Chaucer and the politics of penance

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CHAUCER AND THE POLITICS OF PENANCE

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ABSTRACT

Chaucer and the Politics of Penance

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Chaucer and the Politics of Penance argues for a Chaucerian fusion of penitential values with Wycliffite ideals in the 1390s. The historical setting for this study is the political crisis of 1388 and the political agenda that Richard II employs in the 1390s in an attempt to reassert an image of royal legitimacy and power. The case is made that Chaucer critiques Ricardian autocracy by employing penitential discourse as a possible corrective to Richard’s exemplarism or use of positive exempla to suppress political dissent. Chaucer is joined in this emphasis on the politics of penance by the Carmelite Richard Maidstone whose 1390s account of Richard II’s London re-entry pageant similarly employs penance to warn the king of the dangers inherent to exemplary politics or a political program that exaggerates the king’s virtues. In Chaucer’s Legend of Good Women penitential values merge with Lollard translation values to produce Chaucer’s concept of the “naked” text, a literary program that imagines how penance and heresy might be used to invent English as a literary language. This program finds further
expression in Chaucer *Canterbury Tales* where the figure of the Parson combines Lollardy with penance to hopefully release Chaucer from both orthodox and heretical ideologies to pursue a literature of penitential humility and heretical independence.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The argument made in this paper with respect to Chaucer and the sacrament of penance focuses on the issues surrounding the problematic relationship between the Parson's Lollard profile in the General Prologue and the Parson's orthodox penitential Tale. Rather than approaching this critical problem from the perspective of a mutual exclusion between Lollardy and penance, I have chosen instead to examine the possibility that beginning in the 1390s and in response to the political crisis of 1388, Chaucer blended penance and Lollardy into a single politically dissenting voice that not only questioned Richard II's autocracy but also paved the way for Chaucer's strategic withdrawal from public life and writing. This argument identifies both penance and Lollardy as discourses that extend beyond their doctrinal borders to affect both the political and literary arenas. Chaucer's apparently unique blending of penitential and Lollard elements suggests historical and political origins within Richard II's 1388 failure to maintain power. I argue that the 1388 crisis parallels a symbolic failure on Richard's part to keep his penitential status separate from his public image when he appeared before the Merciless Parliament as a suppliant in 1388. Upon regaining regal authority in 1389, Richard seeks to erase the memory of himself as a suppliant penitent by renewing his claim to absolute power.
In the face of Richard’s tyranny in the late 1380s and 1390s, Chaucer as well as the Carmelite Richard Maidstone initiated a politics of penance that adjusted Ricardian politics towards penitential realities. Maidstone, a royal confessor and public opponent of Wycliffism, employs an exclusively penitential corrective of Ricardian hubris in his *Concordia* through the intercessory and advisory functions of Queen Anne. In Chaucer’s *Legend of Good Women* the poet takes on the role of the penitent, and Queen Anne represents not only penitential but also Wycliffite values. Similarly, the Lollard Knight Sir John Clanvowe in his *Boke of Cupid* features Lollard translation values in his debate between a Francophile Nightingale and a rustic English Cuckoo, a debate that Clanvowe also finally refers to Queen Anne’s judiciary powers. Although Chaucer, Maidstone and Clanvowe each respond to Ricardian tyranny differently, their works suggest a common anxiety regarding Richard’s political agenda. But among these three authors, only Chaucer appears to have envisioned a comprehensive integration of penance with Lollardy. This synthesis initiates an alternative poetic in which the penitential values of “studie” and self-examination displace the moral optimism of the *exemplum* genre, and the Lollard values of the open text supplant the tyranny of Latin texts and ecclesiastically controlled glosses.

Vital to Chaucer’s penitential/heretical poetic is the *Legend of Good Women* with its articulation of a link between heresy and penitence.¹ The God of Love famously indicts Chaucer for translating the *Romance of the Rose* as a “heresy” against his “lawe.” This

¹ See Alan J. Fletcher, “Chaucer The Heretic,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 25 (2003): 53-121 (73). Fletcher suggests that Chaucer may have constructed himself as a penitent figure in the *Legend* in terms of the culture of heresy, since “it is of heresy’s essence that, in common with the practice of literary fiction, it too dares to imagine and celebrate alternatives. This being so, the heretical impulse is necessarily partly commensurate with the creative one, and may provide the creative artist with additional impetus.”
transgression, in turn, earns for Chaucer a penitential role that involves his having to write a series of legends in praise of women, a remedial penance that has the effect of canceling out what the God views as Chaucer’s preference for negative portrayals of women. While Chaucer’s preference for negative exempla suggests a moral bent for the penitential as opposed to the exemplary mode, the link between heresy and penance also suggests a political alternative to Richard II’s post-1389 absolutism. Of course Chaucer was not the only writer to see in penance a possible means of checking Richard’s tyrannical bent. Richard Maidstone also reminds the king of his penitential status in the 1392 Concordia, but only Chaucer merges penance with Lollardy to attack both Richard’s absolutist politics and the kind of literary production that supported it.2

The identification of a common cause between penance and Lollardy makes possible a re-appraisal of the supposed contradiction between Chaucer’s profile of the Parson in the General Prologue and the Parson’s orthodox penitential treatise in his Tale.3 It also calls

2 My argument that Chaucer opposed exemplary discourse on both moral and literary grounds identifies a tension between an Augustinian emphasis upon original sin and Aristotelian ethics. Chaucer participated in the exemplary genre to the extent that various tales in the Canterbury Tales offer themselves as conducive to moral reflection and interpretation. However, Chaucer also uses the Parson’s penitential treatise and his own Retraction to refract his tales through an Augustinian emphasis upon sin and confession. In this way Chaucer challenges ethical pragmatism with the prospect of original sin. For discussions of the medieval exemplary narrative and its contribution to medieval literacy, see Larry Scanlon, Narrative, Authority, and Power: The Medieval Exemplum and the Chaucerian Tradition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) and J. Allan Mitchell, Ethics and Exemplary Narrative in Chaucer and Gower (Woodbridge, England: Boydell and Brewer, 2004).

3 Critics have offered a number of possible solutions for the discrepancy between the Lollard like Parson of the General Prologue and the orthodox Parson of the Parson’s Tale. Charles A. Owen, Jr., “What the Manuscripts Tell Us About the Parson’s Tale,” MAE 63 (1994): 239-49 (245) argues that the Parson’s Tale was appended to the Tales after Chaucer’s death. Michael F. Vaughan, “The Invention of the Parson’s Tale,” Rewriting Chaucer, eds., Thomas A Prendergast and Barbara Kline (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1999), pp. 45-90 attributes the discrepancy to historical and

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for further analysis of the Parson as an exemplary figure, since between the General Prologue profile and the Parson’s actual tale, the Parson’s exemplary portrait must weather the Host’s suspicion that the Parson may not be the Lollard specter he seems. I contend that Chaucer buttresses his fusion of penance with Lollardy through the Host’s punctuated critique of the Parson as a figure incapable of perfect exemplarity once he is immersed within the world of the pilgrimage. In fact both the exemplary Parson and his “brother” the Plowman must be viewed from the outset as penitential rather than exemplary figures given that both have joined a pilgrimage. It follows that most of the difficulties that critics encounter in the Parson stem from a refusal to acknowledge the possibility that as a Lollard exemplar he too has failed. Thus, while a penitential treatise fits ill with doctrinal Lollardy, it responds neatly to the plight of a conscientious Lollard Parson who has failed to maintain his integrity once removed from the familiar conditions of his own parish.

The question that constantly hovers around the discussion of the Parson’s Lollardy asks whether or not Chaucer was a card-carrying Lollard. Responses to this question, of course, must remain inconclusive, but neither can the question be entirely dismissed. Not only has the orthodox nature of the Parson’s Tale been used by critics to deny the Parson a full Lollard identity, it has also been useful for denying Chaucer the same.4 Although political change between when Chaucer wrote his General Prologue in the 1380s and his writing of the Parson’s Tale in the 1390s, thus reflecting a shift from Lollardy as a reform movement to an officially censured heresy. For a reading of the Parson as a figure on both sides of the debate, see Katherine Little, “Chaucer’s Parson and the Specter of Wycliffism,” SAC 23 (2001): 225-253.

4 Critics have also argued against taking the Parson’s Tale as Chaucer’s final work on his life and Tales. See Judson B. Allen, “The Old Way and the Parson’s Way: An Ironic Reading of the Parson’s Tale,” JMR 3 (1973): 255-271; Carol V. Kaske, “Getting Around the Parson’s Tale: An Alternative to Allegory and Irony,” Chaucer at Albany, ed. 4

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my thesis generally argues for a literary fusion of penance with Lollardy as opposed to a biographical union of these two discourses within Chaucer’s own belief system, the Second Nun’s Tale represents a strong case for reviewing critical skepticism regarding Chaucer’s Lollardy. Chaucer’s translation of his Latin source in the Second Nun’s Tale reveals more than just a passing interest in Lollard translation values. Additions and omissions in the Chaucerian translation of St. Cecile’s Legend suggest a poet willing to support Lollard political as well as doctrinal dissent. It seems that in his Second Nun’s Tale, Chaucer reaches something of a climax in terms of his willingness to advocate publicly Lollard beliefs. Of course, this Lollard content is couched within a very orthodox genre, but still a comparative reading of the Latin source with Chaucer’s translation cannot avoid the facts of the Tale’s Lollardy content.

When isolated from the rest of Chaucer’s corpus, the Second Nun’s Tale supports a positive identification of Chaucer as a Lollard. But in company with the other tales, the Second Nun’s Tale also represents Lollardy as subject to the same kinds of lapses characteristic of orthodoxy. Chaucer’s representation of Lollardy in the Tales seems to vacillate between the twin poles of Lollard support and denial. This suggests that in the 1390s the line between orthodoxy and Lollardy had not yet been clearly drawn. Chaucer’s advocacy of Lollard doctrine in the Second Nun’s Tale ultimately must contend with larger issues than whether Chaucer can be identified as a Lollard or not. Lollardy in the Tales confronts not only orthodoxy but also Chaucer’s own doubts regarding the ethical utility of any narrative that attempts to fashion exemplary figures. It may be possible to regard both Lollardy and orthodoxy in the Tales as subject to a larger

Chaucerian interest in the viability of the exemplary mode and the kind of politics it inspires. Can an exemplary Lollard Parson be more capable of stimulating actual societal reform than his orthodox counterpart? Indeed, does the polemicist’s assumption of an exemplary church or priesthood adequately answer to the vagaries of human nature? These questions alert us to the possibility that Chaucer’s Lollardy may be constructed in order to introduce penance as the only discourse capable of sustaining moral vision. As I will argue, in the course of the pilgrimage, Chaucer’s Parson fails to fulfill the exemplary reputation that the General Prologue publishes. This failure does not so much invalidate Lollardy as it investigates the inevitable fate of all reform movements. The Lollard Parson of the General Prologue is truly an exemplary figure, but exemplary figures are more fragile than they first appear. The Parson’s penitential ending becomes highly appropriate as a conclusion not only of the Tales but also as an investigative coda to the Parson’s own Lollardy, especially his exemplary function as an ideal Lollard priest. Rather than attempting to determine Chaucer’s own Lollard commitments, it is more important to examine closely what Chaucer does with his Parson between the idealized figure of the General Prologue, and the more conflicted Parson at the pilgrimage’s end.

Richard II and the Politics of Penance

When Chaucer wrote himself into the Legend of Good Women as a literary penitent, penance has already exerted influence far beyond its sacramental boundaries. In a society where a king’s moral largely determined his political fortunes, public acts of submission or admittance of moral guilt represented political liabilities. Regal authority rested precariously upon the king’s ability to project a public image of moral virtue while
privately occupying the role of the penitent. The obvious contradictions inherent in such a political model become evident when the publication of the king’s moral guilt overrides his public image as the divinely appointed embodiment of Christian virtue. Indeed, the publication of a king’s penitent status could amount to a loss of public support and in the case of Richard II also lead to a state of personal doubt and indecision regarding his own legitimacy as a ruler.

Richard’s political downfall in 1388 serves as historical groundwork for my case that in the 1390s Chaucer combines penance with Lollardy to initiate a discourse of political as well as religious dissent. The 1388 crisis exposed Richard as a flawed ruler. The Appellants’ invasion of Richard’s private chapel, Gloucester’s severe rebuke of the king and the loss of power occasioned when Richard had to employ his queen as an intercessor on his behalf, all contribute to the public exposure of Richard as penitent. Beginning in 1389, Ricardian propaganda aims at reversing the scenes of the king’s embarrassment by exaggerating both the king’s exemplary function as *imago dei* and the actual limits of his powers. During this period of royal consolidation of power, figures like Richard Maidstone, Sir John Clanvowe and Chaucer write works critical of Ricardian autocracy. Central to those critiques are the conjoined issues of penance (Maidstone and Chaucer), literary freedom (Clanvowe and Chaucer) and Lollardy (Chaucer). These apparently disparate elements of penance, literary freedom and Lollardy ultimately merge in Chaucer’s *Legend of Good Women* and his *Canterbury Tales* to form a uniquely Chaucerian poetic of penitential humility and Lollard independence. The 1388 political crisis and the post 1389 Ricardian tyranny function as catalysts for Chaucer’s hybrid poetic of penance and Lollardy. Ricardian tyranny and the psychological need to erase
any memory of the 1388 embarrassment lead to a politics of virtue or exemplarism incompatible with penitential discourse and intolerant of the Wycliffian values of literary freedom. Chaucer’s 1390s works contest Ricardian politics by offering penance and Lollardy as checks to Ricardian hubris.

In his account of the actions against Richard II by the Merciless Parliament of 1388, the Augustinian canon Henry Knighton tries to protect the principle of regal virtue when avoids making too explicit an identification of Richard’s guilt. Knighton carefully transfers blame to Richard’s advisors who lead the young king into error. Knighton attempts to preserve the public image of the crown as the seat of public and private virtue. Yet in the case of Richard II, the imprint of royal guilt remains insofar as the king still emerges from Knighton’s account as vulnerable to bad influence, subject to the magnate’s political will and as an exemplar not of virtue, but of public humiliation and political penance.

The crisis of 1388 doomed any hopes England still held for a glorious fulfillment of Richard’s youthful promise. But the crisis also deeply affected Richard in ways that left him, as Nigel Saul has argued, “psychologically scarred for life.” The apparent military failure of the Scottish campaign, Richard’s injudicious elevation of the unpopular Robert de Vere in 1385, and Richard’s less than heroic bid for peace with France all contributed to a public perception that the king was not fit to occupy the throne. The year 1388

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8 James Gillespie, “Richard II: King of Battles?” The Age of Richard II, ed., James Gillespie (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), p. 146. makes the case that the Scottish
marked not only Richard’s public humiliation at the hands of the Appellants, it also occasioned his near deposition. De Vere’s bold but doomed attempt to defend the crown against the Appellant Lords failed as Radcot bridge on 20 December. Without an army and abandoned by the London populace, Richard added fortifications to the Tower and moved there. On 30 December the Appellants entered the Tower with 500 heavily armed men and took Richard a virtual prisoner. Once confronted by his adversaries, Richard behaved with courtesy and in an apparent sign of reconciliation invited the Lords into his private chapel. The Lords had come into possession of some of the king’s correspondence with de Vere that spoke of a royal plan to call upon the French king for aid in defeating the Appellants. When confronted with this damaging evidence, Richard broke down and tearfully submitted to the Appellants’ rule.

In this confrontation, Richard’s chapel as a place of private penitence merges painfully with his public image as an exemplar of moral and political virtue. The divide between the king’s secular and public image as a defender of virtue collapses into a very damaging spectacle of the king as guilt-ridden penitent. Gloucester’s severe chastening of Richard within the king’s own private chapel denotes a political invasion of Richard’s private moral life and demonstrates the extent to which the publication of a king’s moral faults coincided with a loss of regal authority. This event, perhaps more than any other in Richard’s reign, portends the spiraling downfall of Ricardian power that would eventually lead to the 1399 deposition and Richard’s tragic death in what may have been an act of penance through starvation.

campaign was a military success, but that Richard still failed to adequately project himself as a warrior king.
We know that the Appellants’ treatment of Richard caused the king deep and lasting resentment. In 1397 Richard personally arrested Gloucester in a close parody of the Tower deposition of 1388. In what appears to be an act of planned revenge for Gloucester’s 1388 invasion of Richard’s private chapel, Richard bowed to Gloucester, personally arrested him, took a part of the royal retinue to inspect Gloucester’s own chapel, and then took a leisurely breakfast. In both 1388 and 1397 incursions into their respective chapels, public exposure or political invasion of confessional spaces marked the collapse of both mens’ moral and political reputations. In Gloucester’s case arrest meant torture, confession and death. In Richard’s case the invasion of his private chapel generated a decade of revenge and impolitic measures calculated to shore up his damaged reputation.

The political impact of the 1388 crisis of Richard’s reputation both at home and abroad can be measured by the reluctance of several key electors in Germany to appoint Richard as Holy Roman Emperor. In 1397 rumor had it that Richard might secure the election, but for the fact that two or three of the electors resisted voting for Richard on the grounds that if a king could not effectively control his own subjects, how could he govern an entire empire?

Perhaps the most politically damaging aspect of the 1388 crisis occurred when Richard attempted to halt the executions of his former advisors. In an act of painful and public humiliation, Richard employed Queen Anne to intercede before parliament in order to spare the few remaining members of his inner circle. Paul Strohm describes late

medieval queens as excluded from actual governance but compensated with largely symbolic roles as “passive contributors” to the kin’s royal dignity. In every way late medieval queens emerged as passive, able to influence the king only as petitioners of royal favor as mediators or intercessors. Queen Anne had already fulfilled her role as the intercessor queen in her 1382 mediation on behalf of the disgruntled heir and rebel Thomas Frandon. In 1384 she interceded for John Northampton on her knees at Reading. In 1388 she unsuccessfully attempted to spare the life of Simon Burley and successfully interceded for six justices and sergeants-at-law. With the exception of the 1388 intercession, convention required that the queen petition the king for mercy in a manner that clearly exhibited the king’s mercy thus allowing the king to change his mind while avoiding the imputation of kingly error, what Strohm refers to as “permitting royal reconsideration.” But Anne’s 1388 intercession on behalf of the king puts a remarkable twist in the convention formula of queen-intercession, since instead of petitioning the king for mercy on behalf of the king’s subjects, Anne had to petition parliament on behalf of the king. In other words, the king not only had to petition parliament for the lives of his friends, he had to do so through the intercessory powers of the queen, powers that were only granted the queen by virtue of the king’s royal sponsorship.

This version of royal prerogative gone awry must have deeply offended Richard’s sense of personal authority. Anne’s 1388 intercession on Richard’s behalf not only highlighted the king’s political impotence, it also indicated a break between the king and

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13 Paul Strohm, *Hochon’s Arrow*, p. 103.
the discursive certainties that informed his rule. In symbolic terms by joining the queen as petitioner or member of the mediating body, Richard temporarily left his throne to resume his pre-coronation identity as a mere knight, a pattern that found ultimate fulfillment in Richard’s terminal deposition of 1399. Although Knighton offers no direct evidence that Richard’s political fall stimulated widespread public recognition of the kings’ penitent status, Anne’s intercession publicized Richard’s loss of authority in penitential terms since rather than fulfilling his role as the *imago dei*, Richard had to assume the role of the humble suppliant or the guilty penitent.

The key to Richard’s future political recovery lay in his ability not only to govern better but also to rehabilitate his public image as an exemplary figure. This would naturally require an emphatic re-presentation of Anne in her role as a mediator clearly petitioning the king on behalf of Richard’s former or perceived enemies. Anne in her proper role as petitioner of royal favor when combined with the complementary imaging of the king as a virtuous and sin-pardoning Christ-figure might erase the memory of Richard wholly dependent upon the queen’s intercessory powers and subject to parliament’s will. In order to effect a restoration of his public image Richard needs scripts, narratives of Ricardian virtue that would restore public confidence in the monarch following his 1388 crisis.

Richard Maidstone’s *Concordia facta inter regem et cives Londonie*

Richard Maidstone, confessor to John of Gaunt, contemporary of Chaucer, anti-Lollard, courtier and penitential author wrote what may be described as the pre-imminent narrative of Ricardian political recovery, the *Concordia* or the reconciliation between the
city of London and Richard II. Maidstone represented a powerful group of university trained Carmelites whose literary and political influence at court is most evident in their script-writing for Richard's 1392 London re-entry pageant. The Carmelites were notable among the various monastic orders for having located their studium generale in London instead of the English Universities, a strategic move that positioned them close to the center of government. The London house was situated near both palaces and church residences in the western suburbs between Fleet Street and the Thames.

The London Carmelites of the 1390s are well represented by Richard Lavenham, confessor to the king and author, like Maidstone, of a penitential text. Lavenham may have played a key role in the design of Richard's triumphant London re-entry in 1392 and was also the likely recipient of Maidstone's Concordia, since one of the surviving manuscripts is addressed familiarly to a certain "Richard." As Maidstone's superior, Richard Lavenham may have supervised Maidstone's writing of the Concordia. More importantly, the fact that Maidstone addressed his work to Lavenham implies a clerical

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14 Richard Maidstone was also responsible for writing a Middle English version of the Penitential Psalms. See Richard Maidstone's Penitential Psalms, ed., Valeris Edden (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitatsverlag, 1990).
17 Commentators have assumed that because the Concordia MS. in question is addressed to "Richard" that the recipient must have been the king himself. This attribution proves unlikely given the familiar tone of the address. Lavenham was the likely recipient as he was both Maidstone’s superior and also a confessor to the king at the time. See Richard Maidstone's Concordia: The Reconciliation of London with Richard II, ed., David Carlson with a verse translation by A.C. Rigg (Kalamazoo, MI.: TEAMS, 2003), p. 32.
audience interested in ensuring that its own political future was not too closely tied to Richard's political fortunes.

While the actual level of Lavenham's and Maidstone's involvement in the design and scripting of the 1392 pageant cannot be known, the textual evidence of both Maidstone's *Concordia* and to a lesser extent the *Penitential Psalms* suggests a close alliance between politics and penance, an alliance that Chaucer incorporates as well in his *Legend of Good Women* when he depicts the God of Love as a tyrant and Alceste as an intercessory queen pleading for a heretical and thus penitential Chaucer. The *Legend*, in a manner remarkably similar to Maidstone's *Concordia*, emerges as well as a text responsive to the political implications of Richard's 1392 punitive extortion of London.

The conflict between Richard and London ostensibly had to do with control over the city's trade. Richard depended heavily upon loans from London merchants, but by 1391 such loans had dwindled to practically nothing. In response the king proceeded to strip London of its lucrative administrative functions. The common bench, the Fleet prison, the Chancery and the exchequers of account along with the pleas and receipt were all removed. On June 25, 1392 the king dismantled London's local government. A special commission of inquiry was formed, and some fifty of the city's leaders were summoned. In the end the commission found that London corporation guilty, and heavy fines were imposed. It has been estimated that London forfeited some 30,000 pounds in various fines and penalties.

18 Maidstone's *Penitential Psalms* frequently employs the term "kyng" to refer to God. In three of the Psalms, Maidstone represents the Psalmist's sin and guilt in political terms. For instance, in the ninth Psalm the narrator pleads with the king to refrain from spearing him through for his sins: "Lat me not be theroute isperede!" (lines 69-72). It is tempting to read this as an allusion to Richard's attempt to run Bishop Courtenay through with a sword when Courtenay advised against the king's plan to murder John of Gaunt.

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Richard’s economic and political reprisals against London had their origin in the crisis of 1388. The Appellants enjoyed London’s support against the king during the crisis when the city flagrantly refused to support Richard militarily after the defeat at Radcot Bridge. Moreover, London’s aldermen supplied dubious evidence leading to the execution of Richard’s mayoral appointee, Sir Nicholas Brembe. These acts of disloyalty no doubt motivated Richard’s carefully planned revenge against the city in the early 1390s. The 1388 crisis therefore must figure largely in any account of the political landscape of the 1390s. As Sylvia Frederico notes, after 1388 Richard spent less time in London, choosing instead to hold court in more remote areas of the country.19 While it may be possible to interpret Richard’s punitive measures against London as a matter of political as well as economic necessity, a more accurate understanding of the feud between Richard and his capital city recognizes the opportunity such a rift created for Richard to rehabilitate his public image. Although Richard no doubt fully intended to punish London for failing to defend him in his hour of need, it is tempting to think that Richard staged his feud with London with a view to constructing a spectacle of royal triumph over his enemies.20 The 1392 pageant may also have functioned as a second coronation event calculated to recapture some of Richard’s early promise. Walsingham writes in his chronicle of how in the early 1390s, Richard came across a locked chest in the Tower and ordered it to be opened. Inside he discovered an ampulla of holy oil that, as one prophecy claimed, Beckett intended to use for the anointing of England’s future

kings. Richard requested that the archbishop use this oil to anoint him a second time, a request the archbishop refused. The fact that Richard carried this same vial with him to Ireland tells us something of Richard's emotional state subsequent to 1388. Nigel Saul writes that at the “heart of Richard’s personality there was a barren emptiness... which left him incapable of offering the leadership for which his people craved.”21 This lack may have centered in Richard's own doubt as to his legitimacy as a ruler after 1388, a state of mind that no amount of propaganda or image reconstruction could entirely repair.

At the heart of the campaign to re-assert Ricardian virtue and authority can be felt the fundamental paradox of penance. Once a sinner becomes a penitent it is increasingly difficult to effect a transition from a position of moral failure to a sense of moral rectitude. As Chaucer's Parson makes clear, a good confession cannot include any recitation of one's good deeds. In the political arena, a good king must not be exposed in his private role as a penitent. The incompatibility between penance and politics operated at the center not only of Richard's political life after 1388, it also stimulated resistance on the part of writers like Maidstone, Chaucer, and the Lollard Knight Sir John Clanvowe towards Richard's drive to represent himself as exemplary, a veritable imago dei as the basis for his exercise of personal tyranny. The opposition between the exemplary and penitential modes presents penance as a natural means of lay and clerical resistance to Richard's burgeoning appetite for power. These three writers respond to Richard's 1390's political agenda by narrating Ricardian power as censorious, arbitrary, and at least in Chaucer's and Clanvowe's texts, controlling of both language and meaning. It seems that the London conflict of 1392 may have served as a defining literary as well as

political event that stimulated Chaucer to reconfigure penance and Lollardy as possible rejoinders to the Ricardian politics of virtue.

Maidstone’s *Concordia* appears divided in its loyalties between exemplary politics and the universal values of penance. On the surface, Maidstone’s narration effectively restores the intercessory model to its proper configuration with the king as Christ, the queen as the compassionate Virgin Mary, and London in the role of the penitent. But Maidstone makes provision for reading his narrative as a veiled warning against royal hubris. As a confessor and penitential writer, Maidstone probably would not have dismissed the implicit challenge that Richard’s re-entry pageant posed to the clergy, especially with respect to penance. Of course in a private sense Richard was a much a penitent as any Londoner in 1392, but politically this fact was buried beneath a steady stream of propaganda attesting to Richard’s exemplary role as the image of God on earth.

The necessary dislocation of Richard’s penitential status from his political one sculpts Ricardian politics by transforming penance from a theological discourse into a political means of resistance. This transformation largely accounts for Chaucer’s rather sudden interest in penance as featured in his *Legend of Good Women* and his Parson’s Tale. After 1388, penance with its assumed values of personal humility and political weakness would invariably amplify Richard’s own political humiliation. In this political climate, penance becomes a potentially radical form of political criticism. Before 1388 penance had no political valence in Richard’s court for the simple fact that the king’s penitential life remained private and inviolate. Although the issues at stake in the crisis of 1388 had nothing specifically to do with Richard’s penitence, the outcome was that key penitential sites like the king’s private chapel and the queen’s intercessory function became
politicized. It appears that both Maidstone and Chaucer seize upon penance in order to question Richard’s politics of virtue and the exemplary media that supported Richard’s absolutist tendencies.

Maidstone begins his account of the 1392 re-entry pageant by making a vital distinction between penitent London and the reprobate Appellants. Throughout the *Concordia*, Maidstone employs a spousal metaphor to evaluate Richard’s quarrel with London in terms of a temporary estrangement. Maidstone contrasts prodigal London with Richard’s real political enemies, the *invidiosa cohaors*. Maidstone describes the king as empathetic towards London for the suffering both he and London have endured at the hands of Richard’s enemies:

This gentle king commiserates

With those that grieve—his hand are not the Avenger’s hands,

All England sees how many ills, how many deaths,

He’s suffered from a tender age, still unavenged.22

Maidstone’s topical reference to the “ills” and the “deaths” suffered by the king indicate that the king will not confuse London’s errors with the unforgivable crimes of the Appellants. The *Westminster Chronicle* makes a similar distinction in reporting Anne’s intercessory speech. The queen pleads with Richard not to destroy London merely because of the “passion of its enemies.”23

The 1388 crisis exerts a veiled but still controlling presence within Maidstone’s account. The obscure references to “ills” and “deaths,” and the isolation of the

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22 *Concordia*, p. 51.
Appellants as the kings only enemies make clear that Maidstone understands 1392 as an vital step towards some future act of revenge against the Appellants. The Concordia seeks to enlist London as sympathetic or at least tolerant of Richard's planned elimination of his political enemies. The pageant attempts this re-enlistment by re-configuring Richard as Christ, Anne as Mary and London as a penitent. In effect, London's penitential status as represented in the Concordia prepares the ground for Richard's eventual forced submission of his Appellant opponents and further erases any lingering sense of Richard's own forced submission in 1388.

The isolation of Richard's enemies from the London populace surfaces again in Maidstone's anecdotal narration of the femina nudat scene or naked thigh incident. As Maidstone writes, a reckless cart driver within the pageant's procession lost control of his vehicle with the result that the cart overturned and a group of aristocratic women were dumped out into the street with their skirts over their heads. The narrative suggests that their naked thighs or perhaps even their private parts were exposed to public view (Femina feminea sua sum sic femina nudat):

THESE THINGS thus done, they joyfully proceed to town;
Crowd jostles crowd, for so the route compresses them.
The queen came to the bridge's gate, and then good luck
Provided suddenly a new astonishment:
Two carriages, packed full of ladies, followed her;
A Phaeton was their driver; one was overturned.
When women thus exposed their female thighs to view,
The people scarcely could restrain a hearty laugh.

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So may this lucky fall's significance come true,
And lechery and lustful passion come to grief.

The plebes or general London populace find it difficult not to laugh at the ladies’ plight, an event that Maidstone glosses as “lucky” (prodigum) in the sense that it predicts the downfall of luxus et malus omnis amor. Maidstone’s characterization of the driver as a contemporary Phaeton borrows from classical myth to suggest a usurping and headstrong oligarchy whose dangerous political trajectory must be stopped before they destroy the entire realm. The sudden overturning of the cart suggests Jupiter’s pre-emptive thunderbolt as analogous to a future Ricardian strike against the Appellants. The shameful exposure of the ladies’ thighs predicts a future exposure of Richard’s personal enemies, an uncovering that will subject the Appellants the kind of political exposure and shame endured by Richard at their hands in 1388.

This reading of the naked thigh incident implies a clerical audience accustomed to a rhetorical blend of classical, moral and political values. Maidstone’s narration takes an unscripted event— as risible as it was disgraceful— and uses it to reinforce the fundamental aims of the Ricardian narrative. As an omen, the scene casts an aura of divine providence over the pageant. The unscripted accident, as glossed by Maidstone, offers a fortuitous synthesis of dictum and factum in which Ricardian authority, both moral and political, enjoys the immediate validation of a moral exemplum. By transforming the naked thigh incident into an exemplum predictive of future Ricardian triumph, Maidstone anchors the rest of the scripted pageant within the world of actual

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24 Concordia, p. 63, lines 245-54.
events, a rhetorical ploy calculated to negate the significance of the king’s 1388 embarrassment.

Larry Scanlon characterizes the political or “public” exemplum as supportive of monarchical authority over and against history, “as an incessant and unerring engine of downfall.” Maidstone’s comedic expectation of royal virtue and divine like punishment of sinful passions represents medieval textuality at its most politically optimistic. As Scanlon demonstrates, the purpose of the medieval public exemplum was to give ideology an historical source. The naked thigh incident effectively underwrites the whole of the Concordia to the extent that it historicizes the expectation that Richard will consolidate his political ambitions and punish his enemies.

In the Prologue to the Concordia the ideological function of exemplary narrative emerges in the guise of the shared joys of discovering truth in history. This fellowship centers upon the communal enjoyment of narratives that confirm a common ideology. Maidstone quotes Cicero regarding the social bonding effect of sharing narratives:

> But all that nourishes our fivefold wits and sense
> Is not a bit of good without a friend beside.
> If you’re without a soul to share your pleasures with,
> You feel that none of this has brought you any joy.

Exempla must not only tell a story, they should also root an ideology in history, a process that Maidstone identifies as essential to the bond of personal friendship. In this respect the Concordia is more than just royal propaganda, it also functions as a social narrative.

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25 Scanlon, Narrative, Authority, and Power, p. 81.

26 Concordia, p. 51, lines 5-8.
between clerics that has the potential to function independently of Richard II’s political ambitions.

Commentators have usually identified the *Concordia* as supportive of Richard’s political agenda. David Carlson states that the poem is Ricardian propaganda, and while he acknowledges the possibility that the poem’s aims might be “Carmelite or idiosyncratically Maidstonian,” he concludes that its primary agenda is royalist. Although Maidstone clearly writes with a view to Richard’s political success, he does not do so with absolute confidence. We have to consider that Maidstone’s Carmelite agenda would probably not have supported a blank endorsement of Ricardian power without taking into account the possibility that the king might fail, once more, to implement the kinds of moral reforms that his public and exemplary role implied. Maidstone glosses the naked thigh incident as a *prodigum*, not as a prophetic sign or *portebant*. In this respect Maidstone’s narrative is not quite propaganda, since it allows for future contingency with regards to Richard’s political fortunes. By contrast, the true propagandist tells a story that, within the ideological boundaries it inhabits, cannot be verified or denied because it resists all contingency in favor of a single outcome. For the propagandist it is as

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27 *Concordia*, p. 18.
28 Maidstone’s handling of the naked thigh incident may be usefully compared to Adam Usk’s retrospective treatment of Richard II’s coronation. Usk identifies apparently random occurrences in the coronation ceremony as prophetic signs or indicators of Richard’s ultimate downfall: “At this lord’s coronation, three symbols of royalty foretold [*portebant*] three misfortunes which would befall him: firstly during the procession he lost one of the coronation shoes, so that to begin with the common people rose up against him [1381] and for the rest of his life hated him; secondly, one of his golden spurs fell off, so that next the knights rose up and rebelled against him; thirdly, during the banquet a sudden gust of wind blew the crown from his head, so that thirdly and finally he was deposed from his kingdom and replaced by King Henry.” See Paul Strohm, *England’s Empty Throne: Usurpation and the Language of Legitimation 1399-1422* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), pp. 20-21.

