INTENTION, UTILITY, AND CHAUCER'S RETRACTION

by

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DEDICATION

For my beloved wife, Sharon, whose love and support for me never wavered throughout this adventure. For my parents, whose encouragement is a constant in my life. And for my three beautiful daughters, who may someday pull this book down from the shelf, dust it off, and discover what their Dad was up to on all those late nights when he couldn't read them stories.

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation situates Chaucer's Retraction in the context of medieval thinking about authorial intention and the utility of literary texts. It culminates in a reading of Chaucer's Retraction that emphasizes the Retraction's rhetorical status as a request for prayer, calls into question the presence of a disavowal of Chaucer's literary works, and explores the demands the Retraction makes upon readers.

Augustine provided the foundation for medieval thinking about authorial intention through the development of an interpretive system in which readers have the responsibility of seeking in scripture meanings that will build them up toward love for God and their neighbor. Although the first step of interpretation is to seek out the author's intention, God can be trusted to have foreseen all possible meanings useful to the reader, even those not intended by the historical author. Medieval commentators similarly emphasized spiritual utility, as evidenced by the tradition of *accessus*, or academic prologues, which show interest in the historical author's intentions yet situate discussion of authorial intention in a larger rhetorical context, including consideration of the text's utility. Vernacular authors such as Chaucer and Boccaccio appropriate these interpretive practices in apologies that imply a limited role for authorial intention and leave the task of determining the moral significance of the text to readers.

Modern readers have tended to make sense of Chaucer's Retraction by appealing to the intentions and historical circumstances of its author or by describing the Retraction's place within the aesthetic or doctrinal structure of the *Canterbury Tales*. Yet these approaches do not sufficiently account for the rhetorical context of the Retraction.

Chaucer explains and defends his intention for the Parson's Tale not to fix interpretation but to influence the reader's moral evaluation of its author. He lists his religious and secular works not to retract or disavow the latter, but to enlist the reader's help in praying for his sins and in giving thanks for his good works. Ultimately Chaucer's Retraction offers readers an opportunity to reflect on their own readings of the *Canterbury Tales,* to pray for the author's salvation, and to benefit from his example of self-examination.

CHAPTER 1

Now preye I to hem alle that herkne this litel tretys or rede, that if ther be any thyng in it that liketh hem, that therof they thanken oure Lord Jhesu Crist, of whom procedeth al wit and al goodnesse./ And if ther be any thyng that displese hem, I preye hem also that they arrette it to the defaute of myn unkonnynge and nat to my wyl, that wolde ful fayn have seyd bettre if I hadde had konnynge./ For oure book seith, "Al that is writen is writen for our doctrine," and that is myn entente./ Wherfore I biseke yow mekely, for the mercy of God, that ye preye for me that Crist have mercy on me and foryeve me my giltes;/ and namely of my translacions and enditynges of worldly vanitees, the whiche I revoke in my retracciouns:/ as is the book of Troilus; the book also of Fame; the book of the XXV. Ladies; the book of the Duchesse; the book of Seint Valentynes day of the Parlement of Briddes; the tales of Caunterbury, thilke that sownen into synne;/ the book of the Leoun; and many another book, if they were in my remembrance, and many a song and many a leccherous lay, that Crist for his grete mercy foryeve me the synne./ But of the translacion of Boece de Consolacione, and othere bookes of legendes of seintes, and omelies, and moralitee, and devocioun,/ that thanke I oure Lord Jhesu Crist and his blisful Mooder, and alle the seintes of hevene,/ bisekynge hem that they from hennes forth unto my lyves ende sende me grace to biwayle my giltes and to studie to the salvacioun of my soule, and graunte me

grace of verray penitence, confessioun and satisfaccioun to doon in this present lyf,/ thurgh the benigne grace of hym that is kyng of kynges and preest over alle preestes, that boghte us with the precious blood of his herte,/ so that I may been oon of hem at the day of doom that shulle be saved. Qui cum Patre et Spiritu Sancto vivit et regnat Deus per omnia secula. Amen. (Canterbury Tales X.1081-92)[1]

Chaucer's Retraction, perhaps more than any of his other works, invites questions about authorship and authorial intention. Due partly to its placement at the end of the *Canterbury Tales* and partly to its personal content, seemingly spoken in the author's own voice, it is often read as Chaucer's final statement on his own works. Without irony, without art, without play, so a familiar reading goes, Chaucer here offers his last and most devastating self-criticism in the form of a disavowal of his literary corpus. In so doing, he leaves us with the incongruities of an artist, having reached the peak of his art, rejecting it, and a man, having demonstrated his character and his extraordinary gifts, acting in a way uncharacteristic of everything else we know of him. Our ideas of the author as a unified consciousness and of the literary work (or corpus) as a consistent whole are challenged. These incongruities, however, do not present themselves in a vacuum. They arise only in the presence of a number of assumptions about the authorship

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[1] All quotations from the *Canterbury Tales* are from *The Canterbury Tales: Complete*, ed. Larry D. Benson.

of the Retraction, ranging from the material to the ideological: that Chaucer wrote it, that he meant what he said, that it is in fact Chaucer who is speaking, that the text offers a more or less transparent window into the historical author's mind, that the Retraction is the author's intended ending for the *Canterbury Tales*, and that by virtue of this position it ought to be read as his most authoritative statement about his own work. The validity of one or another of these assumptions has been the subject of most modern scholarship on the Retraction, which is to say that this scholarship has been concerned with questions about authorship and intention.

These terms, however, are not transparent but are among the most contested in literary studies, and to understand their role in interpretations of Chaucer's Retraction, one must first sketch in broad outline modern attempts to make sense of them. On one extreme is the common-sense view of authorship: that texts reflect the intentions—the aims, thoughts, or states of mind—of their historical authors and can therefore serve as a reliable guide to, even while being judged by, those intentions. In its crudest form, this view—admittedly seldom held by writers either medieval or modern undertaking a serious investigation of authorship—assumes a one-to-one correspondence between the thought or purpose formed in the historical author's mind and its realization in the text. This understanding of authorship and intention is what Wimsatt and Beardsley critiqued in the 1940s and 50s, most notably in their 1954 article, "The Intentional Fallacy." Wimsatt's and Beardsley's thesis is "that the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art" (3). They distinguish the author as the cause of the work, which they accept, from authorial

intention as the standard by which the work ought to be judged, which they deny. The obvious problem with the model of intention that Wimsatt and Beardsley attack is its circularity: it uses intention as a standard for evaluating the success of a work of art, but one's knowledge of the intention is available primarily through the work of art itself. The recourse, then, for critics using this model is to search for sources outside of the text itself, usually other statements by the author, to corroborate the author's purpose or meaning. Wimsatt and Beardsley condemn this practice, for "critical inquiries are not settled by consulting the oracle" (18). Wimsatt and Beardsley's more general aim is to separate the oracle from its interpretation: to leave personal expression and intention to the poet, and to assign to the critic "the public art of evaluating poems" (9). In describing criticism as a "public art" Wimsatt and Beardsley refer to the fact that poems exist in language, which in their view is public, objective, and embodied in grammar, syntax, dictionaries, and literary tradition. For the purpose of evaluating a poem as a work of art, nothing can or should be gained from attempts to discover the author's intention that cannot be discovered from an analysis of the poem's language. It is important to note that Wimsatt and Beardsley leveled their attack at the use of authorial intention as a tool for aesthetic criticism—they did not deny its existence, the possibility of knowing it, or its usefulness for other purposes. They sought only to distinguish the poet's action from the critic's and to limit the realm of the critic to language.

On the other extreme from the common-sense view is skepticism about the concept of authorship itself. Barthes's and Foucault's related investigations into the concept of the author are well known. Barthes's stark pronouncement that the author is

dead is an acknowledgment that a text does not reveal its meaning or express the

intention of its author but offers an occasion for a variety of meanings to "blend and

clash" (146). The writer, whose meaning is "only a ready-formed dictionary, its words

only explainable through other words" (146), is displaced as the source of the text's

unity, and in his place the reader is "born": "that *someone* who holds together in a single

field all the traces by which the written text is constituted" (148). Foucault's "What is an

Author?," published a year after Barthes's "The Death of the Author," takes a more

descriptive approach to the concept of authorship, discussing its history and cultural

implications. Foucault distinguishes between the historical writer and the author of a text,

the former designating a relationship between a person and a text and the latter describing

a feature of the text itself. An "authored" text is not simply a text written by someone but

a text that in a given culture has acquired a certain status and is received in a different

mode from texts that are not "authored." Foucault calls this special status the "author

function" and proceeds to describe its characteristics, one of which is "that it does not

develop spontaneously as the attribution of a discourse to an individual," but is instead

"the result of a complex operation which constructs a certain rational being we call

'author'" (150). The "author," then, does not precede the work or cause it; he is instead a

product of reader, culture, and text. He is, moreover, not a benign or passive construction,

but an oppressive figure who exercises control over the production of meaning: "a certain

functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes, and chooses; in short,

by which one impedes the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition,

decomposition, and recomposition of fiction" (159).

Between these two extremes of total identification and total separation of author

and historical writer, between deference to and denial of an author's intentions, lie a

number of intermediate positions.[2] Many of these are marked in the development of

criticism on Chaucer's Retraction from the eighteenth to the late-twentieth century.[3] In

short, that development can be described as follows: the earliest critics, many of them

assuming the sincerity of the Retraction and taking for granted that the voice represented

in it is the historical author's, faced the problem of the artist rejecting his art and the man

acting uncharacteristically. Some responded to these contradictions by lamenting the

existence or doubting the authenticity of the Retraction because it did not accord with

their notions of Chaucer the man. As newer approaches to authorship emerged in the

mid-twentieth century, including New Criticism, which shared a number of features with

"doctrinal" or "exegetical" criticism of medieval texts, and as the textual evidence for the

Retraction's authenticity was accepted, the Retraction gained in status. It became a cause

among many critics for guarded—and in some cases unqualified—celebration. At present

there is perhaps less consensus on the relationship of the Retraction to its author than at

any other time. While admiration for the Retraction's aesthetic value seems to have

subsided in part, many critics still find the Retraction to be an "appropriate" ending to the

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[2] For an array of such positions see William Irwin's collection *The Death and
Resurrection of the Author?*, consisting of essays by a number of philosophers that
attempt to find middle ground between the Barthes-Foucault program and earlier notions
of authorship.

[3] For a review of scholarship up to 1961, see James D. Gordon, "Chaucer's Retraction."

Canterbury Tales, both morally, in reference to the author, and structurally, in reference to the text. This view, however, competes and is intermingled with other readings, biographical, ironic, deconstructionist, and more. The Retraction is seen alternately as sincere and ironic; appropriate and discordant; conventional and personal; "Chaucer's" and Chaucer's.

The purpose of this chapter is to survey readings of the Retraction, noting the views of authorship and authorial intention that they assume, imply, or directly state. Once this modern critical history and interpretive framework has been established, the next two chapters will explore a medieval understanding of the relationship between text and author by way of examining medieval discussions of authorial intention in the commentary tradition and a variety of vernacular texts. The medieval understanding of authorship and intention, as these chapters will show, differs in certain important respects—at the very least in emphasis—from our own. How understanding this difference can help to illuminate Chaucer's Retraction will be the subject of the final chapter.

The earliest recorded responses to the Retraction are those in the manuscripts themselves: the rubrics, most likely scribal, inserted between the end of the Parson's Tale and the beginning of the Retraction. These rubrics show some of Chaucer's earliest readers wrestling with the relationship of the Parson's Tale to the Retraction and with the relationship of both to the author. They have recently been examined closely by scholars

arguing that the Parson's Tale and Retraction were not originally composed as an ending for the *Canterbury Tales* but instead comprised a separate work, Chaucer's *Treatise on Penitence*.[4] A close look at the rubrics shows "an uneasiness with the Parson's Tale, expressed mainly at its juncture with the Retraction" (Owen 239). That uneasiness is primarily a response to the problem of determining the speaker of the Retraction. As Míċeál Vaughan points out, apart from the context of the *Canterbury Tales*, nothing in the Parson's Tale and Retraction demands that they be treated as separate works with separate speakers (46). Once appended to the *Canterbury Tales*, however, they require distinctive speakers. The Parson's Prologue clearly attributes the ensuing tale to the Parson, but the Retraction—or at least parts of it, including the list of Chaucer's works—can only be attributed to Chaucer, the author of the *Canterbury Tales* and the other works listed. Either a distinction must be drawn between the speakers of the Parson's Tale and the Retraction, or the whole thing must be taken out of the dramatic context of, and denied a place in, the *Canterbury Tales*.

Modern editions have made the problem appear less urgent by printing rubrics that draw a clear distinction between the Parson's Tale and the Retraction, such as Ellesmere's "Heere taketh the makere of this book his leve," which not only breaks up the two works but assigns the Retraction to the "makere of this book," presumably the author. There is, however, substantial disagreement in the rubrics of the extant

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[4] The following discussion relies on articles by Charles Owen, "What the Manuscripts Tell Us," and Míċeál Vaughan, "Creating Comfortable Boundaries."

manuscripts. Vaughan has grouped the manuscripts into five categories, ranging from those that mark no break at all between the Parson's Tale and the Retraction, to those that offer a "leave-taking" formula like that of Ellesmere (or a shorter version that omits "of this book"), to manuscripts that add an *explicit* for the Parson's Tale (with or without a "leave-taking" formula). Vaughan's hypothesis is that these categories represent steps in a gradual process of assimilating Chaucer's *Treatise on Penitence* to the *Canterbury Tales*. Modern editors, while acknowledging that the rubrics are most likely scribal, have favored those that draw a clear distinction between the two texts.[5] Faced with a difficult textual problem and no evidence of the author's intentions, editors have seized upon the most convenient solution to the problem despite its scribal (rather than authorial) origin: "Scribal inventions have come to stand for authorial intentions, and potential complications recede before a desire for a satisfactory conclusion to Chaucer's final great work" (Vaughan 47).

Whatever the origin of the Parson's Tale and the Retraction, it is clear that the earliest readers were troubled by the relationship of the Retraction to its author when it served as an ending to the *Canterbury Tales*. The development of the manuscripts shows unease primarily about the speaker of the Retraction, but there are other problems as well. If the Retraction is intended to end the *Canterbury Tales*, not just the Parson's Tale, why

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[5] Most editions from Skeat (1894) to Benson's 2000 edition of the *Canterbury Tales*, using Ellesmere as a base manuscript, have included the Ellesmere rubrics and set the Parson's Tale apart from the Retraction with line or page breaks.

does it refer at the outset to the "litel tretys," evidently the Parson's Tale (X.1081) rather

than to the whole poem? Why is it necessary for Chaucer to declare a doctrinal intention

("Al that is writen is writen for our doctrine") for the Parson's Tale, a work that is

transparently doctrinal? Why is the *Canterbury Tales* included in the list of works to be

retracted—why retract it in the very act of completing it? For nearly two hundred years,

from Thynne (1532) to Urry (1721), editions of the *Canterbury Tales* avoided these

problems entirely by simply omitting the Retraction.[6]

After its reintroduction by Urry the Retraction regained a foothold in editions of

the *Canterbury Tales*.[7] Its renewed acceptance, however, was met with a new challenge:

the theory that the Retraction was an interpolation by a scribe, monk, or Chaucer himself

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[6] The folio editions of the *Canterbury Tales* printed during the period 1532-1687

followed Thynne in omitting the Retraction. Those editions are Thynne (1532, rev. 1542

and 1550?); Stow (1561); Speght (1598, rev. 1602, reissued 1687). Prior to Thynne, only

one early edition, Pynson (1492), had omitted it. See Dane, *Who is Buried in Chaucer's

Tomb?*, pp. 5-10, 95-114.

[7] Urry himself had presumably intended to omit the Retraction, as he shared with Hearne

doubts about its authenticity. Urry died in 1715, six years before the publication of the

edition attributed to him, and the edition was completed by William and Timothy

Thomas, who chose to include the Retraction. Dane, in the work cited above, recounts the

various misconceptions about the textual history of the Retraction on which Urry,

Hearne, and the Thomases based their views of its authenticity and canonicity.

in a state of decline. The manuscript evidence for the Retraction as the original ending for

the *Canterbury Tales* is difficult to overcome[8]—the Retraction appears "in practically all

of the MSS. that have the whole of the [Parson's Tale]" (Manly and Rickert 2:471-72)—

but this fact does not preclude the possibility that someone other than Chaucer (or other

than *our* Chaucer) wrote it. Hearne, in the mid-eighteenth century, was the first to suggest

the possibility of interpolation: "I begin to think the Revocation is not genuine, but that it

was made by the monks" (Hammond 321). For the later eighteenth- and nineteenth-

century critics who subscribed to the interpolation view, the idea that someone other than

Chaucer wrote the Retraction was welcome relief from having to believe that Chaucer

could have been so morbid and narrowly doctrinal. "It would be unbearable to have to

accept [the Retraction] as genuine," wrote A. W. Ward. "Those who will may believe that

the monks, who were the landlords of Chaucer's house at Westminster, had in one way or

the other obtained a controlling influence over his mind" (141-42). J. W. Hales was less

certain that the monks at Westminster were responsible: "One would rejoice if this

morbid passage, occurring at the close of the 'Persones Tale,' could be shown to be the

interpolation of some monk; but as it is we must suppose that to Chaucer there came an

hour of reaction and weakness" (166). The Retraction did not accord with the notion of

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[8] Both Vaughan (46) and Owen (239) concede that the textual evidence (strictly

conceived as the number of MSS of the *Canterbury Tales* that contain the Parson's Tale

and Retraction) is heavily in favor of the Parson's Tale and Retraction as Chaucer's

original ending. Their approach is to focus on previously underappreciated textual

evidence (the rubrics).

Chaucer that these critics gained from reading the rest of his works. Since they were

reluctant to relinquish their notion of Chaucer—proto-humanist, liberal, transcending the

narrow creed of the Roman Catholic Church—they dispensed with the Retraction

altogether or invented another "Chaucer": one who had fallen into a state of decline and

had come under the influence of monks, to whom the dull and narrow sentiments of the

Retraction could be safely ascribed.[9]

These examples represent the crudest version of the interpolation thesis, in which

critics consciously construct their "Chaucer" by selecting the parts of his *oeuvre* that

accord with their tastes and rejecting the rest as inauthentic; others have more carefully

advanced a version of the interpolation theory. Tyrwhitt was the first to suggest that

Chaucer may have inserted a few lines (the list of works, ll. 1085-90) *in propria persona*

into what was originally a speech for the Parson, though he considered it likely done

under the influence of monks (336). Skeat, following Tyrhwitt's suggestion, also

considered the middle part an interpolation, but one made by Chaucer himself at the time

he decided to make the Parson's Tale the conclusion to the *Canterbury Tales*. Because

"litel tretys" refers to the Parson's Tale, Skeat reasoned, the Retraction must originally

have been part of the Parson's Tale, and part of it must have been added later, the logical

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[9] Lounsbury, for example, conceded the Retraction's authenticity only on the grounds

that "the poet, at a period of life when physical and intellectual strength were failing, had

fallen under the influence of men of very earnest convictions and of very limited ideas"

(3.39-40).

time being when Chaucer was revising the *Canterbury Tales* to end with the Parson's

Tale. This interpolation then is no indication of decline or evidence of another's hand but

a sign of an artistic turning point. "This accounts for the whole matter," writes Skeat,

matter-of-factly (475). Unaccounted for, however, is why Chaucer would choose the

middle of a speech originally assigned to a character in his frame story to insert a

conclusion for the entire work spoken in his authorial voice.

The interpolation theory has been renewed recently by Douglas Wurtele to

explain "certain verbal and structural anomalies at the end of the *Tales*" (340). Wurtele

reasons that the opening lines of the passage, through line 1084, must be assigned to the

Parson on the basis of the reference to the "litel tretys" and the use of the Pauline

quotation, "Al that is writen is writen for oure doctrine" (Romans 15.4). While some

critics have taken "litel tretys" as a reference to the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole—most

notably Robertson and Huppé, whose positing of a doctrinal intention for the *Canterbury

Tales* requires it (see below)—the weight of evidence suggests that the phrase refers to

the Parson's Tale and would therefore, in Wurtele's view, be best attributed to the

Parson.[10] As for the reference to Romans 15.4, Wurtele suggests that it is more

appropriate coming from "a pilgrim-narrator with professional training in the *Sacra

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[10] Until the time of Robertson and Huppé, there was a strong consensus that "litel tretys"

referred to the Parson's Tale, and many scholars, for example Skeat (475) and Robinson

(772), simply took it for granted. See Ch. 4, pp. 142-44, for a more detailed discussion of

this question.

pagina rather than from the poet himself." Wurtele supports this suggestion by pointing

to glosses on Paul's dictum that take it as a reference to sacred Scripture, and adds that "it

would have been presumptuous for Chaucer to apply Saint Paul's dictum to his own

profane work" (341). Having assigned the opening lines to the Parson, Wurtele argues

that the middle lines (X.1085-1090a) cannot be assigned to him on the basis of the

reference to the poet's own works and the supplications to heaven that "fit awkwardly

and repetitively" unless some of them are assigned to Chaucer and the rest to the Parson

(341).[11]

　　　Although Wurtele makes a much stronger case for interpolation than any of his

predecessors by arguing from the text itself and not from contempt for the Retraction, his

argument runs into a number of problems. First, despite Wurtele's suggestion that it

would have been inappropriate for Chaucer to cite Paul's dictum in reference to his own

work, it is clear that Romans 15.4 was used by a number of vernacular authors and

compilers of pagan and scriptural texts to justify both sacred and profane works.[12] One

need look no farther than Chaucer's Nun's Priest's Tale for an example of its use in a

non-scriptural context (VII.3441-42). Secondly, the reference to the "litel tretys" need not

come from the Parson if one assumes, as most scholars do, that the voice of the

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[11] On the tripartite division of the Retraction, see. Ch. 4, pp. 138-39.

[12] See, for example, Minnis's discussion of its use in the *compilatio* tradition in *Medieval Theory of Authorship*, pp. 204-9. In addition to the example of the Nun's Priest Tale, one could also point to the *Ovide Moralisé*. See Ch. 4, pp. 165-73.

Retraction is Chaucer the poet's speaking from outside the frame of the *Canterbury Tales*: although the Parson's Tale is assigned to the Parson within the frame, both the Parson and his tale are Chaucer's creations and can be rightly claimed as "his" outside the frame. Finally, and most importantly, Wurtele's argument leaves still unanswered the question of why Chaucer would insert a conclusion spoken in his own authorial voice into a speech assigned to the Parson. It is possible of course to read this multiplicity of voices that "blend and clash" in a Barthesian way, but to describe it as a conscious choice on Chaucer's part requires a less anachronistic explanation.

Wurtele's other contribution to scholarship on the Retraction is his examination of Thomas Gascoigne's report of Chaucer's deathbed repentance, which is often referred to obliquely by scholars discussing the Retraction. It is common for scholars to cite Gascoigne's testimony as evidence independently corroborating the authenticity of the Retraction or as an early reading of the Retraction,[13] but Wurtele points out that upon close examination what Gascoigne says does not accurately report what Chaucer wrote in the Retraction. Gascoigne's account occurs in a section of his *Dictionarum Theologicum* in which he illustrates by example the plight of sinners whose penitence is doubtfully effective because it is made after the power to commit sin has departed. He reports

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[13] For the former view, see Robinson (772); for the latter, see Dean ("Chaucer's Repentance" 64-5).

Chaucer's despair for not being able to call back or destroy the evil things he wrote.[14]

Wurtele argues that this report can neither corroborate nor be derived from the

Retraction, since it shows Chaucer complaining that he is unable to do what in fact he did

by writing the Retraction. "[Gascoigne] quotes, in effect, Chaucer's last words as a

despairing regret that now no time remains to do the very thing that the Retraction does in

fact succeed in doing, as far as lay in Chaucer's power," i.e. "mak[ing] a public disavowal

of whatever in his work conduced to sin" (349). Wurtele, in other words, takes

Gascoigne's testimony as evidence of Chaucer's deathbed remorse but not as direct

corroborating evidence for the Retraction. The Retraction and Gascoigne's account both

point to Chaucer's remorse for his writings, but Gascoigne's account is incomplete (for it

ignores the writing of the Retraction) and therefore not strictly accurate.[15]

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[14] "Vae mihi, vae mihi quia revocare nec destruere iam potero illa quae male scripsi de

malo et turpissimo amore hominum ad mulieres sed iam de homine in homine

continuabuntur. Velim. Nolim" (qtd. in Wurtele 358). ["Alas, alas, that now I will not be

able to call back or destroy those evil things I wrote concerning the wicked and most foul

love of men for women, but they will continue to pass from man to man willy nilly."] My

translation.

[15] Contra Wurtele, Miceál Vaughan has recently argued that Gascoigne's account "makes

eminently better sense when read as the expression of his own predilections and personal

politics," which were severely anti-Lancastrian ("Personal Politics" 103-4). In addition to

presenting an alternative to the prevailing inferences that Gascoigne's account either is

Wurtele's argument is meant to bolster the case for a biographical reading of the

Retraction: he proposes that lines 1085 to 1090a are a deathbed interpolation made by or

at the behest of Chaucer himself "in which material of urgent personal import is added"

(342). His discussion of Gascoigne, however, may undermine a biographical reading of

the Retraction as Chaucer's actual and sincere dying act. Although Gascoigne's apparent

ignorance of the Retraction may result from his not having read it, another possibility is

that Gascoigne read the Retraction, but did not read it biographically, as evidence of a

real action performed by Chaucer the man. In other words, if it could be shown that

Gascoigne did in fact know of the Retraction, his testimony would be evidence that at

least one early reader did not read the conclusion to the *Canterbury Tales* biographically,

as evidence of Chaucer's deathbed contrition, confession, and satisfaction. Unfortunately,

the question of Gascoigne's access to the Retraction is unlikely to be answered any time

soon.[16] In the meantime, biographical readings of the Retraction abound.

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based on or constitutes independent evidence of the Retraction, Vaughan points out an

important error in Wurtele's account: Wurtele claims that the passage in question occurs

under the heading "Penitentia," when in fact it occurs under the heading "Preceptum"

(Vaughan "Personal Politics" 4).

[16] Vaughan has put under serious scrutiny and found wanting, however, the claim (by

Wurtele among others) that Gascoigne's account may derive from personal knowledge of

Chaucer's life ("Personal Politics" 4-7).

Efforts to explain the Retraction biographically became common around the turn of the twentieth-century, once the view that the whole of the Retraction was an interpolation had been largely abandoned. Root chastised those who denied the Retraction's authenticity because it did not accord with their personal taste, but reluctantly conceded that "in the sadness of his latter days the poet's conscience was seized upon by the tenets of a narrow creed, which in the days of his strength he had known how to transmute into something better and truer" (288). Tatlock, less despairing, attempted to downplay the severity of the decline to which he and others attributed the Retraction: though genuine, the Retraction "need imply nothing more than a few weeks of other-worldliness at the very end" (*Development and Chronology* 135). By mid-century, however, a number of critics were offering more sympathetic biographical readings of the Retraction. Donaldson blasted efforts to marginalize the Retraction as defending the poet at the expense of the man. Whatever the implications for the poet, the man had done the logical thing. "The retraction must be taken as heartfelt. The poet was about to die and he feared for his soul. There is no doubt that from the strictest point of view—that of a medieval monk—much of what he had written was sinful. . . . Logical as ever, he did what was best for his soul" (1114). Sister Madeleva went even further, denying that the Retraction was the last-minute product of a deathbed repentance and calling it "probably the most important sentence that he ever wrote" (105). She identified in the Retraction the three elements of penitence—contrition, confession, and satisfaction—arguing that in examining his writings for their moral content, Chaucer was simply conforming to the teachings of the Church, not marking a sudden conversion or

change of heart. The Retraction, being more than a reflection of the author's state of mind, was itself the act of Chaucer's satisfaction and amendment for the sins he had committed in writing, namely "scandal or flagrant bad example," the satisfaction for which "requires a retraction or revocation" (110). Chaucer was concerned with his writings at this point "not as adequate translations, nor as delicate poetry, nor as consummate narrative art, but as moral acts" (108). A higher degree of correspondence between the author-figure of the *Canterbury Tales* and Chaucer the man can hardly be imagined: without the slightest hint of irony, insincerity, or ambiguity, the words on the page document the man's moral act. More recently, a new biographical approach has been suggested by Terry Jones et al. While denying that the Retraction is necessarily a straightforward disavowal of Chaucer's work, they situate the Retraction in a larger historical and political context in which public disavowal of one's writing was an important issue. They go so far as to suggest that Chaucer may have written the Retraction under compulsion, while in prison (319-336).

The most direct challenges to these biographical interpretations are ironist readings, but none of these has gained wide acceptance among scholars. The most well-known of these readings is Olive Sayce's 1971 article that finds precedence for nearly every statement in the Retraction in the conventions of medieval prologues and epilogues. Sayce challenges biographical readings as fundamentally misguided (231), and builds her case for an ironic reading on 1.) the conventionality of Chaucer's statements, 2.) the reference to Romans 15.4, which can be read as affirming the works Chaucer ostensibly retracts, 3.) his use of the word "retracciouns," primarily derived from OF and

meaning "withdraw" but perhaps also alluding to Augustine's *Retractationes* which were

not withdrawals but reconsiderations of his earlier works,[17] and 4.) the lack of specificity

with which he refers to the works for which he claims credit. While her points 2.) and 3.),

at least, do suggest room for an ironic interpretation, her argument has not been widely

accepted because its bulk is devoted to establishing the conventionality of Chaucer's

statements, which, as has been often pointed out, need not rule out their sincerity. While

not as direct as Sayce in her suggestion of irony, Anita Obermeier similarly points to the

Retraction's conventionality and the tension it displays between Chaucer's apparent

disavowal and his strategies for calling attention to his literary achievements.

Obermeier's reading of the Retraction is part of a larger study of authorial apologies from

antiquity through the Middle Ages that identifies two major apology strands, apologies to

God and to women, and she argues that Chaucer exploits the conventions of the medieval

apology tradition to achieve his literary ends. In particular, she calls attention to the

"purposeful and unmitigated vagueness" that characterizes his literary confession: he

does not name the offensive *Canterbury Tales*; he offers only a blanket statement about

many other books and lays; he raises doubts as to his memory of his writings; and he

names only his *Boece* among his redeeming works. Although Chaucer adopts an

ostensibly penitent stance in the Retraction, that stance is undermined by the vagueness

of his confession and by the fact that the Retraction establishes Chaucer's literary canon

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[17] The relationship between the Retraction and Augustine's *Retractationes* is discussed in

greater detail in Ch. 4, pp. 176-79. For other discussions of the reference to Augustine see

Tatlock, "Chaucer's Retractions" and McGerr, "Retraction and Memory."

(through the list of works) in the very act of disavowing it (*Auctorial Self-Criticism* 210-220).[18]

Sayce, in particular, directly rejects biographical readings, but her argument, like other ironist readings, does not escape the figure of the author, since she attributes the ironic intention to Chaucer himself rather than merely describing it as a feature of the text. Similarly, the other direct challenge to biographical readings, the form of criticism developed by D. W. Robertson and Bernard Huppé, locates the work's meaning not in the author's psychology but in his artistic and doctrinal intentions. This "Robertsonian" approach to medieval texts, and its relationship to authorial intention, is best summarized by Huppé, who makes explicit his assumption that:

> Chaucer would have wished to convey a fairly specific kind of doctrinal truth because he wrote in a literary tradition . . . . Behind the tradition, to put the matter at its simplest, lies a theory of literature expounded in St. Augustine's *On Christian Doctrine*. . . . For Augustine—and his tradition—the intention of literature was to promote the "reign of charity"; that is, literature, like all other activities of man, was considered truly functional only as it contributed to God's purpose, unfolded in the New Law wherein man's whole duty is expressed. (5-6)

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[18] For other examples of ironist readings, see John Finlayson, "The Satiric Mode and the Parson's Tale," Judson Boyce Allen, "The Old Way and the Parson's Way," and Robert S. Knapp, "Penance, Irony, and Chaucer's Retraction." For more on analogues of the Retraction, see Obermeier, "Chaucer's Retraction."

