

Contingent Chaucer: Experience, Time, and Modality in Chaucerian Poetics



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Abstract

This thesis makes a new case for Chaucer as a philosophical poet, arguing that his art is profoundly entwined with the philosophy of contingency. Previous studies of contingency in Chaucer have interpreted the poet's treatment of related issues (such as the mutability of language and the nature of free will) in relation to contemporaneous doctrinal controversies such as nominalism, voluntarism, and Lollardy. Going beyond these approaches, this thesis contends that Chaucer, synthesising a memorial omnium gatherum of philosophical learning, innovated a radical, anti-teleological poetics of contingency. Chaucerian contingency, the thesis states, is a comprehensive (yet by its nature fragmentary and modular) understanding of the relationship between individual lives and artistic creation under the conditions of phenomenal experience: the experience of time as linear, sequential and extensive; the translation of immediate consciousness into discrete concepts and words; the epistemological limits imposed by the temporality and multivocality of language. The thesis moves retrospectively through Chaucer's career, first reassessing the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* and *Clerk's Tale*, before passing through *Troilus and Criseyde* and the *House of Fame*, revealing in each case how Chaucer reworks his sources to articulate his vision of contingency, and contest humanist narratives of utopian perfectibility and idealistic, teleological poetics. It situates each poem's ideas of contingency in their fuller context within intellectual history, tracing the arc of Chaucer's developing philosophical vision. In the process, it frees Chaucerian contingency from the strictures of nominalist analyses, using a new paradigm which asserts the basic homology and continuity of medieval and postmedieval thinking on the subject. Linking the conceptual affinities of Chaucer's sources in the Neoplatonic, Augustinian, Boethian, Scotist and Thomist traditions with

their counterparts in postmedieval contingency theory, it concludes that Chaucer was a critical node in a period-spanning tradition of literary explorations of contingency.

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Abbreviations

Bo = *Boece*

CA = John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*

ChauR = *The Chaucer Review*

CIT / CIP = *The Clerk's Tale / Clerk's Prologue*

Conf = St. Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*

Cons = Boethius, *De Consolatione Philosophiae*

CT = *The Canterbury Tales*

CYT / CYP = *The Canon's Yeoman's Tale / Canon's Yeoman's Prologue*

Dec = Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron*

Fil = Boccaccio, *Il Filostrato*

FormA = *The Former Age*

FranT = *The Franklin's Tale*

GP = *General Prologue*

HF = *The House of Fame*

Il Conv = Dante, *Il Convivio*

Inf = Dante, *Inferno*

JEGP = *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*

KnT = *The Knight's Tale*

Lak = *Lak of Stedfastnesse*

LGW / LGWP = *Legend of Good Women / Prologue to the Legend of Good Women*

MED = *Middle English Dictionary*

MerchT = *The Merchant's Tale*

MLT = *The Man of Law's Tale*

MkT = The Monk's Tale

NPT = The Nun's Priest's Tale

OED = Oxford English Dictionary

Par = Dante, Paradiso

ParT = The Parson's Tale

PP = William Langland, Piers Plowman

Purg = Dante, Purgatorio

Ret = Chaucer's Retraction

RR = Guillaume de Lorris & Jean de Meun, Roman de la Rose

RvT = The Reeve's Tale

SAC = Studies in the Age of Chaucer

SEP = Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy

SqT – The Squire's Tale

ST = St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae

TC = Troilus and Criseyde

Th-MelL = Thopas-Melibee Link

TL = Thomas Usk, The Testament of Love

WBP = The Wife of Bath's Prologue

WBT = The Wife of Bath's Tale

1. Poems Without Ends: Chaucer and Contingency

1.1. Chaucer: A poet of contingency?

In the *prima pars* of Chaucer's *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, after bearing witness to a failed attempt at alchemical transmutation, an unnamed and nonspecific stakeholder offers these words:

And though this thyng myshapped have as now,
Another tyme it may be well ynow.
Us moste putteoure good in aventure.
A marchant, pardee, may nat ay endure,
Trusteth me wel, in his prosperitee.
Somytyme his good is drowned in the see,
And somtyme comth it sauf unto the londe.¹

This consolatory pat-on-the-shoulder may be the closest thing to a straightforward moral anywhere in this poem. It may be unsurprising that Chaucer, a poet for whom “irony is his most consistent position and is so unique in spirit that we refer to such irony as being distinctively Chaucerian”, should place this rare morsel of unironic advice in the voice of an anonymous “oon” who is immediately ignored and dismissed, shot down with a scathing “Pees!” (VIII 942, 951).² The narrative and narratorial situation that Chaucer

¹ All Chaucer quotations are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, gen. ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

² Beryl Rowland, “Seven Kinds of Irony”, in Earle Birney, *Essays on Chaucerian Irony*, ed. Beryl Rowland (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), pp. xv–xxvii. ‘Chaucerian irony’ is a topic so deeply integrated in Chaucer studies that I cannot provide an exhaustive account here. A full bibliography on irony in Chaucer would include almost every major study written since the late nineteenth century; for a more comprehensive survey than I offer here, see Vance Ramsey, “Modes of Irony in the *Canterbury Tales*”, in Rowland, ed. *Companion to Chaucer Studies*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 352–79. With that caveat in tow, some particularly important essays considering Chaucer’s irony, in general or in specific tales, include: on Chaucerian irony and its affinity with the epistemic scepticism of late medieval philosophy, David Aers, *Chaucer, Langland, and the Creative Imagination* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980); Judson Boyce Allen, “The Old Way and the Parson’s Way: An Ironic Reading of the *Parson’s Tale*”, *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 3 (1973), 255–71; on the scholastic background to Chaucer’s ironist epistemology, Laura Ashe, “How to Read Both: The Logic of True Contradictions in Chaucer’s World”, *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 42 (2020), 3–29; on

constructs around these few lines ensure that they are well and truly disseminal in the Derridean sense: within the fictional universe of the tale they are words unheard, seeds of utterance that fail to take root in a comprehending auditor, “a wasteful dissipation of semiological meanings”.³ On our side of the readerly fourth wall, meanwhile, these lines resonate with an opened surplus of potential meanings—meanings which are boundless in the sense that they are not self-contained or enclosed, but are constituted and re-constituted in provisional formations with other readers, other texts, other fragments of

ironist hermeneutics, *idem*, “Reading Like a Clerk in the *Clerk’s Tale*”, *Modern Language Review*, 101, 4 (2006), 935–44; on the phenomenology of interpretive ambiguity and ironic multiplicity in the *Prioress’s Tale*, Helen Barr, “Religious Practice in Chaucer’s *Prioress’s Tale*: Rabbit and/or Duck?”, *SAC* 32 (2010), 39–65; on ironist poetics as response to problematics of interpretation, Derek Brewer, “Towards a Chaucerian Poetic”, in *Chaucer: The Poet as Storyteller* (London: Macmillan, 1984), pp. 54–79; Sheila Delany, *Chaucer’s House of Fame: The Poetics of Skeptical Fideism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972); E. Talbot Donaldson, *Speaking of Chaucer* (London: Athlone Press, 1970); Germaine Dempster, *Dramatic Irony in Chaucer* (New York: Humanities Press, 1959); Anthony Farnham, “Chaucerian Irony and the Ending of the *Troilus*”, *The Chaucer Review*, 1, 4 (1967), 207–16; Donald R. Howard, *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1976); Laura Kendrick, *Chaucerian Play: Comedy and Control in the Canterbury Tales* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988); on the *Roman de la Rose* and *Il Filostrato* as influences on Chaucerian irony, Tony Millns, “Chaucer’s Suspended Judgments”, *Essays in Criticism*, 27, 1 (1977), 1–19; Charles Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition* (Berkeley, CA: University of Berkeley Press, 1957), pp. 9–39, 84–93, 128–172; Anne Payne, *Chaucer and Menippean Satire* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1981); on the rhetorical background to Chaucerian irony and equivocation, Robert O. Payne, *The Key of Remembrance: A Study of Chaucer’s Poetics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1963); Edmund Reiss, “Chaucer and Medieval Irony”, *SAC* 1 (1979), 67–82; Paul G. Ruggiers, *The Art of the Canterbury Tales* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1965); on the social ideological factors influencing Chaucer’s attitude towards ‘truthfulness’ in his poetics, Paul Strohm, *Hochon’s Arrow: The Social Imagination of Fourteenth-Century Texts* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), esp. pp. 3–94; Peter W. Travis, *Disseminal Chaucer: Rereading the Nun’s Priest’s Tale* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), pp. 92–117; on narratorial irony as Chaucer’s response to Dante, Chauncey Wood, “Chaucer and *Sir Thopas*: Irony and Concupiscence”, *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 14, 3 (1972), 389–403. Over the last few decades in Chaucer criticism, the impossibly broad topic of “irony” has been refined into more specific concepts; scholars today are more likely to discuss Chaucer’s ‘ambiguity’, ‘ambivalence’, ‘equivocality’, ‘multiplicity’, ‘paradox’, etc., each term pertaining to different intellectual-historical contexts, such as Chaucer’s interactions with scholastic philosophy, or medieval rhetoric, or contemporary socio-political exigencies, and so on.

³ Travis, *Disseminal Chaucer*, p. 17. Cf. Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), pp. 267–8.

phrase. These lines gesture to their own disseminality as they are spoken: whether or not their semiological ‘seed’—the initial *sensus* with which the utterance is freighted, like a merchant’s cargo, once spoken—will take root is *contingent* in modal terms: that is, they *may or may not* “comth...sauf unto the londe” of reception and comprehension. Even if they did, the meanings that may be generated in this encounter are beyond the speaker’s powers to predict.

One such set of distinctly philosophical meanings is formed as the words and images clustered here come into contact with parallel words and images in several other of Chaucer’s poems. This passage articulates an ethical view about an ontological and epistemological situation: it ventures a ‘right way’ for humans to conduct themselves in relation to “aventure”, “Fate, fortune, chance” or “accident[s], events, vicissitudes”, perhaps the closest equivalent in Chaucer’s lexicon to what we would call “contingency”.⁴ While Chaucer never uses the word “contingent” itself (as discussed below), he invokes the concept constantly by way of an associated lexical cluster, with its constitutive terms often tightly collocated and co-occurring (as we often see with the words “hap”, “cas”, “aventure”, for instance). His references to contingency fall into two major categories which are, necessarily, interlocking and overlapping: *metaphysical* and *epistemic* contingency. Broadly, the former refers to the contingency or necessity of acts

⁴ *Middle English Dictionary* (online), s.v. “aventure n.”, 1., 2.(a)–(c), <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED3150> [Accessed 04/05/2021]; *Oxford English Dictionary* (online), s.v. “contingency, n.”, II.3.a. (“The condition of being liable to happen or not in the future; uncertainty of occurrence or incidence”), b. (“The befalling or occurrence of anything without preordination; chance; fortuitousness”), c. (“The condition of being free from predetermining necessity in regard to existence or action”), d. (“The quality or condition of being subject to chance and change, or of being at the mercy of accidents”); II.4.a. (“A chance occurrence...an accident, a casualty”), etc. <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/40247> [Accessed 04/05/2021].

and events, the play of potential and actual in the noumenal world beyond individual sense-perception. The latter refers to the contingency of truth and interpretation at both individual and collective levels, naturally invoking such entangled issues as the temporality of language, the historicity of knowledge, and the unpredictable change that must take place within the worldly episteme.

The above passage from the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* exemplifies Chaucer's characteristic sensitivity to the way these two kinds of modality, the epistemic and metaphysical, are conjoined, meeting at the juncture of individual, phenomenal experience. The metaphysical 'contingency' represented by the "see", which may or may not sink the merchant's "good", is contingent only because of epistemological constraints, the temporal limits on the individual subject. If they enjoyed a privileged vantage over the sequence of time, with all causes made visible, whether or not the sea would engulf the "good" would always be predictable, its otherwise-unknowable necessity manifested. Besides this, there are multiple analogical dimensions to the image: if the "good" itself represents veridical, truth-containing discourse (as its narrative context implies, coming after an unresolved barrage of conflicting interpretations by other witnesses) then this passage encapsulates Chaucer's recurring concern with the referential distance between words and things, and what this situation implies for secular truth-seeking. "Aventure" governs the passage of discourse across the ocean of time as it does capital on the real-world sea; there is no assurance that discourse committed to unknown readers down the chain of history will survive intact, "be understonde" (*TC* V.1798) as intended. Here, the crucial line for our interpretation, "Us moste putteoure good in aventure", is self-contained, thrown into relief as a parenthetical aside, its

importance foregrounded by its suspension in this syntactic airlock.⁵ For this speaker, the situation of the “marchant” is a synecdoche for the situation of all human “prosperitee” in relation to “aventure”. We are never clear about the social station of these observing stakeholders, or the precise nature of their investment in the canon’s experiments, but the lineal sequence of this passage, with the crucial maxim set out *before* the primary exemplum of merchants at sea, makes clear that the “Us” in question are not fellow merchants or alchemists but a more universal *We*, humankind at large. As such, the key word for the interpretation of this line is “moste”. In what sense does this speaker mean that we *must* “putte oure good in aventure”; is this an ethical imperative, or a recognition of an inevitable set of affairs, a relation of bare necessity?

The issue hinges on the fact that this is said specifically in relation to “aventure”, contingency, because the lexeme “moten” (the verb of which “moste” is a variant form) may express two different modal senses: one of possibility (to allow, to permit) and one of necessity (to be obliged, to be compelled).⁶ The question becomes: *must* we or *should* we put our “good” in “aventure”? Throughout the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer shows a marked flexibility in his use of the form “mot[e]” or “moot[e]”. In the *Knight’s Tale*, for example, the verb expresses both the modality of contingency, that “which can be or not be”, in Agamben’s words (“For *outher* I *moot* sleen hym at the gappe, / *Or* he *moot* sleen me, *if* that me myshappe”, *KnT* I 1645–6).⁷ At times it also inscribes the opposite,

⁵ On parenthesis in medieval poetic composition see Paul Saenger, “Silent Reading: Its Impact on Late Medieval Script and Society”, *Viator*, 13 (1982), 367–414.

⁶ *MED*, s.v. “moten v.(2)”, 1.(a)–(d), 2a, 2b, 2c, 2d, 3, 4 <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED28752>. [Accessed 04/05/2021]. *OED*, s.v. “mote, v.(1)”, 1.1.a–b, 2.a–b, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/122618> [Accessed 04/05/2021].

⁷ Giorgio Agamben, “Bartleby, or On Contingency”, in *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, ed. and trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 261.

necessity, that which *must* be irrespective of choice or agency: “For I moot wepe and wayle, whil I lyve, / With al the wo that prison may me yive” (I 1295–6). Chaucer makes use of the form “most[e]” where he is strictly emphasising the subordinacy of human freedom to inscrutable, preordaining forces; again the *Knight’s Tale*, with its heavy emphasis on Boethian concerns, provides some revealing examples. Here, “moste”, “mayst”, and “mote” are collocated with other keywords which are often clustered when Chaucer is inviting readers to think about the issues of free will, predestination, and the category of the unpredictable:

Thou mayst, syn thou hast wisdom and manhede,
 Assemblen alle the folk of oure kynrede,
 And make a werre so sharp on this citee
 That by som *aventure* or some trettee
Thou mayst have hire to lady and to wyf
 For whom what I *moste nedes* lese my lyf.
 For, as by wey of *possibilitee*,
 Sith thou art at thy large, of prisoun free,
 And art a lord, greet is thyn avauntage
 Moore than is myn, that sterve here in a cage. (*KnT* I 1285–94. Emphasis added.)

The inexorable necessity invoked by “moste nedes” counterpoints the diction of possibility, chance, and choice that surround it. This is more than an example of subtextual ironic contrast: the grammatical complexities of this passage trace out a paradoxical vision of time and free will that recurs in Chaucer’s poetry, in which choices are simultaneously free and predestined, and narrative futures contingent and necessary all at once. This conception of the relation between human agency—of choice and consequence as seen through the lived experience of time, and the ineffable cosmic order that supervenes our sense of contingency—is fundamentally Boethian: it reflects Chaucer’s understanding of the metaphysical worldview set out in Book V of the

Consolation of Philosophy, to explain how humans may have free will, yet God must still have perfect foreknowledge.

These metaphysical ideas, as this thesis shows, are of interest to Chaucer in and of themselves, particularly where his Boethian themes are triangulated by Italian humanist sources—as in the *Knight's Tale* and *Troilus and Criseyde*. In both, Chaucer amplifies Boccaccio's Boethian references, and develops them into a fully-fledged philosophical subtext to a greater extent than in the *Teseida* and *Il Filostrato*. Yet while Chaucer shows a scholarly fascination with the subject of “aventure”, contingency ‘as such’, his interest is more consistently piqued by the implications of contingency for human affairs. Chaucer writes often about what medieval Christians saw as humanity's ontological situation—beings fallen, liminal, and bound to experience time in a linear, sequential way—and what this implies for our pursuit of knowledge, our fortunes in love, the ways in which we conduct ourselves in the world. It is with this experiential emphasis attached that the Yeoman's anonymous “oon” says we *moste* “putte oure good in aventure”. “Moste”, in the sense of *needs must* (or “moste nedes”), is often used by Chaucer to signal an attitude of resignation and stoic sufferance in the face of an inevitability; it reflects an alethic necessity, a metaphysical state of affairs, rather than an *imperative* or *expediency*.⁸ The absent “nedes” is strongly felt here: “moste [nedes]”, needs must, we “putte oure good in aventure”. The phrase evokes an essentially unresolved (perhaps

⁸ In Chaucer's works, “moste” is frequently collocated with the terms “endure”, “pacienc”, “nede”, “stedefast”, “abyde”, and usually connotes a necessity that is *imposed* on a subject rather than simply a preferable choice; it is a stronger *must* than in modern usage. E.g. “That Fortune wolde he moste twinne” (*SqT* V 577); “For whan they saughe that it moste nedes be” (*MerchT* IV 1691); “That they moste yeve it up, as for the beste” (*WBP* III 427); “A likerous mouth moste han a likerous tayl” (*WBP* III 466); “Constreynd was; he nedes moste hir wedde” (*WBT* III 1071); “For nedes moste he fighte” (VII 841); “They moste take in pacienc at night / Swich manere necessities...” (*MLT* II 710–11), etc.

unresolvable) tension between positive action and negative passivity as a response to the total contingency of the phenomenal world—one that will recur time and time again in Chaucer’s writing. In this case, the prevailing sense might be rephrased this way: ‘We are bound by necessity to put our secular fortunes at risk, because all things in our order of time are contingent’; *omnia mutantur*. We are like merchants whose cargo may, or may not, sink; like Troilus in love, our fortunes are “possed to and fro / Al sterelees withinne a boot...Amydde the see” (*TC* I.415–17).

The *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale* is not the only place where a Chaucerian voice offers proverbial wisdom about how we should cope with contingency. Theseus’ far more famous advice—“To maken vertu of necessitee, / And take it weel that we may nat eschue” (*KnT* I 3042–3) is effectively the other side of the same coin. If the Boethian model, metaphysically speaking, says that events and things in the temporal world are *both* necessary and contingent, according to different temporal modalities, then this is really the same message as in the *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale*, reframed in response to “necessitee” instead of “aventure”. Just as “aventure”, in that case, adjoins both a strictly philosophical sense and a more mundane, everyday sense, here “necessitee” invokes *philosophical* necessity (a modal category describing a proposition that *must* always be the case), which is the opposite of contingency, as well as the more colloquial and general sense of the term which invokes contingency itself, the apt response to events that befall unpredictably (“aventure or cas”, *KnT* I 1074). All at once, Theseus speaks about the (logically, metaphysically) necessary connection between temporal events—which are links in the Neoplatonic “faire cheyne” (*KnT* I 2988) of being—and the “need or necessity *of life*”, what human beings “moste nedes” do in response to the

unpredictability of fortunes in this world: to make the best of things, eschew egotistical “wilfulness” (I 3057), and stoically abide “that to us alle is due” (I 3044).⁹ There is a mutuality here which is perspectival rather than strictly paradoxical. The aside “Us moste putte oure good in aventure” is both an acknowledgement of a metaphysical fact-of-life, that within our temporal limits our fortunes are inevitably “in aventure”, and a bit of down-to-earth advice: that we should accept the inevitability of risk and move forward imperturbably.

Theseus’ moralisation about making virtue of necessity shares this doubleness of scope. What is meant by “vertu” changes depending upon the sense in which we take “necessitee”. The preceding speech condenses several parts of the *Consolation of Philosophy* to describe an emanationist cosmic order, in which Jupiter/God is “Firste Moevere of the cause above” (*KnT* I 2987), *primum movens* and *causa finalis* of all that takes place in time, and from whom all temporal and material things descend, emanating through layers of metaphysical intermediaries (corresponding to the Plotinian descent of phenomenal reality from the perfect, eternal One via *nous* and world-soul) until they become material, mutable, perceptible and contingent (“But of a thyng that parfit is and stable, / Descendynge so til it be corruptable”, I 3009–10).¹⁰ Theseus accounts for the

⁹ *MED*, s.v. “necessite n”., 1.(a) “That which is required or essential; something needed; a need or necessity of life; also, some necessary act or duty”, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED29175> [Accessed 05/05/2021].

¹⁰ This process of ‘emanation’ is central to Neoplatonic thought, accounting for the fallibility and ephemerality of temporal things in relation to the perfection and immutability of their origin, the Monad or One. Later philosophers such as Porphyry and Iamblichus iterated on Plotinus’ distinction between One/*nous*/world-soul/world, adding many new intermediate layers in this celestial hierarchy, metaphorically affiliated with Greek gods (e.g. Zeus as the Demiurge); the Iamblichian ‘great chain’, set out in the *Reply to Porphyry*, progresses from gods, to archangels, to angels, to demons, to heroes, to transcendent archons, to material archons, to material souls. Neoplatonic ideas, including emanationism, most famously informed Augustine’s philosophical elaboration of Christian belief, exerting influence on his doctrine of *agape* and his view of a transcendental, immutable divine goodness which flows, mediated, into the mutable world of

events they have experienced from this cosmic perspective, one that encompasses two different types of necessity. In one sense, where God is understood as the unmoved mover and first cause, all events are predestined by a strictly *causal* necessity, which Boethius calls “simple”, a *deterministic* chain (“speces of thynges and progressiouns / Shullen endure by successiouns”, I 3013–4). Conversely, where God is understood to be an active Providential hand ordaining events (“He hath so wel biset his ordinaunce...prince and cause of al thyng”, I 3012, 3036), the nature of this necessity becomes more mysterious, a necessity which is itself contingent on an ineffable uncaused cause (the divine will or intelligence). Boethius is not ignorant of this complexity, which may be a consequence of his syncretism of different philosophical strands. It informs his distinction between “simple” and “conditional” necessity, where the former is a self-evident, causal relation, and the latter describes the “necessity of the present”—that what is *presently* the case, is *necessarily* the case—as a solution to the problem of divine foreknowledge.¹¹

Despite this conceptual slipperiness within the Boethian view of necessity, the implications for Theseus’ moralisation are the same in either case.¹² The “vertu” in

divisible things. Boethius’ conception of the fair chain of love, descending downwards unto the realm of the corruptible, is ultimately indebted to this emanationist idea. In later medieval writings, it is difficult to distinguish between the Neoplatonic and Aristotelian notions of a ‘great chain of being’, which were synthesised in the pseudo-Aristotelian *Liber de Causis*, and which, via the commentaries of Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas, exerted significant influence on later metaphysics (and poetry—not least of Dante’s *Comedy*). Riccardo Chiaradonna and Adrien Lecerf, “Iamblichus”, in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2019 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta (2019) <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/iamblichus/> [Accessed 05/05/2021]. Cf. *Boece* III.pr.10; Dante, *Paradiso*, XIII.

¹¹ This solution is discussed further in chapter four of this thesis.

¹² Marenbon notes that *Cons.* IV.5 represents a radical change of direction from the preceding assertion of a non-interventionist God as *causa finalis* to a Providential, intervening God as *causa efficiens*. John Marenbon, “Boethius”, in *SEP* (Winter 2016 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta (2016) <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/boethius/#ConsPhilArguBookIV2> [Accessed 05/05/2021]. See

question must be strictly reactive, a virtuous *disposition* of equanimity towards a reality both unpredictable and ordained by God, since in both cases “necessitee” reflects the governance of phenomenal reality by either a divine agency that is absolutely inscrutable, or a determining causality (flowing from God as first mover, the uncaused cause) that human beings can never predict because of our limited access to knowledge of prior causes. Either philosophical interpretation reflects the view that events in our phenomenal reality are contingent because we can never fully reckon with the necessity that governs their disposition. Yet, the lexis of the passage has a distinctly agential, directive tenor, one that implicitly suggests that we *do* have agency over affairs in the world, and so there are better and worse ways for us to behave. We ought to “maken” virtue of necessity, we ought not to “gruccheth” at twists of fate or downturns of Fortune’s wheel. Both “maken vertu of necessity” and “putte oure good in aventure”, despite suggesting the opposite in strictly philosophical terms, are expressing the same idea in practical, worldly terms: the best bulwarks against contingency are optimism and imperturbability. Chaucer is distinctive for his ability to sustain both dimensions at once, a skill that may partly account for his poetry’s characteristic equivocality, ambiguity, and sustained irresolution. In keeping with the philosophical zeitgeist of his time, Chaucer makes it clear that the persistent human experience of paradox is a product of temporal situatedness and the limits of our faculties, not a characteristic of reality as such. The aporias that emerge from this worldview, the Chaucerian sense of the contingency of necessity and the contingency of contingency, are central issues of this thesis.

also Marenbon, “Divine Prescience and Contingency in Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy*”, *Rivista di Storia della Filosofia*, 68, 1 (2013), 9–21.

1.2. Nominalist Chaucer?

Chaucer lived and wrote in the wake of a re-nascence of interest in contingency as a philosophical and theological issue. The related ‘problem of future contingents’, pertaining to the truth-value of statements made about future events, is Aristotelian in the truest sense. Its most famous formulation is found in chapter IX of Aristotle’s *De Interpretatione*, the so-called paradox of the sea-battle. If we say a sea-battle will take place tomorrow, this claim violates the principle of bivalence (that a proposition *must* be true or false), because it *may or may not* be true, and this possibility is indeterminable at the time (and in the tense) in which the statement is made. Contingency, then, is indeterminacy expressed as logic, in modal terms. As a function of the linear, present-tense way human beings experience events in time, statements about the future can never be true or false—their truth or falsity is resolved *retrospectively*, in much the same way that, in quantum mechanics, Schrödinger’s cat exists in a superposition of alive *and* dead while it remains unobserved, in its sealed box; only once the box is opened does the superposition resolve into the state of being alive *or* dead. The resolution of a future contingent truth into a past necessary truth results from a kind of temporal observer-effect: when we translate reality into logico-linguistic propositions such as “it will rain tomorrow” or “tomorrow there will be a sea-battle”, such claims can never be true or false in any necessary sense until the event in question does or does not take place. Once the sea-battle does or does not happen or the rain does or does not fall, the tense of the statement about that event switches from future- to present- or past-, and the modality of the statement changes from contingent to necessary, possible to definite. Importantly, such examples describe not a *metaphysical* but an *epistemological* problem. They are not suggesting that whether the sea-battle will take place is *really*, metaphysically,

indeterminate; rather, these paradoxes express the limitations of linguistic description, humanity's basic logical and linguistic tools for describing reality. In the Middle Ages, a confluence of historical factors led scholastic philosophers to debate the idea that reality, or more precisely philosophical descriptions of reality, may be contingent at some level. This was exacerbated by the fact that medieval philosophy in Christian Europe took as axiomatic (1) that the universe was ordained by an omniscient, omnipotent, and ineffable God and (2) that truths derived by reason are subordinate to truths revealed by faith, framing reason and language as incapable of fully apprehending God, and His truth.

While contingency may be called an Aristotelian topic, the influence of the twelfth and thirteenth century 'recovery of Aristotle' was not the only vector for its influence on the medieval philosophy of contingency. It may be argued that the rising interest in contingency in the scholastic period was more of a terminological and categorical shift than a substantive change: most of the major sub-questions—on the temporality of language, or the apparent unpredictability of events in time—were at the heart of philosophy throughout the first millennium (not least the *Consolation of Philosophy*). What developed with the Aristotelian recovery was a modalisation of reality, the notion that modal categories may be applied metaphysically as well as epistemically: that we may talk about the contingency or necessity of *events*, not just statements about them. As mentioned, the paradox of the sea-battle belongs to *De Interpretatione* IX, which remained available to European scholars through late antiquity and throughout the Middle Ages, mediated by various commentaries. Unlike much of the Aristotelian corpus, this work was not 'rediscovered' by contact with Islamic Golden Age philosophers, although interaction with Arabic commentaries on it may have contributed

to the growth of ‘contingency’ from a strictly epistemic and modal term to the broader, metaphysical modal term it later became. Boethius translated Aristotle’s *Peri Hermeneias* into Latin and produced two important commentaries, and the Boethian text had substantial currency through the early and high Middle Ages; while the efflorescence of Latin Aristotelian commentaries in the thirteenth century reflects the integration of the Arabic Aristotelian corpus, writings on the *De Interpretatione* reveal a debt to the earlier, Boethian commentary.¹³

The *metaphysical* discourses around potentiality, and the ‘concentric’, emanationist models of the physical and mental worlds derived from Aristotle’s *De Anima* were fresh philosophical material (and were rigorously synthesised with Christian thought by Aquinas, in a historical reprise of Augustine’s Neoplatonised Christian theology); the associated idea of ‘potentiality’, as Agamben shows, corresponds closely to *contingency*, both inscribing the possibility of alterity, for an entity (*viz. potentiality*) or proposition (*viz. contingency*) to take place differently or not at all.¹⁴ But the idea of the contingent in its strict sense as an epistemic modality—a formal expression that the truth-value of a statement cannot be resolved by a relation of *necessity*—and the related problems of future contingents were long in the tooth before this Aristotelianism took

¹³ Deborah L. Black makes the compelling suggestion that the Latin and Arabic commentary traditions surrounding Aristotle’s *De Interpretatione* had very different emphases—the commentaries of Boethius, Albertus Magnus, Aquinas, and the like emphasising the linguistic and semiotic dimensions of Aristotle’s text, while the likes of Al-Farabi and Avicenna, evincing a more sceptical view of the metaphysical status of grammar, less confident in a “universal grammar” (i.e. that language and logic express certain underlying grammatical/linguistic rules, or that they may at least be described in strictly grammatical terms), were able to develop a more holistic understanding of Aristotle, which preserved the independent status of language, logic, and grammar (while acknowledging that many *features* of each overlap and intersect). Deborah L. Black, “Aristotle’s *Peri Hermeneias* in Medieval Latin and Arabic Philosophy: Logic and the Linguistic Arts”, *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, Supplementary Volumes 17 (1991), 25–83.

¹⁴ Agamben, “Bartleby, or On Contingency”, pp. 243–54.

wing in twelfth and thirteenth century scholasticism. Nonetheless, it may be that contingency expanded from an epistemic concept to a metaphysical one thanks to the synthesis of the Arabic commentary tradition, with its strong emphasis on potentiality, possibilism, and the contingency *of reality* under God. This latter idea—the ‘radical contingency’ of reality beneath an omnipotent God—was most famously expressed in Al-Ghazali’s “rejection of necessary causality”, his assertion that the connection between cause and effect is not a *necessary* one, but entirely the result of God’s will. In one example, he denies that the agent cause of burning is fire, and argues that “the agent of the burning is God...either through the intermediation of angels or without intermediation”.¹⁵ Ghazali’s connection of *causal* and *logical* necessity (his rejection of the metaphysical idea of autonomous cause-and-effect, the existence of an inherent quality of ‘causality’ in inherent reality that is separate from God’s will) brings contingency and potentiality into very close proximity; he dissents with the Aristotelian view (held by Al-Farabi and Avicenna) that “the existence of the cause without the effect or the effect without the cause is not within the realm of the contingent or the possible”.¹⁶ In this, Al-Ghazali pre-empts the voluntarist controversies within scholasticism in the succeeding centuries, where (as discussed in chapter four of this thesis) various philosophers objected to the ideas both of causal necessity and future contingency on the grounds that they imposed logical limits on God’s free will, His totally boundless potentiality (*potentia absoluta*).

¹⁵ Stephen Riker, “Al-Ghazali on Necessary Causality in *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*”, *The Monist*, 79, 3 (1996), 315–16. See also Matthew Levering, “Providence and Predestination in Al-Ghazali”, *New Blackfriars*, 92, 1037 (2011), 53–70.

¹⁶ Riker, “Al-Ghazali”, 315.

Whatever the precise causal process, by the late fourteenth century the idea of contingency had been displaced from its pigeonhole in modal logic to something like the catch-all idea of unpredictability, randomness, and possibility it is today. This coincided with the expansion (or *ampliation*, in medieval terminist jargon) of the concept from epistemic to metaphysical modality.¹⁷ Controversies fired within the universities on both metaphysical and epistemic aspects. Aquinas and Scotus wrote at length on the questions of how the future can truly be contingent if God has total foreknowledge, or how free choice can figure in our spiritual destinies if the world is ordained by God’s omnipotent (metaphysically contingent) will, or how linguistic signs, being applied to things-in-the-world arbitrarily and un-necessarily (epistemically contingent) can ever communicate anything about God’s noncontingent and (thus) non-linguistic Truth. The idea of the contingent was all-encompassing in the scholastic philosophy that came out of twelfth century interactions with Islamic Golden Age philosophy, and the re-transmission of Aristotle that ensued. It had been present as an epistemological issue in Western philosophy throughout history, in Boethius and others, and the integration of the Arabic commentary tradition liberated contingency from this restricted, logico-linguistic application to its wider metaphysical significance, aided by the simple insight that *potentiality* and *contingency* are different grammatical lenses on the same basic subject—the category of the possible and unpredictable.

¹⁷ Kenny credits Scotus with innovating a “new, more radical, form of contingency, which has been aptly named ‘synchronic contingency’”, in which events are not only *logically* contingent (in relation to language, as modally described), but *metaphysically* contingent; “a real possibility that is distinct from mere logical coherence...something that could be possible while the nature of the physical world remains the same”. Anthony Kenny, *A New History of Western Philosophy: In Four Parts* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2010), pp. 410–412.

In other words, the sense of the term “contingency” as pertaining to events, not just propositions, emerged in conjunction with a rising interest in the modality *of the world*, not just descriptions of it. Yet the bulk of twentieth century scholarship on Chaucer and contingency refers to a specific, fairly narrow strand of medieval philosophy, commonly termed ‘late medieval nominalism’. Nominalism is the view that universal properties do not have extramental or non-linguistic reality; it rejects Platonic realism (or idealism, terms which are confusingly interchangeable), which says that universals have some kind of ‘real’ existence in the world as it is, not just as we describe it. This does not mean that there is some hidden metaphysical dimension, a white storeroom where the ideal prototypes of cars, cats and chairs reside. It is about the way words and concepts relate to object reality. If we say that a football and a Scotch egg share the property of roundness, a realist would argue that it is meaningful to say that ‘roundness’ exists in and of itself, not just as a function of particular, individual objects; a nominalist would say that ‘roundness’ is a mental and linguistic construct, a relation that only has meaning in the mediated way that humans make sense of the data of experience. Between these two extremes there were, and are, countless variations.¹⁸

Particularly significant in charting the development of late medieval nominalism is Duns Scotus’ concept of haecceity (*haecceitas*). In *De Interpretatione*, Aristotle articulated the basic distinction: universals are predicated of many things; particulars are predicated of single things. Medieval debates on the topic centred on the problem of how

¹⁸ It is beyond the scope of this chapter to recount the whole history of the problem(s) of universals, from Plato and Aristotle through the Middle Ages and beyond; Klima has written an excellent primer on the scholastic debate in the *SEP*. See Gyula Klima, “The Medieval Problem of Universals”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2017 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2017/entries/universals-medieval/> [Accessed 12/5/2021].

universals and particulars correspond. From this, many sub-questions arise: what constitutes an individual? What distinguishes things shared by some, but not other, from things shared by everything? If two separate objects were identical in every property, are they still individuals/particulars? Is this a real or a conceptual problem? Scotus innovated the concept of haecceity (*haecceitas*, or ‘thisness’), in the process of accounting for shortcomings in the realist account of individuation. Whereas quiddity (*quidditas*) described the shared features or qualities that make an entity an individual instance of a universal (or ‘common nature’), haecceity described the quality that gives an individual thing self-identity, that makes it one, unique, particular—it is the difference between my being *one* human and my being *this* human. Crucially, for Scotus, haecceity is neither *real* (in the sense of being a ‘something’ outside of the mind and signs) nor simply a mental concept (a signficatory abstraction belonging solely to mental process); it had a different, intermediate character as a *formal distinction*.

This is an idiosyncratic form of essentialism, asserting that there is some substantive essence that distinguishes one individual *ens* from another, but that this something is, liminally, real *and/or* conceptual, occupying the conceptually challenging mode of formal but not objective being. This is perhaps the most famous instance of a prevailing trend within the scholastic debates on universals: a progressive metaphysical restrictionism, which saw the Aristotelian realism upheld by Boethius develop into a range of intermediate positions, which disagreed on the ontological status of species and genera. Realists were agreed that species in the Aristotelian sense (natural kinds, to which particular individuals belong) ‘exist’ in some sense, but controversy arose on whether this existence is real, conceptual, or indeed formal. Adriaenssen’s recent book on medieval

and early modern theories of representation gives a very useful account of the ensuing back-and-forth between indirect and direct modes of realism (I return to this subject in my final chapter on the *House of Fame*). What matters here is that the gradual shift away from an essentialised view of universals as things-in-the-world—evidenced in the shift from ‘real species’ to ‘species as cognitive apparatus’, secondary to the immediate data of sense-perception and cognition—formed the basis for the controversial metaphysical scepticism espoused by Ockham and Holcot.¹⁹ Ockham’s principle of parsimony (his infamous razor, with which he sliced away the idea of extramental species altogether) may be understood as the natural outcome of this progressive conceptual restrictionism, accelerated if not instantiated by Duns Scotus.

Contingency in Chaucer has been associated with the epistemology and metaphysics aligned primarily with Ockham and Holcot, working in the early to mid-fourteenth century, that emerged (in part) from this process. But in discussing Chaucerian contingency in relation to late medieval scholasticism, it is important to distinguish between two senses of the term. Contingency was an important topic for Ockham, Holcot, Strode, Bradwardine, and others primarily as a term of modal logic—referring to the indeterminate truth-value of propositions about future events—for several reasons. One is simply that it was ever thus: as mentioned, Aristotle’s *De Interpretatione* survived in the West via Boethius’ commentaries, and the issue of future contingents was taken up by philosophers well before the twelfth century Aristotelian turn (not least by Anselm of Canterbury, who drew an important distinction between ‘subsequent’ and ‘antecedent’ necessity, refining Boethius’ claim that God’s knowledge of a future event’s occurrence

¹⁹ Han Thomas Adriaenssen, *Representation and Scepticism from Aquinas to Descartes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), esp. pp. 95–119.

does not make it *necessary*).²⁰ A second, related, reason was that the problems posed for Christian theology by the idea of future contingency (How can statements about the future be contingent if divine foreknowledge exists? How can free choice exist under such conditions?) had gradually evolved from a commonplace topic of speculative debate into a full-fledged religious controversy, epitomised by the Condemnation of 1277 issued by Stephen Tempier, Bishop of Paris. Hundreds of speculative positions which arose from growing engagement with Aristotle (via Averroes, in particular) were denounced in this condemnation, which reiterated the stark boundary between Truth revealed by faith and truths derived from reason, refuting the idea that truths about God may be affirmed by logical methods. One of the most important issues in Tempier's condemnation (*the* central issue, according to Stepsis) was the Averroistic notion that causal necessity imposed limits on God's will and potencies.²¹

That God may not alter future events that are disposed to occur by causation, and that the existence of future contingents imposes limits on God's foreknowledge, were rejected as errors on the grounds that they contradicted revealed Christian truth. Ockham and Holcot are the most (in)famous of the philosophers labouring in the wake of this controversy, balancing an intellectual interest in the paradoxes created by contingency as a modal category, and the desire "to safeguard the supremacy of faith over reason and to emphasize the primacy of God's free and omnipotent will".²² It is assuredly the case that the fourteenth century saw an upswell of interest in the problem of future contingents as a

²⁰ See Peter Øhrstrøm, "Anselm, Ockham and Leibniz on Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom", *Erkenntnis*, 21, 2 (1984), 209–222.

²¹ See Robert Stepsis, "Potentia Absoluta and the *Clerk's Tale*", *ChauR*, 10, 2 (Fall, 1975), 132.

²² J.A. Weisheipl, "Ockham and the Mertonians", in *The History of the University of Oxford*, ed. J.I. Catto, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), pp. 609–10.

theological issue, and the nominalist/anti-nominalist controversy (with Ockham and Bradwardine totemic of each respective extreme of opinion) was closely related to it. For Ockham, the future is genuinely and openly contingent (preserving human freedom), while God does, paradoxically, have knowledge of future contingents—but this knowledge is, itself, contingent. For Bradwardine, nothing whatsoever qualifies or complicates God’s perfect foreknowledge: “God has complete foreknowledge of all future contingents by virtue of his eternal nature”, and His knowledge of the future is not only “simple” but “complex”.²³ The debates on future contingents in the first half of the fourteenth century represent a re-heated controversy, part of a wide-ranging debate about the relationship between divine and human agencies, which produced a range of opinions that some historians place on a spectrum between ‘Augustinian’ and ‘Aristotelian’ extremes. Understood in these terms, Bradwardine was at the forefront of a neo-Augustinian backlash against semi-Pelagian and Aristotelian ideas which would, in various ways, impose limits on God’s absolute power.²⁴ Chaucer was well aware of these currents within fourteenth century philosophy, with the Nun’s Priest referring the reader to Bradwardine himself on the compatibility of free will and divine foreknowledge. There has been much scholarly interest in Chaucer’s interactions with such controversies within

²³ Edith Wilks Dolnikowski, *Thomas Bradwardine: A View of Time and a Vision of Eternity in Fourteenth-Century Thought*, Studies in the History of Christian Thought LXV (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995), pp. 157–61.

²⁴ That said, Aers makes the compelling case that Bradwardine’s thought was deeply influenced by the Aristotelian turn of the preceding century, leading to an over-emphasis on the “ontological abyss between the omnipotent God and feeble dependent creatures”, neglecting Augustine’s insistence on the *cooperation* of divine and human wills in the process of reconciliation. David Aers, *Salvation and Sin* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), p. 63.

fourteenth century scholasticism, notably in the 1980s and 90s, which saw a revival of interest in medieval fiction as “literary nominalism”.²⁵

Proponents of this approach—particularly Utz, Furr, Keiper and (albeit from a different, less post-structuralist vantage-point) Delasanta—take as axiomatic certain assumptions that warrant close scrutiny. Most problematically, they often conflate the ‘nominalism’ of twentieth century philosophy, a reductionist metaphilosophical turn which sees confronting the contingency of language (or communication) as the task of both philosophy and poetry, with the ‘nominalism’ of Biel, Ockham, Holcot and the like. Utz makes this assumption clear in his literary nominalist manifesto:

The notion of nominalism as a philosophical superstratum has so far proven to be the most successful path for establishing correspondences between literature and philosophy. This transdisciplinary approach usually regards nominalism as a highly significant late-medieval movement of thought that was not limited to the ivory towers of Paris, Oxford, and Cambridge. [...] In the eyes of [modern] philosophers, the departures taken by late-medieval nominalist thinkers are as indissolubly linked to the intellectual evolution of (early) modern Europe and their own modern mentalities as...the *literary nominalism* of Chaucer or Antoine de la Sale is linked to our own postmodern artistic structures, aesthetics and selves.²⁶

Late medieval and modern nominalisms may only be considered homologous if by “nominalist” we mean “interested in what the temporality of language means for philosophy and theology”; it is not the case that Ockham and Holcot advocated for a radically contingent cosmos/episteme in the same sense as that of modern nominalism, with its roots in poststructuralist semiotics. Later medieval debates about God’s *potentia absoluta* and *potentia ordinata* were to a large extent speculative thought-experiments,

²⁵ See Hugo Keiper, Christopher Bode and Richard J. Utz, eds., *Nominalism and Literary Discourse: New Perspectives* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997); Richard J. Utz, *Literary Nominalism and the Theory of Rereading Late Medieval Texts* (New York: Edwin Mellen, 1995).

²⁶ Richard J. Utz, “Literary Nominalism in Chaucer’s Late-Medieval England: Toward a Preliminary Paradigm”, *The European Legacy*, 2, 2 (1997), 208–11.

always qualified with the admission that truth by faith supersedes truth by reason, and that none of these discussions sought to diminish God's omnipotence and the perfect orderliness of His creation. Whatever the scholastic philosopher's opinion about the contingency of the world, it was always a given that this contingency is a function of human limitedness, a *perspectival* contingency caused by our temporal limitations, and concomitant inability to perceive all causes and ends. Discussions of contingency in the Middle Ages were invariably modal, pertaining to philosophical descriptions of the world rather than the world itself.

While the sense of the term 'contingency' had expanded from its Aristotelian origins as a strictly logical modality to include modal metaphysics, it was not so capacious in its semantic possibilities as it is today, as used by poststructuralists and postmodernists. There were antecedents in fourteenth century philosophy for twentieth century discussions about the indeterminacy of linguistic signs, and the associated turn from metaphysics represented (in very different permutations) by the likes of Davidson and Habermas.²⁷ Broadly speaking, though, there were also antecedents for these concerns throughout scholasticism, and indeed throughout ancient and medieval philosophy. The notion of a large-scale movement towards radical epistemological scepticism in the fourteenth century, such that medieval and modern nominalisms share

²⁷ See Simo Knuuttila, *Modern Modalities: Studies of the History or Modal Theories from Medieval Nominalism to Logical Positivism* (London: Kluwer, 1988); Richard Rorty, ed., *The Linguistic Turn: Recent Essays in Philosophical Method* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967). On specific analogies and homologies between classical, medieval, and contemporary philosophical ideas, see for instance Claude Panaccio, *Mental Language: From Plato to William of Ockham* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017); Jesse Gellrich, *The Idea of the Book in the Middle Ages: Language Theory, Mythology, and Fiction* (London: Cornell University Press, 1986); R.A. Shoaf, "Medieval Studies After Derrida After Heidegger", in *Sign, Sentence, Discourse: Language in Medieval Thought and Literature*, ed. Lois Roney and Julian N. Wasserman (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1989), pp. 9–30.

an equivalent concern with radical metaphysical contingency, has been somewhat exaggerated, as Penn argues.²⁸

I would suggest that the idea of Chaucer as a nominalist poet labouring in the same intellectual fields as Ockham, Holcot and the like is a pitfall. Notwithstanding that medieval nominalism, responding specifically to the problems of universals and future contingents, was less radical and holistic than its modern counterpart, its interest in contingency more specifically focused and speculatively provisional, there remains no convincing evidence that Chaucer had more than a cursory awareness of nominalist writings. Fleeting references to “philosophical Strode” and Bishop Bradwardine (*TC* V.1857, *NPT* VII 3242) say little about Chaucer’s position on the philosophical problems that agitated their minds and animated their pens. Chaucer’s writerly fascination with such issues as the arbitrariness of fame, the communicative limits of language and of texts, the tendency for narratives to change uncontrollably in circulation, the way human beings might best respond to unpredictable changes in fortune, need not be strictly attributed to nominalist influences to bear hermeneutic fruit. While “contingency” may be simultaneously a term of modal logic and a ‘master-concept’ of epistemic scepticism for today’s nominalists, this was not the case in medieval nominalism. The more expansive sense of contingency as unpredictability, arbitrariness and non-necessity of the world itself (not just descriptions of it) was a profound influence on Chaucer’s work, and his interest derived not from late medieval nominalist thinkers but primarily from poets—

²⁸ Stephen Penn, “Literary Nominalism and Medieval Sign Theory: Problems and Perspectives”, in *Nominalism and Literary Discourse*, pp. 157–189. Penn argues against there being a homogeneous school of sceptical thought termed “nominalism” within late medieval philosophical discourse, and that the influence of these ideas on literary production were, at best, indirect. See also Robert Myles, *Chaucerian Realism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), ch. 1.

the philosophically-inflected humanist works of the Italian *tre corone*, Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio—and from Boethius, the most important medieval philosopher of contingency. What modern nominalism offers is a new vocabulary for making sense of the timeworn ideas about contingency represented throughout Chaucer’s corpus. Further, our use of philosophical vocabularies as a critical tool need not be limited to the concepts of medieval nominalism, since what we now mean by “contingency” is addressed by a great variety of works within medieval theology and philosophy.

This thesis embarks from this starting point: Chaucer was the foremost English poet of contingency in the Middle Ages, and the ideas of contingency that animated him cannot fully be understood through the prism of late medieval nominalism. His interest in metaphysical contingency (of acts and events) is manifest in the recurring themes of free will, necessity, and the relationship between divine and human agencies. His interest in epistemic contingency (of truth and interpretation) informs a recurring scepticism or ambivalence about the capacity of verbal signs to convey reality in a way that might lead to truth-consensus. His understanding of contingency is not shaped by the novel developments of fourteenth century philosophers on these topics (at least not in any measurable way); Chaucer’s engagement with this topic is firmly Boethian, drawing heavily on the famous discussions of free will, causal necessity, and divine foreknowledge in the *Consolation of Philosophy*. It is also Augustinian in a way that has not been fully explored in relation to Chaucer, invoking and analogising ideas about divine grace and its modalities, and the way that the experience of contingency may be amplified by concupiscence, as mediated by many of his direct sources (most significantly, Dante’s *Commedia*).

That contingency is fully explored along metaphysical and epistemic lines in *Troilus and Criseyde*, *The Knight's Tale*, *The Clerk's Tale*, and the *House of Fame*—works indebted to Boccaccio, Petrarch and Dante—is not coincidental. The humanist project of self-consciously elevating vernacular language to the same stature (and truth-telling potential) as Latin was predicated on a sensitivity to the contingency of language, and the sense of language as a Babelic barrier that prevents full comprehension of divine revealed truth.²⁹ An abiding interest in contingency was not unique to *trecento* poetry in the vernacular; as Heller-Roazen has shown in his important study of the *Roman de la Rose*, contingency was at issue in vernacular poetry and romance of several European traditions, and further, these imaginative fictions were able to explore the concept with a freedom unavailable to the philosophers.³⁰ For medieval theologians (as for Richard Rorty and the modern nominalists) the contingency of language makes it impossible to speak unequivocally *about* contingency, since we cannot say anything about the metaphysically *noncontingent* via temporal signs without a translatory conversion taking place, since the noncontingent is non-linguistic and atemporal. As Agamben puts it,

Language—our language—is necessarily presuppositional and objectifying, in the sense that in taking place it necessarily decomposes the thing itself, which is announced in it and in it alone, into a being *about which one speaks* and a *poion*, a quality and a determination *that one says of it*. Language sup-poses and hides what it brings to light, in the very act in which it brings it to light.³¹

This notion was certainly not unique to late medieval nominalists—its roots are Platonic, it was famously adapted to Christianity by Augustine, and the idea that the temporal

²⁹ On the controversial status of vernacular poetry in the late medieval period, see Lois Ebin, *Illuminator, Makar, Vates: Visions of Poetry in the Fifteenth Century* (London: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), esp. pp. xii–xiii, 4–6.

³⁰ Daniel Heller-Roazen, *Fortune's Faces: The Roman de la Rose and the Poetics of Contingency* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).

³¹ Giorgio Agamben, “The Thing Itself”, in *Potentialities*, p. 33.

limits of language render speech incapable of approaching God was at the heart of apophatic theology throughout the Middle Ages (with major implications for literature—the tension between apophatic and cataphatic discourse about God is essential to Dante’s *Commedia*). The sense that Truth resides beyond the limits of contingent language, and that the truths of language may be contradicted by revealed, super-rational Truth led philosophers to a situation where mutually contradictory, incompatible truths must be abided—most notably described by Sheila Delany as the “skeptical fideism” of medieval scholasticism.³²

This inevitable situation, where absolute, noncontingent truth is uncircumscribable, and where contingency itself, paradoxically, can only be discussed *contingently*, was not so problematic for poets as for philosophers. As Morton puts it, “Despite the prevalence of logical deduction from textual authority, alternative modes of thinking were widespread both in scholastic culture and outside it... Much of this thinking took place in the domain of fantasy, in the mental landscapes that were generated to varying degrees of detail or complexity through textual fictions... imaginative thought processes could produce *different ways of knowing* to the probable opinions and certain knowledge of Aristotelian deduction”.³³ In other words, in the Middle Ages it was known that poetry might go where philosophy could not in grappling with the most perplexing mysteries of metaphysics and epistemology. An aporia may collapse a logical proposition or render a syllogism inert; in a fiction, it may be a landmark, a site of generative interpretive action. Further, unresolvable contradictions

³² Delany, *Chaucer’s House of Fame*, pp. 7–21.

³³ Jonathan Morton, “Textual Experiments: Thinking With Fiction”, in *Medieval Thought Experiments: Poetry, Hypothesis, and Experience in the European Middle Ages*, ed. Philip Knox, Jonathan Morton, and Daniel Reeve. Disputatio 31 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2018), p. 5.

within fictions which are caused by their own conditions as acts of temporal language may in fact gesture to the threshold of aporia itself, the impassable limen thrown up by the contingency of language, the fact that as an artefact made of contingencies (of signs, of transmission, of readership), the fictional text must conspicuously fall short of delimiting the noncontingent. Where the philosopher must lay down arms in the face of the ineffable, the contingent text (thanks to its multi-telic nature, not bound to any sole didactic end) may at least trace the outline of its absence, forcing the reader to confront the contingency that is not only constitutive of and (de-)limiting of texts, but of all temporal experience. Language can only speak contingently about contingency, at one remove of abstraction, but fictions, because they are never hermetically closed *statements* but, in some sense, always unfinished, “carry[ing] their own processes of becoming within them”, are open invitations for readers to complete the “imaginative syllogism”.³⁴ They place what is *unwritten*, what is *not* given voice in contingent signs, into the foreground—they enable (and often force) the reader to think about things that cannot be put into words without ‘decomposing’ its substance.

Their divergent responses to this insight are a major reason that medieval and modern nominalisms cannot straightforwardly be conflated. In the twentieth century, poststructuralist and antifoundationalist thinkers responded to the impasses caused by contingency by bringing the domains of literature and philosophy into closer proximity. The more bamboozling aspects of Derrida, Deleuze and the like reflect their taking up of the poet’s tools to attempt what structural logic (favoured by scholastic Aristotelian

³⁴ Kara Gaston, *Reading Chaucer in Time: Literary Formation in England and Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 1. Vincent Gillespie, “Ethice Subponitur? The Imaginative Syllogism and the Idea of the Poetic”, in *Medieval Thought Experiments*, pp. 297–327.

dialectic and contemporary analytical philosophy) cannot: to trace an absence whose absence is owed to the contingency of language and of phenomenal reality itself.³⁵ Contemporary nominalism is a logico-poetic synthesis, reflecting an awareness that propositional/analytical logic cannot transcend their own contingency, imposing hard-coded limits on what philosophers can meaningfully say about the metaphysical (hence Rorty's assertion that the philosopher is "auxiliary to the poet rather than to the physicist", and for Agamben, the idea of contingency is better conveyed implicitly, as in Melville's fiction, than in philosophical argument).³⁶ Within late medieval scholasticism—however attentive it may have been to the limitedness of language—there was no such synthesis. Philosophers responded by continuing their logical and propositional procedures under a strict hierarchy of veridicality or truth-value: theology elucidated the revealed and super-rational Truth; philosophy, "convinced of God's omnipotence...could therefore hope to ascertain only *probability*", and poetry was something of an offshoot of philosophy, bringing readers to affective assent to (or, at least, active contemplation of) ethical ideas.³⁷ But medieval poets outpaced such schematic schoolroom assignments and posed questions about human experience in an

³⁵ Most notoriously, Heidegger and Derrida's typographical gestures to the referential inadequacy of linguistic signs (and its immitigable, un-transcend-able nature) by placing words ~~under erasure~~ (*sous rature*). Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), pp. 6–37.

³⁶ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 8; Agamben, "Bartleby, or On Contingency", in *Potentialities*, pp. 243–71.

³⁷ On the characterisation of late medieval fiction as ethically didactic in function, see Judson Boyce Allen, *The Ethical Poetic of the Later Middle Ages: A Decorum of Convenient Distinction* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), esp. pp. 10–39; Alastair Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship: Scholastic Literary Attitudes in the Later Middle Ages*, 2nd ed. (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1988), esp. pp. xxxv–xxxix, 20.

explorative, non-teleological way.³⁸ For Heller-Roazen, the *Roman de la Rose* (like Bartleby for Agamben) goes further than scholastic philosophy in making readers think about contingency: “Carrying the medieval philosophical problem of the language of contingency to an extreme point...[it] presents itself and its own taking place as the very contingency of which it speaks. As a work that, in its rhetorical and poetic organization, incessantly brings to light its own capacity to be interrupted and to take place otherwise than it does, the *Roman de la Rose* thus radicalizes the medieval reflections on the linguistic form of contingency in displacing them into the domain of poetic composition”.³⁹ This thesis sees Chaucer, in different ways and at different times, doing something similar: allowing his works to inscribe not only their own *narrative* and *textual* contingency (“bring[ing] to light [their] own capacity to be interrupted and to take place otherwise”), but the *epistemic* contingency of their foundational conditions of taking-place, the limits of language and thought that prevent any true cataphatic reckoning with *metaphysical* contingency, the unbridgeable gulf between our temporal mode of experience and God’s “uncircumscrip[t]” (*TC* V.1865) atemporality and noncontingent Truth.⁴⁰

1.3. What does ‘contingency’ mean for Chaucer?

While the significance of contingency for human affairs is constantly at issue for Chaucer, he never uses the word “contingency”. It may be that for this most audience-

³⁸ On medieval theories of vernacular literary authority, exegesis, and the various levels of textual meaning, see Ian Johnson, “Literary Theory and Literary Roles”, in *Geoffrey Chaucer in Context*, ed. Ian Johnson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 65–71.

³⁹ Heller-Roazen, *Fortune’s Faces*, p. 28.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

conscious and tactically self-obscuring poet, the word is at once too narrowly technical (as a modal category central to Aristotelian, syllogistic logic, as used in the medieval universities), and too capacious (potentially denoting unpredictability, randomness, uncertainty, dependency, the unnecessary, the arbitrary, the circumstantial—this semantic breadth certainly creates challenges for a study of contingency in a poet’s whole oeuvre). “Contingent” may have meant less to Chaucer’s primary or secondary audience (that is, to his immediate circle of readers within his “fluid class” of literate ‘gentles’, or any of his wider readerships beyond his personal sphere) than “aventure” or “cas”, and while Chaucer does think seriously about the topic as a philosophical issue, he prefers to show than to tell.⁴¹ In *Troilus and Criseyde*, Book III begins with Troilus anxiously awaiting Criseyde’s visit to his bedside, imaginatively projecting different rhetorical strategies onto a contingent future:

“Mafay”, thoughte he, “thus wol I sey, and thus;
Thus wol I pleyne unto my lady dere;
That word is good, and this shal be my cheere” (*TC* III.52–4).

As ever, the future and its unpredictability make short work of these best-laid plans: in the event, he is struck dumb and tongue-tied, and “his lessoun, that he wende konne / To

⁴¹ On Chaucer’s readership(s), and their influence on Chaucer’s poetic self-presentation, see Paul Strohm, “Chaucer’s Audience”, *Literature and History*, 5 (1977), 26–41; *idem*, “Chaucer’s Fifteenth-Century Audience and the Narrowing of the ‘Chaucer Tradition’”, *SAC*, 4 (1982), 3–32; Malcolm Richardson, “The Earliest Known Owners of *Canterbury Tales* MSS and Chaucer’s Secondary Audience”, *ChauR*, 25, 1 (1990), 17–32; Edmund Reiss, “Chaucer and His Audience”, *ChauR*, 14, 4 (1980), 390–402; Helen Phillips, “Register, Politics, and the *Legend of Good Women*”, *ChauR*, 37, 2 (2002), 101–28. Perhaps the most infamous context for Chaucer’s self-censorship and political correctness is the question of his attitude towards Lollardy: it is well-known that he kept company with ‘Lollard knights’ such as Sirs John Clanvowe and Lewis Clifford, but his own position on Lollard doctrine is notoriously opaque, although some have argued that the name of *Troilus and Criseyde*’s fictitious *auctor*, Lollius, or the *Pardoner’s Tale*’s description of cooks turning “substance into accident” (*PardT* VI 539), may be tantalising (if ambiguous) clues. See Strohm, “Chaucer’s Lollard Joke: History and the Textual Unconscious”, *SAC*, 17 (1995), 23–42.

preyen hire, is thorough his wit ironne” (III.83–4). While contingency and necessity as philosophical issues are at the heart of *Troilus and Criseyde*, Chaucer retains an experiential and psychological locus when he thinks about them.

Whatever the cause of this absence, the word itself was certainly known to Chaucer. Thomas Usk, Chaucer’s ill-fated contemporary, a “fellow writer, political shape-shifter...[and] less cautious factionalist”, seemingly was alert to *Troilus and Criseyde*’s sophisticated philosophical subtext (famously, his *Testament of Love* dubs Chaucer “the noble philosophical poete in Englissh”), and he is less bashful of broaching contingency in overtly philosophical terms.⁴² Book II of the *Testament of Love*—a Boethian dialogue touching on various subjects, including the problem of free will and divine foreknowledge, and the related problem of future contingents—sees the protagonist resist the idea that Fortune’s wheel will *necessarily* turn his sorrow into joy. He objects: “Yet se I not by resoun howe this blysse is comyng—I wote it is contyngent. It may fal on other”.⁴³ Where the *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale*’s stoic stakeholder suggests a metaphysical contingency that is a brute fact of mortal life, a function of our phenomenal limitations, Usk’s speaker expresses belief in a contingency of things in themselves, a chaotic noumenal cosmos. Love, equivalent to Boethius’ Lady Philosophy, retorts in language that recalls *Cons II*, embarking on a similar ‘correction’ of this categorical error: “I have

⁴² Paul Strohm, *The Poet’s Tale: Chaucer and the Year that Made the Canterbury Tales* (London: Profile Books, 2014), pp. 192–3. On Usk as “reader and appropriator of Chaucer’s poetry”, see Marion Turner, *Chaucerian Conflict: Languages of Antagonism in Late Fourteenth-Century London* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), ch. 4. On the *Testament of Love*’s interactions with *Troilus and Criseyde*, *idem*, ““Certaynly His Noble Sayenges Can I Mot Amende’: Thomas Usk and *Troilus and Criseyde*”, *ChauR*, 37, 1 (2002), 26–39.

⁴³ Thomas Usk, *The Testament of Love*, ed. R. Allen Shoaf (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1998), II.9.916. <<https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/shoaf-usk-testament-of-love-book-2>> [Accessed 13/07/2021].

done mokol to done to clere thyne understandyng and voyde these errours out of thy mynde. I wol prove it by resoun thy wo may nat alway enduren” (*TL* II.9.916–18). She goes on to explain how “every thyng kyndely” descends progressively from its origin in the celestial heavens, and that the human sense that the future is fundamentally unpredictable is a perspectival illusion, reflecting our inability to perceive the orderly necessity that Jupiter/God has ordained. Just as the celestial bodies follow fixed courses by inexorable, simple necessity, events in the world follow an inexorable pattern of controlled mutability, phasing constantly between ‘wele’ and ‘wo’:

This course of nature of these bodyes chaungyng stynten at a certayn terme, lymyted by their first kynde. And of hem al governementes in this elemented worlde proceden, as in springes, constellacions, engendrures, and al that folowen kynde and reson. Wherefore the course that foloweth sorowe and joy, kyndely moten entrechangen their tymes, so that alway on wele as alway on wo may not endure...Trewly, next the ende of sorowe anon entreth joy. *By maner of necessaryte* it wol ne may non other betyde, *and so thy contigence is disproved* (*TL* II.9.933–41. Emphasis added.).

Any sense that the semantic capaciousness of the word ‘contingency’ is a modern development is corrected here. This passage of Usk’s *Testament* condenses (and somewhat simplifies) the core Boethian argument about false felicity and “verray blisfulnesse”, that Fortune’s wheel must, of necessity, turn, constantly shifting our worldly fortunes from “wele” to “wo” and back again, but that the only *lasting*, *immutable* “welefulnesse” resides with God, breaking free of the vicissitudes of the temporal world through contemplation of the divine perfection, and the realisation of every human being’s participation in it, as a “devyne beest” (*Bo* II.pr.5.128–9). But neither Boethius nor Chaucer employ the term ‘contingency’ for the “errour” that Philosophy corrects, the belief that the future is unbound by the necessity of change (the idea that, *because* the future is truly contingent, it is possible that bad fortunes *may* not

change). That Usk does, writing in the 1380s, in the wake of Chaucer's deeply Boethian *Troilus*, and very possibly in direct contact with Chaucer himself, suggests that by the time Chaucer is writing, "contingency" has been dislodged from its pigeon-hole as a restricted term of modal logic and come to encompass many of the metaphysical preoccupations of medieval theology and philosophy (whether the future is contingent or not, how God can have foreknowledge of a contingent future, how God's foreknowledge and free will may coexist, etc. It is not, then, anachronistic to speak of Chaucer's forays on these topics in relation to the philosophy of contingency. "Contyngent" means "it may fal on other" in relation to events and human experience, not just modal logic; it refers in the widest possible sense to that which may or may not be, as Agamben says. That Chaucer never uses the term, preferring those such as "cas" or "aventure" (simultaneously more accessible and more narrowly specific in meaning), should be taken as a stylistic and artistic decision, not as a suggestion of poverty, the absence of the word in Chaucer's storehouse.

While Chaucer may be something of a literary name-dropper, peppering his poems with the names of illustrious *auctors* and respected, famous texts (in full keeping with the literary conventions of his time), he exerts tight editorial control over this process. At the end of *Troilus and Criseyde*, as he commends his "litel bok" to the wider world (and the contingencies of textual transmission), Chaucer carefully maintains a decorous distance from his poetic ancestors, the canonical *poetae*:

But litel book, no makyng thow n'envie,
 But *subgit* be to alle poesy;
 And *kis the steppes* where as thow seest pace
 Virgile, Ovide, Omer, Lucan, and Stace. (*TC* V.1789–92. Emphasis added.)

The fortunes of more historically recent poets in Chaucer's allusions are especially revealing. Chaucer is content to laud two of Italy's three *corone*, with the *Clerk's Prologue* praising "Fraunceys Petrak, the lauriat poete...whos rethorike sweete / Enlumyned al Ytaille of poetrie" (*CIP* IV 31–33), while the *Monk's Tale* lauds "the grete poete of Ytaille / That highte Dant, for he kan al devyse / Fro point to point; nat o word wol he faille" (*MKT* VII 2460–2). Chaucer's invocation of poets from classical antiquity is matter-of-fact, eschewing judgements or evaluation of their works since their *auctoritas* is a settled debate. This kind of fame is mutually reciprocal, the cultural value (aesthetic and/or edificatory) of the classic text underwriting the currency of the *auctor's* name. The survival of the name down the chain of history is taken as guarantee that *something* of value may be found in its affiliated texts.⁴⁴

But in the case of these latter-day *poetae* of Renaissance Italy, Chaucer is engaged in an implicit process of valuation and evaluation. The *House of Fame*—profoundly influenced by the *Divine Comedy*—pointedly situates Dante in the same category as the timeless *auctores* of old: the authorities on hell are "Virgile", "Claudian", "Daunte" (*HF* 450). Yet Petrarch is nowhere to be found in Fame's hall, and Chaucer's

⁴⁴ Chaucer deconstructs this assumption that fame must accord, in some sense, to value, and value to fame, in the *House of Fame*, where his allegorical embodiment of Fame is a creature of pure, radical contingency, meting out fame and obscurity according to no stable principle whatsoever. Chaucer's Italian humanist predecessors espoused varied, complex, sometimes contradictory ideas of Fame, preserving a classicising sense of enduring fame as a rebuke of mortality, eternising the worthy beyond the span of one life, while internalising the Boethian contempt of fame as the ultimate 'good of Fortune', an ephemeral and random thing of the world that may never be truly possessed, only borrowed, in contrast with the true good residing with God beyond the temporal world. The most significant example of this tension is in Petrarch's *Trionfi*, where the intermediate or liminal status of Fame is inscribed in its very structure: Fame, in the fourth Triumph, supervenes or transcends Death, the third, but Fame in turn is effaced by Time and then Eternity; even the few allowed to temporarily and conditionally defy death by fame are inevitably subject to a "second death". On Petrarchan/Boccaccian fame and Chaucer, see Benjamine Granade Koonce, *Chaucer and the Tradition of Fame: Symbolism in the House of Fame* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966).

tribute to the latter in the *Clerk's Prologue* is rendered provisional and ambiguous by the visceral reminders of death—and the vanity of literary fame in light of death—that encompass it: “He is now deed and nayled in his cheste... Deeth, that wol nat suffre us dwellen heer... Hem bothe hath slayn, and alle shul we dye” (*CIP* IV 29–37). Boccaccio, meanwhile, rates no mention at all, despite being perhaps Chaucer’s single most important artistic influence, his work forming the basis of *Troilus and Criseyde* and many of the *Canterbury Tales* (most significantly the *Knight's Tale*).⁴⁵ The reason that Chaucer never names Boccaccio as he does Petrarch and Dante is one of the enduring (probably insoluble) questions in Chaucer studies—one on which this thesis takes an agnostic position, albeit noting that the fictional *auctor* “Lollius”, to whom *Troilus and Criseyde* is ascribed, is used as nominal masquerade for several different authorial agencies at different points in that poem, standing in for Boccaccio (the poem’s actual source, as creator of *Il Filostrato*), Petrarch (where his sonnets are adapted into Troilus’ plaintive songs), and Chaucer himself (to underwrite his original additions to the tale, especially in Book III). The salient point is that Chaucer is not careless in his direct mention of sources, and his self-consciousness in doing so complicates any attempt to reconstruct ‘Chaucer’s library’; there are impassable limits on arguments about Chaucer’s intellectual positions that limit themselves to his directly named sources.