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impossible to regard the future as contingent as it would be to contemplate more than a single version of the past. Maidstone's ideology clearly supports Ricardian power, but this support remains contingent upon whether Richard will, in fact, fulfill that moral and political obligations that Maidstone's ecclesiology demands. If Richard fails to actualize the exemplary role that Maidstone celebrates in the *Concordia*, the truth of Maidstone's narrative remains intact, not because Maidstone denies history but because the entire narrative occupies the realm of signs or the *prodigum*, not the predictive or prophetic. To return to Scanlon's definition of the exemplary mode, if history is identified as the validating standard of ideological truth, then a failure on Richard's part to fulfill his moral or political obligations only invalidates Richard's claims. It has not bearing on the truth value of Maidstone's clerical ideology, since if Richard fails he will simply be accorded the value of a negative *exemplum*. The ultimate ideological grounding for Maidstone's *Concordia* lies in its commitment to the divinely ordained terminus of history— the judgment.

Maidstone's narrative of the naked thigh incident can afford to hope for Richard's political success because if Richard fails the church will remain, an ideological fall-back position that allows politically active agents like Maidstone to survive regime change. As Sylvia Frederico observes, "for a medieval Christian the only true history is salvation history," a reminder that in the middle ages politics could not be entirely separated from salvation. The Political entitlement that Richard received in the *Concordia* was both immediate and provisional. Given Wyclif's argument for making the king the political head of the church, it would be surprising Maidstone— an opponent of Wycliffism— would have conceded to Richard unqualified political support. Before the 1390s,
Wyclif’s advocacy of royal control of church assets and even church government had found favor among the English aristocracy and perhaps from even Richard. Maidstone presumably understood the dangers posed to the clergy by a king enamored by the exercise of absolute power. In the context of Wyclif’s political vision, the coincidence of royal authority with ethical or exemplary propaganda might undermine the church’s monopoly of the means of salvation.

Richard’s persistent yet ultimately unsuccessful attempt to have his grandfather Edward II canonized can be understood in light of the Wycliffite threat to church government. Nigel Saul characterizes the effort as “self-interested,” but within the larger context of medieval politics the canonization of Edward II would have also created a useful precedent for an expansion of lay authority within the religious arena. The pope’s rejection of Richard’s book of Edward’s miracles suggests clerical resistance to lay appropriation of spiritual authority. Once canonized, Edward would represent royal authority within the heart of the medieval spiritual economy. Furthermore, Edward’s book of miracles might also laicize the ecclesiastical monopoly over religious texts by redistributing spiritual authorship to the laity.29

As a court confessor, Maidstone occupied a frontline position with regards to managing lay participation in spiritual means. The *Concordia* demonstrates the remarkable degree to which secular power relied upon sacred imagery for its political success. The *Concordia* enshrines Ricardian power without sacralizing it. Maidstone

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29 Scanlon, *Narrative, Authority, and Power*, p. 70 remarks that the sermon *exemplum* offered the lay audience a point of participation within the religious discourse of the clergy at the same time that it also further established the church as the only source of lay empowerment. In order to maintain this distinction it became necessary to suppress the notion that a layperson might achieve ethical or spiritual success apart from the apparatus of clerical control.
maintains political autonomy for himself and the church by celebrating Ricardian power in terms of future contingency. Ecclesiastical authority could both appropriate and circumscribe secular power on the grounds that the church’s autonomy did not rest upon whether it actually exemplified its own spiritual or ethical standards. In this sense Maidstone’s *Concordia*, while appearing to function as a blank endorsement of Ricardian power, actually offers such an endorsement to the church alone.

Maidstone exploits the disjunction between Richard’s exemplary image as portrayed in the re-entry pageant and his status as a layman and penitent by way of Queen Anne’s penitential intercession. As Paul Strohm has demonstrated, Maidstone’s narrative depicts the queen as a contemporary Queen Esther. Anne humbles herself before the king and then once her petitionary role is acknowledged, she uses the abject posture of the suppliant queen to influence and even advise the king.\(^30\) This construction of Anne bears particular relevance to the problem of casting Richard as a veritable *imago dei*. Richard penitential status, the fact that like any other man he is subject to the state of original sin, is provisionally buried beneath Maidstone’s narration of superlative and god-like royal virtue. But the queen, while visually supportive of the political fiction, abruptly assumes the voice of the confessor as she reminds Richard of his mortality, “We too, like these, are mortal, fleeting like a shade; May God forbid that we should give no thought to death!”\(^31\)

Anne’s penitential warning, sounding more like the confessor Maidstone than the queen, springs the ecclesiastical trap on the re-entry pageant’s celebration of Richard’s exemplary virtues. The *Concordia* expresses perfectly the politics of penance by

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\(^{30}\) Strohm, *Hochon’s Arrow*, pp. 98-111.  
\(^{31}\) *Concordia*, p. 75, lines 473-74.
exposing the lie at the heart of exemplary politics. The contradiction between a politics of virtue and the doctrine of original sin works to Maidstone’s advantage here. Anne’s penitential warning acknowledges the contingent nature of Richard’s lordship and identifies the ideological contradiction that lies deep within the Concordia, since in order to rule effectively, Richard had to assert a narrative of exemplary personal virtue incompatible with the doctrinal assumptions underlying the sacrament of penance. Bishop Bradwardine (d. 1349) hinted at this fundamental tension when he warned that too strong an emphasis upon original sin undermines the social imperative of living a moral life. Anne’s penitential warning attempts to strike a balance where potentially none can be had, since the publication of a king’s penitence, as evident from the events of 1388, amounts to a loss of political authority. Thus Anne’s penitential warning supports only one concern, the clergy’s. Maidstone appropriates Anne’s intercessory voice in order to locate firmly absolute authority in the office of the confessor, since Anne’s inclusive “we” denotes the moral fallibility of not only the king and queen but also the compromised nature of all human attempts to achieve political success by advertising one’s personal virtue.

Having identified both Richard and herself as sinners in need of penitence, Anne goes further to offer what can be read as a clerical indictment of the entire re-entry pageant:

Since Brutus’ days and those of ancient kings
(If even Arthur were included in their ranks),
Such honor never has been shown to moral king
As has, this day, been granted and conferred on you.
If greater reverence were shown towards the king,
The public wrong, perhaps, would trouble God himself?\textsuperscript{32}

The “public wrong” at issue here concerns the incompatible faces of exemplary and penitential politics. Richard as \textit{imago dei} is forced to inhabit the same discursive space at the conclusion of the \textit{Concordia} as the fact of Richard’s status as a penitent. The necessary fiction of the exemplary king emerges as dangerously vulnerable not only to the memory of Richard’s political failures of 1388, but to the fact as well of Richard’s mortality. Anne’s evaluation of the entire re-entry pageant as a near breach of divine prerogative that might even “trouble God himself” identifies Maidstone as wary of the pageant’s attempt to suppress Richard’s political misfortunes by negating his penitential status in favor of an over-confident assertion of Christ-like virtue. Anne (or is this Maidstone?) critiques the re-entry pageant as incommensurate with Richard’s actual place in history relative to Brutus and Arthur. The “public wrong” has not yet been committed, but Anne implies that the re-entry pageant has come close not only to exaggerating Richard’s actual virtue but also committing blasphemy.

Anne’s intercessory speech adjusts the \textit{Concordia} to political and spiritual realities by emphasizing the limits of royal authority in terms of the king’s penitential status. If the queen’s penitential warning to the king was scripted and performed with Richard’s blessing, then the king emerges as fully aware of the limits of exemplary narrative and thus willing to publicly incorporate his penitential status within his political vision. But it may also be the case that the re-entry script and Maidstone’s narration of the script represent a point of view not entirely congruent with the king’s political aims. The contrast Anne builds between Richard and Brutus recalls the king’s early promise as the

\textsuperscript{32} \textit{Concordia}, p. 75, lines 479-484.
ruler of New Troy but also suggests it as a dangerous illusion. As D.W. Robertson comments, the link between London and Troy served as both an inspiration and as a warning to English kings, since the Middle Ages evaluated Troy as both the legitimizing fount of aristocratic values and also a negative example of a city compromised by internal treachery. Sir Nicholas Brembe, the Ricardian appointee as mayor of London, was hanged in 1388 for treachery for the crime of wanting to change London’s name to “Little Troy.” After 1388, Richard’s New Troy had fallen and its would-be founders all branded traitors. Anne’s allusion to Brutus not only evaluates Richard’s pageant as exaggerated in its claims, it also recalls the fate of Richard’s earlier attempt to secure a place in history. In a less critical vein, Anne’s penitential warning can also be read as advisory to the extent that it incorporates Richard’s penitence as part of his public image. The implication here may be that Maidstone recognized as slim Richard’s chances that London would forget the king’s 1388 failures, especially given the king’s extortion of some 30,000 pounds of London money. Anne’s warning suggests that Richard can only hope to rehabilitate his public image by adopting at least a modicum of penitential humility. In this respect, it may be that in addition to his implied criticisms of Richard’s hubris, Maidstone internally scripts an invitation to royal penitence as a realistic strategy for political survival. Anne’s intercession and penitential warning begins as expected with the king resuming his function as judge, but Anne’s intercession ends in a confessor’s warning to his penitent directed at the king himself. Consequently, the initial guilt that Maidstone’s Concordia imposes upon London gets redistributed when Anne publicly recalls Richard’s penitent status, a reminder that also pulls into view the recent

history of Richard’s political failures. In this sense Maidstone’s *Concordia* advises a politics of penance as a pragmatic response to the fact of Richard’s political record. In this way the *Concordia* paints an image of Richard growing to fulfill his exemplary role as portrayed in the re-entry pageant through penitence, not through the means of an unrelenting stream of royal propaganda in which an exemplary king emerges as dangerously close to a denial of his own penitential status.\(^{34}\)

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\(^{34}\) Nigel Saul, *Richard II*, shows that the king’s critics accused Richard of quasi-blasphemous pride, p. 43.
CHAPTER 2

CHAUCER'S LEGEND OF GOOD WOMEN AND THE NAKED TEXT

Like Maidstone's *Concordia*, Chaucer's *Legend* responds to Richard's political hubris as represented in the 1392 London conflict. The 1388 crisis and the 1392 conflict together offer historical points of reference for understanding Chaucer's *Legend* as a narrative critique of Ricardian tyranny. Chaucer's *Legend* also employs penance in order to query Ricardian politics, except that in Chaucer's response to the 1392 conflict Chaucer is forced to repent and the God of Love, or Richard, imposes the penance. Both Chaucer and Maidstone, however, employ the queen as an advisor to the king when Chaucer's Alceste makes an effective case against tyranny and advises the king to engage in a process of deliberation prior to making a final decision in Chaucer's case. Maidstone uses the queen to remind Richard of his penitential status while Chaucer assumes the role of the penitent and employs Alceste to advise the God of Love to engage in deliberation. As I will attempt to demonstrate, Chaucer's argument for royal deliberation in the *Legend* ultimately informs Chaucer's Retraction as a penitential, literary coda to the *Canterbury Tales*. In the Retraction, Chaucer's statement that he will "studie" to his soul's salvation echoes Alceste's plea for royal deliberation. In both instances deliberation pre-empts the kinds of hasty generalizations or judgments that lead to illusory conceptions of personal virtue or illegitimate claims to political authority. As
a penitential figure in both the Legend and the Tales, Chaucer articulates values of personal humility that support interpretation over exemplification.

Chaucer's presence as a penitential third party caught between the God of Love's tyranny and Alceste's intercessory function suggests a deliberate choice on Chaucer's part to merge his public, authorial self to his private, penitential self preparatory to his own death. Moreover, in the Legend penance coincides with Lollard translation values to support Alceste's argument for interpretive deliberation. Finally, Chaucer penitential status in the Legend's two Prologues initiates a politics of penance through which Chaucer will distance himself from exemplary narrative in order to recast himself as a confessional narrator. I have employed the phrase politics of penance to describe an important shift in Chaucer poetic vision in the 1390s. As Derek Pearsall comments, in the final decade of Chaucer's life, the poet's previous narrative geniality and optimism seem to fall away revealing a man "alienated from society," "pessimistic" and "less responsible" than the Chaucer of the 1370s and 1380s.\textsuperscript{35} I do not mean to imply that Chaucer's use of penitence in the Legend and the Tales should be regarded as spiritually pessimistic. By identifying himself as a penitential figure, Chaucer effectively signals his abandonment of ethical confidence and politics in favor of spiritual realities. Of course this in itself represents a political critique of Ricardian and exemplary politics to the extent that Chaucer's penitence implies a lack of ethical confidence in one's own moral powers, a lack which in practice expresses itself in terms of narrative and interpretive freedom and political checks and balances.

As John Norton-Smith has suggested, the intercessory scene in Chaucer’s *Legend* finds a potential historical counterpart in Maidstone’s narrative version of Anne’s intercession on behalf of the city of London.\(^{36}\) Paul Strohm has identified Norton-Smith as guilty of “overly narrow historical sleuthing” on the grounds that as a result of his historical claim, Norton-Smith is “forced to assign a very, very late date to the F version of Chaucer’s Prologue” to the *Legend*. Strohm prefers to avoid the problems related to establishing historical precedence on the grounds that Chaucer’s *Legend*, Maidstone’s *Concordia* and the actual events of 1392 were all “produced and understood within a historically created and broadly available environment of ideas of queenship” that Strohm rightly considers as historical as the events that they inspire.\(^{37}\) While it avoids committing the *a priori* error of assuming that literature must always respond to events, Strohm’s approach runs afoul of its own objection by postulating a necessarily early date for the composition of the F Prologue that, itself, depends too much upon the kind of “narrow historical sleuthing” that Strohm disparages. The rejection of a historical connection between Chaucer’s *Legend* and the London conflict and re-entry pageant of 1392 depends perhaps more than it should upon setting an early date for the composition of the F Prologue. The possibility that the F Prologue was written in the 1390s makes a topical and political reading of the *Legend*’s Prologues necessary.

Most critics agree that the reference to *Troilus* in Chaucer’s F Prologue means that the Prologue could not have been written earlier than 1385 and, since in her catalogue of Chaucer’s works, Alceste makes no mention of the General Prologue of the *Tales*, most


critics have dated the F Prologue to between 1386 and 1388. Robert Frank suggested that Chaucer began work on the *Legend* in 1386 as an experiment in writing short narrative preparatory to the *Tales*. The problem with using the absence of the General Prologue as evidence for a 1380s composition date for the F Prologue is that the G Prologue also neglects to mention that General Prologue. Larry Benson states that the General Prologue to the *Tales* was probably composed in the late 1380s, “but a precise date cannot be determined.” If we fix the composition date for the General Prologue to 1387 or 1388 then we have some reason for dating the F Prologue to the mid to late 1380’s. But this assumes that Chaucer had finished the General Prologue and made it available to his readers by 1388. The absence of any mention of the General Prologue in either of the *Legend*’s Prologues suggests that Chaucer had yet to write the General Prologue or that he had not yet made it public. In either case, the absence of any mention of the General Prologue tells us virtually nothing about the relative composition dates of the F and G Prologues since neither text mentions the existence of the General Prologue or the *Tales*.

There is dubious evidence from Chaucer’s *Envoy to Bukton* that Chaucer had released his Wife of Bath’s Prologue to his readership by about 1396. But precise dating of the *Envoy* remains problematic. The reference in the *Envoy* to Frise or Frisia may refer to a military expedition undertaken between 24 August and the end of September 1396, but operations against the Frisians also occurred in the previous decade. This rather tentative means of dating the Wife of Bath’s Prologue may possibly support a 1396

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composition period for both the F and G Prologue, since neither text mentions the Wife of Bath, while both Prologues refer to the “Love of Palamon and Arcite” and the St. Cecilia legend that Chaucer incorporated into the Tales as the Knight’s Tale and the Second Nun’s Tale. Derek Pearsall notes that the fact that these two tales are “left with their original titles” in the revised G Prologue written in 1394 or 1395 does not necessarily mean that they had not yet been worked into the Tales. Thus, Chaucer may have worked on the Tales at the same time as he wrote the Legend. He may also have left off working on the Legend by 1396 in order to devote more time to working on the Tales, a possibility that could help to explain why the Legend remains unfinished.

John Bowers makes a persuasive case for the simultaneous composition of the Legend and the Tales. Bowers detects something of a “split poetic personality” for Chaucer in the 1390s as the poet attempted to accommodate Richard’s pro-French attitude while staying true to his own desire to establish English as a literary language. Bowers views the Legend as a coerced text that Chaucer quite working on as soon as he felt “no further pressure to continue.” Norton-Smith suggestion for a historical link between Chaucer’s Alceste and Maidstone’s Queen Anne further supports Bowers’ claim that the F Prologue to the Legend was written under pressure in 1392. The God of Love’s rebuke of Chaucer for having translated the Romance of the Rose into English corresponds as well with Richard’s burgeoning appetite for French culture in the early 1390s. As Bowers puts it,

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41 Pearsall, The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer, p. 228.
“Chaucer imagined two prestige audiences for these two very different kinds of textual production: the king for the *Legend* and posterity for the *Canterbury Tales.*”

The only external evidence we have for a potential dating of the poem derives from the F Prologue’s explicit reference to Queen Anne’s residence in the Thames’ Valley:

And whan this boke is maad, yive it the queen,
On my behalf, at Eltham or at Sheene. (F Prologue: 496-497)

Most critics agree that lines 496-497 refer to Queen Anne and therefore the F Prologue must have been written between the Queen’s arrival in England in 1382 and her death on June 7, 1394. The assumption that the G Prologue was written after the F Prologue stems from the fact that the G Prologue omits the explicit reference to the queen and her residences, a fact that has led critics to surmise that when Chaucer wrote the G Prologue the queen had already died. The common assumption that Chaucer’s omission of any reference to the queen in the G Prologue must indicate a post-1394 composition has recently been challenged by Delaney on the grounds that the omission could also mean that the G Prologue was composed before the F Prologue, since the references to the queen at Eltham and Sheene could have been intended to memorialize the dead queen. But this reading makes for a significant incongruity between Chaucer’s treatment of the queen’s death and Richard’s order following Anne’s death that both the Eltham and Sheene residences be destroyed. It seems unlikely that Chaucer would have written of the houses as if they were still standing and occupied by the queen when they had been destroyed.

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In my view, more significance might be attached to Chaucer's reference in the F Prologue to Eltham and Sheen as royal residences where the queen was known to have been residing at the time Chaucer wrote the F Prologue. Documentary evidence for the royal itineraries of 1392 shows that the king resided at Sheen for a week in mid-December 1392 and that he spent both Christmas and New Years at Eltham. Until mid-summer 1393 Richard spent the entire summer at Winchester and later at Sheen and Eltham. Eltham and Sheen were also the objects of considerable royal expenditure in the 1380s, including bronze taps for hot and cold water. Michael Bennett notes that after the king’s formal declaration of his majority in 1389, Richard “settled back into a more tranquil routine, with lengthy stays at Windsor, Woodstock, Sheen, Eltham, and Langely.” Bennett also characterizes this period as a time of “relative stability” lasting until the queen’s death at Sheen in 1394. It should also be noted that Sir John Clanvowe links his *Boke of Cupid* with the royal residence at Woodstock. This suggests a composition date for the *Boke* of between 1389 and 1391, the latter date being the year of Clanvowe’s death.

A connection between the royal residence at Sheen and the 1392 London conflict is evidenced by the fact that the royal procession left from Sheen on its way to the re-entry pageant. Although the king and queen stayed at Eltham and Sheen before 1389, a significant body of documentary evidence points to prolonged period of royal residence at both Eltham and Sheen between 1389 and 1394. Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of

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Chaucer’s reference to Eltham in the F Prologue relates to the fact that following Richard’s triumphant London re-entry pageant, the citizens of London visited the King at Eltham as ordered to present the royal couple with expensive Christmas gifts just as they had previously done after the king’s coronation in 1377. This reenactment of the coronation evaluates the 1392 pageant as a virtual second coronation. Chaucer may have had this particular visit in mind when he named Eltham and Sheen as residences to which he anticipated delivering his finished *Legend of Good Women*. Like the Londoners’ gifts, Chaucer’s *Legend* functions as a work of political penance calculated to restore the poet back into Richard’s good favor. It follows that Chaucer’s reference in the F Prologue to the queen’s residence at Eltham and Sheen may date the F Prologue’s composition to 1392. Furthermore, Chaucer may have written his *Legend* to parody Richard’s 1392 punishment of the city of London. Chaucer’s assumed penitential role at the conclusion of the *Legend* and the familiar role of the queen as an intercessor and advisor to Richard or the God of Love both suggest a deliberate attempt on Chaucer’s part to write the *Legend* as a kind of political commentary on the 1392 pageant.

The dating of the F Prologue to 1392 and the G Prologue to 1394 or beyond garners further support for what I see as a vital thematic and causal link between Clanvowe’s *Boke of Cupid*, Maidstone’s *Concordia* and Chaucer’s *Legend*. These three texts critically examine the post-1389 Ricardian political agenda in terms of its larger social and cultural implications. Maidstone checks Ricardian hubris by emphasizing penance and the contingency of redemption history. Clanvowe’s *Boke* contests Ricardian tyranny by questioning the cultural assumptions at work within the conventions of courtly love. Chaucer responds to Richard’s political agenda in the *Legend* by fusing penance with
Lollardy, a strategy that links the Lollard interpretive freedom with penitential humility in order to challenge the values of exemplarism and totalitarian politics. This anticipates a similar fusion of Lollardy and penance in the actual person of Chaucer’s Parson, a figure perhaps best understood in light of Richard II’s absolutism. Like Maidstone, Chaucer sees penance as a useful and ready corrective to Ricardian exemplarism. But unlike Maidstone, Chaucer also grasps the vitality of Lollard hermeneutics as an equally powerful dissenting voice necessary to English becoming a literary language.

Writing about Chaucer’s Legend, Helen Phillips identifies as critical myth the notion of Chaucer as an “inveterate ironist,” a poet who is too often viewed as “apolitical, politically conservative, or cautiously evading direct reference to contemporary events.” Like Phillips, this reading of the Legend assumes a much closer bond between the text and contemporary events that Chaucer’s characteristic polysemy would seem to warrant. In my view Maidstone’s Concordia offers the reader a useful model for the practice of placing indirect challenges to Ricardian tyranny within an otherwise submissive text. Maidstone’s intercessory Anne employs humility and a petitionary role to cloak her bold penitential and political warning. This combination of generic submissiveness with an equally authoritative voice of dissent can be found also in Chaucer’s strategy of balancing authorial modesty against a vocabulary of political and religious dissent in the Legend. Like Maidstone, Chaucer also employs a regal figure, Alceste, to deliver what amounts to a political warning to Richard or the God of Love regarding the dangers of tyranny. But Chaucer differs from Maidstone when he employs what Phillips calls Lollard buzz words to make the case for vernacular translation and a more democratic

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means of textual production and interpretation. The absence of any Lollard terminology in Maidstone’s *Concordia* reflects, of course, the Carmelite’s public opposition to the Lollards. But it also marks a difference between Maidstone’s literary agenda and Chaucer’s. The combined presence of Lollard terminology and penitential forms in Chaucer’s *Legend* suggests the invention of a potent form of literary dissent in which both orthodox and heterodox voices unite to challenge Richard’s political agenda. Again, the events of 1388-1392 are crucial for understanding why Chaucer would attempt to blend penance with Lollardy in both the *Legend* and his *Tales*.

The emergence of penance as a form of political dissent can be traced to both Maidstone’s *Concordia* and Chaucer’s *Legend*. Paul Strohm observes:

> The tendency of London scriptwriters and Maidstone and Chaucer to soft pedal the imagery of queens as abject intercessors and to prefer that of queens as good counselors may address Richard’s notorious impatience with counsel. Easily available to Maidstone and Chaucer were intercessory images of proven compatibility with late medieval ideas about autocratic kingship. But their poems move beyond intercessory images pleasing to autocracy in order to produce ideas of queenship that argue for the tempering of kingly power by good advice.

To Strohm’s analysis could be added that fact that both Anne’s and Alceste’s advice comes served on a bed of penitence. In Maidstone’s version, Anne warns the king directly, like a confessor. In the *Legend*, Chaucer emerges as the guilty party and subject to penance as a kind of straw-man for Alceste’s indictment of the God of Love’s rather hasty willingness to believe court gossip. In both texts penance, with its doctrinal

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premise of original sin, indirectly queries Ricardian autocracy. As an actual confessor, Maidstone’s shaping of penance into a discourse of political challenge assumes the kind of authoritative directness one might expect from a man who may have actually heard Richard II’s confessions. Although Chaucer also incorporates penance as a challenge to Ricardian tyranny, he does so as a penitent, not as a confessor. This has the effect of clearly marking Chaucer as different than Maidstone in terms of how the the English poet situates himself in the role of the lewd compiler. In the *Legend*, Chaucer constructs a dissenting voice cognizant of its own need for penitential correction, a penitent critic whose response to Ricardian tyranny acknowledges Chaucer’s own need for penitential correction. Whereas Maidstone employs penance to challenge Richard’s quasi blasphemous presumption, Chaucer uses penance to identify himself as the victim of the God of Love’s paranoia, a construction that registers Chaucer’s actual political vulnerability as a lewd compiler at the same time as it examines Chaucer’s own motives for writing.

The changes that Chaucer makes between the F and G Prologues further support what I see as Chaucer’s progression towards a politics of penance increasingly dependent upon Lollard values. The F Prologue differs from the G Prologue in its focus on the daisy image and a comparatively limited vision for the establishment of a literary English corpus that might, over time, displace its French and Latin exemplars. As Phillips rightly notes, the G Prologue omits much of the daisy material in favor of a more studied interest in Alceste, a focus that I view in terms of a progression from courtly themes to penitential
content that ultimately produces Chaucer’s Parson’s Tale and his Retraction. The differences between the F and G Prologues also support a sharpening of Chaucer’s critical voice in the G Prologue. As an example, one may compare how the F Prologue envisions the emergence of a literary form of English with the G Prologue’s argument for the same.

In the F Prologue, Chaucer laments that the English language lacks the sophistication or versatility required to “preyse aright” the daisy: “Allas, that I ne had Englyssh, ryme or prose, / Suffisant this flour to preyse aright!” In the next line Chaucer requests help from lovers that have “konnyng and might” to help him in his “labour.” (F, 66-71) In the G Prologue Chaucer omits all references to the poverty of English as a literary language. Instead, he announces that he will neither solicit help from others nor hold to the court convention of the leaf and the flower, a French and Anglo-French daisy cult that enjoyed popularity within the Ricardian court of the 1390s. In both the F and G Prologues, after his initial statement of support for old books, Chaucer digresses into a general celebration of the daisy convention and the “floures white and rede.” (F, 42; G, 42) This threatens to obscure Chaucer’s opening statements regarding the values of old books, but as Chaucer explains in the F Prologue (101-02), he may “not al at-ones speke in ryme,” a line that Chaucer omits in the G Prologue in favor of a more strident declaration of his original purpose. Instead of excusing the daisy digression on the grounds of language’s linear dimension, the G Prologue re-states his support for old books with an important

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49 Helen Phillips, “Register, Politics, and the Legend of Good Women,” p. 119 notes that the G Prologue names Alceste ten times to the F Prologue’s three.  
qualification; not only will he champion old books, he will also “declare” them as “naked” texts. (G, 86)

These alterations reveal the G Prologue as less apologetic and more direct in its vernacular ambitions. They also reveal a poet less willing to bow to French literary precedent and the political hegemony that it supports. In the G Prologue, English no longer languishes under the tyranny of French fashion. By contrast, the F Prologue casts Chaucer in the role of the translator resigned to the task of rendering French love poems into English equivalents. Both F and G lament Chaucer's derivative role as a mere gleaner of literary fields already well picked over by other writers. But whereas the F Prologue casts this anxiety of influence in the second person—“for wel I wot that ye han her-biforn”—the G Prologue employs the third person in order to emphasize what is an increasing sense of authorial and political independence on Chaucer’s part: “For wel I wot that folk han here-beforn.” (F, 73; G, 61) In both Prologues Chaucer acknowledges the anxiety of influence, but in the G Prologue he remodels his authorial role in terms of his independence from not only the help of lovers, but also as a political act in which he distances himself from the controlling binarism of the leaf and flower debate.

The substitution of the second person “ye” with the third person “folk” not only distances Chaucer from aristocratic control, it also alerts the reader to the social implications of language. Before the Norman invasion, English made a clear distinction between “thou” when used to address one person and the plural “ye.” Under French influence the ambiguity of the French “vous” gradually infiltrated English usage so that it became correct to use “you” in place of the plural “ye.” Moreover, “you” also replaced the English “thou” so that the distinction between the the singular and the plural in the
second person was lost. Class distinction also became a feature of the Anglo-Norman "you." In Chaucer's day the pronoun "you" was commonly used to address one's social superiors, while "thou" was reserved for people of lower social rank. Evidence for this class driven distinction between "you" and "thou" can be found in Chaucer's Legend in the dialogue between the poet and the accusatory God of Love. In the G prologue, the God of Love berates Chaucer using the second person "thow" while Chaucer meekly addresses the God of Love as "yow." Throughout the God's litany of Chaucerian transgressions, the second person "thow" occurs at least eleven times in the G Prologue; in the F Prologue it is used just once. According to this measurement the G Prologue is more emphatic in its characterization of Ricardian tyranny that the F Prologue.

Chaucer's stated intention in the G Prologue to produce "naked" texts parodies contemporary Lollard values regarding the need for an English Bible. In his study of the years immediately before the formation of the English literary canon, Ralph Hanna identifies Lollard Bible translation as the driving force in "the movement toward (and the recuperation of) a central English tradition." Any identification of Chaucer as the primary shaper of a revived English literary tradition must contend with the fact that the Wycliffite Bible exists in over 250 manuscripts as compared to Chaucer's 82 manuscripts of the Tales. As a secular poet writing in English, Chaucer must have recognized his subordinate status relative to the Lollard translation project. But Chaucer may also have

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viewed himself as working in tandem with the Lollards to the extent that his translations of secular old books also made authoritative texts available to English readers.

The progression I have identified between the F and G Prologues of an increasing level of authorial independence can also be observed in the progression between the Lollards’ first Biblical translation and their second. The painfully literal Early Version (EV) of the Lollard Bible was completed c. 1380-1384, only to be supplanted by the more idiomatic Later Version (LV) finished in 1395-1397. Malcolm Lambert describes the EV as a “painful literal crib of the Vulgate” expressive of the Lollard translators’ concern that it “might be dangerous to make free” with the Latin originals’ syntax. The LV version of the Lollard Bible displays considerable less anxiety of influence in its willingness to change the Latin syntax in order to render the sense more clear in English.

A study of Lollard translation principles as revealed in the General Prologue of the LV shows that whenever the Lollard translators were confronted with a Latin phrase that could not be translated directly into English, they chose to follow the sentence or meaning rather than a literal word-to-word translation. The author or authors of the LV’s General Prologue, make the case for translating so that the sense of the text will be as “open, or opener, in English as in Latin.” This emphasis on “intent” and “sentence” produces a text that the General Prologue author describes as both “whole and open.” The author goes further to state that although he began with hopes that the translation of the LV would either equal the Latin Vulgate in openness or exceed it, he now expects by

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53 Selections from English Wycliffite Writings, ed., Anne Hudson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 174 dates the LV’s General Prologue to between 1395-1397. Hudson also makes the point that the LV General Prologue was not the prologue normally attached to the LV, but an “exceptional addition to it.”

God’s grace that the translation “may make” the English Bible more “true and open” than its Latin counterpart.55

As Moira Fitzgibbons has shown, the term “open” when applied to vernacular translations could refer simply to the public aspect of vernacular books as, for instance, in the case of vernacular preaching; the Cursor Mundi repeatedly uses the term “open” in the sense that Jesus “openly bigan to preche” when he initiated his public ministry. The official translator of the 1357 Lay Folks Catechism, a monk named Gaytryge, uses “open” to mean honest or frank in a way reminiscent of Middle English devotional writers’ admonition that penitents ought to engage in open shrift or confession. In her analysis of Gaytryge’s translating praxis, Fitzgibbons writes:

Gaytryge himself never disparages clerical authority, throughout the Catechism he insistently links learning the fundamentals of the faith to the attainment of more profound knowledge. Within this context, priests function not as the indispensable mediators and disciplinarians envisioned by [bishop] Thoresby, but as facilitators of the all-important bond between the individual believer and God.56

Gaytryge’s translation is but a single example of a churchman’s attempt to respond to the growth of lay literary by initiating what amounts to vernacular containment. The paradigm shift whereby the clergy keeps abreast of lay literacy acknowledges Bernard of Clairvaux’s vision of a humanized God able to respond to concrete and individual human

55 Selections from English Wycliffite Writings, p. 262.
As Margaret Deanesly pointed out, the Lollards who translated the Bible were academically trained and the translations were almost entirely carried out when Lollardy was still primarily an Oxford movement. Deanesly also noted that the Lollard Bible was not considered heretical in Chaucer's time, and even Arundel did not necessarily view the Lollard Bible as heretical when he prohibited its use in 1408. Anne Hudson's careful scrutiny of Wycliffism has confirmed its role as a textual powerhouse of vernacular translation, and Peter Biller has commented that thanks to Hudson's work, Lollardy now appears "more firmly tied to its Oxford source; it has more spine; the roles of the production and dissemination of books, teaching and literacy are now at the center of the picture."

It follows that Chaucer's intention to produce "naked" texts would not have necessarily been viewed in the 1390s as equivalent to a statement of heretical intent. Given the Oxford origins of the Lollard translation project, Chaucer's naked text statement could be viewed as a hopeful gesture towards Lollard translation as the foundation for an English literary corpus. That Chaucer expresses more anxiety of influence in the F Prologue than he does in the G Prologue may parallel the maturation

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57 Chaucer's oblique claim in his Legend Prologues that "Bernard the monk ne saugh nat all" (F: 16, G: 16), seems calculated to dismiss clerical control of vernacular texts.
58 Margaret Deanesly, The Lollard Bible and Other Medieval Biblical Versions (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), p. 231. See also Anne Hudson, Selections from Wycliffite Writings, p. 163: "Though in 1401 the legitimacy of biblical translation could be debated in Oxford without any charge of heresy being leveled against its proponents, the translation came soon after to be linked with the Lollard movement."
60 This is not to say that Lollard Bible translation was free from controversy. The friars were the chief critics of Wyclif's 1379 mandate for the translation of the Bible into English. See Deanesly, Lollard Bible, p. 230.
curve of the Lollards’ translation project. In the LV’s General Prologue the anxiety of influence takes the form of the translators diligently studying the commentaries of the church fathers before embarking on their actual translation work. The Lollards were revolutionary in England for their belief that Englishmen ought to be able to access ancient texts in the vernacular. This conviction assumed the need for scholarly translations that avoided undue interpretative bias in favor of what they termed an “open” or “plain” textual rendering.

It was not their translations that edged the Lollards closer to the charge of heresy but rather the way in which they encouraged the laity to read the Bible literally. For example, William Swinderby, a Lollard hermit in Leicester, was tried for heresy in 1389. The prologue to the account of his trial identifies the Lollards’ primary offense as their unlicensed preaching and their habit of reading the Bible in a new-fangled way. The Wycliffites did not advocate a standard exegetical model. As Hudson notes with reference to a Wycliffite sermon on Luke 15:11-32, the interpretation of the biblical text is remarkable for its interpretive freedom:

The exegesis of the gospel text reveals many points of divergence from the Glossed Gospels, showing that, unless the implications of the text involved an obvious issue of Lollard belief, no standard of exegesis was followed.

