

CHAUCER'S *WIT*: THE MIND AND *AVYSEMENT* IN MEDIEVAL LITERATURE

by

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I. PROLOGUE: CHAUCER AND THE MIND

When the God of Love strikes Troilus with a sharp pain of love for Criseyde, we are told the once arrogant Trojan knight wanders to his chamber alone, and “gan he make a mirour of his mynde / In which he saugh al holly hire figure” (I 364-5), considering in his mind this newly imprinted love for the beautiful young widow. In *Troilus and Criseyde*, Geoffrey Chaucer portrays the processes of mind by which Troilus and his illicit love, Criseyde, recognize their desires, intentions, and decisions, mediated by their complicated go-between, Pandarus. In Book IV, upon hearing Criseyde’s promises “seyd of good entente” (1416), Troilus “[h]erde al this thyng devysen to and fro, / And verryliche him semed that he hadde / The selve wit” (1423-5). A large portion of the poem’s tensions come from the two lovers struggling to know what they think, feel, and intend. Likewise, the difficulty of coming to terms with romantic pain strikes the narrator, for whom “swich a wo my wit kan nat diffyne” (V 271).

For Chaucer, *wit* is perception and cognition, which includes “the mind and its functions . . . such as intelligence, understanding, normal use of mental faculties, reason, [and] good sense” (Koivisto-Alanko 398). Päivi Koivisto-Alanko centers a study of “cognition and cognitive processes” in Late Middle English on the term *wit* “because it is an old native word which in [Old English] was one of the central terms of cognition, and secondly because the number of its meanings vacillates” (397).¹ In “The Miller’s Tale,”

¹ By *wit*, I do not mean ‘expression’ or ‘sense’, which became common definitions in the Early Modern Period; rather, I mean “the mental powers comprising the human intellect,” according to the Middle English Dictionary. Koivisto-Alanko writes that by “[Early Modern English] the prototypical structure of *wit* changed. The centre PERCEPTION lost ground and was finally replaced by ‘sense’. The centre COGNITION fared well for a while, acquiring new nuances at the beginning of the Early Modern period (superior intelligence, mental quickness, good quality of mental faculties), but then it became less and *less* used. At the same time a new centre, EXPRESSION is formed” (398). The synonymy in defining *wit* with mind is intentional; it shows that Chaucer uses the terms to give expression to many elements of mental

we are told the carpenter “knew nat Catoun, for his wit was rude” (I, 3227), meaning that the carpenter’s intellect is undeveloped or uneducated. Troilus’s “selve wit” (IV, 1425) indicates that he had the same *idea* as Criseyde. In his poetry, Chaucer uses *wit* for understanding, sense, and intellect, and the reader understands that the word embraces many common terms for the mind.

This thesis explores faculties of mind in Chaucer’s characters and examines three narrative and philosophical points at which *wit* is tested in the story to create or resolve complications for the characters. *Avyusement*, a constituent faculty of wit, has a stricter function than the broad definition of mind (though this component shows modest elasticity in Chaucer’s vision of Troilus’s afterlife, about which I write in Chapter Two). The most prominent aspect of *wit* in this study is *avyusement*, a part of mind that means consideration, judgment, and evaluation. Linda Georgianna notes that “careful preconsideration or *avyusement* is fundamental to the architecture of Chaucer’s language” (795). In *Troilus and Criseyde* and *The Canterbury Tales*, *avyusement* is associated with prudence and practical wisdom, and is cast as the *process* of arriving at prudent conclusions.² Walter’s question of Griselda in “The Clerk’s Tale” that she “‘assente, or elles yow avyse?’” (IV 350) is the central paradox of Chaucer’s puzzling marriage tale and generates conflict between critical opinions about the story.

When Chaucer writes *avyse* or *avyusement* in his stories, a character is using their mental powers to (a) determine a truth, (b) evaluate another character’s *entente*, or their

activity simultaneously. “It is interesting to note that Chaucer once translates *mentis vigor* with *wit* when the [other translators of Boethius] use *mind’s force* or *mind*” (408).

² “AVYSEN means ‘to consider,’ or ‘to deliberate’ – not to be confused with [Modern English] advise meaning ‘to give advice to someone.’” Bowden, Muriel. “Glossary.” *A Reader’s Guide to Geoffrey Chaucer*. Octagon Books. New York. 1971.

own *entente*, or (c) judge an action or *speche*. *Wit* anchors a character's presence in the story,³ and *avysement* is the faculty allowing pilgrims and knights to have the state of mind to make determinations in the world of the narrative. It is apparent that *avysement* is an aspect of *wit*; in Chaucer's stories, many crucial narrative moments, such as Januarie's poorly evaluated selection of a young bride in "The Merchant's Tale" or Aurelius's speech to Dorigen that she "[a]vyseth yow er that [she] breke [hire] trouthe" (V 1320) in "The Franklin's Tale," develop themes about the importance of judgment and consideration. Chaucer positions his readers to see a difference between *avysement* and choice, since many characters, we are told, make their decisions *sans avysement*. When characters *avyse*, and when they do not, we make inferences about their *wit*.

Chaucer scholars, such as Earle Birney and J. Allen Mitchell, have often limited their critical attention on *avysement* to issues of practical ethics and prudence. Mitchell writes that the frequency of terms like *avysement* demonstrate "that prudent preconsideration remains central to the poet's thinking" (138). These critical considerations are valuable because Chaucer creates many foolish characters whose lack of *avysement* takes a comic turn, such as Januarie in "The Merchant's Tale." But these discussions too often ignore the epistemic element of *avysement*. For instance, Mitchell says, in the same discussion, that "The Manciple's Tale" "is among other things an exemplum showing the destructive results of haste or recklessness" (138-9). My argument focuses on what Mitchell glosses as "other things," which includes the valuable faculty of mind that is required to infer the *entente* of other minds. Consideration and

³ Koivisto-Alanko's scholarship indicates that the word *wit*, once polysemous and useful, gradually "became too ambiguous [and] the need for new words grew" (399) in this period in which Chaucer is writing. In Chaucer's hands, the ambiguity of the term is fruitful for narrative in a way that may work less productively *at scale* for medieval and early modern cultures.

judgment are not simply indicators that a character is “wise” or “foolish,” but reflect mental processes of inference and evaluation. If we read terms like *avyse* only in regard to ethical practicality, the conclusions we reach will only reflect a character’s practical intelligence. On the contrary, *avysement* includes a whole set of mental processes and reading *avysement* as such will give a larger portrait of intelligence, of the cognitive environment that is present when, as Boethius writes, “jugement is moore cleer” (*Boece* V pr.2 22-4).

I argue that Chaucer employs *avysement* as a synecdoche for *wit*, a part of the whole.⁴ Though the faculty of *avysement* is focused on objects or *entente* outside or apart from the character’s mind, the exercise of this faculty suggests a changing portrait of that character’s *wit* in that situation. Analyzing moments of *avysement* – careful preconsideration – produces insights about how mind – *wit* – is represented in the text. The challenge of *avysement* lies in overcoming some distinction that exists in the world. This is a key theme in Chaucer’s work, and sits at the heart of his preoccupation, cited in “The General Prologue” and again in “The Manciple’s Tale” that “wordes moote be cosyng to the dede” (I 742). For example, when *entente* is mentioned in *The Canterbury Tales*, a distinction – often brought to expression in speech – exists between what a character claims is their *entente*, and what they really intend. “The Friar’s Tale” and “The Summoner’s Tale” take this problem of understanding another person’s *entente* and make comedy from a character’s inability to process the distinction and determine the truth. The tales signal that if a correspondence between words and deeds is possible, *avysement*

⁴ “In old fashioned rhetoric, the designation of a person or object by one or more of its parts or aspects is called *synecdoche*, the designation of it by one of its properties or accompaniments *metonymy*” (Shumaker 92).

is necessary to bring this correspondence to mind. *Entente* does not always match a stated utterance, and judgement is required to seek parity between those elements of communication.

Chaucer concludes that such parity is nearly impossible. Yet he continually invites his readers to see how *wit* is represented when characters make mental attempts to reconcile disparate objects of attention, e.g., the difference between a stated *entente* and that which is really intended. Chaucer mediates our understanding of *avysement* with two medieval philosophies of mind. For Boethius, the distinction between what is known and the object of knowledge in the world *has* parity, and the mind is capable of crossing this divide. In *The Consolation of Philosophy*, which Chaucer translated into English, Boethius presents human knowledge as perfectible. In *Boece*, Chaucer translates “that ryght as whanne that I woot that a thing is, it byhoveth by necessite that thilke selve thing be; and eek whan I have knowen that any thing schal betyden; so byhovith it by necessite that thilke same thing betide” (V. pr.3, 92-6). My thesis focuses on the wit of Chaucer’s characters, and therefore my use of Boethius centers on his presentation of human knowledge as real and possible. Boethius insists that words and deeds, as well as thoughts and referents, have parity. Despite the distinction between a thought and its referent, we have common medium – the universal – by which knowledge is made possible. Though their minds have different substance and scope than the mind of God, humans have a capacity to apprehend the world accurately, and therefore for Boethius, human *wit* is a trustworthy engine.

Chaucer uses the uncertainty and imprecision of knowledge to maintain a distinction against which *avysement* is challenged. In each chapter I examine a moment

of *avysement* in which Chaucer develops *wit* in productive ways.⁵ In *Troilus*, he plays with a speculation of Troilus's "lighte goost" (V 1808) that *avyse*s from an indeterminate location in the heavens, far above earth. By reading both Troilus's indeterminate location and *avysement* with philosophy of mind taken from Chaucer's inspiration, Boethius, the reader intuits a vision of the knight's *wit* in space after death. In "The Clerk's Tale," Griselda's choice is styled as a *sopheme*, an impossible logical puzzle. Chaucer invokes a different operating philosophy for his Clerk: that of William of Ockham, a logician and thinker who complicates the Boethian worldview. For the Clerk, this logical puzzle – a *sopheme* – introduces to *wit* a playful uncertainty. Finally, in "The Manciple's Tale" and his "Conclusion" to *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer intimates a form of *wit* that must learn to understand irony capably in order to (a) maintain political safety, avoiding repercussions from those in power, and (b) overcome the anxiety of the mind's struggle to determine precisely the *entente* of other minds. The Manciple indicates that proper *avysement* may require misrepresenting or hiding *entente*, and at the same time, implicates his fellow pilgrims in the process of using mental powers such as *avysement* to ascertain *entente* that stands in implicit contradiction to its words or signs.

My second chapter focuses on the fifth books of *Troilus and Criseyde* and Chaucer's *Boece*. In *Troilus*'s closing stanzas, the Trojan knight dies and ascends into the heavens, where he will "lough right at the wo / Of hem that wepten for his deth so faste" (V 1820-1). Troilus comes to scorn the things of this world, which he valued for the entire course of the poem, due to new experience of *avysement* in his afterlife. Troilus's

⁵ My *entente* is that "the productive element" of these studied moments of *avysement* will be made apparent in each chapter, but I mean, generally, productive in the sense that *wit* is enhanced, elevated, amended, changed, and transformed in its exercise of *avysement*. In a general sense, this may seem like a recursive process, though *avysement* and *wit* are synecdochal, not interchangeable.

apotheosis draws him closer to God, where the knight's mind *more closely* limns the divine mind, which Boethius asserts is found in eternity. I argue that Troilus's *avysement* is represented best by an asymptote. The asymptote, "[a] line which approaches nearer and nearer to a given curve, but does not meet it within a finite distance,"⁶ extends our reading of Troilus and *wit* in two ways. First, the asymptote is an illustration used to depict Troilus's movement through the heavens, and the device works as a metaphor for how "in the sovereynes devynes substaunces . . . jugement is moore cleer" (*Boece* V pr.2 22-4). It gives us a visualization that shows man's temporal relationship with eternity and maps the experience of time that Chaucer plays with in *Troilus*. The metaphor of the asymptote engages Chaucer's cosmological scheme on a basic visual level, as well as tying in Boethius's work on divinity by graphing Troilus's movement and relationship to God's eternity. A human cannot properly be said to be eternal, which Boethius calls the "parfit possessioun and al togidre of lif interminable" (V 132), but in the journey of the human mind, the knight's space-voyage comes closer to eternity though he is still subject to time. Troilus's "lighte goost" (V 1808) moves on a line asymptotically closer to the eternity of God.

Second, the asymptote metaphor connects Troilus to a state of consciousness called "intimate alterity." In the field of religious anthropology, Thomas J. Csordas offers a phenomenological approach for understanding critically how a human subject relates to the divine in moments of religious experience or transcendence. This kind of interdisciplinarity illuminates connections Chaucer advances between the end of his *Troilus* and the *Boece* translation. Specifically, it describes how *avysement* changes the

⁶ "asymptote, n." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, December 2018.

Trojan knight and gives his mind otherworldly vision. I discuss how Troilus's sudden *avysement* on the last page of Chaucer's Trojan story mirrors the poet's speculation about God's prescience and how that divine mind has a relationship to human *wit*.

In my second chapter, I explore how "The Clerk's Tale" constructs a world in which *avysement* is prohibited, producing its quandary. Adopting the terminist philosophy of Ockham, Chaucer's Clerk constructs a situation in which Walter, while giving Griselda the illusion of choice, restricts Griselda's exercise of *avysement* as rational judgment. The moment of Walter's proposal is framed as a *sophisma*, which are logical paradoxes constructed for argument and disputation by scholastic logicians. In my reading of "The Clerk's Tale," I follow Stepsis, Steinmetz, and Delasanta in claiming that the story is best read by focusing on the Clerk's scholastic background, and Linda Georgianna in reading the importance of Walter's proposal as an implicit exclusion of *avysement*. However, no critics of Chaucer's Clerk have identified that Walter's proposal works as *sophismata*. Walter's option to Griselda that she "assente, or elles yow avyse" (IV 350) follows a long history of *sophismata* in late medieval scholasticism and leads to Griselda's impossible, or insoluble, situation. I contend that the puzzling complications of the tale may be resolved by reading Griselda as if she were solving Walter's *sophisma*.

My final chapter explores "The Manciple's Tale," in which the Manciple urges pilgrims to "kepe wel thy tongue" (IX 333) and avoid speaking unflattering truths. In this story, loose speech or gossip, known as jangling, is associated on the one hand with a lack of *avysement*. On the other hand, withholding the truth and even lying is considered part of *avysement*. Rather than view duplicity and double-mindedness as a breach in faculties of mind – a divorce between the faculties that make knowledge possible – the

proliferation of false *speche* throughout *Canterbury Tales* and its sly encouragement by the Manciple suggest that double-mindedness is actually a profitable territory for *wit*. I argue that *avysement* can determine *entente* even when *entente* does not match the declarative content of an utterance. Since the Manciple encourages his listeners to withhold disclosure of their *entente*, the “Manciple’s Tale” is an ironic text, and this process of engendering irony at the end of the *Canterbury Tales* perpetuates a sense of uncertainty and indeterminacy that carries over into “The Parson’s Tale” and Chaucer’s retraction. I will supplement my reading of “The Manciple’s Tale” by comparing Chaucer’s use of *entente* and *avysement* in that tale with two *Canterbury Tales* that employ *entente*, *wyl*, and mendacity in two opposite ways: “The Friar’s Tale” and “The Summoner’s Tale.”

Judgment and intention – in the sense of recognizing one’s *entente* or gauging the content of other minds – are distinct faculties of *wit*, with differences that have ramifications beyond dissimulation. Chaucer recalls “the sentence of Plato that nedes the wordis moot be cosynes to the things of whiche thei speken” (*Boece* III, pr. 12, 206). He understands that language may be an accurate representation of the world only if there is correspondence between language and the things represented by words. Chaucer lived hundreds of years before Descartes’s *cogito ergo sum* would delineate the modern subject, and many centuries before Saussure’s idea of signifier / signified created a science of the disparity between word and referent. However, *Boece* says “every signe scheweth and signifieth oonly what the thing is, but it ne makith nat the thing that it signifieth” (V, pr. 4, 64-66) and Chaucer patterns his *Tales* and poems to give voice to these issues of correspondence and distinction. Correspondence implies that disparities

between mental activity, such as *avysement*, and objects of *entente* –specific intentions – can be developed in productive ways that show their relationship. I argue that Chaucer’s preoccupation with words being cousin to the deed reflects his anxiety about what occurs when they are not, and that this anxiety takes its highest form in “The Manciple’s Tale.” Chaucer understands that knowledge is dependent on maneuvering across the disparity between subjects and predicates, subjects and objects, or thoughts and their communicated utterances.

