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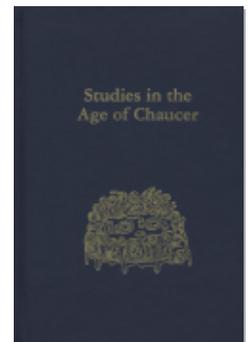
Future Perfect: The Augustinian Theology of Perfection and  
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R. James Goldstein

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## Future Perfect:

### The Augustinian Theology of Perfection and the *Canterbury Tales*

R. James Goldstein  
*Auburn University*

A GENERATION AGO the most vigorous scholarly debates among Chaucerians in North America pitted the neo-Augustinian or exegetical critics, represented by D. W. Robertson and his followers, against New Critical formalist critics, represented most influentially by E. Talbot Donaldson.<sup>1</sup> In recent years, as older controversies over exegetical criticism recede into the ever more distant past, there have been signs that resistance to thinking seriously about the relation of Chaucer's writing to medieval theological discourses is waning. Indeed, current scholarship in the rapidly growing field of vernacular theology suggests that the time may be ripe to reexamine such a fundamental question as how the pervasive influence of Augustinian thought in the fourteenth century might matter to our reading of Chaucer, though such lines of questioning have long been taboo lest one be accused of harboring a reactionary Robertsonian agenda. By focusing on the theology of Christian perfection in *The Canterbury Tales*, the present essay aims to situate Chaucer's work within an Augustinian framework to offer an alternative

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<sup>1</sup>See Lee Patterson's still indispensable analysis of this debate in *Negotiating the Past: The Historical Understanding of Medieval Literature* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), pp. 1–39; for a contrasting account, see Alan Gaylord, "Reflections on D. W. Robertson, Jr., and 'Exegetical Criticism,'" *ChauR* 40.3 (2006): 311–33.

to suggestions in recent scholarship that locates convergences between *The Canterbury Tales* and reformist thought, sometimes of a radical or Wycliffite tendency.<sup>2</sup>

By focusing on the theology of perfection, this essay seeks to remedy the relative neglect of that topic by scholars who have generally not sought to appraise the cultural work performed by Chaucer's writing in terms of medieval ideas of perfection.<sup>3</sup> A notable exception is a recent essay by Nicholas Watson, who argues that Chaucer's self-consciously lay stance in *The Canterbury Tales* is best understood as "anti-perfectionist," or what he identifies as a "mediocrist" position.<sup>4</sup> The "public Christianity" that Chaucer displays in *The Canterbury Tales*, as Watson understands it, "is dismissive of the ideals of the professional religious orders," the religious who in the Church's traditional hierarchical thinking about personhood had claimed the privilege of being the *perfecti*, in contrast to the *mediocri*, those "virtuous lay Christians in active life."<sup>5</sup> While it is far from my intention to recuperate a Robertsonian herme-

<sup>2</sup>For examples, see Peggy Knapp, *Chaucer and the Social Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Paul Strohm, "Chaucer's Lollard Joke: History and the Textual Unconscious," *SAC* 17 (1995): 23–42; David Aers and Lynn Staley, *The Powers of the Holy: Religion, Politics, and Gender in Medieval English Culture* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996); Alan J. Fletcher, "Chaucer the Heretic," *SAC* 25 (2003): 53–121. The list is by no means complete.

<sup>3</sup>Robertson barely mentions Christian perfection in his major work, though the idea received some attention in the work of his followers; see D. W. Robertson Jr., *A Preface to Chaucer: Studies in Medieval Perspectives* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), p. 350; Bernard F. Huppé, *A Reading of the Canterbury Tales* (Albany: SUNY, 1964), pp. 39, 113–17, 142–47, 228–29; Paul A. Olson, *The Canterbury Tales and the Good Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), who concludes that Chaucer "is preeminently the poet of perfection and discipline not only of the mind but of the imagination and affections" (p. 297). An anti-Robertsonian position was staked out in the early work of Donald R. Howard, who suggested that the "hierarchical view of perfection" in medieval Christianity "brought into the life of every Christian an inescapable tension: it demanded of him more than he could be expected to do" and made his or her life one of "unending struggle" (*The Three Temptations: Medieval Man in Search of the World* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966], pp. 39–40; see also pp. 90–92); see also Howard, "The Conclusion of the Marriage Group: Chaucer and the Human Condition," *MP* 57 (1960): 223–32. Ironically, Howard's fierce opposition to the kind of neo-Augustinianism represented by Robertson rests on an insight that is anticipated in Augustine's anti-Pelagian discourse.

<sup>4</sup>Nicholas Watson, "Chaucer's Public Christianity," *Religion and Literature* 37.2 (2005): 99–114; on the self-consciousness of this lay persona, see pp. 100–101. When convenient, further citations to his essay appear parenthetically in the text.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 100, 101. While acknowledging that his models "constantly overlap," Watson sketches three "alternative perfectionist models" available in the later fourteenth century to devout laypersons, which may be summarized thus: (1) a model that adapted the idea of the "mixed life" to the laity; (2) a "puritanical model" that in its more radical forms was Wycliffite but whose conception of the Christian life as "a strug-

neutic, I submit that Watson's argument seriously misreads Chaucer's stance toward perfectionism, foreclosing the possibility of reading *The Canterbury Tales* from within an Augustinian framework that was widely available in the fourteenth century. To help make that case, I propose to examine the contrasting lives of two secular wives who know a great deal about "wandrynge by the weye."<sup>6</sup> If Alisoun of Bath gleefully rejects the suitability of striving for Christian perfection in her own case, Custance is the only figure in *The Canterbury Tales* whom Chaucer explicitly describes as attaining perfection in this life. Chaucer's references to Christian perfection in relation to both fictional wayfarers suggest that the pair may be read as symbolic opposites in ways that cannot be fully appreciated either in terms of the old idea of a "marriage group" or of the reductive Robertsonian binary of *caritas* and *cupiditas*. Instead, I argue, the narratives of these two viators raise insistent questions about the relation between human and divine agency in the free will's cooperation or resistance to grace that Saint Augustine addressed in his anti-Pelagian tracts in the final decades of his career, arguments to which (ironically enough) the so-called exegetical critics paid virtually no attention, though the same cannot be said of fourteenth-century theologians.

My essay begins with a brief analysis of the conceptual foundations of Christian perfection, followed by a summary of Saint Augustine's argument in his anti-Pelagian tracts concerning the relation between the operations of divine grace and the fallen human will, and the constraints this dynamic places on the pursuit of Christian perfection. The Augustinian analysis continued to hold wide currency in Chaucer's day, as evidenced by the work of Oxford theologians as different as Thomas Bradwardine and John Wyclif, who both share, as we shall see, an Augustinian framework for thinking about grace, the will, and the meaning of Christian perfection. The second section offers a detailed rereading of *The Man of Law's Tale* to argue that in its portrayal of the operations of divine grace, Chaucer's revisions to his sources offer an implicit theological argument of a distinctively Augustinian character

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gle against sin, undertaken in obedience to God's law," was broadly shared by less radical reformers like Langland; and (3) the "affective" model that stressed love (p. 102).

<sup>6</sup>*The Riverside Chaucer*, gen. ed. Larry Benson, 3rd. ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), I.467; all quotations of Chaucer are from this edition. Chaucer alludes to medieval theologians' habit of describing life on earth as the time *in via*, defining the human person as a viator. See Gerhart B. Ladner, "Homo Viator: Mediaeval Ideas on Alienation and Order," *Speculum* 42 (1967): 233–59.

in ways that have not been properly appreciated before. The essay then turns in section three to reexamine the Wife of Bath's discussion of the evangelical counsels of perfection, which draws humorously on the distinction between the precepts and the counsels. Aquinas's analysis of this distinction in the *Summa Theologiae* provides a useful reference point, which allows us to contrast the method of the scholastic author with that of the fictional vernacular theologian who touches on such difficult "scole-matere" (III.1272). After analyzing the narrative uses Chaucer makes of the concept of perfection in this contrasting pair of lay secular wives, the fourth part of the essay widens its scope to sketch out what a rereading of *The Canterbury Tales* might reveal if we replace the idea of a "marriage group" with a "perfection group."

## I

Late medieval philosophy and theology inherited the notion that human lives and experiences ought to be measured against an absolute standard of perfection supplied by God, the perfect being: "Be perfect just as your heavenly Father is perfect," said Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5.48).<sup>7</sup> If absolute perfection can only be predicated of God and the kingdom of heaven, the idea of Christian perfection was applied in a relative sense throughout the Middle Ages to the *homo iustus*, the just man who by the grace of God could enjoy perfect charity to the degree to which it was possible in this life.<sup>8</sup> The connection made by theolo-

<sup>7</sup>The pursuit of perfection is a topic that is closely related to the idea of the *imitatio Christi*; for a comprehensive overview, see Giles Constable, "The Ideal of the Imitation of Christ," *Three Studies in Medieval Religious and Social Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). Although it remains outside the scope of the present essay, Chaucer shows an interest in "perfect being theology," inspired by his reading of Boethius (cf. Troilus's predestination speech in Bk. 4, Theseus's final speech in *The Knight's Tale*, and Dorigen's soliloquy in *The Franklin's Tale*). Anselm's ontological proof of the existence of God, accepted by Bradwardine and Wyclif among others, is the most famous instance of arguing for the necessary existence of God as perfect being; for a recent discussion by a philosopher of religion, see Katherin A. Rogers, *Perfect Being Theology, Reason and Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000). A valuable overview of the overlapping senses of perfection is provided by Morton W. Bloomfield, "Some Reflections on the Medieval Idea of Perfection," *Franciscan Studies* 17 (1957): 213–37, rpt. in *Essays and Explorations: Studies in Ideas, Language, and Literature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970), pp. 29–55.

<sup>8</sup>See Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Blackfriars Edition, Latin text and English translation, vol. 47 (New York and London: McGraw-Hill and Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1973), II–II, q. 184, a. 1–2 (subsequent references will be to this edition). For an overview, see "Perfection" in *Dictionnaire de spiritualité, ascétique et mystique: Doctrine*

gians between perfection and justice indicates that the topic of Christian perfection overlaps with the theology of justification.<sup>9</sup> The relative perfection available on earth was traditionally understood to involve a hierarchy of different degrees, such as that represented by the well-known triad of the degrees of chastity or perfection, or the late medieval triad of the active, contemplative, and “mixed” life.<sup>10</sup> For most of the Middle Ages the pursuit of perfection was cultivated by the professional religious, especially in monastic tradition, within which develop arguments about different grades (*gradus*) of perfection.<sup>11</sup> The monastic reforms of the twelfth century, with their “interiorization of monastic values and spirituality,” as Giles Constable observes, “eventually led to monasticizing everyone and destroying the special position held by monks in the early Middle Ages.”<sup>12</sup> The theory and practice of Christian perfection became embroiled in controversy in the thirteenth century with the rise of the mendicant orders and the debates on religious poverty associated with the Spiritual Franciscan movement. Such debates provided occasions for articulating anticlerical positions to the extent that by the fourteenth century, traditional claims that the professional religious enjoyed a privileged access to the highest forms of perfection had lost much of their luster for lay audiences.<sup>13</sup> In England, it hardly needs stressing, the heterodox challenges to “private religion” by John Wyclif and his followers did much to tarnish the reputation of professional religious orders for perfection, putting them sharply on the defensive. The Benedictine monk Uthred of Boldon, an older contemporary of Chaucer’s, wrote two treatises on perfection dated c. 1374–76, partly in response to Wyclif’s

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*et histoire*, vol. 12 part 1 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1984), cols. 1074–136. The fullest history in English is R. Newton Flew, *The Idea of Perfection in Christian Theology* (London: Oxford University Press, 1934).

<sup>9</sup>See Alister E. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). I am grateful to an anonymous reader for supplying the reference and for the observation that many late medieval theologians disagreed with Augustine’s doctrine of justification; see *Iustitia Dei* I, esp. pp. 172–79.

<sup>10</sup>See Howard, “Conclusion of the Marriage Group,” p. 224; *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976), pp. 248–50.

<sup>11</sup>See Morton W. Bloomfield, “*Piers Plowman*” as a Fourteenth-Century Apocalypse (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1962), esp. pp. 44–97.

<sup>12</sup>Giles Constable, *The Reformation of the Twelfth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 7.

<sup>13</sup>On the emergence of anticlerical discourse from antifraternal polemic, see Wendy Scase, “*Piers Plowman*” and the New Anticlericalism, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature, 4 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

attacks on the worldly corruption of and lack of scriptural basis for the regular orders; we shall return later to this debate concerning perfection by Chaucer's contemporaries.<sup>14</sup>

In short, Christian perfection was not a static concept but rather a highly contested category, serving as a kind of lightning rod through which some of the most charged theological and ecclesiological disputes were conducted during moments of institutional conflict at different times in the history of the medieval church. What was there about the idea of perfection, we might ask, that so readily lent itself to such a variety of uses? From the earliest years of Christianity, the discursive functions which the vocabulary of perfection was made to serve suggest that the concept itself marks out the site of certain unstable and even contradictory pressures. As Morton Bloomfield observes, from the beginning Christian perfection was understood as "both continual spiritual growth and spiritual attainment," though "theologians could stress either or both as they wished."<sup>15</sup> The difference between these two perspectives on perfection, as we shall see, creates a tension that writers attempt to work out in the form of two proto-narratives. The theme of the first story-type concerns moral and spiritual *amelioration*. Set in the present world, this narrative pattern tells of an individual's spiritual progress in a constant struggle against temptation.<sup>16</sup> The theme of what I designate the second proto-narrative is *transcendence* beyond the realm of temptation; set in the other world, this pattern narrates the story of an absolute *completion* projected into the future, perfection as *per-ficio* in the sense of bringing something to an end. These alternative patterns, I suggest, are evident in the full-fledged narratives about perfection in *The Canterbury Tales*.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup>See W. A. Pantin, "Two Treatises of Uthred of Boldon on the Monastic Life," in R. W. Hunt, W. A. Pantin, and R. W. Southern, eds., *Studies in Medieval History Presented to Francis Maurice Powicke* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1948), pp. 363–85. Cf. John Wyclif, *De perfectione statuum*, in *John Wyclif's Polemical Works in Latin*, ed. Rudolf Budensieg, 2 vols. (London: Wyclif Society, 1883), 2:440–82, briefly discussed below.

<sup>15</sup>Bloomfield, *Piers Plowman*, p. 53. This double edge to perfection, I suggest, is closely paralleled by the different emphases in the concept of *imitatio Christi*, whether it is the divinity or humanity of Christ that is imitated; see Constable, "Imitation of Christ."

<sup>16</sup>The ameliorative proto-narrative roughly corresponds to Watson's "puritanical" model, the second of his three models of lay perfection he thinks Chaucer rejects (cf. note 5 above), though we should be clear that nothing specifically restricts this proto-narrative to laypersons.

<sup>17</sup>The narratological distinction I offer parallels what McGrath establishes is Augustine's sense that the sinner's justification is both an *event* and a *process*, though to distin-

In Saint Augustine's anti-Pelagian writings, the repeated oscillation between the first and second of these proto-narratives is symptomatic of a logical double bind for the Christian subject, which put in its starkest terms consists in the belief that no human being can fully attain perfection in this life, because "real" perfection, the one worth striving for, by definition takes place elsewhere, at some time in the future. Yet even the progressive path of relative perfection contains a structural instability or contradiction that becomes evident when the New Testament both demands that Christians strive to attain a perfect selfhood and at the same time insists that perfection is impossible without the operation of grace, a force radically alien to the self, without which the self can neither make progress nor attain the final reward. Augustine inherits this tension from the writings of Saint Paul, whose frequent references to his own spiritual struggles after his conversion developed his sense of life in this world as one of unending struggle against temptation in the pursuit of perfection.<sup>18</sup> The Pauline view of the Christian life as a progressive journey toward the goal of final perfection, a journey dependent on divine grace and requiring the vigilant conduct of spiritual warfare and self-discipline, received detailed articulation in Saint Augustine's response to the Pelagian heresy in a series of increasingly polemical works written from 412 to 430, when Augustine worked out his extraordinarily influential views on original sin, freedom, and grace, exploring at considerable length the implications of the concupiscence of the flesh for structurally flawed human beings.<sup>19</sup>

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guish these two aspects clearly is a sixteenth-century development; see *Iustitia Dei*, I, p. 31, where he observes: "God's new creation is not finished once and for all in the event of justification, and requires perfecting, which is brought about by cooperative grace collaborating with the *liberum arbitrium liberatum*. Whilst *concupiscentia* may be relegated to the background as *caritas* begins its work of renewal within man, it continues to make its presence felt, so that renewed gifts of grace are required throughout man's existence, as sin is never totally overcome in this life." Since *The Canterbury Tales* are mostly narratives, not theological arguments, it is more useful for our purposes to describe these two aspects of Augustine's understanding of justification and perfection in narratological terms, as the story pattern of amelioration yielding to one of transcendence.

<sup>18</sup>The Apostle favors two metaphors that help shape both proto-narratives: the race where the winner is awarded the prize (*bravium*), and the defensive struggle against an inimical force (sin or the flesh). For running to attain the *bravium*, see 1 Cor. 9.24, Phil. 3.14; to attain the *corona*, 1 Cor. 9.25; for defensive struggle (*repugno*, *-are*), see Rom. 7.23, Heb. 12.4.