When placed within or next to the context of Lollard hermeneutical freedom, Chaucer’s naked text marks a transition between two kinds of secular translations: a translation

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61 Anne Hudson, *Selections*, p. 176 notes that the Wycliffites frequently disparaged “glossing, a process which the Wycliffites regarded as departing from the true sense of scripture whether that was, in the modern terms, literal of figural.”
beholden to an exegetical tradition and one more focused on producing texts that will encourage independent readings. Chaucer's F Prologue may represent a kind of secular equivalent to the Lollards' EV translation of the Bible, since like the EV the F Prologue exhibits a cautionary approach to the business of translating from authoritative languages into the relatively unknown capacity of English for transmitting the legacy of old books. Chaucer's G Prologue, a text contemporary with the 1395 Lollard General Prologue to the LV, represents a bolder approach in which the authoritative text is released through translation to become more open than its Latin original.

When the God of Love in both the F and G Prologues accuses Chaucer of "heresy," the imputation is not strictly doctrinal but political as well as textual. Significantly, the God of Love accuses Chaucer of heresy for having translated the *Romance of the Rose* in "pleyn text' without a commentary or gloss. Doctrinal issues take a back seat to what Chaucer appears to view as a more central issue regarding the control of texts and their interpretation. Chaucer's request in the F Prologue for assistance from lovers who possess "konnyng and might" (F, 68) gives way in the G Prologue to a relatively independent Chaucer bent upon translating without the filters of glosses, commentaries or the imposition of political concerns.

This difference can be marked as well in the way that Chaucer explicitly identifies with the flower in the F Prologue:

I do yt in the honor

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64 According to the Lollard translator of an English paraphrase of Wyclif's *De Officio Regis*, the mere fact of translation could incur charges of heresy: "Sythen witte stondis not in langage but in groundyne of treuthe, for tho same witte is in Laten that is in Grew or Ebrew, and trouthe schuld be openly knowne to alle manere of folke, twothe moueth mony men to speke sentences in Yngeliysche that thai han gedirid in Latyne, and herfore bene men holden heretics." See Anne Hudson, *Selections*, p. 127.
Of love, and eke in the service of the flour
Whom that I serve as I have wit or might. (F, 82)\textsuperscript{65}

In the G Prologue, Chaucer recants his loyalty for the flower by announcing that he has no interpretative bias at all, those who prefer the leaf can find what they want and those who serve the flower are equally free to interpret his translations in support of their particular bias:

> For trusteth well, I ne have nat undertake
> As of the lef again the flour to make,
> Ne of the flour to make ageyn the lef,
> No more than of the corn agen the shef;
> For, as to me, is lefer non, ne lother.
> I am witholde yet with never nother;
> I not who serveth lef ne who the flour.
> That nys nothing the entent of my labour.
> For this werk is al of another tonne,
> Of olde story, er swich strif was begonne. (G, 71-80)

A similar statement occurs in the F Prologue, but in the different context of Chaucer’s description of the God of Love in the process of holding court. It seems that while both F and G Prologues announce Chaucer as not beholden to either the leaf or the flower, the G Prologue makes the statement much closer to Chaucer’s discussion of his own writing.

\textsuperscript{65} Later in the F Prologue Chaucer appears to contradict his earlier statement of support for the flower when he states, in much the same terms as found in the G Prologue, the he is not one “who serveth leef ne who the flour.” (F, 193) This anomaly suggests that the F Prologue ought to be considered as a draft for the G Prologue with its more explicit account of Chaucer’s authorial goals.
The F Prologue reserves the statement of authorial autonomy until the dream portion of
the Prologue somewhat removed from the issue of textual control.

The claim that Chaucer is not “witholde” to either the leaf or the flower signals his
intention to translate without political constraint. As Lee Patterson has noted in his
discussion of John Clanvowe’s *Boke of Cupid*, the term “witholde” can be understood as
a courtly dictum or as a politically inspired topical reference to Richard II’s 1389
initiation of life retention as a “specific form of indenture.”66 As a politically loaded
term, “witholden” as employed in the G Prologue may contrast Chaucer’s political
freedom after 1391 to the indentured status of a knight such as Clanvowe.67 Although
both the F and G Prologues valorize old books and announce Chaucer’s authorial
freedom in similar terms, only in the G Prologue does Chaucer state his freedom without
also requesting help from lovers. In this manner the G Prologue can be seen as resolving
the contradictions in F among Chaucer’s plea for help from lovers, his statement that he
writes in order to serve the flower, and his contradictory statement later in the Prologue
that he is not beholden to either side.

Although cloaked within the courtly context of the daisy, Chaucer’s statement in both
Prologues that he will translate only for the sake of “olde story, er swich strif was
begonne” (G, 80; F, 196) implies a desire to distance himself from the political strife that
characterized most of Richard II’s reign. As Michaela Grudin observes, from the 1370s
to the 1390s London was a hot-bed of scurrilous speech, slander and political rumor:

66 Lee Patterson, “Court Politics and the Invention of Literature,” *Culture and History
1350-1600: Essays on English Communities Identities and Writing*, ed., David Aers
(Detroit, 1992), p. 10.
67 Chaucer was removed from his post as clerk of the king’s works in 1391, the same year
that Clanvowe died in Constantinople. See Derek Pearsall, *The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer*,
213.
The contemporary records are rife with punishment accorded speech—whether it be slander, false rumor, lies, deceptions, falsehoods, vulgarity, or simply the language of a "common scold."68 This state of affairs finally came to a climax when Richard II sent out an edict to all sheriffs to arrest and punish by death any person found guilty of speaking disparagingly of the king. Walsingham’s Historia Anglicana for 1399 describes how this edict on ly exacerbated political intrigue:

From this it happened that many of his [Richard’s] lieges were maliciously accused of saying something, either publicly or secretly, which could turn to the slander, disgrace, or dishonour of the king’s person; and they were taken and imprisoned and led before the Constable and Marshal of England in the court of chivalry.69

Walsingham’s Lancastrian bias may exaggerate the actual effects of Richard’s 1399 edict, but the account confirms the palpable sense of political suspicion and sensitivity that Chaucer conveys in the G Prologue.

Having distanced himself from the obligation to translate old books as a political partisan, Chaucer emphasizes in the G Prologue the value of old books for their own sake, an emphasis not found in the F Prologue:

But wherfore that I spak, to yeve credence
To bokes olde and don hem reverence,
Is for men shulde autoritiees believe,

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There as there lyth non other assay by preve.
For myn entent is, or I fro yow fare,
The naked text in English to declare
Of many a story, or elles of many a geste,
As autors seyn; leveth hem if yow leste. (G, 81-88)

Chaucer's reference to naked texts does not entirely fit with the Wycliffite translators' use of terms such as "open" or "plain" to describe English texts that render the sense of Latin texts using English syntax and grammar. The word "naked" or "bare" occurs in a variety of literary contexts that generally refer to translation practices; however, a distinction could be made between the sense of "open" as a translator's term and "naked" as a synonym for an unglossed text.

In 1397 during his trial for heresy, the squire John Croft renounced his heretical opinions and promised that he would neither read nor possess any English books extracted by Lollards from the scriptures according to the bare text: neque libros Anglicos secundum nudum textum de sacra scriptura sinister extractos per quosdam Lollardos.70 It is not clear whether Croft was prohibited from reading any English translation of the Scriptures or if the prohibition extended only to his habit of reading portions of the scriptures free of any commentary or glosses. The author of the LV General Prologue implies that any translation of the Bible into the vernacular, with or without glosses, posed a real threat to the ecclesiastical authorities. The LV General Prologue states that "couetouse clerkis" despise and "stoppen holi writ" in order to keep the people ignorant.

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70 Cited by Deanesley, Lollard Bible, p. 288.
of their “symonie, eresie and manie othere synnes.” The General Prologue identifies
the primary threat posed by the Lollard Bible in terms of its power for raising public
ethical standards.

The LV General Prologue employs the term “open” to argue that the English language
is a suitable vehicle for the transmission of the Latin Vulgate’s sense. The author does
not directly treat the problem of political bias in translating. The discussion is limited to
the problem of whether translators should attempt to preserve the Latin grammar and
syntax, or if they should privilege the Latin sense or sentence and attempt to render the
Latin text into idiomatic English:

First it is to knowe that the beste translating is, out of Latyn into English,
to translate aftir the sentence and not oneli aftir the wordis, so that the sentence be
as opin either openere in English as in Latyn, and go not fer fro the letter; and it
the letter mai not be sauid in the translating, let the sentence euere be hool and
open, for the wordis owen to serue to the entent and sentence, and ellis the wordis
ben superflu either false.  

In his 1391 Treatise on the Astrolabe, Chaucer also explains his translating practices in
terms of the Lollard principle of rendering the Latin meaning into English grammar and
syntax:

This tretis, divided in 5 parties, wol I shewe the under full light reules and naked
words in English, for Latyn canst tho yit but small, My litel Sone. (25-28)

Chaucer uses the term “naked” to express what the LV General Prologue means by “open
and hool.” Both Chaucer and the Lollard translators make their case for an English

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71 Hudson, Selections, p. 67.
72 Hudson, Selections, p. 68.
translation of old books on the grounds that the Romans translated into Latin books originally written in Hebrew, Greek and Arabic. As the LV General Prologue states, "Latyn was a comoun langage to here puple aboute Rome... as Englishe is comoun langage to oure puple." Similarly, Chaucer writes that "Latyn folk had hem First out of othere diverse langages, and writen hem in her owne tunge, that is to seyn, in Latin." (Astrolabe, 34-35) Given the nature of the similarity between the Lollard rationale for open translation from Latin to English and Chaucer's rationale for the same, it is likely that in the Prologue to the Astrolabe Chaucer uses "naked" to signify what the LV General Prologue means by "open." In the G Prologue of the Legend, however, Chaucer expands his conception of the naked text to include values of interpretive freedom for both translator and reader. Chaucer's "entente" as adjusted in the G Prologue refuses to participate in the partisan politics of Richard's court as represented by the debate between the flower and the leaf. Unlike the F Prologue where Chaucer announces his intent to honor the flower, in the G Prologue he states that he will honor both sides by refusing to side with either. It follows that in Chaucer's G Prologue, the term "naked" may signify more than just the principle of open translation. In the G Prologue, Chaucer articulates the logical next step towards making English a literary language, namely that it must not only transmit the sense of old books, but it must also translate that sentence in ways that invite interpretation free from political constraints.74

73 Hudson, Selections, p. 70.
74 In the main body of his treatise on the Astrolabe, Chaucer makes explicit his personal skepticism regarding the truth value of the horoscopo for predicting human events: "Natheles these ben observaunces of judicial matere and rytes of payens, in whiche my spirit hath ne feith, ne knowing of her horoscopum." (Astrolabe Treatise, part II, 56-58) In discussing medieval uses of the horoscope, Lee Patterson, Chaucer and the Subject of History, p. 217, notes the existence of a "geomatic and astrological book commissioned

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In the G Prologue, just as Chaucer makes clear his bipartisan stance with regards to the flower and the leaf, the God of Love makes his entrance. The identification of the God of Love as Richard II must take into account that in the Prologue to the *Astrolabe*, Chaucer tries to enlist the king's sponsorship of his rather Lollard sounding translation agenda:

> God save the king, that is lord of this langage, and all that feith berith and obeith, everich in his degree, the more and the lasse. But consider wel that I ne usurpe not to have founden this werk of my labour or of myn engyn. (56-60)

Here Chaucer explicitly links authorial independence (his own "engyn") with political dissent and denies that he has any intention of sowing political discord by translating naked texts. Although Chaucer also makes a Lollard-like case for translating from Latin into English, he also identifies himself as politically submissive. The further identification of Richard II as the "lord of this langage" offers the hopeful gesture that the king will support the Lollards' translation project, and by implication, support as well Chaucer's own aims to translate old books as naked texts into English. In making Richard monarch of the English language, Chaucer also appears to support the Wycliffite political agenda for the separation of church and state, since the notion of Richard as "lord" of the language implies a separation of English government from the languages of French and Latin and the hegemonies they represented. A Wycliffite king would not only supplant the Pope as the head of the English church, he would also displace Latin with English as by Richard II and written in March of 1391," and the discovery after Richard's deposition in 1399 of a scroll belonging to Richard upon which were scrawled "magic incantations." Gervase Mathew, *The Court of Richard II* (London: John Murray, 1968) offers widespread evidence of European princes in the medieval period consulting their horoscopes before making political decisions. Chaucer's rejection of the horoscope offers yet another instance of where the poet differed with Richard II.
the language of Christianity in England. According to this reading, the Prologue to the Astrolabe treatise offers not only English as a competing language to Latin, it also suggests Richard as the “lord” of an English language no longer subservient to Latin.

Chaucer’s invitation to royal sponsorship of his treatise would not itself have represented much of a political threat, since, as John Bowers notes, Richard’s enthusiasm for geomancy and astronomy may explain why Chaucer wrote the treatise in the first place. However, the fact that in the Astrolabe treatise, Chaucer distances himself from the use of horoscopes suggests a point of emerging conflict between the poet and the king. There is not direct evidence that Chaucer wrote the Astrolabe treatise in response to a royal request. As the treatise’s Prologue indicates, Chaucer takes pains to pre-empt any suspicion that he wrote the treatise in defiance of the royal will. The Prologue strategically positions Chaucer as submissive towards the royal will at the same time as it also legitimates Chaucer’s freedom to write what he chooses without immediately coming under suspicion as a political threat. But would Richard be able to respond positively to Chaucer’s bid for authorial freedom? If Chaucer poses this question as still open-ended in the Prologue to the Astrolabe treatise, he offers a less than hopeful answer in the G Prologue to the Legend. The depiction of the God of Love as a severe adversary of independent translations, we get a sense of Chaucer’s fear that Lollard translation values and his extension of those values to secular texts would fall prey to Ricardian paranoia.

We can trace a similar trajectory of dashed hopes in Chaucer’s changing response to the daisy in the F and G Prologues. Within the daisy lurk two conflicting impulses:

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75 Bowers, Politics of Pearl, p. 115.
Chaucer’s native appreciation of the flower for its natural beauty, and the courtly and culturally imposed French evaluation of the daisy as a symbol of competing courtly factions. In terms of the latter, Chaucer characterizes himself as prone to the lure of the daisy and the conventions that surround it, but he also expresses a fondness for the daisy in its more naturalistic and English character. This tension suggests Chaucer’s grasp of the nascent quality of English literary sensibility. In order for Chaucer to invent himself as a fully English poet, he must also invent a distinctly English poetic style and outlook that cannot be attributed to any French originals. It is significant in this vein that Chaucer begins his mediation on the daisy with a very English walk in the countryside:

As I seyde erst, whan cometh is the May,
That in my bed there daweth me no day
That I nam up and walkeynge in the mede
To sen these floures agen the sonne sprede
Whan it ryseth by the morwe shene,
The longe day thus walkeynge in the grene. (G, 45-50)

In her classic study of medieval spring opening conventions, Rosemund Tuve writes that while the French tended to employ naturalistic detail as a mere backdrop for the courtly love theme, the English displayed a keen interest in scientific and naturalistic beauty for its own sake. Chaucer’s attraction to the daisy exhibits a characteristic English love of natural beauty that, although influenced by French literary habits, nevertheless strives to free itself from them. The daisy digression serves as a point of exchange between Chaucer as a French-influenced English poet, and Chaucer as a fully-fledged native poet

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no longer beholden to other more politically dominant languages. In this context
Chaucer’s use of the term “naked” announces Chaucer’s belief that English is just as
capable of achieving political and literary greatness as either French or Latin. As Helen
Phillips has noted, the Legend’s F Prologue features more space given to the celebration
of the daisy than the G Prologue, a change that further supports my contention that the G
Prologue exhibits a stronger or more resolved attempt to assert literary independence.
Chaucer’s implied connection between bipartisan praise for the daisy and his writing of
naked texts marks the G Prologue as an important statement of Chaucer authorial self-
conception. By contrast, the F Prologue apologizes for the daisy digression with the
gratuitous excuse that he can only write in a linear fashion. In the G Prologue Chaucer
excerpts this excuse and simply states that the French inspired cults of the flower and the
leaf have nothing at all to do with his authorial intentions. Chaucer tells his reader that in
place of the leaf and flower debate with its binary straightjacket or either/or
commitments, Chaucer’s subject will be “olde story, er swich strif was begonne.” (G, 89)
This statement evaluates both French literary exemplars and Ricardian politics as
disruptive of a nascent English literary corpus that Chaucer intends to help establish.
Grounded in his conviction that old books both precede and transcend politics, Chaucer
resists French influence by choosing to be bipartisan. Chaucer’s resolve that he will stick
to old stories that pre-date “swich strif” also suggests a desire on the poet’s part to escape
from the straightjacket of Ricardian politics after 1388. The strife at stake here may be
political, literary and even theological. The daisy digression acknowledges as the
immediate social reality of French cultural hegemony, but with the entrance of the God of
Love, French cultural dominance morphs into Ricardian paranoia and cultural tyranny.
The entrance of the angry God moves Chaucer from advocating a fairly obvious Lollard program of vernacular freedom to a penitential stance of writerly submission. Although in both Prologues the God of Love accuses Chaucer of heresy, only in the F Prologue does the God of Love reproach Chaucer for coming “ner my flour.” (F, 318) In the G Prologue the flower is entirely forgotten and the God of Love rebukes Chaucer for coming into his own presence:

“What doest how her
In my presence, and that so boldly?
For it were better worthi, trewely,
A worm to comen in my syght than thow.” (G, 242-45)

This difference focuses on the God of Love and his relationship with Chaucer as a translator. In the F Prologue, the emphasis, while similar, distances the poet from the God of Love by placing the daisy as the center of the dispute (the God of Love refers to the daisy as my “relyke”). The God of Love’s use of the term “relyke” coincides neatly with his earlier accusation of heresy. The veneration of relics was central to Lollard criticism. For example, the Lollard William Thorpe provides a typical Lollard response when he argues that if the various material objects connected to the crucifixion were to be worshipped (the nails, spear, crown, cross) then Judas lips should also be venerated as a “wondir gret relyk.” When the God of Love identifies the daisy as a “relyke” a possible connection is forged between the courtly debate of the flower and the leaf, and the theological debate between the orthodox clergy and the Lollards. Although Chaucer is not very forthcoming about precisely what aspect of the orthodox/Lollard debate the

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daisy signifies, it seems likely that the daisy represents the Eucharist. Chaucer’s earlier ambivalence in the debate between the flower and the leaf suggests that the poet has resisted taking sides, but that this resistance itself can be interpreted as heterodox. In the G Prologue the God of Love ignores the daisy and directly accuses Chaucer of not writing to the standard of the God of Love’s other servants: “My servaunts ben alle wyse and honourable.” (G, 247) In theological terms, this shift in emphasis suggests that the God of Love has reduced his conception of heresy from issues related to doctrine, such as the debate over the Eucharist, to whether the poet has sufficiently supported the god’s rule. This change implies a Chaucerian critique of the orthodox position with respect to transubstantiation. The G Prologue’s suppression of the daisy image exposes the god’s charge of heresy and the insistence upon the sacral value of the “relyk” as politically motivated.

In contrast with Maidstone’s Concordia, the G Prologue, even more than the F, draws attention to the personal nature of Richard II’s conflict with London. I am not suggesting that Chaucer ought to be solely identified with London in the G Prologue, but it is an interesting point of comparison that while Maidstone’s Concordia excuses penitent London in an apparently reconciliatory mode, Chaucer makes explicit the God of Love’s personal animosity towards those who fail to support him. As the God of Love says in both the F and G Prologues, Chaucer is not “able” as a poet because he “lettest folk to han devocyoun/ to serven me, and hodest it folye.” (G, 251-2) The G Prologue differs from the F, however, in the important respect that while in F the God of Love accuses Chaucer of preventing people from serving “Love,” in the G Prologue the God of Love—
in an even more vituperative and personal vein—claims that Chaucer’s translations hinder people from being able to “trust on me” (G, 253).

There is regression between the F and G to the extent that in the G Prologue the God of Love personalizes and thus politicizes all textual production. In the F Prologue the conflict centers over the daisy, or “Love” and Chaucer’s ambivalence towards the leaf and flower debate. In the G Prologue, the conflict degenerates into a more personal affair as the God of Love identifies able or good writing solely in terms of whether it aggrandizes his power; there is no cultural value beyond the God of Love’s lust for power. Caroline Barron has noted that Richard possessed a “very short temper.” He did not take kindly to advice; when Bishop Courtenay criticized the plot to murder John of Gaunt, the king attempted to kill the Bishop with a sword. As Barron comments

> Medieval kings were expected to take counsel with the magnates of the real, and such counsel was likely to involve both advice and criticism. Richard’s inability to listen to advice seriously undermined the authority he sought to establish. He behaved like a wayward teenager and was treated as such.

Barron’s analysis of Richard’s character largely confirms Chaucer’s depiction of the God of Love as a short-tempered and ill-mannered despot, amenable to really only one person, the queen. In creating the figure of the God of Love, Chaucer takes a huge political risk. And it is not surprising that at this juncture he meekly assumes the role of the penitent in dire need of a mediator or intercessor. Chaucer’s resistance to taking sides in the leaf and flower debate has mutated into a forced capitulation to the God of Love. The God of Love interprets Chaucer’s bipartisan stance as insubordination.

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In the G Prologue the God of Love takes issue not only with Chaucer's failure to write narratives that endorse the god's rule, he also objects to Chaucer's choice of narrative materials:

"Why noldest thow as wel [han] seyde goodnesse
Of women, as thow hast seyd wikednesse?
Was there no good mater in thy mynde,
Ne in alle thy bokes ne coudest thow nat fynde
Som story of wemen that were goode and trewe?" (G, 268-73)

This question, as imponderable as it is personal, raises a vital issue regarding the ethics of narrative production. What are the reasons behind an author's choice to write either positive or negative exempla? Which is more ethical as narrative, the negative stories of human moral failure or the positive accounts of human moral success? In the God of Love's case a further ethical dilemma obtains, since the God of Love's service itself entails a breach of Christian ethics in that it focuses exclusively on temporal love to the exclusion of the loved owed to God. Later, after Alceste has made her intercession on Chaucer's behalf, the poet attempts to justify his narrative choices by making explicit the ethical intent that informed his choice to narrate human and, in the case of Crisyde, feminine ethical failure:

"Ne a trewe lovero oghte me nat to blame
Thogh that I speke a fals lovero som shame.
They oughte rathere with me for to holde
For that I of Crisyde wrot of toldo,
Or of the Rose; what so myn auctore mente,
Algate, God wot, it was myn entente
To fortherere trouthe in love and it cheryce,
And to be war fro falsnesse and fro vice
By swich ensaumple: this was my meanynge.” (G, 456-64)

Chaucer’s decision to further truth in love by narrating “falsnesse” does not have its intended effect. According to the God of Love, Chaucer’s guilt consists in using negative exempla of failed lovers instead of the kind of positive narratives that would attract people to the God of Love’s service. As a monarchal figure, the God of Love naturally prefers narratives that enforce a politics of positive virtue in which the protagonist exemplifies ethical success. A topical explanation for the God of Love’s insistence that Chaucer write only positive feminine exempla may be found in Richard’s political strategy of honoring noble women with the robe of the Garter, a practice that Gillespie identifies as useful to Richard, since the rules for choosing female recipients were less restrictive than the rules for choosing males. This allowed Richard to secure male loyalty through honors bestowed upon wives:

“Richard was the first king to bestow such marks of honor upon women on an appreciable scale, and he remained the most prodigal monarch in his distribution of these robes until the practice was discontinued by Henry VIII.”

As a character, the God of Love also emerges directly from the Romance of the Rose, a text whose translation the God of Love clearly does not sanction. When the God of Love declares that Chaucer’s translation of the Rose a “heresy ageyns my lawe,” we are

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tempted to think that the God of Love merely opposed the rendering of a French text into English. But the heresy at issue might also have to do with the content of the *Rose* itself, a text that the God of Love may consider too critical of women. Alan Fletcher examines this issue in terms of whether the heresy is due to Chaucer having “produced a translation of the *Roman de la Rose* so transparent that no further apparatus of explanatory glosses is called for,” or if the “*Roman de la Rose* itself contains heresy against the God of Love’s Law?” Fletcher then surmises that if some of the “skeptical content” of Jean de Meun’s continuation of the *Rose* found its way into Chaucer’s translation, then it would seem likely that Chaucer’s heresy has to do with his failure to translate the *Rose* in such a way as to protect readers from that heretical content.\(^80\) Given Chaucer’s invention of the Legend’s God of Love as a fictional veil for a critical discussion of Richard II, it seems likely that the god’s reference to the *Rose* also functions as a veiled allusion to a more fundamental issue related to translation. That more vital issue becomes clear when the God of Love voices his disapproval of all negative *exempla*. According to the God of Love, Chaucer’s guilt consists in using negative *exempla* of failed lovers.

Chaucer’s statement that he intended to warn readers and lovers away from falseness and from vice supports only one side of Augustine’s rationale for exemplary narrative. Why does Chaucer prefer the negative story of human ethical failure and tragedy to the narrative of human ethical success? Can Chaucer’s negative *exempla* actually support societal development, or do they merely encourage a pessimistic outlook that defers any hope for lasting human happiness to the next life? In response to these questions, Chaucer had more than one medieval model to choose from. Margaret Kim writes that

\(^80\) Fletcher, “Chaucer the Heretic,” p. 69.
Thomas Aquinas' solution to the problem of moral reform was the implementation of absolute kingship, a political model that would naturally favor the positive *exemplum*. Similarly, Wyclif's political vision assumed a "strongly king-centered state as a prerequisite for reform." Alternatively, Augustine's political outlook doubted that monarchs could ever remedy the abject state of human depravity. Kim describes Augustine's negative politics in terms that could be equally descriptive of Chaucer's own stated reason for choosing to write negative examples of human frailty and vice:

For Augustine, political action and struggle cannot be systematically contained by autocracy but rather politics perpetually reinforces and makes us confront the inescapability of fallen nature. 

Augustine's emphasis on original sin mandates that Christian discourse err on the side of penitential of confessional narratives that identify the admission of human moral failure as preparatory to the infusion of divine grace. Christians who favor positive *exempla* take the risk of obscuring the facts of human sin. Chaucer's preference for narratives that feature human moral frailty suggests a moral pessimism reminiscent of Augustine. It also implies a politics of penance suspicious of both autocracy and the positive exemplary narrative that supports it.

The debate between the God of Love and Chaucer over exemplification had a medieval solution. The *Heroides* paradigm stipulated that compilers should balance the negative and positive *exempla* in their collections. Medieval commentators regarded Ovid's narration of tragic and fortunate lovers in the *Heroides* as evidence of the Roman poet's moral intentions, since both the negative and positive stories could be construed as

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supportive of marriage. Chaucer relied upon a glossed copy of the *Heroides* in his composition of the *Legend of Good Women*, but rather than appropriating the Ovidian paradigm, Chaucer, under pressure from the God of Love, tells only positive stories of good women as an apparent attempt to redress his previous mistake in translating negative stories in the *Rose* and in his *Troilus and Criseyde*. Chaucer and the God of Love both appear to resist the *Heroides* paradigm. The God of Love's politics of virtue implicitly rejects the paradigm on the grounds that, as the god puts it, good wives outnumber wicked wives by a ratio of ten to one. Chaucer rejects the paradigm on the grounds, also implied, that without negative stories readers will not be warned of the vice and falseness that characterizes human existence. In this respect the God of Love and Chaucer represent two radically different and perhaps even antagonistic political and literary visions, one exemplary and the other penitential.

A remarkably similar debate occurs between the cuckoo and the nightingale in Sir John Clanvowe's *Boke of Cupide*. As a member of the group that Walsingham called the "Lollard Knights," Clanvowe is notable for his authorship of two texts: the politically active *Boke of Cupide* and the puritanical tract, *The Two Ways*. Although Clanvowe died in 1391 prior to Richard's London re-entry pageant, there are literary and topical grounds for connecting the *Boke* with Maidstone's *Concordia* and Chaucer's *Legend*, since all three texts offer veiled criticisms of post-1388 Ricardian autocracy. In Clanvowe's *Boke*

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the critique takes the form of a debate between a very English bird, the cuckoo, and the more sophisticated and French nightingale. The dispute centers over the question as to the rightful rule of the “god of love” and the closely related issue regarding the propriety of plain English speech over the French intoned English of the nightingale that only a select few seem to be able to understand. The “lewede cukkow,” like Chaucer the lewd compiler in the Legend makes the case for songs that are “trewe and pleyn” as opposed to the nightingale’s obscure notes:

For my songe is bothe trewe and pleyn,
Al thogh I can not breke hit so in veyne,
As thou dost in thy throte, I wote new how.
And euery wight may vnderstonde me,
But, nyghtyngale, so may they not the,
For thou has mony a nyse, queynyte crie.  

Confronted with the cuckoo’s vernacular logic, the nightingale translates one of its foreign songs into an ardent and violent attack on those who disparage the God of Love:

When that I sey ‘ocy! ocy! iwisse,
Then mene I that I wolde rather wonder fayne
That alle tho wer shamefully slayne,
That menen oght ayen love amys.
And also, I wolde alle tho were dede,
That thence not her lyve in love to lede,

Richard II, whom the knight-poet had known closely throughout the king’s entire adolescence.”

For who that wol the God of Love not serve,
I dar wel say he is worthy for to sterve,
And for that skille ‘oey! oey!’ I grede. (Boke, 127-135)
The cuckoo, like Chaucer when he refuses to side with either the flower or the leaf,
rejects the God of Love’s autocratic rule:
“Ey!” quoth the cukkow, “this is a queynt lawe,
That eyther shal I love or elles by slaw.
But I forsake al suche companye,
For myn entente is neyther for to dye,
Ne, while I lyve, in love’s yoke to drawe. (Boke, 136-40)
Like Chaucer when faced with the strict binarism of Ricardian autocracy, the cuckoo
imagines an alternative life in which he functions autonomously from the God of Love.
Chaucer’s rejection of the leaf and flower debate parallels the cuckoo’s resistance to
either having to serve the God of Love or dying.

Much as Chaucer does in his Criseyde narrative, the cuckoo recites the pains and ills
of love, including its illusory language to make it seem more profitable than it really is:
“Nyglyngale, thou spekest wonder faire/ But, for all that, the soothe is the contreyre”
(Boke, 166-67). This line perhaps more than Chaucer’s indictment of tyranny in the
Legend, strikes directly at Richard’s exemplary politics. In a way not too dissimilar from
Maidstone’s critical use of the intercessory Anne, this line bluntly exposes the lie at the
heart of exemplary politics, namely, that human nature cannot support too many public
displays of superlative virtue. The cuckoo also makes reference to the god’s autocracy,
“ffor love hath no reson but his wille,” (Boke, 197) and further criticizes the god’s court
as berif of truth: “In this court ful selde trouthe avayleth,/ so dyuerse and willful ys he” (Boke, 204-05). Similar criticisms are made by the intercessory and advisory figure of Alceste in Chaucer’s Legend Prologues.\(^{85}\)

Clanvowe and Chaucer both characterize the God of Love politics terms of willfulness and arbitrary rule. But more importantly, these writers also focus especially upon the role of language in the maintenance of the god’s rule. The nightingale’s rather violent opposition to anyone who will not serve the god clearly parallels Legend’s God of Love’s nearly obscene verbal attack on Chaucer. Also, both poems represent dissent as suffering swift punitive responses. Chaucer’s case ends up being mitigated through the intercessory Alceste, while the cuckoo, although initially driven from tree to tree by a rock throwing narrator, later gets promised a hearing before Queen Anne at Woodstock. John Bowers notes a possible connection between Clanvowe’s parliament at Woodstock and the Merciless Parliament of 1388.\(^{86}\) Patterson observes that when the deliberative process shifts from Cupid to Woodstock and the Parliament presided over by Queen Anne Richard’s autocratic rule simply vanishes:

Cupid disappears from the poem as a figure of authority, replaced by a parliament constituted by carefully prescribed procedures and uncertain in its outcome, and

\(^{85}\) Lee Patterson, “Court Politics and the Invention of Literature,” *Culture and History 1350-1600: Essays on English Communities, Identities and Writing*, ed., David Aers (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1992), p. 11 compares Clanvowe’s hard-hitting indictment of Ricardian tyranny post 1388 with the articles of Richard’s deposition: “For him [the cuckoo] Cupid is nothing but a tyrant... this critique invokes the standard medieval definition— prominent throughout the Middle Ages— of the tyrant as a figure of angry self-indulgence, a ruler who abrogates the rule of law in favour of the ‘illegal power of the will,’ to cite one of the articles of Richard’s deposition.” Patterson also notes the generally accepted resemblance between the cuckoo criticism of Ricardian tyranny and Chaucer’s Alceste.

\(^{86}\) Bowers, “Three Readings of the Knight’s Tale,” p. 281.
held, moreover, before the Queen but with neither her authority nor participation—a gesture that not only excludes the King but limits the role of royalty per se in parliamentary deliberations.\textsuperscript{87}

In all three texts, Maidstone's, Clanvowe's and Chaucer's converge with respect to Richard's tyranny and Queen Anne's vital intercessory and advisory function. The implication, of course, is that the queen represents the only barrier between Richard and the full-blown tyranny.

Chaucer's royal advocate, Alceste, professes the poet's innocence in terms that support interpretive freedom. Alceste offers four different explanations for Chaucer's decision to write only in the negative mode. These range from poetical and political naivety to the rather ironic notion that Chaucer may have been commanded to write by some person of authority:

\begin{quote}
Therefor he wrot the Rose and ek Crisseyde
Of innocence, and nyste what he seyde.
Or hym was boden make thilke tweye
Of som persone, and durst it not with seye. (G, 344-47)
\end{quote}

Although Alceste appears to have little comprehension of the concept of translation as \textit{inventio}, the number of speculative explanations she marshals on Chaucer behalf models the kinds of reader responses that Chaucer's naked texts demand. As we might expect, none of Alceste's reasons for Chaucer's narrative choices are either confirmed or denied, but this hardly matters since by offering the God of Love a range of narrative choices, Alceste demonstrates the kind of narrative indeterminacy that will challenges political

\textsuperscript{87} Patterson, "Court Politics and the Invention of Literature," p. 12.
tyranny. The God of Love’s failure, like all autocrats and propagandists, is largely a failure of the imagination. At the same time that Alceste offers the god a range of narrative explanations, she also warns him that not every tale he hears at court is “gospel,” since “the god of love hereth many a tale yfeyned.” (G, 327) Some tale are true, others are not, but it is a king’s responsibility to hear them all and to sift out the true from the false: “It is no maystrye for a lord/ to dampen a man withoute answer or word” (G, 386-7). Alceste later contradicts this rule when she refuses to allow Chaucer to defend himself by offering is own reason for writing negative feminine exempla.

Alceste’s defense of Chaucer amounts to a plea not only for a more “merciable” and “tretable” disposition in the god (G, 396-7), but it also makes room for language as counter-narrative which, if suppressed, denotes tyranny. By suggesting that the God of Love has accepted as true false impressions regarding Chaucer’s motives, Alceste grafts to Richard’s politics a radical hermeneutic that constructs royal power in terms of the exercise of deliberation. Alceste admonishes the God of Love not to be like the “tyraunts of Lumbardye, that usen wilfulhed and tyrannye,” for he “that is king or lord is naturel” and must listen to his subjects’ “excusacyouns, and here compleyntes and petyciouns, in duewe tyme, whan they shal it profre” (G, 354-64). All versions of an event, person or an act must be first heard and interpreted before privileging a single point of view.