Irony occurs when *wit* infers meaning from words that are *not* cousin to the deed. A capacity for irony is the mind’s ability to infer that a spoken word should mean its opposite. Characters in *The Canterbury Tales* and *Troilus and Criseyde* profit or perish based on their disconnection between their faculties of mind. For the Manciple’s crow, proper *avysement* would have kept the crow from suffering at Apollo’s hand. Chaucer shows how *avysement* as the means of comprehension and judgment helps characters negotiate that territory of *wit*. *Avysement* is more than a utility, however. It is a faculty of knowledge that seeks to overcome and navigate other distinctions that appear in Chaucer’s tales.

Avysement is a way of gauging what is real. Judgment, or consideration, is a mental process developing inferences that respond accurately to things in the world, whether they are evaluating objects of perception brought to sensory awareness, or evaluating the thoughts, or *entente*, of other minds. In *Boece*, Lady Philosophy asks “wiltow that we joynen togidres thilke same resouns, for paraventure of swiche conjunccioun may sterten up som fair sparcle of soth?” (III, pr. 12, 139-140) In this thesis, I explore *conjuncciouns* that Chaucer offers in *Troilus and Criseyde* and his

Canterbury Tales, showing that *avysement*, when outlined or executed correctly, may discover a *sparcle of soth*, a flash of truth.

II. PROPHECY: AVYSEMENT AS ASYMPTOTIC TO GOD'S ETERNITY IN CHAUCER'S *TROILUS AND CRISEYDE*

In *Shewings*, Julian of Norwich documented her ecstatic experiences drawing her close to the presence of God. The fourteenth-century English mystic writes, "I beheld with avysement, seeing and knowyng in that syght that he doth alle that is done" (20). Julian's understanding of the divine is ascribed primarily to sight, putting her comprehension of the sacred in contact with that most immediate form of perception. "I saw god in a poynte," she says, "that is to say in my understandyng, by which syght I saw that he is in althyng" (20). When Julian is spiritually close to God, the divine gives space to her mind in a way that reflects Philosophy's instruction in *Boece* that "wisdom loketh and mesureth the ende of thynges" (II, P 2, 85-6). Julian reaches a platform of *wit*, through spiritual discipline and "gret plenty of grace inwardly yeven of the Holy Gost" (14). She is lifted to a different plane, a plane where her *avysing* mind⁷ experiences both astonishing distance that "surmountith the envyrounyng of the universite" (*Boece* V, P 4, 163-4) and the sensation of intimate closeness – "till I am substantially unyted to him, I may never have full reste ne verie blisse" (9). Her *wit* gives space to a meeting of supernatural presence and her human experience of time where the distinction between her mind and God's mind is narrowed significantly.

I argue that Julian and Troilus have experiences with God that are similarly engaged in *wit* and that this correspondence of *wit* with God has been largely unexplored in Chaucer scholarship. Julian's *wit* is engaged productively in a liminal space. In the

⁷ Mind, *wit*, and spirit are important here. As noted in Chapter One, I define *wit* in such a way that it encompasses, like Chaucer does in his *Tales*, a broad spectrum of activity characterized by subjectivity and the subject per se, resisting the Cartesian demand to separate mind and body, or mind and spirit. While there are faculties *within* mind that have specific function in regard to the body or the intellect or spiritual activity, *wit* is a whole.

fifth book of *Troilus and Criseyde*, Chaucer narrates the moments after Troilus is slain by “the fierce Achille” (V 1806). Though his life on earth is finished, Troilus continues “[u]p to the holughnesse of the eighthe spere” (V 1809) and “forth he wente” (1826), seeing “with ful avysement / The erratic sterres, herkenyng armonye / With sownes ful of hevenysssh melodie” (V 1811-13). Though Julian’s mystical experiences of God originate in grace and occur for her within the confines of an anchorite’s cell, Troilus, for whom an encounter with the divine occurs in the heavens after his death, experiences *wit* or mental activity that is similar to Julian’s. Julian is a fervent memoirist of her religious phenomenology. The ending of Chaucer’s *Troilus* is a speculative fiction. Yet despite the differences in their setting and genre, their *avysement* – the evaluating extension of *wit* – signals that their interior experiences have correspondence.

Troilus and Criseyde begins with “double sorwe” (I 1). Troilus’s otherworldly end is Chaucer’s attempt to solve the doubleness that permeates his poem. Troilus’s chief faculty of mind – *avysement* – changes its form after his death, as a result of his distance from earth and movement *toward* the divine. *Avysement* in death inaugurates a renegotiation of the doubleness problem and signals resolution to the “yearning for an original, unitary state, uninfected by ‘doublenesse,’ [that] is a profoundly and pervasively Chaucerian theme . . . nowhere more extensively than in the *Troilus*” (Patterson, *History* 85). Chaucer relates two instances of *avysement* after Troilus’s death, one in which the knight “saugh with ful avysement / The erratik sterres” (V 1811-2) and a few lines later “he gan avyse / This litel spot of erthe” (V 1814-5). In Troilus’s moments after death, the function of *avysement* as deliberation or consideration takes a step back, and suddenly the *avysing* mind is simply a perceiving mind. This metamorphosis in how Troilus evaluates

and experiences the world reflects the intersection between human mind and divine mind that Chaucer's *Boece* expounds. Likewise, the Trojan knight's spatial direction in the heavens, inspired by Chaucer's study of Macrobius, plots him on a course toward God. This chapter will ask, and answer, this fundamental question: given what we know about the influence of Boethius on Chaucer, how do we interpret the state and direction of Troilus's mind after he leaves his corpse? Separated from the body, how does Chaucer represent Troilus's afterlife? I argue that Chaucer's representation of Troilus's afterlife is understood best by the metaphor and image of an asymptote. The asymptote, a "line that is approached by a parabola but never touched by it" (Csordas 176), ideally visualizes the spatial work that Chaucer performs on Troilus's mind.⁸ The asymptote contextualizes Troilus's distinction *from*, and experience *with*, God and divine eternity. The growing proximity to God allows Troilus to view his life and romance with Criseyde with a phenomenological perspective that is affected by his liminality to eternity. Moreover, the mathematical metaphor connects Troilus's apotheosis to an approach in religious anthropology and phenomenology called "intimate alterity" that corresponds with themes in the fifth book of *Boece* as well as Chaucer's development of themes of movement in *Troilus and Criseyde*. The asymptote and its idea of intimate alterity is a unique way of approaching the text and seeing how the ending attempts to resolve the doubleness factor, or "double consciousness" (Ganim, "Consciousness and Time" 82), that invades Chaucer's Trojan romance up until the moment of Troilus's killing.

⁸ "There remains a gap, an *écart*, no matter how close the curve approaches" (Csordas 176). Asymptote comes from the Greek, meaning *not meeting*.

The narrator diverts the reader's attention from the moment of Troilus's death at the hands of Achilles. Skipping over the scene of his demise, Chaucer instead makes the reader a companion as Troilus ascends into the celestial spaces above earth. When Troilus

was slayn in this manere,
His lighte goost ful blisfully is went
Up to the holughnesse of the eighthe spere,
In convers letyng everich element;
And ther he saugh with ful avysement
The erratik sterres, herkenyng armonye
With sownes ful of hevenyssh melodie. (V 1807-13)

On one hand, Troilus is dead; there is no more narrative detail regarding the “manere” and circumstances of his demise. He exchanges his body for a “goost” and ascends into the heavens. He is “in convers” – beyond the physical world and slipping deep into the spiritual one. On the other hand, Troilus's journey into the afterlife is characterized by descriptions using sensory awareness. He hears “sownes ful of hevenyssh melodie” and he “saugh” the stars. Importantly, the figure of Troilus floating through the clouds, observing those below, implies a kind of passivity or serenity in the face of what occurred to him. Chaucer, in the mode of Boethius, wants to demonstrate man's relationship to fate and Fortune and that connection to the divine. Romantic love between Troilus and Criseyde is not the only love considered in the poem. His passage from earth to heaven is infused with Christian language, and with references to perception that are dependent on a relation to God:

And down from thennes faste he gan avyse

This litel spot of erthe that with the se

Embraced is, and fully gan despise

This wrecched world, and held al vanite (V 1814-17)

Chaucer's closes his narrative with the protagonist *en route* to the heavens--as if toward fellowship with God--and he closes his romance by committing his text prayerfully "to that sothfast Crist, that starf on rode" (V 1860).

Perhaps because of the abrupt change in the tone of the narrative when suddenly Troilus is lifted into the heavens, certain critics, such as Chauncey Wood, struggle with the ending of *Troilus and Criseyde*, questioning how to reconcile Troilus's death with his long-term pursuit of Criseyde's heart—how, as a pagan, Troilus can enter a Christian heaven. On the one hand, A.C. Spearing identifies *The Consolation of Philosophy* as "philosophical paganism, which overlaps to a considerable extent with Christianity, and indeed is never incompatible with it, but does not extend to revealed truth" (130). Spearing's reading of Boethius excludes Troilus from a Christian death and ending. On the other hand, there is a tradition of Chaucer critics such as Anthony Farnham, Norman Klassen, Karen Elaine Smyth, Claudia Papka, and John Conlee that reads the ending of *Troilus* as Christian. Conlee, for example, rightly argues that Chaucer "portrays in these stanzas . . . a synthesis of pagan and Christian concepts of immortality which by [his] time had become highly conventional" (27). That Troilus's death may be read as an ending in which Chaucer transcends the categories of pagan and Christian has been well-established by many critics. Where Spearing strikes a pessimistic tone about this muddling of boundaries, calling the end of *Troilus* "a patchwork job . . . that apparently

negates much of the human and literary substance of what precedes” (107), then, I regard the poem’s conclusion as a productive space for envisioning new territory of *wit*. Rather than a muddled ending, I consider the conclusion of *Troilus* as a place where Chaucer limns boundaries between the divine and the human mind, playing with imagination and the potential for consciousness after death. Nowhere is this process more evident than at the end of *Troilus and Criseyde* when the Trojan knight “fully gan despise / This wrecched world, and held al vanite” (V 1816-7). This attitude is a position analogous to the asceticism of Julian of Norwich’s anchorite vocation. In the last stanzas, Chaucer uses *avysement* to describe Troilus’s new perception of the world in his spiritual life apart from the body.

In Chaucer’s writing, *avysement* is used more clearly to indicate consideration and the process of decision making.⁹ The association of *avysement* with prudence and judgment is important for our understanding of Chaucer’s use of the term “The Clerk’s Tale,” as well as in “The Merchant’s Tale” and “Melibee,” but this meaning of the word appears absent in these passages from *Troilus and Criseyde*. Like Sherlock Holmes’s curious incident of the dog in the night-time, the absence of preconsideration or prudence in relation to the *avysement* of the *Troilus*’s last stanzas inevitably inflects our interpretation of Troilus’s apotheosis. *Avysement* is synonymous with consideration or judgment in other tales, yet the two usages of *avyse* at the end of *Troilus* seem to lack a

⁹ In “Melibee,” the speaker beseeches “wommanly pitee to taken swick avysement in this nede that we ne our freendes be nat desherited ne destroyed thurgh our folye” (830-1) and heralding the moral complication of the Clerk’s Tale, Chaucer’s Merchant “warne[s] yow wel it is no childes pley / To take a wyf withoute avysment” (318-9). Following David Burnley, Linda Georgianna demonstrates that *avysement* is associated with practical wisdom. Understanding the “Clerk’s Tale” depends on reading *avysement* as a “need for careful preconsideration” (795). Likewise, Georgianna points out that Dame Prudence in Chaucer’s “Tale of Melibee” “uses the term *avyse* more than any other character in Chaucer” (795).

position of consideration. The difference between the *avysement* as consideration and Troilus's *avysement*, serenely glancing down on earth, is that Chaucer positions Troilus on a height.¹⁰

One reason why the ending of *Troilus* may seem abrupt or unexpected is that Troilus in his death appear startlingly passive. However, I introduce Julian of Norwich as an analogy for Troilus's *wit* to suggest that his apparent passivity, far from detrimental, leaves Troilus receptive to the unique experience of proximity to God. His new attitude about the world is a clue about this receptivity. Troilus is hardly the only figure who "despise[s] / This wrecched world" (V 1816-7). Anchorites like Julian of Norwich, other ascetics in intensely spiritual vocations, philosophers, and Stoics of history are listed among those who put this attitude into practice. The difference between the Stoics of the past, and Troilus's *avysement*, is that the former, as discipline, is pragmatic and aspirational; it seeks to achieve, or shape the mind in accord with methods prescribed by practice. The Stoic *avysing* the world is a form of praxis. Meanwhile, Troilus lifted into the heavens, as a fiction, is speculative and revelatory. His apotheosis resembles prophecy – "the action or practice of revealing or expressing the will or thought of God or of a god"¹¹ – more than praxis. Put this way, the methods of the ascetics, mystics, and Stoics are prompted by an *entente* to practice; Troilus, on the other hand, appears passive.

¹⁰ Chaucer took his inspiration for the revelatory passage concluding the *Troilus* in part from his reading of Macrobius, whose *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio* he discusses in the *Parliament of Fowles*. Chaucer summarizes his learning from Macrobius in *Parliament*: "Than bad he hym, syn erthe was so lyte, / And dissevable and ful of harde grace, / That he ne shulde hym in the world delyte. (64-6). The benefit of Macrobius is that Chaucer has a well-established cosmology, hearkening back to Plato's *Timaeus*, in which to set his poem's conclusory passages, but he differs from Macrobius slightly in the function of this cosmology. Scipio's vision of the celestial spheres compels him to pursue political action on earth as civic duty is the highest calling available to man. In Chaucer's version of this kind of scene, however, Troilus is already dead and the opportunity to pursue political action *for its own sake* is over.

¹¹ "prophecy, n." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, December 2018.

Throughout *Troilus and Criseyde*, the designs of his *entente* rarely come to fruition, if he is able to articulate *entente* at all, and nowhere is this absence of willfulness more tangible than his celestial journey. The moments of *avysement* in these stanzas seem uniquely inert, relating how Troilus's *wit* is corrected by dizziness of swift flight into perceiving the world in an otherworldly state of premium receptivity, with no mentor, no instruction, and no discipline required to shape his mind for the journey.

What is this journey, and where does it take the knight? Debates about the Christian versus pagan nature of Troilus's end are answered, I suggest, by understanding that it is a synthesis of the two. I believe that Chaucer focuses less on Troilus's destiny or location than he does on continued movement. Chauncey Wood maintains that Troilus stays within the eighth sphere, which Wood asserts is "more like the Christian purgatory than either the Christian hell or Christian heaven" (189) and that Troilus deserves purgatory due to his "likerous" nature. In *Boece* IV, m I, the soul does penance in the sphere of the fixed stars, the eighth sphere, which Wood assumes to mean that Troilus stays here. Conlee suggests that Wood misunderstands that the ending

is certainly meant to be metaphorical. What this passage actually describes is the process by which a man may turn his thoughts from this world to the next – by clothing them in the feathers of philosophy which allow them to fly heavenward, hence to contemplate the workings of the universe, and finally, after a period of contemplation through which a state of beatitude may be achieved, to soar to the realm of God. (29)

I believe that when Chaucer writes "forth he wente" (V 1826), he implies *continued motion* through the heavens. Since Chaucer declares "[s]wich fyn" (V 1828), repeating

that phrase five times, without telling the reader where “Mercurye sorted hym to dwelle” (V 1827), I take it to mean that Chaucer intends the reader to understand that the state of beatitude remains in a process of *becoming*. While Wood’s interpretation of Troilus’s character differs from mine, his study of Chaucer’s understanding of astrology includes a version of contemplativeness that would privilege such a process. He analyzes perspectives of medieval thought on astrology, first paraphrasing St. Bonaventure that “the heavenly bodies did not need to be put into either a providential or an astrological chain of determination in order to be employed in a figure of thought; they served to illustrate the link between heaven and earth by their philosophical “nature”” (53). Wood links Bonaventure to one of Chaucer’s primary influences, concluding that “*as in Boethius . . . images of the planets are used only as a means and not as an end in themselves*” (53). While Chaucer, *via* “Macrobye” (*PoF* 111) and other medieval sources of astrological knowledge, undoubtedly pored over information in ancient texts about the nature and category of celestial spheres, his poetry subordinates those carefully categorized systems to serve as links and illustrations of a larger scheme, i.e. the relationship of man to God.