⁴⁵ Piero Boitani, *Chaucer and Boccaccio* (Oxford: Society for the Study of Mediaeval Languages and Literature, 1977), esp. pp. 72–197; Carol F. Heffernan, *Comedy in Chaucer and Boccaccio* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2009). I return to the question of Chaucer’s knowledge and use of the *Decameron* in my chapter on the *Clerk's Tale*; on this topic, see N.S. Thompson, *Chaucer, Boccaccio, and the Debate of Love: A Comparative Study of the Decameron and the Canterbury Tales* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), esp. pp. 88–135; Robert R. Edwards, *Chaucer and Boccaccio: Antiquity and Modernity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), pp. 44–62, 128–141; Leonard M. Koff and Brenda Deen Schildgen, eds., *The Decameron and the Canterbury Tales: New Essays on an Old Question* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2000).

This thesis asks: what does Chaucer think about contingency? What do Chaucer's works say about contingency? What can theories of contingency tell us about Chaucer? In answering these questions, restriction to explicitly referenced medieval philosophers of contingency would impose severe and unnecessary limits. In the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, as the narrator struggles to wrap his head around the problem of free will/future contingents and divine foreknowledge (as does Usk in the *Testament of Love*), we are referred to three authorities on the subject: St. Augustine, Boethius, and Thomas Bradwardine. While Bradwardine—Mertonian philosopher, anti-nominalist theologian, and briefly Archbishop of Canterbury, whose lifetime (c. 1290s–1349) overlapped with Chaucer's—does address the controversies around contingency in his influential *De Causa Dei contra Pelagium*, refuting the Ockhamist position that the future is absolutely contingent on the grounds that this would impose limits on God's will, there is simply no evidence that Chaucer knew this particular treatise. None of Chaucer's references to scholastic debates suggests any specifically Bradwardinian influence, and there is no clear textual echoes of *De Causa Dei* anywhere (at least, none that are unequivocal). Likewise, that *Troilus and Criseyde* is committed to the correction of “philosophical Strode” does not imply that Chaucer would have read the treatise on future contingents composed by Ralph Strode (another Mertonian, and Chaucer's acquaintance in London), and there is no evidence for Strode's direct influence on Chaucer (although scholarly certainties are limited on this front by the scarcity of Strode's works in extant MSS). On the other hand, there is good evidence (albeit still circumstantial) to suggest that Chaucer was familiar with a widely-circulated work by another fourteenth century philosopher: the *Super Sapientiam Salomonis* of Robert Holcot. Even if we reject the arguments of Stepsis, Steinmetz,

Delasanta et al. that Holcotian theology was a major influence on the *Clerk's Tale* (as does my chapter on that poem), Pratt makes a compelling case for Holcot's Wisdom-commentary as a main source of the *Nun's Priest Tale's* dream debate, and more recently, Cartlidge has suggested that the lecture on sound in the *House of Fame* draws heavily on that same text.⁴⁶ In other words, in the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, Chaucer stuffs his narrative with philosophical material derived from one 'semi-Pelagian' philosopher, Robert Holcot, who remains nameless, while singing the praises of that philosopher's 'anti-Pelagian' contemporary (and onetime roommate), Thomas Bradwardine, whose work made no direct imprint on Chaucer's poems.⁴⁷ There seems to be an analogue with Chaucer's somewhat shoddy treatment of Boccaccio, his unmentioned antecedent of maximal influence, compared with Petrarch and Dante, highly-praised but less heavily utilised by Chaucer in his poetic craft. In his use of more historically recent material, whether philosophical or poetic, Chaucer seems to wear his 'mild-to-moderate' influences on his sleeve (it helps if they are independently famous, like Petrarch or Bradwardine), while keeping his major influences close to his chest.

We cannot know with certainty the extent to which Chaucer had read and understood thirteenth and fourteenth century philosophical writings on contingency. But we can say that contingency has been a central topic for philosophers at least since Aristotle, and that it continues to be an important site of inquiry for philosophers today, despite the evolution of vocabularies and logic systems. The things that nineteenth,

⁴⁶ Robert A. Pratt, "Some Latin Sources of the Nonnes Preest on Dreams", *Speculum*, 52, 3 (1977), 538–70; Neil Cartlidge, "Ripples on the Water? The Acoustics of Geoffrey Chaucer's *House of Fame* and the Influence of Robert Holcot", *SAC*, 39 (2017), 57–98.

⁴⁷ On this peculiarity see D.P. Baker, "A Bradwardinian Benediction: The Ending of the *Nun's Priest's Tale* Revisited", *Medium Ævum*, 82, 2 (2013), 236–43.

twentieth, and twenty-first century philosophers have to say about contingency are not dissimilar to the things that twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth century philosophers said about it. Indeed, one of the most significant modern philosophers of contingency, Richard Rorty, comments on this in the process of arguing that the work of philosophy is not discovery but “redescription” and “recontextualization”, a process made ceaseless by the very contingency of the language that philosophy is built upon: “Socrates recontextualized Homer; Augustine recontextualized the pagan virtues, turning them into splendid vices, and then Nietzsche reinverted the hierarchy; Hegel recontextualized *aufgehoben* predecessors; Proust recontextualizes (over and over again) everybody he met; and Derrida recontextualizes (over and over again) Hegel, Austin, Searle, and everybody else he reads”.⁴⁸ Much the same notion is expressed time and again by Agamben in his own work on contingency, where he traces the history of the idea from its origins in Aristotle through the Byzantine *Suda*, the mediations of the Islamic Golden Age and scholasticism, through Avicenna, Aquinas, and Scotus, through Kant and Leibniz, to the modern efforts of Deleuze (and also as a context for the fictions of Melville, Walser, and Kafka).⁴⁹ The history of the idea of contingency is a Finneganesque pattern of cyclical progress and return to starting positions, something of a Groundhog Day in which the same paradoxes and aporias are rediscovered, sparking the same controversies—and, crucially, coinciding with similar tendencies towards metafictional self-reflexivity and epistemic scepticism in much of the art of these times. It is no coincidence that the thirteenth/fourteenth and twentieth/twenty-first centuries in the history of philosophy are characterised by “linguistic turns” incited by renewed

⁴⁸ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 134.

⁴⁹ Giorgio Agamben, “Bartleby, or On Contingency”, pp. 243–71.

attention to the contingency of language, and the problems this poses for truth-seeking and truth-telling, and that both epochs saw the rise of metaphysically sceptical schools of thought called “nominalism”.

As mentioned, the term ‘contingency’ refers to that which may or may not be; any proposition or event that holds the potential to resolve or occur differently, or not at all, may be called contingent. Contingency is a term of modal logic—it pertains to the question of how we classify the truth-value of propositions, or statements, given the limitations of time and language. In epistemological terms, it refers to statements about the world that may or may not be *true*—that is, if the ‘truth content’ of a statement about the world cannot be affirmed or denied at this point in time, then that statement may be, at best, *contingently* true. The difference between the statements (1) “It rained yesterday” and (2) “It will rain tomorrow” is that the former (supposing that it did rain yesterday) is *necessarily* true, it *must* always be the case that it rained on that day, and so it is *necessary* that any statement proposing that it rained *must* be true. However, if I say today that “it will rain tomorrow”, it is not possible to assign the values ‘true’ or ‘false’ to that statement, because of the conditions under which that proposition is made. Barring any great advances in meteorology, it is always the case that it *may or may not* rain tomorrow (even if the odds are 99.99 percent). If it rains on the tenth of May, then the statement “It will rain tomorrow” made on the ninth of May was true—but only contingently so, because it may not have been the case. Contingency is at once a restricted, technical term, and a philosophical master-word capable of denoting the most fundamental, pressing problems of human experience—and this is no contradiction. At one level, it is a seemingly pedantic matter of grammatical tenses, a logical extension of

the differences between “it did”, “it is”, “it will”. But in this, it gives expression to the most fundamental limitations on any and all truth-seeking, caused by our situation in time—tense-logic and temporal logic invoke the same issues. That there is a future which cannot be predicted with certainty—and, indeed, that there is a past that cannot be revisited except via imperfect, re-present-ing mediators (individual and cultural memory; imagination and history), that there is no Present but as many *presents* as there are subjective perspectives, our state as partial and fragmentary *experiencing* entities, all individuated and atomised by our perspectival limits. What separates *phenomenal* reality (the world as-experienced) and *noumenal* reality (the world as-is) is temporality, the mediation of data through prisms that are inescapably temporal and mutable, constantly imperfect and in flux: language and psyche. Whether we think of contingency in epistemological or ontological terms—that is, whether we say a proposition may/may not be true, or simply that an entity/event may/may not *be*—the implications are broadly identical.

The impossibility of grasping the noncontingent has vexed philosophers and poets across history; it is why Rorty (the most significant modern nominalist) describes philosophy as an openended practice of *redescription* rather than actual truth-telling. It is why Ockham (the medieval arch-nominalist), asserting that the future is *truly* contingent despite God’s foreknowledge, throws up his hands at the mysteriousness of the atemporal, that which is not delimited by time and change: “Ideo dico quod impossibile est clare exprimere modum quo Deus scit futura contingentia” (Thus, I say that it is

impossible to clearly express the way God knows future contingents).⁵⁰ To acknowledge the category of the contingent is to acknowledge the fundamental, hard-coded limits on what humans can know and say about the world with certainty. Those poets and philosophers who grapple with contingency are attempting to locate and understand the outer bounds of these limits, and they do so by throwing the temporal and contingent domain of reality as we find it into relief against the idea of the atemporal and noncontingent, that which is *not* limited by sequential time or individuation. For medieval philosophers, this ‘category of the noncontingent’ was represented by God, and in post-‘God-is-dead’ modernity the verbal sign ‘God’ has been supplanted by a flurry of terms which are simultaneously more restrictive and abstract/diffuse; the “God” of Augustine and Boethius and the “transcendental signified” of Derrida are attempts at the same Sisyphean project. Like the scientists who, in 2019, released the first ‘image’ of a black hole (imaging the shadow cast on stellar light by a thing that can never be seen by definition; an absence and a silhouette), these philosophers are trying to trace out in language the categorical ‘entity’ (Derrida would place this word *sous rature*) that cannot, by definition, be approached by language, because language imposes signifiatory limits on temporal things and God (or the ‘Absolute’) is atemporal and limitless. What medieval and modern nominalists share is this central insight afforded by the consciousness of contingency: our efforts at understanding take place in the shadow of the incomprehensible, and this incomprehensibility is produced by the very conditions of time and change under which our efforts at understanding must happen; knowledge can

⁵⁰ William of Ockham, *Tractatus de Praedestinatione et de Praescientia Dei et de Futuris Contingentibus*, trans. Marilyn McCord Adams and Norman Kretzmann (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983), pp. 48–50.

only be ‘known’ contingently, via signs (of some kind) in time. Or, as Rorty puts it, “the truth is not out there” because “where there are no sentences there is no truth”; “truth cannot be out there...because sentences cannot so exist, or be out there. The world is out there, but descriptions of the world are not”.⁵¹

1.4. Thought-experiments in contingency?

The aim of this thesis is to account for the ideas of contingency present in Chaucer’s writing, to understand what Chaucer may be or not be saying about contingency, and to situate his thinking in its proper literary and philosophical contexts. Building upon recent advances on contingency in fiction (as, for example, in the 2018 *Textual Practice* special issue on “Literature and Contingency” edited by Christina Lupton) this thesis seeks to open Chaucer’s poetry to recent theoretical advances and a fuller intellectual history—beyond literary nominalism—without departing from what Chaucer may plausibly have ‘really thought’ on the topic, given his literary influences and the philosophical vocabularies available to his own historical moment.⁵² Methodologically, it seeks to account for Chaucer’s reckoning with contingency (taking place, necessarily, in the realm of the implicit and interpretable poetic) without straying into anachronistic, presentist projection, while moving beyond a historicist paradigm that has already been mapped thoroughly. The closest model for this approach in relation to a medieval poet is Heller-Roazen’s aforementioned *Fortune’s Faces*, which performs the impressive feat of reconstructing a plausible medieval poetics of contingency, deeply entwined with (but not limited to) the Aristotelian tradition, while deploying the insights of more recent

⁵¹ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 5.

⁵² Christina Lupton, “Literature and Contingency”, *Textual Practice* 32, 3 (2018), 375–9.

contingency theorists, especially Giorgio Agamben, to illuminative effect. It is certainly the case that Agamben is among the most significant figures in contemporary contingency theory, and among the most amenable to medievalist interest, given his admirable (if at times haphazard) commitment to situating his own thought in relation to classical and medieval antecedents. But Heller-Roazen's findings are somewhat constrained by this indebtedness to Agamben, whose thinking on contingency, while undeniably important, has strict categorical horizons, since it forms part of Agamben's pursuit of a so-called "modal ontology".⁵³ Agamben's account of contingency has a major ontological and metaphysical bent, such that "contingency" is almost interchangeable with "potentiality" in his writing ("only the tautology... 'tomorrow there will or will not be a battle at sea' is necessarily always true, whereas each of the two members of the alternative is returned to contingency, its possibility to be or not to be"). Because his focus is on the relationship between reality itself and what language may say of it, "contingency" and "potentiality" betoken the same basic concept, *possibility*, as perceived through different epistemic lenses ("potentiality" pertaining to events in reality, and 'contingency' to things said about those events). This notion of contingency, while valuable, limits the horizons of inquiry to the impersonal matters of alethic modality. In some sense it subordinates poetry to philosophy all over again, by viewing poetry as a vehicle to reveal truths (about reality, about language). Thus Heller-Roazen writes of the *Roman de la Rose* that it "reveals itself to be dedicated to nothing other than its own bare

⁵³ Giorgio Agamben, *The Use of Bodies: Homo Sacer IV*, 2, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), pp. 146–75. For a primer on Agamben's 'modal ontology' see Rita Šerpytytė, "The Problem of Reality and Modal Ontology", *Open Philosophy*, 3, 1 (2020), <<https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/opphil-2020-0121/html>> [Accessed 28/05/2021].

capacity to take place (*accidere*): to take place as it is, to take place otherwise than it is, not to take place at all”.⁵⁴ Such a conclusion may be as reductive as it is productive, historically and hermeneutically. This approach can lead to a cul-de-sac of interpretation, seeing in all of a poem’s compositional wounds, redundancies, flaws, and fourth-wall-breaks this reflexive master-concept of contingency, taking all as gestures to the contingent text’s potential for alterity, to take place differently, or not at all.

When John Burrow wrote that modern Chaucerians “may be losing their ability to reckon with the accidental and the contingent”, he cautioned against a totalising, philosophy-first approach, where “every vagrant turn or twitch” of the text is subjected to “undiscriminating over-interpretation”.⁵⁵ The literary text may shed light on philosophical ideas in a way that formal logic cannot, but Chaucer at least is not committed to any philosophical programme as his primary reason for writing; indeed, I argue that this very lack of an overriding *raison d’écrire* is among Chaucer’s most radical and forward-looking qualities. To grapple with Chaucerian contingency means suspending teleological models of fiction, while uplifting and re-deploying concepts from various philosophical and literary movements. Chaucer is interested in contingency as a metaphysical issue, and both Boethius and Agamben may be helpful in finding the philosophical pulse of his poetic interactions with this topic. But he is also interested in contingency as the reality of lived human experience, conditioning our affective and psychological being, the origin of felt anxieties and anticipations which can alter our most basic mental processes—the pace of time’s flow, the psychological vividness of sense-perception. A doubleness of focus, approaching contingency as *both* philosopher

⁵⁴ Heller-Roazen, *Fortune’s Faces*, p. 10.

⁵⁵ John Burrow, “Poems Without Endings”, *SAC* 13 (1991), 36–37.

and poet, in a way that does not prioritise philosophical enquiry or literary ‘thought-experiment’ but treats both as mutually reciprocal and co-constitutive, is a defining characteristic of a Chaucerian poetics of contingency.

While the tools this thesis uses may be sharpened by post-medieval philosophy, it is intended to be an excavation not a reconstruction. As such, its structure is retrospective, beginning near the end of Chaucer’s literary career, moving back through the sediment layers, from his late major works in which contingency is at issue (the *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale*, the *Clerk’s Tale*), passing through the site of Chaucer’s deepest interaction with Boethius and Boccaccio (*Troilus and Criseyde*), back to what is (probably) his earliest, most radical confrontation with the idea of contingency—the *House of Fame*.

If any of Chaucer’s poems inscribes their own contingency in the manner Heller-Roazen sees in the *Roman de la Rose*, it may be the *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale*. Unmentioned in the *General Prologue*, the Canon and his Yeoman disrupt the linear progress of the *Canterbury Tales’* frame narrative when they suddenly and unexpectedly interrupt the pilgrims; their tale also exposes the formal contingency of the *Canterbury Tales* itself, with its position in the tale order a perennial source of editorial confusion. The narrative itself inscribes and describes contingency at all turns, from its non-linear and self-interruptive narrative to the episodes of discord and interpretive multiplicity contained within it; most significantly, the failed attempt at alchemy in the *prima pars*, which collapses into pandemonium as each observer interprets the empirical data differently, each offering their own contingent, contradictory description of the truth. The first chapter of this thesis examines the relatively settled and stable concept of

contingency central to this poem (most likely one of Chaucer's later writings, usually assigned to the early-mid 1390s), arguing that Chaucer not only has a sophisticated and distinct view on contingency as a philosophical idea, but that by this stage his interest is in the societal and cultural implications of contingency rather than the concept itself. As such, my chapter argues that the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* serves as one of several later poems that resist certain strands of *via moderni* philosophy which de-emphasise the role of divine grace in actualising individual potential, and a related 'progress narrative' within humanist literature, which suggests future generations see further and achieve greater progress than those that came before them. Rejecting this worldview, the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* imagines an "up-so-down" world of runaway concupiscence, and the disastrous consequences of the sheer, immitigable contingency of truth under such conditions.

We see in the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* that divine grace is a key ingredient in Chaucer's later thinking about contingency. For medieval philosophers, both metaphysical and epistemic contingency were inextricably bound up with theological questions about the relationship between divine and human agencies. The hypothetical situation in which humans have truly untrammelled free will is functionally the same as that in which the future is absolutely and objectively contingent—it rejects predestination and metaphysical necessity. Traditional scholarly discussions about the 'free will vs predestination' debate in Chaucer's fiction may be situated in close proximity to discussions of 'contingency vs necessity'—it is a matter of which philosophical vocabularies are used to map these conceptual problems, whether we are speaking deontically or epistemically, about the out-there world or in-here lived experience. Grace

is a most famous manifestation of the agency of God in His creation; it is also, for Christians, necessary for human beings to rise above their fallen, diminished state, and gain a higher potential—not only to perform good works at the individual level, but to improve the lot of the collective by grace-infused wisdom and potency, and to inspire others to accept the gift of grace themselves.

The greatest extreme of heterodox thinking about grace with mainstream currency in Chaucer's century was the idea—often called Ockhamist, but finding its most radical expression in the writings of Holcot—that this sanctifying or justifying grace is not prevenient (present in the soul from birth) but that humans must earn the initial gift of grace by 'doing what is in them' (*facere quod in se est*). But even this controversial idea accepts the total necessity of grace for human beings to do good: it argues only that humans must first 'do their best', via free and unaided will. The most extreme heterodoxy is only *semi*-Pelagian: it reserves a role for unaided free will in the economy of salvation, but does not go so far as to claim that human beings are any good on their own. In the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* we see an implicit, but fully coherent, model of grace and contingency, which would reject utterly this semi-Pelagian model and reassert an orthodox, Augustinian one, in which grace is always prevenient, providing the potential for merit and wisdom, but the human subject must freely choose to cooperate with it; by the cooperation of human and divine agencies, habits of virtue are gradually cultivated in the soul, and conversely, by refusing to heed the call of grace and instead indulging private concupiscence, habits of vice are instilled, casting the individual further and further from reconciliation with God. For Chaucer, this process takes place at the intellectual and imaginative level, being inextricable from ethics, questions of

behavioural morality and the choice of virtue or vice. Thus, the would-be alchemists of the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, indulging their concupiscence to an extreme, have declined into an abject state of psycho-spiritual blindness, and as more individuals fall into this “graceless” state of “blent discrecioun”, humanity collectively falls into decline, a situation of runaway contingency in the absence of God’s stabilising truth, an “up-so-doun” world characterised by “lak of stedfastnesse” at all levels of philosophical distinction.

The *Clerk's Tale*, adapting the ‘Patient Griselda’ narrative from Petrarch’s *De Insigni Obedientia*, in turn drawn from Boccaccio’s *Decameron* X.10, sees Chaucer working through this idea from a more individualised perspective. My third chapter rejects the conclusion that the *Clerk's Tale* inscribes a ‘nominalist’ or ‘voluntarist’ model of will and grace, the *facere quod in se est* idea, as argued by Stepsis, Steinmetz and Delasanta. I argue the opposite: it is Chaucer’s most explicit elaboration of his thinking about grace and contingency, which is fundamentally in line with the Augustinian and Thomistic concept of *gratia cooperans* (cooperative grace). In this model, individuals who cultivate habits of vice diminish the light of habitual grace that would raise them up to merit, wisdom, and perspicacity, and become creatures chained to the metaphysical contingency of the world as experienced in the human order of time. In doing so, they accelerate and multiply the epistemic contingency of the world of knowledge, encouraging the memetic proliferation of untruth, contradiction and confusion: there is a clear link between private concupiscence and public contingency. The figure of Walter represents this dualistic model: he is at once a hostage of Fortune and an agent of Fortune in the Augustinian and Boethian senses, one who has become a diminished creature of

behavioural impulsivity and mental confusion precisely because he has repeatedly refused the call of grace. For her part, Griselda represents a human life in full cooperation with grace, impervious to the vicissitudes of the world's contingencies (represented by Walter's arbitrary cruelty), and upholding a superior, Solomonic wisdom that makes her an ideal ruler (evidenced in her beneficent government of Saluzzo as Walter's queen). Together, the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* and the *Clerk's Tale* realise a Chaucerian concept of contingency that is at once in line with the 'neo-Augustinian' zeitgeist of the late fourteenth century and utterly idiosyncratic, reflecting Chaucer's synthetic and associative thinking about Boethius, Augustine, Neoplatonism, scholasticism, and the literary humanism of his Italian influences. My third chapter shows how Chaucer reveals the idea of cooperative grace, and its relationship to worldly contingency, in both the lexes and symbolic structures of the *Clerk's Tale*, as well as by a few revealing tweaks to his Petrarchan source material.

This later, mature vision of will, grace, and contingency only comes into being once Chaucer has come to a settled understanding of contingency and necessity as philosophical ideas, and how they relate to prevailing cultural discourses about divine and human agency. My next chapter turns to *Troilus and Criseyde*, Chaucer's most ambitious work, in which metaphysical and epistemic contingency are woven into its most foundational structures. This chapter addresses the ways in which the contingencies of language, truth, and interpretation are engaged throughout *Troilus and Criseyde*, calling attention to the ways in which the limits of human understanding are brought into the foreground, interpreting Chaucer's exposure of contingency *in* the text as well as the

contingency *of* the text (to borrow Ryle's useful distinction).⁵⁶ I argue for *Troilus and Criseyde* as metapoetry, a mirror of contingency which forces the reader to confront the temporal and historical limits on their own understanding (and the way that these limits are, nonetheless, constitutive of their own experience and values). It does this in dialogue with Boethius' well-known model of free will and divine foreknowledge, where contingency and necessity coexist in different metaphysical orders of time. Resisting the binary schematism of previous Boethian readings, I argue that Chaucer reveals the fundamental paradox in human thinking about contingency—the ineffability of the noncontingent, the aporia that emerges in its translation to language, and what this would entail for Boethian ethics. Chaucer forces his readers' attention to the flawed, partial and incomplete nature of our understanding of contingency and necessity (caused by the ineffable and non-linguistic nature of the noncontingent). His poem does this by steadily revealing an antinomy of radical contingency and absolute necessity, exposed via the insistent question of whether we can meaningfully assign value to any temporal modality besides our own. Chaucer draws his structural analogue of metaphysical necessity to its culmination in necessary failure, by creating a striking parallel between two episodes, each inscribing one side of the temporal/atemporal dualism. These are the love scene in Book III and Troilus' death and spiritual ascent at the end of Book V. Chaucer links these not only by an abundance of shared language and image (framing both as spiritual *raptus*, steeped in Augustinian ideas and Dantean echoes) but also by a common technique of narrative privation: both episodes show individual experience rising to uncircumscribable heights, passing beyond what contingent and temporal signs can say; as such, the

⁵⁶ Martin Ryle, "Contingency In/Of the Text: Aristotle, Hardy, Perec", *Textual Practice* 32, 3, 455–69.

narrating subject bounces off the wall of what can be set in language, and is forced to retreat into decorous and formulaic exegesis. Both scenes consist of a narratorial back-and-forth of apophatic and cataphatic description of experiential rapture, and in the poem's conspicuous failure to circumscribe not only the destiny of the soul after death, but the private, carnal "joie" of the soul in loving, Chaucer asserts a profound scepticism about the ability of speech-users in the temporal world to ever "understonde" what lies beyond the bare contingency of our own ontological situation.

Chaucer approaches these heady ideas as a poet, not a philosopher, and so it is no surprise that a more down-to-earth (but no less thorny) question hovers over *Troilus and Criseyde's* exposure of contingency: that of the function and meaning of poetry. This issue is closely linked to the contingency of language and truth—in the teleological views of fiction common to the medieval schoolroom, poets must be sources of useful wisdom, and if all language is contingent then so too are the pearls of wisdom sown by poetry; they are provisional, situational, historically local.⁵⁷ The greatest vernacular poet who asserted an optimistic, humanist idea of the role of the poet was Dante, whose *Commedia* paints a complicated picture in which the poet can never grasp or illuminate the divine ineffable under their own power, but by the infusion of divine grace, they may be inspired to write beyond the limits of contingent thought and signs. The interplay of cataphatic and apophatic in Dante culminates in the apprehension of the Eternal Light, the poet whose virtues are raised up "per grazia" (*Par* XXXIII.25) to behold "l'alta luce che da sé è vera" (that Light, sublime, which in itself is true, XXXIII.54).⁵⁸ Dante the

⁵⁷ See Allen, *The Ethical Poetic*; Christopher Cannon, *From Literacy to Literature: England, 1300–1400* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), esp. pp. 201–229.

⁵⁸ All quotations from Dante's *Paradiso* are from *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: Paradiso*, trans. Allen Mandelbaum (London: Bantam, 1986).

dreamer finds that by grace-infused inspiration he has a great deal to say and write about the thing that he repeatedly asserts cannot be grasped with signs and speech. It is palpable that for Chaucer, the fictive encounter with the ineffable evokes echoes of Dante: at both episodes of rapture in *Troilus and Criseyde* the narrative is textured with lines and images from the *Commedia*. The context for this may be found in Chaucer's more sustained interaction with Dante, his philosophical parody of the *Commedia*, the *House of Fame*, which undermines the idea of the inspired poet effing the ineffable and rising above their own contingency, while meditating at length on whether the values traditionally accorded to the art of poetry (poets as privileged truth-tellers; canonicity and enduring fame as the noble poet's reward) have any meaningful significance, whether Fame offers any bulwark against the world's contingency and the inevitability of change. Chaucer's double vision as "philosophical poet" finds its sharpest clarity in the *House of Fame*. As such, the final chapter of this thesis turns to *Fame*, exploring Chaucer's interactions with Dante's philosophical vision, and coming to an understanding of the concept of contingency that emerges from this catalysis.

The chapter begins by accepting that the *House of Fame* does indeed, as Delany argues in her ground-breaking study of that poem, assay certain interrelated ideas: the question of fiction as an autonomous category, distinct from philosophy and rhetoric, and a series of epistemic ideals that had been (in different times and contexts) attached to the role of poet.⁵⁹ However, I disagree with Delany's argument that the poem has a large-scale "structural movement [which] echoes [the] metaphysical structure... [of] microcosm and macrocosm", and the chapter argues against the notion that the *House of*

⁵⁹ Delany, *Chaucer's House of Fame*, pp. 34–5, 58–9, 69–112.

Fame anticipates and lays a foundation for ‘literature’ as an autonomous category, as an artform finally “released from the obligation” of truth-telling altogether.⁶⁰ This chapter posits that the poem assembles a worldview and a vision of poetry which are more ambivalently opened than this relatively optimistic reading. I argue that Chaucer puts his fictional avatar, Geoffrey, through a *visio* paralleling Dante’s dreamer in the *Commedia*, but one which is not a linear ascent but totally recursive at the conceptual level, carrying Geoffrey to the threshold of insight into “auctoritee”, “reason”, “experience” (corresponding with the narrative’s tripartite structure), but always falling back to the starting position of sheer perplexity, an inability to pierce the veil of noncontingent Truth. Moreover, I argue that Dante in fact provides Chaucer with a cogent and explicit idea of worldly contingency, and that in *Fame* Chaucer is responding directly to the emanationist cosmology set forth in *Paradiso*, where the unitary, changeless light of divine Truth is progressively dispersed, distorted, and rendered *increasingly* contingent as it passes through cosmic intermediaries down to our phenomenal reality of “che brevi contingenze” (brief contingencies), the second-order, “generated things the moving heavens bring into being”, which may uphold truth *and/or* untruth, “con seme e senza seme” (with or without seed, *Par* XIII.61–66).

This chapter analyses many patterns of repetition and variation on Dantean metaphor and symbolism (many of which have remained under-researched). In doing so, it comes to argue that Chaucer’s poem simply brings the poet’s quest to its natural and inevitable endpoint under these ontological conditions: where Dante is raised beyond the region of “brevi contingenze” by the operation of grace, Geoffrey is left adrift, able to rely

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 36, 113.

solely on his own ratiocinative powers in discerning “soth” from “fals”, and taken on a parodic ‘ascent’ that (unlike Dante’s, which penetrates the heights of the immutable and noncontingent) arrives at a House of Fame where all the brief contingencies of the world converge; unable to penetrate the threshold of eternity, Geoffrey bears witness to the immitigable contingency of all worldly discourse. Chaucer does not suggest that this epistemological situation of multiplicity and indeterminacy may be cause for optimism about the role of the poet: the poem ‘ends’ with a telling formal inconclusiveness, a broken sentence, that instantiates the radical suspension of judgement and value demanded by its bleak metaphysical vision. Neither a nihilistic shrug at the futility of it all nor a proto-modern manifesto for anti-didactic aestheticism in fiction, the *House of Fame* is still more radically anti-teleological than readings such as Delany’s would suggest. It conspicuously says *nothing*, in the end, about truth and poetry, leaving in epochal suspension a non-propositional and formally, narratively, epistemically, and tropologically end-less edifice, an artefact whose contingency is exposed (and suspended, as if in amber) by its staged failures to realise any *end*, *telos* or *teleute*, whatsoever. The *House of Fame* (to paraphrase what Camus said of Kafka’s *The Trial*) diagnoses our situation but does not offer a cure.⁶¹ It is an etiological journey, occurring at the levels of

⁶¹ Arguing for Kafka’s novels as ‘theologies in action’, Camus says that “*The Trial* diagnoses, and *The Castle* imagines a treatment”. *The Trial* is an “image of the human condition” as perpetual response to the Absurd, experienced reality as paradox and contradiction; *The Castle* presents “a soul in quest of its grace”, seeking a supervenient order to cope with this situation. The general move from private to public and epistemological to ethical in Chaucer’s thinking about contingency (woven into the timeline of this thesis’ chapters) seems to reflect something analogous, a poet wrapping his head around contingency before wondering how Christian individuals and society might cope with it. Albert Camus, “Hope and the Absurd in the Works of Franz Kafka”, in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), trans. Justin O’Brien (London: Penguin, 2005), pp. 120–133.

the imaginative and affective, that seeks to understand the contingencies of truth and the phenomenal world and what these mean for truth-seeking and truth-telling.

I conclude by reconstructing the conceptual arc of this thesis. There may be no grand unifying theory of contingency for Chaucer. But there is a kaleidoscopic vision, comprised of many mobile, protean fragments (individual texts, selves, readers), of life and art in response, *as* response, to contingency. It cannot be reduced to a pithy *sententia* or a static propositional truth-claim. It may only be left suspended in its perpetual incompleteness, potentiating infinite contingent formations in the unprethinkable historical future, in the contingent text's intercourse with future readers in future times. The thesis ends by defining Chaucer's idiosyncratic and synthetic vision of contingency using the terminological toolkit of modern contingency theory, arguing that this vision gave rise to Chaucer's poetics of irresolution, and may have conditioned the responses of the present and future readers to whom he commended his work with such acute consciousness of their own contingency.

2. “Philosophres speken so mystily”: Contingency and Cultural Progress in the *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale*

2.1. Cracked Alembics: narrative contingency and the limits of language

The *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale* is among Chaucer’s most disorderly poems. On the surface it is a topical tale about alchemy, the “elvyssh craft” of ancient “philosophres” (*CYT* VIII 751, 862) passed down by *auctores* and *compilators* in “olde bokes” (*NPT* VII 208). Yet any consensus about what the poem is trying to say, in ethical terms—or what seed of philosophical thinking may have led Chaucer to write it—remains elusive. Its structure and content are replete with puzzling ambiguities: there are not one but two alchemist-canons; the poem has at least three parts, each with its own lexis and thematic concerns, and these do not connect linearly; there are several false endings and narratorial digressions; uniquely and notoriously, the poem disrupts the pilgrimage frame of the Tales, with Canon and Yeoman unexpectedly happening upon the pilgrims’ progress, before abruptly vanishing. Where the poem does appear in the early manuscript record, it has variable formats and partitions, often containing spurious links and edits, and given almost arbitrary placement in the order of the Tales.¹ Confusion in the face of the

¹ The majority of early manuscripts where *CYPT* is present keep the conventional Prologue separate, but have no partitions between the first, second or concluding sections of the poem. As such, the abrupt and unexplained shift in tone, lexis and matter between the conventionally divided parts is all the more jarring, to the extent that Furnivall felt it necessary to intervene in his edition of Lansdowne MS 851, noting “[No break in the MS]” between the ‘first’ and ‘second’ parts. In Harley MS 7334, extant scribal directions denote the *prologus* and *narratio* (comprising the entire tale, undivided); both Caxton Chaucers link Prologue and Tale with “Here endith the Prolog And begynneth / The tale of the Chanons Yeman”, but have no partition otherwise. The Ellesmere division, which proved influential, may be best explained as a scribal intervention to impose order on a deeply disordered text. Caxton’s 1476 edition suggests other scribes had noticed the problem: there is no partition, but the false conclusion of the *prima pars* (“By that I of my tale have maad an ende”, 971) has been altered to read “That shal ye knowe or that I from you wende / Be that my tale be told unto an ende”. The diversity of editorial approaches to the Tale’s continuity problems suggests that these have an authorial, rather than scribal, origin, and this array of structural and textual interventions exposes the influence of material contingency (here,

unpredictable is a recurring theme throughout its separate parts, and contingency is inscribed into its form and content at various levels. As to the *intentio auctoris*, there may be as many opinions about what Chaucer is saying in this poem as there are readers of it. Chaucer provides a template for this situation in the tale itself, when the first canon's audience, as mentioned above, all bear witness to the same failed experiment and descend into a cacophony of rival interpretations, each offering their provisional diagnosis of what caused the failure, none of which is finally true (because, the tale suggests, true alchemy can *never* be achieved in the created world, for reasons that this chapter will discuss). Readers seeking a pleasant and useful *moralitas* that would harmonise this messy poem find ourselves in the same state of perplexity as its frustrated alchemists who forever “lakken our conclusioun” (CYT VIII 672), and whose acts of interpretation must “concluden everemoore amys” (VIII 957). There is no consensus as to what the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* ‘really means’ or why it was inserted, unheralded, into the established frame narrative, but since the major advances made by Muscatine and Grennen, there has been broad agreement that it is not just some topical piece about alchemy with a straightforward autobiographical context.²

manuscript circulation) on our experience and interpretation of the inscribed text. The Ellesmere scribe's solution—dividing the poem into a ‘tale of parts’—has likely endured for pragmatic and readerly reasons, a means of separating the textually autonomous second part without excising it. The arbitrariness of this partition is inadvertently highlighted in the *Riverside Chaucer*, which adds a superfluous and unprecedented “[*Prima Pars*]” subtitle, calling further attention to the poem's internal discontinuity. The *Riverside Chaucer* partitioning, based on Ellesmere, has been contested; Epstein argues that “what the Ellesmere confusingly labels parts 1 and 2 of the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* [are] really a confessional Prologue and related Tale, in the manner of the Wife of Bath and the Pardoner”. Robert Epstein, “Dismal Science: Chaucer and Gower on Alchemy and Economy”, *SAC*, 36 (2014), 232–3.

² Joseph E. Grennen, “The Canon's Yeoman and the Cosmic Furnace: Language and Meaning in the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*”, *Criticism*, 4, 3 (Summer, 1962), 225–40; Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition*, pp. 214–25.

This chapter argues that the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* articulates Chaucer's late, mature vision of contingency, as an ethical and epistemological issue with interlocking individual and societal dimensions. It presents contingency as the (de-)limiting condition of phenomenal experience, with the contingency of truth in the temporal world foreclosing any cultural progress towards truth-consensus. The poem articulates an ultimately Augustinian and Boethian worldview, where individual concupiscence drives and accelerates the world's decline into discord, disagreement, and contradictory truths. In this, it is Chaucer's contribution to a controversy about sin and science, concupiscence and contingency, that was taking place within late fourteenth century English writing. On placing the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* in dialogue with contemporaneous works about alchemy, science, and the spiritual condition of humanity—Gower's *Confessio Amantis* and Langland's *Piers Plowman*—it becomes clear that Chaucer is voicing an idiosyncratic take on the commonplace topos of the “declining world”.³ I suggest that the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* rejects the cultural ‘progress narrative’ that animated the humanism of his Italian antecedents, encapsulated by the motto *quanto iuniores, tanto perspicaciores*, and that Gower especially advances in his own account of alchemical science. In its place, Chaucer posits a sceptical worldview which is opened and finally ambivalent about the future of materialist science, and of secular truth-seeking at large. As Fyler puts it, the poem “recapitulate[s] the history of human language, which serves as a metonymy for the larger issues of our history on earth and our salvation”.⁴ I agree that the contingency of language is at issue in the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, and that

³ John M. Fyler, *Language and the Declining World in Chaucer, Dante, and Jean de Meun* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

Chaucer associates this contingency with a certain idea of progressive decline in the postlapsarian world. However, this reduction of the poem to a flat, catechistic “metonymy” of the Babelic decline of language warrants scrutiny.

Fyler’s reading builds on twentieth century analyses of the poem which prioritised the Hermetic and Neoplatonic idea of alchemy as microcosm. For Grennen, a major advocate of this approach, Chaucer is ironically exploiting a “pervasive conviction...of a real correspondence between macrocosm (the universe itself) and the alchemical microcosm (the vessel in which the transmutation was to be wrought)”.⁵ Grennen argues that the poem invites its readers to recognise a basic spiritual blindness afflicting all of its alchemical addicts, who “are shown...[to be] sublimely ignorant that they are themselves the stuff of an alchemy transcending the one they consciously practice”.⁶ The trouble is (as Grennen admits) that this ‘microcosmic’ view of alchemy is never really articulated in Chaucer’s poem. Grennen’s interpretation is an argument made “[by] suggestion, and only by suggestion” (in this case, by the adduced connotations of the proverbial phrase “flee the fyres hete”, *CYT VIII* 1408).⁷ This is an allegoretic view of the poem, imagining that it inscribes an idea of transcendental cosmic unity—a unity to which the alchemists, in their materialist addiction, have become oblivious and detached. Grennen declines to posit the ethical implications of this reading; Grenberg, writing soon afterwards, suggests that the poem’s apparent anti-materialism encodes “Boethius’ conception of ‘felicitee’, his adjuration to flee Fortune’s lying promise of happiness through material goods”.⁸

⁵ Grennen, “The Canon’s Yeoman and the Cosmic Furnace”, 233.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 240.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Bruce L. Grenberg, “The *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale*: Boethian Wisdom and the Alchemists”, *ChauR*, 1, 1 (Summer, 1966), 38.

These ideas informed much later criticism of the poem, which moved away from consideration of a unified philosophical meaning in favour of excavating intertextual references (to scholastic philosophers such as Robert Holcot or to particular alchemical treatises).⁹ Fyler usefully relegates the microcosm-macrocosm analogy and trains his sights on the *prima materia* of what is actually on the page: a disjointed tale of “three parts which do not quite coincide with the formal, textual divisions”, overstuffed with ironic, multivalent puns on alchemical keywords, filled with characters whose “blindness” and “confusioun” keep them from properly interpreting their own experience (including the Yeoman himself).¹⁰ What Fyler sees is not so much a mirror of metaphysics as of metaphilosophy, the poem diagnosing the problem confronting philosophers in the search for truth, namely, the arbitrary and multivocal nature of

⁹ See e.g. P. B. Taylor, “Chaucer’s ‘Cosyn to the Dede’”, *Speculum*, 57, 2 (1982), 315–327. Patterson gives an important critique of Grennen and Muscatine’s ‘anti-materialist’ and ‘anti-modern’ interpretations of the poem. He argues that “the Canon’s Yeoman’s performance is a final, extravagant instance of Chaucer’s lifelong interest in the way subjectivity seeks to represent itself in language, and....it expresses Chaucer’s awareness of *himself* as a modern poet oriented toward a dynamic future”. While Patterson’s intervention is important, I reject this comparatively optimistic reading in the course of this chapter. Lee Patterson, “Perpetual Motion: Alchemy and the Technology of the Self”, *SAC*, 15 (1993), 25–57. Like Delany, I view the *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale* as a basically Augustinian corrective to quasi-utopian narratives about alchemical purification and societal perfectibility, and this chapter is in some respects an effort to fill in the intellectual workings of this argument, properly detailing the concepts and topoi to which Delany makes only passing reference (for instance, Delany reduces the tale’s various specific humanist and Augustinian-Thomistic topoi to “the misuse of intellect, a traditional Christian topos”). Sheila Delany, “Run Silent, Run Deep: Heresy and Alchemy as Medieval Versions of Utopia”, in *Medieval Literary Politics: Shapes of Ideology* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), p. 15. For his part, Bruhn argues for the tale as a self-reflexive antithesis to the unrealised totalising project of the preceding *Canterbury Tales*, its alchemical “multiplicacioun” reflecting Chaucer’s finally fruitless “poetic multiplication”; this seems unduly allegoretic and dependent on a speculative sense of the *Canterbury Tales* as a unified master-narrative with a definitive tale order. It also diminishes the topical relevance of alchemy itself, relegating the poem’s subject to a metaphorical cipher for artistry. Mark J. Bruhn, “Art, Anxiety, and Alchemy in the *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale*”, *ChauR*, 33 (1999), 311. Cf. David Raybin, “‘And Pave It Al of Silver and of Gold’: The Humane Artistry of the *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale*”, in *Rebels and Rivals: The Contestive Spirit in the Canterbury Tales*, ed. Susanna Greer Fein, David Raybin, and Peter C. Braeger (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1991), pp. 189–212.

¹⁰ Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition*, p. 214.

postlapsarian language. If not nominalist in the late medieval sense, this reading certainly accords with modern nominalism, reflecting a Rortian view of philosophy as inescapably *linguistic*, the contingency of signs foreclosing a universal “final vocabulary” that describes reality perfectly and that would provide for ultimate consensus among speech-users.¹¹ Fyler’s reading takes place in this context: he suggests that the *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale* demonstrates that “The divine is beyond the reach of language, and the perfect language of Adam has been lost beyond recovery; what remains is a diminished thing”.¹²

Whether or not the tale is really ‘about’ the prison-house of language, the suggestion that language is a “metonymy” for the issues of human history and personal salvation raises important questions. How is the contingency of language related to personal salvation, and the related theological debates about the roles of free will and divine grace in the justification of the soul? How are individual and collective ‘decline’ related, and what do these anecdotes about failed alchemists suggest about each? How does Chaucer’s vision of alchemy, language, and sin, compare with Gower’s and Langland’s—how do these poems speak to each other? By accounting for the tale’s disparate, self-contained narrative segments via the ideas of contingency contained in them, it may be possible to synthesise this fractured tale into a unitary whole. The etiological vision of the ‘declining world’ and contingency of language inscribed in the Prologue and *prima pars* maps organically onto the overt theological themes of the *pars secunda*, where “coveitise” leads a “sely preest” to become progressively more “gracelees” and spiritually “blynd” (*CYT VIII* 1076–79). I argue that these are two sides

¹¹ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, pp. 73–95.

¹² Fyler, *Language and the Declining World*, p. 182.

of the same philosophical coin: each of this poem's three sections articulates a different aspect of a holistic worldview. Chaucer envisions a mutually reinforcing cycle of accelerating decline into further contingency, where individual habits of concupiscence and *curiositas* proliferate useless and truthless discourses in society (here, "lerned...clerk[s]" advancing the fruitless practice of alchemy, VIII 748), and this "multiplicacioun" of useless, foundationless knowledge catalyses a large-scale societal decline, a lapse into mass "confusioun". The tale shows that the contingency of language and the consequences of individual concupiscence are not linearly connected, but intercausal: they reinforce each other.¹³ The *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* imagines these processes at work, and their consequences for the human quests for truth and salvation.

This idea, and its association with alchemy, is not unique to Chaucer. For Langland, the folly of alchemists exemplifies the habitual nature of concupiscence, the way that, as the Parson tells it, sins "multiplie" in the soul, leading to the diminishing of grace and the potential it grants us. For Gower, the failure of modern alchemy reflects *senectus mundi*, alchemy's secret lost because the original stability of language has declined into runaway contingency, and a baffling diversity of conflicting accounts that merely confound modern minds. Viewed through this lens, the notorious non-relation of the first and second parts is largely resolved, thematically and philosophically as well as structurally: the *pars secunda* diagnoses the diminishing of individual wits, based on an Augustinian-derived understanding of the intercausal relationship between individual

¹³ The habitual reinforcement of concupiscence was central to Augustinian theology—and it was intrinsically linked to the idea of humanity's addiction to the temporal world of contingency. I discuss the development of this idea (and its relation to grace) in scholastic theology in the next chapter. See John G. Prendiville, "The Development of the Idea of Habit in the Thought of St. Augustine", *Traditio*, 28 (1972), 29–99.

concupiscence and collective contingency, that have led to widespread confusion and discord in the “up-so-down” modern world.

Chaucer synthesises these ideas into a holistic vision of moral and epistemological decay.¹⁴ The conventionally-assigned *prima pars* of the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* uses the Yeoman's addled, attention-deficit voice to explore the negative consequences of an “up-so-down” world where “word and deed...ben nothing lyk” (VIII 625; *Lak of Stedfastnesse* 4–5). The Yeoman describes himself and his master as being drunk on learning, imbibing copious quantities of alchemical “book[s]” and “bible[s]” (VIII 841, 857). The result of this obsessive “lernyng of...elvysse nyce loore” (VIII 842) is not clarity but deeper and deeper confusion: no matter how many alchemical texts or practices are “lerned of a clerk” (VIII 748), alchemy remains a “slidyng science” (VIII 732), and their efforts “Concluden...Ylike wel” in failure (VIII 849–51).

This confusion is psycho-spiritual, reflecting a view of the individual mind and its faculties as fundamentally linked to the condition of the soul. The postlapsarian soul may be raised to a potential for good beyond its natural, fallen powers by divine grace, and, in practical terms, this elevation manifests as sharper intellectual faculties, and greater ability to discern between false and true testimony. Conversely, the graceless, concupiscent soul makes for an ever dimmer mind, which may be misled down avenues with disastrous or fruitless ends. The nature and meaning of this process will be the

¹⁴ There is some consideration of the epistemological questions raised by alchemy for Chaucer in Daniel F. Pigg, “Representing Magic and Science in *The Franklin's Tale* and *The Canon's Yeoman's Tale*: Chaucer's Exploration of Connected Topics”, in *Magic and Magicians in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Time: The Occult in Pre-Modern Sciences, Medicine, Literature, Religion, and Astrology*, ed. Albrecht Classen (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), pp. 507–522. I return to this subject in chapter five of this thesis, in relation to the *Franklin's Tale* and the notion of magic as science.

theme of the *pars secunda*, but before this the reader is faced with a large-scale exemplification of grace-deprived confusion and blindness, in the textures of the *prima pars*' narrative. The Yeoman—among Chaucer's most boldly characterised and individualised narrators—betrays his diminished faculties in his addled account of alchemical knowledge. The Yeoman's tour of the alchemists' laboratory is profoundly nonlinear, not an encyclopaedic transfer of knowledge but a fragmentary "rehersaille" (VIII 852) of factoids "as they come to [a damaged and distractible] mynde" (VIII 782). The Yeoman's account of alchemical tools, materials and procedures is a bewildering barrage of "clergial" (VIII 752) terms:

As boole armonyak, verdegrees, boras,
 And sondry vessels maad of erthe and glas,
 Oure urynales and oure descensories,
 Violes, crosletz, and sublymatories,
 Cucurbites and alambikes eek,
 And othere swiche, deere ynough a leek—
 Nat nedeth it for to reherce hem alle—
 Watres rubifyng, and boles galle,
 Arsenyk, sal armonyak, and brymstoon;
 And herbes koude I telle eek many oon,
 As egremoyne, valerian, and lunarie... (CYT VIII 790–800)

The poem's established concern with epistemic barriers—the temporal conditions that cause practitioners of this "science" to "lakken [...] conclusioun" (VIII 672)—suggest this to be a practical demonstration of the problem at hand, the contingency of linguistic signs. This wall of exotic noise prises open the gulf between *signans* and *signatum*, a torrent of sounds signifying nothing much to the lay auditor.¹⁵ The Yeoman's promise to explicate the science of alchemy—if only the "part [...] that I knowe" (VIII 716, 719)—

¹⁵ On the Augustinian background of medieval language theory, and the homology of later medieval sign theory with Saussurean semiotics, see David W. Hiscoe, "Heavenly Sign and Comic Design in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*", in *Sign, Sentence, Discourse*, pp. 228–44.

is never realised; it is a recitation of language without knowledge and “word” (*verbum*) without “deed” (*res*).

The Yeoman calls attention to the problematics of naming as he recounts “The foure spirites and the bodies sevene, / By ordre, as ofte I herde my lord hem *nevene*” (VIII 820–21). The mediality of the Yeoman’s pseudo-knowledge is in the lexical foreground: these things are known by hearsay, through a fallible and historical mediator (his “lord”, who received it in turn from old books’ “elvysshe nyce loore”, VIII 842), and this echoic knowledge has been mutated by the contingent nature of names themselves, as signs whose meanings and connotations evolve unpredictably across time. The lines that follow list quicksilver twice (VIII 821, 827): the *nomen* “quyksilver” points to a substance that can be categorised as *both* “spirit” and “[metallic] body”, and the Yeoman calls attention to the fallibility of such categorisation. A “slidyng science” (VIII 732) built on such unstable and technical signs, terms “so clerghial and so queynte” (VIII 752), risks a fall into this kind of semantic duplication. Once more, the Yeoman’s lexis signals the contingencies of nomination and denotation themselves as a major issue: “The firste spirit quyksilver *called* is [...] Mercurie quyksilver *we clepe*” (VIII 822–27).¹⁶ The Yeoman hints at the provisionality of his, and his master’s, knowledge of alchemy, caused not only by their own inadequacies but also by the craft’s transmission through layers of contingencies: the discretion of the individual reader, the material texts they

¹⁶ John Reidy’s notes in the *Riverside Chaucer* point out that the origin of this nominal confusion is the Latin Pseudo-Geber, which treats quicksilver “as a spirit; but...includes ‘Mundification’ of quicksilver among his chapters on preparation of metals”. Pseudo-Geber’s seven metals contradict the six metals of his source, al-Razi (via the *Liber Secretorum*), in a minor and basically terminological way. But this contradiction calls up the more foundational problem of origins that Chaucer may be invoking here: Chaucer’s knowledge is derived from a chain of texts that is constantly revising, mutating, and radically redescribing its received, and ostensibly factual, original truth. *Riverside Chaucer*, p. 950n820.

engage, and the mutable nature of *ad placitum* nomination itself.¹⁷ The signified of quicksilver can be momentarily pointed at with a multitude of signifiers—“quyksilver” or “Mercurie”—and it can only be categorised contingently: it retains the latent potential to be or not be metal or spirit, depending on its conditions at a certain time and place. Language itself cannot circumscribe this alterity—at least, not univocally—because of the here-and-now historical locality of signs: the Yeoman’s word “quyksilver” cannot be categorised as *this* [spirit/metal] because it may also be *this* [spirit/metal] at a different point in time. The name “quyksilver” does not denote one determinate *res* but a pair of *potential* things, whose differentiation can only be temporary, contingent and specific to the instance. Mercury is liquid and/or metal in the encounter with specific conditions at a particular moment in time, and it retains its contingency, its potential to be otherwise. This is a concrete example of the wider issue in the *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale*: the assay for truth in a world where the word is no longer cousin to the thing it signifies; where, in Agamben’s words, “speech, which is nothing other than the manifestation and the unconcealment of something, may be separated from what it reveals and acquire an autonomous consistency”.¹⁸

¹⁷ The Aristotelian classification of linguistic signs into ‘natural’ and ‘conventional’ signs in *De Interpretatione*, mediated and expanded by Augustine and Boethius in the former’s *De Doctrina Christiana & De Trinitate* and the latter’s commentaries *In Perihermeneias*, led to the efflorescence of medieval sign theory, with semioticians over the centuries debating the relationships between spoken and written signs, mental concepts, and extralinguistic entities. While the relationship between extralinguistic reality, mental concepts, and language was fiercely debated in scholastic philosophy, by the time of Ockham it was widely held that the relationship between signifiers and signifieds was itself contingent, “‘imposed’ (*imponuntur*) by common agreement—*ad placitum* or *secundum voluntarium institutionem*”. Jesse M. Gellrich, *Discourse and Dominion in the Fourteenth Century: On Contexts of Writing in Philosophy, Politics, and Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 49. As Fyler observes, Chaucer repeatedly invokes these debates by way of the maxim (from Boethius by way of Jean de Meun) “the word is cosyn to the dede”—and its *ad placitum* inversion in *Lak of Stedfastnesse*, “word and deed...ben nothing lyk”. (*Lak*, 4–5). Fyler, *Language and the Declining World*, pp. 4–6.

¹⁸ Giorgio Agamben, “*Pardes: The Writing of Potentiality*”, in *Potentialities*, p. 207.

Animated by concupiscence, the Yeoman's mind has been trapped on the hamster wheel of temporal Fortune for some time, and as his faculties have diminished ("bled is myn ye", VIII 730), his powers of narration have come to reflect that myopia. We are drawn into the Yeoman's state of confused phenomenal experience, where the ordering logic between predicate and subject, *verbum* and *res*, and fruit and chaff are no longer discernible. The reader's own powers of discretion are exercised with the task of distinguishing unnecessary digression from meaningful content, but they find these categories blurred, challenging conventional hermeneutic strategies. As such, the confusion of that first, deformed question establishes the structural pattern of the *prima pars* as a whole: digressions give way to digressions, and these are no help in locating a stable meaning or rhetorical message.

The trouble is not with the canon himself, but a seemingly universal inability to agree on the facts, as the anecdote that follows the Yeoman's rehearsal makes clear. The canon follows his well-versed protocols to the letter, attempting to perform alchemy for an audience of fellow alchemists (or perhaps investors), but the pot breaks, and the expensive metals used in the experiment are reduced to a smouldering "mullok" (VIII 938). This leads, as mentioned, to a heated debate, where each observer offers a different interpretation of what went wrong:

Somme seyde it was long on the fir makyng,
Somme seyde nay, it was on the blowyng...
"Straw!" quod the thridde, "ye been lewed and nyce.
It was nat tempred as it oghte be". (VIII 922–6)

Each 'reading' of the failed alchemy offers a provisional, but exclusive, version of the truth: "That is the cause and oother noon, so thee'ch!" (VIII 929). These contingent truths are all likewise derived from the received wisdom of "olde bokes", the same literary

record of authorised learning, but there is no way for any of these scholars to discern which, if any, is *the* truth, the *causa materialis* of the experimental failure. The episode ends inconclusively, with one reflecting that no amount of study can mitigate the total contingency of the world as experienced; because the ultimate secret of alchemy is missing from the record, whether an attempt will succeed or fail must always be random for the observer.

And though this thyng myshapped have as now,
 Another tyme it may be well ynow.
 Us moste putte oure good in aventure.
 A marchant, pardee, may nat ay endure,
 Trusteth me wel, in his prosperitee.
 Somtyme his good is drowned in the see,
 And somtyme comth it sauf unto the londe. (VIII 944–50)

The canon will not accept this submissive attitude to the unpredictable. He maintains that “Ther was defaute in somewhat, wel I woot” (VIII 954), suggesting that he will find the full truth by poring over yet more alchemy books: for the canon, the truth *is* out there, waiting to be known. But the Yeoman makes clear that he is mistaken: “[Be] it hoot or coold, I dar seye this, / That we concluden everemoore amys”. (VIII 956–7). The fundamental problem is that these would-be alchemists (and humanity in general) have no innate faculty with which to tell truth from untruth, to see the noncontingent *res* through the clouds of contingent *verba*. Given this emphasis on judgement and discretion, it is not surprising that the *prima pars* closes by lamenting that

Every man semeth a Salomon.
 But al thyng which that shineth as the gold
 Nis nat gold, as that I have herd told. (VIII 961–3)

Sisk rightly points out the Golden Age nostalgia latent in the tale’s *prima pars*:

Solomonic “discrecioun” seems to be beyond the powers of this decayed, “up-so-doun”

modernity, meaning that it is impossible for readers to discern between plausible-sounding hokum and true scientific knowledge.¹⁹ Despite the “preef” of first-hand *experimentum*, non-stop attempts to practice alchemy based on the theory contained in venerated books, no one can bring the “slidyng science” to fruition. But rather than accepting that alchemy may be junk science, these individuals are unable to discern “fruyt” from “chaf”, “gold” from “nat gold”, and so driven by greed they continue to waste their time and minds—“in oure madnesse everemoore we rave” (VIII 959).

2.2. “Gracelees”: the “sely preest”, concupiscence, and psycho-spiritual instability

If the *prima pars* charts the chaos caused by the contingency of truths contained in old books, and the inability of human beings to resolve these ambiguities themselves, the *pars secunda* dramatises the individual fall into psychological confusion—and how this reveals a more fundamental, spiritual decline. The Yeoman launches into another narrative entirely, telling a new, self-contained tale about alchemy—one with, as Grennen notes, a seemingly “factitious” relationship with the rest of the poem.²⁰ A priest, suggested to have a taste for wealth, is visited by a “false chanon” (VIII 1022) who offers to “teche pleynly the manere / How I kan werken in philosophie [alchemy]” (VIII 1057–8). This canon cons the priest, faking transmutation using various sleight-of-hand tricks; exploiting the priest’s curiosity and greed, the canon ultimately strips him of “al the good / Which that I have” (VIII 1376–7). Unlike the parts before and after, the *pars secunda*

¹⁹ Jennifer L. Sisk, “Religion, Alchemy, and Nostalgic Idealism in Fragment VIII of the *Canterbury Tales*”, *SAC*, 32 (2010), 151–177. Cf. Joanna Beall, “Spiritual Gold: Verbal and Spiritual Alchemy in *The Pardoner’s Tale* and *The Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale*”, *Medieval Perspectives*, 15, 1 (2000), 35–41.

²⁰ Grennen, “The Canon’s Yeoman and the Cosmic Furnace”, 225.

has a strong theological emphasis. This canon, unlike the canon of the *prima pars*, is not a credulous seeker but a Mephistophelian tempter, a “devel of helle” (VIII 1238) profiting from human fallibility. The process by which the canon encourages the priest’s vice of avarice is described in terms which closely resemble the Parson’s account of “contritioun”, where he explains how “man is moeved to do synne” by “consentyng of affecciou”, and “resoun” may be powerless to resist “delit of the thought, for delit is ful perilous” (*ParT X* 291–93). As the Parson explains, “there is no deedly synne that it nas first in mannes thought and after that in his delit, and so forth into consentynge and into dede...swiche wikked delites and wikked thoghtes been subtile bigileres of hem that shullen be dampned” (*ParT X* 296–98). The canon of the *pars secunda* embodies and figures, at least partially, this interior process of lapse into sin. The Yeoman comments,

Ful sooth it is that swich profred servyse
 Stynketh, as witnessen thise olde wyse,
 And that ful soone I wol it verifie
 In this chanoun, roote of al trecherie,
 That everemoore *delit* hath and gladnesse—
 Swich feendly thoghtes in his herte impresse—
 How Cristes peple he may to meschief brynge.
 God kepe us from his false dissymulynge! (*CYT VIII* 1066–73)

“Delit” invokes Augustinian *cupiditas*, the selfish love of temporal, worldly joys as opposed to *caritas*—transcendent, God-like, selfless love.²¹ Chaucer frequently attends to the Boethian cousin of this idea, the *Consolation of Philosophy*’s distinction between the “false felicity” of worldly appetites and “true felicity” we can obtain by turning our

²¹ On ‘delit’ and cupidity, see D.W. Robertson, Jr., *A Preface to Chaucer: Studies in Medieval Perspectives* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1962), pp. 81–111, 388–477.

reason away from the material world and its imperfect, time-bound goods, and towards God, the eternal *summum bonum*.²²

The *Parson's Tale* offers a more specific definition, which Chaucer takes from the *Summa de Paenitentia* of Raimundus de Pennaforte (c. 1224–1226): here “delit of the thought” is Chaucer’s translation of *delectatione cogitationis*, the consensual dwelling of the reason on sinful desires otherwise known as morose delectation (*morosa delectatio*).²³ The Parson makes it clear that sin is never an isolated instance but a habitual process: sin spreads like wildfire first in the individual soul, then, through sinful deeds, in the world, tempting others to sin in turn. By “coveitise” and “concupiscence” the individual is moved psychologically to sin (these are “cleped the norrissyng of synne”, *ParT* X 337); sins may then “multiplie in a man so greetly that [the love of] thilke worldly thynges that he loveth...is as greet in his herte as the love of God, or moore”. (X 365). Then, the sinner’s example inspires others to likewise “consent” to “delit of the thought” and fall from grace: they become “newe shepherdes that leten hir sheep wityngly go renne to the wolf...Of this comth poverte and destruccioun, bothe of spiritueel and temporeel thynges”. (*ParT* X 720–1). This process is what the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale's pars secunda* enacts. The priest is this diabolical new shepherd; the “root” of sin is in him in

²² *Cons* III.pr.10. All direct Boethius quotations are from Boethius, *Tractates, De Consolatione Philosophiae*, trans. H.F. Stewart and E.K. Rand, Loeb Classical Library 74 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1918). On the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale's* Boethian symbolism, see Grenberg, “Boethian Wisdom”, 38–46.

²³ On morose delectation in Catholic theology see *ST* I-II.74.a.6. Richard Newhauser, “The Parson’s Tale”, in *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales I*, ed. Robert M. Correale and Mary Hamel (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2002), pp. 531, 543–567. As Wenzel has shown, this was a mediated and multi-sourced borrowing, drawing on a network of penitential manuals and ‘pocket theology’ texts, including Richard of Wetheringsett’s *Summa de Officio Sacerdotis*, the Latin treatise on the vices referred to as *Quoniam*, Grosseteste’s *Templum Domini*, among many others. Siegfried Wenzel, “Notes on the *Parson's Tale*”, *ChauR*, 16, 3 (1982), 237–56.

thought and deed (“feendly thoghtes in his herte impresse”), and now he is an agent of the “devel”, hellbent on bringing “Cristes peple” to “meschief” (*CYT* VIII 1071–2).

Immediately after describing the canon in this way, the Yeoman moves onto his target, the priest:

O sely preest! O sely innocent!
 With coveitise anon thou shalt be blent!
 O gracelees, ful blynd is thy conceite,
 No thyng ne artow war of the deceite
 Which that this fox yshapen hath to thee!
 His wily wrenches thou ne mayst nat flee.
 Wherefore, to go to the conclusion,
 That refereth to thy confusion,
 Unhappy man, anon I wol me hye
 To tellen thyn unwit and thy folye... (VIII 1076–85)

Blindness, being spiritually or metaphysically “blent”, unifies the poem’s first and second parts. As we saw, the *prima pars* ends with a lament for the fallibility of human judgement, our inability to discern true gold from false: it is suggested that the contingency that makes “Every man semeth a Salomon” (VIII 961) is not *essential* to language but caused by humanity’s inability to interpret truth, the limitedness of our powers of “discrecioun” (VIII 613). “Blered is myn ye” (VIII 730) complains the Yeoman; the pursuit of alchemy has “[made] his wittes thynne” (VIII 740). Here, the *pars secunda* offers a theological rubric to interpret this process, and its wider implications. The priest’s “coveitise”, his concupiscent inclination to worldly desire, gives way to a myopic fixation on material, worldly delights at the expense of the true felicity of the *summum bonum*, and the enlightened perspective on the world and its vicissitudes offered by union with the “devyne thought” (*Bo* V.pr.4.166).²⁴ The covetous soul is figuratively blinded, as fixation on mutable and material goods distracts from the

²⁴ See Grenberg, “Boethian Wisdom”, 38.

sole transcendent spiritual Good—just as the Yeoman’s faculties were blinded in the literal sense. This material/spiritual dichotomy is encoded in the word “good”, used as a recurring pun in the *pars secunda*. When the priest laments the loss of “al the good / Which that I have” (VIII 1376–77), he refers literally to his material goods (his invested money) and metaphorically to Boethius’ Neoplatonic notion that, as emanations of the divine intelligence, created beings are called to participate in the *summum bonum*.²⁵ He is also invoking another dichotomous set of goods: in prioritising the worldly “goodes of fortune” (*ParT* X 453) he has lost the “goods of grace” (X 454)—that is, the heightened potential for good works and good judgement engendered by the soul’s habit of grace. The Parson lists some of these “goods of grace”: “science, power to suffre spiritueel travaille, benignitee, vertuous contemplacioun, withstondynge of temptacioun, and semblable thynges”. (X 454). The idea of habitual grace as source of intellectual capacity which may be diminished by concupiscence has profound significance for the *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale* and for the *Canterbury Tales* more broadly. As I will show, it is one that carries associations with alchemy for both Chaucer and Langland.

The main narrative of the *pars secunda* ends by invoking the Parson’s model of habitual sin and the multiplication of societal instability. Sin first spread in the canon by “delit” of “feendly thoghtes”, leading sinfulness in his own soul to “multiplie”, leading him to spread sinfulness in the community, to lead Christ’s people to mischief. This process of sinful proliferation inverts the Catholic theological mainstay known as gratuitous grace (*gratia gratis data*).²⁶ Unlike sanctifying grace (*gratia gratum faciens*), a

²⁵ *Cons* II, pr. 5.70–104.

²⁶ On sanctifying and gratuitous grace, see Robert Reginald Masterson, “Sacramental Grace: Modes of Sanctifying Grace”, *The Thomist*, 18, 3 (1955), 311–72.

permanent condition of the soul that provides us with the disposition to perform good works (and thus to obtain justification), gratuitous grace is a supernatural capacity bestowed actively by God so that an individual may inspire others, guiding them towards cooperation with their own habit of grace.²⁷ Crucial to this model is the concept of “cooperation” (or “consentyng”). Sanctifying grace is an innate potential for salvation with which the individual must freely cooperate: it opens the door to salvation by raising up the human mind beyond its natural capacity, showing the alternative to vice and cupidity—virtue and charity. The individual must still walk through the door of their own free will. Through this cooperation of will and grace, good habits are formed, and good works follow. But the inverse is possible. The gift of sanctifying grace may be diminished by the formation of bad habits, “consentyng” with our innate call to selfish vice, our concupiscence. This is how the “sely preest” becomes progressively “graceless” and loses both his goods of fortune and of grace. The next stage is ‘gratuitous’ sin, inspiring others to indulge the “delit of the thought” and accrue concupiscent habits, becoming “blent” to the higher good illuminated by sanctifying grace, thus “multiplying” sin like a contagion in the community. José Saramago’s novel *Blindness* imagines an epidemic of contagious blindness in a city, leading society to collapse into disorder and violence; the neighbourly threads of charity are swiftly severed, and things fall apart.²⁸ The *pars secunda* of the *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale* imagines something very similar. “With coveitise anon” the “sely preest” is “blent”, rendered incapable of seeing through the con artist’s trickery, and blinded to the way to friendship with God by runaway

²⁷ Ibid. Cf. Joseph Pohle, “Sanctifying Grace”. In *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 6 (New York: Appleton, 1909). <https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/06701a.htm> [Accessed 15/07/2021].

²⁸ José Saramago, *Blindness*, trans. Giovanni Pontiero (London: Harvill, 1999).

concupiscence. Finally, his goods of fortune and grace thoroughly diminished, he becomes a vector for the contagion himself, promising to “multiply” the sins alchemy represents (not limited to avarice and *curiositas*) in the community:

Lo, thus byjaped and bigiled was he!
 Thus maketh he his introduccioun,
 To brynge folk to hir destruccioun. (*CYT VIII* 1385–87)

The *prima pars* imagines the epistemic universe of literacy and science once this diminishing virus has multiplied exponentially in the *civitas terrena*, like Saramago’s blindness.²⁹ No matter how many books they read or how much “clergial” (VIII 752) jargon they accumulate, the alchemists’ search can never “conclude”—not because alchemy is sheer fraud, but because of the collective decline of individual wits, community-wide lapse into a “graceless, ful blynd” state of baffled wit and “blered...ye”. The Yeoman describes this state of onto-epistemological exile as perpetual, fruitless seeking:

I warne yow wel, it is to seken evere.
 That futur temps hath maad men to dissevere,
 In trust therof, from al that evere they hadde. (VIII 874–6)

The alchemists’ failure to master “transmutacioun” reflects “This wrecched worldes transmutacioun”; their plight reveals a world “Withouten ordre or wys discrecioun” (*Fortune*, 1–3). The diminished minds of the alchemists, caused by the bad habit of “coveitise”, expresses the world’s decline from being “stedfast and stable” to an “up-so-doun” state where “Trouthe is put down, resoun is holden fable”; “what causeth this but wilful wrecchednesse?” (*Lak*, 1–15). “Through covetyse is blent discrecioun” (*Lak*, 18).

²⁹ On *civitas terrena* and the connection between contingent signs, diverse opinion, and social fragmentation in Augustinian thought, see St. Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God*, II.xi.1, II.xv.4–6, II.xix.1, 6–7, 17, 27–28.

