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The Deconstructure of the *Canterbury Tales*

Elizabeth Scala

Readers of the *Canterbury Tales* face its interpretive challenges in a variety of forms, those inscribed within the individual tales and the competitive tale-telling framework, as well as those articulated by the critical tradition surrounding Chaucer’s work. But perhaps no more fundamental difficulty confronts potential interpreters than the poem’s incomplete, indeed sometimes missing, narratives. While the notion of completion is vexed with concerns of narrative and philosophical conclusiveness, with the precariousness of manuscript transmission, and with the indeterminacy of authorial intention, I use the term here inclusively and generally to indicate those moments where the Chaucerian text suggests (by whatever means) that there is more to be told.¹ For example, certain tales have been left in a state suggesting Chaucer may not have finished with them. The Cook’s Tale breaks off abruptly after fifty-eight lines. The Hengwrt scribe marginally notes, “Of this Cokes tale maked Chaucer na moore” (57v).² The Squire’s Tale, perhaps interrupted by the Franklin, also ends awkwardly, two lines into its *pars tertia*. Yet these two much-cited instances are not anomalies. The *Canterbury Tales* lacks much of its promised contents.

That Chaucer’s last work remained unfinished at the time of his death has troubled editors since William Caxton first printed it in 1478. Considering the presentation of the poem more recently, Derek Pearsall writes, “The witness of the manuscripts is that the *Canterbury Tales* are unfinished, and that Chaucer left the work as a partly assembled kit with
no directions. That is how, ideally, it should be presented, partly as a bound book (with first and last fragments fixed) and partly as a set of fragments in folders, with the incomplete information as to their nature and placement fully displayed” (Pearsall, *Canterbury* 23).\(^3\) Yet even this design, which would seem to offer the reader the most “accurate” picture of the poem’s incomplete state, does not go far enough. The “fixed” first and last fragments secure the boundaries of remarkably different works. In fragment one, Harry Bailly sets up the contest for “wel nyne and twenty” (I.24) pilgrims by requesting four tales from each, two going toward Canterbury and two on the return journey (I.792-4). However, when Bailly calls upon the Parson in fragment ten, he announces that all but one pilgrim has told his tale.

These two frameworks, while not mutually exclusive, require some kind of explanation; there is none. The sequence of Bailly’s statements has had some interpretive effect on the shape attributed to the journey, but there is no real evidence that it should. For instance, in the epilogue to the Squire’s Tale, the host interrupts the Franklin’s “interruption” of the Squire in order to remind him of his agreement, “that ech of yow moot tellen atte lest / A tale or two, or breaken his biheste” (V.697-8). These elusive descriptions of the tale-telling plan dispersed throughout the links — from the elaborate plans of the General Prologue, to Bailly’s intermediate comment to the Franklin, to the host’s final assertion in the Parson’s Prologue that “now lakketh us no tales mo than oon” (X.16) — have been read as a progressive modification of Bailly’s overenthusiastic plans. Such a reading assumes that Chaucer wrote or revised in serial order. Resisting that assumption, Charles A. Owen has offered a counter-argument proposing that Chaucer was at work revising fragment one at the time of his death, and thus the four-tale-per-pilgrim plan is the revision of the earlier one-way, one-tale-per-pilgrim journey (10-47). In light of other contemporaneous events in Chaucer’s life, this artistic expansion of the *Canterbury Tales* makes some sense. In December 1399, just a year before his death, Chaucer took out a 53-year lease on a tenement house in Westminster, “an unexpectedly long lease for a man nearly 60” (Pearsall, *Life* 275).\(^4\) Both acts of extension can be read as attempts to forestall an unwanted end. While Owen’s proposal remains tentative and Pearsall’s agreement even more so, we are certain that Chaucer did not write the tales in serial order, as many studies of the dates of composition attest.\(^5\) Witness, for example, the shift in the Wife of Bath’s performance from what is now the Shipman’s fabliau to the present Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale. The first tale Chaucer wrote for the Wife now heads fragment seven while the expanded revision is found earlier, in fragment three. There is no reason, then, to assume that the plans of fragment one are any less definite than the ones in fragment ten, nor that revision of the plan logically relates to the pilgrims’ proximity to Canterbury.

Beyond the textual tradition of the *Canterbury Tales*, what the physical manuscripts can and cannot tell us about the state of the poem, we also have internal, “literary” problems and concerns about its form. There are those pilgrims mentioned in the General Prologue for whom we have no tales: the five guildsmen (Haberdasher, Carpenter, Upholsterer, Dyer, and Tapster), the Plowman, and the Knight’s Yeoman.\(^6\) Moreover, the entire poem motions
toward an elaborately conceived yet unachieved framing narrative, which is itself a story of competing narratives of pilgrimage and literary judgment. Yet both pilgrimage and contest frames remain incomplete. There is no arrival at Canterbury Cathedral, no sojourn into the town, no return journey, and no conclusion and judgment to the tale-telling contest with the supper at Bailly's Tabard Inn "at oure aller cost" (I.799).7

Such missing pieces — whether the Squire's pars tertia, the unwritten Plowman's Tale, or Bailly's final judgment — must surely affect our ability to piece together the whole of Chaucer's poetic creation. But the range of such missing elements, the unlinked state of the ten extant fragments and the non-subordination of framing devices, also raise less materialist and more abstract, poetic questions. How does one, indeed can one, interpret what isn't there? And what isn't there forces us to ask how far we can discuss the meaning of the Canterbury Tales as a singular poem. That is, do we see one or many? Robert Jordan has noted such difficulty when he remarks, "Commentators have failed to recognize the extent to which the claim of the whole and that of the parts interfere with and disarm one another" (112). This problem is more generally apparent in the choice we face in referring to the Canterbury Tales in the singular or in the plural. When we talk about the Canterbury Tales, should we say the Canterbury Tales "is" or the Canterbury Tales "are"?

