

CHAUCERIAN METAPOETICS AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF
POETRY

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Thesis Abstract	1
Acknowledgments	2
 PART I	
CHAPTER I: Methodological Considerations and a Brief Portrait of the Pardoner's Old Man.	3 – 29
CHAPTER II: The Metapoetic Function of Religious Irony in the <i>Miller's Tale</i> .	30 – 74
CHAPTER III: The <i>Manciple's Tale</i> and the Proper Use of Language in Poetry.	75 – 110
 PART II	
CHAPTER IV: The Lost World of the <i>Nun's Priest's Tale</i> .	111 – 344
 WORKS CITED	 345 – 371

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This thesis places Chaucer within the tradition of philosophical poetry that begins in Plato and extends through classical and medieval Latin culture. In this Platonic tradition, poetry is a self-reflexive epistemological practice that interrogates the conditions of art in general. As such, poetry as metapoetics takes itself as its own object of inquiry in order to reinforce and generate its own definitions without regard to extrinsic considerations. It attempts to create a poetic-knowledge proper instead of one that is dependant on other modes for meaning. The particular manner in which this is expressed is according to the idea of the loss of the Golden Age. In the Augustinian context of Chaucer's poetry, language, in its literal and historical signifying functions is an effect of the noetic fall and a deformation of an earlier symbolism. The Chaucerian poems this thesis considers concern themselves with the solution to a historical literary lament for language's fall, a solution that suggests that the instability in language can be overcome with reference to what has been *lost* in language. The chapters are organized to reflect the medieval Neoplatonic *ascensus*. The first chapter concerns the Pardoner's Old Man and his relationship to the literary history of Tithonus in which the renewing of youth is ironically promoted in order to perpetually delay eternity and make the current world co-eternal to the coming world. In the *Miller's Tale*, more aggressive narrative strategies deploy the machinery of atheism in order to make a god-less universe the sufficient grounds for the transformation of a fallen and contingent world into the only world whatsoever. The *Manciple's Tale's* opposite strategy leaves the world intact in its current state and instead makes divine beings human. Phoebus expatriates to earth and attempts to co-mingle it with heaven in order to unify art and history into a single monistic experience. Finally, the *Nun's Priest's Tale* acts as *ars poetica* for the entire Chaucerian Performance and undercuts the naturalistic strategies of the first three poems by a long experiment in the philosophical conflict between art and history. By imagining art and history as epistemologically antagonistic it attempts to subdue in a definitive manner poetic strategies that would imagine human history as the necessary knowledge-condition for poetic language.

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CHAPTER I

Methodological Considerations and a Brief Portrait of the Pardoner's Old Man

This chapter evokes Chaucerian method as a transhistorical negotiation, part of a poetic school in the tradition of Western thought. The terms 'occasion' 'content' and 'form' are defined in their consistent and specified use throughout the thesis. Next the idea of 'metapoetics' is initially described and the aporetic opposition between the modes that describe artistic eternity are set against deciduous modes of the phenomenal. Finally a poetic history of Tithonus and his transformation into a cicada from the Homeric Hymns forward is brought to bear on the Old Man in order to imagine them as literary relatives and practitioners of naturalist rhetoric against which a silent poetic irony moves in order to bring back into being prelapsarian symbols that have ceased to exist inside speech.

There is an intellectual heritage beginning in Plato that comes to Chaucer through classical writers such as Cicero, Ovid, and Virgil, a heritage passed down in Latin by Augustine, Macrobius, and Boethius, through France via Alain de Lille, Chrétien, and the *Roman de la Rose*, and inherited by early Italian humanist poets that arrives safely in England because of a trip to Canterbury. According to D. W. Robertson,

Chaucer's obvious admiration for Ovid, for Boethius and for Jean de Meun places him firmly in that tradition of 'poetic philosophy' which extends from early glosses on Homer through the fathers of the Church and down to the more

sincerely Christian humanists of the Renaissance. If he sought, like Ficino's Plato, to 'joke seriously and to play most studiously,' he was only fulfilling the potentialities of the tradition in which he worked.¹

In the same spirit Yasunari Takada argues,

There are notable references in Chaucer to the Neoplatonic *auctores* such as Martianus Capella, Boethius, Macrobius, and Alain de Lille. They stand us in good stead in showing Chaucer working not in insular seclusion but in an active dialogue with the great continental tradition of Neoplatonism. The image of Chaucer as a cosmopolitan poet is indeed familiar enough, particularly to the reader of *Troilus and Criseyde*, where is suggested in a Dantesque manner the author's ambition to affiliate himself with the great European Tradition of 'poesy', i.e. 'Virgile, Ovide, Omer, Lucan, and Stace. The transcultural negotiation here is in a sense simple and straightforward and even austere.²

It also comes to Chaucer through Christianity, whose soteriology is so saturated in the medieval period with an idiosyncratic form of Neoplatonic spirituality. Augustine writes,

Since you first of all desired to show me how you 'resist the proud and give grace to the humble', and with what mercy on your part the way of humility was made clear to men that your 'word was made flesh and dwelt among us', you provided for me through some certain man, swollen with the most monstrous pride, some of the books of the Platonists translated from Greek into Latin. There it was that I read, not indeed the very words, but to the same purpose, and reinforced by manifold reasons, that 'in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God'.³

¹ D.W. Robertson, *A Preface to Chaucer: Studies in Medieval Perspectives*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press: 1962): 365.

² Yasunari Takada, "Chaucer's use of Neoplatonic Traditions." In *Platonism and the English Imagination*. ed. Anna Baldwin and Sarah Hutton. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994): 45.

³ Augustine, *Confessions* (VII: IX). "*Et primo volens ostendere mihi, quam resistas superbis, humilibus autem des gratiam, et quanta misericordia tua demonstrata sit hominibus via humilitatis, quod verbum caro factum est et habitavit inter homines: procurasti mihi per quendam hominem, inmanissimo typho turgidum, quosdam Platoniorum libros ex graeca lingua in latinum versos; et ibi legi non quidem his*

Chaucer's engagement with this philosophical heritage has as much to do with material adaptation and direct textual influence as it does with his poetry's philosophical participation in what was a pervasive and basic epistemological perspective towards language and reality. At its very fundamental level this suggested that there was a form of meaning in the universe that remained unavailable to empirical knowledge and to our life lived *in time*; in looser terms, that the Fall cleaves the world in two and causes symbol and speech to endure a long exile under the cloud of human history. Brief slivers of light shine through prior to the day when it is all reversed, light from a coming world where John tells us "the city had no need of the sun."⁴ In the tradition of medieval Neoplatonism, one of these families of sunless sunbeams is Art, which reunites in itself a lost human inheritance and brings back into being the time prior when we were whole and our reference was direct. In this epistemological structure, material history and literal language are transformed by poetic and spiritual speculation in pursuit of an ineffable symbolic order. Such an attitude towards language is, quite literally, a world apart from naturalistic and monistic traditions to which poets of the euhemerist⁵ temperament belong.

Chaucer's poetry participates in a particular thread or current in the history of ideas, one in which poetry attempts to divest itself of phenomenal conditions (that is, its own complete range of passive and active historical affects) in order to, according

verbis, sed hoc idem omnino multis et multiplicibus suaderi rationibus, quod in principio erat verbum et verbum erat apud deum et dues erat verbum." The Confessions of Saint Augustine, trans. E.M. Blaiklock. (London: Hodder & Stoughton Ltd., 2009): 171.

⁴ Revelation 21:23. Unless otherwise stated, all Biblical references are to the King James Version.

⁵ "Euhemerism." The method of mythological interpretation which regards myths as traditional accounts of real incidents in human history. Oxford English Dictionary: Volume III. (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1933)

to Paul Ricoeur, “reach the mythic level where its function of discovery is set free”⁶ and in doing so, join the ranks of a poetic history.

Go, litel boke, go, litel myn tragedye,
 Ther God thi makere yet, er that he dye,
 So sende myght to make in som comedye!
 But litel booke, no makyng thow n’envie,
 But subgit be to alle poesye;
 And kis the steppes where as thow seest pace
 Virgile, Ovide, Omer, Lucan and Stace.

(*Troilus and Criseyde*, V: 1786-1792)⁷

The history to which Chaucer’s poetry methodologically and candidly aspires has more to do with a mode of argument that figurally establishes itself in a “place apart,”⁸ one in which Ovid and Chaucer could have more to do with each other intellectually than would Chaucer and Gower, and one in which the ‘Ovid’ to which Chaucer’s poetry refers itself with has less to do with the *Ovide Moralisé* than it does the *Metamorphoses*. Marc Pelen’s seminal study of Latin poetic irony in the *Roman de la Rose* speaks well to Chaucer’s poetry:

At this point, a discussion of the ironic unity of the *Roman* can, I think, best be conducted from the memory of a contiguous Latin culture, and I have been myself surprised to find that many of the most original literary procedures in

⁶ Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*. trans. Robert Czerny (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978): 254.

⁷ All references to Chaucer’s work are to the *Riverside Chaucer*. ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987)

⁸ Peter Travis, “Chaucer’s Heliotropes and the Poetics of Metaphor.” *Speculum*, Vol. 72, No. 2. (April, 1997): 407.

the narrative derive from a highly original transformation of its Latin literary models.⁹

This notion of “the memory of a contiguous Latin culture” leaves open the greater possibility of an intellectual and philosophical rather than merely textual tradition, a tradition of mind and of literary spirit. Indeed, conducting a literary genealogy cannot, according to its own power, successfully describe Chaucer’s poetic method. The identification of thematic convergences, shared characters and stories between, for instance, Chaucer and Ovid must begin with the assumption that such elements belong to the “occasion” and “content” of poetry whose ultimate purposes will be self-referentially subsumed in service to a larger metapoetic mode of instruction, by which I understand “form.” Put simply, it is not enough to remark upon the fact that Apollo and his bird make an appearance in both the *Metamorphoses II* and the *Manciple’s Tale*- the critic must try and determine how they serve the philosophy of both poems, a philosophy foreign to the language and action of the poem itself because it is based in the consistent presuppositions of an historical school of thought. This assumption is not modern, however much contemporary philosophers of language might see in some of this their own image, but the logical outcome of the sort of poetry Chaucer writes and the sort of literature and dialectic from which his poems draw their most direct theoretical inspiration, the great achievements of which can frustrate any generation as ably it did Chaucer’s.¹⁰

⁹ Marc Pelen, *Latin Poetic Irony in the Roman de la Rose*. (Liverpool: Francis Cairns, 1987): viii.

¹⁰ For instance, Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 686 (c.1420) contains an alliterative scribal ending to the *Cook’s Tale* in which Perkyn receives his just desserts according to a literal matrix of sin and punishment, while 20th Century critic J. Leslie Hotson attempts a one-to-one correspondence between Chauntecleer and the ill-fated Duke of Norfolk. Likewise the col fox is conveniently paired with a 14th Century “Mr. Richard Colfox.” J. Leslie Hotson. *Colfox vs. Chauntecleer*. PMLA, Vol. 39, No. 4. (December, 1924): 762-781. Both, over the long arc of history, are either purposefully

Note on Terminology and Methodology

I employ these terms consistently, “occasion,” “content” and “form.” They occur on a sliding scale with occasion and content at the literal end and form at the abstract. By “occasion” I understand a literal cause for a poem: the death of Scipio for example- the historical death of the historical Scipio that occasions the writing of Cicero’s *De Amicitia*. This is distinct from Scipio’s representation in literature, as an emissary of immortality, about whom Cicero writes:

Human souls were of God; upon their departure from the body a return to heaven lay open to them...Scipio held this same view, for only a few days before his death...he...devoted almost all of the conclusions of his discussion to the immortality of the soul, making use of arguments which he had heard, he said, from Africanus the Elder through a vision in his sleep.¹¹

By “content” I understand the entire phenomenology of experience both as it obtains under the banner of historical being and the representation of historical being in art, including matters of narrative machinery and interlocutory¹² rhetoric in its literal utterance. This is a poem qua language, plot, drama, social satire, and each subsequent literal evocation that stands distinct and prior to its own ironic reversal. It is this second category to which the various schools of historicism most powerfully speak.

reorienting Chaucer’s irony towards literal ends for some larger metapoetic purpose or are accidentally proving in practice the reverse alchemy of directing poetry back towards life instead of art.

¹¹ Cicero, *De Amicitia* (iv.14) “*Animos hominum esse divinos eisque, cum ex corpore excessissent, reditum in caelum patere...Quod idem Scipioni videbatur, qui quidem, quasi praesagiret, perpaucis ante mortem diebus...cuius disputationis fuit extremum fere de immortalitate animorum, quae se in quiete per visum ex Africano audisse dicebat.*” Cicero: *De Senectute, De Amicitia, De Divinatione*. trans. William Armistead Falconer. (London: Harvard University Press, 2001): 123.

¹² I will refer to characters as “interlocutors” in order to emphasize their role as practitioners of rhetorical rather than psychological modes. “Interlocutor.” “One who takes part in a dialogue, conversation, or discussion. In pl. the persons who carry on a dialogue.” Oxford English Dictionary: Second Edition. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

Finally, by “form” I understand the epistemology of that ironic reversal- an unspoken order of metaphorical abstraction whose substantial¹³ identity belongs to a Platonic epistemology of artistic ideas, by nature antagonistic to both occasion and content. It is this third category to which Chaucer’s favorite philosophers most powerfully speak. The passage from occasion to content and then form is not analog; it is aporetic.¹⁴ It is the difference between the unified upward sweep of low notes to high from an air raid siren as opposed to the sound of violins tuning and the beginning of a concerto. The passage from occasion and content to form is like the second. The medieval Platonic *ascensus* does not take steady steps from life to art and from time to eternity. Rather, form actualizes through the symbolic frustration and ultimate destruction of the previous two categories. Poetic eternity occurs on the ruins of time rather than as the apotheosis of time.

The manner in which the idea of poetic eternity is posited is based in the idea of “metapoetics”- when poetry achieves such a level of abstraction that its metaphors take themselves as their own objects of enquiry. As such, when a poem takes *itself* as its own object of enquiry it takes all poetry as its object as well. At this point poetry alone has become the means of its own self-exegesis. And indeed, that poetry *paradoxically* contains the means of its own self-exegesis is not a new notion, but perhaps one that features less in medieval studies than in certain strands of philosophy¹⁵ or in scholarly considerations of classical literature guided by Platonic

¹³ “Substantial” in its ontological sense: “The nature or distinctive character in virtue of possessing which a thing is what it (specifically or individually) is.” “Substance” Oxford English Dictionary Second Edition. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

¹⁴ I use “aporia” consistently in its most extreme sense: an insoluble contradiction. In the context of this thesis it describes a Platonic impasse between art and history and epistemology and ontology.

¹⁵ See for instance Max Black, Models and Metaphors: Studies in Language and Philosophy. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1962) and Sheldon Sax, On Metaphor. (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1980).

introspection.¹⁶ However, the “self-exegesis” of poetry is paradoxical in the sense that it offers no key to its own interpretation while also providing the *precedent* for its own interpretation. If we agree with the philosophical position that a poem of sufficient metaphorical sophistication can generate knowledge rather than re-describe it, then we also understand that the uncooperative “precedent” poetry provides for its own interpretation is what Peter Travis describes when he writes, “the premise upon which every metaphorical construct is grounded is, simply, another metaphor.”¹⁷ At one level of theory and language, poems beget poems, and part of the unenviable job of the literary critic is to consider according to a limited linguistic perspective infinite regressions of a symbolic order. Even if the history of poetry is a house of mirrors, nevertheless, one manner in which to read a poem is to declare that ‘poetry about poetry is our foremost concern’, and then discover what meanings are produced within the poem’s own metaphorical schedule that self-reflexively constitute a philosophy of itself. In achieving disembarassment from the literal sequence of its own “content,” by ending the outward movement of symbols towards history and collapsing them inward towards themselves, metapoetic literature achieves “form,” achieves the means by which it generates itself without reference to its own *insubstantial* phenomenality.

It is in this manner that the idea of a “poetic eternity” obtains. It happens first at the level of language when this “insubstantial phenomenality” gives way to autotelism, to a tautological world of symbols that that cannot be seized at a moment of literal predication. Next it occurs according to the particular power of the medieval mind to posit the Mind of God as the paradoxical telos of all teleologies. This is not

¹⁶ See G.R.F. Ferrari, *Listening to the Cicadas: A Study of Plato’s Phaedrus*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

¹⁷ Travis. *Heliotropes*, 424.

the end of referentiality or a pure solipsism. To the medieval Neoplatonist, God is a brute fact of linguistic reference. The idea that severing language from its literal referent, from its historical being, entails the loss of meaning is the exact opposite of what they try to express. What the medieval Neoplatonist tries to express is that the loss of meaning *began* the day that language found a literal referent and predicated its own historical being. This, of course, according to the medieval exegetical tradition, is the Friday of the Fall. Instead, the dissolution of historical being in language is the reconstitution of meaning. The end of history in language is prophetic metapoetry. It describes the coming day when the noetic Fall reverses and language takes back its prelinguistic powers. The spiritual import is clear. When Dante approaches God in the *Paradiso*, God is a self-contained circle.

O Light that aye sole in thyself dost bide,
sole understand'st thyself, and being self-known,
self-knowing, lov'st thyself, self-gratified!

...

so I, before that marvel strange and new,
wished to discover how the image lay
within the circle...¹⁸

When in the metapoetry of the medieval Neoplatonist we sense the movement towards that which “sole understand'st thyself” and “in thyself dost bide,” even that which “lov'st thyself, self-gratified” we understand a new mimesis. It is the imitation of divine being. The experience of metapoetry is wistful and religious. It says that we were supposed to know more and mean more every time we spoke. When Chaucer's medieval metapoetry imagines itself without reference to anything but itself, it

¹⁸ Dante, *Paradiso* (XXXIII: 121-125, 136-145) The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri, trans. Geoffrey L. Bickersteth. (Oxford: Shakespeare Head Press, 1972): 769.

suspends the Fall, places itself “before that marvel strange and new” and walks and talks like an incorruptible thing.

Every mode of reading brings us a new Chaucer. The resounding success and domination of historicist criticism over the last quarter century has brought us its own Chaucer, one more politically and socially subtle than the other Chaucers before him. But the Chaucer that has gone missing inside historicism's Chaucer is Chaucer the theorist, Chaucer the mystic, and Chaucer the Platonic comedian of austere poetic practices and influences, the Chaucer whose philosophical mentors would not have taken for a fact what the historicist does - that all writing is a political activity. If there is a 'why' to a Chaucerian metapoetics, it is that there is another 'new' Chaucer to be had, even if he is one with older sensibilities. And it is not just for novelty's sake that a metapoetic Chaucer is desirable. It is because every positive critical choice produces an opposite. For every critical decision to depict all uses of human language as historically inscribed the vacant space opposite fills with the suspicion that perhaps there are human uses of language that are not. Over the span of many years and many reimaginings of that historicist principle, that vacant space has grown to bursting size. There is an entire world inside that space now and in order to recognize its shape, like recognizing the shape of anything so immense, we need to look down at it from above, we need to look at poetry from the perspective of metapoetry. When we do, we find that we are not alone at the sinewy ends of new philosophies but plumb in the middle of an historical school of thought that flowered into one of its highest literary expressions in the later Middle Ages.

The idea of the metapoetic is so tangled within the poetic that it is difficult to describe apart from the medium in which it occurs. Metapoetics is a mode of cognition, a point of view, and as is often the case in the Platonic tradition, something

like an inside joke for the writers who practice it. Even those treatises that we regard as outright *ars poetica* are woven into the normal processes of ironic literature. Horace's *Ars Poetica* is written in a voice, it plays in misappropriation, it makes the glib "delight" function as the fullness of the soul's experience of art. Boccaccio's *Genealogy of the Pagan Gods* requires us to tease theory from mythography. Alain de Lille's *Good and Perfect Man* is the story of language's resurrection from death as much as man's. Chaucer's most sophisticated artistic theorizing is a poem about chickens. For this reason, the metapoetic must be observed in action. It has less to do with applying a set of principles, beyond its baldest definitions, than it does witnessing self-constituting principles emerge from unexpected places, and then collecting them into a transhistorical menagerie. When we do, we begin to recognize an ironic unity. The poems and poets we will consider seem to always attempt the following things: to kiss the superlunary steps of "alle poesye," to reassert language as a visionary prelingualism, to intermingle ridicule and bonhomie while dismissing this world for a better one, to deny that there is a knowledge of the body, to depict sexual bliss as the cure to metaphysics, to lament the passing of the Golden Age. The principal object of this study is demonstrative. It attempts to clear away some of the phenomenal brush that may have accumulated under the historical critic's watch in order to appreciate from within Chaucer's poems the philosophical and mythological rather than the purely social fabric of his very medieval performance. When all the dust has settled, the design is quite simple: This thesis sides with the general idea that the most interesting thing about Geoffrey Chaucer is not that he was alive during the 1380s, but that he was alive when he wrote the *Canterbury Tales*.

In that spirit, I pursue the architecture of Chaucerian metapoetics in four stages. This first stage is a sketch. The next chapters take focused readings of a single poem in order to prefigure philosophies that culminate in the *Nun's Priest's Tale*. For clarity it is structured something like a story. It begins and ends at a tree. It begins at a tree where an Old Man hoards the metals that were mined to bring down the Golden Age and ends at a tree where a rooster heroically reinstates a Golden Age that has yet to lapse. In between, one chapter ponders Nicholas' scream for a Flood to drown a fallen world a second time, and another covers its eyes and looks through its fingers at Phoebus' bloody attempt to bring heaven crashing down to earth in a pulp romance with "wyf." Each of these shorter chapters meets up with the longer concluding chapter in order to answer questions of first principle: What is art? Did art fall along with human history?

"The only way to stay out of trouble is to grow old."¹⁹

The first story that ends at a tree begins millennia prior to the unfortunate afternoon at the pub during which the *Pardoner's Tale* takes place. The antinomies that live inside the Pardoner's Old Man and the unresolved questions of time and eternity will eventually come to a somewhat happy perch on Chauntecleer's branch. Until then we must understand how this Old Man knows that this tree *is* death and why he sends others to it in place of himself. Perhaps the least obvious way is to begin with the question, 'What do Tithonus and cicadas have to do with life and death'? By mythologically tracing the question from the Greek classical age to the Pardoner, we

¹⁹ *The Lady from Shanghai*. Dir. Orson Wells. Screenplay Orson Wells. Perf. Rita Hayworth, Orson Wells. Columbia Pictures. 1947. Film.

are able to appreciate not only the fluency of the poem's philosophical style with a long intellectual and symbolic heritage but also the rather particular manner in which it straddles the houses of Fame and Rumour in order to consider Elysian themes from the comfort of a 14th century setting. And if from what follows we labor to deduce a general approach, then we have the beginnings of a methodology that can help us to understand Chaucer's poetry as something that actively and ironically suggests a poetic philosophy or metapoetics, and one that is neither purely the product of its time or a even a poetic vision of its time, but a poetic vision of itself and of poetry, writ large.

Like many Chaucerian tales, the *Pardoner's Tale's* begins its comedic descent at "prime," the "morwe tyde" and the canonical hour during which Parson tells us, it "is moost covenable a man to seye his preyeres, and for to thynken on God, and for to honoure God." (*Parson's Tale*, 707). Instead, "Thise riotoures thre of which I telle,/ Longe erst er prime rong of any belle,/ Were set hem in a taverne to drynke." (*Pardoner's Tale*, 661- 663). Flanders is sick with plague. Death roams freely through the countryside, but he lives "Henne over a mile, withinne a greet village" (687) where "he hath slayn this yeer" (686) "bothe man and womman, child, and hyne, and page..." (688) "his habitacioun be there." (689). The rioters swear in drunken polyptotons to "sleen this false traytour Deeth/ He shal be sleyn, he that so manye sleeth." (699-700) The narrator echoes, "Deeth shal be deed, if that they may hym hente! (710). But the figure of Death, something of a Macguffin²⁰ in the poem, is not the only twisted thing wandering the nearby woods. "Whan they han goon nat fully

²⁰ "Macguffin." In a film (now also in a novel or other form of narrative fiction): a particular event, object, factor, etc., initially presented as being of great significance to the story, but often having little actual importance for the plot as it develops. Oxford English Dictionary: Third Edition. (Oxford. Clarendon Press, 2001)

half a mile,/ Right as they wolde han troden over a stile,/ An oold man and a povre
with hem mette.” (712- 713).

“Body” is confusion in the *Pardoner’s Tale*, especially an old man’s. The Host tells the Physician, “I pray to God so save thy gentil cors./ And eek thyne urinals and thy jurdones.” (*Pardoner’s Prologue*, 304- 305). Indulgences guard the Pardoner’s body. “Oure lige lordes seel on my patente,/ That shewe I first, my body to warente.” (*Pardoner’s Prologue*, 337- 338). The broken body of Christ figures twice, unresurrected. “Oure blisshed Lordes body they totere--/ Hem thoughte that Jewes rente hym noght ynough.” (474-475). “And Cristes blessed body they torente.” (710). The rioters decide to ‘have a drink and think about it’ and toast a hellscape Eucharist next to a murdered friend. “Now lat us sitte and drynke, and make us merie,/ And afterward we wol his body berie.” (883- 884). In a final confused turn the poem suggests a Platonic exit from flesh: “Whan that the soule shal fro the body passe.” (940).

At the center of this confusion is an Old Man who cannot leave his body behind. “Why livestow so longe in so greet age?” (719). The question is not ‘why are you so old’? The question is how the man is so old for so long, how he lives at all, a walking, talking corpse in funeral dress. “Why artow al forwrapped save thy face?” (718). The Old Man tells us why he cannot die. “For I ne kan nat fynde/ A man, though that I walked into Ynde,/ Neither in citee ne in no village,/ That wolde chaunge his youthe for myn age;/ And therefore moot I han myn age stille.” (721- 725). Of course the correct answer for old men who are not *this* Old Man would be something simpler: “Just old, I guess.” This Old Man’s answer is strange. He has wandered the whole world on foot, gone as far as India to find someone who will change youth for his years. No man wants to die, but what he tells the rioters is that

neither can he find one that wants to live like a dead man. “Thus walke I, lyk a restelees kaityf.” (728). The Old Man says that he cries out to the ground, his “moodres gate.” (729) “Leeve mooder, leet me in!” But it is a ruse; this is a man who refuses to die. Some other power sustains him; his grasp on life is tenacious. He wants to do it all over again, to live again as a young man, to continue bartering his old age for a younger day. He says he would “chaunge my cheste,/ that in my chambre longe tyme hath be.” (735- 736). What the Old Man is not telling the rioters is that will not reenter his “chambre” without his youth. He was locked in it for half of an eternity by the Dawn. By the time he wanders through this poem he has already escaped and fallen from classical heaven to roam the earth searching for someone whose youth he can swindle. He was not always like this, but a long time ago the gods played him a trick.

The earliest version of the myth is the 7th Century B.C. Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite.²¹

So again Tithonus was seized by the golden-throned dawn from your family, a man like the immortals. She went to ask the dark-cloud son of Kronos for him to be immortal and live forever, and Zeus assented and fulfilled her wish-foolish lady dawn, she did not think to ask youth for him, and the stripping away of baneful old age. So long as lovely youth possessed him, he took his delight in Dawn of the golden throne, the early-born, and dwelt by the waters of Ocean at the ends of the earth; but when the first scattering of gray hairs came forth from his handsome head and his noble chin, the lady Dawn stayed away from his bed, but kept him in her mansion and nurtured him with food and ambrosia, and gave him fine clothing. And when repulsive old age pressed fully upon him, and he could not move or lift any of his limbs, this is what she

²¹ Concerning the history of the Tithonus myth I am indebted to the kind assistance of Professor Richard Janko and his soon to be published article “Tithonus and Eos in the New Sappho (fr. 58.11-23), with a note on Horace *Odes* 1.22.”

decided was the best course: she laid him away in a chamber, and shut its shining doors. His voice still runs on unceasing, but there is none of the strength that there used to be in his bent limbs.²²

Translator Martin West's footnote states, "This account seems to hint at the myth, first attested in Hellanicus... that Tithonus became a cicada. Cicadas begin to be noisy around dawn."²³ Other versions of the myth take us in closer to this cicadian voice that "still runs on unceasing." In a fragmentary version from 5th century B.C. historian Hellanicus of Lesbos, the story ends, "Day fell in love with Tithonus, the son of Laomedon and brother of Priam, and had by him a son Memnon. When he (i.e. Tithonus) had become spent by a long life, the goddess turned him into a cicada. This is why the poet (i.e. Homer) compares the councillors, his relatives, to cicadas."²⁴ The symbolic relationship of the cicada to tired rhetoric, old age, and even risking heaven and hell for a pretty girl was common myth in Homer's time.

The two sages, Ucalegon and Antenor, elders of the people, were seated by the Scæen gates, with Priam, Panthoüs, Thymœtes, Lampus, Clytius, and Hiketaon of the race of Mars. These were too old to fight, but they were fluent orators, and sat on the tower like cicadas that chirrup delicately from the boughs of some high tree in a wood. When they saw Helen coming towards the tower, they said softly to one another, 'Small wonder the Trojans and the Achæens should endure so much for so long, for the sake of a woman so marvelously and divinely lovely.'²⁵

The tradition exhibits distinct symbolic associations and philosophical dilemmas:

Tithonus attempts to *experience* eternity (rather than speculate upon it, in the

²² *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*. Homeric Hymns, Homeric Apocrypha, Lives of Homer. trans. Martin L. West. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003): 177.

²³ *Ibid*, 177, fn 48.

²⁴ Hellanicus, *Fragment 140*. Quoted in Janko, 20. Translation Janko.

²⁵ Homer, *Iliad*. The Iliad. trans. Samuel Butler. (London: Arcturus Publishing Limited, 2009): 60.

Boethian sense). The bid to enjoy the Dawn physically as a human lover secures his three-fold curse. He lives ‘forever’ in comic cruelty. He is cast out in his never-ending old age, an old age that never passes through the Ciceronian metonymy whereby it could negotiate the power of the soul and prophesy its impending release. As such his rhetoric is locked in history and bound to the single task of renewing his youth.

However, not all transformations into a cicada are an epistemological dead-end in classical literature. Rory B. Egan argues that classical Greeks held “a related belief that by shedding its skin and sprouting wings on its fresh white body it could realize perpetual youth.”²⁶ Likewise Janko writes, “Even if it is a lowly insect, the cicada was believed to have an immortality of a sort, since it was thought to feed on nothing but dew and to be able to rejuvenate itself by shedding its skin periodically, like a snake.”²⁷ But Tithonus’ new life that collapses his old body and speech into a cicada’s is not immortality. Even a bug that can last as long as the world endures cannot last beyond it. When Tithonus is absent his problem persists in poetic discussions of the cicada: physical perpetuation, the incessant crying that falls upon Eos’ deaf ears, the Sisyphian shedding of old age for youth. Some form of antiphrasis must overcome the inability of perpetuity to reconstitute itself as eternity in poetry. In the *Aetia*, Callimachus writes,

For we sing among those who love the shrill voice of the cicada and not the noise of the asses. Let others bray just like the long-eared brute, but let me be the dainty, the winged one. Oh yes indeed! that I may sing living on dew-drops, free sustenance from the divine air; that I may then shed old age, which weighs upon me like the three-cornered island upon deadly Enceladus. But never mind! For if the Muses have not looked askance at

²⁶ Rory. B. Egan, “Cicada in Ancient Greece: Ventures in Classical Tettigology.” *Cultural Entomology Digest*. Issue 3. (November 1994): 21.

²⁷ Janko, 21.

one in his childhood, they do not cast him from their friendship when he is grey.²⁸

What Callimachus suggests very imperfectly is that a spectral negative exists to the tradition. Eternity can rescue him when the Muses do not “look askance” and “cast him from their friendship when he is grey.” If the cicada itself carries the common sense *telos* that suggests something undying, even at the entomological level, the *Aetia* aims at something more resounding.

What it aims at is this: the figure of the cicada is a double tradition, like Venus. In the Homeric Hymn, Eos locks away a shriveled Tithonus. Such is the nature of poetic failure and the experimental depiction of divine failure, both things perfected in Chaucer’s poetry. First the failed poet of love misappropriates the gods and imagines a world in which he becomes physically immortal by the uninterrupted seduction of the Dawn. In the second, a negligent goddess cannot linger long in the bed of men and returns to her sunrises, returns to her proper function as an agent of eternity. The rhetoric of a crumbling Tithonus becomes like the cicada’s chirping. So Tithonus becomes a cicada- physically enduring and breathlessly calling out every morning as Eos, as young as she will always be, carries out another newborn sunrise on her hips. Meanwhile Callimachus sees an exit from the poetic failure of Tithonus, charter member of ‘natural immortality’ and a perpetual cicadian dawn song.

The *Phaedrus* sees this same ironic exit by the grace of the Muses in which a cicada crosses over from “the realm of the perishable.”²⁹ It occurs in a discussion between Phaedrus and Socrates concerning all uses of words with aim to identify

²⁸ Callimachus, *Aetia* (29-38). *Callimachus: Fragments*. trans. Cedric Whitman. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975): 9. Whitman adds the footnote, “The “voice” of the cicada is frequently used in Greek poetry as a simile for sweet sounds. The cicada, according to Plato... is the favourite of the Muses, and in Alexandrian poetry poets are compared to, or called after it.”

²⁹ Macrobius, *Commentary of the Dream of Scipio*. trans. William Harris Stahl. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990): 131.

successful and unsuccessful, or, living and dead rhetoric. Socrates tells the myth of how the Muses- the judges of poetry- honored certain men for their love of them and transformed them into cicadas who, needing neither food nor sleep, subsisted purely on praising poetic excellence.³⁰

It is most unfitting that a lover of the Muses should be ignorant of such a matter. The story is that once, before the birth of the Muses, cicadas were human beings. When the Muses were born and song came into the world some of the men of that age were so ravished by its sweetness that in their devotion to singing they took no thought to eat and drink, and actually died before they knew what was happening to them. From them sprang thereafter the race of the cicadas, to whom the Muses granted the privilege that they should need no food, but should sing from the moment of birth till death without eating and drinking, and after that go to the Muses and tell how each of them is honoured on earth and by whom.”³¹

That Plato effortlessly elides philosophical rhetoric with the Muses cannot be undervalued.

But to Calliope the eldest of the Muses and her next sister Urania they (the cicadas) make report of those who spend their lives in philosophy and honour the pursuit which owes its inspiration to thee goddesses; among the Muses it is these that concern themselves with the heavens and the whole story of existence, divine and human, and their theme is the finest of them all.³²

In the *Phaedrus* the central predicament is not *whether* poetry has a place at Philosophy’s table but how it too, like all rhetorical modes, can be conceived of as a human activity in pursuit of form rather than one mired in epistemological instability.

³⁰ Plato, *Phaedrus and Letters VII and VIII*. Trans. Walter Hamilton. (London, Penguin. 1973): 70.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

Socrates concludes, “Then we must examine the question we propounded just now, what constitutes excellence and its opposite in speaking and writing.”³³ Plato’s answer is simple enough: in order to generate good rhetoric, language must appeal to the authority of poetry. Thus, in a double cicada tradition, the cicada is a race of Tithonii, failed poets of experience, cursed like Echo to a sepulchral linguistic performance and a broken-record chorus of voices in search of a body. The cicada is also the ironic double suggested in Plato and Callimachus. The example set by the cicadas of the *Phaedrus* is that the reward for the proper praise of poetry is transfiguration; they become uninhibited by natural concern e.g. food, sleep, and time. They drink in eternity and it sustains them. In an otherwise problematic speech, Socrates identifies what would artistically constitute eternity for the cicada. It turns out that the ceaseless praise of the Muses, rather than ceaseless chirping, is the proper activity for the cicadas of poetry. Thus, in the similar manner to which Platonic philosophy seeks to overcome deciduous ontological orders in pursuit of an infinite formal epistemology, so is it the mission of language to overcome its natural order- its empirical and social mode of expression- in order to become a new unbounded semiotic epistemology, capable of communicating realities that lay beyond the reach of a physical system of signs.

In a Platonic conception of literature, poetry is the activity in which language is successfully released from literal referentiality in pursuit of a new anamnestic symbolism. The self-conscious metapoetry of the passage is of the same species as Plato’s wider philosophy. It is the beginning of a literary tradition to which Chaucer later lends his considerable talents. G.R.F. Ferrari writes that Socrates’ “philosophic art,” “investigates (among other things) the conditions of art in general, including its

³³ Ibid.

own.”³⁴ The *Phaedrus* is a mythographic reformer. It reduces the story to a simple opposition: cicadas exist in nature, they chirp to the dawn; they shed their old skin. Their silent kin exist in the Empyrean, sing the Muses’ song to Eos, and have shed years altogether. Entomology absent, his cicadas are not the cicadas *in nature*. They are participants in a symbolic order, relieved of their historical duties. Failed cicadas in art are natural cicadas. Failed rhetoricians are failed interlocutors who mistakenly invest a natural order of language with the power to deliver them from death. G.M.A. Grube writes of Plato’s *Republic*, “Plato is not laying down the rule that artists should hold the mirror up to nature, but blaming them because that is, in fact, all they do.”³⁵ Tithonus becomes a bug, nothing more. He makes Arachne’s mistake. Tithonus imagines Eos as a human lover. Arachne imagines the gods as animals. It is the opposite poetic tradition, a tradition perfected by Lucretius: “Let us allow “Neptune” and “Ceres” for “sea” and “grain,” “Bacchus” for the proper word “wine,” “mother of the gods” for “earth,” provided that he does not in fact allow his mind to be touched by base superstition.”³⁶ Tithonus takes euhemerism further. His rhetoric does not say that an Eos is only a sunrise. It says that a sunrise is only another notch on the bedpost.

That every character in art is implicated as a rhetorician must govern our appraisal of the myth. Tithonus is not a tragic character in as much as we understand that the content of poetry is foreign to its form. The human drama with which the content of art proceeds, the initial emotional deception through which we would empathize with the Old Man, is subsumed in service to an argument which he marshals by his very being, an argument that ultimately serves a range of meanings

³⁴ Ferrari, *Listening to the Cicadas*, 26.

³⁵ G.M.A. Grube, *Plato’s Thought*. (London: The Athelone Press, 1980): 188.

³⁶ Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura* (665-660). Quoted in Mark P.O. Morford and Robert J. Lenardon, *Classical Mythology, Sixth Edition*. (New York: Longman, 1999): 548.

antiphrastic to his own ‘poetry’ in a silent and opposite movement of irony against the language in which it occurs. Callimachus’ prologue to *Aetia* is instructive. “For we sing among those who love the shrill voice of the cicada and not the noise of the asses. Let others bray like the long-eared brute, but let me be the dainty winged one.”³⁷ That cicadas somehow offer a symbolic escape from the failed rhetoric of death seems to be widely understood, but how that could occur seems without resolution outside of the *Phaedrus*. Meanwhile, asses remain the less difficultly conceived and irredeemably failed interlocutors of poetry for the classical writers, a point not lost on Ovid in the Midas panel of *Metamorphoses XI*. I said earlier that Chaucer’s style straddles the houses of Fame and Rumour. His poems draw on another literature in which the mundane is saturated with eternity, like the idea of Eos’ unloved husband strolling through the bubonic 14th Century. For Callimachus and Ovid an ass is like a Tithonian cicada, a blunt object, poetically bankrupt. In Chaucer’s Christian context, an ass prophesies to Balaam and one of its progeny keeps the dirt off God’s feet as He proceeds into Jerusalem on the first Palm Sunday. In poetry there is often a double to a failed image. For every Tithonian cicada there is a Socratic messenger to the Muses. For every Old Brother Ass there is Balaam’s. And for every Old Man there is a New Man.³⁸ In Chaucer’s apophatic poetic, antipoetry is poetry.

“Become old early if you would be old long.”³⁹

³⁷ Callimachus, *Aetia*, Whitman, 9.

³⁸ Ephesians 4:22-24.

³⁹ Cicero, *De Senectute* (x. 32). *Cicero: De Senectute, De Amicitia, De Divinatione*. trans. William Armistead Falconer. (London: Harvard University Press, 2001): 41.

We return to Flanders under the plague; what these young rioters meet is not Death itself, but they do meet a dead man walking. They meet a Tithonus who was like them a very long time ago: young and looking for a way inside a poem to do away with the life beyond death by living in a world without it- negotiating the everlasting by hiding (ful prively) behind the cover of time. Gudrun Richardson writes, “These are all labels, attempts to elucidate the Old Man by ascribing to him the characteristics of some other figure. As with any stereotyping, this inevitably narrows the perspective, preventing an analysis of the true scope of this complex figure.”⁴⁰ But I see nothing limiting in the idea that the blood of Tithonus runs through the Old Man’s veins. One does not necessarily get a better Old Man for the lack of any trace of the cursed Trojan. It is probable that there is very much more to this Old Man than the average Tithonus. Nevertheless, when we imagine them as distant literary relatives, we have the philosophy of an entire poetic history at our disposal. The poem’s palpable spirit of darkness expands. Neglected since “the first gray hair”⁴¹ of perpetual decay, this “oold man, hoor upon his heed” (743) circles the earth as the new Cain. And the Old Man looks the worse for wear by the time he wanders through the *Pardoner’s Tale*. He is nameless and without origin, even relieved of the scant description from medieval analogues such as “hermit,” “wizard,” and “philosopher.”⁴² It is like the *Phaedrus*’ cicada tradition in bare elements, the propping up of age and death to a universal artistic enquiry. The Old Man wants a new body. But the body is a prison. Macrobius writes “Thus you see that Cicero, by the words ‘those who have flown from the bonds of their bodies, as if from prison,’ means both that the body serves as fetters and that it is a tomb, being the prison of the

⁴⁰ Gudrun Richardson, “The Old Man in the *Pardoner’s Tale*: An Interpretive Study of His Identity and Meaning.” *Neophilologus*, Vol. 87 (2003): 324.

⁴¹ *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*, 177.

⁴² *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales*. ed. W.F. Bryan and Germaine Dempster. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd. 1958): 415-438.

entombed.”⁴³ The Old Man thinks his old age is a disease. But Old Age for Cicero is something to be desired young. He writes in *De senectute*,

For old age is honoured only on condition that it defends itself, maintains its rights, is subservient to no one, and to the last breath rules over its own domain. For just as I approve of the young man in whom there is a touch of old age, so I approve of the old man in whom there is some flavour of youth. He who strives thus to mingle youthfulness and age may grow old in body, but old in spirit he will never be.⁴⁴

Tithonus’s predicament is “Tullius kindenesse.”⁴⁵ Old age becomes a metonym for the soul prepared for its new life: “Become old early if you would be old long,”⁴⁶ because, “Is it not apparent to you that it is because the soul of the one, having a keener and wider vision, sees that it is setting out for a better country...?”⁴⁷ Finally, there is the Old Man’s song, his chirping at the dawn- for the *Pardoner’s Tale* takes place at “prime.” (662) The record is still broken and his song is the same: “For I ne kan nat fynde/ A man, though that I walked into Ynde,/ Neither in citee ne in no village,/ That wolde change his youthe for myn age;/ And therefore moot I han myn age stille.” (721- 725). His cicadian chirping, the song of his body in linear time, violates the song of the *Phaedrus*, a song that that exists without reference to any world except the ageless one of the Muses.

Even so, in Chaucer’s hands something has changed in the Old Man. The philosophical austerity of Classical infinity gives way to a more theologically and culturally demanding Christian infinity. The Old Man has survived two eras of human appreciation of the power of the afterlife and has outlived the one less severely

⁴³ Macrobius, *Dream of Scipio*, 130.

⁴⁴ Cicero, *De senectute* (xi. 38) Falconer, 47.

⁴⁵ *L’envoy de Chaucer a Scogan* (47). See also, Alfred Davis, “Chaucer’s Good Counsel to Scogan.” *The Chaucer Review*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (Spring, 1969): 273.

⁴⁶ Cicero, *De senectute* (x. 32), Falconer 41.

⁴⁷ *Ibid* (xxii. 83), Falconer, 95.

conceived, if we agree with the general position that the medieval idea of Satan constitutes a worse possible future than an eternity with Pluto and Proserpina. The Tithonus of the Homeric Hymn was shaped like a man whose youth keeps him in the good life. The Pardoner's Tithonus is shaped like a man whose youth keeps him out of the afterlife. "Now sires, quod he, "if that yow be so leef/ To fynde Deeth, turne up this croked wey,/ For in that grove I lafte hym, by my fey,/ Under a tree, and there he wol abyde." (760- 763). In a sense, when the Old Man tells the rioters to take a short walk to the grove he tells them to walk to the end of the world. What they find there is something very much like the tree that stood at the end of the world that ours replaced, with the Golden Age pressed into florins. "Til he cam to that tree, and ther they founde,/ Of florins fyne of gold ycoyned rounde." (769-770). But it is simply the gold of nature rather than the lost 'golden nature' that poetry describes. It is the tree at the end of Frost's poem rather than the beginning:

Nature's first green is gold,
Her hardest hue to hold.
Her early leaf's a flower;
But only so an hour.
Then leaf subsides to leaf.
So Eden sank to grief,
So dawn goes down to day.
Nothing gold can stay.⁴⁸

There is a new way to cheat death in the Church Age. If the Old Man cannot have the young rioters' youth, he can at least send them in his place to do that which his crippled old age cannot. If any young rioter he sends after Death manages to land a

⁴⁸ Robert Frost, *Nothing Gold Can Stay*. Collected Poems of Robert Frost. (London: Jonathan Cape, 1943): 272.

lucky punch, then there is no eternity to bookend his wanderings. Perhaps then Eos will take him back. “The only way to stay out of trouble is to grow old, so I guess I’ll concentrate on that. Maybe I’ll live so long that I’ll forget her. Maybe I’ll die trying.”⁴⁹

To bring this small portrait to a close, and to draw our eye to a point later in the Tales, the tree in this poem is a liminal symbol, one that stands between two worlds, concealing its meaning from the Old Man like another tree does the noble bird. “A fool sees not the same tree that the wise man sees.”⁵⁰ In that sense, it is like every symbol in art, visible for what it is not and invisible for what it is. The Old Man’s philosophy may intuit it is more than a tree. We observe traces in his rhetoric that somehow poems do “sleen Deeth,” but that rhetoric is hobbled with what must be literature’s most acute case of, to use Virgil’s language, mind/body “dulling” of the soul’s perception.⁵¹ He sends the rioters to destroy a symbolic order to which he is responsible but has not yet confronted. Thus, this new Tithonus’ long prevarication concerning his inevitable appointment with Death (by cheating physical death) results in a philosophically desperate gamble to eliminate the appointment altogether. It is as though he has grown bolder in his wanderings. He has certainly grown less romantic, even in the short time since he passed through Troilus’ complaint: “And ek the sonne, Titan, gan he chide,/ And seyde, ‘O fool, wel may men the dispise,/ That hast the dawying al nyght by thi side.’” (*Troilus and Criseyde*, III: 1464-1466). But there is one thing he has not done according to the philosophy of the *De senectute*: he has yet to grow Old, has yet to write a poem about “setting out” for that “better country,”⁵² and he has spent the last 1,000 years misinterpreting his own age. From this point

⁴⁹ Wells, *My Lady from Shanghai*.

⁵⁰ William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1975): xviii.

⁵¹ Virgil, *Aeneid* (VI: 732-739).

⁵² Cicero, *De senectute* (xxii, 83), Falconer, 95.

forward, the principle aim of this study will be to observe Chaucer's poetry as it reverses the Old Man's gold under a tree into a rooster's tree under the Golden Age.

CHAPTER II

The Metapoetic Function of Religious Irony in the *Miller's Tale*

Through an epistemological opposition between “deerne love” and “Goddess pryvetee” this chapter continues the examination of naturalist rhetorics that would collapse poetic eternity into the world of time and extension. Religion in Chaucer’s poetry is posited as a metapoetic rather than doctrinal and tropological force, and the impasse between art and ethics comes to fruition through a discussion of the Prologue. The poetic profiles of Nicholas and Alisoun become consistent extensions of poem’s wider sexual nihilism that attempts to deploy the machinery of atheism as a stepping-stone towards a more fundamental annihilation of linguistic meaning. The intellectual companionship between “Goddess pryvetee” and the world of metaphor becomes the ironic mode by which transcendence reintroduces itself into the poem. Finally Absolon enters as a parody of the Platonic denial of body, inaugurates the implosion of poetic content against the “iren hoot,” and accidentally reverses the Miller’s poetic universe back to a point before which it began, governed by the secret knowledge of God.

In the previous chapter, the Old Man in the *Pardoner's Tale* helps to set the Classical expectations for Chaucer’s Christian negotiation of a poetic imbalance between experience and intuition. This occurs according to the antinomy between

eternity and ‘natural immortality’, by which we understand both a Platonic oxymoron and the ironic pursuit of perpetuity in the history of poetry. “And forþi yif we wollen putten worthi names to thinges and folwen Plato, lat us seyen thanne soþly that God is ‘eterne,’ and that the world is ‘perpetuel.’ (Boece, V pr. vi, 96-98) Within this incompatibility there exists the potential for a more definite location of an ‘object’ of knowledge in poetry. Language and object mean to accord, and if poetry is a language, even a ‘language beyond language’ in the Augustinian sense, what is its object? Literal language has a literal object: “The woman saith unto him, Sir, give me this water, that I thirst not, neither come hither to draw.”¹ That the woman thinks Christ’s water can save her from the daily trip to the well is a reasonable response to the figural: “But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life,”² the nature of whose object is more elusive. In a similar “transaction between two contexts,”³ to use I.A. Richards’ phrase, the *Miller’s Tale* offers its own metaphor on “water” and it is a rather memorable one, even if it lacks the easy melody of Christ’s. By way of hidden things, the poem debates poetry’s homology with the knowledge of one possible world or the other, by which I mean the world where Tithonus tenaciously exists or the delayed world where he inevitably exists. In the *Miller’s Tale*, the attempt to empty the Flood of its religious meaning has as its central poetic predicament the epistemological content of Nicholas’ “deerne love” and that of “Goddes pryvetee” - that is to say- the antagonistic theories of knowledge presented by human secrets as opposed to God’s. By focusing the Pardoner’s broader ‘life and death’ as an aporia between ‘the life man hides from

¹ John 4:15.

² John 4:14.

³ I.A. Richards, The Philosophy of Rhetoric. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1936): 94.

God's mind and the life God hides from ours', we are better able to appreciate the philosophical force of a poem that refers itself to a mode of knowledge that, by nature, eludes it.

That Chaucerian poetry often assumes a comedic tone when discussing religious themes is perhaps a moot point at this stage in its critical appreciation. This is why our principal concern is to demonstrate the metapoetic implications of Chaucer's religious irony. The *Miller's Tale*, I argue, is not meant to serve as Biblical social satire. Instead, The Flood and its theological implications are transfigured to speak not only to the metapoetic concerns of the poem itself, but also to the wider philosophical problem of 'poetry, as such', by which we understand the figural arena in which metaphorical meaning obtains. Put another way, the theological discussions in the poem can be read in such a way as to illuminate poetry instead of doctrine. Timothy D. Arner writes, "If we read the *Miller's Tale* as textual commentary rather than social commentary, the poem functions as a means for Chaucer to explore the ideas of poetic creation and reception."⁴ In the context of the *Miller's Tale* what needs to be established is the manner in which theological deliberations may be said to carry insights into the language of poetry, the manner in which religion becomes an artistic rather than a doctrinal object. For it is one matter for religion to suggest, in the more typical medieval tropological contribution, that "pride goeth before the destruction"⁵ with reference to Nicholas' behavior. It is another for religion in Chaucer's poem to undergo the ironical reversal that contributes towards the discovery of what manner of poetry Nicholas practices.

⁴ Timothy D. Arner, "No Joke: Transcendent Laughter in the *Teseida* and the *Miller's Tale*." *Studies in Philology*. Vol. 102, No. 2 (Spring, 2005): 154.

⁵ Proverbs 16:18.

The Miller's Lost Life Story

It must be said (and it must be qualified) that the Miller is something of an intellectual and is aware of the anagogical overtones of his poem, but he wishes to convert them into a literal experience. The first qualification has less to do with what the sentence means than with the potential problem attributing to the Miller a 'will' to do anything. The second qualification occurs in the normal course of criticism: In what sense do we detect rhetorical strategies in the *Miller's Tale* that would convert anagogical overtones into a literal experience? To treat the first: I do not mean to locate within the 'Miller- as- character's' psychology some pressing elemental desire, but rather to describe the rhetorical effects and modes of voice and action that move through a frame and poem that his name sponsors. It is as David Lawton describes,

The language in which criticism is conducted may unintentionally foster what...we may call the 'psychological heresy.' I have not avoided the constructions like 'the Pardoner sets' out' or 'the Pardoner says'. It would be too clumsy to keep emphasizing that Chaucer has given us the name of a fictitious narrator and there seems no harm in using it. But we should not mistake the name for the thing itself. When I use such shorthand I am not psychoanalyzing the Pardoner but evaluating the literary content and effect of certain lines attributed to him.⁶

For the special purposes of this discussion, we might also add that an argumentative mode based, for example, in the coherent requirements of Naturalism or Epicureanism may be detected in the voices and action of poems that contribute towards a

⁶ David Lawton, *Chaucer's Narrators*. (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1985): 23.

philosophical setting independent of character-motivation. Nicholas' bedding of Alisoun can quite usefully elide with the larger and silent competitive epistemologies in the poem without reference to the young scholar's psychological profile. Any interlocutor 'Nicholas' may just be in the market for some "deerne love." He also may moonlight unconsciously as a useful second premise towards a working definition of poetic nihilism. For many critics such a thing as literal motivation is impossible to divine anyway. It is true that one would be off on the wrong footing to deconstruct the game of chess according to a thoroughgoing and sympathetic analysis of 'What Pawns Want'. Furthermore, in as much as we conceive of a "psychological heresy" in Lawton's terms, part of the heresy lies not simply in attributing to a narrative *persona*⁷ of medieval poetry novelistic premises of motivation (it does) but also the larger cognitive error in which we assume that the psychology of a poem at the level of poetic content is of a single substance to poetic form. Which is to say, that like other elements of poetic content, the relationship to form is at once subordinately functional and aporetic, by which we understand *a non-logical contribution that occurs at the referential expense of the total sum of content in service to a poetic knowledge proper*. In a sense, any Platonic perspective, Christian or otherwise, in both art and life would seem to require an *a priori* relegation of psychology to the sublunary, for the sublunary is the location of "dispersed"⁸ souls and postlapasarian noetic deficits that must be overcome in order to recall man's old quiet understanding of things-in-themselves in Edenic terms. It could be argued that any great leap forward in Chaucer studies that moved criticism away from a psychological premium was a triumph over problems of modernity rather than those medieval Neoplatonism.

⁷ Lawton, 7.

⁸ Macrobius, *Dream of Scipio*, 131.

All of this is a rather roundabout way of agreeing with Katherine Zieman's argument at a level independent of the Miller's lost life-story that, "The *Miller's Tale*...is not simply a bawdy peasant story; it is a bawdy story told by a peasant that resonates ironically with disparate literary and academic discourses."⁹ This seems to be the case when the *Miller's Prologue* inaugurates a composite religious/artistic skepticism that the Miller's dirty joke sustains. "An housbonde shal nat been inquisityf/ Of Goddes pryvetee, nor of his wyf./ So he may fynde Goddes foyson there,/ Of the remenant nedeth nat enquere." (3163-3166). The dialectical strategy that carries over into the tale itself is first to collapse the epistemological aporia between divine and human secrets, and then to energize the argument by humorously suggesting that not only are God's secrets on the same level with those of humans, but that they can be adequately described by recourse to the secrets of a cuckolding wife. However, the target is broader than theology for the critique extends to poetry, intervened upon by the ghoulish "apocryphal voice"¹⁰ of the *General Prologue*.

And therefore every gentil wight I preye,
 For Goddes love, demeth nat that I seye
 Of yvel entente, but for I moot reherce
 Hir tales alle, be they bettre or werse
 Or elles falsen som of my mateere.

(3171-3175)

It is important to bear in mind that falsifying the elements of a fictional poem is, at best, a prevarication concerning the nature of profanity in art. Nicholas' appointment with the hot poker cannot be further 'falsified' given that the setting in which it occurs

⁹ Katherine Zieman, "Chaucer's *Voys*." *Representations*. Vol. 60 (Fall 1997): 70.

¹⁰ Lawton, 102.

is, by nature, false. Kissing Alisoun's bare ass does not qualify as profane because it is less fictional than another narrative alternative. To "falsen" the false is surely a worthwhile discussion, but one within which it would be difficult to logically locate a qualitative assessment of profanity. In this spirit, John V. Fleming writes, "He (Chaucer) implicitly returns to the Augustinian paradox that the truth of art depends upon the falsifications of artists."¹¹ This familiar Chaucerian deliberation concerning truth in art occurs in the *Nun's Priest's Tale* in the Launcelot de Lake diversion. "Now every wys man, lat him herkne me;/ This storie is also trewe, I undertake,/ As is the book of Launcelot de Lake,/ That wommen holde in ful greet reverence." (*Nun's Priest's Tale*, 3210-3213). The 'truth' is that Launcelot de Lake, like all art, is, "a pack of lies."¹² Therefore, unless the reverence of women in the Middle Ages is the silver bullet of criticism or the secret governing principle of literary candor, then we must allow that the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, like the *Miller's Tale*, is true in the manner in which all great literature is true. And according to the whimsical logic of the passage it has something to do with the fact that, "it is one thing to will to be false and another not to be able to be true."¹³

Literary Ethics and Mr. Miller's Speakeasy

Such Augustinian 'absurdities' of this nature lead directly to the famous option we are offered in the *Prologue*.

¹¹ John. V. Fleming, "Chaucer on Language, Truth, and Art: A Liar's Paradox," in *Essays in Honour of Edward B. King*. ed. Robert G. Benson and Eric W. Naylor. (Sewanee: The University of the South, 1991): 83.

¹² Pelen, Lecture series given at The American University of Paris. Fall 2004.

¹³ Augustine, *Soliloquies* (II.18) *Augustine Earlier Writings*. ed. and trans. J.H.S. Burleigh. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1953): 50.

And therefore, whoso list it nat yheere,
 Turne over the leef and chese another tale;
 For he shal fynde ynowe, grete and smale,
 Of storial thyng that toucheth gentillesse,
 And eek moralitee and hoolynesse.
 Blameth nat me if that ye chese amys
 The Millere is a cherl; ye knowe wel this.

(3176-3182)

Simple enough, the narrator proposes that one manner in which to bypass the profanity of poetry is to turn to “storial thyng(s)” that concern nobility, morality, and holiness. How is this intended to solve the predicament? It does so by curiously suggesting that in as much as one would like to avoid the profanity in the *Miller’s Tale* in pursuit of ethical instruction, do not read poetry; read history. If we read “storial”¹⁴ as a rhetorical category two things follow. The first is that “gentillesse,” “moralitee,” and “hoolynesse” occur in what is “storial.” They occur in what is “historically true, belonging to history.” The second is that “storial” is distinct from poetry or ‘what the *Miller’s Tale* is’. The operative logic is that ethics is not properly basic to poetry. Ethics does not exist as a necessary or possible condition for the poetry in question. Meanwhile, a true story provides a suitable setting for moral reflection by virtue of the fact that its meanings are co-ontological with human existence, the temporal space (as opposed to an artistic space) in which the discourse surrounding the exchange of ethical goods between men obtains.

The narrator warns us that the upcoming tale may possess none of the desirable edifying features of a “storial” thing and washes his hands of its ethical abuses.

¹⁴ “Storial.” “Historically true, belonging to history.” *Middle English Dictionary*. ed. Robert. E. Lewis. (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1975).

“Blameth nat me if that ye chese amys.” (3181). We can appreciate the phrase’s self-defeating composition. Counter-intuitively, for the narrator’s ‘don’t shoot the messenger’ approach to function, the poem cannot be ethically violate or inviolate. It must be ethically incidental. That is, it is no matter if the poem does or does not transgress standards of human ethics, it must never cross them in the first place. Only if the poem is actually ethically-violate, rather than ethically *incidental*, is the apology ethically false. For instance, there are no “storial” things to which to turn in the collection of poems called the *Canterbury Tales*. There is no “leef” we might turn in order to “cheese another tale” that would land us upon the safe “storial” ground of ethics. If this statement is subject to ethics then it is a lie. This simply compounds the supposed ethical deficiency of the *Miller’s Tale* with another unrelated sin: lying.

Furthermore, if the other ‘non-storial’ tales to which we are instructed to turn are also ethically-violate, then the lie is further compounded. It is a worse thing to knowingly tell a tourist that the best way out of the sex-district is to take the underground and get off at the stop that turns out to be the beginning of the next sex district. Where should we stop next, the *Reeve’s Tale*? The other component of the apology is that, “The Millere is a cherl: ye knowe wel this.” (3182). However, the Miller seems to function as a patsy here, for if the tale is ethically-violate then there must at least be some guilt by association for the recurring voice from the *General Prologue*. He/she/it seems to serve some privileged administrative function- a toastmaster for the Canterbury roundel, or a Pandarus arranging a midnight rendezvous between two volatile teens, in this case the *Tales* and the audience of art. We could offer the following permutation to parallel logic: ‘Being involved in the running a speakeasy during The Prohibition in which you know Mr. Miller and others sell Bourbon, even if someone else’s Bourbon that has come to you already bottled, does not excuse you of being

involved in the running a speakeasy during The Prohibition in which in you know Mr. Miller and others sell Bourbon’.

In order for the apology to function, it must function ironically, or, it must be ethically incidental. Only if no standard of ethics applies are all statements true. If ethics hold, then nearly all of Chaucer’s poems are ethically-violate. There is nowhere to turn. Even if we curfew the audience of art for the sake of their delicate constitution to the *Parson’s Tale* it still is not “storial” or true; none of the tales is. The narrative voice would be responsible for two lies about the nature of the non-Miller stories in the collection: both their ethically inviolate ‘storial-ness’ and the fact that he bears no responsibility for their content. Luckily the passage argues that ethics belong to “storial” things, and the context of the passage is a collection of fictional poems. For ethics to judge from without something that is ethically mute within is a simple category mistake; it is the carrying over of the values of one world into another, the application of “storial” principles to artistic ones. Thus, if the action of the poem that *represents itself* as ethically-violate is in the end ethically incidental, by which I mean not philosophically identical to the form of the poem, then the lie itself becomes incidental. The narrator is telling the truth, just not in our world.

In the *Miller’s Tale*, ‘profanity’ at the level of poetic content is a device; it is not a systematic statement on what to do after you read the poem. The questions of the *Miller’s Tale* ought not be intervened upon according to the intellectual machinery of a virtuous existence. The most one could probably do according to that machinery is to swear off adultery and mutilation, which are things one might otherwise have avoided independent of a close reading of the *Miller’s Tale*. Instead, the *Prologue’s* apology occurs according to the necessary Augustinian ‘truth of untruthfulness in art principle’, and thus it is ‘merely’ an expert antiphrasis. Indeed, it is difficult to

imagine how one could tell an ethical lie about what is patently false. For example, one could lie to high heaven about how many suns really circled Superman's doomed home planet of Krypton without committing anything like an ethical error. The story goes that there was only one sun and it went supernova at some point, but to be 'true' to this fact is an artistic rather than an ethical decision.¹⁵ If we are to conceive of art's 'truth' we must locate it at the conceptual borders of experience rather than at its center. Essentially the *Prologue's* apology can be rephrased. The tone becomes schizophrenic. 'This poem is ethically abusive. Do not blame me for the ethical abuses of this poem. It is not my poem and there are other true stories in this collection to which you may turn for ethical guidance. True stories are where ethics occur. When you turn the page, you shall find another poem. Then another. This continues until the end of this book. There are no true stories in this book. There are only poems. There are no ethical abuses'.

It is useful, though perhaps not crucial in this particular case, to uphold a distinction between morality and ethics, the first of which is better conceived according to principle while the second is predicated on human action. Both, according to (by which I largely mean 'against') a medieval context, can be conceived of as properties of "storial." I say "against" because the medieval commentary tradition not only assumes, often without much caveat, the ethical component of poetry but also raises that component to the level of justifying cause. Moral instruction directed towards useful Christian ethics becomes the foundation for composing and reading poetry.

The statement that 'almost all' the grammatical authors 'direct themselves towards ethics' is found in many *accessus*...text after text is declared to

¹⁵ Jerry Siegel, Joe Shuster. "Superman" *Action Comics*, No. 1 (June, 1938): 1-13.

‘pertain to ethics.’...most arts scholars, or *artista*, were happy to accept they were practitioners in moral science, a branch of practical philosophy (the others being economics and politics, within an *ordo scientarium* that goes back to Aristotle).¹⁶

Even if we must cover the spread between the medieval *métiers* of “*artista*” and “makers,” it would be either hydroponic idealism or a deep and abiding cynicism that would read marital fidelity as the “moral science” or “practical philosophy” of the *Miller’s Tale*. That Chaucer’s poetry sides with artistic “delight” in Horatian terms rather than the cultural premium on tropological poetics makes him something of an aesthete amidst medieval literary criticism. That the *Canterbury Tales* treats ethical questions as another component of poetic content rather than poetic form makes him something of a traditional Platonist in the style of writers such as Ovid and Boccaccio.

There need not be a wholesale eradication of ethics from our idea of poetry to conceive of it Platonically. For instance, science often forms part of the content of Chaucerian poetry though to say that Chaucerian poetry is scientific would be to look at it upside-down. Even if the science of tides in the *Franklin’s Tale* and the science of metallurgy in the *Canon Yeoman’s Tale* provide the scholar with a local view of medieval attitudes and practices, such moments occur en route to poetry rather than forming its theoretical definition. Likewise do the moral discussions and ethical set pieces of poems occur en route to poetry. Put another way, the content of Chaucer’s poems- to which the didaxis of morality and the praxis of ethics belong- is incidental to the ‘poetry of his poems’. It is not a matter of saying ‘where there is a poem there is no ethics’ rather, ‘in as much as we conceive of poetry as something distinct to

¹⁶ A.J. Minnis, “Introduction,” in *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism c. 1100-c. 1375*, eds. A.J. Minnis, A.B. Scott, and David Wallace. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988): 13-14.

poems, the ethics of a poem is not its poetry'. In a Platonic framework, poetry is something to be achieved by a poem; it is not a basic quality of a poem. In this view, poetry is a philosophical and symbolic order that occurs in rhetorically transfigured poems, poems having undergone a mysterious reorientation towards the Mind of God which inevitably contain- or once contained¹⁷ - ethical, psychological, scientific, or social machinery. This machinery need not be logically consistent, nor must it represent itself in a positively reinforcing voice or action. One could write a very sophisticated poem with a very elusive form whose content features all manner of devilry without having written an unethical poem. One could conceivably compose a poem that mirrors the logical outline of the Sermon on the Mount while sustaining at its most abstract and elaborate level an utterly unrelated theory of signs.

In the *Miller's Tale*, the attempt to sidestep profanity by outsourcing categorical morality, nobility, and holiness to "storied" things carries its own deceptive solution. It begins by setting up an aporia between the ethical content of life and the ethical content of art; to life belongs every ethical mode and to art none, except as the content of poetry absently serves the form of poetry. Oddly enough, we find that the major perspectives of the poem, by which I understand the Miller's narrators and the ironic form of the poem itself, would both like to guarantee this notion of a history/ethics continuum. The manner in which this is accomplished depends upon the narratological program in which it operates in any given moment. For if the Miller's narrators unconsciously marshal it, its execution becomes paradoxical by virtue of the fact that the poem's arguments do little to perpetuate philosophical taxonomies (between art and life, or an equivalent epistemology and

¹⁷ If we allow that a thoroughgoing literary Platonism requires the paradoxical destruction of poetry's initial referential conditions, similar to the appointment with the Forms that awaits the destruction of our bodies.

ontology) but instead suggest their naturalistic annihilation within an atheistic, and eventually nihilistic, poetic cosmos. In fact, any substantial dilemma at the level of content concerning whether to incorporate art into the same ontological plane in which ethical action occurs dissolves because the poem has already set in motion the means by which to rid the universe of God, the ultimate consequence of which, in the context of this medieval poem, will invalidate the moral component of human action anyway. Therefore, we understand the structure of part of the poem's metapoetics: that there is nothing much to be done for the profanity in the tale, so turn to true stories for moral and ethical instruction, and then wait for the collapse of the space in between the 'profanities' of art and human ethics when the success of these theses renders them equivalent and altogether meaningless. So we may agree with Paul Strohm when he considers the *Miller's Tale* an "unfettered attack on all forms of transcendence."¹⁸

However, a contrary ironic movement in the poem negotiates the antagonism between art and ethics through a tautological query into the generation of meaning in figurative language. God's secrets (unknowable) become the guarantor of poetry's mode of expression (unknowable). In doing so, the poem's profanity does not partake of an antiphrastic recommendation towards more illustrious behavior, but of a stronger argument in which the nature of art's mode of instruction is epistemologically incapable of recommending a proper course of human action. Concerning Wayne Booth's definition of this type of irony, Lawton writes, "Booth would classify it as unstable irony, since the statement, while undercutting, does not reverse itself."¹⁹ The idea is easy enough to imagine if one presumes that the early

¹⁸ Paul Strohm, *Social Chaucer*. (London: Harvard University Press, 1989): 133.

¹⁹ Lawton, 4.

morning activities of the youth of the poem have less to do with charting an opposite and better way to spend a sunrise than they do with the devolution of the question altogether in the artistic vision. The gesture towards ethics instead of literary profanity does not come to represent itself as a solvent opposition in the quest for the relationship of life to art. If anything, it comes up a red herring, introduced at the fringes of a larger enquiry. The profanity of the *Miller's Tale* is rendered moot as it pertains to human action, but not because the poem eliminates the aporetic distinctions between art and life. It is rendered moot according to the knowledge impasse between the content and the metaphorical form of poetry. Perhaps we see a reflection of this in New Testament theology in which Paul articulates the ethically-mute mystery of the New Covenant as superior to the comprehensive ethics of The Old Covenant. It is appropriate to this Platonic discussion that as the New Covenant grows, the Old vanishes. "In that he saith, A new [covenant], he hath made the first old. Now that which decayeth and waxeth old [is] ready to vanish away."²⁰ In Pauline Theology, viewed through Augustinian eyes, works do not contribute to the mystery of salvation, instead they are empty existential signifiers without it, which is to say that the only meaning to which they may avail themselves is to serve as symbols of a superior act of God that exists independently and prior to their contributive power. In a similar manner to the analogy one can make between Platonic philosophy and aesthetics, so can we begin to draw the analogy between the intellectual framework of Christian Theology and Chaucer's medieval poetics. Both subdue ethical action in service to a larger symbolism based in a world beyond ethical action.

