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# Chaucerian imperfections: The other and the turbulent self

Ahmed Seif

University of Mississippi, aseif@go.olemiss.edu

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CHAUCERIAN IMPERFECTIONS:  
THE OTHER AND THE TURBULANT SELF

A Thesis  
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
in the Department of English  
The University of Mississippi

by

Ahmed Seif

May 2016

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## DEDICATION

Language fails me to express my gratitude to my mother who would be saddened by her inability to read these very words and the pages to follow. These pages, however, carry the spirit of affection, compassion, and love that she continues to show me. This thesis is also dedicated to my father without whose example of perseverance, I would not be what I am today. For their many sacrifices, their constant encouragement, and their faith in me, I thank them dearly.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I count myself extremely lucky to have been supervised by Professor Gregory Heyworth. Working with him is a learning experience defined by an intriguing mixture of precise professionalism and a reassuring friendship. The combination of intellectual guidance and emotional support that he gave me leaves in debt.

People usually acknowledge their gratitude to a mentor without whom their academic work would have not reached fruitful completion. This acknowledgement would be less than fair to Professor Steven Justice. Indeed without him, this thesis would have not even started. He believed in me from the very start despite my follies as a graduate student, and despite the fact that I came to the University of Mississippi from Egypt without any background in medieval Western literature.

I take pride in calling myself a protégé of both Professor Heyworth and Professor Justice; their intellectual rigor has been instrumental in shaping my academic identity. I am so deeply thankful to these two men.

I must also express my thanks to Professor Lindy Brady who was so good as to provide me with valuable suggestions on short notice.

Had it not been for Professor Molly Pasco-Pranger, my English translations of primary Latin texts would have not been possible. She kindly agreed to tutor me in Latin for an extended period of time, although I had no Latin background prior to her instruction.

I am grateful as well to Dr. Peter Wirth. Although he was not on my thesis committee, he was willing to read sections of this thesis and give feedback on them. I thank him for his generosity, kindness, and friendship.

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## INTRODUCTION:

### PERFECTION OF IMPERFECTION

To banish imperfection is to destroy expression . . .

— John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice* (1851)

This thesis is interested in forms of “imperfection” in Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*. I define “imperfection” as an authorial gesture performed to narrate an idealized virtue, while depriving it from its perceived idealism. The imperfection of a virtue, however, does not happen absolutely. It is the character’s incomplete, distorted, or decadent command of a given virtue, rather than the virtue itself, that makes it imperfect. The deliberate misrepresentation of school education, for example, would be an instance of such use of imperfection, but I will explain in more detail shortly.

Consisting of three chapters, the thesis examines Chaucer’s imperfection of things idealized within two medieval spaces: the ecclesiastical institution of Church and the secular institution of Knighthood. This is why the thesis has settled on the *Prioress’s Tale* and the *Knight’s Tale* as its only foci of discussion, though I read what the tales have to narrate against the historical insights of a few medieval primary sources as well as few other literary works such as John Gower’s.

The imperfection of different virtues serves Chaucer as a way of making multifaceted statements some of which religious, some others historical, and still others political. One goal of this thesis is to show what some of such statements are as well as how they are made. As an authorial tactic, moreover, instances of imperfection have a direct bearing on the construction of Otherness in the tales. This impact will be an underlying theme in throughout my discussion.



Reading the *Prioress's Tale*, chapter one will set out to discuss the first unperfected virtue: education. This chapter mainly examines Chaucer's deliberate representation of literacy as stunted and unhelpful for the developing a robust understanding of faith. The tale's narrated education (provided by the so-called "litel scole"), which replaces understanding with rote memorization, is of no help to the innocent boy who comes to the school at the age of seven with a distinct intellectual curiosity. Soon, the school system habituates him into becoming a human automaton as it forecloses his desire to comprehend what he regurgitates. Thus the tale makes of the boy's innocence an incomplete virtue, because it is an innocence built on a form of ignorance. The little boy's gradual transformation into a replica of the older fellow, who shows no command of grammar apt for his age, suggests that the imperfect education and incomplete innocence are likely to continue into later life.

On this note, chapter one will blend into chapter two in which I turn to the second unperfected virtue: piety. Here, I will argue the Prioress herself proves a correlation between one's limited literacy and the limitations of one's piety. My scrutiny of the Prioress will facilitate a point of connection with chapter one, namely that the figure of the Prioress anticipates what the little boy and his older fellow will most likely grow up to be like. As such, the tale can be seen as narrating a self-perpetuating problem. Something else needs to be clarified about chapters one and two.

Originally parts of a single monograph, the first two chapters are closely integrated on yet additional accounts. Together, the chapters will serve me to make another integral argument beyond my claim that Chaucer weaves a link between literacy and faith. The imperfection of the young pupils' education as well as of the Prioress's sense of piety forces the story into strong implications

for the demonized Jewish Other. I should be quick to clarify, however, one thing that I do *not* argue. I do not state that ignorance of literacy and faith is the only or even main catalyst for anti-Semitism. In fact, I will avoid accounting for anti-Semitism on purpose, because the *Tale* does not suffice by itself as proof for or against that statement. In other words, I do not say, for instance, that when and where better school instruction as well as solid understanding of faith could be historically attested, anti-Semitism was found to be less intense or less prevalent. Nor will I argue, moreover, that medieval school education was a general failure. Rather, I argue that Chaucer (though I cannot be sure consciously or unconsciously) has created such a strong parallelism between the incompleteness of literacy and faith, and the anti-Jewish sentiment that it is hard not to conceive them in terms of correlation so far as the *Prioress's Tale* is concerned.

This parallelism between the imperfection of Christian virtues (still referring to the incomplete literacy and piety) and the textual defeat of Jewish Other carries, I believe, a historical reference. It is such an irony that the Jewish defeat is achieved by a Christian community whose young clergesons have a deficient command of the written word. Ironic, given the medieval conception of Jews as “the people of the book,” a conception shared by Saint Augustine himself.<sup>1</sup> The dispute between the Prioress's Jews and her Christian “folk” coincides with the well-known fourteenth-century disputations between medieval Christians and Jews. The disputations, Jeremy Cohen notes, were staged by Christian authorities primarily to humiliate Jews into conversion or cause public disgrace. Our Prioress forecloses any possibility of Jewish self-defense during the dispute, thus dispelling their literary identity as “the people of the book.” The tale's Christian side of the dispute, furthermore, is made divisively victorious by the divine intervention of Mary *despite* their shown deficiency of literacy. This seems a strong religious statement to me. The triumph of

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Krupnick, “The Rhetoric of Philosemitism,” in *Rhetorical Invention and Religious Inquiry: New Perspectives* ed. Walter Jost and Wendy Olmsted (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 361.

Christianity is inevitable notwithstanding any shortcomings of its believers. The Jew may keep his literacy, that is, but the Christian has an irreplaceable advantage: *the* true faith. This is coupled with the fact that Jew is not allowed to exercise his superior literacy at any rate. Making the skill of eloquence irrelevant to the outcome of the dispute (and by projection the disputations), the text replaces the efficacy of literacy with the power of divine miracle. In other words, it is faith which comes to the true believer's rescue, not the human art of discourse. The *Prioress's Tale* thus fulfills such Biblical notions as "now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." [Hebrews 11.1]. Tellingly, this idea comes not from the Old Law, but from the New Law. The Christian victory also reasserts the notion that Jews are but "God's *once*-chosen people"<sup>2</sup> [my emphasis]. The textual defeat of the Jewish Other is the way in which the text participates in the fourteenth-century disputations against the Jews.

Still in conjunction, the first two chapters will make a final point. Besides from the Jewish Other, the imperfection of literacy has an unexpected result. It carries an implication for English laity who themselves occupy a space of otherness in relation to the upper echelons of society. Chaucer's "litel scole" neither teaches its pupils proper Latin nor allows them to read in their native English vernacular. Even with her ecclesiastical prominence, the Prioress's ersatz French betrays the same kind of in-between education. This shared limitation will be my basis for arguing that Chaucer puts the tale in conversation with the contemporary 1381 revolt which sought to claim a vernacular voice for the laity. The vernacular's inferior status to French and Latin made of the laity "belated witnesses"<sup>3</sup> to the very political circumstance that shaped their daily existence. In some sense, then, the laity, who could speak no courtly French nor were well versed in Latin, exits in a marginalized position to their English monarchs as the Jews stand as Other to medieval Christendom as a whole.

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<sup>2</sup> Krupnick, "The Rhetoric of Philosemitism," p. 361

<sup>3</sup> Steven Justice, *Writing and Rebellion: England in 1381* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1996), p. 71.

I am fully aware that some of the points I raise may appear to lack a justifiable sense of coherence, but it is precisely part of my argument that what I describe as narration of imperfection forces the story into incidental moves that, although simultaneous, are highly paradoxical, differently routed, and sometimes even self-contradictory.

Chapter three moves the discussion into a third and final form of imperfection largely considered more secular than religious: imperfect chivalry. I will nonetheless maintain that medieval thought imagines a linkage between chivalric decadence and moral decay. Some references to the writing of John Gower, Ramon Llull, and Eustache Deschamps will enable me to prove the historical existence of that link. The chapter is quite a transition from the first two, but it bears a curious connection to my discussion of the *Prioress's Tale*. In brief, I hold that the Knight's and the Prioress's tales become more relatable than they first appear when the reader takes the vantage point of examining the conflict in each tale as a common narrative component. The Prioress takes delight in imagining an external conflict between the aggrandized Christian Self and the demonized Jewish Other, whereas the Knight is deeply concerned about the internal conflict between Christianity's chivalric Self and *itself*. When I say a "conflict between Christianity's chivalric Self and itself," I am precisely suggesting that the tale's war between cousinly Palamon and Arcite is a projection of the warfare between England and France. In other words, the strife between Palamon and Arcite is an internecine conflict, and so is the warfare between England and France since both nations are part of the one Christendom. One aspect of chivalric decadence is (in Gower's language) the mistaken devotion to lucre and wantonness<sup>4</sup> as well as the failure to attend to a knight's prime duty: protecting the Church. In consideration of this, the Hundred Years War would have been a ramification of chivalric decadence; lucrative English campaigns in France can hardly be considered as aiding the

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<sup>4</sup> All Gower references are found in the original languages (Latin and Old French) with full citations in chapter three.

Christian cause. Quite the contrary, Anglo-French warfare was a major divisive force between the two Christian nations. I will argue that the Knight's is a tale equating the state of Christian disunity with the chivalric decadence of the fourteenth century; the Knight, who follows no such pursuits as those decried by Gower and Deschamps, is commenting on the unchivalric state of affairs between France and England using the fictional figures of Palamon and Arcite. The Knight's character will be the cornerstone of my argument. His flawless commitment to his original duties as a Christian Knight is what gives him the moral grounds from which he is enabled to make moral commentary on the chivalric decadence of his time. Since the argument is contingent upon proving the moral authority which I claim he has, the chapter will start with a detailed analysis of his character before it proceeds to discussing the characters of Palamon and Arcite.

The most prominent distinction between the Knight and Prioress ironically lies in what the *General Prologue* says they *seemingly* have in common: devotion to their respective duties. It is Chaucer's usual mastery in employing calculated satire sometimes, and his complete ruling out of it other times, which creates a connection between the tale-narrators. Despite the text's assertions, we should not be fooled into thinking that the Prioress is as devoted to her "ooth . . . by Seinte Loy" as the Knight is to his chivalric oaths. Despite their told devoutness, one, the Knight, must be heard seriously, the other, the Prioress, should be taken humorously. The Prioress is just as much part of the ecclesiastical imperfection as the character she narrates. In fact, her imperfect characters are a projection of her own imperfection. The Knight, on the other hand, is her stark contrast. I will fiercely argue that the source of chivalric imperfection comes not from the narrator Knight, nor his textual delegate Theseus, but from the narrated Arcite and Palamon. Whereas the Prioress proves an integral part of the kind of mistaken piety and impaired literacy I discuss in the first two chapters, the Knight is the moral correction of late medieval chivalric corruption I examine in chapter three.

Terry Jones convinced many a critic with what he sees as the Knight's mercenary character. My reading of the Knight as a reformer of chivalry is premised on a rejection of Jones' beliefs, which is why it was imperative that chapter three start with establishing a counter-reading of his military career. This discussion concludes that Knight's chivalric perfection as a Christian soldier lies in his incapability of being tempted by the ample financial advantages found in Anglo-French warfare, and his concomitant involvement in crusades against the Muslim who is a common enemy of both medieval England and France. The Knight's selectiveness in choosing specific battles to fight, once fully-argued, will facilitate the chapter's second argument.

Since one aspect of the Knight's perfection of chivalry is his renouncement of any armed conflicts with what is commonly described by papal discourse as "Christian brothers," his tale amounts to a statement of the same diplomatic agency as Philippe de Mézières's call for European unity. Philippe urged the ending of hostilities between France and England and the reorienting of European military action into the struggle with the Muslims in the East. Moreover, he associated Christian defeat to the Muslims with the contemporary division within Christendom. Such a mindset would have been commonplace with the politically aware among medieval people since it is traced all the way back to Roman traditions. In his *Bellum Catilinae*, Sallust advocates for the internal unity of citizenry as he invokes within them *metus hostilis* (fear of external enemies), thus forging the same link Philippe de Mézières made between Christian disunity and the Muslim advances into Europe.

It is possible, then, that the Knight, who, one critic argues is modeled on the military career of Philippe de Mézières, is responding to his audience's fear of the Muslim enemy by setting the tale in ancient Greece. As a result of this setting, any possibility of Muslim presence is completely disabled. There is a reason why we should suspect a disabled Muslim presence. Although Chaucer makes it a point to place his Knight only where he can fight the Muslim, he assigns him a tale where

no Muslim could be found. But unlike the Jews in the *Prioress's Tale*, the Muslim Other in the *Knight's Tale* is not exactly silenced. Rather, his presence, as well as the threat it carries to already divided Europe, is blocked by the fundamental choice of tale. Any Muslim presence in the *Knight's Tale* would have been at once an anachronism and anatopism.

The identification between the Knight and Theseus at once confirms and clarifies the foreclosure of the Muslim from the tale. As the Amazons are to Theseus, so are the Muslims to the Knight. The Amazons present a fitting category of otherness for the Muslim enemy. On that basis, I will describe the Muslims as “the new Amazons.” The Knight reassures his audience with a conquering of Femenya so identifiable with his successful conquests against the Muslims in the *General Prologue*. At the same time, the setting allows him to keep the Muslim without, so as to focus on achieving internal unity within. The Knight thus relieves his audience of their *metus hostilis* in relation to the Muslims as he works to rebuild a sense of *virtus* in his contemporary military class. On account of his chivalric merit and moral superiority, he is in a position to comment on, condemn, and ultimately correct the increasingly imperfect state of European chivalry during the time of the Hundred Years War.

