



PROJECT MUSE®

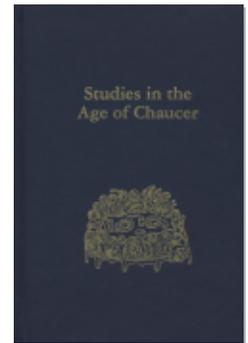
Chaucer and the European Tradition

Winthrop Wetherbee III

Studies in the Age of Chaucer, Volume 27, 2005, pp. 3-21 (Article)

Published by The New Chaucer Society

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/sac.2005.0004>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/587198/summary>

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS
The New Chaucer Society
Fourteenth International Congress
July 15th–19th, 2004
University of Glasgow

The Presidential Address

Chaucer and the European Tradition

Winthrop Wetherbee III
Cornell University

I WILL BEGIN BY APOLOGIZING for a title that might suggest absurdly grandiose ambitions. I remain dutifully subject to the authority of Charles Muscatine, E. R. Curtius, and the other “maisters soverayn” who have helped me think about literary tradition over the years, and, to this extent at least, I emulate the Chaucer I want to talk about. The Chaucer, that is, who was the one truly European poet of his place and time, yet whose unique appreciation of the larger view of poetic tradition that distinguished the writers of *trecento* Italy coexisted with a strong sense of his alien relation to this tradition. Despite the inspiration he drew from the example of Dante, and the deep affinity he came to feel with Boccaccio, he remained closer in spirit to the French tradition and above all to Jean de Meun. Chaucer *owned* the French tradition; his poetry is its finest flowering. But toward Italy he retained to the end something of the shyly self-deprecating attitude of the dreamer at the House of Fame. The assurance with which Dante and Boccaccio addressed the classical tradition, and the sense of the importance of poetry that their work expresses, seem to have made him keenly sensitive to the limitations of the Anglo-French poetic tradition to which he himself had been apprenticed.

I want to examine the ways in which this sense of limitations finds expression in Chaucer’s work, how he both demonstrates an awareness of what poetry in the highest sense might be, and how, by design, and often to telling effect, he avoids a direct response to the challenge this knowledge represents. I will begin by considering a specific instance of challenge and response: Dante’s and Chaucer’s versions of the story of Ugolino of Pisa.

A brief essay by Jorge Luis Borges on *Inferno* 33, the canto of Count Ugolino, addresses the qualities in Ugolino's story that seem to me to have most impressed Chaucer. Borges's concern is with what he calls the "false problem" posed by line 75 of the canto, Ugolino's famous assertion that after days of starvation, during which he witnessed the deaths of four sons, "hunger proved more powerful than grief." Borges reviews the history of critical commentary on Ugolino's enigmatic declaration, and concludes that we *cannot* know whether Ugolino was driven to eat the flesh of the four victims or simply died of hunger after withstanding the effects of grief. To attempt to resolve this question, moreover, is to misread Dante's purpose, for the ambiguity is crucial to the effect of the scene: "To deny or affirm Ugolino's monstrous crime," says Borges, "is less horrifying than to be stunned by it."¹

The one complex turn in Borges's generally straightforward argument occurs when he cites the earlier lines in which Ugolino's sons offer themselves to their father as food:

"tu ne vestisti
queste misere carne, e tu le spoglia."
(*Inferno* 33.62–63)

[“you did clothe us
with this wretched flesh; and do you strip us of it.”]

In the face of a hallowed critical tradition, Borges professes to find here "one of the very few falsehoods present in the *Commedia*": Dante, he says, "could not but feel its falseness, which is made more serious, without doubt, by the circumstance of the four children simultaneously toasting the ravenous banquet. Some will insinuate that we are dealing with a lie by Ugolino, concocted to justify (to suggest) the previous crime."

Borges's insistence on the falseness of the scene is based not just on the implausibility of Ugolino's depiction of his children's last hours but on its quality as art. There is a sense in which this narrative is unworthy of Ugolino—or, better, incommensurate with the power of Dante's con-

¹"El falso problema de Ugolino," in *Nuevos ensayos dantescos* (Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1982), pp. 105–11; I quote from the English translation of the essay by Nicoletta Alegi in Giuseppe Mazzotta, ed., *Critical Essays on Dante* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1991), pp. 185–88.

ception of him. Of all the damned souls in the *Inferno*, only Ugolino is assigned a punishment that consists in the perpetual avenging of the wrongs he claims to have undergone. The desire for vengeance that drives him to gnaw endlessly on the neck of Archbishop Ruggiero is of course insatiable, an eternal goad, but he is allowed to believe that he is causing eternal pain to his victim, and it is in order to inflict the further pain of infamy that he interrupts his labors to tell the story of Ruggiero's treachery. Dante goes so far as to hint at a kind of savage enthusiasm for the endless task when he compares Ugolino to a dog gnawing a bone (78).