Likewise the *Miller's Tale's* intercession into the fundamental antagonism between mystery and experience is to transfigure human action into a metaphorical

²⁰ Hebrews 8:13.

expression whose meaning becomes the property of poetry instead of ethics, a thing that, even if indebted to theological schematics, requires no small amount of sophistication in matters of literary production and literary precedent. Therefore, when the *Prologue* slyly suggests that “storial” things constitute the superior environment for moral instruction, we note the irreconcilable logical expectations of the Miller’s poem and the ‘poem itself’, as both for different purposes, prepare to ironically validate the notion. One perspective invalidates the role of action in reinforcing the ineffable; the other invalidates the ineffable in order to represent human action in a visionary solipsistic nihilism. “As long as we confine ourselves to the world given in experience...we must profess solipsism.”²¹ ‘Annihilation’ is a sort of prize in an aggressive piece like the *Miller’s Tale*. In the narrative play of Miller’s vision, annihilation of form would suffocate the transcendent role of language, and for the silent poem stalking the Miller’s, annihilation of content would relieve language and action of their historical instability and reorient them toward the secret Mind of God: “Goddess Pryvetee.”

In fact, so many issues are raised in the *Prologue*, that we should pause at this point to recognize the contradictory argumentative components. However, instead of aiming at immediate resolution, we are content simply to identify their structure prior to entering the main action of the poem. Among them we might list:

1. The poem is ethically dubious.
2. Falsifying the matter of the poem may soften ethical transgressions. (3175)
3. Poems are, by nature, fictional- that is- false.
4. Therefore, falsifying a false poem begs the question of the unethical in art.
5. In order to avoid the ethically-violate poem, turn to another poem. (3177)
6. In another poem you may find “storial’ things with greater ethical component.

²¹ Andrew Seth, “Mental Philosophy.” *The Contemporary Review*. Issue 294 (February, 1884): 294.

7. However, turning to another poem would not be a movement towards a ‘storial’ thing. See (3).
8. Morality and ethics are properly basic to true stories.
9. There are no true stories in the *Canterbury Tales*
10. Therefore, the poem is ethically-inviolable, in as much as it is art.
11. There is an impasse between literary profanity and ethics.

Compound all of these considerations with the fact that for us, the audience of art, there is no question of passing over a poem that is at the very top of Chaucerian literature, and we have here an eminently paradoxical, playful, and philosophically difficult introduction to a poem that prior to beginning, helpfully and unhelpfully reminds us to, “nat maken ernest of game.” (3186).

Deerne Love

The tale begins with a poetic profile of Nicholas and a dig that his studies in the arts have been replaced with the study of astrology and aeromancy.

With hym ther was dwellynge a poure scoler,
 Hadde lerned art, but al his fantasye
 Was turned for to lerne astrologye,
 And koude a certeyn of conclusiouns,
 To demen by interrogaciouns,
 If that men asked hym, in certein houres
 Whan that men sholde have droghte or elles shoures.

(3190-3196)

The result of these pursuits is that Nicholas is able to predict the weather. In fact, this is not the only instance in which weather prediction functions as an ironic

condemnation in the *Canterbury Tales*. In the *Manciple's Tale*, upon receipt of the crow's report that the patron of poetry has been cuckolded, Phoebus declares,

Now shaltow, false thief, thy song forgon,
 And eek thy white fetheres everichon,
 Ne nevere in al thy lif ne shaltou speke.
 Thus shal men on a traytour been awreke;
 Thou and thyn ofspryng evere shul be blake,
Ne nevere sweete noyse shul you make,
But evere crie agayn tempest and rayn,
 In tokenyng that thurgh thee my wyf is slayn.

(*Manciple's Tale*, 295-302, emphasis mine.)

We shall examine this in further detail in Chapter 3. For now, we acknowledge a recurring ironic mode in Chaucerian poetry which augury's²² entropic²³ end is the ability to predict a storm. The effect of this is to draw the humorous philosophical distinction between a language that could express the secrets of God and one that is limited to the prediction of phenomenal modes- rather banal ones at that. The focus of both the *Miller's Tale* and the *Manciple's Tale* is based in the human response to the divine secrets. Chaucer's wit enters early in the *Miller's Tale*. The ironic praise of the "poure scoler" serves not only to undercut Nicholas' narratological presence but also directs us to a larger predicament in which we realize that Nicholas' talents and methods (and the fruit that they bear) are ill-suited to the theological and metapoetic

²² For both Chaucer and Ovid, Phoebus' bird [*aves*] was once augural on both linguistic and historical thematic considerations. "A bird as an omen or source of omens. An augury, omen, portent." "*Auis.*" *The Oxford Latin Dictionary*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

²³ "The thermodynamic condition of maximum entropy, the most disordered state, in which the least amount of energy is available for useful work." "Entropy," *The Oxford English Dictionary Online*. Second Edition 1989. Accessed 12 July 2010.
 <http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50076387?query_type=word&queryword=ENTROPIC&first=1&max_to_show=10&single=1&sort_type=alpha>.

stakes of the poem. Thus, Nicholas' natural interrogation of the meaning of the universe through astrology fails in a like manner to the crow's literal report of recent local history in its bid to become a poetic product. To be sure, the ability to predict the weather is a fallen shadow of the powers of poetic expression. It seems to partake less of serendipity than of ironic literary foreshadowing that Nicholas invests a good portion of his young life hedging existential bets on natural rainstorms rather than Providential ones. Mark Miller writes, "The Miller's naturalism... at least one as thoroughgoing as that expressed in this tale- cannot have the normative force the Miller wants of it."²⁴

Next we learn that, "Of deerne love he koude and of solas;/ And therto he was sleigh and ful privee." (3200-3201). Perhaps this strikes us as a curious non sequitur, that Nicholas, part-time astrologer, has a special interest making love in secret. However, the proximity constitutes a cohesive naturalistic philosophical unit and one that is consistent with other Chaucerian *reductio*. All narrative naturalism(s) are part of a consistent philosophical Naturalism in the *Canterbury Tales*, and sex is usually the crucible. More importantly, the epistemological content of Nicholas' secrets, his "deerne love," becomes a smaller image of the Miller's rhetorical strategies. Indeed, the Miller's theses extend further into the realm of metaphysics by virtue of the fact that Nicholas' upcoming denigration of the Flood has as its most tangible premises the bedding of Alisoun, whereas the Miller's attacks, voiced or sponsored, upon the theological content of Genesis 6-9 seem to amount to a metapoetic and atheistic bid to "patrol the boundaries between literature and history."²⁵ Put simply, Nicholas is something like an iconoclastic cad and the Miller is something like a violent and

²⁴ Mark Miller, "Naturalism and its Discontents." *ELH*, Vol. 67 (2000): 8.

²⁵ Richard Fehrenbacher, "A Yeerd Enclosed Aboute: Literature and History in the Nun's Priest's Tale." *The Chaucer Review*. Vol. 29 (1994): 135.

sexually frustrated anarchist with a global philosophical mission. Thus, in the same way that Nicholas later reductively mobilizes Noah's Flood for sexual purposes so do we see in the description of his room that his books, instruments of learning, musical talents, all of the liberal arts to which he applies himself seem to amount to nothing in the poem except as they work to supplement his ribald pursuit of Alisoun. After all, "A clerke hadde litherly biset his whyle/ but if he koude a carpenter bigyle." (3299-3300). Therefore, when the poem declares that making love in secret is his talent, we may conceive of it within the emerging theoretical framework of Nicholas, the free-spirited skeptic and purveyor of naturalism, for whom love is adequately experienced sexually, for whom the fruits of human education satisfactorily conclude in astrology, and for whom the metaphorical and spiritual meaning of Noah's Flood can be effectively emptied of its content and made to serve his sexual needs. Such is the poetic region made possible by Nicholas' secrets. Whatever can be known of Nicholas' mind, to say that a poetic interlocutor is 'simply' a rhetorician is to say a lot, for through it we appreciate the poetic predicament in which Nicholas' management of language unconsciously places him. The encounter with Alisoun that directly follows plays predictably to script. When he and Alisoun meet, he grabs her by the 'queynte' (3276) and claims that he will die of secret love if he cannot have her. "For deerne love of thee, lemman, I spille." (3278). When she consents, he plays the psaltery, and quickly: "And thakked hire aboute the lendes weel,/ He kiste hire sweete and taketh his sawtrie/ And pleyeth faste, and maketh melodie." (3304-3306). The celebration of secret love by a quick *capriccio*,²⁶ with its euphemistic possibilities

²⁶ Appropriately related in Italian to "naughty" and defined in English as: "Music. A name variously applied but usually denoting a composition of lively character, and more or less free in form." "*Capriccio*." Oxford English Dictionary Online. Second Edition 1989. Accessed 14 July 2010. <http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50033009?single=1&query_type=word&queryword=capriccio&first=1&max_to_show=10>.

ready in our minds, further develops the tale's contentual²⁷ poetics as one in which art (in this instance the Boethian favorite "music"²⁸) can be successfully sublimated to the young scholar's sexual appetite in good faith to the latter's promise to constitute a stronger first principle in the Miller's impending universe.

Meanwhile, the carpenter's secret is his young wife. "Jalous he was, and heeld hire narwe in cage./ For she was wylde and yong, and he was old. (3224-3226). The ambidextrous description of Alisoun, like Nicholas's, undercuts and praises at once. The 'praise' is precarious by virtue not only of the discrepancy between literary mode and subject- a parodic permutation of a courtly *descriptio* placed in the service of a common and promiscuous girl- but also by virtue of its inability to recommend her outside of her physical beauty and her ability to please men. "She was a prymerole, a piggesnye,/ For any lord to leggen in his bedde,/ Or yet for any good yeman to wedde." (3268-3270). Concerning this, Mark Miller argues that Alisoun is presented as an, "object of consumption for the masculine gaze that wanders over her soft wooliness, sweet mouth, and supple, thin body; it is part of what makes her the perfect object of desire, and we are not invited to imagine it as much more than that."²⁹ When we consider the part of Alisoun upon which the form of the poem will come to depend, we can agree with Miller that her poetic function seems especially linked to her sexual one. Part of Alisoun's role is symbolic for what constitutes the highest aim of the Miller's poetic project: that the satisfaction she offers can be reified to the extent that it would constitute an adequate philosophical and poetic alternative

²⁷ Of or pertaining to poetic content. The distinction is important for there exists for each aporetic category a poetics of its own, each limited or unlimited according to the referential capacity of its mode of language.

²⁸ "Indeed no path to the mind is as open for instruction as the sense of hearing." Because, "Whoever penetrates into his own self perceives human music." Boethius, *Fundamentals of Music*. trans. Calvin M. Bower, ed. Claude V. Palisca (London: Yale University Press, 1989): 3, 10.

²⁹ Miller, 26.

to the religious content of the Flood. As such, her naked ass becomes a figural substitution for a providential order of knowledge in art. Louis M. Bishop writes, “The *Miller’s Tale* thus blasphemously- and deliciously- elevates Alison’s private parts and their unknowability to the level of God’s.”³⁰

Goddes Pryvetee

Thus, the *Prologue* and introductory moments of the tale are awash in typical Chaucerian comic strategy. Of prime theoretical importance, then, is the first mention of ‘Goddes pryvetee’ in the main body of the poem at line 3454. “Men sholde nat knowe of Goddes pryvetee./ Ye, blessed be alwey a lewed man/ That noight but oonly his bileve kan!” (3454-3456). The three lines continue the argument from the *Prologue* that, “An housbonde shal nat been inquisityf/ Of Goddes pryvetee, nor of his wyf./ So he may fynde Goddes foyson there,/ Of the remenant nedeth nat enquere.” (3163-3166). Besides embellishing, in a philosophically consistent manner, one of the *Prologue*’s most important presuppositions, placing these passages together helps illuminate the tale’s most aggressive rhetorical attitude towards religious belief. Here we confront what strikes me as the central philosophical problem of the *Miller’s Tale*, which is to provide a compelling answer to the question of what “Goddes pryvetee” has to do with poetic language. The *Prologue* equates God’s secrets with those of a cuckolding wife. What is the intended argument? Beginning with the obvious: to denigrate the status of divine regions of knowledge. However, the *Prologue* also suggests that like uncovering the secrets of an unfaithful wife, so too

³⁰ Louise M. Bishop, “Of Goddes pryvetee nor of his wyf”: Confusion of Orifices in Chaucer’s *Miller’s Tale*.” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*. Vol. 44, No.3 (Fall 2002): 240.

shall we be disappointed if we probe God's. It is only by *not* enquiring into God's secrets that we "may fynde Goddes foyson there." (3165). What is the nature of this disappointment? The hybrid argument assumes that we could know God's secrets as easily as those of cuckolding wife if we so desired, but it is better that we, along with aggrieved husbands, do not for the sake of our own faith and happiness. Look at the blessed "lewed" who only know enough to say their creed but are robust and happy in their faith. Thus it assumes the knowability, that is, the finitude of God's secrets. It is easy enough to recognize that if we list knowability and finitude as divine predicates, they amount to ontological challenges which, if ultimately successful, constitute defeaters of the God thesis altogether. Therefore, the disappointment that resides at the farthest regions of God's secrets is simply that there are none; the trail goes cold.

In the Miller's theology- his own *Gay Science*- we are Absolon waiting in the dark for a kiss. Furthermore, the target is not merely the denial of God's existence but the fact that it comes at a rather substantial respect deficit for the faithful. "We are of all men most miserable."³¹ For if we retrace and rephrase the complementary strategy of both frame and tale we find something along these lines: 'God's secrets are like those of cuckolding wives in as much as both husbands and saints would be happier to believe that they live in a God-governed universe with a faithful wife. However, this is not the case and disappointment awaits the husband and saint, making fools of them both. Thus, we understand John to be the ultimate fool, cuckolded not only by an unfaithful wife, but also by a Flood that is never sent by a God who never existed'. In this formulation, faith in God *depends* upon not searching out his secrets. In the Miller's

³¹ 1 Corinthians 5:19.

story, theistic belief is a fragile epistemological enclosure³² inhabited by “lewed” and guaranteed by a mode of knowledge so secret that it does not exist.

The dialectical power and the amount of control the Miller’s rhetoric exerts over his poem is uncommon for Chaucer’s interlocutors, perhaps only rivaled by the Pardoner and the Wife of Bath. Strohm argues,

The self-sufficient narrative world of the *Miller’s Tale* frustrates any inclination to look for norms or causes beyond its chronological and spatial bounds. Intimations of transcendence, to be sure, flicker through the tale...yet such allusions are no great challenge to the sufficiency of this world...God’s providence makes no dent in the materiality of the tale. Mocked rather is the very possibility of transcendence.³³

Strohm sees the Miller’s wider project for what it is, and because of it, recognizes its comprehensive philosophical potential. However, it seems to me that the central question is *whether* the poem silently and successfully challenges the “self-sufficient narrative world” of the Miller- whether the world of the Miller’s poem actually achieves self-sufficiency. It appears that in order to argue on behalf of the epistemological self-sufficiency of the tale’s poetic vision, we must to some extent either identify Chaucer’s poetic strategies with those of the tale’s most aggressive rhetoric or allow that the form of the *Miller’s Tale* does not distinguish itself from the content of the *Miller’s Tale*. If we accept either of these methodological reading points, we have here something of a conclusion to our discussion. If we do not, then the burden of proof falls upon us to demonstrate that the poem’s metaphorical

³² Fehrenbacher, 142.

³³ Strohm, 136.

schedule reintroduces a notion of ‘transcendence’, despite the strength of its narrative nihilism. Given the excellence of the composite interlocutory argument(s), we should not be surprised that the ironic contact between content and form in *The Collected Verse Parody of an English Hellmouth* results in one of the most explosive physical scenes in the entire *Canterbury* collection. But long before the hot poker, we begin to recognize the theoretical groundwork by which the metapoetic argument advances.

Therefore, what do God’s secrets have to do with poetic language? There is a Platonic ascent in the *Anticlaudianus* that begins when Rhetoric, who “enfolds in her bosom the complete art of the painter,”³⁴ simply takes hold of a piece of wood to build a chariot. What marvelous things she does are better appreciated in the intellectual context that makes them possible. James J. Sheridan points out that, “In the twelfth century, the idea, dating back to Cicero, of rhetoric as the integrating factor of all education was prominent at Chartres.”³⁵ He goes on to say that, “For Alain, all literature, prose and verse, is essentially rhetoric.”³⁶ For Alain to view all literature as rhetoric is not simply to identify it as decorative speech. Rhetoric forms the operative idea of his poetics; it is the toll-road through which an unredeemable human language passes and becomes infected with symbols from an unspoiled world. There is a distinction to be made, then, between the medieval Cicero through whom the art of eloquence and the art of political speech is carried over from the Classical world, and the 12th century humanist Cicero who passes along, in addition, the visionary rhetoric that aligns itself with truth in Neoplatonic fashion. Edouard Jeuneau writes of Thierry of Chartres’ *Heptateucon* that through Cicero “the science

³⁴ Alain de Lille, *Anticlaudianus or the Good and Perfect Man*, ed. and trans. James J. Sheridan (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1973): 97.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, fn. 26.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

of words...and the science of things... come together harmoniously.”³⁷ Thierry joins this Cicero with Martianus Capella’s *de nuptiis* in which language and reason are only joined together as knowledge in a radical apotheosis that occurs celestially instead of terrestrially.³⁸ Such an idea recalls the *Phaedrus* in which human rhetoric must submit to the Muses in order to tell the truth. The truth in Plato belongs to a supernatural epistemological order uncorrupted by existence; eliding that imperishable reality with rhetoric and poetry inaugurates an entire Western tradition. This historical Platonic and Neoplatonic positioning of rhetoric is to be distinguished from the more typical medieval attitude in which rhetoric is an aestheticization and transmission of existing knowledge objects. Concerning Boethian rhetoric, Richard McNabb writes, “The current “story” tells us that rhetoric was a handmaiden to truth, its purpose limited to making already created truths available to an audience.”³⁹ “However,” he continues, “looking backward at all the unquestioned scholarship, i.e., the unquestioned narrative of medieval rhetoric, I find that there is another definition for rhetoric. I believe there is a humanistic definition that puts forth a rhetoric that is epistemic.”⁴⁰ Whether scholarship favoring the more typical designation is “unquestioned” is less important than recognizing two incompatible visions of rhetoric that, having existed since Plato’s day, were alive and well in medieval thought and exist even yet in contemporary philosophy, if in a less mystical evaluation. Put simply enough, in one vision poetic rhetoric adorns knowledge and in another it creates it.

The Yonge Sonne

³⁷ Edouard Jeuneau, *Rethinking the School of Chartres*. (North York, The University of Toronto Press, 2009): 68.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Richard McNabb, “Remapping Medieval Rhetoric: Reading Boethius from a Grassian Perspective.” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (Summer, 1998): 75.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

The manner in which Rhetoric creates knowledge for Alain is through the transformation of a piece of wood. He writes,

She bespangles the pole with the beauty of gems and sets it in a class apart; she clothes it liberally in silver and the highest decoration is brought in to supplement the wooden material, which has less distinction and this decoration compensates for the wood's inferior status. An adoptive splendour hides the wood's primeval origin from sight and removes every basis for complaint; the old age of the wood disappears and thus it forgets its primeval origins. A star-cluster of gems, then, gilds the pole; in fact its light restores true day and the actual day grows dull for the natural light of day sinks down in admiration before an adoptive light so great.⁴¹

The passage from a piece of wood to a prelapsarian light source is worth considering closely, because in it there exists a methodological attitude towards the relationship between figural language and nature that forms much of the philosophical strength of the *Miller's Tale*. First, she accomplishes what is usually expected of rhetoric: to bejewel an existing natural truth or object, in this case, a wooden pole. She “supplements” it. But the reason and effect are curious. Wooden material “has less distinction” and “this decoration compensates for the wood's inferior status.” The result is that the jewels and silver “set it in a class apart.” The wood is not complete in itself as a symbol. It is inferior to something Rhetoric provides. The decoration does not make the ‘truth’ of the wood more beautiful, rather it “removes every basis for complaint.” What is the basis for complaint if the wood is ‘true’, in as much as it exists palpably in nature? One complaint directly follows: time. “The old age of the wood disappears.” Because of figural representation the initial object “wood” “forgets

⁴¹ Alain de Lille, *Anticlaudianus*, 102.

its primeval origins” to the comprehensive extent that it loses its own history.

“Origin” is the second problem. Whence come poetic objects as opposed to natural ones? The bald assumption here is that the wood has an origin but is on its way to not having one. It is on its way to becoming art. The opposition between two worlds is set. The wood disappears from nature, history, (and the remainder of the passage) and instead the pole’s “star-cluster gems” emit a light that “restores true day.” Rarely does one passage attempt so much; the ‘truth’ that comes from this former piece of wood is the “true day” that makes “the actual day grow dull” so that the latter “sinks down in admiration before an adoptive light so great.” One wooden pole, so transformed by Rhetoric, becomes the sun of a lost world, the “true day” of Paradise instead of the false day of nature. The Edenic home of poetic language posited, we see the complete Platonic ascent from a piece of wood to the lost day of the Golden Age. This transformation does not occur by making the wood more beautiful, although that comes as collateral. It occurs by the saturation of the literal by the figural to such an extent that an object ceases to be itself, loses its beginning, leaves our world, and becomes the “adoptive” light of a world that is more real than our own. And of course the object, like language itself, represents an entire world of knowledge. Thus, language, the wooden pole of the world of *human* knowledge, is transformed by poetry into a mythical force that reunites in itself a lost human inheritance: the “true day” prior to our own history when men pursued “Goddes pryvetee” instead of the postlapasarian noetic epic in which we attempt to take comfort in the language of “deerne love.” Natural objects in Platonic literature have symbolic destinies. Daphne is still a laurel and Apollo’s crown is still made from her leaves. Rhetoric’s wooden pole shines on Plato’s cicadas who are still servants to the Muses.

There exists in the very nature of the tradition a bid for eternity, whether explicit (wooden pole) or implicit (hot poker). In this way Alain argues that language and nature, in their ordinary signifying functions, are incapable of expressing the divine by virtue of the fact that their mode of reference is co-ontological with empirical knowledge. Unless metaphor can overcome language's natural order of expression, then poetry (Platonic rhetoric in service to the Muses) has failed to establish its *raison d'être*, its particular contribution to human knowledge. Concerning this, Paul Ricoeur writes, "The question is precisely whether poetic language does not break through to a pre-scientific, antepredicative level, where the very notions of fact, object, reality, and truth, as delimited by epistemology, are called into question, by the means of the vacillation of literal reference."⁴² In Neoplatonic poems, language is referred to two supernatural points of reference: divinity and the Muses. This does not mean that every Neoplatonic poem is about gods and Muses. Rather, it emphasizes a theoretical movement of language back towards a point prior to its own existence. This is language's anamnesis, but this anamnesis tends further into paradox. In Platonism a soul can remember what it already knows. But the soul's initial knowledge was not linguistic; it still is not. Which is to say, language must remember something it never knew to begin with. If language came into being as a search for God, it came too late and it came blindfolded. Poetic rhetoricians are nonetheless held responsible to a world of symbols that predates their own management of language. Perhaps it sounds more austere than it really is. At least Chaucer's poem seems to locate some very enduring comedy in the fact that

⁴² Ricoeur, 254.

sometimes all that is required of interlocutors is to see an “iren hoot” for the “yonge sonne”⁴³ that it really is.

In fact, the Canterbury tone towards nature does not partake of a comprehensive Platonic superciliousness, which is, incidentally, something that perhaps belongs more to philosophical rather than poetic Platonism. Instead the mood is of an ironic and playful acknowledgment of the limitations of the instructive capacity of natural modes in the face of poetry’s epistemological capabilities and the role they play in the extension of our powers of inquiry. Chaucer’s writing, after all, exhibits an intricate sense of cultural realism. Thus, the focus of the poetic irony is not to simply deny the empirical predicament of language as much as to revel in a form of transcendence based within the paradox that poetry presents as an autotelic metaphorical practice with a ‘compromised bloodline’ due its linguistic (read: social) transmission. Even if the soul is called to remember things in themselves, the inheritance of Genesis 3 is that it must do so in an unscrupulous partnership with the scientific tool by which it relates to the wrong reality, the one it stumbled upon outside Eden’s gates: language, as it now exists. But in order for language to be of one substance with intuition, it must be sufficiently tortured until it achieves an adequate order of embarrassment from empirical referentiality. Put another way, Chaucer’s poetry is not one in which formal non-linguistic and divine meanings simply wait to be *accessed* through the transfiguration of literal language into metaphorical language. Rather, the metaphors of poetry help to generate those meanings. Yes, poetry, in Ricoeur’s words, intends for language to “reach the mythic level where its function of discovery is set free,”⁴⁴ but the discovery of poetry is self

⁴³ *General Prologue* (6).

⁴⁴ Ricoeur, 247.

referential, in as much as it concerns itself with realities it helps to create. Max Black writes, “Metaphorical statement is not a substitute for a formal comparison or any other kind of literal statement, but has its own distinctive capacities and achievements...it would be more illuminating to say that metaphor creates the similarity than to say that it formulates some similarity antecedently existing.”⁴⁵ This is what I take to be McNabb’s meaning when he writes, “I believe there is a humanistic definition that puts forth a rhetoric that is epistemic.”⁴⁶

Therefore, in the *Miller’s Tale*, when we imagine “Goddess pryvetee,” we understand not only the place where the theological meaning of the Flood resides, but also the pre-linguistic epistemological region to which metaphor, and therefore poetry aspire. The *Miller’s Tale* is a “transaction between two contexts,”⁴⁷ and “metaphor creates the similarity.”⁴⁸ The knowledge of poetry may be of the same species of truth housed in divinity, but poetry is not given by revelation. One could conceive of it as inspired by a search to describe divinity rather than divinely inspired. It is a bottom up performance. The religious Flood comes to Chaucer top down and the poetic Flood of his poem travels the other way. To cite Augustine once again, “Literature is not responsible for the falsehood...but gives us scientific knowledge about them.”⁴⁹ It is probable that Biblical accounts of God’s secret knowledge were very much less concerned with scientifically ratifying the false analogy between the divine mind and the ‘truth’ of medieval dirty story, but by making the two equivalent by way of metaphor, Chaucer’s poem does somehow generate and toy with a real science of ideas. Chaucer, in the process of inventing his poem, simultaneously

⁴⁵ Black, 37.

⁴⁶ McNabb, 75.

⁴⁷ I.A. Richards, 94.

⁴⁸ Black, 37.

⁴⁹ Augustine, *Soliloquies* (II.19), 50.

invents the philosophical perspective and poetic form that culminate in the tale's singular contribution to human discussions of the Flood. In this manner, the *Miller's Tale* is a novel if not altogether unique Flood sermon.

The fundamentals of the Miller's thesis are at once irreligious and antipoetic and we can speak comfortably of an atheistic *poetic* cosmos that occurs en route towards a comprehensive and symbolically annihilated one. It seems to arise in a fashion in which the end justifies the means. The Miller is not attempting a systematic dismantling of Christianity but a rhetorical one, predicated on the power of his parodic enterprise. But "Goddess pryvetee" becomes the great prize of the poem and neither narratological perspective can achieve success without its total philosophical integration, because if there exists in the universe a power such as "Goddess pryvetee," then no piece of wood or hot iron is safe and no word from a man's mouth can be given the guarantee that it will express his own will rather than be co-opted and turned into another shining sun in a world governed by God's secrets. Thus, if we recall Strohm's position- that "God's providence makes no dent in the materiality of the tale,"⁵⁰ we may contend that, in fact, a religious order of meaning does remain a dominant poetic force, but does so with perpetual and silent ironic momentum, with reference to a historical tradition of literary irony. God's secrets in the poem act as a guarantee of art itself, and the Miller's rhetorical consistency through frame and tale suggest a developed intuition. However, in his poem (over which his control is not absolute) one world or another will deliver poetic interlocutors from their anxiety and linguistic instability. The Miller 'bets the farm' that enough aggressive sexual empiricism will suffocate the supernatural questions of human existence, grounding objects so that he can rename them and as a New(er) Adam. However, figural objects

⁵⁰ Strohm, 136.

cannot be converted back into comprehensible ones. It is unlikely that Rhetoric's wooden pole will reenter the atmosphere. The clever way around the problem is to deny that anything had to be brought 'back' to history in the first place. Like the two dissonant worlds to which Tithonus is responsible, the symbolic appointment of the language of the *Miller's Tale* will take place in Macrobian sublunary or superlunary realities where the secrets of men and gods reside, and in between which the poetic conflict between "deerne love" and "Goddess pryvetee" takes place. Recognizing the wider tendency and tradition of Chaucer's religious irony to point outside its immediate object, e.g. 'religion', places us in a better position to construct and appreciate from within the poem a contrary attitude at the level of form towards the attempt by its own narrators to empty the Flood of its religious meaning.

"And when she came back she was nobody's wife."⁵¹

In an attempt to locate the meaning of the Flood in the sublunary, by which I mean represent it as something that serves rather than judges humans, Nicholas- after attacking a quart of ale- 'recovers' from his astrological trance and reveals his apocalyptic news.

'Now John,' quod Nicholas, 'I wol nat lye;
I have yfounde in myn astrologye
As I have looked in the moone bright,
That now a Monday next, at quarter nyght
Shal falle a reyn, and that so wilde and wood
That half so greet was nevere Noes flood.

⁵¹ Leonard Cohen, "Famous Blue Raincoat." *Songs of Love and Hate*. Columbia Records. 1971.

This world,' he seyde, 'in lasse than an hour
 Shal al be dreynt, so hidous is the shour.
 Thus shal mankynde drenche, and lese hir lyf.'

(3513-3521)

Comic nihilism pervades as Nicholas parodies his own academic interests in order to make a mockery of John and of the Flood. We might intuit in the Miller's rhetoric an enthusiastic endorsement of Nicholas'; we might see in the young scholar's existentialism a more cavalier and playful version of the Miller's own philosophy. Nicholas' intrigues are free of the Miller's self-loathing that comes to dominate the final act of the poem. If the two rhetorics elide, then it does not seem entirely impertinent to wonder at which point Nicholas' ass ends and the Miller's begins. It is, after all, with remarkable argumentative consistency that Nicholas convinces John of his scheme, binding him to secrecy by invoking the authority of God's secrets. "Axe nat why, for though thou aske me,/ I wol nat tellen Goddes pryvetee." (3557-3558). It is the same sense of humour by which Chauntecleer reenters Paradise by simply hiding in its trees; Nicholas sends the old carpenter to fetch the materials for makeshift boats by which they will escape a Flood that is not only devoid of any working concept of divine justice, but a Flood that never comes at all. While John is snuggled into his skiff, Nicholas and Alisoun enjoy the fruits of their labor until the early hours of morning, at which point, to culminate a brilliant joint project, one that begins in the *Prologue* and whose toil belongs to many hands, the scene ends with a reference to ringing church bells and the strains of the friars' morning song in an ironic aubade- an inverted mass dedicated to his "brave new world."⁵²

⁵² Richard Daniels, "Textual Pleasure in the *Miller's Tale*." In *The Performance of Middle English Culture. Essays on Chaucer and the Drama*. ed. J. Paxson, Lawrence M. Clopper, and Sylvia Tomasch. (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1998): 116.

Ther was the revel and the melodye;
 And thus lith Alison and Nicholas,
 In bisynesse of myrthe and of solas,
 Til that the belle of laudes gan to ryngge,
 And freres in the chauncel gone synge.

(3652- 3656)

Perhaps had the poem ended here, there might have been a stronger case for the Miller's contentual poetics. Indeed, after this point in the poem, the speed increases, first to farcical and then to chaotic pace. If we recall the lengthy ironic *descriptio* of Alisoun and place it alongside the action that follows, we see not only an increase in the velocity of the tale, but also a creeping sense of irritation. Concerning this, Alvin W. Bowker writes, "The dark spirit of the Miller's Tale moves in a distinctly theatrical milieu... The Tale itself, and the drama it embraces, is divided between an initial spirit of ebullience and one of ultimate darkness."⁵³ The tone becomes more desperate and the narratological attitudes less resolute as the poem's irony begins to bear more heavily upon its action.

Puppet Platonism

Absolon enters as a parody not only of the courtier but also of the poem's own Platonism. It is a precious portrait. "In hoses rede he wente fetisly./ Yclad he was he was ful smal and proprely." (3319-3320). Later, "But sooth to seyn, he was somdeel squaymous/ Of fartyng, and of speche daungerous." (3337-3338) Miller points out that, "He (Absolon) is deeply taken with the postures of love-longing- lyrical and

⁵³ Alvin W. Bowker, "Comic Illusion and Dark Reality in "The Miller's Tale." *Modern Language Studies*. Vol. 4, No. 2 (Autumn, 1974): 27.

dramatic expressions of passion...all of which take such ridiculous forms they seem to be designed to keep the possibility of an erotic payoff at bay.”⁵⁴ He goes on to say, “In the context of his squeamishness about farting, his fastidious speech, and his obsession with fresh breath, this aversion begins to look like it has its source in a more general aversion towards the human body.”⁵⁵ Absolon’s attempt to sidestep the poem’s profanity through polite speech seems to be a characteristic Chaucerian accomplishment, provided we acknowledge that the question of profanity in art cannot be satisfactorily concluded by ‘not mentioning it’, and especially by the character responsible for the most profane moment of the tale. In this way, Absolon’s initial rhetorical performance (pre-poker), in its wholesale attempt to avoid the physical aspects of the poem, its disgust for nature, is a peculiarity through which the poem humorously interrogates poetic method. In a less illustrious performance the poem’s philosophical counterargument to the tale’s materialism could embody Absolon, could become a fetishized Platonist romanticism established simply upon negative definitions at the expense of history and the body, one in which the poker would be something to be bypassed or overcome in pursuit of rarer air. But that is not this poem; this poem is about a hot poker.

And the hot poker takes on mythic proportions for our discussion, acting as meeting place for the numerous themes, antinomies, and symbols of the poem. The atmosphere transforms from smug to carnivalesque as Chaucer raises the poker as an ironic figure- some farcical bronze serpent- against which the poem tests the unresolved conflicts between its own irony and the Miller’s voices, between the philosophical conflict of Nicholas’ “deerne love” and “Goddes pryvetee.” The scene

⁵⁴ Miller, 19.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

begins unassumingly, directly following the ironic aubade. Absolon approaches the window, declaring, “What do ye, hony-comb, sweet Alisoun,/ My faire bryd, my sweete cynamome?” (3698-3700). The “self-infantilization”⁵⁶ of Absolon further serves to highlight his conflicted attitude towards his romantic desires. “I moorne as dooth a lamb after the tete.” (3704). In fact, an infant’s relationship to its mother is a rather foot-in-mouth description of Absolon’s romantic enterprise, by virtue of the former’s radical physicality and the latter’s Hippolytian⁵⁷ fastidiousness. Absolon’s *méconnaissance* comes to manifest itself in a shocking manner, inaugurating the implosion of the poem’s content with a famous kiss. “Derk was the nyght as pich, or as the cole,/ And at the wyndow out she putte hir hole,/ And Absolon, hym fil no bet ne wers,/ But with his mouth he kist hir naked ers.” (3731-3734). Pointing out that the Absolon actually kisses something with a ‘berd’ (3737) and ‘long yherd’ (3738) is a well-traveled wink and one that serves to further propel the metapoetic function of the poem’s discursive attempts to swallow the world whole through the fearless sexual desolation of its own theological landscape. Absolon, ironic straw man to the philosophy of the poem, reacts violently to the kiss. “Who rubbeth now, who froteth now his lippes/ With dust, with sond, with straw, with clooth, with chippes.” (3747-3748). Perhaps the poem’s narrative denounces the airy effeminacy of the red-hosed Absolon in service to a “wrastlyng” Miller’s rugged nihilism.⁵⁸ The boy frantically wipes his mouth with whatever he can find; anything it seems, even dirt and woodchips is preferable to the human body.

While Absolon is busy trying to remove all traces of his first kiss, we might pause to appreciate that his particular brand of anti-naturalism is not the proper mirror

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ That is, the enthusiastically virginal Hippolytus of Euripides and not the early Church saint.

⁵⁸ *General Prologue*, 54.

of the poem's supernaturalism. The elegance of poem's argument, unlike Absolon's candied existentialism, survives the bawdiest moments of the main action. Absolon revolts from nature, while the poem's persistent irony frustrates nature's power to limit the figural and anagogical capacity of even a moment such as this. I say "such as this" because Chaucer's looming poker is less benign than Alain's piece of wood, but it shares a common telos. This is why transcendent symbolism continues to grow even when asses are being kissed at all hours, Absolon starts eating dirt, and one blacksmith's iron achieves literary infamy. Chaucer's poem is perfecting comic-seriousness before our eyes. In as much as we conceive of successful Neoplatonic medieval poetry, the Boethian ideal keeps company with these sodomizing rustics as easily as it does Lady Philosophy. Thus, we may imagine the poem's metaphorical schedule as one in which language and action are subverted to represent themselves *alinguistically*, instead of anti-linguistically. One is blithe and the other is reactionary. One "whistles as he walks; slashing the grass with a stick,"⁵⁹ and the other "rubbeth now" and "froteth now his lippes/ With dust, with sond, with straw, with clooth, with chippes."

This opposition between the poem's Platonism and the inadequacies of Absolon's conservative theory of art widens. We witness the theoretical about-face that occurs when the boy abandons his endearing *fin amour* project in favor of bloody-minded revenge. Alisoun's literal rear is enough to constitute the breach of his epistemological horizon to the extent that he damns himself to Hell: "My soule bitake I unto Sathanus,/ But me were levere than al this toun," quod he,/ Of this despit awroken for to be." (3750-3753) It is a cynical coming-of-age story: Absolon discovers the human body. Once he does, he gets busy planning a holocaust. In the

⁵⁹ G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*. (Lenoir: Reformation Press, 2002): 36.

sheer speed with which Absolon's philosophy takes a naturalistic turn we might read a terminal condemnation of a poetic in search of a facile disembarassment from linguistic considerations instead of one that operates in search of an elusive autonomous metaphorical form whose power of expression is a 'language beyond language' or, more precisely, a 'language *before* language'. Art's antagonism to life has to be made of stronger stuff than kolpophobia.⁶⁰ For the failed romantic interlocutors of poetry, the attempt to *not* talk about nature and experience is 'crash diet' often followed by a binge in the final act. Chauntecleer's own foray into world-defying literary abstraction breaks in two by the end and he settles for 20 rounds of feathering. This is because it is one thing to write a poem that denies itself the worldly pleasure of Nicholas' burning ass- which is Absolon's initial poem- and another to write a poem that tramples it into a functioning epistemology- which is Chaucer's initial poem. Thus, Absolon is put to work as a symbol in whose figural weaknesses we might read a self-conscious metapoetic cleansing of the poem's own literary method. The picture that emerges is that the poetic the boy ironically represents lacks the theoretical subtlety and robust creative power to withstand the energy of the Miller's poetic materialism. It is the difference between idealism and Idealism. One is a psychological habit. The other is a philosophy. Absolon's idealism exists in a world too rough for his tastes. The poem's Idealism exists in a world too real for his language. In one, the world defines the idealism and in another the Idealism defines the world.

The Passion of St. Nicholas

⁶⁰ Fear of genitals, particularly female.

The newly damned Absolon runs to the blacksmith in order to get hold of the instrument by which he intends to strike at the source of his disappointment. We might say that the Nietzschean element in this moment is strong. The poem's rhetoric at the level of content depends upon the transformation of God's secrets, both theologically and poetically, into Alisoun's figural ass. Meanwhile, Absolon, whose entire artistic direction has been predicated on the romantic reification of Alisoun is now involved in a slapstick 'death of God' moment with a hot iron. In this sense, Absolon begins as a tinny shadow of Plato but he accidentally becomes the Miller's executioner. Even if he means to pay back Nicholas for laughing at him, it is important to note that there is no indication that he thinks he has kissed Nicholas' ass. Absolon means to brand her ass. Nicholas' just gets in the way. But this event that began at the expense of Absolon's poetic has its effect and counterpart in the failure of the Miller's. The poem's sponsor unwittingly loses control of the arguments upon which the poem's cosmos depends in the vaudeville Passion of St. Nicholas. If God-as-signified is supposed to collapse into the signifier 'Alisoun's ass' and then be mutilated altogether, then we understand a consistent finish to the world of religious signs and of all signs. In Nicholas' ass, the Miller's embodied vessel, his own incarnation into the poem, we understand the self-mutilation of an entire poetic. We understand a philosophy that puts itself out of its own misery.

Absolon, squeamish of farts, is subjected to one "As greet as it had been a thonder-dent/ That with the strook he was almost yblent." (3807-3808). In response, he attacks. "And he was redy with his iren hoot,/ And Nicholas amydde the ers he smoot." (3809-3810). In Nicholas' percussive and alliterative staccato we can hear the end of one world and the beginning of another. "Help! Water! Water! Help, for

Goddes herte!” (3814). Like the Biblical Flood, this is water that brings the fall of a fallen world. Such a thing can be described symbolically and argumentatively. What I mean is that throughout the poem the figural status of ‘water’ shifts. In each shift we see an icon of the artistic stability of the Miller’s story, its philosophical health. Water’s first appearance is in the parody of the Flood, when Nicholas reduces it to a joke.

That now a Monday next, at quarter nyght.
 Shal falle a reyn, and that so wilde and wood
 That half so greet was nevere Noes flood.
 This world,’ he seyde, ‘in lasse than an hour
 Shal al be dreynt, so hidous is the shour.
 Thus shal mankynde drenche, and lese hir lyf.
 (3516-3521)

The second appearance is in the form of Nicholas’ piss. “‘This wol I yeve thee, if thou me kisse.’/ This Nicholas was risen for to pisse.” (3797-3798). Here the status of water marks both the ironic aubade’s planting of the “flag on the Marble Arch”⁶¹ and the nihilistic mood that pervades the poem’s final act. The back alley charm of Nicholas- offering a ring for a kiss from another man’s wife with whom he has just committed adultery and then putting the offer on hold for a piss and a fart shares in that particular brand of instructive “meh” of a similar narrative tone to, “*Aujourd’hui maman est morte. Ou peut-être hier, je ne sais pas.*”⁶² In this sense, Nicholas pisses on the entire system of signification represented by the poetic identity of theology in the poem. For the poem’s content, this is both argumentative culmination and the beginning of decline.

⁶¹ Cohen, “Hallelujah.” *Various Positions*. Columbia Records. 1984.

⁶² Albert Camus, *L’Étranger*. (Paris: Gallimard, 1962): 1.

The final symbolic status of water is the water for which Nicholas cries out to God to soothe his burning rear. It is a peripatetic reversal. Irony collides with narrative and imposes onto the action. For this is the end of the Miller's experiment, the final results of a parodic enterprise. The poem proves itself incapable of generating a metapoetic system outside of the epistemological power of "Goddes pryvetee." This does not occur all at once, nor could it in the context of a sustained, rather than episodic irony. Nevertheless, conflicts peak. The central conflict of this poem seems to peak at the precise moment the poem's own action and rhetoric go silent except for one unforgettable literary mutilation and one blood-curdling scream that invokes a literal flood. It is Alain's conflict in the *Anticlaudianus*: "You would think that the art was seeking opponents and a contest for herself."⁶³ In keeping with Chaucer's ironic sense of poetic justice, the Miller's theses, which have labored with great energy to offer up Alisoun's ass as a satisfactory alternative to the metaphors of art, are presented a formal defeater according to the symbolic power of Nicholas' burning ass in a heavy-handed parallelism. However, it is not merely the burning ass that undoes the Miller's poetic cosmos. It is the fact that Nicholas is abandoned by his patron to the Fortune of a universe he helped to create. It is the fact that Nicholas unwittingly cries out for the return of the self-same Flood that has been subjected to every sort of *ad absurdum* argument available to his intellect. "Help! Water! Water! Help, for Goddes herte!" (3814). This is, after all, a young man who could tell us, "Whan that men sholde have droghte or elles shoures." (3196). Thus, we see that the repressed metaphorical form of the poem, a working concept of the poetic regions of God's secrets, comes to adjudicate and ultimately dominate the action of even a poem as aggressively nihilistic as the Miller's.

⁶³ Alain de Lille, *Anticlaudianus*, 94.

When John hears Nicholas cry for water, he believes the literal Flood has arrived. “And herde oon crien “water!” as he were wood,/ And thoughte, “Allas, now comth Nowelis flood!” (3817-3818). In Chaucer’s poem there is no literal dimension to the Flood. Of course, it is no news to us that the reach of John’s understanding of the meaning of the poem is eminently modest, but more interesting is the dual movement of John expecting the literal flood that Nicholas promises due to Nicholas screaming for a flood of the very same dimension. Nicholas is not crying out for the metaphorical meaning of God’s judgment, his desire is earthier: he wants literal water to cool his literal wounded rear. Thus, the poem is at its playful best by placing Nicholas within a situation whereby a flood of the poetic and religiously bereft character produced by his own philosophy becomes an authentic and not parodic desire. To an extent, then, even in poetry, a fellow must be careful what he wishes for.

John cuts the ropes and crashes to the floor, breaking his arm. The town assembles outside and enjoys Alisoun’s and Nicholas’ mockery of him. At the mercy of his cheating wife and her lover, the old man is declared insane and it becomes his perpetual town reputation. Indeed, the sheer meanness of the Miller and his cabinet should interrupt our literary pleasure. The effect is that of a joke gone too far; ill-will replaces the rollicking tone with which the poem sets out, and we are left to consider the literary portrait of the Miller, whose violent treatment of his own characters points to the larger poetic dilemma of the tale in which the aporetic distinctions between the content of God’s and man’s secrets remain persistently present and unresolved even in the face of his most sophisticated attempts to collapse them into a single experiential region governed by natural linguistic expression. Chesterton memorably notes, “Imagination does not breed insanity. Exactly what does breed insanity is reason. Poets do not go mad, but chess players do...The general fact is simple. Poetry

is sane because it floats easily in an infinite sea; reason seeks to cross the infinite sea and make it finite. The result is mental exhaustion.”⁶⁴ We can see a reflection of this in the Miller. His poem’s attempt to expel the secret regions of divine knowledge and poetic meaning from the universe devolves into self-mutilating narrative disorder. Such is the difficulty of any thoroughgoing natural conception of poetry: its inability to patrol the boundaries of literature to such an extent that its figures can be made to point back towards life instead of art. The Miller’s philosophical program, in which the symbolic order of meaning in art is sacrificed for the natural, the literal, the hyper-sexual, ends in a madness of sorts wherein he discredits his own interlocutors and allows them to expose the inadequacy of a Flood imagined outside of art by demonstrating that such a Flood- were it to come even in its mightiest form- could accomplish little else than the cooling of a burning ass. And of course this flood never comes. The Miller’s poetic world fails to achieve the power by which it could manipulate its own natural world, much less the supernatural one it fails to exterminate.

The conclusion provides little in the way of interpretation or moral exhortation. It simply lists its accomplishments in the hope that the tale might yet amount to a success even in the face of the growing narratological desperation.

Thus swyved was this carpenteris wyf,
 For al his keypyng and his jalousye,
 And Absolon hath kist hir nether ye,
 And Nicholas is scalded in the towte.
 And the tale is doon, and God save al the rowte!
 (3850-3854)

⁶⁴ Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 35.

In the end, the tale and the metaphorical meaning of these episodes belong to a 'world that God hides from man's mind' and not to the Miller's argumentative instability- a world of silent irony through which we are able to appreciate the poem as a celebration of a philosophy that elides poetic eternity with "Goddess Pryvete" rather than one that achieves a nihilistic vacuum at its expense.

CHAPTER III

The *Manciple's Tale* and the Proper Use of Language in Poetry

The final chapter of Part I conducts an Ovidian genealogy through which we are able to appreciate that Phoebus, the white augural crow, and “Wyf” are refocused philosophical icons from the early moments of the Metamorphoses. In both Ovid and Chaucer, the euhemerized god of poetry cyclically expatriates to earth in order to pursue a monistic integration of time and eternity based in sexual bliss. The crow’s report to Phoebus is considered against the Ovidian tradition of artistic judgment in which the failed interlocutors of poetry attempt to invest the literal data of human history with a figural mission. Onomatopoeia becomes the ultimate entropic mode of language, a curse against which the Neoplatonic tradition of poetic silence emerges as a solution to the instability of human speech.

If the *Pardoner’s Tale* and the *Miller’s Tale* tell stories that kick God out of the world, then the *Manciple’s Tale* tells a story that kicks God out of heaven. “It is significant,” writes Marijane Osborne, “that the tale features a euhemerized Apollo, his deity almost entirely suppressed.”¹ Put simply: In the first two stories the men try to become like gods. The Old Man would defy death. First in the bed of Eos and centuries later by killing Death and making sure that the Fall stays put, that nothing comes to replace it. The Miller’s narrators attempt, to use Strohm’s words, an

¹ Marijane Osborne, *Time and the Astrolabe in the Canterbury Tales*. (Norman: The University of Oklahoma Press, 2002): 114.

“unfettered attack on all forms of transcendence,”² attempt to collapse the universe into a single empty signifier. Both poetic worlds try to *mean* more than they can and they destroy each other, either one rioter at a time or one “poure scoler” at a time. The *Manciple’s Tale* is an opposite movement for similar ends. The gods try to become like men. Earlier I called it a “pulp romance.” And that is what it is- a story about a guy with a sidekick who falls in love with the wrong girl. Sidekick tells him that she’s a cheating dame and he shoots her dead.

Perhaps this is part of the reason why it has never been the darling of Chaucerian criticism. F.N.M. Diekstra writes, “I am not going to argue that it is one of Chaucer’s more brilliant tales. It is not. It is obviously a lightweight thing...”³ “As a narrative,” Jamie C. Fumo argues, “the Manciple’s Tale is hardly compelling. As a fabliau, it is profoundly unfunny.”⁴ Derek Pearsall diplomatically concludes that, “The *Manciple’s Tale* is in many respects a peculiar performance.”⁵ Perhaps the tale leaves narrative aspects to be desired. Its minimalism is almost scientific in effect. Narrative minimalism is an unusual literary conduit for such wide-ranging epistemological concerns from the *Metamorphoses* and Platonic linguistic traditions, including the second appearance of the famous aphorism from the *General Prologue*. Even so, the episodic narrative is rife with poetic history. Chaucer’s poem only seems small because it comes at the end rather than the beginning of a very long story. Because of this, I think that a more helpful starting point is Loren C. Gruber’s position that, “The *Manciple’s Tale*...seems for the most part to either have been little

² Strohm, 133.

³ F.N.M. Diekstra, “Chaucer’s Digressive Mode and the Moral of the Manciple’s Tale.” *Neophilologus*, Vol. 67 (1983): 131.

⁴ Jamie C. Fumo, “Thinking Upon the Crow: The *Manciple’s Tale* and Ovidian Mythography.” *The Chaucer Review*, Vol. 38, No. 4 (2004): 355.

⁵ Derek Pearsall, *The Canterbury Tales*. (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1985): 238.

appreciated or but partially understood.”⁶ It is more helpful because the *Manciple’s Tale*, despite its somewhat surprising unpopularity, constitutes one of Chaucer’s most sophisticated, and certainly most focused, philosophical discussions concerning the proper use of language in poetry. The poem continues an Ovidian tradition of poetic judgment but does so with greater metalinguistic precision. It helps trace foundations for a working philosophy of poetic language on historical literary precedents, the internal logic of which undercuts the narrative methods of the Manciple’s voices, whose aggressive attempts to orient the poem’s symbols toward a literal order of meaning create an excessively bloody and puzzling environment. Considering the poem according to these elements helps to clear the way for an appreciation of Chaucer’s performance as not only one of high metapoetic sophistication but also one that is philosophically consistent with the wider literary concerns of the *Canterbury Tales*.

To the discontent of many critics, the story’s narrative elements show, if anything, excessive restraint. Chaucer tells us only that it is a “hous.” “Now hadde this Phebus in his hous a crowe.” (*Manciple’s Tale*, 131). The transitions from one action to another are abrupt. The greater part of the narrative is spent in didactic diversions. Some are abandoned mid-thought. “This holde I for a verray nycetee/ To spille labour for to kepe wyves:/ Thus writen olde clerkes in hir lyves./ But now to purpos, as I first bigan.” (152-155). Instead of indicating failure on the part of the poem,⁷ the construction of the *Manciple’s Tale*- besides featuring Chaucerian narrative in a familiar and idiosyncratic staccato comedic voice- exhibits all the

⁶ Loren C. Gruber, “The *Manciple’s Tale*: One Key to Chaucer’s Language,” in *New Views on Chaucer: Essays in Generative Criticism*. (Denver: The Society for New Language Study, 1973): 43.

⁷ Diekstra, 133. Diekstra cites one critic’s opinion that the *Manciple’s Tale* constitutes one of Chaucer’s “purposely bad pieces.” He allows the critic to remain anonymous.

features of an ‘in-house’ discussion, which is to say, the poem assumes prior knowledge. The prior knowledge assumed is the symbolic heritage inherited from Ovid’s humorous thematic contributions to a literary tradition of which the cicada myth in Plato’s *Phaedrus* stands as one particularly elegant example. The heritage of which I speak is that of metamorphosis, poetic judgment through transformation. Often these transformations are rendered upon an aetiological basis e.g. ‘This is how it came to be that cicadas sleeplessly sing’, or, “And for this caas been alle crows blake.” (308). Like all transformations in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, poetics stalks the narrative and examines the success and (usually) the failure of interlocutory rhetoric. Likewise, in Chaucer’s poem, the principal aetiological component is not that crows turned black at some point but that Phoebus places a hex upon the talking bird: “Ne nevere sweete noyse shul ye make.” (300). It is in this respect that the *Manciple’s Tale* is unique in Chaucerian poetry, the majority of whose relationship with Ovidian literature is based in the misappropriated love rhetoric of the *Amores* and *Ars* and not the aetiological transformations of the *Metamorphoses*. The novelty of the tale is easily missed when considered in isolation to the literary heritage in which it operates.

To argue that the poem’s principal inspiration is the *Metamorphoses* is a philosophical exercise and not one simply based in source study. Much has been written concerning the cosmetic and narrative relationship of the *Manciple’s Tale* to its sources, especially to Ovid’s work, the *Ovide Moralisé*, and Guillaume de Machaut’s *Le Voir Dit*.⁸ However, various critics suggest that a thoroughgoing interrogation into the contentual resemblance of Chaucer’s poem to his sources yields no definitive supertext. For instance, J. Burke Severs argues, “Chaucer’s poem is much closer to the vulgarizations of the story, especially the *Ovide Moralisé*, than to

⁸ See, for instance, J. Burke Severs, “Is the *Manciple’s Tale* a Success?” *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, Vol. 51 (1952): 1-16, Diekstra, and Fumo.

the original Latin,” while going on to say, “The important fact, however, is that his version is quite different from that in any of the analogues. It is by no means a mere retelling of any of them.”⁹ Pelen writes, “A study of the sources cannot resolve Chaucer’s own poetic attitude, let alone the baffling “moral” of the tale.”¹⁰ Therefore, instead of arguing the primacy of one source over another on the level of direct compositional or linguistic correlation, we should propose the *Metamorphoses* on the grounds that Chaucer’s discussion depends more heavily on the energy of Ovid’s metapoetic assumptions than it does on the medieval French sources. A figural genealogy of Phoebus and the crow from *Metamorphoses I* and *II* to the *Manciple’s Tale* tells the cyclical tale of Apollo abandoning his divinity and falling to earth. It is like Jonah’s midnight run from God. After his descent into the sea and full-scale personal revolt he unwillingly converts Nineveh. Apollo, too, kicks against the goads, descends to earth, and accidentally upholds the world of symbols that he no longer wants to govern. Chaucer’s poem is an exercise in linguistic pessimism set to the tune of artistic optimism. The condemnation of Apollonian and avian antipoetry affirms a poetry proper.

Apollo on Earth

The aetiological myth of Coronis from *Metamorphoses II* features a raven and a crow, the symbolic functions of which Chaucer’s poem integrates into a single crow. In the *Metamorphoses*, Apollo lives on earth with a human lover, Coronis who, Ovid reports, is the loveliest in all of Thessaly. Apollo’s raven catches her in bed with a young Thessalian, “The bird of Phoebus detected her in wrongdoing, and, a pitiless

⁹ Ibid., 3.

¹⁰ Pelen, “The Manciple’s “Cosyn” to the “Dede.” *The Chaucer Review*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (1991): 343.

informer, hurried to its master, determined to reveal her guilt.”¹¹ A crow stops Apollo’s raven mid flight. She warns him not to deliver the news. “Look at what I was, and what I now am. If you inquire into the cause of this change, you will find it was my faithfulness that ruined me.”¹² She reveals her human origin: “Do not think me a person of no importance: I was a king’s daughter, and wooed by rich suitors.”¹³ Formerly a human princess, she is changed into “Minerva’s blameless attendant”¹⁴ after the goddess takes pity on her when Neptune attempts to rape her. The princess becomes an augural bird, a servant of the gods. She possesses the power of speech. One day Minerva watches from “the light foliage of a leafy elm”¹⁵ as her crow witnesses Aglauros open a secret chest revealing the motherless infant Erichthonius. When the crow tells Minerva what has happened the goddess banishes her. The goddess did not mean for the contents of the chest to be discovered. Nor was it required that her augural bird tell her a secret that she already knew. It is of prime importance that Minerva does not punish the crow for witnessing the event. She punishes the bird for reporting it. The bird laments,

I told the goddess what had happened and my reward for that service was that I was ousted from my place as Minerva’s attendant, and ranked lower than the bird of the night. The punishment I suffered may serve as a warning to other birds, not to court danger by telling tales.¹⁶

¹¹ (ii. 544- 545) Ovid, *Metamorphoses*. trans. Mary M. Innes (London: Penguin, 1971): 64. Unless otherwise stated, translations are taken from the Innes edition and original Latin from the Loeb: Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, ed. and trans. Frank Justus Miller, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984)

¹² (ii. 551- 552) Innes, 65.

¹³ (ii. 570- 571) *Ibid.*, 65.

¹⁴ (ii. 588) *Ibid.*, 66.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

In this panel Ovid does not tell us the fate of Aglauros¹⁷ who commits the crime; instead the focus is on the bird's retelling. The text indicates to us that only the crow's essence is changed. She is not transformed back into a human; she becomes a degraded bird. Likewise, Phoebus' crow in the *Manciple's Tale* begins and ends in the avian family. Chaucer's poem reflects these literary concerns, for the *Manciple's Tale* also concerns itself with the problem of speaking about events, rather than events themselves. More precisely, it concerns itself with what is expected of augural birds when faced with the secret business of the gods.

An unimpressed Apollo's raven retorts, "I hope your attempts to hold me back may recoil on your own head! I have no time for your futile predictions!"¹⁸ The raven flies to Apollo and delivers the message. When Apollo hears it, "The wreath of laurel slipped from his head, his face changed, his colour ebbed away, and the plectrum fell from his fingers."¹⁹ In the "fever of a swelling rage"²⁰ he shoots Coronis in the heart. In her final breath she reveals that she is carrying Apollo's child and that he has killed them both. Ovid writes, "He [Apollo] hated the bird, whose officiousness had forced him to learn of Coronis' guilt."²¹ The god attempts to revive Coronis, hoping to, "thwart the fates, but he employed his healing art without avail, his aid came too late."²² Apollo decrees that the crow shall, "Never again be counted among white birds."²³

Various metapoetic elements shape the *Manciple's Tale*. The princess, like Daphne from *Metamorphoses I*, is given the opportunity to become a symbol of poetic excellence and exist as figural instead of historical agent. An attempted rape

¹⁷ Later in *Metamorphoses II* Hermes turns Aglauros into stone in an unrelated incident.

¹⁸ (ii. 596- 597) Ibid.

¹⁹ (ii. 618) Ibid.

²⁰ (ii. 618), Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² (ii. 618) Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 67.

occasions both transformations and yet Daphne remains a laurel while the princess-crow is banished (though still remaining a crow). As a thought experiment we might imagine that were Daphne to transgress the gods after *Metamorphoses I* her laurel would become a natural tree and no longer the crown of Apollo. The princess claims her “faithfulness” or “good faith”²⁴ [*fidem*] ruined her. It may be so in as much as we agree with the following: 1. The bird’s language is adequate to describe the literal event. 2. The bird assumes the goddess will be pleased with the literal truth. However, the content of her faithfulness was natural instead of metaphorical. Minerva saves the princess from natural violation by transforming her into an augural bird whose function is to be a messenger of divine and not human history. Therefore, the crow-though reporting with great accuracy her eyewitness account of recent local history-has failed to comprehend the symbolic nature of her post. Minerva does not banish her because the report lacks factual support, rather because in the philosophy of the poem, truth in art stands in an aporetic relationship to the truth of literal language and natural action. Through this judgment, and that of the raven, we learn that the epistemology of poetry is not constituted by the rationalistic and extrinsic correlation of poetic figures to facts, but by the intuitive and altogether autotelic correlation of poetic figures to other poetic figures. If it were the case that poetry stood in direct symbolic relationship to history then the birds would still be the messengers of the gods. Instead, we may grant the crow her literal good faith while also conceding that it was apparently ill-suited to Minerva’s unstated expectations that her servant would speak sacramentally instead of empirically. By ‘unstated’ we might appreciate two things: the first is that the central role of anamnesis in Ovidian form makes it probable

²⁴ (ii. 552), Miller, 98.

that Minerva gave no introductory course in avian augury. The second is that it is not the business of the gods to patrol human language for adequately self-edifying metaphors, or, to patrol human secrets for divine ones. Whether the birds in the poem should have remained silent about the gods' business, simply 'spoken well' about it (in the Socratic sense), or whether the two are poetically identical remain ironic possibilities, all of which depend on the story's careful articulation that the birds' verbal reification of events, rather than their experience of them, was unsatisfactory.

The paradoxical sense of the judgment is that reality, rather than fiction, is in need of reification. Put another way, reality is not 'real enough' to be fictional, that it is somehow of a lesser category of knowledge by virtue of not fictionally obtaining. If anything, it as though the poem suggests an opposite condescension than that which is pervasive in our own day. Today we might excuse ourselves and say, 'it was just a metaphor' whereas the birds of this poem would have to defend themselves and say, 'it was just a fact'. Therefore by 'verbal reification' we understand not simply saying (or making real) something that should not have been said for personal, social, or political reasons²⁵ but a larger ontological problem in which the interlocutors of poetry attempt to invest the literal data of human history with a figural mission without reference to the whether such a maneuver is possible. In the specific narrative context of the Coronis panel, the lack of abstraction involved in the correspondence between language and object at the level of reality renders language inadequate to describe the secret will of the gods. Apollo's raven makes the same mistake as the crow, which is to orient augury towards human instead of poetic history. We should

²⁵ See for instance, Peter C. Herman, "Treason in the *Manciple's Tale*." *The Chaucer Review*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (Spring, 1991): 318-328, and Louise Fradenburg, "The Manciple's Servant Tongue: Politics and Poetry in the *Canterbury Tales*." *ELH*, Vol. 52, No. 1 (Spring, 1985): 85-118.

not be surprised then that Apollo, god of poetry and augury, pronounces judgment upon the crow for trying to please him outside the power of omens.

However, the situation is complicated by the fact that Apollo has taken up residence on earth along with a human lover. In fact Apollo's taste for earth-bound women is a recurring theme in Ovid. For if we return to *Metamorphoses I*, we see that one of his latest attempts at human romance ended in him having to resume his post as the god of poetry, resting beneath the laurels of the transformed Daphne.

Her prayer was scarcely heard when a deep languor took hold on her limbs, her soft breast was enclosed in thin bark, her hair grew into leaves, her arms into branches, and her feet that were lately so swift were held fast by sluggish roots, while her face became the treetop. Nothing was left of her, except her shining loveliness.²⁶

The poem helps direct us by negatives towards a possible solution to Apollo's anxiety, "Even as a tree, Phoebus loved her...Embracing the branches as if they were limbs he kissed the wood: but, even as a tree she shrank from his kisses."²⁷ Once again Apollo attempts to live according to a natural instead of metaphorical order of meaning. Even so he passes judgment, however confused, still in keeping with his divine office. "As my head is ever young, my tresses never shorn, so do you also, at all times, wear the crowning glory of never-fading foliage."²⁸ We should catch the Ovidian wink when at the murder of Coronis, "The wreath of laurel slipped from his [Apollo's] head." For we may assume not only that it the wreath that he made for himself while seated in the shade of Daphne, "My hair, my lyre, my quivers will

²⁶ (i. 548- 52) Innes, 43.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ (i.564- 565) Innes, 44.

always display the laurel,”²⁹ but also that the laurel figuratively dropped from his head when he went chasing after Coronis in violation of the arts of which he is patron. In this sense, Apollo’s judgment of the raven was his first laurel-worthy act since he met Coronis. Even a renegade Apollo appropriately interprets the crow’s report. Despite this, in this degraded state Apollo’s rhetoric and action seem incapable of negotiating his own confusion over the death of Coronis and his poetic disapproval of the bird, for he attempts to revive his dead lover. Ovid writes, “He employed his healing art without avail.”³⁰ In what seems a particularly curious category mistake, but is really a consistent extension of the initial absurdity: ‘Apollo, human lover’, the god attempts to make his powers of poetry biologically relevant by restoring physical life to Coronis. This necrophilic gesture fails, and with it, the naturalistic experiment in which gods, yet again, endeavor to cross the ontological boundary between art and life. There is a dual movement, then, to the naturalism of the poem. In one movement, history attempts to become a verbal icon in the crow’s speech. In another, Apollo and poetry attempt to become a medicinal one. Neither succeeds and yet poetic judgment proceeds unhindered. This is a potent formula that resurfaces in Chaucer’s contribution to the myth.

We could do worse than to briefly consider another Ovidian exploration of the incapacity of poetry to save us from physical death in the Orpheus panel of *Metamorphoses X*. Ovid’s imagery is persistent. In another questionable marriage, Orpheus, the son of Oeagrus and the Muse Calliope, descends into the underworld to save Eurydice. Ovid gives the rather heavy-handed clue that the story does not adhere to the more elegant expectations of *descensus ad inferos*, a literary tradition about which Bernard F. Dick writes, “In myth and fairy tale, the descent to the underworld

²⁹ (i.558- 559) Ibid.

³⁰ (ii. 618) Ibid., 66.

was the highest form of the supernatural, surpassing omens, dreams, and prodigies...it afforded a loftier vision of reality.”³¹ In Ovid’s humorous version, Orpheus makes the rather frank request to the deities of the lower world, “I ask as a gift from you only the enjoyment (*usum*) of her.”³² Orpheus’ mastery of the lyre earns him the brief return of Eurydice but in violation of the gods he turns his head for a glimpse of her and she dies a second death. Ovid’s matter of fact report is that a grief-stricken Orpheus henceforth “preferred to centre his affections on boys of tender years, and to enjoy the brief spring and early flowering of their youth: he was the first to introduce this custom among the people of Thrace.”³³ The panel plays a more peculiar game than in other judgments in the *Metamorphoses*. It remains somewhat elusive whether Orpheus’ subterranean concert was poetically satisfactory. After all, the stewards of the underworld release Eurydice. Then Orpheus exposes his lack of understanding concerning the power of his art to negotiate life and death; he looks backwards to make sure that his wife is keeping pace on the short walk out of Hell.

Nonetheless we have here another example of the supercilious Platonic tone that Ovid’s poetry employs concerning art’s inability to chart the course of human history, a tone expanded in Chaucer’s writing. And indeed, Plato himself retells the Orpheus myth in the *Symposium*, albeit with the added and philosophically precise obfuscation of the underworld gods merely presenting Orpheus with an image of Eurydice, rather than the woman herself, which for a writer famous for warnings against images in caves carries no little import, and perhaps helps to ironically situate our expectations of Ovid’s Orpheus. “But Orpheus, son of Oeagrus, they sent back with failure from Hades, showing only a wraith of a woman for whom he came; her

³¹ Bernard F. Dick. “The *Waste Land* and the *Descensus ad Inferos*.” *Canadian Review of Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 2, No.1 (Winter, 1975): 35.

³² (x. 36- 37) Innes, 226.

³³ (x. 81- 85) *Ibid.*, 227.

real self they would not bestow.”³⁴ Put simply, for both Plato and Ovid, no amount of metaphors will reanimate the human body. Thus in the *Metamorphoses II*, Apollo’s judgment is carried out *in spite* of his medicinal and other soon to be discussed existential failures, and the raven is demoted to the status of natural instead of augural bird, a fitting verdict in keeping with others in the *Metamorphoses*. Transformations- augural bird to natural bird, dead Eurydice to live Eurydice and back again- represent a coherent range of philosophical evocations for poetic rhetoric even in the face of character-sponsored incoherence concerning existential matters and the extent to which they obtain in the artistic vision.

As a final comment, in the *Metamorphoses* the gods transform as both gift and punishment. Daphne is awarded symbolic status and delivered from the interference of a physical order of meaning, human lust, into the epistemology of art. Arachne, on the other hand is transformed into a spider as a punishment for her presumption that technical mastery and the naturalistic representation of the gods could be reified to the status of art. In *Metamorphoses VI*, Ovid writes of Arachne’s performance, “All these incidents were correctly depicted, people and places had their authentic features.”³⁵ Earlier, “Arachne wove a picture of Europa, deceived by [Jupiter when he presented himself in] the shape of a bull. You would have thought that the bull was a live one and that the waves were real waves.”³⁶ Thus, she is damned to the status of technician instead of artist, a weaver of webs for survival instead of a weaver of tapestries that would praise the power of poetry. This Ovidian theme is not lost on Chaucer’s tale, which explores an ironic shadow of Arachne’s photorealism when the crow delivers a perfectly sound point-for-point retelling of the afternoon activities of Phoebus’ wife.