## CHAPTER ONE

### THE IMPERFECT LITERACY IN CHAUCER'S PRIORRESS'S TALE

D. W. Robertson notes that the medieval reader's restriction to what "the text actually says" was in the Middle Ages "a mark of illiteracy."<sup>5</sup> The schoolboys, although attending a grammar school, confirm St. Paul's worry about the Christian's failure to remove the veil from the letter.<sup>6</sup> In fact, not only do they confirm it, but they also complicate it. For it is not exactly that they are unable to grasp the spirit of the text beyond its letter, no; they do not even understand what the letter itself says. Having heard the antiphonal hymn being sung habitually by the senior pupils, the "litel clergeoun" could learn the first verse "al by rote" (VII.522).<sup>7</sup> When the "litel clergeoun" seeks the help of his "felawe", who "elder was than he" (VII.530), to expound the meaning of the hymn for him, he barely learns anything beyond what should be obvious already. The answer does very little to satisfy the boy's curious desire to understand the hymn. As the "felawe" admits, the limitation of the answer he gives is due to his "smal gramere" (VII.536). The exchange between the younger boy and the older fellow uncovers the sort of incomplete literacy I am talking about.

Chaucer, more often than not, cares to specify his or his character's age. The seventh stanza of the *Court of Love* begins with "When I was yong at eighteen yere of age".<sup>8</sup> The Reeve has given his

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<sup>5</sup> Durant Waite Robertson, *A Preface to Chaucer: Studies in Medieval Perspective* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), p. 287.

<sup>6</sup> Robertson, pp. 290-291

<sup>7</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, ed. Jill Mann (London: Penguin Books, 2005). All citations from the *The Canterbury Tales* are from Mann's original-spelling Middle English edition.

<sup>8</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, "The Court of Love", in *The Poetical Works of Geoffrey Chaucer Vol. 4*, ed. Richard Morris (London: Bell and Daldy, 1885), page 2, line 43.



lord accounts of the livestock “[s]in that his lord was twenty yeer of age” (I.601). Our “litel clergeoun” is “seven yeer of age” (VII.503). The Wife of Bath had her first husband when she “twelve yeer was of age” (III.4). The Miller tells us of the carpenter, John, who had married his wife when “eighteteene yeer she was of age” (I.3224). Even when Chaucer indicates some unspecificity with regard to a character’s age, the indication is achieved by appending qualifiers of uncertainty to the verse while retaining some clue of how old the character could be, “He was, *I trowe*, twenty a wynter oold” (III.600), “Of twenty yeer of age he was, *I gesse*” (I.82), and so on and so forth [my emphases]. The fact that Chaucer would only vex us by his use of the comparative adjective “elder” without revealing—as it seems his custom otherwise—the exact age of the fellow, or suggesting a rough estimate of it, is telling; it denotes, as I will argue shortly, a grave inadequacy in the education provided by the “litel scole”.

Judging by his age, seven, Chaucer’s little boy would be in his very first term at school.<sup>9</sup> It is understandable, hence, that he would lack the bare minimum knowledge of what the hymn says even at a literal meaning. But the older fellow’s complete ignorance of the meaning thereof leaves a serious question mark over the quality (and the priorities) of the education at the “litel scole”. One might be inclined to dismiss the rationale of this doubt as far-fetched and thereby unworthy of consideration. For the veiling of the older fellow’s age, it is true, makes it possible that he could have been just a little above the age of seven; and therefore, his confession of ignorance could not necessarily be an indication of a curricular problem in the education of the upper-level pupils beyond that age. This objection thus raises a counter question that needs to be addressed first: How much “elder” could the “felawe” have been? Could he not have been, for instance, just eight or nine

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<sup>9</sup> Carleton Fairchild Brown, *A study of the Miracle of Our Lady Told by Chaucer’s Prioress* (London: Oxford University Press, 1910), p. 113.

years old? He could have. But he also could have been at least twice as old as the “litel clergeoun”.

Two historical records will help me prove that point.

In celebration of the altar of Saint Catherine in 1340 Bishop Burgershe of Lincoln (et. al) left an endowment to support the education of six schoolboys. In his own words, the chantry was to be “perpetual” and:

pro animabus dictorum fundatorum et fidelium, at sex pauperes pueri artem grammaticam proficiscentes custodiantur continue ibidem [Cantaria Sancti Laurencii] ab etate septem annorum vsque ad completos annos quindecim annorum.<sup>10</sup>

for the souls of the aforementioned and faithful founders; and six poor boys, [as they are] gaining proficiency in the art of grammar, may be kept continuously in the very place [i.e. St Laurence’s Church, Ludlow] from the age of seven years until the full age of fifteen years.

A similar trust fund shows that medieval English students could have stayed in pre-university education until later than the age of fifteen. Richard II in 1398 made a grant of 65 marks to St. Ann’s Carthusian Priory at Coventry on the condition that:

quod praedicti prior et conventus [domus sanctae Annae] inueniant et sustineant imperpetuum, infra bundas domus praedictae, duodecim pauperes clericos de aetate septem annorum usque ad aetatem xvij. annorum, ad exorandum pro salubri statu nostro et carissimae consortis nostrae reginae quamdiu vixerimus, et pro animabus nostris cum ab hac luce migraverimus . . .<sup>11</sup>

the aforementioned prior and convent [of the house of St. Ann] would discover and sustain, within the boundaries of the said house, fifteen poor young clerks from the age of seven years until the age of seventeen years, in order to pray for the welfare of

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<sup>10</sup> Chr. Wordsworth, “Lincolnshire Chantries”, in *Northern Genealogist*, ed. by A. Gibbons (York: Printed John Sampson, 1895), p. 153. I am extremely grateful to the scholarship of Carleton F. Brown (1906) for directing me to the Latin sources I used in this paper. I should clarify, however, that Professor Brown made only a very brief mention of the two grants in a footnote without quoting the Latin text. I traced the Latin sources on my own, located the relevant passages, and translated them to English myself. This has been one of my earliest attempts to translate from Latin. I want to thank Professor Molly Pasco-Pranger, the Head of the Classics Department at the University of Mississippi, for generously taking the time to check the accuracy of my translations.

<sup>11</sup> Sir William Dugdale, *Monasticon Anglicanum: A History of the Abbies and Other Monasteries, Hospitals, Frieries, and Cathedral and Collegiate Churches, with their Dependencies, in England and Wales Vol. 6, Pt. 1*, ed. John Caley, Henry Ellis, and Bulkeley Bandinel (London : Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme & Brown, 1830), p. 18. The *Monasticon Anglicanum* is commonly attributed to Sir William Dugdale, but the authorial recognition is on account of his collection of charters and other materials, not composition.

ours and the welfare of our most beloved consort queen as long as we shall live, and [also] for our souls, when we from this light shall depart . . .<sup>12</sup>

The expectations of the endowments are abundantly clear. Henry Burghersh expects the receivers of his endowment to have gained a solid (at least satisfactory) proficiency<sup>13</sup> in Latin grammar by the end of their schooling. Richard II supported his grantees under the expectation that they would eventually become future “clerks” (clericos). Amongst late medieval English school-boys, William Courtenay tells us, those who would advance to higher orders of the clergy were considered well-suited for the upgrade on account of their supposed language basis that would qualify them for more advanced<sup>14</sup> Latin grammar and syntax. With this in mind, it seems valid to assume that although the charter does not specify the study of grammar as a condition, Richard II’s financial investment in the young paupers (like Henry Burghersh’s endowment) expected, as its inherent yield, not only future clerks, but also future grammarians.

How close would the “litel scole” come to fulfilling such expectations? The above charters do not really provide the answer of this question. They only give us some clue about how old a schoolboy could have been beyond the age of seven, i.e. the first term of school. And while they (the charters) show that a medieval English boy’s schooling could have dragged on till the age of seventeen, nothing really indicates, it could still be argued, that Chaucer’s elder “felawe” is near the end of his schooling. But a 1356 letter sent by Bishop Grandisson of Exeter to the schoolmasters of his diocese can provide the insight we need. Bishop Grandisson’s letter is essentially a letter of admonishment:

Dum ipsi scolares suos, postquam Oracionem Dominicam cum Salutacione Angelica, et Symbolum, necnon Matutinas et Horas Beate Virginis, et similia que

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<sup>12</sup> For information about my translations of Latin, please see footnote n. 6.

<sup>13</sup> One of the definitions given by *Levis and Short* of the verb ‘prōficio, prōficere’ is “to gain ground”.  
<http://athirdway.com/glossa/>

<sup>14</sup> **Cited by** Jill Mann, note to *The Prioress’s Tale*, in *The Canterbury Tales*, by Geoffrey Chaucer, ed. Jill Mann (London: Penguin Books, 2005), p. 985.

ad Fidem pertinent et anime salutem, legere aut dicere eciam minus perfecte didicerint, absque eo quod quicquam de predictis construere sciant vel intelligere, aut dictiones ibi declinare vel respondere de partibus earundem, ad alios libros magistrales et poeticos aut metricos ad[d]iscendos transire faciunt premature. Unde contigit quod in etate adulta, cotidiana que dicunt aut legunt non intelligant; Fidem, eciam, Catholicam (quod dampnabilius est) propter defectum intelligencie non agnoscant.<sup>15</sup>

When after those very [schoolmasters] teach their students, imperfectly, to read and speak the Lord's Prayer, the Ave Maria, the Creed, the Matins, the Hours of the Blessed Virgin and other similar things which pertain to the Faith and the salvation of the soul, without [the students] knowing how to parse or understand anything whatsoever of the aforementioned or how to decline the diction therein or give answers in regard to the same parts, then they [the schoolmasters] make them transition to other important-to-learn masterworks, books of poetry or books of meter. Whence, it has become the case that they [the students], in adult age, do not understand the things which they say and read on a quotidian basis; furthermore, they not discern Faith, Catholicism (which is damnable) because of their defective understanding.<sup>16</sup>

The injunction by which Bishop Grandisson closes his letter is very telling. He enjoins that schoolmasters teach prospective grammar students — “prospective” because the Bishop at this point is talking about “Gramadicaibus imbuendos” — to:

non tantum legere aut discere literaliter, ut hactenus, set, aliis omnibus omissis, construere et intelligere faciant Oracionem Dominicam, cum Salutacione Angelica, Symbolum, et Matutinas, ac Horas de Beata Virgine, et dictiones ibi declinare ac respondere de partibus earundem, antequam eosdem ad alios libros transire permittant.<sup>17</sup>

not only learn and read by rote, as it has been hitherto the case, with all else neglected, but to parse and understand the Lord's Prayer, the Ave Maria, the Creed, the Matins, the Hours of the Blessed, and to decline the diction therein and provide answers in regard to the same parts, before they are allowed to make a transition to other [upper-level] books.

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<sup>15</sup> *The Register of John de Grandisson, Bishop of Exeter (A.D. 1327—1369) Part II*, ed. F. C. Hingetoe-Randolph (London: G. Bell & Sons, 1894-99), pp. 1192-1193, **quoted in** Carleton Fairchild Brown, “Chaucer's ‘Litel Clergeon’”, in *Modern Philology* Vol. 3 (1906): pp.484-485.

<sup>16</sup>As with the earlier Latin block quotations, the provided translation of Bishop Grandisson's letter is my translation. While Brown does quote this excerpt in Latin, he provides no translation of it. Although some critics referred to the same letter, I nowhere found the complete translation in English, so I translated it to be able fully understand and use it. Also, please see footnote n. 6.

<sup>17</sup> *The Register of John de Grandisson*, pp. 1192-1193, **quoted in** Brown, “Chaucer's ‘Litel Clergeon’”, pp. 484-485. Please see footnote n. 10 for complete citation.

The resonance between the Bishop's concerns and the education deficiencies that exist in the "litel scole" is deep and fascinating. The devotions that the Bishop lists are, "no doubt",<sup>18</sup> the components of Chaucer's "prymer". Just like the "scolares" (and not so unlikely the "Gramadicaibus imbuendos" too) who are taught "literaliter", the "litel clergeoun" learns "al by rote". Blind repetition without understanding is performed within the Bishop's diocese habitually, on a quotidian basis ("cotidiana"), as in the "litel scole", "yeer by yere" (VII.489). The same type of mechanical habituation can be felt more specifically in Chaucer's "litel clergeoun". He remembers to "worshipe ay" at home (VII.511), he goes to school every day by force of "*wone*" (VII.505), and he regurgitates the hymn "twies a day" on his way back from school "fro day to day" (VII.547-548). Bishop Grandisson's added emphasis on the root of the problem, punctuated by his emphatic "non tantum . . . literaliter . . . set . . . construere et intelligere", may explain the limited answer of the "felawe" who has but "smal gramere". Such a limitation, accounted for as "smal gramere" by Chaucer, sounds as if it could be an Anglicized rendering of the same diagnosis made by the Bishop in the Latin "defectum intelligencie", when he refers to the students of his diocese. Perhaps Chaucer's "felawe", out of the school's hitherto negligence ("ut hactenus . . . aliis omnibus omissis"), is one of those who were made to pass on to higher-level books of learning without building the fundamentals of grammar. The noun phrase "etate adulta", used in the ablative case, suggests that the Bishop means the preceding proposition "in" to give the sense of "within," not "towards." In other words, the students achieved no understanding of what they memorized even *during* their adult years — that is, even *after* they had already reached adulthood, not just as they were about to reach it. As evident by the encyclopedic writings of Isidore of Seville and Bartholomaeus Anglicus, both the early and the high Middle Ages understood "infancia" as lasting until the seventh year, "puercia"

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<sup>18</sup> Carleton Fairchild Brown, "Chaucer's 'Litel Clergeoun,'" in *Modern Philology* Vol. 3 (1906): p. 485

continuing from the seventh to the fourteenth, and “adholescencia” as beginning from the fourteenth, with some variance of opinion as when it ends.<sup>19</sup> With the age of fourteen regarded as the beginning of adulthood, we may now recall that the age of fifteen through seventeen seems to have been the expected time for graduation. It could be argued, therefore, that Bishop Grandisson’s diocesan students, as they transitioned from one level to the next, continued to carry over their deficient, almost nonexistent, understanding of Latin grammar to the very concluding years of their schooling, “in etate adulta”. The failure of the “litel schole” to graduate pupils with years of at least a working command of Latin (as it was expected), accumulated gradually starting from day one, is encapsulated in Chaucer’s use of “elder”. The deficient Latin education starts from the first term and extends over to the very last, crossing the boundaries of semestral sessions. The ambiguity of the adjective “elder” ironically reveals that the lack of Latin instruction in Chaucer’s “litel scole” stretches from the age of seven onwards. It is as if Chaucer supplants the exact age of the fellow by the relative “elder” in order to create a problem that spans the entire schooling period, and perpetuates itself beyond graduation. Jimm Mann would not disagree, “[after learning by memorization], Latin grammar and syntax would be taught, *if at all*, at a later stage” [my emphasis].<sup>20</sup> In other words, we may infer, both Chaucer’s “clergeoun” and “felawe” — like Bishop Grandisson’s “scolares”— will graduate with nearly no real Latin at all. Thus, the exchange between the boy and the little fellow establishes a narration of an incomplete literacy.