Doctrinal readings typically proceed by showing that the grand artistic design of the *Canterbury Tales*, impressive though it may be, is intended to convey a doctrinal truth under the surface: "A work of literature," says Huppé of the Augustinian way of reading, "is like a nut with its shell of form (sense) and its kernel of meaning (sentence)" (5). If there is any doubt that this way of reading is at odds with biographical, or more specifically psychological, approaches to medieval literature, D. W. Robertson makes the point clear:

> If we except some of the devotional poetry of the later Middle Ages, especially that written under Fransciscan influence, and a few scattered pieces here and there from earlier periods, it is safe to say that the function of the medieval poet was not so much to express his personal moods or emotions . . . but to express a reality outside himself. . . . But this is not to say that medieval art and literature lack emotion, or that they are not "sincere." A twelfth-century writer on love tells us that it is a subject about which only he is worthy to speak "who composes words without accordance with what the heart says within." . . . But the love that speaks from the heart in this instance is charity, and its expression is not so much a matter of asserting the "self" as a psychological entity as it is a matter of revealing a gift from above. Medieval man, who inherited the implications of Augustine's doctrine of illumination, looked inward, not to find the roots of emotion, but to find God. (15)

One cannot look to a medieval text for signs of its author's state of mind or trustworthy references to biographical details, according to Robertson, but this does not mean that doctrinal readings avoid references to the author: instead, they locate the meaning of the text in a realization of the artist's doctrinal and artistic vision. In the former respect, the "doctrinal" criticism resembles New Criticism; in the latter, it is hostile to such attempts as Wimsatt's and Beardsley's to exclude authorial intention from interpretation.

The Parson's Tale and Retraction, for Baldwin, as for Huppé, are essential to the doctrinal and artistic vision of the *Canterbury Tales*.[19] "Most cunningly and artistically intervolved with the whole" (Baldwin 89), they represent the climax of the pilgrim drama with their themes of penitence and the final destination of man in God. "And so it does not seem an exaggeration to say that the destination of the pilgrimage becomes, by the interlocked metaphorical and dramatic structure, not so much the Canterbury shrine as the Parson's Tale, because it unfolds the *wey* to Him who is the way, the truth, and the life" (92-3). The Retraction, though it indicates that Chaucer's intention in the *Canterbury Tales* was always doctrinal, is Chaucer's admission that there is a danger in

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[19] Robertson, however, devotes only one footnote of his *Preface to Chaucer* to a discussion of the Retraction. In it, he argues that the speaker of the Ellesmere rubric, "Heere taketh the makere of this book his leve," and the speaker of the opening lines of the Retraction are the same, and that as a result the word "tretys" has the same referent as "book," i.e. the whole *Canterbury Tales* (368-69).

tales of mirth, which may "sownen into synne" (X.1086).[20] "His Retractions serves his own purpose of renunciation, and once more as a reminder to his readers to read the *Tales* for its sentence" (Huppé 237).

The influence of Robertson's and Huppé's criticism waned in the 1970s and 80s, as scholars identified many of their readings as strained: a product, it seemed, of their narrow focus on extracting a single meaning from the variety of medieval texts. Many critics from the 1960s on have found that instead of precluding biographical readings, formal or aesthetic readings of the Retraction can coexist with them. Paul Ruggiers, for example, takes Chaucer's confession as sincere, but emphasizes the role that personal confession plays in the formal whole of the *Canterbury Tales*: his concern is with "the possibility that the ironist-author, by capitalizing upon his spiritual compunction and by making it a part of the total literary form, has made the best use possible at this stage of his moral convictions" (25). The Retraction, though personal and sincere, is also the final statement on the theme of repentance that runs through the *Canterbury Tales* and a final "individualized *exemplum* of the method by which salvation and the kingdom may be attained" (27).

Ruggiers's accommodation of the autobiographical and the formal is echoed in a common description of the Retraction as an "appropriate" ending for the *Canterbury Tales*: the Retraction is described as an appropriate gesture for Chaucer the author to

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[20] Huppé, like Robertson, argues that the "litel tretys" refers to the poem as a whole and that the reference to Romans 15.4 applies to all of the *Canterbury Tales* (236-37).

make when concluding his poem (a biographical reading) or it is called an appropriate ending for the poem (a formal or aesthetic reading) or both at the same time, and in many cases it is difficult to tell which of these is being argued. Rodney Delasanta, writing against ironist readings, gestures toward both applications of the word: "I find it wholly appropriate that Chaucer the pilgrim—perhaps, too, Chaucer the poet—should himself be moved to formal penitential posture" (242). James Dean sees the Parson's Tale and Retraction as the final stage in a process, beginning with the Second Nun's Tale, of "dismantling"—i.e. exposing as fictions—the fictions of the *Canterbury Tales*. In this scheme, the Retraction "is either autobiographical or presents an image of autobiography to enhance the religious theme" and is also the culmination of the formal process of "dismantling" ("Dismantling" 758). Other examples of this accommodation are available, and they often bring the biographical and formal together under the adjective "appropriate." [21]

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[21] An often cited example is Gale Schricker's 1981 article, "On the Relation of Fact and Fiction," in which she argues that the Retraction is part of a pattern of endings in Chaucer's work, wherein the fictional realm of the work is united with the factual world of the author. William Madden, writing in the 1950s, argued that the *Canterbury Tales* shows the influence of multiple standards of behavior to which Chaucer was subject. While he had yielded to standards of "seemliness" throughout most of the tales, especially in his portrayal of marriage, ultimately he submitted to the highest standard of

The final strain of criticism on the Retraction needing mention in this chapter is postmodern and deconstructionist readings. Though often relying on the work of theorists skeptical of traditional notions of authorship, even these readings do not escape reference to the author of the *Canterbury Tales*. These readings, rather than finding the Retraction appropriate within a unified artistic scheme, emphasize the passage's discordant elements and open-endedness. Peter Travis, for example, argues that the Retraction itself anticipates the antithetical traditional readings of humanist rejection and exegetical approbation by setting up an *aporia* between the sentiments of rejection and approbation. Travis distinguishes between what he calls "hardcore" deconstruction, in which all meaning is subverted by the text's contradictions and the author disappears, and "softcore" deconstruction, which identifies these conflicts and contradictions as intended by the author. Chaucer's Retraction, which invites a "softcore" approach, "enables a reconstructive process, as each interpretation catalyzes a more sophisticated and more nearly adequate reinterpretation" (155). In this way, Travis's reading resembles, while also distancing itself from, both aesthetic and doctrinal readings of the Retraction that see it as the realization of Chaucer's artistic intentions. Another "postmodern" reading by Phyllis Portnoy similarly gestures toward authorial intention. Portnoy contrasts the "metaphoric" outer structure of the *Canterbury Tales*, expressing a unified and stable meaning, with the "metonymic" inner structure of the poem, where dissonance and fragmentation prevail. "The reader's composure," she concludes, "does not seem to have

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morality. This shift, registered most sharply by Chaucer's authorial statements in the Retraction, is anticipated by the Clerk's Tale, the Tale of Melibee, and the Parson's Tale.

been the poet's 'entente'" (280); rather, the Retraction leaves its readers with a "no-choice," in which "choosing at all is to 'chese amys'" (291).[22] Finally, Rosemarie Potz McGerr has attempted to place the Retraction within a medieval tradition of resistance to closure in literary texts. McGerr describes the Retraction as a "vantage point" from which readers can review their experience of reading the *Canterbury Tales*. She identifies this vantage point as a feature of the larger "retrospective structure" of the *Canterbury Tales*, which allows for the clash and synthesis of the many individual perspectives of pilgrims and narrator. Like the workings of memory as understood and described by Augustine, the poem allows for an accumulation of perceptions and perspectives, which forces the reader to constantly revise his view of the whole. The Retraction, in McGerr's reading, serves to "recollect the tales for the reader's reconsideration," holding up the negative aspects of language, narration, and fiction alongside the positive ("Retraction and Memory" 111).[23]

To summarize the current state of scholarship, the authenticity of the Retraction is well established (although Owen and Vaughan have cast doubt on the view that it was originally written for the *Canterbury Tales*), but there is no current consensus among

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[22] For another deconstructionist view, see Victor Yelverton Haines, "Where are Chaucer's 'Retracciouns'?"

[23] See also McGerr's more recent *Chaucer's Open Books*, which is discussed in greater detail in Ch. 4, pp. 189-90.

scholars about its meaning or its relationship to its author's life and intentions. There is, however, a general tendency to view the Retraction as an appropriate ending for a poem whose frame story involves a pilgrimage and whose final "tale" is a handbook on penitence attributed to an idealized Parson. It should be clear from the above discussion that readings of the Retraction consistently entail—and to some extent depend upon— contested notions of authorship and intention. Modern scholarship tends to focus largely on the relationship between the text and its author—whether the "author" is considered Chaucer the man or a feature of the text. Such a focus seems obvious and hardly worthy of comment to a modern reader. The purpose, however, of the next two chapters is to explore whether such a focus is common to medieval reading practices. Though it cannot claim to be comprehensive, the analysis that follows shows that for a number of medieval commentators and authors, the relationship between reader and text was of equal concern to the relationship between author and text. In some cases, as we shall see, the reader's experience of the text, rather than the author's intention, became the primary concern in determining the value of reading literary works.

CHAPTER 2

Many scholars attempting to explain Chaucer's Retraction address one of two questions. The first is a question about the author of the *Canterbury Tales*: is Chaucer sincerely repenting for having written the *Canterbury Tales* and other works, or can his posture of repentance in the Retraction be explained as ironic, conventional, intentionally ambiguous, or not really his? A softer version of this question is whether repentance is an appropriate gesture for the author of this work to make. In either case, the question is a moral one—in the hard version, it is whether a given moral act (repentance) can be discerned in the Retraction; in the soft version, it is whether the moral act is an appropriate response to another moral act (writing the *Canterbury Tales* and the other works listed in the Retraction). The second question scholars tend to address is about the text: what is the relationship between the Retraction and the rest of the *Canterbury Tales*? To cite only two extreme versions of this question, does the Retraction represent the climax of the pilgrim drama and underscore the larger work's themes of penitence and pilgrimage, or is it a discordant element in a work whose unity lies less in its form and more in its total effect?[1]

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[1] Or, as Míceál Vaughan and Charles Owen have asked, is the relationship between the Retraction and the *Canterbury Tales* purely scribal?

These two approaches to the Retraction seek to explain Chaucer's statement of intention—his own apparent judgment on his work—by showing it to be consistent with some larger whole: either the author's life and state of mind or the greater literary work (i.e. the *Canterbury Tales*) of which the statement of intention is only a part. The importance of the stated intention is taken in the first place to be what it tells us about the author and in the second what it tells us about the text's larger themes and meanings. These approaches are not mutually exclusive—a statement of intention is at once the expression of a speaker and a text to be understood in its context—and both have shed light on the Retraction. In comparison, however, to medieval thinking about intention as discussed in this and the following chapter, this tendency to focus on the author and the text appears imbalanced. While medieval authors and commentators were clearly interested, as are modern readers, in questions about the author as an historical person and the literary work as a whole, they were equally interested in the text's effect on the reader and the uses toward which the reader could put the text. They tended, in other words, to consider authorial intention in a rhetorical context. My aim in this study as a whole is to shift the focus of readings of the Retraction from the author and the text toward the reader and the rhetorical implications of Chaucer's speech act. The Retraction itself, as I will argue in Chapter Four, invites such a focus, for it shows a clear and prevailing interest in the role and response of the reader.

The following chapter will explore a broad range of medieval discussions of authorial intention, but the present chapter will provide a framework for those discussions by focusing on the work of a single thinker, Peter Abelard (1079-1142). As a

commentator and theologian, Abelard directed his interpretive abilities primarily toward

the exposition of scripture. The early twelfth century, however, the period of Abelard's

prominence, saw significant crossover between methods of expositing secular and sacred

texts. Abelard was among the first scriptural exegetes to apply the technique of the

accessus, a prologue form developed and used by grammarians in medieval schools to

introduce the works of classical authors, to the exposition of scripture. The prologue to

his *Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans* uses the terms and categories of the

most common twelfth-century *accessus* form, which R. W. Hunt called the "Type C"

prologue, including discussion of the author's intention (*intentio auctoris*) and mode of

treatment (*modus tractandi*).[2] Looking beyond Abelard's role in transferring this specific

interpretive technique from secular to sacred texts, we can also see in his work a number

of assumptions shared by later commentators and authors such as those discussed in the

following chapter. My reason for selecting Abelard for particular attention is that his

work helps to explain the tendency, which we will observe in other medieval discussions

of authorial intention, to treat intention in a rhetorical context, as an end or effect of the

text itself as opposed to a mental phenomenon. I am not attempting to argue for Abelard's

influence on Chaucer, but rather for a set of assumptions and practices concerning

intention that would be recognizable to both authors—assumptions, as the following

chapter will demonstrate, heavily influenced by Augustine and therefore decidedly

rhetorical, and ethical, in nature. Having outlined Abelard's thinking on intention, I will

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[2] For a fuller discussion of the medieval *accessus* and the "Type C" prologue, see Ch. 3,

pp. 93-94.

turn to a discussion of Chaucer's Pardoner's Prologue and Tale that emphasizes the epistemological problem raised by the Pardoner's statement of intention and the rhetorical context in which the Pardoner's stated intention must be understood. In closing, I will point out a number of similarities between the interpretive problems raised by the Pardoner's Prologue and Tale and those raised by the Retraction.

As a commentator, Abelard was greatly interested in the role human authors played in the revelation of God's word in scripture. He was particularly concerned with the problem of reconciling and explaining the various causes of apparent contradictions in the scriptures and the writings of the Church Fathers. In his *Sic et Non*, Abelard compiled various statements by the apostles and Church Fathers under 158 questions or problems.[3] In his prologue to the work, he outlines his methods for reconciling the sometimes contradictory statements of his *auctores*. His approach is humble, urging readers not to make rash judgments that impute error or deceit to the author, but first to remove any obstacles toward the reader's understanding of the words in question. Among the barriers to understanding Abelard discusses are an unusual style of writing, the fact that words may have different meanings in different contexts, an erroneous attribution of authorship, and mistaking a quotation from another authority for the author's own

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[3] Originally composed ca. 1122-37, the *Sic et Non* appears to have been revised at least four times by Abelard between 1122 and 1142. For more on the various redactions and manuscripts see Buytaert, pp. xii-xxv.

assertion. In seeking to remove these barriers, Abelard recommends a technique practiced

by many medieval commentators and exegetes, consideration of the author's intention:

> When different views are expressed about the same thing, one should also
> carefully consider what the author is aiming at in the way of enforcing [God's]
> precept, granting pardon, or exhorting his readers to perfection, so that we may
> seek a solution for that incompatibility in the difference between the intentions of
> the authors. If the statement is laying down a precept, we must ask whether it is of
> general or particular application, that is, directed to all generally or to certain
> individuals in particular.

> Diligenter et illud discutiendum est, cum de eodem diversa dicuntur, quid ad
> praecepti coartationem, quid ad indulgentiae remissionem vel ad perfectionis
> exhortationem intendatur, ut secundum intentionum diversitatem adversitatis
> quaeramus remedium. Si vero praeceptio est, utrum generalis an particularis, id
> est ad omnes communiter an ad aliquos specialiter directa.[4]

In sorting out contradictions, Abelard argues, one must take into consideration the end

toward which the author was aiming and the audience, general or particular, toward

which the statement was directed. It is significant that Abelard grounds his discussion of

intention in an explicitly rhetorical context, one which assumes a particular end or effect

envisioned by the author (enforcing a precept, granting pardon, or exhorting readers to

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[4] The Latin text is from Boyer and McKeon, p. 96. The translation is that of Minnis and

Scott, p. 93.

perfection) and an audience who receives the precept, pardon, or exhortation. The significance of intention, in such a context, is what it reveals, not about the mind of the author, but about the orientation of the text and the effect it ought to have on the reader. Abelard practices this method of considering authorial intention in the opening lines of his commentary on Romans. He begins the work by outlining the intention of scripture as a whole, and in so doing he makes explicit the connection between authorial intention and rhetoric:

> The intention of all Holy Scripture is to teach or move men in the same way as a speech does in the sphere of rhetoric. It teaches when it advises what we should do or avoid. It moves us when, by dissuading us with divine admonitions, it makes our will draw back from evil; and by persuasion it brings us to the good, with the result that we want to do what we have learnt we ought to do, or avoid whatever is opposed to that.

> Omnis scriptura diuina more orationis rhetoricae aut docere intendit aut mouere; docet quippe dum quae fieri uel uitari oportet insinuat, mouet autem dum sacris admonitionibus suis uoluntatem nostram uel dissuadendo retrahit a malis uel persuadendo applicat bonis, ut iam uidelicet implere uelimus quae implenda esse didicimus, uel uitare contraria.[5]

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[5] The Latin text is from Buytaert, p. 41. The translation is that of Minnis and Scott, p. 100.

The two intentions Abelard outlines here, *aut docere aut movere*, a variation on an idea Augustine appropriated from Cicero in *On Christian Doctrine*, are often repeated by other commentators discussing authorial intention within the *accessus* tradition.[6] In particular, the idea that texts, scriptural or non-scriptural, teach readers what to do or avoid, is a powerful and commonly used tool for deriving meaning from all kinds of texts, including both explicitly doctrinal and purely narrative works. Again, it is important to note the emphasis of Abelard's discussion of intention: when he appeals to the intention of Holy Scripture, he is appealing not to the mental state of the authors of scripture (human or divine) but to the proper end or effect of the text. Intention is discussed in a rhetorical, rather than a psychological, context.

This is not to say, however, that Abelard is not interested in intention as a mental phenomenon or in the author as a historical person. Indeed, in the *Sic et Non*, he shows a particular interest in defending the Church Fathers against the charge of deceiving readers when they wrote in error, and his defense rests on an appeal to their intentions:

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[6] Augustine: "He who is eloquent should speak in such a way that he teaches, delights, and moves" ("dicere debere eloquentem ut doceat, ut delectet, ut flectat," 4.12.27). Augustine's reference is to Cicero's *Orator*: "The man of eloquence . . . will be the one who is able to speak in court or in deliberative bodies so as to prove, to please, and to sway or persuade" ("Erit igitur eloquens . . . is qui in foro causisque civilibus ita dicet, ut probet, ut delectet, ut flectat," 21.69).

> But we must not accuse holy men of being liars if, holding opinions on some
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> matters which were at variance with the truth, they speak, not out of a desire to
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> deceive, but through ignorance. No statement which is prompted by charity, and
>
> aims at some sort of edification, should be put down to arrogance or sinfulness.
>
> For it is clear that in God's sight all actions are judged in terms of their intention .
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> . .
>
> Sed nec tamquam mendacii reos argui sanctos convenit, si nonnulla quandoque
>
> aliter quam se rei veritas habeat arbitrantes, non per duplicitatem sed per
>
> ignorantiam dicant; nec praesumptioni vel peccato imputandum est quidquid ex
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> caritate ad aliquam aedificationem dicitur, cum apud Deum omnia discuti iuxta
>
> intentionem constet . . . .[7]

In this context it is clear that by "intention" Abelard is referring to the mental state of the

agents (their charity and their desire to deceive or to edify), not to the actual ends or

effects of their actions. Abelard is concerned, not with an evaluation and interpretation of

the statements made by the church fathers, but with an *ipso facto* moral defense of their

actions. In the context of a moral defense, it is the intention formed in the mind and heart

of the agent that settles the matter—intention is treated as a mental phenomenon, and, as

such, it can be perceived only by God ("in God's sight"). In the context, however, of a

rhetorical evaluation of a text (which is the context of the two examples cited above), it is

to the intention embodied in the text that Abelard appeals ("it teaches when . . . it moves

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[7] Boyer and McKeon, p. 97; Minnis and Scott, pp. 94-95.

us when . . ."). This distinction between Abelard's treatment of intention in a rhetorical

context and his treatment of intention in a psychological context can be further explained

through a closer look at his ethical theory. At the heart of that theory is the

epistemological problem to which I have alluded: if, as human beings, we cannot

perceive the intentions (mental states) of other human beings, on what basis are we to

evaluate their actions? The answer at which Abelard arrives has implications beyond the

field of ethics and helps to explain his tendency to treat intention in a rhetorical context,

as an end or effect of the text itself as opposed to a mental phenomenon. And since, as

will be seen in the following chapter, Abelard is representative of a general tendency

among medieval commentators to treat intention in a rhetorical context, his answer to this

epistemological problem may help to explain the treatment of intention in the larger

commentary tradition.

Abelard's *Ethics* or *Know Thyself* (*Scito te Ipsum*), composed c. 1138-39, was

originally envisioned as two books, the first attending to a definition of evil and the

second to a definition of good. The second book, however, was abandoned after only a

few short paragraphs, leaving Abelard's *Ethics* as primarily an exploration of sin. A

distinguishing feature of Abelard's definition of sin is its emphasis on the mental state of

the sinner. Sin for Abelard is an evil intention in contempt of God. Such a definition has

profound implications for human life, for it draws a clear boundary between one's mental

state and one's actions. This distinction between mental states and actions leads also to a

sharp distinction between the knowers of mental states and actions: God, who can see

through actions to the mind, and human beings who can know only the actions, and not the mind, of another.

Abelard begins the *Ethics* with three discussions of what sin is not. From these negative theses emerges his positive understanding of sin. His first negative is that sin is not a mental vice (*vitium animi*). A mental vice for Abelard is a predisposition toward evil—"that by which we are made prone to sin" ("quo ad peccandum proni efficimur," 4.27).[8] Because such predispositions may be overcome, a mental vice cannot constitute sin in itself. Vices such as irascibility or dissipation (*irascendum* or *luxuriam*) are always with us, even when we are not behaving angrily or excessively, and do not cause or constitute sin so much as present an opportunity for a struggle against it. On the contrary, when the predisposition asserts itself, people may either fall into subjection to it and sin, or "triumphing over themselves through the virtue of temperance they may obtain a crown" ("per temperantiae uirtutem de se ipsis triumphantes coronam percipiant," 4.6-8).

Having advanced this first negative thesis, Abelard offers his overarching positive thesis, that sin is contempt of God:

> And so vice is that by which we are made prone to sin, that is, are inclined to consent to what is not fitting so that we either do it or forsake it. Now this consent we properly call sin, that is, the fault of the soul by which it earns damnation or is made guilty before God. For what is consent unless it is contempt of God and an offence against him. For God cannot be offended against through harm but

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[8] Reference is to D. E. Luscombe, *Peter Abelard's* Ethics, for Latin text and translations.

through contempt. He indeed is that supreme power who is not impaired by any harm but who avenges contempt of himself. And so our sin is contempt of the Creator and to sin is to hold the Creator in contempt, that is, to do by no means on his account what we believe we ought to do for him, or not to forsake on his account what we believe we ought to forsake.

Vitium itaque est quo ad peccandum proni efficimur, hoc est, inclinamur ad consentiendum ei quod non conuenit, ut illud scilicet faciamus aut dimittamus. Hunc uero consensum proprie peccatum nominamus, hoc est, culpam animae qua dampnationem meretur, uel apud deum rea statuitur. Quid est enim iste consensus nisi Dei contemptus et offensa ipsius? Non enim Deus ex dampno sed ex contemptu offendi potest. Ipse quippe est summa illa potestas quae dampno aliquo non minuitur, sed contemptum sui ulciscitur. Peccatum itaque nostrum contemptus creatoris est, et peccare est creatorem contempnere, hoc est, id nequaquam facere propter ipsum quod credimus propter ipsum a nobis esse faciendum, vel non dimittere propter ipsum quod credimus esse dimittendum. (4.27-6.6)

There is a strong time component to Abelard's definition of sin—sin occurs at the moment we consent to evil and thus hold God in contempt. Much of Abelard's effort in explaining sin is aimed at focusing our attention on this moment of sin and not on the conditions that precede it or the effects that proceed from it. Because vice is a constant that exists prior to, during, and after the sin has been committed, it cannot constitute sin.

A more complicated matter, however, is the object of Abelard's second negative

thesis: will (*voluntas*). The will to commit an evil act, unlike the predisposition toward

the act, is not necessarily a constant that precedes sin, and it cannot be called an effect of

the sin, so it must either constitute the sin or merely be able to coincide with it. In order

to rule out the possibility that bad will constitutes sin, Abelard offers the example of a sin

committed unwillingly. The example is taken from Augustine's *De Libero Arbitrio*,

though in the service of a different conclusion from Augustine's.[9] The example is this: a

servant, fleeing an angry master who is bent on killing him, is finally unable to flee any

farther and, in order to save his own life, turns on his master and kills him. Augustine had

used the example to show that sin consisted in inordinate desire—desire which outweighs

the value of the object desired: the servant's desire is not to kill the master but to preserve

his own life, which is an object not worth the cost of his master's murder (Mann 282).

Abelard shares Augustine's assumption that the servant does not desire his master's

death, but he denies Augustine's conclusion that the servant's sin consists in another

desire: to preserve his own life. He does not deny that the sin was motivated by that

desire, but he insists that that desire is a very different thing from the desire to kill his

master and cannot be evil in itself. And yet, the servant did commit a sin, for "although

he was constrained by the fear of death, he did do wrong in consenting to an unjust

killing which he should have undergone rather than inflicted" ("et tamen deliquit

consentiendo, quamuis coactus timore mortis, iniustae interfectioni quam eum potius

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[9] Augustine, *De Libero Arbitirio*, 1.3.8 – 1.4.10. Cited in Mann, "Ethics," *The Cambridge

Companion to Abelard*.

ferre quam inferre oportuit," 8.10-12). Again, Abelard's focus is on the moment of

consent, which can be distinguished from vice and can be present even when desire, or

will, is not: it is the moment "when we in no way draw back from [the evil act] and are

inwardly ready, given the chance, to do it" ("cum nos ab eius perpetratione nequaquam

retrahimus parati penitus, si daretur facultas, illud perficere," 8.17-19).

This moment can also be distinguished from that which follows it: the

performance of the deed. This is Abelard's third, and most startling, negative thesis: that

no sin consists in a deed. This thesis rests on an inward/outward dichotomy that is

suggested first in Abelard's justification of his digression on carnal pleasure:

> Now we have mentioned this lest anyone, wishing perhaps every carnal pleasure
>
> to be sin, should say that sin itself is increased by action when one carries the
>
> consent given by the mind into the commission of an act and is polluted not only
>
> by shameful consent but also by the blemishes of an action—as if an exterior and
>
> corporeal act could contaminate the soul.
>
> Haec autem ad hoc induximus, ne quis uolens forte omnem carnis delectationem
>
> esse peccatum, diceret ex actione ipsum peccatum augeri, cum quis uidelicet
>
> consensum ipsum animi in exercitium duceret operationis, ut non solummodo
>
> consensu turpitudinis, uerem etiam maculis contaminaretur actionis, tamquam si
>
> animam contaminare posset quod exterius in corpore fieret. (22.26-32)

The outward act adds nothing to the sin that is committed in the mind—it follows from

the sin itself, which is consenting to the bad action. In addition to the time component

that underlies and supports his entire argument for sin as consent, Abelard supports this third negative thesis by drawing out its implications and showing them to be undeniable or self-evident. The first implication, given that no sin is a deed, is that no commandment of God must forbid a deed. If it were true, Abelard argues, that the commandments "Thou shalt not kill" and " Thou shalt not bear false witness" forbade only the acts of killing and false witness, then someone who consented to killing or bearing false witness but did not act on that consent would not be guilty of sin, whatever his reason for not acting—even if he were only kept from the action by force or inability. Thus, Abelard reasons, God's commandments do not forbid deeds but the consent that gives rise to deeds. A second implication of the claim that no sin is a deed is that it may be possible to perform a deed seemingly forbidden by a commandment of God without committing a sin. For example, the law forbids a man to marry or commingle with his sister, but if a man takes his sister through ignorance—"since one is often unable to recognize one's sisters" ("cum sepe quis sorores suas recognoscere nequeat," 26.16)—he cannot justly be called a transgressor. Here, as in other places, Abelard assumes that the implication of his claim (that one cannot be held responsible for wrongdoing performed in ignorance) is self-evident and sufficient support for the claim itself (that no sin is a deed). Having drawn out these implications, Abelard turns to an argument from authority, citing Augustine's famous statement that "the Law ordains nothing except charity and prohibits nothing except cupidity" (*On Christian Doctrine* 3.10) to further support his claim that actions cannot constitute sin.

At this point in his argument, Abelard makes a terminological shift from consent (*consensus*) toward intention (*intentio*). From this point on in the *Ethics*, he uses the words "consent" and "intention" interchangeably, favoring the latter.[10] For Abelard, intention is consent, and a sinful intention is one that holds God in contempt. Having arrived at intention as the sole criterion of sin, Abelard proceeds to draw out the final implication of the no-sin-is-a-deed thesis: that "works which it is or is not at all fitting to do may be performed as much by good as by bad men who are separated by their intention alone" ("opera quae fieri conuenit aut minime eque a bonis sicut a malis hominibus geri, quod intentio sola separat," 28.1-2). Indeed, Abelard argues, God may even command an act that is unfitting and that would involve sin for someone with a different intention. Case in point: his commandment to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, and his later prohibition of the same commandment. If outward action is the substance of sin, how could God be right in commanding and forbidding the same action? "For if it was good, how was it later forbidden?" ("Si enim bonum quomodo postea prohibitum?" 30.16). Abelard's answer is that because sin consists in intention and not in deeds, God is not guilty of sin in commanding an unfitting action: the intent of the commandment was not to bring about its fulfillment but to test Abraham's faith and allow it to serve as an example. "You see," says Abelard, "that the intention of the command alone, not the

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[10] Luscombe's edition, the standard Latin edition of the *Ethics*, makes no comment on this shift, and my admittedly superficial survey of commentary on Abelard has turned up no discussion of it. Taking their cue from Abelard, his commentators use "intention" and "consent" interchangeably.

execution of the deed, excuses God, since he did well to command what is not a good thing to be done" ("uides quia sola intentio precepti, non actio facti, Deum excusat cum id bene precepi quod non est bonum fieri" 30.19-20).

In locating sin in intention, Abelard has limited the realm of sin to the human mind—"for God thinks not of what is done, but in what mind it may be done" ("Non enim quae fiunt, sed quo animo fiant pensat Deus," 28.9-10). This presents an epistemological problem, for while God can see into the mind, human beings cannot: we are limited to the observation of actions. Abelard distinguishes sharply between the sources of man's knowledge and God's:

> For men do not judge the hidden but the apparent, nor do they consider the guilt of a fault so much as the performance of a deed. Indeed God alone . . . truly considers the guilt in our intention and examines the fault in a true trial. Whence he is said to be both the prover of the heart and the reins and to see in the dark. For he particularly sees there where no man sees, because in punishing sin he considers not the deed but the mind, just as conversely we consider not the mind which we do not see but the deed which we know.

> Non enim homines de occultis, sed de manifestis iudicant, nec tam culpae reatum quam operis pensant effectum. Deus uero solus qui non tam quae fiunt, quam quo animo fiant adtendit, ueraciter in intentione nostra reatum pensat et uero iudicio culpam examinat. Vnde et probator cordis et renum dicitur et in abscondito uidere. Ibi enim maxime uidet ubi nemo uidet, quia in puniendo peccatum non

opus adtendit sed animum, sicut nos e conuerso non animum quem non uidemus,

sed opus quod nouimus. (40.7-15)

This epistemological problem is a distinguishing feature of Abelard's definition of sin, for other plausible definitions, including the objects of Abelard's three negative theses (vice, evil desire, and unfitting action), all have an observable element. Intention alone is an exclusively mental phenomenon, and is therefore unavailable to human senses, for it consists in one's inward disposition toward such things as vices, desires, and actions.

Abelard's judicial language in the passage cited above hints at the potential implications of this epistemological problem. For if we can never see into another's mind, we can never be sure of another's guilt: a fact which has the potential to call human systems of punishment and reward—both ecclesiastical and political—into question. Abelard does not shy away from this implication; rather, he offers up two pathos-laden examples to illustrate it and explain its resolution. The first is of a mother who cannot afford to clothe her baby and, motivated by pity, draws him to her to keep him warm, unavoidably smothering him. While she incurs no guilt before God, Abelard tells us, she is deserving of human punishment so that other women may see the example and be more cautious. The other example is of a judge who knows a man to be innocent of the crime with which he is accused and knows his accusers to be lying. Since the judge cannot refute the witnesses' claims, however, he must allow their testimony and is compelled by law to convict the innocent man. These examples show innocent people receiving punishment, but Abelard insists that the punishments are just. The examples highlight the

difference between God's system of punishments and rewards—which is intended to reward virtue and punish guilt—and man's—which is intended to have the more immediate effect of encouraging good action and discouraging bad. In punishing bad actions, Abelard argues, "we strive to avenge in someone less what harms his soul than what can harm others, in order to prevent public rather than individual injuries" ("nec in aliquo tam quod eius animae nocet quam quod aliis nocere possit uindicare studemus, ut magis publica preueniamus dampna quam singularia corrigamus," 42.7-10). This emphasis on the public function of punishment—even if in a particular instance it is at odds with God's judgment—is what prevents Abelard's ethical theory from undoing human systems of punishment and reward. By preventing injury to the public, Abelard tells us, human punishment serves the common utility ("communi utilitati," 44.5). Confronted with a situation in which the agent's intentions cannot be known, human observers are forced to deliver a provisional, pragmatic judgment, one which is less concerned with the agent's mental state (even though in the end this is what defines the act before God) and more concerned with public usefulness.