It is as if the sheer force of Ugolino's obsession with his wrongs had placed on Dante's sense of justice a claim that could not be denied. Like Farinata, Ulysses, or Guido da Montefeltro, he compels our attention in ways to which the sin of which he stands condemned seems irrelevant, defying judgment and inviting a kind of admiring sympathy. On first seeing Ugolino, Dante himself raises the possibility that his rage against Ruggiero may be justified (*Inf.* 32.135–39), and he is given sole possession of the first seventy-five lines of his canto, a privilege elsewhere granted only to Justinian and Saint Bernard. Although Dante later concedes that Ugolino had been called a traitor (33.85–86), he does not confirm the charge, and the condemnation that follows is directed not against the Count but against his city. That this condemnation centers on the treatment of the children suggests a tacit sympathy with Ugolino's intense rage, and an unquestioning acceptance of his story—a story that only Dante has heard. But the focus of Dante's sympathy suggests as well the Pilgrim's vulnerability to the appeal of sentimental piety in Ugolino's narrative, an appeal that stands in unresolved contradiction to the colossal force of his pain and rage, his embodiment of the plight of “unaccommodated man,”² tragically at the mercy of his need for food, family, and vindication.

It is this strange, savage power that led Matthew Arnold to discover in Ugolino's colossal self-absorption, as in that of Milton's Satan, something monumental, almost a kind of heroism.³ It is what makes the

²I borrow this apt citation of *Lear* from Robin Kirkpatrick's excellent discussion of Canto 33, *Dante's Inferno: Difficulty and Dead Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 415–27.

³In his essay “The Study of Poetry” (*Essays in Criticism: Second Series* [London, 1888], pp. 16–18), Arnold cites lines 49 and 50, in which Ugolino contrasts his own stony incapacity for grief with the weeping of his children. For Arnold, these lines exhibit “the very highest poetic quality.”

pathos of his account of his sons' suffering, which many have seen as both strongly moving and spiritually profound,⁴ ring false both for Borges and, I am quite sure, for Ugolino himself. The elaborate emotionalism of Ugolino's appeal aims at extorting grief and tears from the Pilgrim (40–42), but the experience he relates had left the speaker himself unmoved. We need not question Ugolino's account of how, being now blind, he had groped over his sons' bodies and called their names (72–74), but we must recognize also his inability to reach out to them while they were still alive. At no point does he express remorse for this failure, and, when at last, irredeemably cut off from any possibility of repentance or reparation, he acknowledges their suffering, the manner in which he does so amounts to an exploitation of their pain, an attempt to make of it grounds for his own vindication. It is a telling sign of his bad faith, and Dante's honesty, that the picture he offers is bad religious art, a narrative in which the poignancy of the young men's willingness to die, Christ-like, to ease their father's pain, makes a demand on our sensibilities that is finally outrageous.

Not only is the self-centered savagery of Ugolino impossibly distanced from the innocence and charity of the sons with whom he seeks to identify himself: the tale he tells is Kitsch, in the serious sense this quality can assume when it appears in a context that is in other respects truly serious. It is Kitsch of the sort that most of the world recognized instantly as the defining quality in Mel Gibson's cinematic treatment of the Passion of Christ, which dares us to keep our eyes fixed on its sadistic representation of sacred suffering, while at the same time inviting us to indulge in a kind of sentimental partisanship better suited to the Prioress's little clergion, or Rocky Balboa. The same unholy coupling of extreme brutality with sentimental piety constitutes for Borges the falsehood of the narrative of Ugolino.

Chaucer of course knew Dante's Ugolino, and the version of his fall that appears in *The Monk's Tale*, perhaps influenced by Ugolino's brief but poignant appearance in Boccaccio's *De casibus virorum illustrium*,⁵

⁴The fullest treatment of the religious significance of the children's conduct—to which Ugolino himself is of course impervious—is that of John Freccero, "Bestial Sign and Bread of Angels, *Inferno* XXXII and XXXIII," *Yale Italian Studies* 1 (1977): 53–66; repr. in Freccero's *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp. 152–66.

⁵*De casibus* 9, ed. P. G. Ricci and Vittoria Zaccaria (vol. 9 [1983] in *Tutte le Opere di Giovanni Boccaccio*, ed. Vittore Branca [Milan: Mondadori, 1965–]), p. 820: "Hugolinum Pisarum comitem vidi, amplissimo fletu ciuium suorum saeuitiam ac inediam qua cum filiis perierat deflentem."

distorts the story in a way that gives further point to Borges's reading of the Dantean episode. The Monk's Hugelyn is an apparently innocent victim, imprisoned on the "fals suggestioun" of Bishop Roger, and the Monk goes to great lengths to exploit the pathetic possibilities of his story.⁶ Dante's Ugolino had taken pains to suggest that the children in his tale were small and helpless, but in fact two were grandsons, and even the younger of these, "little Anselmo" ("Anselmuccio," 50) was already in his teens at the time of their incarceration. The three sons of the Monk's Hugelyn have been explicitly reduced to little boys, and the youngest, a child of three, complains movingly of a starvation whose cause he cannot understand, before kissing his father as he dies. Ugolino, too, is altered. Where Dante's antihero describes himself as "turned inwardly to stone," unable to join his children in weeping, Hugelyn weeps freely as his children die around him, and this may suggest the community in suffering that is so strikingly absent in the *Inferno*. But in fact the selfishness of Hugelyn is as absolute as that of Ugolino, who sees in his children's faces only the reflection of his own suffering.⁷ He shows emotion, but his feelings are only for himself. At the sound of the locking of the tower, he realizes that his enemies "wolde doon *hym* dyen."⁸ It is for this that he weeps, and as he gnaws at his limbs he inveighs only against his own betrayal by Fortune (2445–46). The Monk has clearly let Ugolino himself dictate the tone and emphasis of his narrative. His tale aims to elicit sympathy for a bereaved parent, but the maudlin self-pity that it substitutes for the emotional void so starkly depicted in Dante's version provides instead a grotesque parallel to the artistic self-indulgence that is an ever-present danger for those who, like the Monk, practice the art of Gothic pathos.