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<sup>19</sup> Bartholomaeus Anglicus, *De etate*, in *On the Properties of Things: John Trevisa’s Translation of Bartholomaeus Anglicus De Proprietatibus Rerum: A Critical Text lib. 6, cap. 1*, trans. John Trevisa, ed. M.C. Seymour et al. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), pp. 291-3, **quoted in** Kim M. Philips, *Medieval Maidens: Young Women and Gender in England, c.1270-c.1540* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 15. Bartholomaeus Anglicus turns to Isidore of Seville as his authority, but he differs from Isidore in that he places the end of “adholescencia” at twenty while Isidore places it at twenty-eight. Bartholomaeus notes that some physicians place its end at thirty or thirty-five.

<sup>20</sup> Jill Mann, note to *The Prioress’s Tale*, in *The Canterbury Tales*, by Geoffrey Chaucer, ed. Jill Mann (London: Penguin Books, 2005), p. 988.

Against the incomplete literacy of Latin, there is also the incomplete rebellion of the vernacular. The removal of an adequate Latin has heightened the expediency that the employment of the vernacular could have served for the “littel scole”. To a small extent, Chaucer makes a *promachos* of the “littel clergeon” in defence of the vernacular. The boy’s limited appreciation of the hymn is because “[n]oght wiste he what this Latyn was to seye” (VII.523). However, the innocent request carries a message of rebellion as it highlights the inferior status of the English vernacular as an ecclesiastical norm. He is curious to understand the hymn in the vernacular despite the limitation of the foreign language:

... on a day his felawe gan he preye  
T' expounden hym this song in his langage,  
Or telle hym why this song was in usage (VII.525-27)

His prayer was not to be answered until the turn of the sixteenth century. It is not until then, Brown tells us, “that one finds any evidence that the boys were being taught their prymer in English.”<sup>21</sup>

Before that would happen, there had been explicit moves against the deployment of the vernacular as the language of school instruction or engagement with the Scriptures. Bishop Fitz James prescribed that the schoolmaster of his grammar school

shall not teche his scolers nor other petite lernyng, as the crosse rewe, redyng of the mateyns or for the psalter or such other small thyngs, nother redyng of Englysshe, but such as shall concern lernynge of grammar. forr the ffounders of the said scole *intend* wt. our lordes mercy *oonly to have the grammar of latyn tongue so sufficiently* taught that the scolers of the profityng and provyng shall in times to come forever be after their capacities *perfight latyn men.*<sup>22</sup> [my emphases]

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<sup>21</sup> Brown, “Chaucer’s ‘Littel Clergeon’”, p. 21/487

<sup>22</sup> “Burton School: Foundation Deed of Bruton School”, in *Notes & Queries for Somerset and Dorset, Vol. 3*, ed. Hugh Norris, Charles Herbert Mayo, and Frederic William Weaver. (J.C. & A.T. Sawtell, 1893), p. 245. It was Jo Ann Hoepner Moran’s *The Growth of English Schooling 1340-1548* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985) that steered me to the foundation deed. The quoted excerpt, however, is taken from the original source. Moran does not quote Bishop James Fitz’s express stipulation that “oonly . . . grammar of latyn tongue” is to be taught. I quoted this stipulation because I find it strongly relevant to the point the chapter is making at this point, namely that vernacular was disabled.

One could even discern a sense of medieval disdain for the vernacular. A school exercise given by Magdalen College during the 1490s featured an imaginary schoolboy who admits in the first person that:

If I had not used my English tongue so greatly, for which the master hath rebuked me oft times, I should have been far more cunning in grammar. Wise men say that nothing may be profitable to them that learn grammar than to speak Latin.<sup>23</sup>

In light of these historical indications, I see the boy's request for an expounding of "this song in his langage" or "usage" as an authorial point highlighting an imperfect education at once crippled and self-crippling. The exchange between the boy and the fellow is a dialectic between an unadulterated innocence, embodied by the novice boy, and a corrupted incomplete innocence, embodied by the senior fellow. The latter's is a "corrupted" innocence because it seems to have accepted by habituation the upper hand of the foreign language as an uncontested norm. The boy's innocence, on the other hand, is hitherto still unadulterated, because he has not yet been habituated to the counter-intuitive, systematic supremacy of the foreign language to the native tongue. What he asks is a most *intuitive* question: what does the hymn say in *our* language?

What follows, however, is a little disappointing. Even the boy's voice of rebellion is made incomplete. The boy quickly becomes something of a protégé to the senior fellow who later "taughte hym homward prively" (VII.544). Quickly does the boy accept the limitation of meaning, and quickly does he start emanating signs of the same incomplete innocence (the same ignorance of meaning) as does his senior fellow. Chaucer makes the boy happily accept the incomplete answer as he takes back from him the earlier voice of intellectual curiosity. No longer is the boy interested in the meaning of the hymn or what it says "in his langage". All he cares now is "to konne it al er

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<sup>23</sup> *A Fifteenth Century School Book: From A Manuscript in the British Museum (Ms. Arundel 249)*, ed. William Nelson (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1956), p. 39, **quoted in** Nicholas Orme, *Medieval Schools: from Roman Britain to Renaissance England* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press), pp. 148-149.



Cristemasse be went” (VII.540). A little earlier, he was made a *promachos* raising the question of the vernacular; now, he’s a *parrot* repeating in Latin, “al by rote”, what he has an incomplete understanding of. That the intellectual curiosity diminishes into a bi-daily (“twies a day”) regurgitation of what is not fully intellectualized or understood is such a climactic moment; it induces a dramatic effect, which I wish to call the “perpetuation of incompleteness.” In the space of the next three paragraphs, I will try to explain what I mean by the perpetuation of incompleteness; afterwards, I will suggest that the incompleteness, as well as the authorial perpetuation of it, serves Chaucer a dual purpose.

Before he became “elder”, the fellow was a seven year old boy too. His inability to fully address the boy’s question reveals the kind of answers he himself received in the past, when he was a novice. If the fellow were provided with better answers, he would be better able to satisfy the boy’s curiosity for learning. For his part, the boy will grow to be as old as the fellow is now. Subsequently, if he should be approached by inquisitive newcomers with the same curiosity as he has, he will most likely provide answers no less lame and incomplete than those given to him he was seven. The boy’s intellectual innocence in its present state may be, relatively speaking, still unadulterated; but, it is not given a chance to grow, develop, and mature; and soon enough, it will lose its pristine quality, becoming incomplete like the fellow’s innocence — corrupted, crippled, and crippling.

Together, the boy and the fellow mark a generational tautology that sets a causal as well as *retro-causal* relation between present and past. In the philosophy of science, “retrocausality” is defined as “any of several hypothetical or processes that *reverse* causality, allowing the effect to occur before its cause”.<sup>24</sup> I use the adjective “retro-causal” to imply an akin sense of reversibility in the

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<sup>24</sup> Fredrick Kennard, *Thought Experiments: Popular Thought Experiments in Philosophy, Physics, Ethics, Computer Science & Mathematics* (March 20, 2015), p. 74.

hermeneutic experience of dealing with the boy and the fellow. On one level, the older fellow's lack of proficiency in Latin prefigures a similar fate for the younger boy's Latin. To that extent, the relation between them is causal. On another level, their relation is "retro-causal" inasmuch as the experience of receiving a shaky Latin foundation at novice years, which the boy embodies, explains the persistent lack of the Latin proficiency at later years, which the older fellow embodies. We first see a certain "effect" ("I have but smal gramere") and, then, realize, in *retrospect*, what its "cause" might have been (memorizing "by rote"). The relation between "litel clergeoun" and "elder felawe" is causal and retrocausal because their experiences mirror each other perfectly; the younger boy's presence is the older fellow's past, and the older fellow's presence is likely the younger boy's future. Thus, to sum up what I mean by the perpetuation of incompleteness, Chaucer has first removed the possibility of an adequate Latin from the "litel scole" showing how the vernacular could have been helpful instead; then, he has given the boy a disruptive voice against the subjugation of the vernacular to Latin, only to retract that voice back again, echoing the tenacity of the existing state of affairs. The state of incompleteness, as well as the authorial perpetuation of it, gives the audience a paradox. It may appear that Chaucer forces the boy to be content with the regurgitation of Latin so as to celebrate Latin at the cost of silencing the vernacular. Almost the opposite, I argue, is true.

To show how this is the case, I will need to recapitulate a couple of important points. Masking the exact age of the fellow, Chaucer's use of the adjective "elder", I have argued, lends a suggestion of a fellow as old as seventeen years of age. The overt unspecificity of his age, I have also argued, is an authorial desire to make the fellow's language deficit a problem that comes not from an individual pupil's lack of skill or the limitation of an early grade, but a problem for which the "litel scole" is responsible. The elder fellow is a stylized narration to represent not an individual case of an incompetent educatee, but the collective consequence of an incomplete education. As such, the

fellow does not stand for a certain grade but all grades. The “litel scole” provides an amputated language education affecting all its pupils alike, novice or no novice, seven years of age or beyond; and the fellow personifies that amputated education on the whole. Based on Brown’s assertions that Latin was the language of English education, and that the vernacular was not employed before the sixteenth century, the “litel scole” is doing an exceptionally bad job. It leaves its pupils with an incompleteness of a *neither/nor nature*. In the “litel scole”, neither is Latin effectively taught nor the vernacular willingly accepted. Now, perpetuating the incompleteness of literacy, Chaucer has heavily emphasized this “neither/nor” nature of it. The fellow’s “sma gramere” is not redeemed by an available vernacular translation. The boy does not succeed in finding it, and he will likely end up having but “sma gramere” as the fellow, by the fault of the “litel scole”. This, again, is paradoxical. For it is hard to reconcile the importance attached to Latin, as the language of education, by ecclesiastical and pedagogical authorities (and also their concomitant resistance to the vernacular) with the failure of the “litel scole” to provide its scholars Latin instruction commensurate with that importance. But this paradox is in and of itself a Chaucerian statement of dual purpose.

In point of the first purpose: by crafting his own disruptive scenario vicariously through the boy’s request, and then recanting it, Chaucer has raised challenging, hypothetical questions which, I imagine, would have been revolutionary in his time. Both medieval and modern readers may ask: are the vernacular and the foreign language, Latin, mutually exclusive? Does the rise of the former mean the demise of latter? Does the insistence on the latter mean the resistance of the former? What if the “litel scole” were to use the vernacular as a substitute for, or an auxiliary medium of Latin instruction? How helpful would it be for the young scholars to learn the hymn in the vernacular? How unhelpful for future clerks would it be if vernacular continued to suffer an inferior status? To what extent does the unpermissive attitude towards the expediency of the vernacular contribute to

their intellectual incompleteness? These questions may be subject to speculation. But it is not my point to answer them so much as to argue that Chaucer implies them as a disruptive essay against the supremacy of Latin and the ecclesiastical insistence on it. For if Bishop Grandisson, Bishop Fitz James and many of their compeers make Latin conspicuous by attempting to retain and even augment its presence within the confines of school, Chaucer makes the vernacular conspicuous by calling attention to its complete absence within the the same confines. Although Latin may seem too normative to have been challenged by Chaucer, as I argue he does, my reading of his essay could be confirmed by the contemporary 1381 revolt. The peasant rebels, Steven Justice demonstrates, attacked many symbols of authority to assert a new authority of their own.<sup>25</sup> Most notably, they wrote their patent letters using “Middle English equivalent[s]”<sup>26</sup> to the locution of royal communiqués in order to sabotage the linguistic status quo which held the nonnative Latin and French as “the medium of enactment”<sup>27</sup>, and as “prelude to advancement in ecclesiastical or secular service”<sup>28</sup>. The rebels’ “*acts of assertive literacy*”<sup>29</sup> [emphasis in the original] are explicitly subversive, whereas Chaucer’s plea for the vernacular is a mere literary disruption vicariously stated. It would be an exaggeration on my part, in other words, to suggest that Chaucer’s move is as revolutionary as the rebellion; yet, by placing the absence of the vernacular from the “litel scole” in a disappointing light, Chaucer has at least somewhat identified with the rebels. He has placed the boy’s voice, however incomplete, in alignment with the rebels’.

The second purpose, which the creation and perpetuation of the incomplete literacy would serve Chaucer, relates to the matter of anti-Semitism. Jeremy Cohen notes that only “[f]rom the

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<sup>25</sup> Steven Justice, *Writing and rebellion England in 1381* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press 1996), p. 69.

<sup>26</sup> Justice, p. 67.

<sup>27</sup> Justice, p. 71.

<sup>28</sup> Justice, p. 73.

<sup>29</sup> Justice, p. 24.

thirteenth century onward . . . were Jews portrayed as real *agents of Satan*, charged with innumerable forms of hostility Christianity, Christendom, and individual Christians”<sup>30</sup> [emphasis add]. These Jews, Leonard Koff thinks, and I agree, “are in part the Jews of the [*Prioress’s Tale*]”.<sup>31</sup> When juxtaposed, the historical portrayal of thirteenth-century Jews and their fictional portrayal by the Prioress bears a great resemblance. By identifying them with the serpent Satan, “[o]ure firste foo” (VII. 558), who has his “waspes nest” (VII.556) in their hearts, the Prioress has given the Jews a direct Satanic agency. That resemblance is confirmed by another reference, which I mention independently, not borrowing from Koff. The Prioress invokes the “martyrdom” of Little Hugh of Lincoln as a fresh occurrence having transpired “but a litel while ago” (VII.686), when in fact the libel “emerged almost 150 years earlier”.<sup>32</sup> This invention is an anachronism of a certain efficacy. The Prioress has made the “martyrdom” (VII.610) of the little clergeon approximate that of Little Hugh of Lincoln; and in doing so, she has collapsed past and present into a timeless imagination of an imminent and close Jewish danger threatening “Christianity, Christendom, and individual Christians” — thus echoing exactly the contemporary anti-Jewish imagination.

Yet the Prioress’s depiction of the Jews is even more significant on an additional level. The historical Jews of the thirteenth century, Cohen demonstrates, were subjected to staged public disputations with Christians, “however predetermined the outcomes [of such disputations] really may have been”.<sup>33</sup> Notable examples are the disputations sanctioned by Louis IX at the “prodding” of Pope Gregory IX in 1239 and Innocent IV in 1244.<sup>34</sup> A comparative examination of the

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<sup>30</sup> Jeremy Cohen, *The Friars and the Jews: The Evolution of Medieval Anti-Judaism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), p. 244.

<sup>31</sup> Leonard Michael Koff, *Chaucer and the Art of Storytelling* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), p. 210

<sup>32</sup> Lee Patterson, “‘The Living Witness of Our Redemption’: Martyrdom and in Chaucer’s Prioress’s Tale”, in *The Canterbury Tales: Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. Harold Blood (NY New York, Infobase Publication, 2008), p. 59.