Although Abelard's discussion of this problem in the *Ethics* is restricted to its ethical implications, his resolution of the problem can be applied to a literary context as well. In particular, Abelard's argument that human systems of punishment and reward must consider the effect of encouraging good action and discouraging bad can be compared to his observation, in a literary context, that Holy Scripture "teaches when it advises what we should do or avoid." Just as human observers of moral or immoral action must limit their judgment to outward actions and consider the effects of those actions in

forming a response, readers of scripture, or of any text for that matter, must limit their

observation to speech acts, embodied in texts, and consider the effect of those acts on the

reader. And just as Abelard justifies human forms of punishment and reward by

appealing to the common utility ("communi utilitati"), medieval commentators regularly

appeal to the concept of utility (*utilitas*) in interpreting both secular and sacred texts. Just

as for Abelard utility takes the place of intention in determining one's response to moral

or immoral action, for many commentators utility displaces intention in determining the

value of a written text. The following chapter will offer a fuller discussion of the

relationship between intention and utility in the commentary tradition. For now, let us

turn to a discussion of Chaucer's Pardoner's Prologue and Tale, which presents a

rhetorical and ethical situation not unlike the situation in which we find ourselves as

readers of the Retraction, to which Abelard's thinking can serve as a guide.

There would seem to be no better case study in Abelard's ethical theory than

Chaucer's Pardoner. All of the elements of Abelard's system are there: an intention (in

this case an explicitly stated one), an outward action, and an audience of human observers

forced to pass judgment on the man and his self-revelation, tale, and offer of pardon.

Much of the criticism on the Pardoner's Prologue and Tale up to the 1970s was devoted

to reconciling the Pardoner's intentions with his actions in order to find some sort of

unity in him—psychological, doctrinal, or otherwise.[11] The matter of unity is complicated

by his substantial representation in the *Canterbury Tales*. In addition to his prologue, tale,

and General Prologue portrait, the Pardoner makes appearances in the Wife of Bath's

Prologue and the "headlink" to his prologue and tale. He also makes an address to the

pilgrims at the conclusion of his tale that includes what critics have called the

"benediction"—his acknowledgment of Christ's true pardon—and the "afterthought"—

his own offer of pardon. Many commentators support their readings of him with evidence

from the headlink and certain notable features of his tale, such as the Old Man and the

sermon on the tavern sins, and to a lesser extent from his interruption of the Wife of Bath.

Since Curry's identification of the Pardoner as a *eunuchus ex nativitate*, based on the

description of his physical features in the General Prologue, the Pardoner's eunuchry has

been basic to many interpretations of him.[12] Since the 1980s, interpretations of the

Pardoner have focused mainly on his sexuality, mining the narrator's portrait of him in

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[11] A short list of the criticism whose aim is to reconcile or explain these incongruities in

the Pardoner would include at least the following: Kittredge, pp. 211-218, Sedgewick,

Halverson, Kellogg, Miller, Lumiansky, Calderwood, Khinoy, Condren, Morgan,

Rhodes, Pearsall.

[12] Curry, pp. 54-70. See, for example, Ruggiers, who takes the Pardoner's eunuchry as a

sign of "his interior defection of which the exterior flaw is but a corroboration" (124),

and Miller, who argues that "the eunuch is the *vetus homo*, who by willfully cutting

himself off from grace presumptuously sins against the Holy Spirit" and that "Chaucer

suggests this spiritual state by using the image of his eunuchry" (192).

the General Prologue, especially the description of his relationship with the Summoner

and the narrator's apparent speculation about his sexuality: "I trowe he were a geldyng or

a mare" (I.691).[13] Most critics since Kittredge who have offered a comprehensive reading

of the Pardoner's Prologue and Tale, whatever their approach, have had to deal with the

problem of reconciling the Pardoner's brazen confession in the Prologue with his

"benediction" and offer of pardon, and these passages have produced the most plentiful,

ingenious, and sometimes strained commentary on the Pardoner. It is not my purpose in

this chapter to reconcile these elements or offer my own reading of the Pardoner's Tale or

the Pardoner himself. Rather, my purpose here is to note the effect that the Pardoner's

statement of intention has on his audience (both the pilgrim audience and his reading

audience). Despite his apparently forthright statement of intention in the Prologue, the

Pardoner's entire performance serves only to illustrate what Abelard has maintained: that

his true intentions cannot be known. His statement of intention, though it masquerades as

pure intention, is only a rhetorical act that must be understood in the context of his other

actions. For his pilgrim audience, this epistemological problem forces a provisional,

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[13] At issue in many of these discussions is the Pardoner's supposed homosexuality.

Among those critics who take the Pardoner as a possible homosexual are Monica

McAlpine and Steven Kruger. Scholars skeptical of this view include those, like Richard

Firth Green, who see the Pardoner as an effeminate heterosexual, and those, such as C.

David Benson and Alastair Minnis who question the very enterprise of defining the

Pardoner's sexual condition in modern terms. See also Glenn Burger, Donald Howard (p.

344), and Lee Patterson ("Chaucer's Pardoner on the Couch").

utilitarian judgment on the man: their acceptance of him despite his apparent, exaggerated sinfulness. For his reading audience, accepting the statement of intention leads to an inability to take anything else that the Pardoner says at face value, and therefore renders all interpretations tentative and uncertain.

The most striking feature of the Pardoner's performance is undoubtedly his lengthy confession in the Prologue. Here the Pardoner unfolds over 125 lines the single purpose that underlies his preaching and pardoning, his own gain: "For myn entente is nat but for to wynne, / And nothyng for correccioun of synne" (VI.403-4). This purpose is repeated throughout the prologue like a refrain, and he describes in varied detail its expression among his usual audience of "lewed" parishioners, including his speech: "And in Latyn I speke a wordes fewe, / To saffron with my predicacioun" (VI.344-45); his bodily gestures: "Thanne peyne I me to strecche forth the nekke, / And est and west upon the peple I bekke, / As dooth a dowve sittynge on a berne" (VI.395-97); and the substance of his preaching: "Therfore my theme is yet, and evere was, / *Radix malorum est Cupiditas*" (VI.425-26). The extravagance of this unprovoked self-revelation has led to much speculation, as has his apparent cruelty:

> I wol noon of the apostles countrefete;
>
> I wol have moneie, wolle, chese, and whete,
>
> Al were it yeven of the povereste page,
>
> Or of the povereste wydwe in a village,
>
> Al sholde hir children sterve for famyne. (VI.447-51)

Kittredge was the first to suggest that the confession may be a response to the gentles'

objection in the headlink to the Pardoner's telling of a ribald story:

> Under these circumstances, the cynical frankness of the Pardoner is dramatically
>
> inevitable. He is simply forestalling the reflections of his fellow-pilgrims. "I know
>
> I am a rascal," he says in effect, "and *you* know it; and I wish to show you that I
>
> know you know it!" Like many another of us poor mortals, the Pardoner is willing
>
> to pass for a knave, but objects to being taken for a fool. (214)

The idea that the Pardoner is reacting or responding to the gentles' view of him has

generated a number of psychological readings of the Pardoner. John Halverson, for

example, sees the Pardoner's performance as a "put-on" designed to disguise and protect

"the 'real self,' which is never allowed to appear in the process" and to provide "a

channel simultaneously for the expression of hostility [toward the gentles] and for ego

gratification" (197). Similarly, James L. Calderwood argues that the Pardoner is

parodying himself, "deliberately magnifying his character and conduct in order to portray

himself as a monster of evil" and therefore "render ridiculous the stereotype of absolute

evil in terms of which the 'gentils' have imagined and judged him" (304-5). Other critics

have suggested the Pardoner has something to gain, psychological or material, with the

confession. Lumiansky, for example, argues that the Pardoner has joined the pilgrimage

with the purpose of extorting money from the pilgrims, and, seeing that his usual tactics

won't work on such a sophisticated audience, plays on the pilgrims' sense of superiority

by letting them in on the trick he plays with less sophisticated audiences. Sedgewick, on

the other hand, sees the Pardoner as striving for a different kind of gain: "At that moment there can only be one effect that will redound to his glory: since he is known to be a charlatan, he can prove he is the cleverest of his kind from Berwick unto Ware. In short, he must tell a story at once moral and his own" (207-8). Perhaps the most ambitious psychological reading of the Pardoner's confession is Donald Howard's description of the Pardoner as a man caught up in a vicious cycle of pride and contempt for his audience, fueled by anger, despair, and self-hatred (345-47).

Other explanations of the Pardoner's confession rely less heavily on psychologizing him. The idea that the whole episode can be explained by the Pardoner's supposed drunkenness is no longer given much weight. Similarly, the idea that the Pardoner's confession is merely a literary convention, or that the Pardoner himself is a convention, a mere copy of Faux-Semblant in the *Romance of the Rose*, is generally dismissed. The literary confession may indeed be a convention and the Pardoner may indeed be inspired by Faux-Semblant, but most critics have found the Pardoner too real, and too uniquely Chaucer's, to be explained as a mere convention. Somewhat more convincing are readings that stress the doctrinal importance of the Pardoner's confession. Robert P. Miller, for example, argues that the Pardoner's free confession and obvious impenitence make it easy to identify him as a theological type: "a man sinning vigorously against the Holy Ghost" (192). Similarly, Alfred L. Kellogg takes the Pardoner's Prologue and Tale as "an integrated study in Augustinian terms of the secret punishment of evil," in which his confession represents the first step in spiritual degeneration, the defiance of God's will (465). Augustinian theology, however, is itself a form of

psychology, as Donald Howard points out, and doctrinal readings therefore need not be

opposed to psychological readings (355-56). Lee Patterson, for example, has sought to

put the Pardoner's confession in the context of medieval discussions of the psychology of

confession, in contrast to those approaches that seek to explain the Pardoner in modern

psychological terms.[14] A more direct antidote to psychologizing is Derek Pearsall's

reading of the Pardoner as representing "zero-psychology." Pearsall's reading stresses the

lack of psychological cues in the Pardoner (he never expresses thoughts, feelings, hopes,

or regrets, just a single motive he repeats monotonously). "Without soul, without feeling,

or inner being," Pearsall concludes, "he is a creature of naked will, unaware of its

existence but in the act of will. . . . Chaucer is not so much writing unpsychologically as

creating zero-psychology" (361).

Recent discussion of the Pardoner's sexuality has steered the general conversation

away from attempts to find psychological unity in the Pardoner. This change in focus is

due in part to increased attention on the Pardoner's physical characteristics and behavior

as opposed to his psychological motives. Readings focused on the Pardoner's sexuality,

however, have also opened up a space in which the Pardoner's apparent contradictions

need not be explained away. Carolyn Dinshaw's influential reading of the Pardoner's

"eunuch hermeneutics" demonstrates this ability to embrace the Pardoner's

contradictions. Dinshaw sees the Pardoner as defined by absence: if he is taken as a

eunuch, he is a "not-man," and if he is taken as an effeminate male or homosexual, "he is

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[14] Patterson, "Chaucerian Confession."

womanish but not a woman (a not-woman or, better, a not-not-man)" (158). As a figure

of absence, the Pardoner thus represents the possibility that there is no substance

underneath the surface of reality: just as in the realm of the physical there is (or may be)

no fullness underneath the veil of the Pardoner's clothing, in the realm of language there

may be no truth or final significance beneath the letter of the text. Yet the Pardoner

insists on putting forth objects, his relics, as substitutes for fullness. He presents his relics

and his offer of pardon not only to the audience he regularly attempts to swindle but also

to his fellow pilgrims, despite his knowledge that they are empty fakes. "If we express

this in terms of the problematics of interpretation," writes Dinshaw, "we can say that the

eunuch's hermeneutics proceeds by double affirmations, double truths, the incompatible

positions of recognition and disavowal, knowledge and belief" (159). These

"incompatible positions" and "double affirmations" by which the Pardoner's performance

proceeds, have been the subject of much of the criticism on the Pardoner, and many

critics have found them difficult to accept. The meaning of the Pardoner's actions simply

doesn't present itself to the reader without either the invention of a back-story or the

recognition of a sophisticated hermeneutics, and much of the criticism on the Pardoner

has opted for composing the back-story, or, in effect, re-writing the Pardoner's Prologue

and Tale.

The chief difficulty, or "double affirmation," that makes the back-story necessary

is not the Pardoner's Tale itself. The tale, with its sermon on the tavern sins and its

themes of greed and physical and spiritual death, clearly serves the Pardoner's stated

intention toward his usual audience, and can be seen to serve just about any intention

toward the audience of gentles that one chooses to give him: taking pride in his histrionic power, demonstrating his superiority for the sake of ego gratification, or priming the gentles for his attempt to swindle them. The real difficulty begins when the Pardoner concludes his tale:

> —And lo, sires thus I preche.
>
> And Jhesu Crist, that is oure soules leche,
>
> So graunte yow his pardoun to receyve,
>
> For that is best; I wol yow nat deceyve. (VI.915-18)

With these lines the Pardoner seems to signal the end of his performance. His secret intentions have been described, and his means of achieving them have been aptly demonstrated. But in his apparent departure from role-playing and return to speaking in apparent sincerity to his fellow pilgrims, he utters words seemingly incompatible with his earlier lack of interest in true religion and his abuse of its trappings. Are we (and his immediate audience of pilgrims) to take this as a moment of sincerity, or just another of his tricks? Kittredge took it as the former, supporting his claim with an elaborate back-story that has become one of the most famous instances of re-writing in all of Chaucer criticism:

> Then, suddenly, unexpectedly, without an instant's warning, his cynicism falls away, and he utters the solemn words: "May Christ, the physician of our souls, grant you His pardon, for that is better than mine! I will not deceive you, though I get my living by fraud!" . . . The Pardoner has not always been an assassin of

souls. He is a renegade, perhaps, from some holy order. Once he preached for

Christ's sake; and now, under the spell of the wonderful story he has told and of

recollections that stir within him, he suffers a very paroxysm of agonized

sincerity. (216-17)

While Kittredge's back-story makes wonderful psychological sense and deepens the

sense of tragedy and beauty in the Pardoner's performance, its assumptions about the

Pardoner's past life cannot be supported by the text. Of course considering the range of

readings of this passage, the text of the Pardoner's "benediction" appears rather flexible.

For Lumiansky, the Pardoner's benediction is a sincere but self-serving wish that the

Pilgrims receive Christ's pardon, through his agent the Pardoner (219). For Calderwood,

it is an exaggeration of his decency that serves to highlight his earlier exaggeration of his

depravity (308). The range—from agonized sincerity, to self-serving tactic, to parody—is

not surprising: the text, after all, is sparse (and conventional), and for that reason

adaptable to a number of interpretations. In these readings, the passage derives its

meaning primarily from the larger narrative about the Pardoner that the reader is

attempting to construct.

Following this sparse and flexible bit of the Pardoner's monologue is one of the

most perplexing and inflexible passages in the entire narrative: the Pardoner's invitation

to his fellow pilgrims to kneel, receive his pardon, and venerate his relics. Because of the

Pardoner's earlier confession, the offer of pardon cannot simply be taken at face value. It

would be absurd to think that after exposing his intentions and methods at length, and

having demonstrated his power as a rhetorician, he would make a simple offer of pardon

and expect a simple response. No serious critic has suggested it. But the text in this case

hints at no further motivation or meaning, and one has to be found elsewhere. It is no

easy task, for even the most elaborate of hypotheses is hard-pressed to explain what this

Pardoner could be up to, offering pardon to this audience, having made this confession.

Kittredge called it a "wild orgy of reckless jesting," a reaction to the Pardoner's

momentary lapse into sincerity (217). There is no clear indication in the text, however,

that it is either reckless or a jest. Lumiansky comes closest to reading the passage at face

value. Far from seeing it as a jest, he takes the episode as the Pardoner reverting to his

usual method among "lewed" parishioners, breaking the spell he has cast with his

confession, tale, and benediction. But taking the Pardoner's offer at face value—that is,

as a serious offer—runs into the problem of motivation, and the one Lumiansky finds is

far from self-evident. Imbuing the event with psychological validity, he calls the

Pardoner's offer an "unintentional self-revelation of his inadequacy as a salesman" (221).

Taken at face value, the Pardoner's words and actions simply don't add up. The

Pardoner's confession and statement of intention appear to offer a single, simple

explanation for his actions: he preaches and offers pardon simply to line his own pockets.

If we accept this as true, however, we are left wondering what the Pardoner could

possibly be up to in his ostensibly sincere acknowledgment of Christ's true pardon and in

his own offer of pardon to the pilgrims. Far from establishing a single criterion for

understanding the Pardoner's words and actions, the statement of intention merely creates

problems that would not exist if we had only his actions (the tale, the benediction, and the offer of pardon) to deal with.

It is imperative to see that this situation is created by the Pardoner's *words*. In addition to his pardons and his fake relics, the Pardoner has offered something else whose certainty cannot be guaranteed because of the form in which it appears: his intention. The Pardoner, to put it another way, offers to the pilgrims (and to us) what he cannot give us, whether he wants to or not: a window into his mind. As Abelard reminds us, human beings do not have the privilege of seeing through the apparent to the hidden, through the action to the intention: "we consider not the mind which we do not see but the deed which we know." And the Pardoner's statement, while it presents itself as pure intention—pure mind—is only an action. A *statement* of intention is not the same thing as the intention itself, else a lie would be impossible. Just as the Pardoner's poor unsuspecting parishioners have no way of determining the authenticity of his relics, we have no way of determining whether the Pardoner's statement of intention is true. It is only another deed with which we are to assemble our narrative and pass a provisional, earthly judgment. The problem is created by the Pardoner's having spun his words in one direction and his actions in another—by making what Dinshaw calls a "double affirmation." He offers an interpretation of himself that will not fit. Yet his own interpretation should not be given a privileged status—it is merely an action, a speech act, that must be measured against his other actions.

It is also imperative to see that the Pardoner himself is our main source of information about him. One critic has urged caution in accepting his statement of intention at face value, but it seems to me surprising, especially given the almost universal judgment of the Pardoner's depravity, that critics should be so willing to accept his self-revelation as absolutely true. [15] Even if the Pardoner is not being deceitful in his confession—a circumstance that is by no mean self-evident—given the mix of anger, pride, agony, contempt, and self-hatred which are taken by various critics as his motivation, it is generous to assume that he could perceive his own intentions with such clarity. In either case, the problem of the Pardoner is one he creates himself. To explain it away by finding his actions and words to be consistent is, I believe, missing the point. The Pardoner goes to great lengths to convince his fellow travelers that he can say one thing and mean another; in so doing, he invites a re-reading of his tale and of himself. Eliminating the contradiction is not the answer to the Pardoner. He has created a situation

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[15] Halverson provides the note of caution: "It seems to me of first importance to keep in mind that most of what we know, or think we know, of the Pardoner comes from the character himself. The rest is from Chaucer's own comments in the General Prologue and from the Pardoner's interactions with others on the pilgrimage. . . . The figure of the Pardoner that we have to deal with is almost entirely an image that the Pardoner himself projects" (195-96).

in which any interpretation will be provisional at best. That he has made it impossible to explain him with any certainty is exactly the point.[16]

Readers of the *Canterbury Tales* have the luxury of re-reading the Pardoner's actions in light of his words and his words in light of his actions. The judgments we pass are merely literary. The pilgrims, however, must pass immediate judgment on the man in addition to his tale. As has been often noted, the Pardoner's Tale ends in laughter for all but the Host and Pardoner and with a kiss of peace urged by the highest ranking pilgrim. Considering the near universal critical assumption of the Pardoner's evil nature, this acceptance is surprising. As Halverson points out, however, it is the assumption of evil that needs a closer look:

> The evil of the Pardoner has always been rather curious. That he *is* evil has rarely
> been questioned. Kittredge called him the "one lost soul" on the pilgrimage,
> expressing a still prevalent opinion. But if one looks objectively at the charges,
> one finds him at worst an avaricious swindler with an unpleasant personality.
> Simply in terms of acts, he seems no worse than many another venal churchman
> exploiting his position for profit. Indeed, he would seem to be responsible for less
> actual harm than the Friar, either practically or spiritually. The Friar's abuse of

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[16] On this point, I am not far from critics, including Dinshaw and Howard (p. 344), who see the Pardoner's sexual indeterminacy as fundamental to our interpretation of him. Sexual indeterminacy is one aspect of the more general indeterminacy the Pardoner represents and enacts for his fellow pilgrims and readers of the *Canterbury Tales*.

the sacrament of confession is surely greater than the Pardoner's, for the Friar

ignores contrition and gives insufficient penances, whereas the Pardoner, by

virtue of his ordinary histrionic powers, may well induce genuine contrition,

however fake his relics or bad his motives. . . . It will hardly do as some kind of

monstrous evil. This must lie elsewhere; and it has been found not in the

Pardoner's behavior, but in his state of mind, or the condition of his soul. (191)

The Pardoner's presumed evil is internal. Neither the Knight nor any other member of the

party can know it, and no harm has come from it—except, perhaps, to the Pardoner's own

soul. Moreover, his greed does no damage to his usual "lewed" audience, and may

perhaps benefit them. Even his apparent cruelty to the "povereste wydwe" and her

children (VI.450) is, like the statement of intention, merely asserted, and even if it were

true that he would take their money and let them starve, what he intends as cruelty may in

fact be experienced as blessing if he indeed induces genuine contrition. Hypocrisy, after

all, while it may lead to the destruction of one's soul, can be a useful sin, a fact

acknowledged even by St. Paul: "Some proclaim Christ from envy and rivalry, but others

from good will. . . . What does it matter? Just this, that Christ is proclaimed in every way,

whether out of false motives or true; and in that I rejoice" (Philippians 1.15, 18, NRSV).

The Knight's response is an implicit acknowledgment that the realm of intentions and the

heart is the realm of God, not man. He urges the company, including the Host, who takes

the offer of pardon as a personal insult, to accept the Pardoner warmly:

But right anon the worthy Knyght bigan,

Whan that he saugh that al the peple lough,

"Namoore of this, for it is right ynough!

Sire Pardoner, be glad and myrie of cheere;

And ye, sire Hoost, that been to me so deere,

I prey yow that ye kisse the Pardoner.

And Pardoner, I prey thee, drawe thee neer,

And, as we diden, lat us laughe and pleye."

Anon they kiste, and ryden forth hir weye. (VI.960-68)

The company's acceptance of the Pardoner can be compared with Abelard's two examples of innocent people being punished for the sake of the "common utility." In Abelard's examples, those standing in judgment, not having access to the intentions of the accused, are forced to pass provisional judgments on actions alone aimed at the larger social good. Similarly, in the case of the Pardoner, the Knight and the rest of the company have only the Pardoner's actions on which to judge him. His confession, though brazen, is merely a rhetorical act, not a guarantee of his intentions or his cruelty, and his offer of pardon and invitation to venerate his relics represent no serious harm to the company. Rather than rejecting the Pardoner as a monster, the Knight recognizes the pragmatic, social value of reconciling the Pardoner and the Host and of restoring the harmony of the community of pilgrims. The ending of the Pardoner's Tale thus dramatizes a utilitarian response to the epistemological problem presented by the Pardoner's statement of intention.

The Pardoner's Tale and the Retraction appear on the surface to have little in common. One is often considered the high point of Chaucer's narrative art and the other as a falling off or even a counterfeit. One is defined by rich characterization and dramatic appropriateness and the other by mere convention or a repugnant lack of imagination. The differences of form, however, are outnumbered by similarities that critics have not often noted.[17] The questions raised by the Pardoner's Tale, like those raised by the Retraction, are both moral and interpretive. At issue in both cases is the sincerity of the speaker (the moral question) and the relationship of words to actions (the interpretive question). In both texts, speakers address their audiences (in the one the fictional

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[17] The closest thing I have found to a consideration of the similarities between the Pardoner's confession and Chaucer's Retraction is Howard's consideration of the contrast between Chaucer and the Pardoner: "Perhaps every artist has to be an outrageous liar, and if we can judge from the Retraction, Chaucer himself may have experienced some amount of discomfort on this score. Yet it is by his success in creating such an illusion that we judge the artist, but by his intentions that we judge the man. So in the Retraction, Chaucer makes a point of quoting St. Paul that all that is written is written 'for our doctrine,' and says flatly 'that is myn entent.' The Pardoner's intent is the reverse—he says flatly 'myn entent is nat but for to wynne / And nothing for correccioun of sinne.' The figure of the Pardoner unmasks the role-playing Chaucer, makes us see the man himself as he speaks to us in humble peace and hope of his intent" (376).

audience of pilgrims and in the other the reading audience) and offer an interpretation of their own fictions. Both present a "person" doing something apparently out of character. To imagine that the speaker of the brazen confession would make the simple offer of pardon and that the author of the Retraction would pass so superficial a judgment on his own work strike us as impossible. Not surprisingly, then, these two personas have elicited similar readings from critics: elaborate psychologizing, the invention of biographical details, the discovery of doctrinal meanings that explain away the contradictions, or a recognition and acceptance of the contradictions as fundamental to the speaker's art or hermeneutics.

But while we are involved in the kind of interpretation and reconciliation of contradictions these texts invite, it is important to note that the speakers themselves create these contradictions. We resist taking the interpretations of the speakers at face value, for to read the words and events the way Chaucer and the Pardoner appear to interpret them is to admit absurdities and contradictions. Their statements of intention force re-reading, and in our re-reading we may find that we do not agree with their assessments of themselves, their texts, and their actions. It may be that this is exactly the point. The statements of intention, far from settling interpretation, only complicate it. They create tension and uncertainty around narratives that would be more straightforward without them; they alert us to subtleties we might otherwise have ignored. In the case of the Pardoner, it may be that this tension and uncertainty is all part of some elaborate, epistemological trick he plays on his audience (a trick whose motivation can be found in Kittredge's reading of the gentles' objection in the headlink as an offense to the Pardoner,

or, more lightheartedly, in the possibility that, to quote the Wife of Bath's admittedly suspect characterization of her own motives, his "entente nys but for to pleye," III.192). In the case of the Retraction, however, *we* are the audience and, depending on how we receive the statement of intention, we become the participants in a joke, the recipients of a pious request for prayer, or the witnesses to an act of literary self-scrutiny. My own view, which I will explain more fully in the final chapter, is that the rhetorical effect of the Retraction is to invite a reconsideration of the *Canterbury Tales* and of the reader's role in determining their meaning and value. But before getting to this reading of the Retraction, I wish to consider more fully in the following chapter the nature of the practical, utilitarian judgments that the inability to know intentions forces readers to make.

CHAPTER 3

The discussion of Abelard's *Ethics* in the previous chapter led to two observations about authorial intention that are necessary to keep in mind as we move on. First, according to Abelard, intentions can be known with any certainty only by God. Second, faced with a situation in which another human agent's intentions cannot be known, human observers are best served by passing provisional, pragmatic judgments aimed more at preserving the common good (or "common utility" in Abelard's words) than by making absolute moral judgments. The kind of judgments Abelard was concerned with in the *Ethics* were judgments on human behavior, but the principles can be applied to literary judgments as well. When approaching a literary work like the *Canterbury Tales*, there is no easy distinction between judgments on behavior and literary or interpretive judgments, for making literary judgments on the *Canterbury Tales* involves in many cases weighing the behavior of the characters in the drama as if they were human beings against their words and against other characters' evaluations (as well as our own evaluations) of their behavior and words. The aim of my discussion of the Pardoner's Prologue, Tale, and Epilogue was to apply these observations from Abelard to a work in which understanding the speaker's intentions and the relationship between his words and actions is one of the chief interpretive problems. I concluded that, despite the Pardoner's apparently forthright confession, his performance as a whole invites skepticism about the possibility of knowing his intentions, and therefore both the Pardoner's pilgrim audience

in the tale and his reading audience can pass only provisional and pragmatic judgments on him.

I dwelt at some length on Abelard's ideas because they are representative of a generally pragmatic attitude in much medieval writing on the subject of authorial intention.[1] The two basic observations I have drawn from Abelard are implicit in many medieval discussions of authorial intention. While authorial intention is an important factor in interpretation for many medieval authors and commentators, even those authors most concerned with describing authorial intention (their own or another's) are often not

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[1] My characterization of medieval attitudes toward authorial intention as "pragmatic" or "utilitarian" can be compared with M. H. Abrams's more comprehensive classification of aesthetic theories. Abrams classifies aesthetic theories by their various emphases on one of four elements in the situation of a work of art: universe, work, author, and audience. Abrams labels criticism "pragmatic" that is "ordered toward the audience" and "looks at the work of art chiefly as a means to an end, an instrument for getting something done, and tends to judge its value according to its success in achieving that aim" (15). Pragmatic theories of art tend to construct that aim in variations of Horace's description of the aim of poetry, to teach or to delight, and Abrams argues that pragmatic theories predominated from Horace through the eighteenth century. They can be contrasted with those aesthetic theories that see the value or essence of art in its relationship to the universe ("mimetic") or the author ("expressive"), or in the work of art as an isolated object ("objective").

troubled by the difficulty of reconstructing what was in the author's mind at the time of writing. It is common to find medieval commentators giving themselves great latitude in describing the intention of a work of literature. A commentator may, for example, list a number of equally plausible intentions, suggest historically impossible intentions, or describe the intention in such a way that it tells us more about the reader's use of the text than the author's state of mind. Just as Abelard defended human systems of punishment and reward by an appeal to the "common utility," many medieval commentators appear as concerned with the utility or usefulness of a literary work as with what the author meant, even when the topic of discussion is ostensibly the author's intentions. Sometimes medieval commentators explicitly subordinate authorial intention to the usefulness of a work, and other times they describe intention in terms indistinguishable from the utility of the work. Similarly, when we turn from formal commentaries and academic texts to vernacular narratives, we find a tendency in authorial self-commentary to place the burden of interpretation and proper use of the text on the reader. While vernacular authors such as Chaucer and Boccaccio make frequent reference to their intentions, they often do so in the context of a moral defense of their actions rather than an attempt to settle interpretation. This chapter will describe and illustrate these "utilitarian" interpretive practices with the aid of a variety of medieval works, from Latin commentaries on classical and scriptural texts to vernacular narrative poetry.

Before looking at examples of these interpretive practices in late medieval writing, I must lay the groundwork by discussing an authority on interpretation in the Middle Ages. The works of St. Augustine, including the *Confessions* and *On Christian*

Doctrine, contain some of the most developed thinking on authorial intention extant in the Middle Ages. Augustine provides a theological argument for the pragmatic, utilitarian approach to authorial intention that I have described briefly above, and his theology is therefore a necessary prerequisite to understanding the examples in the rest of this chapter. In moving from Abelard to Augustine, my aim is to point out a number of assumptions about authorial intention and interpretation that appear to have a degree of continuity throughout the Middle Ages. From a logical, rather than historical, point of view it makes sense to treat Abelard first because he articulated the general epistemological problem that is the basis for much discussion of authorial intention in the Middle Ages: that intentions can be known with certainty only to God. While Abelard dealt with the subject of intention in the realm of general human behavior, and was concerned with the ethical implications of intention, Augustine moves us closer to our subject of Chaucer's Retraction by approaching the problem of intention in the context of reading and interpretation.