There seems little we can do about the missing or partial pieces of the Canterbury Tales short of a manuscript discovery. However, I want to suggest a way in which we might be more attentive to the various texts we have. Such attention, paradoxically, will focus precisely on the missing pieces of Chaucer's text, the absences so frustrating to Chaucer's readers. Viewing the poem through these absences, as it were, amounts to a kind of concentration on precisely what Chaucer left us. But such attention will also call into question the ways in which the structure of the Canterbury Tales has been elaborated before. For even while recognizing that the poem has been left in a state of incompleteness, many critics have still found enough evidence to argue for its structure. While this essay itself contributes to such an enterprise, it seeks to do so from a decidedly different vantage point. In what follows I will do two things: first, I will discuss the structure of the Canterbury Tales (as a single poem) through its missing parts. I will ask, that is, how certain absences figure in the poem as well as how absence more generally and pervasively figures the poem itself. For what isn't in the poem — yet what has left traces of a presence, real or imaginary, authorial or scribal — invades our thoughts about, and structures for us what is, the Canterbury Tales. And second, I would like to suggest how this play of absence and presence organizes the internal narratives themselves, for what isn't in the tales, I will show, determines to a great extent what is. To follow such a line of inquiry will reveal how these partial tales (or non-tales) uncannily represent the Canterbury Tales, how the implied but unstated has so much power in the poem.8 It is precisely what has been understated, or stated just under the text through implication, that controls the trajectory of Chaucer's last poetic fiction.

Generally viewed and spoken of as a unified poem, the Canterbury Tales has benefited from a great deal of criticism devoted to the shape and substance of
Chaucer's final work. In *The Structure of the Canterbury Tales*, Helen Cooper has produced the most extensive commentary on the subject, in which she claims that "the *Canterbury Tales* demands to be looked at whole; anything less will yield only partial and restricted results" (244). Such a comment, in its call for comprehensive analysis, may be read as representative of criticism that takes as its subject the "structure," "unity," or "idea" of the *Canterbury Tales*. Yet such structural criticism tends to find remarkably coherent "wholes" when addressing this particularly fragmentary poem. While criticism that attends to these totalizing concepts rarely fails to mention the gaps in Chaucer's poem (the broken or missing stories, as well as the disjunction between fragments), it is interesting to note how it mentions them primarily in order to dispose of them: the overarching concepts of "structure," "unity," and "idea" are always independent of these narrative absences.

Appearing to take the absences in the *Canterbury Tales* seriously, Donald Howard calls attention to the importance of junctures (the pauses that make language intelligible). He writes, "The term is useful if we are to talk about a literary structure whose units are tales. We need to look for the kinds of junctures between the tales: they seem to be 'pauses' or gaps or starting points, but if there is structure at all they are points where units are related" (211). However, Howard employs this concept from structural linguistics in order to level the junctures, by finding in them a particular meaning that effectively erases their presence. He reads, for example, the "headless junctures" (fragments that begin abruptly without headlinks) as intentional, arguing "that [Chaucer] meant the Wife's, Physician's, Shipman's, and Second Nun's performances to start without any words from the narrator, as if *in medias res.*" Howard continues, interpreting the significance of these junctures: "To say Chaucer planned it this way is to say a great deal. Yet some instinct, some pleasure he found in these abrupt beginnings, might have kept him from supplying the links" (214). Howard fully admits the conjectural nature of this argument: "It is a conjecture, true; but so is anything else we say about what Chaucer didn't write. And all I am saying is that these headless junctures, which come at key positions, are effective as they are" (215). The more significant phrase in this admission, a phrase that Howard did not emphasize, concerns the "key positions" of these headless junctures. His argument becomes entirely circular: they are of course "key" because of the "disruptive" tales they introduce "*in medias res.*" But the evidence for the disruptive nature of these tales comes largely from their abrupt beginnings. I would gladly concede Howard's point with the Wife of Bath's Prologue, which I would hazard as the foundation for his line of argument. The term "disruptive" fits no performance better. Yet it fits precisely because of the way the frame, missing at the headless juncture, is incorporated into her Prologue with the interruptions of the Pardoner and Friar, who make explicit, along with the Wife's polemical rhetoric, the disruptive nature of her discourse. The Physician, Shipman, and Second Nun are thornier cases, and I remain unconvinced that they follow the Wife's model. They must, however, occupy "key" positions because they form headless junctures, not vice versa. Thus, while Howard ostensibly places these absences center stage, he tellingly limits their function in order to locate determinate meaning there.
Interestingly, Howard finds the unfinished Cook's Tale and Squire's Tale similarly meaningful. But for all his innovative discussion of junctures, he reads the endings of these tales quite conventionally. Like Cooper, Howard suggests that the Cook's Tale may have been too "scurrilous" to be written or copied. Its breakage just as the Cook introduces the wife who "swerved for hir sustenance" (I.4422) suggests the ultimate commercialization of sexual desire. In Cooper's words, "To overgo the physical crudity of the Miller's and Reeve's Tales, as the reference to whoring suggests it might, the plot would need to be very crude — perhaps too much so for Chaucer's taste" (120). And similar to many other readers, Howard thinks the Squire's Tale finished in its present condition. Such arguments find the Squire intentionally interrupted either for artistic purposes that leave the Squire wanting as a narrator or because Chaucer's "sense of decorum" prevented him from completing the Squire's Tale, which suggests in its proleptic final lines a potential incest story.10

This conclusive interpretation of Chaucer's fragments is by no means limited to discussion of these two tales, however, nor to Howard's work. Dolores Frese uses numerological analysis to suggest that the untold tales were never meant to be written. She writes the most literal defense of the poem as we have it in Ellesmere, and her effort at understanding the text as it has come down to us produces a reading of completeness and significance as is:

[F]ar from indicating an abandoned or imperfectly completed work, Chaucer's company of narrators — whose careful introduction in the "General Prologue" may be variously construed as numbering twenty-eight, twenty-nine, thirty or thirty-one, and who perform a numerically fixed schedule of "Tales" whose total is twenty-four — serves to supply the Canterbury Tales with a figuration that represents the hours of the day and the days of the month.