The final line of the Monk's narrative of Hugelyn points to its limitations in another way: "From heigh estaat Fortune away *hym carf*" (2457). The moral is utterly predictable in all but the curious verb, which reminds us that the story the Monk tells has itself been cut away,

⁶See Piero Boitani, "What Dante Meant to Chaucer," in *Chaucer and the Italian Trecento*, ed. Boitani (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 132–36, and the earlier discussions cited by Boitani; see also his *The Tragic and the Sublime in Medieval Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 40–55.

⁷"e io scorsi / per quattro visi il mio aspetto stesso" (56–57).

⁸*The Monk's Tale*, 2428. All quotations of Chaucer are from Larry D. Benson, gen. ed., *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987). Line references will be given in the text; those for the *Canterbury Tales* are given by numbered fragment and line.

excised both from the context of known Italian history that would render Ugolino's crisis intelligible and from the intricate structure of Dante's *Commedia*. Dante, the Monk says, can tell such a story "From point to point," in full detail; and for Chaucer, if not for the Monk, it was the continuity this implies, the ability to set his characters in a context of the fullest significance, spiritual and historical, that made Dante's poetry unique and revolutionary.

By the standard of Dante's seriousness, his constant awareness of fundamental social and religious issues, the Monk's very conception of "serious" literature stands condemned,⁹ and his acknowledgment of Dante is a pathetic admission of failure; he gestures toward Dante's engagement with character and history as if toward another world. But this is only the most obvious of many points in *The Monk's Tale* at which we sense the inadequacy of his conception of tragedy. Repeatedly in the course of his string of exempla, he ignores or falsifies the contexts in which his tragic figures acted and suffered, and he responds to their several fates with the same undifferentiated "bemoaning." All the Monk's heroes are pathetic in the same way, and the pathos of their stories is empty. As Aranye Fradenburg observes, *The Monk's Tale* is "sentimental about nothing," for the fortunes it chronicles render human character and values altogether meaningless.¹⁰

And of course *The Monk's Tale* is a failure not only by the standard of Dante, but by that of the *Canterbury Tales* themselves. Chaucer's pilgrims speak to us of lives lived in a dense social and psychological medium for which the self-revelations of Dante's great sinners offer the closest equivalent, and they have the same power to challenge and suspend our impulse to judge them. Dante's characters are fixed forever in the attitudes defined by their besetting sins, monumental in a way Chaucer's engaged actors cannot be, but the Pardoner, in his self-lacerating spiritual anxiety, or the Wife of Bath, endlessly at odds with a masculinist society from which she seeks validation even as she exposes its hypocrisy, are comparably trapped and goaded. *The Monk's Tale* reveals no such human crises, and despite its historical sweep it tells us nothing about history—nothing comparable, for example, to the disenchanted vision of the Knight, discovering in the histories of Thebes and

⁹See Jahan Ramazani, "Chaucer's Monk: The Poetics of Abbreviation, Aggression, and Tragedy," *ChauR* 27 (1993): 260–76.

¹⁰L. O. Aranye Fradenburg, *Sacrifice Your Love: Psychoanalysis, Historicism, Chaucer* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), p. 151.

Athens the same profound contradictions that beset the world of contemporary chivalry whose values his tale seeks to affirm. *The Clerk's Tale*, oscillating as it does between sentimentality and heroic idealism in its treatment of human suffering, might be seen as offering a comparably stunted perspective on its heroine, but there the contradiction is inherited from the Clerk's source, perhaps inherent in the story itself. The Monk's limitations are self-imposed, a refusal to acknowledge complexity rather than an inability to deal with it.

Nonetheless, the Monk can provide us with a certain insight into Chaucer's sense of literary possibilities, for his choice of subjects for his tragedies makes plain that Chaucer at least was able to see in the story of Ugolino, Hercules, Antiochus, or Samson the lineaments of "tragedy" of a more profound kind. Like Boccaccio, whose *De casibus* is the most likely model for *The Monk's Tale*, and seems to have furnished the title it often bears in the manuscripts,¹¹ Chaucer is aware that the tragic dimension of human experience is more complex than the repertory of themes and narrative patterns available to him can suggest, and *The Monk's Tale* gives a backhanded expression to this awareness. Richard Neuse has argued persuasively that the *Tale* can be seen as responding to the *Inferno* in its tragic aspect,¹² but the Monk's role resembles that of a sententious glossator, bent on extracting a simple lesson from each new story; his reductive summations provide a foil, rather than a key, to serious consideration of the lives he describes.

