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Escaping the Whirling Wicker

Ricardian Poetics and Narrative Voice in The Canterbury Tales

KATHERINE ZIEMAN

IN THE LATE 1980s, Lee Patterson pointed to "Exegetics," the mode of criticism associated with D. W. Robertson, Jr., as "the great unfinished business of Medieval Studies. . . . Unable to absorb Exegetics and move on, Chaucer studies instead circles back almost compulsively to an apparently irrepressible scandal, a recursiveness that itself bespeaks a scandalous limitation to its own critical creativity."[1] In far less dramatic fashion, one might claim that the mode of criticism derided as "dramatic" or "psychological" reading has been similarly irrepressible. Often traced back to George Lyman Kittredge, dramatic readings take as their basic principle the idea that "the Pilgrims do not exist for the sake of the stories, but *vice versa*. Structurally regarded, the stories are merely long speeches expressing, directly or indirectly, the characters of the several persons."[2] If Robertson's Augustinian model of reading presumed that "charity" was the telos of Chaucerian representation, dramatic reading presumed it to be "character." In their most extreme forms, both hermeneutics stand accused of conveniently invoking disjunctive modes of signification—allegory, irony—in the service of

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1. Lee Patterson, *Negotiating the Past: The Historical Understanding of Medieval Literature* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 5.
2. George Lyman Kittredge, *Chaucer and His Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1946), 154–55.

their presumed end. Where exegetical criticism tended to see in Chaucer's romances and fabliaux ironic denunciations of *fol amor,* "dramatic" readings saw fallible narrators whose inept rhetoric or unsavory politics were satirized, but never embraced, by Chaucer.

Dramatic reading was in many ways the corollary of Exegetics. If Exegetics stressed (and overgeneralized) the alterity of the Middle Ages, dramatic reading presumed the continuity of modes of literary expression considered transhistorical. Validated by the New Criticism, above all by E. Talbot Donaldson's "Chaucer the Pilgrim,"[3] dramatic reading took for granted the unity of form and content that gave the literary object an autonomous existence to which interpretive gestures equally appropriate to Coleridge or Browning could be applied. Indeed, as Patterson pointed out, it was precisely against this perception of a universal literary that Exegetical critics were reacting with their brand of historicism.[4] While Donaldson's reference to "Chaucer the Poet" as a transcendent figure does seem old-fashioned, various forms of dramatic reading persist in scholarship and pedagogy, despite repeated critiques of such reading strategies. Though the debate over the nature of Chaucer's narrative voice(s) has never escalated to a degree one would call scandalous, its lack of resolution does suggest an impasse in modern scholarship—one that arises from the same seemingly contradictory imperatives that aggravated the scandal of Exegetics: the goal on the one hand, of defining the concepts and interpretive strategies that define literary study as a coherent discipline, and, on the other, the desire to attend to the contingencies and particular circumstances of past cultures.

Scholarship devoted to Chaucer's narrative voice has gone beyond Donaldson in providing both theoretical nuance and a sense of historical specificity, but with widely diverging results in terms of how we should perceive Chaucerian utterances. Patterson, following H. Marshall Leicester, Jr., reframed the issues raised by Donaldson by claiming that Chaucer was not so much interested in character as he was in subjectivity.[5] This shift to some degree changed the terms of the discussion by acknowledging that every "I" is constructed, yet it also subordinated the stylistic and structural issues of narrative voice to a thematic concern with subjectivity—a concern attributed to Chaucer himself. If such interpretations no longer focused on determin-

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3. E. Talbot Donaldson, "Chaucer the Pilgrim," orig. published in *PMLA* 69 (1954), repr. in *Speaking of Chaucer* (New York: Norton, 1970), 1–12.

4. Patterson, *Negotiating the Past,* 6.

5. Lee Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991); H. Marshall Leicester, Jr., *The Disenchanted Self: Representing the Subject in the "Canterbury Tales"* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

ing the presence of irony, they still relied on the presumed unity of the Tales' narrative voices, as well as the idea that distinctive features of these voices serve to tell us something about the subject who utters them.[6] In direct contrast, scholars such as David Lawton and, more recently, A. C. Spearing have drawn on ideas from Bakhtin and sociolinguistics to argue not simply against the idea that the voices of the tales reflect their tellers, but also against the very coherence of the narrative voices employed in the tales, claiming that the "I" of any given tale is best understood as a rhetorical effect produced by narration rather than as a fully psychologized character.[7] These divergent views represent only two positions in a range of possibilities for perceiving the narrative voice(s) of *The Canterbury Tales.* Nor is it a trivial distinction: how one understands the fictive origin of an utterance—as emanating from a particular pilgrim, from a rhetorically produced "I," or from Chaucer—has a highly significant impact on one's experience of the text.

Indeed, it is difficult to imagine a modern literary work for which there would be this kind of disagreement on such a fundamental issue. This is not to suggest that modern texts have stable voices or that we all interpret them in the same way, but that we come to them with a set of shared expectations, through training and broader cultural practice, that structures our experience—generic, rhetorical, and typographical conventions (e.g., quotation marks) that help us determine how we might experience evocations of the voice in written texts. It is, perhaps, because the matter of how to negotiate this historical distance has not been resolved at the level of methodology that dramatic reading remains a not uncommon practice, especially at the level of the high school and introductory college teaching. Dramatic reading, furthermore, has a certain expedience in that it creates an instantly enabling hermeneutic that offers the satisfactions of affective identification familiar from novel-reading and modern confessional culture. Yet pointing to the uncertainties of historical distance and the comforts of more modern strategies does not explain why Donaldson's hermeneutic was so powerfully enabling to readers of Chaucer when such New Critical strategies fell flat when applied to his contemporaries, such as Langland.[8] Nor does it explain

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6. Leicester, for example, takes as the "proper method" of reading "to ascribe the entire narration in all its details, to a single speaker . . . and use it as evidence in constructing that speaker's subjectivity" (*Disenchanted Self,* 12).