(7)

Frese not only enumerates the ways the General Prologue is various but also finds a determinate meaning to such variety. But neither is this logic specific to numerological analysis. Many of Chaucer's readers find this kind of incompletion or contradiction Chaucer's very intention. One only has to think of those previously mentioned critics arguing ever vigorously that the unfinished Cook's Tale and the Squire's Tale are, in fact, finished as they are (Braddy; Goodman; Peterson).

When unity is sought in the Canterbury Tales readers often look beyond Chaucer to unifying and totalizing schemes located within his historical milieu. Attention to medieval literary theory or genre has provided critics with a whole of which the "fragmentarity" (to coin a needed term) of the Canterbury Tales is simply an emergent part. Judson Allen and Theresa Moritz, for example, employ commentaries on Ovid to structure a typology of four kinds of tales. They reopen the question of unity from the perspective of "medieval poetics and the medieval literary form [of] the story-collection [to find] organization-al principles recognized and used in the Middle Ages [that] have not been taken into account in modern efforts to understand the plan of Chaucer's story
array” (4-5). Alternately, Robert Jordan uses neo-Platonic aesthetic theory to organize his ideas of “inorganic structure.” Most recently, William Rogers sees the tales linked through “dissatisfaction” between world views. Yet, as persuasive as any of these arguments might be, we should also note how driven they are by the fragmentary state of Chaucer’s poem, how the absences in the Canterbury Tales permit, by literally giving space to, the claims of such arguments. Larry Sklute has recognized this critical paradox in his explanation of Chaucer’s poetic skepticism when he writes that the “principle of inconclusiveness has even motivated the enormous critical drive to establish unity in the Canterbury Tales. The complicated diversity of themes and subjects without a clear architectonics, as in the Divine Comedy, challenges readers to order and organize meaning where Chaucer does not” (123). The “drive” exhibited in these analyses emerges not only from Chaucer’s withdrawal from positions of authority but also in response to the material absences in the poem. Witness further the way this “drive” encourages readers (much like the Ellesmere editor) to make these absences invisible.

While such arguments about unity promote a particular interpretation of the extant tales elaborated by each critic, the arguments proffered go so far as to assert that it would make no significant difference to our understanding of the poem if the absent narratives were there. Donald Howard says as much in his discussion of the abandonment of the “quitting” theme of fragment one through “degeneration,” when he claims, quite conveniently considering the state of the manuscripts, that it was entirely unnecessary for Chaucer to have gone further with the fragment: “the effect would likely have been the same if the Cook’s Tale were complete” (247). And of the Squire’s Tale he claims, “As with Sir Thopas, Chaucer did not need to finish the tale; what he wrote accomplishes what he needed to accomplish” (265). Yet Bailly’s interruption of Chaucer’s Tale of Sir Thopas (“Namore of this, for Goddes dignitee [VII.919]) is far more explicit than the situation at the end of the Squire’s Tale, where the Franklin begins what is clearly a link to his own tale: “In feith, Squier, thow hast thee wel yquit, / And gentilly” (V.673-4). His words, however, say nothing explicitly disruptive to the Squire.11 In attempting to find meaning in the poem as it has been left to us, Howard reduces the potential meanings of the Cook’s and Squire’s Tales altogether. Both formulations elide the question of these absent narratives completely. Here, as one more example of this limiting tendency, is William Rogers (defending his reading of the Tales’ open-ended structure):

Chaucer could have finished the Cook’s tale, or even the Squire’s tale. Within limits, he could have added other tales of certain types to certain existing groups. . . . But reading The Canterbury Tales as I have read it does produce a definite structure that might allow us to use the work as evidence for inferring how the historical Chaucer might have looked at the world. (122; emphasis added)

Therefore, according to these critics, the structure that we have (through what we have of Chaucer’s poem) offers readers not only enough of Chaucer’s plan
for an adequate interpretation of its structure, it also provides the limit of such an interpretation: while Chaucer could have written more, it would make no difference to the way we read him. This, it seems to me, goes far beyond a discussion of what Chaucer wrote or what we have of that writing, which implicitly admits to limitation, to making a virtue of necessity. However, if critics have looked beyond Chaucer to find a way to talk about the entire poem, Chaucer himself has already anticipated this move and has passed comment on such totalizing schemes.

I have presented these unifying arguments in a particular light, I will admit. The statements of some critics, notably Helen Cooper, are more convincing in their original contexts than I have represented them here. But it is not simply my framing of such concerns with unity for the fragmentary Canterbury Tales that potentially reduces these arguments to the absurd. The substitution (the addition of theoretical or generic concerns in the place of Chaucerian narrative) seems so incongruous because of the sometimes violent way Chaucer plays with such totalizing gestures in the tales themselves. We might recall, for example, the way the Monk’s Tale provides a negative example of the story collection for the Canterbury Tales, or the way the Squire’s Tale overuses traditional methods of rhetorical amplification in what might be read as its broad parody of models of poetic construction. While these examples are recalled by most of these readers, they are rarely brought to bear on the arguments put forward about the structure of the Tales. In The Structure of the Canterbury Tales, Helen Cooper has followed Donald Howard in comparing Chaucer’s poem to the form of the interlaced romance. And like the interlaced romance, she says, “the tales work not merely sequentially, but cumulatively” (71) with their developing but not constant thematic relations. Yet even as Cooper notes that the Canterbury Tales resembles a good interlaced romance, one that is always controlled by the author, she points to a bad one in the Canterbury Tales itself: the Squire’s Tale. Here a resonant problem arises when the model offered by critics to structure the Canterbury Tales is already called into question by the poem. Cooper herself points out how typical the Squire’s Tale is (in what reads as a wholesale condemnation of the genre): “the fact remains that most examples of the form are shapeless monsters of inordinate bulk. . . . The Squire’s Tale, like all the other tales, is a good one of its own particular kind; but Chaucer is implicitly passing aesthetic judgment on the whole genre” (146). Yet it never strikes Cooper as a contradiction that Chaucer both exemplifies and “passes judgment” on interlaced romance in the Canterbury Tales. Implicit in her comment is a division between the structure offered by the generic frame of the entire Tales and the forms of individual tales. Chaucer, however, appears to resist such easy distinctions between frame and inset narratives. One might think of the appearance of the Wife of Bath in both mimetic frame and fictional discourse of the Merchant’s Tale. Chaucer’s fictionalizing of himself as the naively enthusiastic narrator of the whole journey and of his work in the Introduction to the Man of Law’s Tale also makes uneasy this sharp distinction between “reality” (what Chaucer does) and fiction (what his characters do). That even inclusive genres like the interlaced romance or the story collection should provide adequate ways of understanding his Tales appears compromised by the
Squire's and the Monk's Tales. In this way Chaucer already seems to have anticipated and foreclosed the forms to be attributed to his poem and the interpretive security they would provide by disqualifying them as hermeneutic determinants.

