

CHAUCER'S CRISIS OF FAITH
IN
"THE MILLER'S TALE," "THE CLERK'S TALE,"
AND "THE PARDONER'S TALE"

BY
SHARON DAWN SELBY

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

MASTER OF ARTS

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Sharon Dawn Selby©1999

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ABSTRACT

In *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer's satiric reappropriation of Nominalist word-play reveals the inability of any mortal authority to impart ultimate truth. Through his satire, Chaucer also demonstrates the instability of the meaning of the Word (as it is interpreted by the Church) and thus the word; the resulting uncertainty leads to a crisis which is analogous to that recognized by twentieth-century existentialists. In Chapter One, I examine how the works of St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, William of Ockham, and John Wyclif inform Chaucer's poetry. I also incorporate the works of twentieth century theorists whose ideas seem to be similar to those with which Chaucer was working. In Chapter Two, I discuss how "The Miller's Tale" and "The Clerk's Tale" illustrate the ways in which language can be employed to create an illusion of orthodoxy to attain unorthodox ends. As Chapter Three demonstrates, the dangers involved in reconfiguring reality, as do the Miller and the Clerk with their misuse of science and philosophy, are also implicit in the Pardoner's failed attempt to recreate himself through his words and his relics. Chapter Four proposes that Chaucer's satire in *The Canterbury Tales* demonstrates that any authority can be undermined, and that the struggle to maintain a relationship with God is ultimately a matter that cannot be resolved by reason or pious ignorance alone.

CHAPTER ONE
MEDIEVAL AND MODERN LITERARY THEORY

1. Introduction

Chaucer's pilgrimage in *The Canterbury Tales* represents humanity's quest for knowledge and ultimate truth. In "The Miller's Tale," "The Clerk's Tale," and "The Pardoner's Tale," Chaucer satirizes the inability of finite mortal reason--in such authoritative forms as organized religion, science, philosophy--to provide this truth and to explain to humankind the nature of God and God's relationship with His creation. Chaucer also uses satire to investigate the nature of language and the ways in which language users, in order to preserve one particular version of truth, can (re)interpret and manipulate words to privilege one ideological position while devaluing others. Through his satirical reappropriation of Nominalist ideas, Chaucer demystifies the language and rituals of the Catholic Church; however, he also shows that the ability of Nominalism itself to reveal truth is contingent on faith rather than on reason and is, therefore, inadequate. Chaucer takes the Nominalist conception of the uncertainty of reality to an extreme: the result is skepticism, which Sheila Delany defines as "that sense of the unreliability of traditional information" (2). Skeptics question everything that they are told by supposed authorities because they believe that truth cannot be proven by logic, experience, or tradition and is, therefore,

unknowable. This skeptical tradition is "rooted in the awareness of coexistent contradictory truths and result[s] in the suspension of final rational judgment" (1).¹ In *The Tales*, Chaucer presents many possible truths, none of which can be proven absolutely by reason alone. The inability to find a single, unquestionable truth results in a crisis similar to that faced by twentieth-century Existentialists, in which the insignificance and meaninglessness of humankind's existence in an uncaring world created by an unknowable God leads to despair.

Much of fourteenth-century society revolved around the rituals and teachings of the Catholic Church. The prominence of religious themes and allusions in medieval literature suggests the importance of the Church in daily life. Through the Church, Christ's "Mystical Body," people had access to redemption and grace: "Christ had chosen to manifest Himself under the ecclesiastical dispensations . . . for the express purpose of enabling man to know and love God and other men through an integral union with Him in the life of the Church" (Colish 2). However, the apparent materialism of the Church left it open to charges of corruption and nepotism.

¹ Delaney also notes that this notion of skepticism is not simply an imposition of modern ideas on Chaucer's work; "the skeptical tradition is amply stated in the poet's own time: it is found in cosmology, metaphysics, encyclopedic compilations, poetry, and popular treatises. . . . [T]hat tradition was the product of historical and cultural events that had impaired certain established modes of authority and trust" (1).

As the cultural critic Barbara Tuchman explains, "[t]he claim of the Church to spiritual leadership could never be made wholly credible to all its communicants when it was founded in material wealth. The more riches the Church amassed, the more visible and disturbing became the flaw" (6).

The Church's perceived corruption, coupled with its great influence on daily life, inspired a tradition of religious satire and criticism in the works of medieval authors. Anne Hudson suggests that writers such as Chaucer attack the practices of the Church but not "[the Church's] ideals, however much they argue that contemporary reality betrays [those ideals]" (*Premature* 22). However, Hudson fails to consider that many of Chaucer's works reveal not only the discrepancy between the ideals the Church professed to represent and its perceived corruption, but also the dangers to the laity and the clergy inherent in the rituals and the hierarchy of the Church. Chaucer uses satire to undermine the ideals which were the religious foundation of medieval society, and by so doing reveals the instability of that foundation, forcing his audience to reevaluate the role of the Catholic Church in their polity.

Robert P. Miller notes that "[t]he function of the authorities was to make possible the penetration of 'seductive coverings' which would otherwise distract the unaided mind of Adam's progeny. . . . Truth could not be altered" (*Chaucer* 7); but, after being misled by his

garrulous guide and discovering the subjective nature of authority itself, the narrator of *The House of Fame* declares "I wot myself best how y stonde" (1878). "Geffrey" refuses to follow indiscriminately the advice of any person or institution: ultimately, he chooses to remain independent. In fact, when Chaucer finally introduces a "man of gret auctorite" (2158), the poem ends before "Geffrey" can record any of his words.² The reader is left, paradoxically, with only the authority of Geffrey's experience: in the houses of Fame and Rumour, certainty and justice are reduced to unreliable words and insubstantial illusions. Similarly, in *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer often criticizes and questions the hegemony of the Church and its clergy: the portraits in the "The General Prologue" reveal various forms of sin and corruption, such as the Monk's worldliness, the Friar's wantonness, and the Pardoner's despair. The questionable morality of these characters raises doubts about the clergy's fitness to represent Christ.

As "Christ's mystical body," the role of the Church was to perform God's will. Colish explains that medieval thinkers believed "the Being of God Himself was the guarantee, the criterion, and the *conditio sine qua non* of

² John Burrow discusses how fragmentary endings are enticing to contemporary readers, who must be conscious of "the accident and the contingent" (36); the poem may not have an ending due to accident, loss, etc. He suggests that the concern with "undiscriminating over-interpretation" (37) is a consequence of a postmodern taste for "anti-closure" (35).

whatever men might know about Him, or about anything else" (1). But, in "The Miller's Tale" and "The Clerk's Tale," Chaucer inverts and parodies the ideal of a Church created in the image of God to demonstrate the problematic nature of earthly authority. This parody suggests that if the Church, in all its corruption, truly represents God's will, then God must be equally corrupt. By exploding and inverting the conventional view of God, Chaucer also explodes everything guaranteed by that view and forces his readers to question what they know and can know about anything.

The stability of the Word (and hence the word) itself is also threatened by this inverted image of God which undermines humanity's ability to know and understand things, and creates the uncertainty that is characteristic of Nominalism: it is not merely possible to interpret a word or a phrase in more than one way but, rather, inevitable. According to Nominalist theory, there are as many possible interpretations of a single word as there are individuals. As a result, it is extremely difficult to know anything with certainty, including God: universals and transcendent knowledge do not exist outside the mind. Russell A. Peck says that Nominalism

refutes realist premises that universals are things of creation, proving to the contrary that only individual things exist and are experienced, and that concepts beyond the individual are names

only (concepts which exist exclusively in our heads). (745)

One of the dangers of these intellectual generalizations is that the remembrances or retellings of an experience may not accurately reflect the actual thing or event. This danger parallels the difficulty of conveying meaning through language; speakers can use words to obfuscate and to deceive their listeners through the recreation and reinterpretation of reality according to their immediate needs.³ As Peck observes, the "Nominalistic idea that the mind and its knowledge are an ongoing imagistic-linguistic process is appealing to Chaucer" because the "boundaries of man's interior reality are open to almost limitless variation" (747). Indeed, May's deception of January in "The Merchant's Tale" is an example of the potential disjunction between internal and external reality.

Peck also suggests that Chaucer is interested in the moral implications of this philosophical stance; if these concepts can exist only within the mind of the individual, even morality becomes a matter of will, human or divine, rather than a universal quality inherent in a subject or an act. William of Ockham, a fourteenth century philosopher and theologian, recognizes the importance of the individual and

³ Miscommunications may also be inadvertent, on either the speaker's or the hearer's side.

insists that the morality of any act depends upon the intention with which the will has committed itself (Peck 746). As a result, the Pardoner sins even when he causes people to "twynne/ From avarice and soore to repente" (430-31) because he preaches "nothyng but for coveitise" (433). Further, as Elizabeth D. Kirk points out, Nominalist morality lacks the "organic quality" of Aquinas' morality in that, for Nominalists, "God does not will something because it is good; it is 'good' because he wills it - he might have willed it otherwise . . . elsewhere" (115). Thus, all things are possible for God according to His *potentia absoluta* despite the self-imposed boundaries of His *potentia ordinata*;⁴ He is obligated to keep His covenant only as He wills.

For Chaucer, Nominalist ideas do not provide any ultimate answers; rather, Nominalism complicates the problem of knowledge and truth even further. Chaucer appropriates Nominalist philosophy to upset and invert traditional ways of thinking, but even Nominalism itself is not exempt from his scrutiny. He demonstrates that the indeterminacy of language makes the tasks of accurately portraying and

⁴ According to Oberman, "God can--and, in fact, has chosen to--do certain things according to the laws which he freely established, that is, *de potentia ordinata*. On the other hand, God can do everything that does not imply contradiction, whether God has decided to do these things [*de potentia ordinata*] or not, as there are many things God can do but which he does not want to do. The latter is called God's power *de potentia absoluta*" (Harvest 37).

understanding reality so hopeless that the Manciple ends his tale with the declaration, "be noon auctour newe/ of tidynges" (379-360). Radically Nominalist questioning has the potential to lead to skepticism, to empty all things of meaning, and to alienate people further from God and each other; for the Manciple, the only recourse is silence. Ultimately, Chaucer demonstrates that reason alone cannot provide adequate answers about God and the nature of reality and, in the absence of concrete evidence, humanity must make a leap of faith "to avoid agnosticism" (Delany 24) and despair.⁵ In the end, Nominalism can prove nothing because it, too, depends on faith to explain such problems as the nature of God.

When no philosophy or system of belief can provide absolute proof of the existence and nature of God, humans experience a crisis in faith. As Chaucer seems to have recognized, many were disillusioned by the Church's obvious preoccupation with material things, and their discontent was compounded by the Church's inability to provide a satisfactory explanation of or meaning for such apparently inexplicable events as the Black Plague. Tuchman explains:

If a disaster of such magnitude . . . was a mere wanton act of God or perhaps not God's work at

⁵ This faith may be religious or secular in nature: in the former case, individuals place their trust in God and the afterlife, whereas, in the latter, individuals place their trust in other humans or human institutions and in the present earthly life.

all, then the absolutes of a fixed order were loosed from their moorings. Minds that opened to admit these questions could never again be shut. Once people envisioned the possibility of change in a fixed order, the end of an age of submission came in sight; the turn to individual conscience lay ahead. (123)

When personal doubt and fear isolate the individual from others and from God, that individual faces a void created by the loss of fixity: the future becomes uncertain. Thus, in the face of such a crisis, William Barrett's description of the plight of modern humanity becomes applicable to the fourteenth century:

The loss of the Church was the loss of a whole system of symbols, images, dogmas, and rites which had the psychological validity of immediate experience. . . . In losing religion, man lost the concrete connection with a transcendent realm of being; he was set free to deal with this world in all its brute objectivity. (21)

Barrett demonstrates that without the "psychological validity of immediate experience," people must ultimately move toward a form of personal faith: even disbelief requires a form of faith. Many of Chaucer's tales systematically reveal the instability of philosophies that attempt to establish themselves as "right" beyond doubt, and that claim to provide a definitive solution to uncertainty,

by stripping those philosophies of their certainty and their ability to provide meaning. Chaucer shows that individuals must move beyond this spiritual and psychological void and establish for themselves a set of beliefs to which they can adhere, based only on the authority of their personal experience rather than on an unattainable, absolute proof. As Chaucer's Pardoner demonstrates, anyone unable to move beyond this void becomes "cast adrift, . . . a wanderer upon the face of the earth" (Barrett 21-2).

In the first chapter of this thesis, I will examine the works of St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, William of Ockham, and John Wyclif to show how some of Chaucer's poems are informed by these thinkers. I will then incorporate the ideas of twentieth-century critics, including Saussure, Barrett, and Sartre, to demonstrate how the ideas with which Chaucer was working are, in some respects, analogous to the ideas of modern theorists. In Chapters Two and Three, I will examine Chaucer's use of religious satire in "The Miller's Tale," "The Clerk's Tale," and "The Pardoner's Tale." Together, "The Miller's Tale" and "The Clerk's Tale" demonstrate the ways in which language can be employed to create an illusion of orthodoxy to attain unorthodox ends. The dangers involved in reconfiguring reality, as do the Miller and the Clerk with their Nominalist wordplay and their misuse of science and philosophy, are also implicit in the Pardoner's failed attempt to recreate himself through

his words and his relics: the Pardoner demonstrates the impossibility of controlling and limiting the potential meanings of language. Like "The Miller's Tale," and "The Clerk's Tale," "The Pardoner's Prologue" and "Tale" are examples of Nominalist wordplay because words, deeds, and intentions are at odds. Thus, the Nominalist position is undermined through the revelation that the Pardoner's arrogance and extravagance are subterfuges, intended to disguise his absolute despair. In all three tales, Chaucer uses satire to show the ease with which an authority can manipulate language and create illusions that ironically reveal its own failings; in "The Pardoner's Tale," he shows the crisis of faith that results when these illusions are revealed and stripped away. Chapter Four demonstrates that any authoritative position can be subverted and undermined, and suggests that the struggle to understand the nature of God and the universe is ultimately a matter which cannot be resolved by science, philosophy, or pious ignorance.

2. St. Augustine (354-430)

As J. A. Robson says:

The genius of Plato and Paul, transmitted from antiquity in the monumental work of Augustine of Hippo, cast upon the medieval mind a spell which none could avoid. . . . Indeed it is hard to think of any century . . . more soaked in Augustine than the fourteenth. (25)

Because his writing played such a significant role in fourteenth-century thought, any discussion of that period requires an acknowledgment of Augustine's philosophy and theology. Augustine believed it was necessary for people to question their faith and to understand what Church doctrine demanded of them. He argued that only through rational questioning and contemplation does the individual attain knowledge which, when illuminated by faith, can lead to a better, more personal comprehension of God by transcending "pious ignorance," the blind acceptance of theological doctrine without knowledge or understanding. Meyrick H. Carré explains:

The searching and comprehensive inquiries of Augustine led the meditations of subsequent generations of churchmen to pass beyond this rule of pious ignorance. His writings invited men to examine the rational basis of their faith. He did not deny that it is necessary to believe in order to know; understanding is the reward of faith. But he also declared that Christian doctrine contains many things that we cannot believe unless we understand them. A man who thinks it is sufficient to hold fast to the Faith without aspiring to an understanding of it ignores the true end of faith. (5)

Thus, it is not enough for Christians simply to accept and believe what they are told: they must contemplate and test both their faith and their understanding.