7. David Lawton, *Chaucer's Narrators* (Cambridge, UK: D. S. Brewer, 1985); A. C. Spearing, *Textual Subjectivity: The Encoding of Subjectivity in Medieval Narratives and Lyrics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

8. This is not to say that such readings have not been attempted. See, for example, Jay Martin, "Wil as Fool and Wanderer in Piers Plowman," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 3 (1962): 535–48; Richard K. Emmerson, "'Coveitise to Konne,' 'Goddes Pryvetee,' and Will's Ambiguous Dream

why such cogent arguments against dramatic reading as those articulated by Lawton and Spearing have not been more fully elaborated in an alternative methodology.

I would like to begin addressing these question by moving the discussion away from determining the presence or absence of irony, and away from determining the presence or absence of particular subjective intentions, toward examining the excesses of Chaucerian literary language—the sense that Chaucer's language means more than it says. It is this sense of excess meaning that the concept of irony or the assignment of particular intentions or words to specific speakers have served (however inadequately) to organize. Indeed, some would say that it is a feature of all language we consider literary, yet the question remains as to how Chaucer goes about eliciting and managing such excess in his writings as well as to how his strategies might be seen as responding to the conditions of vernacular literary production in his historical moment. To that end I would like to situate Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* as part of the experiment in "vulgar eloquence" that Anne Middleton defined as "Public Poetry,"[9] in other words, as a project that uses different structural and rhetorical means to responds to the same pressures and concerns that engaged writers like William Langland. With this configuration of the literary and the historical in mind, I will then turn to the *locus classicus* of Chaucer's fallible narrators, the Man of Law, to suggest that while Chaucer's own poetic experimentation produced a form of refracted, duplicitous discourse that allows dramatic reading, his interest lay more in the public than the subjective aspects of language and intention.

Public Poetry and the Problem of Noise

Middleton describes "public poetry" as a project in vernacular literary expression in which writers such as Langland and Gower sought to represent "a 'common voice' to serve a 'common good.'"[10] "Common" in this case is conceived as a social category roughly synonymous with the "third estate": a category defined partly by engagement in labor or productivity, however that might be understood, yet also by lack of membership in the estates tra-

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Experience in *Piers Plowman,*" in *Suche Werkis to Werche: Essays on Piers Plowman in Honor of David C. Fowler,* ed. Míċeál Vaughan (East Lansing, MI: Colleagues Press, 1993), 89–121; Joseph S. Wittig, "'Culture Wars' and the Persona in *Piers Plowman,*" *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 15 (2001): 167–95.

9. Anne Middleton, "The Idea of Public Poetry in the Reign of Richard II" *Speculum* 53 (1978): 94–114.

10. Middleton, "Idea of Public Poetry," 95.

ditionally endowed with the sociopolitical power to engage in public dis-
course. The "common voice" was thus determined by a lack of institutional
interest, even while the raw materials from which it was to be constructed
were often derived from the institutional discourses of church and court.
The shared interests that might be discerned from this extra-institutional
position are rarely self-evident. Public poetry, to the contrary, often evinces
myriad forms of self-interest and is characterized by speakers willing to game
the system to make institutional language work on their own behalf. The
public poet makes it his job to create a common voice "distilled out of all
the disparate special languages of society's parts," yet he attempts to create
this synthesis from within, as it were, eschewing not merely the *personae* of
church and crown that he is not authorized to take on, but also those of
prophet or poet: he "claim[s] no privileged position, no special revelation
from God or Muses."[11]

In attempting to situate themselves outside the institutions that pro-
duced public language, Ricardian poets were in some respects bound to focus
on what M. M. Bakhtin referred to as the "centrifugal forces" of language:
the drive to appropriate language to one's particular interests that is always in
tension with the "centripetal forces" that stabilize and generalize language—
the unifying mechanisms of official language, such as documentary formulae
and conventional verse forms.[12] It is these centrifugal forces that Chaucer
represents so vividly in the *House of Fame*'s Whirling Wicker, the rickety
structure that is simultaneously the repository of all human speech and the
chaotic instrument of its publication. As an image, it captures the sense
of "centrifugal" force better than the examples of carnivalesque reversal—
parody, clowning, buffoonery—Bakhtin himself enumerates to exemplify it.
With this representation, Chaucer shows an affinity for the aims of public
poetry, but simultaneously shows its challenges and pitfalls. The Wicker is
itself an allegorical, and perhaps parodic, representation of the "common
voice," which plays on the idiomatic use of the phrase in Middle English to
mean "gossip, rumor."[13] As utterances circulate in the Wicker's structures, it
becomes clear that the difficulty in representing the common voice is not
merely that it might reveal self-interest rather than common good, but, more
fundamentally, that unless structured by some form of unifying authority,

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11. Middleton, "Idea of Public Poetry," 98, 99.

12. M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays,* ed. Michael Holquist and trans. Caryl
Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), 271–73.

13. *MED,* "voice," 3c. It is, however, not absolutely certain that the idiom was a "buzz word"
among Ricardian poets before the 1390s.

the constitutive elements of such a voice simply will not signify; the result will not be poetry but inconsequential rumor, gossip, and noise.