³⁴ Plato, *Symposium*, trans. W. R.M. Lamb. (London: Harvard University Press, 1991): 105.

³⁵ (vi. 121- 122a) Innes, 137.

³⁶ (vi. 103- 104) Ibid.

Meanwhile, the Coronis panel of *Metamorphoses II* presents the reader with a situation in which the princess' initial gift of transformation reverses into punishment. The *Manciple's Tale* expands the satirical tone of Ovid by further alienating divine elements from their suitable setting and it does away altogether with Ovid's positive transformations.

Phoebus in the Suburbs

Any movement away from Ovid towards the world of the *Manciple's* poem means being shortchanged Elysium for Middle England. Of the atmosphere of the *Manciple's Tale*, Pearsall writes, "Chaucer has removed or not exploited those elements in the tale which might have given it human interest as a story, or poignancy, or a sense of reality or meaningful conflict."³⁷ To be sure, Chaucer's version of the myth does admirably little to elaborate the elegant aesthetic of Ovid's tale, nor does it attempt in any very generous way to orient readers to the literary history of Apollo and the raven. The history of Apollo and the raven remains a silent force, save for a glib but dense mention of "olde bookes." The opening drama of the *Metamorphoses* flattens into a matter of fact tone. "Whan Phebus dwelled heere in this erthe adoun,/ As olde bookes maken menciou." (105-106) It is said without a pause, as though it is perfectly reasonable to assume that the god of poetry keeps an earthly address. After all, "olde bookes maken menciou." But we know from Ovid that Apollo's earth-bound adventures represent a breach of his post as the patron of poetry. From the very beginning of the *Manciple's Tale* the metapoetic conflict is set. Pelen writes,

³⁷ Pearsall, 238.

Implicitly, the Manciple has resurrected an old ploy that Plato and Ovid have ridiculed, to the effect that human failings can be attributed to, or justified in, divine failings. But with the dramatic system of religious irony in the *Metamorphoses*, we observed the fate of poets or artists like Arachne, who conceived of the gods in human terms.³⁸

The comedy begins early: “He was the mooste lusty bachiler/ In al this world, and eek the beste archer. (107-108). Without the appropriate specter of the *Metamorphoses* present in our minds, the poem’s coupling would perhaps strike us as a mere curiosity. However, conjuring up the Ovidian Apollo’s romantic past, we are in a better position to appreciate this Phoebus’ lapse into a “mooste lusty bachiler” who, it should be mentioned, is also good at the bow and arrow. In addition to the sexual possibilities of Apollonian archery (Apollo’s bow is not meant to function like Cupid’s) Phoebus’ talents as a marksman, of course, come in handy in the final action of both Ovid’s and Chaucer’s poems. Prior to that our only introduction into the various lands laid waste by Phoebus’ bow is the fact that he kills Python while the monster sleeps. Diekstra notes the “touch of smug simplicity in the way he [Chaucer] chooses to reduce the heroic feat of killing the Python.”³⁹ “He slow Phitoun, the serpent, as he lay/ Slepynge agayn the sonne upon a day.” (109-110). But even a great success like ambushing sleepy Python is only testament to the satirical narrative premium placed upon Phoebus’ unmatched skill with the bow and arrow. “And many another noble worthy dede/ He with his bowe wroghte, as men may rede.” (111-112). We might consider that the *Manciple’s Tale* is also another archer’s tale that “men may rede.” The image of archery passes through three stages. First it is a cheap joke, Apollo’s ‘arrow’. The

³⁸ Pelen, *Cosyn to the dede*, 349.

³⁹ Diekstra, 141.

comedy is rather broad. Secondly it partakes of typical Apollonian role-playing. The god of omens wants to cash in his laurels for the putti's wings. The third is composed upon a silent antinomy in which the arrow of physical love loses out to the arrow of death- almost a cunning condemnation of failed love poetry's inability to negotiate artistic eternity. But the contentual opposition is futile. Physical death is not of a superior order to physical love. Physical love belongs to the rhetoric of physical death. Killing "wyf" only brings Phoebus another inch closer to the deathless world to which he always returns in the end.

The poem continues to develop a naturalistic thesis in its long description of Phoebus' good looks. "Thereto he was the semelieste man/ That is or was sith that the world bigan./ What nedeth his fetures to discryve?/ For in this world was noon so faire on-lyve. (119-122). Such a strategy should be recognized for its dialectical energy. The argument attempts to reduce Phoebus' figural beauty to physical beauty, as though it were possible that the semiotic properties of metaphor could successfully be realigned with their empirical referents. The boast is that the meaning of Phoebus' beauty could be adequately praised according to natural criteria. Phoebus is the seemliest man *since the world began*. The governing principle is time. Phoebus possesses finer features than anyone on earth. The governing principle is physical comparison: the available fair features on earth at present. It is the deployment of traditional modes of cognition such as time and number as appropriate means to illuminate poetry's particular contribution to human knowledge. The argument concludes, "This Phebus, that was flour of bachilrie." (125). Again, we sense the rhetorical desire to imagine poetry as co-ontological with existence, according to which, the human designation of chivalry could suffice to describe the metaphorical nobility that belongs to the patron of art.

After Phoebus' *descriptio* comes the crow's.

Now hadde this Phebus in his hous a crowe
 Which in a cage he fostred many a day,
 And taughte it speken, as men teche a jay.
 Whit was this crowe as is a snow-whit swan,
 And countrefete the speche of every man
 He koude, whan he sholde telle a tale.

(130-135)

The same species of voice that attempts to naturalize Phoebus declares the crow a pet instead of an augural bird. The crow in the Coronis myth was a former princess enlisted into the league of augural birds in service of Minerva. The raven of Apollo was the god's personal messenger. It is a delightfully reductionist narrative mode and the reduction is exact. The fact that Phoebus "taughte it speken, as men teche a jay" (132) reinforces the poem's negotiation of the Ovidian myth. The gods do not teach birds to speak in the *Metamorphoses*. Strictly speaking, poetic form is not taught, it is remembered. The recovery of direct reference is anamnestic. As such, powers of speech reorient towards the providential instead of the literal. The dual movement to ground augury is this: First the god 'teaches' it. But augury is a gift. Next, not only does the god of poetry teach the bird the divine art of augury, he simply teaches it to imitate humans. The movement is from oracles, to the learnt *technê* of language, to something even lower. The idea of augury as 'nature's mirror' transgresses even the broadest linguistic limits of Platonism. Janet Coleman argues, "Augustine believed that nothing in the material world (*significata*) that is external to the mind can, in the last resort, be regarded as the source of its knowledge."⁴⁰ It is simple imitation, un-

⁴⁰ Janet Coleman, "The Christian Platonism of St. Augustine." In *Platonism and the English Imagination*, 31.

transfigured, natural and mimetic. The argument says that the crow's speech has no "sentence," that it is only the dry carcass of counterfeit sound. To that effect, the space between it and an opposite vision for language generated at the level of form is vast. Margaret F. Nims writes that metaphor is "a word carried out of its normal semantic range into foreign territory."⁴¹ If the realities that Platonic Realism describes lay beyond the reach of a physical system of signs, then a crow that imitates sound, the principal physical constituent of language, has not qualified in its bid to join the ranks of the augurs. The ability of interlocutory strategies at the level of content to contain the crow's initial powers of speech to mere imitation will become increasingly difficult later in the poem. The bird is no imitator. He seems to think perfectly well for himself when he delivers the bad news to Phoebus. He has a will. He also has a history. We know where this bird 'learned' to prophesy. The Manciple's wish that the crow's language would divest itself of noumenal matter comes true at the poem's end, but it happens by accident. For present purposes, let us simply acknowledge that at this point in the poem, the yet unchallenged assertion is that the augural birds of art can be adequately represented as pets that imitate their owners' speech.

Complications arise when the narrator attempts to retrace an earlier rhetorical strategy. "Therwith in al this world no nyghtyngale/ Ne koude, by an hondred thousand deel,/ Syngen so wonder myrily and weel." (136-138). This new attempt to relativize the augural powers of the crow does so by comparison to biological nightingales of *this* world. This undercuts the previous thesis that the crow was simply an imitator of human speech. Put another way, in order to disprove the metaphorical dimension of the crow's powers of speech, the narrator has to suspend the conclusion of the previous discussion, reassert the possibility that the crow is a beautiful singer,

⁴¹ Margaret F. Nims, "Translatio: Difficult Statement in Medieval Poetic Theory." *University of Toronto Quarterly*, Vol. 42, No.3 (Spring, 1974): 215.

and then propose that, nonetheless, the beauty of the crow's singing can be sufficiently understood by recourse to a comparison of the birds in nature instead of art. The *comparatio* is unstable. Since it may be suggested that it is only in art that a crow might sing more beautifully than the nightingale, to even consider that it would carries a somewhat supernatural concession. This 'kitchen sink' strategy is indicative of a philosophy that must, at all costs, convert poetic objects back into their original ontological designations, the difficulty of which results in some of the most disturbing psychological moments in the entire Canterbury collection. Logical contradictions emerge and they are porous in Chaucer. They take an already unstable medium and strip it threadbare. They compromise the ability of the Manciple's narrators to marshal their theses as an ironic metaphorical schedule places increased pressure on the content of the poem.

2.5 Kids and a Mortgage

Still the narrator's argument proceeds. Arnold E. Davidson writes, "In fact, by assessing the Manciple's inconsistencies, the careful reader can discern that there is a definite logic to the muddlement that this character attempts to perpetrate upon his audience."⁴² If up to this point the narration calls into question the aporetic distinctions between metaphor and literal language, it now attempts a full merging. "Now hadde this Phebus in his hous a wyf/ Which that he lovede moore than his lyf." (139-140) The movement now is from naturalization to domestication. Phoebus, god of poetry, lives in a house on earth. He has a human wife and a pet bird. Cosmetically, we are far from the fields of the *Metamorphoses*. In Ovid's myth Apollo keeps a

⁴² Arnold E. Davidson, "The Logic of Confusion in Chaucer's *Manciple's Tale*." *Annuaire Mediaevale*, Vol. 19 (1979): 5.

paramour. In Chaucer's poem the narrator's desire for art to merge with human concerns is more energetic, and so Phoebus is married, and not to a beautiful Thessalian, but simply to "wyf." In fact, "wyf" is the first character not to benefit from a luxurious introduction. She is nameless and silent. She functions only as she pertains to the wider argument surrounding her husband. Certainly, the poem recalls the romantic exploits of the *Metamorphoses*, but in a very bleak way. "Wyf" has none of the instructive virtue of the transfigured Daphne. It will be difficult for "wyf" to elicit the same readerly sympathy as the incomparable Coronis who meets her end mother and child lying in each other's blood.⁴³ What are we to learn from the skeletal romance? The wife's silence has to do with her status as a symbol of the literal world that Phoebus' rhetoric would like to inhabit. The linguistic epistemologies of history and art are unable to communicate with each other without serious philosophical concessions. Phoebus is willing to make these concessions. "Wyf", what little we can divine, seems to have little interest in doing so. But even if Phoebus is willing to trade his symbol for her language, the question remains, is it possible? One almost feels as if "wyf" has been thrust into this situation unwittingly- had a perfectly reasonable boyfriend and a house, and was invaded by a god and his bird for reasons beyond her understanding or interest. In this poem "wyf" does not *meet* her "lemman." She sends for him. "His wyf anon hath for hir lemman sent." (204). We know from Ovid that such presumptuousness is not entirely out of character for the rogue Apollo. Europa was handed a never-ending trough of troubles. Wyf is silent because she cannot speak in a manner that obtains in the world of Chaucer's poem, a world that counterbalances the ironic and experimental depiction of divine failure with the surer knowledge that

⁴³ Of all available analogues to the story, only two others do not feature the child: Gower's brief proverbial poem in the *Confessio* and the *Seven Sages of Rome*, which also does not feature Phoebus. Robert M. Correale and Mary Hamel, *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales II*. (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2009): 749-774.

Phoebus is on the run *from* and not *to* his true home. That is to say, the language of the poem is only *represented* according to the postlapsarian epoch. If its share in that epoch was substantial instead of representational, we may have been able to hear “wyf” speak. But the metaphors of poetry cannot be converted into modes perfectly commensurable with a literal semiotic system. The house of Phoebus cannot contort to fit the shape of the “hous” of man.

Nevertheless, Phoebus does his best to contribute as a literal rather than metaphorical lover. “This worthy Phebus dooth al that he kan/ To plesen hire, wenyng for swich plesaunce,/ And for his manhede and his governaunce,/ That no man sholde han put hym from hir grace.” (156-159). We know from the Coronis myth that this is not the first time Phoebus has been unable to please in bed. We should catch not only a dig at Phoebus as a failed romancer but also identify the larger artistic predicament in which Phoebus, from whom we should expect an art of love instead of the act of love, proves in practice once again that his powers do not extend into the realm of literal language and action. We witnessed it in Ovid and we will witness it here in a culminating and failed attempt to revive the dead with his “healing arts.” Phoebus is not the Promethean champion of sex and death. According to Genesis 3, we are. Within this play of meanings emerges the suggestion that the attempt to invest poetry with a natural mission fails at the philosophical level by virtue of the inability of Phoebus/poetry to make its modality of meaning speak to the concerns of empirical existence. In *De planctu naturae*, Nature concedes the following concerning the central metaphor of the second birth:

By me man is born for death, by Him he is reborn for life...I, Nature, am ignorant of the nature of this birth...It is with difficulty that I see what is

visible, she in her mirror understands the incomprehensible. I walk around the earth like a brute beast, she marches in the hidden places of heaven.⁴⁴

In Alain's elegant treatment of an aporetic linguistic tradition we see the same intellectual lines in the sand Chaucer's poem humorously traces through Phoebus' attempted expatriation to earth. The Manciple's Phoebus has been pulled down from "the hidden places of heaven" to "walk around the earth like a brute beast." In the Christian context of the irony, Phoebus' attempt to revive the dead fails to negotiate the paradox that "It is appointed unto men once to die"⁴⁵ with the fact that "Ye must be born again."⁴⁶ Even Lazarus had to "be born from above"⁴⁷ in order to survive his second death with his soul intact. In that sense, theology could tell the Old Man and Phoebus that they were fooled: it was only a minor miracle that Lazarus lived for a second time. The major miracle is that he still lives today.

Meanwhile, the narrator comes to Phoebus' aid with another rhetorical strategy: "But God it woot, ther may no man embrace/ As to destreyne a thing which that nature/ Hath natureely set in a creature." (160-162). In nature animals act according to instinct despite our domesticating kindness. Pet birds raised on fine meats will still prefer the forest and its worms. (163-174). Cats will chase a mouse and leave the dish of cream. (175-180). However, this string of red herrings fails to address the central theoretical dilemma of the relationship between Phoebus and "wyf:" her infidelity has as its direct cause the inability of Phoebus' art of love to satisfy her physically. In this sense, can we blame her? At least the cat was given a dish of cream. Phoebus' wife was given a string of metaphors, which, although the

⁴⁴ Alain de Lille, *The Plaint of Nature*, trans. James J. Sheridan. (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1980): 125.

⁴⁵ Hebrews 9:27.

⁴⁶ John 3:7.

⁴⁷ John 3:3.

central engine of meaning in poetry, are meager building materials for sexual ethics. Phoebus' marital failures are directly linked to the epistemological failures of the Manciple's thesis, a thesis whose attractiveness seems never to fade to the "lusty bachiler" of *Metamorphoses I, II*, and the *Manciple's Tale*. Thus if we return to the notion that the poem participates (with relish) in the literary tradition that says successful poetry will not produce a stable system of metaphor about physical pleasure, then we can further illuminate the distinctions between the attitude of Chaucer's poetry and those of an opposite poetic tradition, an opposite philosophy that would, for instance, witness the monistic elision of two souls into One in the northward trajectory of John Donne's "compass."

If they be two, they are two so
 As stiff twin compasses are two;
 Thy soul, the fix'd foot, makes no show
 To move, but doth, if th' other do.

And though it in the centre sit,
 Yet, when the other far doth roam,
 It leans, and hearkens after it,
 And grows erect, as that comes home.

Such wilt thou be to me, who must,
 Like th' other foot, obliquely run;
 Thy firmness makes my circle just,
 And makes me end where I begun.⁴⁸

The metapoetic perspective of such a poem is a principle of integration between physical and spiritual ecstasy, dependent on a co-ontological description of mind,

⁴⁸ John Donne, *A Valediction of Forbidding Mourning*. *Poems of John Donne: Vol. I*, ed. E. K. Chambers (London: Lawrence & Bullen, 1896): 51-52.

body, and soul. Such a poem, and such a tradition, belong to the current of Western ideas that Chaucer's interlocutors ironically espouse. Phoebus/Apollo has tried since the Classical Age to write these poems and re-invent himself as a love poet of experience rather than intuition, but always by story's end he is unable to persuade even himself that the proper judge of artistic speculation is the 'truth' of natural bliss.

After the small diversion in which nature trumps nurture, the narrator brings a contradictory conclusion. Such contradictions become more frequent as the poem progresses. Concerning the various examples of animal behavior and what we have come to expect will produce fairly obvious correlations to the behavior of women, the monologue ends, "Alle this ensamples speke I by thise men/ That been untrewe, and nothyng by wommen./ For men han evere a likerous appetit." (187-189). Travis comments,

In a similarly conflicted fashion, after citing several illustrations of women's falsity, he suddenly reverses his condemnation of women by faulting men...either the Manciple is incapable of understanding the basic principles of the meaningfulness of language, or he is unable to confront the deep import of his conflicted attitude toward the import of his own words."⁴⁹

The logic implicates men instead, and expands a judgment of male hedonism for the next six lines before returning to the story with, "This Phebus, which that thoghte upon no gile/ Deceyved was, for al his jolitee." (196-197). Such dialectical schizophrenia recalls a sparkling piece of logic from the *Wife of Bath's Tale*:

'Chese now,' quod she, 'oon of thise thynges tweye:
To han me foul and old til that I deye,
And be to yow a trewe, humble wyf,

⁴⁹ Travis, "The Manciple's Phallic Matrix." *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, Vol. 25 (2003): 319.

And nevere yow displese in al my lyf,
 Or elles ye wol han me yong and fair,
 And take youre aventure of the repair
 That shal be to youre hous by cause of me,
 Or in som oother place, may wel be.

(*Wife of Bath's Tale*, 1219-1226)

Aside from the fact that it represents the informal fallacy of the false dilemma, what follows next attempts to solve a false dilemma by erasing it with a good old-fashioned logical contradiction. “Kys me,” quod she, “we be no lenger wrothe,/ For, by my trouthe, I wol be to yow bothe.” (1238-1239). Though the narrator perhaps means to pass this off as simply fair and faithful, we cannot help but call to mind the earlier dilemma in which the attribute of faithfulness was *properly basic* only to foul old age. Like the Wife of Bath, the desperation of the Manciple’s arguments is indicative of a desire to transform art into a product of traditional cognition, even at the expense of reason and logic, the adjudicators of traditional cognition. “I by my intellect hardly compass trifles, she in her comprehension compasses immensities.”⁵⁰

The famous “lemman” diversion and its deliberate proximity to the Platonic aphorism illuminate the aporetic distinctions between content and form. “His wyf anon hath for hir lemman sent./ Hir lemman? Certes, this is a knavyssh speche!/ Foryeveth it me, and I you biseche.” (204-206). To justify his use of “lemman,” the narrator cites Plato,

The wise Plato seith, as ye may rede,
 The word moot nede accorde with the dede.
 If men shal telle proprely a thyng,
 The word moot cosyn be to the werkyng.

⁵⁰ Alain de Lille, *De planctu*, 125.

(207-210)

Pelen writes, “The particular conjunction of the Ovidian legend and the Platonic aphorism in the *Manciple’s Tale* may afford us now an approach to Chaucer’s poetic irony in his overt use of contradiction and paradox.”⁵¹ The Manciple enlists the services of the Platonic distinction of word/dede in order to marshal the argument that the words wyf/wenche/lemman are empty in themselves and dependant on external objects for meaning. Stewart Justman argues,

His tale is in fact an ironic attack on speech; to say “ther is namoore to sayn” is in keeping with the moral of the tale, which is “Kepe wel thy tonge.” If punning reduces words to sounds, the Manciple reduces reality to silence. His tale perfects the attack on symbols in the *Canterbury Tales*. It is a verbal attack on words.⁵²

“There nys no difference, trewely,/ Bitwixe a wyf that is of heigh degree,/ If of hir body dishonest she bee,/ And a povre wenche, oother than this.” (212-215). Indeed, we must concede this socio-linguistic point to the Manciple. Nims writes, “A word standing alone has an element of un-definedness analogous to that of prime matter. It is, to be sure, a unit of meaning, but much of its meaning is held in suspension, in potency, until its position in discourse stabilizes its grammatical form and elicits the relevant areas of its meaning.”⁵³ However, in conceding this point we do not have to relinquish the obvious, that the Manciple’s point is moot, and constitutes a false defeater. For if he is arguing that in a literal semiotic system language derives its meaning from empirical reality, then, of course, that is exactly what is at stake: whether language possesses the opposite ability according to its own power to

⁵¹ Pelen, *Cosyn to the Dede*, 348.

⁵² Stewart Justman, “Literal and Symbolic in the ‘Canterbury Tales.’” *The Chaucer Review*. Vol. 14. No. 3 (Winter, 1980): 212.

⁵³ Nims, 216.

generate the *artistic* solution to its own instability. It is analogous to asking, ‘I wonder if men could fly without the help of machines’? and responding, ‘Men walk by placing one foot in front of another’. The *Manciple*’s appeal to Plato, then, reflects either an accidental or a deliberate misreading of the philosophical implications of “dede.” The argument seems to expect that imagining “dede” as a literal referent will guarantee success in both poetic and pre-poetic language. But Platonism would postulate that the “dede” to which words must be re-united will not belong to the epistemological power of the natural world. All of Chaucer’s sources for the maxim belong to a Platonic world-denying philosophical current- Calcidius, Boethius, Jean de Meun. Ultimately, Pelen argues,

Chaucer's cousin to the deed is therefore a highly-charged comment, comparable perhaps with Chaucer's oft-expressed interest in Macrobian dreams. The "cosyn" comments on the ultimate function of poetry, which is to speak of the eternity (cousin) beyond literal language (deed) that Plato's myths address...⁵⁴

It is useful to inquire at the level of method upon the evocation of the same Platonic aphorism in both the *General Prologue* and the *Manciple's Tale*. If it was to establish that the words of the *Canterbury Tales* were to be judged according to the accuracy of their correlation to the deciduous ontology of referents in the natural world, then the *Manciple*’s thesis becomes a hermeneutic key to the entire collection. It seems clear enough from the *General Prologue* that this is not the case.

Crist spak hymself ful brode in hooly writ,
And wel ye woot no vileynye is it.
Eek Plato seith, whoso kan hym rede,
The wordes moote be cosyn to the dede.

⁵⁴ Pelen, “Chaucer’s ‘Cosyn to the dede’: Further Considerations.” *Florilegium*, Vol. 19 (2002): 103.

(General Prologue, 739-742)

Even a short examination of Christ's manner of speaking suggests a more elusive vision of linguistic reference. "Jesus answered and said unto them, Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up. Then said the Jews, Forty and six years was this temple in building, and wilt thou rear it up in three days?"⁵⁵ Later in the Gospel of John: "I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman. Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away: and every [branch] that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit."⁵⁶ If the word is to accord to the deed in the manner of "hooly writ," then it bears little similarity the Manciple's project. Instead, the "dede" of poetry seems to suggest the production of metaphors by which we generate meanings foreign to literal language and traditional modes of interrogation. Put simply, Christ is not a vine. By the use of the aphorism in the *Manciple's Tale*, we see that the Manciple's arguments effectively challenge themselves. Instead of relativizing all symbols by restoring natural referentiality, the aphorism reorients the poem's form toward the spirit of its philosophical models, models such as the *Consolation* in which Lady Philosophy inaugurates her speech by reminding, "There is no reason for you to wonder, since you have learned under Plato's authority that words should be akin to the things spoken about."⁵⁷ This moment marks a turning point in the direction of the narrative. The Manciple's arguments have peaked. The mythographic authority of Ovid and the epistemological authority of the Platonic tradition insert an opposite philosophical movement within the narrative, and the final act begins.

⁵⁵ John 2:19-20.

⁵⁶ John 15:1-2.

⁵⁷ Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. S.J. Tester. (London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1973): 307.

“Nothing is more pleasurable than to sit in the shade, sip gin and contemplate other people's adulteries.”⁵⁸

“Wyf” and her “lemman” satisfy their “lust volage” while a white crow silently observes from his cage. Upon Phoebus’ return, “This crowe sang “Cokkow! Cokkow! Cokkow!”(243). According to the narrator, Phoebus taught the crow to speak. Next we learned that all Phoebus taught the bird to do was to imitate human speech. Now, in the crow’s first utterance, we get neither the augury of the Ovidian source material nor the natural mimesis of the narrator’s version. Instead, onomatopoeic noise greets Phoebus, the semiotic inferior of even the Manciple’s earlier report. Chaucer’s long running infatuation with the philosophical implications of noise appears in the *Parliament of Fowls*, the *House of Fame*, the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale*, the *Summoner’s Tale*, and now in the *Manciple’s Tale*, where Chaucer explores the essence of language and its relationship to poetic meaning via an experimental interrogation of the semiotics of noise.⁵⁹ In this experiment, the poem begins to augur. “Cokkow” bookends the crow’s own private Genesis 3, for directly prior to and forever after the sudden termination of the crow’s Elysian employment, the crow “Cokkows.” For a formerly augural bird to trumpet its own poetic failure with the noise of an impending curse is Chaucerian irony at its best.

Phoebus’ surprise is telling. “What, bryd?” quod Phebus. “What song syngestow?/ Ne were thow wont so myrily to synge/ That to myn herte it was a rejoysynge.” (244-246). The fallen patron of poetry was not asking much of his bird

⁵⁸ John Skow. *Books: Curriculum Vitae*. TIME Magazine. (29 July, 1974) Accessed 15 August 2011. <<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,911466,00.html>>.

⁵⁹ Peter Travis. *Disseminal Chaucer: Rereading the Nun’s Priest’s Tale*. (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010): 209.

in these latter days of domestic bliss, but even so, he takes offence. The reality of bird's augural identity comes back into focus. First we come to know of it when the Manciple contradicts his original statement that the bird only imitated human speech. In fact, the crow could sing finer than the nightingale. Now Phoebus confirms it. Next the crow displays volitional speech. "By God," quod he, "I syng nat amys." (248). It is not mere imitation, "as men teche a jay." (132). It is self-defense. The bird does "syng amys" though. He commits the same error as the crow and the raven in *Metamorphoses II*, orienting his powers of speech toward history instead of augury. If by augury we understand the truth of history as conceived of by the gods rather than history as experienced by humans, the linguistic impasses governing the poem remain unresolved by the Manciple's representation of Phoebus as a man. Though the crow tells the truth, the report's modality of truth bears no meaning in art.

To cover his tracks, the crow attempts to reify the status of his literal pronouncement by taking refuge in rhetorical conventions, further demonstrating a misunderstanding of poetry as constituted of rhetorical device rather than Alain's transfigured rhetoric, a confusion the crow shares with the entire philosophy of the *Manciple's Tale*. "Phebus," quod he, "for al thy worthynesse,/ For al thy beautee and thy gentillesse/ For al thy song and al thy mynstralceye/ For al thy waityng blered is thyn ye." (249-252). Besides this obvious Ovidian error of the literality of the report, the crow also wrongly assumes that the social purpose of Phoebus' poetic nobility, his "worthynesse," "beautee," "gentillesse," "al thy song and al they mynstralceye," is to guard the god from being cuckolded by humans. John J. McGavin writes, "There is no doubt that the crow's explanatory speech to Phoebus is rhetorically structured."⁶⁰ However, he continues, "The fact is that the speech modulates into report...The crow

⁶⁰ John J. McGavin, "How Nasty is Phoebus' Crow?" *The Chaucer Review*, Vol. 21, No. 4 (1987): 449.

informed Phoebus of the adultery using irrefutable evidence and words of assured certainty.”⁶¹ McGavin is correct, though his study has as its principal aim a defense of the crow. However, the literary tradition that brings forth this moment partakes of the consistent failed interlocutory hope that the report could, even yet, qualify as a poetic utterance in an anxious dependence upon the stability of literal reference in the symbolic arena of poetry. It is not to the bird’s credit that he begins rhetorically and ends factually. Both, in the end, are the same. The technology of language belongs to the technology of history. In art, both need to be reversed to a time before they existed. It is the difference we observed between Rhetoric’s initial act and her final act in the *Anticlaudianus*. First she “bespangles” a piece of wood. This is what the crow attempts. By the time she finishes, the piece of wood is the “true day and the actual day grows dull.” That is where the crow fails. In the *Manciple’s Tale*, rhetoric as a technology will never make the leap from decorative to Delphic. Only Rhetoric as a philosophy will.

Upon hearing the report, Phoebus takes up his bow and arrow in a rage and murders his wife. In a wild frenzy he destroys his instruments and accuses the crow. “Traitor,” quod he, “with tonge of scorioun,/ Thou hast me broght to my confusioun.” (271-272) Phoebus ‘new’ confusion contributes to the general implosion of the final act. The ultimate failure of the poem’s principal interlocutors occurs in the alarming aftermath of murder. In reality, Phoebus has been confused ever since he took up residence on earth. He has been playing house for an undisclosed period of time. His bird continued to sing and speak for him according to its poetic gifts and helped perpetuate an environment of self-deception. If Phoebus’ judgment of the crow has to do with the sudden shock of the crow’s failed poetic, then this may be the first

⁶¹ McGavin, 452.

time the bird deviates from augury. Yes, the narrator told us that the crow imitates human speech. This was either a conscious and methodical denigration of art or an innocent inability to recognize the crow's figural identity. Perhaps the Manciple's voices could only recognize the audible mechanics of the crow's speech, even while the bird still prophesied, like listening to a Churchill speech and walking away with the anemic observation that the man in the polka-dot bowtie knew how to say things like "beaches" and "landing grounds." In this sense, the Manciple is included in the ranks of Midas and other failed judges of art. No doubt, there is an undergirding humor and fanciful illogic to a poem narrated by one so underwhelmed with a perfectly articulate bird. When the bird feels the urge to report the infidelity of Phoebus' wife, in breach of his augural function, the first sound that it is able to utter is the "Cokkow" of a biological crow. Phoebus' shock tells us two things. The first is that the bird is not in the habit of crowing. The second is that a native sense of poetic justice is so bound up in the god's being that not even a "wyf" can shake it from him.

"Ne nevere sweete noyse shul you make."

And "wyf" is still at the conceptual center of his confusion. First Phoebus bemoans his rash actions and anger and then declares her innocent. The narrator, caught up in the confusion, agrees with Phoebus and pronounces a moral that recommends not acting rashly on bad evidence. However, the crow's evidence is not bad evidence. But it is evidence and that is problem enough. Even if its facticity renders it meaningless in art, in the literal world of the Manciple, it still 'checks out'. The Manciple takes Phoebus' histrionics as a surer word than his own sense perception. Finally "boystous man" and the "lusty bachiler" philosophically part

ways. Phoebus cries, “I wol thee quite anon thy false tale.” (293) Unable to interpret the poetic nature of Phoebus’ judgment, the narrator concludes that the god of poetry must be correct in a literal sense. So the rest of the poem moralizes against jangling. But the nature of Phoebus’ judgment belongs to the philosophical hesitation (distinctive in a philosophically exhaustive sense to exemplary Platonic discussions) concerning whether it is valid to draw a straight line between poetry and reality. Thus, we observe an antiphrasis on “false tale” that points to the poem’s lurking antinomy between the truth of art and the truth of life. Phoebus declares,

Now shaltow, false thief, thy song forgon,
 And eek thy white fetheres everichon,
 Ne nevere in al thy lif ne shaltou speke.
 Thus shal men on a traytour been awreke;
 Thou and thyn ofspryng evere shul be blake,
 Ne nevere sweete noyse shul you make,
 But evere crie agayn tempest and rayn,
 In tokenyng that thurgh thee my wyf is slayn.

(295-302)

It is a move that improves upon Ovid. It takes us into the problem of language in microscopic detail. Ovid’s poem turns a bird black. Chaucer’s poem turns one mute. The judgment causes his oracular powers to devolve until, like Arachne, the bird is relieved of his art. Phoebus transforms the crow’s former powers of augury into the mere squawking that announces rain- from prophet to weather correspondent, a cheap ‘prophetic’ mode mockingly perfected in the description of Nicholas from the early moments the *Miller’s Tale*. The crow is still a ‘prophet’ of sorts, but his access to the “heigh ymaginacioun”⁶² of oracles expires. He is bound to the “lif present.”⁶³ Put

⁶² *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* (3217).

another way, the punishment is identical to the mechanics of the Manciple's entire linguistic project, which is to depict matters of "heigh ymaginacioun" in the language of the "lif present."

Adding to the phantasmagoric setting, Phoebus personally plucks the white feathers out, one by one, to make way for the black. The god ends by damning the bird to the devil. That some of Chaucer's most demanding poems implode and aim for the revelatory through raw physicality should not be undervalued as it pertains to a fundamental incompatibility between the content and the form of poetry. The violence in the final moments of the poem, like that of a poem such as the *Miller's Tale*, suggests the confusion of interlocutors who exist only in order to live inside a poem that they do not understand. Phoebus is ruthless in the final act. It shows how far the god had to fall to serve the Manciple's needs. Even while carrying out his proper function as the judge of poetry he remains in a bloody-minded state of turmoil.

"Kepe wel thy tonge."

The desperation is shared and results in what V.J. Scattergood identifies as "the longest *moralitas* among the *Canterbury Tales*," comprising 54 lines."⁶⁴ Fumo calls it a "self-defeatingly chatty moralization against chatter."⁶⁵ In the *Anticlaudianus*, Alain de Lille writes, "How language, subject as it is to Nature, is dumbfounded when it tries to express things divine, loses its power of communicating and tries to take refuge in its old meaning."⁶⁶ This is precisely what the narrator

⁶³ Ibid., (2980).

⁶⁴ V.J. Scattergood, "The Manciple's Manner of Speaking." *Essays in Criticism*, Vol. 24 (1974): 140.

⁶⁵ Fumo, 367.

⁶⁶ Quoted in James Simpson. *Sciences and the Self in Medieval Poetry*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995): 246.

attempts: to salvage the poem by a “taking refuge” in a comically repetitive *moralitas*, as though the poem was all along about ethics instead of language. It subjects the poem to a traditional mode of cognition persistently resisted in Chaucer’s work: straight moral exegesis. It strains credulity. It is based in a misunderstanding of the poetic verdict against the crow by the protagonist. The Manciple, who with great flare and bombast pushes a thesis until it implodes, now retreats into folksy moral wisdom sponsored by the authority of his mother. The *moralitas* essentially says the same thing 54 times, that given the danger of language, it is better to remain silent. “Kepe wel thy tonge and thenk upon the crowe.”(362). The entire sermon is subject to the Latin figure of *repetitio*. It results not only in an emptying of the intended meaning but produces the final antiphrasis. The silence recommended by the Manciple becomes a philosophical prevarication. Against this, the ironic recommendation is not simply to say nothing at all; the opposite of literal speech is literal silence and not the ‘golden silence’ of poetry. The silence of poetry is full and not empty. “The silences of heaven’s music, of Cicero, Aristotle, Virgil, Phronesis, and Dante, reflect reason’s inability to fathom and language’s inability to express the mysteries of God.”⁶⁷ This is an attitude towards rhetoric for which Chaucer’s poetry could give a long list of thanks; to Augustine, to the ‘school’ of Chartres, to Boethius who holds one rhetoric to be technical and one mystical, a heritage that ultimately owes to long Latinate reappraisals of linguistic perspectives in Platonic dialogues. Boethius writes, “Now do you recognize that I am a Philosopher?” To which the first very cuttingly replied: ‘I should have, had you kept silent.’”⁶⁸ It is an old idea that poetry is silent to language. It is an idea too rich for the Manciple and one that forms a tradition very

⁶⁷Michael Kensak, “The Silences of Pilgrimage: ‘Manciple’s Tale, Paradiso, Anticlaudianus.’” *The Chaucer Review*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (1999): 193.

⁶⁸Boethius, *Consolatio*. Tester, 221.

dear to Chaucer. This is why in the end the poem's argument concerning the proper use of language in poetry remains both highly developed and unstated, the exclusive property of a cognition unable to fully yield itself to natural understanding, despite even the most energetic attempts by discredited narrative voices.

As we approach the final chapter, perhaps we have a clearer idea of what to expect. Chaucer has a career-long habit of drawing interlocutors who would scrub the universe of every last trace of eternity. *How* this is attempted is less important than the attempt itself. Either heaven needs to share a house with an earthling or heaven needs to cease existing altogether. And it is not a problem of religion; it is a problem of language. In one vision God "is a phantom of grammar, a fossil embedded in the childhood of rational speech."⁶⁹ In another, "The conjecture is that 'God' *is*, not because our grammar is outworn; but that grammar lives and generates worlds because there is a wager on God."⁷⁰ In the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, another bird carries all of this in him and is faced with the choice of whether he will dream and "syng" rather than "Cok! cok!"⁷¹ for his survival.

⁶⁹ George Steiner, *Real Presences*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989): 3.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 4.

⁷¹ *Nun's Priest's Tale* (3277)

CHAPTER IV

The Lost World of the *Nun's Priest's Tale*

If the Old Man's tree, an "iren hoot," and "Cokkow! Cokkow! Cokkow!" are the symbolic meeting places for the diverse themes and antinomies of the previous poems, it can be said that the *Nun's Priest's Tale* acts as the crucible for Chaucer's entire poetic, for in it we recognize the resuscitation of nearly every major philosophical discussion throughout the Chaucerian performance. In this spirit E.T. Donaldson writes, "The *Nun's Priest's Tale* is full of what seem to be backward references to the preceding tales, so that it is sometimes taken as a parody- summary of all that has gone before."¹ To that we might add 'after' as well. As the final poem in this discussion, it recalls the metapoetry of religious irony of the *Miller's Tale*, the Ovidian linguistic penalties of sonic entropy in the *Manciple's Tale*, and the Pardoner's narratological intervention into the historical literary theme of perpetuity and eternity. Significantly, all of these poems to a greater or lesser extent attempt to generate sexual order at the level of form, a strategy employed to great effect by the Nun's Priest's narrators. Describing the difficulty of the poem's comprehensive nature, Donaldson writes, "One is apt to come away from this feast feeling that one has been abundantly fed, but one is not sure on what kind of food."² The *Nun's Priest Tale* boasts varied accomplishments. Nevertheless, the poem conceals a beguiling

¹ E.T. Donaldson, "Commentary on the *Nun's Priest's Tale*." In *Chaucer's Poetry: An Anthology for the Modern Reader*. ed. E.T. Donaldson. (New York: Ronald Press Company, 1958): 943.

² Donaldson, *Speaking of Chaucer*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1970): 146.

structure that has to do with a pointed dialectical promotion of the most fundamental aporia in the Platonic and Neoplatonic literary traditions: the contact between Art and History. This makes the tale decisive in any pursuit of a Chaucerian Poetic, even if the unforgiving elemental broadness of the aporia makes it easy for every other topic to ‘stick’ to the poem.

The context of the problem of Art and History is the problem of postlapasarian referentiality, to which Emmet T. Flood describes Augustine’s solution in the *Confessions*:

But when a man turns toward God to address Him, he cannot speak to Him directly through the device of physical language, because God is immaterial. At this juncture, the gap between the physical status of language and the transcendent and immaterial nature of the divine is unbridgeable. Augustine can commemorate God to himself through language, but there are no words which effectively breach the abyss between God as Ultimate Signified and words as signifiers. He seems to be caught in a post-creation material world which is radically and irreconcilably disconnected from the sphere of the divine. But he has noted the key to his escape from this dilemma in his mention of the similarities between the writings of the Platonists and the Gospel of St John.³

Therefore, by ‘Art’ we imagine, in the medieval Neoplatonic context, an uncreated order of knowledge negotiated according to the self-reflexive epistemological achievements that govern the metaphorical destruction of language, and- in Chaucer’s Augustinian context- the participation of God’s mind in the process of signification that further enhances Christian art’s philosophical bid for infinity in

³ Emmet T Flood, “Augustine and the Classical Tradition of Rhetoric.” *History of Education*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (1982): 239.

pursuit of classical models. By ‘History’ we understand the ontological content of poetry as foreign to its form, or the world that forms the *occasion* for the *content* rather than the *form* of poetry. And by *content* we understand everything that belongs to the phenomenology of experience. However, Chaucer’s long march forward from the House of Rumour inaugurates a new cultural realism in the *Canterbury Tales* in which medieval England and its inhabitants replace exemplary epithalemic and Elysian settings.

This complicates matters, no doubt, when one turns the discussion towards art’s antagonism to life. As we have observed, the *Canterbury Tales* achieves high art through the unspectacular. The Old Man of the *Pardoner’s Tale* leaves Eos for a walk through Flanders during the Plague. In the *Summoner’s Tale*, Chaucer figurally represents Pentecost through a fart. The Miller is rather lovingly drawn in the *General Prologue*, and conforms to medieval social stereotypes.⁴

His berd as any sowe or fox was reed,
 And therto brood, as though it were a spade.
 Upon the cop right of his nose he hade
 A werte, and thereon stood a toft of herys,
 Reed as the brustles of a sowes erys;
 Hise nosethirles blake were and wyde.
 A swerd and bokeler bar he by his syde.
 His mouth as greet was as a greet forneys.

(*Miller’s Prologue*, 554-561)

Reconciling the ahistorical bid of the tradition in which Chaucer’s poetry operates

⁴ See, for instance, George Fenwick Jones, “Chaucer and the Medieval Miller.” *Modern Language Quarterly*, Vol. 16, No 1 (March 1955): 1-15. Also, Lee Patterson, *Literary Practice and Social Change in Britain, 1380-1530*. (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1990): 124.

with the historical component and narrative realism of the content of his own poetry becomes especially difficult in a poem that, according to Helen Cooper, "refuses all attempts to turn it into something other than a superb story."⁵ Cooper proposes that what is "quintessentially Chaucerian" about the tale is "the brilliance of the telling and the resistance it offers to possible audience expectations of what it 'ought' to do."⁶ The difficulty derives from the nature of metaphor itself and its privileged place in the generation of meaning in art. Travis argues, "That metaphor was absolutely central to medieval ways of thinking about poetry appears beyond dispute. It would be safe to say, as Lisa Kiser has written, 'that the medieval theory of poetry was to a large extent dependent upon the understanding of how metaphors work.'"⁷ The oft-ignored question regarding complex poetic metaphors is the nature of their 'new' referentiality. It seems to me that the *prima facie* assumption of the historical critic must be that metaphors can refer 'outside' themselves, or towards life instead of art- that a metaphor's movement can be seized at a moment of literal predication. One result of this assumption is that questions of first principle are passed over in pursuit of socio-historical realities to which metaphors might be aligned. *Whether* this is possible in the context of Chaucer's poetic performance receives less attention than the forensic *how*.

Thus, in any reading of the *Nun's Priest's Tale* that will have as its principal aim art's flight from history, two major critical perspectives should receive attention. The first I shall broadly call 'historical', by which I understand the critical practice of reading literature in a way that emphasizes the value of history both as an interpretive

⁵ Helen Cooper. *The Canterbury Tales*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989): 349.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Travis, *Heliotropes*, 401, and, Lisa Kiser. *Telling Classical Tales: Chaucer and the "Legend of Good Women"*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983): 50.

guide and a central order of both social and artistic meaning in poetic texts: 'history' as a knowledge condition *within* poetry.⁸ This broadness strikes me as fair and in keeping with Lee Patterson's discussion of the varied values within the school(s) of historicism when he writes, "To replace "New Historicism," a term with which even those who coined it are now evidently uncomfortable, Howard Horowitz has recently proposed the broadly based term "critical historicism."⁹ He continues, "'Critical historicism' is able to refer to a wide range of historicist initiatives while still asserting the crucial fact of initiation itself."¹⁰ The second reading mode is the general argument of this thesis, which advocates a mode of reading that reflects an aporetic linguistic tradition that survives in modern philology inherited from Classical Platonic, Latin, and medieval Neoplatonic emphases on the self-reflexivity of figurative language towards a divine cognition facilitated through poetry's native disembarassment from empirical referentiality. This mode of reading hopes that a local epistemological mode may be inductively detected within Chaucer's writing and the traditions he adapts and be described according to the available vocabulary of metaphor study. By 'local' I mean, logically limited to an artistic rather than social world of meaning. Luckily enough for both readings, *The Nun's Priest's Tale*, far from representing an outlier in the Chaucerian corpus, is to quote Charles Muscatine, Chaucer's "most representative poem," and one that "fittingly serves to cap all of Chaucer's poetry."¹¹ Thus, both broad modes have the opportunity to confront Chaucer at his 'most Chaucerian'. Peter Travis' expansive and indispensable work on

⁸ Including the view of history as self-generating ideologically constructed discourse- a view of history that makes a stronger play for poetry's 'form' than do the more literal approaches of 'Old Historicism.'

⁹ Patterson, 1.

¹⁰ Ibid, 2. One might also add to the list Stephen Greenblatt's term: "Cultural Poetics."

¹¹ Charles Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957): 238.

the poem persuasively argues, as have other scholars, that it is Chaucer's *ars poetica*.¹² We must imagine, then, that those methodological statements that pertain to the *Nun's Priest's Tale* usefully pertain to the entire idea of Chaucer's poetics.

The prize of the tale is history and whether it survives Chaucer's theatrics. In a candid manner, the *Nun's Priest's Tale* scrutinizes art's ontology. The beast-fable deconstruction takes the simplest and most difficult question that can arise in literature: 'What is art?' The manner in which it conducts this discussion is to offer up a direct antinomy between art and life through which it ironically reviews, according to Travis, not only all of Chaucer's poetry, but medieval education, literature writ large, and ultimately the entire history of Western learning.¹³ For our modest purposes we shall narrow our focus on the antinomy through which this is achieved, as a comprehensive analysis of how the whole world fares through it is very adequately considered in Travis' book. History, though stalking as a linguistic mode throughout the poem, makes brief and candid appearances in the masterpiece through the poor widow and, more difficultly, through a bewildering historical reference to "Jakke Straw and his meynee" during the onomatopoeic uproar of the fox chase. It is not only bewildering because of its sharp aesthetic incongruity with the artificial setting of the poem, but also because it constitutes the only definite reference to the 1381 uprising in the entire Canterbury collection. The manner in which this reference is interpreted (or not for that matter) is indicative, consciously or not, of a particular philosophy of literature and the subsequent and necessary logical enjambment concerning the status of history as a participant in its field of

¹² Travis, *Disseminial*, 4. See also, Seth Lerer. "The Canterbury Tales." In The Yale Companion to Chaucer. ed. Seth Lerer. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006): 243-296. and, Ralph W.V. Elliot, "Chaucer's Reading." In Chaucer's Mind and Art. ed. A.C. Cawley (London: Oliver and Boyd, 1969): 46-68.

¹³ Travis, *Disseminial*, 1-27.

significations. Of course, it is important to bear in mind that an entire poem occurs before Mr. Straw's moment in the sun. One's reading of Straw will more than likely be the effect of an interpretation rather than its cause. The rebel leader cannot very well be read as a successful ambassador of historical ideological meaning unless one was of the mind that the poem is logically capable of expressing such a thing.¹⁴ It is useful to consider particular historical interpretations on a sliding scale, beginning with the most literal readings and moving towards the abstract.

For instance, J. Leslie Hotson's treatment of the poem does not interpret the Straw reference for obvious reasons: it is not a part of the later local history to which he links the plot of the *Nun's Priest's Tale*. Hotson cites the Straw reference, but only in order to highlight the deafening noise of the public reaction to the banishment of the popular Henry of Bolingbroke in 1398. In *Colfox vs. Chauntecleer*, Hotson argues that the poem is an allegorical satire of the events surrounding the assassination of the duke of Gloucester in Calais in 1397. Hotson goes as far as to identify the col-fox and Chauntecleer as, respectively, Thomas Mowbray (although indirectly) and Bolingbroke. Parallels designate the chase scene as the duel between Bolingbroke and Mowbray in 1398, the pride of Chauntecleer due to the fact that, "If ever riches, accomplishments, and good looks made a man a target for flattery, Henry was that man,"¹⁵ though this comes with the preceding stipulation, "Now we have no evidence that Henry of Bolingbroke, like Chauntecleer, was more susceptible to flattery than other men...however, if ever riches..."¹⁶ Mowbray is the one aimed at by the name "col-fox" because his right-

¹⁴ See, Fehrenbacher.

¹⁵ J. Leslie Hotson. "Colfox vs. Chauntecleer." *PMLA*, Vol. 39, No. 4. (December, 1924): 776.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 769.

hand man in the assassination of Gloucester was none other than one Mr. Nicholas Colfox.¹⁷ The said aim of such an approach is to provide a “rational historical explanation of the obscure meanings, the lively apostrophes, and the variations and additions which are found in Chaucer's mock- heroic masterpiece.”¹⁸ Elsewhere he writes, “There is no anti-climax if we catch Chaucer's wink.”¹⁹ Such a detective-like approach to the poem presupposes a complementary critical relationship between history and literature to the extent that the “obscure meanings” of even a poem written in what Strohm calls the “ultra-literary register”²⁰ of *Nun's Priest's Tale* are made clear by looking “beneath his [Chaucer's] lively pictures of human character for sly contemporary hits.”²¹

In this formulation, historical events and poetic meaning stand in a one-to-one relationship of correspondence. Therefore, the business of the literary critic is to locate the historical personalities and events that make for the most complimentary fit with the content of a given poem. This is a materialist conception of poetry, rather than one that is aporetic or dualistic. There is no form to poetry that stands alien to its content. The poem *is* content, and this content can be successfully described according to historical events. “The reality of the sign is fully objective and lends itself to a unitary, monistic, objective method of study. A sign is a phenomenon of the external world. Both the sign itself and all the effects it produces...occur in outer experience.”²² The opposite would be a thoroughgoing Platonism in which poetry *is* form, the destruction of content and not even the transformation of it, an idea Charles

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 781

¹⁹ Ibid., 764

²⁰ Strohm, 164.

²¹ Hotson, 764.

²² V.N. Volisnov. Marxism and the Philosophy of Language. trans. V. Matejka and I.R. Titunik. (London: Seminar Press, 1971): 11.

E. Reagan describes: “In short, if a metaphor destroys the possibility of literal meaning it also destroys the possibility of a referent for the sentence.”²³ Hotson’s method blurs the distinction between metaphor and historical allegory, for if Chauntecleer is Bolingbroke, and the historical Bolingbroke is the farthest referential reach of Chauntecleer, then the trope’s epistemological work is done. And, of course, in this manner of reading the poem would be historical allegory or political satire—Chaucer’s *Animal Farm*. Now, I focus on Hotson’s piece in order to demonstrate that the assumption, without caveat, that history and art share the same philosophical space deserves consideration. For even if the content of the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* is demonstrated to bear significant similarities to various historical episodes, it stands to reason that the poem’s internal metaphorical meanings remain undisclosed. Put simply, if Chauntecleer is Bolingbroke, there is still a fair bit of work to be done concerning the interpretation of dreams in the poem, and whether it contributes to or compromises the premise. Any question of method would be less concerned with whether this is the correct historical series with which to align the poem’s symbols rather than if any series could represent a philosophically valid maneuver and significantly contribute to its figural meaning.

One could conceivably employ Hotson’s method to position the ‘occasion’ of poetry and then continue on in pursuit of its form. For instance, *Moby Dick*’s content recasts the sinking of the American whaling ship *Essex* by a sperm whale in 1820, but such a critical coup would describe the occasion and not the meaning of the book. After all,

²³ Charles E. Reagan, Paul Ricoeur: His Life and Work. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996): 43.

The White Whale swam before him as the monomaniac incarnation of all those malicious agencies which some deep men feel eating in them, till they are left living on with half a heart and half a lung... He piled upon the whale's white hump the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down; and then, as if his chest had been a mortar, he burst his hot heart's shell upon it.²⁴

By 'occasion' I understand a causal relationship between, for instance, the death of a great woman and a poem that honours her. It stands to reason that a poem about the life or death of a great woman can possess a form whose universality is distinct and even foreign to its occasion. Blanche is a metaphor worth studying whether or not she was a woman worth commemorating. Conceivably, whichever view one takes of the real Henry IV would still have to be argumentatively established as appropriate to Shakespeare's symbols. Where there is an occasion to poetry the line between it and the poem itself is not straight. However, I do not think this is what Hotson intends when he writes, "When Chaucer's meaning is not plain to us, the fault lies in our ignorance ... of the smaller and more interesting facts of his life and times."²⁵ What a sentence like this seems to tell us is simply that poetry *means* history. It stands to reason, then, that Hotson's method tells us more about history than it does poetry, by virtue of the fact that the poem is the history of that assassination and possesses no independent figural status. Ultimately the poem is incidental to its own meaning. The poem does not explain history; history explains the poem. Our critical activity, therefore, should not consist of proving Hotson right or wrong, but should involve itself in more fundamental questions concerning what a poem is and what it

²⁴ Herman Melville. *Moby Dick*. (London: Penguin, 2002): 200.

²⁵ Hotson, 762.

accomplishes epistemologically. In addition, the application of the Bolingbroke and Mowbray story leaves many stones unturned, including the bulk of the mock-epic machinery of the poem and most strikingly, the Jack Straw reference.

Concerning the controversial Straw appearance, Steven Justice proposes that Chaucer was “parodying John Gower, who had immediately incorporated a vision of the rising into his encyclopedic political complaint, the *Vox Clamantis*.”²⁶ The sonic chaos of Chaucer’s chase scene parodies Gower’s transformation of the political voice of the rebels into mere noise:

And afterwards I saw dogs standing about and barking as if there were tens of thousands, and the fields shook with their voices... Everyone he called to in his madness listened with ears pricked up, and once aroused to his voice, pursued the prescribed course. Thus many an unfortunate man, driven by his persuasive raving, stuck his hand into the fire again and again. All proclaimed in a loud voice, "So be it," so that the sound was like the din of the sea. Stunned by the great noise of their voice, I now could scarcely lift my trembling feet.²⁷

Justice argues that Chaucer includes Gower within the uproar via the figure of Chauntecleer. “Chaucer places Gower among the animals who rage through the *Vox*...for Chauntecleer- bird and singer and dreamer of terrifying beast dreams- is Gower, and the tale is book I of the *Vox Clamantis* in deadpan.”²⁸ Pertelote functions as an unfriendly dig at Gower’s expense: “Chaucer is getting personal here, suggesting that Gower’s poetic originated in his psychosexual and intestinal

²⁶ Steven Justice. *Writing and Rebellion: England in 1381*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994): 208.

²⁷ John Gower, *Vox Clamantis*. (Bk. 1 Chp. 9) *Major Latin Works of John Gower*, trans. Eric W. Stockton (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1962): 65-66.

²⁸ Justice, 214-215.

dysfunctions.”²⁹ I am not concerned with the truth-value of such a statement, rather, its implications concerning a philosophy of art. Chauntecleer is literally Gower, and the poem is a parodic permutation of Gower’s work that even satirizes his private psychosexual and intestinal life. This is a very particular form of source-study. In fact, the juxtaposition of Chaucer’s chase scene to Gower’s is instructive by virtue of the fact that Gower’s poem seems to take Jack Straw very seriously,

When this great multitude of monsters like wild beasts stood united, a multitude like the sands of the sea, there appeared a Jackdaw, well instructed in the art of speaking, which no cage could keep at home. While all were looking on, this bird spread his wings and claimed to have top rank, although he was unworthy. Just as the Devil was placed in command over the army of the lower world, so this scoundrel was in charge of the wicked mob...Satan himself was freed and on hand, together with all the sinful band of servile hell.³⁰

The *Nun’s Priest’s Tale’s* tone is rather glib. “So hydous was the noyse - a, benedicitee!/ Certes, he Jakke Straw and his meynee/ Ne made nevere shoutes half so shrille/ Whan that they wolden any Flemyng kille,” (*Nun’s Priest’s Tale*, 3393-3396). Jack Straw and his Revolt are shrill, but not quite so shrill as the imaginary residents of Chauntecleer’s “yeerd.” At the very least, he is no Devil leading the Fallen Third. The significance of this will be later discussed.

For now, we can appreciate certain methodological elements. Like Hotson, Justice proposes a direct super-text to the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale*. For Hotson it is local history and for Justice, Gower’s *Vox* and Gower himself. Of course, books do form

²⁹ Ibid., 217.

³⁰ *Vox Clamantis*, 65-66.

the context for Chaucer's poems, but the manner in which Justice describes this places the premium on biography and history. If we were to take Justice's methodology and retroactively apply it to our discussion of the *Manciple's Tale*, the analysis could shift from the metapoetic influence of the Ovidian tradition on Chaucer's tale to whether the poem was a direct statement on Ovid himself- the historical Ovid. The crow could be the exilic Ovid and Phoebus the empire that under the auspices of the Julian Marriage Laws tries to snuff out the earthy and amorous truth-telling of the crow/Ovid's erotic poetry. Nonetheless, "But he that hath mysseyd, I dar wel sayn/ He may by no wey clepe his word agayn/ Thyng that is seyde is seyde, and forth it gooth." (*Manciple's Tale*, 353-355). One cannot bureaucratically wipe out the existence of Ovid's poems, nor can Ovid/crow retrieve his poem from circulating or control its interpretation. Both for the foreseeable future are living with the existentially and socially destabilizing consequences of the *Ars Amatoria*: exile for Ovid and free-roaming wanton advice to young women to commit adultery by one of the capital's best poets, executed in pantomime by a 14th Century pen.

Very well, but to do so, independent of the hasty particulars, would be to once again operate under the assumption that history can sufficiently explain the metaphors of poetry, predicated on a contiguous or co-epistemological vision of poetic form and content. The assumption, of course, is logical if one takes that view of poetry. Whether one must as a historical critic is a keen debate. Thus, in Justice's treatment, instead of Chauntecleer symbolizing Bolingbroke, Chauntecleer symbolizes Gower, and the poem is a straight instead of metapoetic parodic retelling of the *Vox*. The question of what metaphors accomplish is concluded in practice by assigning to them

literal referents, further advancing a “substitution theory of metaphor,”³¹ one in which metaphor ‘stands in’ for a literal statement. It is either a conscious or unconscious monistic vision of poetry in which all human uses of language contribute to a single plane of experiential knowledge. If it is not, then it is one that assumes that historical criticism fulfils the function of only half of an aporia leaving an unstated artistic epistemology untouched, which is doubtful, given that to admit such a manner of epistemic dualism, besides pointing to obvious questions of first principles, is to relativize the power of a fully integrational constructivist historical schema in textual interpretation. More likely, it is D.G. Myers’ suspicion: “No effort is made to ascertain whether the design [of historical criticism] really is at odds with anything; it is simply treated as a *donnée* of interpretation that it must be.”³² And such a suspicion would apply to any interpretation- historicist or otherwise- whether its design is at odds with the philosophical setting of poem.

However, another component of Justice’s interpretation floats more freely and suggests another manner in which to view the relationship between history and metaphor. Justice argues that the depiction of the rebels’ political voice as mere noise in contemporary writers serves the ideological function of reducing the Revolt to its mere physical manifestation. “Noise,” as a figurative reductive, makes it possible to focus on the aspect of the Revolt that was manageable, and as Justice points out, was already managed by the time the texts were composed, namely, the violence.³³

Meanwhile, the true political menace- the viral spread of a critical social consciousness- remains purposefully unaddressed because violence is mobilized to

³¹ Black, 31.

³² D.G. Myers. “The New Historicism in Literary Study.” *Academic Questions*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Winter 1988- 1989): 27-36. Accessed 21 October 2010.
<<http://www.english.tamu.edu/pers/fac/myers/historicism.html>>.

³³ Justice, 207.

“forget something that more urgently threatened clerical authority and lordly privilege, the words and gestures by which they [the rebels]...declared that they understood the clerical bureaucracy that governed them well enough to imitate it.”³⁴

What is useful for our discussion is that Justice has put forward the use of noise as a metaphor whose deployment serves, at once, to erase the truth of the history of the Revolt even while representing it figurally. Put another way, the metaphor of noise transfigures and undercuts the facticity of the historical object it expresses. Indeed, the idea that metaphor alienates referents from their original designations constitutes one of the central interpretive obstacles to any philosophically rich poem. Justice’s discussion of ‘noise’ opens onto larger questions of metaphorical referentiality. The reach of the noise metaphor may conclude in the referent ‘the social significance of the Revolt’ and may still be literally comprehensible, but the action of the metaphor on reality, the wearing thin of its overt historicity, is a problem of metapoetics and one that moves us further away from a vision of the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* obtaining as historical allegory.

Helen Barr also grapples with the semantic difficulties of Chaucer’s poetic rhetoric when she argues that the complex metapoetry of the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* is saturated with social concerns. She writes, “The tale is both a dazzling foray into the arts of fiction-making and an example of the social struggle for empowerment.”³⁵

Barr’s analysis highlights the central role that language plays in the poem’s poetic and social meanings. She writes,

A crucial difference between these (contemporary documents concerning the

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Helen Barr. *Socioliterary Practice in Late Medieval England*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001): 127.

Revolt) accounts and the reference to the rising in *The Nun's Priest's Tale* is that Chaucer writes, not in Latin, or in French, but in the vernacular. Simply in terms of choice of language, Chaucer does not obtain the same kind of narrative distance from the rebels as that in the other accounts.³⁶

As opposed to Gower's use of Latin or the dramatized accounts of Sudbury's last Latin words ringing out against the hellish animal noise of the vernacular, Chaucer chooses English, a literary move that relativizes the set linguistic boundaries between authoritative and common political voice. For Barr, the poem's vernacular enacts a shared social space between literature and contemporary politics. Set in contrast to Hotson, Barr argues that the social meanings of the poem are not produced exclusively by external correspondence. Rather, they are *intrinsic* to the poem itself by virtue of the language in which it is written. Furthermore, it is not merely the choice of English from which the social richness emerges, but also the tendency of Chaucer's ironic style to blend usually distinct social and ontological categories, subverting their traditional meanings in the process.

In what Peter Travis calls the mock-*exemplum* of the poem,³⁷ the description of the poor widow, Barr points out that the poem humorously uses the words 'bour' and 'halle' to describe a two-room cottage. Barr argues that such a description is "grounded in social difference"³⁸ by juxtaposing and making equivalent the descriptive vocabulary for a noble house and employing it in a depiction of a peasant dwelling.³⁹ Chauntecleer represents a similar trope; he is both a noble bird, given his own luxurious *descriptio* in the courtly tradition, and the property of the

³⁶ Ibid., 114.

³⁷ Travis, "Reading Chaucer *Ab Ovo*: Mock Exemplum in the Nun's Priest's Tale." In *The Performance of Middle English Culture*, 161-181.

³⁸ Barr, 115.

³⁹ Ibid.

poor widow, part of her daily sustenance. The fluid boundaries between human and animal further contribute to the complex political space created in the poem and are due to the poem's experimental rhetoric in the metaphorical destabilization of the natural ontology of artistically represented objects. Man = chicken. Noble = common. Chauntecleer, literary hero = widow's *pain quotidien*. Metaphorical juxtaposition compromises the fixed statuses of these referents and thus we see traditional linguistic and social designations beginning to run threadbare under the pressure of Chaucer's figurative language. Barr argues that, "Such rhetorical ambivalence erodes the textual difference between estates."⁴⁰ The chase scene depicts the courtly flatterer seizing the noble Chauntecleer while those who pursue do so merely in order to "restore rightful ownership,"⁴¹ especially the widow, whose literal farm is jeopardized by this aristocratic episode. Contrary to contemporary depictions of the uprising, especially Gower's, the poem's strategy implicates the aristocracy and includes them in the Great Noise, and not merely as participants in the chase, but as causes. The poem's symbols flatten the hierarchical social context they represent.

Therefore, in Barr we find an energetic release from a theory of historical meaning based on the 'poetic event - historical event' model in favor of a discussion of how the use of language opens the textuality of the poem to a range of discursive and varied social and historical significations. In Barr's formulation, the metaphors of the poem still have as their referents the political, but the 'political' here is conceptually conceived. The social context of "restoring rightful ownership" is abstract when compared to Hotson's col-fox/Nicholas Colfox matrix. Nonetheless,

⁴⁰ Ibid., 121.

⁴¹ Ibid.

the symbols are grounded in the literal; even if the col-fox represents the form of the courtly flatterer, its definitive typological function is the figural representation of an actual historical situation, e.g. courtly flatterers. Furthermore, and this applies to any approach, one could assume that the two-line Straw reference is the occasion⁴² of the entire poem when it could simply be the occasion for the two-line reference. It could simply be a reference inside a poem, the greater part of whose *content* is foreign to it, not to mention its form. The bulk of the poem, after all, is an argument between two chickens about dreams. Helen Cooper writes, “The Nun’s Priest’s Tale is 626 lines long, of which only about sixty are spent advancing the story; the debate on dreams, by contrast, occupies some 280.”⁴³ Straw occupies two. This considered, instead of the vernacular automatically investing the entire poem with social concern, it could simply be that the English of the poem invests the Straw reference with social concern. The poem may not be about the 1381 uprising at all. By the ratio of Straw-to-poem, the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* may only be a poem about Straw as much as the *General Prologue* is a poem about Zephyrus.

Whatever the fact, the reference may have already been historically compromised according to Paul Strohm. The further we move away from Hotson’s method, the more the problematic nature of the poem’s language takes centre stage. Whereas Barr argues that language and ironic relativization are engines of social meaning in the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale*, Paul Strohm argues that the “literary supersaturation” of the poem “creates an environment of expectations within which even historically charged references like that of “Jakke Straw and his meynee” may

⁴² ‘Occasion’ in the sense earlier defined.

⁴³ Cooper, 347.

be detached from their troubling social implications.”⁴⁴ Strohm argues that the purely aesthetic manner in which the reference is deployed empties it of historical content and reduces it to just another sound in the onomatopoeic uproar. It is thus made tantamount to “songs of mermaids in the sea, Boethius’ love of music, the deeds of Lancelot, the Pharaoh’s baker, and the sorrowing ladies of Troy.”⁴⁵ Strohm’s perspective is like and unlike Barr’s. In both, the social meanings of the poem remain intrinsic. However, Barr proposes that the poem’s rhetoric generates social meaning. Strohm, on the other hand, contends that Chaucer’s rhetoric suppresses social meaning by converting the Straw reference into an empty signifier.

Instead, argues Strohm, history is “reintroduced at the level of form”⁴⁶ in spite of the ahistorical aspirations of the tale’s figurative language. He writes, “The contribution of the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* lies not so much in its allusions as in its socially charged assumption that diverse levels of argumentative style, socially conditioned genres and forms, and kinds of utterance can inhabit the same literary space, cooperating for the profit of all.”⁴⁷ The multi-vocal nature of the poem, abounding with competing narrative agendas, class antagonism, and disagreeable philosophical programs e.g. Pertelote’s naturalism and Chauntecleer’s attempted Macrobian thesis,⁴⁸ creates a metaphorical setting of social possibility at a structural level. The argument relies, idiosyncratically, upon the organization of poetic content. In the normal course of events, a reading of the poem that would condition its social conclusions on poetic content might take as its principal objects the action and narratology of its interlocutors. Strohm argues that the shape of the content itself is a

⁴⁴ Strohm, 165.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 166. ‘Form’ here used in its traditional designation

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ I hope to argue later that Pertelote’s and Chauntecleer’s metaphysics elide.

metaphor for social possibility, directing metaphorical referentiality, in this case, towards the organization of human society (via the organization of a poem). “Chaucer’s *aesthetic* enterprise of defining a literary space that permits free interaction of different forms and styles may be placed in reciprocal relation with the *social* enterprise of defining a public space hospitable to different social classes with diverse social impulses.”⁴⁹ Even if desirably suggesting the interpretive tautology, the reinforcing circle extends outward from the art itself. In Strohm’s formulation, history is an ironic mode that exists at a level independently of the poem’s rhetoric. That a type of meaning moves in contrary directions to the language of a poem is a necessary philosophical setting for the full appreciation of Chaucer’s ironic achievements. Nevertheless, here either the poem is shaped like human society or human society is shaped like a poem. Both are plausible but neither seems conclusive in pursuit of Chaucer’s nimblest abstractions.

The metapoetic concerns raised by these various writers receive close consideration in Richard W. Fehrenbacher’s powerfully argued “A Yeerd Enclosed Aboute.” His analysis centers upon the idea that the Jack Straw reference is, “One of the most puzzling moments in the *Canterbury Tales*,”⁵⁰ and one that documents the struggle between history and figurative language in the poem’s philosophy of metaphor. Fehrenbacher agrees with Strohm that the rhetorical excesses of the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* have as their immediate aim the defusing of the troubling social implications of the uprising. However, Fehrenbacher raises this immediate aim to the universal, arguing that the tale’s metaphorical schedule amounts to a metapoetic bid to exclude history from poetry altogether in a larger mission to “patrol the

⁴⁹ Strohm, 164.

⁵⁰ Fehrenbacher, 134.

boundaries between literature and history.”⁵¹ Ultimately, for Fehrenbacher, this ends in disappointment and history’s presence places enough pressure on the fantasy of the poem to overcome it in the chaotic fox chase. Thus, the explosion of history vis-à-vis the Straw reference into what should have been a purely literary moment.