The privileging of such material at the level of the frame — Cooper's easy division between structural frame and the form of individual tales — is oddly reminiscent of the authority granted to the General Prologue in older dramatic readings. This privileging effect might be seen as a legacy of the dramatic principle — for all of Chaucer's indeterminacy, his withdrawal from positions of authority, we still grasp for a stable position from which to view the tales, even when we have discredited the autonomous existence of the pilgrims in the General Prologue as an example of just that kind of stability. Using a variety of structural arguments, then, criticism attempts to construct a cohesive narrative the poem markedly lacks. I do not mean to suggest that these structural arguments are useless or untenable but that they are themselves incomplete in not telling, not realizing, the extent to which they depend on particular and important absences in the Canterbury Tales.

There is a long history of erasing the gaps in the Canterbury Tales through a willful blindness that produces over-coherent structural arguments. Commenting on such erasure in a recent essay concerned with “Poems Without Endings,” John Burrow has called attention to the ways in which readers have historically handled the narrative problems presented by the Cook and the Squire. After manuscript space was presumably left for the endings of these tales when they should be found, later editors, such as Caxton, wrote brief endings, knitting up the dangling bit with a few lines; for instance, the Squire announces the suspension of his tale until the next time he will be given opportunity to speak. Similarly, the Cook wraps things up with a moral that then facilitates the transition to the interpolated Tale of Gamelyn. Burrow notes here the simple wish of early manuscript editors and scribes to suture the holes in the partial tales rather than the desire for any continuations of them. However, Burrow also draws attention to the modern predilection, unseen before the twentieth century, toward reading meaning into these breakages, a tendency that he attributes to the post-romantic aversion to closure, a delight in what I have earlier termed fragmentarity. He summarizes the force of this thoroughly modern opinion in this way: “the poems in question are either complete or better off incomplete” (34). Yet I would like to suggest that either way of viewing the problem produces analogous results: whether closing up the holes perfunctorily, writing tales to fill them up, or making the break part of the poem itself by reading it as intentionally disrupted, the reading strategies behind such comments betray a desire for the poem to mask the gap on its pages, a desire not to see its empty spaces. As Burrow notes, the strategies for such writing can be historicized according to the values placed on closure and fragmentation in different eras, but the desire not to acknowledge the empty page — which Burrow attributes to the possibility of mere accident — persists.

Behind the narrative discontinuities in the Canterbury Tales there are, of course, physical gaps in the manuscript tradition of the tales' transmission. It is a measure of the ease with which critics have dispensed with the gaps in the
Canterbury Tales that even these physical disruptions are patched over by the totalizing steamroller of Chaucer interpretation. But there are other ways to consider the absences of Chaucer’s poem, even from the point of manuscript study. Take, for example, the unended tales that Rogers and Burrow mention. Stephen Partridge, in a conference paper entitled “Evaluating the Manuscript Evidence of the Cook’s and Squire’s Tales,” provides codicological evidence for the authority of the manuscript gaps following these two tales by noting “the existence in the early fifteenth-century copies of unusual gaps [that extend to the end of a quire] in a text generally copied across quire boundaries” (7). Because scribal behavior elsewhere in the manuscripts disguises or explains the lack of endings to various tales, we should not consider the large gaps at the end of the Cook’s Tale and Squire’s Tale scribal but authorial. What might it mean interpretively to consider the empty space following the Cook’s Tale and Squire’s Tale as Chaucerian, to consider these tales not simply as poems without conclusions, or as fragmented works — even intentionally so — but as poems with blank, and therefore, potential lines written into the page? This observation asks us to read the blank page in a way that marks its difference from an intentionally disrupted or censored tale (where there might be no lines between its end and what follows). Is Chaucer encoding delay and deferral into the Canterbury Tales? Have our interests — or an adequate space for them — been anticipated in an unusually material way by the gaps at the end of the Cook’s Tale and Squire’s Tale? This is not to say that we should fill that gap, even though that is precisely what critical commentary manages to accomplish, foreclosing other possibilities by answering rather than presenting the absence as an interpretive crux. Perhaps one needs to leave the gap there editorially, even to reconstruct it, if only for historical reasons. We should present this absence as part of the text (rather than as a lack of text) and to teach our students how to read this absence rather than to dispose of it for them.

In the face of all these efforts to the contrary, I want to suggest that absence is, in fact, central to the Canterbury Tales. It need not be explained away, for not only do the absences in the poem produce our readings of the entire Canterbury Tales, they produce the tales themselves. It is no accident that discussions of the structure of the Canterbury Tales, by definition, argue toward unifying principles. But this argument, I would suggest, functions as a textual effect of the poem. Because of the contingencies of the poem’s existence as a collection of fragments left in a state of mid-composition or perhaps, more simply, non-subordination, the poem continues to undo itself, and it is this force above all that these readings of the poem inevitably resist. This difference can be seen at every level of the Tales: for example, between the kinds of joints in fragment one (four tales linked dramatically through what might be generally termed social competition) and those in fragment seven (six tales linked only in a loosely formalistic way through variation in tale types), a difference that shows us different poems. And the very assembly of the tales, I would suggest, is itself produced by violations of imposed orders, which leaves us with a sense that there is always something missing from the Canterbury Tales. The poem derives its own spontaneous power by staging its own transgression.