There is a coherent vision of personal and universal decline, in which sin and stupidity are in lockstep, animating the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*—one that is not rendered any less serious by its somewhat conventional trappings of Boethian terminology.

2.3 Standing on Unsteady Shoulders: *Obscuritas, perspicuitas* and the ends of philosophy

These ethical and epistemological subtexts have been outlined by others—although the hermeneutic unity of the *prima pars* and *pars secunda* has not been argued before along these lines. What remains is to account for the poem's final, concluding section, which brings this harmony to full realisation, synthesising the disparate and seemingly self-contained visions of the first and second parts. I would argue that the poem ultimately resolves not, as Fyler has it, in a vision of “the decay of language” itself, where the arbitrariness of signs causes a problematic contingency of truth, but of a collective spiritual decay which has misreading, misunderstanding and “confusioun” as its main psychological symptoms. It is not just that ‘the world’ or ‘language’ are lapsing further and further into linguistic degeneration by some inexorable historic process, a super-human widening gyre. The disease Chaucer diagnoses is at least as psychological as it is semiological. Fyler's view, while containing many important insights, is unduly anagogical: for him the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* is part of a “coda to the *Canterbury Tales*, in which Chaucer takes us out of the realm of language and all other human things, to the silence of death and eternity”.³⁰ This ascribes a rather fatalistic theology to Chaucer, in which human beings are powerless against the progressive decline of language, the terminal disseverance of “word” and “dede” making the return to “Adamic”

³⁰ Fyler, *Language and the Declining World*, p. 157.

perfection and univocity impossible. Within this frame, the end stage of the *Canterbury Tales* is passage into “the absolute simplicity of supernatural truth, where no words are necessary and human language cannot follow”.³¹ Yet there are numerous clues throughout the *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale* that the failures of modern alchemists are not attributable to some extrinsic decay of signification turning alchemy into an indiscernible mystery, but to individual losses of grace-infused mental faculties accumulating en masse in society, conveying a basically neo-Augustinian view of the relationship between grace and *scientia*.³²

For Chaucer, the fault is not in language but in our intellective souls, when the habit of sanctifying grace is diminished by runaway concupiscence.

This is apparent from the start of the poem’s conclusion. The Yeoman says,

This multiplying blent so many oon
 That in good feith I trowe that it bee
 The cause grettest of swich scarsetee.
 Philosophres speken so mystily
 In this craft that men kan nat come therby,
 For any wit that men han now-a-dayes. (CYT VIII 1391–96)

For Fyler, this shows how “the opacity of jargon prevents even its users from achieving any clear sight”.³³ But it seems clear that the Yeoman’s emphasis is not on language itself but human minds; not language, but collective “wit”, are what’s decaying. In saying that “Philosophres speken so mystily”, the Yeoman is not complaining about the

³¹ Ibid.

³² The mid-to-late fourteenth century in scholastic philosophy has been characterised as a “Neo-Augustinian” Golden Age, corresponding to the backlash against the earlier turn towards semi-Pelagian models of will and grace as well as nominalist theories of contingent language. The example par excellence is Bradwardine’s treatise *De Causa Dei contra Pelagium* (c. mid-1340s). See Aers, *Salvation and Sin*, especially chs. 1–3; Robertson, Jr., *A Preface to Chaucer*, pp. 286–390.

³³ Fyler, *Language and the Declining World*, p. 172–3.

terminological inexactitude of ancient *auctores*, or the accumulation of non-referential terms; rather, he laments the diminished state of human science. Where once readers may have been capable of interpreting the difficult writings of alchemical *auctores*, “now-a-days” no one has the capacity, because of the process of individual and collective blindness set out in the *pars secunda*.

This reference to the misty speech of old philosophers invokes a familiar idea for medieval readers: the topos of the obscurity of the ancients. One of its most famous instances may be found in the Prologue to the *Lais* of Marie de France:

Custume fu as anciens,
 Ceo tesmoine Preciens,
 Es liveres ke jadis feseient
 Assez oscurement diseient
 Pur ceus ki a venir esteient
 E ki aprendre les deveient,
 Ki puessent gloser la lettre
 E de lur sen le surplus mettre.
 Le philesophe le saveient,
 E par eus memes entendeient,
 Cum plus trespasserunt le tens,
 E plus serreint sutil de sens
 E plus se savereient garder
 De ceo ki ert a trespasser.

(It was the custom of the ancients, as Priscian bears witness, in the books that they once used to make, to speak quite obscurely, for those who were to come and who would have to learn them, who would be able to interpret the letter and supply the rest through their understanding. The philosophers knew this, and understood by their own experience how, *the more people passed through time, the more subtle their intelligence would be*, and the more they would know how to guard themselves from that which was to be passed over.)³⁴

³⁴ Claire M. Waters, ed. and trans., *The Lais of Marie de France: Text and Translation* (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2018), pp. 48–49, ll. 9–23.

Marie begins her book by invoking the idea summed up in a widespread motto associated with Priscian: *quanto iuniores, tanto perspicaciores*, the young see more clearly.³⁵

Alchemy, Chaucer sees, is the perfect foil to this progress narrative: a science whose legitimacy is attested by trustworthy sources, the ancient philosophers, that has been lost to human learning by the failure of modern readers to make sense of these old books. For Marie's "oscurement diseient" see Chaucer's "speken so mystily"; the idea refers back, ultimately, to Augustine's concept of *obscuritas*, a stylistic register of "useful and wholesome obscurity" ("utili et salubri obscuritate dixerunt").³⁶

In *De Doctrina Christiana*, Augustine describes two registers of eloquence involved in Christian learning: *obscuritas* and *perspicuitas*. He draws this distinction in part to caution contemporary Christian teachers against imitating the style of Scripture: "the authors whose divinely-inspired writings constitute the canon" exhibit the "kind of eloquence...more becoming in old age" and "a kind of eloquence that is becoming in men who justly claim the highest authority, and who are evidently inspired of God".³⁷ This type of eloquence, *obscuritas*, is underwritten by divine inspiration, and it humbles and predisposes the reader to receive God's truth by a kind of hermeneutic test of faith, "shroud[ing] the meaning in the thickest darkness".³⁸ The stylistic ambiguities of

³⁵ On Priscian's "philosophical" approach to grammar and its influence on medieval hermeneutics, mediated by commentary from Alcuin, John Scotus Eriugena, and William of Conches among others, see *Medieval Grammar and Rhetoric: Language Arts and Literary Theory, AD 300–1475*, ed. Rita Copeland and Ineke Sluiter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 16–22.

³⁶ St. Augustine of Hippo, *De Doctrina Christiana*, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. Philip Schaff, First series, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1886–1890), IV.viii.22. https://ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf102/npnf102.v.IV_1.8.html [Accessed 15/07/2021].

³⁷ *Ibid.*, IV.vi.9.

³⁸ IV.vi.7.

Scripture were “divinely arranged for the purpose of subduing pride by toil, and of preventing a feeling of satiety in the intellect, which generally holds in small esteem what is discovered without difficulty”. But this virtuous *obscuritas*, Augustine says, must not be imitated by modern expositors. Instead, Christian teachers should practice the kind of eloquence “that is more becoming in youth”: clarity of expression, *perspicuitatis*. A far cry from the progress narrative of *quanto iuniores, tanto perspicaciores*, Augustine thinks rather that the *iuniores*, lacking the divinely-inspired *auctoritas* of the canonical authors, cannot practice their “wholesome obscurity” without muddying the waters. To prevent widespread misinterpretation and disagreement on the meanings of Scripture, Christian teachers should “make it their first and chief aim to be understood, using as far as possible such clearness of speech that...he will be very dull that does not understand them”.

Augustine outlines the potential for disarray and conflict caused by the diversity of interpretation, approaching it from two vantage-points. This potential for confusion is caused, in part, by the Babelic fall of language and the contingency of temporal signs: “It has been found impossible to make...signs common to all nations owing to the sin of discord among men...that celebrated tower which was built to reach to heaven was an indication of this arrogance of spirit; and the ungodly men concerned in it justly earned punishment of having not their minds only, but their tongues besides, thrown into confusion and discordance”.³⁹ Fyler’s emphasis on the “decay of language” certainly has an authoritative basis in Augustine, for whom the *obscuritas* of Scripture is meant to humble the reader, diminishing their concupiscent pride of life (*superbia vitae* or *ambitio*

³⁹ II.iv.5.

saeculi). Yet it is not the contingency of language but the contingencies of reading that are Augustine's focus in his account of *obscuritas*. The issue is not that language is becoming more ambiguous over time; rather, it is that modern teachers and readers lack the secret ingredient to make *obscuritas* "wholesome" rather than confusing: direct divine inspiration. The "youth" of modernity are at a disadvantage compared with the "old age" of the canon simply because the latter were inscribing truth derived directly from God, while modern Christian teachers are tasked with interpreting and expositing what they wrote: direct, grace-infused writings of truth versus mediated, temporal accounts of that truth. The onus is on the Christian teacher to be perspicacious in their speech to guide readers to correct understanding of Scripture and its *obscuritas*.

Scepticism about the ability of the *iuniores*, "men...now-a-days" (*CYT VIII* 1396), to decode the obscurity of the ancients under their own steam was baked into mainstream medieval Christianity. Scholars glossed Priscian's maxim *quanto iuniores, tanto perspicaciores* under the influence of Augustine's notion that the ancient authors possessed an inner compass of inspiration guiding them to truth, one that modern readers might lack. William of Conches wrote in his *Glosae Super Priscianum*, "sumus relatores et expositores veterum, non inventores novorum" (we are relators and expositors of the ancients, not inventors of the new), leading naturally to the famous *sententia* associated with Bernard of Chartres: we are as dwarves on the shoulders of giants. In his *Metalogicon*, John of Salisbury writes,

Dicebat Bernardus Carnotensis nos esse quasi nanos gigantium humeris incidentes, ut possimus plura eis et remotiora videre, non utique proprii visus acumine, aut eminentia corporis, sed quia in altum subvehimur et extollimur magnitudine gigantea.

(Bernard of Chartres used to compare us to dwarfs perched on the shoulders of giants. He pointed out that we see more and farther than our predecessors, not because we have keener vision or greater height, but because we are lifted up and borne aloft on their gigantic stature.)⁴⁰

The origin of this metaphor is uncertain, although Jeaneau and Hunt point to a seminal instance in the second redaction of William of Conches' *Glosae*.⁴¹ What is clear, as Hunt points out, is that within twelfth century humanism there were two related but distinct currents of thought about modern readers and ancient texts, indebted to Priscian's idea of the perspicacity of the moderns, and Augustine's idea of the obscurity of the ancients. One of these (represented by John of Salisbury, Bernard, and William) is a relatively optimistic progress narrative: although "the revelation of truth, *rerum veritas*, was an historical and relative process", the "*novi magistri*", Priscian's *iuniores*, "could improve on the works of their predecessors without, of course, being independent of them".⁴² The other is more circumspect about the capabilities of the moderns compared with their towering forebears. The prose prologue to Alan of Lille's *Anticlaudianus* finds the *moderni* lacking compared with the *antiqui*: Alain asks that his poem not be denigrated despite suffering from the "roughness (*ruditas*) of the moderns" ("quod modernorum redolet ruditatem"), because it is properly grounded in the works of the ancients; that is, it

⁴⁰ John of Salisbury, *The Metalogicon of John of Salisbury: A Twelfth-Century Defense of the Verbal and Logical Arts of the Trivium*, ed. and trans. Daniel Doyle MacGarry (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1955), p. 167.

⁴¹ Edouard Jeaneau, "'Nani gigantum humeris insidentes': Essai d'interprétation de Bernard de Chartres", *Vivarium*, 5, 1 (1967), 79–99; Tony Hunt, "Glossing Marie de Grance", *Romanische Forschungen*, 86, 3 (1974), 405–7; Umberto Eco, "Foreword", in Robert K. Merton, *On the Shoulders of Giants: A Shandean Postscript, the Post-Italianate Edition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. xxv. See also Mortimer Donovan, "Priscian and the Obscurity of the Ancients", *Speculum*, 36, 1 (1961), 75–80; Mary-Louise Zanoni, "'Ceo Testimoine Preciens': Priscian and the Prologue to the *Lais* of Marie de France", *Traditio*, 36 (1980), 407–415.

⁴² Hunt, "Glossing Marie de France", 406–7.

is not youthful innovation but humble imitation that may generate worthy new writings.⁴³ For some, the “dwarves on the shoulders of giants” image reflects the new heights and further sights of modern scholars; for others, it emphasises the diminutive stature of the *moderni* compared with the venerable *antiqui*.⁴⁴ Marie de France’s invocation of Priscian seems to evince the former, humanist optimism: the subtler intelligence (“plus serreint sutil de sense”) of future readers will empower them to “gloser la lettre / E de lur sen le surplus mettre” (interpret the letter, and supply the rest through their understanding).⁴⁵ Conversely, the Yeoman’s disdain for “any wit that men han *now-a-dayes*”, and the resulting impossibility of decoding the misty speech of the old philosophers, invokes that other, more pessimistic view of modern *ruditas*.

The *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale*’s conclusion has two sections: an explicit *moralitas* (from VIII 1388–1427), followed by—unusually—some final exempla derived from alchemical treatises (VIII 1428–1481). The *moralitas* is dense with the multivalent alchemical puns that Chaucer has established throughout the first and second parts: “This *multiplying* blent so many...*Philosophres* speken so mystily...A man may lightly lerne...To *multiplie*, and bring his *good* to naught” (VIII 1391–1401). The keyword “multiplie”, used four times in the *prima pars* but never in the *pars secunda*, is reprised in this conclusion, where it is deployed four times to ironic effect. “Multiplie” was one of several terms for alchemy in the Middle English vernacular, derived from one of its procedures (as with “transmutacioun”). Yet throughout the poem, as we have seen, “multiplie” has been tightly collocated with vocabularies of misinterpretation, discord,

⁴³ Alanus de Insulis, *Anticlaudianus* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010), prol., p. 55, l.17.

⁴⁴ See e.g. Kent Kraft, “Modernism in the Twelfth Century”, *Comparative Literature Studies*, 18, 3 (1981), 287–95.

⁴⁵ Waters, pp. 48–49.

and semiotic confusion, such that the term clearly gestures to “multiplicacioun” of a more metaphysical sort—the multiplication of truths in the world of communication, and the multiplication of sin in the individual soul.⁴⁶ Likewise, “philosophre” is used six times in the conclusion, compared with two instances in the *prima pars*; in the *pars secunda*, “philosophie” replaces “multiplicacioun” as the main byword for alchemy, with three uses. Again, Chaucer invites us to read the term polysemously: in the *pars secunda*, “philosophie” refers at once to the canon’s mastery of specific alchemical practices, as well as to the “maistrie” (VIII 1060) of rhetorical sleights and obscure, uncommon knowledge that allows him to *appear* (“wexe” VIII 837) as a true “philosophre” to the blemished eye of the “sely preest”. A “philosophre” is both an alchemist in the restricted sense and a *philosopher* in the broader sense: one with privileged access to a kind of transmitted knowledge, limited to those with the power to interpret the obscurity of the ancients. Chaucer’s emphasis is ethical and epistemological: if “men...now-a-dayes” cannot make sense of the ancients by their own powers, they must trust in the select few mediators of the “philosophres”, the compilers and explicators that Augustine warned must speak with absolute clarity and simplicity, to prevent confusion spreading in the community.

The nefarious canon of the *pars secunda* personifies this process: lacking first-hand knowledge of the secrets of alchemy, the “sely preest” cannot correctly interpret even the evidence of his eyes when the canon performs sleight-of-hand tricks; the

⁴⁶ The polysemy of ‘multiplicacioun’ allows for many other readings beyond this chapter’s scope. For instance, Seal argues for the poem as a parable of perverted procreation, positing alchemy as a sinful “alternative mode of creation”. Samantha Katz Seal, “The *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale*: Invention, Discovery, Problem-Solving, and Innovation”, in *The Open Access Companion to the Canterbury Tales*. <<https://opencanterburytales.dsl.lsu.edu/cyt1/>> [Accessed 21/08/2021].

canon's exhortations to "preeve" "by experience", to "seen at ye" (VIII 1059, 1152, 1212) constantly invoke this idea—that individual *experientia*, the evidence of empirical sense-data, is inadequate to discern the truth of worldly phenomena. The "sely preest" lacked the capacities required to see through the canon's fraud: the powers of "discrecioun" made possible by grace (VIII 1077–78), and the first-hand knowledge of alchemy concealed in the works of "philosophres" who "speken so mystily". "Factitious" as the narrative link between parts *prima* and *secunda* may be, there is a clear structural logic informing the poem's sequence.⁴⁷ *Pars secunda* demonstrates, in a thought-experiment *secundum imaginationem*, the *moralitas* of the *prima pars*:

Every man semeth a Salomon.
 But al thyng which that shineth as the gold
 Nis nat gold, as that I have herd told;
 Ne every appul that is fair as eye
 Ne is nat good, what so men clappe or crye.
 Right so, lo, fareth it amonges us:
 He that semeth the wiseste, by Jhesus,
 Is moost fool, when it cometh to the preef;
 And he that semeth trewest is a theef.
 That shul ye knowe, er that I fro yow wende,
 By that I of my tale have maad an ende. (VIII 961–71)

Taken in isolation, the first and third parts of the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* invite a conclusion like Fyler's: language itself is progressively decaying in the postlapsarian world, leading to a "multiplicacioun" of confusion and disagreement in the secular world; "word" and "dede" are spiralling ever farther apart. But the *pars secunda* frames this problem as a psychological and spiritual one first and foremost, a symptom of runaway individual concupiscence leading to a collective dimming of our faculties of judgement.

⁴⁷ Grennen, "The Canon's Yeoman and the Cosmic Furnace", 225.

Knitting together the poem's polysemous keywords, the concluding section begins by affirming that the themes of the *prima pars* and *pars secunda* are fundamentally linked. The "multiplicacioun" of speech (the contingency of language) and the "multiplicacioun" of "coveitise", the loss of "good", are not independent: they are different vantage-points on the same theological issue. So, the concluding *moralitas* reiterates both in order, first lamenting the spread of disagreement and confusion ("Bitwixe men and gold ther is debaat / So ferforth that unnethes is ther noon" VIII 1389–90) and the spread of foundationless speech, words with no real-world referential use ("They mowe wel chiteren as doon jayes", VIII 1397), before recounting the individual spiritual decline that is the kindling for this wildfire:

Lo! swich a lucre is in this lusty game...
 [That] maken folk for to purchacen curses
 Of hem that han hir good therto ylent.
 O, fy, for shame! They that han been brent,
 Allas, kan they nat flee the fires heete?
 [...]
 So faren ye that multiplie, I seye.
 If that youre eyen kan nat seen aright,
 Looke that youre mynde lakke nocht his sight. (VIII 1402–19)

The origin point of the "confusioun" spreading in the "up-so-down" world is not *linguistic* but *psychological* "lak of stedfastnesse"; indulging habits of "coveitise" leading to the diminished gift of grace, and concomitantly, leading individuals to "lakke" their potential for keen "sight". The ethical and epistemological dimensions of Chaucer's 'declining world' are not linearly sequential, but mutually reciprocal. Chaucer's inflection on modern perspicacity and ancient *obscuritas* is decidedly theological, using the example of alchemy as metonymy for worldly endeavours in general, rendered futile by the universal spread of bad judgement: "*Through coveitise is blent discrecioun*" (*Lak*, 18).

2.4 Love, Labour, Sloth: Alchemy for Gower and Langland

Chaucer's use of fiction to map out this process is unique, but he is not alone among fourteenth century English poets in relating alchemy to the themes of the declining world or the ancients versus the moderns. In Gower's *Confessio Amantis* and Langland's *Piers Plowman*, alchemy is referenced as part of broader discussions of sin and vice. This is where the similarities between these two end, however. Gower's position is ambiguous: in Book IV of the *Confessio Amantis*, Genius' exposition of the seven sins turns to Sloth; surprisingly, alchemy is included not as an example of Sloth, but of Labour, its antitype, the virtue by which all human knowledge was first obtained.⁴⁸ Much of the most ironic and thematically important language from the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* has a precursor here, and so do the particular themes of the *prima pars* and *pars secunda*.⁴⁹ Gower's Genius begins by invoking the correspondence of the human wit and divine grace in philosophical discovery—both in general, and in the specific case of alchemy:

Thurgh mannes wit and goddes grace
The route of Philosophres wise
Controeveden be sondri wise

⁴⁸ See Stephanie L. Batkie, "'Of the parfite medicine': *Merita Perpetuata* in Gower's Vernacular Alchemy", in *John Gower, Trilingual Poet: Language, Translation and Tradition*, ed. Elisabeth Dutton, with John Hines and R.F. Yeager (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2010), pp. 157–168.

⁴⁹ It is widely agreed that the first recension of the *Confessio Amantis* was likely in circulation before Chaucer's composition of the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*. The first recension is distinguished by a dedication to Richard II and an address to Chaucer, both of which were replaced in later revisions. Fisher identifies three versions of the first recension, of which the earliest have been dated to ca. 1384–1389. John H. Fisher, *John Gower: Moral Philosopher and Friend of Chaucer* (London: Methuen, 1964), pp. 303–309. For an overview of issues in dating the extant MSS of *Confessio Amantis*, see Wim Lindeboom, "Rethinking the Recensions of the *Confessio Amantis*", *Viator*, 40, 2 (2009), 319–348. It is generally agreed that the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, a later addition to the *Canterbury Tales*, belongs to the 1390s; on the basis of the poem's rich lexical ironies and parodic narratorial resemblances, I agree with Biggs that Chaucer is likely responding directly to Gower's *Nota de Alconomia*. Frederick M. Biggs, *Chaucer's Decameron and the Origin of the Canterbury Tales* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2017), p. 34.

Ferst forto gete [metal] out of Myne,
And after forto trie and fyne.⁵⁰

With “gret diligence” the first philosophers “founden thilke experience” the science of multiplication “[w]hich cleped is Alconomie”. (CA IV.2457–9). The emphasis on *experimentum* and empirical *experientia* is shared by the Canon’s Yeoman, but already a point of difference is emerging: Gower frequently refers to alchemy by its proper name, “Alconomie”, framing “multiplicacioun” and transmutation as predicates of this named subject—subsidiary processes whose substance is a discrete entity, with its own signifier. That Chaucer never actually *names* alchemy (with one partial and ironic exception—referring to *pars secunda*’s fraudulent canon as “alkamystre”, CYT VIII 1204) is a crucial point that is often neglected. By allowing alchemy’s more broadly suggestive predicates (“multiplicacioun”, “philosophie”, “transmutacioun”) to stand in for its proper name, Chaucer heavily implies that in his story, alchemy itself is a metonymic stand-in for more general concerns (“multiplicacioun” and “philosophie” at large). It also inscribes the final, key point of the tale’s conclusion—that the secret of alchemy has been lost to the world because its name has been effaced by God himself. I discuss this important ending by way of conclusion; here, it is important to note that the germ of the *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale*’s theological and epistemological themes is present in the *Confessio Amantis*.

Rather than dwelling on the spiritual significance of alchemy, Genius begins a lengthy *enumeratio* of alchemical jargon and processes—a blueprint for the Yeoman’s confused, nonlinear, and long-winded “rehersaille” (VIII 852) of alchemical knowledge in the *prima pars*. The Yeoman’s breathless list of exotic terminology, blasted at the

⁵⁰ John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, IV.2451–56. All Gower quotations from *The English Works Of John Gower: Edited From The Manuscripts, With Introduction, Notes And Glossary*, ed. G.C. Macaulay, vol. 1 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1900).

reader without a hint of explanatory context, has little referential value, and the Yeoman makes clear that, in any event, he cannot confirm the veracity of his knowledge because he is illiterate, and his memory of these things has been compromised by his own

“thynne[d]” wits (VIII 741):

Ther is also ful many another thyng
 That is unto oure craft apertenynge.
 Though I by ordre hem nat reherce kan,
 By cause that I am a lewed man,
 Yet wol I telle hem as they come to mynde,
 Thogh I ne kan nat sette hem in hir kynde:
 As boole armonyak, verdegrees, boras,
 And sondry vessels maad of erthe and glas,
 Oure urynales and oure descensories,
 Violes, crosletz, and sublymatories,
 Cucurbites and alambikes eek...
 Watres rubifyng, and boles galle,
 Arsenyk, sal armonyak, and brymstoon... (VIII 784–98)

The Yeoman goes on in this vein for dozens more lines. As Fyler says, this “logorrhea” is “out of order and incoherently presented”; for Grennen, it is a parody of rhetorical *distinctio*, and “one might plead that [it] should be indicated by some word such as *confusio*”.⁵¹ At issue in this passage is not the stuff of alchemy—this bundle of names, lacking a reference frame, tells us little about it—but the Yeoman himself, his “blered ye” and “wittes thynne” reflected in the psychological texture of his narration. He is not only word-drunk, forgetful, and error-prone, he is also highly attention deficit, interrupting his own interruptions, breaking from this *confusio* to pronounce a moral ‘sentence’ before being suddenly struck by yet more fragments of contextless knowledge:

A! Nay! Lat be; the philosophres stoon,

⁵¹ Fyler, *Language and the Declining World*, p. 173; Grennen, “The Canon’s Yeoman and the Cosmic Furnace”, 238.

Elixer clept, we sechen faste echoon... (VIII 862–3)

The psychological verisimilitude of this narrating subject allows Chaucer to inscribe the epistemic consequences of “blent discrecioun” in the basic aesthetic textures of the *prima pars*, before explicating that process in the action of the *pars secunda*. This chapter has suggested that the purpose of the Yeoman’s wayward tour is to comically exemplify the poem’s unifying theme: the diminished “wit that men han now-a-dayes”, and its consequences for the reception and dissemination of canonical knowledge. It is also, potentially, a parodic gesture at Gower’s expense: in *Confessio* IV, Genius devotes minimal space to alchemy’s ethical and epistemological significance, instead embarking on a copious list of jargon and technical terms—one that contains many of the turns of phrase whose multivalency Chaucer will go on to exploit. Like the Yeoman, Genius ‘reherces’ “[the] bodies sevene in special / With foure spiritz joynt withal...” (CA IV.2463–4); he relates the macrocosmic correspondence of the metals to the celestial bodies. Gower makes an error that Chaucer seems to pointedly correct: he associates Jupiter with brass, while the Canon’s Yeoman is clear that “Juppiter is tyn” (VIII 828), true to Chaucer’s apparent sources, Al-Razi and the Pseudo-Geber.⁵² Gower’s list cannot quite be called *confusio*, despite its overabundance of technical jargon: Genius makes a good-faith attempt to describe the *processes* of alchemical practice, whereas the Yeoman merely reels off the terminology, and his scant attempts to be more descriptive lapse

⁵² On Gower’s error, and on the ‘unusually positive’ character of his alchemical account in general, see Clare Fletcher, “‘The science of himself is trewe’: Alchemy in John Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*”, *South Atlantic Review*, 79, 3–4 (2014), 118–119. See also George G. Fox, *The Mediaeval Sciences in the Work of John Gower* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1931), p. 121.

almost instantly into more “logorrhea”.⁵³ Genius explains how alchemists should set up their experiments with perfect proportions or else “the remenaunt mai nocht availle” (CA IV.2503):

Bot what man that this werk beginne,
 He mot awaite at every tyde,
 So that nothing be left aside,
 Ferst of the distillacion,
 Forth with the congelacion,
 Solucion, descencion,
 And kepe in his entencion
 The point of sublimacion,
 And forth with calcinacion
 Of veray approbacion
 Do that ther be fixacion
 With tempred hetes of the fyr,
 Til he the parfit Elixir
 Of thilke philosophres ston
 Mai gete, of which that many on
 Of Philosophres whilom write. (CA IV.2510–25)

We might note that this is exactly what happens to the canon at the end of *CYT*'s *prima pars*. While these passages are perhaps no poetic ambrosia, there is a linear and sequential logic that is absent from the equivalent section in the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*:

Oure lampes brennyng bothe nyght and day,
 To brynge aboute oure purpos, if we may;
 Oure fourneys eek of calcinacioun,
 And of watres albificacioun;
 Unslekked lym, chalk, and gleyre of an ey,
 Poudres diverse, ashes, donge, pisse, and cley,
 And diverse fires maad of wode and cole;
 Sal tartre, alkaly, and sal preparat,
 And combust materes and coagulat;

⁵³ Whether or not the jumble of jargon is deliberately ‘logorrheic’ is a matter of debate. Hilberry offers a counter-argument: that the lists are structured to emphasise the euphony and aesthetic appeal of alchemical language. Jane Hilberry, “‘And in Oure Madnesse Everemoore We Rave’: Technical Language in the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*”, *ChauR*, 21, 4 (1987), 435–443.

Cley maad with hors or mannes heer, and oille
 Of tartre, alum glas, berme, wort, and argoille,
 Resalgar, and oure materes enbibyng,
 And eek of oure materes encorporyng,
 And of oure silver citrinacioun,
 Oure cementyng and fermentacioun,
 Oure yngottes, testes, and many mo. (CYT VIII 802–18)

Chaucer transmutes Gower's windy, technical copiousness into the Yeoman's wall of noise; while the latter's vocabulary is accurate, he cannot apply it in any meaningful way—because his diminished “wit” does not “suffise” (VIII 715).

Gower, like Chaucer, invokes the idea that the secret of alchemy, once extant, is now lost. Unlike in the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, however, here it is merely a throwaway idea, mentioned in passing in the midst of an encyclopaedic passage on the philosophers' stones:

It makth multiplicacioun
 Of gold, and the fixacioun
 It causeth, and of his habit
 He doth the werk to be parfit
 Of thilke Elixer which men calle
 Alconomie, as is befalle
 To hem that whilom weren wise.
 Bot now it stant al otherwise;
 Thei speken faste of thilke Ston,
 Bot hou to make it, nou wot non
 After the sothe experience.
 And natheles gret diligence
 Thei setten upon thilke dede,
 And spille more than thei spede;
 For allewey thei finde a lette,
 Which bringeth in poverte and dette
 To hem that riche were afore:
 The lost is had, the lucre is lore,
 To gete a pound thei spenden fyve. (CA IV.2573–91)

Gower and Chaucer would seem to be in broad agreement: the secret of the elixir, which “makth multiplicacioun / Of gold”, has been lost because men are no longer “wise”.

Modern alchemical quests are doomed to lead to “poverté and dette”, the loss of everything invested. Gower’s “To gete a pound thei spenden fyve” is echoed in the Yeoman’s Prologue:

To muchel folk we doon illusioun,
 And borwe gold, be it a pound or two,
 Or ten, or twelve, or manye sommes mo,
 And make hem wenen, at the leeste weye,
 That of a pound we koude make tweye. (*CYT VIII 673–77*)

However, the Yeoman admits that “it is fals”, and “that science is so fer us biforn, / We mowen nat...it overtake...It wole us maken beggars atte last” (*VIII 678–83*). Gower’s Genius, meanwhile, advises similarly:

I not hou such a craft schal thryve
 In the manere as it is used:
 It were betre be refused
 Than forto worchen upon weene
 In thing which stant nocht as thei weene. (*CA IV.2592–6*)

This is as close as Gower comes to making substantive comment on what the loss of alchemy means. There is no attempt to understand *why* the craft was lost, why we are no longer “wise” enough to make sense of it: there is simply the pragmatic advice that since true alchemy is lost, we should decline to invest in it. Given the context of the *Nota de Alconomia* in the poem’s frame narrative, this incurious stance is particularly confusing. Book IV is committed to Genius’ exposition of Sloth, and its subsidiary vices—*tarditas*, *tristitia*, *acedia*—using various exempla from the classics and the Christian canon. In medieval Christianity, Sloth was especially grave among the sins because it does not only lead the individual sinner to “desdeign” (*VIII 2332*) for God’s creation, it also leads

others towards faithless indifference, multiplying itself in the earthly city.⁵⁴ As I discuss further in the following chapter, the *Parson's Tale* provides its own important exposition of this process (*ParT X* 676–726). Gower's Genius is committed to relating all sinfulness to Love, and he explains that Christian *caritas* is the highest virtue “Which hath the vertus forto lede” (*CA IV.2327*). Sloth pertains to Love because “ydelschipe” leads to hatred of “felaschipe” (*IV.2329–30*); Sloth leads naturally to an inward turn to private concupiscence and selfish “delit”; conversely, Labour lends itself to *caritas*, and the benefit of the whole community. Labour reinforces the good habits of *amore caritatis*, which confers both spiritual and material ‘good’ on humanity at large (because, as Gower and Chaucer are agreed, “wit” and “grace” are essentially interconnected). For Genius, modernity has lost the habit of Labour that led antiquity to its major advances:

For we, whiche are now alyve,
 Of hem that besi whylom were,
 Als wel in Scole as elleswhere,
 Mowe every day ensample take,
 That if it were now to make
 Thing which that thei ferst founden oute,
 It scholde nocht be broght aboute.
 Here lyves thanne were longe,
 Here wittes grete, here mihtes stronge,
 Here hertes ful of besinesse,
 Wherof the worldes redinesse
 In bodi bothe and in corage
 Stant evere upon his avantage. (*IV.2346–58*)

⁵⁴ On the medieval development of *acedia* from a particularly monastic affliction to a “chief vice” of humanity at large, see Siegfried Wenzel, “*Acedia* 700–1200”, *Traditio*, 22 (1966), 73–102. See also Morton W. Bloomfield, *The Seven Deadly Sins: An Introduction to the History of a Religious Concept, with Special Reference to Medieval English Literature* (Lansing, MI: Michigan State College Press, 1952), pp. 95–99. For a study of *acedia* in Chaucer and Gower, see Gregory M. Sadlek, “Love, Labor, and Sloth in Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*”, *ChauR*, 26, 4 (1992), 350–68.

The image of dwarves on the shoulders of giants, seeing farther only because of our forebears' stature, is latent in this passage: the modern world's "redinesse...Stant evere upon his avantage". The progression from the humanist optimism of *quanto iuniores tanto perspicaciores* to contempt for the state of human learning "now-a-dayes" is manifest. Compared with the "besi", wise, long-lived ancients, we are suggested to be feckless, indolent, and unhealthy. Crucially, though, Gower does not see this as a hopeless state of affairs: we are not resigned to ceaseless decline. If we follow our wise forebears' example—if we "every day ensample take"—we may re-establish personal habits of "vertu", restore the link between "mannes wit and goddes grace", and collectively reform the state of the earthly city. Gower does not invoke the obscurity of the ancients as Chaucer does, to shore up a vision of (possibly) irreversible spiritual decline. He takes the sting out of this idea's tail. The ancients are not impossibly obscure, nor humanity fundamentally diminished, we have simply fallen into habits of "ydelschipe" that prevent us from recovering the truth of alchemy *for the time being*: "Bot *nou* it stant al otherwise".

Gower's *Nota de Alconomia* is informed by a humanist narrative of potential progress via personal *imitatio* of the ancients. The account of alchemy is one of Genius' "ensample[s]", exemplifying human progress gained by the "besinesse" of the ancient "Philosophres". In this context, the ambiguity of its warning that no "diligence" can bring alchemy to bear fruit is clarified. Genius suggests that if we reform our habits to selfless "labour" then fruits *such as* the old philosophers' findings might be ours. The problem lies in the ethical direction of human agency: modern-day alchemists, motivated by avarice, only reinforce concupiscent habits, and so their craft is both materially and

spiritually fruitless. Gower sees alchemy in-itself as a true and noble science, the fruit of the towering genius of the inspired and hard-working ancients: “The science of himself is trewe” (IV.2598). To Gower, there is nothing contradictory about valorising alchemy as an example of ancient *ingenium*—an aspirational goal of reform through Labour—because its loss, and our loss of “wit” and “grace”, are not necessarily permanent. Gower’s vision of alchemy is one of qualified optimism: not the unfettered faith in progress of *tanto iuniores, quanto perspicaciores*, but a confidence that by heeding “ensample[s]” of lost “vertu” and its fruits, the diminished state of modernity may be remedied if we work hard at it:

If ther be siker eny weie
 To love, thou has seid the beste:
 For who that wolde have al his reste
 And do no travail at the nede,
 It is no resoun that he spede
 In loves cause forto winne;
 For he which dar nothing beginne,
 I not what thing he scholde achieve. (IV.2688–95)

Chaucer exhibits no such optimism about the restoration of true reason. He transmutes Gower’s lengthy, technical *Nota de Alconomia* into the Yeoman’s confused and confusing logorrhea. He does not shy away from considering why and how “now it stant al otherwise” (CA IV.2580), what specifically has happened to modern humanity that has caused such a fatal loss of perspicacity—the wildfire spread of concupiscent self-indulgence, and the “gracelees” (CYT VIII 1078) state this induces. As he demonstrates in his tale’s *pars secunda*, for Chaucer, modern faculties are so declined that such questions cannot be put reliably to the test by empirical *experimentum*. His poem’s coda, which begins by focusing our view on the decayed “wit that men han now-a-dayes” (VIII 1396), considers the spiritual consequences of this bleaker vision of runaway decline.

This final theological outlook is far closer to Langland's than to Gower's.⁵⁵ For Gower, the fruits of temporal science, philosophy, and alchemy reward human labour when it is properly directed (that is, towards *caritas* not selfish concupiscence). Langland, meanwhile, contends that all the fruit of human learning, secular *scientia*, is subordinate to a higher plane of wisdom: the *sapientia* (wisdom) that is only attainable by God's grace, the superior goods of Theology.⁵⁶ In the B-text of *Piers Plowman*, alchemy is cited with the likes of astronomy, geometry, and other empirical sciences to emphasise that human reason alone cannot grasp absolute and noncontingent truth. Seeking the secret of "Dowel", Will is directed by Wit to Dame Studie, the embodiment of all human learning. Studie soon makes clear that she cannot illuminate this Christian mystery, and she refers Will to her cousin Clergie and his wife, Scripture. Studie recounts her contributions to human progress:

Plato the poete, I putte hym first to boke;
 Aristotle and othere mo to argue I taughte.
 Grammer for girles I garte first write,
 And bette hem with a baleys but if thei wolde lerne.
 Of alle kynne craftes I contreved tooles—
 Of carpentrie, of kerveres, and compased masons,
 And lerned hem level and lyne, though I loke dymme.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ On Chaucer's interactions with *Piers Plowman*, see John M. Bowers, *Chaucer and Langland: The Antagonistic Tradition* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), esp. chs. 3 and 4.

⁵⁶ On the distinction between knowledge (*scientia*) and wisdom (*sapientia*) in the context of later medieval vernacular theology, particularly the English mystics, see Nicholas Watson, "Conceptions of the Word: The Mother Tongue and the Incarnation of God", in *New Medieval Literatures*, 1 (1997), 102–3.

⁵⁷ William Langland, *Piers Plowman*, B X.175–181. B-text quotations from *The Vision of Piers Plowman: A Critical Edition of the B-text Based on Trinity College Cambridge MS B.15.17*, ed. A.V.C. Schmidt (London: J.M. Dent, 1978). <<http://name.umdl.umich.edu/PPILan>> [Accessed 16/07/2021].

Not only are the individual wits of particular men hopelessly limited, but Studie herself appears to “loke dymme” (*PP* B X.181): the procedures of secular learning are, it seems, essentially inadequate to penetrate the deeper mysteries of creation. Studie affirms this:

Ac Theologie hath tened me ten score tymes:
 The moore I muse therinne, the myst[lok]er it semeth,
 And the depper I devyne, the derker me it thynketh.
 It is no science, forsothe, for to sotile inne. (B X.182–5)

The darkness and mistiness Dame Studie finds in Theologie is analogous to the impenetrably misty speech of ancient philosophers, seen through the “blered” eyes of modern readers. Langland and Chaucer seem to be making a similar point in both cases: seeking true answers about reality using the wrong procedures, under the wrong assumptions, is “to seken evere” and encounter only deeper darkness. Alchemy and theology are “no science” in different senses, but each body of knowledge is used to demonstrate the same point: the necessity of grace in perfecting human reason, and discovering truths that cannot be obtained through effortful study alone. Gower’s sense that there is value in the “business” conflicts with Chaucer and Langland’s scepticism about the potential of labour in the absence of grace. For Langland, purely secular “business” will inevitably give way to sin, because its animating impetus is concupiscence, the “norrissyng of sinne”. This notion is developed in the lengthier speech given to Dame Studie in the B-Text, which is absent from the later revisions, and which situates alchemy firmly within the context of sin-promoting endeavour:

Forthi loke thow lovye as longe as thow durest,
 For is no science under sonne so sovereyn for the soule.
 Ac Astronome is hard thyng, and yvel for to knowe:
 Geometry and Geomesie is gynful of speche;
 Whoso thynketh werche with tho t[hre] thryveth ful late—
 For sorcerie is the sovereyn book that to the science bilongeth.

Yet ar ther fibicches in forceres of fele mennes makyng,
 Experimentis of Alkenamy the peple to deceyve;
 If thow thynke to dowel, deel therwith nevere!
 Alle these sciences I myself sotiled and ordeynede,
 And founded hem formest folk to deceyve. (B X.205–15)

Like Gower, the love of *caritas* is positioned as the font of all other “vertu”—Studie has recommended, “For that love is ledere, ne lakked nevere grace. / Loke thow love lolly, if thee liketh Dowel, / For Dobet and Dobest ben of loves k[e]nn[ynge]” (B X.188–90). It is unclear from Studie’s syntax whether active love *precedes* grace or vice versa. What is clear is that Theology, unlike Studie’s domains, encourages mankind to love, that this love is bound up with the grace that enables good works and higher reason, and conversely, that human science in the absence of love and grace is actively detrimental to the human soul. Astronomy, Geometry, “Experimentis of Alkenamy”: these are deceivable enterprises, distractions to be avoided by any soul seeking, like Will, to move closer to God. This is closer to Chaucer’s “up-so-down” world of individual concupiscence and epistemological contingency than it is to Gower’s vision of alchemy as an aspirational Golden Age triumph. In *Piers Plowman*, alchemy is part of a set of ideas similarly staged in the *pars secunda* of *CYT*: a secular science that leads people into a state of psycho-spiritual “confusioun” (*CYT* VIII 1021); their wit and wisdom blinded and deceived by the fruits of concupiscence.

Will follows Dame Studie’s instructions and meets with Clergy and Scripture. He is told to keep faith with the commandments and avoid sin, and they pour cold water on the notion that human wit and wisdom can make sense of God’s mysteries—this mysteriousness is the basis of faith. “[W]it ne wisdom wan nevere the maistrie / When man was at meschief withoute the moore grace” (B X.448–9). The stuff of “konnyng

clerkes” (B X.455), “termes...clergial” and “elvyssh nyce loore” (*CYT* VIII 752, 842), are worthless in the quest for salvation: clerks “Ne none sonner saved...Than plowmen and pastours...Swich lewed juttis / Perce with a Paternoster the paleys of hevne / And passen purgatorie penauncelees...Into the blisse of paradys for hir pure bileve” (B X.456–61). This is the opposite of the humanist valorisation of secular learning, emphasising that faith and grace have total precedence over reason and wit in obtaining salvation, and that secular learning runs the risk of increasing concupiscent habits, and leading Christians astray.

Passus XI begins with Scripture scorning Will because of his desire for a rational understanding of Dowel, upon which he enters a depressive sleep and is seized by another vision. In this dream, the link between concupiscence and contingency—fundamental to Chaucer’s treatment of alchemy—is set forth explicitly. Will encounters Fortune, the personification of the contingency of temporal experience, the unpredictability caused by our linear and liminal experience of time (contrasting, as Boethius wrote, the non-linear nature of the divine view; God’s “simplicite” and “science of presence”).⁵⁸ Here, Langland allegorises his own (fairly mainstream) take on the ethics of Fortune, suggesting that secular appetites and private, selfish loves are fundamentally involved in proliferating the world’s instability, Fortune’s vicissitudes. The figure of Fortune brings Will “into the lond of longynge and love” (B XI.8), presenting him with a mirror of “Middelerthe” (B XI.9) (the long-toothed name ‘middel-erthe’ itself connoting humanity’s liminal situation), with the promise that he will “se wondres, / And knowe

⁵⁸ *Boece* V.pr.6.112–17.

that thow coveite, and come therto” (B XI.10–11).⁵⁹ Fortune encourages the coveting of worldly “wondres”, the focus of one’s spiritual sights on the ephemera of phenomenal reality, rather than on the absolutely stable, simple, and timeless goodness that lies beyond the “mirroure”—the “simplicite of the devyne prescience” (*Bo* V.pr.4.13–14).

Then we see that Fortune is attended by three “faire damyseles” (B XI.12), allegorical figures of the three kinds of concupiscence described by Ss. John and Augustine: “Concupiscencia Carnis” (lust of the flesh), “Coveitise of Eighes” (*concupiscentia oculorum*, or lust of the eyes), and “Pride of Parfit Lyvyng” (*superbia vitae, ambitio saeculi, or libido dominandi*).⁶⁰ The created world of material and temporal things is, in medieval Christianity, Fortune’s dominion: love of secular things is ultimately futile, because we can have no true ownership of these goods of fortune; salvation lies in humble living, charity, and contemplation of God, the *true* good, the *summum bonum*. Concupiscence is not identical with sin in Augustine—these disorderly appetites may be “cleansed” by baptismal regeneration, and even redirected towards virtue—but they are the prerequisite and kindling for sin, the disposition towards love of the world and its “goods of fortune” rather than the “goods of grace” (*ParT* X 453–54) necessary for our reconciliation with God.⁶¹ As we have seen, this is a major theme of the *CYT*’s *pars secunda*, with its protagonist’s “coveitise” rendering him “gracelees” and

⁵⁹ On the etymology and senses of middle-earth, see *MED*, s.v. “middel-ērthe n”, 1.(b), “[The] world of people; people of the world; worldly things (as opposed to divine or spiritual)”. <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED27656> [Accessed 16/07/2021].

⁶⁰ 1 John 2:15–17.

⁶¹ St. Augustine of Hippo, *On Marriage and Concupiscence*, I.25 (XXIII), trans. Peter Holmes and Robert Ernest Wallis, rev. Benjamin B. Warfield, NPNF105 (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887), I.25 (XXIII). <<https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/15071.htm>> [Accessed 16/07/2021].

resulting in the loss of “al the good / Which that I have” (*CYT* VIII 1077–8, 1376–7). Langland describes a similar process. *Concupiscencia Carnis* encourages Will to private sexual “delit”: “Thou art yong and yeep and hast yeres ynowe / For to lyve longe and ladies to lovye” (B XI.18–19). Lust of the flesh is certainly an important impetus to sin in Christian thought, but it is not clear that alchemy indulges this aspect of concupiscence. In *Piers Plowman*, we have seen that alchemy is a false science “ordeynede” by Dame Studie to “deceyve” those seeking knowledge. In the *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale*, the would-be alchemists are animated by dual impetuses of excessive curiosity (the vice of *curiositas*) and by the desire for wealth (this latter drive is highly variable about the *CYT*’s characters: the canon of the *prima pars* seems to be driven by intense scholarly interest and a vain desire to “appiere...a philosopre” [*CYT* VIII 837], while the *pars secunda*’s priest is nakedly avaricious, given to “spendyng silver” [VIII 1018]).

The two main parts of the *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale* associate alchemy with two Christian vices—curiosity and avarice. Each of these corresponds, for Augustine, to *concupiscentia oculorum*, or “Coveitise of Eighes”. Augustine writes in his *Confessions* that “there is present in the soul...a certain vain and curious longing (*vana et curiosa cupiditas*) not for finding enjoyment for the self in what is physical, but of *gaining experience* through what is physical. It masquerades as a craving for knowledge and understanding. Since it consists in a hunger for knowing things, and the eyes are the principal means of knowing by the senses, in holy Scripture this is called ‘visual desire’ (*concupiscentia oculorum*)”.⁶² Where *concupiscentia carnis* represents desire for pleasure by sensual/somatic means, *concupiscentia oculorum* is the desire for sensual

⁶² St. Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, X.35.54, ed. and trans. Carolyn J.B. Hammond. Loeb Classical Library, 26–27 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

apprehension itself—the drive to know worldly phenomena. Both aspects of concupiscence, pleasure and curiosity, are ultimately “functions of physical sensation”, pointed in different directions: “Pleasure (*voluptas*) pursues what is beautiful, melodious, delightful, delicious, polished; but curiosity (*curiositas*) pursues the opposite of these, purely for the sake of testing boundaries—not because it wants to endure hazards, but because of its craving for experience and understanding... This sets in motion investigation into the secrets of nature (which are beyond mortal ken); it does no good to know these things, and such people want nothing else but to know” (X.35.55). The trouble with both drives is that they cause humanity to forget God, and to seek after worldly experiences for reasons other than salvation. For Augustine, our time in the world is limited, our attention and labour utterly limited, and following the cupidity born of the senses (whether for pleasure, or for curiosity) is wasteful vanity. “For when our heart is a receptacle for this kind of stuff, and carries a teeming multitude of vanities, our prayers are frequently interrupted and disturbed... our serious business is cut short by an invasion of trivial thoughts from who knows where” (X.35.57).

This would seem at odds with Gower’s valorisation of “besinesse” in itself, as innately virtuous antidote to slothful *acedia*. It would also seem to impose serious limits on the pursuit of knowledge in general, in any domain of science. Perhaps because of this, as Ingham suggests, medieval intellectuals “thought and rethought the concept [of *curiositas*], insistently reworking, categorizing, recategorizing, and nuancing the topic”.⁶³ Most importantly, Aquinas drew a distinction between *curiositas* and *studiositas*: the former being morbid and excessive interest in insignificant worldly phenomena, the latter

⁶³ Patricia Clare Ingham, *The Medieval New: Ambivalence in an Age of Innovation* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), p. 146.

“a temperate attention to matters of consequence”.⁶⁴ The crux of the issue is judgement, “discrecioun”, the ability to see clearly and distinguish between serious business worthy of *studiositas* and futile enterprises which serve no higher good than sating the appetites of *curiositas* and *voluptas*. Aquinas distinguishes two senses of *curiositas*: “intellective *curiositas* (*circa cognitionem intellectivam*) and...an inordinate appetite for pleasures arising within the operation of the external senses and the imagination, sensory *curiositas* (*circa sensitivam cognitionem*, Thomas’s version of the *concupiscentia oculorum* so vigorously condemned by St. Augustine)”.⁶⁵ Across the history of Christian thought, the desire for secular knowledge was freighted with sinful associations, stemming from Augustine’s account of *concupiscentia oculorum*, and this was certainly the case when Chaucer, Gower, and Langland were writing. Whether alchemists seek the “secree of secrees” for selfish gain, intellectual curiosity, or even ostensibly for the wider benefit of humanity, as a pursuit stemming from sensual desire (in its broadest sense), it may always be seen as a road to spiritual, if not material, ruin.

The “covetyse” that “blent” the priest’s “conceite” in the *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale* (VIII 1076–80) is categorically linked with Langland’s “Coveitise of Eighes”, Aquinas’ *curiositas*, Augustine’s *concupiscentia oculorum*.⁶⁶ The emphasis on blindness in Chaucer’s tale invokes the priority of vision in Augustine’s model of vain desire for worldly knowledge and experience: as the latter writes, “a typical sensory experience is

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 147.

⁶⁵ Gregory M. Reichberg, “*Studiositas*, the Virtue of Attention”, in *The Common Things: Essays in Thomism and Education*, ed. Daniel McInerney (Washington, DC: American Maritain Association, 1999), p. 148.

⁶⁶ On learning, *curiositas*, and concupiscence in *Piers Plowman*, see Richard K. Emmerson, “‘Coveitise to Konne’, ‘Goddess Pryvetee’, and Will’s Ambiguous Dream Experience in *Piers Plowman*”, in *Suche Werkis to Werche: Essays on Piers Plowman in Honor of David C. Fowler*, ed. Mícheál F. Vaughan (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 1993), pp. 89–121.

called visual desire (*concupiscentia* [sicut dictum est] *oculorum*), as I have said; because the function of ‘seeing’, in which the eyes have pride of place, is claimed by the other senses for their own, by analogy, when they are investigating any kind of knowledge” (*Conf* X.35.54). But Chaucer and Langland both situate their treatment of *curiositas* within a broader, communitarian context: they do not simply associate the pursuit of alchemy with the vice of curiosity, and “Coveitise of Eighes”, they also depict the way that this individualised concupiscence accelerates a more collective social decline, fomenting a calamitous “lak of stedfastnesse” or *instabilitas* which undermines human affairs and even language itself. Langland does so allegorically: the three kinds of concupiscence are handmaidens to Fortune (worldly contingency and mutability itself). The specific role of *concupiscentia oculorum* is to distract the heart from *caritas* and meritorious deeds by encouraging vain cupidity, desire of pointless, worldly experience. “Coveitise of Eighes” exists solely to distract Will from his mission to understand the mysterious Dowel:

Coveitise of Eighes conforted me anoon after
 And folwed me fourty wynter and a fifte moore,
 That of Dowel ne Dobet no deyntee me thoughte.
 I hadde no likyng, leve me, [o]f the leste of hem ought to knowe.
 Coveitise of Eighes com ofter in mynde
 Than Dowel or Dobet among my dedes alle. (*PP* B XI.46–51)

This account is offered up by Rechelesnesse, allegorical figure of imprudence and bad judgement, explaining what happens when we “Folwe forth that Fortune wole” (B XI.35). By following Fortune—desiring worldly “goods of Fortune” rather than spiritual “goods of grace—we increase our habits of concupiscence, until “wit shal be torne to wrecchednesse for wil to have his likyng” (B XI.45), “Dowel” is forgotten, and when the wheel turns and Fortune becomes our “foo”, “poverte” will ensue (B XI.61–62).

Chaucer and Langland's references to alchemy evoke a broadly similar theological perspective, which contrasts Gower's. The ambiguity of the *Nota de Alconomia* in the *Confessio Amantis* derives from Gower's admission that modernity is at a disadvantage relative to enlightened antiquity, while still presenting an "unusually positive discussion of alchemy" as the fruits of virtuous labour.⁶⁷ At odds with his contemporaries, Gower "uncharacteristically ignores the moral questions that haunted alchemy in the late Middle Ages".⁶⁸ Alchemy, for Gower, is a true science wrapped up in mists of *obscuritas* that we might penetrate again if we can regain the habit of "besinesse", and rise above Sloth. For Langland, alchemy is bunkum: "Experimentis of Alkenamyte" exemplify the spiritual pitfalls of "Studie", the lapse into distraction, forgetfulness, and submission to Fortune that happens when we indulge our concupiscence, our inclination towards temporal "Coveitise". Chaucer seems less concerned with whether alchemy was ever a 'true science' than in the simultaneous ethical and epistemological issues attached to its loss. For Chaucer, the *obscuritas* concealing the "secreie of secrees" results from the wholesale deterioration of human wit caused by concupiscence, and the pandemonium of discord and misinterpretation staged in the *prima pars* represents the consequences of this psycho-spiritual decline for the human community. The *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* imagines Augustine's earthly city as a towering inferno, "confusioun" spreading like wildfire—not, as Fyler suggests, because of the postlapsarian collapse of language, but because of the accumulation of individual habits of sin, blindness writ large, as in Saramago's novel.

⁶⁷ Fletcher, "Alchemy in *Confessio Amantis*", 118.

⁶⁸ Epstein, "Dismal Science", 215.

Chaucer's poem ends by synthesising its tales of individual and collective decline. His narrator emphatically warns us about the blindness that is both cause and consequence of the alchemist's lust:

Ye been as boold as is Bayard the blynde,
 That blondreth forth and peril casteth noon...
 So faren ye that multiplie, I seye.
 If that your eyen kan nat seen aright,
 Looke that youre mynde lakke noght his sight. (*CYT* VIII 1413–19)

As it was for Augustine, here 'blindness' is a metonym for all sense-experience, everything apprehended by the senses and held within the "mynde". Finally, the Yeoman promises to support his argument that alchemists are doomed to lose all their (material/spiritual) "good" by turning to the books of "philosophres" old and new (VIII 1427). There is no little irony in the Yeoman's turn to the received wisdom of the literary tradition, given the many references to the futility of scholarly book-diving in the *prima pars*. The ensuing quotation from "Arnold of the Newe Toun" exemplifies that, like Priscian's ancient philosophers or Augustine's authors of Scripture, the first alchemists wrote in an intentionally obscure style to ensure that only those willing to put in the effort would learn their secrets:

[Hermes] seith how that the dragon, doutelees,
 Ne dyeth nat but if that he be slayn
 With his brother; and that is for to sayn,
 By the dragon, Mercurie, and noon oother
 He understood, and brymston by his brother...
 Lat no man bisye hym this art for to seche,
 But if that he th'entencioun and speche
 Of philosophres understonde kan;

And if he do, he is a lewed man. (VIII 1435–45)⁶⁹

In isolation, this anecdote would seem to promote a Gower-esque moral: if the labours of modern alchemists keep failing, it's because they are not labouring in the right way—humble study of the giants, the former “philosophres”, upon whose shoulders they stand. This straightforward decoding of Hermes’ “dragon” and “brother” suggests that “this science” (VIII 1446) *can*, at least in theory, be retrieved and “understonde”.

But if alchemy is real, where are all the alchemists? The next anecdote, from the “book Senior” (VIII 1450), offers an explanation—one with major theological implications. Spotlighting the referential confusion of alchemical vocabularies, ironically nodding to the way “philosophre” may signify both “alchemist” and “philosopher” at once, this exemplum depicts Plato himself as alchemy’s forefather, recounting his gnomic responses to a curious disciple:

“Telle me the name of the privee stoon”.
 And Plato answerede unto hym anoon,
 “Take the stoon that Titanos men name”.
 “Which is that?” quod he. “Magnasia is the same”,
 Seyde Plato. “Ye, sire, and is it thus?
 This is *ignotum per ignocius*.
 What is Magnasia, good sire, I yow preye?” (CYT VIII 1452–58)

The contingency of language is plainly at issue: *ad placitum* naming of alchemical agents has led to a basic semiotic “confusioun”, the loss of the original referents of these cryptic signs. “Word and deed”, *signans* and *signatum*, “ben nothing lyk” (*Lak* 4–5).⁷⁰ However,

⁶⁹ On Chaucer’s potentially erroneous ascription of these lines to Arnaldus de Villanova’s *Rosarium*, see Lindy Brady and Andrew Rabin, “‘Arnold of the Newe Toun’ Revisited: A Note on the Sources of the *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale*”, *Notes and Queries*, 65, 2 (2018), 174–77.

⁷⁰ Chaucer’s original source for the recurring maxim that the word should be ‘cosyn’ to the deed is in Boethius’ *Consolation of Philosophy*, III.pr.12, translated by him as “thow hast lernyd by the sentence of Plato that nedes the wordis moot be cosynes to the thinges of whiche thei speken”. (*Bo* III.pr.12.205–7). Taylor has shown that the word change from “thinges” to “dede” or “deed” reflects Chaucer’s adaptation of Jean de Meun’s version of the same Boethian phrase in the

in itself this does not suggest that language has any necessary historical trajectory of decline, and the contingency of language itself is not *the* issue, the “multiplicacioun” of arbitrary signs is not the cause of the widespread spiral of “confusioun” here exemplified by alchemy. The aporetic barriers thrown up by alchemy’s mutated lexis in fact represent a higher, more profound source of mystification.

Plato’s exasperated student implores him to “Telle me the roote, good sire...Of that water [Magnasia], if it be youre wil” (VIII 1461–2). Plato refuses, explaining that the real-world referent of alchemy’s original materials—the semiotic “roote”—has not simply been forgotten because of terminological confusion; it has been effaced from the annals of secular knowledge by the intervention of the divine will. He elaborates:

[“]The philosophres sworn were everychoon
 That they sholden discovere it unto noon
 Ne in no book it write in no manere.
 For unto Crist it is so lief and deere
 That he wol nat that it discovered bee,
 But where it liketh to his deitee
 Men for t’enspire, and eek for to deffende
 Whom that hym liketh; lo, this is the ende”.
 Thanne conclude I thus, sith that God of hevne
 Ne wil nat that the philosophres nevene
 How that a man shal come unto this stoon,
 I rede, as for the beste, lete it goon. (CYT VIII 1464–75)

One type of contingency resides, Matryoshka doll-like, inside another, more foundational contingency. The arbitrariness of human language is supervened by the absolute omnipotence and inscrutability of God’s will. Not only are names applied to things arbitrarily, not only is “forme of speche...change / Withinne a thousand yeer” (*TC*

Roman de la Rose (“Car le voiz aus choses veisines / Deivent estre a leur faiz cousins”, *RR* 15191–2). The semiological emphasis of the original phrase remains relevant even where this change has taken place, as in *Lak* and *GP*. Taylor, “Chaucer’s Cosyn to the Dede”, 321.

II.22–23), but some kinds of natural knowledge are kept beyond the limits of our potential understanding by executive fiat, sheer divine ‘auctoritee’. No wonder, then, that the Yeoman’s attempt to resolve things by resorting to “What philosophres seyn in this mateere” (VIII 1427) amounts to “*ignotum per ignocius*”, “explaining the unknown by the more unknown”.⁷¹ The ancients were “sworn” to secrecy; God “ne wil nat that the philosophres nevene” the fundamental truth about alchemy.

The *obscuritas* of the “philosophres”, their misty speech, is not, like Scriptural obscurity for Augustine, meant to exercise and edify the humble learner: the mists are infinitely concealing. Instead, the obscure speech of alchemy appears to be more like it is for Langland’s Dame Studie: a booby trap for human concupiscence, “the peple to deceyve”, driving them further from grace and into Fortune’s hands. As it relates to the contingency of language, the major theme of the *prima pars*, this final revelation might be read as a gesture to the “nominalist” idea of *potentia absoluta*, that notion of God’s absolutely limitless agency over creation, that He can change our reality according to His totally unreadable will. However, keeping the *pars secunda* in view, with its subtexts of diminished capacity and blindness through “coveitise”, we can read this ending in relation to a more orthodox set of ideas about the role of grace in human salvation.

We saw in the *pars secunda* that “Through coveitise is blent discrecioun” (*Lak* 18). The priest lost all prudence, and the power to judge phenomena correctly, by indulging his “coveitise” and thereby becoming “gracelees”, that is, diminishing his soul’s habit of sanctifying grace (*gratia gratum faciens*) by wilfully turning from its call to salvation, instead accumulating habits of worldly appetite that must end, inevitably, in

⁷¹ *The Riverside Chaucer*, p. 281n1457.

“destruccion” (*CYT VIII* 1387). Grace is not magic; it is potential: this salvific model says that habitual, sanctifying grace enables the human reason to rise beyond its natural capacities (which, in the postlapsarian state, can only lead to cupidity and sin). Stupidity and cupidity both derive from a failure to step through that door, to willingly cooperate with the higher potential on offer through the gift of grace. By focusing our attention on worldly things and acceding to “Coveitise of Eighes”, the potentiality endowed by sanctifying grace is diminished; we lose “al the good / Which that [we] have”, namely the goods of grace described by the Parson: “science, power to suffre spiritueel travaille, benignitee, vertuous contemplacioun, withstondynge of temptacioun, and semblable thynges” (*ParT X* 454). Blindness is just the refusal of the illumination made possible by grace. The accelerating lack of steadfastness Chaucer sees in all walks of life is this individual process in the aggregate, the blind leading the blind around Fortune’s wheel.

The crux of medieval debates about grace and salvation was the role of free will in this process. Can human beings obtain justification under their own steam, by their natural powers (*ex puris naturalibus*), or is divine grace necessary? The notion that grace might not be needed for human salvation was widely denounced as Pelagianism, a heretical doctrine: Augustine argued to the contrary, that God was the ultimate author of all good works and virtue—manifest through grace of various kinds. Yet this raised the complex problem of how human beings can have any agency in their own salvation or damnation. This was debated throughout medieval theology, with Aquinas developing and nuancing the Augustinian concept of cooperative grace (*gratia cooperans*). As he writes in the *Summa Theologica*, “in that effect in which our mind is moved and does not move, but in which God is the sole mover, the operation is attributed to God, and it is

with reference to this that we speak of ‘operating grace’ (*gratia operans*). But in that effect in which our mind both moves and is moved, the operation is not only attributed to God, but also to the soul; and it is with reference to this that we speak of ‘cooperating grace’ (*gratia cooperans*)”.⁷² The initial impetus to do good is credited solely to God’s operation. But for us to *do* good involves both our own free will (responding to this initial call) and the assistance of grace: “[the exterior act of the will] is attributed to the will. And because God assists us in this act, both by strengthening our will interiorly so as to attain to the act, and by granting outwardly the capability of operating, it is with respect to this that we speak of cooperating grace”.⁷³

In the thirteenth and fourteenth century, theologians such as William of Ockham and Robert Holcot argued against the Thomistic model of *gratia cooperans*, on the grounds that it seems to impose necessary limits upon God’s will (by suggesting that, as long as a human being freely behaves virtuously, God *must* admit them to heaven). For Ockham, by His absolute power (*de potentia absoluta*), God may justify an inveterate sinner or even deny salvation to the seemingly virtuous; He may “freely accept as meritorious” whatever He wills: “Merit...is entirely a matter of divine acceptance: *in libera Dei acceptatione*”.⁷⁴ For Holcot, “grace is the remission of sins (*gratia est remissio peccatorum*)” and nothing conditions God’s freedom to remit sins (to bestow grace) according to His own will.⁷⁵ Holcot uses the examples of Leviticus 4 and 6, arguing that “an animal sacrifice was offered for the sin of the people (*pro peccata populi*) and that

⁷² *ST I-II* q.111.a2

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ David Aers, *Salvation and Sin*, pp. 27–28.

⁷⁵ John T. Slotemaker and Jeffrey C. Witt, “Covenantal Theology”, in *Robert Holcot* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 23.

this sacrifice conferred the forgiveness of sin”.⁷⁶ Moreover, in his commentary on the *Sentences*, Holcot made the famous (and infamous) argument that God does not deny his grace to those who ‘do what is in them’ (*facientibus quod in se est Deus non denegat gratiam*).⁷⁷ This immediately suggests that there is autonomy of the human will *ex puris naturalibus* in performing meritorious deeds: humans can attain merit without grace, because God remits sins absolutely freely. Holcot “provides one characteristic example: a wicked old man becomes penitent at the point of death and intends to make satisfaction for his sins if he can (*si posset*). This suffices to elicit divine mercy because if a person wills to do that which is in him toward penitence God accepts this in his mercy”.⁷⁸ Such arguments, seeming to emphasise the radical contingency of God’s will *de potentia absoluta*, were controversial, leading Thomas Bradwardine (the Nun’s Priest’s lauded “Bisshop Bradwardyn”, *NPT* VII 3242) to denounce them as a ‘new Pelagianism’ in his *De Causa Dei contra Pelagium*.

Whether Chaucer had any affinity with the semi-Pelagian models of grace is difficult to ascertain. But given the *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale* and its emphasis on psycho-spiritual decline, inscribed with lexes of grace and concupiscence, it is worth examining the ideas of divine and human agency suggested by the poem’s final lines. There is a significant emphasis on the unfettered freedom of the divine will in Chaucer’s diction here: “where it *liketh* to his deitee / Men for t’enspire...God of hevene / *Ne wil nat* that the philosophres nevene” (*CYT* VIII 1469–73. Emphasis added.). Crucially, Chaucer

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ Aers, *Salvation and Sin*, p. 35. See Heiko A. Obermann, “*Facientibus quod in se est Deus non denegat gratiam*: Robert Holcot, O.P., and the Beginnings of Luther’s Theology”, *The Harvard Theological Review*, 55, 4 (1962), 317–342.

⁷⁸ Aers, *Salvation and Sin*, p. 35.

makes clear that God always reserves the capacity to make exceptions, to will otherwise: should “hym liketh”, by operative grace (*gratia operans*) He may decide “t’enspire” someone with the lost secret of alchemy, and “eek for to deffende / *Whom that hym liketh*” (VIII 1470–71. Emphasis added.). There is no sense that any course of action we may wilfully take will influence God’s decision; gone is Gower’s optimism that by restoring “businessse” we might achieve things like the old alchemists did. The emphasis here is on God’s freedom *de potentia absoluta*. The secrets of alchemy are absolutely contingent on God’s unknowable and unpredictable will—and so, “as for the beste” we ought to “lete it goon” (VIII 1475).

But Chaucer does not commit solely to this Holcot-like view of *potentia absoluta*.

The next lines, which end the poem, complicate things:

For whoso maketh God his adversarie,
 As for to werken any thyng in contrarie,
 Of his wil, certes, never shal he thryve,
 Thogh that he multiplie terme of his lyve.
 And there a poynt, for ended is my tale.
 God sende every trewe man boote of his bale! (VIII 1476–81)

Human agency *is* implicated in our spiritual destiny; we may make God our “adversarie” by performing works “in contrarie / Of his wil” (in this case, the alchemists pursuing worldly cupidity rather than charitable works). While God’s will may be unfettered, He does not break His covenants: *if* we willingly squander our gift of grace, *then* we will make God our “adversarie”, and become “blent” and “gracelees”. This is not an imposition of limiting necessity, as the theorists of *potentia absoluta* saw; it is simply a reflection that God is the essence of perfect goodness, and by the moral law that He has

freely ordained (*de potentia ordinata*), He will never be anything other than good.⁷⁹ We can conclude that Chaucer has a non-specific, somewhat synthetic idea of the involvement of grace in human perfection, plainly indebted to the controversies of late medieval scholasticism, but highly variable in its emphasis. Prevenient, habitual, sanctifying grace seems to be important, as the *pars secunda* suggests: the priest's runaway "coveitise" seems to derive from a "gracelees" lack of potential to behave otherwise, a figurative blindness caused by the diminishing of potential as expressed by Augustine and Aquinas in their models of *gratia cooperans*. The emphasis in these final lines on God's absolute, reserved power to ordain things as He wills has two purposes: it situates the poem's subtext on the contingency of language in a theological context, the "multiplicacioun" of non-referential signs reflecting God's *potentia absoluta*, and it simultaneously emphasises the dependency of human "science" on God's ordained laws (*potentia ordinata*). This is the real issue that alchemy throws up for Chaucer, as for

⁷⁹ It is important to note that many of the 'late medieval nominalists', including Ockham, were not truly heterodox radicals; they did not advocate for hypothetical evil or imperfect Gods, and the idea of *potentia absoluta* was not meant to suggest anything except God's limitless nature. The idea that *potentia absoluta* may lead to 'hypothetical' alter-Gods is not specious, however, given that Ockham had to answer this charge at Avignon. "The thrust of Ockham's view of God's absolute power is that it is never exercised...it is best classified logically as a hypothetical counterfactual". Girard J. Etzkorn, "Ockham at Avignon: His Response to his Critics", *Franciscan Studies*, 59 (2001), 9–19. Ockham is pretty clear that he was no Pelagian: "man is never saved nor could he be saved, nor could he ever elicit a meritorious act, according to the laws now ordained by God, without created grace". Ockham, *Quodlibet VI*, q.1. Etzkorn's translation. Holcot goes further than Ockham in promoting the idea of merit *ex puris naturalibus*. Obermann summarises his argument: "the commitment by which God in eternity obligated himself conveys to man's action a dignity which it would not have in itself: if man goes halfway, God will meet him with the gift of grace. Without this gift of grace man is *helpless*; but it is just as true that without the full use of man's own natural powers, the offer of grace is *useless*". Obermann, "*Facientibus quod in se est*", 328. Chaucer had access to two models of "cooperation", then: one (from Aquinas and Augustine) in which grace is prevenient, making the initial move towards virtue possibly; the other (from Holcot and, to a lesser extent, Ockham) saying that humans must take the first step (however slight) unaided by grace, at which point the gift of grace is infused.