This vision of noise is shared by Chaucer's contemporaries. Figured in the street cries at the end of the prologue to *Piers Plowman* and, in more politically determined fashion, in the rebellious animals of Gower's *Vox clamantis,* noise represents the instabilities of a language not fully structured by institutions as much as it represents the social mobility of those who claimed it as an everyday language.[14] Institutions and the forms of training they made available provided not simply authorization, but the terms of generalizability and stable contextualization that allows utterances to have meaning beyond their immediate moment. Without such terms language cannot signify.[15] The House of Fame depicts precisely such a loss of meaning as Geffrey describes the amplification of the "tydynges" that fill the Whirling Wicker:

> "Nost not thou
> That ys betyd, lo, late or now?"
> "No," quod he, "telle me what."
> And than he tolde hym this and that,
> And swor therto that hit was soth—
> "Thus hath he sayd," and "Thus he doth,"
> "Thus shal hit be," "Thus herde y seye,"
> "That shal be founde," "That dar I leye"—
> That al the folk that ys alyve
> Ne han the kunnynge to discryve
> The thinges that I herde there,
> What aloude, and what in ere.[16]

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14. On English as "noise," see John Ganim, "Chaucer and the Noise of the People," in *Chaucerian Theatricality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 108–20; D. Vance Smith, "Chaucer as an English Writer," in *The Yale Companion to Chaucer,* ed. Seth Lerer (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 87–88; on the sociopolitical aspects of English and "mobility," see Steven Justice, *Writing and Rebellion: England in 1381* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

15. This issue affects all vernaculars, particularly when first pressed into the service of self-consciously literary expression. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o wrote of a similar sense of chaos in his earliest attempts to write literature in his native Gĩkũyũ: "I would write a paragraph in the evening sure of how it read, only later to find that it could be read in a different way which completely altered the meaning. I could only solve the problem by severely controlling the context of words in a sentence, and that of sentences in a paragraph, and that of the paragraph within the entire situation of the occurrence of the action in time and space. Yes, words did slip and slide under my own eyes. They would not stay in place. They would not stay still. And this was often a matter of great frustration" (*Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* [Oxford: Currey, 1986], 75).

16. *The Riverside Chaucer,* gen. ed. Larry Benson, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), *House of Fame,* 11.2047–58. All quotations of Chaucer's works are from this edition.

Without a principle of generalization beyond the fact of their rehearsal, the *tydynges* that were proffered by the Eagle as the stuff from which poetry might be made overwhelm in their copiousness. Ultimately, they can only be represented by vague demonstratives in a series of repeated verbal gestures. Though they are said to grow, this growth does not involve the production of greater meaning, but rather a simple growth in intensity, envisaged as destructive rather than generative, "encresing ever moo, / As fyr ys wont to quyke and goo / From a sparke spronge amys, / Til al a citee brent up ys" (2077–80).

Insofar as content is considered, the chaos of the Whirling Wicker ensures its consistent corruption. The well know passage in which the "sad soth sawe" and the "lesynge" have their slapstick collision as they simultaneously try to escape the Wicker suggests that the very act of articulation introduces falsehood. It does so, furthermore, in language that seems to mock the very idea of a common voice:

> "And here I wol ensuren the,
> Wyth the nones that thou wolt do so,
> That I shal never fro the go,
> But be thyn owne sworen brother!
> We wil medle us ech with other,
> That no man, be they never so wrothe,
> Shal han on [of us] two, but bothe
> At ones."
> (*HF,* 2098–105)

Expressed in the terms of an oath of fellowship (made by whom it is not specified), the duplicity of *tydynges* suggests that truth cannot be distilled from shared interest, but rather that it is precisely this commingling of particular interests that ensures the distortion of meaning.

The House of Fame famously stalls precisely as the mysterious "man of gret auctorite" arrives on the scene (2158), with all the promise of order and meaning he implies. Yet even in its stalling and denial, the poem at some level displays an interest in the project of transmuting *tydynges* into truth. As the experiments of his contemporaries show, the expression of truth in vernacular poetics is a complicated matter, one that they pursue less by explicitly philosophical and political debate than by structural experimentation, in part because they do not pursue truth as a series of propositions or pronouncements made from above, but rather as something that might emerge from the noise of everyday discourse. Put another way, the project was one of

defining and mediating between proper and common[17]—of identifying those aspects of the contemporary and the local that might exceed their particular moments to become relevant to common interest. Ricardian poetry experiments with various forms of focalization to effect such mediation. In the end, the *House of Fame* arguably becomes a comic representation of a failed experiment, one in which vernacular talk simply fails to signify beyond its immediate context, let alone have any claim on public attention.

Even though the Whirling Wicker represents a failure, the *House of Fame* still participates in Ricardian experimentation at the level of voice and form. If the various modes of address that characterize this poetry can be considered in terms of their management of proper and common, the dream vision form of the *House of Fame* is chief among the formal techniques used for such management. With its dual Boethian and French pedigree, the dream vision offered these writers a narrative form that simultaneously invested narrated experience with the promise of visionary truth and allowed that promise to be perpetually deferred. This interest was often coupled with a predilection for estates satire, with its pretensions to represent social totalities. More important than the narrative forms themselves, however, was the "I" that mediated them. Whereas the vague cacophony of voices in the House of Rumor is figured as an ineffective navigation of the range between particularity and generalizability, the Ricardian "I" offered a formal solution to that problem. The "I" who narrates visionary experience has the capacity to modulate between the immediacy of particular experience and generalized reflection, whether on the part of the "I" or through an interlocutor. While the speaker is usually closely identified with the poet himself, often with forms of authorial signatures, the identification is a complex one.[18] Insofar as the "I" coheres as a stable *persona,* it is what David Lawton has called an "open *persona,*" that which "looks outward in order to challenge an audience's responses, rather than a 'closed' *persona,* which turns inwards, hermetically seals the artifact, and requires an independent solution. . . . it operates on the level of response and relationship; it is conceived not as a kind of drama but as a rhetorical extension of the poem's narrative."[19] Though one could say a great deal about the kinds of cultural formations that give rise to such a rhetorical strategy, the "open" *persona* serves not to explore subjectivity as

17. The difficulty in defining what is appropriate to "common" interest is the correlative of the "crisis of the proper" that Middleton identifies in her discussion of Langland's authorial signatures ("William Langland's 'Kynde Name': Authorial Signature and Social Identity in Late Fourteenth-Century England," in *Literary Practice and Social Change in Britain, 1380–1530,* ed. Lee Patterson [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990], 15–82).