Augustine begins *On Christian Doctrine*, his introduction to the interpretation and exposition of the Bible, with a preface that defends the work against a number of anticipated charges from detractors.[2] Augustine's answer to these charges is worth examining before we explore the main part of his argument, for it reveals his general

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[2] The English translations of *On Christian Doctrine* that follow are those of D. W. Robertson. The Latin text is from the Oxford edition, edited by R. P. H. Green.

attitude toward authorial intention and his view of the respective roles of the author, the reader, and God in interpretation. To two groups of hypothetical detractors in particular, Augustine responds as follows:

> I am not to blame because they do not understand. In the same way, if they wished to see the old or the new moon or some very small star which I was pointing to with my finger and they did not have keen enough sight even to see my finger, they should not on that account become angry with me. And those who have studied and learned these precepts and still do not understand the obscurities of the Holy Scriptures think that they can see my finger but not the heavenly bodies which it was intended to point out. But both of these groups should stop blaming me and ask God to give them vision. Although I can lift my finger to point something out, I cannot supply the vision by means of which either this gesture or what it indicates can be seen.

> Ita me non esse reprehendendum quia haec non intellegunt. Tamquam si lunam vel veterem vel novam sidusve aliquod minime clarum vellent videre, quod ego intento digito demonstrarem, illis autem nec ad ipsum digitum meum videndum sufficiens acies esset oculorum, num propterea mihi suscensere deberent? Illi vero, qui etiam istis praeceptis cognitis atque perceptis ea quae in divinis scripturis obscura sunt intueri nequiverint, arbitrentur se digitum quidem meum videre posse, sidera vero quibus demonstrandis intenditur videre non posse. Et illi ergo et isti me reprehendere desinant et lumen oculorum divinitus sibi praeberi

deprecentur. Non enim, si possum membrum meum ad aliquid demonstrandum

movere, possum etiam oculos accendere quibus vel ipsa demonstratio mea vel

etiam illud quod volo demonstrare cernatur. (Praefatio 5-6)

Augustine likens his writing of this book to an attempt to help a fellow man see an object

in the heavens. In this metaphor, Augustine's pointing finger represents his intention in

writing. If onlookers are to benefit at all from Augustine's actions, it will be through

following the direction of his finger, or realizing his intention. The first group of

detractors are unable even to see the finger and therefore find the whole effort useless.

Seeing the finger, or understanding the intention, however, is not sufficient in itself to

instruct the onlookers, for they must also be able to see the object in the heavens to which

the finger points. This appears to be the problem of the second group of detractors, who

think they see the finger but do not see the heavenly object (although Augustine's

language, "arbitrentur se digitum quidem meum videre posse," does not provide certainty

that they in fact see the finger). Augustine's point here is that God alone supplies the

vision that makes sight of both the finger and the heavenly object possible. It is

Augustine's trust in the reality of the heavenly object and the grace of God to grant the

vision to see it that makes his whole system of interpretation possible and gives that

system its extraordinary freedom and generosity. This trust in God, however, does not

negate the role of the onlooker (or reader) who must nevertheless strive to perceive both

the finger and the heavenly object (the intention and the truth to which it points). Implicit

in this metaphor, though, is the possibility that the onlooker may see the heavenly object

directly, without the aid of the finger, or even see, by way of the finger, an object other

than the one intended. Embedded in this metaphor, then, are the crucial role of God in granting vision and understanding, the role of the author in intending, the role of the reader in attempting to understand, and all possible outcomes of the whole rhetorical situation: the reader not understanding, the reader understanding correctly what was intended, or the reader understanding something altogether different from what was intended. Augustine will consider each of these roles and possibilities in laying out his method of interpretation.

The basis of Augustine's method of interpretation is the law of charity. Most of Book One of *On Christian Doctrine* is devoted to developing Augustine's doctrine of charity, leading to his conclusion that the end of all scripture is the love of God and of one's neighbor. "Whoever, therefore, thinks that he understands the divine Scriptures or any part of them so that it does not build the double love of God and of our neighbor does not understand it at all" ("Quisquis igitur scripturas divinas vel quamlibet earum partem intellexisse sibi videtur, ita ut eo intellectu non aedificet istam geminam caritatem dei et proximi, nondum intellexit," 1.36.40). The law of charity describes both the intention of the authors of scripture (the human authors and the Divine Author) and the obligation of the reader who would approach scripture with a pure heart. Throughout *On Christian Doctrine* and the *Confessions*, Augustine places great importance on understanding the intentions of the human authors of scripture. He takes care to instruct the reader in a variety of ways of arriving at that intention, including a proper examination of the context of a passage in question, philological study, and careful distinction between figurative and literal meanings (2.12.18, 3.4.8). Augustine does not, however, allow this concern

with the intentions of the human author to limit or contradict the rule of charity.

Understanding of the human author's intention is a tool to be used when available, but

when it is unavailable, the soundness of an interpretation is measured by the rule of

charity, which is more expansive than the author's intentions: "Whoever finds a lesson

[in the Scriptures] useful to the building of charity, even though he has not said what the

author may be shown to have intended in that place, has not been deceived [perniciously],

nor is he lying in any way" ("Quisquis vero talem inde sententiam duxerit, ut huic

aedificandae caritati sit utilis, nec tamen hoc dixerit quod ille quem legit eo loco sensisse

probabitur, non perniciose fallitur nec omnino mentitur," 1.36.40).[3] Here Augustine states

that a reader who has found a meaning not intended by the author, but nevertheless useful

for the building of charity, has been deceived, but not in a way that will do him much

harm; later he will develop this point further, defending the discovery of such meanings

more vigorously. Augustine compares this deceived reader to a man who leaves the road

he is travelling by mistake but ends up in the place to which the road leads. There is not

much harm in this, "but he is to be corrected and shown that it is more useful not to leave

the road, lest the habit of deviating force him to take a crossroad or a perverse way"

("corrigendus est tamen, et quam sit utilius viam non deserere demonstrandum est, ne

consuetudine deviandi etiam in transversum aut perversum ire cogatur," 1.36.41).

Augustine shows remarkable generosity toward this deceived reader, for his primary

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[3] I have added the word "perniciously" to Robertson's translation to convey the full

meaning of the Latin: "non perniciose fallitur." I am indebted to Glending Olson for

pointing out this crucial omission in Robertson's translation.

concern is not with correct interpretation but with the end toward which correct interpretation (and sometimes incorrect interpretation) points: the reign of charity.

In the above passages, Augustine reveals his concern for the usefulness of an interpretation, which he does not allow to be subordinated to mere accuracy or a correct understanding of the author's intentions. This emphasis on utility or usefulness is rooted in his belief in the ultimate destination of man and the role of the scriptures in leading man toward that destination: "But Scripture teaches nothing but charity, nor condemns anything but cupidity, and in this way shapes the minds of men . . . . I call 'charity' the motion of the soul toward the enjoyment of God for his own sake and of one's neighbor for the sake of God" ("Non autem praecipit scriptura nisi caritatem, nec culpat nisi cupiditatem, et eo modo informat mores hominum . . . . Caritatem voco motum animi ad fruendum deo propter ipsum et se atque proximo propter deum," 3.10.15-16). If the ultimate purpose of the scriptures is to shape the minds of men and encourage the motion of the soul toward God, no reading that furthers these ends should be discouraged merely because it cannot be shown to be consistent with the human author's intentions. Ever systematic and consistent, Augustine does not allow his hierarchy of means and ends to be upset. Later in the same passage, Augustine defines utility as "what charity does to the charitable person" ("quod agit caritas quo sibi prosit," 3.10.16), making explicit the connection between utility and charity: a useful reading (or action of any kind) is one

undertaken with charity and leading the reader toward charity.[4] Augustine's trust in God's ability to grant understanding, declared at the outset of *On Christian Doctrine* through the metaphor of sight, is what allows him to grant such freedom to the reader with the expectation that charity will be the final destination. This trust is revealed in Augustine's statement that "every good and true Christian should understand that wherever he may find truth, it is his Lord's" ("quisquis bonus verusque Christianus est domini sui esse intellegat ubicumque invenerit veritatem"), and the same trust explains, in the famous "spoils of Egypt" passage, Augustine's assertion that all that is true in the teachings of pagans can be rightly appropriated by the Christian (2.18.28; 2.50.60). At the same time, also as indicated in the metaphor that opens the book, Augustine's emphasis on utility places a burden of responsibility on the reader: "For in all things of this kind we are to be commended or reprimanded, not because of the nature of things which we use, but because of the motive in using them and the way in which they are desired" ("Nam in

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[4] This definition of utility is based on Augustine's distinction between things to be used and things to be enjoyed. According to Augustine, to enjoy something is "to cling to it with love for its own sake," while to use something is "to employ it in obtaining that which you love, provided that it is worthy of love" (*On Christian Doctrine* 1.4.4). There are only three things to be enjoyed, or loved for their own sake: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. All other things are to be loved only insofar as they point us toward the Trinity. "Those things which are to be used help, and, as it were, sustain us as we move toward blessedness in order that we may gain and cling to those things which make us blessed," that is the members of the divine Trinity (1.3.3).

omnibus huiuscemodi rebus non ex earum rerum natura quibus utimur sed ex causa

utendi et modo appetendi vel probandum est vel improbandum quod facimus," 3.12.19).

The "useful" reading, then, is one that pays proper attention to understanding the human

author's intention, but aims at the true end of reading and understanding scripture, which

is to extend the reign of charity, and does not allow that end to be subordinated to

anything, including the author's intention. Where multiple meanings are possible in a

passage of scripture, Augustine declares that:

> . . . even if what he who wrote the passage intended remains hidden, there is no
>
> danger if any of the meanings may be seen to be congruous with the truth taught
>
> in other passages of the Holy Scriptures. For he who examines the divine
>
> eloquence, desiring to discover the intention of the author through whom the Holy
>
> Spirit created the Scripture, whether he attains this end or finds another meaning
>
> in the words not contrary to right faith is free from blame if he has evidence from
>
> some other place in the divine books. For the author himself may have seen the
>
> same meaning in the words we seek to understand. And certainly the spirit of
>
> God, who worked through that author, undoubtedly foresaw that this meaning
>
> would occur to the reader or listener.

> . . . etiam si latet quid senserit ille qui scripsit, nihil periculi est si quodlibet
>
> eorum congruere veritati ex aliis locis sanctarum scripturarum doceri potes, id
>
> tamen eo conante qui divina scrutatur eloquia, ut ad voluntatem perveniatur
>
> auctoris per quem scripturam illam sanctus operatus est spiritus, sive hoc

assequatur sive aliam sententiam de illis verbis quae fidei rectae non refragatur

exsculpat, testimonium habens a quocumque alio loco divinorum eloquiorum. Ille

quippe auctor in eisdem verbis quae intellegere volumus et ipsam sententiam

forsitan vidit et certe dei spiritus, qui per eum haec operatus est, etiam ipsam

occursuram lectori vel auditori sine dubitatione praevidit. (3.27.38)

In this passage, Augustine declares free from blame a reader who finds a meaning

consistent with true faith but not evidently intended by the human author. The reader,

then, is free to find any meaning consistent with scripture as a whole. The reader

Augustine envisions will seek to exploit this freedom not for his own selfish ends but for

Christ—not to play games or to see what he can get away with, but to extend the reign of

charity. This is not, in other words, the freedom claimed by post-modernism that allows

the reader to make multiple meanings "blend and clash" because there is no ultimate

meaning to which words can be referred. This is true Christian freedom, made possible

by trust in God and bounded by the truth of his Divine Word, enabling the reader to seek

and find a meaning that is good and useful to him because all that is good and useful

belongs ultimately to God.

  In *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine lays the theological foundation for his

method of interpreting scripture. In Book 12 of the *Confessions*, he offers a reading of the

opening lines of the book of Genesis that rests on this theological foundation.

Augustine's exegesis is complex, relying on his understanding of time, form, and

spiritual and material reality, and it would be impossible to do it justice in a short

summary. Fortunately, it is Augustine's attitude toward other possible readings, rather than the specifics of his own reading, that is of particular interest here. Having offered his reading, Augustine stops to consider the possibility that others may see in these lines from Genesis another meaning and offers an account of several other possible interpretations. After giving each of these possibilities its due, he concludes in terms familiar to readers of *On Christian Doctrine*:[5]

> So tell me, my God, you who give my eyes an inner light, why should I care in this my testimony to you that different meanings can be found in Genesis, so long as they are true? Why should it bother me that another says that his meaning, not my meaning, is what Moses intended? Whenever we read an author, we try to uncover and accept what that author meant by his writings . . . But if one is striving to arrive at what the author of the sacred writings was getting at, what is wrong with arriving at something that you, the light of every truthful mind, show him to be true, even if the writer he is reading, while writing the truth, did not intend that particular truth? (12.3.27)

> Quae mihi ardenter confitenti, deus meus, lumen oculorum meorum in occulto, quid mihi obest, cum diversa in his verbis intellegi possint, quae tamen vera sint?

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[5] English translations of the *Confessions* are those of Garry Wills; the Latin text is from the Loeb edition by W. H. D. Rouse. The two editions use different numbering systems and chapter divisions, so all citations include both numbering systems with Wills's followed by Rouse's.

> Quid, inquam, mihi obest, si aliud ego sensero, quam sensit alius eum sensisse,
> qui scripsit? Omnes quidem, qui legimus, nitimur hoc indagare atque
> conprehendere, quod voluit ille quem legimus, et cum eum veridicum credimus,
> nihil, quod falsum esse vel novimus vel putamus, audemus eum existimare
> dixisse. Dum ergo quisque conatur id sentire in scripturis sanctis, quod in eis
> sensit ille qui scripsit, quid mali est, si hoc sentiat, quod tu, lux omnium
> veridicarum mentium, ostendis verum esse, etiamsi non hoc sensit ille, quem
> legit, cum et ille verum nec tamen hoc senserit? (12.18)

Here Augustine approaches the same problem he had considered in *On Christian
Doctrine*, this time in the context of multiple readers disagreeing about the intention of
the human author. He again assumes that the first step in reading is to gain understanding
of the author's intentions, and he arrives at the same conclusion he had reached earlier,
again stated in negative terms, that there is nothing wrong with arriving at an
interpretation consistent with the truth of scripture even if it is not the particular truth
intended by the human author. He does not allow, in other words, the truth of scripture to
be limited by the author's intentions.

What he states in the negative here, he states positively as he moves on to
consider the larger epistemological problem. Who can say with any certainty, he asks, "in
the bewildering variety of true things that sincere inquirers discover in Scripture" ("inter
tam multa vera, quae in illis verbis aliter atque aliter intellectis occurrunt quaerentibus")
what Moses actually meant? And what does it matter, as long as both readers are saying

what is true? (12.4.33; 12.24). For "even if Moses should come before us and aver, 'This was my meaning,' we would not see into his mind, we would have to take his word for it" ("si ipse Moyses apparuisset nobis atque dixisset: 'hoc cogitavi,' nec sic eam videremus, sed crederemus," 12.4.35; 12.25). Here Augustine goes beyond his earlier assertion that there was "no harm" in discovering a true meaning not intended by the author. He casts doubt on the whole enterprise of seeking an author's intended meaning, and he even draws the same distinction we were forced to draw in our reading of the Pardoner, that is between a statement of intention and the intention itself. In the end there is no certain knowledge of another's intentions—such knowledge is available only to God, who can see through words and actions to the mind itself. In *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine dealt with the problem of intention in the abstract and therefore maintained more confidence in the possibility of knowing intentions. In the intimacy of the *Confessions*, where theory is more likely to be informed by experience, Augustine confesses that he does not know what Moses meant and returns again to the end toward which all human action, including interpreting scripture, should point: to love one another, love God, and seek truth (12.4.41; 12.30). It is to this end that God has suited his scriptures, so "why should we not think that Moses intended all these meanings, since God, who is himself single, has suited his Scriptures to readers who will find various truths when different minds interpret it?" ("cur non illa omnia vidisse credatur, per quem deus unus sacras litteras vera et diversa visuris multorum sensibus temperavit?" 12.4.42; 12.31). In *On Christian Doctrine* Augustine kept utility from being subordinated to intention; in the *Confessions* he makes intention the servant of utility. In addition to advocating working

from the text toward the author's intention, through careful study of words, contexts, and figurative language, Augustine licenses the discovery of intention through finding meanings useful to the reader. Such a way of reading is possible not because there is no ultimate meaning or intention but because God in his infinite wisdom has foreseen and sanctioned all meanings and intentions that build up charity.

In summary, then, Augustine's system is one in which human authors are given their proper place but not allowed to get in the way of the reader's spiritual formation; in which readers have the responsibility of seeking in scripture meanings that will build them up toward love for God and their neighbor, first through, though not to be limited by, a search for the author's intentions; and in which God can be trusted to have foreseen all possible meanings useful to the reader. Discovering authorial intentions, in this system, is not a way of restricting or fixing meaning, but a way of generating meaning. Such a system offers extraordinary freedom, and extraordinary responsibility, to the reader. For the reader is free to find meanings other than those intended by the author, but those meanings must be consistent with charity and the whole of scripture. The reader must approach scripture with a pure heart and an understanding of its true end.

The influence of Augustine's interpretive system throughout the Middle Ages is well established.[6] There is considerable evidence that authors and commentators in the

[6] For a number of recent discussions of this influence see *Reading and Wisdom: The* De Doctrina Christiana *of Augustine in the Middle Ages*, ed. Edward D. English. Also useful

later Middle Ages followed Augustine's interpretive practices concerning authorial

intention and utility. In the first place, writers in the Latin commentary tradition and

authors of vernacular narrative regularly acknowledge the ethical and theological aim of

reading and interpretation. Discussing authorial intention is often a way for a

commentator or author to acknowledge the ethical purpose of a work of literature,

whether the work in question is the author's own creation or a work to be commented on.

For this reason, discussions of authorial intention in the commentary tradition often

entail, and are sometimes indistinguishable from, discussions of a work's moral or

spiritual utility. Second, authors in both the commentary and vernacular narrative

traditions tend to allow readers great latitude in determining the meaning and proper uses

of a work of literature. These authors generally do not allow authorial intention to restrict

a work's meaning or usefulness but instead understand the reader's interpretation to be as

important as the author's intention in generating meaning. Among commentators, for

example, it is common to describe authorial intention in terms of a book's usefulness to

the reader or to discover intentions through finding ethical uses of a book. In the

remainder of this chapter, I will consider these shared assumptions about authorial

intention and utility in the Latin commentary tradition and in some instances of

vernacular narrative.

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is the introduction to D. W. Robertson's translation, in which he surveys the influence of

On Christian Doctrine on scriptural exegetes from Cassiodorus to Erasmus (xii-xiii).

Before turning to the commentary tradition, however, I must pause to anticipate

one objection to considering Augustine's interpretive system alongside the methods of

commentators on and authors of non-scriptural literature. Augustine's interpretive

methods in *On Christian Doctrine* and the *Confessions* are directed toward interpretation

of the Bible. However, if the purpose of all human activity is the enjoyment of God for

His own sake and the love of one's neighbor for the sake of God, as Augustine asserts,

then reading non-biblical texts should be referred toward the same end as reading the

Bible. If the intention of the human author of the Bible is made to serve the cause of

charity, there is no reason why the same cannot be done in the case of a non-biblical

author. While there is no guarantee that a particular truth was intended by the author of a

non-biblical text, the reader can be assured that "wherever he may find truth, it is his

Lord's" (*OCD* 2.18.28). So there is no inherent reason that Augustine's methods cannot

be applied to non-scriptural literature. More to the point, there is evidence in the later

Middle Ages of scriptural exegetes assimilating the methods of commentators on pagan

literature, and of commentators applying the techniques of biblical exegesis to non-

biblical texts.[7] To cite only one example, there is the famous *Epistle to Can Grande della

Scala*, in which the author, whether Dante or not is irrelevant here, applies the four-fold

method of biblical exegesis to Dante's *Divine Comedy*. It is certainly not out of the realm

of possibility, then, to find that the assumptions about authorial intention that govern

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[7] A. J. Minnis discusses this process of assimilation, in both directions, in his introduction

to *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism*, pp. 1-11.

Augustine's interpretation of scripture also governed the writing and interpretation of non-scriptural texts.

The work of A. J. Minnis has brought much attention in recent years to the medieval commentary tradition as a significant source of medieval literary theory and criticism.[8] Minnis has outlined several reasons this tradition deserves attention in our attempts to understand medieval attitudes toward literature and literary interpretation. First, the tradition demonstrates a remarkable degree of internal consistency on literary matters and addresses a wide range of literary questions. Second, the commentary tradition formed the basis of literary study within the medieval educational system and therefore exercised enormous influence on medieval authors. Third, the roots of modern literary criticism can be found, Minnis argues, in the commentary tradition from the twelfth century onwards.[9] Within this broad tradition, my interest lies mainly with the role assigned to authorial intention in the interpretation of works of literature. For this reason, my discussion will focus on one strand of the commentary tradition: the prologues to commentaries on classical and scriptural authors, or *accessūs ad auctores*. These prologues are a logical place to look for medieval perspectives on authorial

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[8] The major works are his *Medieval Theory of Authorship* and *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism, c. 1100-1375*, with A. B. Scott. See also the *Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, Vol. 2: The Middle Ages, edited by Minnis and Ian Johnson.

[9] See *Medieval Literary Theory*, pp. 6-11.

intention, for they include authorial intention as one of the standard categories to be discussed in introducing a work of literature.

Latin *accessus* is literally a "means of approach," made abstract in this sense to denote an "approach" or introduction to the interpretation of a text.[10] The medieval *accessus* grew out of the traditions of the classical and medieval classroom, in which an introductory lecture on an *auctor* began with an explanation of the purpose and contents of the texts to be covered. When lectures were published, this introductory lecture became the prologue to the commentary on the text. As R. W. Hunt demonstrated in his early study of *accessūs*, three types were common in the 12th century, although one, the "Type C" prologue, predominated. The "Type C" prologue organized the introductory discussion of a text under a set of fairly standard headings: intention, utility, arrangement, authenticity, title, and the part (i.e. branch) of philosophy to which the work pertained. Under the heading *intentio* ("intention")—sometimes replaced or supplemented by the heading *finis* ("end")—a work's didactic and edifying purpose was explained. Under the heading *utilitas* ("utility"), the work's ultimate usefulness was considered. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the "Type C" prologue was gradually replaced with a new form of prologue based on Aristotle's fourfold model of causality: material, formal, efficient, and final cause. Most of the categories of the "Type C" prologue found their place in one of the four categories of the new Aristotelian prologue, with intention and utility falling under the category of final cause.

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[10] *OLD*, "accessus, -ūs."

In both the "Type C" and Aristotelian prologues, intention and utility are closely related, whether treated as separate categories or considered together as final cause. The collection of *accessūs* contained in Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm 19475 offers a good opportunity to see this relationship in a number of prologues to various texts.[11] This manuscript contains an anthology of "Type C" prologues, dating from the twelfth century, introducing various pagan and scriptural texts. In some of these prologues, discussions of authorial intention are hard to distinguish from, or are even redundant with, discussions of a book's utility. For example, the prologue to Cato's *Distichs* describes authorial intention in terms that imply the book's ultimate usefulness to the reader. According to this prologue, the *Distichs* intends "to show us by what way we may reach true salvation, and that we should seek after it and zealously search for it, not just for a time but with perseverance" ("representare nobis qua via tendamus ad veram salutem et ut diligenter eam appetamus et omni studio inquiramus, non ad tempus, sed perseveranter" 16; 21). This account of the book's intention offers a statement of not only what the author aimed at but what the reader should do as a result of reading the book: "to seek after [salvation] and zealously search for it." The description of the book's utility that comes next merely generalizes the specific utility that has already been described: "the usefulness of this book is that those who read it should learn to order their

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[11] English translations of the prologues in this manuscript are from the Minnis and Scott translation, in *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism*. The Latin text is from the Huygens edition. The citations include the page number in Minnis and Scott followed by the page number in Huygens.

lives wisely" ("utilitas est hunc librum legentibus ut vitam suam sapienter instituere

agnoscant," 16; 21). Similarly, in the prologue to Homer, the usefulness of the book is

implicit in the intention ascribed to Homer: "his intention, then, is to dissuade anyone

from such an illicit union, as a result of which he may incur the wrath of the gods, as did

Paris, Helen, and the more courageous among their relatives who perished along with

Troy in that war" ("intentio sua est dehortari quemlibet ab illicito coniugio, unde

offensam deorum incurrat, uti Paris et Helena ac suorum fortiores qui destructi bello cum

Troia perierunt," 17; 26). The intention ascribed to the author envisions an action to be

taken (or not taken) by the reader as a result of reading the book. In both of these

examples, the author's intention is not only a meaning the author had in mind or a general

aim in writing, but a purpose entailing some kind of action from or effect on the reader.

For this reason, the prologue to Homer offers, as did the prologue to Cato, a description

of the book's utility that merely generalizes and restates the supposed intention: "the

usefulness is that, having witnessed the destruction of the guilty, we may be afraid to

offend the majesty of the gods by any offence" ("utilitas est ut viso interitu reorum

superum maiestatem tam levi quam gravi delicto timeamus offendere," 17; 26).

The discussions of authorial intention in some of the prologues in this collection

are so focused on the action of the reader that the author disappears entirely, and the

intention under discussion becomes the *intentio libri*, or "intention of the book." This is

the case in the prologue to the work of Arator, in which we are told that the book's

"intention is to encourage us in the direction of the Christian virtues by setting before us

the good deeds of certain men whose authority stands high in the Church, namely, the

apostles" ("intentio sua est nos hortari ad virtutes, proponendo quorundam bene gesta quorum auctoritas viget in aecclesia, scilicet apostolorum," 19; 27). As in the examples discussed previously, the intention here entails a specific, ethical effect on the reader; but here the cause of that effect is the book itself rather than the author. Similarly, the prologue to Ovid's *Remedia Amoris* tells us that the intention is "to give certain precepts whereby [the book] may remove unlawful love" ("dare precepta quaedam, quibus illicitum amorem removeat," 18; 34). In this case, the book is seen as an agent that acts directly upon the reader. Throughout the collection, the phrase *intentio auctoris* is more or less interchangeable with *intentio libri* or *intentio operis* (intention of the work), which has the effect of distancing authorial intention from the mind of the author and associating it more closely with the book's effect on the reader.[12]

In some of the prologues in the collection, discussions of intention and utility are collapsed under a single heading, *causa finalis* or "final cause." This new category, which became the norm in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries as the new Aristotelian prologue replaced the Type C prologue as the dominant form, had the advantage of treating intention and utility as a single topic rather than attempting to keep them separate. For example, the second of three prologues to Ovid's *Heroides* in the collection describes the final cause of the *Heroides* as follows: "the ultimate end (*finalis causa*) is this, that having seen the advantage (*utilitas*) gained from lawful love, and the

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[12] Roughly half of the prologues in the collection refer to the *intentio libri* or *intentio operis* rather than the *intentio auctoris*.

misfortunes which arise from foolish and unlawful love, we may shun both of these and may adhere to chaste love alone" ("finalis causa talis est, ut visa utilitate quae ex legitimo procedit et infortuniis quae ex stulto et illicito solent prosequi, hunc utrumque fugiamus et soli casto adhereamus," 21; 30). In this example, and many of the prologues that treat these topics under the heading of *finalis causa*, the final cause is the end toward which the reader uses the book. It is also, therefore, the end of the book itself, and the question of whether the author intended that particular end is not always important. In some cases, however, the final cause is clearly attributed to the author of the book, but as in the following example from the prologue to Ovid's *Art of Love*, the end envisaged by the author implies action to be taken by the reader: "his ultimate objective is that when young men have read thoroughly the instructions in this book, the course they should follow in a love affair should be made clear to them" ("finalis causa est ut perlecto libro in mandatis suis, quid tenendum sit in amore ipsis iuvenibus enucleatum sit," 33).[13] The tendency, in both the Type C and Aristotelian prologue forms, to focus on the usefulness to the reader when discussing the intention or final significance of a text does not mean that commentators downplayed the author's function. To the contrary, as A. J. Minnis has shown, the rise of the Aristotelian prologue in particular enabled commentators to discuss the role of the author in great depth (*Authorship* 92-93). The close relationship between

[13] I have substituted my translation for Minnis's for readability. Minnis's translation is as follows: "His ultimate objective is that, when the book with the instructions he gives in it has been read thoroughly, the course they should follow in a love-affair should be made clear to young men" (24).

intention and utility in this strand of the commentary tradition is an indication that commentators understood intention as part of a larger rhetorical situation that included, in addition to the author, the reader and the uses toward which he or she could put the text. The author and his intentions were an important aspect of that rhetorical situation, but they were not generally allowed to dominate interpretation. The burden of deciding the ultimate importance and usefulness of the text rested squarely on the reader.

Despite the tendency in some *accessūs* to focus more on the reader's use of the text than what the author had in mind, other *accessūs* describe authorial intentions that are rooted in the author's historical context and reflect his personal aims and desires. A good example from the Munich MS is the prologue to Cicero's *Paradoxa*. In explaining Cicero's *intentio*, the prologue recounts the circumstances under which the book was supposed to have been written. Brutus, a relative of Cato, seeing that Cato's ideas were under attack, asked Cicero to confirm Cato's judgments and refute his enemies. Cicero's first intention in writing, then, is to comply with this request and confirm Cato's ideas and refute his enemies. This historical particularity, however, does not prevent the commentator from assigning a secondary intention to Cicero, which is to profit and give pleasure to his readers.[14] The most abundant examples of authorial intentions described

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[14] "Brutus, a relative of the aforesaid Cato, realized this, and asked his friend Cicero, whom he knew to be very well versed in logic, to confirm Cato's judgements and completely overthrow the machinations of his enemies. Wishing to meet this request he has made Cato's judgements the subject-matter in this little book, but he has [two]

as products of the author's historical circumstances come to us in prologues to the work

of Ovid. According to Fausto Ghisalberti, the lack of a "life" of Ovid transmitted to the

Middle Ages from antiquity, along with the popularity of Ovid's works in the twelfth

through the fourteenth centuries, made the *accessus* a locus for discussions of the

historical and biographical details out of which Ovid's works were supposed to have

arisen (10). For this reason, many discussions of Ovid's intentions in writing—whatever

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different intentions. His main intention is to confirm Cato's judgements and refute those

of his enemies. The usefulness of this work is the confirmation of those judgments. But

another intention is to profit his readers and give pleasure. Here the usefulness is

fulfillment [of that intention] ." ("Hoc autem cognito Brutus, predicti Catonis cognatus,

Tullium amicum suum, quem etiam in arte loyca noverat peritissimum, rogavit quatenus

sententias Catonis confirmaret et emulorum molimen funditus exstirparet. Cuius itaque

rogatui satisfacere volens materiam in hoc opusculo Catonis sententias proposuit, sed

diversas habet intentiones. Nam eius principalis intentio est sententias Catonis confirmare

emulorumque confutare. Cuius utilitas est earundem confirmatio. Alia vero intentio est et

prodesse et delectare. Utilitas perfectio." 30; 44-45). I have departed from the translation

of Minnis and Scott by inserting "fulfillment" for their "perfection" as a translation of the

Latin *perfectio*. I am indebted to Glending Olson for pointing out that the commentator

here seems to be suggesting that the utility is the completion or fulfillment of the

aforesaid intention rather than the attaining of perfection as a result of gaining profit and

pleasure from Cicero's works. This reading is consistent with the general tendency of

commentators to envision the utility of a work as the realization of its intention.

the work in question—include aims and causes that are quite specific to his place and

time. The positing of such historical purposes, however, does not prevent commentators

from finding other intentions and uses of Ovid's texts that extend well beyond the author.

A good example is the prologue to a fourteenth-century manuscript of the

Metamorphoses. This prologue describes the intention of the author as to expound all the

transformations of the world up to the time of Caesar, and then outlines a two-fold

utilitas, with one use applying to the author and the other to the reader. For the author, the

utility is that "he might regain the favor and grace of Augustus" ("favorem Augusti et

gratiam recuperet"), which he lost through the writing of the *Ars Amatoria*. For readers,

the utility is that "we might abstain from vices and brutish ugliness" ("a viciis et a beluina

turpitudine abstineamus").[15] The usefulness for the author, which accounts for the

immediate cause of the book's composition, does not restrict the book's greater

usefulness to readers. A similar two-fold utility is ascribed to Ovid's *Ex Ponto* in a

thirteenth-century manuscript. The usefulness of the *Ex Ponto* for Ovid is said to be that

it helped him "to forget his misfortunes and to do away with his tedium" ("habere

oblivionem de suis malis et tedium removere"), while the usefulness for the readers is

that "through the error of Ovid they may be able to guard themselves against a similar

error" ("per errorem Ovidii sibi possint ab errore consimili precavere").[16]

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[15] Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, N 254 sup. Edited in Ghisalberti, pp. 53-54.

[16] Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, 8197. Edited and quoted in part in Ghisalberti, p. 14.