Langland. Where Fryer sees these problems of language as a “metonymy” for postlapsarian spiritual and social decline, these are really interlocking, mutually reinforcing processes—which the failures of the alchemists exemplify. From the initial spark of *delectatione cogitatio* in a single soul to the wildfire spread of psycho-spiritual “confusioun” in the earthly city, the *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale* is a distorted reflection of an “up-so-down” world where individual concupiscence and collective contingency are constantly reinforcing each other, diminishing the grace we need to restore stability at every level, to mirror the absolute “stedfastnesse” that resides with God, and prevent the wheel of Fortune accelerating into a widening gyre of post-truth discord.

This vision has Augustinian roots. The differentiation of individual judgements, the partiality and fallibility of human “discrecioun”, and the multiplication of interpretations that result—these caused the abyss of the secular world (“quibus omnibus vocibus corporaliter enuntiandis causa est abyssus saeculi”, *Conf XIII.23–24*).⁸⁰ For Chaucer, no worldly pursuit exemplifies this process more thoroughly and more completely than the fruitless labours of the alchemists, struggling with their “blered” eyes to understand “philosophres” who “speken so mystily”, each individual reader only multiplying the “madnesse [in which] everemoore we rave” (*CYT VIII 959*). The *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale* is a snapshot of world lapsed into multiversal contingency, where “the condicion of thynges [is] turned up-so-down” (*Bo II.pr.5.127–8*; *CYP VIII 625*; *Lak 5*). To fully understand the underlying process itself, to lay bare Chaucer’s thinking on concupiscence and contingency, it will be productive to turn to a more overtly personal and theological narrative—the *Clerk’s Tale*. This poem provides an explicit answer to the question

⁸⁰ *Confessions XIII.23*.

implicit through the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*: how can grace help us cope with contingency?

3 Griselda's State of Grace: Fortune and *gratia cooperans* in the Clerk's Tale

3.1 *Facere quod in se est: Do what, exactly?*

Visiting Boethius in his prison-cell, Lady Philosophy made this well-known diagnosis of his malady: “quid ipse sis, nosse desisti” (you have ceased to know what you are, *Consolatio* I.pr.5.40). The full implications of this sweeping judgement will emerge over the course of the *Consolation of Philosophy*: underneath all the mutability and contingencies of the material, temporal world—the domain of Fortune, who has since reclaimed her loaned-out goods from Boethius—there is a kernel of something absolutely stable and noncontingent, carried within his own soul. Philosophy finds Boethius in a nadir of forgetfulness, the main symptom of which is a belief that the phenomenal world of random chance and unjust fortune is all that there is. Addiction to the material world and its fleeting goods has clouded Boethius' perspective and narrowed his spiritual horizons; believing that sheer contingency is the way of the world, he has succumbed to a profound, melancholic hopelessness. This bitterness at the vicissitudes of Fortune must lead, as Chaucer's Parson explains, to the cardinal sin of *acedia* or “Accidie” (*ParT X* 676), a faithless, depressive indifference to the created world.¹ In the Middle Ages *acedia* was often considered the foulest of the seven sins, because it does not only drive the sinner alone further from God, it also spreads sorrow and faithlessness throughout the

¹ Accidie is today referred to as the sin of ‘sloth’, but this does not entirely convey its psychological, spiritual and societal dimensions: “St. Thomas [*ST* II-II q.35] calls it sadness in the face of some spiritual good which one has to achieve [*Tristitia de bono spirituali*]...it means the don't-care feeling. A man apprehends the practice of virtue to be beset with difficulties and chafes under the restraints imposed by the service of God”. Joseph Delany, “Sloth”, in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 14 (New York: Appleton, 1912). <<https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14057c.htm>>. [Accessed 08/07/2021].

human world.² After causing individual sloth, *acedia* leads to “wanhope, that is despair of the mercy of God” (X 692), then to “*tarditas*”, the refusal to hear God’s call to salvation in favour of “fals hope” (X 717–19), and finally to “*tristicia*”, “the synne of worldly sorwe...that sleeth man...[and] shorteth ful ofte the lif of man” (X 724–25). Despair spreads virally, memetically, first leading the individual away from their own justification, before inspiring others to fall into the same “*dych*” (X 717). *Acedia*, as the Parson has it, is a sin that multiplies like wildfire in the earthly city, not just in the sinner’s lonely soul. In this, as discussed above, it is the negative counterpart to *gratia gratis data*, or ‘gratuitous grace’—the means by which God actively confers supernatural potential for good on an individual, with the purpose of guiding others to conversion and salvation.

Philosophy’s cure for Boethius’ depression involves a Stoic form of active apathy, or *apatheia*. Having forgotten what he truly is—a “being who is potentially divine by participation”—Boethius sorrows at the instability of the world as experienced, and yields to “wanhope”, shaking his fist at a seemingly uncaring God: “O thou governour, governynge alle thynges by certain ende, whi refusestow oonly to governe the werkes of men by duwe manere? Why suffrestow that slydyng Fortune turneth so grete enterchaungynges of thynges? So that anoyous peyne, that scholde duweliche punysche felons, punyssheth innocentz...” (*Bo* I.m.5.31–7).³ This is textbook *acedia*, and

² Siegfried Wenzel, *The Sin of Sloth: Acedia in Medieval Thought and Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1967). On the correspondence between medieval *acedia* and modern conceptions of psychological depression, see Robert W. Daly, “Before Depression: The Medieval Vice of Acedia”, *Psychiatry*, 70, 1 (2007), 30–51; Stanley W. Jackson, “Acedia the Sin and its Relationship to Sorrow and Melancholia in Medieval Times”, *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, 55, 2 (1981), 172–185.

³ Matthew D. Walz, “Stoicism as Anesthesia: Philosophy’s ‘Gentler Remedies’ in Boethius’ *Consolation*”, *International Philosophical Quarterly*, 51, 4 (2011), 502.

Philosophy's treatment is likewise textbook: she will bring him, by stages, to embody the cardinal virtue of *fortitudo*, “an affeccion thurgh which a man despiseth anyouse thinges”, a *habitus* that “enhaunceth and enforceth the soule”, imbuing us with the power to withstand the winds of Fortune: “For this *fortitudo* may endure by long suffraunce the travailles that been covenable” (*ParT* X 728–30). The Parson makes clear that human beings in the postlapsarian world cannot obtain this state of virtue alone, by their own naked powers, but neither does it descend entirely from above, without any exercise of will whatsoever. The remedy to *acedia* is obtained when the individual sinner makes the active, wilful effort to resist the call of despair and listen to the grace that lies within them, which, in turn, empowers their will to further *fortitudo*: the way to “vertu” begins “in the trust of the grace of the Holy Goost” and “hope in God and in his seintes...thanne comth seuretee or sikernesse...constaunce...stablensness of corage, and this sholde been in herte by stedefast feith, and in mouth, and in berynge, and in chiere, and in dede” (*ParT* X 731–37). Heeding God's call does not impart *fortitudo* by magic, it helps individuals withstand the fallen world's contingency by “wit and by resoun and by discrecioun” (X 733). Thus Philosophy guides Boethius from despair at the senselessness of a world governed by Fortune to trust in the divine intelligence, and in His supervenient “gouvernement of resoun” (*Bo* I.pr.6.10).

There is a reciprocal logic behind this process: by progressive rational argument Philosophy reminds Boethius of the fundamental source of stability within him—his reason, which can overcome the instability of his passions—and as his spiritual sight is gradually restored, he will remember the “resoun of God” that resides beyond the world of Fortune. The instability of the passional soul has the stability of reason, imparted by

God, within it, and the instability of the “wrecched world” has the stability of God’s goodness beyond its temporal bounds. The ideal state is one in touch with both sources of God’s “verraye light” (*Bo* II.pr.1.105), interior and exterior, which makes the human impervious to *acedia* despite worldly misfortunes: *apatheia*, freedom from extremes of passion, made possible by reason. The Christian virtue of *fortitudo* is not the same thing as the Stoic virtue of *apatheia*: Augustine makes clear that passions are not evil in themselves, but when misdirected towards worldly rather than heavenly things—in the case of despair, for instance, he distinguishes between *tristitia mundi* and *tristitia secundum deum*.⁴ The potencies of the human soul were put there by God; to hold them in contempt would amount to “wanhope”; it is our fallenness that leads our passions to bad, concupiscent habits, and it is through Christ’s passion that our power to redirect these passions in a virtuous direction that pleases God was restored. But, as Walz argues, Stoic *apatheia* is only a preliminary stage in a progressive treatment, an ‘anesthetising’ of Boethius’ *tristitia mundi* to recover his inner gift of reason, and raise him up, in the end, to *fortitudo*, inoculation against worldly sorrow.⁵

Boece and the *Parson’s Tale* invoke an orthodox Catholic view of grace and potency. Every human being was created with a habit of sanctifying grace (*gratia gratum faciens*) in their soul that endows them with the potential for virtue; Adam’s original sin obscured this gift of grace, limiting our capacity to do good and consigning us to habitual sin, which made it impossible to achieve salvation by our own powers (*ex puris naturalibus*). The Passion restored our habits of sanctifying grace, making friendship

⁴ Johannes Brachtendorf, “Cicero and Augustine on the Passions”, *Revue des Études Augustiniennes*, 43 (1997), 301–2. Cf. St. Augustine of Hippo, *City of God*, XIV.6–9.

⁵ Walz, “Stoicism as Anesthesia”, 502.

with God possible again. As Aers says, the path to reconciliation is not one of absolutely free will or absolutely involuntary grace, but the reciprocal interaction of both: sanctifying grace provides the free will with an alternative to concupiscent sin and materialist despair, and by heeding the call to virtue over vice, the power to do good is habitually reinforced, until the individual gains, through will and grace, the “constance” that is antidote to the fallen world’s instability.⁶ As I have said: in this worldview grace is not magic but *potential*, raising up the human spirit and reason to endure Fortune, to defeat *acedia*, to perform good works despite adversity, and to become an example for others, inspiring them to listen to their own inward call to virtue. As Aquinas puts it: “the light of grace” enables us to grasp “higher intelligible truths” (*ST I-II q.109.a1*). “In the state of corrupted nature” we need grace for two reasons: “in order to be healed” (this is “infused virtue”, the power bestowed by habitual, sanctifying grace) and “in order to carry out works of supernatural virtue” (via gratuitous grace) (*ST I-II q.109.a2*). The theological term for this process is *gratia cooperans* (cooperative grace).⁷ Will and grace are not an either/or proposition—the one reinforces the other, according to a logic of “reciprocal causality”.⁸ Chaucer understood this implicitly: his *Retraccioun* credits anything good about his works to “oure Lord Jhesu Crist, of whom procedeth al wit and al goodnesse” (*Ret X 1080*). A mainstream Christian of Chaucer’s time saw themselves as sole authors of their sins, but co-authors, with God’s grace, of their good works.

⁶ Aers, *Salvation and Sin*, pp. 20–4.

⁷ Neil Ormerod, “Operative and Cooperative Grace and the Question of Justification by Faith: A Contemporary Transposition”, *Irish Theological Quarterly*, 80, 3 (2015), 248–58.

⁸ P. De Letter, “Reciprocal Causality: Some Applications in Theology”, *Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review*, 25, 3 (1962), 382–418.

The case of ‘Patient Griselda’ as told in Chaucer’s *Clerk’s Tale* poses interpretive problems that become obvious from a brief survey of its plot. For one, to call Griselda “patient” is a serious understatement. At her husband Walter’s command, their young children are taken to be killed for utterly spurious reasons; the brutish goon who seizes them responds to her pleas for a decent burial with stony silence. Now childless, Griselda is told that her low birth disqualifies her as wife to a marquis, so their marriage has been annulled by papal bull, and she must return to her father’s hovel, naked except for the smock on her back. Then Walter invades her humble life again: he has “no wommen suffisaunt” (*CIT* IV 960) to prepare his home for his new bride, so Griselda must come set the tables and make the beds, and meet this fair new maiden as a servant. Griselda endures this litany of offenses with total stoicism, remaining always “constant as a wal” (IV 1047), betraying not one exterior sign of inward envy, hate, or sorrow. Finally, the truth behind these torments is revealed: Walter meant only “t’assaye in thee thy wommanheed” (IV 1075), to stress-test her womanly and wifely virtues of obedience to her husband and steadfast adherence to her original vow to “nevere willingly...yow disobeye” (IV 362–3). The end of the *Clerk’s Tale* is fairy-tale *eucatastrophe*: Griselda’s accumulated miseries are undone at a stroke, her fortunes restored for perpetuity, and they all live happily ever after, “in heigh prosperitee” (IV 1128).

As readers we are confronted with some difficult questions. Griselda’s radical obedience to Walter’s will results in apparent calamity for herself and for her own children, which is only mitigated by a *deus ex machina* ending. The reasoning behind Walter’s torture of Griselda is never explained—significantly, there *is* no rationale: it is an uncontrollable and seemingly supernatural impulse, a “merveillous desir” to “assaye”

his wife (IV 254) which is, as the narrator repeatedly complains, “nedelees” (IV 621). While Griselda’s core virtues of “stedfastnesse” and “pacience” are framed as “wyfly” and feminine ones, the poem is useless as an ethical exemplum for women, in marriage and beyond: total obedience to a real-world abuser in the name of an idealised steadfastness (that is, unwavering faithfulness to one’s oath, irrespective of changing circumstances) is a road to ruin. As Mann writes, to modern readers Griselda seems to represent a “conception of the ideal wife as a doormat, a creature without will or feeling of her own” because of her idealised faithfulness to her vow of obedience, “a fairy-tale promise claim[ing] an absolute adherence that the practical common-sense of everyday life could not tolerate”.⁹ In the *Lenvoy de Chaucer*, the coda to the poem, we are offered a novel *moralitas* that seems to contradict the Petrarchan one preceding it, and defy the letter and spirit of the poem we have just read:

Griselde is deed, and eek hire pacience,
 And bothe atones buryed in Ytaille;
 For which I crie in open audience
 No wedded man so hardy be t’assaille
 His wyves pacience in trust to fynde
 Grisildis, for in certein he shal faille.

O noble wyves, ful of heigh prudence,
 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! (IV 1177–88)

Plainly, the original narrative posed interpretive difficulties even for its immediate translators. From its Boccaccian beginnings, Griselda’s story confounded the polysemous

⁹ Jill Mann, “Suffering Woman, Suffering God”, in *Feminizing Chaucer*, Chaucer Studies XXX (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2002), pp. 114–15.

instincts of medieval readers with an uncompromising monovalence as Christian allegory. *Decameron* X.10 ends by making clear that Griselda is not at all meant to be an imitable role model for real-world wives, but a supernormal paragon of grace-infused virtue:

What can we say, then, but that Divine spirits may descend from heaven into the meanest cottages; whilst royal palaces shall produce such as seem rather adapted to have the care of hogs, than the government of men. Who but Griselda could, not only without a tear, but even with seeming satisfaction, undergo the most rigid and unheard of trials of her husband?¹⁰

Boccaccio's version communicates three interlocking ideas: (1) that grace is gifted regardless of worldly fortune, by God's uninfluenced will, (2) that poverty incubates virtue and charity as wealth habituates concupiscence and sin, (3) that the world has declined into a state of widespread selfishness and contingency, making the ideal virtue of Griselda unrealisable in the modern age. Bog-standard Christian values are intermingled with the commonplace 'Former Age' topos (one to which Chaucer is also partial). But there is no edifying "fruyt" (*NPT* VII 3443) of imitable virtue; the Horatian poetics of *dulcis et utilis* are confounded by a story without much "murthe" and little in the way of practicable "doctryne" (*Th-MeLL* VII 935).

Petrarch's translation of Boccaccio's story, *De Insigni Obedientia et Fide Uxoris*, attempts to resolve this by explicitly distinguishing between its moral and allegorical senses: while Griselda's example falls short in the former category, as an exemplum for women in marriage, it provides an ethical lesson in a broader, allegorical sense, beyond gendered social values. Petrarch sees Griselda as an example not for women in wedlock

¹⁰ Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, X.10, in *The Decameron; or Ten Days' Entertainment of Boccaccio*, trans. Thomas Wright (London: Chatto and Windus, 1912), p. 530.

but for all people in their relationship with God: in Gilmartin's summary, "God tries us and allows us to be harassed by many scourges, 'not so that he may know our will, which he knew before we were created, but so that our frailty may become known to us by clear and familiar proofs'."¹¹ Chaucer ran with this solution to *Decameron* X.10's ambiguity, faithfully translating Petrarch's conditional moralisation:

This storie is seyde nat for that wyves sholde
 Folwen Grisilde as in humylitee,
 For it were inportable, though they wolde,
 But for that every wight, in his degree,
 Sholde be constant in adversitee
 As was Grisilde; therefore Petrark writeth
 This storie, which with heigh stile he enditeth. (*CIT* IV 1142–48).

The provisos contained in the *Lenvoy de Chaucer* amplify the point that women should not try to imitate Griselda, taking this idea to an almost embarrassingly ingratiating extreme: "Folweth Ekko, that holdeth no silence, / But evere answereth at the countretaille" (IV 1189–90). "Beth nat bidaffed for youre innocence, / But sharply taak on yow the governaille" (IV 1191–92). "Ne suffreth nat that men yow doon offense [...]" (IV 1197–204). "Ne dreded hem nat; doth hem no reverence, / For though thyn housbonde armed be in maille, / The arwes of thy crabbed eloquence / Shal perce his brest and eek his aventaille" (IV 1197–204). This (unconvincing, in my view) pro-feminist act is rich with complex ironies, diametrically opposing the messaging of the prior poem, and reminiscent of the tongue-in-cheek palinodes of the *Legend of Good Women's* Prologue.

¹¹ Kristine Gilmartin, "Array in the *Clerk's Tale*", *ChauR*, 13, 3 (Winter 1979), 243. Gilmartin's translation. Cf. Petrarch, *De Insigni Obedientia et Fide Uxoriam*, VI.75–79 in Robert D. French, *A Chaucer Handbook* (New York: F.S. Crofts, 1927), <http://sites.fas.harvard.edu/~chaucer/special/authors/petrarch/pet-gris.html> [Accessed 20/07/2021].

It is this commitment to a specific kind of allegorical reading—where Griselda’s patience models an exemplary virtue of “vertuous suffraunce” (IV 1162) in the face of adversities “that God us sent” (IV 1151)—that has led Chaucer’s readers down a theological rabbit-hole in attempts to make sense of this poem. Chaucer makes a slight, but significant, modification to Petrarch’s moralisation: for Petrarch, God intentionally subjects us to adversities in order “that our frailty may become known to us”, just as Philosophy exposes Boethius’ error through rational “proofs”. Chaucer removes the assignation of a cause to God’s trials: “He preeveth folk al day [...] And suffreth us, as for oure excercise, / With sharpe scourges of adversitee [...] Nat for to knowe oure wyl, for certes he, / Er we were born, knew al oure freletee...” (IV 1155–60). ‘God foreknows our will, thus shows us our frailty’ becomes ‘God foreknows our will *and* our frailty’. The purpose of these tests is reframed from God’s unilateral, operative revealing of our frailty to a more cooperative process of self-improvement “for oure excercise”. In Chaucer’s text, the agencies of human beings and of God are interlocked in a reciprocal exchange in the development of virtue: our own “excercise” (*askesis*), meeting God’s tribulations, leads us from vice into virtue.

The hermeneutic lens suggested by Petrarch and Chaucer throws up a significant problem. If Griselda represents an ideal of stability, faith, and obedience in response to God’s trials, that suggests that Walter, her cruel, random, venal abuser, stands in for God. To make this seemingly outrageous analogy work, some of Chaucer’s readers have turned to the late medieval nominalist controversies. Stepsis saw Walter as representing the scholastic concept of *potentia absoluta*. As mentioned previously, scholastic theories about God’s omnipotence led to imaginative thought-experiments on a hypothetical God

who did not have to keep faith with His covenants (or *pactum dei*), whereby God was viewed as nothing other than “a single being without attributes whose only predication was the supremacy and freedom of His will”.¹² Notwithstanding the fact that there remains little evidence that Chaucer had first-hand knowledge or deep interest in many nominalist texts, Stepsis’ account of *potentia absoluta* has been partially debunked. As Steinmetz makes clear in his influential response, discussions of *potentia absoluta* never involved fanciful imaginings of Shelleyan tyrant-Gods, capable of turning universal moral law upside-down overnight; ‘Ockhamists’ did not lose sleep worrying that the sky might fall on account of God’s radical contingency. *Potentia absoluta* was theoretically refined by Scotus, Aquinas and Ockham (particularly the former) in order “to meet the exigencies of a controversy”, namely that the process of salvation appears to impose restrictions on God’s free will, because He will always save the faithful and virtuous, and He will never save a truly unrepentant evildoer.¹³ Thus the idea of God’s dual potencies came about as different ways of conceptualising the nature of the divine will. While God *could* punish the good and reward the evil, according to His absolute power (*de potentia absoluta*), He never *would*, because He is absolutely faithful to the laws established by His ordained power (*de potentia ordinata*). This is not some arbitrary, legalistic compact, but a reflection of the fact that the Christian God is not a “being without attributes” beyond naked will. His essential attribute is perfect goodness—it is not possible for God

¹² Stepsis, “Potentia Absoluta”, 135.

¹³ Bernard Lonergan, “St. Thomas’ Thought on *gratia operans*”, *Theological Studies*, 2, 3 (1941), 290. On the development of *potentia ordinata* and *potentia absoluta* as a dialectic, see Heiko A. Oberman, “*Via Antiqua* and *Via Moderna*: Late Medieval Prolegomena to Early Reformation Thought”, *The Journal of the History of Ideas*, 48, 1 (1987), 23–40. On the origins of the *potentia absoluta* formulation, see William J. Courtenay, “The Dialectic of Omnipotence in the High and Late Middle Ages”, in Tamar Radavsky, ed., *Divine Omniscience and Omnipotence in Medieval Philosophy: Islamic, Jewish and Christian Perspectives* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel 1985), pp. 243–69.

to fall short of His perfection as the *summum bonum* by acting in bad faith or betraying His own word. Walter, while enjoying a relatively unbounded will, is a creature of abject weakness and spiritual impotence, lacking even the grace-infused capacity to do anything other than indulge irrational, contingent lusts. As Steinmetz says, “Walter is an imperfect symbol of God. He is an embodiment of possibilities which God has never and will never actualize”.¹⁴ Being imperfect, and an agent of sheer libidinal drives, Walter is not a symbol of God at all. *Potentia absoluta* never entailed hypothetical Gods of other worlds who enacted their will differently: while the potential for such imaginative wanderings is obvious, Ockham (nor any other ‘nominalist’) actually indulged them, and Ockham was never condemned as heretic during his time at Avignon.

Steinmetz’s criticism of Stepsis’ view of Walter as tyrant-God is critically important. Less useful, however, is his ensuing attempt to salvage a nominalist *Clerk’s Tale*. He suggests that while Walter fails as analogue for nominalist concepts, Griselda embodies another, similarly controversial, idea: that free will precedes grace in the process of salvation; that ‘God does not deny His grace to those who do what is in them’ (*facientibus quod in se est Deus non denegat gratiam*). As mentioned, this view (whose main proponent was Robert Holcot) contravened the orthodox model of conversion as articulated by Augustine and Aquinas, in which it is prevenient grace, restored by Christ’s passion, that enables our choice to do good, and thus will and grace cooperate in the process of justification. Holcot’s ‘semi-Pelagian’ model of *facere quod in se est* stated that while fallen humans lack the potential to obtain justification without the gift of grace—we cannot ‘save ourselves’, as the Pelagians had suggested—our *unaided* free

¹⁴ David C. Steinmetz, “Late Medieval Nominalism and the *Clerk’s Tale*”, *ChauR*, 12, 1 (Summer, 1977), p. 44.

will does have a role to play in salvation. For God to bestow the grace we need, we must first choose to behave as virtuously as we are capable in our graceless, fallen state. Bradwardine, Holcot's contemporary, vociferously opposed this idea, penning the influential *De Causa Dei contra Pelagium* in response, which articulates a view of salvation that is the opposite extreme, whereby "omnipresent divine agency" totally supervenes "human passivity in the face of grace and predestination".¹⁵ Steinmetz's nominalist reading has an advantage over Stepsis': there is some proof Chaucer had actually read the works containing these ideas.¹⁶ But Steinmetz stretches the evidence of the text to make this fit. In his view, Griselda is possessed of an inherent virtue that *precedes* grace: in line with the doctrine of election, "God gives the habit of grace (*dignitas*) to every soul which possesses authentic goodness (*bonitas*) [...] The elect receive the habit of grace (*dignitas*) when they actualize the moral virtue appropriate to it (*bonitas*). Virtue (*bonitas*) is the foundation of grace and its presupposition".¹⁷ This Bielian distinction is not one Chaucer seems to share. The *Parson's Tale* invokes both gratuitous grace and sanctifying grace. It is clear that the "remissioun of synnes" is a gift of grace for the faithful, not something caused by human agency, and this justifying grace is differentiated from "the yifte of grace wel for to do" (*ParT* X 283), the prevenient

¹⁵ Aers, *Salvation and Sin*, p. 57. For an overview of Bradwardine's theology and its context in relation to *via moderni* semi-Pelagianism, see Dolnikowski, *Thomas Bradwardine*, pp. 2–68; Gordon Leff, *Bradwardine and the Pelagians: A Study of his 'De Causa Dei' and its Opponents* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957), pp. 127–139.

¹⁶ Robert Holcot's commentary on the Book of Wisdom was likely known to Chaucer; see e.g. Pratt, "Latin Sources of the Nonnes Preest"; Cartlidge, "Ripples on the Water"; *idem*, "'Scientia vera'? Holcot and Chaucer on Astrological Determinism, Magic, Talismans, and Omens", *ChauR*, 55, 3 (2020), 279–97. Bradwardine's *De Causa Dei* is referenced at *NPT* VII 3234–50. On the influence of Bradwardine and Wycliffe on the *Summoner's* and *Reeve's Tales*, see William F. Woods, "Symkyn's Place in the *Reeve's Tale*", *ChauR*, 39, 1 (2004), 17–40; Glending Olson, "Measuring the Immeasurable: Farting, Geometry, and Theology in the *Summoner's Tale*", *ChauR*, 43, 4 (2009), 414–27.

¹⁷ Steinmetz, "Nominalism and the *Clerk's Tale*", 45.

grace that makes good works possible and provides for the individual to freely cooperate, and cultivate habits of virtue. The echo of Revelations 3 that follows emphasises the interdependency and intercausality of human and divine agencies in the production of good works, and the contingency of worldly virtue on cooperation with the habit of grace in the soul: “‘I was atte dore of thyn herte’, seith Jhesus, and cleped for to entre. He that openeth to me shal have foryifnesse of synne. / I wol entre into hym by my grace and soupe with hym’, by the goode werkes that he shal doon, whiche werkes been the foode of God; ‘and he shal soupe with me’ by the grete joye that I shaly even hym’.” (X 287–9). The grace that enables reconciliation is habitual and prevenient: what is required are not good works undertaken prior to the habit of grace: Jesus is always waiting at the door of our hearts, and all that we must do is cooperate in spirit, to heed the call away from worldly sinfulness. It is not “Thanne wol I” but “*I wol entre*”, without predication. Christ’s sacrifice has already restored the “yifte of grace” that endows us with an alternative to our fallen natures. To ‘do what is in you’, for Chaucer, is to respond to the grace that is already there.

The Parson’s model of salvation is one in which grace is needed to do well, and in doing well we gain grace—it manifests the principle of “intercausality” expressed in Augustine’s writings, where “grace is any gratuitous gift of God [...] it is forgiveness, regeneration, justification, but also the power to avoid sins in future; it is being a child of God, and, as well, it is being moved by the Spirit of God”.¹⁸ While some theologians distinguished between *bonitas* and *dignitas*, virtue preceding grace, this Bielian doctrine was by no means orthodox. Aquinas is very clear that the seed of virtue lies in

¹⁸ Lonergan, “St. Thomas’ Thought on *gratia operans*”, 292. On Augustinian “intercausality” see De Letter, “Reciprocal Causality”, 382.

predisposing grace, which enables and potentiates the free choice of good works: “We must presuppose a gratuitous gift of God, who moves the soul inwardly or inspires the good wish” (*ST* I-II q.109.a6). Moreover, it contradicts one of the stated morals of the *Clerk’s Tale*: that “hye God somtyme senden kan / His grace into a litel oxes stalle” (*CIT* IV 207). Griselda exemplifies the Thomistic and Augustinian idea that the seed of virtue is grace, but that the free will must interact with the habit of grace to attain justification. Despite Steinmetz’s analysis, there remains no clear evidence of nominalist influence on the *Clerk’s Tale*. Occam’s razor makes short work of Ockhamist Chaucers (in this case, at least). The problems posed by the *Clerk’s Tale*’s religious allegory (of Walter as God and the value of Griselda’s example) can be parsed and resolved using concepts from thinkers whose influence on Chaucer is evidently paramount: Boethius and Augustine.

The ambiguity of the *Clerk’s Tale*’s theological worldview remains an open critical problem, and the nominalist arguments of Stepsis, Steinmetz and, more recently, Delasanta, are often accepted as a solution without much scrutiny. This chapter offers a counter-argument, based on a prevailing model of concupiscence and contingency present across several *Canterbury Tales*. I suggest that the *Clerk’s Tale*, while never resolving into a straightforward ethical ‘sentence’, is not as impenetrable as Chaucerians often suggest: the philosophical and religious meanings of Walter and Griselda are not mysteries in themselves, but because of the hermeneutic tools we bring to them. We should not assume that because modern readers struggle to interpret this poem, it must be ‘about’ interpretation, as Normandin argues, or that it has no life of its own beyond characterising its teller, reflecting the Clerk’s austere logic as “an adherent of the *via*

rationis".¹⁹ As Ashe points out, given the conservatism of Chaucer's translation of Petrarch here, and the narrator's recurring critical comments, the Clerk must first "be regarded as a reader", not, like the Canon's Yeoman, as a maker, whose own character flaws are essential to the action of his chosen tale.²⁰ The sense of the poem as allegory comes into focus if some initial variables are tweaked. Walter represents the contingency of acts and events as Augustine and Boethius saw it: as the unstable and diverse condition of the postlapsarian world through our limited, temporal eyes, the opposite of God's absolute stability, stillness and univocal truth. As in the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, the *Manciple's Tale*, and his Boethian short poems, Chaucer envisions an ontological situation where the world is declining into a state of ever-greater contingency not as a matter of course, but because of our own concupiscence ("turned up-so-doun / Is al this world for mede and wilfulnesse", 5–6).

For all its emphasis on the Augustinian themes of grace and concupiscence, Chaucer retains a Boethian concern with cultivating spiritual resilience in the face of material, temporal contingencies; this syncretic vision of grace and Fortune might be called 'Boethian-Augustinian'. By yielding to our fallen appetite for fleeting, worldly goods—which, being loaned out by Fortune, can never be owned—we reinforce these appetites in our souls, and our spiritual perspective—our grace-infused potential to transcend material and temporal desires, fixing our sights instead on God, the sole immutable good—is progressively diminished. Human beings who voluntarily diminish their habitual grace lose the potencies that grace can bestow (reason, equanimity,

¹⁹ Shawn Normandin, "Non Intellegant': The Enigmas of the *Clerk's Tale*", *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 58, 2 (Summer 2017), 189–223. Joseph E. Grennen, "Science and Sensibility in Chaucer's Clerk", *ChauR* 6, 2 (Fall 1971), 90.

²⁰ Ashe, "Reading Like a Clerk in the *Clerk's Tale*", 936.

fortitude) and, blind to the higher good beyond the material world, become totally subject to Fortune, victims of contingency un-comsoled by sight of the divine stability that transcends it. Habitual sinners blind themselves to the privileged cosmic perspective that Philosophy gradually instils in Boethius. Feeding their appetite for gifts of Fortune, they lose access to this “stedfastnesse”, enabled by gifted grace. This is why, as we saw in the *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale*, the credulous knowledge-seekers—habitual addicts to *concupiscentia oculorum*—of the first part are doomed by their inability to perceive a world *beyond* contingency, instability becoming the law of their lives: “Us moste putte oure good in aventure” (*CYT VIII* 946). This conception of grace as the font of human potency is not restricted, like the *quod facere in se est*, to scholastic disputations around Oxford and Paris (for which, again, there is little evidence of Chaucer’s sustained interest). It was foundational pulpit teaching, stretching back to the second Council of Orange and Augustine’s anti-Pelagian thinking.²¹

The priority of grace in realising human potential was also something of a commonplace in Chaucer’s literary influences. Dante was especially committed to this idea, his *Commedia* making clear time and again that the way to knowledge is always revealed *per grazia*, by cooperation with grace, the *divina virtù* that will help him express himself beyond his natural powers, to “show the shadow of the blessed realm inscribed within my mind” (*Par I.22–24*). For his part, Chaucer is always careful not to presuppose a potentiating infusion of grace (or, never asserts his own capacity to do justice to what

²¹ Dominic Keech, *The Anti-Pelagian Christology of Augustine of Hippo, 396–430* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), esp. chs. 1 & 2; Philip Schaff, “The Pelagian Controversy”, *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 5, 18 (1848), 205–43; Rebecca Harden Weaver, *Divine Grace and Human Agency: A Study of the Semi-Pelagian Controversy* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1996), chs. 1 & 2.

grace may reveal), a nuance evident in his recalibration of Dante's language: "And yif, devyne vertu, thow / Wilt helpe me to shewe now / That in myn hed ymarked ys" (*HF* 1101–3. Emphasis added.). Chapter five of this thesis, on the *House of Fame*, will examine Chaucer's response to Dante's envisioned poetic illumination at length. Important here, for reading the *Clerk's Tale*, is that Chaucer is highly resistant to the idea that grace ("devyne vertu") may be actively *invoked*, called up on demand, by any fallen individual will—hence the added "yif".

On discarding the *facere quod in se est* reading, Walter takes on two functions, one psychological, the other allegorical. Both are expressed at the lexical and symbolic levels, and they are narratively intra-temporal (*innerzeitig*); that is, not given any formal or structural order of priority, but co-occurring and overlapping, since each function is a *reading* taking shape within one character's phenomenal experience.²² To paraphrase Barr, writing of the "intratemporal" *The Knight's Tale* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Walter and Griselda (and, perhaps, the Clerk), "contain each other's stories".²³ This radical subjectification turns the narrative into a patchwork of individualised temporalities; a panopticon of experiences in time and the provisional interpretations that emerge from them, a set of noncanonical exegeses with no canonic 'official version' overlaid. As discussed in the next chapter, on *Troilus and Criseyde*, Chaucer had much practice in this de-centring strategy, which recurs in his treatment of Boethian themes and Italian sources. Here, it leads to a situation where there seem to be two Walters—because

²² On intra-temporality, see William D. Blattner, "Originary Temporality", in *Martin Heidegger*, ed. Stephen Mulhall (London: Routledge, 2006); Rudolf Bernet, "Is the Present ever Present? Phenomenology and the Metaphysics of Presence", trans. Wilson Brown, *Research in Phenomenology*, 12 (1982), 85–112.

²³ Helen Barr, *Transporting Chaucer* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014), p. 142.

the Walter is not present, only second-order readings of him, taking place within variegated reference frames. Where Walter is the primary narrative focus and our reading experience is ostensibly aligned with his own (when we are reading about Walter's Walter), he goes through the same process that takes over the Yeoman's "sely preest", losing the ability to conceive of a world beyond mutability by a progressive addiction to contingent things. Meanwhile, as Griselda's tormentor and the villain of the piece (Griselda's Walter), he is a radically inscrutable locus of pure contingency; he represents Fortune itself. Like the Boethian figure of Fortune, Walter's gifts—such the regalia of jewels, crowns, rings, and gowns he bestows on Griselda—can only be borrowed, never possessed. They are the "goodes of fortune" (*ParT* X 453), "richesse, hygh degrees of lordshipes, preisynges of the peple", opposed to the "goods of grace...science, power to suffre spiritueel travaille, benignitee, vertuous contemplacioun, withstondynge of temptacioun, and semblable thynges" (X 454).

The contrast (and interrelation) of 'goods of grace' and 'goods of fortune' is a recurring theme for Chaucer, a crucial conceptual opposition in his thinking about the ethical and psychological response to contingency. Again, the epistemic and metaphysical vectors of this idea intersect. The distinction between goods of grace and fortune evokes the opposition of temporal, mutable words and things and those which share in God's atemporal, immutable stability; it also gestures to the metaphysical limen that produces this very distinction, between the phenomenal world of human beings situated in linear time, and the unitary all-at-once-ness of the divine knowledge. In this case, Griselda possesses the stabilising goods of grace in spades, by God-given gift prior to and independent of all material signs or independent acts of will. Chaucer emphasises

that Griselda's "vertu" is a noncontingent value that exists autonomous of "hire array" (*CIT* IV 383), the second-order, contingent value that Walter's (and Fortune's) goods might signify:

A corone on hire heed they han ydressed,
 And sette hire ful of nowches grete and smale.
 Of hire array what sholde I make a tale?
 Unnethe the peple hir knew for hire fairnesse
 Whan she translated was in swich richesse. (IV 381–5)

Walter ritualistically asserts his sovereignty over his new bride by "translating" her. Each of her exterior signs—hair, clothes, adornments—is overwritten with another, replacing signals of her "poverté" with ones communicating "richesse". But "translated" is not 'transubstantiated'. Chaucer's sole use of this uncommon word foregrounds the gulf between the accidents of temporal language and the prelinguistic substance they would signify. The effect is to circumscribe the strictly temporal limits of Walter's sovereignty: his systematic translation of Griselda's accidents is preceded and succeeded by expositions of her substantive value, over which Walter, as an agent of Fortune, has no true control. A far cry from the boundless God of *potentia absoluta*, Walter has unchecked power only over goods of Fortune, material accidents and brief contingencies. The virtues which Griselda manifests as "markysesse" (IV 394) were potentiated by God's grace, not Walter's, and they correspond closely to the Parson's account of the "goods of grace":

I seye that to this newe markysesse
 God hath swich favour sent hire of his grace
 That it ne semed nat by liklynesse
 That she was born and fed in rudenesse,
 As in a cote or in an oxe-stalle,
 But norissed in an emperoures halle. (IV 394–99)

Walter’s translation of Griselda only *communicates* her value to their public sphere, “the peple”, in signs whose value is contingent as currency, and the gulf between this translated value and her originary truth is emphasised: “it *ne semed nat* by liklynesse” that she could have come from where she did. Her true, noncontingent value is generated by the “favour” of divine “grace” and her willing embrace of it. In her rule, thanks to her goods of grace, she exhibits more just than her headline virtue of “suffraunce”—Griselda is the paragon of wise, prudent government and, crucially, it is this Solomonic *sapientia* that “the peple” recognise and applaud, not the surface-level splendour of Walter’s loaned array:

Nat oonly this Grisildis thurgh hir wit
 Koude al the feet of wyfly hoomlinesse,
 But eek, whan that the cas required it,
 The commune profit koude she redresse.
 Ther nas discord, rancour, ne hevynesse
 In al that land that she ne koude apese...
 [...]
 So wise and rype wordes hadde she,
 And juggementz of so greet equitee,
 That she from hevene sent was, as men wende,
 Peple to save and every wrong t’amende. (IV 428–41).

Griselda rises to good fame not for her time-limited outer accidents of idealised beauty or the “heigh bountee” (IV 409) in which Walter drapes her, but for her “science”, “eloquence”, “wit”. It is for her goods of grace, not those of fortune, that her people “hire lovede” (IV 413): evidently, true virtue does not need to be “translated”; good deeds may inspire with or without corresponding words. The *facere quod in se est* reading is accurate in one sense: Griselda *does* ‘do what is in her’, but what is in her is grace as scripture and the Church Fathers described it, raising her up (like Solomon) to a

supernormal potential for virtue.²⁴ There is no sense that she is doing this in the *absence* of prevenient grace; grace is constantly in the verbal foreground. In fact, the *Clerk's Tale* equates the absence of grace with psycho-spiritual diminishment and the loss of capacity. Walter and Griselda, as we will see, represent opposite extremes: of freedom without grace, and constraint with grace. Walter's *liberum arbitrium* is free within strictly temporal and accidental bounds in his diminished, graceless state, his powers limited to the contingent world of time and change. This is opposed to Griselda's radical imperviousness to the contingency of Fortune's world, a *fortitudo* sustained through her cooperation with the *habitus entitativus* of grace, her access to the kernel of God's noncontingent "stedfastnesse" despite the unpredictability of her "up-so-down" world.²⁵

3.2 Walter, the Scrivener? Grace, Fortune, and Freedom

Walter's compulsive, extreme abuse of Griselda in "assaye" of her "sadnesse" (IV 451–55) is an enduring critical problem. The allegorical solution proposed by both Petrarch and the Clerk—that "Griselda's patient acceptance of the inscrutable will of her earthly husband may be taken as a moving example of how the Christian should submit to the divine will"—is, as Edden points out, immediately inadequate.²⁶ There is no analogue in Christian theology for a capricious tyrant-God like Walter. The cruel trials imposed by this lusty, appetitive, worldly "markys", wont to live "in delit" (IV 64–68), bear only a superficial resemblance to Biblical tests of faith—God knows our wills already, as

²⁴ On God's gift of wisdom to Solomon, see 1 Kings 3:3–15.

²⁵ On sanctifying grace as a habit of the soul—specifically a *habitus entitativus*, a "condition added to a substance by which condition...the substance is found permanently good or bad", see Pohle, "Sanctifying Grace", <https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/06701a.htm> [Accessed 17/07/2021].

²⁶ Valerie Edden, "Sacred and Secular in the *Clerk's Tale*", *ChauR*, 26, 4 (1992), 369–70.

Petrarch and the Clerk make clear. Moreover, the cold contingency of the secular world is not attributable to the whims of an unstable God, but to our ontological limitations as non-divine beings. Both Boethian and Augustinian accounts distinguish between humanity's experience of time as a linear, moment-to-moment unfolding, past and future never perfectly knowable, and God's atemporality, the "science of presence" (*Bo* II.V.pr.6.112) that grants perfect knowledge of all ends. The concept of *potentia absoluta*, in its proper context, pertains in a restricted sense to debates about the role of free will in the process of justification. Griselda's obedience to Walter does not represent "the radical obedience of the human will...to the inscrutability of this voluntarist God" as Delasanta suggests, because it is not God but *Fortune* whose contingency must be endured: this contingency is generated by our temporal limits, which close in as we lose sight of God's supervenient stability and truth, and it is cooperation with God's salvific gift that may mitigate this diminishment of faculty, making contingency endurable.²⁷ God tests our faith not so that He can know our strength, but so that we can know it. Yet Griselda is 'complete' from the very beginning of the Tale. She does not grow, nor learn anything, except about the capriciousness of human beings. Her extraordinary sufferance only expresses an extraordinary 'vertu' that was already fully realised.

Edden suggests that we discard the religious and allegorical dimension of the *Clerk's Tale* in view of this inadequacy, proposing that the poem works better as a secular story, in which "what is at stake is not so much her salvation, but human happiness; her reward...is not an eternal crown but reunion with her children".²⁸ This too causes problems. Shorn of their allegorical trappings, the sufferings of Griselda are

²⁷ Rodney Delasanta, "Nominalism and the 'Clerk's Tale' Revisited", *ChauR*, 31, 3 (1997), 209.

²⁸ Edden, "Sacred and Secular", 374.

satanically cruel; her final reunion with her children is an absurdly arbitrary reprieve over which she had no influence. The poem's claimed ethic of "wyfly obeisaunce" becomes extremely ill-advised, risking potential abuse. The value of her "suffraunce" and "suffisaunce" is invalidated, since it is these qualities that *actively encourage* Walter's violence, reducing her patience to a passive indifference which prevents her from offering any resistance to the murder of her own children (viewed in strictly secular terms, Finnegan's argument that Griselda "should have rescinded" her vow, is convincing).²⁹ The poem's seemingly half-formed theological and psychological strands have tied critics in knots. As Edden and Delasanta each demonstrate, there are major issues if we try to minimise one or the other level of meaning. I am arguing for a potential synthesis of the two, deriving not from edgy nominalist discourses but from core Augustinian and Boethian concepts that were utterly mainstream in Chaucer's religious and literary situations.

For both *auctores*, the workings of the human psyche and the mysteries of divine and human agency do not exist separately, vacuum-sealed; they are intrinsically-linked ways of thinking and speaking about the same problem. The common thread is habit: the concupiscent, materialist behaviours that accelerate the world's instability and distance individuals from friendship with God, and the active exercise of good habits that encourages the cultivation of virtue (made possible by grace), and then inspires others towards their own justification. As Aers describes, medieval Augustinianism retained a keen sense of how "sinful [and virtuous] acts become compulsive chains, habits shaping the will, guiding our uses of intellect and conscience, separating us from [or reconciling

²⁹ Robert Emmett Finnegan, "'She should have said no to Walter': Griselda's Promise in the *Clerk's Tale*", *English Studies*, 75, 4 (1994), 303.

us to] God and neighbor”.³⁰ Walter and Griselda represent the interactions of free will and the gifts of grace in this process: Walter indulges concupiscence, amplifying the habit of sin and diminishing the habit of grace, and his psyche reflects the blindness and forgetfulness this causes at the individual level. He is a case study in this process. By losing sight of Philosophy’s remedy, the higher-order steadfastness beyond the contingent world, we are reduced to being truly lashed to Fortune’s wheel, and we become fundamentally unstable, inconsistent, and impulsive ourselves. The hostage of Fortune becomes the agent of Fortune, causing contingency to multiply in the world, just as *gratia gratis data* causes merit to spread by exemplary merit.

Indeed, Walter is positioned as a creature of Fortune from the poem’s beginning. A contrast is established between Griselda’s and Walter’s respective “bountee” (IV 245): Griselda has prior possession of spiritual “vertu” (IV 240) derived from God’s “grace”, sent “into a litel oxes stalle” (IV 207). The proverb becomes literal soon afterwards, when Walter first calls on her “in an oxes stalle” (IV 291), ironically juxtaposing Walter’s subordinate, contingent ‘grace’, an ordaining power restricted to temporal/material things, with the priority of God’s grace, acting within the superordinate domain of the immaterial soul. As such, Walter’s “bountee” is utterly materialistic, and he lives in a surfeit of worldly appetite, ‘delit’, by grace of Fortune, not God: “Thus in delit he lyveth, and hath doon yoore, / Biloved and drad, thurgh favour of Fortune, / Bothe of his lordes and of his commune” (IV 68–70). There is no voluntarist concept of truly autonomous free will here. Rather there is a dichotomy of supervening orders with which humans may choose to be affiliated: Fortune and *instabilitas*, by becoming

³⁰ Aers, *Salvation and Sin*, p. 33.

creatures of the contingent world, or God and *stabilitas*, by resisting concupiscence and developing virtue through cooperative grace (*gratia cooperans*).³¹ Neither Walter's abundance of 'delit' nor the approval of his public are creditable to his own unaided efforts. The logic of cooperative grace is straightforward: we may be co-authors of good, but we are the sole authors of evil, and this point is emphasised in Walter's introduction:

A faire persone, and strong, and yong of age,
And ful of honour and of curteisye;
Discreet ynogh his contree for to gye,
Save in somme thynges that he was to blame;
And Walter was this yonge lordes name. (IV 73–77)

Walter's sovereign virtues are the fruits of his "lynage" (IV 71). Prior to the involvement of his own reason and will, Walter is endowed with profound potential for good works, passed by a causal historical chain under the guiding hand of Providence. All he must do is respond to the call of grace within and realise this capacity for virtue, for his own improvement and the benefit of his "noble contree" (IV 63). But he falls short of this call. While his received capacities make him "discreet *ynogh*" (IV 75) as ruler, the emphasis is on his unrealised potential. His addiction to absolutely temporary, concupiscent pleasures occults his gift of grace and narrows his spiritual horizons, diminishing, like the Yeoman, his reason and discretion:

I blame hym thus: that he considered nought
In tyme comynge what myghte hym bityde,

³¹ *Stabilitas* is traditionally associated with the timeless simplicity of God; it is also a practical remedy for the experience of worldly instability, the contingency of events. For St. Gregory the Great, *stabilitas* (associated with the cardinal virtue of *fortitudo*) was "a set of spiritual relationships: the soul is conformed to the life of God, and the acts of the body are directed by the life of the soul. This 'stability' is an ideal of individual and communal human life with God in the world". Jordan Joseph Wales, "The Narrated Theology of *Stabilitas* in Gregory the Great's *Life of Benedict*", *Cistercian Studies Quarterly*, 49, 2 (2014), 167. On *stabilitas*, *fortitudo*, and *acedia*, see Rebecca Konyndyk Deyoung, *Sloth: Some Historical Reflections on Laziness, Effort, and Resistance to the Demands of Love* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), ch. 8.

But on his lust present was al his thocht,
As for to hauke and hunte on every syde. (IV 78–81)

His virtues came from his lineage, but his vices are his own: “*he* was to blame” (IV 76). Acceding to concupiscence, he develops the key symptom of the Boethian prisoner’s malady—*forgetfulness*. His habitual “lust” reinforces the present-oriented temporal limitation of the postlapsarian subject; diminishing his gift of grace by squandering his virtuous potencies, Walter has lost perspective. Forgetting ‘what he is’ (*quid ipse sis*)—a limited, temporal being with the potential to rise beyond the contingent world—makes him (and his subjects) perfect victims of Fortune. Distracted from anything except in-the-moment “lust”, he does nothing to mitigate the fundamental problem facing temporal beings—the contingency of the future. While his native powers enable him to manage the temporary problems of his realm, this time-blindness prevents him from performing his essential duty as ruler: ensuring the security and stability of his people by insulating them from inevitable downturns of Fortune, mitigating the damage that instability can wreak by planning for many possible futures. He should secure the royal line to prevent future succession wars and power struggles. But he fails in this duty of rule. In his diminished state as hostage to in-the-moment impulsivity, it never occurs to him, forcing his own people to petition him, “flokmeele” (IV 86), to consider this essential anxiety.

We are introduced to Walter as a good “ynough” ruler who could be far better if he was not a slave to habitual compulsions, that is, if he was not dependent on “favour of Fortune” (IV 69). It is in this context that Griselda, despite having been “povreliche yfostred” (IV 213), puts Walter to shame as sovereign, assuring “the commune profit” (IV 431) and winning popular adulation with “wise and rype wordes” (IV 431, 438). The goods of grace are vastly superior to the goods of Fortune. Griselda’s spiritual potential,

the “rype and sad corage” “enclosed” in her “brest” (IV 219–20), is realised and cultivated through her active “exercise”, her choice of “vertu” over “likerous lust”: “Wel offer of the welle than of the tonne / She drank” (IV 214–17). Will and grace are *both* involved in the development of her virtues, which are manifest in her “science” and “wit” as ruler: her willing cooperation with grace raises her potencies beyond what they would be in its absence. She is not simply apathetic in relation to the world of Fortune: she remains a fully-fledged, feeling creature of the world despite her stoicism, evidenced by her baleful request of a proper burial for her children when she learns that they are to die. But she exerts major effort in cultivating equanimity and imperturbability in the face of contingencies that she cannot control (or, that she *deems* she cannot control). In this, she is aided by “devyne vertu” (HF 1101): her habit of grace and good psychological habits are mutually reinforcing. Walter is simply the antitype of this concept, mutually diminishing habits of vice: choosing “lust”, prioritising the material world and his own freedom over his spiritual life, his potencies are diminished, falling short of the capacity for “vertu” passed down to him by “lynage”.

Walter’s time-blindness and impulsivity in relation to Griselda, his impotence in the face of contingency, is reiterated throughout the poem. Griselda’s superior potencies are expressed in her wise rule, and the good fame she accrues, as well as the inspiration she disseminates, have little to do with her material, accidental gifts from Walter. Crucially, Walter’s testing of Griselda is not animated by his rational free agency, but by the interaction of inward concupiscence with outer contingency. The animus for Walter’s actions is *incomprehension*, his simple inability to wrap his head around Griselda’s near-superhuman stability and sufferance, and he is compelled to keep testing these qualities

by the same secular curiosity as the Yeoman's alchemists—lust for worldly knowledge, *concupiscentia oculorum*. Indeed, Walter indulges all three dimensions of concupiscence as Augustine defines them: *concupiscentia carnis*, desire for worldly delights (“Thus in delit he lyveth...in his lust present was al his thocht”, IV 68, 80); *concupiscentia oculorum*, desire for worldly knowledge: (“This markys in his herte longeth so / To tempe his wyf, hir sadnesse for to knowe...he ne myghte out of his herte throwe / This merveillous desir...”, IV 451–54); and *ambitio saeculi*, desire for worldly power (“I seye this: be ye redy with good herte / To al my lust, and that I frely may...do yow laughe or smerte...”, IV 351–53).³² For Augustine, concupiscence is not sin but the kindling for sin. His theology says that it is possible for us to point our concupiscent drives in a virtuous direction, by turning our minds from the material world and its fortunes to contemplation of God, and His absolute steadfastness. Walter, who has reinforced habits of worldly concupiscence, cannot begin to comprehend Griselda's true virtue—more than mere “wyfly obeisaunce”, her superpower is *fortitudo*, resilience in the face of Fortune, sustained by her soul's inclination towards the higher, immaterial world of God.

Walter's impetus in testing Griselda has a key symptom that confirms its concupiscent identity: insatiability. Early on, the Clerk interjects to note his incredulity that Walter's “merveillous desir” can never be sufficiently satisfied:

He hadde assayed hire *ynogh* bifore,
 And foond hire evere good; what neded it
 Hire for to tempte, and alwey moore and moore,
 Though som men preise it for a subtil wit? (IV 456–59)

³² St. Augustine, *De Vera Religione*, 38, 69–71. See Marleen Verschoren, “The Appearance of the Concept *Concupiscentia* in Augustine's Early Antimanichean Writings”, *Augustiniana*, 52, 2 (2002), 199–240.

As Mann points out, the keyword *ynogh* (which recurs nine times throughout the *Clerk's Tale*) contains theological and philosophical implications, inscribing “the resources that will enable one to meet the vicissitudes of ‘this queynte world’ with resilience...[a] version of Stoic ‘suffisaunce’” as well as the “careless abundance” and “inexhaustible outpouring” of “God’s grace”.³³ The frame around Walter and Griselda’s interactions posits the former’s perpetual lack of ‘enoughness’, his failure to find *ynogh*-ness despite his limitless indulgence, with Griselda’s perfect “suffisance” (IV 759), despite her abject powerlessness over her worldly fortunes. Walter truly cannot help himself: his unstable, materialist soul cannot accept the perfect “sturdisnesse” (IV 700) that Griselda exhibits in the face of misfortune, and so he is consigned by his spiritual condition to heap further suffering on her—by force of habit, not reason:

But ther been folk of swich condicion
 That whan they have a certein purpos take,
 They kan nat stynte of hire entencion,
 But, right as they were bounden to that stake,
 They wol nat of that firste purpos slake.
 Right so this markys fulliche hath purposed
 To tempte his wyf as he was first disposed. (IV 701–7)

Conflicting concepts of freedom are juxtaposed in Chaucer’s lexis. Walter’s untrammelled free agency is emphasised, but so is his will’s subordinacy to prevenient forces. Walter enacts a “certein purpos” expressing his own “entencion”—but he is predisposed to do so by his “condicion”, and his habitual compulsion actually reduces his degree of agency: he is “bounden to that stake”, unable to “slake” his appetite’s thirst. The double model of agency here is nothing like the voluntarist *liberum arbitrium*, which conceives of the free will as an independent organ, a locus of decision separate from the

³³ Jill Mann, “Satisfaction and Payment in Middle English Literature”, *SAC*, 5 (1983), 43–48.

habitual and humoral compulsions of the human soul, which makes the first, unaided move to initiate God's gift of grace. Rather, this is in keeping with the Augustinian view of agency as an infinitely complex psychological tapestry, where the freedom of human agency is retained and yet, paradoxically, "divine agency...is prevenient and pervasive".³⁴

This multivalent model of 'double agency', which sets habitual compulsions, sensuous/rational desires, and infused virtue in an opened intercausality, accounts for the overlap of absolute freedom and total subordinacy in Chaucer's language around Walter. Immediately after Walter's subservient "condicion" has been outlined, the poem again asserts the apparently boundless freedom of his will: "For which it semed thus: that of hem two / Ther nas but o wyl, for as Walter leste, / The same lust was hire plesance also" (IV 715–17). This is representative of the main lexical cluster associated with Walter: "wyl", "lyste", "liketh", "luste", and their variants recur insistently in descriptions of Walter and in his speech (see e.g. IV 323, 345, 493, 524, 653, etc.). Walter's speech, and the descriptions of him, are so drenched in the language of volition that the idea of *willing* seems constitutive of his whole textual existence, the *essentia* of his fictive entity. This cluster corresponds, in dialectical contrast, with the diction surrounding Griselda: as Walter *wills*, Griselda *suffers* (in the sense of 'suffraunce', "the patient endurance of hardship...a willingness to bear adversities").³⁵ Her presence in this poem is painted with the terms "suffre", "sad", "stedfast", "siker", "pacience", (IV 220, 237, 452, 564, 602, etc.). Delasanta rightly describes the vocabulary around Walter as

³⁴ Aers, *Salvation and Sin*, p. 15.

³⁵ *MED*, s.v. "suffraunce n"., 4.(a) "The patient endurance of hardship, affliction etc.; a willingness to bear adversities, misfortune, etc".. <<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED43650>> [Accessed 17/07/2021].

“voluntarist diction”.³⁶ By a striking absence of intellectual activity—of psychological, imaginative, or ratiocinative action in the causation of his behaviour, his acts proceeding almost autonomously from a seminal decision “t’assaye” (IV 454)—Walter is depicted as a creature of sheer *voluntas*, of willing as such, radically divorced from *intellectus agens* or *ratio practica*.³⁷ Nothing *changes* with Walter as Griselda endures his tests: nothing considered or learned, he simply, mechanistically, doubles down on further extremes of ‘assaying’ each time Griselda fails to break. He is voluntarist only in the sense that will in isolation is the agent cause of his acts, meaning *voluntas* is conceived as something distinct from intellection.

But this is not evidence for a theologically voluntarist reading of the tale in which Walter is a cipher for the will of God *de potentia absoluta*. Rather, his isolated and compulsive wilfulness inscribes *voluntas* in the Augustinian, rather than Scotist, sense—not as an independent locus of decision with priority over the intellect, but as psychological *inclination* in response to outer stimulus.³⁸ The current in scholastic thought of theological voluntarism, of which Scotus was the most significant innovator, saw God’s will as existing prior to all other attributes: as Hirsh explains, “God was not good simply because he was not evil, or just simply because he was not unjust; he was so

³⁶ Delasanta, “Nominalism and the *Clerk’s Tale* Revisited”, 218.

³⁷ For Aquinas, practical reason (*ratio practica*) is the aspect of reason which pertains to the contingent (where speculative reason pertains to the necessary, what must always be), and is thus the basis for moral reasoning based on human acts—it refers to the mind in the effort to pursue ethical action in the phenomenal world of contingencies. See *ST* I–II q.94.a4; q.90.a1 ad2.

³⁸ On Scotus’ distinction between natural will (*voluntas ut natura*) and the will as such (*voluntas ut voluntas*), see Cruz González-Ayesta, “Scotus’ Interpretation of the Difference between *Voluntas ut Natura* and *Voluntas ut Voluntas*”, *Franciscan Studies*, 66 (2008), 371–412. Scotus’ theorisation of a faculty of volition abstracted from materialist causation may have been influential in the development of later, voluntarist theories of free will in Christian soteriology.

because he was God, and whatever God willed was good”.³⁹ This contrasts the ‘intellectualism’ of Aquinas, which gives priority to God’s reason in the unfolding of the world order. For Aquinas, put simply, God’s will is good because God is good, the *summum bonum*. He cannot will what is not good *de potentia ordinata* because He is goodness itself. However, this does not amount to a ‘restriction’ of God’s will, because evil is simply a *lack*, an imperfection caused by a lack of potential to understand, seek and promote the perfect good that supervenes all temporary sources of happiness.

Chaucer’s depiction of Walter emphasises this lack: his will is not defined in relation to limitless branching futures to choose between but by his limitedness, his inability to choose anything *but* “likorous lust” (IV 214) and the uncomprehending tests of Griselda, experiments that yield nothing but ever-deeper perplexity. Walter seems impervious to the constant proof of Griselda’s “stedfastnesse” until she has been thoroughly, egregiously, abused: that it takes him so long to grasp her obvious “vertu” attests to his spiritual blindness and unimaginative stupidity. In addition to the telling absence of intellectual activity on Walter’s part, his drive to test Griselda is framed consistently as a *temptation*, a compulsive habit that emerges contingently in his psyche, not the action of an independent faculty of will: “This markys caughte yet another lest / To tempte his wyf yet offer, if he may [...] wedded men ne know no mesure, / Whan that they fynde a pacient creature” (IV 619–23). His voluntarism is not theological; it is all too human, reflecting the Augustinian conception of *voluntas* as “not...a faculty or power, but

³⁹ John C. Hirsh, “A Scotian Reading of the *Man of Law’s Tale* and the *Clerk’s Tale*”, *Modern Language Review*, 116, 1 (2021), 4.

occurrent *horme*”, that is, a dispositional impetus that arises in reaction to the extrinsic world.⁴⁰

In his *Confessions*, Augustine famously described his *voluntas* as a spiritual incontinence, a powerlessness to resist the compulsive, concupiscent chains that enthrall him to worldly appetites, and which prevent him from actively seeking God’s higher good:

The enemy held my will in his power and fashioned from it the chains that held me fast. Indeed, a perverse will gives birth to inordinate desire, and when the will serves inordinate desire, a habit is formed; and when the habit is not resisted, it becomes compulsion. By these small hooks, each joined to the one before (this is why I have called them a chain), a brutal enslavement held me in its grip. And yet I knew that a new will had begun to arise in me, a will to worship you without desire of reward and to enjoy you, O God, our only sure joy. But this new will was not yet capable of overthrowing my prior will, which had grown stronger and stronger the longer it endured. Thus my two wills, one old and one new, one carnal and the other spiritual, were at war with one another, and by their conflict they laid waste to my soul.⁴¹

The force of habit compelling Walter’s grotesque tests inscribes this concept of *voluntas*: habitual will, the soul’s addictive inclinations in response to the material world. This will is not distinct from thought and feeling, as in later formulations; rather, they are constitutive of it. Walter’s lack of intellectual action does not represent the priority of the voluntarist God’s boundless will over all other properties. It suggests the diminishment of Walter’s soul and the boundedness of his voluntary potential, having indulged from youth his “inordinate desire”, forming a compulsive chain which keeps him from seeking (or even seeing) that higher, spiritual will towards intimacy with God. The significance of Walter’s will lies in this context of graceless instability, and its dialectical contrast with

⁴⁰ Thomas Williams, “Will and Intellect”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 239.

⁴¹ *Conf* VIII.5.10. Trans. Williams, *ibid.*

Griselda's grace-infused patience. Augustine proceeds to explain that it is only by grace that he was able to break the chains of compulsion and seek reconciliation. Similarly, Griselda's fortitude, her extraordinary capacity to suffer the mobile world of misfortune and contingency, is made possible by *gratia cooperans*, willing cooperation with prevenient, sanctifying grace, which inoculates her from worldly appetites. In the context of their marital compact, Walter is described as her "*worldly* suffisaunce" because her *spiritual* sufficiency is already spoken for. As Mann points out, the grace sent by God "into a litel oxes stalle" is "gret innoghe" for Griselda, the source of her semi-Stoic 'enoughness', while Walter, hopelessly enslaved to the material world of contingent things, enjoys only "*outward* grace ynogh" (IV 424).⁴² As the next section will show, the bivalence of the word "grace" in the *Clerk's Tale* is one of Chaucer's essential tools in realising this subtext.

However, there is another dimension to Walter's "voluntarist" lexis that should be examined first. As I discussed, Chaucer and Petrarch both make clear that this tale should be approached polysemously, with due attention to the distinction between its literal, typological, and tropological senses. As an ethical exemplum, Walter for Chaucer represents the spiritual poverty of will without grace, while Griselda represents the superhuman *fortitudo* of habitual virtuousness (a situation aided, Chaucer suggests, by her "povre" circumstances, which limit her capacity to form libidinous habits). This, I would argue, is Walter's significance *in himself* and as our hermeneutic focus in his relation to Griselda. But when we turn our attention to Griselda as the poem's hero and main site of interpretation, Walter takes on a different, allegorical dimension, not as a

⁴² Mann, "Satisfaction and Payment", 35; *Pearl*, 624, 636, 648, 660.

voluntarist concept of God but as the Boethian idea of Fortune, a figural allegory of the contingency of the world as experienced by human beings situated, unlike God, in sequential time. Walter's "voluntarist diction", his striking lack of reasoning and intellectual activity, the total arbitrariness of his "lust" and his symbolic association with material signs of wealth (most significantly, with gems and jewels) all have a precursor in another of Chaucer's figures of worldly contingency: the goddess Fame, Fortune's "suster" (*HF* 1547).

Chaucer's "lady Fame" (*HF* 1311) is an aspect of Fortune. Like the figure of Fortune in the *Roman de la Rose*, Fame "appears in the poem as a figure capable of rendering all things different from themselves, transforming at one 'the lowest' into 'the highest' and 'the highest' into 'the lowest'".⁴³ As my final chapter will discuss in depth, in the *House of Fame*, the titular goddess's favours and disfavours are meted out to her supplicants according to no orderly or logical principle, in a mode of pure contingency:

They gonne down on kneës falle,
 Before this ilke noble quene,
 And seyde, "Graunte us, lady shene,
 Ech of us of thy grace a bone!"
 And somme of hem she graunted sone,
 And somme she werned wel and faire,
 And some she graunted the contraire
 Of her axyng outterly.
 But thus I seye yow, trewely,
 What her cause was, y nyste.
 For of this folk ful wel y wiste
 They hadde good fame ech deserved,
 Although they were dyversly served;
 Ryght as her suster, dame Fortune,
 Ys wont to serven in comune. (*HF* 1534–48)

⁴³ Heller-Roazen, *Fortune's Faces*, p. 63.

There is already an affinity between the wills of Walter and Fame in their sheer inscrutability and apparent randomness: when Walter is “caughte” by another compulsion to test Griselda, the *Clerk’s Tale’s* narrator is driven to exclaim, “O *nedeles* was she tempted in assay!” (*CIT* IV 621). Figuratively, the “assay” is “*nedeles*”, “superfluous...vain; without purpose”.⁴⁴ Logically, it is *without necessity*, not deterministically caused; in a word, contingent. In the *House of Fame*, the contingency of her *voluntas* is related using the same lexical strategies as with Walter: by the parallelistic clustering of words including “wol”, “lyste”, “lust”, and the like, as well as by an ironic recurrence of the word “grace” in its idiomatic, secular usage, referring to the material and temporal “bountee” meted out by worldly authorities (in contrast with the transcendent, atemporal goods offered by God).

The *House of Fame’s* most expansive and repetitious sequence depicts Fame’s judgements in response to groups of fame-seeking petitioners. It begins:

Now herke how she gan to paye
That gonne her of her grace praye;
And yit, lo, al this companye
Seyden sooth, and noght a lye. (*HF* 1549–52)

Here, Chaucer’s figure of Fame syncretises medieval and antique judgement tropes: all at once Fame is a Solomonic dispenser of decisive *sapientia* from her throne, a Venus-figure presiding over her court of Love, and a Lady Philosophy, a Boethian figure of feminine wisdom guiding masculine prisoners out of *acedia*. Yet the utter unpredictability and arbitrariness of Fame’s decisions ironically parodies all of these archetypes of authoritative, monarchic wisdom: where their utterances would invariably

⁴⁴ *MED*, “*nedeles*”, (adj.) 1.(a). <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED29192/> [Accessed 08/07/2021].

resolve the ambiguities that haunted their supplicants, Fame's voice is an engine of ambiguity. Each act of judgement, in its randomness, further disorients Geoffrey and her audience, and denies the potential of interpreting any predictable order to the meting out of her favours. Her gifts are "grace", but of the secular, not divine, kind. The "bountee" she can bestow is only ever a temporal thing, a "good of fortune", not a persisting "good of grace". The same is true of Walter, who is also petitioned for "grace" by his subjects at court:

With hertly wil they sworn and assenten,
To al this thyng—ther seyde no wight nay—
Bisekyng hym of grace er that they wenten
That he wolde graunten hem a certein daye
Of his spousaille... (*CIT* IV 176–80)

In both cases, the descended, temporal grace of worldly authority is opposed to divine grace by the contrasting usage of the same term. The grace that Walter dispenses is simply the expression of delimited and limited secular power—he returns Griselda's dowry "of my grace" (IV 808)—whereas the grace that empowers Griselda is God-gifted potential to rise beyond temporal instability and suffering: "God hath swich favour sent hire of his grace / That it ne semed nat by lyknesse / That she was born and fed in rudenesse" (IV 395–7). Likewise, the petty "grace" Fame might bestow parallels the divine grace that is the ultimate *fons* of poetic inspiration, readerly understanding, and the realisation of worldly love:

And he that mover ys of al,
That is and was and ever shal,
So yive hem joye that hyt here
Of alle that they dreme to-yere,
And for to stonden alle in *grace*
Of her loves... (*HF* 81–6)

Where Geoffrey, Chaucer's dreamer-avatar, conspicuously refuses to entreat Fame for her grace (that is, for worldly renown), Chaucer (as narrator) humbly prays to God, "that mover ys of al", to bestow all manner of gifts of grace on the well-intentioned reader. He entreats that God "shelde hem fro poverte and shonde, / And from unhap and ech dise..." (*HF* 88–9), before asking that He mete out harsh punishments to those who would "mysdeme" (97) the poem. Animating these revealing contrasts is the recognition that the contingency of fortunes in the phenomenal world (represented by Fame's dubious "grace") is a perspectival illusion, an image of reality supervened by the ordaining hand of the divine plan, in which the gifts of grace provide the human will with the potential to rise beyond the state of fallenness. The temporal and contingent nature of Fame's "grace", and the contrast with divine grace, is implicit in the rhyming tail-words "paye / praye": the graces of fortune are like worldly currency, bearing volatile and mutable value, and their acquisition is framed as *transactional*, pray-for-pay, nothing like the potentiating habit of sanctifying grace, which for Christians is the no-strings-attached *gift* bestowed on all humanity by the passion of Christ.