<sup>19</sup>For an excellent brief discussion of Augustine's views on grace and perfection and an account of the controversy, see Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine, Vol. 1: The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100–600)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), pp. 307–18. See also Carol Harrison, *August-*

Augustine insists that baptism does not erase the inherited concupiscence of the flesh, against which the Christian must constantly struggle. So long as we occupy what Paul in Romans calls “the body of this death,” human beings are self-divided along the fault line of the flesh and must engage in continuous spiritual warfare against concupiscence. Ascetic discipline, or the training of the concupiscent flesh through its mortification, provides the key strategy for the Christian who strives to fulfill the command to be perfect when the full attainment of that goal cannot take place in this world, not even by a saint.<sup>20</sup> Because it is always possible for the viator to make further progress in the journey toward perfection, to name perfection is to name both the struggle itself and the eventual reward for a transcendental desire or hunger that literally cannot be satiated in this world. Augustine’s view of human nature after the Fall was pessimistic; the damage done as a consequence of original sin leaves us utterly dependent on God’s grace, without which we can do nothing good. Thus to narrate the Christian’s spiritual progress on the journey is to tell the story of God’s grace.<sup>21</sup> Unlike the Pelagians, who claimed that it is within human ability to live without sin, for Augustine the moral life is far more complicated; as he argues in *De perfectione iustitiae hominis* (On the Perfection of Human Righteousness), only Christ heals sinners and assists “those who believe and are making

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*ine: Christian Truth and Fractured Humanity*, Christian Theology in Context (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 79–114.

<sup>20</sup> Augustine frequently cites Paul’s testimony in Philippians 3.12: “non quod iam acceperim, aut iam perfectus sim” (not as though I had already attained, or were already perfect); *Biblia sacra iuxta vulgatam clementinam*, 5th ed., Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos (Madrid: Edica, 1977); translations from the Vulgate are from the Douay-Rheims version, *The Holy Bible* (New York: P. J. Kennedy, 1914). In *De peccatorum meritis et remissione et de baptismo parvulorum* (The Punishment and Forgiveness of Sins and the Baptism of Children), Augustine comments about Paul: “He himself admits that he has not yet grasped the goal, that he is not yet perfect in the full righteousness which he longs to attain in Christ, but that he still deliberately struggles on. . . . For although he was a perfect wayfarer, he had not yet reached the end of the journey.” For the Latin original, see *Patrologiae cursus completus . . . Series (Latina)*, ed. J.-P. Migne (Paris, 1844–64), 221 vols., 44, col. 163–64; henceforth cited as PL by volume number and column. Unless otherwise noted, translations from Augustine’s anti-Pelagian writings are cited by volume and page number from *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the Twenty-first Century*, ed. John E. Rotelle, Part I, vol. 23–26: *Answer to the Pelagians*, Roland J. Teske, introduction, translation, and notes (Hyde Park, N.Y.: New City Press, 1997–99); the passage above is from *Works* 23, p. 94.

<sup>21</sup> “Proficientium est enim via: quamvis bene proficientes dicantur perfecti viatores” (This is the path of those who are making progress, and those who are making good progress are called perfect travelers). *On Nature and Grace*, *Works* 23, p. 230; PL 44, col. 253.

progress ‘from day to day’ through the renewal of the interior human being until perfect righteousness, which is like full health, is achieved.”<sup>22</sup> Augustine shifts from the ameliorative to the transcendent narrative in an instant; our traveling may be on the correct path, but perfection cannot be completed until the journey ends.<sup>23</sup> God holds up the absolute standard of perfection that he knows in advance will be impossible to achieve in this life so that we will know through the commandments the direction in which to run.<sup>24</sup> The commandments thus create a moral road map for both the journey and the goal, though the human will alone is insufficient.<sup>25</sup> With the assistance of grace the viator’s ameliorative narrative marks out progress yet cannot reach its final completion in the here and now. The residue of present imperfection can only be resolved with a future perfect tense: “It is, then, one thing to withdraw from every sin, for that is going on at present; it is something else to have withdrawn from every sin, for that will be attained in that perfection to come.”<sup>26</sup>

In this ameliorative narrative of justification, Augustine affirms the interaction of human and divine agency while stressing that the free will needs to be assisted by grace. Although his tract *De gratia et libero arbitrio* (On Grace and Free Choice) addresses a specific monastic community whose members have rejected sexual desire, Augustine notes that his same general point about the dependence of the will on grace applies to those seculars who, not given the more perfect gift of continence, choose to marry and observe marital chastity by avoiding prohibited

<sup>22</sup>*Perfection of Human Righteousness, Works 23*, p. 291, quoting 2 Cor. 4:16. “Hoc fit in credentibus et proficientibus renovatione interioris hominis de die in diem, donec fiat perfecta iustitia tanquam sanitas plena” (PL 44, col. 295). This treatise makes especially clear the extent to which Augustine’s anti-Pelagian doctrine of justification provides an occasion to formulate his theology of perfection.

<sup>23</sup>“as many of us as run perfectly” should be mindful “that we are not yet perfect in order that we may become perfect in that place toward which we are running perfectly.” *Perfection of Human Righteousness, Works 23*, p. 297; “quotquot perfecte currimus, hoc sapiamus, quod nondum perfecti sumus, ut illic perficiamur, quo perfecte adhuc currimus” (PL 44, col. 300).

<sup>24</sup>*Perfection of Human Righteousness, Works 23*, p. 298. “Cur ergo non praeciperetur homini ista perfectio, quamvis eam in hac vita nemo habeat? Non enim recte curritur, si quo currendum est nesciatur. Quomodo autem sciretur, si nullis praeceptis ostendetur?” (PL 44, col. 301).

<sup>25</sup>*Perfection of Human Righteousness, Works 23*, p. 300; “nec iuberetur, si nihil ibi nostra voluntas ageret; nec oraretur, si sola sufficeret” (PL 44, col. 303).

<sup>26</sup>*Perfection of Righteousness, Works 23*, p. 305. “Aliud est ergo, recedere ab omni peccato, quod nunc in opere est; aliud, recessisse ab omni peccato, quod in illa perfectione tunc erit” (PL 44, col. 308).

sexual practices.<sup>27</sup> Despite the focus on the moral choices of *monks*, Augustine insists that the general principle of the will assisted by grace applies to *ordinary* Christians too; in either case, God *prepares* the will, and by working with it (co-operating) perfects that which by working he begins.<sup>28</sup> Augustine finds it difficult to explain exactly *how* this operation takes place, though he affirms that God moves the will within the interior person.<sup>29</sup> What remains uncertain, however, is how free or autonomous the agency of the human will remains if it can move, whether for better or worse, only through the motion of a prior agency.<sup>30</sup>

In *De praedestinatione sanctorum* and *De dono perseverantiae* (On the Predestination of the Saints and The Gift of Perseverance), Augustine continues to place the primacy on God's operative grace, not on the natural ability of the free will.<sup>31</sup> In the first tract he argues that salvation cannot

<sup>27</sup> See *De gratia et libero arbitrio* (426 CE), where he advises the monks at Hadrumetum that the commandments against fornication and adultery demonstrate the existence of our free choice, but that without grace it is impossible to obey them: "Numquid tam multa quae praecipuntur in lege Dei, ne fornicationes et adulteria committantur, indicant aliud quam liberum arbitrium? Neque enim praeciperentur nisi homo haberet propriam voluntatem, qua divinis praeceptis obidiret. Et tamen Dei donum est, sine quo servari castitatis praecepta non possunt" (PL 44, col. 886); *Grace and Free Choice*, *Works* 26, p. 76.

<sup>28</sup> "ille qui praeparat voluntatem, et cooperando perficit, quod operando incipit" (PL 44, col. 901). Teske notes that this discussion is the basis for the later theological distinction between *gratia operans* and *gratia cooperans*; see *Grace and Free Choice*, *Works* 26, p. 36 n. 26. As McGrath observes, "[o]nce justified by divine action, the sinner does not at once become a perfect example of holiness. . . . God *operates* upon man in the *act* of justification, and *cooperates* with him in the *process* of justification" (*Iustitia Dei* I, p. 28; italics in original). McGrath goes on to observe that Augustine denies that a sinner possesses merit before the act of justification but affirms merit after justification, so long as we recognize that merit is "a divine, rather than a human, work."

<sup>29</sup> "God works in the hearts of human beings to incline their wills to whatever he wills" (*Grace and Free Choice*, *Works* 26, p. 102); "Agit enim Omnipotens in cordibus hominum etiam motum voluntatis eorum, ut per eos agat quod per eos agere ipse voluerit" (PL 44, col. 908). The interiorizing of the actions of grace on the will, as Carol Harrison notes, is characteristic of Augustine's thought beginning around 418 (*Augustine*, p. 111 n. 90).

<sup>30</sup> Harrison, *Augustine*, p. 111, acknowledges that scholars have engaged in "herculean efforts . . . to retain meaningful reference to the freedom of the will in the context of his theology of grace."

<sup>31</sup> These two works from about 427 addressed monastic communities in southern France where Cassian was the leading intellectual figure, who worried that Augustine's theology of grace, free will, and especially predestination conflicted with the active pursuit of perfection through asceticism. See Saint Augustine, *Four Anti-Pelagian Writings: On Nature and Grace, On the Proceedings of Pelagius, On the Predestination of the Saints, On the Gift of Perseverance*, The Fathers of the Church, 86, trans. John A. Mourant and William J. Collinge (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1992), p. 188.

depend on the unassisted human mind initiating faith but requires the divine gift of faith to move the will of those whom God has predestined for the kingdom to receive that gift. Augustine's "uncompromising doctrine of election and predestination" was thus the logical result of his insistence that man is wholly dependent on the operations of grace, not merit.<sup>32</sup> The very thoughts that from our vantage may appear to precede our giving the assent required for belief are actually given by God, not autonomously produced.<sup>33</sup> Although Augustine suggests it is futile to attempt to comprehend the justice of why God has chosen some sinners for salvation and not others, he insists that it is God who causes the predestined "to have good works when he makes them observe the divine commandments."<sup>34</sup> In short, the contingent nature of the perfected will implies a diminished agency for human beings. If *The Predestination of the Saints* concentrates on God's necessary role in initiating the conversion of the will to begin the faith of those he has predestined for salvation, *De dono perseverentiae* (On the Gift of Perseverance) focuses on the operation of the grace that assists those so predestined to remain on the right course until the very end—to persevere until death, the moment when the ameliorative proto-narrative gives way to the transcendent one. To tell either of these stories, however, is to tell of God's power and will and the radical insufficiency of the human mind after the Fall.<sup>35</sup> God's agency flows into the deepest recesses of the will, though his grace proves irresistible only to those whom he wishes to save.<sup>36</sup> God has

<sup>32</sup>Harrison, *Augustine*, p. 113.

<sup>33</sup>*Predestination of the Saints, Works 26*, p. 158. "[N]on quia credere vel non credere non est in arbitrio voluntatis humanae, sed in electis praeparatur voluntas a Domino" (PL 44, col. 968).

<sup>34</sup>*Predestination of the Saints, Works 26*, p. 168. "[H]oc ipso quo eos facit habere deinceps opera bona, cum ipse facit ut faciant divina mandata" (PL 44, col. 977).

<sup>35</sup>Augustine recalls Saint Ambrose's observations that "our hearts and our thoughts are not in our power" (*Gift of Perseverance, Works 26*, p. 201; PL 44, col. 1003; cf. *Gift of Perseverance, Works 26*, p. 225; PL 44, col. 1024).

<sup>36</sup>Harrison argues that God's grace is irresistible not because it overpowers the will to do something it otherwise would not wish to do, but "because it unfailingly, irresistibly, calls forth a response which corresponds with man's deepest desires and motivations . . . so that he is able to respond to it freely, wholeheartedly, and in the way grace intends" (*Augustine*, p. 112). Yet because Augustine attributes the very movements of the heart and thoughts to God's agency, her account does not solve the problem but merely shifts the location of divine compulsion a step further back. Robertsonians who fault the Wife of Bath's misdirection of her will would do well to keep in mind this aporia in Augustine's late writings, which in my view neither Bradwardine nor Wyclif eliminates.

judged according to his inscrutable will that "it is better that some who will not persevere be mingled with the certain number of his saints."<sup>37</sup>

The experience of reading Augustine's predestinarian tracts can be a frightening one, since doubts may arise whether oneself is chosen for salvation or is one of those foreknown (*praesciti*) to damnation, as Augustine is well aware when he suggests that a preacher should exercise considerable caution in explaining predestination to his congregation lest he terrify them needlessly.<sup>38</sup> And yet, he insists, until the actual moment of death, no one can "say with a claim to certitude that any human being shares in this calling except when he has departed from this world," though how those who still remain *in via* might be granted this certitude remains unclear.<sup>39</sup> The Augustinian doctrine of predestination thus entails that from any perspective available in *this* life, the ameliorative narrative is liable to be short-circuited at any turn, since never can one be sure it is God's inscrutable will that an individual sinner is one of those chosen to keep up the good fight, to persevere on the path of perfecting righteousness until the end is attained. To everyone except God, therefore, the progress a person makes in life thus remains like an open book until the very end.<sup>40</sup> The Christian life of the viator takes place on the road between the conversion of the will and the final perseverance, though here, at least, Augustine does not offer a detailed road map of the progress of this long journey: "Between the extremes of the beginning of faith and the perfection of perseverance there are those in-between virtues by which we live correctly."<sup>41</sup> This underdeveloped, "in-between" portion of Augustine's narrative of amelioration will be worth recalling when we turn to examine the progress toward perfection of the two Chaucerian wives.

As Alister McGrath has observed, "[t]he characteristic medieval un-

<sup>37</sup> *Gift of Perseverance*, Works 26, p. 201. "Deus autem melius esse iudicavit, miscere quosdam non perseveraturos certo numero sanctorum suorum; ut quibus non expedit in hujus vitae tentatione securitas, non possint esse securi" (PL 44, col. 1003).

<sup>38</sup> See *Gift of Perseverance*, chap. 22, 57–62 (Works 26, pp. 230–33; PL 44, cols. 1028–31).

<sup>39</sup> *Gift of Perseverance*, Works 26, p. 212. "Ad quam vocationem pertinere nullus est homo ab hominibus certa asseveratione dicendus, nisi cum de hoc saeculo exierit" (PL 44, col. 1012).

<sup>40</sup> Augustine acknowledges as much when he uses the progress he has made as an author, in correcting the erroneous views of his earlier books, as an analogy (or synecdoche) for spiritual progress; see *Gift of Perseverance*, Works 26, p. 229; PL 44, col. 1027–28.

<sup>41</sup> *Gift of Perseverance*, Works 26, p. 230. "Inter initium autem fidei et perfectionem perseverantiae, media sunt illa, quibus recte vivimus" (PL 44, col. 1028).

derstanding of the nature of justification . . . refers not merely to the beginning of the Christian life, but also to its continuation and ultimate perfection, in which the Christian is made righteous in the sight of God and the sight of men through a fundamental change in his nature, and not merely his status.”<sup>42</sup> This essentially Augustinian framework, though modified in later centuries, continued to shape later theological understandings; indeed, “medieval theological tradition followed Augustine of Hippo in insisting that man has a positive role to play in his own justification.”<sup>43</sup> One of the most important contexts for the later medieval debates over justification and its close conceptual link to the idea of perfection as both process and result occurs with the systematic development and institutionalization of the sacrament of penance. With the pivotal role played by Peter Lombard’s *Sentences* in later theological debates and with the well-known canon of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) enjoining annual confession on all Christians, “the justification of the sinner” became “firmly linked to the sacramental life of the church.”<sup>44</sup> With this link established, it became difficult to think of the pursuit of Christian perfection outside the sacrament of penance.

Augustine’s analysis of the relation of human and divine agency in the free will’s cooperation or resistance to grace, and his startling claim that God predestined those who would maintain the grace of perseverance until the end, were matters of active controversy in England during the fourteenth century. The neo-Augustinian Thomas Bradwardine’s *De causa Dei* revived such questions, which we know were broadly familiar to Chaucer’s audience, since the humor of the philosophical joke in *The Nun’s Priest’s Tale* (VII.3242) depends on his readers associating Bradwardine’s name with the apparent conflict between God’s foreknowledge and human free will.<sup>45</sup> To support his view of the logical and

<sup>42</sup> McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, I, p. 41.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70; theologians differed in how they viewed “the precise nature of this human rôle in justification.”

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99; see pp. 91–99 for fuller discussion.