Chaucer’s Alceste redefines the lineaments of royal power in terms of interpretative skills: the ability to receive and interrogate more than a single version of events. Authority, as exemplified by Alceste, resists the monologic character of the exemplary mode with its transparent moralities and authoritative reduction of history to doctrine. The “natural” king must respond to nature— that is, he must acknowledge and attempt to
judge between various versions of reality. Ironically, as noted above, Alceste’s argument for narrative diversity does not extend to Chaucer being allowed to present to the god his reason for writing negative stories about women. Alceste stops short of proving Chaucer’s innocence or of allowing the god to hear Chaucer’s defense because to do so would amount to privileging a single explanation—the author’s. We must accept, as Chaucer does, that the cost of interpretive and political freedom is that truth cannot rule unopposed. Even when one’s own narrative work and reputation are misinterpreted, the drive for vindication must be deferred in order for the democratic interpretative process to run its course. Premature judgment regarding Chaucer’s character or his works has produced the crisis of reputation that the poet now suffers. Immediate vindication, however, would require a reflex of interpretative tyranny not unlike the god’s own autocratic preference for positive exempla. Thus, Alceste warns Chaucer to, “Lat be thy arguyng,” since the God of Love will not be over-ruled (G, 465-66). Chaucer will have to suffer indeterminacy in his own case as the price of his redemption as an author of naked texts. The “grace” of interpretive inclusion that Chaucer receives from the god stems from Alceste’s argument for narrative pluralism. It does not then follow that Chaucer can reverse Alceste’s argument by identifying himself as a narrative monad. This paradox is instructive to those who labor to discern whether Chaucer was a Lollard. Even if Chaucer wished to reveal his actual religious commitments, he could not do so without negating the principle of the naked text. Chaucer desires to put before the God of Love the true meaning behind his texts, the doctrine, as it were, of the world’s vice and brittleness as the same time that he wants to argue for interpretative freedom in his readers. This paradox does not really get resolved in the Legend’s prologues, it only gets
deferred to the *Canterbury Tales* where Chaucer’s Retraction appears to function yet again as an attempt on Chaucer’s part to defend his choice of narrative material. Yet once again, the tension between authorial concern and interpretative freedom fails to get fully resolved. In forbidding Chaucer to identify his authorial motives in court, as it were, Alceste preserves the sense of deferred justice and meaning that makes literature possible. There can be no final reading of Chaucer, his motives or his political loyalties without sacrificing his literary ambition to write naked texts. Chaucer must remain under suspicion. As an author he must make confession in the sense that he can only admit to his failure to fully anticipate or control his own texts. The relationship between the naked text and penance hinges on Chaucer’s willingness to resist the urge to self-justify. If Alceste were to allow Chaucer to justify himself, to offer up a positive and exemplary rationale for his writing, then both Chaucer and his naked texts would become clothed and thus resistant to interpretation.

Alceste’s argument for narrative inclusion readily accepts the penitential framework as a suitable analogy for interpretive freedom. The penitent figure is not self-justifying. Unlike the autocratic god, Chaucer’s naked text allows for a broad range of interpretive voices, none of which can claim the kind of self-justifying authority that would silence the others. Naked texts require naked authors, and at the conclusion of the *Legend*, Chaucer’s attempt at self-justification is terminated in favor of a long string of imposed positive legends or *exempla* that force the poet to clothe experience in political doctrine. Yet this final irony hints at the possibility that even positive *exempla* carry in them a negative evaluation of the male counterparts. Chaucer’s sequence of positive female role-models identifies female virtue as a byproduct of male vice. Indeed, in her
instructions regarding Chaucer’s literary penance, Alceste makes clear the negative fallout that accrues from writing only positive stories, since it will require that Chaucer not only glorify women but also “tell of false men that hem betrayen” (G, 476). This particular appropriation of the *Heroides* paradigm (female virtue balanced by male vice) leads to an account of Love’s service just as morally pessimistic as Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde* or his translation of the *Rose*.

The ineluctable logic created by both the god’s initial rejection of negative *exempla* and Chaucer’s penance of having to write positive *exempla* is that human ethical failure is everywhere. This logic of the inevitability of wickedness within all positive accounts of human history, especially when it comes to love, emerges clearly from within Chaucer’s depiction of good women. At the conclusion of the legend of Thisbe, Chaucer laments that “Of trewe men I fynde but fewe mo/ In alle my bokes, save this Piramus” (*Legend*, 917-8). In the legend of Dido, Chaucer similarly asks why women trust men, since they have so many “olde ensaumples” of male infidelity (*Legend*, 1256-9). The very fact that Chaucer is forced to write positive *exempla* as a kind of literary “penaunce” (G, 469) implies the artificial nature of the positive exemplary mode. We should not forget that Alceste employs a series of positive narrative hypotheses to justify Chaucer, none of which Chaucer confirms. Instead, the poet tries to make the argument that negative examples actually encourage devotion to the God of Love by warning lovers away from false lovers, a bit of reasoning that Alceste wisely terminates, since the god’s reign— like Richard II’s— depends upon suppressing the very inconstancy and temporal fragility that Chaucer’s negative stories warn against. It follows that self-justification or political autocracy requires an uninterrupted litany of positive stories that, by definition, clothe the
naked text with an authoritative commentary designed to suppress not only dissent, but also the reality of human vice. Negative *exempla*, by contrast, accumulate in ways that cast doubt on the integrity of human political endeavor to the point of questioning the legitimacy of all enterprises, including the writing of books. The two-edged sword of negative *exempla* is that negative portrayals tend to implicate all parties in a cloud of moral suspicion. Given this tendency, the God of Love tolerates only positive stories about women not just because courtly conventions require him to, but also because Ricardian politics was rebounding from the negative portrayal of Richard during the political crisis of 1388.

The analogy between the God of Love’s “law” and Richard’s attempt to suppress his 1388 humiliation beneath a stream of positive media recognizes in the negative a truth necessary for the production and survival of great literature, namely, that human moral and political endeavors invariably fall short of their own promise. In this sense, Chaucer’s role as a penitent in the F and G Prologues functions as a necessary foundation for his *Canterbury Tales*, a collection of stories that will itself fall short of Chaucer’s doctrinal intentions for it and once more relegate the poet to the role of the penitent. The literary penitent as a figure incapable of self-justification, in turn, supports the kind of narrative polysemy and interpretative freedom that a sense of personal failure inspires. Literary, political or even theological incorrectness makes interpretation possible: a poet who writes only positive stories that oversimplify the rugged terrain between human ideals and actual performance inspires no second reading.\textsuperscript{88} Alceste offers her various

\textsuperscript{88} In his opening comments on Clanvowe’s *Boke of Cupid*, Patterson, “Court Politics and the Invention of Literature,” p. 7, writes, “So many poets are so politically incorrect that
speculations for Chaucer political errors as a template for future readers of Chaucer and his books, yet she sharply warns against allowing even he poet to offer a singular explanation for his books. Ultimately, the penitent poet cannot concern himself with self-justification or align himself too closely with any particular political side. Penance is a discourse of interpretative freedom and self-abnegation, not interpretative closure and self-promotion. This uncomfortable tension between the politics of closure and ethical success and the politics of penance and ethical failure makes Chaucer’s 1390s works attractive to readers as texts that defy reductive interpretations. Reading Chaucer as we do from within a pluralistic and democratic society, Chaucer’s penitential pessimism can easily be mistaken for moral skepticism, irony or even cynicism. But this kind of response fails to take into account that for Chaucer in Ricardian England moral optimism represented political tyranny, and narrative closure with propagandistic attempts to harness all narrative to a single political will. Chaucer’s preference for negative exempla ultimately proves his religious commitment to an Augustinian and other worldly vision of the City of God. For Chaucer the only politics capable of resisting tyranny was a politics of penance supported by an equally penitential literature of human fallibility.

Questions might be raised as to why Chaucer would adopt a penitential role in the Legend prologues at the same time as he identifies with Lollard translation principles. The papal condemnation of Wyclif in 1382 specifically mentions as one of Wyclif’s heretical conclusions the view that, “if a man has been truly repentant, all external
confession is superfluous to him or useless.” The Lollard Knight Sir John Montague, at his death in 1400, refused to confess his sins to a priest, and Walsingham reports that in 1387 the Lollard Nicholas Hereford dissuaded a dying Lollard priest from making an oral confession. However, when under interrogation by archbishop Arundel in 1407, the Lollard William Thorpe allowed that for penitents who could not remember their sins or who were so ‘distroubed’ by a sin that they could not “voide” it, it was “ful nessessarie” that they obtain the “counseile of a good preest.” Yet Thorpe also sites the incident of an orthodox friar who preached that just as a sinner can begin a sinful life without any counsel except that of the devil, so a penitent could be “clene assoylid” without the counsel of any man. Arundel roundly denies that the church “appreueth” this “lore,” but the incident illustrates the extent to which both orthodox and Lollard priests might not fully support the church’s position on oracular confession. An intriguing aspect of the Thorpe trial records is that at no place do we find any mention that Thorpe held to a heterodox position regarding the Eucharist. It may be possible, as Hudson remarks, that Taylor’s views on the Eucharist were not heretical, a possibility that further underscores the eclectic nature of even later Lollardy. Clearly, Wyclif’s rejection of oracular confession did not necessarily entail a dismissal of the entire penitential process. The articulation of a link between Chaucer’s advocacy of the naked text and his penitence must remain tentative, but the naked text, like the naked penitent, assumes a process of discovery and renewed confession. On a purely doctrinal plane Lollardy and oracular

90 See Lollards and Their Influence, p. 84. Two Wycliffite Texts, p. 110.
91 Two Wycliffite Texts, p. 83.
92 Two Wycliffite Texts, p.
confession are opposed, but the penitential process and the production of naked texts both work against a hegemonic culture in which religious and secular authorities united to control both textual meaning and the means of salvation.
CHAPTER 3

CHAUCER'S LOLLARD SAINT

The possibility that Chaucer might have been a Lollard has not received widespread support in modern time. Critics have variously found the Lollard content in the Canterbury Tales insufficient to warrant a positive identification of Chaucer as a doctrinaire Lollard. Yet the question of Chaucer's relationship to Lollardy remains vital given that Chaucer embeds Lollard ideals, literary goals and even doctrinal innovations within both his Legend of Good Women and the Canterbury Tales. How we receive and evaluate Chaucer's relationship with Lollardy may ultimately tell us as much about our own prejudices as his, and even though this question will probably never receive a definitive answer, it remains central to our attempts to understand Chaucer's 1390's literary production.

93 See Lawrence Besserman, "Priest and Pope," "Sire and Madame:" Anachronistic Division and Social Conflict in Chaucer's Troilus," Studies in the Age of Chaucer, Vol. 23 (2001), p. 221. Besserman identifies Chaucer as one of the "self-making" men who "may have discovered in Lollardy's stress on self-salvation the religious security they were looking for." However, Besserman resists identifying Chaucer as an actual "card-carrying" Lollard. Similarly, Alan J. Fletcher, "Chaucer the Heretic," pp. 116-7, assesses a good deal of previously unremarked Lollard content in the Canterbury Tales and comes to the conclusion that Chaucer was theologically orthodox, a kind of "à la carte Lollard." Fletcher identifies three possible approaches to understanding Chaucer's relationship with Lollardy: first, he was a Lollard sympathizer, second, a "scrutineer of Lollardy," and third, a literary opportunist who found in Lollardy a convenient vehicle for his literary goals. In spite of the provocation of his article's title, Fletcher does not conclude that Chaucer was, indeed, a heretic.

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Lollard content is the primary concern of this chapter preparatory to my reading of Chaucer's Parson as a figure of combined Lollard and penitential values. Chaucer employs Lollard translation principles in the Legend to argue for a more open textuality as a concomitant to a more democratic political environment. But although the God of Love identifies Chaucer's translation of the Rose as heretical, a question remains as to whether Chaucer limited his serious engagement with Lollardy to its attractive literary ideals or if he went further to embrace, as well, its heterodoxies.

Any attempt to identify the presence of Lollard doctrines in Chaucer's narrative works has the potential of appearing to be an inversion of D.W. Robertson's attempt to find in Chaucer's Tales narrative confirmations of medieval orthodoxy. The Canterbury Tales reads, perhaps, more heterodox and blatantly heretical, but any decision to regard Chaucer as stolidly orthodox must contend with a formidable amount of Lollard content. It would be tempting to interpret Chaucer's Lollard content in the Tales as programmatic. But, as Alan Fletcher suggests, Chaucer's Lollardy is not very uniform, and frequently ensconced within orthodox genres. Yet the fact of Chaucer's Lollard content in the Tales means that we ought to reconsider the cozy alliance between medieval orthodoxy and modern secular humanism that for the last thirty years or so has suppressed considering Chaucer's Lollardy.

Critical resistance to identifying Chaucer as a Lollard may have its roots in Robertson's guiding assumption that great poets invariably reflect conservative values. Moreover, the Robertsonian exegetes' desire to deny any disharmony in the monolithic Christian culture and the New Critics' suppression of historical influences both may have
combined to make Chaucer seem either unremarkably orthodox, or conversely, transcendentally aesthetic. More recently, the post-modern Chaucer has emerged as socially subversive in his opposition to medieval cultural hegemonies. This too has contributed to a general sense that Chaucer’s religious commitments were unenthusiastically orthodox. The heretical Chaucer has yet to enjoy serious consideration not least because this identification would raise the uncomfortable prospect of a seriously religious Chaucer. A Lollard Chaucer represents the kind of poet that, culturally, we would find difficult to identify with. In our time the sectarian, the cult member, the iconoclast lack serious credibility. This may be the Chaucer we need still to confront.

The reluctance to take seriously the prospect of a heretical Chaucer may have much to do with the way in which the Parson’s Tale has become the touchstone of Chaucer’s religious identity. The apparent contradiction between the Parson’s Lollard profile as depicted in the Tale’s General Prologue and his seemingly orthodox penitential tale has made it difficult to assign to Chaucer a stable Lollard persona. At the same time this seeming contradiction has supported a critical consensus regarding Chaucer’s fundamental orthodoxy. The Parson’s Tale as perhaps suited our critical reluctance to acknowledge Chaucer’s heretical content. Most critics appear to prefer an orthodox and spiritually less energetic Chaucer to the kind of puritanical figure suggested by Chaucer’s Lollard Parson. As long as the enigmatic Parson remains the key figure for determining Chaucer’s relationship with Lollardy, we can avoid having to negotiate seriously with a Lollard Chaucer. Of course, a heretical Chaucer cannot become the only Chaucer, but he should at least be allowed to join the company of Chaucers now available to us.
The Lollard Chaucer also raises the contradiction of a tale-telling Lollard. Naturally we prefer to avoid contradictions in favor of consistent and, therefore, potentially reductive understandings of Chaucer. But the possibility exists that Chaucer intended to convey a sense of doctrinal contradiction as a testimony to his own religious short-comings. The contradictions we find within the Tales between Lollardy and orthodoxy may be essential to Chaucer's poetic enterprise in the 1390s, not because Chaucer prizes contradiction but because all human endeavors, even Wycliffite reformations, enact a series of contradictions between the ideal and the proposed actualization of those ideals. In other words, this contradiction between Chaucer as Lollard and Chaucer as orthodox may actually replicate what we have already seen in the Legend as a fundamental break between what the poet intended and what he can actually perform in terms of promoting doctrine. In this way Chaucer emerges from the Tales as politically incorrect from both the Lollard and the orthodox perspectives, as something of a Lollard milk-toast or coward, unable to face the full consequences of becoming a condemned heretic.\(^{95}\)

Chaucer alienates both sides to the extent that he borrows from each but never fully commits to either, at least not without putting into place a bulwark of narrative caveats that make clear his lack of faith in human initiatives, especially his own.

The Lollard implications of Chaucer's Second Nun's Tale have been much enhanced by Lynn Staley's account of the Tale's exploration of the relationship between politics

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\(^{95}\) Quite a number of the early Lollards recanted when brought to trial. Prominent supporters of Wyclif such as Nicholas Hereford, John Purvey, Philip Repingdon and John Aston all recanted their Wycliffite view when put under official pressure. See Anne Hudson, *Two Wycliffite Texts*, p. 110.
and spiritual authority. The Second Nun’s Tale’s reformist content also reflects a uniquely Chaucerian grafting of two Latin sources that retells the legend of St. Cecilia as a chilling harbinger of the fifteenth-century persecution of Lollards. Sherry Reames demonstrates that Chaucer appropriated two Latin sources for his translation: up to line 344 Chaucer translates the traditional version of the saint’s life found in the *Golden Legend*, but the remainder of his version relies upon a Franciscan version notable for its emphasis upon Cecilia’s polemical skills or, as Staley describes it, her “combativeness.”

Chaucer’s decision to rely upon the edgy Franciscan version for his translation of Cecilia’s trial scene may reflect his awareness of an emerging Lollard rhetoric of dissent in the face of increasing clerical censure. Although Lollard persecution was not yet visible over the horizon, when Chaucer’s legend of St. Cecilia was written the 1382 official condemnation of Wyclif’s heterodox views may have stimulated Chaucer to use the Cecilia’s legend to predict that the persecution of Lollards was inevitable. As Paul Strohm observes, the tone of official comments regarding Lollardy shifted dramatically between 1382 and the early 1390s:

> When the chronicler Knighton retrospectively composed his account of 1382; [a decade later] Lollards were identified by name as *secta nefanda*, observing tenets and educational practices that estrange them from the populace at large… this talk

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of uprooting and destruction came to typify the anti-Lollard discourse of the later 1380s and 1390s.\textsuperscript{98}

Such talk was largely confined to clerical sources, but in the wake of the panic over the 1395 \textit{Conclusions}, Richard compelled the Lollard knight Sir Richard Stury to recant and swear to stay clear of heresy under penalty of death. K.B. McFarlane notes that three of the Lollard Knights must have been friends of Chaucer and that Richard Stury must have known Chaucer well.\textsuperscript{99} It is also of interest that the French chronicler Froissart was a friend of Stury, attesting to the literary bent of the Lollard knights and further supporting the possibility that these knights formed an important part of Chaucer’s intended audience. Stury possessed a copy of the \textit{Romance of the Rose}, a fact that offers as well an interesting alignment of Lollardy, heresy, and the \textit{Rose} such as Chaucer constructs in his \textit{Legend}. As McFarlane remarks, the literacy of the Lollard knights was “exceptional.”

It seems likely that Richard II’s order that Stury recant affected Chaucer deeply. The royal branding of Stury as a heretic not only distanced one of Richard’s most trusted chamber knights, one whose service dated to the Black Prince, it may also have represented an attack on Chaucer’s own literary circle.

There is reason to suspect that Chaucer included his version of St. Cecilia in the \textit{Tales} as a somewhat veiled statement of support for Lollardy. As such it probably represents Chaucer most daring attempt to support the Lollard movement. What we cannot know for certain is whether Chaucer intended to support Lollard doctrine \textit{per se}, or if he was more interested in supporting Lollardy as a means of resistance against Ricardian

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\textsuperscript{98} Strohm, \textit{England’s Empty Throne}, p. 28.
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autocracy. As Paul Strohm explains, Richard’s willingness to co-operate with the clergy in the suppression of the Lollards forms the groundwork for Henry IV’s more programmatic crackdown beginning in the second year of his reign when William Sautre is burned at Smithfield. Chaucer did not live to witness or hear about the burning of the Lollard heretics, but he may have evaluated the 1382 Blackfriars Council and the 1395 royal prosecution of Stury as impending threats to both Lollardy and literacy— the two defining characteristics of Richard II’s Lollard knights, a group Chaucer could have perceived as the future of English letters, not necessarily as authors but as readers, men whose political, military, religious and cultural values most closely resembled the kind of open conception of literature that Chaucer hoped to promote in the Canterbury Tales.

Although Chaucer’s combative Cecilia derives largely from his Franciscan source—the Franciscans were, after all, no strangers to ecclesiastical inquisition— he makes a number of telling additions to his source that demonstrate a willingness to employ Lollard dissent as an alternative to orthodoxy. As Donald Howard argued, the Second Nun’s Tale initiates a progression in the Tales towards the anti-narrative and penitential bias of Chaucer’s Parson. Like an inverted image of Chaucer’s Parson whose apparent Lollardy conceals an orthodox tract on penance, Chaucer’s seemingly orthodox saint’s life discloses a radical attack on catholic ecclesiology and doctrine. In both cases the radical or heretical content of each figure or tale is mitigated by the presence of a consoling orthodoxy. For the critic the problem becomes one of deciding which discourse to privilege. My solution considers the possibility that Chaucer offers both

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heretical and orthodox discourses as viable only in opposition to each other. If pressured to settle for just a single discourse, it seems likely that Chaucer opts for penance. Penance acknowledges human frailty and therefore makes possible the kind of reflection, deliberation and reticence essential to literary as well as confessional discourses. But the Second Nun’s Tale does not require either Chaucer or his readers to choose between Lollardy and orthodoxy; instead it historicizes Lollardy as the medieval embodiment of the apostolic church and the medieval ecclesiology as the equivalent of pagan or repressive Rome. As a narrative slight of hand these affiliations make the either/or of Lollardy and orthodoxy obsolete, since the only thing the reader must choose between is paganism and Christianity. Lynn Staley has effectively demonstrated the Second Nun’s Tale Lollard content:

Cecilia’s apostolic poverty, the critique of the present-day church she implicitly offers, her aggressiveness and her preaching make her as threatening a figure as Wyclif. If the Parson’s dislike of swearing can cause Harry Bailey to smell a “Lollere” in the wind (II [B1] 1173), why does not the tale of Saint Cecilia create even more comment?¹⁰²

In response to her own question, Staley identifies Cecilia’s virginity and her hagiographical status as reasons for why readers do not sense her essential Wycliffism. As Staley concludes, the “indirect strategy” allowed Chaucer to “explore a set of problems” regarding secular authority. Staley insists that she is not aligning Chaucer

¹⁰² Staley, Chaucer and the Postures of Sanctity, p. 213.
with Lollardy, but rather that Chaucer “used his poetry to ask questions about urgent social issues that were “inevitably related to the politics of devotion or sanctity.”103 Although I agree with Staley’s identification of Wycliffite content in Chaucer’s version of the Cecilia legend, I am not persuaded that Chaucer should be protected from too close an affiliation with the Lollards. The notion that Chaucer embedded Lollard content into a saint’s life because he was asking questions or merely exploring social issues implies that Chaucer could not have Lollard sympathies even where he exhibits them. I would suggest that Chaucer’s Lollard content in the Second Nun’s Tale deserves more consideration as evidence of an actual political and religious strain in Chaucer’s poetry.

As a still emerging historical category, Lollardy carries with it a sense of narrow dogmatism that would seem to defy the kind of narrative polysemy that characterizes Chaucer’s naked texts. But his conception of Lollardy may be flawed to the extent that it treats as enigmatic rather than evidential facts such as Stury’s ownership of the Rose or Clanvowe’s composition of an ostensibly secular Boke of Cupide. As Anne Hudson has taught us, Lollardy was as much a literary movement as a doctrinal one. And although there is a tendency to regard a figure like Clanvowe as slightly schizophrenic in his literary tastes, there is also a strong possibility that the schizophrenia lies in us. After all, our frustration at Chaucer’s seemingly contradictory Lollard and orthodox values may implicate us in a kind of modern plot to isolate religion from all other aspects of life. A more fruitful inquiry may involve asking questions about what happens to a religious commitment when it engages with the whole of life, especially from a literary platform like the one espoused by Wycliffe and the Lollards. The Lollard knights, like Chaucer,

103 Staley, Chaucer and the Postures of Sanctity, p. 215-216.
were social and political as well as literary men. Their engagement with Lollardy should not be measured simply against the doctrinal grid of the kind imposed upon Lollards by their clerical detractors. It seems ironic that the present-day test of historical Lollardy should replicate the interpretative tools of the Inquisition as if Lollardy, when identified in a historical figure, automatically reduces that entity to a kind of doctrinal stick-figure.104

More fleshed-out examples of Lollardy have emerged in the figures of John Clanvowe and William Neville, the veritable “Castor and Pollux” of the Lollard movement.105 John Bowers writes of the remarkably close relationship between Clanvowe and Neville as dating from 1378, when both men gained entry into the royal household, until 1391 when the two friends died within the space of a few days of one another outside Constantinople. Bowers comments on the contrast between Clanvowe’s indictment of heterosexual misconduct in the Two Ways and his own “personal preference for homosocial bonding with a single male partner.”106 Bowers offers a persuasive account of Clanvowe as a Lollard knight that was as much a “purist in chivalric ideals as he was in religious practices.”107 It is instructive that the author of the pacifistic Two Ways, along with Neville, was engaged in military campaigns from 1388 until just before his death in 1391. The prospect of a Lollard knight actively fighting Christendom’s wars

104 On the problem of defining Lollardy, see Andrew E. Larsen, “Are all Lollards Lollards?” Lollards and their Influence, pp. 59-72. Larsen argues that “a complete picture of Lollard belief must base itself on a wider study of various records than simply a set of heresy trials…” but Larsen also cautions that there needs to be “a greater sense of the boundaries of the term “Lollard,” an awareness that in some cases modern scholars have cast the net too wide…” p. 72.
105 See K.B. McFarlane, The Lollard Knights, p. 197.
challenges the evaluation of Lollardy as an exclusively religious set of ideals. In this respect I differ with Larsen’s suggestion that a Lollard be defined as “someone in the period after 1377 who shares a significant number of beliefs associated with John Wyclif and his identifiable followers.” In the fourteenth century the term Lollard, although employed by orthodox opponents against Wycliffites, also functioned as a general category for all forms of medieval lay dissent from ecclesiastical norms, including the conspicuous display of lay piety. Perhaps a distinction should be made between Wycliffism and Lollardy to the extent that the Lollard tag could be applied indiscriminately to any person who was overtly pious. Fiona Somerset notes that “recent scholarship has emphasized that Lollards and Wycliffites are not really so indistinguishable,” but this claim does not, perhaps, fully acknowledge the rather loose applications of the term to persons as socially distant as Clanvowe and the remarkable Margery Kemp, a lay woman whose only crime seems to have been her obstreperous piety. The Clanvowe and Neville cases suggest Lollardy as an occasionally elastic category of religious idealism capable of accommodating more than a single kind of life, a religious orientation that could be yoked to even secular ideals like chivalry without an absolute sense of incongruity. It follows that Chaucer’s Parson as a curious blend of the Lollard and the orthodox may also serve as a more realistic template for late fourteenth century Lollardy, than a conception of Lollardy as antithetical to orthodoxy or as exclusively doctrinal in its outlook. Anne Hudson comments:

As is becoming increasingly evident in this area, simple binarism is not adequate: there is a vast range of material that shows some sympathy with viewpoints that

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are characteristic of Lollardy but are not peculiar to that sect, of knowledge of
Wycliffite positions without full agreement with them, of allusion (whether
mocking or not) to Lollard phraseology and idiom. Much analysis remains to be
done, much refinement of critical discernment to be achieved. ¹¹⁰

My reading of the Second Nun’s Tale attempts to account for the narrative’s Lollard
content in terms of a genuine Chaucerian commitment to Lollardy.¹¹¹ This does not
require a commitment to naming Chaucer a card-carrying Lollard. Chaucer’s
commitment to Lollardy, as communicated somewhat furtively through the means of an
orthodox saint’s life, suggests a serious if guarded interest. As I have argued thus far,
Chaucerian Lollardy need not be viewed as necessarily opposed to Chaucer’s penitential
persona, since both Lollardy and penance accommodate the Chaucerian literary project. I
do not mean to imply, however, that Chaucer used Lollardy for solely literary or political
purposes minus any interest in the Lollards’ doctrinal innovations. Lollard doctrine, after
all, was the result of Lollard production of an “open” biblical text and their relatively free
interpretation of the gospels.

¹¹⁰ Anne Hudson, “Preface,” *Lollards and Their Influence*, p. 8. Similarly, Somerset,
*Lollards and Their Influence*, p. 13, suggests that “we should reconsider our ideas about
the range of possible relationships between Lollard groups and the larger communities
within which they found themselves… Whereas literary scholars have recently tended to
believe that English literate culture was divided among Wycliffites and anti-Wycliffites… it seems likely instead… there was a wider noncombatant audience of
readers and writers knowledgeable about heresy, but neither engaged in its persecution,
nor (perhaps thanks to their relatively secure positions) vulnerable to reprisal for their
interest in it.”

¹¹¹ Nicholas Watson, *The Idea of the Vernacular: An Anthology of Middle English
Literary Theory 1280-1520*, eds., Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, Nicholas Watson, Andrew
Taylor and Ruth Evans (Pennsylvania and Exeter: Pennsylvania State University Press
and Exeter University Press, 1999), p. 346 claims that Chaucer had a more “detailed
interest” in Lollardy than most critics have been willing to acknowledge.
Chaucer's version of the Cecilia legend confronts not only the persecution of Lollards, but it also offers the reader a veritable Lollard Saint conspicuous for her rebuke of Roman paganism as an ancient counterpart anticipating medieval ecclesiology. It functions as a Wycliffite refutation of the worship of images and the doctrine of transubstantiation, it also challenges the medieval clergy's possession of temporal goods. As I will argue, the full extent of Chaucer's Lollard commitments in the Second Nun's Tale makes a very strong case for marking Chaucer more than a coincidental or casual observer of Lollardy.

In the course of the Tale, Cecilia is brought before a Roman judge, Almachius, in order to be interrogated. Almachius begins with the question, "What manner woman artow?" (VIII: 424) This question, put to both Chaucer and the Parson by the Host, parodies the inquisitional pattern of late-medieval heresy trials. It also compares the inquisitional examination of the heretic with the examination of the penitent by a confessor. The implication follows that both trials for heresy and oracular confessions only confer identity in response to the claim of absolute church authority: the heretic and the penitent alike must submit to church authority over their identities before they will be absolved from guilt. Politics, not doctrine, is the real motive underlying the question of personal identity. As Lee Patterson has remarked in his study of the Host's question as to Chaucer's identity—"What man artow?"—Chaucer purposely writes a literature that "insists upon its autonomy from both ideological programs and social appropriations."112 The obvious echo of the Host's interrogation of Chaucer in Almachius' question to Cecilia suggests that the heretic, like the penitent, offers an instance of remarkable

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personal freedom, not only the freedom that comes with death (the death-bed penitent and the heretic easily coalesce into a single figure) but also the freedom to speak preparatory to death. Chaucer may have been purposeful in this allusive enmeshing of heresy with penance, since penance emerges as more radical and textually liberating through this unusual combination.

In response to Almachius’ question as to her identity, Cecilia answers, “I am a gentil womman born” and in this response Cecilia starts a process that will inevitably find her guilty. By identifying herself solely in terms of her secular role in society (she is a noble woman) Cecilia forces Almachius to further expose the true motives for having her interrogated and tried. As Paul Beichner has commented, Chaucer basically devalues the legend’s exemplary thrust in favor of a dramatic portrayal of Cecilia as “contentious” and “belligerant” and Almachius as “obtuse” and “stupid.”113 Cecilia’s response suggests a Chaucerian evaluation of heresy as a category of criminal offense dismissive of the circumstances and motives that defined real heretics. In effect, by asserting her identity as a member of the Roman aristocracy, Cecilia forces Almachius to expose the charge of heresy as an artificial category.

In an attempt to steer the interrogation back to religion, Almachius rephrases his question by admitting that his real interest lies in Cecilia’s beliefs and practices. Here the category of the heretic is exposed as flawed to the extent that reduces the person to a discrete set of doctrinal issues. Cecilia responds by confronting Almachius with his blunder of trying to ask for two different things in a single question:

“I axe thee,” quod he, “though it thee greve,

Of thy religioun and of thy bileeve."

"Ye han bigonne your question folily,"

Quod she, "that wolden two answeres conclude

In o demand; ye axed lewedly." (VIII: 426-430)

Furthermore, with her claim to Roman nobility now aired in court, Cecilia establishes herself educated in her legal rights. The formula of the learned lay woman carries with it the immediate connotations of Lollardy as a heresy of the book. More pointedly, the Franciscan abridgement quotes Cecilia’s claim that Almachius has spoken “foolishly” because he has tried to elicit two answers \( \textit{responsiones} \) with a single question \( \textit{inquisitione} \). In his translation, Chaucer makes a crucial addition not found in the Latin source when he writes, “ye axed lewedly.” One could argue that by adding this phrase, Chaucer merely contextualizes in medieval terms the sense of the Latin—\textit{Interrogatio tua stultum sumpsit initium}—but no such reinforcement occurs in the Latin source.

Chaucer, the self-professed “lewed compiler,” identifies Almachius as lewd for his obvious failure to distinguish between two types of questions: the religious and the merely social. The lewd compiler effectively redefines lewdness through his translation as a duplicitous line of questioning in which the surface question conceals a strategy for making heresy define the entire person. Cecilia unmasks this ploy by telling Almachius that he lacks learning. In short, Cecilia in true Lollard fashion inverts the power dynamic by demonstrating a lack of learning in her inquisitor— it is now the interrogator who is lewd, not the heretic.
Cecilia’s implication of ignorance in her inquisitor gets fleshed out more when she calls attention to the limits of Almachius’ civil powers. In an attempt to break Cecilia down, Almachius resorts three times to intimidation:

“Ne takestow noon heede of my power?”...

“Ne woostow nat how fer my might may strecche?”...

“Han noght oure mighty princes to me yiven,
Ye, both power and auctoritee
To maken folk dyen or lyven?” (VIII, 435, 467, 470-471)

Almachius’ limited emphasis upon his temporal jurisdiction exposes him as less interested in his own power than in religion. In yet another display of mental acuity, Cecilia notes that while Almachius can take life, he cannot actually “maken folk... lyven,” a statement that calls attention both to the limits of temporal power and to the kind of distortion that takes place when religion and politics unite to enforce lay submission to clerical authority. Cecilia response heavily indicts a medieval ecclesiology whose insistence upon lay submission involved harnessing the secular arm of the law to kill those very persons that the church was instituted to save. As Cecilia tells Almachius:

But thou mayest seyn thy princes han thee

maked

Ministre of deeth, for it thou speke of mo,

Thou lyest, for thy power is ful naked.” (VIII, 484-486)

These lines emphasize that Almachius’ temporal power, like the medieval clergy’s, depended entirely upon secular enfranchisement. Furthermore, Cecilia’s application of the title “minister of deeth” exposes the degree to which the medieval clergy’s
assumption of secular power had corrupted it. One may also faintly detect a biting prediction of an ecclesiology keen to burn heretics while maintaining an exclusive right to the sacrament of penance and the office of absolving penitents. The incongruity between the church as an office of death and a conduit for spiritual life comes to the fore as Cecilia satirically hints at the mutually exclusive relationship between inquisition and redemptive ministry.

Cecilia’s statement that Almachius’ power is “ful naked” represents a distinct Chaucerian addition to the Latin source text. Where the Latin text reads videberis frustra menitus, Chaucer adds “for thy power is ful naked.” (VIII: 486) The emphasis upon naked power identifies Almachius as the human equivalent of Chaucer’s “naked text” in the Legend. In the immediate context of Cecilia’s trial, the term signifies the limitations of Almachius’ power. His authority is naked because he falsely claims that he can administer death as well as life. Almachius’ power as defined by Cecilia depends upon deception for its claim to legitimacy; when the deception is exposed, the power becomes transparent or naked. In this sense Almachius—like Chaucer’s naked text in the Legend—is a man fully open to interpretation and thus vulnerable to criticism. Cecilia demonstrates the power of Lollard exegesis free from political constraints such as glosses or commentaries to sift the true from the false.

