Reclaiming Reason: Chaucer’s Prose and the Path to Autonomy

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RECLAIMING REASON: CHAUCER’S PROSE AND THE PATH TO AUTONOMY

by

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This thesis entitled:
Reclaiming Reason: Chaucer’s Prose and the Path to Autonomy
written by Dawn Fleurette Colley
has been approved for the Department of English

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The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we
Find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards
Of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.
“Reclaiming Reason” is the first full-length study of Geoffrey Chaucer’s prose. Though scholars have written on the prose texts individually, the most pressing questions have yet to be considered: what, specifically, does Chaucer offer in these works, and why does he choose prose to do so? In pursuit of answers to these questions, “Reclaiming Reason” examines the politics of reading and interpretation in the late Middle Ages and discovers that through his prose works—the Boece, the Treatise on the Astrolabe, the Tale of Melibee, the Parson’s Tale, and the Retraction—Chaucer models principles of interpretation for a time when access to knowledge was controlled by a variety of self-serving authorities. Indeed, these works offer readers strategies to assert their own agency, and thus intellectual autonomy, in the midst of the struggle over the power to control and ability to interpret knowledge. By offering these methods in prose, Chaucer increases the accessibility of these subjects, while demonstrating the extensive benefits of these different forms of knowing (philosophical, scientific, judicial, and religious). In the Parson’s Tale, for instance, he offers the religious practice of confession and repentance as a possible path to individual salvation; in writing for a lay audience, Chaucer implies that this information equally profits secular “selves.” Thus, “Reclaiming Reason” argues specifically that these prose works are essential to a comprehensive understanding of Chaucer’s philosophy: that in an inherently flawed and fragmented realm, individuals can exercise authority over their choices by consciously developing habits of critical engagement. Overall, it makes a case for the recursive reading of Chaucer’s work through the strategies of rational analysis that he provides in the prose. Not only does such recursion shed new light on our understanding of Chaucer’s
poetry, but by extension, the performance of Chaucer’s methods—the act of recursion—creates a progressive dynamic between the individual and whatever machine (i.e. text, scientific device, authority) he engages with to gain knowledge.
For my parents, who created a space “so stedfast and stable / That mannes word was obligacioun,”

For Henry, who brought me boundless joy,

And for my friend (and fellow nobody) Larry, who helped me find “the goode wey.”
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Introduction

A Path to Reason

“Reclaiming Reason” documents the centrality of Chaucer’s prose works to his vision of individual responsibility. For Chaucer, such responsibility is exercised through a form of analysis that goes beyond the identification of personal failures to understand first the processes that lead to such “misdeemings” (the failures) and then to implement that understanding in “right deeming.” As such, this dissertation is placed within the politics of reading and interpretation in the late Middle Ages. During Geoffrey Chaucer’s era (1350-1400), the Church, Academy, and Court struggled for control over language, authority, and, above all, access to knowledge. ¹ Starting in the 1370s, John Wyclif’s writings added a new dimension to this conflict by suggesting that the authority of ecclesiasts was established through the combination of word and deed instead of through words alone. While Plato’s injunction (Timeaus) that the “word must be cousin to the deed” is a persistent concern from that point forward for reformers taking issue with specious rhetorical claims, it is most immediately, in Chaucer’s context, set out by Wyclif. According to Marie Borroff, Wyclif argued that “To ascertain the spiritual status of any professed member of the church, it was necessary only to observe his actions and see whether they accorded with the teachings of Jesus.”² What made this idea so powerful for the laity was that it encouraged individuals to decide for themselves who was credible and who was not; for the ecclesiasts, this idea challenged their claims to what had been their unquestioned, God-given
authority. These power struggles were then made more difficult by the tremendous social consequences of the Black Death and the impact of the child king Richard II’s selfish and manipulative advisors, whose actions created a crisis of governance as competing claims to the civil authority waxed and waned. Chaucer responds to this historical situation by emphasizing means for self-authorization that are implicit in his source materials and thus empowering his audience to determine who and what is authoritative, and through that determination, to make intelligent and responsible choices in all aspects of life.

While his poetry has received extensive critical attention, Chaucer’s prose works remain at best on the periphery of critical discussion and at worst wholly ignored. Yet in his major prose works—the Boece, the Treatise on the Astrolabe, the Tale of Melibee, the Parson’s Tale, and the Retraction—Chaucer models principles of interpretation for the individual in a time fraught with civil unrest: he offers his readers strategies to assert their own agency and thus intellectual autonomy in the midst of this struggle over the authority and ability to interpret knowledge. Unlike Wyclif, whose primary interest was chiefly in offering individuals Church doctrine in the vernacular, Chaucer gives his secular audience the means to assert their autonomy and agency in the domains of scientific, religious, and philosophical knowledge. Through these writings, he indicates that these processes can provide a benefit to everyone, independent of religious affiliation, societal position, education, or age. Thus, “Reclaiming Reason” argues specifically that these prose works are essential to a comprehensive understanding of Chaucer’s epistemology, one that asserts that in an inherently flawed and fragmented realm, the individual can exercise authority over his own choices by consciously developing skills of critical, recursive engagement that lead to right understanding and right deeming. Of course, Chaucer’s oft noted interest in rational processes and in readerly participation are illustrated throughout his verse, but
it is in the prose that his position is both fully developed and more readily accessible. More broadly, this dissertation suggests that Chaucer’s literary prose provides both the Middle Ages and later eras powerful methods for reclaiming reason as an intellectual engine, for understanding the power of language to shape personal choice, and for reestablishing a personal agency necessary for the creation of a productive life.

The process of recursive analysis is foundational to this act of reclaiming reason. As Chaucer deploys it in the *Retraction*, recursion is a process of analysis that invokes the process as part of its operations. For example, when Chaucer assesses both his work and his reading of that work, he follows the method of examination detailed in the *Boece*, as I demonstrate in Chapter One. Part of this method requires that he analyze his own assessment by contextualizing it within a larger framework of the homiletic statement that “all that is written is written for our doctrine,” which is a fundamental epistemological assumption arising from the view of Providence espoused in the *Boece*: all that is written, like all that happens, in one way or another serves the highest good. Similarly, through his use of conditionals at the beginning of the *Retraction*, Chaucer instigates his reader’s own recursive assessment by asking him to consider to what extent those conditions apply. In order to determine the answer, the reader must call upon the methods that Chaucer offers in his prose works. These include a recognition of the fractional nature of knowledge and communication (from the *Astrolabe*), a process of gathering and analyzing quality information (from the *Melibee*), and a method of developing productive, rational habits of assessment and action (from the *Parson*).

To be clear, the process of recursion is distinct from that of self-reflection. From the invention of the Seven Deadly Sins onward, self-reflection is a process of recalling and cataloging individual events as either problematic (the main focus) or beneficial; recursiveness is
a method for analyzing those events or behaviors as part of a process for self-improvement. Recursion can thus be seen as a systematic way of analyzing what is revealed by self-reflection. Examples from the prose exemplify this idea. Boethius reassesses his experiences through the recursive mode of analysis offered by Lady Philosophy. The user of the *Astrolabe* must go back and reassess what he thought he knew about the device (and its limits) as Chaucer’s exposition progresses. Melibee has to reassess and reevaluate what he and others did. The Parson’s penitent has to not acknowledge the events of sin but their interdependence and their pernicious processes if the penitent is to successfully mitigate them. Finally, Chaucer reassesses a prior response to his own work in the *Retraction*.

My approach to this study combines elements of New Formalism and Reader Response Theory. More precisely, I engage in a New Formalist reading inflected by Aristotelian notions of form and by insights gleaned from textual criticism (codicology and paleography) and source study. Within Reader Response Theory, I follow Hans Robert Jauss, one of the foundational reader-response critics, who views literature as a dialectical process of production and reception. It is this idea of a dialectical exchange between text and reader that not only informs Chaucer’s much earlier consideration of that dynamic in his prose, but in fact inspires his careful inclusion of the act of recursive assessment within those works.

For Chaucer, the individual derives his own authority and thus his responsibility by engaging in a process through which he can gain an increasingly competent (though always incomplete) understanding of language and knowledge. This precondition is necessary for effective decision making, for “right deeming.” Such a process requires persistence both in its development and its execution as the individual refines his techniques through experience. The central role of language in such a process has been a focus of much modern criticism. In
“Chaucer and the Nominalist Questions,” for example, Russell Peck explains that the need for this type of programmatic engagement is as necessary for audiences today as it was during the Middle Ages: “Man seems to have an almost infinite capacity for confusing himself, for tying himself up in dilemmas which are often little more than verbal tricks which the mind plays on itself.” To offer methods of engagement with this persistent issue, Chaucer chooses prose, a medium which allows him to develop such processes more clearly than would verse. In “Chaucer’s Prose Rhythms,” Margaret Schlaugh writes that the choice of prose and the cadence of the different prose works are suited to their particular audiences, and Carol Lipson, writing about the Treatise on the Astrolabe, contends that the prose matches the subject matter of the individual compositions. Given Chaucer’s professional activities and the circle wherein he acts, it seems almost self-evident that his audience of such peers would have a vital interest in “right deeming” and thus in its necessary pre-condition of “right understanding” so that the counsel he and his peers proffer is as sound as possible. The Astrolabe, while nominally addressed to his young son, represents a similar (and vexing) challenge to those peers, insofar as the astrological data derived from that technology shaped decisions in a variety of domains. Of course, Chaucer’s audience of peers was not static. As Paul Strohm has shown, the membership within the group of these peers “was in constant flux and that [this group] played a variable role in [Chaucer’s] life.” “Reclaiming Reason” adds to this discussion through its examination of the form of prose and argues that this particular form has distinct advantages over verse: clarity of expression, familiarity of structure, and the capacity for expansive discourse, to name a few. The argument that this dissertation develops throughout is that Chaucer exploits the potential of these advantages to maximize his audience’s accessibility to, as well as their utility of, the methods of engagement that he exemplifies in the prose.
The idea of matching subject with style is offered explicitly either by Chaucer or by one of his characters in the prologues to all of the prose works, save the *Boece* where it is an implicit theme of the entire work. The Prologue to the *Tale of Melibee* provides an example. When the Host defines the verse of *The Tale of Sir Thopas* as “nat worth a toord” (VII.930), he invites the Chaucer-pilgrim (henceforth “Chaucer”) to “telle in prose somewhat, at the leeste, / In which ther be som murthe or som doctryne” (934-35). Priming his audience to receive a “moral tale vertuous” (940), “Chaucer” explains that while the story is familiar and the sentence the same, the way he tells his “litel thyng in prose” will be different (937). In calling his audience’s attention to this change, the narrator implies that prose is the necessary medium for this tale because telling the *Tale of Melibee* in verse would obscure its meaning in “drasty speche.” Similarly, in the Parson’s Prologue, the Parson flatly refuses to attempt anything in verse—“I kan nat geeste ‘rum, ram, ruf, by lettre, / Ne, God woot, rym holde I but litel better” (X.43-44). While he initially suggests that he must choose prose because of his lack of poetic skill, he also refuses to “tellen fables and swich wrecchednesse” (34) because he would miss the opportunity to provide true nourishment: “Why sholde I sowen draf out of my fest, / What I may sowen whete, if that me lest?” (35-36). He decides instead to sow the wheat of “Moralitee and vertuous mateere” (38) in his “myrie tale in prose” (46). In each of these explanations, Chaucer not only draws attention to the choice of prose, but focuses on the reasons that this style is necessary: the *Melibee* narrator does not have the ability to set forth his sentence in verse; the Parson does not want to pass up the opportunity to sow wheat. Along with according subject and style, these examples illustrate two further considerations: the matching of the form to the speaker (*Melibee*) and to the audience (Parson).
Chaucer’s employment of prose in his *Treatise on the Astrolabe* and his *Boece* accords with the Canterbury examples, though his reasoning is not equally clear in both cases. In the *Astrolabe*’s Prologue, Chaucer explains, *in propria persona*, that he composes this work “under full light rules and naked words in English” (26-27) because the primary audience for this piece, his son Lewis, cannot read the Latin treatises. Due to Lewis’ age and level of skill, Chaucer justifies to a larger secondary audience his choice to include what he calls the unsophisticated and superfluous quality of his composition: “The first cause is for that curious endityng and hard sentence is ful hevy at onys for such a child to lerne. And the secunde cause is this, that sothly me semith better to written unto a child twyes a god sentence, than he forgete it onys” (44-49). In other words, Chaucer wants to make clear and understandable (to the degree possible) the astrology of the *Astrolabe*, and the choice of prose enables him to achieve that outcome. Chaucer’s decision in the *Boece* is not as obvious. As is well-known, Boethius composed his *Consolation* in metre-prose form, but Chaucer’s work is entirely prose. One theory is that he translated the metred passages into prose because he was simply following his sources, as Szilvia Malaczkov suggests. Others, such as A.J. Minnis and Tim Machan, explain that the issue is more complicated because Chaucer uses four sources for his *Boece*: “the Vulgate *Consolatio*, Jean’s translation, and the material from Treves and a Remigian commentary.” According to Minnis and Machan, the text that Chaucer creates from these sources is unique: “In the Middle Ages (and beyond), to translate is to interpret, and to this extent Chaucer was, in a sense, the author of both a translation and the ‘composite source’ thereof.” While Chaucer does not explain his reasoning as he does in the other works, I submit that his decision to maintain prose throughout the *Boece* results from a similar consideration that inspires his choice in the other works: that through prose, he can present his audience with a comprehensive method.
of reading that examines information on, within, and outside of the page. Just as he decides to include excessive explanation “under full light reules and naked words in English” for the benefit of the Astrolabe’s audience (Prologue 26-27), so in the Boece he chooses prose to maximize the clarity of its sentence. This choice is reflective of Philosophy’s immediate banishment of the Muses (I.p1.68-73) and subsequent question, in prose, if Boethius understands what she has said in verse (I.p4.1-6). In both instances, Philosophy resorts to prose in order to communicate more effectively. But prose, too, can be complicated. As Boethius explains to Philosophy, “al be it so that I see now from afer what thou purposist, algates I desire yit to herknen it of the more pleynly” (III.p12.18-21). In other words, Boethius understands the sense, but in order to draw the meaning in, he needs plain words.

The idea of “plain words,” of what it means to communicate plainly, clearly interested Chaucer, but this idea is far more complex than the “plain” qualifier suggests. Indeed, Chaucer makes twenty-eight references to pleyn speche throughout his work, the instances of which draw attention to the diverse potential of the claim to such speech. From the Man of Law’s assurance that he does not, at least in this instance, embellish (“for to speke al playn” (CT II.219)) to Boethius’ request that Philosophy communicate more directly (“I desire to herkne it more pleynly of the” (Boece IV p2 96)) to the Parson’s instruction that a person confess a sin “pleynly with alle circumstaunces” (CT X.976), the importance of pleyn speche as a rhetorical form is obvious. Communication that is “plain” claims to be more apparent, more complete, and thus more effective, although that isn’t always the case. Unfortunately, “plain” does not unify signified and signifier perfectly; at best, it only moves closer to such a union. Further, the utility of such assertions can be deceptive: for the Man of Law, it establishes ethos; for Chaucer’s Boethius, “plain words” more readily reveal truth; for the Parson, it wards against self-deception.
Though Boethius and the Parson both communicate concern about access to truth through language, the Man of Law, like many of Chaucer’s characters, frames his speech as plain to constrict the response of his audience. He expects that they will accept the validity of his argument because of the proclaimed “completeness” of his speech. Similarly, Troilus’ Pandarus declares that his words are truthful—“so pleynly for to seyne” (TC II.1126)—because they speak the “full” meaning, and the Legend of Good Women’s God of Love contends that there is no need to “glose” the “pleyn text” (F 328). By providing examples both of honest attempts to communicate clearly and of deceptive efforts to create the appearance of clarity, Chaucer demonstrates that “plain speech” requires the same investment in its consideration as do other modes of communication. Though similar to Wyclif in his interest in the relationship between words and deeds, Chaucer’s particular concern is with the text as an independent object that requires a consideration of all that is contained within it.

To create “plain” communication with words alone, Chaucer employs doublets and metaphors. While the assertions of his characters rely on the supposition that plain speech is “whole” and thus requires no analysis, the fact that Chaucer supplements many of the “plain” iterations with doublets belies the notion of perfection. In fact, Chaucer’s use of these doublets demonstrates his persistent concern about the potential for language both to beguile and to advance understanding: “short and playn” (GP 790, KnT 1091, CIT 577, SNT 360); “plat and pleyn” (MLT 886); “openly and pleyn” (SqT 151); “al open and pleyn” (SNT 284); “ful plat and ek ful pleyn” (MkT 2757); “bare and pleyn” (FranT 720). Of course, even communication that is “full clear and also full plain” fails to convey the full sense of the idea for the simple reason that language is inexact. The prose works are not exempt from this limitation. That Chaucer also utilizes metaphor in these texts attests to an ultimate need for supplementary linguistic tools,
though such use does not diminish his attempt at plain speech, as the contemporaneous Lollard practice makes clear. According to Rebecca Wilson Lundin, the Lollards’ “plain discourse indicated neither the absence of figurative language nor a lack of rhetorical nuance in meaning. Rather, Lollards used the idea of plainness to signify their theological and rhetorical dissociation from medieval scholasticism and thus from orthodoxy.” While Chaucer’s concern was not to distinguish his writings from the authority of the Church (he was, after all, writing for a secular audience), he shares with the Lollards an interest in making knowledge accessible to the individual members of his audience. In his prose, he calls attention to the limitations of language and then writes in such a way as to cause his readers to experience the near-hits and the near-misses that such limitations inevitably create. Of course, the use of doublets in translations into English is not unique to Chaucer. The pairings offered two different linguistic registers—one from Anglo-Saxon, the other from Norman French—and were, as Karla Taylor notes, “self-glossing.” The point is not that Chaucer’s use of doublets is particular to him; rather, he utilizes this structure to highlight the fact that even “plain speech” isn’t plain. The experience of the lack of a concrete explanation can then contribute to the reader’s craft of wise judgment that Chaucer offers through these writings. As R.F. Yeager writes, “Reading Chaucer is to read about reading.” Though I largely agree with this sentiment, I argue that to read Chaucer is to learn how to read.

As part of my study, I consider the various material representations of these works in the manuscripts and what these representations do for the reader. I thus endeavor to understand, to borrow from William Kuskin, “the historical reasons for any one construction” of the texts. For Kuskin, such understanding results from an acknowledgement of both the material and the intellectual constructions of a text, a point which underscores the collaboration between author,
scribe, and reader. My investigations of the manuscripts of Chaucer’s *Treatise on the Astrolabe* in Chapter Two read the resonances between the text and the accompanying diagrams of the astrolabe as an opportunity for the reader to gain both experience and knowledge. In this particular work, words alone—even plain words—are insufficient. Indeed, the illustrations of the various components of the astrolabe serve to expose the intricacies of the device in much the same way as the words, Chaucer’s “naked wordes in Enlissh,” attempt to address the limits of language, textual authority, and ultimately, of knowledge itself. My examinations of the manuscripts which contain the *Melibee* and the *Parson* outside of their Canterbury frame have yielded similar results. I found comparable relationships between the texts, their physical positioning on the page, and Chaucer’s different purposes in each composition. Inclusions of the *Melibee* in other compendia, for example, highlight the benefits of Prudence’s counsel both to Melibee and to the reader, while the *Parson’s* position within a manuscript that is largely devoted to works about active and contemplative lives testifies to the recognized benefit of the *Parson’s Tale* to religious and lay audiences alike. Throughout, the methodology I used in my examinations of these manuscripts includes a review of textual criticism, a consideration of the work’s placement in each manuscript, the physical attributes of the piece, and the correlation, if any, between text and image. I am, therefore, less interested in theme, i.e. Chaucer’s sexuality or his polity, subjects that have dominated Chaucer studies since the 1980s, than in genre and literary form, which I believe is both a fundamental organizing principle and a foundational charge of literary studies. Through my analysis of Chaucer’s deliberate attempts to create an affinity between *pleyn speche* and knowledge, the textual relation between poetry and prose, and the textual positioning of the prose works in the manuscripts, I hope to begin a discussion not only of the importance of Chaucer’s prose, but also of the power he attributes to wise judgment.
I offer my analysis in four chapters. Chapter 1, “Returning to the Path of Reason: the Value of Recursive Assessment in the Boece and Retraction,” explores the recursive dynamic between Chaucer’s final work, the Retraction, and the only work for which he expresses gratitude in that composition, the Boece. The Boece is a dialectic about the benefits of reason, the perils of emotion, and the programmatic system which leads the engaged participant to a position from which he can “deem rightly”; as such, this work serves as Chaucer’s introduction to the potential for literature to effect change in daily life. In recognizing the Retraction’s connection to the Boece, I argue that this final work is a sincere piece of prose that invites the very evaluative processes that Chaucer learned through his translation of the Boece and then illustrates in his Treatise on the Astrolabe, the Melibee, and the Parson’s Tale. There are thus two concurrent yet independent driving forces in the Retraction. The first is Chaucer’s own assessment of his process of reading: as the writer, can he recognize the profit of his work? The second is the prompting of the reader, guided by Chaucer, to judge his or her own methods of reading and interpretation. These recursive analyses provoke an effort to contextualize the information in order to understand rightly—Chaucer’s within the Boethian vision and the reader’s within Chaucerian doctrine.

One of the lasting debates in the scholarship of the Retraction concerns its earnestness. James Dean, Ian Johnson, and John S. P. Tatlock believe it to be genuine attempt to retract the bulk of Chaucer’s work; Olive Sayce argues that it draws on conventional exculpatory motifs; A. P. Campbell suggests that the work is a heartfelt response from Chaucer the pilgrim. Chapter 1 seeks to extend this debate by suggesting that the dual purposes of the Retraction inform a new perspective about what Chaucer intends this final work to accomplish. By referring back to the Boece in the Retraction, Chaucer calls attention to the connection between his own act of internal
assessment—in determining the relationship between his intentions in writing and what he actually produced—and that in which Boethius engages through his dialogue with Philosophy. Through this connection, Chaucer invites the reader to reflect upon her understanding of his writings, to perform her own act of recursive analysis to discover which of her interpretations remain valid and which require modification. This process underscores the limitations of language and knowledge by suggesting that recursiveness is a necessary component of individual understanding precisely because those limits deny the possibility of perfect knowing but allow better knowing through such recursive analysis that refines such knowing.

In Chapter 2, “Learning to Know: Approaching the Universe through Chaucer’s Astrolabe,” I turn to Chaucer’s most difficult prose text, the scientific Treatise on the Astrolabe. Manuscript evidence suggests that Chaucer uses the astrolabe simultaneously to signify the impossibility of achieving complete understanding and to show that the approach to knowledge—like the degrees on the physical device—can be incrementally enhanced. Further, Chaucer’s illumination of imperfect and incomplete knowledge speaks directly to issues of the textual representations and reproductions of information. The fact that early reproductions of the Astrolabe include diagrams to help guide the reader between the text and the device signals Chaucer’s awareness of the need to supplement the text with more visual, physical representations of what was more imperfectly represented in words. Further, he calls attention to the deficiencies in his own text, highlights the benefit of critical engagement, and models methods of using the idea of inherent partiality to form credible (though incomplete) conclusions. While the Astrolabe has received surprisingly little attention, with those scholars who do address it typically dismissing it as a teaching text, Andrew Cole has recently suggested that the Prologue is of much greater importance than was previously thought: contending that it
is central to an understanding of Chaucer’s perception of vernacularity and its politics, he argues that this work is “an important indicator of Chaucer’s sense of literary authority.” I read the Prologue as a powerful attempt by Chaucer to inspire authority in his audience rather than to assert his own. The images in Parts One and Two of the *Astrolabe* corroborate this idea, for evidence from the early manuscripts suggests that the images were integral to understanding the descriptions of the various plates of the astrolabe, as well as the different functions of each section of the device. By intentionally using “naked words” when translating his sources into English, Chaucer makes scientific information both available and accessible to an audience outside of the control of the established “authorities” (i.e., the Church and the Academy). His concern in the *Astrolabe* is not to compose a definitive, scientific treatise in the vernacular; rather, he puts forward the idea that, in the fractured sublunar sphere, a deliberative method of acquiring knowledge leads to an understanding that is less imperfect and more personal. The work’s main accomplishment is that it models the critical evaluation of information and experts through practice, understanding, and experience.

Chapter 3, “Chaucer’s Dialectic of Expectation: *Thopas*, *Melibee*, and the Benefits of Effective Listening,” suggests that Chaucer connects the *Thopas* and the *Melibee* in order to deal with the problems inherent in unscrutinized expectations from different perspectives. More specifically, it argues that in the relationship between the *Thopas* and the *Melibee*, Chaucer challenges the idea that forms—i.e. types of structure or schema—are the most important factors in determining meaning, and that one’s expectations of form and unthinking reactions based upon those expectations limit the individual’s ability to judge rightly the information communicated by and through those forms. Such limitations are illustrated in three ways: by Harry Bailly’s initial response to Chaucer-pilgrim, by Melibee’s unthinking rejection of
Prudence’s advice because of her gender, and by the reader’s invited reaction to the pilgrim-narrator. For instance, by exposing the issue of expectation in the voice of his Canterbury character, Chaucer creates an opportunity for the reader to reconsider whatever preconceived notions inform his or her understanding of these two tales because they are offered by “Chaucer.” Indeed, the “elvyssh” Thopas/Melibee narrator intends to expose both the reader’s and Bailly’s opening assumptions and to reinforce the idea that the processes of information gathering and decision-making call upon faculties beyond sight (or imagination) (VII.703). Further, the narrator’s unclear identity—he is like an elf; he could be a doll—serves to force the audience into a position from which they must determine the value of the Tale on its own merit and determine truth and application not from the relation between teller and tale or that between teller and reader. Rather, the assessment of the Tale must come from an understanding of the value of the process of wise judgment: gathering counselors, evaluating personal motives, scrutinizing future consequences, and basing decisions on sound information. Melibee’s dismissal of Prudence’s counsel works to the same effect, as he rejects her words based not on their worth but on her womanly form. Once he learns to look beyond her form and the expectations that it has created, Melibee discovers how to participate in a process of wise judgment that benefits him and the community he governs because his objective changes from revenge to peaceful accord with the adversaries. My core argument in this chapter is that, through the Thopas-Melibee association, Chaucer presents his audience with examples of the limitations that result from misleading assumptions that impact their capacity to understand rightly—locally in the Canterbury Tales and more broadly in real-world decision making. I then suggest that Chaucer puts forth a method of engagement that counters these self-imposed restrictions. Offered through Melibee’s Prudence, this method models a conscious and specific
process of reading (of all “forms”) and reasoning that is as necessary to his modern readers as it was for his contemporary audience.

Finally, Chapter 4, “Choosing Destiny: Language, Habits, and the Power of Knowing in the Parson’s Tale,” reads the Parson’s Tale as a text that foregrounds individual agency and downplays institutional means to salvation. Though these tenets may suggest an accordance with Lollard beliefs, the Parson’s focus on auricular confession to an extent distances him from that potential, as Katherine Little has pointed out. Other scholars brush this tale aside as either a sermon about penitence or as conforming to the standards of a penitential manual. I argue that the Parson’s Tale has a far wider scope; indeed, there are far more fundamental and more significant implications for both the reader of this particular tale and for those who engage with the other tales of the Canterbury collection, implications that address issues of language, rhetoric, and habits of thoughtful decision-making. For the Parson, the deceptive use of words leads ultimately to self-deception and damnation. Words that are cousin to the deed and plainly spoken, on the other hand, can result in the speaker’s emancipation from the mental and spiritual stagnation that habitual sin creates. Though the issues raised by the Parson do form a sermon, that “lesson” is complex and applicable to both an examination one’s own life and to an examination of how others live theirs to the same end. From the knowledge gained through such an examination, the individual can reframe those habits of mind and action that result first in more effective choices within this fallen world and, through those choices, in the achievement of personal salvation. This promotion of the correct use of words, and the resulting ability to consider the word choice of others, shapes the Parson’s initial call for judgment as he begins his tale: “‘Stondeth upon the weyes, and seeth and axeth of olde pathes (that is to seyn, of olde sentences) which is the goode wey, / and walketh in that wey, and ye shal fynde refresshynge for
This interrogatory process—stand on the existing paths, observe, and interrogate the former doctrine in order to find the “good” within those teachings—is individual and perspectival, and it requires the seeker to make a thoughtful judgment. Ultimately, I suggest that Chaucer’s consideration of the disconnected natures of knowledge, language, and the self in this work promote the audience’s own process of engagement with the world and their own understanding of themselves in order to develop productive habits and to choose who and where they want to be.

“Reclaiming Reason” contends that Chaucer’s prose works are relevant today. He wrote these works to provide a context—a providential frame, to borrow from Boethius—through which readers could discriminate between reliable and misleading information. We live in a world that is increasingly crafted by mediated exchanges: print and aural media, television, celluloid, and the Internet contribute to an inundation of news and narrative. While the ubiquity of these various, powerful, and cooperant forces within our society is often recognized, solutions to the problems raised by such mediated communications remain scarce. The models that Chaucer offers in his prose works, the application of which enables wise judgment and then judicious responses to information that is crafted with sophistication and intent, are as fundamental for decision-making today as they were during the Middle Ages. The prose works are didactic to be sure, but following Chaucer, all writing is instructional; the focus of this dissertation, therefore, is on how this instruction can impact our understanding of the world. Chaucer and his contemporary audience lived neither in the Golden nor the Dark Ages: his world, and the potential productivity of humans in that world, was constrained both by the inherent problems of language, as well as by the guilors who understood how to manipulate those problems to their own ends. What Chaucer gave his contemporary audience, and what he
gives his readers today, is a method of applying the philosophical ideals, found in his *Boece*, of right understanding and wise judgment by flawed individuals in an imperfect world. Of course, much more work needs to be done on the prose texts, both in and of themselves and in relation to their sources. While “Reclaiming Reason” considers these issues in part, its main objectives are to consider the processes of wise judgment that Chaucer offers in the prose, the ways in which he reveals these methods, and the benefits of such methods to the reader.

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1 John M. Mundy (*Europe in the High Middle Ages*) and Jeffrey Burton Russell (*Dissent and Order in the Middle Ages*) both provide useful discussions of this struggle over the magisterium.


8 Unless otherwise noted, this an all other references to Chaucer’s works are derived from the third edition of the Riverside Chaucer, 3rd ed, Ed. Larry Benson, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987.

9 Though Chaucer proclaims “Lyte Lowys” to be the primary audience for the Astrolabe, he indicates an expected larger audience. See Chapter Two for a fuller exploration of this potential.

10 I use “astrology” here in the medieval sense of astrologia, a study which incorporated both astrology and astronomy.


13 Minnis and Machan, 181.

14 “For in pleyn text, withouten nede of glose” (328). The G-text is similar: “For in pleyn text, it nedeth nat to glose” (254). Alceste chides the God of Love for this arrogance.


21 Lee Patterson rightly suggests that the Host’s reaction “implies unrecognizability” (“What Man Artow?” 117).

Chapter One

Returning to the Path of Reason: the Value of Recursive Assessment in the Boece and the Retraction

The twelve lines of the Retraction’s prose comprising Chaucer’s ostensible final work are as pregnant as they are deceptively simplistic. Though he seems to suggest that he is retracting the bulk of his work, the list he provides is less a definitive collection and more an expressed potential:

preye for me that Crist have mercy on me and foryeve me my giltes; / and namely of my translacions and enditynges of worldly vanitees, the whiche I revoke in my retracciouns:/ as is the book of Troilus; the book also of Fame; the book of the XXV. Ladies; the book of the Duchesse; the book of Seint Valentynes day of the Parlement of Briddes; the tales of Caunterbury, thilke that sownen into synne;/ the book of the Leoun; and many another book, if they were in my remembrance, and many a song and many a lecherous lay. (X.1084-87)

While refusing to tell us which of his works might be understood as writings about worldly vanities, Chaucer leaves the final judgment to those readers “that herkne this litel tretys or rede.” While refusing to express his interpretation of these possible “vanitees” openly, Chaucer asserts value of only one specific work and some general types of work: “But of the translacion of Boece de Consolatione, and othere bookes of legends of seintes, and omelies, and moralitee, and devocioun,/ that thanke I oure Lord Jhesu Crist and his blissful Mooer, and alle the seintes
of hevene” (1088-89). That he calls attention to the benefit of his Boece in the Retraction signals a connection between the process required in the act of retraction—recursive analysis (i.e., a specific method of analysis that can be applied to its own result)—and the work that provides a method for such examination—the Boece.

The practice of recursive analysis requires that the individual follow a particular process of evaluation in order to assess a specific issue; the result of that assessment is then incorporated into the reader’s future analyses of the issue. For example, when Boethius assents to Philosophy’s process of analyzing both false and real goods in Book III, Philosophy challenges him to utilize that process to affirm the qualities of the Good. If Boethius accepts that “alle thing that is good…[is] good by the participacioun of good” (III.p11.40-42), then he must grant “by semblable resoun that oon and good be o same thing” (44-46, my emphasis). The reason to which Philosophy refers in this statement is the method of rational analysis that she uses throughout the text; here, that method becomes recursive because she highlights the need to employ this identical process of reasoning in order to reaffirm two propositions (God is found in goodness; humanity can participate in that Good) and to establish a third (that unity and goodness are the same). In other words, the process of recursive analysis encourages a habit of evaluation and modification of one’s interpretations of and responses to the world in order to better that individual’s understanding—in the Boece, Boethius comes to understand the Good and reforges his responses to his situation in light of that knowledge. Boece’s influence on the Retraction is, in fact, extensive and exemplifies this act of recursive assessment. As such, its study can shed light on what Chaucer intends his Retraction to accomplish.

The Boece, Boethius’ Consolation of Philosophy, is a work about developing the skill to judge wisely, to use reason and rational analysis in order to make well-informed, profitable
choices. Boethius wrote the *Consolation* while awaiting execution in Pavia, and it is thus the product of his own struggle to overcome his emotional paralysis and to regain the strength of reason. This narrative journey begins as Boethius, lamenting the loss of his good fortune, fails to recognize his teacher, Philosophy: as he explains, “And I, of whom the sighte, ploungid in teeres, was dirked so that Y ne myghte noght known what that woman was of so imperial auctorite, I wax al abayssched and astoned, and caste my syghte doun to the erthe” (I.p1.77-82).2 The depth of Boethius’ feeling of blind impotence is immediately reframed by Philosophy as the consequences of his choice to be led astray from reason by the force of his own emotion: “Allas! How the thought of this man, dreynt in overthrowynge depnesse, dulleth and forleteth his proper clernesse, myntyng to gon into foreyne dirknesses as ofte as his anoyos bysynes waxeth without mesure, that is dryven with werldly wyndes” (I.m2.1-6). Put another way, in choosing to permit the Muses to “endit[e] wordes to [his] wepynges” (I.p1.44-45), Boethius likewise chooses to surrender his powers of analysis.

Through their dialectical exchange, Philosophy comes to understand that Boethius’ problem stems from his inability to recognize the interrelated conditions of his situation, an issue which itself results from the fact that his emotions have overridden his reason. The consequence, she explains, is that Boethius has forgotten who he is. More troubling for Philosophy is her assessment that Boethius does not know *what* he is: “‘Now woot I,’ quod sche, ‘other cause of thi maladye, and that right greet: thow hast left for to known thyselfe what thou art’” (I.p6.68-70). Once he remembers that he is a rational being in a world of Fortune, that Fortune presents myriad opportunities not only for personal edification but also for the exercise of rational analysis, and that Providence ultimately turns everything to Good, Boethius can see that he has power only over himself. Simply put, his reactions, judgments, interpretations, and choices are
within his control; the way that society creates or destroys his reputation, the beliefs and actions of others, the wickedness of those in authority, and indeed everything external to him is outside the scope of that control. Once Boethius “remembers” who and what he is, once he understands the context of his situation, he can reclaim his sight and understand how to exert his power to create true, lasting happiness.

What the *Consolation* offers, both to Boethius and to his reader, is a rational, analytic process that includes several variables: self-analysis, an understanding of what is within one’s power to control, a consideration of the “eende of thynges” or the context of the information, and deliberation about how the knowledge gained from such analysis can benefit the individual. I call this process wise judgment. An essential part of this practice is recursion: with Boethius, it is the modification of his confusion through a return to a rational understanding by performing the analytic process that Philosophy helps him remember. It is in this vein that I argue Chaucer’s *Retraction* utilizes the *Boece*. As his final work, the *Retraction* offers an occasion wherein both he and his reader can engage in this method in order to judge the value of his work and its utility; through this opportunity, Chaucer creates a link between recursive analysis, authorship, and readership. The extension of this idea is that the *Boece* and the *Retraction* suggest both that the processes of reading and reflection are recursive and that such recursiveness is a necessary component of the ability to judge wisely and use information well.

Chaucer indicates his belief in the importance of this system through his choice to translate this work into prose. Though I discussed this point briefly in the Introduction, a larger consideration here will illuminate the Chaucer’s concern to make this information available to his audience. Ralph Hanna III and Traugott Lawler’s work on the *Boece* helps to make this point. In their interpretation of the fact that Philosophy banishes the Muses and yet intersperses
poetry throughout the text, Hanna and Lawler conclude that “presumably what has been chased away is only meretricious poetry that focuses on partial goods, for poetry is embedded deeply in the fabric of the work.” Their suggestion, of course, speaks to the difference between ornamentation and substance, partiality and completeness (considerations which will be fully developed in the following chapters). If poetry is indeed “embedded deeply in the fabric of the work,” and I believe that it is, then what Hanna and Lawler are implying is that poetry is defined by what it is able to achieve instead of by a quality of ornamentation. Chaucer’s choice to compose the Boece’s original prosimetrum style entirely in prose, then, does not necessarily make his composition less poetic, but rather allows him to bring to English readers the well-known and philosophically important Boethian text by broadening its accessibility through the simplification of its form and the inclusion of glosses.

I offer my argument in four phases. To understand more specifically how the Boece shapes the Retraction, I begin with an examination of the Boethian themes that translate most apparently to Chaucer’s final work. These themes, I suggest, shape Chaucer’s personal assessment and inspire his reader’s own recursive moment. Next, I consider the significance of the Retraction’s placement at the end of the Parson’s Tale with respect to the processes of reflection and wise judgment developed in the Boece. As part of this section, I discuss the current critical responses to the Retraction and the four analogues to the “authorial humility” topos that Chaucer employs in the first two lines of the Retraction—Jean de Meun’s Le Testament, John Bromyard’s Summa Praedicantium, Don Juan Manuel’s El Conde Lucanor, and Giovanni Boccaccio’s Genealogia Deorum Gentilium. I then trace Chaucer’s use of the methods of recursive analysis as he employs them to analyze his oeuvre. Finally, I assay the analytical process that Chaucer instigates in the Retraction to discover what benefits the reader might gain
through this exercise. I focus in this final section primarily on the methods of developing rational habits of analysis and judgment that he offers in his prose because it is in these works that he most plainly reveals the means to gather and assess data. In recognizing the connection between his first prose work and his last, I argue that Chaucer reveals the importance of the *Consolation* not only to his work but also to his life; in offering this benefit to his reader, he simultaneously creates an opportunity to practice wise judgment, while suggesting that the benefit of knowledge is found in its actuation through such wise judgment.

The guiding principle behind Boethius’ vision of the universe is that the world is ordered and governed by reason, and as such, it is approachable through analysis. Indeed, the *Consolation* itself represents Boethius’ own analytic modification of his emotional response to his imprisonment as he works to regain a rational, objective understanding. For Philosophy, Boethius’ initial inability to reconcile the seeming inequity between his self-imposed impotence and the power of those who wittingly distorted the facts to sabotage him signifies the degree to which he focuses on earthly, emotionally-driven concerns. The core problem with such a focus on the immediate situation is that it limits one’s ability to gather and consider any information that resides outside of such particular circumstances. In other words, Boethius looks only to the immediate result of his imprisonment; his inability to balance what he sees (his own confusion) in relation to what he knows (all things are governed by reason) causes distress. This result is particular to the earth-bound gaze: as Philosophy explains, “whatsoevere thou mayst seen that is doon in this world unhopid or unwened, certes it es the ryghte ordre of thinges, but as to thi wikkid opynioun it is confusioun” (IV.p6.234-37). Boethius’ confusion, and by extension humanity’s, is therefore the product of his own misunderstanding: because the universe is ordered, there is a reason for everything that happens. Emotions, then, serve to restrict man’s
ability to comprehend the eternal, providential order of the world, to increase his perplexity, and to create needless suffering. The potential of this theory is that if all men naturally tend toward the Good but are, to varying degrees, misled by their own unique incapacities to understand the Good in any particular moment, both the fault of understanding and the faculty to reclaim that knowledge reside, at the same time, in each individual. These two themes—man creates his own confusion; man has the capacity to regain his rational mind through habits of wise judgment—are central to Boethius’ personal consolation.

In assigning his confusion to “wikkid opynioun,” Philosophy stresses that Boethius’ bewilderment results from his constricted perspective. Initially, he is unable either to assess his situation rationally or to contextualize Fortune properly, and worse, his emotional state then encourages the habituation of such irrationality. Understandably, the incongruity between what he intended to do (protect the Roman Senate from an unreliable charge of treason) and how this action was purposefully twisted to charge him with treason baffles him. For Boethius, this unjust and unmerited action against him is exacerbated by the fact that he is being judged based on the immediate, perceivable result, rather than on knowledge of a reasonable, if not total, understanding of its surrounding circumstances. He explains that rash conclusions result from “the gessynge and the jugement of moche folk ne loken nothing to the desertes of thynges, but oonly to the aventure of fortune; and jugen that oonly swiche thynges ben purveied of God, whiche that temporel welefulnesse commendeth” (I.p4.282-88). Chaucer’s gloss of this passage indicates the destructiveness of such “guessing”: “As thus: that yif a wyght have prosperite, he is a good man and worthy to han that prosperite; and whoso hath adversite, he is a wikkid man, and God hath forsake hym, and he is worthy to han that adversite. This is the opinyoun of some folk” (288-96). According to Hanna and Lawler, this gloss is “Largely Chaucer’s paraphrase
joining material on adversity from Trivet...and material on prosperity from [Jean de Meun].

Through this gloss and its two sources, Chaucer increases the reader’s access to Boethius’ philosophy. As both the philosopher and Chaucer explain, for the majority, Boethius’ guilt rests solely on the fact that he is imprisoned: he has experienced adversity, has been forsaken by God, and is therefore a wicked individual and deserving of punishment—or so the reasoning goes. The fallacy in such “good gessynge” stems from its assumption that there is a direct correlation between an individual’s virtue and his circumstances; because the long-term outcome of the situation is not readily apparent, any attempt at an immediate, concrete judgment is problematic, particularly if that conclusion is predetermined by the acceptance of such faulty logic.