Fehrenbacher writes, “By seeking refuge in the realm of the literary, the specter of Jack Straw and his meynee muscling their way into the text demonstrates how such attempts fail, and how history, attempt to contain it as one might, cannot be entirely banished from the realm of literature.”⁵² Fehrenbacher’s approach is welcome. Its metapoetic ambition is such that it does not assume that history is properly basic to the tale. Instead it argues that despite art’s best attempts to imagine a poetic-proper, an epistemology that would not depend on the historical as a mode of meaning, even so history makes itself a necessary knowledge-condition in metaphor. This, of course, is what I have been aiming at in this review that begins in Hotson: that history must be argumentatively established as poetic instead of presupposed.

For Fehrenbacher, like Barr, tensions appear early in the description of the poor widow. The poem begins very plainly, describing her simple life in appropriately unadorned vocabulary. However, complications arise when “bour” and “halle” are used to depict her cottage, and a “growing sense of unease” emerges when her diet is described negatively according to the aristocratic “deyntee morsel” and “poynaunt sauce” that never pass her lips. As the widow is increasingly defined by social difference, “Chaucer begins a retreat into a literary realm” and the tale’s style transforms.⁵³ The movement into the colorful world of Chauntecleer is the poem’s

⁵¹ Ibid., 135

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid., 139.

wholesale attempt to ban history from the realm of literature through the sheer powers of fantasy and metaphor. A movement Fehrenbacher describes as one away “from the pathetic world of the poor widow, from the realm of history to the realm of the rhetorical.”⁵⁴ Thus, Chauntecleer’s “yeerd enclosed al aboute” represents the tale’s attempt to reify literature into a purely self-referential object.

But this safety is ‘illusory’ for when the chase begins, the guarantors of literary self-referentiality- Chauntecleer, the fox, and Pertelote- are thrust into the chaos of the last 100 lines. Such disorder ensues in the narrative that the previously banished widow returns, and with her, the suppressed realities of social and economic injustice. Meanwhile, Fehrenbacher interprets the fox’s motivation to attack Chauntecleer as an act of resistance to the poem’s attempt to inscribe him into the Biblical, French, and classical literary traditions. “O newe Scariot, newe Genylon...O Greek Synon.” (3327, 3328). The fox revolts in order to reassert his empirical status, his ‘foxiness’, and takes with him Chauntecleer, the poem’s “heliotrope”⁵⁵ and ultimate symbol of “the fragile ahistorical enclosure of Chauntecleer’s barnyard.”⁵⁶ When the poem’s rhetorical elegance breaks down into onomatopoeic sound, the intended literary form of the poem ‘cracks’ and the most violent episode in recent local history appears, the 1381 Revolt. For Fehrenbacher, literature proves itself incapable of an order of meaning that is disembarassed from history and Chaucer’s poetic appeal to empty history of its meaning through figurative language has failed, even in this, his most literate attempt. History produces meaning in literature by virtue of the ultimate inability of poetic rhetoric’s ahistorical aspirations to

⁵⁴ Ibid., 140.

⁵⁵ Travis, *Heliotropes*.

⁵⁶ Fehrenbacher, 142.

transfigure social concerns into purely literary artifacts.

Fehrenbacher's perspective illuminates many concerns. The occasion of the Straw reference is the Revolt, but it is not the occasion of the poem. The reference is metaphorically released from its occasion when it becomes a global metapoetic critique of the poem's organic but clipped movement towards ahistoricity. Thus, Straw becomes a metaphor that self-reflexively interrogates the poem's form; Straw *is* history; the transaction between two contexts is made complete through language's neatest verb: *is, est, être*. This new Straw is not only the leader of a 1381 revolt but an ironic destabilization of an entire theory of art, something he might not otherwise have obtained independently of Chaucer's chicken poem. Any argument against Fehrenbacher, then, would consist less at the level of method than at the level footing of interpretation. Fehrenbacher's method is expressed in practice and is mindful of the abstract stakes of the poem. What eventually complicates his reading is the poem's encyclopedic function- the comprehensive manner in which it organizes Chaucer's wider system of poetics instead of standing as an isolated discussion of history and poetry. If we place our argument in the immense back-story that makes the *Nun's Priest's Tale* possible, it becomes apparent that the poem assumes the prior knowledge of not only Chaucer's poetry but of the philosophical and rhetorical tradition to which it refers itself, figurally reaching backwards in time to Plato, the results of which overwhelm the Straw reference in its bid to subdue an entire history of poetics.

The Low Road Out Of History

It is instructive to begin a consideration of the *Nun's Priest's Tale* from the

incomplete *Monk's Tale*, a tale that serves an anticipatory function. That the Monk's *de casibus* is cut short on account of boredom is an ironic Horatian problem. "The poet winning every vote blends the useful with the sweet, giving pleasure to his reader while he offers him advice. His book will make the Sosii⁵⁷ money and travel overseas, and far into the years ahead extend its author's name."⁵⁸ The trivial standards of pleasure, sweetness, and subsequent reprints, as the basis of literary immortality are amusing and conceal an appealing austerity that the Monk aims for in earnest and misses. But his poem is interrupted: "Sire Monk, namoore of this, so God yow blesse!/ Youre tale anoyeth al this compaignye./ Swich talkyng is nat worth a boterflye/ For therinne is ther no desport ne game." (2788-291). The literal complaint of the pilgrims is that the tale is dull, which seems to be an intended and ably achieved effect. Yet, the Horatian metonym on 'delight' from the *Ars Poetica*⁵⁹ re-orientes our expectations towards a dual-function in which delight is entertainment and another in which delight is identical to the soul's experience of excellence in art. Horace prefigures Chaucer's straddling of the Houses of Fame and Rumour. In the *Summoner's Tale* a fart is funny by virtue of the fact that farts have been funny since the dawn of time and provide an immutable foundation for the best jokes of every generation. Hidden in the same tale are mystical expectations that a fart in poetry can provide a small sliver of an opening onto the spiritual and artistic reality of Pentecost that could instruct and delight the soul.

The question, then, is why does the *Monk's Tale* fail to delight? The tale is, among other things, a metapoetic experiment in whether poetry can have as its basic

⁵⁷ In the time of Augustus the great booksellers were the *Sosii*.

⁵⁸ Horace, *Ars Poetica* (343-346) *Horace's Satires and Epistles*, trans. Jacob Fuchs. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1977): 92.

⁵⁹ See C.L. Wrenn, "Chaucer's Knowledge of Horace." *The Modern Language Review*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (July, 1923): 286-292.

orders of meaning, history and fortune. The result of the singular occupation of the Monk's performance with the rise and fall of great men in history is depression and boredom from the rest of the "compaignye." Even if the complaint against the Monk is grounded in the social anxieties of the Knight or the administrative responsibilities of Harry Bailey, their dissatisfaction, like that experienced by the audience of art, is more fundamental. The nature of this dissatisfaction elides itself with both the *exemplum* of the *Nun's Priest's Tale* and the order of knowledge represented in the parodic fall of Chauntecleer, a fall that is counter-intuitively dependent on Boethian Providence rather than Fortune's wheel. The Host intuits that a better discussion is both possible and desirable. "Ye seye right sooth; this Monk he clappeth lowde." (2781). The space between chatter and poetic speech is aporetic. The Monk's failed rhetoric, his chatter, is unable to please because it cannot deliver upon its own promise to artistically, rather than ethically, marshal the history of literature. This is the same failure of the narrator of the *Nun's Priest's Tale* whose impressive bibliography nonetheless proves in practice that truth in art antagonizes the mere knowledge of it. In this sense, art history is not art, in as much as we conceive of a review of exemplary materials as being, in itself, incapable of guaranteeing meaningful contact with their philosophies. Such is the unconscious component of Harry's "hevynesse."

As han ye seyde, to heere of hevynesse.
 'Sire Monk, namoore of this, so God yow blesse!
 Youre tale anoyeth al this compaignye.
 Swich talkyng is nat worth a boterflye
 For therinne is ther no desport ne game.

(2787-2791)

Harry's complaint is not particular to himself or the Knight but includes the entire

campaigne; the tale stops for the sake of everyone, including its readers, prior to Chaucer's *ars poetica*. "Hevynesse" constitutes the opposite of Horatian delight in its superior metonymous definition- the delight of the soul. The Monk's "hevynesse" would praise a man *qua* man. Horatian delight would praise a man *qua* God. The Monk takes for contradictory what is only counter- intuitive, that medieval 'humanism' practices the second rather than the first in order to delight both the visceral and the speculative.

That a badly told tale is not worth a butterfly deserves critical attention if for nothing else than to help frame the achievements of the *Nun's Priest's Tale* as balm to the literary deficits of the *Monk's Tale*. Any "swich talkyng" that is "nat worth a boterflye," reminds me of Conrad's *Lord Jim* in which Stein the naturalist collects butterflies but turns a deaf ear to their symbolic identity.

I was very anxious, but I respected the intense, almost passionate, absorption with which he looked at a butterfly, as though on the bronze sheen of these frail wings, in the white tracings, in the gorgeous markings, he could see other things, an image of something as perishable and defying destruction as these delicate and lifeless tissues displaying a splendour unmarred by death.⁶⁰

In Classical Greek, the word for butterfly- "psyche,"- is, the same as the word for soul and breath. Aristotle writes, "After a little while the outer covering bursts asunder, and out flies the winged creature that we call the psyche or butterfly."⁶¹ The common Greek conception of the butterfly's eternity was similar to the cicada, first literally guaranteed through its non-dietary perpetuation: "At first, when it is a

⁶⁰ Joseph Conrad. *Lord Jim*. The Collected Works of Joseph Conrad Volume IV: Lord Jim. (London: Routledge/Thoemmes Press, 1995): 207.

⁶¹ Aristotle, *Historia Animalium* (551a) The History of Animals. trans. D'Arcy Wentworth Thompson (Whitefish: Kessinger Publishing LLC, 2004): 147.

caterpillar, it feeds and ejects excrement; but when it turns into the chrysalis it neither feeds nor ejects excrement,”⁶² and then figurally guaranteed as part of a mythographic order of eternity. Such symbolism survives long after Chaucer. For instance, 19th century painter David paints a butterfly above Psyche’s head in his *Amour et Psyché*.⁶³ So pervasive is the tradition that artists would often conflate Psyche with the butterfly and from Greco- Roman art forward Psyche herself becomes winged.⁶⁴ Though there is no mythological depiction of a winged Psyche artists possessed a strong linguistic and literary mandate for the convention. Psyche gains immortality after her Four Trials in the *Golden Ass*. “Then he ordered Psyche to be brought by Mercury and introduced into heaven. Handing her a cup of ambrosia, ‘Take this, Psyche,’ he said, ‘and be immortal. Never shall Cupid quit the tie that binds you, but this marriage shall be perpetual for you both.’”⁶⁵

Metonymically the immortal butterfly, Psyche becomes immortal, circularly reinforcing the common symbol and, in Apuleius’s case, integrating an aporetic ontological premium on the soul’s eternity in keeping with his literary Platonism.⁶⁶

Returning to Chaucer’s “nat worth a boterflye;” it is perhaps, in Dean Spruill Fansler’s words, a “device of emphatic undervaluation”⁶⁷ or a form of *ad absurdum* common in contemporary French literature and a favorite of Jean de Meun

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Jacques Louis David. *Amour et Psyché*. 1817. Oil on canvas. Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland.

⁶⁴ For instance 3RD Century A.D. mosaic, *Eros & Psykhe*. Antakya Museum, Antakya, and, Reinhold Begas, *Pan tröstet Psyche*. 1857-1858. Marble. Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin.

⁶⁵ Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*. trans. E.J. Kenney. (London: Penguin, 2004): 105.

⁶⁶ See Joseph G. DeFilippo. “Curiositas and the Platonism of Apuleius' Golden Ass.” *The American Journal of Philology*, Vol. 111, No. 4 (Winter, 1990): 471-492, and, James Gollnick, *The Religious Dreamworld of Apuleius' Metamorphoses: Recovering a Forgotten Hermeneutic*. (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1999).

⁶⁷ Dean Spruill Fansler. Chaucer and the *Roman de la Rose*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1914): 74.

that Chaucer employs to expert effect some 65 times throughout his work.⁶⁸ For our own purposes we appreciate that the frame of the *Nun's Priest's Tale* would be a poem that could be "worth a boterflye," that could align itself with Horace's silent definition of delight. And were we to preserve the metonym in its entirety then we realize it is tailor made to Chaucer's poetic method. Unlike the Monk's psychological and historical Fortune-sponsored poetics the story of Chauntecleer will be one that makes a play for the soul's knowledge, for a poetics predicated on the destruction rather than the vacillation of literal reference in service to the philosophical expectations of medieval humanist poetry. Thus, in *Lord Jim*, Jim enters Stein's study as though plumb in the middle of the *Monks' Tale/Nun's Priest's Tale* debate:

'To tell you the truth, Stein," I said with an effort that surprised me, "I came here to describe a specimen. . ." "Butterfly?" he asked, with an unbelieving and humorous eagerness. "Nothing so perfect," I answered, feeling suddenly dispirited with all sorts of doubts. "A man!"⁶⁹

Likewise the Monk retires from the story-telling contest: "Nay, quod this Monk, "I have no lust to pleye." (2806). The Monk cannot "pleye" because he fails to realize, like Conrad's characters, that with a different perspective they should have all along been talking about the same thing. Men are butterflies in art; there is no natural man, only naturalism.

In the end, the philosophically rich boredom produced by the Monk bleeds into the next tale by virtue of the fact that the description of the Widow that follows does little to remedy the mood. A discussion of the dietary habits of old women,

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Conrad, *Lord Jim*, 211-212. Quoted in Tony Tanner, "Butterflies and Beetles-Conrad's Two Truths." *Chicago Review*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Winter - Spring, 1963): 124.

ironically- by virtue of simply setting the low themes of history against the high- makes the same mistake as the entire *Monk's Tale*, which is to orient language towards experience instead of intuition. Viewed in ironic juxtaposition, the *Nun's Priest's Tale's exemplum* parodies the inadequacies of the Monk's attempt to reify history and Fortune to the status of art. It does this with a supercilious, but ultimately coherent attitude that assumes the philosophical and literary equivalence between high and low history in the artistic vision. Thus, Chauntecleer's entrance will be all the more invested with philosophical expectation as the poem is not merely undercutting, for lack of a better phrase, the 'Widow's thesis'. It is also discrediting the Monk's narrative method, which, even if restrained by genre, unconsciously instead of argumentatively aligns historical and artistic meaning. The boredom of the company seems to reflect the intuitional dissatisfaction of a reader whose experience of art is no more illuminating than her experience of history. To reference Grube once more, "Plato is not laying down the rule that artists should hold the mirror up to nature, but blaming them because that is, in fact, all they do."⁷⁰

From High to Low History: The Widow's World

"A povre wydwe, somdeel stape in age,/ Was whilom dwellynge in a narwe cotage,/ Biside a grove, stondynge in a dale." (2821-2823). In fact the Nun's Priest picks up where the Monk leaves us, in history. Peter Travis argues that although cast as a traditional *exemplum*, the story of the Widow glibly retreats from the spiritual at every possible turn. "Syn thilke day that she was last a wyf/ In pacience ladde a ful

⁷⁰ Grube, 188.

simple lyf.” (2825-2826). Travis writes, “Here, perhaps, in the narrator’s intimation of the Widow’s former life, is the determiner of the contrastive meaning we need. But are we really meant to imagine in any detail the Widow’s pre-Widowed existence as a life of various and pointed pleasure?”⁷¹ The Widow leads a “ful simple lyf. . . For litel was hir catel and hir rente.” (2827). Travis argues that the simplicity of the Widow’s life, rather than opening onto a heroic spirituality, is “the result of pressing economic circumstance.”⁷² In a sense, this passage conducts a reasonably conceived historicist reading- one that looks beneath the religious language of poverty to economic reality, dispensing with spiritual reification in the name of natural causation, concealing an ethical challenge to interpretations of the poor which transfigure their hardships into devotional artifacts. But there is more at stake. Travis continues his analysis by remarking upon the curious undercutting of the third inroad to the *exemplum* tradition. The poem quickly passes over the Widow’s “doughtren two” for the sake of enumerating her livestock, two of whom (unlike the daughters) it names: Molly the sheep and later, Colle the dog. The opportunity that the tale’s introduction punts is to “to gather us around the hearth to share with these three women their bond of familial *caritas* and Christian devotion.”⁷³ The tale documents her eating habits, whose only positive description seems to be brown bread, milk, and the occasional bacon and eggs. Her physical health is in good order: daily exercise, free from gout and apoplexy, and no weakness for wine.

Of poynaunt sauce hir neded never a deel.
No deyntee morsel passed thurgh hir throte;

⁷¹ Travis, *Disseminial*, 130.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Ibid.*

Hir diete was accordant to hir cote.
 Replecioun ne made hire nevere sik;
 Attempre diete was al hir phisik,
 And exercise, and hertes suffisaunce.
 The goute lette hire nothyng for to daunce,
 N'apoplexie shente nat hir heed.
 No wyn ne drank she, neither whit ne reed;
 (2843-2842)

Travis writes,

What we next learn, again to our slight disappointment, is that one reason the Widow's diet is simple and her meals slender is they were "accordant to hir cote"...Any hope that the Widow's simple diet was a voluntary act of corporeal mortification and spiritual self-actualization is further undone by the narrator's assertion that these rich foods "hir needed never a deel"- which could mean that rich foods did not appeal to her.⁷⁴

Further exaggerating the physicality of the Widow's world is her distinguished role as the only Chaucerian character to exercise. Indeed, the Miller wrestles, "That proved wel, for over al ther he cam,/ At wrastlynge he wolde have alwey the ram." (*General Prologue*, 549- 550). However, he seems to do so in a festive capacity rather than as compliment to a high protein diet, which incidentally, even if absurd, makes for a better match with the tonal condition of the Widow's description. This naturalism is so empirical that its only counterpart seems to be in Pertelote's high opinion of laxatives with reference to the symbolic questions of non-waking cognition.

Now, it would be a useful thought experiment to imagine the *Nun's Priest's Tale's* place in the canon of Western literature were the remainder of the poem

⁷⁴ Ibid., 132.

composed in this register. Useful, because if we did not know that we were suddenly to be transported into the literary domain of Chauntecleer, we might draw the conclusion that this is not an awfully successful poem. The explosion into the poem of the rainbow *descriptio* of Chauntecleer provides us with the clue that excellence in poetry depends on liberation from the physical concerns of the Widow's world. Muscatine writes, "The cock's magnificence breaks out amid this carefully restrained setting with the best Chaucerian effect."⁷⁵ Wetherbee argues, "From the opening lines we see style straining to outgrow the limits of the humble story. Ostensibly they set up the simple life of the poor Widow as a foil to the mock- sumptuousness of Chauntecleer's."⁷⁶ The figurative and aesthetic incongruity between Chaucer's presentation of Chauntecleer and the Widow helps to establish that mission of poetic language is to rescue its audience from language itself. When I say "language itself" I mean language's standard signifying relationship to the objects of existence. For even if Chaucer does a very good job of describing the daily life of the Widow, there seems to be no way to guarantee that her historical biographer might not do a better one. The unique accomplishment of poetry cannot be secured in the empirical arena; language in its pre-poetic state is dependent on history for meaning.

Thus, the inadequacies of the *Monk's Tale* prefigure those of the description of the Widow. Both represent two defined medieval genres, the *de casibus* and the *exemplum*. Interestingly, both genres, with or without failed narrators, perhaps represent limited vehicles for poetic achievement by virtue of the fact that they are ethically definitive modes, modes persistently resisted and often ironically undermined in Chaucer's poetry. In the *de casibus*, "pride goeth before

⁷⁵ Muscatine, 239.

⁷⁶ Chauncey Woods, *The Canterbury Tales*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004): 103.

destruction.”⁷⁷ In the *exemplum*, spiritually motivated human action ethically recommends itself to its readers. The initial divergence of the *Monk’s Tale* and the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* is only temporary. The Monk sticks to his guns and tells his foreshortened *de casibus* up and down according to genre-specific emphases. The *Nun’s Priest* narrator mishandles the genre according to an emphasis on natural instead of moral causation: Simple diet? All she could afford. No fancy *sauce piquante*? Doesn’t much like it. Nonetheless, the tale’s promotion of the aporia of art and life analytically elides two underachieving poems. The *Monk’s Tale* blithely carries on until stopped and the nature of the Horatian failure is deconstructed by the story of the Widow. The Widow’s world, like the Monk’s, is generically designated as a moral one. However, the moral component of the Widow’s example is undercut by the natural, in this case the economic and the dietary. Even so, such generic failures are red herrings by virtue of the fact that they presuppose that a capable execution of tropological genres could be of sufficient metaphoricity to become part of the form rather than the content of art. It might be akin to attributing the failure of a reality TV show to top *Citizen Kane* as a piece of art because of not being a good enough reality TV show. A genre’s highest expression can itself be a problem. Thus, it is possible that the shortcomings of the *Nun’s Priest’s exemplum* occur both artificially- via a narrative failure to fulfill the conditions of the genre- but also by matter of course, like the Monks’ *de casibus*, by virtue of the generic reliance on human history and an experiential notion of knowledge that attempts to literally, rather than figurally, refer itself to the artistic vision.

Likewise, the failure of the *moralitas* at the end of the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale*

⁷⁷ Proverbs 16:18.

helps to further experientially surround the story of Chauntecleer, to wall-in his “yeerd enclosed al aboute” by incommensurable modes of discourse. The concluding *moralitas* unceremoniously attempts to re-inscribe the tale in a moral framework that twice fails to conveniently obtain through illustrious and unillustrious human behavioral discussions: the rise and fall of great men and the daily habits of old women. One cannot accuse the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* of shadowboxing when it comes to guarding its own figures from historical intrusion. The artistic world of the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* is bookended by history and experience. The question is whether they cross-pollinate. Whatever the conclusion, we must agree with Fehrenbacher, Wetherbee, Muscatine, and Travis that it seems clear that the passage from the Widow’s world to that of Chauntecleer’s represents a movement from a historical to a literary realm. However, against Barr, I would argue that the logic of the passage has the composition of poetry nearer to mind than social difference. The social difference of the *exemplum*, however rich in humour, is part of a larger cohesive wave of naturalistic strategy that suddenly crashes against the burlesque circus of Chauntecleer’s private world of symbols.

Thus, the collapse of the *Monk’s Tale* and the transition to the opening of the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* is representative of the ironic attempt to envision a theory of poetry that would have as its principal concern the business of existing in reality. It is worth remembering Barr’s observation that for the Widow, Chauntecleer’s principal significance is that he is a vital component of her food production. But of course that is all Chauntecleer could be to the Widow, because she has become, by no fault of her own, an analytical representative of a failed poetic. Her world, along with the Monk’s, lacks the literary tools necessary to interpret the bird’s figural identity. In the philosophy of art the Monk inhabits, Chauntecleer is another

morality play of the rise and fall of great men (chickens). In the philosophy of art that the Widow inhabits Chauntecleer is a biological chicken. Therefore, we should expect that Widow would be incapable of comprehending (and one can hardly blame her) that her farm's rooster moonlights in another life as a walking, talking theory of art. Her poverty is transfigured from economic poverty into a discussion of the poverty of the knowable world when compared to the metaphors of art. Chauntecleer's nobility is also of metaphorical status, symptomatic of the fantastic world he inhabits, albeit, even if by osmosis, given that he is yet another of the poem's discredited interlocutors, unconscious as the rest to its meanings. We must imagine that as the Widow looks out of her window at Chauntecleer's yard she sees nothing but animals carrying on like animals. We must also imagine that as Chauntecleer looks towards the Widow's cottage he sees nothing at all.

The Chicken's World

It is a shame, too, that the Widow is unable to see what does (not) really go on in her small farm because her rooster sings more merrily than the Church itself.

A yeerd she hadde, enclosed al aboute
 With stikkes, and a drye dych withoute,
 In which she hadde a cok, hight Chauntecleer.
 In al the land, of crowyng nas his peer.
 His voys was murier than the murie orgon
 On messe-dayes that in the chirche gon.

(2847-2852)

His song describes the movement of the heavens better than science. "Wel sikerer was his crowyng in his logge/ Than is a klokke or an abbey orlogge." (2854-2855).

His colors trump nature's: "His coomb was redder than the fyn coral...His nayles whitter than the lylve flour." (2859, 2863), colors like Rhetoric's robes in the *Anticlaudianus*: "Her countenance is steeped in radiant colour: a brilliant red glow tints her face with roseate luster,"⁷⁸ and like Minerva's robe in the *De Planctu*, "The design describes what cannot be circumscribed, offers the invisible for inspection, and speaks what the tongue cannot."⁷⁹ Travis writes, "in his painterly portrait of Chauntecleer, Chaucer has recontextualized in a few brush strokes a long-lasting aesthetic debate concerning the superiority or inferiority of the colors of nature to the colors of rhetorical art."⁸⁰ It is this same medieval Neoplatonic premium on rhetoric's colors over nature's that informs Chaucer's short discussion in the *Franklin's Tale*.

I sleep nevere on the Mount of Pernaso,
 Ne lerned Marcus Tullius Scithero.
 Colours ne knowe I none, withouten drede,
 But swiche colours as growen in the mede,
 Or elles swiche as men dye or peynte.
 Colours of rethrorik been to me queynte;

(*Franklin's Tale*, 719-726)

The structure is clear enough: dye, paint, chlorophyll? Knowable. The colours of "rethorik?" These belong to Ciceronian-educated non-waking residents of Parnassus. It is a travel-size *ars poetica* via the question 'what is the connection between classical authors, rhetoric, the gods, and not being awake for any of it'? It is the question of every Chaucerian dream poem. In the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, this logical ascent of Chauntecleer- Macrobian rhetor, keeper of the coop's library, dreamer, and candidate in Divinity- from literal to figural object is modeled on the

⁷⁸ Alain de Lille, *Anticlaudianus*, 97.

⁷⁹ Alain de Lille, *Anticlaudianus*. Quoted in Pelen, *Latin Poetic Irony*, 87.

⁸⁰ Travis, *Heliotropes*, 418.

Neoplatonic *ascensus*. But as always in Chaucer's poetry, it is as powerful in its humorous hesitation as it would be in fully realized apotheosis. And while Yasunari Takada argues that, "Chaucer is not completely positive about the Neoplatonic view of the world,"⁸¹ I think the more probable interpretation is simply that Chaucer's poetry makes ironic art of an Orphean literary habit. Because if we try and hold fast to what is slipping away the poem becomes more effective, and what is slipping away is that Chauntecleer is a chicken, or at least was once. The more the old Chauntecleer is held up against The Good and Perfect Chicken the more readers finds themselves, through some very robust suspension of disbelief, in a world of impossibilities governed by slapstick illogic.

It is Chaucer at his most fanciful, a chicken through the looking glass.

"I ca'n't believe *that!*" said Alice. "Ca'n't you?" the Queen said in a pitying tone. "Try again: draw a long breath, and shut your eyes." Alice laughed. "There's no use trying,' she said `one *ca'n't* believe impossible things." "I dare say you haven't had much practice," said the Queen. "When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast."⁸²

Indeed, the world of the poem, sponsored by Chauntecleer is mad. Like in Chrétien's *Yvain*, madness becomes its own private symbolic world, one that flees human society.

Yvain cannot reply to her, having lost his senses and power of speech...And

⁸¹ Takada, in *Platonism and the English Imagination*, 48.

⁸² Lewis Carrol. *Through the Looking Glass. Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass*. ed. Roger Lancelyn Green. (London: Oxford University Press, 1971): 177.

his distress continually increases: everything he hears afflicts him, and all he sees grieves him. He would have wished to take flight, quite alone, in a land so wild that nobody would know where to look for him, and where there was no man or woman or anybody knowing anything more of him than if he were in the pit of hell... They are well aware that he does not care about their conversation or their doings... He went away until he was far from the tents and pavilions. Then his head was assailed by so wild a delirium that he loses his senses... They go looking for him through the whole neighborhood, in the knights' lodgings, under hedges and in gardens, seeking him where he is not found.⁸³

Yvain's retreat from the medieval court echoes the world of Chauntecleer, a world that severs itself from the determinative power of the Widow's and the Monk's, emptying itself of traditional logical and numerical modes of cognition in the process, shedding the baggage of understanding for the trip across Chesterton's "infinite sea."⁸⁴ The painstaking discussion of time in the poem is purposefully flawed. Travis points out this typical Chaucerian behavior when he writes, "But the most challenging feature of all three *chronographiae* [In the *Tales*] is also the most frustrating and confusing: when the scientifically inclined reader goes through all the necessary calculations to verify Chaucer's data, it turns out that each and every one of Chaucer's three determinations of time is somehow wrong!"⁸⁵ Despite a Neoplatonic mentor as mathematically and cosmologically austere as Macrobius, the poem employs sacramental numerology irresponsibly, like some fixed cosmic bingo game in which threes and sevens pepper the text without any emerging clarity. "Three large sowes hadde she, and namo./ Three keen, and eek a sheep that highte Malle."

⁸³ Chrétien de Troyes, *Yvain. Arthurian Romances Including Perceval*. trans. D.D.R. Owen. (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1991): 318-319.

⁸⁴ Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 35.

⁸⁵ Travis, *Disseminal*, 269.

(2830-2831). “Sevene hens for to doon al his plesaunce.” (2866). “Syn thilke day that she was seven nyght oold.” (2873). Though something ingenious and unifying could one day spring from the poem’s numerology, it might still come at the cost of the tale’s ruffled charm in which the sacramental seven, God’s number of completion, is used to describe the bucolic life of a chicken septagamist. Seven also is the age of Pertelote when she steals Chauntecleer’s heart, though Pertelote is the strongest naturalist in the poem, an herbal confessor with dietary solutions to all spiritual anxieties.

Reason is the last to go. “For thilke tyme, as I have understonde,/ Beestes and briddes koude speke and synge.” (2880-2881). The narrator enters the mad house and then retreats towards the colors that “growen in the mede” rather than those of “rhetoryk.” Travis rightly describes this as a choplogic defense in which the highly unlikely event of animals speaking is justified by the fact that it was a long time ago.⁸⁶ He writes, “the Nun's Priest's figural justification of his figural art suggests that the premise upon which every metaphorical construct is grounded is, simply, another metaphor.”⁸⁷ Such is the reversal of language in art, that it becomes more reasonable to assume the eloquence and logical cohesion of chicken epistemology than to attempt an explanation. It is a privilege of a poem, no doubt, that it begins epistemologically *in medias res*, unconsciously assuming its own plausibility, guileless as a discussant of its own coherence. The *donnée* of literature is Chicken Middle English rather than the narrator’s, or a critic’s, interpretive history of the world. Thus the attempt to explain the talking chickens of art by appealing to history is also a philosophical exercise in which we discover that history lacks the power to impart reality to art’s

⁸⁶ Travis, *Heliotropes*. 424.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 425.

truths because of an obvious aporetic disparity between its own ontology and that of talking “beestes” and “briddes.” The initial attempts at cross-pollination fail. If we hearken back to Hotson, whose stated purpose was to provide a “rational historical explanation of obscure meanings,”⁸⁸ we note a rather extreme philosophical tension. Perhaps we also intuit the loss of the consummate fancy of the young tale if we label it historical allegory, because the history of murdered dukes in Calais and Peasant Revolts are very serious matters who perhaps deserve better than a ruttish rooster-king feathering his wife twenty times before 6am.

Pertelotean Naturalism

It is a long set-up: The underwhelming *Monk's Tale* and aftermath, the Widow's description, and the new Golden Age of Chauntecleer. What happens next is, from within the tale, perhaps the most difficult for historical readings to absorb. Chauntecleer and Pertelote, without even a ‘good morning’ embroil themselves in a Neoplatonic dialogue concerning the interpretation of dreams modeled on Macrobius' *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*. This argument shapes the poem more than any other element. The level of abstraction achieved by Chaucer's irony is so high, that at long last when the poem resumes, one cannot help but feel the sensation of looking down from above at the entrance of a fox and a chase that follows. It is a level of abstraction and sophistication predicated, as we shall see, upon both the long view of a Chaucerian Performance and an entire historical tradition.

⁸⁸ Hotson, 781.

The representative format of the discussion is Socratic dialogue, picked up by Cicero's dialogues, and now brought forth into the *Canterbury Tales* by way of Macrobius and two chickens. The medieval period extends the discursive format in high allegorical mode through the *De Planctu, Anticlaudianus, Le Roman*, the *Consolatio*, and Martianus Capella's *de nuptiis* among others. However, we must keep driving home that Chauntecleer is a chicken in whom mannishness dwells, so he has been sufficiently metaphorized and needs no further work in the form of "Nature" or "Genius." That the poem so disarmingly rereads Chaucerian marriage discussions through Pertelote and Chauntecleer is perhaps an accomplishment particular to the fact that they are chickens, which in turn, is part of the accomplishment of the entire tale, a tale that funnels Chaucer's life work through non-flying members of the avian family rather than through the eagles of high Dantean Platonism. Instead, the poem brings perspectival dialogue back from the psychomachic and towards the spirit of Cicero's dialogues, a simpler, earthier model in which each interlocutor defends a philosophical school. Pertelote, naturalist *par excellence* argues from the Epicurean perspective, and Chauntecleer from the (limited) Academic perspective.⁸⁹ It is this oscillation between the initial fantasy that undergirds the appearance of the rooster, and then the comic ordinariness with which the dialogue progresses that makes this possible. I have in mind here Chauntecleer leaning against his pillow (for this is another Chaucerian pillow-talk) coolly riffing on the contents of his personal library. There is much to be unlearned from Chaucerian pillow-talks; the Wife and Miller brandish them with particular zest. There is not, however, another pillow-talk quite so measured and educated as this between two

⁸⁹ 'Academic' in this case 'from the perspective of the Platonic Academy.'

chickens. The Wife and Miller talk sex and marriage. Chauntecleer and Pertelote? Whether dreams can be demonstrated to carry oracular meaning according to a contest between bibliography and recent advances in the digestive sciences.

Chauntecleer immediately positions his anxiety according to the available vocabulary of Platonism. “Madame, I pray yow that ye take it nat agrief./ By God, me mette I was in swich meschief/ Right now that yet myn herte is soore afright./ “Now God,” quod he, “my swevene recche aright,/ And kepe my body out of foul prisoun!” (2892- 2897). That Chauntecleer inverts the sense of Platonic categories is itself oracular, for the bird makes a habit of mishandling his literary genealogies. It is not the body that needs saving from “foul prisoun” because the body itself is “foul prisoun.” Macrobius comments on Cicero, “Thus you see that Cicero, by the words “those who have flown from the bonds of their bodies, as if from prison,” means both that the body serves as fetters and that it is a tomb, being the prison of the entombed.”⁹⁰ Cicero writes in the *De Amicitia*, “If the truth is really that the souls of all good men after death make the easiest escape from what may be termed the imprisonment and fetters of the flesh, whom can we think of as having had an easier journey to the gods than Scipio?”⁹¹ Chauntecleer ironically requires a successful dream interpretation according to a soul/body dualism even while botching the appropriate order of the schema. Instead Pertelote argues from the perspective that the meaning of dreams is incidental by virtue of natural causation. It is a thoroughgoing interlocutory naturalism.

1. The meaning of dreams depends upon causation.
2. Dreams originate bodily.

⁹⁰ Macrobius, *Dream of Scipio*, 130.

⁹¹ Cicero, *De Amicitia* (iv. 14). Falconer. 123.

3. Any dream that originates bodily has no interpretation outside the body.
4. Dreamers' anxieties are best interpreted by laxatives.

It is methodologically significant because the broader reach of the logic is that wherein a natural cause is posited for the figural, interpretation is no longer necessary. Thus, when a dream tells a story, the story carries no significance outside of natural causes. Because this dream occurs in poetry, as does the *Dream of Scipio*, we recognize the dilemma for Dream Poetry writ large and for Chaucer's dream poems in particular. Should we find a natural cause for them, by which (in our world, rather than the poem's) I understand natural occasion, then the poems are incidental except as they forensically serve those causes. Occasion trumps interpretation, or, occasion *is* form.

Of course, in our cultural context, "body" is not indicative of half of an entire aporia, but in Chaucer's intellectual context it is a "foul prisoun." Therefore, Pertelote's bodily remedy to dream poetry is the act of an ontology sublimating an epistemology. This may seem a cheap trick, but it forms part of the main discussion of the tale, 'What is poetry'? Body imprisons soul. Soul is the vehicle of our knowledge of God. Successful rhetoric in the *Phaedrus* is "leading the soul by means of speech."⁹² The ontological problem in Macrobius is the same for Augustine: that the soul cannot remember what it knows of God by virtue of the fact that it is "dispersed"⁹³ into history via the body. "The realm of the perishable begins with the moon and goes downwards. Souls coming into this region begin to be subject to the numbering of days and to time."⁹⁴ According to this argument, the "realm of the

⁹² Plato, *Phaedrus* (261a)

⁹³ Macrobius, *Dream of Scipio*, 131.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 130.

perishable” where souls “begin to be subject to the numbering of days and time” is not a fit location from which to interpret the rhetoric of poetry. If there is a fundamental obstruction to a historicism satisfied with the poetic event-historical event model, then it comes from the medieval Platonic tradition itself. Put simply, do not interpret a poem from the cognitive perspective of the “realm of the perishable.” The fact that Chaucer chooses laxatives to represent history’s solution to dreams is no ringing endorsement, but it is wildly reductionist, and like every *ad absurdum*, very funny and probably true.

Pertelote is formidable. Chauntecleer’s argument, even if more ambitious, lacks the clarity and consistency of his wife’s. Her argument is in four parts.

1. 2908-2922: A rebuke to a cowardly husband. (Moral critique)
 - 1a. > 2912- 2917: Divertimento: “What women want.”
2. 2923- 2941: The various natural causes of dreams. (Causal critique)
 - 2a. > 2940-2941: Catonian conclusion.
3. 2942- 2969: Diagnosis and prescription. (Bodily remedy)
4. 3177: Feathering. (Sexual solution)

The first part of Pertelote’s argument links up with the last. It begins and ends as a bedroom discussion. It is the middle sections that progress a marvelous meandering naturalism. Meanwhile, she makes a very unexpected error by citing Cato, a reference that Chauntecleer will take up with gusto, and one that ultimately becomes an ironic hermeneutic to many parts of the poem. Its examination is better utilized as a link between Pertelote’s and Chauntecleer’s argument and will be treated in its turn.

Argument 1: Moral Critique and Divertimento: "What Women Want."

"Shame!' said she, "fy on yow, hertelees!
 "Allas," quod she, "for, by that God above,
 Now han ye lost myn herte and al my love!
 I kan nat love a coward, by my feith!"
 (2908- 2911)

"How dorste ye seyn, for shame, unto your love
 That any thyng myghte make yow aferd?
 Have ye no mannes herte, and han a berd?"
 (2918- 2920)

Pertelote has a light touch, no doubt. By comparison, a 20th century response lacks fire: "Whatever your dream was, it wasn't a very happy one, was it?...Is there anything I can do to help?...You've been a long way away...Thank you for coming back to me."⁹⁵ Pertelote's just says, 'act like a man'. In this sense, a good place from which to begin is to cast Pertelote as a literary relative of the Wife. The weakness of her husband, apparently the first thing to be illuminated by dream poetry, gives way to a classic Chaucerian deliberation: 'What Women Want'. Like the Wife, Pertelote's narratological naturalism is more intellectually ambitious than one that would simply desire literal domination over her man, though such a thing probably would not go entirely unappreciated as collateral. Pertelote tells Chauntecleer,

For certes, what so any womman seith,
 We all desiren, if it myghte bee,
 To han housbondes hardy, wise, and free,

⁹⁵ *Brief Encounter*. Screenplay by Noel Coward. Dir. David Lean. Perf. Celia Johnson, Trevor Howard. Universal Pictures, 1946. Film.

And secree—and no nygard, ne no fool,
 Ne hym that is agast of every tool,
 Ne noon avauntour, by that God above!

(2912 -2917)

The Wife's tale ends:

In parfit joye; and Jhesu Crist us sende
 Housbondes meeke, yonge, and fressh abedde,
 And grace t'overbyde hem that we wedde;
 And eek I praye Jhesu shorte hir lyves
 That noght wol be governed by hir wyves;
 And olde and angry nygardes of dispence,
 God sende hem soone verray pestilence!

(*Wife of Bath's Tale*, 1258-1264)

While this may not appear a perfect fit with the Wife's more boisterous rhetoric directed towards sexual domination, a closer inspection reveals their agreement according to the sweeping ironic naturalism of the *Tales* that makes a habit of eliding initially distinct interlocutory perspectives. If what women want is a husband "hardy, wise, and free," Chauntecleer, the "berdless" coward whose deepest anxieties are outsourced to the general effects of constipation must be having a difficult time covering the spread between Pertelote's perception of him and her expectations of him. That she wants a husband who is "secree" inserts a serious difficulty. "Secree" and its relationship to love is another resurrected Chaucerian theme with precedent in the *Miller's Tale*. "Of deerne love he koude and of solas;/ And therto he was sleigh and ful privee." (3200-3201). In Ovid, Jean de Meun, and Chaucer, secret love appears in the attempt by poetic narrators to experientially, that is sexually, co-opt the definition of love, and most importantly, without God knowing. Ovid's lover in the *Amores* I:XIII wants Eos to take the day

off and stay next to Tithonus so that her sunrise does not send him out of bed. In the *Roman de la Rose*, Mars and Venus would hide their adultery from Vulcan with mirrors. In the *Miller's Tale* Nicholas would have his "deerne love" be, for lack of a better word, "impenetrable" by divine Justice, shrouded in the safety of a Floodless world. If love can be kept secret from God then human knowledge can finally form a separate enclosure for itself from which to generate coeternal definitions solely on the basis of language and experience ("though noon auctoritee"). Meanwhile, in the *Wife of Bath* the old bawd's unscrupulous management of terms in the old=young, foul=fair debate attempts to deploy the meaninglessness of language as cover in order to guarantee her philosophy of love. If language cannot achieve a form of meaning capable of defining love, then she is free to define it as she pleases. In her formulation, the instability of human language safeguards rhetoricians from the possibility that it could align itself with the eye of God. Rhetoric would be safe to marshal meaning *within* itself.

These two strategies- husbandly inadequacy and the contest to define love secretly collide with a third from Jean de Meun and apply to both Pertelote and the Wife. In the Wife's Prologue, she (humbly) redirects the difficult philosophy of a marriage discussion towards her own literal talents. "God bad us for to wexe and multiplie;/ That gentil text kan I wel understonde." (*Wife of Bath's Prologue*, 28-29). What happens here is the scientific outsourcing of a religious discussion that ends in an invalid logical pivot. The answer to 'what is marriage in God's eyes?' is not based in an apocryphal scriptural interpretation that mandates a life of sexual adventurism, or, by answering, 'I'm a ferocious lover inside and outside the marriage bed'. The Wife's technological prevarication finds its precedent in the *Roman*. It is the same category mistake that forms Pertelote's discourse. Jean de

Meun dramatizes Nature's exemplary desire for a technological re-reading of mysteries in which a science of mirrors could generate an optic parlor trick capable of hiding Mars and Venus from the eye of Vulcan. The original question concerns the sacramental status of adultery. The scientific solution (and general red herring) that follows is to simply avoid getting caught in the act with the help of mirrors. Likewise Pertelote's answer to Chauntecleer's questions concerning oracular dreams is to offer him a cocktail of herbal medicines as a remedy for constipation. The pattern is the same for all three: science- plus- red herring. What can be said, is that a technological solution for the poetic anxiety of any interlocutors "Mars," "Venus," or "Chauntecleer" has as its aim the natural suffocation of larger symbolic questions. This occurs en route to a private venue of sexual knowledge hidden from the Absolute. Jean de Meun writes,

If Mars and Venus, who were captured together as they lay in bed, had looked at themselves in such mirrors before climbing into bed, and if they had held their mirrors so as to be able to see the bed in them, they would never have been caught and bound in the fine thin net that Vulcan had put there, and of which they were both unaware.⁹⁶

Pelen writes,

To develop her (Nature's) view, she adduces the Mars-Venus exemplum: with better technology- that is- better mirrors to detect Vulcan's fine nets (II. 18031- 61)- the adultery would have gone undetected. Since Nature has an interest in frequent sexual acts to further the species, her appeal to technology in the natural world is in character with her aims, for her unstated thesis here is that, with sufficient technological sophistication in optics, one can hide

⁹⁶ Guillaume de Lorris and Jean De Meun. *Roman de la Rose*. (II. 18031- 18061). Romance of the Rose, trans. Frances Horgan. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999): 278.

one's purposes (in this case, adultery) from the mirror of providence.⁹⁷

Nature's misreading provides the necessary tools for Pertelote and the Wife—the logically dubious transformation of an initial philosophical discussion into a technological one. Ovid provides the model for unsuccessful dawn poetry: if sunrises could be prevented by a better sexual performance from Tithonus, the “secree” can finally enjoy the time and space to become “pryvetee”. The Wife provides the discursive strategy that could define male inadequacy and submit the form of love poetry to her particular brand of nihilistic linguistic instability. All of these initial argumentative modes end in a “secree” human definition of love that must occur without the gods seeing. Nicholas does away with the Flood and Pertelote the possibility that God ‘thinks’ our dreams. One guarantees that human action is not subject to Providence and the other that human thought is safe from tampering by the Divine mind. The result of these various strategies culminate in “feathering:” The Wife with her young knight, Nicholas with Alisoun, Mars with Venus, and Pertelote with Chauntecleer. The unique move of the *Nun's Priest's Tale* is to begin the seduction with a separate discussion of dreams rather than from a more obvious and coherent argumentative setting. For the moment we can pause to appreciate the philosophical consistency of Canterbury naturalism that guides both Pertelote's medicinal rhetoric with the Wife of Bath's experiential rhetoric of love.

A possible solution to some elements of this arabesque emerges in one of the passage's sources: the *Amores* I:XIII. Ovid's paraclausithyron is a lover's complaint against Eos that her divine light sends secret lovers out of hiding. Ovid's young man puts the blame for sunrises on Tithonus' loveless marriage. “If Tithonus would tell

⁹⁷ Pelen. *Latin Poetic Irony*, 11.

what he knows, no goddess in heaven/ Ever deserved more blame; you flee him because he is old...Is it my fault that you married this tiresome old man?"⁹⁸ Of course if Tithonus could "tell what he knows," he might tell us after we have a few drinks to go find a tree and die. In it we also see the outline of Nicholas, "poure scoler" and maker of secret love. Ovid writes, "Little joy do you bring to either attorney or student./ Each of them has to rise, starting all over each day."⁹⁹ The problem for attorneys and students for Ovid's lover is not that they have to go to work and lectures in the morning, but that they too are forced out of bed and have to begin their seductions anew, under the humorous assumption that a new natural definition of love was near at hand. Five minutes more and man would own his own private epistemology secure from the eye of divinity. More important to Pertelote, Ovid's lover also manages a short discussion of 'what women want' from the lover's perspective. "You, when the women might rest from the toilsome spinning and weaving,/ Call the hand to wool, never let them a pause./ I could endure all that- but to make girls get up in the morning,/ Who but a man with no girl ever could stand this at all?"¹⁰⁰ Buried not very deep within the Ovidian lover's concern is the idea that women ultimately desire the same thing in art as do failed rhetoricians of love: to stay in bed (with him) hiding from God.

But in a most subtle slip-up, the lover tells us what women would be doing otherwise when they could not enjoy a lie-in with him: spinning, weaving. Assuming that what women want in Neoplatonic art would be somewhat the inverse of what this young lover wants for them, then we can appreciate that what women want is to

⁹⁸ Ovid, *Amores* (I:XIII) The Art of Love. trans. Rolfe Humphries. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1957): 35- 36.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

spin; and of course they want to spin because they spin in memory of the Fates, who themselves spin. Especially the Fate Clotho who weaves life itself and whose name is literally, “she who spins.” According to Hyginus, Clotho, along with the other Parcae, and Mercury contributed to the divine gift of language while “Apollo on the lyre added the rest.”¹⁰¹ This is the same mythological tradition by which Joyce appeals to the origin of life and language in *Ulysses*,

One of her sisterhood lugged me squealing into life. Creation from nothing.
 What has she in the bag? A misbirth with a trailing navelcord, hushed in ruddy wool. The cords of all link back, strandentwining cable of all flesh. That is why mystic monks. Will you be as gods? Gaze in your omphalos. HeHo. Kinch here. Put me on to Edenville. Aleph, alpha: nought, nought one.¹⁰²

If there is an ironic unity to discredited Chaucerian discussions of ‘what women want’ than it is this: that female rhetoricians in art should desire to spin in memory of the Fates, to weave successful rhetoric, to be poets, to praise the origin of language and life (both properties of the Fates) as things that came to be in search of an eternity we do not understand but to which we are nonetheless held responsible. In Hyginus’ account of the origin of language, he tells us that seven letters were the gift of the gods and the Parcae but he only lists six, as though language, divinely inspired, is only partially revealed.¹⁰³ In fact the ironic unity is similar for all failed rhetoric, that it could be otherwise if it could commemorate the knowledge of God and the Fates rather than that of the body and mind in history. Poetry does not become theology, but it figurally negotiates according to its own power the regions of

¹⁰¹ Hyginus, *Fabulae* (277) *The Myths of Hyginus*, trans. and ed. Mary Grant. (Lawrence: University of Kansas Publications, 1960): 178.

¹⁰² James Joyce, *Ulysses*, ed. Hans Walter Gabler. (London: The Bodley Head, 1986): 31.

¹⁰³ Hyginus, *ibid.*

knowledge that the soul is ‘always still forgetting’ while in exile in history with only Brother Ass and indicative language as companions. It is language searching for its lost letter.

Instead, failed love poets misappropriate the Fates. Ovid’s lover wants to save girls from going to work in the morning and doing all that spinning. Troilus wants the Fates to bless his upcoming seduction. “O fatal sustren which, er any cloth/ Me shapen was, my destine me sponne,/ So helpeth to this werk that is bygonne!” (*Troilus* III. 733-735). Troilus’ destiny is known to the eye of eternity, even if he (or Chaucer) rather expertly misunderstands what sort of cloth they weave, because his life’s thread, spun by the “fatal sustren” predates those of his first shirt. This is not meant to be anything like an answer or a single meaning for Chaucerian pillow-talks, rather it simply points towards the philosophical arena of expectations that makes Chaucerian irony possible, an arena in which any number of metaphors can echo against each other, independent of other solid objects. Pertelote’s ‘what women want’ travels through the “deerne love” of the *Miller’s Tale* and through the secret love and technology of the *Roman* to find its proper place as a relative of the Wife’s interlocutory naturalism. Meanwhile, the Ovidian model on which they are based provides an ironic exit from their failed discussion. This is possible according to the aporetic view that ‘makes cousin’ two incommensurable forms of language with the equivalent histories each serves to explain, one knowable and the other not. As we transition to Pertelote’s second argument, we see plainly which form of language she proposes as the ablest discussant of her husband’s dreams.

Argument 2: The various natural causes of dreams. (Causal critique)

Pertelote begins according to causation. “Nothyng, God woot, but vanitee in sweven is./ Swevenes engenderen of reppleciouns,/ And ofte of fume and of complecciouns,/ Whan humours been to habundant in a wight.” (2922- 2925) Natural causation is both the original cause of dreams and the cause of their symbols, the first symbol being the color red:

Certes this dreem, which ye han me to-nyght,
 Cometh of the greet superfluytee
 Of youre rede colera, pardee,
 Which causeth folk to dreden in hir dremes
 Of arwes, and of fyr with rede lemes,
 Of rede beestes, that they wol hem byte,
 (2926- 2931)

And also black:

Right as the humour of malencolie
 Causeth ful many a man in sleep to crie
 For feere of blake beres, or boles blake,
 Or elles blake develes wole hem take.
 (2933- 2936)

‘Rede colera’ and ‘malencolie’, of course (save for a vision of the colour yellow) nicely explain Chauntecleer’s oracular fox. “His colour was betwixe yellow and reed,/ And tipped was his tayl and bothe his eeris/ With blak, unlyk the remenant of his heeris.” (2902- 2904). Pertelote would have no trouble accommodating the yellow, one must grant, because prior to her final deduction, she cuts her own discussion short. “Of othere humours koude I telle also/ That werken many a man sleep ful wo;/ But I wol passe as lightly as I kan.” (2937- 2939).

Argument 3: Diagnosis and prescription. (Bodily remedy)

Pertelote offers herbal remedies in the place of the interpretation of dreams. “Now sire,” quod she, “whan we flee fro the bemes,/ For Goddes love, as taak some laxatyf.” (2942- 2943). There you have it, Chaucer’s career-long enquiry into dream literature solved. Cause: bodily. Remedy: “laxatyf.” We should take some delight in this absurdity when Pertelote admits,

Though in this toun is noon apothecarie,
 I shal myself to herbes techen yow
 That shul been for youre hele and for youre prow;
 And in oure yeerd tho herbes shal I fynde
 The whiche han of hire propretee by kynde
 To purge yow bynethe and eek above.
 Foryet nat this, for Goddes owene love!
 (2948- 2954)

If further suggestion was needed concerning the consummate fancy of the ‘yeerd’ we might find it here. The poem asks us to imagine the plausibility of Pertelote’s regret that she lives in a town without an apothecary and has been driven to home remedies. The assumption seems to be that there exist other more cosmopolitan coops with better shops and services and thriving small businesses. The fact that she must teach, rather than simply administer, herbal medicine to Chauntecleer enhances her status as an able theorist of nature in poetry. She is operating upon the ‘teach a man to fish’ principle whereby Chauntecleer could, one day, possess the means to interpret and cure his dreamer’s anxiety naturalistically, to ‘make his own medicine’. And the place to begin is his own “yeerd” where he shall find all manner of herbs and flowers.

But it is a pregnant comedy that sees Pertelote attempt to transform her coop back into the widow's farm. This is the Golden Age of the *General Prologue*; nature comes to life in service to poetry's pilgrimage back "through yonder wicket gate."¹⁰⁴ It teems with flora and fauna that will not serve the natural remedies produced by Pertelote's failed system of rhetoric, anymore than would Daphne's golden laurel. The only thing Daphne's leaves were 'good' for in the end was to crown Apollo for all eternity. The coop becomes a capital of artistic abstraction dependent upon the Neoplatonic literature that forms the poem's foundation. Pertelote's naturalism, at once quotidian and philosophical, takes ultimate refuge in the symbolic order of the widow's farm, sublimated to nature and history by virtue of being a 'real' farm. Herbs that work are a necessary premise. Thus we understand Pertelote's rhetorical play for a monistic vision of human ontology: "The which han of hire propretee by kynde/ To purge yow bynethe and eek above/ Foryet nat this, for Goddes owene love!" (2952- 2594). Herbs cure what ails dreamers in poetry *literally* from the bottom up. I say 'literally' because in this particular monistic¹⁰⁵ vision of man, were Chauntecleer to address his indigestion then his soul (eek above) would follow in suit.

Poulet Machine

"The soul is literal." This is the necessary starting point for any thoroughgoing naturalism, that the soul has no existence apart from the body and that the two partake of a single substance. La Mettrie's argument in *L'Homme machine*, inaugurated by the memorable, "Take up, therefore, the staff of *experience*, and leave

¹⁰⁴ John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*. (London: Simkin, Marshall & Co, 1856): 42.

¹⁰⁵ Not all monisms are natural.

behind the history of all the vain opinions of philosophers,”¹⁰⁶ should be required reading for Chaucer courses, for in it is one of the best and certainly the most confident articulations of the general attitude of Chaucer’s most consistent naturalist interlocutors. Something not entirely unlike Pertelote’s argument can be traced. And, of course, Pertelote’s argument is something not entirely unlike all Chaucerian naturalists. Of Chauntecleer’s lack of courage La Mettrie would agree with Pertelote,

This one cries like a child at the approach of death while that one cracks a joke. What would it take to change the intrepidity of Canus Julius, Seneca, and Petronius into pusillanimity or cowardice? An obstruction in the spleen or the liver, a blockage of the portal vein. Why? Because the imagination shuts down with the vital organs, and thence gives rise to the singular phenomenon of hysteria and hypochondria.¹⁰⁷

As such, bodily imbalance often causes fantastic visions of theroid harm: “What could I say that is new about those who imagine they have been transformed into werewolves, rooster, and vampires, or who believe that the dead suck their blood? ...I shall take no longer to detail the effect of sleep.”¹⁰⁸ Of the primacy of medicine over philosophy:

We should be guided by experience and observation alone. They abound in the annals of physicians who were philosophers, but not in those of philosophers who were not physicians... What have others to tell us, above all, theologians? Is it not ridiculous to hear them pronouncing shamelessly on something they are incapable of understanding?¹⁰⁹

The humours act causally for both chickens and humans.

¹⁰⁶ Julien Offray de La Mettrie, *Man a Machine and Man a Plant*, trans. Richard Watsons and Maya Rybalka. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc. 1994): 30.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 29

Do you not know the color of bodies depends on that of the glasses through which you look at them! Are you unaware that whatever color the humors have, so do the objects, at least in relation to us vain dupes of a thousand illusions. But let the bile flow through its natural strainer to remove this color from the aqueous humor of they eye, and then through the clear eye, the soul will see yellow no more.¹¹⁰

Human thought and education are guided by literal language, which came into being onomatopoeically and mimologically in search of nature rather than God.

Nothing is so simple, as one can see, as the mechanism of our education! Everything is reduced to sounds or words which fly from the mouth of one through the ear of the other into the brain, which receives at the same time through the eyes the shapes of the bodies of which these words are the arbitrary signs.¹¹¹

The logical conclusions of this school of thought designate the soul as contiguous with mind and body (“Thus, the diverse states of the soul are always correlative with those of the body.”)¹¹² Therefore, “Soul is...only an empty word to which no idea corresponds.”¹¹³ As such, writes La Mettrie, “Art is the son of nature, which preceded it for a long, long time.”¹¹⁴

La Mettrie is a perfectly crafted ironic Chaucerian spokesman. Now, if the 18th century could get no further than an imaginary medieval chicken, three things are clear. The first is that Chaucer is as good a fake naturalist as La Mettrie was a real one. The second is that the naturalism Chaucer either intuitively understood and/or

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 64

¹¹¹ Ibid., 41.

¹¹² Ibid., 36

¹¹³ Ibid., 59

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 41.

learned from exemplary literary discussions is the same naturalism that exists during the Enlightenment. This unheard of consistency of approach over the great arc of history for a philosophical school speaks either of a resplendent textual tradition or of the patent simplicity of logic that forms the philosophy of naturalism. The second is the most reasonable. And the simplicity of logic is due to the fact that any naturalistic premise entails the same set of systematic conclusions. That is why La Mettrie seems to have based his life's work on Pertelote's. From a simple starting point- 'dreams originate bodily'- Pertelote, like her literary descendant La Mettrie, is able to determine that the soul is a physical principle, that medicine trumps the history of philosophy, that all uses of human language are natural, and that art serves nature. La Mettrie's *L'Homme Machine* is, by any measure, a gifted reimagining of Chaucer's *Le Poulet Machine*.

Argument 3: Diagnosis and prescription. (Bodily remedy)

At last Pertelote turns to the specific remedies through which Chauntecleer may be relieved of his poor health and through which art may be relieved of its metaphorical burden.

A day or two ye shul have digesti Yves
 Of wormes, er ye take youre laxatyves
 Of lawriol, centaure, and fumetere,
 Or elles of ellebor, that groweth there,
 Of katapuce, or of gaitrys beryis,
 Of herbe yve, growing in oure yeerd, ther mery is;

(2961- 2966)

Various critical perspectives place Pertelote's prescriptions on a scale of malignancy with the purely literary and benign at one end and outright premeditated murder at the other. At the literary end, consummate with Chaucer's typical botched science fancy, Corinne E. Kauffman writes, "A review of her (Pertelote's) prescription will clarify and heighten the delightfully humorous satire Chaucer is directing at little Pertelote. Of the seven herbs, only one could have been gathered in May so that Chauntecleer could hardly have followed her nonchalant advice to "Pekke hem up right as they growe and ete hem yn."¹¹⁵ Kauffman later identifies the more disastrous possibilities, but also at the literary end we can place Paulina Aiken's comment,

Among Chaucer's characters, second only to the imposing Doctour of Phisyk as an authority on practical medical science is little Dame Pertelote of The Nun's Priest's Tale. Her lecture to her husband on dreams, their causes, and the antidotes which should be taken to avoid further complications reveals an undoubted familiarity with certain medical theories of the time, and, in particular, indicates that she had been reading the *Speculum Naturale* and the *Speculum Doctrinale* of Vincent of Beauvais.¹¹⁶

The resemblance between the two is convincing, Vincent even includes a chapter entitled, "*De Regimine Purgatonis Colere, Melancolie, et Flegmatis.*" Among other striking similarities, "Vincent gives directions for preparing the stomach for purging 'binethe and eek above': 'Ex hac enim dispositione accidit stomacho ut desideret

¹¹⁵ Corinne E. Kauffman, "Dame Pertelote's Parlous Parle." *The Chaucer Review*. Vol. 4, No. 1 (Summer, 1969): 46.

¹¹⁶ Paulina Aiken, "Vincent of Beauvais and Dame Pertelote's Knowledge of Medicine." *Speculum*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (July, 1953): 281.

expellere quod in ipso est *aut superius aut inferius*.”¹¹⁷ Thus, we see put to literary use a perfectly literal description of the two possible physical sorties by which a man might be healed of ‘dreams’.

However, Aiken moves towards the maleficent when she suggests that Pertelote prescribes too great a combination of Vincent’s second, third, and fourth strongest drugs. It is to her husband’s benefit that he refuses them.

Not content with prescribing the strongest drug in the list, Pertelote adds the second in potency, and then, to make results triply sure, one of the two which share third place in Vincent's catalogue! It is indeed fortunate for Chauntecleer that he is a sceptic in regard to *materia medica*. His stubbornness in the matter saves him.”¹¹⁸

Kauffman elaborates the potential harm of Pertelote’s herbal cocktail according to historical herbals and determines,

Not only is her proportion of hot to cold quite wrong; her compound is so powerful as to endanger even the most virile and durable digestive system. Three of the seven herbs, laurel, hellebore, and catapuce, are described in the herbals as "gnawing," "fretting," "scorching," and violently caustic. The same three are to be used only under extreme conditions as a last resort and even then with great caution and accompanied by soothing agents, certainly not raw and certainly not in random dosage. Pertelote's suggestion of a preparatory digestive of worms, then, becomes grimly humorous- not all the worms in the barnyard would have been sufficient to enable Chauntecleer to prepare for the virulent onslaught of these herbs. So corrosive a medication would, in fact, have hastened the departure of even the mightiest epic

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 282.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 285

heroes, either human or rooster.¹¹⁹

Kauffman concludes, "In truth, Pertelote is at least as sinister a threat to his (Chauntecleer's) life as the cunning fox. Dan Russell would have killed him instantly and probably painlessly. Pertelote would have unwittingly killed him torturously."¹²⁰ Cooper agrees: "The list of purgatives and laxatives she describes to cure her mate's excess of choler is supported by many herbals and medicinal treatises, though some of them are exceedingly violent, and the total list might well have done Chauntecleer more damage than the fox: it is just as well that he defies the whole lot."¹²¹ It is possible to critically accommodate the severity of any of these interpretations. That the science is askew is in keeping with Chaucer's fantastic vision, to which horology is also twisted in submission. Some of the berries recommended are not even considered medicinal. Some of the herbs are so violent that Chaucer's audience would have recoiled as if someone in our own day recommended chemotherapy for stomach flu.

To the certain amazement of Chaucer's first readers, Pertelote next recommends "katapuce," *euphorbia lathyris*, or "litle Spourge," another third- or fourth-degree hot, dry herb, the third in her perilous compound. Although common in England, catapuce is gathered in autumn rather than in May. Extremely hot and dry, almost in the fourth degree, its effect must be just short of caustic, for Lyte advises that it be given "in a capsule made of baked bread," and Culpeper that it be "beaten small, and tempered with some thing that lubrifieth and allayeth its heat." The consensus is that catapuce not be administered internally except as a last resort against an obdurate melancholy

¹¹⁹ Kauffman, 47.

¹²⁰ Ibid, 48.

¹²¹ Cooper, 343-344.

humor because "by reason of his extreame heate, [it] is very hurtfull to the liver and stomacke, and all the inwarde partes. . .for it chafeth and inflameth the same out of measure," according to Lyte. Or as Gerarde warns, "it is better not to take it inwardly," because it "setteth on fire, scorcheth and fretteth, not only the throte and mouth, but also the stom acke, liuer, and the rest of the entrailes, and inflameth the whole bodie." Bartholomew names other equally direful effects: it "fretteth and gnaweth, & maketh whelks arise in the flesh and skinne." Chauntecleer, it need hardly be added, stands in far, far greater peril than he knows.¹²²

Murder becomes a hilarious and absurd possibility. Is faithful Pertelote a murderer? Is she a literary relative of Delilah? Is she in cahoots with the fox? Perhaps her evil suffocates the fox's rather pedestrian desire for a chicken dinner. It could simply be that Pertelote is a spectacular dunce, though her knowledge of Vincent de Beauvais and the general effects of herbs (dosage independent) would suggest otherwise. We must also bear in mind that she is as accomplished a naturalist interlocutor as we find in the *Canterbury Tales*, and her logic, even if predicated upon what is an unworkable presupposition in Chaucerian poetry, is as water-tight as it would be for any generation of card-carrying naturalist. Of course, the best 'answer' in art is usually the non-answer and all of these are plausible. But that Pertelote's rhetoric belongs to philosophy more than it does plain common sense seems to me very likely, thus, I give her the tentative benefit of the doubt that she knows perfectly well what she is doing in this regard, even though blind to the form of the poem. I do this not because it is the best interpretation- it may or may not be- but simply because it strikes me as the funniest. "To kill art seems to me the most

¹²² Kauffman, 45.

urgent task too, but we can hardly operate in the full light of day.”¹²³ Perhaps she too has it out for her “heliotropic” husband and wants to ‘send him packing’ for history, and the symbols of the poem along with him. Certainly her philosophy does. Neither, according to some forms of criticism, would history mind welcoming poetry’s figures back into the fold.

Argument 4: Feathering (Sexual Solution)

The final component of Pertelote’s argument also concludes Chauntecleer’s response. Until then, though, we can appreciate how it reorients her initial idiosyncratic medicinal naturalism that turns out to be simply ‘naturalism, as such’ and converts it into typical Chaucerian sexual naturalism. In the end, there is one overarching Naturalism in the *Canterbury Tales*, all particular extrapolations roll back into a single perspective, and to taste, sex is its most amusing expression. In a sense, the great bulk of Platonic poetry is love poetry and sexual excellence seems its slipperiest achievement. Socrates’ rhetoric submits to love in many dialogues even while flirting with sexual solutions, such as the *Symposium*. The *Aeneid* ironizes human love in the midst of epic pursuits. Ovid’s lovers affect Jean de Meun and Chaucer more than the idea of metamorphosis; thus, we see a great many failed rhetoricians of love in Chaucer and not very many transformations. Pertelote’s naturalism ends in failed love rhetoric, another ironic aubade, where physical gratification takes place at the rising sun. “Real he was, he was namoore aferd,/ He

¹²³ André Breton, *4 April 1919 Letter to Tzara*. Quoted in Robert Short, “Paris Dada and Surrealism.” *Journal of European Studies*, Vol. 9. No. 75. (1979): 85.

fethered Pertelote twenty tyme.” (3177- 3178). Why is Chauntecleer no longer afraid? He refuses Pertelote’s arguments after all, in a drawn out literary review. In fact, as we shall witness, the divide between Pertelote’s medicinal and Chauntecleer’s bibliographic strategy is not as great as the rooster imagines. Chauntecleer is “namoore aferd” because he finds temporary relief in the ‘arms’ of his wife, whose naturalism adequately over-simplifies for him the larger question of the poem he lives in and makes possible the typical sexual prevarication whereby poetic interlocutors punt their responsibility to manage their own rhetoric.

Cato as Theoretical Common Ground

Pertelote hands over Cato ‘on a platter’ to her bibliophile husband. Her second argument (from causation) concludes, “Lo, Catoun, which that was so wys a man,/ Seyde he nat thus, ‘Ne do no fors of dremes’?” (2940- 2941). The reference is to Cato’s *Distich* II.31: “Trust not in dreams, which make seem real and true/ Just what awake was most desired by you.”¹²⁴ It seems an unlikely source from which to complicate a naturalist’s argument. What we understand of Pertelote’s system would make any reference that promotes the phenomenal as key to the noumenal a good fit. After all, the relegation of the oracular power of dreams to the conditions of waking existence partakes of the philosophical assumption that there is no substantial impasse between the modes of knowledge represented by experience and intuition. In fact, this rather cursory glance towards Cato insert an ironic hermeneutic into the entire poem. Two of its initial pivot points would have been familiar to Chaucer’s medieval

¹²⁴ Cato, *Distich* (II.31) The Distichs of Cato: A Famous Medieval Textbook. trans. Wayland Johnson Chase. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1922): 29.

audience. Whether one had lovingly cultivated a particularly disembodied brand of literary world-weariness, there is obvious enjoyment to be had in the deployment of Cato at the levels of moral instruction and grammar exercises. Both help to form the comedic context by which we appreciate Chauntecleer's rather louche lifestyle and deliberate or accidental torturing of the Latin language.

Through the reference, questions of method obtain within and without the tale. Within, because the tale's playful use of Cato continues the work of the Monk and Widow to antiphrastically portray ethics as the cognitive setting of the poem. This in turn points to the larger category, working alongside multiple narrative strategies to represent history as a necessary knowledge-condition for poetry. Without, because Cato's *Distichs* were basic training in ethics and Latin during the medieval period. Travis argues, "The protracted debate between Chauntecleer and Pertelote concerning the validity of a simple Catonian proposition would have summoned up for Chaucer's readers a wide spectrum of classroom memories."¹²⁵ Jill Mann writes, "This combination of simple Latin and simple morality earned the *Distichs of Cato* the first place in the elementary reading programme for students of Latin- a place which it held for over 1,400 years."¹²⁶ Vincent Gillespie argues, "The *Disticha Catonis* offered few interpretive challenges: the moral credentials of 'Cato' were impeccable."¹²⁷ He continues, "Particular impetus was given to the ethical status of the text by the

¹²⁵ Travis, *Disseminal*, 57.