Such examples illustrate the flexibility of the *accessus* formulae in generating a text's meaning and significance: rather than fixing meaning as the end envisioned by the historical author, the *accessus* scheme can take into account the author's intentions—even those specific to his historical context and personal aims—while extending and supplementing them by considering how the reader will make use of the book. A final example from the Munich manuscript will further illustrate this generative character of the *accessus*. The third of three prologues to Ovid's *Heroides* contained in the collection attributes five intentions to Ovid: to write about the three kinds of love; to commend chaste love and attack unchaste love; to praise those who exercise chaste love and blame those who exercise unchaste love; to show how someone might be courted by letter; and to encourage the pursuit of virtue and discourage the pursuit of vice.[17] The last of these

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[17] "His intention is to write about the three kinds of love: foolish love, unchaste love, and demented love. . . . Another interpretation is that the intention of this book is to commend chaste love as it appears in certain *heroides*, that is, noble Greek women, one of whom is Penelope, wife of Ulysses; or to attack unchaste love as it appears in unchaste married women, one of whom was Phaedra. Another interpretation is that the intention is to praise some of those who write the letters for their chastity, and to blame some for their unchaste love. According to another interpretation, Ovid's intention is that since, in his manual on the art of love, he does not explain how someone might be courted by letter, he completes this part of his teaching here. According to another interpretation his intention in this book is to encourage the pursuit of virtue and to reject vice. He was himself accused before Caesar of having in his writing taught Roman married women

how to conduct unchaste love-affairs. So he wrote this book for them, setting it forth in

an exemplifying manner, so that they might know which women they should or should

not imitate in their love. It must be understood also that although throughout the whole

book he has this intention, and those mentioned above, there are two further intentions in

this book, one general and one particular. The general intention is to give pleasure and to

give profitable advice to all his readers. But he has a particular intention in individual

letters, either praising chaste love as in 'This letter your Penelope,' or attacking unchaste

love, as in 'Unless you give this.' And different letters have different intentions, because

he had different purposes in mind in setting out to commend some for their chastity and

blame others for their unchaste love." ("Intentio eius est de triplice genere amoris, stulti,

incesti, furiosi scribere. . . . Aliter, intentio huius libri est commendare castum amorem

sub specie quarundam heroydum, ide est nobilium grecarum mulierum, quarum una erat

Penolopes uxor Ulixis, vel vituperare incestum amorem sub specie incestarum

matronarum, quarum una fuit Phedra. Aliter, intentio sua est quasdam ex illis

committentibus epistolas laudare de castitate sua, quasdam autem reprehendere de incesto

amore. Aliter, intentio sua est, cum in preceptis de arte amatoria non ostendit quo modo

aliquis per epistolas sollicitaretur, illud hic exequitur. Aliter, intentio sua est in hoc libro

hortari ad virtutes et redarguere vicia. Ipse accusatus fuit apud Cesarem, quia scriptis suis

romanas matronas illicitos amores docuisset; unde librum scripsit eis, istum exemplum

proponens, ut sciant amando quas debeant imitari, quas non. Sciendum quoque est quod

cum in toto libro hanc et supradictas habeat intentiones, preterea duas habet in hoc libro,

unam generalem et aliam specialem; generalem delectare et communiter prodesse,

intentions the commentator roots in the historical circumstances, pointing out that Ovid

was eager to encourage Roman married women toward the pursuit of virtue since he had

been accused before Caesar of having taught them how to conduct unchaste love affairs.

In addition to these intentions, the commentator posits a further general intention for

Ovid—to give pleasure and profitable advice to his readers—and points out that each

letter also has a further specific intention, either praising chaste love or attacking

unchaste love. When he turns to a discussion of the book's utility, the commentator

acknowledges the close relationship between intention and utility by admitting that the

usefulness of the book will depend on the intention considered—for example, considering

the intention of commending chaste love and attacking unchaste love, the usefulness is

that the book encourages us to chaste love. This prologue exemplifies many of the

aspects of the *accessus* tradition I have been describing, including the close relationship

between intention and utility and the ability to consider an author's historical and

personal aims while extending meaning beyond the immediate significance for the

author. It also shows the remarkable flexibility of the *accessus* scheme in generating

meaning. Exploring authorial intention is not a way for the commentator to restrict the

significance of the text to a single, authorially-sanctioned interpretation; rather, the

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specialem habet intentionem, sicut in singulis epistolis, aut laudando castum amorem, ut

in hac: *Hanc tua Penelope*, aut vituperando incestum amorem, ut in illa: *Quam nisi tu*

dederis. Et bene diversae epistolae diversas intentiones habent, quia dum quasdam de

castitate <commendare>, alias de incesto amore reprehendere proposuit, diversa

intendebat," 22-23; 31-32)

commentator uses the category of *intentio auctoris* as a way of generating multiple interpretations, each of which can co-exist with the others and benefit the reader.

   The academic prologues discussed above have illustrated a tendency among commentators to use the terms of the *accessus* to describe the relationship between an author's historical intentions and a reader's use of the text. We have seen that usefulness for the reader is often considered alongside—and is sometimes indistinguishable from—the author's intentions. If we turn from formal academic commentaries to vernacular works, we find that a similar relationship between intention and utility is described or assumed in many works. Rita Copeland has described a process by which the traditional categories and language of the *accessus* began to be applied to texts other than those of a classical or biblical *auctor*. This process begins in exegetical works that apply the traditional categories of the *accessus* not to the primary text under consideration but to the exegetical work itself. Copeland cites the commentary on the *Aeneid* attributed to Bernard Silvester and the anonymous fourteenth-century *Ovide Moralisé* as examples. Each of these works contains a prologue that applies the categories of the *accessus* (intention, utility, branch of philosophy, etc.) not to the primary text but to the commentary itself. As Copeland and others have described, the *accessus ad auctorem* becomes in these works an *accessus ad commentatorem*.[18] This process culminates in vernacular works that are further removed from formal exegesis but nevertheless employ

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[18] In addition to Copeland (pp. 80-82; 107-114), see Ralph Hanna, et al. (pp. 378-379).

the terms and categories of academic commentary. One such vernacular work is

Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*. Copeland has argued that the prologue to the *Legend*

functions as an *accessus* to Chaucer's English versions of the classical stories of virtuous

women. The G version of the prologue, in particular, shows an increase over the F

version in the number of terms and concepts associated with the *accessus* tradition, such

as "entente" (*intentio*), "matere" (*materia*), and "werk" (*opus*), and introduces new

references to classical *auctores* (Copeland 190-93). In addition to these explicit

references to the commentary tradition, the prologue to the *Legend* employs some of the

general interpretive categories of the *accessus*, including intention and utility. As

Copeland has described, the narrative climax of the prologue—the God of Love's

accusation against Chaucer and Alceste's intervention (F. 308-497; G. 234-485)—

functions as a statement of intention for the *Legend* as a whole: Chaucer's collection of

tales is intended to restore him in the favor of the God of Love by telling of virtuous

women who were true in love. This portion of the narrative is reminiscent of *accessus*

discussions of *intentio auctoris* not only because it serves the same basic function, but

because the specific *intentio* it describes is a familiar one, especially from *accessūs* to the

works of Ovid. The *accessus* to Ovid's *Heroides* discussed above, for example, posited a

similar intention for that work—i.e. that Ovid had written the *Heroides* in response to

accusations that he had encouraged Roman women toward unchaste love. Chaucer's use

of this intention, Copeland argues, signals an association with the *accessūs Ovidiani*,

especially with the *accessūs* to the *Heroides*, which was one of Chaucer's chief sources

for the *Legend*. Like the *accessūs* to the *Heroides*, Chaucer's prologue describes an

intention that implies the work's utility for readers: encouragement in the direction of chaste and virtuous love. Whether this posture is ironic is not important for my purposes—regardless of the end toward which Chaucer uses these ideas, their presence suggests an appropriation of the *accessus* tradition.

Chaucer makes a more explicit connection between intention and utility elsewhere in the prologue, just before Alceste pronounces her judgment upon him. In defending his translation of the *Romance of the Rose* and his *Troilus*, Chaucer makes the following claim:

> . . . what so myn auctor mente,
>
> Algate, God wot, it was myn entente
>
> To forthere trouthe in love and it cheryce,
>
> And to be war fro falsnesse and fro vice
>
> By swich ensaumple; this was my menynge. (G. 460-64)

The intention Chaucer claims for these works, like the intention he claims for the *Legend*, is reminiscent of the *accessus* tradition. A number of the *accessūs* discussed above, including the prologue to the *Heroides* referenced in the previous paragraph, claim similar intentions for works that describe less than virtuous behavior. I will discuss the implications of this "exemplary" justification of narrative below; for now, I wish only to note the relationship between Chaucer's stated intention and that of his *auctores*. In referencing his "auctor," Chaucer is adopting an exegetical and self-effacing posture. He does not, however, hide behind his *auctores* by claiming that the meaning of the works in

question is a function of their intentions rather than his own. Instead, he dismisses the intentions of his *auctores* entirely, claiming that regardless of what they meant, his intention was to encourage truth in love and to be on guard against vice. As an exegete, Chaucer does not restrict himself to finding and announcing meanings sanctioned or intended by the author. Instead, he claims primacy for his own intention in relating these works, and his intention implies the utility of the tale for himself and for his readers. This reference to authorial intention, like the more general reference to the intention of the *Legend* as a whole, resembles *accessus* discussions of *intentio auctoris* in its terminology ("auctor," "entente"), its ethics, and the close relationship it implies between intention and utility.

The specific *utilitas* implied in Chaucer's defense of his intention for the *Romance of the Rose* and *Troilus* is common to both the commentary tradition and vernacular works. Among the categories in the "Type C" prologue, the one that shows the greatest degree of consistency from prologue to prologue is the discussion of the branch of philosophy to which a work is said to pertain. For the vast majority of prologues, the work in question is said to pertain to ethics.[19] Often the stated reason for classifying a

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[19] In the Munich, CLM 19475 MS, only two of the roughly 20 prologues identify the branch of philosophy as something other than ethics. This ethical focus, however, does not negate amusement as a valid use of a text. The intention, for example, ascribed to the work known as the *Physiologus* is "to provide amusement in the form of the animals" ("delectare in animalibus"). This is in no way seen by the commentator as contradicting

given work as "ethics" is that it "pertains to behavior." This reasoning grants the study of

ethics a broad field: for if describing behavior qualifies a work as ethical, any narrative

can be classified as ethics, since all narratives can be said to describe behavior. As we

saw in a number of the prologues above, and in the prologue to the *Legend*, narratives

that describe sinful or unseemly behavior are made ethical by claiming that they teach the

reader about behavior to be avoided—in other words, by regarding the descriptions of

behavior as *exempla*. Much scholarship in recent years has drawn attention to the ethical

function of literature in the Middle Ages, and to the role of *exempla* in fulfilling that

ethical function. Judson Boyce Allen argued that the category of "literature" did not exist

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the edifying effects of the work, for it is also said to "edify in its use of figures"

("prodesse in figuris") and its usefulness is said to be "that we should learn of the natures

of animals and their figurative properties" ("ut naturas et figuras animalium

cognoscamus," 17; 26). In this example, the branch of philosophy the work is said to

pertain to is "physical science" ("phisicae"). In this respect, this prologue is an exception

to the majority of "Type C" prologues. However, even in works said to pertain to ethics,

pleasure and amusement are often seen as complementary to edification. For example, the

third prologue to Ovid's *Heroides* classifies that work as pertaining to ethics, and

identifies the general intention of the work as "to give pleasure and to give profitable

advice to all his readers" ("delectare et communiter prodesse, " 23; 32). For more on the

role of pleasure and amusement in medieval literature, see Glending Olson, *Literature as

Recreation in the Later Middle Ages*.

in the Middle Ages, and that poetry was classified not as literature but as a branch of ethics. The particulars of medieval poetry, according to Allen, were to be regarded by medieval readers as exemplary, for the purpose of helping readers to reject evil and cling to the good.[20] Mary Carruthers's study of the medieval arts of memory and their relationship to reading practices has also underscored the ethical function of reading and of *exempla*. For a medieval reader, Carruthers argues, a literary text was regarded as a "source of communally experienced wisdom," whose value was realized through making it one's own—through storing in one's memory both the particulars of the text and one's perception of or emotional response to those particulars. In the case of exemplary narrative, the model for medieval readers was to focus on the example given, respond to it appropriately, and then internalize that response so that one's inner being was changed. According to Carruthers, in this process the intention of the author was given no more weight than the response of the reader who found an appropriate use for the work.[21]

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[20] According to Allen, the basic principle of medieval literature is the relationship between the formal, literal particulars of a text (the *forma tractatus* of the commentary tradition) and an exterior system to which the particulars correspond (the *forma tractandi*). Within this relationship, the particulars embodied in *exempla* point to universal, ethical generalizations, and are intended to have normative force for the reader. See Ch. 1 of *Ethical Poetic*.

[21] See pp. 156-88 of *The Book of Memory* for Carruthers's discussion of the ethics of medieval reading. Carruthers revisits the subject of ethical reading, in the context of monastic reading and meditation practices, in her more recent *The Craft of Thought*.

While neither Carruthers nor Allen discusses the *accessus* tradition specifically, their conclusions reinforce what we have seen of the reader's role in that tradition: namely, that the reader is largely responsible for determining the ethical value of *exempla* and the ethical or spiritual usefulness of texts in general.

In vernacular works, we find that some authors of narrative explicitly describe the ethical nature of reading and the reader's responsibility to use texts, and the *exempla* contained in them, appropriately. This ethical function is stated generally, for example, in Gonnot's prose *Lancelot*, part of which reads much like one of the prologues to Ovid's *Heroides* discussed above: "evil things are written in books that they might be avoided and fled, and good things that they might be followed and accomplished by every man of good will".[22] This claim points both to the exemplary function of narrative and to the reader's proper response. As in the commentary tradition, authorial intention and utility are closely associated—the author intends the reader's proper use of the text. References of this kind to the exemplary function of narrative, and to the reader's proper response to *exempla*, are commonplaces of vernacular narrative. In addition to providing a genuine ethical justification of narrative, this emphasis on the reader's proper response provides a convenient defense for the inclusion of coarse or unseemly content. A major difference between commentary and narrative is that when writers of narrative speak of intentions and readers' responsibilities, they do so in the context of their own work, and many of the interpretive assumptions we have been discussing become the source of authorial

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[22] Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, FR 79, qtd. in Allen, *Ethical Poetic*, pp. 158-59.

apologies, often defending coarse language or subject matter, in narrative works. As authorial apologies, these ideas can distance authors from the effect of, and hence the responsibility for, their work.

For a good example of a narrative that is defended as exemplary, and in which ethical use of sometimes coarse material is a responsibility explicitly assigned to the reader, we can look at Boccaccio's *Decameron*. In the prologue to this work, Boccaccio points out the intended effect, which is to "offer some solace . . . to those who stand in need of it," that is to those who are wearied by the carnage and suffering brought on by the Black Death (p. 2). He goes on to explain in more detail what kind of solace his imagined female audience will find in his work:

> In these tales will be found a variety of love adventures, bitter as well as pleasing, and other exciting incidents, which took place in both ancient and modern times. In reading them, the aforesaid ladies will be able to derive, not only pleasure from the entertaining matters therein set forth, but also some useful advice. For they will learn to recognize what should be avoided and likewise what should be pursued, and these things can only lead, in my opinion, to the removal of their affliction. (p. 3)

As we have seen in the commentary tradition, Boccaccio's intention is expressed as an effect he wishes his book to have on his readers. And, again as we have seen in the commentary tradition, the effect (taking solace) is closely related to, and dependent upon, the use his readers will make of the text (deriving pleasure and useful advice from his

stories). Boccaccio calls attention here to the ethical and exemplary function of his stories, a point he will revisit later on. He does so, however, within the larger context of offering solace and encouragement to his readers. In this case, the exemplary function of the text is set alongside the recreational function, and both are envisioned not as ends in themselves but as the means by which Boccaccio can comfort his readers.[23] As in the commentary tradition, instruction and amusement are not contradictory but complementary pursuits.

Boccaccio has more to say about the reader's responsibility for making good use of his stories in the epilogue to the *Decameron*. In this epilogue he defends the work against a number of objections, including the charge that the stories he has told are too unseemly for his audience. Boccaccio denies this charge by saying that "no story is so unseemly as to prevent anyone from telling it, provided it is told in seemly language," which he claims to have done. Nevertheless, supposing the charge is just, he offers several reasons for having told such stories. His first argument is a variation on one that Chaucer will use, that he is merely reporting the facts of the story: "if any of the stories is lacking restraint, this is because of the nature of the story itself," and "I could not have related it in any other way without distorting it out of all recognition" (p. 798). His second and third arguments have to do with propriety: that it was no more improper for him to use unseemly expressions than it is for men and women to use language with

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[23] For more on the Decameron as "therapeutic," see Olson, *Literature as Recreation,* pp. 164-204.

sexual implications in their everyday speech, and that the tales were not told in a church, but in a garden, "in a place designed for pleasure," among people who were mature enough not to be led astray by them (p. 798). The most important of his arguments for our purposes, however, is the fourth, which turns on the question of proper use:

> Like all other things in this world, stories, whatever their nature, may be harmful or useful, depending on the listener. Who will deny that wine, as Tosspot and Bibber and a great many others affirm, is an excellent thing for those who are hale and hearty, but harmful to people suffering from a fever? Are we to conclude, because it does harm to the feverish, that therefore it is pernicious? Who will deny that fire is exceedingly useful, not to say vital, to men and women? Are we to conclude, because it burns down houses and villages and whole cities, that therefore it is pernicious? And in the same way, weapons defend the liberty of those who desire to live peaceably, and very often they kill people, not because they are evil in themselves, but because of the evil intentions of those who make use of them. (p. 799)

All three of Boccaccio's analogies are directed at establishing the moral neutrality of the object in question, and by extension the moral neutrality of his stories. In the first analogy, the usefulness of wine is said to be determined by the health of the one who receives it, not the wine itself. In the second, Boccaccio argues that one cannot judge fire as inherently pernicious, for it may do good as well as harm. In the third, Boccaccio argues that weapons are used for evil or for good entirely as result of the intentions of the

one who uses them. The morality of the *Decameron*, these analogies suggest, will be determined not by Boccaccio's intentions in writing, nor by the stories themselves, but by the moral condition of his audience, who will make them either helpful or harmful depending on how they use them. In making a moral defense of his writing, Boccaccio appeals to intention, but to the reader's, not to his own. To be sure, assigning moral responsibility to the reader is convenient for an author defending his work against charges of immorality, and Boccaccio's tone here is decidedly playful. However, his argument in this passage is consistent with the interpretive assumptions of the less playful authors and commentators we have looked at in this chapter. What is playful about Boccaccio's defense is not its substance, for Boccaccio is appealing here to well-established ideas, but its context. In applying these interpretive assumptions to his own writing, Boccaccio is testing the limits of a medieval commonplace.

The effect of Boccaccio's defense is to shift responsibility for the utility of his tales away from the author and the text and toward the reader. He assures us that his general intention in writing is a charitable one (offering solace to his readers), but his defenses in the epilogue tell us that his intentions have little value in determining the moral significance of the stories told in the *Decameron*. Boccaccio's apologies imply that knowing the author's intention can tell us about the morality of the author but not about the morality of the stories themselves—that determination is assigned to the reader. If we compare Boccaccio's apologies to those of Chaucer in the *Canterbury Tales*, we find a

similar modest claim for the role of authorial intention.[24] Unlike the apologies in the

Decameron, however, which appear in the clearly demarcated prologue and epilogue,

Chaucer's apologies are complicated by the fact that they are spoken by a character

within the frame story, Chaucer's narrator. In this context, the narrator's stated purpose is

to record the tales of his fellow pilgrims faithfully. In the words of the Miller's Prologue:

> And therefore every gentil wight I preye,
>
> For Goddes love, demeth nat that I seye
>
> Of yvel entente, but for I moot reherce

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[24] For discussion of Chaucer's apologies in the General Prologue and the Miller's

Prologue as part of Chaucer's larger strategy to give himself "complete artistic license,"

see Obermeier, pp. 185-219. In commenting on Chaucer's apology in the General

Prologue, Obermeier writes that Chaucer "leaves room for interpretation and linguistic

license but still exonerates the author, who after all is only a compiler of stories" (205).

Helen Cooper discusses the many parallels between Boccaccio's and Chaucer's apologies

in arguing for Chaucer's indebtedness to the *Decameron* as a source for the frame of the

Canterbury Tales. She summarizes the parallels as follows: "in both works, the authors

use their presence to offer the same justifications for writing, the same excuses for their

stories not all being moral, the same transferring of ethical responsibility to their audience

or readers, and similar discussions of the relation of word to meaning" (11). For more on

the relationship of the *Canterbury Tales* to the *Decameron*, see Root, "Chaucer and the

Decameron."

> Hir tales alle, be they bettre or werse,
>
> Or elles falsen som of my mateere. (I.3171-75)

He makes a similar claim to faithful and literal reporting—and to benign intent—in the General Prologue:

> But first I pray yow, of youre curteisye,
>
> That ye n'arette it nat my vileynye,
>
> Thogh that I pleynly speke in this mateere,
>
> To telle yow hir wordes and hir cheere,
>
> Ne thogh I speke hir wordes proprely.
>
> For this ye knowen al so wel as I:
>
> Whoso shal telle a tale after a man,
>
> He moot reherce as ny as evere he kan
>
> Everich a word, if it be in his charge,
>
> Al speke he never so rudeliche and large,
>
> Or ellis he moot telle his tale untrewe,
>
> Or feyne thyng, or fynde wordes newe.
>
> He may nat spare, althogh he were his brother;
>
> He moot as wel seye o word as another. (I.725-38)

As did Boccaccio in the *Decameron*, Chaucer claims that any unseemliness in his tales is an inevitable result of accurate reporting. In both of these passages, Chaucer makes reference to his own intentions (explicitly in the Miller's Prologue and implicitly in the

General Prologue), and in both cases his claims are modest: he states, notably in the

negative in both cases, that his intentions are not evil, and he describes his role as a mere

passive reporter. Chaucer, like Boccaccio, is of course being playful here, since the

situation out of which his obligations arise is a fiction he created. But even if his

statements of intention were taken at face value as authorial, such claims are not capable

of exercising much control over meaning and interpretation. They are inadequate as

statements of his aims (in fact he claims to have no other aim beyond fulfilling the

obligations demanded by his fictional role of reporter), and in both cases the apologies

are limited to moral defenses of his actions, rather than attempts to settle interpretation

and meaning. Indeed, Chaucer seems especially preoccupied with the moral dimension of

his role as reporter. While Boccaccio stresses the accuracy of his reporting as a way of

minimizing distortion, Chaucer describes his faithful reporting in the language of moral

obligation: "he moot reherce" and "ellis he moot telle his tale untrewe." Chaucer offers

up these statements of intention as playful moral defenses of his actions; he does not

assume that they will control how the work itself will be construed or what its final

significance will be.

Chaucer's self-effacing stance as a mere passive reporter is complicated, however,

by the authorities he invokes following this simple defense of his actions and intentions

in the General Prologue:

Crist spak himself 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. (I.739-42)

Although the context of these lines suggests that they are put forward to support the argument that Chaucer the narrator is morally obligated to accurate and faithful reporting, the lines themselves seem to imply otherwise. The contrast between Chaucer's asserted humble role as mere reporter and the weight of the authorities he cites suggests that something else might be at stake here, and the arguments for which he turns to these authorities confirm that suggestion. Christ is invoked not as an example of faithful reporting but as the supremely authoritative example of speaking "ful brode," or plainly. Chaucer appeals, in other words, to Christ's own manner of speaking not to his accurate reporting. He takes the obligation he has claimed for himself as a passive reporter and expands it, with this appeal, to include a defense of speaking plainly himself. Chaucer's other appeal to authority in this passage similarly expands the scope of the defense. The Platonic imperative to which Chaucer here appeals, that "wordes moote be cosyn to the dede," does not refer in its proper context to a moral obligation to use words that accurately reflect facts, but to a natural relationship between words and the universals they represent. The derivation of the reference to Plato is complex, but Chaucer appears to have taken it from the twelfth prose passage of book three of Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, which he rendered as follows in his translation of Boethius: " . . . thow hast lernyd by the sentence of Plato that nedes the wordis moot be cosynes to the thinges

of whiche thei speken" (3.pr12.205-7).[25] Boethius's reference in turn appears to derive

from *Timaeus* 29B, in which Timaeus asserts that, "in dealing with a copy and its model

[i.e., the physical universe and its model in the mind of God], we must affirm that the

accounts given will themselves be akin to the diverse objects which they serve to

explain." Although the context of Chaucer's reference to this passage would suggest that

it is cited in defense of his moral obligation to accurately report the words of his fellow

pilgrims, the passage itself alludes rather to the natural relationship between Chaucer's

words and the larger world of universals they represent. His words thus take on a

significance beyond their mere accuracy. By citing these two authorities, Chaucer subtly

undermines the self-effacing posture of reporter he has adopted. Although these appeals

do not quite constitute an alternate or subversive intention that can be distinguished from

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[25] The line from Boethius is as follows: "cum Platone sanciente didiceris cognatos, de

quibus loquuntur, rebus oportere esse sermones" (3.pr12.104-6). Chaucer appears to have

relied, however, on Jean de Meun rather than Boethius, as a direct source for the passage.

For a fuller discussion of the derivation of this passage, see Taylor, "Chaucer's *Cosyn to

the Dede*," pp. 320-24. Taylor's article situates this passage within the larger context of

Chaucer's relationship to contemporary theories of language, in particular the nominalist

vs. realist debate. He concludes that "Chaucer's view of language is that of a Christian

Platonist, and that he aspires toward a linguistic realism in which intent informs deeds

through the ministry of words" (325). For a contrasting position, see Peck, "Chaucer and

the Nominalist Questions."

the literal intention he claims for himself, they at least subtly suggest that Chaucer is concerned with something more than mere reporting.

Chaucer's apologies in the *Canterbury Tales* offer no straightforward account of what that something more might be. Whereas Boccaccio insists that readers will be able to derive "not only pleasure . . . but also some useful advice" from his stories, Chaucer is less direct about the utility of the tales and the interpretive responsibilities of the reader. His apology in the Miller's Prologue is as close as he comes to directly identifying the utility of any of the tales, although here, as in the statements of intention cited above, the apology is spoken in his role as narrator rather than in his authorial voice. Even here, however, he keeps his comments about the tales limited to their subject matter and assigns to readers the responsibility not to find something useful but to choose the tales that suit their preferences:

> 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.
>
> So was the Reve eek and other mo,
>
> And harlotrie they tolden bothe two.

Avyseth you, and put me out of blame;

And eek men shal nat maken ernest of game. (I.3176-86)

Chaucer's admissions that the Reeve and Miller "harlotrie . . . tolden," while other tales "toucheth gentilesse, / And eek moralitee and hoolynesse" amount to no more than descriptions of the subject matter of the various tales. Readers are charged not with making a decision about which tales are morally appropriate, or making proper use of the tales, but with choosing tales that suit their preferences and, of course, with not blaming Chaucer should they choose poorly. The only moral obligation Chaucer assigns to the reader comes almost as an afterthought in the final line: "And eek men shal nat maken ernest of game." It is tempting to read this line as an authorial directive to the reader not to look for anything more than momentary pleasure in the Miller's coarse fabliau and therefore as an implied, authorial judgment on the utility of the Miller's Tale. And as Glending Olson has argued, from the standpoint of medieval attitudes toward pleasure and recreation, such a reading is entirely plausible. Inside the larger structure of the *Canterbury Tales*, however, in which the pilgrims interpret, respond to, and disagree about the meanings and effects of the tales told, it is risky to give Chaucer the pilgrim's imperative a privileged, authorial status. It may well be true, as Olson argues, that "Chaucer ultimately would have thought of [the Miller's Tale] and his other fabliaux as less serious, less worthy of being held in the mind, than the Knight's Tale or the Clerk's Tale," but Chaucer the pilgrim's statement here is too unstable to corroborate that claim (145-46).

Olson has pointed out that "ernest" and "game" in this passage are Middle English equivalents of the Horatian polarity of *delectare* and *prodesse*, which we have encountered in various forms throughout this chapter (157). Commentators and authors of narrative alike often express the intention or utility of a given work in terms of the Horatian idea that "poets aim either to benefit, or to amuse, or to utter words at once both pleasing and helpful to life" ("Aut prodesse volunt aut delectare poetae / aut simul et iucunda et idonea dicere vitae"). [26] For example, the *Heroides* prologue discussed above identified that work's intention as "to give pleasure and to give profitable advice" ("delectare et communiter prodesse"), and Boccaccio's statement that his readers will be able to "derive not only pleasure . . . but also some useful advice" expresses the utility of the *Decameron* in similar terms. This Horatian polarity is central to the structure of the *Canterbury Tales.* If there is any authorial statement in the *Canterbury Tales* that approaches an explanation of the aim of the tales as a whole, it is not that of Chaucer but of the "author" of the tale-telling contest, Harry Bailly, who, offering another variation on the Horatian ideal, says that the winner of the contest will be the one who "telleth in this caas / Tales of best sentence and moost solaas" (I.797-98). As the tales progress, the responses of the host and the other pilgrims are continually framed in terms of one or the other of the poles of "sentence" and "solaas." The host expresses the formula in varied terms again when he asks Chaucer to tell a tale "in which ther be some murthe or some doctryne" (VII.935), and several tales occasion comments from the host or other pilgrims that emphasize one or the other of these poles. The episodes that frame the Nun's Priest's

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[26] *Ars Poetica*, ll. 333-34.

tale are a good example of how this polarity informs the pilgrims' reactions to the tales

told. The Monk's Tale invites the host's criticism for containing neither "desport ne

game," leading the host to call on the Nun's Priest for a tale that "may our hertes glade"

(VII.2791, 2811). The host's response to the Nun's Priest Tale, "this was a murie tale of

Chauntecleer," indicates that his expectations have been met, yet the Nun's Priest himself

calls attention to the "moralitee" and "doctrine" in the tale, partly, of course, to humorous

effect (VII.3449, -40, -42). This series of invitations and responses that frames the Nun's

Priest Tale is indicative of the kind of running commentary Chaucer's pilgrims make on

the utility of tales. Debate and discussion about the utility of the tales, in other words, is

built into the very structure of the *Canterbury Tales* by the framing device of the tale-

telling contest. Given this context, the narrator's assessment of the Miller's Tale as

"game" cannot be taken as an authorial pronouncement on the utility of the tale

equivalent to Boccaccio's assurance that readers will find both pleasure and profit in the

Decameron. Certainly readers, as well as Chaucer's pilgrims, find both "sentence" and

"solaas" in the *Canterbury Tales*, and the frame story ensures that readers will not lightly

arrive at conclusions about where one or the other may be found. Like Boccaccio,

Chaucer leaves to the reader the task of determining to what extent the individual tales

offer pleasure or profit (or both), but he shows even greater restraint than Boccaccio by

not offering a general, authorial assurance that they are to be found in the work. That

Chaucer refrains from explicitly identifying the utility of the tales or the reader's

interpretive responsibilities, however, does not negate the demands the text makes on the

reader: readers must grapple with the Miller's Tale and come to their own conclusions

about the extent of its "sentence." In general, Chaucer's restraint concerning the utility of the *Canterbury Tales* serves only to increase the demands on the reader, for, with the possible exception of his problematic statements in the Retraction, he has left no direct authorial pointers toward how the tales should be interpreted or used.

Chaucer and Boccaccio both place the weight of responsibility for proper interpretation and use of their texts on the reader. Together they show an awareness of an interpretive assumption that has been at the heart of this chapter: that authorial intention is capable of only a limited influence on the interpretation and proper use of a text. Although they both make frequent reference to their intentions, they do so in the context of moral defenses of their actions rather than attempts to settle interpretation. Boccaccio goes so far as to explicitly assign the responsibility for proper interpretation and use to the reader in his direct authorial voice, while Chaucer presents the reader—and the pilgrims—with interpretive problems that do not announce their own answers. The purpose of this chapter has been to illustrate what I have called "utilitarian" assumptions about authorial intention and the reader's role in determining meaning. Finding evidence that Chaucer and Boccaccio shared some of these assumptions with medieval commentators is not to say that they wished or expected their works to be read exegetically or with strictly spiritual ends in mind. But it does suggest that these ideas were widespread enough to constitute a medieval commonplace of literary interpretation that Chaucer and Boccaccio could adopt and appropriate for their own purposes.