<sup>45</sup> Thomas Bradwardine, *De causa Dei contra Pelagium*, ed. Henry Saville (London, 1618). Citations will be to book and chapter followed by page number. On Bradwardine, see Heiko A. Oberman, *Archbishop Thomas Bradwardine, A Fourteenth Century Augustinian: A Study of His Theology in Its Historical Context* (Utrecht: Kemink and Zoon, 1957); Gordon Leff, *Bradwardine and the Pelagians: A Study of His “De Causa Dei” and Its Opponents*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought, n.s. 5 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957); McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, I, pp. 116–17; 141–42. McGrath argues that Bradwardine’s Augustinianism was not straightforward: despite the fact that “Bradwardine follows Augustine in discussing predestination within the context of the question of final perseverance, his explicit teaching on *double* predestina-

temporal primacy of grace over human free will, Bradwardine cites Augustine's affirmation in *De gratia et libero arbitrio* that God works in human hearts to incline their wills toward whatever he will, whether toward good or evil.<sup>46</sup> Even closer chronologically to Chaucer are the writings of that other influential Oxford scholar, John Wyclif, who maintains a recognizably Augustinian framework for his theology of grace, free will, merit, and their relation to the pursuit of moral and spiritual perfection. It is well known that Wyclif accepts the Augustinian argument for the predestination of the saved, and God's foreknowledge of those to be damned (*presciti*).<sup>47</sup> Short of divine revelation, according to Wyclif, no human being may possess absolute certainty whether someone was predestined to salvation or foreknown as damned, though one can tell with a high degree of probability if that person's life appears grossly in violation of the evangelical precepts.<sup>48</sup> Still, only God can know whether a sinner's contrition is genuine.<sup>49</sup> Perhaps less well known to literary scholars, however, is how Wyclif's conception of merit was clearly shaped by Augustinian tradition. In *De dominio divino* (1373–74), for example, he argues that because merit is wholly dependent on the grace of God, the creature can only merit relatively (*de congruo*), not absolutely or condignly; thus he can make himself worthy of reward only through God's gracious assistance.<sup>50</sup> The agency of the

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tion at once distinguishes him from the authentic teaching of Augustine" (p. 141; emphasis in original). For McGrath's discussion of the complex question of what criteria we should use to determine if a late medieval theologian is "Augustinian," see pp. 173–79. On revived interest in Augustinianism in this period, see William J. Courtenay, *Schools and Scholars in Fourteenth-Century England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), pp. 207–24.

<sup>46</sup> *De causa Dei*, II, c. 25, p. 563.

<sup>47</sup> See Anthony Kenny, *Wyclif*, Past Masters (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 39–41; Richard Rex, *The Lollards*, Social History in Perspective (Basingstoke, Hampshire; and New York: Palgrave, 2002), pp. 38–39. Unlike Augustine, however, Wyclif went so far as to define the true church as comprising only the *congregatio predestinatorum*, those predestined for salvation; see Anne Hudson, *The Premature Reformation: Wycliffite Texts and Lollard History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), pp. 314–15.

<sup>48</sup> Hudson, *Premature Reformation*, p. 315.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 294. For Wyclif on the necessary link between contrition and predestination, which only God can know, see *Triologus cum Supplemento Triologi*, ed. Gotthardus Lechler (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1869), pp. 331–32. For his views on the grace of predestination, see *Triologus*, pp. 150–54; he seems to treat *gratia predestinationis* and *caritas finalis perseverantie* as equivalent (p. 152).

<sup>50</sup> *De dominio divino*, ed. Reginald Lane Poole (London: Wyclif Society, 1890), pp. 226–27; all translations and paraphrases of Wyclif's Latin are mine. The dates of Wyclif's works are from Willliell R. Thomson, *The Latin Writings of John Wyclif: An Annotated Catalogue* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1983), here p. 39; on Wyclif, cf. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, I, p. 117.

meritorious act thus cannot be separated from God's grace, thanks to which God is the main actor.<sup>51</sup> Wyclif draws on Grosseteste's distinction among three created or infused graces (*preveniens, iustificans, consumans*).<sup>52</sup> Throughout the discussion, perhaps what is most striking is the assumed currency of the early fifth-century controversy between Augustine and the so-called Pelagians; any attempt to historicize the theological implications of Chaucer's work must recognize the extent to which Augustine remains a towering presence in fourteenth-century debates, even if the "conceptual forms" employed in late scholasticism were unknown to Augustine.<sup>53</sup> The abstract story pattern of spiritual progress in the world of temptation, and of the final transcendent perfection achieved by those for whom God's "created grace" inclines the human will to perform meritorious acts and persevere until the end, takes on its most elaborate narrative form in *The Man of Law's Tale*, to which we now turn.

## II

As many critics have observed, in *The Man of Law's Tale* Chaucer uses the historical setting of the tale to create a double focus on the inner spiritual life of the heroine and her place within a larger providential pattern of history.<sup>54</sup> I suggest that divine grace provides the thematic

<sup>51</sup>"Quod autem Dei gracia sit principalior in agendo, patet ex hoc quod creatura principalius disponitur ex Dei gracia ad merendum quam quacunque dispositione alia naturali" (*De dom. div.*, p. 241). Wyclif's argument clearly recalls that of Augustine in *De gratia et libero arbitrio*; indeed, Wyclif reads 2 Cor. 3.4–5 in a way that agrees with Augustine's exegesis in *De dono perseverantiae*.

<sup>52</sup>*De dom. div.*, p. 246. When God wills the sinner's will to turn toward the good, the operation of the divine will is prevenient grace. When the human will cooperates with the will of God and does not resist the offer of grace, this is *gratia gratificans*. Finally, when the will of God wants the justified sinner to keep his will turned toward the good, we may speak of *creata perseverancia* (p. 247), or what Augustine calls the gift of perseverance to the end.

<sup>53</sup>See McGrath's useful distinction between the dogmatic content and conceptual forms of Augustinian thought (*Iustitia Dei*, I, 175).

<sup>54</sup>John A. Yunck, "Religious Elements in Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale*, *ELH* 27 (1960): 249–61. Some critics specifically associate the theme of Providence with Boethius; see, for example, Eugene Clasby, "Chaucer's Constance: Womanly Virtue and the Heroic Life," *ChauR* 13 (1979): 221–33; Stephen Manning, "Chaucer's Constance, Pale and Passive," *Chaucerian Problems and Perspectives: Essays Presented to Paul E. Beichner C.S.C.*, ed. Edward Vasta and Zacharias P. Thundy (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), pp. 13–23. In a more subtle essay, Jill Mann analyzes the Boethian resonance of the word "governance" in *The Man of Law's Tale*; see "Parents and Children in the *Canterbury Tales*," *Literature in Fourteenth-Century England: The J. A. W. Bennett Memorial Lectures, Perugia, 1981–82*, ed. Piero Boitani and Anna Torti (Tübingen: Narr; Cambridge: Brewer, 1983), pp. 165–83 (at p. 168); see also Jill Mann, *Feminizing Chau-*

hinge that connects both aspects of the tale, which is both a narrative about the expansion of Christianity in the Roman Empire and the individual spiritual attainments of Custance.<sup>55</sup> In *The Man of Law's Tale*, Chaucer presents divine grace in terms that are consistently Augustinian in their orientation, a point that will become clearer when we analyze significant changes in Chaucer's adaptation of Nicholas Trevet's life of Constance from his Anglo-Norman *Cronicles*, the primary source for *The Man of Law's Tale*. The implicit theological argument of Chaucer's narrative, in other words, stakes out a distinctly Augustinian position on the relation between grace and will, which Chaucer's unique handling of the narrative helps us locate. By this reading, the often-remarked passive subjectivity of Custance offers a narrative analogue to the downgrading of human agency and free will that we have observed in Augustine's late work and which was reiterated in fourteenth-century England, as we have seen, by Bradwardine and Wyclif.<sup>56</sup> To describe Custance's life in terms of the proto-narratives we have analyzed in Saint Augustine's

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*cer* (Woodbridge, Suffolk; and Rochester, N.Y.: Boydell Brewer, 2002), p. 104; rev. ed. of *Geoffrey Chaucer* [London: Harvester, 1991]). Though she does not specifically use Boethius, Helen Cooney, "Wonder and Immanent Justice in the *Man of Law's Tale*," *ChanR* 33 (1999): 264–87, reads the tale as an exemplum of "the medieval Christian providential view of history" (pp. 266–67), which she suggests was also contained in Trevet.

<sup>55</sup> *Grace* is a key word in the tale, appearing eleven times, seven of which are clearly used in a specifically theological sense, as opposed to a political or purely human one. In Chaucer's entire canon, in fact, the only narrative whose total occurrences of the word in a theological sense approach those of *The Man of Law's Tale* is *Melibee*, which only minimally qualifies as a narrative. Not surprisingly, the only work in *The Canterbury Tales* whose theological use of *grace* surpasses *The Man of Law's Tale* is *The Parson's Tale*, with thirty-two occurrences, in addition to two in *The Parson's Prologue*. I base my analysis on Larry D. Benson, *A Glossorial Concordance to the Riverside Chaucer*, vol. 1 (New York and London: Garland, 1993), s.v. *grace*. *The Clerk's Tale*, interestingly, uses the word ten times, at least six of which occur in a nontheological sense.

<sup>56</sup> Critics who stress her passivity include Yunck, "Religious Elements"; Manning, "Chaucer's Constance"; Sheila Delany, "Womanliness in the *Man of Law's Tale*," *ChanR* 9 (1974): 63–72, rpt. *Writing Woman: Women Writers and Women in Literature, Medieval to Modern* (New York: Schocken, 1983); page numbers cited from reprint. Some recent critics dispute readings that see Custance as passive. See Barbara Nolan, "Chaucer's Tales of Transcendence: Rhyme Royal and Christian Prayer in the *Canterbury Tales*," in C. David Benson and Elizabeth Robertson, ed., *Chaucer's Religious Tales* (Cambridge: Brewer, 1990), pp. 21–38, esp. p. 25 n. 11; Jill Mann, *Feminizing Chaucer*, p. 102; Elizabeth Robertson, "The 'Elvyssh' Power of Constance: Christian Feminism in Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Man of Law's Tale*," *SAC* 23 (2001): 143–80. The extent of Chaucer's knowledge of Bradwardine's work has not been studied in detail, though he could have gained a general knowledge of it from such friends as Ralph Strode; see J. A. W. Bennett, *Chaucer at Oxford and at Cambridge* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974). My argument, however, does not hinge on whether the poet knew his work.

work, her spiritual journey on earth fleshes out the pattern of amelioration, and ends anagogically with her final perfection among the saints in heaven.<sup>57</sup>

From the beginning of the tale, Custance evidently has attained a high degree of perfection, as the Syrian merchants hear in reports about her “vertu”:

“To alle hire werkes vertu is hir gyde;  
 Humblesse hath slayn in hire al tyrannye.  
 She is mirour of alle curteisye;  
 Hir herte is verray chambre of hooolynesse,  
 Hir hand, ministre of fredam for almesse.”  
 (II.164–68)<sup>58</sup>

Although neither Trevet nor Gower provides this detailed portrait, Chaucer’s description makes it difficult to determine as yet whether we should read the passage in Augustinian terms.<sup>59</sup> Yet what Chaucer omits is as interesting as what he inserts. This is perhaps the first of countless instances where Chaucer’s adaptation deliberately downplays her agency.<sup>60</sup> Trevet tells us about Constance’s education; as an only child Constance was instructed in the Christian faith and the seven “secular sciences.”<sup>61</sup> Yunck identifies this information as an example of the only “religious element” Chaucer consistently omits: “the aggressive sanctity of Trivet’s Constance, that sort of militant, self-assured, often unpleasant proselytizing fervor not uncommon in early saints’ lives.”<sup>62</sup> Indeed,

<sup>57</sup>On the anagogic sense of the tale, see V. A. Kolve, *Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative: The First Five Canterbury Tales* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1984), pp. 352–56.

<sup>58</sup>Delany, “Womanliness,” assumes that Custance “is morally perfect from the start of the tale” (p. 37), rejecting the possibility that the heroine’s suffering is related to struggling for perfection. The ameliorative proto-narrative crucial to both Paul’s and Augustine’s discussion of the pursuit of perfection thus disappears from such an account.

<sup>59</sup>To use the technical language of the *moderni*, at this juncture we cannot tell whether she performs her virtuous or meritorious works by doing *quod in se est ex puris naturalibus* or whether her actions are assisted by the habit of infused grace. On *ex puris naturalibus*, see Heiko A. Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1967), pp. 47–50; on the axiom “*facienti quod in se est Deus non denegat gratiam*” (God will not deny grace to one who does her best), see McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, I, pp. 83–90.

<sup>60</sup>Cf. Yunck, “Religious Elements,” p. 251.

<sup>61</sup>*Sources and Analogues of The Canterbury Tales, II*, ed. Robert M. Correale and Mary Hamel (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2005), p. 296; subsequent citations of Trevet will be to this volume (henceforth *SA*).

<sup>62</sup>Yunck, “Religious Elements,” p. 250.

in Trevet's account, when the Saracen merchants arrive in Rome, she "preached the Christian faith to them" (*jour precha la foi Cristiene*), to which they assent; thus "she had them baptized and instructed perfectly in the faith of Jesus Christ" (*les fist baptizer et enseigner parfitement en la foi Jhesu Crist*).<sup>63</sup> Though Trevet's grammatical construction leaves ambiguous the identity of the person or persons who teach the Saracens perfectly, this presumably refers to catechizing by a priest who takes over from where she leaves off. Gower omits the details of her education but retains her active role in the merchants' conversion: she "was so ful of feith" that "Sche hath converted" them.<sup>64</sup> Moreover, Gower, who unlike Trevet is writing under the shadow of Lollardy, does not describe Constance as preaching but merely informing them "with hire wordes wise."<sup>65</sup>

When it comes time for her to depart for Syria, Chaucer's heroine struggles to accept her father's will and is temporarily overcome with sorrow (II.264); she is, after all, only human.<sup>66</sup> But in what begins to look like a distinctly Augustinian emphasis, her grudging acceptance of her earthly father's will is subsumed by her submission to divine will as she prays that Christ might send her grace to fulfill his commands:

"Allas, unto the Barbre nacioun  
I moste anoon, syn that it is youre wille;  
But Crist, that starf for our redempcioun  
So yeve me grace his heestes to fulfille!"  
(II.281–84)

The wording of her concise prayer precisely captures the Augustinian argument concerning the relation between grace and the fulfillment of the commandments; in *De praedestinatione sanctorum*, Augustine insists

<sup>63</sup>SA, pp. 296–97.

<sup>64</sup>*Confessio Amantis*, II, lines 598, 601. All citations of the *Confessio* (henceforth CA) are from G. C. Macaulay, ed., *The English Works of John Gower*, 2 vols., EETS, e.s. 81–82 (London: Oxford University Press, 1900–1901; rpt. 1957).

<sup>65</sup>CA II, 606.

<sup>66</sup>Edward A. Block, "Originality, Controlling Purpose, and Craftsmanship in Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale*," *PMLA* 69 (1953): 572–616, describes Chaucer's Custance as more "human," with greater emotional depth than Trevet's heroine (pp. 591–92), though he nonetheless claims that she "remains too perfect to be a credible human being" (p. 592). Yunck, "Religious Elements," modifies Block's views, arguing that Chaucer's changes to Trevet create "a romantic homily on the virtues of complete submission to divine providence" that "stresses the activity of God and the passivity of all others," making God "the protagonist" of the tale (pp. 250, 251, 259).

that it is God who causes the predestined “to have good works when he makes them observe the divine commandments.”<sup>67</sup> At the same time, Custance connects her adverse situation to her subservient status as a woman: “Wommen are born to thraldom and penance, / And to been under mannes governance” (II.286–87), evidently a reference to men’s rule over women since Eve’s curse.<sup>68</sup> Chaucer thus demands that we read her experience not only as an example of the general human dependence on divine grace to fulfill the will of God, but of the specifically feminine dependence on the will of the controlling authority of man.<sup>69</sup> Indeed, when the tales are read in the Ellesmere order, Custance’s stance is soon to echo verbally in an inverted form with the Wife of Bath’s gleeful declarations: “An housbonde I wol have . . . / Which shal be bothe my dettour and my *thral*”; of her first three husbands, she tells us, “I *governed* hem . . . wel, after *my lawe*” (III.154–55, 219; my emphasis).

When the Sultan’s mother organizes the massacre, the evildoers place Custance “in a ship al steerelees” (II.439), steered only by the power of God. As she prays for grace she emphasizes the redemptive power of Christ’s blood and her need for divine assistance to preserve her and protect her from the fiend: “Me kepe, and yif me myght my lyf t’amen- den” (II.462), which suggests that she views herself as less than fully perfected, especially vulnerable to temptation during this crisis. Yet like Daniel in the den, Jonah in the fish’s maw, the Israelites crossing the Red Sea, or Saint Mary in the Egyptian desert, Custance’s preservation for three years and more becomes both a sign and an instrument of God’s “wonderful myracle / In hire” (II.477–78).<sup>70</sup> In trying to make

<sup>67</sup> *Predestination of the Saints, Works*, 26, p. 168. “[H]oc ipso quo eos facit habere deinceps opera bona, cum ipse facit ut faciant divina mandata” (PL 44, col. 977).

<sup>68</sup> Mann, “Parents and Children,” p. 167.

<sup>69</sup> *The Man of Law’s Tale* has provoked a variety of feminist studies, few of which are sympathetic to its Christian ideology, including Delany, “Womanliness in the *Man of Law’s Tale*”; Carolyn Dinshaw, “The Law of Man and Its ‘Abhominations,’” *Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), pp. 88–112. Studies more sympathetic to its Christian ideology include Jill Mann, *Feminizing Chaucer*, pp. 100–112; Priscilla Martin, *Chaucer’s Women: Nuns, Wives, and Amazons* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1990), who reminds us that despite being intended to serve as an example for all Christians, “her story is in many ways a tale of female suffering” (p. 139); E. Robertson, “‘Elyvsshe’ Power.”