A clear understanding of Church doctrine depended on a correct and rational perception of reality, and Augustine's view of that perception was based on Platonic principles of Ideas and their essences. Barrett explains that for Plato, as well as for Augustine, "[t]hese Ideas . . . were . . . 'really real,' more real than the particular things that derived their own individual being from participation in the Ideas" (91). Augustine believed in the existence of objective, transcendent truths that were independent of the changeable, transient world of things:

The region of reality is the world of Ideas, necessary, immutable, intelligible. Augustine's main concern is this realm of Ideas, and he constantly seeks to show that they are integral to thought, even at the lowest levels. (Carré 12)

These Ideas, perceived by the mind, exist beyond the material world; they "constitute the stable reality of things" (Carré 26).

To deal with the limitations of human speech to express Ideas, such as the nature of God, Augustine developed a linguistic sign system based on his conception of the Word and the problem of its expression. Colish says that Augustine's definition of a sign is a "thing which causes us to think of something beyond the impression that the thing

itself makes upon the senses" (59). Beyond every physical thing lies the Idea or essence of the thing: signs represent universal Ideas but they can also be applied to individual things. Also, it is possible for words to represent God and truth accurately when they are interpreted with the guidance of divine illumination: language can be transformed and recast as a Pauline mirror, faithfully mediating God to man in the present life; and the agencies appointed for the translation of man's partial knowledge by faith into his complete knowledge of God by direct vision were to be redefined as modes of verbal expression. (Colish 19-20)

Thus, when interpreted properly, language becomes an instrument of truth. This transformation occurs because truth is guaranteed by the Incarnation which, Augustine claims, bridges the gap between the human and the divine:

God creates the world and man through His Word, and He takes on humanity in the Word made flesh so that human words may take on Divinity . . . and man's faculty of speech is empowered to carry on the work of Incarnation in expressing the Word to the world. (Colish 35)

Augustine also writes that it is possible to interpret a text either literally or figuratively, and that more than one meaning can be true. Signs are "called literal when they are used to designate things on account of which they were instituted. . . . Figurative signs occur when that thing

which we designate by a literal sign is used to signify something else . . ." (OCD 2.10.15). In other words, it is possible for a text to have meaning on multiple levels. Also, the use of figurative language allows for the possibility that not every sign will be understood perfectly: figurative signs must be interpreted, which allows for more than one way of reading and understanding them but also increases the opportunities for human error.

As a result of the possibilities of signification, authors can reveal profound truths both consciously and unconsciously. Augustine states in *On Christian Doctrine* that, when deciphering the Holy Scriptures, meanings not intended by the author are still valid as long as they do not contradict those set down in other sections of the Scriptures because

the Spirit of God, who worked through that author, undoubtedly foresaw that this meaning would occur to the reader. . . . For what could God have more generously and abundantly provided in the divine writings than that the same words might be understood in various ways . . . ? (3.27.38)

Augustine also acknowledges that, if the Scriptures cannot provide evidence to support a statement's meaning, the interpreter must use reason:

when a meaning is elicited whose uncertainty cannot be resolved by the evidence of places in the Scriptures whose meaning is certain, it

remains to make it more clear by recourse to reason, even if he whose words we seek to understand did not perhaps intend that meaning.

(3.28.39)

He warns, however, that such a departure from the Scriptures is dangerous because it may lead to wrong thinking and sin. Users of language can pervert the truth by telling lies, and it is for this reason that Augustine condemns and rejects the pagan authors because of

their abuse of language and the deleterious morality which he feels that this abuse encourages. The poets, he says, use words erroneously, since they use them to refer to things and ideas which are nonexistent or untrue. Furthermore, he adds, the poets depict ignorant and irresponsible actions in their fictitious characters, who operate in accordance with the unreal universe of the authors' creation . . . and . . . make the fantastic morality of that world attractive and convincing. (Colish 25)

This perversion of language is significant because it adulterates the "true significance of words" (Colish 55), but more importantly because it is a corruption of God's will that blurs the lines of morality and makes this corruption attractive. Yet, despite his warning, Augustine allows for a subjective interpretation of the Word guided by both reason and faith in Scriptural knowledge.

When interpreting the Word and the word, Augustine emphasizes the importance of the individual and the individual's conscience as it is guided by divine illumination. Augustine says to the individual "Go not outside thyself, but return within thyself; for truth resides in the inmost part of man" (Carré 11). Barrett reinforces the significance of Augustine's focus on the individual:

Where Plato and Aristotle had asked the question, What is man?, St. Augustine (in the *Confessions*) asks, Who am I?--and this shift is decisive. . . . Augustine's question . . . stems from an altogether different, more obscure and vital center within the questioner himself: from an acutely personal sense of dereliction and loss, rather than from the detachment with which reason surveys the world of objects in order to locate its bearer, man, zoologically within it. (84)

Thus reason alone is not enough: without faith, the "personal sense of dereliction and loss" leads to despair. True understanding of universal Ideas and of God, who is the source of those Ideas, depends upon the illumination of reason by faith; in this way, the individual achieves wisdom.

Augustine saw "faith and reason--the vital and the rational--as coming together in eventual harmony" (Barrett 85) as a model for the individual as well as for the whole

of Christian thought. He raised questions about the human mind and soul, and about the interpretation of universal truths which would be taken up almost nine hundred years later by St. Thomas Aquinas.

3. St. Thomas Aquinas (c.1225-1274)

Like St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas was primarily concerned with "how the outside world gets into the mind" (Colish 166). He questioned the way that the mind internalizes and understands sensation, which he understood as the process through which people perceive and know reality. The perception of reality includes the perception of the Word; Colish explains that Aquinas expanded upon the theory of signs developed by Augustine:

Translated into the mode of a logic originally formulated to analyze and to organize conceptually the structure and function of the sensible universe, this theory is interpreted by Thomas so as to stress ideas, and to some extent the created universe, as the principle *signa Dei*. Like Augustine . . . Thomas is preoccupied with the task of finding the most suitable terms in which to express man's knowledge of God, and he is interested in the reasons why these terms make different subjective impressions on different audiences. (162)

Aquinas is indebted to Augustine not only for his theories of linguistic signs and subjective interpretations, but also for his theory of the interaction between faith and knowledge, and the dependence of understanding on illumination by God's grace. However, Aquinas takes the Realist premises of Ideas and their divine Source and develops his own theories about knowledge and faith that move towards the subjectivity of the individual mind which the Nominalists would later take to extremes.

Aquinas' works dispute the premise that all minds are one Mind. He declares that "the intellect is united to the human body as its [the body's] form. But one form cannot possibly exist in more than one matter" (*SCG* 2:73:2). Carré elaborates:

The active intellect [which causes particular impressions to be abstracted and generalized in the mind as universals] is not a power outside the mind, an Intelligence in which the mind can share. For it is imperfect and attains truth, not by direct intuition, but by . . . reasoning. The Augustinian view that the active intellect is the divine Mind must be rejected. (86)

Augustine's view of the one Mind is based on the assertion that the body and the mind are wholly separate, and that the mind works actively upon the body which is, in essence, passive and thus unable to influence the mind. Aquinas agrees with Augustine's description of the mind's

incorporeal nature, but suggests that it has a different relationship with the body:

The senses do not know existence save under conditions of *here* and *now*, whereas the understanding knows things absolutely and eternally. So far, Thomas adheres completely to St. Augustine's way of thought. But the great difference between that philosophy and his own is that he does not think that the mind as such, pure understanding, functions in our experience. The mind of man is not a pure intelligence (such as an angel) nor is it a spirit in a corpse. It is an organic composite of mind and body. (Carré 77)

Aquinas' concept of this "organic composite" places importance on the individual perception because

minds are individualized; for the bodies of which they are parts are, as matter, necessarily particular. . . . Since, then, the human mind is intimately allied with matter its thinking is throughout infected with sensible experience. . . . Human knowledge is dependent upon perceptual experience. Our minds cannot free themselves of sensory references even in reflection upon "the eternal truths". . . . Incorporeal principles are known to us only through sensible bodies. (Carré 79-81)

While Augustine declares that the mind could know essences and forms but not physical bodies, Aquinas disagrees, insisting that there could be no knowledge if sense and thought were separate from one another. Carré explains that if

there is nothing in experience but what is apprehended by the senses, experience becomes a perpetual flux. And what is in this state ceases to be and is replaced by another before the mind can say what it is. If on the other hand . . . genuine knowledge were confined to immaterial entities we should possess no understanding of bodies in motion. . . . [W]e are asked to refer to entities which have no connexion with them. (85)

The result of Aquinas' reasoning is that the mind and senses work together to understand objects; each mind interprets the senses that effect its particular body according to its own nature. Thus, there are as many interpretations of reality as there are minds. Aquinas also extends his theory to allow for multiple meanings when interpreting Scriptures, "not because one word has many meanings but because the actual things signified by the words can be signs of other things" (Minnis et. al. 242).

Aquinas reinterprets Augustine's theory of the acquisition of knowledge according to his own belief that knowledge depends upon the senses. Aquinas' theory of

internalization maintains that a sensory sign is made intelligible by the active intellect.

The active intellect in a sense distills the significative content out of the phantasm⁶ by abstracting it from its intelligible species, that is, the aspect of the phantasm which is capable of being conceptualized. The intelligible species is then impressed on the possible intellect, or the mind insofar as it can know all things, and the possible intellect responds by forming a *verbum mentis*, or conceptual sign of the original object. (Colish 172)

Once the *verbum mentis* has been formed, the mind must evaluate the object as a conceptual sign before it can make use of that object.

The validity of the sign must be judged and its truly representative character accepted before the mind can willingly employ the sign in composing negative or affirmative propositions concerning the object. . . . As in [Augustine's] theory of signification . . . the beings signified, for Thomas, are the criteria of the correspondence, and hence the truth, of the ideas that men have about them. (Colish 173-74)

⁶ A phantasm is "[a]n accurate sensible sign . . . formed out of sensory impressions" (Colish 172).

According to Aquinas, it is necessary for the mind to judge the signs offered by the senses; otherwise, "every sensation would be true, even contradictory ones. There would be no means of distinguishing reality from illusion" (Carré 85). It is only by evaluating each sign that the mind can form the phantasm, or perfect sign.

Once the phantasm has been internalized and judged, it is possible for the individual to acquire knowledge:

That which is the universal nature of things, and is the final object of knowledge Thomas properly calls the *quidditas* of things. . . . The cognitive process appears as a specific movement from the individual (*res*) to the universal (*quidditas*). . . . The quiddity is communicated to the possible intellect as the content of the intelligible species by the agent intellect. (Pellerey 95)

In other words, the *quidditas* represents the essence of the object. However, there are limitations to a person's knowledge of an object's quiddity: "Men, [Aquinas] states, do not know natural objects perfectly, even those objects accessible to the senses, since they . . . can make mistakes about them" (Colish 175). When attempting to gain knowledge about God, these limitations are compounded because His nature is unknowable and inexpressible. However,

Thomas frequently quotes St. Paul's dictum: "The invisible things of God are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made" [Romans

1:20]. It is important . . . that we know the world accurately; otherwise we might misconstrue the nature of God. (Colish 182)

Thus, despite the potential for mistakes, it is still possible for signs to represent an object accurately; it is also possible for objects of God's creation to represent the nature of God truly, although incompletely.

Because Aquinas' works are essentially theological, faith takes precedence over philosophy. Colish explains that "the public and private goals of theology make it essential that it be a living dialogue between the contemplator and God, and not merely an abstract discipline" (207). Aquinas emphasizes the importance of faith: "so that man might have a firmer knowledge of Him, God revealed certain things about Himself that transcend the human intellect" (SCG 4.1.4). Reason can be applied to faith in an attempt to understand beliefs that are already held; however, "the greatest demerits go to persons who refuse to believe what they cannot understand scientifically by demonstrative proof" (Colish 200). God can be known through knowledge based on faith, not through knowledge based on philosophy, because humanity's understanding of the existence and nature of God is limited by the finite nature of the human mind: it can come to no absolute rational basis for belief. People must rely on the signs found in nature for evidence of God. Colish summarizes: "The more adequately these signs signify God, the less they rely on reason, and the more closely

correlated to the mystery of the Godhead they become" (222). Thus, despite the differences of their theologies, Aquinas and Augustine come to the same conclusions about the necessity of faith: reason and philosophy cannot provide ultimate answers, and the individual must rely on faith and grace to enlighten imperfect knowledge.

According to Aquinas, because knowledge is imparted by the senses and depends upon the individual's judgment of sensations, it is possible to interpret reality in more than one way; he observes,

there is no reason why there should not be several different images of one thing; it is thus that one man is seen by several. Hence, the existence of several intelligible species in several persons is not incompatible with the intellect's knowledge of the universal. (SCG 2:75:9)

This potential for multiple interpretations of sensory experiences was taken to extremes by William of Ockham and the Nominalists of the fourteenth century in their rejection of universal forms; yet, despite their insistence that universals were mere creations of mind, the Nominalists also acknowledge that "the insights of faith, though they cannot be proven by reason, are not therefore contrary to reason, but simply go beyond it" (Peck 747).

4. William of Ockham (c.1285-1347)

Unlike Augustine and Aquinas, William of Ockham rejected all forms of Realism, claiming that universal Ideas and Forms existed only in the mind. He believed that the Realist arguments for the actual existence of universals were paradoxical, and his response to the Realist premise that universals were part of the existence of individuals was that "there would be as many universals as there are individuals. And this would mean a denial of universals; there would be no common nature" (Carré 109). To Ockham, the perception of universals is an act of the intellect, which "stands for things outside the mind or for other things in the mind, just as the spoken words stand for them by convention" (47). William H. Watts and Richard J. Utz note the significance of Ockham's position on universals:

In asserting the ontological primacy of particular things over universals, Ockham relegates universals to the status of linguistic signs; hence, universals have no substantial existence outside of the human mind. (148)

His insistence on the individuality and subjectivity of all forms of being is the basis of Nominalism.

However, Ockham himself was not an extreme Nominalist; he declared that, as creations of the mind, universals have logical, if not actual, being. Ockham believed that all knowledge was grounded on the "direct apprehension of

individual objects" (Carré 112). In other words, universals such as the concept "humanity"

refer to "intentions" of the mind, to concepts. They cannot refer to realities. . . . "Hence the error of those who believed that there was something in reality besides the singular entity and who held that humanity distinguished from singular instances is something that exists in individuals and is related to their essence (*Summa Totius Logicae*.i.66)." (Carré 115)

Ockham divided existence into exterior and interior realities. Exterior reality is the physical world outside the mind, experienced through the senses. Interior reality is the world of the mind, in which sensation is internalized and considered. Further, "[e]xterior reality is knowable; interior reality is what is empirically known and reknowable through reflection and abstraction" (Peck 747). According to Ockham, there are two stages in the acquisition of knowledge about the external world: first "the mind intuits; it then reflects" (Peck 748); intuition is both sensory and intellectual. Carré explains that "[t]he sensory factor tells us *that* the thing exists, the intellectual factor allows us to recognize it; and any perception requires both elements" (110). However,

it is not only objects perceived by means of the external senses which can be directly known. Actually it is the region of inner experience,

comprising acts of will, pleasure, or sorrow, that are most immediately and convincingly known.

Judgments based on these processes carry greater certainty than any other class of contingent propositions. (Carré 111)

As Carré suggests, Ockham's theory of intuitive knowledge is not without qualification. Ockham explains that the perceptions of the inner senses are more reliable than those of the external senses because while it is possible to doubt sensory experience, the existence of the individual in the world is beyond doubt to that person. Carré says this qualification of the external senses leads to the second qualification of Ockham's empiricism:

For intuitions may sometimes be clear without giving guarantee of their existence. . . . [W]e may continue to see a star after it has been destroyed. And God can give an intuition of an object that has no real existence. (111-12)

Despite these contingencies, intuitive knowledge is the most precise for Ockham: in its immediacy, it can give true knowledge of reality.