¹²⁶ Jill Mann, "He Knew Nat Catoun," in *The Text in the Community: Essays on Medieval Works, Manuscripts, Authors, and Readers*, ed. Jill Mann and Maura Nolan (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2006): 42.

¹²⁷ Vincent Gillespie, "The Study of Classical and Secular Authors from the Twelfth Century to c.1450," in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism II: The Middle Ages*, ed. A.J. Minnis and Ian Johnson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005): 154.

perceived similarity of its *modus agendi* to the sapiential books of the Old Testament.”¹²⁸

However, as Richard Hazleton argues,

As a critical examination of the poet's most notable and most extensive uses of Catoniana reveals, Chaucer did not, like his contemporaries, poets and pedagogues alike, utilize Cato honorifically as a traditional source of ethical doctrine, but rather, parodist that he is in dealing with his literary inheritance and its conventions, he turned Catonian doctrine to the uses of parody.¹²⁹

Such sustained literary superciliousness toward the venerated proverbs of Cato reveals, for Hazleton, not only a rift between the perspective of Chaucer's poetry and that of, say, Gower's in particular, but also the disparity between the perspective of Chaucer's poetry and the general ethical expectations of the medieval reader. He writes:

John Gower, limited in poetic sense if not in prolixity, and writing, we assume, for the same audience Chaucer wrote for, chose to deal honorifically and pedantically with the literary tradition he inherited. For him the proverb, the moral sentence and the appeal to authority are the legitimate poetic devices they were for a host of earlier and contemporary versifiers. But for Chaucer these traditional devices, like the rhetorical prescriptions of the *nova poetria* and the popular genres, are matter for parody.¹³⁰

Elsewhere, “Chaucer's parodic use of Cato in the tales of the Nun's Priest, the Miller, the Reeve, the Merchant and the Manciple offer sufficient evidence of the poet's sophisticated and heterodox attitude towards an ethical authority that all literate men

¹²⁸ Gillespie, *ibid.*

¹²⁹ Richard Hazleton, “Chaucer on Cato.” *Speculum*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (July, 1960): 360.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 380.

of his time held in high esteem.”¹³¹ Hazleton points out that Chaucer is not alone in the parodying of Cato’s aphorisms. The *Carmina Burana* and Walter of Châtillon exercise the same liberty. Appropriately, both belong to the medieval century that is in many ways most easily inherited by Chaucer’s poetry, the 12th Century, whose general character and works have been characterized as, among other things, “a vast exercise in linguistic nostalgia”¹³² “that lament(s) the passing of a universal language of humanism.”¹³³ It is worth mentioning that even if, as Hazleton argues, “parody implies critique,”¹³⁴ that the critique is not necessarily of Cato himself, or of the value-system he represents, which, incidentally, as Hazleton himself argues, was the broader literary value-system of the medieval period- baptized morally instructive classicism. And this particular Cato, determined and encoded in the commentary tradition, is not entirely commensurate with the brute facts of the text. It would seem that Chaucer’s poems are also sounding off the manner in which Cato is represented in the tradition. It is as Gillespie argues: “Commentaries and glosses came to see the *Disticha* as dealing with the four cardinal virtues, though such a way of reading is in fact alien to the work’s actual structure. As is so often the case in medieval readings of ‘classical’ texts, what might be called the *intentio commentatoris* is projected on to the *intentio auctoris*.”¹³⁵ Chaucer’s poetry, like that of many 12th Century humanist poets, draws much of its power according to the ascent from category mistake to a final supernatural impasse between language and object. Perhaps it is simply safer to say that Cato’s mode of wisdom becomes the subject of parody, not because Chaucer

¹³¹ Ibid., 379.

¹³² J.O. Ward, “Rhetoric in the Faculty of Arts at the Universities of Paris and Oxford in the Middle Ages: A Summary of the Evidence.” *Archivum Latinitatis Medii Aevi*, Vol. 54 (1996): 160.

¹³³ Ibid., 162.

¹³⁴ Hazleton, 379.

¹³⁵ Gillespie, 154.

has some bone to pick with medieval Christian ethics- he may or may not have- but because ethics, the moral man in history, when placed into the house of mirrors of Chaucer's yeerd and the *Canterbury Tales* loses itself in the process of figural misrepresentation. Ethics are ultimately directed toward the anamnestic recovery of pre-ethical significations. Put another way, it becomes part of an inferior ontology that forms the losing half of the initial category mistake. The larger scenario is simply Poetry and ethics cannot be the proper object of a scenario whose proper object is itself.

Against this, we have the traditional medieval use of Cato, described by Marjorie Curry Woods and Rita Copeland,

As the beginning texts in both of the standard readers used throughout the later Middle Ages, the *Distichs of Cato* and the *Eclogue of Theodolus* gave the students the basic building blocks for composition exercises that probably accompanied the readings. Thus, they are the most important texts for understanding how medieval writers were taught to think of the composition process. Besides providing a storehouse of ancient anecdotes and stories, the *Eclogue* like the *Distichs* served as an important repository of proverbial wisdom.¹³⁶

If composition and ethics form the dual points of reference in the literary education of the medieval student, we must acknowledge that Chaucer's style takes a novel turn via Platonic mentors by conceiving of a poetics in which the act composition dissolves rather than reinforces ethics. In a sense, Cato ceases to be a judge of poetry the moment he becomes a judge of human behavior. Chaucer sends his "litel boke" to

¹³⁶ Marjorie Curry Woods and Rita Copeland, "Classroom and Confession," in *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, ed. David Wallace. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999): 381.

poets for judgment, not to Cato, whose ethics belong to the content of poems whose forms, by nature of the intellectual tradition, elude them. Thus, when Hazleton remarks upon Chaucer's "sophisticated and heterodox attitude towards an ethical authority that all literate men of his time held in high esteem"¹³⁷ we might appreciate Chaucer's poetic achievement in a more precise manner if we imagine that this sophistication has to do with an irony directed not towards Catonian ethics as a system of values but ethics as unrepresented in poetic knowledge.

And this is just what we see: Cato's appearances in the *Canterbury Tales* occur according to the philosophical tension between content and form, often comedically achieved. Cato contributes to the hyperactive *repetitio* of the *Manciple's Tale*, a tale so intellectually complementary to the *Nun's Priest's Tale*: two birds, two onomatopoeic final acts, two failed *moralitates*. *Distich* I:12 states, "Spread not vain talk lest thou be thought its spring;/ Silence ne'er harms but speech may trouble bring."¹³⁸ The opposite movement to Cato's ethical antinomy between proper and improper speech is the *Manciple's Tale's* poetic antinomy in which silence *is* the proper 'language' of poetry on the paradoxical assumption that poetry is not a language. In the *Miller's Prologue*, Cato's ethical aphorism indicting divine curiosity is co-opted to form part of the foundation of the Miller's nihilistic poetic cosmos. Cato writes, "Ask not if gods there be above the earth;/ For earth care thou who art of mortal birth."¹³⁹ In Chaucer's capable ironic hands the Miller's poem doubles down on the proverb by telling us why we should not: because God's secrets are co-epistemological with those of a cheating wife. "An housbande shal nat been

¹³⁷ Hazleton, 379.

¹³⁸ Cato, *Distich* (I:12), Chase, 19.

¹³⁹ Cato, *Distich* (II.2), Chase, 25.

inquisityf/ Of Goddes pryvetee, nor of his wyf./ So he may fynde Goddes foyson
 there,/ Of the remenant nedeth nat enquere.” (*Miller’s Prologue*, 3163-3166). The
 literary irony is directed where we should expect: towards the poem itself in a contest
 between an earthbound or providential poetics rather than towards a serious enquiry
 into the ethical feasibility of the Catonian proverb. The *Miller’s Tale* humorously
 references “Cato”¹⁴⁰ again in an ethical red herring, “He knew nat Catoun, for his wit
 was rude,/ That bad man sholde wedde his simylitude./ Men sholde wedden after hire
 estaat,/ For youthe and elde is often at debaat. (3227-30). Of course the literary
 problem of the *Miller’s Tale* is not that John married a young girl, or that he should
 have been more polished and learned. The tale is, after all, told by the most rough and
 tumble of all the Canterbury narrators. Its sophistication is something that exists
 philosophically other to the poem’s action and to Cato’s rather reasonable, if archaic
 and existentially incidental, advice to marry the daughter *du même âge* of your dad’s
 pal from the country club rather than the 18 year old can-can dancer.

In a more difficult manner the *Reeve’s Tale* plays off Cato. Hazleton describes
 the quarrel between the Reeve and Miller in the context of a Catonian proverb. He
 writes,

Nor has the poet at the close of the *Miller’s Tale* laid aside Cato as an
 instrument of his comic satire. Just as the "moral" of the *Miller’s Tale* is a
 parodic version of a Catonian precept, so the moral of the *Reeve’s Tale*, told to
 "quite" the Miller, is a Catonian saw turned to the uses of comic irony. It is
 possible to see within the *Reeve’s Tale* and in the wider context of the *Reeve’s*

¹⁴⁰ Jill Mann points out that “Chaucer’s memory seems to have played him a trick. For the piece of
 proverbial advice that he is quoting does not come from ”Cato” at all, but from another, very similar,
 but much later proverbial collection known in the Middle Ages as the *Faectus* (the word is an adjective
 meaning “courtly” or “urbane” or “polite,” reflecting the work’s aim of teaching good behaviour.”
 Mann, 42. For our discussion the object remains the same: how “Cato” functions in Chaucer’s poem. If
 anything, to interchange a thing is to interpret it.

requital of the Miller a dramatic and also parodic demonstration of Cato's *sententia*.¹⁴¹

In fact, the Reeve's Cato travels through the central aporia of our entire discussion, whether the *Nun's Priest's Tale's* "quyts" History in its Art. The Catonian precept is, "Him who is smooth in speech but false in heart, / In his own coin repay, with art for art."¹⁴² A contemporary English version in the Vernon Manuscript reads, "Hoso feyneþ hym frend with word/ And nat wiþ herte stable/ With such a servis serve þou hym/And telle hym tale of fable."¹⁴³ In Chaucer's version the Miller couches a slight in friendly language: "This dronke Millere spak ful soone ageyn/ And seyde, "*Leve brother Osewold, / Who hath no wyf, he is no cokewold.*" (*Miller's Tale*, 3150- 3152, emphasis mine) to which the Reeve responds, "Thus have I quyte the Millere in my tale." (*Reeve's Tale*, 4324). It is a compound irony, no doubt. It would be difficult to imagine a place in Chaucer's poetic attitude that would not manage something expansive on the difference between "speche" and "entente" whose outcome is repaying "art for art," especially when that is not what the sources intend. In Cato's proverbs, repay insincere *politesse* in turn to someone who was kind enough to initiate it. The Vernon MS is more socially focused. It locates Cato's "smooth in speech" as "feyneþ hym frend with word." This elides easily with the Miller's passive aggressive treatment of the Reeve. In the interpretation of Cato's "repay art for art," the analogous Vernon's "telle hym tale of fable" and the Reeve's "I have quyte the Millere in my tale," I am comfortable coming down on the side of dogged literalization, because doing so forces the proverb to manifest itself as an entire poetic.

¹⁴¹ Hazleton, 375.

¹⁴² Cato, *Distich* (I:26), Chase 28.

¹⁴³ The Vernon manuscript: a facsimile of Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS. Eng. poet. a.1 / with an introduction by A.I. Doyle. (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1997): fol. 310v.

If Cato's nuts and bolts proverb conceives of art as 'speech that conceals opposite,' e.g., calling your worst enemy 'dear old friend', then we could quite usefully read the *Tales* as the happy deployment of that sloppy definition- language with concealed opposite - as a perfectly worthwhile introductory account of the 'art' and 'fable' which would be the correct way to repay ironic dividends. In fact, the entire *Reeve's Tale* is not "wip herte stable" because the poem's irony is silent in the face of its own interlocutory iconoclasm. The poem does not mean what it says. Chaucer's poetry, in as much as we conceive of it as ironic poetry, self-referentially repays its own insincerity with art for art. Every Chaucer poem is two poems at once, "quyting" its own narratological voices with unspoken philosophy. Provided this is too pedestrian a point, we must also bear in mind that the global ironic expectations of 'smooth speech' in the *Canterbury Tales* are not based in Cato's opposite recommendation to 'say what you mean', nor even in the higher spirituality of 1 Corinthians 13:1, "Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal," but in an ethically inattentive and artistically serious anagogical foundation of ironic speech: that artists submit things they do not mean to the Muses in order to tell the truth. In this way is art repaid with art, in as much as history's lies become art's truths and the form of poetry repays its content. There is such a thing as historical ahistoricity. Historicism, as a school of thought is not immediately historical because it assumes that history is the cognitive setting of art. Rather historicism can be shown to be unhistorical in instances where an historical tradition of poetry is posited upon a systematic logic of ahistoricity. Put another way, a poem's denial of language and history, its bid for ahistoricity, can itself be the historical context through which a critical reading responsibly manages a poem and other poems like it. Because it is in this way that

Chaucer's poems repay Ovid's as well, in an unbroken intellectual exchange of poems that do not say what they mean in order to tell the truth. It is also in this way that poems and poets with no shared history are drawn toward each other as friendly verbal and philosophical icons. If Augustine's ideas hold and, "the truth of art depends upon the falsification of the artists,"¹⁴⁴ then it is in the very job description of artists to lie to each other in an unbroken heritage of the exchange of poetic goods, something like a functioning House of Fame, always awaiting repayment by the next great liar of art. In the end, the *Reeve's Tale's* use of Cato casts the proverb as the occasion through which it interrogates a macropoetic world of literature transhistorically sponsored by artists who micropoetically "telle tale of fable."

Even if the ethics of the *Distichs* are not the focus of philosophical poetry such as Chaucer's, it is important to understand why the *Canterbury Tales* often acts as if they are, because antiphrastically convicting the behavior of characters at the level of poetic content according to Catonian morality is a satirical play on medieval readerly expectations. It is also part and parcel of the opposite poetic effect that makes Jack Straw, as Strohm put it, like "the songs of the mermaids in the sea."¹⁴⁵ Wayne C. Booth argues, "The essential structure of irony is not designed to deceive some readers and allow others to see the secret meaning, but to deceive all readers for a time and require all readers to recognize and cope with the deception."¹⁴⁶ This holds true for the habits of Canterbury Catoniana and also those of Pertelote's and Chauntecleer's particular engagement: *Distichs* II.31: "Trust not in dreams, which make seem real and true/ Just what awake was most desired by you."¹⁴⁷ After the

¹⁴⁴ Fleming, 83.

¹⁴⁵ Strohm, 165.

¹⁴⁶ Wayne C. Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974): 106.

¹⁴⁷ Cato, *Distich* (II.31), Chase, 28.

initial comfort of the proverbial, readers are left to “cope with the deception” of the context in which it occurs. And when the coping begins, we recognize that the poem, in ascending order, liberates itself from the ethical interpretation and then its materialistic causal structure: ‘waking desires => dream symbology’. Finally the poem imagines a higher function for dream prophecy altogether.

Cato, and Chauntecleer’s First Mistake

We return to Chauntecleer and Pertelote from the perspective that Chaucer’s use of Cato is habitually metapoetic. Pertelote concludes her argument from causation with, “Lo, Catoun, which that was so wys a man,/ Seyde he nat thus, ‘Ne do no fors of dremes.’?” (2940- 2941). Like in Ciceronian dialogue, Pertelote’s naturalism is resolute and Chauntecleer enters, serendipitously enough, as the Cato of Ciceronian literature in defense of the Academic perspective. However, Chauntecleer’s rhetorical missteps are mountainous compared to the subtle hesitations of Cicero’s Cato. We shall see that even Chauntecleer’s nimblest abstractions are based in the expectations of deliverance by a literal future. This prevents him from apprehending in a substantial manner the means by which to marshal the literature that would guide his enquiry.

Madame, quod he, “graunt mercy of youre loore.

But nathelees, as touchyng daun Catoun,
That hath of wysdom swich a greet renoun,
Though that he no bad dremes for to drede,
By God, men may in olde bookes rede
Of many a man moore of auctorite
Than evere Caton was, moot I thee

That al the revers seyn of this sentence,
 And han wel founden by experience
 That dremes been significaciouns
 As wel of joye as of tribilaciouns
 That folk enduren in this lif present.
 Ther nedeth make of this noon argument;
 The verray preeve sheweth it in dede.

(2970- 2983)

Pertelote's naturalistic 'loore' is, if anything, subtler than the *Distich* and Chauntecleer's entire argument, but she does herself no favors by treading into her husband's undergraduate education by way of Cato in order to prove a point already persuasively established by other means. Chauntecleer finds a new wrong angle in the poem; he practically invents it. The formula is literature + experience + the future. Beginning with the idea that Cato's proverb is a trifle, in stunning fashion the bird's abstractions fold back on themselves, collapse the discussion, and place dream epistemology back in the hands of history- the same old place where we can live out the *Distich*. It occurs in a nearly identical manner to his earlier request to have his foul prison released from foul prison, haphazardly reinforcing by reversal the schematic order of Macrobius and Boethius. Likewise is the exit from experience in art not via the door marked "experience" but "olde bookes." What Chauntecleer does is to simply square the circle by referring his argument to the "olde bookes" through which men of greater authority than Cato "han wel founden by experience" arguments to the contrary that reify in the "lif present."

But the principal question is, 'in what manner do "olde bookes" constitute the solution to dreams'? and it hangs upon the power of experience to become the

dominant mode of knowledge in art. For instance, Cato's proverb designates dreams as false apparitions of waking desires. This fails to satisfy Chauntecleer's backwards request to "kepe my body out of foul prisoun!" in several important ways. The first simply is that it begs the question of which dreams are oracular and which are natural, a distinction upheld by Macrobius' ascendant categories. Some dreams do "make seem real and true/ Just what awake was most desired by you;" neither are they the only species of dream nor the species that describes Chauntecleer's dream, bringing us to our second point. Paul R. Thomas explains.

Had the learned Chauntecleer been able to recall the remainder of the distich, he could have easily dismissed the applicability of this particular distich to his particular dream. The type of dream Cato is speaking of represents wish-fulfillment. Following the words of Cato's distich quite literally, we see no evidence that Chauntecleer either "desires" or "hopes" to be seized or possibly even to die in the jaws of the fox, a beast he does not even know from past experience, according to the implications of the text (2898-2901 and 3279-81). Clearly Cato is not speaking of Chauntecleer's sort of dream. For all his pretensions of book learning, Chauntecleer, the expounding preacher, exhibits here the same sort of ignorance of significant texts as he does when Daun Russell boldly alludes to the story of a wise cock in "Daun Burnel the Asse" (3312- 16).¹⁴⁸

But the point must be made that if Chauntecleer does not want to be eaten by a fox, he does little to try and convince himself that his dream does not belong in the family of oracles, or that oracular dreams are not sufficiently well represented in history and

¹⁴⁸ Paul R. Thomas, "Cato on Chauntecleer: Chaucer's Sophisticated Audience." *Neophilologus* Vol. 72, No. 2 (April, 1988): 280.

literature. He does not seem to take the naturalist's exit like Scrooge does when he sees Marley.

"You don't believe in me," observed the Ghost. "I don't," said Scrooge... "You may be an undigested bit of beef, a blot of mustard, a crumb of cheese, a fragment of an underdone potato. There's more of gravy than of grave about you, whatever you are!"... "You see this toothpick?" said Scrooge, returning quickly to the charge, for the reason just assigned; and wishing, though it were only for a second, to divert the vision's stony gaze from himself. "I do," replied the Ghost. "You are not looking at it," said Scrooge. "But I see it," said the Ghost, "notwithstanding." "Well!" returned Scrooge, "I have but to swallow this, and be for the rest of my days persecuted by a legion of goblins, all of my own creation. Humbug, I tell you; humbug!"¹⁴⁹

Instead, the bird spends some 200 lines defending the idea that his dream, like others of a species, literally come to pass. It is as though the bird is willing to uphold what he perceives to be the highest mystical function of dreams for the sake of either vanity- he may not want to believe that his best images are an "underdone potato" rather than a Macrobian inevitability- or because he possesses genuine literary curiosity and is attempting to unconsciously grapple with the questions of the poem in which he lives. At the very least, he does not quickly warm to his wife's arguments that he will not be eaten by the beast of his dream.

And the fox does appear after all. Chauntecleer's faith in dreams pays off. This is why the final, and most difficult, point to manage through the Catonian proverb and various narrative voices is that Chauntecleer's dream is paradoxically not oracular *even if it predicts the future*. The purpose of dreams in the poem, and

¹⁴⁹ Charles Dickens, A Christmas Carol. (Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1986): 16.

throughout Chaucerian dream poetry, is not to announce a future event. The future is not more artistic and abstract than the past. Perhaps it just seems that way to the chicken because it has not happened to him yet; it seems as good a place as any to achieve a theory win, and it is grouped at the ultimate end of dream-species in the narrative of the *Dream of Scipio*. But if the future has happened at all, according to Augustine, it already happened to God. The past is ‘happening’ to Him now as well:

A long time cannot become long, but out of many motions passing by, which cannot be prolonged altogether; but that in the Eternal nothing passeth, but the whole is present; whereas no time is all at once present: and that all time past, is driven on by time to come, and all to come followeth upon the past; and all past and to come, is created, and flows out of that which is ever present? Who shall hold the heart of man, that it may stand still, and see how eternity ever still-standing, neither past nor to come, uttereth the times past and to come? Can my hand do this, or the hand of my mouth by speech bring about a thing so great?¹⁵⁰

In the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, Art will not “quyt” History when the oracular powers of dreams are limited to the eventual reification of symbols in a historical future.

Nicholas and the crow are able to do the same concerning the weather; for the crow this ability to predict future events is part of his final judgment for trespassing his augural function; for Nicholas it is part and parcel of the failed natural interrogation of a universe governed, against his will, by “Goddess pryvetee.” The Old Man predicts the golden death of the rioters, but refuses to face the fact of his own life beyond death. The magician in *Franklin's Tale* predicts the tide, though the one that comes is neither the natural tide nor the show-stopping two-year miracle. The fox comes to kill

¹⁵⁰ Augustine, *Confessions*. (XI). *The Confessions of St. Augustine*. trans. Edward B. Pusey. (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1949): 260.

Chauntecleer but only manages to bite him. The deliverance by History never comes, is always deferred, and fails to satisfy the philosophy of the poem and the anxieties of its occupants.

Instead symbols must share in the expansive Realism in which symbols ‘always already happen’. That is to say, the reification of symbols does not occur in an impending historical future, rather the reification of history is potentially possible in an impending poem. The epistemology is inverse: Chauntecleer’s yeerd is real; Jack Straw is only a candidate for the real. In Augustine’s appraisal of God and Substance, time occurs at the fringes of reality.

Nor dost Thou by time, precede time: else shouldest Thou not precede all times. But Thou precedest all things past, by the sublimity of an ever-present eternity; and surpassesest all future because they are future, and when they come, they shall be past; but Thou art the Same, and Thy years fail not.¹⁵¹

For Augustine it is difficult to understand in what sense, if any, time is real. Reality is ‘pure present’, based in the immutability of God’s will. The paradoxical possibility of the logic is that if time does not exist in God’s will, it is not real, or does not possess Substance. It is according to this theology that we arrive at the most aggressive possible end of literary Platonism in which history evaporates altogether.

Epistemology destroys rather than sublimates ontology. History is only *depicted*. It strikes me that the most interesting question of method regarding Chaucer is to what extent his literary Neoplatonism antagonizes history, not whether.

¹⁵¹ Augustine, *Confessions* (XI). Pusey, 261.

This compromises Chauntecleer's ability to achieve a more powerful release from the naturalism of Pertelote's and Cato's dream scepticism. Even the arrival of the prophesied fox is not able to recalibrate the balance of the poem's narrative towards its form. Instead, his first act as mythographic reformer is to make experience the centerpiece of literary fame. "And han wel founden by experience/ That dremes been significaciouns." (2978- 2979). Who "han wel founden by experience?" "Many a man moore of auctorite/ Than evere Caton was." (2975- 2976). This misstep is significant, no doubt, because it is not merely the rooster claiming the authority of experience: rather, he bases it in his uniform interpretation of "olde bookes" that comes to occupy the next 216 lines, which all are all directed towards a single unworkable point: that the proper interpretations of dreams in art is the prediction of the future events. An anagogical 'future' is aporetically related to 'the future'. What do dreams signify for Chauntecleer? Things "that folk endure in the *lif present*." (2981, emphasis mine). Chaucer's dream poems do not take as their object the prediction of future events in the "lif present." Instead they are dialectical explorations for lost definitions via "olde bookes" that could deliver Chaucer's dreamers from the epistemological weakness of experience. The dreamer exits waking history into a fantastic world of symbols. The *Parliament of Fowls* exists in a preposterous and altogether meditative and harmless eternity, an epithalemic setting in which talking birds place the philosophy of marriage on trial. That Chauntecleer's access to the interpretation of his dreams is by virtue of the "verray preve" (2983) of "olde bookes" ironically situates our expectations. He argues "The verray preve sheweth in dede." (2983). True enough, though the "dede" with which the bird should occupy himself is the dede to which "wordes moote be cosyne" that Chaucer inherits from Calcidius' *Timaeus*, the *Consolatio*, and the *Roman*. In the *Prologue* to the

Legend of Good Women, “These bokes, ther we han noon other preve.” (*Prologue to the Legend of Good Women*, 28). In the *Parliament of Fowls* Chaucer’s dreamer contradicts Chauntecleer’s coupling of the present life and art. “The lyf so short, the craft so long to lerne.” (*Parliament of Fowls*, 1). There is neither enough life- for one man or all of them put together- to learn the (infinitely) “long” craft of art that operates in the eye of eternity. Longevity remains an ironic problem and an ill-advised poetic solution. Tithonus may be beginning to realize this. More time simply means that more things happen, and “poetry makes nothing happen.”¹⁵² And yet a young dreamer with no experience of love is still held responsible for its definition.

For al be that I knowe nat Love in dede,
 Ne wot how that he quiteth folk here hyre,
 Yit happeth me ful ofte in bokes reede
 Of his myrakles and his crewel yre.
 There rede I wel he wol be lord and syre;
 I dar nat seyn, his strokes been so sore,
 But “God save swich a lord!” I can na moore.

(*Parliament of Fowls*, 8-14)

Lacking the experience of love, the young dreamer intuits through “olde bookes” that there is nothing to be done but stand silently (compose poetry) in such a manner that preserves Love’s station (God save him). In the end, the historical Platonic Art of Love discovers that there was never an experience of love, and that a dreamer’s anxiety over his fitness as a discussant of love is an Orphean gaze back towards life. If there is an object to the game of dream poetry, it is to remember what art already

¹⁵² W.H. Auden, *In Memory of W.B. Yeats*. *W.H. Auden Collected Poems*. ed. Edward Mendelson. (London: Faber and Faber, 1991): 248.

knows by writing a poem that could commemorate it. Emmet T. Flood writes, “The key may reside in Augustine's appropriation of the Platonic conception of *anamnesis*. If all true knowledge is *memoria*, and memory is ultimately of God as Origin, then genuine knowledge, and with it valid rhetoric, is contingent upon a recovery of the Origin.”¹⁵³

Chauntecleer's Argument: Goodbye to Cato (for a while)

If Cato's literary authority were such that it could preside over the tale, the form would represent itself according to the perspective of ethics and human action in matters artistic. Thomas paints such a scenario,

By having his cock challenge the authority of Cato, Chaucer is planting in the minds of his readers a further ironic commentary on Chauntecleer's overweening vanity. At the end of the story, the cock tells us that he has learned his lesson. He could have learned this lesson a little less painfully, we might say, if he had paid a little more attention to his Cato and rather less to burying his little wife under a mountain of authorities. This is not the “meaning” of the Nun's Priest's Tale, but it is a little extension of the observant and ironic humor with which Chaucer portrays Chauntecleer.¹⁵⁴

Such a comment, though not representative of Thomas' entire perspective, is based in a not too far fetched full-circle interpretation whereby Chauntecleer proves in principle that, “There are two ways of getting home; and one of them is to stay there.

¹⁵³ Flood, 241.

¹⁵⁴ Thomas, 282.

The other is to walk round the whole world till we come back to the same place.”¹⁵⁵

But Chaucer’s story is not a Hero’s Journey, and Cato was never the home of the poem. If we find some truth in Booth’s idea that it is the function of irony to “deceive all readers for a time and require all readers to recognize and cope with the deception,”¹⁵⁶ then we might argue that it is simply part of the larger persistent dupe of the frame and poem that travels through Monk, Widow, and now Cato. Coping with the deception begins when we refuse to accept the American-style mythology in which a little salt of the earth wisdom might after all have done that Ivy League chicken some good. “He could have learned this lesson a little less painfully, we might say, if he had paid a little more attention to his Cato and rather less to burying his little wife under a mountain of authorities.”¹⁵⁷ Perhaps, but to pursue the idea much further would put us at the short end of a more pregnant humour, based in the poem’s ironic stratification, in which we puff out our chests and give the slow knowing nod that says ‘silly old chicken’ to a poem in which we all run the risk of being critically guignolled by two ugly phantoms named “Art” and “History.” Of course, Cato’s wisdom could form the basis for a worse poem because there is always a worse poem happening while Chaucer writes a good one; it is the poem that his interlocutors produce at the level of content; the poem that belongs to the power of history and the man “under the sun.” As for the good poem that silently stalks the bad one, its judgment belongs where Chaucer- despite ironic protestation to the contrary- seems to have always intended: at the superlunary staircase alongside “alle

¹⁵⁵ G.K Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*. (San Francisco: The Ignatius Press, 1993): 2.

¹⁵⁶ Booth, 106.

¹⁵⁷ Thomas, *ibid*.

poesy.”¹⁵⁸

When Chauntecleer interrupts his own 200 plus line ‘director’s cut’ literary showcase to praise Pertelote’s beauty, he famously mistranslates a simple Latin tag. “*In principio/Mulier est hominis confusio-/ Madame, the sentence of this Latyn is,/ Womman is mannes joye and al his blis.*” (3165- 3166). The structure is ‘Cato-argument-Cato’. But a great deal occurs prior this final reunion, and we will treat it in order, because it serves to cap Chauntecleer’s argument and to foreshadow the poem’s onomatopoeic uproar.

For now, the structure of Chauntecleer’s argument is as follows:¹⁵⁹

1. 2970- 2983: Rebuttal to Catonian precept.
2. 2984- 3062: The Murder of the Pilgrim (Dreams forecast death.)
 - > 2a: 3050- 3057: Divertimento: Moral against murder.
3. 3063- 3109: Death by drowning. (Dreams forecast death.)
4. 3110- 3121: Tale of Seint Kenelm. (Dreams forecast death.)
5. 3122- 3156: Literary review. (Dreams forecast death.)
 - Macrobius, Daniel, Joseph, Pharaoh, Pharaoh’s butler, Croesus, Andromache.
6. 3157- 3171: Cessation of argument and physical praise of Pertelote.
 - Mistranslated Latin/Catonian jibe.
7. 3172- 3186: Feathering. The reunion of Chauntecleer and Pertelote’s theses.

We have already discussed (1), and we see that there is little in the way of logical progression. It is instead a single point, elaborated and amplified with occasional *divertimento*. Eventually the bird grows tired and takes a break to praise his wife’s

¹⁵⁸ *Troilus and Criseyde* (1790)

¹⁵⁹ Maurice Hussey’s list has been modified for our purposes. Maurice Hussey, *The Nun’s Priest’s Prologue and Tale*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965): 4-5. Quoted in Travis, *Disseminat*, 10-11

looks, mistranslate some Latin, and give her a good feathering. If anything, it devolves; entropy sets in and the bird himself suddenly caps off the movement from order to disorder. What we should expect, then, as in other staccato transitions in Chaucer, is the abandonment of a failed discussion of art for the home and hearth comfort of the knowable, and nothing is quite so knowable as sex for the rooster, if by ‘knowable’ we understand that repetition is the key to all learning.

2. The Murder of the Pilgrim

The stories Chaucer tells are structured “like Russian nesting dolls”¹⁶⁰ and the Platonic references coalesce to form thematic miniatures of the tale itself. It is photo-mosaic at the level of content, with ‘pictures forming Picture’, and an impressive theoretical *mise-en-abyme* at the level of form. The medieval *mise-en-abyme*, “the object depicted within itself,” becomes “the Idea depicted within itself.”¹⁶¹ Chaucer’s first story, apparently from “oon of the gretteste auctor that men rede,” (2984) concerns two travelers at an inn. One of the travelers is visited by his companion in a series of dreams telling him that he just been murdered. The cause of the murder is not unfamiliar to the Pardoner’s audience: “My gold caused my mordre, sooth to seyn.” (3021). The troubled dreamer wakes to find his companion missing and later finds his dead body in a dung cart. An analogue to Chaucer’s story is found in Book I of Cicero’s *De Divinatione*. It is not the most gripping story

¹⁶⁰ Cooper, 347.

¹⁶¹ Stuart Whalling, “Putting Mise-en-Abyme in its (Medieval) Place.” Conference paper given at “Medieval ‘mise-en-abyme’: the object depicted within itself.” 16 February 2009, Courtauld Institute of Art. Accessed 11 January 2011.
<<http://www.courtauld.ac.uk/researchforum/projects/medievalarttheory/documents/Mise-en-abyme.pdf>>

to be sure, but Cicero's philosophical finish is a tour de force. He concludes his tale of oracular murder with a discussion that recalls Chaucer's initial Platonic request.

It is satisfactory to the tale on many levels. Cicero writes,

Then shall we listen to Epicurus rather than to Plato?...”But,” you retort, “Epicurus says what he thinks.” But he thinks nothing that is ever well reasoned, or worthy of a philosopher. Will you, then, put this man before Plato or Socrates, who though they gave no reason, would yet prevail over these petty philosophers by the mere weight of their name? Now Plato's advice to us is to set out for the land of dreams with bodies so prepared that no error or confusion may assail the soul. For this reason, it is thought, the Pythagoreans were forbidden to indulge in beans; for that food produces great flatulence and induces a condition at war with a soul in search of truth.¹⁶²

There are two philosophers to whom we refer the interpretation of dreams, either the Epicurean perspective of content or the Platonic irony of form. Epicurus “says what he thinks;” Plato and Socrates “gave no reason.” What is at stake, of course, is whether dreams are oriented towards understanding or intuition, ‘understanding’ belonging to mind and body and ‘intuition’ belonging to the soul, one knowable naturally and the other mystically. Epicurus speaks plainly because body *is* understanding. Chaucer figures this out in the end. Silently, a form of knowledge that “gives no reason” argues that bodily preparation for “the land of dreams” would be the eradication of the body altogether and not, as Cicero's interlocutor brilliantly mistakes, a bean-free diet. It is typical Platonic humor that dissolves an eminently worthwhile discussion of the effects of beans on the “soul in search of truth” by doing away with the entire premise of body. It continues:

¹⁶² Cicero, *De Divinatione* (I. xxx. 62- 63). Falconer, 293-294.

But on the other hand, when the man, whose habits of living and eating are wholesome and temperate, surrenders himself to sleep, having the thinking and reasoning portion of his soul eager and erect, and satisfied by a feat of noble thoughts, and having that portion which feeds on carnal pleasures neither bitterly exhausted by abstinence nor cloyed by over-indulgence- for, as a rule, the edge of thought is dulled whether nature is starved or overfed... then will the thinking and reasoning portion of his soul shine forth and show itself keen and strong for dreaming.¹⁶³

It ends, "I have reproduced Plato's very words."¹⁶⁴ In Platonism a diet can only mean as much as a body, and we know where that line of logic leads. However, a temperate diet is the very substance of Epicureanism which, though mistakenly used in our own day to describe acute hedonism related to food and drink, was for Epicurus better conceived of in terms of temperance and, if anything, culinary restraint in an effort to make a well-balanced bodily experience free from pain the sufficient grounds for ethical philosophy. Epicurus writes, "For it is not continuous drinkings and revellings, nor the satisfaction of lusts, nor the enjoyment of fish and other luxuries of the wealthy table, which produce a pleasant life."¹⁶⁵ The absence of pain- such is the pleasant life, the "blis" sought by the Franklin's narrators for whom it is "no disport/ To romen by the see, but discomfort." (*Franklin's Tale*, 894- 895). Often Chaucer's Epicureans conceive of pleasure according to the absence of pain. "Blis" appears four times in the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, "ese" three times. Pain directly corresponds to a confused contact with an art that "gives no reason," whose immensity and mode of humor are not integrated into a rhetorical perspective. Chaucerian narrators see

¹⁶³ Ibid., (I. xxix.61). Ibid., 293.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*. (III. 132) *Epicurus: The Extant Remains*. trans. Cyril Bailey. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926): 89.

Epicurean presuppositions through to expansive literary conclusions, and the greater the premium they place upon the “ese” and “blis” of physical understanding, the larger the metaphysical vacuum between rhetoric and form.

But for Cicero’s pithy commentary, the misappropriation of the Platonic notion of the body takes on a curiously Chaucerian form: Pythagoreans avoid beans in order to better contemplate the soul uninhibited by farting. A fart-free body is not in a better position to meaningfully evaluate Eleatic Being than those afflicted, such as the Summoner’s friar or the Miller’s Nicholas. Even a particularly efficient digestive record does little to remedy the perspectival difficulty presented by the corporeal experience of the Macrobian sub-lunar “realm of the perishable” to the soul in pursuit of eternity. Body- as such- is a vehicle, but not for philosophy. It is a vehicle by which a soul passes through history in effort to praise (ultimately at the body’s expense) its foreign origin. As a piece of apologetics this may not jive in our own day, but for Chaucer’s poems, unconcerned as far as I can tell with apologetics, it seems a good empirical framework by which to convict narratological naturalism concerning dreams. It is empirical because it is attested to by a choking cataract of literature belonging to the consistent approach of a school of philosophy and poetry.

One day someone will perhaps be charged with writing a book concerning high Platonism and indigestion, to which end, reservations concerning Chaucer’s discomfort with the perceived impenetrable elegance of the tradition can begin to be resolved by recognizing that the two seem somehow thematically linked throughout history, having co-mingled in some of the best discussions since Plato, such as Aristophanes’ hiccup attack in the *Symposium*. If there exists the perception that literary Platonism is too austere for a writer of such earthy medieval humor as Chaucer, it is either because Dante and Petrarch were unusually aristocratic in style or

that the dialectical school of thought accomplished what it set out to do: to cloak the ineffable in a shroud of common failures. One would be hard-pressed to locate a representative Platonic discussion uncluttered by ironic misappropriations and philosophical exasperation. In fact, one could very well argue that it would be a breach of the entire Platonic perspective towards language that there could exist a representative- rather than a misrepresentative- human discussion. That Chaucer's poetry takes those misappropriations to heart and places them in the mouth of a chicken whose wife tells him to take laxatives is merely an extension of an old joke, a joke that would be a tired one were it not so ingeniously paired in incongruence with the world of knowledge it seeks to represent.

Thus Chauntecleer begins his refutation of naturalism unwittingly in the pay of Ciceronian irony from which he is unable to extricate his logic. Cicero's dialogue somehow understands that to tell a story of dreams predicting an actual murder is only a prelude to the discussion of how dreams relate to the ontology of the soul, even if forced by rigorous and harassing measures to complement a discussion of beans. Chauntecleer seems content with the easier fact that the dream does, in fact, predict a future event. It is a simple case of missing the point, like being satisfied that one's subtraction tables check out in the middle of a discussion of whether mathematics refers to an absolute order independent of mind. 'Did we invent or discover mathematics? $30-10 = 20$, so yes'.

The Other Death of Socrates

Another classical traveler's tale seems to refract all the various light of the rooster's poem. That story is the Aristomenes panel in Apuleius' *Golden Ass*. In

Apuleius' rather psychedelic version, the first traveler is Socrates. The philosopher has taken a turn for the worse after sleeping with a witch while on a business trip. The second traveler, Aristomenes, finds him drunk and homeless, babbling regret over his foul play with the sorceress. "As you know, I'd gone to Macedonia on business.... I took shelter in an inn kept by a woman called Meroe, not at all bad-looking for her age...that first night with her was the start of a long and degrading association."¹⁶⁶ A shocked Aristomenes replies, "Well damn it...you deserve anything you get and worse than that, for preferring the pleasure of fornicating with a leathery old hag to your home and children."¹⁶⁷ Aristomenes rents a room with Socrates. That night witches pour a serum over him and transform him into a turtle. As a turtle he witnesses Meroe cut Socrates' throat. Aristomenes awakes to find that it was a dream, that he is not a turtle, and that Socrates is in fine form. Nonetheless, the stink of witch serum is on him. The angry innkeeper enters and solves the mystery, "Get off me, you stink like the worst kind of urinal,"¹⁶⁸ to which Socrates adds, "it's not blood put piss you're drenched with."¹⁶⁹ However, after breakfasting on polenta- "the Philosopher's cheese"- Socrates goes to the stream for a drink, whereupon, the dreamt-of neck wound opens and he bleeds to death.

Apuleius, a self-fashioned "*philosophus Platonicus*"¹⁷⁰ accomplishes a rather novel re-imagining of Socrates as a failed literary interlocutor: an old man gallivanting with a witch whose death is partly due to acute thirst after "having wolfed

¹⁶⁶ Apuleius, *Golden Ass*, 10-11.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁰ Warren S. Smith, Baynard Woods. "Tale of Aristomenes: Declamation in a Platonic Mode." *Ancient Narrative*, Vol. 2 (2002): 184.

down the best part of a first rate (Philosopher's) cheese."¹⁷¹ At any rate, this Socratic death- choking on polenta at a random inn- does not seem to have gained much traction against its statelier literary ancestor. Smith and Baynard comment on the role of Meroe the witch in literature.

The choking of all three characters is a warning that in trying to combat witchcraft with the maxims of Platonism, they have more than met their match. . . . A Thessalian witch like Meroe is associated with pure appetite, including heavy drinking, vengefulness, macabre violence, and nymphomania. Such witches reduce their victims to sexual beings, like the fictional Socrates, and punish them when they try to escape.¹⁷²

To put it plainly, Platonism and Socrates fail (philosophy), witchcraft wins (practical action). Chaucer's stories stand as miniatures to the *Nun's Priest's Tale* in which he stars. The tale of Aristomenes seems to tick all the right boxes. The dream's witch serum turns out to be bedwetting in the real world. Socrates becomes a sexual "slave" of Meroe. Dreams predict the future, the neck wound was real. The last of these seems like something to place in the 'win' column for dreams, but as we have discussed, and as is attested in this analogue, a dream in art can fail when it foreshadows and serves the content of a poem rather than its form. Prophets and witches had similar powers as well in Scripture, with only one being an agent of Providence. For our purposes, we have here, thanks to Cicero and Apuleius, the stipulations of success and the nature of the Chicken's naturalistic and sexual failures. Chaucer plays to script and cuts a dashing Socrates to Pertelote's Meroe.

Chaucer's Library

¹⁷¹ Apuleius, *Golden Ass*, 17.

¹⁷² Smith, Baynard, 187.

The complementary philosophies of Cicero and Apuleius constitute some of the most subtle and interesting unconscious moments of Chauntecleer's long defense of dreams. For the most part the stories that follow are shorter and contain less literary possibility. But they are not utterly hopeless if we understand that their poetic achievements are genealogical rather than immediate. Travis writes,

If the point of each narrative is to prove that dreams come true, in other words, what is the point of there being so many? What is the point of their being so differently designed? And what is the point of this extruded catalogue withering on the vine, getting more artless and exhausted the further it is strung out? The only thing that makes these nine narratives fascinating as literature is their limited success as literature. Even though each manages to make the very same didactic "point," they are scarcely the stuff that will transport us toward self-knowledge, Canterbury, or the New Jerusalem—unless, inside their local literary context, we are invited to read them parodically.¹⁷³

I said earlier that the argument devolves rather than progresses. At the very least it stalls; it stalls because of a limited starting point in which "olde books" do not function for the rooster beyond their promotion of experience to the conceptual center of literary "auctorite." But irony begins to breathe freely in an underwhelming performance when the Ciceronian and Apuleian stories within the story of the two travelers place experience— that new conceptual center— on the level of farts and Socrates' comedic demise at the hands of Meroe. It also stalls because of a repetitive structure; it is a one-point sermon made nine times. *Repetitio* is a plague to narrators

¹⁷³ Travis, *Disseminial*, 324.

throughout Chaucer's work. It takes hold here in typical Canterbury fashion: at the moral of the story.

2a. Divertimento: Moral against murder

To taste, the poem's structure continues to resuscitate the dialogue- story- moralization model and prefigures the literary effect of the concluding moralitas.

O blissful God, that art so just and trewe,
 Lo, how that thou biwreyest mordre alway!
 Mordre wol out; that se we day by day.
 Mordre is so wlatson and abhomynable
 To God, that is so just and resonable,
 (3050-3062)

The tone, buoyed by generic expectations, assumes the logical validity of its relationship to the murdered pilgrim story. But the dissonance between this moral and Chauntecleer's argumentative needs in the panel is vast. Yes, God is just and true; He does not suffer murder to remain hidden in Scripture. David repents for Uriah. Cain, it turns out, *was* his brother's keeper. Desiring these concepts of moral justice to speak to a pilgrim story that serves as cover for fart free dreams which itself serves as cover for a piece of high Platonism in which we "set out for the land of dreams with bodies so prepared that no error or confusion may assail the soul"¹⁷⁴ asks a lot. Nathan's famous prophetic whipping of the king, "Thou art the man,"¹⁷⁵ puts a hermeneutic finish on the curious demise of Apuleius' philandering Socrates that curdles on contact. Whether murder is always uncovered in a universe governed by God's justice is somewhat of a red herring to the fact that dreams predict death. Conceivably a

¹⁷⁴ Cicero, *De Divinatione* (I.xxx.62). Falconer, 293.

¹⁷⁵ 2 Samuel 12:7.

dreamer could foresee death and take his secret to the grave, and not all deaths are murders. For instance, Chaucer's story about a drowning sailor is not a tale of murder. God cannot "mordre out" a non-murder. The only moral of the story that could function is one that would be identical to the point of the story, that dreams predict death. And it is barely a moral; but it is at least an idea, a watertight and attractive one to Chaucer and his argument clings to it for dear life.

We might detect the literary voice of the *Monk's Tale*, the single-mindedness, the topical fidelity. For the Monk, great men fall because Fortune's wheel tramples them. For Chaucer, they fall because it is foretold in dreams. But Chaucer does not really fall; he escapes. In doing so, he demonstrates somewhat the opposite of his thesis. Dream prophecy turns out to be weaker than Fortune, or at least a little bit weaker than good luck. At any rate, its symbols do not crush the variables by the force of their inevitability. But that is not how Chaucer's stories make it seem. The dreams in his stories are designed to match an impending future. Chance is not meant to upend them. What is crucial to note is that when Chaucer escapes, he may demonstrate the opposite of his thesis but he does not demonstrate the opposite of his dream. His dream was broad and simple and it comes true: a fox will come that "wold han had me deed." (2901). The problem seems to be that the facts of his dream do not suit his philosophical tastes regarding his dream. His dream lacks the precision and palpable apocalypse of the real *nobles songes*. His argument is about a different class of dream than the one that put him in a cold sweat in the early morning hours. Chaucer's unfinished biography is related only by strained analogy to visionary deaths and their reification. That is why the philosophical question, and the central dupe of Chaucer's argument, is not whether his dream is like the dreams in his

stories, but whether his stories about dreams can be domesticated to the extent that their literary histories and evocations will inductively support his artificial thesis.

3 and 4: Death by Drowning and St. Kenelm

“And certes in the same book I rede,/ Right in the nexte chapitre after this-/ I gabbe nat, so I have joye or blis.” (3064-3066). The *Riverside*’s timely note on the text reads, “This statement does not apply to Cicero, Valerius, or Holcot.”¹⁷⁶ For our purposes we might add Apuleius. It continues, “Manly remarks that Chauntecleer is perhaps deceiving Pertelote by a pretense to scrupulous accuracy. In l. 3164 he is certainly not above taking advantage of her ignorance of Latin!”¹⁷⁷ In this case the loss of Cicero for the drowning panel is also our loss. Apuleius might have been a fine source too, he briefly mentions that Phrixus was saved from drowning by a swimming goat, which is a better match for the fate of our chicken rhapsode than any story in which the drowning actually takes place. “You too will have your place among the wonder-tales of old, cited as an example from real life to inspire our belief that Phrixus swam across the sea on a ram.”¹⁷⁸ Phrixus goes on to a live happy life and fathers the Argonauts. We can only hope from the peaceful tone of the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale*’s final scene that Chauntecleer lives out the rest of his years in the “joye and blis” that so generously peppers his rhetoric.

But that is not how Chauntecleer’s drowning story ends. Instead, located in the very same book (3064) from very same author that did *not* write the book from which his previous tales came, two travelers by sea sleep a final night in port. “To that o man

¹⁷⁶ Benson, *Riverside Chaucer*, 938 n. 3065.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Apuleius, *Golden Ass*, trans. P.G. Walsh. (Clarendon Press, Oxford: 1994): 116.

fil a greet mervaille:/ That oon of hem, in slepyng as he lay,/ Hym mette a wonder dreem agayn the day./ Hym thoughte a man stood by his beddes syde,/ And hym comanded that he sholde abyde.” (3076-3079). What does the “marvaille” of this “wonder dreem” say? What patient wisdom makes the bumpy journey from eternity to the dreamer’s mind? “And seyde hym thus: ‘If thou tomorwe wende,/ Thow shalt be dreynt; my tale is at an ende.” (3081-3082). Thanks specter. And thank you Chauntecleer for getting down to brass tacks. Of course the ship’s bottom breaks open and Chauntecleer intuits a win. “And therefore, faire Pertelote so deere,/ By swiche ensamples olde maistow leere.” (3105-3106). The intellectual saber-rattling occurs despite the fact that the prophecy offered a choice and not an inevitability. One of the sailors simply chooses to stays ashore. We might pause for a moment and imagine the palsied face of Pertelote, who so generously lays out in argumentative form a towering naturalism, as she is greeted with this half-baked rebuttal. Next Chauntecleer begins the story of St. Kenelm. I say “begins” because that is all he does. Kenelm, the seven-year-old king dreams he will die. He is too young to heed the import of his vision and he dies. Chauntecleer wraps the ending of that story with, “By God! I had levere than my sherte/ That ye hadde rad his legende, as have I.” (3120-3121). Of course Chauntecleer will have time to reread that legend, because unlike Kenelm, he did not dream of death and he will not die. Chauntecleer is stuck in a tree inside a poem talking to a fox that cannot kill him.

5. Literary Review: Macrobius

Macrobius is a sponsor of the poem and the *Dream of Scipio* serves as an intellectual history to all Chaucerian dream discussions. Scipio is the subject of the

opening of the *Parliament of Fowls*. Scipio meets the dreamer and acts as guide. Perhaps this is why St. Kenelm only gets 12 lines and an unfinished story while Macrobius receives the following close attention.

Dame Pertelote, I sey yow trewely,
 Macrobeus, that writ the avisioun
 In Affrike of the worthy Cipiou,
 Affermeth dremes, and seith that they been
 Warnynge of thynges that men after seen.
 And forthermoore, I pray yow, looketh wel
 In the olde testament, Of Daniel...

(3122-3128)

If ever defeat was snatched from the jaws of victory, this is it. Chauntecleer lands upon the most significant source that would resuscitate his argument and he gives Macrobius fewer lines than St. Kenelm. In fact, he dedicates to Macrobius less than half the lines of St. Kenelm. There is a reason that Macrobius has loomed larger than Kenelm for the audience of Chaucer these last 600 plus years, but it is no thanks to Chauntecleer's study. If there is a theoretical reason that Chauntecleer does not spend more of his literary review on Macrobius it has to do with the fact that the language of *Scipio*, in the Platonic tradition, is at odds with its meaning.

One of the highest stated functions for dreams in Macrobius' translation is the prediction of future events. But the rescue of Rome by Africanus is a feat charged with the same philosophy as the *Aeneid*; Aeneas, agent of Fate, fulfills the will of the gods, achieves disembarassment from the natural mandate of Carthage (including, appropriately, the advice of Dido) and founds Rome. And as Cicero writes,

“Human souls were of God; that upon their departure from the body a return to heaven lay open to them...Scipio held this same view, for only a few days before his death...he, as if in premonition of his fate, discoursed for three days on the commonwealth, and devoted almost all of the conclusions of his discussion to the immortality of the soul, making use of arguments which he had heard, he said, from Africanus the Elder through a vision in his sleep. If the truth really is that the souls of all good men after death make the easiest escape from what may be termed the imprisonment and fetters of the flesh, whom can we think of as having had an easier journey to the gods than Scipio?”¹⁷⁹

Scipio saves one city and departs for another. It shares in the same literary history as the Rome that Augustine adopts as the eternal city. To Chaucer's credit, saving Rome from Carthage seems to suffice at the level of language and action. For any reader 'Chaucer' and any treatise that presents the 'prediction of future events' as an ultimate category for dream visions, we find an easy friendship. On the same token, for any reader 'not Chaucer' and any Neoplatonic treatise that elides 'future events' with 'oracular' we recognize an impasse. Apollo god of poetry governs prophecy. The *Manciple's Tale* is persuasive concerning the fact that Apollo and history make for a very poor team, that poetry and prophecy cannot take up residence on earth. These great city epics: the *Dream of Scipio*, Plato's *Republic*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, and Augustine's *City of God* share a common bloodline. Prophecies about the founding and rescuing of cities partake of an uncreated order of knowledge. Scipio does not just save Rome from Carthage; he saves Heaven from Earth, saves an unbroken thing from a broken one. The city Aeneas founds on earth is a shadow, in the Platonic sense of the word, of Ideas both larger and smaller- because a man is

¹⁷⁹ Cicero, *De Amicitia* (iv.14). Falconer, 123.

smaller than Rome, but the City of God is larger than the world. But Augustine's argument is that what is inside a man is still larger than Rome, because in substance it shares in the same eternity as the City of God. A Republic in men and the Republic to which men travel in death exist in unbroken continuity inside a symbol. "For it is from this earthly city that the enemies spring against whom the City of God must be defended."¹⁸⁰ To confuse them is to understand them. "What they have forgotten is just that it is an *ideal* republic for which Plato is legislating, 'a city which is not anywhere on earth', one that is to be for us a pattern laid up in heaven."¹⁸¹

Commenting on Plato's *Republic*, Macrobius argues,

With a deep understanding of all human affairs Plato advises throughout his discussion of the establishment of a republic that a love of justice must be instilled in men's minds...He realized that in order to implant this fondness for justice in an individual nothing was quite so effective as the assurance that one's enjoyments did not terminate with death.¹⁸²

Macrobius continues,

Cicero proved to be equally judicious and clever in following this method of treatment: after giving the palm to justice in all matters concerning the welfare of the state, he revealed, at the very end of his work, the sacred abodes of immortal souls and the secrets of the heavens and pointed out the place to which the souls of those who had served the republic prudently, justly, courageously, and temperately must proceed, or rather, must return.¹⁸³

¹⁸⁰ Augustine, *The City of God Against the Pagans*, trans. George McCracken. (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1957): 13.

¹⁸¹ Grube, 189.

¹⁸² Macrobius, *Dream of Scipio*, 81-82.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 82.

It is perhaps appropriate to Chaucer's tone, that in the *Tales* he simply takes a road trip to a city that already exists and does not need saving. Nonetheless, we still intuit the palpable hiddenness of the City behind the city- or the Coop behind the coop- and the responsibility of poetic symbols to negotiate the power of a lost kingdom of God with the fact that the "kingdom of God is within you."¹⁸⁴

The anagogical identity of these city epics serves a previous and smaller point in the context of Chauntecleer's argument. They demonstrate that even if we draw a very straight line between dream and future event, the event remains a ruse to another timeless 'future' to which symbols are ultimately referred. The event becomes a shadow of a causal structure that is circularly reinforced. Eternity is the cause of a dream whose symbols praise the inevitability and power of eternity. Though Macrobius' categories ironically halt on their way towards an unspeakable reunion of dreams with infinity, in addition to the Ciceronian tradition of Scipio as an emissary of the soul's immortality, he suggests a sub category within a prophetic dream that evokes the superlunary: "the universal." "And it is universal since by gazing up and down he was initiated into the wonders of the heavens, the great celestial circles, and the harmony of the revolving spheres, things strange and unknown to mortals before this."¹⁸⁵ There is more to a prophecy than a happening, there are "things strange and unknown to mortals before this." Chauntecleer's Cipion, no larger than the average Kenelm, is a smaller idea of a dream than that which can be found in Cicero and Macrobius.

5b. Literary Review: Everyone Else

¹⁸⁴ Luke 17:21

¹⁸⁵ Macrobius, *Dream of Scipio*, 91.

It is as though Chaucer is reading his own argument, because the stories become mercifully short. Five stories occur within the space of twenty lines. Two lines are dedicated to Daniel. Three for Joseph, three for Pharaoh, three for Croesus, and a generous eight dedicated to Andromache, though Chaucer tires of it: “But thilke tale is al to longe to telle.” (3149). The stories differ in detail. The same ‘story within story’ phenomenon continues to draw an unspoken order of meaning away from Chaucer’s repetitive proof and towards the long philosophical arc of the poem’s form. When the stories do not unfold the larger philosophy of the poem, they often contain too many contending points about dreams to function in the singular manner Chaucer’s argument requires. In Daniel, Nebuchadnezzar dreams the rise and fall of empires, and eventually, the end of the world. This, we might note, is another hastily missed opportunity for Chaucer. The dreams throughout the Book of Daniel lead to a final vision set at the end of history: “And he said, Go thy way, Daniel: for the words [are] closed up and sealed till the time of the end.”¹⁸⁶ Joseph dreams that his brothers will bow before him and it comes true. However, Joseph does not foresee the unhappy road to that moment. Matthew Henry writes, “Observe, Joseph dreamed of his preferment, but he did not dream of his imprisonment.”¹⁸⁷ Neither does Joseph dream he will be thrown in a pit and left for dead. Because Joseph interprets the dream of the “butiller” he is called up from prison to interpret Pharaoh’s dreams of famine. Once again, Chaucer cites a story in which a dream comes true without reference to its eschatological import. Yes, the famine comes, but

¹⁸⁶ Daniel 12:9.

¹⁸⁷ Matthew Henry, Thomas Scott. The Comprehensive Commentary on the Holy Bible: Genesis to Judges. (Battleboro: Fessenden and Co, 1835): 163.

disaster is averted by the promotion of Joseph under whose authority enough grain is stored to feed Egypt through the seven lean years. Furthermore, this famine reunites him with his father and brothers, a happy ending with a dark cloud hanging over, because this is the beginning of the Hebrews in Egypt, perhaps the greatest obstacle in the Biblical history of salvation save for the Cross itself. The significance of Joseph in the story of the Hebrew captivity and liberation does not seem to have gone missing on Moses: “But God led the people about, through the way of the wilderness of the Red Sea: and the children of Israel went up harnessed out of the land of Egypt. And Moses took the bones of Joseph with him: for he had straitly sworn the children of Israel, saying, God will surely visit you; and ye shall carry up my bones away hence with you.”¹⁸⁸ It inaugurates the Exodus, the wars for the Promised Land, the eventual birth of Christ, and by dint, the end of the world and final Redemption. It could be said that the victory of that story has very much less to do with the reification of Pharaoh’s dream than it does the reification of God’s dream, which is the entire soteriology that runs from Exodus through Revelation.

The introduction of Croesus complicates Chauntecleer’s argument in various ways. When different versions are cobbled together, the Croesus story starts to run eerily parallel as a character study to the rooster, much like Apuleius’ Socrates. In the bird’s retelling, the Lydian King functions only as much as he dreams of the tree upon which he is hanged. “Lo Cresus, which that was of Lyde kyng,/ Mette he nat that he sat upon a tree,/ Which signified he sholde anhangen bee?” (3138-3139). But in most versions, Croesus’ death is only a near-death and is typically depicted at the pyre. In fact, Croesus is famous for not dying at all. As Marie Gelbeck points out, “Although

¹⁸⁸ Exodus 13:18-19.

the versions vary considerably in the amount and character of the details that are given, they always agree on one point, namely, that Croesus, though condemned to death, was not actually executed, but his life was saved by some intervention.”¹⁸⁹ In Boccaccio’s *De Casibus Virorum Illustrium* Croesus escapes death. Likewise, Boethius writes in the *Consolation*, “Did you not know the story of Croesus, the king of the Lydians; how he, not long before such a terror to Cyrus, was soon wretchedly given over to be burnt, but saved by a shower from heaven?”¹⁹⁰ Another pyre version found in Bacchylides’ *Odes* is undercutting in the manner of Chaucer’s reference to Joseph; once again, full disaster is averted and the story reorients itself towards the end of history. Zeus rescues Croesus and his family by sending a rain that quenches the flames and then transports them from the pyre to the Hyperboreans.¹⁹¹

What once was hateful is welcome; 'tis sweetest to die.' So spake he... The maidens shrieked, and threw up their hands to their mother; for the violent death which is foreseen is to mortals the most bitter. But when the bright strength of the dread fire began to rush abroad, Zeus brought a dark rain-cloud above it, and began to quench the yellow flame. Nothing is past belief that is wrought by the care of the gods. Then Delos-born Apollo carried the old man to the Hyperboreans, with his daughters of slender ankle, and there gave him rest, in requital of his piety; because of all mortals he had sent up the largest gifts to divine Pytho.¹⁹²

In the account of Croesus in Herodotus’ *Histories*, the Lydian king is a man of gold who dares others to find another on earth who lives in such “ease and bliss.” Solon

¹⁸⁹ Marie Gelbach, “On Chaucer’s Version of the Death of Croesus.” *JEGP*, Vol. 6 (1906-7): 657.

¹⁹⁰ Boethius, *Consolation*. Tester, 183.

¹⁹¹ In Bacchylides, “Hyperborean land appears as a place to which pious mortals are translated without dying.” Sir Richard C. Jebb, “Introduction to the Odes,” in *Bacchylides: The Poems and Fragments*. ed. and trans. Sir Richard C. Jebb. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1905): 196.

¹⁹² Bacchylides, 259-260.

rebukes Croesus for his attachment to the present life and for evaluating human happiness without reference to ends.

He who unites the greatest number of advantages, and retaining them to the day of his death, then dies peaceably, that man alone, sire, is, in my judgment, entitled to bear the name of 'happy.' But in every matter it behoves us to mark well the end: for oftentimes God gives men a gleam of happiness, and then plunges them into ruin." Such was the speech which Solon addressed to Croesus, a speech which brought him neither largess nor honour. The king saw him depart with much indifference, since he thought that a man must be an arrant fool who made no account of present good, but bade men always wait and mark the end. After Solon had gone away a dreadful vengeance, sent of God, came upon Croesus, to punish him, it is likely, for deeming himself the happiest of men. ¹⁹³

Ctesias, a 5th Century B.C. physician and historian, casts Croesus as a trickster. Helen H. Law writes, "According to Ctesias, the son of Croesus, given as a hostage to Cyrus before the city was taken, was killed by him because Croesus had used trickery in the negotiations."¹⁹⁴ Law discusses another version by the First Vatican Mythographer in which rain merely provides a cover for a crafty Croesus to escape. "He includes the story of the fall of Croesus among his myths... When Croesus was placed upon the funeral pyre, a storm suddenly rose which extinguished the fire, and Croesus found an opportunity to escape."¹⁹⁵ The Vatican Mythographer's version takes an interesting turn. Law continues,

¹⁹³ Herodotus, The History of Herodotus, trans. George Rawlinson. (London: J.M. Dent Sons Ltd., 1910): 17.

¹⁹⁴ Helen H. Law, "Croesus from Herodotus to Boccaccio." *The Classical Journal*. Vol. 43, No. 8. (May, 1948): 456-457.

¹⁹⁵ Law, 460.

One notes that there is no suggestion that the storm came in answer to prayer or that there was anything miraculous in his escape. It was after this, when Croesus was rejoicing and boasting of his great wealth, that, according to this version, Solon warned him that one never knows what a day may bring forth. That very night he had a dream in which Jupiter wet him with water and the sun dried him. His daughter, Phania, interpreted the dream as meaning that he was to be fastened to a cross, wet by the rain and dried by the sun. This dream was fulfilled when he was again captured by Cyrus and fastened to a cross.¹⁹⁶

The *Roman de la Rose* constitutes another rare mention of Croesus' death. But Jean de Meun's hermeneutical setting envisions the king as a rhetorician arguing on behalf of a literal view of dreams. The relationship between naturalistic dream interpretation and the demise of the king is causal. Because of it, the bulk of the *Roman's* Croesus panel, and this may sound familiar, is a deliberation of the status of symbols in dreams. Eric Jaeger writes,

In arrogantly insisting upon a literal interpretation of his dream, Croesus comes under the censure of a long exegetical tradition that "the letter killeth." His preoccupation with pleasurable surface meanings, his delight in the "letre," diverts him from understanding his dream as an admonitory figure that requires interpretation. Through the spiritual death of his literalist reading, he blindly goes to the physical death represented in his allegorical dream by the tree, glossed by Phania as "le gibet" (6547).¹⁹⁷

Croesus argues,

E quant par vostre fol respons
M'avez mon songe ainsinc espons,

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Eric Jaeger, "Croesus and Chauntecleer: The Royal Road of Dreams." *MLQ*, Vol. 49 (1988): 6.

Servi m'avez de granz mençonges;
 Car sachiez que cist nobles songes,
 Ou fausse glose voulez metre,
 Deit estre entenduz a la letre...¹⁹⁸

(6605- 10)

Croesus inverts Macrobian source material; here *nobles songes* would require interpretation to the letter rather than the figure. The dialectical emphasis of the Jean de Meun version seems to be what guides Croesus' appearance in the *House of Fame*. Jaeger argues that "the Lydian king is held up as a prime example of the misinterpreter. Near the beginning of the poem, the narrator warns the reader not to "mysdemen" his dream "Thorgh malicious entencion" (92-93) and wishes that any misinterpreter may have such a conclusion. 'As had of his avision/ Cresus, that was kyng of Lyde, / That high upon a gebet dyde.' (103-6)."¹⁹⁹

By the time Croesus arrives in the Monk's *de casibus*, the most salient elements of classical myth and medieval rhetoric are boiled down to the problems of pride and Fortune, ethical modes that form the cognitive false exit in the chicken epic.²⁰⁰ Jaeger argues that, "the Monk edits the legend in order to make Croesus meet the requirements of his genre."²⁰¹

Anhanged was Cresus, the proude kyng;

¹⁹⁸ "In your foolish response, when you explain my dream to me in this way, you have served me with great lies; for know that this noble dream, to which you want to put a false gloss, should be understood according to the letter." Jaeger, 5-6.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

²⁰⁰ Various critics see in the *Nun's Priest's Tale* a free will apologia that counters the Monk's Fortune-sponsored tragic determinism. See for instance: Lynn Staley Johnson, "'To Make in Som Comedye': Chauntecleer, Son of Troy." *The Chaucer Review* Vol. 19, No. 3 (Winter, 1985): 225-244, and, William C. Strange, "The 'Monk's Tale': A Generous View." *The Chaucer Review* Vol. 1, No. 3 (Winter, 1967): 167-180. It seems to me that the debate is- like other potential dramatic and academic themes in the tale- sufficiently displaced from the setting in which machinery serves local rather than metapoetic definitions.

²⁰¹ Jaeger, 9.

His roial trone myghte hym nat availle.
 Tragediës is noon oother maner thyng
 Ne kan in syngyng crye ne biwaille
 But for that Fortune alwey wole assaille
 With unwar strook the regnes that been proude;
 For whan men trusteth hire, thanne wol she faille,
 And covere hir brighte face with a clowde.

(*Monk's Tale*, 2759- 2765)

Chaucer's narrators are intent on killing off a character who is notoriously lucky at the pyre. In the end, Croesus is the literalist of Jean de Meun and the *House of Fame*, the king whisked away from death, a worldly myope who thinks "that a man must be an arrant fool who made no account of present good, but bade men always wait and mark the end,"²⁰² a trickster, a clever escape artist, a man of "ese and blis," and an immortal resident of the Hyperboreans. Of course Croesus is also the skeletal hangman's victim of the *Nun's Priest's Tale*: "Lo Cresus, which that was of Lyde kyng,/ Mette he nat that he sat upon a tree,/ Which signified he sholde ahanged bee?" (31383-3140), but only according to a chicken in whom resides all of Croesus except the one he imagines.

In Chauntecleer's final story, Andromache dreams Hector's death. The version, without classical precedent, comes to Chaucer through *Renart le Contrefait*, Guido delle Colonne, and Dares Phrygius. In *Renart*, she warns Hector,

Sire, n'alez pas ad ce jour
 En bataille ny en estour!
 Se ad ce jour vous y allez,
 Si come des dieux est revellez,

²⁰² Herodotus, 17.

Ochiz serez sans nulle faille²⁰³

(31329- 31333)

And in Phrygius: “When time for fighting returned, Andromache, Hector’s wife, had a dream which forbade Hector to enter the fray. He, however, dismissed this vision as due to her wifely concern.”²⁰⁴ Chaucer might be guilty of vision casting here,²⁰⁵ neither does Pertelote dream his death, nor does she weep when it is told to her. “‘Avoy!’ quod she, ‘fy on yow, hertelees!’” (2908). Instead the role is reversed and Chaucer suffers anxiety attacks over his own dream. “Yet of his look for feere almost I deye.” (2906). Of course Pertelote does go into frenzy during the fox chase, but she is a realist and a fox actually eating her husband is a genuine matter for concern. Furthermore, unlike in Dares Phrygius, there is no parallel for Hector’s rather masculine dismissal of Andromache’s worries. In the first, Chaucer begs her to put him at ease after the dream. His subsequent argumentative rebuttal and rather unconvincing Latin misogyny have as their principal aim the vainglorious reinforcement of his medieval and Sentimental Education rather than fearlessness in the face of death. In the *Iliad* Patroclus foretells Hector’s death before his own at Hector’s hands. “And put away in your heart this other thing that I tell you. You yourself are not one who shall live long, but now already death and powerful destiny are standing beside you, to go down under the hands of Aikos’ great son,

²⁰³ *Le Roman de Renart le Contrefait*, eds. Gaston Raynaud and Henri Lemaître. In *Sources and Analogues*, 478-479. “Sir do not go this day into battle nor into fighting. If on this day you go there, just as it has been revealed by the gods, you will be killed without fail.”