<sup>70</sup> Contrast Dinshaw, *Sexual Poetics*, who reads the tale as patriarchal ideology, since it presents women as especially “vulnerable to becoming Satan’s ‘instruments’” (p. 110). I agree that the tale is ideological in sexist ways, but in teasing out its Augustinian nuances I would locate its misogyny in the context of a more general antihumanist ideology. Mann, “Parents and Children,” reminds us that “it is not women alone who are under governance . . . women attract attention because their subjection to male

sense of divine providence, the lay narrator reminds us that not even the theological experts fully understand God's inscrutable will in shaping human destinies: "By certeine meenes ofte, as knowen clerkis," Christ acts "for certein ende that ful derk is / To mannes wit, that for oure ignorance / Ne konne noght knowe his prudent purveiance" (II.480–83). The incomprehensibility of divine justice in God's predestining some sinners for salvation and foreknowing others to damnation, as we have seen, is a point reiterated by St. Augustine and stressed by Bradwardine and Wyclif.

Chaucer's Augustinian-inflected rhetoric continues in the Northumbrian episode, where a brief review of Trevet's version will help clarify what our poet accomplishes. The source is quite explicit about how Constance plays an active role in Hermengyld's conversion, through the example of "her noble and virtuous way of life" and her persuasive teaching of the elements of the faith.<sup>71</sup> Chaucer omits all this and instead has Custance sojourn long, "In orisons, with many a bitter teere, / Til Jhesu hath converted thurgh his grace / Dame Hermengyld" (II.537–39).<sup>72</sup> With this description of the agency of grace in Hermengyld's conversion, we might recall Augustine's observation that "no one is sufficient by himself either to begin to have faith or to bring it to completion."<sup>73</sup> Indeed, it is likely that Chaucer picked up a specifically Augustinian hint in this episode from Trevet, who describes his heroine "as one whom God had *predestined* for grace and virtue in temptation and joy," though Chaucer avoids referring to the controversial idea of predestination and omits reference to temptation, which might seem out of place here.<sup>74</sup> Although it is true that Chaucer presents Custance

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'governance' is a model of the human subjection to God" (p. 168); see also Mann, *Feminizing Chaucer*, p. 104.

<sup>71</sup> SA, 304–5.

<sup>72</sup> Cf. Yunck: "What Trivet's heroine accomplished by preaching, Chaucer's accomplished by prayers and tears. Jesu brought about the conversion, the Hand of ever-watchful providence" (p. 251). Contrast Carolyn Dinshaw, "Pale Faces: Race, Religion, and Affect in Chaucer's Texts and Their Readers," *SAC* 23 (2001): 19–41, who misleadingly claims that despite being "utterly passive" Custance "manages to effect the conversion of the pagan Hermengyld" (p. 28).

<sup>73</sup> *Predestination of the Saints, Works*, 26, p. 151. "[N]emo sibi sufficit vel ad incipiendam vel ad perficiendam fidem, sed sufficientia nostra ex Deo est" (PL 44, col. 963).

<sup>74</sup> "E tut fut ele bele de merveil de corps, nepurquant ele passa en beauté de vertues come cele qe Dieux avoit *predestiné* a grace et vertue [en] temptacion et joie" (p. 304–5; my emphasis). I assume that Trevet presents Constance as not beyond temptation because he is writing the story for a nun; the perils of temptation constitute a traditional theme in both hagiographic and monastic literature. Although Block does not notice the specifically Augustinian rhetoric of either Trevet or Chaucer's version, he makes the general point that Chaucer's changes and additions heighten the religious element of

as playing an active role in the conversion of the constable (“so ferforth she gan oure lay declare / That she the constable, er that it was eve, / Converteth, and on Crist made hym bileve” [II.572–74]), her actions come in the context of advising Hermengyld to work “the wyl of Crist” (II.567) in response to the blind Briton’s appeal for healing.<sup>75</sup> Furthermore, when the constable asks what all “this fare” amounts to, she explains: “it is Cristes myght, / That helpeth folk out of the feendes snare” (II.569–71). Once again Chaucer declines to follow Trevet’s lead, who had described Hermegild and Constance as “preaching.”<sup>76</sup> Writing at a time when some Lollards were affirming the right of lay persons and even women to preach, Chaucer seems to go out of his way *not* to describe Custance as preaching, unlike Trevet, who did not need to display such caution earlier in the century.<sup>77</sup>

Yet the pattern of Satanic temptation (and *concupiscentia carnis* as a consequence of the Fall) returns, for just as the serpent overcame the Sowdanesse (described as a descendant of Eve), he now attempts to prey on Custance: “Sathan, that evere us waiteth to bigile, / Saugh of Custance al hire *perfeccioun*, / And caste anon how he myghte quite hir” (II.582–84; my emphasis). Chaucer borrows from Trevet the idea of the devil instigating the knight to tempt the heroine to “consent to carnal sin.”<sup>78</sup> However, only in Chaucer’s version is the knight presented merely as Satan’s instrument, whose object of assault is her *perfection*, though as we expect, the knight’s attempt to seduce her “availleth noght; / She wolde do no synne, by no weye” (II.589–90). Although Chaucer declines to explain how her will withstands the temptation, the

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the tale and both Custance and Alla show greater piety (pp. 587–89). Cf. Gower, who also puts an Augustinian spin on the narrative: “Thurgh grace of goddes pourveance / This maiden tawhte the creance / Unto this wif so parfitly” (CA II.753–55).

<sup>75</sup>In the corresponding passage in Trevet, Constance refers not to the will of God but to “la vertue qe Dieux te ad doné” (p. 307). Gower following Trevet narrates the miraculous restoration of sight to the blind Briton, which is enough to persuade the constable to convert (CA II.756–78).

<sup>76</sup>SA, pp. 306–7.

<sup>77</sup>Chaucer is more cautious than Elizabeth Robertson recognizes when she reads Custance as representative of a nonhierarchical, “apostolic Christianity” in some ways reminiscent of the Lollards: “A woman converting those around her through her prayers and explications of doctrine evokes one of Lollardy’s cherished tenets: that anyone—even women and the uneducated laity—can preach” (“‘Elyvshe’ Power,” p. 169).

<sup>78</sup> “[U]n chivaler . . . estoit par privé temptacion suppris en l’amur la pucele Constance. . . . Et . . . par malveise emprise et temptacioun del diable ala susquere la pucele Constance de assent de pecché charnel” (pp. 307–9). Gower, unlike Chaucer, does not describe the knight’s lust in terms of temptation, either his own or Constance’s.

larger Augustinian pattern in the tale makes it unlikely that he conceives of her will as unassisted by grace; as Augustine reminds us in *De perfectione justitiae hominis*, we would not be commanded to avoid sin “if our will did nothing at all, and we would not need prayer, if our will alone were sufficient.”<sup>79</sup> To put this point in terms of fourteenth-century scholastic debates, instead of her withstanding temptation by acting through the power of her unassisted will, *ex puris naturalibus*, Bradwardine holds that God is a “coefficient cause” of every human act; from this perspective, God is the first cause of Custance’s acts of will.<sup>80</sup> Indeed, the emphatic rhetoric of the passage strongly implies she has received such grace that not only will she refuse the consent of reason; she does not even seem to experience delectation at the suggestion of sin. Bradwardine insists that God’s special grace is required for a person to overcome temptation or avoid sin.<sup>81</sup> We thus might read the poet’s explicit identification of her state of perfection—a moment unique in Chaucer’s work—as implying that she is the recipient of what scholastics call *gratia gratum faciens*, the habit of justifying grace that makes the sinner acceptable to God, placing her in “a state of grace and inclined to meritorious works.”<sup>82</sup>

After the lustful knight frames Custance for murdering Hermengyld, the pattern of direct divine agency that has been so strong in Chaucer’s version of the story takes a remarkable turn when the hand of God smites the wicked knight and a voice from heaven miraculously declares his

<sup>79</sup> *Perfection of Human Righteousness*, Works 23, p. 300; “nec juberetur, si nihil ibi nostra voluntas nostra ageret; nec oraretur, si sola sufficeret” (PL 43, col. 303).

<sup>80</sup> On Bradwardine’s doctrine of “divine coefficientcy,” see Oberman, *Bradwardine*, p. 77; as Oberman observes: “It is the Almighty who performs in men their movements of will, albeit in such a way that at the same time they do it entirely by themselves,” because both “God and man are *similiter causa efficiens* of every act of will” (p. 81).

<sup>81</sup> “[Q]uod liberum arbitrium quantacunque gratia creata suffultum sine alio Dei auxilio speciali non potest temptationem aliquam superare” (II, c. 5, p. 477); “Quod nullus non tentatus, solius liberi arbitrii viribus, sine gratia quantacunque creata, absque alio Dei auxilio potest peccatum aliquod euitare” (II, c. 7, p. 490); cf. Leff, *Bradwardine and the Pelagians*, p. 72, and Oberman, *Bradwardine*, pp. 68–69. For an overview of Bradwardine’s doctrine of grace, see Oberman, *Bradwardine*, pp. 135–42.

<sup>82</sup> I quote the definition from Oberman, *Harvest*, p. 470; see pp. 135–40. See also McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, I, p. 189, for a similar definition and pp. 100–108 for medieval developments in the concept of grace. Cf. Wyclif, *De dominio divino*, p. 247, who comments on Grosseteste: “[V]idetur quod prius causaliter est gracie prime infusio quam peccatorum remissio, et per idem prius causaliter est peccati remissio quam medie gracie gratificantis infusio” (it seems that the infusion of the former grace [sc. *preveniens*] is causally prior to the remission of sins, and through it the remission of sin is causally prior to the infusion of the intermediate, justifying grace [i.e., in between *gracia preveniens* and *perseverentia*]).

guilt and her innocence. Moreover, unlike Trevet (whose divine voice speaks Latin), Chaucer has God manifest his will by speaking in the vernacular. To the best of my knowledge, this is the only instance in all of Chaucer in which the *vox dei* is heard to speak directly rather than through signs. If so, this is a uniquely powerful moment of theophany in the poet's work; because of this miracle, "by Custances mediacioun, / The kyng," along with many others who witnessed it, "Converted was, thanked be Cristes grace!" (II.684–86). Grace seems to operate the conversion; she is merely the instrument through which God directly manifests his grace, a point rhetorically emphasized by the strong stanza-final position, which stresses the importance of divine grace over human will.

Shortly afterward, it becomes clear that God's plan for the "hooly mayden" takes a new turn when Alla weds her: "And thus hath Crist ymaad Custance a queene" (II.692–93). The controversial stanza describing her wedding night expresses some anxiety over her need to step down from the highest grade of perfection as a virgin:

They goon to bedde, as it was skile and right;  
 For thogh that wyves be ful hooly thynges,  
 They moste take in pacience at nyght  
 Swiche manere necessities as been plesynges  
 To folk that han ywedded hem with rynges,  
 And leye a lite hir hoolynesse aside,  
 As for the tyme—it may no bet bitide.

(II.708–14)

To be sure, the almost mocking tone of the passage evident in the description of wives as holy "thynges," the odd circumlocution for husbands with its flat-footed rhyme, and the qualifier "a lite" to describe how much the transition from virginity to lawful sexual activity matters to her degree of holiness: the tendency toward bathos here is of a piece with the frequently melodramatic, over-the-top voicing that Chaucer adds to his version of the tale, which is so frequently remarked by critics.<sup>83</sup> Once again, it may be helpful to gloss this moment with the Wife of Bath's discussion of holiness, especially her jocular rejection of virginity as the highest grade of perfection in favor of the lowest grade (even as she gleefully turns Augustine's key term *perseverentia* upside down):

<sup>83</sup>For example, Helen Phillips, *An Introduction to the Canterbury Tales: Readings, Fiction, Context* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), p. 82.

In swich estaat as God hath cleped us  
 I wol *persevere*; I nam nat precius.  
 In wyfhod I wol use myn instrument  
 As frely as my Makere hath it sent.  
 (III.147–50; my emphasis)

These two cases present nearly polar opposites. The Man of Law's melodrama and mockery sporadically undercuts his serious presentation of the Augustinian theology of grace; the Wife of Bath's suggestion that she is only playing (III.192) invites us not to take her rejection of the theology of perfection too seriously. In exploring the contemporary relevance of traditional ideas of the grades of perfection, Chaucer characteristically exploits his fictional personae and their ironic voicings.<sup>84</sup>

Despite the ironic tone, Custance once more finds the grace to remain impervious to the concupiscence of the flesh on her wedding night. From a perspective that idealizes her perfection, even lawful marital sex is treated as one more trial that God in his providence sends her, along with the grace to endure "[s]wiche manere necessities" with "pacienc." Custance's patience and perseverance emerge clearly in the contrast between her reaction to Donegild's wicked actions and the reaction of Alla's servant, who, faced with the forged order to set Custance adrift in the boat again, struggles mightily with a question familiar to Chaucer from Boethius, one that Bradwardine had recently revisited: How can God allow evil to flourish?<sup>85</sup> The messenger wonders aloud:

"O myghty God, if that it be thy wille,  
 Sith thou art rightful juge, how may it be  
 That thou wolt suffren innocentz to spille,  
 And wikked folk regne in prosperitee?"  
 (II.813–16)

<sup>84</sup>Cf. Watson, "Chaucer's Public Christianity," p. 109, who describes Alisoun of Bath, with her "impassioned argument for an ethic of imperfection," as "one of the most ostentatiously indirect mouthpieces in *The Canterbury Tales*; indeed, she is as thickly swaddled in devices to distance the poet from his words as anything Chaucer wrote." We shall return to Chaucer's sometimes ironic distancing when he narrates the pursuit of perfection.

<sup>85</sup>Bradwardine takes an Augustinian position on evil as privation of good in I, c. 26; he discusses the senses in which God wills and does not will sin in I, c. 34; cf. Oberman, *Bradwardine*, pp. 123–34. Wyclif investigates whether evil is necessary in *Trialogus* III, c. 8.

Although Custance's "deedly pale face" (II.822) registers her very human (and especially female) susceptibility to fear, rather than question God's will as does the messenger, she fully embraces it, which we may read as a further sign of her grace: "she taketh in good entente / The wyl of Crist, and knelynge on the stronde, / She seyde, 'Lord, ay welcome be thy sonde'" (824–26).<sup>86</sup> Without questioning or attempting to understand God's will, she remembers what is most important: God preserved her throughout the last sea voyage. She measures her life in relation to the sovereign power of God, who is unchanging:

"He that me kepte fro the false blame  
While I was on the lond amonges yow,  
He kan me kepe from harm and eek fro shame  
In salte see, althogh I se noght how.  
As strong as evere he was, he is yet now.  
In hym triste I, and in his mooder deere,  
That is to me my seyl and eek my steere."  
(II.827–33)

She does, however, question her husband's will as she addresses her innocent child: "Why wil thyn harde fader han thee spilt?" (II.857). Crossing herself, she boards the ship, and "with an hooly entente / She blisseth hire" (II.867–68). The provisions, we are told, are sufficient to meet her needs and those of her child, "heryed be Goddes grace!" (II.872).

Her triumph over the apostate knight who attempts to rape her serves as one more confirmation of the operation of God's grace in her life. Again, Chaucer's emphasis is significantly different from that of his source. In *Trevet* the knight is moved by Satan to tempt Constance to consent to sin, though we are told that God did not wish her to assent.<sup>87</sup> Yet in Chaucer's version, the very *expression* of the hypothetical possibility of Custance succumbing to temptation is literally written out. More-

<sup>86</sup>Yunck uses this passage to conclude: "In Chaucer's tale second causes fade into nothing in the majestic ubiquity of the great First Cause" ("Religious Elements," p. 259), a point Bradwardine would commend. Manning suggests that Yunck's comment "raises questions about Constance's free will" ("Chaucer's Constance," p. 20). On the implications of her fearful response, cf. Dinshaw, "Pale Faces."

<sup>87</sup>"E l'enemi, qi par tut s'afforsca de mal faire, moveit le chivaler renee a grevouse temptacion d'enticer la dame a consent de pecché. Mes Dieux, a qi ele avoit doné [son] queor de enfance, ne la voleit soeffrer assentier a tiel mal" (*SA*, p. 317).

over, as has often been remarked, in Chaucer's version Custance is much less actively involved in her defending herself than is the case in Trevet, where she tricks him into turning his back and pushes him overboard.<sup>88</sup> Instead, we are told: "The thief fil over bord al sodeynly . . . / And thus hath Crist unwemmed kept Custance" (II.922, 924). The *apo kinou* construction allows us to read the adjective *unwemmed* as applying equally to Christ and his servant; the adjective is also standard in Marian devotions, and indeed earlier in the stanza Mary's active role is mentioned. That Custance measures herself by the high standard set by Mary is clear when earlier she consoled herself by contrasting the degree of her suffering to Mary's far greater sorrow before the cross (II.841–47).<sup>89</sup> The homiletic rhetoric points the significance of the episode by denouncing the sin of lust, which weakens man's mind and destroys his body. However familiar the concupiscence of the flesh would be to most of Chaucer's readers at firsthand, the "foule lust of luxurie" (II.925) seems outside the heroine's lived experience. Instead, in the next two stanzas the emphasis is not on her constitutive weakness but on what God graciously offers her, affirming that she receives her strength from the same source as David and Judith, who both overcame more powerful foes: God sent all three the "spirit of vigour" (II.943).<sup>90</sup>

Custance evidently perseveres in a state of grace after her return to Rome, where she dwells a long time "In hooly werkes evere, as was hir grace" (II.980). The Augustinian implication is clearly that her works are deemed meritorious because God has justified and accepted her through his offer of grace. Alla, in contrast, at least in his own mind, has more to answer for and thus goes on pilgrimage to Rome to pray for Christ's forgiveness for "his wikked werkes" (II.994) after he "fil in swich repentance" (II.989) for executing his wicked mother. When Alla wonders about the identity of the child who reminds him of the wife he believes long dead, the senator affirms that she is "So vertuous a lyvere"

<sup>88</sup> Cf. Yunck, "Religious Elements," pp. 257–58. See also Cooney, who reads the episode as an instance that the narrator "attributes to providence as miracle something which Trevet unequivocally attributes to human agency" ("Wonder," p. 271). In Gower we are told "the myhti goddes hond" protected her (*CA* II.1124).