The most striking evidence of Lollard sympathy in the Second Nun’s Tale occurs when Cecilia rebukes the pagan Almachius for his worship of images. Here Chaucer echoes specific Lollard principles regarding both the eucharist and the church’s use of sacral images in worship. The rebuke starts with a straightforward appeal to common sense:

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“Ther lakketh no thing to thyne outer yen
That thou n’art blynd; for thing that we seen alle
That it is stone— that men may wel espyen—
That ilke stone a god thow wilt it calle.
I rede thee, lat thyn hand upon it falle
And taste it wel, and stoon thou shalt it fynde,
Syn that thou seest nat with thyne eyen blynde…
For communly men woot it wel overall
That mighty God is in hevenes hey;
And thise ymages, wel thou mayst espie,
To thee ne to himself mowen noght profite,
For in effect they been nat worth a myte.” (VIII, 498-511)

Initially Chaucer sticks to his Latin source with the notable exception of his use of the
epithets, “a lewed officer and a veyn justice.” Again, Chaucer deploys the category of
the lewd to reinforce the readers’ sense that it is the inquisitor who lacks education, not
the heretic. Specifically, Chaucer has reconfigured lewd as the province of the
inquisitors whose authority rests on political rather than spiritual, ethical or intellectual
grounds.

Cecilia’s attack on idol-worship is predicated upon Almachius’ tendency to confuse
accident with substance. When moved into the medieval context, her rebuke of
Almachius’ idolatry evaluates the Lollard opposition to transubstantiation as theoretically
the same as the Lollard’s opposition to the use of images in worship. Paul Strohm
observes:
From its inception, debate over the eucharist was inseparable from considerations of political power. In its late fourteenth-century realization, the church and the secular arm would employ the relation between the substance of Christ’s body and the accident of bread as the crucial litmus by which the errant Lollard was to be separated from the orthodox fold.114

Ironically, Cecilia identifies the confusion of substance and accident inherent to the doctrine of transubstantiation to identify the common sense error of Almachius’ pagan idolatry. Chaucer makes seemingly minor but very telling changes to his Latin source that critique the medieval ecclesiology as equivalent to the pagan persecutors of Christianity in apostolic times. Chaucer’s translation recounts Cecilia telling Almachius to reach out his hand and “taste” the stone idol in order to ascertain its true substance as mere “stoon.” The Latin source reads differently as it quotes Cecilia as commanding Almachius to only “touch” the stone with his hand; there is no suggestion of a taste-test (Mitte manum tuam et tangendo nosce saxum esse si videndo non Nosti). Significance must accrue from Chaucer’s decision to translate tangendo as “taste” given the context of the line in question. Moreover, Chaucer makes another key addition to his source when he describes Cecilia as telling Almachius not only to reach out his hand and “taste the stone, but also that he should taste it “wel.” The Latin text omits any reference to either tasting the stone (how would Almachius taste the stone with his hand?) or to tasting it well, omissions that further underscore a narrative argument in Chaucer’s version against transubstantiation, since anyone who tastes or touches the host during Mass must conclude that it is in fact material bread and not the actual body of Christ.

Cecilia’s taste-test implies a more radical position on the eucharist than the view held by Wyclif himself. As Anne Hudson explains, Wyclif generally affirmed the real presence while also denying that the host actually became the body of Christ. For Wyclif the issue had less to do with substantial change than with symbolic value. Hudson cites Wyclif’s analogy of a man looking at a statue to demonstrate Wyclif’s primary interest in the host’s symbolic function. Just as a man regards a statue more for its representational power than for its material substance, even so the eucharist’s function is to represent the atonement. The radical denial of the real presence did, however, characterize some of Wyclif’s followers. Chaucer’s incorporation of the more radical Lollard denial of transubstantiation in the Second Nun’s Tale suggests a serious interrogation of orthodox doctrine within the very heart of an exemplary genre. Chaucer’s additions to his source accuse medieval ecclesiastical officials of paganism to the extent that, like Almachius, they have failed to pass the taste-test with respect to both images and the true substance of the host. As the Lollard translator of Wyclif’s De Officio Regis claims, “witte stondis not in langage but in groudynge of treuthe.” The truth in this instance emerges through an open translation of the Latin that makes significant additions to the original text in ways that manifest a truth intrinsic to the Latin account but not present in its actual language.

Given his choice to translate tangendo as “taste” rather than “touch” as the Latin text requires, Chaucer produces a vernacular version of the Cecilia legend that identifies Lollardy as truly participating in the historical continuum of true orthodoxy. Admittedly,

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115 Hudson, Premature Reformation, p. 282.
116 Hudson, Selections, p. 9.
117 Hudson, Selections, p. 127.
the fact of Almachius’ paganism somewhat frustrates the parallel between the ancient
Roman’s persecution of Christians and the church’s persecution of Lollards. Similarly,
the resemblances between Cecilia and the Lollards must contend with the fact that in both
the Latin source and in Chaucer’s translation the pope clearly side with Cecilia. But at
the conclusion of the Second Nun’s Tale, while Chaucer faithfully translates the Latin
text’s statement that Cecilia requested that Pope Urban erect a church over her grave,
Chaucer does not translate the Latin text’s statement that Cecilia wished to dedicate her
house I perpetuity to the ownership of the church. Lynn Staley does not specifically note
this difference between Chaucer’s version and his Latin original, but she does observe
that the legend’s ending raises a host of issues:

   It is by her simple act of benefaction that Cecilia initiates a process of increasing
   complexity, a process that Wyclif and others would decry in the gift of
   Constantine... Urban, in fact, was credited with being the first pope to take rents
   and temporal possessions for the church, which before that time had existed in
   apostolic poverty... where most versions of the life of Saint Cecilia end by stating
   the date of her martyrdom and asking the saint to intercede for the audience,
   Chaucer ends a tale of clarity with a decidedly muddy detail.118

However, a close comparison of Chaucer’s ending with that of his Latin source reveals a
number of crucial additions and excerptions that clarify the Lollard thrust of the Tale’s
ending. The Latin text’s conclusion reads as follows:

   Tunc sanctus Urbanus corpus eius auferens cum diaconibus nocte sepelivit eam
   inter colleges suos episcopos, ubi omnes sunt confessors et martyres collacti.

Domum autem eius I eternum nomini sancta ecclesie consecravit, in qua beneficia Domini exuberant ad memoriam Sancta Cecile usque in hodiernum diem.

Then Saint Urban with his deacons removed her body and buried it by night among his associates, the bishops, where all the confessors and martyrs were placed. He also dedicated her house in perpetuity to the ownership of holy church and it is filled with blessings of the Lord, in memory of Saint Cecilia, down to the present day.¹¹⁹

Chaucer follows his Latin source verbatim until he gets to the matter of church ownership of Cecilia’s house, now church:

And ham yaf hir moebles and hir thing,
And to the Pope Urban betook hem tho,
And seyde, “I axed this of hevene kyng,
To han respit thre dayes and namo
To recomende to yow, er that I go,
Thise soules, lo, and tha I myghte do werche
Heere of my hous perpetually a cherche.”

Seint Urban with his deknes prively
The body fette and buryed it by nyghte
Among hisothere seintes honestly.
Hir hous the chirche of Seint Cecilie hight;
Seinte Urban halwed it, as wel he myghte;
In which, into this day, in noble wyse,

¹¹⁹ Sources and Analogues, p. 527, 210-214.
Chaucer follows his Latin source verbatim until he gets to the matter of church ownership of Cecilia’s house, now church:

And harn yaf hir moebles and hir thing,
And to the Pope Urban betook hem tho,
And seyde, “I axed this of hevene kyng,
To han respit thre dayes and namo
To recomende to yow, er that I go,
Thise soules, lo, and tha I myghte do werche
Heere of my hous perpetually a cherche.”
Seinte Urban with his deknes privelly
The body fette and buryed it by nyghte
Among hisothere seintes honestly.
Hir hous the chirche of Seint Cecilie hight;
Seinte Urban halwed it, as wel he myghte;
In which, into this day, in noble wyse,
Men doon to Crist and to his seint servyse. (VIII, 540-551)

Chaucer’s translation erases the Latin text’s clear reference to church ownership of Cecilia’s home and substitutes the line, “Seinte Urban halwed it, as he wel myghte.” As a fellow saint, Urban sanctifies the home as a church, but in Chaucer’s text there is absolutely no hint of church ownership. The line excerpted from Chaucer’s translation reads as follows: Domum autem eius in eternam nomini sancta ecclesi consecravit. The word nominee signifies “name” as in a legal title or deed. A similar construction is used by the Latin text in line 209 when Cecilia announces her dedication of “this house of
mine in perpetuity to the ownership of the church— *et hanc domum meam in eternum ecclesie nomini consecraem*— a line Chaucer also cuts from his version, replacing it with, “and that I myghte do werche/ Heere of myn hous perpetually a cherche.” (VIII, 209) by excerpting both of these Latin lines that attest to church ownership, Chaucer makes a clear demarcation between the Lollards’ campaign to strip the clergy of its temporal endowments and the orthodox insistence that such possessions were theirs by right. Rather than introducing a “muddy detail” as Staley claims, Chaucer’s ending clearly redistributes church ownership from the papacy or clergy to the laity as those who worship in Cecilia’s church: “in whiche, into this day, in noble wyse,/ Men doon to Crist and to his seynt servyse.” The concept of perpetuity gets shifted from ecclesiastical ownership to individual acts of worship. The Latin text explicitly limits the concept of perpetuity to the clergy’s ownership of the site whereas Chaucer’s translation limits the concept of perpetuity to those who do noble “servyse.” Whether this can be construed as clear support for Wyclif political views is open to debate, but in stressing noble service over perpetual ownership Chaucer only narrowly avoids siding with the Donatist view that only a righteous person has true spiritual authority.  

The shift in emphasis in Chaucer’s version from ownership to “servyse” implies a Wycliffian vision of a clergy stripped of its temporal possessions, a church belonging not to those who claim exclusive rights to the *nomen* or deed of ownership but rather to those who do service in “noble wyse.” Of course Chaucer concept of ownership, if indeed it can be termed such, departs from Wyclif’s political map in that it does not indicate a shift

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of church ownership from clergy to king, but rather it emphasizes worship and devotion to the implied exclusion of any concern over who actually owns Cecilia’s church.\textsuperscript{121}

The changes in Chaucer’s version of the St. Cecilia legend indicate a poet supportive of Lollard doctrine yet also wary of Lollardy’s own potential for becoming embroiled in politics. Chaucer’s Lollard content in the Second Nun’s Tale conspicuously avoids confirming the concept of ownership found in the Latin source text in a manner that tacitly warns Lollards against falling prey to the very abuses that it criticized in the clergy. At the same time the concinnity of Chaucer’s “servyse” ending as a coda to Cecilia’s taste-test identifies the Second Nun’s Tale as a turning point in the \textit{Canterbury Tales}. As Staley queries, “if the Parson’s dislike of swearing can cause Harry Bailey to smell a Lollere in the wind (II, 1173), why does not the tale of Saint Cecilia create even more comment?”\textsuperscript{122} Staley, however, seems reluctant to pursue fully the implications of her own question.

Critical reluctance to identify the Second Nun’s Tale as a Lollard text has much to do with the hagiographical status of the narrative. One must consider why Chaucer would choose to place radical Lollard values within an orthodox saint’s life. The clash between the Cecilia legend and Chaucer’s Lollard re-writing of it can be understood perhaps best in light of the cultic figure’s iconic status. Thomas Heffernan observes:

The potential cultic status of these texts marks, I believe, a major difference between Christian sacred biography, its Greco-Roman –-Semitic ancestors, and the

\textsuperscript{121} David Aers, \textit{Faith, Ethics and Church}, p. 38-39 argues that Chaucer’s Clerks’ Tale depicts a world according to Wyclif, a world without the medieval church. As Aer’s puts it, in the Clerk’s Tale Chaucer has “imagined absences, imagined the consequences for Christianity of a certain withering away of the traditional church without feeling obliged to imagine a Wycliffite alternative.”

\textsuperscript{122} Lynn Staley, “Postures of Sanctity,” p. 213.
Renaissance biography which followed it. The text of the Christian saint’s life is meant to serve two audiences, not only the present, temporal one but the divine as well, for the lives of the saints are meant to reflect honor and glory to God. The medieval sacred biographer and the community interact and the fruit of this labor establishes what I call the text’s iconicity.\(^{123}\)

The interface between the Tale’s orthodox demeanor and its somewhat veiled Lollard content lies in the Tale’s claim that Lollardy is the inheritor of true, orthodox Christian practice and belief. Chaucer’s version rewrites cultic history by denying church ownership in favor of authentic worship. The papacy’s sacral authority is limited to the act of sacralization, subsequent ownership of Cecilia’s church by the papacy is tacitly denied. As a positive exemplum, Chaucer’s version contains a negative or perhaps horatory element that identifies the medieval church as the equivalent of pagan Rome—a gesture that implies support for the Lollard identification of the papacy as the anti-Christ.\(^ {124}\)

In this respect Chaucer achieves the exemplary ideal in the Second Nun’s Tale of balancing his narrative depiction of what Heffernan refers to as “not quite a demi-god: in relation to the reader. As Heffernan notes, if the sacred biography is “weighted too far toward the supernatural we lose the man, while if the exemplary is underemphasized, we end up without our saint.”\(^ {125}\) Chaucer’s ending clearly supports the Augustinian ideal that the saint’s life should inspire holiness. Cecilia’s church achieves that goal to the


\(^{125}\) Heffernan, *Sacred Biography*, p. 30.
extent that it inspires “servyse” to Christ. Chaucer does not allow, however, that implication that the saint’s life merely serves to underwrite clerical ownership of property. Instead, as an able and combative Christian martyr and saint, Chaucer’s Cecilia actually models an iconic version of Lollard resistance within the inquisitional process.

Chaucer’s version of the legend also depicts medieval ecclesiology as a negative exemplum with its political genesis firmly situated in pagan Rome, not the apostolic church.

The status of Chaucer’s Second Nun’s Tale as a serious indication of Chaucerian Lollard commitments also finds support in the Tale’s Prologue which functions itself as a autobiographical account of the spiritual origins of Chaucer’s translation. The Prologue begins with a brief homily against “ydelnesse” in which the devil is represented as hunting down idle Christians whose only activity in life consists of sleeping, eating and drinking (VIII, 20). In order to escape his own proclivity towards the slothful life, Chaucer (and the Second Nun) refer to his translation as evidence of his “faithful bisynesse” as he tries to secure his salvation through writing, since ‘feith is deed withouten werkis” (VIII, 64). Chaucer actually addresses his translation directly to St. Cecilia herself:

I have heer done my faithful bisynesse
After the legende in translacioun
Right of thy glorious lif and passioun,
Thou with they gerland wroght with rose and
Lilie—
Thee meene I, mayde and martyr, Seint Cecilie. (VIII, 24-28)
Chaucer makes equally clear that his intention to "werke" requires the assistance of divine aid:

Now help, thow meeke and blissful faire mayde,
Me, flemed wrecche, in this desert of galle…
Be myn advocate in that heighe place…
And of they light my soule in prison lighte,
That troubled is by the contagioun
Of my body, and also by the wighte
Of erthely lust and fals affecioun;
O havene of refut, O salvacioun
Of hem that been in sorwe in distresse,
Now help, for to my werk I wol me dresse. (VIII, 57-77)

Unlike his Retraction, this prayer precedes Chaucer’s literary work instead of following it. As Donald Howard remarks, the previous tale-telling of the Canterbury Tales seriously called into question by Chaucer’s version of the Cecilia legend. As Chaucer states in the Prologue, Cecilia is the pre-imminent "Ensample of good wise werkes alle" (VIII, 105). James Dean argues that the Nun’s Prologue with its critique of idelness initiates the closing down sequence of the entire Tales project. We can mark the Second Nun’s Prologue and her Tale as a fairly obvious transition from play to earnest, a precursor to the Parson’s Tale and the Retraction. The Prologue’s sequential order of prayer before narrative is markedly absent from the statement of Chaucer’s narrative

procedure as expressed in the *Tales’* General Prologue. The purely temporal rationale of reporting what he hears is displaced by a spiritual and exemplary motive that demands divine aid and, intercession. Chaucer’s prayer to the Virgin to be his “advocate” resonates with the role of Alceste in the *Legend of Good Women* and signals to the reader that what follows is more than just a tale.

Chaucer’s reference to himself as a “flemed wrecche” in the “desert of galle” also suggests a historical correspondence with the periods of either 1386 or 1391, both years in which Chaucer found himself without employment. Chaucer resigned from the customs office in 1386, and the “desert of galle” could refer to the imposed rule of the Merciless Parliament that lasted until Richard II resumed his regality on May 3, 1389. Given the inclusion of Cecilia’s life in the catalogue of Chaucer’s works in the *Legend of Good Women*, the desert of gall reference could fit to the period 1386-1389. Regardless of how one chooses to read the metaphor, desert of gall, the crisis years of the late 1380s to the early 1390s drastically altered Chaucer’s conception of himself as an author. Like the Retraction, the authorial voice in the Second Nun’s Tale Prologue addresses the problem of authorial fallibility exclusively in terms of spiritual values. As with Chaucer’s Parson, Cecilia represents a spiritual ideal that Chaucer translates in an act of faith, in an attempt to fulfill “al oure intente” (VIII, 6). Chaucer identifies translation or writing as a category of good works for the reason that it makes the saint’s life available to others. But can such an act of translation be considered the equivalent of actual good deeds? Has Chaucer performed a kind of writer’s slight of hand when he foists upon the reader his assumption that writing is a species of faithful busyness? Is Chaucer’s writing, itself, adequate enough in an ethical sense to quality as an exemplary act of virtue?
These questions may receive at least partial answers in the Prologue’s opening homily on idleness. Sloth is defined by Chaucer as a spiritual state of non-productivity, a way of life marked by conspicuous consumption, not by vital production. Chaucer identifies his translation of Cecilia’s life as the means whereby he will make a drastic shift from sloth to busyness, but can writing about an exemplary figure’s life really be anything more than an extension of Chaucer’s felt inability do anything actual? Can writing about a saint be viewed as the moral or spiritual equivalent of emulating a saint? Or does Chaucer perpetrate the writerly condition of habituated vicariousness, a condition familiar to readers of the early Chaucer in the courtly tradition. The suspicion arises that in the Second Nun’s Prologue Chaucer could be mocking himself. There might be a subtle contrast between Chaucer’s faithful busyness of translation, and Cecilia’s emphatically active virtues. Can a vicarious translating of a saint’s life or a vicarious reading of that translation amount to anything more than a second-hand illusion of ethical performance? It seems ironic that a poet beset with the temptations peculiar to the idle would choose as a remedy to translate the life of a saint particularly active in her virtues. The contrast between Chaucer’s “faithful bisynesse” and Cecilia, “bisy evere in good werkynge” (VIII, 24,116), cannot be avoided. The question then follows: what is the difference between a person who is ‘bisy… in good werkynge” and a poet who is faithful to “bisynesse?” Chaucer is merely busy, and faithful in his busyness, the saint is busy in good works. Although Chaucer’s translation appears to participate fully in the exemplary orthodox mode, its identification of early Christianity with Lollardy implies a contrary motive, a Chaucerian anxiety regarding the religious and ethical utility of any kind of busyness that merely reports. The Parson, as the General Prologue comments, first
“wroughte” and “afterward he taughte,’ and ethical progression that interrogates the exemplary standard of teaching or writing and producing exempla as a stimulus to good deeds or even as a possible substitute kind of virtuous action. This interrogation of the exemplary mode also works through Chaucer’s translation of the Cecilia legend in the way that it identifies the medieval clergy’s use of exempla as a form of idleness since exempla easily inspire admiration at the expense of imitation.

Close on the heels of the Second Nun’s Tale, the Canon’s Tale critically assesses the art of medieval alchemy as a craft that never actually produces any tangible results. Alchemy and the writing of exempla both excite admiration, longing and a desire to experience the kind of transformations that both genres promise, but neither seem to be able to perfect the transforming mechanism. As Chaucer’s Yeoman says:

This cursed craft whoso wole exercise,

He shal no good han that hym may suffise,

For al the good he spendeth thereaboute

He lese shal… (VIII, 830-833)

Within the immediate aftermath of the Second Nun’s Tale, alchemy becomes a potential metaphor for any kind of discourse that fails to get beyond itself. Chaucer’s concept of translation as a kind of “faithful bisynesse” as opposed to an actual “good work” raises the possibility that exemplary discourse leads nowhere. The Canon Yeoman remarks upon how the alchemist’s rhetoric “exciteth oother folk” and how the use of various “clergical” and “quentye” terms make the practioner “semen wonde wise” (VIII, 744-752). Yet in spite of the labor that the Alchemist’s language produces and the promise it inspires, “noght helpeth us; oure labour is in veyn.” (VIII, 777)
The prospect of a life devoted to perfecting a craft that proves useless in the end not only haunts the Canon Yeoman but also troubles the Manciple. The Manciple’s fable of the tell-tale bird interrogates the role of the moralist or reformer specifically, a role that Chaucer seems to be occupying, at least provisionally, through his translation of the Cecilia legend. The Manciple also remarks how language fails to effect the desired results. In the case of the Manciple’s fable, the loyal informer and moralist might think to be rewarded for telling Phebus of his wife’s infidelity, but the opposite result ensues when Phebus, after killing his wife, turns upon the informer and brands him a “traitour” (IX, 271) This narrative reversal also informs Chaucer’s Man of Law’s Epilogue, where the Host also brands the Parson a Lollard when the Parson confronts the Host with his sinful swearing. In both these narrative incidents, the truth-bearer becomes the criminal figure, as it were. After killing his wife, Phebus regards her as innocent and the crow as guilty for telling a “false tale” (IX, 293) This reversal is not based upon any new evidence or a reappraisal of the crow’s motives. It stems directly from Phebus’ regret for having killed his wife hastily and in anger, a sin that he thinks to expunge by making the crow the cause of his own rash temper. It is the crow, the narrator of human fallibility, who will carry in his person the marks of the villain. This narrative evaluation of the political risks inherent to narrating human evil finds its narrative inception in Chaucer’s *Legend of Good Women* where the God of Love chastises the poet for writing ill of women.

If, as I have suggested, the Second Nun’s Tale offers the most committed example of Chaucer’s Lollard opinion, its Prologue, in conjunction with the tales that immediately follow the Second Nun’s Tale, all question the advisability of taking on the mantle of the
reformer. The Prologue to the Second Nun’s Tale as well as the Canon Yeoman’s and Manciple’s tales raise a constellation of doubt, not with respect to Lollard doctrine, but to the problem of textual outcomes and Chaucer’s worry that even if his narratives do stimulate actual concrete responses, how can he be certain that those actions will be along the lines that his text intended. Lollardy may be true, unlike alchemy, but can Chaucer afford to ignore the sorts of liabilities, both personal, human and societal, that come along with the reformer’s territory? Is the role of critic and polemicist tantamount to doing good works, or does the reformer, like his orthodox opponent, too easily confuse polemics and truth with actual good deeds? These questions may well lead to Chaucer’s invention of the Parson, a reworking in character of the Lollard values of Chaucer’s Cecilia legend that addresses the problems raised by translating an orthodox saint into a Lollard icon. These problems force Chaucer, yet again, to defer the promise of Lollard reform in favor of the immediate responsibility of penitence. Perhaps the reason that Chaucer yokes Lollardy to penitence in the figure of the Parson and at the conclusion of his Tales has much to do with Chaucer’s pessimistic view of human nature. Without Lollardy Chaucer cannot achieve the political autonomy he requires, but without penance that same Lollard autonomy leads to the moral impasse of never being able to get beyond the critique or exposure of societal wrongs to the doing of any actual good deeds. It is interesting in this respect that the Parson’s idealized Lollard identity does not appear to survive beyond his description in the General Prologue. Once immersed within the world of the actual pilgrimage the Parson’s Lollardy necessarily changes. It is not that he abandon’s his beliefs entirely, or that he becomes a blatant hypocrite, rather the Parson adjusts his ideals to the situation he finds himself in, a change that either speaks to the
impossible nature of the entire Wycliffian enterprise or one that suggests the necessity of penitence for both parties, Lollard and orthodox.

CHAPTER 4

CHAUCER'S RETRACTION AND PENITENTIAL STUDY

Throughout the 1390s, Chaucer continued to write and work within the secular milieu of Richard's court. If we take into account texts such as the Treatise of the Astrolabe and the Equatorie of the Planets, it becomes evident that Chaucer shared the court's interest in astronomy. But during this same period, Chaucer probably also translated Innocent III's De Miseria Condicionis Humane, now lost, and the Parson's penitential treatise,

See Derek Pearsall, The Life of Chaucer, p. 217.
texts that specifically transcend localized influences to target the universal facts of
original sin and the prospect of the afterlife. These four texts, evenly divided as they are
between the heavens and the problem of human salvation suggest that Chaucer’s more
imaginative works of this period also negotiate with eternal verities. But it is in the
figure of Chaucer’s Parson and through the medium of his penitential outlook that we
find Chaucer’s most explicit shift in perspective from the secular to the eternal. In a
manner similar to the divine invocation found in the Prologue to the Second Nun’s Tale,
Chaucer’s Parson asks for divine aid preparatory to his Tale:

And Jhesu, for his grace, wit me sende
To shewe yow the wey, in this viage,
Of thilke parfit glorious pilgrimage
That highte Jerusalem celestial. (X, 48-54)

Here the Parson assumes a Wycliffite response to the earthly pilgrimage as analogous to
the spiritual journey of the Christian to Heaven. The function of the earthly pilgrimage
as a temporal expression of spiritual values suggests both Wyclif’s epistemological
realism with its emphasis upon divine universals and his biblical hermeneutic of
amplified time in which *synecdoche*, or the part, can stand for the whole. As an

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129 John M. Bowers, “Controversy and Criticism: Lydgate’s *Thebes* and the Prologue to
*Beryn,*” *Chaucer Yearbook* 5 (1998): 91-115 (103-104), observes that while the Parson’s
“concept of pilgrimage as a spiritual redirection to the celestial Jerusalem is based on
theological authorities as venerable as St. Augustine,” it had become a “standard topos in
the catalogue of Lollard tenets exactly during the period in which Chaucer was writing
the *Canterbury Tales.*”

130 In her discussion of Wyclif’s *Principium*, Beryl Smalley, *Wyclif and the Oxford
Schools* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), p. 161, reminds us that
Wyclif’s doctrine of time provoked four separate attacks by the Carmelite Kenningham.
Wyclif’s extreme realism led to a concept of two time schemes: the temporal or *tempus*
and *duratio* or God’s time in which there is not past, present or future. See David Lyle
epistemological realist, Wyclif argues that the disdain for universals invariably leads to sin, a position he amplifies in his attacks against nominalists such as William of Ockham. In his greatest philosophical work, *Summa de Ente* (1365-1372), Wyclif makes the case that all sin is caused by a failure to apprehend and love universals:

All envy or actual sin is caused by the lack of an ordered love of universals... because every such sin consists in a will preferring a lesser good to a greater good, whereas in general the more universal goods are better... Thus, if proprietors who are devoted to particulars were more concerned with the well-being of the commonwealth than with the prosperity of their kinsfolk they would not press for their own people to be raised to wealth, office, prelacy and other dignities... beyond all doubt, intellectual and emotional error about universals is the cause of all the sin that reigns in the world.\textsuperscript{131}

Even in a work of the 1360's devoted to philosophy, Wyclif manages to level criticism against the temporal obsessions of the prelacy. It may not be possible to identify the Parson's emphasis upon the "celestial Jerusalem" as exclusively Wycliffite, but in view of the of General Prologue's profile of the Parson as a paragon of fundamentalist and even Lollard values, the Wycliffite overtones seem to collaborate the set of Lollard clues that surround the Parson. The Parson's identification of the heavenly Jerusalem as the proper goal of earthly pilgrimage assumes a realist outlook shared not only with Wyclif but also with Augustine—the church father Wyclif quotes most frequently and with whom Wyclif is always careful to agree. Whether the Parson is identified as a Lollard or

Augustinian he remains a staunch advocate of a universalizing theology of time in which temporal life has value only to the extent that it acknowledges and prepares for eternity.\textsuperscript{132}

A more vocal criticism of earthly pilgrimage when it fails to keep eternal verities in sight is found in the Lollard William Thorpe’s defense of Lollard belief before Archbishop Arundel in 1407. Arundel interrogates Thorpe as to his definition of the church on earth:

“What is holi chirche here in earth?” And I seyde, “Ser, though holi chirche be evere oon in charite, yit it hath two parties. The first and the principle hath overcomen parfitly al the wickednesse of this lyf, and regneth joifulli in hevene in Crist. And tother part is here yit erthe, bisili and contyueli fightinge dai and night ayens temptaciouns of the fend, forsakynge and hatinge the prosperite of this world, dispisinge and withstandinge her fleischli lusts, whiche oonli ben the pilgrymes of Crist, wandrynge towards hevene bi stable feith... for these hevenli pilgrimes moun not neither thei wolen be lettid of her purpose bi the reyne of ony doctrine discordinge from holi writt...\textsuperscript{133}

Thorpe’s response contains all the key ingredients of the Lollard agenda, including its emphasis upon otherworldliness and the Bible. Like the Parson, Thorpe’s identifies true pilgrimage in terms of a spiritual journey towards heaven. Unlike Chaucer’s Parson, Thorpe’s critique of medieval earthly pilgrimages makes constructs earthly and spiritual

\textsuperscript{132} See Richard K. Emmerson and Ronald B. Herzman, \textit{The Apocalyptic Imagination in Medieval Literature} (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), pp. 152. Emmerson and Herzman remark that the Parson’s Tale is informed by “a conjunction of the universal and the individual…”.

pilgrimages as mutually exclusive journeys. This difference may be helpful for identifying the precise nature of the Parson’s apparent Lollardy. Unlike Thorpe, Chaucer’s Parson appears to sanction participation in earthly pilgrimages despite their reputation for worldliness.

The Parson’s exhibition of Lollard traits right up to the point at which he delivers his penitential tale suggests that Chaucer viewed some aspects of Lollardy and penance as complimentary. By inventing the Parson as a Lollard/orthodox hybrid, Chaucer captures the best of Lollardy while neutralizing its more extreme, heretical liabilities. On a theoretical level, penance as a discourse of human fallibility represents a platform from which to critique all sides in the debate. Furthermore, the coincidence of heresy and penance as discourses of self-incrimination suggests penance as a doctrine of political autonomy. Penance does not so much deny politics as it transcends it. When it comes time to offer his tale, the Parson chooses to deliver not the rhetorical equivalent of the Lollard Conclusions, but instead he identifies a condition of habituated sin common to both sides in the Lollard/orthodox debate. In this sense the penitential content of the Parson’s Tale functions as ideological common ground, at least in the provisional sense that all parties can agree upon the need for penitence even though they also disagree over the issue of oracular confession. This blend of Lollardy and penance contributes to the Parson’s problematic role in the Tales. We may not read the Parson’s Tale with much enthusiasm, but it is hard to resist figuring out the enigmatic Parson.

When the Parson announces that he will “shew... the wey” to heaven, a hermeneutical connection is forged between earth and heaven. The Parson’s ambiguous line, “in this viage” may refer to the penitential treatise that will soon follow, or to the pilgrimage, or
the spiritual life—or all three. This “viage” can no longer be identified solely in terms of
the temporal dimensions of earthly pilgrimage. This ambiguous reference signals that the
pilgrimage and all the tales that it contains signify a continuum of the temporal with the
eternal. The Parson also identifies his treatise as an interpretative act that both “knyttes”
and also makes an “ende” (X, 47). This makes evident the Parson’s intent to provide a
gloss or commentary on the tales that have preceded him, not by dismissing them but by
placing them within a framework that acknowledges judgment as a spur to contrition,
confession and moral reform. Penance becomes an “ende” to the extent that it promises a
new beginning in which the various pilgrims retell their narratives, not as mere “tales” or
“japes” but as confessions.134 Significantly, the Parson does not immediately promise to
“shew... the wey” to Jerusalem. Instead he states that he will “shew... of,” thus making
clear his view that the temporal and textual pilgrimage is the “viage” that signifies a more
“parfit” and “glorious pilgrimage” that leads to Augustine’s city of God, the heavenly
Jerusalem. In a manner again reminiscent of Wyclif’s realist hermeneutic, Chaucer’s
Parson acknowledges temporal narrative as productive of a qualitative understanding of
spiritual time and reality.

134 For a pluralistic accounts of the Parson’s Tale as another possible view of life and
man’s nature, see Laurie A. Finke, “To Kyntte Up Al This Feeste’: The Parson’s Rhetoric
John Finlayson, “The Satiric Mode and the Parson’s Tale,” The Chaucer Review 6
Reading of the Parson’s Tale,” Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies 3 (1973):
225-271, also denies that penance is Chaucer’s “last word,” arguing instead that
Chaucer’s meaning in the Parson’s Tale is communicated ironically. For readings that
foreground Chaucer’s Parson’s Tale in relation to the rest of the Tales, see Ralph
Baldwin, The Unity of the Canterbury Tales, Anglistica, 5 (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and
Bagger, 1955), Patterson, Chaucer and the Subject of History, p. 316, Helen Storm Corsa,
Chaucer: Poet of Mirth and Morality (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame
At the beginning of his actual tale the Parson refers to penance as one of the many “weyes spirituals” or “olde sentences,” that lead “folk to oure Lord Jhesu Christ and to the regne of glorie” (X:76-80). This shift from the genitive “of” to the directional “to” marks not only the Parson’s transition from a statement of his general interpretative principles to an evaluation of the pilgrimage, but it also indicates a shift from narrative to ethical action. This recalls the discussion in the last chapter of Chaucer’s anxiety over the ethical utility of writing exemplary narrative. Can narrative really be identified as a species of good works, and if not, can we really be sure that exemplary narrative will produce the kinds of good deeds in their audience that they celebrate vicariously through narration? Chaucer’s Parson identifies the mechanism that can transform narrative into ethical or concrete spiritual actions as penitence and confession. Confession itself requires the production of yet another narrative form, but unlike the exemplum, the confessional narrative offers a record of ethical failure. This, as Chaucer’s Retraction affirms, is the necessary disposition or narrative space for the infusion of divine grace that makes actual concrete reform possible. The pragmatic force of the preposition “to,” indicates a standard medieval assumption that the purpose of all right interpretation is right action. As Jeffrey states with respect to Wyclif’s hermeneutics, “the reader of Scripture will become only as effective as an interpreter of the text as he is already a translator of the text in the actions of his or her personal life.”¹³⁵ The ethical actions that the Parson urges on his audience are grounded in penitence, since as the Parson acknowledges, this particular group of pilgrims stands in dire need of confession:

Many been the weyes spirituals that leden folk to oure Lorde Jhesu Crist and to
the regne of glorie. Of which weyes ther is a ful noble wey and a ful covenable,
which may nat fayle to man ne to womman that thurgh synne hath mysgoon fro
the right way of Jerusalem celestial; and this wey is cleped Penitence… (X, 76-81)

It follows that the way to the celestial city chosen by the Parson is also the way
appropriate to those who have not been able to stay on course. This speaks to the
Parson’s willingness to preserve and in fact build upon the very narratives that he refuses
to sanction. Although the pilgrims’ flawed records indict them as sinners all who have
“mysgoon” during the lives, these same lives as recorded in the various tales told by the
pilgrims can become the means of salvation through penitence. The incongruity of the
pilgrims’ various narratives as the actual means of their spiritual recovery becomes
reconciled by the Parson’s emphasis upon the saving properties of confessional narrative.
Confessional narrative may not be the moral equivalent of actual good deeds, but it
makes possible the recognition of divine grace as the necessary pre-condition for human
moral reform. The Parson does not burden the pilgrims with crudely generalized
moralisms, nor does he condemn pilgrimage outright as Lollards like Thorpe did, but
instead he outlines a road to spiritual and ethical recovery suitable to the pilgrims’ actual
conditions. Compare the Parson’s mild and implied rebuke of pilgrimage with William
Thorpe’s explicit attack on pilgrimage as a inveterately secular distraction from spiritual
things:

Also Sir, I knowe well that when diurse men and women will goe thus aftir their
own willes, and finding out one pilgrimage, they will ordaine with them before, to
hauve with them both men and women that can sing wanton songes... and if these
men and women be a moneth out in their pilgrimage, many of them shall be an
halfe yeare after, great janglers, tale-tellers, and liers.\textsuperscript{136}

The Parson, like Thorpe, eschews tale-telling and jangling, but he does not outright deny
the spiritual utility of going on a pilgrimage and his failure to opt out of the tale-telling
game at the outset of the trip suggests that he may have recognized in the pilgrimage a
pastoral opportunity. Of course, it is also likely that the Parson fails to object to the tale-
telling game at first because he fails to assert his Lollard identity within the worldly
context of the pilgrimage, and this raises the interesting question as to why the Parson
was on pilgrimage to begin with. It is sufficient perhaps to say that the Parson embodies
Lollard ideals, but he grasps the other pilgrims’ failed spiritual and ethical lives as the
only currency they can produce in favor of their own salvations. In this way the genitive
“of,” signifying the pilgrims’ possession of sin and guilt, transforms into the ethically
pragmatic “to” as the Parson converts their moral lapses into a journey of penitence
which leads the way to salvation. This is the only means of conversion available to the
Parson that preserves Christianity’s ethical standards without denying the reality of
human failure or, conversely, that avoids subsuming penance into a medieval orthodoxy
interested primarily in serving the political agenda of ecclesiastical authority.\textsuperscript{137}

\textsuperscript{136} Gray, \textit{Late Medieval Verse and Prose}, p. 15-16.