Before closing, it is worth summarizing what has been said about authorial intention and utility up to this point. We saw in Augustine that the author's intention, though an important factor in interpretation, was not allowed to get in the way of meanings useful to the reader for building up charity. In the *Confessions*, Augustine goes so far as to declare that what the human author intended at the time of writing is both unknowable and less important than knowing whether a given interpretation is in accordance with the larger truth of the Divine Word. This emphasis on the spiritual utility of reading and interpretation is also evident in the commentary tradition, which was represented in this chapter by prologues that consistently acknowledge the ethical function of reading and focus on the reader's proper use of the text. Many of these prologues, like Augustine's interpretations of scripture, show an interest in the historical author's intentions, yet they tend to situate discussion of authorial intention in a larger rhetorical context, including consideration of how the text can shape the reader's moral life. In vernacular works, these assumptions show up in authorial apologies, such as those in Boccaccio's *Decameron* and Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women* and *Canterbury Tales*, that imply a limited role for authorial intention, and leave the task of determining the moral significance of the text to readers.

This "utilitarian" approach to interpretation that I have been attempting to describe needs to be sharply distinguished from the allegorical approach associated with D. W. Robertson, with which it shares some features. Robertsonian criticism is mainly concerned with extracting one consistent meaning from a wide variety of medieval texts, whatever their form. It operates under the assumption that a proper reading of a medieval

text will conform in meaning to the Augustinian doctrine of charity. Robertsonian criticism, in other words, sees doctrinal, and specifically Augustinian, ideas behind the particularities of most medieval texts. By contrast, what I am suggesting is that the evidence from medieval discussions of authorial intention reveals more interest in exploring the effect and usefulness of texts than in settling their meaning as that envisioned by their authors. My argument in this chapter shows that there was an influential theological foundation (in Augustine) for valuing spiritual utility over authorial intention; an active practice of considering utility alongside authorial intention in the interpretation of biblical and non-biblical texts (the *accessus* tradition); and an awareness, and appropriation, of these assumptions by at least two major authors of vernacular poetry. It may well be true that medieval texts, as Robertsonian critics claim, generally conform to the doctrine of charity; but the evidence in this chapter suggests that such a claim would say more about how medieval readers used texts than what medieval authors intended or what their texts ultimately mean.

The question remaining to be answered, then, is how understanding medieval thinking about intention and utility can help us understand Chaucer's Retraction. One answer is that it encourages a reading of the Retraction that is attentive not only to the author's intentions (stated and implied) but to the Retraction's potential uses and effects. Modern readers and critics, as the first chapter showed, tend to find the value of the Retraction in what it tells us about its author (the biographical approach) or the ultimate meaning and form of the *Canterbury Tales* (the aesthetic approach). The evidence in this chapter, however, suggests that medieval readers would likely have also considered the

effect the Retraction could have on the reader or the use a reader could make of it. In claiming that medieval readers may have approached the Retraction with an eye toward its effect and usefulness—in addition to its intention and form—I am not denying the value of biographical or aesthetic readings. I am, however, suggesting that because such readings are natural and obvious to us they tend to obscure other ways of approaching the Retraction that may have been natural and obvious to a medieval reader. Incorporating the assumptions and practices of medieval readers into our reading of the Retraction is no guarantee that we will be reading it as a medieval reader would, but doing so can enrich our understanding of the text and expose the blind spots in our own readings. The relatively small amount of attention that has been placed on the effect the Retraction has on its readers is one of those blind spots. It is hardly possible to deny, for example, that the Retraction has the effect of putting the *Canterbury Tales* into (or back into) an explicitly ethical and rhetorical context—readers are reminded of the author's moral responsibility and of their position as the recipients of Chaucer's speech act. This effect, however, has rarely figured prominently in readings of the Retraction. It may be that such an effect is what lies behind appending the Retraction (and the Parson's Tale for that matter) to the *Canterbury Tales*, whether such appending is attributed to Chaucer or to a later compiler. Even if, as some recent scholars, including Micéal Vaughan and Charles Owen, have suggested, the Parson's Tale and Retraction was not the original ending of the *Canterbury Tales*, the Retraction circulated as part of the *Canterbury Tales* in most

early manuscripts.[27] A more detailed examination of the potential effects and uses of the

Retraction will be the subject of the following chapter.

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[27] The Parson's Tale and the Retraction have been part of the experience of reading the

Canterbury Tales for most readers since the time of the earliest manuscripts, and their

placement at the end of the *Canterbury Tales* may well have been authorial, even if they

were originally envisioned as a separate work. For more on Owen's and Vaughan's

analysis of the relationship between the Retraction and the rest of the *Canterbury Tales*,

see Ch. 1, pp. 15-17.

CHAPTER 4

The practice of discovering and describing authorial intention was central to medieval commentary on classical, sacred, and vernacular texts. The analogy with which Augustine begins *On Christian Doctrine* illustrates this crucial role of authorial intention in interpretation. Although Augustine admits that it is God who grants the vision to see the heavenly object toward which he points, the onlooker must nevertheless begin by understanding the direction in which his finger is pointing, that is, by grasping his intention. Sharing this assumption with Augustine, the medieval *accessus* tradition assigned a foundational role to the proper grasp of authorial intention by including *intentio auctoris* or *finalis causa* among the basic topics to be considered in commenting on a text. Understanding the role played by authorial intention in medieval commentary on literary texts—whether such commentary is of the formal, academic variety or the authorial self-criticism of a vernacular author—requires close examination, for it is easy to project the role we assign (or deny) to authorial intention onto medieval discussions of the subject. In particular, three principles, which emerge from the discussions of intention in the previous two chapters, help to clarify the role played by authorial intention in medieval commentary on classical, sacred, and vernacular texts. First, medieval commentators describing authorial intention do not limit themselves to a description of the psychological state of the author at the time of writing.[1] Rather, they tend to treat

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[1] Minnis offers a similar generalization regarding the focus of late-medieval accounts of authorial intention: "In the case of the study of grammar, accounts of authorial intention

authorial intention in the broader context of its rhetorical value. The intention is understood to be the end toward which the work can be said to point, and this end is often envisioned as an effect the work will have on its readers, sometimes quite apart from the volition of the historical author. This is not to say that medieval commentators showed no interest in the author's wishes, desires, or mental state, but that they understood intention as part of a larger interpretive framework that included—in addition to the author—the reader and the uses toward which the reader could put the text. Second, the use of authorial intention as an interpretive tool is balanced by a healthy skepticism about the possibility of knowing intentions with certainty, or at least about the possibility of identifying a single intention that can fix meaning absolutely. Abelard frames the basic epistemological problem by distinguishing between deeds, which human beings can know, and intentions, which only God can know (*Ethics* 40.7-15). Even Augustine, when pressed to the point by his relentless interrogation of his own interpretations of scripture, asks whether certainty about the intentions of the authors of scripture is within human

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were prescriptive rather than descriptive: there was rarely any attempt (at least, not until very late in the Middle Ages) to relate a person's purpose in writing to his historical context, to describe an author's personal prejudices, eccentricities and limitations. The commentators were more interested in relating the work to an abstract truth than in discovering the subjective goals and wishes of the individual author. The *intentio auctoris*—the intended meaning 'piously expounded' and rendered unimpeachable—was considered more important than the medium through which the message was expressed" (Minnis *Authorship* 20).

reach (*Confessions* 12.4.33; 12.24). Exploring authorial intention is not a way for commentators to restrict the significance of the text to a single, authorially-sanctioned interpretation; rather, commentators use the category of *intentio auctoris* as a way of generating interpretations that may or may not accord with the historical author's original aims. Third, the medieval interest in authorial intention rarely takes the form of a search for authorial statements that can validate a given intention. Medieval commentators do not settle interpretive questions "by consulting the oracle," the practice decried by Wimsatt and Beardsley (18). In my discussion of the Pardoner, I distinguished between the Pardoner's intentions, which are not available to his fellow pilgrims or Chaucer's reading audience, and his statement of intention. The statement of intention, I argued, must be seen as a rhetorical act, not as a transparent window onto the intention itself. Medieval commentators often assume a similar distinction. Augustine makes this distinction explicitly in reference to the authors of scripture, declaring that "even if Moses should come before us and aver, 'This was my meaning,' we would not see into his mind, we would have to take his word for it" ("si ipse Moyses apparuisset nobis atque dixisset: 'hoc cogitavi,' nec sic eam videremus, sed crederemus," *Confessions* 12.4.35; 12.25). These three principles distinguish the medieval practice of discovering and describing authorial intention from the modern "common-sense view" of authorial intention, which I described in Chapter One, and which was the object of Wimsatt's and Beardsley's attack against "the intentional fallacy."

In addition to these three principles, which must be kept in mind when considering the role of authorial intention in medieval commentary, there is a

complementary concept which completes the meaning and contextualizes the use of authorial intention for medieval commentators: *utilitas* or usefulness. In the *accessus* tradition, and in all the varieties of formal and informal commentary explored in this study, consideration of an author's intention is rarely far from consideration of how a text will be used or what effect it will have on its readers. The close relationship between these two concepts can be explained in part by the larger ethical framework in which most, if not all, of the commentators and authors we have considered place reading and interpretation. Many of the works considered in this study have shared the assumption that texts ought to benefit their readers by providing ethical or religious instruction or impetus. The academic prologues we considered make the connection between reading and ethics explicit by identifying most of the texts they comment on as pertaining to ethics. Even the vernacular authors we considered, who seem to run farthest afield from this ethical or transformative function, appeal to ethical principles in apologies that either defend the author's intentions as moral or acknowledge the moral responsibility of the reader. The work of scholars such as Judson Boyce Allen, Alistair Minnis, and Mary Carruthers has drawn attention in recent decades to this ethical framework in which the acts of reading, writing, and interpretation were situated in the later Middle Ages. Their work has made it clear that for medieval readers and commentators there was no easy separation between literary and ethical questions. But the relationship between intention and utility can also be accounted for in more pragmatic terms, as a consequence of the epistemological problems surrounding intention. Whereas intentions are difficult to identify and impossible to know with certainty, usefulness is determined almost entirely

by the reader. Hence the practice, licensed by Augustine and seen in many of the *accessūs* we considered, of discovering intentions by identifying uses, or reading from utility to intention. What I have called the subordination of intention to utility is simply an acknowledgment—whether explicit or implicit—on the part of some medieval commentators and authors that, in the ethical context in which reading and interpretation take place, what matters most is not correctly understanding the author's intention but discovering the value of the text for the reader. While a search for authorial intention, conceived apart from utility, has a limiting effect on interpretation, consideration of utility opens up interpretation and leads to the production of meaning, even meaning that could not have been foreseen or intended by the historical author. The concept of utility, added to the concept of intention, shifts the balance in interpretation from the author toward the reader. Thus we find authors such as Boccaccio and Chaucer recognizing the reader's responsibility to make ethical choices in what and how they read and assuming a limited role for their own intentions in the reader's interpretation.

My purpose in exploring the roles played by—and relationship between—intention and utility in medieval commentary has not been to establish how a medieval reader would have read the Retraction, for surely medieval readers were as diverse a group as modern readers. Instead, my aim has been to shift the balance in modern readings of the Retraction, which tend to focus primarily on the author and his intentions, toward a consideration of the Retraction's larger rhetorical situation. Modern readings of the Retraction, I argued in Chapter One, have tended to focus either on problems surrounding Chaucer as the author of the Retraction (his sincerity, his state of mind, his

historical circumstances) or on problems surrounding the form and meaning of the

Retraction as the conclusion of the *Canterbury Tales*. Both kinds of reading often rely on

an appeal to the author's intentions, either his spiritual intentions in "retracting" his

works or his artistic intentions in concluding the *Canterbury Tales* on such a note. The

appeal to his spiritual intentions often proceeds through speculation about his supposed

death-bed repentance or other aspects of his biography; the appeal to his artistic

intentions often proceeds through discovery of a structural or thematic coherence (or

dissonance) in the *Canterbury Tales* and the Retraction. Both of these approaches have

raised valid questions about the Retraction and both have contributed to our

understanding of the Retraction and the *Canterbury Tales*. In the context, however, of

medieval thinking about intention and utility that has been the subject of the previous two

chapters, this tendency to focus on the man and the text appears imbalanced. Medieval

commentators were indeed interested in questions about the author and aesthetics, but to

this they added an interest in how the reader could use the text or how the text would

affect the reader.

My goal in the following pages will be to explore the larger rhetorical situation of

Chaucer's Retraction, including what it suggests about the intentions of its author, but

also what it tells us (or does not) about the utility of the texts it ostensibly "retracts" and

its own utility. Because the Retraction is both a form of commentary on Chaucer's other

works and a text requiring interpretation itself, questions about intention and utility can

be asked on two levels. First, as commentary, what does the Retraction have to say about

the intention and utility of the texts it concludes and comments upon? We can answer this

question by identifying the terms and assumptions Chaucer employs in his self-commentary. Second, as a text itself, what does the Retraction suggest about its own intention and utility? Answering this question will lead us to discussion of possible motivations behind the appending of the Retraction to the *Canterbury Tales* and about the effect of the Retraction on readers. Answering the first question can serve as a guide to the second, for it is reasonable to suppose that the views of reading and interpretation we can identify in the Retraction may be able to account for the production and intended (or historical) uses of the Retraction itself. The second question covers ground that modern critics are loath to tread, for it veers dangerously close to subjectivity and groundless speculation. Medieval commentators, as I have indicated in the previous chapter, proceeded much more confidently in this territory. My own reading will attempt to deal with both questions, pointing out what the Retraction ostensibly says about intention and utility, and concluding with consideration of what purpose the Retraction might serve and what might have motivated Chaucer or a later compiler to append it to the *Canterbury Tales*.

Before proceeding to a broader discussion of what the Retraction has to say about intention and utility we must first lay the groundwork by considering the chief problems presented by the Retraction with which any reading must come to terms. The Retraction is often considered Chaucer's final and most important commentary on his own work, especially the *Canterbury Tales*, which it concludes in most manuscripts. Yet as a final and conclusive statement on Chaucer's substantial literary corpus, it appears quite limited. We can identify two basic parts of the Retraction. The first part, consisting of

lines 1081-83, includes Chaucer's concluding remarks on the work immediately

preceding it, the Parson's Tale:

> Now preye I to hem alle that herkne this litel tretys or rede, that if ther be any
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> thyng in it that liketh hem, that therof they thanken oure Lord Jhesu Crist, of
>
> whom procedeth al wit and al goodnesse./ And if ther be any thyng that displese
>
> hem, I preye hem also that they arrette it to the defaute of myn unkonnynge and
>
> nat to my wyl, that wolde ful fayn have seyd bettre if I hadde had konnynge./ For
>
> oure book seith, "Al that is writen is writen for our doctrine," and that is myn
>
> entente. (X.1081-83)

Here the author asks the reader to thank God for anything pleasing in the "litel tretys" and

to attribute anything displeasing therein to the author's lack of skill, rather than to his

will; cites St. Paul in Romans 15.4, "al that is writen is writen for our doctrine"; and

claims Paul's statement as an expression of his own intention. In the second part, which

consists of lines 1084-92, the author expands the literary reference from the Parson's Tale

to his larger literary corpus, asking the reader to pray for the sins he committed in writing

and translating worldly vanities:

> Wherfore I biseke yow mekely, for the mercy of God, that ye preye for me that
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> Crist have mercy on me and foryeve me my giltes;/ and namely of my
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> translacions and enditynges of worldly vanitees, the whiche I revoke in my
>
> retracciouns:/ as is the book of Troilus; the book also of Fame; the book of the
>
> XXV. Ladies; the book of the Duchesse; the book of Seint Valentynes day of the

Parlement of Briddes; the tales of Caunterbury, thilke that sownen into synne;/ the book of the Leoun; and many another book, if they were in my remembrance, and many a song and many a leccherous lay, that Crist for his grete mercy foryeve me the synne./ But of the translacion of Boece de Consolacione, and othere bookes of legendes of seintes, and omelies, and moralitee, and devocioun,/ that thanke I oure Lord Jhesu Crist and his blisful Mooder, and alle the seintes of hevene,/ bisekynge hem that they from hennes forth unto my lyves ende sende me grace to biwayle my giltes and to studie to the salvacioun of my soule, and graunte me grace of verray penitence, confessioun and satisfaccioun to doon in this present lyf,/ thurgh the benigne grace of hym that is kyng of kynges and preest over alle preestes, that boghte us with the precious blood of his herte,/ so that I may been oon of hem at the day of doom that shulle be saved. Qui cum Patre et Spiritu Sancto vivit et regnat Deus per omnia secula. Amen.

In the second part, the author asks the reader to pray that Christ may forgive his sins, in particular his "translacions and enditynges of worldly vanitees," which he claims to "revoke in my retracciouns"; lists these works by name, including among them, along with the majority of his literary corpus, "the tales of Caunterbury, thilke that sownen into synne"; indicates his thankfulness to Christ, Mary, and all the saints of heaven for his translation of Boethius and "othere bookes of legendes of seintes, and omelies, and moralitee, and devocioun"; and concludes by naming those things for which he implores Christ, Mary, and the saints.

My reason for treating these as two distinct, but related, parts is that the author makes two shifts at the juncture between these lines. The first shift is rhetorical: he shifts from asking readers to attribute their pleasure or displeasure to its proper source to asking readers to pray for the forgiveness of his sins. The second shift is grammatical: he changes the explicit referent of his remarks from the "litel tretys" to a greater list of his works. This division of the Retraction stands in contrast to a more common division of the Retraction into three parts, which Anita Obermeier describes as follows: "the initial prayer, the author's plea for intercession on his behalf (1081-84); the 'retractio' proper, his confession of his literary offenses and the list of works (1085-89); and the final prayer (1090-92)" ("Chaucer's Retraction" 779). The primary differences between my proposed division and the conventional one are that the conventional division includes line 1084 in the first part of the Retraction and that it identifies a distinct third part in lines 1090-92. My reasons for departing from the convention in these two respects are both grammatical and rhetorical. Line 1085, the starting point of the second part of the conventional division, which begins with "and namely," depends grammatically upon the "giltes" to which Chaucer refers in line 1084. Similarly, the conventional third part, lines 1090-92, beginning with "bisekynge hem," depends grammatically on the "Lord Jhesu Crist and his blisful Mooder" of line 1089. By contrast, the end of my proposed part one is a full stop, and the beginning of my proposed part two begins with the clearly transitional "wherefore." Thus, the only clean grammatical break of the two proposed dividing points is the one I suggest, between lines 1083 and 1084. Just as the two-part division more closely follows the grammatical structure of the passage, so it more closely reflects the

rhetorical movement of the passage. The clear rhetorical shift in the passage occurs at the juncture between lines 1083 and 1084. Chaucer makes two basic requests of readers in the Retraction. First, in lines 1081-83, he asks readers to attribute their pleasure or displeasure with the Parson's Tale to its proper source. Second, in lines 1084-92, he asks readers to pray for the forgiveness of his sins. All that is included in the second part of the Retraction, including Chaucer's confession, the list of works, and what Obermeier refers to as the "'retractio' proper" and the "final prayer" are qualifications or elaborations of this basic rhetorical act—the request for prayer. Setting apart the last three lines, which are an extension of Chaucer's statement of gratitude for his works in lines 1088-89, from the rest of the passage artificially separates the confession, list of works, and what is called the "'retractio' proper" from the context of Chaucer's request for prayer. In general, the tripartite division has the effect of laying undue stress on the poet's literary confession and isolating this confession from the larger rhetorical framework of the passage. By contrast, the proposed two-part division more closely follows both the grammatical structure and the rhetorical movement of the passage without artificially isolating or emphasizing any one part.

The first part of the Retraction sets up a number of the problems that have been central to scholarly debate. Who is the speaker of the Retraction? What is the "litel tretys" to which the speaker refers? For which work(s) is Chaucer declaring a doctrinal intention? All three of these problems arise entirely from the context in which the Retraction is placed in most manuscripts, immediately following the Parson's Tale and concluding the *Canterbury Tales*. Apart from the context of the *Canterbury Tales*,

Vaughan has pointed out, there is no difficulty in reading the Parson's Tale and the

Retraction as a single "Treatise on Penitence" written in Chaucer's single, authorial voice

(46). Similarly, without the possibility of another referent for "tretys," the word is applied

simply to the Parson's Tale, along with the doctrinal intention that follows. Yet, as both

Owen and Vaughan acknowledge, the manuscript evidence is overwhelmingly in support

of the Retraction as the earliest, if not authorial, ending for the *Canterbury Tales*.[2] Owen

and Vaughan have argued persuasively that the Parson's Tale and the Retraction

originally stood alone as a "Treatise on Penitence." The most important implications of

this point, however, are for future readings of these texts (in effect, a newly discovered

text) apart from the context of the *Canterbury Tales*, which can now proceed on solid

ground. For interpretations of the *Canterbury Tales*, including the Retraction, the origin

of the Parson's Tale and the "Treatise on Penitence" is of primarily historical importance.

Whatever their origins, the Parson's Tale and the Retraction have been part of the

experience of reading the *Canterbury Tales* for most readers since the time of the earliest

manuscripts, and their placement at the end of the *Canterbury Tales* may well have been

authorial, even if they were originally envisioned as a separate work.[3] Thus, the problems

created by this placement must be considered in context.

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[2] See Ch. 1, p. 19.

[3] Readers of the editions produced between Thynne (1532) and Urry (1721), of course,

experienced the *Canterbury Tales* without the Retraction. This omission, however, was

not contemporary with Chaucer and not able to persist into the modern era.

As Owen and Vaughan have described, the earliest recorded readings of the Parson's Tale and Retraction, the scribal rubrics that mark a transition between the two texts, show a gradual process of setting the texts apart and distinguishing the speaker of the Retraction, "the makere of this book" in the Ellesmere rubric, which most modern editions have followed, from the speaker of the Parson's Tale. The textual cue provided by the rubric, however, has not settled the question of speaker, as scholars have suggested further ways of dividing up the speakers of the texts in the form of the various interpolation theories, which I have discussed in detail in Chapter 1 (pp. 18-23). Here I need only repeat that I find the various arguments for interpolation unconvincing. Even those versions of the interpolation thesis that arise out of supposed textual evidence, rather than mere distaste for the Retraction, leave unanswered a fundamental question: why would Chaucer insert a conclusion spoken in his own authorial voice into a speech assigned to the Parson? It would seem the burden of proof rests on those advancing such a complex reading of these lines. This unanswered question, added to the fact that the lines and phrases attributed to the Parson by those arguing for interpolation, including "litel tretys" and the Romans passage, can just as easily be assigned to Chaucer, leaves the various interpolation arguments wanting. A straightforward reading of the passage finds the speaker making two basic requests of readers: a generous interpretation of his intentions and prayer for his soul. Both of these requests are easily and reasonably attributed to Chaucer, the author of the *Canterbury Tales*, including the Parson's Tale, and the rest of the works listed in the Retraction.

The "litel tretys" to which Chaucer refers in line 1081 is best understood as the Parson's Tale. Although D. W. Robertson and Bernard Huppé ignited much discussion of this phrase by arguing that here, as well as in two similar instances in the introduction to the *Tale of Melibee* (VII.957, 963), "litel tretys" refers to the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole, no conclusive evidence was ever put forward for this reading.[4] Robertson's and Huppé's readings of the *Melibee* passage rest on the assumption that Chaucer could not be using "tretys" there to refer to his immediate source for *Melibee*, Renaud de Louens' *Livre de Mellibee et Prudence*, "for it would be meaningless, unless we are to assume that the pilgrim-audience consists of a group of scholarly collators, each equipped with the critical edition of the original" (Huppé 235-36). Instead, they argued that the word had the meaning of "narrative" and referred to the *Canterbury Tales*, and this reading of "tretys" supported their larger argument that Chaucer is reminding the reader in this passage that the "sentence" of the *Canterbury Tales* is "al oon" (VII.952). Huppé then used this reading of the word in the *Melibee* passage to support a similar reading of "litel tretys" in the Retraction. His only argument for this reading from the Retraction itself was that "litel tretys" could not refer to the Parson's Tale because there was nothing in that tale for Chaucer to feel guilty about (236). Robertson rested his reading of "litel

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[4] I have not found a single commentator or editor prior to Robertson and Huppé who understood "tretys" as a reference to the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole. The only editor I have encountered who even acknowledges that there is a question about the matter is Tyrwhitt (1775), while such editors as Skeat (1900) and Robinson (1957) simply assume the phrase applies to the Parson's Tale with no indication of a controversy.

tretys" in the Retraction on the rubric that closes the Parson's Tale, in some manuscripts,

with "heere is ended the book of the tales of Caunterbury." "The inference," he argued,

"that the author of the rubric thought 'this book' and the 'litel tretys' to be one and the

same is clear" (369, n. 179). Most scholars since Robertson and Huppé have found these

readings strained.[5] Although it is true that "tretys" was used in Middle English to refer to

a narrative work, there is no evidence that Chaucer ever used it this way.[6] Furthermore,

Glending Olson and John W. Clark have each offered plausible readings of the *Melibee*

passage that take "litel tretys" as a reference to the various versions in which the Melibee

and Prudence story existed, presenting an alternative to the "either-or" approach of

Robertson and Huppé. As for the evidence from the Retraction itself, Robertson's

assumption that the interpretation offered by the author of the rubric can settle the

question of reference is suspect. The author of the rubric may well have understood the

reference of "litel tretys" and "this book" to be one and the same, but this evidence is not

as strong as evidence from the text itself. Finally, Huppé's argument that the phrase

cannot refer to the Parson's Tale because there is nothing in that work to feel guilty about

misconstrues the opening lines of the Retraction. Chaucer does not admit feeling any

guilt about the "litel tretys"—he simply asks the reader to thank God for what is pleasing

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[5] For a more thorough dismantling of Robertson's and Huppé's arguments, see Olson, "A

Reading of the *Thopas-Melibee* Link," and Clark, "'This Litel Tretys' Again." Clark (p.

155, n. 9) offers a list of scholars who have taken "litel tretys" as a reference to the

Parson's Tale. To his list might be added Minnis (*Authorship* 207).

[6] *MED*, "tretis(e), n." See Olson, p. 150, for Chaucer's use of the word.

in it and to ascribe anything displeasing to a lack of skill rather than ill-will. In any case, few scholars who do not already share the "doctrinal" view of the *Canterbury Tales* that this reading supports have accepted Roberston's and Huppé's interpretation. The simplest reading of the passage is that "litel tretys" refers to the work that immediately precedes it, the Parson's Tale.[7]

The first part concludes with Chaucer's statement of intention for the Parson's Tale, which is borrowed from St. Paul: "All that is written is written for our doctrine, that by the steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope" ("quaecumque enim scripta sunt ad nostram doctrinam scripta sunt ut per patientiam et consolationem scripturarum spem habeamus," Romans 15.4). Chaucer's use of this scriptural passage invites comparison with other contexts in which it is found. In its original scriptural context, the passage is a reference to the edifying nature of divine scripture. Some authors, however, including Chaucer in the Nun's Priest's Tale (discussed below, pp. 170-73, along with other parallel uses of Romans 15.4), used the passage to point to the doctrinal value of pagan and non-scriptural works or to justify the reading of such works. Thus, Chaucer's application of the passage to a non-scriptural work, the Parson's Tale, is not without precedent. Second, this Pauline justification of secular literature is associated with a literary tradition from which Chaucer drew in

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[7] It is also worth noting that if Owen's and Vaughan's thesis is accepted, the phrase can only refer to the Parson's Tale, for the *Canterbury Tales* would not have been available as a referent in the Retraction's original context.

various ways, the genre of *compilatio*.[8] In this tradition, the terms *compilatio* and

compilator indicated both a literary form and a literary role. A *compilatio* was a

collection of the statements of *auctores*, selected and arranged in a particular order by a

compilator, who typically claimed responsibility only for the selection and arrangement

of the pieces, not for the statements themselves.[9] In defending and explaining their work,

some compilers used this Pauline justification of secular literature to stand for the final

cause of the work, much as Chaucer uses the Romans passage in reference to the Parson's

Tale. Thus, again, Chaucer's use of the passage to stand for his intention is not without

precedent. The implications of associating Romans 15.4 with the *compilatio* tradition will

be discussed in more detail below; for now, I wish merely to note that Chaucer's use of

this passage from St. Paul signals such an association, and that Chaucer is not unique in

applying what was originally a referent to the edifying nature of divine scripture to

secular literature in general or to his own work in particular.

     The referent of Chaucer's statement of intention here, like the referent of "litel

tretys" of line 1081, has also been the subject of some debate. Some scholars, including

Minnis, have argued that, while "litel tretys" refers to the Parson's Tale in particular,

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[8] My discussion of the development and qualities of the genre of *compilatio* here and

below draws on the work of Minnis, especially *Authorship*, pp. 190-210.

[9] For more on the role of the compiler with respect to the *ordinatio*, or arrangement of

parts, see Parkes, "The Influence of the Concepts of *Ordinatio* and *Compilatio* on the

Development of the Book," especially pp. 58-62.

when Chaucer cites Romans 15.4 the reference expands to the *Canterbury Tales* as a

whole.[10] Minnis makes this argument on the basis of other medieval references to

Romans 15.4, the majority of which refer to a compilation rather than to a single text

(207). The language of the Retraction, however, seems at odds with this interpretation.

Although it is tempting (and not only for Robertsonian critics) to see line 1083 as

Chaucer's stated intention for his last and greatest work, this application runs against a

plain reading of the passage. In lines 1081-82 Chaucer asks the reader to praise God for

what is pleasing in the Parson's Tale and not to blame the author for what is displeasing.

Line 1083 ("For oure book seith, 'Al that is writen is writen for our doctrine,' and that is

myn entente") begins with the conjunction "for" (in the sense of "because"), clearly

connecting the clause that follows to the lines that precede it, which refer specifically and

exclusively to the Parson's Tale.[11] Thus, although expanding the referent of the Romans

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[10] Howard suggests that Chaucer "slipped unawares" from his earlier reference to the

Parson's Tale into a reference to the whole *Canterbury Tales* (59-60).

[11] D. W. Robertson, in defending his application of "litel tretys" to the *Canterbury Tales*,

makes the point that Chaucer's statement of intention "makes no sense as a reference to

the Parson's Tale, which is transparently doctrinal" (p. 369, n. 179). This would be true if

Chaucer were defending the *meaning* of the Parson's Tale as doctrinal, but this is not

what he is doing. Chaucer is defending his *intention* as "doctrine." In other words, he is

making the point that whatever readers find in the text (pleasing or displeasing), he

intended to instruct them.

15.4 passage to include the whole of the *Canterbury Tales* might be convenient for interpretive purposes, such a reference rests on a strained reading of these lines.

The reference of Chaucer's words expands beyond the Parson's Tale with the first word of the following line (l. 1084), the adverb "wherefore," which signals his rhetorical shift and introduces the request for prayer. Next, in lines 1085-87, he expands on the nature of the sins for which the reader is to pray. At this point, Chaucer is no longer commenting on the Parson's Tale exclusively, as the sins he names are his "translacions and enditynges of worldly vanitees, the whiche I revoke in my retracciouns" (l. 1085). He goes on to list these works by name, including among them, "the tales of Caunterbury, thilke that sownen into synne" (l. 1086), along with the majority of his literary corpus. These works he distinguishes from those works for which he thanks Christ, Mary, and all the saints of heaven, which are his translation of Boethius and "othere bookes of legendes of seintes, and omelies, and moralitee, and devocioun" (l. 1088). For many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century critics, these lines occasioned the lamentation, biographical speculation, and assumptions of an intellectual decline (or textual interpolation) discussed in Chapter One.[12] That the lines indicated a rejection or disavowal of Chaucer's greatest works was treated as a given and reinforced by the convention, established by Urry, of referring to the entire passage as Chaucer's "Retraction," "Retractions," or "Retractation." Many later critics who were less despairing of the Retraction did not deny

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[12] Hales offers a good example of scholarly lamentation, while Lounsbury and Tyrwhitt propose various theories of interpolation or intellectual decline. See Ch. 1, pp. 18-23.

that the lines comprised a rejection of Chaucer's works, but they found such a rejection either an aesthetically appropriate ending, "neatly calculated" in Baldwin's words, or a morally appropriate act of piety.[13] Even ironist critics, who deny Chaucer's personal sincerity in these words, and post-modern critics, who point to a tension between rejection and affirmation in the Retraction, base their readings on an ostensible disavowal in these lines, which is undermined or counter-balanced by other implications of Chaucer's language.[14] This assumption of a disavowal is based upon Chaucer's statement in line 1085 that he "revoke[s]" in his "retracciouns" his "translacions and enditynges of worldly vanitees." Understanding whether or not this line constitutes a disavowal and, if so, of what, depends upon two important matters: the meanings of the words "revoke" and "retracciouns" and the referent of the latter.