<sup>89</sup> On Custance's association with Mary, see Mann, "Parents and Children," pp. 73–74; Dinshaw, *Sexual Poetics*, p. 111.

<sup>90</sup> I suspect "spirit of vigor," not in Chaucer's source, is his interpolation of a theological term I have been unable to trace but that would be the opposite of *languor naturae*, a synonym for *lex membrorum* or *concupiscentia carnis* (see, e.g., *De causa Dei* I, 40, p. 364). The context suggests the spirit of vigor could also be described as the grace of perseverance.

that he has never seen or heard of a greater “Of worldly women, mayde, ne of wyf” (II.1024–26). For this witness, at least, Custance seems to have achieved in this life the highest degree of perfection available to a woman living in the world.

When she is finally reunited with her husband, the joyous communal feast, as V. A. Kolve has demonstrated, anagogically points to the eschatological feast of the saints, “the joye that lasteth everemo” (II.1076).<sup>91</sup> In terms of the Augustinian proto-narratives, her eternal glory marks the definitive end of the narrative of amelioration *in via* and the shift to fulfilled perfection or transcendence *in patria*. But the earthly joy of the reunited Alla and Custance soon comes to an end: “litel while it lasteth . . . / Joye of this world, for tyme wol nat abyde” (II.1132–33). And so, we are asked,

Who lyved euere in swich delit o day  
That hym ne moeved outhur conscience,  
Or ire, or talent, or som kynnes affray,  
Envye, or pride, or passion, or offence?  
(II.1135–38)

We should note that the passage stresses not simply the transitory nature of worldly joy, but how it is daily disturbed by the temptations and struggles within the individual soul, precisely the kind of observation that Augustine repeatedly voices in his anti-Pelagian writings.<sup>92</sup> Although the reminder of daily internal struggles such as even Saint Paul and Saint Augustine acknowledge in the ameliorative narratives of their own lives hardly seems to describe Custance’s experience, the stanza nonetheless reminds us that *no* human being is ever wholly immune to the inherited *poena* of original sin.<sup>93</sup> We should thus recall that many theologians, including Augustine, Bradwardine, and Wyclif, insist that

<sup>91</sup>Kolve, *Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative*, pp. 352–56.

<sup>92</sup>Kolve thus seems slightly off the mark when he suggests that with this stanza the “story is adjusted to accord with what we know about all human lives. The joy that is possible within this world . . . must prove finite, unstable, and impure” (*Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative*, p. 339). The passage on brief joy is based on Innocent III, *De miseria condicionis humane* I.20, as the Latin gloss to line 1135 indicates (*Riverside Chaucer*, p. 862), though the thought is Augustinian.

<sup>93</sup>In terms of Watson’s three “models” for lay perfection that he believes Chaucer rejects, Custance most clearly is situated within the second, the so-called puritanical one; as should be abundantly clear by now, I think a more accurate descriptor for this framework is “Augustinian.”

no one can know with certainty whom God predestined for salvation or foreknew to be worthy of damnation.<sup>94</sup> Does Chaucer wish us to believe that God graciously justifies and accepts Alla? The poet will not say: he only invites his readers to “prayen God his soule blesse” (II.1146). About Custance and her father there may be excellent reasons for hope, though not certainty: when Custance returns to spend the rest of her earthly days in Rome, we hear that they both live “In vertu and in hooly almus-dede” (II.1156) until death parts them. The narrator concludes with a prayer for Christ “of his myght” to send joy and to “governe us in his grace” (II.1160, 1161).

As my reading of *The Man of Law's Tale* demonstrates, Custance represents a very high standard of perfection indeed (it is not for nothing that the tale is generally conceived as a hagiographical romance), even if, when measured by an absolute standard of fulfillment, completion, and reward for the race well run, she sometimes “pales” with earthly fears while still on the road.<sup>95</sup> Subject to the temptations of the world, the flesh, and the devil but situated in history after the Redemption, the viator requires divine grace at every moment, and for every meritorious act, according to the implicit Augustinian argument delineated far more sharply in Chaucer's retelling than in Trevet's version.

### III

In the Ellesmere order, the next figure Chaucer's readers encounter after Custance is Alisoun of Bath, who stands, as we have already begun to

<sup>94</sup>Bradwardine insists that no one knows what end he will have, “nec vtrum sit praedestinatus finaliter filius vitae vel mortis” (I, c. 39, p. 338). In *De statu innocencie*, Wyclif argues that we should suppose that our neighbor will be saved when we see him do well, and that those who do the contrary will be damned. *De mandatis divinis and De statu innocencie*, ed. Johann Loserth and F. D. Matthew (London: Wyclif Society, 1922), p. 515. In *De civili dominio*, he affirms that no one can know whether someone is in a state of grace without special revelation (II, p. 211); in book three of that work he reiterates that no one can know if they are in a state of grace, though we can make intelligent conjectures on the basis of probable signs (IV, p. 525).

<sup>95</sup>Watson dismisses *The Man of Law's Tale* as “redolent of the desert ideal” in its “evocations of an ancient world of holy living . . . an age of miracles whose lessons cannot be directly translated into the present”; “Christian Ideologies,” *A Companion to Chaucer*, ed. Peter Brown (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 75–89 (quotations from pp. 85, 77). He maintains the same stance in “Chaucer's Public Christianity,” claiming that the tale “belongs to a past so distant that few of its wonders can be expected to recur in the present” (p. 107). However, Chaucer and his audience, whether orthodox or Wycliffite, would surely view the operation of divine grace in the soul as wondrous. Cf. Morton W. Bloomfield, “*The Man of Law's Tale*: A Tragedy of Victimization and a Christian Comedy,” *PMLA* 87 (1972): 384–90, esp. pp. 388–89.

appreciate, as the symbolic inverse of Custance. Like the Wycliffites, the Wife of Bath satirizes the pretensions of the friars to imitate gospel perfection, as her subversive remarks about the practice of *glosing* and her digression into antifraternal satire at the beginning of her tale both suggest. Unlike Wyclif and his followers, however, Alisoun never challenges the distinction between evangelical counsels and precepts, never suggests that the pursuit of perfection as it was traditionally conceived by clerical authorities should no longer be taken seriously by anyone.<sup>96</sup> Indeed, she seems rather more interested in discussing the ideal of perfection than Wyclif tended to be. If the heterodox theologian's contribution to late medieval thinking about perfection as a topic in its own right remains sparse and underdeveloped, Wyclif's relatively shallow interest may be explained by his animosity toward followers of what he came to call "private religion" (monks and, after 1380, especially the friars); the Wife's satirical swipes, on the other hand, are mild by comparison. As Wyclif's views toward the "new sects" grew more vehement, the idea of perfection came to have too many bad associations for him to have much explicit interest in the concept, except of course when he polemically challenged his opponents' claims to be pursuing it.<sup>97</sup>

Yet at the same time, the scriptural admonitions to be perfect and a millennium of theological thought about the topic guaranteed that in some contexts, at least, Wyclif found it impossible to avoid speaking in such terms. Given that he was a university-trained cleric writing primarily for other clerics, it should come as no surprise that like other theologians of the time, Wyclif betrays a clear bias toward the professional religious life in a way that tends to leave relatively underdeveloped the space reserved for the secular life of the faithful lay Christian. In *De civili dominio* (late 1375 to late 1376), for example, he affirms the superiority of virginity to marriage.<sup>98</sup> Moreover, unlike some of the more radical

<sup>96</sup>On the possible convergence of *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* with Lollardy, see Alcuin Blamires, "The Wife of Bath and Lollardy" *MÆ* 58 (1989): 224–42. On the broader question of Chaucer's "indeterminate" relation to Wycliffite thought, see Fletcher, "Chaucer the Heretic."

<sup>97</sup>On the polemic by Wyclif and his followers against "private religions" of the so-called new sects, see Hudson, *Premature Reformation*, pp. 347–51. See David Aers, "John Wyclif's Understanding of Christian Discipleship," *Faith, Ethics, and Church*, pp. 119–48, esp. pp. 125–26 on Wyclif's rejection of the distinction between counsels of perfection and the commands to be obeyed by all Christians.

<sup>98</sup>*De civili dominio*, ed. Reginald Lane Poole and Johann Loserth, 4 vols. (London: Wyclif Society, 1885–1904) 1:167; date from Thomson, *Latin Writings of John Wyclif*, p. 48. Cf. Rex, *Lollards*, p. 46. As Anne Hudson remarks, if Wyclif at times "castigated the requirement of sacerdotal celibacy," he never seems to "commit himself in positive terms to a married clergy" (*Premature Reformation*, p. 357).

Lollards, Wyclif did not explicitly argue for the priesthood of all believers, even if some of his reasoning tended in that direction.<sup>99</sup> Yet he also argues that evangelical counsels like suffering injuries are not just for heroes or saints, but that everyone is bound by them.<sup>100</sup> Wyclif thus believes all viators are obligated to follow the counsels at least under pain of venial sin; each man must judge for himself, considering how neglect of the counsels easily leads to temptation.<sup>101</sup> Unlike imperfect human vows, ceremonies, and sects, the doctrine of Christ in his precepts and counsels—the Christian religion in the form it is handed down in the Gospel—is the most perfect of all.<sup>102</sup> Christ, he suggests, knew that it was not expedient that everyone should be monks or friars; indeed, it would be better for the church if this diversity of orders did not even exist.<sup>103</sup>

<sup>99</sup>See Hudson, *Premature Reformation*, p. 325, who suggests that the anti-Lollard polemicist Thomas Netter was correct to attribute the fully developed idea not to Wyclif but to some of his followers.

<sup>100</sup>*De civili dominio* II, p.156. Contrast Rex, *Lollards*, p. 37, who observes that Wyclif viewed Christ's injunction of poverty as a counsel of perfection, not a precept.

<sup>101</sup>*De civili dominio* II, p. 163.

<sup>102</sup>“[R]egula ac religio christiana secundum formam in evangelio traditam est omnium perfectissima et sola pro se bona. Unde vota et religiones humanitus adinvente sapiunt quamdam imperfectionem; ideo in quantum sunt plures in ecclesia talis ordinis” (II, p. 163).

<sup>103</sup>*De civili dominio* II, p.165. Wyclif continued to harp on these themes with increasing vehemence later in his career. For example, in the *Triialogus* (from late 1382 or early 1383 [dated Thomson, *Latin Writings of John Wyclif*, p. 79]), he suggests that all viators should be content in their own grade, in imitation of those “perfect” men the apostles, who did not have excess in their food or in their clothing (*Triialogus*, p. 195). The Supplement to the *Triialogus* refutes the claims of perfection by monastics; the more perfect Christian religion rests with those living in the world than with those private orders where the obligation is greater but the fruits fewer (*Triialogus*, pp. 429–33). In *De perfectione statuum* from May 1383 (Thomson, *Latin Writings of John Wyclif*, p. 293), Wyclif contrasts the true perfection of the Christian order to that claimed for themselves by the private orders, especially the friars (*John Wyclif's Polemical Works in Latin*, ed. Rudolf Buddensieg, 2 vols. [London: Wyclif Society, 1883], 2:440–82, at pp. 451–52).

For a taste of the kind of dissident preaching on perfection that may have circulated in the vernacular while Chaucer worked, perhaps the closest we can get is the recently edited Lollard sermon *Omnis plantacio*, probably written by the second decade of the fifteenth century, which offers an account closely resembling Wyclif's of the false claims to perfection by members of the “new sects” who ignore the perfection of gospel precepts by establishing “newe rulis not expressid in þe gospel” and impudently claim “þat þer stondiþ þe plente of perfit lyuyng, þei menen in her doing and seiuyng þat Crist was fauti [i]n his ordynaunce, and þat he and hise apostlis and oþir perfit men at sueden Crist wiþoute ony addicions of newe ritis or rulis of religioun kept not perfiteli Goddis lawe, siþ þei weren not of suche ordris ne kepten þe priuat newe foundun rulis of such religioun. For, if Crist tauzte fulli þe rule of perfeccioun and lyuede þeraftir, it hadde be ynow for a man þat wolde haue be perfit, as þis maistir was, for to haue sued his rule and his lyuyng. But þese sectis, menyng þat Crist shulde haue be vnperfit in his loore

In attempting to divorce themselves from self-justifying claims to perfection by the religious orders, the radical reformers thus offered a model that even lay women could choose to pursue if they wished, one based on the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. In this highly charged environment, the theological significance of Alisoun's lifestyle choices may be far more complicated than previous criticism has acknowledged, least of all criticism of the exegetical variety. Whatever else she may represent—and perhaps no other figure in Chaucer's poetry has represented more diverse things to more readers—the Wife of Bath surely dramatizes in highly symbolic ways the difficulties that possessing a will poses for the viator. Fully embracing the secular life of living in the world, the fictional viator of whom we are told “she koude muchel of wandryng by the weye” (I.467), the Wife narrates a story informing us that her most distinctive form of “wandering” consists in a marital history of passing through a succession of husbands. As she tells us early on, she intends to remarry for a sixth time because, as she explains with characteristic brio, “I wol nat kepe me chaast in al” (III.46; my emphasis). Indeed, marriage is so central to her constitution as a “social person” that the history of Chaucer criticism has been much concerned since Kittredge to viewing her performance as initiating a marriage group.<sup>104</sup> Few critics, however, have attended to the question of her choice to marry in the context of Christian perfection, and the possibilities for attaining perfection in this life as a person living in the world. Marriage and conducting business affairs—the two things that most constitute the kind of person the Wife represents—are unmistakable marks of the secular life. In the discussion of marriage in her prologue, as Alisoun ponders the choices that face a woman living in the world, she raises some of the central issues for what it might mean to live ethically in the world, rather than to seek the more demanding life of withdrawing from it. She represents, according to Watson, “the poem's

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and his lyuyng, han cloutid up a rule þe which conteyneþ al þe perfeccioun of Cristis rule—and sumwhat of perfeccioun ouer as þei seien. And so, as her rule passþ in perfeccioun Cristis rule þe which he kepte, so þei þat kepen þis rule passen Crist in perfit lyuyng.” *The Works of a Lollard Preacher: The Sermon Omnis plantacio, the Tract Fundamentum aliud nemo potest ponere, and the Tract De oblacione iugis sacrificii*, ed. Anne Hudson, EETS o.s. 317 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 17–18.

<sup>104</sup>I borrow the useful concept of “social person” from Elizabeth Fowler, *Literary Character: The Human Figure in Early English Writing* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003).

most important attempt to articulate a mediocrist religiosity outside *The Parson's Tale*.”<sup>105</sup> For that reason alone she deserves our careful attention.

The Wife of Bath's portrait in *The General Prologue* informs us that if any other wife goes before her in making offerings at her parish church, “certeyn so wrooth was she / That she was out of alle charitee” (I.451–52). Earlier generations of exegetical critics read these lines as evidence of her moral hypocrisy, but when reading the pilgrim portraits, it is always worth asking who is speaking. Instead of assuming this comment represents Chaucer's moral judgment on her character, we might consider that the poet's source for this insight may be the Wife herself, whose language of moral self-criticism the poet may be citing in free indirect discourse. Although Robertson offered a superficial allegorical interpretation of the Wife as representing feminine carnality itself, the issues her performance raises, when read within the discursive field of Augustinian theology, are far more complex than such self-assured monological readings allow.<sup>106</sup>

In justifying her decision at the age of twelve not to remain a virgin, or, the next best thing, not to complete her days after the death of her first husband as a chaste widow, Alisoun observes that both Christ and the Apostle Paul accept the place of marriage within the divine scheme. Indeed, she proceeds to defend her lifestyle choices in terms of a crucial theological distinction, ultimately based on Saint Paul, between what God mandates or prohibits by his commandments and what he recommends: that is, the difference between a “precept” (*praeceptum*) and a “counsel” (*consilium*). The distinction proves crucial for theologians who wished to understand the scriptural demand for Christians to seek perfection. In claiming that it is possible to attain a measure of holiness (III.58) even in the state of matrimony, the Wife introduces the distinction thus:

Wher can ye seye, in any manere age,  
That hye God *defended* mariage  
By expres word? I pray yow, telleth me.  
Or where *comanded* he virginitee?  
I woot as wel as ye, it is no drede,  
Th'apostel, whan he speketh of maydenhede,

<sup>105</sup> Watson, “Chaucer's Public Christianity,” p. 109.