The second stage in the acquisition of knowledge is to abstract the information provided by the senses, which Peck defines:

From intuited information, the intellect, motivated by the will, abstracts words, images, and concepts which it holds in the mind for

further abstraction and confirmation. Through repetition these processes lead to principles and habits which constitute each individual's sense of reality. (748)

Abstract knowledge is less reliable than intuitive because such knowledge is less certain when it has passed in the intellect from immediate to past experience,

[f]or even memory images are classified as abstract in this strict empiricism. When I see a wall or touch a flame, I know certainly that the wall or flame exists. But if I recall them or imagine them I am not sure that they exist.

(Carré 110)

Thus, the accuracy of abstract knowledge remains problematic because "it does not enable us to know the existence of what does exist or the non-existence of what does not exist" (Ockham 27). Peck elaborates on the problem, suggesting that the degree to which experience reflects individual truth depends upon the perception of the individual: "The will can motivate, but it can also interfere, and the intellect may be weak, thus obscuring judgment. Error may lie in both the apprehension and the judgment" (749).

While limiting the role of universals like "good" and "evil," Ockham increases God's active role in the world, ascribing to him unlimited power. Ockham insists that God's *potentia ordinata* does not restrict His *potentia absoluta*. In fact, His *potentia ordinata* is contingent upon the

covenant God has made with humanity, and not at all the result of necessity (Oberman, "Shape" 12). As a result,

[t]he combined effect of Ockham's restriction of the ontological status of universals and his elevation of the power of God is to render all creatures and things utterly contingent upon their creator not only for their existence, but also for the circumstances that govern their existence. If universals have not substantial existence, then God is the final source and guarantor of truth just as he is the final source and guarantor of laws concerning physical bodies. (Watts and Utz 149)

The result of the limitations imposed on universals and the elevation of God's power is that all of his Creation depends on Him alone for existence and truth. However, the distinction between God's two powers becomes problematic: Ockham's declaration that God's absolute power is unlimited by his ordained power removes all limitations from the divine volition. In other words, the distinction between morality and immorality is based not upon inherent universal concepts of "good" and "bad" but upon the particular intention of God's will. As Courtenay explains,

God could have established and still could establish a different moral order in which murder and adultery would be virtuous acts. God could even cause a man to hate him and accept such

actions as meritorious. The moral order which presently pertains, therefore, is dependent solely on the arbitrary will of God and can be altered.

(29)

The apparently arbitrary nature of the moral order leads to the possibility of skepticism and religious pessimism. Since abstract cognition is not reliable and God has the power to make people perceive things that do not really exist, even intuitive cognition can be unreliable (which makes abstractive cognition doubly so). Humans rely on God for Truth, but Truth is a universal without real existence and so is dependent on particular situations which, in turn, depend upon the arbitrary will of God. Ultimately, people cannot know the world with any certainty because "there is no assurance that universal ideas and words bear any resemblance to the real world" (Watts and Utz 149). Even language itself becomes problematic: Holly Wallace Boucher observes that, because of Ockham's theorizing,

[t]he firm bonds between signifier and signified . . . had unraveled: so had the necessary tie between sign and reality. . . . Words could no longer be assumed to fit the shape of reality because of their origin in a real world of ideas beyond the mind. Language . . . has become a skewed grid that may not fit the scheme of reality. (215)

Because of the contingency of language and the problem of abstract generalizations already existing in the minds of both author and reader, interpretation becomes problematic. A person's interior reality can be altered and separated from the initial perception of external reality, since the two forms of existence are coterminous only in the mind. When the two are disunited or, as Peck says, when "[t]he *ficta* in the brain fail to correspond exactly with the phenomena," there is a danger that, lost in the confusion between the inner and outer worlds, people can become imprisoned by their own ideas or become trapped by someone else's words (757).

It is possible to interpret Ockham's discussions of the inability to know anything with certainty as a proper Christian awareness of the individual's dependence on God (Watts and Utz 149). Sturges writes that "Ockham's philosophical world is inhabited by radically individual beings separate from all others. Since God is separate from humanity, human knowledge is severely limited" (27). Sturges' statement is qualified, however, by the theory that "the giver of forms may be seen in the forms," suggesting that God can be known, to some degree, through His creation, and especially through the human mind (Peck 750). The result is that Christians rejoice in their dependence on a God whose nature can be known, though imperfectly. However, when placed in the context of the Nominalist belief that this universe is created according to the arbitrary decisions of

the divine will, and that it is possible for God to cause people to perceive things that do not exist, the faith of the individual Christian may waver and turn the former believer into a skeptic. For the Nominalist, faith is essential: "The insights of faith, though they cannot be proved by reason, are not therefore contrary to reason, but simply go beyond it" (Peck, previously cited, 747). God is understood to be a radically free and omnipotent creator, subject to nothing except non-contradiction, free of all law (even his own), the absolute necessary being who might command his chosen one (Abraham) to slay his only son (Isaac) while judging him according to his fidelity to that singular divine command and discounting any mere moral law proscribing such an act.

(Delasanta 212)

Without faith to sustain the individual's confidence in the ultimate benevolence of God and to guarantee the truth of the Word, the Nominalist is left alone in a universe without certainty or meaning.

5. John Wyclif (c.1330-1384)

John Wyclif's "ultra-realism" (Delasanta 214) dominated the latter part of the fourteenth century. Nominalism had dismissed universals and discouraged metaphysical contemplation, and the certainty provided by universals was replaced by skepticism:

when the universal is understood to exist solely as a sign in the human intellect, such an epistemology does violence to the essentiality of the real and impedes any intellectual accessibility to a metaphysical or moral order.

(Delasanta 214)

Consequently, Wyclif's restoration of the universal and his claim that philosophy could provide absolute proofs to questions such as the existence of God were very appealing to his contemporaries, especially as a counter to the Nominalist suggestion that nothing could be known with certainty. Robson summarizes the two most important aspects of Wyclif's metaphysics: "that we can obtain absolute certainty of knowledge, and that the basis of ultimate truth, including divine truth, lies in 'pure philosophy'" (142).

Wyclif, like Augustine, believed that all human knowledge was grounded on immutable universal ideas that exist in the divine Mind. As Delasanta observes,

this was standard Augustinian doctrine, and as such was not particularly remarkable, except that Wycliffe redefined these archetypes as ideas participating in God's own being. . . . By making the individual's archetype share God's being, Wyclif conferred upon it the same attributes of eternity, necessity, and indestructibility as God enjoyed. (214-5)

Wyclif takes Augustine's Realism to extremes. His belief in the indestructible nature of individuals led to his rejection of Transubstantiation which, in turn, contributed to his attacks on the clergy. As Knapp says, his "uncompromising realism drove him to attack the doctrine of transubstantiation, which posited that the substance of the bread disappears in the sacrament of the Eucharist" (*Chaucer* 66). Unlike some of his followers, Wyclif affirmed the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. He argued that the spiritual being of Christ is added to the physical elements of bread and wine; there is no physical transformation. Wyclif was concerned with the meaning of the sacrament, not the "accidents and subjects" (*Hudson Premature* 282). In his sermons, he reasons that, should a mouse eat a consecrated wafer, "a mous etip not Cristis body, al zif he ete þis sacrament, for þe mous faylip gostly witt to chewe in hym þis beleue" (*EWS* 206/24-25). Like the mouse, an unrepentant sinner is unable to receive spiritual benefits from "Cristis body": the sacrament depends upon the spiritual condition of the communicant rather than of the priest.

The Eucharist was not the only sacrament Wyclif scrutinized; he also turned his attention to confession. He declared that only God can forgive sin because only God can know if the sinner is truly penitent, which suggests that the priest who serves as intermediary between humans and God is again unnecessary. Hudson explains that "[a]t the root of the offender's state of mind is his state of grace, a state

dependent upon his predestination to salvation or his foreknowing to damnation; only God knows this state"

(*Premature* 294). As a result,

zif we han synned neuere so myche, and neuere so longe han lyghged in synne, axe we God mercy in oure powzt, and haue we sorwe for þis synne, and God is redy to forzzyu it, howeuere þat preestus faylon. (*EWS 82/106-09*)

Wycliffite writers objected to the practice of oral confession because contemporary practices of confession were not in keeping with Biblical examples, and because of the abuses to which the laity and the clergy were exposed. All forms of simony in the sacraments were deplored; by making the individual ultimately responsible for his or her own salvation, Wyclif effectively reduced the importance of the clergy. As Tuchman observes,

Wyclif reached the point of denying the validity of the priesthood itself as necessary to salvation. . . . From there the rest followed--the non-necessity of the Pope, rejection of excommunication, confession, pilgrimages, worship of relics and saints, indulgences, treasury of merit. (289)

Out of Wyclif's criticisms of the sacraments and the clergy come two of the most important aspects of his theology: the concept of predestination and the preeminence of the Bible. Both aspects are important to Wyclif's vision

of "displacing the centuries-old claim that Christianity is founded on both the Bible *and* the institution of the Church and substituting the Bible alone as the authority which must establish Christian doctrine and practice" (Knapp, *Chaucer* 65). Predestination played an important role in what Wyclif saw as the diminishing authority of the Church and the clergy. For Wyclif, the institutional church was divided between the *congregatio predestinatorum*, those "predestined for salvation" and who belonged to the "true" church, and the *congregatio prescitorum*, those "destined to damnation" and who were not members of the "true" church. *Congregatio predestinatorum* and *congregatio prescitorum* both possessed a combination of virtue and vice; the distinction between the two depended on their final ends, which could not be known by any human being. Robson points out that

no creature predestined to salvation can merit eternal punishment, however gravely he may sin, nor any foreknown to reprobation evade it, however pleasing he may be to God in this life. For if we allow temporal merit to elicit its reward, the reward itself cannot be heavenly but only temporal. (212)

In other words, salvation is not the result of virtuous behavior; rather, "God naturally justifies men to eternal life before the predestined show merit in this world" (Robson 208).

The inability of humans to distinguish between those who are saved and those who are damned had disturbing consequences for the authority of the church. As Hudson remarks,

[t]he institutional church, to a medieval outlook, contained the entire population. . . . But it was unreasonable to think that the whole population was *predestinatus*; it was equally unlikely even that all the English clergy were, let alone the clergy of the whole Roman church. Where, amongst the institutional church, was the true church . . . to be found? . . . [A]uthority, whether over inanimate goods or over animate nature, depended upon the state of grace of the man wielding it.

(*Premature* 315)

A cleric who was not in a state of grace had no authority; any dispositions made by such a person were neither legal nor binding.

Wyclif insisted that the Bible was the sole authority of proper doctrine and practice in the church. He found that [t]he institutional church bears the perfectly readable marks of divergence from apostolic truths in the Bible: it errs in doctrine, notably Eucharistic doctrine, and in practice, by abusing property and power (ecclesiastical property, neglect of the poor, papal wars). (Knapp, *Chaucer* 68)

The clergy was unreliable because many members were guilty of various abuses and corruptions; even papal decrees could not be trusted because of the questionable morality of many popes. Hudson observes that this uncertainty was far more detrimental to the institution of the church than was the condemnation of abuses, which could be identified and remedied. According to Hudson, once the authority and identity of the church were questioned, any attempts at reform were subject to the same doubts. She concludes, "As effectively as later Protestant theology, Wyclif's views forced the individual Christian into making his own judgments" (*Premature* 316).

Wyclif's views placed new responsibility on the individual and presented a need for an English version of the Bible. Nowhere, Knapp writes, is Wyclif more clearly involved with

the social world of active lay piety, of increasing lay literacy, of increasingly blurred boundaries between the estates, and of changing assessments of women's roles than in his egalitarian openness about Bible reading and scriptural interpretation. (*Chaucer* 73)

Wyclif argued that every Christian should be free to read and study the Bible. He believed that the Bible should be accessible to everyone, and that the clergy should follow Christ's example and preach to the people in their own language. He believed that anyone in a state of grace who

approached the scriptures with meekness and humility would be able to interpret and understand them correctly, while anyone in a state of sin would be unable to discern true meaning (Gellrich 95). This belief in the importance of grace in guiding the interpretation of the Scriptures is similar to Augustine's theory of divine illumination; Wyclif wrote:

[w]e schulde not trowe in þis enke, ne in þese skynnys þat is clepud booc, but in þe sentence þat þei seyen, whyche sentence is þe booc of lyf; for al ȝif þer ben manye trewþus and diuerse resonys in þe gospelus, neþeles eche of þes trewþus is þe substaunce of God hymself. (*EWS* 94/19-24)

Also like Augustine, Wyclif favored literal interpretations of the Bible but also recognized the need for allegorical readings; he argued, however, that

when a figure is undeniably the intention of the divine author, it may be counted as literal. . . . His Latin treatise *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae* defends the literal truth of the Bible by making a distinction between what is literal (proper) in human language and what is literal (proper) in divine discourse, which in some cases overrides ordinary grammatical and semantic usages.

(Knapp, *Chaucer* 72)

Wyclif argued that the Scriptures should be presented to people without the standard readings of the patristic

glosses, to which he objected on the grounds that they obscured the truth. However, ecclesiastical authorities also claimed that the Wycliffite glosses were equally obfuscating. The result of this controversy was a redefinition of the word *glose*; Knapp explains:

glose is used by both sides to mean 'specious or sophistical interpretation' (*Middle English Dictionary*), alongside its positive meanings. . . . Once a *lying gloss* is able to be conceived of, the patristic tradition takes its place, important but not alone, among other interpretive systems. (*Chaucer* 75)

Wyclif's emphasis on a literal interpretation of the Bible was based on his belief that "the Word of Scripture was God Himself, an emanation of the Supreme Being 'transposed into writing'" (Robson 146). In other words, the Bible contains Truth; it is up to the individual guided by faith to interpret it.

Like the Nominalists, Wyclif leaves the possibility for salvation to the individual. However, his "ultra-realist" belief in universals provides an objective Truth which gives the Wycliffites a source of security that the Nominalists did not have. Wyclif's ideas seem to indicate a return to Augustine and his theories of universals, which ratifies Augustine's importance in any discussion of fourteenth-century philosophy.

6. Twentieth Century Theorists

Every time period is dominated by "large-scale conceptual frameworks" which Richard Harland, a critic of structuralist and post-structuralist theory, calls "epistemes" (105). An "episteme" is the *a priori* upon which any new idea or discovery is based, whether that idea is true or false. It is a cultural foundation that consists of all pre-existing perceptions and understandings of the world that inform the minds and ideas of the people living in a given society. An episteme shapes the ways in which people define and think about their world, causing them to share common understandings and questions about the way the universe works. These conceptual frameworks contain all the discourses which exist during a given period of time; Peggy Knapp appropriates Catherine Belsey's definition of discourse, using it

to indicate, "a domain of language use; a particular way of talking (and writing and thinking)" which "involves certain shared assumptions which appear in the formulation that characterize it."⁷ Ideology is always implied in discourse; we must make assumptions about the world in order to say anything. (2)

⁷ Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice* (London: Methuen, 1980) 5.

Knapp is referring to particular ways of looking at and understanding the world. These ideological positions can be conflicting as well as harmonious; ideas which oppose each other provide alternate perspectives from which a society can be understood. Any discussion of late-fourteenth century ideas must acknowledge how literary works are inevitably informed by the works and thoughts of other authors. Because the ideas of St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, William of Ockham, and John Wyclif inform the various fourteenth-century schools of religious and philosophical speculation, Chaucer would have been at least aware of the principles that they present.