18. Middleton, "William Langland's 'Kynde Name,'" esp. 24–37.

19. Lawton, *Chaucer's Narrators,* 6.

such, but rather to mediate narratives in a particular way. It contextualizes narrated events through the particularity of experience, while simultaneously broadening its scope by modeling perception and reflecting on it: "the first-person narrator is there not to concentrate attention but to generalize it."[20]

Though Lawton claims that both Chaucer and Langland make use of open *personae,* he, like most scholars, distinguishes between them in terms of their handling of the technique. There is of course reason to do so: whereas Langland's public poetry speaks "as if" to a larger audience conceived as the Christian community, Chaucer's "Geffrey" seems, in his earlier poetry at least, to address those familiar with him. Whereas Langland's rhetorical stance is drawn largely from penitential traditions, Chaucer's is indebted to French courtly poetry. Yet insofar as these distinctions have underwritten a critical notion of Chaucer as unremittingly ironic and Langland as perpetually earnest, they may distract us from the ways in which the projects of both poets converge as they both come to explore the mediation of proper and common, particularly in regard to experimentation with narrative voice. Langland's extension of his similarly stalled A Version of *Piers Plowman* takes the direction of making his open *persona* and its generalizability the subject of scrutiny and formal elaboration. As I have argued elsewhere, it is in the extension of Vision Three, with "Will's" complaint about the value of *clergie* and the inner dream that it initiates, that the Dreamer is resituated from an observer on the boundaries of the narrative to an actant within it, thereby creating the possibility of a more closed *persona.*[21] This possibility, however, is realized only strategically and partially and never becomes a structural element of the poem as a whole.[22] The exploration suggests, rather, that the distinction between "open" and "closed" *personae* might best be considered as a spectrum, analogous to the spectrum between proper and common, that Ricardian writers were interested in exploring.

In *Piers Plowman* this spectrum—in part because it is surveyed by means of the first person—fraught with ethical tension. D. Vance Smith discusses this problem in the context of the oft-quoted passage from Will's chastisement by Ymaginatif in the B Version of *Piers Plowman:* "And þow medlest þee wiþ makynges and myȝtest go seye þi sauter" (B 12.16). As Smith points out, vernacular making is for Langland defined as a kind of "meddling."[23] It involves Will's presumptuous, unauthorized intrusion into the language of

20. Lawton, *Chaucer's Narrators,* 9.
21. Katherine Zieman, *Singing the New Song: Literacy and Liturgy in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 162–75.
22. See, however, the studies mentioned in n. 8 above.
23. Smith, "Chaucer as an English Writer," 111.

truth, his active wrangling of and within it, which is contrasted to the performance of the Psalter, a performance in which the "I" merely conforms to David's image and is assimilated to it. The Chaucerian "I" of the dream visions and the *Troilus* at best seems to play out this tension by means of an imperfect and ironized relation to the "authorities" on which his tales are based rather by questioning the value of his enterprise altogether, yet the image of the Whirling Wicker does seem to engage this tension more directly. Smith in fact reads the "meddling" of the "sad sothe sawe" and "lesynge" of the *House of Fame* as a direct response to the Ymaginatif episode. While one might be reticent to lay that much interpretive weight on a single repeated word, it is clear that a similar cluster of concepts involving the publication of truth and its problematic nature is at stake in both cases. Smith claims that for Chaucer, in contrast to Langland,

> meddling is simply what we begin with, a mixed relation between truth and falsehood that we encounter whether we turn to the primal scene of poetry, language, or fame or to the larger world. And Chaucer seems to be offering a way out of the Langlandian hall of mirrors in this passage, also. We have no choice but to turn to "tydynges" if we want to say anything at all. The utterance itself tells us that we humans are powerless to evaluate its truth claims, and moral indignation is quite literally beside the point.[24]

This is an insightful description of the workings of language in *The House of Fame.* At the same time, it also describes the Chaucer of much modern scholarship whose double-voiced discourse seems so often deployed to resist reduction to a single (moral) point of view.[25] Yet if Langland's "I" managed to encase itself in a hall of mirrors in his self-interrogations, it is not clear that the decontextualized "tydynges" that escaped the Whirling Wicker signify anything more successfully.

Chaucer's efforts in reworking the materials of the *House of Fame* in *The Canterbury Tales,* as I will discuss, suggest that his implicit claims about the impossibility of truth are not his final pronouncement on the potential of public poetry. Whereas his way out of the hall of mirrors may have involved some acknowledgment about the nature of language, his escape from the

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24. Smith, "Chaucer as an English Writer," 111–12.
25. Thomas J. Farrell is one of the few scholars who have attempted to work against this point of view. He points out that critics like Jill Mann have limited the degree of irony with which they presumed the text to signify, then replaced that irony with an ethical ambiguity by stating that Chaucer always suspends judgment on his characters ("The Persistence of Donaldson's Memory," *Chaucer Review* 41 [2007]: 291).

Whirling Wicker involved transforming the narratorial voice of his poetry, replacing Langland's reflexive "I" with the "he" and "she" of *The Canterbury Tales,* who each perform *as* a particular, locatable "I," but are distinguishable from Chaucer's "I." This distancing of the voice from the poet's "I" does not forestall the ethical questions raised by the implicated speaker. If anything, it places the notion of intention and interest in sharper relief as inevitable aspects of performance. Though Chaucer criticism has tended to focus on the refracted, duplicitous speech that results as a source of irreducible irony, Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale* suggests that public truths can emerge from such implicated speech.

Meddling with Makings and the Man of Law

While the Canterbury project as a whole can be said to rework the issues raised between *House of Fame* and *Piers Plowman,* it is in *The Man of Law's Tale* that the dialogue about *tydynges* and truth is continued most explicitly. Several scholars have noted the importance of *tydynges* to both poems: in *House of Fame,* as we saw, "tydynges" were put forth as the raw materials of vernacular poetry; similarly, in *The Man of Law's Tale,* the merchants' "tydynges" are figured as the source of the tale of Constance (*MLT,* 2.129–30).[26] Given the problems connected to *tydynges* in the House of Rumor, where they issued only in chaotic noise, one might claim that in *The Man of Law's Tale,* Chaucer figured out what to do with *tydynges*—how to make them signify.