The parameters Chaucer draws around the wills of Walter and of Fame are strikingly similar, and similarly encoded in the semantics of "grace". Chaucer employs a similar "voluntarist diction" in describing their acts of decision, but with different implications. The lexis around Walter's will frames his choices as radically contingent—not in the sense of being unbounded by necessitarian limits, but as utterly unpredictable because of their sheer arbitrariness, and their surreptitious and emergent nature. We first read of what Walter may "leste" in a context of limitedness, his will's *lack* of room to

manoeuvre, as his subjects pressure him to choose a bride against his own desire for a bachelor's life:

I dar the better aske of yow a space
 Of audience to shewen our requeste,
 And ye, my lord, to doon right as yow leste.
 [...]
 Save o thyng, lord, if it youre wille be
 That for to been a wedded man yow leste;
 Thanne were youre peple in sovereyn hertes reste. (*CIT* IV 103–111)

Walter is faced with an offer he can't refuse. His subjects present him with an apparently binary decision, but one in which to choose the negative (to refuse their request) would be catastrophic, casting Saluzzo into chaos and crisis:

For if it so bifelle, as God forbede,
 That thurgh youre deeth youre lyne sholde slake,
 And that a straunge successour sholde take
 Your heritage, O wo were us alyve! (IV 136–39)

Walter is no godlike figure free to do as he “leste” without severe consequences. His free will is that of an acutely human figure burdened with the responsibilities of rule. He is ‘free’ to choose not to wed, but to do so would threaten his subjects, whose subordinacy is not at all like the obedience of humans to an inscrutable God. The Saluzzans’ fealty is conditional upon his good, beneficial rulership, and comes with an implicit threat that it may be withdrawn should his misrule endanger their welfare:

Accepteth thanne of us the trewe entente,
 That nevere yet refuseden youre heeste,
 And we wol, lord, if that ye wole assente,
 Chese yow a wyf... (IV 127–30)

Human prayers to God do not (or should not, at least) come with provisos and quid pro quos attached. It is not necessary for us to ask that God should take note of our erstwhile obedience to His “heeste” in asking him for a favour: His will is beyond our

understanding, and His grace is not obtained by bartering from any doctrinal viewpoint, voluntarist or otherwise. By contrast, in his capacity as ruler, Walter's *voluntas* is certainly not 'free' in the sense of the absence of conditioning limits. He is subject to Fortune, and his fortunes are totally entangled with those of his people.

Fame's will is of a different order—not divine, given its arbitrariness, but *superordinate* in relation to human understanding. The first company of petitioners asks for her grace and favour in language redolent of the *facere quod in se est*, asking that good works be rewarded with grace:

Folk that here besechen the
That thou graunte us now good fame,
And let our werkes han that name.
In ful recompensacioun
Of good werkes, give us good renoun. (*HF* 1554–8)

Fame rejects them, and her response confirms that her *voluntas* is free will of a radically different nature than Walter's: asked for the "cause" of her rejection, she replies simply, "For me lyst hyt nought" (*HF* 1564). The parsimony of this answer and its lack of predication, a statement of active resistance to causality *itself* as determinative, prefigures a more famous act of negation: Bartleby the Scrivener's "I would prefer not to".⁴⁵ Bartleby's words have become a pivotal motto for postmodern philosophers ranging from Agamben to Žižek. For the former, Bartleby's refusal to make a rational choice inscribes "impotentiality", an event or entity's potential *not to be*, representing a metaphysical liberation from *all* necessity by effacing or forgetting the past itself, by giving up copying with absolutely no causal impetus whatever.⁴⁶ That is, it represents a radical exemption of

⁴⁵ Herman Melville, *Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street* (New York: Open Road Integrated Media, 2010), p. 14.

⁴⁶ Agamben, "Bartleby, or On Contingency", p. 253.

the *voluntas* from the causal chains that govern the phenomenal world. For Žižek, Bartleby's anti-choice is "a kind of *arche*", representative of a seminal instant of contingent change in the social order which neither negates its precursor nor positively actualises the new order.⁴⁷ In the context of medieval scholasticism, Fame's will is Scotist *voluntas* taken to an experimental extreme, a locus of decision which does not only exist independent of causal and dispositional factors (contrasting Augustine's concept), but which actively revels in this state of exemption, making choices in the purest sense of total contingency, isolated from all exigencies and causal order itself. Fame's choices cannot be explained because they are not predicated on anything. Rather, they negate the very principle of predication: they are choice 'as such', in metaphysical suspension of/from historicity and time. Fame is a choice-box: her decisions are radically present-tense, she has no memory nor appetite nor agenda to condition her judgements. This pattern is realised throughout her long sequence of responses to petitioners, always coded in a lexis of willing that figures her choice as utterly autonomous of desire, reason, or any other conditioning factor that would derive from a temporal order of experience. She summons Aeolus to help ferry tidings of praise and ill fame on the medium of wind, making clear that the only criterion governing her apportioning of these is her in-the-moment disposition, which may change on a dime:

And bid him bringe his clarioun...
With which he wont is to heraude

⁴⁷ "The difference between Bartleby's gesture of withdrawal and the formation of a new order is—again, and for the last time—that of parallax: the very frantic and engaged activity of constructing a new order is sustained by an underlying "I would prefer not to" which forever reverberates in it—or, as Hegel might have put it, the new postrevolutionary order does not negate its founding gesture, the explosion of the destructive fury that wipes away the Old; it merely gives body to this negativity. The difficulty of imagining the New is the difficulty of imagining Bartleby in power". Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), p. 382.

Hem that *me list* ypreised be.
 And also bid him how that he
 Brynge his other clarioun
 That highte Sklaundre in every toun,
 With which he wont is to diffame
 Hem that *me liste*, and do hem shame. (*HF* 1573–82. Emphasis added.)

Crucially, Fame is not even bound to arbitrariness. The contingency of her will defies even the predictability of randomness, with her deigning *at times* to mete out fame or blame according to a logical cause. She replies to the third company:

“I graunte”, quod she, “for me list
 That now your goode werkes be wist,
 And yet ye shul han better loos,
 Right in dispit of alle your foos,
 Than worthy is, and that anoon”. (*HF* 1665–69)

This time, good works yield good fame with good reason. But the clause “me list” hovers over each judgement: it is her *choice* to make a choice according to “cause”, to reject “cause” as predicate to her decision, or to make any decision at all. Her faculty of choice is palpably autonomous of *all* deterministic causal relations, not *by necessity*, but as a state of totally boundless contingency, a freedom of choice so boundless that it resembles the most radical, Holcotian version of *potentia absoluta*.

Conversely, the repetition of “liste”, “leste”, and “wol” in *The Clerk’s Tale* has the opposite effect: it affirms the dependency of Walter’s in-the-moment choices on *appetites*, unpredictably emergent drives, over which he has no alternative choice because of his ‘gracelees’ spiritual incontinence and impotency. His cruelty is not a contingent preference, it is necessitated by rising impulse. It does not even occur to Walter that he can choose, like Bartleby, *not* to assay Griselda; he does not have the imaginative or metacognitive range to moot alternatives to the desire put in front of him

by his own compulsiveness: “him leste” to “chaunge his wyf” (IV 986), therefore this happens. Apropos of nothing he “caughte” a “lest / To tempte his wyf” (IV 619), and, without reflection, he makes it so. He speaks of his “wyl” as something separate, extrinsic—“my wyl is outrely / This mayden” (IV 953–4)—in a reflection of his limited and compulsive condition. Fame is nothing but her will, while Walter’s will is distinct from (even at odds with) his intellect and self-consciousness, because his desires rise up unbidden and become his ‘will’ without any resistance. In short, Walter’s will is as inscrutable and unpredictable *for him* as it is for Griselda, his subjects, and the reader. The desire to test Griselda descends on him as a temptation, the *libido dominandi* and *libido sciendi* of a husband chained to the temporal world by force of habit. Each manifestation of this master desire emerges likewise as a contingency, an event which *befalls* at Fortune’s behest, as Troilus’ gaze first fell on Criseyde: “*Ther fil, as it bifalleth tymes mo [...]* This markys in his herte longeth so / To tempte his wyf...” (IV 449–52).⁴⁸

Both Walter’s interactions with his subjects and the foregrounding of the contingency of his desires affirm that his will is “free” only within profound limits: a powerful marquis, he is “free” to choose from the options that occur to him, but his psyche, with its diminished gift of grace and habits of worldly appetite, cannot grasp any other options than the loud voice of compulsive “yvele” (IV 460). The freedom of

⁴⁸ The etymology of ‘contingency’ reveals a deep-rooted sense of events *falling* (from the heavens, from the gods; i.e. unpredictably)—fittingly, “bifel” is one of Chaucer’s key terms in the lexical cluster he uses to inscribe contingency (as the next chapter will show in the case of Troilus first seeing Criseyde: “upon cas bifel”, *TC* I.272). See Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary: Founded on Andrews’ Edition of Freund’s Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879) s.v. “con-tingo, v., a., n”., II. B. 3.b. “to happen to one, to befall, fall to one’s lot...to happen, fall to, turn out, come to pass (etc.)”. *MED* s.v. “bifallen v”., 2. “To come to pass, come about, happen, occur...”, 3. “To fall to (one’s) lot (etc.)”. <<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED4416>> [Accessed 20/07/2021].

Walter's will in the absence of sanctifying grace, which reveals the *alternative* to worldly concupiscence, is meaningless. The parallel between his lexis of free will and Lady Fame's has two main functions. First, one of contrast, exposing the subordinacy of human *voluntas* to the vicissitudes of Fortune, the contingency of the experienced world. Fame is Fortune in all but name; she is instability itself. But Walter is Fortune's hostage, the Boethian prisoner in the absence of the consolation of Philosophy, addicted to the goods of fortune and inured to the goods of grace. His *voluntas* is Augustinian, not voluntarist: he does not represent will as radically autonomous like Lady Fame's, nor as the inscrutable and inexplicable decisions of God *de potentia absoluta*. He represents the spiritual poverty of human life in the absence of the gift of grace, caused by a refusal to cooperate with its call to charity.

The second function of this parallel is to align Walter directly with Fortune—not in essence, but as Griselda sees him. Much of the interpretive difficulty surrounding this poem come from its unstable focalisation, the overlap between Walter and Griselda as the principal viewpoint through which we experience the narrative. In himself, Walter is a hostage of Fortune, but in Griselda's eyes, he is, like Fame, a cipher for Fortune itself as Boethius describes it, a figure of totally immitigable and uninterpretable arbitrariness. Unlike Walter, Griselda represents virtuous cooperation with divine grace, and the superhuman potential to abide worldly instability this enlightened perspective affords. Viewed from this vantage-point, Griselda's perplexing inertia in response to Walter's brutality—particularly, his arranging the murder of their children—begins to make theological (if not tropological) sense. This approach goes some way towards explaining another of Griselda's interpretive problems: her unfettered joy at finding her children

alive, and her materialistic happy-ever-after ending, which would seem to problematise a Boethian/Stoic interpretation of her “vertuous suffraunce”.

3.3 Re-reading Griselda: Fortune vs. God

An impediment to modern interpretations of the *Clerk's Tale* is its heroine's indifference, her refusal to resist the cruelties to which she—and, more damningly, her children—are subjected. Allegorically, Griselda's idealised patience may effectively invoke a Job-like silence and steadfastness in acceptance of an inscrutable higher order (albeit one more that more closely resembles Fortune than God as such). Yet it is this mode of radical “patience” that seems to fatally undermine the ethically exemplary and ‘psychological’ dimensions of the poem. As the *Lenvoy de Chaucer* makes clear, this unyielding, unquestioning “suffraunce” is terrible advice for any real-world aspect of human life—*especially* marriage: “Lat noon humylitee youre tonge naille [...] Lest Chichevache yow swelwe in hire entraille!” (IV 1183–88). To explicitly reject the apparent *moralitas* of one's own poem is an unusual step, but the *Clerk's Tale* does so twice in succession, incorporating the above as well as Petrarch's own caveat:

This storie is seyde nat for that wyves sholde
Folwen Grisilde as in humylitee,
For it were inportable, though they wolde.
But for that every wight, in his degree,
Sholde be constant in adversitee... (IV 1142–46)

Clearly, this poem demands a polysemous approach, and its various levels of meaning do not resolve into formal unity. This is partly because it is a poem particularly focused on the act of reading itself. Not only are Walter and Griselda imperfect readers of each other and their world; the tale exposes how the layers of mediality between an original

narrative and its dissemination as text, its reception in circulation, introduce ambiguities as different readings, errors, and “myswrit[ings]” (*TC* V.1794) accumulate. The tale does not resolve into a pleasant and instructive moral, because Petrarch, Boccaccio, Chaucer (and/or the Clerk, and the scribal readers mediating all of this) make sense of Griselda’s mysterious nature—her ‘patience’, and its relationship to grace and Fortune—in different ways, and these differences all cohabit in the text together.

As we have seen, Griselda’s introduction to the narrative immediately associates her with divine grace:

Amonges thise povre folk ther dwelte a man
 Which that was holden povrest of hem alle;
But hye God somtyme senden kan
His grace into a litel oxes stalle;
 Janicula men of that throop hym calle.
 A doghter hadde he, fair ynogh to sighte,
 And Grisildis this yonge mayden highte. (IV 204–10. Emphasis added.)

This idea is present in Petrarch’s version (“As the grace of Heaven sometimes visits the hovels of the poor”).⁴⁹ However, it is originally Boccaccio’s:

Che si potrà dir qui? se non che anche nelle povere case piovono dal cielo de' divini spiriti, come nelle reali di queglii che sarien piú degni di guardar porci che d'avere sopra uomini signoria. (*Dec* X.10.68)

(What can be said here? But that divine spirits may rain down even on poor houses, while nobler homes may produce those more worthy to tend to pigs than to have lordship over men.)

Boccaccio and Chaucer both emphasise that material poverty is conducive to amplifying the gift of grace, while riches are a spiritual disadvantage.⁵⁰ While Boccaccio states this

⁴⁹ Petrarch, *De Insigni Obedientia*, <http://sites.fas.harvard.edu/~chaucer/special/authors/petrarch/pet-gris.html> [Accessed 20/07/2021].

⁵⁰ The extent of Chaucer’s first-hand knowledge of the *Decameron*, and whether he had ready access to a copy, remain topics of debate. Recently, Biggs has argued that reading the *Decameron*

outright, Chaucer demonstrates it through the early emphasis on Walter's development of concupiscent habits, his indulgence of worldly "delit" and the insatiable appetite this creates. Whether or not Chaucer had direct access to the *Decameron* at time of writing, his instincts in handling Griselda's story are closer to Boccaccio's than Petrarch's: the lexis of "suffraunce" and "suffisaunce" encodes explicitly Boethian emphases on Fortune and Providence that are present in *Dec* X.10, but relatively diminished in *De Insigni Obedientia*. Boccaccio's Gualtieri is explicitly a figure of Boethian Fortune, as exclusive owner and lender of 'goods of fortune', and as Providence perceived through temporal eyes, an emanation of the divine reason (*Bo* IV.pr.6):

Signor mio, io conobbi sempre la mia bassa condizione alla vostra nobilità in alcun modo non convenirsi, e quello che io stata son con voi da Dio e da voi il riconoscea, né mai, come donatolmi, mio il feci o tenni ma sempre l'ebbi come prestatomi; piacevi di rivolerlo, e a me dee piacere e piace di renderlovi: ecco il vostro anello col quale voi mi sposaste, prendetelo. (*Dec* X.10.44)

(My Lord, I always knew that my base condition would not accord with your nobility, and for all that I've been with you, I hold myself indebted to God and to you; I never considered these things mine to keep, but always thought them loaned to me, and I am greatly pleased to return them: I present to you the ring with which you married me.)

Boccaccio's Griselda accepts the decisions of Gualtieri without gripe because her theological worldview interprets him as Fortune (in this Boethian conception). Petrarch expands Griselda's speech here, but in doing so diminishes the clear Boethian subtext:

inspired Chaucer to develop the concept of the *Canterbury Tales*, and that individual *Tales* find their 'story shape' in stories from the *Decameron*. Taylor's review of Biggs casts a cold eye on this notion, given a lack of primary evidence for many of the adduced source relationships. Whatever the precise relation, Boccaccio and Chaucer are alike in emphasising the Boethian resonance of Griselda's story, a nuance that is relatively submerged in Petrarch's version. Biggs, *Chaucer's Decameron*; Karla Taylor, "Review: Frederick M. Biggs, *Chaucer's Decameron and the Origin of the Canterbury Tales*", *RES*, 69, 292 (2018), 976–78. Cf. Thompson, *Chaucer, Boccaccio, and the Debate of Love*, pp. 88–135.

“I have never considered myself worthy to be—I will not say, your wife, but your servant. [...] For these years, therefore, that I have dwelt with you in honor far beyond my deserts, I give thanks to God and to you. [...] Naked I came from my father’s house, and naked shall I return again”.

Petrarch’s version refocuses the narrative on subtexts of divine grace and submission to God’s will—most obviously by adapting Job 1:21 (“Naked I came out of my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return there”). The Boethian connotations attached to the idea of ‘goods of fortune’ on loan are substantially (though not entirely) minimised. Petrarch does retain some emphasis on Griselda’s virtuous sufferance of Fortune’s vicissitudes, the Stoic equanimity to which the Boethian prisoner is led by Philosophy: “followed by many, who railed at fortune, she alone dry-eyed and to be honored for her noble silence, returned to her father’s house”.

Chaucer’s adaptation restores the Boethian subtext significantly, in matter and meaning. Petrarch’s “nulla homini perpetua sors est” (man has no lot which lasts forever) becomes

No man may alwey han prosperitee.
With evene herte I rede yow t’endure
The strook of Fortune or of aventure. (*CIT* IV 810–12)

The virtue Walter sees in Griselda is Stoic *aequanimitas* (“evene herte”) as the only bulwark against contingency (“aventure”), the downturn of Fortune’s wheel, reclaiming loaned-out “prosperitee”. The subtext of grace is situated in this Boethian context, which figures Fortune as Providence experienced from the temporal human perspective. Thus, in a passage which diverges from Petrarch’s original, Griselda wishes that “of youre newe wyf God of his grace / So graunte yow wele and prosperitee!” (IV 841–2). God’s grace is, for Griselda, the font of “wele” and “prosperitee”, which are nonetheless

attached to Fortune's wheel—that is, both good and bad Fortune manifest the divine will, which is incomprehensible to humanity because of our temporal limitedness.

Indeed, Chaucer goes further than any of his sources in foregrounding perspective itself, the dependency of understanding on phenomenal qualities (imperfect knowledge, fallible sense-perception, imaginative guesswork). He does so by bringing the readerly focus in the narrative closer to Griselda's subjective image of reality (and away from an objective or omniscient viewpoint). Boccaccio's Gualtieri retains an autonomous subjectivity even when his Griselda is the primary focus, evident in his concealed sorrow at Griselda's suffering. Sending her back to her father's hovel in favour of a new bride, he stifles his private anguish: "Gualtieri, che maggior voglia di piagnere avea che d'altro, stando pur col viso duro, disse: 'E tu una camiscia ne porta'" (Gualtieri, who wanted nothing more than to weep, set his features hard as stone and said, 'And you may keep the blouse to wear', *Dec* X.10.46). The focal point from which Gualtieri represents the contingency of Fortune—Griselda's view, that is—is framed as a provisional, limited, and subjective interpretation which does not align with the reality of Gualtieri's own psyche. (That he seems reluctant and baleful to heap more suffering on Griselda, despite having no impetus to do so beyond a compulsive curiosity, poses its own interpretive questions). Petrarch, having relegated the Boethian subtext to the status of a topos, mere conventional set-dressing, amplifies the pathos of Walter's divided will: "Abundabant uiro lacrimae, ut contineri amplius iam non possent, itaque faciem auertens, & camisiam tibi unicam habeto. Uerbis trementibus uix expressit, & sic abiit illacrimans" (his tears welling up, such that they could be restrained no longer, he turned his face aside and said,

‘You have your one shirt’. Trembling, he could hardly get the words out, so he went away weeping).⁵¹ Chaucer makes a subtle, but significant, change:

“The smok”, quod he, “that thou hast on thy bak,
 Lat it be stille, and bere it forth with thee”.
 But wel unnethes thilke word he spak,
 But wente his way, for routhe and for pitee. (*CIT* IV 890–94)

Chaucer retreats even further than Boccaccio from the idea that Walter, too, is suffering. In Chaucer’s version, Walter does not weep or stifle tears, merely departs with the generalised courtly virtues of “routhe” and “pitee”. Chaucer’s version is unique in relating only Griselda’s affective experience here, reflecting a different model of the relationship between reader and narrative than in his sources. Where Walter is the focus, his working reality (of compulsive wilfulness, curiosity, and confusion in the face of Griselda’s sheer constancy) is *our* working reality; where Griselda is the focus, we share *her* interpretation of reality (in which she must keep faith with her given vow as a basic Christian imperative in spite of all downturns of Fortune, a task in which she is aided by God’s grace). This mode of discourse is not absolutely stable: we are privy to knowledge and perspective that Griselda is not, from Walter’s “routhe” and “pitee” on departure to the lamenting of her “folk”, who weep and curse Fortune as she makes her way home (IV 897–8). But Chaucer has stripped Walter of his status as a reified and consistent subjectivity, whose interior discourse is available to the narrative view, in contrast with his sources. The effect is to emphasise Walter’s situation as a cipher for Fortune: here he is a literary automaton, an agent of narrative necessity. His “routhe” is reduced from

⁵¹ Petrarch, *De Insigni Obedientia*, in *Opere Latine di Francesco Petrarca*, ed. Antonietta Bufano (Torino: UTET, 1975), https://petrarca.letteraturaoperaomnia.org/petrarca_de_insigni_obedientia_et_fide_uxoria.html [Accessed 27/08/2021].

individualised bitter tears to conventional *courtoisie*, and his words of consolation are a mix of courteous fair speech befitting a literary prince, and ambivalent complaints of his own dearth of free agency (“My peple me constreyneth...”, IV 800). By retaining determinate boundaries between the perspectives of Walter and Griselda, the shifts between them are more distinct and striking than in any other version of the tale, and, as such, the ambiguity produced by the different emphases and thematic concerns can be attributed to a view of the conditionality of interpretations of the phenomenal world, the contingency caused by perspective itself.

Most importantly, Chaucer’s choice prevents pathos and mixed perspective from muddying our clear view of Griselda’s *askesis*, the significance of her active, taxing resistance to despair in the face of misfortune:

But she fro wepyng kepte hire eyen dreye,
Ne in this tyme word ne spak she noon. (IV 899–900)

Griselda is not indifferent or unfeeling; she is “sad and constant as a wal” (IV 1046) in keeping her covenant. It is not the specific matter of her vow that is primarily at issue, but the virtue of “stedfastness”, of “trouthe” as *binding* of reality in an absolutely noncontingent way. This is an idea with deep and overlapping literary roots. But it also reflects a prevailing view in Chaucer’s Boethian writings that restoring a binding connection between “word” and “dede” is not just a matter of individual honour, but of universal import. Chaucer sees a social world in which “untrouth” is spreading like a pestilence, with instability in human affairs reflecting and accelerating the “encres” of contingency itself in the declining world. In the ‘Former Age’, “The lambish peple, voyd of alle vyce, / Hadden no fantasye to debate”, but now the world is a site of ceaseless ‘debate’, in which the epistemic centre cannot hold because language has no univocal

correspondence to reality: “For in oure dayes nis but covetyse, / *Doublenesse*, and tresoun, and envye...” (*The Former Age*, 50–1, 61–2). “Tobroken ben the statutz hye in hevene / That creat were eternally to dure”, and so Scogan is misled to “errour” by false speech rooted in dissimilitude (*Lenvoy de Chaucer a Scogan*, 1–2, 7).

Somtyme the world was so stedfast and stable
That mannes word was obligacioun,
And now it is so fals and deceivable
That word and deed, as in conclusion,
Ben nothyng lyk, for turned up-so-doun
Is al this world for mede and wilfulnesse,
That al is lost for lak of stedfastnesse. (*Lak*, 1–7)

Chaucer’s Boethian short poems are often dismissed as the poet turning his hand to a well-worn genre, a technical exercise along conventional lines. But it is surely significant that every single one of them expresses and develops this theo-philosophical worldview, where “mannes word” is intrinsically linked to the “condicioun” of the world itself, the contingency of language manifesting (or exposing) the contingency of phenomenal reality itself.

Griselda’s essential virtue, “stedfastnesse”, must be read in this context, reflecting the glass-half-full dimension of the Boethian short poems, imagining human beings actively and wilfully restoring the binding link between “word” and “dede” and thereby imposing a semblance of noncontingent order upon a contingent episteme. Thus, Richard II is entreated to “Dred God, do law, love trouthe and worthinesse, / And wed thy folk agein to stedfastnesse” (*Lak* 27–8), and *Fortune*’s plaintiff rages in defiance of contingency by holding up Boethian “suffisaunce” as a shield. The plaintiff of *Fortune* gives voice to a praxis of contingency management based on imperturbability and equanimity:

But natheles, the lak of [Fortune's] favour
 Ne may nat don me singen though I dye,
Jay tout perdu mon temps et mon labour;
 For fynally, Fortune, I thee defye.
 [...]

But trewely, no force of thy reddour
 To him that over himself hath the maystrye.
 My suffisaunce shal be my socour,
 For fynally, Fortune, I thee defye. (*Fortune*, 5–16)

This is what Griselda represents for Chaucer. While her followers weep and wail at Fortune's cruelty, she stubbornly resists, despite feeling the call to *acedia*. Her "suffisaunce" is grace, potentiating her to keep the *summum bonum* always in view, and to never forget that all worldly things are goods of Fortune, beyond her power to control. By keeping faith with her word as an absolutely, ontologically binding force, in spite of the terrible grief this "trouthe" invites, Griselda exemplifies the actively restored link between *verbum* and *res*, the potential for a people fallen into dissimilitude and total subjection to contingency to be "wed again to stedfastnesse". This is why Griselda's virtue, despite being radically individualised, has a significant public-facing dimension throughout the *Clerk's Tale*. As a ruler with Solomonic wisdom, and as a model of *Kontingenzbewältigung* through wilful 'trouthe', she is an illuminating exemplum for the people of Saluzzo, who have descended into unsteadfastness and "newfangelnesse" (*SqT* V 610) under Walter's rule:

O stormy peple! Unsad and evere untrewe!
 Ay indiscreet and chaungynge as a fane!
 Delitynge evere in rumbul that is newe,
 For lyk the moone ay wexe ye and wane!
 Ay ful of clappyng, deere ynogh a jane!
 Youre doom is fals, youre constance yvele preeveth;

A ful greet fool is he that on yow leeveth. (IV 995–1001)⁵²

The Augustinian habitual logic that informs this poem’s concept of grace applies beyond the individual soul to the *civitas terrena* at large. Faithlessness begets further faithlessness, and the world is thrown “up-so-down” into a post-truth pandemonium by the accumulation of individual acts of “untrouthe” and concupiscent “delitynge”. Griselda is the antitype to the “stormy” and “unsad” state of Saluzzo’s people, their defenceless subordination to Fortune’s caprice. And Fortune is not, as Griselda demonstrates, an abstraction, but the sheer fact of contingency at every level of temporal experience; to her, Walter is one of Fortune’s faces, a point Chaucer makes clear by collocation:

But she, ylike sad for everemo
 Disposed was, this humble creature,
 The adversitee of Fortune al t’endure,

Abidyng evere his lust and his plesance,
 To whom that she was yeven herte and al,
 As to hire verray worldly suffisance. (IV 754–9)

The virtue Griselda exemplifies is resisting despair through constant remembrance of the immutable good beyond the world of contingencies. However, the meaning of the virtue is shaped entirely by its difficulty: she has not gained indifference per se to the created world (total indifference being, as noted, itself an aspect of the vice of *acedia*), she practices, despite her very human disposition to self-pity and despair, a positive

⁵² For Lübbe, the sociological function of religion is *Kontingenzbewältigung*, “coping with (or managing) contingency”. The experience of worldly events as befalling randomly or arbitrarily is considered an illusion of perspective, a side-effect of being an embodied and imperfect(ible) perspective situated in time. In Christianity, this sociological function coexists and overlaps with theodicy: evil, suffering, and contingency itself are features of our created and postlapsarian reality, that is ontologically dissimilar to God’s. Hermann Lübbe, “Kontingenzerfahrung und Kontingenzbewältigung”, in *Kontingenz*, ed. Gerhart v. Graevenitz and Odo Marquard, with the collaboration of Matthias Christen (München: Fink, 1998), pp. 35–47.

acceptance, *fortitudo*, in which she acts with wise and beneficent agency up to the very limits of her autonomy (in aiding her father, in co-ruling Saluzzo). However, as soon as this limen is crossed, where Fortune comes to reclaim her worldly goods, Griselda exercises the state of “vertuous suffraunce” that her cooperation with the habit of grace has made possible to her.

This is how she interprets her children being taken at Walter’s command, and it is why she responds to it in the way that she does, with the acquiescence that so offends contemporary moral sensibilities. Her conception of her relationship to Walter is that of the Boethian prisoner to Fortune—unable to see the future as Providence does, lacking divine foreknowledge, the contingency of her worldly ‘bountee’ cannot be mitigated:

“Whan I first cam to yow, right so”, quod she,
 “Lefte I my wyl and al my libertee,
 And took youre clothyng; wherfore I yow preye,
 Dooth youre plesaunce; I wol youre lust obeye.

And certes, if I hadde prescience
 Youre wyl to knowe, er ye youre lust me tolde,
 I wolde it doon withouten necligence...” (IV 655–61)

To exercise *liberum arbitrium* over Fortune is impossible, a paradox. But Griselda’s sufferance is not unfeeling, automatic action, as if her entire subjectivity were *literally* subsumed by Walter’s. Her trademark patience is comprised of an inner emotional burden that is not allowed to break her outer surface: “And evere in oon so pacient was she / That she no chiere maade of hevynesse, / But kiste hir sone, and after gan it blesse...” (IV 677–79). There is a “hevynesse” within her soul that is being suppressed: just as Petrarch’s Walter arranges his face into a stony aspect despite his inner turmoil, Griselda ensures that her “chiere” does not give away her sorrow. She asks her husband’s goon to ensure that “Hir litel sone he wolde in erthe grave / His tendre lymes, delicaat to

sighte, / Fro foweles and fro beestes for to save” (IV 681–3), a final assay of her own limited agency. A world concept is reflected here with which we cannot easily identify: for Griselda, her children are figuratively goods of Fortune, literally belonging to Walter, as every ‘bountee’ attained after her vow of “obeisaunce” does not belong to her but to him. As such, Walter is a manifestation of the immitigable contingency of the created world, and Griselda responds to him, fortified by grace, like Boethius after Philosophy has led him out of self-pity and *acedia* into permanent remembrance of the superordinate stability and peace that lies solely with God.

The allegorical and psychological planes of the *Clerk’s Tale* are not absolutely incompatible. Griselda’s behaviour retains an ethical and psychological dimension even at its most seemingly allegorical and Job-like. The sad, steadfast indifference with which she greets misfortune, while ostensibly caused by an extreme, almost ideological fidelity to her marital vow of obedience, is not *true* indifference; it is not the case that she is an automaton devoid of agency because, post-vow, “Ther nas but o wyl”, (IV 715). She has not really yielded her autonomy to Walter’s caprices in any substantive sense—only in the accidental, surface-level sense that is Walter’s sole mode of understanding the world. Importantly, Griselda’s “indifference” is *askesis*, an active and demanding spiritual exercise: her sustained imperturbability in the face of seemingly intolerable contingencies reflects a grace-infused capacity to see beyond the world of Fortune to the one true, stable good beyond. In this, her attitude in response to terrible loss caused by Fortune parallels the *Pearl*-maiden’s consolatory message: that beyond the unstable world, for the righteous there lies the absolute security of “Godes ryche”, in which there is “no

joparde”, no contingency, because it exists in a different order of time.⁵³ Griselda is radically devoid of autonomy in the material world, the order of contingent things over which Walter (literally, as an absolute ruler; figuratively, as a cipher for Fortune) has dominion. She does not resist when he takes her children because, from her radically anti-materialist perspective, they are not ‘hers’ to protect. Her unresisting surrender of her own children is crucial to the hypothetical, thought-experimental dimension of this poem—it is a radical test not of Griselda’s “paciencce” or obedience, but of the anti-materialist Christian world-concept that her “suffraunce” epitomises.

Taken to its crystalline extremity, this Christian-Stoic model says *even your own children are goods of fortune that may be taken against your will*. Walter’s treatment of Griselda stress-tests this horrific idea, in which human beings have no true ownership over any of the phenomenal world’s contingent things whatsoever, and so the transcendent rewards of the Christian afterlife should be privileged above *all* worldly cares. This is not quite the same as a Job-like test of faith: rather, it is a thought-experiment in whether it is possible for a Christian to suffer the gravest miseries life can throw up when they faithfully adhere to this anti-materialist reading of the world. Griselda does not *exemplify* an attitude towards Fortune we are meant to emulate. In Chaucer’s version, she represents an ethical stance of Christian indifference to the mutable world taken to the extreme. Her *aequanimitas* is almost uninterpretable, to the reader as to Walter—at least along the schematic lines of the ethical poetic. This is because it is (in part) super-normal, superhuman, beyond ordinary frames of reference: reinforced by divine grace, and a habitual fortitude cultivated throughout her life,

⁵³ *Pearl*, ed. Sarah Stanbury (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2001), 601–2, <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/stanbury-pearl> [Accessed 08/11/2021].

Griselda cannot be reduced to *acedia*'s hopelessness, despair, melancholy, and indifference by downturns of Fortune (even those most grave). But, crucially, she remains always human, and it is important that this capacity to withstand contingency is not a superpower bestowed from on high by sole divine operation (*gratia operans*)—or else her own agency would play no part in resisting *acedia*. Griselda fights back tears as her children are taken, she pleads that their bodies be buried properly, “That beestes ne no briddes it torace”, (IV 573). Chaucer takes care to emphasise the fact that she actively struggles to sustain this imperturbable state, by exertion of her own will. Grace, as the Parson says, simply laid the foundation that made this possible. Griselda's cooperation with grace by good will opened the “dore” to “Jhesus”, reinforcing the soul against its (otherwise inevitable) fall into sinfulness: she willingly sustains “the yifte of grace wel for to do...by the goode werkes that [she] shal doon, whiche werkes been the foode of God” (*ParT X* 283–9). But it is constant, hard work, emotional Labour (as the antitype to Sloth).

The difficulty lies in understanding what ‘fruyt’ a reader is supposed to take away from this. At the allegorical level, it is a parable about the cruelty of Fortune, the secular world's latent potential to exact intolerable losses on even the most virtuous at random, by sheer contingency. In this sense, Griselda's fortitude is not so much a practicable virtue to be imitated as a failsafe survival technique, suggesting that the only remedy to living in *acedia* is friendship with God. This reading inscribes the Christian leap of faith's greatest difficulty. Griselda loses everything: not just her marital fortune but her own children, begging the question (in secular terms) of why she *shouldn't* despair, what point there was to her acting as a beacon of *gratia gratis data*, leading others to virtue

and justification. The spiritual bonus that would reward those who perform the hard ‘exercise’ of cultivating virtue is immaterial, atemporal, and utterly transcendent; as such, there is no trace of it anywhere in Griselda’s secular life or in the *Clerk’s Tale* at all—the belief that this imperturbability will lead to heavenly reward seems well and truly a leap of faith. Except that the narrative’s *eucatastrophe*, which sees Griselda’s children pop up unharmed, her wealth and marriage restored at a stroke, to live happily ever after, demolishes this theological *moralitas* entirely. Disrupting the anti-materialist values that underwrote her Christian-Stoic *askesis*, the tale retreats into a conventional ‘Wheel of Fortune’ story-shape, instead suggesting the moral “it byhoveth the to suffren wyth evene wil in pacience al that is doon inwith the floor of Fortune” (*Bo* I.pr.2.91–3). As Fortune’s wheel must decline, it must also ascend again: “thy wo may nat alway endure...next the ende of sorowe anon entreth joy” (*TL* II.9.917–40). This introduces its own ambiguities. The *Clerk’s Tale* has reopened the rift between the older, Stoic tradition of sustained indifference to worldly contingencies (*apatheia*, *aequanimitas*) and its Christianised forms (*stabilitas*, *fortitudo*); the tale falls apart in trying to explain *why* we should endure the winds of Fortune “wyth evene wil”, whether in hopes of secular restoration or spiritual recompense. As mentioned, this ambiguity is openly acknowledged at the end of the *Clerk’s Tale*, as its narrator struggles to salvage a *moralitas* more restricted in scope (first, on marital ethics, then, on Christian obedience) before the *Lenvoy* jettisons the tropological sense entirely, contradicting all of these on the grounds of real-world impracticality (IV 1183–1212).

Chaucer ensures the poem’s openendedness and resistance to hermeneutic closure through a dynamic play of perspectives, setting contradictory images of reality (Walter’s

and Griselda's) in dialectical opposition. It is Griselda's *fortitudo*, earnest belief in "trouthe" and "stedfastnesse" as essential virtues, and a consequence of her genuinely laudable resistance to despair in the face of misfortune that leads her to surrender her own children to Walter's "ugly sergeant" (IV 673), presumably to be murdered. Griselda is not a real-world mother here, but a Boethian prisoner, and Chaucer presents her actions (or lack of them) as an open interpretive question, a *demande*, not as a programmatic exemplum. Griselda's tale is an enclosed, complete parable of Boethian sufferance which is contingent on *her* perspective of reality, her theological interpretation of phenomena which sees Walter (and all the exigencies that confine her agency) as an aspect of Fortune, futile to resist and only to be defied through an active resistance to despair, made possible by the truth of God's supervenient order, the "parfit blisse" awaiting her and her children beyond the illusory world of temporary, fleeting things.

The theological view of ethical self-determination generated, in different aspects, in Walter and Griselda, is not posited as an *argument*; they are set within a higher order of contingency created by the incompatible, mutually uncomprehending perspectives on reality they each uphold. Inasmuch as Chaucer makes us conscious of the irresolution caused by the multi-perspectival nature of time-bound reading (and the nature of literary artefacts as products of repeated re-reading), there are occasional hints of his own, distinct understanding of Griselda's tale, autonomous of Boccaccio and Petrarch's frameworks. Whether or not radical steadfastness is of use to the individual in coping with the world's contingencies, Chaucer sees it as necessary from a collective, sociological standpoint. As the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* diagnosed an "up-so-doun" world of runaway *instabilitas*, the *Clerk's Tale* (to quote Camus again) "imagines a

treatment”.⁵⁴ “The world is nat so strong...As it hath been in olde tymes yoore” (IV 1138–9), the *Clerk’s Tale* concludes; Saluzzo’s forgetful, “undiscreet and chaungynge” (IV 996) people are the same as the alchemists, fallen into concupiscence and (thus) contingency. Griselda represents the possibility of a restoration of individual stability which may, cumulatively, lead to a kind of herd immunity against further psycho-spiritual disintegration: by following her patient example and cooperating again with grace, we might be “wed...agein to stedfastnesse” (*Lak*, 28). Chaucer’s thinking about contingency in the *Canterbury Tales* is consistently characterised by this sociological dimension, an attentiveness to the interdependency of individual and collective (in)stability. The origins of this important habit may be traced back to his earlier, exploratory experiments in the experience of contingency, in the triangulation of Boethian metaphysics and epistemology that takes place in his masterwork, *Troilus and Criseyde*.

⁵⁴ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 126.

4 *Troilus and Criseyde*: Reading in/on Time

4.1 Boethian Readers? Problems with the ‘Providential perspective’

From the absolute threshold of what can be called ‘experience’—when Troilus’ soul passes beyond the event horizon of the “eighth spere” (*TC* V.1809)—down to the specific tones and textures of temporal language, *Troilus and Criseyde* reveals Chaucer’s concern with contingency in its metaphysical and epistemic aspects. Throughout, this poem evokes the gulf between different orders of time, and (as a consequence), the aporetic, inconclusive nature of discourse about the divine, God’s atemporal order. Chaucer creates a tensile opposition between embodied, temporal experience (and the future contingency and “fre chois” [IV.971] that delimit and constitute it), and a necessitarian, Providential “ordre of causes” (IV.1017), a temporal modality in which all seemingly contingent events are in fact part of a necessary, causal sequence. Chaucer’s emphasis is on the affective and experiential, rather than philosophical didacticism: much of the pathos of Troilus’ declining fortune comes from his affective bafflement as his seemingly “fre” agency is infiltrated by unforeseen impetuses, from below (the vicissitudes of psyche, waves of emotion) and above (the winds of Fortune, vicissitudes of fate). As many critics have noted, *Troilus and Criseyde* appears to uphold a Boethian structural analogy, one which simulates the Boethian distinction between an atemporal God with Providential knowledge of the world from beyond time, and the temporally-limited perspective of the experiencing subject. In Grady’s words: “the text [...] enacts the *Consolation*’s most difficult philosophical concept, the difference between human reason and divine intelligence”.¹

¹ Frank Grady, “The Boethian Reader of *Troilus and Criseyde*”, *ChauR*, 33, 3 (1999), 230.

For ‘Boethian readers’ such as Grady, Troilus’ subjective experience of contingency—his anxiety and angst in the face of a future (and a love-interest) whose unpredictability cannot be mitigated—meaningfully contrasts the reader and narrator’s privileged vantage-point over narrative time. We are told what will happen at the end in the opening lines, and reminded throughout of the ‘fatal’ forces (cosmological, authorial, logical) ordaining these events; yet Troilus and Criseyde are always suspended in the present-tense, unable to see all causes and their necessary ends. Ostensibly, the text “gives the reader God’s view” over time, in line with the account of divine and human timescales given in Boethius’ *Consolation of Philosophy*, a central influence on *Troilus and Criseyde* (as well as Boccaccio’s *Il Filostrato*, its main source).² There, Philosophy tells Boethius that free will and divine foreknowledge are compatible because humans and God experience different orders of time: our limited, linear moment-to-moment temporality in which the future is always contingent, and God’s atemporal knowing of all time (past, present, future) at once. Since God resides outside of sequential time, His perfect knowledge of all ends does not negate our free will. Philosophy explains that God’s knowledge is not *fore*-knowledge at all, but an all-at-once present-tense witnessing:

Thou ne schalt naught demen it as prescience of thinges to comen, but thou schalt demen more ryghtfully that it is science of presence...For whiche it nis nat ycleped ‘previdence’, but it sholde rathir ben clepid ‘purveaunce’. (*Boece*, V.pr.6.112–17)

This is how Boethius resolved the problem of how human beings could have free will, and how future events may be contingent, if God has perfect knowledge of all that will

² Robert P. apRoberts, “The Boethian God and the Reader of the *Troilus*”, *JEGP*, 69, 3 (1970), 429.

transpire in time. According to apRoberts, Grady, and others, the readerly and narratorial ‘foreknowledge’ of *Troilus and Criseyde* analogises this Providential “purveance”, God’s atemporal knowledge of all contingencies.

Within scholastic theology, however, it was taken as axiomatic that temporal minds cannot properly understand or articulate the nature of God’s non-linear relationship to created time.³ Chaucer makes it clear that the posterior, pseudohistorical viewpoint of narrator and reader over this tale’s events is *not* analogous to divine “purveance”. We are reminded throughout that our access to this tale is mediated by an abundance of other temporal perspectives, including a problematically protean and unstable narrating voice: there is no genuinely ‘Providential’ viewpoint on offer. The ‘advance’ knowledge we are given at the start is partial and generalised—we only know for certain that Troilus will experience a “double sorwe” (*TC* I.1), and that Criseyde will betray him before she dies (an event that does not, in fact, happen in this book, leading Henryson to complete her story in his *Testament of Cresseid*). The narrator is not a pristinely clear lens over narrative time but a subjectivity that withholds crucial information, exposing our distinctly non-Providential dependence on second-hand information, and, as such, the provisionality of our assumptions about what will happen next. In Book II, when Pandarus recounts Troilus’ plaint in the palace garden, the anecdote is as novel to the reader as it is to Criseyde. Pandarus tells her he had left Troilus alone, then secretly listened to his private complaint:

Right thus to Love he gan hym for to pleyne:
He seyde, ‘Lord, have routhe upon my peyne...

³ Thus, as mentioned earlier, Ockham’s dictum: “Ideo dico quod impossibile est clare exprimere modum quo Deus scit futura contingentia” (Thus, I say that it’s impossible to clearly express the way in which God knows future contingents). Ockham, *De Futuris Contingentibus*, p. 48.

For certes, lord, so soore hath she me wounded,
 That stood in blak, with lokyng of hire eyen,
 That to myn hertes botme it is ysounded'. (II.522–35)

Neither we nor Criseyde can possibly know whether this actually happened. This is plausibly Troilus' retelling of his first encounter with Criseyde as it was written in Book I, recalling its emphasis on looks and gazes, and the experiential flux caused by them. But it is also plausible that Pandarus is spinning a rhetorically persuasive yarn, making instrumental use of well-worn literary tropes. This interplay of different perspectives, different degrees of knowledge, and different experiences of time, is one of the poem's most significant and sustained stratagems—and the traditional idea of 'Boethian readers' does not truly make sense of it. This chapter attempts to account for the meaning of *Troilus and Criseyde*'s play of temporal perspectives. I argue that the failure of the Boethian analogy may, in fact, be the point: it exposes the aporia preventing apprehension of the Truth (in Christian terms) beyond linear time and individuated perspective, forcing a readerly recognition of the immitigable contingency of secular knowledge and discourse.⁴

Troilus and Criseyde's multi-temporal kaleidoscope of perspectives is not meant to serve as a binary and schematic Boethian analogy. Rather, it is evidence of a more profound engagement with Boethius on Chaucer's part, from which an idiosyncratic phenomenology of reading emerges—a Chaucerian idea of contingency. *Troilus and Criseyde* asserts contingency as both conditioning and constitutive of all acts of reading

⁴ It may be apt to think of *Troilus and Criseyde* as a "tale about time" in Ricoeur's terminology: a narrative in which "the structural transformations that affect the situations and characters take time [and] it is the very experience of time that is at stake in these structural transformations". Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer, vol. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), pp. 100–12.

(not only of texts, but of phenomenal reality itself). Similar to Deleuze, it posits contingency as the pre-condition enabling individualised thought patterns to emerge, as the basic foundation for immediate, temporal experience and the perspectival diversity that results.⁵ *Troilus and Criseyde*'s frequent spotlighting of the sheer *limitedness* of the readerly and narratorial viewpoints *on* narrative time—not just on Troilus and Criseyde's limited viewpoints *within* that time—would suggest that Chaucer's interest is on the temporal contingency of readers themselves. The metanarrative *méconnaissance* produced by moments like the previous example, where the presumptive roles of narrator and reader as omniscient observers of a fictive history are disrupted by the exposure of our epistemic limits, lead to a specular recognition of these limits in our own time, beyond the bounds of fictional experience.⁶ Confronting its readers with their own "situatedness in time", *Troilus and Criseyde* sheds light on the historical locality, the temporal limitedness, of all perspective(s)—not only on other texts and selves, but on phenomenal, time-bound reality itself.⁷ The anxiety that the narrator expresses—that the

⁵ For Deleuze, contingency is the seminal foundation of consciousness itself: "Concepts...lack the claws of absolute necessity...there is only *involuntary thought*, aroused but constrained within thought, and all the more absolutely necessary for being born, illegitimately, of fortuitousness in the world. Thought is primarily trespass and violence, and nothing presupposes philosophy: everything begins with misosophy. Do not count upon thought to ensure the relative necessity of what it thinks. Rather, count upon the contingency of an encounter with that which forces thought to raise up and educate the absolute necessity of an act of thought or passion to think. [...] Something in the world forces us to think. This something is an object not of recognition but of a fundamental encounter". Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (London: Continuum, 1994), pp. 139–40.

⁶ For Travis, the *Book of the Duchess* sees Chaucer "spotlighting...confusion, incomprehension, and *méconnaissance* as profound responses to the mystery of linguistic signs". Peter W. Travis, "White", *SAC*, 22 (2000), 3. I am arguing that *Troilus and Criseyde* produces a similar recognition of indeterminacy and partiality in the reader, not only to inscribe the contingency of signs, but the contingency of truth that results from the limitedness of phenomenal experience itself (temporal limits which are psychological and conceptual as well as communicative).

⁷ The phrase 'situatedness in time' is Lupton's, describing the dependency of fictional narratives on historical contingencies. The striking parallel between the unpredictable destinies of individual lives as of texts recurs in *Troilus and Criseyde*; I do not think Chaucer would object to my

immitigable contingency of his text, as a material “bok” let loose on the ocean of time, means it can never universally or terminally “be understode” (V.1798)—is inscribed at every level of form and matter, the text always gesturing to its nature as an artefact that can never, as Gaston puts it, climactically obtain “the end of [its] formation”.⁸ Far from putting the reader in God’s shoes, Chaucer leads us to confront the contingency of perspective that results from our un-God-like condition as time-bound readers of the world. Not only Troilus the hero, the Troilus-narrator, and *Troilus and Criseyde* the “litel bok”, but also the historically local readers of *Troilus* are confronted with the impossibility of true closure, and of comprehending the only truly stabilising constant—the atemporal absolute represented, in late medieval writing, as/by God.

Troilus and Criseyde persistently evokes two major dimensions of phenomenal experience: the emergence of conscious thought, and the internal sense of the flow of time. The passages representing Troilus and Criseyde’s affective experience inscribe what Husserl calls “pure subjective time-consciousness...the phenomenological content of lived experiences of time [*Zeiterlebnisse*]”.⁹ Their sense of momentary duration (or Bergsonian *durée*) is constantly phasing and warping in response to external contingencies, and this radically experiential mode of time is reflected in the allocation of narrative space.¹⁰ That is, an instant of ‘objective’ time may dilate to encompass multiple

redeployment of this phrase to describe his poem’s exposure of the contingency of human experience. Lupton, “Literature and Contingency”, 375.

⁸ Gaston, *Reading Chaucer in Time*, p. 1.

⁹ Edmund Husserl, *The Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness*, ed. Martin Heidegger, trans. James S. Churchill (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1964), p. 22.

¹⁰ Henri Bergson argues that when we talk about time, we arrange phenomenal impressions and events into a discrete order of succession; the lived experience of time is, rather, a pre-individual and undifferentiated chaos of impression—neither concept actually denotes ‘objective Time’. Our idea of an objective time is really time infiltrated by the concept of space (extensive time; time-space). For Bergson ‘time’ is inseparable from individual conscious states—the

stanzas of text; or, an entire night may elapse in an instant of narrative elision—crucially, these tempo changes are connected to the psychological states of the focalising protagonists. Meanwhile, as mentioned, the ‘objective’ timescale to which we occasionally zoom out is gradually revealed to be porous, fallible, and itself utterly perspectival. There is no straightforward hierarchy between individual experience (time-consciousness) and an enclosing, impenetrable, objective time. Here, time and consciousness orbit each other in a complex, interpenetrating relation, in which individual experience presupposes the passage of time, yet the linear, sequential time of creation presupposes subjective experience. There is no secure hierarchy between the temporal subjectivities of Troilus and Criseyde and the narrative’s pretend destiny: each negates the ontological status of the other, yet allows it distinct, differentiated form. The final effect of this intertemporal medley is not a propositional conclusion: it is simply to call forth the aporia that encloses all thinking and writing about time and thought, the impossibility of punching through the *Truman Show* wall of metaphysical contingency.

From its opening lines, *Troilus and Criseyde* situates its reader in a privileged vantage-point over its pocket of time. The events that will unfold are already determined by their pseudo-historicity, and so Chaucer condenses the whole course of the poem into a low-resolution precis:

The double sorwe of Troilus to tellen,
That was the kyng Priamus sone of Troye,
In lovyng, how his aventures fellen

unmeasurable and intensive *quality* of change that differentiates one conscious state from another (pure duration; *la durée*). Gilles Deleuze developed this notion further, suggesting that to make ideas ‘thinkable’ we introduce the impurity of concept: we cannot think directly about thought as such, as experience experiencing itself, but only a “pre-philosophical *image of thought*”, which is naturally inclined towards truth and against error. Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, trans. F.L. Pogson (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 1–10; 79–82. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, p. 132.

Fro wo to wele, and after out of joie,
My purpos is, er that I parte fro ye. (*TC* I.1–5)

The basic structural conceit is that all of this has already happened in a static past and been recorded; the narrator's task is to 'remind' his fictive audience of this canonic myth. Chaucer encodes the absolute necessity of this pre-historic timescale in the form of the text itself, its syntax and lexis.¹¹ Certain declarative line-openings and time-markers recur frequently in the first book, falling into two main categories: 'It is well-known', and 'it befell'. The book is sewn into the existing Troy canon by the narrator's insistence that his readers should already know and universally recognise this narrative: "*Yt is wel wist* how that the Grekes stronge / In armes with a thousand shippes wente / To Troiewardes..." (I.57–59). This projected audience is itself affiliated with the Arcadian timelessness of the mythic past: we are "loveres, that bathen in gladnesse" (I.22), and our prior knowledge of the containing myth is presupposed, known by both experience *and* authority:

That this be soth, hath preved and doth yit.
For this trowe I ye known alle or some,
Men reden nat that folk han gretter wit
Than they that han be most with love ynome... (I.239–42)

Chaucer installs an imagined readership at both poetic and metapoetic levels. We are identified with an inscribed audience of lovers that "bathen in gladnesse" and who *belong* to the poem's mythic temporality—members of the same species as Troilus, who know

¹¹ Medieval philosophers produced several theorisations of the modal necessity accorded to events that happened in the historical past. Boethius' distinction between *simple* and *conditional* necessity in his *Consolation of Philosophy* (V.pr.3) was refined by St. Anselm into *precedent* and *subsequent* necessity: in the case of the latter, foreknowledge that an event will necessarily occur does not compel the event to occur; it is merely a truth-statement. This proved influential in later efforts towards a compatibilism of free choice and God's foreknowledge. See St. Anselm of Canterbury, *De Concordia* (c. 1107–8), Library of Latin Texts, Series A (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010), 1.2.

his “gladnesse” by experience—while we are also a projected audience of real-world readers well-versed in this bundle of legends from the ‘olde bokes’ to which this narrator will frequently “refere” (I.266). The opening stanzas of Book I construct a temporal frame for the contained narrative that is both quasi-mythic and pseudo-historic. The narrator’s task will be to “tellen forth in special” (I.260) a tale already told, total and complete, a temporary animation of always-elapsed time that must, “of necessitee” (II.623), lead to the foregone conclusion of its own “predestyne” (IV.966). Its penultimate stanzas in Book V will restore the text’s tightly-contained dynamism to this statuesque stasis, as the narrative itself returns to its initial register of distanced, neutered historicity:

In many cruel bataille, out of drede,
Of Troilus, this ilke noble knyght,
As men may in thise olde bokes rede,
Was seen his knyghthod and his grete myght... (V.1751–54)

The end of the poem has a strong sense of cyclical return: we are reminded of our original appointed place in this orderly, canonical choreography, as a non-individualised collective of Arcadian lovers:

O yonge, fresshe folkes, he or she,
In which that love up groweth with youre age,
Repeyreth hom fro worldly vanyte,
...and thynketh al nys but a faire,
This world that passeth soone as floures faire. (V.1835–41)

The audience of lovers that “bathen in gladnesse” reside in a kind of temporal suspension, anterior to ordinary, sequential time. Yet to experience the inexorable march of change and decay, the “yonge, fresshe folkes, he or she” are prelapsarian in a pagan sense, existing in an experiencing changelessness that is paradoxically prior to causality itself. Still perceiving, sensing and interpreting, they nonetheless exist in a state before

time (as a measure of change) begins to *elapse*: a pre-Babelic “blisful lyf” (*FormA* 1, 58) of experience minus contingency. “This wrecched worldes transmutacioun, / As wele or wo” (*Fortune*, 1–2) is not the only temporality in play in *Troilus and Criseyde*, a book that begins and ends in a simulated static timelessness, where Troilus departs his temporary “wrecched world” (*TC* V.1817) of “permutacioun” (V.1542) and returns to the immutable repose of the canonic past. The temporal frame of *Troilus* casts its narrative as a predictable, historically necessary done deal, a performance “in special” of a “wel wist” jazz standard. But it is what takes place *between* these seemingly necessitarian start- and end-points that complicates things, and reveals this conceit of timelessness as ersatz, an artifice.

At the book’s beginning and end Chaucer’s narrator tries to set his tale among the changeless canonic icons (“ymages / of gold...figures / Of olde werk”, *HF* 121–27) in *Fame*’s Temple of Venus: in its register and sense of imperviousness to contingency, *Troilus and Criseyde* is a pretend cousin to *Fame*’s tale of Dido and Aeneas, inscribed securely on a brass tablet and metaphorising the absolute completedness and *auctoritas* of the ideal canonic text. In *Troilus* as in *Fame*, the shard of Trojan myth is declaratively announced (“I wol now synge”, *HF* 143; “The double sorwe of Troilus to tellen”, *TC* I.1), and the register of *Troilus* often echoes *Fame*’s inventorial rehearsal of events as affectless, uninflected things-that-happened:

Ther saugh I...
 Ther saugh I...
 Ther saugh I how the tempest stente,
 And how with alle pyne he wente,
 And prively tok arryvage
 In the contree of Cartage;
 And on the morwe, how that he
 And a knyght highte Achate... (*HF* 209–226)

*And she hym thonked with ful humble chere,
 And ofter wolde, and it hadde ben his wille,
 And took hire leve, and hom, and held hir stille...
 And with that word he gan to waxen red
 And in his speche a litel wight he quok,
 And caste asyde a litel wight his hed,
 And stynte a while; and afterward he wok... (TC I.124–126, V.925–928)*

This anaphoric recursiveness encodes a sense of steadfast sequentiality to the progress of narrative time. Despite Diomedes's outward volatility, in this case, the march of events is subject to necessity—'what will be, will be', because, being canonised narratives, they have always already 'been'. In both poems the effect is similar: being "olde bokes" there should be no potential for novelty; their "fyn" is predestined and their sequenced events are antecedent causes, occurring by necessity. Their mythic *auctoritas* forecloses novel experience and would deny the possibility of free will and future contingency. But in each case Chaucer engineers faults into these narrative machines that reveal, ultimately, the impossibility of inscribing absolute truth, the paradox of inscribing necessity in a text that will always respond newly to new readers, and of communicating meaning with univocal and atemporal—noncontingent—solidity.

Famously, Chaucer ends the poem by recognising that his ideal, authorised text must itself become situated in time, subject to the contingency of future readings and re-writings—the closed text must exist as an open 'boke', "possed to and fro...sterelees withinne a boot" (TC I.415–16). "[T]her is so gret diversite / In Englissh and in writyng of oure tonge, / So prey I God that non myswrite the...be understonde, God I biseche!" (V.1793–78). But this is not a belated and wistful recognition of contingency: Chaucer has encoded contingency into the form of the poem itself, into its heavily foregrounded sense of sequential time. Chaucer undermines his narrator's pretence of the poem's canonic stasis and necessity by allowing the affective experience of his characters—

Troilus and Criseyde's conscious states, their moment-to-moment timeliness—to disrupt, distort and rupture the narrative's shapeliness and symmetry, surprising and involving the distanced narrator and forcing the narrative's sense of time to dilate and condense in active response to their here-and-now experience. By revealing the dependence of the narrative's "necessity" on the contingency of its characters' novelised experience, Chaucer reveals the hard-coded limits on what poetic discourse can write about the absolute and noncontingent. We see that it's impossible to inscribe time independent of individual perspectives *situated* in time, which experience its flow with relativistic differentiation. The conceit of an absolute timescale reveals its own contingency by stalling, skipping and pausing, and foregrounding its own dependency on the perspectives that experience it and narrativise it. It is impossible to inscribe a sequence of time without the possibility for novelty because novelty and temporality have the same precondition—embodied, conscious, subjective experience. And so the canonic imperviousness to change professed by *Fame's* brass tablet and *Troilus's* narrator is never on the cards; temporal subjects who experience time and change cannot think or word eternity as God knows it.

As such, the way in which Troilus experiences time—a mobile presence whose conscious states influence its apparent flow, and for whom the future is radically unpredictable, with a latent potential for contingency—is set in opposition to the narrative's enclosed, destinal time, but it resists being fully subordinated. The representation of Troilus' thoughts and emotions is unnecessary to the poem's narrative progress, almost defiantly superfluous, yet it nonetheless takes up textual time and space, inscribing contingency. This conceptual drama plays out in the poem's competing lexes

of time: the fatalist mood of terms such as “bifel” is offset by the experiential immediacy of words like “sodeyn”. As we have seen, the poem’s opening crawl is dense with pseudohistorical necessity: as the narrative moves from Troy myth as a generality (“Yt is wel wist...”) to the high-resolution particulars of *this* Troy book, narrative time is marked as past-tense reportage: “Now *fel* it so...”, “The thynges *fellen*...”, “And so *bifel*, whan comen was the tyme / Of Aperil...” (I.64, 134, 155–56). The latter chronographia, which will introduce Criseyde in a temple crowded with indistinct courtly lovers (I.162–69), contains overlapping implicatures of timeliness and timelessness, encoding the poem’s crucially variegated timescales. As with the opening of the *General Prologue* (“Whan that Aprill...”), the passage knits together different timescales: it serves as a starting pistol for the sequential time of the succeeding narrative, producing a sense of causal (pre-)determinacy. But metaphorically, its springtime of lovers invokes the pre-historic timelessness of an Arcadian Golden Age, a ‘Former Age’ of prelapsarian subsistence characterised by enduring, atemporal simplicity, univocity and love; and being a season-opening, it is embedded with *cyclical* time—just as Fortune’s Wheel turns lovers from “wel to wo, and after out of joie”, the world turns from ‘fruyt’-ful harvest to wintry senescence to Spring’s youthful renewal—a self-contained temporality that moves within determinate bounds, and independently of individual agency.

Chaucer’s timekeeping does not just collocate time and eternity—it is open to different *kinds* of temporality and atemporality, in which contingency and necessity co-exist in a kind of superposition, each ‘true’ in relation to a certain concept of time, which is always in the shadow of its alternative. The eternity of Arcadian spring, of lovers that “bathen in gladnesse”, is a thinking, feeling, momentary eternity—time with motion and

succession, but without change or end. This is nothing like God's atemporality, "eternity...without succession, comprehending all time...in the high citadel of eternity, which is all at one time".¹²

If *Troilus and Criseyde* sets temporal subjectivity and contingency against atemporal necessity, it does so with the caveat that *true* atemporality—the unfocused glance of Providence, the centrifuge for the poem's Boethian thematics—is totally ineffable, and that our working metaphors for this absolute timescale never come close to circumscribing its substance. That is, it is not possible for language-users in the "wrecched world" to conceptualise time outside of experience, so the mythic/metaphoric 'timelessness' of lovers (in the 'Former Age' beyond Fortune's wheel; pre-Babelic univocity) remains irreducibly experiential, an affective state of "gladnesse" and "joie". If we can only think about time phenomenologically—a mutable, extensive metaphor to measure change—it is impossible to write sensibly about necessity, about time as a noncontingent and theoretically predictable sequence of events: as Bergson puts it, "In order to perceive a line as a line, it is necessary to take up a position outside it, to take account of the void which surrounds it, and consequently to think a space of three dimensions".¹³ In writing time, the lived experience of heterogenous and non-successive conscious states in the present-tense are narrativised, translated into a working metaphor for objective time.¹⁴ As Bergson writes, we "distinguish between the [immediate, experiential] unity which we think of and the unity which we set up as an object after having thought of it...we set our states of consciousness side by side in such a way as to

¹² J.J. MacIntosh, "Aquinas and Ockham on Time, Predestination and the Unexpected Examination", *Franciscan Studies*, 55, 1 (1998), 185–91.

¹³ Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, p. 101.

¹⁴ Ann Game, "Time Unhinged", *Time and Society*, 6 (1997), 115.

perceive them simultaneously, no longer in one another, but alongside one another...we project time into space, we express duration in terms of extensity, and succession thus takes the form of a continuous line or a chain, the parts of which touch without penetrating one another".¹⁵ The analogic necessity supposed to pre-ordain the events of *Troilus and Criseyde* reveals itself to be an abstraction that is ontologically dissimilar to true necessity, God's non-experiential timescale ("eterne on lyve"), and anything less is just another way of spatially organising sense-experience after-the-fact—the conscious states of the poem's individuated perspectives are the origin and determinant of its inscribed sense(s) of time.

In the predestinarian timescale of these necessity-analogues there would be no potential for immediacy, unpredictability or any contingent futurity—but, through his careful use of language, Chaucer calibrates the historic timescale with the here-and-now momentariness of embodied experience. When "upon cas bifel" that Troilus' gaze alights on Criseyde, his experience of time is momentarily frozen, and narrative time responds dynamically to his affective experience:

And *sodeynly* he wax therwith *astoned*,
 And gan hir bet biholde in thrifty wise.
 "O mercy, God", thoughte he, "wher hastow woned,
 That art so feyr and goodly to devise?"
 Therwith his herte gan to sprede and rise,
 And softe sighed, lest men myghte hem here,
 And caught ayeyn his firste pleyinge chere. (*TC* I.274–80. Emphasis added.)

The texture of the narrative itself shifts in this moment from pseudohistorical reportage to phenomenal *durée*, time embodied and experiential—the reader is now, with Troilus,

¹⁵ Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, pp. 83–101. There is a remarkable homology between Bergson's concept of *durée* and the Thomistic idea of human time as continuity without instants; see *ST* 1.q.14.a.9ad1.

situated in local time, experiencing events as he does: contingently. With this come the paradoxes and contradictions of lived experience, evoked verbally and grammatically: the hypermobile dynamism of “sodeynly” collides with the petrifying halt of “astoned”; Troilus agentially, and *actively*, seeks a better way (“gan hir bet”) to *passively* absorb (“biholde”) her visage. His emotional and temporal consciousness is allowed to take up textual space: “Therwith his herte gan to sprede and rise”. The narrator’s destinal timescale of things-that-happened (that “bifel”) yields to the momentariness of real-time experience—in Bakhtinian terms, the “epic past” of the opening, a static myth impervious to novelty, gives way to the “novelised” incompleteness of phenomenal experience, made receptive to “contact with the present in all its openendedness”.¹⁶ Giving up lines and narrative space to the affective experience of time, *Troilus and Criseyde* lays bare the faultlines in its quasi-enclosed timescale. Phenomenal time *overrides* chronological time, novel *interrupts* epic, and the text unfolds its own perpetual incompleteness, its resistance to fixed resolution. This shift is not sustained—only a temporal motivity that yields back to mythographic stasis, a double helix of timescales in changeable orbit.

The word “sodeynly” is an important chronotopic marker throughout, signalling a change of gears in narrative time. It marks a shift from historical time, and its inscribed necessity, to the malleable, pliable time of phenomenal experience, in which time and thought are inextricably and non-successively conjoined. This conjunction of time and thought is heavily signalled: for instance, when Criseyde turns her gaze to Troilus,

...ther gan to quyken

¹⁶ M.M. Bakhtin, “Epic and Novel”, in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 7.

So gret desir and such affeccioun,
 That in his herte botme gan to stiken
 Of hir his fixe and depe impressioun. (I.295–98)

Troilus’ “herte” is the crux of his affectivity, with the term splicing together connotations of inward consciousness, “the centre of psychic and sensitive functions”, with the immanent and autonomous soul, the “centre of spiritual life and moral virtues”.¹⁷ The ‘herte’ is the seat of temporal sense-experience, and the subjective response to contingent, emergent events; the term also denotes the individual soul of the Christian tradition. In this latter respect, the stanza that follows can be mapped along lines of Augustinian theology:

[He was] ful unwar that Love hadde his dwellynge
 Withinne the subtile stremes of hire yen;
 That sodeynly hym thoughte he felte dyen,
 Right with hire look, the spirit in his herte:
Blissed be Love, that kan thus folk *converte!* (I.304–308. Emphasis added.)

In this context, Love is an aspect of the divine grace that, for Augustine, makes it possible for us to choose charity and virtue, without overriding human free agency. The “spirit in [Troilus’] herte” is “converte[d]” by a *sodeyn*, contingent encounter with Criseyde’s eyes; here, the mutability of the soul is a positive—that dynamism is what makes possible a change of spiritual trajectory from the abyss of the secular, an ascent from the motivity and chaos of the “wrecched world” (V.1817), back to God’s timeless, stable *verum esse*.¹⁸

¹⁷ *MED* s.v. “herte n”., 2a. (a), (b). <<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED20604>> [Accessed 21/07/2021].