Chaucer avoids telling us where Troilus belongs, but the relationship between man and the divine clearly takes on greater importance in the last few stanzas. In her reading of *Troilus*, Karen Elaine Smyth highlights several astrological distinctions between the eighth and ninth spheres and considers how Chaucer “tailors cosmological discourse to satisfy his own ends” (158). Arguing that a notion of God seemingly absent from the main text of *Troilus* is vital to our understanding the end of it, Smyth asserts that Troilus “moves into the ninth sphere of the *primum mobile*” (151) and concludes that

“Troilus’s continued movement after entering the eighth sphere is . . . a symbol for the transformation of the narrative from an intense love story to an affirmation of Divine devotion” (158). The progression of movement tells us more about how Troilus changes after his death than any settled location in the universe could. The fact that Chaucer does not place the dead knight in any specific sphere indicates that his journey is more salient without that detail. Summarizing the end of *Troilus*, Smyth calls it “[finality] implied . . . although not attained” (159). Smyth is referencing Chaucer’s Christian cosmology, but “*finality implied though not attained*” is a line that perfectly and poetically describes the asymptote.

The asymptote is an ideal analogy for Troilus’s movement because it is, like Boethius, chiefly invested in our relationship and proximity to eternity.¹² A major point in the fifth book of *Boece* is that God’s eternity and the human experience of time exist concurrently. Boethius raises the question about how human agency can exist when divine foreknowledge understands things that will occur in the future, by necessity. This conundrum frames the problem of providence and free will in terms of a distinction, one between human minds and God’s, as well as the distinction between what occurs by

¹² Asymptotes were used to illustrate methods of thinking for medieval mathematicians. In the Arabic intellectual world, Abû Sa’îd Ahmad ibn Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Jalîl al-Sijzî, an astronomer, astrologer, and mathematician of the tenth-century, pens a “Treatise on how to imagine the two lines which approach one another but do not meet.” The asymptote represents an abstract limit with boundaries infinitely *in process* of coming together; thus, working in the mathematics of these equations is a highly abstracted project of intellectual imagination. Gad Freudenthal argues since “al-Sijzî explicitly refers to the problem of imagining the asymptotes suggests that he, at least, was aware of, and interested in, the epistemological consequences that can be drawn from the mathematical treatment of asymptotes” (118). Tracking the spread of asymptotic math into medieval Europe, Freudenthal suggests that Maimonides was a link between the Arabic community and the court of Frederick II, indirectly prompting a Latin translation of al-Sijzî’s text at the request of the emperor’s court philosopher, John of Palermo. While it is not clear that Chaucer himself uses the asymptote, it should be of considerable interest that he thinks in geometrical ways, in his *Treatise on the Astrolabe*, which he dedicates to the instruction and education of his son, Lewis. And I believe that whether or not Chaucer himself explicitly used the asymptote metaphor, it remains a vital image for the *Troilus*.

contingency as opposed to by necessity. But Lady Philosophy's solution in *Boece* Book V is to reframe Boethius's understanding of God's knowledge and presence in time. Where philosophical problems of human agency explore the implications of divine prescience, the topic of eternity explores the substance of divine presence. The former implies that God, *as if* existing in our human experience of time, is privy to information regarding events that have not yet occurred. Presence, upon which Boethius meditates in Book V when Philosophy tells him to "considere thanne what is eternite" (V, 6, 11), indicates an existence in time that is *not* predicated by human experience. Though Lady Philosophy assures Boethius that there is "no swich thing that men mighten trowen by ryght that it is eterne" (V, pr. 6, 32-4), she tells him that by studying the divine science, he may come to understand that form of God much better, and *that in doing so*, his relationship with the world changes. The asymptote's non-linearity analogizes Boethius's knowledge in relation to God's eternity.

Imagine the story of *Troilus and Criseyde* as a graph. Picture the final stanzas in which Troilus's "lighte goost" floats serenely into the heavens as if it were a simple $x | y$ axis from high school algebra. Troilus's movement toward "the pleyn felicite / That is in hevene above" (V 1817-8) is asymptotic. The asymptote, "a straight line that [a] curve approaches in such a manner that it becomes closer and closer, steadily closer, without touching it" (Kidron 1265), is Troilus's *ever diminishing* distance from the eternity that is "the estat . . . of the devyne substaunce" (*Boece* V, 6, 6). The y-axis – *the vertical line* – is God's eternity. The x-axis – *the horizontal line* – is humanity's linear experience of time. God does not see events of the future, says Lady Philosophy. If God sees events that occur in the future, then Boethius's concern about the freedom of will is a valid

concern (*Boece* V pr. 3, 8-16). Instead, Lady Philosophy says eternity is something different than linear time. It cuts across the graph of linear time, in which “God ne hath nat taken it of the bytydnye of things to come, but of his proper symplcicite” (V 6, 275-7). In this illustration, Troilus is a curving line that trails along the x-axis horizontally, and languidly, for the sequence of *Troilus* Books I through V, then swiftly and exponentially rises to follow the y-line, God’s eternity, in a nearly vertical change of course.

However, Troilus cannot be eternal. He “suffreth temporel condicioun” (*Boece* V pr.6, 27-8).¹³ Though Troilus *as a subject* still exists in the axis of human time, his trajectory of *avysement* rises higher and higher, his perception is improved, and from this height Troilus no longer *avyses* human events entirely in the sequence that “procedith fro preteritz into futures” (*Boece* V, pr 6, 18-9). In this space, Troilus experiences a dramatic and sudden reorientation of value. The importance of his romantic entanglement with the daughter of Calchas passes away. Where he once pined for Criseyde, Troilus now sees the events of this world as “vanite” (V 1817). This change in *avysement* is a critical part of the divine science that Boethius learns from Lady Philosophy. That which approaches eternity sees a wider “collacioun of temporel thinges” (*Boece* V, pr.6, 16-7), re-orienting the faculty of desire to *ends* more appropriate to the orbit of the subject.

Though eternity is beyond our substance, it is apprehensible to the intellect. Boethius acknowledges that it “schewethe more cleerly by the comparysoun or collacioun of temporel thinges” (V, pr. 6, 15-7).¹⁴ This reading of Boethius favors the

¹³ In their essay categorizing modes of time and eternity, Strump and Kretzmann argue that what “is temporal and what is eternal can co-exist . . . but not within the same mode of existence” (436).

¹⁴ In the final book of *Boece*, Lady Philosophy disarms the complications of free will by establishing the relative simultaneity of God and man. God, she claims, “overpasseth alle temporel moevement, duelleth in the simplicite of his presence, and embraceth and considereth alle the infynit spaces of tymes preteritz and

axial comparison of divine substance to human substance; he also implies that this comparison is the only means by which we can understand eternity. For “ryght so as ye seen some thinges in this temporal present, ryght so seeth God alle thinges by his eterne present” (V, 6, 133-5). The reason why Troilus’s movement is asymptotic is that the temporal aspect of eternity is not absolute. Since time is experienced in different ways, any description of time must involve relativity. As *Boece* attests, the only eternal thing is the divine. However, part of Lady Philosophy’s mission is to use Boethius’s rational powers to help him understand that 1) as human beings dwelling in time, our relationship with the eternal is continuous, and 2) access to an *avysement* of eternity is available, *in this life*, inasmuch as we put reason to use, since reason is the faculty of knowledge that is shared with the divine intellect. Represented in the *next life*, Troilus is on a path past “[t]he erratik sterres” (V 1812), closer and closer to the divine, curving infinitely toward a threshold of God’s perspective. Troilus can “lough right at the wo” (V 1821), signaling that he sees life with a perception closer to God’s objectivity. He cannot properly be described as atemporal, but because he views his life from a position on high, he witnesses the purposes and ends of this world with perception informed by proximity to God’s presence.

Alterity is a prevalent theme in *Troilus and Criseyde*, and Chaucer’s romance makes the difficulty of relating to “the other” a major motif. Critics such as John Ganim

futures, and lokith in his simple knowynge alle thinges of preterit ryght as thei weren idoon presently ryght now” (V, 6, 104-9). She is saying that God’s eternity is an atemporal duration that tracks as a line of simultaneous points extending infinitely in directions both forward and backward. In describing “the stedfastnesse of the thought of God” (IV, 6, 137), Chaucer expounds on a related mathematical model. In *Boece*, all that falls “undir destyne ben certes subgitz to purveaunce” (IV, 6, 109,10) but there are a class of things that “sourmounten the ordenance of destyne” and “the ordre of destynal moevablete” (IV, 6, 112, 114). This class of things is akin to points that draw near to the center of a circle. The innermost center has a “symplesse of the myddle” (119) and “any thing that knytteth and felawschipeth hymself to thilke myddel poynt, it is constreyned into simplicite” (125-7).

and Lee Patterson identify “double consciousness” as an underlying concern of the poem. Patterson writes that “yearning for an original, unitary state, uninfected by ‘doubleness,’ is a profoundly and pervasively Chaucerian theme and nowhere more extensively than in the *Troilus*” (*History* 85). The poem is “about how two people strive, unsuccessfully, to become one; and their failure is a function of their own lack of oneness or integrity” (Patterson 137). Although not in regard to the *Troilus*, the anthropologist Thomas J. Csordas similarly writes that alterity is “an essential displacement, not a center of meaning but a duplicity (doubleness/deceit) of the kind that is recognized in the phenomenological epoche” (172). On an interior level, Troilus’s inability to come to terms with his “double sorwe” (I, 1) is part of the alienation of his own *wit* and is symptomatic of this doubleness. Thinking in terms of alterity, “difference, otherness,”¹⁵ eternity in *Boece* is Chaucer’s response to these problems of *wit*, i.e. faculties of mind that are separated from themselves, and the problem of other minds. The asymptote in *Troilus* Book V can be seen as a portrait of that response.

Beyond tracking Troilus’s motion, the asymptote connects the graphing movement itself to a form of subjective experience called intimate alterity.¹⁶ Though the oxymoron of the title has a poetic ring to it, intimate alterity is a phrase describing the phenomenology of religious experience. As an image, the asymptote aligns with Troilus’s movement through the cosmos. As a metaphor, the asymptote’s swift rise over the x-axis to (almost) meet the y-axis demonstrates how the scope of the mind widens as it draws

¹⁵ “The fact or state of being other or different; diversity, difference, otherness; an instance of this.” “alterity, n.” *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, December 2018.

¹⁶ “In the structuralist 1970s Hans Robert Jauss and Paul Zumthor wrote about the ‘alterity’ of the Middle Ages” (Burrow 483). See also: P. Zumthor, *Essai de poétique médiévale* (Paris, 1972), 19. and H.R. Jauss, “The Alterity and Modernity of Medieval Literature,” *New Literary History*, 10 (1979), 181-229: 182.

closer to eternity. Consider this corollary image of *wit*, and how the asymptote can be used to transcend – like the universe – the boundaries and borders created by subject and object. Those distinctions are a “way of thinking [that] might be a prison of western logics prone to think in terms of fissons, gaps, and so forth” (Puglisi 131). In response to this fundamental problem of distinction, Csordas proposes the asymptote as a figure of conjunction and the process of adjoining. “The asymptote is the line that is approached by a parabola but never touched by it. There remains a gap . . . no matter how close the curve approaches” (176). For the anthropologist, this modality demands examining our interiority, since the gaps that most often need a bridge are the gaps that constitute the human *wit*, the human subject. “We humans are the asymptote of the ineffable that never touches us” (176) he adds earnestly. The thematic concerns of *Troilus and Criseyde* find resolution in the metaphor of an asymptote, a mathematical figure of a curving line that is set on an infinite approach to a line that it may never reach.

Invoking intimate alterity means that Troilus’s greatest issue – deeper, more fundamental, and more long-lasting than his inability to court Criseyde without Pandarus’s intervention – is the problem that all human beings face as subjects with interior lives. The asymptote does not mean that the human experience of time is entirely eclipsed or erased. The figure of the asymptote maintains a gap (what Csordas calls an *écart*) no matter how closely the lines draw together, or no matter how closely the subject and object draw together, between Troilus’s substance and God’s substance. Even from his height in the cosmos, Troilus is not “substantially unyted” to God, to borrow Julian of Norwich’s phrase. Alterity is a constituent factor of existence, with anthropological, psychological, and ontological dimensions, ensuring that there is always an “other” in

some form. But intimate alterity – and its emblem, the asymptote – proposes to limn the exchanges that characterize otherness to enable connections that cross those distinctions, gaps, and fissions.

Troilus's relationship with love, both romantic and divine, is an exchange of continuity and discontinuity that culminates in his movement toward God. In Chaucer's condemnation of "feyned love" at the end of the poem, the poet is pointing out how Troilus's love for Criseyde is an idealization that does not represent the real. It is, moreover, as Papka argues, Troilus's relinquishment of Criseyde provides him with an enlightenment: Criseyde is "not a mystical textual construct, and it is precisely in discovering this, and in the transgressive giving up of lyric love for a love that is alive in history, and therefore radically discontinuous, that Troilus himself begins to become 'real'" (275). In addition to developing a form of continuity, Troilus's ascension is a transcendence that moves him beyond the unacknowledged control of Fortune. We trust that Troilus is viewing the events of the world as continuous *due to* the discontinuity he experiences in his severing from the corporeal. In other words, the distance provided in the heavenly epilogue gives Troilus the sphere of vision necessary to see Fortune's causes and effects on the earth.

The crucial lack of judgment characterizing the *avysement* of Troilus' postmortem moments are an indication that his judgment as a human being are no longer necessary. The relationship between *knowing* and *being* at this point is more closely intertwined and approaching simplicity. If in other works Chaucer represents the gap between a character and what they know, or claim to know, then in *Troilus* he attempts a closing of this gap. It is impossible to put into words any phenomenology of the afterlife, substance, or God's

foreknowledge without complicating our narratives about the temporal present. Strump and Kretzmann argue that “God cannot deliberate, anticipate, remember, or plan ahead” (446) because these processes “[take] time to be performed (like deliberation or in requiring a temporal viewpoint as a prerequisite to performance” (446).¹⁷ We should not be surprised that *avysement* lacks deliberation after Troilus is slain; he is somewhere beyond the temporal present and moving toward the eternal present on a curve.

Chaucer’s use of contrasting language complicates the distinction between the terrestrial and spiritual. Though Troilus is dead and gone from his body, the narrator takes care to remind us of the “wrecched worldes appetites” (V 1851). The ending of *Troilus and Criseyde* is meant “to emphasize the Boethian concept of the discrepancy between man’s limited perception while in this world and his vastly expanded perception after his release from this world” (Conlee 27). Limited perception is due to man’s clunky movement through time as discrete parts; humans are bound to a set of time bookended by birth and death. Vastly expanded perception, which sees this human set as “vanite,” is spatially and substantially closer to that perception occupied by the divine. Thinking of this exchange of *avysement* in terms of psychoanalysis, Fradenburg speculates that

when Troilus seems so alone with his fate, his revenance has him virtually transmitting by satellite. The narrator is still there to listen, and we ourselves read the traces in the book made of his life. To this extent, Troilus’s story is still structured by the economy of sacrifice: it is devoted to recovering, with a

¹⁷ It would not be anachronistic to investigate Boethian notions of time alongside Einstein’s theory of relativity. However, “the problem of omniscience and immutability – depends on the concept of an absolute present, a concept that is often thought to be dependent on a Newtonian conception of absolute time. But the concept of an absolute present which is essential to our discussion is not discredited by relativity theory. Every conscious temporal observer has an undeniable, indispensable sense of the absolute present, *now*, and that thoroughly pervasive feature of temporal consciousness is all need.” (Strump, Kretzman, 440).

difference that is also a bonus, whatever he relinquishes. The bonus is enhanced sentience and prosthetic power. Having crossed the line, Troilus can not only see and hear in a new way; he can commune with the living, because we can hear him. (*Sacrifice* 235-6)

Beyond doubleness, there is a kind of presence that transcends the boundaries of subject and object.¹⁸ As Fradenburg points out, this position has the benefit of a kind of power. This movement, going beyond doubleness, though difficult to define or typify, negotiates the vertical space which characterizes the eternal. The dialogue between Boethius and Lady Philosophy, discovering the nature of Providence and free will, culminates in Book V with an ontological investigation of eternity. In this context, alterity is “the otherness of God and the divinity of otherness” (Murchadha 155). It is grounded in a notion of God described by Rudolf Otto as “the Wholly Other” (Roy 120).¹⁹ *Troilus and Criseyde* is Chaucer’s attempt to manage a vision of religious phenomenology, a field characterized by Rudolf Otto’s idea of the divine. The Wholly Other is religious alterity in a nutshell. Troilus’s advanced and amended *avysement* is borrowed from his intimate closeness to the Wholly Other from its remarkable height of eternity.