²⁰⁴ Dares Phrygius, *The History of the Fall of Troy*. trans. R. M. Frazer Jr., in *The Trojan War: The Chronicles of Dictys of Crete and Dares the Phrygian*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966): 152.

²⁰⁵ “A mental image or a dream of a highly desirable future state for the organization.” Jay Alden Conger. *The Charismatic Leader: Behind the Mystique of Exceptional Leadership*. (Thousand Oaks: Jossey-Bass publishers, 1989): 38.

Achilleus."²⁰⁶ Hector goes to his death in the *Iliad* in service to the Fates. Once again the end of Hector's story is the beginning of another. Hector's cousin Aeneas, a soldier in his army, survives the Trojan Wars and founds Rome- that Rome lives on in Chaucer's references, saved by Scipio in the Punic Wars and prophesied in a dream to endure until the stone "cut out of the mountain without hands"²⁰⁷ consumes the empires of man leaving only Augustine's Rome beyond Rome.²⁰⁸

And the fourth kingdom shall be strong as iron: forasmuch as iron breaketh in pieces and subdueth all things: and as iron that breaketh all these, shall it break in pieces and bruise. And whereas thou sawest the feet and toes, part of potters' clay, and part of iron, the kingdom shall be divided; but there shall be in it of the strength of the iron, forasmuch as thou sawest the iron mixed with miry clay. And as the toes of the feet were part of iron, and part of clay, so the kingdom shall be partly strong, and partly broken. And whereas thou sawest iron mixed with miry clay, they shall mingle themselves with the seed of men: but they shall not cleave one to another, even as iron is not mixed with clay. And in the days of these kings shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom, which shall never be destroyed: and the kingdom shall not be left to other people, but it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand for ever.²⁰⁹

What has yet to be mentioned is that there is another structural story-within-a story that governs these stories. It governs the entire poem. It may seem idiosyncratic to read Chaucer's stories as romances that meet at the end of the world or the

²⁰⁶ Homer, *Iliad*, (XVI. 851-854). The Iliad of Homer. trans. Richard Lattimore (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1951): 353.

²⁰⁷ Daniel 2:45.

²⁰⁸ See Augustine's *Tractate 4 on the Gospel of John 4.4*. St. Augustine: Tractates on the Gospel of John 1-10. trans. John W. Retting. (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1988): 95-96. Also, Gerhard Pfandl, "Interpretations of the Kingdom of God in Daniel 2:44." *Seminary Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 2, (1992): 249-268.

²⁰⁹ Daniel 2:40-44.

world that ours replaced. However, one finds that it is in the very nature of metaphor- the building block of poetry- to constitute itself in movement teleologically, but, as W.H. Kelaga argues, “without telos.”²¹⁰

Within the realms of signs, i.e., the realm of cognition (construed in the non-mental, non-actual sense) both teleology (as the principle) *and* telos (as the objective) are contained in and involve movement: At each moment of the interaction between the sign and the semiotic *universum*, a telos is constituted and with each moment it is annihilated- via the continuous movement of teleology- into another telos- never an ultimate one.²¹¹

In the same spirit, Travis writes. “I believe that these poets (Chaucer, Alanus, Machaut, and Froissart) all situate their prized poetic figures in a special “other” world, a world that Alanus terms a “place apart.”²¹² He continues, “The quintessential poetic metaphor appears to be retreating as far as possible toward the domain where words and things are one, or even further toward a preverbal and prelogical iconicity where *res* simply represents *res*.”²¹³ Alfred David writes, “The very success of the medieval poet’s fiction, therefore, will tend to distance us from any reality that is not of his own making.”²¹⁴ Chaucer writes in the *moralitas* on jangling *Manciple’s Tale*, “Thyng that is seyde is seyde, and forth it gooth.” (*Manciple’s Tale*, 355). We understand its shared philosophy to one of the cognitive false exits at the end the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale*: “That jangleth whan he sholde holde his pees.” (3435). “Not speaking” becomes an antiphrastic metonym for poetry, a language that is silent in history. Alain muses, “It is no cause for wonder if Prudence withdraws from the lists,

²¹⁰ W.H. Kalaga, “Semiosis, continuity, teleology.” *Semiotica* Vol. 106, No. 3/4. (1995): 270.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*

²¹² Travis, *Disseminal*, 178.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 178-179.

²¹⁴ Alfred David, *The Strumpet Muse*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976): 6.

faced with matters that are so far beyond the dominion of mother Nature that they rise above her course, cause the mind to fail, the intellect to come to a standstill, the reason to grow numb, wisdom to totter, Tullius himself to be silent, Maro's Muse to fall dumb, Aristotle to droop, Ptolemey's sense to grow dull."²¹⁵ Where does a "thyng that is seyð" in poetry go? It goes along the path of Kelaga's symbol, a symbol that steamrolls each successive telos through its own teleology, annihilating every predicate on its way back to being. At some point, but in a single instant, history runs out of predicates, a sign marches on to a new world, and a silence falls. It is a paradox though. Because metaphor does have a telos in medieval Neoplatonism, but that telos is, to use Travis' phrase, a "special other world." That special other world is an unspoilt infinity that bookends a contingent finity. The paradox is this, if something has a telos in the Mind of God, then it only has teleology. There is no final resting place in a never-ending place.

Thus at the micropoetic level, metaphor "retires or retreats from the field of proper semantics into a space of its own."²¹⁶ At the next level, Chaucer's stories within stories have an insecure purchase on the "lif present." Instead they are poetic eschatologies in miniature. Finally, at the macropoetic level, the *Nun's Priest's Tale* is a tapestry woven of small threads of infinity that, when one steps back to observe the whole, tells a story about infinity never lapsing. The teleological poem is teleological at a cellular level; all of its parts are moving the whole towards an unreachable telos. As Cooper writes, the *Nun's Priest's Tale* is, "A tale that can claim to be the *Canterbury Tales* in miniature. Its layering of stories within stories makes it a story collection itself...Its rheotrical pyrotechnics and its inclusion of almost all the

²¹⁵ Alan de Lille, *Anticlaudianus*, 149-150.

²¹⁶ Travis, *Disseminal*, 178.

significant themes found in the rest of the tales...make it an epitome of the larger work.”²¹⁷ In this sense the patch of fabric that is the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* is identical to the cloth of the *Canterbury Tales*.

We might again return to Travis’ point, that, “Even though each [story] manages to make the very same didactic “point,” they are scarcely the stuff that will transport us toward self-knowledge, Canterbury, or the New Jerusalem- unless, inside their local literary context, we are invited to read them parodically.”²¹⁸ That is a large “unless” though, large enough so that when we do Chauntecleer’s work for him, the ghosts inside of his references either end up looking like him and tell his story, or they tell another story altogether, often one in which dreams in art pave a road out of history that begins at Scipio’s advice to “Know thy-self first immortal” and ends in “that place dere,/ That ful of blis is and of soules clere.” (*Parliament of Fowls*, 73b, 76b-77). The New Jerusalem is a paradoxical moving target- the telos of all teleologies. Chauntecleer can tell a bad story and still manage a good plot of land there because he happens to live inside in a good story, and that good story is really what his bad ones are about, if we understand that *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* is at every instant a poem about the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale*. As a final comment on these dream vision panels, if we hear the noise of static running through Chauntecleer’s visionary literature, it is the voice of Lady Philosophy: “Ye, too, creatures of earth, have some glimmering of your origin, however faint, and though in a vision dim and clouded, yet in some wise, notwithstanding, ye discern the true end of happiness.”²¹⁹ We might

²¹⁷ Cooper, 350.

²¹⁸ Travis, *Disseminal*, 324.

²¹⁹ Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*. trans. H.R. James. (London: George Routledge & Sons Ltd., 1897): 78.

also hear the sage wisdom of Chesterton, "The center of every man's existence is a dream. Death, disease, insanity, are merely material accidents."²²⁰

6. The End of The Argument: Pertelote and Chauntecleer Agree to Agree

Lest there be too much water drawn from stones, Chauntecleer's stories end, "But thilke tale is al to longe to telle,/ And eek it is ny day; I may nat dwelle." (3149-3150). Earlier we considered Fehrenbacher's argument that history muscles it way back into the fantasy of the *Nun's Priest's Tale*. As Chauntecleer's long argument sputters to a stop, the idea of history and fantasy at this point seems to be executed in pantomime. If we imagine- at the level of content- that Chauntecleer's high literature stands in for the *gesamtkunstwerk* through which history so suddenly breaks, then certain possibilities come to life. The most important among them is that the art of the rooster's book report is spectacularly mishandled and that the great historical rupture of that complete vision comes in the form of "I gotta' go it's ny day." Neither literature nor history flies too close to the sun in this permutation, but Chauntecleer's rather important two-hundred line filibuster has something that "ny day" does not: the antiphrastic behavior of the source material that he fails to marshal, sources that imagine oracular dreams as agents of Reality and not history. The pressing "ny day" is a retreat back from the edges of intuition to understanding. This may seem unfair, as up to this point only "laxatyves" have functioned metonymically. That is perhaps the reason for the verses that immediately follow.

²²⁰ G.K. Chesterton, "The Position of Sir Walter Scott," in *Twelve Types : A Book of Essays*. (London: Arthur L. Humphreys, 1902): 183.

Shortly I seye, as for conclusioun,
 That I shal han of this avisioun
 Adversitee; and I seye forthermoor
 That I ne telle of laxatyves no stoor,
 For they been venymes, I woot it weel;
 I hem diffye, I love hem never a deel!

(3151-3156)

A few things can be teased out from Chauntecleer's conclusion: He sufficiently proves to himself his one main point: "I shal han of this avisioun adversitee." But "death" rather than "adversitee" was the main point of his dream panels. Either "adversitee" is simply the broad category under which 'deadly fox attack' falls or it is an unconscious softening of his conclusion due to the fact that many of his sources escape definite extinction (Croesus) or because some of his dreams barely predict death (Pharaoh's famine dreams, Joseph's dreams of preferment). He refuses laxatives because they are poisonous, a conclusion he determines literature-independent, that is, he seems to have arrived at that opinion due to his knowledge of laxatives rather than his knowledge of St. Kenelm. These lead to the main problem of Chauntecleer's rebuttal: even if the bird refuses Pertelote's solution to dreams, the refusal takes place at an insufficient level of abstraction. Because of this, it does not participate except by way of reversal towards the philosophy that defines itself antithetically to the poem's naturalist interlocutory rhetoric.

Mistranslated Latin and Cato's Last Goodbye

Therefore, at the very literal level, Pertelote recommends laxatives and Chauntecleer refuses them. At the level of method, Pertelote offers a naturalistic solution that Chauntecleer counters through literary *Argumentum ad Verecundiam*. However, at a higher level in pursuit of the poem's form we realize that Chauntecleer's rhetoric towards laxative renunciation lacks definitive embarrassment from the rhetorical premium on history that travels through the Monk, Widow, Pertelote, and other narrative voices of the tale. It begins when he transfers Cato's authority to the authors of those "olde books" who, so the argument goes, "han wel founded by experience that dremes been signifigaciouns." The argument, not necessarily dead on arrival, then fails to achieve lift-off despite the literature of Macrobius, Cicero, and Jean de Meun. The conclusion, hardly the product of the inevitable force of logic, ends with an ironic victory in which Chauntecleer upholds the figures of dreams and against natural interpretation. It is an ironic victory because the philosophy of the poem also denies the candidacy of laxatives to act as foil to the anagogical future glimpsed in dreams. But it does so in spite of the bird, not in tandem. It is also ironic because Pertelote wins the argument. She locates symbols in history and Chauntecleer retreats from literature back to history.

'Now let us speke of myrthe, and stynte al this.

Madame Pertelote, so have I blis,

Of o thyng God hath sent me large grace;

For whan I se the beautee of youre face,

Ye been so scarlet reed aboute youre yen,

It maketh al my drede for to dyen;'

(3157-3162)

Chauntecleer aims for heaven itself, falters, and retires for some “myrthe.” Perhaps there is a faint whiff of W.C. Fields, ‘I’d like to see Paris before I die... Philadelphia will do.’²²¹ Chauntecleer exchanges one Socrates for another and cedes the speculative attack on “the unexamined life”²²² for the “philosopher’s cheese.”²²³ As Cicero’s interlocutor says in *De Divinatione*, Socrates and Plato “gave no reason,” while Epicurus “says what he thinks.”²²⁴ Chauntecleer settles back into understanding, the “myrthe” and “blis” of the Franklin’s narrative strategies. “To lyven in delit was evere his wone,/ For he was Epicurus owene sone,/ That heeld opinoun that pleyn delit/ Was verray felicitee parfit.” (*General Prologue*, 335-338).

However, Chauntecleer interrupts his Epicurean retirement with one last (somewhat) academic gasp. “For al so siker as *In principio,/ Mulier est hominis confusio./* Madame, the sentence of this Latyn is,/ ‘Womman is mannes joye and al his blis.” (3163-3166). This is the point at which we finally wave farewell to Cato. As I mentioned earlier, the structure is Cato-argument-Cato. The mode of wisdom represented by the *Distichs* bookends Chauntecleer’s literature. Pertelote loses the floor to her husband when she references him. We observe that Cato’s wisdom aligns with the natural linguistic and interpretive perspectives in the poem. Chauntecleer launches his own antithetical investigation by referring himself to men of greater literary authority. The argument is unsuccessful and Chauntecleer returns to the world of practical wisdom. The way he checks back in is with a Latin exercise, Latin he probably learned copying Cato’s *Distichs*. This is not an interpretation of the bad Latin, merely a signpost that it is harder than the average poetic narrator might think

²²¹ *My Little Chickadee*. Dir. Edward F. Cline. Perf. W.C. Fields, Mae West, Joseph Calleia. Universal Pictures, 1940. Film.

²²² Plato, *Apology*. trans. Harold North Fowler. (London: William Heinemann, 1953): 133.

²²³ Apuleius, *Golden Ass*. Kenney, 17.

²²⁴ Cicero, *De Divinatione* (I.xxx.62). Falconer, 293.

to free one's speculation of the machinery of experience, from "Just what awake was most desired by you."²²⁵

One can take many views of Chauntecleer's Latin. Stephen Manning argues that, "surely it is funnier if, after such a magnificent display, he has totally exhausted his learning."²²⁶ Also on team Chauntecleerian naïveté is George R. Petty Jr., who proposes,

From previous actions in the tale we know Chauntecleer is susceptible to such errors, for his moral foolishness is developed through misinterpretations of texts. Chauntecleer's sexual desire for Pertelote not only mixes up his Latin, but distracts him from his own learned discourse on dreams. Later his pride keeps him from understanding the fox's flattery. But these are not sophisticated performative misconstructions. Just the reverse, these mistakes are ridiculous, and illustrative of Chauntecleer's naïveté.²²⁷

Others critics argue that the mistranslation is deliberate. Bonnie Wheeler writes, "Chauntecleer's 'translation' of the traditional misogynistic maxim- woman is man's ruin- is a gross put purposeful misreading of the Latin, since he has already demonstrated his familiarity with both Macrobius and Virgil."²²⁸ Wendy Harding argues, "He (Chauntecleer) is a devoted servant of Venus, "goddess of pleasure"... The clash between sexual drive and learned reasoning is illustrated by

²²⁵ Cato, *Distich* (II:31), Chase, 29.

²²⁶ Stephen Manning, "Fabular Jangling and Poetic Vision in the *Nun's Priest's Tale*." *South Atlantic Review* Vol. 52, No. 1 (January, 1987): 5.

²²⁷ George R. Petty Jr., "Power, Deceit, and Misinterpretation: Uncooperative Speech in the 'Canterbury Tales.'" *Chaucer Review* Vol. 27, No. 4 (1993): 416-417.

²²⁸ Bonnie Wheeler, Representations of the Feminine in the Middle Ages. (Dallas: Academia Press, 1993): 15.

Chauntecleer's deliberate mistranslation of "*Mulier est hominis confusio*."²²⁹ Other critics emphasize the philosophical provenance to Genesis. Pelen writes,

That Chaucer should be concerned with man's fall seems clear from the reference to "In principio" (VII 3163) which draws our attention to the opening of Genesis as much as to the opening of the Gospel of St. John, and later to the Priest's own imprecation following the appearance of the "col-fox" in Chauntecleer's barnyard. The cock, the Priest declares, has taken the counsel of his wife (3253) in ignoring his dream about the fox, and he adds:

Wommennes conseils been ful ofte colde;
Wommannes conseil broghte us first to wo
And made Adam fro Paradys to go,
Ther as he was ful myrie and wel at ese.

(3256-59)²³⁰

Peter Travis and Patrizia Grimaldi Pizzorno take the problems of language and translation as central interpretive obstacles. Travis writes, "In my judgment the most productive way of beginning to respond to the translation exercise is to read it as a heuristic parody of the very activity of translation itself."²³¹ Elsewhere, "By the late fourteenth century, the words *confusio* and *confuse* were technical terms referring to referential ambiguities of language."²³² He concludes, "Thus it is apparent that the more carefully we read this innocent-looking Latin tag, the more resistant it proves to

²²⁹ Wendy Harding, *Drama, Narrative and Poetry in the Canterbury Tales*. (Toulouse: Presses Universitaires du Mirail: 2003): 229.

²³⁰ Pelen, "The Escape of Chaucer's Chauntecleer: A Brief Reevaluation." *The Chaucer Review*, Vol. 36, No. 4 (2002): 330.

²³¹ Travis, *Disseminal*, 95.

²³² Joseph A. Dane, "Mulier est hominis confusio: Note on Chaucer's Nun's Priest's Tale, line 3164." *Notes and Queries* Vol. 39 No. 3 (1992): 276. Quoted in Travis, *Disseminal*, 100.

be to any kind of truly 'accurate' translation."²³³ Pizzorno's focus on the problem of translation takes different route. She writes,

I believe that the "gentil" cock knows his Latin very well and that his so-called "mistranslation" is the correct translation of the parodic *etymologia composita* of the word *confusio*. Employing Varro's and Isidore's method of voluntary derivation, the anthropomorphized cock deconstructs- so to speak- *confusio*; treating its syllables as units of sound and meaning he gives the *etymologia composita* of "confusio" and reveals through the appropriate translation its metaphorical import, which is the exact opposite of the one intended by Vincent of Beauvais.²³⁴

Next Pizzorno identifies a strategy that one could hardly call far-fetched when held up to the *Miller's Tale*,

"Joy and bliss" obviously cannot be a direct translation of *confusio*; rather it is the translation of its *etymologia composita*: "Con/fusio"-that is, *con* (OF "woman's genitalia" [Latin *cunnus*, "wedge"]) and *foison* (OF "extreme abundance") [Latin *fusio*, "a pouring out"]. The etymological pun on *confusio* is reinforced by a metaphor which rests on a metonymy. That "woman = confusion" is a metaphor is clear enough; it is also clear that a phonic identity exists between *confusio* and *con/foison*. The words used by the cock in his translation of *con* and *foison* are 'joye" and "blyss"; in the language of the troubadours, they refer to the "gueredon" for the service of love, specifically the woman's sexual parts and the man's orgasm (figuratively, a *fusionem*).

Perhaps, it is possible to see in Chauntecleer's Latin all of these perspectives, even if doing so makes it difficult to find a unified way out. For instance, whether the

²³³ Travis, *Disseminat*, 101.

²³⁴ Patrizia Grimaldi Pizzorno, "Chauntecleer's Bad Latin." *Exemplaria* Vol. 4, No. 2 (1992): 400.

mistranslation was accidental or deliberate, Chauntecleer's mistake occurs according to a larger and unobserved philosophy. Beginning at the bottom and working upwards, Chauntecleer, could have accidentally or professionally botched the Latin in service to a rather nauseating seduction. Dane writes, "Chauntecleer is attempting to seduce Pertelote, and says, 'It's the Gospel truth: *©#(\$*%&!_\$(*#&%)(%); madame, this means "woman is man's joy and bliss"! If there is a social law in the interpretation of language here, it would be: 'In matters of seduction, the literal meaning of language is irrelevant.'"²³⁵ He continues, "What Chaucer has constructed here is a situation in which any foreign phrase, or for that matter, any English phrase, would mean 'woman is man's joy and bliss'. The actual colour of Pertelote's eyes is not at issue when Chauntecleer calls them red. What is at issue is the language required to allow Pertelote to consider herself seduced."²³⁶ As concerns "Chauntecleer, Latin lover," either scenario is satisfactory, though if we fall on the side of a deliberate mistranslation, the sheer meanness of it inflates, which is a pleasant effect. In either case, Petty Jr.'s evaluation can be useful: "Chauntecleer's sexual desire for Pertelote not only mixes up his Latin, but distracts him from his own learned discourse on dreams."²³⁷ Chauntecleer's desire for Pertelote does mix up his Latin at some level, though that level may have more to do with philosophy of Croesus' divinely ill-received sensual rebuke of Solon's philosophy of ends. Meanwhile, even if Chauntecleer tries to score a cheap win at Pertelote's expense, in the context of the poem any achievement surrounding his mistranslation is beleaguered first by the rather overwhelming intellectual superiority of her argument,

²³⁵ Dane, 278.

²³⁶ Ibid.

²³⁷ Petty Jr., 216.

and then by the philosophically rich nature of the Latin tag itself in relation to the epic failure of his literary rhetoric. Whether Chauntecleer understands Latin or not, the more interesting point seems to be how the lines function independent of a character-study of the rooster. Nonetheless, there is nothing barring us from imagining Chauntecleer in a more or less unscrupulous light- manipulative *séducteur* or bumbling first date- as we advance abstractions towards the emerging epistemology of this important mistranslation. Along the way we encounter the problem of literary misogyny.

Wheeler writes, “Chauntecleer’s ‘translation’ of the traditional misogynistic maxim- woman is man’s ruin- is a gross but purposeful misreading of the Latin, since he has already demonstrated his familiarity with both Macrobius and Virgil.”²³⁸ Besides representing a familiar literary topos that appears throughout Chaucer’s poetry we also recognize a theological misstep, “Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned.”²³⁹ And if we observe in the misogyny the common Chaucerian interlocutory retreat from poetic speculation, then we also understand that Chauntecleer jumps from one sinking ship to another, from a stalled literary defense to the psychological comfort of a mistaken theological perspective and an ironic trope in literature. Jeremy Dimmick writes, “Several constituencies could regard Ovid’s books as fit for burning. Christine de Pizan (c. 1363-c. 1430) takes them as a threat to the dignity of women: for her, Ovid is the father of a tradition of clerical misogyny in love poetry whose chief modern son is Jean de Meun in the *Roman de la Rose*.”²⁴⁰

²³⁸ Wheeler, 15.

²³⁹ Romans 5:12.

²⁴⁰ Jeremy Dimmick, “Ovid and the Middle Ages: Authority and Poetry.” in The Cambridge Companion to Ovid. (New York: Cambridge University Press: 2007): 267.

Nonetheless we find in Ovid that the trope is permeable. Our discussion of *Amores* I: XIII showed that Ovid's lover wants to keep women in bed to stop them from spinning like the Fate Clotho, from weaving language and life. In which case, the misogyny of the Ovidian lover, upon which Jean de Meun and Chaucer repeatedly draw, is a strategy of reverse alchemy that turns Clothos into sex-toys. Misogyny becomes a tactic that is deployed to sublimate those responsible for language's unspoilt origins to a world governed by failed love rhetoric. In as much as we detect misogynistic strategies in the language of Chauntecleer and other narrators, we also recognize its instability in the face of the symbolic power of the female poetic mission it attempts to disrupt. Thus when Wendy Harding argues that "He (Chauntecleer) is a devoted servant of Venus, "goddess of pleasance,"²⁴¹ I understand it not according to the conflict she proposes: "The clash between sexual drive and learned reasoning."²⁴² I understand it to function in a like manner to the traditional irony of Ovid's Clotho-caging lovers who forgo a universal language of love, an art of love, in the tergiversatory attempt to reify a laughable and ultimately tubercular virility as the soul's new contract with eternity. "Learned reasoning" is at once too socially limited and too generous praise for Chauntecleer's book report. The philosophical function of language in art that is sponsored by the less-illustrious Venus of the double Venus tradition helps to redirect our critical focus and assimilate the moment as another analog extension of a recurring theme in the Chaucerian performance.

It seems to me that a strong interpretation would elaborate all of these assumptions and take place at the cross section of Travis and Pizzorno's concern for language and translation and Pelen's position that the Latin travels back to a time

²⁴¹ Harding, 229.

²⁴² Ibid.

before Genesis 3. If it is as Pizzorno argues and the “con/fusio” of a woman is metonymously the “wedge pouring out” and thus co-epistemological to Chauntecleer’s eventual “joye and blis” then we see further reinforcement of Chauntecleer’s typical Chaucerian withdrawal from the speculative to the sensual. Like Dorigen, the path goes away from art and towards natural understanding: “But, Lord, thise grisly feendly rokkes blake,/ That semen rather a foul confusion,” (*Frankiln’s Tale* 868-869) to “Hire freendes sawe that it was no disport/ To romen by the see, but discomfort/ And shopen for to pleyen somwher elles.” (895-897). Then the quick jump from natural understanding to sex: “And with that word he fley doun fro the beem...He fethered Pertelote twenty tyme.” (3172, 3177). The “joye and blis” of the Franklin’s Epicurean experience ends at the foot of the Wife’s bed, intellectually and practically reborn in Pertelote’s unconcern for the Boethian “glimmering of your origin, however faint,”²⁴³ and her rather literal interpretation of “Defraud ye not one the other,”²⁴⁴ to which John Gill adds the following gloss, “refusing to pay the conjugal debt.”²⁴⁵

Thus it is possible that, “*In principio, Mulier est hominis confusio*” becomes a split reference, a fork in the road; one path is a return to the world and the other the return to a lost one. Both happen at once in the poem. Both have to happen at once for either to exist. Poetry begins in exile- its not much of a pilgrimage that does not assert that something better for the soul lies at the end of a long walk. Edmond Reiss writes, “The necessary inadequacy of language made its manipulation an ironic craft. Man's understanding of his limited understanding, his recognition of his inevitable

²⁴³ Boethius, *Consolation*. James, 78.

²⁴⁴ 1 Corinthians 7:5.

²⁴⁵ John Gill, *An Exposition of the Old and New Testaments Vol. II*. (London: Matthews and Leigh, 1809): 643.

ignorance, is ironic in itself; even more ironic is man's attempt to evaluate himself and his world; but most ironic of all is man's attempt to create art."²⁴⁶ When Travis and Dane remark upon the 14th Century's deployment of *confusio* to interrogate the "referential ambiguities of language" Reiss' position begins to make sense of the irony's necessary and, in a way, heroic push against the futility of reference. If there is a way out of Chaucer's Latin, one must work backwards from "joye and blis" to "*Mulier est hominis confusio*" until we arrive at "*In principio*," because reading a sentence backwards takes us back to its beginning, and reading this sentence backwards takes us back to the very beginning. Pizzorno argues, "With his *In principio*, the cock recalls the Edenic life when Adam conversed with angels and language was whole and perfect."²⁴⁷ Travis writes, "Augustine's heart-wrenching difficulties derive in a large part from a host of metaphysical complexities concerning the nature of time and eternity, since both modalities meet at the precise point of the world's beginning, its *in principio*."²⁴⁸ This is why Pelen's initial position holds in spite of the dramatic, sexual, social, grammatical, and logical stuff of the of the rooster's Latin, "That Chaucer should be concerned with man's fall seems clear from the reference to '*In principio*,'"²⁴⁹ because history in the poem, like language itself, is saturated with the exit from its own death, its own inability to philosophically exist and to reconstitute itself as everlasting. The *Nun's Priest's Tale*, by referring itself to *In principio* sets itself up as both the first poem ever written and the last. Because Eden lies at the end of history, not just the beginning. Anamnesis recovers knowledge that predates visceral existence in order honorably to retreat from it- to "the place

²⁴⁶ Edmond Reiss, "Medieval Irony." *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 42, No. 2 (April-June, 1981): 216.

²⁴⁷ Pizzorno, 401.

²⁴⁸ Travis, *Disseminal*, 98.

²⁴⁹ Pelen, *Escape of Chaucer's Chaucer*, 330.

which souls... must proceed, or rather, must return.²⁵⁰ Thus, there is a second philosophy in the poem that carries through Monk, Widow, and Tale that is not naturalistic. It cuts the Monk's history short, it unfolds an invisible Golden Age out of a widow's farm, and causes a simple one-point sermon to spring so many leaks that join up with the river at the end of the world. A bird cannot even mistranslate a throwaway piece of Latin without the poem juggernauting onward toward the unknowable. The shuttered Golden Age continues to "measure the disappointments"²⁵¹ of the world that replaced it.

When Chauntecleer flies "doun fro the beam" (3172) he flies in the wrong direction: away from the beginning of his Latin towards the end, from *In principio* to *confusio*: "For it was day, and eke his hennes alle." (3172-3173). "He fethered Pertelote twenty-tyme." (3177). The poem disproves the principle before the principle existed: "The ability to make love frivolously is the chief characteristic which distinguishes human beings from the beasts,"²⁵² which might also involve a general point made by Ian Bishop that, "There is more than a hint or two that the author of this tale was, in certain respects, a Darwinian by prolepsis."²⁵³ The dream discussion begins and ends as a Chaucerian pillow talk. Two seemingly opposite theories of dreams turn out to be part of the same narratological strategy, united by a final feathering. Bishop writes, "Having <<mastered>> her in academic debate, he feels entitled to master her sexually."²⁵⁴ It is oft remarked that Pertelote never speaks again in the poem. This must be because she has earned her rest. She taught Chauntecleer to

²⁵⁰ Macrobius, *Dream of Scipio*, 82.

²⁵¹ Pelen, *Latin Poetic Irony*, 8.

²⁵² Heywood C. Broun, *It Seems to Me*. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1935): 13.

²⁵³ Ian Bishop. "The Nun's Priest's Tale and the Liberal Arts." *The Review of English Studies, New Series*. Vol. 30, No. 119. (August, 1979): 257. Brackets mine.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 266-267.

delay the inevitable; the rooster is ready for the early and more luminous era of his Tithonian eternity. That is how I understand such a heroic intellectual finish to a long defense of dreams: “I am so ful of joye and of solas,/ That I diffye bothe sweven and dreem.” (3170-3171).

The New Widow’s World and The Rusty Golden Age

When Phaeton grabs the reigns of his father’s chariot the whole world burned.²⁵⁵ In typical Chaucerian fashion, Chauntecleer’s attempt to steal a sunrise fails to catch fire and ends with a morning stroll and a sitting ovation from the audience of art. It is as though the poem briefly rewinds to the beginning. Once Chauntecleer renounces vision and dream he lives out a short life of natural bliss: eating, clucking, feathering.

And with that word he fley down fro the beem,
 For it was day, and eke his hennes alle,
 And with a chuck he gan hem for to calle,
 For he hadde founde a corn, lay in the yerd.
 Real he was, he was namoore aferd.
 He fethered Pertelote twenty tyme,
 And trad hire eke as ofte, er it was pryme.

(3172-3175)

Chauntecleer’s chickenness is palpable. If we imagine that the Widow has been occupied with her daily exercise until this point, it might also be useful to imagine that she peaks through her window for a quick glance at the coop, because the tale

²⁵⁵ *Metamorphoses* II.

unevenly juxtaposes two rhetorics here, one in which Chaucer struts like a lion and another in which it is twice mentioned that he clucks because he has found a seed. It recalls the incongruous “bour” and “halle” of the Widow’s cottage. “He looketh as it were a grym leoun,/ And on his toos he rometh up and doun;/ Hym deigned nat to sette his foot to grounde./ He chukketh whan he hath a corn yfounded.” (3179-3182). In fact we might detect three distinct strategies here. The first carries over from Chaucer’s new Epicurean lease on life since his descent from Parnassus, “Real he was, he was namore aferd.” The second carries over from Herodotus’ Croesus, the man of gold who retreats from the speculation of ends and takes comfort in the perks of nobility. Jaeger writes, “Chaucer is also like Croesus in lapsing into a complacency based in present comfort and, in animal terms, wealth...Like Croesus who futilely trusts in his “roial trone,” Chaucer is reassured by his own sense of royalty.”²⁵⁶ Jaeger sees a “repeated linking of Chaucer’s “royalty” to his sense of invincibility.”²⁵⁷ The third seems to partake of those stories in which toys come alive at night and drop dead in their tracks when someone walks in the door. Chaucer, lecturer in literature, flies down from a high beam in victory, summons his hens to his side...and then clucks over a corn. In take two, Chaucer, grim lion, roams up and down his kingdom, deigns not to set a foot upon the ground...and then clucks over a corn. The panel ends swiftly with mixed message. “Thus roial, as a prince in his halle,/ Leve I this Chaucer in his pasture,/ And after wol I telle his aventure.” (3184-3186). The narrator speaks to two audiences; to one Chaucer is bathed in noble fearlessness and to the other, he is hungry for a corn. Neither of these

²⁵⁶ Jaeger, 12.

²⁵⁷ Ibid., 13.

permutations kicks very strongly against the growing sense that the history narrative is coming in spurts now rather than as a sustained philosophy.

Thus for the second time an aborted quotidian unfolds a Golden Age. Chaucer's brief tenure inside the "joye and blis" at the end of his Latin gets the hook and "*In principio*" enters to pick up the pieces. Throughout criticism, the term "mock" precedes almost every other word used to describe the genre of the *Nun's Priest's Tale*. It is especially useful at this important turning point, because now that the long argument on dreams has come to so satisfactory a close the real dada begins, or, what Piero Boitani describes as a "succession of verbal fireworks."²⁵⁸ In this new "Eden raised in the waste Wilderness"²⁵⁹ Chaucer and his seven wives stand very momentarily transfixed.

Whan that the month in which the world bigan,
 That highte March, whan God first maked man,
 Was compleet, and passed were also,
 Syn March [was gon], thritty dayes and two,
 Bifel that Chaucer in al his pryde,
 That in the sign of Taurus hadde yronne
 Twenty degrees and oon, and somewhat moore,
 And knew by kynde, and by noon other loore,
 That it was pryde, and crew with blissful stevene.
 "The sonne," he seyde, "is clomben up on hevene
 Fourty degrees and oon, and moore ywis.

(3187-3199)

²⁵⁸ Piero Boitani, "'My Tale is of a Cock,' or The Problems of Literal Interpretation," in *Literature and Religion in the Later Middle Ages: Philological studies in Honor of Siegfried Wenzel*, eds. Richard G. Newhauser and John A. Alford. (Binghamton: Medieval & Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1995): 34.

²⁵⁹ John Milton, *Paradise Regained*. (Philadelphia: Henry Altemus, 1899): 23.

What Chauntecleer's pride has to do with this famously frustrating bit of timekeeping seems to be a false start on a theme that begins in earnest later. Meanwhile, two voices speak, beginning with the narrator and ending with a hand-off to Chauntecleer. Chauntecleer offers only one scientific observation: "The sonne... is clomben up on hevene/ Fourty degrees and oon, and more ywis" and makes quick business of redirecting his rhetoric towards "blis." For our purposes, we need not linger long on Travis' detailed deconstruction of this inconclusive *chronographia* that yields multiple dates. Those critics working with editions that read, "Syn march was [gon]" "thritty dayes and two" were passed calculate May 2 and May 3. Pearsall and Travis maintain a "Syn March [bigan]" reading. While Pearsall still proposes May 3,²⁶⁰ Travis argues that this causes the dates to fall in April. He offers April 1 and April 2.²⁶¹

May 3 is, perhaps, the most intellectually satisfying of the possible days. Besides being "the all-time favorite among Chaucerians,"²⁶² occurring in the *Knight's Tale*, *Troilus and Criseyde*, and the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, it thematically recalls Ovid's *Fasti*. John P. McGall argues,

The contexts surrounding the May 3 date, therefore, do have a common denominator: on this day the effects of irrational love, or concupiscent desires, are keenly felt. It would seem, then, that Chaucer uses the date because he is aware that Ovid assigned May 3 to the goddess Flora and her celebrations. Ovid and many other writers make it amply clear that the festivities of Flora were especially wild and libidinous. They included not simply honors to the "floures," mentioned by Arcite and Chauntecleer, but also such revelries in

²⁶⁰ Derek Pearsall, *The Nun's Priest's Tale: Part 9 of A Variorum Edition of the Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, Vol. 2, *The Canterbury Tales*. (Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1983): 205-208.

²⁶¹ Travis, *Disseminal*, 287

²⁶² *Ibid.*, 286.

honor of the flowers of the flesh that they once even shamed the populace of Rome. In modern terms, May 3 was the festival day on which all the call-girls and drabs put on a massive and barren display.²⁶³

He continues,

But perhaps we should confine ourselves to the *Fasti*, for we can be fairly sure that Chaucer had this much in mind...He (Ovid) notes that the festival attracted to the Circus a multitude of prostitutes, for Flora "warns us to use life's flower, while it still blooms; for the thorn, she reminds us, is flouted when the roses have fallen away."... Finally, the festivity included hunting "the unwarlike roes and shy hares" rather than the Libyan lionesses, for as Flora tells Ovid, the woods are not her province, "but gardens and fields, where no fierce beast may come."²⁶⁴

McGall's reading squares with the passage on many levels. Chauntecleer's hurried exit from the narrator's scientific date to the "blis" "revel" and "solas" of this rusted Golden Age's festival flora and fauna: "Madame Pertelote, my worldes blis,/ Herkneþ this blisful briddes how they synge,/ And se fresshe floures how they sprynge;?/ Ful is myn herte or revel and solas!" (3200-3203). Flora is "the mistress of Venus;"²⁶⁵ in her gardens and fields "no fierce beast may come." Ovidian sensuality is like Chaucerian sensuality, functioning aporetically in pursuit of artistic intuition rather than experience while luring interlocutors into a false sense of security based in the knowledge of body.

But other considerations complicate a sure May 3. A lament later in the poem reads,

²⁶³ John P. McGall. "Chaucer's May 3rd." *Modern Language Notes*, Vol. 76, No. 3 (March, 1961): 203-204.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 204-205.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 205.

O Venus, that art goddesse of plesaunce,
 Syn that thy servant was this Chauntecleer,
 And in thy servyce dide al his poweer,
 Moore for delit than world to multiplye,
 Why woldestow suffre hym on thy day to dye?
 (3342-3346)

This might confirm or confuse matters. Flora is a servant of Venus, and *Ludi Floralis* took place between April 28 and May 3. But Venus' own day was the *Veneralia* on April 1. Thus Travis and McGall's dates coincide with festivals of Venus. Meanwhile, in keeping with both the willy-nilly sacramental imagery and the poem's more consistent primitivism, the narrator twice claims the poem takes place on Friday. "And on a Friday fil al this meschaunce." (3341). Pearsall writes, "Friday is chosen for many reasons: it is the day of Venus...and traditionally an unlucky day. It is a day of change and the unexpected...It is also the day of the Crucifixion and therefore, in the synchronized dating beloved of biblical exegetes, the day of the Fall."²⁶⁶ As for Good Friday and the Easter cycle, this could suggest any date between the vernal equinox and a full moon, which provides a window of March 22 to April 25-unhelpful to May 3 and accommodating to April 1 and April 2. It should be noted that calculating the date of Easter, a moveable feast, is itself a notoriously tricky affair based in a soft landing point between lunar and ecclesiastical calendars, the difference between a full moon and a Paschal full moon, various historical interventions by the

²⁶⁶ Pearsall, 237.

Church to unify celebrations, and the differences between Julian, Gregorian, and Jewish calendars.²⁶⁷

Nonetheless May 3 is philosophically convincing. But if it is as Travis contends- thirty two days “syn March [bigan]”- then we cannot lean our entire weight upon it. Instead, Travis argues,

The time of the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, it's fictive present, seems to hover somewhere between the ending of day one (April 1) and the beginning of the next (April 2). But what is most weird is that this unit of time which we have determined to call the fictive present exists as an instant *before the ending of the past* and *after the beginning of the future*. While a resolution to this strange paradox remains a possibility, I leave its achievement to other readers. For it should by now be clear that Chaucer's major point is heuristic: that is, his parodic *incipit/destinit* sophism is meant first and foremost to raise questions about the nature of time and the complexities of its mensuration, rather than to posit a date upon which the *Nun's Priest's Tale* happens.²⁶⁸

For our purposes we take away the following important philosophical structures from both possible dates. The first is simply that we observe language and time to be insufficiently determinative in a poem. Nether is language always sufficiently determinative in life, so it seems, by virtue of the imprecision of language to transmit its own object, much less its lost object. Meanwhile, if all of Chaucer's timekeeping panels in the *Tales* are flawed, perhaps two jokes exist side-by-side. In one, time and language cannot represent themselves in art according to their own powers of enquiry. In the other, we intuit that a very precise date- such as May 3- is

²⁶⁷ See, for instance, Mario Aloisio, “The Calculation of Easter day, and the Origin and Use of the Word *Computer*.” *Annals of the History of Computing*. Vol. 26, No. 3 (July-September 2004): 42-49.

²⁶⁸ Travis, *Disseminial*, 295-296.

not conclusive *in itself* to steer the poem's form back towards the literal tools by which it was determined. What I mean is that Ovid's Flora is a sponsor of Chaucer's new Eden. This occurs either because the *chronographia* falls exactly on May 3rd or more likely because it is by creed instead of habit that Chaucer's pleasure gardens parade themselves as symbolically undefiled in the manner of Jean de Meun and Ovid. The poem's literary sensuality was a brute figural fact long before the narrator catches up with it by calculation. The common classical literary misadventure of a bodily Golden Age sustains this chicken's Yeerd Regained as much as it would Amant's *jardin*. Therefore, even a sure date for the *Nun's Priest's Tale* (none such seems to exist) would be a very small voice amidst the loud clash between content and form (Certes, he Jakke Straw and his meynee/ Ne made nevere shoutes half so shrille.)

Of course there is a 'date' to the *Nun's Priest's Tale*. Irony hangs ripe on a low branch in any chronological account of eternity. Travis writes,

It takes little training in logic to appreciate that "March," standing alone, could denote any month by that name in history; and it likewise takes little training to see that that the doubly restrictive identification of this March as "the month in which the world bigan...whan God first maked man" pulls its referential scope powerfully in the direction of the very beginning of human time.²⁶⁹

April 1 and 2 or May 3, assigns a date to a time before time. The fictive present of the tale is a pure present. Naming dates is a game of pin the tail on the donkey, though the donkey here is Balaam's Ass. It is not, as has been argued, because the poem is a new Fall- a new Genesis 3- that it takes place in the unknown epoch of Genesis 1 and 2. It

²⁶⁹ Ibid., 297.

is because art in its medieval Neoplatonic designation never makes it to Genesis 3, only artists do. In this sense, any confusion concerning whether this is a poem about the Fall might be resolved with the simple recommendation that this is a poem about the Fall never taking place. It is a poem that pivots between two dates, but they are the same. In Chauntecleer's stories the date is the end of history. Here it is the long day before history began, Alain de Lille's "true day" before which "the actual day grows dull."²⁷⁰ In both, "the city had no need of the sun."²⁷¹

Perhaps this is why when the passage foreshadows the parodic Fall of Chauntecleer, what begins in dramatic mode then commits itself to rhetoric and epistemology.

But sodeynly hym fil a sorweful cas,
 For evere the latter ende of joye is wo.
 God woot that worldly joye is soone ago;
 And if a rethor koude faire endite,
 He in a cronycle saufly myghte it write
 As for a sovereyn notabilitee.
 Now every wys man, lat him herkne me;
 This storie is also trewe, I undertake,
 As is the book of Launcelot de Lake,
 That wommen holde in ful greet reverence.
 Now wol I torne agayn to my sentence.

(3204-3214)

But desiring rhetoric and epistemology, the metapoetic ends of which I hope to have blurred by this point, to marshal their powers in literal service to the narrator's tragic drama partake more of the *technê* of sophism than of Dante's hopes for an apotheosis

²⁷⁰ Alain de Lille, *Anticlaudianus*, 102.

²⁷¹ Revelation 21:23.

of poetry and *alta fantasia*. Desiring rhetoric to “faire endite” that the “worldly joye is soone ago” enjoys a professionalism missing from Dante’s poetic helplessness when he stares into the sun: “How scant is language, all too weak to frame/ my thoughts! And these are such, that, set beside/ my vision, ‘faint’ is word too weak for them.”²⁷²

The *Nun’s Priest’s Tale*’s sudden shift to a rhetoric aimed toward truth is a curious move. Which of the preceding elements from the passage are as “trewe” as Launcelot de Lake? Some or all of them? What is “this storie” as opposed to the “sentence” to which he returns? Do these 27 lines intend to stand as an independent poetic unit? It seems to raise more questions than it answers. What can be said is that the poem plays antiphrastic definitions of truth off each other. If it is simply that a story in which “evere the latter ende of joye is wo” is as true as another story, then we must grant that the point coheres with Canterbury metapoetic in general in which “the premise upon which every metaphorical construct is grounded is, simply, another metaphor.”²⁷³ Art is the history to which art must be referred. It could be that a flawed *chronographia* is as true as a story about Launcelot, or the truth of Launcelot is only as good as a flawed *chronographia*. If the failure of the *chronographia*, by which I mean its “lie,” is as true as Launcelot, then we are back in the same place, with the lies of history constituting the first principles of artistic truthfulness. If the *chronographia* is simply an equivalent human use of language to Launcelot, then we recognize a different strategy. In one, the *chronographia* reifies itself to the status of art; the other depicts art as co-epistemological to the language of astronomy. Whether the astronomy moves up or the art down, the strategy is the same: somehow

²⁷² Dante, (*Paradiso*, XXXIII: 121-123) *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*. trans. Geoffrey L. Bickersteth. (Oxford: Shakespeare Head Press, 1972): 769.

²⁷³ Travis, “Heliotropes,” 424.

equivalence means that history consolidates linguistic power through a standard of utility. However since the timekeeping in the poem is flawed, its only chance at truth-telling depends upon the claims of Launcelot de Lake's truth. And there is a species of truth the *Nun's Priest's Tale* shares with Launcelot: "Ne ja de riens n'an mentirai,/ se li preudome n'en mentirent/ qui les anciens livres firent."²⁷⁴ As such, perhaps an antithetical system of reification runs through the passage wherein the Edenic era, "the month in which the world bigan," and the incalculable non-linear epoch to which art refers itself is as true as the Launcelot de Lake story. The *chronographia* is true because it is wrong, because it is not able to calculate the incalculable. This seems sturdy tautological ground. Once again, poetry and eternity provide each other with the means by which they refer to each other, by referring to each other. To my mind, the narrator's big finish- that women hold it "ful greet reverence"- only reinforces its epistemological worth if we understand that Ovidian misogyny ironically protects the Fates while parading them dressed in the uneven social rhetoric of sexual domination. F. Anne Payne make the timely comment, "The song and speech of the chickens disturbs [or continues to disturb] him into throwing his setting back to the golden age: "For thilke tyme, as I have understonde,/ Beestes and briddes koude speke and syngne"²⁷⁵ This, along with an Ovidian Genealogy of Misogyny continues the whirlpool like pull of form upon content towards the dawn of the age of Clotho, her satisfaction so far uncluttered by bad love poems.

I eat chickens, therefore, I am

²⁷⁴ "I shall tell no lie, unless the worthy men who wrote the ancient books also lied." *Roman de la Rose*, (15192-15194). Horgan, 235.

²⁷⁵ F. Anne Payne. "Foreknowledge and Freewill: Three Theories in the *Nun's Priest's Tale*." *The Chaucer Review*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (Winter, 1976): 208. Brackets mine.

From the original explosion from the widow's world to the end of the dream exposition, the poem's theory sings at a high pitch. It seems momentarily, and comedically, to sputter in the clucking for corn/victory lap panel and the narratological confusion of how best to achieve a second lift-off into the Golden Age: astronomy, Epicurean "blis," dramatic turns from "joye to wo," rhetoric, epistemology, and a misogynistic relapse scrap over the 27 lines given to them in order to reassert, at the level of content, the art of the "yeerd" according to the newly-minted naturalistic machinery of Chauntecleer and Pertelote's dream debate. And then the col-fox appears. "A col-fox, ful of sly iniquitee,/ That in the grove hadde woned yeres three,/ By heigh ymaginacioun forncast." (3215-3217). His arrival is invested with dramatic expectation. It builds on the similar sense of mystery that surrounds the grizzled but recognizable form of Tithonus passing through plague-riddled Flanders on his never-ending pilgrimage to nowhere. The fox has been here the whole time. "Yeres three" has he dwelled in a symbolically connected grove, neither in the coup, nor as far outside it as the Widow's cottage. He knew Chauntecleer's father. He was "by heigh ymaginacioun forncast."

It is important that we take a position regarding whether the fox that appears is "by heigh imaginacioun forncast," whether it travels through the Macrobian universal to glimpse "things strange and unknown to mortals before this."²⁷⁶ Because it is true that Chauntecleer dreams of a beast that he has never seen. To what extent is the fox something "strange and unknown to mortals before this?"

Withinne our yeerd, wheer as I saugh a beest

²⁷⁶ Macrobius, *Dream of Scipio*, 91.

Was lyk an hound, and wolde han maad areest
 Upon my body, and wolde han me deed.
 His colour was betwixe yelow and reed,
 And tipped was his tayl and bothe his eeris
 With blak, unlyk the remenant of his heeris;
 His snowte small, with glowynge eyen tweye.
 (2899-2905)

Even if we know a fox from experience, Chauntecleer does not. Descartes ponders the problem in his *First Meditation*.

For clearly even painters, when they try to imagine the most unusual sirens or satyrs, cannot assign natures to them which are completely new; rather, they simply mix up the parts of different animals. Even if they happen to think up something so novel that nothing like it was ever seen before- so that it is therefore very clearly fictitious and false- nonetheless, at least the colours from which they paint it must surely be real. In a similar way even if these general things- the eyes, the head, the hands and so on- were imaginary, it must still be admitted that at least some other things are real, that they are even more simple and general and that it is from them, as if from true colours, that all those images of things in our thought, both true and false, are constructed.²⁷⁷

It is true that Chauntecleer's beast vision "mix(es) up the parts of different animals," uses colours from nature, has eyes and a head on which to put them. Descartes would not fault him for it. "Physical nature in general and its extension seem to be of this kind; likewise, the shape of extended things; also the quantity, or their size and number; similarly the place in which they exist, the time through which they last, and

²⁷⁷ René Descartes, *First Meditation. Meditations and other Metaphysical Writings*. trans. Desmond C. Clarke. (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 2003): 20.

similar things.”²⁷⁸ Shape: “lyk an hound.” Quantity: “eyen tweye.” Place: “Withinne our yeerd.” Nevertheless, Chauntecleer, “never erst hadde seyn it with his ye.” (3281). But Chauntecleer does manage something mysterious. He possesses an idea of something he has never seen. In the cause and effect of the *Meditations* only God possesses the ontology- the infinity of substance- by which finite minds necessarily perceive him. “Thus the idea of God is the only one left about which to ask the question: does it contain something that could not have originated from me?...And even though I have an idea of substance from the very fact that I am substance myself, it would not, however, be an idea of an infinite substance because I am finite, unless it originated from some substance that is genuinely infinite.”²⁷⁹ Chauntecleer’s perception of the fox occurs to a certain magic that perhaps would not be accounted for by first principles. The fox does not possess the infinity that would act causally on Chauntecleer’s mind; he is a fox of finite substance that inhabits the world of extension. Nonetheless, he appears to Chauntecleer *a priori*. So ruling out the fox as the prime mover, we are left with some other power by which he is perceived.

Whether the beast Chauntecleer sees is photographically our col-fox matters little. A col-fox appears, just as his dream predicts. It resonates in a rather literal manner with the poem’s Macrobian intellectual heritage. At first glance, it is more impressive than Scipio’s dream. For Scipio’s dream to have equal predictive power, he would have been raised in a city-less world and then one day dreamt of a vast concentration of white things, tall as trees, carved out like grottos, in which people lived, beset by a foreign army that he was somehow destined to save. Initially, Chauntecleer’s predictive purchase on reality is stronger. But does it reflect the

²⁷⁸ Ibid.

²⁷⁹ Ibid., *Third Meditation*, 38.

medieval tradition of “heigh ymaginacioun” by which the text claims the fox is “forncast?” A clarification of terms is desirable. Karl P. Wentersdorf writes,

In light of the comments on predestination which follow only a few lines later (VII 3232-53), most editors take *forncast* in line 3217 to mean 'foreordained', while *heigh ymaginacioun* is interpreted as 'the foreknowledge of the One on high'. Neither Skeat (1894) nor Pollard (1904) saw any need to comment on the line, but Tatlock translates it 'by decree of almighty Providence'; Manly interprets with 'predestined by divine foresight'; Robinson (in his glossary) has 'foreordained' and 'by divine foreknowledge'; Donaldson, 'predestined by divine planning'; and Fisher, 'predestined by divine foresight'. This interpretation is questionable.²⁸⁰

He continues,

The assumption that *forncast* means 'foreordained' has not gone unchallenged. Sisam found in line 3217 an allusion to the Cock's night-time vision, and he offered this gloss: "'foreseen by the exalted imagination'—referring to Chauceteer's dream." This interpretation was later supported by Hamm's observation that the imagination has been associated by many writers, including Plato and St. Augustine, with prophetic visions in the form of dreams; furthermore, the dream visions in Dante's *Divina Commedia* are twice referred to (*Purgatorio* XVII.25, *Paradiso* XXXIII. 142) as *alta fantasia*, and this phrase is, in Hamm's view, "the exact Italian equivalent of Chaucer's 'heigh ymaginacioun.'²⁸¹

Wentersdorf, after refusing to link the phrase with the later textual theme of divine foreknowledge goes on to link it with the later dramatic theme of plotting. This he does by virtue of the insufficient etymological connection between “ymaginacioun”

²⁸⁰ Karl P. Wentersdorf, “*Heigh Ymaginacioun* in the Nun’s Priest’s Tale.” *Studia Neophilologica*. Vol. 52 (1980): 31.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 32.

and dreams in Middle English. But “ymaginacioun” is a mode of perception, like reason. There need not be a forensic etymology, for instance, between “reason” and politics for the two to participate. A satisfactory exit presents itself if we imagine that the phrase is yet another mode of the poem’s unbroken philosophy rather than a thematic prelude to the Priest’s or the Fox’s narrative. Ian Bishop writes,

The col-fox's irruption into the hen-yard is described as having been 'By heigh ymaginacioun forncast' (vII. 3217). 'Heigh ymaginacioun' is a technical term of medieval psychology: it denotes the faculty that enables one to experience a *somnium coeleste* or 'avysioun', as opposed to a natural dream. In sleep, the ordinary imagination was indeed (as Pertelote argues) subject to illusions caused by vapours rising from the stomach (cf. 2923 ff.). But the 'exalted imagination' could, as the result of divine inspiration, experience either a vision of eternal verities or a warning of things that will happen 'in this lif present'. So Chauntecleer's apprehension about his dream seems to be vindicated theoretically as well as in practice.²⁸²

However, as we observed there remains an impasse between “vision(s) of eternal verities” and “a warning of things that will happen ‘in this lif present.’” The difference, perhaps, is the same that separates psychology and psychomachy. The parameters of the impasse are Platonic and Dante is particularly useful here. Travis writes, “For Dante, *alta fantasia* is the human imagination working at its most exalted level, as poetry borders on mystical vision.”²⁸³ Nevertheless, the baptized Icarian art of Dante is overcome. “In the *Purgatorio*, through a dream, Dante’s *alta fantasia* fails to conjure up an image through which it might apprehend the mind of God.”²⁸⁴ Even

²⁸² Bishop, 265.

²⁸³ Travis, *Disseminal*, 322.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

so, "He had gone beyond the world of metaphor and simile into the place of things that *are*, and it was changing him."²⁸⁵

How scant is language, all too weak to frame
 my thought! And these are such, that, set beside
 my vision, 'faint' is word too weak for them
 O Light that aye sole in thyself dost bide,
 sole understand'st thyself, and being self-known,
 self-knowing, lov'st thyself, self-gratified!

...

so I, before that marvel strange and new,
 wished to discover how the image lay
 within the circle, and how joined therto-
 flight too sublime for my own wings to essay,
 had not a flash of insight countervailed
 and struck my blindness into sudden day.
 To the high fantasy here vigour failed,
 but now, as a wheel's turned that never jars,
 Were my desire and will by love impelled,
 the Love that moves the Sun and th'other stars.²⁸⁶

There comes a point at which even "heigh ymaginacioun" and *alta fantasia* cannot artistically define the soul's intuition. But that point is very much beyond the prophecy of a hungry fox. We may grant, at once, that Chaucer predicts the future and that "heigh ymaginacioun" travels beyond it- to "the Love that moves the sun and other stars." To be fair, Dante is a poet of *ascensus* and Chaucer, by appearances, *descensus*. But where some critics read a retreat from epistemology back to ontology, from Fame to Rumour, and heaven to earth, I see only a traditional

²⁸⁵ Neil Gaiman, *Neverwhere*. (New York: Avon Books, 1996): 277.

²⁸⁶ Dante, *Paradiso* (XXXIII: 121-125, 136-145), Bickersteth, 769.

Platonic topos of flippancy towards the wonderful not entirely dissimilar in method and voice to Hart's "Hates California, it's cold and it's damp."²⁸⁷ Travis, who is less impressed than I with Chaucer's palmary piece of oneiromancy, nevertheless recognizes that if the fox prophecy and "heigh ymaginacioun" are depicted as co-epistemological, then, "At its highest, "heigh ymaginacioun" would seem capable of decrying only the most general kinds of truth. It is not very high after all."²⁸⁸

Foreknowledge and Fate: Un-making the Tragic Hero

The fox arrives, even if he is not brought forth from the Empyrean by high imagination. During the night he creeps into the "yeerd" and hides in the cabbage. But even after a bucolic intermission and a patient chronological resumption of eternity, Biblical and literary histories continue to unhorse the story of the chicken. The first idea we draw from this is what Fehrenbacher describes, "And even when the "col-fox, ful of sly iniquitee," finally bursts through the hedges surrounding Chaucer's demesne, his threatening presence is again erased by the literary, as the narrator introduces a long digression that makes a rhetorical mountain out of a fox lying in some cabbages."²⁸⁹ "O newe Scariot, newe Genylon,/ False dissymulour, o Greek Synon,/ That broughtest Troye al outrely to sorwe!" (3227-3229). And this is nothing new; the tale makes Camelot out of a coop the moment Chaucer appears and it never lets up. The second is that narrative agendas begin to cross-pollinate. If in the *Miller's Tale* rhetorics blur and a branded ass begins to look like a philosophical

²⁸⁷ *The Lady is a Tramp*: Words by Lorenz Hart, music by Richard Rodgers. The Rodgers and Hart Song Book. (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1951):166-171.

²⁸⁸ Travis, *Disseminal*, 323.

²⁸⁹ Fehrenbacher, 142.

timeshare, so too do we observe parallel rhetorics between Chaucer's high literature and this new narrative voice of *divertimento*, one that begrudgingly relates the rest of the story in between lovingly-drawn intercultural excursus. The present machinery is the same as Chaucer's: the treachery of murder, the witness of bibliography and dreams. The narrative use of the "God wol mordre out" theme pivots from the ratification of oracular dreams to the dramatic framing of hunter and prey. "As gladly doon this homycides alle/ That in await ligen to mordre men." (3224-3225). Immediately after it pivots in service to a tragic *mise-en-scène*: "O Chaucer, acursed be the morwe/ That thou into that yerd flaugh fro the bemes!/ Thou were ful wel ywarned by thy dremes." (3230-3232). A curious contradiction takes place- first the smothering of a poetics that operates in the eye of eternity in the dream panel. To that effect, the poem's collected rhetoric at the level of content endorses Chaucer's flight down from the beam. Once he does, he is a grim lion; his feet do not touch the ground. He is "namoore aferd." He vacations on the "softe syde" of life. Now, Chaucer, tragic hero, has been "full ywarned by thy dremes."

In this new mood, part of the focus becomes Chaucer's place in the tradition of the medieval *de casibus* by which it briefly shifts its weight to questions of foreknowledge and determinism. By turning to the tragic mode of the *de casibus*, the poem looks back once again towards the Monk. Jahan Ramanzi writes, "The Pardoner, the Wife's Jankyn, and Chaucer all resemble the Monk in telling *de casibus* narratives to exploit the power of the tragic, hoping to command through its force greater authority, but their extortionate use of the tragic vitiates its power."²⁹⁰ First the Monk's high history is rendered the poetic equivalent of the Widow's typical

²⁹⁰ Jahan Ramanzi, "Chaucer's Monk: The Poetics of Abbreviation, Aggression, and Tragedy." *The Chaucer Review*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (1993): 274.

Friday morning. Next Chauntecleer's stories continue the literary concern for the fall of great men. However, the men of the Monk's stories meet their fate according an inevitability that partakes of the larger determinative power of a pagan fate.

Chauntecleer's attempts to depict the reification of death prophecies in similarly sure terms collide with chance in the persistently unkillable Croesus and the bird's own extension of the king's luck at the pyre. In another of Chauntecleer's tales, one man escapes drowning by heeding the dream and simply staying ashore. The indeterminacy of Chauntecleer's dream of the fox that "would han had me deed" renders the most important elements of the *de casibus* somewhat moot. The lost story of Caesar dreaming that someone would one-day desire to kill him and then escaping is insufficiently antagonistic towards chance, too cavalier towards death, and altogether imprecise in visionary detail to add much to the genre.

There is a certain irony that forms the back-story to the poem's brief foray into the free will and determinism debate. Whatever the narrators intuit, Chauntecleer's dream in broad strokes, his unwritten third act, and his inconclusive literature require a more liberal reading of determinism than the *de casibus* affords. La Mettrie's philosophy and Pertelote's rhetoric, for instance, would probably come down on the side of physiological determinism which involves less 'will' than Fate. And if the Monk's notion of fate is shortsighted it is because he assigns to it more power than it can wield in the epoch of Providence. Boethius writes, "Whereby it is that all things which are under fate are subjected also to providence, on which fate itself is dependent; whereas certain things which are set under providence are above the chain of fate-*viz*, those things which by their nearness to the primeval Divinity are

steadfastly fixed, and lie outside the order of fate's movements."²⁹¹ Thus, one could read the progression from materialism, to *de casibus*, to Bradwardine, Boethius, and Augustine as the continued softening of the poem's materialism, rather than what some critics view as the opposite movement. Christianity problematizes matters of free will instead of arguing, up and down, human mortification to Fortune's wheel. When the narrator elides them, the effect lies somewhere in between baffling and philosophically consistent.

The *Monk's Tale's* closed-loop vision of fate is superseded by Christianity's debate conducted on a sliding scale. Three different perspectives towards necessity play off of each other. The first is simple necessity: "Wheither that Goddes worthy forwityng/ Streyneth me nedely for to doon a thyng-/ 'Nedely' clepe I symple necessitee." (3243-3245). The second is the Augustinian free will: "Or elles, if free choys be graunted me/ To do that same thyng, or do it nought,/ Though God forwoot it er that I was wrought." (3246-3248). The final is Boethian conditional necessity. "Or if his wityng streyneth never a deel/ But by necessitee condicioneel." (3249-3250). Nevertheless, that sliding scale never includes outright determinism, which complicates a lament on tragic inevitability.

Bradwardine's *De Causa Dei* walks the line closest to the narrator's idea of simple necessity, but scholars such as Howard Rollin Patch, Heiko A. Oberman, Chauncey Wood, and Edith Wilks Dolnikowski- to name a few- have taken a more generous view of Bradwardine's much maligned "determinism."²⁹² Dolnikowski

²⁹¹ Boethius, *Consolation*. James, 157.

²⁹² See Howard Rollin Patch, "Troilus on Predestination," in *Chaucer: Modern Essays in Criticism*. ed. Edward Wagenknecht (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959): 366-384., Heiko A. Oberman, James A. Weisheipl, "The *Sermo Epinicius* Ascribed to Thomas Bradwardine (1346)," *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du moyen âge*, Vol. 25 (1958): 295-329, Edith Wilks Dolnikowski, *Thomas Bradwardine: A View of Time and a Vision of Eternity in Fourteenth Century Thought*. (Leiden: E.J.

writes, “Indeed, the burden of the three books of the *De causa Dei* was to illustrate both philosophically and theologically how human will can be guided at all times by God’s will and yet remain free.”²⁹³ She continues, “The deterministic nature of Bradwardine’s arguments made the *De causa Dei* a controversial work when it was published in 1344 and to some extent it remains so today. It is important to remember, however, that many of Bradwardine’s ideas were perfectly consonant with the Augustinian theological tradition.”²⁹⁴ Augustine views human agency through the divine atemporality in which foreknowledge and determinism cease to antagonize each other. Wood writes, “St. Augustine felt that God “foreknows” that a man will or will not do a certain thing with his free (or “freed”) will, but that God exists in an eternal present in such a way that his “foreknowledge” does not in any way abrogate the freedom of will. Our wills are secondary causes, God’s will is primary cause and any resulting paradox is nevertheless true.”²⁹⁵ Boethian conditional necessity squares the circle.

God’s knowledge imposes only conditional necessity in that if He knows an act will take place, it must take place. But that does not mean that the act of its own nature is necessary. It is this absence of simple necessity that leaves room for free will. Thus, Boethius maintains, that an act can be free even though God knows that it will happen.”²⁹⁶

Therefore, as Wood writes, “Bradwardine, like St. Augustine before him, was

Brill, 1995), and Chauncey Wood, *Chaucer and the Country of the Stars*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970).

²⁹³ Dolnikowski, 166.

²⁹⁴ Ibid.

²⁹⁵ Wood, *Country of the Stars*, 27.

²⁹⁶ Gregory Rich, “Boethius on Divine Foreknowledge and Human Free Will.” *Thinking About Religion*, Vol. 5 (2005). North Carolina Religious Studies Association. Accessed 7 April 2011. <http://organizations.uncfsu.edu/ncrsa/journal/v05/rich_boethius.htm>.

commenting on predestination as part of a diatribe against Pelagianism or Neopalagianism... Chaucer had the Nun's Priest group Bradwardine with St. Augustine and Boethius because of his similarity to them, not because of his differences with them."²⁹⁷ Elsewhere Wood makes the important distinction that, "Of course there was a fourteenth-century controversy, but it has been recently shown to have been somewhat more complex than had been thought previously, and it must be emphasized that it was not simply a debate on whether or not there was predestination. Rather the controversy was primarily about the relationship of merit and grace in salvation."²⁹⁸ If Wood is correct and the major axis of the debate is the relationship of merit to salvation, then it is a subtly commensurate with the poem's literary Pelagianism, the irony by which Chauntecleer tricks the universe back into Salvation through language and action and negotiates the (non) loss of the Golden Age according to the co-salvific powers of chicken merit. The irony of the passage is that the intellectual machinery of the argument is co-opted. First it fails to supply a real concept of determinism and undercuts the argument in which it appears. When that happens it becomes a piece of literary foreshadowing and consistent metapoetic enquiry into the tension between content and form by which we understand that poetic figures are governed by mystery and not action- the same sort of mystery whereby "any resulting paradox is nevertheless true."²⁹⁹ And of course any lingering *dramatic* hope for determination fizzles when the chicken lives another day. Anne Payne writes, "It is true that Chauntecleer does not meet his fate on this day, and the reasons for that seem a long world away from the explanations of Bishop Bradwardine and St.

²⁹⁷ Wood, *Country of the Stars*, 21.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 26.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 27.

Augustine and the rules of the Boethian conditional necessity, in spite of the delightful possibilities for satire which its bright tautological formulations offer.”³⁰⁰ So it seems the only possible connection between Chauntecleer’s watered-down *de casibus* and determinism is that the fox arrives and wants to eat him. As for the relation to the thoroughgoing elements of the tradition, a unifying principle seems elusive. But as we observe, even if Chauntecleer’s dream gets the future right, according to Bradwardine, Augustine, and Boethius, it does not mean he glimpses a determined rather than a free action. The point, like so many others, is moot.

Nevertheless, if we want to prop up “agency” a little longer yet then we find that it is difficult to bring the idea to bear on Chauntecleer while keeping a straight face, though some small possibilities arise. The first is that we observe yet another instance of a perfectly worthwhile discussion from the world outside looking rather Picasso-like once it hits the poem. The second, on the same principle, is that the question of free will has a difficult time obtaining in the context of work of fiction by an author. Even if a metaphor opens onto an infinity that an author cannot control, it remains unlikely that Chaucer tried to kill Chauntecleer but could not because of the brute theological fact of the chicken’s free will. Meanwhile, at the level of narrative, Chauntecleer may or may not be determined, not everyone in his stories is. Conditional necessity may be a non-starter in the scheme of authorial production, e.g. Chaucer allows Chauntecleer the minute conditions while manufacturing the fatal ones. Perhaps it is Augustine’s resignation to the aporetic impasse between human and divine perception that holds best in this context: Chauntecleer understands his own agency volitionally but a world of secrets separates and settles the paradox

³⁰⁰ Payne, 219.

between that contingent understanding and the unknowable and plenary force of Chaucer's foreknowledge. Payne argues that the Widow acts as God in the Augustinian scheme. "He [Chauntecleer] is an orphan who has had no ancestors to hand down the traditional lore of the chicken race. Without insight into the divine worlds above him, he freely wills to go out into the barnyard. In contrast, the widow holds the key to the information that is revealed in the dream: she knows that a fox will pounce on a chicken if he can."³⁰¹ It is an attractive reading, but one that is complicated by the significant leap required to imagine God as an unwitting consumer of the eggs produced by chickens too magnificent for his comprehension that inhabit a world more Real than his own. Furthermore, even if the Widow understands the conflict between fox and chicken, she does not seem to foreknow it, and foreknowledge rather than "information" is what is at stake. Earlier we considered Barr's idea that the Widow's socioliterary motive in the chase is "to restore rightful ownership." If that were so, the Widow should have probably locked the rooster up had she foreknown that the fox was coming.