Though Boethius’ capacity to understand and participate in the Good ultimately permits him to disregard the base evaluations of others, he initially struggles with those opinions. In fact, he laments his wrongful imprisonment not only because of his inability to reconcile his current circumstances with his belief that the universe is divinely arranged, but more so because “moche folk” unthinkingly dismiss his integrity in favor of accepting the easiest conclusion: in an ordered cosmos, for them, Boethius’ misfortune automatically signifies his wickedness. Though his experience of being the subject of such negligent conclusions is reasonably discouraging, it is through this incident that Boethius learns that the opinions of those who “look not to the merit of things, but only to the chance results” have naught to do with him. Indeed, Boethius agrees immediately with Philosophy’s assertion that “high renown,” even if properly situated, has very little intrinsic value. False praise, she explains, is shameful, and true praise cannot benefit its receiver: “yif that folk han geten hem thonk or preysynge by here dissertes, what thing hath thilke pris echid or encresed to the conscience of wise folk, that mesuren hir good, nat by the rumour of the peple, but by the sothfastnesse of conscience?” (III.p6.12-17). In agreeing that the
wise individual disregards the “rumor of the people” in favor of measuring his value by the truth of his conscience, Boethius comes to recognize that anguishing over rumors of his wickedness is as fruitless as basking in glory. Only he knows the veracity of the relationship between his intent and his actions; with this knowledge, he is best equipped to evaluate his situation and discover within those circumstances a profitable, reasoned response.

Even though the governed order of the universe permits exploration and understanding of that universe through rational analysis, misperceptions about the significance of that order nonetheless persist. As the “gessynge and the jugement of moche folk” demonstrates, the acknowledgement of a world governed by reason does not, in itself, automatically illuminate the correct conclusion because one’s understanding is directly dependent upon his own individual capacity to comprehend any particular issue, subject, circumstance, etc. In fact, as Paul LaChance notes, this limitation is compounded by the “absence of moral virtues in the will [which impose] a destructive force on the operation of the mind—at least in so far as the will exercises some control over the intellect.”5 Not only is it fruitless, then, to pay immediate heed to the opinions of the masses or to seek their approval, but any endorsement or condemnation (even if that response is the product of care and deliberation) is useful only to the degree that the individual has himself the faculty to understand and assess the situation with reason. The point that Philosophy offers to Boethius through this discussion is that he is only responsible for the choices that he makes; he is not accountable for the “gessynge and the jugement” of others because they understand his situation not for what it is, but rather through the ways their own individual aptitudes shape it. As Ann Astell points out, “True perception…depends on the recall and the matching of the proper form—a form belonging to the knower, not the object of one’s knowing.”6 Ultimately, “knowing” has more to do with the individual and that individual’s
ability to judge well than it has to do with the subject or the authority conveying the knowledge; the development of a habitual practice of wise judgment, therefore, is tantamount to realizing one’s innate potential as a human being.

Even as Boethius himself claims to be “replenysshid and fulfild with [Philosophy’s] techynges, and enformed of [her] maneris,” he confesses a total lack of understanding of his situation (I.p4.76-77). In fact, his absolute surrender to the seductive power of the Muses clouds his reason as it simultaneously perpetuates his emotional torment. For Philosophy, this perpetuation of irrationality, if unchecked, habituates man to a state of stagnation: the Muses not only ne asswagen noght his sorwes with none remedies, but thei wolden fedyn and noryssen hym with sweete venym. Forsothe thise ben tho that with thornes and prikkynges of talentz or affecciouns, whiche that ne bien nothyng fructigyenge nor profitable, destroyen the corn plentyvous of fuytes of resoun.

For thei holden hertes of men in usage, but thei delyvre noght folk fro maladye.

(I.p1.50-59)

Though the Muses ostensibly comfort Boethius during his difficulty, the fact is that their presence undermines the possibility of fruitful consolation and fosters further distraction. Worse yet is the potential for Boethius to habituate himself to unreasoned and unproductive responses because he is being “nourished with sweet venom.” While emotional reactions are a component of human nature, Philosophy’s concern is that one’s capacity for reason, the faculty through which the individual understands the Divine, can be diminished by the passions if its potential is not properly and consciously exercised. By demonstrating the degree to which even a practiced philosopher can lose sight of reason in the midst of emotional upheaval through the narration of his own confusion, Boethius indicates that the processes of rational deliberation and conscious,
well-considered choice that Philosophy offers are a practice of life that must be exercised and used persistently. As she reminds him, “ful anguysschous thing is the condicioun of mannes goodes; for eyther it cometh nat altogidre to a wyght, or ells it ne last nat perpetuel” (II.p4.75-78). Because the potential for confusion and mistaken interpretations is ever-present, so the attempt to judge wisely and respond productively must be persistent. Philosophy’s return then serves as a reminder both to Boethius and to his reader that adversity is endemic to the human condition, but it is in the way that one chooses to respond to such hardship that determines one’s ability to find the Good.

Though Boethius bemoans the “good gessynge” of the people, he is guessing too when he concludes that Fortune abandoned him. In reality, his struggle is with the fact that he doesn’t deserve to be imprisoned and awaiting execution, but his “guess,” his mistake in judgment, restricts his capacity to recognize the framework of Fortune. By reminding Boethius that the nature of Fortune is change, Philosophy implies that “the same chaungynge from oon into another (that is to seyn, fro adversite into prosperite) maketh that the manaces of Fortune ne ben nat for to dreden, ne the flaterynges of hir to be desired” (II.p1.86-91). Put another way, there is little reason to desire the attention or lament the abandonment of Fortune; both are experiences of the Wheel. As a result of learning that the opinions that others hold of him are irrelevant to his own understanding and that he can resolve his dismay about his current condition by properly contextualizing the role of Fortune and her Wheel, Boethius can better understand how to respond productively to his situation.

As Philosophy explains, because everything happens for a reason, “thane is alle fortune good” (IV.p7.12). If all fortune has a purpose—to reward or discipline, to punish or chastise—then the claim of misfortune precludes an understanding of how an individual can profit from the
experience. Earlier Philosophy had asserted that looking at an immediate outcome and expecting to find significance in that occurrence alone severely limits an individual’s ability to profit from the experience; now she asserts that an inability to understand the potential benefit of all types of fortune suggests an inadequate understanding of the fundamental principle that the universe is governed by reason, and as such, the end of everything is the Good. Within this system, fortune can be said to present each person with opportunities to exercise his capacity to judge any given situation wisely and thus discover that Good.

In this way, Boethius is brought to see that Philosophy’s system of wise judgment requires an acceptance of the idea that understanding is perspectival: he can only dismiss his immediate, emotional reaction by shifting his perspective from a position of confused powerlessness to one of rational empowerment. While he has no control over what is happening to him, he can absolutely control how he responds. As Philosophy explains, “For it is set in your hand (as who seith, it lyth in your power) what fortune yow is levest (that is to seyn, good or yvel)” (IV.p7.101-3). Bluntly put, it lies within each individual’s power to determine his own perception of fortune. Even adverse fortune, then, benefits the individual who can, through a change in perspective, situate himself within the context of Providence and understand that there is profit in all experience. Such capacity to judge, though, is entirely individual: “For every thing that may naturely usen resoun, it hath doom by whiche it discernith and demeth every thing; thanne knoweth it by itself things that ben to fleen and things that ben to desiren” (V.p2.10-15). Because man has the ability to reason, he also has the responsibility to determine, for himself, what to desire and what to avoid (although as Philosophy points out, man just as easily misguides himself in his pursuits as he does in his reactions to fortune).
By remembering the perils of remaining in an emotional haze and then working through the methods of evaluating his reactions and selecting profitable responses, Boethius empowers himself to transform his turmoil into understanding. In other words, his ability to modify his assessment of his situation and transition from confusion to clarity relies on his willful participation in the Good. Siobhan Nash-Marshall’s study of what she calls Boethius’ “doctrine of participation” illuminates this point. She explains that Providence, for Boethius, “is both the formal and the efficient cause of contingent things’ perfection. For (1) God moves all things in the universe through Providence; (2) Providence itself is God’s knowledge; and (3) God’s knowledge is contingent things’ forms.”\(^7\) For man’s part, Boethius offers three main ideas of human ‘good’: “his being ‘sui compos’ (self-sufficient), that is, his possessing himself”; “his participating in the First Good”; and his virtuous behavior, which is its own reward.\(^8\) Nash-Marshall concludes that this “doctrine of participation” is dual: “it claims (1) that things must participate in God in order to acquire their actuality, and (2) that they must participate in His ideas in order to acquire the modality of their actuality: their essences.”\(^9\) Given the view that the universe, in all forms, is governed by reason, man can choose to participate in the Good and thereby create a space for personal enrichment, reasoned awareness, and self-sufficiency. More locally in the *Consolation*, Boethius’ recollection of the Good inspires a renewed appreciation of the purpose of fortune, of wicked men, and of his own current situation.

An essential component of this practice is a return to the self, to self-assessment, and to inborn knowledge. When one understands, according to Philosophy, that everything, at the most basic and fundamental level, desires the Good and that the end of all things is the Good, then one can use that knowledge to contend with uncertainties and to assess the rationality of desires. There is thus in the *Consolation* a sense of the importance of returning to the beginning to
include, in an assessment of the present, a consideration of what knowledge one had in order to understand more fully the knowledge that one has:

_Glosa._ Whoso wol seke the depe ground of soth in his thought, and wil nat ben disseyvid by false proposiciouns that goon amys fro the trouthe, lat hym wel examine and rolle withynne himself the nature and the propretes of the thing; and let hym yet eftsones examinen and rollen his thoughts by good deliberacioun or that he deme, and lat hym techyn his soule that it hath, by naturel principles kyndeliche yhud withynne itself, al the trouthe the whiche he ymagineth to ben in things withoute. And thane al the derknesse of his mysknowynge shall [schewen] more evidently to the sighte of his understondynge than the sonne ne semeth to the sighte withoute forth. (III.m11.13-27)

While this gloss comes from Trivet, the fact that Chaucer includes it in his translation indicates its importance for the reader as it calls attention to the depth of consideration that Philosophy suggests is necessary for the individual to reacquaint himself with the Truth. To know a “thing,” she states, one must “seek the deep ground of truth” as a sturdy foundation from which “false proposiciouns” may be recognized and then “well examine and roll within himself the nature and the properties of the thing.” That is to say, in order to gain an understanding of a subject, the individual ought to engage in a multidimensional study that considers different angles and perspectives. Before he “deems” or judges the matter, moreover, he must examine his own thoughts by “good deliberation” with the knowledge that, innately within him, he already possesses the Truth. It is through this consideration that man has the capacity to clarify the darkness of his own misunderstanding. In seeking the “depe ground of soth,” Boethius returns to the knowledge of the Good; in examining and rolling “his thoughts by good
deliberacioun or that he deme,” he refigures his understanding of his situation and thereby creates his own Good.

Boethius achieves this rational perspective by remembering what he had forgotten: “that good is the fyn of alle things” (III.p11.229-30); that Fortune and her Wheel operate within the bounds of Providence and always present opportunities for learning; that emotions foster impotence and irrationality; that misunderstanding and confusion actually denote man’s individual mistakes in drawing informed conclusions; and that man innately possesses the capacity to rectify those mistakes through deliberation and to learn, or remember, how to judge wisely. A key element of this method is its recursiveness, its demand that one develop the habit of returning to “the deep ground of truth in his thought” in order to reassess his particular perspective and the experiences that led to that viewpoint. To be sure, there is a great deal of self-reflection in this process, but Boethius moves beyond the act of self-reflection by invoking Philosophy’s method of rational analysis as part of his own process of examination. Each instance of remembering listed above results from this process and is then utilized as a component to that method as Boethius continues his progress from a state of confused blindness to one of clear discernment. While Philosophy makes clear that this potential to remember is inherent in man, Boethius’ creation of Philosophy in the Consolation hints at the vast benefits of counsel and the need to consider other points of view. In speaking of those who endeavor to discover the truth, Philosophy states, “Thanne who so that sekith sothnesse, he nis in neyther nother habite, for he not nat al, ne he ne hath nat al foryeten; but yit hym remembreth the somme of things that he withholdeth, and axeth conseile, and retretith deepliche things iseyn byforne (that is to seyn, the grete somme in his mynde) so that he mowe adden the parties that he hath foryeten to thilke that he hath withholden” (V.m3.47-56). The point is clear: he who seeks truth
is neither wholly ignorant nor completely informed, yet he may increase his understanding and decrease his errors in judgment through counsel and deliberation.

Through the dialectical dialogue of the *Consolation*, Boethius uses his reason to assess both his situation and his response to a predicament over which he has no control; through that engagement, he realizes where his power lies and how to exercise his knowledge constructively. The Boethian vision of wise judgment and the enormous personal advantages which result from such engaged assessments are not of singular value to Boethius; indeed, in medieval Christian society (and the Stoic society which preceded it), the benefits were accessible to all. Having a practical knowledge of what lies within one’s power to control, realizing that all experience offers valuable lessons, and remembering, above all, that the universe is governed by the rational order of God are tools of exceptional value to the creation of a productive, self-sufficient life.

Boethius maintains that part of the process of wise judgment is the ability to situate, rationally and individually, one’s responses within the larger system of information which is that vision. It is through such contextualization, I argue, that Chaucer performs an act of self-assessment of his experiences as a writer in the *Retraction*, while asking, at the same time, for his readers to engage in an individual assessment of their experiences of his writing as readers.

Though the importance of the *Boece* to Chaucer’s work is widely understood, the degree to which this early translation informs the *Retraction* has escaped notice. Instead, critics attend to questions about Chaucer’s purpose in writing this final composition. Both James Dean and Jameela Lares, for example, read the *Retraction* as a statement of repentance that the reader is meant to accept with all sincerity, while Larry Scanlon argues that this work serves as a consolidation that “deauthorizes the ‘sinful’ tales [without] necessarily depriv[ing] them of all value.”11 Richard Newhauser and Gregory Roper independently suggest that the *Retraction* is a
literary, confessional response about the act of writing.\textsuperscript{12} Others interpret the \textit{Retraction} as the work of Chaucer the pilgrim: Mary Flowers Braswell contends that this work is an ironic statement; A.P. Campbell suggests that the pilgrim retracts the work of the poet; Peter Travis speculates that this persona is “probably as unreliable and incomplete as any of [Chaucer’s] other fictive creations.”\textsuperscript{13} Though I largely agree with Scanlon, Newhauser, and Roper, I believe that the placement of the \textit{Retraction} at the end of the \textit{Parson’s Tale} is crucial not only to our local understanding of this work but also to a more general, and individual, insight into the utility of knowledge. What I’m arguing, then, is that the \textit{Retraction} offers a glimpse into Chaucer’s understanding of his own work through this moment of reflection, while at the same time attempting to instigate the readers’ assessment of their own understanding of and reactions to that work. This instigation, following close upon the \textit{Parson’s Tale}, connects what the \textit{Retraction} requires—self-assessment—to what the Parson offers—a programmatic method for such an assessment. While Chaucer sets the \textit{Retraction}, in physical position, as the final comment on his work, the Boethian themes which he incorporates create not an ending, but a beginning.

The \textit{Retraction} is situated so closely to the \textit{Parson’s Tale} in the manuscripts, in fact, that their distinction isn’t readily apparent. According to Miceal Vaughan, the limited rubrication that distinguishes the two works results from an editorial choice.\textsuperscript{14} Vaughan’s main contention is that this choice, made first by the scribes and then followed willingly by modern editors, creates a false separation of the two works. Worse, this choice serves to craft an acceptable relationship between the \textit{Parson’s Prologue}, the \textit{Tale}, and the \textit{Retraction} that the text, \textit{sans} rubrication, does not support. He writes,
Though modern editors regularly acknowledge the rubrics’ scribal origin, they nonetheless retain the rubrics to help readers (including themselves) avoid facing the possibility that if the *Retractions* can be assigned to Chaucer *in propria persona*, then the *Parson’s Tale* should also be delivered in his own authorial voice…The choice is clear: either dismiss this entire tale’s assignment to the Parson (and deny it a place in the *Canterbury Tales*), or else find an alternative way to resolve the ambiguous attribution caused by the tale’s prologue and “epilogue,” an alternative that maintains the necessary critical distinction between Parson and poet, fiction and fiction-maker.\(^\text{15}\)

Although Vaughan’s argument serves as a reminder that rush judgments or artificial delineations ultimately limit our ability to comprehend this piece, the rubrics should not force us into the interpretive opposition that Vaughan creates. Indeed, the change of voice within the text which signals the move from the *Parson’s Tale* to the *Retraction* is not anomalous within the Canterbury collection. As Ian Johnson notes, the change in voice from the Parson to Chaucer the poet “was recognized by the Ellesmere scribe, who inserted at this juncture the critically alert comment ‘Heere taketh the makere of this book his level.”’\(^\text{16}\) Given Chaucer’s chastisement of his scribe’s negligence in “Chaucers Wordes unto Adam, His Owne Scriveyn,” I submit the possibility that the rubrical clarification was approved by Chaucer. Even if the rubrication were removed entirely, there is still a clear distinction between the *Parson* and the *Retraction*: the Parson speaks to the pilgrim audience who “list to heere / Moralitee and vertuous mateere,” and Chaucer addresses the *Retraction* to “alle that hernke this litel tretys or rede” (X.1081). This statement alone creates an obvious demarcation between “this little treatise”—i.e. the *Parson’s Tale*—and the *Retraction*. Indeed, Chaucer’s use of this type of linguistic shift to signify a
change in character is not without precedent. The pilgrim-narrator’s interjection at the end of the *Miller’s Prologue* is one example. While modern editions use an end-quote to make clear the moment when the narrator stops repeating the Miller, this designation does not occur in the Ellesmere, and yet, there is no question about who is speaking. At the end of the *Clerk’s Tale*, the scribe distinguishes between the Clerk’s narrative and the textual response to the narratorial depiction of steadfast and patient oath-keeping by labeling the latter “Lenvoy de Chaucer.”

Similar to the shift from the *Parson’s Tale* to the *Retraction*, the “Lenvoy” indicates a change in speaker through a modification of the audience. Instead of speaking to the fellow travelers, “Chaucer” speaks to an extended group that includes “noble wyves” (IV.1183), “archewyves” (1195), and “sklendre wyves” (1198). This change, while made more obvious through the rubrication, is nonetheless apparent. What I am suggesting is that the rubrics clarify the shift in speaker from the Parson to Chaucer and create a clear distinction between these two works in order to set the *Retraction* as a work closely associated with, and yet distinct from, the *Parson’s Tale*.

In figuring the *Retraction* as an extension of the *Parson’s Tale* and the latter’s programmatic method of self-assessment, Chaucer implies that these analytic strategies continue into this final work. This implication prompts the process of recursive analysis because the *Retraction* invokes those very methods that extend into it. The practice that the Parson recommends expands upon the process of repentance. The manner through which one may realize “verray repentance” is predicated on that individual’s ability to self-analyze correctly: the recognition and lamentation of one’s faults; an honest and complete confession that is communicated through plain language; “satisfaction,” or enjoined actions which are intended to inspire the formation of new, productive habits; a steadfast intention to avoid the sinful behavior;
and the continued performance of “good works.” Without investing in the identification of the what, why, when, where, and how of the sin, the potential for change remains unrealizable, while the potential for damnation increases. By endeavoring, truly, to understand the causes which inspired the occasion for and the permission to commit the sin, the individual can consciously participate in his own salvation by purposefully creating new habits of fruitful behavior while evading iniquitous thoughts, speech, and actions. Through the recursive invitation in the Retraction, the reader is encouraged to consider the what, why, when, where, and how which resulted in the initial interpretation and to evaluate, given new information and a different perspective, the value of that initial assessment.

The Parson’s choice to begin his Tale by quoting Jeremiah—“Stondeth upon the weyes, and seeth and axeth of olde pathes (that is to seyn, of olde sentences) which is the goode wey,/ and walketh in that wey, and ye shal fynde refresshynge for youre soules, etc.” (X.77-78)—frames his subsequent discussion of penitence as an action that requires reflection, investigation of the “paths” and “sentences” available, and deliberate choice about the best method of proceeding along one’s individual “way” through life. One of the goals of this system of self-assessment, fundamental to the conscious cultivation of beneficial habits, is to form a practice of engagement with and analysis of all forms of knowledge: given the instabilities of life, the individual who situates himself within different “weyes,” observes and inquires of the authority of “olde pathes” and “olde sentences,” and uses that information to determine the “goode wey” must revisit this process when presented with new information or experiences to ensure that he continues, deliberately, in the ‘good way.’ In other words, this process, like that which Philosophy offers to Boethius, is continuous and meant to buttress the individual and lessen his confusion through its exercise. Even though the Parson focuses on the religious aspect, this
system translates effectively into the secular world: acceptance of personal consequences, understanding the reasons why an action occurred and how to prevent or encourage it, endeavoring to use this knowledge to craft habits of reason, all promote the creation of a productive life. In placing the Retraction at the end of the Parson’s Tale, Chaucer invites both religious and secular readers alike to join in this practice from a point where they can look back, if only to their interpretations of the Parson’s Tale, to assess the effectiveness of their responses.

The Retraction’s placement at the end of the Parson’s Tale, and perhaps that of the Canterbury collection, distinguishes it from the majority of its literary topoi analogues. As Anita Obermeier points out, these analogues tend to situate such information in the prologues to their companion pieces, instead of in their epilogues. For example, Jean de Meun writes in Le Testament,

Et s’il y a nuls biens, en la glorie Dieu aille,
Et au salut de m’amé et as escoutans vaille;
Et de mal, s’il y est, leur pri qu’il ne leur chaille,
Mais retiengnent le grain et soufflent hors la paille.

“And if there is any good, may it go to the glory of God, and to the salvation of my soul and may it be of worth to those who are listening, and of the evil, if it is there, I beg them not to be concerned but to retain the wheat and throw out the chaff.”

Another analogue comes from John Bromyard, a fourteenth-century preacher. In his Summa Praedicantium, he states, “Ceterum quicquid in hoc opusculo reprehendendum estimatur/ mee asscribatur insufficientie, quicquid vero vtile/ saluatoris et perpetue virginis attribuatur clemencie” “Moreover, whatever is deemed reprehensible in this work should be attributed to my inadequacy; whatever is truly useful should be attributed to the mercy of the Savior and the perpetual Virgin.”

Don Juan
Manuel’s *El Conde Lucanor*, a prose treatise on morality written in 1335, serves as an especially good example because its wording is most similar to that of the *Retraction*. At the beginning of this work, Don Manuel advises his audience to bear in mind his intention in writing: “por la su merced [de Dios] et por la su piadat quiera que los que este libro leyeren que se aprovechen dél a servicio de Dios et para salvamiento de sus almas et aprovechamiento de sus cuerpos, así commo Él sabe que yo, don Johán, lo digo a essa entención” “for the mercy of God and for his compassion I wish that those who read this book profit of its devotion of God and for the salvation of their souls and benefit of their bodies, as He knows that I, don Juan, say these things with this intention.” Further, his readers are to consider what is and what is not “well said”: “Et lo que ý fallaren que non es tan bien dicho, non pongan la culpa a la mi entención, mas pónganla a la mengua del mío entendemiento. Et si alguna cosa fallaren bien dicha o aprovechosa, gradécanlo a Dios, ca Él es aquel por quien todos los Buenos dichos et fechos se dizen et se fazen” “And whatever they might find that is not very well said, let they not blame my intention, but rather fault the deficiency of my understanding. And if they find something well said or useful, let them thank God, as He is the one through whom all good sayings and deeds are spoken and done.” By including this gesture at the beginning, Don Manuel frames the stories that follow as his conscious effort to provide, with God’s help, solace and pleasure to both the bodies and the souls of his readers; whatever each reader encounters that falls short of that mark should be attributed to Don Manuel’s lack of understanding and not to his intention. The positioning of this information primes the reader to discover divinely-approved lessons in the reading, and within that expectation, he crafts his response accordingly. Bluntly, the reader is instructed to find something beneficial in the reading and such instruction both limits his ability
to respond to the work comprehensively and restricts the greater utility of the recursive process that Chaucer encourages in the Retraction.

The posterior position of the Retraction changes the reader’s reception of Chaucer’s work dramatically. Instead of approaching his work from an author-controlled position, as do readers of Jean de Meun, John Bromyard, and Don Juan Manuel, Chaucer’s readers first experience and respond to his compositions naturally and are only later encouraged to reflect upon the efficacy of those responses. By choosing not to frame the Canterbury Tales, or any of his other works, as opportunities to consider, from the outset, their potential to benefit the audience, Chaucer creates an occasion for the audience to think about their own methods of reading and utilizing the information gained through that effort. To be clear: in using “authorial humility” to introduce their subsequent compositions, Jean, Bromyard, and Manuel prime their readers to seek a “good” within their works. While such priming may result in finding a particular benefit within the first reading, it also limits the reader’s ability to discover the greater profit that develops from the type of recursive evaluation that Chaucer instigates. But it isn’t only the position that achieves this end, as the conclusion of Giovanni Boccaccio’s Genealogia Deorum Gentilium demonstrates. Written in 1360 and revised until 1374, this work is the final analogue to the first two lines of Chaucer’s Retraction. In it, Boccaccio writes, “si quid boni inest, si quid bene dictum, si quid votis tuis consonum, gaudeo et exulto, et exinde labori meo congratulator, verum scientie mee imputes nolo, nec lauros aut honores alios ob id postulo; Deo quippe, a quo omne datum optimum et omne donum perfectum est, attribuas queso, eique honores impendito et gratias agito” ‘If it contains anything good, if it is well said, if it is suitable for your wishes, I am delighted and happy; from that I derive joy for my labor. I do not want you to impute truth to my learning, nor do I ask laurels or other honors for it; certainly, give to God, from whom every
good and every perfect gift comes, the honors and thanks. Although Boccaccio includes these statements in the Conclusio, there is a distinct difference between his words and Chaucer’s: there is no call to reflection in Boccaccio, nor is there a prompt to recursive assessment. Simply put, the Retraction’s position and its provocation of such analysis offers each reader an opportunity to challenge and to learn from the interpretations dictated by his or her own initial perspective. Through that learning the reader may, like Boethius, discover where his power lies.

Echoing the Parson’s suggestion that one “seeth and axeth of olde pathes” (X.77) and to Philosophy’s recommendation that Boethius return to the “depe ground of soth in his thought” (III.m11.13-14), Chaucer’s self-assessment hints at the recursive demands of wise judgment. The ability to evaluate one’s own efforts and to determine, for himself, their value requires that the individual situate a particular result within the body of information and experiences that contribute to that outcome. Again, there is a clear element of self-reflection in this process, but wise judgment requires the citation of the method in its performance. The idea, as used both by Boethius and by Chaucer, is that recursion is a process of analyzing what is discovered through self-reflection. Without any consideration of the universal conditions within which man abides, for example, Boethius’ confusion and anger over his imprisonment incapacitates him; by reframing his position through the lens of Providence, he regains his ability to participate in the Good. The Parson’s Tale suggests that one’s investment in determining the circumstances of a sin prepares the individual not only to avoid future iniquities but also to participate in his own salvation. In the Retraction, Chaucer works through these processes himself: he reflects upon his motives in writing, contemplates how well he translated those intentions into his work, and determines which of his writings succeeds and where his responsibility for those successes or failures lies.
The guiding objective of Chaucer’s work, as he defines it, is to offer benefit through instruction: “For oure book seith, ‘Al that is written is written for oure doctrine,’ and that is myn entente” (X.1083). The significance of this quote cannot be overstated: everything that is written is instructive. While he certainly draws upon Romans 15.4, Paul conceives of this idea in terms of scripture: “For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope.” In his Second Epistle to Timothy, Paul explains that scripture is infused with the Divine: “All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.” Paul’s focus, then, is particular to the Bible: the Spirit informs Scripture, and scripture is doctrine. Chaucer’s treatment of this concept is decidedly more comprehensive than Paul’s, as he follows the Boethian expansion of this theory to include all writing. By calling his reader’s attention to this principle, Chaucer effectively situates his work—including the “translaciouns and enditynges of worldly vanitees,” those tales of Canterbury that “sownen into synne,” and “many a lecherous lay”—within the vast and extensive corpus of educational opportunities.

Philosophy’s explanation of the benefit of doctrine emphasizes the importance of such instruction: “For certes the body, bryngynge the weighte of foryetynge, ne hath nat chased out of your thought al the cleernesse of your knowynge; for certeynli the seed of soth haldeth and clyveth within yowr corage, and it is awaked and excited by the wynde and by the blastes of doctrine” (III.m11.28-34). Doctrine, as Philosophy conceives it, has the power to blast through the body’s “weight of forgetting” and to awaken and excite the “clearness of knowing.” By aligning his work with “doctrine,” Chaucer at once focuses on what is within his control—i.e. the matching of his intentions to his actions—while at the same time distancing himself from the
interpretations and reactions of his reader. Boethius’ illumination of the role of conscience highlights this point: the wise “mesuren hir good, nat by rumour of the peple, but by the sothfastnesse of conscience” (III.p6.15-17). As I argue, there are two distinct objectives in the Retraction: Chaucer’s self-assessment and that which the reader performs for himself. In this author-centered moment, Chaucer is the only individual who can, through the truth of his conscience, determine the merit of his writings in relation to his original objectives. Whatever good he finds has nothing to do with the “rumour of the peple.” Instead, Chaucer’s evaluation of his efforts—both in writing and in reading—situates his work within the larger milieu of doctrine and hints to his audience of the value he finds.

Chaucer’s process includes a reflection on the link between his compositions and his goals. Given his interest in the relationships of words and deeds—the Canterbury narrator states that, following Plato, “The wordes moote be cosyn to the dede” (I.742); the demon in the Friar’s Tale explains that truth is found in the equivalency between intention, word, and action; the Fair White of the Book of the Duchess consistently dismisses the Black Knight until his words and intentions match his behavior—it is unsurprising that in the Retraction, Chaucer ponders the relationship between his own intentions (the words) and his writings (the deeds). Though he chooses not to make explicit whatever conclusions he may have drawn, the crux of Chaucer’s assessment rests with his interpretation of how well his own “entente” relates to his actions: that he expresses thanks for “the translacion of Boece de Consolatione, othere bookes of legendes of seintes, and omelies, and moralitee, and devocioun” indicates that he sees an equivalent correlation between his intention and the product of his efforts. Given that the determination of which works belong to which categories speaks largely to the individual’s judgment, this generic list of topics serves to communicate only that there are other works in which Chaucer finds
value. The fact that he does not elaborate on his own assessment accords with the Boethian vision: Chaucer’s interpretation of his work should not be the primary factor in his reader’s own personal assessment.

By calling attention to the *Boece*, Chaucer emphasizes the overall authority of this work and, by extension, illuminates the guiding principles of rational analysis which drive its philosophy. Throughout the *Consolation*, there is a provocation to reclaim reason, a necessity which, at its core, results from the human capacity to forget through distraction: Boethius incapacitates himself by permitting his emotions to reign with abandon; in returning, systematically, to a place of rational understanding, he recovers his power and creates his own happiness—even while in prison and awaiting his execution. In reflecting upon the relationship between his intentions and his writings, Chaucer essentially performs the same sequential process: as part of his evaluation, he separates himself from any emotional desire that would, like the Muses who write Boethius’ words, limit his capacity to access all information available; he reflects upon his initial goal in writing; he judges, from this particular standpoint, how well he’s done. In tacitly performing this process, Chaucer indicates his depth of appreciation for the *Boece* in that he actuates the knowledge that he gained through its translation. Based on the degree to which this one work informs his subsequent writings, I submit that Chaucer both recognizes and highlights the advantage of the *Boece* not only through his use of Boethian themes in his writings but also in what that use represents: the sharing of knowledge, the sharing of fictional narratives which are intended to entertain as well as to inform.

In expressing his appreciation for the translation of the *Boece* and the “other books,” Chaucer thanks “oure Lord Jhesu Crist and his blisful Mooter, and alle the seintes of hevene.”

Pushing beyond this statement of gratitude, Chaucer beseeches them to act on his behalf:
that they 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. (1090-1092)
The general Christian tenor of this passage leads Ian Johnson to interpret this work as an honest
appeal for salvation. Indeed, he writes that Chaucer’s use of Romans 15.4 (‘Al that is written is
written for oure doctrine’) serves as “a confessional passage declared before God, with the patent
intention of saving his soul,” and “To dismiss the Retracciouns...as no serious spiritual
transaction but only a ‘literary’ ploy is to overlook the Pauline context of hope—truly
hopeless.”27 Yet the intrigue of this passage comes not from the Christian sentiment, as Johnson
believes, but rather from what Chaucer is asking and from whom he is asking it. As the Parson
explains, grace is a gift from God that may be extended through Him, Christ, or the Holy Ghost;
because it is a gift, the individual may choose to accept or to reject it. In his exposition of pride,
for example, the Parson states that “a man to pride hym in the goodes of grace is eek an
outrageous folie, for thilke yifte of grace that sholde have turned hym to goodnesse and to
medicine, turneth hym to venym and to confusioun” (X.470). The extension of grace, itself, is
thus insufficient to cause goodness if man abuses its nature. In asking for help from those
inhabitants of Heaven who, through their individual experiences in this life, learned how to
match good words with good deeds, Chaucer signifies his commitment to the process of wise
judgment. Instead of asking God or the Holy Ghost to grant an extension of grace, he asks those
who exemplify the “good way” to help him continue to progress down his own path and to
choose, intentionally, that grace which is extended to him.
That Chaucer extends an opportunities in his writings through which the reader may educate himself neither makes such learning Chaucer’s responsibility, nor reflects upon him should the reader choose to ignore that extension, accept it waywardly, or profit greatly from it. Following Boethius, the idea that Chaucer is accountable for any misunderstanding on the part of his reader is as nonsensical as it is confused, though critics continue to assign blame. Peter Travis, for instance, insists that Chaucer is “responsible for our misreading of his intent,” and Rosemarie Potz McGerr claims that Chaucer is liable for the “works in which he has not sufficiently emphasized the need for the reader’s active engagement in distilling truth from fiction.”28 Were he to assume this liability, he would at once seek the glory of those who understand correctly and expect that all of his readers possess equal abilities to comprehend—both of which are contrary to those express Boethian themes that flourish in Chaucer’s work. In fact, Chaucer rejects such responsibility from the first sentence of the Retraction: if the reader finds anything of value, he is to “thanken oure Lord Jhesu Crist, of whom procedeth al wit and al goodnesse”; if he is displeased by Chaucer’s work, he should “arrette it to the defaute of [Chaucer’s] unknonnynge and nat to [his] wyl, that wolde ful fayn have seyd better if [he] hadde had konnynge” (X.1081-81). What I would like to suggest is that the Retraction is not about disowning or regretting his work: as Chaucer says, he intends to write for doctrine, and everything is doctrine. Further, to recommend that some or all of his writings be rejected would suggest that Chaucer misunderstood or denied the tenets of wise judgment that Boethius offers, i.e., that these writings would, of necessity, be turned to Good in a cosmos governed by Providence. As it relates to Chaucer’s self-assessment, then, the Retraction is purposefully ambiguous because Chaucer’s assessment of his work does not, and should not, define what the reader gains.
Though Chaucer disowns in the *Retraction* any responsibility for the interpretations of others, he does not abandon his reader to work through the issues alone. Indeed, by specifically defining his audience—those “that herkne this litel tretyes or rede” (X.1081)—Chaucer implies that before the individual may productively begin the process of evaluation himself, he must first understand the principles of self-assessment as defined by the Parson. These principles include a willingness to reflect starkly and honestly upon the factors which conceive of, permit, and occasion one’s behaviors; the point is to determine which behaviors are beneficial and which are destructive, and to form conscious, thoughtful habits of choice. In connecting the *Retraction* to the “litel tretyes,” Chaucer frames his final work in terms of the *Parson’s Tale*: for those who have hearkened or read this *Tale*, the *Retraction* reads as a meditation, a “standing upon the ways” in an effort to determine the “good way” to proceed. Put another way, the reader must evaluate each work both singularly and in relation to the sum total of what he has read, i.e. all of the “olde pathes” of his learning. The paths through which Chaucer instructs and delights his audience are many, and he offers his *Retraction* as a moment during which his reader may evaluate the worth of each.

Because the process that Chaucer advocates is individual, it is instructive to focus initially on what he offers in each of the prose works because, through these compositions of plain speech, the explanations of the systems of rational analysis are most clear. While these works deal with their own specific subjects, they share an overarching theme: through consistent, conscious effort, one can develop habits of wise judgment which promote personal empowerment, freedom from the bonds of emotional torment, and ultimately, happiness. The *Boece*, as discussed above, offers a method of returning to the most fundamental knowledge—that the universe is governed by order—and using that insight to contextualize the constant
changes of life, to develop the practice of reason, and then to choose what to pursue and what to avoid. In the Parson’s Tale, along with his method of self-assessment, the Parson also suggests that once knowledge is obtained, the individual is responsible for how he uses that information—with free will comes accountability. In the Astrolabe, Chaucer explains that, because of the inherent limitations of this realm—constraints of knowledge, our ability to understand, the shortcomings of authorities, and the complications of infinity—one’s approach to knowledge is more important than the knowledge itself. Finally, in the Melibee, Chaucer offers specific methods of garnering wise counsel in an effort to distance oneself from the haste of emotion and to make conscious, well-considered choices. The principle underlying all these works is that good judgments and their subsequent actions result both from a recognition of personal limitation and a learned, analytical response meant to counter that limitation to the extent that one is able. As I argue, when Chaucer stands on the ways, he reflects on the perceived and actual outcomes of his efforts. In creating a similar moment, the reader can utilize these methods to initiate an assessment of his own responses and reactions in order to understand more fully his own mindset, as well as to evaluate any changes to his current process to make future choices more productive.

As the prose works suggest, the need for such reflection is continual because the natural limitations of one’s ability to “know” prohibits any complete or lasting resolution in a world defined by change. The Boece, for example, suggests that one must exercise the habit of wise judgment because the mutability of Fortune challenges the individual with accolades and dishonors which, if unchecked by rational analysis, obfuscate reason. As Philosophy states, “yif thou wolt loken and demen soth with cleer lyght, and hoolden the weye with a ryght path, weyve thow joie, dryf fro the drede, fleme thow hope, ne lat no sorwe aproche…For cloudy and derk is
thilke thought, and bownde with bridellis, where as thiese thynges reignen” (I.m7.14-21). Not only does Philosophy point out the necessity of “clear light” to the “looking and deeming of truth,” she also hints at the perpetual nature of this endeavor: in order to “hold the way with a right path,” one must avoid joy, fear, hope, and sorrow, for emotions inhibit the mind’s potential to “see clearly.” Similarly, Chaucer’s Parson interprets sin, especially “synful usage,” as self-created confusion: “ye shul understande that in mannes synne is every manere of ordre or ordinaunce turned up-so-doun” (X.260). In the Melibee, Prudence’s instruction in the solicitation of counsel calls to mind the limitations of perspective while at the same time explaining the need to judge the counsel one receives; in the Astrolabe, Chaucer foregrounds his work by highlighting the limitations that all individuals must face. Though these restrictions deny perfect understanding, they inspire both a continual pursuit of knowledge and recursive analyses of how one interprets that knowledge. Through the Retraction, then, the reader has the opportunity to reconsider previous judgments in order to uncover, in part, the doctrine of Chaucer’s work, but more so, to discover the wisdom inherent in the act of self-assessment.

Of course, Chaucer includes examples of similar moments of reflection throughout his poetic works, and the reader may certainly learn from each. For example, the Wife of Bath provides an insightful glimpse of a character who refuses to become a victim of her different circumstances and instead uses each as an opportunity to refine her own approach and to utilize what power she possesses. The men in both her Prologue and her Tale are victims of their own reactive and untutored habits, and each must learn the futility of those unthinking and destructive routines before discovering more rewarding approaches. After chastising the poor for their wickedness, the Man of Law tells the story of Constance, a young maiden who survives the many tragedies which befall her because, as he argues, she is protected by God. For the Man of
Law, such protection is an immediate and definitive indicator of Constance’s “goodness”; of course, this line of reasoning also allows him to assert that he is a good person because he is successful. Though we learn from the Boece that one’s fortunes dictate naught about one’s nature, the Man of Law’s implication of his own “goodness” presents the reader with a chance to ponder the superficiality of such a claim. Outside the Canterbury Tales, the formel eagle, from the Parliament of Fowls, successfully opposes the pressures from the other birds and asks for time to consider her decision: “I axe respite for to avise me, / And after that to have my choys al fre” (648-49); in the Book of the Duchess, the Black Knight contemplates the magnitude of his loss; the narrator of the Legend of Good Women is given time to reflect upon a different way to perceive narrative histories. Though the examples of such moments are plentiful and demonstrate a character’s moment of reflection (the Wife), or lack thereof (the Man of Law), and give the interested reader larger ideas to ponder, such occasions center themselves around specific examples. In contrast, the prose works provide specific, programmatic methods of forming the very habits that will lead to the virtue of rational response both to Chaucer’s tales and to life.

One of the crucial elements to this process is the ability to situate information within a larger context. Though Chaucer differs from Boethius by focusing less on Providence per se, his investment in the power of perception and the need to remain actively aware of its influence encourages him to reveal his “entente” in writing. Through this disclosure, the audience is invited to refigure their initial interpretations within the idea that all writing is instructive. As Philosophy points out, an individual’s perception can exert exceptional control: “nothing [is] wrecchide but whan thou wenest it. (As who seith, thow thiself ne no wyght ells nis a wrecche but whanne he weneth himself a wreche by reputacion of his corage)” (II.p4.109-13). In other
words, things will only be what one determines they are: in this case, a person becomes a wretch when he thinks of nothing but what a wretch he is. Boethius transforms from a state of misery to one of contentment when he moves from a mindset that “wenest,” or supposes a conclusion, to a process that rationally analyzes the situation. Similarly, Chaucer encourages his audience to perform an act of recursive evaluation in order to increase that their knowledge-base and thus their understanding. Such analysis requires that the individual assess his response to Chaucer’s work through the external frame that Chaucer provides. If there is some benefit to be gained through all writing, then it is the individual’s duty to determine what that profit is and how to use it.

Chaucer encourages this practice by suggesting that the determination of any potential benefit gained from his work requires each reader’s individual deliberation:

Now preye I to hem alle that herkne this litel tretys or rede, that if ther be any thyng in it that liketh hem, that therof they thanken oure Lord Jhesu Crist, of whom procedeth al wit and al goodnesse./ And if ther be any thyng that displease hem, I preye hem also that they arrette it to the defaute of myn unkonnynge and nat to my wyl, that wolde ful fayn have seyd better if I hadde had konnynge./ For oure book seith, “Al that is writen is writen for oure doctrine,” and that is myn entente. (X.1081-83)

The syntactic structure of the first two sentences invites the reader to ponder the value of the Parson’s Tale: for whatever he defines as worthwhile, he should thank Christ; for that which displeases him, Chaucer asks that the reader ascribe it not to a willful desire to offend, but rather to the inherent limitations of his ability. As Olive Sayce notes, there is a formulaic quality to this structure: “The first two sentences combine the familiar idea of authorial incapacity with that of
Christ as the source of all good and of the poet’s talent in particular, and therefore as solely responsible for any merits of the work.”