Fragment one, for obvious reasons, provides the most developed and articulated instance of this transgression. The General Prologue organizes the com-
pany of pilgrims — from its highest-ranking secular participant, the Knight, right down to the “cherles” — according to the memory of its pilgrim narrator, an order that will be violated immediately when the Host takes control and a number of pilgrims that will change when a panting Canon and his Yeoman ride up to the pilgrims at “Boghtoun under Blee” (VIII.556). This originary order of the narrator’s memory, however, is itself already called into question, since the narrator has apologized for not “set[ting] folk in hir degree” (I.744). Thus, the order of pilgrims as presented in the General Prologue originates as a violation of another order (“degree”) that has never been set, while it simultaneously presents a kind of descending (if not absolute) social order.16 Yet concerns with order and organization do not end with the narrator but continue within the pilgrims’ fictional world. The Host, who appears to have set up a straw-drawing scheme to elect the Knight as the first teller, attempts to impose an order according to social rank and propriety, an order that might follow the “degree” not offered by the narrator in the General Prologue, though one imagines Bailly to have social priorities different from those of the pilgrim Chaucer. The Miller then interrupts Harry Bailly’s plan with a thematically oriented game of “quitting” — one that comically deflates the high ideals, social and literary, of the Knight’s Tale. But the Reeve, in a literalization of the quitting metaphor, and arguably a misreading of the reference of the Miller’s Tale, savages the Miller for the personal insult he sees dramatically expressed there. The transgressive turn that fuels fragment one relies on absenting something: degree, social pretention, insult, et cetera (even if that something is only momentarily constructed), displacing it from a potential structure and the possibility of order in the poem.

So various are the absences fueling the poem, in fact, that each of them has sparked separate critical movements in the interpretation of the Canterbury Tales — the dramatic reading is, of course, the most recognizable of these. It emerges from the Reeve’s depiction and its motivating anger, even from Harry Bailly’s implied sleight of hand. But this process also occurs outside of fragment one. For instance, we might consider the allegorical interpretation of the Clerk’s Tale problematized in the Clerk’s Envoy, the danger of childlike understanding witnessed in the Prioress’s behavior yet advocated by her Tale, and the impossibility of moralizing, separating fruit and chaff, in the Nun’s Priest’s Tale. In spite of all these “warnings” in the Canterbury Tales, however, such allegorizing and moralizing tendencies have not been given up; the extensive influence of Robertsonian exegesis in the critical tradition attests to that.17 From these considerations we might think of criticism emerging from such transgressions, in fact, criticism as a transgression of Chaucer’s poetry. The power of the Canterbury Tales originates, then, not from a revelation of what the tales are — in what way they should be read and related — but from a disclosure of what they are not. Seen in this way, Chaucer leaves us a poem with many encoded modes of reading, all of which, of course, are subverted, destabilized, and critiqued. This situation suggests that how we should read the poem is always different from the way the poem is being read at any given moment. Every mode of reading is proposed and rejected by the Canterbury Tales: Harry Bailly’s literalizations, the allegorization offered and rescinded by the Clerk in his Envoy, the
moralizations trumpeted and frustrated by the Nun's Priest, the dramatic and thematic modes presented in fragment one that I previously mentioned.

Contrary to the many attempts to discover the structure of the *Canterbury Tales* (and the interpretive frame such a structure provides), I want to suggest that what we ultimately find in Chaucer's work reads more like the deconstruction of the *Canterbury Tales*. Because of the way that he simultaneously offers multiple structures that are only disabled, we perhaps cannot even discuss such a thing as the structure of the *Canterbury Tales* unless we participate in and merely repeat Chaucer's structural illusion. Deconstruction has, of course, been brought to bear on the critical reading of the *Canterbury Tales* before.18 In Traugott Lawler's words, "The *Canterbury Tales* is in some obvious ways a deconstructor's dream: not only an unfinished and so indeterminate text, with lots of evident discontinuity and self-contradiction, but a nonreferential or self-referential or mediated text, both because many tales ask us to focus as much on the teller as on the subject matter and because such outward references as it has point regularly not to reality but to more texts" (85-6). In pointing out the absent narratives in the texture of the *Canterbury Tales*, the absences on its surface which concretize the contradictions and disjunctions to which deconstruction so infamously draws attention, I mean to suggest that the texts to which the *Canterbury Tales* refers are not simply those "behind" the Chaucerian tales (like sources) but are parts of the Chaucerian tales themselves. Deconstruction, as I have employed the term here, gives a name to a text that is not only open-ended, as Lawler's description suggests, but open-centered as well.19 Similar to Marshall Leicester's definition of "structure as deconstruction," my use of the term deconstruction "registers (by undoing it . . .) the constructed character of any meaning whatever, by showing that meaning is never an immanent property of things but always a way of reading, something done to a text by human agents rather than derived by them from it" (Leicester, "Structure" 244). Within the *Canterbury Tales* Chaucer dramatizes human agents struggling to construct those meanings over and again.

Not only are gaps to be found between tales or at the ends of tales, absent narratives appear to be the foundations for some of the tales themselves (especially the romances, stories, like the Canterbury tales, which are part of some larger, inclusive narrative). Here we might think, for example, of the narrative of incest the Man of Law refuses to entertain but ends up unwittingly repeating, as Carolyn Dinshaw shows, in his tale of Constance (88-112). Similarly, the recursive Squire's Tale doubles over its own material again and again in a search for the "origin" (and therefore end) of its own fiction that remains always prior, always absent (Scala, "Canacee"). And finally, another version of this absent narrative is witnessed in the occluded and overdetermined narrative of the Theban women and Amazons in the Knight's Tale brought to critical attention by Elaine Tuttle Hansen. Turning to the Knight's Tale, I will here show in brief the importance of the narrative absence originating and structuring the tale.

Hansen's study calls attention to the unnarrated conquest of the Amazons that logically precedes the events of the Knight's Tale, a form of which is included in Chaucer's source, Boccaccio's *Teseide*. In one of the few passages
that Chaucer probably added to his “Palamon and Arcite” in order to incorporate it into the Canterbury fiction, the Knight explains:

And certes, if it nere to long to heere,
I wolde have toold yow fully the manere
How wonne was the regne of Femenye
By Theseus and by his chivalrye;

But al that thyng I moot as now forbere.