But the suppressions and omissions the Monk's narratives reveal when compared with their sources have a significance of their own. The tale is an experimental work, but the experiment is neither the serious, self-conscious exercise in quasi-classical tragedy that some have found in it nor the send-up of such strenuous neoclassicism that it has seemed to others. Chaucer's concern, I would argue, is with the light that an experiment in this newly reemergent form, defined with an exaggerated rigor for the occasion, could shed on more familiarly medieval narrative forms. From a range of sources, he draws stories whose character is inherently tragic, then deliberately dissipates their tragic power by contaminating it with arbitrary moralism, the pathos of popular religious

¹¹ See Thomas H. Bestul, "The Monk's Tale," in *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales*, ed. Robert Correale, Mary Hamel, vol. 1 (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2002), pp. 410–11.

¹² *Chaucer's Dante* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), pp. 151–58.

literature, or the optimism and idealism of chivalric romance. The effect is to demonstrate how easily the process of *translatio* to these characteristic medieval modes can distort or obfuscate social and political reality.

In this respect *The Monk's Tale* is a particularly striking illustration of Chaucer's lifelong preoccupation with the status and value of his poetic projects. Worthiest of the heirs of Jean de Meun, he was keenly aware of the potentially revolutionary implications of Jean's challenge to the courtly tradition, and was inspired by the freedom with which he had incorporated classical poetry, contemporary history, science, and philosophy into his vast poem. From Jean, and still more from Dante and Boccaccio, Chaucer drew a sense of the capacities of literature that, as I have suggested, enabled him to see the French and English traditions in a larger, fully European perspective. But these traditions also made him keenly aware of their limited power to assimilate fully the great works of the classical tradition as Dante had or to emulate the modernity of Boccaccio's narratives.

It is possible, indeed, to read the evolution of Chaucer's poetry largely as a series of testings of the limits of his literary heritage. The preoccupation is already audible in his description of the volume of poetry with which the narrator of *The Book of the Duchess* attempts to put himself to sleep:

And in this boke were written fables
That clerkes had in olde tyme,
And other poetes, put in rime
To rede and for to be in minde,
While men loved the lawe of kinde.

(52–56)

If *The Book of the Duchess* is Chaucer's earliest surviving poem, then this is his first reference to books, poets, and reading. The name of "poet" is one that Chaucer will assign carefully in his later works; like Dante, he applies it almost exclusively to the ancient poets who wrote in Latin. Is "poet" used with the same precision here? If "clerkes" denotes a type of poet, and if "poets" write in rhyme, as the passage suggests, then the term must encompass vernacular writers in the tradition of *clergie*—the authors of *Le Roman de la Rose*, for example, or Guillaume de Machaut. And we should perhaps see the pairing of clerk and poet as hinting at the growing stature of the vernacular.

But we should also note how time is treated in this passage. That the clerks and other poets evoked wrote “in olde tyme” suggests a literary tradition more ancient and august than that defined by *Le Roman de la Rose*, scarcely a century old when Chaucer wrote, and still sufficiently “modern” to constitute the paradigm-text for makers of courtly verse. It is as if Chaucer had been prompted by his own reference to “olde tyme” to recognize that the “clerkly” tradition by itself was not really what he meant to invoke, and had added the more portentous term “poetes” as an almost involuntary gloss. But it is in the last two lines of the passage that our perspective is decisively broadened. Poetry is now the substance of thought and memory, an authoritative guide to the laws of nature. And perhaps here too we can see “olde tyme” becoming timeless. The phrase “While men loved the lawe of kinde” has seemed to some commentators to denote a time that is past, the pre-Christian era when pagans and their poets ordered their lives wholly in terms of vital necessity and cosmic process. Others have heard it as a periphrasis for the full span of natural human existence, historical time itself.

How does the tradition of the poets inform *The Book of the Duchess*? The poem falls into two main sections, the first centered around the legend of Ceyx and Alcyone, the second around the figure of the Man in Black. The two centers are intimately linked, and the connection expresses an underlying complementarity between vernacular rhyming and the work of the classical poets, between courtly idealism and the harsh inevitabilities of the “law of kind” embodied in ancient myth.

Chaucer’s poem is recognizably a *dit amoureuse* in the tradition of Guillaume de Machaut, and it is from Machaut that he took the idea of making Ovid’s Alcyone an emblem for the love-longing that is the proper concern of the *dit*. But the effect is very different. Machaut emphasizes the element of sentiment in the story of Alcyone, putting Ovid’s narrative into the mouth of the lovelorn knight who is his counterpart to Chaucer’s Man in Black, and who emphasizes Alcyone’s loyalty and grief. Chaucer suppresses her raving grief and says nothing of the redeeming metamorphosis. He remains comically obtuse in the face of the self-pitying Man in Black, and reduces the elaborate lyric effusions of Machaut’s courtiers to brief, often clumsy ejaculations of spontaneous feeling. Yet the poem is as sophisticated as its French models, and psychologically more profound. Its reading of Ovid is astute, and it shares with Ovid a serious insight into the experience of mourning. Even as it affirms Chaucer’s right to a place in the French tradition, it shows

him moving beyond this tradition and its preoccupation with “love-tidings.” Chaucer has heard Ovid’s voice as well as Machaut’s, and the wisdom of the ancient poet has informed his use of the medieval poet’s form and motifs. In taking up his book of fables, then, Chaucer is showing us what he sees as the most significant aspect of the work of his French predecessors, and, at the same time, as he quietly exposes the limitations of Guillaume de Machaut as an Ovidian poet, defining a possible program for his own poetry, nothing less than a marriage of the courtly and the classical traditions.