More compromising is the fact that Chauntecleer dreams of a beast that will come to harm him, understands the framework that 'any red, yellow, and black hound-like creature is a potential life-ender' and then fails to recognize the fox an hour or two later. So to argue that he simply did not know about the general conflict between beast and prey seems to be upended by his dream. The more serious question is how in the world he forgot it so quickly, or what does he see in the garden that is so unlike his vision that he fails to identify it as the oracular hound-beast? At one level, theodicy belongs to reason and is misrepresented in poetic cognition. At another level,

³⁰¹ Payne, 206.

theodicy in this particular poem continues to slingshot figures towards the Mind that makes history contingent- that makes the meaning of human agency a non-contributory adjunct to the orders of knowledge represented by Providence and Salvation. And if it has been a while since we reminded ourselves that all of it is burlesque, despite some professional dalliances with learned themes, then it is a valid intellectual exercise to pause once again and appreciate that all that has so far come to pass in the way of logic, philosophy, and science has only done so in a poem about talking chickens, and one that continues to require that we travel outside of time to a better and unknowable place before and after which our own epoch takes place. For the question of free-will and predestination, once again, contributes to the larger and most illustrious family of diversions in the poem that draw the eye towards the Mind of God, wherein is housed the inscrutable truth of the matter. As Pearsall writes of Boethius, “The answer of Philosophia to the problem of this apparent irreconcilability, and the necessarily consequent denial of human free will, is in the doctrine of differential cognition (5, pr. 6): the concept of God’s “foreknowledge” is a fictitious product of man’s limited understanding, since God’s knowledge of all things is in eternity, unconstrained by time.”³⁰² Pelen, commenting on this in the *Roman* and the *Consolation* discusses the shared philosophical emphasis on,

the insufficiency not only of earthly goods themselves, but even of the rational mental process by which they are evaluated. In the end, Philosophy says, the freedom we have, as humans, cannot be based on nature but is found only in God’s supernatural order of being, which cannot be known, let alone

³⁰² Pearsall, 219.

preempted by our “natural” freedom, as La Vielle would wish.”³⁰³

He continues, “Philosophy argues that God’s providence has a simplicity on which the order of our fate (and freedom) depends (Book IV, prose 6).”³⁰⁴

It is abstract territory to be sure. How the poem arrived here is probably not as important as the fact that the poem keeps arriving here. Various and increasingly creative narrative strategies attempt to control the poem and the poem seems to push back, and always by pregnant comedy in the direction of otherworldliness.

Fehrenbacher writes,

This rhetoricization continues for about the following fifty lines, allowing the reality of the fox to recede as the text plunges into the world of literature, alluding to, among others, St. Augustine and Boethius on simple and conditional necessity, the textual tradition of anti-feminism, and the bestiary of Physiologus. At this moment, at the center of the Nun's Priest's Tale, the Canterbury Tales are as far from the historical world as they ever get.³⁰⁵

The point is well-taken, though it seems to me that the poem is not particularly seraphic here as opposed to when a chicken relies on Hector’s death in order to prove one of the finer parts of Macrobian philosophy. The truth is that everything that goes into the poem comes out literature. “For now, as I look at the things we have said since daybreak, they seem to me to be very like literature of a sort.”³⁰⁶ This moment is only more abstract as the entire poem is “trewe as Launcelot de Lake.” Thus when the divine foreknowledge folds, it does so simply by placing us ‘back’ in the poem. “I wol nat han to do of swich mateere;/ My tale is of a cok, as ye may heere.” (3251-

³⁰³ Pelen, *Latin Poetic Irony*, 132.

³⁰⁴ Ibid.

³⁰⁵ Fehrenbacher, 141-142.

³⁰⁶ Plato, *Laws*. (811c). Quoted in Grube, 201.

3252) Narrative divertimento is rhetorically encoded to appear as though the poem pauses while the narration imports data from the outside world. When the same strategy appears later in the poem, Travis asks, “We might wonder for a moment where the devil we have been if not somewhere inside the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale*.”³⁰⁷ From here, the dramatic portrait of ‘Chauntecleer, member of the medieval *de casibus*’ continues, but it does so without any real steam from the most important theological debate of the 14th Century.

Causal Misogyny

My tale is of a cok, as ye may here,” and without a skip, “That tok his conseil of his wyf, with sorwe.” (3253). Far from returning to the tale from the lawless borders between art and life, here we are, no further then literary misogyny, running parallel to the earlier Latin misogyny discussed in detail by Pizzorno. But going “no further” than literary misogyny means that we are once again on familiar Ovidian quicksand, which of course means that the poem’s metapoetic energy has yet to wane. We have yet to observe any trace that “repressed historicity will return with a vengeance.”³⁰⁸ I said earlier that one could not accuse the poem of shadowboxing when it comes to defending its metaphors against history. For the poem’s naturalism continues to break up and then unify. Pertelote’s and Chauntecleer’s perspectives submit to the power of feathering towards an Epicurean funeral for dreams and visions. Now, Chauntecleer’s misogyny, situated in Genesis 3, makes another more thoughtful lapsarian comeback through another voice. “Wommannes conseil broughte

³⁰⁷ Travis, 257.

³⁰⁸ Fehrenbacher, 142.

us first to wo/ And made Adam fro Paradys to go.” (3257-3258). It is the same theological misstep as earlier, only this time directed towards some surprising illogic. First the narrator portrays Chauntecleer as a pawn of tragic oracular forces, and now the reason he is in trouble is because he listened to his wife’s advice. Of course, he defies Pertelote’s laxatives, at least at the literal level. There seems to be no indication that the bird really thinks he has lost the argument, only that he tires of a long intellectual win and cashes it in for twenty short physical ones. John Block Friedman writes: “By the end of the argument he has ceased to regard his wife as an intellectual opponent and sees her merely as a member of the fair sex whom he has set aright.”³⁰⁹ Payne highlights the perspectival reversals:

First of all he introduces the meeting with two equivocations; we have merely to check what he has told us before. His statement: "Thou were ful wel ywarned by thy dremes" (4422) is inaccurate. The dream does not warn Chauntecleer that the coming day is perilous to him; it warns him that the animal only we and the widow know to be a fox is perilous to him. It is the Narrator who is suddenly taking the liberty of saying that the dream is a fateful warning about this day's events. The second comment of the Narrator is also inaccurate. He cites Pertelote's counsel as the reason for Chauntecleer's walking in the yard. But Chauntecleer does not go down to the barnyard because of her advice; he goes because her beauty and sexual attractiveness fill him with such joy (that and several other delights philosophic and heroic) that he renounces and defies her laxatives, his interpretations of dreams, and even his fear.³¹⁰

The only manner in which Pertelote could be held accountable is if the original

³⁰⁹ John Block Friedman, “The ‘Nun’s Priest’s Tale’: The Preacher and the Mermaid’s Song.” *The Chaucer Review*, Vol. 7, No. 4 (Spring, 1973): 260.

³¹⁰ Payne, 209.

deductive misogynistic premise holds: that Eve is utterly, and not symmetrically, responsible for the loss of Innocence.

But what sort of Golden Age was lost? “There as he was ful myrie and at ese.” (3259) Again, and according to precedents in the *Roman* and elsewhere, the poem offers two contending prelapsarian visions: the traditional literary defect of a bodily Golden Age propped up against the Golden Age itself. And one can hardly claim that Chauntecleer is anything but “ful myrie and at ese” when he allows himself to shut the books and enjoy Pertelote’s company. The contradiction compounds. First by virtue of the un-deconstructed misogyny, the fact that the narrator’s rhetoric places philosophical good faith in it rather than its victims- the caged “fatal sustren” of the *Amores* I:XIII. Second, it bemoans the loss of the physical experience of innocence, apparently the halcyon days when chickens had sex without feeling bad about it as opposed to the Ovidian age when “valleys unplowed gave many fruits”³¹¹ and “spring was everlasting, and gentle zephyrs with warm breath played the flowers that sprang unplanted.”³¹² To that effect Payne offers the pithy, “The Fall of Man is the descent from the hen house.”³¹³ The misogynistic lures continue, though this time according to the ‘don’t shoot the messenger’ topos.

But for I noot to whom it might displese,
 If I conseil of woemmen wolde blame,
 Passe over for I seyde it in my game.
 Rede auctores, where they trete of swich mateere,
 And what they seyn of wommen ye may here.
 Thise been the cokes wordes and nat myne;

³¹¹ Ovid, *Metamorphoses* (i.109) Ovid’s Metamorphoses. trans. Brookes More (Francetown: Marshal Jones Company, 1978): 5.

³¹² *Ibid.*, (i.107-108), Miller, 9-10.

³¹³ Payne, 211.

I kan no harm of no womman divine.

(3260-3266)

It is a swift maneuver to be sure, but the tracks are hard to cover. The narrator elaborates and makes clear what was only a possibility, though a distinct one, in Chaucer's Latin. Misogyny gets a longer leash and then is handed off to the rooster, who has not said a word since "Ful is myn herte of revel and solas!" (3203) some 60 lines ago. Chaucer begins the passage in third person and then becomes the responsible party. It is highly unlikely that the rooster, who despite everything, so unwittingly takes a stroll among the cabbages and fails to recognize the beast of his dreams, is in charge of this particular argument in which he is compared to the charter member of the *de casibus* whose demise cost the entire universe its constitutional charity.

All the same, the narrator takes us back, yet again, to the place that both form and content in the poem tend in antiphrasis: the persistent astrological, chronological, predestined and free-willed, misogynistic comedic hellscape of Epicurean ease and mirth which only Jean de Meun's Nature would be happy to call Paradise. Like the narrator, "She [Nature] is bound to the discussion of a lesser world," instead of "the better time of the Incarnation and Redemption... which she cannot pursue. In all, she too seems bound to the contrary of what she claims to seek."³¹⁴ "Bound to the contrary" works both ways, too, for the poem's narrators, the group effort to imagine Elysium under nuclear winter does more to draw attention to its opposite. Ovid, joking on the level, writes in the *Ars*: "Now is the true Golden Age: gold is all men

³¹⁴ Pelen, *Latin Poetic Irony*, 12.

value, gold is what buys you love."³¹⁵ The narrator compares Chaucer to Adam according to philosophical premiums on misogyny in order to represent him as a victim of the primordial Wily Woman. That is to say, in order to rhetorically establish the imperial see of The Good and Perfect Man, he blames women for the spiritual death of the world and then makes them predators of the defenseless Good and Perfect Man. Various causal equivocations need to take place. The progression is like this. Chaucer dreams that a beast will want to eat him. Chaucer transforms this vision about a fox into the equivalent of oracular prophecies of murder. By doing so he 'proves' that dreams act in a causal capacity and that his death is inevitable. Therefore Cause: Dream about homicidal hound = dream about murder. Effect: Murder. The narrator lets this go unchecked and then envisions Chaucer as one of the *Virorum Illustrium* destined to fall. The reason this is so is because Chaucer is like Adam, who 'because of his wife' was forced out of Paradise. Chaucer has a wife; she is responsible for his "inevitable" (see: dream about random homicidal hound) Fall. Cause: Wife. Effect: Fall of the Innocent Chicken. How a dream about a hungry fox became the seed for the loss of the Golden Age at the hands of women is a question for a subtle mind.

If there is a common denominator in all this it is that the narrative *persona* in the *Tale* are desperate to see this chicken experience the Fall, rather than continue to bathe in the "yonge sonne." And ill-will cannot entirely explain it. Instead, it is probably due to the fact that the only chance of reversing the Fall according to this comic vision of literary Pelagianism is if Chaucer actually falls. How else to re-enter Paradise simply by hiding in its trees? Put simply, even if the answer to a literal

³¹⁵ Ovid, *Art of Love*, (II. 277-8). Quoted in Andrew Wallace-Hadrill. "The Golden Age and Sin in Augustan Ideology." *Past & Present*, No. 95 (May, 1982): 27.

Fall is a literal return to Paradise, it will not obtain in the unfallen world of art. It is in this sense that the greatest joke the Golden Age ever played was convincing the Nun's Priest that it didn't exist. Chesterton puts it this way:

I have often had a fancy for writing a romance about an English yachtsman who slightly miscalculated his course and discovered England under the impression that it was a new island in the South Seas. I always find, however, that I am either too busy or too lazy to write this fine work, so I may as well give it away for the purposes of philosophical illustration. There will probably be a general impression that the man who landed (armed to the teeth and talking by signs) to plant the British flag on that barbaric temple which turned out to be the Pavilion at Brighton, felt rather a fool. I am not here concerned to deny that he looked a fool. But if you imagine that he felt a fool, or at any rate that the sense of folly was his sole or his dominant emotion, then you have not studied with sufficient delicacy the rich romantic nature of the hero of this tale.³¹⁶

The best and broadest irony of the *Nun's Priest's Tale* is that it treats the Golden Age as something whose existence depends upon the poem's arguments rather than something upon which the entire poem depends for existence. Thus by whatever means possible, the poem's various narratological perspectives will have Chauntecleer fall despite the scant evidence of definite demise in his dream. First according to the power of dreams, then Fortune's wheel, and now the "conseil of women"- corrupt no sooner than it is spoken by these original practitioners of human

³¹⁶ G.K. Chesterton. *Orthodoxy*. G.K. Chesterton: Collected Works Vol. 1. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986): 211. If I quote Chesterton to excess it is because I agree with Harold Bloom's introduction to Chaucer: "My own models for writing about Chaucer always have been my late friend E. Talbot Donaldson... and the formidable man of letters and burly roustabout, the thoroughly Chaucerian G.K. Chesterton, who would fit easily into the *Canterbury Tales*." Harold Bloom, Michelle M. Sauer, Bloom's How to Write About Geoffrey Chaucer. (New York: Infobase Publishing: 2010): vii. One finds that Chesterton's Chaucerian spirit is not limited to his 1932 *Chaucer*.

cupidity. But the philosophy behind this new Fall may speak to more definite concerns. Because if Chauntecleer really does fall, brings the whole Golden Age down with him, and then reestablishes it by walking back through the front door, then it turns out that his descent from Camelot to coop, from art to life, is no more philosophical than exiting a café and reentering it a few minutes later. It becomes a literal and physical thing, negotiated purely according to human action. If Chauntecleer's Fall is authentic, then he expatriates from art to history and the verbal icon disperses into verbs. Art is incapable of symbolically regenerating itself independent of history. If Chauntecleer reenters art from the history of the chase when he flies back to the tree, then the point is the same, if more pedantically effective- poems are toll roads between history and art- enter from either side. So there is much to be gained as an interlocutor from the rhetorical and typographical representation of Chauntecleer as Adam, even if that representation is not entirely stable. And curiously in the narrative representation of this new(ish) Adam, the first thing we learn is that he sings finer than a mermaid.

The Mermaid Tavern

“Souls of poets dead and gone,/ What Elysium have ye known-/ Happy field or mossy cavern/ Choicer than the Mermaid Tavern?”³¹⁷ Either Keats' poem praises a pub at the expense of eternity, uses that which is best to make the lesser thing better, assumes that the Elizabethan poet's club shares in the Elysian inheritance, or literally thinks a pint at the Mermaid Tavern has more to offer than heaven itself. All of these

³¹⁷ John Keats, “Lines on the Mermaid Tavern.” *The Poetical Works of John Keats*. ed. H. Buxton Forman. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1906): 242.

are possible in the idea of Chauntecleer-as-mermaid. It is also possible that the narrator's comparison is a throwaway directed towards the further sedimentation of absurdity in the poem. "Like any other extraordinary being, she has the potential of becoming either a humorous or tragic figure."³¹⁸ Horace writes in the *Ars Poetica*,

If a painter had chosen to set a human head
On a horse's neck, covered a melding of limbs,
Everywhere, with multi-coloured plumage, so
That what was a lovely woman, at the top,
Ended repulsively in the tail of a black fish:
Asked to a viewing, could you stifle laughter, my friends?³¹⁹

At any rate, never to be upstaged by the "tale of a cok" the narrator takes a final maritime detour before the plot resumes.

Faire in the soond, to bathe hire myrily,
Lith Pertelote, and alle sustres by,
Agayn the sonne, and Chauntecleer so free
Soong murier than the mermayde in the see
(For Phisiologus seith sikerly
How that they syngen wel and myrily).

(3267-3272)

Depicted in subtle sexual tones as *Les Baigneuses*,³²⁰ the set-up for the sirens' song seems obvious- except that Chauntecleer sings it. Peter Meredith comments, "Elsewhere he crows and clucks. Between lines 3270 and 3320, however, the word *syng* or its derivatives appear eight times; four times in relation to Chauntecleer,

³¹⁸ Ailene S. Goodman. "The Extraordinary Being: Death and the Mermaid in Baroque Literature," in *Literature and the Lore of the Sea*. ed. Patricia Ann Carlson. (Amsterdam: Rodopi B.V., 1986): 260.

³¹⁹ Horace, *Ars Poetica*, 92.

³²⁰ Pierre-Auguste Renoir, *Les Baigneuses*. c. 1918-1919. Oil on Canvas. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

three in relation to his father, and once to the mermaids.”³²¹ The nature of Chauntecleer’s song comes into sharp focus in the final act, culminating in the mythology of Boethius’ *De Musica*. Yes, Chauntecleer’s remake of “My lief is faren in londe” comes earlier (2879), but the discussion of the poetic identity of music begins in earnest with the mermaid’s song. In the *Manciple’s Tale*, we only learn through circumstantial evidence that the crow was once a singer instead of a journalist. “What, bryd?” quod Phebus. “What song syngestow?/ Ne were thow wont so myrily to synge/ That to myn herte it was a rejoysynge.” (*Manciple’s Tale*, 244-246). And in tradition of medieval dream gardens, birds otherwise musically bankrupt sing more beautifully than nightingales. “Therwith in al this world no nyghtyngale/ Ne koude, by an hondred thousand deel,/ Syngen so wonder myrily and weel.” (*Manciple’s Tale*, 136-138). The same is true in the *Roman*. “These birds [among them both nightingale and the improbably gifted parrot] that I am describing to you performed in most excellent service. They sang as though they were heavenly angels...So sweet and lovely was that song that it seemed not to be birdsong, but rather comparable with the song of the sea-sirens, who are called sirens because of their pure, sweet voices.”³²² As for the narrator’s *comparatio* in the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale*, we already know that Chauntecleer sings “murier than the murie orgon.” (2851). Now he sings “murier than the mermayde in the see.” (3270). The movement from a heavenly song to a siren’s song is instructive. The narrators in both poems seem to imagine angelic song/”murrie orgon” as equivalent praise to the mermaid’s song. At some level they may be, and perhaps in the same manner by which Strohm equates

³²¹ Peter Meredith, “Chauntecleer and the Mermaids.” *Neophilologus*, Vol. 54, No. 1 (January, 1970): 82.

³²² *Roman de la Rose*, (669-674), Horgan, 12.

the historicity of Jack Straw's with the song of the mermaid.

The literary supersaturation of this tale in turn creates an environment of expectations within which even historically charged references like that to "Jakke Straw and his meynee" may be detached from their troubling social implications. Introduced in a decidedly minor key, as a *comparatio* designed to convey the racket in the widow's farmyard upon the abduction of Chauntecleer, the reference to Jack Straw's incitement to kill Flemings is placed on the same plane of reference as the songs of the mermaids in the sea...³²³

To a great extent this is true: they function co-epistemologically in the poem, representing equal historical power in a poem of such "literary supersaturation." Another manner in which they are equivalent is from the materialist rhetorical perspectives in the poem according to which sirenic sensuality and Jack Straw belong to the world of experience instead of intuition. Pearsall argues that, "Chauntecleer sings only by instinct, and the way he sings is typical of his general lack of rational control and discretion; that is why he is compared with the mermaids."³²⁴ But any real evil related to the mermaid's song must occur according to literary tradition rather than to sheer literariness.

And as literary traditions go the song of the mermaids carries a sinister one. This literary tradition encodes three paths: dramatic, ontological, and epistemological. In the dramatic, "There's always a siren singing you to shipwreck."³²⁵ Geoffrey of Vinsauf warns, "Take the example of the Sirens; be taught by them always to fear that

³²³ Strohm, 165.

³²⁴ Pearsall, 229.

³²⁵ Radiohead, "There, There." *Hail to the Thief*. Capitol Records (2002) CD.

the good conceals the worse. Trust not in things; after the honey comes the poison.”³²⁶

Sirens flatter: “Hither, come hither, renowned Odysseus, great glory of the Achaeans.”³²⁷ Of course, foxes are flatterers too. “Þe fifþe synne is whan flaterers defedeþ and excuseþ and heleþ þe vices and synnes of hem þat þei wole flaterere...þerfore þer beþ wel likened to foxes tailles for here hauylones and sleyztes and wrechednesses.”³²⁸ But if Chauntecleer sings the mermaid’s song, it seems that flattery becomes a solipsistic matter. It is also appropriate to the poem that Sirens know the future. “For lo, we know all things, all the travail that in wide Troy-land the Argives and Trojans bare by the gods’ designs, yea, and we know all that shall hereafter be upon the fruitful earth.”³²⁹ Like Chauntecleer, their foreknowledge culminates in the events of the “lif present.” It is a tempting but ultimately prevaricative description of human destiny in the artistic vision. When one stops to listen to their song or their wisdom, it is as Meredith describes: “The mermaids sang their victims to sleep so they could seize and devour them; Chauntecleer is induced to sing himself and “sleep” so that he can be seized and devoured. He almost, in fact, becomes his own mermaid.”³³⁰ To that effect, argues Meredith, “The simile of the mermaid, then, is not only a joke but a tragic-comic anticipation of Chauntecleer’s fate.”³³¹

Carried over from classical literature, medieval depictions of sirens and

³²⁶ Geoffrey of Vinsauf, *Poetria Nova* (286-288) trans. Ernest Gallo. Quoted in Ernest Gallo, *The Poetria Nova and its Sources in Early Rhetorical Doctrine*. (The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1971): 29.

³²⁷ Homer, *The Odyssey of Homer*. Trans. S.H. Butcher and A. Lang. (London: Macmillan & Co., 1906):197-198.

³²⁸ *The Book of Vices and Virtues*. ed. W. Nelson Francis. (London: The Early English Text Society, 1942): 58.

³²⁹ Homer, *Odyssey*, 198.

³³⁰ Meredith, 81.

³³¹ *Ibid*, 82.

mermaids (the two were often confused, or considered equivalent)³³² emphasize the calamitous fate awaiting the unlucky sailor. Donaldson writes, “When the rooster’s singing is compared with the singing of mermaids, the expert on mermaids’ singing is named- Physiologus, whose authority presumably makes the simile respectable.”³³³

And as Physiologus “seith sikerly:”

Sirens are born of the sea, and the strains of their marvelous voices
 Oft come to listening ears in many melodious measures,
 Hearing these, sailors are lured into places of imminent danger,
 Thereto enticed by the sound of voices so sweetly enchanting,
 Thus by them not only ships, but also men’s lives are imperiled
 Those who have seen them will say, that the nature of them is as follows,
 From the waist upwards they’re shaped in the form of a beautiful virgin,
 What makes the wonder so great, is from thence lower down they are fish
 like.³³⁴

The Book of Vices and Virtues describes the grislier finale.

Per is a þing þat scheweþ out of þe see or of oþere waters
 þat men clepen mermaydens, þat hauen body of womman
 and tail as a fesch, and þei syngeþ so likyngly þat þei
 haueþ power to brynge men o-slepe þat hereþ hem, as
 schipmen and oþere þet vsen þe water; and whan þei haue

³³² Chaucer writes in the *Romaunt of the Rose*, “Song of the mermaydens in the see,/ That for her syngyng is so cleere,/ Though we mermaydens clepe hem here./ In English, as is oure usaunce,/ Men clepe hem sereyns in Fraunce.” (680-684). Hoccleve recounts the story of Ulysses and the Sirens from Holcot, and calls them mermaids: “Whan þat Vlixes saillid to and fro/ By meermaidis; this was his policie:/ All eres of men of his compaignie/ With wex he stoppe leet...” Thomas Hoccleve, *Selections from Thomas Hoccleve*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981): 18. Quoted in L.A.J.R. Houwen, “Flattery and the Mermaid in Chaucer’s *Nun’s Priest’s Tale*.” In *Animals and the Symbolic in Medieval Art and Literature*. ed. L.A.J.R. Houwen. (Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 1997): 86.

³³³ Donaldson, *Chaucer’s Poetry*, 943.

³³⁴ Physiologus, *Physiologus: A Metrical Bestiary of Twelve Chapters by Bishop Theobald*. (London: John Edward Bumpus, Ltd., 1928): 87.

brouzt a man aslepe, þei slen hym and deuouren hym.”³³⁵

The implications for Chauntecleer are clear enough, when the final note of the mermaid’s song sounds, prepare to be eaten. Likewise is the ontological element clear. Many of literature’s pilgrims have diverted their soul’s course from the mandates of Fate and Providence to pursue the possibility that human desire can be satisfied in the bodily world sponsored by the sirens. But any Maritime Sensualist who would pursue the sirenic in itself meets another an ignominious end: condemnation to a philosophy without ends. Ailene S. Goodman writes, “The concept of a mermaid or merman whose body was human above the waist with a fish’s tail below suggests sexual deprivation...and the unfulfilled dream.”³³⁶ If the mermaid/siren is a representative of the philosophy of experience, than we appreciate that experience is incapable of generating its own solution to human desire. It raises up a contingency as an infinity. It then takes this new “infinite” sexual desire and directs it towards sexual impossibility. Walter Copland Perry writes, “Their song, though irresistibly sweet, was no less sad than sweet, and lapped both body and soul in a fatal lethargy, the forerunner of death and corruption.”³³⁷ Perhaps it is not entirely inappropriate, then, that siren’s song is high praise in the garden of Idleness. Nonetheless, it is a special twist that Chauntecleer sings it himself.

A resolution to the paradox presents itself in the *Consolation* by resuscitating the epistemological discord of Plato’s *Republic*.

³³⁵ *The Book of Vices and Virtues* (58-59.). Quoted in Meredith, 81.

³³⁶ Goodman, 256. As a note, often in classical mythology sirens are depicted as feathered, which seems not to complicate Goodman’s general point about sexual frustration.

³³⁷ Walter Copland Perry, “The Sirens in Ancient Literature and Art.” *The Nineteenth Century*, Vol. 14 (July 1883): 117.

And when she saw the Muses of Poesie standing by my bedside, dictating the words of my lamentations she was moved awhile to wrath, and her eyes flashed sternly. ‘Who’, said she, ‘has allowed yon play-acting wantons to approach this sick man- these who, so far from giving medicine to heal his malady, even feed it with sweet poison? These it is who kill the rich crop of reason with barren thorns of passion, who accustom men’s minds to disease, instead of man whom your allurements were seducing, as is usually your way, I should be less indignant. On such a one I should not have spent my pains for naught. But this is one nurtured in the Eleatic and Academic philosophies. Nay, get ye gone, ye sirens, whose sweetness lasteth not; leave him for my muses to tend and heal!’³³⁸

Here the *Consolation* equates poetry with the “barren thorns of passion,” a “sweet poison” that is of a particular stench to Philosophy by virtue of the fact that the present prey is “nurtured in the Eleatic and Academic philosophies.” “Poesie” is the fleeting siren’s song, sensual impermanence awaiting the balm of Philosophy’s muses. Chaucer one-ups Boethius in *Boece* when he calls the Muses “comune strompettis.” (*Boece, Prosa 1*, 49).³³⁹ Nevertheless, as Alfred David remarks, Philosophy does not “reject poetry altogether, affirming divine Providence in some of the most beautiful Latin meters of the Middle Ages.”³⁴⁰ The *Consolation* is a piece of poetry, an imaginary walk through forever with a lady named Philosophy. Given the poetic setting of the *Consolation* and Platonic aesthetics upon which it depends, we understand the eventual and inevitable appointment of all the Muses with the Good. This strengthens the irony of the passage, especially as it concerns sirens antagonizing Eleatic Idealism, something that defined itself against Pre-Socratic physicalism. Put

³³⁸ Boethius, *Consolation*, James 6.

³³⁹ *Boece*, Metrum 1, Prosa 1 (44-73). Chaucer uses “mermaydenes” and not “sirens.”

³⁴⁰ David, 3.

another way, The Muses of poetry, rhetoric, and philosophy are modes of eternity, part of the family of Ideas. It is unlikely that they would compromise the Eleatic philosopher's push against the physicalist.

Some other ironic solution is at work. Chauntecleer as "rhetor" sings the mermaid's song, a song so dangerously seductive that Odysseus, pilgrim by sea, plugs his companions' ears with wax and ties himself to the mast so they might safely pass (while he listens).³⁴¹ The mermaid's song has victims, should the entire poem plug its ears with wax and save itself from the rooster? David S. Chamberlain writes, "His singing "murier than the mermayde in the see" is pointed and amusing, since these creatures, or Sirens, were almost universally considered irrational and destructive."³⁴² However, any failure on the part of Chauntecleer's rhetoric is a blessing to be shared amongst the other naturalistic voices in the poem. If rhetoric towards an earth-bound poetics is the problem, then the poem is full of sirens.

This brings us to a second and more probable thought. As Meredith argues, Chauntecleer essentially sings himself to sleep; he is the victim of his own song. Meanwhile, according to Travis, at a level of abstraction independent to his rhetoric, Chauntecleer remains the poem's "heliotrope" with an "uncanny affinity with the sun,"³⁴³ and a "narcissistic self-assurance [that] is preeminently a celebration of poetry's luminescent and self-generating beauty."³⁴⁴ In the *Consolation* the sirens whose "sweetness lasteth not" *are* the Muses of poetry. If I have been too hard on Chauntecleer up to this point, then perhaps it is boon to admit that the rooster-mermaid, by way of Boethian/Platonic irony, is Art itself. And antiphrastically art has

³⁴¹ *The Odyssey* 12.1.

³⁴² David S. Chamberlain, "The Nun's Priest's Tale and Boethius's *De Musica*." *Modern Philology*, Vol. 68 (November, 1970): 190.

³⁴³ Travis, *Disseminal*, 193.

³⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 192.

only sweetness and infinity according to a passage that says “Nay, get ye gone, ye sirens, whose sweetness lasteth not.”³⁴⁵ The conflict is this: Chauntecleer may be a poor poet but he is poetry proper. He may sing the mermaid’s song according to his naturalistic ships-run-aground rhetorical perspective but he sings the mermaid’s song in his very being by way of Boethian reversal. Chauntecleer’s coop is at least as good a house of fame as the House of Fame. Fehrenbacher argues that, “The crisis of the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* begins after the fox, singularly unimpressed by attempts to refigure him rhetorically, steals off with Chauntecleer.”³⁴⁶ It is persuasive because his attempt to reassert himself historically by demetaphorizing the rooster calls upon the entire widow’s world as back up. Attacking Chauntecleer may be a rather human or foxy response to the tedious bird. It may be an appropriate logical counter to the bird’s incongruous hyper-literariness and rhetorical sensuality. But it remains an attempt to steal art from art, to kidnap poetry and eat it.

Chauntecleer does not simply stand-in for art; the idea runs deeper. Expressing it critically is difficult, but the idea of Chauntecleer as lunch is going to be as tall an order as interrupting the eternal chase by pulling down Sirius in order to light a smoke.³⁴⁷ Sirius is appropriate too, because Zeus had to bring about a hound whose

³⁴⁵ Boethius, *Consolation*, James 6.

³⁴⁶ Fehrenbacher, 142.

³⁴⁷ Sirius is at the head of the constellation Canis Major whose mythographic aetiology is as follows: “Lailaps (or Laelaps) was a magical dog which was always destined to catch his prey. He was first given to Europa of Krete by the god Zeus, and was later handed down through King Minos, to Prokris and Kephalos of Athens. Kephalos used the hound to hunt down the Teumessian Fox, a monstrous beast which was laying waist to the countryside of Thebes. However, the fox was destined never to be caught, and Zeus, pondering the dilemma of the uncatchable fox being chased by an inescapable hound, turned the pair to stone, and placed them in the heavens as the Constellations Canis Major and Minor. In so doing he froze their contest or set it to play out for eternity in the heavens.” Aaron J. Atsma. “Kuon Lailaps.” *Theoi Greek Mythology*. (2001-2008) Accessed 14 April 2011. <<http://www.theoi.com/Ther/KuonLailaps.html>>.

prey could never elude it in order to chase an uncatchable Fox out of Thebes.³⁴⁸ The uncatchable fox was sent as a plague to Thebes “because they had barred the descendants of Cadmus from the kingship.”³⁴⁹ Cadmus is another city-founder and Herodotus and others credit him as the man who brought the Phoenician alphabet to the Greek language.³⁵⁰ Zeus solves the paradox by making the paradox eternal. He sets the dog and fox as statues and then places them as stars in the heavens. And so the two never catch each other. Nor does the fox catch Chauntecleer in the end, nor do the barn animals catch the fox. Lealaps and the Fox simply chase each other forever. The fox and Chauntecleer might sit and talk with each other in the shade of that tree forever. They might repeat the same chase every Friday. But they remain distinct. The constellation has yet to collide. Boethius is right that the “barren thorns of passion” must be done away with in order that the Eleatic man might heal, and what the *Consolation* and the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* do is to counter-define that thorn as that which belongs to the rose of the present world rather than that of the siren Muses of poetry.

The following can be said for the idea of Chauntecleer-as-mermaid.

Chauntecleer’s siren song begins as the grounded rhetoric that would devour his own infinity but it becomes the Boethian art that would consume history. The fox revolts against metaphor for his daily bread in order to reassert his *historical* being. He does this because Chauntecleer sings as merry as the mermaids in the sea in a self-reflexive act of *artistic* being. Chauntecleer is becoming inedible. So Like Canus Major and

³⁴⁸ Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca* (2.57-59). Apollodorus’ Library and Hyginus’ Fabulae: Two Handbooks of Greek Mythology. trans. R. Scott Smith and Stephen Trzaskoma. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company Inc., 2007): 27-28.

³⁴⁹ Theony Condos. Star Myths of the Greeks and Romans: A Sourcebook. (Grand Rapids: Phanes Press, 1997): 67.

³⁵⁰ Herodotus, *Histories* (5.59.1)

Minor, they will chase each other forever inside this poem without understanding that they have been fated to private lives. The only unevenness in the equation is that one is Major and the other Minor. As the story goes, Zeus preserves the chase in syrup just as Lealaps, somehow, overtakes the uncatchable fox.³⁵¹ That it is not the other way around helps to illustrate a Platonic perspective, with the Apollonian brightest star in the night sky³⁵² hunting the Dionysian. The fox may be the pursuer in the *Nun's Priest's Tale* but the tale reads nearly everything in backwards irony. And in a thoroughgoing Platonic framework, Art does not antagonize history; it annihilates it. History obtains only as pastiche. Medieval Christian Neoplatonism would finish off Zeus' work with an apocalypse; eventually the two constellations would collide. "And all the host of heaven shall be dissolved, and the heavens shall be rolled together as a scroll: and all their host shall fall down, as the leaf falleth off from the vine, and as a falling [fig] from the fig tree."³⁵³ The only thing missing after the universe is rolled up like a scroll is the universe, leaving Dante's "Love that moves the sun and the other stars" rather than the sun and stars themselves. The same is true of Rhetoric's new sun, the "true sun" that she created from a wooden pole in the *Anticlaudianus*. The old sun bows before it and then disappears altogether.³⁵⁴ Boethius inverts the most aggressive literary threat of the mermaid- those "comune strompettis" who would poison our philosophy. Now the poem's siren, Chauntecleer, is on his way to singing the universe to sleep so that he might devour it. And when history in the poem is

³⁵¹ Pausanias writes, "There is also another legend, which tells of a Fox called the Teumessian Fox, how owing to the wrath of Dionysos the beast was reared to destroy the Thebans, and how, when about to be caught by the Hound [Lailaps] given by Artemis to Prokris the daughter of Erekhtheus, the Fox was turned into a stone, as was likewise this Hound." (9.19.1). Pausanias, Description of Greece, Vol. IV. trans. W.H.S. Jones. (London William Hienmann LTD., 1935): 251

³⁵² Sirius is the star closest to earth, save for the Sun, making it the brightest star in the night sky. "Stars similar to it are called sirii by astronomers." Condos, 65.

³⁵³ Isaiah 34:4.

³⁵⁴ Alain de Lille, *Anticlaudianus*, 102.

rolled up like a scroll, we might imagine that the *Nun's Priest's Tale* will stand there in naked Golden-Spangled Hamburg glory clucking over a corn the size of the brief epoch of the fallen world.

“*Le Papillon est une Fleur qui vol, la Fleur un Papillon fixé,*”³⁵⁵ or, “If there’s a bustle in your hedgerow.”³⁵⁶

Sex is a philosophical Rubicon in Chaucer’s poems and the *Nun's Priest's Tale* is no exception. It is the quixotic culmination of narrative theses conducted at the summit of historical agency. Next comes the habitual quickening of narrative frenzy towards a rhetorical free-for-all. As the drama of the poem transforms, we look briefly to the *Miller's Tale* whose philosophy crests when Nicholas and Alisoun bed each other while John sleeps in a skiff.

Ther was the revel and the melodye;
 And thus lith Alison and Nicholas,
 In bisynesse of myrthe and of solas,
 Til that the belle of laudes gan to ryng,
 And freres in the chauncel gonne synge.

(3652- 3656)

It is the surest footing of the poem’s atheistic poetic cosmos- a Flood sublimated to the language of appetite, signifying nothing, except as it provides room and board for the “bisynesse of myrthe and solas,” within clear earshot of one of God’s new

³⁵⁵ Ponce Denis Ecouchard Le Brun. *Epigramme LXXXVIII. Oeuvres de Ponce Denis (Ecouchard) Le Brun*. ed. P.L. Ginguené (Paris: Gabriel Warée, 1811): 317.

³⁵⁶ Jimmy Page, Robert Plant. “Stairway to Heaven.” *Led Zeppelin IV*. Atlantic Records (1971) LP.

tombs.³⁵⁷ But even the more aggressive anti-poetry of the Miller's rhetoricians leaves a little room for some "myrth and...solas." Likewise the abstract territory of Pertelote and Chauntecleer's dream debate collapses when materialist rhetoric and an aborted Academic perspective collide and feather each other twenty times. There, too, lovers in art breathe the free air of "myrthe" and "solas" after an anxious contact with infinity. Both poems, after rather luxurious seductions, become hyperactive, impatient with their own material. In the Miller the energy finds darker expressions. The same can be said for the other poems we have discussed. When the curtain falls on the *Pardoner's Tale* three rioters are left dead at the hands of one of the walking dead. The *Manciple's Tale* ends in murder and mutilation.

But Chauntecleer's poem is a merry one. Even its typically Chaucerian disaster of a third act is merry. Thanks to *divertimenti* the story goes missing in between the feathering and now. When it returns it continues to "pley" where the Monk's does not. It is a piece of Horatian talk that as we discovered, could quiet Harry Bailey and be "worthe a boterflye." "Sire Monk, namoore of this, so God yow blesse!/ Youre tale anoyeth al this compaignye./ Swich talkyng is nat worth a boterflye/ For therinne is ther no desport ne game." (2788-291). And that is right where Chauntecleer first finds the fox, when he casts his eye on a butterfly. "And so bifel that, as he caste his ye/ Among the wortes on a boterflye/ He was war of this fox, that lay full lowe." (3273-3275). Perhaps Chauntecleer looks at his soul and the first thing he sees is a beast ready to eat him. But we know that the subject of 'devouring' is complicated in a poem where a rooster sings the mermaid's song. Perhaps the scene comedically tells the story of the rough and uneven world that awaits when one

³⁵⁷ "What are these churches now if not the new tombs and sepulchers of God?" Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, 120.

diverts the gaze beyond the butterfly, a world condemned by the excitable St. Prosper of Aquitania: “Thence our inherited mortality, thence the manifold corruptions of body and mind, thence ignorance, distress, useless cares, illicit lusts, sacrilegious errors, empty fear, harmful love, unwarranted joys, punishable counsels, and a number of miseries no smaller than that of our crimes.”³⁵⁸ We might read in the poem’s second use of ‘butterfly’ the anxiety of the natural chicken thrust back into the poem from Epicurean retirement. First he sees a butterfly after a long rhetorical experiment in natural modes. Then the fox disrupts the harmless and meditative eternity of coop’s only butterfly, reviving and bringing back into focus the chicken’s earlier and unwelcome psychomachia. The chicken’s attempt to take refuge in corporeal bliss of “foul prisoun” is intervened upon, at once, by his own soul and the animal that wants to eat it. Conrad writes,

‘We want in so many ways to be,’ he began again. ‘This magnificent butterfly finds a little heap of dirt and sits still on it; but man he will never on this heap of mud keep still. He want to be so, and again he want to be so...’ He moved his hand up, then down... ‘He wants to be a saint, and he wants to be a devil- and every time he shuts his eyes he sees himself as a very fine fellow- so fine as he can never be...In a dream.’³⁵⁹

The metaphor-in-pantomime of the man who cannot see the psyches for the butterflies takes firm root in both *Lord Jim* and the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale*. As always Chaucer’s style contorts elegant questions of philosophy and spirit to fit behind the shape of narrative farce. But there they are nonetheless. As for any possibility for the butterfly

³⁵⁸ St. Prosper of Aquitania. *De vocatione omnium gentium*, I, vii [Migne’s *Patrologia Graeca*, LI, 653 f.] Quoted in George Boas, *Primitivism and Related Ideas in the Middle Ages*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997): 55.

³⁵⁹ Conrad, *Lord Jim*, 215.

as a governing metaphor, after the four trials in the *Golden Ass*, Psyche- literature's immortal butterfly- gains access to eternity by special dispensation from Venus.

Chauntecleer's comedic single trial restores him to an eternity that has yet to lapse inside a poem by the sheer force of his 'wit', a vaudevillian wit about as experimental as asking someone 'What's that on your shirt?' and flicking their nose when they look down. "Sire, if that I were as ye,/ Yet sholde I seyn, as wys God helpe me/ 'Turneth again, ye proude cherles alle!" (3408-3410).

When Chauntecleer sees the fox, the supernatural crooner and Boethian traitor to the mermaid race is at rare loss for Middle English. "He was war of this fox, that lay ful lowe./ Nothyng ne liste hym thanne for to crowe,/ But cride anon, "Cok! cok!" and up he sterte/ As man that was affrayed in his herte." (3275-3278). The problem is of similar nature to the *Manciple's Tale*. When presented with the 'facts of life' - in Chauntecleer's case the cognitive idea of death- the language in the poem scrambles into sound. "What song syngestow?" The narration applies the broad strokes of this idea and represents the sonic irregularity according to the conflict of beast and prey in nature rather than according to earlier and more literary strategies. "For natureely a beest desireth flee/ Fro his contrarie, if he may it see." (3279-3280). Stewart Justman writes, "It is with sounds that symbolize nothing, mere onomatopoeia, that we come closest in this tale to the reality under the overlay of words: At these "moments of truth" language is not symbolic."³⁶⁰ Justman takes this as another proof for the fact that "the *Nun's Priest's Tale* really concerns the authenticity of the commonplace, the chaff, and of the literalist perception. It shows that high Latin culture has no place in

³⁶⁰ Justman, 207.

the barnyard.”³⁶¹ And while the poem’s onomatopoeic experiments seem to problematize in a definite manner that the delicate problem of the representation of the historical in art, of depicting *reality* in the language of *Realism*, the finality of Stewart’s judgment of Chauntecleer’s very chicken moment- itself compliment to his earlier clucking- is complicated by what follows. “Though he never erst hadde seyn it with his ye.” (3281). The shift from natural to preternatural is immediate.

Chauntecleer is back to his initial employ as an oracle. The poetics of animal noise comes into sharper focus in the chase, but this small eruption foreshadows the poem’s climax and begins the linguistic chase cycle of noise-conversation-noise-conversation. For now, we see the first sign of the clash between two languages, like the first static that comes over the radio prior to a storm outage. The art of the “yeerd” resumes though with reference to the bolts of an earlier discussion- the prediction of the fox, and his urbane overture to the chicken. “Gentil sire, allas.” (3284).

Chauntecleer fails to recognize the fox despite having dreamt up something very like Russel just that morning. The reason for this belongs to the impasse between the manner in which the Macrobian vision of *somnium coeleste* obtains in life as opposed to art. It is one thing to predict a future event in the setting of historical agency and another thing to do so in the setting of art. The first is “a splendid and helpful thing,”³⁶² and a verifiable miracle. In art the prediction of a future event does not provoke the same sense of wonder because we understand that wonders in art come cheap. Prophecy in literature only discloses a deeper set of symbols. For example, in *Macbeth* the ripest element of metaphorical surprise does not seem to be the premonitory power of witches. Nor is this the case in the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale*. I

³⁶¹ Ibid., 208.

³⁶² Cicero, *De Divinatione* (I.i). Falconer, 223.

have yet to come across a critical reading whose singular interest is to celebrate Chauntecleer's mystical purchase on the future. Usually, critics dispute the accuracy of the prediction, or convict Chauntecleer for disregarding the import of his dream, or deconstruct the perplexing fact that his dream comes true and that he does not recognize it when it happens. All of these approaches, any such approach that considers Chauntecleer's dream *en route* to other more pressing matters of interpretation ratifies a simple idea: that we expect different things of oracles in art than we do in life. We expect meaning rather than event. This unfolds a simpler idea: that we expect art to mean more than life, or to mean differently than life. If the palm reader at Coney Island told me that one-day I would fall in love with the girl under the apple tree and it happened, I would be content to praise the mystery and raw talent of the Coney Island palm reader. If I read that story in a book I would want to know what it means to fall in love with a girl under an apple tree.

One particular difficulty has to do with the irony of context, for instance if one praises the power of prose in verse. Chauntecleer, a talking chicken in a poem, argues that dreams predict the future in life. His dream comes true. He fails to recognize it when it does. What has happened is that Chauntecleer proves a point about reality that does not obtain in Reality. The fact that he cannot recognize the reification of his dream is because it is not really the reification of his dream. The reification of his dream is the *Nun's Priest's Tale* that he does not know he is in. "One of the major dramatic ironies of the *Nun's Priest's Tale*," Travis argues, "is that Chauntecleer, who reads his own dream as if it were a typical dream of literature, the *somnium coeleste*, isn't himself aware that he is actually living inside a piece of literature..."³⁶³ What

³⁶³ Travis, *Disseminal*, 320.

Chauntecleer has done is “wel founden by experience/ That dremes been significaciouns/ As wel of joye as of tribulaciouns/ That folk enduren in this lif present.” (2978-2981). But when the time comes to witness his dream come true in the “lif present” it does not happen. It happens in a magical barnyard and was brought forth by a history of literature that withdraws the reification of dreams from the “lif present” to Croesus’ plot of land in the Hyperboreans. Chauntecleer’s noise is philosophically consistent with the aporia that runs through the entire poem. “Metaphors speak of what remains absent.”³⁶⁴ “Cok! cok!” is the sound of a dream coming true in the wrong world.

The Dialogue

It is because this world is an argument. Because of this it is a trick. The question is not whether dreams *come* true; the question is whether dreams *are* true. In the former, what happens is true. In the latter, what’s true is true. We might not know what is true in a poem like the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* save for the fact that all of it is true, or, as Charles S. Singleton says of Dante, “the fiction of the *Comedy* is that it is not a fiction.”³⁶⁵ Chauntecleer’s reading of his own dream was no help to him. He does not understand what he sees. This is not because of an ethical violation- pride or dismissiveness. It does not owe to stupidity- he remains one of the smartest chickens in the universe. It is because he was waiting for Godot, waiting for history to *happen* to his poem, like a ghost who does not know that he is dead and wonders why the

³⁶⁴ Karsten Harries, “Metaphor and Transcendence.” *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 5, No. 1, (Autumn, 1978): 84.

³⁶⁵ Charles S. Singleton, “The Irreducible Dove.” *Comparative Literature*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (Spring, 1957): 129.

waitress never takes his order. Thus, the fox comes but Chauntecleer's philosophy cannot tell him what it means. He simply emits a sound that reverberates off the fox's two selves- animal and *anima*. So he will hear this nice chap out, his new "freend."

According to Boethius, that which is true is "released from its earthly prison, and seeks heaven in free flight."³⁶⁶ The push and pull of the dialogue between the fox and Chauntecleer has to do with prison and free flight, referent and symbol, "Cok! cok!" and "synge." Chauntecleer, once "namoore aferd," returns for one sonic moment to the bald terror of "kepe my body out of foule prisoun!" Just as quickly, the poem tells us that "He wolde han fled, but that the fox anon" (3283) greets him in good Middle English. "Be ye affrayd of me that am youre freend?" (3286). The speed and ease with which the chicken resumes laconic debate vacillates between the literal and antiphrastic meanings of his Platonic request. As though echoes from history were audible, he cries "Cok! cok!" for fear of the destruction of body. As though Chauntecleer intuits the nugatory status of body in this epistemology, he sticks around after the "Cok! cok!" to give a command performance. Both seem to take place at once.

The fox tells Chauntecleer, "I am nat come youre conseil for t'espye,/ But trewely, the cause of my comynge/ Was oonly for to herkne how that ye synge." (3288-3290). Once again we observe the Canterbury continuation of Latin and French themes of things "secree." The Ovidian birds transgress the secrets of Minerva and Apollo. Phoebus' crow does the same. In *Amores* I:XIII, the lover wants to delay the sunrise to practice his prose in the dark. In the *Roman Nature* instructs Mars and Venus in the science of optics so they might hide from Vulcan. Nicholas sets up

³⁶⁶ Boethius, *Consolation*. James, 62.

“deerne love” as heir to the vacant throne of “Goddess pryvetee.” In the Pardoner, Death is a “privee thief” (675) and the executioner of the young men who consume a cynical Eucharist of “breed and wyn, ful prively.” (797). Pertelote wants a husband who was “secree.” Chaucer experiments repetitively with Nicholas’ “deerne love” to tremendous effect. Now the fox arrives “not” wanting to spy on Chaucer’s secrets, which have, at this point, become metonymic for a poetics of both experience and form. In either case, the chicken’s secrets are so secret and so split between his language and his being that he does not know them himself.

Chaucer’s most important secret is his artistic identity. That is why the fox’s mode of language would guarantee that Chaucer’s rhetoric is identical to Chaucer’s being- that naturalism causes a thing to be natural, that idea (or more precisely, ideology) entails existence, or, more simply, that we are what we say. Illogically, he has the rooster “syng” better than the angels in order to facilitate the inevitable destiny of natural things: death, either by nature or by accident, and the fox is happy to be the accident. From what the fox hears and sees he makes an intellectual judgment about Chaucer: “natural(ist) rooster; not ‘candle of the sun [that] banished winter’s shade, forcing all cold to suffer exile’;³⁶⁷ conclusion: good for eating.” Such a rhetorical perspective, like any idea of a fox taking a rhetorical perspective, is thanks to the fact that this happens to be “thilke tyme.” The farce is as follows: In order for a talking fox to prove that a talking chicken is only as good as his word, and is fit to be treated like a natural chicken due to the fact that his rhetoric and action are “secree” rather than Universal, in the Macrobian sense, that fox should have the chicken sing like the spheres for him “For trewely, ye have as myrie a

³⁶⁷ Alain de Lille, *The Complaint of Nature: Yale Studies in English*, v. 36. trans. Douglas M. Moffat. (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1908): 22.

stevene/ As any aungel hat that is in hevene.” (3291-3292). Such confusion recalls earlier narrative strategies. Somehow, this natural chicken’s crowing is merrier than the organ, more accurate than the church bell, like the mermaid’s song, and now, better than the angels. It even has “moore feelynge/ Than hadde Boece, or any that kan synge.” (3293-3294).

Music as Myth

Boethius’ *De Musica* receives less attention than it deserves as a Platonic myth. The philosophy of the myth has to do with the relationship of music to human ontology and, of course, to Form. Boethius’ aetiological focus is the discovery of music by the “night owl” (*nocturnus*) and stargazer Pythagoras. In *De Musica*, the myth unifies the math, so to speak, and not the other way around. The *ascensus* begins according to the Platonic tension between *epistêmê* and *technê*, in this case musical theory and musical performance. Musical theory belongs to the speculative and performance to the sensible. Boethius sides with the higher end of the paradox rather than the lower. Boethius’ supercilious tone is similar to Philosophy’s towards the poetic Muses in the *Consolation*- “comune strompettis” that they are- which is itself borrowed from Plato’s narrative method in the *Republic* when the poets are banished from the Ideal State. Boethius writes,

He indeed is a musician who wins the science of singing through intellectual meditation, not in the servitude of performing but in the sovereignty of speculation. We see this in the arts of building and of warfare, where terms are used differently: the name we associate with a building, or with a triumph, is that of the person whose mind and control brought it about, not those of the men who served. So in music we can make a threefold distinction. . . . Those whose sole task is performance, such as singing lute-players (*citharoedi*), are

far from the scientific understanding of music, for they are servants . . . as has been said: they bring nothing intellectual to it, they are quite unspeculative. Another kind of makers of music are the poets (*genus poetarum*)—yet they are drawn to song not so much by speculation and reason as by a kind of natural instinct. So they too must be kept out of music (*a musica segregandum est*). Thirdly, there are the experts at judging, who can scrutinize rhythms and songs and entire poems. As this is wholly based on reason and speculation, theirs can truly be called the province of music . . .³⁶⁸

Peter Dronke comments, “This was all very well for Boethius the critic. Chaucer the poet could not take it solemnly. With a single deft touch he intimates that on this point he found Boethius as insensitive, as quaintly wrongheaded, as most of us would today.”³⁶⁹ Such is the irony of the fox’s compliment to Chauntecleer’s father—“Certes, it was of herte, al that he song.” (3303) an irony that Dronke identifies with Chaucer’s push against Boethian austerity. Dronke reads a premium on theory rather than practice in the *De Musica* and the opposite in Chaucer’s poem due to fact that the poet is a performer. One cannot deny that Boethius, along with Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Augustine, and Macrobius would consider “the theoretical kinds of knowledge to be more of the nature of Wisdom than the productive.”³⁷⁰ Augustine’s own *De Musica*, an imaginary Platonic dialogue between *magister* and *discipulus* “deals not with practical music making but with music as a speculative science . . . the work betrays the influence of both the Neo-Platonic and Neo-Pythagoreans traditions.”³⁷¹ The same “rational art of music,” of Cicero and Macrobius is an “organizing principle of in the

³⁶⁸ Boethius, *De Musica* (I.34) Quoted in Peter Dronke, “Chaucer and Boethius’ ‘De Musica.’” *Notes and Queries* Vol. 13, No. 3 (1966): 92.

³⁶⁹ Dronke, *ibid.*

³⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

³⁷¹ Brian Brennan, “Augustine’s *De Musica*.” *Vigiliae Christianae* Vol. 42 (1988): 267.

Parliament of Foules.”³⁷² The idea resurfaces frequently in Chaucer, Jean de Meun, and Dante.³⁷³ This traditional perspective is part of the larger history of philosophical Platonism that locates knowledge outside the deciduous phenomenology of experience.

However, Dronke’s antinomy of “performance and theory” does conclude the matter of the musical representation of the philosophical. In the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* opposition takes the form of “herte” and “wisdom,” but like its poet-banning predecessors, it is the beginning rather than the end of philosophy. Because just as one must accept the irony whereby the poet of the *Timaeus* elsewhere is the philosopher who banishes the poets, so too must we understand the Boethian condemnation of singers who are “quite unspeculative” according to the fact that Boethius “quite literally...did *compose* and *sing* music in the poems of the *Consolation*.”³⁷⁴ In the *Consolation*, “‘Music’ is a ‘little servant’ of Philosophy,’ that is, of reason, but actually it is Philosophy herself who composes, sings, and accompanies on strings the poems of the work, so music is really an aspect of her own powers just as ‘Rhetoric’ is.”³⁷⁵ This is the same maneuver we observed in the *Phaedrus*- Rhetoric (elsewhere discredited as it serves sophism) travels to the Muse of Poetry (elsewhere discredited as it serves sensibility) in order to join Philosophy at the world’s end, free of the noetic defects of time and extension. In this sense, the fox’s comparison of Chauntecleer’s song to the angelic song represents an unconscious mistake, a crack in his rhetorical perspective. Chamberlain argues, “The singing of the angels to which the Fox alludes was traditionally a rational music that imitated both the melody of the

³⁷² Chamberlain, 189.

³⁷³ *Ibid.*, 190.

³⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 189.

³⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

spheres and the exemplars of all music in the mind of God.”³⁷⁶ If he sings like the angels according to the medieval tradition, then he sings like “Ye, where the day eternal hath its source/ keep watch, so that from you nor sleep nor night/ can steal one step of the ages in their course.”³⁷⁷ Dronke’s reading has Chaucer’s irony convicting Boethius’ overly rational vision of music. Chamberlain corrects this by identifying the medieval Platonic elision of “rational music” as that which praises the soul at the expense of the body. Boethius is a singer of the soul because music, understood by number, “is perfect and has its origin in the One.”³⁷⁸ This is why Chamberlain concludes that Chauntecleer, servant of Venus, sings the song of prurience.³⁷⁹

But the reference to Boethius travels further yet. The object is not simply to further ironize Chauntecleer’s well documented attachment to mind and body, though that does seem to come as collateral. Boethius’ *De Musica* sets its sight on the origin of music as it is understood epistemologically, as it is understood as Form. And any good Platonic epistemology is a mythology. Platonic “myth serves as the medium through which is made possible any discussion of the ‘first principles’ of philosophy.”³⁸⁰ This is because Form exists prelinguistically. It is mediated to language symbolically and not literally. Calvin M. Bower writes, “Boethius intended to treat only peripherally the actual theory and practice of music; his focus was knowing.”³⁸¹ He continues, “Even musical details essentially independent of mythic and mathematical elements are made to blend in with the Pythagorean

³⁷⁶ Ibid., 191.

³⁷⁷ Dante, *Purgatorio* (XXX. 103-105), Bickersteth, 487.

³⁷⁸ Augustine, *De Musica* (6.17). Quoted in Brennan, 274.

³⁷⁹ Chamberlain, 190.

³⁸⁰ Robert Scott Stewart, “The Epistemological Function of Platonic Myth.” *Philosophy & Rhetoric*, Vol. 22, No. 4 (1989): 260.

³⁸¹ Calvin M. Bower, “Introduction,” in Boethius, *Fundamentals of Music*. trans. Calvin M. Bower, ed. Claude V. Palisca (London: Yale University Press, 1989): xx.

background.”³⁸² Boethius’ Platonic starting point is that “there happen to be four mathematical disciplines, the other three share with music the task of searching for truth.”³⁸³ The reason this is so, according to Boethius is that, “What Plato rightfully said can likewise be understood: the soul of the universe was joined together according to musical concord.”³⁸⁴ But music fell along with the Golden Age. “It (music) has been squandered in various promiscuous ways, it has lost its measure of dignity and virtue; and having almost fallen onto a state of disgrace, it preserves nothing of its ancient splendor.”³⁸⁵ Once again, human will-as-technology rather than will directed towards Form or the Mind of God is to fault. “Thus, when Timothy of Miletus added one string to those that were already established, thereby making the music more capricious, a decree was drafted to expel him from Laconica.”³⁸⁶ Adding a string in this instance shares in the same epistemic mythology Eden’s forbidden fruit, the departure of *caritas* and the arrival of Justice, and the mining of the earth for the metals³⁸⁷ of war that brings down Elysium. Palisca argues,

Music began in a state of grace, as it were, with four strings sounding intervals of the octave divided by a fourth and a fifth, intervals embodying the tetractys discovered by Pythagoras at the smithy. In the age of gods and demigods, nothing discordant was found in music. The historical allegory reaches back to

³⁸² Ibid. “Introduction,” xxiii.

³⁸³ Boethius, *De Musica*, 2.

³⁸⁴ Ibid.

³⁸⁵ Ibid., 5-6.

³⁸⁶ Ibid., 6.

³⁸⁷ “But cursed was the tyme, I dare wel seye,/ That men first dide hir swety bysiness/ To grobbe up metal, lurking in derknesse.” *The Former Age* (27-29).

the most ancient of Greek prehistory, naming the inventors of strings who had been associated with the invention of the modes.³⁸⁸

Boethius tells the story of Pythagoras who, by all measures, had given up the hope that the mutability of musical perception could be reconstituted as true knowledge. “Granting them (instruments) a minimum of trust, yet remaining curious for some time, Pythagoras was seeking a way to acquire through reason, unfalteringly and consistently, a full knowledge of the criteria of consonances.”³⁸⁹ Pythagoras, “by a kind of divine will”³⁹⁰ passes a blacksmith and overhears the beating of hammers that “somehow emit a single consonance from differing sounds.”³⁹¹ Pythagoras thinks that the strength of the men hammering is the principle behind the consonance. Boethius writes, “But the property of sounds did not rest in the muscles of men, rather, it followed the exchanged hammers.”³⁹² Pythagoras intuits number to be the language of music and Boethius tells us that in doing so he “was the first to ascertain...by what ratio the concord of sounds was joined together.”³⁹³ Once number is established as the pure mode of musical reference the soul’s judgment sublimates the senses. Brennan writes of Augustine’s *De Musica*,

The perfect numbers in the soul are those termed by Augustine judicial. Within the soul these *numeri judiciales*, unlike other transient numbers, are alone immortal. They establish that which is rightly pleasing in musical sound, but may however be judged and evaluated by “more hidden” numbers. The completed series of *numeri* form a hierarchy of ascent by which one may rise

³⁸⁸ Bower, “Introduction,” *De Musica*, xxii.

³⁸⁹ Boethius, *De Musica*, 18.

³⁹⁰ Ibid.

³⁹¹ Ibid.

³⁹² Ibid.

³⁹³ Ibid., 19.

“from the consideration of changeable numbers in inferior things to the unchangeable numbers which are already in unchangeable truth itself.”³⁹⁴

Thus when we encounter a Neoplatonic numerical theory of music, we understand that the numbers are an effect of the soul’s knowledge rather than the scientific application of experiential knowledge- we do not learn numbers, we know them, or we anamnestically recover them. Performance is a shadow of the truth of music. Like other disciplines, it awaits its grace and is insufficient according to its own power to lay claim to it. Augustinian and Boethian *numeri judiciales* become the mystical artistic judge of sound. That judgment is what makes a sound a musical sound. Put another way, music *happens* to sound, just like poetry can *happen* to language.

The myth of Pythagoras is in the spirit of Platonic and Biblical literature: one man living in the epoch of the Fall reemerges from a cave with the truth. Chesterton supposes that,

Something like it might have been attempted in the more archaic and decorative medieval art. But the more the artists learned of realism and perspective, the less they could depict at once the angels in the heavens and the shepherds on the hills, and the glory in the darkness that was under the hills. Perhaps it could have been best conveyed by the characteristic expedient of some of the medieval guilds, when they wheeled about the streets a theater with three stages one above the other, with heaven above the earth and hell under the earth. But in the riddle of Bethlehem it was heaven that was under the earth.³⁹⁵

³⁹⁴ Brennan, 274.

³⁹⁵ Chesterton, *Everlasting Man*, 173.

It has an elemental appeal: Plato's Myth of the Cave, Pythagoras in the smithy, as Chesterton calls the Nativity, "The God in the Cave,"³⁹⁶ Christ in the tomb, Christ's Harrowing of Hell. The descent to a place lower than the earth in order to reclaim the world above the earth is a persistent intercessory vision of anamnesis. And though it may seem too elite a company in which to include Pythagoras' trip to the smithy, the extent to which, for Boethius, music negotiates the soul's knowledge should be understood because, "Indeed no path to the mind is as open for instruction as the sense of hearing."³⁹⁷ Because, "Whoever penetrates into his own self perceives human music."³⁹⁸ That is why, "It appears beyond doubt that music is so naturally united with us that we cannot be free of it even if we so desired. For this reason the power of the intellect ought to be summoned, so that this art, innate through nature, may also be mastered, comprehended through knowledge."³⁹⁹ And this is not a piece of Enlightenment style rationalism, as Dronke posited as the focus of Chaucer's irony. Rather it is the territorial reconditioning of art from experience, the submission of song to symbol and ultimately to Symbol. Harmony is not simply a matter of arranging sounds to please; it is also a matter of arranging all human knowledge in symphonic unity with our memory of God's. "If a certain harmony did not join the diversities and opposing forces...how would it be possible that they could unite in one mass and contrivance?"⁴⁰⁰ Put simply, inside each of us is a soul, inside that is soul is music, the soul and its parts must be brought into harmony with the order whence it came.

³⁹⁶ Ibid., 169.

³⁹⁷ Boethius, *De Musica*, 3.

³⁹⁸ Ibid., 10.

³⁹⁹ Ibid., 8.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid., 9.

Boethius's philosophical vision of harmony and consonance governs the noise in the poem, from the "Cok! cok!" to the shrill dissonance of the fox chase, because, "Dissonance...is a hard and unpleasant percussive of two sounds....For as long as they are unwilling to blend together and each somehow strives to be heard unimpaired, and since one interferes with the other, each is transmitted to the sense unpleasantly."⁴⁰¹ In this spirit Travis argues,

A fundamental question the fox chase asks is one that Chaucer has been addressing since the beginning of his career: do the sonorities of poetry bear any resemblance to, and do they bear any responsibilities toward, the noisy realities of the world? Much more pointedly, does poetry have anything to say about the (dis)harmonics of human justice?"⁴⁰²

In Boethian terms, can the two sounds "unwilling to blend together" that both "strive to be heard unimpaired" be brought into harmony? In the terms of this thesis, can the song of the world outside the *Nun's Priest's Tale* harmonize with the song of the world inside the *Nun's Priest's Tale*?

"I knew your father;/ These hands are not more like."⁴⁰³

Chauntecleer's Family Tree

When we consider the *De Musica* and bring that musical mythology to bear upon Chauntecleer's father a different perspective becomes possible. To appreciate

⁴⁰¹ Ibid., 16.

⁴⁰² Travis, *Disseminal*, 239.

⁴⁰³ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (1.2.210). *The Oxford Shakespeare: Hamlet*. ed. G.R. Hibbard. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987): 167.

that perspective, we must first realize that that the direct appeal to Chauntecleer takes only one line and comes at the very end, “Lat se; konne ye youre fader countrefete?” (3321). The fox’s total argument is the story of Chauntecleer’s mother and father.

Roger Ellis writes,

He (the fox) presents himself as a friend of the family and a lover of good music. Whatever men may say about singing, he knows that no human agent can compare with Chauntecleer in singing. Only the angels in heaven could stand the comparison and, of course, Chauntecleer’s own father, who was unsurpassed in his own time.⁴⁰⁴

Payne calls Chauntecleer an “orphan” and such an idea would make for an interesting mood. Chauntecleer’s most tragic moment could occur unconsciously in the poem rather than as the fruit of the narrator’s bibliography. It is the somewhat sad picture: Chauntecleer hearing for the first time about his dad and wanting to emulate him. The rooster fails to understand that the fox did not have his parents *to* dinner: “My lord youre fader- God his soule blesse!-/ And eek youre mooder, of hire gentillesse,/ Han in my hous ybeen to my greet ese.” (3295-3297). The fox’s “ese” (indeed, every voice in the poem wants some) is the same as the Widow’s- chickens are for eating and not for speculating on the tones of the spheres. Not that “ese” is ever narratologically represented in Chaucer’s poetry as the soul’s first breath without lungs; “ese” belongs to the phenomenal. One need not read it so dramatically, of course. Chauntecleer could listen to the story and hear further proof of what he already knows to be true- that he is a very fine chicken indeed. He could be thinking about corn.

⁴⁰⁴ Roger Ellis, Patterns of Religious Narrative in the Canterbury Tales. (London: Croon Helm Ltd., 1986): 280.

Nonetheless, the argument that convinces Chauntecleer to sing for the fox is a Thumb Bible that tells a cyclical generational history of fox and chicken. We do not know if the fox ate Chauntecleer's parents. The fox insinuates it, but Chauntecleer also insinuates that he is destined for death. Insinuations run amok in the tale. At any rate, if the Old Chauntecleer was eaten, a new one replaced him. The story, the characters, the world rehearse the same play into perpetuity. Though we cannot know the history of Chauntecleer's parents we can understand its representation in the fox's rhetoric. And the fox represents the parents according to the confusion that runs through the entire poem: Chauntecleer is a royal prince grazing in a pasture. Here, the fox tells a story of the natural battle between hunter and prey the subtext of which is that he ate Chauntecleer's parents and he will eat him too. The curiosity by which he represents this natural sisyphism is to demonstrate that Chauntecleer, like his late father, was the best singer in any region and the wisest man to boot. "Save yow, I herde nevere a man so synge/ As dide youre fader in the morwenynge." (3301-3302). "...Ther nas no man in no regioun/ That hym in song or wisdom myghte passe." (3310-3311). Further instability saturates the fox's language. He never calls chickens "chicken." He calls them "man." "I herde nevere man so synge." (3301). "That ther nas no man in no regioun." (3310).

Thus two ideas of mimesis occur in the fox's speech, one literal and one by antiphrasis. In the first, mimesis is the imitation of nature. Within this natural mimesis the fox makes a general and a specific point. Generally, the fox urges Chauntecleer to imitate the natural ontology of his father and mother- to be a chicken, to get eaten by a fox. Specifically, he provides the literal template for how to do so.

And for to make his voys the moore strong,

He wolde so peyne hym that with both his yen
 He moste wynke, so loude he wolde cryen,
 And stonden on his tiptoon therwithal,
 And strecche forth his nekke long and smal.