To claim that *The Man of Law's Tale* resolves anything might seem odd, as few critics would place among Chaucer's more successful tales. Nor is there much agreement about it, particularly in terms of its narrative voice. The tale is, as I mentioned, a *locus classicus* for interpretations that rely on fallible narrators as well for scholars determined to eliminate the idea of the fallible narrator altogether. Possessing all the elements that cause interpreters to wonder about its status, it is not to the liking of modern tastes, either aesthetically or politically. It employs what most modern readers perceive as extravagant, even inelegant, rhetorical gestures to tell a tale that represents women as objects of exchange among men, much of it set in an orientalist

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26. This connection has been noted by David Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity: Absolutist Lineages and Associational Forms in England and Italy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 185–87; Carolyn Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 95; Smith, "Chaucer as an English Writer," 112–13.

landscape.[27] For every reader who has distanced the tale from Chaucer by assigning its excesses and failures to the Man of Law, there is another critic who insists that the tale is "serious"—that its seeming excesses arose because Chaucer "deepened and thickened the rhetorical and moral texture of the story."[28] While such readings have valuable things to say about the socio-political import of the tale, the narrative *persona* they describe does seem suspiciously confected to organize our responses to its inconsistencies. It is perhaps no coincidence, then, that the tale is also a target for anti-dramatic critics, who have set forth compelling cases to show that the "I" of the tale is "no more than a product of the Tale's rhetoric" instead of a coherent *persona*.[29] All told, however, the collective ambivalence about the tale points to more fundamental matters of narration and voice that arguments about the presence or absence of a coherent narrative *persona*—open or closed—merely serve to obscure.

Examining these matters involves another look at how precisely the voice of the *Man of Law's Tale* is constructed. For most readers, the narrator's presence is felt most vividly—to put it kindly—in the tale's frequent narratorial intrusions. The tone of this speaker, however, differs from that of the *Tales'* other intrusive narrators, such as the Knight. Much of the difference in tone, as Lawton has noted, is due to repeated citations within the tale of Innocent III's *De miseria humane conditionis*.[30] The majority of the tale's narratorial intrusions are, in fact, direct quotations of this well-known text.[31] With this gesture, Chaucer affiliates the tale's narrative voice with a penitential tradition more characteristic of Langland than the courtly stylings of his earlier work. This affiliation involves not simply the affective quality of its appeals, but also its rhetoric gestures, specifically the inter-

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27. Graham D. Caie, "Innocent III's *De Miseria* as a Gloss on the *Man of Law's Prologue* and *Tale*," *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 100 (1999): 175–85, looks at the Man of Law's rhetorical failings; Ann W. Astell, "Apostrophe, Prayer, and the Structure of Satire in the *Man of Law's Tale*," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 13 (1991): 81–97, interprets the Man of Law's consistent use of *apostrophe* as an indication of his limited vision; Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics,* discusses the tale's representation of the "traffic in women," whereas Susan Schibanoff, "Worlds Apart: Orientalism, Antifeminism, and Heresy in Chaucer's 'Man of Law's Tale,'" *Exemplaria* 8 (1996): 59–96, relates its misogyny to Orientalist discourse. For a critical history of interpretations of the tale and its narrator, see Spearing, *Textual Subjectivity,* 103–18.

28. C. David Benson, "Poetic Variety in the *Man of Law's* and the *Clerk's Tales*," in *Chaucer's Religious Tales,* ed. C. David Benson and Elizabeth Robertson (Cambridge: Brewer, 1990), 140.

29. Lawton, *Chaucer's Narrators,* 92; Spearing, *Textual Subjectivity,* 118; Robert M. Jordan, "Heteroglossia and Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale*," in *Bakhtin and Medieval Voices,* ed. Thomas J. Farrell (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1995), 93.

30. Lawton, *Chaucer's Narrators,* 91.

31. Glosses in several early manuscripts, including Hengwrt and Ellesmere, show awareness of the tale's citational practices by adding marginal glosses that provide the quoted passages of *De miseria.*

ruptive use of the vocative to make those affective appeals. In this respect, however, *The Man of Law's Tale* distinguishes itself in important ways. *Piers Plowman* features frequent interruptive vocatives, but if public poetry in general is "defined by a constant relation of speaker to audience within an ideally conceived worldly community," these exclamations suggest that this relation is not a simple one. Indeed Langland's exclamations are often unsettling to modern readers insofar as the affective immediacy and intensity they are meant to create seems at odds with the mediations of the dream vision frame. In Vision Three of the B Version, for example, the speech of Clergy, who, according to the fiction of the vision, is lecturing Will, is interrupted (rhetorically, if not thematically) by an admonition addressed directly to the clerical offenders under discussion: "Forþi, ye Correctours, claweþ heron and correcteþ fyrst yowselue."[32] One could read such moments as narratorial intrusions and assign them to the poetic "I," since the change in address is one way to signal such a change in speaker. Yet the identity of this speaker matters less than the rhetorical gesture of direct address, which transcends the boundaries of the vision to speak truth. Nor is that truth addressed to the common itself, but rather to a particular group ("ye Correctours") that the common can agree require public censure. Whereas the fiction of the dream vision produces a generalized "I" that can mediate various interests, it is set alongside gestures of complaint that reach beyond that fiction to elicit a more collective response.

Chaucer's incorporations of passages from *De miseria* similarly seize upon the affective immediacy of *exclamatio,* but in a very different manner. Favoring the classical "O" over the Langlandian "ye" of complaint, the pure vocality of Chaucer's interruptions emphasizes the presence of the individual speaker as much as the addressee. It is likely, in fact, that Chaucer added the "O" to his translation of Innocent's text where it did not occur in the Latin to emphasize the intrusion of a speakerly presence.[33] That presence is further defined not simply by the use of *exclamatio,* but more specifically by *apostrophe.* Where Innocent laments that "sudden sorrow always follows worldly joy" ["Semper mundane leticie tristicia repentina succedit"],[34] the

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32. William Langland, *Piers Plowman: The B Version,* ed. George Kane and E. Talbot Donaldson (London: Athlone Press, 1975), 10.289. All further quotations are from this edition.