Troilus and Criseyde can be seen as a similar experiment on a larger scale. It relocates the urban intrigue of Boccaccio’s *Filostrato* within the world of the *roman d’antiquité*, while making us constantly aware of the epic history that envelops its characters and menaces the decorum of the romance Chaucer’s Trojans speak and act by the conventions of *courtoisie*, yet just out of view is a world as fated as Vergil’s, and as modern as that of the *Decameron*, a world where cities are betrayed and heroes die in vain, where people count their money, sue one another, covet their brothers’ wives, and make life-determining decisions on grounds that are not those of the courtly code. All the while, as Lee Patterson has shown, the story of Thebes lowers over Troy, a potential source of self-knowledge that surfaces repeatedly but that none can understand.¹³

Pandarus can be seen as an emblem of this complex project, at once wholly new, true to his origins in *Le Roman de la Rose*, and at times almost a tutelary spirit, a genius figure. In all of these ways he can be seen as a virtual complement to the Wife of Bath. The Wife, too, is a radically modern creation, yet subtly and solidly linked, both to the *Rose* and to the Latin tradition of Platonizing allegorical poetry that Jean de Meun had effectively undermined yet somehow kept alive. The Wife’s obvious antecedent is La Vieille, but she is also a surrogate for Jean’s goddess *Nature*, eloquently identifying herself with the forces that sustain universal life, yet garrulously bitter about their inability to fully inform the life of mankind. Like Nature’s long plea for procreation, the Wife’s *Prologue* displays prodigious intellectual and imaginative energy in affirming her sexual role, but for both figures sexual assertiveness is balanced by deep resentment and frustration at their inability to be “realized,” possessed, and appreciated by a male sensibility commensu-

¹³Lee Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), pp. 128–36.

rate with their capacity for generous response. This is what Nature comes down to in the world of the *Canterbury Tales*, where no genius-figure exists to integrate human life with the larger natural order, and desire is the stuff of fiction.

In all these respects, Chaucer defines for himself a “subject” position vis-à-vis European literary tradition, “subject” in the sense in which he uses the term in the closing stanzas of *Troilus*. There, having imposed several unsatisfying conclusions on his love-story, he looks beyond, and defines its relation to “alle poesye”—poetry in the classical tradition, poetry with a capital P, poetry in the sense in which Dante uses the term—but declines to dignify his own work with this title as Dante does. And just as it is necessary to break through a series of formal barriers to attain this perspective and align his *roman d’antiquité* with the great tradition, so modernity will come to dominate the *Canterbury Tales* only by a similar breach of decorum. Here it is the decorum implied by the *Natureingang* of the General Prologue and the procession of portraits that follow, a decorum that is recognizably that of Guillaume de Lorris, but that gradually gives way to the anarchic energies of the world of Jean de Meun. Like its narrator, the poem frankly acknowledges its centrifugal tendency in various ways, while managing, through its mixed style and interplay of genres, to avoid any final capitulation to the social forces to which it gives rein.

The manner in which *The Monk’s Tale* expresses Chaucer’s oblique, “subjit” relation to the larger literary world, the world of Dante, Boccaccio, and the *poetae*, differs from the dialogic interplay of *Troilus* or the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole, in that Chaucer and his contemporaries only dimly recognized the aspect of the larger tradition to which it points. To a certain extent this limitation can be defined in terms of their limited understanding of what constituted tragedy. The standard definitions inherited from such sources as Boethius and Isidore associate it with public affairs, and define the tragic action wholly in terms of the unhappy ends of powerful and often wicked men. The Monk’s remarks on tragic “storie” thus present the orthodox view, and the tales he tells conform to it, however reductively, both in their narrative trajectory and in their utter indifference to the particular situations of the heroes and rulers they depict.

The Monk’s ignoring of the larger forces that shape his heroes’ lives is all the more curious in that he is evidently aware of them. Thus he announces Samson, the subject of his first fully rendered story, as a man

consecrated to God and “annunciat” by angelic prophecy, but then he focuses exclusively and repeatedly on Samson’s inability to conceal secrets from his wives. The effect is to reduce the brief narrative to a tale of just deserts that ends appropriately with the hero blind and helpless at the mill. The Monk goes on to report Samson’s destruction of the Philistine temple but offers no comment on the redemptive self-sacrifice that transforms his tragedy of fortune into a spiritual triumph, and instead ends with a final warning against confiding in one’s wife. His stunted, philistine perspective recalls the recurring humiliation that dogged the hero in his life.

The story of the death of Hercules, which follows, has no moral at all beyond a pointless hint that the hero’s acceptance of Deianira’s gift of the poisoned garment of Nessus was a failure of self-knowledge. In place of the hero’s agonized questioning of the justice of his fate, a memorable feature of the Ovidian version of this episode,¹⁴ the Monk offers only bumbling remarks about the motive for Deianira’s gift, and the story ends by focusing on Hercules’ death throes for their own sake, with no hint of the meaning of his death for gods or mortals. This ignoring of larger implications is even more striking in the story of Antiochus, drawn from the second book of *Maccabees*. Much space is devoted to the literal details of the wounds with which Antiochus was afflicted by God for having thought to conquer Jerusalem. Antiochus finally acknowledges God’s dominion, but the single line devoted to his repentance is all but lost amid repeated references to the “stink” of his wounds, and we hear nothing of the desperate attempts, so prominent in the the Monk’s biblical source, to atone to God and make restitution to the Jews. In each of these three cases a story with the character of classical tragedy is robbed of its inherent power and rendered trivial.