Chaucer’s employment of this construct, however, is more complicated than Sayce’s reading allows. While distancing himself from any responsibility for how others read his work—again, he neither solicits praise nor accepts blame—Chaucer highlights the reader’s obligation to reassess previous interpretations. The conditional clauses ask the reader to decide not only what he finds valuable in the *Parson’s Tale* and what he believes useless, but to make this determination with specificity. By following these conditionals with his intent—to write for doctrine—Chaucer subtly suggests that, even if the reader initially ascribes “any thyng” in the *Parson’s Tale* as displeasing, there is yet some “good” to be learned both from the *Parson’s Tale* itself and from this preliminary response. And while the reader is encouraged to thank Christ for the capacity to find the good, the effort required to discover that benefit comes solely from the reader. Thus in the first three lines of the *Retraction*, Chaucer inspires a reflection not simply about the *Parson’s Tale*, but about its utility; he then immediately asks the reader to reevaluate this initial response, given the new information about his intention. As the *Retraction* continues, Chaucer revises this process to provoke the reader’s reassessment of his other works.

As part of this re-examination, the reader must engage not only in a consideration of each work, but also in its categorization. Aside from the *Boece*, the “othere books of legends of seintes, and omelies, and moralitee, and devocioun” for which Chaucer gives thanks are included only as a generic list, and those that may fall into the category of “translacions and enditynges of worldly vanitees” are offered only as potentially qualifiable: “as is the book of Troilus; the book also of Fame; the book of the XXV Ladies; the book of the Duchesse; the book of Seint Valentynes day of the Parlement of Briddes; the tales of Caunterbury, thilke that sownen into
synne;/ the books of the Leoun; and many another book, if they were in my remembrance, and many a song and many a lecherous lay” (X.1086-87). Such deliberate ambiguity emphasizes, once again, Chaucer’s interest in provoking his reader’s investment in his own interpretations and reassessments of his work. Victor Yelverton Haines elucidates this point: “If Chaucer had wished to emphasize the meaning that the books themselves should be annulled, he would have left out the ‘as is’ and just listed the books.”31 Further, by utilizing the Boethian idea that one understands based not on the subject but on the individual’s capacity to know, Chaucer invites the reader to empower himself to learn where his individual strengths and weaknesses lie, and through that knowledge, to adapt his own approach to the gathering and interpretation of information in order to make that process more productive. Though Chaucer cannot know the real-world outcome of his works, save the Boece, his reader can: through dedication to the craft of knowing, the individual can determine how to use the knowledge that he gains through the reading or hearing of Chaucer’s work and decide that outcome for himself.

While I argue that this list of works and categories inspires the reader’s participation, some scholars believe that Chaucer uses the list to establish his canon. Olive Sayce, for instance, writes that “there is a striking contrast between the precise listing of the works to be condemned and the vague general designation…of those works for which credit is claimed, which suggests that Chaucer is more concerned with the establishment of the canon of his works than with their rejection.”32 Sayce is certainly correct to call attention to the peculiarity of this contrast, and the idea that Chaucer is attempting to establish his canon through this list is tempting. Yet the omission of any mention of his Treatise on the Astrolabe would then suggest that Chaucer either neglected to include his scientific treatise as part of the collection of his most influential works or simply that he deemed the Astrolabe insufficient to include: I will contend in Chapter Two that
the *Astrolabe* is not only essential to Chaucer’s objectives but also that he recognized its importance. As an alternative, I argue that this list, beyond facilitating the reader’s recall, offers a chance to situate each work within a different frame: i.e., doctrine. In fact, Victor Yelverton Haines makes a case that the meaning of “‘Retraccioun’…derive[s] from correspondence with the act of dragging something back over again, from A back to B.”³³ In this sense, “retraction” implies the very activity that Chaucer calls upon his reader to perform—recursion.

Above, I argue that the universality of the Boethian vision both influenced Chaucer’s work and likewise resonated with the poet’s medieval Christian audience. What I would like to suggest here is that these themes, offered through the prose works and evoked in the *Retraction*, benefit his modern readership as well. Because wise judgment requires the contextualization of information, the same strategies of rational deliberation hold: in learning that the nature of the world is change, the individual is freed from the pains of expectation and ownership; in discovering that unbridled emotions obscure reason, one may become skilled at recognizing and limiting the influences of the passions; in realizing that the only power that an individual truly has is over his choices, he empowers himself to create happiness; in understanding that the only assessment that really matters is self-actuated, the individual may gain the wisdom to improve his understanding and thus himself. If one puts faith in a universe governed by order, then one must also accept, as Boethius does, that everything is good. If one supposes the universe to be chaotic and disordered, the conclusion remains relatively the same: there is no point to complaint, to giving way to emotional torment, to creating self-impotence through distraction. As Chaucer tells us in his *Retraction*, he intends his work to instruct, and after six centuries, it continues to blast his readers with doctrine. It is up to us, as individual readers, whether we choose to accept the invitation.
Though the debate continues as to whether Chaucer intends “this litel tretys” to refer to the *Parson’s Tale* or the *Canterbury Tales*, I follow Vaughan’s argument that the rubrication which distinguishes the Retraction from the *Parson’s Tale* results from an editorial decision. Without such distinction, the close connection between these two works suggests that “this litel tretys” is the *Parson’s Tale*. For Vaughan’s entire argument, which will be discussed later in the essay, see “Creating Comfortable Boundaries: Scribes, Editors, and the Invention of the Parson’s Tale,” *Rewriting Chaucer: Culture, Authority, and the Idea of the Authentic Text*, 1400-1602, Eds. Thomas A. Prendergast and Barbara Kline, Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1999, 45-90.


While there is some debate about whether the Parson’s Tale is correctly or erroneously placed at the end of the Canterbury compilation, based on certain textual indications (X.24-28, 45-47), I submit that Chaucer intended this Tale to appear, if not in the final position, late in the collection.


X.87-88.


2 Timothy 3.16. The Holy Bible: King James Version.

For a larger explanation of Chaucer’s interest in words and deeds, see P. B. Taylor’s “Chaucer’s Cosyn to the Dede,” *Speculum* 57.2 (April 1982): 315-27.

Johnson, “The ascending soul and the virtue of hope,” at 256 and 257.


For a full explanation of this idea, see Chapter Two.


32 Sayce, 245.

33 Haines, 137.
Chapter Two

Learning to Know: Approaching the Universe through Chaucer’s Astrolabe

When Chaucer composed his *Treatise on the Astrolabe* in the mid-1390s, he was, as he tells us, responding to the “bisi preyere in special to lerne the Tretis of the Astrelabie” (Prologue 4-6) putatively made by his son, “Litell Lowys”.¹ Through this composition, he intends to “teche a certein nombre of conclusions apertenynge to” (13-14) this remarkably sophisticated instrument. Along with *astrologia*, the astrolabe was used to find ecliptic latitudes and longitudes, calculate time and distance, navigate, survey, track and predict the movements of heavenly bodies, and fathom space.² In his *Astrolabe*, Chaucer creates more than a definitive manual about this device: he constructs a treatise that serves to facilitate his reader’s understanding not only of the design, functions, and potentialities of the physical machine, but also about how his text and the astrolabe together can be used to comprehend far greater and more abstract universal concepts. More specifically, from the Prologue through Parts One and Two of his *Astrolabe*, Chaucer models a way of engaging with the text that pushes the reader beyond the simple act of reading into a more involved system of recursive reading: one learns, Chaucer avers, by participating in a continual process of gathering information, determining the accuracy of said information, and then applying the knowledge that one gains. What he ultimately offers in the *Astrolabe*, to an audience larger than Little Lewis, goes beyond the teaching of the “conclusions,” or the
applications, of the astrolabe; he also invites his reader to participate in a philosophical consideration of knowledge. What does it mean to “know”? How do personal and external limitations affect one’s capacity for understanding? What is the relationship between a concrete device and the intangible dynamics of the universe? Indeed, what Chaucer does with the Prologue and Astrolabe together is suggest that, in a world of infinite imperfection and possibility, one may gain a degree of understanding and authority by coming to see that the way one approaches knowledge is as, if not more, important than the knowledge itself. The idea of subordinating the outcome to the process from which it results compels the individual not only to learn through recursion but, through that practice, to acknowledge the problems intrinsic to understanding: for example, imperfect language, problems of scribal reproduction, and limited human capacity. What Chaucer offers through this theory is a method of learning that encourages the type of perspectival understanding that Boethius learns through Philosophy.

This theory, and the incredible potential it offers, has remained unnoticed. In the mid-twentieth century, scholars tended to accept the Astrolabe at face value, with responses typically admiring Chaucer either for his ability to translate a scientific text in language accessible to a child or for his understanding of the importance of matching style to the intended audience. Through the 1970s, the Astrolabe was regarded as a curiosity—Derek Brewer writers that it was “a laborious task done for love at a time when one would have expected Chaucer to be anxious to get on with other things,” and Mahmoud Manzalaoui describes it as “an unexpected use of his talents”—and then in the 80s and 90s responses, critics such as Sigmund Eisner, Peter J. Hager, and Ronald J. Nelson shifted the focus to a consideration of Chaucer’s role as a technical writer. More recently, scholars have begun to recognize other possible implications of the importance of this work: for Seth Lerer, it is “a meditation on responsibility”; Frances McCormack argues that
it is “as much about translation as it is about astronomy”; and Andrew Cole maintains that “the
sheer accumulation of allusions in the Prologue renders it central to our understandings not only
of the poet’s use of literary traditions and authorities but his sense of vernacularity and its
politics.” However useful to our understanding, these perspectives focus more on the Prologue
than the treatise proper and in so doing, pass over the complexity inherent in the treatise itself.
Viewing the Astrolabe as a whole allows us to recognize the potential of what Chaucer calls
“learning to know.”

This “learning to know” philosophy, which offers a method of reading that differs from
the religiously prescribed approaches of the late-Middle Ages (e.g., the lectio divina), stresses
the value of analyzing information, testing it for accuracy, and determining its applicability. In
the third conclusion of Part Two of the Astrolabe, Chaucer refers to his own method of approach
as “learning to know.” After using both his text and astrolabe to work through the process of
finding “the howr of the nyht and [the] assendent” (II.3.61-62), he states that it is “thus” that he
discovers “in which manere” (61) he can derive the time and the ascendant at night. This
controlled and conscientious method, for Chaucer, defines not only what an individual
understands, but also how he understands it. In this way, Chaucer subordinates knowledge to the
method of acquiring and utilizing it: instead of highlighting the conclusion (the answer), he
emphasizes the importance of the process of gathering and assessing the information that leads to
it. In the vein of Boethius’ awareness that rational analysis is the most profitable method of
regaining his reason and Chaucer’s final utilization of this system to assay his own understanding
in the Retraction, Chaucer encourages his reader to perform this method of “learning to know” in
order both to discover and to analyze its outcomes. Only through such effort can an individual
understand the imperfections in human knowledge, how to compensate for those limitations to
the extent that he is able, and how to draw reasonable conclusions from incomplete data. In short, Chaucer teaches us how to learn.

This exemplification of a personal, engaged methodology, at its core, invites the Astrolabe’s reader to realize not a perfect understanding of the universe—as such understanding, to follow the Boece, is an inherent impossibility in this realm—but to become less imperfect in the way that he understands the world, as well as his role within it. By examining the way Chaucer frames his Astrolabe in the Prologue, as well as the relationships he creates between text and image, reader and text, and individual and universe, I argue that the Astrolabe is fundamental not only to understanding what Chaucer views as the limits of language and knowledge, but also to how he would have his audience judge information and authorities in a productive and profitable way. Such judgment, Chaucer reveals, is necessarily personal: just as the conclusions of the astrolabe “ben suffisantely lerned and tawht” (Prologue 41-42) in many languages “by diverse rewles, ryht as diverse pathes leden diverse folk the ryhte wey to Roome” (42-44) so his reader must plot his own path to the acquisition and utilization of knowledge, a path that is as fundamental to understanding as it is unique to the individual. The course that Chaucer’s Astrolabe prescribes suggests that it is through engagement with (and assessment and application of) knowledge that the reader can discover his own productive “wey,” a process which demands the application of the recursive analysis discussed in Chapter One. This course, moreover, connects the Astrolabe to rest of Chaucer’s canon through its emphasis on a contributory and on-going form of learning; exercised here with the technical and literary aspects of the Astrolabe, these methods can easily be extended to reconsider earlier interpretations of Chaucer’s poetry and prose. Outside of that canon, the reader can “learn to know” any subject available to him. If the thrust of Chaucer criticism—perhaps, medieval English literary criticism overall—has been
to recognize the significance of fourteenth-century vernacular literary exploration, then the Astrolabe shows us not only how to participate in a scientific method of reading, but also how to learn productively.

The path that this essay takes “to Roome” develops in four segments. First, it begins with an examination of the textual history of the Astrolabe, including the sources that Chaucer claims to “lewdly compile,” the scribal changes that were made to his text, and the resultant implications for the reader. Next, I turn to the manuscripts themselves. Through my study of nineteen of the thirty-two extant manuscripts which contain all or part of the Astrolabe, I discovered that several of the early manuscript copies contain accompanying diagrams. As such, I include images from two early reproductions—MS. e. Museo 54 and MS. Dd.3.53—to demonstrate the importance of the diagrams to this work.9 I argue that these illustrations are crucial to Chaucer’s goal of promoting his reader’s active involvement with the text. My analysis then moves to a consideration of a concept that Chaucer adds to his Astrolabe—that of infinity—and how this idea relates not only to the “smale fraccions” (I.8.12) marked on the device but also to reading, interpretation, and learning. As Chaucer is the first to introduce the “infinite” into English, his choice to supplement his source texts with this concept underscores his appreciation for the limitations of knowledge.10 Finally, I challenge the scholarly focus on the Prologue alone to suggest that in reading the Prologue against the actual manuscripts, the reader can discover a cogent theory of erudition that Chaucer proposes through the Treatise on the Astrolabe. As I understand it, Chaucer’s text is a metaphor for the astrolabe; both are knowledge machines for calculating the infinite nature of the universe on a human scale, and both mediate intangible ideas through tangible devices to encourage a form of vernacular reading
that allows the reader to participate in his own process of learning the information that was becoming increasingly accessible through translation.

Chaucer adds to this body of translated information by assembling and translating scientific treatises, for which he is quick to disavow intellectual ownership. He tells his reader: “considere wel that I ne usurpe nat to have fownde this werk of my labour or of myn engin. I nam but a lewd compilatour of the labour of olde astrologens, and have hit translated in myn English only for thi doctrine” (Prologue 63-67). He has, in other words, simply collected and translated texts—the knowledge is not “his,” but rather part of a larger pool of information that he invites his reader to consider. Upon examination, Chaucer’s compilation turns out to be more complicated than he gives us to believe. Noting that the Astrolabe is “an assemblage, put together out of materials that were themselves assemblages,” Edgar Laird argues that Chaucer’s two most important sources, the pseudo-Messahalla De Compositione et Operacione Astrolabii and John of Sacrabosco’s Tractatus de Sphaera were themselves compilations. Alkabucius, one of two authorities that Chaucer names in his Astrolabe, similarly creates his own text by gathering together knowledge from different writers: as Laird summarizes, Alkabucius, in recognizing the problems with the works that came before, “began to make his own book, and has collected (‘collegi,’ ‘gadered togidre,’ ‘conqueulli’) what was necessary for his science from the sayings of ancient authors.” That the Astrolabe seems to be a compilation of compilations might further substantiate Chaucer’s proclaimed identity as a “lewd compilatour,” a collector of data who is not its master. Yet as Carol Lipson points out, Chaucer’s debt to these ancient collections is not as large as he suggests: because Chaucer’s readers did not have to assemble their own astrolabes, given that the devices were readily purchasable during his time, he forewent the inclusion of the construction section of the earlier manuals, such as the pseudo-
Messahalla. This choice, Lipson suggests, required “an expanded version of Messahala’s parts list, which he called a description.” As Lipson calculates it, this description “is seven times longer than Messahala’s thirty-three line version; he tells us not only what is the part’s name and function, but also what it looks like, how it is used, why it is named what it is.” Further, his consistent interjections throughout Parts One and Two of the Astrolabe, as well as the detailed explanations of the sequences he works out in Part Two, undermine his claim that he is a mere compiler of others’ efforts; he is working with compiled data, to be sure, but his interjections in and interpretations of the text make this work very much his own.

These personal interjections into the text, in fact, become important guideposts for the Astrolabe’s fifteenth-century reader. Chaucer’s Astrolabe, it seems, found a strong following during this time: there are thirty-two extant manuscripts which contain all or part of this work, placing the Astrolabe second only to the Canterbury Tales in reproduction. Of these thirty-two, twenty-eight are dated from the fifteenth century, and eleven contain diagrams, which vary in their degrees of completion and expert rendering. Based on the fact that the manuscripts “are not all descended from one another,” Catherine Eagleton suggests that “it is very likely that the original version of Chaucer’s text was illustrated with a set of diagrams.” Though these images are, as I argue, essential to the text, they nearly disappear from production during the fifteenth century. While four of the six manuscripts copied during the first quarter of this century have diagrams, only four of the eleven second-quarter, one of the six third-quarter, and one of the four fourth-quarter manuscripts retain the images. That Chaucer intended for his text to contain illustrations is clear in his explanation of the planned third part of the Astrolabe, a section which was meant to contain “diverse tables of longitudes and latitudes of sterres fixe for the astrolabie, and tables of declinacions of the sonne, and tables of longitudes of citeez and of townes—and as
wel for the governance of a clokke as for to finde the altitude meridian—and many nother notable conclusioun” (Prologue 80-87). M. C. Seymour theorizes that the scribes intentionally abandoned these various figures because they were too taxing to include: “The ‘diverse tables’, being troublesome to copy, soon dropped from the scribal tradition; the exactly comparable fate of the diagrams of the astrolabe (originally at least 61 and shrinking by stages to none) is evident in the extant manuscripts.” Indeed, of the nineteen fifteenth-century manuscripts I’ve examined, none contain Chaucer’s prescribed tables and only eight contain diagrams; of these eight, there are variations between both the images that are chosen for inclusion and their degree of completion, as we will see below with Dd.3.53 and e. Museo 54.

The elimination of necessary visual information is just one difficulty with which later readers of the Astrolabe must contend. In the Astrolabe’s Prologue, Chaucer communicates a desire to reduce “curious enditing and hard sentence” through the use of “ful lihte rewles and naked wordes in Englissh” (Prologue 49, 29-30). The purpose of this endeavor is to offer the information contained within this work in the clearest, most accessible way. Yet the accepted structure of the Astrolabe, which Chaucer establishes quite plainly in the Prologue, may well have become confused in the manuscript editions. Seymour explains: “It is at once apparent that the extant manuscripts both lack some features of this plan (i.e. the tables and concluding theory) and add some others (i.e. some duplicate propositions), and the major task facing the reader is to discover the outlines of the original text.” Based on a reference in Part Two that points the reader to Part Four of the Astrolabe—“This conclusioun wol I declare in the laste chapitre of the 4 partie of this tretis so openly that ther shal lakke no worde that nedeth to the declaracioun” (II.11.17-20)—Seymour concludes that “the idea that having a clear statement of contents in the Prologue, he then gave to ‘litel Lowys’ (and no doubt to his friends in London) an incomplete
version, lacking the essential tables and part of the text, is nonsense.”

Adding to this discussion, Andrew Cole suggests that the Prologue was the last thing that Chaucer wrote for this work. If Cole’s assumption is reasonable, and I believe that it is, the extension of his proposal is that Chaucer’s *Astrolabe* was complete and circulated with diagrams and diverse tables, both of which were present to support the reader’s understanding.

These analyses of the manuscripts advance the very problem that Chaucer highlights in his Prologue: texts, like the ideas they contain, are both changeable and variable. By highlighting this issue in the Prologue, Chaucer essentially frames his work as one that contains solid information, though it may contain authorial or scribal errors. Thus, the reader may be grossly misled if he does not consider the possible faults of the “mediacion of this litel tretis” (Prologue 12) before he chooses to accept or deny a truth that such mediation conveys. While textual discrepancies in any written work may encourage the reader to construct meaning, the fact that Chaucer calls attention to this issue underscores his idea that everything contains discrepancies. The process of recursive analysis that Chaucer’s learns from the *Boece* is thus called upon even in works of science. In short, Chaucer frames his *Astrolabe* as a contribution to a larger, inherently imperfect though necessary discussion about learning in which the reader himself must actively participate; the textual history of the *Astrolabe* demonstrates this basic principle of learning.

One of the tactics that Chaucer uses to support his reader’s understanding is repetition, what he calls his “superfluite of wordes” (Prologue 47-48). Though he asks his reader to excuse his verbal excesses, the point that he makes is that superfluity is needed to translate “curious enditing and hard sentence” in a way that exposes the potential of the astrolabe and enhances the reader’s use of both the text and the scientific device. By considering that his apology here is actually an introduction to his strategy of communication, the additional explanations, his
“superfluous speech,” become necessary not only to Chaucer’s localized undertaking with his translations, but also to his larger reflection about reading and learning. In fact, Chaucer offers the ostensibly gratuitous information to maximize correct understanding not just for the proclaimed recipient of this work—“Litell Lowys”—but for his entire audience.26 Throughout Parts One and Two, Chaucer interprets and denudes the material he translates, calls attention to important issues—“tak kep,” “Forget nat this,” “have this in mynde”—and recapitulates potentially confusing phrases—“that is to seyn.” While these phrases may be formulaic, their use is important, as they serve to guide the reader through the text in the same way as do the illustrations.

The first “superfluous” interjection occurs in I.7:

Fro this litel + up to the ende of the lyne meridional under the ring shaltow fynden the bordure devyded with 90 degres; and by that same proporioun is every quarter of thine astrolabie devyded. Over the whiche degrees ther ben nowmbres of augrym that devyden thilke same degres fro 5 to 5, as shewith by longe strykes bytwene. Of whyche longe strykes the space bytwene contienith a mile wey. And every degree of the bordure contieneth 4 minutes, that is to seyn, minutes of an howre. And for more declaracioun, lo here the figure. (Fig. 2.1)
Figure 2.1—MS. e Museo 54, 4r
This description accomplishes several goals: it draws attention to the degrees of the border, while informing the reader that the diagram is intentionally incomplete—only the first 90 degrees are marked; it explains the significance of the “longe strykes” and Arabic numerals which mark intervals of 5 degree increments; it indicates the space and time contained within each 5 degree interval; and concludes, “every degree of the bordure contieneth 4 minutes, that is to seyn, minutes of an howre,” before inviting the reader to reference the diagram. The inclusion of this additional information—that is to say, minutes of an hour—allows the reader to connect the different aspects of this description: the marked border contains 90 degrees; the “long strikes” measure the space of 5 degrees; each degree equals 4 minutes. The “long strikes,” then, measure 20 minutes of time and one mile of space. Thus Chaucer’s interpretive gesture—“that is to seyn, minutes of an howre”—actually clarifies his reader’s understanding by anticipating and answering the fundamental problem of incomplete representation. In recognizing Chaucer’s desire to minimize his reader’s confusion by providing specific, declarative statements, these moments become less redundant and more crucial to the overall goal of this work, especially in light of the differences between manuscripts. Chaucer, through his “rewde endytyng,” “superfluite of wordes,” and use of diagrams, composes a work on astrologia that invites the reader’s participation in the discovery of knowledge, as that reader moves from text, to image, to the astrolabe itself.

Because both the text and the knowledge contained therein are necessarily incomplete, Chaucer uses descriptive language and familiar references to help the reader make the connection between a particular passage and the device. For example, he likens azimuths (the lines that extend from the zenith to the horizon lines) to “the clawes of a loppe, or elles like to the werk of a womanes calle” (I.19.2-4) to facilitate the reader’s ability to distinguish these lines.
from other markings. The azimuths become readily apparent when the reader looks for an image akin to spider’s legs or a woman’s hairnet, instead of the more abstruse “krokede strykes…kervyng overthwart the almynkanteras” (2-5). Yet as a practical text, the verbal descriptions and the mental images they invoke are insufficient because of the astrolabe’s complexity; as such, the diagrams are less a trivial component of the early manuscripts and more a fundamental part of what Chaucer wants to accomplish with his Astrolabe. Surprisingly, these illustrations have received surprisingly little attention. I argue that Chaucer included the diagrams intentionally to facilitate the reader’s ability to recognize the distinct parts of the plates, as well as the different plates themselves, along with their respective and cooperant applications. The illustrations in e Museo 54 and Dd.3.53 clarify this point. As the diagram above and those below show, the manuscript orientation of the Astrolabe situates the diagrams within the textual space, a placement which suggests their importance to this work. Bruce Eastwood argues that diagrams which appear in the textual space were either prescribed by the authors or because the scribes believed them to be integral parts of the text, and as Kari Anne Rand Schmidt contends, the placement of the text around the diagrams of Dd.3.53 suggest that these images were drawn in before the text was written. Indeed, the diagrams in both e Museo 54 and Dd.3.53 support these views: e Museo 54 prescribes roughly thirteen line-spaces per image, and Dd.3.53 affords roughly thirteen to fourteen. In the case of the Astrolabe, the text itself implies that the choice to integrate the diagrams within the textual space was not scribal. The illustration that accompanies I.7 (Fig. 2.1), for example, draws the reader’s gaze to the upper-left quadrant, providing a visual reference for the text: “Fro this litel + up to the ende of the lyne meridional under the ring shaltow fynden the bordure devyded with 90 degres; by that same proporcioun is every quarter of thine astrolabie devyded” (1-5). The inclusion of the final
clause suggests that the accompanying diagram offers partial information. Instead of visually replicating this particular aspect in its entirety, the 90 degrees are numbered by 10s, marked in 5 degree increments, with only the first 15 degrees identified by the smaller tick marks. Thus, the diagram provides sufficient information to aid the reader in identifying the exact feature of the explanation on the device—in this instance, the border, divided into 360 degrees, as well as the space and time that each 5 degree interval contains. Not only does the positioning of the diagrams suggest their importance to this work then, but the text itself hints at both the presence and reductive aspects of the illustrations. The abridged qualities of the verbal and visual elements require the reader to engage with the information and to demonstrate understanding by completing the sequence. Though this process of reader-involvement is not necessarily unique, the fact that Chaucer highlights the incompleteness of both of these textual elements makes the experience overt and deliberate.

Before the reader can begin to put the astrolabe to practical use, he must first be able to identify its various components, an endeavor which requires the employment of the textual diagrams. As Chaucer explains, “it is necessarie to thy lernyng to teche the first to knowe and worke with thine owne instrument” (II.5.5-7), and so “The firste partie of this tretis shal reherse the figures and the membres of thin astrolabie, by cause that thow shalt han the grettre knowyng of thine owne instrument” (Prologue 69-72). In turning from Prologue to the Astrolabe proper, the reader first encounters descriptions of each element of the device, which are then accompanied by illustrations that help guide him between the text and his astrolabe. Though the diagrams of Part One are simplistic and often incomplete, showing only that portion of the device that the text describes, they provide concrete examples of the descriptions. While e Museo 54’s I.7 diagram (Fig. 2.1) contains the + and the label “the bordure” as guides, it does
not follow the textual explanation precisely: the diagram marks only the first fifteen of the ninety degrees of the border; instead of providing “nowombres of augrym that devyden thilke same degrees fro 5 to 5, as shewith by longe strykes bytwene” (6-8), the diagram replicates the long strikes but prints the degrees by ten, not by five.\(^\text{38}\)

These slight variations should not indicate, however, that the diagrams are not useful.\(^\text{39}\) Following Chaucer’s declaration in the Prologue that texts are, in varying degrees, altered and alterable, it is irresponsible to expect that any information is complete or to accept it, immediately and thoughtlessly, as accurate; still, the reader may use to his benefit the awareness of the fractional quality of a datum that is part of a greater, unknown whole. In I.7, while acknowledging that neither the description nor the diagram provide the “entirety,” both factors are purposefully clear and effective: Chaucer explains, for instance, that “every degree of the bordure contieneth 4 minutes,” and then interjects, “that is to seyn, minutes of an howre” (10-11). The diagram, then, serves as both a visual aid to the description and as a tool for gaining a practical, if not elementary, understanding of an abstract equation.\(^\text{40}\) By providing only basic information, Chaucer offers his reader an opportunity not to read and accept the text passively, but rather to engage with it and participate in its construction of knowledge. Working through this description, for example, affords the following: if one degree equals four minutes of time, simple arithmetic offers that 360 degrees equal 1440 minutes, and one revolution equals twenty-four hours. In other words, I.7 and its accompanying diagram offer a way of understanding the revolution of the universe around Earth. Thus, the medieval reader gains a concrete way of understanding the workings of the universe by discovering and utilizing the mathematical expressions of movement of cosmological units on a tangible device.
Not only are the diagrams pertinent to their respective descriptions, but the relationship between illustration and text extends beyond any one particular section. Throughout, the reader must refer back to previous diagrams in order to recognize not only the different elements of the device but also the relationships between those various aspects, a requirement which points to the intricacy of the astrolabe. In this, Chaucer’s *Astrolabe* is like the astrolabe, a textual device that requires operation. Chaucer, in fact, tells us as much in the Prologue, by describing the text as a “mediacion.” With the diagrams in Parts One and Two, the reader’s need to operate the text is even more apparent, as he must move about the book, returning to previous images in order to make whole a series of visual fragments. Thus, the text becomes not only a “mediacion” through which Chaucer may teach, but also a tool for discovery of knowledge. Section I.8, for example, begins by referring the reader back to the previous description: the zodiacal signs on the astrolabe are written “Under the compas of thilke degres” (1) that I.7 describes. In this example, the adjectival reference to “thilke degres” intends to situate I.8 in relation to I.7 on the device, as the text makes clear: “and the nombres of the degres of tho signes ben writen in augrim above, and with longe devysiouns, fro 5 to 5, devyded fro the tyme that the signe entreth unto the laste ende”(5-9). As the top illustration in Figure 2.2 shows, I.8’s diagram does not include the “longe strykes” (I.7) or “longe devysiouns” (I.8) that mark the 5 degree intervals, an omission that requires the reader either to transpose one image on top of the other mentally or to identify both elements on the physical device in order to understand their relationship. Though the beginning of I.8’s explanation refers to information presented in I.7, “tho signes” qualifies the statement by relating the long division lines directly to the zodiacal signs, a move which makes these markings relevant to two different equational components of the astrolabe.
Figure 2.2—MS. e Museo 54, 4v
That the text provides neither entire explanations nor complete diagrams demands that the reader become involved in processing the information. Case in point: in MS. e Museo 54, the descriptions and their accompanying diagrams do not necessarily appear together on one page. For example, 3v contains the illustration for I.6 and the description for I.7; 4r offers I.7’s diagram (Fig. 2.1), which is followed by the explanation for I.8; the diagram for I.8 (Fig. 2.2) appears on 4v, along with both the text and the diagram for I.9. The association between I.7’s text on 3v and its diagram on 4r is simple enough provided the reader is paying attention; however, in order to assemble the illustrations of I.7 and I.8 visually, the reader must physically turn the leaf from 4r to 4v, a move which renders either diagram temporarily absent. This point is important: while Chaucer could not have known that this particular manuscript would be oriented in this manner, his familiarity with other manuscripts and the potential for variations of the same work between manuscript copies may have contributed to his desire to make his reader cognizant of the need to engage in the process of learning. Further, the text that appears within several of the diagrams forces the reader to manipulate the manuscript physically: in Figure 2.3, for example, “thy altitude” is written perpendicular to the text on the page for ready identification of the altitude line; “thy est orisonte” is written upside down; the signs of the zodiac are written as they would appear on the device (Fig. 2.3).
Unless the reader were adept at reading script in different directions, he would need to manipulate the manuscript physically by turning it to where he could easily read the words. Such required repositioning of the manuscript mimics the movements the user would need to make with the astrolabe itself in order to utilize its potential. To read this text passively—to read the words and glance at the images without thinking about their relationships—is to miss the point; based on the possibility of the different textual orientations of the manuscripts, the act of reading the Astrolabe becomes more an exploration and amalgamation of information than a simple process of acceptance. In other words, the text and diagrams, the orientation of the Astrolabe in the manuscript, and the incomplete nature of the illustrations and explanations call for the reader’s active involvement, which in turn permits an experience of the acquisition and consideration of that knowledge which is available in our fragmented sublunar realm.

The abstract concepts that Chaucer offers in this work further emphasize the need for active reading. For example, I.7 uses concrete examples to familiarize the reader with the more
intangible idea of universal movement; in a similar way, I.8 uses the long divisions of the
degrees as a way to contain and simplify knowledge about the zodiacal signs. These ostensibly
physical limitations allow for the introduction of an even more abstract concept, that of infinity,
while at the same time restricting its application specifically to the degrees of the signs. Chaucer
advises, “But understond wel that thise degrees of signes ben everich of hem considered of 60
mynutes, and every minute of 60 seceondes, and so forth into smale fraccions infinit, as seith
Alkabucius. And therfor, know wel that a degree of the bordure contieneth 4 mynutes, and a
degre of a signe contieneth 60 minutes, and have this in mynde. And for the more declaracioun,
lo here thy figure” (I.8.9-17). Though I.7 and I.8 make use of the same long division lines, the
lines mark different quantities: in reference to the universe’s movement around the earth, it takes
four minutes of time to move one degree of angle; in this description, “these degrees of signs”
may be divided into sixty minutes, each minute into sixty seconds, and so forth. Whereas one
full revolution in I.7 equals 1440 minutes, or twenty-four hours, the completion of 360 degrees in
I.8 equals twelve zodiacs, or one year. To extend this proposition further, each zodiac represents
thirty degrees of rotation and each degree may be continually divided by increments of sixty into
infinity. The potential problem with these two descriptions stems from the fact that they rely on
the same sub-units of data—an entanglement for the reader that Chaucer tries to mitigate through
his emphasis on the different applications: “Understand well that these degrees of signs contain
sixty minutes”; “know well that a degree of the border contains four minutes and a degree of a
sign contains sixty”; “keep this information in mind.” Because these descriptions rely on the
same visual information, Chaucer seems anxious to obviate any possible confusion by inserting
clarifying statements. Though these insistent reminders may read like the superfluous
information for which he apologizes in the Prologue, their purpose is clear: to help the reader
navigate the visual and verbal representations effectively and, through such navigation, to begin
to disentangle the complexities of the device and its numerous applications so that when he is
called on to use this knowledge in the conclusions of Part Two, he may do so accurately.

The introduction of infinity demonstrates one such complexity.\textsuperscript{42} The perception of
infinity in late medieval England comes, in part, from Aristotle, whose texts are also
fragmentary, insofar as they consist of talking-points, rather than full expositions.\textsuperscript{43} In his
\textit{Physics}, the philosopher maintains that while infinity may apply to different categories, it can
only exist potentially and reductively: taking the division of magnitudes as an example,
determined, fractional quantities are finite and actual, while the infinite refers to the potential for
those fractions to be bisected continually.\textsuperscript{44} Though a particular measurement may be
perpetually divided, its magnitude cannot be increased. As Aristotle explains, “What is
continuous is divided \textit{ad infinitum}, but there is no infinite in the direction of increase. For the
size which it can potentially be, it can also actually be.”\textsuperscript{45} In \textit{On the Heavens}, Aristotle considers
the cosmic implications of a potential infinite within the bounds of a finite form. Ruminating
about what may exist beyond the universal First Mover, Aristotle writes, “whatever is there, is of
such a nature as not to occupy any place, nor does time age it; nor is there any change in any of
the things which lie beyond the outermost motion; they continue through their entire duration
unalterable and unmodified.”\textsuperscript{46} Based on the unchanging and unchangeable quality of that which
lies “beyond the outermost motion,” Aristotle theorizes that the universe is contained within a
finite form.

In the Middle Ages, the concept of a determinate universe was adopted into Christianity;
in place of the perfect invariant “outer-bounds,” Church doctrine substituted God above the ninth
sphere.\textsuperscript{47} The universe, then, became incorporated within the Divine. In opposition to
Aristotle’s theory of an unchanging, and thus bounded, presence, Thomas Aquinas reasons that God is infinite: “since the divine existence is not received in anything, but is itself its own subsisting existence…it is clear that God is infinite and perfect.” While God may have been conceived as unbounded, the universe remained within the fixed, Ptolemaic structure, and the concept of infinity remained largely unchanged because the universe and, by extension, its ability to be infinite, was still bounded within a magnitude. Aquinas, in considering whether anything other than God may be “infinite in magnitude,” reaches the same conclusion as Aristotle: “through the division of a whole we arrive at the matter, for the parts are related to the whole like matter; but through the addition of the parts we arrive at a whole, which is related to the parts as form to matter. And thus we do not find an infinite in the addition of magnitude, but rather only in the division of magnitude.” William of Ockham extends the idea of “potential existence” to suggest that the infinite exists in actuality. For Ockham, Aristotle’s theory of potentiality demands that a continuum be inseparable:

although the Philosopher posits infinite parts of the same proportion to be actually in every continuum, still he does not posit that they can actually be separated from one another. And therefore he admits that infinity exists potentially and not actually—and so, for the same reason, he posits that number is infinite potentially and not actually, not because there are not present an actual infinite number of parts, but because all the parts are not and cannot be separated.

Ockham’s reading of Aristotle, then, puts forward the notion that an “actual infinite number of parts” can exist within a potentially infinite, inseparable whole, which is, in fact, what Chaucer refers to. Whether potential, actual, or both potential and actual, the understanding of infinity
in the Ptolemaic universe limited the concept to reduction: nothing extended beyond the established boundary, but the space within that magnitude could be divided infinitely.

In order to situate this concept within the astrolabe, the reader must return to “these degrees of signes”—i.e. the long division lines which quantify each sign of the zodiac by degrees of five. An examination of the diagram with respect to infinity necessitates the reader’s initial reliance upon the illustration, while simultaneously highlighting the limitations of the image: just as words can define the meaning of infinity but cannot accurately convey its extension, so I.8’s diagram can serve only as a visible magnitude which functions as a preliminary, tangible reference for the infinity of information to which the device, the images, and Chaucer’s Astrolabe overall, can only allude. Based on the inherent constraints of knowledge and language that he first exposes in the Prologue—“truste wel that alle the conclusiouns that han ben fownde, or elles possibl myhten be fownde…ben unknowe perfity to any mortal man in this regioun, as I suppose…that sothly, in any tretis of the astrelabie that I have seyn there ben some conclusions that wole nat in alle thinges performen hir byhestes. And some of hem ben to harde to thy tendre age of x yer to conseuye” (Prologue 17-27)—Chaucer advises his reader of the need for engagement in the discovery of knowledge and then provides him the opportunity to experience the limitations of both the text and the diagrams in this process. In other words, Chaucer’s use of the infinite in I.8 pushes the reader to advance beyond the visual symbols on the page and into a space of active inquiry, a space where the relationship between I.7 and I.8 establishes a material foundation from which the reader may consider the abstract, bounded infinity of the Ptolemaic universe. By including this gesture toward infinitely small fractions, Chaucer calls upon the contemporary understanding of the bounded infinite to underscore the limitations of human knowledge. Meaning, just as his reader can conceive of the potential, but not actual, knowledge
that “possibl myhten be fownde in so noble an instrument as an astralabie” (Prologue 18-20), he can imagine, but not fully fathom, the infinity that extends from the zodiacal sixty minutes, into the sixty seconds of each minute, and so forth.

What I am arguing is that in the *Astrolabe*, Chaucer uses the inherent, incomplete aspects of the text and the diagrams to create a space where participation with texts and authorities is necessary. By reinforcing the idea that knowledge is innately imperfect in the sublunary world, Chaucer creates a foundation from which his reader may learn to deal productively and competently with such limitations. In fact, Chaucer models an approach to such information in Part Two by providing examples of this section’s propositions and working through the conclusions himself. In II.1, for instance, he explains that “To fynde the degree in whych the sonne is day by day, after hir cours abowte,” the reader must “Rekene and knowe which is the day of thi monthe, and ley thi reule up that same day, and thane wol the verray point of thy rewle sitten in the bordure, upon the degree of thy sonne” (II.1.1-5). Though this statement seems straightforward, Chaucer illustrates the solution by including a real-world example: “Ensample as thus: the Yer of Oure Lord 1391, the 12 day of March at midday, I wolde knowe the degree of the sonne” (6-8). After describing step by step his process of finding the degree of the sun, Chaucer affirms that he understands the governing principle of this procedure after he performs the solution: “And thus knowe I this conclusioun” (15-16). He doesn’t gain its “ful experience” (25), however, until he works the problem again with different variables. Through this careful search for accuracy, Chaucer reminds his reader of the possibility to falter: it is necessary to perform the action more than once to ensure the accuracy of the manuscript’s propositions, the exactitude of the astrolabe being used, and the user’s correct grasp of the conclusion. This “ful experience” assures Chaucer that his method of approach to the first conclusion works because
he can repeat the sequence to find another degree at a different time of the year. What this process suggests to the reader is that reliable understanding is born from fidelity, a concept that seems a striking precursor to the replicability central to the scientific method. Such understanding, of course, must recognize the problems of manuscript reproduction (as Chaucer advises in the Prologue) and the potential of infinite variation, both of which underscore the necessity of the rational approach to knowledge that Chaucer offers.

Chaucer again employs this strategy in conclusion three, as he describes, and then demonstrates, how “To knowe every tyme of the day bi liht of the sonne, and every tyme of the nyht by the sterres fixe, and eke to knowe by nyht or by day the degree of any signe that assendeth on the est orisonte, which that is cleped communly the assendent, or elles oruscupum” (II.3). In this conclusion, he pushes the point that his experience facilitates his understanding of the method, not the solution.54 Having worked the formula once, Chaucer declares, “And in this wyse hadde I the experience for evermo in which maner I sholde knowe the tyde of the day, and ek myn assendent” (II.3.37-40); after his second attempt, he states, “And thus lerned I to knowe ones for ever in which manere I shuld come to the howr of the nyht and to myn assendent, as verreyli as may be taken by so smal an instrument” (60-63). In each of these instances, Chaucer draws attention to the process instead of the result: it is “in this way” that he gains a permanent understanding of this method of discovery. It is “thus” that he “learns to know,” forevermore, in which manner he can determine the information.55 Chaucer’s focus on this programmatic process of “learning to know” elevates his approach to the acquisition of knowledge over its significance, suggesting that the approach to a subject dictates how that subject is understood and how that knowledge can be used. Thus, his inclusion of the conditional clause—“as verreyli as may be taken by so smal an instrument”—underscores the importance of the method, as it
reminds the reader that the astrolabical device is limited: the information Chaucer gains is reliable only insofar as the device is exact. Given that the astrolabe can only gesture towards the infinity of knowledge that forever remains outside the bounds of human cognition, Chaucer’s practice of “learning to know” creates a powerful dynamic between the reader’s approach to knowledge and the machines which contain it. By announcing the deficiencies in his own text and including diagrams to help the audience make connections between their own astrolabes and the treatise, Chaucer guides them through his own practice of reading. In acknowledging the imperfections of the device, the text, and human authorities, his readers can better prepare themselves to acquire useful knowledge.