<sup>106</sup> Cf. Robertson, *Preface to Chaucer*, p. 321; Olson, *Canterbury Tales and the Good Society*, p. 243.

He seyde that *precept* therof hadde he noon.  
 Men may *conseille* a womman to been oon,  
 But *conseillyng* is no *comandement*.  
 He putte it in oure owene *juggement*;  
 . . . . .  
 Poul dorste nat *comanden*, atte leeste,  
 A thyng of which his maister yaf noon *beste*.  
 The dart is set up for virginitee;  
 Cacche whoso may, who *renneth* best lat see.  
 (III.59–68; 73–76; emphasis added)

At stake in her argument is nothing less than the nature of divine law, the moral obligations it creates, and the relation of free will—the ability to make rational moral choices through the exercise of what medieval theologians refer to as *liberum arbitrium*<sup>107</sup> (cf. *juggement* in the passage quoted above)—and the grace and justice inherent in God’s system of reward and punishment based on merit and demerit. In other words, far more is theologically at stake than a simplistic description of the Wife as a carnal sinner who promotes the reign of *cupiditas* over that of *caritas*. Moreover, the Wife’s adaptation of Saint Paul’s metaphor of a competitive foot race anticipates her introduction of the idea of Christian perfection a few lines later.<sup>108</sup> As the Wife explains—and her theological reasoning on this point carries a great deal of authority—the prize for virginity “is nat taken of every wight, / But ther as God lust gyve it of his myght” (III.77–78). The final verse of this couplet thus refers to God’s pleasure or will (*voluntas*), his gift (*donum*), and his power (*potentas*). No wonder scholars in recent years have adduced the Wife as participating in the late fourteenth-century English phenomenon of vernacular theology: we are only a few verses into her theological argument and already she has implicitly raised fundamental questions that occupied Saint Augustine, as we have already seen, in his response to Pelagius and his followers, namely, the nature of grace as God’s gratuitous, unmerited gift, and the relation among grace, free will, and the predestina-

<sup>107</sup> See McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, I, pp. 18–23, who indicates that the Eastern church adopted the nonbiblical Greek term *autexousia* from the Stoics, which Tertullian then introduced to the Western church as *liberum arbitrium*.

<sup>108</sup> The heavily glossed manuscripts of *The Wife of Bath’s Prologue* identify Chaucer’s immediate source here and throughout much of the *Prologue* as Saint Jerome’s *Adversus Jovinianum*; the text from Saint Paul used by Jerome is 1 Cor. 15.8; see *Riverside Chaucer*, p. 866 n. line 75.

tion of the saints, questions that also occupied Wyclif only a decade or so before Chaucer created the Wife of Bath. As Augustine might remind us, "God works in the hearts of human beings to incline their wills to whatever he wills."<sup>109</sup> If the Wife were a real person, no one could know with certitude whether her heart was to remain hardened (if that even accurately describes her condition), or whether she was predestined to have God prepare her will to respond to his gracious call, and to persevere to the end.

The Wife's immediate concern, however, is the place in God's scheme of salvation that might be available to a lesser vessel such as herself, whom God manifestly has not called to the higher standard of virginity, to whom God has not offered that admirable gift. Her answer, again, hinges on Paul's personal example and his distinction between counsel and precept. Although he himself was a virgin and expressed the desire that everyone could be like him, "[a]l nys but conseil to virginitee" (III.82). Thus the Wife of Bath relishes the freedom to remarry, because Paul gave permission "[o]f indulgence" to be a wife (84).<sup>110</sup> The distinction between precept and counsel leads her to articulate the idea of Christian perfection: because Paul states in 1 Corinthians that it is "good no womman for to touche" (87), she concludes, the Apostle "heeld virginitee / Moore parfit than weddyng in freletee" (91–92). Yet not all the vessels in a lord's household can be of gold, she observes; even wooden and earthen ones do service (99–101). There must be a place for diverse callings in the divine plan: "God clepeth folk to hym in sondry wyse, / And everich hath of God a propre yifte" (102–3). We might say that her optimism about the possibility for ordinary Christians who choose the lesser path to reach salvation is, to use one of her favorite words, refreshing.

Having introduced the notion of relative degrees of perfection based on the grades of chastity, the Wife soon enlarges the concept of Christian perfection and its relation to the most disciplined forms of imitating Christ available to those who would attain the highest form of perfection not as a matter of precept but of counsel:

<sup>109</sup>*Grace and Free Choice*, Works 26, p. 102. "Agit Omnipotens in cordibus hominum etiam motum voluntatis eorum, ut per eos agat quod per eos agere ipse volueri" (PL 44, col. 908).

<sup>110</sup>Cf. 1 Cor. 7.6. Robertson, *Preface to Chaucer*, p. 322, cites Lombard, *Sententiae* 4.26.1–3 on marriage as indulgence, not commandment in the New Law.

Virginitee is greet perfeccion,  
 And continence eek with devocion,  
 But Crist, that of perfeccion is welle,  
 Bad nat every wight he sholde go selle  
 Al that he hadde, and gyve it to the poore,  
 And in swich wise folwe hym and his foore.  
 He spak to hem that wolde lyve parfitly;  
 And lordynges, by youre leve, that am nat I.  
 (III.105–12)

Thus the Wife of Bath in fashioning a story about herself performs the historically important task of imagining a space for the integrity of ordinary life against the backdrop of the elitist “ethic of supererogation” that gave rise to medieval monasticism.<sup>111</sup> In returning to Jerome’s *Ad-versus Jovinianum* as his primary source for the ethical debate in which the Wife engages, Chaucer stages a return to a foundational moment in establishing institutional supports for an ethical elite, implicitly diagnosing the causes behind the theoretical underdevelopment of a viable domain for moral excellence capable of being lived out by the ordinary lay person.<sup>112</sup> Unlike Watson, however, who believes that perfectionist ideology, or “the pursuit of purity as a serious and workable contemporary ambition for those living in the world, is . . . nowhere extolled in *The Canterbury Tales*,” I do not believe that Chaucer seriously abandoned the Augustinian model of lay perfection. Nor do I believe that “Chaucer’s ecclesiology is . . . anti-perfectionist” (a point to which I shall return in the fourth section of this essay), or that the poet ultimately wished to contest what is admirable about an ascetic ethic of supereroga-

<sup>111</sup>I take the phrase from Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 26. In Catholic moral theology, “works of supererogation” are “acts which are not enjoined as of strict obligation, and therefore are not simply good as opposed to bad, but better as opposed to good”; thus the counsels of evangelical perfection (poverty, chastity, obedience) were taken to be not universal obligations but supererogatory; see *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone, 2nd cor. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 1324. The term, based on Luke 10.35, only appears to have emerged in this technical sense in the Middle Ages. Aquinas employs it several times in *Summa theologiae* II–II, 186–87.

<sup>112</sup>It is worth noting that Pelagius sided with Jovinian against Jerome, though he “was not endorsing [Jovinian’s] attempt to find the ideal Christian life in that led by the married majority, but on the contrary, was advocating the ascetic life as the standard which *all* Christians ought to be aiming for; he did not advocate mediocrity as the norm, but perfection” (Harrison, *Augustine*, p. 102).

tion (as Wyclif and his followers most certainly did).<sup>113</sup> Nonetheless, we can be confident that the comic figure of the Wife provides an important supplement to the narrow framework typical of medieval theologians' attempts to work out the implications of scriptural admonishments to moral perfection that are coupled with reminders of the limitations to human agency: the moral choices made by the free will depend on the quality of God's assistance to that will.

For an example of what I call the relatively underdeveloped domain for moral excellence by ordinary persons (*mediocriter boni*) that is an unintended consequence of theologians' focus on questions of perfection, we may turn briefly to the *Summa Theologiae*, where this problem emerges with illustrative clarity. Thomas focuses on the state of perfection for those who undertake perpetually binding vows, such as bishops and monastics.<sup>114</sup> Within this conceptual framework, the relation of Christian perfection to the vows of poverty, continence, and obedience is examined in the question devoted to the religious state.<sup>115</sup> In a move that is not at all surprising, he confirms the traditional theological view that perfection consists principally in charity (II-II.184.1), or that out of which the Wife sometimes finds herself, according to *The General Prologue*. Although it may at first appear that perfection in this life is not possible, Thomas maintains that it is possible to be perfect in this life in two limited senses. The first occurs when "everything incompatible with charity, i.e. mortal sins, is excluded from the will of a man" (p. 25). Since charity cannot thrive without the exclusion of mortal sin from the will, perfection is necessary for salvation (*sine tali perfectione caritas esse non potest. Unde est de necessitate salutis*). Because Aquinas is not such an ethical elitist as to believe that *only* the professional religious are likely to be saved, however, his observation about the necessary relation between

<sup>113</sup>Watson, "Chaucer's Public Christianity," p. 108.

<sup>114</sup>Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, Latin text and English translation, vol. 47 (New York and London: Blackfriars, 1973), II-II.183.1. When convenient, citations appear parenthetically. Thomas devotes questions 185 (the episcopal state) and 186 (the essential elements of the religious state) to the instituted states of perfection.

<sup>115</sup>Defining perfection in terms of states of being risks excluding a dynamic notion of spiritual progress. To avoid such an exclusion, Thomas employs a tripartite terminology based on Augustine; states are not all equidistant from the goal and may be distinguished "according to beginners, advanced, and perfect" (*secundum incipientes, proficientes et perfectos* [ST II-II.183.4]). As the Blackfriars editors note, "Thomas preferred the terminology of Augustine because it better described the psychological aspects of growth in Christian perfection and was more expressive of the dynamism of charity" (p. 13).

perfection and salvation potentially maps out a theoretical space for lay persons to seek Christian perfection. Yet Thomas's bias toward the professional religious reemerges when he defines the second limited sense in which perfection in this life is possible, when "the will of a man rejects not only what is incompatible with charity, but even that which would prevent the affection of the soul from being directed totally to God" (p. 25). These two pathways toward perfection hinge on the distinction between the willing transgression of the law and the voluntary removal of those obstacles that stand in the way of the proper direction of the *affectus mentis* toward the perfecting of charity.<sup>116</sup> The difference is between staying on the road until reaching the destination (the moment at the end of life when what I have called the ameliorative narrative cedes to the transcendental one) instead of taking a different road, and using tools that might prove instrumental toward reaching that end, pushing aside the obstacles on the road that might otherwise have led the traveler astray.

On the basis of this distinction, Thomas considers the relation of the precepts and the counsels, inquiring whether perfection in this life consists in observing not only the precepts but also the counsels. Such may appear to be the case from Jesus' admonition to the young man in Matt. 20.40: "If thou wilt be perfect, go sell what thou hast, and give to the poor, and come, follow me." This text, of course, is the same one that attracts the Wife of Bath's interest: "Crist, that of perfeccion is welle, / Bad nat every wight he sholde go selle / Al that he hadde, and gyve it to the poore. . . . / He spak to hem that wolde lyve parfityl" (III.107–11). In his attempt to solve this theological problem, Thomas observes that there is no limit to the commandment to love God and one's neighbor, since one can always strive for more charity. In this ameliorative narrative, whatever "goes beyond" (*quod est plus*) the charity enjoined in the commandment is thus the domain of the evangelical counsels.<sup>117</sup> If the purpose of the precepts is to remove those things contrary to charity (which he previously identified with mortal sin), the counsels are designed to "remove those impediments to the exercise of charity which

<sup>116</sup> Aquinas cites Augustine: "venenum caritatis est cupiditas, perfectio nulla cupiditas" (covetousness is the poison of charity; the perfection of charity is the absence of all covetousness), LXXXIII *Questiones* 36 (PL 40, col. 25).

<sup>117</sup> "Perfection consists essentially in the precepts," but secondarily and instrumentally "it consists in the counsels, all of which, like the precepts, are ordained to charity, but in different ways" (*ST* II–II.184.3. *resp.*).

are not incompatible with charity, *such as marriage, secular occupations, etc.*"<sup>118</sup> Here it becomes readily apparent how little space Thomas in fact leaves in his moral scheme for exploring the possibilities for ordinary Christians to make spiritual progress worthy to be described as "perfection." Shrewd businessmen or women for whom marriage is a sound investment (like the Wife of Bath) evidently need not apply. Yet the relatively underdeveloped concept of spiritual perfection for ordinary Christians in Thomas is, I suggest, precisely the theoretical weakness within medieval theology that the Wife of Bath, in a late fourteenth-century context, playfully wishes to expose. If the abstract modalities and clerical subjectivities interpellated by theological discourse from Augustine to Aquinas and beyond left a relatively underdeveloped theoretical space for the texture of lived experience by a layperson, a space that the fictional figure of the Wife of Bath jocularly fleshes out (as it were), Chaucer's achievement points to his awareness of the need to conceptualize in greater detail the possibilities for perfection by lay persons who live in the world.

Such a need was also apparent to Chaucer's older contemporary, the Benedictine monk Uthred of Boldon, author of *De substantialibus regule monachalis* (On the Vows of the Monastic Rule) and *De perfectione vivendi in religione* (On the Perfection of Living in a State of Religion), two closely related treatises written c. 1374–76, partially in response to Wyclif's attacks on monastic orders.<sup>119</sup> In the second work Uthred affirms that personal perfection is indeed available in principle not just to professional religious but also to lay persons since it consists in the practice of the theological virtues, which may be regained through penitence. Therefore, a man may be perfect in any walk of life, whether secular, regular, or ecclesiastic, though as we might expect from a monastic writer, he believes that attaining a higher form of perfection is more likely for someone nonsecular like himself.<sup>120</sup> Although, as Pantin suggests, we

<sup>118</sup> "[C]onsilia autem ordinantur ad removendum impedimenta actus caritatis, quae tamen caritati non contrariantur, sicut est matrimonium, occupatio negotiorum saecularium, et alia huiusmodi" (p. 28, my emphasis).

<sup>119</sup> Pantin, "Two Treatises of Uthred of Boldon," pp. 363–85; translations from Uthred are mine.

<sup>120</sup> "Nec gradus aliquis nec status in Christianismo secularis, religiosus aut ecclesiasticus qualicumque reddit aut efficit hominem sic perfectum esse, sed eius conversatio virtuosa, quamvis gradus et status huiusmodi multum iuvent . . . et quanto gradus superior, tanto perfectior, quia Deo propinquior, occupans debet esse" (In Christianity, it is not any secular, regular or ecclesiastic grade or state whatsoever that makes a man perfect in this way, but his virtuous way of life, though the grade or state helps many

might view Uthred's concessions to the possibility of perfection among ordinary Christians as "reflect[ing] the growing desire to open up the spiritual life to the devout laity" (p. 384), it is clear where his allegiances lie when he continues to treat as normative the monastic rules based on the evangelical counsels. He may sense the need to respond to critics like Wyclif, but he is not prepared to make a radical break. In her own way, the Wife of Bath wishes to expose the same limitation in the theology of perfection as it was developed by celibate clerics. If perfection is admirable but no more than supererogatory, why should anyone bother with the counsels any more? Orthodox theologians like Uthred grudgingly admit that choosing the more elitist pursuit of perfection offers no guarantee of success, and conversely, that choosing to live within the world as a lay person is not necessarily a recipe for spiritual disaster. Such an admission points to a theological blind spot that a lively questioning mind like the Wife of Bath's has exposed to daylight. Indeed, we might even conclude that Chaucer uses the Wife of Bath as his most richly imagined figure to represent the double bind encountered by a fourteenth-century laywoman when confronted by traditional demands for Christian perfection. But this hardly means that Chaucer is signaling, through his playful fiction, his willingness to jettison the traditional norms underpinning the discourse of Christian perfection entirely, any more than do these orthodox theologians.

Indeed, neither Alisoun's frank enjoyment of sensuality ("In wyfhod I wol use myn instrument / As frely as my Makere hath it sent," 149–50) nor her recognition that market values have permeated fourteenth-century social relations ("Wynne whoso may, for al is for to selle," 414) implies that Chaucer believed the Augustinian theology of perfection should not apply to her life story. It is, of course, her keen awareness of her individual life as a *process* that her autobiographical confession reveals:

"But—Lord Crist!—whan that it remembreth me  
Upon my yowthe, and on my jolitee,  
It tikleth me aboute myn herte roote.

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... and the higher the grade, the more perfect the one occupying it ought to be, since it is closer to God [Pantin, "Two Treatises," p. 376; his ellipses]. Although the *regula paradisi* (the domain of the evangelical counsels) may help men attain perfection, "it does not therefore follow that the life of regulars is generally to be called more perfect than that of seculars, who may perhaps be more discerning and stronger in resisting temptations," since perfection is a matter of interior habits of virtue, not of corporeal observances (quoting Pantin's summary, "Two Treatises," p. 379).