(875-8; 885)

Read traditionally as Chaucer’s simple abbreviation of his Boccaccian source, this narrative gesture has not been of much concern. Indeed, if anything, it has been taken as a marker of its narrator’s measured and elegant style, the Knight’s discursive control, so well matched by Theseus’ political and social ordering impulses. As Cooper has pointed out, once the story of Palamon and Arcite is incorporated into the Canterbury fiction and ascribed to the Knight, “the reason for th[e] abbreviation, which thematically is already entirely justified, can now be fathered on the story competition” (64). But unlike Cooper’s notion of transparent justification, making visible such omissions and their regular effects in the Knight’s Tale becomes especially important because of the kind of priority his tale has.

Indeed, Cooper herself calls attention to the way in which the abbreviation, potentially a rather neutral narrative strategy, becomes a significant and signifying gesture of the Knight’s once his tale is placed in position — a position that sets in motion the Canterbury Tales as a whole. As the initial tale, the Knight’s story works as a particular kind of origin for the other narratives to follow, and Cooper spends an entire chapter of her book on the multivalent opening afforded by the Knight’s Tale (91-107). The authoritative position of the Knight’s Tale comes from both its initial placement in the Canterbury scheme as well as its larger thematic and philosophic aspirations. It deals with such issues as order and chaos, divine intelligence, fate and free will, “gentlesse,” “sovereintee,” and “curteseye,” issues that return in the tales that follow (Cooper 65). Cooper also notes the ideal beginning offered by the Knight’s Tale stylistically: its formality marks it off from everyday speech and sets a rhetorical standard, while its motifs and imagery — the recurring topos of female beauty, love gardens, and romantic rivalry — emerge as a source for the other pilgrim speakers (65). In some sense all the other Canterbury tales are already contained in the Knight’s Tale; in Cooper’s words,

What emerges most clearly from the Knight’s Tale by itself is the immensity of issues it raises. These themes are not complete in themselves, as plot motifs are, but are often presented as questions. Later stories take up the questions in different forms, or occasionally even suggest answers; but all such concerns open out from the first of the tales.

(91)
But we might also see other stories indicated in what the Knight so self-consciously or rhetorically excludes from his narration. The *Canterbury Tales* originates as much in what the Knight cannot say as in what he can.

One of the Knight’s decorous and masterful pauses over matter he will not relate concerns Emily’s bath before her prayer to Diana, and the Knight himself makes us aware of the narrative stakes of his decisions about what matter should and should not be narrated. He describes:

This Emelye, with herte debonnaire,
Hir body wesh with water of a welle.
But how she dide hir ryte I dar nat telle,
But it be any thing in general;
And yet it were a game to heeren al.
To hym that meneth wel it were no charge;
But it is good a man been at his large.

(I.2283-8)

The Knight’s gestures are easily glossed over as polite refusal to discuss Emily’s private ablutions. They may even function more critically as an allusion to Acteon’s fatal crime of witnessing Diana’s bath, which Emily will herself reference in her prayer to the goddess (“keepe me fro thy vengeance and thyn ire, / That Atthen aboughte cruelly” [I.2302-3]).

The Knight’s politeness thus contains an implicit warning of the dangers of telling such a tale, for to repeat this tale threatens a repetition of *what happens in* the tale. But the Squire’s gloss on his father’s masterful discourse prompts us to read more closely, to read between the Knight’s program of telling “in general” — what most readers have taken to be his narrative strategies throughout the adaptation of this “Statian”/Boccaccian tale — and the pleasurable “game” of hearing “al.” As the Knight pauses over what he “dar nat telle” and displays his self-imposed narrative restraint, he alludes — albeit unwittingly — to the game that will momentarily break free from his control with the forward charge of the Miller, who certainly “meneth wel” but in an entirely different sense, and with the freedom that the Miller will take (“at his large”) and to which he will take the tale-telling game beyond the “general.” We might say, then, that in the kind of concern and decorum the Knight shows here in abbreviating and closing off subjects for narration, even when heeding the warnings of classical models, he only exposes an open terrain for the *Canterbury Tales* to be taken into.

The quiting game that organizes and produces fragment one originates with the Knight, in both his high style of narrative speaking and his subject matter, as well as his elevated social position, to which the Miller is only the first to respond. But the Knight’s influence is felt far beyond fragment one. The Knight interrupts the Monk’s seemingly endless tragedies; he preserves order at the end of the Pardoner’s performance; he is depicted in whatever distorted forms by the Merchant’s, Franklin’s, and Wife of Bath’s Tales. Moreover, his rhetorical control has also been used as a yardstick for the other secular tales, most notably the Squire’s, which has been viewed in comparison as a naive and inept performance. Recently, I have challenged this typical view of the tale,
arguing that the Squire is in fact an archetypal narrator ("Canacee"). His tale "thematizes over and over again, almost to the point of parody, that which gets left out in the act of narration, indeed, how narration is founded upon particular acts of exclusion" (35). Here I would like to turn my attention to the retrospective effects of the Squire's Tale, that is, its influence on our perception of the Knight's rhetorical order. As I have already mentioned, the Knight functions as a Thesean analogue; his narrative control mimes Theseus' political order. However, while Theseus' power and prerogative have been called into question, especially by feminist critics interested in exploring the politics of romance, the Knight as narrator and narrative exemplar for the Canterbury Tales has suffered relatively little. The kind of feminist argument offered by Elaine Hansen, for instance, has significant structural implications for the way in which the Knight's Tale operates and therefore for the way the rest of the tales do as well.

Hansen shows how the Knight's Tale, which seems primarily to concern the relations of the two male cousins and Emily, actually repeats a story passed over in the Knight's opening lines. She writes:

The tale actually begins not with the love triangle — Palamon, Arcite, and Emily — but with another triad of characters that has a different gender ratio, in which Emily is the only common factor: Theseus, Hippolyta, and her "yonge suster Emelye" (871) on the way back to Athens after Theseus has conquered the Amazons and married their queen.