<sup>33</sup> Cohen, p. 62.

<sup>34</sup> Cohen, pp. 62, 64.

Prioress's language and that of the popes in their correspondence with Louis lends some weight to the possibility that the *Tale's* fictional Jews are a narration of the real thirteenth-century ones who were subjected to the disputations. Writing to Louis, Innocent reminds the king the Jews are “ungrateful to the Lord Jesus Christ”<sup>35</sup>. Addressing the pilgrims, the Prioress essentializes the Jews and their lords as “[h]ateful to Crist and to his compaignye” (VII.492). Innocent, moreover, cultivates an image of Jews “from whose heart our Redeemer . . . has not removed the veil but has thus far permitted it to remain . . . in partial blindness”<sup>36</sup>. Likewise, the Prioress echoes a similar image of Jews blinded in their heart by Satan himself, “the serpent Sathanas / . . . in Jues herte his waspes nest” (VII.558-559). Both the letter of Innocent and that of Gregory reprimand the Jews because they “ignore” and “despise” the “Law of Moses and the Prophets”.<sup>37</sup> Their condemnation of the Jewish disregard for the Old Testament suggests, in essence, a papal approval of the Old Testament. Judging by the letters, in other words, the Old Law does not seem to have been a target for the papal attack. What is under attack is “another Law”, “some traditions of their [i.e the Jews] elders”<sup>38</sup> — the Talmud. This, too, is reflected in the Prioress's speech. Satan, for the Prioress, goads the Jews into anti-Christian violence by reminding them that the singing of *O Alma Redemptoris Mater* is “agayn youre lawes reverence” (VII.564). The opposition set between “youre lawes” and the Christian hymn highlights an attack in accordance with that of the popes, an attack not on the approved Old Testament but rather on the rejected Talmud. Chaucer, thus, has crafted Jews narrated by the same language, depicted by the same imagery, and subject to the same attacks as those suffered by the real Jews who were at the receiving end of the disputations. In effect, Chaucer

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<sup>35</sup> Solomon Grayzel, *The Church and Jews in the XIIIth Century*, trans. Solomon Grayzel (Philadelphia, 1933; rev. ed. 1966), pp. 250-53, **quoted in** Cohen, p. 67. Cohen notes that “several changes in Grayzel's translations” have been made.

<sup>36</sup> Grayzel, pp. 250-53, **quoted in** Cohen, p. 67.

<sup>37</sup> Grayzel, pp. 250-53, **quoted in** Cohen, p. 67.

<sup>38</sup> Grayzel, pp. 240-41, **quoted in** Cohen, p. 66.

has made of his Jews a literary replica of the Jewish side of the disputations. By extension, I think, it is possible to view his Christians also as a literary replica of the Christian side of those disputations. Accordingly, the *Tale* itself is a literary stage for a Jewish-Christian disputation sponsored by a Christian author. Borrowing the language of Edward Said, Louise O. Fradenburg describes the Jewish ghetto as a “theatre”<sup>39</sup> to imply the aggrandization of the Christian Self at the cost of the Jewish Other. Inducing the same effect of the “predetermined outcomes” of the Jewish-Christian disputations, Chaucer’s “provost” (VII.629), as if a debate moderator, announces victory for the Christian side, “and that anon”(VII.630), without a real trial. Without their having the smallest chance of defending themselves, the Jews meet a fate similar to that of their Talmud, “[w]ith torment and with shameful deeth echon / This provost dooth thise Jewes for to sterve” (VII.629-30). And this fate they meet “by the lawe” (VII.634), a phrase equally denoting the Christian law as well as royal edicts. Reading the *Tale* as “a literary stage for a Jewish-Christian disputation sponsored by a Christian author” raises a vexing question of authorial intention and collective meaning, which leads down some contradictory avenues. For if Chaucer’s own intent were to lionize his own “Cristene folk” (who stand for the Christian side of the disputation), why should he decide to depict them as lacking such a fundamental qualification for a debate as complete literacy? Their flawed eligibility amounts to a harsh irony. In Chaucer’s own time, “regular public disputations [among other things]”, writes Kathryn Lynch, flourished “as Latin literacy increased among grammar schools graduates, including those who did not go on to university”<sup>40</sup>. The “litel scole” does not seem to be one of such schools. The incomplete literacy (the “smal gramere”) that it provides must have been intended to leave some Chaucerian effect. If this effect is to satirize and condemn the Christian folk’s anti-Semitism to show their ignorance, then what are we to make of his silencing of the Jews,

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<sup>39</sup> Louise O. Fradenburg, “Criticism, Anti-semitism, and the Prioress's Tale”, in *Exemplaria* Vol. 1(1989): p. 77

<sup>40</sup> Kathryn L. Lynch, *Chaucer's Philosophical Visions* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: D.S. Brewer Press, 2000), p. 22.

and their defeat by the same folk presumably satirized and condemned? Perhaps Chaucer begs the incomplete literacy of the “Cristene folk” as an apologetic pretext for their anti-Semitism. Perhaps, on the contrary, he forewarns against a Christian illiteracy faltering against Jewish blasphemies, yet allows devout piety to prevail over its enemy at the end, as a relief for his Christian folk. Or perhaps, he shows how devout piety could be built on a form of ignorance, and yet, at the same time, uses that ignorance to invoke Christian pathos in repudiation of the Jews. Although I am disposed towards the third possibility, I use “perhaps” heavily here because I do not see the *Tale* offering determinate evidence. It is reassuring, however, that “the indeterminacy” of the *Prioress’s Tale* is, Koff thinks, “the point of engagement”<sup>41</sup>. He sees in Chaucer an example of “how an indeterminate text gives us a pluralism of value and intent as a kind of hermeneutic manifestation of being”.<sup>42</sup> Koff seems to suggest that the notion of “pluralism” is just as true for the author as it is for author’s audience. Reiterating the same notion, Koff adds that “Chaucer anticipates in the indeterminacy of meaning and intention the rejection of one exemplary method implicit in the idea of the hermeneutic circle”.<sup>43</sup> Just as Chaucer’s text could raise a pluralism of hermeneutic value (one text can mean different things for different readers), it could have also arisen from a pluralism of authorial intent, forcing the narrative into different — perhaps even self-contradictory — yet simultaneous moves. It is such a belief in the pluralism and simultaneity of authorial intent which most informs my reading of the relation between anti-Semitism and the incomplete literacy. Writing *Tale’s* dispute as a literary simulation of the disputations, Chaucer flaws his Christian folk by an incomplete literacy at the same that time he lets complete victory fall to their lot against their Jewish enemy. A Christian community that is imperfectly educated yet perfectly enabled to prevail over the

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<sup>41</sup> Koff, p. 220.

<sup>42</sup> Koff, p. 220.

<sup>43</sup> Koff, p. 219.



Jewish enemy is not so much ironic as miraculous. By marring the literacy of the pupils, Chaucer has given the power of literacy no role in the ultimate triumph of Christianity. I am by no means saying that Chaucer believed that literacy was not important, but rather that, by pushing it to the periphery, he has stressed the role of devout faith as the true secret of victory over the Jewish enemy. As such, he has put the *Tale* in conversation with the Christian-Jewish disputations by making an interesting statement: whether in the *Tale's* dispute or real life disputations, the Christian folk derive their legitimacy not from a human means or skill, such as eloquent literacy, but from the validity of “[t]he white lamb celestial” (VII.581). Their unity with and reliance on “Cristes mooder meeke and kynde” (VII.597) alone suffice to make inevitable the Jewish defeat. The inadequacy of the boy’s education is made irrelevant to the inevitable Christian survival in the face of the Jewish threat. It does not really matter that “[n]oght wiste he what this Latyn was to seye” (VII.523); what does is that he is “sowded to virginitee” (VII.579) — whether with or without an adequate literacy. If the “Cristene folk” were made victorious by virtue of a murder trial, a strong legal standing, or eloquent argumentation, there would be no miraculous intervention rewarding the devout, no reassurance of a god-given superiority, no implication of inherent Jewish falsehood, and no Christian exceptionalism. The approval of the Christian pathos would be contingent upon the validation of logic. The saving grace would be the rhetorical articulation of one’s grievance, not a foregone conclusion exclusively guaranteed for the “Cristene folk”. If the Christian folk won, even justly, by the advantage of having an eloquent literacy, their winning would be by an advantage any other folk could attain, Christians or non-Christians. But Chaucer, in giving his “Christian folk” incomplete literacy, has declared their winning both the *Tale's* dispute and real-life disputations as an intrinsic inevitability of Christianity, irrespective of the shortcomings of its followers.

## CHAPTER TWO: THE PRIORESS'S IMPERFECT PIETY

In chapter one, I argued that the boy and the fellow form a causal and retro-causal relation between present and past. The former's unfulfilled desire for an understanding that complements the memorization of text may well explain the eventual Latin deficiency of the latter as a school senior. The limited knowledge of the latter, I added, anticipates a similar fate of ignorance for the former as a school novice. The beginning stages of schooling, bespoken in the figure of the younger boy, and the final, ante-graduation stages of it, in the figure the older boy, prefigures, from an interpretive standpoint, a post-graduation future both of them are likely to have. That future is not hard to imagine because it is personified in the figure of the Prioress. The collective image of the pupils (novices and seniors) attending the "litel scole" and that of the Prioress echo the temporal progression of things, a progression T.S Eliot beautifully encapsulates in the opening lines of his *Four Quartets*:

Time present and time past  
Are both perhaps *present* in time future  
And time future *contained* in time past.<sup>44</sup> [my emphases]

The linear years of such incomplete schooling as that accumulated "yeer by yere" (VII.495) and "day by day" (VII.504) at the "litel scole" are figurative seeds that will grow into the sort of ersatz literacy that is *present* in the Prioress's character. I understand the act of "containing" as an act of *sustaining* a future yield. A future possibility is carried in a host of present indicators. The young pupils who have

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<sup>44</sup> T.S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton" in *Four Quartets* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), p.13

but an incomplete literacy are seeds *containing* the possibility of an a Prioress-esque future.

Conversely, the Prioress's hyper femininity can also suggest that she herself *contains* the future of the boy and his older fellow in her ecclesiastical womb. Now, not only is the incomplete literacy I am speaking about prominently featured in the Prioress, but it is even exceeded by yet an additional dimension of incompleteness: an incomplete piety.

In point of her ersatz literacy, she betrays signs that hers is no better an education than that of the boy and his fellow. The French that she speaks artificially, “fetisly / After the scole of Stratford-atte-Bowe” (I.125), resonates with the fellow's superficial, almost nominal, command of Latin as well as the boy's complete lack of it. Deanne Williams points to the significance of the word “fetisly” as a derivative from Old French. Looking at different examples of how the word was used by Chaucer and William Langland, Williams shows that *fetis* “carried with it connotations of masquerade [and] even mendacity.”<sup>45</sup> Such connotations give reason to suspect that the Prioress's façade of *fetis*-ness is nothing but ignorance in masquerade. Despite the seeming of fairness, as in “And Frenssh she spak ful faire” (I.120), one may question what the extents of her linguistic credentials really are, whether she well understands what she utters, and how familiar she is with the niceties of the second language. The heavy presence of “Stratford-atte-Bowe” in her French suggests a tenacious (as well as undesirable) mother tongue influence, thus implying an inadequacy analogous with the “neither/nor” nature of the boy's and fellow's incomplete literacy. Her assertion that “[t]her may no tonge expresse [the virtue of Mary]” (VII.476) ascribes her inability to express the divine to the indescribable nature of it. It is hard, however, to accept that ascription without

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<sup>45</sup> Deanne Williams, *The French Fetish from Chaucer to Shakespeare*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 33

skepticism; for the limitation of “tonge” is most likely not the human language’s failure but the Prioress’s own linguistic failure. It is remarkable that she masquerades her ignorance in a simile of innocence.

My konnyng is so wayk, O blisful Queene  
For to declare thy grete worthynesse  
That I ne may the weighte nat susteene;  
But *as a child of twelf month oold, or lesse,*  
That kan unnethes any word expresse,  
Right so fare I, and therfore I yow preye  
Gydeþ my song that I shal of yow seye. (VII.481-7) [my emphases]

This apostrophe is at once a pretext for ignorance and a prayer for help. Her “konnyng is so wayk” not because of her own linguistic shortage, as she would not admit, but because of “thy grete worthynesse”. Yet despite her best denials, we hear in “That I ne may the weighte nat susteene” an unconfident voice trembling with anxiety about the task of *speaking* that lies ahead. The task, for her, is so enormous that she abases herself to the status of “a child of twelf month oold, or lesse” who can hardly express a word, a status lower even than that of the “yong and tendre” clergeon. It is if she is securing a preemptive defence from the pilgrims’ possible judgment of her capabilities. Addressing Mary directly, she pleads her devotion and service as she prays that the virgin would come to her aid. Without that aid, she feels, the risk of self-exposing is high.

Projecting an incomplete literacy on the boy and the fellow, the Prioress has not only exposed the limitations her own literacy, but also presented her skewed understanding (or misunderstanding) of piety. The Prioress, we are told, is “so pitous” (I.143); yet, her misrepresentation of pious devotion as the contented acceptance of an incomplete understanding of it (the said pious devotion) imparts an incomplete piety just as well as incomplete literacy. The fellow’s incomplete answer does not seem to frustrate the boy’s devotion, as if understanding is but a mere luxury irrelevant to faith. The only question “this innocent” (VII.538) has left is: “Is this song maked in reverence / Of Cristes mooder?”. When he receives an affirmative answer, he

excitedly affirms a relentless pledge to commit the rest of hymn to memory. As if rote memorization of text were the only thing that should matter, the boy promises that “do my diligence / To konne it al er Cristemasse be went” (VII.539-40). And indeed, with the help of the senior fellow, the boy keeps practicing “Fro day to day, til he koude it by rote” (VII.545).

The Prioress’s placing of piety in young Christian pupils who learn “by rote” and regurgitate Latin hymns they don’t fully understand makes one wonder how thoroughly (or how, period) *she* understands the Latin *Amor vincit omnia* with which she adorns herself. What are, and who are, the *omnia* to be conquered? In what manner are they *conquered*? And would *amor*, for Madame Eglentyne, be unconditional or contingent on her ability to identify with others? The answers are obviously not favorable so far as the Jewish Other is concerned. The Prioress “wolde wepe, if that she saugh a mous / Kaught in a trappe” (I.144-45), but she would not object to the mass arrest of the Jews who are later “bynde” (VII.620), based on circumstantial evidence. She “soore wept” tears (I.148) if “*oon*” of her little dogs were dead, yet she would tolerate the sight of the Jews being indiscriminately put to “shameful deeth *echon*” (VII.628) [my emphases]. I say “indiscriminately” in reference to the fact that, among the Jews executed, some are punished merely because they “of this mordre wiste”(VII.630); they are punished not for committing the murder, but for allegedly knowing about murder. Despite her “conscience and tendre herte” (I.150), she would not extend the Jews the right to a fair investigation or trial. Nor would she pause to sympathize with the pain the Jews underwent when “with wilde hors he [i.e. the provost] did hem drawe” (VII.633) as she does “if men smoot it with a yerde smerte” (I.149). As well as an imperfect literacy, the Prioress betrays a flagrant lack of sympathy. She is incompletely “pitous”, incompletely “charitable”, and incompletely “amiable” (I.143,138). Chaucer makes her incomplete piety go hand in hand with her anti-Jewish sentiment. The incomplete innocence (of both literacy and faith) and the anti-Judaism are so tightly interwoven

by Chaucer that he forces the narrative, consciously or perhaps unconsciously, into presenting them as mutually inclusive — or, again to use the language of T.S. Eliot, “correlatives”.