As further evidence that this is a deliberate strategy, that Chaucer was aware of possible alternatives to his own “medievalizing” treatment of tragic material, I would like to consider passages from two other Chaucerian narratives that show him briefly contemplating tragic possibilities, only to decline the challenge they pose. The first is the account of the death of Hector in the fifth book of *Troilus and Criseyde*, an event singled out by Chaucer to illustrate the power of Fortune, as she effects the great “permutacioun” whereby *imperium* is transferred from Troy to the Greeks (*Troilus* 5.1541–45). This characterization of Fortune is the

¹⁴ *Metamorphoses* 9.134–272.

richest such passage in Chaucer, comparable to Dante's in its clarity and conciseness, and a reminder of what will be utterly lacking in *The Monk's Tale*. But having created this portentous setting, the narrator refuses to consider further the implications of Hector's death, and instead responds to it with chivalric rhetoric of an utterly conventional kind; it is an event

For which me thynketh every manere wight
That haunteth armes oughte to biwaille
The deth of hym that was so noble a knyght;
(5.1555–57)

The grief of Troilus is reported in equally conventional terms. Within a bare two lines, the "sorwe" of Troilus the grieving fellow-warrior has been displaced by the pain and "unrest" of Troilus the jealous lover, and Hector is wholly forgotten. A pivotal event in world history has been effaced by the pathos of Troilus's loss of Criseyde. Here, as throughout the poem, the lesser hero, whose feats of arms are all for love, draws us away from larger, Homeric concerns. Much later, Homer will be invoked directly, in the lines that describe Troilus's final moments of heroism. This last stand is sonorously heralded as a display of "the wrath of Troilus," as if pathos had been left behind and a new and truly heroic phase of his career were opening. But in the event this *aristeia* runs its course in a single stanza, at the end of which romance in the person of Troilus is "dispitously" rendered subject to the more authentic wrath of Achilles, and epic at last regains the upper hand.

My second passage is the speech in which Saturn describes his all-encompassing influence on the human world of *The Knight's Tale*. The strange, somber figure of Saturn exists for the sole purpose of effecting worldly "permutacioun" by destructive means. He can hardly be called a god, and is perhaps best described in the terms used by Dante's Virgil to describe Fortune, as one of the *prime creature* (*Inferno* 7.95). He could almost be said to constitute an aspect of Fortune herself, and in him Chaucer has come as close as any medieval poet to giving that power a local habitation:

I do vengeance and pleyn correccioun,
Whil I dwelle in the signe of the leoun.
Myn is the ruyne of the hye halles,
The fallynge of the toures and of the walles

Upon the mynour or the carpenter.
 I slow Sampsoun, shakynge the piler.
 (I.2461–66)

The feature I would call attention to in this passage is the reference to Samson in the last line. This is the central line of Saturn's speech, and thus locates Samson at the very center of the Knight's elaborately concentric universe. Samson's name constitutes the one nonpagan reference in a poem that otherwise preserves a resolutely pagan perspective on its action.

To imagine Chaucer as meditating a Samson Agonistes of his own devising would be wishfully anachronistic, but a poet who could set his medievalizings in the perspective attained in *The Monk's Tale* may perhaps be credited with special powers. What seems clear is that the very presence of Samson in a literally pivotal role poses the possibility of viewing human freedom in very different terms than those of the Knight's *Tale* or the Monk's. Fortune has been momentarily exposed as sheer stupid force, and the next stage would be a "translation," which would substitute for her meaningless dominion a demonstration that individual human experience is what matters, that the significance of political change is most truly expressed in the labor and sacrifice of the hero.

But Chaucer never makes a decisive move in this direction. Heroism in Chaucer, even when it can arguably be considered tragic, is never shown to bear an integral relation to larger events. The story of Troilus is a tragedy of *courtoisie*, as that of Arcite and Theseus in *The Knight's Tale* is a tragedy of chivalry. The inability of these masculine codes to confront their own inadequacies is the dilemma of "Thebanism," a blindness to the past that ensures its repetition, so that the passion and violence that assail the knightly hero assume the role of historical forces.¹⁵ But Chaucer is curiously reluctant to pursue these implications. Even the explicit Thebanism of Cassandra's prophecy to Troilus remains enigmatic. Diomedes may or may not be the agent of destiny, and Troilus never quite emerges as a microcosmic image of Troy.

The raising of such questions, though his poetry yields no answer to them, expresses a concern that Chaucer shares with his contemporaries.

¹⁵ See Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History*, pp. 129–31; Wetherbee, *Chaucer and the Poets: An Essay on "Troilus and Criseyde"* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), pp. 130–31.