Within any episteme, there are people who are in positions of power; one way of preserving that power is to undermine opposing positions. Language, whether written or spoken, can either reveal or conceal power. Therefore, to control conflicting view-points, one need only control the language, thereby limiting what can and cannot be said. A society can prohibit and exclude certain discourses which threaten to expose the weaknesses of its own privileged positions through a process of division and rejection: it divides truth from falsity, right from wrong. A discourse becomes authoritative when enough people believe that it reveals truth. However, if society rejects the "restraining language" (Harland 100) through which an authority defines its version of right and wrong, that authority is rendered powerless. Thus, when affirmed by enough people, one

position is considered "true"; the marginalized position is, necessarily, considered false because, in such an exclusionary system, there can be only one truth. It is also possible for a false premise to be accepted as true if people believe it because of the power of language and the individual's will to believe. Truth is a convention, not a universal. As Paul Rabinow observes, "there is no external position of certainty, no universal understanding that is beyond history and society" (4).

Like truth, language is also subject to convention. As Ferdinand de Saussure says in his *Course in General Linguistics*, language is an already existing "collection of necessary conventions that have been adopted by a social body to permit individuals to exercise that faculty [of speech]" (9). Language does not exist in an individual but in a group of individuals; as a result, it is beyond the power of an individual to change language. Because of its arbitrary, conventional nature, the distinguishing characteristic of a sign is that "in some way it always eludes the individual or the social will" (Saussure 17). Saussure explains that every language system is made of "distinct signs corresponding to distinct ideas" (9). A "sign" is the combination of two parts: the signifier which is a word, and the signified which is the concept to which the word refers. Saussure says of the arbitrary connection between signifier and signified:

the whole system of language is based on the irrational principle of the arbitrariness of the sign, which would lead to the worst sort of complication if applied without restriction. But the mind contrives to introduce a principle of order and regularity into certain parts of the mass of signs. . . . (Saussure 133)

In contrast to Saussure, post-structuralists do not believe that the mind is able to impose order on language or on anything else: for post-structural theorists, as for Augustine, irrational complications and disorder are inevitable because the conventions linking the signifier to the signified

can be changed, disregarded, broken. . . . [Words] are able to point to the truth but do not possess it. And consequently, all kinds of slips are possible between the speaker, his language, and his audience. (Dinshaw 171)

Thus, it is possible to free signifiers from the things they signify. It is through the freeing of signifiers from definite meaning that authoritative positions can be destabilized; for example, in the late fourteenth century, the Wycliffites attempted to redefine the doctrine of "transubstantiation" by demonstrating how logically impossible the transformation was, then redefining the terms that originally meant a physical alteration to suggest a symbolic presence.

The conventional nature of language means that individuals are limited by the episteme in which they live: their means of expression and understanding are inseparable from the conceptual framework which informs their perception of the world. In other words, "[l]anguage is no longer a pure transparency, but filled with 'hidden' forces that the language user never directly experiences" (Harland 112). Therefore, the user of language can never exhaust all the possibilities of meaning contained in that language. Language cannot contain all the possible meanings of a statement; as a result, statements cannot be considered in isolation. Therefore, within every episteme there are "[r]elations between statements (even if the author is unaware of them; even if the statements do not have the same author; even if the authors were unaware of each other's existence)" (Foucault 29). Each statement reflects on and changes the meaning of the other statements in every episteme. Authors' intentions may influence the interpretation of their words; the intention, however, does not dominate the interpretation.

Like any authoritative discourse controlled by language, that of the Medieval Church contains conflicting ideas, including those of the philosophers and theologians discussed earlier. And, like other authorities, the Church claims to be objective but, because it creates the criterion by which it is to be judged, it cannot be considered anything but subjective. Thus, orthodox dogma is privileged,

whereas positions such as Nominalism are marginalized. To control and subjugate such positions, the Church uses words such as heresy, sacrilege, and sin. The subversive elements resist the Church's language by creating their own language, countering accusations with "logic" and "rationalism."

As Augustine observes, God's presence in nature is subjected to multiple interpretations; therefore, many interpretations can exist simultaneously that either oppose or support the privileged position. Harland's comments are applicable to the Medieval period:

What we now see as the natural world appears . . . as a great artifice, a great book, in which God, as the Word itself, inscribes signs and clues and an endless play of overlapping resemblances for men to interpret. (109)

For example, Chaucer uses religious satire and wordplay to raise questions about religious orthodoxy from various alternative positions. Each of these marginalized positions translates the authority's words into its own language, thereby revealing the weaknesses of the orthodox position. The result of this revelation "is to discredit the clergy [who follow these orthodoxies] . . . by showing its learning as a cynical exploitation of the word with which it is entrusted" (Knapp, "Deconstructing" 75). By discrediting the clergy, Chaucer's satire attempts to raise doubts about Catholic truths. His undermining of Church ritual and language leads to questions about the Church's authority. A

loss of faith in Church doctrine leads to a loss of confidence in the Church itself which, in turn, can create the state of confusion, fear, and despair, exhibited by Chaucer's skeptical and nihilistic Pardoner. The result is the alienation of humanity: people are estranged from God, nature, and society, as well as from their sense of self, resulting in the absolute psychological isolation (hence alienation) of each individual.

This theme of the alienation of humanity becomes the central theme of twentieth-century existential philosophy. Barrett itemizes the historical conditions that produced existentialism:

Alienation and estrangement; a sense of the basic fragility and contingency of human life; the impotence of reason confronted with the depths of existence; the threat of Nothingness, and the solitary and unsheltered condition of the individual before this threat. (31)

The conditions created by the crises of the fourteenth century appear analogous to those described by Barrett: disillusioned by the failure of the systems on which they had relied, people began to question the authenticity of these systems. Although Chaucer cannot be called an existentialist, many of the questions and ideas raised in his works are similar to those of the existentialists. Chaucer was doubtless aware of the alienation of humans because "[s]uch matters as anxiety, death, the conflict

between the bogus and the genuine self, the faceless man of the masses, the experience of the death [i.e., the removal] of God are . . . themes of life" (Barrett 9). Nothingness is the void created by humanity's sense of its alienation and homelessness in the world. Religion provided a "framework,"

a structure that encompassed man's life, providing him with a system of images and symbols by which he could express his own aspirations toward psychic wholeness. With the loss of this containing framework man became not only a dispossessed but a fragmentary being. (Barrett 35)

The danger of nothingness is that the individual may remain incomplete and desperate. Humanity is left seeking wholeness; for some existentialists like Sartre, the solution was to find a project, a cause for action that could fill the void with meaning and lend significance to existence. As Sartre says, "Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself" (28).

Existential philosophers question the meaning of religion and religious faith "in relation to the individual. Each has put religion itself radically in question" (Barrett 15). The decision to either affirm or deny faith rests on individual judgment, and existentialism is a philosophy of individual responsibility and freedom. Sartre explains that human existence is grounded on the individual's actions and experiences: "Man is all the time outside of himself: it is

in projecting and losing himself beyond himself that he makes man to exist; and, on the other hand, it is by pursuing transcendent aims that he himself is able to exist" (55). Like Thomas Aquinas and the Nominalists, Sartre believes that existence precedes essence. In other words, individuals first exist, then create themselves through experience, an idea not unlike that expressed in Chaucer's "Wife of Bath's Prologue," in which the experiences which have shaped the Wife become her authority. And, since humans must ground their existence on their experience and in their own actions, they are responsible for their own lives. Thus, for Sartre and, perhaps, for Chaucer, the only response to the recognition of nothingness is not nihilism but action: in an uncertain universe, the only way to live a meaningful existence is to choose to act. I will argue that, for Chaucer, writing *The Canterbury Tales* is the necessary action; his response to the recognition of uncertainty and nothingness is the questioning of his own faith in "The Miller's Tale," "The Clerk's Tale," and "The Pardoner's Tale."

CHAPTER TWO

"THE MILLER'S TALE" AND "THE CLERK'S TALE"

Authorities limit and govern speech by recognizing and using the power of language. These authorities attempt to control what can be said; however, as Chaucer's satiric use of language demonstrates, this control is an illusion. In "The Miller's Tale" and "The Clerk's Tale," Chaucer exposes these false appearances of control, revealing the power of language to undermine the discursive formations which comprise the fourteenth-century episteme, and showing the ease with which apparently reasonable premises can be inverted and misinterpreted. So-called "universal truths" are shown to be deceptions created by authorities to maintain their positions; therefore, definitive answers to questions of nature and existence are unattainable using rational means alone. As a result, Chaucer's satirical treatment of religious themes demonstrates the potential for skepticism and despair that can result from too heavy a dependence on reason. He shows that, ultimately, individuals can find truth and substantiate their beliefs, but only through an act of personal faith.

In "The Miller's Tale" and "The Clerk's Tale," words become the means through which the characters test both their knowledge of the world and the ability of that knowledge to reveal truth. The Miller tells the tale of a student of astrology (mis)using his knowledge to dupe his lover's husband who, in his "pious ignorance" of that

science, is willing to believe what he cannot understand. By warning that people should not inquire too deeply into "Goddess pryvetee" (3164), "The Miller's Tale" becomes an exploration of the ability of human authorities, such as those of "The Knight's Tale's" assertions of certainty in Theseus' Prime Mover speech¹ or of Church doctrine, to provide fundamental assurances about the nature of God and the Divine Mysteries. The tale seems to conclude that such an exploration leads to disillusionment because nothing can be known definitively. "The Clerk's Tale," too, explores the possibility of answering such unanswerable questions. The Clerk examines God's relationship with His creation through the description of Walter's 'experiment' using Griselda as the subject. But the Clerk only calls into question the extent to which such a philosophical exercise can provide a reliable understanding of the human relationship with God: in the end, the ways of God still remain a mystery. Both Walter and Nicholas use language to create illusions of reality contrary to what they know to be true to achieve their own ends: Walter attempts to measure his wife's constancy by subjecting her to three cruel tests, and Nicholas falsely predicts a flood so that Alisoun "sholde slepen in his arm al nyght" (3406). The lies and

¹ Theseus ascribes the events that lead to Arcite's death, for which (as the audience knows) Saturn was responsible, to Jupiter; Theseus' misapprehension undermines the idea of order that he presents.

misunderstandings that are essential to the unfolding of the characters' schemes are also manifestations of the unreliable nature of language.

The Canterbury Tales begins with the Knight because his social status is the highest among those on the fictive pilgrimage and his tale reflects his position. "The Miller's Tale" is a reaction against the artificial courtly love and social order that the Knight upholds and recreates in his tale. Here, the Miller's low social status and impious attitude towards the Knight's tale presents an alternative that subverts the Knight's courtly and conservative position even as it acknowledges the power of that position. As Hanning says, the Miller pierces "through facades to lay bare pryvetee, exposing the strategic fictions that are thereby shown to be a central part of life" (112). The plot of "The Miller's Tale" is complicated by the intervention of Absolon, whom Prior describes as "at first just simply David's Absalom, beautiful but doomed" (61-2). He is a parody of the courtly characters in "The Knight's Tale" but, in "The Miller's Tale" where everything is inverted, the "prize in this competition does not go to the patient, self-restrained suitor . . . but to the one who seizes the main chance" (Knapp, *Chaucer* 38); ironically, however, Absolon is more self-repressed than "self-restrained": "sooth to seyn, he was somdeel squaymous/ Of fartyng, and of speche daungerous" (3337-8).

As a result of Absolon's overconfidence in his courtly role, his "fantasy begins to outrun perception, the imaginary to usurp the real" (Gallacher 44). Consequently, he is unable to conceive of the possibility of Alisoun as an independent, physical being with a very unladylike sense of humor; he is misled by the promise of a kiss and fails to recognize his mistake until "with his mouth he kiste her naked ers/ Ful savourly" (3734-35). The scene is a parody of a parish clerk worshipping, not the Virgin Mary whom he should have been worshipping, but an earthly woman. . . . And it is no accident that, as he prepares himself outside her window to receive Alisoun's kiss, Absolon "doun sette hym on his knees" (A 3723) and asks for Alisoun's "grace" (A 3726). (Beidler 94)

In swearing revenge, this parody of the courtly lover whose language configures him as a weak, corrupt figure of Solomon and of Christ in a parody of the Song of Songs,² becomes a figure of Judas when he returns from the forge with a "kiss of betrayal" (Prior 63). Absolon returns to Alisoun's window with a hot coulter; his words, "Spek, sweete bryd, I noot nat where thou art" (3805), cue Nicholas' thunderous fart. In that moment, all speech is rendered meaningless as words

² R. E. Kaske discusses Chaucer's parodic treatment of the "Canticum Canticorum," particularly in Absolon's references to "hony-comb" (3698), "bryd" and "my sweete cynamome" (3699), and "lemman myn" (3700) (Kaske 481-2).

and perceptions are shown to be mistaken; when the conventional connection between signifiers and their signifieds is broken, speech is reduced to the "eyr ybroken" of *The House of Fame* (765). The Miller rejects the universal ideals and courtly manners represented by the Knight, and reaffirms his own position, stripping

the authoritative discourse of its exalted status by pointing out what he takes to be the common needs of all people--John's ungovernable curiosity about Nicholas, both suitors' sexual appetites, Alisoun's desire for a young lover, Nicholas's getting up "for to pisse," and the like. (Knapp, *Chaucer* 42)

Thus, Absolon embodies the failings rather than the virtues of the courtly lover who is more concerned with his role and the idealization of his lover than with the lover herself. When Absolon makes Alisoun "the object of his 'love longyns,'" he reinforces his own language and self-image by reducing Alisoun to a reflection dependent on his flattery and discourse for her own identity" (Donaldson 145). By exposing these fictions, the Miller shows the instability of the courtly ideal and its language.

This exposure reaches its climax with Absolon's unexpected reappearance, when Nicholas loses his ability to continue the deception, culminating in the "fart/ As greet

as it had been a thonder-dent" (3806-7)³ which signals the meting out of various penalties to characters too confident in their own ability to control language and circumstances. Referring to this instability, Peggy Knapp declares:

The story proceeds because Nicholas, in his con of the carpenter, plays fast and loose with the faith the dominant discourse had placed in the revelatory power of words. (*Chaucer* 48)

Through the satire implicit in the tale, Chaucer's narrator is able to "reappropriate language for [his] own cunning and irreverent uses. . . . [T]he signifiers Robyn exploits already have the double edge that allows his outrageous linguistic alchemy" (Knapp, *Chaucer* 41). That is, words can create and reveal illusions by combining both the sacred and the sacrilegious in a single signifier.

The Miller also intentionally misuses significant elements of religious legend to undermine its authority. He proposes to tell a double-edged "legende and a lyf/ Bothe of a carpenter and of his wife" (3141-2). As Beryl Rowland has pointed out, "[l]egend is the regular title for the life of a saint . . . [and] the audience would probably identify the saint with the famous carpenter . . . St. Joseph, the husband of the Virgin Mary" (44). The double-edge of the

³ Nicholas' fury internal, which so offends Absolon, works as a parody of Pluto's "fury infernal" (KnT 2684) which causes Arcite to be thrown from his horse; in both cases, a rumbling in the bowels (of either Nicholas or of the earth) is critical to the denouement of the plot.

religious satire "pushes to the blasphemous extreme the similarities between the Creator, the Saviour, and the Saved, on the one hand, and their antitypes the Avenger, the Tempter, and the Fallen, on the other" (Prior 60). In the tale, Nicholas sings the *Angelus ad virginem*, which places him in the role of Gabriel speaking to the Virgin, but the allusion to the sacred event is undermined by association with Nicholas' lascivious intentions: e.g., as when "prively he caughte hire by the queynte" (3276). Through Nicholas' appropriation of the Annunciation, "[the Miller] depicts clerical learning as a cynical exploitation of the Word with which the religious state is entrusted" (Knapp, *Chaucer* 40), a depiction, incidentally, consistent with Wyclif's distrust of the clergy.