Unto this day it dooth myn herte boote  
 That I have had my world as in my tyme."  
 (III.469–73)

One need not be part of a Robertsonian rearguard action to insist that we have not properly heard the implications of her use of the word *world* unless we recognize it as equivalent to *seculum*: the time-bound world that is passing away. In other words, as the Man of Law reminds us at the very moment his ameliorative narrative shifts to the transcendent, anagogical one, “joye of this world” only lasts for a short while, “for tyme wol nat abyde” (II.1133). Alisoun’s process of recollecting enjoyment past offers a mirror image of the Augustinian paradigm for the right use of memory in *The Confessions*; her movement on the road appears to reverse his directions for the journey toward the future perfect: “Between the extremes of the beginning of faith and the perfection of perseverance there are those in-between virtues by which we live correctly.”<sup>121</sup> In short, the direction of Alisoun’s wandering seems the reverse of Custance’s symbolic movement, of whom we are told upon first meeting her *in via*: “Hir herte is verrey chambre of hoolynesse” (II.167). On the other hand, unlike the Robertsonians, I do not believe Chaucer implies that the reader’s most appropriate response to her “ticklish” heart is to castigate her for hardening it against the offer of prevenient grace. Indeed, it is not at all a matter of succumbing to Robertson’s cardinal sin of sentimentality to recognize that her performance is carefully calculated to appeal to the lay reader’s sympathetic identification with the difficulties and temptations she faces while living “in between.”<sup>122</sup>

In short, for all the frivolity of her holiday mood, the Wife’s story of her will to imperfection contains a serious point; as Augustine observes, “God works in the hearts of human beings to incline their wills to whatever he wills.”<sup>123</sup> Moreover, human intelligence is incapable of understanding God’s inscrutable decision that “it is better that some who will

<sup>121</sup> *Gift of Perseverance*, Works 26, p. 230. “Inter initium autem fidei et perfectionem perseverantiae, media sunt illa, quibus recte vivimus” (PL 44, col. 1028).

<sup>122</sup> For a parallel Augustinian sense of human life in the middle used by Chaucer, see V. A. Kolve, “‘Man in the Middle’: Art and Religion in Chaucer’s *Friar’s Tale*,” *SAC* 12 (1990): 5–46.

<sup>123</sup> *Grace and Free Choice*, Works 26, p. 102; “Agit Omnipotens in cordibus hominum etiam motum voluntatis eorum, ut per eos agat quod per eos agere ipse voluerit” (PL 44, col. 908).

not persevere be mingled with the certain number of his saints.”<sup>124</sup> Yet who is to say how the Wife of Bath might respond to the Parson’s call to contrition, the way of “refresshyng for youre soules” (again, one of the Wife’s favorite words), in short, the “ful noble wey . . . which may nat fayle . . . and this wey is cleped Penitence” (X.77, 79–80). As we saw in the first part of this essay, with the well-established link between the justification of the sinner and the sacraments of the Church, it was difficult to think of the pursuit of Christian perfection outside the sacrament of penance. Yet even within the temporal boundaries established by the fiction of *The Canterbury Tales*, the Wife of Bath’s story is not over, though if she were a real person, only God could know with certitude, Chaucer would doubtless agree, how that story would end.<sup>125</sup>

#### IV

As the previous section suggests, if *The Wife of Bath’s Prologue* offers readers one of the most detailed and persuasive narratives in medieval literature of what the textured experience of living in the world feels like, this is in large part because, as Elizabeth Fowler has brilliantly argued, it is not the theologians but the poets who perform the important cultural work of producing a recognizable interiority: Chaucer, she proposes, “presents poetic character as a more moving and compelling vehicle for these insights than is the theological discourse about penance.” In reading his fiction we “become habituated to a world in which person, passion, and cognition can work the way they do when we read Chaucer.”<sup>126</sup> Alisoun of Bath and Custance, with their manifestly different relation to the ideal of perfection, thus offer richly textured insights into what it is like for an embodied being in the world who must struggle with temptation (or with one’s fifth husband over the indignities of misogynistic clerical authority).<sup>127</sup> Yet at the same time, the aporia Saint

<sup>124</sup> *Gift of Perseverance*, Works 26, p. 201. “Deus autem melius esse iudicavit, miscere quosdam non perseveraturos certo numero sanctorum suorum; ut quibus non expedit in hujus vitae tentatione securitas, non possint esse securi” (PL 44, col. 1003).

<sup>125</sup> As for the ending of *The Wife of Bath’s Tale*, it would probably be too much of a stretch to read the magic of its happy ending as a fairy tale analogue of the Augustinian aporia implicit in the dialectic between the sovereign human will responding to the gratuitous offer of supernatural grace.

<sup>126</sup> Fowler, *Literary Character*, pp. 36, 92.

<sup>127</sup> Although Watson believes Custance lives in a world too distant to have relevance to the fourteenth century, he recognizes that “her mode of selfhood (like her devotion) is more familiar than Griselda’s” (“Chaucer’s Public Christianity,” p. 107).

Augustine reaches when he interiorizes the actions of grace on the will, where even “our hearts and our thoughts are not in our power,” suggests that what we habitually experience as most intimate within ourselves could also be viewed as a force radically alien to the self.<sup>128</sup>

If Chaucer was more engaged by the theology of Christian perfection than previous criticism has acknowledged, what might a reading of *The Canterbury Tales* begin to look like if instead of assuming that Chaucer deliberately created a “marriage group,” we consider the possibility that he has created, in effect if not conscious intention, a “perfection” group? As the contrasting marriages of Custance and Alisoun of Bath suggest, such a group would include those tales in which marriage is an important concern, though it need not be limited to them. It might also include tales that use in thematically important ways lexical items sharing the root derived from the Latin verb *per-ficio* and its French derivatives.<sup>129</sup> But there is no need to restrict the group to tales that employ the vocabulary of perfection, since other works demonstrate a significant thematic concern with perfection. For example, we should include *The Canon Yeoman’s Tale* because of the centrality of the idea of perfection to alchemical writings.<sup>130</sup> In what follows, then, let us briefly sketch out a reading of *The Canterbury Tales* as unfolding a narrative of both the progress and completion of perfection.<sup>131</sup>

<sup>128</sup> *Gift of Perseverance*, Works 26, p. 201; PL 44, col. 1003. I do not suggest, of course, that this represents Augustine’s own understanding of the logic of his argument.

<sup>129</sup> As a specialized term from philosophical and theological inquiry, the Latin *perfectio* and related words entered French and then Middle English, where the earliest recorded instance in the *MED* is from the early thirteenth-century *Ancrene Wisse*. See *MED*, s.v. *perfeccioun*, for examples under definitions 1 (d) from *Ancrene Wisse* (c. 1230 [?a1200]), and examples under 1 (c) and 1 (d) from *Ayenbit of Inwit* (1340). It is only with Chaucer’s generation of vernacular writers that the vocabulary of perfection seems fully naturalized in the language, both as an everyday term so common as barely to attract scholars’ notice, and also as part of an emerging lexicon of theological and philosophical vocabulary. Unfortunately, the word is not included in J. D. Burnley, *Chaucer’s Language and the Philosophers’ Tradition*, Chaucer Studies 2 (Cambridge and Totowa, N.J.: D. S. Brewer, 1979).

<sup>130</sup> The link between alchemy and perfection is clear from Gower’s frequent use of the word in his discussion of alchemy in *Confessio Amantis*, Bk. 4. It is worth recalling the relevance of the doctrine of alchemical marriage to *The Canon Yeoman’s Tale*. On the pursuit of perfection in that work, see Lee Patterson, “Perpetual Motion: Alchemy and the Technology of the Self,” *SAC* 15 (1993): 25–60, esp. pp. 51–50; he cites Roger Bacon’s claim that the elixir could re-create the perfection of Adam and Eve before the Fall (p. 51).

<sup>131</sup> My discussion omits Fragment I, though it is worth noting that Theseus’s speech about the First Mover bases its argument for marriage on perfect being theology (I, 3007–9). Theseus counsels that Palamon and Emily should “make of sorwes two / O parfit joye, lastynge everemo” (I, 3071–72). However, his view of the perfect joy of

Not long after the Wife of Bath's discourse is concluded, the fourth fragment offers *The Clerk's Tale* and *The Merchant's Tale*, a pairing that deserves to be reconceived as variations on the central theme of the perfection group. Certainly any reading of *The Clerk's Tale* must come to grips with the critically vexed problem created by the clashes between the surface narrative of Walter's gratuitous cruelty toward his wife and the Clerk's allegorical interpretation after the story ends, or "the disunity of the tale's two levels of meaning."<sup>132</sup> However, to describe Griselda's patience, rather than her husband's cruelty, as "monstrous" seems to give less credit to her perfectionism than her exemplum demands.<sup>133</sup> To read the tale from within an Augustinian framework, however, would be to contrast the operation of divine grace on Griselda's unfathomable interiority with the way Walter succumbs to temptation as he "in his herte longeth so / To tempte his wyf" (IV.451–52). Indeed, Walter's wonderment at Griselda's patient endurance is filtered through the vocabulary of perfection: if he did not know that his wife *parfitly* loved her children, he would have thought her steadfastness was some kind of trick (IV.690). I certainly do not mean to suggest that reading *The Clerk's Tale* within an Augustinian framework exhausts that tale's significance.<sup>134</sup> Instead, I am suggesting that the apparent dissonances within the tale are greatly amplified by the way it engages in a dialogue with other versions of Christian perfection in *The Canterbury Tales*; Griselda's "inportable" humility (IV.1144) offers a narrative analogue to the aporia within the deepest recesses of the will in Augustine's interiorization of divine agency within the soul. *The Clerk's Tale*, in short, presents Griselda as one who by all appearances seems likely to enjoy the

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erotic love—an idea paralleled in Chaucer's other romance of antiquity, *Troilus and Criseyde* (II, 891) and in *The Wife of Bath's Tale* (III.1258)—must seem inadequate when read retrospectively from the Augustinian perspective on history introduced by *The Man of Law's Tale*, since there is no possibility for the lovers to experience transcendence to eternity, notwithstanding Theseus's claim. If we read the sequence of fabliaux that follow the first tale as initiating from the Miller's repudiation of the Knight's idealism, Theseus's lofty vision of marriage as an imitation of divine perfection exactly names the specific ground of his philosophical ideal.

<sup>132</sup> Aers and Staley, *Powers of the Holy*, p. 235.

<sup>133</sup> Watson, "Chaucer's Public Christianity," p. 107. Cf. Kathryn L. McKinley, "The Clerk's Tale: Hagiography and the Problematics of Lay Sanctity," *ChauR* 33 (1998): 90–111, who faults the tale for its theology of perfection (p. 106) and regrets that Chaucer fails to submit the tale's notion of sanctity to more critical scrutiny (p. 109).

<sup>134</sup> I do not wish to ignore the political significance of the tale as a study of Lombard tyranny as described by David Wallace, for example. Indeed, the other-worldly perspectives of the tale provide a tense contrast with its critical analysis of authoritarian polity.

grace of perseverance until the end. If from the vantage point of a viator who finds the interior acts of the will more difficult to sustain than does patient Griselda, her evident progress in the ameliorative narrative serves as a reminder of how dependent we are on divine assistance.

*The Merchant's Tale*, on the other hand, explores the theology of perfection in the context of marriage in a consistently burlesque fashion, offering a comically inverted image of Griselda's patient endurance. The grotesque wedding night between January and May contrasts with the one in *The Man of Law's Tale* examined earlier. January's desire to regain paradise through marriage to a twenty-year-old bride is presented as a mock version of an eleventh-hour conversion, his repentance at death's brink for a life of sensual enjoyment (IV.1400–404). His repentance is a sham, of course; to the extent that the tale is as much about the human longing for transcendence as it is about marriage, it makes a mockery of the pursuit of perfection in the Fallen world. In his fantasy, January believes that transcendence is possible on earth: "I shal have myn hevене in erthe heere" (1647), though his garden marks the site not of a return to prelapsarian justice but of his blind participation in May's adultery. The moment of January's miraculously restored vision provides a witty parody of the beatific vision, a satirical narrative of transcendence, an upside-down version of what Dante provides his readers at the end of *Paradiso*. When his wife persuades him that his vision is only a foretaste of what is to come, only "som glymsyng, and no *parfit* sighte" (IV.2383; emphasis added), we laugh heartily as we imagine the future imperfect of their marriage. The pairing of the two tales of Fragment IV, then, explores the pursuit of perfection by running the gamut from the sublime to the ridiculous.

Lest the exemplum of Griselda's patience fade from memory, however, Fragments V and VII offer at least two recapitulations of key portions of its argument in different generic and modal contexts. Kittredge, we recall, famously thought *The Franklin's Tale* ended the "marriage debate" with Chaucer's own ideal solution; for our purposes, we need only to observe that the Franklin's core moral argument extols the "heigh vertu" of patience (V.773), a necessary virtue because, in comparison to the absolute perfection of God (an axiomatic principle that initiates Dorigen's philosophical conundrum [V.871–72]), no one can measure up to that highest of standards:

Lerneth to suffre, or elles, so moot I goon,  
Ye shul it lerne, wher so ye wole or noon;

For in this world, certein, ther no wight is  
 That he ne dooth or seith somtyme amys.  
 (V.777–80)<sup>135</sup>

The link between perfection and the need for patience is also made by Prudence in *The Tale of Melibee*, a point likely to be lost on a reader who does not remain alert to the way the theme of perfection is carefully woven through the *Tales*. In reply to Prudence's scriptural text that "paciencie is a greet vertu of perfeccioun" (VII.1517), Melibee takes an aggressively antiperfectionist stance:

"Certes," quod Melibee, "I graunte yow . . . that paciencie is a greet vertu of perfeccioun; / but every man may nat have the perfeccioun that ye seken; / ne I nam nat of the nombre of right parfite men, / for myn herte may nevere been in pees unto the tyme it be venged."

(VII.1518–21)

But of course we know that Prudence will ultimately prevail by rhetorically shaping the movement of Melibee's will. The grace that Melibee is finally willing to extend to his enemies is explicitly described as an imitation of God's mercy to sinners and points hopefully to the future perfect, when the story not only of Melibee's life but of all Christians who have perseverance to the end reaches the transcendent state of eternity (VII.1881–88). Guided by the counsel of Prudence, Melibee thus provides another variation on the ameliorative narrative of perfection as a work still in progress. As we observed in the first section of this essay, the Augustinian framework for understanding justification, with its close conceptual link to the idea of perfection as both process and result, was inseparable from the sacrament of penance, which after 1215 was equally enjoined on both lay and religious orders of society. In precisely this sense, the closing gesture of *The Tale of Melibee* anticipates the summative role of *The Parson's Tale* for *The Canterbury Tales* as a whole.

Although this preliminary sketch of a perfection group thus far has retraced the marriage debate according to the Ellesmere order, not all

<sup>135</sup>On this passage as the core moral argument of the tale, see Derek Pearsall, *The Canterbury Tales* (London and Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1985), pp. 159–60; to Pearsall's illuminating remarks on how Chaucer adds "a new meaning to a moral commonplace" about patience (p. 160), I would add that the moral framework provided by the topic of perfection, no less than that of marriage, enables him to achieve that new meaning.

of Chaucer's concern with the theology of perfection coincides with his interest in marriage. Indeed, after the Wife of Bath's performance, the next tale that explicitly raises the issue of perfection is *The Summoner's Tale*, Chaucer's most extended piece of antifraternal satire.<sup>136</sup> Chaucer's treatment of the hypocritical friar clearly calls into question his vocation, and rewards him with the well-deserved indignity of a fart in the face. The friar claims special privileges not only for his order, but for himself individually. When Thomas complains that he has donated "many a pound" to various friars "yet fare I never the bet" (III.1951), the friar questions the layman's need to seek other friars when he himself is "a *parfit* leche" (1956; emphasis added). About twenty years ago, Paul Olson provided compelling evidence that Chaucer's satire against the friars pointedly draws on arguments first made by Spiritual Franciscans against Conventuals and later taken up by secular clerics, including Wyclif.<sup>137</sup> On the other hand, Watson concludes from Chaucer's use of anticlerical satire in *The General Prologue* and in certain tales that "[i]n the most general terms, the poem is *dismissive of the ideals* of the professional religious orders."<sup>138</sup> To be sure, the satirical material raises legitimate questions about Chaucer's ecclesiology. Though I claim no originality here, satire traditionally works by signaling to readers that a large gap ironically separates an ideal definition of a stable norm (for example, the Benedictine rule that the Monk in *The General Prologue* cavalierly dismisses) from the aberrant behavior of the individual or group targeted by the satire. Chaucer, like Langland, continues to value the *ideal* of religious perfection that members of the regular orders

<sup>136</sup>For an exegetical reading, see John V. Fleming, "Gospel Asceticism: Some Chaucerian Images of Perfection," in David Lyle Jeffrey, ed., *Chaucer and Scriptural Tradition* (Ottawa: Ottawa University Press, 1984), pp. 183–95.

<sup>137</sup>See Olson, *The Canterbury Tales and the Good Society*, pp. 214–34. Olson concludes that although Chaucer agrees with Wyclif's diagnosis of what has gone wrong with the "the four sects of the Church," "[h]e does not accept the Wycliffite call for abolition and disendowment of the new orders" (p. 292).