“The chief characters in Ricardian narrative,” says John Burrow, “achieve little of public consequence”; questions of human freedom and responsibility are a central concern of the major poets of the period, but their view of humankind is unheroic, and they are at one in leaving these large questions conspicuously unresolved.¹⁶ The Prologue to Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*, largely a rehearsal of the themes of his earlier poems, wrestles with the question of how far humankind is to blame for the “division” that constantly threatens human institutions, and the poet broods on the uncertain relation of human and cosmic life. Both fortune and the chronic instability of the world are firmly linked to the unstable behavior of man, “Which of his propre governance / Fortuneth al the worldes chance”; yet the world, too, “of his propre kynde / Was evere untrewre,”¹⁷ and the *Prologue* offers no assurance that human society is capable of withstanding its destabilizing power. Throughout the *Confessio* proper, the role of Amans is deliberately miniaturized, kept almost maddeningly out of touch with the political concerns that recur again and again in Genius’s narratives. And in the end, question of responsibility and control are unresolved. Gower too has his European aspect, and at several points the *Confessio* becomes explicitly a mirror for princes in the continental mode, but the political and the social are never decisively brought together. That Apollonius, the hero of Gower’s concluding narrative, triumphs over adversity is due mainly to his being a perfect gentleman, “well-grounded” as a husband and father, and he is never shown exercising political responsibility. The dreamer of *Piers Plowman*, on the other hand, struggles to establish a purposeful relation to a world that evades and confuses, where an endless series of voices contests his claim to legitimacy. What Anne Middleton says of Langland’s project is true of Ricardian poetry in general: it is anti-Boethian, and expresses the situation of men who seek not to accept and transcend their alienation from the world but to reclaim possession of their identity and history as worldly beings.¹⁸

With the Ricardian qualities of Chaucer’s poetry in mind, his peculiar

¹⁶J. A. Burrow, *Ricardian Poetry: Chaucer, Gower, Langland, and the Gawain Poet* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), p. 100.

¹⁷*Confessio Amantis*, Prologue, lines 583–84, 535–36, in *The English Works of John Gower*, ed. G. C. Macaulay, EETS e.s. 81–82 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1900–1901).

¹⁸Anne Middleton, “Narration and the Invention of Experience: Episodic Form in *Piers Plowman*,” in *The Wisdom of Poetry: Essays in Early English Literature in Honor of Morton W. Bloomfield* (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Medieval Institute Publications, 1982), p. 104.

blend of European vision with what can seem a willful provinciality, I would like to conclude by examining the view of poetry obliquely set forth in *The Nun's Priest's Tale*, which begins as an exercise in the humblest of genres and contains some of Chaucer's finest exercises in popular homiletics, yet manages also to invoke the classical tradition and raise serious questions about the social value of "serious" poetry. In the homeliness of its narrative vehicle and the loftiness of its allusions, it constitutes Chaucer's fullest statement about his relation to the European tradition.

The Nun's Priest's Tale, says Peter Travis, "is pure parody, and nothing else," its targets being Chaucer's own poetry and Western literature in general.¹⁹ But while the tale can certainly be read this way, it is also studded with a remarkable number of references to tragic events, legendary and historical: the death of Hector (treated here with due solemnity); the treachery of Ganelon and Sinon; the deaths of two British kings; the capture of Troy; the burning of Carthage and Rome; and the murderous violence that accompanied the Uprising of 1381.

Chaucer harbored a deep distrust of religious enthusiasm, and of most forms of affective piety, and the narrative vehicles of his religious tales tend to complement, in their form and style, the flawed or distorted spirituality of the pilgrims who employ them. Emotive piety produces the Kitsch of *The Prioress's Tale*, and the kitschy moments in the Man of Law's, calculated invitations to vicarious involvement and the indulgence of false emotion. Striking features of *The Nun's Priest's Tale*, then, are its several examples of carefully controlled religious rhetoric, most notably the first mini-tale that Chauntecleer tells to Pertelote to illustrate the importance of dreams.

Two pilgrims are forced to take separate lodgings for the night, and one is visited with a series of dreams that report the murder of the other. Twice the dreamer fails to respond when his fellow pilgrim appears to announce his imminent death and appeal for aid. But when in a third dream his fellow, now dead, describes his murder and explains how it may be exposed, the dreamer finally acts. His loud appeal to the city magistrates stirs the crowd, the corpse is recovered, and the murderers are caught, tortured, and hanged.

¹⁹ "Learning to Behold the Fox: Poetics and Epistemology in Chaucer's *Nun's Priest's Tale*," in Roland Hagenbüchle and Laura Skandera, eds., *Poetry and Epistemology: Turning Points in the History of Poetic Knowledge: Papers from the International Poetry Symposium, Eichstätt, 1983, Eichstätter Beiträge*, Band 20 (Regensburg: F. Pustet, 1986), pp. 30–32.

The brief story includes a small anthology of grim reminiscences of earlier tales. The face that appears to the sleeping pilgrim in his third dream, pitiful and pale of hue (VII.3023), is that of the condemned man invoked in the central stanza of *The Man of Law's Tale* as Custance stands trial (I.645–51), and the Christ-like aspect of both figures is reinforced in Chauntecleer's narrative when the dead man bids his friend "Bihoold my bloody woundes, depe and wyde" (VII.3015), exactly as Christ calls out from the Cross in many fourteenth-century hymns. The posture in which the friend envisions the corpse "gaping upright" (VII.3042) evokes the Knight's dark imagining of "colde deeth" in the Temple of Mars (I.2008). The dung-cart in which the murder victim is concealed recalls the Jewish privy of *The Prioress's Tale*, as the torture and hanging of the murderers recall the Provost's retaliation against the Jews.