\textsuperscript{137} Chaucer’s Parson is notable for his pastoral qualities. Lee Patterson, “The Parson’s
Tale and the Quitting of the \textit{Canterbury Tales},” \textit{Traditio} 34 (1978): 353-354, observes
that Chaucer’s description of the six causes of contrition in the Parson’s Tale represents
an expanded sense of the emotional aspects of contrition, including a new and more
positive emotion not found in Chaucer’s Latin source, the remembering of the passion of
Christ.
Penitence as spiritual pilgrimage also emerges from the Parson’s Tale as the only way in which medieval orthodoxy can be freed from its secularity without resorting to Wyclif’s more radical agenda of royal dominion. Thus Chaucer establishes a bridge or synthesis between the temporal as part of the spiritual or eternal whole, rather than a hermeneutic of the spiritual whole dismissive or disdainful of the temporal. The pilgrims are interpreted not as positive or negative exempla but as texts still open to negotiation or interpretation through penitence and confession. Although the way to the celestial Jerusalem is vital to the pilgrims’ eternal destinies, the Parson only discloses that information after first evaluating the pilgrims’ sinfulness as the incomplete part that, through confession, can reveal the whole of the more perfect journey. Although the Parson, like a Lollard, refuses to tell a tale himself, he does respond to the other pilgrims’ tales with a call to confession, itself a narrative discourse capable of narrating sin, although without the motive of self-justification.

What we do not receive from Chaucer is an actual or model confession. The Parson’s penitential treatise clearly envisions a parallel text of private confessions in which each of the pilgrims shifts from tale-telling as a form of self-aggrandizement to confession as an act of narrative self-exposure and incrimination. But this parallel text is not reported as having taken place. Chaucer’s Retraction, although frequently described as a literary confession, only revokes books, but it does not really constitute an actual full confession of Chaucer’s sins. Furthermore, that Chaucer allows his revoked texts to remain for

138 For a comprehensive account of Wyclif’s political views and Chaucer’s reception of them, see David Aers, Faith, Ethics and Church, pp. 119-148. 139 Patterson, “The Parson’s Tale,” takes a different view, stating that the Parson’s Tale does not “invite a reinterpretation or even a revaluation of the fiction,” instead it declares it to be “transcended... the certainties of the Parson’s Tale render the complexities of the tales inconsequential and even sophistical.”
posterity, suggests that this apparent penitential winnowing is actually more an act of moral interpretation or inclusion that it is an act of penitential exclusion.

The seeming gap between the Retraction as a statement of authorial intent and the continued presence of the revoked tales argues for not taking Chaucer’s penitence seriously. But what if the Retraction is not a confession, what if its function as a revoking of texts works similarly to the Parson’s attempt to substitute confessions for tales? Critics have wrestled to make sense of the apparent contradiction between Chaucer’s revoking of tales and his obvious failure to eliminate them from his corpus. The Parson’s Tale, however, provides important clues why Chaucer fails to make good on his apparent Retraction. It could be significant that in his “tale,” the Parson warns his fellow pilgrims against thinking that they can confess their sins as mere “tales” rather than as confessions fully imbued with penitence and sorrow for sin:

Thou shalt nat eek renne to the preest sodeynely to tellyen hym lightly thy synne, as whoso telleth a jape or a tale, but avysely and with greet devocioun. (X, 1025)

According to the Parson, a confession can be distinguished from a mere “jape” or “tale” in terms of how much time the teller spends in reflection and deliberation before he actually goes to the confessional to narrate his sins. A secular tale differs from a confession to the extent that the former lacks deliberation of the kind that produces “greet devocioun.” An accurate confessional narrative follows upon a process of private devotion, a point that the Parson reiterates as necessary even in light of his instructions that one’s confession must also be “hastily doon” or at least not put off too long:

Thi shrifte moste be purveyed before and avysed; for wikked haste dooth not profit; and that a man konne shryve hym of his synnes, be it of pride, or of envye,
and so forth with the species and circumstances; and that he have comprehended in
hys mynde the nombre and the greetness of his synnes, and how longe he hath
leyn in synne; and eek that he be contrite of his synnes, and in steadfast purpos,
by the grace of God, never eft to falle in synne... (X, 1003-1004)

The Parson’s warning that confession must be “avysed” resonates with the Manciple’s extended warning against too much speech:

My sone, God his endeless goodnesse
Walled a tonge with teeth and lippes eke,
For man Sholde hym avyse what he speke.
My sone, ful ofte, for to much speche
Hath many a man been spilt, as clerkes teche,
But for litel speche avysely
Is no man shent, to speke generally. (IX, 322-328)

The Manciple’s warning against unadvised speech, when aligned to the Parson’s warning against unadvised confessions, suggests an approach to understanding Chaucer’s Retraction as an authorial affirmation of advised deliberation as necessary to the narrative process. In this respect the Retraction responds specifically to the Parson’s instructions for a well “purveyed” confession and perhaps more generally to the Manciple’s dire sense of the non-retractable nature of ill-advised speech or tale-telling. As the Manciple states:

But he that hath mysseyd, I dar wel sayn,
He may by no wey clepe his word again.
Thyng that is seyd, and forth it gooth,
Though hym repente, or be hym nevere so
Looth.

He is thrall to whom that he hath sayd
A tale of which he is now yvel apayd. (IX, 353-358)

As previously suggested, the Manciple’s advice may be read as a belated response to the Lollard polemics of Chaucer’s Second Nun’s Tale which, like the Manciple’s crow, assumes the risk of exposing sins without any guarantee of there being a positive social or spiritual response. The Parson’s similar warning against unadvised confessions moves the problem of unadvised speech from the political or polemical setting to the spiritual arena, a shift in emphasis that seems to focus Chaucer’s authorial anxiety in the Retraction to the problem of the effect his tales will have on the salvations of his readers. I do not regard this change as a negation of Chaucer’s Lollard content in the Second Nun’s Tale. Instead, the Parson—recognizable as at least a strong candidate for Lollardy—offers penance as a discourse common to both orthodox and Lollard readers and thereby avoids trapping the Tales in a cul de sac of sectarian debate. But the Parson’s Tale is not really the final word in the Tales, since the Retraction responds not just to the Parson’s penitential Tale but specifically to the issue of advisement, a nuanced response to the Parson’s call to confession that emphasizes interpretation and study.

In her discussion of penitential manuals, Andrea Hopkins remarks on meditative self-study as an essential act preparatory to examination by a confessor:

Generally speaking, the examination which the penitent gives to himself in accordance with the instructions of these manuals is a detailed, minute, conscientious analysis of his sinful acts and the degree of intent with which they
were committed. It is thoughtful, systematic, and essentially sedate. The outcome of it is a confession which will be as accurate an account as possible of the penitent’s state of mind... above all, the manuals are intended to train the penitent’s mind to form mental habits which will enable him to prepare for confession efficiently and thoroughly.¹⁴⁰

Note that the Latin penitential manuals describe the penitent engaging in an initial stage of private self-examination before going to the confessional. The fact of penitent self-examination prior to confession has been largely ignored by adherents to the Foucauldian claim that the modern subject of self emerged from the medieval confessional as an unintended byproduct of institutional examination. Foucault postulates a secular process whereby the penitent informally acquires the tools of self-examination for his private and unsupervised use outside of the confessional. John Ganim explains Foucault’s view that through formal confession the penitent gained an awareness of the self:

This self-examination was assisted by the confessor and was meant to conform to a large-scale totalized program, but the requirement of its relative privacy—the confessor and the penitent—may have had a countervailing effect. Confession resulted in an increased awareness of the moral sins of the individual, especially in terms of his or her intent and conduct. It contributed to the increasing articulation of the private life and of the self by which we measure the depth of modernity.¹⁴¹

The above account fails to acknowledge that private self-examination outside of the confessional was stipulated as an integral part of the formal penitential process. Based upon the evidence of the Latin manuals for confessors, it would appear that there was no supposed “countervailing effect,” since the articulation of the private self was expected to take place before confession in order to ensure that the formal confession was accurate. The real difference between the modern and medieval articulation of the self has to do with their quite different aims. As Robert Twomby observes, pre-confession meditational praxis required that the medieval penitent “dismantle the defenses that constitute and define self.” The modern self, by contrast, engages in introspection in order to construct a self. According to Focault’s model, the modern self emerges only after it has been freed from institutional control as exercised over the penitent in the confessional. Once accepted, this account requires that all modes of self-expression outside of the confessional be characterized as secular. But in the middle ages the articulation of the self was not separated according to whether self-expression occurred inside or outside of the confessional. The self was either dismantled through the process of penitential self-examination and formal confession, or it errors were further constituted and defended through acts of self-justification. It is an over-simplification to suggest that the emergence of the modern self occurred as the medieval penitent learned to express himself outside of the institutional controls of the medieval confessional. The split between the medieval and the modern conception of the self occurred as medieval persons failed to engage in penitential discourse. The modern self does not so much secularize the confessional as it secularizes the self by refusing to acknowledge the

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doctrine of original sin or the implications of that doctrine with respect to any human attempt to constitute or defend the self.

Chaucer’s Parson emphasizes the need for time outside the confessional in which the penitent meditates upon his sins in order to enact a transition between a justification narrative of the self and a self-abnegating account of the life. Chaucer’s Pardoner, by contrast, represents a modern approach to identifying the self to the extent that the Pardoner consistently defends his sins even as he ostensibly confesses them. This tendency to construct the self defensively applies to most of the characters in the Tales. Ganim comments upon how the various pilgrims, rather than making true confessions, typically attempt “to expiate, excuse, or disguise. In fact, it is the attempt of characters to cover up or deny interior conflicts that, more often than not in Chaucer, is explicitly connected to confessional practice.”

Such narratives really do not belong within the category of confessional narrative instead they function antithetically to confessional narrative to the extent that they defend the self. Outside of the penitential framework any attempt at self-constitution no matter how sophisticated, morally inspired or self-aware lacks spiritual integrity. The point of medieval penitence and self-narration is not to construct a stable and defensible self, it is to actually disable one’s sense of self-hood in a narrative admission that the sinful self cannot be defended, that it should be dismantled.

Chaucer’s Retraction cannot properly be considered an act of confession. It does function as a statement of authorial guilt, but it implies that there must be a process of penitential analysis before Chaucer can actually make his own confession. The Retraction honors the distinction the Parson draws between a secular “tale” and a

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143 John Ganim, “Chaucer, Boccacio, and Subjectivity,” p. 139.
confession by outlining a reflective space between Chaucer as a compiler and the confessing Chaucer. This space is one of silence, an unscripted lacuna between Chaucer's authorial sins and his confession. The Retraction identifies Chaucer as having made his own writing the subject of penitential self-examination prior to his making himself the subject of penitential self-examination. Indeed, these two textual bodies are the same. Accordingly, the Retraction revokes but it does not erase a formula that responds directly to the Parson's instruction that confessions, although narrative in form, cannot be told from within a secular perspective. The confession, if told with deliberation, becomes merely entertaining, lacking in substance. The confession and the tale both narrate the self. The difference is that the tale glorifies human nature and the confession bewails it. Chaucer's Retraction responds to the Parson's warning that the transition between these two types of narratives requires silent, meditative reflection. This transition can be seen in Chaucer's statement in the Retraction that he will spend the remainder of his life a penitent:

    From hennes forth unto my lyves ende sende me grace to biwayle my giltes and to studie to the salvacioun of my soule, and graunte me grace of verray penitence, confessioun and satisfaccioun to doon in this present lyf. (X, 1089)

Once more Chaucer evokes the pattern first seen in the Prologue to the Second Nun's Tale of invoking divine grace preparatory to his embarking on the writing of a narrative. The difference, of course, is that in the Retraction there is no text that follows, instead Chaucer makes a plea for grace in order to effectively "studie" the facts of his sinful life preparatory to his making confession. The Retraction informs the reader that Chaucer
final authorial act will involve a time of deliberation and "studie" preparatory to his final narrative, his own private confession.

Earlier in the Retraction, Chaucer re-affirmed that his intention has always been to write for "oure doctrine," but in his plea for grace to "studie," the poet marks a dramatic shift away from writing to interpretation. This change suggests that Chaucer recognized the problems that accrue to exemplary discourse. Interpretative space allows for renegotiation between Chaucer's doctrinal intent and the likelihood that his worldly tales will, as the God of Love says, "lettest folk to han devocyoun" (G Prologue, 251). The risk of moral pessimism, always present in Chaucer's choice to tell stories that feature human fallibility, seems to given way in the Retraction to "studie." Thus Chaucer's Retraction is not a confession but rather the announcement of a new and essentially private ordinatio in which Chaucer will "bewayle" his "guiltes." The prospect of Chaucer studying himself recollects the Parson's instructions to meditate upon one's sins before confession. In revoking his worldly tales, Chaucer marks his awareness that he has told stories lacking in "devocioun." The fact that he does not actually erase those tales implies that they are still materially valuable as narratives to be studied in preparation for confession.

William Provost notes that the Canterbury Tales contains the earliest recorded usage in English for any sense of retract, retractation or retraction. "Chaucer is also the first recorded user of the word revoke in any of its senses." Provost also states that the only

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Olive Sayce, "Chaucer's 'Retractions,'" The Conclusions of the Canterbury Tales and its place in the Literary Tradition," Medium Aevum 40 (1971): 230-248, makes a convincing case for reading Chaucer's Retraction as similar in function to Augustine's Retractiones, a text that rather than canceling Augustine's earlier works aims to correct them.
other text outside of Chaucer’s Retraction where the word *revoke* occurs is in the *Troilus* where the sense is ‘to call back to life, restore.’\(^{145}\) This supports the view that the Retraction revokes only in the sense that it moves the pilgrims and their tales into a penitential context of “studie” and interpretation, a process that also supports Chaucer’s 1390s declaration that he intends to write naked texts, that is, texts without glosses that are open to revision.

Making a true confession does not mean, as the Parson makes abundantly clear, that one must sanitize it. The Parson instructs penitents to “tellen it platly, be it never so foule ne so horrible” (X, 1021). Chaucer’s “studie” may well require his revoked narratives as subject matter, not as autobiographical materials but as specimens of human attempts to justify the self, anti-confessions that tell us more about the complexities of the sinful condition than any actual confession would. Here lies a potential key to Chaucer’s penitential coda, the Parson’s Tale. The Parson’s aim is to make human fallibility and sin, so profoundly exhibited in Chaucer’s tales, a subject of careful deliberation as opposed to mere entertainment or “pleye.” Penitential confession as mediated through the Retraction creates an interpretative space for the study of all human souls as they are exposed or revoked through the various tales. In this way, Chaucer initiates the English literary canon as a textual body of revoked texts that foreground human culpability so that it becomes open to study. By inventing this category of revoked texts, Chaucer also isolates his worldly texts from the exemplary tradition by noting their failure to fulfill his doctrinal intent. In other words, Chaucer appears to realize that negative *exemplum* will not necessarily warn readers away from worldly vanity, they will more probably attract

them to sin. Cut off from commentaries as naked texts, the revoked tales can only fulfill Chaucer's doctrinal intent if they are carefully resituated within the context of penitential, pre-confessional "studie."

If Chaucer can identify his worldly tales as pre-confessional study sites, he will transform the failure of his original moral intent to a literary success by making the Tales at once more naked and open to interpretation yet also accountable to salvific realities. This reading of the Retraction does not offer a mandate for reading Chaucer's tales a series of confessions. The function of pre-confessional "studie" was to deliberate and study one's sinful life in order to arrive at a true or accurate confession, as a dismantling of the self. The study stage occupies a liminal space between procrastination and "wikked haste," a crucial period between the actual committing of a sin and the forgetting of it. Interpretation cannot be indefinite, an interpretative conclusion and a formal confession must be made. It is this sense of reflective haste that the Retraction builds around he Tales. The forensic issues of confession, contrition, absolution and satisfaction all wait beyond the study time. In this preparatory space the penitent dismantles his secular self in order to narrate a defeated self. This process, as Chaucer also makes clear in his Retraction, cannot be achieved without significant infusions of divine grace.

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146 Mary Braswell, The Medieval Sinner: Characterization and Confession in the Literature of the English Middle Ages (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1983), p. 13, identifies the temporal space within the confessional as productive of a vibrant individuality: "isolated from his own environment, his will at odds with the Divine Will, he is an individual indeed. And his personality is composed of those particular sins which he has committed in his own inimitable way... his internal nature is as important as his external one. He is a lively, rounded character, unacceptable to the Church, but attractive both to modern readers and to those sinners in the medieval audience who were able to view him in a special way."
We lack a precise understanding of Chaucer's theology of grace if indeed he had one. But the justification theory of the late medieval via moderni such as William of Ockham and Gabriel Biel helps to explain the significance of Chaucer's appeal for grace in the Retraction. Alister McGrath, in his account of the influence of the moderni on Luther, comments that in the late medieval period grace was "conditional upon a particular response on man's part—and once that condition was met, the bestowal of grace followed as a matter of necessity." As McGrath observes:

The entire discussion of man's justification before God on the part of the theologians of the via moderni proceeds without reference to the incarnation and the death of the Son of God. The late medieval failure to recognize fully the substitutionary import of the cross meant that although the moderni acknowledged the primacy of grace, they still maintained that man must do something before he could receive that grace. As Biel affirms, the penitent must desist from sin before God will remit his guilt. God does this not because the penitent's contrition actually deserves God's favor but because God has graciously consented to accept such acts as meritorious.

Whether this theology is essentially Pelagian or anti-Pelatian is a matter of scholarly debate. Heiko Oberman argues that Biel's doctrine of justification is Pelagian. McGrath disagrees on the grounds that Biel's theology of justification, by the standards of his time, could not have been identified as Pelagian:

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2 McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, p. 61.
Any theology of justification which permits man to have a limited role in his own justification is open to precisely the same criticism—and yet exactly this understanding of justification is characteristic of the Western church! God’s gift to the man who does *quod in est* is due to an act of generosity on God’s part: God bestows his grace *sola liberalitate*, in that it is given under the terms of divine compassion. By his grace, God has ordained that the man who does *quod in est* may be granted the gift of justifying grace. There is nothing ‘remarkable’ or ‘Pelagian’ about this... by the generally accepted standards of the time (that is, in terms of the canons of the Council of Carthage) and by his own definition of Pelagianism, Biel’s doctrine of justification is not only not Pelagian, but is actually strongly anti-Pelagian.150

McGrath is certainly correct to argue that Biel was not a Pelagian, since Biel did not believe that any human act, *ex puris naturalibus*, could lay claim to God’s grace without God having already chosen to graciously regard such acts as meritorious. But, as McGrath acknowledges, not all late-medieval theologians could agree at to the precise nature of man’s responsibility in the process of justification:

There was, of course, considerable divergence of opinion within the schools concerning the precise nature of man’s obligations to God and whether man could fulfill these unaided... or whether he required the assistance of prevenient grace, and concerning whether this ‘preparation’ or ‘disposition’ for justification could be considered meritorious..."151

150 McGrath, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross*, p. 62.
151 Alister McGrath, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross*, p. 86.
McGrath’s thesis that Martin Luther owed something to the justification theories of the *moderni* should not be allowed to obscure the fact that in the late Middle Ages, there was confusion regarding the precise role of the penitent in the justification process. In 1958 Ernst Bizner first made the argument that Luther’s theological breakthrough during the winter of 1517-18 must be understood as entirely medieval. But Luther’s debt to medieval justification theory did not include the medieval uncertainty as to the penitent’s role in justification. For Luther the minimum requirement for salvation is that the penitent fulfills the condition of divine grace by simply crying out for it. Here Luther demonstrates Augustine’s influence, since the *humilitas* of mankind is emphasized over his natural powers, thus clarifying the medieval confusion with respect to whether man could merit salvation *ex puris naturalibus*. Admittedly, in the period 1517-18 Luther was still operating entirely within the bounds of late-medieval theology, but relative to Biel, Luther devalues man’s natural capacity to love or respond to God. As Oberman observes, Biel maintained a very high regard for man’s natural powers which, it may be argued, contributes to the late-medieval confusion what man could or could not do in order to receive grace:

Biel has a high regard for man’s natural capacities even outside the state of grace. If man really does his very best, he can love God more than anything else. He defines the freedom of the will as inalienable spontaneity. This is the basis of both goodness and meritoriousness since only spontaneous acts are acts for which man can be held responsible.

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152 Alister McGrath, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross*, p. 90.
Biel claims that the actual transformation of human attrition into contrition takes place, not as a result of prevenient grace, but as a psychological impact that happens when the penitent is confronted with the external measures of the sacrament of penance. Thus, as Oberman concludes, "the sacrament of penance serves as the means to strengthen man's natural powers. We conclude: the strictness of Biel's contritionism necessarily would enhance scrupulousness and despair."\(^{154}\) Of course, as a fifteenth century theologian, Biel's particular theory of justification cannot be attached to Chaucer, but Biel's position usefully illustrates the essential late-medieval problem regarding precisely what a penitent must do to obtain grace. As McGrath observes, in the late medieval period God was perceived as fully committed to mankind's justification, but man must do something to warrant the gift of grace. God would justify man

provided that man first fulfilled a certain minimum requirement on his part... the basic principle expressed here is that when man fulfills his obligations to God (by doing what lies within him)... God will respond by bestowing the gift of justifying grace."\(^{155}\)

Luther makes clear that God gives grace only to those who ask for it, but unlike Biel, he does not mandate that the penitent offer contrition as a precondition for grace. In this respect Luther's early justification theory approximates Duns Scotus' claim that for those who lack sufficient attrition or contrition, grace may still be given on the basis of a merely voluntary reception of sacramental absolution, not \textit{ex merito} but \textit{ex pacto divino}.

Thus we can see a latent medieval theory of justification in which the only prerequisite for grace is that the penitent ask for it. Scotus' justification theory is complicated,

\(^{154}\) Heiko Oberman, \textit{A Harvest of Medieval Theology}, p. 160.
\(^{155}\) Alister McGrath, \textit{Luther's Theology of the Cross}, p. 86.
however, by his allowance for a second path to justification in which a sinner may have attrition of such intrinsic quality that it is sufficient for the reception of grace. Thus we can see that Scotus still clings to the possibility that at least some sinners can generate enough attrition so that they do not require the sacrament of penance. As Biel observes, the problem with Scotus’ two paths to justification is that not only certitude but also conjecture and uncertainly are possible. How can the penitent know for certain which path to justification he must travel?156

It is with this theoretical background that Chaucer’s prayer for grace in the Retraction becomes recognizable as broadly Augustinian in its emphasis upon the need for grace. Chaucer appeals not only to Christ but also to Mary and all the saints to give him grace prior to his becoming a penitent:

sende me grace to biwayle my giltes and to studie to the salvacioun of my soule, and graunte me grace of verray penitence, confession and satisfaccioun to doon in this present lyf, thurgh the benigne grace of hym that is kyng of kynges and preest over alle prestes, that boghte us with the precious blood of his herte, so that I may been oon of hem at the day of doom that shulle be saved. (X, 1089-1090)

In a manner similar to the early Luther, Chaucer asks for grace on the condition only of his great need. Chaucer’s prayer clearly assumes that he needs grace not only for attrition, contrition, confession, and satisfaction, but also in order to be able to “studie to the salvacioun” of his soul. Chaucer’s prayer also assumes the covenant or pactum of divine graciousness typical of the moderni. He acknowledges that the grace that God

156 Heiko Oberman, A Harvest of Medieval Theology, p. 150, note 27.
grants to sinners so that they can become penitent depends wholly upon God’s choice to extend grace: the sinner receives grace only “thurgh the benigne grace of hym that is kyng of kings…”

A careful reading of this line reveals two key characteristics of late medieval and early Lutheran justification theory. McGrath comments that for both Luther and the *moderni* the gift of grace was bestowed because of divine initiative and liberality, not as a direct result of human merit. Chaucer, like Luther and the *moderni*, also employs the image of the king to illustrate the principle of the *pactum* or covenantal causality. As Luther constructs the king analogy, god promises to extend grace as long as the recipient shows up to receive the gift. Chaucer clearly emphasizes the gratuitous nature of God’s decision to grant sinners grace and he also grounds his reception of grace in God’s liberality. Thus Chaucer appears to possess a fairly astute grasp of late medieval justification theory, enough at least to recognize his insufficiency and the contractual framework within which he can ask for grace without any merit of his own. Like a king, God is bound by what he has promised. If we ask for grace we shall have it. Note that in the Retraction Chaucer does not identify himself as a penitent. There is no attempt to suggest that he already possesses an attrition of such quality as to attract divine grace. Instead, the Retraction states that Chaucer believes that he needs grace before he can become penitent. Grace is necessary before he can “biwayle” his sins or “studie” his own soul with respect to salvation. Thus Chaucer’s construction of grace complements his conception of himself as a flawed author. Rather than actually canceling out his worldly tales, Chaucer preserves them as an act that implicitly rejects the notion of the exemplary life. The flawed nature of Chaucer’s corpus, as he identifies it in his Retraction, supports
Chaucer's bid for divine grace. A literary corpus without any apparent moral flaws would hardly commend itself to Chaucer's carefully framed plea for divine grace. Similarly in the *Legend of Good Women*, Chaucer's preference for negative *exempla* identifies his pessimism with regards to human nature as befitting his concept of justification, while the God of Love's insistence that only positive *exempla* be written suggests a theology of human dignity and intrinsic merit that Chaucer's Retraction denies.

This paradox informs what J.A. Burrow sees as the rather "un-heroic" temper of Ricardian literature.\(^{157}\) Chaucer's Retraction capitalizes upon the penitential paradox in order to encourage interpretation over moralization. It also appropriates human weakness and perversity as key ingredients of a distinctly English literary sensibility. The flawed author described in the Retraction becomes synonymous with the flawed Christian whose very weakness becomes the means not only of his salvation but also of his literary survival and success. The facts of human fallibility and moral depravity, as Chaucer configures it with respect to himself in his Retraction, serve as mandates for literary interpretation. Although revoked, Chaucer's worldly tales remain as material evidence of his authorial guilt. Their spiritual and moral lack ensures that Chaucer's readers will always have to contend with Chaucer's doubts regarding his own moral status, an interpretative focus that enforces Chaucer's sense of personal fallibility by making it the subject of study. The Retraction signals a point of departure in terms of how we read those tales whose integrity depends upon our ability to recollect and re-interpret what has not yet been fully "avysed" (X, 1003). The Retraction teaches that all narratives,

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especially worldly ones, when made subject to penitential reflection become more than just a "jape or a tale" (X, 1024).

The record of Chaucer's literary guilt also distinguishes confessional narrative, with its implied standard of self-examination, from exemplary discourse with its dual preoccupation with what either should or should not characterize human behavior. Chaucer's combined interpretative and penitential emphasis in the Retraction balks at the exemplary urge to confess quickly. I describe Chaucer's works of the late 1380s and 1390s as increasingly penitential in their outlook since, although as a group they do not all focus specifically upon doctrinal penance, they do articulate a pessimistic view of human nature that identifies the penitential process in terms of its hermeneutical potential, not as just a means to encouraging interpretation but also as the end of all literary interpretation in the sense that understanding human nature as flawed is a prerequisite for grace and salvation.

In this respect I disagree with Ganim's claim that Chaucer and Boccacio "displace" the methodology of confession into a "thoroughly secular and mimetic arena." The Parson's Tale and the Retraction identify medieval subjectivity as a matter of spiritual and moral reflection not amenable to secular modes of self-fashioning. Chaucer's appeal for grace in the Retraction preparatory to self-study clearly identifies legitimate self-awareness as a spiritual exercise, not a secular one. Admittedly, Chaucer does not produce an Augustinian type of confession, but instead he produces a series of exemplary tales whose complex blend of secular and sacred elements challenge the reader to re-evaluate the exemplary premise that human moral character can be achieved through

mere imitation of positive role models or the avoidance of negative ones. In his
description of Augustine’s tradition of confessional discourse, Ganim observes the
rugged nature of the terrain between the secular and spiritual, from the worldly self as a
defensive political entity to a genuinely dismantled and contrite penitential self:

The life of the narrator is depicted as something less that a smooth transition to a
coherent inner life. Instead, enlightenment is temporary and contingent, and each
new experience requires a new and equally difficult effort to comprehend and
master, an effort which fails as frequently as not.159

The above description also characterizes the tension between human fallibility and the
requirement of a true confession as featured in Chaucer’s Retraction. The Retraction
announces the poet’s failed attempt to articulate doctrine through narrative. The fact that
Chaucer does not articulate this struggle in explicitly confessional terms does not mean,
as Ganim thinks, that he was “more rooted in the secular realm.”160 In the Tales the
struggle toward the achievement of a genuine subjectivity through exemplary narratives
leads to failure and the necessary adoption of penitential means in order to recover a
purpose for literature. In this respect Chaucer’s apparent secular orientation is strictly
provisional, intended only to demonstrate the impossibility of achieving an authentic
subjectivity while rooted in the exemplary and secular discourses of human ethical
success. As the Retraction demonstrates, apart from grace all attempts to constitute a
coherent self must fail, given the fact of original sin. It is true that Chaucer’s worldly
tales suggest a secular appropriation of confessional discourse, but this secular
identification ignores the penitential rules that stipulate the false nature of any confession

that lacks devotion, a quality that Chaucer firmly links to pre-confessional study abetted by grace. It may be possible to identify the more confessional pilgrims like the Pardoner as offering negative examples pseudo-confessions, but it does not follow that Chaucer has therefore secularized confession. Such pseudo-confessions do not necessarily support the argument for Chaucer’s secular appropriation of penance, but rather they demonstrate the flawed nature of human subjectivity apart from divine grace.

Attempts at self-constitution apart from grace fulfill Neitzsche’s skeptical notion of illusory confessions that legitimate the “moral ground” of refusing to deceive oneself with the fiction of confessional honesty. Chaucer’s Retraction rejects the Neitzschean morality of awareness when it identifies grace as necessary to the achievement of true confession. Neitzsche’s “moral ground” of skepticism with respect to the truth-value of confessions attempts to moralize awareness. Chaucer—possessing much the same awareness—refuses this option when he asks for grace in order to “studie” his own soul, a literary as well as spiritual act that creates space not only for interpretation but also for truth. Indeed, Chaucer’s prayer for grace in the Retraction underwrites the whole of his corpus to the extent that it makes human fallibility a condition for both accurate interpretation of the self and thus accurate confessions. Without grace, Chaucer’s profound narrative accounts of human nature would be reduced to a vacuous exercise in human awareness, the so-called moral ground of Neitzschean skepticism unrelieved by any hope for divine aid. Apart from grace, Chaucer’s narrative achievement could go no further than to stimulate more reader awareness of the slippery nature of human attempts at self-disclosure. Too often Chaucer’s prayer for grace and indeed the entire Retraction

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is treated as if it were not Chaucerian, its function reduced to a cliché, its prayer to a
generic formality. But without the Retraction we would be left with the Parson’s generic
confession as a type of reflective barrier, productive of either confessional illusions, of
the kind that Neitzsche warns against, or the Neitzschean alternative of a skeptical and
terminal awareness of human fallibility.

Although Chaucer does not offer us a model of divinely inspired confession, the
Parson’s description of the good confession suggests that self-disclosure without grace, as
an ethical response to the moral imperatives of exemplary discourse, always fashions
itself as a means to recapturing some sense of normative ethical success. Confession as a
means to restoring one’s ethical confidence identifies a discrete area of abnormal or
amoral behavior that the penitent hopes to exorcise through naming. A confession
without grace ensures that although the penitent may have failed morally, his confession
trumps his moral failure with an even more impressive display of honest self-exposure.
Confession, thus understood, capitalizes on moral failures or sins as means to
constructing a self whose morality consists in its ability to admit to having done wrong.
This self-deception in turn breeds even more frank confessions that, just as those that
preceded them, merely perpetuate the illusion that if one can narrate moral failure
accurately, some kind of ethical success will have been achieved.

A possible alternative to confession as a substitute for moral action would involve
dismantling all forms of positive exemplification generally. In this respect it may be
instructive that the Parson does not supply a written model of a good confession. The
rules he stipulates in his treatise define confessional objectives in theoretical terms. In
the confessional ‘al moste be toold (X, 976). The confession must also be told “pleynly
with all the circumstances" (X, 975), and no sin can remain “untoold as fer as thow hast remembraunce” (X, 1009). The exemplary confession is held out as a goal, but its achievement remains theoretical. It follows that a good confession, by definition, is one that studies its own fallibility, not as a means to achieving Neitzsche’s skeptical moral ground of mere awareness but as a precondition for receiving grace. The true confession must expose itself as a failed attempt to use self-condemnation as a means to self-constitution. Not only does Chaucer reject positive exempla as transparent accounts of human ethical success, he also queries the successful or true confession.

Thus I regard Chaucer’s Retraction as a serious, nuanced and even critical response to the Parson’s Tale. Chaucer uses the Retraction to identify his worldly texts as literary sins in order to “studie” for the salvation of his soul. He defers confession in order to study his confession. This deferment argues for a Chaucerian awareness of the pitfalls of confession as a naïve attempt to constitute the self. Chaucer does not go so far as to cancel confession in favor of a secular subjectivity, but his Retraction certainly implies a bit of Chaucerian reluctance to commit to the Parson’s ideal of the true confession as a unifying “ende” to both the Tales and Chaucer’s own moral existence. The only confession that Chaucer ever gives us amounts to a directive to engage in further “studie” as a prologue to a final, death-bed confession.