¹⁸ Discussing Aquinas’ distinction of *esse* and *essentia* in relation to uncreated and created being, Étienne Gilson summarises the Thomistic position on the nature of God’s being: “If God is Being, He is not only total being: *totum esse*. He is more especially true being: *verum esse*, and that means that everything else is only partial being, hardly deserves the name of being at all”. Étienne Gilson, *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), p. 64. This neatly encompasses a range of currents in late medieval Christian and

But Chaucer never eradicates the other possible sense of “herte”, its ‘selfish’ connotation as the locus of individual experience, the condition of embodied, liminal timeliness. This Christian-Neoplatonic lexis complements and complicates the secular and sexual substance of the episode—the awakening of intensely individual lust, *concupiscentia carnis*. “Ther gan to *quyken*”, to (sexually and/or spiritually) arouse or enliven “gret *desir* and such *affeccioun*”—concupiscent “lust, passion, craving” but also the inclination to “love, charity, friendship, good will”.¹⁹ Is an Augustinian lexis being ironically grafted onto an episode of quite un-Christian lustfulness, or is secular love being somewhat dubiously translated into an emanation of grace, a habitual “impressioun” that might turn the soul to good? Neither reading is foreclosed; both are suspended in phenomenological *epoché*, and so Troilus’ ‘herte’ is both brought to life (“to *quyken*”) and killed (“he felte *dyen*”) by the same immediate encounter. The interpretive bivalency may be the point: the reality of immediate experience cannot be truly circumscribed, only narrativised, and narratives will catalyse different interpretations to different readers in different times. Troilus’ affective experience decoheres from the narrative’s ordering of that experience into a stable ethical interpretation.

From this point, the lexis of conscious thought is insistently temporal. Desire and affection *quicken* within Troilus while an enduring, memorial “impressioun” of the

Islamic theology on the contingency of creation in its relation to the non-contingency of the creator, and the implications of Gilson’s *verum esse* vs. partial being—that temporal being is corruptible and imperfect, so temporal words and concepts are insufficient to contain the truth of God—is a most important aspect of Chaucer’s thinking about the contingency of truth. The full implications of this will become clear in the next chapter, on the *House of Fame*.

¹⁹ *MED* s.v. “desir [n.]”, 2. <<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED11314>>; “affeccioun [n.]”. 2.(c). <<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED676>> [Accessed 22/07/2020].

elapsed encounter with Criseyde inheres static and immobile to his “herte botme”: it “gan to *stiken* / Of hir his *fixe* and depe impressioun”.²⁰ Thoughts, in this narrated, second-order form, are coherent linguistic statements that take up narrative time, and are therefore divisible in a way that prelinguistic thought is not. “*Sodeynly hym thoughte* he felte dyen, / Right with hire look, the spirit in his herte”: a discrete thought emerges *sodeynly*, contingently, but this is thought at one linguistic remove, the translation of an immediate sensation—in which he *felte dyen*. The transposition of immediate sensory experience into grammatical signs necessarily betrays that original, private taking place of experience; as Agamben says, “in taking place, [language] decomposes the thing itself (*to pragma auto*) that is at issue in it...language supposes and distances what it brings to light, in the very act in which it brings it to light”.²¹

When Troilus’ eyeline falls upon Criseyde, a communicative gulf is prised open between the sequential progress of ‘objective’, historical time and the elastic, heterogenous flux of ‘subjective’, phenomenal time. But at first this spotlight on aporia seems to be in full accord with the poem’s Boethian subtexts, already introduced in the poem’s assertive, pseudohistorical opening sequence. Troilus’ individual experience is situated in time, thus open to future contingency; the inscribed narrator and his

²⁰ Husserl uses Franz Brentano’s theory of linear time as “an illusion which proceeds from the vivacity of primordial association”. For Brentano, the lived experience of time as a succession of instants is actively generated by imagination, or ‘phantasy’: the “notion of temporal flow” comes about when a stimulus (the encounter with Criseyde) produces an immediate sensation (Troilus’ lust) which cannot persist, but is trans. the conscious subject into “a phantasy-idea [*Phantasievorstellung*] like, or nearly like, itself...[t]his idea again awakens a new one which is always attached to it, and so on”. Husserl, *The Phenomenology of Internal Time Consciousness*, pp. 31–33. Troilus’ ‘impressioun’ of Criseyde is immediately dissimilar to the actual Criseyde, whose individual reality only subsists in the psyche as a constantly re-created after-image. This idea of Criseyde exists in a different temporal flow than Criseyde’s own, or the narrator’s, or the reader’s—it is an always-provisional holding concept that resides, constantly modifying, in Troilus’ autonomous, individual time-consciousness.

²¹ Agamben, “Tradition of the Immemorial”, in *Potentialities*, pp. 106–7.

projected audience subsist outside of that time, beholding with “ful avyusement” (V.1811) these antecedent causes in full knowledge of their predestined conclusion. Read in this way, the poem simply encodes the two-track ontology of Boethian-Augustinian metaphysics, and the gulf between the contingent time of the created and the noncontingent time of the uncreated—God as the ineffable origin of absolute Truth, whose knowledge transcends the contingency of events, because for Him all events are both *happening* and *happened*. But, as we have seen, this “purveiaunce” resists (by its atemporal nature) translation into temporal language; one half of the analogy cannot be meaningfully present in the narrative. When Criseyde glances back at Troilus, the act itself and her outer accidents exude agency, volition and free intentionality—but, since our perspective is subordinate to Troilus’ perspective in this moment, the substance of the gesture is unverifiable, only provisionally interpretable: “she let falle / Hire look a lite aside in swich manere, / Ascaunces, ‘What, may I nat stonden here?’” (I.290–92). Troilus’ perspective is closely aligned with the narrative eye in this moment, and we join him in making hypothetical sense of the gesture. But this is a *quasi*-truth, an as-if: the assumed historical advantage of reader and narrator does not afford any kind of omniscient access to knowledge, not in any stable way—it is only a reading of a *narrative* set in the past.

In Book I, after the narrative has, for a time, allowed Troilus’ affective experience to interrupt and override its destinal timescale, the narrator re-asserts the conceit that this is a record of myth, a canonical tale from tradition being retold without novelty or contingency. Narrative time snaps back from experiential newness to mythographic historicity:

The sharpe shoures felle of armes preve
 That Ector or his othere brethren diden...
 And yet was he...
 Founde oon the beste, and longest tyme abiden
 Ther peril was, and dide ek swich travaille
 In armes, that to thenke it was merveille. (I.470–76)

We are reading a tale of two Troiluses, one mobile, novel, experiencing, the other static, epic, historical, both suspended in double time. The novelised experience of the ‘newe’ Troilus, the Troilus of love, not arms, leads the narrative line on excursions into the experience of time in an embodied consciousness, and Chaucer the author to the aporia foreclosing its univocal representation. But this seemingly dynamic protagonist, for whom the future is (experientially) contingent and whose ‘herte’ is free to adventure into hypothesis and fantasy, is periodically re-frozen into the Troilus of the epic past, whose deeds of war are a matter of record—the Troilus of “armes”, recycled from old books (of Boccaccio, Benoit, etc.). This Troilus is un-experiencing, temporally static, and his “hertes line” is never circumscribed. To experience the world consciously is to encounter contingency and dynamically assay in response to it; for the Troilus of fully enclosed mythic time, for whom everything is absolutely, necessarily predestined, having elapsed, there is no possibility for conscious experience because every encounter is noncontingent, a thing-that-happened. The Troilus that is situated in time and the Troilus of elapsed mytho-historic time are at a disjuncture. The narrator who sets out to tell the “double sorwe of Troilus” would, initially, have us believe this whole tale occurred in a semi-mappable past, and when he writes about Troilus as a creature of ‘olde bokes’ he does so in the neutered, flat register of the historian, describing Troilus and his deeds as seen from a (temporal) distance, and affording no textual space to his thoughts and feelings, his quandaries, conjectures, hypotheses, or provisional predictions. But for the

most part, Troilus sorrows in real-time—the free-floating subjectivity of the narrative line integrates with his lived experience and simulates the experience of contingency. So the narrative oscillates, sometimes awkwardly, between objective and experiential timescales—in the former, we’re told about the Troilus of ‘armes’, frozen in the accretive pseudo-history of Troy myth, his deeds flatly recorded without subjectivity; in the latter, Troilus encounters love, is unfrozen into a dynamic, and dynamically interpretable, presence, and is temporarily open to the irreducible contingency that is the text’s own destiny. The narrator struggles to maintain his predestinarian command of the text and, occasionally, yields to the novel timeliness of the experiencing Troilus even though it punctures the central conceit that all this has happened—Book II will end on a cliff-hanger based on illicit future contingency: “O God, what shal he seye?” (II.1757).

When Troilus and Criseyde look at each other, narrative time runs off its rails into conscious experience and its properties—possibility, hypothesis, active imagination. The lovers’ encounter injects a philosophical and affective dynamism into the pseudohistory of the containing poem. The narrative then quickly reasserts objective time, and records its canonic matter in a flat register of reportage. But just as quickly, this brief act of narrative timekeeping gives way again to Troilus’ immediate experience—his ‘sorwynges’ is an always-present inscribed experience, re-experienced by different readers in future times. “And fro this forth tho refte hym love his slep...and ek his sorwe / Gan multiplie...” (I.484–86). After the immediate encounter, sorrow multiplies in the mediating locus of his “herte” like “soun” for *Fame*’s Dantean eagle or failed “mullok[s]” in the Canon’s Yeoman’s alembic. That is, the determinate “sorwe” of distance from Criseyde is transmuted into a protean flux of potential quasi-sorrows

because of the imagining subject's situatedness in time. Troilus' mind manages the contingency of his open, potentiated future by 'imaginative empiricism': his imaginary, phantasy Criseyde may or may not reject him, may or may not be already betrothed, may or may not be faithful. Contingency is necessary to inscribe experience and consciousness. For Chaucer to tell the "double *sorwe*" of Troilus means to open the closed text of canonical old 'bokes' to novelty—the novelised sense-experience of its protagonists, and the new and renewable *gestalt* of contingent encounters with different readers in different places and times.

The timeliness of the experiencing, interiorised Troilus is at odds with the historicity of the epic, canonic Troilus, and Chaucer exploits this tension to foreground the underlying problem: eternity beyond experience cannot be circumscribed, but neither (it is suggested) can immediate, individual experience—not without converting it into something else. The narrative to which we have access is suspended between two inexpressible absolutes, and so it phases between an absolute historicity that is self-consciously apocryphal and piecemeal—founded on Lollius' shaky "auctoritee"—and an experiential timeliness that can only speak about its own conditions in an apophatic way. Troilus finds a joy that is beyond description, only approximated in the negative, and his experience is rendered sensible and narratable, the immediate noise of his "brestez yë" (I.453) refigured as rhyming, metrical lines. It is this foundational indeterminacy, related to the liminality of signs and the contingencies of the material text in circulation, that enables this basic temporal tension to subsist, and it finds its fullest expression in the disjunction between the phenomenal Troilus and the historical Troilus.

This tension is manifest in several different, overlapping ways. As we have seen, Chaucer frequently exposes the ways in which interiority itself presupposes contingency, the way thought emerges from contingent encounters. He also shows how interior experience (individual emotion, reflection and prediction) depends on *privacy*, the departure from social selfhood. Public and private are not just competing exigencies here, they are different modes of experience altogether: Troilus and Criseyde's public selves cannot think, feel or process freely because they are subordinated to a collective; communal truth-consensus overrides their individual quests for truth, their making sense of contingent encounters. To have meaningful interiority Troilus and Criseyde must be alone (or, at the seminal moment of their union, with each other); they must exempt themselves from the exigent pressures of their socially, as well as literarily, canonical selves. Stricken with lovesickness, Troilus calibrates his public, socially-interpretable self to conceal the illicit secret of his love for Criseyde, and the different, experiential mode of knowing time that it has awakened: "Lest men of hym wende / That the hote fir of love hym brende, // And seyde he hadde a fevere and ferde amys" (I.489–91).

This experiential mode, set in opposition to the narrator's containing pseudo-history, is overstuffed with contingencies: the flux of immediate sense-experience, the weather-patterns of cognitive process, and acts of prediction directed inwards, towards intense affective experience, rather than being outward-looking portents of a higher-order necessity.

[Love] With disespeyr so sorwfulli me offendeth,
 That streight unto the deth myn herte sailleth.
 Therto desire so brennyngly me assailleth,
 That to ben slayn it were a gretter joie
 To me than kyng of Grece ben and Troye. (I.605–9)

Here Troilus invokes Chaucer's recurring maritime metaphor: his "herte", possessed by Love, is like the merchant ship put "in aventure" on the stormy/still seas; whether his "good" (*CYT* VIII 944–50) will be sunk or make it safely into port is beyond the ken of a mind situated in time. Yet Troilus makes a provisional prediction of the unreadable 'fyn', one predicated wholly on the intensity of his emotional state: his "hertes line" (and narrative line with it) will progress inexorably "streight unto the deth". Unlike Pandarus and Calkas, with their in-universe "calkulynge" (I.71) and "astronomye" (IV.115), or Cassandra and Diomedes with their uncanny, fourth-wall-breaking knowledge of their containing myth, Troilus' acts of prediction do not *reveal* a predestinarian order controlling events; rather, they are an ironic declaration of despair at the contingency of his own future from his place in time. At this point in the text, Troilus' dismay at his own certain death is not literal, but formulaic lovesickness.²² It is his own strictly provisional interpretation of his future "fyn" based on things past and present: he predicts that *if nothing changes* then he will remain on the trajectory of despair and certain death. It is his very situatedness in time, and the conditions of temporal subjectivity itself, that will lead his "herte" to "deth". This hyperbole takes on new resonance and ironies in view of his actual death in the narrative, and the reader's foreknowledge of it.

The reader is primed from the start to expect Troilus' death—we are 'reminded' of the broad contours of this pseudo-myth in a few short lines: "...ye may the double

²² On lovesickness and melancholia in medieval literature generally, and *Troilus and Criseyde* in particular, see Jeremy Tambling, *Allegory and the Work of Melancholy: the Late Medieval and Shakespeare* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), ch. 2; Carol Heffernan, "Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*: the Disease of Love and Courtly Love", *Neophilologus*, 74, 2 (1990), 294–309. On melancholy beyond the courtly love convention of love-sickness, in Chaucer and Hoccleve, see John M. Hill, "The *Book of the Duchess*, Melancholy, and that Eight-Year Sickness", *ChauR*, 9, 1 (1974), 35–50.

sorwes here / Of Troilus in lovyng of Criseyde, / And how that she forsook hym er she deyde” (I.54–56). This ‘reminder’ is a misdirection, as mentioned: the book’s endpoint is the death of Troilus, not Criseyde, and the latter’s ultimate fate remains unwritten. But the necessity of Troilus’ coming downfall suffuses the early narrative, with destinal reminders interpolated between passages of his affective experience (e.g. “This Troilus is clomben on the staire, / And litel weneth that he moot descenden; / But alday failleth thing that fooles wenden”, I.215–17). The reader is always privy to the secret that Troilus can’t know, with his perspective fully contained in fictive time. So, when Troilus complains of his future death from heartache—a conventionally hyperbolic topos—there is an obvious irony for the reader who surveys from outside this enclosed timescale: he is right that his “herte” is bound “streight unto the deth”, but he cannot know how or when; his prediction is not real-world knowledge but an emotional heuristic that just so happens to be technically correct, ahead of time. According to Aquinas, God can (by His *potentia ordinata*) induce in created beings a revelation of the future that is true, but which is unfalsifiable and has no pragmatic utility. Angels (experiencing time discontinuously, unlike humans) can possess *ideal* knowledge of future contingents, prophetic knowledge of necessary future events in the abstract, but without any particulars; in substance not accident.²³ The situationally dependent irony of Troilus’ complaint puts the reader in something like this angelic temporality—not God’s simple intelligence of all time at once, but superior to the continuous, linear temporality of beings contained within that time, experiencing its linear unfolding. As such, the truth of Troilus’ death is actually foretold by his words, but not in its historical particulars: it is known as both a

²³ J.J. MacIntosh, “St. Thomas on Angelic Time and Motion”, *The Thomist*, 59, 4 (1995), 547–75.

generalised idea and a laconic reminder of myth, but not as a specific event: the whole trajectory of Troilus' experience is unforeknown and novelised. When Troilus dies in Book V, we see that his anxious prediction that intense affective feeling will kill him is erroneous, running counter to the detail of the event itself.

Troilus' narrated death signals the triumph, in one sense, of the necessitarian, pseudohistorical narrative mode over Troilus' experienced contingency. When he sees Criseyde's brooch on Diomedes' coat-of-arms, the penny drops that all potential for "joie" is now foreclosed, elapsed, and "[f]ul *sodeynly* his herte gan to colde" (V.1659). The idea that he will die from the heat of excess feeling is ironically inverted. The chronotopic *sodeynly* fulfils its existing function, changing the gears of narrative time from subjective to objective, 'experience' to mythographic "recordyng", and the novelised, experiencing, time-conscious character of Troilus is re-calcified into its mythic point of origin. (Narratively) speechless, unthinking and unfeeling, Troilus' actions become automated, recorded from a neutered distance by the historian-narrator, and he progresses to his death by impenetrable, affectless necessity. The origin for the narrator's words is no longer Troilus' interior discourse, but the ostensibly static *auctoritas* of the canonic record, and he becomes a creature of knightly *gest* rather than a "sorwyng" lover:

Of Troilus, this ilke noble knyght,
As men may in thise olde bokes rede,
Was seen his knyghthod and his grete myght... (V.1752–54)

The story of Troilus is now decisively a thing-that-happened. The time in which he moves, thinks and feels is elapsed; the metaphysical "writing tablet [*grammateion*]" of

pure potentiality that allows for contingent encounters has been totally filled in.²⁴ As such his conscious state has no more capacity for novelty or change—there is no more experience to record and re-create. In Bakhtin’s terms Troilus has passed out of the fairy-tale chronotope in which his experience is individuated, novelistic, and thus “hours are dragged out, days are compressed into moments”; he has been returned to the adventure-time of epic, in which chance events are wholly preordained and the instant “between two moment of biographical time...leaves no *trace* in the life of the heroes or in their personalities”.²⁵

Troilus and Criseyde begins and ends with Troilus a static “ymage” inscribed on the walls of the *House of Fame*’s temple of glass. The moment at which the individual, experiencing Troilus dies goes unwritten, presumed to occur/have occurred in the intermediate blank space between two stanzas:

But—weilawey, save only Goddes wille,
Despitously hym slough the fierse Achille.

And whan that he was slayn in this manere,
His lighte goost ful blisfully is went... (V.1805–8)

Narrator and narrative are now profoundly dissociated from Troilus’ conscious experiencing of contingency—the final events of his life are flatly depicted in their mechanistic determinism. His death represents the apogee of narrative and consciousness, objective time and experiential time. As such it’s recorded as an afterthought, an authoritative fact about an absolute past, shorn of potentiality and impotentiality and kept impervious to interpretive action. The lexis of contingency has been overwritten by a

²⁴ Agamben, “Bartleby, or On Contingency”, p. 244.

²⁵ Bakhtin, “Form of Time and the Chronotope in the Novel”, in *The Dialogic Imagination*, pp. 90, 154.

lexis of necessity, and the narrator's pseudohistorical register: "*And whan that*"—*it was*—"he was slayn...". The narrative voice and the narrated subjects have all returned to their originary state at the start of Book I, when things were ordained, past, present and future, by the subsequent necessity of absolute history. Troilus is re-engraved in the philosophical stasis of the epic past of 'olde [Troy] bokes'. That this Matter of Troy is not nearly as absolute and authoritative as the narrator pretends is not the point. The Troilus that belongs to "Lollius" exists as a counterpoint to the contingency of our (future readers') Troilus, feeling and thinking and moving in his own time, open to possibility and capable of imaginative flight. This latter Troilus is ephemeral, suspended 'in the myddeward' between the after-the-fact historicity of the tale's beginning and conclusion, necessarily evanescent as an experiencing subject amid the anti-experiential necessity that his tale assembles around him.

As was discussed, this dichotomy of subjective and objective timescales plays out through the form of the narrative, at times oscillating awkwardly between Troilus' (and Criseyde's) experiences of contingency, and the privileged reader's foreknowledge of the poem's necessity. But even where the narrator asserts the necessity of his narrative it is with a glance to the fourth-wall, a muted admission that this 'absolute' time is itself subject to a higher-order contingency: its condition as fiction, subject to mutation as it resounds through future times and is received by different audiences. At the end of Book I, Pandarus' self-conscious role as *causa efficiens* for the tale's own destiny is affiliated with Chaucer's role as the guiding hand of the narrative line, as he invokes the trope of the author-as-housebuilder, well-known to a rhetorically educated audience from Geoffrey of Vinsauf's *Poetria Nova*:

For everi wight that hath an hous to founde
 Ne renneth naught the werk for to bygynne
 With rakel hond, but he wol bide a stounde,
 And sende his hertes line out fro withinne
 Aldirfirst his purpos for to wynne.
 Al this Pandare in his herte thoughte,
 And caste his werk ful wisely or he wroughte. (I.1065–71)

In Chaucer's translation of the *Consolation of Philosophy*, a close analogue of this image is used to describe the emanationist "unfoldynge of temporel ordenaunce" (*Bo* IV.pr.6.73–4) from the divine intelligence—the orderly way in which reality unfolds according to God's disposition. The frequent disruption to the narrative by Troilus' immediate sense of time emphasises that this narrative has no ordained, enclosing line to follow: while the maker of this fiction may have 'pre-ordained' the narrative's contours, this imposes no *necessity*. Chaucer makes choices contingently, and being situated in time himself, must respond dynamically to emergent factors (that is, to the *surprises* which emerge in the openended act of writing).

The dynamic between Troilus' and the narrator's perspectives inscribes this contingency at the metanarrative level, but not in the hierarchical sense of Boethian perspectivism. Rather, Chaucer emphasises that we are all in the same "boot" (I.416), ontologically speaking, confronting the contingency that both conditions and is conditioned by temporal experience (and the interpretive incompleteness this generates). There can be no one true interpretation that organises this poem's interlaced perspectives on time into a simple hierarchy. This is why at key points both reader *and narrator* are confronted with an unreadable narrative future. This is most obvious at the end of Book II:

But now to yow, ye loveres that ben here,
 Was Troilus nought in a kankedort,

That lay, and myghte whisprynge of hem here,
 And thoughte, “O Lord, right now renneth my sort
 Fully to deye, or han anon comfort!”
 And was the firste tyme he shulde hire preye
 Of love; O myghty God, what shal he seye? (II.1751–56)

The first six lines sustain the established pattern of inscribing Troilus’ “thoughte” in “tyme”, and the anxiety of anticipating an unpredictable future. But for the narrator to close out Book II with the open question “what shal he seye?” is profoundly significant. As with Troilus and Criseyde’s initial locking of eyes, and the glitches it introduced to narrative time, Chaucer endows a stock romance trope, the *demande d’amour*, with novel significance by deploying it in this metaphysical and metafictional context. This moment actively situates the audience in the narrative present-tense, a key instant in Troilus’ experience of time rendered as a freeze-frame cliff-hanger; in this moment, the ‘Providential’ narrator has been drawn deeper still into the phenomenal ‘present-ness’ that makes up much of the text. This does not mean that the narrator is seriously unsure of what will happen next, as if reading a serial novel. Rather, the effect of this instant of deferral is to re-assert the temporal condition of narrator and audience, *as opposed to* God’s aperspectivity, His mysterious *non*-situatedness in time. Despite our quasi-foreknowledge of this quasi-predestinarian tale, both reader and narrator are reminded of their permanent situation in a localised here-and-now, and so any affiliation of these perspectives with Providential “purveance” is at best inchoate, a half-formed, minor thread of interpretation, not a holistic metanarrative project. Chaucer is a “philosophical poete”, as Usk said, not a philosopher: the exposure of the contingency of perspective *as such* is not his primary goal. Rather, it is a necessary preliminary stage for addressing a related concern: the time-limited nature of literary interpretation, and what this means for the completedness of his “litel bok”.

4.2 ‘Sodeyn deth’: Reading in ‘hevene’

By Book III, we have come to know the narrating voice as a ghost of Christmases Past and Present—both passive, neutral reader of past-tense ‘history’ and emotional, vicariously invested co-pilot to Troilus and (to a lesser extent) Criseyde’s conscious experience. In the same way, we have been exposed to a past-tense Troilus, whose long-gone deeds belong to an elapsed mythic past, and to one who is an experiencing, time-conscious subject, a hostage of Fortune who must make choices in the face of an unpredictable future. The tension between these two narrative perspectives and two Troiluses creates a situation in which we readers find ourselves alongside Troilus, the narrator, and the “litel bok” itself, in a prison-house of temporally delimited experience. This basic pattern—woven throughout in the narrative’s constant shifting between interlaced readerly perspectives (both *in* and *on* narrative time)—creates the conditions for a provocative thought-experiment.

At two crucial moments, the narrative’s established, multi-perspectival pattern stretches to an extreme and things begin to fall apart: in Book III, when Troilus and Criseyde consummate their love, and in Book V when Troilus dies, and is spirited away beyond the celestial spheres. An array of similarities alerts us to the thematic link between these episodes: they share a disorienting oscillation of focal perspectives (Troilus’, the narrator’s, and in the latter case Chaucer as author) and rapidly mixing extreme time dilation with jarring jump-cuts and time-skips. Both sequences contain, as Windeatt shows, the highest density of allusions to Dante’s *Paradiso*, Chaucer’s literary reference-point for imaginative encounters with the ineffable; both times, the narrative gives a sense that it is struggling to inscribe spatio-temporal experience at these heights

of rapture in the same way as before, papering over the cracks with breathless *occupatio* and exegetical diversions.²⁶ What is being conveyed about the contingency of perspective and, indeed, the valuation of erotic and divine love depends heavily on our interpretive response to this parallel, since Chaucer, famously, declines to reduce his “litel...tragedye” to a single, easily-digested *moralitas* at its formal end. The reader is asked to perform a feat of interpretation in the absence of key information: each flight to “hevene” takes place off the narrative radar; the psycho-spiritual dimensions of these time-splitting moments of rapture are depicted (with more than a knowing wink to Dante) as apophatic, indescribable, leaving the reader’s interpretation of their meaning permanently incomplete. Whether we accept that Troilus and Criseyde really do find a kind of experiential equivalent to heavenly bliss which defies the conversion into temporal signs, or whether this rapture is simply metaphorical, a sign of a narrator who “Ne dar to Love, for myn unliklynesse”, (I.16), our interpretation of these parallel moments must remain contingent. The artificiality of the core strategy of placing the reader in Troilus’ mind is exposed, forcing us to confront the fact that there is no Providential viewpoint available at all to impose a Boethian order on the perspectival flux that makes up this fiction.

Before arguing this point, it is important to discuss a prominent lack of a different type—the absence of Criseyde. Criseyde’s interiority is never afforded the same space and time in the narrative as is Troilus’: she is focalised, almost always, through a male gaze (of Troilus throughout, of Pandarus in Book II’s garden-meeting, and, tellingly, of

²⁶ For a collation of Chaucer’s references to Dante’s *Commedia* in *Troilus and Criseyde*, see Barry Windeatt, *Oxford Guides to Chaucer: Troilus and Criseyde* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), pp. 124–37.

Diomedes in Book V's condensed wooing sequence, despite Criseyde being the sole, main actor then). Despite Criseyde's manifest importance, the narrative frames her experience as 'unknowable' in a different sense than that of Troilus: psychological autonomy in this poem is typically expressed *in private*; ruminations, anxieties, imaginative wanderings take place where the character is unseen (like Troilus in his bed), but Criseyde is almost always trapped in a panopticon situation, pressured to project an exterior, public self in response to the exigencies of her function as aristocratic woman.²⁷ However this absence may be explained, we cannot diminish the fact that where Chaucer has the option of prioritising a masculine interiority over Criseyde's own experience, he generally takes it. This insistent objectification reaches its perigee in the love-scene, in which the two main reading positions available are (1) Troilus' perspective, interpreting Criseyde's outward signs and speech, (2) an apophatic lack of access to *both* characters' psychological experience at the heights of love (cf. V.1310–11); in other words, there is no point at which Criseyde's consciousness is available to the reader in the same way as is Troilus'.

When Troilus and Criseyde spend the night together, then, their sexual union is framed as an extended *raptus* where both characters go off the narrative grid. Bodies and

²⁷ There is also a metapoetic dimension to Criseyde's heavily restricted autonomy. At time she seems almost conscious of her position in terms of literary, as well as social, decorum—as love-object in the generic choreography of *fin'amor* narrative. Thus, as Marels points out, she critiques her own literary source, lamenting that she “lacks Prudence's third eye (V.744–5), which enables a conceptualisation of universals”. Jelena Marels, “The Philosophical Entente of Particulars: Criseyde as Nominalist in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*”, *ChauR*, 47, 2 (2012), 208. On the complex, restricted nature of Criseyde's interiority and autonomy, see Jennifer Garrison, “Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* and the Danger of Masculine Interiority”, *ChauR*, 49, 3 (2015), 320–43; Corinne Saunders, “Affective Reading: Chaucer, Women, And Romance”, *ChauR*, 51, 1 (2016), 11–30; Andreea Boboc, “Criseyde's Descriptions and the Ethics of Feminine Experience”, *ChauR*, 47, 1 (2012), 63–83; Robert S. Sturges, “The State of Exception and Sovereign Masculinity in *Troilus and Criseyde*”, in *Men and Masculinities in Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde*, ed. Tison Pugh and Marcia Smith Marzec (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2007); Winthrop Wetherbee, *Chaucer and the Poets: An Essay on Troilus and Criseyde* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), ch. 2.

subjectivities entangled, Troilus and Criseyde appear to depart, as figures whose interior psyches are available to us, from their containing narrative. The lexis of transcendence and Neoplatonic return-to-source would seem to suggest that they have found a state of non-linguistic “gladnesse” beyond ordinary time, a “joie” that counterpoints the looming, inexorable “sorwe” that is fated to come “by predestyne” (III.1086, 1313, IV.966).

Anticipating the narrative meltdown of Book V’s ending, the narrator’s struggle to make sense of their experience here creates a perspectival drama, offering up different, competing interpretive approaches, none of which makes definitive sense of what we are reading. This begins with a shift in narrative mode, from past-tense passivity to immediate, perspectival experience, and, as in Book I, the shift from objective time to present-tense contingency is triggered by lexes of duration and sight:

This Troilus, with blisse of that *supprised*
 Putte al in Goddes hand, as he that mente
 Nothing but wel; and *sodeynly avysed*,
 He hire in armes faste to hym hente. (III.1184–87)

This moment of clarity embeds the narrative in Troilus’ immediate temporal experience, making clear that in this instant Troilus is not an automaton of Providence (as he becomes in Book V, where his deeds are related at a temporal remove from the heat of *his* moment). His actions are not pre-ordained by narrative necessity or historical facticity, but by a radically contingent inclination of the soul, experienced as the surprise of epiphany. The ensuing stanza reveals the narrator’s apprehensiveness as the scribe of such novelty. He retreats to proverb to express his own lack of agency over the contingency of narrative (“What myghte or may the sely larke seye, / Whan that the sperhauk hath it in his foot? / I kan namore...” III.1191–93), before attempting to reimpose some extrinsic order through recourse to “Lollius”, some underwriting

auctoritas: “[S]omtyme I moot, / After myn auctour, tellen hire gladnesse” (III.1195–96).

He writes Criseyde’s immediate response in a mode of epic temporal distance

(“Criseyde...As writen clerkes in hire bokes olde, / Right as an aspes leef she gan to quake”, III.1198–1200), but Troilus’ affective experience and interior discourse instantly disrupts him: “But Troilus, al hool of cares colde, / Gan thanken tho the bryghte goddes sevene” (III.1202–3).

As their carnal joy unfolds, the narrative repeatedly moves to describe their bodily, if not psychological, experience, but quickly diverts into the truth-telling apparatus of ethical poetics:

This Troilus in armes gan hire streyne,
 And seyde, ‘O swete, as evere mot I gon,
 Now be ye kaught; now is ther but we tweyne!
 Now yeldeth yow, for other bot is non!’
 To that Criseyde answerde thus anon,
 ‘Ne hadde I er now, my swete herte deere,
 Ben yolde, ywis, I were now nought heere!’ (III.1205–11)

Faced with this, the narrator averts his gaze to the margins, digressing into fourteen lines of proverbial ‘sentence’:

O, sooth is seyde, that heled for to be
 As of a fevre or other gret siknesse,
 Men moste drynke, as men may ofte se,
 Ful bittre drynke...
 For love of God, take every womman heede
 To werken thus, if it comth to the neede. (III.1212–25)

While the narrative line has drawn us to this moment ‘with’ Troilus, ostensibly privy to his interior discourse and experience of time’s passage, at the key moments of consummate “joie” this access is suddenly, jarringly, withdrawn. A fundamental privacy of experience is asserted, and the narrator papers over the narrative cracks with

proverbial token-ethics, similar to the barrage of provisional *sententiae* that closes out Book V. A frantic back-and-forth of focalisation takes place as the established narrative pattern founders at the threshold of what temporal signs can circumscribe of immediate experience—sex, in a sense, seems to break the scribe’s pen, stretching the narrative’s strategy for translating experience into words to its very limits, forcing narrative time to dilate and restrict dramatically and in quick succession.

When the narrative returns to the lovers, it reports their experience hastily and in the vaguest generality, as it did earlier with Troilus’ private speculations (cf. II.52–53): “Criseyde...made hym swych feste it joye was to sene, / Whan she his trouthe and clene entente wiste” (III.1226–29). The eroticism here upholds a tragic, ironic allusiveness: “And as aboute a tree, with many a twiste, / Bytrent and writh the swote wodebynde, / Gan ech of hem in armes other wynde” (III.1230–33). As Marie de France’s *chevrefoil* and *codre* (honeysuckle and hazel) are so intertwined that they will die quickly upon separation, the putative “hevene” of Troilus and Criseyde’s love is rendered partial, fallible and imperfect by the inevitability of their terminal separation (known in advance, as mentioned, by reader and narrator).²⁸ Although the transcendental nature of their “delite” would already seem to be a mirage, nonetheless, Chaucer does not convert Troilus’ psychological response to this “gladnesse” into narrative in the same way he describes his “sorwe” before and after—if the rapture here is an illusion, it is one which is reverently sustained for a time. In Books I and II, the reader saw that Troilus’ “sorwe” infiltrated his sense of time, variably dilating and truncating his experienced moments; here, Troilus and Criseyde seem to pass out of narratable time altogether, leaving a

²⁸ Marie de France, *Chevrefoil*, in *The Lais of Marie de France*, pp. 292–99.

textual lacuna Chaucer fills in with moralistic “thing collateral” (II.262). The narrator makes another stab at relating their experience, resulting in a strikingly erotic stanza of *effictio*:

Hire armes smale, hire streghte bak and softe,
 Hire sydes longe, flesshly, smothe, and white
 He gan to stroke, and good thrift bad ful ofte
 Hire snowissh throte, hire brestes rounde and lite.
 Thus in this hevene he gan hym to delite,
 And therwithal a thousand tyme hire kiste,
 That what to don, for joie unnethe he wiste. (III.1247–53)

This is as close as the narrative gets to the heart of their “joie”: we are alongside Troilus in his moment-to-moment sense-perception as he reads Criseyde’s figure one divisible part at a time. The narrative emphasises the self-sufficient individuality of Criseyde’s outer accidents rather than her holistic substance: it enumerates her body in its *haecceity*, its indivisible particularity, over its *quiddity*, the property that makes it of a kind with other bodies, and Criseyde herself with other individuals. The privacy and separateness of their carnal joy is in the foreground. Yet this is nothing like the scaffolding of *caritas* which the narrative builds around it.

After this stanza, however, the poem bounces off the threshold of ‘joie’ and is forced back into programmatic exegesis. Somewhat uncannily, Troilus becomes an exegetical reader of his own narrative, offering up an Augustinian hermeneutic with which readers might make sense of this scene:

Than seyde he thus: ‘O Love, O Charite!
 Thi moder ek, Citheria the swete,
 After thiself next heried be she’, (III.1254–56)

The narrative chasm is filled by having Troilus pause mid-coitus to propound a Neoplatonic ethical frame: “Benigne Love, thow holy bond of thynges, / Whoso wol

grace and list the nought honouren”, (III.1261–62). By couching selfish, private love in the language of Augustine’s selfless, unifying love, Chaucer is responding to a well-trodden courtly love topos. But in the established context, this has a more meaningful function: it frames the heights of secular, temporal joy as a somehow ineffable and atemporal “delit”—at least, that is how Troilus is reading it.

The narrative makes clear that we have no *true* understanding of Troilus and Criseyde’s ecstatic experience, while simultaneously framing their sex (in pointedly Dantean language) as a “hevene”, placing it in a structural and symbolic parallel with the spiritual ascent to come. Whether Troilus and Criseyde’s “joie” corresponds in any sense to the “pleyne felicite / That is in hevene above” (V.1818–19) is beyond the powers of reader and narrator to verify—and this aporetic openendedness is the point. Chaucer maintains an interpretive bivalency on this point: their erotic rapture *may or may not be* a “hevene”-like bliss that breaks time and passes understanding—or these narrative gaps may simply reflect the narrative subject’s inexperience in love. One prominent hint favouring the latter lies in the narrator’s wistful plaint, “Why nad I swich oon with my soule ybought, / Ye, or the leeste joie that was there?” (III.1319–20). The heavily-foregrounded sense of their erotic bliss as heaven-like (“lat hem in this hevene blisse dwelle”, III.1322) is complicated by an infernal association, that for the narrator to have enjoyed such bliss would entail that his soul be “ybought”—accompanying a genuine envy of this secular “gladnesse” is a Christian reader’s sense that such a love might *in itself* impede the work of salvation. Yet the question is left open: we are told that the narrator cannot relate their “blisse” not because he has no similar experience, but because “That is so heigh that al ne kan I telle!” (III.1323).

Troilus and Criseyde's night together is narrated according to a pattern: of snatches of experiential immediacy, followed by swift retreat into decorous moralisation. And as with the poem's ending, this back-and-forth is imperfectly enclosed by a range of alternate reading positions which offer competing, partial interpretations of what is really happening, each exposing the contingency of the other. At another moment of juncture—Criseyde's "Welcome, my knyght" (III.1309)—Chaucer abbreviates the eroticism of his source and refocuses the narrative on the ineffable nature of their "gladnesse", casting their tryst as participation in an uncircumscribable, heaven-like bliss:

Of hire delit or joies oon the leeste
 Were impossible to my wit to seye...
 O blisful nyght, of hem so longe isought,
 How blithe unto hem bothe two thow weere...
 Away, thow foule daunger and thow feere,
 And lat hem in this hevne blisse dwelle,
 That is so heigh that al ne kan I telle! (III.1310–23)²⁹

²⁹ Chaucer replaces Criseida's coy reluctance to remove her underclothes in *Fil* III.31 with a humility topos based on the narrator's inexperience in love. *Fil* III.32, where Troilo implores her to strip naked, and she throws her chemise aside, is excluded. But *Fil* III.33, where Boccaccio's narrator characterises their carnal ecstasy as beyond the powers of all the poets combined to describe, is expanded considerably: first, Chaucer explicitly aligns this "gladnesse" with the immutable good of the *summum bonum* ("lat hem in this hevne blisse dwelle", *TC* III.1322), significantly complicating the poem's Boethian thematics of false vs true felicity. Then, Chaucer refers to the contingency of his translative writing practice, and the active role of readerly encounters in the poem's gestalt-formation: this reformation of "myn auctour[']s" original (here, Lollius stands in for Boccaccio) is committed to the "correccioun" of unnamed and unknown readers who are more experienced authorities "in loves art" (III.1324–37). Chaucer conjoins the metaphysical and the metafictional: here the permanent provisionality of the text, even as a "litel bok" committed to the world, is emphatically foregrounded. See Stephen A. Barney, ed., *Troilus and Criseyde with facing-page Il Filostrato* (London: Norton, 2006), pp. 192–93. For various interpretations of the philosophical significance of the love scene, see John M. Hill, "The Countervailing Aesthetic of Joy in *Troilus and Criseyde*", *ChauR*, 39, 3 (2005), 280–97; Charles A. Owen, "Mimetic Form in the Central Love Scene of *Troilus and Criseyde*", *Modern Philology*, 67 (1969), 125–32; Donald R. Howard, "Courtly Love and the Lust of the Flesh: *Troilus and Criseyde*", in *The Three Temptations: Medieval Man in Search of the World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), pp. 77–160.

After this, the narrative returns, again, to Troilus and Criseyde in bed, but its focus remains on their looks and sighs and kisses, extrinsic accidents of love, not their inner time-consciousness, and not their psychological processes of interpretation (which would seem to have been suspended by sheer “joie”). Their subjectivities seem, at times, to be off the narrator’s radar—we are privy to their gestures, movements, even to Criseyde’s naked form, but not to their emotions or psychological processes: the sheer contingency of the narrator’s own situation as a time-bound perspective is placed into the spotlight by this pseudo-transcendental assertion of the lovers’ privacy.

This experiential aporia leads to a kind of hermeneutic antinomy. At least two readings, each with profound philosophical implications, now subsist in the narrative as contingent propositions, interpretive *options* which may or may not be true of Troilus and Criseyde’s unknown experience. We are invited to wonder whether or not their love (later dismissed as “feyned”, V.1848) may be a *true* transcendence, exempting them from their necessitarian timescheme and its fated “sorwe”, or whether there is a more mundane explanation for these characters’ *psychological* absence here (such as the narrator’s own inexperience of love, as is suggested). The indeterminacy stems from the fact that no perspective here is ‘reading experience’; all are reading other readings: whatever is happening with Troilus and Criseyde, all that is available on the page are provisional interpretations, from Troilus’ Neoplatonic moralisations to the narrator’s apophatic disclaimers. Experience *itself* may not be narratable without a conversion that changes it: thus at this moment of experiential rapture the narrative reveals its onion-layered multi-perspectival nature, and its distance, as contingent artefact, from the reality of immediate experience.

Troilus' death in Book V, and his soul's ascent to the eighth sphere, is marked by an absence from narrative time of a distinct, but parallel, kind. The instant of death constitutes one kind of narrative absence in itself:

But—weilawey, save only Goddes wille,
Despitously hym slough the fierse Achille.
And whan that he was slayn in this manere... (V.1805–7)

In telling contrast with the prior Books' adventures in immediate experience—and the joy, angst, and anxiety that come with it—the last events in Troilus' life are narrated at a temporal and emotional remove, with no space accorded to his individual consciousness. Shorn of the Bergsonian *durée* of experiential time, the only timescale left is the pseudo-history with which the tale began, where all this has happened before in the determinate mythic past. Troilus' death is totally situated in the past tense, a “whan that”. This marks the poem's terminal return to narrative necessity, the antitype of the experiential here-and-now that we encountered when Troilus first saw Criseyde, and during their long night together. The emotionally and temporally involved narrator who asked of us “O myghty God, what shal he seye?” has given way to the passive, neutral translator of Lollius' “olde boke”; with no more future contingency, there is no more potential for novelty, merely a return to the canonic stasis that opened the tale.

Upon his death, Troilus' “lighte goost” (V.1808) departs his corpse and begins its ascent “to the holughnesse of the eighth spered” (V.1809). Once more, Chaucer suggests a differentiation of temporal modes *within* the created world, which remains distinct from God's undifferentiated and indivisible time. Troilus is finally exempt from the lived experience of time as an embodied, liminal subject, moving through time as a sequence of moments, suspended between an always departed past and always unpredictable

future. Disembodiment leads to a new, more privileged, reading position over secular time: Troilus “gan avyse” (V.1814) the world from a pseudo-Boethian viewpoint, the knowledge of antecedent causes that reduces contingency to a perspectival illusion. Seeing time from above, the necessity of events is finally perceptible; the anxious angst caused by future contingency appears ridiculous; the temporariness of worldly “joie” renders it “vanite” (V.1817).

The experience of Troilus at this point is not the solution to the Boethian equation but a remainder of individuated subjectivity, suspended in amber before passing to its unknowable and unwritable destination. This is the crucial complication added by the last lines of these three *Teseida* stanzas: “And forth he wente, shortly for to telle, / Ther as Mercurye sorted hym to dwelle” (V.1826–27). The ultimate fate of Troilus’ “goost” is withheld, related in terms as referentially vague as Book III’s “gladnesse”. We do not know where Troilus’ soul will finally “dwelle”, and Chaucer hints that there is unwritten matter here by casting his account as *abbreviatio* (“shortly for to telle”). The reader’s privileged access to Troilus’ immediate consciousness is withdrawn; we are alienated from the experiencing Troilus at the pivotal junctures of ‘gladnesse’ and “deth”. What is clear is that Troilus’ spirit never reaches “hevene” within the bounds of this “litel bok”—except, it seems, in Criseyde’s arms.

When Troilus dies, *Troilus and Criseyde* concludes in a multivocal and multifocal meltdown, a slapdash sequence of conventional endings that fails to harmonise its philosophical and affective dimensions.³⁰ We already experienced a similar narrative

³⁰ The ‘over-ended’ quality of *Troilus and Criseyde*’s conclusion is a scholarly commonplace; for a useful and comprehensive guide to the final kaleidoscope of ending formulae, see Wetherbee, *Chaucer and the Poets*, ch. 8.

breakdown in Book III, when Troilus and Criseyde crossed the limen of sequential time into the undiscovered country of atemporal “gladnesse”, and the narrator tried to repair his ruptured narrative with frenzied moralisations. At this point, we confront two poles of interpretation: one in the pure contingency of Book III’s private “hevene”, which defies circumscription, the other in the truth revealed to Troilus—but not to us—upon dying, inspiring his hollow laughter. As Troilus passes beyond timely experience, what remains for the reader is only an after-image, frozen on the event horizon of temporal language.³¹ Author, reader, and text find themselves in the same boat as the experiencing Troilus, “possed to and fro” by their situation in time and dependency on language, never privy to the Providential viewpoint that would make absolute sense of experience, and abolish all contingencies.

Chaucer had a thoroughly familiar model for poetry which sought to eff the ineffable, before ending in antinomy and paradox—Dante’s *Commedia*. Paradox abounds in *Paradiso*, evoking a constant tension between what Dante’s alter-ego is experiencing, and what contingent signs can relate of that experience. Fittingly, that poem ends, as Crisafi argues, in a self-contradictory interplay of apophatic and cataphatic discourse, with Dante’s ‘internal time-consciousness’ colliding with God’s all-at-once atemporality. At *Paradiso* XXXIII, the times of contingency and of necessity coexist, in the end, in pure sustained paradox: “the two should [...] be read simultaneously, as equals in a neutralised time”.³² Chaucer achieves something similar here, framing both the heights of erotic ecstasy and the soul’s passage out of time as *absences*—if not from ordinary time

³¹ On the temporality of language, see Garth Gillan, “The Temporality of Language and the Symbolic”, *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 3, 1 (1970), 13–39.

³² Nicolo Crisafi, “Dante’s Masterplot and the Alternative Narrative Models in the *Commedia*”, (DPhil thesis, University of Oxford, 2018), 97–104.

as such, at least from the inscribed temporality to which we, as readers, have access. At both junctures, experience goes where narrative cannot, forcing narrator and reader into a state of suspension which invites a crucial self-reflexivity, an encounter with the contingency that provides perspective with its constitutive limits, and which prevents us ever experiencing time as others do. The parallel between utterly individualised erotic joy (private even from the reader—at least in its psychological dimensions) and the felicity obtained after death, that makes worldly travails in love worthy of contemptuous laughter, does not invalidate the poem’s conclusive shift from loves “which that may nat laste” (V.1824) to love of Christ, and the immutable good that would flow from it (V.1842–8). It does, however, create an implicit *demande* of the unknown future reader in the light of our own contingency, our situation on this side of God’s atemporal and aperspectival modality, “eterne on lyve” (V.1863).

What value should accord to selfish loves that may all, finally, be “feynede” (V.1848), especially in the light of Christian revelation? Chaucer, typically resistant to teleological models of ethical poetry (leaving such didacticism, in this case, to “moral Gower”, V.1856), offers no simple answer. But by creating this parallel he leaves open the *possibility* of a provocative alter-reading: that given our inability to share others’ experience and quit our time-bound perspectives, the erotic heaven of Book III *might have been* equal to the final heavenly ascent, if only for that brief (but vastly dilated) time. The temporariness of that erotic heaven and the associated downturn of Fortune ensure that this fleeting idea never truly undermines the final gesture to eternal, post-temporal bliss. Chaucer’s point, I argue, is that this strategy forces us to entertain the notion that it *might*. The temporal conditions under which phenomenal experience takes

place mean that no one (not even Dante) can relate anything of the “uncircumscrip” (V.1865) Love that may await beyond time—not without a conversion into temporal signs, a transposition into the realm of the contingent. We are left without a sententious takeaway, only a stubborn re-assertion of the hard-coded limits of temporal experience, our situation as contingent readers (of texts, of one another, of the ‘out-there’ noumenal world). There is no verbalising or narrating anything of divine Love, and so the faithful must trust and believe that there is a stability, a “pees” and “suffisaunce” (V.1309), that surpasses even the time-splitting ‘delite’ known by Troilus and Criseyde in their private “hevene” (V.1251). Read in this light, it may come as no surprise that Dante, *poeta theologus*, gets the last word in *Troilus and Criseyde*, when Chaucer quotes his prayer that humbles the contingent author, reader, and text before the “uncircumscrip” timelessness of God (V.1863–69).³³

In this respect, Chaucer’s metanarrative strategy in *Troilus and Criseyde* is at once more consonant with the substance of Boethius’ *Consolation* than is often assumed, yet far removed from the over-determined structural analogue ascribed to him by some ‘Boethian readers’. *Troilus*’ restless play of perspectives cannot be reduced to the contingentist/necessitarian binary of Boethian perspectivism—one half of the binary, the Providential, is conspicuously absent, after all. Rather, it is a sustained strategy which inscribes the fundamental contingency of all perspective—not, as the narrator frets, as impediment to the solidity of a univocal truth-statement that can be universally “understonde” (V.1798), but as the basic constitution of a narrative that is an

³³ On Dante as *poeta theologus* see Concetta Carestia Greenfield, *Humanist and Scholastic Poetics, 1250–1500* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1981), p.56.

inexhaustible locus of perspectivalness itself, a hall of mirrors—or, perhaps, a house of twigs, “That never mo hyt stille stente” (*HF* 1926).

5 Chaucer's Waste Land: Appearance and Reality in the *House of Fame*

5.1 Doors of Perception, 'ymad of glas'

The beginning of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* turns one of Chaucer's most famous images, of April showers piercing the drought of March "to the roote" (*GP I 2*), inside-out:

April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.
Winter kept us warm, covering
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding
A little life with dried tubers.¹

Chaucer's renewing and vitalising April is here "cruel", her flourishing rooted in sedimentary layers of dead matter, while for Eliot winter is not a barren "droghte" but warmth, a temporary source of maternal protection from the cruel re-creative process of the April to come. For Eliot, the memories of cultures and of individuals are not perfectible—mingled with "desire", the *re*-collection of the past is always a making of something mixed and new. What's past is "dead", irrevocable, and the "lilacs" that grow from its grave will themselves become the land and be reconfigured, with no true memory of what they were before. *The Waste Land* is placed in the shadow of this cosmically indifferent natural process, and this may account for its morosely elegiac tone. Eliot shores up fragments of canonical matter—Dante, Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare—against the march of time and forgetting, but in doing so merely proves that the fate of

¹ T.S. Eliot, "The Waste Land", 1, in *The Waste Land*, ed. Michael North (London: W.W. Norton, 2001), p. 5.

individual artists and works is to be fragmented in the remembering, to be reduced to names, *sententiae*, snatches of phrase, to be deployed in different contexts to new and alien aesthetic ends.

Eliot's redeployment of a Chaucerian image, garbled in the remembering, would seem to prove this point from the start of his poem. It is also in full accordance with Chaucer's own inflection on this theme: his awareness that his texts, mutated by the contingencies of circulation across time, will not "be understonde" (*TC* V.1798) in any way that he would recognise. Eliot treats Chaucer with relative uninterest: where *The Waste Land* is fertile with dispersed seeds of Dante and Shakespeare, Chaucer, onetime "Father of English Literature", is ditched and forgotten after that first, superficial, echo.² Had Eliot read Chaucer more curiously, he would have found a deeply sophisticated precursor to the philosophical concerns at issue in his own masterwork. Chaucer's *House of Fame*, like *The Waste Land*, shores up fragments of canonised poetry—especially Dante—in a way that reveals the irrevocability of origin, and the always re-creative catalysis of an old text's encounters with novel readers. Like *The Waste Land*, it combines ontological, epistemological, and poetological themes in a mutually reciprocal arrangement. *Fame*'s interest in the temporality of language informs its subtext on the nature and function of poetry; at once, its meditation on the place of the poet forms part of a broader discourse on what language can and cannot say about the absolute. As in *The*

² On the constructed image of 'Father Chaucer' by his self-fashioning successors in the fifteenth century, and Chaucer's changing fortunes as canonical figure throughout the centuries, see Seth Lerer, *Chaucer and His Readers: Imagining the Author in Late-Medieval England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); Isabel Davis and Catherine Nall, eds., *Chaucer and Fame: Reputation and Reception* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2015); Ardis Butterfield, *The Familiar Enemy: Chaucer, Language, and Nation in the Hundred Years War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 8–35; Thomas A. Prendergast, "Canon Formation", in *A Handbook of Middle English Studies*, ed. Marion Turner (London: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), pp. 239–51.

Waste Land, Dante casts a long shadow as the prime exemplar of vernacular poetics and as the poet of heaven and hell. Both poems redeploy Dantean matter out of sequence, but to very different ends: Eliot's Dante is a fallen and broken-up colossus of decaying grandeur, whose *Comedy* is refigured in the guttural voices of an infernal modernity ("A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many, / I had not thought death had undone so many", *TWL* 63–64). The *House of Fame*'s Dante, meanwhile, represents a vision of the divinely-illuminated poet as truth-teller that incites in Chaucer a productive and generative resistance.³

In their own distinct ways, *The Waste Land* and the *House of Fame* both construct coherent visions of progressive ontological exile, in which the gulf between appearance and reality, phenomenal experience and objective truth, can no longer be bridged via communication, because of the contingency of language. As Chaucer presents it, a major impediment to universal consensus and univocal communication is a side-effect of the emanationist model of the cosmos, the Neoplatonic origin-story of diverse individual words and things from a unitary source. Signs are subject to an uncontrollable process of "multiplicacioun" and "encres" that renders speech-acts in the world ever more diverse, and ever more disseminal; the "up-so-down" world is therefore accelerating into greater and greater depths of discord and disagreement, as contingent and partial truths proliferate. In their thinking about appearance and reality, both poets were heavily influenced by Dante (his *Convivio* as well as his *Commedia*), and also by major philosophers in whose writings they were expert: for Chaucer, Boethius; for Eliot, the idealist F.H. Bradley, whose *Appearance and Reality* contends that the truth of reality

³ On Chaucer's response to Dante, see Karla Taylor, *Chaucer Reads The Divine Comedy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1989).

resides in a pre-individual and pre-conceptual ‘field’ of Experience, and that the discrete individuals and contingencies of the apparent world amount to, in D.H. Lawrence’s words, “fading phrases of the untruth”.⁴ Chaucer’s philosophical reading gave him a homologous sense of the gulf between “appareance [...] fals in existence” (*HF* 265–66), and the way in which the truth of ontological being and ontic beings are always “kevered with the myst” (352) of temporal perception, cognition, and linguistic representation.⁵

The gulf between appearance and reality is at the heart of the Neoplatonic tradition, with its emphasis on hierarchical levels of distinction between the unitary origin of the cosmos and our material world made up of differentiated things. Via the likes of Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius and Boethius, this cosmogony was brought into harmony with the revealed truth of Christian belief—the emergence of the composite from the simple, the diverse from the singular, were explicated using terms and concepts from

⁴ D.H. Lawrence, *The White Peacock* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1935), p. 47.

⁵ Heidegger’s early distinction between ontological (*ontologisch*) and ontic (*ontisch*), that is, between “the specific way an entity of a certain kind has its characteristics” and “[the] concrete properties and characteristics of an entity”, may be relevant to the question of the aporetic thresholds of what language can convey of reality, and of the distance between empirical knowledge and reality itself. Jan Slaby, “Ontic (*Ontisch*)”, in *The Cambridge Heidegger Lexicon*, ed. Mark A. Wrathall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. 542–6. Ontological, ontic, and propositional truth comprise nested layers of presupposition, at each stage becoming further removed from Being *simpliciter*—this is similar to the epistemological consequences of the emanationist cosmology propounded in *Paradiso* XIII (and echoed in *HF* II). As Scheibler writes, “Heidegger distinguishes the fundamental dimension of ontological truth (*aletheia*) from the level of ontic truth, which in turn presupposes the level of propositional truth...Heidegger’s concern is to show that propositional truth...only allows us to know something as an object; it is therefore limited to the ‘ontical’ level of inquiry”. Ingrid H. Scheibler, *Gadamer: Between Heidegger and Habermas* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), p. 107. Cf. Martin Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, trans. Richard Taft, 5th ed. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1997), pp. 169–70 (“How is knowledge of beings in general possible? If the previous understanding of the constitution of the Being of beings belongs to the possibility of the knowledge of beings, then the question concerning the possibility of ontic knowledge is thrown back onto the question of the possibility of *ontological* [knowledge], i.e., the laying of the ground for *Metaphysica Specialis* is focused on the laying of the ground for *Metaphysica Generalis* (ontology)”).

these pagan metaphysics.⁶ Chaucer interacted with this tradition along several lines: direct and deep familiarity with the likes of Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*; some degree of familiarity with the commentaries and treatises that emerged from this foundation in scholastic philosophy; the triangulation of these ideas in the works of other poets, not least Boccaccio, Petrarch and Dante.⁷ The medieval theories of perception and representation which grew out of this Christian and Neoplatonic basis (influenced by renewed engagement with the Aristotelian tradition) developed in a distinctly restrictionist pattern. The idea that the substance of the unitary, transcendent origin must inhere in all of the individual and temporal things that descended from it was gradually called into doubt; analogically, the idea that our perceptions of things in the world, and the things we say about these perceptions, tell the truth about reality was heavily debated. For Boethius, human intelligence contains a natural faculty (*mentis vigor*, or “strengthes of the thought”, *Bo* V.m.4.49) which verifies the reality or falsity of apparent (perceived) things. In his idealist version of Aristotelian perception theory (which, as Magee rightly says, “breathes Plotinian”), the soul contains indwelling species alike to the Platonic Forms, by which perceived objects are naturally organised and comprehended:

Algatis the passion...in the quyke body goth byforn, excitynge and moevyng the strengthes of the thought, ryght so as whan that cleernesse smyteth the eyen and moeveth hem to seen...than is the strengthe of the thought imoevid and excited, and clepith forth to semblable moevyngis the spesces that it halt withynne itself, and addith tho spesces to the notes and to the thinges withoute-forth, and medleth

⁶ See Jan A. Aertsen, “Platonism” and Gareth B. Matthews, “Augustinianism”, in *The Cambridge History of Medieval Philosophy*, ed. Robert Pasnau and Christina van Dyke, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 76–98.

⁷ On the *House of Fame*'s interactions with Boccaccio (especially the triangulation of Boethius and Dante via the *Amorosa Visione*) see Kathryn McKinley, *Chaucer's House of Fame and its Boccaccian Intertexts: Image, Vision, and the Vernacular* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2016).

the ymagis of thinges withoute-forth to the foormes ihidd withynne hymself. (*Bo V.m.4.46–60*).⁸

The notion that species bore an essential link to the Forms, the originary ideal from which the mobile world emanates, fell into disfavour throughout scholastic philosophy (as did Platonic idealism itself, with the flourishing of nominalism). For Aquinas, the mind apprehended real objects through a formal medium, a “special representational device” called a *species in medio*, and “[the] inner world is firmly glued to external reality by the existence of the same forms both in our senses and intellects on the one hand, and in the external world on the other”.⁹ As Adriaenssen argues, representational theories after Aquinas (for instance, those of Peter John Olivi, Peter Auriol, William of Ockham and Robert Holcot) were marked by a progressive move away from his indirect realism, towards a situation where “species were *inner objects of cognition* that veiled external reality”, culminating in Ockham’s “nominalism”, where all universal forms and concepts are simply abstracted from encounters with particular things, and terms thus never evoke the precise same mental concept (or *intentio anima*) in the mind of another.¹⁰

The extent of Chaucer’s first-hand knowledge of later scholastic writings is perhaps an insoluble question (although Neil Cartlidge makes a compelling argument for the direct influence of Holcot’s Wisdom-commentary on the *House of Fame*).¹¹ But this efflorescence of representationalist theories is one dimension of the wider tendency that

⁸ On Boethian theories of representation and their later influence, see John Magee, *Boethius on Signification and Mind*, *Philosophia Antiqua* LII (Leiden: Brill, 1989); Giorgio Pini, “Species, Concept, and Thing: Theories of Signification in the Second Half of the Thirteenth Century”, *Medieval Philosophy and Theology*, 8 (1999), 21–52.

⁹ Adriaenssen, *Representation and Scepticism from Aquinas to Descartes*, pp. 3–11.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 3. See Claude Panaccio, *Ockham on Concepts* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004); *Mental Language: from Plato to William of Ockham*, trans. Meredith K. Ziebart (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017).

¹¹ See Cartlidge, “Ripples on the Water?”, 57-98.

Sheila Delany calls “skeptical fideism”, a tradition in which truth-claims about the created world are contingently true *in relation to* the created world, but they do not impose any rational limits on God’s “universal contingency”, His *potentia absoluta* and concomitant capacity to change universal law at will.¹² In Delany’s view, Chaucer was a full participant in this tradition, which accounts for his dialectical staging of conflicting moral and epistemic arguments which end without asserting a positive conclusion, instead engaging in “fideistic evasion” by gesturing to God’s reserved capacity to definitively distinguish truth from falsity.¹³ Whether or not Chaucer had read this or that scholastic treatise, he was immersed in an intellectual zeitgeist where truths told *in* the world were understood to be fundamentally contingent and were ultimately subordinate to the noncontingent Truth (*of* the world) that God alone upheld. The idea of “skeptical fideism” is a very useful shorthand code for the epistemological aspect of the heterogeneous nominalist and antinomialist tendencies within later scholasticism. As Delany’s study of *Fame* demonstrates, it can be productively applied to the thorny question of Chaucer’s “aesthetics of irresolution”, his oft-noted tendency to allow mutually contradictory interpretations to coexist within a narrative.¹⁴ Late medieval “skeptical fideism”, as well as the Aristotelian and Neoplatonic valences of Augustine, Boethius and Dante, are all important dimensions in making sense of the *House of Fame*’s dynamics of appearance and reality, truth and untruth, words and things. But within Delany’s influential analysis of the poem itself there is some simplification of its conceptual trajectory, as well as a misreading (or, at least, a contestable interpretation) of

¹² Delany, *Chaucer’s House of Fame*, p. 17.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

¹⁴ See Thomas L. Reed, Jr. *Medieval English Debate Poetry and the Aesthetics of Irresolution* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1990).

the Eagle's speech. In my view, these minor demerits of a deservedly canonical study have contributed to a mainstream (though not uniformly orthodox) view of the poem, which is at once unduly positivist and optimistic (in suggesting that Chaucer anticipates a novel poetics of aesthetic autonomy; the "self-sufficiency of fiction" that Delany herself rightly rejects as Chaucer's intent), yet which does not do justice to the radical, iconoclastic idiosyncrasy of what the *House of Fame* really achieves.¹⁵

The major points of Delany's analysis are insightful and valuable. Unlike more recent readings, she unflinchingly accepts the bleakness of the poem's epistemological landscape by the end, and Chaucer's cautious ambivalence towards this 'wasteland'. She rightly asserts that the poem stress-tests various epistemic ideals in succession, culminating in a trial of 'experience' (*experientia*) as a stable source of verifiable truth, before concluding: "This is the depth of Chaucer's skepticism. Experience is no substitute for tradition for it is subject to the same weakness: neither can be relied on for truth".¹⁶ It is true that the *House of Fame* disrupts the teleologies of late medieval poetics and approaches to fiction, revealing that the cultural record of history and story cannot confer noncontingent truth on readers because (1) there is always another reading,

¹⁵ Delany, *Chaucer's House of Fame*, p. 29. Delany herself rejects a positive, anticipatory spin on the poem's formal and semantic inconclusiveness; other studies that do justice to the nuanced nature of the poem's final outlook include Kathryn L. Lynch, *Chaucer's Philosophical Visions* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2000), ch. 3, esp. pp. 79–82; T.S. Miller, "Forms of Perspective and Chaucer's Dream Spaces: Memory and the Catalogue in *The House of Fame*", *Style*, 48, 4 (2014), 479–95; Lewis Beer, "Authors and Readers in Chaucer's *House of Fame*", in *Medieval English Literature*, ed. Beatrice Fannon (London: Palgrave, 2016), pp. 112–27. Examples of studies which (despite many merits) reflect a postmodern bias favouring the generative potential of indeterminacy include Eleanor Johnson, "Against Order: Medieval, Modern, and Contemporary Critiques of Causality", in *Chaucer and the Subversion of Form*, ed. Thomas A. Prendergast and Jessica Rosenfeld (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 63–70; Rosemarie P. McGerr, *Chaucer's Open Books: Resistance to Closure in Medieval Discourse* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1998).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

another source, another potential truth available, and (2) because truth told by fiction is not passively conferred but actively *generated*, a product of the dynamic and seminal encounter between contingent texts and contingent readers. In Delany's words, "Tradition...provides too many answers"; unlike in most dream-visions, "the reader is invited to judge ("demen") rather than required to believe", and the poem occurs with a reflexive awareness of "the deception of the written word".¹⁷

But Delany imposes on this underlying contingency a conceptual superstructure that is overly linear and determinate, and which in my view undermines the poem's radically indeterminate and self-contradictory aesthetic. She sees the *House of Fame* as built upon a macrocosmic conceptual arc, a sequentially unfolding "process of expanding consciousness" which moves, in its three Books, through "Psyche, History, [and] Cosmos"; "from the world of the mind through the world of men to the created world at large".¹⁸ At each of these checkpoints Chaucer provides an interpretive antinomy which reveals the fallibility of a respective epistemic ideal: the Temple of Venus corresponds with literary-historical tradition, the Eagle's flight with empiricist science, the House of Fame with canonical *auctoritas* and the House of Rumour with direct experience. But this scheme does not account for the fact that *experience* is at issue from the very start and as a constant throughout, from the first lines of the first proem. Far from a macrocosmic voyage through the universe of knowledge itself, in which *experientia* is just one locus of several, the poem never ceases to insist upon the perspectival contingency to which all other routes to knowledge are subordinate and secondary. The

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 42–44, 66.

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 36–37. On the medieval dream-vision as a staging ground for imaginative, opened engagement with philosophical and theological ideas, see A.C. Spearing, *Medieval Dream-Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

House of Fame exposes how experience itself consists in the encounter with contingency, the way that the limits of perception and consciousness are constitutive of individualised experience—and, most importantly, what this means for a putative *telos* of truth-telling in fiction, the assertion of the poet as inspired and inspiring locus of illumination (as, at least in the *House of Fame*, the *Commedia* seems to represent for Chaucer).¹⁹

Every stage in the poem's para-celestial ascent is narrated with a focus on individual sense-perception and interpretation. Book I's amalgam of Virgilian and Ovidian accounts of Dido and Aeneas is a "newe thyng", an inscription of one time-bound reader's encounter with the stuff of the mytho-historic canon, which records *his own* processes of abbreviation, amplification, and exegesis. The dreamer's account of this story is as insistently phenomenal and perspectival as Troilus' own interactions with narrative time: "*First sawgh I the destruction / Of Troye*" (*HF* 151); "Ther saugh I...Ther saugh I...Ther saugh I..." (209, 212, 219). The Eagle's lecture on the "multiplicacioun" of sound through "kyndely enclynyng" (734, 784) does not take place in a vacuum but as a distinctly lop-sided dialectic with a comically dim auditor. The paradoxicality of Fame's palace is framed as product of Geoffrey's limited and liminal faculties, in his role as the focalising narrative subjectivity (with particular emphasis on sight, a faculty with

¹⁹ It would be overly simplistic, to say the least, to say that Dante's poetry asserts a straightforward vision of the divinely-inspired poet as truth-teller. Nevertheless, the frequent attribution of revealed truth to divine grace, along with a Thomistic belief "that whatever is noble and high in man—virtue or knowledge, philosophy or love or glory—is what God rewards", gives Chaucer ample freedom to act as devil's advocate towards a poetics of illuminated authority, as he does in *Fame*. See Rocco Montano, "Italian Humanism: Dante and Petrarch", *Italica*, 50, 2 (1973), 205–21; Simone Marchesi, "Epic Ironies: Poetics, Metapoetics, Self-translation (*Inferno* 18.1, *Purgatorio* 24.52, *Paradiso* 1.13)", *Dante Studies*, 131 (2013), 99–117; Mario Trovato, "Dante's Poetics of Good: From Phenomenology to Integral Realism", *Annali d'Italianistica*, 8 (1990), 232–56; William Franke, "Dante and the Poetics of Religious Revelation", *symplokē*, 2, 2 (1994), 103–16; John Took, "Dante and the Modalities of Grace", in *Conversations with Kenelm: Essays on the Theology of the Commedia* (London: Ubiquity, 2013), pp.81–104.

specific valency in scholastic representational theories): thus “Ther *saugh* I Colle tregetour... *Y saugh him* carien a wynd-melle / Under a walsh-note shale” (1277–82). The medial gulf between *apparent* reality and reality in-itself is always scrupulously observed, and it is ascribed to the contingencies of thought, the temporal processes of perception, cognition and representation. The goddess Fame herself is an anti-representational image of paradox, whose figure is mentally ungraspable because of the liminal conditions of thought and ‘semynge’: “*Me thoughte* that she was so lyte / That the lengthe of a cubite / Was lengere than she *semed* be” (1369–71). The fault is not in our stars but in ourselves: the contingency of epistemic ideals, and consequent unattainability of absolute truth, is a product of *experience*; provisional truths diversify as individual subjects and speech-communities multiply, a speech-situation of fragmentation and differentiation in which second-order truths and untruths are always uncontrollably “encresing ever moo” (2077).