(3304-3308)

As Meredith argued, “Chauntecleer sings himself to sleep to be eaten by someone else with his own mermaid song.”⁴⁰⁵ After painting the picture of Chauntecleer’s father, eyes closed, on tiptoes, neck outstretched, wailing his swansong, the fox follows with the eminently cohesive, “And eek he was of swich discrecioun/ That ther nas no man in no regioun/ That hym in song or wisdom myghte passe.” (3309-3311). At one level, it is a fairly pedestrian mode of humor. Step 1: Tell story about someone doing something stupid. Step 2: Call it smart. Result: humor. At another level, there is a lingering case of the shakes in the argument that can be forensically traced to the reference to Boethius’ *De Musica*. Chauntecleer’s father sings from the heart rather than from Pythagorean speculation. (3303). So much so that he closes his eyes and cranes his neck, hungry fox in the cabbages be damned. (3305-3308). Next, Chauntecleer’s father’s wisdom is without equal. (3311). The tension between musical sensibility and musical form remains unresolved in the fox’s argument. They continue to tend together, to share in a common telos, but the simplicity of the distinction between “herte” and “wisdom” is inadequate to express it.

That is where the antiphrastic idea of mimesis in the fox’s story begins. As we observed, Boethius provides a solution to the paradox according to traditional Platonic precedents. “What Plato rightfully said can likewise be understood: the soul of the

⁴⁰⁵ Meredith, 81.

universe was joined together according to musical concord.”⁴⁰⁶ Lorenzo’s thoughts in the *Merchant of Venice* holds true for the col-fox of the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale*:

The man that hath no music in himself,
 Nor is not mov'd with concord of sweet sounds,
 Is fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils.
 The motions of his spirit are dull as night
 And his affections dark as Erebus.
 Let no such man be trusted. Mark the music.⁴⁰⁷

Boethius’ idea of musical concord, via Plato, says a lot. At the beginning of all things, even prior to the Golden Age, God creates the universe and gives it a soul through music. The universe has a soul. That soul is song. Viewed through St. Paul’s letter to the Romans in which he says, “For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now”⁴⁰⁸ we begin to understand conflicts within and without the poem. What I mean is this, man and the world are fallen. Both have souls. The soul of the universe is music and the soul of man is thought. The universe “groaneth and travaileth” (it should be singing) and man cannot know the proper object of his thought. Problematically, man has only language to describe and remember both the “musical concord” by which God created the soul of universe and the object of his thought. But language cannot describe music without becoming like music. Number can, but number does not describe music. According to Boethius and Augustine, music *is* number. Number is the soul acting upon sound. Number “is

⁴⁰⁶ Boethius, *De Musica*, 2.

⁴⁰⁷ William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*. ed. Charles Edelman. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002): 251

⁴⁰⁸ Romans 8:22.

perfect and has its origin in the One.”⁴⁰⁹ Therefore, the relationship of number to music is one of being. Language is not number. Language is not being. It is dead to the soul and dead to knowledge. But symbol is soul acting on language and symbol is being. Language must become number; it must become a true symbol in any possible world in order to express anything about ours, much less the better world beyond it. In the same sense, man and nature are dead to their own souls, dead to their own music and symbol. That is why a New Man in Scripture inhabits a new heaven and a new earth. But in a sense they are really the Old Man and the old heaven and the old earth. They just died for a while. But here we are in the Boethian world of a poem, with music and symbol dancing in an easy *pas de quatre*. When Chauntecleer is singer, language has being. When language is represented in regression, when symbol ceases to act upon it, it loses being. It goes “Cok!, cok!” and “recalls us to the fallen world.”⁴¹⁰ Thus, we understand any disruption of music in the poem, such as the chase, as a challenge to the musical concord to which even something as sweet and underwhelming as Chauntecleer’s version of “My lief is faren in londe” refers. What then shall Chauntecleer imitate when the fox asks him to “countrefete” his father?

The fox’s story of Chauntecleer’s father takes place under a thick mist of Boethian and Biblical music mythology. “Save yow, I herde nevere man so synge/ As dide youre fader in the morwenyng.” (3301-3302). The fact that it is unclear who Chauntecleer and his father are is because it is unclear what a metaphor becomes. But if a metaphor involves the “transaction between two contexts”⁴¹¹ rather than merely a transaction between the meanings of two words, then part of the context here is the

⁴⁰⁹ Augustine, *De Musica* (6.17). Quoted in Brennan, 274.

⁴¹⁰ Winthrop Wetherbee, *Geoffrey Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004): 106.

⁴¹¹ Richards, 94.

date of musical concord of Boethius. The symbols are unclear but their epoch is not. Chauntecleer is very much like an Adam. But he is not Adam. He has a mother and father. They may be dead. Payne argues that Chauntecleer and the fox are Abel and Cain. "The meeting is of course the meeting of Cain and Abel, in the guise now of grain eating rooster and meat-eating fox."⁴¹² True enough. But Cain kills Abel and wanders the earth cursed and in exile. The fox sits in the shade of a tree talking to Chauntecleer at the end of the poem. If the fox ate Chauntecleer's parents, his exile was only to the cabbages of the same "yeerd" from which he usually hunts.

Another prelapsarian figure becomes a possible part of the context.

Chauntecleer's father sings in the "mowenyng." So did Lucifer. "How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! how art thou cut down to the ground, which didst weaken the nations!"⁴¹³ I do not mean to imply that Chauntecleer's father was the devil. There is a more interesting possibility. Jeffrey Burton Russel writes,

Although a few medieval literary works distinguish between the persons of Satan and Lucifer, the tradition as a whole affirms their unity and uses the terms indiscriminately as names of a single personage, the Devil, the personification of evil. The name "Lucifer" was born through the association of the great prince of Isaiah 14, the morning star, Helel-ben-Shahar, who falls from the heavens through his pride, with the cherub of Ezekiel 28, who was "perfect in his ways from the day he was created until iniquity was found in him," and of both with Satan, prince of this world and obstructor of the kingdom of God. Exactly when the three concepts came together is uncertain, but Origen treated them as a unity in the third century."⁴¹⁴

⁴¹² Payne, 211.

⁴¹³ Isaiah 14:12.

⁴¹⁴ Jeffrey Burton Russell, Lucifer: The Devil in the Middle Ages. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986): 11-12.

The confusion is important because it also carried with it a distinction. “Lucifer is not the proper name of the devil, but denotes only the state from which he has fallen.”⁴¹⁵ Christ himself is described as the daystar. “And we have the more firm prophetic word: whereunto you do well to attend, as to a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawn and the day star arise in your hearts.”⁴¹⁶ Confusing Lucifer with Satan is to understand that the name “Lucifer” praises a state of Innocence, one so expansive that the Devil once shared in it. And when he did, he roamed Eden, endowed with the power of music since the day of his creation. “Thou hast been in Eden the garden of God; every precious stone was thy covering, the sardius, topaz, and the diamond, the beryl, the onyx, and the jasper, the sapphire, the emerald, and the carbuncle, and gold: the workmanship of thy tabrets and of thy pipes was prepared in thee in the day that thou wast created.”⁴¹⁷ There is an ontological difference between Lucifer and the Devil. “Thou wast perfect in thy ways from the day that thou wast created, till iniquity was found in thee.”⁴¹⁸ Or as Chaucer writes in the *Monk’s Tale*, “O Lucifer, brightest of angels alle,/ Now artow Sathanas.” (*Monk’s Tale*, 2004-2005). Nonetheless, the technicolored garden-wanderer with music woven into his bones was in his better day an aubade. If we imagine such singing “sons of the morning” alongside what the Parson tells us about the dawn, ideas about Luciferian Innocence meet Boethian musical primitivism and begin to unify as an idea.

For soothely, the morwe tyde is moost covenable a man to seye his preyeres,
and for to thynken on God, and for to honoure God, and to yeven almesse to
the povre that first cometh in the name of Crist./ Lo, what seith Salomon:

⁴¹⁵ Maas, Anthony. "Lucifer." *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 9. (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1910) Accessed 30 Apr. 2011. <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/09410a.htm>>.

⁴¹⁶ 2 Peter 2:19

⁴¹⁷ Ezekiel 28:13.

⁴¹⁸ Ezekiel 28:15.

‘Whoso wolde by the morwe awaken and seke me, he shal fynde.’/ Thanne cometh negligence, or recchelesnesse, that rekketh of no thyng.”

(*Parson’s Tale*, 707-709)

Chamberlain comments, “Really the whole tradition of the canonical hours works implicitly to make Chauntecleer’s singing more amusing.”⁴¹⁹ Like other Chaucerian dawn songs, Chauntecleer passes on the opportunity to “seye his preyeres” and instead seduces Pertelote “Whan that the brighte sonne gan to sprynge,” (2878) with Top 40 medieval hits such as “My lief is faren in londe.”(2897). The fact remains though that such buffoonery rarely stands alone *qua* buffoonery. That sunrise and that sentimental favorite are justified according to the Luciferian morning to which the poem continues to refer itself: “From thilke tyme as I have understonde/ Beestes and briddes koude speke and synge” (2880-2881) follows directly in order to reinforce the central paradox of the poem- that in order for Chauntecleer and his kind to make such a mess of eternity they have to be residents of it. The fallen, paradoxically, inhabit an unfallen world; but that of course is the point- the world fell and art did not. The poem is a stress test for the idea that Art is free to represent fallenness without having to exchange its birthright for soup, without having to sign away its Innocence in order to do so. The same idea runs through the history of Platonism: Philosophy does not have a *substantial* share in privation even while it represents it in dialogue.

Thus we understand that there are opposing forces in the representation of Chauntecleer’s family tree. The fox’s rhetoric would honorifically depict Chauntecleer and father so that he might flatter them into their natural function. But the insecurity of that rhetoric manifests itself by dithering on a facile opposition between “herte” and “wisdom.” The fox’s misreads the Boethian elision of the

⁴¹⁹ Chamberlain, 190.

judgment of reason with the “herte” of performance. Musical judgment becomes pre-existing knowledge in the soul acting upon sound, turning the tables on the debate and making the soul the cause and music the effect. The manner in which this is done is to refer music to the moment of creation, the Luciferian “morwenynge” when Chauntecleer and his father sing. The fox’s rhetoric accepts at face value the camp fallenness of Chauntecleer- his heartfelt musical impiety- without reference to its experimental status as a mode of art and without reference to the fact that representation, as such, has no independent causal identity.

Meanwhile, we continue to observe the reorganization of natural rhetorics into a single narratological force in anticipation of the fox chase. The fox has read “Daun Burnel the Asse” which is a fairly throwaway piece of literature were it not a comedic suggestion of some grudge that exists between priests and chickens, like the one that exists between foxes and chicken.

I have wel rad in ‘Daun Burnel the Asse,’
 Among his vers, how that ther was a cok,
 For that a preestes sone yaf hym a knok
 Upon his leg whil he was yong and nyce,
 He made hym for to lese his benefice.

(3312-3316)

It comes out of nowhere in the text, but it comes from somewhere as a perspective. It joins up with the unique mood of the section: the historical depiction of conflicts with chickens. Now it seems that there is a particular duel between feather and cloth. I said earlier that all rhetorical perspectives will have the chicken fall. The fall, however, is not an ethical fall from grace to sin- Chauntecleer’s membership into the Merry

Gang⁴²⁰ could hardly be refused- but a fall from oracle to indigestion, from son of the morning to lunch, even from “My lief is faren in londe (a hymn by irony in “thilke tyme”) to “Cok! cok!” In short, the poem’s naturalists want him back from art. They want him back without realizing that they are not “back” themselves. Their rhetoric is the nervous intuition that the unknowable is the principle of self-knowledge, that one cannot experience oneself; one can only *speculate* oneself.

Every time a Chauntecleer arises, father or son, he must be reintroduced to the world by force or we are left like Dorigen to roam alongside the “rokkes blake” waiting for something other than a husband to come across the sea and make sense of things. And that is no “disport.” At the end of his story when the fox tells Chauntecleer, “Now syngeth, sire, for seinte charitee;” we might hear an echo of Jean De Meun’s lament for the passing of the ideal world. Pelen writes, “We learn that the castration of Saturn and the resultant birth of Venus introduce a fallen world where Justice, inferior to Charity, is now necessary.”⁴²¹ After Saturn’s misfortune, “whose testicles Jupiter, his hard and bitter son, cut off as though they were sausages and threw into the sea,”⁴²² *Raison* divides the world into two epochs; in the fallen epoch Justice comes to replace *caritas*, “But Love which comes from charity possesses greater necessity by far than does Justice.”⁴²³ Justice is only a steward and the political man is a brief contingency. “They would never have a king or a prince; there would be neither bailiff nor provost...so I say that Love by itself is worth more than

⁴²⁰ The “Merry Gang” is a titled bestowed by Andrew Marvell upon a famous group of libertines that included the infamous John Wilmot, 2nd Earl of Rochester. Andrew Marvell, The Poems and Letters of Andrew Marvell: Vol. II, Letters. (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1971): 355.

⁴²¹ Pelen, *Latin Poetic Irony*, 8.

⁴²² Jean De Meun, The Romance of the Rose. trans. Charles Dahlberg. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971): 112.

⁴²³ *Ibid.*, 113.

Justice.”⁴²⁴ Viewed through the aporia of the poem, the fox’s argument is not that Chauntecleer should sing to Charity as much as he should sing farewell to Charity and surrender himself to the Justice of a fallen world, the newborn goddess rising out of the sea from Saturn’s sausages, and his new life as a political animal.

How to Administer the Apocalypse

Both the fox and the form of the poem achieve their mode of mimesis when, “This Chauntecleer stood hye upon his toos,/ Strecchyng his nekke, and heeld his eyen cloos.” (3331-3332). Chauntecleer imitates his father. The question is which father does he imitate? The absentee dad? The fox’s last best meal? Or is it the crooning Lucifer from the “pryme” of Jean’s Charity and the castrated world of the Titans? A tug of war begins over what order of knowledge governs this day. “O destinee, that mayet nat been eschewed!/ Allas, that Chauntecleer fleigh fro the bemes!/ Allas, his wyf ne roughete nat of dremes!/ And on a Friday fil al this meschaunce.” (3338-3341). In four lines there are four governors, and some of them are already discredited.

If we allow Friday to bear upon the four-line unit retroactively then it compromises the candidacy of each. To quote Pearsall once more: “Friday is chosen for many reasons: it is the day of Venus...and traditionally an unlucky day. It is a day of change and the unexpected...It is also the day of the Crucifixion and therefore, in the synchronized dating beloved of biblical exegetes, the day of the Fall.”⁴²⁵

Questions of predestination have failed to meaningfully obtain, they have only pushed

⁴²⁴ Ibid.

⁴²⁵ Pearsall, 237.

the poem further away from the world of men. When destiny enters, the next line waters down the typically inscrutable force when Chauntecleer makes a poor choice to fly down from the beam. 'Choice' is further saturated with unimportance as Pertelote is skewered as being somehow responsible for the advice that her husband never actually takes. By the time the unit arrives at Friday, the Monk's Fortune- cagey and unpredictable, sun and rain on good and bad alike- shakes off the sleep and tries to make something of itself in this poem.

However, the only unifying principle seems to be that all of these things were said on Friday about something that happens on a Friday. To my mind, only three of Friday's imports have survived the poem's insincerity towards chance, destiny, Fortune, and foreknowledge: the Crucifixion, the Fall, and Venus. If that is the case, then all the available authorities thus far are gods. Venus was the first birth after the Titan's castration that brought about the Fall. Christ's Resurrection is the first birth in the coming world that replaces it. Theatrics are thus far insufficient to alter the aporetic course of the poem.

Venus survives the first blast:

O Venus, that art goddesse of pleasance,
 Syn that thy servant was this Chauntecleer,
 And in thy servyce dide al his poweer,
 Moore for delit than world to multiplye,
 Why woldestow suffre hym on thy day to dye?

(3342-3346)

The narrative refocuses, sheds the unnecessary weight of its musings upon agency, and aligns its prize chicken with the only god born in its preferred epoch. Even here the strategy is unstable. Of course it is obvious at this point that Chauntecleer's

sensuality, like the “mooste lusty bachiler” of the Manciple is more than rakishness- it is traditional literary short-hand for the expatriation to history, for the experience of form rather than the contemplation of it. How did Chauntecleer do as an agent of Venus? He did “Moore for delit than world to multiplie.” (3345). It is a restless description. It manages the rather pedestrian opposition of sex-for-the-fun-of-it against the Biblical command, “And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.”⁴²⁶ But in doing so it makes rather clear that the accomplishments of Venus occur in counteraction to the commandments of Genesis 1, and we know what happened last time an accomplishment occurred outside the commandment of Genesis 1. Our interest is not the ethics of wantonness and chastity, or even the ethics of the Fall. Rather it is the deception of ethics as durable mode of narratology. That is, the alignment of Chauntecleer with the postlapsarian Venus due to his language and action rather than the resignation of the rooster in spite of such things as a symbol to the time before it. It is probably only a funny coincidence that had Chauntecleer done “moore to multiplie” that the chicken/man would have dominion over all other animals. But I cannot see how he could have done more for the cause than he already has and his dominion of over the coop is resolute. One of the central ironies of the rooster is illustrated- that there is some power that sustains him as oracle despite the contentual representation of his phenomenality. Finally, the opposition is false dilemma: multiplying is hardly a chore and does not antagonize Chauntecleer’s “delit” in any very meaningful way.

⁴²⁶ Genesis 1:28.

The idea of dominion is the feather in the cap for these panels- to which sphere's philosophical power can the poem be referred in these final moments before the chase? As if in anticipation of the fact that the Friday that the world died and the Friday that Christ reversed it were continuing the to lead the march out of history, the narrator replaces a Good Friday for a bad one. The way he does this is not to simply insert King Richard for God and Paradise, but to insert King Richard into the 'laws' of poetic production via Geoffrey de Vinsauf.

O Gaufred, deere maister soverayn,
 That whan thy worthy kyng Richard was slayn
 With shot, compleynedest his deeth so soore,
 Why ne hadde I now thy sentence and thy loore,
 The Friday for to chide, as diden ye?
 For on a Friday, soothly, slayn was he.
 Thanne wolde I shewe yow how that I koude pleyne
 For Chauntecleeres drede and for his peyne.

(3347-3354)

Fehrenbacher writes, that

Although the fox's entrance causes the narrator to attempt yet again to slip into the realm of the literary- this time by apostrophizing destiny, then Venus, then Fridays, in the course of apostrophizing Geoffrey of Vinsauf, the rhetor who taught him how to thus apostrophize- in this instance history will not so easily be evaded. For when the narrator invokes the most literary place imaginable- Geoffrey of Vinsauf's rhetorical handbook- he finds that even there history awaits him, in Geoffrey's reference to Richard I.⁴²⁷

⁴²⁷ Fehrenbacher, 142.

Besides tending, at this point in the poem, towards an inverse “telescopic fallacy,”⁴²⁸ it is important, perhaps crucial, to note that that the reference is not a direct one to the death of Richard but to its rhetorical representation as an apostrophe in literature. To my mind, it should be somewhat unsatisfying as a powerful piece of historical incursion. The narrator does not use the death of England’s greatest hero to amplify Chaucer’s. Instead, he laments to his rhetorical mentor that he is not as capable a writer as he, that he cannot “pleyne” as well as the exempla in the *Poetria Nova*.

This complicates matters. In what many have remarked is one of the most explicit historical references in Chaucer’s writing, the narrator treats history as a subject of formal rhetoric, the machinery of apostrophe. Even so, it is probably overstating the case to call Geoffrey’s exercises in rhetoric “the most literary place imaginable.” Travis writes,

It is a tour-de-force of apostrophes, punctuated by more than a dozen “O’s”!, with the dire day itself (“O tearful day of Venus!”), the “soldier of treachery” who murdered Richard, death (“Do you realize, impious death, whom you snatched from us?”), nature (“you seize precious things, and vile things you leave as if in disdain”), and even God (“why then did you shorten his days?”) all serving as addressees of the poet’s complaints.”⁴²⁹

Travis concludes, “What needs to be appreciated here is that this schoolbook exercise is a knowing and serious self-parody: that it, it is self-consciously designed to illustrate as many apostrophic tropes as possible, all within the floribundant style of

⁴²⁸ “The *telescopic fallacy* makes a long story short. It appears in interpretations which reduce an extended trend to a momentary transformation.” David Hackett Fischer, *Historians’ Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought*. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971): 147.

⁴²⁹ Travis, *Disseminal*, 86.

twelfth-century academic verse.”⁴³⁰ And so it is that Geoffrey’s introduction to *Apostrophe* is not signposted “The Death of Richard.” It is merely a discussion of “apostrophe,” which is “the fourth means of delay by which you can hold back the matter and expatiate for a while.”⁴³¹ Thanks to apostrophe, “You will enjoy these courses without which the food would be sufficiently abundant, but whose presence swells the dishes of an outstanding feast. The greater number of dishes in the banquet and the tardy delay of the feast make for dignity.”⁴³² Fehrenbacher’s argument depends upon two ideas. The first is that a handbook of over-the-top exercises in composition is “the most literary place imaginable.” It would be something like calling a book of method acting exercises the most theatrical place imaginable rather than playing Hamlet. Like Geoffrey’s exercises, method-acting experiments can take consciously exaggerated forms, such as Brando’s idea to play a role “like a green suitcase.”⁴³³

The second idea is that King Richard bursts into the poem as a piece of prime matter, rather than as the subject of what is probably the most famous of Geoffrey’s how-to’s, one that circulates as an excerpt in various manuscripts.⁴³⁴ Other apostrophes accompany Richard’s in the *Poetria Nova*, including one that warns against sirens. Another apostrophe takes a pessimistic view of avian prophecy. “Will you question the cries of birds with your ear? Or their flight with your eye? Or the Fates through Apollo? Away with the sooth-sayers! The augur is deaf, the haruspex blind and the prophet insane. It is for man to know the present, but for God alone to

⁴³⁰ Ibid.

⁴³¹ Geoffrey of Vinsauf, *Poetria Nova* (264-265). Gallo, 29.

⁴³² Ibid., (266-269), *ibid.*

⁴³³ “Show Business: Here Comes Superman!!!” *TIME Magazine* (27 November, 1978) Accessed 5 May 2011. <<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,916487,00.html#ixzz1LU6qcLQw>>

⁴³⁴ Cooper, 344.

foretell the future.”⁴³⁵ Furthermore, the apostrophe focuses its rhetoric on themes that directly precede and follow: pride, tragic reversals of fortune. In which case, it is difficult to trace the line that would separate the pride, tragic fortune, and murder of Richard from the pride, tragic fortune, and near-murder of Joseph, who was also seen as an historical figure. However, no one reads the mention of Joseph in the poem as a compelling about-face in which the figural collapses under the pressure of the social reality of the Egyptian empire.

Even so, I do not want to minimize the importance of Richard as a potential defeater to the poem’s ahistoricity. Instead, I want to remark that his historicity, more than Straw’s, is inscribed within the context of rhetoric. Besides dulling its disruptive power, it is a trick. The historical and rhetorical are modes of phenomenal substance. Rhetoric and Richard are equipoetic, which is to say, that left to their own signifying devices they are unpoetic. So the trick that is played works in two movements. In the first, history tries to enter the poem but only manages to piggyback a poetic exercise. In the second, a poetic exercise illustrates the impasse between rhetoric and form that we observe in the *Phaedrus*- the impasse between cicadian chirping and singing. Likewise in the *Anticlaudianus*, Alain characterizes rhetoric as painting, on the assumption that it too must move upwards on the ladder of *ascensus* until it can “bring into being something that can have no real existence.”⁴³⁶ In a poem that has made metapoetic rather than simply formal use of Geoffrey’s rhetorical apostrophe, we understand a Platonic principle: that in the space between technique and truth lays a mystery.

⁴³⁵ *Poetria Nova*, (350-353), Gallo, 33.

⁴³⁶ Travis, *Disseminal*, 171.

The historical weakness of this King Richard, co-opted to interrogate the relationship of rhetoric to poetry, does not go unanswered in the poem. When the signal scrambles again, history much more energetically attempts to become prime matter. The way it does this is to try and correct this earlier wrong first by shedding the baggage of rhetoric, and then by attempting to collapse any language whatsoever into sound. The last and best hope for the reification of history will depend upon the demystification of the poem's mode of reference. But this Richard lacks the autonomy from not only his own mythic quality in the medieval English national imagination,⁴³⁷ not only from the manner in which the narrator encodes him as a secondary discussion in a letter addressed to Geoffrey of Vinsauf, but also from the apostrophe's inconclusive and relativized relation to others in Geoffrey's discussion of the various occasions of apostrophe. Jack Straw, on the other hand, is a "subtle piece of professional violence"⁴³⁸ that would be more like inserting 9/11 into a contemporary American poem for a laugh. Its effect, however brief, is sharper.

For now, though, the *Poetria Nova* rather than Richard survives into the next panel. The narrator wants to "pleyne" like Geoffrey and the references that follow echo the pattern of his rhetorical exercise. "*Minos subvertit Athenas,/ Ylion Atrides, magna Cartaginis arces/ Scipio, sed Romam multi.*"⁴³⁹ In Chaucer's formulation, the order of the mytho-historical weeping women louder than whom Pertelote and the other hens invariably shriek is Troy, Carthage, and Rome. Travis argues that, "Priming himself for the upcoming fox chase, the narrator takes a deep and very

⁴³⁷ "Richard Lionheart was the stuff of legend, his life enveloped in an aura of idealized chivalry and crusading piety, as distant from the concrete realities of contemporary life as the Knight's treatment of Theseus." Wood, *The Canterbury Tales*, 109.

⁴³⁸ Travis, *Disseminal*, 260.

⁴³⁹ *Poetria Nova*, (361-363). Gallo, 32.

rhetorical breath.”⁴⁴⁰ It is important that it is a “deeply rhetorical breath.” Unable to “pleyne” like Geoffrey, the narrator spoils the *comparatio* between his chicken and Richard. Such is the effect of pre-packaging Richard as a discussion of how good a Vinsauf apostrophe he is rather than how well he could work to co-tragedize the chicken’s abduction on historical terms. The rhetorical breath that the narrator takes attempts to, on its own steam, to outdo Geoffrey. This is because along with the Friday upon which “fil al of this mesachaunce,” the idea of rhetoric is the last governor to survive the panels before the chase. The baton passed as follows: Destiny (3338) chance (3339) wommanes conseil (3340) and Friday (3341). Friday survives, and with it, the theological day of both the Fall and Crucifixion and the festival of Venus. Born out of Saturn’s testicles the day the Golden Age ends, Venus’ command to do “Moore for delit than world to multiplie” (3345) squares off with “be fruitful and multiply” and pits Chaucer’s postlapsarian sensuality against a command from God given to Adam in his Luciferian morning- a command that tells the first Good and Perfect Man to make sure that Paradise is always filled with Good and Perfect Men.

Once this happens, Venus’ inchoate Friday fails to obtain in the poem’s never-ending one. The narrator replaces this universal Friday with a particular one- Richard’s death- but does so as a personal journal entry about Geoffrey’s apostrophic skills. Still, rhetoric is as much a dupe in the history of classical Platonism as it is in medieval Neoplatonism, and the poem accepts and expands these models to reach this conclusion on the governance panels: that the only thing left to administer the coming apocalypse is the “rhetoric” of poetry, a rhetoric that already died to itself and was

⁴⁴⁰ Travis, *Disseminal*, 246.

reborn as Alain's Rhetoric, who "enfolds(s) in her bosom the complete art of the painter,"⁴⁴¹ rather than, and with no disrespect to Geoffrey, a "means of delay by which you can hold back the matter and expatiate for a while."⁴⁴² In this way, when the rubble from these panels clears, what remains is a Rhetoric of Art along with the Friday that redeems the Friday of the Fall. And understanding how these two form a single idea seems to me the primary business of criticism in the *Nun's Priest's Tale*.

In response to this inability to apostrophize Chauntecleer, who proves lucky at the pyre in preceding panels, the poem shifts its entire power away from the rooster. Instead, the narrator apostrophizes the cries of the hens, "Certes, swich cry ne lamentacion/ Was nevere of ladyes maad whan Ylion,/ Was wonne,..." (3335-3357a). "But sovereynly dame Pertelote shrighthe/ Ful louder than dide Hasdrubales wyf." (3361-3362). "O woful hennes, right so criden ye/ As whan that Nero brende the citee/ Of Rome cryden senatoures wyves." (3369-3371). But this too walks the unsure road of rhetoric, a thing too easily co-opted by art and made all "foreign glitter" instead of "native hue."⁴⁴³ In addition, the references themselves are suspect. They tell a story of the rise and fall of the eternal city. The destruction of Troy sends Aeneas on his mission to extricate himself from his sensual understanding of his destiny in the form of Dido and Carthage and found Rome. Carthage returns led by Hasdrubal to destroy Rome in the Punic wars and is defeated by Scipio. Appropriately, as Pearsall writes, that the Carthaginians were "determined on self-immolation, but Hasdrubal, unable to face death, begged for mercy from the victor. His wife, indignant at his weakness, and with some last scathing words for him to take care of his life, cast her

⁴⁴¹ Alain de Lille, *Anticlaudianus*, 97.

⁴⁴² *Poetria Nova* (264-265). Gallo, 29.

⁴⁴³ Alain de Lille, *Anticlaudianus*. Quoted in Travis, *Disseminat*, 171.

sons and then herself into the flames.”⁴⁴⁴ More stories within stories and even here misogyny lurks. The wily woman besets all of our warlords. Next Rome burns under Nero’s watch, and, perhaps while he fiddles.⁴⁴⁵ That is to say- for our purposes- the last reference before narrative tries to “burn” the coop down through raw sound is to a man perverting the Boethian musical concord that is the soul of the universe while he torches the eternal city. These are not gentle apostrophes: destruction, suicide, fire. Fiddle or no fiddle, they warn us that the musical soul of Chauntecleer’s universe is about to go up in smoke. We are lucky then that we know the spiritual fate of Rome in Augustine. If we did not, we might worry that the ‘barbarians at the fence’ were the final word on this eternal coop. The narrator’s apostrophizing does not last long. “Now wol I turne to my tale agayn,” (3374) saying, in other words, “this didn’t really count.” The noise is coming.

Framing a chase in a poem about dreams

In each poem that we have discussed in this thesis, there comes a point at which aggression reads as an epistemological Hail Mary, a final push for human governance in art. Three rioters die in the place of the Old Man in another Sisyphean labor to make nature’s first gold green, instead of the other way around. Mutilation in the Miller starts a fire that only a discredited Flood can quell. Poor “Wyf” lies with an arrow in her heart when Phoebus’ crow loses the ability to speak because he forgets how to sing. The poem’s contentual strategy is not entirely benign; it envisions itself

⁴⁴⁴ Pearsall, 242.

⁴⁴⁵ “The twelfth and thirteenth centuries mark the rebirth of the Nero tradition in western historiography... Vincent of Beauvais in his *Speculum Historiale* comments on Nero's enthusiasm for musical competition on the cithara.” Mary Francis Gyles, “Nero Fiddled While Rome Burned.” *The Classical Journal*, Vol. 42, No. 4 (January, 1947): 213.

as a monistic metapoetic that sends Chaucer on a satirical suicide mission in order to co-rhetorize experience and intuition into a single linguistic performance. What no one tells Chaucer is that his immortality depends on the fence around his coup becoming a bulwark. Because the more history that gets in and breathes the social into the soterial the closer he comes to the end of the never-ending day that has thus far sustained him as *coq magnifique* instead of *coq au vin*. He has a better chance with the fox than he does the Widow. Though “I kan noon harm of no womman divyne.” (3266). Fehrenbacher’s account of the chase is exciting:

The reintroduction of the “sely wydwe and eek hir doghtres two” shatters the ahistorical frame the narrator has constructed in his attempt to contain the tale’s historical dimension. Here the tale’s setting expands not just from the “yerd enclosed” into the poor widow’s barnyard, but beyond it, extending into the widow’s village community, introducing “many another man,”⁴⁴⁶

He continues,

The tale’s hyperliterary style also falters, as rhetorical virtuosity, up to this point that defense used to keep the historical at bay, breaks down. Language no longer operates in the realm of lofty rhetoric, but is characterized as barking, shouting, crying, and yelling, as peasants holler “‘Out! Harrow and weylaway!/ Ha, ha! The fox!;’ and the sounds of animals and the language of humans conflate...the repressed returns; and when it does it is monstrous: an animalistic, incoherent mob of murderers.”⁴⁴⁷

For Fehrenbacher, this is the definitive interruption of a hyperlitarariness whose function is to “enable societies to mystify and delude themselves about social

⁴⁴⁶ Fehrenbacher, 144.

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid.

inequalities.”⁴⁴⁸ And “these delusions- as well as the rhetoric and literature surrounding them- have a habit of collapsing in the face of historical realities like the rioting Jack Straw.”⁴⁴⁹

To that effect, a few remarks are in order so that we might frame the chase in the wider context of the poem. First- and I want to sound off of Fehrenbacher because of the strength of his interpretation- he argues that the hens’ laments in the context of the *Aeneid* and Troy, “trace not just the progress of the Trojan Aeneas from Troy to Carthage to Rome, but also the genealogy of the English nation. This passage thus rehistoricizes the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale*.”⁴⁵⁰ This is because Brutus is the mythical founder of Britain. However the poem is rife with Troy references, one of which (“o Greek Synon,/ That broghest Troye al outrely to sorwe! [3228-3229]) earlier prompted Fehrenbacher to write, “And even when the ‘col-fox ful of sly iniquitee,’ finally bursts through the hedges...his threatening presence is again erased by the literary... This rhetoricization continues for about the following fifty lines, allowing the reality of the fox to recede as the text plunges into the world of literature.”⁴⁵¹ The second point is that the legendary founding of a city is literary matter. References to Romulus in Latin literature do not necessarily entail a detailed account of the state of the economy. However, if we allow that English history attempts to reify itself in the chase, many interesting possibilities emerge.

If contemporary criticism is any indicator, it is very tempting, often I would wager for the sake of space, to skip over a good 2/3rds of the poem in order to describe the chase. However, it is also especially tempting in the current critical mood

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid., 146.

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid., 143.

⁴⁵¹ Fehrenbacher, 141-142.

because of Jack Straw. But as Cooper points out, this is a poem about dreams. Its penultimate scene is a chase. The final scene is a conversation. This long story of Chaucer introduced a world of talking animals, dream debates, philosophical battles of wit, and at the very least, some very polished back and forth. As the cabaret *descensus ad inferos* begins, the first thing to remark is both obvious and surprising. The chase is not a story about Chaucer. While the language of the poem is put through the blender of onomatopoeic noise, the rooster never speaks. He gets one passing reference, “And bar upon his bak the cok away.” (3379). When the rooster speaks again, introduced in the same manner of his brief farewell, “This cok, that lay upon the foxes bak” (3405) the noise of the chase disappears. The way to visualize it is this, in order of appearance: “Hennes crie and maken wo, Out! Harrow and weylaway!, Ha, ha!, berkyng, shoutyng, yolliden, cryden, hydous noyse, shoutes shrille, bras bemes, skrieked, howped and blewe and powped and skrieked—AND- Sire, if that I were as ye.” Urbane overtures dismiss noise in the poem. After Chaucer cries “Cok! cok!” the fox calmed the sonic irregularity with “Gentil sire, allas.” (3284). Here too, the noise stops, the conversation resumes, and the entire Widow’s world - who chased after what they *saw*- “And out at dores stirten they anon/ And syen the fox toward the grove gon,” (3378-3379)- seem to not see this. Whatever happens, they disappear and the chase ends. The poem never mentions them again. The only thing left is a fox, a rooster, a tree, and a narrative voice or two all involved in the finer points of hard-learned lessons and chicken wit. That is to say, even if the poem changes for a moment, the poem is *left* unchanged. This helps to frame our reading.

The second feature of this intellectual setting is that it is all low history rather than high. The Monk’s high history is interrupted by the “campaignye.” The transition

to the Widow's low history is cut short as well. Neither was "worth a boterflye." Neither could "pley." Chauntecleer's world is all high literature and history. It concludes in a narrative comparison of crying chickens to the ladies of Troy, Carthage, and Rome. Very abruptly low history returns in the chase. The references now are not to Nero and Pirrus, but to Malkyn, Jack Straw, and some very loud animals. But this too is short-lived and the narrator resumes with a lament according to the Monk's *cause célèbre* and Boethius' much-maligned capital-*F* Fortune. Then the sober Middle English dialogue resumes. We observed the elision of the Monk and Widow's modes of history in the same manner of Chauntecleer's "learning" with Pertelote's "wisdom." A simple way to understand this is to recognize its circularity. Natural voices represent high history governed by Fortune, then low history according to the daily habits of small farmers, then high literature and history according to any available concept- chance, predestination, Fortune, then low history governed by the daily habits of small farmers e.g. "that fox is stealing my chicken!" and finally the narrator settles on the high literary lament against Fortune. Thus, the available machinery of historical power in art is exhausted. It is equivalent to the frustrated parent saying 'I've tried everything with this kid, kindness, discipline, bribery, manipulation, I guess I'll try bribery'. In this sense, Chauntecleer's world is unruly and "refuses" as Cooper says, "all attempts to turn it into something other than a superb story."⁴⁵²

It is important that the *Nun's Priest's Tale* flattens contentual distinctions. It is a complicated poem about a simple opposition. All oppositions are simple but their philosophical evocations are not. It is the subtle antagonisms that make for quick

⁴⁵² Cooper, 349.

work. Opposites *become* meaningless in Platonism due to the fact that the larger power eventually causes the lesser to go extinct. But that is epistemology and this is a piece of criticism. Without that initial and simple opposition between Art and History, it is hard to tell which oppositions are only seeming ones. It is difficult to determine when a rhetoric of history truly belongs to history or whether it belongs to a mode of artistic representation. It is important that distinctions are flattened within an opposition because the chase's mode of language is elemental and it is unique. The only clue to the noise of the chase was a telling "Cok! cok!" If by the time the chase arrives we had not witnessed through the lens of aporia various anti-poetries regrouping into a big tent philosophy, we could not appreciate the full percussive force- the bald "thud" of onomatopoeia as it strikes the wicket gate between Coop and coop.

A third preliminary observation is in order. Throughout the tale a superstructure develops. The idea is reverse chronology, the continual rewinding to the Golden Age established in the *General Prologue* and invested with special shimmering properties in the *Nun's Priest's Tale*. The paradoxical narratological strategy is to reverse human history without eliminating the possibility of the visceral experience of the time before it. The idea is to extend human history into the ideal word without any ontological concessions. Even for characters whose rhetorical attachment to the "lif present" is resolute, the uneasiness of existing in their own time comes to express itself strategically in the form of the attempt to reinhabit a form of the Golden Age with their experience intact. All of the tales that we have considered share in that structure. The Pardoner's Old Man carries over an even older argument from the history of literature, that if he can survive the mortal epoch with his body intact, then he can viscerally experience his own physical perpetuity in Paradise. That

is, if the whole world is eliminated and the days in which we age come to close, then the oldest man on earth can be young again. In order to do this, the Old Man has two strategies: to wait it out or to send sad people to premature deaths. Sooner or later the earth will depopulate. When it does, he can merge infinity and contingency into his own being and exist palpably in a world of symbols. In the *Miller's Tale*, interlocutors rewind their world to one that existed prior to the Judgment of the Flood. The way the poem's philosophy does this is not to reconvene the machinery of antediluvian primitivism but to simply kill the God who sent the Flood. Part of the idea of the tale is to turn back the clock to a time before the drowning of the world while experiencing its perks corporeally without reference to the superior order of knowledge that it serves. In the *Manciple's Tale*, the current separation of men from gods is rolled back to reveal the Golden Age, where Hesiod and Ovid say that gods and men walked side-by-side. But, of course, the way this is done is simply to have Apollo walk side-by-side with "wyf" on the current earth. Cohabitation in this instance is not merely between Phoebus and Wyf, but between heaven and earth, content and form, in a monistic marital bliss.

In the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, the Monk's high history quits and low history loses its grip on its own coop. A new Golden Age is born in Chauntecleer and it is a not-so-distant cousin to "Whan in Aprille." The narratological premiums on experience are represented in the poem as the devolution of the initial fancy and culminate, according to other Chaucerian models- *Troilus*, and the *Miller's Tale* for instance- in an epically timed philosophical bedroom finish. The next scene falters between a rhetoric that cannot decide whether to represent Chauntecleer as a floating Croesus or a chicken hungry for a corn. As a mock piece of metapoetry, the poem rewinds and "explodes" into a second Golden Age in a flawed *chronographia*. The poem sings like a dog-

whistle to history again, combing over the subtleties of predestination and suddenly becomes audible again when Chauntecleer sees the fox. The effect of the “Cok! cok!” is once again replaced by the launch of the poem into the Boethian Musical concord, a figural genealogy of Chauntecleers, and a mimetic place even prior to the first man when Lucifer was covered in gems and sang matins. Next the poem collapses this third otherworldliness into the reintroduction in the chase scene of the Widow’s world and then concludes matters in the happy light of the “yonge sonne.”

The confusion of the poem centers upon the question of how to achieve infinity *consciously* as narrative strategy rather than unconsciously as form. Chauntecleer’s Golden Age came easy and accidentally by comparison. It came as the result of the undeniable fact that Chauntecleer’s coop is the City of God to a poet of Chaucer’s temperament, similar to how “*il faut cultiver notre jardin*”⁴⁵³ is the symphonic estate for human happiness in *Candide*. Once that City is named, the narrators of the poem try, according to each one’s particular brand of rhetorical antigenius, to interpret and define it. The tension takes place in between the rhetorical strategies that want to submit Chauntecleer to the common sense of herbs, wish fulfillment, and the literal future and the fact that this poem is identical with a lost world of “thilke tyme.” And just as the poem seems to so violently rewind the Golden Age again into the loud quotidian drama of losing a rooster, it resurrects it when Chauntecleer outsmarts all of human and divine history “And heigh upon a tree he fleigh anon.” (3417). As unconvincing this is a narratological accomplishment it is a rigorous ironic return to a place that can only be negotiated by the unspoken form of the poem.

⁴⁵³ Voltaire, *Candide ou l’optimiste*. (Oxford: The Voltaire Foundation at the Taylor Institution, 1980): 260.

To sum up, the narrators attempt to depict the Golden Age as slipping away, and then as lost to the chaos of nature and history, and then as regained according to the technology of Chaucer's wit. Like every poem we have considered, the idea is that it is preferable to live in a Golden Age but that we should repopulate it in the current human estate. Why become a disembodied and speculative force by the intervention of symbols when we could have a perfectly good forever as an agent of nature? It is the problem with which we set out, the problem of Tithonus: that there is no infinity for the experience of history in art, only perpetuity. Chaucer's escape is achieved to the satisfaction of both action and poetry. At the level of action, Chaucer is safe in a tree. But at the level of poetry, action is insufficient to conclude the story of the re-integration of language and being, of cognition with intuition. In the end, it may be suggestive of a return to Paradise but its underwhelming simplicity is parodic and instructive. The real accomplishment is the metapoetic function of "resumption:" the resumption of the supernatural state of affairs in the "yeerd" and the larger and more fundamental joke that Paradise in the poem is not a thing to be resumed but a thing to be accepted as the cold hard philosophical fact of zoonic existence inside this poem.

The question posed by various rhetorics in the poem is whether the Golden Age can be an effect of interlocutory strategy or whether it is the preexisting condition for it. The coop and the Golden Age are the answer to it by virtue of the fact that "reversing" them back to a time before they happened in the poem, the Widow's world, is representational and derivative. This happens at an obvious level and an ironic one. The chicken escapes and will see another sunrise. Ironically, it is an expert extension of Chaucer's models in which the Golden Age is invaded, intervened upon, and then restored. This is the lesson of Apollo and Daphne, and it is the lesson here,

that the return to ‘business as usual’ is the poetic definition of time and eternity, with eternity being the natural state of affairs. Peneus turns Daphne into a tree in order to restore Apollo to his oracular order of being. A talking chicken flies in to a tree in order to sonically restore his own oracular order of being. In Ovid’s poem ‘order’ is restored to a comically virile vision of the Golden Age, but it is still a Golden Age, just like Chaucer’s coop is something like a bar fight in Eden. Ovid’s poem represents “rape” as the potential defeater of Elysium. In Chaucer’s poem it is Jack Straw. But Ovid’s poem is not about the suppressed idea of rape making itself a necessary knowledge condition of poetry. Neither is the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* the victim of its own traditional literary strategy, which would be the critical perspective of one who believed that the chase is a rupture instead of an experiment. Jack Straw, however staccato and singular, is not a feral element in a cautiously guarded literariness, or as Fehrenbacher calls it, a “fragile ahistorical enclosure.”⁴⁵⁴ He is part of a traditional mode of literature in which disruption represents an argumentative challenge to the continuity of its own vision, and is then overcome by an element of fantasy: *Metamorphoses* for Ovid and the resumption, after the parodic disruption, of the magical stipulations of “thilke tyme” for Chaucer. All of this plays a delicate game with the fact that it is representational inside a tautology. It is not thesis-antithesis-synthesis. Desiring that Straw subdue the entire poem, or the entire philosophical and literary tradition from which the poem draws asks him to do too much. It asks him to actually *be* historical, to obtain as something *other* to the cyclonic art of the poem, to make the leap from illustrated to incarnated.

⁴⁵⁴ Fehrenbacher, 142.

All of this considered, a primary metapoetic function of the chase is not to ontologically puncture fantasy with reality, but to dramatize and speculate upon it at the level of language. This linguistic experiment is philosophical. It interrogates the self-sufficiency of the artistic vision and whether the mode of language that belongs to itself and to history can partake of a single substance. The chase questions things in the baldest terms- can the voices of art and history hear each other? Can they speak a common tongue? From these questions another emerges: can Chaucer and Jack Straw see each other?

Chickiness is in the eye of the beholder

“Now wol I turne to my tale agayn.” (3374). This curious line is a border between high history and low. Preceded by, “Wihouten gilt this Nero hath hem slayn.” (3373), and followed by, “This sely wydwe and eek hir doughtres two.” (3374). It should strike us as funny that for 500 lines or so we have been in the world of talking chickens and when the narrator once again turns to his ‘real’ tale he goes back to the Widow. But the concept of what the Widow sees continues to define the space between history and art. When discussing the Widow’s *exemplum*, I argued that we must imagine that as the Widow looks out of her window at Chaucer’s yard she sees nothing but animals carrying on like animals. We must also imagine that as Chaucer looks towards the Widow’s cottage he sees nothing at all. In the Epicurean retirement panel, the narrative split personality that brought us King Croesus clucking over corn, the idea of the Widow’s gaze once again obtained. At that moment it seemed as if the poem was being *watched*. The way the poem sees itself is quixotically played against a bored Widow casting a glance towards her quiet

little farm. If we take the poem at its word, Chauntecleer has been singing and philosophizing and setting land speed records as a lover and the Widow has not seen or heard anything out of the ordinary. Now, “This sely wydwe and eek hir doughtren two/ Herden this hennes crie and maken wo,/ And out at dores stirten they anon,/ And syen the fox toward the grove gon.” (3375-3378).

One can only imagine what any of us would do if we saw that our farm was populated by talking creatures who read Macrobius. Instead, the Widow and company have been up to this point more interested in daily exercise and abstention from “poynaunt sauce.” This is not because they prefer low-acidity to art, it is simply because they cannot see art through all that history. What I mean is that if this were really a historical setting- if this were our world- the moment Chauntecleer sang “My lief is faren in londe” we would have reacted like this: “Out! Harrow and weylaway!/ Ha, ha!”(3380-3381). The truth is that I think the Widow and the inhabitants of her world would have gone into hysterics had they heard Chauntecleer sing “My lief is faren in londe” but they could not. That is another difference between our history and hers. Ours is permeable, we have a front row seat to art. It might be hard to see its omens about our inner life, which is really our next life, through the fog of our deciduous predicament, but we have glimpsed the impossible. We *know* that animals worry about predestination. The Widow’s history is something less than history. It is history in art. It is simply represented. And it is didactically represented. History cannot see Chauntecleer; it can only see a rooster. This is what I mean by the philosophical evocations of opposites. History cannot know eternity on its own means. This is a central argument of the poem. The more subtle antagonism, and the easier thing to grasp, comes from analogies to our own life. The reader is a hybrid thing in a Platonic conception of the universe, fated or created to live two lives and

only one of them ends. The life that does not end is the audience of art. The one that does is the agent of history. In that sense, the Widow, as she functions in an epistemological vision, is relegated to history; we are only inhibited by it.

The importance of the gaze of the Widow's world continues to expand in the chase. In the Widow's world, dogs are dogs. "Ran Colle oure dogg, and Talbot and Gerland," (3383). It is the rebirth in the poem of the non-talking beasts, missing since the three sheep and cows of the *exemplum*. "Ran cow and calf, and eek the verray hogges,/ So fered for the berkyng of the dogges." (3385-3386). "The dokes cryden as men wolde hem quelle/ The gees for feere flowen over the trees; Out of the hyve cam that swarm of bees." (3291-3292). And just when the animals reach the loudest point of their *presto*, the invisible chase crosses paths with Jack Straw. "So hydous was the noyse- a benedictee!-/ Certes, he Jakke Straw and his meynee/ Ne made nevere shoutes half so shrille/ Whan that they wolden any Flemyng kille." (3393-3396).

The essence of the scene is visual. Filming it would require two external settings. In one, an angry nighttime mob led by Jack Straw gathers with torches at a clearing in the forest from which they see the lights of London. In the other, a sunlit woodland on a Friday morning becomes the setting for a talking fox seizing a talking chicken by the neck, pursued by lamenting hens shouting, "O doleful day of Venus!" When these magical creatures reach *their* version of the clearing in the woods where, in another dimension, Straw and his mob gather, two very different things happen. The torch lit mob lifts their feet to allow an oinking, clucking, and quacking barnyard jailbreak pass. As silly as that may seem, I think it is the comedic mood of the chase, based in the philosophical idea of the gaze. The idea is not that Jack Straw steps into the "yeerd," but that when the "yeerd," runs into Jack Straw, the poem does not look to him like it looks to us. It looks to him like it looks to the Widow. If we were to add

directorial notes, we might add the caveat that when the animals of the “yeerd” run under the feet of “JACK STRAW” and “MOB” that night that they do not see anything standing in their way on the sunlit clearing in *their* woods. Either that, or that “JACK STRAW” and “MOB” are rendered as the typical furniture of their fantasy world. Perhaps they look like Ents.⁴⁵⁵ This is one of the ways to understand the fact that “Certes, he Jakke Straw and his meynee/ Ne made nevere shoutes half so shrille.” (3395). The poetic residents of the farm hear and see themselves as they are (not)- eloquent witnesses of a potential assassination. In which case, art is louder than “Jack Straw and his meynee” simply because history has no voice in art. History never arrived. The widow’s farm was a fake address for Chauntecleer’s kingdom. The residents of the “yeerd” do not see or hear the world chasing after them. They could whisper in their world and still be louder than “Jakke Straw and his meynee.” C.S. Lewis does a fine job illustrating such a problem in *The Magician’s Nephew*. He writes, “‘Now sir,’ said the bulldog in his business-like way, ‘are you animal, vegetable, or mineral?’ That was what it really said; but all Uncle Andrew heard was ‘Gr-r-r-arrh-ow!’”⁴⁵⁶

But this brings up another point. If the perspective of the chase apes the historical, and bees buzz instead of banter, then even so, buzzing is louder than “Jakke Straw and his meynee.” And this is where Chaucer’s oft-observed superciliousness towards contemporary politics most meaningfully obtains. Travis writes, “Rather than a moment from the classical past, what is wrenched into the poem and given an unasked-for hearing is the Peasant’s Revolt of 1381, the most earth-shaking and

⁴⁵⁵ Ents are a race of beings in J. R. R. Tolkien’s fantasy world Middle Earth who closely resemble trees.

⁴⁵⁶ C.S. Lewis, *The Magician’s Nephew*. (London: The Folio Society, 1996): 134.

decentering event in English history during Chaucer's lifetime."⁴⁵⁷ He continues, "Chaucer very rarely alludes to contemporary historical events, as we have noted, and many readers would perhaps be relieved had he not chosen to situate his only overt allusion to the Peasant's Revolt in such a farcical context."⁴⁵⁸ "Unless," Travis adds, "one finds human slaughter to be a sprightly witticism."⁴⁵⁹ To use the example again, it would be like writing the *Nun's Priest's Tale* within a decade or two of 9/11 and saying, 'Certainly those collapsing towers never made shouts half so shrill as that same day was made upon the fox'. What heuristic point could come of depicting bee banter and bee buzzing as louder than the Peasant's Revolt is difficult to understand. It could simply take itself for the traditional good-natured daydreaming of the philosopher of art in which a painting about a man is more real than the man. It is the attitude of Wallace Stevens' *Ideal Order at Key West* when the sea fades into nothingness as it is represented in song.

And when she sang, the sea,
 Whatever self it had, became the self
 That was her song, for she was the maker. Then we,
 As we beheld her striding there alone,
 Knew that there never was a world for her
 Except the one she sang and, singing, made.⁴⁶⁰

That may be too pretty an idea for too tasteless a joke. But it is not simply a tasteless joke, though it is a joke about a tasteless joke. It is an old fashioned piece of anti-humor. In the case of the Jack Straw joke-bomb, beneath the anti-humour is a

⁴⁵⁷ Travis, *Disseminal*, 259.

⁴⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶⁰ Wallace Stevens, *The Ideal Order at Key West*. The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954): 129-130.

literary provocation. But even if it is an aggressive idea it may be a consistent one. Epic high history and bucolic low history have already become “history, as such,” history as a mode of poetic content and not poetic form. Now our history does too. Pearsall suggests that the use of language here is “an encouragement to closer participation:” “Ran Colle *oure* dogge.” (3383). If that is the case, and we accept Chaucer’s invitation, the first view into our own history is Sudbury’s head on a pike. The second thing we see is that head made equivalent to the imaginary historical life of a 14th century widow along with whom Jack Straw and his “meynee” shout and whistle. By comparison, the daily life of a widow has the austere ring of high history. If Gower’s poem makes a myth out of the Revolt, Chaucer’s poem makes an *ad absurdum*. If there is the faint whiff of condemnation of the *Vox*, as Justice argues, perhaps it has less to do with Gower than the general perspective that Chaucer’s poem borrows from writers like Dante and Alain de Lille: that history cannot obtain as art because it cannot understand it. “I barely see the things that are visible, she comprehends in their reflection things incomprehensible. I by my intellect hardly compass trifles, she in her comprehension compasses immensities. I, almost like a beast, walk the earth, she serves in secret heaven.”⁴⁶¹

Chaucer’s poem just puts a new and more *piqué* spin on it: poetry cannot tell that it is *supposed* to know that London burning during a revolt is more important, is louder, than a swarm of bees. It is as if the poem is historically autistic and is unable to read the facial expressions of the poor “Flemyng” as something that requires a better and more sensitive craft than a barnyard ruckus. Travis questions, “The effect, for many of Chaucer’s readers, is profoundly disturbing. Why has Chaucer done this?”

⁴⁶¹ Alain de Lille, *De planctu*, 30.

What does he expect us to learn here, as our literary pleasure is suddenly arrested by historical slaughter?”⁴⁶² I make no pragmatic point about Chaucer; he probably took the Revolt very seriously. But part of the point of the chase panel is this: poetry is a force, a locust swarm. When history, high, low, now even the painful and immediate lies in its path, it leaves nothing behind. We know that the Miller, the Manciple, and the Pardoner can be aggressive rhetors and host aggressive rhetorics. The contribution of the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* is that art becomes the unconscious aggressor- the proverbial bull in a china shop. Art does not defend itself from reality. In this instance, reality defends itself from art. In the chase, art is an indiscriminate and elemental thing, sucking social ontology and rendering 1381 noise, co-sonic to a swarm of bees in a self-serving illustration of self-sufficiency. The critical problem transitions from the misrepresentation of a particular political voice to the potential futility of the representation of all political voice. Unlike contemporary depictions, the point is not to render peasants like animals, but to render all of history as noise that needs a good tuning. But if tuning a discord can eventually lead back to a concord, then all of history’s noise might run the risk of one day losing itself entirely to the creative principle of Boethius’ *De Musica*: “What Plato rightfully said can likewise be understood: the soul of the universe was joined together according to musical concord.”⁴⁶³ But that is for another poem to ponder. In this poem, like a Frankenstein version of the *Ideal Order of Key West*, the “hydous noyse” of history becomes more real than history. This is the second way to understand “Certes, he Jakke Straw and his meynee/ Ne made nevere shoutes so shrille.”

⁴⁶² Travis, *Disseminal*, 209.

⁴⁶³ Boethius, *De Musica*, 2.

The noise and the silence. The end of the chase.

Hearing the chase enacts the same aporetic principle as seeing the chase. Chaucer's writing career repeatedly draws on two experimental depictions of the conflict between literal and poetic language- noise and silence. The chase begins in noise and ends in silence. It goes from "This sely wydwe and eek hir doughtres two/ Herden these hennens crie and maken wo" (3375-3376) to the fox taking a page from the Manciple's mother and condemning those "That jangleth whan he sholde holde his pees." (3435).

The first idea of the noise of the chase is one we have already discussed: the rewinding of the Golden Age. The onomatopoeic chase in the *Nun's Priest's Tale* attempts to rewind the particular Golden Age of Chauntecleer but in doing so, attempts to rewind the entire Golden Age of the *Canterbury Tales* that begins in the *General Prologue*. This is because the spring and the animals that come to life in the opening lines of the *Canterbury Tales* are the broad strokes of a supernatural world that the *Nun's Priest's Tale* takes us into in microscopic detail. It takes us to one particular magical farm on a Friday morning. The *General Prologue* is the Golden Age viewed from space. The *Nun's Priest's Tale* is the Golden Age viewed from a butterfly in the cabbages. In the *General Prologue* the spring comes to life to celebrate pilgrimage.

Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote
 The droghte of March hath perced to the roote
 And bathed every veyne in swich licour,
 Of which vertu engendred is the flour;
 Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth

Inspired hath in every holt and heeth
 The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne
 Hath in the Ram his halfe cours yronne,
 And smale foweles maken melodye,
 That slepen al the nyght with open eye-
 (So priketh hem Nature in hir corages)

(*General Prologue*, 1-11)

Those sweet little birds “that slepen al nyght with open ye” at the beginning of the *Tales* grow up to become Pertelote, herbal murderer, and the husband who seduces her in mangled Latin by proclaiming that she is the root cause of damnation. The “smale foweles” of the *General Prologue* expand, absorb more fantasy, and swell into the philosopher chickens of Paradise. The chase attempts to wash them down the drain; the sucking noise is last thing they are meant to hear as sentient beings. Because when they are spit out at the other end of the pipe they become animals. They live on a farm outside the beginning of the *General Prologue* where they were first born into Chaucer’s poetry and the poem begins without them.

Chaucer is an ironist and his beatific visions often move in opposite directions to Alain’s and Dante’s. True, Dante’s *alta fantasia* reaches so far into heaven that symbol overwhelms the grace given to language through poetry, but the movement was always upwards. Chaucer takes a downward path; he writes in *via negativa* and creates an apophatic literary world. Apophaticism is defined thus:

It describes God by saying what he is not, rather than what he is, because as finite beings we cannot recognize God's attributes in any real and full sense and because God is beyond what our language can positively describe. Negative theology claims that religious language is non-cognitive and equivocal. The ultimate thing is beyond all human concepts, and so what is

affirmed of it must also be denied. Hence, all predicates – not only the negative ones such as evil and false, but also the positive ones such as good and true – should be subtracted from God. Such a negation of description does not lead to skepticism or unbelief, but leads instead to the truth that God is beyond all such words. It is only by removing from God all the imperfections of his creatures that his transcendence and otherness can be safeguarded. Negative theology enables us to maintain the radical distinction between God and his creatures. The Scriptures are full of paradoxical descriptions of God because they try to show something inexpressible that cannot be stated positively. This type of theology is rooted in Platonic thought as developed in Neoplatonism.⁴⁶⁴

Travis writes,

What is absolutely clear, at any rate, is that Chaucer is not going to lead his readers straight up Dante's grammatical ladder of education from *sonus* to *vox* to *elementum* to *dictio* to *oratio* to *lectio* to *enarratio* and from there to a pronouncement engraved in the heavens and accompanied by the music of the saints explicating the workings of divine justice in human history.⁴⁶⁵

Instead, language descends into onomatopoeia. At one level this builds on the accomplishments of the *Manciple's Tale*. Onomatopoeia describes the classical transgression, based in Ovid, of representing art according to the power of historical speech and event. Doing so expels an interlocutor from art itself. Phoebus' augural bird is doomed to a life of "Cokkow!" which, unlike his figural former life, is speech headed towards extinction. At another level, in the *Parliament of Fowls* the descent

⁴⁶⁴ "Negative theology." The Blackwell Dictionary of Western Philosophy. eds. Nicholas Bunnin, and Yu Jiyuan (Blackwell Publishing, 2004.) Blackwell Reference Online. Accessed 11 May 2011. <http://www.blackwellreference.com/subscriber/tocnode?id=g9781405106795_chunk_g978140510679515_ss1-58>.

⁴⁶⁵ Travis, *Disseminal*, 251.

into sound dramatizes the clash between the Boethian and Macrobian cosmic harmony of the spheres and the noise of history, “the possibility of realizing the *harmonia* of heaven inside the erotic polity of earthly existence.”⁴⁶⁶ In the *House of Fame*, “Chaucer listens to the orchestrated bedlam of the *longue durée*- the earliest recorded sounds to the most recent- and finds that the noise of history writ large avails itself to no historiographical, or “harmonic” interpretation.”⁴⁶⁷ Jeffrey Schnapp describes Dante’s poetic solution to consonance and dissonance. At the centre of Dante’s universe music’s ultimate source is Christ’s body, an “invisible instrument” that serves as “a scandalous countersign to anarchic discord of the human city,” staging a utopian integration of the “heterogeneous strings of the city of man into the transcendent unity of the sign of Christ in anticipation of history’s end.”⁴⁶⁸ It would be rushed judgment that would read Chaucer’s literary patience with noise as epistemological rather than practical pessimism. Chaucer, as Travis points out, “finds dissonance rather than consonance to be the dominant chromatic of the body politic.”⁴⁶⁹ Chaucer’s ironic poetry gives noise a longer leash than writers like Augustine, who would witness human society’s harmonious return to cosmic principles of order. Chaucer seems to just let things be: there is a cosmic order, an earthly disorder, full stop. It makes for some fine comedy too. Most would concede that Chaucer and Boccaccio are funnier writers than Macrobius and Augustine for letting the world be the world. But it does not mean, as Justman proposed, “the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* really concerns the authenticity of the commonplace, the chaff, and of the literalist perception. It shows that high Latin culture has no place in the

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid., 207.

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid., 209.

⁴⁶⁸ Jeffrey Schnapp, *The Transfiguration of History in the Center of Dante’s Paradise*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986): 163. Quoted in Travis, *Disseminal*, 216.

⁴⁶⁹ Travis, *Disseminal*, 216.

barnyard.”⁴⁷⁰ High Latin culture, or more precisely what Pelen calls “the memory of a contiguous Latin culture”⁴⁷¹ transmits Plato’s divided universe right into Chaucer’s yard. In Chaucer’s poetry, there is no principle by which the world can be reorganized as universal, there is only a principle by which our language might.

But the poem’s depiction of onomatopoeia- and onomatopoeia, as such- is not entirely stable as linguistic collapse. “Ha, ha! The fox!” (3381) is only one part nonsense. “They ronne so hem thoughte hir hertes breeke,” (3388) is rather pretty way to describe the predicament of unthinking things. The very brief noise panel in the poem has the hangover of the wider poetic mode of representation it interrupts. And as for onomatopoeia generally, we might read it as the rewinding of human language back to the time of its infancy. Travis discusses the work of philologist Charles Nodier “whose *Dictionnaire des onomatopées* and *Notions élémentaires de linguistique* advance the thesis that only a ‘slight effort’ is needed ‘in order to arrive...at the belief that the imitation of animal noises was the main element in the beginning of natural languages.”⁴⁷² Travis continues, “For Nodier the child’s maturation toward articulate speech repeats the growth of the species...‘His linguistic expression was at first simply vocal, like that of the animals...bellowing, mooing, bleating, cooing, hissing.”⁴⁷³ What this means for the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* is that the rewinding of the Golden Age is such an aggressive one that it forgets to stop once it reaches human history. It races backwards in time until the birth of onomatopoeic and mimological human language, an event that occurs at the point when language and

⁴⁷⁰ Justman, 208.

⁴⁷¹ Pelen, *Latin Poetic Irony*, viii. See also, R. Klibansky, *The Continuity of the Platonic Tradition During the Middle Ages*. (London: The Warburg Institute, 1939).

⁴⁷² Travis, *Disseminal*, 243. See Charles Nodier, *Dictionnaire Raisonné des Onomatopées Françaises*. (Paris: Demoville, 1808). Travis’ discussions of Nodier are conducted with reference to Gérard Genette, *Mimologies*. trans. Thaïs E. Morgan. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995).

⁴⁷³ *Ibid.*

oracular object divorce and the advent of the Neoplatonic catastrophe when language and literal object begin to draw near to each other. Again we arrive at the Fall. In the last full day in Paradise its inhabitants were silent. In first day subject time they are mute. Having lost their former and direct symbolic reference, they begin language anew in the wrong mode. “The majority of the words of primitive man were formed in imitation of the noises that struck his hearing. This is what we call *onomatopoeia*.”⁴⁷⁴

Next mimilogism mixes with onomatopoeia. “Primitive man also ‘figuratively represented his own vocal noises, his cries, his interjections.’”⁴⁷⁵ Travis uses Nodier’s example of the word *haha*, a “mimilogism of an exclamation of surprise and, by extension, the name of a barrier or ditch [sunk fence] that appears unexpectedly and wrenches this exclamation from the travelers.”⁴⁷⁶ It is only too appropriate to this poem that the Oxford English Dictionary defines “ha-ha” as “a boundary to a garden, pleasure-ground, or park.”⁴⁷⁷ The boundary between Chauntecleer’s garden and the Widow’s world is the linguistic impasse of a shout. It is the sound of “Ha, Ha!” (3381) as it trips over the ha-ha around the “yeerd.”

Mimilogism and onomatopoeia in the poem begin as a dramatic poetic collapse *en voix historique*. However, they thrust human language backwards to its infancy, to the Friday day of the Fall- the day this poem takes place. What this means is that historical voice in the poem teeters to the extent that it too cannot help but slip back to a date before it could speak, back to the silence of Paradise. “It is thus the poets’ charge to invent new words and to redeploy existing words in such a way as to restore language to its occluded symbolic powers. Yet as we wait for writers to repair

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid., 244.

⁴⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁷ “Haha,” The Oxford English Dictionary. Second Edition. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

the link between words and things, we must as reader ‘welcome into our mother tongue the distant echoes that reverberate in the hollow centers of words...when reading words we see them and no longer hear them.’⁴⁷⁸

When at the end of the chase the fox tells Chauntecleer, “That jangleth whan he sholde holde his pees,” (3435) we understand what has happened to the noise of the chase: it has reversed itself to extinction. The “silence” of the “thilke tyme” resumes once Chauntecleer speaks. The Widow’s world disappears, leaving once again the magic language and humanity inaudible and invisible to her and Straw. Perhaps historical language in art fails because it knows something about itself that we only intuit- its own contingency- its own ability to be perceived by poetry in its entirety. The *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* tells the backwards history of language in one chase panel- from the fullness of discord to its onomatopoeic and mimological origins, to its silence. Thus, what we observe is that the poem repeats the poetic path towards silence of authors like Alain and Dante, but does it in reverse. Kensak writes, “The silences of Chaucer...derive from the fictional pilgrimages of Dante’s *Paradiso* and Alain de Lille’s *Anticlaudianus*. As they approach the triune God, Dante and Phronesis are plunged into a silence born of mortal incapacity and linguistic confusion. In both texts however grace transforms the silence of human limitation...”⁴⁷⁹ As such, Alain’s “Phronesis is no longer governed by the silence of natural man.”⁴⁸⁰ The trick Chaucer’s poem plays is to enter the silence of poetry by the back door. In addition to ascending the heights via the fabulous world of Chauntecleer, he also allows human language the space to reify itself in the artistic

⁴⁷⁸ Travis, *Disseminal*, 245.

⁴⁷⁹ Kensak, 191.

⁴⁸⁰ Kensak, 194.

vision. When that reification falters and language is unable to find sure footing in a sonic tempest, it travels back towards the prelinguistic, towards the day when it was cleaved in two, at which point, writes Kensak, "Vision replaces language."⁴⁸¹

All's well that ends how it started

The fox pleads with Chauntecleer at the end of the poem, "Com down, and I shal telle yow what I mente;/ I shal seye sooth to yow, God help me so!" (3425). But the 'truth' of the fox's reading of Chauntecleer has evaporated. History came and went, and when it did, it hardly even looked like itself. It looked like a poem. The truth is that every idea of poetry, silence, and music has reconvened by these final moments. Chauntecleer is safe in a tree, which, even though vast in its imperfection as a solution to time and eternity, at least lets us know that we can leave the coop as we found it- safe and strange at the dawn of the world in the unwitting but never unlucky hands of a hero. And if we listen closely through the noise of the phenomenal, inside the silence we might catch the faint strains of "My lief is faren in londe" being sung every Friday morning in the coop right before a discussion of dreams and a fox chase. This particular Chauntecleer may not be immortal, we will never know if another one replaces him; but at least from our view, he hasn't aged a day in over 600 years. Early in Fehrenbacher's study, he writes,

Indeed, here the tale's retreat from history is so powerfully enacted that it abandons not only England, but also the realm of humankind entirely. For

⁴⁸¹ Kensak, *ibid.*

over five hundred lines, the tale remains in a land of chickens and literature in a "yeerd enclosed al aboute," a place so utterly removed from the social and historical that it can only "constitute" itself in an ultraliterary register that no longer even purports to reflect social reality but that revels in its dependence on established voices, themes, modes, and genres, many of which have been (or will be) encountered on the Canterbury pilgrimage."⁴⁸²

My response simply would be to scratch the inevitable "however" of historicism and breathe the free air of a lost world.

⁴⁸² Fehrenbacher, 140.

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