Acknowledging the difficulty of discussing eternity and its relationship to time, Brian Leftow suggests that “one cannot in the end accede to so great a distance between what is ‘in the head’ and what is in reality” (131). When factoring in the notion of

¹⁸ The weird intermingling of subjectiveness is analogous to Chaucer’s establishment of his “author-ity” in the final stanzas. As Wetherbee notes, “the narrator discovers simultaneously both the nature of his literary indebtedness and the final independence of his own poem” (227-8).

¹⁹ “Taking his cue from Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, each of those languages having a special term that refers to this Reality, Otto proceeds to create a new German word, *das Numinose*, ‘the numinous’ . . . [a] peculiar term serv[ing] to designate what is unique in religious experience as distinct from moral experience” (Roy 110).

intimate alterity, the subject and the other have this same ambiguous relationship. Is the relationship distant, or near? The asymptote clarifies that both things can be accurate, at the margins of the graphing function. In his response to Stump and Kretzmann, however, Leftow parses their definitions of duration, concluding that eternity “is a mode of being midway between temporality and the absolutely durational existence of an instant” (140). Sixteen-hundred years after the death of Boethius, philosophers continue to argue the minutiae of perspectives about time, and we must be reminded that Chaucer is “a philosophical poet . . . [who] seems to prefer the questions and will leave the conclusions to the clerks” (Peck 745). Chaucer translates *Boece*’s philosophy, but seems to cleave to a simple definition of eternity that is “parfit possessioun and al togidre of lif interminable” (V, pr. 6, 13-5). While accounting for the philosophical nuances that make up those elements of Boethius’s definition, Chaucer’s poem retains a simplicity that Troilus approaches at his death. The ambiguities of representing an atemporal duration allow Chaucer to place Troilus in an empyrean, a space with eyes to witness the scope of his corporeal life, a heart that lightly laughs at terrestrial misfortune, and a soul that feels peace among the spheres.

At the end of *Troilus and Criseyde*, what is phenomenology of Troilus’s *wit*? What is he experiencing and how does it feel? Based on Chaucer’s correspondence between the heights of the cosmos, the ascension of the mind, and the metamorphosis of its faculties, I am suggesting that Troilus’s perspective resembles that of the mind of a mystic. Chaucer’s portrayal of Troilus’s ascension mirrors Julian of Norwich’s visions. While *Troilus* endows the Trojan knight with a Christian afterlife, Chaucer is aware that the form of *wit* antecedent to divine participation is obliquely available in this life.

Asymptotic thinking requires seeing that minds are not either/or. Just as it may not be helpful to a reading of the text to say that Troilus is *either* a pagan *or* a Christian, intimate alterity suggests that *near* and *proximate to* are the only prepositions that may serve to describe relationships to divine presence. For instance, this divine participation is spiritually available to a mystic, such as Julian. Alterity, the “phenomenological kernel of religion” (Csordas 164), is ever-present in our relationships with ourselves and others, including the divine. Intimate alterity was just as present to Troilus in his “double sorwe” (I 1) as it was in his death, but its true nature was only *avysed* by his *wit* after his spatial, asymptotic distance from the earth.

Confined to a cell as an anchorite, Julian’s religious experiences occur in a setting that is designed to typify death. The ascetism of withdrawing into a small enclosure until death gives *occasion* to the mental events that characterize Julian’s mysticism. Troilus is far from a religious figure in the poem, but in his language of love, though faltering and failing and out of his control, he approaches an elevated *wit* that is analogous to mystic experience. Jamie C. Fumo tentatively suggests that “[p]erhaps we are to regard Troilus in the hours before his death as abandoning his Thomistic attempts to rationally approach his deity and espousing instead the language of mysticism, a path toward God which transcends reason and is incited by the emotion of love” (“Ends of Love,” 82-3). Troilus is *not* Julian of Norwich, a fervent memoirist of her own experience. However, both Julian’s *Shewings* and Chaucer’s portrayal of Troilus evidence a desire to participate in God’s presence and proximity to the divine.

Troilus is in space! A straightforward reading says that setting makes Troilus’s experience different than Julian’s. But *wit* is a repository of interiority, and though

representations of interiority vary – e.g. Troilus’s spirit cast into the Milky Way as fictional dream vision, and Julian’s soul caught up by God as mystical memoir – the figures they represent have convergence in that they are changed inasmuch as they approach God. As Chaucer’s readers, we are privileged to witness Troilus’s entanglement with the divine. In the face of Troilus’s encroaching simplicity in the presence of God, the critic may articulate “poyntes and the propertes” of distinction and correspondence, to show ways this divine relationship with the knight functions and enunciate perspectives on Chaucer’s vision of his hero’s afterlife that might be unconsidered. If Chaucer himself is suited to roles other than logician or theologian, his readers may likewise appreciate “swich fyn.”

III. PUZZLE: OCKHAM ASYLUM: *SOPHISMATA* AT PLAY IN “THE CLERK’S TALE”

“I trowe ye studie about som sophyme” (IV 5) says Harry Bailey to the Clerk, extending a request to hear “som murie thyng of adventures” and put away the Clerk’s “terms . . . colours, and . . . figures” (IV 15-16). The Clerk tells the tale of Walter, a marquis in Italy who takes a poor woman named Griselda as his wife. Walter proposes to Griselda with a strange caveat: she may be his wife but must do as he “best thynketh . . . [a]nd never . . . to grucche it” (IV 354). Under that condition, she may “assente” to be his wife, or else “avyse” (IV 350). Griselda assents, but Walter soon tests her decision, putting her through a series of tests in which he claims to have their children killed. Later, Walter’s exercise of power is revealed to his wife and subjects to have been an elaborate trick. If we consider Walter’s either / or prospect to Griselda, we see that the Clerk did not put away his terms or figures: the mental tools of a scholastic. Instead, the Clerk shrouded his terms in the veneer of a story. I contend that Walter’s exclusion of *avysement*, rational judgement, in his proposal is a critical part of the puzzle that comprises the “Clerk’s Tale.” The fact that Griselda cannot *grucche*, even later in the tale when Walter leads her to believe he murdered her children, is a problem for critics of the Clerk’s tale. However, it is Griselda’s choice to assent or *avyse* in response to Walter’s offer to marry that sets the stage for how we read the rest of the tale. The Clerk, after all, is first and foremost a scholastic, a fact that Harry Bailey uses to tease him. The Clerk follows Harry Bailey’s request for a story but encloses a segment of material from his own studies of “Aristotle and his philosophie” (I 295).

I argue that Walter’s proposal to Griselda functions as a “sophyme.” *Sophismata* in medieval scholastic were logical tools employed by students, terminist philosophers,

and logicians such as William of Ockham and Jean Buridan as “logical constructs [dealing] with voluntarist topics, among others” (Delasanta 212) or a “scholastic regimen of logical and even metaphysical ‘tests’” (213).²⁰ I argue that terminist *sophismata* are essential for understanding “The Clerk’s Tale” as an intellectual puzzle. Joseph Grennan and Rodney Delasanta have cited these sophisms in connection with “The Clerk’s Tale,” but those scholars only mention *sophismata* generally, highlighting that: first, readings of the tale ought to focus on the Clerk as a scholastic, and second, that the tale’s themes result in paradox.²¹ Stepsis, Steinmetz, and Delasanta have written essays that interpret Walter’s actions and Griselda’s responses in terms of the Clerk’s vocation as a scholastic, but their influential articles do not go far in examining Griselda’s situation as it originates from logic and the Clerk’s study as a logician in the tradition of Ockham. Instead, as they concentrate on topics of the will and dissecting Walter’s allegorical role as God, they primarily write about the Clerk as a nominalist. This leads them to lengthy discussions of *potentia absoluta* and *potentia ordinata*, while ignoring or generalizing the *sophisma* at play in the tale. No critics of Chaucer have identified Walter’s proposal as *sophismatic*. Linda Georgianna persuasively argues that Griselda’s choice, as Walter frames it, is “an opposition between prudent deliberation and

²⁰ On this branch of scholastic inquiry, de Rijk writes that “the terminist movement . . . has its starting point in the vivid interest of eleventh- and twelfth-century scholars in linguistic analysis and the study of fallacies as indispensable instruments for solving serious (or less serious) problems. The doctrine of fallacy, including grammatical analysis as the apparatus *par excellence* for unmasking fallacious arguments, underlied terminist logic. (14). Following a metaphor initiated by Moody, de Rijk says that terminist logic is experiential, experimental, and even playful, in a way that uses categories even in fallacious ways in order to figure out the boundaries of propositions and terms. The analogy they explore is that of learning how to build a house. Terminism does not catalogue the material required to build a house, but begins putting material together, this way and that way, to see how the assortment and combination “affects its construction” (30). This leads to *sophismata*, or terminist sophisms.

²¹ Grennan mentions *sophismata* to “illustrate vividly the fact that the concern of the clerkly mind is with the imaginable rather than the possible” (82).

assent that appears nowhere else in Chaucer” (794). My interpretation of “The Clerk’s Tale” differs from prior scholastic-oriented readings – such as those of Delasanta, Laura Ashe, Gerald Morgan, or Michael Raby – by asserting that this opposition between assent and *avsyement*, Walter’s proposal itself, should be read as the *sophisma* of the “Tale.” Griselda’s choice to assent, rather than *avyse*, in the moment of her acceptance of Walter’s proposition is insoluble because assent presupposes judgment.²² William of Ockham’s philosophy of logic and epistemology gives us a picture of how the mind must think about *insolubilia*, or propositions – such as Walter’s marriage proposal – that offer contradiction.²³ Ockham distinguishes between apprehension and judgment, as well as intuitive and abstractive cognitions, faculties of the mind that are tested when Walter insists that Griselda must “assente, or elles . . . avyse” (IV 350). Mark Reuter has been essential to my understanding of Ockham’s position on these logical problems, and I work with Reuter’s thesis “locating the crux of the paradox within a deliberate human act” (129) to think about how Griselda’s impossible selection allows the story to proceed in ways that frustrate and perplex critics who insist on solving or decoding Griselda’s behavior. Instead, reading the tale’s proposal as an insoluble *sophisma* suggests that, though the sophism will remain unresolvable to the reader, it is properly interpreted only by Griselda, in what Ockham calls an *actus humanus*.

I propose that the Clerk is using his tale a *sophismatic* puzzle, based on principles of terminist logic, and that he is using this tale to place our allegorical interpretations in

²² Though there are characters in Chaucer elsewhere who makes decisions without *avysement*, such as the Merchant’s story about Januarie, the Clerk does not allow us to read Griselda as foolish or unprepared for the consequences of her decision. The set up is different; it does not implicate Griselda as foolish like many of Chaucer’s characters who are made fools by their lack of *avysement*.

²³ Insolubles, or *insolubilia*, are a class of “logical problem which yield by deductive reasoning a pair of statements that are contradictory” (Reuter 110).

irresolvable discrepancy with each other. Various readings of “The Clerk’s Tale” suggest the need for an approach that incorporates the idea of a puzzle directly into how the tale is read. Why does Walter make such tyrannical and cruel demands of Griselda? Why does Griselda go along with his harsh demands? Critics have tried to interpret the tale by showing that Walter represents God, and that the tale is an allegory of man’s relationship with the divine. Readers must decide if they accept the pre-conditions and resolutions of Walter’s tests; however, critical opinions of Walter contribute to the reader’s perspective of Griselda’s character, and vice versa. Walter exercises his authority tyrannically, but arguably, the Paduans absolve Walter of his apparent abuse of power because its result is unification, trust, and certitude. If a reader rejects the terms upon which Walter builds his tests, then can the same reader truly appreciate Griselda’s steadfastness? Is Griselda a cowed wife and pushover, or is she a long-suffering saint or Christ-like figure? Walter the marquis stands as the primary stumbling block in resolving the story. Walter is frequently allegorized as a figure of God, and Chaucer’s source for the tale, “Petraque, le laurier poete” (IV 31),²⁴ considered the marquis a figure of God. Some critics such as Edward Condren have inverted the allegory to read Griselda as God in the figure of Christ, and Walter as man. Condren sees Chaucer’s changes to the source material as an indication that Griselda is “analogous to God’s very offspring” (102). Those changes include adding figures from the Nativity in “a litel oxes stalle” (IV 207) where Griselda is found. Ganim admits the confusion about how to read the allegorical elements based on the character’s action when he says “there is now some disagreement as to who the real

²⁴ “Certainly the Clerk invites a religious reading at the end of his tale when, following Petrarch, he allegorizes Griselda’s devotion in terms of Christian faith (IV 1149-62). In the tale itself, the Clerk and Walter create a biblical ambience through their attestations that the greatest virtue (that is, Griselda’s virtue) is found in the humblest of people” (Shutters 63).

monster of the tale might be. After all, there are ways in which Griselde herself seems monstrously passive, or, to be more accurate, passive/aggressive” (“Carnival Voices” 121). None of these readings adequately explain or resolve the conundrums about Griselda’s patience or passivity, in response to Walter’s cruelty, that are posed by the tale.

A psychological approach can generate unique possibilities about character for most narratives, but in the context of “The Clerk’s Tale” this kind of interpretive scheme may lead to bizarre conclusions. The hazard of treating Griselda and Walter only as fully cognizant individuals, instead of allegorical types, is illustrated by the conclusions offered by a psychoanalytic reading. Considering the strictly human mindset of the marquis, Bernard J. Paris writes that “Walter feels obliged to perform his duties when pressed but does not wish to give up his freedom. He hopes that choosing Griselda will enable him to satisfy his conflicting needs . . . [and] believe[s] that Walter is more concerned with freedom than with domination, which is but a means to his end. Griselda’s submission insures that he can still follow his whims” (83-84). Paris argues that because Griselda appears to value Walter and his choices above all else, her behavior is incompatible with an allegorical reading. Paris offers us the dubious proposal that “Griselda is living for the worldly glory that Walter represents, her need of which is so intense, because of her base position perhaps, that she will sacrifice anything to hold onto it” (85). Clearly that interpretation makes little sense. Chaucer presents us with characters who are at once allegorical *and* human.