The diagram that accompanies II.3 contributes to this design. Whereas the illustrations in Part One are meant to facilitate the connection between the descriptions and the device, II.3 both depicts the actual relationship between specific parts of the astrolabe and provides a visual reference for Chaucer’s first “experiential method.” In fact, the text included within the diagram guides the reader to the specific areas of the astrolabe that Chaucer uses (Fig. 2.4).
Figure 2.4—MS. e Museo 54, 12r
The identified “label” points to the “X” from whence he concludes, based on the counting of letters from the line of midnight, that the time is 9 o’clock (II.3.28-34). From this point, he looks “down upon the est orisonte, and fond ther the 20 degree of Gemynis assending, which that I tok for myn assendent” (34-37). In the diagram, the degree of 20 is labeled on the outside of the zodiacal signs, above and to the left of Gemini; directly below the “20” and the concentric zodiac border is the label “the assendent.” Thus, the diagram serves, together with the text, to grant a type of rudimentary experience of the method. The second example Chaucer provides for this conclusion, however, renders the diagram less effective, as he necessarily uses different variables. This difference is important: instead of relying entirely on the authority of the text, the interested reader must follow Chaucer’s verbal illustration on his own device, which affords him a greater opportunity for engagement with the process and, therefore, a more practical understanding of the potential of the astrolabe.

Occasions for the reader to “learn to know” the various potentialities of the astrolabe abound in Part Two. In fact, out of the forty extant conclusions, only six include examples of the solutions. The remaining thirty-four offer precise directions for working through a formula, examples of responses to authority, or explanations about different responses to the conclusions. Based on Chaucer’s provocation of his reader’s engagement in the Prologue, his encouragement of such participation in Part One where the reader must use both diagram and text to assemble an understanding of the different elements of the device, and his introduction of the idea of learning to know through experience, it seems credible that the lack of comprehensive, author-centered examples in Part Two intend to promote active participation in the acquisition of knowledge and to discourage the passive acceptance of information. The logical extension of what Chaucer offers in this work is that knowledge is a product of learning, and learning extends from an
experiential relationship between the individual and the information proffered by authorities. While this relationship allows him to know “ones for ever” a method of gathering and assessing information, his consideration of the knowledge obtained from investigation is governed by his awareness that understanding is imperfect, experience is perspectival, and authorities are limited.

Just as the reader must contend with the fact that the limitations of knowledge and authorities deny the potential for “perfect” understanding and the possibility that the manuscript he uses contains errors, the astrolabe itself is a constraint. To highlight the possible restrictions, Chaucer makes this point repeatedly throughout the treatise: astrolabes are accurate, he argues, “yif so be that the makere have nat erred” (I.21.7); “This conclusioun is verrey soth, yif the sterres in thine astrolabie stonden after the trowthe” (II.34.11); “Now is thine orisonte departed in 24 parties by thy azymutz, in significacioun of 24 partiez of the world (al be it so that shipmen rikne thilke partiez in 32)” (II.31.7-9). The conditional nature of accuracy is amplified by Chaucer’s choice of syntax: by including “if so be,” “if the stars,” and “all be it so” in these phrases, Chaucer reinforces the possibility of imperfect knowing. The combination of these different modes of communicating and obtaining ostensibly whole, but in fact partial, information, for Chaucer, denies the attainability of absolute knowledge. In truth, these various possibilities reinforce the significance of Chaucer’s inclusion of infinity in this work, as the potential for errors or intentional modifications (to the text, to the device, to one’s understanding) are endless.

Along with these contingencies, the reader faces one more obstacle to “knowing”: he must determine how the treatise he reads relates to the device he uses. In two instances in the Astrolabe, Chaucer points out that Louis must first learn to use his own device, a less-accurate model, before he provides information about the other, more precise astrolabes. If the reader is
using a device that is either calibrated for a different location or is of a different quality than that which Chaucer describes, he will need to adjust his use of the Astrolabe to account for the differences. Further, as Chaucer points out in II.39, explanations that various authors provide lack congruity: while some authors claim that “The latitude of a clymat is a lyne ymagined from north to south the space of the erthe” (27-29), others “seyn that yif men clepen the latitude thay mene the arch meridian that is contiened or intercept bytwixe the cenyth and the equinoxial” (32-35). In this example, though the writers are essentially referring to the same lines on the astrolabe, Chaucer includes both identifiers, “latitude” and “arch meridian,” to demonstrate another possible variant: here, the perspective of the “auctour.” These passages point to the fact that, as with Chaucer’s Astrolabe, other treatises on the astrolabe are not universal: because there are different devices and different ideas about how to explain the astrolabe’s potentiality, the information contained in each treatise will not necessarily be entirely, or accurately, dependable, and the only way to discover the reliability of the information is through the type of engagement that Chaucer models in Part Two. Mindful of the probable variations, the reader can better mitigate any possible problems which result from different manuscripts, devices, and descriptions. The idea that Chaucer puts forth is that the translation of one’s awareness about the imperfect nature of information can permit the critical reader to operate within that flawed system in a productive way and draw, as he does, reliable, though ultimately incomplete, conclusions.

Chaucer uses the factors which contribute to this flawed system—imperfect language, deficient authorities, and individual capacity for understanding—as a way to construct his ideas about reading. As he tells us in the Prologue, there are two main reasons why he translates the Astrolabe: he has “perceived well by certeyne evidences [his son Lowys’] abilite to lerne
sciencez touching noumbres and proporciouns” (Prologue 1-4), and he is compelled by Lowys’ “bisi preyere in special to lerne the Tretis of the Astrelabie” (4-6). Chaucer’s use of the word “lerne” in this context suggests an attempt to unite the processes of reading and learning and to apply those systems locally to the manuscript and to the astrolabe, and generally to all knowledge machines; ideally, the application of this knowledge leads both to mastery of medium and of content, a point which Chaucer stresses throughout the Astrolabe proper. What he alludes to through this word choice here is that the impetus behind this work, in essence, is a desire to expose a beneficial means of knowledge acquisition—a practice which requires consideration of language, authority, and one’s reasonable responsibility to determine the validity and utility of information. This first sentence also gives us a glimpse into Chaucer’s thought process: while he considers Lowys’ desire to read the Astrolabe, he focuses primarily on whether or not that inclination “to lerne the Tretis of the Astrelabie” is proper. Chaucer deems his son’s desire rightful after he “perceives well” and observes “certain evidences.” Though his own method is not yet explicit, this initial section looks forward to the Astrolabe’s overt examples of engagement with and assessment of information that Chaucer relies upon, consistently, to make thoughtful choices.

After establishing that this work is the product of his determination of the righteousness of Lowys’ petition, a rectitude that then extends to the virtue of his own understanding, Chaucer quickly points out that his Astrolabe is not a definitive work about the device. Instead, he views it as a companion to the “sufficient astrolabe” that he has given to Lewis: he writes, “therfor have I given the a suffisaunt astrelabie as for owre orizonte, compowned after the latitude of Oxenford, upon which by mediacioun of this litel tretis I purpose to teche the a certain nombre of conclusions apertenynge to the same instrument” (Prologue 9-15). According to the MED,
“mediacioun” signifies “by means of something” or “by way of something.” Chaucer’s fashioning of the Astrolabe as a mediation, then, suggests that he views this work as a medium through which ideas may be shared: what he offers will come to include his knowledge of the astrolabe, its potential applications, and the methods for obtaining specific information, along with his own personal observations about knowledge, authority, and the determination of whatever “truth” might be found in this realm. The included description of this particular astrolabe, sufficient for “owre orizonte, compowned after the latitude of Oxenford,” narrows the scope of both Lewis’ astrolabe and Chaucer’s Astrolabe. This limitation, then, focuses his son’s attention, and ours, on the fact that the information mediated through this work needs to be tested by the reader to ensure its accuracy because of possible differences between Lewis’ astrolabe and others not calibrated to Oxford’s latitude. Put another way, the information that Chaucer offers may or may not translate precisely to different instruments; as such, the task of determining exactitude, by necessity, remains with the reader. Following this reasoning, Chaucer’s Astrolabe is a means through which both he and his reader participate, individually and collectively, in the act of knowledge acquisition and assessment.

By offering only a “certain nombre” of conclusions, Chaucer intentionally limits the scope of the work and thus further frames his Astrolabe as a result of his personal engagement with his own method of learning. As he explains, there are “thre causes” which define this limitation:

The furste cause is this: truste wel that alle the conclusiouns that han ben fownde, or elles possibli myhten be fownde in so noble an instrument as an astralabie, ben unknowe perfittly to any mortal man in this regioun, as I suppose. Another cause is this: that sothly, in any tretis of the astrelabie that I have seyn there ben some
conclusions that wole nat in alle thinges performen hir byhestes. And some of hem ben to harde to thy tendre age of x yer to conseyve. (15-24)

What Chaucer proffers in these reasons is the idea that knowledge is confined within boundaries: not only does he submit that all information that has been found is “unknowe perfitly,” but the construction of future potentiality through the repetitious “possibly might” pushes the point that a complete understanding of the information derived from the astrolabe is impossible precisely because such information is intrinsically fragmentary. In other words, imperfect understanding inhibits the potential of current knowledge, which in turn is bounded by the fact that there is knowledge yet unknown.⁶³ Both Chaucer’s Astrolabe and the physical device, then, become tangible magnitudes which contain information that is infinitely, though not irredeemably, incomplete.

Chaucer complicates this perspective, moreover, by asserting that there is no authority, no expert, to whom one may turn to gain absolute mastery of this information: as he writes, there is no mortal man in his region who has a complete understanding of the astrolabe…as he supposes. While this statement, on the surface, seems to indicate that knowledge is geographically situated, that somewhere there may be a man, mortal or otherwise, who has perfect knowledge, the point that Chaucer makes here is that he doesn’t know: he, as an author, as a potential authority, can only deduce conclusions based on what information he has.⁶⁴ By highlighting the partiality of his knowledge, Chaucer refigures his authorial position from the role of authority to one of rational, though limited, credibility. In fact, Chaucer drives home this declared lack of expertise by protesting that this work isn’t even his: “But considere wel that I ne usurpe nat to have fownde this werk of my labour or of my engin. I nam but a lewd compilatour of the labour of olde astrologens, and have hit translated in myn Englissh only for thi doctrine”
(63-67). As a “lewd compilator,” Chaucer asserts no ownership over the treatise that he compiles; he translates the “labour” of others solely for the instruction of his readers. Chaucer’s decision to distance himself from the role of authority challenges the expectations of readers who assume that what is written is necessarily true. Instead, he offers them the reasons why the actuality of a completely and perfectly reliable authority is extremely problematic: what knowledge there is remains fractional; the information is not perfectly understood; an authority cannot render a subject flawlessly. In so doing, Chaucer gives warning against the immediate and uncritical acceptance of information, a warning which promotes the awareness of alternative possibilities.

Chaucer reinforces that warning by suggesting the possibility that the written transmission of ideas may likewise lack reliability. Along with the incomplete nature of human knowledge and the limited capacity of and differences between astrolabes, manuscripts may well contain errors: “that sothly, in any tretis of the astrelabie that I have seyn there ben some conclusions that wole nat in alle thinges performen hir byhestes.” Not unlike the first cause in which the limits of his knowledge allow him only to suppose a conclusion, Chaucer here first avers the fractional quality of his information: he is dependent solely on those manuscripts that he has seen. That he acknowledges the existence of other information beyond his ken reminds the reader of the fractionality of knowledge in general. Beyond that fractionality lies another problem: in the treatises which he does know, incorrect figures and their subsequently false conclusions exemplify an error with either the formulae or the calculations themselves. As Chaucer states, some will not, in all things, perform what they promise. Expressly put, calculating a flawed equation with different variables leads to inaccurate results. This problem with the information provided by his sources illustrates the limitations of both generalizations.
(the formulae) and their application (the calculations) in making effective use of an astrolabe, a problem that many of his characters elsewhere (Melibee and Januarie being but two instances) fail to confront. The extension of Chaucer’s admonition about the fallibility of both equations and calculations is a call to awareness: the blind acceptance of any formula or sententia may lead to error or misunderstanding, while the accurate reckoning of a calculation and its subsequent applications requires the reader’s cautious and critical interaction with the assertions being made. Without that, erroneous data may be overlooked and accepted, rendering it useless and possibly pernicious. In other words, to understand and utilize the information offered through such formulae and such calculations, the reader simply must carefully and critically engage with the information with which he is presented, including Chaucer’s own. While he makes no overt recommendation to this practice, Chaucer is able to deduce that all astrolabical treatises contain errors precisely because he has the experience of having tested the propositions himself. Indeed, as we have seen in Part Two of the Astrolabe, Chaucer advocates the experience of working through the equations as the only true way to learn how to use the device and understand its potential and its limits.

Just as Chaucer denies his own personal authority through his insistence that his understanding of the device, and, in fact, knowledge itself, is perspectival, he likewise rejects any authoritative claim for his Astrolabe for the same reasons that he is skeptical of the untested accuracy of other manuscripts. By stating that his work excludes those ideas which are too difficult for Lowys’ tender years to understand, Chaucer professes that the Astrolabe is, and will always be, incomplete. Further, his pointed lack of specificity, “some conclusions,” underscores his claim about knowledge, as he informs his reader that there is additional information about the astrolabe and its workings that he does not include. His intentional ambiguity in this instance
reifies the unknown possibilities and, in so doing, urges his audience to acknowledge the limitations of the information he proffers and then continue their search for additional and more reliable information. That Chaucer sets up his *Astrolabe* as a product of deliberation that offers a programmatic approach to knowledge and yet refuses to allow it to serve as an expert document suggests that he was more interested both in the discourse that this work could initiate and the process that he advocates—for Lowys and for others—than he was in creating a definitive English translation of scientific information.

The reliability of his sources and the calculations they offer is not the only problem he poses for his audience. Chaucer’s choice to translate his Latin sources “under ful lihte rewles and naked wordes in EnGLISH” (26-27) suggests that he not only desired to translate his sources into the vernacular, but that he was concerned to translate them into a clear and readily understandable composition. Instead of creating a system of communication that merges signified and signifier in perfect union, though, Chaucer acknowledges this unattainable “absolute.” Indeed, his appeal to “every discreet persone that rethith or herith this litel tretis, to have [his] rewde endyting for excused, and [his] superfluite of wordes” suggests that while he attempts to present the information in a clear, straightforward manner, that too is problematic. Thus he apologizes (in its fullest sense) for the repetition and simple writing of the *Astrolabe* for two reasons: “The firste cause is for that curious enditing and hard sentence is ful hevy at ones for swich a child to lerne. And the seconde cause is this, that sothly me semeth betre to writen unto a child twies a good sentence than he forgete it ones” (48-53). The point to the writing, then, is to make the knowledge of *astrologia* accessible through a deliberate and purposeful attempt to simplify the abstruse composition of his Latin sources and the difficult subject matter,
as the combination of complicated writing and complex material is too cumbersome for his little Louis to manage.

While Chaucer draws attention to his personal experience with manuscript errors in the Astrolabe’s Prologue, his concern with scribal transcription is most apparent in his poem “Chaucers Wordes Unto Adam, his Owne Scriveyn.”67 Likening Adam’s errors to “negligence and rape,” Chaucer contends that he engages in a constant struggle to ensure the correct copying of his work: “So ofte adaye I mot thy werk renewe, / It to correcte and eke to rubbe and scrape, / And al is thorugh thy negligence and rape” (5-7).68 The charge here is clear: Adam has taken Chaucer’s words and, through either witless inattention or willful choice, made a new, unauthorized text. By availing his readers of the “thre causes” in the Prologue, Chaucer establishes that every text, including his own, may contain errors and faults, and as we learned above, the manuscript editions of the Astrolabe do include errors, additions, and deletions. Proceeding from this knowledge, then, judgments about accuracy or applicability of information become fixed squarely within the purview of each individual reader precisely because, for Chaucer, a complete and perfect text, like complete and perfect knowledge, is impossible.

As Chaucer makes every attempt to guarantee the accuracy of his work, so he offers his reader methods to deal with such textual discrepancies productively. Yet the problem that the reader faces is greater than one of textual errors. Chaucer points out in the Prologue that the real issue is one of knowledge, which is communicated through a flawed system of language and authority. Thus a reader’s engagement in identifying useful and reliable information is essential to the extraction of the potential knowledge in a text. Of course, attempting to ascertain the utility of information without some type of experiential method of working with that information is akin to the providentially-guided but powerless Constance of the Man of Law’s Tale who is set
forth in a rudderless vessel that carries her to destinations unknown. So Chaucer not only points out the issues of language, authority, and knowledge in the Astrolabe’s Prologue, but he also provides a model of engagement in the Astrolabe proper that shows how one can participate actively with the information the text contains in order to experience the discovery and acquisition of knowledge. In fact, this process of knowledge acquisition, Chaucer’s “learning to know,” allows his reader a broader, vernacular means of reading through which the individual may hone his craft of mindful participation and empower himself to deal competently with these imperfect systems.

Of course, competence, or sufficiency, indicates a degree of ability which is, as Chaucer would have us to understand his Astrolabe, one piece of a greater whole. That is, the process that Chaucer offers can help the reader to become a better thinker, but it will not, because it cannot, lead to perfect knowledge. Chaucer’s inclusion of infinity in Part One reinforces this idea as it acknowledges the limitations of the physical astrolabe—the division lines not only mark delineations of space and time, but these divisions conceptually continue both within the parameters of the device, as well as in the translation of that data to the world. Similar to the limitations of the astrolabe, the physicality of the manuscript imposes certain restrictions on a text’s capacity to proffer information. In the first of the three conditions that Chaucer applies to his text, he suggests that current knowledge is both incomplete and fractional; further, the true magnitude of any one particular idea cannot be assessed. The second condition highlights the possibility that written knowledge is flawed, and the third announces that Chaucer, himself, refuses to compose a “complete” work. Based on these preliminary causes, along with Chaucer’s later intimations about the constraints of all mediation—some astrolabes are more accurate than others; similar to manuscripts, some devices are flawed; some “astrologiens” cast
horoscopes, which require superficial data input and produce subjective results—what Chaucer really offers to his reader in the Astrolabe is not simply an opportunity to master the workings of the scientific device, though familiarity with the astrolabe and its applications is a consequence. Instead, he is providing an occasion for his reader to consider the implications of circumscribing entities, while at the same time providing a method of engagement with limited, though useful, information.

As his causal conditions in the Prologue demonstrate, the awareness of the necessarily inconclusive nature of what we “know” instructs a continual consideration of different ideas and perspectives. The Astrolabe, Chaucer states, is one such interpretation: “considere wel that I ne usurpe nat to have fownded this werk of my labour or of myn engin. I nam but a lewd compilatour of the labour of olde astrologens, and have hit translated in myn English only for thi doctrine. And with this swerd shal I slen envie” (Prologue 63-68). The envy which Chaucer hopes to slay with this statement is envy of expertise. As I argue above, Chaucer is careful to distance himself from the role of authority; here, by extinguishing an emotion that would hinder his reader’s ability to engage in the “learning to know” process he advocates, Chaucer simultaneously suggests that the Astrolabe is one part of a vast body of knowledge, one compilation that results from his own understanding of and approach to this subject. Beyond the compilation of science, though, remains a statement about reading that is everywhere in Chaucer—passive, credulous reading at best leads to limited, and essentially useless, understanding. The narrator of the Legend of Good Women, for example, gains knowledge through reading and advises “to the doctrine of these olde wyse, / Yeve credence” (F-Text 19-20). Yet shortly thereafter, having given these books his “feyth and ful credence, / And in [his] herte have hem in reverence” (F-Text 31-32), he excitedly goes into a field and pledges his
allegiance to a flower. Apparently, his “faith and full credence” denied his ability to understand the metaphor. The narrator of the *Parliament of Fowls* provides another example, as he readily admits that he stops thinking when he reads: “To rede forth hit gan me so delite / That al that day me thoughte but a lyte” (27-28). In the *Canterbury Tales*, the Wife of Bath’s Jankyn reads his book of wicked wives “with ful good devocioun” (III.739) because it permits him to proclaim superiority, however hollow, over her. By emphasizing the process of “learning to know” in his *Astrolabe*, Chaucer helps his reader prepare himself to manage differences in astrolabes, errors in manuscript transcription, and authoritative entities because it is this method of approach to knowledge that the reader can control and authorize. In short, it allows him to become skilled in the way he reads. It is this process of reading, of understanding that all information is but a piece of a larger puzzle, that instructs Chaucer’s modern reader to recognize that the Prologue is one part of the *Astrolabe*-whole. Such recognition, I argue, better prepares us to realize, if incompletely, what Chaucer understood to be the promise of his method of “learning to know.”

For his contemporary reader, the extension of this “learning to know” philosophy has the potential to empower that individual to become the master of his own knowing. As this potential relates to the astrolabe, the reader’s ability to learn how to use the device, with the help of the text and its diagrams, facilitates his ability to situate himself within the fixed sphere of the earth in relation to the moving spheres of the cosmos. Through the mediation of tangible tools, the reader may embark on a basic discovery of universal space and time, distance, and infinity and a consideration about how these factors can, and do, impact his life. Out of such purposeful deliberation, the limitations of astrolabes, manuscripts, and authorities become object lessons in the discovery of, and appreciation for, a cosmological understanding that medieval science had yet to gain and a language that can never adequately communicate those ideas to which science
can only allude. The translation of this awareness to daily life, then, makes the need for participation in learning paramount to any true understanding of the limitations and applications of knowledge.

In the six centuries since Chaucer first wrote his *Astrolabe*, our understanding of the universe has dramatically changed: Earth was repositioned from the fixed center of the universe to a rotating and orbiting planet within a solar system; that solar system was discovered to be but a small unit on the outskirts of a much larger celestial system—the Milky Way Galaxy; however large the Milky Way is in comparison to our own solar system, it is itself a small, peculiar entity within the space we know as the universe. As opposed to the Ptolemaic model that enclosed the universe within a bounded actual, modern science has revealed the fact that the universe is both infinitely large and continuously expanding and includes not only black holes, but also dark matter. This universe which we study, however, may not be all there is to examine: theories of parallel universes and multiverses suggest the possibility of a future understanding to which our current knowledge can only begin to fathom. Though science has allowed us to progress beyond the medieval geocentric understanding of the world, it has also, to borrow from Chaucer, pointed to an infinitely vast wealth of knowledge that we, one day, “possibly might find.” So while our knowledge base has changed, the need for the methods and processes, the experiential way of “learning to know” that Chaucer advocates in the *Astrolabe*, has not. What Chaucer proposes through the “mediacion of this litel tretis,” then, is that while knowledge may never be perfect and language will always be flawed, one can, through a pragmatic, deliberate, and reflective approach, understand less imperfectly.
All references to the *Treatise on the Astrolabe* are taken from *The Complete Poetry and Prose of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 2nd ed. Ed. John H. Fisher. The text of this edition is based on MS. Dd. 3.53, “with corrections and variants from Bodley 619, Bodley Rawlinson D.913, and Harvard University.” Though most commentators tentatively agree that the date of composition is 1391, based on Chaucer’s use of March 12, 1391 in Part II of the Astrolabe, I follow Andrew Cole’s suggestion that the date is more likely towards the middle of the decade. For his argument, see Cole, “Chaucer’s English Lesson,” *Speculum* 77.4 (Oct 2002): 1128-67, at 1154.


J. E. Cross believes that Chaucer’s translation is so effective at teaching scientific principles to Lewis that it would have become a text to which adults would turn to teach their own young sons about the device. “Teaching Method, 1391: Notes on Chaucer’s Astrolabe,” *English Literature, Criticism, Teaching* 10.59 (1955): 172-75. Margaret Schlaugh argues that Chaucer “explicitly declares the principle that style should be adapted to a reader’s age and capacities.” “The art of Chaucer’s prose,” *Chaucer and Chaucerians: Critical Studies in Middle English Literature*, Ed. D. Brewer, University: U of Alabama Press, 1966, 143.


In the *lectio divina*, the reader is instructed to complete four steps (not necessarily in sequence) with the goal of being moved to contemplate God. While both the *lectio divina* and Chaucer advocate active participation in their respective methods, their determined objectives differ greatly.

The specific quote, which will be considered later in the essay, is “And thus lerned I to knowe ones for ever in which manere I shuld come to the howr of the nyht and to myn assendent, as verreyli as may be taken by so small an instrument” (II.3.60-63).

The ascendant is a rising zodiacal sign.

According to the *MED*, Chaucer is the first to use “infinite” in the sense of “ad infinitum.” The early adjectival connotations are all ascribed to Chaucer, as well. The noun form, “infinity,” first appears in the B-text of *Piers Plowman* and is followed shortly thereafter by Chaucer (*Boece*).


Alkabucius, also known as Al-Qabisi and Alchabitius, was a 10th century Arabic astronomer who wrote *Introductorium ad scientiam judicialem astronomiae*. Chaucer quotes Alkabucius at I.8. Chaucer also cites Ptolemy at I.17.8. For Laird’s argument, see “Geoffrey Chaucer and Other Contributors to the *Treatise on the Astrolabe*,” 146.

Lipson, “Descriptions and Instructions in Medieval Times,” 249.

Lipson, 249.


An extended consideration of this topic is outside the scope of this essay.

The manuscripts that contain diagrams, with respective time period, are as follows: 1400-1425, A¹ (Bodleian MS. Ashmole 391), B² (Bodleian MS. Bodley 68), Dd¹ (Cambridge University Library MS. Dd.3.53), and M¹ (Bodleian MS. e Museo 54); 1425-1450, Br (Brussels, Bibliothèque Royale Albert 1er MS. 4862-69), Hg (Aberyswyth, National Library of Wales MS. Peniarth 359), R¹ (Bodleian MS. Rawlinson D.913), and Sp² (British Library MS. Sloane 314); 1450-75, R¹ (Trinity College MS. R.14.52); 1475-1500, Hv (Harvard, Houghton Library MS. English 920).


To date, I have examined Dd¹, Dd² (Cambridge University Library MS. Dd.12.51), J (St. John’s College MS. E.2), R¹, A¹, A² (Bodleian MS. Ashmole 360), A³ (Bodleian MS. Ashmole 393), B¹ (Bodleian MS. Bodley 619), B², Dg (Bodleian MS. Digby 72), M¹, M² (Bodleian MS. e Museo 116), R², Rp (Bodleian MS. Rawlinson D.3), Ad¹ (British Library MS. Additional 23002), Ad² (British Library MS. Additional 29250), Eg (British Library MS. Egerton 2622), Sp¹, and Sp² (British Library MS. Sloane 314). Though I have not yet studied the Brussels MS, Edgar Laird observes that this manuscript “has spaces for nineteen figures, none of which has been supplied.” See “Geoffrey Chaucer and Contributors to the *Treatise on the Astrolabe*” 163n57.


Ibid., 101. Seymour supports this claim by challenging Skeat’s contention that the *Astrolabe* is incomplete and offers another possibility. Based on his interpretation of what we read as Part Two, Seymour argues that this section actually includes Parts Two through Four: Part Two “contains sections on the fixed stars and the planets (foreshadowed in the Prologue as *tertia pars* and *quarta pars*); rubrics in MS. Bodley 68 divide Part Two into Parts two through Five; “Each section begins with a coloured initial or, where the decoration was not added, a blank space with guide letters therein”; no section is numbered; “all manuscripts are imperfect at their end”; “the ‘Supplementary Propositions’ (II.41-46) and the ‘Spurious Conclusions’ (II.41a-42b) are not part of the original work”; and finally, “The extant text comprehends virtually all the substance of its major source, the pseudo-Massahalla” (102-103).

Cole, 1154.

For an alternate reading, see Edgar Laird, “Geoffrey Chaucer and Other Contributors to the *Treatise on the Astrolabe*.”


27 John Fisher notes that 20 minutes was considered the length of time required to walk a mile. *The Complete Poetry and Prose of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 911n7.9.

28 J. D. North, in *Chaucer’s Universe*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988, explains that “minute” could have referred either to “the sixtieth part of a degree, or to a time equivalent to a quarter of a degree” (48).

29 For a discussion of Chaucer’s use of descriptive language, see Carol Lipson, “‘I N’am But a Lewd Compliator’: Chaucer’s ‘Treatise on the Astrolabe’ as Translation,” *Neuphilologische Mitteilunge* 84 (1983): 192-200.

30 In addition to highlighting their importance, Catherine Eagleton argues that Chaucer’s original text had diagrams and suggests that later devices were created based on the illustrations in the early manuscripts. For her complete analysis, see “‘Chaucer’s own astrolabe’: text, image, and object,” 303-26.

31 There is a long history of recognizing the importance of the relationship between diagrams and text. In his discussion of the astronomical diagrams in Pliny’s *Natural History*, Bruce Eastwood suggests that diagrams were modified “by a desire for more rapid communication of information” (“Plinian astronomical diagrams in the early Middle Ages,” *Mathematics and its applications to science and natural philosophy in the Middle Ages: Essays in honor of Marshall Clagett*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987, 141-72, 157). Similarly, Carl Nordenfalk writes, “Books were, it is true, occasionally illustrated ever since the beginning of the Hellenistic period, but the function of the illustrations was mainly practical. That this applies to scientific treatises, in which figures had a descriptive value, goes without saying” (“The Beginning of Book Decoration,” *Essays in Honor of Georg Swarzenski*, Ed. Oswald Goetz, Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1951, 9-20, 9). While both of these scholars deal with work before the late Middle Ages, I believe that their observations are analogous.

32 Catherine Eagleton, in “‘Chaucer’s own astrolabe,’” argues that these manuscripts “were probably copied by the same scribe from a common source” even though “there are nonetheless differences in the way that the diagrams are drawn” (307), and Walter Skeat suggests that these manuscripts were apparently “written out by the same scribe, nearly at the same time. The peculiarities of spelling, particularly those which are faulty, are the same in both in a great many instances” (viii-ix). He goes on to observe that Dd.3.53 is corrected, while e Museo 54 is not. For his full analysis, see *A Treatise on the Astrolabe, addressed to his son Lowys by Geoffrey Chaucer*, Ed. Walter Skeat, EETS, 1872.

33 Given the constraints of space in the manuscripts, the exact number of ruled-spaces may occasionally differ. The ruled-spaces prescribed in each of the figures in this essay are as follows: Figure 2.1, 13; Figure 2.2, 13 per image; Figure 2.3, 14 (the top of the page is not ruled); and Figure 2.4, 13.

34 The diagrams in this manuscript are introduced by the phrase: “And for more declaracioun, lo here the vigure.” While Bruce Eastwood rightly points out that such phrases could have been scribal, Chaucer’s *Astrolabe* contains two references to a diagram which occur within the text in II.26: “And the almykanteras in her astrolabies ben streyhte as a lyne, so as sheweth in this figure”; “and the embelif orisonte, wheras the pol is enhawsed upon the orisonte, overkerveth the equinoxial in embelif angels, as sheweth in the figure” (II.26). Later manuscripts that do not include the illustrations nevertheless contain these references, with one exception: Andrew Edmund Brae’s printed edition (1870).

35 Catherine Eagleton, in “Chaucer’s own astrolabe” notes that “the provision of geometrically inaccurate diagrams could allow someone to know which part of a real or imagined astrolabe is being referred to, as a reminder of the
parts of the instrument or as a reminder of the procedures described in the text, and this function is often overlooked” (305).

36 Dd.3.53’s diagram is likewise partial, but it is labeled differently: it does not mark “the bordure,” but it identifies the “+” as “thy litel” and marks “the est lyne” and “the lyne meridional.”

37 As J. D. North tells us, “The quality of an astrolabe depended to a great extent on the number of circles engraved on it. Only a large and fine instrument was likely to carry ninety almucantars. Lewis’s evidently had forty-five of them, at two-degree intervals, which implies that it was quite a respectable possession. Chaucer mentions others with them every three degrees; but intervals of five and six and even ten degrees are known” (Chaucer’s Universe 60). North’s Chaucer’s Universe offers a detailed explanation of the astrolabe.

38 The corresponding image in Dd.3.53 marks degrees 1-90, labels the “est lyne” and “The lyne meridional,” but does not label “The bordure.” Whereas e Museo only marks the +, Dd.3.53 includes “thy litel” to the left of the cross, presumably to emphasize that the cross on the diagram is the “litel croys” in the description.

39 In the Variorum edition of the Astrolabe, Sigmund Eisner chooses not to include any manuscript diagrams because, as he explains, “no manuscript has a complete set of figures, and because the manuscript figures are sometimes inapt or, even in Dd 1, inaccurate.” Though Chaucer points out in the Prologue that manuscript errors are common, which would certainly include the diagrams, Eisner opts to use drawings of the Painswick Astrolabe, even though, as he points out, “the Painswick itself is mismarked in one place” (10).

40 The textual orientation of e Museo 54 was planned with the images in mind: the leaves of the ms are ruled down the side, allotting each image 13 spaces.

41 Peter J. Hager and Ronald J. Nelson make a similar argument in reference to the text alone: “As Treatise is written primarily for the lay audience, Chaucer uses clear transitions…that methodically move readers from the description of one part to that of the next…For example, having just closed Section 1 of Part I, which introduces the readers to the astrolabe ring, Chaucer opens Section 2 with the transitional combination of ‘This ryng renneth in a maner…’” (90). For their complete argument, see “Chaucer’s A Treatise on the Astrolabe: A 600-year-old Model for Humanizing Technical Documents,” 87-94.

42 Edgar Laird notes that “Chaucer’s citation of Alchabitius here represents an importation, from outside astrolabe literature proper, of matter from an astrologer who, as such, needs limitably small units of space and time.” This importation, Laird offers, comes from “a passage near the beginning of differentia prima of Alchabitius’s Introductorius ad magisterium judiciorum astrorum, of which there is no recent edition. It is a tenth-century Arabic astrological work translated into Latin in 1144 and into French and English in the late fourteenth century.” In “Astrolabes and the Construction of Time in the Late Middle Ages,” 58 and 66n53. J. D. North, in Chaucer’s Universe, provides the actual citation in the Middle English translation: “And a degree is divided into 60 minutes, and a minute into sixty secundes, and a secunde into sixty thriddes; also that folewith, scilicet, the 4 and the 5, ascendinge til to infinite” (48n14).

43 John E. Murdoch argues that while many considerations of infinity and continuity were “interpretations and elaborations of things said or implied by Aristotle…there were also elements within the fourteenth-century analysis of the infinite and the continuous that went well beyond what one could appropriate from the Philosopher,” in “William of Ockham and the Logic of Infinity and Continuity,” Infinity and Continuity in Ancient and Medieval Thought, Ed. Norman Kretzmann, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982, 165-206, 165.

44 These categories include time, generations of man, and division of magnitudes. The entire explanation may be found in Physics III.6.25-26. Unless otherwise noted, this and all other references to Aristotle’s works are taken from The Basic Works of Aristotle, Ed. Richard McKeon, New York: Random House, 2001. Physics III.4-8.

45 Physics III.7.15-17.


49 Aquinas, I.7.4, lines 77-82.


51 Chaucer’s introduction of infinitely small fractions is an example of a continuous entity: space, when divided, is still space. For an in-depth explanation of this idea, including Zeno’s paradoxes, see John L. Bell’s “Oppositions and Paradoxes in Mathematics and Philosophy,” in *Axiomathes* 15 (2005): 165-80.

52 Though the diagram includes even longer division lines which mark the 30 degree intervals of the zodiacal signs, these are not referenced in the description.

53 Jose Luis Espejo argues that the conclusions of Part II show a practical application through the inclusion of specific dates and the narration of Chaucer’s experience. See “La prosa científica de Geoffrey Chaucer: Estudio textual y gramatical de *A Treatise on the Astrolabe*,”

54 Carol Lipson recognizes Chaucer’s attention to the method, but her response to this technique focuses on how the personal examples affect the success of the directions. For her complete argument, see “‘I N’am But a Lewd Compilator.’”

55 These two moments are so important, in fact, that *nota bene* hands accompany them in Dd.3.53. The first of these hands points to “And in this wyse hadde I the experience for evermo in which maner I sholde knowe the tyde of the day, and ek myn assendent” (II.3.37-40); the second points to “And thys lerned I to knowe ones for ever in which manere I shuld come to the howr of the nyht and to myn assendent” (60-62). Following Skeat, Kari Anne Rand Schmidt suggests the textual corrections were made by the illustrator of Dd.3.53. Given that the ink of the N.B. hands is similar to that of the diagrams and the corrections, I would argue that the illustrator is responsible for them, as well. See Rand Schmidt’s *The Authorship of The Equatorie of the Planetis*, esp. 155, and Skeat’s *A Treatise on the Astrolabe; addressed to his son Lowys by Geoffrey Chaucer*, EETS, esp. vii-viii.

56 Dd.3.53’s diagram likewise provides information for this first example; it is, however, more complete than e Museo 54’s and requires more work on the part of the reader.

57 The images that are combined in this diagram are first presented in I.8, I.16, I.17, I.18, and I.22. II.3 is not unique in this achievement: many of the diagrams in Part Two are similarly complex.

58 Bruce Eastwood (*Ordering the Heavens*) discusses the necessary collaboration between word and diagrams in scientific texts: “Insofar as the text presents words while the diagram presents continuous lines there is an obvious difference. Beyond that, the continuous line that forms, let us say, a circle that imparts to a viewer a coherent image that on first viewing actually explains ‘circle,’ since no aspect or combination of letters in the word does so. At the same time, ‘circle’ is a necessary connective to allow a speaker to bring the linear form into linguistic communication. On these simple grounds we understand that neither ‘circle’ nor the circle can stand alone without at least implying the other” (395).

59 In response to Section 1 of Part II, Peter Hager and Ronald Nelson (“Chaucer’s *A Treatise on the Astrolabe*: A 600-year-old Model for Humanizing Technical Documents”) argue that the “rhetorical technique of involving the...
writer as participant engages the audience in the work at hand and strengthens the reader-writer relationship by making the exercise, in effect, a joint effort” (91). While their interpretation of this situation is valid, Hager and Nelson do not consider the implications of the absence of the joint effort in later conclusions.

60 Conclusions 1, 3, 12, 23, 25, and 40 contain examples.

61 I.18 and II.5.

62 Chaucer mentions that Louis’ astrolabe is “compowned after the latitude of Oxenford” (Prologue, line 11) and that the almincantaraths “ben compowned by 2 and 2” (I.18.11). J. D. North (Chaucer’s Universe) remarks that the quality of astrolabes could vary widely: “The quality of an astrolabe depended to a great extent on the number of circles engraved on it. Only a large and fine instrument was likely to carry ninety almucantars. Lewis’s evidently had forty-five of them…which implies that it was quite a respectable possession. Chaucer mentions others with them every three degrees; but intervals of five and six and even ten degrees are known” (60).

63 Sheila Delaney provides an interesting reading of such limitations in Chaucer’s House of Fame: The Poetics of Skeptical Fideism, Gainesville: UP of Florida, 1994, esp. 78-81.

64 This, in fact, may well have been a consideration of Chaucer’s, given his personal exposure to information and knowledge from different countries, different time periods, and different languages.

65 The reasons for such failings are likely scribal. John Reidy notes, “Treatises could contain erroneous information, and so give rise to misleading results,” The Riverside Chaucer, 3rd ed., Ed. Larry D. Benson, 1987 at 1095. Edgar Laird (“Geoffrey Chaucer and Other Contributors to the Treatise on the Astrolabe”) goes so far as to suggest that scribes of the Treatise took liberties in adding, deleting, or reordering conclusions.

66 Cole suggests that here Chaucer “takes up the modesty topos typical of countless translators” (1135).

67 As E. T. Donaldson points out (“The Manuscripts of Chaucer’s Words and Their Use,” Writers and Their Background: Geoffrey Chaucer, Ed. Derek Brewer London: Bell, 1974, 85-108), “If Chaucer himself were to read his works in the best of modern editions he would probably charge the editor with innumerable infidelities, and address him a stanza even more scathing than the one he addressed to Adam his scribe, whose ‘negligence and rape’ in copying cost Chaucer painful hours of correction” (85).

68 “Chaucers Wordes unto Adam, His Owne Scriveyn,” in The Riverside Chaucer. All references to Chaucer’s works, except for the Astrolabe, are taken from The Riverside Chaucer.

69 For information on Alchabitius’ Introductorius ad magisterium judiciorum astrorum and a more detailed analysis of Chaucer’s use, see Edgar Laird, “Astrolabes and the Construction of Time in the Late Middle Ages.”

70 In I.18, Chaucer points out a difference between the astrolabe that he is describing and others: “Thise almykanteras ben compowned by 2 and 2, albeit so that on divers astrelabies some almynkanteras ben devyded by on, and some by two, and somme by 3, after the quantite of the astrelabie” (10-15). On the most accurate astrolabes, as John Fisher points out, “an almicantarath is marked for every degree of latitude,” The Complete Poetry and Prose of Geoffrey Chaucer, 916n18.11. In I.21, Chaucer mentions that the longitudes and latitudes of the fixed stars determined “yif so be that the makere have nat erred” (7). Chaucer’s use of “astrologien” should not be confused with the modern “astrologer.” Until the 17th century, there was no separation between astronomy and astrology, so an astrologien would be one who practices this combination. Chaucer, however, declares that he has no faith in the casting of horoscopes (II.4.57-60).

71 There is no appreciable difference between these lines and those of the G Text.

72 Science has recently discovered that the characteristics of our solar system—sun; small, rocky planets; massive, gaseous planets; regular, predictable orbits—are relatively unique. “NPR Reporters Reflect On 2010’s Important

Chapter Three

Chaucer’s Dialectic of Expectation: Thopas, Melibee, and the Benefits of Effective Listening

As Prudence catalogues the various ways in which Melibee has erred in his solicitation of counsel, she charges him with misconstruing others’ words to his own end: “Ye han erred also, for ye han maked no division bitwixe youre conseillours…ne ye han nat knowe the wil of youre trewe freendes olde and wise, / but ye han cast alle hire wordes in an hochepot, and enclyned youre herte to the moore part and to the gretter nombre, and there been ye condescended” (VII 1255-57). Melibee should have, according to this criticism, considered the source of the information (true friend or feigned counselor), determined the “wil” or intentions of his old and wise friends, and then judged the advice based on these factors. Instead, he creates a hodgepodge of words that allows him to justify his desire for vengeance. Melibee, in other words, does not actively listen, a choice which severely limits his potential both to understand the situation correctly and to respond to it rationally. Melibee’s chosen assumption illustrates an issue that Chaucer addresses in the both the Tale of Melibee and the Tale of Sir Thopas. Indeed, it is this problem of expectation that incites Harry Bailly’s anger at the Thopas, leads to Melibee’s initial rejection of wise counsel, and inspires Chaucer to offer a method of engaging wisely and deliberately with this system of unthinking expectations in the Melibee.