33. It is, of course, possible that Chaucer worked with a version of the text that included these "Os" as well as the vocative forms discussed below. Robert E. Lewis's extensive research into versions of *De miseria* (see n. 34 below), however, has not turned up such a version, nor, in the end, does it matter whether the vocative "O" was Chaucer's own invention or not. The quotations from *De miseria* in marginal glosses of *Man of Law's Tale* manuscripts do not include vocatives.

34. *De miseria condicionis humane,* ed. and trans. Robert E. Lewis (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1978), 1.21. All further quotations and translations of the text are from this edition.

narrator of *The Man of Law's Tale* apostrophizes that sorrow: "O sodeyn wo, that evere art successour/To worldly blisse" (*MLT,* 2.421–2). Where Innocent describes the shame of the beggar ("si petit, pudore confunditor"), the narrator addresses the beggar himself: "To asken help thee shameth in thyn herte" (*MLP,* 2.99–101). Jonathan Culler once described apostrophe as the essence of the literary, in that it is the trope by which the speaker both creates objects by addressing them and effectively creates himself as a speaking subject in relation to that object.[35] In this narrative, rather than lyric, context, however, it seems more useful to note that these apostrophes orient the speaker in relation to his narrative. In contrast to the exclamations of *Piers Plowman,* which speak across and trouble narrative boundaries, the apostrophes of *The Man of Law's Tale* articulate that very boundary, defining a stable locus of articulation from which the tale is narrated. To claim that these consistent intrusions serve to construct a *persona* is not by any means to claim that the tales are narrated by fully psychologizable, "closed" *personae;* it is, rather, to suggest that Chaucer was first and foremost interested in the poetic possibilities of refracted discourse that a *persona* creates. By arranging his narrative such that *tydynges* are performed from particular contexts, he is able to create resonance from noise.

That resonance results from the sense that discourse is not simply refracted but reiterated. The notion that words are repeated in varying contexts creates the possibility that they can be infused with new intentions with each new performance. *The Man of Law's Tale* emphasizes this possibility still further by assigning the narrator highly emotional intrusions that are quoted from a prior text.[36] If we imagine the intrusive narrator of the tale as a speaking subject defining himself in relation to his narrative, it is equally important to note that this "subject" is made from prior texts. The idea of the Man of Law as a fallible narrator, in fact, derives in part from his seeming corruption of the meaning of *De miseria.* The prologue's opening *apostrophe* to "poverty," drawn directly from *De miseria,* suggests precisely such corruption:

> O hateful harm, condicion of poverte!
> With thurst, with coold, with hunger so confoundid!
> To asken help thee shameth in thyn herte;
> (*MLP,* 2.99–101)

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35. Jonathan Culler, "Apostrophe," in *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981), 135–55.

36. In those cases where *De miseria* is not quoted, other texts lie beneath the surface. At 1. 295, Ptolemy is brought to bear on the story (and appears in the marginal glosses as well); at 1. 358, Semiramus is mentioned. The function of *apostrophe,* in other words, is to connect the tale to the "disparate special languages" of the *litterati.*

Pauperes enim premuntur inedia, cruciantur . . . fame, siti, frigore . . . O
miserabilis condicio mendicantis! Et si petit, pudore confunditor. (*De mise-
ria* 1.14)[37]

While the passage functions to establish the speaker's rhetorical temperament, it also focuses attention on the issues of material wealth that drive
the tale's narrative as well as the odd moral the narrator seems to draw from
Innocent's text in this context.[38] As several scholars have noted, Innocent's
point in mentioning the plight of the poor is to chastise those who judge
solely according to one's material wealth: "Secundum fortunam estimatur
persona, cum pocius secundum personam sit estimanda fortuna" ["A person
is valued according to his wealth, when wealth should be valued according to
the person"] (1.14).[39] The Man of Law, however, stays with the former criterion of evaluation rather than the latter, and thus turns away from the poor
to "riche marchauntz" with his next *apostrophe* (2.122), not only praising
them for their wealth, but decreeing them "fadres of tidynges / And of tales"
(2.129–30), and thus linking them and their goods to his narrative activity.

The misappropriation is so blatant that it is difficult imagine an unironic
interpretation. The uses of *De miseria* in the tale itself, however, are more
equivocal, nor is it clear what prompts the use of the text in the first place.
The first example occurs as a rhetorical delaying tactic, by which the narrator, having described the sumptuousness of Constance and the Sultan's wedding feast, and having hinted at its horrible outcome ("But al to deere they
boghte it er they ryse" [2.420]), prepares the audience for the horrific events
that will ensue:

O sodeyn wo, that evere art successour
To worldly blisse, spreynd with bitternesse,
The ende of the joye of oure worldly labour!
Wo occupieth the fyn of oure gladnesse.
Herke this conseil for thy sikernesse:
Upon thy glade day have in thy mynde
The unwar wo or harm that comth bihynde.
(*MLT,* 2.421–27)

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37. "The poor are indeed oppressed by starvation; they suffer . . . hunger, thirst, cold . . . O the
miserable condition of a beggar! If he begs, he is confounded by shame."

38. On the importance of commerce in the tale, see Dinshaw*, Chaucer's Sexual Poetics,* 95–99;
Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity,* 190ff.; Smith, "Chaucer as an English Writer," 112ff.; R. A. Shoaf, "'Unwemmed Custance': Circulation, Property, and Incest in *the Man of Law's Tale,*" *Exemplaria* 2 (1990):
287–302.

39. Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity,* 200; Smith, "Chaucer as an English Writer," 112.