A *sophistic* reading of the tale, one that incorporates the Clerk’s role as a terminist and his inclusion of a *sophisma*, accounts for Griselda’s resistance to critical

attempts to psychologize her. If Griselda's chief ambition is glory, even an internalized sense of glory, then Walter's demands (though they are revealed to be deceptive) do the opposite, denigrating her status and exposing her to shame. A broad experiment in psychological reading is frustrated by the demands made on Griselda by her lord. Paris attempts a study that imagines human character in fiction, but errs by reading Griselda as if she has a strong interior psychology that is decipherable to psychoanalysis. He compares Griselda's submission to Tess of the D'Urberville's willingness to die by the hands of her somnambulant lover Angel Clare, which takes on the resonance of the Freudian death drive. "The Clerk's Tale" is not emotionless – readers should sympathize with Griselda's plight – but the central conflicts the tale provokes, unlike Thomas Hardy's novel, are not prompted by feeling or strong emotion. Griselda does not have a death drive. She values her life, her children, and her service, and it is because she continues to follow Walter's proposal and command to assent, not to *avsyre*, and never to *grucche*, in spite of losing those things she values over the course of Walter's test, that a reader could be deceived into believing that she disregards her children and her life. Paris's analogies go awry because "The Clerk's Tale" avoids thematic differences between issues of language and emotion. Instead, the tale's theme is centered on conflict of language and meaning.²⁵ A conflict between language and meaning indicates that

²⁵ *Sophismata* occur – by design – at the permeable, liminal border between language and meaning. There is a difference between significance and semantics; however, de Rijk notes that semantics is the close "twin" (14) of terminism, for which the discipline had a "scholastic predilection" (14). He argues that while there is a "difference between *significatio* and *suppositio*: the diverse ways in which significative terms can stand for (*supponere pro*) things only come about when their meaning is differentiated as a result of their being used in the context of a proposition" (35) which is the function of *sophismata*. Roberts mentions that *sophismata* in Buridan "involves a theory of signs and an interpretation of logical truth. It is an analysis which illustrates the distinction between significance and supposition, a traditional distinction which can be traced through the so-called 'terminist' texts and is to be found in the writings of Peter of Spain upon whose works Buridan's logic may be said to be based" (273).

allegory might not help interpret narrative conflict. Allegorical readings of “Clerk’s Tale” are plentiful in the scholarship about the tale,²⁶ but it is difficult to apprehend *at one time* the multifaceted ways in which these interpretative contradictions push against each other. Those interpretations of the text are useful, nor do I mean to suggest those interpretations of the story are incorrect.²⁷ Rather, I am arguing that no interpretation based on a narrative approach to this text will explain the origin of the opposition that exists between Walter and Griselda without couching that origin in the terms of paradox that the Clerk, as a scholastic, would have intended.

Scholasticism covers a range of intellectual disciplines, although in *The Canterbury Tales*, the Clerk is the sole pilgrim who merits that title.²⁸ Nonetheless I want to clarify that the Clerk’s concentration in his tale on Griselda’s choice to assent or *avyse* reflects the influence of terminism, or terminist logic, which “had its origin in the late twelfth century and was essentially a supplement to Aristotle’s logic that addressed the way in which categorematic and syncategorematic terms operated in propositions” (Courtenay 6).²⁹ The focus on terms and propositions, in which “an account of the meaning of the proposition is built up out of accounts of the meanings of all the words in

²⁶ J. Allan Mitchell writes that the tale functions best as a kind of parable, or exemplum; Peggy Knapp likewise sees the tale as belonging to exemplum, and argues that the “medieval habit of mind [was] accustomed to perceiving fictional characters as types based on the scriptural tradition, but capable of viewing them as idiosyncratic individuals when textual clues invite such a response” (340).

²⁷ Bornstein notes, “The allegorical significance of the tale is certainly important. For medieval readers, however, the literal level was equally important” (322).

²⁸ “Technical diction,” Grennan notes, “is a device of characterization of which Chaucer is a master. The Man of Law speaks like a lawyer, the Merchant like one whose life has centered on the driving of hard bargains, and so forth” (83).

²⁹ “Initially a development common to Paris and Oxford, it was largely neglected at Paris in the second half of the thirteenth century, while it was continued and rapidly expanded upon at Oxford in the early fourteenth. Ockham’s logic in this respect was nothing new. His *Summa logicae* was simply the point at which the enormous body of supplementary material in logic (the treatises on *syncategoremata*, supposition, fallacies, consequences, etc.) was used to restructure the haphazard arrangement of Aristotle’s treatises that introduced the beginning student into logic through an examination of the quasi-metaphysical structure of the categories and the problem of future contingents.” (Courtenay 6)

their occurrences in the proposition” (Kretzmann 768), comprises a major part of the Clerk’s environment. The Clerk’s training at Oxford has not been in doubt, but critics who write about Griselda in terms about her psychology, her willfulness, or lack thereof, or even Griselda’s allegorical role, do not necessarily reflect how essential his scholastic education is on the construction of the tale. The Clerk’s training would have been in logical argument. Weisheipl explains in a study of the curriculum at Oxford that a clerk would have “had to attend disputations, to respond *de sophismatibus* for at least one year, and to respond *de quaestione* at least during the summer term preceding [their] determination” (267).³⁰ The Clerk would have spent a *significant* amount of time developing his sense of argument.

Sophismata must be sharply distinguished from their well-known counterparts in the discipline of rhetoric. Though rhetoricians engaged in sophistry that were famously denounced by Plato in the *Gorgias*, schools of disputation and terminist logic in late medieval scholasticism developed *sophismata* as tools of logic and argument. Not only is the Clerk steeped in disputation, but his symbolic role in the *Tales* puts the scholastic tradition of dialectic in opposition to the school of rhetoricians. John A. Arnold argues that the Clerk should be read against the Wife of Bath as the dichotomy between logic and rhetoric. “The Clerk,” he writes, “is Logic personified. The Wife is not only one of the most rhetorical of the storytellers; she is Dame Rhetoric herself” (110). Though hyperbolic, Arnold’s position shows how distinctly the Clerk’s position as the scholastic and logician in the pilgrimage defines his storytelling enterprise. When we discuss

³⁰ Delasanta suggests “that the cognoscenti in the Chaucerian audience would have been prepared for what was coming when, in the Prologue to the *Clerk’s Tale*, the Host teases the Clerk by surmising that ‘ye studie aboute som sophyme.’ Recall that sophism was one of the pedagogical things that clerks *habitually* did” (212).

sophismata, we are talking about a branch of logical argument. *Sophismata* “may be defined most simply as logical fallacies . . . [m]ore broadly defined, they include a wide variety of puzzles, specious or not, that tax the imagination . . . or elucidate the subtleties of ordinary usage” (Alford 126). The sophisms used by terminist logicians

are not to be understood as sophistical arguments such as the term suggests. They consisted of problematic statements which were explored as to their difficulty and explained by the philosophy of the master responsible for their interpretation . . . [*Sophismata*] had three pedagogical functions: it was used for purely dialectical exercises, as a method for showing the application of theories previously explained, and also as a means for impressing new ideas upon the students.

(Roberts 273)³¹

The Clerk offers a *sopheme* that is not associated with the sophistry of the schools of rhetoric or the Platonist condemnation of rhetoricians. *Sophismata* differs from sophistry in that sophisms (from *sophismata*) are developed by scholastics and logicians in their training in disputation. Chaucer’s Clerk is a scholastic of this type.

Sophismata often developed into nonsensical or contradictory positions because they were “used at advanced levels to test a proposition by subjecting it to the most extreme conditions possible” (Alford 126). Of these most extreme conditions, Delasanta added that

there is no denying the abundance of bizarre theological propositions assayed by some well-known ‘clerkes’ in Chaucer’s day, like those relating to whether God

³¹ *Sophismata* “of Siger de Courtrai may be described as exercises in grammar, while those of William of Heytesbury and Richard Swineshead clearly offer an exposition of problems concerning the new physics. They were particularly popular, however, in the field of logic. These logical sophisms might best be compared to the exercises in analysis which appear in logic texts of our own time” (Roberts 273).

could create intuitions of non-existing objects, or whether God could will his creation to hate him, or whether God was powerful enough to annihilate himself – all the stuff *secundem imaginationem* of God’s *potentia absoluta* and often clothed in the garment of *sophismata*. (221)

Sten Ebbesen, who compiled an extensive catalogue of *sophismata* along with Frédéric Goubier, gives an example of “a very popular sophisma in the 13th century” (336). The *sophisma* is titled “Si tantum pater est, non tantum pater est” and develops a paradox in this fashion:

1. Probatio: Si tantum pater est, pater est; et si pater est, filius est; et si filius est, non tantum pater est; ergo a primo: si tantum pater est, non tantum pater est.

(Proof: If there is only a father, there is a father; and if there is a father, there is a child; and if there is a child, there is not only a father; therefore, from the start: if there is only a father, there is not only a father.) (336)

The *sophisma* turns on the word “only,” which, in context, paradoxically *excludes* the father based on a definition of the word *pater*, “father,” meaning someone who by necessity must have a child. In this sophism, “only” is *syncategoremata*, which are “clauses in the proposition . . . exercising some ‘function’ (*officium*)” that do not mean anything necessarily in themselves (Kretzmann 769). In studying *sophismata*, scholastics like our Clerk would identify and play with various functions of terms. These functions could include “negation, distribution, exception, exclusion, conjunction, or conditionalization” (Kretzmann 769). The Clerk’s *sophisma* includes the latter three functions.

When Walter proposes to Griselda, his request to her is couched in specific, black-and-white terms: “sith [the marriage] shal be doon in hastif wyse, / Wol ye assente, or elles yow avyse?” (IV 349-50). It is not possible for Griselda to take *avysement* – that is, to seek wisdom, give due consideration, listen to advice from sage counsel – if she is to assent to Walter’s proposition. Walter does not give her this option. Ironically, his option – the proposal itself – is a deficit of option. She must say “yes,” lest any other response, even were it wise, will be considered a “no.” As Linda Georgianna notes, “The need for careful reconsideration or *avysement* is fundamental to the architecture of Chaucer’s language” (795). Elsewhere she writes that after

Walter’s first encounter with Griselda, the word *avyse* rarely appears again in the tale; it is replaced by either morally neutral terms for perceiving, thinking, and knowing (such as ‘aperceyveth,’ ‘wende,’ ‘saugh,’ and ‘deeme’), which are used repeatedly in the tale, or by ‘subtil,’ a term that accrues increasingly negative connotations as the tale proceeds. (811)

In the Clerk’s framing of Walter’s *speche* acts when he proposes to Griselda, he urges her to select immediately “sith it shal be doon in hastif wyse” (IV 349). Walter is successful in his proposition, for Griselda “assents immediately, eliminating the time for *avysement* even before she vows to eliminate the will for it” (Georgianna 802). Griselda, for all narrative purposes, has made a selection and assents to his terms. Walter’s *avysement* led him to select Griselda as his wife (though his people urged him to marry, generally), and Griselda’s choice to assent or *avyse* leads to her marriage. But the story continues with less and less mention of *avysement*, per Georgianna. Furthermore, if we examine the terms in context, it is not clear that Griselda made a true choice. Thinking of Walter’s

proposition as a *propositio*, the “or” is syncategoremic; that means that the term “or” creates a situation of exclusion or conditionality. Griselda is free to *avsyse*, but her *avysement* precludes her assent to his proposal. Georgianna notes that “Walter’s question . . . suggests an either/or proposition. To wish to consider, deliberate, ‘avyse’ in Walter’s parlance, amounts to a refusal. Phrased in this way, as a choice between terms usually seen in Chaucer as two parts of a single, reasonable process, the question seems perverse” (799). That perversity is the reason why “The Clerk’s Tale” is full of overlapping interpretive problems; the scholar must determine whether the story is meant to be didactic and instructive, and whether it serves some moral purpose. To the extent that the trials of patient Griselda resemble those of Job in the Old Testament, confrontation and struggle, or *debate*, are written into the fabric of the narrative and no amount of explication seems to be able to successfully resolve the contradictions and uneasy ending.

“The Clerk’s Tale” as a *sophyme* is the source of multiple interpretative contradictions. Indeed, “there is no straightforward way to tell the Griselda story,” as Amy Goodwin points out:

Every writer must confront the tale’s extreme artificiality. Its overt didacticism must be disguised on the one hand, and sufficiently lucid on the other. Walter’s cruelty and Griselda’s unnatural submission must be acknowledged but subordinated to the virtuous behavior the tale examines. More than most tales, this one keeps the reader teetering on the verge of disequilibrium between two unproductive reading strategies: falling into the illusion that Walter and Griselda are real people, or rejecting it. The best reader must be of two minds. (53)

Readers should “be of two minds,” because the Clerk’s logical play forces the reader to struggle between layers of meaning. On one hand, Walter and Griselda are antagonist and protagonist in a story about a jealous marquis / aristocrat testing his wife of lowly origins. When the Host of the *Canterbury Tales*, Harry Bailey, requests a story from the Clerk, he asks for “som myrie tale” (IV 9) but adds “precheth nat” (IV 12) lest a lengthy moral put the listeners to sleep. On the other hand, the tale has allegorical resonance that allows the reader to map God, Christ, the Virgin Mary, or even the church onto Walter and Griselda, and many critics have done so. Furthermore, the Clerk responds that he “wol yow telle a tale which that I / Lernet at Padowe of a worthy clerk, / As preved by his words and his werk” (IV 26-8). “Preve” highly suggests a scholastic interpretation, which means the Clerk intends to tell a myrie tale, but of his own kind: a tale that will serve as a scholastic proof.³²

If the plot of “The Clerk’s Tale” emerges from a *sophisma*, it makes simultaneous readings possible and opens the door to equivocal interpretations. Moreover, it hints that univocity is not the *entente* of the tale. A critic who more perceptively reads the layers of meaning that are at the heart of “The Clerk’s Tale” is Francis Utley, who reads the genres of the tale as “the fairy tale, the real world or novella, and the symbolic world or anagogic figura” (199). Rather than identify a particular “meaning” of the tale, Utley properly sees the complex story in terms of its “matrix” (200), writing of “the functions

³² Several sophisms of the late medieval period included brief anecdotes, such as a *sophisma* in which Socrates approaches Plato, who is guarding a bridge. They exchange in brief dialogue and greetings, and Plato tells Socrates that he will allow Socrates to pass, *not* throwing him into the river, if the philosopher utters one true proposition. Socrates responds that Plato will throw him into the water (Jacquette 455). It is, of course, the Liar’s Paradox, which was popular with terminist logicians, such as Buridan, to explore the nature of *propositio* and correspondence to reality. Chaucer tells us a few times in *The Canterbury Tales* that “words moote be cosyn to the dede” (I 742), but he is keenly aware, like the logicians, that this is not always the case!

as encapsulating, linking and reinforcing the levels of meaning” (200). However, Uteley neglects to discuss the aspects of the Clerk’s vocation and study that make the tale a scholastic puzzle. Delasanta comes closest by describing the entire “Clerk’s Tale” as a kind of sophism about “the dual nature of God’s *potentia*, and mankind’s moral obligation thereto” (213). But voluntarism in the tale seems to be rather an *effect* of the sophism, because these readings are based on the conflict between Griselda’s freedom and Walter’s cruelty that occur as a result of her assent to his marriage offer. Griselda’s response at the moment of Walter’s proposal reflects a paradox that is typical of terminist disputation and is the *cause* that makes possible those interpretations of voluntarist issues about the freedom of will and God’s *potentia absoluta*.

Before the Clerk tells about the opposition between Griselda’s will and Walter’s power, his *sophisma* offers the contradiction of judgment without *avysement*, which sets the stage for Walter’s restrictions on his bride and his ensuing tests. No reader seems to be able to determine why Walter prohibits Griselda’s dissent, or any dissent from any other party. Despite his prohibition against *grucchyng*, he cannot stop the people from doing so. His mistreatment of Griselda leads to complaint and disrespect on their part. Ironically, he does respond positively to *grucchyng* by his subjects early in the Tale because he listens to the subject’s complaints, takes a wife, and perpetuates his lineage as they request, though on his own terms. But later in the tale, Walter perceives more reality behind words than the words merit. Words themselves seem to have more power than he should reasonably allow. He will not brook any complaint against his leadership as a *markys* and as a *housbonde*.

However, readers can imagine that Walter's motivations originate in a sense of his ego or his role as a *markys*. Because the marquis wields power, it is not out of the ordinary to see an exercise of power going awry due to self-centeredness, paranoia, or ego. But Griselda's motives in the face of Walter's challenges to her safety, her status, and most importantly, her children's lives, are more inscrutable. Chaucer does not portray Griselda as stupid or naïve. Rather, Griselda seems to know exactly what she is signing up for, and in all respects, she is capable of meeting the task. "Nat oonly this Grisildis thurgh hir wit / Koude al the feet of wyfly hoomlinesse" (IV 428-9) the Clerk tells us, but she is also proficient at statecraft; "whan that the cas required it, / The commune profit koude she redresse" (IV 430-1). She is a character who understands Walter's stakes and responds to them in her own way, but readers are left wondering what her motivation is for accepting these terms.