Yet most alarming is the self-perpetuating cycle of anti-Judaism that the *Tale* lends. As I have suggested above, the boy and the fellow, on the one hand, and the Prioress, on the other, give a personality to Eliot’s “Time present and time past / Are both perhaps present in time future”. The sort of cyclical movement that Eliot captures is to my mind the same force that sustains the tautology of anti-Judaism in the *Tale*. The boy, the fellow, and the Prioress mark the different points of progression from start to end, from being a novice at school to becoming a member of the church. I can perhaps conclude this essay by quoting the remark of an avid seventeenth-century observer of trees: the “seeds . . . that [a] Tree actually has in it self [sic] wherewithal to be multiplied and produced again . . . [a]nd each Seed of a Tree contains in itself a second Tree”<sup>46</sup>. In terms of analogy, the perpetuation of anti-Judaism in the *Tale* can be similarly conceived. The boy’s and the fellow’s present schooling contains their ecclesiastical future just as the Prioress’s past education has probably led to her present limitations. The Prioress, as a Christian educator, has within her the same seeds of ignorance now being implanted in the Christian pupils; and, the pupils, in turn, carry the likelihood to grow as anti-Semitic as the Prioress. Once grown, they, too, will be Christian educators.

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<sup>46</sup> Messieurs Lesser with Mr. Lyonnet’s remarks, “The Theology of Insects”, in *A Literary Journal*, Vol. 1, Pt. I (March, 1745): p. 278.

### CHAPTER THREE: PALAMON'S AND ARCITE'S IMPERFECT CHIVALRY

If the Knight were to be judged by the moral standards produced by his historical and cultural circumstance, he would easily satisfy every knight's primary duty: upholding and defending Christendom from its enemies. In *The Book of the Order of Chivalry or Knighthood*, Ramon Llull writes that "[t]he duty of a knight is to support and defend the Holy Catholic Faith."<sup>47</sup> Later, John Gower confirms this notion twice throughout his literary career. His *Mirour de l'Omme* teaches that a knight should, as his first duty, "Sainte eglise en son degree / Defendre, que nuls la confonde"<sup>48</sup> [defend the Holy Church (and maintain it) in its degree, so that no one may bring it to ruin] (ll. 22232-33; trans. mine). In his *Vox Clamantis*, he tells us that the order of Knighthood "Ecclesie prima debet defendere iura"<sup>49</sup> [ought to first to defend the rights of the Church] (V, l. 5; trans. mine). As *General Prologue* tells us, Chaucer's Knight comes back home having fought "for oure faith" against the Muslim infidel [I.62].

The heavy historical presence of the Hundred Years War, however, is given no textual admittance into the *General Prologue*. In the context of the Knight's expeditions, the military conflict between England and France is conspicuous by its absence. While the text tells us the

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<sup>47</sup> Ramon Llull, *The Book of the Order of Chivalry / Llibre de l'Ordre de Cavalleria / Libro de la Orden de Caballería*, trans. Antonio Cortijo Ocaña (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2015)

<sup>48</sup> John Gower, "Mirour de l'Omme," in *The Complete Works of John Gower, Vol. 1: The French Works*, ed. G. C. Macaulay (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1899), page 249.

<sup>49</sup> John Gower, "Vox Clamantis," in *The Complete Works of John Gower, Vol. 4: The Latin Works*, ed. G. C. Macaulay (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1902), page 201. I am grateful to the work of Jordi Sánchez Martí (2000), which I cite fully in note 47, for bringing to my attention to Gower quotations.

Knight has been in wars “[a]s well in Christendom as heathenesse” [I.49], it does not say that he ever fought *against* Christianity. The Knight indeed fought on the side of the heathen lord of Palatye, but only to fight “agayn another hethen in Turkye” [I.66]. That the Knight fought both beyond and within Europe, and yet is not said to have ever taken part in the Hundred Years War, is in fact an added reason for wondering why the Anglo-French warfare is absent from the text. Chaucer’s act of textual excision seems incongruent with the historical reality of his milieu. During the late fourteenth century, the English participation in religious campaigns, notes Jordi Sánchez Martí, “was insignificant if compared with other lucrative military expeditions, such the Hundred Years War.”<sup>50</sup> Although fourteenth-century English monarchs had no objection to the Crusades from a moral standpoint, their support for the religious wars against the Muslims were “reluctant” and “impersonal”<sup>51</sup> from a financial standpoint. Christine Chism mentions that Edward III was “the first king since Stephen not to declare himself a *crucesignatus*, initiating instead more profitable wars against Scotland and then France.”<sup>52</sup> The Knight’s military devotion, then, is a political gesture standing on authorial trope of *occupatio*. The knight’s career is emptied out of the same military affairs English monarchs were occupied with. Edward III, continues Chism, “left it to his subjects’ private initiative to launch their own [crusading] campaigns which they did with great enthusiasm.”<sup>53</sup> This has an implication for our Knight. It would show him to the eyes of English courtly audience as an independent decision maker. Indeed, the Knight does not join the troops of Edward the Black Prince in the Anglo-French Battles of Crécy, Poitiers, or Nájera, although “they fit well within the time frame for [his] military career.”<sup>54</sup> Instead, he fights alongside Peter de Lusignan (Peter I of

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<sup>50</sup> Jordi Sánchez Martí, “The Representation of Chivalry in The Knight’s Tale,” *Revista Alicantina de Estudios Ingleses* Vol. 13 (2000): p. 162.

<sup>51</sup> Christine Chism, *Alliterative Revivals* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), page 170.

<sup>52</sup> Chism, *Alliterative Revivals*, p. 170.

<sup>53</sup> Chism, *Alliterative Revivals*, p. 170.

<sup>54</sup> John H. Pratt, *Chaucer and War* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2000), p. 147.



Cyprus) against the Muslims in Spain (“Algezir” and “Gernade”), Turkey (“Lyeys”), North Africa (“Belmarye” and “Tramysene”), and Egypt (Alisaudre) [I.51-63]. Chaucer, thus, has given the Knight motives for practicing chivalry that are out of keeping with the financial interests of English monarch. By the same move, he has put his military expeditions in keeping with the diplomatic and literary efforts urging Anglo-French reconciliation. These efforts are attested, for instance, in the hopeful treatise offered to Edward III by crusade propagandist Roger of Stanegrave,<sup>55</sup> or in *Le Songe du Vieil Pèleri* of Philippe de Mézières.

The Knight’s profile gives another implication. Not only does he stand out for his commitment to his primary duty as a Christian soldier, but he also sets himself apart as a true knight who “. . . falt q’il se soit armant / Non pour le lucre tant ne qant, / Mais pour droiture supporter”<sup>56</sup> [must arm himself not for any lure whatever but to uphold the right]” (*Mirour*, ll. 24019-21; trans. Wilson).<sup>57</sup> The Knight is so serious about his devotion to the ideals of chivalry that even his horse seems in a better state than his own, “His hors were goode, but he was nat gay” (I.74). His gypon is of “fustian” (I.75). The “fustian,” a word already suggesting an air of simplicity in Middle English, is sadly stained by his coat of mail, “bismotered with his habergeon” (I.76). I do not believe that the Knight is meant here to be presented as “the butt of satire and humiliation.”<sup>58</sup> His disheveled attire rather suggests an example of sacrificial devotion; he hardly seems a beneficiary of war. His is not a financial efficiency in pursuit of a “supplementary source of livelihood,” or lucrative “‘advantages’ of

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<sup>55</sup> Chism, *Alliterative Revivals*, p. 170.

<sup>56</sup> John Gower, “Mirour de l’Omme,” in *The Complete Works of John Gower, Vol. 1: The French Works*, ed. G. C. Macaulay (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1899), page 265

<sup>57</sup> John Gower, *Mirour de l’Omme (The Mirror of Mankind)*, trans. William Burton Wilson, rev. trans. Nancy Wilson van Baak (East Lansing, Michigan: Colleges Press, 1992), page. 314.

<sup>58</sup> Laura F. Hodges, “Costume Rhetoric in the Knight’s Portrait: Chaucer’s Every-Knight and his Bismotered Gypon.” In *The Chaucer Review* Vol. 29, No. 3 (1995): p. 274

war”<sup>59</sup> which the service in France would have earned him. It is rather a selfless efficiency on the battlefield for the benefit of Christendom. Despite their different judgments of the Knight, critics Charles Mitchell<sup>60</sup> and Edward I. Condren<sup>61</sup> already considered the Knight’s worthiness in terms of his efficiency in fighting Christianity’s enemies. Condren holds that the Knight is “an efficient overachiever in the [battle] field.”<sup>62</sup> Similarly, Mitchell maintains that the Knight’s “efficiency [‘especially’] in martial action”<sup>63</sup> is the main source of his perfection and worthiness. To these remarks, I add that the Knight’s military efficiency also extends to his ability to make strategic choices in favor of the grand cause he serves. Here, I am again referring to the Knight’s service under the heathen lord of Palatye. In his “A Knight Ther Was,” John Manly states that “the lord of Palatye was a heathen bound in friendly treaty and doing homage to Pierre de Lusignan,”<sup>64</sup> thus explaining why the Knight would do knightly service to a Turkic lord. Even if Manly’s statement is doubtful, the text suffices to explain the Knight’s service under the lord of Palatye. The only reason given for his service of the heathen is to fight “agayn another hethen” [L.66]. To put it another way, the Knight, under the Peter de Lusignan has aided — or “used” — one heathen only to eliminate another. Perhaps from an ethical standpoint the Knight’s tactical acumen in using the enemy against himself would be deemed amoral by a modern reader, but the morality of that choice should, I think, be beside the point. Rather, the point is the contrast between his military efficiency as a knight dedicated to fending off the Muslim enemy in the faraway East, and the financial efficiency of those

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<sup>59</sup> Christopher Thomas Allmand, *The Hundred Years War: England and France at War c.1300—c.1450* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), page 47.

<sup>60</sup> Charles Mitchell, “The Worthiness of Chaucer's Knight.” in *Modern Language Quarterly* Vol 25, no. 1 (1964): p. 66-68

<sup>61</sup> Edward I. Condren, *Chaucer and the Energy of Creation: The Design and the Organization of the Canterbury Tales* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1999), page 3.

<sup>62</sup> Condren, *Chaucer and the Energy of Creation*, p. 3.

<sup>63</sup> Mitchell, “The Worthiness of Chaucer's Knight:” p. 67-68

<sup>64</sup> John Matthews Manly, “A Knight Ther Was” in *Transactions of the American Philological Association* Vol. xxxviii (1907): p.100

who are motivated by the ample opportunities for achieving personal gain through the warfare with the sisterly France.

The Knight thus is a perfect antithesis of the imperfect chivalry of his own time. Disregarding the “le lucre” of war, he imaginably would be commended by John Gower for being one of those few Englishmen (“trop sont petit”) who still fought for the service of God (“pour dieu servir”). He is a speck of hope in the mire of chivalric despair, which Gower laments thus:

Chivalerie est trop perdue,  
Verrai prouesce est abatue.  
Pour dieu servir trop sont petit :  
.....  
Car d'orguil ou du foldelit  
All jour present, sicomme l'en dist,  
Chivalerie est maintenue

[Chivalry is not to be found  
True prowess has been lost  
To serve God, too few are (there):  
.....  
For, nowadays, as they say,  
It is on the shaky grounds  
Of pride and foolish delight  
That chivalry stands.]

(*Mirour*, ll. 23980-88; trans. mine)

The worthiness of Chaucer’s Knight, the text makes it clear, does not thrive on “orguil” and “foldelit,” both of which are “renounced by the author [i.e. John Gower] as encapsulating the primary incentives to engage in crusade.”<sup>65</sup> He is “wys” enough to divorce himself from wantonness and pride, as he is “of his port as meeke as is a mayde” [I.69]. The Knight’s chivalric worthiness lies in the battles he has helped win against the heathen enemy, and thereby in the protection he has helped provide for his Christian brothers abroad from the heathen enemy. A prodigy of chivalry that

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<sup>65</sup> Marcel Elias, “Mixed Feelings in the Middle English Charlemagne Remanences: Emotional Reconfigurations and the Failures of Crusading Practices in the Otuel Texts” in *New Medieval Literatures 16*, ed. Laura Ashe, Wendy Scase and David Lawton (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2016), page. 210

is driven primarily by the love of God, the Knight is a textual reincarnation of the former, more pristine sentiment of the Crusades. He is the type of knight Pope Alexander III had in mind as he called upon Europe to go to the aid of Eastern Christians under Muslim rule. Deeply seated in ethos of fraternal love and solidarity, Alexander III's appeal urged Europe to help relieve the needs of "the faithful of Christ" in the East by "defending them against the onslaught of the pagans."<sup>66</sup> There, Alexander appeals to the notion that those in need of protection in East are the Western laity's brothers in Christianity. The Crusades must be fought, Alexander implores, so that "the virtue of brotherhood shines forth praiseworthy."<sup>67</sup> Returning to the same theme, Innocent III reminds soldiers throughout Europe that "[their] Christian brothers in faith and in name are held by the perfidious Muslims in strict confinement and weighed down by the yoke of the heaviest servitude."<sup>68</sup> This papal discourse allows for an inference of a possible authorial intent: Chaucer confers upon the Knight a "sovereyn prys" [I.67] on account of his being an anachronism, a lone upholder of the bygone codes of chivalry amidst an atmosphere of chivalric decadence.