Chaucer’s Pardoner narrates the type of confession that the Retraction attempts to avoid. Lee Patterson describes a kind of confessional negation in his reading of Chaucer’s Pardoner:

In sum, the Pardoner confession contains within it an anti-confession. It is a penitential act that challenges the legitimacy of the very penance it seeks to
perform.... he his mocking that formalism, is himself revealing the emptiness of
the penitential procedures of which he is an agent.162

I do not regard Chaucer’s Retraction as a mockery of penance, nor do I fully agree with
Patterson that the Pardoner challenges the legitimacy of penance. If we compare
Chaucer’s declaration that he will become a full-time penitent with the Pardoner’s facile
revelations of personal guilt, it seems that the Pardoner exemplifies that hasty confession,
the too easy confession that sounds more like exhibitionism than a devout confession.

Chaucer’s Retraction hesitates where the Pardoner’s pseudo-confession rushes ahead in
an effort to secure his audiences trust. The self-exposed Pardoner enjoys the social
benefits that accrue to those not caught in paralyzing waves of penitential self-doubt. We
are sure that after reading his Prologue that the Pardoner possesses a profound sense of
his fallen nature, because he appears to exemplify the deliberative process that the
Parson’s Tale stipulates as necessary preparation for an accurate and devout confession.

Yet, although the Pardoner’s confession may be accurate, it is manifestly not devout:

   For myn entente is nat but for to wynne,
   And nothing for correcioun of synne...
   I preche nothing but for coveitese. (VI, 403-404, 433)

These lines parody Chaucer’s similar and less cynical statement in the Retraction that his
intention as a writer is doctrinal: “Al that is writen is writen for oure doctrine, and that is
myn entente” (X, 1084).

The Pardoner, in spite of his base motives, preaches a morally exemplary tale that
many critics have judges to be the clear winner of the tale-telling contest. Chaucer,

162 Lee Patterson, Chaucer and the Subject of History (Madison: University of Wisconsin
however, judges that even though he set out to tell stories that would teach doctrine, he has failed to the extent that some of his tales are worldly. The Pardoner and Chaucer narrate radically different accounts of human nature. The Pardoner’s open admission of his sinful motives for preaching approximates the Neitzschean claim that pure motives are not possible. Chaucer’s admission in the Retraction that in spite of his best efforts his tales do not all achieve their doctrinal aims allows for admits human fallibility but then capitalizes upon that failure as a platform for receiving divine grace. The Pardoner may be, as Patterson claims, the victim of an “ossified and empty formalism.” But he is a victim as well of his failure to grasp the concept that confession, in order to be efficacious, cannot be narrated like a tale, that is, without grace or a process of divinely inspired study and reflection. There is a strange proportionality between the cynical depth of the Pardoner’s self-incrimination and his apparent disregard for his own salvation. As Patterson claims, this may be evidential of spiritual despair, but it could also signify pride. The Pardoner’s pseudo-confession approximates an ethical act to the extent that it gives the Pardoner credibility. As a self-expressed exemplar of sin, the Pardoner achieves a kind of perverse transparency that substitutes for genuine subjectivity. We think that we know the Pardoner because he has publicly exposed his own hypocrisy, but we must remember that self-admissions of hypocrisy, like Cretan liars, should always be regarded with suspicion.

It is likely that the Pardoner is the victim of his own confession. He feels no need for the absolution he preaches because he is not a common sinner engaged in disguising his sins from others. Through his public admissions, the Pardoner appears to possess a

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163 Lee Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History*, p. 420.
heightened level of moral awareness commensurate to his baseness, the medieval
equivalent, perhaps, of Neitzsche’s moral ground of hyper-awareness. The Pardoner’s
pseudo-confession affords him the social advantage of political autonomy, and his
publicized immorality becomes the signature of his moral superiority. Immoral
perfection becomes for the Pardoner the means for establishing a morally inverted but
also stable sense of self that closely resembles ethical confidence. Having named himself
a “ful vicious man” (VI, 459) quite given over to “yvel entencioun” (VI, 408). The
Pardoner assumes the superior airs of the man who knows he is an erredemable fraud.
Patterson notes that there are signs throughout the Pardoner’s Tale that his is not as
confident a sinner as his Prologue claims, but we should not underestimate the power of
the Pardoner’s pseudo-confession to create the illusion of emotional security where none
in fact, can be had. By publicly naming his covetousness and gross hypocrisy, the
Pardoner exposes his moral guilt at the risk of concealing from himself the far more
serious sin of pride, a sin that also manifests itself as spiritual despair. Confession alone
as a demonstration of self-awareness, cannot guarantee freedom from the need to justify
the self. The confession of one’s immorality can also imprison narrative to the extent that
it creates the illusion of a unitary immoral self that differs little from the exemplary
narrative’s attempt to achieve self-hood through the display of a moral self.

As a literary penitent, Chaucer makes a bid to escape the discursive confines of both
exemplification and confessional discourses by refusing to bend the raw material of
human nature to didacticism’s neat categories. Yet at the same time confessional
discourse, as modified by the Retraction, offers Chaucer an alternative to the exemplary
hubris of either the positive or negative varieties. The effect of the Retraction with its
emphasis upon study and grace is that discursive confession alone cannot guarantee the kind of transparent honesty that it promises. The exemplary self and the confessional self both fail to respond fully to the penitential standards set by the Pardoner’s treatise. Chaucer’s Retraction foregrounds the narrative lapses, omissions, exaggerations and cloaked intentions common to all confessions and all also to all narrative. Chaucer’s penitential impulse, first identified in the _Legend of Good Women_, resists exemplary narrative’s moral optimism, but it also interrogates discursive confession as a secure platform for ethical success. It may be for Chaucer that confession supports only an expectation of further confessions, each as potentially flawed as the one before it. Thus Chaucer’s Retraction with its appeal for divine grace underwrites Chaucer’s transition from moral writing to confession.

CHAPTER 5

CHAUCER’S TWO PARSONS

If Chaucer’s Second Nun’s Tale harbors Lollard doctrine, it is equally remarkable that Chaucer’s Lollard-like Parson delivers a treatise on penance. These seeming contradictions between messenger and message suggest a new genre in which competing religious discourses are forcibly united in order to engage a common enemy. While recognizing the danger of creating a false synthesis between Lollardy and orthodox penance, a case can be made for Lollardy as a natural concomitant to penance since theoretically both discourses attack traditional practice as a proto- secular culture.
characterized by spiritual apathy. On a doctrinal level the apparent antipathy between Lollardy and penance finds resolution in Chaucer’s Retraction where penitential study corresponds to the Lollard emphasis of open texts.

The Parson’s directive that the penitent must tell all (X, 975), that he must not divide his shrift between different confessors (X, 1005), and that he must not “peynte” his confession with “faire subtle wordes” (X, 1021) defines narrative in terms of penitential transparency that corresponds easily with the Lollard appetite for the naked or open biblical text. In opposition to exemplary discourse with its priority of making stories that historically affirm doctrine, Chaucer identifies within penitential theory and Lollard translation principles the foundation for a particularly English literary sensibility. We have already seen that Maidstone’s *Concordia* employs penance and the queen as intercessor to warn Richard II that exemplary discourse must be tempered by an awareness of human fallibility. Chaucer employs a similar critique of Ricardian hubris, but with the difference that by attaching Lollardy to penance, he radicalizes penance as a model of narrative inclusion and openness resistant to the temporal demands of exemplary politics.

The Chaucerian link between Lollardy and penance, while untenable at the purely doctrinal level, at least with respect to oracular confession, finds support in Chaucer’s invention of the Parson as a figure whose Lollardy adjusts to the social and spiritual circumstances of the Canterbury pilgrimage. The Parson’s Lollard profile in the General Prologue describes the Parson only within the boundaries of his own parish, on his home turf as it were. Once the Parson becomes a participant in Harry Bailey’s storytelling contest, the Parson must negotiate with a different set of social and religious
circumstances. This process challenges the exemplary Lollard profile of the Parson offered by the General Prologue and raises the possibility that Chaucer’s Parson changes in the course of the pilgrimage. Such a change may well account for the anomaly of a Lollard-like priest delivering an orthodox penitential treatise.

Rather than attempting to divide the Parson’s identity between Lollardy and penance, I prefer to see in the Parson’s dual identity a deliberate union of Lollardy and penance. In this way Chaucer invents an exemplary Parson equally vulnerable to both Lollard and orthodox attack. This vulnerability may also immunize Chaucer to dangerous criticism from both sides to the extent that both may legitimately claim the Parson as their own. At the same time, the Parson’s dual identity suggests a Chaucerian willingness to attack ideological complacency on both sides. The Lollard Parson rebukes clerical corruption while the penitential Parson employs orthodox discourse to remind reforming Lollards that they are subject to the same fallen nature as their opponents.

Although I hesitate to employ the word *subversive* in connection with Chaucer’s Parson, as a dual figure embodying a discrete set of both Lollard and orthodox values, the Parson confronts not only the pilgrimage’s secularity, but he also queries the didactic story-telling game initiated by the Host. The Parson as a Lollard calls for spiritual pilgrimage, while the Parson as orthodox priest mandates confessional narratives instead of exemplary tales. These two objectives redirect Chaucer’s *Tales* by making it more invested in self-examination than self-promotion, a narrative agenda indirectly critical of Richard II’s policy of endorsing royal power through the use of exemplification. Even more importantly, by linking Lollardy with penance Chaucer creates a new textual *ordinatio* capable of producing narratives not beholden to exemplary norms. Instead of
embracing exemplification, Chaucer looks to the confessional as a model for “naked
texts,” narratives that must be studied, not as objects of prudential deliberation, but as
accounts of human fallibility. Before this can be achieved, however, Chaucer must
dismantle the binarism of orthodoxy/heresy in order to concentrate the reader’s attention
on the more fundamental state of human nature, namely, its depravity. Inherent to both
Lollard and orthodox polemics is the tendency to resort to exaggerated versions of each
the other side’s views. Such exaggerations, like narrative exempla, tend to obscure that
need for interpretation and study. Polemical hyperbole may also have the effect of
making truth or the desire to promote truth a facile substitute for self-examination.
Chaucer’s Parson, a seeming blend of Lollard and orthodox values defies polemical
excesses as practiced by both sides in the late fourteenth century. The Parson’s
penitential emphasis potentially subverts the polemicists on both sides by recalling to their
common or shared condition as sinners.

It is remarkable how easily the Host’s secular ordinatio appropriates the more
religious pilgrims’ narratives. The familiar medieval binarism of “earnest” and “pleye”
collapses in the Tales as the Host imposes a secular framework as a rationale for telling
both secular and religious tales:

Ye goon to Canterbury— God yow speede,
The blissful martir quite yow youre meede!
And wel I woot, as ye goon by the weye,
Ye shapen yow to talen and to pleye (I, 669-772)
The Host acknowledges the spiritual goals of the pilgrimage, but his emphasis upon
“pleye” to the exclusion of “earnest” suggests a denial of the self-scrutiny or penitential

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reflection that Chaucer valorizes in the Retraction. The Host assumes that in spite of the pilgrimages’ ostensibly spiritual function, the pilgrims are getting set to do nothing more than play. Religious tales are told in the course of the journey, but their import is controlled by the Host’s secular ordinatio. The Host does not envision the demise of the religious, only its containment within the controlling perspective of temporal play. As Patterson comments, serious characters in the Tales are consistently at risk of being curtailed, intimidated and out performed by their comic or worldly counterparts. Patterson describes this form of literary intimidation as a “circumspection of the serious” arguing that Chaucer’s invention of the secular story-telling contest “implies an unorthodox and even subversive poetics.”

But Patterson’s reading assumes that the Host represents a secular entity distinct from, in opposition to or only barely tolerant of the religious pilgrims he governs.

Another approach would be to consider the Host as an embodiment of a secular majority inclusive of the all the pilgrims, worldly and religious. Instead of identifying Chaucer’s invention of secular story-telling as subversive, it could be argued that the Host’s secular ordinatio accurately describes the orthodox status quo as it was expressed through the culture of the medieval pilgrimage. In other words, the Host’s secular story-telling contest was not subversive in the least since its containment of the religious within a context of play actually represents the medieval status quo. This interpretation finds support in an exchange between the Lollard William Thorpe and Arundel. Thorpe critiques the medieval pilgrimage for its essential secularity, remarking that when people

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164 Lee Patterson, “The Parson’s Tale and the Quitting of the Canterbury Tales,” p. 374.
return from pilgrimage the have become, “greete janglers, tale-tellers and lyeris.”

Thorpe also berates pilgrims for their ostentatious music and for the effects such music has on village life. Arundel’s defense of these practices seems strained at best, but it gives a good sense of how medieval orthodoxy went out of its way to accommodate the religious or the “earnest” to secular “pleye.” Arundel responds:

The Archebischop seide to me, “Lewid Losel, thou seest not fer inough in this mateer, for thou considrist not the grete traveile of pilgrymes, and therefore thou blamest that this that is praisable. I seie to thee that is right wel don that pilgrymes have with hem both syngeris and also baggepipes, that whanne oon of hem that gon barefote and smytith his too ayens a stoon and hurtith him soore and makith hym bled, it is wel done that he or his felowe rake thanne up a songe…

Arundel’s ridiculous hypothetical of the utility of music for pilgrims with bruised toes makes evident the orthodox willingness to keep peace between the religious and non-religious Christians. It follows that perhaps the true test of orthodoxy, at least within the culture of the medieval pilgrimage, was not doctrinal at all, but entirely social. The Parson, although orthodox in his commitment to sacramental penance, is potentially heretical to the extent that he, like Thorpe, opposes tale-telling. The Host, like Arundel, approves of religion, but not at the expense of the culture of diversion and play. The only time that the Host reacts negatively to religious discourse is when it threatens to move from the exemplary to the penitential, from theory to practice.

In all agreeing by “oon assent” (I, 777) to the Host’s governance, the pilgrims tacitly acknowledge their reluctance to engage fully in the penitential process of reflection and

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165 The Oxford Book of Late Medieval Verse and Prose, ed., Douglas Gray, p. 15.
sober analysis of their sins. The Host does not so much introduce a subversive secular poetic into an otherwise religious context as he merely encourages a secular bent already present within the medieval and orthodox pilgrimage frame. This reading challenges the facile assumption of a fundamental opposition between the religious and secular pilgrims. All the pilgrims, including the Parson, agree to pass the time in diversionary story telling as opposed to what the Host characterizes as the dull silence of penitential reflection:

> For trewly, confort ne myrthe is noon  
> To ride by the weye doumb as a stoon;  
> And therfor wol I maken yow disport,  
> As I seyde erst, and doon yow som confort. (I, 773-776)

The Host offers the “confort” of avoiding silence, especially the silences that might allow for penitential reflection. As we learn from the Clerk’s Prologue, the Host further refines his conception of “pleye” by specifically excluding any tale that raises the subject of sin and penitence:

> Telle us som myrie tale, by youre fey!  
> For what man that is entred in a pleye,  
> He nedes moot unto the pleye assent.  
> *But precheth nat, as freres doon in Lente,*  
> *To make us for oure olde synnes wepe* (IV, 9-13)

The Host prefices these remarks by calling attention to the Clerk’s silence, a disposition that causes the Host anxiety since it betokens not only solemnity but also study:

> “Ye ryde as coy and stille as dooth a mayde  
> Were new espoused, sittynge at the bord;
This day ne I herede of youre tonge a word.

I trowe ye studie aboute som sophyme [fallacious argument]

For Goddes sake, as beth of better chere!

It is no tyme for to studien here. (IV, 2-8)

The Host fears not only penitence and the prospect of having to contemplate his own
guilt, but he also objects to silence generally. The Host’s dislike of study also resonates
with Chaucer’s evaluation of study in the Retraction as necessary to confession. Both
figures appreciate the value of silence and study as appropriate to penance. The Host’s
tale-telling *ordinatio* clearly resists penance. Pilgrimage as an act of penance— a contest
as it were between sin and grace— gives way under the Host’s governance to a
pilgrimage of narrative competition among pilgrims. The Host essentially defers the
sober Lenten facts of personal guilt to another “tyme,” presumably the very end of life.

Equally endemic to the Host’s aversion to penance is the other pilgrims’ failure to
consider fully the implications of their assent to his secular agenda:

> Oure conseil was not longe for to seche.

> Us thoughte it was noght worth to make it wys,

> And graunted hym withouten moore avys,

> And bad hym seye his voirdit as hym leste. (I, 784-787)

The pilgrims too appear to eschew the penitential values of advisement and studie. The
Parson’s warning in his Tale that ill advised confessions produce only light tales
evaluates the Host’s *ordinatio* as predicated upon a similar failure to engage in reflection
and deliberation. This lack of advisement becomes the defining characteristic of the
Host’s governance. The Parson’s penitential orthodoxy opposes the Host’s secular
ordinatio and the kind of religious complacency it spawns by insisting upon the very penitential silences and deliberation that the Host wishes to avoid.

Given the Host’s prohibition against penitential preaching in the Clerk’s Prologue, it comes as something of a surprise that the Host grants the Parson permission to “prechen us somewhat” in the Epilogue to the Man of Law’s Tale. This concession follows the Parson’s rebuke of the Host for swearing, a socially disruptive event that first raises the specter of Lollardy. Given the Parson’s Lollard-like portrait in the General Prologue, it seems remarkable that the Parson ever agreed to the Host’s governance in the first place, but as David Raybin suggests, the final emergence of the Parson as a penitential figure assumes the progression of the other tales:

The Parson’s Tale may offer what from an orthodox perspective is a necessary coda to the Canterbury Tales, but the very necessity of such a perspective to be articulated depends on poet and reader having made the journey of those tales.167 In spite of some critical resistance to the notion that Chaucer’s characters develop and change in the course of the pilgrimage, it seems that not only does the reader have to make the tale’s journey, so also do the pilgrims themselves.168 Elizabeth Fowler’s observation that Chaucer’s characters are built “out of a collection of details and

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168 David Lawton, “Chaucer’s Two Ways: The Pilgrimage Frame of the Canterbury Tales,” Studies in the Age of Chaucer 9 (1987), p. 11, questions the critical approach that looks for “dramatically conceived character,” the “close and ironic relation of tale and teller,” and the general expectation of a “unified spiritual, ethical, or ‘reflexive’ vision that informs most readers of the Canterbury Tales.” Lawton suggests that “voice” or “tone” should displace characterization as a key to understanding “problematic narratorial passages.” I must confess that it seems that any study of tone or voice naturally presumes an interest in character.
fragments" recognizes that although figures like the Host and Parson are not fully realized characters such as we might expect from the novel genre, these various bits of information do invite us to make the attempt to piece the fragments together into better understand human nature or the "inward man."^{169}

While remaining agnostic with respect to Chaucer's full narrative design and its relation to Chaucer's use of fictional characters, it seems a mistake to negate character development in the Tales on the grounds that the text, as we have it, does not represent a final, authorized form of the Tales. Figures like the Host or the Parson change and develop through an accretion of narrative detail that potentially transcends the problem of the finding out the probable form Chaucer intended a finished version of the Tales to take. The Parson's fragmentary presence in the General Prologue, the Epilogue to the Man of Law's Tale, and finally in his own Prologue and Tale stimulate curiosity. These fragments of personality or belief create gaps that demand filling. Chaucer's Host and his Parson are truly characters of the gaps, figures whose development must remain a matter of narrative reconstruction. The fact of characterization as reconstruction may actually get us closer to an original Chaucerian intent that the opposite view that Chaucer did not intend his characters to be read as individual, self-governing moral agents capable of change. The latter view must assume the greater burden of proof since it must argue against textual evidence. Although fragmentary and inconclusive, the fact that the Parson emerges more than once in the course of the pilgrimage, and the fact that he, like the Host and others, responds to other pilgrims makes a fairly convincing case for viewing his character as undergoing significant changes.

^{169} Elizabeth Fowler, *Literary Character: The Human Figure in Early English Writing* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2003), pp. 33-34.
As characters, the Host and the Parson develop in tandem, and the anticipated confrontation between the Host and the Parson takes time to emerge. In the Reeve’s Prologue the narrator tells us that “for the moore part they loughe and pleyde (I, 3858). This nuanced register of audience response to the bawdy Miller’s Tale suggests that the Parson, like the other pilgrims, has not yet turned into the anti-fiction Lollard priest of Fragment X, or at least he does not yet feel ready to go public with his Lollard beliefs. When the Host and the Parson do finally emerge as opponents, the dispute centers upon the matter of the Host’s swearing and irreverence, not his secular ordinatio, that will only become an issue at the near conclusion of the pilgrimage:

“Sir Parisshe Prest, “ quod he, “For Goddes bones,
Telle us a tale, as was thi forward yore.
I se wel that ye lemed men in lore
Can moche good, by Goddes dignitee!
The Parson him answered, “Benedictee!
What eyleth the man, so sinfully to swere?” (II, 1170-1171)

The Host’s two-pronged response to this rebuke negotiates between two characterizations of the medieval clergy: “O Jankin, be ye there? I smelle a Lollere in the wynd.” (II: 173) By referring to the Parson as “Jankin”, a pejorative name for a priest, the Host accuses the Parson of hypocrisy for failing to make known earlier his actual agenda. The Host seems to register his surprise at finding out the true nature of the Parson’s religious commitments. The rhetorical question, “O Jankin, be ye there?” not only identifies the Parson as deceptive, it also suggests that a Lollard Parson who goes on pilgrimage may
be as hypocritical as the corrupt priests that the Lollards criticize. The Lollard identification, like the Jankin allusion, signals the Host’s confusion. In the end, as the Host makes clear when he announces that the Parson will be allowed to preach, the Lollard identity sticks, at least for the present: “we schal han a predicacioun/ This Lollere heer wil prechen us somwhat.” (II, 1176-1177) At this stage is would seem that the Host has it right, and the Parson must be a real Lollard, given that he rebukes the Host’s swearing and fails to deny the Lollard assignation, once it is applied. Yet the Host’s identification of the Parson as a Lollard raises the general problem of what test to use in order to confirm Lollardy. The Parson’s Tale itself would seem to warrant a denial of the Parson’s Lollardy, but would the Host have found penance and Lollardy to be incompatible? Does the Host brand the Parson a Lollard on doctrinal grounds, or is his test for Lollardy based purely on the fact that the Parson has just reminded the Host of his sins? As we have already seen, in the Host’s secular economy where penance is not admitted, the Parson’s rebuke could amount to an act with heretical implications. Not because it violates doctrine, but because it disturbs the orthodox and secular status quo. Standard definitions of Lollardy may not apply in this context since, although they are not immaterial to the problem of the Parson’s identity, the Host’s particular aversion to penance tends to redefine Lollardy in terms of any voice that makes the Host think about his “olde synnes.”

When the Parson rebukes the Host for “synfully” swearing, he does more than create a social disturbance. In the Clerk’s Prologue the Host specifically forbids any talk that would cause the pilgrims to remember their sins. The Lollard tag is attached to the

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Parson regardless of the fact that Lollards typically disapproved of pilgrimages, but expressly because the Parson rebukes the Host’s sin of swearing. The Parson’s rebuke coincides with the Host’s fear of penance to suggest that Chaucer has an interest in redefining the concept of heresy to include any type of discourse that stings the collective conscience. In this respect it is interesting that in the Clerk’s Prologue that the Host specifically forbids any speech that might resemble the friar’s Lenten sermons. The Host is not condemning Lenten sermons as much as he is warning against any attempt to extend the Lenten sermon beyond its defined boundaries. The Parson rebukes sin informally, outside the sermon genre, and in a manner that extends penitential awareness beyond its institutional limits into the everyday and secular world the Host enjoys. Like the infamous Margery Kemp, the Parson is tagged a Lollard for acting out of character. Unlike a “Jankin,” the Parson violates the Host’s expectation that his play will not be interrupted by anything penitential. This is the first glimpse we have of the Parson as a direct opponent to the Host’s secular orthodoxy. It follows from this reading that it is Chaucer’s Parson who is the actual subversive voice within the Canterbury Tales, not because he is a doctrinal heretic, or just because he rebukes the Host for swearing, but because he shows signs of an increasing unwillingness to support the Host’s governance and ordinatio of rejecting penance in favor of play. As the Thorpe/Arundel exchange over pilgrimage demonstrates, medieval orthodoxy favored the type of pilgrimage that the Host wants.

Towards a Definition of Lollardy: Doctrine or Devotion?
Pamela Gradon’s longstanding definition of Lollardy as a synonym for *gyrovagi* no longer answers to the more precise and yet multi-faceted concept of Lollardy that we now possess. As Andrew Cole writes, Gradon’s definition “comprehends virtually all the discourses of anti-vagrancy in England and he continent.” Gradon’s comprehensive definition of Lollardy sidesteps the vital issues of doctrinal heresy and Lollard political dissent. Although vagrancy and its various ills were universally lamented and something branded heretical, Wycliffites were not the original *gyrovagi*.

The seminal invention of “Lollard” as a heretical tag has commonly been assigned to the London Blackfriar’s council of 1382. The Carmelite account of the Blackfriar’s council in the *Fasciculi Zizaniorum* names an Oxford opponent of Wycliffe, Henry Crump, as having been suspended from scholastic duties—“because he called Lollards heretics.” The fact that Crump was penalized at Oxford for referring to Wycliffites as heretics and underscores the lack of consensus in 1382 over the status of Wyclif’s teaching. Although the *FZ* cites Crump as having named the Wycliffites as Lollards, or the Lollards as heretics, recent scholarship has challenged the seminal value of the 1382 date. Wendy Scase notes that “Lollardos” does not appear in the official document used by the *FZ* Carmelite compiler. The official document actually calls for Crump’s reinstatement, given that he acted only in support of the Archbishop of Canterbury and

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172 In the mid-fourteenth century John De Grandisson, Bishop of Exeter, complained that false hermits or *gyrovagi* and false confessors were in his diocese distributing false pardons and hearing confessions without licenses. Chaucer’s Pardoner may well represent this sense of the term *gyrovagi*. This form of mediant misconduct bears some relevance also to the Lollard movement since both groups preached without Episcopal license, see Lawrence M. Clopper, “Franciscans, Lollards, and Reform,” *Lollards and Their Influence*, pp. 181-183.
should therefore not be penalized by his Oxford colleagues for having associated Wyclif with heresy. As Scase puts it, “the word [Lollard] must be that of the Carmelite compiler writing some years after the events reported occurred, by which time the term was regularly used to denote Wycliffites.” As a participating member of the Blackfriar’s Council, Crump probably called Wyclif and his followers heretics, but it is doubtful that he called them Lollards, at least not in the later sense of the 1390s when the term Lollard became roughly synonymous with Wycliffism.

Cole similarly identifies the equation of Lollardy with Wycliffism as a “back-formation” in the sense that Wyclif’s opponents applied the term retroactively in the late 1380s in order to characterize Wycliffism as if it had always been identified with heresy. In 1382 the precise range of the term Lollardy had yet to be secured by either side in the debate. Nicholas Hereford’s famous anti-fraternal sermon on Ascension Day, 1382—barely a week before his condemnation as a heretic at the Blackfriar’s council—was recorded in Latin as naming the friars as *lurdici et loselli*. Scase argues that the term *lurdici* could derive from the verb *lordicare* which in the Benedictine Rule described the false beggar’s pretend infirmities. Scase suggests that the probable English phrase Hereford uses was “lollers and losels,” itself a likely translation of *lurdici et loselli*.

It is not entirely clear why Scase argues for a 1382 Wycliffite usage of Lollere to refer to corrupt friars after having also argued that Lollard, as a term, was not yet available to the notary of the official document of the 1382 Blackfriar’s council. The implication of Scase’s argument is that the term Lollere was appropriated by Nicholas Hereford against

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the friars and only later re-appropriated by the friars to consolidate their heretical charges against the Wycliffites. Cole appears to disagree, arguing that the term Lollere or Lollard does not make any firm textual appearance until 1389 and that Wyclif, in all his writings, never mentions the term Lollard.\footnote{Cole, “William Langland and the Invention of Lollardy,” p. 42.} It seems likely that in 1382 the use of “Lollard” as a synonym for Wycliffism was still insecure, but as Hereford’s sermon illustrates, it was common to use “Lollard” to refer to persons who were regarded as the medieval equivalent of the gospel’s “cockles and tares.” In 1382 a Lollere was a “tare,” but not yet a heretic or a Wycliffite.

The name most likely used by the Wycliffites to refer to their own itinerate preachers in the early 1380s was viri evangelici or in English, “trewe men.”\footnote{Clopper, “Franciscans and Reform,” pp. 189-190, note 45.} Phillip Repingdon—the chronicler Henry Knighton’s former abot, Wyclif’s follower, and after recanting the bishop of London—reported that John of Gaunt referred to Wycliffite preachers as sancto sacerdotes.” It has been suggested that this was a copyist’s error and that the actual term used by Gaunt was simplices sacerdotes. Lawrence Copper, however, notes that “neither Wyclif nor the Lollards invented the term sacerdos simplex,” but it was a term used in canon law to distinguish the lower clergy from the bishops. Wyclif, it seems, used the terms viri apostilici or viri evangelici to distinguish “trewe men” from the common orthodox clergy or sacerdotes simplices.\footnote{Copper, “Franciscans and Reform,” pp. 189-190, note 45.} Given the degree of both popular and influential support for Wyclif at Oxford in the early 1380s, Wyclif’s enemies needed to supplant positive terms such as “trewe men” with other, less laudatory names.
In the early to mid-1380s the Wycliffites may have gained the discursive advantage in their appropriation of terms such as *lollia* to refer to the clergy. At least two Oxford poems written in support of Wyclif suggest that Wycliffite writers employed *zizanium* or *lollia* to refer to corrupt friars, men who faked poverty in order to enrich themselves as seeming beggars. The genesis of Lollard as a derivation from *lollia* or “tares” is probably impossible to prove, as is Scase’s suggestion of a possible link between the Benedictine *lordicare* and Lollard, but we do know that in the early 1380s control over the term Lollard with its implication of “tares” was not yet decided. In 1382 Oxford sided with Wyclif in branding false friars *lolium* but by 1388-89 we find Nicholas Hereford lamenting the hostile application of “Lollard” to Wycliffites. The Carmelite Richard Maidstone, writing against the Wycliffite John Ashwardby in the late 1380’s, identifies Ashwardby’s doctrinal views as characteristic of the *secta lollardum*. Therefore, it seems that the emergence of the term Lollard as synonymous with Wycliffism roughly corresponds to Richard II’s 1389 resumption of full regality and the general need throughout English society to reassert traditional authority.

The Appellants’ provisional disposition of Richard in 1388 may have sealed the Wycliffite’s political fate by forcing Richard to take more seriously his role as defender of orthodoxy and incidentally secured the clergy’s control of the term Lollard. The Appellants initiated the first serious parliamentary action against Wycliffites during the Merciless Parliament. A political competition develops between Richard and the Appellants was over who could be more anti-heresy. Upon regaining power in 1389,

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178 Anne Hudson observes that the term “Lollard” was ‘intensely disliked by those to whom it was early applied, though later it became a badge proudly worn.” *The Premature Reformation*, p. 3.

Richard proved himself a firm defender of the catholic faith in his newly discovered opposition to Wycliffism.

Sir John Clanvowe’s Orthodox Lollardy

The Lollard Knight Sir John Clanvowe’s *Two Ways* provides yet another account of the evolution the term Lollard as a positive sign of their fundamentalist Gospel ethos. Written in the late 1380s, Clanvowe’s treatise makes explicit reference to “lollers” and “losels” (line 512) as a despised minority of which Clanvowe counts himself a member. Clanvowe resents the application of “lollers” to those who take seriously the Gospel command to follow the “nargh wey that leedeth to heune” (line 827), but he also appropriates this kind of rejection by the clergy as evidence of a worldly inversion of spiritual values such that those who follow the Gospel are considered “foolis” or “lolleris,” while those who love the world are praised as “goode felawes” (line 585).

The stigma of Lollardy becomes for Clanvowe a mark of distinction. The same kind of scorn, he argues, was also heaped upon Christ “and recche we neuer though the world scoorne vs or hoolde vs wrecches” (lines 520-521). Clanvowe’s specific appropriation of “lolleris” redefines Lollardy as true orthodoxy and medieval orthodoxy as false and worldly in it preoccupation with temporal things. Clanvowe’s positive absorption of “Lolleris” also functions as social evidence for Clanvowe that the Lollards were traveling in the Gospels narrow way, since the prelacy’s rejection of Lollard beliefs confirmed the Lollards’ otherworldliness. Although the scholarly consensus is that Wycliffism and Lollardy describe the same reform movement, Clanvowe’s treatise never makes any
explicit statements linking its biblical or Gospel ethic with Wyclif’s doctrines or political innovations. K.B. McFarlane writes:

The only trace of Lollardy is in the silences. Clanvowe says nothing in favor of confessions, pilgrimage, the veneration of saints, the effectiveness of the sacraments, nothing at all about the priesthood. He ignores the Church as an institution altogether.¹⁸⁰

We cannot say that Clanvowe did not regard himself as a Wycliffite, only that in the late 1380s the term “lollere” could be applied without making direct reference to any of Wycliff’s doctrinal positions.

When Chaucer, an associate of Clanvowe’s, makes explicit reference to Lollardy in the Man of Law’s Epilogue, we should not assume an implication of doctrinal heresy. It may be possible to read the Host’s reference to the Parson as a Lollard in light of Clanvowe’s conception of Lollardy in the Two Ways. Between 1388-1400, the time-frame in which Chaucer probably wrote the Canterbury Tales, Wycliff’s opponents used the term Lollard to refer to Wyclif’s heretical doctrines, yet during this same period “Lollere” could also be applied derisively to any person of pious demeanor or speech—the usage appropriated by Clanvowe.¹⁸¹ Anne Hudson cites the Wycliffite sermons of

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MS. Bodley 806, folio 70 as evidence for the latter usage. The sermon laments that “if a man or a woman do wel or speke wel, and gladly wolde plesse God, they ben contrarie to here dedis and so thei scornen suche men and clepen hem Lollardis.” This account confirms Clanvowe’s definition of Lollardy and identifies Lollardy in terms of the difference between Christian believers who literally follow the Gospel commands and those professed Christians who do not. Clanvowe accepts that he is a Lollard not because of specific doctrinal commitments, but because he adheres to a strict interpretation of the bible as the rule of life for Christians.

Clanvowe also links Lollardy to a willing assumption of poverty, a usage that recalls the gyrovagi and the larger medieval debate over the prescriptive value of Christ’s poverty. In this respect it may be possible to identify the pejorative sense of “lollerie,” as Clanvowe understands it, as an implication of vagrancy on the part of any person who lives “meekliche in this world:”

And also swiche folke that wolden fayne lyuen meekliche in this world and ben out offe swich forseid riot, noise, and stryf, and lyuen symplely, and vsen to eten and drynken in mesure, and to cloothen hem meekely, and suffren paciently wroonges hat oother folke doon and seyn to hem, and desiren noo greet name of this world, ne no pris ther of, swiche fold the world scorneth and hooldeth hem lolleris and loselis, foolis and shameful wrecches. (lines 503-513)

Clanvowe’s excavation of the term “lolleris” makes no reference to discrete doctrine. Instead, Clanvowe appears eager to defend Lollardy against the accusation of vagrancy since they tended to generalize “towards the higher perspective” as opposed to the “particularized style” of nominalism.