Chaucer crafts his examination of this system into a practical exercise in which the reader may participate: by staging himself as a character of the Canterbury Tales—the pilgrim-narrator
of both the *Tale of Sir Thopas* and the *Tale of Melibee*—he invites his readers to confront their expectations about what “Chaucer” will deliver. The fact that this *Thopas-Melibee* union represents the only instance in the *Canterbury Tales* where a Tale is brought to an abrupt end and its speaker is invited to tell a new, different story suggests that, for Chaucer, there is something meaningful about the relationship between these two distinct works. Though their superficial differences are clear—their compositional forms, their subject matter, and their presentation in the manuscripts—I suggest that Chaucer connects these two Tales in order to deal, from different perspectives, with the problems inherent in unscrutinized expectations. This is a lesson similar to that which Jill Mann reveals in her groundbreaking analysis of Chaucer’s use of sources in the *General Prologue*. According to Mann, critical enthusiasm for the *Prologue* often results from “the few characters who provide focus for a critic’s particular interest, whether this is in their comic aspects, their psychological complexity, or the moral significance attached to them.” Following this argument, such critics unwittingly impose limitations on their ability to understand the *Prologue* as a whole because of the expectations they place on their assessments of the characters. My analysis of the *Thopas-Melibee* is comparable to Mann’s study of the *Prologue*. I argue that in the relationship between the *Thopas* and the *Melibee*, Chaucer challenges the idea that forms—i.e. types of structure or *schema*—are the only determining factors of meaning, and that one’s expectations of form and unthinking reactions to those expectations limit the individual’s ability to judge the information communicated by and through those forms wisely. Indeed, what Chaucer reveals in the *Boece*, the *Retraction*, and the *Astrolabe* underscores the fact that meaning can never be determined by one factor alone; instead, through his provocation of recursive assessment and “learning to know,” Chaucer highlights both the complexity of cognition and the methods that lead to productive learning
within that multifarious system. By exposing the issue of expectation through his Canterbury character, Chaucer invites his readers to reconsider the preconceived notions that inform their understanding of his Tales, as well as the ways in which such notions are ultimately limiting. Through the Thopas-Melibee association, Chaucer presents his audience with an issue that impacts their capacity to understand rightly—locally in the Canterbury Tales and generally in real-world interactions—and proposes a method of engagement that opens the idea of form outward. This method, offered through Melibee’s Prudence, models a conscious and specific process for both reading (of all “forms”) and reasoning that is as necessary to his modern readers as it was for his contemporary audience.

Critical responses to the Melibee vary widely, but there are four distinct approaches that inform my argument. For example, both Judith Ferster and Larry Scanlon locate the work among the fürstenspiegel or “mirror for princes” tradition and thus highlight the importance of its genre: these writings typically addressed a king or prince and intended to educate him about the virtues and duties of a ruler. Other scholars focus on the Tale’s moral implications. Karla Taylor writes that “the ethical and social problem the Melibee treats is how to diffuse the violence of a powerful man, allegorically by fostering self-governance within Melibee’s wounded mind, and, more naturalistically, by reconciling Melibee with his enemies,” and Paul Ruggiers remarks, “As a serious piece, it must be taken as a guide-post of moral philosophy dealing with the correction of the intellect and the practical decisions affecting action in this life.” Yet another critical approach examines the role of gender in the tale. Amanda Walling argues that “Melibee is concerned with the ways in which gender is refracted in language, and with how texts and their reiterations make visible both the gendered conditions of their production and the gendered social structures that shape how those texts are used.”
specifically about such social structures, Mari Pakkala-Weckstrom calls attention to the fact that “even the learned and eloquent Prudence needs to resort to role-play to attract her husband’s attention.”

Jane Cowgill furthers our understanding of this gender dynamic by arguing persuasively that women could assume an advisory role provided that they first established their authority through the embodiment of their own advice. While my argument is in keeping with these first three perspectives, I contribute to this critical discussion through my emphasis on the relationship between the Thopas and the Melibee. I argue that Chaucer carefully cultivates this relationship to draw his reader’s attention to the problematic, though natural, issue of expectation.

The final line of inquiry that is important to my study considers how the forms of the Thopas and the Melibee relate to Chaucer-the-poet. Richard Firth Green contends that “It is perhaps not over-fanciful to see in the two tales which Chaucer assigns himself within the Canterbury framework an expression of two contrasting aspects of the court author’s role.” Lee Patterson pushes this idea further and focuses on how the Thopas-Melibee defines Chaucer himself: these two tales “represent a further attempt on Chaucer’s part to define both the kind of writing that constitutes The Canterbury Tales and, more tellingly, the kind of person who wrote it.” Patterson interprets the Thopas-Melibee relationship as one that allows Chaucer to align his authorial identity with minstrelsy: “the juxtapositioning of the two tales, and the dramatic context in which they are located, should lead us to the conclusion that Chaucer is disowning not the childish frivolity of Sir Thopas but the pragmatic didacticism of Melibee, and that he is defining his authorial identity…in terms provided by the obsolete and disregarded tradition of minstrel performance.” Like Patterson, I find value in the relationship between the Thopas and the Melibee, but my analysis emphasizes what these two works teach the reader about himself...
and the benefits to prudent reason. Included in this consideration is my examination of how the lessons from the *Melibee* apply both to the *Thopas* and to Harry Bailly’s expectations about what the *Thopas* will be. As I contend, both the *Melibee*’s position within the Canterbury collection and its form of prose encourage a moment of reflection; the affinity that Chaucer creates between these two Tales creates a natural starting point for such a reflection.

My core argument in this chapter is that Chaucer illuminates the relationship between form and *sentence* in the *Thopas* and the *Melibee* in order to demonstrate the problems of unscrutinized predictions (i.e. those that the individual immediately accepts as absolutely valid) and to consider the complex nature of understanding. I begin this examination by discussing the theoretical framework of form and expectation that shape these two Tales. Next, I focus on the assumptions of the characters and the invited suppositions of the reader to illustrate the consequences of these self-created limitations for rational decision-making. As part of this analysis, I consider the differences between the verse form of the *Thopas* and the prose form of the *Melibee* in order to analyze both their superficial differences and how those qualities impact initial interpretations. Further, I argue that the examples Chaucer offers of emotional reaction in these works demonstrate not only another impediment to reason, but also indicate the incomplete nature of subconscious predictions. I then turn to the Ellesmere and Hengwrt manuscripts in order to assess the correlation between the material text, each Tale’s respective genre, and Chaucer’s examination of expectation. Finally, I draw attention to one of Chaucer’s chief concerns in the *Melibee*: that knowledge is limited by capacity, perspective, and availability, which thus demonstrates the need for counsel and then the need to assess all information, including advice, before choosing to accept to reject it. As I argue in Chapter Two, Chaucer highlights the need for such assessment due to the fragmented nature of this realm in his
Astrolabe. Through the Melibee, Chaucer suggests another method of dealing with such fragmentation productively. To illuminate this point about the need for counsel and evaluation, I offer a comparison between the Melibee’s source, Renaud de Louens’ Livre de Mellibee et Prudence, and Chaucer’s version and then move into a discussion of semiotics and Melibee’s contract with the adversaries. Overall, I suggest that because form is both a material and rhetorical structure for reasoning, Chaucer’s decision to link the Thopas and the Melibee offers his reader a moment in which to reflect about his own expectations of schema and to discover the benefits to gathering information, deliberating, and making rational choices, as opposed to reacting emotionally.

“Form,” obviously, is a complex topic, and Christopher Cannon’s work on medieval theories of form illustrates the importance of its consideration. Cannon argues that the relationship between form and content allows for the reader to determine a version of the originating thought (or thoughts) that govern the text.\(^\text{12}\) This idea of form, Cannon suggests, is “simultaneously a theory of literary making (a set of views about how thoughts become things),” and a “rigorous, practical interpretive tool” that “allows criticism to move from the most trivial of details to the most complex of ideas.”\(^\text{13}\) Cannon’s theory therefore asserts that there is a “necessary and constant relationship between a poet’s originating thought and the shapes in which it unfolded.”\(^\text{14}\) What I would like to suggest is that through the examples of Bailly and Melibee in these two works, Chaucer complicates the notion that his reader can discern his originating thought by the shape in which he unfolds it, to borrow from Cannon, by highlighting the influence of the reader’s own perspective as it informs his initial, and to some extent, his continual, understanding of Chaucer’s text. As Ralph Hanna notes, “Chaucer is oppressively conscious of the way in which literature physically subsists and thereby enters culture. And he
retains a fastidious hope that he can arrest that process, apparently down to the level of ensuring that words get written with the proper final –e’s.”¹⁵ Such concern demonstrates the extent to which, as an author, Chaucer tries to ensure a correct representation of his ideas.

That the Melibee appears in the middle of a work that is, up to the point where “Chaucer” offers his “litel thyng in prose” (VII.937), entirely verse must be a part of this representation. By including a composition in prose, Chaucer simultaneously calls upon his readers’ expectations of this form and challenges them to investigate the utility of those beliefs. Helen Cooper’s study on prose romances in the Middle Ages illuminates the history of the prose form: “Prose had long been the dominant medium for historiography, and the composition of narrative in prose immediately suggested the historical.”¹⁶ If at its most basic level, “form” tells us what a thing is (though not the entirety of what it contains, as the infinity within the astrolabe demonstrates), then following Cooper’s argument, the prose form’s connection to history alludes to a stronger, real-world significance and application of its information than does verse. Further, according to N.F. Blake, prose “allowed for length, a more leisurely development, a more involved style and the introduction of learned words.”¹⁷ In short, the prose form allows for a freedom of expression that verse cannot match: with prose, greater explanation is possible where it is needed; clarity can be more easily achieved through the use of doublets (as in the Melibee) or superfluous speech (as in the Astrolabe); the similarity between prose and common speech allows for better access to its content.

Prose can also be poetic. While the immediate identifiers of poetic expression are rhyme and metre, the historical conception of poetry, as a genre, focuses on the potential of language, as opposed to its aesthetic structure. From Aristotle’s suggestion that poetry occurs independent of form to Thomas Aquinas’ delineation between secular and Scriptural poetic expression, a
common concern among these philosophers deals with what poetic speech can accomplish. As Chaucer’s work contributes to this historical conversation, it is instructive to consider these points briefly. For Aristotle, the designation of “poetry” based solely on rhyme scheme thwarts the inherent capacity of true poetic speech: “it is the way with people to tack on ‘poet’ to the name of a metre, and talk of elegiac-poets and epic-poets, thinking that they call them poets not by reason of the imitative nature of their work, but indiscriminately by reason of the metre they write in.” Aristotle’s argument, ultimately, is that poetry is distinguished from different types of writing because the essence of poetry deals with statements of universals: he explains, “By a universal statement I mean one as to what such or such a kind of man will probably or necessarily say or do—which is the aim of poetry.” In other words, there is an intrinsic quality to poetry that elevates the mind to a consideration of larger ideas; the distinction between poetry and other forms of writing occurs not by virtue of form, then, but rather in what each message communicates. Aquinas writes that poetic speech, while pleasing in secular writing, is an essential component of Scripture: “Poetry makes use of metaphors to produce a representation, for it is natural to man to be pleased with representations. But sacred doctrine makes use of metaphors as both necessary and useful.” Aquinas’ understanding of the potential of metaphor to create connections between the esoteric and the material in order for laymen to understand religious Truth suggests that, like Aristotle, he believes that poetry invites a consideration of larger ideas. While Chaucer may not have studied these concepts directly, his work is suggestive of his interest in creating poetry that makes, to borrow from Aristotle, a universal statement. Indeed, the superficial rhyme of the Thopas encourages a reflection about what “poetry” is, and the prose of the Melibee invites a consideration about such universal concepts as gender, truth, and the methods of sound judgment. Simply put, through his Thopas-Melibee, Chaucer
Chaucer’s consideration of predictions based on form invites a further reflection: that particular forms impose restrictions on their accompanying content, as well as on their textual orientation in manuscripts. Writing about the form of annals and chronicles, Sarah Foot remarks that this structure “is not an impediment to comprehension but is a central element in conferring meaning on their content. If sets of annals are read entire, rather than as random assortments of variously collected (and unedited) notes, they convey significant narratives.”

Foot’s caveat—that one can distinguish narrative in what might otherwise read as a miscellany of observations only through reading the annals in their entirety—highlights the importance of recognizing the relationship between the form and the totality of its contents, including manuscript orientation, before determining significance. Indeed, as Judith Butler argues, the relationship between form and content is indivisible: “If matter never appears without its schema [i.e., its ‘form, shape, figure, appearance, dress, gesture, figure of a syllogism, and grammatical form’], that means that it only appears under a certain grammatical form and that the principle of its recognizability, its characteristic gesture or usual dress, is indissoluble from what constitutes its matter.”

Likewise, the relationships between forms and sentence in the Thopas and Melibee are inextricably entwined; the meanings of these relationships, however, are influenced by the unthinking demands that the characters or the reader place on the schema. This point bears repeating. Form and content together offer more information and thus a greater chance for comprehension, but another factor must be considered along with these elements: the influence of the reader’s expectations about form.
From a cognitive perspective, expectations are a fundamental aspect of our daily interactions. M. A. K. Halliday notes that in modern linguistic theory, predictions are “the most important phenomenon in human communication. We make predictions—not consciously, of course; in general, the process is below the level of awareness—about what the other person is going to say next; and that’s how we understand what he or she does say.”

George Lakoff and Mark Johnson’s more recent work on the “cognitive unconscious” reveals exactly how complicated this system of prediction is: “Our unconscious conceptual system functions like a ‘hidden hand’ that shapes how we conceptualize all aspects of our experience. This hidden hand...shapes how we automatically and unconsciously comprehend what we experience.”

Put another way, meaning is constrained not only by form, but also by the unwitting expectations that an individual exerts on that form. Stephen Bax’s study, *Discourse and Genre*, develops this concept. He writes, “Our mental schemas...set up expectations which help us to predict what we will find in any new situation, and scripts help us to predict what will happen next. Both types of conceptual structure help us to function and cooperate effectively in the real world, and both also impact our understanding and construction of texts.”

With both Harry Bailly’s rejection of the *Thopas* and Melibee’s initial dismissal of Prudence’s counsel, Chaucer proffers examples similar to these modern theories: both characters anticipate, in each case wrongly, the content based on the form through which it is given. Though modern scholars instruct us that such predictions take place at a subconscious level, Chaucer theorizes that wayward interpretations result from the assumption that such predictions provide complete information. By extending this idea to include written modes of communication, Chaucer invites his readers to consider the expectations that both they and the Canterbury pilgrims place on genre, those that the readers...
bring to the manuscript, and the assumptions about bodily forms that Chaucer exposes through Harry Bailly and Melibee.

Following Lakoff and Johnson, the complexity of the association between structure, prediction, and understanding stresses the need to work within that system as a whole, instead of trying to separate one factor from the others: they write, “our categories are formed through our embodiment. What that means is that the categories we form are part of our experience! They are the structures that differentiate aspects of our experience into discernible kinds. Categorization is thus not a purely intellectual matter, occurring after the fact of experience.”

Thus, experience directly affects, and is affected by, classification, which in turn impacts the individual’s ability to understand a given data-set. In their relation to the Thopas-Melibee, these theories underscore the intricacy of expectation. Foot’s notion of totality demands, I think, the consideration not only of the forms that real individuals and fictitious characters see, but also any predictions that limit the individual’s capacity to observe that totality. Butler’s reading of the bounded nature of schema and content demonstrates the need to evaluate the entirety of available information. Lakoff and Johnson’s revelation about the mind’s use of categories stresses the importance of Chaucer’s consideration of such issues in the Thopas-Melibee. More specifically, by drawing our attention to the consequences of both Bailly and Melibee’s flawed predictions, Chaucer suggests that the individual may broaden his perspective, and thus increase his awareness, by acknowledging the limitations of his own understanding.

Along with form of composition (the Thopas is, in form, poetic; the Melibee prosaic), there are two different, though complementary, concerns about form raised by the Thopas-Melibee: manuscript form and bodily form. A study of manuscript form, which will be discussed later in the chapter, examines the orientation of these works in the manuscripts, what
their arrangements communicate about the texts, and what predictions might be encouraged through their appearance. To prompt a reflection about bodily form, Chaucer includes reactions to the physical bodies of both his Canterbury pilgrim and Melibee’s Prudence. As part of his larger consideration of the expectations that an individual places on a particular form, Chaucer includes assumptions about bodies and gender. As Carolyn Dinshaw explains in her landmark study of the role of the body in Chaucer’s work, “A defining characteristic of the female, in both classical and Christian exegetical traditions, is her corporeality, her association with matter and the physical body as opposed to the male’s association with form and soul.” In applying this definition to language, Dinshaw argues that “If the first Adam is associated with the spirit of an utterance, Eve is associated with its letter, divided from intent or spirit, fragmentary, limited, and unstable.” Following this reading, Eve, and by extension the feminine, is thus figured as a lapse in true signification that requires masculine intervention. Though Dinshaw’s analysis suggests a general trend in medieval attitudes about gender, I posit that Chaucer’s Thopas-Melibee demonstrates an exception to this rule. Indeed, these works criticize both Bailly and Melibee’s prescriptive reactions to the bodies they encounter and suggest that each of these characters fashions his response in a way that benefits the way he wants to view the situation. Jane Cowgill notes the lengths to which Prudence must go to overcome her gender: “The fictional opportunities offered Prudence in the Melibee suggest that woman must prove her worthiness not only by being wise and virtuous, but also by embodying the very values which she hopes to persuade her male opponent to accept.” The role of the body and gendered forms in these two works, I argue, underscores Chaucer’s overarching concern with expectation, while at the same time challenging his audience to confront their own easy assumptions about the significance of gendered bodies.
The way these particular structures constrain and, in some ways, invite predictions of content is analogous to the medieval understanding of matter and form. Notably, in his discussion about the soul, Aristotle asserts that “matter is potentiality, form, actuality.” If we consider a form’s *sentence* as comparable to its matter, then the compositional, textual, or bodily form would be seen as an “actual” or concrete entity, whereas the *sentence* communicated through that form is “potential” to the degree that the receiver correctly understands it. In the *Thopas-Melibee*, he acknowledges his reader’s role in determining the significance of his work, while at the same time instigating the reader’s examination of how well he controls his own process of assessment. Thus, I propose that Chaucer’s examination of form calls attention to the perspectival reactions to different structures (compositional, manuscript, and bodily) because any meaningful consideration of “form” must first acknowledge and work through the limitations that an individual necessarily, and often unthinkingly, places on those forms. These two works together offer the reader the opportunity to reflect upon the different variables that contribute to right understanding and to recognize the folly in expecting one factor alone to communicate the whole. In other words, these two works together offer an opportunity for the reader to exercise the process of recursive assessment from the *Boece* and later the *Retraction* and the acknowledgement of fractional understanding from the *Astrolabe*. The *Thopas-Melibee*, then, becomes an object lesson in the utility of conscientious, rational deliberation in the determination of truth.

Chaucer illustrates the problem of such unthinking expectations with the Host. When the Prioress concludes her tale of hasty, emotionally-blinded disaster, Harry Bailly turns to the pilgrim “Chaucer” and attempts to define, and thus to understand, this character based solely on what he sees: the Host “at erst” looks “upon” the pilgrim and asks, “What man artow?” (VII.694,
While this question denotes Bailly’s confusion as to how to classify this particular pilgrim, the heart of the query is based on his desire to understand what, and by extension who, this character is. Instead of waiting for a response, Bailly attempts to answer his own question by relying only on his limited perception; that is, the Host believes that “Chaucer’s” appearance holds the answer. By looking only to this type of schema, Bailly limits his own capacity to find the information he seeks. Though he attempts to define “Chaucer” by assigning different labels—“This were a popet” (701); “He semeth elvyssh” (703)—Bailly gets no closer to identifying exactly what he is looking at. When the pilgrim agrees to tell his tale, the Host determines, based solely on the pilgrim’s “cheere,” that the group will hear “Som deyntee thyng” (711). These attempts to assign meaning quickly and concretely severely limit Bailly’s potential to discover what “Chaucer” is: it remains unclear whether or not Bailly’s ambiguous statements are apparent even to him, and his unfounded assessment of what the tale will offer denies his potential to profit from its telling. In fact, it is this assumption-based approach to knowledge that leads to his angry interruption of the Thopas:

“Namoore of this, for Goddes dignitee,

…for thou makest me

So wery of thy verry lewednesse

That, also wisly God my soule blesse,

Myne eres aken of thy drasty speche.” (919-23)

Despite the fact that the pilgrim informs the group that his tale is “of a rym I lerned longe agoon,” the Host dismisses this statement in favor of his own baseless assessment: “Ye, that is good…now shul we heere / Som deyntee thyng, me thynketh by his cheere.” Instead of providing a “deyntee” poem, Chaucer gives his pilgrim namesake a four-beat couplet, three-beat
line rhyme scheme. This choice draws attention to the subject of schema, in this case, verse form, the unsupported expectations which can result from predictions about form, and the subsequent problems that such unscrutinized presumptions can cause.

When Harry Bailly declares that the Thopas is “nat worth a toord,” he bases his interpretation on the difference between what he expects to hear—“Som deyntee thyng”—and what he believes “Chaucer” provides—“rym dogerel.” His analysis, thus, is driven by his own expectations. Though he doesn’t recognize the flaw in his own process of assessment, Bailly certainly reacts to the experience of the rhyme’s vocalization. Indeed, he calls attention to the style of composition four times within the span of nine lines: “Now swich a rym the devel I bitche!” (924); “This may wel be rym dogerel” (925); “Thy drasty rymyng is nat worth a toord!” (930); and “Sire, at o word, thou shalt no lenger ryme” (932). Bailly’s repetition of “rhyme,” coupled with his vehement irritation with the poem, is further evidence that the meaning he assigns to the vague “Som deyntee thyng” differs from what the pilgrim, in fact, delivers. Chaucer’s repeated use of the term “rhyme” in this section serves a different purpose: by drawing attention to the declared subject of the Thopas—it is “of,” or about, rhyme—he offers readers the opportunity to participate in the long-established conversation about the purpose of poetic speech by confronting, initially, their own expectations of what such speech is. What does it look like? What does it sound like? Does it rhyme? While Bailly’s response implies his answers to these questions, it also highlights the disjunction between his erroneous, and thoughtless, prediction about the tale’s content and what “Chaucer” delivers. Through this judgment, moreover, Chaucer presents his audience with an occasion to observe Bailly’s emotional reaction to his own miscalculation, which in turn both emphasizes the problem of the unconscious prediction and the need to make such responses conscious and considered. Similar
to Bailly’s self-imposed restriction to understanding who and what “Chaucer” is, his expectation that he has predicted the content correctly based on schema alone denies his ability to find meaning in the *Thopas*.

Chaucer crafts an opportunity for his audience to consider their own expectations about form: the poetic surface of the *Thopas* insists upon the reader’s assessment of poetry as a category. Similar to the other verse Tales, it follows a particular format of meter and rhyme scheme, save for the occasional bob-lines, and its composition is purposefully aesthetic. But if we accept Bailly’s assessment, it falls short of poetry’s purpose—to inspire the minds of its audience to a consideration of larger ideas. Indeed, as a mélange of various sources and styles, the arrangement of the *Thopas* does seem to favor the creation of poetic design over poetic substance. In this way, scholars who argue that this work is “devoid of sentence” are partially correct; because Bailly interrupts the poem, we cannot know what the overt sentence might have been. I would like to suggest a different approach: instead of looking only to the *Tale of Thopas*, I propose an examination of the way in which Chaucer frames the *Thopas* with its Prologue and Bailly’s later interruption. Inasmuch as “Chaucer” tells his audience that the tale is about a rhyme, its episodic narrative is secondary to the work’s stated purpose. Bailly’s inability to understand this design stems from his earlier dismissal of the information that the pilgrim provides. Chaucer’s frame, then, elevates the *Thopas* sequence from “rym dogerel” to a work that invites a larger exploration of one’s personal reactions to and expectations of different forms. So while Bailly misses a chance to learn from “Chaucer’s” poem, the larger, universal statement that Chaucer affords is yet open for analysis: the reader can learn from the Host’s reaction and reflect on the implications of such unthinking responses.
The physical layout of the Thopas in the early manuscripts of Chaucer’s Tales presents the reader with another schema, this time of appearance: each couplet is joined by an end-bracket; the three-beat line extends from the couplet-bracket; the three-beat lines are themselves joined by brackets, off of which appear the occasional bob-lines. This structure overwhelms the reader and the page. While the Prologue to the Thopas requires between four and five inches of horizontal page space in the Ellesmere, the layout of the tale itself requires roughly eight inches of the approximate 11.25” of possible horizontal space. With the bob-line additions, this requirement expands to nearly 9.5” (see Figure 3.1).
Figure 3.1—MS. Ellesmere, 152r
Chaucer’s medieval audience would have been familiar with the graphic tail-rhyme schematic, as Rhiannon Purdie points out: “it was regularly employed by copyists of Anglo-Norman tail-rhyme poems in manuscripts dating from the end of the twelfth century into the fourteenth century. It was inherited by the scribes of Middle English tail-rhyme verse.”⁴⁰ Even while his contemporary readers would have been accustomed to this visual apparatus, Chaucer’s bob-line additions intensify an already complicated structure. The text in Figure 3.1 reads,

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Into his sadel he clamb anon,} \\
\text{And priketh over stile and stoon} \\
\text{An elf-queene for t’espye,} \\
\text{Til he so longe hath riden and goon} \\
\text{That he foond, in a pryve woon,} \\
\text{The contree of Fairye} \\
\text{So wilde;} \\
\text{For in that contree was ther noon} \\
\text{That to him durste ride or goon,} \\
\text{Neither wyf ne childe (VII.979-806)}
\end{align*}
\]

The inclusion of the bob-line “So wilde” confounds an already elaborate arrangement: in the Ellesmere, Adam Pinkhurst, the scribe of both the Ellesmere and the Hengwrt, creates a new series of brackets which extend from the second set in order to accommodate the bob; in the Hengwrt, he indicates the separation of the bob-line with two forward slashes (“//”) (see Figure 3.2). Maintaining this visual form becomes so difficult, in fact, that even Pinkhurst can’t produce it flawlessly: in both the Ellesmere and the Hengwrt, he drops “That to him durste ride or goon” (805).⁴¹ Due to this absence in the Ellesmere, Pinkhurst foregoes the bracket and
simply draws a straight line from “For in that contree was ther noon” to “neither wyf ne childe” in order to join “childe” with the bob-line “so wilde” (Figure 3.1). In Hengwrt, he abandons the graphic tail-rhyme entirely for the two lines which follow this particular bob-line (“so wilde”) and then picks it up again once the rhyme scheme normalizes (Figures 3.2 and 3.3). These two moments indicate that the structure of the *Thopas* is such that a professional scribe not only had difficulty managing it, but that he was dissatisfied with his first attempt in the Hengwrt and thus tried a new approach in the Ellesmere.
Figure 3.2—MS. Hengwrt, 214r
Figure 3.3—MS. Hengwrt, 214v
Bailly’s reason for protesting the Thopas becomes both visually apparent to readers of these manuscripts and aurally obvious to listening members of a public reading: the reader confronts the specific and demanding challenges presented by the graphic tail-rhyme schematic; the listener contends with the complications that such schema present. Purdie notes that the structure of this tale “would keep [readers] constantly aware of the process of navigating through it, thus interfering with their imaginative submersion in the fiction of the tale-telling contest or the tale itself.” Indeed, if Chaucer uses the Thopas and its frame in order to examine the issue of form and the frustrations inherent in presumptions based on that form, as I argue, then the aesthetic construction of this work in the manuscripts underscores these issues by creating an experience wherein a structure is separated, to the degree possible, from its content. The point, of course, is to suggest that the one cannot be divorced from the other—they are two components of the same entity. Following Purdie, reading Thopas in the manuscripts forces the reader to pay less attention to the story and more attention to its aesthetic arrangement. The physical orientation of this text in the manuscripts, then, creates an opportunity for the audience to experience the distraction of form and the difficulty of finding meaning when that form is divided from its sentence. By the time Bailly interrupts the tale, the reader has traversed three full pages of graphic tail-rhyme, and one imagines that his eyes ache as much as do Bailly’s fictitious ears.

The Host’s interruption of the Thopas instigates a change in style: after the simplified, though visually complicated, graphic tail-rhyme scheme, Chaucer introduces iambic pentameter couplets. In the manuscripts, these couplets require slightly more horizontal page space than the rhyming couplets of the Thopas, which not only highlights the visual distinctiveness of the rhyme doggerel, but also reminds the reader of its excesses. In the Ellesmere, the Melibee’s
prose requires roughly 6.5 inches of horizontal space, and a portrait of the pilgrim “Chaucer” appears with the text (see Figure 3.4).

Figure 3.4—MS. Ellesmere, 153v
That this portrait, with its left index finger pointing to “Melibee” accompanies the *Melibee* instead of the *Thopas* suggests the scribe’s belief in *Melibee*’s greater significance. Indeed, “Chaucer’s” hand seems to mimic the Nota Bene hands commonly used in manuscripts to draw the reader’s attention to something particularly important. While the Hengwrt includes no pilgrim portraits, the *Melibee*’s layout is roughly equivalent, requiring 5.19” of its available 8.25” of horizontal space (see Figure 3.5).43
Figure 3.5—MS. Hengwrt 216r
Though the *Melibee* consumes more physical space on the page in both manuscripts, due to its horizontal layout and its lack of stanzaic breaks, its appearance is visually less demanding: to navigate this tale, the reader need only follow the common linear path. Further, both the Ellesmere and the Hengwrt include the names of authorities cited in the text (including Melibee and Prudence), next to the line where the reference occurs. These marginal signposts are specific to a readership and serve to facilitate engagement with the text. In the transition from the complicated schematic of the graphic tail-rhyme to iambic pentameter to prose, Chaucer continues to challenge his reader’s predictions about *schema*; here, in the form of prose.

As mentioned above, the prose form suggested a sense of historicity while allowing the writer more freedom in his compositional choices. In appearance and in accessibility, the prose form simulates every-day communication and thus opens its content to a vaster audience and permits greater clarity. While the *Melibee*’s prose form, in itself, is not particularly striking given its *sentence*, its placement at the center of the *Canterbury Tales* is. Paul G. Ruggiers notes that the *Melibee* “has a singular import for a whole range of meaning and structure of the tales. Chaucer to be sure does not tie in its special meaning in any overt way, nor does he do so with the Parson’s Tale; rather, he allows the Parson’s Tale and the *Melibeus* to stand as the great pauses for definition with regard to the rest of the structure.” ⁴⁴ (88). Ruggiers has a point: when the Host turns to “Chaucer,” the reader of the Canterbury collection has already encountered a series of issues inspired by or communicated through the pilgrims, and I submit that many of these problems result from erroneous expectations. The Reeve, for example, expects that the Miller intends his story as a direct, personal affront and thereby misses the moral (not to mention the connection between the *Miller’s Tale* and that of the Knight). The Host labels the Parson a
Lollard simply because the latter chastises him for swearing. The Friar assumes that his assertion of superiority over the Summoner will be accepted by his audience: “Pardee, ye may wel knowe by the name / That of a somonour may no good be sayd” (III.1280-81). The Prioress believes that no one will reject her anti-Semitism. When the Host turns from the Prioress to “Chaucer,” his initial query—“What man artow?” (VII.695)—suggests that he is trying to establish a frame through which to anticipate “Chaucer’s” character. Thus begins the Thopas-Melibee’s meditation about expectation and the benefits of examining such assumptions through recursive analysis. By moving from verse to prose during this meditative moment, Chaucer draws upon the benefits of the prose form while simultaneously asking his audience to examine their presuppositions about this form. Further, the qualities of the prose form evoke the meditation that the Thopas-Melibee requires through its expansive, expository structure. The Melibee’s prose thereby slows the reader’s progression through the text and invites him to reflect not only upon the sentence of the Melibee but also upon how these teachings impact his initial responses to the earlier Tales.

When “Chaucer” accepts Bailly’s invitation to “telle in prose somewhat, at the leeste, / In which ther be som murthe or som doctryne” (934-35), he frames the Melibee as “a moral tale vertuous, / Al be it told somtyme in sondry wyse / Of sondry folk, as I shal yow devyse” (940-42). That is, the story he chooses is moral and virtuous, characteristics which persist through different iterations by diverse speakers. By framing his Tale in this way, “Chaucer” focuses his audience’s predictions about the ensuing story by proclaiming its virtues; while the responsibility for determining those virtues remains with his audience, the idea of benefit lessens the possibility of outright dismissal based on different schema. Chaucer reinforces this idea of distinct “tellings” through his pilgrim-namesake’s statement, “as I shal yow devyse.” The MED lists “to
design or plan (sth.),” “To form (sth.), fashion, shape, or construct; portray (sth.),” or “To tell (sth.), say, relate” as possible meanings for “devisen.” By establishing the pilgrim as the deviser and not simply a speaker, Chaucer fashions the Melibee as a tale with which the audience may be familiar but that is told in a different way by someone new. This point that information may be communicated in different ways without affecting the message is so important, in fact, that “Chaucer” mentions the potentiality four times:

But nathelees hir sentence is al sooth,
And alle acorden as in hire sentence,
........................................
And though I nat the same wordes seye
As ye han herd, yet to yow alle I preye
Blameth me nat; for, as in my sentence,
Shul ye nowher fynden difference
Fro the sentence of this tretys lyte
After the which this murye tale I write. (946-64)^45

Though subtle, “Chaucer” suggests that diversity (in both speaker and rendering) can produce “oon sentence,” an idea that he substantiates through the example of the Synoptic Gospels (951). The idea, in effect, is that all roads lead to Rome. In borrowing from the Boethian ideal that the end of all is the Good, Chaucer implies that there is a similar Good in analogous literary works.

As a method of curtailing unconscious predictions of content by his pilgrim companions, the significance of “Chaucer’s” desire to prepare his audience to deal with the probable variations of his version cannot be overestimated. By calling attention to the differences between speakers and renderings of the story, and yet asserting that the sentence does not vary,
“Chaucer” reminds both fictional and physical audience members that the appearance of the speaker and the genre of speech are not the only indicators of meaning. Indeed, in the *Melibee*, Chaucer pushes the boundaries of prose beyond linear argumentation and into the realm of poetic expression. Eleanor Johnson’s study of Boethius’ use of prose and metre in his *Consolation of Philosophy* helps to illuminate this point. She cautions that while “Boethius makes prose the form of dialogic argumentation and logic, and meter the form of song,” these forms are not rigid: “Part of the *Consolation*’s goal is to help the character Boethius to appreciate the particular aesthetic ‘sense’ of the prose passages, and to understand that the *metra*, like the *prosae*, can bear serious cognitive content, in addition to providing sensual pleasure and affective bolstering.” I argue that through the *Thopas-Melibee*, Chaucer similarly serves his reader: understanding comes from considering both *schema* and content, apart from resolute predictions about what the content should be.

As I have been arguing, Chaucer introduces the issue of form and the complications which result from ill-informed judgments in the Prologue to the *Thopas*: Harry Bailly expects the pilgrim-narrator to produce “Som deyntee thyng” based on how the narrator appears instead of on what he says. Chaucer’s inclusion of Bailly’s expectation, along with the unthinking dismissal of pertinent information and the angry interruption of the tale stress that the Host’s reaction is the result of his own misconceptions. Similarly, one of the core issues in this “litel thyng in prose” is that Melibee errs in his approach to his situation: he permits his emotions to govern his response and uses Prudence’s gender to dismiss her sage advice. Given that he comes to accept the profit of her counsel, his initial censure of her words stems from an untutored rejection of her *schema*, her gendered form. Like the Host, Melibee misdeems the issue because he chooses to misunderstand it. In this way, the *Melibee* is an extension of the problem of form
that begins in the Prologue to the *Thopas*. The relationship that Chaucer creates between these two works provides examples of reactions based on misconceptions that result from irrational expectations of a given situation: Bailly’s willful presumption results in his angry rejection of the *Thopas*, while Melibee’s visceral response, if unchecked, would have led to war. Through these examples, Chaucer challenges his readers to evaluate the ways in which their own irrational expectations lead to needless complications and futile actions.

Unlike the collection of sources, tropes, and motifs that comprise the *Thopas*, Chaucer’s main source for the *Melibee* is Renaud de Louens’ *Le Livre de Mellibee et Prudence*, which itself is a rendition of Albertanus of Brescia’s *Liber Consolationis et Consilii*. Albertanus composed his text in prose in 1246, and Lee Patterson describes this work as “above all a piece of pedagogy, and one directed specifically to youth. Addressed to his youngest son, its narrative recounts the dangers faced by a *juvenis* who ignores the good advice proffered by the men called in Chaucer’s version ‘thise olde wise.’” In 1337, Renaud translated Albertanus’ Latin version into French, and although he maintained its original prose form, he made significant changes to the character of Prudence. According to William Askins, the “political and intellectual considerations are dropped or muted and the general effect is to domesticate Prudence, to present her as someone concerned primarily with how her husband and his circle of advisors think.” Recently, Dominick Grace’s compelling study argues that Chaucer made changes, as well. Noting that Chaucer’s Prudence “is affected by what has happened and by her husband’s reaction,” Grace argues that “The emphasis on words, on answering the perceived desires of the lord, and on the difference between such words and truth, are all Chaucer’s modifications of Prudence’s argument.” Further, Grace contends that Chaucer’s version “modifies and expands Prudence’s conclusions about how Melibee has judged his counsel” and establishes “the idea that
Melibee himself is at fault, both in his previous relations with his enemies and in his plans for vengeance on them.”52 Ultimately, Grace asserts that Chaucer’s changes challenge his readers to interpret the tale themselves, instead of relying on guides within the text. The underlying sentence in each of these versions remains the same: in order to judge a situation wisely, one must eschew emotion, deliberate, and seek counsel.53 The possibility that the same message may be communicated in different ways by different speakers contributes to Chaucer’s larger examination of form. While the Thopas provokes a consideration of Bailly’s, and by extension the audience’s, expectations of what a “rhyme” should offer, in the link between the Thopas and the Melibee, Chaucer extends that examination to include not only forms of speech, but forms of speakers as well. The ways in which Chaucer changes the characters of Melibee and Prudence in the tale proper challenges the audience, fictive and actual alike, both to confront Melibee’s irrational dismissal of Prudence’s guidance, as well as to consider their own expectations of the potential of women’s ability to provide wise counsel.

Whereas some scholars believe that Prudence has to overcome obstacles because of her gender, that, in fact, she has to play the role of the medieval woman in order to gain Melibee’s attention, the issue that Chaucer highlights is Melibee’s willful emotionality.54 Favoring the reckless and hasty encouragement of the youth—“right so as whil that iren is hoot men sholden smyte, right so men sholde wreken hir wronges whil they been fresshe and newe” (VII.1036)—Melibee rejects the request of the “wise men” for time to deliberate. When Prudence intervenes to prevent her husband’s proposed action and likewise suggests that a proper response requires time for consideration, Melibee cites four reasons as to why he will not heed her advice: he will look like a fool; women are wicked; it will appear as though she has maistrie; accepting her counsel would require secrecy.55 Though Melibee uses Prudence’s gender to support his
thoughtless rejection of her words, each of his reasons deals primarily with the way others will perceive him; her gendered schema, then, is less the core issue and more an excuse by which to fulfill his impulsive desires. If we examine this situation with respect to my earlier suggestion that schema and content are analogous to form and matter, then Melibee’s rejection of Prudence here indicates his participation in a historical narrative about the relationship between physical bodies and metaphysical content. As Judith Butler writes, “it is clear from the start that matter has a history (indeed, more than one) and that the history of matter is in part determined by the negotiation of sexual difference.”

Though Melibee draws his four reasons from authoritative, historical sources, his reliance upon the prescribed method of restricting the gendered, female form weakens his argument because these reasons do not apply to his rejection of the wise men’s call for deliberation. To follow Butler, “To call a presupposition into question is not the same as doing away with it; rather, it is to free it from its metaphysical lodgings in order to understand what political interests were secured in and by that metaphysical placing, and thereby to permit the term to occupy and to serve very different political aims.”

By calling our attention to Melibee’s inadequate and presupposed reasons, I argue, Chaucer invites us to consider both the utility of Melibee’s participation in this historical narrative and the validity of such “certain” presumptions about gendered forms.

Melibee’s desire to war with his adversaries highlights another presupposition: he believes that his understanding of the situation is complete. Much like the Host’s hasty and witless prediction about the Thopas, Melibee’s conviction denies any potential to make a reasonable decision: his initial refusal to consider perspectives that differ from his own underscores his assumption that his grasp of the situation is entirely correct. When the wise men and Prudence both advocate a carefully considered response to the situation, one governed
foremost by a determination of the most productive resolution, they suggest not only that Melibee’s understanding is incomplete, but also that any attempt to increase one’s knowledge-base requires three factors: an awareness of the limitations of knowledge; a desire to supplement one’s understanding by seeking outside perspectives, in the case, counsel; and an ability to consider the validity of those perspectives. To this end, the wise men do not reject Melibee’s desire for vengeance, but rather “axen leyser and espace to have deliberacion in this cas to deme” (1029). Asking for time and space to deliberate implies that the wise men will engage in this type of rational process: by considering other viewpoints and the consequences of different actions, the assembly can determine the most productive response. As the “wise advocate” explains, “the commune proverbe seith thus: ‘He that soone deemeth, soone shal repenteth.’ / And eek men seyn that thilke juge is wys that soone understondeth a matiere and juggeth by leyser” (1030-31). The importance of this approach to a well-reasoned and informed analysis is suggested by Prudence’s reiteration: “as ye herde her biforn, the commune proverbe is this, that ‘he that soone deemeth, soone repenteth’” (1135). What this aphorism suggests is that rash action leads to unforeseen consequences for which the actor is responsible. In other words, theirs is first a desire to consider the optimum result, followed by a consideration of how to produce such an end. Writing about the process of advice-seeking from an analytical standpoint, Thomas Aquinas also advocates this approach to problem solving: he contends, “the principle in the inquiry of counsel is the end, which precedes indeed in intention, but comes afterwards into execution…beginning that is to say, from that which is intended in the future, and continuing until it arrives at that which is to be done at once.” The explicit process, stated first by the wise men and then repeated by Prudence, emphasizes the importance not only of checking emotional responses—of being “prudent”—but also of recognizing the self-imposed limitations that such
unrestrained responses invite. In this way, prudent reason stems from a conscious effort to examine one’s own motives, to reduce the power of thoughtless reactions (or predictions), and to participate, deliberately and authoritatively, in the acquisition and use of knowledge.