In "The Clerk's Tale," different faculties of mind do not go hand in hand. Perceptually, we are encouraged to consider Griselda's appearance as if her exterior indicates something about her interior life, but the text confuses those suppositions. For instance, prior to his engagement with Griselda, Walter "in sad wyse / Upon hir chiere . . . wolde hym ofte avyse" (IV 237-8), treating her visual aspect as if her character is intelligible to his judgment. His *avysement*, in this instance, is used to evaluate her "wommanhede / And eek hir vertu" (239-40) as if his apprehension of Griselda's visual appearance is sufficient to render an accurate opinion of her character. Kathryn Lynch notes the distinction between knowledge and perception, pointing out how even the people come to appraise Walter's judgment as correct when they see the daughter whom he presents as his new bride-to-be, evaluating her as more noble or beautiful than

Griselda. The people agree to Walter's exercise of tyranny due to the pleasant appearance of his apparent replacement. As Lynch points out "[t]he difficulty they have here in penetrating beyond the appearances of things, beyond the rich 'array,' echoes the difficulty of perception and judgment" (52). First, by removing the clothes she wears as a poor daughter, Walter despoils her (to use Lynch's phrase), and later removes her aristocratic attire, leaving her only a smock to "wrye the wombe of here / That was [his] wyf" (IV 887-8). If Griselda's appearance offered a correspondent portrait of her inner life, then Walter would never have considered putting her vow to never *grucche* to the test. Walter's impulse to test Griselda means that he doubts the *avysement* that compelled him to select her as his bride. But if Walter doubts his own *avysement*, readers are left wondering how, and when, Griselda is allowed her own *avysement*.

The Clerk's *sophisma* begs the question of whether assent without *avysement* is possible. A scholastic answer to the question requires examining the distinction between faculties that make cognition possible. Ockham expounds on the basis of cognition in terms of two acts of the intellect. The first of these acts is the act of apprehension which relates to everything that can be the term of an act of the intellective power, whether this be something complex or non-complex. For we apprehend not only that which is non-complex, but also propositions and demonstrations, and impossibilities and necessities, and, in general, anything within the scope of the intellective power. The second act may be called an act of judgment, by which the intellect not only apprehends its object, but also gives its assent or dissent to it. This act has to do with a proposition [*complexum*] only. For our intellect does not assent to anything unless we believe it to be true, nor does it dissent from

anything unless we believe it to be false. It is clear, therefore, that in reference to a proposition, a twofold act is possible, namely an act of apprehension and an act of judgement.

Proof: It is possible that someone apprehends a proposition, but nevertheless gives neither assent nor dissent to it (Boehner 18).³³

Griselda's agreement to Walter's proposal is a reference to cognition, specifically, that of the intuitive intellect. I want to be specific about the kinds of cognition that are at play here, because it helps frame the *sophisma* in particular terms. Ockham makes a distinction between two main forms of cognitive activity: first, intuitive cognition "is a cognition such that by virtue of it can be known whether the thing exists or not, in such a way that if the thing does exist, the intellect at once judges it to exist and evidently knows it to exist" (23).³⁴ Ockham uses intuitive cognition to refer to the faculty of mind that recognizes the properties of things; when he refers to existence, he means the cognizable properties of things that are evidently present. If a time traveler is visiting ancient Greece and walks past Socrates in the *agora*, the capacity of mind that apprehends Socrates and acknowledges that it is Socrates would be the intuitive intellect. A child at a zoo looking at a zebra, apprehending its black and white stripes, is having an intuitive cognition.

³³ "Est ergo prima distinctio ista: Quod inter actus intellectus sunt duo actus, quorum unus est apprehensivus: et est respectu cuiuslibet quod potest terminare actum potentiae intellectivae, sive sit complexum sive incomplexum, quia apprehendimus non tantum incomplexa sed et propositiones et demonstrationes et impossibilia et necessaria, et universaliter omnia quae respiciuntur a potentia intellectiva. Alius potest dici actus iudicativus, quo intellectus non tantum apprehendit obiectum, sed etiam illi assentit vel dissentit; et iste actus est tantum respectu complexi, quia nulli assentimus per intellectum nisi quod verum reputamus, nec dissentimus nisi quod falsum aestimamus. Et sic patet, quod respectu complexi potest esse duplex actus, scilicet actus apprehensivus et actus iudicativus. Hoc probatur: Quia aliquis potest apprehendere aliquam propositionem, et tamen illi nec assentire nec dissentire" (Boehner 18)

³⁴ "Quia notitia intuitive rei est talis notitia, virtute cuius potest sciri, utrum res sit vel non, ita quod si res sit, statim intellectus iudicat eam esse et evidenter cognoscit eam esse" (Boehner 23).

There is a second type of cognition, that for Ockham, *usually* corresponds with intuitive cognition:

Abstractive cognition, on the other hand, is that knowledge by which it cannot be evidently known whether a contingent fact exists or does not exist. In this way abstractive cognition abstracts from existence and non-existence; because, in opposition to intuitive cognition, it does not enable us to know the existence of what does exist or the non-existence of what does not exist.³⁵ (Boehner 23-24)

It is to abstractive cognition that *avysement* belongs, because the faculty of mind that *avyse*s represents considered judgment or consideration. The apprehension of an intuitive cognition is through what Ockham calls a proposition. “In general what we know and judge are propositions not things in themselves. These propositions comprise subjects and predicates” (Vossenkuhl 34), which is part of Ockham’s assertion that mental cognitions do not share substance with the things that are known. After all, the philosopher “emphasizes that the truth of a sentence does not depend primarily on the nature and properties of things in reality, but simply on the semantic properties of its terms, their supposition” (Novaes 65).³⁶ So Griselda, when she responds, saying “as ye wole yourself, right so wol I. / And heere I swere that nevere willingly, / In werk ne thought, I nyl yow disobeye” (IV 361-3) is responding to Walter’s particular *terms*. The Clerk would have been cognizant that the words he uses in Walter’s proposal, assent and *avyse*, could have

³⁵ Notitia autem abstractive est illa, virtute cuius de re contingente non potest sciri evidenter, utrum sit vel non sit. Et per istum modum notitia abstractive abstrahit ab existentia et non-existentia, quia nec per ipsam potest evidenter sciri de re existente quod existit, nec de non existente quod non existit, per oppositum ad notitiam intuitivam. (Boehner 23-24)

³⁶ Of course reality and semantics are not entirely disconnected, as “the supposition of a term ultimately does depend on the nature of things . . . But the crucial move here is to ascribe truth to the semantic level of supposition, while the metaphysical connection between terms and things is taken care of by the notion of signification, which is precisely somewhere in between semantics and metaphysics/epistemology” (Novaes 65). *Sophismata*, as discussed, are going to play *by design* with those boundaries and classifications!

particular scholastic resonances. These denotations – which would have been obscure to his fellow pilgrims – point toward debates about apprehension and judgment, and intuitive and abstractive cognitions, that scholastics regularly engaged in.

What does Ockham’s philosophy of the mind tell us about Griselda’s response to Walter? In keeping with Ockham’s foundational interrogations of the mind, I suggest that the scholastic questions posed by “The Clerk’s Tale” are twofold: first, “how are things known”, and second, “how do humans come to know them.” More specifically, if Walter’s *sophisma* creates an untenable distinction between assent and *avysement*, then how does Griselda capably answer his proposal? In keeping with the themes of terminist logic at play in Chaucer’s tale, how we respond to *sophismata* is essential for understanding how Griselda resists signification. Mark Reuter suggests that the answer, for William of Ockham, is in an *actus humanus*. On *insolubilia*, Ockham indicated that a human act was necessary to determine the statement.

By contingent statements, the Clerk would have meant that the precondition for assent and the precondition for *avysement* exclude each other necessarily. That exclusion is the format of the Clerk’s *sophisma* (with the syncategoremic “or”). Reuter asserts that Ockham uses the term *actus humanus* to mean an “imposition of a restriction on the supposition of [a] term” (119) based on an inference. Though Ockham is a philosopher and logician, he “has more interest in human nature and human acts than in logic and language. For him these latter will always be viewed in the context of the former. Logic and language for him will be not so much autonomous disciplines, but tools to be used to arrive at an understanding of human nature” (129). Though Reuter develops this idea from Ockham in a strictly philosophical setting, I argue that an *actus humanus*, which

refers to the human element in making inferences that affect logical outcomes, should illuminate Griselda's choice to assent to Walter's marriage proposal. After considering Ockham's position, we can see that our readings of "The Clerk's Tale" will *continue* to result in interpretive contradictions. Solving a *sophyme* requires an *actus humanus*; therefore the *sophisma* is Griselda's to solve, because the *sophisma*, in the Clerk's telling, is posed to her.

Since *sophismata* is part of scholastic debate, Walter's proposal as *sophisma* is directed toward her as a character. In attempting to understand the role of *actus humanus*, Reuter says that it helps "if we recall that the context of the discussion of insoluble statements was the *obligatio* [formal scholastic debate]" (125). It serves *insolubilia* best to understand that Griselda's actions in the tale are a consistent response to Walter's proposal as debate. Next, assent and *avysement* would require an *actus humanus*, per Ockham, to determine the contingency of those terms "assent" and "avyse." Reuter argues that "Ockham uses the term *actus humanus* in this passage to refer to [a] type of second-order cognitive reflection" (121). This suggests that the response to *insolubilia* involves subjective thinking, because solving the *sophisma* requires trust in the subjective mind to recognize and comprehend lower-level mental processes such as apprehension. This is because the cognitive activity required to solve the paradox develops in a network that includes "several different kinds of acts: an 'act of speaking' [*actus dicendi*], and 'act of signification' [*actus significatus*] . . . and 'reflection' [*reflexio*]" (Reuter 121). While complex,

when these types of acts become part of a reflective hierarchy that comes about when an act is self-reflexive . . . it refers back to itself or considers itself. These

types of acts seem to involve a higher, or second-order type of reflection. We do not just talk; we talk about what we talk about. We do not just reason and deliberate; we deliberate about our own processes of deliberation. And so on.

(Reuter 121)

Self-reflective acts are part and parcel of *sophismata*. Because *sophismata* are tools of scholastic debate, self-reflective acts may be used to create a sophism; they are definitely required, however, to solve a sophism.

In what way does “The Clerk’s Tale” demonstrate that Griselda is partaking in a self-reflective cognition? If Walter’s proposal is *sophisma*, then the cognition required to *prove* or solve the *sophisma* is Griselda’s to know. Far from being an evasion of interpretation, I believe this framing helps us think about Griselda properly. She is a character who resists interpretation, as prior criticism has shown. Her allegorical roles become confused, and the tale encourages those variant readings. If the tale encloses a sophism that is read and interpreted only by Griselda, her resistance to interpretation is obvious. In *Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics*, Dinshaw suggests that “Griselda reads herself as allegorical image and thereby ‘authorizes’ us to read her allegorically” (147). Though she is reading Griselda in terms of *translatio* rather than *sophismata*, Dinshaw sees Griselda’s place in the tale precisely. Ashe, who encourages critics to read like a clerk, says that “properly to read is a transformative act, an act which takes the material of the story and forms it into a part of oneself. It is for this reason that reading feels like an experience, and that experience, as recorded by memory, is itself a form of reading” (937). I would like to go one step further than reading as a clerk; we must allow Griselda to read like the Clerk. Only Griselda is capable of interpreting the *sopheme*, since it requires a subjective

exercise of cognition to affirm or negate the terms Walter proposes. Griselda is the character who is transformed by her reading of Walter's *sophisma*. Her patience and stability under pressure and her fortitude reflect that reading experience. Laura Ashe writes that "[t]he difficulty of stabilizing even one's own individual response to the tale is, it seems, a central facet of its workings (935). We may have difficulty as readers stabilizing *our* responses, but the reason for that difficulty is that Griselda herself seems so stable in the face of such gross cruelty and inhumanity. There are critics such as Pearlman who go so far as to act astonished that "we are asked to admire a heroine whose actions repel common sense" (248), but that is not what the Clerk is asking us to do. Nor do Griselda's actions repel common sense, if we read the tale sophistically.

"The Clerk's Tale" is a terminist scholastic project, but what does it mean that the Clerk is using Oxford sophistry and "termes . . . colours . . . and figures" (IV 16) to fabricate this tale? Russell Peck offers insight into the construction of Chaucer's poetry, claiming that the author of *Canterbury Tales*

is a philosophical poet . . . and is profoundly interested in the moral implications of nominalistic questions . . . Chaucer . . . seems to prefer the questions and will leave the conclusions to the clerks (or rather, the clerks to their conclusions).

Though he may not be interested in whether we can know with certitude only individual things, he is profoundly interested in how we know individual things.

(745)

In "The Clerk's Tale" both Walter and Griselda are bound to language – language is the vehicle in which they can express their *wit*. Language can be a tool for comprehension, but also a means of obfuscating our understanding. A *sophistic* approach says that the

tale proceeds from the latter. The clerk created a story in which the search for a sovereign good, like all stories, may be sought, but the complication of the plot seems to preclude any acquisition of a sovereign good. Though, from the Clerk's perspective, the story is meant to be entertain, it also develops upon his own expertise, which is in disputation. The *hooste* cries, "Telle us som myrie tale, by youre fey! / For what man that is entred in a pley, / He nedes moot unto the pley assente" (IV 9-11). Even the host's use of "assent" is a clue that the Clerk is permitted to touch on scholastic and nominalist themes in his story. Chaucer's use of language in "The Clerk's Tale" is put in scholastic terms to allow the Clerk to use his first story on this pilgrimage in a way that test logical boundaries and reflectively, even playfully, examine his own discipline. Scholastics might eschew merry tales as proof, but they certainly used the form of tales to test the contours of logical disputation.

While it is difficult to piece together the Clerk's meaning, at the end of this tale, he suggests employing faculties of mind that are as various as the interpretations of his story. Chaucer's Envoi suggests that the reader "Be ay of chiere as light as leef on lynde, / And lat hym care, and wepe, and wrynge, and waille!" (IV 1211-2). In the absence of a more coherent, less interwoven complication of a narrative, his *avyse* to enjoy the *myrie* tale will have to be *ynogh*.

IV. PARABLE: THE MANCIPLE PRINCIPLE: INDETERMINACY AND IRONY IN CHAUCER'S PENULTIMATE PILGRIM

In my second chapter I discussed the ending of *Troilus and Criseyde* as a narrative rendering of the ambition for transcendent knowledge that we find in Book V of Chaucer's *Boece*. The topic of Boethius's *Consolation* – prevalent in many of Chaucer's tales – is centered around free will and Fortune, and the application of limited human knowledge in concert with the necessity of fate. The aspirational quality of Boethius insists that human knowledge is scalable to perfection when it aligns with divine prescience. My thesis in chapter two was that the ending of the *Troilus* acts as a kind of prediction, a vision of what happens when, as Lady Philosophy tells Boethius, “we enhaunse us into the heighte of thilke sovereign intelligence; for ther schal resound wel seen that that it ne main at byholden in itself . . . in what manere the prescience of God seeth alle things certains and diffinyssched” (V, pr. 5, 97-102). In my chapter on “The Clerk's Tale,” I drew upon Chaucer's understanding of scholasticism to show how his Clerk, familiar with William of Ockham, is concerned with the distinctions of faculties of the mind. His construction of a tale as a *sopheme* reflects this preoccupation. “The Clerk's Tale” is an insoluble puzzle that demonstrates the limits of human minds. “The Manciple's Tale” represents a different aspect of the mind – that of irony – which is a horizon of knowledge. Irony places a limit to knowledge, because it depends upon an inference of another person's intention. The Manciple claims, after telling his story, that this kind of knowledge – successfully appraising another person's intention – is not possible. Chaucer claims at the beginning of *The Canterbury Tales* that “the worde moot been cosyng to the dede,” but he puts Plato's idea to practice in “The Manciple's Tale” and shows readers and his pilgrims how this Platonic saying functions poorly in reality.

Although in theory language should have a proper relationship with “dede,” this tale illustrates that this correspondence proves impossible in a fable, let alone the real world.