> Semper mundane leticie tristicia repentina succedit. Mundana igitur felici-
> tas multis amaritudinibus est respersa. Extrema gaudii luctus occupat. Audi
> ergo salubre consilium: In die bonorum ne immemor sis malorum. (*De
> miseria,* 1.21)[40]

As Graham Caie has noted, the passage of *De miseria* left out of this quo-
tation refers to the tragedy that befell Job when his children were killed by
a storm while feasting in his brother's house (Job 1.18).[41] Although this
omitted passage might explain how this part of Innocent's text came to be
associated with this moment in the story, the connection is at best super-
ficial. Caie, in fact, takes it as an indicator of the Man of Law's misplaced
priorities: "Innocent advocates sobriety and wisdom in the face of tragedy
and reminds us that all things work together for good for those who love
God. The Man of Law is simply appalled by the disruption of a jolly good
feast and equitable marriage bargain, throwing up his hands in despair and
pronouncing the fatalistic and pessimistic view that all joy ends in sorrow."[42]
Exaggerations aside, Caie's reading seems suspect to anti-dramatic readers
because it uses psychological depth to compensate for the apparent super-
ficiality of intertextual reference. Yet if the alternative is to interpret rather
than compensate for this seeming disjunction of text and context, what are
we to make of it?

Other examples are still less clear-cut. When the messenger returns from
Alla, bearing the letter expressing the king's acceptance of the child he had
falsely been led to believe was monstrous, the narrator addresses him as a
personification of drunkenness:

> O messenger, fulfild of dronkenesse,
> Strong is thy breeth, thy lymes faltren ay,
> And thou biwreyest alle secreenesse.
> Thy mynde is lorn, thou janglest as a jay,
> Thy face is turned in a newe array.
> Ther dronkenesse regneth in any route,
> Ther is no conseil hyd, withouten doute.
> (*MLT,* 2.771–77)

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40. "For sudden sorrow always follows worldly joy. Worldly happiness is besprinkled indeed with
much bitterness. Mourning takes hold of the end of joy. Listen then to a wise counsel: 'In the day of
good things, be not unmindful of evil things'" (trans. in Caie, "Innocent III's *De Miseria,*" 176; cf. *De
miseria* 1.21).
41. Caie, "Innocent III's *De Miseria,*" 177.
42. Caie, "Innocent III's *De Miseria,*" 177.

Quid turpius ebrioso, cui fetor in ore, tremor in corpore; qui promit stulta, cuius mens alienatur, facies transformatur? "Nullum enim latet secretum vbi regnat." (*De miseria,* 2.19)[43]

Taken from Innocent's treatment of the seven deadly sins, the passage's performance in this context seems truthful in spirit only. The messenger's betrayal does not stem from weak knees or loose lips, but because he falls asleep (indeed, in the first instance, Donegild got him drunk *because* he revealed his errand, not vice versa). As previously, the *apostrophe* seems primarily motivated by concern for narrative pacing, as if it serves to enhance the audience's experience of the resumption of a tragedy seemingly averted by Alla's good will. If this is the case, the focus on drunkenness at best defers to an aesthetic in which penitential admonitions are never gratuitous or distracting. Whatever expectations may have been set up in the prologue, the Man of Law's various appropriations of *De miseria* in the tale itself resist reduction to a single coherent intention.

Part of the problem with readings that attempt to locate such coherence, however, is the narrow psychological understanding of intention (along with an implicit expectation of moral censure) that is brought to bear on the interpretation. In a culture that places more value and authority in institutionally-affirmed, shared texts than in the newly-forged utterances of individual persons—in a self-consciously intertextual culture, if you will—"intention" is a far more complex concept, one that needs to account for the myriad ways that textual performances can be said to bear meaning or desire.[44] In some respects, Chaucer's interest in the inevitability of "meddling" in the Whirling Wicker calls attention to this very complexity of intention and signification. With *The Man of Law's Tale,* arguably with the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole, he takes this interest further by examining particular instances of meddling that come to light in the context of specific performances.

From this perspective, the Man of Law's engagements with the *De miseria* exhibit textual commingling—impure and possibly self-interested mediation that does not signal an ethical or aesthetic failure, but presents a more grounded and specifically, if fictionally, contextualized structuring of rumor and the "commune voys" (2.155). This meddling results in various forms of

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43. *De miseria* 2.19: "What is more repulsive than a drunkard, in whose mouth is a stench, in whose body a trembling; who utters foolish things, whose reason is taken away, whose face is transformed? 'For there is no secret where drunkenness reigneth'" (trans. based on Lewis, *De miseria,* 166–68).

44. For more on the complexities of intention in the late medieval period, see Zieman, *Singing the New Song,* 92–113, 121–27, *et passim.*

refracted discourse that are often described using the Bakhtinian term "heteroglossia," and there is value in acknowledging the dialogism that exists in both Chaucer's and Langland's writing. Yet whereas Bakhtin describes how novelistic discourse allows heteroglossia to enter a field perceived as unified, Ricardian poets seem rather to imagine heteroglossia in terms of the various building blocks out of which one forges a unified poetics—a common voice that has pretensions toward truth, though they create this voice in different ways. To return to the dialogue between Chaucer and Langland elucidated by Smith, one might say that while Langland continues to harbor the fantasy that he can escape his hall of mirrors to give voice to truth, Chaucer harbors his own fantasy that truth will out despite the meddling. It is not simply the Man of Law's narration that represents this desire, but the structure of the narrative itself. Beginning with "tydynges," the story proceeds by a series of verbal mediations, none of them pure or disinterested. The Man of Law gets his tale second-hand from merchants (2.133); the Sultan hears the "common voys" about Constance second-hand, also from Merchants (2.155, 176–84); the marriage between the Sultan and Constance, we are told, is then arranged, "by tretys and embassadrie,/And by the popes mediacioun" (2.233–34); Custance is betrayed again and again by waylaid and miscommunicated messages and letters; much is made at the end of the tale of the rumor that the son Maurice was the messenger who arranges Alla's dinner with the Emperor and thus Custance's reunion with her father (2.1086–92). Whereas some of these impure mediations stem from evil intentions, such evil intentions seem an almost necessary condition to publish Custance's truth to several nations.