Hudson, Premature Reformation, p. 3, note 8.

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by arguing that the apostolic virtues of meekness, self-control and poverty have been scorned. Clanvowe depicts a Christian world where the apostolic virtues are scorned by nominal Christians, persons that Clanvowe simply refers to as the “world.”

In his brief account of the life of Christ, Clanvowe cites Christ as our “ensampl of meeknessse and willful pouerte” (lines 730-731). At the core of Clanvowe’s Lollard ethic lies the conviction that one’s life ought to conform literally to the Gospels. A parallel conviction informed the Spiritual Franciscans’ determination to follow their founder’s rule of absolute poverty, a stance that led to a papal condemnation in 1323.¹⁸³ Both the Lollards and the Spiritual Franciscans advocated strict literal readings of their founding texts. The Spiritual Franciscans espoused St. Francis’ Last Testament, while the Lollards insisted upon a literal implementation of the Gospel’s commands.

Yet in Clanvowe’s case these resemblances are misleading. Clanvowe writes that extreme abstinence as well as extreme poverty of the kind that encourages sloth is a vice. He repeatedly argues for “mesure” or Aristotle’s “mean” as a crucial interpretive principle in his reading of the Gospels. Clanvowe tempers his advocacy of “willful pouerty” with the admonition that true Christians ought to “trauaille trewely,” and if they earn more than what they need for themselves, they should give it to those who have less (lines 310-312). This clarification also informs William Langlands poetic commentary on the evolution of “lollares.” As Cole has shown, Langland makes a sharp distinction between good and bad Lollards. Bad Lollards or “lewede Ermytes” are former tradespersons or workers who discover that by adopting the guise of begging friars they can avoid having to work. Good Lollards or “lunatyk lollares,” like Clanvowe’s

appropriation of the term “loller,” are those persons whose worldly foolishness marks their spiritual integrity. Cole notes that Langland recovers and appropriates the term “lollare” as an “ideal form of apostleship.” For Langland, the bad Lollard who shuns work is the true heretic, not the Wycliffite Lollard who labors but who also shuns worldly ambition, wealth and ease.  

The association of the term Lollard with the Vulgate’s *lolia* or tares seems to have presented no barrier to both Clanvowe’s recuperation of the term to indicate apostolic virtue. By adopting a term of abuse, Clanvowe reorients the debate. Instead of fighting over who would ultimately control the term Lollard, he abandons it to orthodox control and adjusts the debate to focus on qualitative differences. It follows that the term Lollard becomes less important as an indicator of one’s religious status than does the scrutiny of a person’s actual life. Clanvowe nullifies the force of the term Lollard by adopting it. In its place, he establishes a standard of Christian praxis that resists the kinds of reductive summaries that Chaucer’s Host seems to favor. Clanvowe’s appropriation of the term Lollard also mitigates against a reductionist account that distinguishes Lollardy from orthodoxy by virtue only of its heresies.

It is this understanding of Lollardy that has made Chaucer’s relationship with Lollardy so fraught with contradictions. The prospect of a strain of Lollardy that identified itself exclusively in terms of the Gospel rather than with Wyclif’s political or doctrinal views may deserve consideration. Hudson talks about the “gray area” that existed between

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orthodoxy and Lollardy. She also remarks, “conservative Lollardy is sometimes very close to radical orthodoxy.” As a strategy, Clanvowe’s account of Lollardy in the *Two Ways* attempts to identify Lollardy more in terms of its actual praxis than its doctrines. The *Two Ways* does not so much rehabilitate the term Lollard, as it insists upon a re-examination of what made Lollardy necessary in the first place—namely, the worldliness of the medieval church. Clanvowe represents a Lollardy committed to denying worldly vanity, not a Lollardy devoted to attacking orthodox doctrines. The urge to define Lollardy in terms of its doctrinal views regarding oracular confession, the eucharist, pilgrimages and images may actually represent an orthodox caricature of Lollard dissent that effectively neutralized Lollardy as a reform movement by defining it exclusively in terms of its doctrinal heresies. Once defined exclusively in terms of its heterodoxies, Lollardy would potentially lose much of its popular reformist appeal. Clanvowe may well write the *Two Ways* in an attempt to redefine Lollardy as a reform movement rather than as a heretical sect. Clanvowe opposes swearing, fables and secularism generally rather than pilgrimages, indulgences, confessions or the eucharist.

This strategy may offer a productive approach to understanding Chaucer’s reference to Lollardy in the Man of Law’s Epilogue. Critics have often regarded Chaucer’s Host’s reference to Lollards as a textual anomaly given the Parson’s doctrinal orthodoxy as exhibited in his penitential tale. But this approach privileges a definition of Lollardy favored only by the extreme sides in the debate. If the explicit rejection of the real presence is taken as the touchstone of Lollardy, then Chaucer’s Parson is not a Lollard,

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but neither then is Clanvowe or even Wyclif himself. Similarly, if the Lollard rejection of oracular confession becomes a standard by which Lollardy is defined, again the Parson must be accounted orthodox.

It seems likely that the full orthodox consolidation of the term Lollard as a pejorative and reductive tag for Wycliffites depended largely upon the actions taken against Wycliffites by the king in 1389. This process begins in 1382 when the pope condemns Wyclif's emphasis upon the symbolic function of the eucharist and his denial of the need for priestly absolution. But not until 1389 does the secular arm of government begin to support the church's attempt to brand the Wycliffites heretics. Paul Strohm shows that Chaucer was fully apprised of the 1382 condemnation of Wyclif's eucharist theory.\(^{187}\)

The fact that Chaucer allows the Lollard tag to be attached to a Parson who exhibits no sympathy whatsoever to the Wycliffite doctrines condemned by the pope in 1382, suggests that Chaucer, like Clanvowe, attempted to rescue Lollardy from its sectarian identity. This does not necessarily mean that Chaucer rejected the Lollard critique of transubstantiation, after all the Second Nun's Tale's Lollard content suggests that he may have supported it, at least at one time. Chaucer may have concurred with Wyclif heterodoxy, but strategically the attempt to emphasize Lollard spirituality over its doctrinal views potentially removes Lollardy from the political trap that Richard and the clergy set for it in the late 1380s. Once the persecution of Lollards became a means of gaining political capital, Wyclif's heterodoxy became a serious liability to court employed figures such as Clanvowe and Chaucer. Chaucer's veiled support in the Second Nun's Tale for the Lollard rejection of the real presence must be balanced against

Chaucer’s depiction of a Lollard Parson conspicuous for his lack of interest in both Lollard doctrines or the orthodox condemnation of them. Between the Second Nun’s Tale and the Parson lies an apparent gray area of either Chaucerian indecision, political caution or, perhaps, a careful Lollard strategy. What is remarkable about both Clanvowe’s *Two Ways* and Chaucer’s Second Nun’s Tale and Parson is that they differ greatly from other Wycliffite writings in terms of their reluctance to limit their conceptions of Lollardy to Lollard doctrine. Instead of adopting the polemical stance of the Lollard preacher and pamphleteers, Chaucer embeds his Lollard doctrines in orthodox genres and gives his Lollard Parson an orthodox penitential voice. These narrative evasions suggest a strategy common to both Clanvowe and Chaucer for redefining Lollardy as less political in a time when Lollards had to decide whether they would become heretics or reformers. The political Lollard would functionally become the Lollard heretic, while the apolitical Lollard would suppress his heterodoxy in order to preserve his otherworldliness. The implication of both Clanvowe’s *Two Ways* and Chaucer’s Parson is that the choice to foreground Lollard doctrine amounts to a decision to politicize the gospel and potentially reduce Lollardy to a polemical bid for power. The reformation paradox in play in the late 1380s and 1390s is that if Lollardy became the new orthodoxy, it would invariably begin to assume the liabilities of the old orthodoxy it had displaced, such is the nature of orthodoxies.

While the Host precipitously names the Parson a “lollere,” he does so because the Parson takes as literal and binding the biblical commandment against blasphemous speech or swearing (II, 1173). The Host’s specific use of “lollere” to identify the Parson confirms Clanvowe’s recognition of “olleris” as a term of abuse for anyone who actually
tried to put into practice the Gospel. Chaucer' Host embodies the worldliness that Clanvowe find in society’s much approved “goode felawes” but more importantly, the Host’s failure to connect Lollardy with doctrinal Wycliffism or heresy aims a criticism at those who did by exposing their use of the term for what it was, an ploy to impugn Wyclif’s reform agenda by reducing Wycliffism to a discrete set of heretical doctrines. Clanvowe’s strategic redefinition of Lollardy in the Two Ways tacitly criticizes the papal condemnation of Wyclif in 1382 by making evident what the church chose to ignore—namely, the Wycliffite’s apostolic virtues. In this way Clanvowe and Chaucer also redefine clerical opposition to Wycliffism as actually opposition to Christ and the apostles. By removing all mention of Wyclif’s distinctive doctrines, Clanvowe effectively silences clerical opposition, leaving a strongly defended impression of Lollardy as the medieval incarnation of the apostolic way of life. Clanvowe and Chaucer attempt to steer a middle course between Lollardy as heresy and Lollardy as a type of social irritant. The ideal Lollardy that both writers seem to envision is neither overtly political, nor is it just socially disruptive. But as Chaucer seems to understand, this formulation of Lollardy is also impossible to maintain. The Lollard, as constructed by Chaucer, must constantly adjust his Lollardy to the constant attempt by society to make a Lollard into what it thinks a “tare” or a heretic should be. It follows that the key issue regarding the Parson’s identity should not be whether he is a card-carrying Lollard, but rather what kind of Lollard do others want him to be. Chaucer’s Parson appears to represent that awkward stage in the evolution of a movement when the idealistic founders find themselves unable to identify any longer with their own cause. One gets the sense that the Oxford based Wycliffites are taken off guard by the heretical trend the movement

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has taken, that the protagonists of Lollardy are no longer the Lollard Knights or figures such as Hereford, Repingdon or, perhaps, Chaucer. In their place we find the William Thorpes, the martyrs and the polemicists, men who would be defined by their persecutors solely in terms of their doctrinal beliefs. We cannot say that Chaucer was not a Lollard, but we can say that if he was, he was not willing to be defined solely in terms of Lollard doctrine.

Chaucer’s Host, although potentially representative of Clanvowe’s “goode felawes,” has the rhetorical function of protecting Clanvowe’s conception of Lollardy from the taint of Wycliffite heresy. This is natural, given the Host’s lay status. Lollardy, as defined by the Host, amounts to a religiously engendered social irritant. In her reading of the Man of Law’s Epilogue, Anne Middleton also argues that by “lollere” the Host means someone who makes a general nuisance of himself by talking endlessly about religion regardless of context, “an incipient sower of discord, set loose in the house of social fiction.” The Host does not appear to recognize the Parson as a doctrinaire Lollard or heretic. He does, however, recognize the Parson as a Lollard to the extent that the Parson appears insists upon a literal observance of the biblical prohibition against swearing. Some critics have tended to characterize Chaucer’s Host as merely suspicious of the Parson’s Lollardy, a view that probably reflects a general critical reluctance to acknowledge any figure or text as Lollard unless it features conspicuous signs of supporting Lollard doctrine. But as Clanvowe’s characterization demonstrates, the Host’s attribution of Lollardy to the

Parson need not reflect any taint of doctrinal heresy. The restricted sense of the Lollard as doctrinal heretic fits the 1382 condemnation of Wyclif’s heterodox views, but it may have little bearing on the Host’s grasp of Lollardy. Alexander Patschovsky writes of heresy in the Middle Ages as a disruptive element, a social and political interruption of the status quo in which moral laxness and even doctrinal error on the part of the church hierarchy were seen as preferable to disunity. The Parson’s somewhat belated attempt to forward Gospel religion by rebuking the Host, represents a distinctively Wycliffian strategy that anticipates the modern division of church and state. The Parson rebukes sin with an eye to what offends God, not what offends man. Thus, the Parson envisions disunity or at least a degree of social tension as a necessary byproduct of Gospel living. The Host identifies the Parson as a Lollard not because he is doctrinally heretical, but because his rebuke implicitly challenges the essential unity of Catholicism, a unity predicated upon a general willingness to not only adhere to the same doctrines, but to also avoid causing discord by insisting on strict standards of Christian behavior. When the Parson rebukes the Host for swearing, he furthers his biblical agenda at the expense of social harmony. In this narrative event Chaucer makes evident orthodoxy’s commitment to social harmony and unity.

Although the Host names the Parson as a Lollard, only the Shipman makes an explicit connection between Lollardy and Heresy. The Shipman protests against not only the Parson’s Lollardy, but also against the Host’s decision to allow the Parson to “prechen us somewhat.” (II, 1177) The Shipman protests:

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“Nay by my fader soule, that schalt he nat!”

Seyde the Shipman, “Heer schal he nat preche;
He schal no gospel glosen here ne teche.
We leven alle in the grete God,” quod he;
“He wolde sowen some difficulte,
Or springen cokkel in our clene corn. (II: 11789-1183)

Since much of my argument is based upon a careful reading of the Man of Law’s Epilogue it becomes necessary that I also address some of the editorial issues that the Epilogue raises. In spite of its exclusion from later manuscripts of the Tales, most notably the twenty-two that follow the Ellesmere pattern, the Man of Law’s Epilogue attests to an early narrative design in which the Host emerges as willing to hear a Lollard sermon. We cannot be certain that Chaucer intended to erase fully the Man of Law’s Epilogue from some finished version of the Tales. It is just as likely that the Epilogue was set aside for a final revision that never happened, but a scholarly cancellation of the Man of Law’s Epilogue excises from the Tales a remarkable glimpse into the relationship between the Host and the Parson. The fact remains that in thirty-five of the fifty-seven complete manuscripts of the Tales the Man of Law’s Tale is joined to the tale that follows it by the Epilogue. Among these thirty-five manuscripts, the Epilogue usually introduces the Squire’s Tale, and in only a single manuscript does the Epilogue introduce the Shipman’s Tale. Apparently, medieval scribes used the Epilogue to introduce the Squire and the Summoner as well as, in a single instance, the Shipman. As the Riverside Chaucer editors affirm, all three readings of the Epilogue as an introduction to the
Shipman, Squire or Summoner are "scribal inventions." But the Host's naming of the Parson as a Lollard and the identification of gospel preaching with heresy by a character other than the Host are not scribal inventions in some thirty-five manuscripts of the Tales.

It is ironic that the Host emerges from his encounter with the Parson as still willing to allow the Parson to preach. The Shipman—or the Summoner or Squire, depending upon which manuscript one consults—refuses, however, to budge from the Host's secular ordination. This apparent lapse on the Host's part from his anti-penitential bias marks the first indication that the Host is actually more amenable to penance than he at first appears. The Man of Law's Epilogue nearly terminates the entire contest, since there is the possibility that if allowed to preach, the Parson would deliver his stultifying penitential treatise. It is interesting that the Shipman buttresses his objection to the Parson's preaching by alluding to Lollardy's heretical reputation. The Shipman, like the Host, identifies the Parson with the Gospel. The Shipman also defines orthodoxy in terms of strictly nominal belief and heresy as any exercise of religion that exceeds the nominal to undertake actual Christian praxis. Thus the Shipman defends a secular orthodoxy in direct opposition to the Bible. Although no evidence of doctrinal heresy has yet been detected in the Parson, his rebuke of the Host's swearing amounts in the Shipman's mind to an un-necessary and disruptive of medieval orthodoxy, defined by the

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191 *The Riverside Chaucer*, pp. 862, 1126 and p. 863.
192 John Bowers, "Two Professional Readers of Chaucer and Langland: Scribe D and the HM 114 Scribe," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 26 (2004), p. 123 describes the Man of Law's Epilogue or "endlink" as "really a prologue without a tale, or rather the draft prologue perhaps introducing the original tale for the Wife of Bath, later reassigned without real revision to the Shipman. Therefore formal rather than ideological motives may account for the passage's absence in Hengwrt and Ellesmere."
Shipman as a nominal belief in God that does not disturb the religious/secular status quo.

By constructing the exchange among the Parson, Host and Shipman in this way, Chaucer challenges the heretical classification leveled against Wyclif and his followers in 1382. The real heresy that incited the clergy against Wyclif had less to do with Wyclif’s actual doctrines than it did with his repeated attacks upon conventional religious practice.

Chaucer constructs a non-heretical strain of Lollardy for both strategic and satirical purposes. A non-heretical type of Lollardy not only reconnects reader awareness to the Lollard’s Biblicism and in the process bolsters it reform agenda, it also exposes the real reasons behind the orthodox attempt to reduce Wycliffism to a merely a set of heretical doctrines. As the Shipman’s outburst demonstrates, “gospel” is a term closely associated with Lollardy. As Hudson notes, Wyclife was commonly referred to as Doctor Evangilicus—“this name links two important aspects of his message: the gospel and the duty of preaching the gospel.”193 In his General Prologue, Chaucer similarly depicts the Parson as engaged in gospel preaching—“Christes gospel trewely wolde preche” (GP, 481)—an activity that, according to the Shipman, defines the Parson as a heretic. Both Clanvowe and Chaucer appear to collaborate in an effort to show how the orthodox attack on Lollardy amounted to an actual attack on the Gospel itself. They do not attempt to debate the doctrinal issues, but rather they critically examine the root cause of the debate, namely the orthodox rejection of the Gospel.

The Shipman (or the Summoner or Squire) rejects the Parson as a Gospel preacher at the same time that he rejects the Host’s “governaunce.” The Shipman figure expects that the Parson will preach the Gospel, of course by the time the Parson actually is allowed to

tell his "tale," he actually ends up delivering a treatise on penance. This eventuality suggests again that the heresy debate may not have been as doctrine specific as it seems in retrospect. What does the Shipman mean by "gospel" preaching? Did the Parson's eventual choice to give a penitential message confirm or deny the Host's or the Shipman's Lollard suspicions? Given the Shipman's informal definition of Lollardy as any type of discourse that introduced the "gospel"—a term that the Shipman introduces as a synonym for "difficile"—the Parson's penitential treatise would also have offended the Shipman's nominal Christianity. It is unclear how far Chaucer intended to conflate the Gospel preaching Parson with the Parson's penitential treatise, but it the rhetorical implication is that the Shipman's objections were germane to both Lollard and orthodox discourse to the extent that they troubled his conscience.

Compared to the Shipman, Chaucer's Host emerges as more aware of salvific issues than he first seems. The Host's earlier objection to penance in the Clerk's Tale Prologue compromises his willingness to allow the Parson to preach "somwhat." Moreover, the Pardoner's sharp claim that the Host is "moost enveloped in synne" transforms the Host from a thoroughly secular figure into a more spiritually sensitive layman opposed to illegitimate forms of absolution (VI, 942-946). These changes suggest that Harry Bailey initial objection to penance is rooted in penitential anxiety. The Host may not be as secular as he is reluctant to commit his spiritual health to the heavily compromised

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194 See Derek Pearsall, "Chaucer's Pardoner: The Death of a Salesman," *Chaucer Review* 17 (1983-1984): 358-65. See also Lee Patterson's influential reading of the conclusion of the Pardoner's Tale as a displaced attempt to enact his "confessional needs through a series of oblique displacements." Patterson interprets the Pardoner's taunting of the Host as an attempt to solicit the penance of "exclusion." Patterson interprets the final reconciling of the Host and the Pardoner, "Anon they kiste and ryden forth..." (968) as the psychological equivalent of absolution. *Chaucer and the Subject of History*, p. 406.
penitential economy. The Host’s anger at being proffered an indulgence may parody Piers the Plowman’s anger at discovering that Truth’s Pardon is not an indulgence at all, but a command to do well. The Pardoner offers to “assoile” or absolve the entire company (VI, 939), but the Pardoner’s absolution entirely negates the authoritative process of contrition and confession. The Host’s rejection of the Pardoner’s dubious absolution adds another layer of complexity to the Host’s spiritual outlook. He fears penance, but he detests penitential counterfeits. The Pardoner’s cynicism and the Parson’s gospel ethos together expose the Host’s own painful if belated sense of religious integrity. The Host’s statement that he will no longer “pleye” with the Pardoner implies that while the Host has thus far tried to avoid penance, he cannot tolerate the Pardoner’s attempt to trivialize the sinful condition that he would prefer to ignore. It is one thing to avoid penance, but it is another thing entirely to debase it. The Host, the ostensible champion of secular “pleye,” refuses to play anymore with the Pardoner on the grounds that the Pardoner is an angry man. This anger itself follows from the Host’s refusal to honor the Pardoner’s relics, a conflict that momentarily aligns the Host with the Lollards in their rejection of relics.

The Host’s transition from one of Clanvowe’s worldly “goode felawes” to a defender of penitential integrity may have its source in the way that Chaucer constructs his Parson. Premature identification of the Parson as a heretical Lollard, and the Host as secular seems a likely target of Chaucer’s satire. The Host says, “I smelle a Lollere in the wynd” as if to allow for the possibility that the Parson is not a Lollard or that the Host’s own grasp of what makes a Lollard a Lollard is lacking. But when the Parson fails to deny or confirm a Lollard identity, the Host applies it anyway. The specter of Lollardy in the
Man of Law's Epilogue reveals a Host and a Parson not as antithetical as Clanvowe's Two Ways would assume. The gradual or punctuated changes in the Host's religious persona that begin with the Man of Law's Epilogue are easily overshadowed by the Wife of Bath's massive narrative presence, but in this sometimes omitted end-link we discover valuable evidence that Chaucer's Host can only be fully understood within the still evolving contest between orthodoxy and Lollardy.

The thorny problem of the Parson's real identity surfaces near the conclusion of the Tales when the Host attempts yet again to find out who the Parson truly is:

"Sire preest," quod he, "artow a vicary?
Or arte a person? Sey sooth, by they fey!
Be what thou be, ne breke thou nat our pley;

For every man, save thou, hath toold his Tale. (X, 22-25)

Just as in the Man of Law's Epilogue, the Host names the Parson a "preest," but this time he goes further to ask whether the Parson is a vicar or a parson. Yet, just as when the Host voiced the suspicion that the Parson was a Lollard, the Parson does not answer. The Host appears to abandon this line of questioning and simply requests that the Parson not interrupt the "pleye" by refusing to tell a tale. Again, the Host attempts to include a Lollard parson, but in this exchange the attention shifts from Lollardy to an issue closely tied to the Lollard movement—the problem of benefices and clerical absenteeism. The Host acknowledges that the Parson is a "preest," but he appears to question whether he is actually a parson, the legal occupant of a parsonage, or if he is a vicar, a vicarious or substitute incumbent acting in a parish on behalf of an absent parson or rector. This question has a significant bearing upon the Host's earlier imputation of Lollardy given
Wyclif's pointed attacks against the common ecclesiastical practice of appointing vicars to parishes in order to excuse the parson from having to personally reside in his own parish.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* cites Wyclif's use of "vicar" to castigate the clerical absenteeism—"the feend hath founden cautels to bringe in vikeris in persouns stede"—a practice that Wyclif condemns under the general principle that "no persone ne vicare ne prelate is excused fro personele residense... in ther beneficys." In view of the Host's earlier attribution of Lollardy, it seems likely that the Host intends to determine whether the Parson really is the exemplary stay-at-home Parson of the General Prologue. The General Prologue also responds to the Wycliffite critique of absenteeism, making clear the Parson's faithful residency in his own parish:

He sette nat his benefice to hyre
And lette his sheep encombred in the myre
But dwelte at hoom, and kepte wel his folde...

He was a shepherde and noght a mercenarie. (I, 507-514)

The Host's vicar/parson question re-examines the General Prologue's explicit denial that the Parson was either an absent Parson or a "mercenarie" vicar. Yet the Parson has, in the course of the pilgrimage, equivocated by agreeing to participate in the tale-telling game that he will eventually terminate. In the Man of Law's Epilogue the Host registers surprise when the apparent "Jankin" vanishes to be replaced by a prurient Lollard. Thus far the Host has registered two identities for the Parson: the first, the Jankin persona, represents the sort of worldly priesthood that the Parson's complicity in the Host's game

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implies. The second, the Lollard persona emerges directly from the Parson’s rebuke of
the Host’s swearing. Now in the third and final attempt to identify the Parson, the Host
examines the Parson’s apparent Lollardy in order to determine its integrity. Unlike the
Shipman character’s indictment of Lollardy as heretical because of its Biblicism, the Host
seems intent on testing the Parson’s Lollardy to discover whether it practices what it
preaches. As a test, the question as to whether the Parson is a vicar or parson examines
the historical and personal roots of Lollardy. There is evidence to suggest that Wyclif
himself may have been guilty of parochial absenteeism, a possibility that adds yet another
complicating factor to our assessment of Chaucer’s relationship with Lollardy.

K. B. McFarlane discusses Wyclif’s absenteeism at length, noting that in 1362 Wyclif
was granted a non-residential benefice in the collegiate church of Westbury-on-Trim near
Bristol. Given Wyclif’s sharp criticism of such practices in his later writings, we might
expect that although the benefice did not require residence, Wyclif would prove the
exception. Apparently this was not the case. Of course, had he moved to his parish in
1362, he would never have been able to write the works that targeted clerical
absenteeism. In 1366 the bishop of Worcester visited Wyclif’s college and found that all
five canons, including Wyclif, had been non-resident since the day that they had been
installed and that only one, not Wyclif, had actually employed a vicar.196 The bishop
called the canons to account and their revenues were sequestered. Later in the same year,
Wyclif was commanded by yet another bishop to declare all his benefices, and in this
matter it appears that he may not have responded. What we know for certain is that
Wyclif retained his prebend of Aust in Westbury until he died, and we have no evidence

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that he ever actually resided there or hired a vicar to carry out parish duties. As McFarlane observes, the fact that Wyclif appears to have been a "negligent pluralist... has naturally given rise to much unfavorable comment." Of course had Wyclif taken residence in Westbury, he would have lost his academic career. If he had chosen to resign his few benefices— they were not lucrative— he would not have been able to support himself at Oxford.

It may be possible to interpret Wyclif's attack on absenteeism as aimed at a system of abuses of which he considered himself more of a victim than a participant. But the fact remains that Wyclif did not appear willing or able to sacrifice his academic career to set an example of priestly integrity. It remained for Chaucer to construct a Lollard figure who was both learned and anonymous. The Host's question regarding the Parson's office suggests a gap between urging reform and actually doing it, a problem that Chaucer similarly voices in his Retraction when he cites Romans 14 as evidence of his doctrinal intent. Chaucer intended to promote doctrine but at the conclusion of his Tales he has to revoke or amend those works that he fears will actually promote sin. The Retraction demonstrates that good intentions do not always translate into good outcomes. The Retraction calls attention to a disconnect between authorial intention and achievement, a condition endemic to those who ply their Christian vocation by means of writing and preaching, by words instead of deeds.

Chaucer really leaves us with two Parsons to consider: the exemplary Parson of the General Prologue, and the merely human Parson that the Host suspects of hypocrisy. The Host's vicar/parson query stems from two anomalies in the Parson's character. First he

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cloaked his Lollardy when he agreed with the Host's initial *ordinatio*, and secondly, if he is a Parson in residence, what is he doing on a pilgrimage? Robert Swanson follows a similar line of contradictions when he notes that while the General Prologue describes the Parson as traveling about his parish on foot, while on the pilgrimage he rides a horse:

> After all, there is an obvious, though generally ignored, paradox in this depiction of a paragon who does not abuse his benefice and walks around his parish to minister to his flock: here he is, on pilgrimage to Canterbury. Simply to be in that position he must have accumulated a surplus from his revenues; even if for a short time, he must have abandoned his parish to the charge of a stand-in. Nor is he walking.¹⁹⁸

Much as with Wyclif's apparent pluralism, changing circumstances necessarily complicate our understanding of Chaucer's Parson. The image of the Parson as an ideal priest does not fit into the pilgrimage setting without certain modifications. This does not necessarily mean that we should regard the General Prologue's profile of the Parson as untrustworthy. Rather, the discrepancy that the Host tries to uncover suggests that exemplary profiles necessarily occupy a fairly narrow circumstantial space. Chaucer's General Prologue expressly states that the Parson "dwelte at hoom, and kept wel his folde," that he "sette nat his benefice to byre" and that he was a "shepherde and noght a mercenarie." (I, 507-514) In other words he fulfills the Wycliffian notion of an ideal priest far better than Wyclif did himself. It is in this sense that the Host historicizes the Parson. The General Prologue describes the Parson according to the circumstances of the parish, it cannot anticipate what the Parson will become once he is immersed in the

secular orthodoxy of the pilgrimage. We never find any hard evidence that the General Prologue’s description of the Parson is false, but we do begin to realize through the Host’s wariness that even Lollards can falter. Alan Fletcher cites an instance of an aging Lollard losing some of his former idealism in the face of temporal change:

The notorious Leicester Lollard John Belgrave twitted Philip Repingdon, bishop of London and one-time follower of Wyclif, on the bishop’s visitation in 1413, saying of the current bishop contradicts sermons he formerly preached, because if he did what he preached when he was young, he would go around the country on foot and preach in the manner of the apostles.”

Clearly Repingdon’s abandonment of his former Lollard beliefs cannot be construed as predictive of Chaucer’s Parson, since the Parson corrects any potential lapse by ending the pilgrimage with a Lollard rejection of tales and a re-affirmation of Wyclif’s realist assessment of the spiritual pilgrimage. But Repingdon’s career does demonstrate the fluid nature of Lollard commitments as the movement transitioned from Oxford and its respectable connections with John of Gaunt and Richard’s court to its political isolation in the 1390s and heretical persecution in the early 1400s.

The possibility that the Parson has experienced something of a change while on pilgrimage must contend with the General Prologue’s portrait of the Parson as an exemplary reformist priest. The General Prologue characterizes the Parson’s religious vocation in terms of an ethic of doing before preaching or teaching, the Parson will not instruct others to do anything that he has not already carried out in his own life, “first he wroughte, and afterward he taughte.” (I, 497) It follows that the Parson would not exhort

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199 Fletcher, “Chaucer the Heretic,” p. 104.
any behavior that he had not himself been able to perform. The sequence of putting deeds before words may inform the Parson's decision to preach a penitential treatise, a decision that carries the suggestion that the Parson has, at least temporarily, failed to live up to his billing in the General Prologue. What does an exemplary priest do when he fails to live up to his own ethic? And what does a Lollard priest do when he participates in an orthodox pilgrimage? The answer is that they must repent. Although we cannot be certain of the Parson's identity with respect of Wycliffism and orthodoxy, we can identify the in the Parson's penitential treatise an implication of the Parson's own need for penitence.

Although critics have typically focused upon how the Parson's orthodox penitential tale contradicts his reformist persona as found in the General Prologue, it may be possible to imagine the Parson differently in terms of a practical contradiction between the world of the parish and the Host's secularized pilgrimage. The Parson changes while on pilgrimage into a less exemplary figure, a change that the Host first registers in the Man of Law's Tale. When the Host probes further into the Parson's full identity in the Prologue to the Parson's Tale we never learn if the Parson is a vicar or an actual parson. But we do learn that the Parson now rejects the tale-telling ordinatio that he initially seemed to approve. Furthermore, the Parson also offers his audience a penitential treatise, thereby tacitly acknowledging the universal need for penance and also deflecting the Host's attention from the Parson's identity to the more essential identity crisis that confronts all Christians. Critics have naturally assumed, given the exemplary status accorded to the Parson in the General Prologue, that the Parson's tale targets the other pilgrims, not the Parson himself. But the Parson's penitential ending may represent a
final rendering of the Parson's identity as a exemplary priest in which exemplary status can never entirely escape the requirement of penitential humility. The prospect of a penitential Parson, much like William Langland's confusing image of an exemplary yet also flawed Plowman, suggests a fourteenth-century urge to reconcile Aristotelian inspired exemplarism with the Augustinian account of original sin. The result, at least in literary terms, was a sophisticated narrative process in which exemplary figures become penitents. Chaucer's Parson partly terminates Chaucer's authorial presence in order to call attention to the limits of narrative as exemplary discourse, limits that the Parson has discovered in his failed attempt to enact his Lollard or reformist ideals within the secular and largely uncooperative world of the medieval pilgrimage. Like Maidstone's intercessor queen, Chaucer's Parson recognizes penance as necessary for those who have failed to maintain their exemplary status. Chaucer's Parson, like the historical Richard II, fails to fulfill his early promise. Unlike Richard II, the Parson chooses penance as the only sure road to political and salvific recovery from the experience of having failed to live up to one's own expectations. Like Queen Anne in Maidstone's Concordia, the Parson warns readers that all narrative attempts at self-fashioning are merely "tales lightly told," half-formed and graceless scripts whose only value consists in their raw potential for becoming true, devout and self-incriminating confessions.

There is yet one more coda to Chaucer's Canterbury Tales. Thomas Gascoigne, chancellor of Oxford and author of the Dictionarium Theologicum (circa 1434-1457) wrote that on his death bed Chaucer frantically recalled his sinful tales and lamented up to the very moment of his death the fact that he could not stop those tales from spreading evil from reader to reader down through time:
Thus many penitents say that they will repent later, when they can no longer destroy their evil deeds or the evil consequences of those deeds; hence Chaucer before he died repeatedly cried out: “Alas for me! Alas for me! That I am not able to recall or destroy all that I wrote about the turpid and wicked love of men for women, and now these books will be handed down from person to person continually. I would, I would not.” And lamenting in this fashion he died.

Sic plures penitere se postea dicunt quando mala sua et mala per eos inducta destruere non possunt; sicut Chawserus ante mortem suam sepe clamavit ve michi ve michi quia revocare nec destruere jam potero illa que male scripsi de malo et turpissimo amore hominum ad mulieres et jam de homine in hominem continuabuntur. Velim. Nolim. Et sic plagens mortuus.

Crow and Olson add that Gascoigne’s description of Chaucer’s death-bed regret follows close upon an allusion to Judas Iscariot as just one of many negative exempla of sinners who have repented too late to make restitution for their sins. While it may be impossible for critics to know whether this account of Chaucer’s end can be trusted, it is profoundly ironic that Gascoigne uses the example of Chaucer’s life to illustrate the fate of those who fail to make right their sins, especially given the Retraction’s statement of Chaucer’s intention to revoke or correct his dangerous worldly tales. Yet again we find that Chaucer cannot quite manage to fulfill his moral intent. As interpreted by Gascoigne’s account, the Retraction seems to mock Chaucer’s inevitable failure to

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achieve successful moral closure, a flaw that lands the poet next to Judas, the exemplar of despair. Gascoigne’s account clumsily reduces Chaucer and his worldly tales to the problem of penitential restitution, thereby turning Chaucer into a negative exemplar of penitential failure and even despair. But the prospect of Chaucer as a negative exemplum potentially affirms Chaucer’s decision to end the Tales with a Retraction that focuses upon the hermeneutical intricacies of self-knowledge. There is a sense in which Gascoigne’s story successfully captures the essence of Chaucer’s nuanced personal response to penance. Like the Retraction, Gascoigne’s story identifies Chaucer in terms of moral lack, not moral sufficiency. Had Gascoigne offered a story of Chaucer approaching death with complete confidence, an exemplar of penitential restitution and confidence, the conclusion could be drawn that Chaucer, in the end, found something in himself to admire. But all the narrative evidence points the other way. And while one cannot credit Gascoigne’s story as the ultimate coda to Chaucer’s life, it does have value to the extent that it represents what may have been Chaucer’s spiritual Achille’s heel, his penitential pessimism.
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