitly to which Church Fathers she is referring. Further, it does not serve my purpose to examine the works of these authors because it is not my intention to defend or attack their position. What matters is that we understand that there existed a sacral position against which the *Retraction* defends. Once we understand that there is a particular stance from which to accuse Chaucer of literary sins, it becomes possible to clarify that Chaucer had ulterior intentions and motives for writing the *Retraction*.

The *Retraction*, I argue, is intended to silence those who would denounce Chaucer's work on religious grounds. According to Evan Carton, this silence is first established in the *Parson's Tale*:

> The Parson's sermon follows, sweeping away the pretence of a company of storytelling pilgrims. [...] [T]he Parson gives us not a tale but a book that instructs us to look to our own souls and that we approach with no sense of being part of a community. When the Parson has finished, Chaucer issues his retraction. Fellowship has given way to solitude, language to silence. (60)

The closing Fragment anticipates reactions to Chaucer's work and includes him among the sinful in order to avoid persecution, just as the Prioress's closing words include her among the sinful:

> Preye eek for us, we synful folk unstable,
>
> That of his mercy God so merciable
>
> On us his grete mercy multiplie,
>
> For reverence of his mooder Marie. Amen (*PT* 687-90)

According to Osberg, "[t]he ultimate effect in the Canterbury frame of the Prioress's tale is to silence all the pilgrims" (53).

Thus, in effect, Chaucer has beaten his critics "to the punch." One cannot denounce Chaucer on the grounds of his work because he has repented. And, to respond to the work is to absolve Chaucer, for responding to the work itself denies authorial agency. Thus, future authors and compilers are implicated, as well. The open frame of *Tales* caused by the inclusion of the Canon's Yeoman emphasises the inevitability of response. And one who feels compelled by doctrine *must* respond, or face the consequences of *inactivity*, as does the congregation in the *Prioress's Tale*. Chaucer, I argue, has realized that by retracting his works, he has created artefacts of his works, and suspended his own identity in the time and space of those artefacts. That is to say, like the suspended state of the living-dead clergeon martyr of the *Prioress's Tale*, the "idea" of Chaucer—the fictional construct—exists with his works: the works forever judged, but Chaucer himself never sentenced. In this respect, Chaucer truly does become "elvyssh," "an otherworldly being but in temporal terms the opposite of a child" ("What Man

Artow" 131).[77] He becomes a myth established in his literature. Thus, the earthly transcendence of Chaucer through the *Prologue to Sir Thopas* identified earlier in this chapter comes to fruition. While this idea may seem anachronistic to a modern audience, I suggest that it is the solution Chaucer required to appease his own youthful aspirations of joining the tradition of *auctores* standing on pillars in Fame's Palace.[78]

Thematically, therefore, the *Retraction* mirrors the end of the *Prioress's Tale*. While the latter is intended to silence the pilgrim audience, the former is intended to silence Chaucer's audience. Although Chaucer was well aware of the debate regarding moral responsibility pertaining to fiction, he chose not to engage his critics in the same manner as his early contemporary, Boccaccio. Instead, realizing that the layer of deferral his narrator creates was not enough, Chaucer chose instead to silence his critics and those who would respond to his work artistically. His insight of our modern views was clear enough to remove Chaucer the man from sentence, leaving only Chaucer the idea for critics to judge. In a manner, we can consider, therefore, another parallel with the *Prioress's Tale*: while the *Retraction* suggests that Chaucer's intent has changed over the course of the *Canterbury Tales*, the *intent of the story* remains as long as his work does.

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[77] In Derridean terms, I am speaking of the *specter* of Chaucer, a fictional construct of historical investigation whose identity becomes fluid. See Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, New York: Routledge, 1994.

[78] See the *House of Fame.*

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