Prior claims that Alisoun's role as "a type of the Virgin Mary . . . is primarily suggested through her relationship to . . . Nicholas" (61). However, the allusions to religious symbols in Alisoun's description also associate her with the Virgin Mary:

Fair was this yonge wyf, and therwithal
 As any wezele hir body gent and smal . . .
 White was hir smok, and broyden al bifoore
 And eek bihynde, on hir coler aboute,
 Of col-blak silk, withinne and eek withoute.
 The tapes of hir white voluper
 Were of the same suyte of hir coler; . . .
 (3233-42)

Rowland explains that Alisoun is compared to the weasel which "conceived by the ear and gave birth through the mouth" as the Virgin conceived God's Son, the Word made flesh. Alisoun is dressed in black and white, which are the "colours of holiness"; she is "softer than the wolle is of a wether" (*MLT* 3249) and wool is "the most famous of all symbols of the Virgin Mary" (Rowland 47). However, when these images are considered in the context of the lecherous "swalwe" (3258), Alisoun's coltish spirit, her plucked eyebrows, and her "likerous ye" (3244), the religious symbols of wool and weasel are mingled with their natural, sexual characteristics and are thereby undermined. Also, the narrator's assertion that she was "a prymerole, a piggensnye, / For any lord to leggen in his bedde, / Or yet for any good yeman to wedde" (3267-70) subverts the religious illusion that the references to the Virgin Mary create. Alisoun comes to resemble "the eternal Eve" (Rowland 47), easily seduced by Nicholas playing the role of the Tempter.

Knapp explains that, in the expropriation of Noah's Flood, Nicholas' scheme hinges upon "using in a distorted way the dominant discourse of obedience to biblical injunctions" (*Chaucer* 36), reinforcing the validity of Augustine's concern for those who believe without questioning. Nicholas takes advantage of John's faith in what he believes to be Scriptural truth and his belief in

the power of words to portray truth and reality, relying on his "pious ignorance":

[i]n Nicholas' trick, the predictive power of science, in this case astrology, and the sacred power of scripture (the Noah story) are used cynically to authorize a scam completely of Nicholas's own manufacture. (Knapp, *Chaucer* 39)

Again, Nicholas seems to play the role of God's messenger (if not of God himself) as he predicts another flood to John. However, Nicholas provides what Wyclif would call a "lying glose" to his own text; John is deceived by having too great a faith in words, and in the dominant religious and scientific authorities that Nicholas exploits.

Nicholas is able to convince John that his prediction of the approach of another flood is true because John believes in the Bible stories: he does not question Nicholas' story, but cries, "Allas, my wyf!/ And shall she drenche?" (3522-3), illustrating his immediate and absolute faith in Nicholas' words. As Knapp elaborates, "[t]he whole scam relies on John's belief in the truth of the Bible, which in turn rests on its pervasiveness and authority in his culture (for John is a simple and unoriginal man)" (*Chaucer* 40). And, it is John's simplicity and lack of originality that allow Nicholas to manipulate and subvert the privileged religious position, while providing an alternative which must rely on John's faith and his incomplete knowledge of the Bible for its validation.

Nicholas recognizes that the discourses he manipulates are very powerful, but he also has to be aware of their weaknesses: if he believed that Bible stories about the punishment of sin were true, "the chance he takes with his blasphemy would be too great. . . . Nicholas is not afraid of the consequences of diverting authorized discourses--biblical and astrological--to his own ends" (Knapp, *Chaucer* 40).

The religious satire in the Tale appears to be informed by the Nominalist idea that the power of words can create illusions of goodness that can disguise underlying corruption. As Knapp observes, "[t]he *Tale* should be called Nominalist because words--signifiers--are irreverently pried loose from what they signify. No guaranteeing order is assumed to prevail to keep everything in place" (*Chaucer* 48). "Hende" Nicholas' references to divinely-inspired events create illusions without substance: his test of his own cleverness and the manipulation of his clerical knowledge fail when he is unable to see through Absolon's words and is "scalded in the towte" (3853). Nicholas orchestrates the events and initially seems to control the illusions he creates with his words, but the language on which he relies fails him; as Knapp says, he "should have trusted the stability of language less, not more. . . . He is vulnerable to unpredictable accidents and the machinations of his rivals in this chaotic world" (*Chaucer* 40). In the end, Absolon's courtly persona, John's faith in

the privileged position of religious authority, and Nicholas' deceptions are worth no more than a fart. Alisoun alone goes unpunished for her disloyalty to her husband, partly because she is the only one who is unconcerned with words. She is involved only with the tangible realities of sex, and not with the abstractions of science or philosophy. Like Alisoun, the Miller seems to embody a principle of action and a concern for what is real. He laughs at those who fall into the marle pit of "pious ignorance."

In "The Clerk's Tale," as in "The Miller's Tale," one character subverts an authority's use of language to orchestrate events as though he were a god. In the Clerk's narrative, Walter uses words to deceive, to manipulate, and, in the end, to justify his deceptions and manipulations. Knapp observes that Walter desires "Griselda's 'sadnesse for to knowe' in order to purge himself of something that looks very much like intellectual doubt" (*Chaucer* 138). However, Ockham's Nominalist view of knowledge saw

a severe restriction on what could be predicated about God and divine things by the unaided rational human mind. The emphasis came to be placed on an ever wider scope for faith in defining the nature of God. (*Stepsis* 132)

In the tale, Walter's ineffectual experiment demonstrates that reason alone is not enough to dispel intellectual

doubt; he is no more certain of Griselda's constancy in the end than he was at the start.

Like "The Miller's Tale," "The Clerk's Tale" seems to move towards the moral that "[m]en sholde nat knowe of Goddes pryvetee" (*MILT* 3454). With its references to Job (871-2, 932) and situational parody of Abraham's acquiescence to God's demand that he sacrifice his son (501-4), "The Clerk's Tale" seems to advise individuals to accept injury without question, and that their individual wills should be in complete conformity with God's. The relationship between Walter and Griselda reflects the relationship between God and humankind: "sith a womman was so pacient/ Unto a mortal man, wel moore us oghte/ Receyven al in gree that God us sent" (149-51). This relationship implies that it is best to accept the Lord's will without question. However, by showing the possible consequences of blind acceptance and pious ignorance, the tale subverts its own moral.

The Clerk's philosophical positioning of Walter as God is problematic: as Stepsis says, Walter is "cruel, vain, capricious, and unfeeling" (129). Walter reflects the Nominalist vision of the absolute freedom of God; as Stepsis observes, "[t]he only absolutely true statements that man can make about God is that He can do whatever He wills and He can will anything because he knows everything" (135). As a result, God can also determine what is good:

that which is good is not good *per se*, but is good because God willed it to be good; and since his will is free and all-powerful, it is entirely conceivable that He could will something to be good, rather than that which is now the good.

(Stepsis 134)

Chaucer's portrayal of Walter as constrained only by His own will forces his readers to question the orthodox doctrine of the appropriateness of submissive responses to God's seemingly arbitrary decisions to test his people. For example, Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son seems unnatural and is reflected in Griselda's equally unnatural submission to her husband's whims. Griselda remains constant to her lord despite his cruelty and, by consenting to the murders, actually becomes an accomplice in the crimes. Walter considers Griselda's consent to what she believes is the murder of her children a virtuous act, creating a paradoxical situation in which murder can be at once virtuous and unvirtuous. Thus, the tale challenges the morality of such conformity and also of the tests that Walter attempts to justify as he manipulates language.

Through the testing, Griselda supposedly becomes an emblem of the patient human soul in its ideal response to the adversities visited on it by God or as a figure of the Virgin, Job, or Abraham in their obedience to the apparently arbitrary demands of the Lord. (Stepsis 129)

She vows to conform her will entirely to Walter's; Stepsis writes that, "[h]uman freedom resides in the ability of the creature to conform his will to the infinitely free will of the Creator" (134). As a result, a person's action is virtuous not in itself but because of the conscious decision to do God's will, whatever God's will happens to be. Thus, Griselda's unvirtuous behaviour becomes virtuous according to Walter's rewriting of events.

Once Griselda has made her vow of conformity, all signs of her former life are erased and she "translated was in swich riches" (385). The *Middle English Dictionary* defines "translated" as "[t]o change the nature, condition, or appearance . . . , transform, alter . . . ; also, advance (one's position)" (983). David Wallace writes that "[t]ranslation in Chaucer is a term that is customarily hedged with nervous qualifications. . . . Every translation contains a trace of impurity because no translator can guarantee a perfect transfer between languages" (197). Translating inevitably changes the essence of the original "text" because the translator controls that text and imposes his or her own interpretation onto it. Thus, Griselda is transformed by her vow, physically and spiritually: as Finnegan says, "Griselda deliberately creates herself in Walter's image, adopting his ends, and accepting perforce thereby his means towards them" ("She" 307). She verges on "the edge of vowing the extinction of herself as a person. Such extinction implies the abrogation of conscience, of the

authority to make moral decisions" (Finnegan, "She" 306). Her obedience is a form of "pious ignorance," an unquestioning acceptance of what Walter demands of her which demonstrates her blind faith in something beyond her understanding. Because she has become a reflection of Walter's own beliefs and intentions, his test reveals more about himself than it does about Griselda: through the tests, Griselda becomes alienated from both her sense of her self and from Walter (and, therefore, from God). In fact, Walter's transformative test is doomed to fail because he "has made Griselda unknowable to himself by the very command on which the marriage is based" (Kirk 116):

I seye this: be ye redy with good herte
 To al my lust, and that I frely may,
 As me best thynketh, do yow laughe or smerte,
 And nevere ye to grucche it nyght ne day?
 And eek whan I sey 'ye,' ne sey nat 'nay,'
 Neither by word ne frownyng contenance? (351-356)

"The Clerk's Tale" further challenges the doctrine of patience and acceptance to which Griselda subscribes by taking her submission to extremes. She tells Walter,

If I hadde prescience
 Youre wyl to knowe, er ye youre lust me tolde,
 I wolde it doon withouten necligence;
 But now I woot youre lust, and what ye wolde,
 Al youre plesance ferme and stable I holde;
 For wiste I that my deeth wolde do yow ese,

Right gladly wolde I dyen, yow to please.

(659-665)

Griselda acknowledges a willingness to fulfill Walter's desires even before he tells them to her; she insinuates that if she had known he wanted to kill their son, she would have committed the murder herself. She is even willing to commit suicide. Griselda is willing to sacrifice not only her own life and her children's lives but it appears that she is also willing to sacrifice her soul. The Clerk demonstrates the double edge of this doctrine of unquestioning acceptance and "pious ignorance": religious philosophy fails to provide an adequate solution to Walter's tests, and the individuals within the artistic frame--and, by extension, the audience outside--are left to consider the nature of the relationship between God and humans for themselves.

Van says that Walter's "relentless testing of Griselda is an examination, by surrogate, of his own spiritual interior" (215). Like Nicholas, Walter seeks to test his own knowledge of philosophy and human nature. He claims that his people are dissatisfied, that he intends to remarry, and even that he has the power to obtain Papal bulles with which he convinces Griselda that the Pope approves of his plan.⁴

⁴ The ambiguity of the bulles' authenticity is irrelevant because, as Wyclif observed, the binding power of any bulle depended upon the moral state of the Pope who issued it; even if the bulles came from the Pope, he was clearly in Walter's service and probably guilty of the simony that

Ironically, he tells Griselda to "[t]aak heede of every word that y yow seye" (475) even though he lies to her throughout the tests. He manipulates Griselda and imposes a recreation of reality on her. Inevitably, the tests fail, even though Griselda does exactly what Walter requires. As Van observes, "[b]ecause [Walter] is looking for ocular proof of what cannot be seen . . . he will never know for certain" (221). Walter wants proof of Griselda's virtue, but the evidence causes him to question her virtue even further; as Finnegan states,

Walter is now troubled by Griselda's conduct, wondering whether her 'paciencie' in response to his 'tempting' does not exhibit '. . . some subtilitee, . . . of malice, or of crueel corage. . . .' (691-92). Thus the tempter himself fears he has been too successful and he, the narrator and we are forced to consider whether Griselda, in keeping her promise, has not lost absolutely her formerly virtuous character. ("She" 316)

At the very least, Griselda is permanently changed by the testing: Finnegan compares her to a coin that has been bent to test its worth, remarking that "once having been tested thus, the bent coin can never be reconstituted to its pristine, its innocent, condition" ("She" 319). Walter's

Wyclif despised. In that case, even authentic bulles would have had no true power.

philosophy fails to remove his intellectual doubt. In fact, he is left in more doubt about his wife; he may even have destroyed that which he valued most in her. The tests fail to prove anything.

"The Clerk's Tale's" subversion of orthodox religious ideology demonstrates the failure of language to express the nature of God. Steinmetz states that "God is guided by His own inner sense of justice, which, even if it cannot be predicted, commends itself to human reason as self-consistent and reasonable, once it is revealed" (41). In the end, Walter reveals his intention, and his behavior seems to be justified because Griselda appears to have passed the tests. By manipulating language, he creates the illusion that the tests were part of a plan and attempts to demonstrate his omnipotence.

In the tale, the Narrator observes that "[t]his markys in his herte longeth so/ To tempte his wyf" (451-2); "tempt" carries with it the demonic implications of enticing a person to sin.⁵ However, Walter is also connected with God and the Clerk observes that God does not tempt men, he "preeve that he wroghte" (1152), thereby proving that their intentions and faith are genuine (*MED* 1277). Because Griselda passes the tests by avoiding the sin of

⁵ The *Middle English Dictionary* defines "tempt" as "[t]he act of testing the faith or character of a person. . . . The act or condition of being tempted by the devil, fleshly desires, etc." (197). The act of "tempting" is generally associated with the Devil.

disobedience, Walter is able to translate "tempt" into "assai" through a process of linguistic alchemy that transforms Griselda and alters the people's interpretations and thus their memories of the events. By the end of the *Tale*, "assai,"⁶ with its ceremonial and religious connotations, has replaced "tempt": Walter insists,

I warne hem wel that I have doon this deede
 For no malice, ne for no crueltee,
 But for t'assaye in thee thy wommanheede,
 . . . Til I thy purpos knewe and al thy will.

(1073-8)

Walter redefines the concepts of "tempting" and "testing" to reconfigure the events that occur during his testing of Griselda, much as Nicholas does at the end of "The Miller's Tale" when he and Alisoun "tolden every man that [John] was wood" (*Milt* 3833). Walter also transforms the ideal of virtue to create the illusion of a happy ending. Despite the fact that Griselda's virtue lies in her blind submission to external forces, rather than in an intrinsically motivated devotion to what is good, she has proven to Walter that she is virtuous in the ways he required, so she is reinstated as his wife and her children are returned to her. Ironically,

⁶ "Assai" is defined as "a testing of character or personal traits (such as faithfulness, friendship, fortitude); trial, ordeal; . . . A test of arms, combat; an attack or sally; . . . a sally (as of the Devil or an enemy)" (*MED* 436). This form of "testing" carries with it connotations of ceremony and formality.

Griselda's reward seems to prove that "[a]dversity, no matter how severe, never invalidates the principle . . . [that] God is faithful to the soul who is faithful to Him" (Steinmetz 51). But Walter's behavior only seems to be justified, and therefore the covenant he made with Griselda and his people seems to be preserved; the manipulation of language creates the illusion that Walter's tests have proven her virtue and are thereby justified. Through Walter's recreation of the events, the authority of orthodox doctrine appears to remain intact: God's actions, "while mysterious and unpredictable, are finally just" (Steinmetz 51). However, Chaucer reveals the instability of the orthodox position and undermines its authority through the exposure of the illusions Walter has created through his manipulation and creative "translation" of words.