(216)

Hansen draws attention here to the Knight's characteristic use of rhetorical tropes such as occupatio, his elegant manner of crafting and controlling the long story he has drawn from "Stace." Occupatio, readers of the Squire's romance will recall, is precisely the trope the Squire relies so heavily upon and the one his critical readers have found so troubling. The Squire's occupatios mark the places at which his story seems to digress out of control. Reading the tales linearly amounts to reading the Knight as the exemplar for the Squire. But to glance backwards from the Squire's Tale gives us a different perspective on the relation of these two performances. The Squire's focus on rhetoric, indeed the way in which it seems to confound him and stunt the progress of his romance, calls attention to the Knight's literalizations and excisions. The Knight, Hansen writes, "speaks of what he will not, he says, have time to represent fully." But as Hansen goes on to show, this statement is not simply one of necessary abbreviation. The Knight repeats this absent narrative of feminine conquest in the very story that he tells. In her words, "the conquest of Femenye that we were told we were not going to hear about is actually reenacted inside the gates of Athens through the narrative strategies" of the Knight's Tale (223). If the conquest of the Amazons cannot be encompassed within the Knight's performance, the conquest of women remains the fundamental gesture and ideological end of the Knight's romancing.

At work here and latent in Hansen's analytical discourse, I would suggest, is the repression of a story that results in a structural repetition compulsion.
The Knight’s omissions need not only be read in terms of gender, in terms of a feminine difference that his chivalry and gentilesse both require and contain. In the very story told by the Knight, built upon its continual scenes of battle (lyrical, martial, courtly) for Emily and ideological struggle (in which Emily must be denied her one spoken desire to remain a virgin devotee of Diana, the huntress), the reign of Femenye is conquered and reconquered in a variety of ways that ultimately “repeat” — by acting out — the narrative repressed in the Knight’s elegant and stylized opening gestures.21

Indeed, analogous to this absent narrative repressed and then repeated by the Knight’s Tale, Emily herself functions as something of a missing story. Many readers, and most recently Susan Crane, have called our attention to Emily’s curious (and curiously silent) position as heroine of the Knight’s romance. Crane emphasizes the contradictions surrounding Emily and her unmotivated actions in the tale.22 Her one speech, we will recall, is a plea to be removed from the love triangle involving her (I.2297-2330). The other intimations of Emily’s “desire,” her friendly glance toward a victorious Arcite (“And she agayn hym caste a frendlich ye / (For wommen, as to spoken in comune, / Thei folwen alle the favour of Fortune)” [2680-2]), her sorrow at his funeral (“And after that cam woful Emelye, / With fyr in honde, as was that tyme the gyse” [2910-11]), and her happy union with Palamon (“And Emelye hym loveth so tendrely” [3103]), are all narrated secondhand, mediated and projected by the decree of Theseus as is her marriage at the tale’s end — “Suster,’ quod he, ‘this is my fulle assent’” (3075). She functions as a kind of undecidable blankness that suggests, in Crane’s words, “her configuration as a ground of adventure for the male protagonists” (173). Yet, Emily’s function as that “ground” work is literalized in the Knight’s Tale in a way that brings Crane’s and Hansen’s observations together in a telling way. Emily’s absence from the romance written around her by Palamon and Arcite, and then by Theseus, is emblematized as such in the tale. This absence, I would suggest, not only facilitates the projection of these male characters’ desires by turning Emily into the “ground of adventure” but also makes the narrative possible, turning Emily — the absence of Emily, really — into the grounds of discourse.

Specifically, as Palamon and Arcite take matters into their own hands, that is, in their primary and unsanctioned (as yet by Theseus) battle for Emily, the Knight relates their positions on a material and ideological landscape with the following simile:

Right as the hunters in the regne of Trace,
That stondeth at the gappe with a spere,
Whan hunted is the leon or the bere,
And hereth hym come russelshyng in the greves,
And breketh bothe bowes and the leves,
And thynketh, “Heere cometh my mortal enemy!
Withoute faille, he moot be deed, or I,
For outher I moot sleet hym at the gappe,
Or he moot sleet me, if that me myshappe.”

(I.1638-46)
Each Theban hero stands before his adversary as a Thracian hunter before his prey, each locked in a zero-sum game in which “he moot be deed, or I.” The “gappe” is glossed in The Riverside Chaucer as “gap (toward which the game is driven)” (47). The “gappe” is at the same time an open and empty field and the place of battle, the goal “toward which the game is driven” and that which, by giving the game its telos, makes it possible. It is the empty and unoccupied space that allows the contest to take place. Like Emily, this empty field provides the grounds for the competition between men. For narratologically, Emily’s storylessness, her continual and oppressive silence, her contradictory “desire” and appearance (at least as the Knight tells it), offer a point of contest for Palamon and Arcite. Emily is quite literally the gap “toward which the game is driven” in the Knight’s Tale, the gap without which the tale, as well as all the socially and psychologically significant stories it tells and performs, could not itself exist.

The ostensibly whole, gapless, and unfragmented Knight’s Tale may be seen, then, as the (w)hole of the Canterbury Tales in little. As in that Tale, what I hope to have shown throughout this discussion is how the gaps and absences in Canterbury Tales are not only necessary but structurally central. The critics who notice these absences but resist their function in understanding the structure of the poem are quite literally missing something. I want to suggest above all that to read the absences in the Canterbury Tales is to read the poem (as well as to read the poems). The absences are constitutive of structure, and to interpret the Tales so as to erase these gaps is in some sense to change materially the Canterbury Tales. It is equally important to see that even the “whole” parts making up the Canterbury Tales (such as the Knight’s Tale) are themselves structured by absences. Placing the Canterbury Tales over and against any unifying or totalizing model (generic, theoretical, literary) only shows us the way in which the poem anticipates and transgresses that model — sometimes repeatedly. Structure is always becoming unstructured or, so to speak, de-structure. So it is crucial that we learn to read Chaucer where he was writing the Canterbury Tales, “at the gappe.”