The portrait of the Knight, therefore, has forced the text into an interesting link between chivalry and Christianity. The link can be viewed on three integrated levels. Firstly, the upholding of the codes of chivalry means the upholding of Christianity itself. Secondly, it naturally follows, the decadence of chivalry could usher in a state of Christian decay. The link between what the secular institution of Knighthood and the ecclesiastical institution of Christianity would have not been a foreign concept to medieval thought. Ramon Llull writes thus:

Then, just as our Lord has chosen scholars and priests to support the Holy Catholic Faith with scripture and reason against heretics and infidels, similarly God in His

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<sup>66</sup> **Quoted in** Constance H. Berman, *Medieval Religion: New Approaches*. (New York & London: Routledge, 2005), page 57

<sup>67</sup> **Quoted in** Berman, *Medieval Religion*, p. 57

<sup>68</sup> **Quoted in** Berman, *Medieval Religion*, p. 57

glory has chosen Knights so that by force of arms they may conquer the heretics who daily labor to destroy the Holy Church.<sup>69</sup>

This parallel holds the Knight, or any knight, not only to military standards, but to moral ones as well. A knight who does not look to his fundamental chivalric duties for which he was knighted in the first place is analogous to a priest who fails to fulfil the religious mission God chose him for. Corrupted chivalry would be the tantamount of moral decay. “Most medieval men,” Robertson notes, “regarded social and political problems as moral problems.”<sup>70</sup> And “moral problems in a Christian society,” he continues, “were essentially problems of love.”<sup>71</sup> Robertson was not talking about chivalry, but the helpfulness of his insight is relevant to our Knight. The Knight’s engagement in the Crusades derives its momentum from a love of the *right thing*: the love of “trouthe” [I.46]. By contrast, the Knight’s contemporary military class seemed more motivated by a love of the *wrong thing*: “prouesce enorguillie” and “foldelit.” It is the Knight’s commitment to the unadulterated ideals of chivalry which gives him a moral agency as well as a status equivalent to that of a holy priest. Gower’s use of the word “confonde” in “que nuls la [i.e. “sainte eglise”] confonde” is illustrative of the existential necessity of sound chivalry as a buttress to the Church and the preservation of Christianity. Gower uses the Old French “confondre” in the sense of “destroy” or “ruin,” but the verb also carries the Latin sense of “confuse,” “mix up,” or “lead astray.” For Gower, Christianity’s very survival depends on knights not led astray by wantonness and not confused about what their true duties are. In other words, we as audience of both Gower and Chaucer may infer this: it is due to Christian soldiers not confounded (as in “mixed up”) about what their true knightly duties are that the Church has not been confounded (as in “defeated”) by its

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<sup>69</sup> Ramon Llull, *The Book of the Order of Chivalry / Llibre de l'Ordre de Cavalleria / Libro de la Orden de Caballeria*, trans. Antonio Cortijo Ocaña (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2015).

<sup>70</sup> Durant Waite Robertson, *A Preface to Chaucer: Studies in Medieval Perspective* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), p. 462.

<sup>71</sup> Robertson, Preface, p. 462.

enemies yet. Chaucer's Knight is one such unconfounded soldier, which would give him a moral superiority to those who are not. His having the right motives in warfare would provide the unshakable grounds without which the Christian society loses its moral integrity; the Church, its moral legitimacy. Still personified in the Knight's character, this inextricable link between the state of chivalry and the well-being of Christianity extends to yet a third level of meaning.

That Knight, who chooses not to engage in warfare against his Christian brothers in Europe<sup>72</sup> and instead devotes all his energy to defending his other Christian brothers in the East, is presented as a champion of true chivalry is not a mere coincidence. Thus, thirdly, the text has put the ruin of chivalry in some relation to the rupture of ties between the one Christian and his brother. Chaucer puts the text in agreement with the voices of John Gower and Eustache Deschamps who denounce the state of contemporary chivalry, and, at the same time, adds a unique voice of his own. Not only is corrupted chivalry defined by the pursuit of "lucre" (which the Knight does not do), but it is also understood as engaging in warfare against one's Christian brother (which the Knight refuses to do). The Knight is unmistakable about *where* his duties lie just as he is about *what* these duties are. And where they lie, the Knight's example shows, is not in neighboring Christian lands. Thus, the Knight's position on the Hundred Years War is akin to that of Philippe de Mézières who "wished to reorient the purpose of European warfare away from what might be called a civil war and towards a holy struggle to recapture Jerusalem from the Ottoman Turks."<sup>73</sup> No wonder Stefan Vand Elst was able to show that the Knight's military enterprises, deeds, and concerns not only echo the writings

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<sup>72</sup> Gerald Morgan further emphasizes the Knight's non-involvement in Crécy, Poitiers, and Najera as a principled objection to those battles, noting that he Knight (unlike historical military figures such as John Hawkwood) is also not mentioned to have fought in Italy in 1362. Gerald Morgan, "The Worthiness of Chaucer's Worthy Knight" in *The Chaucer Review* Vol 44, No. 2 (2009): p, 133.

<sup>73</sup> Ardis Butterfield. *The familiar Enemy: Chaucer, Language, and Nation in the Hundred Years War*. (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 311.

of the Philippe de Mézières, but they are even inspired by the man's actual life and career as a French soldier and statesman.<sup>74</sup>

The Knight, therefore, by way of his career, makes a political as well as a moral statement that goes to the heart of the ravaged Anglo-French relations of his time. Chaucer's election of the Knight to make such a statement is based on his knightly merits. With his record in protecting the weak amongst his Christian brothers abroad as well as his implied disdain for ample financial gains as incentives for warfare, he is elevated above the stooping standards of chivalry which plagued the fourteenth century. The moral authority Chaucer vests in the Knight enables him to comment on what Lee Patterson calls a "crisis of chivalric identity."<sup>75</sup> The tale, Mark A. Sherman writes, and I agree, "provides insight into the concerns of its pilgrim narrator."<sup>76</sup> Chaucer's omission of battles the Knight could have been part of are in effect the Knight's own choice of battles to part of. The Knight's concern is the fact that Western chivalry is eating itself away instead of consuming the enemy — or, to use the phrase of Maurice Keen, his concern is "chivalry's war against its own distorted image."<sup>77</sup> The Knight's is a tale most interested in the distorted or imperfect Western chivalry as a moral crisis afflicting Europe, a problem which must be taken up domestically, within the all-encompassing European homeland shared by England and France alike.

The authorial *occuptio* by which Chaucer avoids any mention of the anti-Christian battles in which the Knight could have participated is matched by another instance of *occuptio*, this time used by the Knight himself. Disabling all possibilities of narrative coverage of external realms, the Knight

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<sup>74</sup> Stefan Vander Elst "‘Tu es pèlerin en la sainte cite’: Chaucer's Knight and Philippe de Mézières." In *Studies in Philology* Vol 106, No. 4 (2009): 379-401.

<sup>75</sup> Lee Paterson's chapter "The Knight's Tale and the Crisis of Chivalric Identity" in *Chaucer and the Subject of History*, (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), pp. 165-230

<sup>76</sup> Mark A. Sherman, "The Politics of Discourse in Chaucer's Knight's Tale" in *Exemplaria* Vol 6, no. 1 (1994): p, 89.

<sup>77</sup> Maurice Hugh Keen, *Chivalry* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 237.

lives up to his author-given task of examining the decay of chivalry as an internal crisis within the domestic boundaries of Europe. Notably, he withholds details which, while they may interest us, hardly matter to his purpose. He would have told us “fully the manere” [I.876] in which the land of the Amazons (a non-European space and a non-European Other) was “wonnen” [I.877] by Theseus, but he must forgo the details because

I have, God woot, a large feeld to ere,  
 And wayke been the oxen in my plough.  
 The remenant of the tale is long ynough.  
 I wol nat letten eek noon of this route. [I.886-89]

The significance of the Knight’s trope of *occupatio*, as I will discuss shortly, has important implications for *any* non-European Other. But the curious excuse given for this *occupatio* is impregnated with meanings for the European Self (i.e. the Knight and his audience) too. Read figuratively beyond its letter, the “large feeld” to be ploughed by the Knight provides insight into his actual task. Allegories taken from agriculture, and especially those of sowing seeds and ploughing fields, abound the Bible. In the Book of Matthew (13:37), sowing seeds into the ploughed ground is a metaphor for inculcating an unshakable faith and a steadfast system of virtues. Images of agricultural endeavor were also “the standard analogy”<sup>78</sup> for the Greek and Roman conception of *paideia*. Founded on the principle that “both [man’s] body and soul need care,”<sup>79</sup> *paideia* was an integrated education system aimed at the cultivation of intellectual, rhetorical, moral, and physical virtues as the very rudiments of culture. Burton Mack’s analysis of the writing of ancient Greek as well as Roman philosophers finds that the analogy of *paideia* to the agricultural processes of ploughing, sowing, and reaping is pervasive in the educational literature of the Greco-Roman period.

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<sup>78</sup> Burton L. Mack, *A Myth of Innocence: Mark and Christian Origins*. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1991), p. 159.

<sup>79</sup> Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture, Volume III: The Conflict of Cultural Ideals in the Age of Plato*, trans. Gilbert Highet (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 144.



He writes that “the ‘sower’ was a stock analogy for the ‘teacher,’ ‘sowing’ for ‘teaching,’ ‘seeds’ for ‘words,’ and ‘soils’ for ‘students.’”<sup>80</sup> The Knight’s agricultural trope (having a large field to plow) would put him at the same level of responsibility as that of a “sower,” i.e. an ancient teacher. Even higher, his stature as a story-teller (or a “teacher” as it were) would approximate the appeal of an apostle-like figure, aboard the same allegorical boat with Jesus, thus reinforcing the moral authority afforded to him by Chaucer in the *General Prologue*. By association, the words of his tale are the seeds; his audience of pilgrims and military leaders, the unplowed soil. A Christian soldier with a large field to plow, the Knight is no ordinary soldier, but a projection of the “sower” who “sows the word” (Mark 4:14), or “the good seed” (Matthew 13:38), into the “hard ground” (Jeremiah 4:3) of his audience’s hearts. And indeed he does so by way of the one of the longest tales. Concerned with the withering of Western chivalry, the Knight is about to plow the figurative ground of the Anglo-French relations in order that he may sow into it the good seeds of reconciliation. Figuratively still, the Knight’s identity as a lone champion of chivalry is highlighted when we read that the “oxen” are “wayke,” as if to suggest a task no other person can undertake. To sow the “good seeds,” another Biblical image tells us, is to “plant the good seeds of righteousness.” Here, we have a biblical reassertion of the link between chivalry’s fundamental code of conduct and Christianity’s fundamental moral code.

Given its deeply rooted association with what is fundamental not only in Biblical Parables but also the Greco-Roman traditions, the Knight’s agricultural trope would have commanded the respect, at least the serious attention, of his audience—both within *Tales* and beyond. It would have prepared them for an issue the gravity of which makes it intimately linked to the very foundations of one’s culture and the very roots of one’s faith.

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<sup>80</sup> Mack, *A myth of Innocence*, p. 160

Furthermore, the Knight's use of the allegory is particularly complex because it has a long history of being used in reference to a wide range of virtues. An integral part of *paideia* programs was the pursuit of physical refinement, which was achieved by the practice of gymnastics and exercised in wrestling rings. Predicated on the instilling of "the knightly mores and noble ethic of warrior culture,"<sup>81</sup> the physical component of *paideia* seems an early anticipation of medieval notions of chivalry and gentility. Equally integral to *paideia* was also the attainment of moral refinement. The care of the soul was important, because it is in the soul that "moral action originates."<sup>82</sup> Taken all together, the sowing of *paideia* blended the moral with the physical. In accordance to the teaching of both Pre-Socratic philosophy and the Bible, the Knight seems to have taken upon himself the task of "sowing" a tale reinforcing the inextricable link between the exercise of right chivalry and the upholding of Christian values.

Preluding his *Tale* with a trope both Biblical and Greco-Roman, the Knight makes a move most effective and fitting for his intent to discuss something akin to a family matter. The tale to be told, in other words, raises an issue essentially Christian and exclusively Western. The Knight does not set his tale anywhere near the locales of his military expeditions, although he would have been much more eligible a raconteur than the homely Prioress for bringing a story from "Asye." But no, he instead steeps his story in the vintage traditions of ancient Greece, the very seat of Western civilization. With this in mind, it is interesting to note that the Knight does not say he has "a large feeld to ere" to cut the tale short. Rather, the apology is made for the self-conscious excision of narrative, as if to say that the textual space needs to be saved for the "stuff" that truly matters. What the Knight shuns from his field of text are not just matters of trivial importance such as the festive

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<sup>81</sup> Bruce A. Kimball, *The Liberal Arts Tradition: A Documentary History* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2010), p. 13.

<sup>82</sup> Werner Jaeger, *Paideia*, p. 53.

wedding of the Duke Theseus to Amazon queen Hippolyta, but also relatively more important narratives pertaining to the conquest of “the regne of Femenye,” a conquest which, in Sherman’s words, “becomes a pejorative identification for any Other figured in opposition to the reign of Theseus.”<sup>83</sup> It is this complete avoidance of external narrative that sets the tale, despite the toil of its narrator, in an inevitable relation to the Other. Like Sherman, I too “read [the *Knight’s Tale*] from its beginning with an eye for what is not said or articulated and in fact blatantly suppressed,” though my ensuing argument takes a different path than his.

The notion that a thing may have ample significance both despite and on account of its utter absence is as medieval as it is modern. “Let *skillful* implication,” prescribes thirteenth-century grammarian Geoffrey of Vinsauf, “convey the unsaid in the said”<sup>84</sup> [emphasis in original]. It is hard to argue that Chaucer lacked the poetic talents praised by Geoffrey of Vinsauf. Commenting on the same stylistic tactic in *Chaucer the Maker*, John Speirs writes thus:

The art is in seeing exactly what each is in relation to what each ought to be; an art of exact contemplation but not in a void ... The art is as much in what is left unsaid as in what is said; and what is said consists in the simple juxtaposition of statements which it is left to the audience to know how to relate.<sup>85</sup>

Reading what is unsaid in the *Knight’s Tale* against what is said of the Knight in *General Prologue* gives me reason to suspect that the category of otherness, signified by “Femenye,” is a position most capable of being occupied by the Muslim heathen. The *inconvenient* presence of the Muslim heathen in the *General Prologue* rhetorically matches his *convenient* absence from the *Knight’s Tale*. Together, they make a perfectly integrated pair of *occtapios*. Speirs’ remark will be helpful in

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<sup>83</sup> Sherman, p. 91.

<sup>84</sup> Geoffrey of Vinsauf, *Poetrical Nova*, trans. Margaret F. Nims (Toronto, Canada & Wetteren, Belgium: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies/Universa Press: 1967), p. 40-41.

<sup>85</sup> John Speirs, *Chaucer the Maker* (London: Faber and Faber, 1951), p. 103-104.

clarifying what I mean by the adjectival antonyms, and it will enable my further discussion of tale itself.

Medieval audience au fait with contemporary states of affairs would have been, as Chaucer was, aware of the increasing threat of the Muslim presence — for instance, evinced in the conquests of North Africa, the expansion westward into Bulgaria and Hungary, and not in the least the seven-century occupation of Spain. Islamic society “was by no means distant . . . as many late-medieval Christians might have wished it to be.” Its presence was “felt in England in very direct and personal ways.”<sup>86</sup> The *General Prologue*, then, captures the inconvenience of that presence for Christian Europe. The range of won battles against the Muslim enemy is simultaneously a textual awareness of the parameters of the threat he had proved able to pose. Historical hindsight into the later fall of Constantinople is but a further insight validating the anxiety over the Muslim enemy’s ability to undermine Christendom. But Chaucer heightens that anxiety only to bring it to a relief. The Muslim appears in order to disappear; he vanishes the moment he is mentioned because he’s vanquished the instance he figures.