The Melibee is not the only work in the Canterbury Tales during which Chaucer explores the precarious nature of rash judgments. In the Physician’s Tale, for instance, Virginius learns of the corrupt judge Apius’ ploy to deflower his daughter. Concluding that “Ther been two weyes, outher deeth or shame,” Virginius smites off her head (VI.214). There were, of course, other means of recourse, as the coterminous revolt against Apius demonstrates; the emotionally ridden father, however, is unable in that moment to acknowledge alternative possibilities, and Virginia dies as a result. In the Merchant’s Tale, January’s desire to marry hastily leaves little room for consideration; indeed, he refuses Justinus’ request for “leyser for t’enquere” (IV.1543) while eagerly accepting the sycophantic encouragement of Placebo. When he witnesses his young wife’s pear-tree-tryst, she explains that he misunderstands the situation: “Ful many a man weneth to seen a thyng, / And it is al another than it semeth. / He that mysconceyveth, he mysdemeth” (IV.2408-10). Though January’s acceptance of May’s explanation does not lead to the irreversible result of the Physician’s Tale, January nevertheless persists in misunderstanding his situation, due to his unwillingness to consider anything beyond his perspectival desire. May’s statement also stresses the relationship between conceiving and deeming: in order to judge well, one must understand correctly.

In each case, the character assumes that his understanding of the situation is complete. Virginius concludes erroneously that there are only two options available: death or shame; January purposefully ignores Justinus’ call to gather more information and opts instead to operate in haste. Likewise, Melibee assumes that there are only two responses to his situation:
start a war or accept the label of impotence. But as Chaucer points out in the Prologue to his *Treatise on the Astrolabe*, any claim to perfect or complete knowledge is a sham: stating that his *Astrolabe* can only offer a “certain nombre of conclusions,” he explains that “alle the concluisions that han ben fownde, or ells possibli myhten be fownde…ben unknowe perfity to any mortal man in this regioun, as I suppose” (Prologue 17-22). In other words, the data which the user can gain from the astrolabe, including any future potential of the device, is limited by that user’s inability to understand, in perfect totality, the knowledge of each conclusion. Further, Chaucer asserts that, in his experience, all manuscripts have flaws: “sothly, in any tretis of the astrelabie that I have seyn there ben some conclusiouns that wole nat in alle thinges performen his byhestes” (22-26). Though he uses these explanations to frame his *Astrolabe* as a treatise that offers some beneficial information, the underlying principle is that all knowledge is known imperfectly and communicated incompletely; to draw reasonable conclusions, then, requires both a conscious awareness of the fact that there is always more knowledge to be gained and an active deliberation to determine what information to accept and what to disregard. More specifically, in the *Astrolabe*’s Prologue, Chaucer explicitly elucidates the idea that human understanding is fractional, and though one can assess a situation productively, such assessment, as well as subsequent future reconsiderations, must include an awareness of the limitations of knowledge. When Virginius acts with the expectation that he has a perfect understanding of the various contributing factors to his situation, he creates his own devastation; had his consideration been governed by an awareness of his own limited perspective, however, the outcome might have been different.

In the *Melibee*, Chaucer offers an example of a character who employs a recognition of her own perspectival limitations: Prudence explains to her husband that while she may not fully
understand why “God suffred men to do [him] this vileyne” (VII.1405) she can, “by certeyne presumpciouns and conjectynges” (1408) suggest that this experience was just and reasonable. Though the point is brief, Prudence frames her response with respect to her lack of complete knowledge: she “kan nat wel answere, as for no soothfastnesse” (1405) because “the sciences and the juggementz of oure Lord God almyghty been ful depe” (1406). Her judgment of the situation, then, is based on her interpretation with respect to the information she has access to; based on such limitations, she remarks that her answer will not be entirely truthful. This relation that Prudence establishes between truth and knowledge, a connection that does not appear in Renaud, suggests that while the pursuit of truth in evaluating situations is necessary, a determination of absolute truth is inherently complicated and ultimately unachievable. Daniel Kempton notes the perspectival interests that shape what a particular “truth” is: “In Melibee’s assembly, for example, every counselor gives advice that pertains to his own character and interests, without regard for Truth.” Because one’s perception of “truth” results from a combination of the individual approach to the issue and the predictions made about that issue, any attempt at sound, rational understanding must first acknowledge the ways in which information is framed by all contributors.

A similar point is made when Prudence declares that counsel which asserts an unequivocal and unchanging position is delusive: “And take this for a general reule, that every conseil that is affermed so strongly that it may nat be changed for no condicioun that may bityde, I seye that thilke conseil is wikked” (VII.1231). Chaucer’s restructuring of this statement is significant. In Renaud’s version, Prudence asserts, “Aprés, tu doiz ce tenir pour rigle general: que tout conseil est mauvais qui est fermes que l’on ne le puet changier par condition qui surviengne” ‘After, you must keep as a general rule: that all counsel is bad that is so closed that
one cannot change by whatever condition might arise." Though the sentence of each rendition remains the same, Chaucer’s highlights Prudence’s core concern—a rigidly fixed perspective—before she offers her own assessment: such counsel is wicked. By focusing on a process of engagement instead of providing a declarative statement, Prudence encourages Melibee’s, and by extension the audience’s, consideration of the validity of her judgment. Of course, both Renaud and Chaucer include the qualification that the rule is “general”; as a result, the recipient of any advice must assess the information before determining whether or not to accept it. However eager Melibee is to resolve his situation, the changes Chaucer makes to these sections highlights the idea that a beneficial solution requires time and deliberation.

At the end of the tale, Melibee resolves to follow Prudence’s counsel, which is a point that concerns some recent scholars, such as Judith Fers ter, Kempton, and Dolores Palomo, who argue that Prudence’s character is contradictory and thus problematic. “Chaucer’s” explanation of this scene suggests a different reading:

Whanne Melibee hadde herd the grete skiles and resouns of dame Prudence, and hire wise informaciouns and techynges, / his herte gan enclyne to the wil of his wif, considerynge hir trewe entente, / and conformed hym anon and assented fully to werken after hir conseil, / and thonked God, of whom procedeth al vertu and alle goodnesse, that hym sente a wyf of so greet discrecioun. (VII.1870-73)

In Renaud’s version, “Quant Mellibee ot oÿ toutes les paroles Dame Prudence et ses sages enseignemens, si fut en grant paix de cuer et loa Dieu, qui lui avoit donné si sage compagnie” ‘When Melibee had heard all of Dame Prudence’s words and her wise teachings, he felt great peace in his heart and praised God, who had given him so wise company.’ The following table
illustrates the changes Chaucer made to this passage and thus demonstrates the importance
Chaucer places on the process of inquiry that his *Melibee* prescribes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Renaud</th>
<th>Chaucer</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“toutes les paroles”</td>
<td>“great skills and reasons”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“ses sages enseignemens”</td>
<td>“her wise information and teachings”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“si fut en grant paix de cuer”</td>
<td>Chaucer’s Melibee considers both what Prudence has said and her intentions in saying it before he accepts her counsel; there is no discussion of feelings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(no equivalent)</td>
<td>Once Melibee deliberates, he then immediately proceeds to action.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Loa Dieu” because his wife is wise.</td>
<td>Thanks God for a wife of “so great discretion.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This final change is particularly illuminating: while Renaud’s Prudence is wise, Chaucer’s uses her wisdom with discretion, a point which bears not only on Prudence’s rational arguments, but also on her choice to “maken semblant of wratthe” (1687) when necessary to refocus Melibee’s attention. Thus, Chaucer’s Prudence is a wife “of good judgment.” The differences that Chaucer crafts into this passage illustrate that his Melibee recognizes the problems of hasty action, incorporates the procedure that Prudence offers, and only then makes an informed choice about how to act. In other words, Chaucer’s Melibee performs an act of recursive analysis by utilizing
the process that Prudence defines in order to evaluate and modify his initial responses. Through his effort to reposition his emotional confusion within the larger framework of Providence, this Melibee moves from expectation to rational discernment as he comes to listen effectively and participate in the dialectic. Bluntly, Chaucer’s Melibee learns, as do Boethius and the reader of the *Astrolabe*, through recursion.

That the adversaries also recognize the value of Prudence illustrates the extensive benefits both of her method of rational assessment and of the choice to listen effectively. Indeed, when the adversaries “herden the goodliche wordes of dame Prudence, / they weren so supprised and ravysshed and hadden so greet joye of hire that wonder was to telle” (1733-34). Such a reaction bespeaks the poetic capacity of prose, as I discussed earlier and also marks a quality of listening: the adversaries hear Prudence’s “goodly words” because their expectations, whatever they may be, do not override the desire to learn her counsel. A similar absence of expectation informs the final reconciliation. When the adversaries appear before Prudence at the end of the tale, they agree to abide by Melibee’s command, provided that Prudence’s “good will” mediates his decision; they condition their promise upon Prudence’s ability to “fulfillen in dede [her] goodliche wordes” (1744). The fulfillment of their oath, in other words, relies upon Prudence proving through her actions that her words are truthful. This suggestion that participants must enter into honest agreements in order for such promises to be enforceable recalls Prudence’s earlier declaration that dishonest oaths are not legally binding: “For the lawes seyn that ‘alle bihestes that been dishoneste been of no value’; / and eek if so be that it be impossible, or may nat goodly be parfourned or kept” (1229-30). In asking that Prudence match her words with action, then, the foes imply their interest in a reliable, contractual obligation. Prudence herself then makes a similar proposition. When speaking with Melibee, she advises that he send his
messengers to convey an offer of peace to the enemies: “that if they wole trete of pees and of accord, / that they shape hem withouten delay or tariyng to comen unto us” (1797-98). Again, the implication is that a correlation between words and deeds, not expectation, demonstrates truth: if the adversaries want peace, then their actions will show their desire.

In his final speech, Melibee conciliates with the adversaries, but his pardon is qualified: “for as muche as I see and biholde youre grete humylitee / and that ye been sory and repentant of youre giltes, / it constreyneth me to doon yow grace and mercy” (1878-80). Melibee’s forgiveness, then, is conditioned upon the adversaries’ actions, not on his expectation of an outcome: his inclination to give grace and mercy extends only insofar as their deeds match their words. By creating a parallel stipulation to that which is required for Christian absolution, Melibee equates integrity in the secular sphere with truth-telling to the Divine. As he states, his forgiveness is “to this effect and to this ende, that God of his endless mercy / wole at the tyme of oure diynge foryeven us oure giltes that we han trespassed to hym in this wrecched world. / For doutelees, if we be sory and repentant…he wole foryeven us oure giltes” (1883-86). Though Melibee praises God’s bountiful mercy, he also declares that one must be both sorry for and truly repent of the offense in order that the Divine forgive the transgression. As the Parson later explains in his own tale, “Wepynge, and nat for to stynte to do synne, may nat avayle…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” (X.90, 93). In other words, the outward demonstration of shame is insufficient; in order to be forgiven, the sinner must act, eschewing sin and doing good works. According to the Parson, “the grace of the Hooly Goost fareth lyk fyr, that may nat been ydel; for fyr fayleth anoon as it forleteth his wirkyng, and right so grace fayleth anoon as it forleteth his werkynge” (250). The point here is that behavioral change is
central to repentance. The state of grace and the certainty of salvation, then, are secured through the purposeful and continual good works of the repentant sinner; should he either repeat the offense or cease his good works, “Then leseth the synful man the goodnesse of glorie, that onely is bihight to goode men that labouren and werken” (251). In creating an analogy between the necessary course of action to receive forgiveness from God and the actions the enemies must perform in order to secure his continued mercy, Melibee suggests that the standard for honesty between men is just as high as is the standard for truth with God. Although Melibee’s final reconciliation with the adversaries goes against Prudence’s earlier suggestion that old enemies cannot be trusted—“For sikerly, though thyne enemy be reconsoled, and maketh thee chiere of humylitee, and lowteth to thee with his heed, ne trust hym neveere. / For certes he maketh thilke feyned humilitee moore for his profit than for any love of thy persone” (VII.1187-88)—his process at the end of the tale differs from his unthinking actions at the beginning. Instead of merely accepting the words of the adversaries as truth or rejecting them without thought, Melibee now considers their actions in order to determine their fidelity to the agreement. In order for peace to remain between them, the future actions of the foes must continue to accord with their words.

Just as honesty is an important component of an oath’s validity, so too is the correct understanding of its requirements. Indeed, the necessity of understanding a situation rightly before determining a course of action is a consistent theme in the Melibee: from the wise man’s comment “that thilke juge is wys that soone understandeth a matiere and juggeth by leyser” (1031) to Prudence’s declaration that legal behests are not binding “if so be that it be impossible, or may nat goodly be parfourned or kept” (1230). The underlying issue in both of these statements is that accurate comprehension can lay the foundation for profitable results, whereas
uninformed choices create difficulty: “For the commune proverbe seith thus: ‘He that soone deemeth, soone shal repente’” (1229). Chaucer’s use of doublets throughout the Melibee attests to the importance of this issue. In fact, I argue that Chaucer’s inclusion of doublets throughout this Tale intend to facilitate his readers’ understanding of the processes which Prudence prescribes. Karla Taylor’s work on civic discourse emphasizes this point. By her count, more than seventy-two percent of the Melibee’s doublets are added by Chaucer. She concludes, “By giving both (or several) alternatives, the heavily collocated text provides the means for all readers to acquire the vocabulary less familiar to them.” Of course, the use of lexical doublets derives from a much earlier attempt to reconcile Anglo-Saxon and Norman French, so Chaucer’s use of this linguistic strategy is not unique. Yet his choice to use a substantially greater number of doublets in the Melibee than Renaud employed in his version suggests Chaucer’s interest in the importance of accurate perception to wise decision-making.

The contracts into which the adversaries and Melibee enter at the end of the tale illustrate this point further, as their speech abounds with doublets: the enemies “consideren and knowelichen” (1745) that they have “offended and greved” (1747) Melibee; they “oblige and bynden” (1878) themselves and their friends to the oath; Melibee sees and beholds that they are “sory and repentant” (1879). In each of these groups, the intentional pairing of complementary words serves to promote a greater depth of cognition; the implication of the doublet is that neither word is sufficient by itself. Tim Machan’s explanation of this linguistic strategy in translation is helpful here: “Doublets can be an effective way of capturing the semantic range of a source word.” Chaucer’s use of doublets in the Melibee thus indicates that, along with translating the sense of the source word, he was interested to limit the possibility of miscommunication. When Melibee states that the enemies are “sorry and repentant,” for
example, he suggests that he recognizes both that they regret their actions and that they have reformed their behavior. Because it is possible both to lament the action without changing the behavior, as well as to reform the behavior without regretting it, Melibee’s inclusion of both adjectives signifies that his judgment of the situation is comprehensive. Unlike his initial emotional restrictions to understanding, here he looks past the external schema of the adversaries’ to consider all information available to him: by considering both what they say and how they act as two elements of the same situation, Melibee advances beyond his previous self-limiting expectations.

Though Palomo and Grace conclude that the ending of this tale suggests that Melibee does not learn how to think for himself but rather exchanges his set of authorities for Prudence, this response denies the explanation that Chaucer adds to his text: Melibee accepts Prudence’s counsel only after he considers her skills, reasons, information, teaching, and her intentions. In other words, Melibee does not mindlessly agree to follow advice that sounds good or accords with his own personal desires; rather, he follows the procedure prescribed by Prudence of gathering information and deliberating before making his choice. Indeed, the medieval understanding of prudence—the ability to utilize past and present information to affect a good (possible) future outcome—underscores Melibee’s process. Chaucer develops this definition of prudence in *Troilus and Criseyde*, as Criseyde laments her inability to conceive of the influence of her past on her present circumstances:

Prudence, allas, oon of thyne eyen thre
Me lakked alwey, er that I come here!
On tyme ypassed wel remembred me,
And present tyme ek koud ich wel ise,
But future tyme, er I was in the snare,
Koude I nat sen; that causesth now my care. (V.744-49)\textsuperscript{72}

Melibee does not suffer a similar fate. At the end of the Tale, he demonstrates a type of prudent recursion, wherein he performs the definition of prudence in his decision-making.\textsuperscript{73} That Chaucer includes Melibee’s cognitive process in this final section highlights the value of the method of wise judgment that he offers in this Tale: unlike Renaud’s Melibee, whose heart is filled with peace by Prudence’s words, Chaucer emphasizes that his Melibee’s acceptance results from a consideration not only of what Prudence says, but also of her intentions in saying it. By mulling over Prudence’s advice and motives, Melibee subjects his wife to the same degree of scrutiny to which she suggests all advisors are answerable. In Renaud, Melibee’s acceptance of Prudence’s counsel is implied through a quasi-Divine intervention: after hearing “toutes les paroles Dame Prudence et ses sages enseignemens,” his heart is filled with peace, he praises God, and forgives the enemies. Renaud emphasizes that the praising of God and forgiveness of the enemies results from the peace that Melibee feels in his heart. More specifically, the words of Renaud’s Prudence incite an emotional reaction instead of a thoughtful response. In contrast, Chaucer’s inclusion of Melibee’s deliberative process both underscores the importance of the method prescribed in the tale, as well as indicates that this Melibee has learned to set aside his unthinking expectations in favor of making an informed choice.

The goal of Melibee’s extension of grace is to reconcile with the adversaries. Whereas his initial reaction was to start a war, his participation in the Prudence’s programmatic system of rational deliberation results in a more inclusive appreciation of the situation, which in turn leads to a choice which bears in mind the profit of the entire community. Though there is no guarantee that the adversaries will continue to act in accordance with their words, the emphasis in this final
section is on a thought process that is deliberate, comprehensive, and oriented towards a favorable outcome that benefits everyone involved. The idea that the goal of an action is its own reward is also offered by Boethius’ Philosophy: “For of alle thinges that ben idoon, thilke thing for which any thing is doon, it semeth as by ryght that thilke thing be the mede of that” (IV.p3.6-9). Whether the ultimate result of Melibee’s action will be a generation of the good, as we see in the Franklin’s Tale, or of its destruction, as we see in the Merchant’s, the point is that Melibee is responsible only for the way he chooses to respond to this situation; similar to the grace of God, Melibee extends forgiveness only insofar as the adversaries continue to maintain their oath. What Chaucer offers in his Melibee, then, is not only a guide to good decision-making, but also an example of the inherent benefits of wise judgment which includes a knowledge of the limitations of one’s authority.

The fact that the Melibee appears in various miscellanies outside the Canterbury Tales suggests that audiences through the fifteenth century recognized the importance of this work. By including the Melibee in the miscellanies most scribes “omit any material from the pilgrimage frame which would connect the tales to particular tellers.” MS. HM 144 (San Marino, Huntington Library), for example, includes “a very free version” of the Melibee (titled “prouerbis”) which is followed by an incomplete Monk’s Tale (titled “The falle of Princis”). Instead of including Chaucer’s prologue to the Monk, the scribe links the two works by admonishing the audience to remember the proverbs lest they fall prey to Fortune: “They that this present & forseyde tale haue or shal reede remembyr the noble prouerbis that rebukyth couetise and vengeaunse taking in truste of ffortune whiche hathe causyd many a noble prince to falle as we may rede of them here folluyng.” According to this warning, the proverbs of the Melibee have the potential of protecting the reader against a downfall that results from covetous
and selfish action; more telling is the suggestion that this particular tale is potentially as applicable to the reader’s daily existence as is Prudence’s fictive instruction of Melibee. Though the HM 144 scribe rightly asserts that the Melibee is a valuable text that can benefit the careful reader, his interpretation only highlights a portion of what the Melibee offers within the frame that Chaucer creates. Indeed, readers of the excerpted Melibee not only miss Chaucer’s consideration of the relationship between formal expectations and cognition, but because of this lack, they miss the force of Melibee’s initial dismissal of Prudence’s counsel and his acceptance of the contract with the adversaries.

Even though he has been accused of “belaboring the obvious” in the Melibee, Chaucer deals with the necessity of the rational mind’s ability to reign in natural, emotional reactions and assumptions in favor of implementing the beneficial process of wise judgment.77 The metaphorical blindness which results from such emotional control is an idea that Chaucer encountered first in his translation of Boethius’ Consolation of Philosophy. At the beginning of the work, Philosophy finds Boethius in deep despair: “Allas! Now lyth he emptid of lyght of his thoght, and his nekke is pressyd with hevy cheynes, and bereth his chere enclyned adoun for the grete weyghte, and is constreyned to loken on the fool erthe!” (1.m2.28-32). While she recognizes that Boethius is bound by the heavy chains of misinterpretation, she does not express concern: “‘Here nys no peril,’ quod sche; ‘he is fallen into a litargye, whiche that is a comune seknesse to hertes that been desceyved. He hath a litil foryeten hymselfe’” (1.p2.18-22). The point that Philosophy makes here is that Boethius misconstrues his situation because he has forgotten himself; in other words, though Boethius has a rational understanding of his situation, he cannot enact that knowledge due to the fact that he has permitted his emotions to dominate his mind. As Boethius observes, his sight, “ploungid in teeres” (1.p1.78), is obscured by darkness.
He regains the “light of his thought” and remembers how to assess his situation in a productive way through the subsequent dialectic with Philosophy.

Chaucer continues to explore the potential for emotions to cause a type of intellectual amnesia elsewhere in his poetic works, a fact which demonstrates Chaucer’s interest in the power of the affective. In the *Knight’s Tale*, for example, when Palamon cries out in heart-struck anguish at seeing the fair Emelya, Arcite counsels him to “taak al in pacience / Oure prisoun, for it may noon oother be. / … / We moste endure it; this is the short and playn” (I.1084-85, 1091). When Arcite then espies the maiden, however, he exchanges his own patience for emotional attachment, and the two sworn brothers become enemies: “Greet was the strif and long bitwix hem tweye” (1187). Even though Palamon and Arcite are imprisoned without the possibility of ransom, their long-lasting friendship quickly devolves into a long term and bitter rivalry for the sake of their respective love of Emelya. Though comical, this disagreement highlights the problem of the power of unchecked emotions: both Palamon and Arcite understand rationally that they must endure their life in prison, but neither demonstrates an ability to use that knowledge to cope with the emotional desire he feels for Emelya. While these characters comprehend the concept of patience, their inability to realize this idea in action results first in the petty disavowal of friendship and later in a deadly battle.

In the *Melibee*, Chaucer presents his reader with a topical exploration that pushes beyond this type of visceral reaction to consider how Melibee, like Boethius, can recognize the limitations of emotion and return to a position from which he can reasonably assess his situation. Though Lee Patterson believes that “*Melibee* counsels self-reflection but enacts a pedagogical program that forecloses true understanding, aspires to leisurely exploration but can never evade the pressures of linear temporality,” Chaucer calls attention to the necessity of self-reflection and
leisure for prudent interpretations in a world in which true understanding is an impossibility; as such, the procedure that Prudence outlines and Melibee follows focuses on a method of judging incomplete and perspectival information with wisdom and discretion. Given that linear temporality binds both the fictional realm of his pilgrims as well as the world of his audience, the point is not that one should indefinitely forego decision-making in order to make that decision with leisure, but rather that important judgments should not be made in haste.

In many of the tales presented on the Canterbury pilgrimage, Chaucer offers his readers examples of the consequences of rash assessments: the Friar’s Summoner damns himself; the Merchant’s January chooses to metaphorically blind himself; the Physician’s Virginius exiles himself. Each of these actions results from the character’s inability to recognize the ways in which his assumptions contribute to the “truth” of his particular situation; by responding only to his own expectations, he contributes to his own downfall. In the Franklin’s Tale, Chaucer continues to examine how form, content, and expectation influence understanding: Dorigen makes an oath “in pley” that binds her to the eager Aurelius when he misunderstands her intention; the clerk’s apparent “magic” is actually predictive science. The marriage of Dorigen and Averagus provides the most provocative illustration: while the “form” of their marriage is traditional—Averagus retains “the name of soveraynetee, / That wolde he have for shame of his degree” (V.751-52)—their construction of this relationship is not, as Averagus swears that he will never “take no maistrie / Agayn hir wyl…and folwe hir wyl in al” (747-49). Indeed, even while demanding that Dorigen fulfill her oath to Aurelius, Averagus attends to the maintenance of the traditional form of their union and forbids his wife, “up peyne of deeth, / That nevere, whil thee lasteth lyf ne breeth, / To no wight telle thou of this aventure” (1481-83). He relies, in other words, on the general expectation that an apparatus equals whatever is contained within it and,
through this reliance, works to maintain his wife’s good name. Elizabeth Robertson notes that Averagus’ dependence upon such expectations actually undermines his marriage: “To have a contradiction between what occurs publicly and what appears privately is a violent breach of the harmony of the household.” Though the consequences of the Host’s expectation about the Thopas are certainly not as unpleasant, his superficial determination leads to his own misinterpretation.

As I have been arguing, Chaucer links the Thopas and the Melibee in order to provoke an exploration of the inherent but often unrecognized relationship between expectation and the capacity for accurate understanding: Bailly expects “Som deyntee thyng” based on the pilgrim-narrator’s appearance, just as Melibee initially dismisses wise advice in favor of his hotchpotch. These responses, as well as those of the Summoner, January, and Virginius, point to the problems of irrational judgments, but it is only in the Melibee that Chaucer puts forth a systematic approach to analysis and productive reasoning. The core issue of this tale is one of right judgment: how does one make a rational, well-informed, intentional choice while in a state of confusion? Chaucer’s “devising” criticizes Melibee’s irrational thought-process and his lack of engagement in his own situation, but it also emphasizes the benefits afforded to everyone when Melibee remembers the advantages of deliberation and counsel. In the Thopas-Melibee, Chaucer provokes a consideration that is as essential to rational analysis as it is to the reading process, itself: given the limitations of knowledge and individual perspective, he avers, useful responses begin with a process of acknowledging those limitations and acting to correct them through self-assessment, counsel, and deliberation. The theory of cognition that Chaucer develops through the Thopas-Melibee demonstrates the possibility of reversing the influence of expectation by engaging in this process, which begins by listening (and reading) effectively.
Given that the manuscripts assign the *Thopas* and the *Melibee* to Chaucer, I identify the Canterbury pilgrim as “Chaucer” throughout this essay.

For other interpretations of this relationship, see Richard Firth Green, who contends that “It is perhaps not over-fanciful to see in the two tales which Chaucer assigns himself within the Canterbury framework an expression of two contrasting aspects of the court author’s role,” in *Poets and Princepleasers: Literature and the English Court in the Late Middle Ages*, Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1980, esp 143. Lee Patterson argues that these two tales “represent a further attempt on Chaucer’s part of define both the kind of writing that constitutes The Canterbury Tales and, more tellingly, the kind of person who wrote it,” in “‘What Man Artow?’: Authorial Self-Identity in The Tale of Sir Thopas and the Tale of Melibee,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 11 (1989): 117-75, at 120.


Patterson, “‘What Man Artow?’” at 120.

Patterson, “‘What Man Artow?’” at 123.


Cannon, “Form,” 182.

Cannon, “Form,” 188.


Though Chaucer’s construction of the Thopas-Melibee frame underscores the importance of the relationship between these two tales, scholars have focused on their drastic differences in form. Paul Olson, in The Canterbury Tales and the Good Society, Princeton, Princeton UP, 1986, at 105, argues that “First, Chaucer explores the hazards of misleading, fantastic art in the Thopas, then the benefits of properly directive philosophic and jurisprudential discipline in the Melibee,” Rhiannon Purdie, in “The Implications of Manuscript Layout in Chaucer’s Tale of Sir Thopas,” Forum for Modern Language Studies 41.3 (2005), at 270, contends that “The ‘drasty rymyng’ of Sir Thopas and the didactic prose of Melibee represent two extremes of contemporary tastes in reading material.” Lee Patterson argues that “the juxtapositioning of the two tales, and the dramatic context in which they are located, should lead us to the conclusion that Chaucer is disowning not the frivolity of Sir Thopas but the pragmatic didacticism of Melibee,” in “What Man Artow?” at 123. Even though Ann Astell suggests that “the tales of Thopas and Melibee provide a key that unlocks the whole structure of the fragment as a systematic exploration of the four Aristotelian causes of books,” she too highlights the solaas of the Thopas and the sentence of the Melibee. See “Chaucer’s ‘Literature Group’ and the Medieval Causes of Books,” ELH 59.2 (Summer 1992): 269-87.


32 The MED lists “subject matter” as a definition of “sentence.”

33 Lee Patterson has noted the import of this question: “While this is not the only time that Harry interrogates a pilgrim, what is striking about this occasion is the comprehensiveness of his opening question, its utter lack of specificity: ‘What man arto?’” By contrast, for example, Harry asks the Monk and the Parson not to identify themselves but simply to explain their specific ecclesiastical offices…that the Monk is a monk and the Parson a priest are facts not in question” (117). See “‘What Man Artow?’”

34 Both Charles Owens, “‘Thy Drasty Rymyng…’” in Studies in Philology 63.4 (July 1966): 533-64, and William Witherle Lawrence, “Satire in Sir Thopas,” in PMLA 50.1 (Mar 1935): 81-91, suggest that the Thopas is a satire; as
such, it would inspire thought. Alan Gaylord, however, in “The Moment of Sir Thopas: Towards a New Look at Chaucer’s Language,” Chaucer Review 16.4 (1982): 311-29, argues that the Thopas has a “recreative capacity” because it “make[s] itself its own amusement” (319).

35 Joanne A. Charbonneau notes that the Thopas “has no known single source or analogue, but instead borrows extensively from romances and ballads with echoes from these popular works in virtually every line. Unlike most of the other tales in the Canterbury collection, Sir Thopas is not really a tale at all, but is instead a hodgepodge of common rhetorical devices and popular plot motifs” (649). For her entire discussion, see “Sir Thopas,” Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales, Vol II, Eds. Robert Correale and Mary Hamel, Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2005, 649-714. John Matthews Manly, “The Stanza-Forms of Sir Thopas,” in Modern Philology 8.1 (July 1910): 141-44, argues “It seems clear that we have in Sir Thopas not a mere miscellaneous collection of stanzaic forms, but a set of variations upon a single form, apparently made for some definite purpose” (143).


37 Alan Gaylord, in “The Moment of Sir Thopas: Towards a New Look at Chaucer’s Language,” writes, “we should be on guard when Chaucer apologizes for the sorry antiquity of a tale he ‘lerned long agoon’ (1899), for he has made something new. Before our eyes, he shows how he invents his own English . . . and then goes on to parody not the romances but the fancies and temptations of his own practice” (320). Though Gaylord makes a strong case, I believe that Chaucer is less evaluating his own practice and more inviting his audience to consider the ways in which they predict content based on schema.

38 Though Rhiannon Purdie points to the fact that “twenty of the fifty-three Thopas manuscripts use graphic tail-rhyme for at least part of their length, with eleven managing it throughout,” I have selected to examine the Hengwrt and the Ellesmere as representative texts. For her entire argument, see “The Implications of Manuscript Layout in Chaucer’s Tale of Sir Thopas.”

39 Though Figure 3.1 is a smaller version of the actual page, it is to scale.

40 “Graphic tail-rhyme” is a term coined by Rhiannon Purdie to describe the brackets that connect the tail-rhyme lines, which I have adopted for my analysis. For more detailed analyses, see Purdie (above), and Judith Tschann, “The Layout of Sir Thopas in the Ellesmere, Hengwrt, Cambridge Dd.4.24, and Cambridge Gg.4.27 Manuscripts,” in Chaucer Review 20 (1985): 1-13, and Joanne Charbonneau (above).

41 The alternative possibility is that the omission of this line is the result of its absence in Pinkhurst’s exemplar.

42 “The Implications of Manuscript Layout in Chaucer’s Tale of Sir Thopas,” 268.

43 There is a 5% variation between the layouts: in the Hengwrt, the Melibee uses 63% of the page, while the Ellesmere copy uses 58%.


45 The first three references (946-48, 952, and 961-64) concern different speakers, while the last pertains to the pilgrim-narrator and the Melibee (959-64). Dolores Palomo suggests that in this passage Chaucer is pointing out the irrelevancy of words. Though her interpretation is thought-provoking, it does not consider the relation between form and content that I discuss here.


47 William Askins contends that “while Chaucer may have been familiar with the Latin, it is nonetheless clear that when he composed the Melibee he turned to the Livre de Mellibee, the French translation of the Liber consolationis et consilii” (322). His argument may be found in “The Tale of Melibee,” Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales, Vol II, Eds. Robert Correale and Mary Hamel, Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2005, 321-408.
48 Patterson, “What Man Artow?” 146.


50 Dominick Grace, “Telling Differences: Chaucer’s Tale of Melibee and Renaud de Louens’ Livre de Mellibee et Prudence,” in Philological Quarterly 82.4 (Fall 2003), believes that the changes Chaucer made to the Melibee “tend to undercut the allegorical reading usually given the tale” (377). For scholars who argue that Chaucer’s version is a strict translation, see Mari Pakkala-Weckstrom, “Prudence and the Power of Persuasion – Language and Maistrie in the Tale of Melibee,” esp. 400. See also Dolores Palomo, “What Chaucer Really Did to Le Livre de Mellibee,” in Philological Quarterly 53.3 (Summer 1974), who argues that the close translation “forces us to look outside the text for clues to the translator’s interest in the text” (305).

51 Grace 386 and 389.

52 Grace 391 and 379.

53 Dolores Palomo argues for the opposite reading: “Since Chaucer assures us four times in the Melibee headlink that the sentence of his ‘moral tale vertuous’ has not changed even though he is using different words, we may assume that this insistence points to the opposite—that the different wording has indeed changed the meaning,” in “What Chaucer Really Did to Le Livre de Mellibee,” at 319.

54 See Jane Cowgill, “Patterns of Feminine and Masculine Persuasion in the Melibee and the Parson’s Tale” and Mari Pakkala-Weckstrom, “Prudence and the Power of Persuasion – Language and Maistrie in the Tale of Melibee.”

55 Though Melibee only provides four reasons, Prudence responds to five. The fifth reason, which is absent from both the Hengwrt and the Ellesmere, reads, “Car is est escript, la genglerie des femmes ne puet rien celler fors ce qu’elle ne scet. / Apres, le philosophre dit, en mauvais conseil les femmes vainquent les hommes; et par ces raisons je ne dois point user de ton conseil” “For it is written, “The chattering of women can hide nothing except what she does not know.” Further, the philosopher says, “In bad advice women outdo men. For these reasons I must not use your advice” (translation Sharon Hiltz Romino). According to Sharon Hiltz Romino, the omission is Chaucer’s. See “Explanatory Notes,” lines 1060-61 in The Riverside Chaucer, 3rd ed. Ed. Larry Benson, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987. William Askins asserts, “That Chaucer might have had rhetorical reasons for downplaying Melibee’s antifeminism is perhaps worthy of consideration” (“The Tale of Melibee” 338n3.6). Given that Chaucer includes Prudence’s response to this section, both of these suggestions seem unlikely.

56 Butler, 29. See also Amanda Walling, “‘In Hir Tellyng Difference’: Gender, Authority, and Interpretation in the Tale of Melibee.”

57 In reasons two and four, Melibee cites Salomon; in reason three, he uses Jhesu Syrak.

58 Butler, 30. Though Butler’s explanation here has to do with her own approach to the subject of form and matter, I find the similarities between her approach and Chaucer’s to be interesting and worthy of further consideration.

59 In Askins’ Sources and Analogues chapter, he cites I. Burke Severs’ recognition that neither this nor Prudence’s preceding proverb appear in either Renaud or Albertanus at this moment in the text; however, Askins notes that different versions of these proverbs occur elsewhere in the Latin text, which leads him to conclude that Chaucer may have been familiar with Albertanus (338n.2.46).


Judith Ferster and Kempton argue that Prudence is contradictory and selfish; Palomo proclaims that Prudence’s advice is “repetitive, contradictory, arbitrary, and fundamentally simple-minded”; Amanda Walling suggests that Prudence “conscripts [her authorities] and their meanings in order to support her own local and circumstantial arguments.” For their entire analyses, see Ferster’s *Fictions of Advice: The Literature and Politics of Counsel in Late Medieval England*, esp 96-103, Kempton, “Chaucer’s Tale of Melibee: ‘A Litel Thyng in Prose,’” esp 268, Palomo, “What Chaucer Really Did to Le Livre de Mellibee,” at 306, and Walling, “‘In Hir Tellyng Difference’: Gender, Authority, and Interpretation in the *Tale of Melibee*,” at 165.


This passage differs from the Renaud to such an extent that William Askins argues that “it is not a ‘translation’ at all and its language seems purely Chaucerian” (407n51.10).


Palomo states that Prudence “argues her husband into acquiescence” (316), and Grace suggests that “Melibee is not judging and interpreting as he has been instructed to do, but simply doing what he is told” (394).

There are an abundance of parallels to Chaucer’s conception of the three-eyed Prudence. Stephen A. Barney provides a helpful list in the explanatory notes to *Troilus and Criseyde* in *Riverside Chaucer*, 1052.


The following manuscripts include the *Melibee*: HM 144, Pepys 2006 part 2, Arundel 140 part 2, Sloane 1009 part 1, and B XXIII.

70 Seymour, M.C. *A Catalogue of Chaucer Manuscripts*, 152.

71 See Palomo’s “What Chaucer Really Did to *Le Livre de Mellibee*,” esp. 315.

72 Dorigen’s oath to Aurelius is at V.988-98, the clerk explains his science at 1116-1164.

Chapter Four

Choosing Destiny: Language, Habits, and the Power of Knowing in the Parson’s Tale

In the previous chapters, I argue that Chaucer shares methods for recursive analysis in his prose works that benefit his audience. In the Boece, he offers a recursive method for understanding one’s own state; in the Retraction, he models this process while encouraging his reader to perform his own act of recursive assessment. In the Astrolabe, he provides a recursive procedure for coming to know the physical world through that finite instrument. In the Melibee, he presents a recursive practice for responding to dilemmas in the social world. In the last Tale on the road to Canterbury, Chaucer offers his final recursive method. Utilizing and yet going beyond these other recursive practices, the Parson’s method encourages the development of habits that both lead to self-sufficiency in this world and affect one’s salvation in the next. This method requires the individual to recognize patterns of behavior, understand how these patterns influence personal choice and agency, and develop purposeful habits of engagement which facilitate conscientious and more productive decision-making. Similar to the other prose methods, this process requires self-reflection; it is recursive because it also demands an assessment of the product of its reflection through that same process. An underlying premise of this method is that knowledge in the earthly realm is and always will be imperfect and incomplete. Nonetheless, according to the Parson, the ability to distinguish between right and
wrong is inherent in the human condition and because we have free-will, we are responsible for how we choose to develop that capacity.

For the Parson, man’s need to regain such understanding is a consequence of Adam and Eve’s fall from grace: “She took of the fruyt of the tree and eet it, and yaf to hire housbonde and he eet, and anoon the eyen of hem bothe openeden. / And whan that they knewe that they were naked, they sowed of figeleves a maner of breches to hiden hire membres” (X.329-30). Focusing not on God’s response to their disobedience but rather on the act and its consequences, the Parson draws attention to the operations of knowledge. In the first clause, Adam and Eve are actors: Eve takes the fruit and eats it; she then gives the fruit to Adam, and he eats. In the second clause, Adam and Eve experience the cost of disobedience: after consuming the fruit, their eyes are opened not by a conscious choice, but instead by the knowledge they gain of “good and harm.” This “eye-opening experience” reveals the fullness of both pain and sin “that was erst but oonly peyne of concupiscence” (334). The consequence of their transgression, then, is the constant threat of unrelenting temptation. Though this reading is conventional to standard religious commentary, Chaucer focuses his reader’s attention on an issue that resonates throughout his Parson’s Tale: through the activation of Adam and Eve’s understanding of good and harm, they can cultivate personal practices (i.e. habits) to defend against such temptations and gain a greater understanding of virtue and sin. Through exercising the method that Chaucer sets forth in this Tale, the reader can practice the habits of reading that are offered in the other prose works and developed collectively through the Parson. Indeed, this personal process of reading and analysis that Chaucer develops in the Parson’s Tale calls upon the themes of recursive analysis, “learning to know,” fractional knowledge, and expectations of form and then
invites a further consideration: that of genre. The placement of the Parson’s Tale at the end of the Canterbury Tales, I argue, encourages such reflection.

The relationship between the Parson’s Tale and the rest of the Canterbury Tales has long been a problem in scholarship. For some, the Parson’s Tale signals a type of literary, religious virtue. Ralph Baldwin, for example, contends that the tale “unfolds the wey to Him who is the way, the truth, and the light.”¹ Traugott Lawler argues that “One very large aspect of the relation of the Parson’s Tale to the rest of the poem is that it replaces literary truth with moral truths, asserting implicitly that this general mode of discourse is more effective than that particular mode.”² Albert Hartung asserts that there is no question “that the prologue, tale, and Retraction belong together and are representative of Chaucer’s intention to end the work on a moral and transcendent note.”³ For others, the Parson’s Tale responds to the problems that underlie the other tales. For example, Jean E. Jost maintains that “the function of the tales is to present the ‘problem’—multivalent vowing and foreswearing—in various genres and tones, while the function of the Parson’s Tale is to critique that betrayal and offer the means for exonerating betrayal in actual life through penance,” while both John Finlayson and Donald Howard view the Parson as a “retrospective guide” to the rest of the tales.⁴ Others argue that the Parson’s Tale occupies its position in the Canterbury frame not by Chaucer’s design, but rather because of scribal decision. Most prominently, Miceal Vaughan has argued that the Parson’s inclusion results from readers’ and editors’ misguided “feelings”:

The Parson’s Prologue (about whose placement there is no doubt) proposes a Parson’s Tale at the end of the Canterbury Tales, but there is nothing to indicate firmly that Chaucer intended to put his double treatise in the Parson’s mouth—
nothing, that is, except readers’ and editors’ feelings of its appropriateness, feelings also evidenced by the extant manuscripts.5

Vaughan’s primary issue is with the scribal rubrics which allow readers and editors to circumvent the complications that would arise from a text that transitions from the Parson’s Tale to the Retraction without a clearly designated change in speaker. Excepting Vaughan’s argument about the Retraction, which I dealt with specifically in Chapter One, I would like to suggest that the tale itself indicates Chaucer’s intention and should be used to reflect upon the works that come before. In this way, the Parson’s Tale explains a method of recursion similar to that which Boethius works through in his Consolation. To be clear, I agree with several of the arguments mentioned here, though I maintain that, following the Parson’s instruction, we should read them as facets of a more complex issue: Baldwin, for example, is correct in his understanding that the Parson illuminates a path to the Divine, but Chaucer’s character makes clear that it is a path and one which is constructed and modified by each individual; Lawler’s contention that the Parson reframes the discourse is apt, but it fails to recognize the Parson’s overarching suggestion that all discourse, all knowledge, will benefit the individual who puts himself to the task of discovering the Good; Howard’s idea that the Parson’s Tale is akin to a Speculum moralitatis is inspired, but it stops short of considering works outside of the Canterbury frame. And that’s precisely what I think the Parson impels us to do. At the beginning of his Tale, he directs his audience to “Stondeth upon the weyes, and seeth and axeth of olde pathes (that is to seyn, of olde sentences) which is the goode wey” (X.77). In “standing on the ways,” we stand on everything that we’ve encountered: the various Canterbury tales, Chaucer’s other works, real-life stories, self-narratives, all sources of knowledge. What I argue in this chapter is that the Parson’s Tale provides a methodical approach for identifying,
analyzing, and acting on partial, and possibly emotional, data; the underlying issues of
to promote passive acceptance of human failing, but
rather to provide opportunities to learn from the various journeys that we embark upon through narratives about life. This is the process of recursive assessment. That Chaucer offers this meditation in prose underscores the importance of its subject. The verse of the Canterbury collection entertains the audience with tales of intrigue and ribaldry, delights them with its various linguistic assays, and offers larger ideas for consideration, but it does not provide a programmatic method for developing habits of rational engagement or self-authority, nor does it intentionally drive its audience to meditate on earlier interpretations and “olde sentences.” That is a responsibility that Chaucer entrusts to the medium of prose and its capacity to convey knowledge more fully (though never completely). It is important to note that this chapter does not argue that the Parson’s Tale offers revolutionary ideas to its readers; rather, it aims to demonstrate the originality that Chaucer gains by placing this text within the context of a larger work that is aimed at a lay audience.