<sup>138</sup>Watson, "Chaucer's Public Christianity," p. 100 (my emphasis). At the same time, he asserts that Chaucer's conservative religious views imply he has "no direct truck with Lollardy or other radical contemporary discourses" (p. 112). See Fletcher, "Chaucer the Heretic," p. 111 n. 165: "In *The Canterbury Tales*, it is not so much contested theological issues that are foregrounded than [sic] the ecclesiological ones to which the theological issues, to be sure, have given rise. Broadly speaking, the 'new sects' of the Church . . . come off badly in *The Canterbury Tales*, but not the seculars, the only wing of the clergy having members evangelically sanctioned and of whom Wyclif therefore approved." Fletcher believes, in short, that Chaucer *did* have "'direct' truck"; he devotes the final section of his essay to considering the full range of possible explanations.

sought to emulate, even if what is most striking to a fourteenth-century observer is the failure of so many professional religious to live up to those ideals. Logically, to satirize hypocritical individuals is not at all to imply that the ideals they fail to live up to are themselves contemptible. When the Prioress describes the abbot in her tale as “an hooly man, / As monkes been—or elles oghte be” (VII.642–43), it is the failure by many monks to live up to the ideal of holiness that Chaucer targets, not the status of the claim that monks ought specially to pursue perfection. Indeed, this is precisely the distinction that Chaucer recalls in the address to canons regular that interrupts *The Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale*:

But worshipful chanons religious,  
 Ne demeth nat that I sclandre youre hous,  
 Although that my tale of a chanoun bee.  
 Of every ordre some shrewe is, pardee,  
 And God forbede that al a compaignye  
 Sholde rewe o singuleer mannes folye.  
 To sclandre yow is no thyng myn entente,  
 But to correcten that is mys I mente.  
 (VIII.992–99)

If the shoe fits, wear it: this may be an ancient rhetorical topos for satirists, but I see no reason to read it ironically instead of taking Chaucer at face value here.<sup>139</sup> If the poet’s reformist ecclesiology were as radical as Wyclif’s, to insist on the distinction between individuals and species would only confuse the issue. In short, if Chaucer, like the Wycliffites, thought it was the existence of “new sectes” themselves that was illegitimate, it would be far more difficult to explain the Yeoman’s or Prioress’s continuing to value the ideals that hypocrites immorally fail to embody. If we wonder why Chaucer loses no opportunity to satirize members of the religious orders in the poem, one obvious reason might be that the growing vernacular literature of anticlerical satire offered greater satisfactions to writers and readers with a taste for satire than do stories about friars ministering to lepers in the spirit of Saint Francis, or about devoutly prayerful monks. Borrowing from Fletcher, we might even consider the possibility that Chaucer wanted to demonstrate, through his mastery of anticlerical satire, that he “could simply be a club member for whom the belonging was what mattered.”<sup>140</sup>

<sup>139</sup> See Watson’s discussion of satire in “Chaucer’s Public Christianity,” pp. 110–12.

<sup>140</sup> Fletcher, “Chaucer the Heretic,” p. 113.

*The Second Nun's Tale* is a tale that some critics have wished to add to the list of members of the marriage group, because of Cecilia's chaste earthly marriage and her spiritual espousal to Christ, which links her with the fictional Second Nun. However, in introducing us to the only canonized saint to whom an entire narrative is devoted, *The Second Nun's Tale* also provides Chaucer's most detailed instance of Christian perfection as both process and achievement. Her narrative culminates at the moment of her transcendence, a moment that literally takes place outside of secular time in the gap between two stanzas, since the exact moment of her death is never described (VIII.546–47). That moment of the end of her life's journey is anticipated by the martyrdom of Valerian and Tiburce, whom she prepares by exhorting them through the familiar Pauline-Augustinian imagery of *bravium* and *corona*, of the race and battle won and the victor's crowning:

“Ye han for sothe ydoon a greet bataille,  
 Youre cours is doon, youre feith han ye conserved.  
 Gooth to the corone of lif that may nat faille;  
 The rightful Juge, which that ye han served,  
 Shal yeve it yow, as ye han it deserved.”

(VIII.386–90)

From the vantage of the Augustinian framework that I have argued Chaucer quietly and unostentatiously advances in *The Canterbury Tales*, the two brothers' preservation of their faith is due to the gift of final perseverance; their works are deemed meritorious because God has justified and accepted them through his offer of grace, which they accept. The saint's life demonstrates, as the Second Nun reminds us in her prologue, the biblical proposition “that feith is deed withouten werkis” (VIII.64). Moreover, the close conceptual link between Saint Cecilia and the theology of perfection is demonstrated by the last of the several meanings assigned to her name, which contains the ideas of “good *perseverynge*, / And brennyng evere in charite ful brighte” (117–18; emphasis added). Although it is easy to miss the Augustinian resonance of *perseverance*, or indeed how Cecilia's grace of perseverance rights the Wife of Bath's reversal of it (III.148), we need to take seriously the proposition that the Second Nun and her performance represent the poet's celebration of the dignity and worth of the ideals of monasticism, the supererogatory works of those called to the path of higher perfection,

however troubled the institution clearly seemed to critical fourteenth-century observers. There is no reason to read *The Second Nun's Tale* as expressing Chaucer's "despair" over the lost currency of traditional monastic ideals, rather than his cautiously optimistic sense of the possibility of reform by individuals and their collective institutions, and his sense of urgency that fourteenth-century monastic orders would do well to return to the pristine ideals embodied by Cecilia and the Second Nun.<sup>141</sup> The traditional motive employed by Chaucerian satire, as the direct address in *The Canon Yeoman's Tale* reminds us, is the correction of vice, not for the radical project of abandoning a millennium of monasticism as wrong from the start. The respect he clearly bestows on the Second Nun strongly suggests that Chaucer is no Wycliffite.

Before Chaucer turns to the Parson, we may turn briefly to consider what the Augustinian reading of perfection might do to our understanding of what exactly is at stake in *The Canon's Yeoman's Tale*. Many critics have pointed out the infernal symbolism of the fruitless labors in the alchemist's laboratory in the first part of the Yeoman's tale, with the "smel of brymston" (VIII.885), and the hellish discord that breaks out when the pot is shattered (916–31). What I wish to add is the suggestion that the unexpected and dramatic encounter of the pilgrims with the Canon and his servant near the final stages of the journey is literally about the "roadness" of the road itself, which allegorically represents the symbolic space of the progress narrative, the course of a lifetime of exercising the free will, with the assistance of infused habitual grace, to make good choices: "Between the extremes of the beginning of faith and the perfection of perseverance there are those in-between virtues by which we live correctly," as Saint Augustine wrote late in his career.<sup>142</sup> If Augustine provides no detailed road map of the progress of this long journey, that is precisely what Chaucer offers in his fictions of the human figure. As we are approaching the end of the road to Canterbury, the Yeoman boasts that his master can "clene turnen up-so-down" the road to Canterbury (VIII.625), an image that anticipates the anagogical, infernal imagery of the alchemist's laboratory. What perhaps deserves not-

<sup>141</sup> Watson believes that "the very lack of thematic contact between the simple evangelical faith of the catacombs and the Canon's messy fraudulence suggests something like despair over the modern relevance of the learned purity Cecilia represents" ("Chaucer's Public Christianity," p. 108).

<sup>142</sup> *Gift of Perseverance*, Works 26, p. 230. "Inter initium autem fidei et perfectionem perseverantiae, media sunt illa, quibus recte vivimus" (PL 44, col. 1028).

ing in this context is that the dress of the Canon clearly identifies him as a Canon Regular of Saint Augustine.<sup>143</sup> Rather than imagining that the poet was taking revenge on an individual Augustinian canon who had swindled him as used to be suggested, it is worth considering the possibility that Chaucer has deliberately chosen an Augustinian canon at precisely the moment when he wanted to dramatize the *viatas* of the *via*, to coin a scholastic term. For it is here that the Yeoman apparently decides, before our very eyes, to change the direction of his life by abandoning his master of the last seven years, when that least likely instrument of divine grace, none other than Harry Bailey, encourages him to continue his story without fear of his earthly master. In other words, the drama of *The Canon's Yeoman's Prologue* reads like an exemplary conversion narrative along the lines adumbrated by Augustine in *The Predestination of the Saints*, which concentrates on God's necessary role in initiating the conversion of the will to begin the faith of those he has predestined for salvation. The failed enterprise of alchemy ("For evere we lakken our conclusioun" [VIII.672]) thus symbolizes the infernal reversal of the workings of the Holy Spirit on human hearts. What remains impossible to determine, however, is whether the Yeoman's conversion is genuine, for there are many signs that he still feels the attractions of the old life; even if we assume that his conversion is real, we cannot say whether Chaucer would have us imagine his fictional character receiving the gift of final perseverance.

The roadness of the road as an allegorical symbol, of course, recurs in its more familiar guise in *The Parson's Prologue*, with the final speaker's prayer for divine assistance in his task:

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.48–51)

Penance is the "siker wey" (X.94) for the viator's ameliorative narrative of perfection to reach its transcendent completion, the very "conclusioun" that the Yeoman so far lacks. *The Parson's Tale* itself helps establish the continuing influence of Augustinian doctrines about justification or

<sup>143</sup>See *Riverside Chaucer*, p. 948 n. 557.

the perfection of righteousness on the penitential theology of the later Middle Ages:

But natheless, men shal hope that every tyme that man falleth, be it never so ofte, that he may arise thurgh Penitence, *if he have grace*; but certainly it is greet doute. For, as seith Seint Gregorie, “Unnethe ariseth he out of his synne, that is charged with the charge of yvel usage.” / And therfore repentant folk, that stynte for to synne and forlete synne er that synne forlete hem, hooly chirche holdeth hem siker of hire savacioun. And he that synneth and verrailly repenteth hym in his laste, hooly chirche yet hopeth his savacioun, by the grete mercy of oure Lord Jhesu Crist, for his repentaunce; but taak the siker wey. (X.90–93; my emphasis)

The Parson is describing three different categories of sinners, each with its own degree of certainty of salvation. The first group is the largest, comprising those Christians (whether lay or clerical is totally irrelevant) who, thanks to the residual effects of the Fall, sin again and again but undergo the sacrament of penance at least once a year, as required by the canon of 1215—the historical backdrop to the pastoral literature Chaucer employs as his two main sources in the tale. However, the more often concupiscence (or the *pena* of original sin according to Augustine) becomes habitually acted upon, burdening the sinner with its oppressive *charge* (in Saint Gregory’s words), the greater the risk of failure. The second group is a far more select one, comprising precisely those sinners, even Saint Paul in Saint Augustine’s analysis, who “are running perfectly” and are well on their way to crowning glory but have not yet attained the future perfect when the race and the victory are finally won. Such sinners enjoy as much certainty of salvation as is possible from a human perspective in this life, though only God possesses absolute certainty whether they will persevere to the end. The final group, small but not so select (unless we mean in the strict Augustinian sense of those chosen or predestined for salvation), comprises those eleventh-hour penitents who risk damnation day after day, year after year, in the event they meet the sudden kind of accidental death about which the Pardoner so offensively warns his fellows after concluding his exemplum (VI.935–36). Because of the great danger that the habit of sin will be ever more difficult to dislodge and replace with the habit of justifying grace (*gratia gratum faciens*, in scholastic terminology), the first group is living in “greet doute.” We should also notice that such repentance is

presented as entirely conditional upon divine grace: without it, according to Augustinian thinking about grace and free will, including the views of Bradwardine and Wyclif, the will cannot move by itself to repent.<sup>144</sup>

However, the best way I know to demonstrate Chaucer's unostentatiously Augustinian position in the concluding tale is to notice how effortlessly he summarizes Augustine's anti-Pelagian position in the second part of *The Parson's Tale* in a crucial passage that does not rely on one of the tale's main sources. As we saw in part one above, so long as they occupy what Saint Paul calls in Romans "the body of this death," or as Chaucer translates it here, "the prisoun of my caytyf body" (X.343), human beings are self-divided along the fault line of the flesh and must engage in continuous spiritual warfare against temptation: "Therefore, al the while that a man hath in hym the peyne of concupiscence, it is impossible but he be tempted somtime and moeved in his flessch to synne. / And this thyng may nat faille as longe as he lyveth; it may wel wexe fieble and faille by vertu of baptesme and by the grace of God thurgh penitence, / but fully ne shal it nevere quenche, that he ne shal som tyme be moeved in hymself."<sup>145</sup> The pursuit of perfection thus requires self-discipline against an unruly aspect of the inner self that lies at the deepest core of one's being. But once again, Chaucer emphasizes that without divine grace there can be no effective penance. For this reason, it is important to reinstate the unanimous manuscript order of the last two couplets of *The Parson's Prologue*, because Chaucer deliberately has the *Prologue* conclude with the word *grace* (we may in fact read

<sup>144</sup> Contrast Watson's comment on this passage: "This passage distinguishes two levels of certainty of salvation: the confidence of those who succeed in shaking off their sins in their lifetimes (who are 'siker of hire savacioun'), and the hopeful fear of those who repent only after they are incapable of sin in 'greet doute' of mercy" (p. 103). I remain baffled by Watson's analysis of these less certain sinners for three reasons: first, because even on one's deathbed one still remains capable of sin (though not every category of sin); second, because even if we stipulate that someone is already "incapable of sin," there would then be nothing to repent; and third, because no one but Jesus, the one perfect man, is incapable of sin (cf. X.1007, X.955). We should remember, in other words, as Saint Augustine frequently reminds us when discussing the perfection of human righteousness, that not even Saint Paul describes himself as *incapable* of sinning (the note to line 93 in *Riverside Chaucer*, p. 957, is somewhat misleading, though it does clearly connect the passage to Augustinian thought).

<sup>145</sup> X.338–41. The sentence concludes by listing exceptions: sickness, sorcery, or cold drink can each cool the concupiscent flesh. The passage is not translated from one of Chaucer's main sources; *Riverside Chaucer*, p. 959, cites Peter Lombard for a condensed version of this Augustinian view of original sin transmitting concupiscence of the flesh.

the couplet as spoken by the Parson, praying that his listeners receive the grace “to do wel” (X.72).<sup>146</sup> The prayer for grace that concludes the *Prologue* thus anticipates the ending of *The Parson’s Tale*, creating symmetrical balance between the two endings by concluding the tale with the negation of sin from the transcendent perspective of the future perfect; the gorgeously composed cadences of the final sentence of the final tale provide the right-side-up description of the beatific vision that was so savagely parodied in January’s garden: in heaven the final “fruit” of penance will be “every soule replenyssed with the sighte of the *parfit* knowynge of God . . . and the lyf by deeth and mortificacion of synne” (X.1079–80; emphasis added). This eloquent finale stands in effect as the poet’s more humble equivalent of Dante’s final prophetic vision at the end of *Paradiso*, without the ego.

Near the end of his life, when Chaucer finally speaks in his own voice outside *The Canterbury Tales* in his Retractions, his petitionary prayer to Jesus, Mary, and the saints is fully consistent with the Augustinian emphasis that receiving prevenient grace is a necessary precondition to sincere repentance: “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 . . . so that I may been oon of hem at the day of doom that shulle be saved” (X.1089–91). If his prayers were answered, Chaucer’s own narrative of the self has completed the shift from the ameliorative to the transcendental one and achieved his future perfect in communion with the saints.

In this essay I have assumed the desirability and possibility of answering questions long avoided until fairly recently, questions about the “opinions, beliefs, prejudices, and passions” that Chaucer’s “writings about religion express or take for granted in his earliest readers,” and I share Nicholas Watson’s conclusion that Chaucer’s view of Christian community was “traditional, even conservative.”<sup>147</sup> Where we part company is in my belief that Chaucer demonstrates an ongoing interest in understanding the requirements for Christian perfection by both clerical and lay orders of fourteenth-century society, though as a layman writing primarily for other lay readers, it is not surprising that he was especially

<sup>146</sup>On the unanimity of the manuscripts, see *Riverside Chaucer*, p. 1134 n. 73–74.

<sup>147</sup>Watson, “Chaucer’s Public Christianity,” pp. 99, 112.

interested in the opportunities and temptations presented to those who have chosen to live as fully active participants in worldly affairs. Moreover, I have argued that the soteriology assumed and given narrative embodiment throughout *The Canterbury Tales* places sufficient emphasis on revealing the dialectical relation between human and divine agency in the free will's cooperation or resistance to grace as to deserve being described as "Augustinian," so long as we understand that both Bradwardine and Wyclif share such a framework, for all their other differences. Finally, I have joined those who suggest that Chaucer's ecclesiology was broadly reformist rather than radical like that of the Wycliffites, even though he agrees with their diagnoses of ecclesiastical corruption. As Alan Fletcher has recently observed, there is no reason to assume that Chaucer's opinion of the Lollards remained fixed over time.<sup>148</sup> The same should be said of his views about those who claimed to pursue the highest perfection as a special vocation. However difficult a time the poet may have had making up his mind about the validity of the Lollards' various claims, I see no reason to conclude that he ever seriously doubted that all Christians had an obligation to follow Saint Augustine's exhortations to pray for God's gracious assistance and hope to be enabled through their cooperative striving to make progress on the road to the future perfect, despite the many obstacles temptation places in the way. Whether Chaucer, like both Augustine and Wyclif, believed his outcome was predestined, neither *The Canterbury Tales* nor the *Retractions* allows us to answer with confidence. But as we know from *The Nun's Priest's Tale*, it was a question he thought both worth raising and, at least at that point in his life, worth celebrating with laughter.

<sup>148</sup>Fletcher, "Chaucer the Heretic," p. 109.