In this way, the Muslim in the *General Prologue* serves the same purpose as the *Knight Tale*’s Amazons, who, having been defeated, disappear twenty lines into the narrative. Femenye as “a pejorative of identification for *any Other* figured in opposition to the reign of Theseus” [my emphasis] weaves a connection to the Knight as well as it does to Theseus. True, it is the Amazons not the Muslims who stand in opposition to the reign of the Greek Theseus, but I argue that Muslims are the new Amazons. A threat to Christendom, the Muslims stand in the same relation to the Knight as do the Amazons to Theseus. Indeed, the identification of the Knight with the Theseus dominates the narrative. Both have just made it home from a military expedition, both have returned

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<sup>86</sup> Sheila Delany, “Chaucer’s Prioress, the Jews, and the Muslims” in *Chaucer and the Jews: Sources, Contexts, Meanings*, ed. Sheila Delany (New York and London: Routledge: 2002), pp.45-56.

victorious over their enemies, and both have brought with them tokens of their victories. The Knight has achieved the celebrated renown of winning “Ayas” and “Satalye,” and Theseus has claimed possession of the defeated Amazonian queen Hippolyta and her sister Emelye. Citing Fulcher of Chartres’ account of the First Crusade, Sarah Lambert writes that:

Saracen women were used to represent the field of conquest, and of total victory. If crusaders captured women and children from the enemy, then they conclusively triumphed. Towards the end of his tale [i.e. Fulcher of Chartres] . . . those same conquered and captured women seemed to be absorbed peacefully through marriage.<sup>87</sup>

Hippolyta and Emelye are not Sarasan women, but their representation as spoils of war reinforces the parallelism I see between Theseus as a Greek “conquerour” and the Knight as a Christian crusader. That the Knight’s position to Muslims is so comparable to that of Theseus to the Amazons makes those enemies relatable to each other. The *Tale’s* conquered Amazons are so reminiscent of the *Prologue’s* defeated Muslims; consequently, the Amazonian defeat is a Muslim (as well as an Islamic) defeat by association. If Femenye, therefore, were to be understood figuratively as a category of otherness capable of holding “any Other” regardless of space and time, I am inclined to think the Muslim Other the best fit for that category.

It is precisely on account of the *Tale’s* insinuation at the unnamed Muslim enemy that he can be read as constituting a particular sort of absence, a convenient absence. The insinuating force of identification between the Muslims and the Amazons ironically exposes the textual replacement of the Muslims by the Amazons. The Muslim absence from the tale looms large because the Knight, though himself a “conquerour” of Muslim territories, makes it a point to tell a tale where it is the Amazons, not the Muslims, whose reign is conquered. The Amazonian presence, brief and amputated as it may be, in effect masks the complete rejection of the Muslim from the tale.

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<sup>87</sup> Sarah Lambert, “Crusading or Spinning” in *Gendering the Crusades*, ed. Susan B. Edgington and Sarah Lambert. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), p. 10

Achieving a Muslim absence is most convenient for the Knight's intent to take up the European crisis of chivalry domestically. But unlike the Jew in the *Priores's Tale*, the Muslim is not absent from the *Knight's Tale* by way of silencing or censorship. The act of silencing would connote some sort of faint or suppressed presence, when in fact the Muslim has no presence at all. The Muslim absence lies rather in the fundamental choice of tale; it is an authorial avoidance of what the Knight ought *not* to say. The Knight, to put it differently, is deliberately assigned a tale where any Muslim presence at any level whatsoever would have been both an anachronism and anatopism. But if one reads, as I do, the Knight's election of fictional setting together with his selection of historical battlefield, one may find the *Tale* exemplifying of "what [the thing] is in relation to what [it] ought to be." I am not suggesting here that the Knight ought to have set his tale in terrains such as "Asie" or "Surrey." But the fact that he doesn't, despite the locations where he spent his entire military career, raises eyebrows of wonder.

The wonder is resolved, however, when one considers medieval thought's tendency to associate the failure of the Christian Self to uphold moral and chivalric idealism with the likelihood of defeat particularly by its Muslim Other. Addressing King Philip of France, Philippe de Mézieres attributed the defeat of the Christian armies by the Muslims at Nicopolis to "Christian division and decadence." In the same letter, he also proposes reforms that

would knit Christian knights into a militant order governed by the fourfold moral virtues of right rule (*règle*), discipline, obedience, and justice. . . [And] in "L'épître lamentable et consolatoire," [he] places the same internal focus on the problems of Christianity as do Langland and Wycliff and makes the same logical link between Christian reform and dispelling the Islamic threat.<sup>88</sup>

The full-knowing medieval reader would have not found Philippe's sentiment individualistic or exaggerated since it really came to the Middle Ages from Roman traditions. In the *Bellum Catilinae*,

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<sup>88</sup> Christine Chism, "Too Close to Comfort" in *Text and Territory: Geographical Imagination in the European Middle Ages*, ed. Sylvia Tomasch and Sealy Gilles. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), p. 125

Sallust shows “a foreign enemy who provokes heroism and allows the Romans to develop and demonstrate *virtus*.” As if an anticipation of Philippe’s ideology, he believed that the state is “bound together by the need to unite against its enemies.” Furthermore, his use of the public’s fear of the enemy (*metus hostilis*) “benefited the state by creating concord.” And like Philippe and Gower, he represented the source of moral decline “as the twin evils of *luxuria* and *avaritia*.”<sup>89</sup> Sallust’s notions of *virtus* equate to Philippe’s ideals of chivalry. The former’s concern about the moral decay of the Roman state sounds like the latter’s condemnation of the immoral Christian disunity.

Philippe’s recipe for Western triumph is followed to the letter by the Knight whose profile could have easily qualified him to join that “militant order governed by the fourfold moral virtues.” Having defeated the Muslims enemy in the *General Prologue*, and having confirmed their defeat by association to the figure of the Amazons, the Knight can now turn to his unplowed field. He is determined to order the moral chaos that is divided Europe. Doing so requires that Muslim enemy be kept at a distance, which is exactly fulfilled by a tale that could not have a place for him; for after all, the tale is advantageously set in ancient Greece, and conveniently predates the inception of Islam by centuries. As such, the Knight would afford an opportunity for medieval Europeans to face up to their state of division, while at the same time fencing the textual space off from the Muslim enemy who, as Philippe imagines, would take advantage of the internal turbulence within self-ravaging Europe. Western and Christian defeat precipitated by Europe’s internal division would be, in Philippe’s words, a “shame” (“vergoigne”).<sup>90</sup> Here, it is tempting to imagine a parallel between what Philippe fears would befall Christian armies and what had already befallen Muslim armies. With the assistance of a heathen lord, it may be recalled, the Knight has helped achieve Christian victory

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<sup>89</sup> Aislinn Melchior, “Citizen as Enemy in Sallust’s *Bellum Catilinae*” in *Valuing Others in Classical Antiquity*, ed. Ralph M. Rosen and Ineke Sluiter (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2010), p. 394

<sup>90</sup> Quoted in Chism, “Too Close to Comfort,” p. 125

against “agayn another hethen in Turkye.” Achieved by the help of one Muslim against another, this self-induced defeat is precisely the kind of “shame” Philippe fears Christendom would one day suffer. But there comes the Knight, “toiling” to relieve that anxiety. His tale is almost a second chance at reconciliation between the one Christian and his brother, a much needed redemption in the context of the Hundred Years War. The redemption brings with it a call for reuniting and mobilizing the one army of God, while warding off its enemy till it gets ready.

In this regard, the dividedness between Philippe de Mézières’s France and Chaucer’s England can be seen expressed in the breaking of brotherhood between Arcite and Palamon. This is not to argue that either character by necessity has to be figurative of the one country rather than the other. But their rivalry, despite their shared bond of brotherhood, speaks to the Anglo-French friction during the Hundred Years War. As the *Tale* provides its conflicting characters (and its medieval Anglo-French audience) the opportunity to reexamine their disunity, it simultaneously gives us the opportunity to examine the way Chaucer imagines the Christian Self against the way he presents its Other. In my discussion of the *Prioress’s Tale*, I showed how the religious dispute between the “Cristene folk” and the “Jewerye” may be reflective of the historical fourteenth-century disputations between Jews and Christians. The *Knight’s Tale* offers something similar, because the conflict between Arcite and Palamon is a dispute also alluding to the historical conflict of the Hundred Years War. Reading the two conflicts in light of each other can inform our understanding of both, though I execute such a comparison primarily to explore the ways in which the Judeo-Christian dispute can provide insight into the conflict between Palamon and Arcite.

The conflicts differ on two accounts. First, the conflict in the *Prioress’s Tale* ensues as a result of a Jewish, thereby external, disruption of the Christian harmony. No indication is given that the Christian community’s peacefulness would have been disturbed otherwise. The disharmony comes



not from inside but visits upon the Christians through an outsider. Ignited by an external Jewish aggression, the conflict becomes the tantamount of an attack against on what is the very core: “oure Lord” [VII. 453] and “our blisful Lady” [VII.510] themselves. The conflict between Palamon and Arcite, on the other hand, is internal in terms of its communal fold and concomitant fall-out. Arcite and Palamon are “of sustren two yborn” [I.1019]. They are presented as cousins both literally and figuratively. Their shared cousinly bond is a quality which (despite the actual genealogical ties between Judaism and Christianity) could have not be said of the Jews and Christian of the *Prioress’s Tale*. Furthermore, whatever damage the conflict between Arcite and Palamin wrecks can only come from what is interior, not exterior. In other words, no Muslim, no Amazon, no Jew, or otherwise non-Greek Other is enabled to worsen or benefit from their internal conflict; the text has disabled the presence of all these said groups.

Second, the religious nature of the Judeo-Christian dispute in the *Prioress’s Tale* creates an ideological dualism on the one end of which is Christianity, on the other end Judaism. Those are opposing sides between which medieval Christian audience would have not found it hard to decide. Perhaps most medieval readers would have ruled, as Charlemagne would, that “païen unt tort e chrestiens unt dreit” [heathens are wrong, Christians are right] (line 1025).<sup>91</sup> The conflict between Arcite and Palamon is by contrast not of a religious nature; therefore, it does not yield such a fundamental dualism as to necessitate the reader’s approval of one of them over the other. In the context of Arcite and Palamon, it is harder to decide which side to err on than it is when it comes to the Judeo-Christian dispute in the *Prioress’s Tale*. One would be torn between Arcite and Palamon because they are essentially the same as each other and equally relatable to medieval Christian audience. They both exemplify the kind of corrupted and imperfect chivalry the Knight is

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<sup>91</sup> La Chanson de Roland, *La Chanson de Roland: Student Edition*, ed. Gerard J. Brault (Penn State Press, 2010), p. 62.

determined to speak about. They are shown mutually blamable for their breach of *compagnonnage* as well as equally worthy of the reader's sympathy. With each being given the same chivalric degree, they are brought into equal and open competition. Each of them ends up being at once victorious and defeated. When one reads textual references to their indistinguishability with the Hundred Years War in mind, their conflict appears more fittingly describable as "internecine." The disorderly world of the *Tale* becomes a textualization of the scandalous disunity within Christendom as a one nation. This has an incidental result for our comparison of the two tales. If the interfaith conflict in the *Prioress's Tale* is a tension between the Christian Self and the Jewish Other, then the conflict between Palamon and Arcite is rather an act of negotiation and reconciliation between the Christian Self and *itself*.

The perceived evil of the Prioress's Jew is rooted in his otherness in relation to her and her Christian folk. His being the enemy lies in his textual capacity to "characterize whatever is radically different from me"<sup>92</sup> and is the reason why it becomes inevitable that he must exist the tale being the defeated side of the dispute with the Christian Self. Therefore, the Jewish Other, "oure firste foo," [VII. 558] must be subdued to the "vertu of the hooly Trinitee" [VII. 646]. His non-Christian "lawes reverence" [VII. 564] must be proven wrong before our "Fadres sapience" and the "reverence of his mooder Marie" [VII.472, 690]. This is not the case when it comes to Palamon and Arcite. Neither needs to be proven wrong because neither stands as Other to his medieval readers or to the other. They are both Theban. Both are knights in the same armor ("harneys"), fighting under the same crown (Lord Creon), and wearing the same military garment ("wede"). When the reader encounters them for the first time, each is in the same state as the other: "nat fully quyke, ne fully dede." They were "liggyng by and by" in "in oon armes." Most importantly, they were recognized

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<sup>92</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press), p. 115

“by hir cote-armures and by hir gere” as being “of the blood roial,” just like their readers in French and English courts. [I. 1006-1018]. We are reminded every now and again that each is the other’s “cosyn and . . . brother.” [I.1131]. Even the conflict that breaks out between them punctuates their uniformity because they fall in love with the same woman almost exactly at the same time. As they prepare to take arms against each other, they address their prayers to gods who, though different, do come from the same pantheon. Chaucer collapses Arcite and Palamon into an undifferentiated yet chaotic whole, thus encapsulating the state of warfare between belligerents from the same tradition and of the same faith. That they are intimately related cousins makes their division as sad an affair as the Anglo-French war felt to Philippe de Mézières. As brotherly knights, their behavior while in conflict would have been distasteful not only to such advocates of Anglo-French peace as Philippe, but also to their narrator who avoided engaging in wars against his kin in France and instead fought for his brothers in the East. But since, as I argue, the Knight’s objective in telling the tale is to order the moral chaos this behavior brings about, his treatment of Arcite and Palamon is diplomatically measured and unbiased. He condemns them then redeems them, breaks them up only to bring them back into harmony.

Arcite and Palamon are imprisoned in a tower “in angwissh and in wo” [I.1030] under the watch of Theseus. Their imprisonment, nevertheless, serves more as an act of bringing together two halves of the same unsettled soul, or what Henry Marshall Leicester perhaps would have termed the same “disenchanted self.”<sup>93</sup> Following the same line of interpretation, I lean towards reading the refusal of Theseus to accept any ransom figuratively. The rejection of ransom, despite the “usual [late] medieval view of a prisoner as a definite commercial asset”<sup>94</sup> for the captor, punctuates what is

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<sup>93</sup> I am generally referring here to Henry Marshall Leicester’s book *The Disenchanted Self: Representing the Subject in the Canterbury Tales* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

<sup>94</sup> Stuart Robertson, “Elements of Realism in the ‘Knight’s Tale.’” in *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* Vol. 14, No. 2 (April, 1915): p. 230

not the point of their imprisonment. Theseus “*no lde no raunsoun*” [I.1024] just as the Knight would not pursue the “*lucre*” that he could have gained by participating in the military campaigns against France. What both Theseus and the Knight seek to achieve is rather a moral rehabilitation of the anguished and *woebegone* (“*in angwisssh and in wo*”) state of European chivalry figured in Palamon and Arcite. To disable the possibility of ransom, therefore, is to enable the opportunity of chivalric rejuvenation. Furthermore, the earlier gesture by which Chaucer has modeled Theseus on the Knight’s character comes into full force here. The definitive ruling out of ransom, Robertson notes, emphasizes “*the unmercenary character of Theseus,*”<sup>95</sup> and by affiliation, I add, exonerates the Knight of the charges levelled against him by Terry Jones.<sup>96</sup> Their identification means that the Knight, having been repeatedly established to be morally above mercenary behavior, has the moral authority to watch over Arcite and Palamon vicariously through Theseus. The abstention of the Theseus from making ransom money facilitates the later microscopic examination of Arcite’s and Palamon’s unchivalric behavior in times of crisis.