As a number of scholars have shown, both words had a wide range of meanings and associations in Middle English and the languages from which they were derived. Olive Sayce points out that both classical Latin *revocare* and OF *revoquier* have the primary sense of "call back" or "recall." Only in late Latin and in medieval French from the fourteenth-century onwards did the words acquire the sense of "withdraw." Sayce

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[13] Baldwin, p. 110. Among those critics who find the ending aesthetically appropriate are Robertson, Huppé, Ruggiers, Howard, Delasanta, Schricker, and Dean. Critics who find it a morally appropriate ending include Madeleva, Madden, and Donaldson.

[14] The most influential ironist reading is that of Olive Sayce. Post-modern critics include Travis and Portnoy.

concludes that Chaucer's use of the word derives from the late medieval French sense of "withdraw" (242). Skeat, however, objected to this meaning on logical grounds, since for Chaucer such an action would have been impossible. He argued that Chaucer is here merely saying that he wishes to "recall" (i.e. "bring to mind") what he "may have said amiss" (475). The range of meanings for "revoke" in Middle English was wide, including those already mentioned, in addition to the senses of "revive," "bring back" or "rescue," "restore," "repeal," and "repress." Aside from this passage, Chaucer used the word only once, in *Troilus*, in the sense of "revive" (3.1118). Although this single instance is insufficient to establish the word's meaning in the Retraction, it does increase the likelihood that Chaucer uses the word in the Retraction to mean something more like "call back" or "recall" than "withdraw." This likelihood is reinforced when we consider the other word whose definition is critical to understanding Chaucer's meaning in this passage: "retracciouns."

Although the context suggests that Chaucer uses "revoke" in either the sense of "withdraw" or "bring to mind," the possibilities are greater for "retracciouns." Chaucer's use of the word here appears to be the only extant example of its use in such a context.[15] Sayce has offered the fullest discussion of the possible derivations for the word. They include Latin *retractio*, which has the sense of "withdrawal" (the verb form *retrahere* can be transitive or intransitive in meaning), and the extended form *retractatio*, which in its

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[15] The only other context being a medical one: a withdrawal of blood or the drawing back of the tongue. MED, "retraccioun, n."

verb form (*retractare*) signifies "reconsider," "revise," and "withdraw" (transitively or intransitively), and in its noun form signifies "reconsideration" and "remembrance," in addition to "withdrawal." The plural form, *retractationes*, signifying "revisions" or "corrections," was used primarily in reference to St. Augustine's work bearing that title. These words appear in OF in the forms *retraction*, in the senses of "reproach" and "withdrawal" (the verb form *retraire* is either transitive or intransitive and includes the sense "revoke"), and *retractation*, in reference to St. Augustine's *Retractationes*. The ME words "retracten" and "retractaciones" are derived from the Latin, the former used transitively in the sense of "draw back" or "draw in," and the latter used only in the plural as a reference to Augustine's work.[16] Sayce suggests an amalgam of the meanings and associations from the various cognates: "Chaucer has thus probably added to a noun derived from French in the sense of 'withdrawal,' the meaning of 'revoke' present in the related verbs, and combined this with an allusion to the well-known title of Augustine's work" (243). Sayce's reading, however, begs the question: she assumes the French derivation on the grounds that the sense in which Chaucer uses the word here ("withdraw/revoke") is not attested in the Latin. But the sense in which Chaucer uses the

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[16] See Sayce, pp. 242-44, and Tatlock for discussion of the various forms in Latin, French, and English. See also *MED*, "retractaciones, n. pl." and "retracten, v.," *OLD*, "retractatio, -onis," "retractio, -onis," "retracto, -are," and "retraho, -here," as well as the Latin dictionaries of Lewis and Short and Latham. Unfortunately, the *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources*, is only available through fascicle 11 (up to Pos-) at this time.

word is exactly the question. Tatlock suggested a different amalgam of the French and Latin: "The form *retracciouns . . .* instead of *retractaciouns*, may be meant to convey the idea of withdrawal as well as of rehandling" (524). He also points out that the plural form makes the word concrete in sense. As I mentioned above, the only attested use in ME of the plural form "retracciouns" occurs in this passage, and the only attested uses of the plural "retractaciouns" are references to Augustine's *Retractationes*. Similarly, in OF and Latin, the plural forms of the word are used primarily in reference to Augustine's work. The plural form, then, by making the sense concrete, increases the likelihood, as others have also noted, of an allusion to Augustine's *Retractationes*.[17] Thus, it seems likely that Chaucer's use of the word here is an allusion to Augustine's work, but whether the word draws more heavily on the notions of "withdrawal" and "revoking" or those of "reconsidering," "remembering," and "revising" is a matter of some debate. A look at Augustine's work in relation to the Retraction, offered below, will shed some light on the question.

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[17] Both Sayce and Tatlock see a reference to Augustine in the word. Tatlock discusses three Latin works, including Augustine's, that use the word concretely in the sense of a reconsideration or correction. He concludes that Chaucer's reference is probably either to Augustine or to Gerald de Barri's *Descriptio Cambriae*, "either of which might have served to crystallize a narrowly pious impulse in the sick or aging Chaucer" (525). A more recent reading that explores the reference to Augustine in greater depth is Rosemarie Potz McGerr's, "Opening the Book and Turning the Page in the *Canterbury Tales*," Ch. 7 of her *Chaucer's Open Books*.

The referent of "retracciouns" is generally assumed to be the list of works

Chaucer offers in lines 1086-87. There is less certainty than is usually admitted, however,

that this list of works in fact constitutes Chaucer's "retracciouns," whether that word is

understood in the sense of reconsideration or of withdrawal. The tendency among editors

to use the singular form "Retraction" or "Retractation" to refer to Chaucer's work as a

whole has the effect of generalizing the word, as if it signified the action represented by

the entire passage. As noted above, though, Chaucer's use of the word is more concrete:

he is either referring to the lines that follow, his list of works, as his "retracciouns" or he

is referring to another work of "retracciouns" that has not survived. The question is

skewed in one direction by the modern editorial convention of placing a colon after the

word "retracciouns," implying that what follows the colon, the list of works, is an

elaboration on this word: ". . . my translacions and enditynges of worldly vanitees, the

whiche I revoke in my retracciouns:/ as is the book of Troilus . . . ." The list of works,

however, introduced by the conjunction "as," can just as easily be read as pointing back

to "translacions and enditynges," with the intervening clause being regarded as

parenthetical. "Retracciouns," then, could point to a separate work of Chaucer's that has

not survived, rather than to the list of works itself. If this were in fact the case, then the

convention of referring to this passage as Chaucer's "Retraction," and along with it the

implication that Chaucer is disavowing or retracting (in the modern sense, i.e. "taking

back") the works listed would no longer be tenable. Should such a work exist, it might

indeed contain a disavowal of Chaucer's literary corpus, but we would need to examine

that work to determine the nature of Chaucer's disavowal, and what is commonly referred

to as the "Retraction" would cease to carry such heavy implications. While the prospect of proving such a work existed is doubtful, the suggestion cannot be dismissed outright. The language of the passage itself is open to either interpretation, and the referent of "retracciouns" must not be taken for granted.

The list of works, beginning, in lines 1087-88, with those the author identifies as his "translacions and enditynges of worldly vanitees," reads for the most part as a straightforward accounting of Chaucer's major poems. Aside from the references to "the book of the Leoun," which apparently refers to a work that has not survived, and the "book of the XXV. Ladies," a reference to the *Legend of Good Women*, although that work includes the stories of only ten women, the rest of the works named are easily identified. One work, however, is distinguished from the rest with a qualification: "the tales of Caunterbury, thilke that sownen into synne." Whereas the rest of the works listed are identified as worldly vanities in their entirety, Chaucer includes in this category only those *Canterbury Tales* that "sownen into synne." The meaning of "sownen into synne" is usually understood to be something like "conduce to sin," a reading that leads to the conclusion that Chaucer is expressing concern with the effect his work may have on readers.[18] The word Chaucer uses here, however, a form of the verb *sounen*, need imply

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[18] Benson, in his 2000 edition of the *Canterbury Tales* and the *Riverside Chaucer*, glosses the phrase as "tend toward, are conducive to, sin." Neither Robinson nor Skeat commented specifically on the phrase, and I have not encountered a single critical study that offers a gloss for it. Most scholars choose to quote Chaucer's words directly.

nothing more than that the tales "have to do with" or "are in accord with" sin. ME *sounen* (Latin *sonare*, OF *soner*) had a range of meanings, but its primary sense was "to make a sound," and, by extension, "to play" an instrument, or, of a song or noise itself, "to sound." More abstracted senses included "to proclaim" or "tell," and therefore "to indicate," "reveal," or "mean." When combined with the prepositions "in" or "into," meanings included "express," "have to do with," "be in accord with," "be a concern to," and "incite." Chaucer used the word 28 times, including ten instances with the prepositions "in" or "into."[19] Of these latter instances, the majority describe an attribute of a person's actions or speech, and none carries the clear implication of inciting or encouraging.[20] We are told, for example, in the General Prologue that the Clerk's speech

Wurtele's claim, however, that in the Retraction Chaucer "made a public disavowal of whatever in his work conduced to sin" appears to depend on this gloss (349).

[19] The instances that do not include the preposition are: *Astr.* 1.21.52; *Bo.* 1.2.16, 2.pr3.17, 4.5.16; *BD* 926; *CT* I.275, 565, V.105, 270, X.160; *HF* 1202, 1826; *LGW* F 91; *Rom.* 715; *Tr.* 2.573, 1031, 3.189, 5.678. In the majority of these instances (13), the word is used in the sense of "produce a sound" or "play an instrument"; twice it means "speak" or "declare"; once each it signifies "mean," "seem," and "imitate."

[20] *CT* I.307, V.517, VI.54, VII.1967, 2158, IX.195, X.1086; *Tr.* I.1036, III.1414, IV.1676. The *MED*, "sounen, v.," cites the line in question in the sense of "to concern (sth.), have to do with," and three of the above instances in the sense of "to be in accord with (sth.)." It does not cite any of Chaucer's uses of the word in the sense of "lead to (sth.), incite, encourage."

was "sownynge in moral vertu" (I.307); in the Squire's Tale, that the falcon "kepeth in

semblaunt alle his observaunces / That sownen into gentilesse of love" (V.517); and in

the Physician's Tale, that Virginia's words are "sownynge in vertu and gentilesse"

(VI.54). For an example outside of the *Canterbury Tales*, we can look at Chaucer's

description of the night Troilus and Criseyde spend together, which we are told " . . . was

byset in joie and bisynesse/ Of al that souneth into gentilesse" (III.1414). As the first

three examples illustrate, Chaucer was particularly fond of using the phrase to call

attention to someone's virtue or "gentilesse," and in such a context the meaning of

"conduce to" seems wholly unnecessary—the point Chaucer is establishing in such

instances is the moral quality that one's words or actions reveal, not the state into which

those words or actions "conduce." By contrast, when the word is used in ME in the sense

of "incite" or "encourage," often the context clearly reveals an explicit interest in the

effect of one's actions or behavior on oneself or others. [21] For example, John Capgrave's

Life of Saint Gilbert of Sempringham makes the following claim about the saint: "If ony

man had interfered wordes whech wer not plesauns to God, ne soundying to uertuous lif,

þei schuld gretly displese him" (96.12). The parallel construction of "plesauns to God"

and "soundyng to uertuous lyf," both of which modify "wordes," suggests causative force

for "soundyng" as for "plesauns." The anonymous Middle English translation of

Christine de Pisan's *Book of the Body Politic* makes the causative or effective force of the

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[21] In addition to the two examples cited here, the *MED* offers seven quotations for

"sounen" under the meaning of "to cause (sth.), produce" and "lead to (sth.), incite,

encourage." *MED*, "sounen, v."

behavior in question clear, not through a grammatical construction but through the logic

of the assertion: "to be vertuous is . . . to withdrawe all thyngis that sownyth to euyll and

to vices": to be virtuous is to abandon all things that lead to the opposite state (42.1-4).

None of Chaucer's uses of this phrase, however, appears to require, either grammatically

or logically, causative force for "sowneth," and all, including the instance in question,

can be safely understood in the senses of "have to do with" or "be in accord with."

Although the word was indeed capable of carrying the implication of "conducing" in

Middle English, this does not appear to be certainly a sense on which Chaucer drew. It is

of course possible that Chaucer is nonetheless drawing on the causative force of the word

in the Retraction, but this reading cannot be taken for granted. Skeat rightly understood

the phrase in a restricted sense: "Whilst thanking God for his devotional works, it was not

out of place for him to 'recall' his more secular ones; for this expression [i.e. 'thilke that

sownen into synne'] seems to mean no more than that he could not claim they were

written in God's service" (475). Understanding "sownen" in this sense ("having to do

with" or "being in accord with" sin) does not remove the moral implications of the

phrase; it simply changes their emphasis. Chaucer is clearly including the writing of at

least some of the *Canterbury Tales* among his "giltes." The "synne" into which these

tales "sowneth," however, is Chaucer's sin in writing them, not the sin into which they

could lead readers. In other words, while the passage no doubt constitutes an admission

of guilt on Chaucer's part for writing worldly vanities, this confession need not imply any

judgment on the suitability of these works for readers or any concern for their harmful

effects.

Among the "worldly vanitees," then, Chaucer includes only the *Canterbury Tales* that are in accord with sin. The specificity of this list, amplified by the qualification of the *Canterbury Tales*, stands in stark contrast to the generality of the list of works for which he gives thanks. Among these, he lists only one work by name: his "translacion of Boece de Consolacione." The rest are referenced by type: "bookes of legendes of seintes, and omelies, and moralitee, and devocioun" (l. 1088). Sayce takes the generality of the reference, in contrast to the specificity of the list of "worldly vanitees," as evidence that Chaucer is viewing the condemnation of secular literature "with ironic and humorous detachment" (245). It is certainly possible, however, to explain the contrast without resorting to irony, by returning to the broader context of this line. The list of "worldly vanitees" occurs in the context of a list of sins for which the reader is asked to pray. The mention of "bookes of legendes of seintes, and omelies, and moralitee, and devocioun" occurs at a transition in the passage, in which the author turns from naming his sinful acts to describing his gratitude to "Lord Jhesu Crist and his blisful Mooder." The urgency, and therefore the need for specificity, is greater in the context of the confession and request for prayer than in the context of the expression of gratitude. Like other features of the Retraction, including the author's confession and reference to his "retracciouns," the author's expression of gratitude must be considered within the larger rhetorical context.

The final note of the passage, though not distinct enough to merit further division of the passage into three parts, is Chaucer's movement away from consideration of his own works and toward reflection on "Jhesu Crist and his blisful Mooder." The last three lines focus on the grace he hopes to receive from Christ and Mary as a result of his, and

the readers', prayers. Some have taken these lines, especially the reference to "penitence, confessioun and satisfaccioun," the three parts of "verray parfit Penitence" considered in the Parson's Tale (X.106), and the appellation applied to Christ, "preest over alle preestes," as better attributed to the Parson than to Chaucer himself. There is nothing in these lines, however, that would require attributing them to anyone other than Chaucer. Certainly Chaucer has as much reason as the Parson to make an oblique reference to the Parson's Tale—it is no doubt as much his work as the Parson's. And while the reference to Christ as "preest over alle preestes" would certainly be appropriate for the Parson, there is no reason why it would not also be appropriate for Chaucer. Once again, the burden of proof rests on those arguing for interpolation, for nothing about the passage as a whole requires identifying more than one speaker.

The passage concludes, appropriately, with a conventional Latin phrase used to conclude liturgical prayers and sermons: "Qui cum Patre et Spiritu Sancto vivit et regnat Deus per omnia secula. Amen" (l. 1092). Once again, we are reminded of the rhetorical action of the passage: it is a request for prayer. Chaucer the author begins to recede from view as the focus shifts from the subject of the prayer, his list of works, to its proper aim: "the benigne grace of hym that is kyng of kynges and preest over alle preestes." With this final line, Chaucer recedes from view entirely. The final note of the passage is struck not by any act of confession or "retraction," or for that matter by any action of Chaucer's, but by consideration of the eternal reign of Christ.

Before considering the two parts of the Retraction separately, let us first consider

what they have in common. The first and most obvious, yet perhaps the most important,

point to make about the Retraction is that it is an address to the reader. One of the earliest

manuscripts that marks a transition between the Parson's Tale and the Retraction, Harley

7334 (ca. 1410), contains a rubric that designates the Retraction as the "Preces de

Chaucer," the "Prayer of Chaucer."[22] The prayer, however, is addressed not to God but to

the reader: "alle that herkne this litel tretys or rede." Although it is true that in the last

few lines of the Retraction Chaucer's focus shifts away from the reader and toward his

thankfulness to God, the chief requests Chaucer makes, for a generous interpretation of

his intentions and for prayer, are addressed to the reader. Much attention has been paid to

what the Retraction reveals about its author and its relationship to the *Canterbury Tales*,

but the Retraction makes reference to the author and the *Canterbury Tales* only by way of

requesting certain actions and responses from the reader. Like many of the texts we

looked at in the previous two chapters, the Retraction reveals a strong interest in the role

of the reader. While the passage no doubt contains a literary confession and makes

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[22] On the dating of Harley 7334, see Manly and Rickert (220) and Owen (*Manuscripts* 7-

14). Owen argues that the rubric used in Harley 7334 is probably the earliest used to set

the Retraction apart from the Parson's Tale ("What the Manuscripts Tell Us" 242-244).

The more common rubrics are those that include a "leave-taking" formula, such as that

used in Ellesmere: "Heere taketh the makere of this book his leue." For more on the

various rubrics marking the transition from the Parson's Tale to the Retraction, see Ch. 1,

pp. 15-17.

reference to "retracciouns" of one kind or another, it does so only in the context of a request for prayer. As we consider the implications of the confession and apparent disavowal, we must remember that these are only subordinate elements in a larger rhetorical act. With this in mind, let us turn to a consideration of the two parts of Chaucer's speech act.

Immediately striking about the opening of the Retraction is the contrast between the contingency of the first two lines ("if ther be any thyng . . . And if ther be any thyng") and the finality of the third line ("oure book seith . . . and that is myn entente"). This contrast can be accounted for by the two standards of judgment, both outside of the text, to which Chaucer here appeals. The first standard is the interpretation of the reader. Chaucer does not assume that the reader will necessarily find anything pleasing or displeasing in the Parson's Tale. His language here is an admission that readers may have different responses to his words. The determination of what is pleasing in the Parson's Tale is left to those who "herkne this litel tretys or rede," and Chaucer does not presume to know how readers will judge. The second standard of judgment is Chaucer's intention. Chaucer does not cite the Romans passage to establish the meaning of the Parson's Tale (much less the *Canterbury Tales*) but to express his intention in writing it. The value of intention in this context is not primarily for interpretation, but for making a moral judgment upon the author. Chaucer offers his intention here not to establish the meaning of the Parson's Tale but to ensure that readers will not conclude that he meant them any

harm (or anything less than "doctrine") should they find something displeasing.[23] His

citing of Romans 15.4 occurs in the context of a defense of his will, that is, in an

explicitly moral context. From the author's point of view, intention can be expressed

without contingencies, for it is entirely within the author's control—despite the various

interpretive judgments that readers may make about it. The passage as a whole, then,

acknowledges the two kinds of judgments that can be made about the Parson's Tale and

its author: an interpretive judgment (on the text) and a moral judgment (on the author).

The interpretive judgment depends upon the text and rests in the hands of the reader; the

moral judgment depends upon intention, and rests in the hands of the author (or of God,

who will judge the intention).

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[23] Robert Myles, in *Chaucerian Realism*, rightly separates the interpretive question from

the moral question in this passage: "While he is concerned about intentional

misinterpretations that might 'sownen into synne' (X.1085), it is not the unintentional

misuse or misinterpretation of language that is Chaucer's primary concern. While we are

responsible for careless misspeaking which may lead others into sin, our imperfect fallen

nature together with the natural imperfection of language virtually guarantees that we

shall all, on occasion, be imperfect language users and interpreters. Rather than such

unintentional, 'natural' misuse, it is 'unnatural' misuse that is sinful: the intentional

upsetting of the 'natural' relationship between word and thing that one may 'arrette' or

attribute to someone's 'wyl.'" (26-7)

Although no direct sources for the Retraction have been found, scholars have identified a number of analogues that draw on literary *topoi* like those found in the Retraction. Sayce locates the Retraction in a medieval tradition of prologues and epilogues that includes the following conventions: recapitulation of the story and its moral, *captatio benevolentiae* or capturing the reader's sympathy, requests for favorable interpretation, protestation of modesty and incapacity, admonition to sinners to take heed, prayers and requests for intercession, and establishing the poet's name and the name of the work (232-33). Many of these conventions can be observed in the opening of the Retraction, in particular the request for favorable interpretation and the protestation of incapacity, and it is this part of the Retraction that appears most closely to resemble the available analogues. Chaucer's request that the reader thank God for anything pleasing in his work is closely paralleled by at least four of the analogues. [24] The analogues vary, however, in what they suppose to be the occasion of thanks and praise. In his *Le Testament*, for example, Jean de Meun appeals to an objective standard for evaluating his work:

> And if there is any good, may it go to the glory of God, and to the salvation of my
> soul and may it be of worth to those who are listening, and of the evil, if it is

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[24] All four analogues are reproduced, along with translations, in Anita Obermeier's article on the Retraction in *Sources and Analogues* (779-82). With the exception of Don Juan Manuel's *El Conde Lucanor*, all translations are Obermeier's.

there, I beg them not to be concerned but to retain the wheat and throw out the

chaff.

[Et s'il y a nuls biens, en la gloire Dieu aille,

Et au salut de m'ame et as escoutans vaille ;

Et du mal, s'il y est, leur pri qu'il ne leur chaille,

Mais retiengnent le grain et soufflent hors la paille.] (ll. 2109-12)

Like Chaucer, Jean de Meun offers a humble plea that the reader give credit to God and

frames it in similar contingent terms: "And if there is any good . . . and of the evil, if it is

there . . ." He appeals, however, to an objective standard—good or evil—for his works,

whereas Chaucer appeals to the reader's experience of the text—his pleasure or

displeasure. Neither presumes to know what the final judgment on the text will be, but

Chaucer's request leaves more responsibility in the hands of the reader. Jean de Meun's

reader will give credit to God for what is objectively in the text, while Chaucer's reader

will do so for what he finds pleasing. Another analogue, John Bromyard's *Summa*

Praedicantium, appeals, like the opening of the Retraction, to the reader's standard of

judgment: "moreover, whatever is deemed reprehensible in this work should be attributed

to my inadequacy; whatever is truly useful should be attributed to the mercy of the Savior

and the perpetual Virgin" ("ceterum quicquid in hoc opusculo reprehendendum estimatur/

mee asscribatur insufficientie, quicquid vero vitile/ saluatoris et perpetue virginis

attribatur clemencie," Prologue, p. 2). Although Bromyard does not signal a contingency

with an if/then construction, he nevertheless defers to the reader's standard of judgment:

it is the reader who will determine both what is reprehensible and what is useful in the work. A third analogue, from Boccaccio's *Genealogia Deorum Gentilium*, appears to have it both ways: "If it contains anything good, if it is well said, if it is suitable for your wishes, I am delighted and happy . . . . [C]ertainly, give to God, from whom every good and every perfect gift comes, the honors and thanks" ("si quid boni inest, si quid bene dictum, si quid votis tuis consonum, gaudeo et exulto . . . Deo quippe, a quo omne datum optimum et omne donum perfectum est, attribuas queso, eique honores impendito et gratias agito," Bk. 15, *Conclusio*, ll. 8-13). In contingent terms similar to those used by Chaucer and Jean de Meun, Boccaccio appeals to both the objective standard ("if it contains anything good, if it is well said") and the reader's assessment of the work ("if it is suitable for your wishes"). A final example, from Don Juan Manuel's *El Conde Lucanor*, resembles the Retraction in containing not only a request for favorable interpretation and a protestation of incapacity but also an explicit defense of the author's intention:

> And whatever they find therein that is not well said, let it not be blamed upon my intent, but rather on the weakness of my understanding. And if they find something well said or profitable, let them thank God for it, as He is the One through whom all good sayings and deeds are spoken and done.
>
> [Et lo que y fallaren que non es tan bien dicho, non pongan culpa a la mi entención, mas pónganla a la mengua del mio entendimiento. Et si alguna cosa

fallaren bien dicha o aprovechosa, gradéscanlo a Dios, ca Él es aquél por quien

todos los buenos dichos et fechos se dizen et se fazen.] (Prologue, p. 52; 8) [25]

Like Boccaccio, Don Juan Manuel appeals to both an apparently objective standard

("whatever they find . . . that is not well said") and the judgment of the reader ("if they

find something . . . profitable"). These analogues make it clear that Chaucer was working

with well-established literary *topoi*, yet these *topoi* were flexible enough to allow authors

to put various emphases on them. Given this range of emphasis, that Chaucer grounds his

protestation of humility in an acknowledgment of the reader's freedom of interpretation

must be regarded as a distinct authorial choice. Although, like Don Juan Manuel, he

defends his intention in absolute terms, he repeatedly foregoes the opportunity to make an

absolute judgment on the value of his works for readers.

The specific intention Chaucer claims in the opening lines of the Retraction

deserves closer attention. The scriptural passage Chaucer cites, as noted above, is from

Romans 15.4. Although in its original context this scriptural passage is a reference to the

edifying nature of divine scripture, some authors, including Chaucer in the Nun's Priest's

Tale, used the passage to point to the doctrinal value of pagan and non-scriptural works

or to justify the reading of such works. Ralph Higden (c. 1280 – c. 1363), for example,

cites this passage of scripture in defense of his *Polychronicon*, although his point is not so

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[25] Page numbers refer to the translation and Spanish edition, respectively. The translation

is that of John E. Keller, L. Clark Keating, and Barbara E. Gaddy, *The Book of Count*

Lucanor and Patronio: A Translation of Don Juan Manuel's El Conde Lucanor.

much to justify secular literature *per se* as to distance himself from responsibility for the truthfulness of what he records: "For þe apostel seith nouȝt, 'All þat is write to oure lore is sooþ,' but he seiþ 'Al þat is i-write to oure lore it is i-write'" (1.1.10).[26] John of Salisbury (c. 1120-1180) alludes to the passage as part of a more general defense of secular learning:

> It may be assumed that all writings except those that have been disapproved should be read, since it is believed that all that has been written and all that has been done have been ordained for man's utility although at times he makes bad use of them.
>
> [Omnes tamen scripturas legendas esse probabile est, nisi sint reprobatae lectionis, cum omnia non modo quae scripta sed etiam quae facta sunt ad utilitatem hominis, licet eis abutatur interdum, instituta credantur.] (7.10) [27]

John's application of this Pauline idea takes it far beyond its original scriptural context—Paul's reference to all scripture becomes, literally, all that has been written, unless it is specifically prohibited. It is worth noting, too, that John replaces the Vulgate's "ad nostram doctrinam" with "ad utilitatem hominis," perhaps owing to the emphasis placed on spiritual utility in the commentary tradition and the "Type C" prologue. In some

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[26] Trevisa's translation. Higden's Latin is "Nam et apostolus non, 'Quaecunque scripta sunt vera sunt,' ait; sed, 'Quaecunque scripta sunt, ad nostram doctrinam scripta sunt' inquit."

[27] The translation is Joseph B. Pike's.

contexts, this Pauline-inspired justification of secular learning is used in conjunction with an admonition to the reader to take the good in the text and leave the bad, and authors turn into an imperative what John merely points out as a lamentable fact: the reader's responsibility (or failure) to use texts well. The anonymous fourteenth-century author of the *Ovide Moralisé*, for example, connects the Pauline idea to one of the commonly-cited utilities for non-scriptural texts that we saw in the *accessus* tradition, a utility that implies the reader's responsibility to take the good and leave the bad:

> If scripture doesn't lie to me, all that is written in books, whether good or evil, is for our instruction. For anyone who really wants to pay attention, evil is presented there so that one may guard against it, and good so that one may imitate it.

> [Se l'escripture ne me ment,
>
> Tout est pour nostre enseignement
>
> Quanqu'il a es livres escript,
>
> Soient bon ou mal li escript.
>
> Qui bien i vaudroit prendre esgart,
>
> Li maulz y est que l'en s'en gart,
>
> Li biens pour ce que l'en le face . . .] (ll. 1-7) [28]

The author of the *Ovide Moralisé* here connects the general Pauline idea of "instruction" to the specific utility provided by *exempla*. As I discussed in the previous chapter, the

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[28] The French text is that of de Boer, and the translation is Rita Copeland's, in *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation*, p. 110.

exemplary justification of literature opens up a broad field for both author and reader. The author is free to include virtually any kind of narrative, "whether good or evil," and the burden of responsibility is placed on the reader to make the right use of it. In effect, the responsibility for the ultimate value of the text is shifted from the author toward the reader.

As discussed above, this Pauline justification of secular literature is also associated with a literary tradition from which Chaucer drew in various ways, the genre of *compilatio*. In defending and explaining their work, some compilers in this tradition used this Pauline justification of secular literature to stand for the final cause of the work, much as Chaucer uses the Romans passage in reference to the Parson's Tale. Minnis identifies two conventions associated with the genre of *compilatio* that are directly relevant to Chaucer's use of the Pauline quotation in the Retraction. First is the author's disavowal of responsibility, which we saw expressed in reverse, as an assignment of responsibility to the reader, by the author of the *Ovide Moralisé*. The convention arises out of the specific role of *compilator*, which depended on a distinction between asserting (*assertio*), which was the role of an *auctor*, and reciting (*recitatio*), which was the role of a compiler. Minnis notes that many compilers were careful to distinguish in their works between those statements for which they accepted personal responsibility (assertions) and those for which they claimed no responsibility (recitations). Chaucer ostensibly classifies his *Treatise on the Astrolabe* as the latter, signaling his awareness of the genre of *compilatio*, the role of *compilator*, and the final cause expressed by Romans 15.4: "I n'am but a lewd compilator of the labour of olde astrologiens, and have it translatid in

myn Englissh oonly for thy doctrine."[29] Such a distinction may also help to explain

Chaucer's insistence, in the General Prologue and the Miller's Prologue, on his role as a

mere passive reporter (I.725-36; I.3171-75).[30] The Ellesmere scribe evidently understood

Chaucer to be writing in the genre of *compilatio*, as we can see from the rubric that

follows the Retraction in that manuscript: "Heere is ended the book of the tales of

Caunterbury, compiled by Geffrey Chaucer . . . ." The "disavowal of responsibility"

convention is related to another principle acknowledged or assumed by many compilers:

the reader's freedom of choice. Minnis cites the example of Vincent of Beauvais's

Speculum Maius, in which "no attempt has been made to force the *auctores* to speak with

one voice, and it is up to the reader to make his own choice from the discordant

auctoritates offered to him" (Minnis 201). Chaucer combines the principle of the reader's

freedom of choice with a disavowal of authorial responsibility in the Miller's Prologue,

when he admonishes the reader to "turne over the leef and chese another tale" and with

the warning that follows: "blameth nat me if that ye chese amys" (I.3177, 3181). The

compiler, writes Minnis, "is not responsible for his reader's understanding of any part of

the *materia*, for any effect which the *materia* may have on him and, indeed, for any error

or sin into which the *materia* may lead a reader" (201-2). The genre of *compilatio* and the

Romans 15.4 defense of secular literature bring into focus many of the assumptions that

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[29] *The Riverside Chaucer*, p. 662.

[30] Parkes first identified the influence of *compilatio* on the structure and content of the

Canterbury Tales (61-2). Minnis discusses this influence in greater detail, especially in

reference to Chaucer's authorial posturing in the *Canterbury Tales* (207-10).

we have encountered in other texts, including the assumption that intention (in many cases the specific intention of "doctrine") is the responsibility of the author, while determining the meaning, effect, and utility of a text are the responsibility of the reader.