Just as he uses satire to reveal the inconsistencies in Walter's logic, Chaucer uses the double-edge of satire in these tales to expose gaps in the logic of the privileged position of the late-fourteenth-century Church. The radically Nominalist conception of God, seen in the characters of Nicholas and Walter, demonstrates the inability of finite human reason to explain the infinite. This Nominalist perspective challenges and empties traditional readings; in the end, Nominalism is also emptied of meaning when it becomes radically skeptical and unstable. Thus, John warns Nicholas:

Ye, blessed be alwey a lewed man

That nocht but oonly his bileve kan!
 So ferde another clerk with astromye;
 He walked in the feeldes for to pry
 Upon the sterres, what ther sholde befalle,
 Til he was in a marle-pit yfalle;
 He saugh nat that. (3455-3461)

John suggests that becoming too involved in abstract studies causes people to lose sight of real events in the tangible world. But John fails to heed his own warning; like Nicholas and Absolon, he suffers for his curiosity and his over-confidence in the stability of language. Walter, too, falls into the "marle-pit" (3460) when his desire to control and understand his wife alienates Griselda from him and makes her unreadable. Both "The Miller's Tale" and "The Clerk's Tale" demonstrate the dangers of depending too heavily on the stability of any authority when they show how alternative realities can be created with language in order to subvert these authoritative positions while, at the same time, seeming to preserve them.

The illusions that the characters create to preserve or recreate their vision of the world are hollow. The "moral order neither punishes [Nicholas] nor rewards John's generous concern for Alison or regard for the law" (Knapp, *Chaucer* 41); their reward or punishment is contingent on Absolon's unexpected actions, just as his relies on theirs. Walter, too, is punished by the failure of his tests, not because he was wrong but because of his overconfidence in

his ability to control language; the tale merely appears to have a happy ending. Although the characters who seek to test their knowledge are able to manipulate others' "pious ignorance" of certain authorities well enough to rewrite their own endings, their tests are ultimately unsuccessful. Philosophy, religion, and science fail to provide the concrete evidence that would fill the void created by intellectual uncertainty; instead, the characters who employ these ideologies face the possibility of becoming further alienated from the truth that they seek because of their reliance on a world created with words. The words they use are insubstantial, changeable, and, finally, not worth a fart. As the Clerk says, demonstrating his recognition of the weaknesses of his philosophy while still appreciating the act of tale-telling,

Lat noon humylitee youre tonge naille,
 Ne lat no clerk have cause or diligence
 To write of yow a storie of swich mervaille
 As of Grisildis pacient and kynde,
 Lest Chichevache yow swelwe in hire entraille!
 (1184-88)

CHAPTER THREE

"THE PARDONER'S TALE"

The Miller and the Clerk demonstrate how authorities use words to create the certainty and control that maintain their dominant positions; however, these seeming rational certainties are only an illusion. For an authority, as well as for individuals, these illusions are necessary: they provide reassuring and meaningful answers to questions which would otherwise be unanswerable. "The Miller's Tale" and "The Clerk's Tale" warn their readers not to inquire too deeply into "Goddess pryvetee" because such questioning can undermine and destroy the illusions to which people cling in pious ignorance. However, both the Miller and the Clerk intentionally subvert authoritative illusions and leave the reader with the idea that not everything requires the support of an authority for validation; some things, such as the nature of God, can be examined rationally but, ultimately, must be accepted on faith alone. "The Pardoner's Tale" demonstrates that the shattering of illusions can lead people to skepticism and despair if they are unable to discover their own form of individual faith. The Pardoner abuses and misrepresents the Church's ideals and sacraments through his Nominalist manipulation of the mutable nature of language. Chaucer creates in the Pardoner a character who has been stripped of his illusions and his faith, and who is left with only the torment of religious despair in the face of fundamental uncertainty. In this chapter, I will first

examine the history of indulgences and penance in the Catholic Church; then, I will discuss the ways in which the Pardoner, in his despair, abuses and misrepresents these doctrines through a manipulation of language similar to that which I have discussed in my analysis of "The Miller's Tale" and "The Clerk's Tale."

The Pardoner abuses the power he gains through his association with the Church. People relied on the clergy for the sacraments that would put their souls in the proper state of grace and that would ensure their entrance into heaven. In other words, if a person committed mortal sins, he or she could potentially be reconciled with God through the sacrament of penance. The administration of this sacrament generally required a member of the clergy with the proper faculties to hear the confession, grant absolution, and instruct the penitent in ways of avoiding future sin. Divine forgiveness of all past sins was essential for salvation; however, before they could receive divine forgiveness, sinners had generally to fulfill the conditions of contrition, confession, and satisfaction (Lea 2: 169).¹ Contrition, the result of intense self-examination and

¹ Contrition is the sinners' sincere repentance for their sins: "Catholic teaching distinguishes a twofold hatred of sin; one, perfect contrition, springs from the love of God Who has been grievously offended; the other, imperfect contrition, arises principally from some other motives, such as loss of heaven, fear of hell, the heinousness of sin, etc." (*Catholic Encyclopedia* 338). Perfect contrition does not necessarily require the sacrament of Penance to reconcile people to God.

self-judgment, is sincere remorse for offending God. Confession is an act of humility in which sinners are required to confess their sins and any mitigating circumstances to a priest who would grant absolution on the condition that the penitent makes satisfaction. Satisfaction is the act of atonement in which the priest prescribes a series of prayers or actions whereby the sinner can make amends for offending God. The doctrine of penance requires that all three conditions be met; absolution is denied to any person who makes a sacrilegious confession by consciously concealing even a single mortal sin, failing to feel contrition, or being unwilling or unable to make satisfaction. Lea states:

There can be no partial reconciliation with God, and the willful omission of a single mortal sin . . . renders the whole confession invalid and unsacramental; in fact, receiving the sacrament thus irreverently is a new sin. No amount of contrition and of life-long penance can wash away a sin thus concealed; every confession and communion is a fresh sin, and it were better for the penitent to live and die wholly without the sacraments. (1: 348)

To encourage people to meet all the conditions of absolution, indulgences were presented to those who had received absolution and who had given donations to support the church. The indulgences worked in conjunction with the

sacrament of penance: once the guilt of a sin was forgiven, an indulgence could remit either part or all of the time spent in purgatory which had been earned by having sinned initially (Lea 3: 39). There were two types of indulgences: plenary (absolute) and partial. Plenary indulgences completely excused the holders from punishment; partial indulgences exonerated them from only part of their punishment. Indulgences drew on the "Treasury of Merit" in which "the merits of holy men on earth [beginning with Christ and including all the saints] formed a fund for the benefit of the sinner" (Lea 3: 19).

Technically, people were not allowed to buy or sell indulgences or relics; however, they could (and the truly penitent would) offer goods or money after receiving an indulgence to demonstrate gratitude and continued support of the Church's good deeds. The difference between buying an indulgence and giving money in appreciation of an indulgence is crucial: in the latter situation, the penitent who receives the indulgence has achieved the appropriate psychological and spiritual state; in the former, the person has paid to make up for the inadequacy of his or her contrition, thereby committing the sin of simony.

To ensure that no one was deprived of the opportunity to do penance (and to contribute to the church), pardoners were hired by the Church to offer indulgences and to fully explain their benefits to "the faithful" who were "exhorted to perform the service or give the 'alms' which would

procure them" (Lea 3:284); however, this practice was grossly abused and was eventually abolished in 1567 by Pius V (Lea 3:424). Pardoners were notoriously corrupt; "councils everywhere throughout Europe were constantly occupied with the subject [of pardoners' corruption], giving ample evidence of the evil reputation of the clerics who followed the trade of pardoner" (Lea 3:286). Lea quotes from the council of Mainz in 1261 which condemns pardoners as:

infamous liars . . . who abuse the word of God for filthy gain. They often exhibit as relics the profane bones of men and beasts, they invent miracles . . . and promise remission of sins in such fashion that scarce any one can restrain himself from purchasing, to the destruction of discipline, for there are few who will accept penance from their priests, believing . . . themselves to be absolved from their sins by such indulgences. And the gains thus stolen from the Church are spent in drunkenness, feasting, gambling, and lechery. (3: 287)

By peddling false pardons and granting false absolution, a pardoner not only robs the people of their material possessions but possibly causes them to lose their souls as well. People who bought fraudulent indulgences would discover their error in the afterlife when they received a punishment that they thought had been remitted. Because of the terrible repercussions of such abuse, pardoners who took

advantage of their position for their own personal gain to the detriment of others were threatened with excommunication. However, the threats were seldom carried out because, as Lea notes, there "were always greedy prelates and needy churches to disregard [rules and threats]" (3: 288).

Between the rigorous spiritual demands of confession and the people's uncertainty about the exact nature of the indulgences they were receiving, there was great potential for corruption in the sacrament of penance. Because some indulgences were wrongly believed to pardon guilt as well as repeal punishment, some people relied on the power of an indulgence rather than attempting to achieve the proper state of contrition and going to confession; thus, their sins would remain unforgiven. Paradoxically, however, contrition itself could lead the penitent into the sin of despair, the self-imposed alienation of the sinner from God. Because sin causes the individual to be divided from God and makes the individual incomplete, the penitent must be truly remorseful to be reunited with God. However, as Patterson explains, the remorse which leads to contrition and forgiveness may be overwhelming to the sinner. If the only way to attain salvation is through

the intensity of [the sinner's] remorse, he will enter into a process of self-judgment in which he allows himself no quarter--with the . . . result that he will become so overwhelmed with

self-loathing that he no longer believes himself worthy of the salvation he so desperately desires.

(Patterson, *Chaucer* 378)

Ironically, then, the attempt to reach the frame of mind required by the Church had the potential to drive the penitent to mortal sin. Unable to ask for forgiveness, the sinner remained alienated and lacking in spiritual wholeness.

The danger to the confessor was also great. He could be led to sin through the confessions of his parishioners, particularly, it was thought, those of women confessing carnal sins. Lea comments on the numerous warnings given to priests, instructing them not to question their penitents too closely about "sexual aberrations . . . lest both parties be led into temptation" (1: 380). The confessor had also to avoid the temptation to use his powers of absolution for material gain either for himself or in alliance with corrupt pardoners or other clergymen. Once tempted and fallen, the confessor, who would become the penitent, was equally susceptible to despair.

Because the risks were so great and the penalty for failing to satisfy the requirements was so high, controversy and debate surrounded the sacrament of penance. Scholastic theology argued that contrition before confession was not necessary, as the sacrament itself often brought about the appropriately repentant state of mind (Patterson, *Chaucer* 374). Normally, this meant that the penitent depended on a

member of the clergy to administer the sacrament, to guide him or her through the stages of contrition, and, finally, to grant absolution. The ritual took responsibility from the penitent and placed it on the sacrament and the confessor which could be problematic because the penitent becomes dependent on the priest for guidance. Wyclif, for example, insisted that "a priest's role was purely declarative at best; at worst, when the priest's decision was at odds with the knowledge of God, it was of no force and was a misleading and blasphemous arrogation of divine power" (Hudson *Premature* 294); in other words, it was possible for a priest to declare that a sin had been forgiven when God denied forgiveness, or vice versa. Wyclif argued that the priest must be in a state of grace to interpret correctly God's will; and, since priests were not exempt from sin, there was no way to be certain that the confessor belonged to the *congregatio predestinatorum* and was in a state of grace (and therefore able to give true absolution). However, the Church's official stance was that as long as the priest declared that the penitent's sins were absolved, they were forgiven: the priest's moral state was irrelevant. To explain this stance, which was problematic because it denied the necessity of a priest providing a moral example, Aquinas "[cast] the responsibility on God to evoke good out of . . . evil, forgetful that he [was] thus practically denying the priestly power" (Lea 1:249). Patterson summarizes the debate:

despite the efforts of scholastic theologians to render questions of the psychology of repentance moot by defining penance as a largely objective action, the pervasive contritionism of late-medieval religious thought reinstated this psychology at the center of spiritual concern.

(*Chaucer* 384)

This debate raised the question of whether priests had any special power to grant absolution; Wyclif insisted "Criste . . . oonly clenſiþ man of synne, and preſtes ben helpers wiþ hyme. . . . And ſo bynde and vnbynde wiþ hyme whenne þei haue þat power and þe keye of kunnyng [knowledge], and elles þei neþer byynden ne lowsyn but ſcateryn abroad" (Hudson, *Premature* 295). If the penitent did not need to rely on the condition or the example of the priest for absolution, and the responsibility lay with the individual (as Nominalist theologians claimed), it follows that "the sacrament is not the *causa efficiens* of grace" but merely a sign (Patterson, *Chaucer* 377); the responsibility for proper contrition lay with the individual. On the other hand, if the penitent did depend on the priest but could not receive true absolution from a priest who was in a state of sin and therefore unable to interpret God's will, there was no way of knowing if the penitent's sins were forgiven. The corruption of the pardoners created the same problems; people could not depend on the indulgences they obtained, especially from a person who may not be licensed to hear

confessions and whose indulgences were not necessarily genuine. Rather than a figure of divine grace and mercy, the priest risked becoming a figure of arbitrary divine justice: if absolution was effective, the penitent was among the fortunate; if absolution was ineffective, the sinner deserved no better for having sinned in the first place.

Chaucer creates his Pardoner in the context of these debates. The Pardoner perpetrates every crime stereotypically attributed to pardoners: he "telle[s] an hundred false japes" (394); he preaches, cajoles, and blackmails to sell his indulgences and fraudulent relics, declaring that anyone who has an unforgiven "synne horrible" (379) on his or her conscience "shal have no power ne no grace/ To offren to my relikes in this place" (383-4); he openly admits that he does not care if "hir soules goon a-blakeberied" (405). His corruption both symbolizes and causes his skepticism and disillusionment with the Church, leaving him in a psychological state which reflects the dangers of the radically Nominalist position. For the Pardoner, the Church's dishonesty has emptied its sacraments of meaning and inverted its sacred signifiers by severing them from the things that they were thought to signify. The Pardoner attempts to use the instability of language to recreate and control the illusions of certainty and power surrounding the Church and himself; he promises miracles in return for "pens, or elles grottes" (376), a desperate act of

simony that depends upon the uncertain nature of language which allows the Pardoner's patrons to be deceived.