On the whole, these allusions reinforce the power and efficiency of a story that is a textbook example of melodrama harnessed to homiletic purpose. A religious sensibility is provoked, first by warnings and then by a Christ-like apparition, and responds in a way that in turn provokes the community at large to collaborate in exposing evil and obtaining justice. To this extent the little tale is the efficacious exemplum par excellence. Whereas the pale face in *The Man of Law's Tale* is a gratuitous embellishment, irrelevant to the actual situation of Custance, the pale and bloody figure in Chauntecleer's exemplum plays a crucial admonitory role. And the echo of the Knight's grim panorama of the work of Mars in the lodger's horrific vision of the gaping corpse within the dung-heap lends added force to his appeal to the city fathers.

This appeal is worth examining more closely. It would seem to confirm the effectiveness of the vividly focused sequence of dreams, which finally elicit a uniquely efficacious response, as nightmare is abruptly translated into coherent political discourse:

"I crye out on the ministres," quod he,
 "That sholden kepe and reulen this citee.
 Harrow! Allas! Heere lith my felawe slayn!"
 (VII.3043–45)

But there is something implausible about a mode of vision this efficient. We can also hear in these lines an undertone of terror and near panic, and we should notice their larger effect, an explosion of mob violence

that leads directly to the abrupt, brutal punishment of the murderers.²⁰ Are we finally edified or merely shocked by all this? Is the "intent" of the tale at this point fully in line with its homiletic pretensions? For Chaucer's purposes, the raising of such questions was primary. For Chauntecleer, meanwhile, the consciousness of having created an effect with the lurid details of his story, and the dramatic discovery that climaxes it, is an end in itself. Declaring his own dream an "avisoun," the highest type of prophetic dream, and making vivid the "adversitee" that threatens him becomes an occasion for striking a heroic pose, wholly unmindful of the obvious bearing of this and his other exempla on his own situation.

Chauntecleer's self-aggrandizing posture here mocks the world-historical and Dantean pretensions of the Monk, but his tale of the two pilgrims can be taken seriously, and recognizing its function can help us understand the relationship between Chauntecleer's situation and the frame of tragic history the Nun's Priest constructs around it. Despite its appeal to civic order, the Pilgrim's outcry on seeing the dung-cart is no more a political act than Chauntecleer's own "Cok! Cok!" at the sight of the fox. Its strange blend of fear, prayer, and advice to princes expresses a psychological need, an attempt to gain private stability by invoking public order. And the rhetoric of the later portions of *The Nun's Priest Tale*, for all its high comedy, responds to this same need, by suggesting how its humble story might be made to assume the dignity of tragedy.

The tact of the Nun's Priest's is flawless: it is never precisely his story or his hero that we take seriously, but he manages to convey the reality of our moral experience, and call attention to real dangers. High poetry is not spared his ironic and humbling scrutiny. When he notes that his story took place on Friday, and is then drawn to reflect on Friday as sacred to Venus, as the day on which King Richard Coeur-de-Lion was murdered, and therefore as the focus of the invective of the master-poet Geoffrey of Vinsauf, we are reminded of the limited power and potential foolishness of poetry, which can "do" nothing about the events it presumes to engage, and is all too apt to delude itself about its ability to interpret them. The distance between the particularity of fable and the aggrandizings of classical rhetoric may well seem unbridgeable.

²⁰The pilgrim's outcry and the ensuing violence are not found in Chaucer's likely source, the *Super Sapientiam Salomonis* of Robert Holcot. See Thomas Bestul, "The Nun's Priest's Tale," in *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales*, ed. Corrales and Hamel, 1.486–89.

But lurking amid the absurdity of the Nun's Priest's bewailings is a serious point. It *is* finally the business of poetry to engage with history, to give point to our own anxiety and sense of fatedness by focusing on the continuum of human experience, the precedents and likely consequences of our acts and follies, and the accidents we incur. As we move outward from hens bemoaning the plight of Chauntecleer to the desperate women of Carthage and Rome, we encounter the figure of Richard Lionheart, a king who was the stuff of legend, traditionally viewed through a haze of idealized chivalry and crusading piety, but whose historical presence here focuses and authenticates the poetic amplification of the story. And as the social world of the tale disintegrates into the pell-mell pursuit of the fox, a second historical allusion, this time to the disruption of the civic order of a modern city by a rioting mob, helps us bridge the gap between the barnyard world of the fable and the panorama of ancient cities destroyed by fire and the sword. *English* history, both the painfully fresh and the semilegendary, have become vital elements in an evocation of literary tradition in its fullest, most European sense.

A vision capable of comprehending these different social spheres and a depth of historical understanding sufficient to demonstrate the continuity among them—this is what Chaucer saw as the proper aspiration of serious poetry, what he saw being realized in the work of Dante and Boccaccio, what he sensed that tragedy, whatever tragedy was, might accomplish best of all.