And as it happens, they do behave in such a way that their commitment to chivalric values becomes clearly questionable. Contrary to the Knight and Theseus, who are driven by “*pitee*” [I. 920 & 1762] and social order, Arcite and Palamon are moved by female beauty. They devolve into habitual oath breakers willing to disregard their vows of perpetual brotherhood just as quickly as they fall in love with Emelye. Still unaware of the true cause of his pained cry, Arcite is quick to console his Palamon:

For Goddes love, taak al in pacience  
 Oure prisoun, for it may noon oother be.  
 Fortune hath yeven us this adversitee. [I. 1084-86]

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<sup>95</sup> Robertson, “Elements of Realism,” p. 229

<sup>96</sup> Terry Jones, *Chaucer’s Knight: The Portrait of a Medieval Mercenary* (Methuen Publishing Limited, 2016).

That suddenly changes, however, the moment he sees Emelye and feels the sexual desire to compete for her. Arcite's discourse quickly leaps from "cosyn myn, what eyleth thee?" [I. 1081] into an unhesitating "ech man for hymself" [1182] breaking thus the most basic bond of *compagnonnag*. Not only does he break his vows, but he also does not show any moral qualms about justifying his violation of the code of chivalry. "Who shal yeve a loveve any lawe?" he says, challenging Palamon's claim [I.1164].

Arcite has been traditionally viewed as the instigator of the tale's chaos since he has been the first to show a disposition for breaking of the sworn oath, while Palamon has been merely seen as passive in his responses to Arcite's violation. Catherine A. Rock, for instance, argues that Arcite's transgressions "account . . . for his ultimate fate of death after winning the battle for the maiden."<sup>97</sup> This may be true; I do not contest it. But I could not find any evidence in the tale suggesting that the Knight wishes to show Palamon less blamable for the breach of oath or more deserving of the reader's sympathy. In fact, he displays a dangerously childish logic and a subtle degree of hypocrisy that even out Arcite's proactive aggression. His rationale that "I loved hire [i.e. Emelye] first" [I 1146] implies that he broke his vow of perpetual brotherhood with Arcite because it was Arcite who broke it first. There is hardly any reason to believe that Palamon would have acted any differently than Arcite had the situation been reversed. By this I mean to suggest that Palamon, though only drifting with the circumstance, proves just as willing to forego the bond of brotherhood as Arcite. This becomes clear when he proclaims that "I am Palamon, thy mortal foo" addressing Arcite. It becomes even clearer when the Knight lets us hear his inner thoughts as he prepares himself to launch an attack on Arcite, "Heere cometh my mortal enemy!" [I. 1643]. That he does not *speak*, but "*thynketb*" [my emphasis], revealing a capacity for grudge-bearing that matches Arcite's initiation of

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<sup>97</sup> Catherine A. Rock, "Forsworn and Fordone: Arcite as Oath-Breaker in the 'Knight's Tale'" in *The Chaucer Review* Vol. 40, No. (2006): p, 416.

disloyalty. As well as a capacity for grudge-bearing, he also shows the same kind of falsehood and double standards he chides Arcite for. Palamon denounces Arcite's furtive reentry into Athens by having "byjaped heere duc Theseus" [I.1584] despite his pledge never to return; yet six lines later, the same Palamon shows relief to have escaped unnoticed by Theseus "out of prison . . . by grace" [I.1592]. Chaucer's attribution of equal culpability to Arcite and Palamon reinforces my belief that they are meant to be not just proxy knights investing themselves in the wrong conflict, but also tragicomic puppets who, like a Shakespearean clown, speak the harshest of criticism into the ears of English and French monarchs for their mutual hostility.

But since, as I mentioned earlier, the Knight's true "entente" [I.1000] is the endorsement of a harmonious middle ground between the two nations, his equal condemnation of Arcite and Palamon is coupled with his extending each of them the courtesy of equal representation. This is a privilege that we do not see given to the Prioress's "cursed Jew" [I.570]. The authorial admission and denial of different perspectives into the reader's perception of the one conflict seem to coincide with who the conflicting parties are. Where the conflict is "intranecine," i.e. between the Self and the Other like, the story shuns any possibility of hearing the Other's perspective. Except that the Jews are antagonized by the little boy's devotion to Mary, we hear nothing of what they think or why they resort to aggression. We do not, for instance, see the Jewish Other be allowed to bring up the history of his expulsion from Europe into the Ottoman Empire where he is as the Prioress narrates her tale. We are told instead about the murder of the Little Saint Hugh of Lincoln which he allegedly committed. But where the conflict is "internecine," like the one between Arcite and Palamon (the Christian Self and itself), we are offered a narrative almost too impressively neutral in its ability to precisely speak the minds of both sides of the dispute.

Palamon may be “wounded sore,” but Arcite is “hurt as much as he, or more.” [I.1115-16] Palamon, to be sure, can enjoy “the sight of [Emelye]” every morning [I.1239], but he may not “have hire to lady and to wyf” like Arcite if he manages to raise an army against Theseus [I.1289]. Arcite, although now at large, “of prison free” [I.1292], has lost the joy of seeing Emelye to the still imprisoned Palamon. For Arcite, Palamon is not in prison, “certes nay, but in paradys!” [I.1237]. As far as Palamon is concerned, however, the curse of exile is Arcite’s very “greet . . . avauntage” [I.1293]. Chaucer’s fair allowance for each of them to express his perspective in the first person is seconded by his Knight who is careful to have his audience feel equal sympathy for each of the two:

Yow loveres axe I now this questioun:  
Who hath the worse, Arcite or Palamoun?  
That oon may seen his lady day by day,  
But in prison he moot dwelle alway;  
That oother wher hym list may ride or go,  
But seen his lady shal he nevere mo.  
Now demeth as yow liste, ye that kan,  
For I wol telle forth as I bigan. [I.1347-1354]

The audience is left to judge as they please, but only after the Knight has made it nearly impossible for them to privilege either Arcite or Palamon over the other.

Further on in the tale, the Knight reaffirms the impression we are led to have of Arcite and Palamon from the very start. Namely, they are equals, especially on the battlefield where they are afforded the same degrees of honor. During the first duel, Palamon fights like “wood leon” [I.1656]; Arcite is no less mighty because one would think him “cruel tigre” [I.1657]. Soon enough, the tale turns the duel into a “game” of military tournament to be adjudicated fairly by Theseus. This is another instance where the Knight and Theseus can each be identified by the other. They collapse into one undifferentiated diplomatic force, bringing the tale closer to its ultimate point of reconciliation. By its very nature, the practice of tournaments in the Middle Ages allows for reading this episode at once literally and figuratively. Read figuratively, it is an unbiased court of justice

allowing an equal opportunity of self-representation before Theseus as its impartial and true judge (“evene juge. . . and trewe” [I.1864]). Read literally, it surprisingly affords a very similar result, because the tournament is actually a trial by combat. This sends us right back to the *Prioress’s Tale*. There, by contrast, no trial of any kind was possible for the Jews. The meticulous impartiality of Theseus as the tournament judge is not to be found in the Prioress’s provost who does not hesitate to put all the Jews to death without an investigation. While Theseus (and thereby the Knight) shows moral restraint in enjoining, for example, that “ne no man shal unto his felawe ryde” [I. 2548], the provost (thereby the Prioress) orders that Jews be dragged behind a horse as a punishment.

The colosseum (the “lystes”) where tournament takes place is also described as a “noble theatre” multiple times. While the execution of the Jews is not described in theatrical language as is the tournament, the travesty of justice that takes place against them has led Louise O. Fradenburg to imagine the Jewish Ghetto as a figurative “theatre” for Christian representation of dominance over the Jews. The analogy of both tales to theatre will help me bring the chapter to a close.

The Prioress’s theatre presumes an external struggle between the Christian Self, as a force of good, and the Jewish Other, as a force of evil. Naturally, the force of perceived good (the Christian Self) must be made to prevail over the force of perceived evil (the Jewish Other). But the Knight’s theatre is set with a different intent. Palamon and Arcite are two sides of the same Self. As I have put it before, theirs is an internal conflict between the Self and its very self. There is no reason the Knight would have an ideological need to make either of them victorious over the other, which is why he in the figure of Theseus eventually declares that:

The gree as wel of o syde as of oother  
And eyther syde ylik as ootheres brother

The moment Theseus speaks these lines, Arcite has not died yet. Strictly speaking, Arcite is as victorious at this point as he was prior to this point, before he was thrown from his pitching horse.



As the text itself indicates, Arcite's triumph, while short-lived, cannot be considered a defeat because, "fallyng nys nat but an aventure" [I.2722]. But to bring Arcite's victory and Palamon's defeat to completion is *not* at all the point. What *is* is the reconciliation of the two, a reconciliation which can only exist by "incompleting" the happiness of winning and the sorrow of losing in such a way that the happy Arcite and the sorrowful Palamon end up completely even and perfectly undifferentiated. Unlike the Prioress whose theatre relies on a moral differentiation between protagonist and antagonist, the Knight sets the stage for a clash between two sides "so evene, withouten variacioun" that no one so wise could say "that any hadde of oother avauntage" [I.2590-91]. That "soothly ther was no disconfiture" [I. 2721] is to blur the line between victory and defeat. And to blur the line between victory and defeat is to reject both the categories of winning and losing. This act of rejection is subversive because it carries within it the Knight's tactical refusal to acknowledge the moral legitimacy of a war fought between two cousins. The Knight has created a battle the outcomes of which defy the very foundational terms of it. Who gets Emelye is not after all who he wins. Arcite wins the tournament, but soon after dies; Palamon loses it, yet gains Emelye who is the point of the fighting the tournament in the first place. They each thus exits the tale neither completely victorious nor completely defeated just as they enter it "nat fully quyke, ne fully dede" [I.1015].

As a performance, the tale borders more closely on theatre in moments such as when Theseus, as if delivering a didactic monologue, tells his medieval audience how he

Considered that it were destruccioun  
 To gentil blood to fighten in the gyse  
 Of mortal bataille *now* in this emprise. [I. 2538-40] [my emphasis]

This reads to me as the tale's political statement in its most explicit and provocative form. The force of language in "destruccioun," "gentil blood," and "bataille," cannot be more redolent of the Anglo-French warfare, which (like the tale's battle) was still unfolding "now" as Theseus spoke. The

statement encapsulates a moral (*moralis*) ready to be discovered in retrospect when the reader pauses to recall the dialogue between Saturn and Venus earlier in the tale. Figments of his imagination, the gods above speak the Knight's own reflection on his world of mortals below. Heavenly chaos, Saturn preaches, is inherent with "swich divisioun" among the Greek gods. By projection, Saturn is evokes contemporary Anglo-French dividedness as having a deterministic byproduct of mayhem for the reader's Christendom. The moral of the story, which is part and parcel of the Knight's original "entente," comes to a full didactic force when Saturn enjoins that "bitwixe yow ther moot be som tyme pees" [I.2474]. More than just an enjoinment, this line serves as an aphoristic maxim that encapsulates the entire tale. It is also a diplomatic statement which I find it very tempting to imagine would have delighted Philippe de Mézières— or maybe, would have demanded an enthusiastic nod of approval from Eustache Deschamps who hails "noble Geffroy Chaucier" as the "grand translateur" of French thought "en bon angles."<sup>98</sup>

The Knight's and Prioress's tales indeed have something of a theatrical identity. But they are hardly a modernist *Waiting for Godot* where the audience can make their own meaning. Instead, they are each more of a morality play that presumes a command of "auctoritee." One tale endeavors to restore order to the immoral turbulence within the Christian Self, while the other works an imagined miracle into asserting a moral distinction from the non-Christian Other. Both are didactic in their outlooks, and both are ceremonial in their shared closing—"Amen."

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<sup>98</sup> Quoted in Derek Brewer, "Eustache Deschamps, Great Ovid," in *Geoffrey Chaucer: the Critical Heritage, Vol. I: 1385–1837*, ed. Derek Brewer (London, 1978), pp. 39-24.

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## VITA

AHMED SEIF

Alexandria, Egypt

(662)715-0777

[aseif@go.olemiss.edu](mailto:aseif@go.olemiss.edu)

### EDUCATION

M.A., English Literature, University of Mississippi, May 2016

Concentration: Fourteenth-century medieval English literature.

Thesis: "Chaucerian Imperfections: The Other and the Turbulent Self"

B.A., English studies, University of Alexandria, Egypt, May 2009

Concentrations: Linguistics, Translation, English Literature

### TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Teaching Assistant, 2013-2016

University of Mississippi

Courses: Survey of English Literature (Part 1 & 2); Survey of World Literature (Part 1 & 2).

Teacher of classical Arabic, 2011-2012

Jackson State University

Teacher of English, 2008, 2010

Corporate Trainer in Business English

### NON-TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Business Trainer, 2010-2011

IBM, Egypt.

English-Arabic Translator, 2008-2010

Alexandria and Cairo, Egypt

### HONORS AND FELLOWSHIPS

Fulbright Award, 2011-2012

U.S. State Department

Full Teaching Assistantship, 2013-2016

The University of Mississippi

Honors Award, 2013-2016

University of Mississippi



## ACADEMIC CONFERENCES

Southeastern Medieval Association Conference, October 2015  
Little Rock, Arkansas

- Presented a paper entitled “Religious Intolerance in *The Prioress’s Tale*”

## REFERENCES

### **Dr. Gregory Heyworth**

Thesis Supervisor

Associate Professor of English and Director of the Lazarus project

The University of Mississippi, English Department.

[heyworth@olemiss.edu](mailto:heyworth@olemiss.edu)

### **Professor Steven Justice**

Thesis advisor (via distance)

Chancellor's Professor of English

UC Berkeley, English Department

[sjustice@berkeley.edu](mailto:sjustice@berkeley.edu)

Professor Ivo Kams

The Head of the English Department

The University of Mississippi

[egkamps@olemiss.edu](mailto:egkamps@olemiss.edu)

Dr. Peter Wirth

Senior Lecturer

Teaching Supervisor of classes I taught at the University of Mississippi

[phwirth@olemiss.edu](mailto:phwirth@olemiss.edu)

662-915-5035 (preferred method of contact)