Readers as early as Kittredge have despised him and labeled him a lost soul; however, the Pardoner is better described as a figure of despair, a character who is unredeemed because he has lost faith in redemption. As a soul in despair, the Pardoner is the product of the institution that he both represents and perverts. According to Arieh Sachs,

He who despaired of his salvation was regarded as being in the psychological and theological state of *discordia*, disturbed, disordered, isolated, cut off from the source of his being, and consequently desiring universal discord and alienation. (232)

The Pardoner exhibits both his despair and his desire for "universal discord" through the sale of false relics and the indifference he shows towards the spiritual state of his customers. His religious despair is compounded by his extreme *cupiditas*, which Leicester defines: "in the deep Christian and Augustinian sense . . . [*cupiditas*] refers to a consuming desire for that which one is lacking--it means *wanting* in both senses" (45).² The Pardoner is inadequate as a spiritual leader and he is lacking the spiritual

² The *OED* defines "want" as: "1.b. to fall short; . . . d. to fail . . . ; to give out; to be insufficient for (a purpose, etc.). 2.a. Not to have; to be without; to lack; . . . e. to be deprived of, to lose" (879).

connection with God that he tries to replace with material wealth. Thus, the Pardoner appears to face a despair very similar to that confronted by existentialism, which declares that humans are removed from God and that the despair of being alienated and insignificant in the universe is the natural state of humanity.³

As a false preacher, the Pardoner perverts the premises of teaching, delighting, and persuading--Augustine's three criteria for a good speaker (*OCD* 4.143)--and gives rise to what Augustine warns against in his discussion of the potential dangers of locating multiple meanings in Scripture. When he preaches that money is the root of all evil and causes people "soore to repente" (431), the Pardoner reappropriates Church doctrine and uses it to further his own purposes. His manipulations and deceptions reveal the mutable nature of language and the "kinds of slips [that] are possible between the speaker, his language, and his audience" (Dinshaw 171). These "slips" demonstrate the Pardoner's nominalist wordplay, "in which words and deeds are at odds with one another" (Watts and Utz 153). For example, the Pardoner admonishes "*Radix malorum est Cupiditas*" (334), hypocritically preaching against the sin

³ However, the existentialists, rather like Chaucer himself, respond to the recognition of nothingness and meaninglessness by developing their own personal systems of belief based on questioning, evaluation, faith, and action, whereas the Pardoner embraces his despair and becomes nihilistic and (self-)destructive.

that he consciously and eagerly commits: he will save them from the dangers of materialism, "for to make them free/ To yeven hir pens, and namely unto me" (401-402). His claim to be doing "Cristes hooly werk" (340) is ironic and blasphemous; he makes a mockery of the Church's language and rituals when "in Latyn I speke a wordes fewe,/ To saffron with my predicacioun,/ And for to stire hem to devocion" (343-45). Even his relics, which are supposed to help people feel a connection to God, appeal to greed and lead to sin: he claims that his holy sheep's bone will cure any animal that has been poisoned by a snake, multiply a man's "beestes and his stoor" (365), and cure jealousy in husbands--even if they know that their wives have been unfaithful and "taken prestes two or thre" (371). Finally, anyone who wears his holy mitten "shal have multipliying of his grayn" (374). When he boasts that "[b]y this gaude have I wonne, yeer by yeer,/ An hundred mark sith I was pardoner" (389-90), the Pardoner puns on the words God and gaude, once again juxtaposing the audience's spirituality and credulity with his own verbal trickery. He is the serpent who will "stynge" (413) his enemies with his false preaching.

In his tale, the Pardoner demonstrates ironically the consequences of having too much faith in words (though it is unlikely that his listeners recognize the danger they are in because of their faith in the Pardoner's words): the rioters take the boy's description of the anthropomorphic personification of the "privee thef Deeth" literally, and

find only an untimely demise. Like the Pardoner himself, the old man says what the rioters expect to hear, but his words mislead and so direct the rioters to their deaths; also, the rioters' oath that they are "sworen brother[s]" (809) is rendered meaningless by their treachery. Thus, throughout "The Pardoner's Prologue" and "Tale," the Pardoner's audience is placed "in the strange position of knowing and not knowing simultaneously" (Peck 756). In such a position, the meanings of words that the audience believes it has heard are continually at odds with those intended by the Pardoner who, like Walter, repeatedly tells his audience to "Taak of my wordes keep," (352), even though every word is false. By exposing the Pardoner's corruption and despair through such wordplay, Chaucer questions the ability of the Church's powerful hierarchy (as well as the rituals which necessitate and sustain it) to provide the individual with answers to questions of belief.

"The Pardoner's Prologue" focuses on the Pardoner's reappropriation of Penance and indulgences, revealing the potential to corrupt both confessor and penitent that is inherent in the doctrines and practices themselves. As the Pardoner plays the role of confessor, his attempt to fill his spiritual "lack" with ill-gotten material wealth has led him further into sin; as a penitent, the Pardoner's despair has led him to spiritual sterility through his self-created alienation from God. His declaration that he preaches "nat but for to wynne,/ And nothyng for correccioun of synne"

(403-04) displays the Pardoner's ability to manipulate Church doctrine with such brilliance that he manages to "maken oother folk to twynne/ From avarice and soore to repente" (430-1) despite his self-serving intentions.

However, the Pardoner's

works are not the product of the faith--they are the product rather of his "yvel entencioun" to "wynne gold and silver." Hence the Pardoner's faith is without works, and "even as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead" (James 2.26). The Pardoner's faith is like his body, his body like his faith--there but sterile, alive but dead. . . . (Shoaf 218)

In other words, his works are fruitless. Even the Pardoner's confession to the sins of greed and hypocrisy is masochistic and, therefore, an inverted and ineffective sacrament of Penance. Further, the works he performs are ineffective because he seems motivated to serve only himself rather than the penitents, the Church, or God.

The Pardoner's perversion of the doctrine of Penance is the result of his inability to believe in any form of spiritual redemption. The repetition of the word "will"⁴--which he uses forty times--shows his attempts to

⁴ The *OED* defines "will" as: "the power or capacity of willing; that faculty or function which is directed to conscious and intentional action; power of choice in regard to action" (340-1).

control his tale, himself, and his audience. It also exemplifies the significance that Nominalism places on individual volition: the morality of any act depends upon the intention behind it. Aquinas also emphasizes the importance of the role of will in acts of faith: he declares that, to the mind, faith

represents partial knowledge . . . which cannot be verified in a manner leading to scientific certainty. It is to overcome these intellectual scruples that the will now intervenes, silencing the doubts of the intellect. In the completed act of faith, the will supplies what is lacking in the intellect. . . . (Colish 187)

The Pardoner is unable to undertake the leap of faith that would overcome his despair and silence his intellectual doubts. His hypocrisy is both the cause and the result of this despair. Stripped of the belief in redemption that protects other Christians from despair, the Pardoner fits Barrett's description of "a being who has become thoroughly questionable to himself" (41) because, as Shoaf explains, the Pardoner "is not whole, and he knows it; moreover, the community in which he must live can include him only by ostracizing him" (214). Alienated from God, his society, and himself, the Pardoner's "psychic balance" is upset and he becomes "not only a dispossessed but a fragmentary being" (Barrett 35), exposed to the nothingness that is his existence. Unable to escape from his empty state, the

Pardoner becomes like the Old Man in his tale: homeless, alone, existing in a living death.

The Pardoner's "honest thyng" (328) begins with the confession that he preaches his sermon against greed by rote and that his intent is "nat but for to wyne,/ And nothyng for correccioun of synne" (404). But the Pardoner's confession to the pilgrims is defiant and invalid because he demonstrates no contrition nor is he willing to change his ways: in his pride and despair, he inverts the sacrament of penance by turning his confession into a boast; for example, he declares,

I wol have moneie, wolle, chese, and whete,
 Al were it yeven of the povereste page,
 Or of the povereste wydwe in a village,
 Al sholde hir children sterve for famyne.

(448-51)

Instead of attempting to save himself, he condemns himself further. Patterson describes the characteristics of a typical person in despair: "Accused by his conscience, he fears to be assailed; yet nonetheless he is always increasing that by which he is assailed. He scorns his return [to God], despairs of grace, glories in sin" (*Chaucer* 382). He cannot humble himself to ask sincerely for forgiveness because he does not believe it is possible: the Pardoner despairs further and willfully rejects the possibility of redemption. Thus, as Sachs points out, despair is also a sin of pride because the sinners believe,

in their rebellion, that "there is more strength in sin than virtue in God to annul it by forgiveness" (232).

The Pardoner's alienation from God is mirrored in his alienation from the pilgrims. He is, says Dinshaw, "the defective man who makes the gentils cry out and object even before he begins to speak" (156). As Pearsall points out, the Pardoner is a fraud because he is incomplete; his spiritual lack is amplified by the fact that he is a fraud. By describing the Pardoner as "a geldyng or a mare" (691), the Narrator identifies the Pardoner "in terms of an absence of something: either male sexual organs . . . or masculine gender identification" (Dinshaw 157). This lack of defining sexual characteristics is a reflection of his spiritual castration; his sins "result in insufficiency . . . drawing him back to the nothingness from which he was originally fashioned. And its effect was to alienate him from God, from nature, and from himself" (Shoaf 370). The Pardoner's spiritual sterility and despair are evident despite his attempts to portray himself as a figure of excess in his "Prologue" and "Tale."⁵ Since penance is the only means by which sinners can receive grace and restore themselves to wholeness, the Pardoner, because he is unable to ask for grace, is impotent and ineffective as a spiritual guide. In

⁵ The Pardoner's licentiousness and debauchery are also symptoms of his despair: Sachs says that "the despairer must wish at least to enjoy his temporal existence, and this desire will drive him to voluptuousness" (233).

fact, he is not merely ineffective, he is destructive because he sells what may be false pardons: he consciously and indifferently damns the people who believe that they have been pardoned when they accept his indulgences.

The Pardoner's physical and spiritual lacks are further connected through his exclusion from conventional sexual identity. If the pardoner is emasculated, the typical gender categories of male and female do not apply to him. The Pardoner belongs to neither category. Because he is outside both categories, he is vulnerable to despair in yet another way: Sachs notes that Despair argues,

God cannot love an ugly, odd creature like yourself. You are deformed, illegitimately conceived, a stranger in God's ordered creation. The only logical thing to do is despair of ever becoming part of it. (249)

As "a stranger in God's ordered creation," the Pardoner's despair and the sense of his own emptiness is masked by his exhibitionism. Left without a discernible identity, the Pardoner uses his words as well as his relics to recreate his spiritual and physical identity. Patterson argues,

[l]anguage is the means by which the Pardoner creates himself for others and for himself, whether it be the cocksure prattle with which he simultaneously disguises and reveals his eunuchry, or the witty and learned sermon, embellished with telling exempla, with which he establishes his

authority before the "lewed people." (*Chaucer*
398)

As Pearsall comments, the Pardoner "exists only in the act of performance" (99); his identity is as illusory as his relics and his words.

By engaging in Nominalist wordplay, the Pardoner attempts to create verbal diversions to hide what Dinshaw would call his "masculine lack" and the spiritual impotence it reflects. He also masks the despair created by his spiritual and physical deficiencies by emphasizing his concern with fashion and wealth; as the Narrator observes in "The General Prologue":

But hood, for jolitee, wered he noon,
For it was trussed up in his walet.
Hym thoughte he rood al of the newe jet;
Dischevelee, save his cappe, he rood al bare.
(680-4)

Shoaf explains that if the Pardoner

takes Christ's redemption "literally," reducing it to "real" coins, he covets "real" coins in part because of their metaphoricity in the theology of Redemption. . . . Because Christ's saving work is understood in terms of purchase, merit, treasury, wealth, and so on, these and related concepts and objects hold a special appeal for the Pardoner, who desires even as he resents and resists Christ's saving work. (218)

The excessive nature of the Pardoner's claims that "I preche nothyng but for coveitise" is part of the masochistic attempt to draw attention from his nihilism and despair by suggesting he is wholly evil and corrupt (Dinshaw 157). The pilgrims do not realize that the "profit" he seeks and can never find is wholeness; his emphasis on greed and avarice reveals his rapacious appetite for completeness that can never be satisfied.

The Pardoner also attempts to use his relics and indulgences as substitutes for his lost physical and spiritual virility. As Dinshaw states, "he is filled with the radical desire (*cupiditas*) for wholeness; he holds on to these objects, even though they are false, in hopes that they will complete him and make him part of the larger group" (159). His preoccupation with his own incompleteness is unintentionally revealed through the dismembered body parts that appear in the Pardoner's speeches (Hoerner 75): "nekke" (395), "handes" and "tonge" (398), "Our blisshed Lordes body they totere" (474), "wombe . . . bely . . . stynkyng cod" (534), "bones" (541), etc. Although he is eloquent as a preacher, he reveals his obsession with incompleteness and despair despite his attempts to conceal them. The Pardoner plays roles, assuming personas which are artificially active and virile: he interrupts the Wife of Bath in her *Prologue* to "teche us yonge men of youre praktike" (187) and claims to have "a joly wenche in every toun" (453). As Pearsall observes, even "the Summoner's

'stif burdoun' ("General Prologue," 673) becomes an obscene double entendre, indicative of the nature of the association between the Summoner and the Pardoner" (94). As Pearsall suggests, the Pardoner has not "lost the sense of the relationship between the words he uses and the reality to which they refer" (100); in fact, he understands the relationship so well that he attempts a Nominalist recreation of reality and himself through his language. However, his words cannot do what he requires of them and so reveal more of himself and his despair than he intends. The Pardoner "presents a theatricalized self-representation of evil so extravagant that it necessarily calls itself into question" (Patterson, *Chaucer* 398).

As he is in his prologue, the Pardoner seems to be present in his tale as a figure of lack rather than as the figure of excess that he claims to be (Patterson, *Chaucer* 402). The self-destructive behavior of the three rioters who "doon the devel sacrifise/ Withinne that develes temple in cursed wise,/ By superfluytee abhominable" (469-71) reflects the Pardoner's own perilous spiritual existence; they, too, take pride in their sins and are brazenly unrepentant, and they represent the Pardoner's belief that redemption and atonement are impossible for those who have willfully rejected God. The three rioters vow that they "wol sleen this false traytour Deeth" (699), "call[ing] up suggestions of Christ's sacrifice, which is the unspoken alternative to their misled and unregenerate quest" (Knapp, *Chaucer* 83).

They also enact an inverted Eucharist when the "yongeste of hem all" (804) gives them the bread and poisoned wine that brings death rather than eternal life to those who eat and drink it (Patterson, *Chaucer* 402); the poisoned wine is analogous to the Pardoner's poisonous words (Leicester 53): "Thus spitte I out my venym under hewe/ Of hoolynesse, to semen hooly and trewe" (421-2). The inversion of Christ's sacrifice and the Eucharist is similar to the Pardoner's perversion of the indulgences and relics which should lead to salvation but lead instead to damnation.

In the Pardoner's corrupt imagination, the three rioters are an inverted trinity: "we three been al ones" (696). This parody of the Trinity is pushed farther when the two older rioters send the younger "to the toun" (837); while he is away, they plot his murder. When the rioter returns, the other two kill him; this scenario is a perversion of God's plan to sacrifice His Son. In this version of the Trinity, no one is saved by the shedding of blood: there is no resurrection. The other two rioters die when they eat the bread and wine, a poisoned last supper shared within sight of their murdered friend's corpse. Like the Pardoner, this Trinity is spiritually dead. Even the apothecary, whose duty is to heal people physically just as a cleric's duty is to heal them spiritually, is willingly deceived and sells the poison to make a profit: he tells the young man that he will give him

A thyng that, also God my soule save,

In al this world ther is no creature
 That eten or dronken hath of this confiture . . .
 That he ne shal his life anon forlete;
 Ye, sterve he shal, and that in lasse while
 Than thou wolt goon a paas nat but a mile,
 This poyson is so strong and violent. (860-6)

Not only does the apothecary tell the rioter that the poison is strong enough to kill anything, he even suggests how far away the rioter could get before his victim dies.⁶

Everything with the potential for good is made questionable through Nominalist inversions in the tale because the story is told by a despairing, spiritually dead character who has attempted to replace redemption with the material possessions of this world. Since the sacraments depend upon grace, the Pardoner can only invert them.