A brief discussion of Chaucer’s source texts will help to illuminate how the Parson’s Tale both contributes to and stands apart from these earlier works. As is well-known, the Parson’s treatment of penance is derived from the chapter “De paenitentiis et remissionibus” from Raymund of Pennafort’s Summa de paenitentia. The source for the middle section of the Tale, which provides information on the seven deadly sins, is William Peraldus’ Summa de vitii et virtutibus. A third source, which influenced Chaucer’s remedies for the deadly sins, was the Summa virtutum de remediis anime. As Richard Newhauser explains, “Both Pennafort and Peraldus were Dominicans; their works testify to the role of this fraternal order as one of the
important institutional vehicles in carrying out the penitential and pastoral canons of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215).”¹⁸ This evidence leads Newhauser to conclude that “The basis for Chaucer’s penitential and moral theology in the Parson’s Tale, thus, has a conservative foundation, for it is derived from contextual sources which were roughly 150 years old by the time he adopted them for this treatise.”¹⁹ Newhauser’s observation is important for our understanding of Chaucer’s use of orthodox ideas, but Chaucer also includes contemporary concerns about confession and religiosity similar to those of the Lollards. Indeed, he calls attention to this affinity earlier in the pilgrimage. When the Parson chastises the Host for swearing, Bailly casts him as a Lollard and then reaffirms that assessment four lines later (II.1173, 1177). Of course, Bailly’s judgment is flawed, being based solely on the Parson’s disapproval of swearing, but it does introduce the possibility that both the Parson and his Tale are more complex than initial expectations allow. Indeed, I argue that Chaucer situates the Parson’s Tale within the sentiments embodied in anticlerical, antifraternal, and Lollard concerns—all of which challenge the authority of the establishment—in order to stress the importance of acknowledging such expectations (as he does in the Melibee) and to invite his audience to “learn to know” their individual positions within the debate about lay access to God and biblical knowledge. Though Chaucer utilizes these ideas, he pushes beyond this discussion by including the Parson within the Canterbury collection, a move that, by extension, implies that this final Tale is beneficial to a courtly audience. In other words, the Parson’s Tale draws on texts that were intended to guide religious leaders (confession manuals for priests) and were primarily written for readers within religious institutions; it reaches out beyond these particular audiences to proffer its knowledge to a secular readership.
As sons and daughters of Adam and Eve, humans are “engendered of vile and corrupt mateere” (333), but they also inherit a sense of right and wrong from that same event, and with that, a continuing responsibility to use that awareness. For the Parson, humans are accountable not only for gaining such understanding but then for its habitual employment. Chaucer repeatedly points out that human knowledge is fractional and imperfect, and in the Parson’s Tale he emphasizes that this quality is part of the pelerinage de la vie humaine. What Chaucer offers through his Parson is a methodological approach to promoting one’s understanding of the self through an examination and assessment of one’s thoughts and habitual behaviors; from that, the individual then has the responsibility to choose those behaviors which are truly profitable and make them routine. Though many scholars brush this tale aside as either a sermon about penitence or as conforming to the standards of a penitential manual, I argue that the Parson’s Tale has a far wider scope; indeed, there are fundamental and significant implications for both the reader of this particular tale and for those who engage with the other tales of the Canterbury collection, implications which concern language, rhetoric, and habits of thoughtful decision-making. The issues raised by the Parson do form a sermon: its structure, syntax, use of formulaic expressions, and method of audience engagement, for example, correlate to other sermons in the late Middle Ages.\textsuperscript{10} Yet this “lesson” from Chaucer is complex and applicable to both an examination of one’s own life and to an examination of how others live theirs to the same end: gaining the knowledge from this type of inquiry can engender those habits of mind and action that result in, first, more effective, rational responses to this fallen world and, ultimately, personal salvation. It is also a lesson about recursive analysis, about “learning to know,” about expectation and form. It is also about genre and how a reader’s expectations about genre, in this
case the penitential manual, limit his ability to access whatever information might reside outside of that generic qualifier.

Chaucer deals with these disconnections in his other prose works. The Boece reminds the reader of the limitations of perspective and the need to situate a given viewpoint correctly—for Boethius, that context is the framework of Providence. In the Retraction, Chaucer performs a recursive assessment of his writing and his ability to read those compositions effectively; within that performance, he invites his audience to engage in their own recursive evaluations of their interpretations of his work. He crafts his Astrolabe to grant access to scientific knowledge but, perhaps more importantly, offers a method of “learning to know” that confronts the infinite fragmentations inherent in this realm. In the Melibee, he uses the prose form to create a recursive moment for his audience that is modeled by Melibee’s own similar process, as he “learns to know” the method from Prudence. That Chaucer presents these same factors as a collective in this work about developing self-awareness suggests that we constitute ourselves, at least in part, through reading—how we learn, how we relate to the world and to its inhabitants, and how we come to understand both who we are and what we are happens through the act of reading. The inclusion of this prose work at the end of the Canterbury Tales thus provokes a second, more comprehensive recursive assessment, as Chaucer encourages his reader not only to reflect upon the Tales that have come before but indeed upon all forms of reading and responding that create the individual self.

I develop my argument in four stages. Beginning with an explanation of the ways that expectation influences our understanding of genre, I consider how the Parson’s emphasis on a particular, programmatic form of self-investigation pushes the Tale beyond the limits of its assumed genre: the penitential manual. Though subtle, this difference challenges expectations
of genre by proffering information that a reading through the generic lens of “penitential manual” might miss. I make this point by comparing the intent of the penitential tracts and the ways in which they convey their goals to the ideas that Chaucer presents through his Parson. As part of this discussion, I include the broader tradition about penance and confession to illustrate the Parson’s greater emphasis on personal authority. Next, I turn to Chaucer’s concern with the disjointed condition of knowledge and language and consider what such fragmentation means for the individual, his habits, and his understanding of the world. I then situate Chaucer’s understanding of the influence of habits in the sublunar sphere within the writings of other philosophers with whom he would have been familiar. Through this positioning, I demonstrate the extent to which the Parson’s Tale breaks free from the penitential form due to its inclusion of larger, more philosophical considerations about language (Augustine and Alain de Lille), knowledge (Boethius and Jean Gerson), and habits (Aquinas and Boethius). Finally, I reflect upon the Parson’s position within the Canterbury frame and argue that this work, which for Chaucer demands the employment of prose, provides a methodical process of thinking and acting responsibly in a world that is fragmented and fractured. To this end, I suggest that the lessons offered in the Parson’s Tale can, and should, shed new light on the various “life pilgrimages” of the other tales. Through this reading, I argue that Chaucer’s consideration of the disconnected natures of knowledge, language, and the self inspire the individual’s recursive engagement both with himself, as he comes to understand who that self is through reading, and with the world around him.

As we learned in Chapter Three, expectations are a natural part of the cognitive process; when these presumptions are the main factors in interpretation, misunderstanding results, as evidenced by Harry Bailly. Stephen Bax explains that the idea of genre elicits a similar process
of expectation: “Genres are akin to mental structures such as concepts and schemas, in that we carry mental representations about genres around with us and make use of them to prepare for communicative events, and to interpret communicative events.”\textsuperscript{11} As he defines it, genre has several key features which are important for our discussion here. For instance, “Genres are ideals,” that are “shared as mental constructs by members of a particular community.”\textsuperscript{12} In addition, they are “characterized first and foremost by the function(s) which they perform,” which in turn “guides the features of the genre.”\textsuperscript{13} Lastly, “Genres are identified not only by formal criteria, but also by social and contextual factors.”\textsuperscript{14} One issue that these features suggest is that genre invites expectation about what is communicated through it. In fact, Richard Newhauser writes that genres “belong to the determinants of comprehension in the relationship between an author, his/her literary production, and the reader’s horizon of expectations…In this relationship, genres, as ‘literary-social institutions,’ act as the medium of negotiation for the necessary consensus between the author and the reader on all matters of instruction, entertainment, morality, and the like.”\textsuperscript{15} If genre is conceived of as a relationship between the author, his work, and the reader’s expectations, then the potential for misinterpretation becomes obvious when we consider the examples that Chaucer provides in the Thopas-Melibee. Further, if genre is a negotiation, then it is akin to the “mediacioun” through which Chaucer instructs Little Lewis in the Astrolabe: it is a construct, another “knowledge machine,” that conveys but does not contain information. And because it is a construct, presumptions relating to a particular genre are learned—they do not result from an innate quality of the composition. Chaucer challenges the boundaries that generic assumptions impose in his Parson’s Tale. By calling upon his audience’s expectations of the genre of the penitential manual, he invites them to
recognize that genre, like the issue of form in the *Thopas-Melibee*, is but one component to communication.\(^\text{16}\)

Penitential manuals gained popularity in England after the Fourth Lateran Council’s proclamations about confession in 1215. These manuals intended either to help the individual prepare for confession or to instruct the priest on methods to tease out the entirety of the confessant’s sinful admissions and to determine a proper penance. Lee Patterson has noted that these manuals follow a particular format with “a tripartite structure to match the three parts of penance: they begin with contrition and its causes, then deal with confession and the seven deadly sins, and conclude with an account of satisfaction.”\(^\text{17}\) Differences between the manuals are not surprising, but Patterson points out that Chaucer’s text is distinct because it contains “an elaborate account of sinfulness *per se.*”\(^\text{18}\) I argue that Chaucer’s concern to explain sin, its causes, and its consequences results from a critical difference between the objective of his *Parson’s Tale* and those of the other manuals. Examining the ways in which sin is treated in *Handlyng Synne*, *The Weye of Paradys*, *Instructions for Parish Priests*, and *Jacob’s Well*, I suggest that Chaucer effectively refashions sin as a deed that one can learn to avoid by creating habits of rational analysis. The manuals, conversely, seem to expect a cycle of sin and confession and thus, in following the Council’s twenty-first canon, focus their readers’ attention primarily on the acknowledgement but not the avoidance of iniquity. Moreover, the Parson’s process is recursive in that it requires the utilization of its formula to assess both prior interpretations gleaned through that formula and whatever new information the individual has gathered, while the penitential manuals encourage a rote expression of understanding.

The twenty-first canon declares not only that “All the faithful of both sexes shall after they have reached the age of discretion faithfully confess all their sins at least once a year to their
own (parish) priest and perform to the best of their ability the penance imposed,” but those who fail to abide by this proclamation are to be “cut off from the Church (excommunicated) during life and deprived of Christian burial in death.” The severity of this prescription certainly intends to incite compliance, but there resides within the imposed obedience a formulaic relationship between the individual and the Church that establishes the primacy of ecclesiastical authority: “Let the priest be discreet and cautious that he may pour wine and oil into the wounds of the one injured after the manner of a skilful physician, carefully inquiring into the circumstances of the sinner and the sin, from the nature of which he may understand what kind of advice to give and what remedy to apply, making use of different experiments to heal the sick one.” This analogy suggests that, from the Church’s point of view, the priest remedies sickness; he does not teach his patient methods to prevent it.

Given the threat of excommunication, it is not surprising that the manuals were, as Mary Flowers Braswell notes, “designed with a double purpose in mind: to teach man the intricacies of the doctrine of sin, so that he might learn to recognize and avoid evil, and to confess properly and save his soul.” Indeed, it is this second purpose—to save the soul through proper confession—that drives a very real anxiety in penitential literature. In Handlyng Synne, for example, Robert Mannyng of Brunne proclaims, “Letteþ nat ȝoure synne to telle: / Þenkeþ on þe peyneþ of helle.” Mannyng’s point, clearly, is that imagining a future, eternal harm to the individual provides sufficient impulsion to reveal his sins. Similarly, in The Weye of Paradys, the author contends that confession “schittyth the ȝate of helle, the whiche was open to the sinner er he schrof hym.” One of the overarching principles of these manuals is that humans perpetually sin; as such, these works admonish the individual to confess in order to forestall eternal punishment. While Chaucer’s Parson would agree that sin cannot be eliminated, he
illustrates ways of minimizing its propagation through mindful habits. The manuals, in contrast, propose that humanity is redeemable only through confession after sin, which in fact, reinforces iniquitous patterns: the individual is to think about Mannyng’s “peynes of helle” with respect to confession, not with regards to a consideration about whether the offending deed should be committed at all; in the *Weye of Paradyse*, the focus is on how confession shuts the gates, not on the fact that a conscious decision not to sin would have made the threat of the gates moot. Both of these authors suggest, as does the Parson, that confession protects the sinner from Hell, but whereas the Parson construes confession as one part of a larger whole that focuses prominently on repentance and thus places more responsibility on the individual, both of these manuals emphasize the operations of the confessor and God’s grace. Through the Parson, Chaucer thus engages concerns raised elsewhere in Lollardy, antifraternalism, and anticlericalism about the role a confessor should play in confession and invites his audience to participate in the consideration of such concerns.

It is arguable that Church doctrine saw confession as the only means by which an individual could realize himself as warranting eternal life: when the sinner confesses, he becomes an individual actor (i.e., has agency); through the act of confession, he rejoins the Christian community by acknowledging his particularly human failings. As Gregory Roper explains, “By probing the subjective, personal memory of the actions through the screen of the objective list of sins, the penitent comes, that is, to a moment of self-discovery that is simultaneously a discovery of how typical and unindividual that self is.” Taking a slightly different approach, David Raybin suggests that while “it is sin in its infinite variability that distinguishes the self,” one retains a sense of individuality within the collective: “the act of contrition triggers God’s mercy by signaling one’s individual readiness for salvation even as it
joins one into the common mass of penitents.”24 Roper and Raybin are each, individually, correct in their readings of Church-authorized confession, but neither addresses the fact that what agency the sinner obtains through this process is, at best, pallid: the Church’s focus in confession is on the sinner revealing actions already taken, to an individual who is trained (by the Church) to ask questions in a particular way to solicit particular responses. In his *Instructions for Parish Priests*, for example, John Mirk directs the priest to confess sinners in a timely fashion:

Whenne on hath done a synne,
Loke he lye not longe there ynne,
But a-non that he hym schryue,
……………………………..
Leste he forȝet by lentenes day,
And oute of mynde hyt go away.25

It is the responsibility of the priest, in other words, not only to ensure a complete confession, but also to intervene after a sin is committed on behalf of the sinner’s soul. Chaucer, through the Parson, offers a much more progressive form: he reframes the narrative of confession from the constraints of the Church to the rigors of repentance. In so doing, Chaucer’s Parson invites the creation, and then continuation, of a program of personal agency (which is required by repentance), whereas the Church, via the manuals, works to maintain its own power over the community through the power of absolution.

Manuals such as Mirk’s *Instructions for Parish Priests* and *Jacob’s Well* reinforce the Church’s claim to authority by suggesting that external forces (i.e. the confessor or the Holy Ghost) define the individual’s opportunity for salvation. Mirk, for example, demands that the priest “grope the sore” of the confessant in order to ensure a complete confession: “And when he
The anxiety that Mirk communicates in his text hints at a real concern for the safety of his fellow Christians, but at the same time, it also implies that the individual can neither be entrusted to reveal the entirety of his sins, nor to discover the details without the intercession of the priest. Thus, he underscores the clergy’s role as an essential mediator between the confessant and his eternal destination. *Jacob’s Well*, likewise, argues that man’s capacities are given to him: in this case, “*pe ȝyfte of knowynge, of kunynge*” comes from the Holy Ghost. It is only through this gift, the author asserts, that one learns self-knowledge: “*it techyth þe to liven ryȝtfully a-monge euyll lyuerys, & to teche ryȝtly, & to defende þi ðeyþ wyþ resouns fro inpugnyng of heretykes…it techyth þe to kun knowe þe-self, whanne þou art synfull, & whanne þou art ryȝtfull, and how þou schalt gouerne þe to saue þi soule.*” In other words, what “good” the individual accomplishes results not from free will, but rather from a gift from an external source. In this instance, self-knowledge and the ability to make good choices are gifts from the Holy Ghost. Whether attempting to provoke compliance through intimidation or fear, one idea seems to govern these manuals’ construction: based on man’s inherent flaws, the Church must assume authority over the individual in all matters pertaining to the soul because man simply cannot be trusted with that responsibility. The problem with this strategy is that the Church’s assertion of authority overrides the individual’s free will, rendering it, and the responsibility it demands, inconsequential.

The point should be made that the Parson’s instruction is not exceptionally unorthodox: to a large extent, he agrees with the authors of the penitential manuals and conforms to the traditional confessional texts, such as the *Ancrene Wisse*. There are two distinct shifts away
from these more conventional works. The first is in the Parson’s suggestion that man chooses his eternal destination for himself. Christ’s mercy “is alwey redy to receiven hym” (X.1073), but the mercy does not force itself onto the individual; man shall have the “strengthe of the help of God, and of al hooly chirche, and of the proteccioun of aungels, if hym list” (1075, my emphasis). Here, the Parson refocuses away from the power of God or Christ to save man and instead illuminates the authority—and thus the responsibility—of the individual to know and thus to save himself. While this statement, of itself, is conventional, the Parson’s extension of this idea is not. Directly after calling attention to the choice (“if hym list”), the Parson offers another: man “may” purchase an eternity in Heaven “by deeth and mortificacion of synne” (1080). To be blunt, the Parson states that it is not God who saves or damns; rather, the individual chooses to accept or reject God’s grace after death based on the habits that he has cultivated during life. The second shift away from the penitential manuals and confessional texts has to do with the Parson’s position within the Canterbury collection. By including this work within a secular text, Chaucer increases its accessibility while at the same time suggesting that the information contained herein is valuable beyond a specifically religious context. Through the Parson, Chaucer argues that one’s productiveness or frustrations in this life and, more importantly, one’s eternal destination, are not tendered either through God’s judgment or grace, as the manuals proclaim, or through an eleventh-hour intervention by Christ, but rather remain choices available to each individual not only throughout life but also into death. Further, the determination of the benefit or futility of one’s actions and the cultivation of productive habits—both of which are included within the Parson’s method—profit all readers.
This interpretation of the interminable nature of man’s free will is strikingly Boethian.

As Philosophy explains the extent to which wicked people bring about their own misery and good people find true happiness, she asserts,

For yif thou conferme thi corage to the beste thinges, thow ne hast noon nede of no juge to yeven the prys or mede; for thow hast joined thiself to the most excellent thing. And yif thow have enclyned thi studies to the wikkide thinges, ne seek no foreyne wrekere out of thiself; for thow thiself hast thrist thiself into wikke thinges, ryght as thow myghtest loken by diverse tymes the fowle erthe and the hevene, and that alle othere thinges stynten fro withoute, so that thow nere neyther in [hevene] ne in erthe, ne saye no thyng more; thane scholde it semen to the as by oonly resoun of lokynge that thow were in the sterres, and now in the erthe. But the peple ne loketh nat on these thinges. (IV.p4.194-209)

This is “the jugement of the perdurable law” (IV.p4.193-94): eternal law allows for man to choose his own goodness (and thus his reward) or his own desolation (and thus his confusion).

What he sees and the way he understands what he sees is determined “by oonly resoun of lokynge.” For Chaucer, the responsibility of such agency requires that an individual develop a process of continual self-examination, adaptation, and action (i.e., a habit) that is founded on rational choices informed by all of the data, though incomplete and imperfect, that is available to that individual. If the reader is reading within the bounds of his expectations of the penitential manual genre, this perspective would be missed. To follow Philosophy, such readers “loketh nat on these thinges.” Yet, Chaucer makes this knowledge available to those who read beyond the boundary.
The figure of the Parson and his characterization as a Lollard provides an interesting analogy to this discussion of genre. When the Parson chastises the Host for swearing, Bailly answers, “O Jankin, be ye there? / I smelle a Lollere in the wynd” (II.1172-73). To stress his interpretation of the Parson’s religiosity, Bailly repeats this label four lines later: “This Lollere here wil prechen us somewhat” (1177). Katherine Little argues that the Host’s assessment “seems to be confirmed by the portrait of the Parson in the General Prologue. This Parson ‘Cristes gospel trewely wolde preche’ (I.481), and his single-minded adherence to interpreting and teaching the gospel…supports the term Lollere.”

Frances McCormack agrees: “It is…likely that Chaucer wanted his audience to see shades of Lollardy in the depiction of the Parson.” Labeling the Parson’s Tale as a Lollard work is not as clear-cut. As Little points out, the Tale “does not confirm the heretical tendencies suggested by the Parson’s earlier appearances. Rather, as a penitential manual that reinforces the necessity of auricular confession, it concerns itself with one of the practices vehemently opposed by the Wycliffites.”

McCormack’s extensive study, on the other hand, traces Lollard threads throughout the text. While I find that the Parson creates a role for the confessor that is more supportive and less authoritative and places more emphasis on the authority of the individual, I agree with Little’s contention that the way the Parson is characterized earlier in the Canterbury Tales is intentionally distinct from the Tale he tells. Further, I believe that McCormack’s investigation highlights the importance of looking beyond the negotiations and expectations of genre. I would like to push this argument one step further: in categorizing the Parson’s belief-system via Bailly and the pilgrim-narrator, Chaucer evokes expectations about the Tale that this “Lollere” will proffer. Similar to Bailly’s attempt to determine the type of story that “Chaucer” would provide based on the latter’s appearance alone, Chaucer draws his reader into the text by placing him in a
position that is similar to Bailly’s. The question, then, is this: can the reader learn from all of the information that is presented, or is his understanding circumscribed by what he expects to read? Again, I would follow Philosophy: the answer depends on how the reader looks “on these thinges.”

Although the Parson’s Tale is generically similar to penitential manuals, Chaucer signals his departure from this form by defining a different genre for the tale. Having rejected fables, rhyme, and alliterative verse, the Parson proclaims that he will “telle a myrie tale in prose” (46); more specifically, he offers a “meditacioun” (55). When the Host accepts—“‘Telleth,’ quod he,’ youre meditacioun’” (69)—he places a condition on the telling: “But hasteth yow; the sonne wole adoun; / Beth fructuous and that in litel space” (70-71). Though “meditacioun” in this context most obviously indicates a moral discourse or sermon, the use of this word also suggests that the subject matter requires space for contemplation. The distinction between the “litel space” that Bailly affords the Parson’s speech and the textual space that the Parson’s 1005 lines require invites a consideration of the fleeting nature of speech and the fixity of text. In the House of Fame, the eagle remarks that “Soun ys noght but eyr ybroken, / And every speche that ys yspoken, / …/ In his substaunce ys but air” (765-68); while texts remain bound by linear time given their physicality, they are able to maintain a quasi-permanence that speech cannot enjoy. Their role in both recursive analysis and “learning to know” is essential to these processes. Further, considering that the method the Parson advocates requires a lifetime commitment, the textual space that the length of this tale demands is, indeed, “litel.” As the Parson avers throughout his tale, the mind, if not actively engaged in the process of productive consideration, can easily be overthrown by emotion; by creating this meditation through text, Chaucer invites
his readers to return to the *Parson’s Tale* in order to remember, reevaluate, and recreate their individual paths as knowledge and experience demand.

Chaucer’s choice to compose the *Parson’s Tale* in prose instead of in verse both speaks the importance of its subject matter and provides an example of the potential of language that aims to communicate its *sentence* with clarity. The malleability of language, however, is not a subject unique to Chaucer’s Parson; the authors of the penitential manuals likewise express concern about the capacity of words to deceive. The author of *Jacob’s Well*, for instance, advises that confession be direct and plainly-spoken: “ne telle noȝt in þi schryfte flateryng iapys & talys, no oþere processe þat longeth noȝt to þi schryfte; but symplely late þin herte & þi tung acorde in one, & reherse in þi schryfte no proces but þat nedyth.” In *Handlyng Synne*, Robert Mannyng informs his readers that sins which are covered “wyþ feyr wrd” benefit the devil and harm the sinner: “Yn swyche wrdes þe fend ys queynte / To make þy shryfte fals & feynte.”

By calling attention to the potential for language to obscure the sin, either with fair words or excessive and misdirecting details, both authors submit that “colored” confessions are worthless: in *Jacob’s Well*, when sins remain unconfessed, “þanne were all lost”; in *Handlyng Synne*, “Wyþ mouþe to speke & noght to hyde, / Elles hyt ys a spyce of pryde.” Through the Parson’s explanation of this issue, Chaucer again pushes beyond the manuals to assign responsibility directly to the individual who uses language intentionally to obscure the truth: “Thow shalt nat eek peynTe thy confessioun by faire subtile wordes, to covere the moore thy synne; for thanne bigilestow thyself, and nat the preest. Thow most tellen it platly, be it neve so foul ne so horrible” (1022). Though the “painting” of one’s sins with beautiful, subtle words may minimize the shame of the sin or the penance assigned to make restitution not only does this strategy not benefit the sinner, but indeed, it entices him to sin again. Furthermore, by proposing that one
confess “platly,” the Parson indicates that a speaker can construe (or misconstrue) meaning by the way he constructs his words. Thus, Chaucer distinguishes his Parson from these other works through the responsibility that he places on the sinner-speaker: though the goal of covering the sin with words may be to deceive the priest, the fact that Chaucer’s Parson focuses on the consequences to the sinner in the earthly realm highlights the degree to which one creates life, or the “derknesse of deeth,” through choice. In offering this meditation in prose, Chaucer models an attempt at speaking “platly” to communicate as clearly and as openly as possible within the constraints of an imperfect system.

The fact that knowledge and understanding are limited both by human capacity and the incomplete nature endemic to this universal space complicates the Parson’s method of rational analysis. As discussed in Chapter Two, the medieval concept of a determinate universe was based on the Ptolemaic model, which placed Earth in the center of nine crystalline spheres, with the First Mover governing the ninth. When this model was adopted into Christianity, God became the definable magnitude of the universe. While everything above the lunar sphere is in a state of perfection, what resides in the sublunar sphere remains deficient, incomplete, and flawed. Given that the medieval understanding of infinity allowed for infinite reduction but not infinite enlargement, the various imperfections and confusions that are natural to this cosmic space increase indefinitely as one moves from the lunar sphere to Earth and then into Hell. What this cosmology suggests is that, while Hell is an irredeemably confused and unproductive space, the earth serves as its definable magnitude and thus as the boundary for its infinite, and innate, degenerations. As such, the space between that boundary and the lunar sphere, though inherently imperfect, is one that nonetheless permits a rational ordering. Through reason, man can use the knowledge of both the natural qualities of this space and that of his own inherited limitations in
order to assume agency over those things which are within his power and avoid or otherwise accept those things which remain without. I argue that for the Parson, such agency is only possible over the self—as it is for Chaucer in the Retraction, Boethius in the Boece, and Prudence and Melibee in the Tale of Melibee. Yet through the Parson, Chaucer suggests that even self-authority is imperfect, as self-knowledge is constrained by the very factors which innately limit both knowledge and language in general. Further, agency does not, of itself, limit the potential to sin. The force which drives the discipline to make distinctions between what is within and without one’s power and then acting on these decisions, therefore, requires the development of habitual, rational engagement that not only leads to personal satisfaction as defined in the Boece, but in fact permits a choice between posthumous Heaven and Hell.

While Heaven is perfection and Hell is the ultimate irrational chaos, the sublunar sphere is the intermediate space where the individual can either surrender to fleshly desire or else develop mindful systems which enhance the intellect and then promote those practices which make the individual more in the image and likeness of God. As the Parson makes clear, it is this former assuetude that results in confusion and emotional servitude: “Soothly, synnes been the weyes that leden folk to helle” (141). By using “sins” as the subject of the sentence, the Parson at once gives governing control to the transgressions, while at the same time stripping power away from the sinner: the individual, then, becomes something that is acted upon instead of someone who acts. When Adam and Eve commit the “original sin,” they temporarily lose agency, as their eyes are opened by a knowledge which is at once fractured and imperfectly understood (to borrow from Chaucer in his Astrolabe); the more perilous result, however, is that sin severs their intimate connection with the Divine. In this way, original sin further weakens the individual’s inherent capacity to understand rightly; nonetheless, while the realization of perfect
understanding remains impossible, the individual can strengthen or steadily diminish the bond with the Divine through choice. The fact that Chaucer uses the plural forms of “sin” and “way” serves to reify the medieval conception of the universe as discussed above, as well as to introduce the peril of habitual sin: the “weyes” serve as the diverse and sundry paths whose continual travel lead “folk” to Hell, while “synnes,” driven by a combination of desire and lack of reason, pull their cargo in whichever direction temptation inclines. Such a path has no proper destination because it is not considered, is ever-variant because it is guided by each moment’s yearning, and is unproductive because it separates, with each step, the individual from his intellect. What the Parson makes clear is that the individual creates his own path to Hell by permitting the naturalization—the habituation—of sin and thus the implicit abandonment of the ability to reason and act in accordance with that reason. Through the choice to indulge in constant sin, man loses his status as an individual and instead becomes akin to the collective “folk” who eternally circle vainly through Dante’s *Inferno*.

The intellectual impotence that results from an engrained pattern of irrationality is illustrated in both Dante’s *Inferno* and Boethius’ *Consolation of Philosophy*. As Dante’s pilgrim-narrator explains, in the second circle of Hell reside the carnal sinners, “che la ragion sommettono al talento” [who subject their reason to their lust] (Canto 5.39); in this space, “La bufera infernal, che mai non resta,/ mena li spirit con la sua rapina; / voltando e percotendo li molesta” [The infernal whirlwind, which never rests, drives the spirits before its violence; turning and striking, it tortures them] (31-33). Not only does the rapid rotation of the environment endlessly and violently thrust the powerless souls wherever it pleases, but such propulsion also dooms them to an eternity of pursued and pursuing. Dante’s use of verse parallels this sensation, as its structure propels the reader forwards and backwards. Though the
siners persist in their desires, the constant churning of the winds forbids the consummation of their lusts. Their thoughts and actions, fixedly directed by a ceaseless yearning, are forever out of place and irrelevant to their situation; through this, they remain condemned. In the *Boece*, when Philosophy appears before the grief-stricken Boethius, she recognizes that his amnesia results from the fact that his worldly cares have mesmerized him: “Allas! How the thought of this man, dreynt in overthrowynge depnesse, dulleth and forleteth his propre clernesse, myntyng to gon into foreyne darknesse as ofte as his anoyos bysynes waxeth withoute mesure, that is dryven with werldly wyndes” (I.m2.1-6). Of course, the Muses share no small part in the creation of these winds, as their immediate banishment by Philosophy indicates. Similar to Dante’s subsequent use of a whirlwind to illustrate the powerlessness of sinners who have so permitted their desires to overrule their minds that they are trapped in an eternity of perpetual pursuit, Philosophy explains that Boethius’ rational mind is drowned in overthrowing emotions, which in turn intentionally propel him with “worldly winds” into the darkness of confusion.

As the Parson defines it, Hell is a physical, eternal space: it is pure darkness (X.182); it is shame and confusion (187); it is degradation and corruption (191); it lacks food (194), drink, clothing (for body (196) and soul (197)), friendship (199), and delight (207). Not only is Hell agonizing, but the Parson explains that the “darkness of death” results from “the synnes that the wrecched man hath doon, whiche that destourben hym to see the face of God, right as dooth a derk clowde bitwixe us and the sonne” (185); strictly speaking, the abject sinner cannot see the face of God because of his sins. This inability to see beyond the cloud of one’s emotions represents the incapacity of man to use reason when he has entrenched himself in habitual vice. Chaucer’s Parson thereby implies that those who reside in Hell are held in thrall by their own
emotions: it is not God who damns, but rather the loss of reason through the naturalization of sinful thoughts and actions leads individuals to a place from which they cannot escape.

Hell, it is important to note, is not just an eternal, subterranean space. Given the close proximity between Earth and Hell in the Ptolemaic model, the potential similarities in experience within these two realms are not surprising: the “misese” of shame and confusion and the darkness of the mind, in fact, are worldly matters. Food and drink, companionship, and shelter relate to the body, while mental darkness refers to the obscurity of the intellect. Further, the disorder of Hell begins in the sublunar sphere. As the Parson explains, “And al be it so that God hath creat alle thynges in right ordre, and no thyng withouten ordre, but alle thynges been ordeyned and nombred; yet, nathelees, they that been dampned been nothyng in ordre, ne holden noon ordre, / for the erthe ne shal bere hem no fruyt” (218-219). What the Parson proposes here is that both belonging to and being apart from the order of God occurs during life: they that have been damned, i.e. led to Hell by their sins, experience the disorder of damnation while opportunities still remain to reform. By not checking the impulse to sin, by not scrutinizing habits and changing them as necessary, and by not considering action but rather reacting, man dams himself for an eternity because, after death, he loses the potential to consider alternative possibilities inasmuch as the naturalization of his fractured understanding has been irrevocably set.

Though the choice to sin separates man from God’s divine order and creates a personal Hell through routine sinfulness, man can redefine his course and thus control his opportunity for salvation through contrition: “contricion destroyeth the prisoun of helle, and maketh wayk and fieble alle the strengthes of the develes, and restoreth the yiftes of the Hooly Goost and of alle goode vertues” (311). The process of contrition is mentally demanding and particular to each
individual, but the impetus is “the verray sorwe that a man receyveth in his herte” (129). That the spark of contrition happens independent of man’s free will indicates that the knowledge of good and evil that man inherits from Adam and Eve, i.e. the governing conscience, speaks through the darkness and confusion of Hell. Yet contrition requires more than the experience of sorrow: if such remorse results from an intuitive faculty, then its experience is natural and irrepressible, provided that one’s habits have not obscured its recognition. What one does with this sorrow is a choice: one can either dismiss or otherwise excuse it, or one can, “with sad purpos to shryve hym, and to do penaunce and neveremoore to do synne” (129). It is through the exercise of this latter sequence that one may destroy the prison of Hell by mindfully creating new habits, or reinforcing current routines, that intentionally avoid the circumstances which lead to iniquity.

If this prison is created through the habitual thoughts, speech, and actions that remove the sinner from God’s natural order and hinder his ability to see the Divine, it stands to reason that developing beneficial habits prohibit its reconstruction. Not only does contrition destroy the prison, but it also restores man to his “goode weye”: “it clenseth the soule of synne, and delivereth the soule fro the peyne of helle…and restoreth it to alle goodes espirituels, and to the compaignye and communyoun of hooly chirche” (312). By recognizing the fault, confessing it, doing penance, and actively creating different patterns that avoid repeating the sin, the individual can return to the path and once again find refreshment for his soul. More importantly, through confession the sinner returns to the company and communion of Holy Church; in other words, one has the power to return to and participate in the Divine order even after sinning. The completion of this process does not mean that the penitent will not return to sin: as a flawed individual residing in a flawed realm, recidivism remains a real possibility. As such, the Parson
warns his audience that “al the while that a man hath in hym the peyne of concupiscence, it is impossible but he be tempted somtime and mooved in his flessh to synne. / And this thyng may nat faille as longe as he lyveth; it may wel wexe fieble…but fully ne shal it nevere quenche” (339-41). Even with the formation of new habits, temptation remains and will, at times, overpower the sinner, but the point is to create new patterns of behavior to combat temptation, to work for the benefit of the self, others, and God, and to respond to the enticements of this world in productive ways.

The Parson contends that the development of such patterns requires three components: an understanding of the power of language, a growing ability to engage effectively with one’s own responses and with the world around him, and an appreciation of how important it is to govern one’s actions with knowledge. Chaucer provides an anti-example of a reckless reaction that is justified through language directly before the Parson’s Tale in the Manciple’s Tale. Here, spoken truth results in distorted action: when the crow informs Phebus of his wife’s infidelity, Phebus kills his wife and blames the bird for his rash action: “thurgh thee my wyf is slayn” (IX.302). To punish the bird, Phebus tortures, permanently silences, and exiles him. The moral, as the Manciple gives his audience to believe, is that, regardless of truth, it is best to remain silent: “Kepe wel thy tonge and thank upon the crowe” (362). This threat, be silent lest you be maimed and discarded, redirects the audience’s attention away from Phebus’ thoughtless and disastrous actions and asks them to accept this response as natural because the crow, really, should have kept his beak shut. By following the Manciple’s Tale with the Parson’s, Chaucer calls attention to the potential of speech and the degree to which language can be shaped to the speaker’s ends, and the fact that Chaucer follows the poetry of the Manciple’s Tale with the prose of the Parson’s underscores such potentiality—the elaborate construction of poetry, and
here specifically of the Manciple’s verse, invites consideration because the *sentence* is not
plainly spoken (though the Manciple would have us to believe otherwise), whereas the prose of
the Parson invites meditation on themes that are developed clearly and directly throughout the
tale. More specifically, the Parson addresses in intentionally plain terms the power of language:
it can induce one’s damnation, but it also has the promise to correct one’s understanding and to
turn the world right-side up.

While the Parson spends much of his time highlighting the mistaken thinking that spirals
and fractures towards confusion, chaos, and eventual damnation, he also offers a means of
engaging with thoughts and behaviors that are every bit as individual as are ways of sinning.
Though less explicit than his discussion of futile and damning routines, the Parson contends that
the development of beneficial habits must be governed by knowledge, in this case, knowledge of
the processes of sin: “For certes, ther is no deedly synne that it nas first in mannes thought and
after that in his delit, and so forth into consentynge and into dede” (297). With the possible
exception of the act itself, the process of sinning is framed by language: the thought is
constructed through words, as is the desire, and the permission to engage in the act requires that
language be composed in such a way as to make the deed acceptable. Just as the sinner beguiles
only himself with a dishonest confession, so he deceives himself by painting the thought and
desire with fair, subtle words in order to permit a future act or to justify one already committed.
For this reason, the Parson states that “man oghte sorwe for his wikkede wordez as wel as for his
wikkede dedes” (300). In fact, “actual sin” occurs at the moment when the individual sanctions
the deed: “thus is synne acompliced by temptacioun, by delit, and by consentynge; and thanne is
the synne cleped actueel” (357). Sin occurs through language. As such, the words that
introduced temptation to desire and crafted it into acceptability should inspire as much sorrow as
the physical act. In order to create new, more profitable patterns, the Parson asserts, one must understand the process of sinning. This awareness empowers the individual not only to inhibit action through deliberation, but also to recognize that the power of language can promote virtue when it results from reason and then from will. The promise of personal agency thus allows equally for the individual to develop practices that serve the Good or to foster patterns of iniquity and vice.

Chaucer first deals with the issue of human agency in his *Boece*. The idea that each person asserts his individuality though his choice either to sin or to confess those sins follows the Stoic vision as illustrated by Boethius’ Philosophy: “For every thing that may naturely usen resoun, it hath doom by which it discernith and demeth every thing; thanne knoweth it by itself thinges that ben to fleen and thinges that ben to desiren” (V.p2.10-14). The difference between Philosophy’s interpretation and that of the penitential manuals has to do with the degree of personal agency that an individual claims: the manuals intend to reunite the sinner with God via the priest or the Holy Ghost, while Philosophy suggests that those who use reason have the capacity to determine which actions are just and reasonable before the action itself is performed can, through their own faculties, recall and then act profitably on what they once knew but had forgotten. In other words, the manuals focus on remitting actions that have already occurred, while Philosophy advocates that the individual use his judgment to “discern and deem everything” before he acts. It is within this latter line of reasoning that Chaucer situates his Parson. Though the Parson clearly acknowledges the necessity of the priest during confession—he is the “meene and mediatour bitwixe Crist and the synnere” (990)—the purpose of his tale is to invite his audience to engage in a process of consideration that empowers them, individually, to become agents in the creation of their own destinies. Chaucer’s Parson thus differs from the
medieval Church’s definition of individuality by suggesting that the surrender of free will leads to a habituation of thoughtlessness that in turn herds the individual into the faceless multitude of “folk”; one remains an individual (i.e. has agency) so long as he thinks and acts rationally. What’s more, the Parson’s focus on repentance demands that the individual develop and then rely upon his own faculties of reason, whereas the Church’s claimed dominion over the process of confession ultimately denies such agency.

The Parson advocates this individual, mindful engagement from the very beginning of his tale. He suggests a process that requires gathering and then considering both knowledge and the vehicles through which that knowledge is transmitted before determining a response: “Stondeth upon the weyes, and seeth and axeth of olde pathes (that is to seyn, of olde sentences) which is the goode wey, / and walketh in that wey, and ye shal fynde refresshyng for youre soules” (77-78). In using the plural “weyes,” “pathes,” and “sentences,” the Parson calls his audience’s attention to the limited perspectives of all knowledge machines and to the idea that “refreshment for the soul” is a consequence to understanding the fractured nature of knowing. Yet if an individual dismisses this process in favor of capitulating to earthly delights, he surrenders control of both his body and his mind; in essence, he becomes a beast (in Boece, a non-person). As the Parson explains, habitual sinning leads to a change in human nature:

for biforn that tyme that ye synned, ye were the children of God and lymes of the regne of God; / but for youre synne ye been woxen thral, and foul, and membres of the feend, hate of aungels, sclaudre of hooly chirche, and foode of the false serpent, perpetueel matere of the fir of helle; / and yet moore foul and abhomynable, for ye trespassen so ofte tyme as dooth the hound that retourneth to eten his spewyng. / And yet be ye fouler for youre longe continuynge in synne and
youre synful usage, for which ye be roten in youre synne as a beest in his dong.

(136-39, emphasis mine)

While sin alienates Adam and Eve from the Divine, the Parson asserts that man maintains a stronger connection to God when he eschews sin; when man chooses sin, he simultaneously weakens his bond with God and bolsters his connection to the devil. Man’s affiliation with these ethereal beings fluctuates as he either persists in sin or amends his behavior. As the Parson makes clear, man returns to God during those moments of penitential satisfaction, but these moments last only to the extent that he retains his agency; when he chooses to regress to fleshly pursuits, then he loses his autonomy once again. Worse than the vacillation between virtue and vice are the deepening effects of one’s unthinking habits, which the Parson construes as a dog returning to eat his own vomit. Through this metaphor, the Parson creates an analogy between persistent sinning and natural behavior. The dog returns and consumes what he has regurgitated not because of conscious deliberation and choice to ingest the “spewyng” but rather because it is a natural behavior for the dog. Chaucer’s use of figural language in this passage works to assert a new literal condition within the prose medium: sin increasingly strips man of his humanity because its regularity cultivates a new, non-human nature. By including this discussion within the Canterbury frame, Chaucer brings a religious commonplace into the courtly realm and offers, for the consideration of his readers, the power of habits to shape choice.