The Manciple tells the tale of a crow belonging to Phebus (Apollo). The crow, who is covered in white feathers and speaks loquaciously, makes the mistake of telling the god that “his wyf had doon hire lecherye” (IX 259). The news of his wife’s infidelity proves to be the downfall of all parties. The crow mentions that Phebus’s wife conducted an affair with a man far below the god’s station, as “oon of litel reputacioun” (IX 253). The double-edged nature of irony is on display when reading the crow’s words about Phebus’s “worthynesse” (IX 249); the crow is seemingly lavish in his praise, naming the god’s traits repetitively. “For al thy beautee and thy gentillesse, / For al thy song and al thy mynstralcye, / For al thy waityng” (IX 250-2), the crow cries, as if the animal is propping up Phebus’s ego in anticipation of the emotional blow that the animal will land. But if that is the crow’s intent, the opposite occurs. The crow’s gossip and ostensible flattery incite the god’s wrath: “Phebus gan awayward for to wryen, / And thoughte his sorweful herte brast atwo” (IX 262-3). Before considering the consequences of his action, the god murders his wife “in his ire” (IX 265). Torn apart in anger, the god turns his wrath onto the crow, as the creature who spread the unwelcome news to him and decides to disbelieve the crow as a way of coping with his own butchery. Phebus turns the crow black and condemns his faculty of speech.

Irony, a trope in which what is spoken is different than what one intends or knows, requires judgment to evaluate the speaker’s intention and mediate the difference. Irony occurs when the *entente* of a statement or situation does not match its content as perceived by another person’s mind. Chaucer’s irony is discernable, therefore, when

readers interpret that *entente* is occluded by, or contrary to, the content available. The *avysement* that Chaucer favors as a means of rational determination is necessary to critically evaluate irony. However, the irony in Chaucer's "Manciple's Tale" is that the Manciple entirely withholds *entente*, not just his own. Elise Louviot notes, "In common usage, the terms 'irony' and especially 'ironically' are often used very loosely, to describe anything paradoxical or unexpected" (233). But the process of uncovering irony in "The Manciple's Tale" must involve a capable sense of judgment and an *entente* that is not explicit in the content of the sentence or narrative. Thus, a difficulty of discussing irony involves determining the content of a person's mind when responding to a statement or phrase that may or may not be ironic, or, in the case of a text, the intention of the author or the particular significance of a scenario that even a character fails to grasp. Entertaining irony means two things: it means finding significance through inference and being able to construct knowledge in someone else's mind. The reason irony is heavily dependent on context is that it involves the production of meaning between at least two minds. The declarative content of language is in this case only a clue or interpretive signpost, indicating that the full meaning lies elsewhere.

This chapter discusses the situation created by the Manciple in his prologue and tale but takes a position on how Chaucer views *entente* in the penultimate segment of his *Canterbury Tales*. Irony is difficult to identify precisely because the Manciple's *entente* is never certain. The irony at the end of *Canterbury Tales*, then, represents instability, for which Chaucer apologizes in his coda after "The Parson's Tale."

I present the following ideas to show the format of knowledge in "The Manciple's Tale":

- 1) Irony is a substitute of certain knowledge, because discerning *entente* requires inferential processes between minds that may not share common mental ground.
- 2) As a brief fable, “The Manciple’s Tale” is interpreted most productively in the context of other *Canterbury Tales*.
- 3) The Parson’s refusal to engage in storytelling halts the regress of the Manciple’s irony.
- 4) The Manciple anticipates Chaucer’s closing distinction in his retraction (after “The Parson’s Tale”) between knowledge and will.

However, the central conflict of the tale is less an ethical quandary that *avyses* Phebus’s actions than a problem of language and mind. Phebus sits in judgment of himself, and for this reason, comes to blame the crow whose words initiated his “unavysed” (IX 280) rage. The problem of language takes its cue from the Manciple’s repetition of this idea from “wise Plato” (IX 207) that: “The word moot need accorde with the dede. / If men shal telle proprely a thing, / The word moot cosyn be to the werkyng” (IX 208-210). This phenomenon of signaling the opposite, or contrary, of a statement is common in Chaucer, especially when it involves the description of a pilgrim. While pointing out that Chaucer is an ironic writer is certainly not new to the critical scholarship, I intend to note several moments where irony is articulated in the tale and presentation of how the excision of *entente* matters for understanding the Manciple in his place as the penultimate Canterbury tale. As Earle Birney indicates about the Manciple in his tale and “The General Prologue,” “irony begins with the opening phrase: ‘A gentil Maunciple.’ No one in his fourteenth century audience would imagine that Chaucer the Poet intended this adjective seriously, for no manciple was ‘gentil’ by position” (126-7). Birney, however, reflects a

different perspective on Chaucer. While he acknowledges Chaucer's great talent for irony, his examples of these ironic moments – usually comic and witty – come mainly from a vision of the poet as a naïve or gullible storyteller. Birney's position nearly gives less credit to the creator of the tale than to the Manciple for the latter's "shrewdness, a curious mixture of slyness and boldness which, in a sense, helps him to triumph over his moments of imprudence" (259). Birney does not sufficiently account for Chaucer the author's role in veiling his own *entente* and seems to perceive only the comic aspects of Chaucer's ostensible naivete.

The problem with a view of Chaucer the author as naïve is that such a perspective fails to see that ignorance – especially feigned ignorance – can be a savvy role to play. Both Chaucer and his Manciple pretend to know less than they do. We suspect the Manciple knows more about human nature than he declares, but we cannot say for certain because his playfulness with the Cook in the tale's Prologue goes awry. His taunting seems like a moment of practical ignorance, arrogance, or social faux pas, yet he successfully provokes and *then* alleviates the Cook's ill temper, to Harry Bailey's amusement. Critics like Birney may criticize the Manciple's didactic speech as "pretentious moralizings and digressions, [with] anticlimaxes of tone and monotony of diction" (131). But this reductive view of the Manciple's "lesson" does not entertain notions about what role that advice to be "war, and taketh kep what that ye seye" (IX 310) plays in conjunction with the Manciple's fable. Instead, the Manciple's speech is part of the ironic discourse of the tale, which includes the didacticism which he borrows from his mother, his taunting of the Cook, and his story of the crow's punishment for telling a truth.

Several points of ironic discourse and the valence of narrative irony in “The Manciple’s Tale” and “Prologue” show how Chaucer is representing the process of knowledge in this final segment of his *Canterbury Tales*. The Manciple himself, we are told, is intelligent; the narrator in the *General Prologue* asks “Now is nat that of God a ful fair grace / That swich a lewed mannes wit shal pace / The wisdom of an heep of learned men?” (I 573-5). As I note in discussing Birney’s contribution to Chaucerian irony, critics do not adequately take into account the irony that suffuses Chaucer’s relationship with the Manciple, who confuses the distinction between the learned and the ignorant. From the classical world, irony is a rhetorical figure that expresses a contrary, and the reader sees both levels of irony intertwined in the Manciple.³⁷ The rhetorical aspect of irony starts with

Quintilian and Cicero [who] introduce the Greek *eironeia* into Latin as *dissimulation*. While they point out, again with reference to Socrates, that irony may express an entire personality, their main interest lies elsewhere – namely, in coming to a rhetorical understanding of irony. (Avanessian 2)

That basic function of irony, to express the contrary of a statement, is rife in Chaucer’s writing, but it also takes part in a larger context. Irony does not only characterize statements or the meaning of speech, but has a component that relates to identity. What occurs in “The Manciple’s Tale” is that irony as a figure of rhetoric and irony as a philosophic phenomenon are mixed in a more pronounced way. While irony developed as

³⁷ "irony, n." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, March 2019. "1. orig. *Rhetoric*. a. As a mass noun. The expression of one's meaning by using language that normally signifies the opposite, typically for humorous or emphatic effect; *esp.* (in earlier use) the use of approbatory language to imply condemnation or contempt (cf. *SARCASM n.*). In later use also more generally: a manner, style, or attitude suggestive of the use of this kind of expression. Cf. *IRONIA n.*"

a rhetorical tool in classical and medieval rhetoric, Armen Avanesian acknowledges that irony “is not (or no longer simply) a rhetorical tool but an ontologically distinct phenomenon”; it “has an ontological dimension” (4). Edmond Reiss points out that “medieval irony is a necessary feature of the Middle Age’s perception of reality, something built into the context itself rather than something consciously derived from human experience” (211). Beyond the role of an utterance, the dissimulating aspect of irony that partakes in identity means that ironic formulations of character will disclose truths about a person or figure only to those with the *avysement* to see past a purported *entente* to the true *entente*. This process of devising true *entente* means that knowledge about a character is likely to be unstable and unstated. Since irony entails the opposite of what is apparent, perceptual faculties of mind are not only unhelpful in comprehending irony, perceptual faculties cannot be trusted to develop a stable mental picture of the ironic object.

The Manciple’s Prologue generates a sense of indeterminacy about his character. After his Tale, the Manciple quotes advice from his mother: “lerne it if thee leste, / That litel janglyng causeth muchel reste. / My sone, if thou no wikked word hast seyde, / Thee thar nat drede for to be biwreyd” (IX 349-352). However, the didactic speech after telling the fable of Phebus and the crow clashes with his actions of the prologue in which he taunts the drunk Cook and incurs the Cook’s wrath. His interaction with the Cook indicates that 1) he does not realize his mother’s moral makes him a hypocrite, or 2) the Manciple learned a valuable lesson about *avysement* and the dangers of the tongue over the course of relating his fable. One of the themes of “The Manciple’s Tale” concerns when to retain or feign ignorance. Harwood comments upon “a short rhythm recurrent in

the tale and prologue [that] Phebus begins and ends unconscious of his wife's promiscuity [and] the Cook begins and ends insensible" (IX 273). The similarity between these two incidents in "The Manciple's Tale" implies the hazard of conscious moments. As "Phebus becomes dangerous when conscious; so does the Cook" (IX 273). Phebus regrets his actions to such an extent that he considers taking his own life (IX 291), and injudiciously places all blame on his crow, calling the crow's story a "false tale" (IX 293).

Entente signals a character's motivation and offers insight into what we know about a character. Since intentions as mental states are connected to all activities requiring human volition and touch nearly all possible human events, there is wide latitude for defining *entente*.³⁸ Philosophically it can be regarded as an ethical issue as well as an epistemological one. Richard Passon notes that "in Chaucer's usage 'entente,' meaning 'intention' or 'will,' is of central importance in defining moral culpability" (167). Chaucer uses *entente* to evaluate character, for "[e]ven in parodies of orthodox morality, in works whose characters are judged in terms of the moral code of courtly love, Chaucer consistently uses 'entente' as the true gauge for judging good and evil" (Passon 167). However, I agree with Elizabeth Archibald, who argues that the words *entente* and *entencioun* "help us not so much to judge moral culpability, as Passon suggests, but rather to explore the ways in which decisions are made, and to assess the changing relationships between the characters, and their success or failure in

³⁸ "The *Chaucer Glossary* gives six definitions, which do not always coincide with the six non-technical definitions of the MED: 1) intention, aim; 2) plan, design; 3) desire, ambition, attention; 4) mind, spirit, reason; 5) meaning; 6) occupation. This second list suggests that the word may have acquired some meanings in Chaucer which are not applicable in other texts; it becomes 'reason' as well as 'mind,' 'ambition' as well as desire,' . . . Yet it must be admitted that it is often hard to distinguish between meanings, especially the first three" (Archibald 191)

communicating what they want to say” (192). Passon is correct that *entente* is a gauge, but *entente* as mental content or as moral content is not univocal and displays Chaucer’s interest in portraying diverse states of mind. “The Friar’s Tale” and “The Summoner’s Tale” show that Chaucer does not always use *entente* in the same way.

In those back-to-back tales, with the Friar and Summoner bitterly sniping at each other, *entente* serves as a foil for the use of intention that we find in “The Manciple’s Tale.” The summoner character in “The Friar’s Tale” gladly searches for signs of *entente* that will benefit him; we are told that he “was . . . ful of jangles” (III 1407) and cannot keep from idle talk and loose *speche* as he travels with his boon companion, a fiend from hell. For his part, the devil speaks plainly about his own intentions, telling the foolish summoner:

I wol entende to wynnyng, if I may,

And nat entende oure wittes to declare.

For, brother myn, thy wit is al to bare

To understonde, although I tolde hem thee (III 1478-81).

In this tale, which heralds the Manciple’s warning “to restreyne and keep wel thy tongue” (IX 333), speaking one’s mind is considered a sign of weak *wit*. Although the devil speaks candidly about his *entente*, it is the summoner who is accused of jangling and naiveté. The summoner tries to take advantage of the carter who curses his horses and asks the devil to take them as the carter exclaimed, but the devil insists that an utterance must be paired to its true *entente* and that the carter’s words were “nat his entente” (III 1556). “The carl spak oo thing,” he instructs, “but he thoghte another” (III 1568). In “The Friar’s Tale,” it is the thought that corresponds to *entente*, not the actual word. The

summoner's failure to see the importance of clearly articulating *entente* damns him in the end. Moreover, his failure is a sign that he cannot intuit *entente* as the devil can.

Ironically, it is a fiend from hell who most closely follows Chaucer's advice from Plato that "the word moot ben cosyn to the dede." The summoner's propensity for duplicity is what allows the devil to speak to him honestly, as a peer, and acknowledge that he is "a feend" (III 1448). Since the Summoner and the devil have the same *entente*, to "ryde aboute my purchasyng" (III 1449) and "wynne good" (III 1453), the content of their *wit* is made transparent.

"The Summoner's Tale" stands in contrast to the "The Friar's Tale," because words are correspondent to *entente* rather than the mental content of the friar's mind. Trying duplicitously to convince Thomas to give him more money, the friar "seyd all his entente" (III 1733) but the words he speaks do not correspond to his mental content. The friar's game is greed, but his words try to cover that up, with little success. Ultimately the friar is made a fool because Thomas sees that the friar's stated *entente* is not truthful. Thomas knows this is deception because prior experience with the friar allows him a framework in which to intuit the friar's *wit*, rather than accept his words at face value. "The General Prologue" hints at another connection between the Summoner and the Manciple. The former, an atrocious pilgrim whose breath stinks of "garleek, oynons, and eek lekes" (I 634), is compared to a bird in a way that hints at Chaucer's connection between the Manciple's fable and the Summoner's character. The Prologue's narrator asserts that the Summoner's knowledge of ecclesiastical law is like "that a jay / [that] Kan clepen 'Watte' as wel as kan the pope" (I 642-3), presaging the crow's ability to speak that proves crucial to the moral conundrum of the Manciple's story.

“The Summoner’s Tale” connects to the Manciple’s epilogue with the injunction against speaking truth to power.

Beth war, therfore, with lords how ye pleye.

Syngeth Placebo and ‘I shal, if I kan,’

But if it be unto a povre man.

To a povre man men sholde his vices telle,

But nat to a lord, thogh he sholde go to helle. (III 2074-8)

This is the crime that condemns the crow. If the Manciple’s crow limited its *speche* to “Cokkow! Cokkow! Cokkow!” (IX 243), Phebus might never have punished the animal for its bold articulation. With Chaucer’s pun on “cuckold,” the crow had deniability since the god may have drawn two inferences from the exclamation, instead of a single conclusion about his wife’s infidelity. Without clarification, multiple inferences would have functioned merely as implications. Had Phebus been forced to expend his rational powers in determining the content of the crow’s pun – essentially, *avysement* – he might have had enough capacity for doubt about his own conclusions. A moment of *avysement* might have forestalled the butchery instigated by his fury. Jamie C. Fumo offers a reading of this moment in the fable by considering how the transmission of information (and reception of knowledge) takes the form of an oracle:

In response to Phebus’s request for clarification, the crow delivers the ‘oracle’ proper . . . If the crow’s revelation does not seem as ambiguous as we would expect of a genuine oracle, it must be remembered that, conventionally, oracles are ambiguous only upon second glance . . . The inquirer’s instinctive initial

reaction to an oracle, or apprehension of a chance remark, is usually at odds with the *lectio difficilior*, which turns out to be the correct interpretation. (*Apollo*, 223)

The problem with the oracular version of interpretation is that the Manciple erases the opportunity for second glances and rational reactions by telling the readers that *entente* must be occluded since it has no bearing on the course of events. Consider how the Manciple treats *entente* when he soberly says

But God it woot, ther may no man embrace

As to destreyne a thyng which that nature

Hath natureelly set in a creature.