The meddling of impure verbal mediation has been viewed by other scholars in terms of commercial exchange and the inevitable corruptions of language.[45] Set against these figures of corruption is Custance, who, however much she may be moved around, is always stable in her signification. She is figured as the bearer of truth, "an icon of the originary power of the proper name,"[46] who in turn is a willing and welcoming recipient of "goddes sonde," whatever it might be (2.524, 760, 825, 903). While there is little question that this opposition of pure and corrupt communication is the central opposition of the tale,[47] there is perhaps a more fitting figure of Chaucer's

45. E.g., Shoaf, "'Unwemmed Custance.'"
46. Shoaf, "'Unwemmed Custance,'" 288.
47. In Shoaf's dramatic reading, the unrealistic desire for the purity of Custance and her transcendent meaning is assigned to the Man of Law, which in turn grants Chaucer the ability to realize the impossibility of this position. Like many dramatic readings, the assigning of particular viewpoints and positions to a narrator is often merely an expository or conceptual expedient that perhaps does not configure the ideas of the tale as effectively as it might, but nonetheless identifies important aspects of the tales.

poetic embedded in another instance of divine communication. When the spurned young knight who has falsely accused Custance of murder swears false witness against her on the gospel, he is promptly and directly "smoot" by the hand of God (2.669–72). Less a "communication" than a non-discursive gesture, this action would not seem to require comment. Nonetheless a heavenly gloss—the only representation of the *vox Dei* in all of Chaucer's works—descends from the heavens:

> A voys was herd in general audience,
> And seyde, "Thou hast desclaundred, giltelees,
> The doghter of hooly chirche in heigh presence;
> Thus hastou doon, and yet holde I my pees!"
> (*MLT,* 2.673–79; cf. Ps 49.21: "haec fecisti et tacui")

With his use of Psalm 49, it would appear that God too engages in meddling. And while such a gesture should establish beyond a doubt that "meddling is simply what we begin with," it is a particular kind of meddling: the act of verbal reiteration, which becomes the figure of both divine communication and vernacular poetics. The power of the Psalter may for Langland (or, at least, for Ymaginatif)[48] lie in its call to the "I" who utters it to assimilate himself to the text, yet for that text to enter into the discourse of lived experience, it must lend itself to multiple contexts. It is in that multiplicity that the surplus of meaning we associate with the literary resides.

One might then say that with the Canterbury pilgrims, Chaucer was more interested in exploring a discourse of self-conscious citationality than in representing character or subjectivity and that his positioning of the narrative voice of the tales was the primary mechanism through which he did so. The crafters of the Ellesmere manuscript also appear to have picked up on the importance of narrative intrusions in fixing that position. At several points throughout the *Tales,* including in *The Man of Law's Tale,* intrusions beginning with the vocative "O" are marked with the word "auctor."[49] The

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48. Langland's recasting of this episode in the "autobiographical insertion" of C 5, where he speaks of liturgical texts as "þe lomes þat y labore with" (C 5.45), suggests that he has continued to involve himself in "meddling." See Zieman, *Singing the New Song,* 150–81.

49. These glosses have been noticed as a general phenomenon in the Ellesmere manuscript by Andrew Galloway, "Authority," in *A Companion to Chaucer,* ed. Peter Brown (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 28; and Stephanie Trigg, *Congenial Souls: Reading Chaucer from Medieval to Postmodern* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 78–79. The glosses occur in other manuscripts, including Hengwrt, but less extensively. Similar glosses also occur in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Rawlinson poet. 163, a manuscript of the *Troilus,* where they also mark narratorial intrusion (see C. David Benson and Barry A. Windeatt, "The Manuscript Glosses to Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde,*" *Chaucer Review* 25 [1990]: 40, 43, 44, 46, 48, 49, 51).

gesture is similar to and possibly derived from glosses in manuscripts of the *Roman de la Rose,* which use the term "auctor" or "actor" and "amant" as speech markers that distinguish between the "I" who narrates and reflects on the action and the "I" who acts within the narrative.[50] That readers should desire to distinguish between the two shows their awareness of positionality and its rhetorical effects. That the makers of the Ellesmere should also interest themselves in the moments where the "I" is so positioned suggests that they were more interested in calling attention to the pilgrims as narrators than as individual characters at those junctures. In this respect, it might indeed be fair to claim that the narrators of the *Tales* are a product of the tales' rhetoric, yet to deny that there is any connection between specific pilgrims and their tales risks overlooking the very particularity that allowed them to be situated as narrators.[51] Though it is not a question of aligning every irregularity with a character trait of unified subject, I would suggest that interpreting tales like the Man of Law's involves considering the complex range of intention and desire and its expression in language that can span from the individual and subjective to the institutional or communal. With that, we should also consider the greater implication that it is through exploring that range in its full complexity that Chaucer imagines a common voice might be found.[52] At the very least, such considerations might encourage scholars of Chaucer to seek more flexible and historicized conceptual vocabularies of intention, intertextuality, and irony that could better analyze Chaucer's Canterbury project.[53]

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50. Sylvia Huot, "'Ci parle l'aucteur': The Rubrication of Voice and Authorship in 'Roman de la Rose' Manuscripts," *SubStance* 17 (1988): 42–48.

51. See Lawton, *Chaucer's Narrators.*

52. Largely out of considerations of space, I have refrained in this essay from considering the politics of such a common voice. Given the palpable presence of "other" voices in *The Man of Law's Tale* in particular, however, it is safe to say that such an examination would be equally complicated.

53. David Lawton, "Donaldson and Irony," *Chaucer Review* 41 (2007): 231–39, touches on the poverty of vocabulary on irony in his attempt to bring Donaldson's reading of Chaucerian irony in line with theories of the Chicago school. Farrell ("The Persistence of Donaldson's Memory") also points out that most discussions of Donaldson's criticism tend to oversimplify it, as I, too, may have done in conflating his work with "dramatic" readings in general.