Before applying these implications of Romans 15.4 to Chaucer's reference to the passage in the Retraction, we must look at Chaucer's other use of this scriptural passage in the Nun's Priest's Tale. Having finished his tale, the Nun's Priest quotes Paul's dictum to defend the tale's utility:

> But ye that holden this tale a folye,
>
> As of a fox, or of a cock and hen,
>
> Taketh the moralitee, goode men.
>
> For Seint Paul seith that al that writen is,
>
> To oure doctrine it is ywrite, ywis;
>
> Taketh the fruyt, and lat the chaf be stille. (VII.3438-43)

The Nun's Priest's point, that even a beast-fable concerning a cock, his paramours, and a fox, can contain "moralitee" and can be used for "oure doctrine," shares with the Retraction a basic application of Paul's dictum to non-scriptural texts. Both Chaucer and the Nun's Priest take the passage out of its original context and apply what was intended as a reference to divine scripture to their own texts. This in itself is not extraordinary, as the examples of Higden's *Polychronicon* and the *Ovide Moralisé* cited above can attest. However, the Nun's Priest's admonition must be viewed with some skepticism. Critics who read the Nun's Priest's tale as allegory tend to accept his words here at face value.

Robertson takes the passage as straightforward evidence of Chaucer's general concern for

sentence (367), while Huppé attributes the concern to the Nun's Priest and identifies the

specific *sentence* as the consequences of "desray" in marriage (176). Similarly, Mortimer

Donovan offers an allegorical reading of the tale as a sermon on the Christian's alertness

to moral obligation (498). That such morals can be gleaned from the Nun's Priest's tale

has not often been denied, although E. T. Donaldson cautioned that locating the tale's

meaning in such an allegorical *sentence* would leave Chaucer "guilty of the most horrid

misproportioning" (20).[31] Instead it is the abundance of morals that are and can be drawn

from the tale that has more often given critics pause. Stephen Manning argues that by

putting forth several morals for the story (Chauntecleer, the fox, and the Nun's Priest

each offer their own versions) Chaucer is weighing in on the medieval debate about the

value of fables or fiction in general and poking fun at those "who felt that a poem had to

have some moral in order to justify its existence" (416). Although, Manning argues,

Chaucer addresses his Pauline defense in the Retraction to "alle that herkne this litel

tretys or rede" the Nun's Priest addresses his argument specifically to those who "holden

this tale a folye," suggesting that the Nun's Priest's remarks are aimed as a comic barb at

those who, like Chaucer's Parson, detest "fables and swich wrecchednesse," preferring

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[31] Donaldson makes no mention of the Nun's Priest's use of Romans 15.4 in his article,

which is a response to the allegorical criticism of Robertson, Huppé, and others. Paul R.

Thomas makes a point similar to Donaldson's, that the meaning of the Nun's Priest's tale

is to be found not in allegory or doctrine but in the rhetorical elaboration of the tale, while

grounding his argument in a discussion of the Nun's Priest's citation of Romans 15.4.

"moralitee and vertuous mateere" (X.34, 38). Walter Scheps argues, similarly, that the abundance of morals in the tale constitutes a *reductio ad absurdum* of the Nun's Priest's admonition to take the "moralitee" (6). Both Manning and Scheps, therefore, take the citation of Romans 15.4 as a comic or ironic gesture, rather than a serious suggestion of how the tale is to be read. Whether or not the statement is taken as clearly ironic, Chaucer's placing of the Romans 15.4 passage, which he appears to cite un-ironically in the Retraction, in the hands of the Nun's Priest and at the end of a rhetorical and artistic flourish, creates, at the very least, a certain distance from the straightforward Pauline defense.

There are other differences as well between Chaucer's use of the passage in the Retraction and his use of it in the Nun's Priest's Tale. In the Nun's Priest's Tale the passage is used by one of Chaucer's pilgrims to justify a tale attributed to him by Chaucer's fiction, whereas in the Retraction Chaucer uses it in propria persona in reference to his own text. More importantly, the Nun's Priest uses the passage in the context of a direct admonition to the reader to take the "moralitee" from his tale, while Chaucer uses the passage in the context of a justification of his own intentions. The Nun's Priest places the emphasis of this passage on the reader; Chaucer places it on his own shortcomings as author. Together, these two uses of Romans 15.4 indicate Chaucer's awareness of the complementary responsibilities attributed to author and reader by the literary theory of his time: the author's responsibility to intend something beneficial for his reader and the reader's responsibility to find something useful. By their differences, they also demonstrate, as did Chaucer's use of related ideas in the General Prologue and

Miller's Prologue, the various uses to which Chaucer could put such ideas and the various emphases he could give them. Although I see no reason to read Chaucer's statement of intention in the Retraction as ironic, that need not imply Chaucer could not have used Paul's dictum to different ends elsewhere. Rather than reflecting uni-dimensionally the literary theory of his time, Chaucer tends to subject it to scrutiny and testing. The theory itself, at least insofar as authorial intention and utility are concerned, has a degree of internal consistency, but Chaucer's view of that theory varies, depending on his particular purposes.

Chaucer's use of Romans 15.4, as we have seen, connects his statement of intention in the Retraction with the genre of *compilatio* and the roles of author, reader, and compiler that are associated with this tradition. Although it may appear hasty to read all of these associations into the Retraction simply because Chaucer happens to cite the same passage of scripture that some compilers cite, I believe the reading is justified. In the first place, as we have seen, Chaucer clearly drew on the conventions of *compilatio* elsewhere in his writing. Second, leaving aside the question of what associations may have been in Chaucer's mind, the distinction between Chaucer's two appeals in lines 1081-83 (to the reader's interpretation and to the author's intention) is similar in nature to the distinction between the roles of author and reader associated with Romans 15.4. Chaucer's language ("if ther be any thyng that liketh hem . . . And if ther be any thyng that displese hem") assumes the same freedom and responsibility of the reader that we find associated with Romans 15.4 in other works. Chaucer does not assume that his statement of intention will control the meaning, interpretation, use, or effect of the text;

he states his intention only in the context of a moral defense of his role as author/compiler, much as he does in his apologies in the General Prologue and the Miller's Prologue. The consistency of Chaucer's understanding of the roles of author/compiler and reader between his statements in the General Prologue, the Miller's Prologue, the Nun's Priest's Tale, and these opening lines of the Retraction is remarkable, especially given that the Retraction is often viewed as a radical departure from the attitudes Chaucer expresses elsewhere in his works. Although the uses to which he puts these assumptions (and the emphases he gives them) vary considerably by context, the assumptions themselves remain largely intact.

Although Chaucer's reference in line 1083 is specifically to his intention for the Parson's Tale, the whole first section (ll. 1081-83) establishes a general framework, including the basic assumptions we have identified about the roles of author and reader, that must be carried over to the second part of the Retraction, Chaucer's request to the reader to pray for his sins. Some critics carry over the implications of Romans 15.4 to the rest of the Retraction to show that the scriptural quotation undermines Chaucer's "unqualified rejection" of his secular works.[32] This approach is useful if one agrees that

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[32] The phrase "unqualified rejection" is McGerr's, who writes: "In placing this assertion ahead of his discussion of specific texts, Chaucer counters both the Parson's condemnation of fiction and the possibility of reading the rest of the Retractions as an unqualified rejection of the greater portion of Chaucer's literary composition" (101).

lines 1084-92 in fact (or ostensibly) include a rejection or disavowal of some of

Chaucer's works. A careful reading of these lines, however, suggests that the notion of

disavowal or rejection has been overestimated. Just as it cannot be overemphasized that

in the opening lines of the Retraction Chaucer is offering a prayer to the reader, it cannot

be overemphasized that in these lines Chaucer is asking for the reader's prayer, and, in

particular, prayer for the forgiveness of his sins. Chaucer's focus here is on the moral

implications of his actions as an author and on the role the reader can play in his

salvation. Anything that can be said about the language Chaucer uses here or the

references he makes to his literary corpus must be understood in the larger context of this

request for prayer. Even if one holds to the view that Chaucer's words indicate a rejection

or disavowal of his work, that rejection or disavowal is not the primary aim of the

Retraction, but a subordinate theme. In the rush to explain the apparent, and surprising,

rejection, the primary thrust of Chaucer's words has too often been overlooked. Chaucer

maintains here, as elsewhere, his assumption that as author he is morally responsible for

his intentions and actions, but that readers will be the final arbiters of the meaning and

utility of the texts themselves.

One can hardly blame modern readers, however, for seeing a rejection in this

passage when it is introduced with the ominous title of "Chaucer's Retraction," followed

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Olive Sayce makes a similar point in her argument for an ironic understanding of the

Retraction (237).

by the author's claim that he "revokes" his works in his "retracciouns."[33] Modern usage

tends toward the meaning of "recant" for "retract" and "negate" for "revoke."[34] The

meanings of the Middle English words, however, afford other interpretations. As

discussed above, Chaucer appears to use "revoke" here in either the sense of "withdraw"

or "bring to mind," and his only other attested use of the word would suggest the latter.

The possibilities for "retracciouns" are greater, as the word encompassed the senses of

"withdrawal" and "revoking" as well as those of "reconsidering," "remembering," and

"revising." The plural forms of the word and its cognates in OF and Latin, as noted

above, were used primarily in reference to Augustine's *Retractationes*, and many

scholars see in Chaucer's word a reference to Augustine's work. Some understanding,

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[33] Benson's 2000 edition of the *Canterbury Tales* reserves this title for the explanatory

notes and not for the text itself. The *Riverside Chaucer* does the same, but refers to the

passage as "Chaucer's Retractation."

[34] The recent controversy surrounding the journal *Science*'s retraction of a paper by North

Korean scientists is a good example of the context in which the word is used today. In

this case, the journal determined that it was necessary to retract the paper once allegations

surfaced that the some of the research had been fabricated. Dr. Katrina Kelner, one of the

investigators in the case, commented, in response to the care that was taken to the

wording of the retraction, that "once a paper is retracted, you can't retract it again." The

notion of withdrawal, and even of negation, is clear (Kolata, "Amid Confusion, Journal

Retracts Korean's Stem Cell Paper").

then, of the purposes and content of Augustine's *Retractationes* may shed light on the lexical problem presented by the words "revoke" and "retracciouns."

Augustine's work, composed ca. 427 when he was seventy-three years old, does not retract his previous writings in the modern sense. Instead, he offers an inventory of his writings and attempts to clarify, correct, or defend his earlier assertions. In some cases, his comments are merely an expression of pleasure or displeasure with what he had written. In other cases, his intent is clearly to revise his work for the benefit of his readers, as he describes in Epistle 224:

> I have been engaged on a work which is extremely urgent, for I am revising all my works, and if there is anything in them which displeases me or could offend others, I have been making clear, partly by correcting and partly by defending, what can and ought to be read.
>
> [Agebam uero rem plurimum necessariam; nam retractabam opuscula mea et, si quid in eis me offenderet uel alios posset offendere, partim reprehendendo partim defendendo, quod legi posset et deberet, operabar.] [35]

Augustine shows concern here with the effect his works might have on his readers. In reconsidering and revising them, he is attempting to control, as far as is possible for an author, the potential effect his works might have on readers. He does not assume, however, that the attempt will succeed. He makes clear the distinction between his and

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[35] Goldbacher, pp. 452-3. Trans. Wilfrid Parsons, p. 118. Cited in McGerr, pp. 98-99.

his readers' experience of his works in the *Retractationes* in the course of his comments on the *Confessions*:

> The thirteen books of my *Confessions* praise the just and good God for my evil and good acts, and lift up the understanding and affection of men to Him. At least, as far as I am concerned, they had this effect on me while I was writing them and they continue to have it when I am reading them. What others think about them is a matter for them to decide. Yet I know that they have given and continue to give pleasure to many of my brethren.

> [Confessionum mearum libri tredecim et de malis et de bonis meis deum laudant iustum et bonum atque in eum excitant humanum intellectum et affectum; interim, quod ad me adtinet, hoc in me egerunt, cum scriberentur, et agunt, cum leguntur. Quid de illis alii sentiant, ipsi uiderint; multis tamen fraterbus eos multum placuisse et placere scio.] [36]

In the *Retractationes*, Augustine approaches a problem similar to that which he explored in *On Christian Doctrine* and the *Confessions*, but this time from the perspective of author rather than exegete. Just as in the earlier works he demonstrated great care in attempting to discover an author's intention, in the *Retractationes* he carefully reconsiders and refines his earlier writings to make his meanings clear for the benefit of the reader. Yet, in both his earlier works and in the *Retractationes* he recognizes the limits of authorship: while authors are morally responsible for their words and the

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[36] Knöll, pp. 137-38. Trans. Bogan, p. 130.

intentions behind them, readers will ultimately determine the value and effect of those words.

Given the nature of Augustine's *Retractationes* as a reconsideration and revision of his earlier works, rather than a recantation or rejection of them, it seems unlikely that Chaucer would use the word "retracciouns" here (in the plural, probably signaling a reference to Augustine) to mean "withdrawals," "revocations," or "recantations." Instead, the word is best understood here as something like "reconsiderations," and "revoke" in the same line is best understood as "recall" or "bring to mind." This reading best suits the larger context of Chaucer's request to the reader: in asking for prayer for the forgiveness of his sins, he pauses to remember and reconsider those sins. The ideas of recalling and remembering also help explain the otherwise puzzling note of uncertainty that concludes the list of works: "and many another book, if they were in my remembrance" (l. 1087). This reference to his "remembrance" underscores the general idea that Chaucer is here attempting to bring to mind the works for which he needs to ask forgiveness. This reading is also more appropriate than the disavowal reading in the context of the reader-author relationship that Chaucer assumes in lines 1081-83 and elsewhere in his works, in which he takes responsibility for his intentions as author but leaves the matter of interpretation to the reader. Within such a framework, a recantation or disavowal of his works is unnecessary, for readers will be responsible for determining their ultimate value. He is responsible for his actions in writing (as his statements of intention, in the Retraction and elsewhere, make clear), but he does not presume to know what readers will make of his works. The question of his work's value for readers must be separated from the question

of his culpability as author. Chaucer does not deny the value of any of his works for

readers—he simply acknowledges that he sinned in writing about worldly vanities.

This anti-disavowal reading is also supported by the list of works that follows.

Although the referent of "retracciouns" is usually assumed to be the list of works itself,

this meaning is by no means settled. As discussed above, the possibility that Chaucer is

referring here to a separate work of "retracciouns" is equally plausible from the

standpoint of the language and grammatical structure of the passage, thus leaving open

the possibility that the list of works does not in fact constitute Chaucer's "retracciouns,"

whatever one takes the meaning of that word to be, and thereby disassociating the

passage in question from any direct act of withdrawal or disavowal. In the context of his

request for prayer, according to this reading, Chaucer lists the works that constitute his

"translacions and enditynges of worldly vanitees." Even here he keeps his claims limited

to his own personal morality—we are told no more about most of these works than what

he has already told us, that he sinned in writing them. As for the works themselves, the

literary tradition on which Chaucer drew, and which influenced, as we have seen, the

language of the Retraction itself, afforded readers ample room for such worldly vanities:

"all that is written in books, whether good or evil, is for our instruction" in the words of

the author of the *Ovide Moralisé*. We are told slightly more, however, about one of these

works, "the tales of Caunterbury, thilke that sownen into synne" (l. 1086). As we have

seen, although the meaning of "sownen into synne" is usually taken to be something like

"conduce to sin," the phrase need mean nothing more than that the *Canterbury Tales*

"have to do with" or "are in accord with" sin. It is possible, as Skeat suggests, that

Chaucer is making a reference here to no more than the subject-matter of the *Canterbury Tales*: the "synne" to which Chaucer refers would then be the sin described and illustrated in the various tales. Even the Reeve's Tale and Miller's Tale, which by Chaucer's own admission might be objectionable to some readers, elicited an apology from Chaucer not for the sin into which readers might be led by reading them, but for their subject-matter (". . . harlotrie they tolden bothe two," I.3184). A more likely possibility, however, given Chaucer's request that the reader pray for the forgiveness of his sins, is that the "synne" he refers to is his sin in writing about worldly vanities. Such an admission of guilt, however, need not imply concern on Chaucer's part for any potential harmful effects of these works. His confession remains limited to his own actions in writing, and throughout the Retraction he refrains from any judgments on the value of his works for readers. To deny that Chaucer's language implies concern for the harmful effects of his work does not in any way diminish the gravity of Chaucer's sin. Any non-ironic reading of the Retraction must take Chaucer's sin seriously, for it is his urgent need for forgiveness that prompts the second part of Retraction. The question, however, is not whether Chaucer's sin is serious enough to merit a retraction or disavowal of his works, but whether retraction or disavowal is a necessary or logical response to his sin. The assumption behind a disavowal reading of the Retraction is that what constitutes sin for Chaucer must necessarily be a cause of sin for his readers. The literary tradition we have been exploring, however, does not appear to validate this assumption. As we have seen, it is the reader's use of the text, not the author's intentions, that determines whether it will have beneficial or harmful effects. In the words of

Boccaccio, "like all other things in this world, stories, whatever their nature, may be

harmful or useful, depending on the listener" (*Decameron* p. 799). Chaucer's confession

seems to locate his culpability in his having written and translated vain and lecherous

stories, but that admission need not implicate the stories themselves. What is vain and

lecherous for Chaucer may become a means of avoiding vanity and lechery for his

readers: evil things are written in books, more than one compiler has reminded us, so that

they might be avoided.

A number of scholars have observed that by "retracting" only those *Canterbury*

Tales that "sownen into synne," Chaucer is putting the burden of judgment on his

readers.[37] The judgment he is deferring to readers is considerably less weighty if we see

the phrase "sownen into synne" as a comment on the subject-matter of the tales, or on

Chaucer's own morality, rather than on their utility for readers. The observation,

however, does point to a larger feature of the list of works: the *Canterbury Tales* is the

only work for which there is a qualification. This fact has been taken by some critics as

evidence for an ironic reading of the Retraction. Considered within the larger rhetorical

context of the passage, however, this qualification need not be taken as ironic. The list of

"worldly vanitees" occurs in the context of a list of sins for which the reader is asked to

pray. At stake is the author's salvation. The reference to "bookes of legendes of seintes,

and omelies, and moralitee, and devocioun" occurs at a transition in the passage, in which

the author turns from naming his sinful acts to describing his gratitude to "Lord Jhesu

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[37] For example, Knapp (47-48), Howard (58-60), McGerr (101-2).

Crist and his blisful Mooder." The urgency, as noted above, and therefore the need for

specificity, is greater in the context of a confession and request for prayer than in the

context of thanksgiving. The contrast between the two lists, however, like the

qualification, underscores the variety of material in the *Canterbury Tales*. The Man of

Law's Tale, the Clerk's Tale, the Pardoner's Tale, the Prioress's Tale, the Tale of

Melibee, the Second Nun's Tale, and the Parson's Tale, to name only the most obvious

examples, would seem to belong among the "bookes of legendes of seintes, and omelies,

and moralitee, and devocioun." That Chaucer leaves the responsibility to the reader of

identifying which tales "sownen into synne" and which are deserving of thanks is not

evidence of irony or a tension between affirmation and rejection. It is simply a

recognition of the variety readers may encounter in the *Canterbury Tales*, some of which

may be the occasion of thanks, for reader as well as author.

Unlike the opening lines of the Retraction, the list of works does not make an

explicit reference to the reader's responsibility or freedom of choice, but neither does it

presume any judgment on the texts themselves or their value for the reader. Chaucer's

focus in the second part of the Retraction remains on his own personal morality, not on

the potential harmful effects of his work. Scholars have tended to focus their attention on

Chaucer's apparent disavowal of his literary works, but disavowal is neither the primary

aim of the passage nor even a necessary implication of his words. Furthermore, it is

inconsistent with the roles of author and reader within the larger interpretive tradition (as

embodied in Augustine, the medieval *accessūs* tradition, and the vernacular apologies we

have seen) on which Chaucer drew throughout his work and to which he makes reference

in the Retraction itself. That tradition would assign Chaucer the responsibility of intending something beneficial for his readers and the reader the responsibility of determining the value and usefulness of the work itself. The first part of the Retraction, as we have seen, clearly affirms these roles, signaling no significant departure from the stance Chaucer takes in his earlier works. The second part of the Retraction, seen through the lens of this same interpretive tradition, reveals an author concerned less with withdrawing his works from the world and more with directing his own attention away from "worldly vanitees" and toward the kingdom of heaven. For the final shift Chaucer makes in the Retraction is away from consideration of his own works and toward reflection on "Jhesu Crist and his blisful Mooder":

> But of the translacion of Boece de Consolacione, and othere bookes of legendes of seintes, and omelies, and moralitee, and devocioun,/ that thanke I oure Lord Jhesu Crist and his blisful Mooder, and alle the seintes of hevene,/ bisekynge hem that they from hennes forth unto my lyves ende sende me grace to biwayle my giltes and to studie to the salvacioun of my soule, and graunte me grace of verray penitence, confessioun and satisfaccioun to doon in this present lyf,/ thurgh the benigne grace of hym that is kyng of kynges and preest over alle preestes, that boghte us with the precious blood of his herte,/ so that I may been oon of hem at the day of doom that shulle be saved. Qui cum Patre et Spiritu Sancto vivit et regnat Deus per omnia secula. Amen. (ll. 1088-92)

The loose, cumulative structure of these closing lines suggests not an interpolation, but a shift in focus away from the relatively restricted relationship of author to reader and toward the more expansive relationship of man to God. The succession of dependent clauses that Chaucer hangs on his final note of gratitude is anything but morbid: "thanke I oure Lord Jhesu Crist and his blisful moder . . . bisekynge hem that they . . . sende me grace . . . and graunte me grace . . . thurgh the benigne grace of hym . . . that boghte us . . . so that I may been oon of hem . . . that shulle be saved." Chaucer's language here turns, literally, on the ideas of grace, redemption, and salvation. That critics have found the Retraction as a whole morose and narrow seems to be a consequence of the tendency to focus on its subordinate and parenthetical elements, rather than on the larger rhetorical act of which these elements form a part.

In closing, let us consider the broader implications of Chaucer's rhetorical act in the Retraction. The passage as a whole reveals Chaucer's interest in his moral responsibility as an author. He explains and defends his intention for the Parson's Tale, not to control the reader's interpretation but to influence the reader's moral evaluation of its author. He lists his religious and secular works not to retract or disavow the latter, but to enlist the reader's help in praying for his sins and in giving thanks for his good works. I see no reason, then, to insist on any irony in the language Chaucer uses here. This position, however, need not imply any speculation about Chaucer's psychological state or the biographical details that could lead to such words. The Retraction is a rhetorical act,

not a window onto the author's mind. That rhetorical act appears plainly directed at

enlisting the reader's generosity and prayer, and I find in Chaucer's words no clear

indication of any more subversive ideas. In my reading of the Pardoner's Prologue and

Tale, I argued that as readers we are forced into a recognition that the Pardoner's

statement of intention is only a rhetorical act by a context that makes a plain reading of

his words impossible. Readings of the Retraction have often proceeded on the basis of a

similar, problematic context. Finding a rejection of Chaucer's literary achievements in

the closing lines of the very work that crowns those achievements has caused many

critics to question the sincerity (or the authorship) of the Retraction. One result of this

perceived problem has been the discovery, and in some cases the production, of ironic

undercurrents and biographical contexts that can assign other aims (or other peoples'

aims) to these statements. Such attempts to explain away the plain import of Chaucer's

statements seem at the very least unnecessary. There is nothing in this request for

generosity and prayer that demands anything other than a straightforward reading.

In light of this reading, Chaucer's posited intention, the aim toward which his

words can be said to point, appears limited to his own personal context. For interpretive

purposes, identifying and describing this intention can take us only so far. As readers we

are interested in more than what the work itself, or its author, purports to aim at. At the

very least, we are interested in the role this text plays in our larger reading of Chaucer's

works and, in particular, our reading of the *Canterbury Tales*. The tool employed by

medieval commentators to broaden the range of interpretation beyond authorial intention

was the concept of utility, which added to the question, "What did the author intend?" the

questions, "What effect does this text have on readers?" and, "To what use can readers

put this text?" Let us, then, consider the effect and utility of the Retraction. In the first

place, one can point to the reaction of many modern critics to explain away, suppress, or

lament the existence of the Retraction. This effect, however, seems as much a function of

the undue attention paid to the supposed recantation as a response to Chaucer's total

rhetorical act. It can be accounted for, in part, by modern editorial preferences that turn

Chaucer's concrete reference to his "retracciouns" into a generalized act of "Retraction."

Consider, by contrast, the effect of referring to this passage as the "Prayer of Chaucer," or

of not distinguishing it from the Parson's Tale at all, either of which editorial choices is

faithful to the manuscript tradition, and understanding Chaucer's "revoking" of his works

in the sense of recalling or reconsidering. Experiencing Chaucer's statements in such a

context is far less likely to be a cause of denial or regret for readers.

Another way of asking about the effect or utility of the Retraction is to ask why it

would be appended to the *Canterbury Tales* in the first place. With what effect on readers

in mind would the author, or a later scribe, have placed it in this context? Miceál

Vaughan has suggested that the Retraction achieved, and has maintained, its current

status as the conclusion to the *Canterbury Tales*, in spite of the problems created by this

placement, out of the desire for a satisfactory ending to Chaucer's otherwise unfinished

work.[38] The work of many scholars bears witness to this particular effect of the

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[38] See Vaughan pp. 45-48. Vaughan's argument would apply to the Parson's Tale as well,

since he takes the Parson's Tale and the Retraction as one originally indivisible text. The

Retraction, for many have argued that it provides an aesthetically and morally appropriate

ending to the *Canterbury Tales*. Certainly there is something to be gained in pointing out

the resonances between the themes of the Retraction and the larger themes of the

Canterbury Tales, or of Chaucer's own life. However, I would argue that accounting for

the Retraction's existence in entirely aesthetic or biographical terms undervalues the

rhetorical aim of Chaucer's words. The Retraction is not exclusively, or even primarily,

an artistic object to be evaluated or a transcript of the author's life. It is an act of speech,

explicitly requesting certain responses from, and having certain effects upon, the reader.

And although it may be true that one of those effects is providing thematic closure for the

reader (or personal closure for the author), these readings do not fully account for the

active participation Chaucer asks of the reader.

In the above reading, I have emphasized the Retraction's unwavering focus on the

reader and its overall structure and logic as a request for prayer. At the same time, I have

pointed out the contrast between Chaucer's intense moral scrutiny of his own behavior as

an author and the restraint he shows toward assessing the significance and utility of his

literary output. One potential effect of these two features of the text is that readers may

use the Retraction as an opportunity to reflect upon their own readings of the works

Chaucer "revokes," reconsidering their judgments on the significance of the works just as

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evolution of the scribal rubrics, according to Vaughan, can be explained as a process of

assimilating the Parson's Tale and Retraction to their context as the conclusion of the

Canterbury Tales.

Chaucer reconsiders his culpability in having written them. I am not the first to recognize

in the Retraction this opportunity for readers to reconsider their earlier readings of

Chaucer's works. In *Chaucer's Open Books*, Rosemarie Potz McGerr has argued that

each of Chaucer's major poems, including the *Canterbury Tales*, "offers a 'reading

lesson' of sorts . . . that encourages readers to take a critical or revisionary stance, not just

toward the poem in hand but toward texts of all kinds" (13). McGerr's reading of the

Retraction differs from my own in some important respects. She does not distinguish, for

example, between the scope of Chaucer's statement of intention in the first part of the

Retraction, which I have argued is aimed exclusively at the Parson's Tale, and the scope

of his list of works in the second part, which clearly refers to the majority of his literary

output. This allows her to see the Retraction as positing a "doctrinal" intention for the

Canterbury Tales and, indeed, for Chaucer's entire literary corpus, and therefore opens

the door to ironic readings of the Retraction. She also sees Chaucer as expressing concern

for the effect of his works on readers, whereas I have argued that Chaucer keeps his

concerns with his literary output limited to his own behavior and does not presume to

judge their significance for, or effect upon, readers.[39] More fundamentally, she grounds

her reading in a medieval tradition of resisting closure in literary texts, whereas I have

grounded mine in views of intention and utility within the commentary tradition and

vernacular texts. Despite the differences in our readings and our different starting points,

however, McGerr's conclusion affirms the contrast I have been drawing in the Retraction

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[39] This aspect of McGerr's reading is based mainly on her acceptance of the traditional

gloss of "sownen into synne" as "conducing to sin."

and elsewhere between "the ambiguous role of the author's intent in the significance of the text" and the "reader's interpretation as the determining factor in generating meaning" (155). Indeed, I can offer no better description of the primary literary effect of the Retraction than that offered by McGerr: "By asking us to assess the work's effect on us, the passage requires us to review our experience of the *Canterbury Tales* retrospectively from the vantage point of the end (that is, both the closing and the goal) of the book" (136).

The metaphor of a "vantage point" is an apt and powerful means of recognizing the literary value of the Retraction. In asking the reader for a generous view of his intentions and requesting prayer for his sins, Chaucer is inviting the reader to reflect upon his moral responsibility as author. At the same time, he leaves open the question of his works' ultimate value, acknowledging the reader's freedom and responsibility. It can hardly be denied that participating in this reflection with the author has the effect of causing readers to reflect on their own view of Chaucer's works, especially the *Canterbury Tales*. Chaucer's moral reflection and reconsideration of his works provides an occasion for a similar reconsideration of those works by the reader, and, perhaps, for a reflection on the reader's moral responsibility to find the "doctrine" in Chaucer's works, wherever it may be found. Even those readings that interpret Chaucer's rhetorical act as a withdrawal or disavowal of his works bear witness to this effect—for one of the most common and recurrent objections to the Retraction is that many of the works listed do not warrant a withdrawal or disavowal. Even the argument that Chaucer adopts a "narrow" point of view in the Retraction can make sense only by contrast with another, less

narrow, view of his works taken by the reader. This reconsideration of Chaucer's works from the "vantage point" of the end is a useful, and seemingly natural, response to Chaucer's Retraction. What makes it seem natural, however, may be that it is primarily a literary response, with which modern readers are comfortable. The Retraction, however, asks for more.

Throughout this chapter I have been emphasizing the Retraction's rhetorical status as a request for prayer, arguing that anything else we might discover in the passage (a statement of intention, a confession, a list of works) is a subordinate element of the larger rhetorical act. The simplest, most direct response to this rhetorical act, indeed the one the author asks for directly, is to pray. The opening lines of the Retraction provide needed context for the prayer—the author assures us that, for the Parson's Tale at least, his intentions were beneficent. He acknowledges, however, the possibility that his works may nevertheless displease some. The rest of the passage provides the chief points for which the reader is to pray: the sins for which the author is in need of forgiveness, the works for which he is thankful, and, as the author's remarks broaden in scope, the proper end of this or any prayer, the grace of God for the salvation of his soul. The passage thus provides a kind of modeling of the action it requests—the chief elements, and perhaps even the proper sequence, are humility, confession, gratitude, intercession, and, ultimately, grace and salvation. That the Retraction requests such a response and provides such modeling should be no surprise given the very real possibility that it was originally conceived as part of a stand-alone treatise on penitence. Even apart from this possible original context, however, the literary tradition in which I have been grounding the

Retraction provides an impetus for this kind of modeling. As we have seen, the Romans passage Chaucer alludes to both here and in the Nun's Priest's Tale is associated in the commentary tradition with an exemplary justification of literature. In the words of the author of the *Ovide Moralisé*, "for anyone who really wants to pay attention, evil is presented [in books] so that one may guard against it, and good so that one may imitate it." Whatever attitude Chaucer may have adopted toward the Nun's Priest's admonition to "taketh the fruyt, and lat the chaf be stille," it seems clear that the Retraction presents the reader with a straightforward opportunity to take the fruit. The fruit, however, is not a meaning, doctrinal or otherwise, for any of Chaucer's works. It is a moral response and an action to be taken, to "take the good" from Chaucer's example of self-examination and confession, and like any potential use or effect of a text, the reader will ultimately decide whether or not to take it. Modern readers are in all likelihood less willing or able, apart from the religious context which permeates all of Chaucer's works, to respond to the text in this way, and tend instead, as the Retraction's critical reception demonstrates, to wonder about the author's personal circumstances or aesthetic designs. I would suggest, however, that some consideration of the demands that Chaucer's rhetorical act is making on us as readers, whether or not one yields to them, can balance out our interest in the author and the artistic object and therefore deepen our understanding of Chaucer's final authorial statement.

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