The gestalt-formation in the encounter between contingent readers and contingent texts is always, by its nature, unpredictable and temporary. But this does not mean that Chaucer looks with mercantile boldness to a brave new poetics of ‘self-sufficient fiction’ cresting on the horizon. Rather, it means that Chaucer has a more sophisticated understanding of the implications of this immitigable indeterminacy than is usually admitted: the *House of Fame*’s thought-experiment is staged in the full awareness that fiction without preloaded epistemic and ethical values, and without any predeterminate ‘end’ (*telos* or *teleute*), never loses its potential to be an absolute waste of time. Readings of the *House of Fame* which argue that it is a novel *ars poetica* which “ends up asserting the hermeneutic freedom of the reader from the pressure of literary tradition”, that the

poem is somehow “*ecstatic* about the possibilities that are opened up when the true disorder and non-linearity of literary making and human life are embraced”, or “an overall new poetic”, are anachronisms which are too heavily freighted with post-structuralist assumptions about fictional openedness.²⁰ Gaston is right to say that “there is no single reader to awaken the forms that populate the House of Fame”, yet, as in other postmodern readings of the poem, she sees the outline of the Bakhtinian novel in the formal openedness of Chaucer’s poem, the negative space after the poem’s terminal ellipsis (“A man of gret auctorite...”, *HF* 2158) a site of pure potentiality: “In the *House of Fame*...the future has the potential to recover the silent past. The synchronic space of Fame’s domain is not the endpoint for language. Rather, language has its ends in history, whether they come about quickly or slowly”.²¹

Yet Chaucer’s poetics of contingency are about *impotentiality* as much as potentiality, the capacity of a time-bound text *not* to be read, *not* to “be understode”, not to “dure” across time and not to communicate anything of stable value, ethical, aesthetic, or otherwise. By failing to formally end while undermining the very concept of literary *ends*, that fiction must make a point, the *House of Fame* challenges certain presuppositions that continue to express themselves in modern-day reading practices. These assumptions are historically contingent ephemera in themselves, whose contingency is eradicated in the determination of a positive or negative judgement, the readerly ‘observer effect’ that expresses potential over impotential. Crucially, Chaucer does not positively *assert* anything at all about literature or truth, and it is this absolute

²⁰ Eleanor Johnson, “Against Order”, p. 70; Laurence K. Shook, “The *House of Fame*”, in *Companion to Chaucer Studies*, rev. ed., ed. Beryl Rowland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 422.

²¹ Kara Gaston, *Reading Chaucer In Time*, p. 178.

suspension of authorial, as well as readerly, presuppositions (i.e. that the author of a text is actively *conveying* meaning, attempting to move the reader towards one stance or another), in the face of the sheer multiversality of knowledge held in language, that allows the poem to trace the outline of contingency itself.

Contingency is the “thing itself” of the *House of Fame*, which suspends the readerly act of valuative closure by exposing the alterity of its underlying presuppositions, creating a gesture to the first-order contingency of which this poem, and all the perspectives in and on it, consist. What Chaucer offers is not merely a vision of a post-classical literary teleology or a cipher for epistemological scepticism, but a boundless set of ontological mirrors, a *mise en abyme* of contingent, time-bound texts and contingent, time-bound readers, engaged in a limitless process of recreating and dismantling the other. The deconstruction of epistemic ideals adduced by Delany is thus a preliminary tactic that does not impart a *reading* as much as it induces a *state*: an attitude of *epoché*, of Boethian “suffisaunce”, in response to the abyss of runaway “multiplicacioun” that is imaginatively reflected back to us. The *House of Fame*, in this view, is not a prototype for a novelised poetics of Bakhtinian dialogism; it does not look forward to negative capability or aesthetic autonomy as *raison d’écrires* rising from the ashes of the medieval ‘ethical poetic’. It is a radical vision of poems without *ends*, which looks, as Fumo says, to a new situation of “dialogic barter...among shipmen, pilgrims, and pardoners (no doubt slouching toward the Tabard to be born)”, but which does so with the anxiety and trepidation of an artist fully cognizant of what contingency really implies for poets and philosophers—impotence.²² Far from being an *ars poetica* that

²² Jamie C. Fumo, *The Legacy of Apollo: Antiquity, Authority, and Chaucerian Poetics* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2010), p. 6.

predicts the aesthetics of dialogism, the *House of Fame* is an etiology of ontological exile, a diagnostic of a speech-situation where “fals and soth” are always irrevocably “compounded” (2108), and the world of knowledge is a widening gyre of exponential “encre” and “multiplicacioun” (2074, 784), whose originary centre of Truth has long since passed beyond the horizons of individuals and of culture. It is at once more pessimistically inflected and exilic in tone, yet more radical, innovative, and philosophically adept, than postmodern readers are prone to admitting.

Fame rejects openendedness and multivalency as unequivocally positive *raisons d'écrire* in themselves. At the same time, it actively resists a poetics of vatic illumination.²³ *Paradiso* XXXIII ends the *Comedy*, as discussed above, in a paradoxical play of apophatic and cataphatic, in which the uncircumscribability of the Trinity is asserted in the same breath as it is positively described in strikingly plain speech. For Crisafi, Dante “[takes] advantage of paradox’s ability to neutralise teleological time [...] and thus opens up for Dante the possibility of expressing an essential trait of the transcendent, excessive, *oltraggiosa* ‘reality’ that is the subject matter of the *Paradiso*”.²⁴ Chaucer’s poetic aim is less lofty, and his reading of *Paradiso* is tinged with scepticism. While paying due respect to the peerless virtuosity of Dante’s masterwork in terms of style, philosophical sophistication, and breadth of subject matter, he sees that the poem cheats, in the end, the ground-rules it has established with its emanationist structural

²³ On classicising ideals of *poeta vates* in relation to the Italian *trecento* and to fifteenth century poetry, see Ebin, *Illuminator, Makar, Vates*; Piero Boitani, “What Dante Meant to Chaucer”, in *Chaucer and the Italian Trecento*, ed. Piero Boitani (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 115–40. On Chaucer’s challenge to Dantean classicism in this poem see Glenn A. Steinberg, “Chaucer in the Field of Cultural Production: Humanism, Dante, and the *House of Fame*”, *ChauR*, 35, 2 (2000), 182–203.

²⁴ Crisafi, “Dante’s Masterplot,” p. 104.

model, in which the properties constitutive of phenomenal experience—time-consciousness, contingent signs—accumulate exponentially the farther one gets from the Oneness that subsists in the Empyrean heaven. Dante’s narrator retains his individual this-ness and time-consciousness past the point at which these properties cannot truly persist, in the Ninth Heaven and beyond: “Che ne prima ne poscia procedette / Lo discorrer di Dio sopra quest’ acque” (there was no *after*, no *before*—they were not there until God moved upon these waters), a situation of “*sanza distinzione in essordire*” (no distinction in beginning: all at once, *Par XXIX.20–21, 30*).

Answering Dante, the *House of Fame* is a meditation on the poet’s conundrum—“why write?”—in an ontological and epistemic situation where paradox is *not* resolved *per grazia*, where the cosmic wayfarer pings off the threshold of atemporality and is sent hurtling back into the region of contingency—the temporal world of “*che brevi contingenze*” (brief contingent things), of proliferating words and deeds whose secondarity alienates them from any necessary relation to Truth, and which therefore always carry the potential for disseminality (contingencies that emerge “*con seme e senza seme*”, with or without seed, XIII.64). Dante, as Gillespie writes, asserted “a new form of heroic poet: the poet as hero, as well as a poet about heroes: a *poeta theologus*—a poet theologian, combining the prophetic role of the human authors of Scripture with the philosophical function of some of the most ancient poets who wrote allegorically about gods and monsters in an attempt to understand and explain the world they lived in”.²⁵ The heroism of ‘Geffrey’, the Chaucerian poet, involves a humbler intent that belies a more consistent and perhaps more sophisticated understanding of contingency. More so than

²⁵ Vincent Gillespie, “Authorship”, in *A Handbook of Middle English Studies*, ed. Marion Turner (London: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), pp. 141–42.

Dante, Chaucer makes the case for an attitude of true and profound *humilitas*, not in the face of named *auctores* but the medium in which their names travel, in the disseminal world of competing truths and antinomy that is caused by our situatedness in time.

The *House of Fame* stages the contingency of reading and writing beyond the threshold at which truth, emanating, per Dante, from God's 'light' ("che viva luce che si mea / dal suo lucente", *Par XIII.55–56*), "centres both my speech and your belief, just like a circle's centre" (*Par XIII.50–51*). In the Neoplatonic cosmology of Dante's *Paradiso*, the material world, in the outermost reaches of this emanationist set of circles, is the place where the shadows of untruth creep into the world of apparent being. While all created things in the world have God as their first and final cause, the mediality of His light through layer upon layer of cumulative materiality and temporality eventually lead to a situation where contingent things can exist with or without Truth:

Quindi discende a l'ultime potenze
Giù d'atto in atto, tanto divenendo,
Che più non fa che brevi contingenze;

E queste contingenze essere intend
Le cose generate, che produce
Con seme e senza seme il ciel movendo. (*Par XIII.61–66*)

(From there, from act to act, light then descends down to the last potentialities, where it is such that it engenders nothing but brief contingent things, by which I mean the generated things the moving heavens bring into being, with or without seed.)

This modality in which untruth (dissimilitude with God's Idea) is a possibility is the subject of a brief further explication in the *Paradiso*:

La cera di costoro e chi la duce
Non sta d'un modo; e però sotto 'l segno
i dëale poi più e men traluçe.

Ond' elli avvien ch'un medesimo legno
 Secondo specie, meglio e peggio frutta;
 E voi nascete con diverso ingegno. (*Par XIII.67–72*)

(The wax of such things [contingents] and what shapes that wax are not immutable; and thus, beneath Idea's stamp, light shines through more or less. Thus it can be that, in the selfsame species, some trees bear better fruit and some bear worse, and men are born with different temperaments.)²⁶

In these four stanzas, Dante offers up nothing less than the origins of difference and dissimilitude, of the potential for individuation and for dissimilarity, within the bounds of the divine Idea. Dante passes serenely from this exposition of contingency to the potential for noncontingent truth via the *mentis vigor*, here underwritten by Love, and gifted *per grazia*:

Ma la natura la dà sempre scema,
 Similmente operando a l'artista
 Ch'a l'abito de l'arte ha man che trema.

Però se 'l caldo amor la chiara vista
 De la prima virtù dispone e segna,
 Tutta la perfezion quivi s'acquista. (*Par XIII.76–81*)

(But Nature always works defectively—she passes on that light much like an artist who knows his craft but has a hand that trembles. Yet where the ardent Love prepares and stamps the lucid Vision of the primal Power, a being then acquires complete perfection.)

²⁶ Here Dante employs the commonplace metaphor in medieval philosophy of the sealing wax and ring. Its origins are Platonic, originally used at *Timaeus* 50c–d as an image of the relation between the ideal and real, between Form and the imitations of Form. Aristotle adapted this metaphysical symbol into one that is both metaphysical and epistemological, representing the relationship between soul and body on the one hand (*De Anima* II.1 412b6–9) and external objects with the faculties of sense-perception (*De An.* II.12 424a17–24). Boethius invoked the image at *Cons* V.m.4, with this hybrid sense, in the context of describing how (epistemically) sensible images are imprinted on the soul and are then, by inherent passions of the soul, ordered according to inner species, which conjoin “ymagis of thinges withoute-forth to the foormes ihidd withynne hymself” (*Bo* V.m.4.58–60). The bivalency of light in Thomas' account of emanation in *Paradiso*, as the metaphysical light of creation itself and the metaphorical light of *sapienza*, has a long and illustrious pedigree in this wax-and-ring image. See Joseph Owens, “Aristotle: Cognition a Way of Being”, *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 6, 1 (1976), 1–11.

The manifest imperfection of things as generated by Nature (“kynde”) is itself temporary to Dante, for whom cooperative grace is a constant and limitless process, allowing the faithful to apprehend the true being beneath apparent reality. But Chaucer cannot pass over the radical contingency of the world as he finds it so readily. In an ontological state where words, ideas and things can be generated *con seme e sanza seme* the word is not necessarily cousin to the deed: the veil over apparent reality is a door of perception that is not so easily cleansed. The reader is indeed in the same boat as Dido, betrayed by the failure of any *prima virtu* to tell the truth about her ideal, cognised Aeneas. “That he was good, for he such semed. / Allas! What harm doth apparence, / Whan hit is fals in existence!” (*HF* 264–66). Canto XIII of the *Paradiso* provides the seeds of *HF*’s opened exploration of these ideas, from its concentric elemental cosmology, with an anchoring metaphor of circles spiralling outwards, to the epistemic issues it locates in this ontology, where the phenomenal world of the *principium individuationis* is a region of “apparence” where the Light of truth casts perceptual shadows of untruth, a “myst” that cannot easily be dispersed.

5.2 Light and Shadow; Sound and Echo

Light is the central symbol, metaphor, and image of Dante’s *Paradiso*; it is also, with sound, one of two key symbols in the *House of Fame*. Dante’s poem imagines (or, in his conceit, recalls and re-presents) a spiritual *raptus* in which the trappings of temporal being are progressively shed. The ascent through the concentric heavens, which ends with immersion in “that Light, sublime, which in Itself is true” (*Par* XXXIII.54), is a return from ontological exile: the shadow realm of *brevi contingenze* that humans call home, and the uncertainty, conflict, and difference that emerge there, are the natural

result of the created world's emanationist process of "multiplicacioun" over time: words, things, and thoughts multiply in the temporal world; different people interpret this multiplying world differently; the truth is lost in the widening gyre of discourse *con seme e sanza seme*. Chaucer's poem conducts thought-experiments within this concept, with the more down-to-earth vantage-point of one who accepts that his own voice is violable, lacking the extramundane guarantor of enabling and potentiating grace.

The importance of light in *Fame* is implicit from start to finish. Venus' temple, being "ymad of glas" (*HF* 120), forms an amplificatory greenhouse, drenching its "ymages / of gold" (121–2) in the light of the "sonne" that shines unshaded on its barren "feld" (486–97). The eagle's arrival makes the context of this light symbolism clear. On leaving the temple of glass, Geoffrey is alarmed to find himself in a wasteland of indistinction, a non-place defined by the lack of individual objects with which to orient himself:

Then sawgh I but a large feld,
 As fer as that I myghte see,
 Withouten toun, or hous, or tree,
 Or bush, or grass, or eryd lond;
 For al the feld nas but of sond
 As smal as man may se yet lye
 In the desert of Lybye.
 Ne no maner creature
 That ys yformed be Nature
 Ne sawgh I, me to rede or wisse. (482–91)

The chiasitic envelope of phrases invoking sense-perception ("Then sawgh I...Ne sawgh I...") primes us to interpret this bleak image in terms of phenomenal experience, not extramental reality: it is not the emptiness of the space that is important, but what it means for this individual's reading of the world. It suggests the dependency of

phenomenal reality, our stable concept of the outer world, on the presence of differentiated ‘brief contingent things’, and thus individualised consciousness must find itself perplexed and adrift in a de-individuated situation. As I discuss below, this is one of several examples in this poem where Chaucer evokes a central paradox in Dante’s vision, of the retention of individualised identity beyond the threshold of de-individuation, where the brief contingent things return to their unitary source and shed their temporary, temporal qualities; as in *Troilus and Criseyde*, Chaucer is attentive to the interdependency of consciousness and contingency.

In this context, it makes perfect sense that Geoffrey’s next step is to beg God’s grace to cleanse the doors of perception and provide some guidance to his baffled faculties: “‘O Crist’, thoughte I, ‘that art in blysse, / Fro fantome and illusion / Me save!’” (492–4). Immediately, the eagle arrives in a blast of light—but it is light that distorts, dazzles, and obscures reality, rather than illuminating it:

Myn eyen to the hevene I caste.
 Thoo was I war, lo, at the laste,
 That faste be the sonne, as hye
 As kenne myghte I with myn yë,
 Me thoughte I sawgh an egle sore,
 But that hit semed moche more
 Than I had any egle seyn.
 But this as sooth as deth, certeyn,
 Hyt was of gold, and shon so bryghte
 That never sawe men such a syghte,
 But yf the heven had ywonne
 Al newe of gold another sonne... (495–506)

Again, phenomenal qualities are in the foreground, the processes of seeing, thinking, and understanding densely knit together. The light that heralds the eagle’s landing is not the light that is truth itself but secondary, radiated light—the kind that rebounds off reflective

metals and may, in the process, cast illusory shapes and shadows. This is not the light of the sun, Ur-symbol of generative, originary light; it is a *second sun of gold*—and gold, as we saw in the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, may symbolise the deceptive potential of radiated light (“al thyng which that shineth as the gold / Nis nat gold...”, *CYT* VIII 962–3). That descended light creates contingency, as St. Thomas’ account of emanation in *Paradiso* would suggest, generating phenomena which may or may not bear the seed of the originary creative light (that is, which may or may not be true). As such, the “ymages of gold” depicting canonic tales out of the epic past are *mutually contradictory*: the Ovidian and Virgilian accounts of Dido and Aeneas are interwoven, such that the whole narrative becomes ethically inconclusive (as Delany puts it, “Chaucer’s inclusion of both sources suggests that Aeneas cannot be judged to be entirely right or entirely wrong...it will be found that the two points of view are very nearly evenly balanced”).²⁷ The eagle’s appearance throws up one of the poem’s prevailing concerns—the unbridgeable gulf between appearance and reality, the contingency of *esse apparens*, the emergence of “fantome and illusion” out of the basic conditions of experience. The context for this (and its relation to light symbolism) lies in Chaucer’s reading of Dante, and the Neoplatonic account of emanation and return-to-source (or *exitus* and *reditus*) explicit in Thomas’ etiology of *che brevi contingenze*.²⁸

The real-world Aquinas played a pivotal role in medieval debates about the metaphysics of light. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries philosophers advanced metaphysical theories in which light was a primal substance, “inundating and informing

²⁷ Delany, *Chaucer's House of Fame*, pp. 55–56.

²⁸ On Plotinian emanation and return-to-source in *Troilus and Criseyde*, see Clíodhna Carney, “Chaucer’s ‘litel bok’, Plotinus, and the Ending of *Troilus and Criseyde*”, *Neophilologus*, 93 (2009), 357–68.

both objects and their ambient space...no less than the instrument with which God created the universe”.²⁹ Adapting the Neoplatonic model in which the many progressively emanate from the One, passing through celestial intermediaries, such theories distinguished between *lux*—the original, creative, unitary light of God, eternally present in the Empyrean heaven, and *lumen*—the radiated, secondary, corporeal light that descends from it through the celestial heavens, dividing into the multiplicity of mobile things that makes up the physical world. Grosseteste in his *De Luce* suggested that the reflection of *lux* originated the celestial spheres themselves, as Brown describes:

Having completely realized its potential for spherical expansion, the outermost parts of the universe (the firmament) are more extended and more rarefied than those within...the firmament can expand no further, and transmits its own reflected or secondary light (*lumen*) concentrically, back towards the centre of the universe. The *lumen* of the firmament also realizes its maximum potential...In its turn, the second sphere gives out its *lumen*, thus generating a third sphere. This process of propagation continues, the spheres becoming progressively smaller and less rarefied, until the universe is complete, with the earth and its four elemental spheres at the centre.³⁰

The Christianisation of Neoplatonic light metaphysics reaches back to Augustine, who in his “attack on Manichaean materialism...sharply distinguished between an intelligible light which is created, an uncreated light which is God Himself, and a created material light which is needed by the physical sense of sight”.³¹ Scholastic thought was steeped in

²⁹ Peter Brown, *Chaucer and the Making of Optical Space* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007), p. 45.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 46. On the Dionysian foundation of Grosseteste’s light metaphysics see Vincent Gillespie, “The Colours of Contemplation: Less Light on Julian of Norwich”, in *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England: Exeter Symposium VIII*, ed. E.A. Jones (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2013), pp. 11–17. Gillespie’s summary of Dionysian *exitus* and *reditus* of light is eminently applicable to what is happening in *Paradiso*: “Light endlessly diffuses itself from the source of *lux*, and *lumen* is a trace of *lux* that leads the spiritual intelligence to seek to return to pure undifferentiated *lux*”.

³¹ Joseph Anthony Mazzeo, “Light Metaphysics, Dante’s *Convivio* and the Letter to Can Grande della Scala”, *Traditio*, 14 (1958), 194.

this Neoplatonic light theory, in which the phenomena of light bridged the gulf between physical and intellectual reality, as between God and creation; Vincent of Beauvais' *Speculum Naturale* (a source of the eagle's acoustic theory in *Fame*) "begins with the familiar proposition that God is light, and that nothing is illuminated except that which is created and formed by him. By 'illumination' Vincent intends both physical light and the illumination of the soul of man".³²

Aquinas famously rejected the idea that God is light in any substantial or essential sense. Such Neoplatonic light metaphysics mistook the metaphorical for the literal: rejecting the idea that light is a substance or a body in itself, he "maintains that the proponents of this theory have been misled by metaphors of light such as 'a ray goes through the air' [etc.]".³³ He also rejected the idea, associated with the likes of Bonaventure, that light is spiritual or intelligible. Rather than being a substantial thing in itself, light for Aquinas was "a quality of the first among those bodies which effect change...light can be predicated properly only of bodies...[it is] a form of the first among those bodies which act as agents, i.e., the celestial bodies, a quality which they possess".³⁴ So, light is not substantial to creation itself but is *of* creation, a quality of bodies. In arguing thus, Aquinas re-asserted the metaphoricity of light, its utility as *analogy* for the generation of diverse things from one origin—and, crucially, as metaphorical explanation for the existence of untruth, and contingent truth, in a universe created by God who *is* Truth.³⁵ Unexpectedly, Chaucer is the better Thomist than Dante in this instance: where in *Paradiso* Thomas' account of light descending "d'atto in atto"

³² Brown, *Optical Space*, pp. 81–82.

³³ Mazzeo, "Light Metaphysics", 196.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 197–99.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 199.

until it generates contingencies is *both* analogical and literal, referring to the emanation of wisdom (*sapienza*) from the firmamental *lux* to the created world, where its *lumen* may spread as true or *false* wisdom, and also to the generation of the noumenal world itself, Chaucer's reconfiguration of these light metaphysics is decidedly metaphorical—it pertains, as we've seen, to the contingency of *truth* in the mobile world, and to the phenomenal impasse preventing individual apprehension of the noncontingent and unmediated Truth—that is, to truth-seeking in a world of multiplying *lumen*, where *lux* resides beyond the cosmic 'brynke'.

This also informs a most conspicuous echo of Dante—the image embedded in the eagle's account of acoustics of ripples on the water, multiplying en route to the outer brink of their vessel. The eagle explains (in a lecture which is not directly parodic, but a faithful bricolage of Aristotelian physics) how every sound that's made in the physical world must reverberate upwards until it reaches the outer threshold of the celestial spheres. All utterances will find their way to the House of Fame, which exists at this threshold, "Betwixen hevne and erthe and see" (*HF* 715), because of the elemental inclination described by Aristotle: speech is sound, sound is air, air rises, and everything that rises must converge. He explains using the image of ripples on the water:

...yf that thou
 Throwe on water now a stoon,
 Wel wost thou hyt wol make anoon
 A litel roundell as a sercle...
 And ryght anoon thou shalt see wel
 That whel wol cause another whel,
 And that the thridde, and so forth, brother,
 Every sercle causynge other
 Wydder than hymselfe was;
 And thus fro roundel to compas
 Ech aboute other goynge

Causeth of othres sterynge
 And multiplynge ever moo
 Til that hyt be so fer ygoo
 That hyt at bothe brynkes bee. (789–803)

Fame's house awaits at those "brynkes". It is well-known that this analogy for the motion of sound derives from Boethius, by way of the *Speculum Naturale*, and perhaps also Holcot's Wisdom-commentary, as Cartlidge suggests. But it also stages the emanation of light in reverse, the *reditus* of contingent things to the firmament at the outer heavens, and it is precisely in this vein that Dante himself uses a similar image:

Dal centro al cerchio, e si dal cerchio al centro
 movesi l'acqua in un ritondo vaso,
 secondo ch'è percosso fuori o dentro (*Par XIV.1–3*)

(From rim to center, center out to rim,
 so does the water move in a round vessel,
 as it is struck without, or struck within.)

This comes at the beginning of Canto XIV, shortly after the emanationist account given by St. Thomas in Canto XIII, and just prior to the passage that is possibly Chaucer's most famous Dantean borrowing:

Quell' uno e due e tre che sempre vive
 e regna sempre in tre e 'n due e 'n uno,
 non circunscritto, e tutto circunscribe... (*XIV.28–30*)

(That One and Two and Three who ever lives
 and ever reigns in Three and Two and One,
 not circumscribed and circumscribing all...)

That Dante's image of ripples on the water is in such close proximity to the image of the Trinity with which Chaucer will end *Troilus and Criseyde* makes it unlikely that Chaucer would not have it in mind, during his own account of ripples widening "fro roundel to compas...Til that hyt...at bothe brynkes bee". That Chaucer has changed light into sound

reflects an awareness (of which St. Thomas would approve) that the Dantean light refers analogically to *sapienza*, wisdom, the univocal and absolute Truth that resides with God, in the atemporal oneness beyond the world of contingency. The punchline of the *House of Fame* is that for Geoffrey (as for all the House of Fame's embodied speech-acts) there is no return-to-source; Fame is the Kafkaesque gatekeeper at the door to eternity, straddling the cosmological "brynke", but the only options she makes available are *exitus* (names being cast back down to earth, to continue multiplying contingencies) and negation, reduction to nothing. Since all the action of *Fame* takes place this side of eternity—in the absence of whatever grace raised Dante's dreamer beyond the mobile spheres to "la luce eterna" (*Par* XXXIII.83)—the only truth on offer is second-hand, mediated truth, the *lumen* to the *lux* of God's Truth, which is transmitted via written and spoken acts of language. Sound and light are the two metaphorical vectors for Chaucer's vision of contingency locked in a ceaseless back-and-forth from "roundel to compas" or "centro al cerchio", the non-stop exile and return of worldly discourse whereby ("multiplyinge ever moo", with or without "seme"), diverse contingent truths proliferate and the unitary divine *sapienza* becomes increasingly obscured in the din. Thus, what he finds in the House of Fame is a locus of secondarity, figured as both light and sound which cannot dissolve contingency nor pierce the heavens to be immersed in the originary source of Truth.

Dante's dreamer is ferried to the threshold of the Eighth Heaven, the fixed stars, beyond which individuation begins to dissolve back into the divine *lux*; as such, Beatrice encourages him to take one last look down at the temporal world, and (like Chaucer's Troilus and Boccaccio's Arcita) he is amused by its vanity. Shorn of the chaff of untruth,

progressively enlightened by such guiding lights as Thomas, Dante becomes increasingly inured to the concerns of the differentiated world of brief contingent things—and he returns to the source, the unchanging light of God. But for Chaucer’s dreamer, the chaff of untruth does not fall away in his own heavenly flight. Rather, he finds himself deposited at Fame’s House, located on the penultimate threshold of contingent episteme, which is awash in brilliant light of a different kind altogether. This House of Fame is a locus of mediality itself, focused on light *as humans see it* and sound *as humans hear it*: mediated phenomena which can distort their original source beyond recognition. The place Geoffrey finds is not one of resolved ambiguities, where celestial voices sing in harmony and the Eternal Light (“l’eterno lume”, *Par* XXXIII.43) shines undimmed. It is where worldly speech, brought together in sum, is a cacophony of overlapping, discordant noise, and where light is refracted through prisms (gemstones) and reflected in metals and mirrors, abstracted from origin, of unclear and unverifiable provenance. The light that beams throughout Chaucer’s House of Fame is a mediated light of *esse apparens*, not the *esse subiectivum* of Dante’s heavenly Light.³⁶

Book III begins with Apollonian light: the invocation now is to Apollo, “God of science and of lyght” (1091). The emanationist pattern of the earlier proems is expressed again: Apollo, in this context, is an agent intelligence, an emanant intermediary between God and phenomenal reality, whose “devyne vertu” (*HF* 1101) is invoked to raise a temporal mind beyond its circumscribed capacities: “helpe me to shewe now / That in

³⁶ On apparent being (*esse apparens*) in Auriol’s account of perception see Adriaenssen, *Representation and Scepticism*, pp. 84–88. On *esse subiectivum*, as distinct from *esse obiectivum*, see Stephen Read, “The Objective Being of Ockham’s Ficta”, *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 27, 106 (1977), 14–31. N.B. p. 17: “*Esse obiectivum* is contrasted with *esse subiectivum*...it is the reversal of our present use of ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’—what is *obiectivum* is in the mind, *subiectivum* in reality”.

myn hed ymarked ys” (1102–3). But where in *Paradiso* Dante invoked the “*divina virtù*” to allow him to inscribe the “shadow” of God’s “blessed realm”—an absolutely true reality etched on his *mente* (*Par* I.22–24), Chaucer again emphasises the indeterminate truth-value of his dreamed experience: it is merely “that in myn hed ymarked ys”.

Chaucer’s invocation is predicated on the two contingencies that Dante outlined in *Il Convivio*—those of liminal thought and temporal language, and the gulf between them.³⁷ Chaucer recognises that his immediate phenomenal experience, his recollection of it, and its representation in language, are all different, and that each stage of mediation introduces a new potential for misinterpretation. Apollo, in the pagan canon, is god of poetry, truth, judgement and light: Chaucer notably does *not* ask him to reveal the truth beneath his experience, nor to guide his or his readers’ judgements of it, but simply for the *descriptive* capacity to relate his memory of it with fidelity, “The Hous of Fame for to descryve” (1105).³⁸ Underneath the conventional humility topos there is an implicit rebuke of Dante; it inverts the pattern of Dante’s invocations, which presuppose the truth of what he writes and make bigger demands—the capacity to describe the ineffable. Chaucer reframes these demands by implying the fallibility of his ability to describe the effable; the implication that the basis of Dante’s account in actual, truthfully inscribed,

³⁷ Tractate III of Dante’s *Il Convivio* was identified by Lowes as a source of Chaucer’s term “propre mansioun” (*HF* 754) in the eagle’s account of inclination. There, Dante also provides an account of the contingencies of phenomenal experience that is strikingly similar to Chaucer’s thinking on this theme. Dante describes the “twofold source” of his insufficiency as a poet, and reader of the world, in terms of the mediality of experienced things: the limits of intellect (“what my intellect does not grasp”) and of language (“[that] my tongue lacks the eloquence to be able to express what is spoken [...] in my thought”). Dante Alighieri, *Il Convivio* III.iv, in *Dante’s Il Convivio (The Banquet)*, trans. Richard H. Lansing, Garland Library of Medieval Literature 65 (London: Garland, 1990), p. 96. See John Livingstone Lowes, “Chaucer and Dante’s *Convivio*”, *Modern Philology*, 13, 1 (1915), 19–33; Alastair Minnis, “‘Dante in Inglissh’: What *Il Convivio* Really Did For Chaucer”, *Essays in Criticism*, 55, 2 (2002), 97–115.

³⁸ On Chaucer’s ‘Ovidian’ Apollo of ambiguity and multivocality, see Fumo, *The Legacy of Apollo*, pp. 12–24; 71.

experience (a product of his *mente*, not his ‘Thought’) is disrupted—Chaucer pointedly makes no claim as to the truth-value of what is “ymarked” in his head, and, as we saw in Book II’s proem, he is acutely mindful of the indeterminate ontic status of experiences generated in the “engyn” of “Thought”. Dante’s frequent uses of inexpressibility topoi express the inadequacy of his poetic powers to fulfil their role in the emanation of truth: there is no question that what he relates is true, underwritten by its stable origins in God’s light, only that the passage to language might distort it. Chaucer scrupulously maintains his neutrality on that point. His very first move in *HF* was to assert the truth-value of dreams as indeterminate, beyond the capacity of mortal minds to definitively ascertain. The truth-telling potential of *this* dream is always, crucially, contingent—a point reiterated by the restricted demands of this invocation. Geoffrey is deposited in the House of Fame in hopes of finding “som maner thyng” or some undefined “good”; the possibility that this may not come to pass is always latent. As readers, our experience is now framed similarly: Chaucer hopes and prays for the cunning power to render his vision faithfully to what he is imagining, whose veridicality and value are totally uncertain; we are not promised revelation, or instruction, or entertainment, and so we are forced into a suspended state of interpretive *epoché*, waiting for the poem’s resolution, its formal and teleological ends, to be born.

Chaucer foregrounds the secondarity of speech to experience as he describes Geoffrey’s arrival: “I wol yow al the shap *devyse* / Of hous and site...” (1113–14). Whatever the reality or otherwise of the dreamer’s experience, its representation in narrative is inevitably a “devyse”, a literary construction consciously devised, in keeping with the poet-as-architect topos expressed in *Boece* and *TC*. Moreover, at the moment of

arrival there is a spatial contradiction (or, at least, the reader has to square a circle in the narrative line): Book II ended with Geoffrey deposited “in a strete” (1049) at the threshold of Fame’s “paleys”; Book III begins with Geoffrey scrambling up a rocky mountain, “gan to thys place aproche / That stood upon so high a roche, / Hier stant ther non in Spayne” (1115–17). A minor compositional wound in the logic of the poem has a metapoetic valence in the context of the proem, reasserting the dreamness of the dream, a space where the rules of ordinary experience and of narrative can be bent. This dream is a product of Thought, not revelation.

Geoffrey’s climb up the rocky mount is narrated in terms that intensively emphasise perception and recognition as a temporal process—as a linear, moment-to-moment unfolding, where sense-perceptions gradually cohere into an identification of the perceived object, followed by an act of interpretation that would set the perceived thing into relation with the surrounding world. The progressive nature of this process has, as seen, various analogues in scholastic representational theories which—while diverging on the fundamental issues of the ontic status of concepts and perceived objects—all emphasise the mediality of human cognition and the potential for fallibility this introduces. The image of Fame’s rocky seat that unfolds gradually in Geoffrey’s sense-perception is essential to the poem’s metaphors of light and solidity, and for its subtexts of appearance versus reality, framing second-hand, mediated images of a thing against its (lost) originary substance. That Geoffrey finds Fame’s palace built upon “A roche of yse, and not of stel”, and that this “feble fundament” (1130–32) metaphorically refers to the contingency of fame as a good of Fortune—founded on conditions of mutability that will, at some unknown point, change, as ice will eventually melt—has been discussed in depth

by Flannery and others.³⁹ It comes as little surprise that the locus of Ovidian *fama* should be situated on mutable grounds that may or may not melt depending on external contingencies. But the sequential acts of perception (and the significance of what they find) that occur in the lines before this recognition have been less frequently analysed.

The narrator clearly declares his explorational intent during the climb; his focus is not only on the subject of his overarching, ultimate enquiry—pursuit of “som maner thyng” amid Fame’s love-tidings—but on the immediate experience of his eyes and ears. For all that Geoffrey was an uncritical and dull auditor for the eagle’s display of “resoun”, now he seems to evince a novel curiosity towards *experientia*:

Yit I ententyf was to see,
 And for to powren wonder lowe,
 Yf I koude any weyes knowe
 What maner stoon this roche was. (1120–23)

There is no narrative exigency that makes this emphasis on the rock itself necessary; its symbolic and metaphorical functions are crucially significant. The indeterminate nature (and thus, indeterminate value) of the rock is emphasised using a lexis which parallels the indeterminate ends of Geoffrey’s quest in-itself: the space of “som maner thyng” is set atop an edifice of some “maner stoon”, whose substantive properties are not immediately apprehensible to the naked eye. Geoffrey’s acts of perception, cognition and interpretation are acutely temporal; they take place in narrative slow-motion, moment by moment: in this, the indeterminacy of value and teleology that Geoffrey will experience is centred on the experiencing subject rather than the experienced object. It isn’t that this rock is substantively unidentifiable, but that Geoffrey, as individuated subject, does not possess

³⁹ Mary C. Flannery, *John Lydgate and the Poetics of Fame* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2012), p. 29.

the requisite knowledge to identify it—and yet there is no ‘objective’ ontological plane available to the reader beyond Geoffrey’s phenomenal reality, and the fallible acts of recognition and judgement that he makes.

First he makes a provisional identification based on simile—“For hyt was lyk alum de glas”—before, in the next dilated instant of thought, recognising a dissimilarity that forecloses this reading—“But that hyt shoon ful more clere”—culminating in his acknowledgement that he cannot assign a proper name to this mystery substance: “But of what congeled matere / Hyt was, I nyste redely” (1124–27). Among other things, in Chaucer’s time, alum glass was an alchemist’s ingredient—the Canon’s Yeoman will include “alum glas” (*CYT* VIII 812) in his inventory of his master’s tools—and the *CYT*’s major theme, the “multiplicacioun” of temporal matter in search of supernormal value, leading only to its degradation into a worthless “mullok”, is prefigured here. Crucially, this rock is a “congeled matere”, the unidentified and unnamed result of the admixture of individual substances, accreting and comingling over an extended span of time—at one level, it symbolises tradition, the abstraction of the narratives and names that survive from their original substance, becoming something autonomous and liminal in the process. At another, it expresses the temporality of language itself—never ideal, never perfectible, speech (as the eagle explained) multiplies far beyond its place of origin until reaching the “brynkes” at which echoes overlap and their initial significances become something novel, a “congeled matere” that requires new identity and valuation. The palace of Fame is built on a mountain of “mullok”—contrasting the purity of Venus’ temple, replete with gold and pure metals of persisting value, this hill is an indeterminate

alloy whose original constituents are lost to the temporal process of ‘encres’ that caused them to mix, multiply and mutate.

Chaucer emphasises the suspension of interpretive action that this situation of ambiguity makes necessary. Geoffrey’s acts of recognition and nomination are deferred, as this unknown matter is gradually and fallibly apprehended through a cloud of unknowing, until he is finally able to assign it a proper name: “yse” (*HF* 1130). In this place, the threshold of Fame’s house, the simplest acts of sensory interpretation are problematised by the sheer “multiplicacioun” of temporal things, and the aporia thrown up by their opened admixture. Being “yse”, the rock reflects and amplifies light to a superlative degree—“hyt shoon ful more clere” (1125) even than alum glass—but this reflected light is not an emanation of immutable truth, clearly representing one true reality to all that view it. Both the ice itself and its reflected, secondary light obscure as many true substances as they convey. On the ice itself, Geoffrey notes, “Tho sawgh I al the half ygrave / With famous folks names fele” (1136–37)—the famed and infamous are canonised here (presumably, at this point, according to some stable criteria), yet the material conditions of their canonicity cause these inscribed names to degrade over time: “They were almost ofthowed so, / That of the lettres oon or two / Was molte away of every name / So unfamous was woxe hir fame” (1143–46). These names are words that are no longer “cosyns” to their original referents. They have mutated and degraded into something new that may signify something different or, as here, nothing at all: an explicit metaphor for the contingency of names and fame.

There is a substantive difference between the species of fame offered in Venus’ temple and here, on Fame’s icy mountain: in the temple, names will be inscribed on

noble metals, hedged against temporal mutability, but, as we saw, it is *only* their names that may “duren ever”; the narratives and significant values to which they are appended are bound to mutate constantly in the act of reception, the interaction with novel readers. Here, names will not endure, but narrative tidings may continue to circulate long after their named *auctor* has been lost to time: as such, the narrator moralises what he has witnessed using a second-hand ‘sentence’ of indeterminate origin: “But *men seyn*, ‘What may ever laste?’” (1147). The conceptual arc of the *House of Fame* between Books I and III does not represent a linear move from canonic stasis to novel motivity, or Bakhtinian monologism (solid value attached to named *auctores*) to dialogic novelism (narrative as multivocal, multivalent, with ever-shifting significance). It is a recursive move from one species of contingency to another. First we learn, with Geoffrey, how individualised, temporal experience means “olde werk” will always be re-newed; now, we learn that the survival of famous names is arbitrary, and their reference to specific, factual, people, deeds, or things can never be absolutely guaranteed. They are different perspectives on the same lesson: the uncontrollability and unpredictability of narratives and readers in the world, and the unprethinkable contingency of the novel matter generated by their infinite encounters.

No cultural value or orderly principle governs the survival of certain names over others—only the indifferent, elemental processes of the created world’s move through time. Eliot complained of April’s cruel warmth and showers “breeding / Lilacs out of the dead land”, undoing winter’s comforting stasis. Geoffrey understands (that is, he *imagines*, hypothetically simulates; “in myn herte caste”, 1149) that the inscribed names of canonised figures have been similarly deformed by uncaring, transcendent change, a

mutability framed as essential and inevitable, a basic property of temporal being, rather than an episodic tempest: “they were molte away with hete, / And not away with stormes bete” (1149–50).

Next he sees that, on the hill’s “other syde”, other “names / Of folks that hadden grete fames” are also engraved—but these, protected from the sunbeams by the hill’s shadow, “were / As fresh as men had writen hem here / The selve day right” (1151–57). On the surface this is just common sense: ice in the sunlight melts and freezes anew constantly; ice in the hillside shadows persists, is closer to permanent. But at the metaphoric level this is a paradoxical inversion of Dante’s master-symbols in *Paradiso*, where light is truth and shadow is untruth. Chaucer tweaks Dante’s settings, imagining an ontological situation in which there is, crucially, *too much* light. Yet this does not contradict the Neoplatonic worldview that Dante adapts; rather, it lays bare its implications for temporal subjects in the cold light of day. Proper names are the ultimate contingent artefacts: they formalise the principle of individuation itself, linguistically encoding the singular *haecceity* of one, historically local, named individual. That the light dissolves these names back into the indistinction of pre-individual being is entirely in keeping with *Paradiso*. This is what happens when the layers of contingent being are stripped away in the ascent to *l’etterne lume*; the return to the Neoplatonic monad is the undoing of the *principium individuationis*, diversity harmonised, the unrefracting of multicoloured individuality into the pure light of reunion with God. Chaucer does not undermine the conceptual basis of Dante’s vision.⁴⁰ Rather, he focalises these ideas

⁴⁰ On medieval Christian ideas of contemplative ascent and mystical union, see Bernhard Blankenhorn, *The Mystery of Union With God: Dionysian Mysticism in Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2015).

through a different lens. From Geoffrey's vantage-point (as a subject situated in time, experiencing contingency), the dissolution of canonised names in the sun's white "hete" is unequivocally negative, an impediment to his time-limited and language-oriented quest for "newe thyng" to write about.

Names are contingent things. For Dante, these *brevi contingenze* only subsist in the farthest reaches from God's truth, which is manifest in light; for the dreaming Geoffrey, as a poet in and of the contingent world, their survival in shadow is a fortunate boon (for they are goods of Fortune). The challenging idea that Chaucer will realise in *Troilus and Criseyde* is that the ultimate consolations of the Boethian tradition are impossible for temporal beings to conceptualise; worldly goods may be perceived, known, measured and valued, but heavenly goods are beyond human ken. Foregoing temporal goods of fortune and forswearing the "wrecched world" of contingent things in which we move is easier said than done because the alternative, the atemporal 'good' of union with God beyond the "brynkes" of time and language, is by default beyond comprehension, outlined only apophatically (except, as Dante claims, by lightning-bolts of epiphany *per grazia*). Consciousness itself—subjective time-consciousness, and the acts of recognition and judgement that take place within it—is, as far as Chaucer is concerned, a temporal phenomenon, one that is conditioned by and conditioning of contingency. Geoffrey is, like the *Troilus*-narrator later, a locus of temporally delimited perspective, an evocation of the workings of a liminal mind moving through this region of contingent phenomena. Names have only temporal and relational meaning; as lexical markers of distinction and difference, they cannot have meaning in a metaphysical scene

of indifference and indistinction, like that of Dante's Empyrean heaven.⁴¹ They only matter within the "brynkes" of temporal being; their meaning and value are utterly contingent—but this is no impediment for a subject whose experience is totally conditioned by contingency, a reader whose perspective is in and of time. Geoffrey's disorientation in the face of molten names, and inquisitive delight on encountering names preserved in the shadows cast by Fame's mount, emphasise that acknowledging the contingency and mutability of temporal values does not mean negating them; for an experiencing subject, nothing is more "true" than experience. This is why, as discussed in the above analysis of *Troilus and Criseyde*, the final passage into Boethian atemporality does not efface the aesthetic and affective ecstasy that Troilus and Criseyde obtained in their experiential "hevene" of sexual "gladnesse". And it is why, here, Geoffrey revels in the acts of temporal language taking place in his own country of temporal dissimilitude, in the metaphorical "shade" (1160) untouched by Dante's Dionysian light.

Moving to the House of Fame itself, Chaucer re-emphasises the liminality and limitedness of Geoffrey's perspective. The castle's beauty resists circumscription—not because it is a oneness beyond words, like God's light, but because of the sheer accumulation of particular features:

That al the men that ben on lyve
 Ne han the kunnyng to describe
 The beaute of that ylke place,
 Ne coude casten no compace,
 Swich another for to make,
 That myght of beaute ben hys make,
 Ne so wonderlych ywrought;
 That hit astonyeth yit my thought,
 And maketh al my wyt to swynke,

⁴¹ Cf. *Il Conv* XXII, *Par* XXXIII.

On this castel to bethynke,
 So that the grete craft, beaute,
 The cast, the curiosite
 Ne kan I not to yow devyse;
 My wit ne may me not suffise. (1167–80)

Paradiso is overstuffed with uses of the inexpressibility topos—generally in the face of the apophatic, the immutable light that ‘passeth understanding’. Here Chaucer reframes its parameters: the “castel” is indescribable because of the copiousness of peculiar, unrecognisable objects—“cast” and “curiosite”—that baffles Geoffrey’s “wyt”. Dante cast an image of creation in which phenomena emanate, diversifying and multiplying, from a unitary central light, until this multiplication makes untruth (discourse *sanza seme*) a possibility. Chaucer plants his House of Fame on the threshold at this outer edge, where all these multiplying things ultimately find themselves. Geoffrey’s confusion here is nominal—an incapacity to assign names to the near-infinite variety of temporal phenomena shored up here—not metaphysical.

Before the threshold of hell in Dante’s *Inferno* is a nameless, formless, de-individuated mass of lamenting souls, the fameless many “sanza infamia e sanza lodo” (*Inf* III.36). Before the gates of Fame’s palace, Chaucer imagines a mass of named, discrete individuals, amassed in such overabundance that they confound Geoffrey’s ability to identify and name them. Chaucer introduces a vast array of named and unnamed figures of poetry and song: “gestiours that tellen tales...Of al that longeth unto Fame”. (1200). Paradoxically, all of these famous “gestiours” appear to be perpetually playing their own songs, yet this not a cacophony of discordant confusion; the narrative focalises each in turn, organising them into an artificial linear sequence:

Ther herde I pleyen on an harpe,
 That sowned bothe wel and sharpe,

Orpheus ful craftily,
 And on his syde, faste by,
 Sat the harper Orion,
 And Eacides Chiron,
 And other harpers many oon...
 Tho saugh I stonden hem behynde...
 Many thousand tymes twelve,
 That maden lowed mynstralcies...
 Tho saugh I in an other place
 Stonden in a large space,
 Of hem that maken bloody soun...
 There saugh I sitte in other seës,
 Pleyinge upon sondry gleës,
 Whiche that I kan not nevene,
 Moo than sterres ben in hevene,
 Of whiche I nyl as now not ryme,
 For ese of yow and los of tyme. (1201–56)

This should not be an orchestra but a deafening din of competing instruments, multiplied en masse to the point of absurdity. But the music Geoffrey hears is neither harmonic nor discordant. Rather, each individual song is preserved in its self-sufficiency by the spatial rules of Fame's House: this is an infinitely extensive space in which the distinguishability of each diverse song is preserved, each note resounding crystal-clear without violating the myriad songs being played around it. In this it is the antithesis of the zone of indistinction Dante finds in his own seventh heaven, at the threshold of transcendence. He, too, finds a great mass of singing "sterres"—but where Chaucer finds so many diverse individuals that he "kan not nevene" them, Dante's stars show individuation being erased and dissolved, reduced back to indistinct, heavenly light. Geoffrey hears too many distinct voices and sees too many faces to identify; sheer 'multiplicacioun' of diverse things defeats his faculties. Dante cannot assign names to the stars in the seventh

heaven because their outer accidents have been washed away by light—they must reveal to him who they once were:

As pleased my guide, I turned my eyes and saw
A hundred little suns; as these together
Cast light, each made the other lovelier.

At this, the largest and most radiant
Among those pearls moved forward that he might
Appease my need to hear who he might be. (*Par* XXII.22–24, 28–30)

Asking for the “grace / to see, unveiled, your human face” (*Par* XXII.59–60), Dante is told explicitly that the individuating aspects of these ex-individuals have been subsumed within God’s light. To see what were their faces, Dante must enter “l’ultima sfera” (the final sphere, XXII.62), return to the created world’s *fons et origo* where there is no space and there are no poles (“non è in loco e non s’impola”, XXII.67). The “pynacles” and “habitaclcs” of Chaucer’s House of Fame are this idea’s antitype: the “paleys” is definitively spatial, both a place (*loca*) “in myddes of the weye” (*HF* 714) between heaven and earth, and Place *simpliciter*, where localised and spatially situated individuals all subsist in diverse unison—a potentially boundless space, but still (unlike Paradise) space. The fragmentation of temporal phenomena is progressively undone in *Paradiso*, culminating in the return to light; the *House of Fame* imagines a space where fragmentation simply *is*, where the process of ‘multiplicacioun’ governing the temporal world can be confronted as a thing in-itself.

The outer accidents of the House of Fame are described with almost exactly the same lexis as the temple of Venus:

But many subtil compassinges,
Babewynnes and pynacles,
Ymageries and tabernacles

I say; and ful eke of wyndowes
 As flakes falle in grete snowes.
 And eke in ech of the pynacles
 Weren sondry habitacles,
 In which stoden, al without—
 Ful the castel, al aboute—
 Of al maner of mynstralles... (1188–97)

The glass temple in which the dreamer first awoke was outlined similarly:

In which ther were moo ymages
 Of gold, stondynge in sondry stages,
 And moo ryche tabernacles,
 And with perre moo pynacles,
 And moo curiouse portreytures,
 And queynte maner of figures
 Of olde werk, then I saugh ever. (121–27)

Any sense of linear progression in the narrative is undermined by this uncanny redux of past words and images. Geoffrey has struggled up the icy mountain to find himself back where he started: before a near-identical edifice, which likewise bears up countless calcified “figures” of canonical stature. Chaucer makes clear that Geoffrey has not been flown from a realm of doubt to one of truth and clarity. The conceptual pattern of Geoffrey’s journey is not an inflationary “macrocosm”, as Delany suggests. It is parabolic, beginning with the perspectival conundrum posed by Geoffrey’s experience reading Dido and Aeneas, rising, in the eagle’s talons, to a privileged vantage-point (from which the temporal property that leads to this confusion—“multiplicacioun”—is perceptible), before ending on the same plane that it began: in the liminal space where the world’s brief contingencies congregate, beyond the mental powers of any one reader to definitively valuate and interpret. The apparent stasis of canonised narratives in Venus’ temple was dissolved in the encounter with an experiencing subject; here, too, as we will see, the locus of Geoffrey’s experience as reader novelises the canonised material he finds

there. Whether Venus or Fame deign to eternise names and narratives is irrelevant: those narratives must invariably mutate in their reception by different readers in different places and times. In representational terms, there is no possibility of unmediated, perfect cognition of any external phenomenon (word, thing, or concept) without its being converted into a provisionally real, contingently true, mental image—for Auriol, *esse apparens* or *esse intentionali*—that may or may not align with the object of representation.

As Chaucer revisits the language of Book I he also renews this subtext. In a move he will repeat in the *Franklin's Tale*, *Squire's Tale* and *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, Chaucer turns to the topic of “magik”, prising open the gulf between the apparently and truly magical, to foreground the epistemic indeterminacy caused by the temporal limits on our perceptions. If the court of Fame is, at this point, ostensibly a locus of epistemic judgement, where tidings of compounded “fals and soth” are distilled into their constituent truth and untruth, then the waiting area prior to this ultimate “demyngge” is one where judgements of truth and value are suspended, held in *epoché*. The array of magic-users that Geoffrey sees is described in terms that reinforce this notion:

Ther saugh I pleye jugelours,
 Magiciens, and tregetours,
 And Phitonesses, charmeresses,
 Olde wicches, sorceresses,
 That use exorsisacions,
 And eke these fumygacions;
 And clerkes eke, which konne wel
 Al this magik naturel,
 That craftily doon her ententes
 To make, in certeyne ascendentes,
 Ymages, lo, through which magik
 To make a man ben hool or syk. (1259–70)

As far as Geoffrey is concerned, in this place prior to Fame's judgement, there is no distinction between true and false magic: the dividing line between reality and "appareance" has not yet been imposed. "Tregetours" and "jugelours"—tricksters and illusionists—are in the same category as "sorceresses", "Phitonesses" and "wicches"—seemingly legitimate magic-users. Apart from phony and legitimate magicians, there are also "clerkes...which konne wel, / Al this magik naturel"—astrology, the predictive "calkulynge" of Calkas and Pandarus, is an empirical science that *may as well be* magic for the unlearned observer, the majority who are not endowed with the privy knowledge out of "olde bokes". Whether these species of magic are true, false, or *apparently* true (because of the observer's limited knowledge-base) is not the issue here. In this space prior to Fame's transcendental act of truth- and value-judgement, the only perspectives available on the sum of human knowledge (here, of magic) are fragmentary, partial, historically local ones, like Geoffrey's. And as far as Geoffrey is concerned, what's good is what sounds goods; aware of his limited knowledge and perspective, he is more interested in *evaluation* than *valuation*. The veridicality of the magics performed by "tregetours", "charmeresses", and "clerkes" is beyond his capacity to discern; it is a judgement deferred: he is not agnostic about the truth of magic, but conscious that he is in an ontological situation where "apparences" are as real as it gets. Prior to Fame's court, different interpretations of phenomenal reality coexist peacefully—antinomy is sustained by the temporal conditions of perception and interpretation, which means there is no categorical distinction between the really magical and the apparently magical.

In the *Franklin's Tale*, magic practice is a perspectival illusion that might as well be real because of its pragmatic efficacy: it is arcane lore, "magik naturel", astronomical

“calkulynge”, that makes the rocks appear to vanish—but the epistemological and perspectival limitedness of the observers generates an *esse apparens* of supernatural power. The language of *FranT* grows out from this passage of *Fame*: Aurelius’ brother, the first node in his path to magical knowledge, is a “clerk” (*FranT* V 1105) learned in “magyk natureel” (V 1125), the “sciences / By whiche men make diverse apparences, / Swiche as thise subtile tregetoures pleye” (V 1139–41). In the epistemology of the *Franklin’s Tale*, one person’s magic is another’s science, their cunning “wenynge” of the stars. Magic is, like the alchemical “philosophie” of *CYT*, simply knowledge hid in the shadows of obscurity—the exploitation of ordinary facts about the universe that *Fame* has not favoured with mass dissemination. The path to power is a chain of clerks, mediators and gatekeepers of uncouth knowledge out of “olde bokes”. Even to the Franklin, the ontological status of his “subtil clerk[’s]” magic is rendered indeterminate by his own epistemic limits, his lack of the requisite privy knowledge: the magician’s efforts may “maken illusion / By swich an apparence or joglerye— / I ne kan no termes of astrologye” (V 1264–66). What is merely an educated prediction of the tides based on the moon’s position is, to the Franklin, to Dorigen, hocus pocus: “his japes and his wrecchednesse / Of swiche a supersticious cursednesse” (1271–72).

In the *Franklin’s Tale* as in the *House of Fame*, magic is made in the eye of the beholder; it is a product of the encounter between a possessor of uncommon knowledge and an observer whose knowledge-base is partial and whose perceptions are fallible. In the *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale* there is a lost, true art of alchemy, withdrawn from the phenomenal world (and its language) by “Crist”, and there are credulous, earnest practitioners of “multiplyinge” (the Yeoman and his master in the *prima pars*), and then

there are unscrupulous con artists performing sleight-of-hand tricks (the “cursed” canon of the *pars secunda*). In a world where no epistemic ideal can reliably distinguish between what’s true and what merely appears true, Chaucer’s emphasis is ends-oriented—indifferent to the distinction between honest and fraudulent alchemists, he focuses on the products of their efforts, and their relative value (they are uniformly worthless, from the first canon’s ‘mullok’ to the second canon’s fool’s gold). These examples all suggest that the definitive allocation of truth-value is beyond the capacities of “wits / that men han now-a-dayes” (*CYT* VIII 1396), leaving only a second-order kind of valuation available to temporal readers: the assignation of relational, contingent value to narratives spun by “tregetoures”, “clerkes”, “philosophres” and “magiciens”. If the hard-coded truth-value of *auctoritas* is not a dependable guarantor of value, the focus turns to their real-world efficacy in the readerly here-and-now. That different readers judge mysterious, “uncouth” (1279) “apparences” differently, as magic, as illusion, or as science, means these phenomena can only be assigned temporary value according to their situational utility. In relation to poets and poetry, this means “fals and soth” cannot be un-“compounded” by ordinary, temporal readers, and so the best they can be told to do is “Taketh the fruyt” (*NPT* VII 3443) of a time-limited and historically local value-judgement, in the knowledge that this value is utterly contingent, bound to change with times and readerships. Populating the space outside Fame’s court with true and false magicians, Chaucer’s tactic is to take “demynge” out of mortal hands, deferred to the judgement of a figuration of higher-order truth-telling (the role played by Philosophy in Dante’s *Convivio*, transposed from Boethius’ prison-cell to the seat of judgement at the

threshold of temporal episteme). That this figure is herself an engine of absolute randomness is not yet known, to Geoffrey or the reader.

The narrative moves from general to specific, magicians as a category to named, famous magic-users:

Ther saugh I the, quene Medea,
 And Circes eke, and Calipsa;
 Ther saugh I Hermes Ballenus,
 Limote, and eke Symon Magus.
 Ther saugh I, and knew hem by name,
 That by such art don men han fame. (1271–76)

The narrative pattern of the prior description of musicians is inverted: there, named and renowned authorities are followed by masses of nameless imitators; here, the nameless throng of magicians has its canon appended like an afterthought. In one sense this evokes the dependency of this narrative's linear organisation on Geoffrey's perspective, reiterating the focality emphasised by the recurrence of "Ther saugh I" (1233, 1251, 1271). In another it resigns the reader to the fact that there is no totalising principle ordering the kinds of discourse amassed here. This is made abundantly clear by the relation of these lines—a dense collation of timelessly famous names out of antiquity—with those that follow:

Ther saugh I Colle tregetour
 Upon a table of sycamour
 Pleye an uncouth thyng to telle—
 Y saugh him carien a wynd-melle
 Under a walsh-note shale. (1277–81)

"Colle tregetour" may be, as Fyler speculates, one "Colin T", a fourteenth century magician based, like the *Franklin's Tale's* "subtil clerk", in Orleans.⁴² If so, his pre-

⁴² John M. Fyler, "The House of Fame", in *The Riverside Chaucer*, p.987n1277.

eminence in the narrative here is telling: the historically recent “Colle” is afforded more narrative space than the most famous ancient magicians combined (five lines to their four), and he alone is granted the narrative space to demonstrate his powers, a phenomenal deed to correspond with his nominal category. This emphasises the space outside Fame’s House as a situation *prior* to all objective value-judgement, prior to the allocation of fame and obscurity. In this place where veridicality cannot be verified and canonicity has no intrinsic value, the rules that held up in Venus’ temple are turned on their head: the most significant name among the magicians, in Geoffrey’s eyes, is an ambiguous figure of contemporary notoriety, not canonical names freighted with moral lessons. The principle governing what is amplified and what is abbreviated is simply Geoffrey’s subjective and utterly relational evaluations rather than any value-judgement beyond the immediate situation. We read nothing of the deeds of Medea, Circes, Simon Magus, but this historical minnow called Colle does something that catches Geoffrey’s interest: he appears to hold a windmill in a walnut shell.

Colle’s “wynd-melle” is more than a bit of exotica: it is a striking image of paradox that calls the boundaries between perception, representation, and reality further into doubt. In the context of epistemological indeterminacy that has been firmly established, this uncanny image at once asserts Fame’s House as a space of sustained paradox, while locating the roots of this paradoxicality in perceptual process (not reality itself). The reader is forced, with Geoffrey, into consciousness of the uncanniness of what they are being asked to mentally envisage. It locates Geoffrey’s current space in imaginative dream-logic, a reality of pure *esse apparens* where deceptive “appareance”

has the same ontic status as anything real, because the distinction between the two is forcibly deferred.

These “fals apparences” are engendered, symbolically, by an overflow of light—not the Neoplatonic pre-individual light of Dante’s *Paradiso*, but light that is always second-hand, dissevered from its origin and distorted in the mediation. Venus’ temple was awash in light itself, “ymad of glas” (121), resplendent with shiny noble metals, but now that luminosity is reframed as a hazard that impedes Geoffrey’s distinguishing between appearance and reality:

Upon these walles of berile,
That shone ful lighter than a glas
And made wel more than hit was
To semen everything, ywis,
As kynde thyng of Fames is... (1288–92)

The light refracted through the castle’s beryl walls is amplified and multiplied, “lighter” than the unfiltered light beaming in Venus’ “glas”, casting shadows and mirages that make perceived objects greater than they are in reality. The elemental “multiplicacioun” over which Fame’s House presides is not only of things and narratives in themselves: in this house of mirrors, outer accidents and real-world substance are prised apart by the multiplication of the media through which they are known—light and sound. In this it is a situation of discourse *con seme e sanza seme*: even the most foundational act of judgement (of reality or unreality) is impeded here, beyond human faculties, outsourced to a higher volition. Geoffrey admires the intricately adorned castle-gate, and in describing this Chaucer invokes the Boethian distinction between the experientially contingent and the essentially necessary:

The castel-yate on my right hond,
Which that so wel corven was

That never such another nas;
 And yit it was be aventure
 Iwrought, as often as be cure. (1293–98)

The marvellous design of this gate is, for Geoffrey, “be aventure / Iwrought”. Its shape has been carved by the winds of Fortune: well-versed in Boethius’ *Consolatio*, Chaucer knows that the contingencies caused by “aventure” only appear random as a side-effect of our situatedness in time, and that they are, from God’s vantage-point beyond time (the only place from which the whole truth is knowable), causal and orderly. The false “semynge” that plagues Fame’s occupants is not caused by the things themselves but by the conditions under which Geoffrey apprehends them: their mediation in refracted, false-colour light, and as a temporal subject who is not privy to the supervening order that encompasses his phenomenal reality.

On crossing the threshold, Geoffrey finds Fame’s halls to be another paradox-space of indistinct distinction and uniform diversity. There are so “many oon” all shouting over each other, vying for Fame’s attention, that Geoffrey’s faculties bounce off a wall of sound, unable to distinguish individual voices and names. Likewise, there are so many unique heraldic vestures that he could not begin to circumscribe them,

For hyt to me were impossible;
 Men myghte make of hem a bible
 Twenty foot thykke, as y trowe. (1333–35)

As we will see in the *Reeve’s Tale*, “twenty foot” is Chaucer’s idiomatic expression for finite infinitude, extensive space that defies measurement—Symkyn the miller mocks the scholars for their clerical amphibologies: “Ye konne by argumentes make a place / A myle brood of twenty foot of space” (*RvT* I 4123–4). The House of Fame presents a universe of knowledge in which there are too many discrete facts for any individual or

culture to truly know (that is, to affirm by first-hand ‘assay’), because of the created world’s emanationist process of “multiplicacioun”. Here, the runaway diversity of heraldic signs has stripped them of referential utility; their bearers’ quests for individual fame are immediately undermined by the over-abundance of competing signs, reducing Fame’s halls to a scene of Babelic babble. “For certeyn, whoso koude iknowe / Myghte ther alle the armes seen / Of famous folk...how shulde I now telle al thys?” (1336–41).

By *occupatio* Chaucer relates the reflective splendour of the halls of Fame—each wall “Was plated half a foote thikke / Of gold” (1345–46). Like Venus’ temple, this palace appears to be a locus of limitless value—but ‘gold’, for Chaucer, symbolises only *apparently* noncontingent value: as in *CYT*, where alchemists seek to “multiply” the gold of absolute value and produce only “mulloks”, in Fame’s palace it is impossible to distinguish between true and false gold: “Hit is not al gold that glareth” (273). It is beyond Geoffrey’s powers to deem whether Fame’s court is adorned with gold or fool’s gold—the gold is “as fyn as ducat in Venyse” (1348); that is, like real-world currency, its value is wholly relational, situational, and subject to unpredictable change.

Light, as we have seen, rebounds around Fame’s palace, illuminating and distorting reality all at once, amplified and diversified through lapidary prisms. Naturally, the structural centre of the House of Fame—the court where Fame herself presides—is the apex of this process: it is “Ful of the finest stones faire, / That men rede in the Lapidaire” (1351–52). Geoffrey’s first glimpse of the goddess of Fame, whose judgement, he hopes, will resolve all ambiguities, has a “femynyne creature” seated “in a see imperiall, / That mad was of a rubee all, / Which that a carbuncle ys ycalled” (1361–63). The lapidary encyclopaedia Chaucer has just named—Marbode of Rennes’ *Liber*

Lapidum—makes the metaphoric significance of this named gemstone clear. Marbode writes of “carbuncle” that its brilliance surpasses all other gemstones (“*Ardentes gemmas superat Carbunculus omnes*”) and that, crucially, its light cannot be extinguished by darkness (“*nec tenebre possunt extinguere lumen*”); that is, its light is in some sense self-generating and autonomous, a *lumen* that persists even in the absence of its origin—self-sufficient contingent truth.⁴³ Fame’s “see imperial” is a locus of light that has emanated beyond immediate relation to its origin: this is precisely the ontological situation that, for Dante, allows the temporal world’s *brevi contingenze* to exist, for discourse to abound with no relation to God’s original truth (*con seme e senza seme*). Fame’s self-sustaining light is not *Paradiso*’s light of truth at all—it is something else entirely. If, for Chaucer, untruth abounds in the “wrecched world” because of a “permutacioun” that means dissevers language from reality, Fame’s House is the immortal “engyn” at the heart of this process.

Chaucer’s description of the goddess of Fame is spatially paradoxical—not unlike Colle’s windmill in a walnut shell—and it reiterates her Ovidian origins and Dantean resonance at once:

Me thoughte that she was so lyte
 That the lengthe of a cubite
 Was lengere than she semed be.
 But thus sone in a whyle she
 Hir tho so wonderliche streighte
 That with hir fet she erthe reighte,
 And with hir hed she touched hevene,
 Ther as shynen sterres sevne... (1369–76)

⁴³ Marbode of Rennes, *Libellus de lapidibus preciosis*, f. c3r.
 <<https://archive.org/details/LibellusDeLapidibusPreciosis/marbode-b-lapidibus-1511-RTL015154-LowRes/page/n27/mode/2up>> [Accessed 23/07/2021].

Fame is a “creature”, a created thing; she is not ineffable or non-spatial (like the Trinity Dante ultimately looks upon), but her proportions, which defy determinate measurement, reiterate the liminality of Geoffrey’s human perceptions. Here Fame is extra-dimensional, a created being occupying a higher plane of reality than the linear temporality of human experience. Her spatial paradoxicality is a product of the hard-coded limits of Geoffrey’s perspective, his cloudy doors of perception, which can only represent her as atomically miniscule and cosmically vast in the same moment. Fame’s *esse subiectivum* is beyond mortal comprehension; in its conversion to *esse apparens* by Geoffrey’s sight, it is prismatically refracted into multiple contradictory extremes. As Ovid wrote, she is situated in “myddes of the weye” between heaven and earth—in her maximal aspect her head touches “hevene” and her feet straddle “erthe”—she is, in herself, the infinitely extensive boundary line between these ontological situations, between atemporal heaven and temporal earth.⁴⁴ Despite Geoffrey’s apparent ascent to the “contre of the sterres” (*Bo* IV.m.6.22), he has not reached the same heights as Dante, Troilus and Scipio Africanus: Fame’s head only *touches* the heavens, within which “shynten sterres sevene” (*HF* 1376). The outer bound of these heavens, as Geoffrey sees them, is Saturn’s sphere, the seventh heaven, the last checkpoint before the de-individuating passage into Dionysian union that begins, as Dante shows, in the sphere of the fixed stars.

The goddess of Fame is anti-figural—fittingly, given that her House is where appearance and reality cannot be disentangled. Her spatial dimensions encompass extremes of vastness and smallness at the same time, and the outer accidents of her senses appear (to Geoffrey) infinite. Chaucer describes her in a surreal repeat of the

⁴⁴ Cf. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, XII.43–52.

ekphrasis of Venus in Book I. But unlike Venus “naked fletyng in a see”—paragon of idealised “femynyne” beauty—Fame contains multitudes: her features, as Geoffrey perceives them, are an uncanny mix of mundane and marvellous:

For as feele eyen hadde she
As fetheres upon foules be,

Hir heer, that oundy was and crips,
As burned gold hyt shoon to see;
And soth to tellen, also she
Had also fele upstondyng eres
And tonges, as on bestes heres (1381–90)

As with the windmill in a walnut shell and her own spatial dimensions, Fame’s body is related in terms that confound representation as mental “ymag”, estranging and foregrounding the readerly processes of recognition and representation. The limits of circumscription are exposed where language itself strains to signify; if Fame’s key quality for Chaucer is her liminal situation “bitwixen” the Boethian dichotomy of temporality and atemporality, this accounts for the uncanniness of her linguistic and cognitive figuration. Fame is neither a Lovecraftian eldritch horror of infinite eyes and ears nor an arch-“femynyne” beauty symbol; she has crisp, wavy, golden hair, and she has as many eyes as fowls have feathers. She is an indefinite mix of measurable and immeasurable, mutable and immutable, properties: language, being temporal and contingent, can only encompass her temporal and contingent qualities—but her atemporal aspect casts an apophatic shadow over her *esse apparens*, manifest in the seeming infinitude of her eyes and ears. With Geoffrey, we are forced to account for the failure of our words and concepts to fully apprehend Fame’s body, an entity embodying liminality itself.