The images of beasts and bodily waste in this passage highlight the divide between man’s capacity and his failings. Though man, through his inheritance from Adam and Eve, is “as goddes, knowynge good and harm” (328), his choice to sin and worse, to create unthinking habits that become natural, sinful reactions, degrades him to the level of beasts. In other words, man’s character is created by his actions. As Aristotle writes in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, “states
of character arise out of like activities,” and for this reason, “we must examine the nature of actions, namely how we ought to do them; for these determine also the nature of the states of character that are produced.” In the Consolation of Philosophy, Boethius also addresses this issue. When he faults Fortune for his downfall, Philosophy chastises him for his irrational response to Fortune’s character: “Enforcestow the to aresten or withholden the swyftnesse and the sweighe of hir turnynge wheel? O thow fool of alle mortel foolis! Yif Fortune bygan to duelle stable, she cessede thanne to ben Fortune” (II.p1.110-14). In reminding Boethius of Fortune’s nature, she also reminds him of his own, which “were wont to hurtlen and despysen hir with manly woordes, whan sche was blaudysschinge and present, and pursuydest hir with sentences that weren drawen out of myn entre (that is to seyn, of myn enformacioun)” (II.p1.27-32). What Philosophy offers Boethius is a way of rationally analyzing his situation through education and reason: in this case, understanding Fortune’s character “maketh that the manaces of Fortune ne ben nat for to dreden, ne the flaterynges of hir to ben desired” (II.p1.88-91). For the Parson, the idea that an individual can change his character through the conscious shaping of habitual actions, eradicating those that are pernicious and inculcating those that are productive, is at once promising and perilous. The true issue is one of self-knowledge. Understanding how and to what end personal habits direct behavior, as well as the methods for creating and reinforcing beneficial habits, provide the individual with the tools necessary to shape his own nature and thus his destiny.

Chaucer, certainly, is not singular in his understanding of the powerful influence of habits. Arguing that the nature of habit “is principally related to the will,” Thomas Aquinas distinguishes between the apprehensive and appetitive powers and concludes that “in the appetitive powers…no habit is natural in its beginning.” Habits created by the appetitive or
desirous principle, then, occur as the result of unintentional repetition, and the more often the act
is performed, the more the habit is reinforced: “repeated acts cause a habit to grow.”

When confronting choices between right and wrong, between accepting and avoiding temptation,
stronger, established habits dictate the response of those who indulge unmediated reaction over a
considered response. As Aquinas remarks, “man differs from irrational animals in this, that he is
master of his actions.”

Following this reasoning, the Parson argues that man’s denial of his
innate ability to control his choices in favor of consenting to emotional temptations makes him
fouler than the dog that eats his own vomit and more abhorrent than the beast that mires itself in
its own feces. By choosing not to “master his actions” and instead to allow sinful habits to
determine his responses, the sinner departs from the “goode wey” and stumbles into the chaos of
Hell. Should he continue in this state, he is damned: “they that been dampned been so bounde
that they ne may neither wel do ne wel thynke” (686).

In part, the nature of the sublunar sphere, with its imperfections and inconsistencies,
creates the potential for the emotions to overwhelm the individual; the fact that knowledge, too,
is and always will be fragmentary complicates this situation further. As the Parson consistently
reminds his audience, his own understanding is likewise incomplete: “this meditacioun / I putte it
ay under correccioun / Of clerkes” (55-57); “and many another twig that I kan nat declare” (391);
“Of whiche, smoothly, thise forseyde thynges, and mo than I have seyd, apertenen to Pride that is
in the herte of man” (410); “And whan they sourden by freletee unavysed, and sodeynly
withdrawen ayeyn, al been they grevousse synnes, I gesse that they ne been nat deedly” (449). By
calling attention to the limitations of his own knowledge, the Parson reminds his audience that
his is but one perspective of many and that their understanding is dependent upon personal
investment in acquiring knowledge. In contrast to the Manciple who expects his audience not
only to accept his false moral, but in fact to take in and act upon it unthinkingly, the Parson demands his audience’s involvement in the acquisition and analysis of information for the very reason that what he offers is not the potential entirety of that which is available: “no man kan outrely telle the nombre of the twigges and of the harmes that cometh of Pride” (390), for example. The fact that the Parson’s knowledge, indeed, everyone’s knowledge, is incomplete suggests that the very process of understanding that he espouses throughout his tale requires continual effort. Put another way, the way out of Hell is through a perpetual consideration of one’s thoughts, desires, permissions and actions; the way to Heaven is through the creation of habits of engagement with knowledge of oneself. Certainly, this discussion of imperfect knowledge has a long history in both religious and scientific contexts; its inclusion, instead of offering new information, reminds the reader to acknowledge the innate imperfections of knowing.

In view of the fact that language and understanding are necessarily incomplete, self-knowledge, by extension, is likewise fragmentary. The method that the Parson offers is therefore complicated not only as a result of incomplete knowledge of the external world, but also a lack of true understanding of the internal self. As the late medieval theologian Jean Gerson affirms, “The diversity of human temperament is incomprehensible—not just in several men, but in one and the same man—and not, I say, in different years or months or weeks, but in days, hours, and moments!”42 In proposing that disposition is not a fixed state of being, Gerson offers perhaps the chief reason why Boethius succumbs to the seductions of the Muses, why the Parson commits the occasional transgression, and why the cultivation of a habit of self-reflection is essential: simply, because we live in a realm of flux. This transience highlights not only the imperfection
of knowledge, but also the degree to which the fundamental deficiency of language prohibits a concrete understanding of, and ability to rely upon, anything—including the self.

Augustine’s theory of language is instructive here because it attempts to bridge the imperfection of man’s word with the perfection of the Word. In the *Confessions*, Augustine writes that ideas are not language and that words can only convey the sentiment, but not the idea: “I have heard the sounds of the words by which their meaning is expressed when they are discussed, but the words are one thing and the principle another.” In fact, it is this notion that leads Augustine to conclude that his communication with God happens within a space that is both linguistic and nonlinguistic: “I make my confession, not in words and sounds made by the tongue alone, but with the voice of my soul and in my thoughts which cry aloud to you. Your ear can hear them.” Humans obviously cannot receive such extralinguistic information, and language, as Augustine notes, offers verisimilitude at best: “When they hear me speak about myself, how do they know whether I am telling the truth, since no one *knows a man’s thoughts, except the man’s own spirit that is within him*?” His criticism hints at a concern about the potential for language to create impressions of truth which intend to mislead the receiver. While Augustine asserts that the flaws of language are corrected by God’s intercession, his skepticism also encourages the reader, as Chaucer later does through his Parson, to remember that communication offers perspectives of a greater, and often unknown, whole.

Similarly, in the *Anticlaudianus*, Alain de Lille draws attention to the issues of language when Theology steps forward to help Phronesis and Reason, as they cannot progress into the heavenly spheres because their language no longer functions in that space. He explains, “What the tongue cannot tell the picture does: how language, since it fails to reach the essence of God, grows senseless when it tries to take refuge in its old meaning.” Alain’s suggestion points to
the complex nature of language: when words fail, meaning is communicated through the vision alone, but since the mind interprets images through language, the individual must rely on faith, Alain’s Theology, to complete the design. Any degree of self-knowledge, according to these philosophers, is fractional and fleeting, at best; for Augustine and Alain, such awareness requires divine intervention. The Parson, in contrast, argues that man is capable of acknowledging the flaws of language and yet using that language competently and virtuously. Again, Chaucer empowers the reader to develop his own personal agency, through which he can make rational choices born of conscious habits, instead of relying solely on outside involvement. The *Parson’s Tale*, then, exposes the benefits of both religious commonplaces and philosophical considerations of language and self-awareness to a larger audience.

The impossibility of ever knowing one’s self fully is not, as it might seem, an obstruction to the process but rather a crucial component in the equation. By acknowledging his own limitations, the Parson highlights the limitations of the individual: confession, for instance, must be complete “as ferforth as he kan” (319). Given the limitations of the human mind, a total or complete confession is impossible, but the Parson’s focus on intention allows for the inevitable lack of both understanding and the ability to communicate that understanding *in toto* while at the same time affirming the potential of the attempt to “do well and think well.” Moving away from the strict and threatening demands of the manuals, which insinuate that salvation results primarily from a recommitment to Church doctrine, the Parson argues that it is through the acceptance of ultimate imperfection coupled with the intention to think and act rationally that in fact leads to salvation. The point, then, is that the individual must engage in the process of scrutinizing thoughts and behaviors in order to make informed choices instead of reacting emotionally, binding oneself to worldly concerns and so creating a Hell of futility and distress.
Though new habits of engagement increasingly protect the sinner from the chaos of continual sin and allow for a fruitful path through a life of right reason, the imperfect nature of the human condition makes future sinning inevitable. The objective, then, is not to destroy temptation but to understand its nature and respond to it rationally. When this awareness fails to redirect the self from temptation towards a profitable response, the individual, in effect, forgets himself through the emotionally-driven confusions which result from sin. In the *Boece*, for example, Lady Philosophy recognizes that Boethius’ abasement results not from a true corruption of his nature, but rather from his inability to appreciate his situation rationally: “‘Now woot I,’ quod sche, ‘other cause of thi maladye, and that ryght greet: thow hast left for to knowen thyselfe what thou art’” (I.p6.68-70). The process that they subsequently engage in intends to help Boethius re-member himself, and through that re-collection, to understand the world and his place within that world once again. This manner of recursive progression through life, according to the Parson, is unavoidable: given the inexperience in dealing with constantly varying stimuli, even individuals like Boethius who have trained themselves to deliberate and act rationally will, at times, falter. Indeed, the Parson, himself, reveals his own struggle with temptation: “Wherfore I woot wel sykerly…that everich of us hath matere and occasioun to be tempted.” The goal of active self-awareness is to create a personal, individual path that carefully and thoughtfully navigates the temptations, darkness, confusion, and imperfections of this world in a productive way. The failure to remain steadfastly on this path presents the individual with an opportunity to engage in the method of reflection and consideration that the Parson advocates in order to develop greater self-knowledge and a stronger resolve to “do well and think well,” should the individual choose.
Given the ever-present quality of temptation and the propensity to surrender to desire, the individual must continue to revise his path throughout life. Similar to contrition, which the Parson maintains “moste be continueel…for to amenden hym of his lyf” (305), one’s personal engagement with his thoughts, desires, and actions must be continual with a steadfast purpose for amendment precisely because knowledge is constantly acquired through various means. One of the processes that the Parson stresses throughout his tale deals with the purposeful gathering of information: with regard to penitence, for example, he suggests that one must first understand the meaning and the purpose of contrition, confession, and satisfaction before the individual can learn how to engage with these different processes. However, as he ruminates about the significance of the name of Jesus Christ, *Iesus Nazarenus rex Iudeorum*, the Parson also indicates that the contemplation of language in general is important in order to understand its larger meanings and possible applications. As such, the habit of continual engagement includes all knowledge that one gathers, along with one’s perspective, emotions, and rational consideration of the different factors as new data, situations, and experiences arise. The purpose to this method is to acknowledge, actively, the innate limitations of one’s understanding and then continuously to reassess that perspective in order to stay on the path.

The Parson highlights the benefits of such habits in his discussion of the seven deadly sins, a discussion which interrupts his explanation of the conditions and benefits of confession. In fact, the Parson spends over half of his tale, a full 568 lines, detailing the various sins which result from the seven “chieftaynes” and their respective remedies. After listing sixteen sins specific to pride and alluding to countless others, the Parson devotes the subsequent eighty-three lines of this section to the exposition of these faults, which he argues harm both sinner and society. Superfluous clothing, for instance, “which that maketh it so deere” (416), distracts
those who erroneously accept the fallacy that one’s moral fiber is directly related to the degree of ornamentation of dress, while at the same time driving up the price of fabric through needless excess. While the demand for ostentation affects everyone, inordinate lack of clothing is equally detrimental. Speaking specifically of men’s “wikked entente” in dress, the Parson proclaims that “somme of hem shewen the boce of hir shap, and the horrible swollen members, that semeth lik the maladie of hirnia, in the wrappynge of hir hoses; / and eek the buttokes of hem faren as it were the hyndre part of a she-ape in the fulle of the moone” (423-24), which aims to distract and inflame the desires of others. Pride in the accoutrements of riding and pride of the table, i.e. the “delices of luxurie” (446), likewise disserve the community. Along with pointing out the various degrees of pride, this section also consistently highlights the negative effects that these actions have on others: one person’s transgression negatively impacts another, guides someone else to sin, and reinforces the primary sinner to sin again. Through his attempt at a comprehensive (though admittedly limited) explanation of pride, the Parson demonstrates the degree to which this one sin extends in various directions, while at the same time increasing its extension via the mindless permission of those who allow it to reign with abandon. While this discussion is orthodox, the Parson’s use of the chieftains, in part, creates an analogy with the fractured nature of language and knowledge, which, like the sins, continue to splinter with each misuse. By drawing attention to the nature of this root sin, the Parson prepares his audience to make informed choices about their individual thoughts, actions, and outward demonstrations, as well as to consider the deeds and appearances of others, while reflecting upon how the imperfections of language shape those choices.

The Parson’s illustration of the confusion promoted by the chieftains also serves to reinforce his theme of personal agency: thoughtless participation in sinful behavior leads to
powerlessness, while mindful choice facilitates understanding and self-authority. In order to protect oneself from the complicated snares of Pride, the Parson contends, the individual must understand that pride springs from three things: “somtyme it spryngeth of the goodes of nature, and somtyme of the goods of fortune, and somtyme of the goods of grace” (450). Given that these goods are outside of one’s control, the Parson argues that it is “outrageous folie” to assign them value. Instead, he argues that one’s character is defined not by goods, but rather by what one chooses to do with them. Indeed, similar to the hag’s proclamation in the *Wife of Bath’s Tale* “That he is gentil that dooth gentil dedis” (III.1170), the Parson claims that gentility is not a societal position but a compilation of actions: “Now been ther generale signes of gentiliesse, as eschewynge of vice and ribaudye and servage of synne, in word, in werk, and contenaunce, / and usynge vertu, curteisye, and clennesse, and to be liberal – that is to seyn, large by mesure” (464-65). According to this description, gentility is a trait of character, given that the individual chooses and cultivates his own nature. Throughout his description of each deadly sin, the Parson consistently calls attention to the uncontrolled, and seemingly uncontrollable, generation that each of these “root sins” initiate: when the sinner permits these faults to propagate unhindered by consideration or rational deliberation, emotional reactions escalate and remove the individual further from the “goode wey” and closer to disorder and chaos.

There are opportunities to recognize the chaos and create anew the path of productivity: should the individual so choose, he can apply the remedies for each sin. Unlike the continual, outward extension of the twigs which grow from the branches of the seven deadly sins, the remedies for each are rather concise: the remedy for pride, for example, is humility or meekness. As the Parson explains, “That is a vertu thurgh which a man hath verray knoweleche of hymself, and holdeth of hymself no pris ne deyntee, as in regard of his deserties, considerynge evere his
“verray knoweleche” instructs the individual that he, indeed, is “no pris.” Following the Parson’s theme that self-knowledge is fragmentary, the only way in which a person might have pride is through tricks of language. Though the Parson does provide a brief explanation of this remedy, which includes the three types of humility and the four factors which contribute to the humility of speech, the eight lines of text that are required here pale in comparison to the eighty-seven lines of text that the twigs of pride—those that he does include—consume.

The explanations of the remaining six deadly sins likewise require much more textual space than their accompanying remedies. In fact, the virtues necessitate only slightly more than one quarter (25.85%) of this section. This difference between the space devoted to the explanation of the sins and that to the virtues implies that the seven “chieftaynes” inspire a continual devolution of thoughts and actions, in that each encourages patterns of behavior which work to distance the sinner from the faculty that distinguishes man from beast—his reason. The mindless involvement in such patterns results in, and consequently from, a series of extending and unseen outcomes: man is separated from his reason, stripped of protection for his soul, removed from God, and bereft of his rationality. Applying the cosmological model to this image, the seven deadly sins create infinite complications, as they match the continually fractured and expanding possibilities that begin at the sublunar sphere and splinter into the innermost region of Hell. The remedies, in contrast, are more simplistic because they attempt to include the awareness of the fractionality of knowledge in the determination of thoughts and actions. One combats wrath, for example, by being meek and having patience. Both of these qualities proclaim a lack of perfect intelligence: meekness comes from “verray knoweleche” of the self, which is by no means complete, and patience is governed by an appreciation that the
cause of hardships, providentially, must be accepted as working toward some future good, while an immediate good can be achieved by disengaging the emotions and scrutinizing any given situation rationally.

The life that self-knowledge and providential awareness create must also acknowledge and overcome the inherent hardships of this realm: frail and feeble bodies, weak wills, incomplete knowledge, limited intellects, and ever-present temptations. For the Parson, the creation of an individual “heaven” is achievable through the development of and consistent participation in habits of right understanding. At the end of his tale, he explains that there is no “wo ne grevaunce” (1077), no pain or insecurity, no hunger, thirst, or cold in Heaven; likewise, there is “the blisful compaignye that rejoysen hem everemo, everich of othere joye” (1077), and “every soule replenysse with the sighte of the parfit knowynge of God” (1079). With the exception of the bodily comforts that result from completion in death, the other benefits can be enjoyed on Earth: one can rejoice in another’s joy, for instance, by incorporating the virtues of humility, love, and patience, instead of permitting the sins of pride, envy, and ire. Though perfect knowledge of God is forbidden during a life of limitation and incompleteness, one “shal fynde refresshyng for [his] soule” through walking the “goode wey.” Such refreshing, of course, is momentary in this realm, but the phrasing of this statement suggests the certainty of the experience if one develops the habit of “standing upon the ways.” By the end of the tale, there is an additional sense that this method of standing, observing, and scrutinizing applies just as much, if not more, to one’s own various paths and the respective lessons therein, as it does to the teachings of authorities. In fact, the more one engages in this method, the more the habit is established, and the more often one’s soul finds refreshment.
The habits that one cultivates during life both increase one’s productivity in this realm and ultimately determine the destination of one’s eternal soul. The Parson ends his tale by explaining how an individual gets to heaven: “This blisful regne may men purchace by poverte espiritueel, and the glorie by lowenesse, the plentee of joye by hunger and thurst, and the reste by travaille, and the lyf by deeth and mortificacioun of synne” (1080). Offering this endless experience as both a choice and an exchange, the Parson hints at the power that the individual’s habits finally have upon his soul. If an individual habitually permits sin to guide his actions, then he will be ill-equipped to make a conscious choice when the need arises; instead, his sins will continue to dictate his response and, as the Parson states, will “lead him to Hell.” Those who have formed intentional habits of wise judgment, on the other hand, will be prepared to accept the offer of eternal bliss because they are not bound in the chains of worldly concerns. The Parson reinforces this idea in the final clause: one may purchase life both by death and by the killing of sin. Given the impossibility of obliterating sin entirely during this life, the choice to expunge the capacity to indulge bodily temptations must happen after death. Bluntly, whether the individual has cultivated a habit of mindful analysis or one of mindless reaction will determine his choice: he can continue sinning, which would increasingly bind him to his Hell and continually distance him from his rational mind as do the inhabitants of Dante’s Inferno, or he can choose to release himself from worldly concerns in favor of finding absolute fulfillment. The importance of the Parson’s message here cannot be overstated: because God gave free-will to man, it is within man’s control to accept or to reject God’s extension of eternal salvation. Such ability, as the Parson outlines in his tale, requires active participation in a process that is imperfect but workable, linguistic but containable, flawed but redeemable.
One “wey” to acquire the habit of rational analysis is to follow the methods that Chaucer develops in his prose. Through the Boece, Chaucer offers a dialectic which stresses the primacy of contextualization, the need for clear communication, and the benefits of self-awareness to wise judgment. In the Astrolabe, Chaucer highlights the fact that one’s approach to knowledge—the way one “learns to know”—is just as, if not more, important than the knowledge gained through that inquiry. Additionally, he submits that one gains greater understanding by revising former conclusions to include new information. Through the Thopas-Melibee, he illustrates the problems of relying solely on expectations of form to understand content, and in the Melibee, he utilizes the form of prose to communicate Melibee’s own recursive analysis and to inspire the reader to perform a similar assessment of his own responses to the Tales that came before. In the Retraction, he models (albeit ambiguously) the process of recursive assessment and invites his reader to analyze, via recursion, the validity of his interpretations of Chaucer’s writings. Through his Parson, he suggests a similar process of recursion and reflection that can, and should, influence earlier interpretations of the narratives told on the journey to Canterbury. It is this very process, I argue, that supports the Parson’s final position in the Canterbury line-up and calls upon the processes of reclaiming reason that the reader learned in the other prose works. In this final moment in the journey to Canterbury, Chaucer creates an opportunity for meditation about the Tales that have come before; it is here that he welcomes his reader to “Stondeth upon the weyes, and seeth and axeth of olde pathes (that is to seyn, of olde sentences) which is the goode wey” (X.77). A brief analysis of a few of these “olde pathes” will demonstrate the utility of the prose methods to finding that “goode wey.”
The *Friar’s Tale* illustrates an example of the perils of willful blindness, for example. The Friar’s summoner, upon meeting the shape-shifting fiend from Hell, decides to best him in a competition of chicanery. The summoner’s desire to demonstrate his superior skill deafens him to the demon’s warning, though it is offered plainly—“Thou shalt herafterward, my brother deere, / Come there thee nedeth nat of me to leere, / For thou shalt by thyn owene experience.”

The summoner dismisses it in favor of boasting about his ability to manipulate people. When the pair comes upon the carter damning his horses, the demon refuses to take them because “It is nat [the carter’s] entente” (III.1556). Recognizing that the carter’s words result from a moment of frustration and are thus not representative of his actual intention, the demon draws the distinction between words spoken truthfully and those spoken in haste. His earlier suggestion that fiends work only with the consent of God—“Withouten hym we have no myght, certayn, / If that hym list to stonden ther-agayn” (1487-88)—signifies a partial redemption of language: in the perfect, superlunar realm of the Divine, God recognizes when words and intentions correlate. Had the summoner paid attention to the knowledge offered by the demon, he might have saved himself from damnation; instead, his mind is clouded by pride and greed. When the widow offers both the summoner and her new frying pan to the devil, the demon asks after her intent: “Is this youre wyl in ernest that ye seye?” (1627). She confirms her statement, but then offers the summoner the chance to redeem himself through repentance. He immediately refuses—“Nay, olde stot, that is nat myn entente” (III.1630)—and the demon takes both man, and pan, to Hell.

Though the Friar takes great pleasure in damning the summoner through the will of God, an act for which he is repaid when the Summoner proclaims that all friars spend eternity safely tucked within Satan’s “ers,” the underlying issue of this tale is that man damns himself through his own choices. Certainly the summoner’s emotions work against him, but the fact that he
consciously decides, at different moments in the tale, to agree to the fiend’s stipulations indicates his character: as he states, “Stomak ne conscience ne knowe I noon; / I shrewe thise shrifte-fadres everychoon” (1441-42). Though he, himself, is part of the Church, he uses his position to extort money and material goods from the poor and curses those who perform their duties religiously. What’s more, he refuses to shrive himself of these behaviors (1439-40). In other words, the summoner’s habits of sin are so firmly rooted in his mind that when the widow allows him a chance to redeem himself, he cannot make a conscious choice; instead, to his endless peril, his habits answer for him.

While the Friar’s summoner and the Summoner’s friars spend eternity in Hell, the Parson offers his audience a means of escape: the salvation of the soul, as well as the destruction of one’s personal Hell-on-Earth, is achieved through the creation of beneficial habits. The Parson points out at the beginning of his tale that salvation is specific to each individual’s free will: “Stondeth upon the weyes, and seeth and axeth of olde pathes (that is to seyn, of olde sentences) which is the goode wey, / and walketh in that wey, and ye shal fynde refressynge for youre soules, &c” (75-78). In this passage, God neither saves nor damns humanity; instead, he hopes that no man perish and wishes for all “to come to the knowledge of him and to the life that is perdurable.” Thus, man’s salvation or damnation lies not within God’s proclamation, but rather in the choice that he makes of his own free will. Though God hopes that man chooses wisely, he does not actively intervene in that choice and instead provides guidance, in this case, through Jeremiah.52 This counsel provides an opportunity, not a defined solution, as it places responsibility squarely on man: while Jeremiah advises that one observe and gather the sentence of old teachings, walking the “goode wey” requires the construction of the best path, as well as the resolve then to act in accordance with that choice. In contrast to the “weyes that leden folk to
helle,” the Parson introduces his treatise by reminding his audience both of the power of free will, as well as the more productive path toward the Good.\textsuperscript{53} By framing his tale in this way, the Parson suggests that it is ultimately the ability to match words, deeds, and intentions, which are governed by reason, that allows man to “find refreshing for his soul.” God recognizes man’s capacity to discern, to gain knowledge, and to make a sensible choice; given that ability, man is responsible for how he chooses to use it.

Though the benefits of the mindful habits that the Parson advocates are readily apparent, creating and acting on such habits with constancy and intention is a complicated process, as we witness in the \textit{Clerk’s Tale}. During the course of Walter and Griselde’s marriage, two habits develop: Walter’s obsessive testing of his wife, and her ability to suffer his machinations as was implicit in her blind oath of fealty. As the Clerk remarks, Walter’s desire to see her fail caused him to escalate his attempts each time she withstood the challenge: “He hadde assayed hire ynogh before, / And foond hire evere good; what neded it / Hire for to tempte, and alwey moore and moore” (456-58). By evaluating this situation through the lens that the Parson offers, we can see that Walter’s endeavors result from an increasingly irrational urge to prove her inconstant; his attempts intensify because he has bound himself to the will of his desire and thus each test is worse than the former. As Walter’s habit progresses, so Griselde strengthens her ability to withstand his unrelenting attempts to cause her to break her oath. Not only is she “sad stidefast” (564), but her capacity increases with age: “the forther that she was in age, / The moore trewe, if that it were possible, / She was to hym in love, and moore penyble” (712-14). What the Clerk suggests here is that Griselde intentionally cultivates, over years, a habit of patience that has become “evere in oon ylike sad and kynde” (602). If, as the Parson explains, “Horroure is alwey drede of harm that is to come, and this dredeshal evere dwelle in the hertes of hem that been
dampned” (X.224), then Griselde’s steadfast ability to accept whole-heartedly those things over which she has no control allows her to reject the anguish of an earthly-Hell and instead create a space of productivity and love.

Yet as the Clerk declares, the absolute patience that Griselde embodies in the tale is not achievable: “Grisilde is deed, and eek hire pacience, / And bothe atones buryed in Ytaille” (IV.1177-78). Not only are she and the perfect sufferance she exemplified dead, but the Clerk separates such potentiality even farther from his present company by burying her in a foreign land; in other words, Griselde and her patience never existed in England. Distance aside, unqualified patience was, and is, impossible by virtue of the incompleteness inherent to this life; what is possible, though, is the development of habits that remind one to consider the profit, or lack thereof, of one’s own thoughts, feelings, and actions, as well as to take others’ dispositions into account in order to make informed choices. Through her marriage to Walter, Griselde develops a practice of actively considering all available information before determining the best course of action: as the Clerk states, her “wise and rype wordes…And juggementz of so greet equitee” (IV.438-39) provide significant service to the people. Griselde then uses that ability to deal with Walter’s strategems of torment.

Though the strength of Griselde’s character is made clear by her consistent actions, Walter’s inability to recognize this quality stems from his presumption that character is determined by outward appearance. According to the Parson, this erroneous assumption results from pride: “Eek for to pride hym of his gentrie is ful greet folie; for ofte tyme the gentrie of the body binymeth the gentrie of the soule” (X.461). Walter’s expectation that the body, or the style of dress, demonstrates character leads him to “translate” Griselde by changing her clothing: “Unnethe the peple hir knew for hire fairnesse / Whan she translated was in swich richesse”
(IV.384-85). David Wallace argues that this passage signifies Walter’s power “as both ruler and rhetor,” and given the rapidity with which the people accept Griselde’s gentility, his argument is persuasive. But Walter’s power in this tale also invites a criticism of the superficiality of both Walter and his people: the elaborate adornments and combed hair conceal Griselde and “translate” her into someone else. In these clothes, the people laud her talents: “That she from hevene was, as men wende, / Peple to save and every wrong t’amende” (440-41). Yet when she is stripped of these garments, the people’s initial sadness gives way to jubilation when they see the rich array of Walter’s next “wife”: “For she is fairer, as they deemen alle, / Than is Griselde…And moore plesant, for hire heigh lynage” (988-91). Even though Griselde consistently demonstrates her integrity, both Walter’s relentless trials and the people’s eagerness to judge based on physicality alone point to the value of appearance in this society. It is only when Griselde continues to demonstrate her character in her “rude and somdeel eek torent” clothing that Walter finally understands the distinction between outward appearance and inner capacity. In the Clerk’s Tale, then, habits not only cause hardship and provide the ability to deal with those difficulties rationally, but they also inspire change: Walter recognizes Griselde’s character independent of her appearance, and “Ful many a yeer in heigh prosperitee / Lyven thise two in concord and in reste” (1128-19).

Given the severity of Walter’s treatment of Griselde, it is initially difficult for modern readers to accept that he subsequently enjoys a life of love and prosperity, but this life is a direct result from his perspectival transformation. The Parson, I argue, would suggest that the potential to create such a life is available to everyone independent of the habits they have formed and the natures they have cultivated. Indeed, though this possibility is not explained in any of the other tales, the Parson’s explicit theme of “the journey of life” underlies every tale in the Canterbury
pilgrimage. The Knight’s Palamon and Arcite detour from the path of brotherhood and camaraderie to one of conflict and competition based on their individual, emotional responses to the object of their shared desire: the fair Emily. The Man of Law’s Constance journeys through dangers and hardships, often without personal control or ability to protect herself, as she converts people to Christianity. The Friar’s summoner walks a path to Hell. Not only do the tales offer journeys of life, but often the characters themselves divulge their own paths in their prologues.

In the Pardoner’s Prologue, for instance, he explains his method: he cultivates “an hauteyn speche” (VI.330), shows his bulls and relics (336-376), and publicly shames his audience into participation (377-386). Though the Pardoner’s “entente is nat but for to wynne” (403), what he unknowingly explains is that his methods have stuck him in a circular path: he boasts, “For I kan al by rote that I telle. / My theme is alwey oon, and evere was – / Radix malorum est cupiditas” (332-34), and later reveals, “I preche of no thyng but for coveityse. / Therfore my theme is yet, and evere was, / Radix malorum est cupiditas” (424-26). In case his audience has missed the significance of this statement, the Pardoner continues, “Thus kan I preche agayn that same vice / Which that I use, and that is avarice” (427-28). Chaucer’s rendering of the Pardoner’s cupidity as mindless participation illuminates the futility of his actions: by preaching against his own vice, the Pardoner nullifies the meaning of the words that he, himself, uses. This nullification of language results in the ultimate impotence of his speech, which he figures as a circle: “I peyne me to han an hauteyn speche / And rynge it out as round as gooth a belle” (330-31). In “ringing” his sermon out as “round as a bell goes,” the Pardoner boasts that his speech, essentially, goes nowhere; instead of considering and incorporating new teachings, his sermons perpetually follow a course that simply goes round and round. As with his speech, the Pardoner is trapped in this circular path: “For myn entente is nat
but for to wynne, / And nothyng for correccioun of synne” (403-04); “But shortly myn entente I wol devyse: / I preche of no thyng but for coveityse” (423-24); “But that is nath my principal entente; / I preche nothyng but for coveitise” (432-33). The repetition of his objective—“nought but for to win,” “nothing but for covetous,” “nothing but for covetous”—calls attention to the fact that it is not only his sermon that he performs by rote, but indeed, he acts by rote as well. Having cultivated his habit of “winning” to the extent that he no longer thinks, the Pardoner damns himself to a perpetual cycle of futility.

The Pardoner’s desire to demonstrate his expertise in preaching against the very vice that he willfully enjoys speaks to the senselessness of his choices: though he wins gold and silver for his efforts (VI.440), his actions are entirely thoughtless because he permits his vice to consume him. The Pardoner again highlights his own lack of awareness at the end of his tale. After having told the story of the three young rioters who kill one another in their search for Death, the Pardoner then turns to his audience and attempts to perform the very trick that he explained in the prologue. Though he commands, “Com forth, sire Hoost, and offer first anon,” Bailly denies the Pardoner’s attempt to force his acquiescence and declares, “Thou woldest make me kisse thyn olde breech, / And swere it were a relyk of a seint, / Though it were with thy fundement depeint” (948-50). The trick fails because the Pardoner’s habit of deception disallows a true perspective: he gives his audience the means to respond rationally to his methods, and Bailly uses that awareness to protect himself.

The ultimate pointlessness of the Pardoner’s habits highlights the benefits to active, rational engagement; in the Canterbury pilgrimage, the Wife of Bath is the character who most exemplifies this process. Though some scholars view her prologue as either an autobiography or a confession, both her prologue and her tale are also narrative accounts of journeys through life.
In the prologue, the Wife demonstrates the profit of engaging with and using knowledge based on practical experience. Through her five marriages, the Wife’s responses to her various situations change as she gains self-awareness and adapts to a lack thereof in others: with her first three husbands, she learns how to establish dominion over her own body; with husband four, the “revelour” (III.453), she realizes how to communicate through suggestion an experience that, through her intelligent analysis, allows her to avoid reciprocating with her own sinning and instead offer her husband the opportunity to experience a “purgatory” of benefit to his soul; with Jankyn, she discovers how to overcome his eager acceptance of male superiority to reach a mutual accord of respect and affection. Through this narrative, the Wife explains what she learned about herself and how she used that knowledge not only to her advantage, but to the profit of others as well. It is through her willingness to engage with knowledge and experience that allows her to reject the definitions and expectations assigned to her by others and instead to create her own, individual path of productivity.

While the idea of a “life journey” underlies both the Wife’s prologue and her tale, neither is offered as a programmatic scheme. As she explains, the process for everyone is different: “God clepeth folk to hym in sondry wyse, / And everich hath of God a propre yifte – / Som this, som that, as hym liketh shifte” (III.102-4). The point, of course, is that each person has his own talents and capacities, and as such, individual responses to the same stimuli will necessarily differ. What the Wife offers in her prologue, then, is her own personal example of the productivity of engagement with authorities, language, and experience; in her tale, she illustrates the promise of such engagement when the knight, instead of being killed for raping the maiden, is given an opportunity to learn how to become a better person. The Parson, in contrast, does offer a system of self-analysis which affords his entire audience the tools with which to escape
the circularity of the Pardoner’s journey, to create a personal path through life, and to return to or reconstruct that path as reason and experience require.

Earlier I suggested that the Jeremiah quote offers a method of organizing knowledge in a way that allows the individual to understand what has come before in order to shape future thoughts and actions. As opposed to retrospective quality that Finlayson and Howard have observed, I suggest that Chaucer offers the Parson’s Tale not as a lens through which the other tales gain a truer meaning, but rather as a meditative moment that permits the consideration of how each tale, each narrative journey, can benefit the reader. Simply put, Chaucer invites the audience to consider the stories that have come before, to identify their respective benefits and failures, and to incorporate that knowledge insofar as it instructs the individual to do well and think well. Using the Pardoner as an example, I would argue that the observer does not benefit from simply judging this character as prideful, avaricious, envious, gluttonous, or wrathful; rather, it is what one chooses to do with that judgment that matters. Here, the recognition of the Pardoner’s perpetual cycle of mindlessness offers the lesson without the danger of the experience. The profit of the Wife’s habitual engagement with her own thoughts and actions likewise serves the individual through example. As the Parson maintains, there are lessons to be learned from all “ways” if one observes, interrogates, and determines the best course of action in light of the knowledge gained through the process. The Parson, then, not only belongs with, but is indeed integral to, the Canterbury Tales because it is through the Parson that Chaucer frames his collection not as a group of stories that are told to win a game, but rather as a series of paths from which his audience can benefit through the cultivation of right reason, self-scrutiny, and deliberate choice.
The point to creating such habits is to cultivate rational responses that become part of one’s nature. If, within human nature, there resides an innate tendency toward the Good, however obscured or otherwise warped that inclination might be, then it is through one’s habitual responses that such trends are supported. Chaucer’s framing of the Parson’s Tale with an introduction of the “Good way” and a conclusion which gestures toward the eternal destination underscores the idea that one’s habits ultimately enable one to choose not only that final destination, but also the way one lives this present life. Just as contrition must be continual with steadfast purpose to confess and amend the behaviors, so the “goode wey” through life is a process of continual engagement that considers personal thoughts, desires, ideas, language, habits, and new teachings in order to determine, at each moment of consideration, whether or not the path (i.e. the habits) are as productive as they might be. For the Parson, the point is not to create a perfect path to a perfect life and a perfect death; failure and misapprehension are native to this life. What he does offer, rather, is a process of learning how to avoid the apparent pitfalls of life, as well as of understanding how to return to the “goode wey” every time one detours off of the path. In a world in which so much is outside of our control, the Parson’s Tale demonstrates the fruitlessness of serving desire; by choosing not to walk that path and instead create our own, the Parson’s Tale provides a system of creating meaning and purpose, indeed, of creating life, that is just as necessary today as it was in the Middle Ages.

1 Ralph Baldwin, The Unity of the Canterbury Tales, Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1955, 93.


Newhauser, 531-32.

Sabine Volk-Birke provides a compelling and thorough study of the ways in which the Parson’s Tale fits within this genre. For the entire argument, see *Chaucer and Medieval Preaching: Rhetoric for Listeners in Sermons and Poetry*, Tübingen: Narr, 1991, esp. 193-227.

Bax, *Discourse and Genre*, 60.

Bax, 60.

Bax, 60.

Bax, 60.


Patterson, “The ‘Parson’s Tale’ and the Quitting of the ‘Canterbury Tales,’” 339.
18 Patterson, 341.

19 For the entire text, see Medieval Sourcebook: Twelfth Ecumenical Council: Lateran IV 1215
http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/lateran4.html. E. A. Jones (note 1) provides a brief history of penance leading up to and following the Fourth Lateran Council.

20 Braswell, The Medieval Sinner: Characterization and Confession in the Literature of the English Middle Ages, Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1983, 57. Richard Newhauser explains that “the penitential manual was designed in particular to address both the sacramental and the psychological/pedagogic functions involved in penance, preparing the confessor to hear confession and instructing the penitent’s conscience in what to confess, and it was calculated to do so with some degree of exclusiveness.” For his entire argument, see “The Parson’s Tale and its Generic Affiliations.”


26 Myrc, Instructions for Parish Priests, Lines 911-916.


28 Jacob’s Well, 276.

29 Thomas Tentler persuasively argues that the summa for confessors were intended as means of social control. For his entire argument, see “The Summa for Confessors as an Instrument of Social Control,” in The Pursuit of Holiness in Late Medieval and Renaissance Religion, Eds. Charles Trinkaus and Heiko Oberman, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1974, 103-125. Jean Jost, in “The Parson’s Tale: Ending ‘Thilke Parfit Glorious Pilgrymage that Higte Jerusalem Celestial,” presents an alternate view to my reading: “Like most theological tracts of the day, the Parson’s uses intimidation and the threat of hell to turn his hearers to moral righteousness” (101).


32 Little, Confession and Resistance, 81.

33 For a discussion about the role of meditation in the Parson’s Tale, see Thomas Bestul, “Chaucer’s Parson’s Tale and the Late-Medieval Tradition of Religious Meditation,” Speculum 64.3 (July 1989): 600-19.
For a discussion of the role of conscience during the Middle Ages, see Dorothy Potts, *Conscience in Medieval Philosophy*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1980.


*Summa Theologica* Q.50 Art. 5, *ST* Q.51 Art. 1

*ST* Q.52 Art.3

*ST* Q.1 Art. 1


*Confessions*, Book X, chapter 2.

*Confessions*, Book X, chapter 3.

*Confessions*, esp. Book X.


For a longer discussion of the Parson’s potential transgressions, see Ferster’s “Chaucer’s Parson and the ‘Idiosyncracies of Fiction.’”

For the sins of pride, the Parson lists “inobedience, avauntynge, ypocrisie, despit, arrogance, inpudencie, swellyng of herte, insolence, elacioun, inpacience, strif, contumacie, presumpcioun, irreverence, pertinacie, veyneglorie, and many another twig that [he] kan nat declare” (X.391). In defining these sixteen sins, the Parson includes a seventeenth: “Janglynge is whan men spoken to muche biforn folk, and clappen as a mille, and taken no kepe what they seye” (406). This addition is not mentioned in the *Riverside* notes.

The Parson explains that “the moore that clooth is wasted, the moore it coste to the peple for the scarsnesse” (X.420).

III.1515-17.

Paul Beekman Taylor, in *Chaucer Translator*, Lanham, UP of America, 1998, observes that the Parson omits the quote’s attribution as well as the response that is contained in its source (56).

Judith Ferster, in “Chaucer’s Parson and the ‘Idiosyncracies of Fiction,” *Closure in The Canterbury Tales: The Role of the Parson’s Tale*, Eds. David Raybin and Linda Tarte Holley, Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2000, 115-50, points out the changes that Chaucer makes to this passage which highlight the fact that there is more than one “goode weye.” See esp. 138-39.
Epilogue

A Student of Chaucer

During the process of writing about Chaucer’s prose, I have become increasingly aware of, and invested in, my own habits of engagement. I have learned, and accept fully (to the extent that my limitations allow), that this current attempt at working through the prose and revealing its profit, first to myself and second to my readers, is just that—an initial assay. It has informed my path (to borrow from the Parson), my understanding of the tangible and potential life-altering profit to studying literature, and my appreciation for my place within the universe (though this cosmos is far different than that which Chaucer knew). And it is at this point that I stop to reflect upon this work, this product of a passion born of a desire to confront two questions that have remained unresolved in Chaucer scholarship: why did the Father of English Poetry choose prose for these particular works, and how does this medium reveal the utility of these writings in a way that poetry could not? Through my own “litel tretis,” I have endeavored to begin to work towards the answers to these questions. Should the reader find anything useful these writings, may he be grateful to himself for having engaged with this fractional knowledge to discover its benefit. Should the reader be displeased with anything, may he attribute it to the nature of my personal limitations and not to my will that would most eagerly have written better if I had the ability. As Chaucer says, “‘Al that is writen is writen for oure doctrine,’ and that is myn entente” (X.1083).
Heere taketh the makere of this book her leve.


Bestul, Thomas H. “Chaucer’s Parson’s Tale and the Late-Medieval Tradition of Religious Meditation.” *Speculum* 64.3 (July 1989): 600-619.


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