Taak any bryd, and put it in a cage,

And do al thyn entente and thy corage

To fostre it tendrely with mete and drynke (IX 160-165)

The Manciple takes the pessimistic view that *entente* has no bearing on the course of Nature. Although he refers to Nature, the crow's *speche* indicates the problem here is more than natural in that it involves the impossibility of influencing change or bringing about change through force of will. This comment and his later comments that "thy tonge sholdestow restreyne / At alle tymes" (IX 329-30) places a limit or, or a warning about, *entente* in the text. Furthermore, the Tale signals its erasure of intention with the Manciple and Parson disclaiming textuality and avoiding the responsibilities incurred by another person's interpretation of their words. The Manciple repeatedly indicates that he is "nought textueel" (IX 316) and the Parson likewise clarifies that he is "nat textueel" (X 57). The reason for their disavowals is predicated on a fear of appropriation. The Manciple's disclaimer – paired with his exhortation for silence – essentially

communicates “you may take whatever *sentence* you like from this message, but I do not mean it.” By occluding his own *entente*, essentially cancelling his own viewpoint before it is received by others, he is saying that meaning can be infinitely fluid but without any real import.

Parsing the variety and classifications of irony can make *avysement* seem difficult, and indeed, if Chaucer’s pilgrims are any guide, *avysing* true *entente* can be a complicated affair, since our interpretations of texts, events and the minds of other people and characters is bound up tightly with dissimulation. Wayne Booth argues that irony begins as *entente* on the part of the author. Our evaluation of “[w]hether a given word or passage or work *is* ironic depends . . . not on the ingenuity of the reader but on the intentions that constitute the creative act” (91). Even if the reader is unaware of irony, it is nonetheless in the text. The problem, he points out, is that text is insufficient to determine irony on its own, for “those . . . who believe that ‘the text’ is always in some sense final arbiter of meanings will find ourselves using many contexts” (91) that extend beyond the text itself. *Entente* is difficult to evaluate on its own terms. The Manciple’s quietism, which “denies free expression of what is most human” (Grudin 333), makes it impossible. Chaucer as a creator is placed in a situation that makes his own *entente* difficult to identify also. When “The Parson’s Tale” ends, Chaucer concludes his *Canterbury Tales* with an irony that corresponds to the Manciple and Parson’s self-humbling claims that they are “nought textueel” (IX 316). Chaucer prays that “if ther be any thyng that displesse hem, I preye hem also that they arrette it to the defaute of myn unkonnyge and nat to my wyl, that wold ful fayn have seyde bettre if I hadde konnyng” (X 1082). He makes a clear distinction between his limited faculties of knowledge (“myn

unnkonnyge”) and his “wyl,” or *entente*. Placed in this ironic position by the Manciple and then the Parson following, Chaucer absolves himself of “enditynges of worldly vanitees” (X 1084) and “many a lecherous lay” (X 1086) by taking advantage of the gulf between knowledge and *entente* that is perpetuated by Manciple, and cloaking himself in the indeterminacy provided by this ironic posture.

It is a testament either to Chaucer’s genius and to the difficulty of understanding ironic modes of discourse that so much is misunderstood about *Canterbury Tales*. In an essay whose subject is irony, Anthony E. Farnham writes of *Troilus and Criseyde* that “Chaucer’s irony is not always understood in its full scope and depth” (215). Within the same paragraph he asserts that the ending to the *Canterbury Tales* is a sincere apology made in “true humility.” Imagining that Chaucer’s “retraction [of the *Canterbury Tales*] shows he believed that what he had done was not good enough – that it was, in some sense, ‘al for nought.’ The true humility of that retraction is often overlooked” (215). Is Chaucer expressing true humility in his retraction, or does that passage signal the opposite, that he is full of pride? I won’t presume to answer that question about Chaucer’s personal virtue. But I do not read Chaucer’s apology as Farnham does. While he gets the sense that Chaucer feels that “what he had done was not good enough” (215), I do not believe the retraction expresses Chaucer’s real *entente*. Irony prevents us from deciding what any *entente* may be, beyond blatant speculation, but irony can give the reader a sense of what *entente* is not. Edmond Reiss comments that “Chaucer might insist that the word must be in accord with the deed, [but] the basis for his statement is the recognition that the two are rarely in accord and that the disparity is the necessary

condition of man” (217). “The Manciple’s Tale” is the point in his *Canterbury Tales* in which that disparity between language and meaning widens to its maximum length.

“The Manciple’s Tale” is a moment in the text in which various pilgrim minds that are composing and listening to each other’s stories begin to lose trust in the storytelling process. The cook is wrathful but capricious in his anger, the Manciple advises the Canterbury pilgrims to keep quiet in the face of real, uncomfortable truths, and the Parson delivers a sermon instead of a story. This is because the processes of knowledge that foreground the transmission of storytelling and narrative are called into question in a way that comes to bear on the stories themselves. This moment in the pilgrims’ storytelling is filled with the kind of irony that makes doubt possible. These conflicts of meaning “are signs of a structural method in the *Prologue* and *Tale* in which Chaucer sets up networks of meaning and runs them against each other” (Grudin 331). Thinking about the *entente* of the author, Michaela Grudin counters critics who ascribe cynical attitudes to Chaucer in this work. She suggests that, “rather than negating the poetic principles of the *Canterbury Tales*,” this narrative “explains and reinforces those principles” (330). While Grudin’s claim that “The Manciple’s Tale” can be read without much cynicism is perhaps too optimistic, her point that we can read the tale as reinforcing poetic principle, *at the same time* as it negates poetic principles, is apt. Indeed, irony makes it difficult to choose between these two versions of her critical perspective. The irony in the Manciple marks a summit of the pilgrimage’s exploration of the problems of language. Language is constituted by disparities between subjects and predicates, and speakers and listeners. While these disparities make language and communication possible, they rely on trust that *entente* is being communicated accurately and received

intelligently. That trust is a necessary feature of the irony that informs the tale. It is difficult, for this reason, to draw dogmatic conclusions about Chaucer's role as an artist in the final sections of his *Canterbury Tales*. There is too much hidden from the reader, and so much material presented, that it makes sticking to one perspective impossible.

Finlayson remarks that the trouble with

any dogmatic approach to an artist so encyclopaedic as Chaucer is that in the desire to order according to the canon, to seek the Castle of Truth which the believer *knows* must be there, the work of art is subjected to the drastic surgery of simplification: the heart is revealed to the eager student, after the lancet of criticism has cut through the enveloping flesh, and is sometimes passed off as the whole man. All art, in such skilled hands, is reduced to the dimensions of the moral fable. (95)

Even Finlayson's comment is ironic, since we anticipate that critical skill is likely to produce even greater meaning, as a way of buttressing the meaning of a story. It is the opposite, he claims; the kind of critical "skill" which he indicates may be dogmatic – finding a definitive *entente* – is a problem because it reduces the *sentence* of a story to a single interpretation. Much as the crow should have restrained itself to "litel speche avysely" (IX 327) and ended its talk after "Cokkow!," perhaps the critic should lean toward an antidogmatic approach that proliferates disorder and shy away from "the drastic surgery of simplification" (Finlayson 95). Irony is a device and a phenomenon that is inherently complicated.

If the basic principle of irony is contrariness or opposition, then the Parson's refusal to play the storytelling game that the pilgrims is the natural next step after the

Manciple's warnings about *speche*. A sermon does not lack for meaning, but in the context of a collection of tales, the sermon pivots from the function of a storytelling enterprise. Harry Bailey requested "[t]ales of best sentence and moost solaas" (I 798). "The Parson's Tale" has *sentence* but does it have *solaas*? Rather, this final tale is responding to "The Manciple's Tale" in an attempt to restore form and content to the *Tales*. Readers who acutely pass judgment on "The Manciple's Tale" as a cynical ending to the storytelling pastime of the *Canterbury Tales* have done so in part because as readers the Manciple shepherds us into a situation that resembles the impossible decision offered to patient Griselda. We are placed in a situation where the *avysement* necessary to determine *entente* is obstructed. We are told *entente* is immaterial and the speaker cautions us to be silent. Where the Clerk places this paradox about the impossibility of *avysement* as a puzzle, the Manciple indicates in his speech that this has real consequences.

It is difficult to read "The Manciple's Tale" without considering its relationship to the rest of the *Canterbury Tales*. While this is the best hermeneutic to follow for any of Chaucer's pilgrims, it is especially so for the penultimate one, whose brief story is the final poem before the Parson's prose sermon that concludes the pilgrimage's assortment of narratives. As I explore the Ovidian "Manciple's Tale," I want to remain focused on the irony in this tale foremost, but we must also consider how the occlusion of *entente* in that fable prefigures the form of "The Parson's Tale." Prior critics such as Lee Paterson have asserted that the Manciple's didacticism is pessimistic and prepares us for the grim Parson. The Parson refuses to tell a story or tale, citing the authority of Scripture:

For Paul, that writeth unto Thymothee,

Repreveth hem that weyven soothfastnesse
And tellen fables and swich wrecchednesse.
Why sholde I sowen draf out of my fest,
Whan I may sowen whete, if that me lest? (X 32-36)

“The Parson’s Tale” carries out the consequences of the Manciple’s Tale, and readers can read forward and backward to interpret the functions of each. The Parson cannot tell a fable, or even an adequate narrative. The Manciple finalized the impossible exchange of *entente* and *avysement*, “not just by rehearsing one of the fables the Parson is going to reject but by casting doubt upon the whole poetic enterprise” (Patterson, “Parson’s Tale” 377). Jamie Fumo goes further than Patterson in giving shape to this ultimate consequence of the Manciple’s story, arguing that by “silencing the crow and shattering his musical instruments, finally, Phebus . . . negates the possibilities of poetry” (*Apollo* 225) and leads the way to the Parson’s sermon.

The Parson offers a solution for the Manciple’s negative irony. Like his predecessor, he claims he is “nat textueel” (X 57) and will “take but the sentence, trusteth weel” (X 58), meaning that he considers the meaning of things, their *entente*, to the exclusion of all else. If such a talent for interpretation were possible, that would make the Parson the most skilled ironist among the Pilgrims, but also the pilgrim with the most unironic story. Instead, he scales back the Manciple’s indeterminacy by delivering a long sermon on topics of sin and penance.

If the Manciple urges his listeners “to restreyne and keep wel thy tonge” (IX 333), the implication is that the content of their thought is destructive. However, he counters that implication by pointing out that the real power is asserted by those who interpret

those words, that “He is his thral to whom that he hath sayd” (IX 357). The theme of his didactic coda is clearly political, in the sense that it is about the mediation of power, but undercuts the political resistance by shielding his *entente* from any possible interpretations. It is this seeming willfulness to undercut the interpretative power of his own tale that puts the Manciple in a place that L.O. Fradenburg suggests that, in addition to the political overtones, the Manciple’s “meditation on the social dimensions of language . . . allows the Manciple a continued deferral of the moment of confrontation with life.” (“Servant Tongue” 105). This deferral is an act of *will* responding to the knowledge that Fortune places many events in life outside of rational control.

Edmond Reiss asserts that medieval irony “is based on a sense of the real, or ultimate, compatibility of things” (214), informed by “*connexio rerum*, the idea, which Thomas Aquinas took from Pseudo-Dionysius, that everything in creation is joined with everything else” (214). It is no accident that the Host passes the Manciple’s storytelling baton to the Parson, who begins his tale by invoking the hope of 1) knowledge, and 2) eternity. He prays “that no man wole perisse but wole that we comen alle to the knoweleche of hym and to the blissful lif that is perdurable” (X 74). However, I want to counter Reiss’s explanation that medieval irony is based on connection; at least in “The Manciple’s Tale” and the concluding passages that follow it, irony is weighted by disconnection, and the Manciple’s stark command to “Dissimule as thou were deaf” (347). And while irony commonly is a form of knowledge that succeeds on account of a linguistic dissimulation, the end of *Canterbury Tales* is informed by irony that cannot succeed on that level. The necessity of inferring *entente* is precluded in the Manciple’s

repudiation of *entente* and leads to a sense that, opposite Reiss, the straggling pilgrims are hollowly motivated by a real sense of the incompatibility of things.

In my second chapter, I wrote that Chaucer's *Troilus* comes to an end that wraps up a little tidily for many critics. It is not the happy ending we may wish, as readers, but the Christian tenor of Troilus's death has perplexed many critics suspicious. I argued that the apparent Christian ending is an asymptotic movement that puts Troilus infinitely closer and closer *toward* heavenly union with God. Troilus achieves (or rather, limns the narrowest possible boundary of achieving) the Parson's goals of "knoweleche of hym and to the blissful lif that is perdurable" (X 74). Furthermore, I argued that the ending Chaucer writes for Troilus in Book V has an overwhelming correspondence to the eternity which is articulated in Chaucer's *Boece*. Next, I wrote about Chaucer's Ockhamite puzzle in "The Clerk's Tale." As noted in the chapter on "The Clerk's Tale," Chaucer is not a philosopher, but he is interested in the philosophical implications of things. He may not come to conclusions about what we know, but nonetheless he represents *how* we know them. Throughout the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer uses *entente* to demonstrate a character's will, wish, desire, or intention, and puts them in a situation in which that *entente* will harm, help, or relieve them. In most cases, characters in his tales are not only subject to their own *entente*, but respond to the *entente* of other characters.

The host, Harry Bailey, declares after the Manciple has concluded the fable, that his game is nearly done. "Fulfilled is my sentence and my decree" (X 17), Bailey claims, contradicting his own *sentence* in "The General Prologue." At the onset of Chaucer's collection of pilgrimage tales, the Host's *sentence* has greater scope. He devises an

entertainment in which each pilgrim “shal telle tales tweye / To Caunterbury-ward” and “homward he shal tellen othere two” (I 792-4). It is no coincidence that the Manciple’s fable cautioning silence and the guarding of one’s tongue immediately precedes Harry’s dramatic revision of his earlier sentence. The Manciple is a signal in the *Canterbury Tales* that *wit* has reached its natural limits. In disclaiming the “textueel,” it is impossible to shine light on identity and continue the storytelling enterprise.

The Manciple disavows textuality and meaningful communication by language because he distrusts that an audience will faithfully discern true entente. Irony, however, depends on possessing the capability for *avysement* and also a determination of *entente*. “The Manciple’s Tale” – at the ending of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* – is also Boethian, but rather than imagining some starry union of the divine with man, a confluence of Fortune and free will, the Manciple’s irony is a strategy for inoculating himself from Fortune, as far as that is possible. Lady Philosophy uses knowledge as a means of seeing one’s proper role in the nexus of events that constitutes fate, and thus accommodating oneself to the wheel of Fortune. The Manciple, afraid that he will be “thral to whom that he hath sayd” (IX 357), removes himself from the nexus of fate by purposing to avoid *speche* entirely. His exclamation regarding the murderous god, “O wantrust, ful of fals suspicion, / Where was thy wit and thy discrecioun?” (IX 281-2) is a response to the duplicity of language as a medium of communication. Its own irony is that his purported solutions to the problem of this power only widen the distinctions that cleave *wit* in two and contribute to the impossibility of knowledge. His fear of “fals suspicion” only lays the ground for an exacerbation of the ironic distance that engulfs language, leading to the critical charged levied against the Manciple that he casts “doubt on the poetic enterprise.”

(Patterson, “Parson’s Tale” 377). The Manciple repeats Chaucer’s claim that “[t]he word moot need accorde with the dede. / If men shal telle proprely a thing, / The word moot cosyne be to the werkyng” (IX 208-210). Whereas Boethius takes the direction of Lady Philosophy and takes her lessons to heart with good spirit, the Manciple sees that he and his fellow pilgrims are exposed to the consequences of fate in processes of communication and he warns his fellow pilgrims not to play along. The problem of *speche*, the Manciple demonstrates, is “that alle thing that is iwist nis nat known by his nature proper, but by the nature of hem that comprehenden it” (*Boece* V, pr. 6, 2-4), and the Manciple lands on the pessimistic side in regard to the *wit* of those pilgrims – or murderous gods – who are free to mistake and misinterpret his words.

This description of the fable and the Manciple’s telling as a locus of negative irony is not to imply that “The Manciple’s Tale” is a creative failure. On the contrary, the exemplary faculties of knowledge and faculties of interpretation that are required to read the tale in light of all its nuance are well put to use in its nexus of *entente* and *avysement* and eternity and Fortune. As the Manciple himself might add, we must “beeth avysed wel and sobrelly” (IX 286) if we are to discern irony in all its subtle meanings.

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