Notes

I wish to thank Douglas Bruster, Lisa Freinkel, Stephen Partridge, and Marjorie Curry Woods for their helpful suggestions on a number of earlier drafts of this essay, as well as the essay’s anonymous readers.

1. With concern for the philosophic issue of conclusiveness see Sklute. Burrow offers an excellent overview of the textual situations accompanying Chaucer’s fragmentary and unfinished work.

2. See the facsimile of the Hengwrt MS published by the Variorum Chaucer Project (Ruggiers). For a discussion of the manuscript hands in Hengwrt, see also Manly and Rickert 269, 274 and passim. All parenthetical quotations from the Canterbury Tales refer to The Riverside Chaucer.

3. It should also be remembered that although editors seem to have such decisions made for them by their initial choice of base manuscript, readers are
complicit in such decisions when they choose an edition or, when using the standard *Riverside Chaucer*, they choose to reference fragments either by letters or by numbers.

4. This association of events — extending his tenement lease and revising fragment one — is also made by Pearsall. Summarizing the reasons for Chaucer's move to Westminster, he writes: "He was most probably in failing health, though I should like to believe he was in these months engaged in expanding the plan of *The Canterbury Tales* and adding the non-finishing touches to the Cook's Tale rather than sinking into the penitential gloom that preceded the deathbed repentance that Thomas Gascoigne so predictably attributes to him" (*Life* 275).

5. See *The Riverside Chaucer*, explanatory notes (796-7).

6. I leave in abeyance the question of the Priores' other two priests. While no manuscript contains any variant for the "preestes three" accompanying Madame Eglantyne on the pilgrimage, their existence has been contested. See the discussion offered by Andrew 170-1.

7. See Manly for a discussion of the Manciple's Tale as a story for the return journey. See also the continuations of the *Canterbury Tales*, such as John Lydgate's *Seige of Thebes*, the Tale of Beryn, and the Ploughman's Tale, in Bowers.

8. Such power has been previously noted in local discussions (though not in the large scale way I present here), as, for example, when Lee Patterson, following Paul Strohm, notes how the ethic of the pilgrimage is significantly silently expressed: "the social ethic of the pilgrimage' is that of the silent guildsmen: ‘fraternity, expressed through vital and egalitarian social interchange, is the order of the day'" (323).

9. Besides Cooper see, for example, Baldwin; Howard; Jordan; Owen; Payne, chapter 5; and Rogers.

10. See, for example, Braddy; Goodman; Pearsall, "Squire"; and Peterson.

11. In fact, while much of the evidence for the Franklin's interruption of the Squire's Tale, and hence the Squire's Tale's completion in its present condition, comes from the social interchange read out of this link, we might note that the best manuscript of the *Tales*, Hengwrt, here links the Squire's Tale to the Merchant's.

12. Reading the General Prologue as a "key" to understanding the tales begins with Kittredge and ends with Lumiansky whose text ironizes every tale to the moral detriment of its "flawed" narrator.

13. Speaking of the Cook's Tale particularly, but in ways we can easily apply to the Squire's Tale as well, Partridge "account[s] for the manuscript evidence which would argue on one hand, that Chaucer did not continue the tale or consider it complete as it stands and yet, on the other, that its survival in its present form is not accidental" (6). Partridge, citing Derek Pearsall, explains that the *Canterbury Tales* may have been written "in order to improve the chances for survival of a number of shorter pieces" to explain why Chaucer would have allowed fragment one to be copied for presentation even when the booklet acknowledges the provisional nature of the work. For Pearsall's discussion of the issue, see *Canterbury* 4.
14. As Partridge notes, the leaves left blank to the end of the quire, in Ellesmere and Hengwrt for example, have since been removed.

15. For discussion of fragment seven in these terms see Gaylord and, more recently, Astell.


17. See Robertson, Preface; and Essays. Recent publications registering the lingering influence of Robertson’s work include Besserman; Hermann and Burke; Hill; Jeffrey; Keenan; and Olson.

18. The usefulness of deconstruction in understanding Chaucer’s work has been most fully discussed by Leicester.

19. Interestingly, Howard’s discussion of the interlace structure is invested in a similarly “open” model; he explains, “the interlace often has no beginning or end or center, yet is coherent” (220). However, with the Canterbury Tales the beginning does not seem to be in any question. Howard uses such a formulation, likening the interlace to an “endless knot” (220) or a labyrinth (226), in order to free readers from linear reading constraints and to open the Tales to a variety of simultaneous nonlinear relationships. And indeed, while Howard notes the clear beginning of the Canterbury pilgrimage, he attributes this to “form” rather than structure.

20. Slightly earlier in the Knight’s Tale, the story of Acteon is itself depicted on the walls of the temple of Diana. The Knight says: “Ther saugh I Atheon an hert ymaked,/ For vengeance that he saugh Diane al naked;/ I saugh how that his houndes have hym caught/ And freeten hym, for that they knewe hym naught” (I.2065–8). Crane also calls attention to the Knight’s refusal to narrate Emily’s bathing ritual and its relation to the Acteon story (176–7): “The prohibition implicit in ‘I dar nat telle’ and the transgressive pleasure in ‘it were a game to heeren al’ both recognize feminine separateness and adumbrate its violation” (177). That both Emily and the Knight align themselves with Acteon is an interesting association I cannot pursue here.

21. I here draw on classical Freudian theory to delineate the relation of the compulsion to repeat with the concept of repression. For a fuller discussion of the use of the concepts of repression and repetition in literary analysis see Rimmon-Kenan and, in a specifically medieval literary context, Scala, “Wanting.”

22. Crane argues for an affiliation between the Knight’s Tale and romance that explains some of the illogicalities and ambiguities of an otherwise classically oriented and Boethian narrative. She writes, “Emelye is the most evident instance of a multivoiced ambiguity that characterizes the Knight’s Tale and that for romance has its origin in gender difference” (174).

Works Cited


—. “Structure as Deconstruction: ‘Chaucer and Estates Satire’ in the General