On her throne, Fame is adorned with jewels—“perry” (1393)—and Calliope, chief of the Muses, sings “eternally” a “hevenyss melodye” (1403, 1395). The antinomic quality of conjoined contradictions that is the abiding theme of Fame’s House is represented here: this song is both the Boethian music of the spheres (*musica mundana*), expressing Love as a binding and defining force (“armonye”) in one, inviolable, voice, and a many-voiced multitude of diverse “songes” (1396). Diversity and unity are not conflicting poles in this place of liminal suspension: they subsist, because Fame’s House is a locus of potentiality prior to actualisation, before the causal determinacy of temporal phenomena is imposed. Boethius succinctly explains the principle of “kyndely enclynyng” in a letter to John the Deacon: “Diversity repels; likeness attracts. That which seeks something outside itself is demonstrably of the same nature as that which it seeks” (“Omnis diuersitas discors, similitudo uero appetenda est; et quod appetit aliud, tale ipsum esse naturaliter ostenditur quale est illud hoc ipsum quod appetit”).⁴⁵ Geoffrey adventures in a thought-experiment where the diverse and the similar coexist, where their “kyndely” inclination (*appetit*) has been suspended, out of ordinary time. Calliope’s music expresses this paradox:

And ever mo, eternally,
 They songe of Fame, as thoo herd y:
 “Heryed be thou and thy name,
 Goddesses of Renoun or of Fame!” (1403–6)

The causal rules of narrative (and grammatical language itself) resist the description of eternal song, as does the linearity of internal time-consciousness, the moment-to-moment sequentiality of reality as experienced. The song is only narrated “as thoo herd” Geoffrey,

⁴⁵ Boethius, *Quomodo Substantiae*, in *Tractates, De Consolatione Philosophiae*, p. 51.

after its translation into linear, causal, delimited fragment—the “thing itself” cannot be set on the page. This couplet is temporally linear, moving from ‘point to point’; it is not sung “eternally”, because this poem is an act of temporal language—the “armonye” of non-linguistic *musica mundana* (“soun” beyond individuated “speche”) cannot be set forth in this linguistic format, founded on the diversity of linguistic signs. “As thoo herd y” does not resolve this contradiction, but it is a phenomenological escape-clause, directing the narrative away from first principles towards the strictly relational mediation of Geoffrey’s individualised perspective. Paradox is sustained in the House of Fame because it can always be rationalised away as a side-effect of seeing things through temporally clouded doors of perception: the Boethian temporal/atemporal dichotomy becomes a generative instrument, in which these thought-experiments in contingency can take place.

Fame’s halls are held up by “many a peler / Of metal that shoon not ful cler” (1421–22)—pillars of lesser, impure metals (that is, of relational and contingent value) that are themselves supported by famed individuals, the most eminent *auctores* of particular subjects within the literary canon. Lady Fame’s eternising of names does not take place in a vacuum: the time-defying valence of cultural memory, of fame, is only as effective as the sum of individual memories. Thus the “Jewes gestes” are borne up by eight “Wise and worthy” figures, favoured by Fame, but Geoffrey the dreamer (and, perhaps, Chaucer the author) can only call one of their names to mind: “Ebrayk Josephus the olde” (1433); the other seven are, ironically, “worthy for to nevene” (1437) but conspicuously nameless here. If the House of Fame is a universe of knowledge, only a few of its colours are visible: as a dream, its contents are limited to the contents of

Geffrey's own mind, leaving many of Fame's figures faceless, nameless and generic—unknown to the dreamer, therefore unrepresented to the reader. Geffrey knows *of* certain *auctores* central to the literature of “the Jewerye” (1436), but cannot name them; there are also authors he can name, but of whose writings he knows little. The account of named and unnamed *auctores* holding up Fame's pillars emphasises the difference between “word” and “dede”, the gulf between the accidents of authors' names and the substance of their canonised writings—a divergence created in the prism of Geffrey's phenomenal *experientia*.

The pillars holding up the matters of Thebes and Troy prove this point: on the former, Statius is given pride of place, alone bearing the fame of Thebes “Upon his shuldres” (1461). The pillar of Troy, in contrast, is overcrowded:

And by him stood, withouten les,
 Ful wonder hy on a piler
 Of yren, he, the gret Omer;
 And with him Dares and Tytus
 Before, and eke he Lollius,
 And Guydo eke de Columpnis,
 And Englyssh Gaufride eke, ywis;
 And ech of these, as have I joye,
 Was besy for to bere up Troye. (1464–72)

The matter of Troy is here “fals and soth compounded” (2108)—these names are a mix of first-hand and second-hand knowledge, *auctores* known by Chaucer and those merely known *of* by Chaucer. “Gret Omer” is tersely ticked off, and the canonical Dares and Dictys are joined by the apocryphal Lollius, an *auctor* whose writings Chaucer could not have read because they (almost certainly) didn't exist. The indeterminacy caused by contradictions between canonic texts—exemplified earlier with Venus' Dido and Aeneas mashup—is explicitly exposed here:

Betwex hem was a litil envye.
 Oon seyde that Omer made lyes,
 Feynyng in hys poetries,
 And was to Grekes favourable;
 Therfor held he hyt but fable. (1476–80)

“Oon”—unnamed—holds Homer’s *Iliad* “but fable”, but from Geoffrey’s historical moment, far-flung from this mythic past, there is no means to resolve this ambiguity. The historicity of the Troy mythos, and the veracity of its record in narrative, are insoluble: whether or not they have a true, factual origin can never be determined by subjects situated in time; their historical reality is too remote, wrapped up in mists. Chaucer simply raises the question, and in doing so foregrounds the crucial distinction between narrative text and narrated thing.

The allocation of space within the House of Fame has a metapoetic correlative in the allocation of narrative space within the edifice of the *House of Fame*. They are not, however, equivalent—Chaucer, as author, directs the allocation of his limited textual space (framed by the exigencies and decorum of medieval poetics) according to his aesthetic judgements, and these directorial choices expose some telling biases. Virgil, for his *Aeneid*, is given a pillar holding up the fame of “Pius Eneas”; the description is short and perfunctory, taking up five lines (1481–1485). Ovid, though, utterly dwarfs him, in both figural and textual space:

And next hym on a piler was,
 Of coper, Venus clerk Ovide,
 That hath ysowen wonder wide
 The grete god of Loves name.
 And ther he bar up wel hys fame
 Upon this piler, also hie
 As I myghte see hyt with myn ye;
 For-why this halle, of which I rede,
 Wax woxen on highte, length, and brede,

Wel more be a thousand del
 Than hyt was erst, that saugh I wel. (1486–96)

Prominence within Fame’s House is not a metric of any one literary value: it simply figures the named individual’s renown, their importance within canons of knowledge as a matter of historical fact. But this does not explain the diminishing of Virgil in Ovid’s shadow. That Chaucer wrote in an *aetas Ovidiana* is a commonplace, but Virgil was no wallflower. By the fourteenth century, in Western Europe, Virgil was not only a canonical poet of immense *auctoritas*, but a mythologised symbol of vatic inspiration and truth-telling through poetry, a pagan poet assimilated into the Christian literary tradition as prophet; thus Virgil was Dante’s guide through hell as well as his poetic “maistir”.⁴⁶ Ovid does not dwarf Virgil in the House of Fame because he enjoys greater renown and canonical stature. But in a restricted sense, when all criteria of literary value, merit and judgement are removed from the equation, it may be that he is more *famous*. Ovid towers over Virgil (and any other named poet) here on two axes: spatially, in Fame’s House, and textually, in Chaucer’s narrative. The former metric is not of fame as a post-valuation judgement (e.g. as Dante’s “infamia” and “lodo”) but of Ovidian *fama*, the mere *survivability* of a name down recorded time, autonomous of any contingent value it might (temporarily) accrue. The latter may reflect Chaucer’s own (e)valuation of Ovid while asserting Geoffrey’s genetic relationship with him: Geoffrey has been categorised as a poet of love, writing in Venus’ service, and Ovid is “Venus clerk”, lodestar of love-poets. Love as the poet’s chosen subject-matter might account for Ovid’s spatio-temporal vastness in Fame’s halls, too: all that it signifies is that Ovid is read far and wide, across

⁴⁶ See Domenico Comparetti, *Virgil in the Middle Ages* (1908), trans. E.F.M. Benecke, reprinted 2nd ed. (London: Allen & Unwin, 1966), p. 206.

different places and times. As poems of love, not arms, his narratives may have a greater in-built propensity to go forth and “multiplie” than gests of warlike deeds aimed, as instructional mirrors, at a restricted body of readers who possess, or are proximal to, power. The implication of Ovid’s stature before Fame is that love-tidings spread like wildfire, changing as they go.

While the House of Fame and Temple of Venus are parallels in many significant ways, this expresses a key distinction between them: the glass temple encodes fame as a value-judgement; for a narrative to be eternised here in its gilded murals is a recognition of its *auctoritas* and enduring value. Virgil has the upper hand in Book I: the inscribed tale of Dido and Aeneas is explicitly framed as a version of the *Aeneid*, to which fragments of Ovid have been introduced as a foreign body that is disruptive to its moral trajectory. Ovid has the advantage in the House of Fame—but only as a name, dissevered from its original referent. Fame eternises names alone, prior to value-judgements (which, as we have seen, can never be immutable). Ovid’s steadfast immensity here is a pyrrhic victory over time: only the name is garlanded; the man himself lost to his historical moment and his writings circulating autonomously of him, in the “marketplace of narrative”.⁴⁷ In this thought-experiment, Chaucer separates out the formal constituents of temporal being as the Aristotelian tradition understood them: the thought, the word, and the thing itself are divided into their own partitioned conceptual spaces. Chaucer will lament that in the contingent world “word and deed / Ben nothing lyk” (*Lak* 4–5); here, he imagines that very situation as an ideality which locates worldly fame as just another fleeting ‘good’ of Boethian Fortune.

⁴⁷ Gillespie, “Authorship”, p. 150.

The disparity between Ovid and Virgil here is soon followed by another puzzle, an interpretive question held open by Chaucer: Dante is the single most significant poet in the *House of Fame*, but he is absent from the House of Fame itself. In Book I, the reader was referred to “Virgile, Claudian, Daunte” (450) as the most prominent writers on hell; here, the fame of hell is held up by “Daun Claudian” alone. This raises the question of what Fame’s criteria for entry might be—and, again, the answer is that representation here is only a measure of *fama*, not *infamia* or *lodo*—reputation prior to any valuation. For all that Chaucer punctures Dante’s more grandiose postures, his pose as Christian seer guided by truth-revealing voices, it’s clear that he rates his poetry highly. In the *Monk’s Tale* Dante is “the grete poete of Ytaille / That highte Dant, for he kan al devyse / Fro point to point; nat o word wol he faille” (*MkT* VII 2460–62). Dante’s power to “devyse”, to convert imagined image into temporal language, is here infallible (although the question of its origins in God’s active grace is left open). And in *Fame*, as we have seen, Dante’s *Paradiso* is *fons et origo* of this poem’s imaginative thought-experiments, its imagery of concentric, emanating sound and revealing or distortive rays of light, as well as the Ptolemaic cosmic system through which Geoffrey is flown. By most customary terms of literary value—certainly of *dulce et utile*—Dante is invaluable. But he does not rate a mention in Fame’s halls because here these criteria are all suspended. Presumably, he is just not famous enough. Dante held peerless renown in *trecento* Italy and was garlanded as *auctor* and poet, subject of imitation and scholarly exegesis (not least by Petrarch and Boccaccio). But the circulation of Italian literature in France and England was slowed and restricted by—among other factors—limited knowledge of the Italian language among literate circles. There is no watertight criteriological reason for

Dante's absence from Fame's hall: he was historically recent (but so were "Guydo...de Colmpnis, / And Englyssh Gaufride", 1467–70), he wrote in a vernacular (but he also wrote widely in Latin), and he has already been noted in this poem as an authority on his chosen subject (of hell, at least). Unless we take the omission as a choice of Chaucer the author, not the goddess of Fame—as a critical comment on the 'modernity' of Dante's humanist poetics, in which poets can know and reveal noncontingent truth (even in vernacular languages), making them vatic guides for the leaders and citizens of nations—the omission makes sense only when we apply the logic established by the examples of Ovid and Virgil: from Chaucer's perspective, Dante was not yet famous enough across places and times to merit recognition here; the gilded dust had not yet settled on Italy's *tre corone*, in spite of their classicising and laureate postures.

Our tour of Fame's pillars, focalised through Geoffrey's eyes, is cut short with a passage that re-invokes the state of interpretive confusion caused by the overlap of Dido narratives in Book I:

What shulde y more telle of this?
 The halle was al ful, ywys,
 Of hem that writen olde gestes
 As ben on trees rokes nestes;
 But hit a ful confus matere
 Were alle the gestes for to here
 That they of write, or how they highte. (1513–19)

The "Former Age" was a blissful state before people "Hadden fantasye to debate" (*FormA*, 51): the decline from this Arcadian "armony" was propelled by the universal process of "multiplicacioun" within secular time. At this later stage, the sheer accumulation of multiplying, mutable knowledge, and of individual readers of it, has led to a post-truth situation where there can no longer be consensus—there are so many

names famed for having “writen olde gestes” that the world of knowledge (*episteme*) is one of “ful confus matere” beyond total understanding and resolution. The only truths available in this situation are contingent ones, truth-claims upheld in the knowledge that total, perfect knowledge is unattainable, and that most knowledge held by individuals is of a second-order, mediated nature. The halls of Venus and Fame make the same point in the end; they are not diametrically opposed poles, but different measures of temporal fame whose contingency is likewise revealed in the encounter with Geoffrey’s individual, subjective experiencing.

What Geoffrey sees next in Fame’s court are her acts of judgement. Humanity in all its near-infinite variety (which is not really true infinitude, but only the appearance of it from a temporal viewpoint: as the eagle said, multiplying temporalities must rebound off the cosmic “brynkes”) attends her court. In the eagle’s talons, Geoffrey learned why his experience in Venus’ temple ended in confused irresolution: the “multiplicacioun” of narratives, solidified in the traditional canon and shored up against the march of time, leads to a situation where, as Delany says, tradition provides “too many answers”.⁴⁸ Here, we see that the *House of Fame* is not only concerned with “multiplicacioun” as a literary-historical conundrum, but in the abstract, as a fundamental issue both conditioning and complicating human knowledge and experience. The “multiplicacioun” of contingencies in the descended world of time leads inevitably to an onto-epistemological scene which is, in Odo Marquard’s term, “multiversal” rather than universal.⁴⁹ Marquard contends that in our reality of boundless differentiation the epistemic ideal of “universal history”—that

⁴⁸ Delany, *Chaucer’s House of Fame*, p. 44.

⁴⁹ Odo Marquard, *In Defense of the Accidental*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 64–70.

is, of a Habermasian “ideal speech situation” where absolute truth-consensus is achieved—is neither attainable nor desirable.⁵⁰ Instead, because the “motley differentness” of our contingent reality is the very property that enables communication to take place, Marquard advocates for a pragmatic idealisation of “multiversalistic communication”, a social sphere where the emergent “motleyhood” of our phenomenal reality (circumscribed by limits of sequential time and relational language) should be acknowledged, embraced, and actively preserved. Diversity is the self-perpetuating foundation of a phenomenal reality that is known and conceptualised through diverse and diversifying processes of cognition, representation and signification.

But Marquard is a philosopher writing after post-structuralism, in response to late twentieth century German neo-pragmatism. Chaucer is writing in a post-nominalist zeitgeist in which a Pauline-Augustinian-Boethian orthodoxy has been unsettled (but certainly not dismantled) following the “neo-Aristotelian” representational theories (and concomitant restrictionism) that sprang up after Scotus, and reached their zenith with Ockham and Holcot. Chaucer was sceptical of the potential for universal truth-consensus in an “up-so-down” world characterised by a referential “lak of stedfastnesse”—a sceptical inflection informed by the post-nominalist emphasis on the “ontological abyss between the omnipotent God and feeble, dependent creatures”.⁵¹ The multiversality that results from the fragmentation of readers of the world and of speech-communities is an inevitability, but not yet a positive value, as in the valorisation of “openendedness”

⁵⁰ Jürgen Habermas, “Wahrheitstheorien”, in *Wirklichkeit und Reflexion*, ed. Helmut Fahrenbach and Walter Schulz (Pfullingen: Neske), pp. 211–265.

⁵¹ Aers, *Salvation and Sin*, p.63.

evinced by, for instance, Bakhtinian novelism. Here the generalised diversity that the eagle gestured towards is reified into a multiverse of individualised speech-communities:

A right gret companye withalle,
 And that of sondry regiouns,
 Of alleskynnes condicions
 That dwelle in erthe under the mone,
 Pore and ryche. (1528–32)

The multiverse of *brevi contingenze* comes together in still-diverse unison at the foot of Fame's throne, awaiting her transcendent act of "demynge" that will actualise or negate their potential to proliferate in the temporal world. What Geoffrey finds, horrifically, is that the judge at eternity's threshold is not an orderly, Solomon-esque arbiter of "fals and soth" but an "engyn" of pure caprice, a locus of utterly arbitrary, unpredictable, and contingent decisions:

And somme of hem she graunted sone,
 And somme she werned wel and faire,
 And some she graunted the contraire
 Of her axing outterly.
 But thus I seye yow, trewely,
 What her cause was, y nyste.
 For of this folk ful wel y wiste
 They hadde good fame ech deserved,
 Although thy were dyversly served;
 Ryght as her suster, dame Fortune,
 Ys wont to serven in commune. (1538–48)

The key note is indifference, in both literal and philosophical terms. Fame upholds the essential properties of her "suster", Fortune: absolute unpredictability (as far as time-conscious subjects are concerned) and, relatedly, resistance to causal logic. There is no rhyme or reason to Fame's meting out of favour and disfavour. Her judgements are not choices in the ordinary sense—informed by some causal logic that is (in theory, anyway) predictable—they are simply junctures of potentiality, actualising a positive or negative

course according to no *a priori* principle whatsoever. Fame's decisions express possibility without probability, like quantum randomness. They are not totally indeterministic; they realise one of a narrowly limited clutch of potential outcomes within a strictly determinist schema: by the necessitarian action of physical "multiplicacioun", we have heard, it is absolute inevitable that within the "brynkes" of secular time, speech-acts will find themselves in her court. It is not a site of infinite potential: as far as we know, there is no situation where speech can evade this metaphysical sorting, nor can Fame, being allegory for a consequential phenomenon (the survival or non-survival of names and narratives), act with infinite freedom. Fame is not Lewis Carroll's Queen of Hearts, free to misbehave limitlessly in her own domain—Geffrey's head is quite safe. It is deterministically predictable that Fame will decide to "graunt" fame, to refuse it, or to grant "the contraire"—presumably, *infamia* rather than *lodo*. But which of these delimited options she will enact is, in Gregg Jaeger's phrase, "maximally unpredictable": it is entirely non-probabilistic, the outcome unaffected by contextual factors or by any properties of its nominal predictors (in this case, the arguments and petitions of her supplicants).⁵² As Agamben argues, using the example of Melville's Bartleby, the scrivener who refuses to write because "I would prefer not to", the purest expression of contingency is causeless decision, the refusal of causative predictability and probability in-themselves. Fame enacts this pure contingency—which, in late medieval Christianity, was reserved to God's *potentia absoluta*—in a secularised form (albeit one in total alignment with Boethian orthodoxy, where Philosophy and Fortune are emanant figurations of God's will).

⁵² Gregg Jaeger, "Quantum Randomness and Unpredictability", *Fortschritte der Physik*, 65, 6–8 (2017), p. 6.

As regards fame—which is the temporal fortune of second-order experience, converted from the “thing itself” into names and narrative—Geffrey finds that the necessary destination of “spech” is this absolute contingency, a fate apportioned by an entity of cosmic indifference to human concerns and values. Fame’s judgements are also indifferent with respect to differentiation, the diversity of those things that have multiplied and mutated within time: the anaphoric repetitiveness of her judgements (“And somme...And somme...And some”, 1538–40) does not only convey Fame’s flat affect, her affective indifference to her petitioners’ complaints; it flattens the individuation of diverse things that “multiplicacioun” causes and that generates the post-truth waste-land of epistemic indeterminacy that Geffrey inhabits. The paradoxical idea that has been hitherto sustained—the indifferent difference, diverse similitude, of temporal phenomena, is fully realised here. The runaway differentiation of individuals that consigns temporal readers, like Geffrey, to a situation of perpetual inconclusiveness, is immediately dissolved in the encounter with an atemporal observer (or, at least, one with one foot in eternity): the kaleidoscopic diversity of created things, in Fame’s eyes, is a homogenous mass to be divided at random in a threefold order. Once again, Boethian perspectivism is invoked: difference, diversity, mutability, the generators of contingency, are contingent themselves, a matter of perspective, only meaningful within the confines of sequential time. The distinction between appearance and reality is crucial: Fame’s insoluble paradoxicality is caused by the temporal limitedness of Geffrey and all contingent readers of the world, which cannot circumscribe her atemporal and ineffable nature.

The expansive section that follows, depicting Fame’s response to the individual petitions of particular groups of fame-seekers, exemplifies this idea over and over again.

Different rationales are given for the fame-worthiness of different groups, and in each case the absolute, logic-breaking unpredictability of Fame's judgement is reasserted. It is a repudiation of a rationalist philosophical paradigm which assigns causes to temporal phenomena as well as a readerly hermeneutic that reduces texts to teleological truth-tellers, ciphers whose moral value is revealed by the able reader's interpretation of the causes of its events. Just as Geoffrey finds Fame's decisions apparently causeless ("What her cause was, y nyste", 1544), each group of petitioners—the good, the bad, and the ugly—encounter the same aporia of perspective:

"Madame", seyde the, "we be
 Folk that here besechen the
 That thou graunte us now good fame,
 And lat our werkes han that name..."
 "I werne yow hit", wuod she anon;
 "Ye gete of me good fame non,
 Be God, and therefore goo your wey".
 "Allas", quod they, "and welaway!
 Telle us what may your cause be".
 "For me lyst hyt nocht", quod she. (1553–64)

Like Bartleby, the scribe who will not write because he would prefer not to, Fame's animating "cause" is that she "lyst hyt nocht", her utterly arbitrary flight of fancy. Those groups who are worthy and unworthy according to values of Christian morality and pagan heroism are likewise granted fame, relegated to obscurity, or doomed to perpetual mis-representation by Fame's random judgements. Geoffrey's flirtation with fame-seeking, any nascent desire to self-fashion as a modern-day *poeta* or *auctor* in the vein of Italy's classicising *tre corone*, is nipped in the bud by this revelation. Word and deed are well and truly "nothing lyk": the name bears no enduring relation to the signified, taking on contingent value autonomously of its origin, and proliferating or vanishing according

to no one dependable principle. The *raison d'écrire* of authorial self-eternising that Dante, in *Convivio*, perceived as Boethius' motive in writing the *Consolatio Philosophiae* has been utterly dismantled: we have learned that the *signans* "Geffrey" does not necessarily bear anything substantial of its prelinguistic *signatum*, and that this name has long lost sight of its real-world origin point in its progressive "multiplicacioun" through time and place.⁵³ Geffrey's name is only given by the eagle in Book II: in Book I he is an unnamed dreamer struggling to make sense of canonised narratives; here, he is a potential fame-seeker who ultimately "rejects the naming that is a crucial part of the process of laureation".⁵⁴ Whether or not the entity called "Geffrey" is substantively the same across Books I, II and III is entirely beyond our capacity, as time-bound readers, to know.

If, in this deconstruction of fame as an authorial animus and textual *telos*, Chaucer resists the humanist poetics in which poets are seers and prophets of revealed truth, whose fame allows their lessons to endure and to proliferate without losing their essential truth, it remains unclear what *raison d'écrire* is offered up by way of an alternative. As Geffrey bears witness to Fame's abattoir of fame-seeking fantasies, a voice whispers in his ear:

"Frend, what is thy name?
 Artow come hider to han fame?"
 "Nay, for sothe, frend", quod y;
 "I cam noht hyder, graunt mercy,
 For no such cause, by my hed!
 Sufficeth me, as I were ded,
 That no wight have my name in honde.
 I wot myself best how y stonde;
 For what I drye, or what I thynke,
 I wil myselfen al hyt drynke,

⁵³ Cf. *Il Conv* I.

⁵⁴ Gillespie, "Authorship", p. 151.

Certeyn, for the more part,
As fer forth as I kan myn art". (1871–82)

This is a refusal to play the game of literature according to the rules as he finds them. But it is less a confident assertion of self-sufficiency than a neutral acknowledgement of what he has witnessed, a statement of fact: acknowledging the irrelevance of human agency, the unimportance of the individual author's "cause" for pursuing their craft, Geoffrey simply shrugs. This is not an assertion of the self-sufficiency of fiction in view of the death of the author as much as it embodies an attitude towards contingency: one of "suffisaunce" and "suffraunce" in the face of absolutely uncontrollable historical process. Geoffrey emphasises his resolution to remain unnamed with an idiomatic phrase—"Sufficeth me"—and it is characteristic of Chaucer to renew idiomatic language, dredging up the buried original signification of phrases that have become self-sufficient by the accumulation of non-literal, situational usages. This was such with the phrase "gracelees" in *CYT*, where the "sely preest" of the *pars secunda* was not just "gracelees" in its figurative sense of "improvident, unwary, unlucky", but also in the literal sense of one who has diminished the gift of sanctifying grace by embracing concupiscence.⁵⁵ Here "Sufficeth me" is not just a line-filler expressing Geoffrey's 'enoughness' *in this instance*, situationally and figuratively; it connects cleanly with the Boethian subtext that has been established in the preceding sections to assert a general philosophical attitude. "Suffisaunce", in Boethian thought, refers to the Stoic virtue of self-sufficiency: those who seek after the fleeting goods of fortune, who "desiren...rychesses, dignytes, reignes, glorie, and delices" will never experience the ultimate "suffysaunce" that they desire (*Bo* III.pr.2.135). True "suffisaunce" means redirecting one's spiritual sights on the

⁵⁵ *MED*, s.v. "gracelees, adj"., 1.

atemporal—“perdurable”—goods of Christian godliness, and remaining undisturbed by Fortune’s vicissitudes: “He that hath lak or nede of aught nys nat in every wey suffisant to hymself”. (*Bo* III.pr.3.56). By this Stoic connotation, “suffisaunce” is semantically proximate to “suffraunce”, self-sufficiency in the negational and passive sense of abiding immitigable contingencies. Long-suffering Griselda in the *Clerk’s Tale* embodies the ideal of self-sufficiency both as negative “suffraunce” (perhaps as a virtue idealised to an absurd extreme) and positive “suffisaunce”: she endured the “sharpe scourges of adversitee”, abiding faithfully in God’s unreadably “governaunce”, living and dying “in vertuous suffraunce” (*CIT* IV 1156–62). She was also “Disposed...The adversitee of Fortune al t’endure, / Abidyng evere his lust and his pleasance, / To whom that she was yeven herte and al, / As to hire verray worldly *suffisance*” (IV 755–59). Walter’s injustice is perversely legitimised by the model of marriage that frames the marital bond as a reflection (or emanation) of God’s bond with his creation—Griselda takes her bond with Walter to be a good of grace rather than a good of Fortune, and so her marriage is an expression of her spiritual “suffisaunce” as a Christian whose spiritual gaze is trained on the *civitas dei* rather than the fleeting fortunes of *civitas terrena*. Geoffrey, having borne extensive witness to the “adversitee” of “Fortune’s suster”, fashions himself a Boethian Stoic who has no need for the temporal “rychesse [and] dignytes” that Fame can offer. He is “suffisaunt” and “suffraunt”, one that “hath lak or nede of aught” and who, recognising the powerlessness of human agency in the face of Fortune, seeks to abide contingency. In this case, that means not *rejecting* the possibility of fame, but acknowledging that the survival of the *nomen* “Geoffrey” over time and place has absolutely nothing to do with him. Even should his name become famed, it would not

refer to *him*, the *esse subiectivum* of “Geffrey” as a delimited subject: it would multiply, mutate, and become autonomous of “what I drye, or what I thynke”. Geffrey’s refusal to give his name is his Boethian answer to the Boethian problem he has just encountered.

Geffrey’s “suffisaunce” and “suffraunce” is a pragmatic attitude: for individuals in general, it advocates acknowledgement of the radical contingency of the future, and an attitude of forbearance, patience and resilience in response. For poets, it means accepting that literary fame is a temporal good of Fortune—to seek it out is futile and self-defeating, and it is a hollow gift in any case, only causing names and narratives to “multiplie” uncontrollably, becoming progressively alienated from their origins in the process. The semantics of “suffraunce” also bear major significance in relation to the *House of Fame*’s epistemological subtext: for Boethius the “suffraunce” of the wit is the innate *passio* that allows the mind to discern between true and false “apparences”. In *Cons V.pr.4*, Boethius articulates the Neoplatonic model of emanation by which phenomenal reality descends from the Platonic forms that reside in “the devyne thought” (*Bo V.pr.4.162–66*). The “strengthes of the thought” are the human mind’s “kyndely enclynynge” towards this pre-individual Truth, the soul’s innate disposition to see through the apparent world’s cloud of unknowing to the absolutely determinate reality beyond perception. Because human minds are temporal, fallible, and prone to misdirection, diversity of opinionial knowledge (“dirknesse of opinioun, nat sothfastnesse of science”, *Bo V.pr.4.127–8*) emerges. But by the proper disposition of “resoun” and “ymaginacioun”, the faculties that organise sense-perception, it is possible that God’s truth might be perceived. Boethius articulates a model where human experience takes place in a cognitively-generated image of reality that cannot perfectly reflect the object

reality from which it is perceptually derived: “Alle the thingis in knowynge usen more of hir faculte or of hir power than thei don of the faculte or power of thingis that ben iknowe” (*Bo V.pr.4.209–12*).

The truth of the world as “wened” and “demed” by individual subjects is contingent on the limited powers of their rational and imaginative faculties. The *metrum* that follows concisely articulates the way this works:

Yimages and sensibilities...were enpriented into soules fro bodyes withoute-forth...But yif the thryvyng soule ne unpliteth nothing...by his propre moevynges, but *suffrith* and lith subgit to the figures and to the notes of bodies withoute-forth, and yeldith yimages ydel and vein in the manere of a mirour, whennes thryveth thanne or whennes comith thilke knowynge in our soule, that discernith and byholdith alle thinges? Or whennes is the strengthe that devydeth thinges iknowe; and thilke strengthe that gadreth togidre the thingis devyded; and the strengthe that chesith his entrechaunged wey? [...] Algatis the passion (that is to seyn, the *suffraunce* or the wit) in the quyke body goth byforn, excitynge and moevyng the strengthes of the thought, ryght so as whan that cleernesse smyteth the eyen and moeveth hem to seen, or ryght so as voys or soun hurteleth to the eres and commoeveth hem to herkne; than is the strengthe of the thought imoevid and excited, and clepith forth to semblable moevyngis the spesces that it halt withynne itself, and addith tho spesces to the notes and to the thinges withoute-forth, and medleth the ymagis of thinges withoute-forth to the foormes ihidd withynne hymself. (*Bo V.m.4.6–60*)

The faculties of reason and imagination that convert immediate appearance into a persistent reality are preceded by a “passion”, the mind’s “suffraunce”, that validates perceived images by assigning them to the pre-individual form, the species, that for Boethius is inherent to the soul. If the “suffraunce” of an individual subject is a response to the inevitability of changing fortunes ‘washing over’ them, Chaucer’s use of “suffraunce” to translate Boethius’ *passio* reflects his conception of the way sense-perceptions ‘wash over’ the soul, their veridicality affirmed or denied *prior* to intentional mental action.

In this model, the reality of an object is verified within the soul by the inherence of species, which bear true relation to the ideal “foormes”; for Aquinas, species were assigned independently of both the mind and the object (as *species in medio*); for Auriol, species did not exist independently of the mind, and (contrasting Boethius) the mind contains no innate power to verify the reality or non-reality of a perceived entity, it can only impose the *contingent* ontic status of *esse apparens*. The representational dimensions of the *House of Fame*—the constantly recurring emphasis on the gulf between appearance and reality—shows that for a philosophy-using poet like Chaucer, writing in this climate of epistemic indeterminacy, contingency was an ontological as well as an epistemological issue. If the truth is not out there because of the contingency of language, the ‘real’ is not out there either, because it is generated in the fallible “engyn” of sense-perception.

Geffrey’s “Sufficeth me” is an onto-epistemological stance in relation to the contingency he has discovered in Fame’s court. It is not only *value* (epistemic, ethical or edificatory) that is fundamentally contingent, but the very reality in which those values are assigned. The phenomenal ground on which Geffrey walks cannot, because of this fundamental indeterminacy, bear up a pathway to noncontingent truth. To seek absolute Truth in the contingent world is “to seken evere” (*CYT VIII 321*); the revelation of Fame’s court is that even the noble virtues of truth-seeking and truth-telling are temporal desires, “rychesses” of Fortune that cannot lead to “suffisaunce”. Uncommonly for a dream-vision, Chaucer repeatedly emphasises the dreamness of this dream, its ontic non-reality as an imagined vision generated by a material ‘brayn’. The abiding effect of this tactic is to sustain a degree of interpretive openedness on the part of the reader, and to

inscribe a contingent futurity within the poem's narrative line (that is, the future of the narrative cannot be predicted by an 'in-the-know' reader, because this is a radically individuated fiction that does not adhere to one existing generic shape; the future turns of the dream-narrative are, nominally, unpredictable for any reader). Now this dreamness can be situated within *Fame*'s holistic vision. The very ground on which Geoffrey stands is radically contingent—like the created world in the nominalist scheme, it sustains an infinite potential for unpredictable change. Chaucer being Chaucer, he turns the dream-vision genre, and its presuppositions, 'up-so-down': rather than asserting the difference between dream and real—as in poems which use the dream-frame as a self-contained space to imagine impossibilities—this poem emphasises the dreamness of the reader's reality: it is a metapoetic mirror of the fundamental contingency of phenomenal *experience*, exposing the aporia this throws up for any questing after absolute, noncontingent truth. Geoffrey does not just refuse to obey the rules of literary fame: he rejects the notion that there is any possibility for poets (or philosophers) to tell timeless truths about a reality characterised by "multiplicacioun" and mutability. For Geoffrey, the totally contingent and relational truths available to us, as subjects experiencing the world through temporal mediation, as *esse apparens*, must suffice. The goddess of Fame is not only a locus of real-world *fama*: she is a perverse parody of the truth-revealing Lady Philosophy that Dante sees at eternity's threshold in *Convivio*. Far from an entity who sorts out "fals and soth compounded", Geoffrey finds that the arbiter of humanity's enduring knowledge-base, of the names and narratives that will be permitted to persist, is blind and indifferent to the very concept of noncontingent truth: in this ontological situation, there is no potential for poetic revelation. The poet must suffer the immitigable

potential for untruth and illusion caused by the mind's generation of a second-order image of perceived reality.

Geffrey, going wilfully unnamed, now embodies this basically Boethian ideal of contingency-consciousness. He reasserts that his purpose in coming to Fame's House is not to seek any measurable, temporal good. It is:

Somme newe tydynges for to lere,
Somme newe thinges, y not what,
Tydynges, other this or that,
Of love, or other thynges glade. (1886–89)

The parameters of Geffrey's flight have progressively receded from a passing desire for "stellification" to a non-presuppositional receptiveness to the novel in itself. Each line of this statement of intent is freighted with a clause that emphasises the irrelevance of individual agency and desire in the face of future contingency, and which acknowledges the total contingency of "tydynges" and "thinges", their ever-present and unpredictable potential to take place differently, or not to take place at all. Any notion of poetry as a prophetic enterprise or as a route to enduring fame could not have survived what took place in Fame's court. Geffrey is left with (almost) absolutely suspended judgement: he knows only that he "not what" he will find in "newe tydynges". These tidings may or may not contain "fruyt"—utterly relational and time-limited value—or they may be an abject waste of time, meaningless "chaf". There is a vestigial hint of Geffrey's self-identification as a love-poet after Ovid: he mentions, almost as afterthought, his original mission of hearing tidings "Of love", but the presupposition that love-tidings will be of value is now gone: now Geffrey's quest for "love-tydynges" is only provisional, a placeholder for the as-yet unknown "other thynges glade" to come.

Geffrey, freshly shorn of pre-loaded purpose, is led to the wicker whorl where “tydynges” accumulate, prior to Fame’s judgement. In terms of literary influence, this House of Rumour is as it’s described: in a constant state of re-creation, without start or end, changing “as swyft as thought” such that “never mo hyt stille stente” (1924–26). A garbled recollection of Daedalus’ maze from Boethius (“so entrelaced that it is unable to ben unlaced”, *Bo* III.pr.12.157–58), it metaphorises individual and collective memory all-at-once, a restlessly mobile inversion of the Temple of Venus, Book I’s memory palace of static *auctoritas*. This “hous...mad of twigges, falwe, rede” (1935–6) gyrates endlessly, and it buzzes with the indistinct beehive noise that Geffrey heard prior to Fame’s judgements (“so gret a noys...ryght so hyt ferde / As dooth the rowtynge of the ston / That from th’engyn is leten gon”. (*HF* 1927–34). This “engyn” refers literally to a siege engine, the roaring of a catapult or trebuchet, but it also recalls the cognitional “engyn” of “Thought” invoked in Book II’s proem: at some level, the House of Rumour is thought itself. A more verisimilar memory palace than Venus’ orderly dreamscape, it shows the “tresorye” of individual and collective memories (that is, of thought itself and of the traditional record of cultural knowledge) as an endlessly mobile process without discrete beginning or end, an always-moving target comprised of experiential “tydynges” that are constantly being displaced and replaced. The buzzing sound cascading around the Houses of Fame and Rumour represents individuation multiplied to such an extent of diversity that it becomes unintelligible, impossible for the liminal human ‘brayn’ to interpret. This concept is imaged here as Rumour’s anti-static, multiversal porousness. It is Rumour’s absolute incompleteness, and resistance to steadfast orderliness, that enables “novelries” to come into being: the indefinite incompleteness of the canon of knowledge,

generated by the “multiplicacioun” of individual “tydynges” and “thinges”, permits new things to be thought and said and written: “And on the roof men may yet seen / A thousand holes, and wel moo, / To leten wel the soun out goo” (1948–50). The doors of Rumour are never shut: there is no gatekeeper enforcing any anterior valuation.

As we saw in *Troilus and Criseyde*, Chaucer is aware that converting non-linear, immediate sense-experience into linear narrative is a degrading and mutative process. Geoffrey hears a kaleidoscopic chaos of “tydynges” all-at-once, without beginning or end, and this is how Chaucer converts it to narrative:

And over alle the houses angles
 Ys ful of rounynges and of jangles
 Of werres, of pes, of mariages,
 Of reste, of labour, of viages,
 Of abood, of deeth, of lyf,
 Of love, of hate, accord, of stryf,
 Of loos, of lore, and of wynnynge,
 Of hele, of weknesse, of bildynges,
 Of faire wyndes, and of tempestes,
 Of qwalm of folk, and eke of bestes;
 Of dyvers transmutacions
 Of estates, and eke of regions;
 Of trust, of drede, of jelousye,
 Of wit, of wynnynge, of folye;
 Of plente, and of gret famyne,
 Of chepe, of derthe, and of ruyne;
 Of good or mys governement,
 Of fyr, and of dyvers accident. (1959–76)

Gellrich is wrong to call this *amplificatio*, except in the broadest sense.⁵⁶ It is an impossibly dense *abbreviatio* of the world-as-knowledge, the knowledge-base of a culture as heard by one individual at one historical moment, the sum of the human story

⁵⁶ Gellrich, *The Idea of the Book in the Middle Ages*, p. 197.

in a handful of dust. It is impossible for Geoffrey to apprehend each of these near-infinite “tydynges” in their individuality: all he can do is categorise them. This list is tediously anaphoric because inventorial copiousness is all that’s left once readerly value-judgements have been suspended. As with the Canon’s Yeoman’s disorientingly copious list of alchemical jargon, Geoffrey sets out an unintelligible, medleysome mass of “spech” into a minimally presuppositional narrative line—that is, a list, in a neutral register. We are not told what to think about these “tydynges”; we are not even given access to the “tydynges” in their individual discreteness—because these processes take place later, in Fame’s court. With Geoffrey abiding in “suffraunce” of universal contingency, what were once the most valuable and worthy topics for writers—Love and War—are now reduced to a pair of token-words among many. If Troilus (and Dante) saw their temporal world reduced to a pale blue dot at the threshold of the eighth heaven, then Geoffrey is having a similar experience in relation to the world *as narrative*—rather than making claims about reality as such, Chaucer emphasises the secondarity of our world-concept, its basic dependency on contingent language mutating diversely over time.

Just as all speech-acts in creation find their way to the House of Rumour by “kyndely enclynynge”, in formal terms, the diverse images and thematic concerns of this poem all amalgamate here, a dense mix of “congeled [narrative] matere”. The lessons Geoffrey has learned about the instability of literary and epistemic values, and the unreliability of phenomenal reality versus “noumenal” reality, are all reprised in this wicker house. The Temple of Venus, all gold, brass and stony edifice, represented one kind of time-defying durability: the vacuum-sealed stasis of narrative prior to, and isolated from, the readerly encounter (which, as we saw, transfigures the solid, epic

narrative into a “newe thinge” in the dynamo of “ymaginacioun”). This House of Rumour represents a different kind of durability: the infinity of narrative as a non-individual generality, the solidity of the swarm out of the evanescence of its constituent, individual, bugs:

And loo, thys hous, of which I write,
 Syker be ye, hit nas not lyte,
 For hyt was sixty myle of lengthe.
 Al was the tymber of no strengthe,
 Yet hit is founded to endure
 While that hit lyst to Aventure,
 That is the moder of tydynges,
 As the see of welles and of sprynges;
 And hyt was shapen lyk a cage. (1977–85)

There is, as before, an ironic charge to Chaucer’s idiomatic assurance, “Syker be ye”, given that the poem until now has progressively dismantled the idea that our knowledge can ever be “syker”. Mileage, as ever, stands in for spatial paradox: Rumour’s extensity has no beginning or end, and is constantly in flux, so the measurement of “sixty myle” represents an arbitrary and temporary act of circumscription. This is an ambivalent image of paradoxically contingent infinitude, an utterly solid building comprised of constantly changing atomic kernels, an edifice that is functionally durable, for all intents and purposes, but which always retains an immitigable potential to dissolve without warning: “founded to endure / While that hit lyst to Aventure”.

This is the multiverse of narratable knowledge in which poets operate: it can never be guaranteed that any one narrative will persist unchangingly, but it is near-guaranteed that Narrative will persist: in the temporal region of *brevi contingenze*, notwithstanding God’s absolute power to change the laws of creation, all that is certain is that there will be “tydynges”, that narrative itself will persist despite the mutation of its

every constituent text. Within the prison-house of language (“shapen lyk a cage”), language cannot tell noncontingent truths about reality beyond its own confines—but it does express one, implicit, fundamental truth—that language will continue to take place for as long as we live and use speech, and that the image of reality that language is fundamentally involved in generating (the world-as-knowledge; the collective knowledge-base in which individuals are defined and potentiated), will persist. For all that Chaucer’s philosophy is of a Boethian bent, he never fully commits to the *contemptus mundi* that Lady Philosophy endorses: the contingency of the temporal world has its own consolation—that because contingency (of language, of time) is the pre-condition for the individual experience of reality, that reality does uphold a certain “stedfastnesse”—phenomenal reality is relationally stable and dependable within its own contingent “brynkes” (“While that hit lyst to Aventure”). We cannot really conceive of a noncontingent mode of reality; this is as real as it gets. Troilus and Criseyde’s “gladnesse” in each other’s arms endures in the contingent text: it is only a vanity from the post-temporal vantage-point of Troilus’ spirit, laughing from the high heavens. And although the fate of individual poems may be to multiply and mutate (or else to disappear) down the chain of time, they always retain the *potentiality* of value, to bring delight and utility of diverse sorts according to the changing conditions under which they will be re-read. Contingency is potential and impotential at once—this is why the *House of Fame* ends with a “congeled matere” of pessimism and optimism about the novelised, openended future of narrative; the insecure consolation of “fals and soth compounded”.

“Tydynges”, the basis of an enduring cultural image of reality, are contingency itself. “Aventure”, Fortune, is their “moder”; merchants, Chaucer’s go-to figures of risk-

exposure, value-exchange, and fortune-seeking, are their “fadirs”. The sea, symbol of reality’s contingency for time-bound subjects, is the medium that ferries some “tydynges” safely to new harbours (and new readers), while dooming some (whatever their potential to be valuable) to be “drowned in the see” (*CYT* VIII 949). Canonised texts may take on a relativistic persistence out of the collective matrix of Narrative itself, like the wells, “sprynges”, and tributaries of the “see”, but *true* eternity is off-limits to all things temporal. The canonised text will mutate in the encounter with novel readers, the canonised name will take on new significance (and lose the old) according to the winds of Fortune.

In the wake of Geoffrey’s realisation, the eagle returns. Where Dante had shed layers of contingency in his ascent through the concentric heavens, Geoffrey has accumulated them, becoming ever more conscious of the fundamental instability of all things temporal, individuated, and multiplying. What Geoffrey has shed are presuppositions: of the value of fame, the value of literature at large, and even of the security of his apparent reality. Fittingly, the eagle once again reduces the parameters of Geoffrey’s flight. Gone are any notions of acquiring laureate fame, of finding love-tidings to enrich his art, of finding anything “to lere” in “new tydynges” altogether. Now all he can hope for is “solace” (2008). The House of Rumour, as Geoffrey sees it, strikes the postmodern reader as an engine of potentiality, of novelistic openendedness and infinite aesthetic variety. But for the eagle, and for Geoffrey, it is an abysmally bleak vision to behold. The eagle’s last speech is an expression of sympathy with Geoffrey’s abject ontological situation and an offer of a potential consolation in the “tydynges” to come, despite Fortune’s refusal to grant Geoffrey the “[fruit] of al thyn hertys reste” (2016–17).

As Troilus was (we hope) transported to a new state of post-temporal “solas” (*TC* I.51) after his unfortunate sorrowing, Geoffrey is offered one last dice-roll of potential value at the limen of eternity, this locus of all contingencies at the “brynkes” between heaven, earth and sea. The eagle prays he will find comfort, if not knowledge, truth, or fame:

Syth that Fortune hath mad amys
 The [fruit] of al thyn hertys reste
 Languisshē...
 That [Jove], through hys myghty merite,
 Wol do the an ese, al be hyt lyte...
 ...I am obedient,
 To further the with al my myght,
 And wisse and teche the aryght
 Where thou maist most tidynges here. (2016–25).

Geoffrey holds in his hand only a promise of “ese”. In Boethian ethics, that “ese” from concupiscent “disese” comes only from the stoic “suffraunce” of Fortune’s dominion over worldly goods, and the refocusing of one’s spiritual sights onto the noncontingent good that is friendship with God. As at the end of *Troilus*, there is a sustained moral irresolution, an indeterminate see-sawing between the proto-Absurdist consolation of allowing contingent value to suffice (revelling in the openendedness of temporal experience) and of the classic Boethian consolation of faith that beyond our apparent reality of vanities loaned out by fickle Fortune, there is an abiding permanence and oneness to which we can return. We do not know what Geoffrey’s promised “ese” will look like: we hold multiple potential frames of reference in hand, forcing us into interpretive suspension (*epoché*) once again.

The eagle hoists Geoffrey into this otherwise-impenetrable gyre of pure discourse, dropping him on a “wyndowe” (2029). Inside, he encounters a “congregacioun / Of folk” (2034–35), a *civitas terrena* (or *aeria*) of anonymous yet individuated figures. The

embodied “tydynges” that “rome aboute” the House of Rumour are protean spectres, emanations of speech-acts that may or may not be allowed (by Fame) to actualise in the historical record. In its use of Dante, the poem returns to the very beginning, a recursive reminder of the impossibility of escape from ontological exile. The House of Rumour is much like *Inferno*’s liminal space before the gates of hell: a place of anonymous, nameless spectral emanations, whose “diverse lingue, orribili favelle” (*Inf* III.25; *HF* 1958–60, “whisprynges...rounynges...jangles”) collectively generate a castle in the sky, filled and made of wind (or “eyr ybroken”):

Faceveno un tumulto, il qual s’aggira
Sempre in quell’ aura senza tempo tinta,
Come la rena quando turbo spira. (*Inf* III.28–30).

(All went to make a tumult that will whirl forever through that turbid, timeless air,
like sand that eddies when a whirlwind swirls)

The grains of sand on which Venus’ temple is built descend down from this billowing edifice. What strikes Geoffrey most about the figures inside is their sheer number, their diversity born of “multiplicacioun”:

Some wythin and some wythoute,
Nas never seen, ne shal ben eft;
That, certys, in the world nys left
So many formed by Nature,
Ne ded so many a creature;
That wel unnethe in that place
Hadde y a fote-brede of space. (2037–42)

Paradox reigns again—again the near-boundless mass of embodied speech-acts are angels dancing on the head of a pin, an extensive infinitude that breaks down measurement and circumscription. Geoffrey has a similar, but tweaked, response to these faceless figures as Dante to the fameless shades and Eliot to the throng of Londoners:

where the latter two “did not think death had undone so many” (*TWL* 63, *Inf* III.56–7), Geoffrey cannot believe that Nature has “So many formed”: the post-truth situation in which he finds himself is generated by Nature’s “kyndely” multiplication of temporal entities, readers and texts, manifest in the runaway diversification of language in general and “tydynges” in particular. Geoffrey sees that narrative proliferates in the world-as-knowledge like rings from a stone dropped in water; they multiply exponentially, and mutate into novel things in the process:

And every wight that I saugh there
 Rouned everych in others eye
 A newe tydyngge prively...
 That al the folk that ys alyve
 Ne han the kunnyng to discryve
 The thinges that I herde there,
 What aloude, and what in ere.
 But al the wondermost was this:
 Whan oon had herd a thing, ywis,
 He com forth ryght to another wight,
 And gan him tellen anon-ryght
 The same that to him was told,
 Or hyt a forlong way was old,
 But gan was somewhat for to eche
 To this tydyngge in this speche
 More than hit ever was. (2043–67)

Words and things, language and reality, are not alike because all knowledge is spoken, mediated, and altered in the mediation by countless contingencies. This is not just an allegory of the spread of rumours around communities as a pragmatic and political problem: it strikes at something more fundamental. As the eagle made explicitly clear during the flight to this place, these speakers of tidings *are* the tidings; the “multiplicacioun” of which they are catalysts is also their fundamental pre-condition of being. They only have reality as long as there are listeners to hear them, and in each such

encounter they themselves are multiplied and mutated. This is an image of language as the contingently immortal “engyn” of a shared, stable reality—and it is in relation to this that its vision of instability can be understood as etiologically, a diagnosis of the world’s ongoing “disease”, its epistemic “lak of stedfastnesse”. The process that allows a shared reality to “congele” is the same process that ensures it can never solidify into a totalised truth-consensus. Speech is sound, and sound must multiply, changing as it goes:

Were the tydynges soth or fals,
 Yit wolde he telle hyt natheles,
 And everemo with more encres
 Than yt was erst. Thus north and south
 Wenten every tydyng fro mouth to mouth,
 And that encresing ever moo,
 As fyr ys wont to quyke and goo
 From a sparke spronge amys,
 Til al a citee brent up ys. (2072–80)

If, in *Paradiso*, the City of God is absolute, immediate, light, here the earthly city blazes brightly in flames. For Aristotle, fire is the element that rises by “kyndely enclynynge” to the heights of the air: in light of *Fame*’s meditation on the elemental “multiplicacioun” of speech as “eyr ybroken”, it makes sense that Chaucer would use wildfire as metaphor for the acceleration of disseminatory speech in the temporal world. For Chaucer, the world in which he lives and writes has reached the late stage of diversified speech where truth-consensus is no longer possible—Dante’s region of discourse *con seme e sanza seme*.

The conceptual arc of the *House of Fame* ends here: in the *civitas terrena* as a towering inferno of “fals and soth compounded”. Geoffrey sees that *Fame*’s judgement is not the only locus that determines which tidings “encres” and which disappear: only *some* of the speech-acts here are able to leave the House. Even the constitution of *Fame*’s court is contingent on a first-order randomness, the unpredictability of which “tydynges” will

manage to “crepe at some crevace, / And flygh forth faste for the nones” (2086–87). The rest, presumably, bounce off the wicker walls to be heard, repeated, and mutated again: there is no telling how many mutations a narrative has undergone before it is assigned to a name and canonised for posterity. Crucially, *no* tidings are capable of reaching Fame’s court as a sign bearing absolute truth or absolute falsity—every one of them is a mixture of both:

And somtyme saugh I thoo at ones
 A lesyng and a sad soth sawe,
 That gonne of aventure drawe
 Out at a wyndowe for to pace;
 And, when they metten in that place,
 They were achekked bothe two,
 And neyther of hem moste out goo
 For other, so they gonne crowde,
 Til ech of hem gan crien lowde...
 “We wil medle us ech with other,
 That no man, be they never so wrothe,
 Shal han on [of us] two, but bothe
 At ones, al beside his leve” ...
 Thus saugh I fals and soth compounded
 Togeder fle for oo tydyng. (2088–2109)

This is the speech-situation of “now-a-dayes” (*CYT* VIII 1396), the endpoint of the exponential “encres” of recorded knowledge over time. All texts that survive time are a mix of truth and untruth, placing the onus on individual readers to “deme” their value—but, as we have seen, temporal readers cannot mitigate the contingency of their own liminal ‘thought’, leading to a perspectival diversity of contingent truths, the *confusio* of differentiated interpretations we saw in the canon’s laboratory. The *Canterbury Tales* will enact the promise made by this vision in the House of Rumour: it will contain a diversity of tidings of “fals and soth compounded”, a set of tales that realise inherited

generic shapes and literary ideals that are centred on the reader's individual "discrecioun", ultimately revealing this process of "wenynge" and "demynge" narrative fruit and chaff to be indefinitely opened and fallible. Readers and authors are both inadequate to the hermeneutic task imposed by the text.

Whether the *House of Fame* is a discarded prologue to the *Canterbury Tales* or just a memorial storehouse of meditations to which Chaucer would regularly return, after its philosophical argument 'ends' in this scene of perpetual inconclusiveness, the remainder of the poem dovetails out to the *Tales*' mass of contingent "tydynges":

And Lord, this hous in alle tymes
Was ful of shipmen and pilgrimes,
With scrippes bret-ful of lesinges,
Entremedled with tydynges,
And eek allone be hemselve.
O, many a thousand tymes twelve
Saugh I eke of these pardoners,
Curroures, and eke messagers,
With boystes crammed ful of lyes
As ever vessel was with lyes. (2121–30)

Merchants are the fathers of tidings: the key distinction among speech-users, for Chaucer, is not 'ecclesiastical or lay', as in the *Canterbury Tales*' pilgrimage-frame; it is the difference between those who voyage and those who don't. The Augustinian dichotomy of stasis and motivity is central to this envisioning of the proliferation of "tydynges": spatially and temporally mobile subjects are the catalysts of *fama*; if "eyr" is the medium for meaning, then the *species in medio* would be these pardoners, "curroures", "pilgrims", wanderers and seafarers, from whose "boystes" tales of "fals and soth compounded" resound.

Openendedness means inconclusiveness—both formally (as *teleute*) and hermeneutically (as *telos*). Whether the end of the *House of Fame*—a glimpse of “A man of gret auctorite...” (2158) followed by an immediate cut-to-black—is a metapoetic tactic or coincidence of composition will always be insoluble. Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar; as Burrow cautioned, there is always a danger of “over-interpretation” in analysing the “vagrant twitches” of historical contingency.⁵⁷ Nonetheless, the end of the *House of Fame* is in perfect accord with the vision of indeterminate, nightmarishly recursive, never-ending quest for “some newe thyng” we have just read. The ellipsis serves the same aesthetic function as the suspended black frame that infamously concluded *The Sopranos*, leaving Tony Soprano’s fate forever unresolved: it is the ultimate expression of narrative contingency, the *House of Fame* gesturing to its own status as one of the true-and-false tidings Geoffrey met in the House of Rumour. Formally and semantically, the end of the *House of Fame* is infinitely deferred, withholding from us the ability to assert one true interpretation of the poem: its ending withdrawn, the paint can never dry on the *House of Fame*, until the final determination of truth and untruth that will take place at the end of recorded time—God’s absolute “demyng” “at the day of doom” (*Ret* X 1094). With this cut-to-black, the reader is jolted from the discursive level of active interpretation to the immediacy of the narrative here-and-now; at the same time, the threshold between the dreamness of this *visio* and the ‘reality’ of the reader’s immediate experience is broken down. Unlike in the vast majority of dream-visions, in which the dreamer has a definitive instant of waking, here there is no recessional buffer-zone between dream and real: Geoffrey’s experience in the *House of Fame* and the reader’s

⁵⁷ Burrow, “Poems Without Endings”, 36–7.

experience of reality as a mediated secondary mental image are in the same ontological boat.

Those who see in this ending a straightforward optimism about novelised fictions without presuppositional structures of value embedded may be guilty of the over-interpretation Burrow warned against. What we are shown is negative potentiality, contingency as the *impossibility* of closure, static meaning, and truth-consensus. This is not the same thing as negative capability, the assertion of temporary and relational aesthetic value as an end in-itself, a counterpoint to the teleological poetic systems constantly re-emerging throughout the medieval and early modern eras. All the same, Chaucer is not as bleakly sceptical of modern fragmentariness as Eliot was in *The Waste Land*, which ended in a clutch of fragments of canonic literature shored up against the ruins of Venus' temple. Eliot's poem about poetry ended with a pyrrhic shrug in the face of the uninterpretable Oneness (*shantih shantih shantih*) that transcends the fragmentary world of individuation and true-or-false *esse apparens*. Chaucer's ambivalent standpoint is more like Kafka's. He diagnoses the problem with empirical positivism, and truth-telling as a teleological poetic, but he does not propose a cure—this is not a proto-modern *ars poetica*. It ends on a non-teleological glance at the poetic future not as a dismal ontological exile, nor as a brave new world of “self-sufficient” fiction, but as both, “compounded”, inconclusiveness and constant renewal as a philosophical matter-of-fact, the natural consequence of the elemental “encres” perpetually taking place in the universe of language. We find the *House of Fame* is an etiology of ontological exile that does not assign a positive or negative value—its refusal to posit or negate, to hold presupposition and judgement in suspension, is its most radical feature. Geoffrey's

pseudo-celestial journey begins and ends in the same state of confusion, caused by his incapacity to make sense of too much multiplied sound—whether that’s the mass of canonised matter in Venus’ temple or the pandemonium of novelised tydynges in the House of Rumour. Unlike Dante, Geoffrey’s journey never brings him closer to truth, because he is always Geoffrey, a subject situated in time, experiencing contingency. If, in the end, this experience has given Chaucer an answer to the question, “why write?”, then, like the true identity of the eagle’s human voice, it’s none of our business, irrevocably lost to the unwritten and unrepresentable past: even now, Chaucer alone knew what Chaucer thought; “I wot myself how best I stond”.

6 In-Conclusion: Into the Chaucer-verse

The *House of Fame* is a poem without an end: its “man of gret auctorite” never arrives, his broken line remaining a site of hermeneutic potentialities that can never terminally resolve. To the still-hot question, “Who was Chaucer’s man of great authority meant to be?” there can never be truth-consensus, only contingent truth-claims (barring, that is, the discovery of some ‘complete’ manuscript buried in our world’s melting “yse”).¹ It is, moreover, a poem without an *end*, an ethically edifying *telos* to its formal *teleute*. The celestial flight of its in-world figure of the poet rebounds off the cosmological threshold through which Dante’s dreamer had been ferried, by the grace of God, with relative serenity. The punchline to Chaucer’s semi-parodic vision of truth exiled in the waste land of contingency is that there is no possibility of return-to-source, no *reditus* from the

¹ On the ‘man of gret auctorite’ and the significance of his non-identity, see Mary J. Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), ch. 6; Fumo, *The Legacy of Apollo*, esp. ch. 1; T.S. Miller, “Writing Dreams to Good: Reading as Writing and Writing as Reading in Chaucer’s Dream Visions”, *Style*, 45, 3 (2011), 528–48; Johnson, “Against Order”, pp. 69–70. Serious attempts to ascribe determinate historical or allegorical identities to this phantom are today uncommon. For an overview of significant theories in the critical history see Pat Trefzger Overbeck, “The ‘Man of Gret Auctorite’ in Chaucer’s *House of Fame*”, *Modern Philology*, 73, 2 (1975), 157–161. On Chaucer’s disruption of ideals of *auctoritas* and the traditional pursuit of *intentio auctoris*, see Joseph E. Grennen, “Chaucer and Chalcidius: The Platonic Origins of the *Hous of Fame*”, *Viator*, 15 (1984), 237–262; Thomas A. Prendergast, “Canon Formation”, pp. 239–251; Gillespie, “Authorship”, pp. 137–40. On the Habermasian definitions of “truth-consensus” and “truth-claim”, which remain significant in philosophical debates about contingent, language, and truth, see Mary Hesse, “Habermas’ Consensus Theory of Truth”, *PSA: Proceedings of the Biennial Meeting of the Philosophy of Science Association*, vol. 2 (1978), 373–396. For Habermas “the objective world, rather than ideal consensus, is the truth-maker...” however, “the inescapability of language dictates the pragmatic epistemological character of his realism”; that is, there is no hope of resolving “the relationship between proposition and world”, and the contingency of language necessitates that the closest we can get to a stable, universal image of reality is a matter of *consensus* about the reference of language within a historically local community of speech-users. James Bohman and William Rehg, “Jürgen Habermas”, *SEP* (Fall 2017 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta. <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/habermas/>> [Accessed 12/07/2021]. See Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action I: Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1984), pp. 273–337.

exitus of discourse. Once the Truth has diversified and multiplied in its emanation into brief contingent things, truths, there is no mechanism to restore its univocity and the potential of collective truth-consensus—not on this side of eternity, in any case; not without divine help. The poem’s progressive and sequential evocations of total contingency—the randomness underlying fame itself, and its time-defying *telos* as ostensible guarantor of value—throw a spanner in the works of the traditional *commentator* in search of an intelligible *intentio auctoris*. Geoffrey’s deflation at what he sees at the cosmic “brynke”, and his consequent refusal to play Fame’s name game, prevent the poem from resolving into any digestible *moralitas*, or any unequivocal statement of “entente” in relation to contingency itself. At its “end” the *House of Fame* becomes a poem perpetually without a point—and pointedly so. If the poet’s quest is, as the *Troilus*-narrator has it, to ensure that their poem “be understonde” (*TC* V.1798), then it is significant that Chaucer relegates all responsibility for this process of understanding to the reader, absolving author and text of any circumscribed (and circumscribing) role in this process. *Troilus* is commended to Gower and Strode, men of *some* authority (however provisional and parodic), for their correction; *Fame* is commended ‘to whom it may concern’, passed to unknowable future readers without comment or complaint, an opened act of language forever “in formation”, as Gaston puts it.²

What, then, can be concluded about a poet whose work consistently “refuses to be conclusive”?³ What definitive truth can be told about a poet whose works, as hopefully I have demonstrated, so often expose the multitude of potential, contingent truths that the

² Gaston, *Reading Chaucer in Time*, pp. 175–178.

³ Larry M. Sklute, *Virtue of Necessity: Inconclusiveness and Narrative Form in Chaucer’s Poetry* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1984), p. 3.

encounters of text and reader may (or may not) bring into being? What might Chaucer be trying to say *about* this contingency? In suggesting some answers to these questions—answers which must be, “of necessitee”, provisional and partial (*KnT* I 3042)—it may be useful to survey what has come before, as if in the eagle’s talons. In the *House of Fame*, engaged in deep (and deeply inconclusive) imaginative play with Dante (and Boethius, and Ovid), Chaucer develops a paradoxical sense of the poet’s place in a contingent episteme; in *Troilus and Criseyde*, he takes the most prevalent model of contingency in his time—the compatibilist model of temporal modalities from Boethius—to such extremes that it collapses into antinomy, reasserting the contingency of language over all philosophical enterprise (even the understanding of contingency itself); in the *Canterbury Tales*, turning his imaginative eye outwards, Chaucer considers the implications of this established vision for the pragmatics and ethics of human life, individually and societally, and he suggests that while human beings may have no means of control over the contingencies of worldly events and of the episteme of their historical moment, they may have *some* agency, however provisional and historically conditioned, over their spiritual and psychological destinies, by choosing to cultivate the habit of grace or sin, by cooperation with Christ through charity or by ceding to the call of concupiscence.

Here, I return to one of this thesis’ core methodological assumptions: of a basic homology between medieval and modern concepts of contingency, which the traditional idea of ‘late medieval nominalism’ fails to encompass in full. The attitude towards contingency on display in Chaucer’s work is complex and anti-teleological, but it is also fully harmonious with the Boethian-Augustinian tradition within which his work is situated. Yet to the extent that there is a philosophical ‘position’ to be parsed from these

many mosaic-pieces, the precision tools of contemporary philosophical vocabularies may be of greater use in its formation.

The view of contingency available in Chaucer is, I would suggest, something like the position that Stephan Leuenberger has called “general contingentism”, which says, in short, “there could be brute necessities...[but] the claim that there are brute necessities is itself contingent. On the general contingentist view, the world is full of contingency—but only contingently so”.⁴ The orthodox position within medieval theology (especially in those arguments informed by Aristotelian modal logic) which posits God as the first mover, uncaused cause, and atemporal beginning-and-end of sequential time, asserts that the necessity and/or contingency of events in the world is predicated on what is known in modern epistemology as a ‘brute fact’, a seminal creative act that simply *is, simpliciter*, beyond explication and causal logic. The intellectual current on which Chaucer seems to surf—of epistemological scepticism about human faculties to resolve metaphysical truth because of their temporal limitations, Delany’s “skeptical fideism”—represents a significant development on this long-standing model, analogous to the nineteenth and twentieth century turn away from metaphysics and towards onto-epistemology.⁵ What the nominalists and anti-nominalists have in common is a displacement of the

⁴ Stephan Leuenberger, “The Contingency of Contingency”, *The Journal of Philosophy*, 112, 2 (2015), 85.

⁵ I adopt Karen Barad’s term ‘onto-epistemology’, which they describe as “the study of practices of knowing in being”, to emphasise the interrelatedness of being and knowledge in post-metaphysical models of truth and interpretation. For Barad, “We don’t obtain knowledge by standing outside the world; we know because we are *of* the world. We are part of the world in its differential becoming. The separation of epistemology from ontology is a reverberation of a metaphysics that assumes an inherent difference between human and nonhuman, subject and object, mind and body, matter and discourse”. Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), p. 185.

incomprehensibility of the cosmic order away from the as-such ineffability of God and onto the conditions of temporal experience itself—what Dante calls the “twofold source” of the “insufficiency” of our phenomenal qualities: the imperfections of sense-perception and conscious thought, and the incapacity of language to fully transcribe these experiential reflections of reality (*Il Conv* III.iv).⁶

For Chaucer, truth is contingent on language and experience—both of which are contingent on each other, in a paradox caused by aporias of temporality, not the nature of the universe itself. The foundational quality of taking-place that means there is something and not nothing, and on which time and change are predicated, is ineffable (or, in Schelling’s term, ‘unprethinkable’).⁷ The temporal limitedness of language and of conceptual thought entails that all truth-claims that take place within them uphold an immitigable contingency; even truths by faith, once they have been translated and transposed into the corruptible realm of contingent language and understanding, bear the

⁶ On scholasticism and epistemological scepticism, see John Marenbon, *The Many Roots of Medieval Logic: The Aristotelian and Non-Aristotelian Traditions* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), esp. chs. 1, 5; Henrik Lagerlund, ed., *Rethinking the History of Skepticism: The Missing Medieval Background* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), esp. Claude Panaccio and David Piché, “Ockham’s Reliabilism and the Intuition of Non-Existents”, pp. 97–118; Gyula Klima, “The Anti-Skepticism of John Buridan and Thomas Aquinas”, pp. 145–170; Dominik Perler, “Does God Deceive Us? Skeptical Hypotheses in Late Medieval Epistemology”, pp. 171–192.

⁷ ‘Unprethinkable Being’ is a term from Schelling’s *Naturphilosophie*, a transcendental realism with some striking parallels to the illuminationist theories within medieval light metaphysics (in which light as phenomenon is consubstantial with God’s creative act, and so in some sense the non-contingent *verum esse* of *lux* inheres in the partial beings of contingent *lumen*, or secondary, radiated light). For Schelling, light bears a relation to the “unprethinkable Being”; as Gabriel says, “*the unprethinkable Being is not God...it is nothing but the name for the facticity of reason...Yet, in which sense could the pure actuality, the mere being there of reason be contingent?*”. According to Gabriel, Schelling’s concept of unprethinkable Being exposes the aporia that emerges in discourse about metaphysical modality, the contingency of necessity and the necessity of contingency: “the necessity of the unprethinkable Being, i.e. the very necessity of the *necessario existens* is contingent because it depends on the existence of something contingent. *The necessity of the necessario existens can only be ascertained after contingency is established*”. Markus Gabriel and Slavoj Žižek, *Mythology, Madness and Laughter: Subjectivity in German Idealism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009), p. 56–8.

potential to be misread, misunderstood, misrepresented. The “brute fact” of God as cosmic *causa finalis* is itself contingent, a truth in language, transfigured in our temporal and phenomenal dimensions which are so fundamentally dissimilar to the “simplicite” and “stabilenes” of the “devyne intelligence” (*Bo* IV.pr.6, 41–53). Chaucer, in short, as a *true* ‘Boethian reader’ with his finger on the pulse of his period’s philosophical advances, *knows his limits* in the most profound sense imaginable. While there is no skirting the aporetic nature of temporal signs and concepts, the hard-coded limits on what can be communicated of reality, Chaucer sees that the realm of the fictional has the potential to do what propositional and logical philosophy cannot: to enable an imaginative look beyond the event horizon of language, such that the first-order contingency of being itself may be traced via absence (if not given solid shape). Like all experiences, fictions are made of contingency, they express that basic Aristotelian tension between potentials and actuals that is perpetually taking-place at all levels of created time. They cannot say anything permanently and universally true—they cannot be understood by all readers in all times in guaranteed consensus—but they can, unlike philosophy’s logico-linguistic schemata, *expose* this predicative dimension of impermanence and multiversality—the cosmic background radiation of potentiality in which Troilus and Criseyde’s night of love, the alchemists’ lab-shaking failures, Griselda’s suffering, Geffrey’s flight in the eagle’s talons, are always taking place. Contingency is the natural consequence of the non-stop diversification and divisibility that are the source of all difference in the temporal world; to be without contingency is to no longer be of this world, to be beyond the matter available to the poet’s pen. So, the poet’s traditional *telos* of illuminatory truth-telling may be unworkable—and as such, the writer’s work may never end.

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