The other prominent figure in the tale is the Old Man whose words mirror the Pardoner's spiritual dismemberment: "Lo how I vanishe, flessh, blood, and skyn!/ Allas, when shall my bones ben at reste?" (732-3); his age and inability to die represent the Pardoner's living death. According to Purdon, the Old Man is the most "theologically accurate description [of] the punishment meted out to those living in despair by sinning against the Holy Spirit" (335). The Old Man represents the "Cain-like wandering," Patterson says,

⁶ Of course, the rioter is killed before he is able to take advantage of the apothecary's sound advice.

the "living death, wandering, and sterility" which "are all characteristics of despair, and they are characteristics shared by the Old Man and his creator and alter ego, the Pardoner" (*Chaucer* 404). The Old Man also represents the Pardoner's nihilism: he walks the earth,

. . . lyk a resteles kaityf,
 And on the ground, which is my moodres gate,
 I knokke with my staf, bothe erly and late,
 And seye, "Leeve mooder, leet me in!" (728-31)

As Leicester writes, the Old Man represents the Pardoner's desire

to be rid of not physical decay but consciousness. Although he sounds suicidal (727-33), the Old Man is not so in the ordinary sense. . . . What he wants is to be swallowed up--"Leeve mooder, leet me in" (731)--to become nothing, to escape from the restless consciousness of his privation, his *cupiditas*. (49)

Most fearful of all, the Old Man can be recognized as a symbol of the Nominalist vision of divine justice. The rioters die with all their sins on their heads and are, therefore, damned. The Old Man sends the three to their doom when he directs them "up this croked wey" (761), but he cannot be viewed as a demonic figure even though his actions may not fit the mortal conception of divine mercy and justice; the rioters were never deprived of their free will and mortals cannot know God's intention for humanity. Thus,

God's will is served and their punishments are just because it is God's will.

In telling his tale, the Pardoner seems to come close to a moment of self-recognition. He poses a question in his sermon:

Allas, mankynde, how may it bitide
 That to thy creatour, which that the wroughte
 And with his precious herte-blood thee boghte,
 Thou art so fals and so unkynde, allas? (900-3)

He continues on with his invocation of God to forgive the "goode men" (904) and warns them to be wary of avarice, but he does not include himself with the men whom God should pardon which, Sachs observes, is yet another symptom of despair: "[t]he despairer placed himself outside the divine order in precisely the way Lucifer had rejected his honoured post in God's ordered kingdom" (232). Another, more telling example is his statement to the pilgrims:

And Jhesu Crist, that is our soules leche,
 So graunte yow his pardoun to receyve,
 For that is best; I wol you nat deceyve."
 (916-18)

The tone of the lines is self-mocking; he has already excluded himself from the "goode men" who need to be (or even can be) saved--he says "yow" not "us," even though he has admitted that he has many unforgiven sins. He recognizes Christ as the redeemer yet he parodies the healing that he desperately needs and wants (Patterson, *Chaucer* 223). Since

he cannot confess, he returns to his outrageous offer of pardons and relics through which, as Finnegan observes ("Eschatology" 308), he usurps the power and position of God with the declaration, "I yow assoille, by myn heigh power." Like Walter and Nicholas, the Pardoner becomes a parody of the unknowable and unpredictable God that Chaucer suggests is represented by the corrupt and controlling clergy. Peering for a moment into his own "spiritual abyss" (Patterson, *Chaucer* 388), the Pardoner sees the depth of his despair and alienation. He faces a crisis of faith: the Pardoner's desperate craving for salvation results in

the fear or the blank awareness that comes when you realize that you are only one . . . that there was only yourself to deal with all the time. With this recognition, with the lack of a genuine "other," you collapse into nothingness. (Shoaf 216)

Even after his confession and revealing tale, the Pardoner rejects his own advice to the pilgrims to look to God for pardon and falls back on the ritual he knows. His "sickness . . . has become almost comfortable" (Shoaf 223). His moment of sincerity becomes a sadomasochistic attack: if they are awed by his rhetoric and buy his false relics so he can "assoille" them, he triumphs over them. If they counter his attack, he relishes the masochistic pleasure of his false atonement. Like his confession, the Pardoner's act of atonement has been inverted. He has not humbled himself;

rather, he has revealed his pride and his contempt.

Leicester paraphrases the Pardoner's sales pitch (919-45):

I am what the pope licenses, what the church
supplies for your spiritual needs; I am the
instrument of Christ's mercy, the representative
of the Holy Ghost among you; I am what you kneel
to, whose relics you kiss. . . . (57)

The Pardoner's expression of this attitude both undermines the authority of the Church and his own role in it, and draws Harry Bailey's attack. His masochism creates a mask behind which he can hide and control what his audience sees. Masochism is a perversion of humility, just as his sacrilegious confession is a perversion of penance in which he is punished but never forgiven. Divided from God, the Pardoner suffers

insatiable longings for the inversions of God, for
the created rather than the Creator, for
peripheral accidents . . . that serve to
consolidate the Pardoner's illusion of the proud
self as center. (Hoerner 81)

The Pardoner inverts the images of God and the sacraments because, in his despair, he both longs for them and, because he cannot have them, hates them. He wallows in his spiritual pain which serves as both a perverse act of atonement and a confirmation of his existence (in a nominalist and an existential sense), and which lends significance to his otherwise meaningless life.

The Pardoner's despair makes him dangerous because he has no hope and no desire to save himself or anyone else. He also has the potential to stop the pilgrimage permanently which, as a spiritual journey, seeks the way to heaven. If St. Thomas' relics are replaced by the Pardoner's false ones, the pilgrims would have no reason to continue, and would be in the same spiritual condition as the Pardoner. Fortunately, the Host's aggressive declaration that "I wolde I hadde thy coillons in myn hand. . . . I wol thee helpe hem carie; They shul be shryned in an hogges toord!" (952-55) "disarms" the Pardoner (Patterson, *Chaucer* 409) by rendering him speechless and breaking the spell that the Pardoner has attempted to cast with his words; the danger is averted and the pilgrimage continues.

By revealing the danger implicit in depending too heavily upon supposedly sacred ceremonies that are administered by another imperfect being, "The Pardoner's Tale" allows Chaucer to challenge the legitimacy of confession and, by extension, the rest of the Church's sacraments by demonstrating the ease with which they corrupt and can be corrupted. He makes blind obedience to Church doctrine impossible by forcing his readers to question an institution that would place such a destructive man in a position of power over God's flock and, through the Pardoner, to question the necessity of a ritual that has the potential to drive people to despair. Through the Pardoner's

corruption, Chaucer reveals the illusions that the Church attempts to maintain:

In every case what ought to be a manifestation of divine power, mercy, care, and love is shown to be cheapened and undone by human stupidity or malice, unthinking literalism or calculating self-interest. What the Pardoner is making fun of is the way the putative transcendence of the institutions of the church is continually reduced to a set of merely human practices. (Leicester 43)

"The Pardoner's Tale" demonstrates the spiritual abyss created by the loss of faith in illusions of certainty: because the Pardoner has no faith, he cannot operate within the ideology of the Church, nor can he create his own alternative set of beliefs, as do the Miller and the Clerk, each in his own way.

CHAPTER FOUR

CONCLUSION

In *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer reveals the failure of any authority to provide a definitive solution, based solely on rational and empirical evidence, to questions of existence and belief. Only an act of faith, whether secular or religious, can provide the fundamental assurances of significance and meaning which are absent from the Miller's, Clerk's, and Pardoner's tales; unlike the insubstantial illusions required to sustain mortal authorities, only faith can provide the individual with authentic answers to questions of belief or disbelief. Chaucer's application of Nominalist principles in these tales demonstrates the weaknesses of the orthodox medieval Church doctrine by showing that universals--including the relationship between signifiers and signifieds, and the concepts of good and evil--might not exist and, therefore, can provide no certainty. However, Chaucer also shows that Nominalism is as unstable as orthodoxy: in its radical form, Nominalism is so contingent on individual interpretation and experience that it, too, can lead to skepticism, despair, and even, as the Pardoner illustrates, nihilism. Without the protective illusions that the Church or other authorities attempt to maintain, people must find their own certainty through their own faith. The exposure of the illusions of certainty inherent in any ideology to which individuals cling--whether religious, philosophical, or scientific--leaves those

individuals in fundamental doubt. As Leicester explains, the individual who becomes engulfed in a desire "to become nothing" (49) faces a crisis of despair and alienation which is essentially analogous to that of the existentialists (49). So, while the Miller and the Clerk manage to avoid falling into the "marle-pit" (*MilT* 3460) created by insecurity and disillusionment, the Pardoner cannot; he, like the Old Man in his tale, despairs. Chaucer himself may have responded to this recognition of despair by embarking on his own spiritual pilgrimage in writing *The Canterbury Tales*.

Chaucer's depiction of the despair that results from the loss of confidence in fundamental beliefs and authorities is not limited to the Miller's, Clerk's, and Pardoner's tales. Chaucer demonstrates throughout *The Canterbury Tales* how the power of any authority resides partly in its ability to use words: he tests the ability of religion, science, philosophy, language, and individuals' perceptions to reveal truth. Even literary tradition is questioned in *The Tales*. Chaucer the pilgrim tells two tales: "Sir Thopas" undermines the conventions of Romance poetry by creating two hundred and six frivolous lines of outrageous rhymes and limping meter. When the Host complains that Chaucer's "drasty rymyng is nat worth a toord!" (930), Chaucer responds with "The Tale of Melibee," which is a "practical demonstration of the ways in which the author can manipulate his discourse and how that resultant text can be variously apprehended by the

audience" (Waterhouse and Griffiths 340). The pilgrims' ecstatic response to the moral quality of the tale calls further attention to this parody of literature and language because, as Waterhouse and Griffiths point out, "as a moral lesson, the tale's 'sentense'/signification is finally indeterminable" (339).¹

Similarly, the Wife of Bath manipulates the words of anti-feminist authors to serve her own purposes, one of which is to justify her actions. She begins her tale by invoking experience as her authority; but, in her "Prologue," the Wife turns the words of authorities to her advantage, thereby revealing not only the flaws in the logic of the patriarchy but also the weaknesses in her own argument. She attempts to recreate herself in her "Prologue" and "Tale," but the inconsistencies and contradictions in her language work against her by revealing the discrepancies in her story and, ultimately, by causing the illusions she wishes to create about herself to fail. This failure calls to mind the Nominalist contention that only in immediate experience are things known; once an experience has been transferred to memory, the individual's knowledge of events becomes unreliable.

¹ Waterhouse and Griffiths explain that "Melibee is reconciled with the world, the flesh, and the devil. . . . Thus there is an irreconcilable gap between the narrative discourse and its story on the one hand and the potential allegory to which we are alerted by Dame Prudence herself on the other, since coherent parallels that fit into the syntagmatic line of each level do not exist" (346).

The Wife of Bath is not the only character who reinterprets events to suit her own purposes. In "The Merchant's Tale," young May is able to reconfigure the events that old January witnesses in the garden so that he distrusts his own eyes and doubts what he actually has seen. When he declares with absolute conviction that, "He swyved thee; I saugh it with myne yen,/ And elles be I hanged by the hals!" (2378-79), she convinces him that he had "som glymsyng, and no parfit sighte" (2383); his statement, "me thoughte he dide thee so" (2386) shows his growing uncertainty. May finally convinces him that "[f]ul many a man weneth to seen a thyng,/ And it is al another than it semeth./ He that mysconceyveth, he mysdemeth" (2408-10). May's revision of events demonstrates the potential for deliberate misinterpretation and the power of a speaker to intentionally lead people astray. Similarly, the alchemist's ruse leads the priest astray in "The Canon's Yeoman's Tale," in which the alchemist's transmutation of base metal into silver is nothing but a trick, accomplished through sleight of hand and convincing language. The narrator laments, "O sely preest! O sely innocent! With coveitise anon thou shalt be blent!" (1076-77). The priest is blinded by his greed and so is easily deceived by the alchemist, who takes advantage of the priest's desire to believe in the illusion that he creates. This scientific practice is exposed as fraudulent; like Nicholas' astronomy and Walter's philosophy, its success depends on blind faith and "pious ignorance." Thus,

the alchemist's trick with silver is analogous to Walter's trick with language: his base temptations of Griselda seem to become virtuous tests and Griselda seems to be "translated" positively, even though she consents to what she believes are the murders of her children.

Language is also shown as unreliable in "The Manciple's Tale" when Phebus, the God of poetry, uses it to reconfigure the events which led him to murder his wife: he convinces himself that the crow speaks falsely when it cries, "Cokkow!" (243) and that his own vision of his wife's constancy is a true reflection of reality. Language in the tale is unable to represent reality accurately because its ability to create illusion seems greater than its ability to represent truth; like old January, Phebus clings to his illusions rather than facing what he has done. Phebus is able to recreate falsely both his wife and reality because anyone who could refute or disprove his retelling of the events has been silenced: any alternative positions have been overpowered by the authoritative. The tale concludes with the narrator's despairing cry for silence:

Thyng that is seyde is seyde, and forth it gooth,
 Though hym repente, or be hym nevere so
 looth.

He is his thral to whom that he hath sayd
 A tale of which he is now yvele apayd.
 My sone, be war, and be noon auctour newe

Of tidynges, wheither they been false or trewe.

(355-60)

Thus, deception and the false recreation of reality are not the only dangers implicit in the slippery nature of language. Users of language risk facing alienation from others because of the inability of language to fully express their ideas, and from themselves through self-deception. As a result, the individual must either find a way to move beyond this emotional and spiritual void or fall into despair.

The final tale is told by the Parson. Chaucer's presence is felt, as it is in "Sir Thopas" and "The Tale of Melibee," when the author outside the artistic frame is recognized as the shadow of Chaucer the pilgrim: "My shadwe was at thilke tyme, as there/ Of swiche feet as my lengthe parted were/ In sixe feet equal of proporcioun" (7-9). The journey comes to an end as night falls: the pilgrimage has revealed the insufficiency of various illusions to which many of its participants have clung, and shown the despair that results from that revelation. Because the cry, "be noon auctour newe/ Of tidynges" ("Manciple's" 359-60) is followed by a sermon which seems to repeat the traditional teachings of the Catholic Church and because *The Canterbury Tales* ends with Chaucer's retractions, there is a sense of personal conviction in this final sermon/treatise.

Scholars such as Sheila Delaney argue for Chaucer's desperate reversion to the old dogmas and blind faith in the

Church because he "can find no reason to believe" (118). It can also be argued that the tale expresses the absolute despair of one who no longer believes in his power to create or find meaning in existence and so falls into a creative void by repeating the authoritative and traditional words of the Church (even though the illusions and uncertainties inherent in those words have already been revealed in the other tales). However, whether "The Parson's Tale" is read as a sincere statement of faith or a hopeless demonstration of despair, it manifests Chaucer's reaction to the unreliability of knowledge and experience, and to the fundamental inadequacy of finite mortal reason.

Because "The Parson's Tale" presents a personal stance that arises from questioning and contemplating the Church's doctrine, Chaucer does not necessarily have to be pious, solemn, or orthodox. Thus, even in his retractions, he can be ironic and humorous because he has freed himself from earthly authority.²¹ When he observes that "'Al that is writen is writen for oure doctrine,' and that is myn entente" (1083), responsibility is once again placed on the reader: because of the mutable nature of language and the inevitability of individual interpretation, it is the

²¹ In *Nausea* and *The Outsider*, Sartre and Camus respectively are able to find humour in their representations of the absurdities of human existence; likewise, it would be possible for Chaucer to appreciate, from even a position of despair, the irony of humanity's attempts to find rational certainty in an utterly uncertain universe.

reader's own fault if he or she learns a bad lesson. Ironically, Chaucer lists "many a song and many a lecherous lay" [1087]) instead of focusing his reader's attention on his didactic works: he refers directly only to "the translacion of Boece de Consolacione, and othere bookes of legendes of seintes, and omelies, and moralitee, and devocioun" (1087). Again, because of the uncertain nature of language and our inability to be completely sure of anyone else's meaning, it is up to the reader to determine whether Chaucer's retraction is sincere. No matter how the reader chooses to interpret "The Parson's Tale" and the retraction (i.e., as texts intended to be taken literally, ironically, or both), Chaucer makes it clear that his philosophical stance is his own: as "Geffrey" said, "I wot myself best how y stonde" (HF 1878).

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